A short history of typography

By Roger Druet
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All typefaces, even the most modern digitized characters designed with the help of a computer, are based on forms of writing. This link between written and printed characters is particularly noteworthy in the history of European typographical design.

The Phoenicians and the Greeks, who invented the early alphabets from which Western scripts derived, were seafaring and colonizing peoples who needed to carry precise and legible messages over very long distances. Consequently the priorities of Western writing were speed of execution and simplicity of design.

The creation of phonetic alphabets (instead of ideographic systems) using only twenty to thirty signs for the transcription of language was a decisive step in a process of abstraction in which the Greeks played a leading role by considerably developing the Phoenician alphabet. The alphabet they created is the basis of the Latin characters used in many parts of the world today.

By the fourth century BC, the Golden Age of Hellenic thought, Ionic script had already developed the rectangular form of modern capital lettering. During the Greek and Roman classical era, writing acquired the harmonious and balanced form which is known as lapidary because of its resemblance to the monumental script used for inscriptions in stone. This script with its firmly chiselled grooves and broad strokes which stood out well in sunlight and were enhanced by shadow, answered a need for beauty and harmony but also expressed imperial power. Latin capital-letter script may be regarded as the basis of subsequent developments in Western scripts and, later, type designs.

Cyrillic script, which was adopted by Orthodox Christians for the Slavonic languages, particularly in Russia, emulated these upright, monumental styles of writing. Systematically used as a phonetic form, it became a widely employed substitute for Latin script in the Slav countries. The invention of Cyrillic script, derived from a Greek book hand, is attributed to the ninth-century Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius, and was standardized by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII.

After the heavy quadrata, or square capitals, the basis of all Latin scripts, and the Roman rustic capitals, an early form of cursive script, writing evolved towards the rounded uncial script. In the ninth century, Charlemagne imposed on the Holy Roman Empire the form of small lettering now known as Carolingian miniscule, which included most of the features of the lower case Latin alphabet. The official adoption of this cursive script did not bring about the disappearance of capital letters, but it was the dominant hand of Western Europe throughout the ninth century and served as a model for later innovators until the dawn of European printing in the fifteenth century.

With the foundation of universities in Europe in the twelfth century, parchment became scarce. A new script, known as black-letter or Gothic, as angular and narrow as the Gothic pointed arch, answered the needs of the moment in that it took up a minimum of space. The expression of thought seemed to be channeled through a kind of grid. This design gave rise to two basic scripts: the rigid, vertical Textura, used primarily for liturgical texts; and a more flexible script, Rotunda.

In the fifteenth century, the angular Gothic script, having been appropriated by the lettered classes in France, became known as batarde or Bastarda. The invention and use of spectacles also made it possible for writing to become smaller. It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that the Germans introduced capital letters into the Gothic alphabet for woodblock printing. Hitherto, the place of the “dropped initials”—initial letters at the beginning of a page or chapter, which covered two or three lines of text—had been left blank, to be filled in by the illuminators.

For engraving, the Germans had adopted a spiky kind of script, whose rather fussy, fractured style suggested its name, Fraktur. The great painter and engraver Albrecht Durer, who thought that letters could be governed by mathematical laws, undertook to impose a constructive discipline on Gothic script. This admirable undertaking culminated in a balanced appearance for each character.

Around 1440, the German printer Johannes Gensfleisch, known as Gutenberg, of Mainz, took the remarkable step of bringing together and organizing all the processes of printing: punch-cutting, making matrices, type-casting, composing and the use of a hand press. Once the discovery had been made, the art of printing spread rapidly. The Gutenberg forty-two-line Bible (see back cover), the first great feat of Western printing, was printed in Gothic lettering. Subsequently, Gutenberg increased his range of typefaces to almost 300 so that he could reproduce different scripts as accurately as possible.

The humanist scholars of fifteenth-century Italy never took to Gothic script. Petrarch considered that it looked blurred from a distance and caused eyestrain close to, as if it had been created not to be read, but for some other purpose. The Italian Renaissance therefore turned for inspiration to classical Antiquity, and calligraphers revived ancient monumental lettering, thus returning to a simplicity and clarity that are still characteristic of printing today. The West, influenced by its artists, pursued the chimera of “divine proportion”, the mathematical relationship believed to be the key to beauty. Leonardo da Vinci sought it in the human body, as did Durer and the great French typographer Geoffroy Tory, who studied the composition of letters according to the proportions of the human body in the Champfleury (1529), a treatise on type design.

An important event which encouraged a new approach to printing was the sack of Mainz in 1462, which forced many of Gutenberg’s collaborators to leave the town. They took the secrets of printing to several European countries. Around 1470 one of them, the French engraver Nicolas Jenson settled in Venice, where he drew inspiration from humanist scripts in designing a new type with wedge-shaped serifs. This pure and beautiful style was known as roman, a name which would in future be applied to typefaces with an upright
design. Among the heirs to his workshop in that illustrious city was the learned Aldus Manutius, one of the great figures in European publishing. His type designer, Francesco Griffo of Bologna, cut the first example of a sloping type which became known as Aldine and is today called italic. It was based on the informal cursive writing developed by chancery clerks to speed their work.

The sixteenth century was the Golden Age of calligraphy in Europe, rich in great calligraphers such as Ludovico degli Arrighi, Ugo da Carpi, Giovanniantonio Tagliente and Palatino in Italy, Jean Beauchenne in France and Roger Ascham in England. As progress was made in copper engraving, so a cursive script with slender finials (terminal hooks) emerged and came to fruition in the work of Lucas Matherot and Louis Barbedor.

In France, where the development of printing was influenced by the work of Geoffroy Tory, the Estienne family was prominent. One of its members, Robert Estienne, was printer to King Francois I. He entrusted Claude Garamond with a royal command to cut typefaces for editions of classical Greek texts. The famous Grecs du Roi which resulted were uncluttered and elegant. Garamond, the first commercial typefounder, also designed the roman and italic typefaces which bear his name and which played a leading role in European typographical design until the end of the sixteenth century.

In this great humanist movement, Christophe Plantin, a French bookbinder who became a citizen of Antwerp and a printer, acted as a connecting link with the Netherlands, where a great dynasty of printers, the Elzeviers, had come to the fore and would be active until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Elzeviers gave their name to an elegant wedge-serif typeface.

In 1692, during the reign of Louis XIV and classicism, Abbe Nicolas Jaugeon, was called Romain du Roi and was reserved for the exclusive use of the Imprimerie Royale—the Royal Press. This cold, majestic script was first used in 1702.

The eighteenth century was an age of elegant typography in Britain. The typefounder William Caslon cut a highly legible typeface which is still in use today. Caslon was the typeface in which a Baltimore printer issued the official copies of the United States Declaration of Independence. Another English printer, John Baskerville, who taught calligraphy, designed a graceful, balanced typeface which revolutionized typography and is still popular.

In eighteenth-century France, Louis-Rene Luce, engraver to King Louis XV, introduced the rational spirit of the Enlightenment and the Encyclopedists into typographical experimentation, while Pierre-Simon Fournier and Francois-Ambroise Didot invented the point system of typographic measurement. Both Didot’s son Firmin and Giambattista Bodoni of Parma were inspired by Baskerville’s work to create very similar forms of austere lettering with strongly contrasting thick and thin strokes. Their work influenced nineteenth-century type design in several countries.

The development of lithography, a process of printing from a stone surface invented in 1796 by the dramatist Aloys Senefelder (see page 7), encouraged printing from types based on calligraphic script with fine, supple curves. From 1830 onwards, as a result of scientific and technical advances and the development of industry and trade, a dynamic form of typography came into being through the work of typefounders such as Alexandre de Berny and Theophile Beaudoire. Egyptian, with its slab serifs, and Fat Face, still widely used in the press and advertising, were highly fashionable typefaces.

William Morris, the poet and writer who made a major contribution to the revival of English decorative art in the late nineteenth century, was the leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement which took inspiration from the styles of medieval times. The work produced by his Kelmscott Press had a strongly individual graphic personality and exercised wide influence. In France, George Auriol and the painter and engraver Eugene Grasset were among the masters of Art Nouveau. The latter received support from the typefounder Georges Peignot, who later, with his son Charles, produced a range of typefaces which would dominate printing until the advent of phototypesetting in 1956. Peignot, designed by the French poster artist Adolphe Mouron Cassandre in 1937, and Bifur, a shaded script of great originality, are among the finest typefaces cut by the Deberny and Peignot typefoundry.

Today, although computerization is widespread, there is a welcome revival of interest among young people in the art of calligraphy, which is encouraging the search for and creation of new designs. Outstanding modern designers of digitized letters include the great German calligrapher Hermann Zapf; Adrian Frutiger of Switzerland; Ladislas Mandel, Jose Mendoza, Albert Boton, all of France; as well as the young French designer of Arin, Franck Jalleau.

We are at the dawn of a new age of typography. Lettering is no longer created by lead objects but by strokes of light. Photocomposition systems can now provide higher screen resolution, allowing sharper definition of characters, as well as an immense variety of typefaces, offering great scope for creativity. Soon, these machines will achieve a degree of sensitivity close to that of handwriting, and will give typographers a degree of control over the design of lettering far superior to that of early electronic typesetting systems. But to safeguard an entire heritage of craftsmanship, metal type must not be allowed to disappear.