

Printer's fist: Fontesque
(Nick Shinn, 1994)
Maple leaf: Cartier Book
(Rod Macdonald, 2000,
after Carl Dair, 1967)
Headline: ITC Usherwood
(Les Usherwood, 1984)

You Set The Scene

Pump up the synergy of your design process with Canadian typefaces.

by Nick Shinn

Fifteen years ago art directors got their type set locally, and their photos and illustrations from local talent. Now one can buy thousands of fonts from all over the world, set them to standard software defaults, and use the same royalty-free stock photography as everybody else. Sure, there are a gazillion options, but when they're the same for everyone, it does tend to detract from local color.

This is not to deny national trends in font usage; FontShop Canada's **David Michaelides** notes that FontFont's 1992 *Instant Types* package—a set of vernacular types from industrial packaging, appropriated by the Dutch duo of Erik von Blokland and Just van Rossum—was well used in Canada during the 1990s. However, these fonts were hot in other parts of the world too.

ILLUSTRATED FONTS

More significantly, Michaelides created a Canadian trend in type design by convincing designers such as **Bruce Alcock** (*Souphone*), **Val Fullard** (*Mambo*), **Barbara Klunder** (*Klunder*), and myself (*Fontesque*), to design expansive sorts of illustrated “cuts” as companion fonts to the typefaces. His thinking was to both exploit the illustrative talents of the designers, none of whom had previously produced digital fonts, and market fonts that provided a packaged graphic look that went beyond type. Both *Mambo* and *Fontesque* were hugely successful, at home and abroad.

There was ample precedent for decorative fonts matched to typefaces: most of the old metal foundries produced ancillary graphic material in font form, such as Bauer, with *Bernhard Curvise Ornaments* and *Weiss Borders*, and Linotype, with *Caravan*. It was a practice that had not yet re-emerged in the digital era, and the time was right in the early 1990s, when vectored illustration was much in vogue. At that time, bitmapped images were slow to

work with, *Photoshop* was a strange monster, and royalty-free stock had yet to plaster the world with photographism.

INVISIBILITY OF UBIQUITOUS FACES

There are certain practical advantages to using fonts that are freely available—if you don't mind your work looking generic. But if you really want to create unique imagery, you should use fresh fonts. Don't kid yourself, whatever cleverness you do with *Gill Sans*, 10,000 other people already went there.

There is a sensibility that the most well-known faces (which have had all the novelty rubbed off by constant use), deployed in an offhand, understated manner, won't distract the viewer from the dazzling wholeness of the layout and concept. But that's a lazy, vain attitude—and dangerous, because a ubiquitous font may not be noticed at all.

MASTERING NEW TOOLS

Fonts are software applications that set type—they are tools, or more accurately instruments. As such, they can be used with varying degrees of skill. Just as there are power users of *Adobe Photoshop*, there are power users of say, *Adobe Garamond*—typographers who get off on switching to a tracked-out small cap font at the slightest pretext, and who would never dream of using lining figures in a text setting.

Like all instruments, it takes time to master a typeface. This was brought home forcibly to me in 1992, when I received a font of a face I had designed and drawn in 1985, *Shinn Sans*, which had just been digitized by the Red Rooster foundry. At that time I had abandoned type design and had not yet started creating digital types.

My excitement at being able, for the first time, to set type with

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

2RebelsDeux (Denis Dulude, 2Rebels, 1995)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Albertan No. 977 (Jim Rimmer, Lanston, 1987)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Balladeer (Al Elliott, Headliners, c. 1975)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Bullpen (Ray Larabie, Larabiefonts.com, 2001)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Cartier Book (Rod Macdonald, after Carl Dair, Agfa, 2000)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Caxton (Les Usherwood, Letraset, 1981)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Flange (Les Usherwood, Scangraphic, 1972)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Fontesque (Nick Shinn, FSI, 1994)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
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Hip (Paul Sych, FSI, 1991)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
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Klunder Script (Barbara Klunder, FSI, 1994)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
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Mambo (Val Fullard, FSI, 1992)

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Manticore (John Hudson, Agfa, 1995)

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Seagull (Bob McGrath, Bitstream, 1978)

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Soupbone (Bruce Alcock, FSI, 1993)

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Steinem (Apostrophe, Apostrophiclab.com, 2000)

CANADIAN TYPEFACES
Canadian typefaces

Table Manners (Bob Beck, 2Rebels, 1996)

This small showing doesn't begin to do justice to the great variety of Canadian-designed fonts.

To further your explorations, check out Luc Devroye's Canadian font links, cgm.cs.mcgill.ca/~luc/canada.html.

one of my own designs was crushed when I started to use the typeface; I dropped it into a newsletter I was working on, and it looked like crap. But I fiddled with it, adjusting the size, leading and tracking, and what do you know, after a while it didn't look too bad at all.

So this is the hurdle that unfamiliar typefaces must cross: it's so much easier for art directors to work with known quantities. Clients and readers, too, have expectations. The challenge for art directors and designers is to use new materials and get those ingredients to mesh into a seamless whole; this is design. It's what we're paid the big bucks for. Did I say work? It's workplay. That's

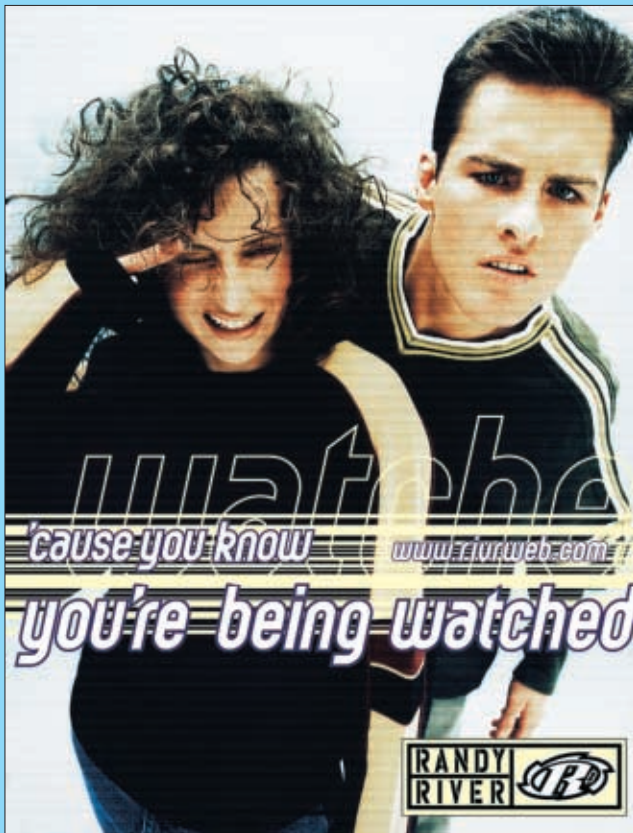
what so great about being a graphic designer.

If you really want to be original, get the local synergy going. It's a mistake to copy the fashions of hip cities—their scenes are converging, and the new idea always comes from nowhere.

DIVERSITY OF CANADIAN TYPE SCENE

Type designers are a mixed bunch.

Some are professional lettering artists through and through, like **Rod Macdonald**, who specializes in revivals. Most recently he has revised and expanded the family of the first Canadian typeface, **Carl Dair's Cartier** (1967). No doubt Dair, a control



Keeping it real

The surest way to originality is with exclusive fonts. You can commission from your local type designer, or develop a face in house. This is the route taken frequently by Toronto's Barkinhot Studio; in fact, it's an integral part of its design/marketing strategy.

It helps that one of the collective is Tad Biernot, a typographer skilled in the traditional lettering arts, and not averse to applying himself digitally to the world of consumer fashion.

For instance, for an *Oil of Olay* TV ad, Biernot created a script font and 3D-mapped it to a moving image of a model's face.

Barkinhot has designed custom fonts for *Natrel*, *Future Shop*, and *Randy River*. The fonts are put to work in both print and TV. The same approach works for film titles and posters.

As the studio's Liam Greenlaw puts it, "It gives the design more of a proprietary value...more personality...and it gives us a forum for experimenting with new ideas."

Barkinhot has been threatening to publish typefaces such as *Video* (see left), but it's unlikely. There's a labour-intensive level of typographic functionality that's not necessary for posters and film titles—the full range of rarely used and accented characters, kerning pairs, etc.—and right now the studio is too busy with the next typeface to finish up and release its back catalogue.

freak, would have been appalled at the liberties Macdonald has taken, but it does put him in the classic league with Bodoni, Caslon, etc., who created strong designs able to survive re-interpretation. In fact, *Cartier* was first "revived" in 1977 as *Raleigh*.

Dair was a generalist, an art director/graphic designer/typographer, as are **Val Fullard**, **Paul Sych** and myself.

Others, epitomized by **Barbara Klunder**, are illustrators with a fondness for lettering.

Ray Larabie and **Apostrophe** are part of an Internet font culture that centres on freeware and shareware. It's slightly out of sync with the professional graphic design industry (a position which has both its pros and cons). Their emphasis is on novelty and quantity, so the fonts generally lack kerning and sophisticated metrics. However, Larabie's *Blue Highway* family sells for \$19, a heck of a lot cheaper than Font Bureau's ultra-trendy *Interstate*, and it's just as legit—both are knock-offs of highway signage.

Denis Dulude's Montreal studio **2Rebels** publishes fonts from a hefty roster of international designers, as well as artsy stock images. The vibe is very type-as-art, with fonts that are predominantly Post-structuralist. 2Rebels is the only Canadian outfit to match, in style and the number of designers it publishes, the well-known American foundries like T-26, Thirst, Emigre, and House; it also aggressively markets its products around the world.

This is just a brief list. To go deeper, check out **Luc Devroye's** Canadian font links, cgm.cs.mcgill.ca/~luc/canada.html.

Of course, in this multi-cultural country, there is a lot of activity in fonts for non-English and French usage; Larabie's *Bullpen*,

for instance, while it may lack kerning, comes with a full range of Central European, Turkish and Balkan characters. In Vancouver, Tiro Typeworks' **John Hudson** recently won an international competition for Cyrillic fonts.

THE MAESTRO

Les Usherwood (1932-83) is by far the most important type designer Canada has produced. His Toronto company **Typsettra** was both type house and foundry, producing hundreds of fonts, a half dozen or so of which look set to become classics. *Flange* (created for a Canadian government program in 1972), and *Leawood* (1982) with cap height barely larger than x-height, are icons of the photo-type era. The high-end typesetting of Typsettra—using Usherwood's types—propelled a generation of Canadian art directors to giddy levels of accomplishment.

Maybe you can't always afford original photography or illustration for every job. But you can afford a new font. Some effort will be required to discover its strengths and weaknesses, but like any good tool, it's worth getting a feel for, and that investment of time will help keep your work vital. Oh, and did I mention?—buy Canadian! 🇨🇦

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