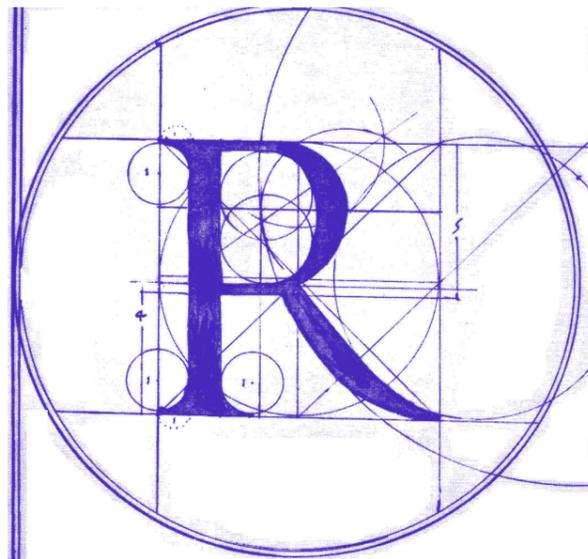


TYPE DESIGN

Early manuscripts and carved inscriptions show that lettering design was studied in ancient times. When printing started, the letters used copied hand-written styles very closely, partly because these were established successful shapes, but also because at the time, novelty in design was more likely to jar than to be seen as interesting. However, the increase in the volume of reading matter, and the number of those able to read as a result of printing spread, made improvements in legibility more important, and type design's evolution was shaped accordingly. For example, the 'Roman' style was soon generally adopted in preference to 'Black Letter' because the letter-shapes were more distinct; while Black Letter's thick verticals in every letter gave a unity to the overall appearance, they masked the smaller differences between the letters.

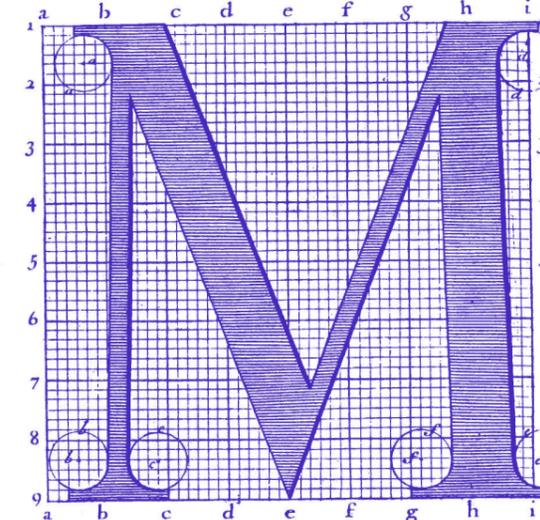
Until mechanisation, types were produced by hand-cutting at actual size, steel punches used to stamp the letter-shapes into brass matrices to cast the type.

This was a skilled and incredibly precise job, for a typical text letter was only about 3-4mm high; imagine cutting a letter on the plastic end of a ball-point pen, actually rather larger than most type, and you can get some idea of the problem. When you realise that the subtleties in type design lie not



Letter design by Palatino from the 1550s

just in cutting such punches, but in getting their proportions of thicks & thins, heights and widths, etc to match through an alphabet, you begin to realise the technical skill involved, quite apart from the artistic aspect that discussions on lettering design focus on. The type designer had to consider legibility, and technical requirements such as allowing for the ink spreading outside the actual



A design from 1692 for the French Academy of Science

metal letter as printed.

There have been many approaches to type design, and in the last century, much research on legibility to try to improve letter shapes which have given many valuable insights, but in the end it seems that the best designs have usually come from instinctive

craftsmen. As far back as Dürer in the 1400s, artists were trying to design letters by geometry, but few geometric designs have proved successful, other than in a decorative sense.

The letter designer has to try to give his characters a unity of some sort, so that no one jars and interrupts the reader's focus on the text, and yet has to ensure that each character is distinct to enable fast recognition. Modern research has shown that when reading text at reasonable speed, the eye recognises overall word shapes rather than stopping to study each character. This indicates that the spacing of the characters too influences legibility, as letters placed too far apart would lose cohesion in a word.

Type design has had periods of rapid change, as well as ones of stability. These have usually been for external reasons, such as a technical advance, or a social change. The invention of the iron press made large bold letters printable, and brought a rush of such designs in the early nineteenth century. Later, lithography (which allowed reproduction of fine detail from drawings more easily, and lettering specially drawn for a job by an artist) led to a rash of overblown overelaborate lettering in metal in competition. The arrival of composition casters meant that the letter designs available from them became dominant, and Monotype in particular was both influential and creative in its attempts to provide the best designs, often reviving & revising classic old styles.