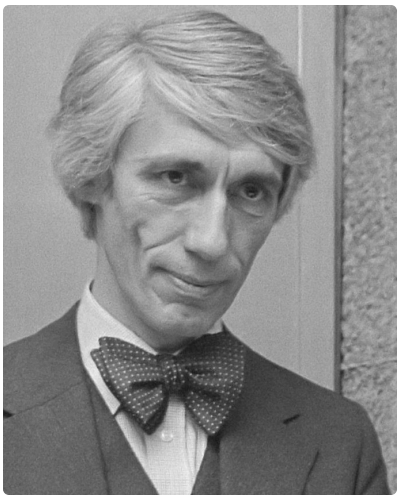
AN ICON YOU SHOULD KNOW...

Wim Crouwel

Dutch graphic designer and type designer, 1928 to 2019

Wim Crouwel was a Dutch graphic designer and type designer who lived from 1928 to 2019. He built his work on the grid and often let the grid show in the finished design. His posters for the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and his experimental typefaces made him a leading Dutch modernist. Read this page in about five minutes, then use the links at the end to look deeper.



Wim Crouwel. Wikimedia Commons, CC0. Full credit on page 3.

FURTHER LOOKING

Museum of Modern Art, *Vorm Gevers*: The collection page for his 1968 Stedelijk poster, with letters built from a visible grid. moma.org

Museum of Modern Art, *Henri Michaux*: His 1964 Stedelijk poster, set on the museum grid. moma.org

Design Museum, Wim Crouwel: A short biography from the London museum. designmuseum.org

Video: Talking About Swiss Style: Wim Crouwel

Collection: *New Alphabet* at MoMA

Reading: Broos, Kees. *Wim Crouwel: Alphabets*. BIS Publishers, 2003.

Reading: Huygen, Frederike. *Wim Crouwel Modernist*. Lecturis, 2015.

01 Fact Sheet

1928	Born in Groningen in the north of the Netherlands. He later studies fine art at the Minerva Academy there.
1952	In Amsterdam he assists Swiss designers on exhibitions and discovers Swiss typography.
1954	Edy de Wilde, director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, makes him the museum's designer.
1963	Becomes one of the five founders of the Total Design studio in Amsterdam, and starts a grid system for the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam that he uses until 1985.
1967	Designs New Alphabet, a typeface made only of horizontal and vertical strokes.
1970	Works on the Dutch pavilion for Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan, with architects Jaap Bakema and Carel Weeber.
1974	Designs a typewriter typeface for Olivetti, later released as Gridnik.
1976	His number stamps for the Dutch PTT go into use. They stay in use until 2002.
1985	Becomes director of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam until 1993.
2019	Dies at age 90. The Type Directors Club gives him its medal the same year.

Life and career Milestones tied to the key works

THREE KEY WORKS, PAGE 2

1967 New Alphabet

1974 Gridnik

1975 Dome on the Binnenhof

02 Three Key Works

Crouwel's Stedelijk posters and his number stamps are still in copyright, so they are linked under Further Looking. The three works below are shown with free type samples and an archive photo. Typeface names are trademarks of their foundries.

1967: New Alphabet

Letters for early screens

Crouwel drew New Alphabet for cathode ray tube screens, the screens used on early computers and data displays. Every letter uses only horizontal and vertical strokes with rounded corners. Many designers thought it went too far. Crouwel later agreed: "The New Alphabet was over-the-top and never meant to be really used. It was unreadable" ("New Alphabet"). In 1988 Brett Wickens used it on the Joy Division album *Substance*, and the Museum of Modern Art now holds it in its collection.



New Alphabet, 1967. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

LOOK FOR No curves and no diagonals | Every letter fits the same grid

See New Alphabet at the Museum of Modern Art →

1974: Gridnik

A typewriter face drawn on a square grid

Around 1974 the typewriter maker Olivetti asked Crouwel to design a typeface for its new electric typewriters. Olivetti called it Politene. Every character is drawn on a square grid with 45 degree corners, and all lines are the same thickness. Interest in electric typewriters faded before he finished, so the rights went back to Crouwel. He drew a special version for his Dutch number stamps. Years later the London type foundry The Foundry digitized it and named it Gridnik, after his nickname.



Gridnik, 1974. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

LOOK FOR Cut corners at 45 degrees instead of curves | Lines that all share one weight

Read about Gridnik on Wikipedia →

1975: Dome on the Binnenhof

Graphic design that people could walk into

In 1975 an exhibition marking 100 years of Dutch government care for cultural heritage was held on the Binnenhof, the old government square in The Hague. The Nationaal Archief caption for this photo credits the design of its dome to Crouwel. The photo was taken while the show was being set up. The plain white dome carries the words monumenten voor 1999 in lowercase, set against the Gothic towers of the Ridderzaal. Crouwel also designed exhibitions for the Stedelijk Museum for many years.



Dome on the Binnenhof, 1975. Wikimedia Commons, CC0.

LOOK FOR A plain white dome against old brick towers | Lowercase lettering that follows the curve

See the photo record at the Nationaal Archief →

TRY THIS

Pick one of his Stedelijk posters and draw its grid on tracing paper before you open any software. Then make your own event poster where the grid sets every size, space and line.

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REFLECT

Think About It

He called his own typeface unreadable, yet it ended up on a famous album cover and in a museum. When is a design experiment worth making anyway?

03 Sources

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