A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KING OF PRINTERS: GIAMBATTISTA BODONI

Compiled by Michael Messmer
The image shown above is an engraved portrait of Bodoni which is displayed on the first page of the Manuale Tipografico.
Giambattista Bodoni was a brilliant type cutter, engraver, designer, printer, and publisher who lived in Italy from 1740 to 1813. He is said to be the “king of printers” due to his perfectionism and scholarly approach. He is best known for bringing the modern typeface to its height of elegance and sophistication. His modern typeface reached its peak of perfection in the late 18th century, and remained popular throughout the 19th century. (Dodd, Gutenberg to Opentype)

Bodoni was the son of a printer and grew up training in the skills necessary to enter the business as well. At the age of 18 he was hired as a typesetter in the Vatican’s Propaganda Fide printing works. He was put in charge of Vatican oriental typefaces, as he expressed interest in exotic types. Here Bodoni organized and catalogued the oriental typefaces, many of which were cut by Grandjean and Garamond two centuries earlier. (linotype.com)

At the age of 28 he became interested in meeting one of his greatest influences, John Baskerville of England. Baskerville is best known as a perfectionist type designer and printer. He created the typeface Baskerville, which was cut by his employee, John Handy. Baskerville’s typeface is classified as a transitional type because it broke away from the standards in type design of the time. The
King of Printers

Baskerville type was less of a success in England than it was throughout the rest of Europe. His type is characterized by full, open letterforms that give the page a light grey appearance. (Dodd, Gutenberg to Opentype)

In preparation for his journey to meet John Baskerville, Bodoni fell sick with malaria and had to recover while in his birthplace of Saluzzo, Italy. During his recovery he received a proposal from the Duke of Parma to become the director of a new printing office, the Stamperia Reale, in Parma, Italy. He left the Vatican in 1766 to set up and run the printing works. (Dodd, Gutenberg to Opentype)

The Stamperia Reale is where Bodoni spent the rest of his working life. He first used types from Pierre Simon Fournier to print, but soon designed and cut his own types that expressed his concept of elegance. He elevated the letterform to an art, a feat similar to Baskerville’s ideals; however, Bodoni’s type was the modern type, while Baskerville’s is transitional, between the old-face traditions and the modern face. Bodoni was able to perfect his type by laboring endlessly in refining them, due to his safety financially provided by his patron, the Duke of Parma. This labor of love was possible because he did not have to concern himself with commercial considerations. (Dodd, Gutenberg to Opentype)

ITC Bodoni Seventy-two, ITC Bodoni Seventy-two (EF), ITC Bodoni Six, ITC Bodoni Six (EF), Bodoni TS, ITC Bodoni Twelve, ITC Bodoni Twelve (EF), Berthold Bodoni, and Linotype Gianotten. (linotype.com) Bodoni Ultra is a fat face developed in the 20th century, used as an extra bold type.

One of the tips in usage of these digital fonts is to minimally increase tracking, recommended to overcome the visible vertical stress the face creates. This is a strategy preferred by type founders in the 19th century. Bodoni prints best on smooth, matt-coated paper. Avoid high gloss surfaces when printing text. Berthold Bodoni needs to be leaded due to tangling descenders with capitals and ascenders on the line below. Bauer Bodoni is wider set than Berthold, which is significant over many pages of text. Use ITC Bodoni Six for small-sized text, such as captions. Adobe Poster Bodoni, Monotype Bodoni Ultra Bold, and ITC Bodoni Seventy-two book and bold weights are best used for display. ITC Bodoni Seventy-two includes swash fonts for both italics. Heavily letterspacing capitals is recommended. Bodoni does not lend itself well to on-screen display, due to the fine hairlines of the serifs and horizontal strokes. (Dodd, Gutenberg to Opentype)
In 1771 Bodoni published his first typographical contribution, “Fregi e Majuscole.” A little over a decade later in 1782, Charles III of Spain named Bodoni his court typographer.

The first volume of Bodoni’s most famous work, the “Manuale Tipografico” was published in 1788. The book contained examples of 100 Roman, 50 italic, and 28 Greek fonts, including minuscules. In 1790 the Duke of Parma gave Bodoni permission to open his own printing works, entitled “Tipi Bodoni”– where he published volumes of Greek, Roman, and Italian classics. Many of these printed books were created for the London bookseller, James Edwards. Titles published by Bodoni include “Horace” in 1791, “Virgil” in 1793, and “Catullus” in 1794. He also published Homer’s “Iliad” in 1908, a copy of which he printed on vellum and presented to Napoleon in 1810. His widow published Bodoni’s second volume of his “Manuale Tipografico” after his death. This volume contained examples of Roman, Greek, Gothic, Asian, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Coptic, Armenian, and Phoenician fonts, as well as typographic ornaments, often in more
Characteristics of Bodoni’s types include unbracketed
hairline serifs and hairline horizontal strokes, contrasted
dramatically by thick stems. The types lack the rhythmic,
calligraphic flow of the Renaissance forms, but have a
static formality, which can be at the expense of text’s
readability. Punch cutting for such fine serifs required
enormous skill in cutting, striking matrices, and casting
metal type. The famous designer William Morris, associ-
ated with the Arts and Crafts movement in England, con-
sidered Bodoni’s mechanical perfection in typography the
ultimate example of modern ugliness. (infoplease.com)

Bodoni emphasized the use of good paper and strong ink.
He developed a process of calendaring, which consisted
of putting a sheet under a roller after it is printed
to make it smoother. (octavo.com)

The twentieth century gave way to a revival of Bodoni’s
types. Type foundries cut new types to simulate the origi-
nal types cut by Bodoni. With the advent of the digital
age, many versions of the typeface Bodoni have become
available to designers and the general public. Among
those are EF Bauer Bodoni, Bauer Bodoni, Bauer Bodoni
(BT), Bauer Bodoni (URW), EF Bodoni, Bodoni, Bodoni
(BT), Bodoni Antiqua, Bodoni Classico, ITC Bodoni
Ornaments, Bodoni Poster, Bodoni Poster Compressed,

than one font. There were symbols covering algebra,
geometry, medicine, music, and the zodiac. There were
only 250 copies produced, and remaining copies are
highly prized by collectors. Bodoni’s goal was to produce
spectacularly visual experiences for his reader. His
books were seldom read, but rather they were collected
and admired as works of art. (linotype.com)

In his preface to the “Manuale Tipografico,” Bodoni
lists four principles of qualities from which a good type
derives its beauty. Regularity or uniformity of design is
the first, and consists of understanding that many of the
characters in an alphabet share common elements which
must remain “precisely and exactly the same in them
all.” The second is “smartness and neatness,” in other
words, well-cut and finished punches that produce clean
matrices from which sharp and mirror-smooth type can
be cast. The third principle consists of good taste. Here
the type designer must maintain a “neat simplicity” and
an awareness of his or her debt to the best manuscript
letterforms. The fourth and final quality evident in a
beautiful type is charm, difficult to define, but present
in those letters which give “the impression of being
written not unwillingly or hastily, but painstakingly,
as a labor of love.” (octavo.com)
TRANSITION: TYPOGRAPHY IS ART

Baskerville

English printer John Baskerville’s 1750’s typeface has full and open letterforms.

Didot

French printer Francois Didot’s son Firmin developed the first Modern typeface in 1784.