

Character Studies

by Paul Shaw & Stephen Coles

From 2005 until the end of 2010, I wrote the Hot Type column for Print. Early this year, the magazine asked me to make room for Stephen Coles. We called our joint column Stereotype. But we never got a chance to properly introduce ourselves—to each other or to readers.

We are seemingly opposites, though we have a lot in common. (How else could we end up writing a column in tandem?) I am based in New York; Stephen lives in San Francisco. I am in my mid-50s, while Stephen is closer to 30. Stephen is computer- and web-savvy. I still use a landline and haven't owned a watch since 1977. I was banned from the annual TypeCon competitions for winning too often, usually barely besting Stephen. We met at TypeCon, and the first thing Stephen said to me was, "I want your job." He meant Hot Type. Well, he didn't get it. Instead, he got one half of Stereotype. —Paul Shaw

Stephen: Why did you start drawing letters?

Paul: Because I discovered I couldn't draw trees. I found the third dimension of branches, even in wintertime, too difficult. Two-dimensional letters were easier to grasp. I must have been about eight years old.

Stephen: How did you get involved with type?

Paul: I first became interested in type—as opposed to lettering or calligraphy—when I began doing design work to pay for graduate school, circa 1980. Unaware that it was the dawn of the digital age, I decided to learn about foundry type and Linotype by ordering it for my offset jobs. I added the galleys to my mechanicals in the same way I added phototype PMTs. My preferred typesetter was Al Siegel, of Crosby Typographers in Soho.

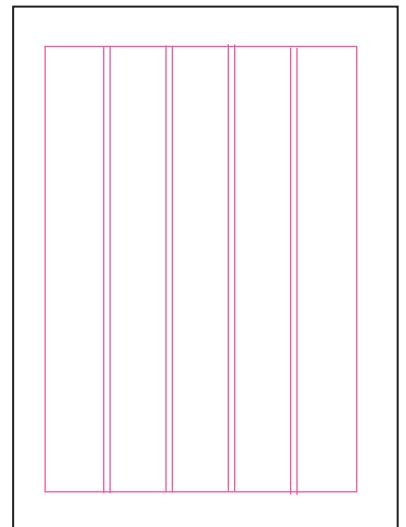
Stephen: For me, it was when I met my first Mac. It was the ability to choose and use fonts that opened my mind to the world of typography. Later, I explored this in a practical context when I worked as a paginator at my college newspaper.

The first typefaces that excited me were the more showy system fonts that came with that Mac, San Francisco and Athens. They drew my attention to variety in type. Of course, these aren't favorites anymore, but I love them like an old car.

What was the first typeface you fell in love with?

p1:

design magazine
mid-upper level education
higher taste level
interview format
introduce pictures to create
interest
5 columns 1p3 gutter
49x60p page
inside margin 5p
outside margin 4p
top and bottom 4p



Paul: I actually set type before I discovered it. In the summer of 1978, I worked for George Abrams Alphabets, a type house specializing in advertising headlines. Headlines were set by photographing photostats of type specimens and cutting up the letters, arranging and spacing them, and then using rubber cement to glue them down. The final result was rephotographed to create a clean photostat or repro proof for the ad agency. At the time, I thought of this as being little different from calligraphy or lettering for reproduction. It was not type in the historical sense. And although I discovered Jessenschrift, Carolus, and (pirated) Hunt Roman during that brief job, the typeface that I really fell in love with was Trump Medieval by Georg Trump. It is classic and contemporary at the same time.

But as much as I liked Trump Medieval, the first type designer I admired was Hermann Zapf, whose typefaces—especially Palatino, Michelangelo, Sistina, Hunt Roman, and, most of all, Optima—seemed to effortlessly integrate calligraphy. I still respect Zapf's work, but there are other type designers I prefer today. Palatino was brilliant for its time, but it is too ubiquitous today and no longer the same design as the metal face issued by Stempel. Optima, although timeless, is difficult to use well.

Who is your favorite type designer or typographic hero?

Stephen: I read Erik Spiekermann's *Stop Stealing Sheep* in college. The ease with which he related typography to everyday concepts played a big part in my early type education. Fifteen years later, after seeing him present over a dozen times and having the good fortune to be employed by him, I'm still impressed by his ability to talk about type. We need more advocates like Spiekermann to spark the minds of young designers. An interest in typography doesn't come as easily as the more graphical parts of design.

Paul: The book that made me finally understand the nuances of typography was Spiekermann's *Rhyme and Reason: A Typographic Novel*, the predecessor to *Stop Stealing Sheep*. His declaration that there were no absolute rules in typography, only a set of interrelated factors (or, as I call them, parameters), made complete sense and simplified typography for me. And he explained everything with a welcome dose of humor. Spiekermann has always managed to be serious without being deadly serious.

Since we are talking about typography now, what typographic faux pas bothers you the most?

Stephen: Flipped apostrophes and missed kerns always itch, but the less obvi-

ous—yet more damaging—mistake is being “safe” with typeface choices, using a font simply because one is familiar with it or saw someone else use it. This contributes to a typographic homogeneity that infects our world despite the increasing number of good typefaces available.

Paul: One reason for playing it safe is the seemingly high cost of fonts. I say “seemingly” because both you and I know that in the history of printing, type has never been cheaper. But if you were a poor design student and only had \$500 to spend on fonts, what would you buy?

Stephen: Students aren’t the only ones who cannot afford fonts. My income barely supports it, but I try to buy myself two or three families every year. The last was Fakt, a new OurType release by Thomas Thiemich with a big bundle of alternates that transforms it from a grot like Akzidenz to a neogrot like Helvetica, to an even more contemporary sans with “schoolbook” forms. It’s like three fairly neutral typefaces in one. This kind of versatility is a good option for a cash-strapped student.

What about you? How would you spend the big bucks Print pays us?

Paul: I would not buy entire families but a range of typefaces that solve as many different design situations as possible and work with one another. That said, putting such a strategy into practice is difficult, especially since it runs counter to the bundling pricing of several foundries. Coupled with the \$500 budget, this effectively rules out fonts from such excellent foundries as Hoefer & Frere-Jones, the Enschedé Font Foundry, the Dutch Type Library, OurType, and the Feliciano Type Foundry. I would play it safer than you because that would allow me to buy more fonts. I would start with Trump Medieval (Roman, Italic, Roman SCOSF, Italic SCOSF), PMN Caecilia Pro (Roman 55, Italic 56), Frutiger (45, 65), FF Scala Pro (Roman, Italic), and Minion Pro (Regular, Display, Italic, Italic Display). That is \$510 at current prices. The money goes fast, doesn’t it?

Why don’t we end our joint interview with a less weighty typographic question. What is your favorite culinary use of letters?

Stephen: Birthday cakes. Right now, across America, people are picking up a pastry bag and making letters with a pretty difficult writing tool. The words “Happy Birthday” offer a lot of stylistic opportunities, and with homemade piping we get to see our friends and family become unwitting lettering artists.

Paul: Mine is Dutch Christmas chocolate letters, slab serif letters that are designed to be of equal weight, which means that the narrow I and the wide W have to occupy the same volume. I used to get a capital S as a gift from Karina Meister. I always had a hard time getting up the courage to bite off a serif.

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