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A celebration of sans

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various designers

Sans (FR) 1628–1924

By Sébastien Morlighem Design by Sébastien Morlighem and Élodie Boyer. Published by Ésad & Les Éditions Non Standard, €35



If, by setting out its content on its cover, a book could be said to wear ‘its heart on its sleeve’, then that is what *Sans (FR) 1628–1924* does. The visual essay it presents starts on the front cover and concludes on the back, with none of the formal preliminaries of a title, contents or editorial blurb. The 356 double black and white printed pages are wholly devoted instead to a broadly chronological arrangement of 234 images, which show the evolution of the idea of the sans serif letterform as manifest in French visual culture between the years 1628 and 1924. They draw from books and publications, printed ephemera, engravings, paintings and, perhaps most evocatively, from contemporary street photography. A short textual rationale and historical contextualisation follow the images along with a thorough set of captioned thumbnails by way of sharing the image sources, and an imprint page to acknowledge the collaborative efforts and merit of this publication as a work of design and print. It is this fusion of rigour with artistic practice that so distinguishes the book, and reflects the two sides of its key protagonist Sébastien Morlighem, both as a disciplined scholar of typographic history and as a lover of the book.

Right. One of many spreads from *Sans (FR) 1628–1924* featuring street scenes rich in the letterforms that once shaped everyday French life. Here a giant shadowed sans illuminates a ghostly 1903 Eugène Atget photograph, *Place Saint-André-des-Arts et rue Suger*, Paris. Top. A detail from *Le Courrier français* (1835) celebrates the more tactile relationship we share with the sans serif letter via the newspaper page. It reminds us, too, of the longevity of a basic visual grammar of news, and the power of a headline sans, still very much in evidence today.



In focusing on how sans serif letterforms have actually been used, the book avoids a common problem of typographic scholarship, namely the shaping of knowledge by industry cognoscenti who have a vested interest in tastemaking by ascribing value to types that might actually prove to be commercially unsuccessful or, vice versa, in writing popular types out of history for reasons of snobbishness. And so, sans serif typefaces, with their associations with the ‘jobbing’ printing of everyday business and advertising, were deemed inferior to the book types and associated historiography that early twentieth century machine type manufacturers needed printers to buy into. Here, Morlighem redresses some of that imbalance, championing an approach of ‘looking for oneself’ and assembling a trail from which to start. By maintaining his typographic gaze across the knowledge-silos of the histories of art, photography, and printing, there are echoes too of the breadth of scholarship of Nicolette Gray. Like her, Morlighem builds a convincing visual case for the contribution of lettering to our everyday landscapes.

Yet the images are not presented as a catalogue of research findings. This is a publication that celebrates the form of the book itself, being co-published by Ésad (L’École supérieure d’art et de design d’Amiens), where the author teaches, and Les Éditions Non Standard, who previously published *Essaïme*, an even more esoteric personal project of Morlighem. And so, a precise chronology is rejected in favour of a more intuitive organisational thread, which Morlighem describes as, ‘an iconological approach’ whereby ‘editing and design are narrowly cooperating and mutually reinforcing a permanent learning process; selecting pictures, identifying patterns, sensing connivances, designing sequences’, akin, he argues, to creating a musical mixtape. Some source images are included as details, others are reversed out, while others fully exploit the shimmering qualities of print to enhance the evanescent qualities of the glass negatives from which many of the originals would have been formed. The debt to Walter Benjamin’s assemblage of images of Paris in his *Arcades Project* is clear, and is acknowledged in a quote from another Benjamin text that reminds us how ‘strength lies in improvisation’, especially apt given this was a project improvised during a pandemic lockdown. The sections are stitched but uncovered, still further reinforcing the sense of editorial open-endedness.

The short text is written in French with an accompanying translation into English. However, the literalness of the translation holds me at a distance, so that I am conscious of the spaces between expression and understanding. Given the heuristic ambitions of the project perhaps that is even appropriate? The completist in me will curse one day when I cannot find the bookmark which substitutes for a title page. I will need to be attentive. For attentiveness is what this book calls for on all levels. I applaud it.

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