

The image is a complex collage of various handwriting styles on a grid background. At the top, the word 'scriptes' is written in a cursive, slanted font. Below it, the word 'GRRR' is written in a bold, blocky, stylized font. In the center, a white circle contains the text 'found in translation' in a red, lowercase, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the word 'aeggdhh' is written in a tall, narrow, condensed font, and below it, the word 'urgerments' is written in a similar style. The background is filled with other faint, overlapping handwriting samples, including 'OUR' and 'me', and some abstract scribbles. The overall composition is layered and textured, with a mix of colors and styles.

*Akira Kobayashi
began his love affair
with Western culture as a youth
growing up in Japan. Little did he know
that he'd one day influence
that culture as an important
type designer.*

BY TAMYE RIGGS

Akira Kobayashi practically radiates bliss.

He loves his job. As type director at Linotype in Bad Homburg, Germany, he oversees the aesthetic direction of one of the world's oldest type companies, and one of the few to survive the massive changes in technology that killed most pre-digital era foundries.

He lives with his wife and two young sons in a peaceful suburb of Frankfurt. The commute to his office is a six-minute stroll. He draws type most of the day, reviews new typefaces by other designers and travels extensively, meeting with other artists and technology gurus to talk about the subject that fuels his passion.

How did a young Japanese designer—a non-native English speaker lacking a Western education or insider connections—capture the creative leadership role at such a venerable institution with its strong Euro-American heritage?

For one thing, Kobayashi is incredibly gifted at drawing type. But more than that, his (Jeep love of letterforms, his determination and his serenity have led him to a place where he's shaping the future of Western typography.

EAST MEETS WEST

Kobayashi was born on the Fourth of July, 1960, in Niigata, Japan. Growing up in Asia at a time when the world still retained much of its innocence, he became intrigued with U.S. culture and the whimsical, youthful spirit of the times. A number of his typefaces carry the influences of the mid-century American aesthetic.

"I like American art deco, and things from the '30s and the '50s," Kobayashi says. "I saw *The Jetsons* as a kid, and American films and comics from the era." He later became an avid collector of old editions of popular American magazines like *Time* and *Life*, which offered a fascinating glimpse into a world so different from his own.



THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

Whether perfecting his original creations or executing the vision of masters like Zapf and Frutiger, Kobayashi is meticulous in crafting letterforms. In his peaceful office at Linotype's Bad Homburg headquarters, Kobayashi carefully reviews proofs of the myriad calligraphic characters that make up the expansive Zapfino family.



As is typical in Japan, Kobayashi began learning English at age 10, which also marked his first significant exposure to the Western alphabet (also known as the roman or Latin alphabet). It wasn't until three years later that he became interested in the design of alphabets of any kind.

"When I was 13, I drew a poster with watercolor," Kobayashi says. Although he wasn't quite satisfied with the picture, he thought his Japanese lettering was on point. "It made the whole poster look wonderful." The project was an awakening for Kobayashi—he's been passionate about lettering from that day forward.

After graduating from high school, Kobayashi entered Tokyo's Musashino Art University in 1979, where his course of study included classes in lettering and typography. "Naturally, they focused on Japanese script," he says. Kobayashi was disappointed that a decent textbook about designing Western alphabets was not part of the curriculum.

"Things like the relationships between stroke thickness and the angle of the broad-edged pen were never mentioned in books on lettering in Japan," he says. His teachers subscribed to the "ruling-pen-and-compasses" theory of European Renaissance scholars as the sole principle in designing type. Unfazed, Kobayashi supplemented his traditional design education with forays into antique bookshops, where he discovered treasures amid the stacks of old books, magazines and papers, including many examples from the 1950s and '60s.

Upon his graduation from Musashino in 1983, Kobayashi began a six-year stint in the type design department at Sha-Ken, a manufacturer of phototypesetting machines. He typically drew two dozen or more characters each day.

"Japanese is a complicated system of writing," Kobayashi says. "We have basically three scripts." His native language includes thousands of pictorial characters adapted from Chinese ideograms (Kanji, or Chinese letter) plus two kinds of phonetic scripts (Hiragana for depicting things ethnically Japanese, and Katakana for rendering foreign words and names). "Each day, we use a couple of thousand Kanji symbols and about 80 glyphs each in Hiragana and Katakana."

Compared to a Latin typeface with its relatively small character set (approximately 200 glyphs are typically housed in the base set), a decent Japanese text font must contain at least 9,000 characters. That's simply too many for a single type designer to complete unaided, Kobayashi says. "Designing a Japanese font usually takes a couple of years and several skilled designers," he says.

At Sha-Ken, he occasionally had an opportunity to design Latin characters and Arabic numerals, but felt that he needed further education in the Latin alphabet. Kobayashi soon realized that he needed to get a better grip on the English language if he wanted to progress in designing Western letterforms.

"The books available to me on the Latin alphabet were almost always written in English," he says. "I knew that if I was not very familiar with the Western alphabet, I could not know if the characters I drew would be acceptable to a Western reader."

BY THE BOOK

In Sha-Ken's design department, Kobayashi discovered "About Alphabets," a slim volume of lettering wisdom penned by Hermann Zapf. It was the first English-language book he'd ever read. "It took me six months to finish reading [Zapf's book], then I had a strong urge to practice Western calligraphy," Kobayashi says. "Zapf wrote that he started with [lettering master Edward Johnston's 'Writing and Illuminating and Lettering,' so I followed in his footsteps."

Johnston's seminal book, first published in 1906, is often called the single most influential book ever written on calligraphy. Kobayashi ordered a copy through an overseas bookshop and began to teach himself calligraphy. He left Sha-Ken in 1989 and moved to London, where he enrolled in an evening calligraphy course at the London College of Printing and continued studying English.

"As I had never been to a foreign country, everything was a completely new experience for me," Kobayashi says. He immersed himself in British culture while devouring books on typography and type history. He was pleasantly surprised to find that, unlike the institutions in his homeland, a typical British library might house any number of books on typography.

He continued his self-directed course of study in Western typography and lettering, meeting with craftsmen and artists who helped supplement his book learning. It was during his time in London that Kobayashi designed his first original Latin typeface, a display script called Skid Row.

"Before I left Japan, I had sent Letraset a couple of specimens of Arabic numerals that I had designed for Sha-Ken," he says. "Colin Brignall, then the art director of Letraset U.K., asked me to design a type in a similar style."

Kobayashi drew an alphabet on paper with a hand-made brush, giving the letterforms a streaky look, and then refined the characters to regularize their texture. He named his creation Skid Row after a song from his favorite film, "Little Shop of Horrors." Brignall was pleased with the unusual design and released Skid Row in 1990 as part of the Letraset Premier Instant Lettering series.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Kobayashi returned to Tokyo in 1991 and took a position with Japanese type design studio Jiyu-Kobo, and three years later moved to TypeBank, where he designed Latin companion alphabets for the foundry's collection of 17 digital Japanese fonts.

aegdh

FF CLIFFORD ROMAN

Inspiration for FF Clifford struck when a friend gave Kobayashi a copy of Pliny the Younger's *Opera*, printed in 1751 by the Foulis brothers in Glasgow. When Kobayashi opened the book, he was stunned by the typeface they had used. "That's the kind of serif typeface we need in the digital era!"

FF CLIFFORD EIGHTEEN ROMAN
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg
Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww
Xx Yy Zz 1234567890

FF CLIFFORD NINE CAPITALS
AA BB CC DD EE FF GG
HH II JJ KK LL MM NN OO
PP QQ RR SS TT UU VV WW
XX YY ZZ 1234567890

FF CLIFFORD SIX ROMAN LF
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff
Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm
Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

FF CLIFFORD EIGHTEEN ITALIC
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh
Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq
Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz
1234567890

FF CLIFFORD ITALIC

As no italic was used in the Foulis book, Kobayashi selected Joseph Fry and Sons' *Pica Italic No. 3* (circa 1785) as his model for FF Clifford Italic. He incorporated some of the Fry type's flair, gambling that the ornate touches would harmonize well with the roman. "I retained the vigorous swashes on the letters 'Q,' 'T' and 'Y' that were typical of the Anglo-Dutch Oldstyle types."

iouburgcapteq



A CORNUCOPIA OF CHARACTERS

A prolific designer, Kobayashi finds inspiration in every quarter. Antique books, ornate architecture, the refined splendor of a Japanese garden—even those space-age American icons, the Jersons—all have fueled Kobayashi's creative fire at one time or another. At left: a pencil sketch from FF Acanthus Borders, a nod to the leafy ornaments often seen in architectural carvings.

FF ACANTHUS TEXT REGULAR Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo

FF ACANTHUS OPEN REGULAR Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo



ITC SILVERMOON REGULAR Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu

ITC WOODLAND MEDIUM Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq

COSMIQUA REGULAR Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm

In mid-1997, Kobayashi left TypeBank to focus on a freelance type design career. During his tenure at Jiyu-Kobo and TypeBank, he'd kept busy with personal type designs in his off-hours. Perhaps the most well known of these side projects is the typeface that would eventually become his widely praised FontFont release, FF Clifford.

Although it wouldn't be published until 1999, Clifford's story is actually rooted in Kobayashi's first exposure to digital type eight years earlier. He had never touched a computer until he started work at Jiyu-Kobo, where he was asked to choose a small selection of digital fonts for the company. His choices included several weights of Bembo, one of his favorite text families. After receiving the fonts, Kobayashi opened Bembo Roman to examine its letterforms.

At first glance, he thought he'd been sent the wrong font—this was not the Bembo he knew and loved. Much to his dismay, Kobayashi soon realized that he was indeed looking at Bembo, but a poorly digitized version that inherited all of the flaws and compromises of the phototype version, obliterating the beauty and stamina of the original type cut for metal.

"Types that were originally designed for hot metal often looked too light and feeble," Kobayashi says. "I always wanted to redesign Bembo and all the old Monotype Classics."

Kobayashi vowed to create his own text family, one that would be meticulously crafted for digital applications, and one that would be "better than Bembo or any other Monotype Classic." The design eventually became "an anthology of 18th century British foundry type designs," Kobayashi says. He picked a name that sounded British, and Clifford was born—his first digital type designed for use in Western countries.

Although Kobayashi was eager to release Clifford, others felt the timing wasn't right for an unveiling. Me \rote to Zapf about Clifford in 1995, told him the family was near completion, and eagerly awaited a response from his idol. Zapf replied favorably, but warned him that it was not a good time to submit a traditional text face to font distributors—typographic fashion at the time veered off in other directions. He reluctantly put Clifford in the drawer and vowed to present the family to type distributors at a more opportune time.

In 1996, Kobayashi began work on a sprightly sans serif based on his handwriting (dubbed Woodland in honor of his family name, which means small woods). He submitted the type family to the International Typeface Corp. (ITC) in New York, which published ITC Woodland in 1997. It was the first of many types he would place with the popular American type foundry.

RISEING STAR

Following the release of Woodland, ITC inadvertently played another role in boosting Kobayashi's star. In the fall of 1997, the company announced a typeface design competition organized by U&Lc, its magazine about type and design. Kobayashi decided to enter Clifford in the contest, but not before carefully reviewing and revising almost every letter in the family. His efforts paid off: Clifford took top honors in the text category and was also named best in show.

It was a major breakthrough for the as-yet-unknown designer. Berlin-based FontShop International took

notice and offered to publish FF Clifford through its FontFont library one of the hottest type collections of the 90s. After spending five years on its development, Kobayashi would see his pet project become one of the boutique label's most popular text families. (Even FSI co-founder Erik Spiekermann has said that Clifford is one of his favorite typefaces.)

Buoyed by the outcome of the ITC competition, Kobayashi embarked on a flurry of typographic activity, releasing a dozen type designs between 1998 and 2001 through Adobe, FontFont, ITC, Linotype and Typebox. "I could not stop designing," he says. These releases ranged from deco- and wood type-inspired display designs and ornaments to the stunning Didot-inspired FF Acanthus, an impressive family with multiple text, display and open styles.

While Kobayashi was busy drawing type around the turn of the 21st century, he was also collecting awards and accolades. Perhaps the most significant of these was Kobayashi's first-place showing in Linotype's International Type Design Contest. Zapf was one of the judges and attended the awards presentation held in Mainz, Germany, in the summer of 2000. When Kobayashi made his acceptance speech, he told the audience how Zapf's book had changed his life as a type designer. Two days later, he paid a visit to Zapf at his home in Darmstadt. The two artists easily spanned their generational and cultural gaps, finding a common ground in their love of lettering. They spent the afternoon talking about type design, with much of their discussion centered on Zapf's iconic typeface Optima.

Although Kobayashi didn't know it at the time, Linotype was searching for a director to oversee the Optima Nova project (a redesign of the existing digital Optima). Linotype management was impressed with Kobayashi's typographic sensibilities and his obvious dedication to his craft. His instant rapport with Zapf sealed the deal; in December of 2000, Linotype asked Kobayashi to join the company as type director.

MEETING OF THE MINDS

It was no small decision for Kobayashi. Signing on with Linotype meant uprooting his family and moving from Japan to Germany—a tremendous cultural leap. After careful consideration, Kobayashi accepted Linotype's offer. His first order of business in Bad Homburg was to collaborate with Zapf on Optima Nova.

Zapf and Kobayashi reworked Optima's existing letterforms to better capture the spirit of the original design and made refinements to take advantage of contemporary technology. During the font's development phase, Zapf drew precise sketches on paper, which the younger designer would then draw directly onscreen by hand. Zapf would often sit beside Kobayashi in front of the computer, directing him in the execution of each letterform.

"I am just like his right hand, just like he is using his pen to visualize his ideas," he says. Kobayashi also designed Optima Nova's titling font, a completely new alphabet compatible with the rest of the family.

Kobayashi's next major project at Linotype was working with Adrian Frutiger to update the Swiss leg-

ZAPFINO EXTRA Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo

PARTNERS IN TYPE

Kobayashi, shown here in his studio with Hermann Zapf, says: "Working with the two 'type giants' was the most fascinating thing that happened in my career. When I had read books about Zapf and Frutiger [while still in Japan], they were to me like gods. But when I joined Linotype and started working with them, I realized that they were ordinary human beings, just very nice and thoughtful people. My German is still not very good, but to me it is not a big problem. We can communicate through letterforms."



end's 1988 sans, Avenir. Kobayashi's partnership with Frutiger was vastly different from his collaboration with Zapf. Frutiger's sketches were looser—more of a relaxed guide than a strict road map to design. Kobayashi had more freedom in drawing the new Avenir, but consulted frequently with Frutiger to ensure he was on the right path.

Kobayashi has teamed with Zapf and Frutiger on several other projects, including Zapfino Extra and Palatino Sans with Zapf, and Nami, a new humanist sans, with Frutiger. Kobayashi hints that more projects with the legendary designers are in the offing—Zapf and Frutiger are eager to collaborate with him again.

Working on so many collaborative projects and revamps has given Kobayashi little time to focus on his own designs. But earlier this year, Linotype published his Cosmiqua, a quirky, informal text family influenced both by Caledonian Italic (a Miller 8c Richards typeface, circa 1900) and retro advertising design, Kobayashi says it mixes "end-of-the-19th century italics and the perky handwriting style of the 1950s with a 'Jetsons' kind of space-age feel."

Although much of his career has been focused on behind-the-scenes collaborations, Kobayashi isn't worried about being overshadowed. "I cannot draw beautiful alphabets like Hermann does. ... I do not make sculptures like Adrian does. I would rather be happy to stay back-of-the-stage, be anonymous or to be described as a skilled craftsman," he says. "However, there is something that I can be proud of: Perhaps I am the very first type designer specializing in the Latin alphabet that grew up in Asia, where people use a different writing system—and I'm somehow good enough to work with giants like Hermann and Adrian." ■■■

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EDITOR'S NOTE Kobayashi's Latin types are published through Linotype (www.linotype.com), ITC (www.itcfonts.com), Adobe (www.adobe.com), FontShop (www.fontshop.com), Typebox (www.typebox.com) and Type Project (www.typeproject.com).