**Typewriter**

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As with many other mechanically complex items for the office or study, the typewriter, which for commercial

purposes was first introduced by Scholes and Gidden in the USA in 1868, borrowed its design language from

the domestic sewing machine, developed in the early 1850s. Most typewriters had relatively overt displays of

working parts on a cast metal framework with pressed metal coverings. The working parts were bright nickel

plated, the framework and covers lacquered black with varied amounts of gold lining and transfer decoration.

There was considerable variation in the mechanics of early typewriters as different makers and patentees

jockeyed for position in the market. Many typed from below, whilst others, such as the Hansen “Writing Ball,”

had idiosyncratic key positions and therefore appearance. By the early twentieth century the “Remington”

style typewriter, with QWERTY keyboard and the type striking the paper on a roller directly ahead of the keys,

allowing the typist to read the typing as it was struck, had become completely dominant.

Design began to move away from the sewing-machine aesthetic in the 1940s and 50s, most notably by

Olivetti under the design leadership of Marcello Nizzoli who encased the machine in rounded forms with its

framework largely concealed. Black lacquer was replaced by colored enamels, typically in muted tones of tan,

blue, and green. Set by the Lexicon 80 of 1948, the Olivetti aesthetic was to dominate typewriter design for

twenty years. In 1969 Olivetti was to further innovate in typewriter design with the Valentine portable. This

machine, designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry King, made use of injection-molded plastics and was colored

bright red with yellow ribbon reel covers. The significance of this design was its pioneering attempt to make a

piece of “serious” office equipment young-looking and fun, a portent of changes in attitude to office design

more generally.

Although the Valentine sold well, it was an exception; most typewriters continued to be far less

dramatic in use of color, the forms becoming more rectilinear. The final chapter of typewriter design was

dominated by the electric golf-ball machine, where the type was cast into a ball that printed through a dry-ink

coated plastic tape rather than a wet-ink saturated ribbon. The first golf-ball machine was the IBM “Selectric”

of 1961, its case designed by Eliot Noyes. Being electro-mechanical, the golf-ball machine could be “touch

typed,” with minimal force on the keys (which were now really buttons). These machines were entirely cased

in plastic. Initially they were colored in the same sort of tones as Olivetti had established, but in the 1970s and

80s they had become dominated by shades of cream to light gray. The Selectric was last made in 1986, but its

rectilinear form and colorways were to establish an aesthetic which was continued in early desktop

computers.

In all industrially developed countries the typewriter is now obsolete, replaced by the far more

advanced and versatile word processing of the personal computer, both in desktop and laptop (portable)

forms. However, the traditional typewriter continues to have one huge advantage over the computer, it needs

no more power than the human finger, therefore it will always have a place wherever electricity supplies

cannot be relied upon.

**References and further reading**

Vangool, Janie. 2015. *The Typewriter: A Graphic History of the Beloved Machine*. Calgary: Uppercase Pub. Inc.