

# Robert Harling

Brilliant typographer and editor whose imagination helped transform domestic taste in Britain

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Robert Harling, who has died aged 98, was a key figure in mid-20th century graphic design. As a typographer and editor, he bridged the gap between the gentlemanly artist-craftsmen of the prewar printing world and the new breed of professional postwar graphic designers. A multi-talented and raffish character who resisted being typecast, he also wrote successful novels, one of which - *The Paper Palace* (1951) - has become a Fleet Street classic, based on his own days in journalism. He was an inspirational editor of *House & Garden* in the great days of glossy magazines.

Born in Highbury, north London, Robert was brought up by an aunt after the early deaths of his parents, and went to school in Brighton and London. He then studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, showing precocious talent. He first worked as a designer for the *Daily Mail* and was simultaneously an adviser on typography for London Transport and for the Sheffield based foundry Stephenson Blake & Co, designing their literature and three popular display typefaces, *Playbill* (1938), *Chisel* and *Tea Chest* (both 1939).

While still in his 20s, Robert co-founded and became editor of *Typography*, a journal of contemporary lettering and print, published by his friend and ally James Shand at the Shenval Press. When it first appeared in 1936, the journal broke new ground in its coverage of the European avant garde - including the first serious article on Jan Tschichold's work to be published in Britain. It was also very different from earlier, and primmer, typographic magazines in its zest for letters of all kinds, not just fine book printing. Issue one contained an article on Kardomah tea labels; issue two an analysis of tram ticket typography. Robert's early championing of typographic ephemera anticipated the burgeoning of 1960s Pop.

Eric Gill was a notable contributor to *Typography*. In an article ostensibly about the work of Denis Tegetmeier, his son-in-law, Gill launched into a typical diatribe on the role of the artist in society: "The artist is first of all a workman; a servant. He does not exist simply to tickle his own fancy." Robert was entranced by Gill's esoteric lifestyle, becoming a regular visitor at Pigotts, Gill's Catholic craft community and printing press near High Wycombe, in Buckinghamshire. His own illuminating study of *The Letter Forms and Type Designs of Eric Gill* appeared in 1976.

Before the second world war, Robert taught at the Reimann School of Design in London, where one of his pupils was the young émigré Alex Kroll, later to join him as art director on *House & Garden*. A keen weekend sailor, Robert took part in the wartime evacuation of British forces at Dunkirk in May 1940, which he described in his book *Amateur Sailor*, published in 1944 under the pen name Nicholas Drew. The poet John Masefield praised the book as the best eyewitness account of Dunkirk ever written. Robert then joined the Royal Navy, first serving on mid-Atlantic convoy duty. Again, he gave a marvellous account of this experience in his atmospheric memoir *The Steep Atlantick Stream* (1946).

His friend Ian Fleming was responsible for Robert's sudden transfer from anti-submarine warfare to the newly constituted Unit 17Z, given its name by Fleming himself and headed by Donald McLachlan. This small and, to Robert, highly congenial outfit, soon to be known as Fleming's Secret Navy, was responsible for day-to-day liaison between the naval intelligence division and the British war propaganda teams.

Secret navy assignments, involving solitary missions to the US and the far and Middle East, appealed to the cloak-and-dagger instinct in Robert. The fastidious James Lees-Milne described him as "a rough diamond". So, to some extent, he was. Wartime experiences cemented Robert and Fleming's mutual admiration. Robert is depicted fondly in *The Spy Who Loved Me* as the make-up man on the Chelsea Clarion - "a man called Harling was quite a dab hand at getting the most out of the old-fashioned type faces that were all our steam-age jobbing printers in Pimlico had in stock."

After the war, with a new onrush of energy, Robert returned to the typographic world. He and Shand now set up the specialist publishing firm Art and Tecnic. Robert was the editor of its journal *Alphabet and Image*, eight issues of which appeared between 1946 and 1948. The magazine was lavishly illustrated with colour plates, and with the many inserts and folding plates so loved by Robert. There were memorable articles by Edward Bawden on England, Percy Muir on the Kate Greenaway centenary and John Lewis on the book illustrations of Lynton Lamb.

In 1948 *Image* split off to become an independent quarterly, concentrating on the visual arts. Again, there were eight volumes, ending in summer 1952. Under Robert's brilliant, eclectic editorship, the journal published work by such important postwar artists as John Minton, John Piper, Leonard Rosomon, Blair Hughes-Stanton and Edward Ardizzone, and introduced to a British audience the drawings of the American Ben Shahn.

Both these journals reflected Robert's own instinct for quality, his breadth of interests and provocatively quirky views. He was surprised and amused by the speed with which they became collectors' pieces. When students started writing dissertations on *Image*, he guffawed to see the pall of academic respectability fall on publications he had put together in a spirit of pure pleasure. I have never known a man with less pomposity.

At the same time as publishing his typographic journals, Robert was working as art director of Everett's advertising agency. Through Ian Fleming he became architectural correspondent and then typographic adviser to the

Sunday Times, an appointment that continued until the 1980s. His happiest years there were under the dynamic editorship of Harold Evans. The two thrived on late Saturday crises when the breaking of an unexpected news story meant the total redesign of the front page.

Robert adored the pace and gossip of the journalistic world, and newspapers provided the background for several of his novels. The best of these, *The Paper Palace*, is an expert indictment of the machinations of mid-century press barons. He was unambitious in the worldly sense, but a fascinated observer of the politics of power.

My own first job was with *House & Garden* in the early 1960s. I reached Vogue House early in the day to find a rugged, bronzed and beak-nosed man in drainpipe trousers and fedora already in the office, having just flown in from Majorca. Our devotion to each other never ceased.

Robert, who never got the hang of feminism, ran his office as an amiable harem, extracting his mini-skirted girl assistants one by one for a cappuccino at a nearby coffee bar in Maddox Street. He was fanatically loyal to his staff and when I, a woefully inexperienced merchandise editor, wrote an article on deep freezes suggesting that readers deep-freeze cabbages, he defended me valiantly once the sarcastic letters started flooding in. He was a good picker and marvellous encourager of talent. On the magazine then was a very young Hugh Johnson, soon to become a formidable wine expert, and Ann Barr, whose *Sloane Ranger Handbook* would define a new sector of society.

Robert's great achievement on *House & Garden* was to bring living people into previously bare interiors. He invented what would soon be known as lifestyle features. I remember being sent off to interview the future home secretary Kenneth Baker and his bride for a series on Young Marrieds. Their Richmond home included one of those converted cast-iron cathedral heaters that were trendy at the time.

Robert was such fun to work for because he saw the meretricious joke of the design world. He ran *House & Garden* from 1957 to 1993, until he was well into his 80s, with unflagging ebullience and legendary style.

When you say that someone is a very private person the term is usually relative. But Robert was seriously secret. He would not divulge his birth date. Neither of his homes showed their faces in *House & Garden* - neither the Gothic one in Surrey nor the seaside pleasure palace at Porto Petro, in Majorca. He refused all invitations, preferring to spend time at home with his beautiful wife Phoebe, whom he claimed (one never knew quite how far to believe him) to have picked out from the throng in Leicester Square.

My enduring memory of Robert is of lunching with him at his usual table in the *Causerie*, at Claridges. We are eating his favourite Dover sole with Pimms. He is giving me a rundown of the sex lives of the dowager duchesses sitting round us, of which he had an encyclopaedic knowledge. Perhaps his greatest triumph lay in the designing of such a satisfactory and entertaining life.

Phoebe predeceased him, and he leaves three children: Simon became a painter, while Nicholas and Amanda both followed him into journalism.

**Patrick O'Connor writes:** The same generosity of spirit that prompted Robert Harling's dealings with staff and contributors at House & Garden was typical of his social life. To be invited for lunch or dinner at the Glebe House, the Harlings' residence in Godstone, Surrey, was a rare treat. A gothic, castellated rectory, set on a hillside, it was decorated in flamboyant style. The drawing room had brilliant yellow and gold Regency wallpaper, rose-pink chintz curtains, royal-blue upholstered sofas and Aubusson carpets, as a background for Robert's collection of Nelson memorabilia and nautical paintings. With a log fire blazing in the grate, on all but the most sultry summer days, it made a perfect setting for Robert and Phoebe's gatherings. "Are you going to bring a popsy with you?" Robert would inquire.

Until her death, Phebe retained her own individual style. It is said that Robert was first smitten by her because she had prematurely white hair, and this was always swept up in curls quivering over her forehead. Robert used to pick out all her dresses from the boutiques in Bond Street, when he was out after lunch - shopping bored her. The last time I dined with them, a few years ago, she was wearing a coral pink chiffon mini-dress, her still very shapely legs displayed in black tights.

Robert's enthusiasm and charm could also, when necessary, manifest itself as biting irony. I have a copy of a letter he wrote in reply to some reader's complaint: "Thank you for taking time off from your busy life to give us your tetchy and out-of-touch views on this magazine."

• Robert Harling, typographer and editor, born March 27 1910; died July 1 2008