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Fontsmith

“Crafting these abstract drawings we know as the alphabet is a very personal thing.” Up close and typographical with the Fontsmith himself...

Jason Smith's long-running love affair with type design began with a six-month stint in the Monotype drawing office at the tender age of 18. Some 15 years later Jason's Fontsmith foundry has produced typefaces for some of the nation's biggest names, running the typographic gamut from PostOffice to E4.

Moving up the ranks

Unlike most lads his age who spend a fortnight battling with the photocopier, Jason recalls his work experience as being a decisive career moment: “After spending about six months in the Monotype drawing office,” he says, “it became very clear to me this was the direction I wanted to pursue.”

True to his word, Jason went to work with David Quay at The Foundry immediately upon graduating in 1992. After this apprenticeship he moved on to work with the inimitable Bruno Maag, developing his understanding of digital type.

While still working with Bruno, Jason embarked on a freelance career, “Doing most of Safeway's consumer packaging and 'own brand' labels.” This was the first of several large corporate jobs.

Not surprisingly he describes these as a good couple of years, during which time, “It became clear I needed to

concentrate on typeface design as this was where I got most enjoyment.” So, at the tail end of the 90s Jason set up FontSmith.

The joy of type

“I've always liked the erotic woodcuts of Eric Gill,” reflects Jason on the influences that have had implications for his production values. “The long shapely single lines with sensitive variation of thickness taught me that to design shapely typefaces, one should be able to draw.”

He's no less rigorous when it comes to his motivations: “You can't teach anyone how to have ideas or a craft unless they have a genuine passion.” Somehow this 'organic' approach is reassuringly demanding in a type designer.

Certainly Jason's clients appreciate it. There is, after all, no substitute for hard work. “I like to understand the whole brand experience the designers are trying to get across before I attempt a font for the client,” he says. This sounds something like the state-of-mind thing Kyudo is obsessed with. Lending weight to the Japanese archery theory, Jason adds: “A lot of what I do is instinctive and hard to give reasons for.”

“Graphic design is about communication,” says Jason, in which he gives type design a central role. “As

typographers, we can sum up a message through the personality of its letterforms in an instant.” This is a power open to abuse as the fontsmith himself is well aware: “Typography can create a subliminal message very easily.”

However, it's this same power that makes typography a viable living: “The use of a unique corporate typeface is an extremely effective way to 'glue' together all the elements of an identity,” explains Jason. It helps that owning the rights to a font also makes it more straightforward to distribute it to suppliers.

Experimentation

The freedom to experiment with type is a relatively new thing and, as with most new things, is prone to extremes. Despite this, Jason is happy about the growth of interest in type: “I see no reason why every designer can't have a go at designing a font,” he says. “Experimental or serious, it all has a place in graphic design.”

But it isn't a complete licence to kill; there's an important caveat: “There has to be a reason it.” So no fonts for fonts' sake. Given these reservations about motivation, the picture's still rosy: “Generally I think the use of type by graphic designers is good, creative and”, wait for it, “even exciting in some places.” It's in the everyday that Jason despairs: “When it comes to

practical information in day-to-day life, timetables, signage, magazine design, some of these

are dreadful.” The central problem is, according to Jason, a lack of art. “What tends to happen [at the cheaper end of experimentation] is someone will open up a typeface with a piece of software and completely bastardise it.” While he's willing to admit this can lead to fascinating results, it's also illegal most of the time. If you want to experiment, try it from the ground up.

“We see Fontsmith typefaces all over the place, and it's really satisfying to see,” says Jason. This includes British Gas, the Natural History Museum and a planned global campaign by cosmetics giant Avon.

FontSmith has been blessed with phenomenal success, particularly in its bespoke work. At root, this comes down to a commitment to the art and craft of typography, as Jason remarks: “As a rule, here at Fontsmith, I believe in purity when designing letters.”

See the full collection of Fontsmith's fonts and logos at www.fontsmith.com. You can call the company on +44 (0)20 7251 5656



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