

An exclusive Linotype Font Feature

Now online – a nonlinear history of sans serifs by Adrian Frutiger

Bad Homburg, September 8th, 2004. How closely has the simplification of letter shapes over the last centuries reflected the changing times? Are serifs merely an unnecessary encumbrance from the past soon to be phased out for good? Or do they really improve the overall legibility of a typeface? These questions and many more are investigated in a fascinating text by the world-famous type designer Adrian Frutiger. Strictly speaking, this is the history of sans serif type, but in reality there is so much more to be discovered. Supported by a wealth of illustrations and pictures, comparisons are drawn to everything from architecture and automobile styles to clothing and popular music, documenting in a refreshing and remarkably enlightening way the evolution of type design over the centuries – and especially in recent decades, as traditional forms of typesetting have become more or less obsolete. Can the human eye keep up with these changes in technology and fashion? Discover the bigger picture behind the development of the sans serifs – an exclusive Linotype Feature in the Font Lounge at <www.linotype.com>.

Much has been written about the evolution of type – from the stone tablets of ancient history to the first printing presses of the Renaissance. But what about the last 500 years, when the basic forms of letters have remained more or less unchanged? Master type designer Adrian Frutiger – who has brought us such modern classics as Univers, Avenir and, naturally, Frutiger – takes us on an exciting journey, introducing us to myriad type variations which have emerged over the past few centuries. Spanning such a whirlwind of styles and ages, Frutiger stimulates a number of surprising reflections. For instance, he traces the origin of sans serif type back to the dawn of the 19th century, when, driven by the industrial revolution, a general "rationalization" in society was beginning to take place. Instead of simply describing the initial public resistance to these typefaces, Frutiger demonstrates in a few simple illustrations of lines and crosses, the

emotional impact it has on a viewer when demarcations and stabilizing elements are removed. The reader is thereby not only invited to slip inside the psyche of another age, but also to reflect on the wide-reaching implications brought about by the loss of serifs in general.

Besides these fascinating excursions into what might be called the metaphysics of typography, Frutiger also delivers plenty of hard facts. In what he pens "the sans serif wave", the key fonts which emerged throughout the 20th century are analyzed not as separate entities, but in their wider historical and often political context. At the same time, essential formal aspects are also discussed, like the gray line – or the perception of typography as a graphic element – and the discovery of the grid, a breakthrough in type design inspired by the use of straw mats for planning in Japanese architecture. In turn, these new experiments and evolving methodology allowed for more in-depth speculation on such things as the science behind what readers consider "normal", the optimal construction of an italic and the visual rhythm of letter spacing. But it wasn't until computers appeared on the scene that "the sans serif wave" finally found its shore.

In brief, Adrian Frutiger's discourse into the history of sans serifs is a "must read" for all typography professionals. Spanning several centuries and encompassing many unexpected aspects of society, his approach may seem somewhat nonlinear at times, but the wealth of information and fascinating insights make the journey all the more worthwhile, not to mention a rewarding and enthralling read.

At the end of the text, for comparison, there is even a compilation of the most common sans serif fonts available today. Just drop by the Font Lounge on the Linotype website at www.linotype.com and click into the Font Feature area. Your understanding of type will never be the same again.

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