



The Italic Style: Getting It Straight

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Abstract. This paper is based on a dissertation study of the italic, both the writing style and the typographic font. It seeks to understand and define it, while analyzing and describing its history, origin and evolution. We have noted that many important history of design publications have most typographic styles very well defined, but not the italic, regarding its history and definition, and therefore felt the need to study this topic in more depth. For this research we have reviewed relevant literature and observed multiple manuscripts and typefaces. Authors such as Andrew Robinson, Michelle P. Brown, Berthold L. Ullman, James Wardrop and Stanley Morison were essential for a good theoretical foundation. The analysis of manuscripts and typefaces allowed us to verify and exemplify the information that was studied in books and identify with more clarity the characteristics of the italic. With this investigation, we hope to contribute to a better understanding and a good use of the italic style.

Keywords: Italic · Calligraphy · Typography · Humanistic writing Latin alphabet

1 Introduction

Italic, both typographic font and calligraphic style, is easily recognizable by the Western population. However, graphic designers hardly know about it, although they use it daily on their computers, and few scholars study it. As the title indicates, this work intends to clarify the origin and evolution of the italic style.

Taking into account the main research areas of this research problem, it becomes pertinent to explain the concepts of calligraphy and typography.

The word “calligraphy” comes from the Greek words kallos, meaning “beautiful,” and graphein, which means “to write.” According to Noordzij [9]: “Calligraphy is handwriting pursued for its own sake, dedicated to the quality of shapes.” The goal of a calligrapher is to produce something beautiful.

According to Baines and Haslam [1], typography is the “mechanical notation and organization of language.” Through a mechanical (or digital) process, typography has the purpose of creating typographic fonts and composition to transmit a message.

Before the invention of the printing press, all books were written by hand. In these manuscripts (manu, which means “hand”, scripts, which means “writing”) we find many different “writing styles”. Like a typographic font, a writing style is meant to represent a

writing system (for example, the Latin alphabet), in which the symbols present common characteristics (for example, contrasts between line weights).

The transition from manuscripts to printed books was gradual, not a total and sudden break (Brown, 1998, p. 62) [2], and the printing press did not make handwriting unnecessary. The two forms have interacted throughout history and still influence each other today. [3] However, books and typography studies avoid talking about this fact and treat the typographic letter, in other words the printed letter, as independent and autonomous of the written letter. [9] For this reason, many designers are unaware of the way in which the first typographic letters were based on handwritten letters. Typographers can learn a lot by studying handwriting.

“With the success of Gutenberg’s press, it seems likely that writing by hand would become a thing of the past. Far from it. Thanks to printing, the literary world expanded to ever-greater proportions, but the quill pen remained the indispensable tool for recording thought” [6].

The ability to use fonts effectively is an essential skill for any graphic designer.

Since the introduction of digital design systems, the graphic designer has been faced with a bewildering choice of typefaces, as well as the means to manipulate them. Never been so important for graphic designers to know the history of printing and typography (Pipes, 2009, 27).

“Grounding in calligraphy is essential for proper understanding of good typography and graphic design, and its practice is to be encouraged” (Pipes, 2009, p. 60).

2 Research Motivation

The basis of the motivation for this study is that we observed there was a lack of specific information in works of reference on the history of graphic design such as *Meggs’ History of Graphic Design* (2012), *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (2009) and *Graphic Design: A New History* (2007). In hundreds of pages, only two to three paragraphs are somehow devoted to italics. The information found in these books was as follows (and, as we shall see, much more can be said about italics).

Meggs’ History of Graphic Design [7] is a bestselling book currently on its sixth edition. It is probably the most popular book on graphic design history among university students.

Meggs first mentions the italic when he explains that in 1501, Francesco Griffo created the first italic type for the first pocket book of Aldo Manuzio, *Opera de Virgilio*.

“1501 — Griffo designs & cuts 1st italic type for Manutius’s pocket book” (Meggs, Purvis, 2012, P. 66). Its use allowed the insertion of more characters in a line, compared to the Roman/ round of Jenson or Griffo, due to its narrower letters. This italic was based on the *cancelleresca*, a style of inclined writing used by intellectuals of the height, who liked speed and informality in their writing “In 1501 Manutius addressed the need for smaller, more economical books by publishing the prototype of the pocket book. This edition of Vergil’s *Opera* (Works) had a 7.7 by 15.4 cm (3.75 by 6 in.) page size and was set in the first italic type font. Between the smaller size type and the narrower width of italic characters, a 50% gain in the number of characters in a line of a given measure was achieved over Jenson’s fonts and Griffo’s type for *De Aetna*. Italic

(Fig. 7–24) was closely modelled on the *cancellaresca* script, a slanted handwriting style that found favor among scholars, who liked its writing speed and informality. An unusual publication by Manutius using Griffo’s Greek italic is the 1504 edition of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.”

“Until his death in 1515, Manutius published numerous classical editions in the small format and italics of Vergil’s *Opera*” [7].

The capitals, which were used with the lower italics, were the Roman ones [7].

Although typographic printing has led to an inevitable decline in the production of manuscripts, it has also created new opportunities for master calligraphers. The rapid growth of literacy has created a huge demand for masters of writing. The first manual of writing was created by the master calligrapher and printer Ludovico degli Arrighi, in 1522, under the title *La operina da imparare di scrivere littera cancellaresca*. With clear and simple instructions, he intended to teach the writing style known as *cancellaresca* in a few days. Influenced by this, other master calligraphers created their own manuals, such as Giovanni Battista Palatino “Italian writing masters Although typographic printing produced an inevitable decline in manuscript writing, it also created new opportunities for master calligraphers. The rapid growth of literacy created a huge demand for writing masters, and the attendant expansion of government and commerce created a need for expert calligraphers who could draft important state and business documents. The first of many sixteenth-century writing manuals was created by Italian master calligrapher, printer, and type designer Lodovico degli Arrighi (d. c. 1527). His small volume from 1522, entitled *La operina da imparare di scrivere littera cancellaresca* (The First Writing Manual of the Chancery Hand) (Fig. 7–27), was a brief course using excellent examples to teach the *cancellaresca* script. Arrighi’s masterful writing was meticulously cut onto woodblocks by engraver Ugo da Carpi (c. 1479–1533). Arrighi’s directions were so clear and simple that the reader could learn this hand in a few days. *La operina da imparare di scrivere littera cancellaresca* sounded the death knell for the *scriptorium* as an exclusive domain for the few who could write; it rang in the era of the writing master and public writing skill. A follow-up 1523 volume, entitled *Il modo de temperare le penne* (The Way to Temper the Pen), presented a dozen handwriting styles. Among those influenced by Arrighi, Giovanni Battista Palatino (c. 1515–c.1575) produced the most complete and widely used writing manuals of the sixteenth century. Others included da Carpi, who published a compilation of Italian writing masters in about 1535 (Fig. 7–28).

The Italian Renaissance began to fade with the sack of Rome in 1527 by the combined forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and his Spanish allies. One of the victims of this outrage appears to have been Arrighi” [7].

Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide [4] is perhaps the most incomplete book, as far as the history of italics is concerned. He makes references to Aldo Manuzio and Francesco Griffo, and to pocketbooks, but without ever speaking of the italic type. Unlike the other authors, he states that Arrighi was to create the first italic type in 1522 “1522 — Arrighi designs first italic type” [4].

Graphic Design: A New History [5] mealy states the following:

Around 1500, Aldo Manuzio (printer) publishes the first book with the first italic type. This was based on a style of cursive writing and created by Francesco Griffo. In the beginning, it was not used in conjunction with the Roman to distinguish information, as is usually nowadays. It proved to be valuable because it allowed for the insertion of more words in a line of text compared to both Roman and Gothic. Aldo Manuzio published a series of small printed books (called eighths) in italics “Around 1500, Aldus Manutius (1449–1515), a Venetian Humanist and printer, published the first work in roman italic type. Based on cursive handwriting, italic was not used as subset to create emphasis, as it mainly is today, but was its own style — one that proved valuable because more words could fit on each line than with either gothic or roman. In 1501, Manutius, in association with the punch cutter Francesco Griffo, released a volume of poetry by the ancient Latin author Virgil. Manutius’s attention to economic issues also led him to become one of the first publishers of small printed books, called *octavos* because each sheet was folded so as to create eight leaves” [5].

3 Historical Writing Systems and Styles

It was through the study of historical writing systems and styles that we came to the important realization that the shapes of their symbols are influenced not only by the materials, tools and medium (and the manner in which these are used) as well as by whom and to what purpose.

It is easy to understand how two individuals searching for a writing system will design symbols in entirely different ways, depending on whether they are using a paintbrush with papyrus paint or a clay stiletto. And even if, instead of inventing their own writing system, they merely reproduce a known one, the result will still be quite different. At the same time, if you are writing for others or for posterity, be careful to keep the forms clear and legible.

For centuries scribes used formal styles to write books, where letter forms had to be understood by others, and informal and cursive styles for personal notes, where the message was only meant to be readable to the one writing it.

As we analyze the evolution of the letters of the Latin alphabet over several centuries, we find that each style of writing was based on an earlier one. No scribe was a radical. The scribe who was an innovator or a reformer, knew the styles of writing that existed and used them as models, modified them in order to respond to the needs and values of his time (and place), thus creating something considered new.

4 The Italic Style, Getting It Straight

The italic, known among paleographers as Humanistic cursive is born in the fifteenth century. This originated during the Italian Renaissance, a period of cultural and economic change, which was characterized, among other aspects, by the awakening of interest in classical models.

Humanists called for the reform of writing styles. They wanted to replace the Gothic minuscule with the styles of the ancient Romans. This idea came from Francesco Petrarca and was supported by Coluccio Salutati. After unremitting searches throughout Europe for forgotten works, they found the Caroline minuscule, an old style, elegant and more readable. Based on this, Poggio Bracciolini (disciple of Salutati) developed the *littera antiqua* or *littera humanistica*, to be initially used in Latin texts of classical antiquity. This new style was encouraged by Niccolò Niccoli, preferred by the Medici (Ullman, 1960, p. 60) and other book collectors, and sold and promoted by book merchants like Vespasiano of Bisticci. It was gradually perfected by scribes like Gherardo del Ciriagio, Antonio di Mario and Pierantonio Sallando.

The first cursive variant (Italic or Humanistic cursive), known as *littera antiqua corsiva*, was created by Niccolò Niccoli around 1420, and it was an informal hybrid style that crossed the Italian cursive Gothic with the *antiqua littera*. Niccoli, who was not a professional scribe, used it to copy books for his own use or to send as a loan (Morison, 2011, p. 208) so that others could copy them, in a formal style and favored by society. It was an extremely quick but readable and clear writing that gradually gained popularity among the humanists, especially for margin notes (Wardrop 1963, p. 11). It was eventually used in less important books, turning into *littera humanistica cursiva libraria* (*Libraria* is a formal style to be used in books). When adopted and perfected by professional scribes it has acquired a high degree of formalization, becoming an acceptable and elegant style for documents and for the different genres of books. In the mid-fifteenth century, the scribes of the Papal Chancery developed a variant of the cursive Humanistic, which became known as *Cancellaresca littera*. It quickly spread through the rest of Europe and in the sixteenth century was known in many countries as “Italian style” or “italic”, derived from the name of the country of origin (Italy). **The term “italic” (as a writing style) is currently used to describe any variant of Humanistic cursive.**

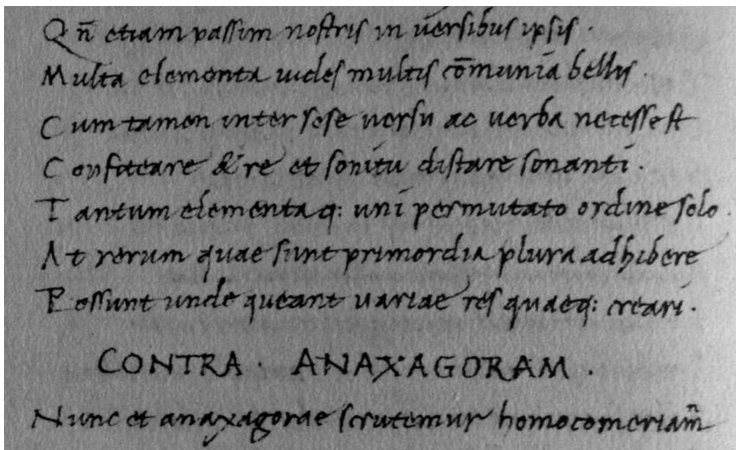


Fig. 1. Text by Lucrécio, handwritten by Niccolò Niccoli in *littera antiqua corsiva*

An analysis of the manuscripts written by Bartolomeo Sanvito (one of the best Renaissance scribes) and Ludovico degli Arrighi (scribe of the Papal Chancery) helped us to better understand the letter forms of the two main variants of Humanistic cursive. Sanvito produced the first pocket manuscript and had a semi-formal writing. Arrighi published the first manual of writing to illustrate and teach the *cancellaresca* (Fig. 1).

Italic is one of the most variable styles, which can be fast and informal or slow and very elegant. In general, it is lighter than other styles. It is characterised by having condensed letters (laterally) often with a slope to the right, the oval letter and the asymmetric letters (as “n”).

Informal italics aim to achieve a balance between readability and practicality. The ductus is as natural as possible, looking for the easiest and quickest route. The speed tends to reduce the number of liftings of the device, so as not to disturb the rhythm of writing. With few parting surveys, ligatures (letter-bonding strokes) are necessary and consequential, and the arcs are produced by the branching of the stem. The angle of the paring is usually 45° and the letters are usually inclined, or at least show a sense of movement from left to right.

Formal italics, the elegance of form is more important than speed. Speed can be as slow as desired to produce individual strokes accurately. Most letters are composed of



Fig. 2. Manuscript handwritten in by Pierantonio Sallando in formal style *littera humanistica cursiva libraria*. Pádua, 1483

several strokes and their order corresponds to the normal order for formal styles. Even though many of the letters, for example “n”, are an interrupted construction, their characteristic form essentially comes from the continuous construction of informal italics. The angle of the parting is usually between 35° and 45° . The letters are usually slightly sloped (about 10°), with the exception of some more elaborate cursives (that can reach the 15th).

This italic style, *littera humanistica cursiva libraria*, was developed for use in handwritten books, for its elegance and legibility (Fig. 2).

The evolution of the italic, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, is observed through the writing manuals of the master calligraphers. It was from the *littera Cancellaresca* that the italic developed in several European styles, eventually turning into styles known as copperplate, where all the letters in a word could be linked, almost without lifting the pen. Gradually these styles were increasingly “corrupted,” with excessive flowery, and their readability was lost. However, they were (and are) the basis of most cursive writing models taught in schools.

The first printed books used manuscripts as models. The writing styles that were used in these were the basis for the first typefaces. It was thus that in Venice, in the sixteenth century, Aldo Manuzio and Francesco Griffo converted the style of writing italic to typography. Possibly based on a manuscript (in small format) written by Bartolomeo Sanvito, they created the first typographic italic. It had good readability in a small size and, because it was narrower, it took up less horizontal space and a greater number of words fit on a page, saving space, therefore also paper, and thus, money, both by the printer and the consumer.

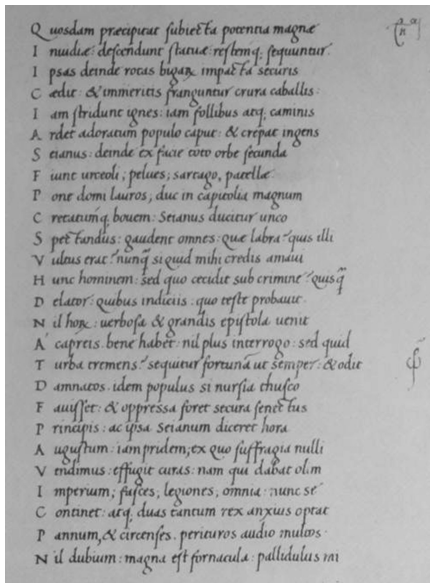


Fig. 3. Left: Manuscript handwritten in by Bartolomeo Sanvito

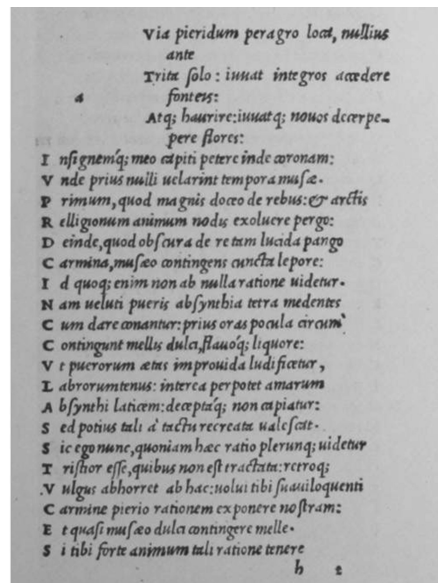


Fig. 4. Right: Text printed by Aldo Manuzio, in 1515

Italic was quickly copied or used as a model by other European printers. One of the best was created by Ludovico degli Arrighi (same calligrapher already mentioned) based on his *cancellaresca*.

Contrary to what is happening today, there were no italic capitals, Roman capitals were used to follow the lower case, and whole books were printed in italics (Figs. 3 and 4).

5 Conclusion

With our research we have concluded that the most mainstream history books on graphic design do not contain all the history on italics as it is known by paleographers. This knowledge is important for designers who use typography daily and especially for font designers.

The history of writing tells us the history of the Italic and of its evolution over time since its appearance in calligraphy, its evolution from cursive writing to a formal book writing style until its conversion to typography.

This history teaches us that italic font is not merely a skewed version of the roman style of the font, considering they were based on different handwriting styles with different characteristics, letter structures and gestures, and these were transformed into typographic shapes. As a result, the italic font has characters with a design that is clearly different from the design of roman characters of the same font. Especially the lowercase “a”, “e”, “f” and “g” are the ones that can undergo major changes. Inclination, lateral compression of letters, and cursive details are only secondary characteristics.

Not all fonts have a “true” italic. Instead, usually letterheads with square serifs or without serifs, have a sloping variant of the roman font, which we call oblique. While the true italic refers to the Italian cursive writing of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the oblique is based on the round font of the same typeface.

It was through the analysis of fonts that we can verify that an italic to be true must have characters different from those presented in the roman font, which demonstrate the influence of the letters forms of the writing style Humanistic cursive, and at least one of the secondary characteristics: slope, lateral compression or cursive details.

Currently, there are two valuable rules for designers, which should never be broken when it comes to italics. The first is that you should not use only italic capitals in a word, phrase or text, because they were only created to match the lowercase letters.

The second rule is to never use software (digital composition programs) to artificially tilt a Roman (it is considered a typographical error by many typographers and designers). In doing so, it inevitably distorts the forms of the letters and makes them less readable and pleasant.

We are accustomed to considering italics as a secondary typographic font and possibly for this reason we treat it as such, not giving it the necessary importance. Perhaps because of this, or because of its complexity, few scholars study it. By not understanding its origin and its characteristics, we end up making unnecessary mistakes, using it incorrectly.

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