**Interdisciplinary: A Conversation about Rudolph Ruzicka**

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\*Rudolph Ruzicka was an American printer and type designer, who worked for the Mergenthaler Linotype Company, one of the largest manufacturers of typesetting equipment.

\*Rudolph Ruzicka was an American printmaker, whose wood engravings were collected by major institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

While both of these sentences are accurate as ‘nutshell’ descriptions of a career that spanned much of the twentieth century, they connote professional trajectories that often have been considered separate disciplines, both in their practices and in historical and critical engagement with them. From those starting points we might consider seemingly divergent categories: commerce or art; engagement with text or image; production by machine or by hand; studied by book history or art history; or, indeed categorised as ‘printing’ or ‘printmaking.’ However, Ruzicka’s work is an excellent case study to consider the commonalities across what emerge, for him, as artificial borders between those pairings.

I was scanning through the American print collections in the online catalogue of the Hunterian Art Gallery when I ran across Ruzicka’s 1915 series of wood engravings depicting New York City. These were pretty extensive holdings in the UK for an American artist with whom I confess I was not previously familiar, so it made me curious to learn more. When I found out Ruzicka was also, later in this career, a type designer, I got in touch with Edwin to see if he knew anything about him. I think what has become a bit puzzling for both of us is in fact why we weren’t more familiar with Ruzicka, because it takes very little digging to realise that he was well placed in the transatlantic circles of what the Grolier Club—which published and exhibited Ruzicka’s work—would celebrate as the ‘book and graphic arts.’

When Daniel Berkeley Updike, the influential printer, designer, and founder of the Merrymount Press published his key reference work *Printing Types: Their History, Forms, and Use* in 1922, his first acknowledgment was to Ruzicka, whom he had entrusted to read early drafts of the chapters and contribute illustrations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Clearly over the course of his career, Ruzicka had developed not only technical and artistic skill in wood engraving and design practices, whether of type, books and magazines, medals, or gravestones, but also historical knowledge and insights into his field. While we’ve been interested in all the places and correspondence in which Ruzicka appears, our aim here is not simply to ‘recover’ his career, but rather to think about the ways in which he navigated his varied artistic and design practices, bridging different disciplines.

Ruzicka was born in 1883 in rural Bohemia about 20 miles from Prague, the youngest of ten children. In reminiscenses published late in his life, Ruzicka noted that his father was a tailor who was head of his guild and his mother came from a family of potters, which he called ‘the most ancient of the arts;’ he notes that his eldest brother studied sculpture and that his ‘other brothers were craftsmen.’[[2]](#footnote-2) So even in recounting his family history, Ruzicka seems to be establishing a lineage of artisanal skill and pride in craftsmanship. The family emigrated to the United States when Ruzicka was 11, and he had only three years formal education in Chicago public schools; he also took drawing classes at Hull House, the pioneering settlement house founded by social reformer Jane Addams. The drawing teachers, he wrote, were ‘well-known commercial draftsmen’ and his own ‘charming teacher …was a woman distinguished in advertising design.’ While Ruzicka recalled the ‘commercial’ sphere of his tutors’ work, he classified his own work, from an early age, as art. He recounts a story from one of his first jobs, in an engraving firm, as a 14-year old apprentice in wood engraving:

I was hired, as I say, as their apprentice, but I got no salary. After about six months I was able to do a journeyman’s work. But I was discovered at this by a factory inspector, and the company was brought into court, accused of employing a minor on industrial work. I stood up for the company, because I thought it was *art work* (I thought doing engraving of any kind was art work!)—much to the amusement of the court.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In publishing this story, Ruzicka added italics for emphasis to his key term, and separated into two words—art work—setting up the contrast with industrial work. I think this short phrase is important for how Edwin and I are trying to interpret Ruzicka’s career; he absolutely considered himself an artist, and he also considered art as a vocation: as an economic endeavour. Though that combination is not unusual, it is also not always so grounded in the artist’s life history: it does underpin what appears to be Ruzicka’s pragmatic and flexible approach to his career.

In his first few working years in a variety of Chicago engravers, printers, and box makers, Ruzicka learned a variety of skills: wood engraving, press work, hand-lettering, electrotypography, photo engraving, etc. Although he worked across different print medium, it appears his ‘first love’ was wood engraving; when he first embarked on the apprenticeship discussed above, Ruzicka writes, ‘…wood engraving was still very active, because photo engraving was in its infancy. It was cheaper to do a thing by hand; it would cost too much to photograph and etch it.’[[4]](#footnote-4) While he roots his training in this particular historical moment, Ruzicka clearly developed an affinity for this particular form of printing, which he continued to use whenever possible despite the many developments in print technology he would see over his long working life. (Indeed Ruzicka wrote about a commission from the 1930s that was engraved on copper, ‘…actually, my doing of these illustrations was kind of a mistake. I had no liking for copper. It was rather foreign to me. Working with it required technique that I was not brought up in, and I had no real feeling for the material, no sympathy for it.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Though he is writing here in the negative, this displeasure with working on copper gives us a sense of the ‘sympathy’ Ruzicka had for wood engraving.)

In 1903, when he was 20, having worked his way up through Chicago engraving and printing firms, he moved to New York, in the first instance to take a position with the American Bank Note Company, working for the railroad division, for the most part designing decorative covers for railroad timetables. He moved on to the advertising firm Calkins & Holden, but at the same time was experimenting with wood engraving in his own time, sometimes printing at the Village Press of Fred Goudy, just when the latter was starting his career in type design. Ruzicka wrote of this period, ‘I wanted to do wood engraving exclusively, of my own designs, and not to use wood engraving merely as a method of reproduction.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Ruzicka bought a small press to streamline the process of proofing his prints, and also organised a group of colleagues to produce *A Portfolio of Prints* in 1908 for which Ruzicka produced a portrait of Augustus Saint-Gaudens and a view of the East River. He also around this time met Updike, to whom he had been recommended to engrave a frontispiece for one of Merrymount Press’ books. Though they initially quarrelled (about modernism versus tradition in printmaking), they became good friends and colleagues, and together started the tradition of issuing a New Year’s card or ‘keepsake’ from Merrymount Press to its readers, usually a scene of Boston or environs, engraved on wood by Ruzicka, with an inscription in Latin chosen by Updike; they continued this tradition from 1911 to 1941.

From this start, Ruzicka started working primarily as a freelance artist producing prints for magazines and later as book illustrations. His earliest commissions were images of New York, studies of which he had been doing on his own for years. So it is perhaps not surprising that his first major independent work was the series of New York prints, published by the Grolier Club, which I mentioned earlier. Ruzicka did a series of wood engravings in colour, and also smaller black and white illustrations incorporated into a text written by Walter Prichard Eaton. However, in addition to the ‘art work’ Ruzicka also wrote an opening essay for the volume, entitled ‘A Note on the Development of Colour Printing from Wood Engravings.’ Here, in his typically understated way, Ruzicka makes the case for wood engraving to be recognised as an artistic form in its own right, and also for acknowledgment of the Japanese influence on this form, as European interest waned at the turn of the twentieth century. He writes, ‘As the engraver became increasingly more able to reproduce any effect of the brush, so also he became more subservient to the artist, both losing regard for the essential qualities of wood engraving.’[[7]](#footnote-7) This harks back to the sentiment I quoted earlier, that Ruzicka does not see wood engraving as merely a tool to reproduce other art works, but that artistic expression is derived from engagement with the specific materials and tools of any artistic discipline. At the same time that it contained this manifesto for wood engraving, the Grolier Club book was also Ruzicka’s first foray into book design, and he would become increasingly engaged with all facets of the graphic arts over the twentieth century.

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Ruzicka’s relationship with the designer W.A. Dwiggins, who had introduced him to D.B. Updike, would again prove pivotal with an introduction in the mid 1930s to Chancey H. Griffith, Vice President for Type Development of the Mergenthaler Linotype Company. Linotype at this time was the largest supplier of industrial typesetting equipment in the world and the introduction represented an important step in Ruzicka’s recognition as a leading designer. It also reflected a desire on the part of big business to engage with intellectually active designers such as Dwiggins and Ruzicka. The latter’s relationship with the company lasted some 40 years, taking in a range of design and consultancy roles.

Ruzicka’s first and most significant font series was Linotype Fairfield. In his usual modest way the artist describes starting the process by handing over to Griffith a folio filled with sketches of letters compiled from years of experiment:

I gave over my designs to him with a sense of complete hopelessness. I had no idea that he would ever accept any of them. But he chose two that I had made. And it was decided to try one of these experimentally with the cutting of one or two letters. I think we chose the ‘n’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Drawn and drafted between 1937 and 1939, the typeface was released by the Mergenthaler Linotype Company in various sizes and weights between 1940 and 1949. Fairfield is named after the Connecticut town where Ruzicka spent a summer working on these letters. It’s design essentially sits within the Old Face or Garalde classification of types, being a serifed type where the axis of curved strokes inclines to the left, with a smooth transition between thick and thin areas of curved letters. The Italic is a true italic, with each letter drawn specifically for the purpose rather than being a slanted version of the Roman. As opposed to the Primer typeface which Ruzicka designed a decade later Fairfield is not a straight book or newspaper typeface for long continuous text but probably best understood as a face for both books and shorter texts such as poetry, advertising copy and titles. It is a subtle, light, unpretentious type and might seem easily overlooked when compared to other types used in advertising and publicity of the time. But this understated design is telling of the era’s school of ‘scholarly design’ of which Ruzicka can be seen as a key proponent. On Fairfield’s commercial release in 1940 Ruzicka was much quoted in the publicity materials announcing its launch. This suggests Linotype’s belief that attaching his name would help to generate sales but his remarks also help to confirm and clarify Ruzicka’s intellectual position:

‘Type is made to be read’ implies a reader, and it may usefully be asked what does that all-important but often disregarded person expect? He expects nothing but to be left in optical ease while he pursues his reading. He wants no interruptions of the process of following the printed thought….” “To submerge consciousness of type, all obvious cleverness must be ruled out. There should be a kind of impersonal ease… Type is after all only a medium between writing and reading.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This statement quite clearly echoes the sentiments of Beatrice Warde, in her Crystal Goblet essay of 1930 (written under the pseudonym Paul Beaujean), in which she draws comparisons between the intended purpose of type and the purposes of glass:

The book typographer has the job of erecting a window between the reader inside the room and that landscape which is the author's words. He may put up a stained-glass window of marvellous beauty, but a failure as a window; that is, he may use some rich superb type like text gothic that is something to be looked at, not through.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The modern roots of this argument are to be found in the work of William Morris, clearly expressed in the posthumously published ‘A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press’:

I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To modern eyes Morris may have fallen short of his goal with his heavy types and highly ornamented pages but the impact of his educated attempt to ‘clear typography of the mess of centuries’ through the study of 15th C. printed books and manuscripts cannot be underestimated. Influential inheritors of Morris’ ‘new traditions’ of thought, though not his aesthetics, included Stanley Morison, typographic advisor to the Monotype Corporation and *The Times* newspaper. A long-term correspondent of D.B. Updike and close colleague of Beatrice Warde, Morison appears to have encapsulated this argument of the sublimated, transparent typeface in his best-known contribution to typography ‘Times New Roman’, first used in 1932. Indeed he once remarked of Times: “It has the merit of not looking as if it had been designed by somebody in particular”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Ruzicka and Morison, who were closely linked through their friendships with Updike, would have been well aware of each other’s work and their shared philosophies. But where Morison was the instigator of typefaces drawn by others under his watch, Ruzicka’s hand was very much present in all of his work. His type bears the hallmarks of the Crystal Goblet theory, as well as a historically informed position, and yet it is very much his own. Linotype’s contemporary publicity for the digitised version reads: “Fairfield mixes the forms of Venetian old style type with Art Deco details, giving the design its distinctive appearance.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The use of the term Art Deco here seems misplaced as the type is decidedly lacking in decoration but despite clumsy terminology their assertion that the type is distinctive is accurate and important in understanding it’s key qualities. The 1940’s Fairfield publicity material refers to a ‘spirited design and sensitive balance’, the quote from Ruzicka: “type is after all only a medium between writing and reading.” actually continues: “But to invite continuous reading, type must have a subtle degree of interest and variety of design….”[[14]](#footnote-14)

On viewing the first proofs of Fairfield in 1937 Dwiggins wrote to Griffith:

I was sure Rudolph would come through with hot stuff if we could start him—He knows his letters to the bone, with ample historical background, and his combination of Czech & USA gives us the outside touch we want.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As it was his first type design and Linotype did not issue royalties to their designers, the initial payment for Fairfield was minimal but Griffith arranged for a payment of $100 per week to be paid out to Ruzicka indefinitely, and indeed he was still receiving this payment 40 years later totaling an enormous sum. There was no contractual obligation for this money to be paid and so we must assume that it was arranged in recognition of the quality and popularity of the typeface and the value of keeping someone with Ruzicka’s skills on retainer.

The seeming disparity between the transparent and the distinctive in Fairfield is, I believe, indicative of Ruzicka’s character as an artist and designer. His ability to appreciate the nature of a commission, whilst retaining a distinct identity is clear. As is his concurrent mastery of several distinct mediums. It is difficult not to describe someone with his personal background, diverse practical experience, scholarly interests, teaching career and multiple professional plaudits as ‘moving between worlds’. However, in examining his work it appears that one key to his success was the ability to not draw distinctions between mass market or fine commission, between the anonymous and the celebrated. His work displays an almost idealised combination of commercial training with historical and theoretical understanding. An attitude in the tradition of Morris ‘to re-attain a long-lost standard of craftsmanship in book printing’[[16]](#footnote-16) and summed up in the aims of Updike’s Merrymount Press: ‘To do common work uncommonly well.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

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This notion of Updike’s finds a parallel in Ruzicka’s approach: it is not just *what* constituted his ‘art work’ but *how* it was carried out. Across several disciplines of art and design, he appears passionate about practice, craft, and skill, and the ways in which art derives from applying these to seemingly simple tools and materials, and often through the agency of the human hand, whether in carving a block of wood or operating a printing press. For example, in writing of his friend and colleague, the type and book designer Bruce Rogers, Ruzicka wrote the following homage:

We see a cunning hand endowing ordinary materials with a higher value: the type becomes clearer and more eloquent than the familiar face of the specimen book, the ink ‘behaves,’ the paper somehow acquires finer qualities of texture and color than were displayed by the manufacturer’s sample. Even the words of an unalterable text seem to obey and marshal themselves with apparent ease into an order, as if destined by their author for the particular line, page, and volume. Out of these tools Rogers fashions an instrument upon which he is an unmatched virtuoso. He makes them fully responsive to his ends, combining them to produce objects of rare and delicate quality, an art of his own.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The key phrase here, I think, is ‘endowing ordinary material with a higher value’—it seems Ruzicka’s way of paraphrasing Updike’s aims. And this also is a strong statement of what unified Ruzicka’s ‘art work’ into an interdisciplinary career.

1. Edward Connery Lathem and Elizabeth French Lathem, *D.B.U. and R.R: Selected Extracts from Correspondence Between Daniel Berkeley Updike and Rudolph Ruzicka, 1908-1941* (New York: American Printing History Association, 1992) p. 96-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *Rudolph Ruzicka: Speaking Reminiscently* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1986) p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lathem, pp. 13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lathem, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lathem, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lathem, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rudolph Ruzicka, ‘A Note on Colour Printing,’ in *New York: A Series of Wood Engravings in Colour* (New York: Grolier Club, 1915) p. xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lathem, p.111 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rudolf Ruzicka, Linotype Fairfield Advertisement, *P.M. Magazine* (New York, February 1940) p.89 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Beatrice Warde, ‘The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should be Invisible’*,* first presented as an address to the British Typographers’ Guild at St. Bride’s Institute, London, 1932. Published in various journals from that date. The Quotation used here is taken from *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography* (London: Sylvan Press 1955) p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ## William Morris, *A note by William Morris on his aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press together with a short description of the press by S.C. Cockerell & an annotated list of the books Printed thereat*, (Kelmscott Press, 1898), p.1

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Stanley Morison, David McKitterick, ed., *Stanley Morison & D.B. Updike: Selected Correspondence* (London: Scholar Press 1979) p.185 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Linotype Matrix*, Volume 4, issue 3 (Mergenthaler Edition by Linotype GmbH, 2007) p.60 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rudolf Ruzicka, Linotype Fairfield Advertisement, *P.M. Magazine* (New York, February 1940) p.89 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Linotype Matrix*, Volume 4, issue 3 (Mergenthaler Edition by Linotype GmbH, 2007) p.60 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. William Morris, quoted from Roderick Cave, *The Private Press,* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971) p.133 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. D.B. Updike, David McKitterick, ed., *Stanley Morrison & D.B. Updike: Selected Correspondence* (London: Scholar Press 1979) p.x [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rudolph Ruzicka, *On the Aesthetic Values That Are To Be Found In The Printed Work of Bruce Rogers* (New York: The American Institute of Graphic Arts: 1939) pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)