

Episode 3 / Bodoni

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Producer: Inger

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Non-Designated Designer for this week: Anitra

Special Guest Contributor: David Spears

Episode Summary

If you've ever questioned whether you're a Carrie, a Charlotte, a Miranda or a Samantha, this is the episode for you! Although be warned, Didone typefaces can be tough to tell apart!

Jason and Anitra investigate why designers have, for more than two centuries, stuck with Bodoni through thick and thin. They're joined by special guest, David Spears, designer and teacher, who shares his insights. Jason reveals Giambattista Bodoni was famous enough to ghost Napoleon Bonaparte, and still have a museum built in his honour! As with all great brands, Anitra and David warn to beware of cheap knock-offs, and they agree with Jason that this typeface feels out of the league of most people.

You can find the show notes and transcript set in Bodoni at: <https://www.anitraland.com/podcast>

If you'd like to share your own views on Bodoni, or the pod, email us on designsleuth@yahoo.com or leave us a message on speakpipe.com/thesiswhisperer

You can find us on Twitter: @type_pod and on Insta: @the_type_pod

Our Producer Inger is on twitter as @thesiswhisperer

Anitra: Welcome to The Type Pod!

I'm Anitra Nottingham, a former book designer, former typography teacher, and former co-chair of a graphic design school. I'm now a learning designer, but I'm a type nerd and I always will be.

Jason: I'm Jason Phillips, formerly a book designer and typography teacher. I'm a sometime illustrator and artist. In my career I've never strayed far from type and it will always have my heart.

Anitra: We are whipped into shape by our producer Inger Mewburn, professor at the Australian National University and editor of the Thesis Whisperer blog.

Jason: We are designers and friends who went to the same design school. Anitra failed her typography assignments – but I didn't.

Anitra: Again with the gloating...

Jason: Didn't you tell me you did well in other assignments?

Anitra: I did get an HD for a gift voucher assignment once.

Jason: There you go. Swings and roundabouts.

We met when we worked together at Oxford University Press, where we honed our type skills, became friends and developed a mutual hatred of the typeface Goudy, all of which still burns strong 25 years later.

Anitra: Each episode we deep dive into one typeface, finding out the sometimes surprising history behind the design and the designer, we admire (or not) its anatomy, ponder its uses and cultural impact.

Then we ignore all of that and talk about our feelings. In this episode we have a special guest along to talk about his feelings as well. Hi, David!

Jason: Hi, David and welcome.

Anitra: David, would you introduce yourself.

David: I'm David Spears, a former student of Anitra's. I'm a designer in Washington, DC, a typography teacher, and I recently learned enough type design skills to be dangerous.

Anitra: This episode we are going to talk about Bodoni. A transcript is available set in Bodoni which you can download from the show notes. Let's get started.

Jason: Before we launch into a bit of history, I just want to address the fact that when we were divvying up the typefaces for this season – and I kind of volunteered for this one – I did so without considering the Italian and French names I would likely have to butcher during our discussion. So can I just say, well played, Anitra.

Anitra: Pre-revenge for me having to butcher German in episode one.

Jason: I did try and help out with the pronunciation then. But Anitra confidently assures me I'm on my own here. Unless, David, you have some Italian or French expertise?

David: Sorry.

Jason: Oh well. Here goes.

So far in the podcast we've featured British and German type designers, but in this episode we're heading off to the Mediterranean. So pack the sunscreen and a bottle of prosecco!

Anitra: I'm ready, ciao bella!

David: Ciao, ciao!

Jason: Giovanni Battista, or Giambattista, to use the less formal version of the name, Bodoni was born in 1740 in the town of Saluzzo, an Italian town near the border with southern France. He was the son of a printer, and of course this was a time when you were really encouraged to follow in your father's footsteps. It was also a time when you went where the patronage was,

so in 1758 he upped stakes and moved to Rome, where he worked for the very impressive-sounding Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, which was basically the missionary arm of the Vatican. Apparently Bodoni had a gift for languages, and after studying Hebrew and Arabic, he specialised in compositing foreign language texts. Back then, and some might argue nothing much has changed, the Catholic Church operated as much as a multi-national corporation as a religious institution, and it was the connections Bodoni made in Rome that helped him land his next gig. In 1768, he was appointed Director of the press of the Duke of Parma. Bear in mind he's only 28 at this point. Now admittedly I came to design a little later than you, Anitra and David, but at 28 years old I can't imagine being appointed Director of anything. I was too busy being barked at and told to make type designs bigger and bolder, and 'can we try that bit centred instead'.

Anitra: I imagine that he was probably a little more accommodating to the Duke than we were to the various publishers and marketing managers we worked with though, Jason. I doubt he would've eyeballed the Duke as he approached his desk and said "Don't even ask me to put that type in a starburst."

Jason: We all have our own strategies for maintaining our professional dignity.

But back to Bodoni. You're also probably thinking Parma, isn't that some provincial backwater where they spent their time perfecting crumbed chicken dishes? In fact the Dukes of Parma were descended illegitimately from one of the Popes, and when the male line ran out, the female heiress scooped the pool and married the King of Spain. Europe was full of odd bits of territory that were being swapped around through complicated inheritance agreements and treaties, and Parma went on to be ruled by the Austrians (the Hapsburgs), and even the widow of the Emperor Napoleon – which makes the duchy sound like an tatty gift no one much wanted, but an official court appointment there was a actually a big deal at the time. Bodoni made such a name for himself that he was headhunted by other famous patrons, so the Duke offered him a private press, where Bodoni could work whenever he liked, in addition to his court post. He became a celebrity and something of a tourist attraction – Benjamin Franklin was a fan, as was Pope Pius VII, and unfortunately Bodoni was sick when Napoleon and Josephine (incidentally NOT the wife that ended up as Duchess of Parma) paid a special house call on visiting the city. Can we just pause a moment to consider the prestige of someone who can turn away the most powerful man in Europe at the time?

Anitra: As my children would say, that's a chad move.

Jason: Anyway, Bodoni continued living and working in Parma (and presumably turning away visitors to his workshop), building up his fan base. In the last couple of years before his death in 1813 his patron was the King of Naples, who also happened to be Napoleon's brother-in-law. Bodoni was survived by his widow, and it was she who posthumously published his catalogue and masterpiece 'Manuale Tipografico' in 1818.

Such was the continuing prestige of Bodoni that in 1963 the city of Parma opened a museum in his honour, a tourist attraction that still operates today.

Anitra: Look, I had a robust discussion with my husband about whether one should go back to Italy first when the world reopens or should one go somewhere else for a bloody change, and look, if he'd told me about this museum the conversation may have gone a bit differently.

David: I had no idea about it either. I want to go too.

Anitra: But it sounds like Giambattista had a full plate with all his other commissions, though. Why design a typeface on top of everything else, Jason?

Jason: We've talked before in this podcast about how back in the day typefaces were created by an individual type foundry or printer. It was a way of making a name for themselves, advertising their skill and differentiating themselves from their competitors. The Bodoni typeface first appeared around 1790, and immediately it represented a high degree of printing precision and technology because of its dominant feature, which is the extreme contrast between the thick and thin line weights. We're talking hairline widths at a time when metal type was cast by hand. It also took advantage of improvements in paper manufacturing – let's face it, rough surfaces are not kind to fine lines.

David: The process of type design is pretty invisible to consumers. It's like, all of a sudden a new typeface is ready to use. But it's an experimental process of playing with form that often comes from asking "what if?" That "what if" could stem from technological constraints or technological advancements. In this case, we see how technological advancements encourage experimentation.

Jason: For the look of his typeface Bodoni was influenced by the work of French type designers Francois-Ambroise and Firmin Didot, both of whom were contemporaries of Bodoni, and also Pierre Simon Fournier, who lived earlier in the eighteenth century and who was in turn influenced by John Baskerville. In fact, after leaving his Rome job and before starting up in Parma, Bodoni had planned a trip to the UK in honour of that inspiration – a sort of Kon-tiki tour in reverse, I guess – but it fell through.

As well as his new typeface, Bodoni developed a sparser, cleaner page layout, with less overt decoration and more white space, which brought the typeface into even more focus.

Anitra: What was Bodoni trying to achieve with these sorts of changes though? What was the point? Just to show off?

Jason: I'll just backtrack for a minute and mention the Romain du Roi, or the King's Roman. This was an attempt in late seventeenth century France to formulate a new, more mathematical typeface for official use by the Royal Print Office. It was commissioned by Louis XIII at the insistence of his chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu – famous for being the shadowy antagonist in *The Three Musketeers* stories – and involved mapping out letterforms on standardised grids, rather than relying on the more organic evolution over time that modified other previous typeface styles. The result was rounded letterforms became more perpendicular, and serifs became sharper and showed less bracketing (the tapering of the wedge that connects the serif to the main stroke). The project took ten years, and in the end, like a lot of government initiatives, it didn't have the uptake they'd hoped, but the concept remained quite influential.

So I can't help thinking that Bodoni was trying to reflect the spirit of his time. The eighteenth century was when the Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, really hit its stride. As you can tell from the name, this was a philosophical movement that saw itself as progressive and rational, and wanted to distinguish itself from anything that had gone on before. It covered a broad range of subjects from politics and law through to economics and

sociology, and emphasised the scientific method whilst questioning religious orthodoxy. Of course this is all before the advent of mass media, so I'm not suggesting your average person had much exposure to the congratulatory, "I say, well-spotted, sir!" correspondence that was criss-crossing Europe and America at the time. But remember that Bodoni moved in some pretty elevated circles, and these sorts of ideas were turning up in the new coffee houses and salons, as well as printed pamphlets and journals.

David: Just how art is influenced by and reflects movements and thoughts of a time, so does type design. This is a great example of that! We see rational thought and mathematics being applied to type form in a new way. The natural slant (stress) of 'o's, for example, that occurs from handwriting and calligraphy is replaced with an 'o' with vertical symmetry.

Jason: However, don't let all this talk of liberty and fraternity fool you. Bodoni's life was bracketed by two momentous European conflicts: the War of the Austrian Succession in the 1740s and the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. The first started because basically no one wanted a girl running the Hapsburg Empire, and the second started because in the political ruin after the French Revolution, a sufferer of short-man syndrome from Corsica saw an opportunity to emulate Alexander the Great. So still plenty of death and mayhem for everyone to enjoy.

Specifically around the time of this typeface's release, George Washington gave the first State of the Union address in New York and a few months later signed into existence the District of Columbia, future site of the capital of the United States; and keeping on a United States theme, following a revolution in 1798 the United States of Belgium was formed. More locally, Fletcher Christian and the other mutineers from the Bounty landed on Pitcairn Island.

Anitra: Okay, let's move from history to anatomy. What are the key elements that distinguish Bodoni as a typeface?

Jason: Bodoni comes under the type classification Didone. The category name itself is an amalgam of the surnames of Firmin Didot, who I mentioned earlier, and our friend Giambattista Bodoni. Which, for those of you who are Brangelina, Bennifer and Kimye fans, goes to show that celebrity portmanteaus have been around a lot longer than you might think. This class of typefaces is also sometimes referred to as Modern – as opposed to Oldstyle or Renaissance-derived letterforms – which I think really emphasises the self-consciously forward-looking and progressive aesthetic they tried to encapsulate.

David: I've also heard them called Neoclassical typefaces. Again, emphasizing a move away from the classical approach.

Jason: It's a serif typeface, with narrow serifs that are a nearly constant width when horizontal, and some strokes ending in a ball terminal instead of the wedge associated with other serif typefaces. You see this on the lowercase 'f' and 'j', for example. But the most distinct feature, you could call it the signature look, is the strong contrast between the weight of the thick, predominantly vertical strokes and the very fine mainly horizontal strokes.

If you've ever picked up a copy of *Elle* or *Harper's Bazaar*, you'll recognise it instantly as a typeface synonymous with the world of FASH-UN. Similarly, it's been used by Elizabeth Arden, Giorgio Armani, and in the unmistakable lowercase 'c', uppercase 'K' combo of Calvin Klein.

Anitra: Look, identifying between the Didones can be a nightmare. I was flicking through (Simon) Garfield's *Just My Type* and I read his take on spotting typefaces which made me laugh: "identifying a particular font can be the most infuriating task and designers can spoil their whole day by walking past a shop window and seeing something they can't name. It's far worse than trying to identify a song from a snippet of lyric or melody". And it is!

To me Bodoni is like the Audrey Hepburn of typefaces. It's stylish, thin and can be a total nightmare to work with. I'll admit I think the italic is lovely, though —and I am very partial to the medium italic in particular. It's also easier on the eye than it has any reason to be.

David: I agree, the italic is very beautiful.

Anitra: After writing this sentence I did a bit of a dive to find out why that might be. Which led me into the fascinating world of typeface legibility studies. Which is...such a fraught area, don't get me started. Dr Louis Emile Javal conducted some of the earliest scientific studies in the 1940s, and Bodoni was one of the few typefaces that passed his "blink test", which was, as it describes, the number of extra times you blink when reading a passage of text. Something something eye strain something something. Garfield says about Javal that he defined "good type" only in terms of "legibility" and did so with "terrible severity" so take that as you will – it's a pretty simplistic way to think about the human brain. Garfield says also that in the 1970s the RCA Readability of Print Research Unit "concluded that people found type with strong distinctive strokes and a greater distinction between letters lead to a clearer and faster digest on information." If so ,this is probably why Bodoni is more readable than it appears to be. I have to say a slab of body copy set in Bodoni can be offputting to the reader.

And one more thing there are some REALLY terrible digital cuts out there. My students used to cut corners with free knock-offs and they always looked terrible. It's an unforgiving face, so if you use a bad version it's much more noticeable. It's also a typeface that students murder regularly, which made me a bit jaded.

David: Bodoni has a lot of fine details and nuanced balance. Those free and awful versions don't have the same attention to detail. If you zoom in really close and see any jagged lines or imperfect curves, stay far far away from it. It may seem obsessive and you'd think "oh, no one will be able to really tell", but the eye is really good at being distracted. You compound all those imperfections and you get an awful design and challenging reading.

Anitra: Now to our feelings. Overall impression and best/worst feature in your opinion, Jason.

Jason: Not everyone was/is a fan. A French printer once wrote that the Modern typefaces were so precise and symmetrical that they should be reserved for printing railway reports. And Frederic Goudy, about whom we'll have more to say in a future episode, confessed that he could not develop "any enthusiasm" for Bodoni in particular, because of its "artificiality".

Anitra: Look isn't that just a bit sexist of Goudy, though? Given Bodoni's predominance in women's fashion?

Jason: The high contrast does mean that the thin strokes drop out against anything but the plainest background, leaving you with sort of half-letters that are still legible from a distance but a bit odd-looking. Apparently the technical term for the effect of those dominant thick strokes and

receding thin strokes in body copy is “dazzling”, which to me sounds like the most admiring form of criticism. Like, there’s a negative deep in there if you can be bothered digging through the compliment to get to it. A form of dazzling in itself, really.

David: Placed in the right hands though, a designer could really leverage the legible but odd looking. Sometimes you need to slow a viewer down and shock in order to catch attention and draw them in. And Bodoni has enough character to do just that

Anitra: Look, honestly Bodoni, and all Didones just don't always play well with others, do they? And I think that’s why I like it. It’s really best on a white page, or a field of colour. If you put it over an image you have to make sure there’s very, very minimal contrast. I am kind of convinced that it’s used in fashion magazines – and websites — because those articles are not designed to actually be read, because I don’t think it encourages reading. One of its best features is that it instantly conveys “fashion” and “high-class” (although there’s a school of thought that if you ever say that about something it isn’t, which is probably true), but unlike display typefaces it’s not so obvious. I used to say to students that Helvetica is the “vanilla sponge” of typefaces because it will soak up any meaning you want but Bodoni is like fish sauce, it has a flavour. It also means you can use it to contrast really well. A title in Bodoni and say, Helvetica, is instantly more interesting because there are opposite vibes happening.

David: Or even a Geometric Sans like Futura. They’re different avenues to precision and symmetry.

Anitra: Garfield points out interestingly that the industrial revolution, which came after Bodoni, was designed the other way: typefaces became “fat, heavy and ungainly” (which post-COVID, no judgement) fonts that “soaked up ink and boasted of their gluttony and pride.” (Listen, I love you, Simon Garfield, but it’s a bit fat phobic, honestly.) He says that the “industrial revolution had no time for delicacy and so redefined types of earlier centuries were discarded”. But maybe, I don’t know, everyone got sick of typefaces that looked like they were on a diet all the time? It says something about the modern age that it’s still around so much, perhaps.

David: Yeah it’s a sign of the evolution of time and styles. Even though Bodoni departed from Oldstyle, today we associate rigidity with an old style. Type today is much more fluid and more in line with the Industrial Revolution’s approach: bespoke and fluid and varied.

Anitra: Gloves off time. This is the segment where we recommend whether you should or shouldn’t have a relationship with this typeface. What are your feelings on this? You first, Jason.

Jason: Really, if you have anything to say about FASH-UN you have to spell it out in Bodoni. What I find fascinating is that the Age of Enlightenment was predominantly about men’s ideas and men’s opinions about the world, and yet a typeface that grew out of that has become culturally anchored in feminine interests, however clichéd a generalisation that might sound. It reminds me of the way pink, rather than blue, used to be considered the most suitable colour for boys, and now people would be aghast at the suggestion. Like Barbie’s boyfriend Ken already has a questionable sexual identity – can you imagine people’s reactions if they decided to butch him up by dressing him in pink?

Anyway, as you said, Bodoni’s been used to suggest class and elegance and sophistication, so I can only imagine that those grunge icons Nirvana adopted it for their band insignia with the

deepest sense of irony. But I think lazy choices have devolved it further to represent the pretentious and the frivolous. I'm looking at you, Kardashians, and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Anitra: Yes, but *The Hollywood Reporter* uses the italic face for its masthead.

David: And we love the Bodoni italic.

Jason: But then also take the recent offering from Amazon Prime, 'Cinderella', a try-hard attempt to makeover the heroine into a feminist couturier. If you check out the promo artwork, apparently nothing says, relax guys, it's still all about the dress, like a Didone.

Anitra: Look it just says "class" which makes it hard to use it for anything else except as you pointed out, ironically like nirvana did. And like you say, class isn't what it used to be. Sniff. Speaking of irony, *Teen Vogue* has some great journalism so maybe I should not say it's the choice you make when you don't actually want anyone to read an article.

Look I'll confess I really like Bodoni, I've barely used it ever though. Firstly I never got the fun "chick lit" titles when I worked at Penguin (not that I am bitter or anything – I got the young adult titles, and I don't want to think too hard about that), and after that it says more about my career choices than the typeface itself probably. Not much call for it at Silicon Valley tech firms.

Now for our final section: Kiss, date, kill or marry. When we talk about why we would want to be with this typeface (or not).

Jason: Kiss. It's like one of those celebrity crushes. You might fantasise about it, but realistically, when are you going to get the chance to ever act on those feelings? Unfairly or not, I think it has a limited useability. And Bodoni does have a highly-strung look to it. I feel obliged to suck in my gut whenever I see it.

David: Kiss. But I do think it has limited usage. It works best with another font to contrast, turning a fish on it's head.

Anitra: Date – if I could – and not in a secret way either. In a show off way, knowing all the time I am out of my league. Also you can take Bodoni anywhere and it will comport itself well, you know? It never gets sloppy drunk in a couture dress at the Melbourne Cup and falls over a trashcan showing everyone it's underwear and ends up on TV with mascara over its face telling everyone that it's found someone's wallet.

Jason: We're still talking just about Bodoni, right?

Anitra: Thanks for listening! These are our feelings and opinions about typefaces, we're interested in yours. You can email us on the address in the show notes or leave a review on Apple Podcasts – where you can also rate us and make the pod easier to find.

If you want to join us with a question or opinion, a great way to do that is to record it via our speak pipe page. You can find it at <http://www.speakpipe.com>. We'd love to hear from you!

How can listeners contact you, Jason?

Jason: You can email me at designsleuth@yahoo.com

Anitra: And I'm at @anitrannot on all the things and anitraland.com

Our producer Inger is @thesiswhisperer on Twitter

Where can we find you, David?

David: I'm on instagram: @daviespree.

Anitra: Where you can find lots of pics of his very cute dog, Ava.

David: She's been sitting here listening with me the whole time.

Anitra: Thanks for coming on the show, David.

Jason: It's been great having you with us.

David: It's been fun. Thanks for inviting me.

Anitra: Thanks everyone for listening!

Jason: Thanks for your company!