

type

The SECRET HISTORY
of LETTERS

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5 | 'Hideous Italians': thicks, thins, and the rise of advertising type

Although John Baskerville experienced little take-up of his ideas in Britain during his lifetime, his efforts had not gone unnoticed elsewhere. More than a decade before his death, his work had made an impression on a young Italian, Giambatista Bodoni (1740–1813), who took the developments Baskerville introduced into his type design – the contrast between the thick and thin strokes which had so offended some of his fellow countrymen – a step farther, and so brought about the type style that would come to be characterized as 'Modern'.

Bodoni was born in Turin in 1740. His father was a printer, and this was to be Bodoni's trade as well. From the age of eighteen he worked for eight years as a compositor at the Propaganda Fide, the Church printing house in Rome. Inspired by Baskerville's productions, he decided to head for England and find work there. But he was fated not to arrive; he contracted malaria, and returned to the parental home in Saluzzo to recover. His father was still running his printing business in the town, and Bodoni, while helping out with the family concern, began to cut his first typeface. His reputation as a printer grew, and he was given the task of setting up a printing house for the Duke of Parma. This he ran for forty-five years, building its reputation to a level of European pre-eminence.

His type layouts featured generous white space, letter-spacing and sparing use of ornament, much in the style that Baskerville had favoured. Bodoni's type, although seen as the first example of a Modern face, drew on the 'Romains du Roi', the type designed exclusively for the French king Louis XIV's printing, which boasted flat, unbracketed serifs. Although use of the type outside of the royal printing house was forbidden by law, subtly modified versions were produced by other type founders, most notably Pierre Simon Fournier and Pierre-François Didot. Fournier's work in particular influenced Bodoni, and he developed the flat serif into a virtual hairline, with the thin strokes of the characters of a comparable thickness.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Bodoni, and the subsequent Modern-style faces it has inspired, have been regarded as cool, elegant and sophisticated. The Modern face is the 'classic fashion' typeface: books or magazine features on, for example, Christian Dior or Coco Chanel invariably use it for headlines and titling. It is surprising, therefore, to realize the depths of loathing it inspired in the century or so after its creation. This is Emery Walker, of the Doves Press (see Chapter 7), on the subject:

Bodoni admired Baskerville and he carried the exaggeration of the thin and thick strokes of the letters still further, until Baskerville's type by the side of the Italian looks serious and dignified. Bodoni's influence on type design was very great, but from the point of view of beauty, entirely bad. At the end of the century it had driven the reasonable types of Caslon out of the market,



20 Giambattista Bodoni, whose typeface typified the Modern style. William Morris was later to consider his influence responsible for 'sweltering ugliness', but the twentieth century associated the style with extreme elegance.

and for the next fifty years a style derived from his letters was dominant, ending in what [William] Morris called 'sweltering ugliness'.¹

Francis Meynell, writing in 1946, is more guarded, but describes Bodoni as having 'almost parodied' Baskerville. It's difficult to say whether the anecdote he cites is in approval or the opposite:

Paul Valéry tells us that Stendhal once visited Bodoni at Parma, and found him at a moment of typographical triumph. He had just finished the arrangement of a title-page. The word OEUVRÉS was centred above the word DE, and that was centred above BOULEAU-DESPRÉAUX. 'Look, sir,' cried Bodoni, in a fervour of self-appreciation, "'Boileau-Despréaux'" in a single line of capitals! I have searched six months, sir, before I was able to find this arrangement!²

Bodoni died in 1813; his widow, Paola Margherita, finished the book he was working on at the time of his death, the *Manuale Tipografico*, which was finally published in 1818. He was a rare example of an early type designer who actually made some money out of his work; at the height of his success he was even receiving 300 francs a year from no less than Napoleon Bonaparte. However, what is now perceived as a general decline in printing standards in the nineteenth century took its toll on the fine strokes of the Modern face, which explains in part the reaction against them. It was only in the twentieth century that Bodoni experienced a revival. Morris Fuller Benton designed the American Type Founders version, but his redrawing took into account the printing realities of the time, with a consequent strengthening of the characters. Monotype also revived it, but the most faithful version was considered to be that of the German foundry Bauer, designed by Heinrich Jost (1889–1948).

Although the Modern face did achieve some popularity in Britain, there the new thrust in type innovation was pushing in an entirely opposite direction – towards thick, not thin, serifs. These were characterized by Clarendons, with thick, bracketed serifs, and the unbracketed, but equally weighty, Egyptian, later to be known as the slab serif. The catalyst for type development in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century would not be

A E M
a b x

²¹ Bodoni: the thin strokes are now very thin, the serifs flat, unbracketed.

¹ From Emery Walker's Cambridge Sanders lecture.

² Francis Meynell, *English Printed Books*, London, 1946.

CONCERT POSTPONED
 IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE TOWN HALL BEING ENGAGED FOR PUBLIC BUSINESS ON THE NIGHT ADVERTISED.

MRS. H. WALKER
 Begs to announce to the Public, that the TWO
ENTERTAINMENTS
 will take place in the above Hall, on the Evening of
Friday & Saturday, March 19 & 20,
 WHEN HE WILL INTRODUCE HIS

ROCK HARMONIGON
 OR MUSICAL SIDDIES,
 singing a variety of Comic and Sentimental Songs, with Harp Accompaniment. Also, exhibit a beautiful collection of

DIORAMIC SCENERY!!!
 To conclude with the Laughter Effects of the

PHANTASCOPE

TO COMMENCE AT EIGHT O'CLOCK.
 Reserved Seats, 1s. 1 Front Row, 6d. 1 Back Row, 3d.
 Place the Ticket at 2 P.M. at 11a. High Street, Strand, and Ticket Office, New Bridge-st.

22 A typical nineteenth-century riot of display letters, like Bodoni, the victims of a late-nineteenth-century backlash. 'Who can exaggerate the horrors of those letters?' wrote a commentator in 1895.

continuous text reading, but short, impactful advertising copy.

The origins of the slab serif – heavy, monoline (having a uniform stroke width), with thick square-ended serifs – are uncertain, but it was probably developed by sign-writers around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Rather than relying on existing typefaces, they experimented with creating heavier letter forms that better suited their requirements for short, bold copy. Clearly, for this kind of unhesitant reading on the move, fine, contrasted types such as Baskerville or Bodoni lacked impact, and it's not difficult to see how a slab serif would be easier to paint than a thin bracketed one. Thus the display face, the headline, was born.

Type foundries eventually responded to this demand by producing their own slab serif faces. The London foundry of Vincent Figgins offered an 'Antique', as they chose to name it, in their 1817 specimen. Also in London, the death of type founder Robert Thorne in 1820 resulted

in his business being bought by William Thorowgood (or Thorogood), whose 1820 specimen also featured slab serifs (presumably in preparation by Thorne at the time of his death). He called them 'Egyptians' – doubly confusing, as this was the name that William Caslon IV's foundry had given to their solitary, pioneering sans serif face (see page 37).

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s the production of display faces snowballed: 'fat faces', Bodoni's concepts taken to their ultimate conclusion, with extremely heavy thick strokes and very fine thin strokes, ornamented faces with decorations within the stroke areas, and 'open' styles, containing a white cut-out area within the letter form. The latter styles clearly worked better on a heavy face, and slab serifs were ideal. Taken to an extreme, the slab serif developed to the point where it was thicker by far than the other strokes in the character, in the style we now dub 'Wild West'.

The popularity of slabs was waning by the middle of the century, and they were superseded by increasingly complex, largely 'grotesque' faces (as sans serifs were now generally known) – ornamented, outlined, with three-dimensional, 'perspective', shadow effects. These are the faces, usually used in a typographical riot, that typify the Victorian advertising handbill, the auction notice and the theatre poster. Because of their size, all these display types would have been cut in wood, not cast in metal. Their strength and energy are such that their use today inescapably conjures up a 'period' feel. And the period they represent was one of growing commercial vigour.

Britain had been first into the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century; a rapidly increasing output of mass-produced goods needed aggressive advertisement. A French visitor to London in 1850 was astounded by the pervasive and inventive advertising sites used in the West End:

In Piccadilly, St James's Street, everywhere in fact where the crowd was densest, one met men transformed into walking advertisements. One wore a scarlet boot as a headress, was wrapped in a garment entirely composed of cardboard, and carried a flag bearing a bootmaker's name and address. There were others in all sorts of grotesque accoutrements. When the goods advertised need

long explanation, the man is concealed in a closed-up sentry-box. They wall him in between four boards, clap a little roof on top, and he rotates slowly to allow the passer-by to read what is written on the placards ...

Publicity invades even the asphalt pavement. It relies on the frequent rain and the habit people have here of looking down as they walk. When the weather is fine, dust dulls the surface and nothing much is visible. But as soon as a shower has washed it clean the characters appear, letters blossom under your feet, and you find yourself walking on gigantic posters.³

The end of the century found slabs joining Modern faces in the doghouse of aesthetic opinion: 'Who can exaggerate the horrors of those letters? Sometimes one sees a facsimile playbill or ticket of, say 1812. There seems no redeeming feature in the job-letter. Flat, squat, flat-serifed romans; enormously thick antiques, the serifs as heavy as the body-marks; hideous "Italians" – romans with the thick and thin lines carefully reversed ...'⁴

Strong stuff indeed. But as with most things that fall from grace, a revival eventually comes. A new wave of slab serifs arrived in the late twenties and early thirties, and the slab enjoyed a vogue in post-war Britain as a particularly British type style, notably in Charles Hasler's lettering for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

³ Francis Wey, *Les Anglais Chez Eux*, extract taken from *The Story of Advertising*, James Playsted Wood, New York, 1938.

⁴ R. Coupland Harding, *The Inland Printer*, August 1895.