

TRAJAN® PRO 3

Presented by John D. Berry

The letters at the base of the Trajan column in Rome are generally regarded as the finest examples of ancient Roman inscriptional lettering, and have served repeatedly as the models for capital letters throughout the history of typography. When Carol Twombly created the typeface Trajan for Adobe in 1989, her intention was to make as faithful an adaptation as possible, while turning letters that had been carved in stone into a digital font.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ & 1234567890

The Trajan typeface was widely successful. Trajan is seen frequently in advertising and in book titles, and it has been especially popular for the past two decades on movie posters. In fact, Trajan seems to be used for just about every movie title that could possibly be contrived to have some connection with ancient Rome, and quite a few that couldn't.

The digital typeface varied from the carved letters in having a companion bold weight – something that didn't exist in the ancient world, or indeed in the first centuries of printing. Today's type users, however, expect to have fully fledged families of related typefaces at their fingertips; and since with digital type it's easy to increase or decrease the size of the letters, sometimes a heavier weight holds up better at a smaller size than a light weight would. Trajan was never designed for text – it is purely a display typeface, and one best used big – but the bold weight, slightly heavier than the regular, gave designers a little more leeway in how they used the typeface.

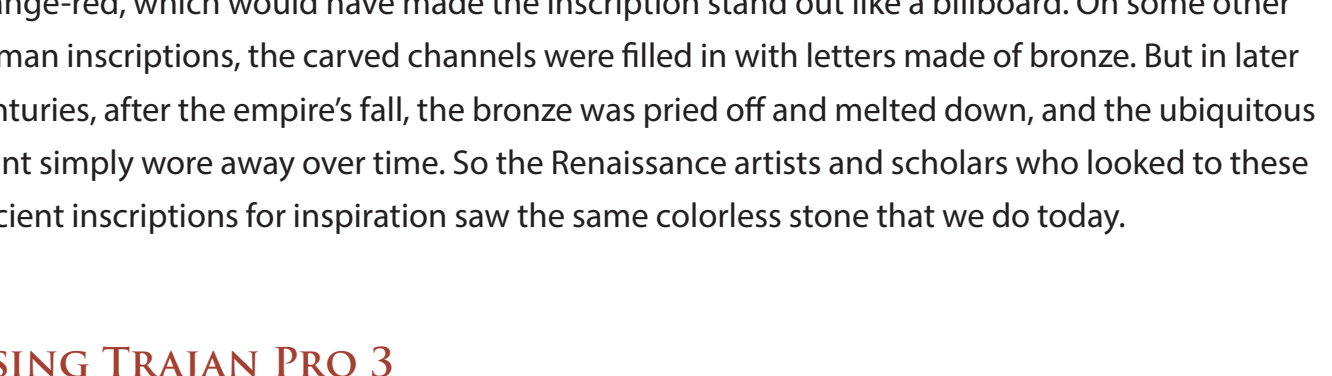
Although Carol Twombly has retired from designing type, Adobe has continued to consult her before embarking on any expansion of the typefaces she designed. In 2001, Adobe released Trajan Pro, in OpenType® format, with another variation: slightly smaller versions of each of the letters included as “small caps.” (Since Trajan has no lowercase, these smaller versions are much closer to the full cap size than most fonts' small caps.)

Now the palette has been expanded again. Principal designer Robert Slimbach has given Trajan four extra weights – two of them lighter than the original two weights, two of them heavier – as well as a companion series, Trajan Sans; and he has expanded their range to include Greek and Cyrillic along with the Latin alphabet.



ORIGINS & NATURE OF THE TRAJAN LETTERS

When the inscription on Trajan's column was carved, in the 2nd century CE, it was part of a program of what today we might call branding. The most important part of the column, of course, was the spiral frieze of carved images, illustrating the emperor Trajan's victorious campaigns against the Daicans; the plaque at the bottom, over a doorway in the base of the column, was basically a label, detailing the attributes of the divine Trajan and explaining that the Senate and the Roman people had dedicated this monument to the emperor. But the letters carved into that plaque represented a standard form of the written Latin language, a style of monumental inscription that could be found all across the empire. The arches and buildings and memorial cenotaphs that were adorned with such inscriptions embodied the might of Roman civilization, and that's exactly what they were meant to do. Although the Romans used other styles of writing for other purposes, and although even inscriptional styles evolved over time, at the height of Roman power these square Roman capitals could almost be called the corporate typeface of Rome.



S P Q R

Top: Trajan inscription, circa 114 A.D. Above: Trajan Pro 3

Those letters served as a template in later centuries, even as Rome's power crumbled and a variety of styles of writing and inscribing flourished. In 16th-century Italy, when all things Roman were being revived and reinvigorated in what we call the Renaissance, the Trajan capitals and other classical inscriptions were looked to explicitly as models of the ideal Latin letter. They influenced the development of the new art of typography. Renaissance lettering artists even tried to retrofit the Trajan forms into precise geometrical models – despite the fact that one of the strengths of the Trajan letters is that they are not strictly geometrical, but are instead subtly adapted to fit together and harmonize with each other. As the historian of letters Nicolette Gray put it, “the perfection of a Roman inscription consists in the perfection of the drawing of each letter, and in the order and clarity of the spacing.”

Much more recently, in 20th-century Britain, the Trajan capitals had another heyday, notably inspiring the lettering of Edward Johnston and Eric Gill. This influence continued into the phototype and digital-type eras; in the explosion of type design in recent decades, the Trajan forms have been adapted and referred to again and again by type designers.

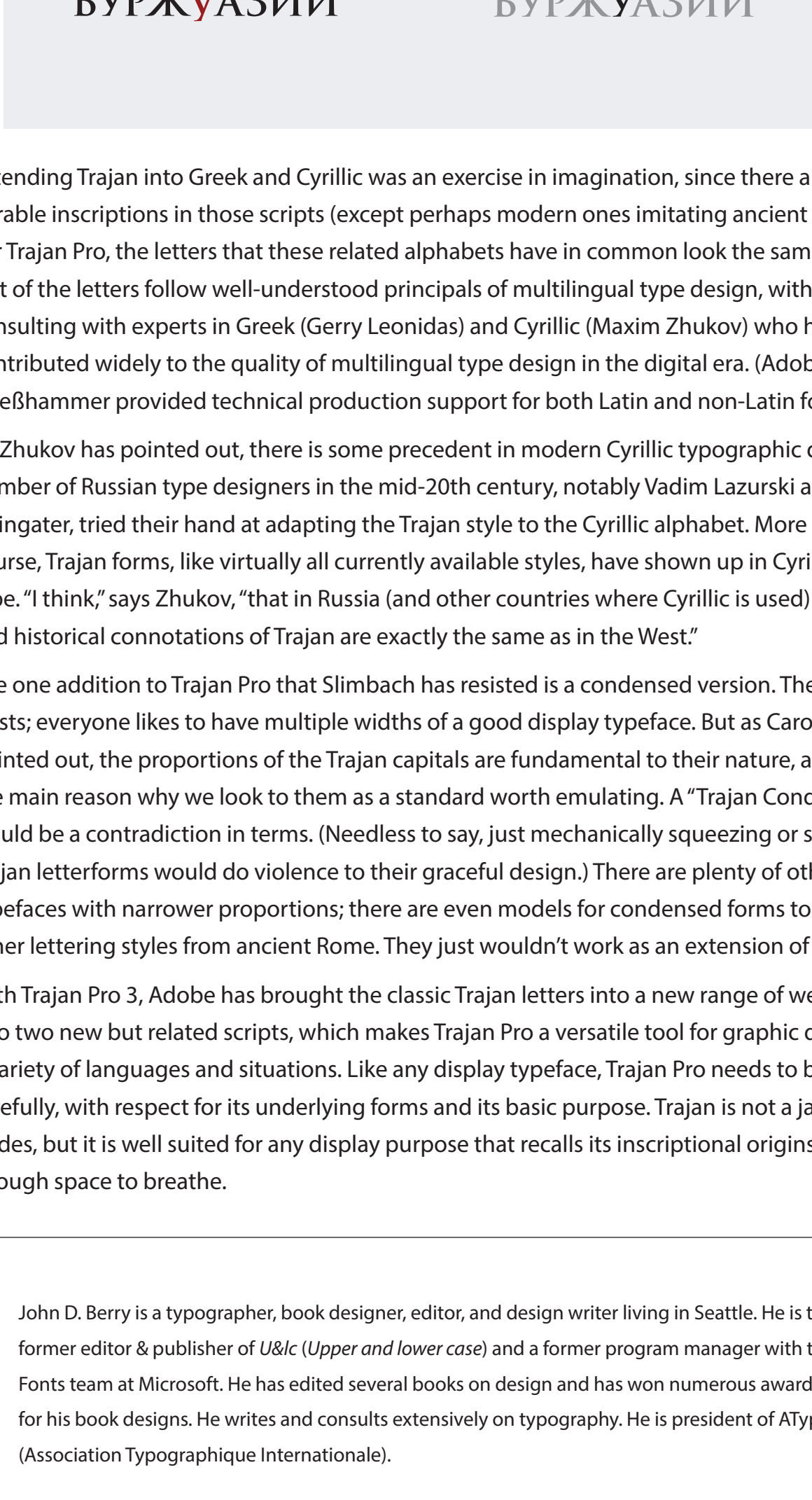
The Trajan letters are characterized, according to Nicolette Gray, by “the modulated width of the letter-line, the small bracketed serifs, and the proportions, approximately 10:1:1/2 for the relationship between the height, and the widest, and the narrowest, width of the letter-line.” They are clear, easily identifiable letters, with almost no decorative flourishes, and they march across the stone in a stately progression, the spacing between letters carefully calculated for easy reading and maximum effect. Yet the chiseled lines are not simple.

There has been a lot written about the Trajan letters and how they might have been created. The generally accepted theory is the one espoused by Fr. Edward Catich in *The Origin of the Serif*: that before carving, the letter shapes were ending a brushstroke. Certainly there were other forms of serifs in less formal lettering styles, as shown by the brush-written rustic lettering found in Pompeii. Wherever the serifs originated, they are an integral part of the effect, along with the modulation of the strokes, the generous interior spaces of the rounded and square letters, and the way they were placed in a vertical surface for reading from below. Even the weather and the time of day must have had an effect, as the angle of the sunlight changed and the shadows increased or decreased in the V-shaped channels of the inscribed letters.

The effect would have somewhat different from what we see today. It's worth recalling that originally, the carved letters on the Trajan column and other Roman monuments were painted, as were the bas-relief figures on the column's frieze; we are used to seeing both Roman and Greek sculpture as weathered white marble, but that's not the way they were seen by the people of their time. The color of paint commonly used in inscriptional lettering was vermilion, a bright orange-red, which would have made the inscription stand out like a billboard. On some other Roman inscriptions, the carved channels were filled in with letters made of bronze. But in later centuries, after the empire's fall, the bronze was pried off and melted down, and the ubiquitous paint simply wore away over time. So the Renaissance artists and scholars who looked to these ancient inscriptions for inspiration saw the same colorless stone that we do today.

USING TRAJAN PRO 3

Like most of the Adobe Originals®, type families, Trajan Pro 3 is intended to guide graphic designers an extended set of typographic tools, or what Slimbach has called “an extended suite of expressive voices.” The six weights of Trajan Pro provide a much wider range of effects than the simple Regular/Bold of the original Trajan. Obviously, all of the weights other than the Regular have different proportions of stroke weight to height and width than the original Trajan capitals; finding the right weights and making them look harmonious was the principal design challenge. From Extra Light to Bold, the new weights form a continuous series (with the original Trajan Bold renamed Semibold to describe it more accurately within this range).



*Greyed blocks indicate original language coverage and weights.

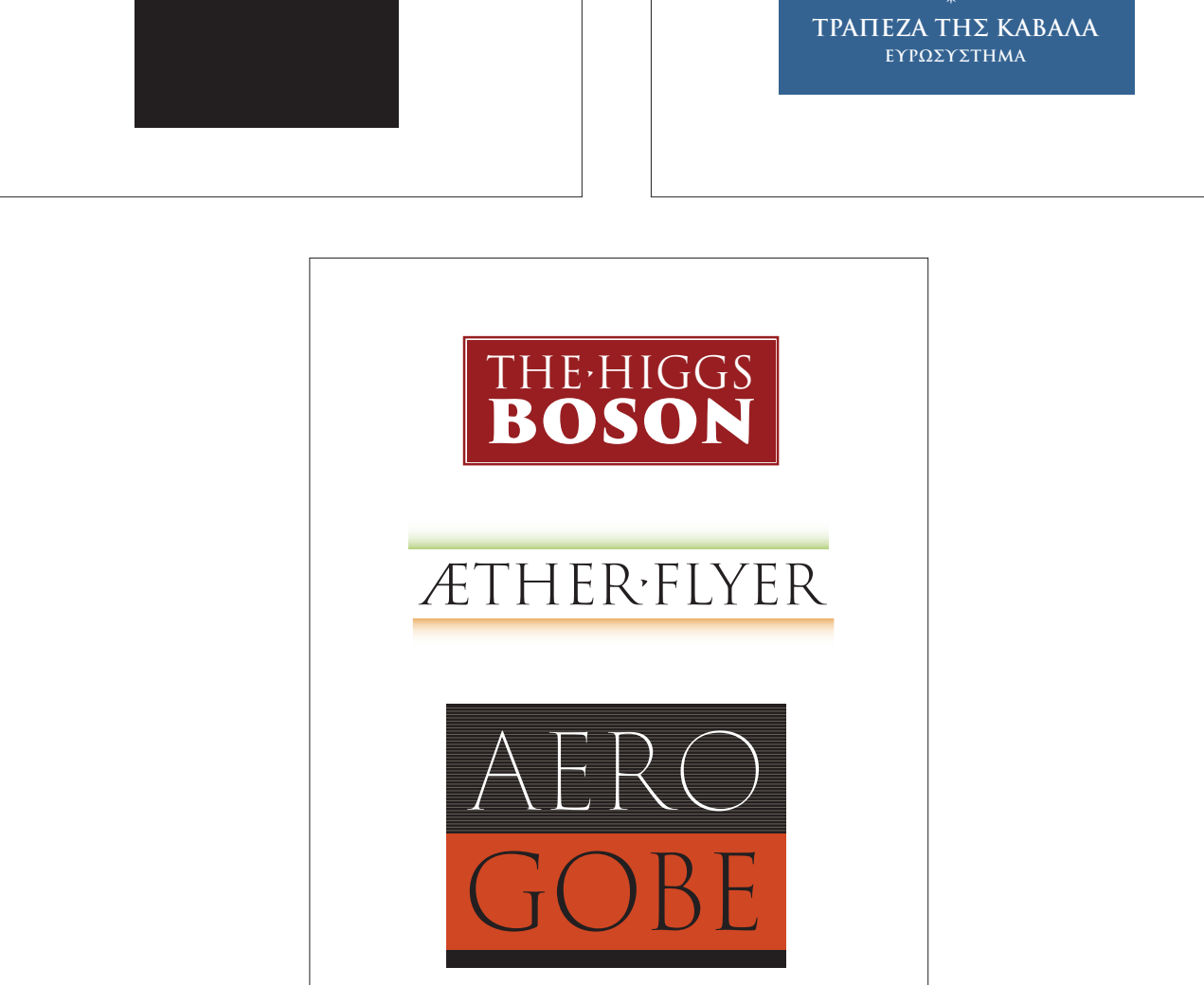
Trajan Black is something of an anomaly; because of the small size of the counters in such a heavy letter, notably in the A, it looks chunkier, more informal, almost like a sort of Fat Face. Although its serifs are bracketed, like the other Trajan serifs, in the Black weight they are so thin compared to the thick strokes that they give a very different appearance to the letters; there isn't an extreme contrast between thick and thin strokes, yet those tiny serifs suggest such an effect. It will be interesting to see where Trajan Pro Black gets put to use the most, once it is in designers' hands.

TRAIANVS

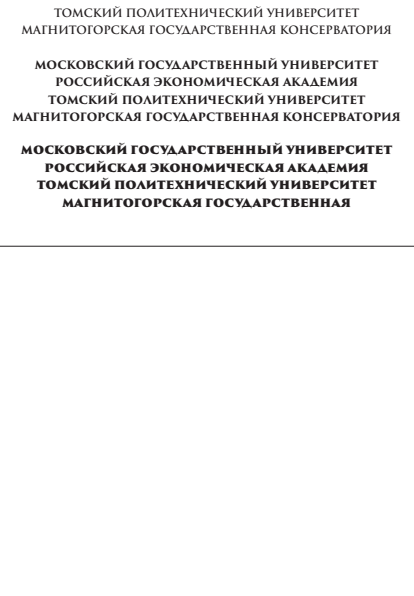
TRAIANVS

The other weights will probably be used much the way Trajan is used today, but with a lighter or a heavier weight chosen to fit a particular circumstance (Light or Extra Light at very large sizes, Semibold or Bold at smaller sizes). The weight range also makes it possible to set one word or phrase in contrast to the rest of the line, while still setting the whole passage in Trajan.

Besides the “small” caps, Trajan Pro has a number of alternate characters, such as an even longer-tailed Q, a double-T ligature, and even a double-N ligature (which should be used judiciously). It has an extended Latin character set far beyond anything the letter carvers of Trajan's column ever imagined, suitable for setting text in most of the languages that use the Latin alphabet today, as well as Greek (which they might have imagined) and Cyrillic (which was still centuries in the future in Trajan's time).



John D. Berry is a typographer, book designer, editor, and design writer living in Seattle. He is the former editor & publisher of *U&Lc* (*Upper and lower case*) and a former program manager with the Fonts team at Microsoft. He has edited several books on design and has won numerous awards for his book designs. He writes and consults extensively on typography. He is president of ATypI (Association Typographique Internationale).



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