Introducing “Tribute” — a family of 8 fonts by Frank Heine, released by Emigre Fonts (2003)

Introductory Booklet

Contents →
I've always had a desire to design a typeface based on a Renaissance Antiqua.¹

There are two reasons.

First, the Renaissance Antiqua can be considered the prototype for most of today’s typefaces. It already provided a formal maturity at the end of the 15th century, with an exceptional level of differentiation between single characters, offering good legibility.

Second, I am particularly attracted to its archaic feel, especially with settings in smaller design sizes (Nonpareil through Bourgeois). It is rougher with less filigree than the types of the following centuries, thus exhibiting much of the cruder craftsmanship of the early printing processes.

To a certain extent the early Renaissance Antiqua congenially reflects the contradictions of its time; the vanishing Middle Ages versus Humanism, and the urge for cognizance or Inquisition versus Reformation.
François Guyot’s types were not as influential as those of his elders, Griffo or Garamond. There were many inconsistencies not usually seen in this class of typefaces. Some of the characters have an undefined or unusual feel, such as the N, the asymmetrical M, the abrupt cut of the tail of the y, or the treatments of the accents and brackets. (NMxy) èee

Furthermore, the available size on the original print from which I worked did not reveal much detail. For instance, no clear examples were apparent regarding the logic of serifs or stroke endings. In this respect the source left enough room for individual decisions. Most of these detail decisions — such as how far the character stays within the historical attributes, or how far it edges away from them — were relatively easy to arrive at, since the basic forms of a Renaissance Antiqua are quite familiar to me. As I was drawing each letter directly in Fontographer 3.5, I made these decisions quite intuitively.

Due to my preference for smaller design sizes, Tribute was equipped with a robust stroke width and decreased contrast between thin and bold strokes. This ensures the needed heavy text “color” and equalibility that is necessary for good legibility at small sizes. Despite my fondness for typefaces originating from about 1480 to 1560, there was the nagging question about the sense and purpose of adapting a historical model for today’s digital techniques. There are already many, partially well designed, revivals available. But many of these solutions (the digital version of Stem-

1 The Renaissance Antiqua is based upon a misunderstanding. Early Italian Humanists rediscovering the Greek and Roman Antiqua interpreted the Carolingian Minuscule (which came 700 years later) as Roman handwriting and imitated its style. The Humanist handwriting became the source for the first (Venetian) Renaissance Antiqua cut in Italy by Sweeneyheim and Pannartz (in Subiaco near Rome, 1465). This typeface still shows some characteristics of Gothic types. But only a few years later, Nicholas Jenson created his elaborated types in Venice in 1470, which became the model for many successive punchescutters and typeface designers until today. Another interesting aspect of the Renaissance Antiqua is that it is the first typeface consisting of two alphabets: capital and lowercase letters. While the lowercase letters were modeled after the Humanist handwriting, the capital letters were taken from Roman inscriptions such as on the Trajan Column in Rome.

2 The German Industry Norm (DIN) differentiates between Venetian and French Renaissance Antiqua. Within the United States the terms French Aldine or Aldine Roman may sound more familiar. The typical characteristics of a French Renaissance Antiqua/French Aldine are shown in the Tribute letters below:

From top to bottom: Scan of Guyot’s 1544 Double Pica Roman (scaled 50%); detail of the original model (scaled 270%); interpretation of serifs (H, h, k) and stroke endings (e, l, k).

The nagging question...
On the one hand, a type designer who makes a serious effort to acknowledge certain sources of inspiration opens himself or herself to criticism concerning the ethics of appropriating the work of another. On the other hand, a type designer who fails to cite sources, or, worse, makes a conscious effort to avoid acknowledging sources, leaves himself or herself open to charges of impropriety. One may ask, “Is there no safe and sound route these days?” I believe there is. In fact, I think there are several good roads. To understand the intrinsic differences between plagiarism (normally regarded as a bad thing) and preservation (normally regarded as a good thing), we should look at various means by which newer typefaces are derived from older ones. There are indeed many approaches. Outlining them can be helpful in considering the practices surrounding revivalism in general. The integrity of a typeface revival depends not solely on what the designer does to create a workable version of an old idea; it also depends on what the designer, or the designer’s copywriter or publicist, has to say about the genesis of the design. If ad copy, or whatever prose is written to launch a typeface, is inaccurate or misleading, there might be grounds for a dispute. In contrast, if the story behind the designer’s effort stands up to the scrutiny of type historians and scholars, a revival has a far better chance of being considered a welcome addition to the world of revivals—not so much for being a “servant” to a given typographic model as for bearing a relationship to its history. Historians regard type history in ways that type designers and type critics seldom do. This theme was articulated in a keynote address at the 1992 conference of the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI) in Rome by Paul F. Gesell, historian and curator of a type-history collection at The Newberry Library, in Chicago.

In his talk, Gehl noted that type experts (including some effective and influential type promoters, I should add), have been known to give imprecise descriptions and fabricate misinformation. Monotype’s introduction in 1920 of a typeface series known as "Bembo," based on the first roman type of Aldus Manutius, circa 1495, was cited by Gehl as an opportunity for Stanley Morison, the typographical advisor to Monotype, to inaccurately characterize Bembo, as he did with other historically-based typefaces by Monotype in the 1920s. Morison, according to Gehl, “...insisted upon calling his historical reconstructions of the 1920s ‘recuttings’ of early type, when in fact most of them were beautiful new types inspired by handsome old ones.” This observation strikes a familiar chord among type reviewers. Accuracy often hinges on semantics, so semantics are important.

It seems that the term “recutting” could be accurately applied to a faithful recreation, if it were cut by hand and cast in metal, but that is not exactly what has been done in the process of creating usable facsimiles of centuries-old type. To do a “recutting” in the most literal sense of the word would ostensibly require a cutter of type to work in the same manner, and with the same materials, as the originator. The term “recutting” has come into modern usage partly by way of inheritance and partly by way of convenience. There is no real cutting being done by makers of digital typefaces; namely, faces meant to be fully accepted as recreations of former glories. In the digital medium, a medium without the physicality of sculpture, what’s attainable can be but a silhouette of facial features produced by carving type at the size—the only size—it will print, in relief, in reverse, in steel. Unlike cutting away excess material to render the form desired, digital type is shaped by manipulating on-screen descriptions of contours. Any “digital recutting” takes place merely in a figurative sense. But don’t let pure semantics completely limit our abilities to label today’s digital replicas of historical typefaces as real and fitting ways. Apt descriptions are almost always possible if there exists a broad vocabulary from which to establish appropriate terminology. We still need new nomenclature for the digital era to replace outdated language that has lost its meaning or has taken on an erroneous twist. Oxymorons like “digital punchcutter” and “digital type foundry” are common in the trade, but at least they have the word “digital” as a qualifier. That’s a lot better than not having a qualifier. The same may be said of the common term “revival” in describing updates of typefaces that never fell completely into disuse before being converted to a new medium. Labeling a typeface “digital revival” lets us know that the original was born in a pre-digital medium, most often metal. To do a revival in type is to resurrect a design that has fallen into disuse, not to rehash a workable design that never became obsolete or outdated. As Gehl has noted, “Let’s just resolve not to call them historical reproductions, ’recuttings,’ or even ’re-designs’ unless we intend to do just that, reproduce a type that works like the original.” Gehl further remarked, “...In my professional capacity as collector, I frequently meet with designers and design teachers and students. What I have to say today is thus conditioned not by my sense of what you as typeographers and type writers are doing right or doing wrong, but by my reading of what practicing designers and design students make of what you do and say about type.” On that cue, a few definitions would be handy. Below are mine. I’ve divided my descriptions into two categories: one for designs that closely follow the original, and the other for designs that loosely follow the original.
Introducing
“Tribute”
—a family of
8 fonts;
Roman,
Italic,
Small Caps

ORDINALS:

P 9

Call it What it is

Centuries ago, loose interpretations were easier to produce than close (faithful) interpretations because the level of skill needed to produce punches was high. But late in the 19th century, the use of the pantograph as a tool in cutting punches and matrices by machine eliminated the need for a punch-cutter who worked by hand. The speed of replicating existing typefaces increased. Phototype was yet another step in the direction of fast copying, and digital type can be copied in an instant by almost anybody. Our ability to make digital facsimiles of types that were cut by hand centuries ago affords us a chance to render them as we see fit. We can make them look old, like the original types, or we can make them look fresh. We can’t, however, make them look identical to historical models, for digital type is not metal type. The two are different creatures and they manifest separate identities. They each have their own idiosyncrasies. Realizing that digital type can actually only simulate the “look” of old type is an important aspect of evaluating type revivals. Terms like “digital homage” or “historical fiction” can be used to describe what we attempt to do when we pay tribute to types of the distant past without relying too heavily upon their design. It is evident that Frank Heine’s Tribute preserves an element of “type caricature” in its drawing, but this fact doesn’t relegate it to that one category. Heine has really gone beyond parody, well into an area of personal exploration. He has challenged many traditional assumptions that we “connoisseurs” of hand-cut type have maintained in our attitude toward the historical accuracy sought and loved and expected in “revivals.” The result is a unique combination of caricature, homage, alchemy, and fanciful reinterpretation. Tribute, I think, recalls Guyot’s native French-learned style, primarily as a point of departure for an original—albeit implausible—work of historical fiction, with merits and faults of its own.
Typi non habent claritatem insitam; est usus legentis in iis qui facit eorum claritatem. Investigationes demonstraverunt lectores legere melius etia qui legunt saepius. Claritas est etiam processus dynamicus, qui sequitur mutationem consuetudinum lectorum. Mirum est notare quam littera gothica, quam nunc putamus parum claram anteposuerit litterarum formas humanitatis per saecula quarta decima et quinta decima. Eodem modo typi, qui nunc nobis videntur parum clari, fiant sollemnes in futurum. Typi non habent claritatem insitam; est usus legentis in iis qui facit eorum claritatem. Investigationes demonstraverunt lectores legere melius quod ii legunt saepius. Claritas est etiam processus dynamicus, qui sequitur mutationem consuetudinum lectorum. Mirum est notare quam littera gothica, quam nunc putamus parum claram anteposuerit litterarum formas humanitatis per saecula quarta decima et quinta decima. Eodem modo typi, qui nunc nobis videntur par.

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Synopsis of Characters
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