

SEMPlicità PRO

IN LATE 2008, Bill Troop and I started thinking about reviving an innovative typeface called Semplicità, designed by Alessadro Butti and published by the Nebiolo foundry in 1930. Semplicità as it existed in 1930 is a type designer's typeface — everyone knows about it, but nobody has it. It is never revived as such, though it was hugely popular in Italy between the wars and immediately after. Instead, Semplicità has been used as an idea factory for decades. Its aesthetic DNA is an essential ingredient in the contemporary type designer's toolbox, and its fingerprints can be seen on many sans serif faces produced in the last twenty years.

Part of Semplicità's attraction is its relation to Paul Renner's 1927 sans serif Futura, the most popular typeface of its day, the instant popularity of which triggered Butti's design. So we spent some time looking closely at Futura. This was for the most part a pleasant process of rehashing what constitutes a geometric typeface, musing over the fundamental fallacy of even having such a classification in type while in reality very little geometry is left after the application of the optical adjustments inherently needed in simplified alphabet forms, trying to understand how far such concepts can go before entering into minimalism, and scoping the relativity between form simplicity and necessary refinement. Mostly academic, but very educational and definitely worth the ticket.

Futura, as we all know, is based on geometric principles. Lots of typefaces have been based on geometric principles, but all of them pale besides the strong influence Futura has had on typography for over 80 years now. What makes Futura so special? What has allowed it such undiminished use for so long? The truth is, when you really analyze Futura, it isn't invariably geometric. Wherever geometry was getting in the way of readability, or interfering with vernacular comfort levels, Renner — or his bosses — threw it out. What's left is a supremely practical deco-minimalist balancing act that still has enormous traction for us today.

Yes, Futura is great. But it's very easy to imagine Butti and his colleagues in Turin looking at this Teutonic miracle and thinking that they could do better, because to their eyes Futura must have seemed a surrender to geometry, clinical, unnatural, ungraceful.

And they did do better. If Semplicità's father is Futura, its mother is calligraphy, the archetypal Italian hand. Semplicità is really a radical reworking of the entire idea of Futura. It keeps some key concepts but replaces Futura's essentially cool, geometric soul with a warm calligraphic, humanist one. It isn't out of the question to look for Chancery influences in Semplicità, just as it isn't out of the question to discuss the constructed letterforms of Albrecht Dürer as a remote influence on Futura. If Futura is a deco-minimalist balancing act, Semplicità is a deco-minimalist-humanist act. Or, much more simply, German style versus Italian style.

Semplicità's radical design logic and idiosyncrasy become more apparent when directly compared with Futura in that face-off context. Futura attempted to go as far as geometry could take it, which ultimately made it too rigid and considerably hurt its viability for text setting. Renner himself acknowledged some of its flaws, and even proposed alternate functionality treatments, with a more humanistic approach applied to some forms, all of which went nowhere because Futura's real mission was

minimalism, and that was not to be disrupted by something so trivial as aesthetic or functionality. William Dwiggins' Metro design, a direct descendent of the Renner's design, went almost diametrically the opposite way of Futura, with the deco facets considerably magnified and the geometry toned down. Butti decided a design that finds the middle ground in that aesthetic tug of war was probably a better idea than either extreme. So, if taken strictly as an answer to Futura, Semplicità was certainly quite adventurous and very prophetic. It anticipated calligraphic skeleta in sans serif forms long before the heyday of humanist sans serif design that emerged in the 1960s, with such key paradigm shifters as Syntax and Frutiger. Semplicità's innovation opened the flood gates almost instantaneously, with Lucien Bernhard using quite a few of its features in his Bernhard Gothic, published just one year after Semplicità.

The merits of Butti's response to Futura, especially the degree of humanism he introduced to the design with those critical, abruptly cornered round forms, became more evident as we began looking at its italic, which, just like Futura's, was a pantographic slant of the upright font. Pantographic slants are always coarse, but putting those two side by side is quite revealing. The humanist traits in Semplicità lend themselves very naturally to slanting. The calligraphic soul of the typeface really blossoms in its italic. Yet somehow, the geometry is still prominent, in an almost perfect act of juggling influences. Of course, the italics would need to be manually subdued and slightly condensed in digital, but that's just technical work we've done and done again plenty of times.

But Semplicità did have its eccentricities, the most visibly adventurous of which were the f and t, both having no left-side crossbar, with the f's stem also extended down to fully occupy the typeface's descender space. These forms and a few other quirky facets of the typeface were the fork in the road that a type designer reaches in every revival or retooling project. As I've said countless times, a typeface is always limited by the tools available to it when it was made. So the process of retooling a typeface eighty years after it first saw the light inherently comes with a question: Should alternative, more contemporary aesthetics, now available to us because of modern tools and cultural evolution, be considered and applied? Rejecting that proposition results in a revival coming out like a crisp photocopy of the old design, a print of a painting. There's nothing wrong with that if typographers out there find it useful for their work. The majority of early digitizations of the classics are like that, functional photocopies of the old designs, some very good, some adequate, some very rushed. Futura is like that. Its proposed alternates are still buried, and now it's been so long hardly anyone knows about them. If the proposition of including alternative aesthetic features in the revival is accepted, more work would of course have to be done, mostly creative decisions and refinements, and of course the technical/production work that comes with that.

Bill and I knew we were going to go for that proposition from the very beginning. Aside from the obvious work we had to do on the italic, and although we did acknowledge right off the bat that Semplicità was a good display face right out of the box, it had some things that just wouldn't have worked for a good, versatile sans serif text face, which is what we intended the result of this project to be. So somewhere along the line, key Semplicità shapes were relegated to alternate forms, while the main forms were redrawn to something much more suitable for text treatments. Small caps were made. More alternates were drawn. Many sets of figures were made. Weights were added. This project became much more than a Semplicità revival. It became a Semplicità for this very day and age, a Semplicità Pro.

This font family took almost three years to finish — an eternity in an internet age. During that time there were many memorable moments for both Bill and myself.

Markers, if you will. There was that moment when we were astonished to find the soul of an absolutely modern and original sans serif laying before our eyes in bad printouts from 80 years ago. There was the time when we realized that we were gradually being lead by the design itself further and further away from the way Semplicità looked in 1930, delicate authenticity be damned. Bill tells me that he considers my accentuating the droopy calligraphic round forms that were just discernible in metal as a defining moment of the typeface's progress. Personally, I consider just as important the moment when Bill put a brake on the calligraphic elements of which we were becoming overly fond.

Semplicita Pro is a plausible, beautiful, and astonishingly readable sans serif — if I may say so myself. It was developed out of Alessandro Butti's ideas and guided by his spirit. We evolved it to become thoroughly contemporary, but its feet are rooted in the past. I think that rootedness gives it a feeling of dependability and authenticity we seldom find in contemporary designs. Semplicità means, of course, simplicity. In that spirit, Semplicita Pro avoids all the obvious eccentricities of the original metal typeface, but through the magic of OpenType also makes available the many options of playful display elements, the deco fantasy, of the original cutting. As you will note from the rest of this document, it goes even deeper with typographic finesse and extra features that logically grow out of Semplicità's forward thrust into the 21st century.

It's interesting that Paul Renner's greatest typefaces — Futura and Topic — are *sui generis*. They're so self-contained and definitive, they allow no room for serious evolutionary progeny. Butti's design was hasty and erratic by comparison with Bauer's impeccable implementation, but its children are everywhere today. And Semplicita Pro is among the most mature.

We hope you like it and find it useful.

Patrick Griffin, Toronto, August 2011

A A U U a a b b d d f f g g p p q q t t u u

Key differences between **Renner's Futura** and the *metal Semplicità*.

In many people the very name "Spy" excites a shudder of apprehension; we Spies, in fact, get quite used to being shuddered at. None of us Spies mind it at all. Whenever I enter a hotel and register myself as a Spy I am quite accustomed to see a thrill of fear run round the clerks, or clerk, behind the desk.

Us Spies or We Spies—for we call ourselves both—are thus a race apart. None know us. All fear us. Where do we live? Nowhere. Where are we? Everywhere. Frequently we don't know ourselves where we are. The secret orders that we receive come from so high up that it is often forbidden to us even to ask where we are. A friend of mine, or at least a Fellow Spy—us Spies have no friends—one of the most brilliant men in the Hungarian Secret Service, once spent a month in New York under the impression that he was in Winnipeg. If this happened to the most brilliant, think of the others.

All, I say, fear us. Because they know and have reason to know our power. Hence, in spite of the prejudice against us, we are able to move everywhere, to lodge in the best hotels, and enter any society that we wish to penetrate.

Let me relate an incident to illustrate this: a month ago I entered one of the largest of the New York hotels which I will merely call the B. hotel without naming it: to do so might blast it. We Spies, in fact, never name a hotel. At the most we indicate it by a number known only to ourselves, such as 1, 2, or 3.

Semplicita Pro Regular 10/11.75. Text by Stephen Leacock.

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Futura Book 10/11.75.

SEMPlicitA Pro LIGHT

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- 8 /9.6
- 10 /12
- 12 /14.4
- 14 /16.8
- 18 /21.6
- 24 /28.8
- 30 /36

PORTEZ CE VIEUX WHISKY AU JUGE BLOND QUI FUME.
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SEMPlicita Pro Light Italic

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- 8 /9.6
- 10 /12
- 12 /14.4
- 14 /16.8
- 18 /21.6
- 24 /28.8
- 30 /36

QUEDA GAZPACHO, FIBRA, LÁTEX, JAMÓN, KIWI Y VIÑAS.
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SEMPLICITA PRO REGULAR

6 /7.2
8 /9.6
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12 /14.4
14 /16.8
18 /21.6
24 /28.8
30 /36

THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER A LAZY DOG.
the quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog.
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SEMPlicita Pro Medium

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- 10 /12
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- 14 /16.8
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- 130 /156

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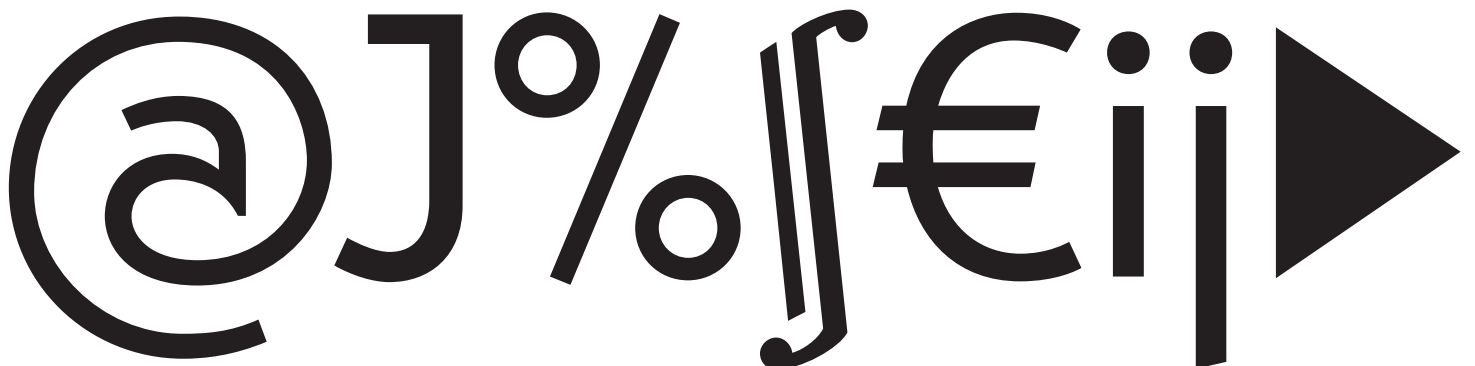
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SEMPlicita Pro Medium Italic

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SEMPlicita Pro SEMIBOLD

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- 8 /9.6
- 10 /12
- 12 /14.4
- 14 /16.8
- 18 /21.6
- 24 /28.8
- 130 /156

VIF JUGE, TREMEPEZ CE BLOND WHISKY ACQEUX.
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SEMPlicita Pro Bold

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- 10 /12
- 12 /14.4
- 14 /16.8
- 18 /21.6
- 24 /28.8
- 130 /156

JACKDAWS LOVE MY BIG SPHINX OF QUARTZ.
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SEMPlicita Pro Bold Italic

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8 /9.6
10 /12
12 /14.4
14 /16.8
18 /21.6
24 /28.8
130 /156

PCHNAĆ W TĘ ŁÓDŹ JEŻA LUB OŚM SKRZYŃ FIG.
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PCHNAĆ W TĘ ŁÓDŹ JEŻA LUB OŚM SKRZYŃ FIG.
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WHAT THESE TWO words are that will get a room in New York at once I must not divulge. *Even now, when the veil of secrecy is being lifted, the international interests involved are too complicated to permit it. Suffice it to say that if these two had failed I know a couple of others still better.*

IN MANY PEOPLE the very name “Spy” excites a shudder of apprehension; we Spies, in fact, get quite used to being shuddered at. None of us Spies mind it at all. Whenever I enter a hotel and register myself as a Spy I am quite accustomed to see a thrill of fear run round the clerks, or clerk, behind the desk.

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ALL, I SAY, FEAR US. Because they know and have reason to know our power. Hence, in spite of the prejudice against us, we are able to move everywhere, to lodge in the best hotels, and enter any society that we wish to penetrate.

Let me relate an incident to illustrate this: a month ago I entered one of the largest of the New York hotels which I will merely call the B. hotel without naming it: to do so might blast it. We Spies, in fact, never name a hotel. At the most we indicate it by a number known only to ourselves, such as 1, 2, or 3.

On my presenting myself at the desk the clerk informed me that he had no room vacant. I knew this of course to be a mere subterfuge; whether or not he suspected that I was a Spy I cannot say. I was muffled up, to avoid recognition, in a long overcoat with the collar turned up and reaching well above my ears, while the black beard and the moustache, that I had slipped on in entering the hotel, concealed my face. *“Let me speak a moment to the manager,” I said. When he came I beckoned him aside and taking his ear in my hand I breathed two words into it. “Good heavens!” he gasped, while his face turned as pale as ashes. “Is it enough?” I asked. “Can I have a room, or must I breathe again?” “No, no,” said the manager, still trembling. Then, turning to the clerk: “Give this gentleman a room,” he said, “and give him a bath.”*

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