

# Type Casting

By ROB WALKER

# Bello

In a world of images, words sometimes don't seem to have as much value as appearances. But what about the appearance of words? While most of us don't think about typography, beyond choosing among the preinstalled fonts in our home computers, consider an up-and-coming font, like [Bello](#). Bello recently won a best new "display font" award from the Type Directors Club, and is on pace to sell a respectable 160 licenses in its first year. Underware, the European three-man type foundry that created Bello, will be on hand at the font-maker gathering TypeCon in New York City this weekend. Yet it's unlikely that you have heard of Bello. "People are very unaware of this whole business," says Akiem Helmling, one of Underware's principals.

Like many creative businesses, typography has been radically reshaped by technology. Font-making was once rooted in expensive metal-and-machine processes that date back to Gutenberg, but today it is thoroughly digital. Linotype, Bitstream and other big companies are a bit like major record labels, with catalogs full of reliable classics like Helvetica and Futura -- the type of type sold in packages to software companies. There are also hundreds of smaller players: indies, in music-business terms. Emigre is one of the best known of these (with hit fonts like Mrs Eaves), along with Hoefler & Frere-Jones, House Industries and P22. Such firms may sell licenses for one person to use a single font for \$50 or less, or sell packages of fonts for multiple users to design firms, ad agencies and the like. (They also create custom typefaces for specific clients, for much larger fees.) Meanwhile, as Tamye Riggs, executive director of the Society of Typographic Aficionados, points out, the digital revolution has also spawned tools that make it easy for almost anyone to create a new font and sell it for as little as \$2 -- or even give it away as a form of promotion. Not surprisingly, font piracy is pervasive. "Just like MP3's," Riggs says.

One thing that allows typographers to continue making a living is the fact that tastes evolve. In a 1976 essay reprinted in her book "The Sponsored Life," Leslie Savan, the media critic, assessed the dominance of Helvetica: its clean, authoritative, sans serif look reassured us "that the problems threatening to spill over are being contained." (Serifs are the little flourishes on the edges of letter strokes. This column is printed in serif-y Garamond.) The 1990's saw a huge spike in messier and trickier fonts -- "grunge" fonts, some were called in the trade. Gary Munch, president of the Type Directors Club, says that Trixie may have become the most famous of these when it was used as the "X" in the title of "The X-Files." In the last few years, the trend has been toward "script" fonts that look more handmade, like Bello.

Type obviously appears in all kinds of places, from book text to billboards, and Bello is a display font, meaning it looks better bigger. Its handmade look does not so much suggest writing as sign-painting. Based on lettering done with a brush, it evolved from a series of experiments with hand-drawn letters. Established and currently popular script fonts include P22 Cézanne (based on the handwriting of the artist) and Felt Tip Roman (based on the handwriting of Mark Simonson, the type designer who created it). Bello is too new to be at their level; Helmling figures that it takes about five years for a font to become a bona fide success, with sales of 500 or more licenses a year. Still, Bello is working its way more widely into the real world. One designer has just used it as the basis of a Coldplay tour T-shirt, for instance.

One tricky thing about script fonts is that in actual handwriting, the form of one letter might be affected by the letter next to it. Interestingly, Bello uses a digital format called OpenType, which, among other things, makes just such adjustments. As you type the word "Bello," for example, the second "l" looks different from the first. Helmling suggests this may be exactly what people find attractive about Bello and other script fonts. It's not just the appeal of "handwritten flavor," as he puts it, in a digital age. It's the way that technology allows users to harness those comforting imperfections perfectly.

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