

## Typography

• This article is more than 1 month old

### |Obituary|

# Phil Baines obituary

**Graphic designer whose distinctive typographic work graced Penguin book covers, museum signage and London monuments**



📍 Phil Baines at his 2023 exhibition Extol, at the Lethaby gallery, Central Saint Martins, where he taught for 32 years

---

## Adrian Shaughnessy

Tue 12 Mar 2024 15.46 GMT

Phil Baines, who has died aged 65 of multiple system atrophy, was one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary British graphic design. His work included books, posters, art catalogues and lettering for three important London monuments – the [memorial to the Indian Ocean tsunami](#) in the grounds of the Natural History Museum and the 7 July memorials [in Hyde Park](#) and Tavistock Square, commemorating the victims of the 2005 London bombings. These projects point to Baines's defining attributes: a scholarly appreciation of letterforms, a deep-rooted respect for materials and a love of collaboration.

Such attributes can also be seen in Baines's cover designs for the Penguin Great Ideas series (2004-20), works by "great thinkers, pioneers, radicals and visionaries" that gave him a canvas on which to display his typographic philosophy. The Saint Augustine - Confessions of a Sinner cover, for instance, uses ancient ecclesiastical letterforms and yet looks superbly modern. For [Chuang Tzu – The Tao of Nature](#), Baines arranged letters to suggest a butterfly in flight. David Pearson, one of two art directors for the series, described how his "often-oblique approach gave the series a crucial added dimension".



📷 Phil Baines working on the Tavistock Square memorial commemorating the victims of the 2005 London bombings, for which he provided the lettering. Photograph: Carmody Groarke

Born in Kendal, Cumbria, Phil was one of the three children of Martin Baines, a construction contract manager, and Joan (nee Quarmby), a horticulturalist. Growing up in a Roman Catholic household, he began studies for the priesthood at Ushaw College, County Durham. During the holidays from Ushaw he worked at the Guild of Lakeland Craftsmen, Windermere, and from there his interest and confidence in art grew.

At the start of his fourth year, he quit Ushaw, and in 1980 began a year's study on the foundation course at Cumbria College of Art and [Design](#). In 1982 he moved to London and enrolled on the graphic design course at St Martin's School of Art (now Central Saint Martins), where he met Jackie Warner, whom he married in 1989, and where he was among a talented cohort, many of whom

went on to study, as he did, at the Royal College of Art.

Richard Doust, then leader of the first-year course at St Martins, recalled the portfolio Baines submitted for admission: “I was so excited ... I was sure he was going to be someone very special. He quickly established his individuality. He made typography and particularly letterpress his own territory.”

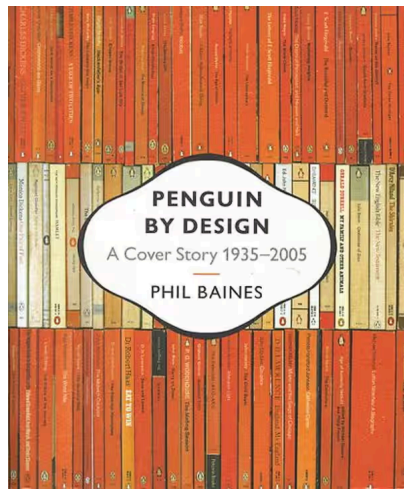
Baines was fiercely individual - he did not join schools of thought or align himself with fashionable camps. Instead, he built a creative practice based on his belief in the “humanist” qualities of the English typographic tradition.

His contemporaries were using the computer to bring a new complexity to graphic communication. Smart software allowed for the overlapping and interweaving of text in ways that echoed the ecclesiastical manuscripts that Baines admired so much. He was no Luddite, and used the computer himself, yet his work invariably retained an element of the handmade.

Paradoxically, his work was greatly admired by the new generation of digital designers. [Neville Brody](#), for instance, included Baines’s work in his experimental typography publication FUSE, produced to demonstrate the malleability of the new digital typography. Baines’s work does not look out of place among the other contributors, many of them American typography radicals whose multi-layered layouts were driven by modish theories of deconstruction and poststructuralism.

In 1988 he returned to Central Saint Martins (CSM), as part of the faculty. In staff meetings his willingness to say the unsayable was a frequent cause for consternation among colleagues. To his students he preached a doctrine of “object-based learning”, a typically contrarian notion in the age

of screen-based and virtual graphic design. He was appointed a professor in 2006 and retired in 2020 as emeritus professor.



Phil Baines's 2005 book *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935-2005*, helped establish Penguin cover art as one of the most important bodies of graphic art in British design history

Despite his commitment to teaching, Baines did not give up his work for clients. As well as designing books for leading publishers, he worked for the Crafts Council and the Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, and designed the signage for CSM's [King's Cross campus](#). He designed exhibition catalogues for Matt's Gallery, south-west London,

relishing the creative three-way collaboration that existed between the gallery's director, Robin Klassnik, exhibiting artists and himself.

He wrote books that contributed to the understanding of visual communication: *Type & Typography* (with Andrew Haslam, 2002), *Signs: Lettering in the Environment* (with Catherine Dixon, 2003) and *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935-2005* (2005), the last of which helped establish [Penguin cover art](#) as one of the most important bodies of graphic art in British design history.

With Dixon, he co-curated the [Central Lettering Record](#), an archive of typographic history housed at CSM, and in November 2023 his work was celebrated in an exhibition, [Extol: Phil Baines Celebrating Letters](#), at the Lethaby gallery, CSM. He was appointed as the Royal Mint advisory committee's lettering expert in 2016, and reappointed in 2021 to advise on the integration

of lettering on [new coins](#) and medals, with consideration given to special issues and the accession of King Charles to the throne. For this work, in 2023 he was awarded the Coronation medal.

Baines was an enthusiastic runner and cyclist, and loved music, especially the Manchester post-punk band the Fall. He was a collector of signs, lettering, and railwayana, and built his own studios at his home in Willesden Green, north-west London. A few years before his retirement he moved to Great Paxton, Cambridgeshire, where he took up bellringing.

He is survived by Jackie, their two daughters, Beth and Felicity, his brother, Christopher, sister, Margaret, and his father.

Philip Andrew Baines, graphic designer, born 8 December 1958; died 19 January 2024

## Related stories

### Ken Garland obituary

1 Jun 2021 3



### Shalom Schotten obituary

18 Oct 2020



### Milton Glaser obituary

10 Jul 2020 26



## More from Culture

**Olivier awards**  
Sunset Boulevard  
wins big as  
celebrity talent  
largely  
overlooked

12h ago

**Amadeus, Elgar,  
a bogus gold disc  
and Goldie  
Hawn**  
Neville Marriner's  
best recordings

3h ago 6

**Travels Over  
Feeling: Arthur  
Russell, a Life  
review**  
Down the rabbit  
hole with a  
musical maverick

2h ago 6



## Comments (2)

This discussion is now closed for comments but you can still [sign in](#) or [create your Guardian account](#) to join the discussion next time

Sort by **Newest** ▾ Per page **25** ▾ Display threads **Collapsed** ▾



**scouser58** 15 Mar 2024 3.58

0 ↑

I've got a copy of "Type and Typography" on my shelf. I used it frequently when I was studying and in work I did after college. Phil Baines was and is held in high regard by graphic designers. I am inspired now to buy the book on Penguin cover design. I think it's on my Amazon wish list (sorry Amazon haters, but finding books on design in English where I live now isn't possible. In Spanish, maybe, but my Spanish isn't that good). You had a good life Phil and left a legacy for the design world. Not many can say that. RIP.

[Report](#)



**pauleile** 13 Mar 2024 18.10

0 ↑

RIP Phil XP

[Report](#)

## Most viewed











