



The 'revival' of slab-serif typefaces in the twentieth century

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Running text set in Adobe Warnock Pro, with main headings and captions set in Adobe Cronos Pro, both typefaces designed by Robert Slimbach. Typeset in Adobe InDesign 2.0.1 on an Apple Macintosh computer.

Introduction

The slab-serif letterform is a relatively recent idea in typographic history. It was an unmistakably English invention that was first triggered by the need to communicate with large, bold lettering on posters and bills, facilitating the booming economy and the prospering manufacturing industries at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Despite its young age, the slab-serif is a category of typefaces that has been subjected to scores of rises and falls of typographic fashion, and has been constantly reinventing itself to adapt to the needs and aesthetics of particular periods.

This essay will evaluate the formal characteristics and focus on the evolutions of form and use of slab-serif typefaces in a chronological manner. It will first give a short historical survey of the early development of slab-serif typefaces in the early nineteenth century, then examine in more detail the ‘revival’ – or more appropriately, the reinvention – of the slab-serif idea in the twentieth century.

SLAB-SERIFS DEFINED

What exactly constitutes a slab-serif typeface? When looking at this category of typefaces one frequently has to confront with myriad of names. There seems to be no single accepted way to define these terms, and different authors often have different definitions and varied ideas of how they should be used. It goes without saying that these terms are not mutually exclusive. Of these terms ‘slab-serif’ seems to be the most fitting for describing the typical characteristics of these letterforms, since it is a visual description, not a time-bound one. The term slab-serif is hence used here as a general term that encompasses all typefaces that have prominent, square-cut, slab-like serifs. Therefore egyptian, antique, clarendon, ionic are all considered sub-categories of slab-serif letterforms herein. While clarendons are certainly classified as slab-serifs by definition here, it is felt that their developments took a course of their own and would warrant an account in their own right. They are therefore omitted for this essay.

Synopsis: early nineteenth century

At the advent of the nineteenth century, something quite revolutionary was beginning to happen in the typographic world. Owing to the industrial revolution that began in the latter part of the previous century, two new forms of typographic communication – the handbill and the poster – became increasingly important for the dissemination of commercial messages. At the beginning, common book typefaces at the time such as Baskerville and Caslon were used. However, these traditional book typefaces soon proved to be inadequate to cope with the ever-increasing competition. These new forms of typographic communication clearly required new forms of typefaces. The idea of display typefaces, something unprecedented in typographic history, began to emerge. Typefaces began to have their own voices and became more expressive instead of merely quiet servants of their readers. Reading, on the other hand, became a non-linear and active process. The obvious solution to this communication problem was to make the type as big and as bold as possible. Michael Twyman writes, '[...]the need for bold type related to what might be described as the growth of non-linearity in graphic design.'¹ During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, three main varieties of display typefaces emerged. They were, in order of appearance the fat faces, sans serifs² (more generally known as grotesques or antiques) and slab-serifs (widely known as egyptians³ or antiques).

The exact origin of the slab-serif letterforms is unknown, but it is likely that they came from signwriting.⁴ According to James Mosley however, no reliably dated examples of a 'true slab-serif letter' exist before the début of the first egyptian printing type by Figgins.⁵ The first slab-serif typeface called 'antique' appeared in a supplement to a 1815 type specimen published by Vincent Figgins in 1817 (**figure 1**). It only had capitals, with serifs that were as thick as the main strokes. Its blackness exceeded that of the fat faces which was unprecedented.

Figure 1
Double pica Antique,
Vincent Figgins 1928.
According to Nicolette
Gray these capitals are
the same as the first
antique published by
Figgins in 1817.
Gray: *Nineteenth century
ornamented typefaces* p18

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZÆŒ
£ 1234567890 &

- 1 Twyman: 'The bold idea' p.112
- 2 The first sans serif typeface – confusingly known as 'egyptian' – appeared in William Caslon 1v's specimen of 1816 as an all-capitals font. However, this medium weight sans serif was not commonly used. It wasn't until 1830 when the weightier 'grotesques' became available when the use of sans serifs was truly popularized.
- 3 The use of the name 'egyptian' was first used by Thorne and was later widely adopted by other foundries. Ruari McLean suggests that it probably came from the vogue of 'Egyptian motifs and manners derived from the French contemporaries and the Empire extravaganza'. McLean p.4
- 4 McLean: 'An examination of egyptians' p.39
- 5 Mosley defines the 'true slab-serif letter' as 'monoline, geometrical in construction, with square, unbracketed serifs'. Mosley: *The Nymph and the grot* p.39

The early Egyptians were far from monolinear in construction, though the degrees to which they were modulated were very inconsistent. In a specimen published by the Vincent Figgins in 1823 (**figure 2**), the six-lines pica Egyptian shows that the thinning of strokes were done in a rather *ad hoc* way in difficult areas such as when a curve

R. THORNE
£126780
diminishing

Figure 2
 William Thorowgood's slab-serif from a 1921 specimen book. Gray: *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces*, p.24

meets a vertical stem in the lowercase and in the crossbars of the capitals. Though it has a completely monolinear capital O. Other examples show slight modulations with a vertical stress. By looking at the stroke modulations of these early Egyptian types it is seen that they in fact loosely follow the logics of the fat faces, particularly in the lowercase. The slab-serifs, clearly, was modelled on the fat faces. Compare Figgins's fat face and antique of 1821 (**figure 3**).

No other typefaces received stronger criticisms at the beginning of the nineteenth than the slab-serifs. Critics' comments range from 'the most brilliant typographical invention of the [nineteenth] century'⁶ of Nicolette Gray to the disdainful 'typographic monstrosity' of T. C. Hansard.⁷ Even typefounders themselves were travestying the peculiarity of these exceedingly bold typefaces. In a specimen published by Vincent Figgins dated 1823, the sample text for the two line great primer antique reads: 'The increased fatness in job-letter is an improvement, but is it not in many instances carried to an extreme?' (**figure 4**).

As an aside, slab-serif italics were also made, first as a capitals-only type by Figgins in 1921, and lowercase was introduced in 1825⁸ (**figure 5**). In the late 1830s and 1840s, slab-serif types began to be used in the articulation of typographic information such as headings, functioning as a bold type within text matter.⁹ Clarendon, another branch of slab-serifs, emerged in 1845. It was a more gentle typeface, with marked modulation of thicks and thins, vertical stress and bracketed serifs. A version called Ionic was used for newspaper printing, attributing to its robustness.

m
m
a
a

Figure 3
 Comparison of Figgins's fat face and slab-serif of 1821. Gray p.18. The slab-serif letters are from figure 4.

- 6 Gray: *Twentieth century ornamented typefaces* p.23
- 7 From T. C. Hansard's *Typographica*, 1825, from Tracy: *Letters of credit* p.81
- 8 Gray: *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces* p.26
- 9 Twyman: 'The bold idea' p.119

TWO LINE GREAT PRIMER, ANTIQUE.

**The increased fatness
in JOB-LETTER is an
improvement, but is it
not in many instances
carried to an extreme?
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OP**

V. FIGGINS. 1823.

Figure 4

From a specimen book of Vincent Figgins, 1821. From a photographic print, collection of the University of Reading, UK.

***in the State Lotteries
procure the successful
speculators mansions
and equipages, parks,
ABCDEFGHIJKLM***

Figure 5

Caslon's English two-line antique, 1825. The capitals were first introduced in a specimen book of 1821. Gray: *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces* p.26

speak of this and that
 In our fools' lives
 which might have
 better gone,
 Complaining idly of
 too niggard fate
 And wishing still
 their senseless past
 undone,

Figure 6
 William Morris's Golden
 type, c1890.
 Biggs: *An approach to
 type* p.69

FGH
 FGH

Figure 7
 A line-block and initial
 drawings of Eric Gill's
 Solus.
 Harling: *The letter forms
 of Eric Gill* p.52

AMW
 QCGD
 abcdéo

Figure 8
 Eric Gill's Joanna.
 Harling

Twentieth century: revivals and reinventions

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, all the Egyptian slab-serifs had already fallen into disuse and virtually disappeared from the market. The second decade of the twentieth century saw the beginning of Modernism in design. The sans serif types reigned supreme as the ultimate sign of functionalism, advocated by such proponents as Jan Tschichold, the author of *Die Neue Typographie*. Until the 1930s, Egyptian slab-serifs were virtually nowhere in sight. However, it could be argued that the idea of the clean, square-cut serif had been quietly introduced into the design of book typefaces prior to the 'mainstream' revivals of the 1930s, in England.

PROLOGUE: ENGLAND, PRE 1930S

William Morris's Golden type, designed in 1890 for his private press, according to Morris, was a reinterpretation of Jenson's roman type (figure 6). One could argue that it was far from a reworking of Jenson's roman type – the bottom serifs are in the form of slabs. As much as Morris despised advertising typefaces, his work was, either knowingly or instinctively, influenced by this prevailing trend. It could therefore be contended that the seed for the revival of slab serifs was already planted at the end of the nineteenth century.

Solus, a typeface designed by Eric Gill in 1929 could be considered the pioneer in the 'revival' of the slab-serif letterform (figure 7). Robert Harling writes: '[...]it is obvious that Gill had devoted considerable attention to the problem of trying to make a slab-serif type design reasonable in design and readable in practice.'¹⁰ Harling continues that Solus failed to please the advertising market at the time because it 'held too delicate a hint of some of the more reticent of nineteenth-century Egyptians for twentieth-century tastes.'¹¹ Furthermore, the bold version lacked the 'blackness and insistent slab serifs' that was expected of an Egyptian typeface. After all, Gill himself dubbed his Solus type 'light Egyptian.'¹² Joanna, a much more well-known slab-serif typeface of Gill also possesses the virtues (or, for some, shortcomings) of Solus (figure 8). Unlike nineteenth century slab-serif typefaces and other contemporary geometric slab-serifs of the 1930s and their nineteenth century predecessors, Solus and Joanna have resolute modulations of thick and thin and humanist proportions which were unparalleled at the time. Solus and Joanna were clearly slab-serif typefaces that were designed for book typography, not advertising.

10 Harling: *The letter forms and type designs of Eric Gill* p.52

11 *Monotype Recorder*, volume 41, no. 3, 1958 p.18

Figure 9

A sample of Linotype
Memphis.
McGrew: *American metal
typefaces of the twentieth
century* p.215

MEMPHIS LIGHT & ITALIC, Lino 14-pt.
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

MEMPHIS MEDIUM & ITALIC, Lino 14-pt.
AABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ&
αabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890
AABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ&
αabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890

MEMPHIS BOLD & ITALIC, Lino 14-pt.
AABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ&
AABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ&
αabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890
αabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890

Figure 10

Bauer Beton Bold, from
an undated specimen
booklet published by the
Bauer Type Foundry.

Distinctive Production
MAGNIFICENT RING

Reinforced Frame
FINE HORSEMEN

Pleasant Sight
BIOGRAPHER

GEOMETRIC SLAB-SERIFS OF THE 1930S

In the 1930s there was a renewed interest in slab-serif typefaces in Germany. Yet the Germans' approach to reinventing the slab-serifs was quite different from that of Eric Gill's. This renewed interest coincided with the arrival of modernism in design in the previous decade. German sans serif typefaces such as Paul Renner's Futura (1924–26) became the norm in what was called 'the new typography'. The 'revival' of slab-serifs, naturally, also followed this prevailing trend.

In 1929, the German foundry Stempel issued Memphis, a geometric slab-serif typeface cut by Rudolf Wolf (**figure 9**). Unlike nineteenth century egyptian slab-serifs, Memphis is almost completely monolinear. There are slight thinnings of curves as they join the vertical stems and the slab serifs, but they are merely optical adjustments to prevent those awkward areas from becoming too dark. It is constructed with pure geometry, with a perfectly circular *O*. The serifs are slightly thinner than the main stems but in fact optically equal. The *a* and *g* are single-storey, and the *t* has a short flat serif. One curious feature is that the ear of the lowercase *r* was reduced to a circle. It also offered a handful of alternate characters, for example a capital *A* with a rounded apex. These characteristics are much like Renner's Futura. In fact Alexander Lawson simply states that these revivals 'consisted of the addition of serifs to the Futura model'.¹³

In an undated specimen sheet of Memphis issued by Linotype, the text reads: 'Memphis is an outstanding example of the modern egyptian face. There is no "penny-plain, tuppence-coloured" touch about the contemporary egyptian types; they have a job of work to do, and they do it without affectation but with considerable effect.' It seems that the new slab-serifs fitted well with the spirit of the 'machine age.'

Memphis was an immense success and many more geometric slab-serifs began to flood onto the market. Beton, cut by Heinrich Jost for the Bauer foundry in 1931 followed much of the character of Memphis but with gently bracketed serifs 'on strokes which would be thin in contrasting romans'¹⁴ (**figure 10**). The vertical serifs on letters such as *E* and *T* are slightly inclined. The capitals are wide and have similar widths. A curious feature is the *t*, which does not have a tail but was instead given a horizontal slab serif. Beton was a type favoured by advertising agency typographers and, along with Memphis, became very popular.

The surge of slab-serif 'revivals' in the 1930s was primarily led by German typefounders. Foundries in continental Europe, Britain as well as the United States followed suit. Many foundries hopped onto the bandwagon and produced their own varieties of slab-serif designs: Cairo (Intertype 1931), Karnak (Ludlow 1931), Rockwell, Pharaon (Deberny & Peignot 1933), Scrarb (Stephenson, Blake & Company 1937), to name but a few. They all followed the geometric style and were extremely similar to one another (**figure 11**).

¹³ Lawson: *Anatomy of a typeface* p.318

¹⁴ McGrew: *American metal typefaces of the twentieth century* p.35

Figure 11

A selection of geometric slab-serif typefaces from the 1930s. *Alphabet and image*: 1 p.50

ABCDEFGHIJKL

Karnak (Ludlow)

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN

Beton Light (Bauer, Frankfurt-am-Main)

ABCDEFGHIJKLM

Rockwell Medium (Monotype)

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQR

Memphis Medium (Linotype)

ADBCEFGHIJKLM

Scarab (Stephenson Blake)

Many of these new slab-serifs have a range of weights and sizes, and were intended for both continuous text and display setting, forming coherent type families. Very light weights were available for the first time. Alexander Lawson suggests that ‘the serified geometric pattern was not compatible with the design of the numerous variants required by the advertising typographers.’¹⁵ Walter Tracy also writes: ‘when an Egyptian is used for text matter the evenness of its strokes and its prominent square serifs produce a canvas-like texture which in a long text soon becomes tiring, with the possibility that the reader’s comprehension may suffer. Its readability is not high.’¹⁶ However, in their publicity material typefounders claim otherwise: ‘the serif of Egyptian types is not a hoary survival. It is an horizontal crossbar added to a block design to square up each letter, and to make them cohere horizontally,’ quoted from an undated specimen sheet of the Ludlow foundry featuring the Karnak typeface. As popular as these new slab-serifs were, they somewhat existed under the shadow of the fashionable sans serif types, which was inevitable considering the widespread influence of modernistic design. In order to compete with sans serifs, the text in the Karnak specimen continues: ‘Sans-serif letters do not cohere well together. Egyptians do. To speak Irish, Karnak is a sans-serif type with serifs.’

The slab-serif ‘revivals’ of the 1930s received equally severe condemnations from type critics as their nineteenth century predecessors. Ruari McLean writes: ‘it would be no great loss if all the modern slab serifs, headed by Rockwell, could be taken out into mid-Atlantic and sunk. They are all travesties, genteel and gutless, of a kind of display type that used to be, and still can be, lively and vigorous.’¹⁷ McLean

15 Lawson: *Anatomy of a typeface* p.321

16 Tracy: *Letters of credit* p.84

17 McLean: ‘Miller and Richard’s Egyptian’ p.27

was clearly not impressed by the idea of the geometrically constructed slab-serifs and felt that the true English tradition of the slab-serif should be revived. Another criticism from Walter Tracy: 'If in the older types some of the letters have a 'blacksmithed' awkwardness, at least they seem to have come from a human hand. The faces of the 1930s suggest the product of a formula and a machine.'¹⁸ Frederick A. Horn commented in the *Penrose Annual* of 1934: 'the advent of the 'machine age,' with its catch words of 'fitness for purpose,' 'functional design,' and so forth, has successfully blinded us to any virtues that nineteenth-century productions may have possessed.'¹⁹ He continues that if used according to modern techniques, the old types of the nineteenth century could look just as contemporary as the more recently designed ones. It could be seen that in the 1930s in England, there was a yearning to revive the tradition of nineteenth century typefaces. Are these new slab-serifs such typographic abominations, or could any merits be found in these designs?

One of the main shortcomings of these new slab-serifs is their strict monolinearity. Although there are slight thinnings of strokes at the joins, they are hardly enough for visual compensation. Although as mentioned above, these geometric slab-serifs were essentially Futura with added slab serifs, the details were far less considered than in the Futura type. Although the thicks and thins of the early Egyptian sans serifs were rather inconsistent, at least the joints had adequate visual compensation. To our contemporary eyes, these 1930s geometric slab-serifs have a strong period appearance that is reminiscent of the 'machine age,' but their value in contemporary typography is rather doubtful. The monolinearity and geometrical appearance of these typefaces also made them unsuitable for the setting of continuous text. It would be fair to say that however popular these geometric slab-serifs were, they were still at the peripheral of the typographer's toolbox, ascribing to the widespread effect of Modernism. It could be argued that these geometric slab-serifs were merely convenient spin-offs of the geometric sans serif typefaces to satisfy the market's desire for more novelty advertising types. However, according to Walter Tracy, the light versions of these slab-serif typefaces work well for television graphics, owing to the high degree of legibility of the capitals.²⁰

One laudable innovation at this time, though, seems to be Georg Trumpp's City, designed for the Berthold Foundry in 1930. Is a distinctive condensed slab-serif typeface with squared-off curves (**figure 12**). City's bold and medium weights are in fact quite different in construction. In the regular version the flat serifs connect directly with the bowls, while the bold weight has wedge-shaped joints. These were innovative features that set it apart from its contemporaries. However, it is unsuitable for use in continuous text. Interestingly, Sebastian Carter suggests that it was a 'mécane Egyptian taken to its ugly limits, much less attractive than the later Monotype Rockwell';²¹ which is rather difficult to be agreed upon.

18 Tracy: *Letters of credit* p.84

19 Horn: 'Old types with a new significance' p.17

20 Tracy: *Letters of credit* p.83

21 Carter: *Twentieth century type designers* p.111

Schadow, another design of Georg Trump's design, is a slab-serif with marked thick and thin modulations (**figure 13**). It was designed between 1937 and 1945 for the C. E. Weber foundry. It is a high contrast typeface compared to the slab-serifs designed at the beginning of the decade, and strict geometry was abandoned in favour of a more condensed design. The lowercase a and g are two-storey. The problems at the joints were skilfully resolved. These characteristics make it suitable for the setting of continuous text. Sebastian Carter comments that the Schadow family is 'a far more assured and attractive performance than City.'²²

After this experimental transitional period of the 1930, apart from the revivals of clarendons in the 1950s and the nostalgic interest in nineteenth century letterforms at the Festival of Britain in 1951²³, no major new slab-serifs were designed until the close of the 1960s.

Figure 12
City Medium and Bold, designed for the Berthold Foundry in 1930 by Georg Trump. Jaspert at al.: *Encyclopaedia of type faces* p.47

ABCDEFGHIJKLM abcdefghijklmno
ABCDEFGHIJKL abcdefghijklmn

Figure 13
Schadow, designed by Georg Trump for the E. C. Weber foundry, 1937–1945. Carter: *Twentieth century type designers* p.112

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OP
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuv

1970S CONTRIBUTIONS

Serifa, designed in 1967 by Adrian Frutiger for the Bauer foundry, was claimed by Frutiger himself as not a continuation of the 'spirit of constructivism of the 1930s with slab-serif typefaces' but 'the result of a basic and up-to-date evaluation of optical requirements and readability, with serifs consciously positioned for these purposes'²⁴ (**figure 14**). It was a typeface designed primarily for publicity use, but for text of all sizes and quantities. Despite these claims, the result is quite close to the 1930s slab-serifs, though with great improvement, immaculate craftsmanship and much less severe. American graphic designer Herb Lubalin designed Lubalin Graph in 1974 for ITC, a typeface that closely followed the footsteps of its forefathers in the 1930s (**figure 15**). It was a serif version of his immensely successful Avant Garde Gothic, a purely geometrical sans serif. It was 'designed to work well with new photographic typesetting technologies.'²⁵ But like its 1930s counterparts it seems to be an offshoot of Avant Garde Gothic that has nothing new to offer except more coldness and impersonality.

²² Carter p.113

²³ 'Egyptians' was one of the styles of lettering that was recommended for the Festival of Britain in 1951. *Penrose Annual*, 1952.

²⁴ Frutiger: *Type, sign, symbols* p.34

²⁵ Meggs, ed.: *Revival of the fittest* p.102

Figure 14
Serifa by Adrian Frutiger,
1967. Wallis: *Modern
encyclopedia of typefaces*
p.136

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz
 ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
 1234567890 &£\$.,:;!?’

Figure 15
ITC Lubalin Graph by
Herb Lubalin, 1974.
Wallis: p.101

abcdefghijklmnopqrstvwxyz
 ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
 1234567890 &£\$.,:;!?’

1990S: HUMANIST SLAB-SERIFS

Robert Bringhurst writes: ‘One of the typographic achievements of the late twentieth century is the humanization of the slab-serif letter.’²⁶ Although many seriffed book typefaces designed in the 1990s cannot be strictly classified as true slab-serifs, their serif formations are nonetheless in the form of square slabs. Scala, designed by Martin Majoor in the 1980s and issued in 1991 is an example (**figure 16**). While Scala’s top serifs are sloping, its lower serifs are slabs.

In 1991, Linotype released Caecilia, a slab-serif typeface designed by Peter Matthias Noordzij (**figure 17**). It is optically compensated monolinear typeface with humanist proportions. It is suggested that it might be the first of its kind.²⁷ For the first time since the early nineteenth century egyptians, Caecilia comes with a set of true slab-serif italics.²⁸ Small caps and ranging figures are also available, which makes it unquestionably a slab-serif book typeface. Caecilia is available as an extended family with a range of weights. Sumner Stone’s Silica, designed in 1993, is another example of a humanist slab-serif. The idea of the slab-serif has now been truly assimilated into the language of book typefaces, just as Eric Gill proposed in 1929 with his Solus typeface.

HUMANIST SLAB-SERIFS FOR LOW RESOLUTION OUTPUT

The heavy square-cut serifs of slab-serif typefaces have a robustness that makes them very suitable for reproduction under less than ideal printing conditions. Newspaper typefaces such as Ionic and Excelsior of the Monotype legibility group had thick serifs in order to survive low-grade printing on newsprint; monospaced typewriter faces such as Prestige Elite and Courier (both designs of Howard Kettler for IBM, 1953 and 1955 respectively) have long been slab-serif designs to withstand the impact of the typewriter mechanism. Slab-serif letterforms have even been used for television titling and early dot-matrix impact printers.

²⁶ Bringhurst: *Elements of typographic style* p.231

²⁷ Bringhurst dubbed this typeface a ‘neo-humanist slab-serif’.

²⁸ All previous slab-serif revivals from the 1930s till the 1970s only came with obliques but not true italics.

Figure 16
Scala Serif by Martin
Majoor, 1991.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Figure 17
Caecilia by Peter
Matthias Noordzij,
1993. From *Letters in
studie: Letterontwerpen
van studenten in
het, Nederlandse
kunstonderwijs* p19

Drs. F.J.M. van de Ven

Een Gymnasium
onder De Mammoet

*Het Stedelijk Gymnasium
van 's-Hertogenbosch in de
periode 1968 tot 1983.*

The invention of PostScript page description language coincided with the release of the 300 dots per inch Apple LaserWriter in 1985. This resolution was rather low compared with the quality of standard typesetting: traditional typefaces with hairline serifs and high stroke contrasts tend to break or disappear under this coarse resolution. New typefaces had to be designed to tackle this shortcoming. Slab-serifs with thick serifs and more even stroke weights seemed ideal.

Lucida Serif (**figure 18**), designed by Charles Bigelow and Kris Holmes in 1985 was the first typeface to address the issues of 300 dots per inch low-resolution laser printing. Its thick, stubby serifs survive not only low-resolution laser printing but also faxing. Unlike most slab-serif typefaces we have discussed here, Lucida Serif has a rather high stroke contrast and retains the proportions of Humanist book type. Lucida Serif has a true cursive italic.

Figure 18
Lucida Serif by
Charles Bigelow and
Kris Holmes, 1985.

Hamburgev

In 1987, Matthew Carter designed Charter (**figure 19**), the first original typeface for his then newly formed Bitstream digital foundry. Carter intended Charter to be a ‘revival’ of Fournier, yet with new characteristics that would tackle the challenges of low- to high-resolution output. Charter’s serifs are indeed in the form of slabs, though this typeface is not usually referred to as a slab-serif design. Perhaps it is because of its sheer elegance and rather ‘learned’ appearance.

Officina Serif, designed by Erik Spiekermann and released in 1990 by ITC is another slab-serif face designed to work on coarse-resolution laser printers as well as high-resolution devices (**figure 20**). It is a very condensed face with even stroke contrast.

Figure 19
ITC Charter, designed by
Matthew Carter, 1987.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Figure 20
ITC Officina Serif by
Erik Spiekermann, 1990.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Conclusion

It is shown in this essay that within a time span of merely little more than a century the slab-serif letterforms underwent tremendous shifts in form and use. It was originally conceived as a new kind of typeface that broke away from traditional book typography to satisfy the needs of mass communication, but evolved into something quite far from its original purpose – book typography. Despite these constant changes, slab-serif typefaces did not become a mainstream typographic style like the sans serifs did in the last century. They remain at the peripherals of typographic design, even to this day. It was seen in this essay that slab-serif letterforms as an idea was very flexible in adapting to the changing communication and technological needs and aesthetics of different periods. Perhaps this flexibility is demonstrated in Matthew Carter’s typeface for the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, New York (**figure 21**). The typeface features a variety of ‘snap-on’ serifs, which include slab serifs. The serif, once an implicit part of the letterform, now becomes a mutable entity that could be put on or taken off at will. It seems that more new opportunities are yet to be sized upon for the slab-serif idea.

Figure 21
Matthew Carter's
typeface for the Walker
Art Center, Minneapolis.
Eye magazine, No.19,
1995. p.72



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