

Scrambled Eggs and Serifs

By Tobias Frere-Jones

Years ago, I asked one of my mentors what he thought was the hardest part of designing a typeface. I was expecting “the cap S” or “the italic lowercase” or something like that. But he answered without hesitation: the name. Finding the name is the hardest part.

Type has a long and rich history, not just in its shapes but also its organization and presentation. Scholars have discussed the marriage of roman and italic, originally independent forms. Others have charted the idea of “bold”, the shift of weight that is a signal all by itself. But the idea of a typeface name has received less attention.

Today, we expect a name to be a unique designation, independent of context, emphasizing personality rather than structure. It wasn’t always this way, so I went digging to find the beginning of this concept. As with most of type history, the answer is complicated.

So the modern typeface name—evocative and abstract—was not a breakthrough by one individual, but a project that took countless hands and over two hundred years to realize. And I quickly came to agree: the name is the hardest part.

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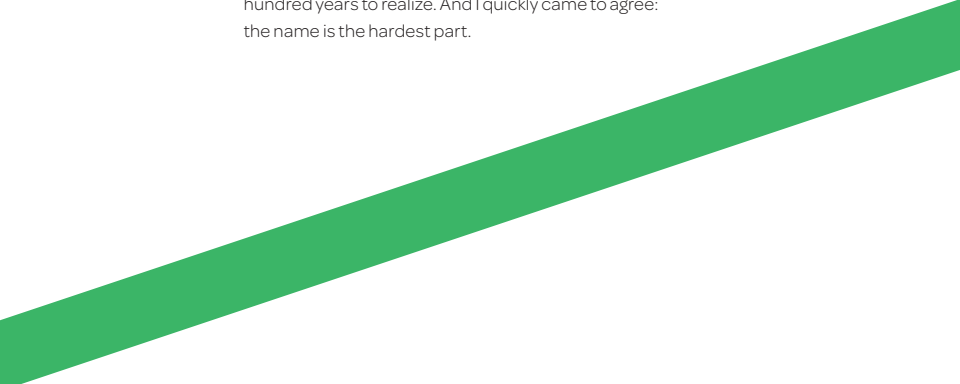
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