Q1: How did you get interested in letterforms?

A: My initial interest in letter shapes came from my parents, especially from my father. He had taken a mechanical drawing class when he was an undergraduate in college, and had learned to “print” capital letters carefully with a drafting pencil. My father admitted to me, some decades later, that before he took the class, his attention to the formation of letters was minimal, even though he had been around type for much of his young life, having worked first in his dad’s print shop and later in his dad’s newspaper office. The mechanical drawing course my father took in college placed a solid emphasis on making tidy, precise, regular, well-spaced, single-stroke majuscules. (This generic style of “architects’ lettering” was commonly used on blueprints.) After taking the course, my father said, he always gave more thought to the construction of letterforms. As a matter of fact, both his longhand (cursive) and his “block style” capital letters improved because of that one college course. Hence, my early enthusiasm for pencil-made capital letters was surely influenced by watching my father demonstrate the “correct” way to form and space caps, as opposed the “naïve” way most children are left to go about it. I’ve noticed that my early lettering shows no minuscules whimsically mixed in.

I am the oldest of my parents’ 4 sons. We boys had no sister to contend with. My brothers and I were born in Tacoma, Washington. When I was two and a half years of age, and my brother Tom was an infant, our family traveled by car across the U.S. so that my father could pursue a year of postgraduate studies at Yale University in Connecticut. To keep me occupied during those many, many hours in the car, my parents encouraged me to draw pictures and to make letters — two things that I loved to do. I was easy to entertain. Before age 3, I could draw quite passable depictions of ordinary objects, faces, birds, and animals — all from memory. I could recite and write the alphabet, and even spell a few short words like “car,” “cup,” “cat,” “dog,” and “cow.” It seems that my facility for spelling aloud, and via pencil-on-paper, provided motivation for memorizing the formal shapes of letterforms. Again, patient guidance from my parents, plus my natural attention to accuracy, were instrumental.

By the time I was 9 or 10, I was one of the best artists and letterers at my school. I would routinely be chosen by teachers to design and produce hand made posters. When I was 13, I won a city-wide “Be Kind to Animals” poster contest sponsored by the Humane Society of Tacoma. This happened at a time when nearly every public school’s art classroom there had recent editions of *The Speedball Textbook* for students to use. It was written and illustrated by a local lettering celebrity, Ross George, of Seattle. Gradually, Speedball pen lettering become a cornerstone of the art curriculum at many public schools around the Puget Sound area. We were awash in India ink.
Another lucky thing for me was that Tacoma had fabulous commercial signage. The sign painters there were extremely competent. Moreover, Tacoma had a teeming tenderloin district, and in the seedy parts of town, (where adult arcades, pawn shops, bail bond offices, gambling halls and taverns were clustered), the bright, colorful storefront signs often caught my eye. That ilk of brash, gaudy, “carnival lettering” or “circus lettering” still appeals to me. Well before my high school years, I clearly wanted to learn how to form letters that looked convincingly professional, but I was already leaning toward lettering styles and color combinations that were crassly commercial. That’s when my first independent attempts at brush lettering began.

Q2: Carnivalesque lettering has a pervasive appeal, but teachers tend to dismiss this in favour of rigorous structured lettering. Did you go on to study calligraphy or graphic design formally?

A: My formal study of calligraphy and graphic design occurred sporadically. When I was about to begin 9th grade, my family moved from Tacoma to a mill town called Longview, which is not far downriver from Portland, Oregon. Like Tacoma and Seattle, Portland had a splendid lettering tradition. Portland is the home of Reed College, from where the teachings of the late calligrapher Lloyd Reynolds spread. My first art teacher in Longview had studied with one of Reynolds’ disciples, so I received a watered-down version of the Reynolds method. However, I did not go on to study with him, like some other folks who eventually became known in the lettering world did. It’s amazing to consider that Reed College, being so small, was such a hotbed of activity in several lettering arts, not just calligraphy. Among the individuals who got bitten by the “calligraphy bug” there, and later turned to type design, are Sumner Stone, Chuck Bigelow, Kris Holmes, and Paul Shaw. I should mention, too, that Apple Computer cofounder Steve Jobs became a calligraphy enthusiast at Reed, and his exposure to letterforms and typography there was central to the subsequent development of the Mac interface. His appreciation of letters and letter spacing, which he acquired in Portland, ultimately had worldwide impact. (See the text of his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford).

Speaking of colleges, my choice of Washington State University for advanced education was based less on the strength of its Art Department, than on the weakness of its men’s swim team. Such was indicative of my priorities at age 18. Swimming came first. I wasn’t a talented enough competitive swimmer to be welcomed onto the one other in-state Division I university team, and all I could afford was in-state tuition. WSU was the doormat of the Pac 8 (now, the Pac 10) conference. Circumstances made it possible for me join the swim team as a walk-on. I also learned water polo at WSU — a game I still regularly play.

The calligraphy and graphic design program at WSU was good, but it was limited to a few essential courses. I came in not only with advanced standing, but with advanced understanding. Thanks to the fact that I had begun working for a sign painter before I completed high school in Longview, I had dabbled in various styles of lettering:
from mild to wild. The wild, flamboyant styles were fun, but the traditional, conservative styles inspired me to start investigating the history of classical lettering. Scholarship began to interest me. The short time I worked in a sign shop was very educational, in terms of connecting the history of the craft and its practice. Soon my academic advisors at WSU realized that I had more skills — skills of a technical nature — to teach, than the faculty did. The faculty waived all of the lettering classes for me, and bumped me ahead to the upper-level design classes. When I had run out of courses to take, they hired me to teach brush lettering. Teaching a lettering class was more instructive for me than taking one would have been. But teaching was not to be my vocation.

I began graduate studies in painting at The University of Iowa in 1973 after working at sign shops in Des Moines for about a year, immediately following my matriculation from WSU. The chairman of the painting department at the UI was Byron Burford, proprietor of The Great Byron Burford Circus of Artistic Wonders — a traveling art show and circus, in one. It included moving cutouts of exotic animals, motorized trapeze artists, contortionists, and acrobats, and all sorts of freakish animated characters under The Big Top. The entire show traveled from town to town in a lavishly decorated and illustrated, brightly-lettered converted school bus. Professor Burford was so busy attending to the management of the show, that he hired me as his sign painter. It was the one time I had a teacher who embraced circus lettering, and who was a competent lettering & layout artist himself. I had a blast as part of the circus crew.

The next year I returned to teaching brush lettering. The UI kept me on staff until I finished my MFA degree. Being in eastern Iowa also brought me into contact with calligraphers, sign painters, and stone cutters who had been greatly influenced by the teachings of Fr. Edward Catich, of St. Ambrose College in Davenport. Although I once watched Fr. Catich demonstrate, I never officially studied with him. Nevertheless, his influence was inescapable. His obsession with the inscriptive Roman letter certainly had a sobering effect on accomplished lettering artists at the time. For example, I recall seeing furniture delivery trucks that had been lettered in classical Roman majuscules: a style not commonly seen on commercial vehicles elsewhere in the U.S.

Q3: It’s funny how people like Reynolds Stone, or Edward Johnston in England, have a far greater impact than [merely] on their immediate disciples. I assume you were also influenced by your reading. Did you learn as much from books as from the environment?

A: My high school offered no art history classes. The school library was strong on literature, but not very strong on art, so I spent many evenings and weekends at the Longview Public Library, which had recently been remodeled. It provided a very comfortable place to read about art and artists of the past. Renaissance art was one of my budding interests. Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings and notebooks, as well as
Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts and wood engravings captivated me. My exposure to Dürer's work led me to learn about the proportions and geometric construction of Roman majuscles. In truth, I soon discovered many shortcomings of trying to systematize and rationalize the construction of the alphabet by imposing a geometric approach, but the idea remains with me. In sign painting, there are numerous applications of geometry.

When I started training as a sign painter, I had already been repeatedly unsuccessful at obtaining work with the one and only other sign shop in town, so I was pleased just to be given a chance. The man who hired me was young, freewheeling, unruly, and very charismatic. He didn't much care about my lack of training. He liked my enthusiasm. He also admired my earnestness. The environment at the shop was altogether unlike the environment at the public library. For one thing, there were no books on hand at the shop, not even a lettering manual. It was, at times, a chaotic place — due partly to the fact that sign painting was not the sole activity of the shop. It was a gathering spot for motorcyclists, hot rodders, truck drivers, and vintage automobile collectors. Pinstriping was my boss's specialty, and it attracted a clientele that didn't seem focused on erudition, exactly. Normally, there was a period of time before a pinstriping job would commence when there'd be a concerted effort to get loosened up. My boss would mix a few Rum & Cokes, or perhaps light a joint to get himself relaxed enough to take on the task at hand. He didn't mind having an audience. It simply added to the banter and repartee. The pinstriping performance would usually be the main attraction at these parties, but not necessarily the only thing going on. Often, there would be ladies dropping by to say hi, and to share a cocktail or two.

Somehow, I never got around to mentioning all the details of these activities to my parents. My folks were just glad to know that I was spending so much of my free time at the library, learning about art and such. And, of course, my skills as a sign painter were improving noticeably. That much was readily apparent. Consequently, I moved on to college well prepared to conduct research either at the library or at an alternative locale where booze and babes were in ample supply along with the requisite paint and brushes.

Q4: We were fortunate to be part of a more permissive time than our parents. What did you study in college (apart from girls and other recreational activities)?

A: I went away to college the same year my parents bought a grocery store in a little town called Ocean Park, on the SW Washington coast. There was never a plan for me to work at the store, but I did paint numerous signs for the store when I spent summers with my family. In college, my strengths were mathematics and art. The math was laborious, tedious, and competitive. I fared well, but I didn't have tremendous ambition for math. The classes were full of guys who planned to become engineers or scientists, and they were quite intense. The few girls I encountered in math were
not particularly sociable. To put it plainly, they did not radiate warmth and feminine charm. I took math principally because I had always taken math. For convenience, it also was the quickest way for me to get a few graduation requirements out of the way. By contrast, the elective classes in art always had more females than males, and the work was normally enjoyable. So was the company. The art students were a fun bunch. Art school was like a playground for many of us. Right away, my work stood out. Soon, I was getting a lot of notice.

As I mentioned earlier, swimming was my primary passion. It occupied large chunks of my time. Early morning weight training followed by swimming; afternoon cross-country running and dryland exercise sessions followed by another swimming workout (or water polo practice in the off-season); plus miscellaneous team obligations, all kept me on a pretty tight schedule. Fortunately, I’ve always been able to budget my time reasonably well. My grades in college were excellent. I could handle very heavy course loads without faltering. In retrospect, I do not regret bypassing certain other activities that, at that time, characterized The College Experience for many males. The things I gladly elected to avoid or forego were (1) ROTC — or anything military, (2) menial jobs that paid poorly, (3) student protests, (4) obsessive partying, and (5) a hippie lifestyle. I never got into the drug scene. I never got into any trouble, either. I was a straight, clean-cut, middle class jock — clearly not an anti-establishment sort of kid, but definitely not a fervent patriot, either. The young guys who fled to Canada in the ’60s and ’70s were not cowards or criminals, in my view.

Staying away from the war in Viet Nam was, alone, enough justification for my being in college. Males who shared my birth year (1951) were the youngest to be granted an automatic college deferment. The draft system was changing. A lottery scheme was being initiated. The first and second batches of lottery numbers for the draft were drawn during my freshman year. My lottery number was 112, but by the time I got my bachelor’s degree, three years later, the war was winding down. Number 112 was out of range because the Selective Service was no longer conscripting men who had 3-digit numbers. That’s how I escaped the military, and Viet Nam.

Fortunately, college was not a total disruption of my sign painting education. The Department of Fine Arts offered me good pay to paint signs around the art building. A few of my signs from the early 1970s are still intact there. I practiced brush lettering for recreation, and freelanced more frequently as my skills continued to improve, but there was no opportunity for me to continue with my apprenticeship the way it had begun. It went along in spurts until I graduated from WSU and moved to Iowa. Once I got settled in Iowa, with my eye on graduate school, I was able to dedicate myself to sign painting full-time. After grad school, I again plunged into the sign trade full-time. From 1976 until 1988, I focused on sign painting, glass gilding, show card writing, and silkscreen printing, with a bit of graphic design and paste-up work, as well. Designing display alphabets to use as letter templates had become a professional hobby of mine. In 1983, I strayed seriously into text type design, but type design didn’t become a preoccupation until 1988 when I began a 5-year “sabbatical” in San Francisco, which redirected my career path.
Q5: When you say “professional hobby,” when did you first get the idea you could sell type designs, and what made you think yours were good enough?

A: Design magazines occasionally ran ads for upcoming type design contests, as well as ads showing the winners of type contests. I eschewed contests. The decisive moment for me came in 1983 when I read an ad in U&lc. It was an invitation to aspiring type designers to submit typeface designs in person and to meet the ITC Typeface Review Board as it visited different cities. The ad appealed to me explicitly because there was no hint that the meeting scheduled for Chicago was to be a contest. The event was billed as a chance to get feedback on my work. That’s what I wanted. I was fully expecting a professional critique, complete with useful and insightful comments from experienced practitioners.

What happened in Chicago astonished me. Only three respondents to the ad showed up. With members of the ITC Review Board assembled, we did make small-talk and sip coffee for more than an hour, but they declined to look at our designs as I requested. Instead, they sent the other designers and me away, and reviewed our typefaces in closed session. They called us back for lunch. Following lunch, we sat through a slide presentation that utterly failed to articulate what ITC’s selection criteria were. The individual type designs we had submitted for consideration that day were not addressed. No critique materialized. The whole experience was bizarre. Before we left, ITC announced that my text typeface, alone, had been chosen for further development. Exactly what that meant was not fully explained, but it was clear that ITC was offering me $500 to finish the character set and send it to them at a later date. That would have been fine if they had offered concrete specifications, or even a few clues, but their wishes were unclear. Very sketchy. The one lasting benefit from my experience in Chicago was making friends with a couple fellows from the Photo-Lettering side of the ITC partnership. I got on well with Ed Rondthalé and Ed Benguiat, two veterans of the custom lettering game. In subsequent years, I would visit them at their offices in New York City, and try to learn as much as possible while they let me hang around. They always seemed happy to see me.

By contrast, my rapport with the other half of ITC (the marketing half) didn’t develop. They jabbered in a sort of PR lingo that didn’t impress me. I couldn’t relate to their obsession with carefully-contrived publicity strategies. On the whole, the marketing men were not sufficiently knowledgeable about typeface design to be posing as experts, nor trying to direct me. I had automatically expected them to be at least marginally conversant, but the chaps barely comprehended the language of letterforms. They weren’t savvy about drawing technique, they couldn’t talk authoritatively about printing, paleography, or epigraphy, and they really didn’t know what to make of me. It was literally as if they had never encountered a sign painter, or any accomplished letterer, who also had academic interests. Questions of a scholarly nature stumped them. Apparently, I was more familiar with type and type history than they were. The trouble was evident. As salesmen (aka typeface marketers) they didn’t know their product. For as little as they grasped about the nuts and bolts of type design, they’d have done about as well selling used cars. Con men.
After a couple years of wrangling with me, and considerable expenditures on their part, ITC gave up on my typeface. The cost to ITC of giving up is still untold. ITC had spent huge sums to fly their team of 7 or 8 men to meet with designers in London, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Out of the more than 100 typeface designs they considered while on their quest for new typefaces, mine was the only one to receive a commission outright. One other face did get noticed, but did not initially get purchased. It was submitted, and later resubmitted, by a then-unknown type designer in California, Robert Slimbach. Finally, it got through. The type family — after I don’t know how many rounds of revisions and years of toil — became ITC Slimbach. That was the outcome of ITC’s costly hunt.

Robert had already been working in the field of type design. I had not. In Chicago, when instead of a critique I received a commission, it was a safe bet that my type designs would be good enough to sell. Eventually, they were. However, my first typeface was a team effort. Soon after ITC pulled the plug, Matthew Carter (by then one of my allies in the field of type design) responded with an attractive offer, plus a refreshingly more equitable (designer-friendly) contract. I soon began working from my abode in San Francisco for Matthew and others at his digital type foundry, Bitstream, in Massachusetts. I couldn’t have asked for a happier arrangement: being overseen by one of my heroes, interacting with a helpful, seasoned, unquestionably professional production group, proceeding at my own pace, and all for better money. The typeface I began in 1983 was released in 1991 as Iowan Old Style. It’s the one text face that I drew entirely by hand, pencil on paper, glyph by glyph. At Bitstream, Dennis Pasternak did a meticulous job of digitizing my production drawings, fitting the face, and kerning it. Matthew has since told me that he feels like a proud godparent when he sees Iowan Old Style used tastefully. The mentor/protege relationship that he and I formerly shared has evolved (if not dissolved), and over time we’ve become more like aging comrades: old pals who can look back and smile.

Q6: Everyone’s criteria of what makes a good type is different. I know this from experience: when I judged a type design contest, all four judges (me, Jonathan Barnbrook, Louise Fili, and Fred Smeijers) chose completely different sets of types. To me Iowan looks like a reworking of Bembo, a safe old-style outing. But after you moved to San Francisco you began to submit work to Emigre, didn’t you? How did living on the West Coast affect your thinking & your work?

A: Yes, normally a jury of practicing typographers will have varied tastes. Of the judges you name, Jon and Fred are also designers of type, which gives them a different slant. And, besides making digital type, Fred cuts punches for making metal type. It’s a skill that very few contemporary type designers have acquired. Naturally, typographers tend to favor types that work best for their own purposes, so experience (professional or otherwise) does color one’s expectations, preferences, connoisseurship, and so on. My tastes in text types are quite conservative, but the text types I have created for my own pleasure tend to slip into less conventional design
areas. Mysteriously, they seem to get pollinated and fertilized along the way, despite my intentions to maintain direction. Influences are hard to shut out. You mention the relationship between Iowan and Bembo. It isn't coincidental. I've long admired Renaissance types, particularly Venetian Old Style faces and Aldine romans. All the same, Iowan Old Style, while not classified as an Aldine roman, isn't entirely a Venetian roman, either. It's simply more Venetian than Aldine in its overall construction (details such as Iowan's rather Aldine style 'e' notwithstanding). It should be added that Iowan Old Style was inspired partly by ancient Roman inscriptions and 20th-century hand lettering, not solely by preexisting old style typefaces. You might call it a hybrid: one with pronounced regional overtones, to boot. Hence, its name.

Hybridization can produce fascinating results. Designing typefaces has much in common with genetics, I'd say. Cross-fertilization on a cultural level occurs in type design, and in myriad other arts. Typefaces are designed in a certain place, by a person with a certain outlook, at a particular time, for a particular time. As you suggest, environment can be a factor in directing one's thinking and work. I know that my years in San Francisco helped broaden my definition of useful type. As a result, my fonts are commonly more palatable to nontraditional users of type. Similarly, my hand lettering has become appealing to clients outside the Anglo-American sphere. Minor revelations that happened in San Francisco inarguably did affect my design philosophy. Curiously, some of my discoveries which did not seem profound at the time, in retrospect turned out to be quite important. I do believe that having a sense of place can contribute positively to one's wisdom and understanding.

Right now, I'm finishing a set of four large painted signs that could be considered cross-cultural. In this series, I've approached sign painting as folk art. The lettering was laid out and brush lettered on rusty, beaten-up, corrugated metal which was salvaged from a farmer's machine shed. The panels are approximately 2' x 7'. One sign reads FRUTAS, the next reads TACOS, another reads VERDURAS and the last reads REFRESCOS. The colors and the letters, in all their flamboyance and naivete, are reminiscent of vernacular signs painted in rural areas of Mexico, but the techniques I employed to achieve the crusty, rustic, chromatic effects are from my own repertoire. Elaborate outlines and highlights, split shades, blended shades, the works. Steel wool was used to buff the paint so that it looks old and weathered. Distressing the signs is as much fun as painting them. Degradation knows its own beauty. For this sign painting project, observations I first made years ago in San Francisco are coming into play.

Much to my delight, I've been able to observe interesting aspects of native regional lettering styles wherever I've traveled or lived. Moving to the Bay Area at the end of 1987 was a return to a coastal climate I knew well, but it was absolutely not a return to the culture or habitat I had known as a lad. Although I was not unfamiliar with Mexican and Central American influences on society and agrarian life in the U.S., residing near San Francisco's colorful Mission District definitely provided a big dose of dominant Hispanic sensibilities. Spanish speaking individuals from all over the world, not just from our continent, are well established in San Francisco. Being on
the fringe of that melting pot of Latin influences was highly energizing. Of course, the signage immediately caught my eye.

Rapidly, I began to notice the distinctive work of Bolivar Cordova, an illiterate Ecuadorian immigrant who painted signs and murals for many of the shops operated by Latinos. Like numerous other immigrants who found sign painting to be a low-overhead enterprise that could be started without any formal training, he was self-taught. To call oneself a sign painter in the Mission District, all one needed were a few cans of paint, an artist’s brush or two, a laborer’s mentality, and an ability to communicate in Español. In short, “No Experience Required” ... and no exam to pass in order to obtain a license to practice the trade. There was virtually no adherence to municipal codes. Outlaws were on the loose. It was amazing to watch. The dazzling color combinations were sensational; the character shapes were outrageous, the paint application methods were atrocious. Yet, increasingly, I’d find something novel and refreshing in even the most pathetic lettering. And, while on average the sign objects were truly pitiful, the experience of seeing them was fantastic. I’d never encountered so much junky signage made with so much care, patience, and ignorance combined. Walking around the poorer ethnic neighborhoods of San Francisco, studying amateurish, childlike signs made by unskilled adult letterers who (although not being true professionals or experts) nevertheless charged money for their efforts, was often a surreal journey. The strong influence of clashing Latino lettering on the visual landscape was like a bombardment. At times, it was a bit overwhelming. Too much [visual] information. Sensory overload. Graphic mayhem.

The same was fast becoming true in the type business, as newcomers to world of fonts were delving into typography, experimenting with letterforms, and mixing things up, commonly on Apple computers. Like immigrants with no training in the filed of sign painting, neophyte makers of digital type were starting to emerge as a class of artists outside the traditional circles of typesetting and equipment manufacturing. Emigre was a shining example. Immigrants, indeed — but certainly not uneducated immigrants. Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko came to my attention by way of colleagues who told me about their activities in Berkeley. I phoned them and soon went for a visit. Rudy nearly flipped when he saw drawings and a paste-up proof of the italic for a sans serif type I’d begun about 3 years earlier. He loved it and wanted to license it, but Emigre didn’t have an accounting system in place that would be able to keep track of royalties, so a couple of years passed before I began to actually release fonts through Emigre. Before the release of Triplex Italic in 1990, I worked for Emigre, on and off, as a subcontractor, hand editing bitmaps for Adobe. Such attention to screen fonts was needed prior to the introduction of Adobe Type Manager, which improved the appearance of type on screen and eliminated the chore of tweaking or rebuilding bitmaps manually for each point size in the style menu.

Since those days, my routine encounters with lovers of legible lettering has led me to believe that there still exists a desire for sound training in the lettering arts. Even though the fundamental concept of “professional standards” for good lettering and
fastidious workmanship was literally unknown around some parts of San Francisco, things were better during the early boom of nearby Silicon Valley. Workhorse typefaces were held in high esteem. Fonts were the rage, and font fanatics appreciated well made letterforms. However, as with Mission District signage, regulation was nonexistent, and still is. There’s no union of digital typeface producers. There’s no oversight by industry peers, as there is in other professions like dentistry, medicine, and law. As a pure notion, having a trade union such as the Sign Painters’ Union, was unthinkable to those who, in ethnic communities, call themselves sign painters. It was about as far out as proposing a union for, say, graffiti artists. Imagine hearing a tagger complain that he was going to have to quit tagging walls and rollscreens because he couldn’t get into the Taggers’ Union! A radically different meaning of Night School now exists: tagging in the dark, so as not to get caught.

The sign painting apprenticeship system which once ensured that capable journeymen would be produced in adequate supply, has vanished. I don’t bemoan everything about the demise of trade unions. I do bemoan the dearth of proficient sign painters who have worked for and obtained the master’s “pedigree” that serves as a lifelong credential. According to my best estimate, I was one of fewer than a half dozen professionally-trained glass gilders in San Francisco when I lived there. I could name them. Fifty years ago, the city had a significantly smaller population, but there were easily more than a hundred men who could make a handsome living producing gold leaf signs exclusively. Today, exclusivity is chiefly the result of attrition. I’m lucky to have been one of the last men of my generation to get instruction from old guys who were ready to retire when I was starting my career.

Q7. I like the analogy between Cordova and neophyte type designers. Cordova (who died about ten years ago) had a working life of twenty years or so and painted hundreds of signs (I photographed at least 100) but they are almost all gone. Not because of urban renewal, many of the taquerias are still there, but he used cheap paint that faded or was easily washed off windows, and despite your disparaging his talents, the work that replaced it is a lot poorer. But it was intended to be transient, like graffiti almost, and I wonder if type design can be seen as equally temporary? Certainly the early bit-mapped fonts of Emigre have been junked, but one likes to think of Garamond and Granjon’s types as timeless — nevertheless they are very mutable and never fixed (despite their cast metal origins). Does the evolution of media mean that typefaces will keep evolving too?

A. I don’t know if the analogy is original, I just know that it represented my perspective at the time. My disdain for unprofessional artisans has perhaps become less harsh, but it still is pronounced. With regard to your impression that I was disparaging the talents of Bolivar Cordova, I’d like to say that I actually admired his talents. But let’s be clear about what his talents were and were not. He was industrious, enterprising, productive, and (in spurts) prolific — at least when he wasn’t staggering drunk. He left a mark as a street artist who worked in the realm of Hispanic
vernacular/folk painting. And, he had one talent above all: an inimitable & intuitive sense of color. As a colorist, he was truly an enigma. His chromatic effects would often stop me in my tracks. They were striking. They may not have been very carefully conceived, but they were surely not accidental. I don't know if his alcoholism had much to do with his preferred pairings of hot or warm colors with and cold or cool colors. I do know that something remarkable was at play. He was attuned to peculiar “color keys” which most observers probably couldn't analyze, if even identify. The talent was obvious to me.

In stark contrast, Cordova did not have discernible talent for producing balanced layouts, nor consistent letter shapes, nor masterly brushwork. His layouts showed a distinct lack of planning, his letters were usually weakly drawn and poorly matched, and he used ratty brushes, inferior paints, and horrid application techniques. His pictorial work was saddled with a twisted sense of perspective. These were not his strong points. I don't rank them among his talents. But, even worse, he was uneducated. He didn't know that 'J' and 'L' are different letters of the alphabet, not merely left-facing and right-facing variants of the same capital letter. How many times did we see a flopped 'J' in place of an 'L' (or vise versa) in his sign work? Many times! I also saw 'K' and 'X' used interchangeably in his work, which is somewhat more understandable, given the low frequency of 'K' in Spanish. I suppose that a typical preschooler, too, would perceive 'K' and 'X' as similar enough in shape as to be barely distinguishable, if distinguishable at all, from one another. Cordova's comprehension of letters was negligible, while his sense of chromatic resonances was unbelievably sophisticated. He went with what he had for talents, and tried to make-do with his deficiencies. I think that most artists tend to act accordingly.

This brings me back to the subject of my faith in education and literacy. Acquiring good training, learning from professionals, practicing the tricks of the trade, and building a set of marketable skills, are important for success. Cordova used worn-out hog bristle oil painting brushes to apply industrial enamel paints and/or latex paints to surfaces that were not properly prepared. He didn't know any better. It is true that the paint easily came off windows and faded from storefronts, but I would argue that the work he produced was neither meant to be permanent nor impermanent. How long the work lasted was not one of his concerns. But its short life was inevitable because of his inattention to craft: a craft he learned on his own. I'm reminded of an old saying, which I shall paraphrase for the sake of this discussion. “He who teaches himself has a fool for a master.”

Attempting to teach oneself is a dubious undertaking. Designing type is no exception. Time has shown that the types which have so far endured are the types that were made well, regardless of style. While it can be shown that some very well made types have been transitory, the reverse is hardly ever true. As a rule, poorly-made types don't reach old-age. Longevity isn't likely for types made from poor stock. The longevity of a typeface depends, in large part, on the expertise of its maker. Individuals who were dabbling in type design on the Macintosh in the late 1980s and early 1990s were not all coming to the field with prior exposure to the type industry,
nor with professional lettering experience. As I mentioned, I got into type design as a profession without ever being employed by a typeface manufacturer. However, my 20 year history as a sign painter and show card writer gave me a tremendous advantage. Unlike other newcomers, I was not producing “grunge type.” I wasn't defacing existing type by vandalizing proprietary digital outlines. One thing that signs painted by Cordova had in common with type designs spawned by Mac users was the unmistakable smack of amateurism, in all of its homely manifestations. That’s where the similarity ended, though. Cordova was definitely not denigrating the works of other lettering artists. He produced original works, and he didn’t destroy existing signs in the process, as an affront to their makers. Creators of grunge type were dissing conventional typefaces for various reasons: to show off, to rebel, to offend, to act out, to thumb their noses at the established ways of doing things. I did not embrace their devil-may-care prankishness, nor admire their immature attitude. I discovered that I was not alone in my view.

More than a few famous senior typographers at the time considered the bitmap fonts Emigre designed and published to be a swipe at the core values their beloved typographic establishment revered. One of Emigre’s most vocal detractors called the work “typographic garbage.” Fans, conversely, regarded it as progressive. The war of words was happening in my presence, and I was following it closely. The critics were off the mark, in my opinion. I gradually concluded that folks who considered themselves to be proponents of traditional, conservative, classical, typographical virtues had cause to dislike the look of Emigre’s work, but failed to understand that the work was not a statement of protest, per se. It was instead a new and unfamiliar solution to a problem which had never before been addressed outside the fields of engineering and machine manufacturing: namely, the way type looks onscreen, and how that particular look translates to print (or doesn’t). It was a major conundrum then, and it still exists to a certain extent. Emigre sought to reconcile the obvious differences between the appearance of the computer screen and print by making print look more like the computer screen. The bitmap look caught on and it survived for a while. But as you indicate, the bitmap look in print is no longer the Hot Ticket.

Today, inkjet printers and laser printers are capable of rendering pages of text that can be read easily, as long as the chosen typeface is appropriate and the point size is adequate. Reading onscreen isn’t always so easy. Yet, digital incarnations of types cut by 16th-century French masters Garamond and Granjon are looking better and better onscreen as successive generations of monitors and display technologies are introduced. I believe that this evolution of media does mean that typeface designs will keep evolving too. Type always will be an important aspect of the total look. Long may it last.

THE END