

PUBLIC LIVES

Two Type Designers, Joining Forces and Faces

By David W. Dunlap

For young Jonathan Hoefler, it was cans of treacle and boxes of custard mix in his mother's kitchen on the Upper West Side. For young Tobias Frere-Jones, it was jars of marmalade and pots of mustard in his mother's kitchen in Brooklyn. For both, it was the realization that something about the type on those labels (Gill Sans, they later learned) marked the food, with no other cues needed, as indubitably English.

And so, two type designers were born.

Six days apart, as it happened: Jonathan on Aug. 22, 1970, Tobias on Aug. 28. Both had English mothers—Doreen Benjamin from Yorkshire, married to Charles Hoefler; and Elizabeth Frere from Kent, married to Robin Jones—who bought imported groceries that stoked their sons' fascination with letter forms unlike any they were accustomed to seeing in the United States.

(Thirty years ago, before the advent of computer typography, national fonts often stayed within national borders. Gill Sans, a utilitarian English typeface, was designed in 1928 by Eric Gill along the lines of that used in the London Underground.)

With so many parallels in their adolescence, it seems inevitable that Mr. Hoefler and Mr. Frere-Jones would become business partners. But fate kept them apart for a while.

Mr. Frere-Jones's father brought home layout boards for advertising campaigns on which he was working. His mother brought home printing samples from her job. And there were framed pages from 15th-century books on the walls.

"I got the idea that somebody, somewhere, has the job of deciding what these letters look like," Mr. Frere-Jones said. "It was like someone was designing water or designing air."

He graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992 and moved to Boston, where he worked at the Font Bureau, a digital type foundry. Among the fonts he designed in the early 1990's was Interstate, based on federal highway signs.

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Mr. Hoefler's father was a theatrical set designer and producer of industrial shows, which meant that there were always sheets of rub-off lettering around the house. His first type book was the 1977 catalog for Letraset transfer sheets.

"Tobias and I were probably the only two people under 14 who subscribed to U&lc," Mr. Hoefler said, referring to a magazine, Upper & Lower Case, published by the International Typeface Corporation.

Rather than going to college, he founded the Hoefler Type Foundry in 1989 and quickly won a commission from Sports Illustrated, which led to a face called Champion Gothic, inspired by 19th-century wood type. He has also designed fonts for The New York Times Magazine, among other clients.

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This was not the first time their paths had crossed competitively in search of books. It began to dawn on both men, who admired each other's work, that combining forces—and libraries—might make sense. "The whole thing had taken on the tone of an arms race," Mr. Hoefler said. "It was financially ruinous for us both."

Mr. Frere-Jones joined the Hoefler Type Foundry in 1999. The name of the firm was changed this year to Hoefler & Frere-Jones. Five people now work there, in the Cable Building at Broadway and Houston Street. Mr. Hoefler is married to Carleen Borsella, the firm's marketing director and chief operating officer.

Though the spotlight does not often shine on typographers, the firm received wide attention this summer for its Gotham font, designed by Mr. Frere-Jones, which was used on the Freedom Tower cornerstone. Its plain, vernacular quality struck an understated aesthetic tone for the first permanent element of the new World Trade Center.

When designing, one partner will typically draw the font while the other acts as editor and kibitzer. Or one might draw the text version, while the other draws the display version. They are currently designing Mercury and Chronicle typeface, intended for newspapers.

“Working together has diminished by half the number of opportunities that are available to us individually,” Mr. Hoefler said, “but it's doubled our ability.”

The centerpiece of the office is a double-sided bookcase 16½ feet long and 8 feet high, from which specimen books fly when the partners delve into typographic history. They finish each other's sentences, ranging with easy erudition from the influential printer and type historian Theodore L. De Vinne to a 1950's potato-chip-shaped typeface called Calypso. It's by Roger Excoffon, they point out.

Within minutes, their conference table is piled high with the Stempel specimen book; an 1882 catalog from George Bruce's Son & Company of Chambers Street; MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan's “11th Book of Specimens of Printing Types and Every Requisite for Typographical Uses and Adornment”; and the 1977 Letraset catalog.

Mr. Frere-Jones looks up. “When we start grabbing books off the shelf—”

“—we need to be stopped,” Mr. Hoefler says.