The History of a Typefounding Classification
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Transitional is a term often used to describe the design of certain printing types. Some value the term for offering a finer-grained distinction between the venerated categories of old-face and modern forms of roman text types. Meanwhile, others reject it, often with the rationale that it implies a historical development that the facts do not bear out. Still, the misgivings of these naysayers have not prevented the frequent use of transitional by classifiers of type design for many generations. How did a potentially ill-conceived term take hold? The historical context of transitional’s emergence sheds light on the success of its entry into the parlance. Although arguably inaccurate and even inherently problematic, the transitional label for type designs fitted the paradigms of cultural history current at its emergence.

To make my case, I outline a trio of connected terms in type classification—old-face (or oldstyle), transitional, and modern—and then take a closer look at examples of each. I then look at some problems that arise with the term transitional. Finally, I discuss the historical context of the term’s emergence: when it was introduced, what changes were taking place in the type world at that time, and what models for cultural development were current in the broader world.

What Is Transitional Type?

“The ‘transitional’ types… make an historical approach to type inevitable. One cannot talk of a transition without knowing what went before it—nor what became of it.”

Acknowledging this guidance from type historian James Mosley, our first task is to discern the previous and subsequent styles that the transitional style purportedly links. In the world of type design history, the previous style is the one often called old-face or oldstyle and the subsequent style is called modern. Thus, transitional describes a letterform that shares features with both the old-face letter and the modern letter. To explore the relationships among these three terms, it will be useful to analyze exemplary typefaces for each.

Different writers have expressed differing spans for the scope of what falls under the old-face class, but in the broadest sense of the word, old-face letters are the forms characteristic of...
roman printing types from the Renaissance to the mid-eighteenth century. Of course, there was no need to label them as old-face before the arrival of modern types as an alternative, any more than there would be reason to refer to guitar music as acoustic before the arrival of electric guitars. The label is a retronym. Thus, the old-face design of type dates back to the sixteenth or even fifteenth century, but the old-face label for these designs comes from the nineteenth century.

As an example of old-face types we can use Englishman William Caslon’s. In the 1720s, Caslon cut a series of fonts based on Dutch models (see Figure 1). These Caslon types proved very popular over the ensuing half century, particularly in England and America. They fall incontrovertibly into the old-face category—indeed, they were likely the first to be so named, as we will see.

Closer to the turn of the nineteenth century, letterforms like Caslon’s were eclipsed by the crisp, high-contrast style most often associated with Giambattista Bodoni of Parma (see Figure 2). However, even with the arrival of this new style of type, we still do not see contemporary references to an old-face and modern distinction. Producers of what we call modern typefaces saw their designs not as an alternative to be offered alongside the older style, but rather simply as the appropriate way of forming letters, which superseded that older style. The supersession was celebrated by Caleb Stower in 1808:

Adieu, barrières trompeuses, courirons des héros,
Il n’en sort que trop pour vivre dans l’histoire;
Sorvrent quarante ans de travaux
Ne valent qu’un instant de gloire,
Et la haine de cent rivales.

Adieu, grandes; adieu, chimeres;
De vos blotties passagères
Mes yeux ne sont plus éblouis:
Si votre faux éclat dans ma naïve amoureuse
Fut trop imprudemment écore
Des désirs indécis, longtemps évanouis;
Au sein de la philosophie,
Ecole de la vérité,
Zénon me détroupe de la frivolité
Qui fait l’illusion du songe de la vie,
Et je suis avec modestie
Rejeter les poisons qu’offre la vanité.

Adieu, divine volupté;
Adieu, plaisirs charnels, qui flatterez la mollesse;
Et dont la trompe enchanterser
Par des liens de fleurs enchanta la gaiété,
Compagnes dans notre jeunesse
De la brillante puissance,
Qui faisa de nos ans l’insipide vieillesse.

Figure 1 (left)

Figure 2 (right)

The great improvement which has taken place of late years in the form of printing types, has completely superseded the Elzevir shape introduced from Holland by the celebrated Caslon, near ninety years ago. Every one must observe, with increasing admiration, the numerous and elegant founts of every size, which have with rapid succession been lately presented to the public.¹

This changeover was also documented, albeit with much less enthusiasm, by typefounder Edmund Fry in 1828. Fry lamented that:

the Baskerville and Caslon imitations, all completed with Accents, Fractions, &c., were, in consequence of this revolution, laid by for ever; and many thousand pounds weight of new letter in Founts ... were taken from the shelves, and carried to the melting-pot to be recast into Types, no doubt, in many instances, more beautiful; but ... [none] equal in service, or really so agreeable to the reader, as the true Caslon-shaped Elzevir Types.⁵

So the new letter design replaced the old rather than joining it. Only following the mid-nineteenth-century revival of types of the older design did the letterforms we now see as old-face and modern meet simultaneously in the same arena. Only then did the necessity of the differentiating labels arise.

Specifically, the revival of that Caslon face, mentioned by Stower and Fry, is what triggered the old-face/modern distinction. The style of Bodoni and his followers was joined by Caslon’s design when the latter was relaunched in the 1840s. In 1887 Talbot Reed gave this account of this revival:

In the year 1843, Mr. [Charles] Whittingham, of the Chiswick Press, waited upon Mr. Caslon [descendent of the firm’s founder] to ask his aid in carrying out the then new idea of printing in appropriate type “The Diary of Lady Willoughby,” a work of fiction, the period and diction of which were supposed to be of the reign of Charles I [1600–49]. The original matrices of the first William Caslon having been fortunately preserved, Mr. Caslon undertook to supply a small fount of Great Primer. So well was Mr. Whittingham satisfied with the result of his experiment that he determined on printing other volumes in the same style, and eventually he was supplied with the complete series of all the other founts. Then followed a demand for old faces, which has continued up to the present time.⁶

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¹ Cited in David Chambers, ed. Specimen of Modern Printing Types 1828 (London: Printing Historical Society, 1986), 11. (“Elzevir” was the family name of renowned Dutch printers of the seventeenth century.) The totality of this supersession can be measured in Alexander Lawson’s observation that the 1805 specimen from the Caslon firm (then run by descendants of the aforementioned type-cutter) does not include a single old-face exemplar. Alexander S. Lawson, Anatomy of a Typeface (Boston: Godine, 1990), 175.

⁵ Chambers, 1828 Specimen, 7. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ Talbot Baines Reed, A History of the Old English Letter Foundries (London: Elliot Stock, 1887), 255. Worth noting here is that this demand, which may have been continuous, was also primarily for specialized application. G. W. Ovink reminds us that throughout the nineteenth century, “the bulk of text printing was executed in didones, and their Fraktur-counterparts for the German-speaking countries. ... [Alternatives like oldstyle types] were always used consciously, by self-willed printers or publishers, in opposition to the normal, viz. the didones. Hence they are to be found in texts of a historical, literary or artistic nature if they are themselves historical (Caslon, Old Style, Elzevir etc.).” G. W. Ovink, “Nineteenth-Century Reactions Against the Didone Type Model - 1,” Quaerendo 1, no. 2 (1971), 21.
Old face, as Reed used here, was first used (as far as I am aware) in the specimen books of the foundries selling their revived Caslon. If Caslon is the quintessential old-face type and Bodoni the modern, our example of transitional types can be found in the work of John Baskerville, a Birmingham printer whose career is positioned in between Caslon's and Bodoni's dates. Inspired by letters that could be found in the copybooks of master writers, Baskerville produced elegant types (See Figure 3). His fonts and his deluxe editions manifesting his innovations in printing techniques were somewhat ill-matched for the contemporary British printing trade, but they found many admirers in continental Europe and America.
With our exemplary typefaces established, we can look more closely at their formal qualities to ascertain how the relationships between them encouraged the transitional label. To do so, we define and analyze four characteristics: contrast, axis, stroke construction, and serif shape. Throughout this discussion, readers can refer to the detailed illustrations of Caslon, Baskerville, and Bodoni in Figures 4, 5, and 6, respectively.

Contrast
Contrast may be defined as the difference between the thinnest and thickest strokes of a letterform. A high-contrast font has thinner thin lines relative to the thick lines, as compared to a low-contrast font, which has more even stroke widths. The standard account says simply that modern faces like Bodoni’s have higher contrast than old-face fonts like Caslon’s. If Baskerville is to exemplify a transition in this dimension, we might expect to find a higher contrast than Caslon and a lower contrast than Bodoni. But a more complex dynamic is at play in contrast analysis.
than appears at first blush, as Gerrit Noordzij has pointed out.\(^9\) The reason is that contrast is not a singular spectrum, but a relationship of two variables: the widths both of the thicks and of the thins. Positing Baskerville as an intermediary design forces us to acknowledge this complexity. Compared to Caslon, Baskerville’s difference in weight is better described as a lighter design: Its thins and thicks appear narrower than the corresponding parts in Caslon, but they remain in a similar proportion.\(^10\) For their part, Bodoni’s late designs retain the thin thins of Baskerville but resume the thick thicks of Caslon, resulting in their oft-noted high contrast. So perhaps Baskerville can be seen as a stepping stone in the development of contrast.

**Axis**

Axis refers to the angles at which the thickening strokes reach their thickest point and the thinning strokes reach their thinnest point. Analysts of type picture a line running through the thinnest parts of a round letter as its axis. Like many later old-face types, Caslon displays a mix of axis in its letters, but most letters tend toward a back-inclined axis. This tradition in type design is based on writing with a broad-nibbed pen, held conventionally in the right hand. This angle can be seen in letters like /b/, with the preponderance of weight on the right side of the bowl tending above its midline. Likewise, if we imagine a clock face superimposed on capital /C/, we see it gets thickest at about the eight o’clock position. This diagonal lean of the axis is nearly expunged in Bodoni’s upright modern letters. With few exceptions (e.g., the capital and lowercase /S/, the diagonal letters, the bottom of /g/), Bodoni strokes are thickest when precisely vertical and thinnest when exactly horizontal. The lower contrast of Baskerville may make its similarity to Bodoni less obvious, but the former shares this vertical axis with the latter. In both Baskerville and Bodoni, lowercase /b/’s right side is balanced above and below its midline. At the lower left corner of the letter, where Caslon’s slanted axis dictates a thickening, Baskerville and Bodoni bowls connect to the stem with a hairline. The capital /C/ of the latter two both reach their thickest point at nine o’clock. In terms of axis, Baskerville would seem to have moved quickly toward what we find in modern typefaces.

**Stroke Construction**

Stroke construction refers to the manner in which the thinning and thickening of strokes happen. This quality can be classified into the mechanics of the pen and its handling, which the type emulates. In *The Stroke*, Gerrit Noordzij has proposed a classification of stroke structure. Noordzij bases his analysis on the shape and movement of what he terms the counterpoint, which we can imagine as the writing tip of the pen. First, he identifies *translation* strokes.


10 Note that the lighter effect of Baskerville as printed is a consequence of factors beyond just the thickness of the lines of the printing sorts. More spacious side-bearings play a role, as do all sorts of variables in the printing process that might lessen ink spread.
as when “the contrast of the strokes is the result of changes in the direction of the stroke alone, because the size... and the orientation of the counterpoint is constant.”

For example, a translation stroke would occur if a broad-nibbed pen were held firmly while it wrote a letter (see Figure 7). In contrast, Noordzij identifies expansion as when “the contrast of the stroke is the result of changes in the size of the counterpoint.”

For expansion, we could imagine trading the broad-nib pen for a split-nib pen, which spreads out as we push down harder on the pen while writing, and the stroke is thereby thickened, no matter which direction it is traveling (see Figure 8).

Caslon’s old-face stroke construction is dominated by the translation model. Looking at lowercase /o/ and /c/, we can see the axis vary—the /o/’s is more upright—but in each case the thickening of the stroke is gradual and happens in concert with the changing direction of the stroke. Bodoni’s modern stroke construction is markedly different. The strokes abruptly thicken independent of their direction. So, for example, the overall shape of the lowercase /b/’s bowl is smooth and round, but the stroke jumps from thin to thick to thin as it completes its circular trip. The resulting shapes—such as an /o/ that looks a bit like an upright, white rounded rectangle centered in a black, rounded-diamond-shaped setting—defy translation logic. Attempts to reproduce their forms with a writing tool using simple strokes would require expansion, such as the split-nib pens splaying out on paper, or an engraver’s burin digging deeper into a copper plate. Both of these tools were eminent media for making letters in Bodoni’s day. Baskerville seems to split the difference, pulling away from translation but not so completely nor obviously as Bodoni does. So here again the transitional label would seem apt.

Serif Shape

Serif shape refers not only to the overall shape of those small finishing strokes called serifs, but also to the way that they are joined to the main strokes that they terminate. Caslon’s serifs are heavy, where Bodoni’s are hairline-thin; Caslon’s are bracketed—that is, they seem to grow out of the stems—while Bodoni’s are perpendicular add-ons; Caslon’s lowercase ascenders have triangular serifs, like short pennants on thick flagpoles, and Bodoni’s are characteristically thin and rigidly horizontal. Baskerville’s serifs are more similar to Caslon’s, particularly in their bracketing, which lends to their Caslon-like triangular appearance. However, Baskerville’s ascender serifs seem to be rising toward the horizontality of Bodoni’s—a characteristic that seems of a piece with Baskerville’s aforementioned more vertical axis. Thus in serif shape, Baskerville again seems to fit between the old-face and modern exemplars.

12 Ibid. Noordzij also recognizes a third structure, rotation, when “the contrast of the stroke is the result not only of changes in the direction of the stroke, but also of changes in the orientation of the counterpoint.”
13 Treatment of lachrymal (teardrop-shaped) terminals follows this same pattern: They are more abrupt—close to round balls—in Bodoni’s type. This shape is apparent in /a/ here, and also true of letters like /f/ and /r/, although in these cases the difference is more easily seen at font sizes larger than those examined here.
What Is Wrong with “Transitional”?  

From this visual analysis we can see some logic in considering Baskerville to be a transitional face between Caslon and Bodoni: Many of the ways in which it departs from Caslon’s design appear in retrospect to be heading toward Bodoni’s. But with further consideration, we can see that the orderly development in design implied by the transitional term is not without its problems. This simple, tripartite timeline gets troubled when we consider the sources of Baskerville’s letterforms. A look beyond Baskerville to another frequently cited example of transitional style, Scotch Roman, complicates the picture. Finally, and most crucially, we consider how the teleological assumptions of the transitional term might be inherently problematic.

With the oldface-transitional-modern storyline, we might be tempted to see Baskerville as picking up from Caslon’s design, changing it in ways that suited his own time, and thereby setting the stage for Bodoni’s further alteration. But type design is by no means the whole of letterform design, and if we expand our vision beyond movable type, we can find precedents for Baskerville’s designs that predate Caslon’s. These precedents appear most remarkably in the written and engraved letters of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century writing masters. This influence was noted as early as 1924, in an article in the Monotype Recorder (unsigned but perhaps attributable to the preeminent historian on staff, Stanley Morison). The article’s author cites a couple of penmanship guidebooks and notes the resemblance of Baskerville’s fonts to the Latin alphabets therein (see Figure 9). “This is a similarity, of course, only to be expected,” the Monotype writer notes, “since during the years 1730–5 Baskerville flourished as sign-writer, tombstone-cutter, and writing-master. Thus he shared with his colleagues the same models, [and] taught the same hands.”

This broader perspective complicates matters: The design features of Baskerville’s types that the transitional label imputes to his fixed historical position between Caslon and Bodoni actually derive from a time before that era. These older written and engraved models throw the simple transitional timeline into disarray.

The first type of Roman characters was made at Subiaco in 1465 by the German printers, Swenheim and Pannartz. It had little to recommend it; the letters were rudely cut, and of poor shape. But in 1470 Nicolas Jenson, French by birth, established as a printer at Venice, devised a Roman type which from that day to this has served as a model of excellence. The specimen of it here reproduced, Plate II, is taken from a fac-simile in Mr. H. F. Brown’s able and interesting book on “The Venetian Printing Press,” and even after this double process of reproduction, in which something of the sharpness of the type is lost, the beauty of the original may be discerned, while the close relation of the forms of the letters to those of the finer manuscripts may be seen by comparison of it with Plates III and IV.

Figure 10
Farmer Foundry Scotch Roman type. The Printing Art 6 no. 5 (1906). Courtesy James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota.

Mosley has traced the design that came to be known as Scotch Roman back to the Pica No. 2 typeface sold by William Miller’s foundry in Edinburgh, which can be seen in its 1822 specimen. By a century later, it was available in a wide variety of cuts from different foundries in both Europe and America.

How does Scotch Roman compare formally with the trio of Caslon, Baskerville, and Bodoni as already analyzed? We can take the Farmer foundry version as exemplary and compare it using the four elements of our earlier analysis (see Figure 10). Scotch Roman’s high contrast and resolutely upright axis are closest to the modern-face exemplar Bodoni. As for stroke construction, Scotch Roman’s strokes generally jump in width without regard to the stroke direction, following the expansion model (perhaps in the curly leg of capital /R/ most of all); however, the abruptness is less extreme than Bodoni’s and thus comes closer to the Baskerville precedent. In serif shape, Scotch Roman’s serifs are thin and horizontal like Bodoni’s but bracketed like Baskerville’s.

Based on this analysis, we can see that Scotch Roman does not incontrovertibly fit into one of the classes of our tripartite scheme. Type historian Daniel Berkeley Updike (to whom we will return later) considered Scotch Roman a modern type, and other writers have echoed this classification. But more commonly it has been assigned to the transitional category. I have found three American publications from the 1930s that use the term transitional: All three include Scotch Roman as exemplary. Two American guidebooks from the late 1940s also call Scotch Modern transitional. David Gates’s 1973 book, Type, does the same. In some of these sources, Scotch Roman is held up as a primary example of the transitional design. Would these circumstances not seem to beg an objection to the term transitional? If Scotch Modern is a primary exemplar, and the earliest model of it (Miller’s Pica No. 2) appeared in specimen books only after the types of Didot and Bodoni were issued, is it sensible to give it a label implying that it transitions toward types that actually predate it? Stylistically these fonts are in between old-face and modern types, but historically they are not.
In addition to these complications tangling up our formerly simple timeline, the implications of the term *transitional* also conjure a more philosophical objection—one that might have been at the root of type designer John Hudson’s discounting of the classification. On the Typophile.com Internet forum, Hudson called the term “fantastical… as if Baskerville were somehow anticipating Bodoni and designing his own as an interpolation between the ‘Oldstyle’ and the as-yet-non-existent ‘Modern.’” I name this objection *teleological*. As philosophers use the term, *teleological* signifies the appearance of something being attributed to its aim or purpose (or *telos* in Greek). Teleological accounts of history see history as an unveiling of an inevitable path toward a foreordained end. Such accounts probably reached their zenith in the teachings of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

Hegel’s teleological framework and the concept of transitional categories have been insightfully criticized by architectural historian Willibald Sauerlander. In his 1987 article, “Style or Transition? The Fallacies of Classification Discussed in the Light of German Architecture 1190–1260,” Sauerlander observes that the conception of a transitional style in medieval architecture—moving from Romanesque to Gothic style—arose during the nineteenth century, when the term in fact became central in a number of discourses about historical development. “Probably the most telling examples of this nineteenth-century use of the term *transitional* could be found in the treatment of the history of nature, where transitional forms played such a crucial role in the discussion of the origin and the development of species.” Sauerlander contrasts the Darwinian model of continuous evolution—in which, you might say, everything is “transitional”—to Hegel’s almost laughably idealist notion of natural history:

> It was none other than Hegel who saw the whole system of classification of beasts threatened by the existence of transitional species…. “Naturally, there are animals that are neither one thing nor the other; the reason for this is the weakness of Nature which does not remain true to a single concept and cannot adhere consistently to a predetermined idea.”… Now this statement may sound absurdly platonic or authoritarian to anyone reasonably habituated to the belief that the study of nature or of history has to do with fortuitousness of empiricism. But perhaps it is useful to keep Hegel’s statement in mind. Apodictic as it is, it reveals the inconsistencies between any system of classification—however subtle it may be—and the concept of evolution: classification being always normative, and evolution being always endless, continuous and not normative. The whole

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21 In the discipline of art history, the move from Romanesque to Gothic is the most frequent location for formal acknowledgment of a transitional style, although others exist. For example (and temporally more pertinent to our type discussion), decorative-arts historians talk about a transitional period between Rococo and Neoclassical style during the reign of Louis XVI. Monique Riccardi-Cubitt, “Louis XVI Style,” http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T052117 (accessed June 7, 2012).
22 Sauerlander found earlier uses of the term, but they were limited to discussions of rhetorical, literary, or musical composition. Willibald Sauerlander, “Style or Transition? The Fallacies of Classification Discussed in the Light of German Architecture 1190–1260,” *Architectural History* 30 (1987), 2.
23 Ibid.
The conception of transitions in the history of nature, or the history of style, is the result of this unavoidable conflict between the norm of classification and the stream of evolution.\textsuperscript{24}

Later in the article Sauerlander expands on the reasons why keeping Hegel’s statement in mind could be salutary for the stylistic classifier: “The trouble is, surely, that we are looking for a neatness of classification which does not work with these often chameleon medieval buildings” (for which I propose we could easily substitute “typeface designs”). He continues, “Perhaps we behave with our conceptions of ‘transition’… rather like Hegel, who ascribed the intermediary beasts, which did not behave as they should according to the conception of the mind, to the weakness of nature.”\textsuperscript{25} The normative presumptions of the classificatory project are exposed by such ill-fitting specimens, and labeling them as transitional may only reinforce its flawed structure.

**Why “Transitional” Then?**

With all these historical and philosophical objections to the “transitional” label, we now have to wonder how the term emerged in the first place. When was transitional first used in reference to type design? What was happening in the world of type that allowed it to gain traction?

In Daniel Berkeley Updike’s 1922 magisterial study, *Printing Types: Their History, Forms, and Use*, we encounter what may have been the launching of the term, in a discussion of the very font used to publish the book itself:

> Whence are derived the shapes of the characters in which you read the sentence before you; and whence comes the type in which this sentence is printed? The type of this book is a font transitional between the “old style” types of the school of Caslon and the English equivalent of the pseudo-classic types made at the beginning of the nineteenth century under the influence of Didot of Paris, Bodoni of Parma, and Unger of Berlin.\textsuperscript{26}

Updike’s original italicization of the word nearly seems like a christening. Indeed, although he also uses the word to discuss various late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century types that move from gothic to roman forms, he employs it quite consistently to describe the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fonts like Baskerville. He even refers to the latter as a class of types, to which he also assigned estimable examples from William Martin, an English follower of Baskerville, and fonts from the Didot foundry before it developed into the leading producer of modern types in Paris.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 2:242, 2:123–4, 1:227–8.
Following Updike’s publication of *Printing Types*, the use of the term *transitional* to describe type designs picked up speed, although its referents were broader than Updike’s had been. Paul Beaujon (the pen name of Beatrice Warde) described Fournier le Jeune’s roman of 1742 as “the first of the ‘transitional’ faces” in a 1926 issue of the *Monotype Recorder.* In doing so, she used scare-quotes around the label, perhaps indicating that it was a fresh and not-yet-fully-accepted term. In the 1930s, a handful of published references on type used the term, more often than not accompanied by a phrase that indicated its novelty. For example, one American introduction to typography from 1932 says not that Scotch Roman is a transitional face, but rather that it “is known as a transitional face.” Another, from 1937, refers to such types as “so-called Transition faces.”

By the time *transitional* emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, the terms *old-face* or *oldstyle* and *modern* had been established for generations. Examples of this two-part conception abound. An 1889 specimen book from a London printer presented all “book-work types” as either “Old Style” or “Modern.” In 1911, a guide-book published in Chicago said bluntly, “Of the roman type-faces, we have the old-style and the modern,” and Henry Lewis Bullen said the same in the pages of *Graphic Arts* magazine. Likewise, just after the appearance of Updike’s study, such a division of types into the two categories of oldstyle and modern was still common, as witnessed by the table of contents of the 1923 *Manual of Linotype Typography,* which assigns all of its text fonts to one or the other category.

Why did the *transitional* descriptor arrive so much later than *old-face* or *oldstyle* and *modern*? The very likely reason is that the Baskerville typeface, which we have already taken to be a primary example of transitional types, was largely forgotten until its revival in the 1920s. After Baskerville's death in 1775, his widow sold his printing tools, including his punches and matrices used to produce type, to a French dramatist who took them to the continent. The typefounding equipment soon fell into obscurity, resurfacing at the Bertrand foundry in Paris over a century later; but by that point, it had been severed from knowledge of its English source. In Bertrand's specimens, these types were called “elzevirs anciens,” and they were used here and there in the years leading up to World War I. American typographer Bruce Rogers was the first to recognize their origins, and after the war he arranged for the French firm to cast a font for his new employer, Harvard University Press. He used the type for seven books between 1921 and 1927. John Dreyfus recounts the further history:

This rediscovery did not pass unnoticed during the great typographical revival of the nineteen-twenties. Interest in Baskerville’s types was stimulated by the numerous recuttings, which for a time appeared yearly. In 1924
came the Monotype Corporation’s version, based on the 1757 Virgil. The Bauer Foundry brought out a considerably less faithful copy in 1925. The Stempel Foundry issued an excellent re-cutting in 1926. By now Bertrand was receiving a number of demands for Baskerville type. Finally, in May 1929, Bertrand produced a sixteen-page specimen devoted to *Les Caractères de Style—Le Baskerville*. On one of the founts shown in this specimen Linotype based their version, Stanley Morison having told their typographical adviser, G. W. Jones, of Bertrand’s founts.  

In many ways, the Baskerville revival of the 1920s resembled the Caslon revival of the 1840s. In each case, the old type-founding equipment from the English originator was dusted off after generations of disuse and relaunched as a viable design. And for the purposes of my argument, there was also a common effect on nomenclature: Just as the Caslon revival necessitated the new labels *old-face* or *oldstyle*, the Baskerville revival accompanied the new concept of *transitional* typeface designs.  

More broadly, Baskerville’s revival was only part of a larger campaign to revive old designs for the modern printing industry, which was tied to a surging interest in the history of type design. Signs of such interest were already visible before 1885—the point at which Linn Boyd Benton invented the pantographic punchcutter. This invention, James Mosley notes, enabled accurate reproduction of old types and set the stage for the equally revolutionary hot-metal casting and composing machines, including Linotypes and Monotypes. Mosley writes, “The types cut for composing machines have made familiar the names of printers and punchcutters which were known only to the scholars, and has encouraged an approach to printing types among the teachers of printing which is largely historical.” Perhaps purveyors of the cutting-edge technological change that hot-metal casting represented strategized to temper the radicality of their offerings by looking backward for design—or maybe they just turned to historical designs as available fuel for their accelerated programs of type production. The Arts-and-Crafts revivalism of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press also is an often-cited factor in spurring type historicism leading up to this era. I propose that the addition of the *transitional* term, which turned the binary alternatives of *old-face* and *modern* into a narrative of development, underscored the historical character of type classification at a time when industry interest in type history was at its height.  

This conclusion might be reinforced by returning to Darwin. In this period, the most prominent model for envisioning morphological development over time was surely that of evolutionary biology, as previously mentioned. By the time

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35 George Bruce’s Son’s 1882 specimen book strikes me as a pioneering effort to inject type history into the conversation of the printing industry. Scores of its pages serve simultaneously as specimens of Bruce’s display types on offer and as a bibliography and rapid-fire lessons about typographical history. Text faces were shown off at the end of the book, in the setting of printer-historian Theodore Low De Vinne’s *Invention of Printing.*
transitional was used for type design, over half a century had passed since Charles Darwin’s publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859. But Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection was still discussed and debated prominently—as witnessed by the famous Scopes Monkey Trial that took place in the 1920s. In these debates, naysayers often criticized the concept of human evolution from lower species by pointing out the “missing link” in the fossil record—that is, the lack of transitional forms between known species that would help reinforce Darwin’s evolutionary account. But through the years, paleontologists did discover transitional fossils like *Homo erectus* in 1894 and *Australopithecus africanus* in 1920, which were hailed in turn as discoveries of the “missing link.”

Just as these discoveries of transitional hominids confirmed for Darwinists the rightness of their model of evolutionary history, we might see the labeling of transitional type designs as cementing the interwar historicist’s picture of type history as evolutionary and progressive.

My argument may be summarized in three points. First, the need for the old-face/modern classification arose not with the appearance of these different type styles, but only later (in the mid-nineteenth century) with their establishment as viable alternatives for each other. Second, calling a type style transitional implies a historical slot between old-face and modern types, but that simple timeline is problematic. One complication is that the transitional face Baskerville borrows heavily from writing styles that predate old-face types. Another is that the transitional face Scotch Roman dates from after the appearance of modern types. And beyond these problems in application, there may be a fundamental flaw in the notion of transitional style—a consequence of the inherent conflict between classification and evolution. Third, this use of transitional has nonetheless thrived since the 1920s, when D. B. Updike seems to have coined it in relation to type. Its coming to prominence in the ensuing years was doubtless fueled by the printing industry’s surging interest in type history and revivalism generally, and by the rediscovery and multiple revivals of Baskerville’s designs specifically. The category of transitional style served as a “missing link,” affirming the growing appreciation for the evolution of type design.

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38 Again, Sauerlander’s historiography of the term offers a parallel. He tells us that in the world of architecture, the concept of transitional style “had a special fascination” for nineteenth-century adherents of historical eclecticism. “It seemed to reveal architectural history… in movement, in the making, in evolution. Buildings thought of or seen as transitional seemed to be the fulfillment of the dream of aesthetic historicism. They were hailed as monumental witnesses of the continuous evolution and progress in architectural history.” Sauerlander, “Style or Transition,” 1–2.