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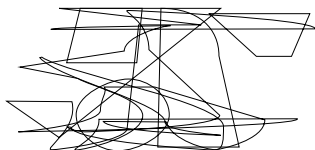
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REYNOLDS

An essay about Azimut
and the fabrication of writing.
Azimut, an original typeface created
by Benjamin Blaess, Julien Priez
& Mathieu Réguer.



“The alphabet is the greatest thing,” as the 19th-century German poet Emanuel Geibel famously stated, “for in it lies the deepest wisdom. Yet, only he can fathom it, who truly knows how to put it together.” Thanks to the combinability of letters, we live in a world filled with books, which, until recently, were the foundation for mass learning and cultural distribution.

At first glance, the Roman alphabet looks like it has been sculpted by artists or perhaps drafted by experienced engineers in pencil on a large board. However, our uppercase and lowercase letters each grew out of handwriting. The uppercase shapes evolved in Rome during the late Republic and early Imperial eras for large inscriptions painted or carved onto walls and other surfaces. Our small letters, on the other hand, came from books written in medieval scriptoria. Despite the 15th-century transition from carved, painted, and calligraphed letters to printed forms, typographers are always well served to remember their craft’s connection to writing.

As the late Dutch letter theorist Gerrit Noordzij reminded us, typography is just writing with prefabricated characters. More than almost anyone in his lifetime, Noordzij understood how constituent strokes build up our letterforms. That remains true whether one brings a stroke onto the surface with the help of a brush, stencil, computer-driven plotter, or any other instrument. The Azimut typeface visualizes this for today’s readers by helping bridge the gap between three kinds of text formation: typing, handwriting, and constructing.

Most well-made “families” of individual “fonts” – the delivery mechanism for typefaces – now include dozens of members. Developers can even program so-called “variable fonts”, which contain a near-infinite amount of typographic settings for users. Nevertheless, the fonts used most often in contemporary typography are still regular, italic, and bold.

Azimut offers exactly these styles – no more, no less. While most classical type families focus on consistency and harmony across their styles, Azimut shifts the standard structure of the modern type family to offer a typographic trio with heterogeneous forms and eclectic uses. Each variant of Azimut summons a different point of view on typography and its relationship to writing, the shape of text, the form of the book.

The tension between the styles is interesting, and – in a way – the family is a meta-commentary on type design. By doing more with less, it reminds us of the alphabet itself. As Geibel suggested, one can build whole books with just a few letters. Azimut designers remind us that maybe one could build a whole library of books with just 3 typefaces.

The typeface’s Regular style is for more immersive-style reading, building upon half a millenium of typographic tradition. It is designed for text heavy lifting, as seen in literary books, essays or news websites. Azimut’s Italic, referencing humanistic pen-based writing, is at its best when used to emphasise certain passages, and used within complex layouts. Today, we often italicize



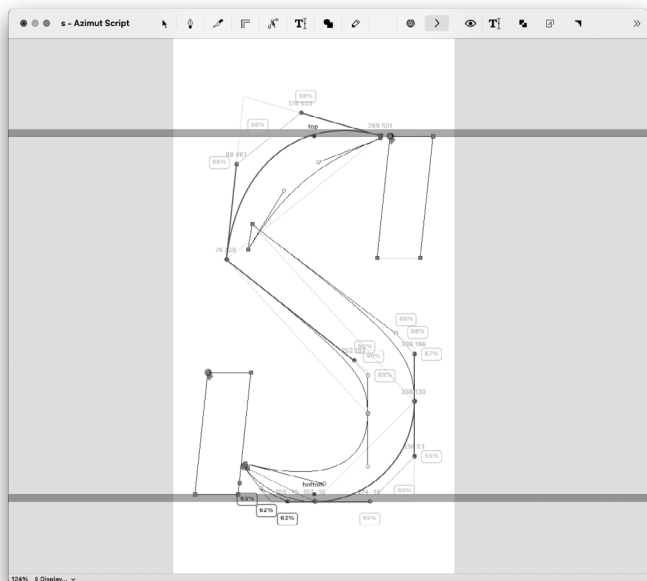
individual words that are particularly important, or we use italics to denote a book or film title within a text. Azimut's Bold style is constructed, following early bold typefaces from the advertising age, it is meant to shout on book covers, posters or logotypes.

One could map Azimut's three styles across the intersection of two spectrum, one going from writing to drafting, the other from reading to seeing. Yet, whether they are calligraphic in their structure, reminiscent of early Renaissance types or avant garde geometric experiments, all three styles are linked together through their stencil-like – and indeed digital-like – finish.

Even in everyday handwriting, the underlying modularity of letterforms is sometimes apparent. To write an m, the shape of the n is repeated. Writing an h is done very similarly to an n. It is also not so different from an i or an l. To form the u, one essentially makes a mirrored n – or not, as was long the case in German script where, until the 1940s, n and u were indistinguishable from one another – unless one placed a macron-like stroke over the u, or the reader could guess due to context. Other letters reuse the same parts, albeit in different places. The b, d, p, and q are each a “ball and stick”. Often, the lowercase g is hardly different. Modularity is even visible in uppercase letters if you look closely. To make the right-hand side of a D, one usually first mirrors a C. Similar forms appear twice in a B. The relationship between O and Q is often self-evident, such as when the Q is an O with a long tail. A, V, and sometimes W reuse the same open triangle (a Greek Lambda). I is found again in B, D, H, L, P, and R.

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AUDREY STRASBOURG
MATHEU REUEER BENJAMIN BLESS, ST



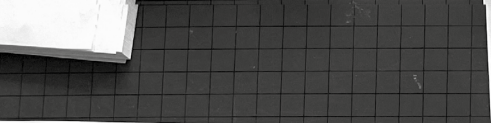
Within that logic, it is possible to construct long texts even with a small set of stencils that, together, can be reused to create most letters of the alphabet. Centuries ago, some manuscripts and hymnals were painted with the help of stencils. Today, on the streets of Strasbourg and other Western European cities, it is still common to see house numbers painted with stencils whose basic design was codified by 19th-century French artisans. Drawing on the Roman alphabet's underlying modularity, Azimut's designers developed a series of details that



bind all three of the family's styles together. Modularity allows for the reuse of parts, taking advantage of a pillar of the computer age: copying and pasting.

That might strike some readers as a shortcut. But instead it is another manifestation of Azimut's resolution to do more with less. Azimut unsubtly reuses basic shapes and elementary forms, proudly displaying its digital nature.

From an artistic perspective, making letter outlines differs from writing or painting. The designer holding a brush or pen may quickly place a stroke on paper. A few such strokes are sufficient to form a letter. Yet, on screen, it is not the stroke itself that is drawn but the outlines around the strokes instead. Together, those outlines separate the foreground of a finished letter from its background. Readers familiar with computer graphics will know that there are two underlying file paradigms for images. Those that can be made as a collection of colored pixels saved into a grid, a bit like the mosaics of old. Or, images can be saved as outlines – mathematical equations rendered on screen or in print as neat divisions of space. While all letters printed on paper or rendered on screen are displayed as points or pixels, respectively, they are drawn by type designers as outlines. Today's method of digital outline drawing originated with two Frenchmen, mathematician Paul de Casteljau and Renault engineer Pierre Bézier in the late 1950s. Later, during the early 1970s in Hamburg, Peter Karow developed a method using digital outlines to save the outlines of digital glyphs. All digital fonts today still rely on this technology. While some expertly hide



1 strashouro
les trois brigands
micromegas
driferstergas

tell me o muse of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide
after he had sacked the famous town of troy many cities did he visit and
many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was
acquainted moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own
men for they perished through
his own sheer folly in eating the
of the sun god hyperion so
prevented them from ever
going home tell me too about all
things oh daughter of jove from
never source you may now them

micromegas
tell me o muse of that ingenious
hero who travelled far and wide
after he had sacked the famous town
of troy many cities did he visit and
many were the nations with whose
manners and customs he was
acquainted moreover he suffered much
by sea while trying to save his own
men for they perished through
his own sheer folly in eating the
of the sun god hyperion so
prevented them from ever
going home tell me too about all
things oh daughter of jove from
never source you may now them

megaš

tell me o muse of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he had *saced* the famous town of troy many cities did he visit and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home but do what he might he could not save his men for they perished through their own sheer folly in eating the cattle of the sungod *hyperion* so the god prevented them from ever reaching home tell me too about all these things oh daughter of jove from whatever source you may know them so now all who escaped death in battle or by shipwreck had got safely home except ulysseus and he though he was longing to return to his wife and country was detained by the goddess *kalypso* who had got him into a large cave and wanted to marry him that as years went by there came a time when the gods noticed that he should go back to lithia even then however when he was among his own people his thoughtful wife did not

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les trois brigans
micromegas
d'ifenster

strasbourg
capitale du li

tell me o muse of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he had *saced* the famous town of troy many cities did he visit and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home *but do what he might he could not save his men* for they perished through their own sheer folly in eating the cattle of the sungod *hyperion* so the god prevented them from ever reaching home tell me too about all these things oh daughter of

Ulises
Pier
Requer

Chamberling Capitaine du Ligne d'Europe
Général de l'Armée
10 April 2024 - 12:51

tell me o
hero wh
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sheer folly in eating the cattle of the sungod *hyperion* so the god prevented them from ever reaching home tell me too about

Ulises
Pier
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Chamberling Capitaine du Ligne d'Europe
Général de l'Armée
10 April 2024 - 12:51

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the fact that they are constituted of outlines (emulating the texture of ink or the warmth of paper...), Azimut fully claims its computer origins.

In all three Azimut font styles, the uppercase letters are monospaced. That means that each one shares the same amount of background space. Normally, the W is significantly wider than the E or F, while the I would usually be the narrowest letter. The equilibrium of the uppercase widths extends beyond each of the three fonts' styles: the fonts' caps are triplexed, too, meaning that the monospace value is the same in Regular, Italic, and Bold. This unusual typographic stunt allows Azimut's users to easily substitute caps from one of the other fonts into their texts, allowing for ornamental possibilities. While professional designers are more versed with things like OpenType features, kerning, and tracking tricks, the interchangeability of Azimut's uppercase enables non-professional users to create striking text settings, too. Most professional aids of that kind are either missing or hidden in the software commonly used, like Word and PowerPoint. Azimut's designers remind us that good design can be achieved with any software. They've embraced available technology to help all users shape their text. If you think about it, that's the definition of the Gutenberg method, in a nutshell.

This family is the work of a trio of designers. While it is tempting to assume that Benjamin Blaess, Julien Priez, and Mathieu Réguer were each responsible for one of its styles, they are all common works of the group. Together, they named the typeface after the "azimuth",

an angle defined by 3 points in space, a navigation measurement used to describe the position of a celestial object related to the horizon and the observer. Azimut is a starting point, an invitation to explore, a tool to typeset the multiplicity of the book, and write the plurality of the city.

The Azimut typeface was commissioned to support the type design craft during the year when Strasbourg was the UNESCO World Book Capital. There are few better places to discuss writing, our alphabet and typography than Strasbourg. For instance, it is very likely that Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz developed his tactic for casting movable metal type and printing from it during his Strasbourg years. Almost immediately after Gutenberg's bible was completed in Mainz, Johannes Mentelin began printing in Strasbourg. Whether Strasbourg was the cradle of European printing or the second place where it was practiced, the city has been a genuine hub for publishing since. Its university dates back to the 16th century. When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe came to study there between 1770 and 1771, he was captivated by the beauty of the cathedral. It may seem like a stretch to compare a centuries-long building project like a cathedral with a typeface. Yet, when "Goethe saw in the cathedral façade a coherent structure with a thousand details", as Neil MacGregor noted, he "«could savour and enjoy them, but by no means understand or explain them.»" It was a structure that left him, in spite of its detail and its diversity, with an impression of oneness, wholeness and greatness." One could say the same thing about the Roman alphabet, or Azimut.

Azimut, an original typeface
created by Benjamin Blaess,
Julien Priez & Mathieu Réguer.

A thousand details, an original
essay by Dan Reynolds

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Benjamin Blaess, Julien Priez
and Mathieu Réguer

Graphic Design and Layout
by Clémence Michon

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an original text in French
by the poet and performance
artist Yoann Thommerel,
created as part of a writing
residency within the
Azimut typeface.

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Cultural direction
Strasbourg mission Unesco
World Book Capital 2024

Cultural and artistic development
department

Communication department

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The City of Strasbourg would also like to thank the Ministry of Culture for its support.

Special thanks also go to Benjamin Blaess, Mathieu Réguer and Julien Priez, who, with Azimut, embody the values of openness and sharing promoted by the City of Strasbourg.



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Strasbourg's history, its geographical location, its architecture, its institutions, its people make it a complex, polymorphous, contrasting and resolutely pluralistic city.

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Digital, calligraphic, free, theatrical, drawn, cut-out, modular, irrational, heterogeneous, condensed, wide, synthetic, generous, thin, bold, legible, visible, pragmatic, spectacular, radical, nuanced, discordant... With three distinct, yet coherent styles, Azimut shifts the standard structure of the modern type family (regular, italic, bold) to offer a typographic trio with heterogeneous forms and eclectic uses. Each variant of Azimut summons a different point of view on typography and its relationship to the world.

In this book-type specimen, the poet and performance artist Yoann Thommerel, the historian and researcher Dan Reynolds and the graphic and book designer Clémence Michon explore, each in their own way, the different paths of Azimut, an original typeface created by Benjamin Blaess, Julien Priez and Mathieu Réguer. Azimut is commissioned by the city of Strasbourg as part of its CINESCO World Book Capital 2024 label.