

## Adrian Frutiger, 1928–2015

Norbert Preining

*The textural quality of a typeface is like the timbre of a musical instrument, and the individual letters are like musical notes. A text composed in one typeface can look very different when composed in another because a complex visual sensation emerges from the repetition and interaction of nearly subliminal design features of the type. Frutiger's exploration of manifold type forms delights the eye with textural variations and deepens the understanding with abstract forms that express their distinctive meanings.* (Charles Bigelow [1])

On September 10, 2015, Adrian Frutiger passed away after a long and productive life. He has left us a rich heritage of fonts he designed, as well as important works on communication and visual language.

### Life

Born in Unterseen, a small village in the mountainous regions of the Berner Oberland, in 1928, Adrian Frutiger moved to Interlaken and later to Zürich to learn the craft of the typesetter. In 1949 he enrolled in the School of Applied Arts, from which he graduated in 1951 with distinction. His final project, a woodcut series about the development of Western type, inspired the interest of Charles Peignot of the Paris foundry *Deberny & Peignot*, where Frutiger worked until 1961, when he established a freelance studio. In 1972, his first design for Linotype was released, Iridium, followed by many others for Linotype over the next 35 years [7].



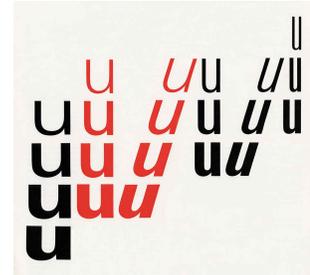
However successful his professional life, his private life was struck by a series of calamities: His first wife Paulette died after giving birth to their son, and both children with his second wife Simone experienced mental health problems and committed suicide, leading the Frutigers to establish the *Fondation Adrian et Simone Frutiger* to improve mental health support.

After having spent most of his life in France, particularly Paris, he returned to Switzerland and passed away in Bremgarten near Bern at age 87.

### Fonts

Adrian Frutiger designed about 40 type families, including masterpieces Frutiger and Univers, and notably also OCR-B for optical character recognition.

With Univers, he created one of the first super-families, one design with, initially, 21 sets (or styles). Originally targeting the Lumitype phototypesetting machine where manufacturing costs



were much lower per set, its enthusiastic acceptance led Peignot to publish Univers also in lead type.

Besides widespread adoption in advertising and industry, such as by Apple, Deutsche Bank, and General Electric, Univers was used for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, as well as at the Paris Orly Airport [4]. For Univers he also created a numerical coding system to overcome international discrepancies in naming. Despite the renown of this famous creation, which continues to thrive throughout all changes in the typographic world, Frutiger always remained modest about his achievements:

*I don't want to claim the glory. It was simply the time, the surroundings, the country, the invention, the postwar period and my studies during the war. Everything led towards it. It could not have happened any other way.* (Adrian Frutiger [2])

Based on an original design from 1970 for the Charles de Gaulle Airport, which was named after the suburb of the airport's location, Roissy, Frutiger released an improved design for print, giving it his own name, Frutiger. This became another internationally famous widespread typeface, due to its mixture of ideas from Univers with organic influences from Gill Sans, creating an extremely legible font of generally humanist design.

*Frutiger is basically the best signage type in the world because there's not too much 'noise' in it, so it doesn't call attention to itself. It makes itself invisible, but physically it's actually incredibly legible.* (Erik Spiekermann [6])

The design has seen many re-interpretations, including Frutiger Next and Frutiger Neue, as well as the serified versions such as Frutiger Serif.

Other designs to be especially noted are Avenir, a more humanist version of the geometric sans-serif types faces of the early 20th century, and OCR-B, which in 1973 became the world standard for optical character recognition.

While Frutiger's most famous typefaces are sans-serif, he also designed excellent serif typefaces, such as Egyptienne, Centennial, Méridien (recently revised and re-released as Frutiger Serif), and Iridium.

In all his designs, he focused on readability and fonts as tools.

*The whole point with type is for you not to be aware it is there. If you remember the shape of a spoon with which you just ate some soup, then the spoon had a poor shape. Spoons and letters are tools. The first we need to ingest bodily nourishment from a bowl, the latter we need to ingest mental nourishment from a piece of paper.* (Adrian Frutiger [5])

# Avenir

# Centennial

# Didot

# Egypt

# Frutiger

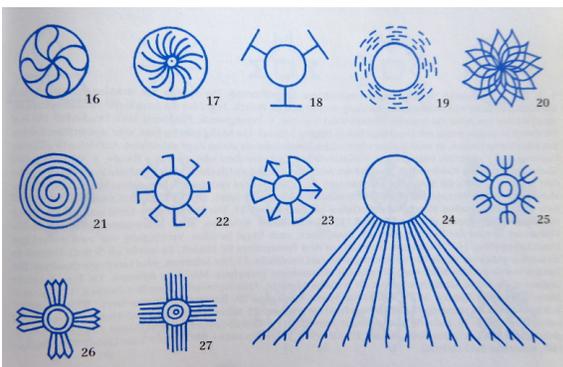
# Frutiger Serif

# OCR-B

# Univers

## Visual communication — signs and symbols

Besides being a prolific font designer, Frutiger was interested in the visual language of symbols, their development and interaction. His book *Der Mensch und seine Zeichen* (Signs and Symbols) [3] is a profound study on the development, history, and use of all kinds of symbols. In this book, translated into many languages, Frutiger explores the depth and breadth of symbols, but the most important aspect for him, easily seen from the German title, is the human (“Der Mensch”). Symbols are created, changed, and used by and for humans. His studies exhibit connections between various cultures when it comes to sign usage and design.



He also explores such signs as a modern language, and their importance for visual communication and identity building, along with the development of the Roman alphabet. He concludes this book with a very wise statement:

*Alphabetic signs alone have long been insufficient to record and convey human thoughts and statements. Orientation and communication would be impossible today without diagrams, signs and signals. Written or printed expression is necessarily complemented by pictorial communication.* (Adrian Frutiger [3])

With the loss of Adrian Frutiger, one of the great minds of typography is gone. He and Hermann Zapf [8] together formed the ground of font design and typography like no others in the twentieth century. Frutiger’s knowledge and insights into the craft will be guidance for many generations of typeface designers to come:

*On my career path I learned to understand that beauty and readability — and up to a certain point, banality — are close bedfellows: the best typeface is the one that impinges least on the reader’s consciousness, becoming the sole tool that communicates the meaning of the writer to the understanding of the reader.* (Adrian Frutiger [7])

## References

- [1] Charles Bigelow. Philosophies of Form in Seriffed Typefaces of Adrian Frutiger. <http://goo.gl/1aekRD>.
- [2] Eye Magazine. Reputations: Adrian Frutiger. <http://goo.gl/BwjAow>.
- [3] Adrian Frutiger. *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*. Watson-Guptill Publications, 1998.
- [4] Linotype. Nachruf auf Adrian Frutiger. <http://goo.gl/J4CQ3X>.
- [5] Linotype. Typography as the highest form of visual communication — a talk with Adrian Frutiger. <http://goo.gl/4AKvDv>.
- [6] New York Times. Adrian Frutiger dies at 87. <http://goo.gl/5IdcBp>.
- [7] Swiss Foundation Type and Typography, editors. *Adrian Frutiger Typefaces: The Complete Works*. Birkhäuser Verlag, 2008.
- [8] *TUGboat*, 36(2):92–99, 2015. Remembrances of Hermann Zapf. <http://tug.org/TUGboat/Contents/contents36-2.html>.

◇ Norbert Preining  
Japan Advanced Institute of  
Science and Technology  
Nomi, Ishikawa, Japan  
[norbert \(at\) preining dot info](mailto:norbert@preining.info)  
<http://www.preining.info>