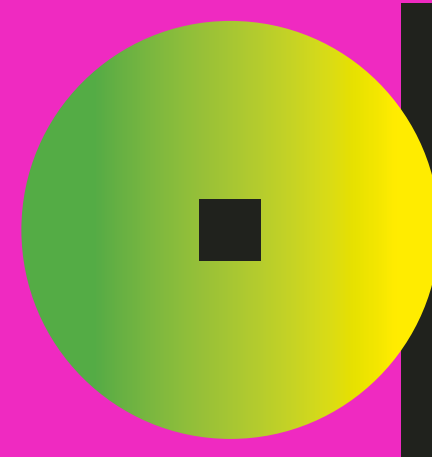
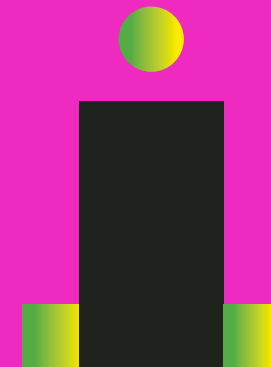
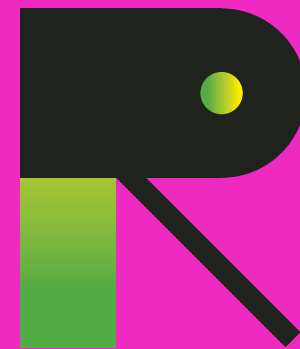
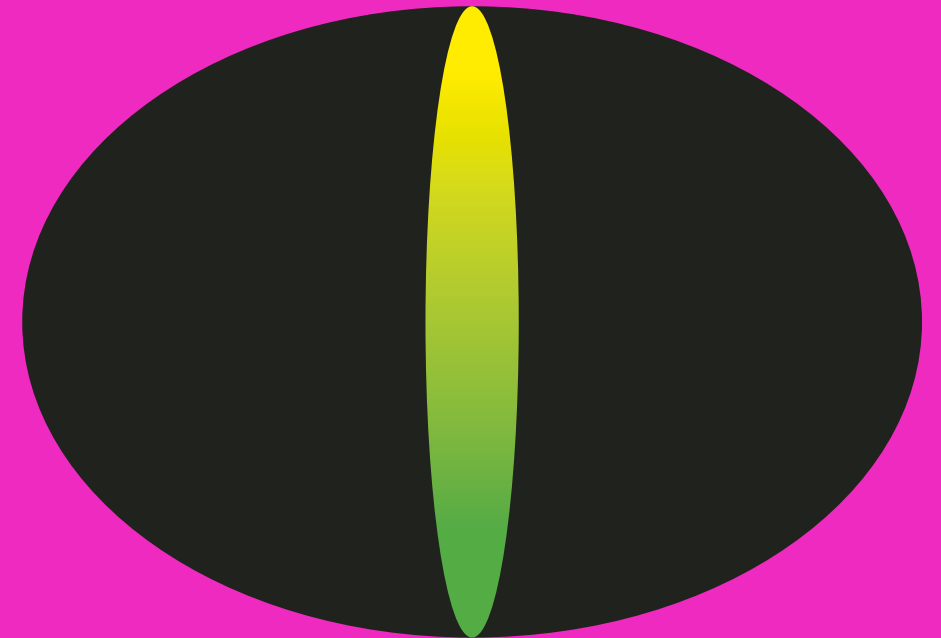
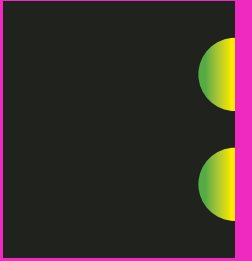


GERRIT NOORDZIJ





Arranger of the Type Universe
A personal in memoriam of
Gerrit Noordzij
(April 2, 1931–March 17, 2022)

In his speech, after being honored with the 26th Type Directors Medal at the ATypI Amsterdam 2013 conference, Gerrit Noordzij modestly said he expected to become famous, but not before his death. ‘New ideas of the sort that could justify fame not only require more than a lifetime to be accepted; they also require a new point of view. [...] a new concept demands a new generation’; according to Gerrit. He went on to say that the TDC Medal changed his outlook with the chance that he would enjoy fame while still in this world. Of course he did: Gerrit’s theories and teaching methods are embraced all over the world. For example, The Stroke: Theory of Writing has been translated into many languages. In this booklet Gerrit characteristically describes typography as writing with prefabricated letters.¹ Moreover, there is the Gerrit Noordzij Prize for extraordinary contributions to the fields of type design, typography, and type education.

It must have been in 1980 that Gerrit entered his classroom of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, better known as KABK, with a copperplate and burins. If I remember correctly, he blinded a window with a sheet of transparent paper to filter the light and then started engraving. Probably for *Deliciae*, a collection of 12 engravings after models by the illustrious seventeenth-century calligrapher Jan van den Velde, which appeared in 1984. For this edition it was decided not to reproduce the original copperplate prints in offset, but to re-engrave them (besides Gerrit there were two other engravers). Gerrit did not shy away from doing this exceptionally delicate job in a noisy classroom, because he never seemed to doubt his skills, control, and insight.

Two years earlier, I had become his student, actually by chance. I did admission for the Fine Arts

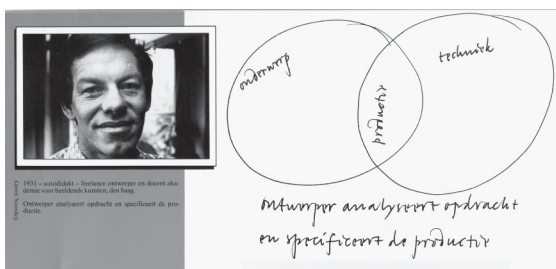
department of the KABK, but the committee on duty concluded that I was more of a graphic designer. I was familiar with figure drawing and painting, but writing and type design were completely new to me. Gerrit was a striking figure and a very passionate teacher: he impressed my fellow students and me with his extensive knowledge and skills. I used to put sheets of blank paper on my table for him to demonstrate with broad nib, pointed pen, and flat brush. If my table was empty now and then, Gerrit would use something else to write on, such as a paper towel. The result was always impeccable.

Gerrit often used texts from the Bible for his examples –not only for the ones he made for his students, but also in type specimens. I believe he was essentially Reformed Protestant (my background too, hence the recognition). Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd) and Isaiah 43:1 are quoted on the obituary sent out by his family. In general, the Bible plays an important role in Gerrit’s oeuvre: he designed the 1977 postage stamp to commemorate the Delft Bible, the first printed Dutch-language book, dating exactly 500 years earlier. He also designed *Rembrandt en de Bijbel*, published in 1984, in which religious work by the master painter was combined with the biblical texts on which they are based.

When I listen to the characteristic, somewhat stubborn organ music of Johann Ludwig Krebs, Bach’s favorite pupil, I sometimes associate it with Gerrit’s work. Listen, for example, to Krebs’ wonderful and typical chorale arrangement ‘Von Gott will ich nicht lassen.’²

Whatever the subject within his field of vision, Gerrit became an expert. In 1979 Gerrit wrote *Zeis en Sikkel: De kunst van het maaien* (‘Scythe and Sickle: The Art of Mowing’). That he had really become a specialist in this field became apparent when a friend and I visited Gerrit in the summer of 1982. To set up an ad-hoc camping spot in an orchard near his house, Gerrit drove ahead of us on a small bicycle with a scythe on his shoulder. Then he professionally mowed the field where we pitched our tents. Those were the days.

Gerrit was self-taught when it came to moving, as he also taught himself to engrave –at least as far as I know. He had become a type designer on his own strength after obtaining a bookbinder’s diploma and a short letters-oriented study at the KABK. The fact that he had to discover a lot for himself must have influenced his personal arrangement of the type universe. Gerrit made a classification based on the contrast and contrast flow from writing with the broad



nib (which he called ‘translation’) and with the flexible-pointed pen (‘expansion’): ‘Contrast is governed by the techniques of handwriting, but it may be modified in design. A range of drawings with gradually increased and reduced contrast reveals all the possibilities of typedesign.’³ This idea eventually culminated in his famous cube, which includes all variants from high to low: ‘The ranges of sort of contrast, increase of contrast and reduction of contrast can be set out on the dimensions of a cube [...]. My description of the cube is a mixture of technology, design, cultural history, and psychology with a flavor of cultural anthropology; a square kind of fortune-telling.’⁴

In *Zeis en Sikkel* Gerrit’s typical sense of humor is clearly present: ‘Blades of grass are attached to the ground with their undersides, so that they cannot be blown away. But they are just loose at the top.’⁵ Another example can be found in a booklet accompanying a retrospective of his work in the University Library of Amsterdam in 1980, entitled *Het verzamelde misverstand van Gerrit Noordzij* (‘The Collected Misconception of Gerrit Noordzij’). ‘Putting things upside down does not make them always clearer, but often funnier’, can be read on the illustrated cover. Both booklets were ‘typeset’ in Gerrit’s beautiful broad-nib handwriting. In line, his classes at the KABK were always laced with humor, which was a good counterpoint to the serious depth of his theories.

Gerrit strongly advocated handwriting as the underlying

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1 Photo from *Vergeetboek* by Gerrit Noordzij (1995) taken by William Hoogteyling.

2 From *Het kader van grafisch ontwerpers. Lecturis 10'* (‘The framework of Graphic Designers’), a publication intended to gain insight in the views of Dutch graphic designers. Gerrit writes/illustrates: ‘designer analyzes task and specifies the production.’

3 Cover design by Gerrit Noordzij for a ‘Magazine for Graphic Culture’ from 1979. The layout of the entire publication was in the humorous hands of Gerrit, and he made all illustrations as well.

force for type design. He was convinced that while developing an understanding of type through handwriting is not necessarily easy, it is the best way to make complex and subtle matters clear: ‘Convention is no longer a restricting fence but a vast territory.’⁶ This implies that writing explores the basic structure of type, on which the designer can develop his own specific idiom. The alternative method to gain more insight is to study existing fonts. However, this could severely limit the designer, as it will be difficult to imagine what is possible outside of the models examined.

Gerrit’s students, whom he mentioned in his TDC-Medal speech, proved that writing is a solid foundation for type design. Teaching helped Gerrit to develop and refine his theories, but the results of his students also evangelized his ideas and methods. I remember how pleased he was with the small exhibition of the Letters] working group, consisting of former students who wanted to help and learn from each other, at the ATypl Basel conference in 1986. The displayed type designs provided solid proof of the quality of his teaching methods. These methods are used today by many of his former students and it is interesting to see how Gerrit’s essentially recalcitrant ideas have been canonized by them.

As a personal side note and, in line with Gerrit, a bit contradictory with my tutor: while it is clear that handwritten models formed the basis for movable type, there is a quintessential difference between the two forms, which is that in movable-type characters need to be positioned on distinct rectangles. Although there was undeniably a direct relationship between roman and italic type and their handwritten precursors, the Renaissance punchcutters had to deal with all kinds of technical constraints that calligraphers were not aware of. This raises the question of whether certain details in roman and italic type are the result of these constraints rather than the interpretation of calligraphic models.

In 1987 an exhibition took place in the Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum. Work by five prominent Dutch type designers was on display, namely Chris Brand, Bram de Does, Dick Dooijes, Sem Hartz, and Gerard Unger. Gerrit’s type designs were not present, only because the criterion was whether work was produced for a typesetting-machine manufacturer and thus available to the end-user market. I know Gerrit was negotiating with Monotype when I was his student. He once showed a relevant typeface of his hand and explained how he structured the capitals of the bold

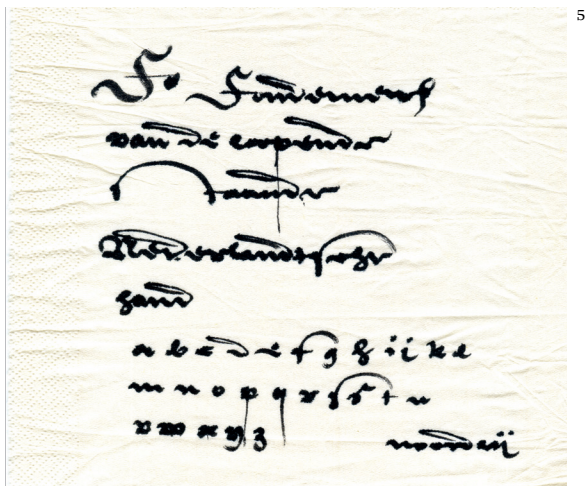
to act as small caps for the medium weight. I do not know why the typeface in question was not licensed by Monotype in the end. I cannot rule out that Gerrit’s stubbornness played a role in this. However, in the preface to the booklet accompanying the exhibition, John Dreyfus did not forget to mention Gerrit and his international significance as a teacher of type design.⁷

At the time, Gerrit mainly applied his typefaces to the numerous book covers he designed. For this, he had adapted a photo enlarger so that it was in principle comparable to Berthold’s Staromat photographic headline setter. He used orthochromatic 35mm film on which the letters and their character widths were recorded. As with the Staromat, strips of photo paper were wetted with developer and the letters were positioned with a red filter before exposure. In the end, the paper was further developed and fixed. Gerrit used a small Aristo drawing board and a glue stick to position the final paper strips on the cover designs. He did this very quickly and efficiently, the proof of which I saw. Gerrit later digitized his type designs with Ikarus M: he clearly enthusiastically embraced the personal computer at an early stage. Eventually, his fonts became available exclusively in digital format through The Enschedé Font Foundry, run by his youngest son Peter Matthias.

Gerrit was very handy, not only as a bookbinder, and, like the aforementioned photosetter, often made his own tools. For example, he modified the refill of a Parker Jotter by removing the ballpoint and fitting a small diamond to the end, so that he could use the easy-to-carry pen for glass engraving. In addition, in the early eighties he used pressed solid polystyrene to create molds for type design, i.e., advanced French curves. In my opinion this creativity was exemplary of the way in which he always wanted to shape the world to his will.

Undoubtedly, sooner or later a biography will be in the making that will do justice to the idiosyncratic character and impressive oeuvre of Gerrit Noordzij. The type designer’s current profession would not have looked the same without him —certainly not to me.

—Dr. Frank E. Blokland

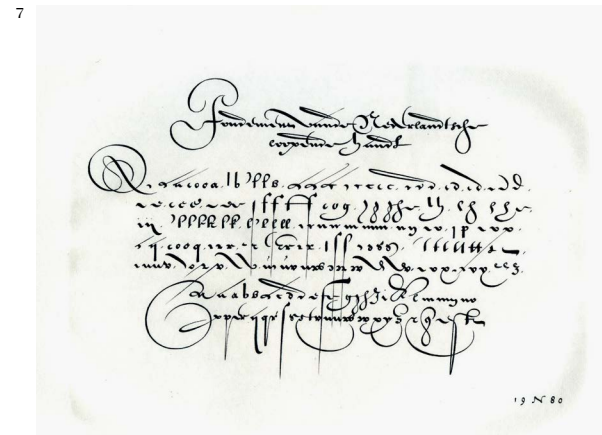
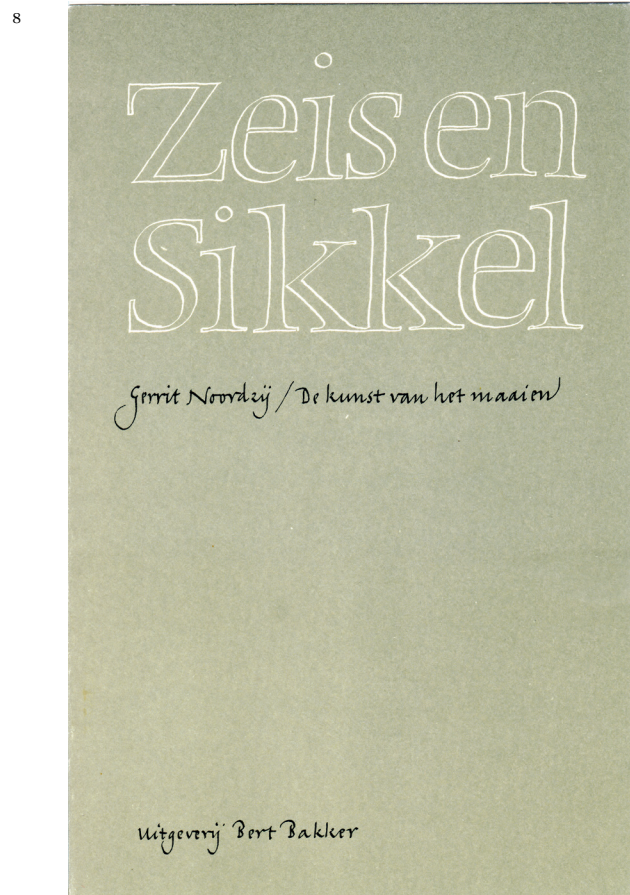
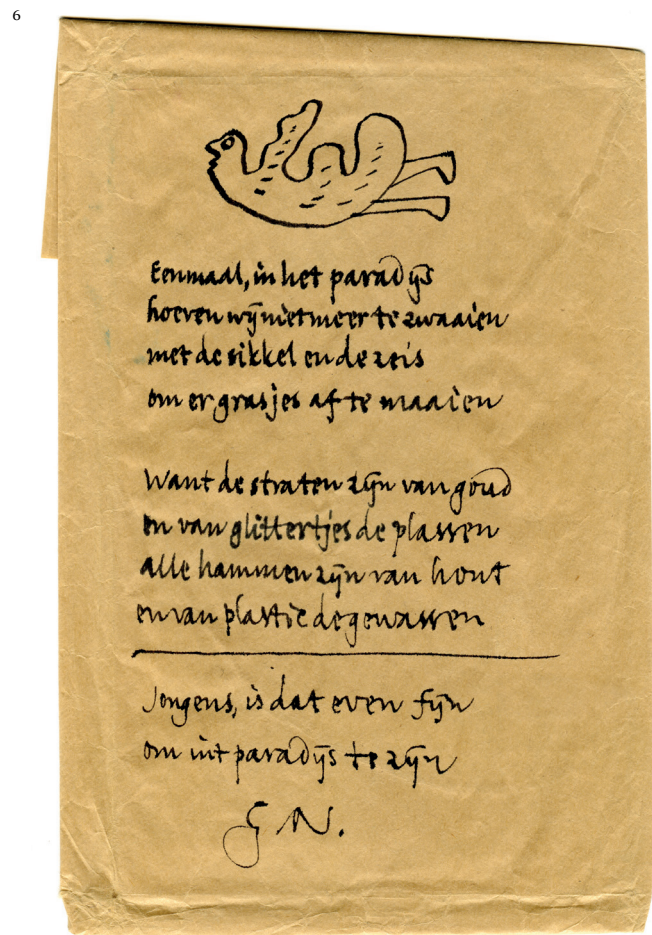


4 Calligraphy with brush on a paper towel, made by Gerrit during a class at the KABK around 1978/1979.

5 Calligraphy on a napkin, made by Gerrit during a diner in a restaurant in the mid 1980s.

NOTES

- Gerrit Noordzij, *The Stroke: Theory of Writing* (London: Hyphen Press, 2005), p.49
- <https://youtu.be/7YuRThmHO7o>
- Gerrit Noordzij, ‘A Program for Teaching Letterforms’, *Dossier A-Z 75: Association Typographique Internationale* (Andenne: ATypl, 1973), p.86
- Gerrit Noordzij, ‘The Shape of the Stroke’, *Raster Imaging and Digital Typography II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 34–42 (p.38)
- Gerrit Noordzij, *Zeis en Sikkel: de kunst van het maaïen* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1979), p.65
- Noordzij, ‘A Program for Teaching Letterforms’, p.86
- Mathieu Lommen, *Letterontwerpers* (Haarlem: Joh. Enschedé en Zonen, 1987), p.17



6 In 1984 I bought Zeis en Sikkel, and Gerrit not only signed the booklet, but also decorated the packing paper in his characteristic style.

8 Signed French title page of Zeis en Sikkel.

9 Engraving by Gerrit from 1972, apparently after a model from Martin Schongauer (ca.1450–1491), and hand printed by him in 1975.

7 Engraving by Gerrit from 1980 for Deliciae, which was published in 1984.