

TYPECAST

Typography's cultural
connotations have been
redefined over centuries.
Who gets to decide what a
community looks like in print?

BY

DESIGN

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From the ornate Blackletter that once filled the Gutenberg bible in the 1450s to the clean versatility of Helvetica on Macintosh's first computers in the 1980s and the widely used Times New Roman on double-spaced essays, typefaces often carry connotations beyond the words they make up.

During the days of letterpress printing, where typefaces were etched onto physical pieces like metal or wood, "typeface" was defined as the design of letters used in printing. "Font" or "type," was its manifestation on physical materials. Now, in a digitized world of online design applications, "typeface," "font" and "type" are used interchangeably.

To understand how typography influences communication and design, typographic historian and designer Paul Shaw has spent over three decades designing, researching and teaching the history of type. According to Shaw, a type's characteristics lend itself to interpretation.

"People see something in a typeface that reminds them of something else," Shaw said. "People use Papyrus ... because they see the rough edges and they say, 'Well, this suggests something old.'"

Type designers utilize people's perceptions of fonts to convey messages to audiences, whether it be displaying personality, visual appeal or readability. Graphic designer and typographer Cyrus Highsmith, who has designed fonts for starwars.com and The Wall Street Journal, said many fonts' versatility acts as a narrative component.

"I think of typefaces as voices, or maybe actors, in a way," Highsmith said. "Some typefaces are really good at playing a lot of different roles. Some typefaces just do one thing really well."

While Shaw and Highsmith highlight the visual and narrative qualities of typography, the impact of typography extends beyond those functions. Through discussions, critiques and hands-

on explorations of how technology interacts with society, Rhode Island School of Design Assistant Professor Kelsey Elder finds that typefaces do not solely communicate content; they also reflect and participate in broader cultural values and assumptions.

"Typography and graphic design aren't just about making pleasant shapes," Elder said. "Instead, the disciplines are equally about authorship, politics and the systems that shape visual language."

When looking at history, Elder's point becomes even more evident. Many Western narratives locate the origin of typography in the Gutenberg press, a printing press developed by German craftsman Johannes Gutenberg around 1440 CE that made books more affordable and accessible. However, Ramon Tejada, associate professor of Graphic Design at Rhode Island School of Design, points out that a Western perspective of the origins of type may overlook many inventions developed in non-Western countries, such as block printing in China.

"The history of typography is enveloped in thinking that the beginnings of it are ... from Europe," Tejada said. "[European tradition] is not the only tradition. We start to see that the gestures some [Western] designers are making towards other cultures come from assumptions about what those cultures are, rather than any real understanding of them. When people use those designs carelessly, that creates problems."

These gestures have come to be known as stereotypography: the use of type that presents assumptions of cultures.

"When we look back at fonts through time, we see many examples in which the dominant Western market created 'exotic' fonts to represent other cultures, reducing them to simplistic visual tropes," Elder said. "These fonts became tools of one-sided representation; a kind of visual shorthand the West used to label 'the other.'"

The creation of products with stereotypography could stem from admiration towards the original culture. However, Tejada argues that this may not equip people with the tools needed to execute their ideas with cultural sensitivity.

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Yet, much like how meaning and interpretation is often subjective, identity designer and typographer

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Raven Mo asserts that determining whether a font is stereotypographical is not always a clear-cut process — it depends on context and intent.

"If you are a Chinese American making this art piece that pays tribute to a specific era of the Chinese food scene, and the Chop Suey font is part of the visual artifacts that come with it, then it's an appropriate use of it," Mo said.

Meanwhile, utilizing a seemingly culturally-linked typeface with ignorant intentions fuels harmful assumptions.

"If you're a company who wants to mock the COVID-19 pandemic that happened in the 2020s, and you use Chop Suey fonts because the context it carries has cultural appropriation in it, then you're insinuating a bias, or something that's racist," Mo said.

These shifting interpretations are further complicated by changing cultural contexts. Lois Harada, a Rhode Island based artist and printmaker, said that a font's original purpose can easily be overshadowed by new contexts of use.

According to architecture and design magazine ICON, the font Comic Sans was designed by Vincent Connare in 1995 for Microsoft computer users. Wanting the lettering to feel more human and casual, he took inspiration from comics and graphic novels. The wide letter-spacing allowed for increased legibility that appealed to many users, especially those with dyslexia.

"Comic Sans is often derided in design circles, but it was actually intended to be an easier to read option, an intention that is now obscured by its use in memes or as a joke," Harada said.

Similarly, Shaw said that the original intentions of the font Neuland became distorted from taking on associations with different cultures over time, becoming an example of stereotypography as a result. The font Neuland, for instance, is now commonly seen as the "African typeface." However, when German type designer and calligrapher Rudolph Koch created the font [in 1923], he was deviating from the modern, standard process of creating typefaces mechanically.

Seeking to go back to the old way of designing typefaces,

Koch decided to carve letters in steel. In this process, he chose simple forms for the letters, each having little curves and bumps from the carving process.

"Imported to the United States in the 1920s, ... the typeface reminded people a lot of what we used to call 'primitive cultures,'" Shaw said. "[By] carving things in wood, you'd often get simple forms because of the materials involved in the carving. Neuland letters reminded people of that."

Another way typefaces can accumulate meaning is through naming the fonts, which carries its own associations. Shaw recounts how one such naming gave an ordinary typeface a darker connotation. Jim Crow, a font designed in France during the 1850s and initially known as Gothic Shade, predates the identically-named Jim Crow era of American history. Yet after reaching the U.S., the font came to be tied with the derogatory character Jim Crow, who was utilized for racist propaganda in the United States from the 1870s to 1960s.

"The typeface now called Jim Crow [originally] had no name to it ... [but] a major American type foundry named it 'Jim Crow,' which is a very bizarre choice of naming," Shaw said. "The rediscovery and renaming of the Jim Crow typeface coincided with a period of heavy lynching."

These associations are a reminder that though we may discuss fonts as if they are culturally neutral today, their history and usage tell a different story. Tré Seals, founder of Vocal Type, a company which designs typefaces for creatives of color, said that the typefaces we now call 'neutral' only gained that status because they were once the one most widely circulated, taught and standardized, often by those in power.

"Typefaces are deeply tied to systems of cultural power, whether we acknowledge it or not," Seals said. "Fonts that are often described as neutral, like Helvetica or Times New Roman, have never actually been neutral. They reflect the people, values and environments that produced them. ... History shows that neutrality is often a reflection of access and adoption, not cultural absence."

It is within this landscape of accumulated associations that Chop Suey fonts have become one of the most infamous



cases of stereotypography. Invented by Western designers in the 19th century, the design is tied to western perceptions of Chinese writing and calligraphy.

“The ‘Chinese Restaurant’ typeface most likely became associated with Asian cultures as its brush-like strokes felt closest to calligraphic marks to Western designers and audiences,” Harada said. “Though it had origins in French sign painting or other hand-painted traditions, it now is synonymous with a stereotypical representation of Asian Americans.”

When Mo immigrated from Southern China to the United States, she found that the Chop Suey fonts that adorned local restaurant signs bore little resemblance to her personal Chinese identity.

“Chop Suey fonts are not something that you see in China in the same context ... compared to the United States,” Mo said. “Chinatown in Chicago was where I first encountered [Chop Suey fonts], and I thought this type of font looked quite weird, like letters being manipulated in really arbitrary ways.”

Mo’s experience underscores the growing awareness of a gap between cultural reality and the stereotypes in some typefaces. With the world becoming more attentive to appreciating cultural diversity, more people are reflecting on the existence of stereotypography. Senior Rena Kim, the art captain of Paly Robotics, attributes these fonts’ continued existence to their distinctive associations.

“Designers use these kinds of fonts [stereotypical fonts] because ... they’re recognizable,” Kim said. “They stand out in your brain, and your brain immediately makes the connection to the cultural connection they’re trying to convey. That’s something that designers are always trying to do, make their design stand out and mean something with just one look.”

Junior and self-proclaimed design enthusiast Kit Wendling also notes that behind these design choices are market forces which drive usage of fonts and the incentive for quick associations and signaling.

“In a capitalistic landscape where advertising is crucial to the success of a lot of businesses, typography is a crucial part of our economy,” Wendling said.

Typefaces can signal many things. The Helvetica font, for example, is often used to signal corporate values.

“‘Helvetica’ means Switzerland,” Tejada said. “It has the values of Switzerland embedded in it. But now, the context of

Helvetica is corporate. You see it, and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s corporate. I trust it.’”

And, while it’s easy to conclude that all usages of stereotypography are “uneducated” or appropriating and deem all stereotypography “racist,” it is also common for people of the community that the font attempts to imitate to purposely use these fonts for their recognizability value.

“These letterforms function like a ‘fake foreign accent’ in visual form,” Elder said. “In early 20th-century Chinatowns, some Chinese-owned businesses adopted this look in their signage to appeal to Western audiences, making a pragmatic, if problematic, choice to meet economic and cultural expectations.”

Yet what constitutes an accent is also shaped by dominant cultures.

“Because some typefaces were marketed as universal or objective, they’ve come to dominate visual culture to the point that anything outside of that visual language can be seen as trendy,” Seals said. “That imbalance mirrors how cultural power works more broadly. The dominant culture defines what looks neutral, and everything else becomes other.”

Now, Chop Suey fonts are not commonly seen on new designs because they’re widely considered outdated or problematic.

“A lot of Chop Suey font usage that we see nowadays, they’re all pretty much part of a legacy that has been passed down by [usage] done years ago,” Mo said.

Though the prevalence of stereotypical fonts have declined, economic accessibility and lack of copyright restrictions have also played a role in keeping them in circulation. In her own work as a designer, Mo often has to consider the financial costs of renewing font licenses for her client.

“The reason why stereotypography is so popular is due to its economic value, and the fact that it’s a free font and [there’s] a lack of copyright protection,” Mo said. “Chop Suey fonts are usually free floating, where everyone can download them. Everyone has access to it so it’s really easy for [people] to use.”

But, the question remains: Who gets to design fonts for a culture? While many typefaces associated with stereotypes have emerged from outgroup designers and lack accurate representation or cultural nuance, many designers now seek to bridge this gap by collaborating with experts.

“When a community has little say in how it’s portrayed, as was the case when colonial-era designers or advertisers [who] invented fonts for ‘exotic’ themes, it reinforces a power imbalance,” Elder said. “In essence, type design has been part of a broader system that can either perpetuate stereotypes or, if done thoughtfully, challenge them.”

As Tejada sees it, design should be a means to open up spaces of discourse.

“There needs to be diversity in these teams of people that are making decisions,” Tejada said. “If you want to engage with the community, you have to have representation from that community in the decision making process.”

Seals describes seeing design projects about cultural topics that used typefaces devoid of culture or identity. Although they were meant to celebrate a community, he found that the typography often spoke in someone else’s voice, usually a Western or European one.

“Representation isn’t just about visual accuracy. It’s about authorship and agency,” Seals said. “Who gets to tell the story, and who benefits from it? Those are questions we have to keep asking ourselves as designers.”

Still, the designing and usage of fonts are only one part of the story. Placing too much emphasis on symbolic interpretation of a typeface may reinforce stereotypes and limit the font’s function in design.

“No one work of art can ever represent an entire culture,” Highsmith said. “It’s even more true with the typeface, especially a typeface that’s more readable ... if [fonts are] trying to illustrate something cultural too much, it becomes too decorative and can distract from [design] content.”

Fonts must have a balance between visual interest and practicality. Harada acknowledges that though there has been progress in recognizing the blind spots and inherent biases that Western design education often imparts on students, many design institutions are still based in a colonial way of thinking.

“Yes, teaching about European type designers is important, but [it is] not more important than learning about histories and design traditions from indigenous cultures, Latin America and other underrepresented and marginalized groups,” Harada said.

In order for designers to move towards more authentic representation, Harada states that designers must research the cultures they plan on designing for.

“Designers really need to be students at all stages of their careers,” Harada said. “Research is important to every project so that you have an understanding of the histories and contemporary cultures you’re representing, referencing and speaking to.”

Accurate representation can be improved by learning about different written language forms. Without that knowledge, Elder says, even well-intentioned work can become caricatured.

“I am a big advocate of learning other languages and scripts,” Elder said. “This will help you understand the calligraphy and lettering traditions of the script and culture you are working with.”

Simultaneously, designers from marginalized communities are reclaiming visual narratives by designing their own alternatives to stereotypography. Their work challenges assumptions about what culture looks like and expands the visual vocabulary available to designers in the future.

“Tré Seals, through his foundry Vocal Type, is creating ... typefaces inspired by historical movements for civil rights and liberation across the globe, offering design rooted in real stories rather than stereotypes,” Elder said. “Similarly, the Bye Bye Binary foundry is creating fonts that include new ways to express gender and identity. ... Reclamation, in this context, often means redefining the narrative and expanding access.”

Through Vocal Type, the typeface Jim Crow was revived and renamed as VTC Ruby after Ruby Bridges, an American Civil Rights activist who became a catalyst for ending Jim Crow Laws. Currently Seals is conceptualizing making Chop Suey fonts functional for small text, revitalizing it with a new context and purpose.

“Using a typeface that was once used to harm and recontextualizing it to tell authentic stories is really intriguing to me,” Seals said. “Reclaiming [Chop Suey] by giving it a new purpose feels powerful, and that’s one of my many current project goals.”

Whether one sees fonts as tools, art or reflections of identity, they remain central to how we communicate and represent ourselves. As typography continues to evolve, it tells new stories about one’s identity and how they see the world.

“We’ve gone from hand to block printing to letterpress to desktop technologies,” Tejada said. “Technology is pushing it into a more open, generous, expressive and iterative approach. The large number of designers who become type designers, from many different parts of the world ... are making work that speaks to the history, culture, where they come from and their language.”

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