

This 1000-word blog post was invited by the University of Brighton's Internationalising Design History research cluster and was published in April 2016. The published version can be found here:

<http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/idhbrighton/2016/04/13/bellapollenmostbeautifulbook/>

On producing the Most Beautiful Book in Switzerland

Anabella Pollen reflects on the collective process of book making in the wake of winning an international design award.

It's a prize that makes people laugh. The title, 'The Most Beautiful Swiss Books', strikes an odd note. What could be more subjective than rewarding beauty? And why is it located in Switzerland? When I learned in February 2016 that my book, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* had been awarded one of the 18 accolades of 2015, I felt as if I had won a sash in a pageant.

The prize, however, turned out to be much more impressive than its slightly antiquated and highly localised name suggests. Established in 1944 by celebrated Swiss typographer and book designer Jan Tschichold, perhaps most famous for remodelling the now iconic Penguin book covers, the prize has a venerable history and is judged by an elite jury. It is one of a number of design prizes awarded annually by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. Swiss graphic design has long held a highly regarded status in histories of modernism, with a distinctive identity marked by formality, austerity and precision. The Swiss prize was one of a number of European book design awards established in the mid-century, and it remains one of several national competitions with the same title. Winners of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books prizes are automatically entered into a global competition to compete against the Most Beautiful Books in the USA and Japan, for example. In a process with marked similarities to the rather less respectable Miss World competition, the eventual winner is awarded the Golden Letter, and crowned Most Beautiful Book in the World.

So how did a book written by a British national about a peculiarly English interwar camping, hiking and handicraft movement, largely based in the London suburbs, come to receive such an accolade?

It is thanks in no small part to the talents and nationality of the book's designer, Roland Brauchli, who is based in Basel and London. A gifted artist and Senior Lecturer in graphics at Ravensbourne, Roland is now a two-time winner of the Swiss prize, which is no small achievement given the hundreds of entries every year. It was my pleasure and privilege to work with Roland on the book's concept and design, alongside the substantial input of the publisher, Conor Donlon, and his talented assistant, book arts graduate, Anna Howard. While I wrote the book following several years of research, the editing of the book's extensive illustration sections was a collective endeavour.

This was a new way of working for me. For previous books, I have simply sent Word documents and image jpegs to a publisher, who then magically transforms them into a book shape. Although my other publications have delightful covers and I was able to choose the lead images, the design of the book itself – its dimensions, its font, its paper type – were all decided elsewhere. Working with Donlon Books was a different process entirely. Conor had a particular vision for the publication from the outset, based on his wide professional knowledge of artist's books and books-as-objects. Once I saw his previous publication – the beautifully executed *Malicious Damage*, a study of the defaced library books of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, which was also designed by Roland Brauchli, I knew they would treat the subject well. Conor and I also shared some common tastes and backgrounds; he originally trained and later lectured in fashion design at Central Saint Martins before working as assistant to photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. His art bookshop in Hackney features exactly the kinds of critical theory and esoteric literature that I have on my own shelves.

The process of developing the book's look was protracted, but pleasurably so. Every aspect of the publication was carefully thought through, from weight of paper and specially commissioned object photography within, to the flush binding and dyed paper block edges without. As I researched the design preferences of Kibbo Kift, who were fiercely aware of the power of the visual, I noted with interest that they promoted modernist type style in the 1920s, including Erbar-Grotesk, the earliest German sans serif. Roland eventually elected Nobel for the body text, a crisp and clear font that is

closely related in both period and geographical origins. We each brought inspirational books to planning meetings, looking in particular at *Meret Oppenheim: Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben einwickeln*, the 2013 study of the Swiss surrealist's archive, as well as German publications from the 1920s whose style and content echoed Kibbo Kift's interests in life reform and body culture. We pored over Pantone colour swatches to select the correct shade of green for dyed paper edges, just as Kibbo Kift had argued over the correct shade for their characteristic cloaks and jerkins. Ironically, given the Swiss focus of the prize, we spent some time considering as a potential cover image a very striking photograph by Angus McBean that showed a single hooded Kinsman silhouetted on a mountain in Switzerland. We eventually rejected it as a misleading image for an organisation so rooted in the English landscape. The final cover – a green-tinted McBean image of three Kinsmen making choreographed K-shapes with their bodies on Silbury Hill - expresses the playfulness and strangeness of Kibbo Kift under the book's title, which was rendered in a striking geometric font designed especially for the book by Roland.

The end result is a book that, I think, reflects the visual interests and stylistic tone of the group it examines without being a historical pastiche. The benefits of working as part of a creative team on a book as a creative project was not just the style of the final product; the process also had a knock-on effect on my writing. The pleasures of playing with non-chronological layouts led me to play with other conventions in the text (the first chapter, for example, is simply titled '?'). The input of the creative team at Donlon Books played a key role in the shaping of *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* and I'm delighted that we rightly share the winning spotlight in the beauty contest.

The Most Beautiful Swiss Books of 2015 can be seen in a travelling exhibition, which is accompanied by a specially commissioned publication. The award ceremony takes place at the exhibition launch in Zurich on 12 May 2016. The exhibition then travels to Ticino, Basel and Lausanne in Switzerland, and then on to venues in Copenhagen, Oslo, Paris, Venice and Vienna.

Annebella's book, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, is available direct from Donlon Books: <http://donlonbooks.com/products/the-kindred-of-the-kibbo-kift-intellectual-barbarians-by-annabella-pollen>