A Very Short, Sketchy and Incomplete History of Fonts

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of fonts in use. What this short “History” attempts is to show a few important ones — historically important, and still popular today — but most of all it wants to show two things: that fonts are works of art, created by artists, and that many fonts that we use today have changed astonishingly little since their ancestors were created more than 500 years ago, in the late 15th century.

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https://dunyazad-library.net
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Old Style (Renaissance)

Let's not talk about German "blackletter" fonts here (their German name is Fraktur, which means broken) which were in use in German printing far into the 20th century.

The history of "our" letters begins in Italy, in the late 15th century — the fonts that we know as "Antiqua", based on ancient Roman inscriptional capitals and Carolingian handwriting. (In German, "Antiqua" is the name for serif fonts, while in English both serif and sans-serif fonts are called Antiqua.)

Two names to remember are Aldus Manutius and Francisco Griffo — Manutius was the printer, Griffo designed fonts for him. With some simplification, it could be said that Gutenberg invented the technology, Manutius invented the art of printing.

In 1497 Francisco Griffo designed a font called Bembo (named after Pietro Bembo, the author of the first book for which Manutius used it) — the italics are a later addition, created in the 1520s by Giovanni Antonio Tagliente. Even if it necessarily looks a bit different now in digital form than the printed lead letters on paper looked at the time, this font is not only still in use, it is still considered one of the most beautiful and at the same time legible fonts ever designed.

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You can find more about the Bembo font here: https://luc.devroye.org/fonts-53286.html

Fonts from the early age of printing are called "Old Style" in English, their German name is "Renaissance" fonts.

Another important name here is Claude Garamond, a 16th century French printer and font designer — to quote Wikipedia: "Considered one of the leading type designers of all time, he is recognised to this day for the elegance of his typefaces. Many old-style serif typefaces are collectively known as Garamond, named after the designer." The name "Garamond" represents 16th century French font design, not always by Garamond himself — different fonts today are using that name. Here is a free and quite good version that is reasonably true to Garamond's work, the EBGaramond:

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You have to look rather closely to see details in which it differs from Griffo's font. Both are excellent "old style" or Renaissance fonts, still in use after five centuries.

Transitional (Baroque)

The next era in font design is called “transitional” in English (because it stands between Renaissance and 19th century “Didone” (“modern” or “classicist” fonts), and is called “baroque” in German. You still need to look closely to see the differences.

The Baskerville font was created in England by John Baskerville in 1757 — we are now two and a half centuries after Manutius and Griffo, two centuries after Garamond.

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A few decades later, around 1790, the Bulmer font was created by William Martin for the Shakespeare Press, run by William Bulmer. Wikipedia: “Bulmer is considered to be a late ‘transitional’ face. Faces in this style, which became most common in the mid to late eighteenth century, were more crisply engraved than earlier faces. William Martin’s typefaces show strong influence of the Baskerville typeface of John Baskerville which popularised this style in England, but with more contrast, bolder, narrower and with sharper serifs.”

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While I love the Bembo, the Bulmer is the font that I use for the books in the Dunyazad Library — it is almost as beautiful, but its digital version is better legible on screens than the Bembo’s.

Today the best-known and most widely used (though not the most aesthetically pleasing) baroque style font is Times New Roman, created in 1931 by Stanley Morison for the London Times:

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Note that, unlike with most other fonts, the spacing of the regular and italic letters is the same, which can make life easier for the typesetter.

When we compare the Bulmer from 1790 (left) to the Bembo from 1497 (right), we can see that the basic forms of the letters have hardly changed in those 300 years:

(The thinner lines of the Bembo are a bit deceiving — printed with lead letters on paper, the lines of the Bembo appeared thicker. When a historical font is digitized, there is always the question whether to replicate the shape of the letters as they were cast in lead, or as they appeared on paper.)

Didone (Modern, Classicist)

New fonts were developed in the late 18th and early 19th century, making use of advantages in metallurgy that allowed for thinner lines and sharper angles, but also trying to represent the modern Age of Enlightenment with a clear and rational design.

One important example is the Bodoni font created by Giambattista Bodoni in the late 18th century, who based his work on that of John Baskerville:

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Note the thin and angular serifs of the “modern” Bodoni (left), compared for instance to those of the “transitional” Baskerville (right):

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Didot is another name that has to be mentioned (Firmin Didot was the designer, his brother Pierre Didot the printer) — the Didot takes thinness to the extreme.

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The name “Didone” for this style is a 20th century creation, combining the names Didot and Bodoni. Didone fonts were popular in the 19th century, but tmeanwhile we again prefer the look of older designs.

Slab Serif (Egyptienne)

In strong contrast to thin-lined rational (or sophisticated) classicist fonts, later in the 19th century appeared thick-lined vulgar and violent fonts with absurdly exaggerated serifs as we see them on “Wanted” posters in Western movies — the slab serif or “Egyptienne” fonts (not that they have anything to do with Egypt).

We wouldn’t have to talk about them here if it weren’t for toned down versions that, for instance, were used in newspaper print — for instance the Clarendon, created 1845 in London by Robert Besley:

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And here is the Clarendon (here in the “light” version, left), again compared to the “transitional” Baskerville (right):

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The exaggerated serifs made it into typewriter fonts — we all know the Courier (created for IBM in 1956), which is not only a slab serif and a monospaced font, but also an example of a strictly monolinear font, that is a font where all lines have the same unvarying thickness:

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There were monolinear slab-serif fonts in the 19th century, but more important became the monolinear concept for some 20th century sans-serif fonts — see next page.

Sans-Serif (Grotesque)

Letters have serifs for three reasons: serifs have a decorative function, they help telling certain characters apart — Illinois (Times New Roman) is easier to read than Illinois (Helvetica) — and they support the reader by providing a base line along which the eye can follow a line of text.

While serif-less (sans-serif) types already existed since the 19th century, they were not used for running text before the early 20th century, when, as had happened more than 100 years earlier, new scripts were again created to be modern and rational. (The name “grotesque” for serif-less fonts dates back to the early 19th century — somewhat different explanations exist for the name, this is not the place to discuss them.)

Sans-serif fonts are often used for large print (e.g. on posters and signs, and for headings), for small print, and for screens — cases where their simpler design gives them an advantage in legibility.

Sans-serif fonts often are monolinear or nearly monolinear, but even when they are not they have less pronounced differences between thick and thin lines than serif fonts usually have.

Sans-serif fonts can be geometric — that is, their characters are constructed from basic geometric forms. The best known geometric sans-serif font is the Futura, designed in Germany by Paul Renner in 1927 (a closer look at some characters shows that it is not strictly monolinear):

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While Renner was strongly opposed to fascism and had to emigrate to Switzerland, the Futura reflects the spirit of the Italian Futurist movement of the early 20th century, which (quoting Wikipedia) “rejected the past and celebrated speed, machinery, violence, youth, and industry […] introducing a new concept of beauty rooted in the human instinct for aggression. […] The Futurists' explicit glorification of war and its ‘hygienic’ qualities influenced the ideology of fascism.” Undeniably there is a certain elegance to the Futura, though.

From the geometric sans-serif fonts differ the so-called “humanist” or “classicist” sans-serif fonts, for instance the Helvetica, created 1957 by Max Miedinger, based on a turn-of-the-century font named Akzidenz-Grotesk. (“Relatively little-known for a half-century after its introduction, it achieved iconic status in the post-war period as the preferred typeface of many Swiss graphic designers in what became called the ‘International’ or ‘Swiss’ design style which became popular across the Western world in the 1950s and 1960s.”) Here is the Helvetica-clone Swiss721:

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And here is the highly regarded Frutiger, created 1976 by the Swiss designer Adrian Frutiger (actually this is a Frutiger clone, Humanist777):

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When you closely compare the Futura (left) and the Frutiger (right) some letters clearly show the difference between the “geometric” and the “humanist” approach:

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This text, btw, is set in Calibri, designed by Lucas de Groot for Microsoft, with an emphasis on readability on screens, published 2006 — it is clearly influenced by the Frutiger, but note how the italic *f* recalls that of classic serif fonts:

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Postscript

As said at the beginning, there exist hundreds if not thousands of fonts, or rather font families, often consisting of light, regular, semi-bold, bold, small caps, condensed, italic etc. versions and combinations thereof — a fully developed font family will easily have a dozen of members or more. Fonts have been developed, and still are developed, to accomodate changing tastes, ideas, technologies and fields of use, but also for the sake of creating something new and different. This little history cannot come even close to giving an overview of all the fonts you come to see each day or may want to use yourself, but maybe it can help to see them in a historical and aesthetical context — I thank my friend Mollie whose questions have inspired me to write it.

— The End —