For the masses

Throughout the 20th Century—the age of mass media—traditional serifed typefaces dominated the advertisements and editorial pages of mass circulation magazines. By Nick Shinn

The passage of time distorts our awareness of the past.

Firstly, it distills the mess of culture into a few heroic symbols, such as the Bauhaus. Secondly, as we pursue our current obsessions, we seek precursors, and so our era of hitmapped images rediscover historical footnotes like Wim Crouwel’s ’60s grid-mongering, and inflates their importance. But there is another way to view history, and that is to ask a simple question, “What was popular then?”

Enough mass-circulation magazines survive to provide an answer. A market exists for this ephemera, and a 1920s Saturday Evening Post, a ’30s Esquire, a ’50s Life or a ’60s Playboy can each be had for under $10. In their pages, there is a musée sans murs, an astounding wealth of advertising and editorial design and typography—most of it set in classic, seriffed typefaces. Seeing what Lewis Blackwell calls “the living tradition of design” provides an alternative to histories derived from specimen books, awards annuals, and famous careers.

Magazines in 1900 were dreary affairs with small, monochrome ads and degenerate typography. Fifteen years later, what a difference!

The graphics industry took off on the wings of two major phenomena:

- Packaged goods: Harley Procter put a printed wrapper round a bulk product (Ivory Soap), and advertised it. Branding created an industry with jobs for illustrators, photographers, and artists who specialized in packaging and advertisements.
- Typesetting machines: these enabled enough content for a mass media—large, frequently published magazines and newspapers financed by advertising revenue.

As the profession emerged, it developed self-awareness. Printers and artists, in an era already nostalgic for the pre-industrial, looked way beyond the recent past to discover a noble heritage.

With the new technologies of halftones, Linotype, and huge runs on coated stocks, the main concern was integrating the graphic quality of image, decoration, and type. Linework was the answer. “There is too, that quality in the engraved or drawn line which harmonizes with the varied linear quality of type and dominates the old bookmaking,” wrote Charles E. Dawson in the 1909 Penrose Annual.

Hence the outrageously radical historicism of the 1920s Phoenix campaign (right), targeted at a new wave of short-skirted, short-haired, car-driving, cigarette-smoking women with jobs, and soon, the vote.

The tight fit and angled stress of Fred Goudy’s historical fiction Kennerley, the centerpiece of the ad, produced a humanist colour that would figure strongly in the new century’s typography through faces such as Garamond, Goudy Old Style, Times, and Palatino.

On the next few pages are examples of many of the most popular typefaces of the 20th Century, with photos of the ads and editorial pages from which they are taken.

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1921

Saturday Evening Post
Kennerley (F. Goudy, 1911)

1921

Honda ad, Life. 235 × 323 mm
Caslon 540 (Wm. Caslon, 18th C.)

1986

Caslon was the only oldstyle to survive the “modernization” of type design in the 19th Century, and was tremendously popular during the first decades of the 20th, when the culture was heavily into quaintness. It has since been reworked many times.

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1900

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This is a brilliant book. But it is, as the author notes in the introduction, “deliberately weighted to noting the avant garde rather than the living traditions of design.”
To the tip of your toes you will be thrilled by Phoenix economy. The fine feeling which comes from the wearing of comfortable silk hosiery, and the sense of security and elegance which it brings, are really incidentals. Phoenix is the best selling line of hosiery in all the world, because of its remarkable wearing qualities, because of the long mileage it insures at low cost.

PHOENIX
HOSIERY
The close-cropped halftone, the wrap-around text, the old-style text face—these are the stock-in-trade of the 20th century advertising art director.

The 19th Century sans serif was a proletarian attention-grabber that said "cheap" and "unfinished." The idea that a sans could convey a progressive rationality with an air of severe beauty (as they would have said in the 'twenties), was revolutionary.

The years 1927–30 saw the release of a remarkable crop of new sans faces—Erbar, Kabel, Gill, Stellar, Futura, Bernhard Gothic, and Nobel—handsome faces all, especially in contrast to the sans genre as it stood: heavy, ugly grots.

The geometric sans, with modernist layout, caught on quickly in a few niche markets—fashion and industry—and the bold weights found wider favor, used for contrast.

Paul Renner, designer of Futura, was an intellectual driven by logic to express the spirit of the age: "Our printing type is not the expression of a movement like handwriting; everything deriving from a left-to-right dynamic, all thick and thin... make no sense in printing type." (Quoted in Chris Burke's Paul Renner, Hyphen Press, 1998)
Hand lettering was widespread until the 1960s, and used in many places where you’d expect type. The fact is, typography was an expense which art studios could avoid by doing in-house lettering, and given the poor quality of much type, the limited selection of faces, and the time factor, the results were frequently preferable. This Ipana headline is so exquisitely rendered that it could easily pass for process lettering (from an early form of photo-heading machine). But it’s better! Look how the widths of the serifs on the “i” and “n” are adjusted for context, and how the tail of the first “a” is slightly closer to the body of the letter than in the second.

The Garamond, too, makes a sturdy impression; that, and the wonky way it won’t sit on the baseline, are at odds with today’s insipid digital Monotype version. There is now a vast variety of Garamond fonts—the right choice depends on how the job will be printed, or displayed.

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One thing about modernism: size mattered. Holiday was a big magazine with vast pictures of wide open spaces, acres of white space, and exquisitely sharp typography. Put that on your lap and dream of faraway places. I'm gone!

The layouts were modernist—asymmetric, with subtle deviations from implied grids. Modern, but not in a rigid, brutal way, because the Bauer Bodoni is so elegant, so ultimately classic and classy. And Times had found its metier, text type of the dignified magazine, and it's never looked better.

Today, the digital Bauer Bodoni font doesn't work like its namesake of yore. But there are others that do, taking the edge off high-resolution, digital perfection with a subtle distress that mimics the trace of the letterpress process: ITC Bodoni (Fishman, Goldsmith, Parkinson, Stone, 1994), FF Bodoni Classic (Wiescher, 1994–5), and Filosofia (Licko, 1996).

A theory for the persistence of serifs: it’s how we learn to read. Century Schoolbook was commissioned by Ginn & Co., educational publishers, with legibility the issue. Benton researched reading and eyesight, and produced an honest face devoid of affectation.

Sans serifs can be confusing. Compare s, a, and e. Similar shapes, alright. Now look at the s, a, and e serifs in Schoolbook—each is categorically different. That helps. For while children may not be able to create detailed complexity in their own art, they love it, because that’s how the world is. Like the beautiful, crazy world of Dr. Seuss.

Mr Happy, however, are a banal insult to kids—and Adrian Frutiger.
Advertising in the '60s: it was hip, it was art, it was poetry. §/#*¬—it was happening and magic how the picture didn’t make sense without the words, and vice versa, but put them together and boom!

It was minimal, it was conceptual, it was the big idea. Don’t let no logos get in the way. It was literate, metaphorical, pure semiological rhetoric and the typography was in your face.

You see, the headline wasn’t a headline, it was just a phrase that once crossed someone’s mind, typeset and larger than life. Hence the paragraph indent and the asymmetry, but isn’t that far out with the offbeat layout?!

And that scrap of body copy, that’s a transcript of audio, it’s a haiku, it’s a little chunk of concrete poetry. Hey, it’s pop art reclaimed off the gallery wall back where it belongs glorifying consumer culture with its disposable icons and check out this ad because you’re so high you can hear that taste, man. Chug-a-lug.

Goudyism: Tight but not touching. Did I mention green is my favorite color? Look: it’s all about the Zen of layout, like the page is some kind of Japanese rock garden, and the ragged setting is gravity blowing sideways in the breeze. Dada collage à la Suisse.

You’re travelling across the page the perfect balance of not much at all, but it means everything. Looking at a dialectic that turns news into culture, but wait a minute, this is the culture of culture. Oh wow, that’s deep.

Did you mistake it for one of America’s most expensive cars? Lots of people are
Poor Herman Zapf. Not only was his masterpiece Palatino ripped off all over the place, but the perpetrators usually saw fit to “improve” upon his design.

In the modified versions the ascenders are the same height as the caps, not taller as in the original, and there are a number of serifs added to previously unadorned strokes, because Zapf forgot to include them. Right.

No matter, it’s such a wicked design that they can screw it up no end and it still rocks.

Zapf created a calligraphic, humanist type for book work and 35 years later its offspring was being used for 18 point body copy in a muscle-building ad. During the Last Days of Typography, before desktop publishing swept away the type shops’ magnificent folly, that’s the kind of weird stuff that went down.

The type got pumped, like Rambo. Blame it on cheap space—and specimen books. Every month the type rep dropped off another and the art director marveled, “Look how big that type is, and how nicely kerned. I wonder how it would look even bigger and tighter.”

Overlapping even. It’s quite remarkable how word spaces vanish in the Royal Caribbean headline. For their part, type designers were playing the “my-x-height’s bigger than yours” game, with ITC leading the way.

And still the setting got tighter. So it went, in a feedback loop.

Friedrich Poppl got caught in the vortex—Pontifex is a sort of “ITC Palatino”—as did Aldo Novarese (Symbol, Fenice), Tony Stan (ITC Garamond, American Typefounders), and Les Usherwood (Flange, Caxton, Usherwood).

One more ’80s swan song: the invention of a new paragraph style, “partly justified.” Or should that be Post-justified?

Soloflex builds the chest. With the same efficiency and simplicity that it builds the rest of the body.

It all starts ten stories above the sea in the Viking Crown Lounge. With a cool drink in hand, here’s perhaps the ideal vantage point to say goodbye to a spectacular day.
The art director as type designer: Like Herb Lubalin’s Avant Garde, Neville Brody’s Industria arose from the need for a type that would conform to the strict geometry of its creator’s page layouts. Or was it the other way around?

Avant Garde. 277 × 286 mm
Avant Garde by H. Lubalin and T. Carnase, 1970
The Face. 232 × 302 mm
Industria by N. Brody, 1984

The legacy of looseness left by the deconstructed, grunge aesthetic of the heroic desktop era has formalized into the multisized sentence.

When handled with precision, it looks best with a strongly structured serif type—providing a visual richness of detail to entertain and satisfy the eye.

In some ways, it’s similar to the classic typographic play of mixing roman with italic and small caps. It’s all part of the living tradition.

Entertainment Weekly, 204 × 267 mm
Bureau Grotesque by D. Berlow, 1989
Century Expanded by M. Benton, 1900

This kind of Post-modern bravura is well-served by the Font Bureau’s Victorian revivals—maximum contrast all the way, mixing the sparkling hairlines of Century Expanded text with bloated Bureau Grotesque headlines and all manner of tricked out, tracked out, drop capped, and celebrity bold-faced Bureau Grotesque family members. And for special issues, guest appearances by hot new fonts.

Entertainment Weekly is a gargantuan tour de force of intricate typography, complex, decorated layouts and charts, and commissioned illustrations and photography.

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1971
1984
1997
1998

stronger.”

ALBERT

By Pat Dillon Photographs by Michael Jang

Fast Company, art director Patrick Mitchell. 220 × 275 mm
FF Scala by M. Majoor, 1990
FF DIN by A-J. Pool, 1995

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