A humanist

sans serif font

Optima

Optima was inspired by letters in a medieval church, called the Basilica di Santa Croce, in Florence. It had a small ancient Roman gravestone that was easy to miss, but had a unique Roman font that lacked the traditional serifs.

This is a small photo of the actual gravestone.

Frankfurt Germany

At the time, Herman Zapf was hired by the D. Stempel AG Foundry in Frankfurt, Germany to create a font. Inspired by the gravestone, he then worked and refined the design for over 2 years.

While designing, Zapf purposefully proportioned the font with the golden ratio.

1953-1955

The font was commercially released in 1958 and became an instant success.

To the right are some of the initial sketches of Optima. At the time, he did not have any sketch paper left, so was left to draw on a 1000 lira banknote.

Herman Zapf

The final result is a unique font that follows humanist characteristics - its capitals are similar to the Roman monumental capital font it was inspired by, but also has a modern sans-serif approach as well. Some say it should be considered as a sans-serif Roman typeface.
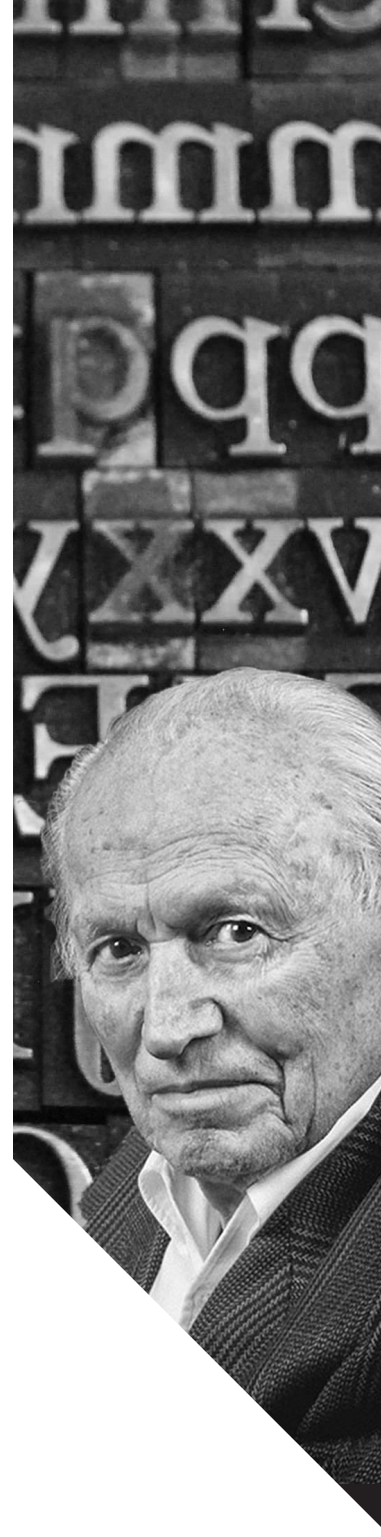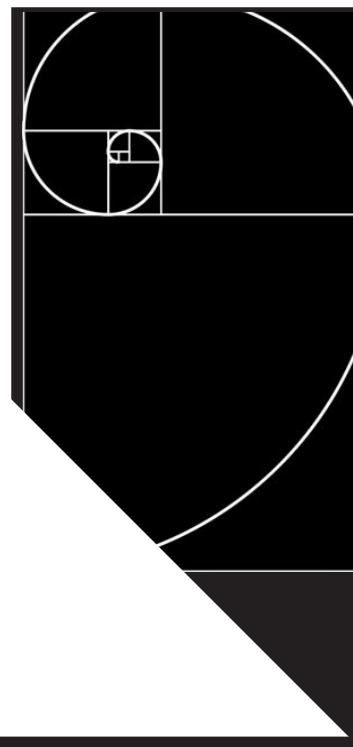
It's important to remember that Optima was designed when letterpress was still popular - thus Zapf included this technical part in his design. He had somewhat flared terminals because many movable type would lose their crispness in a lengthy run. A slight exaggeration of the terminals was implemented to overcome this.

E R M

Zapf wanted to avoid the monotony of sans-serif capital letters fitting a square space. The 'E' and 'R' fill in a half square, while the 'M' splays out from the square.

Font families include:
Regular
Bold
ExtraBlack

Italic
Bold Italic

The Italic font-family of Optima is not a true Italic. Although Zapf wanted a true Italic, due to time demands, he had to settle for a sloped version.

slight swelling at terminals suggests glyphic serif

letters were designed around the golden rectangle/ratio

Below is a larger version of the Italic font family. It's more similar to a sloped Roman sans-serif font.

has a purely vertical scale despite being a humanist sans-serif font

Regular *Italic*

Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.

Perfume and luxury goods

John McCain's presidential campaign

Optima is linked to memorials and veterans, being used in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.

It is thought that John McCain used Optima to allude to his veteran status.

Often used professionally

Looks good at large sizes where a certain 'style' is more important than pure functionality.

Good for anything that looks modern yet classic in appearance.

Mixes well with serif designs and many sans-serif designs as well.

Can be bland.

Faux classy quality.

Is criticized for not being either a Sans or Serif font, but appeals to the middle.

Some designers have stated that Optima suits everything, and pleases nobody.

Is somewhat associated with parking garages, hospitals, and hygiene products.

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