

On Choosing & Buying Secondhand Type

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A regular feature of the Convention and of many branch meetings is the popular Bring & Buy Sale. The enthusiasm displayed by those present at these affairs, nudging their way to the front of the crowd, is demonstrative of the way in which most small printers are ever eager for a printing equipment bargain.

Whether or not the printer ever really needs the type or equipment that he so avidly buys at bargain prices is another matter, especially regarding the suitability of the newly-acquired face when used in conjunction with the typefaces he already owns and uses. The choice of new typefaces for the expanding print-shop is a subject of its own. This article concentrates on the factors the printer should bear in mind when proposing to buy second-hand type.

Perhaps it would be a rather sweeping statement to say that one just shouldn't buy secondhand type, because frequently types are inked but once or twice before the beginner tires of his new toy and then sells out, but the inexperienced printer should certainly exercise much care and judgement before making such purchases, and then proceed only after expert advice.

Probably the most important aspect of the proposed purchase is the synopsis of the fount. Are all or most of the characters present, including punctuation and numerals, in approximately the correct proportions? Are one or more of the vital letters like e or t absent or low in proportion to the remainder of the fount? Printers will often leave a certain word or phrase which they use most frequently standing in a galley or locked up in a chase, and these letters may either get separated from the rest of the fount or be so badly worn in comparison with the letters in the case that they are practically useless.

For a collector of the older or rarer types, this may not be so important. One good specimen of each character is good enough for him; further copies can be made either from reproduction proofs or from casting in moulds made from the original type. (Resin castings, etc.)

For the amateur who is trying to save money by buying cheaply, the cost of sorts obtained in order to bring the fount up to a reasonable synopsis may well approach the amount he has saved and that assumes that sorts are still available. The tyro should

familiarise himself with the approximate proportions of the characters in both card founts and large weight founts, even if only to check brand new type straight from the founder.

Another important factor is the amount of wear to which the type has been subjected. The initial inspection must be visual and badly-worn type is usually self-evident. Serifs take a lot of punishment and become rounded off; hairlines are weak points and may become flattened or broken altogether. There may be an actual change in the height of the type from feet to face (the 'height-to-paper') due to excessive pressure or subjection to a very long run. This can be checked by comparing an unused z or x with a well-worn e, or better still by using a type-height gauge. (The open jaws of a good composing stick set to an M laid on its back will make a reasonable type or block gauge.) If possible, take a pull of the type sandwiched between lines of new type or strip border.

Ink in the counters can easily disguise the design and conditions of a fount, and is also an indication of the care with which the former owner treated it. Caked ink can hide an almost unused type, so before discarding it as useless, wash the type well in water-soluble paint stripper, or one of the proprietary brands of type cleanser. You may find a hidden treasure there, but for safety wash both type and hands thoroughly afterwards.

On the other hand, cleaning type in this manner may reveal a sorry mixture of typefaces, and not the one that was advertised. Remember that the former owner may not have been an expert on typefaces nor even have really known what he had bought himself. He may have 'strengthened' a fount with a wrong design or simply have dissed into the wrong case without realising it. Unfortunately too, he may not be as honest as you would wish, and may realise what a pie he now possesses and simply be looking for a mug to buy it from him, because he is too lazy to sort out the mess!

Beware also that the fount is not a mixture of two or more families. These may be similar faces like founder's Granby and Monotype Gill Sans or Times New Roman mixed with Plantin Light. Alternatively they may be completely different faces altogether. Printers

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having run short of cases have been known to mix say 8pt small caps with 18pt roman because they are readily discernable in the case.

The case may contain a mixture of sizes too. Probably the most likely is the unhappy marriage of 10pt and 12pt Times New Roman, a face very popular with the amateur who hasn't yet mastered the different body sizes. He too is the printer who very carefully mixes the small capitals C O S U V W X and Z with their respective lowercase forms, and the I (and perhaps o) with figures 1 and 0 in old-style faces. Only too frequently does one find cap I, lowercase l, and the figure 1 in the wrong box. (Occasionally these latter characters are code marked on the beard of the type to differentiate between them.)

In very old cases of founder's type (c1900 and before) you may find that the type is cast to the pre-point-size system, where the body size varied from founder to founder. This applies particularly to display faces as very little old composition type (less than pica or 12pt) exists nowadays. A mixture of types of the two systems would cause havoc when it comes to locking up the chase.

Two ways of distinguishing the founders are the nick on the front of the type and the pinmark on the side. The pinmark often incorporates the initials of the foundry together with the type size in a circle. Nicks will vary tremendously. Most Monotype has the familiar rectangular nick, which lies halfway between the beard and the foot. It is possible to cast Monotype faces in founder's metal on a Monotype caster at a slow rate. This product may have a different nick from the usual rectangular pattern.

Founder's type can have one or more nicks either cast into the shank or cut out after casting. Various code patterns of nicks (often semi-circular in section) are cast to distinguish either between various body sizes or between different families on the same size bodies. Faces like Spartan or Engraver's Titling have different nicks to code the various sizes of caps and small caps, or sizes 1, 2, 3, & 4 on the 6pt or 12pt body.

Type cast to its natural height to paper has a smooth foot with a rough line across the middle where the tang produced in casting has been planed off. In some cases this planing of the tang goes so far as to

give two separate feet. Continental type which has had the foot milled down to produce English (Anglo-American) height to paper is distinguished by the curved 'circular saw' marks on the foot. Beware: this may also indicate a Continental or Didot point size type, which will not align with English types. If the case or package is marked, for example, 16D/18 or 24D/30 this indicates that it is a 16 (or 24) point Didot face cast on an 18 (or 30) point Anglo-American body to permit its use with English types. This usually means that it has been planed down to Anglo-American height too.

It is also possible to distinguish between Monotype and founder's metal on similar typefaces by gently pressing two characters together at right angles, using the vertical edges between the front and side of each. Invariably the Monotype metal will indent to a greater extent than the founder's type. The detailed identification and classification of individual typefaces themselves is beyond the scope of this article. However it is always best to attempt to identify type before buying, and to consider some relevant practical consequences of buying particular faces.

When buying more recent designs one should take care that sorts will still be available if one wishes to extend the range later. Is the face still cast? Many faces are already being deleted from the catalogues.

Take care over the alignment of the face on the body. Does the new match the old? When ordering sorts to supplement an old fount, send an alignment sample character with the order so that the founder may adjust the new casting to match the old. (Ask the founder which character he prefers to use.) When buying type of a style you already have, either from a founder or another printer, take an alignment character along with you from your present fount to check: e.g. a lower case x or cap H or M. Note that as mentioned above certain faces such as Spartan have several sizes of caps on the same body all aligning on the same base line. If buying this kind of face it is useful to make one's own 1, 2, 3 line score mark along the front of types before dissing them into the case to identify the various sizes on the same body. Beware of mixing Spartan from founders with the Monotype copy; they will not align! This situation occurs with other faces cast in two or more versions.

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The Monotype Corporation recommends standard dimensions of alignment for each face and size. For various reasons suppliers of Monotype faces do not always cast to the specified dimensions and you may find that 24pt Plantin bought from one company will not align with the same type from another.

If setting a long text with two supplies of the same face, finish one paragraph with type from the one case as it begins to run short and commence a new paragraph from the new case. Never mix the two cases unless you are positive they are identical. Make a note of where the change occurs and disassemble the types back into their respective cases again. This applies particularly to leaders (...) which look awful if mixed, and to borders and any other repetitive settings where variations are made noticeable by the regularity of the context.

Leaders are available in 3-dot, 4-dot, 5-dot or 6 dots to the em. It is useful to purchase 12pt 6-dot, 10pt 5-dot, 8pt 4-dot and 6pt 3-dot leaders. Then if different body sizes are used in the same job all the leaders have the same pitch of one dot per 2 points. It is also possible to fiddle the end of a line of 12pt 6-dot leaders where you have less than an em by using one of the other sizes. It is always better by choice to buy leaders new as they wear down quickly, and the top ones in the compartment will be much more worn than the less frequently used ones.

Script faces are available in numerous designs often very similar. They can be cast on either rectangular or angled bodies, and the same face may be cast on both. Because of the less distinct base line they are particularly prone to misalignment. Different founders use different angles of slope for the 'winged' body and you should always check that the new type has the same slope as your own. For example, Monotype Palace Script will not mix with the original founder's version.

Script faces frequently have hairlines in the design, which wear down rapidly and are also prone to wear where one letter joins the next. Ask for a proof of a fount if there is any doubt as to how badly the face is worn. Founder's designs often include N, S, E, and 1, 2, 3, etc in italic small caps for use in the old postal address, which Monotype designs omit.

Script faces are frequently kerned too. (A kern is

the small over-hang on a letter such as an f or j.) Kerns are particularly liable to breakage or wear and the script should be checked for this also. Because of this many kerned characters scripts require special 'winged' spaces to support the kerns and these too may not be interchangeable with existing types.

Some early founder's types had no kerns and letters such as f or j had 'pot hook' designs as in Linotype faces, where the letter is bent to stay within a normal rectangular body. More recent founder's faces and most Monotype faces incorporate kerns on one or more characters, especially in the italics, to improve the design of the face. As with scripts these should be checked for damage. Founder's types frequently have the kerned characters hand-filed after casting — this may help to distinguish them.

The ff series of ligatures, *ff fi fl ffi ffl* were devised to stop the f kerns breaking off in the more usual combinations of letters set. Amateurs tend to ignore these ligatures and they may be missing from the fount if the previous owner has put them to one side.

A test to distinguish founder's metal from Monotype metal was mentioned above. This is because founder's metal is much tougher and lasts longer, subject to treatment and use. Monotype metal is cheaper when new but wears more rapidly, so second-hand Monotype metal is also cheap but usually not worth buying.

Type metal is easily melted and type which has been allowed to get too hot, or has been in a fire can look alright but be too distorted to print properly. But corrosion is a much more frequent cause of damage to type metal. Type stored in damp or cold conditions oxidises easily producing a white powdery surface which prints with a mottled effect. Metal may also be damaged by misuse of chemical cleaners (or abrasive cleaners such as steel wool!) Oxidation often occurs on the least-used characters which are left in the case. Chemical corrosion occurs on the letters which are used most frequently. Type can be protected from corrosion by the small film of ink left by washing-up. Type which has become oxidised is also rather difficult to lock up and the face may be permanently deformed.

Beware battered and spiked type with distorted shanks. Also broken characters and dented letters.

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This is most noticeable on fancy letters but may be acceptable if the typeface is old and rare. Consider throwing away all the bad letters to leave a small fair fount of all good sorts, or if the type is valuable, putting the battered characters aside to be used only if absolutely necessary.

Be careful about spacing material too. Founders' spaces may even be pre-rationalisation type sizes, and thus may not mix with point sizes. Monotype spacing is much more tricky. Monotype spaces sold for hand setting are made in standard thicknesses of en, mid, thick and thin or half, third, quarter and fifth of a square em of the body size. Monotype spaces in a machine-set text are different for every line, and therefore should not be mixed with normal spaces. If you decide to diss some trade-set type into a case for re-use, throw the spacing away. It cannot be re-used except with extreme difficulty, and remember that the type is probably a lot softer than the other kinds you use.

Finally, note the cases that the type is stored in. These may vary considerably, having different layouts and different sizes, quite apart from the variations in 'homemade specials'. English and American case-lays are different. 'Doubles' are for caps and lowercase together, 'Uppers' are for caps alone (caps and

small caps), and lowercase alone goes in a 'Lower'. Not everyone, of course, necessarily uses the cases in the way they were intended, nor puts only one fount in a case. There are also other special cases for several small founts at once, for borders, for rules, etc. Check the case itself for size, both width and depth, and the depth of the front. All can vary. Beware of cases with bottoms that sag (letters jam under the divisions) or are cracked (letters get lost). Odd sized cases are best avoided if possible, especially home-made ones, as they pose problems of storage racking. One particular kind of note is the 'Stanhope' size, about two-thirds of normal. Racks for these are obtainable, but rare, and it is best not to buy any cases unless you get a rack at the same time.

As far as we know there is no standard work on buying secondhand type. While it was not possible in this article to go into identification of types, there are, apart from catalogues, a few books that can help with this aspect of buying. (Remember when buying, that it is only worth buying a type with a good design, suitable for the work you have in mind, and compatible with others in your stock.) Two good books are *Encyclopedia of Typefaces* by Turner Berry, Jaspert and Johnson and *A Handbook of Type and Illustration* by John Lewis.