Pan Optica

Shinntype
Panoptica
 unicase &
 monowidth

regular
ABCDEFGHI01234

italic
ABCDEFGHI01234
doesburg
ABCDEFGHI01234
egyptian
ABCDEFGHI01234
octagonal
ABCDEFGHI01234
pixel
ABCDEFGHI01234
script
ABCDEFGHI01234
sans
ABCDEFGHI01234
sans medium
ABCDEFGHI01234
sans bold
ABCDEFGHI01234

Shinntype — 364 Sunnyside Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M6R 2R8, Canada
nick@shinntype.com  416-769-4198
my father opened the field guide to crystals to pages with fine print to show me how to decipher a language

he gave me his gemcutter’s eyepiece and left me alone to revel in detail — edges of serifs, fibres in paper

only later did he teach me how to sound out the words

new alphabet ~ new typeface
by nick shinn
Type Designer Creates New Alphabet For Poet

Toronto, Dec. 9, 2003 — When poet Christian Bök (Eunoia, Crystallography) asked Toronto type designer Nick Shinn to recommend a monowidth typeface for setting some of his specially configured poems, Shinn’s response was immediate: “There’s nothing suitable—I’ll design what you need.”

The result turned out to be not just a font design, but a new alphabet, for which Shinn has made fonts in a wide range of ten different typeface styles. He has named it the Panoptic alphabet, and the typeface Panoptica.

The essence of the alphabet is the formula “Monowidth + Unicase.” Monowidth means that each character occupies the same width—as in a typewriter, and this is the pertinent constraint of Bök’s poems. In the 28-page work Diamonds for instance, paragraph blocks, within each an identical number of letters per line, are positioned with geometric precision upon the page. Unicase means that there are no separate upper and lower case letter shapes, just 26 letters—a mixture of majuscule (capital) and minuscule (small) forms.

Shinn rejected available monowidth fonts on two grounds. Firstly, they carry the utilitarian connotation of a typewriter, inappropriate for a book of poetry. Secondly, they all have an upper and lower case, and in a normal setting of predominantly lower case forms the combination of narrow letters such as “i” and “l” with wide ones such as “m” and “w” makes for distorted letters and uneven spacing between them.

In Panoptica, by combining upper and lower case letter shapes in a unicase, Shinn has solved two monowidth font problems with one stroke—both distancing text from the typewriter, by virtue of the typeface’s novelty, and simultaneously achieving a far more even texture than usual. For instance, by combining the lower case form of “a” with the upper case “A”, the gap between “AT” or “at” is avoided: “aT”.

The Panoptic alphabet has several 20th century antecedents. In 1925 capital letters
were abolished at the Bauhaus, and professor Herbert Bayer designed his “Universal Alphabet” of lower case forms, which he demonstrated in a variety of executions, including handwriting and a typewriter (monowidth) version, although this was never manufactured. Unicase alphabets that substitute lower case forms of a, e, m, and n into the upper case were pioneered by Bradbury Thompson in 1950, and this has become the most popular form of unicase. However, the concept of an alphabet that is both unicase and monowidth is, so far as Shinn is aware, original.

“If I had set out to create a new alphabet, no doubt I would have experimented with novel forms of existing letters, or new phoneme symbols, but I was designing an easy-to-read typeface for a specific project, so I stuck closely to familiar models,” says Shinn of his invention. “However, the monowidth constraint placed on a fairly typical unicase alphabet gives rise to a quite specific set of forms, and one that is capable of maintaining its identity in whatever style it is rendered. This is what makes the Panoptic alphabet a universal alphabet.”

**The Panoptica styles**

A universal alphabet may exist in any number of styles, and ten are included in the Panoptica 1 package. Every glyph in all the fonts, including punctuation and diphthongs, is the same width.

*Old Style Roman and Italic:* “For me, poetry belongs in old style typefaces,” says Shinn, “The poetry I grew up with, from ‘Now We Are Six’ (A.A. Milne) to the ‘Penguin Modern Poets’ series, was set in old style types—usually Garamond or Bembo. So Panoptica had to have an Old Style.” Panoptica Italic proved to be a tricky proposition; the Panoptic effect is that of a square grid, yet italicization emphasizes diagonality. It was decided that each italic glyph should strive to occupy the four corners of its “square” with some part of its anatomy, while the direction of upright strokes should slant. This was straightforward for the “n”, while giving the “H” a slightly unusual semi-serif structure. The most difficult letters were the curved ones, and here Shinn again revived the baroque “left-handed” stress of Frederic Goudy’s “Companion” type of 1927—which he had adapted for use in his 1997 design, Oneleigh.

*Sans Serif:* Three weights in a classic style give the typographer plenty to work with.

*Egyptian, Pixel, Script:* A diverse selection of standard genres.

*Octagonal:* Strictly orthogonal; a quite unusual trope, yet one that seems suited to the measured cadence of this alphabet.

*Doesburg:* Named after the De Stijl artist who created alphabets composed entirely of vertical and horizontal strokes.
Layout possibilities
The tonality possible with traditional monowidth fonts is restricted both by the awkward spacing and distortions of many of the glyphs, and by their business-like evocation of the typewriter. Panoptica’s smoother combination of classic letter forms opens up the expressive range of the monowidth font, and its diversity of styles goes a step further. Now, contrasting styles of monowidth font—Bold Sans heads with Old Style Roman and Italic body text, for instance—may be mixed on the same page.

The extreme metric regularity of the typeface, which also has (with the exception of slight tails on the “q” and “y”) a uniform height, creates new layout possibilities.

Nick Shinn
Nick Shinn, R.G.D. is a Toronto art director and designer of the popular typeface Fontesque—and the headline faces of The Globe and Mail, Canada’s national newspaper. In 2001 he designed the commemorative Richler typeface.

He was born in London, England, in 1952, educated at Bedford., and has a Dip.AD in Fine Art from Leeds Polytechnic, in Yorkshire. Nick has lived in Toronto since 1976. During the 1980s he was an art director and creative director at a number of advertising agencies. He went digital in 1989 and started Shinn Design, specializing in publication design. Since 1980 he has designed 21 typeface families, for a variety of publishers, in particular the German FontFont brand. In 1999 he launched ShinnType, which now publishes and markets his fonts worldwide. Nick writes regularly for Graphic Exchange magazine and has contributed to many other publications including Marketing, Applied Arts, and the UK design journal Eye. He teaches part time at York University, is a board member of the Society of Typographic Aficionados, and was one of the organizers of TypeCon 2002, in Toronto.

His typefaces are on view at www.shinntype.com, where many of his articles can also be downloaded.

Christian Bök
Christian Bök is the author of Eunoia (Coach House Books, 2001)—a bestselling work of experimental literature that has won the Griffin Prize for Poetic Excellence (2002). Crystallography (Coach House Press, 1994), his first book of poetry, has also earned a nomination for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award (1995). Bök has created artificial languages for two television shows: Gene Roddenberry’s Earth: Final Conflict and Peter Benchley’s Amazon. Bök has also earned many accolades for his virtuoso performances of sound poetry (particularly Ursonate by Kurt Schwitters). His conceptual artworks (which include books built out of Rubik cubes and Lego bricks) have appeared at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York City as part of the exhibit Poetry Plastique.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to enhance the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.
The formal qualities of a typeface energize, facilitate and inform the typographic layout. Skilled typographers will leverage the attributes of judiciously chosen fonts to maximize the personality.