

Revival Meeting: Digital Revivals of Historic Typefaces and Other Letterforms

Graphic designer Paul Shaw gave a talk at the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto in which he surveyed the many ways in which historical typefaces have undergone a “revival” in the digital era. The talk was sponsored by the Alcuin Society in partnership with the Sheridan Typographic Hub of Sheridan College, the Type Directors Club and the Registered Graphic Designers. The following is Amphora’s pick of the most interesting examples from his presentation.

~ Peter Mitham



Paul Shaw at the lectern. (Don McLeod photo)

REBRANDING

Adrian Frutiger is known for ur-forms underlying the majority of his typefaces. Consequently, when Linotype wanted to follow the contemporary trend of matching serif and sans serif typefaces, they decided to pair the serif typeface Méridien, designed in 1954 (and never updated for the digital era), with the sans serif Frutiger, designed in 1976. The notion makes sense but somehow Méridien, rebranded as Frutiger Serif, does not seem to feel comfortable with Frutiger. It is an arranged marriage rather than a love match.



REJUVENATION

It is easy to resurrect an old typeface. A much harder task is to give it a new reputation. In the course of revising and updating Monotype Grottesque, Rod McDonald found himself restoring Venus Grottesque instead. Venus was the inspiration for Monotype Grottesque. Moreover, it was arguably the most popular sans serif in Germany until the 1930s and was widely used in the United States until the 1960s. Its reputation sank as first Futura and later Helvetica eclipsed it in popularity. McDonald has given it new life as Classic Grottesque by not being wholly faithful to the original, even though he has included some odd characters as alternates (see the long f and u-shaped y).

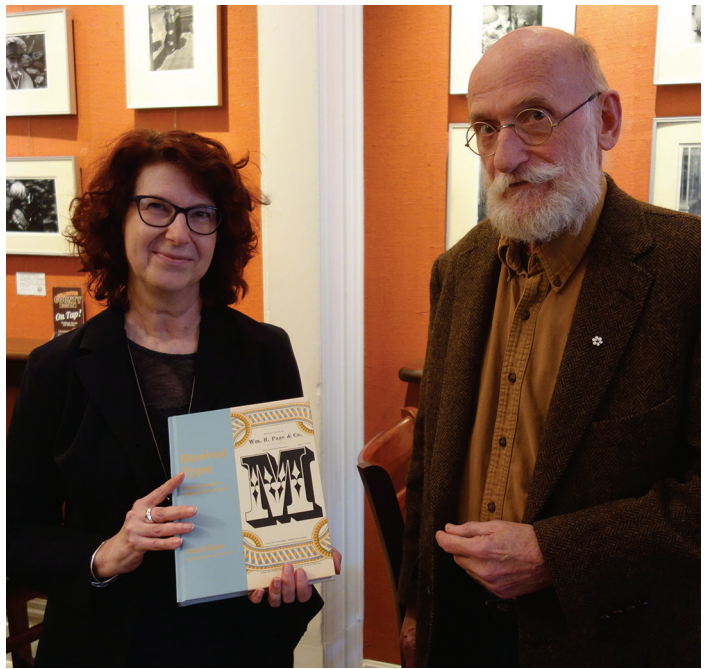
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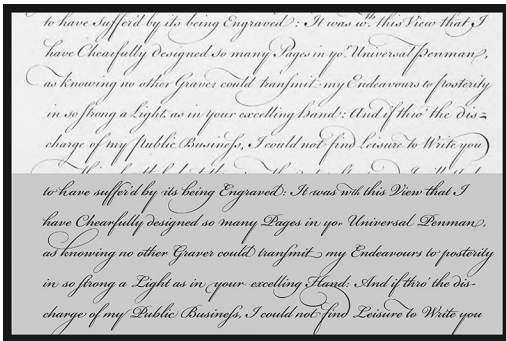


Upper right, Paul Shaw at the podium of the Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, on March 29, 2017; above, with Alcuin Society director Chester Gryski; lower left, with type designer Rod McDonald; middle left, with Nathalie Dumont of Concordia University and Patrick Griffin of Canada Type (Don McLeod photos)

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Top to bottom, Donna Braggins
of Sheridan College speaks
with Stan Bevington of Coach
House Press; Brian Donnelly
of Sheridan College with Linda
Gustafson of Counterpunch;
Camilla Gryski looks on as
Michelle Walker and George A.
Walker smile.
(Don McLeod photos)



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INSPIRATION

Not all type revivals are revivals in the narrow sense of the word. Instead, historical sources can provide a convenient jumping-off point for new designs. An instance is Marian by Paul Barnes, a reimagining of a series of classic types from the mid-16th century to the early 19th century in skeletal form. Stripped of weight, stroke contrast and the subtleties of stroke joining, they appear amazingly fresh. The pure beauty of the original types is best revealed in Marian 1554 italic, 1565 italic and 1571 italic—all derived from italics by Robert Granjon.

TRANSMUTATION

Letters carved in stone, cast in metal or written on vellum often attract the attention of type designers as much as old typefaces do. Bickham Script by Richard Lipton, inspired by George Bickham's *The Universal Penman* (1741), turns roundhand calligraphy (commonly called copperplate script today) into type. While its large glyph set fails to fully capture the possibilities of calligraphy—for example, it lacks some common forms of 18th-century swash capitals as well as word ligatures—it remains the most intelligent and empathetic homage to the era of the master penmen.

A recurring theme in any assessment of a type revival is determining whether or not the designer used good judgment in balancing fidelity and function. A type revival may be applauded for its accuracy in hewing close to the original design while at the same time criticized for being of limited use in the 21st century. And, on the other hand, a designer may be chastised for ignoring or smoothing out the idiosyncracies of a past design in the belief that doing so makes the revival fit contemporary aesthetics. The best type revivals manage to steer carefully between these two poles. Whether they succeed or not is, of course, a matter of expectations and perspective.