

Typographica® Our Favorite Typefaces of 2007

Typographica's fourth annual review showcases the best in new typeface design.

With script faces, it's always something. They're generally misunderstood and easily misused.

Consider an all-caps setting, for laughs. Or how about wide tracking? But users are not always to blame. Some script faces are so illogically designed, that users have a hard time making them look natural even at optimal sizes. One typical downfall of type designers is to assign a connecting-style 'r' as the primary character in a font containing mostly letters which are not expected to connect. Typographers become understandably frustrated when they have to confront — as the default — a style of 'r' that lacks compatibility with most of its lowercase companions. It's an anomaly known to many. Examples abound.

Murray Hill (ATF, 1956) was a prototypical upright nonconnecting casual script face. It has an attractive but troublesome 'r' which loves to lead but rarely likes to follow. The same is true of the 'r' in a casual script face such as Montauk. ITC Studio Script has surely the most disagreeable default 'r' of all, despite the presence of two alternates in the font which behave better. Nevison Casual has, as its original alternate, an orderly nonconnecting 'r' but numerous other lowercase letters in the font are simply too rowdy to let it do its job.

Overcoming these common maladies are two informal upright script faces by John Nahmias, namely Scriptionah & Casual Brush. The letters are not meant to overlap, and the style of 'r' is refreshingly uncomplicated. The character shapes are free and open, and they have more guts than most of their forebears. They're unabashedly robust and not annoyingly fussy, though they are quirky in certain ways. Quirkiness seems to go with the territory.

Informal nonconnecting scripts are closely related to handwriting. Some handwriting is stylish. Some handwriting is bland. Obviously, not all handwriting connects, or slants, or looks consistent.

Yet, functional handwriting has a rhythm and a flow. It can be bouncy and irregular, erratic and undisciplined, but it needs to "feel the beat." (If a beat cannot be detected, it's very bad news, like no pulse.)

Outstanding performance at small display sizes is not a strength associated with casual script typefaces, ordinarily because they have a low x-height. By contrast, Nahmias' script faces, which sport a higher than average x-height, read clearly at small display sizes, and even at big text sizes. But insofar as point size can be rather arbitrary, and is admittedly not an equitable way of comparing typefaces, "virtual size" is. Scriptionah and Casual Brush appear relatively bigger than one might expect.

This has to do with a sturdy structure. Scriptionah, in any of its four weights, is not particularly pretty or delicate, but it is far from homely. It's firm and fibrous; it's raw. Casual Brush, though also tough, is plainly an exercise in jotted gestures, with moderate stroke contrast as an attribute.

The ampersand is a true beauty. It's my favorite character in the typeface. So sweet and so simple. It breathes with gusto, like a panting dog just back from a good hard romp.

—John Downer

An accomplished sign painter, show card writer, and letterer, helps to keep the hand-driven crafts alive by demonstrating to captive audiences around the globe.

He has also designed typefaces for Bitstream, Emigre, The Font Bureau & House Industries.

Scriptionah

Light, Regular, Demi Bold, Bold
Firm & fibrous

CasualBrush

So sweet & simple
plainly an exercise in jotted gestures