

WHERE ARE the Women IN TYPE DESIGN?

COMMENTARY
by VERENA GERLACH

Being one of the rare type designers who happen to be female, I occasionally get this question from other (mostly male) designers. It's difficult to find other female designers with whom to exchange experiences and share knowledge.

The most common explanation is that type design is a "technical" profession. This is rubbish. Yes, font production does involve some programming, but, as a whole, doesn't type design have much more to do with the patience required by classic female handicrafts, like needlework and knitting?

My guess is that the real answer is found in gender-specific socialization, both in general society and in the type design scene itself.

In Germany, women and men are still not treated equally. Young boys are rewarded much earlier in life, and for much less, than most young girls. Being born as a boy — and therefore a son and heir — is for many parents an achievement in itself. They project this sense of worth on their son. Everybody is already proud of him, by default.

As a daughter, you have to prove that you deserve being rewarded. Yet even a concerted effort may not lead to a positive reaction from adults. The girl also isn't worthy of the same support because she won't carry the family's name.

Looking at type design as a working process, you must eventually decide when the typeface is finished. For most designers it's difficult to find an end and be satisfied with the result. Then you add the expectations of others, amplified by the gender gap. Women constantly think they could do better. It's never enough, they could get judged, they have to please, etc.

There are many of women who have great type designs tucked away in their drawers. They don't dare to show them to the public.

The same is with women on the stages of type conferences. For most guys, public speaking is less of a problem. They are used to show off with every little bit they produced, knowing they will get rewarded — and if not, well, it's no big deal.

I have the impression that this imbalance in our upbringing is stronger in Germany than elsewhere in the Western world. It could be one reason why some great female designers with German or Swiss roots had to get out and become successful abroad.

Another aspect is networking, which is still a male thing, and which women typically aren't taught. They tend to be solitary fighters, which of course has a negative effect on their careers.

Later, if that career does progress, our social structure simply makes it very difficult for women to combine the time working on a typeface with having a family, given the mother's traditional role as primary caregiver. You find a lot of over-qualified female design-

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ers doing production for type foundries, which gives them a financial security in their beloved profession.

One more sad truth: as a lesser known woman, the (male) type scene just doesn't take you seriously. You are just a "student" who fancies the cool "boys". You can sit down and listen to them, but you won't be asked to give your opinion on "serious" type issues. This attitude may seem prehistoric, but honestly, I've heard it often.

The solution? Women should be aware of self-censorship, be less hard on themselves, and continue to maintain a high standard of quality without hiding in their chambers. (And some guys shouldn't jump on stage at the drop of a hat. These changes alone would enhance the quality of some type events.)

I had to do this too. I pushed myself to give lectures and presentations and face the reaction of other type designers. And now, I like it a lot.

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