The Return of Stencil Lettering: Had it Ever Gone?

By Steven Heller

Most type scholars have probably never heard of Ruth Libauer Hormats and her brother, Robert Libauer. But if Jeffrey N. Levine had his way the duo would be elevated from a lowly footnote (if that) to a major paragraph, even a chapter, in the history of type and letters. Levine, a Florida-based type designer, is on a mission to raise their profile and celebrate the magnitude of their typographic invention. In the 1940s Ruth conceived and Robert marketed an easy-to-use stencil letter drawing system for the student, teacher and basic do-it-yourselfer that made drawing lettering for signs and displays much easier and efficient. Ruth was herself a Baltimore teacher and although she did not invent the stencil process per se, her Stenso guide sheets produced on heavy cardboard (or oak tag) were state of the art long before phototype or the computer. 'The Stenso Lettering Guide was so unique with its spacing holes (called 'indicators' by Hormats) that she submitted her patent design in 1940 and was awarded a patent for her invention in 1942,' wrote Levine in an online article titled A Brief History of the Stenso Lettering Company. Even Macy's, the world's largest department store in New York, promoted the product's versatility through live demonstrations.

Stensos came in various sizes and families, including Gothic, Old English, Frontier, Modern Script, Art Deco and even Hebrew. It was a significant material departure from the standard brass stencils originally used for marking crates and bales filled with tobacco, cotton, and all manner of consumer goods dating back to the eighteenth century and before. Paper stencils were also used during the Victorian period in very intricate compositions and applied to wood boxes and other surfaces as identification and advertising. Stenso borrowed from these traditions but was not simply rogue type. Stenso was to type design, what military music is to music – decidedly functional yet not nuanced and, by fine typographic standards, comparatively unattractive. Nonetheless, in the same way that booming marshal rhythms have been incorporated into classical and popular music, the stencil lettering style has long influenced sophisticated typography and graphic design, and for some curious reason continues to do so. For example, Levine has designed over a dozen stencil alphabets of his own, including Stencil Gothic
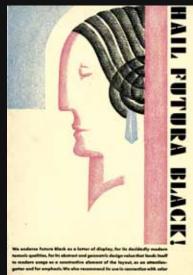
1, 2 Two stencils hand cut for High Grade Coffees. One for basic lettering, the other for the drop shadow, spray painted in brown (c.1890s)

and Maverick, a stencil version of a bifurcated Tuscan 'frontier' typeface.

Stencil lettering, characterized by breaks or channels of empty or negative space between portions of each letter, never really went out of fashion. If one considers fashion to include Post No Bills signs, military labels, parking garage directional signs, and the Boston Police and Fire department logos (the last are variants of Futura Black), stencil is perpetually with us in a quiet, vernacular way. Yet for the past few years it appears to nonetheless be coming back into style in a big way. In case you've not noticed already, even the masthead of the very magazine you are reading is a stencil typeface.

To pinpoint the exact moment (and specific example) of this seeming renaissance would be difficult, but perhaps one of the most visible examples was the logo for the rappers Public Enemy, which was designed to suggest a prison, police and violence aesthetic. Then there was the logo designed by Drew Hodges for the 1994 RENT, the urban musical based on Puccini's La Boheme. It seemed to be logically based on the original logo designed by Saul Bass for movie version of the musical West Side Story, but according to Hodges that's not the case. 'it was supposed to be what the leads in the play would do if they were to make their own logo. This was back in the day before everyone had Photoshop, and I walk to school 5 miles in the snow with no shoes 'cause my horse was sick,' he says. Whatever the rationale, the stencil certainly

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evoked the 'downtown,' Bohemian, post-no-bills, gritty plot-line involving a gaggle of impoverished young artists and musicians struggling on New York's Lower East Side during the AIDS epidemic. Stencil said it all.

Lately, New York has seen the emergence of more stencil icons. Perhaps because there are continually stencils on sidewalks and building walls, commercial advertisers see its value. On the sides of city buses logos for the recent Broadway revival of West Side Story and sci-fi film District 9 were writ large. Stencil is so easily used to signify something raw or dirty that it was also used to approximate the 'underground' graffiti spray look on promo posters for the last year's Rambo remake. And the logo/slogan for the independent U.S. presidential campaign of 'The Ron Paul Revolution' was also a sprayed stencil face. The West Side Story logo with its silhouetted fire escapes, originally designed in the 1950s, evokes the look of a tenement; the sullied stencil letters suggest the torn posters found on many such buildings. The designer Saul Bass also designed the stenciled logo for Exodus to suggest the Israeli armed struggle. Arguably, the 'W' logo Bass designed for Warner Brothers was also possibly inspired by a stencil. The logo for District 9 implies a West Side Story ghetto of a different kind; this one an off-limits refugee camp for unassuming

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extraterrestrials who had the ironic misfortune to land in post apartheid South Africa and are keep apart from the earthlings. These examples represent a kind of 'typography parlant,' in which typefaces conjure or speak to the essence of what the word or words mean – like the word ICE with icicles hanging from it. When it is not evoking a military aura, stencil lettering shouts demonstrative commands like 'danger,' 'no trespassing' or 'no parking.'
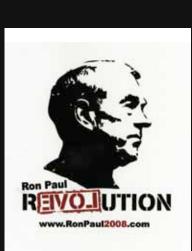
But not all stencil typefaces are so decidedly authoritarian. About every year type designers produce new stencil fonts continuing a typographic tradition started in the early twentieth century by such devout modernists as Paul Renner, who designed Futura's stencil cousin Futura Black, or the Bauhausler Josef Albers, who constructed an avant garde geometric stencil face. Stencil became fashionable in the Art Moderne 20s and 30s. Harper's Bazaar briefly employed a stencil masthead, and faces with art deco decorative traits were issued for advertising and editorial use. In the forties the American logo-meister Paul Rand introduced a stencil logo for El Producto cigars. His motivation for using an elegant, broken serif derives from the venerable stencils on the bales of tobacco, which proved a perfect compliment for his hand drawn illustrations that defined the El Producto campaign. Arguably, Rand's stripped IBM logo is a kind of stencil too (although he never admitted that and would deny it if asked).

Stencil fonts can be either high and low typographic art, sometimes both in a single face. Milton Glaser's 'Glaser Stencil,' a very clean, contemporary geometric
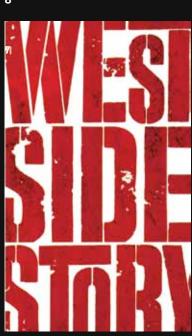
sans serif has been used on everything from posters advertising a jazz record label to a series of art books, and is a popular seller on the website 'My Fonts.' Matt Desmond's 'Bandoleer,' so titled because the face evokes martial might, is not as pristine as Glaser's but evokes an alluring coolness. The negative space between the letters also makes 'Bandoleer' seem kinetic, which increases its intrinsic eye-catchiness. Eben Sorkin's 'No Step,' featured on the Typophile blog, is another of the many entries into the crowded stencil field, inspired by lettering he had seen on an airplane wing (indeed many new typefaces are inspired by the vernacular and adapted as formal alphabets). Where to place the negative space is often the difference between a boring stencil and a vibrant one, and the extra spaces in Sorkin's Os, Cs, and Us add 'color' to the type.

Although the majority of stencil faces are sans serif, even venerable and classic serif faces, like Caslon and Garamond have been adapted as stencils, albeit often poorly. An authentic stencil is usually a little rough around the edges, but owing to the precision of computer font-making programs current stencils are flawless (unless not intended to be). My favorite, and not just for its name, is called Der Weiner Stenzel (available through Font Bros), which comes in all caps, and is frankfurter shaped characters cut into pieces with perfect vertical lines. Maybe that's the next direction for stencil faces – type and food.

I wonder if Ruth Libauer Hormats were working today she would produce a Stenso for Der Weiner Stenzel? Maybe she'd call it Weiner Stenso.

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3 Stenso lettering package for 1¼" Gothic letters and numbers (*c.*1945).

4 Logo for the musical *RENT* designed by Drew Hodges (1993).

5 Hail *Futura Black* type specimen sheet from American Typefounders Co. designed by Paul Renner (1924–26).

6 IBM logo on package of Selectric typewriter ribbon designed by Paul Rand (1962).

7 Movie poster for *District 9*, designer unknown (2009).

8 Campaign poster for the Republican Ron Paul, designer unknown (2008).

9 Typography for the revival of *West Side Story* (2009).

10 El Producto cigar can designed by Paul Rand with logo based on tobacco bail stencil (1950).

11 Art deco design for Coty cosmetics, designer unknown (*c.*1930).

12 *No Step* type family by Eben Sorkin (2007).

13 *Der Weiner Stenzel* by Font Brothers (2006).