
ANATOMY
OF A
TYPEFACE

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FRANKLIN GOTHIC AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY GOTHICS

When the late Stevens Watts was manager of the American Type Founders' foundry, he was fond of saying that 'while types come and go, Franklin Gothic goes on forever.' The type was a perennial best seller, and over the past seventy years it has been one of the best-known representatives of a style of type notable for its multiplicity of forms, the modern gothics. These faces are not, despite their name, gothics—at least in the traditional understanding of the term. And Franklin Gothic is doubly misnamed, having no historical relationship to Benjamin Franklin.

If anyone can be blamed for the gothic misnomer it is perhaps the corporate body of the Boston Type and Stereotype Foundry, which back in 1837 issued a new series of types without serifs under the name Gothic. Probably it was the bold weight of this type that prompted the designation. In any event, the Boston firm was the first foundry in America to introduce a serifless design then attaining great popularity in Europe, particularly England and Germany.

In the post-World War II era, when sans-serif types dominate the typography of the marketplace, it is difficult to recall that typefounders up to the beginning of the nineteenth century sought to please only book printers. It was the Industrial Revolution, of course, that brought to printers, as to manufacturers, countless changes and the introduction of extra-bold types, called fat faces, patterned somewhat akin to the Didot and Bodoni styles. These were welcomed for their display value by printers specializing in the production of broadsides, handbills, and posters.

The impact of the new commercial types evidently stimulated William Caslon IV—of the famous English typefounding family—in 1816 to offer experimentally a monotone type without serifs under the name Two-Line English Egyptian. This 28-point type, produced in capitals only, was the first sans serif to be purveyed as a printing type.

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Franklin Gothic (ATF)

Caslon's design did not meet with immediate support, primarily because its introduction coincided with that of the well-received square-serif faces currently being issued by competing typefoundries. But by 1825 the German firm of Schelter and Giesecke was also offering a series of condensed sans serifs, which included lowercase characters. Then, in 1832, three English foundries brought out additional sans-serif types. One of these firms, that of William Thorowgood, termed the style 'grotesque,' a classification that is still standard in Britain for the sans-serif types that originated in the nineteenth century.

By 1850 all of the world's typefounders were issuing sans serifs in an endless, and confusing, variety of weights and widths. This

CASLON JUNR LETTERFOUND

The sans serif type of William Caslon IV, c. 1816

venezianischer
Porträtmalerei

Sans serif lowercase of Schelter & Giesecke, c. 1825

MARCHES

Early American sans serif of George Bruce, c. 1853

typographic overkill continued until metal types were largely superseded by film fonts in the past few decades.

When the American Type Founders issued Franklin Gothic in 1905, it didn't seem that the company needed another gothic. For after ATF had been formed in 1892—as an amalgamation of many American typefoundries—the new firm issued a specimen book that showed about fifty gothic types. Some of these types had such colorful names as Turius, Altona, Octic, and Telescope, but most of them were simply numbered. Many of the faces were difficult to distinguish, but all of the widths now common in gothic series were represented, from extra-condensed to extra-extended.

When ATF's Morris Benton became fully involved in type design, about 1902 (when he was thirty), he began cutting the Franklin Gothic series. In this he was no doubt influenced by the German production of sans-serif type, for in 1898 the Berthold foundry in Berlin had produced the Akzidenz series (later known to American printers as Standard) which had proved very popular and inspired the cutting of Reform Grotesk by Frankfurt's Stempel in 1903 and the Venus series by the Bauer foundry, also of Frankfurt, in 1907.

Franklin Gothic is an excellent example of a traditional early-nineteenth-century sans-serif letter which retained certain features common to roman. For example, the lowercase *a* and *g* are normal roman characters, and in all of the letters there occurs a thinning of stroke at the junction of rounds to stems. Some of the contrast of roman letters also persists, although the overall appearance is monotone. The weight of stroke of Franklin Gothic is heavy, or what modern practitioners call extra-bold. It should be pointed out that there has never, alas, been any consistency in the terminology for the thickness of a stroke; such unquantified designations as *light*, *thin*, *medium*, *bold*, *heavy*, *extra-bold*, *ultra-bold*, and *semi-bold* indicate the difficulty faced by typographers in type recognition and description.

Benton finished designing Franklin Gothic in 1902, but it did not appear until about 1905. (The years in which typefaces were drawn frequently differ from their dates of issuance. Unfortunately, the records of the manufacturers have rarely survived, making it extremely difficult to affix accurate dates.) In 1905 a condensed variant was drawn, and in 1906 an extended one—the latter was abandoned at the time and not cut until 1953, as Franklin Gothic Wide, following the great revival in the fifties of these early gothics. An extra-condensed version was also produced in 1906. Benton completed his contribution to the Franklin Gothic family with the drawing in 1913 of an italic for the original face and in 1914 of a condensed shaded modification.

The monotone structure of the gothics readily lends itself to a variety of weights in which a type designer can maintain both a uniformity of style and his original concept. In merchandizing their wares, typefounders learned to take advantage of this fact by suggesting to printers that they required two or three *weights* (light, bold, etc.) for each style of type, along with several *widths* (extended, condensed, etc.). The printer was then urged to purchase these variations in series, that is, all of the sizes cast for each family variant.

Such marketing procedures were just beginning to emerge during

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Alternate Gothic No. 1 (ATF)

the period 1900–1910, as an inspection of any typefounders' catalogues will disclose. A very successful example was the dissemination of the Cheltenham design, but it was with the serifless types that this approach to manufacture and selling came to fruition.

It was with the gothic types that early in the present century foundries began exploiting the concept of offering types in a variety of weights and widths. For example at ATF Morris Benton drew a condensed gothic named Alternate Gothic cast in three widths differentiated by number but all narrower than normal. Since Franklin Gothic was an extra-bold type, Alternate Gothic was designed as a normal boldface. To fill out Benton then cut Lightline Gothic and News Gothic, the latter being a medium-weight letter. The success of this venture is evident, since all of these styles remain in use in photographic or digitized versions of the original designs.

Successful from the start, ATF's original twentieth-century gothic was eventually adapted by all the composing-machine manufacturers, and more recently it has been transferred to film. The fact that Franklin Gothic survived the impact of the geometric sans serifs during the period from 1926 to 1950—in addition to the revival of its contemporary competitors, Venus and Standard—warrants the conclusion

that Morris Benton, even in his early efforts as a type designer, possessed the skill to create a printing type that could withstand obsolescence.

Indeed, up to 1950 the geometric unserified types, as represented by Futura, dominated commercial printing. But by midcentury a reaction against them had begun to reduce their effectiveness: Futura was damned as being too cold for modern tastes—the word of critical disapprobation being *mécanique*, ‘mechanical,’ as used by the Swiss typographers, who were the vanguard of a search for a new typography that fitted the needs of a postwar generation. It was not to be expected that the younger designers would sponsor a return to the roman letter, although their elders were buoyantly anticipating such a gesture. Instead, the sans-serif ideal was reaffirmed, but the form embodied a return to an earlier tradition rather than to that of the geometric unserified types of the turn-of-the-century ‘gothics.’

Perhaps resurrecting these gothics seemed more efficient to the typefounders than taking the time to commission new designs. Thus,

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News Gothic (ATF)

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Lightline Gothic (ATF)

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Standard (Berthold)

from the Bauer foundry came Venus, circa 1906, and Berthold reissued the even older Akzidenz Grotesk, which was renamed Standard for the English and American markets. The first series of Venus to reach the United States was the extra-bold extended group, and it precipitated an explosion in the use of wide types, which in turn spread to gothics of all widths. Such was these types’ impact on American advertising designers that for a time most of the German freighters making the westerly Atlantic crossing were ballasted with Venus and Standard types. The appearance of the types fortuitously coincided with a design trend then touching every object from furniture to automobiles: wide and squat was in.

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X Y Z a b c d e f g h i j k l
m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
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Venus Bold (Bauer)

For two or three years Venus and Standard had the market to themselves, with typographers vehemently disagreeing as to which was superior. ATF in the United States attempted to meet the competition with aggressive promotion of its Benton gothics, but it was a losing battle, for the German types possessed a greater range of compatible series. More important, Venus and Standard were sold as single-type families, thus assuring the typographers of their effectiveness in a comprehensive advertising campaign. In the meantime, new approaches were being sought by the typefoundries, eager to promote and prolong this regeneration of the early serifless letter forms.

In the mid-1950s all this activity came to a boil, with nearly every supplier of printing types peddling redesigned gothics to a trade already saturated with the earlier models. The appeal was made, therefore, to the printer's customer—often an advertising agency—rather than to the printer himself, and the solicitation was explicit in its offer of typographic sophistication.

In 1953 Adrian Frutiger, a twenty-five-year-old Swiss designer and former compositor, was invited by the Paris typefoundry Deberny et Peignot to assist in the selection of types to be used for the Lumitype phototypesetting machine, the European version of the American Photon machine, which the foundry was manufacturing under license. Before this assignment Frutiger had been experimenting with a uni-

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Eurostyle Bold (Nebiolo)

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X Y Z a b c d e f g h i j k
l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
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Univers 65 (ATF-Deberny Peignot)

fied series of gothic types in which a single designer controlled every facet of their construction. At Deberny et Peignot the opportunity to produce such a design was provided, resulting in the type named Univers, first distributed in 1957. The name was anticipatory, but the style did become available to printers in forms other than for photo-composition, for the foundry itself produced the type in metal for its own market and, by agreement with the American Type Founders

Company, for sale in the United States. Arrangements were soon concluded with the Monotype Corporation of London to transfer Univers to the Monotype.

Univers represents a most ambitious program of integrated type design, for Frutiger brought to the task a highly developed skill in letter design. As a critic of the Futura concept of sans-serif construction, he sought to modify its severe strokes yet stay within the serifless boundaries. In discussing his ideas Frutiger said, 'A purely geometric character is unacceptable in the long run, for the horizontal lines appear thicker to the eye than the vertical ones; an O represented by a perfect circle strikes us as shapeless and has a disturbing effect on the word as a whole.'

But what is undoubtedly the most unusual contribution of Frutiger to the marketing of printing types was his defiant attempt to simplify typographic nomenclature. Rather than employ the ordinary imprecise designations of weight and width, he organized his entire design plan of twenty-one series into a logical 'palette,' by which each variant received a number that instantly identified its structure. The palette consisted of six vertical and six horizontal rows; the extended versions occupied the vertical rows, diminishing in width from left to right; and the weights were categorized horizontally, the lightest at the top and the heaviest at the bottom.

For the first time, Frutiger's palette for printers brought a rational approach to the difficulties of describing the various type weights and widths, always an area of debate among practitioners. Though not applicable to many other types, the palette clearly differentiated the numerous gothic and sans-serif faces, with their multiplicities of stroke and variations of width. Unfortunately, however, Frutiger's idea never caught on; when printers put Univers into their cases, they compared the weight of each series with that of the geometric sans serifs and applied the weight of the latter to the new type. The type-specimen books of different printers therefore varied considerably from one another, to the great confusion of customers. And, in the Monotype version, Frutiger's numbers conflicted with the font number assigned by the company to all of its types and so the palette was discarded. Thus, a worthy attempt to bring order to the chaotic designation of type weights and widths was allowed to fail.

Univers met with competition when it was introduced – 1957 was a halcyon year for the new gothics, three others also emerging from the drawing boards. Mercator was cut by the Dutch typographer

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Helvetica (Hass-Stempel)

Dick Dooijes for Typefoundry Amsterdam. Folio was produced by Germany's Bauer foundry, and a type named Neue Haas-Grotesk issued from the Swiss Haas'sche foundry, of Basel. The following year, Aldo Novarese, at the Nebiolo foundry in Turin, produced a gothic family named Recta. Neither Recta nor Mercator made an impact in the United States, but Folio and Neue Haas-Grotesk certainly did.

Folio, designed by Konrad Bauer and Walter Baum, benefited from the promotion of the excellent sales agency that Bauer had long retained in this country. It also became available for the linecasting machine when adopted under a royalty agreement by the Intertype Corporation.

Neue Haas-Grotesk, designed by Max Miedinger, was cut for Linotype by the German Linotype firm, which named it Helvetica. And the Stempel foundry entered into an arrangement with Haas'sche to manufacture the type for export, again under the name Helvetica.

By the early 1960s, when the manufacturers of all these competing types had brought their production up to encompass the innumerable series involved, there was, of course, intense rivalry in their promotion. Each design had its adherents, and it was fairly simple to start an argument among typographers concerning the efficacy of each style. The older type professionals naturally recalled the period, thirty years earlier, when the geometric sans serifs had been subjected to similar polemics; at that time, a single design – Futura – received by far the most enthusiastic approval and became the dominant form. Among the neo-gothics, Helvetica has received greatest attention by adver-

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Folio (Bauer)

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Mercator (Amsterdam)

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Record Gothic (Ludlow)

tising-agency designers, and up to the present it is the most widely used of them all. The more traditional typographers are mystified by this preference, believing that the subtleties of difference among these styles are so slight that an intelligent judgment of them is impossible.

It is evident that the admiration for Swiss typographic design in general was an additional attraction in the selection of Helvetica as the best representative of that style. In any case, the use of Helvetica has spread from advertising into the world of publishing, where it turns up frequently for the setting of textbooks of every description – thus violating long-established precepts concerning typographic legibility.

Notwithstanding the impact of the rejuvenated gothics, the older forms still are very much in evidence at every hand. It would therefore appear that Franklin Gothic will be selected by future designers whose great-grandfathers would have nodded their approval.