



# PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

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## Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman: Graphic Designer and Printer

by Joe Sullivan

Late in 1994, I received the Dutch postal service's philatelic bulletin announcing three stamps to be issued January 17 the following year. One of these stamps honored H.N. Werkman. It ignited in me an interest in this man and his work far surpassing the effect of any other stamp I have encountered in 50 years of collecting. (I only wish our journal was printed in full color.)



life. At 21, he began to express his creative side as a journalist, composing vignettes of daily life for the *Groninger Dagblad*, the city's daily newspaper. In these simple anecdotes, Werkman probed below the external surface to reveal life's richer dimensions. This deeper level of consciousness characterizes his very personal body of creative work, including writing, painting, graphic design and printing.

The new issue bulletin described Werkman as a graphic designer and printer—two areas of special interest for me, yet I had never heard of him. A bibliographic search yielded very little written in English, reference on the internet was sparse (and generally in the Dutch language), and my acquaintances in the Netherlands had only limited knowledge of Werkman, though they provided useful early research.



What I have since learned is that Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman was a printer, artist, writer, graphic designer, typographer and much more.

Werkman was born in the Dutch province of Groningen in 1882, the son of a veterinarian. His first job was as a type sorter, an occupation that would influence his entire adult

Top: Netherlands, 17 January 1995, 80c stamp features poem by Charles Peguy published in *De Blauwe Schuit* (5), 1941. Bottom: Werkman's hand press, manufactured in Germany in 1850 by Cristian Dingler, now in the Grafisch Museum, Groningen.

About 1908, Werkman again became involved in the printing trade, this time with himself as proprietor and printer. The business grew, but his indifference to making money eventually led to the failure of the print shop in 1923. Willem Sandberg, graphic designer and influential director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam after World War II, described Werkman as someone for whom anything utilitarian was completely beyond comprehension. Exploring elusive and complex human dimensions, first seen in his early journalistic writing, was becoming his life's primary work.

After the failure of his business in 1923, Werkman set up a 'one man' print shop equipped with an antiquated hand press in a warehouse

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Left: The Werkman Family, 1923. Below: Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman—photo, left; self-portrait, right. Right: Invitation to a meeting of De Ploeg, 1926.



attic in the city of Groningen. What was left to him at the end of this difficult period was his love for printing, his joy in artistic experimentation, and an eye for the poetry in his immediate surroundings. He continued to draw and paint, which he had begun in 1917, and was involved with De Ploeg (The Plow), Groningen's artists' circle.

As a commercial enterprise his new printing works was never a success, but it allowed plenty of time for his creative explorations. Werkman transformed himself from an amateur painter to professional artist. He also created personal pictures utilizing his press and the familiar printer's materials which were available around him: printing ink, rollers, type and even miscellaneous hardware. The initial expression

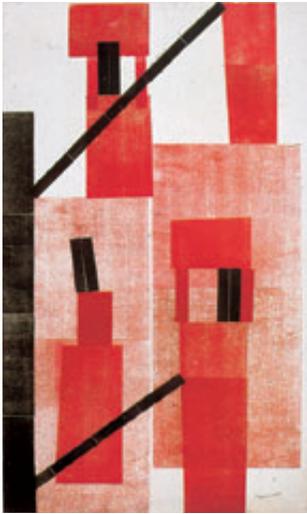
of Werkman's new direction was an intriguing and mysterious pamphlet mailed to his artist friends in Groningen in September 1923. The publication's slogan read: "GRONINGEN BERLIN PARIS MOSCOW 1923—Beginning of a Violet Season." It announced an avant-garde publication bearing the cryptic, un-Dutch title *The Next Call* and declared the birth of a new era in the arts. "It must be attested and affirmed," the pamphlet stated, "art is everywhere." At that time, Berlin, Paris and Moscow were all centers of progressive art movements, and by adding Groningen to the list, Werkman proclaimed the beginning of an art movement in that city too, though the movement was essentially Werkman himself.

Right: Cover of the first issue of *The Next Call* on which Werkman combines wooden letters with part of a door lock. Far right: a page spread from the first issue of *The Next Call*.



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Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman / Continued



Far left: Chimneys 2 (a *drukseel* print), 1923. Left: Poster for De Ploeg exhibition in the Pictura gallery, 1931. Right: In a 1933 poster for the expressionist play *De Rekenmachine* (The Adding Machine), Werkman demonstrates his playfully direct approach to graphic imagery and his unconventional use of elements from his type case in portraying the calculator.



Between September 1923 and November 1926, nine issues of *The Next Call* were produced at irregular intervals. In 1924 its distribution was extended beyond Groningen to Belgrade, Paris and Prague, joining a growing number of magazines through which international avant-garde artists stayed in touch with one another. Werkman was certainly influenced by these journals.

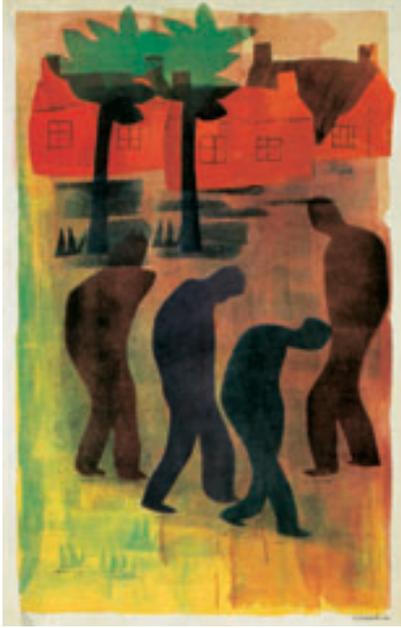
*The Next Call* was an important vehicle for Werkman to explore and publish in imagery and words his ideas about art, and it kept him in contact with the avant-garde of other countries. The publication's size and page count were limited and the printing paper was ordinary, but its design was original and visually provocative. A sense of freedom, vitality and optimism emanated from the pages. Graphic art historian Alston Purvis describes Werkman's creative printing as, "Both expressive and reflective, Werkman's compositions were consistently inventive, direct and playful..." The issues of *The Next Call* contained typographic experiments, 'drukseel' prints (graphic explorations using layered color and textured paper) and a variety of expressionist, lyrical and dadaist texts, mostly written by Werkman himself. He embraced the accidental graphic imagery that unfolded in his creative approach to the printing process. "The subject proclaims itself and is never sought," he said. Layout and design did not precede the typesetting and printing process; rather, the three were fused into one creative experience.

The final issue of *The Next Call* appeared in 1926 and was composed of the same elements, rough paper and a straightforward approach to imagery and typography, and closes with a wistful poem by Werkman:

once when the earth  
was still not round  
once when  
art was still not art  
once when the ant  
was not yet diligent  
once when he  
was still young  
once when she  
was still small  
once when my  
mother still sang  
once when it  
was summer  
once when it was still  
the day before yesterday  
once when yesterday  
was not yet today

The years following the final issue of *The Next Call* were productive for Werkman. During the 1930s his innovative approach to graphics continued to develop as he expressed more of his poetic visions on paper. He introduced cut stencils and stamping into his work, drew directly onto the printing paper with his ink roller, and varied the viscosity of his inks.

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Above left: Werkman's illustration from *De Blauwe Schuit* (1941) for "Hasidic Legends 1-2, Fathers and Sons" from *The Werewolf*. Above right: "Alleluia," the title of the Easter edition of *De Blauwe Schuit* (1941). Both illustrations demonstrate Werkman's use of the inked roller applied directly to the printing paper and the visual effects achieved by varying the viscosity of the printing inks.

Between 1926 and 1945 Werkman also produced nine calendars—rich with experimental typography. He presented texts in this series with typical artistic freedom, using different typefaces and contrasting color to highlight important phrasing, and by setting type both horizontally and vertically and creating open spaces in the text, which give a primitive but poetic feel to printed work. In 1939 he began to incorporate illustrations into the calendars, an addition that anticipated his subsequent wartime design which utilized the skills he developed creating hundreds of druksel prints.

Overall, Werkman's design and art are not as closely linked to a particular style or movement as the work of his better-known contemporaries, but rather to his personal exploration of the human spirit. He once commented that secluded paths are the most beautiful. He was a dreamer, an explorer of the unseen, a loner—living very much in a personal and private world.

By 1940, as Purvis notes, Werkman "had redefined the symbolic significance of letterforms," and his role in avant-garde typography would reach its apex with his clandestine publications during the occupa-

tion of his homeland. The most influential of these were the forty issues of *De Blauwe Schuit* (The Blue Barge), a rich outpouring of the typographic experiments he had begun in the pages of *The Next Call*.

The outbreak of war in 1940 so deeply affected Werkman that he made no prints that year. Shortly after the German invasion of the Netherlands in May of 1940, a small group gathered together in Groningen: Ate Zuitoff, August Henkels and Adri Buning. Henkels later described the scene: "There we sat, together, all of us filled with the same thoughts. Each with his private and personal experiences in life, but now everything veers toward a new focus: the tyranny that has come over us. Our hostess remembered a poem by Nijhoff which ran: 'It is not that we do not dare, it is that the hour is not yet here. So begins every beginning...'" Henkels concluded, "...something in the room had changed. A spark had set fire to the desire for action. We told each other: this poem must be printed."

One member of the group had heard Werkman's name and that he printed unusual things. Werkman was asked to print this first broadsheet of *De Blauwe Schuit*. The three friends then met again in

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Werkman's attic print shop. Henkels describes the encounter: "There it appeared that the humble jobbing printer was a prince incognito, who had gone through life for decades masquerading as a beggar...There it also appeared that this person, this divinely endowed artist had always been one of the company of that singular Ship of Fools—unremarked in the world of art, and likewise unrecognized in the circle of his friends and colleagues. A 'fahrende Gesselle,' whose colors blazed with the manners of the 'roaring boy'...That was how we came to Werkman. But Werkman was *De Blauwe Schuit* before we thought of it."

In his clandestine publications for *De Blauwe Schuit*, a summary of Werkman's creative life can be found. Always fond of the expressiveness of language, Werkman harmonized the content and form of his texts. He conjured away the heaviness of his printing materials making them instead rarefied and transparent—spiritualized. Texts were chosen with great care. On the surface might be a poem or song, beyond the surface was biting commentary of the horrific events of war. On December 16, 1943 Werkman wrote Henkels: "It's been quite a job; during the last few weeks I worked very hard and almost without stopping. But it was inspiring, and relaxing at the same time."

On March 13, 1945, Werkman was arrested by the Gestapo, presumably on suspicion of having done illegal printing. A month later he was executed—two days before the liberation of Groningen by the Canadian army.

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I've asked myself why Hendrik Werkman, a multifaceted and innovative artist, is so little known. Histories of graphic design present him as a minor player. In art histories he is virtually ignored. The answer, perhaps, is revealed in Werkman's solitary personality, which Herbert Spencer described as "honest, simple, contemplative yet passionate—and above all, intensely human." I believe this genuine, deeply honest humanity is so rare that Werkman can only be viewed as truly unique—outside the norm. And because Werkman is not neatly categorized, his contributions to the arts and humanity are often overlooked.

Today, the richness of meaning and innovativeness in graphic expression in his work can be just as strongly experienced as when it was created, if not more so. He truly was an artist, writer, graphic designer, typographer, printer...and much more. Once he perceptively described what he felt inside himself: "Increasing laughter. Despite art. For art has a lot on its conscience."

Finally, this has been said of Werkman, the printer:

*In Werkman's hands, the basic letterpress was pushed beyond previously known possibilities. Every subtlety played a part—the unique oddities of wood grains, scratches on damaged or heavily used pieces of type, the thickness of ink, disparate methods of inking, and diverse paper textures. ~ Alston Purvis*

*Werkman treated the machine (his highly antiquated press) like a comrade....the pair of them turned out creative work together. The richest years in both their lives. ~ Willem Sandberg*

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*Thanks to all who have shared information about H.N. Werkman with me. Special thanks to Alston Purvis for his writings about Werkman and for lending me photographs from his files. Joe Sullivan*