

Professor Michael Twyman

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Professor Michael Twyman

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Professor Michael Twyman, who has died aged 91, pioneered the study of typography as an academic discipline in a British university. His vision for the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading intertwined history, theory and practice in graphic design, typeface design, information design and book design. It was innovative in its interdisciplinarity, drawing on linguistics, psychology, social and economic history and other social sciences and humanities to address ‘design for reading’.



Figure 1. Michael at James Mosley’s 80th birthday celebration in 2015. Photograph courtesy: Paul Luna.

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As a student in the School of Art at Reading he was inspired by courses in printing, book production, typography and print making as well as European ‘grand tours’ under direction of the art historian, Leopold Ettlinger. It became clear to Michael that teaching typography needed a rigorous approach not unlike the teaching of architecture that combined history, theory and practice. This required a collaborative approach, and in the early years he drew in particular on the expertise and skills of Ernest Hoch, an Austrian émigré and pioneer of information design; James Mosley, historian, bibliographer and librarian; Ken Garland, a graphic designer of remarkable range; Gillian Riley, book designer and historian; and Cliff Morris, master printer, to establish what was then the Typography Unit. Reading began to award degrees in Typography & Graphic Communication in 1968 (previously they were Fine Art awards), and the Unit achieved full departmental status in 1974.

An important innovation was the Reading PhD, one of the very first in any design field, and which became a springboard for international collaboration and influence on other institutions.

From the late 1970s Michael worked with PhD students to enhance theoretical and historical dimensions of typographic design and graphic communication. His innovative and excellent PhD provision was recognised through external studentships, including from Brazil that led to collaborations and formal agreements with Brazilian universities and individuals, keen to extend the reach of Michael’s work.

Michael’s commitment to cross- and inter-disciplinarity aligns with this journal. He corresponded with Merald Wrolstad supporting first *The Journal of Typographic Research* and its transition to *Visible Language* in 1971, and then engaged with Sharon Poggenpohl when she became editor in 1987. His contributions to *Visible Language* reflect his interests in the theoretical aspects of typography and graphic communication. His “Typography without words” (Twyman, 1981) remains a key text for explaining typographic hierarchy and differentiation. He contributed to the 1985 discussion about “Graphic design: computer graphics. What do they mean? How do they fit?” — another example of cross-disciplinary engagement (Twyman, 1985).

Michael’s extensive range of published outputs reflected the ‘history, theory, practice’ mantra that had guided him from the outset (see Nash & Twyman, 2024). In the 1970s, he wrote a now-classic milestone of printing and graphic design history, *Printing 1770–1970*, the complex illustrated design of which he also undertook, as well as seminal papers on the theory of graphic language, and important contributions to the pedagogy of design. He wrote many award-winning books and papers about the history of lithographic printing. Michael was honoured to be asked to deliver the British Library’s Panizzi lectures in 2000. After his retirement from the University in 1998 he was able to pursue his ambition of writing a book about lithographic printing in



Figure 2. Michael lecturing in 2002. Photograph courtesy: Paul Luna.

colour: *A History of Chromolithography: Printed Colour for All*, (Twyman, 2013). His most recent publication, based on books and ephemera from his personal collection was *Reproducing the Bayeux Tapestry Over Three Centuries* (Twyman, 2024).

Michael believed passionately that his students should engage with and learn from looking at original documents and artefacts. Thanks to him, working in close collaboration with university librarians and archivists, the University of Reading holds outstanding collections in printing, graphic and typographic design, and publishing history and printed ephemera. To define and raise the profile of printed ephemera, Michael initiated and directed the University's Centre for Ephemera Studies, opened by Lord Briggs in 1993, that became a national focus for research into non-book documents, both manuscript and printed. The ground-breaking *Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (Twyman, 2000) led to collaboration with museums and libraries, including the Library of Congress, in developing descriptive frameworks for the cataloguing of ephemera.

‘Design for reading’ continues to integrate history, theory and practice and remains relevant and significant for students today. Michael believed that to design effectively for reading we need to know how people read and what makes it easier for them to see and engage with text; why people read raises user perspectives — reading for pleasure, learning or information; what people read encourages forays into the past to discover more about readers and document types. His beliefs were exemplified in his research and in his teaching. Students engaged in user-centred research, concerned with how the needs of particular readers might be, using methods derived from psychology and social science. Reading alumni have raised the profile of typographic heritage in their writing and exhibitions drawing on Michael’s approach to close reading, analysis, comparison, synthesis and curation.

Michael’s legacy is not just the Department he founded but a unique approach to visual communication as rational thinking that is transferable and applicable to any new media or platform, that can respond to the challenge of the digital economy through focused research and relevant application through strong links with industry, and that has developed the discipline through high-quality research, publications and collections. The integration of history, theory and practice distinguished Michael’s work. He encouraged ways of looking, believing that learning from the past feeds into the future. He believed that ‘thinking about the reader that isn’t you’ reminds us to think about users, circumstances of use and other contextual factors when we are designing. In an increasingly digital world he championed craft skills and making and that when ‘designing for reading’, that students be encouraged to make documents to understand their material attributes. Finally, Michael’s commitment to and support for doctoral research is something to emulate and encourage, and through this find ways to introduce his work to new generations of scholars.

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Author

Sue Walker is Professor of Typography at the University of Reading. She became Head of the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication when Michael retired in 1998 before assuming other leadership roles at Reading. She undertakes research in information design and health communication, and Marie Neurath's Isotype books for children.