

Em Bifurcated Bodoni - 'the missing link'

by Jon Melton

Bifurcated Bodoni is the culmination of a series of contextually and historically inspired faces produced as part of a masters degree in typographic design at the Cambridge School of Art. The intention for the combined research was to define an age of typeface development and exuberance that has only recently come to be respected. The nineteenth century saw proliferation and innovation married to unsurpassed craftsmanship but is often devalued as an era of misguided, undirected folly within typographic evolution. Through practice based and more traditional research methodology certain pivotal stages of type development within this period were revisited in order to establish the drivers and preoccupations of the Victorian foundries, in an attempt to evoke or even forward the art of the ornamented display letterform within contemporary typography today.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the merits of historical research within type design - not as a vehicle for type face revivalism, but as a means to discovery of passed practices or forgotten developments, and to seek new opportunities to further typographic evolution and perhaps more importantly reawaken excellence within practice.

The notional font foundry - 'Em foundry' was established as a platform for practice research - with its own ideology: to focus upon pivotal moments in (principally 18th and 19th century, through to the early 20th century) type evolution in an attempt to establish missed opportunities, forgotten types and ultimately the true course of typographic history. Because it is purely speculative, non-commercial and seeks to serve type development it has no fixed identity and utilises changing logotypes and imprints to signify typographic 'time-travel'.

The first font design was inspired by a 1960s sugar sack from Cuba, it was featured in the recent issue of Ultrabold unfortunately with limited supporting explanation. The 'Revolts' of Cuban and its partner face Russian, reflect the *Rationalist* ideologies of the 20th century that were in stark and reactive opposition to the Victorian values that had gone before.

The next family of designs revisited the influence of the 18th century metal engravers and the part they played in popularising decorative typography within a growing industrial and increasingly commercial society. Essentially a classically inspired and evolved *Vernacular* form, at a 'fat' display weight. It has the flexibility to accommodate the prevalent decorative elements of its period: open, with fletching or with applied ornaments. The Types currently function as sets of initials, and as such are far from complete fonts, but remain an attempt to create a family that serves to re-establish the traditional use of drop initial characters within bookwork.

These two projects effectively marked the research boundaries - of the beginning and end of Victorian type design, and ultimately led to questions regarding the apparent abrupt end to the classically inspired rationalist approach to type design.

The *modern* or *didone* evolution appears to stop, (as a display type at least); now 'overweight' it is abandoned in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in favour for more-and-more highly individualised display faces - the product of: the 'jobbing' print trade and the demands of growing commercial clientele. Rationalist classical ideology is seemingly abandoned.

This rationalisation began in earnest with the Renaissance and a preoccupation with scientific order; establishes itself as a classical thing of beauty with the Romain de Roy; and arrives with purity and simplicity itself as Didot's majuscule. The reason often sighted for its demise - is the letterforms *transition*, its fine line serif characteristic, and its poor reproduction within a fast, and more competitive (cheaper) printing industry.

There is evidence of course of innovations within the *rationalist modern* types, but these it seems are largely ignored - presumably because they don't reflect the type historians accepted and established historical time-line. Jean François Porchez's: Ambroise was informed by some rather strange *late didot* adaptations to the lowercase *g*, *y*, the *&*, and to some extent both *kK*s. These letterform designs were conceived circa 1830 and are likely derivatives created by the Didot's punch cutter Vibert. Pochez quickly realised that these unusual or even unique forms were a deliberate and logical innovation within the *rationalist moderns* evolution - in order to maintain the letterforms natural verticality. Thus the unearthing of these forms delivers a forgotten rationale and a design methodology that can be applied by today's type designers.

It is of course highly unlikely that the *Didones* use at larger display sizes fell from grace overnight and we know that its setting as a bookface continued despite the re-establishment of the *Elzevir* model later in the century. But how did we travel from the ever fattened display types to the myriad of ostentatious wonders produced by the 1850s? What influences and letterform designs led to the movable feast of the *Tuscan* with its many guises? Surely the respected *Didones* had an influence or even a part to play within the immense display face developments of the mid-victorian period.

It was the very subtle curl to the serif of the Bodoni majuscule from the 1818 specimen that captured *Ems* attention and creative imagination as being a plausible evolutionary link. Was it merely an Italian vernacular trait - informed by the writing masters hand such as Giovanni Francesco Cresci c.1570? Or was this type pointing a way forward and a desire for more flamboyant and individually distinct letterforms? Probably the former would turn out to be true, but not as interesting a hypothesis.

The development of Bifurcated Bodoni retraced this time frame utilising the influences and prevalent design style of the period. That of a romanticised gothic obsession - in order to recreate a face that *may* have existed on the drawing board of a nineteenth century founder, but is now lost in time. Could a more decorative *modern* have existed that influenced the development of the type style that has become synonymous with the Victorian age - the *Tuscan*? Or was there a missed opportunity for subtle innovation whilst retaining (a functional) classically inspired *Didone* form?

Bifurcated Bodoni therefore sets out to be the missing link between classical rationalism and victorian eclectic exuberance. Therefore it retains its Roman origins but tentatively explores subtle *tuscan* modelling and an increasing popularity and dominance for the gothic revival.

The types development:

Early digital experiments in slowly extending and exaggerating a bifurcating line serif led to a letterform that acquired a distinctive gothic quality. As it developed it became deliberately informed by gothic architecture, and more importantly the Victorian preoccupation with *Gothic Revival*. Which fittingly became highly fashionable by the 1840s and remained popular, yet evolving in one form or another, for the rest of the 19th century. Odder influences, such as bifurcated wrought iron tiebars were considered along with pre-existing letterform models such as the inscriptions of Filocalus. Whose letterforms are considered the earliest bifurcating Roman and as such, a ready model for Bodoni and his peers to revive. It was logical and fitting that Bodoni's majuscule was the starting point for the fonts development.

Bifurcated Bodoni was ultimately destined to reflect the *Romanesque* both in architecture and typographic context - where classical line meets ecclesiastical tracery; and at the cusp (or flared median) a Tuscan is born.

The final letterform not surprisingly bares similarities via its approach and methodology to the fonts of others:

Jan van Krimpen's initials for the Curwen Press explore the potential for a classical *Tuscan* but creates a face that reflects an early 20th century idiom. Both *Alchemy* by Jeramy Tankard and *Morpheus* designed by Eric Oehler explore medieval influences and gothicisation. And of course Miles Newlyn's highly experimental letterform *Missionary* that utilises 18th century Fournier and Rosart inspired foliate (or acanthus) ornaments married to a kind of Venitian Gothic. Gabor Kothay's *Aquamarine* for PSY/OPS creates a font family inspired by the letter art of Nicholas Kis which includes a fully formed *Tuscan*.

Ems Bifurcated Bodoni has a long way to go before it can become a fully versatile and functioning Font. But it is evolving - with the tentative introduction of Two Line Titling, Decorated Initials and the re-application of *Factotums* (or is it *Factotae*) - within its family.

To conclude...

Historical inspiration within practice has, by some, been dismissed as mere type revivalism, and as such makes little contribution to the evolution of contemporary typography. Bifurcated Bodoni hopefully demonstrates that the past can offer insight and opportunities to push the practice of type design forward and offer some new welcome surprises.