

*nahwehwedzetsitsir
naboromâingo
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gentium

a typeface for the nations

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Gentium was birthed

out of the union of two purposes—to fulfil academic requirements and to meet a global need.

It has been designed as part of the Master of Arts in Typeface Design program at the University of Reading. The assignment brief was simple: design two contrasting variants of a text typeface with a basic character set.

For inspiration, I looked to both historical and modern typefaces—some familiar, many new to me. The research required for my essays pushed me to discover how designers have solved various problems with type. I learned how strongly type design has been influenced by practical needs, from lithography to road signage.

What I needed was a unifying purpose—a problem of my own to solve. This would give me direction and focus, and be a final arbiter of design decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would have been impossible for me to carry this project through to completion without a great deal of help and guidance. I thank Chris Burke for pushing me out to sea; Gerry Leonidas for his constant encouragement and careful eye; Gerard Unger for his wisdom and personal example; Michael Harvey for teaching me tradition and freedom; the rest of the faculty at Reading for their solid historical and theoretical grounding; and my fellow students for bearing with my endless revisions.

I am also indebted to four designers who have indelibly shaped my love for type: Hermann Zapf—whose designs first awakened my interest in type, Frederick Goudy—who showed me that rules can be broken, Matthew Carter—who continues to define readability, and Robert Slimbach—who proves that beauty and utility can be one.

I also thank my colleagues at SIL International for their understanding and technical expertise. Finally, I thank my family and loving Creator for their constant support.

Balanced



*Glyphs from Palatino,
Berkeley Old Style,
Charter and Minion*

It's all Harry Carter's fault.

In my research on legibility I came across his article 'Optical scale in typefounding' (Typography 4, 1937) in which he lauds Fleischman for low joins on the letters h m n. 'The effect is clearer', he writes.

This stunned me. Could such a calligraphic feature actually benefit legibility? Most trends in readable typefaces were going in the opposite direction—toward higher joins—to increase counter size.

Would it be possible to create a highly legible face based upon a calligraphic foundation? How could the dynamic nature of the pen be balanced with the steadiness needed for text type?

I wanted to create a solid, robust face that did not wear its calligraphic heritage too boldly. Too much character would be a distraction to the reader. I did desire speed and rhythm, but not at the cost of clarity and legibility.

My original calligraphic experiments for the roman and italic were completed on consecutive days, and the result is a close connection between the two. The dynamic features I desired have lived on most authentically in the latter.

Comparison of initial calligraphy and resulting font. Dynamic features in Gentium Italic: swelling pen-like terminals, smooth but energetic curves, balance between sharp and smooth corners.

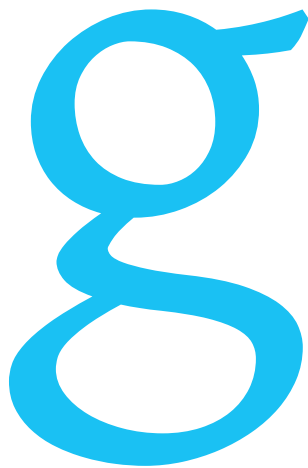


Dynamic

caveboring
caveboring



potential energy



Steadiness

How could I capture this dynamism in the roman?

Early attempts proved too calligraphic—and worked poorly as typeforms. The process of distilling the forms down to their basic elements was painful. Every time I removed an expressive feature I felt a sense of loss. Would the result still seem dynamic?

In the end, steadiness was gained not only through the loss of pen features, but through consistency, reduction of contrast and intentional serif design.

Because the area at x-height has so much activity, a firm horizontal footing was needed. Slab serifs, though tempting, would have been out of character in such a humanist face. The best compromise was traditional bracketed serifs upon a flat base.



Translation from pen to type. Serifs and vertical stems are clearly more typographic. In addition, stroke weight is slightly reduced and counters are more open. Obvious pen features, such as the thinning of lower left to upper right curves, are less pronounced.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Page 1: Photo courtesy NASA.

Page 3: Photo courtesy Colin Woodward.

Page 4: Quote from Harry Carter, 'Optical scale in typefounding' (Typography 4, 1937), p. 5.

Page 8: Illustration courtesy Paul Mijksenaar, Bureau Mijksenaar <www.mijksenaar.com>;
More information on the *bukvar:raz!* competition can be found at
<<http://www.atypi.org/atypicompresults.pdf>>.

Page 11: Greek text from Olivier Clement, 'Ο Κόσμος των εικόνων'
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Page 16: Text from Eleanor H. Porter, *Just David* (1916), p. 1-2.

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<<http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm>>.

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Gentium was produced using Macromedia Fontographer, Freehand, FontLab, and Adobe Photoshop.
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Future



Gentium is available for use by anyone at no charge, in order to stimulate literature production around the world. To download the most recent version of Gentium, or get a copy of this booklet in PDF format, visit the Gentium web site:

<http://www.sil.org/~gaultney/gentium/>

The current version of Gentium contains only regular and italic faces, and supports only Latin and Greek scripts. Cyrillic support is under development, and preliminary work has begun on additional weights. A complementary sans-serif face is in embryonic form.

Priorities for these developments will be driven by users. Comments and suggestions are welcomed at victor_gaultney@sil.org. The web site will also be the central location for information on ongoing development.

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