D is for Deutschland

Germany, Typography, Identity

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TWO JOHANN’S AND AN ALBRECHT: WHY PRINTING BEGAN TO MATTER

The history of typography is deeply entwined with the history of Germany: to write about one is to unfurl the other. The most often told story is of Johannes Gutenberg, a goldsmith from Rhineland who piloted the printing press in the mid 1400s to create the first mass-produced document, thusly named the Gutenberg Bible. His introduction to Europe of “Das Werk der Bücher” (the work of books) transformed the printed page from a painstakingly transcribed manuscript to a facile form of communication (Whipps). Before Gutenberg’s press, books were the work of monks, who with ink and brush lettered page after page and hand-bound the final product. If the tech giants of today were to examine the development and launch of Gutenberg’s press, they would commend him for such strategy; printing a Bible on his new-fangled press of 1452 is akin nowadays to exclusively hosting the premiere of a Taylor Swift music video on an improved media streaming platform. It was the most viral of content curated on a fresh, effective and—let’s face it—sexy medium.
Gutenberg had effectively transformed a slow process into a scalable technology utilizing moveable type, setting the stage for Germany to become the incubator of western printing innovation. Leveraging his goldsmith experience, Gutenberg crafted small blocks of single letterforms, which slid next to each other to combine and recombine into each unique line. The lines were pressed into a mold, which was then cast to make reusable pages for printing at mass quantities. Many across Deutschland began to experiment with their own “Werk,” and a few early German printers are particularly notable: first, Albrecht Pfister followed Gutenberg’s lead within a decade of the Bible, carving woodcut illustrations equally reproducible for print. The press helped move Das Werk Der Bücher towards its destiny as a highly experiential medium, and the picture book was born. Then, a little over a century after Gutenberg came another German Johann: Johann Carolus published “Relation aller Fuernemmen und Gedenckwürdigen Historien,” or “Collection of All Distinguished and Memorable News,” presently regarded as one of the first printed newspapers in the world (Chappell 127). Centuries before the New York Times’ presses began to hum, Johann Carolus might as well have subtitled his publication “All the News That’s Fit to Print.”

But this is getting ahead of the story of type itself.

GUTENBERG AND MOVEABLE TYPE: THE DO RE MI OF WESTERN TYPOGRAPHY

Johannes Gutenberg’s timing could not have been better. The German Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries impassioned thought leaders throughout Europe to examine and write about classical texts within the context of their more “modern” times. With this huge volume of essays produced, the printing press seized the opportunity to spread new ideas across Germany and Europe, galvanizing others to do the same. Furthermore, Columbus’s voyage to the New World at the end of the 15th century expanded Renaissance writers’ and printers’ sphere of influence: suddenly, there were exponentially more ideas to communicate as well as a whole new world to inform. Thanks to Gutenberg’s goldsmithing skills and movable type, Germany was deservedly at the center of the new technology and communication.

Typography has long since moved past function and communication and into the realm of art and expression. So how does new technology grow new forms of art? Contemporary designer Timothy Goodman often quotes a mentor of his, who advised: “If you want to change your look, then you have to change your tool” (Purdy). In the context of typography’s development, this was certainly the case. Gutenberg pioneered movable type with his goldsmith-influenced hand
mould. With this tool and others, printers could imagine and create one hundred identical A’s after perfecting just one mold. So Gutenberg’s tool enabled printers everywhere to change (and standardize) their new “look.” With some handwork taken out of printing, more attention could be paid to the letterforms themselves.

**FRAKTUR: SCRIPT TO PRINT**

Gutenberg’s first forms of type paid homage to the aesthetic and hard work of the original bookmaking monks. Ellen Lupton recounts early type’s origin in her second edition of the compendium *Thinking With Type*: “Gutenberg’s famous Bible took the handmade manuscript as its model. Emulating the dense, dark handwriting known as “blackletter,” he reproduces its erratic texture by creating variations of each letter as well as numerous ligatures (characters that combine two or more letters into a single form)” (13). This blackletter was not Fraktur—Fraktur as we know it today was created twenty years after Gutenberg’s Bible. But as one of the most common blackletter typefaces today, Fraktur will here be used colloquially to describe the entire class. Fraktur, its relatives, and its rivals weave through Europe’s most pivotal events from the 14th century to today.

This is Fraktur.

Gutenberg did not print in Fraktur, but what could be referred to as its grandmother: textualis or Textura. This variation was also called Gothic Bookhand, influenced by early handwriting of those monks already referenced (Davidson 2008). As textualis type gained traction alongside the printing press, other typefaces also developing in the surrounding European countries seeped into those of German persuasion.

So while blackletter typefaces dominated German presses, Italians and French of the Renaissance took a different route and attempted to craft “perfect” letterforms from the most holy of things: man’s body, as made by God. Lupton writes, “[French designer] Geofroy Tory argued that letters should reflect the ideal human body. Regarding the letter A, he wrote: “the cross stroke covers the man’s organ of generation, to signify that Modesty and Chastity are required, before all else, in those who seek acquaintance with well-shaped letters”” (16). Typeface, in this period, became tied to religion, serving both Art and a Higher Power.

These proclaimed “Humanist” typefaces melded with Gutenberg’s Textura to create Schwabacher, which dominated documents in Germany from around
1480 to 1530. This holier hybrid ably served a certain German friar: Martin Luther. On 31 October 1517, his Ninety-Five Theses were written in protest of the church’s sale of indulgences. Two months later, the Ninety-Five Theses were printed and distributed in the typeface Schwabacher. This printing and distribution is recorded as one of the first scandals enabled almost entirely by Gutenberg’s press (Kelley 2012). Luther’s connection to Schwabacher survives today; a religious study website features the full German “Lutherbibel” displayed in Schwabacher, even offering a download link so the font can be displayed at its best on screen (Lutherbibel 2008).

Then in the early 16th century, one man’s mission replaced Schwabacher with Fraktur as the classically German typeface. Emperor Maximilian I of the Holy Roman Empire commissioned woodcutters and printmakers to create a perfect German face for his writings and propaganda. Though his writings were few, they were widely known among scholars. And after Maximilian I’s death in 1519, his connection to Albrecht Dürer and other thought leaders of the German Renaissance helped to propagate Fraktur through the Holy Roman Empire (Whaley 2012). So despite the relatively small volume of Maximilian’s texts using the specially commissioned face, the well read of the time regarded it as a noble display for a noble word.

As the late emperor’s library disseminated through the upper class, influential artists used the late Emperor’s typeface in countless redistributions and original works. Dürer, arguably Germany’s DaVinci, used Fraktur in his extensive writings on the analysis of beauty, which soon exploded in popularity. In theme with the Renaissance Era’s typical examination of beauty, these writings were widely read and reread (Whaley 2012). Dürer was one of many scholars projecting scientific reason onto the perception of beauty. As these texts grew in popularity and influenced the minds of anyone within reach of their distribution, Fraktur was soon heralded as the German messenger of goodness and truth.

FRAKTUR: BLACKLETTER BRANDED

Since Fraktur’s birth as the face of Maximilian’s Holy Roman Empire propaganda, it has earned a few enemies. First came its natural nemesis, the typeface class Antiqua. Fraktur, whose etymology is from “fractured” or “broken”, is recognizable by elegantly separated letterforms. As its counterpart, Antiqua’s letterforms, though also hinting at gothic blackletter, flow together like a Gothic calligraphic script (Flippo). The poetry of Antiqua was perfect for Latin scripture and text, while Germany’s heavy use of Fraktur established the two as opposites and arguably equal. The Walden Font Company, in their booklet
on the history of Fraktur, detailed the dynamic between Fraktur and Antiqua: “It allowed for an easy distinction of Catholic and Protestant publications: The Protestants printed German, using Fraktur, the Catholics printed Latin, using Antiqua types … One edition of the Bible even had each verse start with a Fraktur letter when the topic was salvation or other positive events, but Antiqua [was used for themes of] Satan, hell, and eternal damnation” (Gutenberg Press). This tone of voice as reflected through type was one of the first strategic uses of typeface differentiation and selection, and only enforced the Fraktur-Antiqua rivalry.

As the rest of Europe used Antiqua more and more, traditionalists in Germany became vocally opposed to its spread. In the early 19th century, the Romantic Era brought nostalgia for “classically German” values (and typefaces). This was especially poignant with the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 by Napoleon Bonaparte. Antiqua and the serifed predecessors to Times New Roman were disavowed for their French use and Latin origins (Flippo). An embittered Germany rejected all that in their view, went against German culture. These sentiments were so strong, proto-Romantic writer von Goethe’s mother pleaded with him in a 1794 letter to “stay German even in your type, I beg you” (Worm 2014). Otto von Bismarck, a powerful figure during the unification of Germany, vehemently rejected Latin typefaces. He was known to return German books printed in Antiqua, proclaiming, “Deutsche Bücher in lateinischen Buchstaben lese ich nicht! (I do not read German books in Latin letters!” (Worm). Such stubborn dedication was admired by German nationalists of the time.

Even into the 20th century, Fraktur remained a symbol of Germany’s struggle to establish and maintain this nationalism. Adolf Reinecke, who founded the Allgemeine Deutsche Schriftverein in 1890 as a movement against the popularization of Latin typeface, wrote an impassioned protest against Antiqua and Latin faces in 1910 (Flippo). In his publication Die deutsche Buchstabenschrift, Reinecke explicated the superiority of German script, claiming it was healthier for the eyes and its use would best prevent “infestation” by foreign words, and (most importantly) the use of Fraktur and other Germanic faces wouldn’t impede the development of German language and culture in other countries.

The debate came to a boil in 1911, when the German government voted on whether to replace Fraktur with Antiqua as an official typeface of the region, as well as whether or not to stop teaching cursive blackletter (“Kurrent”) in schools. As the official typefaces of the German Empire since 1871, Fraktur and Kurrent
just barely kept their standing: the “classically German typefaces” won in an 85-83 vote.

This all set the stage for rampant German Nationalism to seize the following decades. Practically speaking, serifed fonts were more legible and better suited for trade. Many still refused to accept a change and became even more vehement in their opposition to Latin and Roman type. And in the first half of the 20th century, the Nazi party rose to power on the back of its beloved blackletter. Once again, Fraktur was perfected in propaganda. Simon Garfield’s work *Just My Type: A Book About Fonts*, details blackletter’s heavy use, recounting the Nazis “not only employed gothic lettering for its message, but made it the message itself: one slogan read: ‘Feel German, think German, be German, even in your script’” (190). Not all German designers felt this way however, and dissenting voices would define the future of German design. But in order to finish telling the story of Fraktur, it is first necessary to address Futura.

**FUTURA: A REBEL AND A HERO**

Paul Renner designed Futura in the mid 1920s. This surprises many: its geometric letterforms and translation to digital devices indicate a typeface made by and for the digital age. In 1924 it was designed and released for publisher Jakob Hegner, who requested it be “artistically liberating” (Garfield 193). Futura was certainly liberated from the typical typefaces of its pre-Nazi era; it comes as no surprise that its designer Paul Renner would be equally forward thinking.

An admirer but not founding member of the Bauhaus, Renner’s rise coincided with that of the Nazi party. He was vocally opposed to the Nazis, publishing the book *Kulturbolschewismus? (Cultural Bolshevism?)* in 1932. With this, he flipped the term the Nazi Party used to discredit increasingly popular modernist artists. The Nazis, suspicious of modern art for its deviation from “traditional German values” and leanings towards democratic rule, disavowed the progressive artists as “Cultural Bolshevists.” Renner, evidently, fit the bill. His book, question mark included, was a blatant protest of the Nazis public defamation of his character. And within the community of anti-Nazi European designers, Renner was closely tied to fellow German designer Jan Tschichold, creator of the typeface Sabon (we’ll arrive at him later). When the Gestapo arrested Tschichold in 1933, Renner protested and was arrested himself. Renner’s arrest closely followed a lecture in which the Nazis, avid fans of Fraktur, determined Renner’s monologue to be far too biased in favor of Roman types. Along with Tschichold, Renner was declared a “cultural Bolshevist” for his leanings.
In 1941, irony leaks into Fraktur’s story. Despite the Nazi party condemning those designers moving Germany toward Roman type, the Third Reich soon found itself constrained by its beloved Blackletter. As Nazi territory grew, they could not find the gothic typeface in foreign countries with which they could rebrand the area as their own. Gothic blackletter was illegible and in short supply; pragmatism prevailed, and the Third Reich switched sides. For its prevalence in Germany (at the Nazis’ insistence), Fraktur was far too common—including in the storefronts of German-Jews. For its association with Jewish businesses, the party finally declared blackletter faces to be “Schwabacher-Jewish” (Garfield). The font, once a shining symbol of German sobriety and steadfastness, was cast aside as the typeface of a lesser race.

Soon, the Roman-Style type with which Renner had “sympathized” overtook the Nazi brand. Once the war ended Renner said of this transition, “the motives that led to this step may have been loathsome, but this decree itself was an undeserved gift from the heavens, of the kind which occasionally deliver goodness from those whose intentions are bad” (Garfield 192). As a designer caught between the Gothic Blackletter of his country and the Roman serif type of the outside world, Renner placed himself in a perfect position in 1927 by creating Futura, a sans-serif to stand outside the fray.

Paul Renner contributed richly to the German people: he authored such works as *Typographie Als Kunst* (*Typography as Art*), which established the importance of understanding type in the 20th century; his had been a voice against the injustice of the Nazi doctrine, warning the Nazis would wreak havoc on graphic design: “Political idiocy, growing more violent and malicious every day, may eventually sweep the whole of western culture to the ground with its muddy sleeve”; finally, Renner was a visionary, applying his Bauhaus-ian principles to the organization of letterforms. His workflow and minimalist principles spawned the now-classic phrase *Form follows function* (Fabian). Renner’s design allowed typography to reach a comfortable simplicity: each stroke intentional, versatile, legible. Though dreamt up and published nearly one hundred years ago, Renner’s type would propel functional design in the 20th century through Germany and the world.

**FUTURA AT LARGE**

Futura, for its name and clean minimalism, seems to come from a time much closer to the new millennium. Upon first testing the typeface, Paul Renner’s mantra was “die Schrift unserer Zeit” (the font of our time). And so it became. At ninety years old, the face has earned plenty of exposure for its versatility.
To begin, a search engine’s recent rebrand has made a form of Futura again ubiquitous. Upon closer look, the new Google logo is not quite Futura: the crossbar of the lowercase E is tilted at 45 degrees rather than horizontal; the descender of the lowercase G and the ascender of the lowercase L have shrunk; the capital G’s crossbar has been shifted up and slightly lengthened. All this pixel adjustment ensures readability on the screens of small devices. The typeface of Google’s new logo was created in-house and named “Product Sans.” The new logo has faced much scrutiny: Design writer David Kadavy breaks down Google’s September 2015 redesign pixel by pixel. Judging its familiar proportions, he writes, “At first glance, the logo looks to be set in Futura,” and acknowledging near-identical ratios of the two typefaces, continues, “Product Sans was clearly influenced by Futura.” So though it might not be exact, Renner’s design philosophy still speaks to us today as the world searches the web over 100 billion times per day.

But just as Futura and other faces overtook the now archaic-looking Blackletter or new Roman, Futura has in its life been similarly ousted. In 2009, Ikea ended its 60-plus-year relationship with Futura, replacing the face with Microsoft’s designed-for-the-screen Verdana. Its web-friendly origin is precisely why Microsoft’s Futura derivative was constructed: to better serve all types of screens. This rebrand was met with the chagrin of designers and die-hard Ikea-ites (Abend). To them, Verdana was the harbinger of a cold age of digital typography. Idsgn.com reported, “People are passionate about IKEA’s typography, Verdana has made it to Twitter’s trending topics and there is already an online petition to replace it” (Challand). The online petition fueled the strong sentiments, with one user commenting,

This is a disastrous move by a company that’s supposed to be design-led! The use of Verdana has the unfortunate effect of making any design look as if it’s been quickly knocked out on a home computer with no thought or effort, just because it’s (usually) the default typeface on any Windows machine. Pages from IKEA’s catalogue now look like rubbish flyers for a backyard sale. (Challand)

In one fell swoop, the hand-crafted geometry of Renner’s warm forms were traded for generic pixel-precision.
Six years after the booting of Futura from Ikea’s iconic brand, it was once again traded for another more homogenous typeface. In May of 2015, Futura ceased to be the font of the car of the people; the German Volkswagen, after 50 years of Futura, replaced the classic for its new typefaces “Volkswagen Head” and “Volkswagen Text.” Given Germany’s history of great type and great automobiles, this pivot fell far below expectations. Design bloggers lamented: “Volkswagen is Futura” and called the new typeface “a bland mishmash” (Torchinsky). Jason Torchinsky of the popular car news weblog Jalopnik writes, “Like so much of VW’s recent designs, the new typeface is blander, more forgettable, and much harder to pick out of a crowd. Sort of like, say, the new Passat.” A double burn for the designers at Volkswagen. It’s true, VW’s cars are changing: the new Beetle is a streamlined (and some would say neutered) version of its vintage design. And though the public holds those classic rounded fenders as closely as Futura’s classic rounded bowls, time moves ever forward. Futura cannot forever be “Die Schrift unzerer Zeit” as Renner had proclaimed. There is, however, one place where Futura will forever stand. On 20 July 1969, the world watched and listened as Neil Armstrong took mankind’s largest step onto the Moon. And when he and Buzz Aldrin returned home in Apollo 11, they left behind more than their footprints and an American flag. A sign, reading “HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON. JULY 1969, A.D. WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND” was erected to mark the feat (Garfield 195). The curves of Paul Renner’s Futura-O pair well with the celestial body upon which the sign now lives. Best of all, with no atmosphere to disturb the sign on the Moon, Futura could easily outlive our home planet. Neither Volkswagen Head, nor Verdana, nor any typeface to come, can change that.

AKZIDENZ GROTESK: THE FORGOTTEN OLDER CHILD

If I ever talk about typography with a new friend, the same conversation blooms each time. Within two minutes of the topic’s introduction my partner will ask: “Oh, you like fonts? Do you know about Helvetica?” This is happening more and more recently; I am grateful to Gary Hustwit’s 2007 documentary Helvetica, which normalized a near-obsessive attention to the design of type. Erik Spiekermann, a central figure in the German design community, has not only normalized, but also popularized typeomania. In the documentary Helvetica, he says of his happy fixation, “I just love looking at type. I just get a total kick out of it: they are my friends. Other people look at bottles of wine or whatever, or, you know, girls’ bottoms. I get kicks out of looking at type.
It’s a little worrying, I admit, but it’s a very nerdish thing to do.” He goes on to compare the typeface to water, perhaps inspiring the creation of a Helvetica perfume: two ounces of plain water, sold for $28 in a 24-Karat gold printed bottle (Hou).

So thanks to Hustwit’s movie, any layman can now appreciate (or like Spiekermann, openly disavow) Helvetica. It is as ubiquitous as water, and the typeface is now synonymous with clean design; upon its release from Switzerland in 1957, it quickly grew to standardize brands and signage everywhere. “In post-war Switzerland,” Simon Garfield writes, “Helvetica arose to spearhead

This is Helvetica.

modernism’s spread around the world” (Garfield 36) But Helvetica did not spring from thin air; its roots are in an older, forgotten face whose goal was also to modernize and standardize worldwide communication. This typeface rarely comes up in Helvetica’s conversations: Akzidenz Grotesk.

Born over sixty years before Helvetica, Akzidenz Grotesk was inspired by the industrial revolution in Germany. Akzidenz Grotesk was created to be a beacon of clarity in a quickly changing world. The name translates as “sans-serif (Grotesk) trade type (Akzidenz)” (De Groot and Straka). So its purpose is declared in its name: clearly communicating in industry and trade. Helvetica was, in fact, originally named Neue Haus Grotesk, and regarded by designers as a newer version of Akzidenz (Helvetica). In designer Paola Antonelli’s 2007 TedTalk, she acknowledges the relationship: “The typeface is Helvetica . . . [created by] Max Miedinger and all those Swiss designers together, trying to outdo Akzidenz-Grotesk and come up with a new sans-serif.” And their very similar proportions reinforce this: only a few subtle differences like the angles of the terminals differentiate Helvetica from its predecessor. So where Akzidenz Grotesk blazed a trail for sans serif faces, Helvetica followed along.

This is Akzidenz Grotesk.

But how and why was Helvetica’s older sibling first created? It comes from a much more complex background than Helvetica by Max Miedeger’s pen. The Berlin type foundry Berthold released earlier forms of Akzidenz Grotesk at the end of the 1800s, and its construction closely mimics the history of Germany. Just as Germany was for so long a shifting group of territories united by various
leaders, the Akzidenz Grotesk font family were composed of multiple similar-looking sans serif faces. Akzidenz Grotesk, like Germany, was in its early days a hodgepodge of loose identities but very close associations. The font was loved for its slight imperfections, which some believed Max Miedeger strangled into submission with his Helvetica in 1957. Typographer and designer Manfred Klein went a step further saying, “The living irregularities of Akzidenz Grotesk are widely preferred to the obsolete regularity of dead Helvetica” (De Groot and Straka).

So prior to Helvetica’s arrival, Akzidenz Grotesk was the backdrop to a German State in flux. Its living irregularities were used in materials for the Prussian Academy of Science in Berlin. This period lasted from the late 1800s until the early 1900s—used in German scientific communication under the name “Royal Grotesk” as an ode to the then-ruling Prussian monarchy. History intervened here, and with the end of WWI and the fall of the Prussian monarchy, Royal Grotesk was absorbed into the Berthold foundry’s Akzidenz Grotesk family (Garfield). So as Germany was left in shambles in the wake of the Great War, a typeface once representative of the old way of life became a member of what would soon make up the modern design movement.

Akzidenz Grotesk and one of its well-known users, Swiss designer Josef Müller-Brockman helped to shape modern typography; some say he and the font launched modern design. Müller-Brockman’s early 1950s posters for the Zurich Town Hall are still referenced in design schools today and heralded for their gloriously uncomplicated aesthetic (Schwemer-Scheddin). And though the typeface rose from Germany’s political and industrial turmoil, Akzidenz Grotesk’s clean shapes evoked a neutral sensibility to attract many European designers. Josef Müller-Brockman capitalized on this neutrality; in a profile of Müller-Brockman on design site Noupe.com, Speider Schneider writes, “The simple, clean and graphic messages were, as with the music event posters, able to be understood by viewers [speaking] different languages.” Müller-Brockman’s bridging of language barriers established Akzidenz Grotesk as the engine behind the Swiss International Design movement. With this, he standardized European design, which soon became synonymous with good design.

Müller-Brockman loved Akzidenz Grotesk for its careful geometry, which, much like Futura’s, leaves no room for subjective analysis. As a pioneer of modern design, Müller-Brockman developed specific, grid-based design principles, or what he called “laws.” These laws arose from his frustration with the ornamental design of the late 1800s, and Akzidenz Grotesk proportions fit into his vision of a
clean and standardized design. Leveraging the same laws of proportion inherent in Akzidenz Grotesk’s measurements, Müller-Brockman developed the now-famous concept of “Gute Form,” a phrase that soon encapsulated the German simplicity and elegance of good design (Schwemer-Scheddin).

With this Gute Form, Müller-Brockman saw no way his designs could fail. Akzidenz Grotesk enabled Müller-Brockman to reach and develop his balanced designs, treating a page’s layout and its typefaces as small-scale architecture. In an interview with the design magazine Eye, Müller-Brockman explained, “Can you [imagine] the Eiffel Tower or the work of Le Corbusier other than how they are? No great work is created without material rules, without knowing about stress ratios or the laws of perception . . . Tomorrow or in ten or twenty years’ time aesthetic tastes will have changed, but laws last and are independent of time” (Schwemer-Scheddin). And if it not for 1896 German-born Akzidenz Grotesk, Miedeger’s Helvetica of 1957 would have had no role model to become the most well-known font of today, much less the subject of a documentary or any subsequent conversations.

NOT A DINGBAT: THE FACES OF HERMANN ZAPF

Around the same time Royal Grotesk joined its new Akzidenz family at the end of WWI, renowned typographer Hermann Zapf was born in Nuremburg, Germany. Zapf went on to become the architect of the fonts Palatino, Optima, Zapf Dingbats, and more.

Along with Wingdings, Zapf Dingbats is one of the most whimsical of fonts. It was released in 1978, around the time technology began to secure connections across the ocean; here Germany’s typographic history inevitably bleeds into the US’s. And across the ocean in America, Zapf Dingbats was met with some initial confusion—but the whimsical font has since gotten the last laugh.

Zapf’s life spanned the rise, fall, and resurrection of Germany and German design. Developing in an ever-changing country, his eye for type was similarly progressive, and he understood better than most how technology could advance typeface design. It is for this reason, perhaps, that he was so willing to collaborate with the then-new foundry International Typeface Corporation. During the 1970s, Zapf and ITC dreamt up a typeface to reject the status quo.

During his time with ITC, Zapf struck up a professional relationship with Steve Jobs, who subsequently built Zapf Dingbats into an Apple laser printer
in the 1980s (Weber). As Apple expanded, so did the public’s familiarity with
typography and the process of font selection. Zapf’s fonts soon garnered
attention from anyone word processing on a personal computer. The inclusion
of Dingbats on the system helped introduce the public to the use of icons for
cheeky communication. In Gizmodo’s tribute to Zapf upon his death, Kelsey
Campbell-Dollaghan writes, “Zapf Dingbats went on to become the foundation
for Unicode’s symbols, and is probably the most commonly used set of dingbats
today. They paved the way for emoji, too, many of which are based on Unicode
symbols.” Years after his birth and months after his death, Zapf’s ingenuity lives
on in our daily iMessages and texts. 📝

But Zapf’s typefaces have not always been used so lightheartedly. In 2008,
his Optima was selected as the official typeface of John McCain’s US presidential
campaign. This selection sparked a New York Times article by Steven Heller, in
which he polled a number of designers on McCain’s type choice for his
campaign’s visual identity. Responses varied, but reflected a general trend best
articulated by Ellen Lupton, author of Thinking With Type, “Optima attempted
to merge characteristics of serif and sans serif typefaces. You could call it a
centrist font” (Heller). Even before Zapf pushed boundaries with Dingbats,
he crafted sans-serif fonts with serif proportions—quite uncommon when
Optima was set in 1958. McCain’s campaign hoped to leverage this moderate
position, especially pitted against Obama’s now-iconic “HOPE” campaign
identity, set as all-caps in the bold, optimistic typeface Gotham.

In her interpretation of McCain’s choice of Optima, Lupton acknowledged, “I’m sure John McCain’s design consultants know that
Optima is the typeface used on Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial. Mr. McCain’s
image is inexorably tied to his status as a war hero; this is his story, and
Optima helps him tell it” (Heller). Indeed, the near 500-foot long Vietnam
Veteran’s Memorial Wall is one of the largest typographic installations of
recent memory. The wall lists 58,300 names—all carved into black stone
wall in Zapf’s Optima (USNPS). Zapf had designed the typeface with the
golden ratio in mind, thus the fifty-eight thousand names do not crowd the
eye. At such volume, the engraved names pop out from their places on the
wall to convey the massive devastation the United States faced in and after
the Vietnam War.
Given the context of Optima in the United States, we might find some satisfaction in the story of its origin. The idea for a “sans serif serifed design” does not drop from the sky. Though origin stories are often sensationalized, there is physical proof of the moment the inspiration for Optima struck Hermann Zapf. While Zapf was visiting Florence in the 1950s, words inscribed on a set of graves caught his attention. He found the four hundred year old lettering in Florence’s Santa Croce Church and was instantly intrigued by its design. At the time Zapf had no paper, so he instead used the Italian liras in his wallet to sketch his type inspired by grave plates dating back to 1530. The sketches of this gentle sans serif would later become Optima (Christensen). Zapf’s liras are artifacts of a major shift in typographic history, blending the line between old and new, serif and sans serif. With his sketches, a typographer tourist linked the dead of Santa Croce with our nation’s heroes. And though these people died half a millennia apart, they are forever linked though Zapf’s gentle curves marking their memorial.

And once more, Optima’s “centrist” styling brought comfort to a grieving nation. On the design of the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, two bronze panels flank two pools to represent the fallen towers at Ground Zero. The 3,000 victims’ names are inscribed on the bronze, once again in Optima (Weber). This was not an issue of conservative-liberal, of young-old, of serif-sans serif, but of how the memory of Americans ought to be honored.

NO FREIHEIT FOR SABON AT STANFORD

Across the country from war memorials stands an entire school serving as a memorial to a dearly departed son. In 1891, Jane and Leland Stanford welcomed the first students to Leland Stanford Junior University, built in memory of Leland Jr. (“Stanford - Birth of the University”). A few years prior, Leland Jr. had succumbed to typhoid fever at 15, devastating his parents. Though the university hit financial difficulty in the first part of the 20th century, it is now well established as one of the top institutions in the world. Naturally, it is important to represent this school well in print and media—which is why, when the university
abandoned the venerable “STANFORD” logo set in Sabon, the backlash rivaled that of VW or Ikea. This was, however, not the only instance of persecution for Sabon’s designer, Jan Tschichold.

As mentioned earlier, Jan Tschichold’s progressive (read: a bit communist) ideals led to several run-ins with the Gestapo. However problematic his views, the fact that he was unafraid to dissent from public opinion helped him design several innovations in German typography. For instance, in the 1920s, Tschichold was responsible for creating a universal alphabet in German. As Simon Garfield wrote, he “cleaned up its non-phonetic spelling and advocated the replacement of the jumble of fonts for a simple sans serif.” This exercise garnered much attention, and he was then contacted to accomplish what was at the time quite tricky: design a font to look the same whether printed on a monotype (one letter set at a time) or linotype (one line set at a time) machine.

After its design in the 1960s, Sabon operated beautifully under its requirements: it occupied the same amount of space whether italic or regular; it saved much space—and money—compared to the previous standard printing font, Garamond; it was highly readable across a variety of mediums. Its serifed forms hint at nobility without condescension. It was no wonder Stanford unveiled a shining new logo in Sabon in September 2008.

Stanford was restless only four years later. Sabon, they complained, did not display well on mobile screens, quickly becoming the main method of web browsing. But the reactions to Sabon’s replacement, according to The Stanford Daily, were “overwhelmingly negative” (Farag). Kristi Bohl on The Stanford Arts Review argued, “Sabon was created by a German typographer, and its Teutonic roots dovetail nicely with Stanford’s distinctly German motto, ‘die Luft der Freiheit weht’ (the wind of freedom blows).” In realizing the impact of German typography on both European design and American design history, one can support Sabon’s usage to compliment Stanford’s brand. This 2012 typeface had none of that. Even more, the very name of the new font was not true to the school. “The new font is called ‘Crimson.’ CRIMSON,” Bohl wrote. “A brief note to Bright, the ‘design firm’ that created our new font, which ostensibly ‘spent a lot of time’ developing it: OUR COLOR IS CARDINAL. Crimson is Harvard. Get. It. Together.”
Rants aside, the Sabon replacement was panned most for its resemblance to a tech start-up rather than a 100+-year-old university. Lisa Lapin, associate Vice President of university communications for Stanford, offered the excuse, “The [Sabon] mark is very pretty and academic and classic, but it was designed specifically for print and stationery . . . the world has changed in the past ten years” (Stampler). According to Lapin, Stanford University had to be tech-conscious to thrive in the heart of the Silicon Valley. So just as a shift in technology motivated Sabon’s original commission, a shift in technology swept it out of Stanford’s brand.

As much as we might disagree with any shift in visual identity, change is part of type design; though we may not like the new logo, perhaps it is a small misstep on the journey to build a better typeface. Years into the future, we might attribute our classic and technology-friendly fonts to this necessary prototype. After all, who said the Gutenberg Bible was the most legible or readable of texts? It was innovative, and it galvanized Germany to become the heart of modern printing technology and typography. When Stanford University debuted the new logo, it asked that the logo not be copied in any way, and for the public to treat it “as artwork, not as typography,” implying typography and art are mutually exclusive.

Which, we all know, is the furthest thing from the truth.
WORKS CITED


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