DESIGN

Tobias Frere-Jones

TYPE DESIGNER

INTERVIEW BY DAVE KIM

PORTRAIT BY ROB KULISEK

Earlier this year, the designer behind some of the world's most widely used typefaces—including Gotham and Interstate—parted ways with his business partner, Jonathan Hoefler. Frere-Jones has designed more than 800 fonts for clients including The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Martha Stewart Living, *and the Whitney Museum. Last year, he received the AIGA Medal, one of graphic design's most prestigious recognitions.*

In January, you brought a lawsuit against your former partner for declining to give you equity in what you thought was an evenly split partnership. What's been the toughest thing to deal with in all of this?

I helped build our company for 15 years and it was my home. So obviously there are commercial dimensions to this, but it's a very emotional thing as well. This was literally the last thing I wanted to do. It was my last option.

What have you been up to since you went out on your own?

I started a blog in April, and it's been a lot of fun to take time to talk about design and typography in the broader context I like to think of it in. I teach a class at Yale every fall, and this summer I'm doing a class at School of Visual Arts. I'm getting some time in to draw typefaces as well. Some people feel like they'll die if they don't write or play music or do whatever other passion they have. This is mine. I still feel lucky that I get to do this thing that I really love to do.

What sort of broader contexts does typography occupy?

Typography connects in some way or another to just about everything we do in our lives; it's like a thread that runs through civilization. There are a couple of different macro views. There's a technological one in which, when I'm drawing a typeface, I have to look ahead and anticipate what would happen in print, but also what would happen on a screen, a website, or tiny cellphone screen. There's also the broader cultural context, particularly in what I call "public lettering"—what you see on street signs and storefronts and so on. It's a cultural indicator in the same way that a regional style of architecture or an accent in the voice would be. Typography has the same kind of potency to it. I find it fun and challenging to help point that out.

Globalization has also kind of homogenized what's thought of as good or effective design. Do you think we need to reintroduce things like regional specificity and variety for variety's sake?

There are some who go looking for a kind of perfectly neutral, exact, 50-percent-gray typography. It's people who have this fetish or fascination with Helvetica for supposedly being neutral and eternal. That's less interesting to me. But there's also already enough entropy that'll just happen naturally; I don't really need to add to that. I can create structure, clarify it, and let that out into the world. The way a designer uses a typeface that I design will add to its voice.

"Voice" is such a great word to describe a typeface. Is there a Frere-Jones voice?

Everything I do is built on the most solid historical foundation that I can make for it. I've got a love of researching things—whether it's a style that's been forgotten or something I can extract from a historical period without its exact representation. I've referred to this as atomized history, where a point in time and the artifacts of that time can kind of be exploded and looked at to see what was successful, what wasn't.

What's an example of a design that applied this kind of examination?

There's a typeface called Exchange I did for *The Wall Street Journal* that uses this atomized-history approach. The exterior of the letters are treated with 19th-century British slab serifs. The interior of the letters take a cue from a design called Bell Gothic that was done in the States in 1938. And the personality that sort of holds them together is a class of designs from turn-of-the-century U.S. and U.K. newspapers. I not only have the right performance, but also the right kind of personality, so it wouldn't seem so foreign to the newspaper context.

Gotham, which you began developing for *GQ* in 2000 and which later became the typeface for Barack Obama's presidential campaign, is now one of most popular fonts in the world. What sort of historical synthesis went into it?

That was less a project of synthesis and more of projection. I found this piece of lettering on the Port Authority bus terminal in Manhattan and expanded its character set to include all of the things that are not on that sign—the lowercase, the italic, the condensed—for what ended up being a very big family. I took a kind of Method-acting approach to type design and tried to put myself in the head of an engineer. There's a rule of thumb in structural engineering in which a structure should be built to be able to support three times the weight it's specified to bear. That's why the italic in Gotham is really, really steep. I imagined an engineer would knock that thing over really far so there was no question about what was what.

It's never been simpler to create typefaces, though it's maybe just as hard to create good ones. What are the most pressing challenges facing type designers today?

The challenge now is to restrain oneself. It would be really easy to produce a family that goes from the hairline weight to some crazy super ultrablack that literally has 100 steps in between. We can do that. But it would be

DESIGN

really hard to use. And it would be just baffling for the end user to contend with all of these choices. So one challenge now is to have the restraint, the kind of curatorial skill to build families that offer the range of voices, but not make it feel like you've been dropped into some enormous supermarket with 25 different brands of butter and you have no idea how any of it is different.

Maybe this is where your historical research comes in. To be a sort of guiding force or reference.

Some designers may not want to be bothered with that sort of stuff. They think that things have to look as contemporary as possible. One of the things I try to show my students is that historical grounding does not exclude being contemporary. The future is not the opposite of the past. It's easy to think that, because language sets it up that way: Day is the opposite of night, up is the opposite of down, and therefore the future must be the opposite of the past. But it doesn't actually work like that. I try to get my students to imagine this practice as having roots that go deep and wide into the ground, to be able to build something substantial and durable. Because otherwise it'll blow away in the wind.

Abbott Miller

PARTNER, PENTAGRAM

Miller talks about designing his first monograph, Abbott Miller: Design and Content *(Princeton Architectural Press), which comes out in September.*

In making a book I wanted to put a frame around all the different projects I've been involved with and try to see the connecting points among them. Graphic design, as an endeavor, has many expressions—it can be a book, a brand, an identity, environmental graphics, an exhibition, or something digital like a website or an app. When you work across that many different channels, it becomes a more complex set of expressions. For a long time, I've wanted to be able to put an overlay on top of all the projects—to step back and look at everything as some form of a line through them. For me, that line has been this notion of design and content, which is why it's called *Abbott Miller: Design and Content*. The book looks at how designers are constantly staging content for a reader, a user, or a consumer; the whole endeavor of design is so much about making content more effective or more beautiful or more deeply felt. The book looks at all those different media that I've worked in and how each one allows you

to do different things.

To describe this, I use the example of exhibition design, in which you may be working with someone who's a curator—or you yourself may be a curator—and the way that it's brought to life can go in a million different directions. I think of design as being a facilitator of every possibility—with the tools that designers have available to them, they make something more experiential, more dramatic, more powerful.

The book is a monograph, but I've tried to examine this idea that the core of being a graphic designer is being an intermediary between ideas and images and words. We're in this funny position of being the first interpreter working with different kinds of clients who need us to help them bring something to life. The selection process for the book was one of identifying the projects that seemed most representative of the way that designers are filtering and creating a hierarchy among messages and making things more vivid for the reader or the viewer.

It would have been fun to do a much longer book, but I think its concision forced me to zero in on things that offer some kind of takeaway. —*As told to J.L.*