

The birth of typefaces

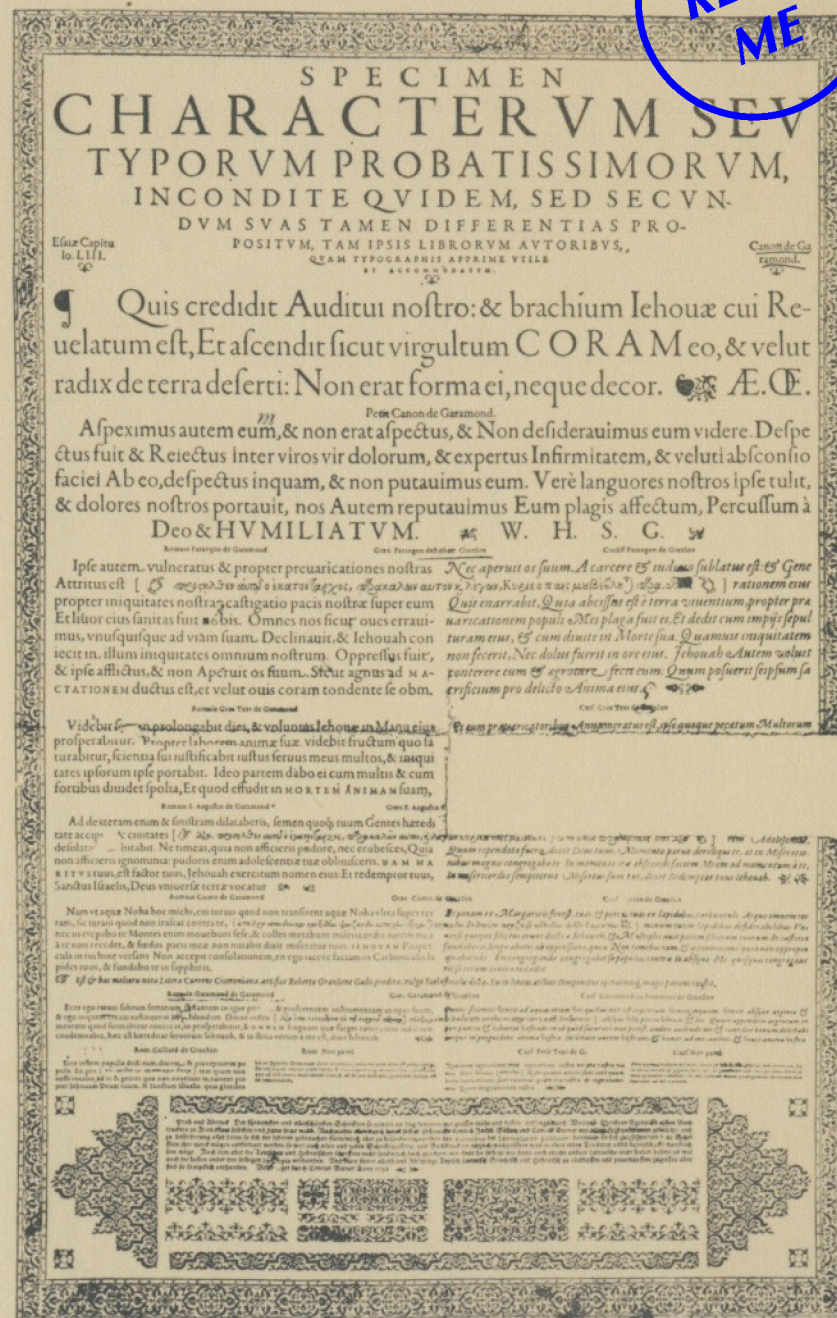
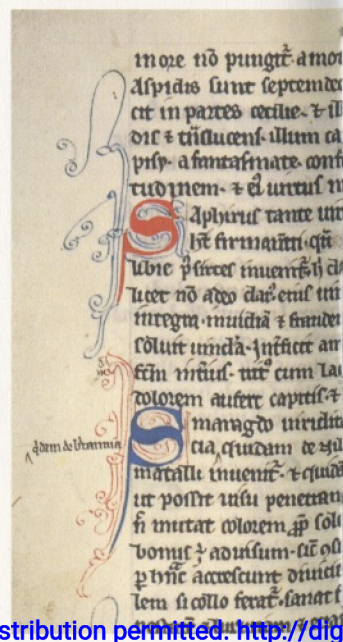
If the process of manufacturing type remained the same for many centuries, the *appearance* of type changed almost immediately. Today Gutenberg's Bible appears difficult to decipher because we are not accustomed to the Gothic, or black-letter, hand it was replicating, and we know even less about the contexts in which it would have been read. Scholars or clergy in Gutenberg's day would have had no such problems with legibility. Gutenberg undoubtedly intended his printed Bible to carry the same weight of authority as the handwritten versions it was supplanting.

Given the pre-eminence of black letter as the standard book hand of the day, it is interesting that dissatisfaction with its visual heaviness was expressed almost as soon as printed books began to proliferate. Before very long, new fonts were being created, and by the middle of the sixteenth century printers outside Germany had abandoned the use of black letter altogether, except where its authoritative voice was desirable – in legal documents, for example. In Germany, by contrast, black letter remained a common typeface well into the twentieth century.

What the new medium of printing seemed to be calling for was a new type language. This soon emerged in Renaissance Italy. Here a fine, slanted cursive script was popularly used for written communication. From this script, which was itself based on much older forms, the first roman and italic typefaces were derived. The Frenchman Nicolas Jenson (1420–80) was the first to create letterforms specifically *for* type, rather than translating a book hand *into* type. In Venice, where he had gone to work, Jenson cut the first roman typeface and began printing with it around 1470. His open, round, readable type combined roman capitals with miniscule forms based on the cursive script. The coherent, balanced result created a dynamic use of white space. A little later, Francesco Griffo (1450–1518) cut the first italic typeface, another variant of the humanist minuscule; its compression met a demand for pocket editions of the classics by making more economical use of the page.

Right: Claude Garamond (c1480–1561) based his roman type on that cut by Francesco Griffo in 1495. After Garamond's death, some of his punches went to a foundry in Frankfurt. The 'Egenolff-Berner specimen' showing Garamond roman and italic, issued by the foundry in 1592, is an important reference for the typeface.

Below: A folio from the Aberdeen Bestiary, written and illuminated in England around 1200.



THE BERNER SPECIMEN BROADSIDE OF 1592

READ
ME

MAJUSCOLE

91

A B C D E F G

H I J K L M N O

P Q R S T V

A B C D E F G

H I J K L M

Left: Eighteenth-century roman typefaces were more geometric than anything that had gone before. This example of Bodoni is taken from the *Manuale tipografico del cavalier Giambattista Bodoni* (1818).

Below: John Baskerville was a famous eighteenth-century English typographer. He devised blacker inks and used polished paper to heighten contrast and better display the elegance of his letterforms.

Roman typefaces spread northwards and proved especially popular for printing Latin literature. When these fonts arrived in England in 1520, they were adopted by Wynkyn de Worde (died 1534), whose mentor, William Caxton, was the first English printer. By the mid-sixteenth century the centre of type had shifted to Paris and Lyon, where Claude Garamond (c1480–1561) produced a refined French version of roman type.

Humanist scripts on which the first roman types were based were written with broad-nibbed pens. As these gave way to the pointed pens used in baroque and rococo cursive scripts, the same aesthetic shift was evident in type design. The contrast between thick and thin strokes increased, round letterforms were compressed, and there was greater vertical stress.

Most type used in Britain from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth was from the Netherlands and, much of it was of poor quality. The first major figure in English typography was William Caslon (1692–1766). A specimen sheet published by Caslon in 1734 showed an entire family of typefaces, including roman, italic, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic. His best-known font, Caslon roman, which was widely used in the American colonies, was a precisely cut upright typeface, with a certain old-fashioned irregularity that gave it great charm and appeal. Another renowned eighteenth-century English typographer was John Baskerville (1706–75), a writing master who was much concerned with the aesthetics of letterforms. Baskerville's roman type was especially elegant, and he ensured its optimum presentation by devising blacker, glossier inks and fine polished paper to accentuate contrast.

The first 'true' modern roman typefaces reflected the eighteenth-century classical revival in architecture and art, and were much more geometric than anything that had gone before. Giambattista Bodoni (1740–1813) and Firmin Didot (1764–1836) created typefaces that – with their long ascenders and descenders, fine, precise serifs and rigorous symmetry – expressed the rationalist spirit of the Age of Enlightenment.

EUNUCHUS

ACTUS V. SCEN

PYTHIAS, CHREMES, SOP

Q U I D ? quid venire in mentem
mili?

Quidnam, qui referam sacrilego illi g
Qui hunc supposuit nobis? C H. Mov
Te, nutrix. S O. Moveo. C H. Video
moves.

P Y. Jamne ostendisti signa nutrici? C
P Y. Amabo, quid ait? cognoscite? t
moriter.

P Y. Bene edepol narras: nam illi fav
Ite intro: jamdudum hera vos expec
Virum bonum eecum Parmenonem in
Video. Vide ut otiosus it, fi Di place
Spero me habere, qui hunc meo excruc
Ibo intro, de cognitione ut certum sci
Poll exibo, atque hunc perterrebo faci

ACTUS V. SCEN

P A R M E N O, P Y T H I

R E V I S O, quidnam Cherea hic
Quod si altu rem tractavit, Di vo
Quantum et quam veram laudem capio

READ
ME