

Episode 2 / Gill Sans

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Producer: Inger

Designated Designer for this week: Jason

Non-Designated Designer for this week: Anitra

Episode Summary

Due to technical issues during recording, we skip our advertised feature on Times New Roman; although fear not, we will return to Times New Roman in the future. Instead we focus on Gill Sans, and Eric Gill, type designer and religious artist, with a sideline in erotic woodcuts.

Jason warns that luxuriant facial hair combined with smock-wearing are a red flag, and Anitra confesses some disturbing revelations mean she is no longer a fan of Eric Gill or Chris Pratt. We agree that Gill Sans is not a typeface for beginners, and discuss the hazards of uneven proportions in letterforms. Anitra laments that Gill Sans being the “British Helvetica” doesn’t wash with Americans.

WARNING: this episode does include some potentially triggering content.

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

If you'd like to share your own views on Gill Sans, or the pod, or anything else in this episode (we listen to all critiques) email us on designsleuth@yahoo.com or leave us a message on speakpipe.com/thesiswhisperer

You can find us on Twitter: [@type_pod](https://twitter.com/type_pod) and on Insta: [@the_type_pod](https://www.instagram.com/the_type_pod)

Our Producer Inger is on twitter as [@thesiswhisperer](https://twitter.com/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 a place in 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. I always got great marks for my typography assignments.

Anitra: (Audible sigh)

Jason: 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.

Jason: Then we ignore all of that and talk about our feelings.

Anitra: This episode we were going to talk about Times New Roman. But! We have tried to record it 4 times now, and every take had sound problems (sorry, Inger). Times New Roman was boring to start with – and it's just too boring to do it again!

It will be the missing episode for now. And we will move on to Gill Sans instead.

Now it's not often a nerdy show about typography needs a content warning but this episode does. If any sensitive little ears are listening, turn this episode off. We will also give you a warning to skip ahead in places, as some of this may be triggering.

Bet you are awake now yeah?? OK, Let's get started.

Jason, who designed Gill Sans, when, and why?

Jason: Gill Sans was designed by, and named after, Eric Gill – who you might think sounds like a early member of Monty Python who dropped out before they hit the big time, but he was in fact a sculptor, a stone and letter cutter, an illustrator of both the sacred and the profane (and on the profane side of things I'm including his erotic wood-cuts), and of course, pertinent to our discussion, a type designer.

He was born Arthur Eric Rowton Gill – so you can understand why he might have gone with something a bit punchier – in Brighton on the south coast of England in 1882. He attended the Chichester School of Art and then apprenticed to a London ecclesiastical architect. Which was apparently a thing back then. Nowadays you'd probably cop some odd looks if that's how you introduced yourself at parties. Not to mention your job title requiring a double-sided business card.

Anyway, there is one example of Gill's architecture, a Catholic Church completed just prior to his death, located in the delightfully British-sounding Gorleston-on-Sea. And as a sculptor he worked on some large commissions such as the Stations of the Cross at Westminster Cathedral and several war memorials – interesting that he was himself a pacifist.

In London Gill studied at the Central School of Art and Crafts, which was where his typographic journey began. He was invited to design his first typeface by Stanley Morison of the Monotype Corporation, who was impressed by a sign for booksellers in Bristol designed by Gill (which looks very similar to Gill Sans). He was made an Associate of the Institute of British Architects in 1935, and given the title of Royal Designer for Industry (the highest accolade) in 1936. In 1937 he was made an Associate of the Royal Academy.

Over the years he wrote numerous essays on art and religion, and died at home after an operation for lung cancer in 1940.

Now that all sounds fairly respectable, right?

Anitra: Yes and I sense there's a "but" coming?

Jason: Yes. This is where we need to stress the content warning mentioned at the start of the episode for survivors of sexual abuse especially. (Pause.)

It turns out that Eric Gill kept diaries, which detail not only numerous extra-marital affairs, but incestuous relationships with his sisters and two of his daughters, AND a – shall we say – unhealthy interest in the family dog. WHICH HE RECORDED FOR POSTERITY. I mean, this is a guy who was a bit of a religious nutter, and who effectively moved to rural Sussex and founded an artistic community centred around himself. He rocked an Amish-style beard – and I'm not at all suggesting that the Amish do impolite things to their farm animals or that a Rumspringa year would have sorted out young Eric – but we've all seen enough pseudo-religious B-grade horror flicks to know that luxuriant facial hair, combined with the somewhat wild-eyed look Gill has in photographs and a predilection for smocks, adds up to trouble...

Anitra: Yeah. I'd heard the topline details about Eric Gill being a weirdo for years, not the family pet stuff but the rest of it. I was like, that sounds bad, but I liked this typeface so I just kind of ignored it or didn't think about it too hard I guess? Worse, honestly I think I glossed over it as "ancient history". It wasn't until one of my students went and did a deep dive into the original sources and came to me a bit distressed that we hadn't sufficiently warned her that I went and read some of the diary entries myself. Big mistake, really trust us on this and don't look it up, you can't unread it once you read it.

Jason: I don't think we want to dwell on the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime (apologies, Mark Haddon) – or the sisters, or the daughters, or even the long-suffering wife – so let's turn to the broader cultural context in which Gill lived. We focus so much on the two World Wars that sometimes the years in between, which is when Gill's output is most prolific, seem like just a breathing space.

But in fact this is a period of tremendous political, social and economic upheaval. There's the collapse of various governments and regimes across Europe, the fall-out of Communism taking over Russia, the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s, and the events leading up to the second World War. Gill was anti-fascist, so he was obviously politically active and would have viewed developments in Italy, Spain and Germany with alarm.

Some other significant events around the date of Gill Sans's commercial release are: Charles Kingsford-Smith and his crew complete the first flight across the Pacific Ocean from the US mainland to Australia; John Logie Baird demonstrates the world's first colour television transmission in Glasgow; Alexander Fleming first discovers what becomes known as penicillin, and Mickey Mouse debuts in 'Steamboat Willie', considered to be the first sound film.

Eric Gill's life spans Art Nouveau to Art Deco and Modernism.

To me his illustrations for the Four Gospels – which we will put a link to in the show notes – are a good example of how dramatic the aesthetic change over that time was. They are the love child of traditional medieval manuscripts and Aubrey Beardsley (who was another sexually controversial English convert to Catholicism. Just saying). As a result the Gospels wouldn't look out of place in the interior of a fancy Art Deco apartment.

Anitra: Gill Sans was designed to reflect the new Art Deco styling too. Gill was working for the Monotype Corporation with Stanley Morrison when he was asked to design a competitor to the new fangled and popular sans serif fonts like Futura. Morrison figured that a typeface like the London Underground typeface (which people often think is Gill Sans but isn't) would be a best seller, and he was right.

Thanks Jason, that was... refreshing.

Now for our next section, Anatomy, where we briefly check out the body of our typeface for this episode. Jason what do we need to know about Gill Sans's body?

Jason: Gill Sans is a sans serif font. It's categorised as "Humanist", which means it uses geometric shapes but is characterised by some stroke modulation making it more organic and less machine-like. Now I realise that once you know certain things about Eric Gill's...ahem... proclivities it's difficult not to cast everything about him in a sort of Benny Hill/Mrs Slocombe – "my pussy" – light. You could be forgiven, for instance, for thinking that his other most famous font design, Perpetua, sounds like an early brand name rejected for Viagra. And don't get me started on Golden Cockerel Press Type. People, not Eric Gill obviously, were a lot more innocent in those days. But by stroke modulation we mean a blend of thicks and thins, rather than a uniform line weight. This is evident in the lowercase 'a', 'e', 'g' and 'r'. Another key feature is the vertical stroke ends on letters such as upper and lowercase 'c's and 's's, and the lowercase 'f', which create the optical illusion of tapering.

Gill Sans was designed for both body copy and display text and it includes a quite extensive family of weights and styles, ranging from condensed and thin to heavy.

Anitra: Yes I looked it up and there are 36 derivations, which is a lot!

Thanks Jason. I think Gill sans is good looking body wise – elegant, modern and spare. It's very British – not the quirky British like Benedict Cumberbatch – more of the smoothly good looking British like Jude Law.

Now to our feelings. Overall impression and best/worst feature of Gill Sans, Jason?

Jason: I find a lot appealing about it. I like the geometry and the mix of narrow and broad characters. Other sans serif typefaces like Helvetica feature a more uniform width of characters but I think that creates a stretched and artificial look to some letters.

So I prefer the mix that Gill Sans utilises. But once you start getting into the bold, extra-bold, ultra-bold and heavy faces, the letterforms look ridiculous (really, at that point what typeface doesn't?) – they lose all proportions. It's like someone decided, let's see much air we can pump into these babies before they blow. I can't seriously think of a single instance when, as a designer, I would be tempted to use them.

Anitra: Well to be fair the ultra bold faces were designed I think in the 1960–70s by other people, like the sequel cashing in on the success of the original. Not even as a joke though? My friend Tony likes to say there's one job in your career for a display typeface, maybe you just haven't found the job for Gill Sans Ultra Bold yet??

Jason: No. Just...no. The scale between the x-height and the cap-height also bothers me. Gill went for a deliberately and comparatively low x-height, and I find if you look at them long enough the upper case characters tend to teeter over the lowercase ones. And to be really fussy – which I am – some individual letters bug me as well. Other opinions may differ, but I find a really successful uppercase 'G' is tough to nail, and the Gill Sans version looks top-heavy, like it's about to topple over. Same with the double-storey lowercase 'a'. This is the version of an 'a' with the little curl over the top.

Anitra: I agree, and I think this problem is why the argument that Gill Sans is not a good body copy face maybe has some merit. It's certainly very hard to set well as body copy. When I started teaching at the Academy my boss Mary and I had our first argument about whether you can in fact set body copy well in Gill Sans at all. She had no truck with my "but it's the British Helvetica! I come from the Commonwealth so I see it differently!" argument. It was early into my time at the academy and I think during that argument she suspected my taste level wasn't quite right at that point – I got a look. To be fair, she had seen one too many student projects that tried and failed – she's not wrong. A few years later I had to go back and agree with her that it's not for beginners.

The discussion ended BTW when I told her my resume was set in Gill Sans and she had still hired me anyway. Not to brag but getting that resume to look killer in Gill Sans was not easy.

OK now it's time to get right into it, where we throw all caution to the wind and discuss whether you should or shouldn't have a relationship with this typeface. Jason, as a designer what relationship do you have with Gill Sans?

Jason: I've used this font both on book covers and in interior pages, because it has that display and body copy versatility. And it would be useful to evoke a particular period – early to mid-twentieth century, say – if required.

Apparently about ten years ago there was some online debate about whether to boycott Eric Gill. However, there is also a tribute font named Canicopulus. Safe to say there are mixed feelings out there. Anitra, does the fact that you know some uncomfortable truths about Eric Gill mean that you are uncomfortable using Gill Sans?

Anitra: I used to use it all the time, including my first website design and my resume. The closest I ever got to a design award was with a cover that used Gill Sans – ironically that had a dodgy picture of a cat with its tail up on it now I think about it. Anyway, Gill Sans to me is like Chris Pratt. I used to love Chris Pratt and find him very attractive but over time his personal life has made him less attractive. Like he probably had an affair with Jennifer what's her name, then he left his wife in a rude way, then he started being very weirdly performatively catholic and posting pictures of himself carrying a large cross around (like, ok dude but, why?!) and being all anti choice – we call it forced birth now yeah? borderline Trumpy – well didn't come out against Trump anyway – and lately he has been just slightly

anti-masker. And well, ugh. Stop it you know? Like you're still cute but I don't want to rush to watch something with you in it anymore. The magic has gone. That's kind of what happened with me and Gill Sans. Over time I just... stopped using it, probably after I read that diary entry but not immediately, it took some time. I am not sure you can always separate the art from the artist.

Jason: Not everyone is squeamish about associating with Gill Sans. In fact it has a prominent corporate history. The BBC's use of the typeface in its logo since 1997 post-dates those revelations about Gill's sex life. Perhaps they figured most people wouldn't have read the biography. But most famously Penguin Books chose it for their original colour-coded paperback covers, and these have had a recent revival, which puts the typeface back in the public eye. Gill Sans also replaced the Johnston typeface (designed by Gill's old mentor Edward Johnston) in use by British Railways. So it has that safe and trustworthy feel. I think it's fallen out of fashion more recently, but it would be a good choice if you wanted something less formal than a serif but still clean and conservative.

Anitra: Look, I think the "it's the British Helvetica" is the best way to think about it as a design choice. It's got that "keep calm and carry on" vibe. Which lets face it in this world is a welcome thing visually.

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).

Is this typeface a one time thing, or do you just go out with it occasionally. Do you never use it, or do you use it so much you worry about yourself? Let's get real.

Jason: I would definitely date Gill Sans. Hell, I would even consider a friends-with-benefits arrangement. I think it has a lot going for it. On a purely aesthetic level I think it is quite attractive, with a degree of sophistication. Reliable. You could hold a decent conversation in Gill Sans. But... eventually I would want to start seeing other people. I suspect Gill Sans would start to get a bit bossy. A bit demanding as the relationship progressed. And a bit clingy at the hint of a break-up.

Anitra: Well I think it's safe to say that Gill Sans and I have broken up and I am not sure I admitted it to myself that it was really over before we did this episode. And luckily I ghosted Gill Sans, because you are totally right the break up would have been weird for sure. Like a very old romance that you can look back on fondly, I can still see what I found attractive, and I don't blame you for dating Gill Sans, Jason – no judgement at all. It's just there are other Sans Serifs in my life now you know?

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 option, 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!

You can find us on:

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Thanks for listening!

Jason: Thanks for your company