

## Diggin'

What did you find at the dirt this weekend?" is often heard first thing Monday morning in the House Industries office. The office is staffed by collectors, always looking for the odd magazine, book, poster or object to feed into a current or future project and "the dirt"—the local flea market so nicknamed because one finds the best deals in the dirt, not the paved, section—is a favored hunting ground. Given the preponderance of designers sharing their collections online through sites like Tumblr, FFFFound or Flickr, it's clear that we aren't the only ones finding inspiration in collecting. Whether it's a working library of books, a file of reference images or a penchant for thrift-store finds, the tendency to collect provides fodder for design work. In the areas of typeface design and lettering, where the notice of a small detail may become a body of work, a collection can be a personal "dirt"—a place to go digging for treasure.

To see how other designers pull from their collections while working, I asked several typeface designers and lettering artists to share what they collect and to talk about how their collections have influenced their work. Common was the sense that the work they produce and the objects they collect were joined, neither coming first but both growing organically out of their interests. Each brings an original viewpoint to their collection, which then becomes the starting point for a project.

Books are the obvious objects that many spend time amassing. "As much as I hate to give the exact answer one would expect, the only thing I collect is type specimen books," says Christian Schwartz, partner in Commercial Type. "The first one I bought was the famous 1923 American Type Founders specimen, and a bunch of other American specimens followed, before I branched out to European specimens." For Schwartz, this collection

has been essential to his practice. "I couldn't have designed FF Bau, a faithful revival of Schelter Grotesk, without the c. 1912 Schelter & Giesecke specimen that was my primary source."

Though he currently doesn't work on such strict revivals as much, Schwartz's work is still grounded in typographic history. For this, his collection of specimens has proven to be an invaluable resource. Schwartz gives his working process for Commercial Type's Graphik as an example. "I thought it would be interesting to look beyond the graphic design canon and the icons that everyone knows—Futura and Helvetica—to see what else had been done with these genres. There are some very interesting ideas to be found in the lesser-known examples of the geometric sans and the grotesk. Some were much more inventive than others, but each had its own individual charm, even when they weren't executed particularly well." In finding details that had been forgotten or had fallen out of fashion in different eras, Schwartz placed Graphik outside an exact period in type history; he created a design that is wholly modern but that also seems to have been unearthed from a previously unknown archive. Schwartz's skill in combining his references with modern ideas brings an echo of history to his work.

For others, collections ranged further from the typographic. The collection of printer and typeface designer Russell Maret focuses on "photos of letters, mainly mediæval European inscriptional lettering and *fin de siècle* signage; books about the history of lettering, principally pre-typographic lettering but also typographic lettering from 1450 until about 1830;

writing manuals, mostly in facsimile; and photos and books about pavement designs."

Unlike Schwartz, Maret's typefaces are only for use in the books he prints for his private press. His current work explores his long-standing



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A sampling of Andy Cruz's tiki mug collection, showing the various lettering styles that were employed on the mugs.



## typography

interest in early non-typographic alphabets. "One of my photographic archives centers on early syllabic alphabets, mainly early Greek, Cypro Syllabic and Linear B. In many of my non-typographic alphabets I reference forms from these older scripts that are not necessarily Roman characters but read as them nonetheless," he says.

Maret uses those alphabets to explore connections between the meaning of a word and the physical form of the printed word. In so doing, his books exhibit a love of letterform common among letter artists and typeface designers. His favorite piece from his collection is Emil Hübner's *Exempla Scripturae Epigraphicae Latinae* from 1885. "In it Hübner, an epigrapher with the German Academy, meticulously redraws thousands of classical inscriptions, dividing them chronologically so that you get a real sense of the alphabetic changes that occurred between emperors. It's also very charmingly obsessive." Much like Hübner, Maret's work pays homage to inscriptional lettering but also extends its history into his own time period.

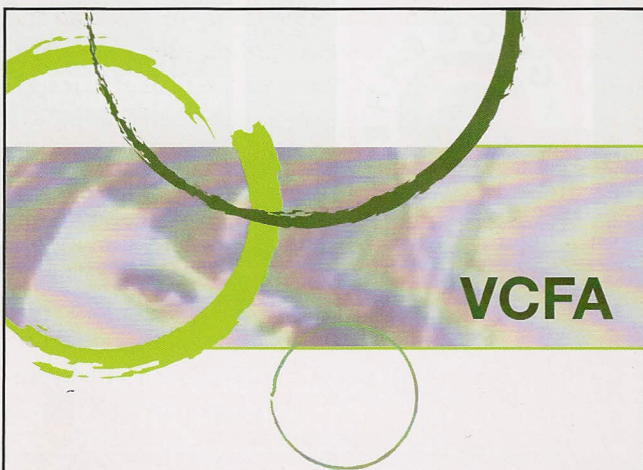
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Hamburgers

A sample of Christian Schwartz's Graphik. Images courtesy of Commercial Type.

Maret isn't alone in collecting non-typographic sources of inspiration. Though Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones famously out-bid each other for rare type specimen books before partnering as designers in 1999, one of their firm's more famous typeface designs, Gotham, came from Frere-Jones's photographic collection of New York City façade lettering. Until the middle of the twentieth century, this lettering was often created by engineers or draftsmen fulfilling a specification for a building's signage. Focused more on the need to make legible letters and less on traditional typographic tradition, this lettering style has what Frere-Jones calls the "mathematical reasoning of a draftsman." Combining this practical typographic naiveté with the tempering hand of a typeface designer, Gotham takes from those lettering forms and makes them work as a typeface family without losing the warmth they bring to the design.

From hot-rod magazines to modern furniture, Andy Cruz, co-owner of House Industries, has fueled the output of the studio with his various collections; his collection of tiki mugs, started at thrift stores, flea markets and the early days of eBay, is just one example. "The names and logos of Polynesian dining establishments were often sculpted in clay as dimensional lettering or stamped somewhere on these majestic appropriations of Oceanic art. The mugs and the stories they told about glazed clay and America's love for sucking up booze from ceramic idols in South Pacific-themed restaurants supplied the fuel for a font collection in the 1990s," Cruz says. The mugs' typographic forms became the basis of the Tiki Type typeface collection and the associated T-shirt packaging that mimicked the mailing tubes for the mugs. The influence of Cruz's collection didn't end there. "As with most nerds who obsess over their collections, I soon became fascinated with the kilns/manufacturers and studied the production techniques of these ceremonial imbibing artifacts," he adds. This interest in ceramic production lay dormant until recently when it found application in a number tile project with Heath Ceramics—almost two decades later.



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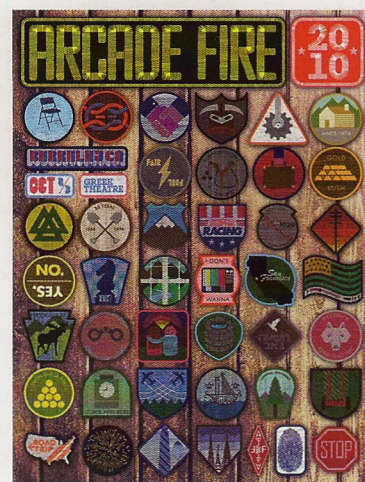
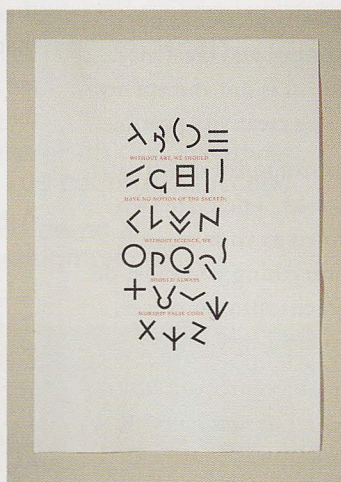
Three stamps from Mike Davis's collection: (from left) unknown designer; stamp design by Lance Wyman; and unknown stamp designer.

Like Cruz, Mike Davis, designer/illustrator/letterer at Burlesque of North America, looks to both production technique and period style in his collection. He collects remnants of popular culture from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, searching after ephemera, records and design books. "The creative envelope was getting pushed so far just before computers became available," Davis explains. The influence of pre-digital production techniques is the foundation of his work, which either employs similar techniques or mimics them digitally. Of all the ephemera in Davis's collection, postage stamps are his favorite: "There are folks who collect the rare ones, the upside-down airplanes, the kitten stamps, etc., but I've been more interested in the stamps from the '70s with really heavy graphics, all very indicative of the era. There are some absolute gems out there, some of which you'd never expect to see showing up in your mailbox. Big name designers like Peter Max,

Israel's Asher Kalderon and Dan Reisinger and Bulgaria's Stefan Kanchev have cranked out some truly breathtaking designs—all printed on about one square inch, not for an art gallery, but for an everyday throwaway item." The influence of this collection, which he shares at [somuchpileup.blogspot.com](http://somuchpileup.blogspot.com), can be seen in Davis's poster designs. He employs the same technique of bold lettering, bright color and

graphically simplified illustration to make his posters pop off the wall in much the same way that his favorite stamps drew attention when affixed to envelopes.

A collection says something about a designer's body of work and what they value in the work of others. For all I spoke to, collecting is a way of focusing one's attention on the tradition in which they are working. Collections influence not only aesthetic choices but also give inspiration for production methods and ways of working. They encourage exploration and research into related fields as the collector's interest and knowledge grows. A collection reinforces the idea that no one works in a vacuum and that influence can be found in the common or the rare. And not least of all, collecting provides the thrill of the chase, of rounding a corner and finding something that stops you in your tracks, be it something you'd been searching for, or an unexpected treasure. **CA**



Andy Cruz's collection of tiki mugs inspired the glaze selection for a partnership with Heath Ceramics.

Russell Maret's 2011 New Year's card using his non-typographic alphabets. The card is a preview of *Specimens*, a book of his typeface designs to be published in the Fall of 2011.

Mike Davis's poster for Arcade Fire was loosely inspired by the styles he found in his collection of postage stamps.