

Form + Code - Zuzana Licko

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Zuzana Licko is a Slovak-American typographer and type designer, known primarily for co-founding type foundry *Emigre Fonts* and experimental design journal *Emigre*. Born in 1961 Czechoslovakia, she emigrated to the US as a child⁽¹⁾. Graduating from the University of Berkeley with a degree in graphic communications, she and her husband at *Emigre* designed bitmap fonts using public domain Macintosh software as opposed to adapting fronts from calligraphy, lead, or phototyping. Licko tended to design highly structured typefaces, reflecting the evolution of digital technology while “questioning conventional ideas of legibility and layout”⁽²⁾. By the late 1980s *Emigre* had hit the mainstream, being featured in designs for *The New York Times* and *Nike* and winning them awards from the graphic design establishment. *Emigre* combines innovative and exploratory typefaces and layouts as forms of expression, breaking and deconstructing established design rules at the time and resulting in criticism from the industry. It focused on creating juxtaposition through how design is read, seen, written and visualized⁽³⁾. The duo believed that familiarity with a typeface improved its legibility and made it individually expressive, as opposed to being “invisible containers of thought”⁽³⁾. Zuzana was an early adopter of emerging technologies such as the Macintosh computer, allowing her to design typefaces dictated by the computer’s bitmap limitations (such as “Oakland”) and apply old techniques adjusted for technological development. The software at the time also allowed *Emigre* to interpret text, layouts and images in original ways, blurring the lines between text used in both written and visual compositions³. The journal often employed unexpected white spaces, irregular grids, distorted letterforms and clashing typography which challenged traditional design norms of legibility while embracing progressing technologies.

The font Licko claims is her most influential⁽²⁾ is “Mrs. Eaves” from 1996. In the design brief for this font⁽⁴⁾ she recalls how shocking she found the difference between letterpress type and phototype; she described phototype as having an “uncanny polished tightness”, one that tried to perfect the glyph tightness that lead presses could not achieve. After that, designers rarely noticed the charm and softness of letterpress due to the “gain of impression” and “ink spread”. As digital fonts came into play there became more and more concentration around perfection, an irony as the development of typographic technology was meant to increase freedom and reduce mechanical restrictions. Licko believed this technology could be instead used to inspire interpretations, and therefore she decided to “revive an old classic”: Baskerville. Baskerville’s work was chosen because it was criticized at its time to be too “sterile”, a fact that parallels the modern desire for perfection in typefaces. In that way, it was the perfect transitional typeface, standing on the precipice of antique typefaces and modern ones. Baskerville also proved that reader preferences are shaped more by familiarity than any actual characteristics of typefaces, as it had been criticized at its time and yet fits quite well with modern reading habits. The font itself uses contrasts between stems and hairlines as well as incorporating Baskerville’s openness and lightness: lower case characters have wider proportions, with a reduced x-height relative to the cap-height to make the font highly legible to the modern reader.

Citations

1. Licko, Zuzana. "Zuzana Licko Bio." *Zuzana Licko*, Emigre, www.emigre.com/Designer/ZuzanaLicko. Accessed 18 Feb. 2025.
2. Rubinstein, Rhonda, and Zuzana Licko. "Feature: Reputations: Zuzana Licko." *Eye Magazine*, 2002, www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/reputations-zuzana-licko.
3. Boyle, Chaney. "Typography and Legibility: An Analysis of Tschichold, Licko, and Vanderlans." *Bloom 2020 – Showcase For CCI103 Perspectives On The Creative Industries*, 2020, <https://bloom.csu.edu.au/2020/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BOYLE-Chaney-for-CCI103-BLOOM.pdf>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2025.
4. Licko, Zuzana. "Mrs Eaves, a Typeface Designed by Zuzana Licko." *Mrs Eaves*, Emigre Fonts, www.emigre.com/PDF/MrsEavesClassic.pdf. Accessed 18 Feb. 2025.