Where Did All The Serif Typefaces Go?

A project by Zach Marino.

Everyday, more and more logos, signs, and billboards move away from serif typefaces to sans-serif ones. Why are they all disappearing?

I started by looking around Boston for any usage of a serif typeface and I could only find a couple around Northeastern's campus. I couldn't find a single usage of the typeface downtown.

Shillman Hall

WB Mason Logo

Northeastern Sign

NEC Sign

Office Space Advertisement

Mass Horticultural Society

The serif typefaces I *did* see were only used in academic or nostalgic settings. The NEC sign and the Northeastern sign all advertise academic activities and the WB Mason logo harkens back to an earlier time to give the impression of history and prestige. More broadly, serif typefaces are seen as old, storied, and prestigious.

Did they go online?

Thankfully, serif typefaces can still be seen online, though once again not in the same way that sans-serif typefaces are. As well, they are mostly seen in logos and only occasionally as text Here are some examples I found:

Northeastern Logo

Time Magazine Logo

Whole Foods Logo

New York Times Logo

Once again, serif typefaces are typically seen in reference to academia or some storied institution like TIME magazine. This isn't the rule however. Some logos have nothing to do with either of these and are still serif, like the Whole Foods, Sony, and T-Mobile logos.

SONY

T··Mobile™

Sony and T-Mobile logos

There's also the coca-cola logo which is technically serif, but it is just illustrated to look like a serif typeface. It was hand lettered in 1885 by Frank M Robinson.

Coca-Cola logo

Why are they disappearing?

Not only are serif typefaces disappearing in general, companies are specifically getting rid of them. Many high fashion brand are ditching their old serif logos for more contemporary sans-serif logos.

BURBERRY®
LONDON

BURBERRY
LONDON ENGLAND

Old

Berluti
Paris

1895

BERLUTI
PARIS

New

This disappearance of serif fonts is attributed to both the internet and the modernism movement of the mid to late 1900s. This movement, made up of many smaller movements like fluxus and minimalism, stressed simplicity in its design. This usage of simplicity has influenced our modern day aesthetics, and has therefore influenced the way we interact with text to prefer more simple (and therefore sans-serif) typefaces. Serif typefaces were originally created to emulate handwriting from a calligrapher. With computers and printers now widespread, there is no need to emulate handwriting unless there is an express motif that needs to be captured (like giving the impression of prestige or importance). When computers were first invented screen resolutions were too small to properly display serif typefaces with their contrasting line weights. This limitation is what caused sans-serif typefaces to proliferate on the internet. Now that the internet is an essential part of our lives, sans-serif typefaces have proliferated further.

[Serif Typefaces] can still be cool!

Mostly logos have been talked about because logos represent a brand. A choice of typeface can influence how a brand is perceived and whether people pay attention to it or not. But that is not the entire story. There are many beautiful serif typefaces out there that may not be used for a logo but still deserve to be appreciated:

Garamond

One of the first serif typefaces from the 16th century. A classic old-style font.

Times New Roman

An English student's best friend. Created in 1932 for the Time of London newspaper.

Essonnes

The typeface I used for this project and a personal favorite modern typeface. Created in 2015.

Baskerville

Created in the 1750s by John Baskerville. This transition font has more contrast in its line weight than Garamond.

For the foreseeable future, serif typefaces will continue to be relegated to either body text or specific use cases as logos, but that does not mean they are not there. They may not be seen often in the real world, but they can still be found online if you pay enough attention.

faces.