Designing
Typefaces

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To Mum, Doug and Scut

In order of appearance

A typeface is not merely a representation of the Roman alphabet. It is the combination of thousands of years of collective human social, technological and economic history, combined with the passion, skill, experience and personal history of its often lone creator.

The Phoenicians are widely believed to have created the basis for the Roman alphabet we know and use today. Thousands of years after their culture died out, their history has survived, visible in every newspaper, computer, television, book and publication that contains that alphabet. For example, it is believed that the letter 'A', the first letter of our modern alphabet, was originally derived from their representation of an ox's head. Oxen were very important in the lives and culture of the Phoenicians, who used them to plough fields, harvest crops and haul wares to markets. As such, they represented a vitally important element in their lives.

Social issues continue to affect typography. This may be on a small scale where design styles arise from political, social and economic change – be it the bell-bottomed type of the late '60s or the rough anarchic 'anti' graphic design in the blossoming of the punk movement of the late '70s and early '80s; or on a larger scale, where events cause wholesale replacement of alphabets, as seen in recent years in Azerbaijan.

Society's social influence on typeface design could easily fill several books. Technology, too, plays an important part. The chisel of a Roman stone cutter formed serifs not because it aided readability or was part of the history of the glyphs themselves, but because it was a necessity of the stone-carving craft – it served as a neat way of ending a carved line.

How glyphs were constructed in the days of handwritten manuscripts of the monasteries of medieval Europe again had as much to do with the qualities of the quill as the aesthetics and visual culture of the time.

In modern times, computer technology has done much to free us from the constraints of even recent history, and certainly in the lifetimes of many of those featured in this book. Armed with a modern desktop computer and font-editing package, we are all free to experiment with typography without

the limitations that those who came before us faced. With this new freedom and accessibility, it is possibly this individual perspective which is the most important. Let us take a brief example.

A Catholic high school in a small city in South Wales once had a student in the latter half of the 1980s who had, it later transpires, a mild form of dyslexia. As a result of this, he had terrible, scrawling, cursive handwriting, and one of his many frustrated teachers decided to ban him from cursive writing, only accepting individually formed glyphs in assignments. A few months later this student discovered a solitary Apple Mac and laser printer in the corner of the computer lab. Fascinated by the amazing quality of the printouts, and after many weeks of persuading and pleading with those in charge of it, he finally got to play with it one lunchtime.

On it, he discovered a now long gone package called 'Ready, Set, Go', an early example of desktop publishing software. After a few more lunchtimes of playing, the student started handing in his assignments in laser print, not pen ink. Two years later he was spending more time designing the covers of his assignments and worrying about the finer points of spacing the body copy than writing the words in the first place. Five years on, he was tentatively experimenting with his own typefaces in Art School.

Now, that student is sat at his Apple Mac, typing these words. Would my fascination with typography and type design have been sparked if it were not for that teacher focusing my mind so clearly on my own inability to create written communication by hand? Perhaps. It does, however, illustrate a point that typeface design is as much about the creator as the typeface itself; so much time and effort is involved in the creation of a family of faces that it is foolish to think that it cannot be inextricably linked to the designer. My personal history shapes my own approach to design – I tend to focus on readability. The same cannot be said for, to pluck a random example, aspects of Neville Brody's approach to typography.

Throughout this book, the designers have given their own unique perspectives on type design. Some are contradictory to each other, but each is

heartfelt and right for that person. All are equally valid, as is proven by their personal successes. Those conflicting voices in the texts are a testiment to the simple fact that, like many creative endeavours, the type design process is a deeply personal and subjective activity – not everyone agrees on what is the 'proper' way to do things. The likes of Jonathan Barnbrook usually start on paper, while others, such as Zuzana Licko, work exclusively on computer. Some, like Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum, will collaborate on projects, while others prefer to work alone. Rian Hughes prefers to keep his families small, often concentrating on display typefaces. Others spend year after year perfecting and enlarging their families into comprehensive works that can be applied to the most challenging of typesetting applications. A typical example is Jeremy Tankard's Bliss; a typeface family that has taken over a decade to develop, it currently consists of over 160 typefaces.

How they approach typography will, inevitably, be different to you – if it were not, there would not be tens of thousands of typefaces available for Mac or PC. The aim of this book is to bring together a wide variety of different designers from around the globe, and find out about their lives and work, in order to build up a picture of the type design community and its processes. Each designer, due to their own particular pasts, interests, skills, personalities and even politics, brings to the book their own focus and areas of expertise. The end result is a comprehensive examination of the whole type design process.

The final section of the book brings together some of the more practical advice from the designers on how to actually get started yourself. The tutorial aims to provide enough grounding in the whole process from start to finish to get you off to a flying start. As far as is practically possible, the skills and advice contained within are not tool-specific or platform-specific – it is hands-on and immensely practical in its scope, but you are the one in the driving seat.

What this book is not, is a step-by-step manual. It is here to inspire you to find out more and experiment for yourself, to help foster a passion for typography and a respect for the craft and profession of type design. Learn from the designers, their opinions and methods, and use those which suit you as a designer.

A few words of warning to you. Typeface design is neither easy or quick. To create typefaces of value and quality requires time, effort, skill and above all, patience. Be inspired, be eager, enjoy yourself, but remember that the alphabet you are working with has taken thousands of years to develop to its current state. Respect that history, learn from the past, and give yourself and your work the time it deserves to succeed. To do otherwise is a recipe for disaster.

Good luck, and happy designing!

Designer profiles

Jonathan Hoefler

A self-proclaimed 'armchair type historian', Jonathan Hoefler is well known not just for the excellent quality of his typeface designs, but also for his understanding of the historical context in which those designs rest.

Born in 1970 into the creative hub that is New York, Hoefler has spent his life interested in type – from childhood, when he would play with Presstype, through to high school when his awareness of typography grew as he was exposed to the work of Fred Woodward in *Rolling Stone*, *Spy Magazine* and others. Rather than take the traditional route into design by going to art college, Hoefler went straight into the world of work, initially as a graphic designer.

He found, however, that the world of graphic design could not offer him sufficient typographic stimulation, either in terms of type research or in writing – both activities he is deeply passionate about. In creating his own foundry – the Hoefler Type Foundry – he has been able to marry this fascination with the history of the craft with the creativity of developing new typefaces.

His work has included typefaces for the magazines *Rolling Stone* (The Proteus Project) and *Sports Illustrated* (the Champion Gothic family), and for the company Apple Computer (the Hoefler Text family). He has also revived several, including HTF Didot (based on the work of the French type founder, Firmin Didot).

Given his interest and knowledge of the historical aspects of type design, I asked him if, as a designer, he ever felt that this knowledge and understanding of historical work could be seen as a double-edged sword. Having a clear understanding of the problems faced and how those before us solved them can help, but it might prejudice our work and inhibit new, creative solutions to problems. He responded:

"I do think it's possible to be inspired by history without being hidebound to tradition. As you say, it's useful to see how others solved familiar problems, and one of the maddening things about typography is that so many seemingly new problems have already been addressed, though sometimes obliquely. Analysing the historical record is also a useful way to find new challenges: there are still a lot of gaps to be filled,

"I do think it's possible to be inspired by history without being hidebound to tradition…"

and there are plenty of opportunities to complete unfinished experiments or solve unsolved equations. As far as I'm concerned, things as pedestrian as 'how do you create a boldface Old Style?' or 'what kind of italic should a Venetian have?' are still open and valid questions. The joy of typography is that it is inherently experimental, and plenty of experiments that failed early on are still worth re-enacting. There are hybrid serif/sans serif fonts from the 1880s, an aesthetic that wasn't further explored for another 110 years.

"When I was working on The Proteus Project, I spent a lot of time looking at Regency and Victorian display types, and collecting loose ends that seemed worth tying up. Why did slab serif 'egyptians' and sans serif 'grotesques' deserve matching italics, but not wedge serifed 'latins' or chamfered 'grecians'? Answering these questions required stepping off the historical path without losing sight of traditional letterforms, and the solutions often required synthesizing something out of two seemingly contrary approaches to type design.

"Right now, I'm mulling over a set of six blackletter initials that Caslon Junior left us, wondering if I'm properly interpreting what I think might be an interesting thesis. Whether or not I'm able to understand his intentions may in the end be irrelevant, since my goal is just to create a worthwhile typeface, but I think this means of arriving at the destination is a productive and interesting one."

In the past Hoefler has dismissed the suggestion that his work be described as classical, preferring it instead to be described as experimental. His work, such as that on HTF Gestalt certainly gives credence to this assertion: an intelligent, witty typeface, it was constructed in such a way as to only become legible within the context of a sentence, rather than each individual glyph necessarily being readily identifiable in its own right.

Hoefler Text is another experimental face, but this time in terms of technology. It was originally commissioned by Apple to demonstrate the flexibility of its QuickDraw GX font technology (now defunct), which allowed for vastly extended character sets including swashes, extended sets of ligatures, ornaments, and so on.

His family, Hoefler Titling, was released as a display counterpart to Hoefler Text, the typeface he created for Apple. Hoefler Titling was created from scratch, however, rather than being based on the forms of Hoefler Text. I asked Jonathan about the reasons behind this:

"Hoefler Titling began as a deeper exploration of some of the historical material I'd looked at for Hoefler Text. Hoefler Text was inspired most directly by two hot-metal designs, Linotype Garamond No.3 and Linotype Janson Text 55. Both of these are really secondary sources, interpretations of more noteworthy historical types – in this case, the seventeenth-century work of Jean Jannon (who was mistaken for Garamond) and Nicholas Kis (who was mistaken for Janson).

"I didn't set out to create a counterpart for Hoefler Text, as much as I just wanted another chance to immerse myself in the baroque. My early drawings for Hoefler Titling seemed better suited to display sizes than text – the design's long ascenders seem to single it out for bigness – and I was pleased with the way this new font worked with Hoefler Text, provided I relegated that design to small sizes. (Hoefler Text is full of things that are easier to forgive at nine point than at 72.) Since I was developing the new font as an autonomous family, I didn't feel particularly constrained by the forms of Hoefler Text. I just presumed that since both fonts had been marinated in the same historical broth, they'd ultimately have some affinity for one another."

So much of Hoefler's work has been influenced and informed by metal-founded type, that I wanted to know if he felt that modern, clinically-precise digital revivals can ever hope to recapture any of the warmth that's often attributed to metal type:

"I think so. One of the amazing things about type is just how many different strategies a designer can use to achieve the same goal. It's not hard to evoke the warmth of foundry type in very superficial ways – bumpy edges, erratic baselines, and all that – and the results are often surprisingly effective. Years ago I tried auto-tracing the seventeenth century 'Fell Types' as a demonstration of why you shouldn't slavishly ape an original source, and much to my horror the results were kind of nice.

In a subsequent experiment, I tried comparing my warts-and-all digitisation to a more abstracted revival, in which the rocky curves were replaced by smooth ones and the serifs were pruned to less rakish angles. The point was to demonstrate that the beauty of foundry type is the sum of its shortcomings, but once again I was surprised: this time, the 'clean' version lost none of the warmth of the original. I think this must prove that the virtues of a good typeface are more than skin-deep.

"When I first got involved in typography professionally, I was quick to seize on the easy strategies for making typefaces feel less digital. This was in 1988, when Robert Slimbach's Adobe Garamond felt like a brilliant riposte to the proudly digital work that Zuzana Lîcko was doing at Emigre, which I was trying not to imitate. Robert is especially good at bending the medium to his aesthetic, and I admired the ways in which Adobe Garamond concealed its bezier points beneath bowed serifs and rounded corners. In many ways, Hoefler Text was my exuberant jump into this pool; I wanted to create a typeface that didn't feel like a digital font. At the time, I felt that straight lines meant digital, and digital meant cold, which was a bit of an oversimplification.

"In subsequent years I've changed my mind about this, noticing how many of my favourite fonts – how many truly warm designs – are unfailingly digital. Matthew Carter's 'Galliard' and 'Miller' come straight to mind, along with Bram de Does' 'Lexicon' – each of these faces is a riot of sharp corners and parallel lines, and yet somehow they manage to have all the warmth of the best foundry types. Hoefler Titling, which I began in 1994 and finally wrapped up this year, is probably the last stop for me on the soft-and-rounded trajectory; I'm really interested now in seeing how the digital aesthetic and the appeal of traditional typography can be simultaneously embraced."

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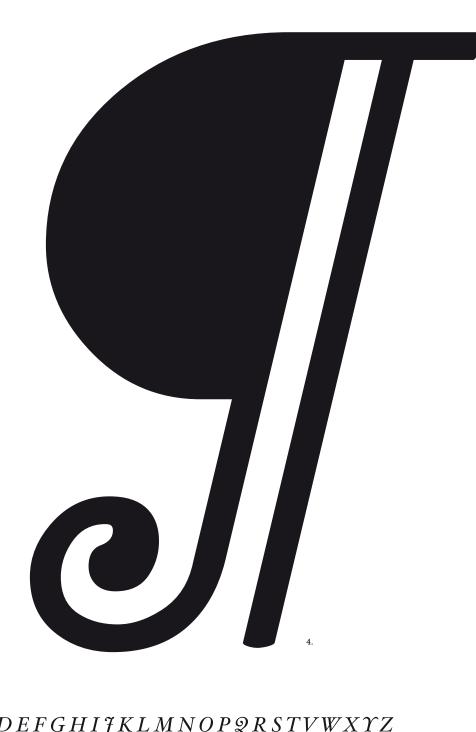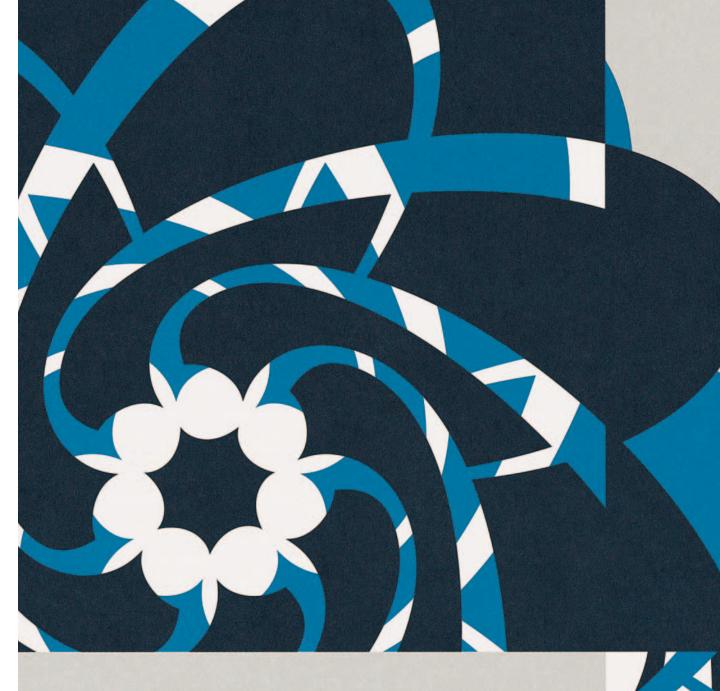
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1. Hoefler Titling typeface family, 2002

   Hoefler Titling, as its name suggests, was designed for use above 36pt in titling applications, and was designed as a companion font to the earlier Hoefler Text family. Jonathan Hoefler's great interest in the historical aspects of typography often shows through in his work – just like Hoefler Text, the Hoefler Titling family was greatly influenced by the seventeenth century baroque types of Jean Jannon and Nicholas Kis.

2. Hoefler Text typeface family, 1991–1993

   Originally developed for Apple Computer to demonstrate the power of its now defunct QuickDraw GX font rendering technology, the Hoefler Text family of typefaces spans twenty-seven designs. It was designed from the outset to be a comprehensive family that would be of heavyweight serious typographic use, as it includes not just the standard range of weights, but also small caps and swashes, alternative versions, fleurons, ornaments and even pattern tiles.

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