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# **Familiarity in history**

Since the creation of the first book, letterforms and typeface styles have moved in a variety of directions, controlled by different trends and by individuals with a desire to exploit or standardise lettering in various ways. An analysis of some of the public responses to these developments and their relation to time and place can help clarify the kind of influences that changes in typography can have on the present-day reader.

Familiarity follows from experience, so in order to experience an unfamiliar type as difficult, one must already be familiar with a certain style of lettering. Furthermore, type history suggests that clarity of letters is a concern mostly of stable societies. In unstable environments, the emphasis on aesthetic, social or ideological identity will be viewed as the most significant concern; as a result, legibility falls into the background.

### Reading and writing in the Middle Ages

Before the Western world settled on the standard forms of the Latin alphabet, the style of scripts differed widely from one another. Scripts not only varied in their overall appearance but were also occasionally based on rather dissimilar letterforms.

In the early Middle Ages, literacy was the domain of a small and exclusive group of people who had some connection with monasteries and palaces; it was not a part of life for the general public. An ordinary copy of the Bible would have cost a common labourer the equivalent of 15 years' earnings. The lack of writing skills among ordinary people is illustrated by the fact that a song about a defeat of Charlemagne in 778 was not written down until late in the 11th century. Reading and writing were not altogether easy tasks: A study of manuscripts from the Middle Ages shows that the same word tended to be spelled in different ways by different scribes, who would write down what they were hearing based on a phonetic approach<sup>1</sup>. Like the scribes, the reader was part of a culture dominated by verbal communication; a medieval reader usually gained new knowledge orally and would not be familiar with processing information from paper. In the course of understanding the meaning of a text, references were therefore more closely connected to whether one had heard the word before than to whether one had seen the word in writing. This practice was not made any easier by the fact that many manuscripts were hastily written and full of contractions and abbreviations, which did not

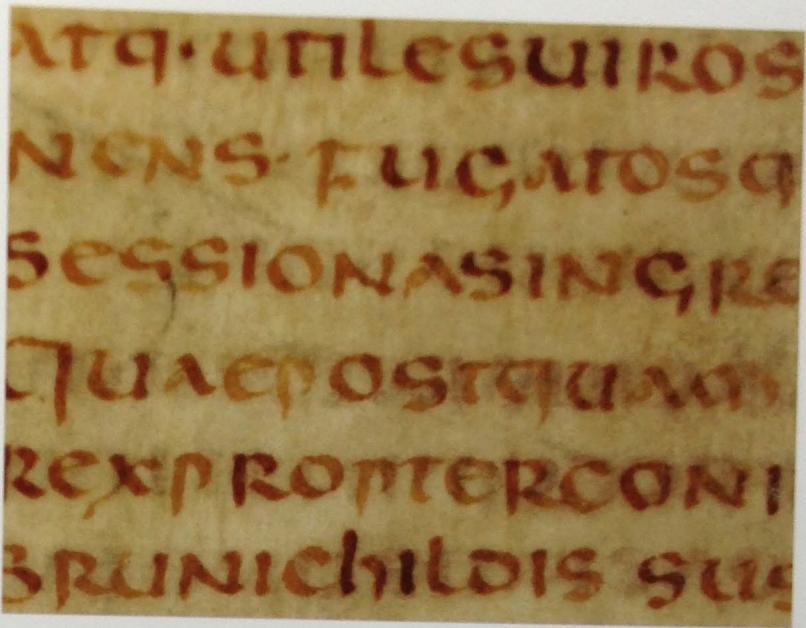


Figure 14.1. **Uncial manuscript.** An example of the Uncial book hand, one of the writing hands practiced in Europe in the Middle Ages. Illustrated with Book V of Gregory of Tours' History of the Francs.

# ALCHEMY PASSION UNKNOWN APOTHECARY {MAGICAL} THE HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND

Figure 14.2. **Typeface based on sources from the Middle Ages.** The typeface Alchemy by Jeremy Tankard is inspired by the old manuscripts of scribes twisting and stretching the letters in various forms to fit the page and enhance the word's shape.

→ **Figure 14.3 Evolving from the Carolingian Minuscule.** The typeface Pietro by Tobias Frere-Jones for The Font Bureau follows the ideas of the printer Aldus Manutius and his punchcutter Francesco Griffó of 1496, whose type evolved from the Carolingian minuscule and the Roman capitals.

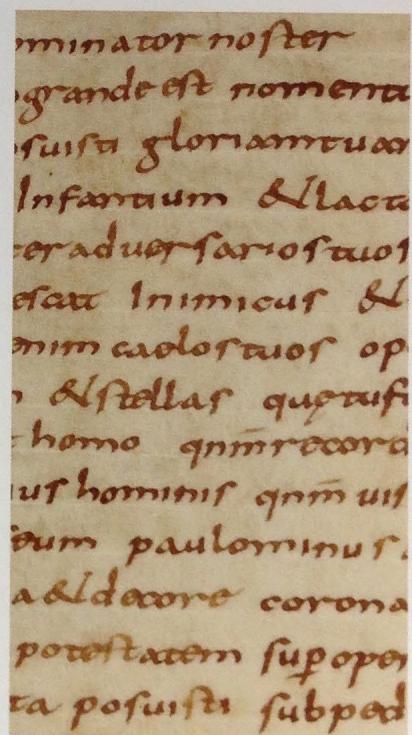
Almost everyone you meet knows more  
on some subject than you do.  
*Turn that side of him towards you and absorb all  
THE OPPORTUNITY IS PRESENT  
and endeavour to mentally remember the most*

exactly enhance the word recognition process. The norm among ancient readers was to read the text out loud, as evidenced in a note left by an 8th century scribe, explaining his own way of reading and writing: "Three fingers hold the pen, the eyes see the words, the tongue pronounces them as they are written and the body is cramped with leaning over the desk"<sup>2</sup>.

Today, we view the inability to read without moving one's lips as a lack of competence, associated with poor reading skills. Thus, an average reading session would have been a rather cumbersome affair. The ancient reader would not have been able to look past the book hand, and the lettering would not become transparent in the way most legible type designs do today; instead the reader would be far more aware of the actual act of reading, a feature that would have made reading quite a tiresome task.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, national scripts flourished in large parts of Europe, leading the illiterate Charlemagne, in 789, to commission and then standardise the Carolingian Minuscules (Fig. 14.4). In this change, some readers had to adjust to a more unfamiliar script style. His royal authority may have helped Charlemagne in the standardisation of a script for his empire, but the poor reading skills of his people might have helped the process along as well. If readers already feel uncomfortable with the script they normally read, shifting to another script does not pose a major disruption. The fact that the tradition was to apply different calligraphic hands side by side in texts for different purposes serves as further example that the writing style was never transparent; the typographic presentation was just as essential as the content. Thus, due to the limited number of readers and the fact that poor reading skills seem to have been the norm, legibility in this period appears to have been a somewhat secondary priority.

↓ **Figure 14.4. The Carolingian Minuscule.** In the late 8th century, Emperor Charlemagne decided to charge the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monk Alcuin with applying one single script as the standard in all manuscripts. The script that was eventually selected was based on existing written hands, and it became known as the Carolingian Minuscule – the style that later became the Roman lowercase alphabet. Illustrated with *Biblia Latina*, a French manuscript from the years of 800-820.



### Blackletter and Latin types

Blackletter types were initially used widely throughout Europe. The Italian rediscovery of the Carolingian Minuscule in the Renaissance did not immediately cause the rest of Europe to automatically follow the change from Gothic hands to Latin. However, the spirit of humanism eventually penetrated all areas within Western Europe, and so did the roman and italic scripts – a process that apparently was not without its difficulties. For instance, the Flemish punchcutter Joos Lambrecht encountered problems in 1539 when attempting to introduce roman types to the public, as he noted, "I am ashamed about the uncivilized attitude of so many people in our country, who are unable to read our low-Dutch or Flemish-tongue when printed in Roman type, saying that they do not recognize the letters, and that it seems Latin or Greek to them"<sup>3</sup>. This view was also evident in Germany many years later. In a letter written in 1882, Otto von Bismarck stated that it took him much longer to read a page set in Latin type than to read the same page set in blackletter<sup>4</sup>.

Blackletter typefaces remained popular alongside roman in the German-speaking part of Europe until the Second World War. However, the style was not altogether approved of by many 18th, 19th and 20th century intellectuals, and in 1904 the calligrapher Rudolf von Larisch published a pamphlet criticising the lack of differentiation and the excessive complexity of blackletter typefaces<sup>5</sup>. German-speaking scholars found that the dominant use of blackletter type created problems for them when working in international settings. Because the Fraktur style was unfamiliar to readers of other nationalities, German scholars flouted popular mass media conventions and printed their books and periodicals in Latin typefaces.

Figure 14.5. **Contemporary blackletter type**. In recent years, blackletter type has been coming back into vogue, with type designers reinventing the style. One such example is the typeface Fakir by Underware, a blackletter style that is legible to modern-day readers even in text sizes.

Beautiful printing is an educator, the same as is any art.  
**The thoughts of an author take on added value  
by reason of it. The mind is  
always receptive in proportion as it is  
helped to comprehend the real meaning of the writer.**

The wide application of Fraktur in Germany was challenged in 1941 when the National-Socialist Party suddenly declared that "the so-called Gothic script consists of Schwabacher-Jewish letters", and therefore the "Fuehrer has decided that Roman type from now on shall be designated as the normal type"<sup>16</sup>. The reason for such a strong declaration may stem from the difficulties the Nazis encountered in communicating their propaganda in the occupied nations with a type style unfamiliar to the reader. The fact that the new rules had nothing to do with Schwabacher, Fraktur or other Gothic styles being Jewish was revealed in a letter circulated ten days later. Here the Nazi Party decreed that all newspapers and periodicals were to be printed only in roman typefaces "because foreigners who can read the German language can hardly read this script"<sup>17</sup>.



↑ Figure 14.6. The monthly members' magazine of NSDAP. Examples of the change in type style before and after the Nazi Party declared blackletter types to be of Jewish origin, and that the Latin alphabet was the only style permissible.

◆ Figure 14.7. Sub-categories of blackletter.

**abita sicut ipa: neq; sum  
nus sit. Omnia aut que il**

**Textura:** Applied by Gutenberg in his Bible, Textura is a narrow bold style of a large x-height with almost no curves and made out of sharp angular lines. Illustrated with a facsimile of Gutenberg's type.

**Füge, du Arbeit, Hand in E  
Herzen zu Herzen!  
Siehe, zerpalten in tausend  
taumelt die Menschheit in e  
Kein gemeinsamer Glaube**

**Rotunda:** Originating in southern Europe, the shapes of Rotunda are generally rounder than what was seen in the North at the time. Illustrated with Rudolf Koch's Wallau.

**T**Vnd sollen einem iegliche  
derscheit wiehernach folget /  
vnd mögen darnach die ande

**Schwabacher:** Evolved from Textura, the Schwabacher style was influenced by the humanist hands of Italy. Illustrated with a facsimile of type by Johann Schoeffer, 1509.

**er Vertiefung im Kunstwerke v  
n und Ahnen, was wird oder ga  
lle Prophetie bezieht sich nur a**

**Fraktur:** From the mid 16th century until the early 20th century, Fraktur was a highly popular style in German-speaking countries. The 'o' is striking, with its vertical stem to the left and the round shape to the right. Illustrated with Walter Tiemann's Kleist-Fraktur.

**Beautiful fields and enticing mountain trails become wonderfully attractive to sportsmen and vacationists during late summer and early fall. Nature provides numerous recreations during this season.**

↑ Figure 14.8. **Contemporary blackletter type.** In the development of the typeface Herb, Tim Ahrens was interested in creating a new family that maintained the humane characteristic of the Fraktur types while being legible to modern-day readers.

According to the Swiss type designer Adrian Frutiger, the appearance of blackletter type makes no difference, as long as the reader is used to the style. Frutiger emphasises that he himself had no difficulties in learning to read using blackletter characters<sup>8</sup>. The idea that those familiar with reading blackletter typefaces perceive the characters effortlessly is further supported by three legibility studies that were carried out by different German researchers around 1920. All three studies found a small advantage for the Fraktur style compared to Latin style typefaces<sup>9</sup>. It does not seem that the extreme similarity in the vertical strokes of the characters was a serious issue for readers at that time. As long as they had experience with the style, it appears that they actually preferred the monotony of the Fraktur type to the more differentiated forms of the roman faces.

## The Civilité type

The now vanished Civilité type was first introduced in print by Robert Granjon in 1557. Today, the style is so rare that most people are unaware of its existence. Based on a Gothic handwriting style that was popular in France at the time, Civilité was cut to imitate handwriting as much as possible, with lots of ligatures and alternate letter shapes for the beginning, middle, and end of a word. Due to its close resemblance to contemporary handwriting styles, the Antwerp-based French printer Christophe Plantin was very fond of the type and recommended it as a model for children learning to write. The style further became popular for use in various official forms and other printed matters that sought the illusion of being handwritten.

Granjon's main intention with Civilité was to create a French national type style. In the preface to the book where he first introduced the style, Granjon declared: "When I call to mind how Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and even some barbarous nations took such care of their own language that they scrupled and thought it a shame to use letters found out by any people but their own, I could but blush for the heedlessness in this respect of our forebears"<sup>10</sup>. At the time, a strong sense of nationalism permeated the French printing community. That same year, printer Robert Estienne described how the French letters differ from the popular Italian Cancelleresca: "We have our peculiar forms for the letters, not far removed from those of the Italians; but they do not slope forward as theirs do, but are upright like the Roman and fatter. The bodies of our letters are short, and the heads and tails long"<sup>11</sup>. In a foreword to another book printed by Granjon in 1558, R. Constantinus stated that despite the novelty and strangeness of the Civilité type, he believed that the style would eventually become familiar to the reader, since it was such an eminent imitation of the writing hand<sup>12</sup>.

Granjon was so excited about his new printing type that he managed to convince the king to grant him a ten-year monopoly on his design. This patent eventually proved fairly worthless: A few years later, several other Parisian printers published work that was a close copy of Granjon's Civilité type.

With all this popularity, what happened to the type, and why did it not manage to become an everyday style? Type historians<sup>13</sup> have located 288 books printed in Civilité between the years of 1557 and 1600, the majority of which were from France and the Low Countries. In following years, the number of books in Civilité rapidly declined. The style finally met its defeat in the years between 1851 and 1874, a period for which the historians have only located eight books printed in the style.

Several factors probably played a role in the decline of Civilité. The fact that the French were so busy declaring it a 'national' type might not have helped in the international arena. Furthermore, at the time the Cancelleresca italic style was already firmly established in the reader's mind. The cursive style in book printing was well known by this point, and the Civilité type was too late in the race. While both roman and italic styles managed to make the transition from imitated script hands to printing types on their own merits, the Civilité type never succeeded in doing so. This notion is further supported by the fact that a similar style in England was called 'Secretary', in reference to the secretarial writing hand. Since the style of writing changes over time, the Civilité type was vulnerable. When the particular writing style became obsolete, so did the printing type of Civilité.

↓ Figure 14.9. **OpenType Civilité**. In the extensive Civilité revival by the foundry P22 – including six different styles based on the historic collection of the Enschedé foundry – the user can choose between letter variations that stay true to the historical origin and modern versions of a more familiar skeleton.

form is more than a convention,  
more than a precept, more than a practice; it is  
the mold in which ideas are most  
perfectly cast; it is not only a source of delight to the  
reader or the beholder,  
but it is invaluable discipline to the thinker,  
to the poet, to the painter, to the  
sculptor; it compels him to see, think, and express himself clearly.

## John Baskerville and his peers

The story of John Baskerville is an oft-cited historical reference in support of the power of the familiarity effect. Zuzana Licko, who designed the typeface Mrs Eaves (Fig. 7.7) as a free interpretation of Baskerville's types, said, "When selecting a typeface for revival, I recalled reading in various sources that Baskerville's work was severely criticized by his peers and critics throughout his lifetime and after. From personal experience, I could sympathize"<sup>14</sup>. Given that Baskerville's ink was darker in colour, the paper brighter and the type sharper than what was produced by his contemporaries, the argument goes that readers were not accustomed to the look and therefore disapproved of a typeface that is now considered one of the most legible types ever produced.

Although Baskerville's work did receive mixed reviews, it is unlikely that he was disliked quite as much as some writers have suggested. One of Baskerville's contemporary admirers was the famous French punchcutter Pierre Simon Fournier, who complimented Baskerville's type for being cut with much spirit and constituting real masterpieces<sup>15</sup>. In a letter to Fournier, the German typographer Breitkopf explained how a correspondent of his had sent him various specimens from England, and that among them was a production from "an eccentric amateur near London, in a new letter, good in both roman and italic—far superior to the usual English types [...] One may say that the whole book is a technical masterpiece"<sup>16</sup>.

Baskerville himself was highly aware of this recognition, as he wrote in a preface to his second published book: "After having spent many years, and not a little of my fortune in my endeavours to advance this art, I must own it gives me great Satisfaction, to find that my Edition of Virgil has been so favourably received"<sup>17</sup>. On several occasions over the years, Baskerville emphasised in letters that he had obtained "the reputation of excelling in the most useful art known to mankind"<sup>18</sup>.

Most of the criticism of Baskerville came from his compatriots. In a book presenting all English foundries, which was written by one of Baskerville's English contemporaries, he received the following brief mention: "Mr Baskerville of Birmingham, that enterprising place, made some attempts at letter-cutting, but desisted and with good reason. [...] indeed he can hardly claim a place amongst letter-cutters. His typographical excellence lay more in trim glossy paper to dim the sight"<sup>19</sup>.

Another anecdote often referred to in connection with Baskerville's type is found in a letter, written to Baskerville in 1760 by the prominent American politician Benjamin Franklin, who was also a printer. In the letter, Franklin describes

TITYRE, tu patulæ recubans sub tegmine fagi  
Silvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena:  
Nos patriæ fines, et dulcia linquimus arva;  
Nos patriam fugimus: tu, Tityre, latus in umbra  
Formosam resonare doces Amaryllida filvas.

T. O Melibœe, Deus nobis hæc otia fecit:  
Namque erit illi mihi semper Deus: illius aram  
Sæpe tener nostris ab ovibus imbuet agnus.  
Ille meas errare boves, tu cernis, et ipsum  
Ludere, quæ vellem, calamo permisit agresti.

M. Non equidem in video; miror magis: undique to  
Usque adeo turbatur agris. en ipse capellas

a conversation he had with a gentleman: "he said you would be Means of blinding all the Readers in the Nation; for the Strokes of your Letters, being too thin and narrow, hurt the Eye, and he could never read a Line of them without Pain"<sup>20</sup>. However, Franklin goes on to elaborate how he later tricked the gentleman by showing him one of Caslon's specimens as if it were the work of Baskerville, and how the gentleman did not spot the difference.

It is possible that the antipathy towards Baskerville had more to do with trade jealousy from London than with his work as such. The notion of the industrial boomtown of Birmingham producing elegant printing was either absurd or, if true, profoundly disturbing. Another likely source of jealousy is the fact that Baskerville started out as an amateur. He was a moneyed outsider who did not need to make a profit to survive, and who could therefore allow himself to spend the extra time necessary to refine his prints, a luxury that was not permitted to his competitors. Critical views, such as those represented above, were therefore more closely related to his rivals' perception of him as a threat than to the quality of his typefaces.

↑ Figure 14.10. John Baskerville's book type. The 1757 copy of Publili Virgilii Maronis Bucolica Georgica et ae neis demonstrates the high-quality print that Baskerville had been working so hard to achieve.

## Didone fonts and the French Revolution

Although much had changed in arts and politics in the years between Baskerville's work and the later Didone styles by Bodoni in Italy and the Didots in France, it is interesting that the Didone typefounders did not meet the same level of objection from their contemporaries, not even when they moved their designs much further toward the extremes than Baskerville ever did.

The differences in the reception of the works of Baskerville and Bodoni are quite remarkable. Daniel Updike sums up Bodoni's career as follows: "He was appointed printer to Carlos III of Spain; he received a pension from his son, Carlos IV; he corresponded with Franklin; he was complimented by the Pope; the city of Parma struck a medal in his honour; he obtained a medal for his work at Paris; he received a pension from the Viceroy of Italy; Napoleon gave him another and a larger one, and in short he was a great personage"<sup>21</sup>.

Although generally popular, the Didots did experience some resentment toward their typefaces. Citizen Sobre explained the reason for his own opposition in 1800, as he referred to a test carried out several years before by Etienne Anisson-Duperron, director of the Imprimerie Royale<sup>22</sup>. In this test,

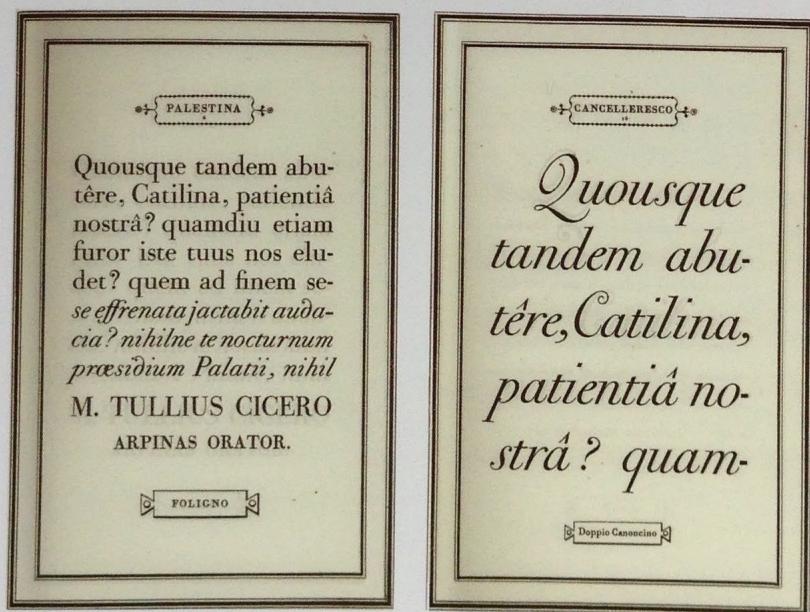


Figure 14.11. **Bodoni type.** Specimens from Bodoni's book *Manuale Tipografico* of 1818.

# LA MANDRAGORE.

NOUVELLE TIRÉE DE MACHIAVEL.

Au présent conte on verra la sottise  
D'un Florentin. Il avoit femme prise  
Honnête et sage, autant qu'il est besoin,  
Jeune pourtant, du reste toute belle :  
Et n'eût-on cru de jouissance telle  
Dans le pays, ni même encor plus loin.  
Chacun l'aimoit, chacun la jugeoit digne

↑ Figure 14.12 Didot type. From the book *Contes et Nouvelles en Vers*, printed by the elder Pierre Didot in 1795.

Anisson applied a distance study comparing a page set in a Garamond face with another in a Didot and found the Garamond to be legible at several stages after the Didot could no longer be read. This made Anisson refuse to install the new Didot typefaces in the state printing office. However, after the Revolution, it was Anisson and not the type that perished. Anisson was guillotined, and the Didots took over his printing office in the Louvre.

Despite disapproval from the director of the state printing office, the Didot types were quite popular at the time. One reason for this might be the success of the Didot point system. In 1783, François Ambroise Didot refined the system of comparative body sizes. It appears that the spread of the system among printers enhanced the superiority of the Didot fonts over others that were not based on the same standard.

hamburgefontsiv  
hamburgefontsiv

↑ Figure 14.13. **The Didot tradition today.**  
The typeface Didot Display by Bill Troop  
of Canada Type.

→ Figure 14.14. **The Didot tradition today.**  
Vogue Floral and Vogue Paris by Henrik  
Kubel are revivals of typefaces located in  
the Vogue archives.

Vogue Floral  
ROSES & BUTTERFLIES  
Paris Luxury

Vogue Paris  
\*  
Autumn  
MILAN GLAMOUR

# Politeness may be defined as a true Kindness. It is more a matter of the heart than of established precedent.

The lack of any noteworthy opposition to the Didone typefaces should also be viewed in the context of prevailing contemporary trends. The growing interest in antiquity that occurred around 1800 had a major impact on the development of typefaces. Printers were looking for designs that symbolised the greatness of the ancient monuments; furthermore, in post-revolutionary France, with its atmosphere of change, the novelty of Didot typefaces became a symbol of the new enlightenment due to their mathematical structure and serious air.

The lack of disapproval of Bodoni's work in Italy is likely related to the fact that most of his work was rather expensive and aimed at serious bibliophiles. It appears that many of his books served more as collectors' items than as actual, popular reading material; this notion is supported by Bodoni's rather careless approach to proofreading. He seems to have been more interested in the overall appearance of the page than in the actual reading matter. Bodoni was not interested in communicating to the masses; he was a court printer, and his work was aimed at the elite. Thus, because Bodoni chose an audience that was fascinated with the ability to create fine hairlines and clear printing quality, his typefaces were held in high regard – although a later, often voiced opinion would find that the high contrast and vertical emphasis made for poor legibility.

↑ Figure 14.15. A contemporary Didone style. As a tribute to Gambattista Bodoni and his wife, PampaType takes the Didone style to the most extreme in this modern-day display typeface, Margarita, in an attempt to make a sensual letterform out of the archetypical 'caricature' side of the modern style.



◀ Figure 14.16. **Didone type today.** The typeface Carmen by Andreu Baldu is a modern interpretation of the 1830s Spanish take on the Didone tradition.

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