

FINANCIAL TIMES

# HOW TO SPEND IT

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THE DESIGN ISSUE



# THE FIX



PROFILE

## “I DISCOVERED THIS NERDY WORLD OF PAPER AND INK”

Ramdane Touhami is an artist, DJ, designer and co-founder of Buly 1803. But perhaps his biggest passion is the disappearing world of print. By *Mark C O'Flaherty*

PORTRAIT BY YASUYUKI TAKAGI



French-Moroccan artist Ramdane Touhami, in his signature woollen hat, has a boundless energy and beguiling spiel. He is the ultimate ideas man with interests in beauty, music, fashion and furniture. As part of his process in shaping the fragrant and ornate universe of French apothecary brand Buly 1803 – which he established with his wife Victoire de Taillac with a mission to revive 19th-century design and traditions – he selects everything, from the incense in his Sacre candles to the textured letterpress packaging around the bars of soap. His hand is evident in all he does.

If he were a typeface, he would be the antithesis of all things Helvetica.

He describes his publishing project WAM, which he launched late last year, as “an ego-centric magazine”: it is filled with stories about Touhami’s world, complete with an advert for Gucci where he stars as the model. But the heavyweight glossy is also a masterful portfolio of print technique and typography. Most notable are its purpose-designed fonts, as beautiful as any fashion spread. “I like to speak directly to a small crowd,” he says. “We created a single page using just our Guitry typeface, rendered by a super-complicated, old-fashioned five-colour printing process. We did 3,500 pages, individually. Most people wouldn’t notice, but those who get it really want to know how we achieved it.”

While he remains best known for Buly 1803, a niche but global luxury entity, Touhami’s secretive Paris-based design agency, Art Recherche Industrie (ARI), and his printing press based in Switzerland and Paris, the Société Helvétique d’Impression Typographique (playfully referred to as “SHIT”), have enormous industry influence. “We work for a few private clients who are so big, we can’t talk about them,” he says. He also keeps the identity of his artisans a closely guarded secret. “There’s a guy I work with on fonts who I call ‘Rasputype’. He looks like Rasputin and lives alone in Jura. He is



Above: Ramdane Touhami in his Tokyo office. Left: WAM, Touhami’s “ego-centric” magazine. Bottom left: Buly 1803 Double Pommade Concrète hand cream

autistic so the idea of coming to the office panics him – he doesn’t even have a mobile phone. I send him stuff, and he sends back the finished type. He is amazing.”

Three years ago, around the same time that a luxury fashion group took a minority stake in Buly 1803, Touhami got deeper into the world of print. Hoping to create packaging with a distinctive letterpress element, he found a ramshackle press in Lausanne that could execute his exacting standards. And fell head over heels in love.

“The owner was in his 80s and suffering from Alzheimer’s,” he recalls. “I asked him if he would sell the business to me, and he said no. But then I went back and he had forgotten our meeting. He asked if I wanted to buy the press.”

Of course, Touhami agreed, and began assembling a team who could work with the rare and bewildering Heidelberg machines,





Top: Touhami at work. Top centre: his printing press, the Société Helvétique d'Impression Typographique. Above: the Lanserhoff typeface created by ARI

and develop the Touhami aesthetic in new ways. Today, there's the press in Lausanne, and a second legacy workshop in Paris that he collaborates with. He works closely with print expert Benoist Dallay, who helped foster his current obsessions. "I had already worked with him for Buly," Touhami explains. "After his own company crashed, he came to work with me – he works with the last letterpress machines of their kind in the world. Through him, I discovered this nerdy world of paper and ink."

**THE TYPOGRAPHY IN WAM** is a revelation – the result of fastidious research, as you'd expect from a man who once trekked to a monastery on Mount Athos and bedded down with its monks until they would give him samples of the incense they produce. "I spent a lot of last summer photographing the lettering in graveyards in the north of Italy," he says. "I've been doing that for 20 years. We created the Armorial font this year, based on a 19th-century logo. Then there's Ari Dirty Mix, which is based on our Ari Clean font, printed at our factory and rescanned, so it shifts the detail slightly. Few people will see that detail, but it makes us happy." He is now working with a Swiss typographer for text in Japanese. "It's so complicated, and that really excites me," he says.

Touhami is never off duty. Perversely, he finds himself most inspired when he is forced to stop working. He goes on regular fasting retreats to the Lanserhof Tegernsee medical resort in Bavaria. When the strange, delirious energy that comes with being nil-by-mouth kicks in, he goes hiking. "I always have members of my staff staying in hotels nearby," he laughs. "The last time, I was inspired to create our Lanserhoff typeface," he laughs. Just call it inside-font humour.



In a digital age, Touhami has an eye for type that is fresh and distinctive on screen as well as by hand. He is creating differences. "I am a typologist," he says. "I am not a typographer – I don't have the techniques myself, but I have the team, and I know how to use them. I want to add layers of complication to things. Look at how brands are simplifying things, with the typography at Balenciaga, Berluti and Givenchy. In the 1970s, typographers like Lou Dorfsman and Herb Lubalin created fonts for each individual purpose. It was

### "I SPENT LAST SUMMER PHOTOGRAPHING THE LETTERING IN GRAVEYARDS IN ITALY"

all crafted, in the same way that Mies van der Rohe made the Barcelona Chair for the Barcelona Pavilion. Design has to go back to being

like that. My use of type, calligraphy, embossing, gold foil and marbling is the opposite of simplification." The team at ARI has learnt how to tune into Touhami's wavelength, helping to tweak and amplify his style. "To work in Ramdane's world, you have to be very quick," says graphic designer Jan Abellan, Touhami's right-hand at the agency. "Sometimes he communicates with a single word. We might be in an old bookstore or looking at



EAU DE LA BELLE HALEINE, BULY 1803'S MOUTHWASH

engraved stones, but if I hear him say 'Huf...!', I know it means 'Dude, we have to digitise this, make the whole alphabet, develop the lowercase and the numbers'. I remember once he texted me with pictures of old hand-painted German movie titles from the 1930s – probably the only trace left on earth of this typeface. We developed a whole font from them."

Touhami's obsession with print and paper is a costly indulgence. "By using letterpress printing for our packaging, the production cost multiplies by three or four times," he admits. But it's the physicality of presentation that makes the work special.

In an age of digital ennui, when the idea of a Zoom meeting fills everyone with existential dread, Touhami likes to keep it real. "I always turn up to a meeting with everything printed," he says, concluding. "We presented something to an American client recently, and I had it perfectly executed on paper. The impact was 100 times more powerful than it would have been on screen. And everyone in the room left saying 'Wow!'" ■HTSI

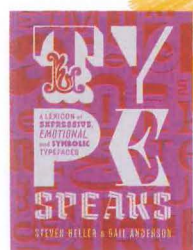


TOUHAMI IN A GUCCI ADVERT IN WAM

## BOOKS

# Fonts of knowledge

Six great reads for graphic-design obsessives. By Christina Ohly Evans



### Type Speaks: A Lexicon of Expressive, Emotional, and Symbolic Typefaces

By Steven Heller and Gail Anderson

With computers replacing pens, and hundreds of new fonts available through digital foundries, typefaces are increasingly used to express a wide array of emotions and ideas. For anyone interested in symbolism and composing messages with words, this book is an indispensable guide to modern communication. Abrams, published in June, £21.99



### Montblanc: Inspire Writing

By Alexander Fury

In the modern age of technology, the pen remains a powerful tool for creativity and expression. This 216-page book pays homage to some of history's greatest writers, artists and explorers through the lens of *How To Spend It* contributor and author Alex Fury, while exploring master pen-maker Montblanc's archive of images, letters and still-life photography by Laziz Hamani. Assouline, £175



### How Many Female Type Designers Do You Know? I Know Many and Talked to Some!

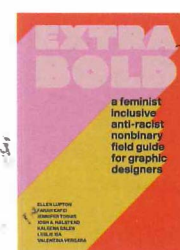
By Yulia Popova

This book explores the important work of late-19th- and early-20th-century female designers who, until recently, have remained largely unrecognised. It also includes interviews with 14 contemporary creatives – Louise Fili, Veronika Burian, and Zuzana Licko among them – who shed light on their role in the industry. Onomatopoe, £24



### The World's Best Typography: The 41st Annual of the Type Directors Club

If you're into "excellent typography, nothing else", the latest edition by the Type Directors Club – an organisation founded in 1946 to celebrate excellence in graphic design – is a must-read. Highlighting the winning work of today's talent, this colourful tome celebrates everything, from posters and packaging to interactive applications and corporate branding. Verlag Hermann Schmidt, €69



### Extra Bold: A Feminist, Inclusive, Anti-racist, Nonbinary Field Guide for Graphic Designers

By Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Tobias

A practical guide for career designers – or those just obsessed with type – *Extra Bold* is "part zine, part text, part manifesto". It presents interviews, typefaces and projects by a diverse array of designers, while the playful illustrations by Jennifer Tobias bring the book to life. Princeton Architectural Press, published in May, £25



### Louise Fili: Inspiration and Process and Design

Iconic graphic designer Louise Fili takes the reader on a visual voyage through her oeuvre. Her process (which begins with meticulous research into vintage typography) melds old and new elements to create her signature style – one that has graced postage stamps, wine bottles, New York City subway walls and some well-known restaurants. Princeton Architectural Press/Moleskine Books, published in June, £18.99