

Ephram Edward Benguiat

1927-2020

This week we learned of the passing of the most prolific American type designer of the second half of the twentieth century. Ed Benguiat was also a pilot, a philosopher, a skilled raconteur, an engaging personality, and a world-class jazz percussionist. But his legacy will be not merely his great talent but his great adaptability to client needs.

In the 1960s, with huge type libraries rare, New York City art directors would pay hundreds of dollars for a couple of words set in a specialized headline font. If planning a long campaign, that would easily justify designing a typeface, considering also the possibility that somebody else might want to use the same face later. Most of these were not intended for a typesetting computer, but rather a filmstrip-driven machine, where each letter was hand-positioned by the operator for optimal fit, usually specified by the client as TNT (Tight, Not Touching).

Ed designed hundreds of such faces for his employer, Photo-Lettering Inc., often without being credited for them, although if you see a face with *Hand-tooled* in its name it's probably one of his. Because he was designing for art directors with many different opinions, he learned to adapt his design skills to match almost any style.

This skill was highlighted shortly after it became possible to buy typesetting machines inexpensively, especially those of Compugraphic Corp. Understanding that an opportunity existed to market typefaces to owners of these machines, Photo-Lettering created the International Typeface Corporation, ITC, to produce them. Ed was its lead designer, and now he could produce faces designed for text setting and not just headlines. He also, in partnership with Herb Lubalin, founded and designed ITC's fabulous magazine *U&lc* (Upper and lower case), always featuring the latest ITC designs.

Those designs reflected, or perhaps accounted for, the taste of the times. They were assertive and somewhat impractical. They often were based on historical designs, to which they usually added additional weights and variant characters. But the distinguishing feature was a very large x-height (the ratio of the height of the lower-case letters to the caps) and sometimes an exaggeration of the distinguishing features of the updated face.

To show what I'm talking about, let's compare two variations on an eighteenth-century theme. Figure 1 contrasts Ed's ITC Caslon #224, released in 1983, with Carol Twombly's Adobe Caslon, which appeared seven years later.

The quick brown fox jumps over the
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy

Figure 1. Top line, ITC Caslon #224 (Ed Benguiat, 1983). Bottom line, Adobe Caslon (Carol Twombly, 1990). ITC designs usually featured very large x-heights.

The two are at the same point size, although they don't look it. History has favored Adobe Caslon. It's the text face of *The New Yorker* and is in common use in many other contexts, including my last book. Ed's face? I haven't seen it used in twenty years.

Why? It makes a statement—but it isn't very legible. Technically speaking it is readable at a smaller pointsize, but this means nothing because the same wordcount results in a longer line. So the question is whether you want to make an artistic statement at the expense of losing the meaning of what you have to say. The market has answered that. Figure 2 includes the faces featured in the body of this post.

ITC Souvenir
ITC Bookman
ITC Modern No. 216
ITC Tiffany
ITC Panache
ITC Barcelona
ITC Benguiat

Figure 2. Some of the text faces issued by ITC and identifying Ed Benguiat as the sole designer. All but ITC Modern No. 216 are used in the text and captions of this document.

The top three were based on historic designs; the others were novel. These once-popular faces are rarely seen today, with one exception, and that extraordinary. You are now trying to read the face that Ed

named for himself. The eccentricities make legibility a problem. And the design suggests obesity, at least it does to me.

For this reason, Ed also released a condensed version, to which I have shifted now. As was the ITC custom, each came in four different weights with companion italics and a slew of alternate characters. You are not likely to find too much text set in either of these variants.

And yet ITC Benguiat Condensed is not dead—not even close. Setting it in capital letters with very tight linespacing is so astonishingly effective that it has become almost a cliché, as Figure 3 indicates.

And speaking of clichés, that’s what ITC Souvenir was in the 1980s, together with ITC Avant Garde, a sans-serif designed by Lubalin and drawn by my office-mate Tom Carnase. I’m sure the actual number was

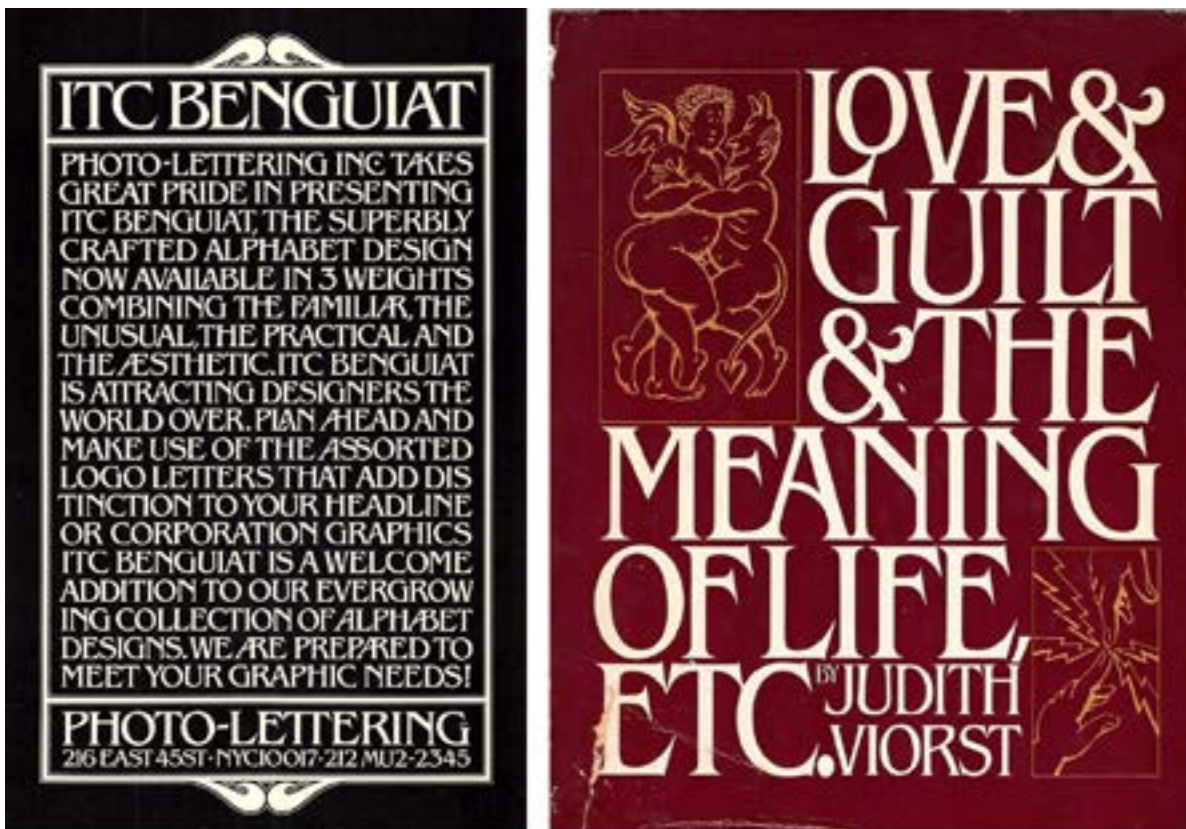


Figure 3. ITC Benguiat isn't much of a face for setting texts, but when set in all caps the effect is striking.



much lower but it sure seemed to me that half of the print advertising in the United States was set in one of the two. ITC Garamond, another huge x-height variant of a traditional face, was a particular favorite of Steve Jobs. The designer, Tony Stan, had also created a condensed version, just as Ed did with his ITC Benguiat. But neither the standard nor the condensed version of ITC Garamond satisfied Jobs. He commissioned a version halfway between them. The Macintosh was introduced in 1984 and all of its advertising was set in this variant face for nearly twenty years.

The original Mac supported only bitmap fonts, this being before the days of serious laser printing. PostScript support was added in 1988 and with it, Apple supplied a handful of real fonts, including two ITC faces: Avant Garde and this one, Ed's ITC Bookman. Consequently the world was flooded with documents prepared in one of them, ordinarily by people ignorant of any design principles.

Typophiles were horrified, including Ed. But we all had to live with overuse of ITC Bookman and Avant Garde for a decade or so until more alternatives started to appear. The two are no longer supplied with Macintoshes. As far as I can tell the only Benguiat face that is can be found at the top of the first page. It doesn't have a large x-height, though. Ed was also a great devotee of handwriting-like faces. He gave this one the tongue-in-cheek name of Edwardian Script.

Ed was not a big fan of Avant Garde. He notoriously said, "The only place Avant Garde looks good is in the words *Avant Garde*." Then again, he didn't much like ITC Bookman either. But he was a font chameleon (and I called him this to his face in the 1980s; he had a good laugh), He could adapt to any style. They wanted a big x-height, he gave it to them.

More ironic: Avant Garde was released so early that, unlike most ITC faces, there was no condensed version. In view of the monstrous popularity of the base face, ITC knew that there was big demand for such a condensed. Who do you suppose they turned to for a faithful rendition of that which he didn't like? Ed's 1974 Avant Garde Condensed blended seamlessly with the original.

He also designed logos, for *The New York Times*, *Playboy*, the *Planet of the Apes* series, *McCall's* magazine, and many others. Though he was the foremost typeface designer of his time, nobody would ever call him



Figure 4. The Ford Motor Company logo, 1927

the foremost *logo* designer. That honor would unanimously go to Paul Rand. Yet Ed's adjustable, tradition-conscious approach allowed him to outshine Rand in one of the great corporate logo redesign projects.

The problem: the Ford Motor Company's logo was originally based on the actual signature of Henry Ford. Even cleaned up, it was hard to digest. By 1911 the company had adopted a new one, designed by a calligrapher, with the word *Ford* within a blue oval. And this, shown in Figure 4 in its 1927

iteration, was the principal logo for many years.



Figure 5. The Ford Motor Company logo, 1957

It was, however, considered deficient, so in the 1950s the company commissioned a remake, and got Figure 5, which became its official logo in 1957.

Considering that there would be some question as to whether this was even set in a Roman alphabet, corporate management tried again, and in 1961 restored the original oval shape with Figure 6.

After a couple of years of mounting this logo on the hood of each Ford vehicle and getting complaints that the flourish in the cross-stroke of



Figure 6. The Ford Motor Company logo, 1961

the F looked like a spare tire, management decided to bite the bullet and contract with the best designer that money could buy, Paul Rand, who already had the iconic logos of IBM, UPS, ABC, and Westinghouse (all still in use 50 years later) to his credit.



Figure 7. Paul Rand's proposed remake, rejected by the company.

As was his custom, Rand studied the history of the company and thought he had come up with a design that was faithful to its tradition. Management did not think that it did. It was Figure 7.

So, after Rand collected his paycheck for work thrown in the trash, management

turned to Ed Benguiat. The result is seen in Figure 9—and on the front of every Ford vehicle today, and just about every print advertisement. In video, they don't use the oval, but Ed's script survives.



Figure 9. Ed Benguiat's redesign.

How did such a simple and elegant solution elude so many top designers for so long? Of course it helped that Ed had vast experience designing and using script faces. But, as he was fond of saying, “Doing something a long time does not mean you're good. It only means

you've done it a long time.”

I would say that this Ford logo proves which one he was.

I didn't know Ed well; I worked for Photo-Lettering's (and ITC's) chief competitor. But we met from time to time. I remembered having called him a font chameleon when, in the early 1990s, there was actually a software package introduced called FontChameleon. It offered a couple of hundred base fonts that could be morphed into intermediate versions. At about the same time, the Fontographer font creation program introduced a more complex morphing capability. And Adobe introduced a new technology called Multiple Master, where a single font master could generate an almost infinite variety of distinct fonts.

All this was a response to ITC's successful model, and to the Apple use of a modified-width ITC Garamond. In the days of metal type

and in the early years of phototypesetting, it was rare for a face to have more than two weights. Condensed versions were also rare. The ITC releases proved that designers did want more than a light and a bold, that semibold and black versions were useful. And some people jumped to the conclusion that if four weights were better than two then four hundred would be better still.

I wrote a column in response to all this, calling it *The Case for Cross-Breeding Fonts*. I thought the implementations overkill, particularly Multiple Master, which indeed died out in a few years after quite a few releases and a lot of fawning publicity. But I applauded the basic idea, and I ended with, “No matter how many new faces may be released, no matter how many hybrids we create, the best artists will always be plagued by the nagging suspicion that, maybe, just maybe, somewhere in history, or somewhere in the future, there is a type that is the one and only right one for the next job.”

That would make a pretty good epitaph for Ed Benguiat: such a career, such a legacy, such a lesson to anyone working in the graphic arts. It won't be, of course: Ed passed away around twenty miles from me in New Jersey, where public funeral services are currently banned.

But it wouldn't have been, anyway, because Ed was, as mentioned earlier, one of the top jazz percussionists in the world. He had left instructions that he wanted his funeral to feature live music, a solo drummer.