



The Speed and Grace of Roger Excoffon

By John Dreyfus

International Typeface Corporation is proud to announce the launch of four new typefaces based on some of the best known and most successful designs created by celebrated French designer Roger Excoffon. Of these four, three are light versions of Mistral, Choc and Banco while the fourth is a lower-case addition to the original Banco. To celebrate the occasion, ITC commissioned John Dreyfus, printing historian and Excoffon's longtime friend, to write an essay about this outstanding designer. Dreyfus' text provides a fascinating account of the man, his achievements and his enormous contribution in the field of graphic communication, both in France and on the international stage.



Click here to learn more about [ITC's development of Mistral Light, Choc Light, Banco, and Banco Light](#).



Roger Excoffon has four claims to fame. Since his death in 1983 at the age of 72, he is remembered best for his highly original type designs (which have been given a new lease on life by being adapted and extended

for use in digitised versions). In his lifetime, however, he was famous first and foremost as an outstanding graphic designer and painter who produced magnificent posters in the 1960s and 1970s for Air France and other leading French companies.

He was also admired for the quality of the work which came from his own advertising agencies - first U&O from 1956, and then Excoffon Conseil from 1971. Finally he became an influential and widely respected public figure by taking a prominent part at meetings of French and international bodies where graphic design and publicity were intensely debated.

My friendship with Excoffon developed in 1955 while we attended a week-long meeting in the Basses Alpes.

This meeting of "typographical argonauts" took place in the village of Lurs, sited in a mountainous area named Lure. Only at Delphi have I been so stirred by the spirit of a place: it had panoramic views of immense beauty, and a magical quality of light.

The instigator of the annual meetings at Lurs in the last week of August was Maximilien Vox, with whom Excoffon and I had become acquainted in Paris. He had a passionate interest in

typography, and it had grown out of his many talents as a writer, illustrator, type designer, journalist and publisher. After a visit to the ruined village of Lurs in 1951, Vox had appealed to a few people of proven typographical ability to join him in Lurs to debate subjects of mutual interest. So successful were these meetings that what are now called the Rencontres Internationales de Lure still take place every year in August at Lurs. That they are still so well attended is partly attributable to the role played by Excoffon from 1963 to 1968 as President of the Rendez-vous Graphhique de Lurs.

Excoffon had many innate qualities that made him the natural leader of a group. An air of authority and self-confidence was combined with a great deal of charm and natural grace. Many of his French contemporaries thought he looked like an Englishman, with his fair hair and blue eyes. His clothes, too, looked British and he had a liking for black and white cloth woven with a houndstooth or check pattern. He stood about six feet tall and was of slim build; lithe and swift in his movements, he conveyed a strong impression of effortless elegance.

His expression in repose was usually serious and thoughtful, but it quickly became engagingly open or amused while he listened. He talked in an attractively mellow voice, speaking fast but expressing himself very clearly, not only in words but through gestures made with his hands and especially with his fingers. Speed seemed to me to be so much a part of his character that his usual rapid pace seemed to mirror his customary impatience to understand and enjoy whatever was being discussed. Later I will describe how his love of speed affected his type designs and graphic work; but first I must explain how the man I met in 1955 had lived during the 45 years before our friendship began.

From Painting to Type Design

He was born in 1910 at Marseilles. His family had been active as flour millers and magistrates. At his family's suggestion he went as an undergraduate to the University of Aix-en-Provence to read law. Very soon he found that his heart was not in it. So at the age of 19 he went to Paris, ostensibly to study painting, though his interests began to centre on graphic art and letterforms. Having a nimble



brain, he also attended some courses in philosophy at the Sorbonne. Throughout his life he relished every chance that came his way to stretch his mind by having long and searching arguments with his friends. At the same time he enjoyed the solitary excitement and risk of handling his paint brushes with tremendous vigour and freedom. He came to admire the extent to which these qualities appeared in the paintings of Georges Mathieu and Hans Hartung; but above all he admired the *joie de vivre* which he found in the paintings of Pierre Bonnard.

Immediately after peace returned to Europe in May 1945, Excoffon joined the Fonderie Olive. This typefoundry was

managed in Marseille by his brother-in-law who made Excoffon the firm's art director. Consequently he became responsible for promoting sales of the foundry's types. He did this so successfully that he discovered that he had a talent for publicity work. At the same period he quickly learned enough about the technical side of typefounding to start designing new types for the Fonderie Olive.

The first of his type designs was named Chambord. Its purpose was to compete in the market with the Touraine series of types designed by Cassandre for the Deberny Peignot foundry in Paris. Charles Peignot once told me with a chuckle that when he suggested to Excoffon that the similarity between Chambord and Touraine was a little too close for comfort, Excoffon tried to set Peignot's mind at rest by assuring him that he had kept Cassandre's design in front of him all the time he was working on Chambord - "just to make sure that he didn't copy a single letter". Despite this incident, Excoffon joined the Association Typographique Internationale soon after it had been founded by Peignot, and he remained on very cordial terms with Peignot for the rest of his life.

Type Designs with Style and Vivacity

Excoffon's second type for Olive was far more original than Chambord. Named Banco - an allusion to a term used by gamblers playing baccarat - it was designed to provide vigorous emphasis for a displayed name or phrase in a wide variety of jobbing printing.



Demonstrations of how effectively it could be used were given in a lively and stylish type specimen booklet. This was produced in close collaboration with Olive's salesmen who know from their visits to printers how important it was to show them how new typefaces

could be used for the categories of printing in which they specialized.

Banco was cast as a titling fount containing only capitals and numerals; this simplified Excoffon's task by reducing the number of letter combinations that he needed to foresee while designing the letters.

He was exceptionally thorough and systematic while he worked out his type designs. He attached great importance to the tops of letters because he knew how important they are in creating distinctive word shapes. From legibility studies he knew that experienced readers take in the shapes of several words together each time their eyes pause for a fraction of a second as they sweep across a line of text. In Banco, the tops of the capitals are made distinctive by emphatic serifs on C and S, and by highly unusual transitions from stems to curves in letters such as P and

R.

While Banco was being developed, Excoffon played a dual role in supervising the production and marketing of a new type named Vendome which had been designed for the Fonderie Olive by a stage designer named Francois Ganeau. With no previous experience of type design, Ganeau had managed to create a fine design which was refined and improved by Excoffon. To publicise it, Excoffon designed one of the most beautiful and elaborate type specimen books produced by any French typefoundry in the 1950s. It was produced by La Ruche, his favourite printing house in Paris where the craftsmen took exceptional care with their presswork and did complete justice to his unusual range of coloured inks.

His first script type, named Mistral, was introduced in 1953. Like Banco, its purpose was to bring greater vivacity into French typography which at that time involved printing from letters created for casting in metal on rectangular bodies. That technology placed an obstacle in his creation of a perfectly free inclined script which was to reflect the personality of mid-twentieth century man.



Hoping to find out what characteristics would convey some of the good qualities of mid-twentieth century man, he consulted eminent graphologists.

To his disappointment, they explained that theirs was a purely analytical science, so they were incapable of helping him to synthesize or recreate a graphic symbol of the qualities he wanted to be embodied in Mistral.

At this point he realised that he would have to base his design upon his own handwriting because it would be the easiest and most familiar one for him to adapt. Knowing it so intimately, it would be relatively easy for him to modify its individual letters into shapes which would conform to the restraints imposed by typefounding. Unfortunately some of those restraints made it very hard for him to design script letters which would seem to have the same characteristics as free handwriting, notably: (a) absence of alignment; (b) total disregard of the rectangle on which typefounders cast letters; (c) infinite variations in the way letters were linked; and (d) different shapes used for the same letters. Helped by a careful study of data supplied to him by cryptographers tabulating the frequency of letter juxtapositions in the French language, he managed to simulate the irregular alignment of handwritten letters. The liberty taken by the hand

in varying the shapes of written letters was simulated to some degree by varying the angle in the more prominent downstrokes in Mistral. Finally he showed great ingenuity in concealing the difficulties he had to overcome with linking strokes; the reader's eye was deceived by the deliberately irregular edges of the letters he designed for the typeface. In the wake of its success came Choc in 1953. Excoffon's very bold brush script had no link strokes. Its exceptionally heavy weight precluded it from having as much success as Mistral, but its capitals can be highly effective when used for a single word or name.

Three years after Mistral and Choc, Excoffon brought out his fresh interpretation of a formal copperplate script which he named Diane. Its novelty lay mainly in the way he managed the links between the formal lowercase, and the characteristic panache which he displayed in the design of its swirling capitals. The Fonderie Olive showed great technical skill in casting the letters, and for many years it had an honourable place in French jobbing printing. It could hardly have been more different from his next type named Calypso (1958). This was another titling fount and it showed his fascination with the effects that could be obtained from mechanical screens in photo-engraving. In fact, the drawings for Calypso were made entirely by hand, helped at one stage by an airbrush. The final result is a set of letters which are more likely to succeed when handled by a trained graphic designer, but which few printers were capable of handling with confidence.

While the Diane and Calypso types were being developed, Excoffon engaged a young type designer named José Mendoza as his assistant. The two men had been introduced to each other by Maximilien Vox. Mendoza worked in the Fonderie Olive's Paris studio from September 1954 until July 1959 before setting up as a freelance type designer of great distinction. Another talented friend of Vox named Gerard Blanchard also worked in the Olive studio for four years at this period (and later became President of the Rencontres Internationales de Lure). Excoffon needed their help because he was becoming ever more deeply involved in his advertising agency, and at the same time had launched into his last and largest venture in type design for the Fonderie Olive.

The Antique Olive Series

What eventually grew into a set of 11 related typefaces for the Antique Olive series began in 1956 with Nord, a new type by Excoffon. He had been made art director by Air France, for whom he designed a house style and posters.



These incorporated the airline's name as a logo, drawn by Excoffon in a distinctive new sans serif style. Several typefoundries

in the mid-1950s were at work on new sans serif type families, notably Deberly Peignot with Frutiger's Univers, and Haas in Switzerland with Miedinger's Helvetica. Marcel Olive and Excoffon decided they, too, would bring out a new sans serif, similar to

that used in the Air France logo.

None of the types on which Excoffon had worked previously for the Fonderie Olive were meant to be used for continuous texts, except for Francois Graneau's Vendome; and even that had been given such a noticeably forward tilt in the roman that it was used mainly for advertising work. Now Excoffon was keen to design a set of typefaces that could be used for both text and publicity setting. With such a marked fresh interest in sans serif types (known in France as "antiques"), it was natural for him to try his hand at designing a set of types of this kind for a growing market.

Taking Nord as a point of departure, he developed 11 new romans and italics in a variety of weights and proportions for the set which became Antique Olive. Mendoza and Blanchard gave him much-needed help in the early stages of this ambitious undertaking. Blanchard was sent to the Bibliotheque Nationale to study a treatise published in 1905 by Emile Javal on the physiology of reading and writing. This was a pioneer work in which Javal, when dealing with the legibility of type, singled out an old typeface from the Fonderie Olive for its high degree of legibility. Excoffon discussed Javal's findings with his collaborators and they tried to apply them as they developed the design of Antique Olive.

The first trial drawings were really caricatures of types, made to find out by experiment how far you could go without going too far. It was typical of Excoffon to combine audacity with caution. Mendoza remembers how their task involved reducing the extremely heavy weight of Nord, and concentrating upon the upper parts of the letters because they were so important in creating easily recognizable word shapes. Mendoza told me that the final design of Antique Olive, issued between 1962 and 1966, was formulated in reaction to the uniformity and regularity of Frutiger's Univers family of 21 typefaces. Excoffon had been irritated by the very Swiss geometrical construction of Univers which, in his view, created too even an effect. Excoffon was more concerned with creating typefaces that were easy to read, and this depended upon stressing the distinctive character of each letter along its top. He was convinced that by emphasizing individuality in letterforms, legibility was enhanced.

A Business Leader and Visualiste

By the early 1960s, his active involvement in type design declined, but his passion for typography remained intense it showed brilliantly in his re-design of the Income Tax Return introduced in 1973. This was not set in a type of his own design, and I have sometimes wondered whether he used the type named Souvenir (French for remember) so as to pique the conscience of typographically sophisticated French taxpayers. Evidently he went to great pains to make the print run of 80 million copies as lucid and as legible as he could even for unsophisticated French citizens; and to speed up the transfer of information from the completed tax returns to the taxmen's computers.

From 1951 he built up an impressive list of clients for his own agency U&O, and from 1971 for its successor which he named Excoffon Conseil. His clients included several multi-national companies, as well as French state institutions such as the Banque de France and the Post Office. He worked on Larousse encyclopaedias, on packaging for several pharmaceutical firms, and on a catalogue for a leading French mail-order business named 3 Suisses. His work became more quickly known to the French public from the series of about 20 superb posters which he designed during the 1960s for a mix of institutional and commercial clients. As his reputation grew he became actively involved with numerous French and international associations concerned with the graphic arts, and he often served on design juries.

He was founder-president of the UVPI (Union des Visualistes Publicitaires indépendants) from 1967-72, and as there was virtually no French word for design, he tried to get the word visualiste accepted when he created the UVPI. From 1965-70 he served as president of the Syndicat National des Graphistes Publicitaires. And after being made a member of the internationally respected Alliance Graphiques in 1961, he acted as its secretary-general from 1964-71, and for the next four years as its vice-president.

He was active in many more associations than those I have mentioned; and with all his other commitments, he began to regret that success and popularity left him too little time for painting. After all, the reason why he had abandoned his law studies and moved to Paris was to become a painter. The public became familiar with his dazzling artistic talents through his posters and his work as a graphic designer, which won awards in many European countries and in the US. Yet it was only a small consolation for him to have had an exhibition of his paintings at Toulouse in 1979, four years before he died.

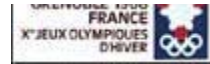
Much to my regret, I never managed to see that show. Previously I had seen too few of his paintings to guess whether his life might have been successful and happy if he had concentrated on being a painter. I am, however, convinced that by leading so much of his life in direct contact with others, as he did, he enriched and energised the lives of many of his contemporaries. His was a mercurial and beguiling presence: and the moment has now come for me to honour my earlier promise to explain how his love of speed affected his type designs and his graphic design.

Always the Fast Track

Perhaps his greatest gift was to create a vivid and highly personal rendering of speed in his posters for Air France, French Railways, and the Olympic Games at Grenoble in 1968. He did so mainly by the speed with which he handles his brush, and by his remarkably successful choice of colours which enhanced the effect. Sometimes he would keep peripheral detail out of focus to



sharpen the impact of the central image; and on a poster for Dunlop tyres, his fuzzy splash beside the sharp pattern created by the tread of the tyre created the illusion of speed.



Like Georges Mathieu whose work he admired, Excoffon handled his brush with the disciplined speed of a Chinese calligrapher. Rigorous training created self-confidence which allowed him to work at a speed which would otherwise have been very hazardous.



Speed is also the feature which gave so much vigour to his type designs, notably Mistral and Choc as well as Banco and Calypso. As with his posters, speed would have been risky had he not prepared himself so thoroughly to use it as he chose. He mastered the art of courting danger in order to create compelling effects which would never have been achieved by more timid and less disciplined artists.

There is another reason why we must be thankful that speed was so dominant a part of his character. He was 35 when he began his postwar career in type design and graphic design in 1945: had he not enjoyed working at such high speed, he would have found it almost impossible to produce so much fine work before his death in May 1983.

In 1956 I had firsthand experience of the advantage which speed gave him when he took on a commission from me. It was to decorate a printed edition of a visitors' book kept by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor, the home built for him in the style of the chateaux de la Loire. The book contained 58 entries by guests who had visited the Baron between 1886 and 1898. Excoffon agreed to design a series of cartouches to surround the names and date of the contributors. In 1966 the technique of powderless etching on zinc was scarcely known in France. I explained its advantages to Excoffon who was always keen to exploit new techniques. I suggested that he take his inspiration from photos of the ornamentation of the building. A trial etching proved that the new process could hold even the tiniest dot drawn by Excoffon on a rough-surfaced handmade paper.

This commission made me realize that for Excoffon, speed heightened his concentration and enthusiasm. It also showed me that a great stimulus to his creativity was the desire to surmount a new challenge, and to exploit the potential of a new technique. He grew old - but always stayed young at heart.