

THE  
NEW  
BODONI  
BODONI

GIAM-

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TISTA

*Bodoni*

The Designer and the History of  
the Typeface He Created

By Peyton Klemm



# Giambattista Bodoni

was born in 1740 in Saluzzo in northern Italy. Both his father and grandfather were printers, so learning to make woodcuts, experimenting with different typefaces, and printing were all part of his upbringing. Working with types and printing came very naturally to Bodoni.

As a young man, he traveled to Rome and worked as an apprentice at the Propaganda Fide. This was the Catholic press that printed missionary materials for use throughout the world. It was there that Bodoni learned punch cutting.

While he was studying in Rome, his mentor, Costantino Ruggeri, the director of Propaganda Fide, committed suicide. This led to Bodoni's decision to leave Rome. He left with the intent to possi-

*jämbät-testä*

1740 - 1813

bly travel to England and work with the printer and type designer, John Baskerville. That plan did not unfold, however, because when he was briefly visiting his parents, the 28-year-old designer was invited by Ferdinand, the Duke of Parma, to establish and direct a printing shop. Bodoni took charge of the press, Stamperia Reale, and became the private printer to the court. There, he printed official documents and publications for Ferdinand, as well as his own projects and designs. Also in Parma, in 1788, he printed his first catalogue of more than 100 of his own typefaces.

## The Typographer of Kings, the King of Typography

Word of Bodoni's skills & talents spread internationally and many other dukes and kings, such as the King of Naples, approached him and invited him to work as their printer. In 1790 the Vatican invited him to come back to Rome and establish a press there. The Duke of Parma countered these offers by expanding facilities at Stamperia Reale and allowing Bodoni to have greater freedom and flexibility in his printing, and encouraged him to also print for other clients. Since he remained in Parma, Bodoni was able to spend an enormous amount of time refining his designs and cutting his type face. He also attended language courses in order to develop typefaces for different languages.

When the French Revolution began and the order of society started to change, elements of design also changed. This new, more modern design movement replaced the elaborate, decorative rococo style. Bodoni updated his typefaces and page layouts to make them more simple. These updates helped to pave the way for a new, more modern era of type design.

Around 1775, Bodoni was competing with a rival printer and type designer, François-Ambroise Didot. Didot's designs, much like Bodoni's, were light and geometric. Both designers were influenced by John Baskerville and there is speculation as to who created the designs first, and who followed. The rivalry encouraged the two designers to further push the boundaries of the modern style, which led to the highest level of neoclassical refinement in type design.

Bodoni

Baskerville

Didot

Aa

Aa

Aa

Bb

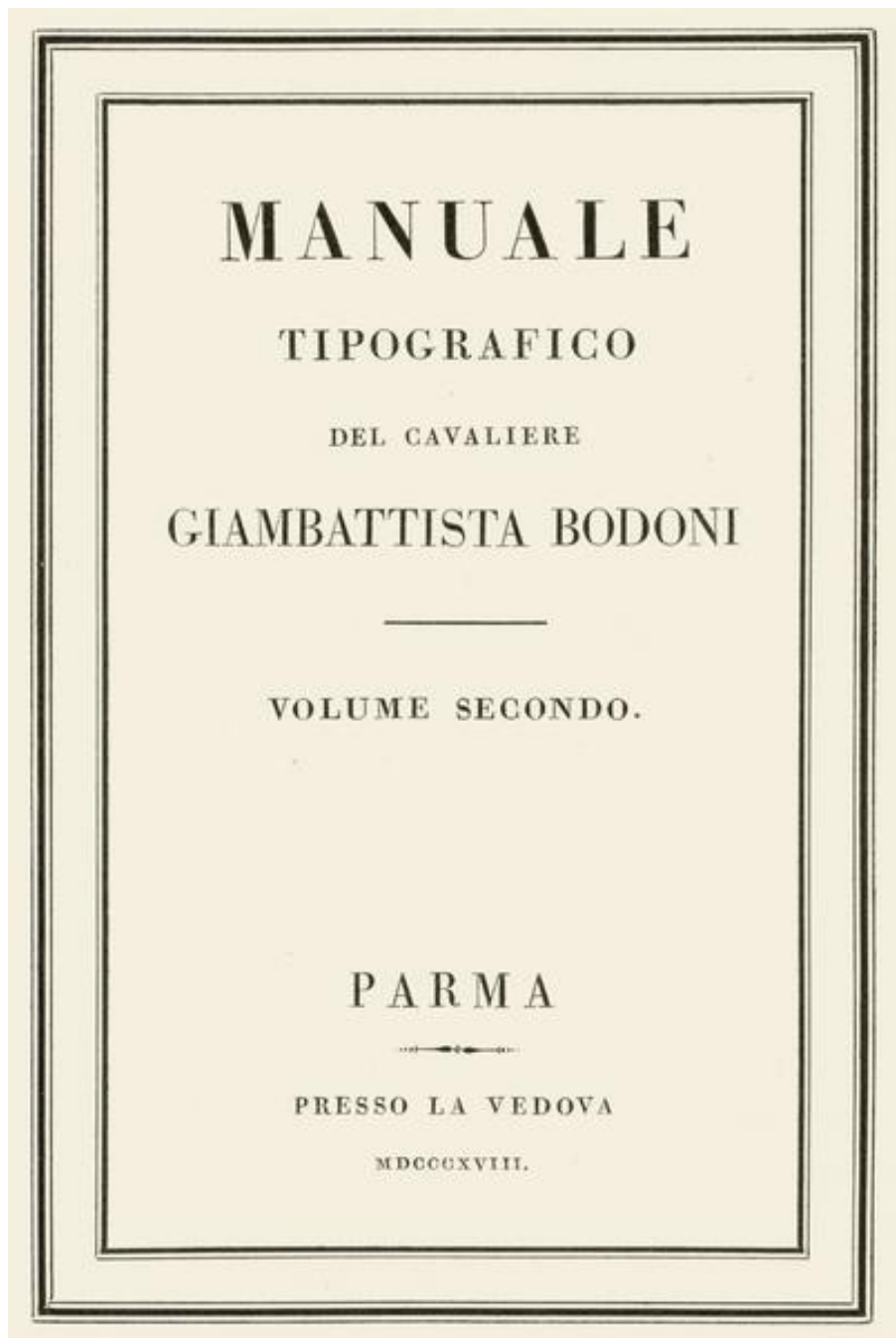
Bb

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Cc

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Bodoni died in 1813. Throughout his life, he published 345 books, designed about three hundred type fonts, and printed over 1,000 volumes at his press using his typefaces. Some of his greatest works are folio editions of Horace (1791), Vergil (1793), The Divine Comedy (1795), and Homer (1808), which were made to be admired for their typeface and layout. In 1818, Five years after his death, Bodoni's widow, Margherita Dallaglio, and the technical chief of the Officina Bodoni, Luigi Orsi, published The Manuale Tipografico. It was a manual of typography which Bodoni had been working on for more than four decades. It is the culmination of his life's work and it is known as his greatest contribution to the history of graphic design.

# *Type* & *Design*

Giambattista Bodoni was first influenced by the design style of Fournier le Jeune, a French punch-cutter, type creator, and typographic theoretician. Fournier's metal casting foundry supplied type and ornaments to Bodoni's press in Parma.

In his earlier work, Bodoni's page layouts, filled with decorative borders and ornamental designs, brought international fame to the Stamperia Reale in Parma.

Later, Bodoni was inspired by the work done by designers such as John Baskerville and Philippe Grandjean, who were using thin, straight serifs in their more modern typefaces. Baskerville was working to make graceful, delicate changes to the "old style" romans fonts. The two designers were also creating more contrast between the thick and thin strokes. Finally, the designers were using narrower, more condensed letterforms and giving type a taller, more geometric appearance. This made the page layouts and typography feel lighter.

This new, lighter way of design led to Bodoni's redesign of roman letterforms around 1790. He designed each letter to be more mathematical, geometric, and mechanical in appearance.

Bodoni's "Modern Roman" typeface had three main char-

acteristics that set it apart from the earlier roman faces, or the old-style, and from Baskerville's transitional typeface.

First, in the old-style letters, the differences between the thick and thin lines are not very noticeable. In Bodoni's letters, the

thick and thin strokes of each letter are significantly different.

Second, Bodoni created "swells" when putting weight stress on the letters. This increased the thickness on the letters at certain points, which was different from the old style.

Third, Bodoni made radical changes to the design and placement of serifs. He redesigned the old style roman serif by having it form a sharp right angle instead of tapering off. He designed the thin strokes of each letter to be as thin as the serifs attached to them. This created a sharp, stark contrast that was groundbreaking. He also exaggerated the height and verticality of the ascenders and descenders of each letter. Bodoni's redesigned type became popular around the world and

led to his widespread fame as a type designer.

The industrial era and the emergence of machinery played a role in his type design as well. Bodoni's design ideology was focused on clean lines, good taste, charm, and regularity. He was inspired by the standardization of units and wanted this same kind of regularity to be applied to his letterforms. With this in mind, Bodoni created letters in his type font that contained combinations of a very limited

number of identical units. This design marked the death of calligraphy. It ushered in a new era of typography that did away with the imprecise cutting and casting of earlier type design.

Also at this time, his page layout style changed from decorative to simple and efficient. The pages became more open with generous margins, wide spacing, and large areas of white space.

Bodoni's greatest contribution to typography and design came from the *Manuale Tipografico*. This manual redefined the existing Roman Antique type through technical refinement. It presented 142 sets of roman and italic typefaces. It included typefaces in more foreign languages such as Hebrew, Etruscan, Armenian, Tibetan and Ethiopian. This manual also listed 25,491 punches and more than 50,000 matrices. Bodoni also put together an extensive overview of recommendable ornaments for use on the typeset page. This overview of ornaments included various borders, frames, lines and brackets.

Bodoni's preface in the *Manuale Tipografico* is a standard work of classic typography within itself. Here, he delineates the four central characteristics of an excellent type face:

1. The uniformity and regularity of the type face;
2. Clarity and smoothness of the punches
3. The good taste necessary when choosing the shapes for the type face
4. The charm or elegance of the type face.

**Bodoni described the 'beauties of type' as 'conformity without ambiguity, variety without dissonance, and equality and symmetry without confusion. A second and not minor value is to be gained from sharpness and definition, neatness and finish.'**

# B o d o n i

## Throughout History

The typefaces Bodoni and Didot were developed around the same time period and contain similar design elements. The two continue to be used throughout history in similar ways.

The typefaces created by Bodoni and Didot were widely used until the late nineteenth century. They briefly faded from use during the Arts and Crafts movement, but returned in the early twentieth century when the font's geometric clarity seemed modern again. It was then that an Italian foundry, Nebiolo, issued a new cut of Bodoni in 1901. Ten years after that, the largest American foundry, ATF, issued its own very popular cut of Bodoni.

Didot was first introduced as a type for

fashion magazines when Alexey Brodovitch, who served as the art director at Harper's Bazaar from 1934 to 1958, introduced it. The font became the signature of Harper's Bazaar as well as Brodovitch's own signature.

In the 1950s Bodoni was used in many other design contexts as well. It was the chosen type for the cover of a 1950 Museum of Modern Art book, *What Is Modern Design?*, designed by Jack Dunbar. The "fashionisation" of Didot and Bodoni occurred when Vogue magazine used Didot on the cover in 1955. The font has remained fixed since then and today continues to represent a powerful international franchise. The two types evoke luxury and refinement and are used by many fashion brands for their elegance.

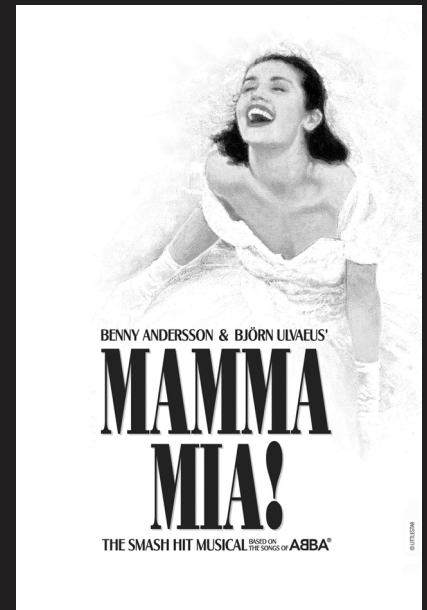
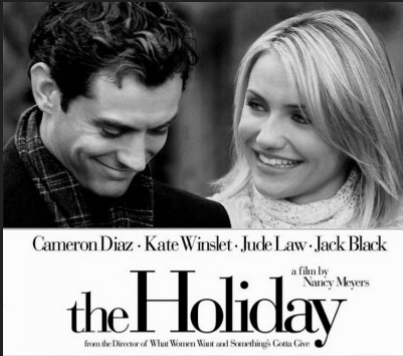


# BODONI TO DAY

Giambattista Bodoni's contemporary typefaces are still popular.

The Bodoni typeface has evolved with its rival font, Didot, and the two are still used in relation to fashion because of their elegant design and precision.

Additionally, Giambattista Bodoni's four timeless characteristics of excellent typography still ring true today.





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