The Scribe and the Silhouette

Many type designers, both historical and contemporary, possess a wide variety of artistic talents, but the study of type and typography is often focussed only on their typographic and calligraphic achievements. Baskerville's contributions to papermaking and printing inks are frequently skimmed over, as are Dwiggins' puppets and stage designs. The same is true of Rudolf Koch (1876–1934) and the art of papercutting. Koch was an artist-craftsman of extraordinary capabilities and one of the great type designers of the twentieth century. As a scribe, he created interpretive works of startling originality in which he took letter forms to unprecedented levels of expressiveness. Much of this mastery is also evident in the types he designed for the Klingspor Bros. Type Foundry in Offenbach, Germany between 1906 and 1934, in his blackletter designs as well as in his few excursions into roman types, most notably Koch Antiqua and the rugged, exuberant Neuland. Less well known, however, is his impressive work in Scherenschnitte, a folk art in which patterns and images are cut out of paper and which enjoyed considerable popularity during the Victorian era and the first decades of the 20th century.

The art of papercutting is centuries old, having begun in China soon after the invention of paper in AD 100. A widespread craft strongly influenced by painting and done with shears or a knife, it was very popular around AD 1000, especially during the Sung Dynasty (10th–13th century) and portrayed everything from traditional patterns and floral ornamentation to mythical creatures. From China, it travelled via Indonesia, Persia and the Balkan Peninsula to Austria, from where it spread to the rest of Europe.

Along with patterns and genre pictures, the most popular images cut in black paper were the silhouettes of loved ones. That particular term comes to us from Etienne de Silhouette, who was the minister of finance under Louis XV in 1759 and an avid fan of outlining and preserving shadows, a craft which he learned of during a visit to England and propagated in France. De Silhouette was a proponent of fiscal responsibility and was therefore disliked and considered miserly by his wasteful contemporaries. And so his tenure as minister to the king was brief, but long enough for the inexpensive cut-paper portraits to become known as pictures "a la Silhouette." Thus his name was preserved in history, not for his frugal economics, but as a term for representing a person's profile in black paper.

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Fig. 1: *The Typefoundry in Silhouette,* cover

Rudolf Koch's remarkable proficiency in papercutting is hardly surprising. Forced to discontinue a classical education by the early death of his father, Koch began an apprenticeship in metal chasing[1] in 1892 and concurrently received extensive training in drawing at the Art School in Hanau and later at the School of Arts and Crafts in Nuremburg. After deciding he did not want to pursue a profession in metal chasing, he worked as a draftsman for a book bindery in Leipzig from 1899 to 1902, creating book covers in various styles, although most were imbued with the trappings of the Jugendstil (Art Nouveau style) popular at the time. It was as a freelance draftsman in 1903 that he first came upon the idea of creating letters with a pen which began his stellar career as a scribe and calligrapher. Answering a classified ad in 1906 for a position in the Rudhard Foundry in Offenbach (which would later become the Klingspor Bros. Type Foundry) and recognized for his considerable talent by Karl Klingspor, Koch was hired at the age of 28 to design typefaces. What followed was a series of blackletter designs of unparalleled energy and integrity,[2] and a few thoroughly unique roman designs, one of which – *Neuland* – put to use his acquired chasing skills when he cut the letters himself.

1. The OED defines this as the act of engraving or embossing metal. Chasing is different from engraving in that no metal is removed, and the artist not only cuts into the metal, but can also push it up into relief. WILLIAM CASLON (1692–1766) also began his career in metal chasing and engraving, earning his keep by creating elaborate designs in the gunstocks and barrels of wealthy patrons in England.

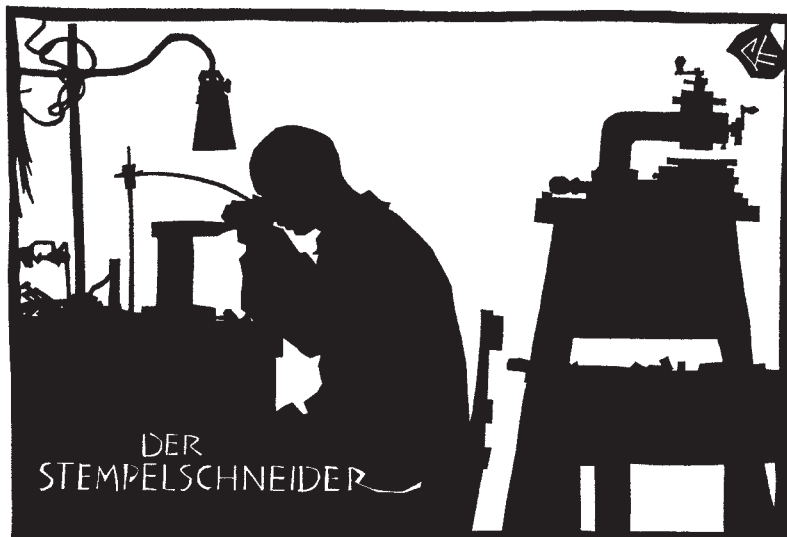2. One of these is the *Wilhelm-Klingspor-Schrift* used for the title of this essay.

FIG. 2: *The Punchcutter*

Type design was not to be his only responsibility at the foundry. Klingspor was the first amongst German type founders to print books on site as promotional pieces for private circulation, an idea which was copied by many other foundries. In 1918 Koch was commissioned with the first of three books which he would create using the technique of *Scherenschnitte*, the German term for the art of papercutting. *Die Schriftgiesserei im Schattenbild* (*The Typefoundry in Silhouette*) [FIG. 1], con-

Was der Zeichner erfand in jahrelang mühvoller Übung,
soll es dem Drucker erstehn in der beweglichen Form,
Fügen muß es sich erst in des Handwerks notwendige Grenzen,
daß in die Wirklichkeit trete seine freie Idee. –
Mächtig fördert das Werk mit tiefem Verständnis der Meister,
lobt und tadelt zugleich, zweifelt, verwirft und erwägt,
Treibt den Armen dadurch zu immer erneuter Bemühung
bis die Zeichnung am Schluß doch beide lobet zugleich.

FIG. 3: The first image (with self portrait, standing), page size: 9 ¼″ × 12 ¼″.

tains 25 cut-paper images which describe, page for page, the process of creating and manufacturing printing type at the Klingspor foundry. (A few of these images are shown here greatly reduced in size.) Accompanying each image in black is a descriptive caption in orange, authored in verse by Koch and set in his first design for Klingspor, a fraktur named *Deutschschrift*.[3] The titles are part of the silhouettes, which is apparent in the interconnectedness of the letter forms and the stencil-like character of letters reversed out in silhouette areas. The blackletter titles are especially remarkable in that they display the same energetic angularity and personality of Koch's penmanship.

3. This was later renamed *Kochschrift*.

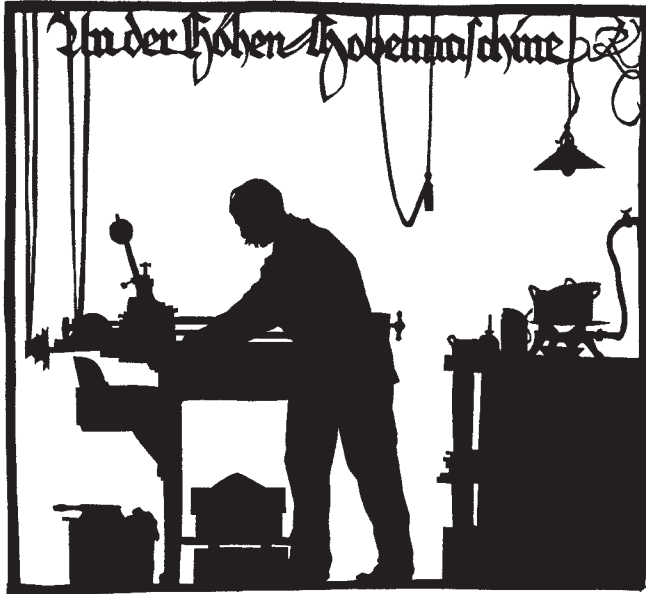FIG. 4: *The Compositor, At the Hand Press, At the Inking Station.*
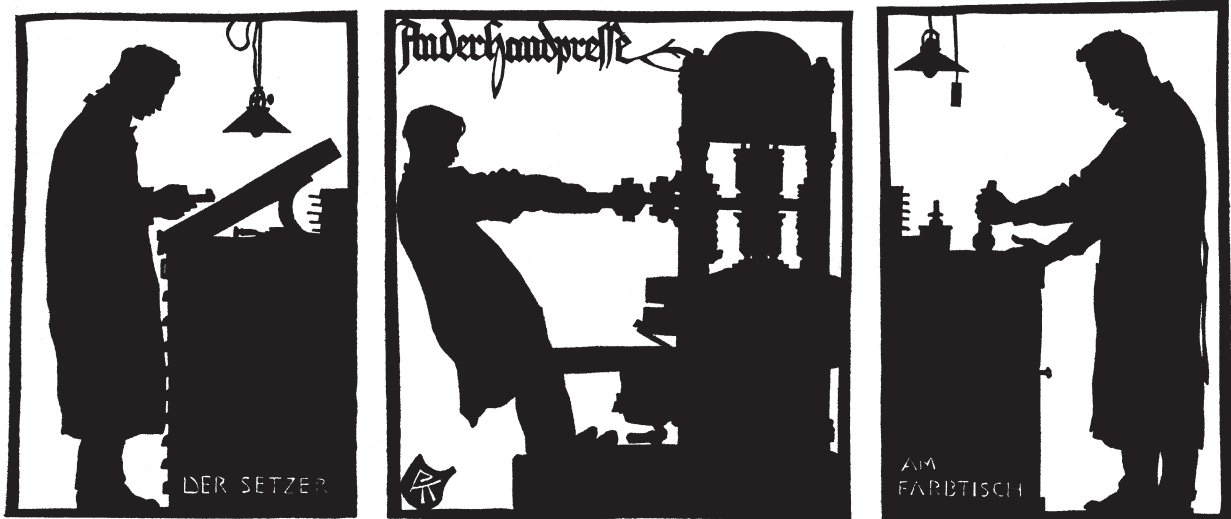
Fig. 5: *At the Type-High Planing Machine*

The original book from 1918 measures 9 ¼″ × 12 ¼″ (ca. 23.5 × 31.0 cm); a reprint issued in 1936 was reduced in size. Judging by the delicate intricacy of the outlines, Koch used a knife to cut these images, which were then used – perhaps in contact exposure – to create the raised metal surfaces of photo-engravings. Faithfulness to detail is given not only to the renderings of the foundry, but also to the people who appear in them: affectionate portraits of Karl Klingspor and Koch's fellow workers. (A self-portrait is also included in the book's first image.) The result is a touching depiction of the type founding business in the first decades of the past century, revealed through little more than figure and ground divided by a crisp, lively and masterful edge. It remained a rare treasure for the next half-century, known in its entirety by relatively few people.
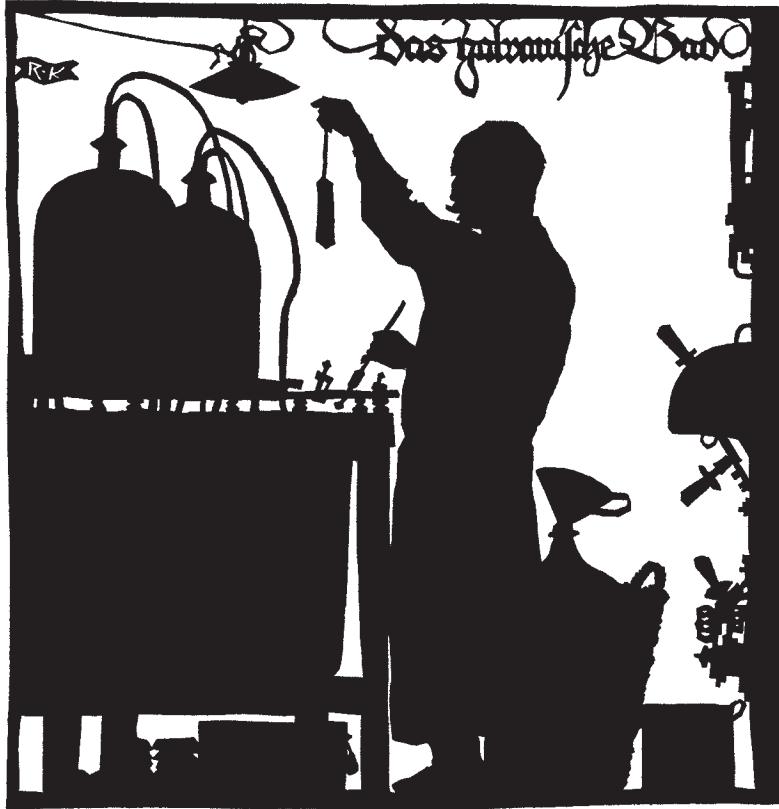
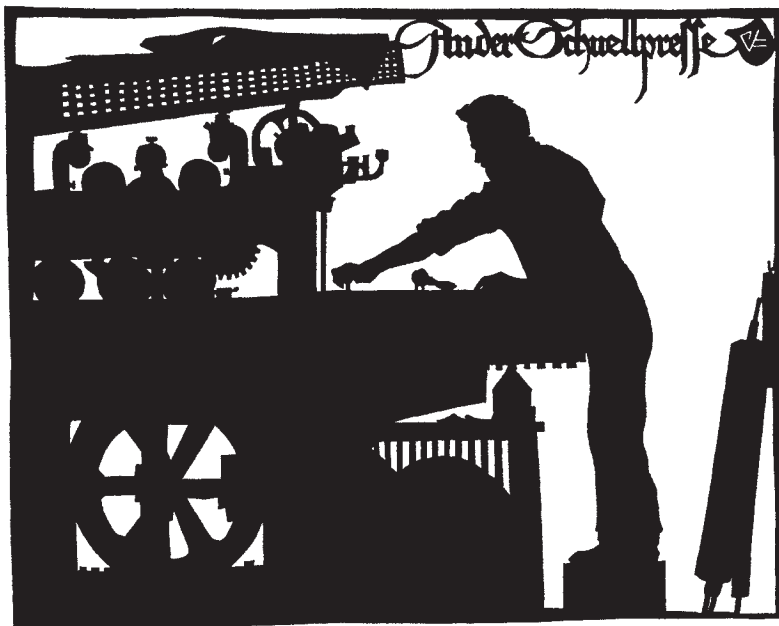Fig. 6: *Photography*
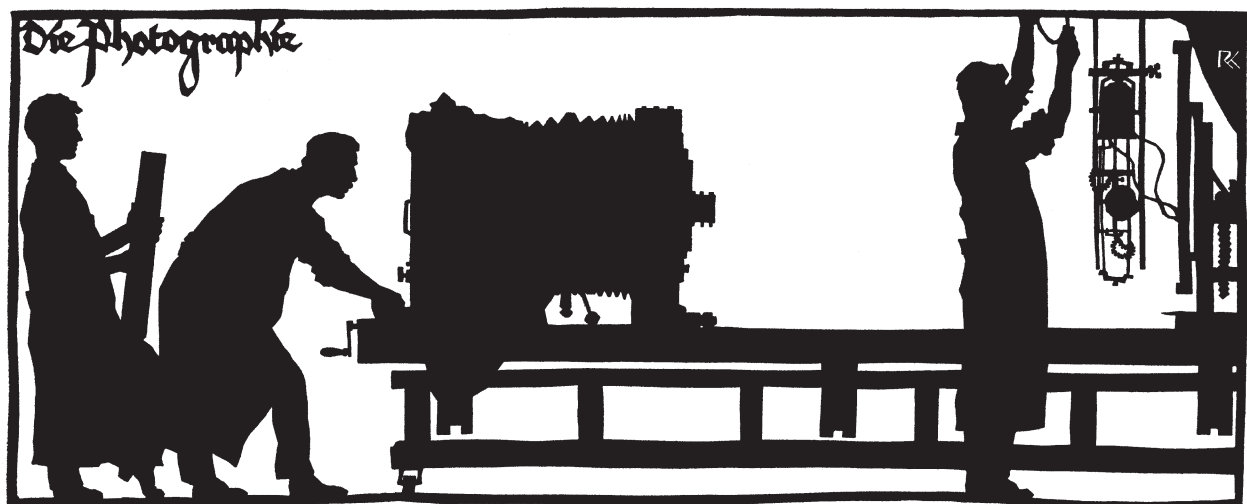
Fig. 7: *The Galvanic Bath*

Fig. 8: *At the Cylinder Press*

In 1982 the Arion Press in San Francisco published a limited edition reprint of the book from new photo-etchings at original scale. A beautifully encased loose-leaf portfolio rather than a book, it includes an introduction by Arion's founder Andrew Hoyem and English translations of Koch's poetic captions by Alexander Nesbitt. The Arion Press edition has found its way into many public, college and university libraries around the U.S. and Canada. An online search for "The Typefoundry in Silhouette" at *www.worldcatlibraries.org* will locate one in the nearest library. Seeking it out will guarantee a rich experience in art, type history and the sublime aura so prevalent in all of Koch's work and best described by Albert Windisch in *The Fleuron*:

> ". . . the various objects created by Rudolf Koch, in his honesty of workmanship, [are] the outcome of a pure spirit. One thing they all have in common: that is the human spirit, often touchingly human. In his inspired hands all material becomes spiritualized." ❧

Fig. 9: *The Typefoundry*
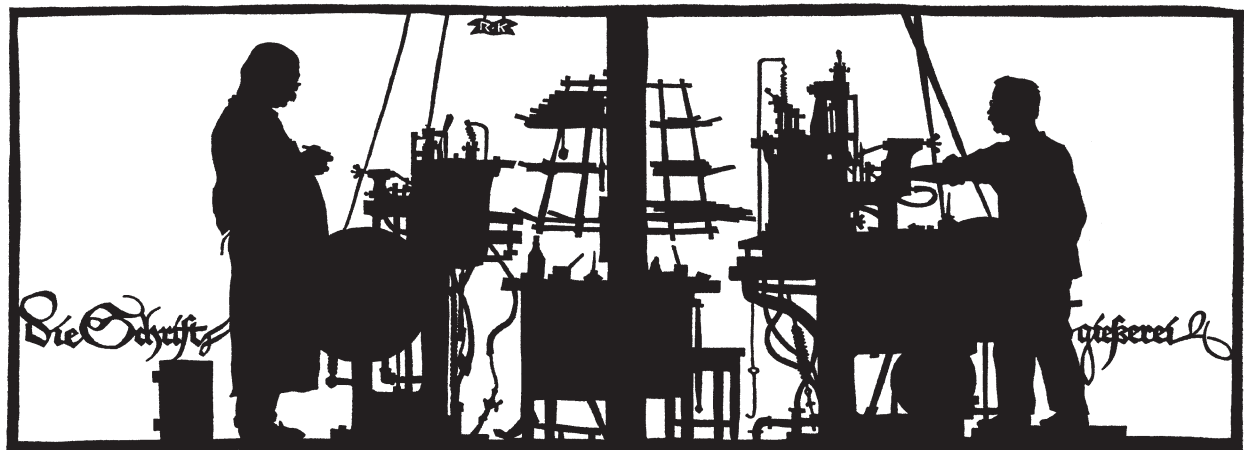
Sources:

Hoyem, Andrew. Introduction to *The Typefoundry in Silhouette* (Reprint). San Francisco: Arion Press, 1982.

Koch, Rudolf. *Mein Lebenslauf.* Offenbach am Main: 1921. *www.rudolfkoch.de*

Schipfer-Geiser, Suzanne. *Scherenschnitte: Designs and Techniques for the Traditional Craft of Papercutting.* Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 1996.

Windisch, Albert. "The Work of Rudolf Koch." *Fleuron Anthology.* London: Ernest Benn LTD, 1973.

All cut-paper images in this essay are from:
Koch, Rudolf. *Die Schriftgiesserei im Schattenbild.* Offenbach am Main: Hausdruckerei von Gebr. Klingspor, 1918.