

book review

Penguin by Design

a cover story 1935 – 2005

by Phil Baines

London, Allen Lane Penguin Books £16.99

500 words by mid May for World of Interiors

The orange, green and blue covers of Penguin books have been, since the 1930s, a familiar part of the cultural landscape in Britain. The covers project an identity for their texts, whatever their genre, through a set of design values that make them integral to the national and personal trajectories of dramatic social change in Britain. Penguin books are cultural objects whose meanings and significance are not simply literary and text based.

Allen Lane established the firm in 1935 to provide inexpensive, paper-covered reprints for a mass market of serious minded readers. His colleagues in the industry were sceptical about whether such a market existed but were

confounded when Woolworth's placed an order for 63,000 books from the first offering. The books sold and a publishing phenomenon was launched.

Lane had recognised that the political and social trends of the 1930s had created a new market of the educated and politically engaged amongst ordinary people. The memory of WW1, the unfolding tragedy of the Spanish Civil War and the experience of WW2 simply extended the franchise. By 1945 Penguin had become synonymous with paperback publishing.

The powerful visual identity of Penguin was first devised by Edward Young as a horizontal and colour-coded grid. The scale of publishing activity during WW2 placed this system under enormous strain. Typographic consistency and a coherent house style were re-established by Jan Tschichold, the former Bauhaus typographer, in 1947.

Tschichold's work was summarised in the axiomatic *Penguin Composition Rules*. The processes of typographic refinement were continued by Hans Schmoller so that, by the end of the 1950s, the books had become exemplars of typographic sophistication.

The advent of increased competition throughout the 1950s and the development of pictorial covers, as powerful point-of-sale advertisements, forced Penguin to redefine its house style. A new grid system was devised by Abram Games. In the 1960s the new grid system was further developed by Germano Facetti working with Romek Marber. The Marber grid was to provide a platform for the coherent visual integration of type, information and visuals throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.

The simultaneous explosion of visual culture, counter-cultural politics and radical texts that occurred at the end of the 1960s was orchestrated, more or less, by the editorial policies and art-direction of Penguin Books.

Phil Baines, typographer and designer at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, has presented an exemplary visual history of the development of Penguin house style. The selection of covers shows the pursuit of design perfection as an integral part of the literary, political and social transformations of post-war Britain.



Penguin Crime

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Typographic and design judgements in publishing can often seem, to the uninitiated at least, as secondary to the arguments of author and text. Baines has shown, ably helped by the designer David Pearson, that they can provide a richly textured but coherent platform that supports the publishing house, its various imprints and its authors. The result is a kind of cultural archaeology that connects life and art in satisfyingly modest form.

The publication of a series of philosophical extracts, presented under the banner *Great Ideas*, during 2004 became the pretext for a series of Penguin covers that explore the relationship between typographic style, content and meaning. The successful rediscovery, by public and publishers, of letterpress typography and the varied textures of imprint are testimony to the continuing appeal of print. The excellence of the designs in this project was recognised by their inclusion in the Design Museum's *Designer of the Year Award* for 2005. The spirit of experimentation continues with the presentation of the Penguin 70s.

The conjunction of excellence, utility and mass-production has been elusive in Britain where, generally, economies of scale have been associated with a less rigorous technical

specification. The successful integration, in a business model, of the contradictory values of utility and excellence is worthy of celebration. Happy birthday Penguin!

Paul Rennie

581 words

Add a short paragraph about the new Penguin covers and their inclusion in the Designer of the Year Award. Typographic expression and letterpress printing.