type *digital perfection*

BY MARYROSE WOOD

LEGENDARY TYPE DESIGNER HERMANN
ZAPF, ALONG WITH AKIRA KOBAYASHI,
HAVE UPDATED THE CLASSIC OPTIMA
TYPEFACE ZAPF CREATED IN 1952.

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In Hollywood they call it the "director's cut," the release of the film that most fully reflects the creator's vision. For movie aficionados, the director's cut is the gold standard, the version that undoes the cuts and compromises imposed by pressure from producers, distributors, focus groups, and marketing consultants. In any art form where commerce and technology play a defining role–typography, for instance–the triumph of artistic vision over more mundane matters is cause for celebration.

Since the first of this year, type lovers have been able to celebrate a "director's cut" of their own, this time starring that well-known and popular sans-serif star, Optima. What's more, this improved and expanded version of the design, originally released in 1958, has been developed by the original designer: the legendary Hermann Zapf. To accomplish this, Zapf collaborated with Akira Kobayashi, an established type designer in his own right and type director of the Linotype Library.

OPTIMA'S OPTIMA Optima nova is the latest release in Linotype's Platinum Series–reworked and revitalized classic designs from the Linotype Library. "These revivals of some of Linotype's most popular designs are marketed to connoisseurs," says Bruno Steinert, the company's managing director. "They're not intended for everyone. They're for people who can see and appreciate the difference." And, he adds, "They're not cheap." Titles in the Platinum Series are only available as complete typeface family packages on CD-ROM. The first in the series was Adrian Frutiger's Univers, which was followed by Frutiger Next and Syntax. Now Optima nova joins the series.

In keeping with the series' objective of releasing improved versions of classic Linotype designs, Optima nova promises to be "Optima's Optima," says Steinert. "Most of the text typefaces that are popular today were limited by technical constraints of then existing typesetting methods," he explains. "Now, we can recreate the typeface as the designer intended."

So what did Hermann Zapf originally intend Optima to be? Back in 1952 when he created the typeface, Zapf first conceived of the design as a display face, a sans serif with the feel of a Roman. In fact, the design was inspired by actual Roman inscriptions Zapf found on his Italian travels (Zapf recalls that the first sketches were done on a 1,000 lire bank note, since he didn't have any paper handy). But a text face is what Optima evolved into, a graceful and somewhat feminine alphabet whose combination of modernity and classic elegance have made it a favorite of cosmetics companies, and widely popular ever since.

Now, Zapf and Kobayashi have seized the opportunity to undo the technical concessions made in earlier versions of the typeface. One distinctive design feature that gives Optima much of its elegance is the slight curve of the character strokes. While shaping this subtlety in fonts for hot metal and photocomposition was somewhat problematic, other characteristics Zapf intended for the original display design had to be dramatically compromised because of the technical limitations of text typesetting equipment. In Optima nova, all of the letterforms have been reshaped as Zapf initially intended. In addition, a true, cursive italic was designed.

The design team has also added a variety of new designs to round-out the Optima family: a full range of weights from very light to very bold, in Roman, condensed, and italic, as well as the addition of small caps and old style numerals. There's even a completely new face called Optima Titling, an all-caps version with a calligraphic feel. Creating this new display Optima was "particular fun" for Zapf, says Steinert, allowing the designer to invent special ligatures and character shapes that are new to the design.

THE PERFECT COLLABORATOR For Kobayashi, the chance to work with Zapf on one of the master's most well-known designs was exhilarating. Kobayashi says, "I chose my career because I was inspired by one of Hermann's books." This is a larger statement than it may first appear; Kobayashi is a native of Japan, but his growing interest in designing Latin alphabets led him, eventually, to move to London, where he studied calligraphy and typography.

Kobayashi first met Zapf in June of 2000, at Zapf's home in Germany. One of the things they talked about was Optima. "The

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Optima typeface is, to me, the utmost in elegance," says Kobayashi. But he did have questions. "I asked Hermann about the design of the Optima italic," he recalls, which was a slanted roman rather than a true italic. Kobayashi had always wondered what technical constraint had led to this seeming compromise. Zapf was forthcoming; the italic had been a victim of the toughest technical constraint of all: the deadline. "He said he had no time," laughs Kobayashi. "He designed it in a day."

As a close-up witness to this seemingly odd-couple team, Steinert refutes the assumption that the differences in the collaborators' ages or cultural backgrounds impacted their working relationship in a significant way. "After all," he says, "Hermann is just twice as old as Akira." (Zapf is now 84.) "The most significant difference between them," says Steinert, "is that Hermann has never used a computer, and Akira is a master of current digital design tools." Although both designers created sketches on paper during the design process, when it came to the digital world, "Akira was Hermann's hand," observes Steinert, and the two often worked sitting side by side.

Creatively, the two designers' shared love of type and industrious work ethic made for a harmonious partnership. "Hermann is very open minded," says Kobayashi. As for the creative decisions, both partners were involved in the planning of Optima nova from day one, and there were "no serious design conflicts," he asserts, adding, "sometimes, discussions." The team became notorious for their 20-minute lunches in the Linotype canteen, both eager to get back to work.

In fact, Steinert recalls, "One afternoon, Hermann came to my office at five o'clock and said, 'Herr Steinert, today you can be very satisfied with our work. We did 80 characters today.'" And how does one react to such prodigious output from an 84-year old legend? "'Carry on!' is what I said," says Steinert. "Carry on!"

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MISSHAPEN CLASSICS

Many of the typefaces that we currently view as classics were actually compromises from the original designer's intentions. The reason? Technology lagged behind artistic vision. Some of the aspects of typesetting machines that allowed them to set type quickly and easily created deterrents to the creative expression of type designers.

UNSOPHISTICATED SPACING SYSTEMS

The most basic of these was character spacing and proportions. Fonts for metal typesetting machines like the Linotype and Monotype had to be created within a crude system of predetermined character width values. Every letter had to fit within and have its spacing determined by a grid of only 18 units. This meant that if the ideal proportions of a particular character did not fit within a sub-set of these 18 units, it had to be designed so that it did. Type designers were continually making compromises from what they felt was ideal to something that would work within the confines of the technology. Many felt that this severely impaired the design process.

DUPLEXING TYPEFACES

Because machine-set metal type used a "font magazine" to hold the matrices for the individual characters and only one font magazine could be put into a typesetting matching at a time, many typefaces were developed that shared common character widths for various members of the type family. This allowed more than one typeface to be put into a single magazine. These typefaces were identified as duplexed (two variants containing the same character widths) triplexed (three variants containing the same character widths), and quadraplexed (four variants containing the same character widths). The result here was that italic designs, which are normally slightly condensed and spaced tighter than their roman counterparts, had to be drawn wider and spaced more open than they should. Bold designs suffered in that they had to be drawn narrower than what would be ideal, full-bodied proportions.

Because early phototypesetting equipment had to mirror the output of metal typesetting machines, the original, compromised character shapes, duplexed, triplexed and quadraplexed typeface designs were replicated in phototype fonts. These were, in-turn, used as the basis for virtually all early digital fonts.