



# The Romain du Roi

## Introduction

The Romain du Roi is a typeface developed in France between 1692 and 1745 and first used in 1702. It has an important role in the development of typography in the West. The story of its development and use reflects not only important milestones in the history of typography but social and political issues as well.

## Historical Background

### King Louis XIV

The Romain du Roi was created for use by the Royal Print Works during the reign of Louis XIV. Louis XIV, who lived from 1638 until 1715 and ruled France from 1654 until his death, was certainly the most famous French king and perhaps the country's most influential monarch. Under his reign, France emerged from the Middle Ages and made huge strides toward becoming the modern country it is today.

Louis built palaces, fortresses and monuments, he established "academies" that promoted science and the arts, and he carried out many military campaigns around Europe and even in the Americas. He called himself the "Sun King" and presided over an era of splendor and extravagance that has perhaps never been equaled. It was for him that the Romain du Roi, or "King's Roman" was created.

### The French Royal Print Works

The history of the Royal Print Works bears mentioning here as well. French kings tightly controlled printing, largely to block challenges to royal and religious authority. This began in 1538 when King François I founded the first king's printers'. Claude Garamond created some of the type used in this printing house. About a hundred years later, Louis the XIII, the father of Louis the XIV, expanded upon this basis to form the Royal Print Works. The Romain du Roi typeface was specifically created to be used in this printing house.

Interestingly, this establishment still exists today. In the 369 years since it was created, it has been the Royal Print Works, the Print Works of the Republic, the Imperial Print Works, and is now the National Print Works. It was the exclusive provider of printed material for the French government until 1994, when its status as official printer was revoked.

Today its future as a printing house is in some doubt, but it still functions as a repository and museum of sorts, containing a priceless collection of type, punches, and matrices that go back almost 500 years. In addition to

original type from the era of François the First, it has the first Romain du Roi matrices and punches as well as type created by the Didots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Development of Typography**

The Romain du Roi holds an important place in the history of typography. It was arguably the first of the so-called “transitional” typefaces. These faces formed a bridge between the Old Style typefaces, which were modeled on handwritten letters, and Modern typefaces which were designed specifically to be printed by a press and have much less of the heritage of hand-drawn letters.

The Romain du Roi has important characteristics, as we will see later, which form a clean break from humanistic, or hand-drawn, characters. It paved the way for what was to come.

## **Creation of the Romain du Roi**

### **Why it was created**

The Romain du Roi was created, perhaps indirectly, by order of King Louis XIV. Its creation happened as a side effect of a general overhaul of the Royal Print Works, which needed new type and better organization in the late seventeenth century.

More generally, however, it was motivated by a desire to communicate the fact that the state was the all-powerful centralized authority of public life. Its perfection (the idea was to create the “perfect” typeface) and stateliness was a reflection of the power and splendor of the monarchy.

### **The committee of four and their work**

A committee of four scientists, formed in 1692, had the job of designing the king’s new typeface. These four men were Abbot Bignon, Jacques Jaugeon, who had experience with printing and with type, Gilles Filleau des Billettes, and Father Sébastien Truchet, who was a mathematician and civil engineer. They were all members of Louis XIV’s new Academy of Sciences.

The committee’s original purpose, however, had been to study and create a set of illustrated books describing all existing arts, crafts, and trades. In preparing these books, they had decided to start their research and writing by studying the craft of printing, which they considered to be the most important: to them it was “the art that preserves all others.”

Importantly, they saw printing as an outgrowth of engraving rather than of calligraphy. This was a new attitude at the time.

Since they were already studying printing, the development of the Romain du Roi was a logical task for them. The group met frequently and regularly and kept minutes of their meetings. These minutes have been useful in tracing the development of their ideas and their work.

## The new point system for sizing type

In studying the printing trade, they had immediately run up against some problems inherent in the practices of the time. One of the most important of these was the lack of standard type sizes. Type sizes in those times had names that stemmed from the books where they were first used rather than from any description of their actual size. For example, names like “Cicero” or “Saint Augustine” were common.

What was just as unhelpful was that one type foundry’s Cicero wasn’t the same size as the Cicero of another type foundry. Even typefaces from the same foundry often couldn’t be used together because the sizes weren’t standardized in-house.

To address this problem, the committee, and more particularly the mathematician Truchet, came up with a system of points to describe type sizes. The points were based on subdivisions of the official measure of the time, the “king’s foot” (which was divided into inches like the English foot, even though the French and English feet were not the same size). Note that the metric system did not come into use in France until the French Revolution, which began in 1789, almost 100 years later.

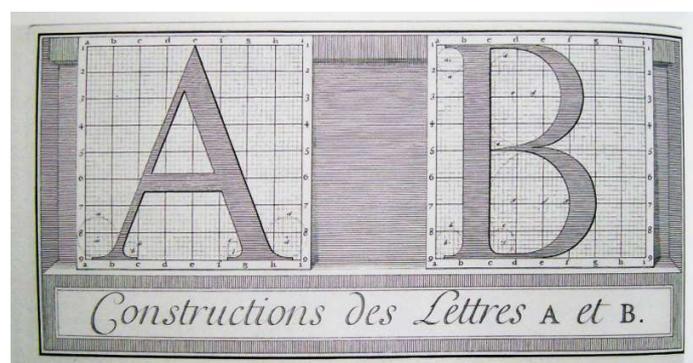
The idea of using small units of measure to describe type sizes was entirely new. It was later to be refined and extended by Fournier and by Didot, who created the type measurement system that gave rise to the one we use today.

## A new “scientific” typeface

By 1693, the committee had interrupted its work on the directory of crafts and trades and started working on the Romain du Roi, the new typeface for the Royal Print Works. This typeface would include a roman and an italic version.

It would be nine years before the type could actually be used for printing for the first time, and it would be another fifty-two years before the type existed in all its sizes and variants. It ultimately included twenty-one different type sizes (both roman and italic) in eighty-two complete fonts.

In addition to making use of the new point system, the characters of the Romain du Roi were created on a grid of 48 units on a side (making 2,304 tiny squares per letter), and their curves were drawn as arcs of circles and ellipses.



The engraver Louis Simonneau transformed the committee's drawings of the letterforms (probably executed by Jaugeon) into copperplate engravings (an example is above). Philippe Grandjean, an engraver himself, used these quite beautiful images as a guide when he cut the punches for the letters.

The committee met regularly with Grandjean to check on the status of the work, and they made many changes and adjustments, sometimes requiring Grandjean to destroy his punches and matrices and start over.

This was the first time that an entire typeface was designed using mathematical principles and geometry, rather than the more organic and looser process of hand-drawn character models that had been used up until that time. This represents a significant break with the calligraphy-based approach of the past and helped to pave the way for the Modern typefaces that were to come in the new century.

William Morris said that the Romain du Roi replaced the calligrapher with the engineer as a typographical influence. Coming from Morris, this was most likely not a compliment!

Even though the Enlightenment was not yet fully underway, some have seen this typeface and its scientific basis as an outgrowth of the Age of Reason and of the new interest in science and mathematics that characterized this period.

### **Uses of the Romain du Roi**

The first book published using the new typeface was Médailles sur les Principaux Evènements de la Regne de Louis le Grand, which appeared in 1702. This book contains a series of over 290 medals that had been struck to commemorate important events in the reign of Louis XIV (referred to as Louis the Great in the book's title and by many in France at that time).

The book itself is a fascinating glimpse into the France of the turn of the eighteenth century. There are medals for almost every imaginable event, from battles won by the French army to times when the King got sick, with corresponding medals for when he got well again. There is even a medal for when the King had the city of Paris repaved because the old paving had worn out and was causing all kinds of problems.

The book can be seen both as the "coming-out" of the new typeface and also as a piece of masterful public relations on the part of the monarchy. The language in the book is unfailingly flattering, even adulatory, toward the King.

Apparently the idea of striking medals to publicize the events in the life and reign of a king impressed people all over Europe, and it wasn't long before other monarchs issued their own medals.

Some authors claim that type founders other than the Royal Print Works were forbidden by law to copy the Romain du Roi because it was reserved for official government uses. Nevertheless, some scholars describe this idea as a "persistent legend" because there appears to be no evidence that the monarchy ever issued any edict to this effect.

However, in 1814, after the Revolution and during the brief period of the restoration of the monarchy, the crown did issue an official proscription against anyone other than the government using the Romain du Roi, so

this may be the source of the confusion. Amazingly, it was still the official typeface of the French government 112 years after it was created. It was not retired until 1816, when it was replaced with a new typeface in a style similar to that of the Didots.

### Characteristics of the Romain du Roi

The Roman

What made the Romain du Roi such a departure from what had come before were several of its very distinctive characteristics. One was its very upright structure. All its vertical elements are truly vertical and not inclined at all:

b d f h i k

Also, the serifs at the tops of the letters are flat with nearly non-existent brackets and they extend on both sides of the ascenders rather than just on the right side, which was more typical.

One of the most distinctive features is the lowercase “l”, which has a spur on its left side:

l

It’s not entirely clear why this spur was added. Some say it was because Louis wanted this letter, which began his name, to have a distinctive touch. Others say it was because without the spur, it would be impossible to tell the lowercase l from the uppercase I. One thing is certain – people who copied the typeface but wanted to avoid too close a resemblance removed the spur.

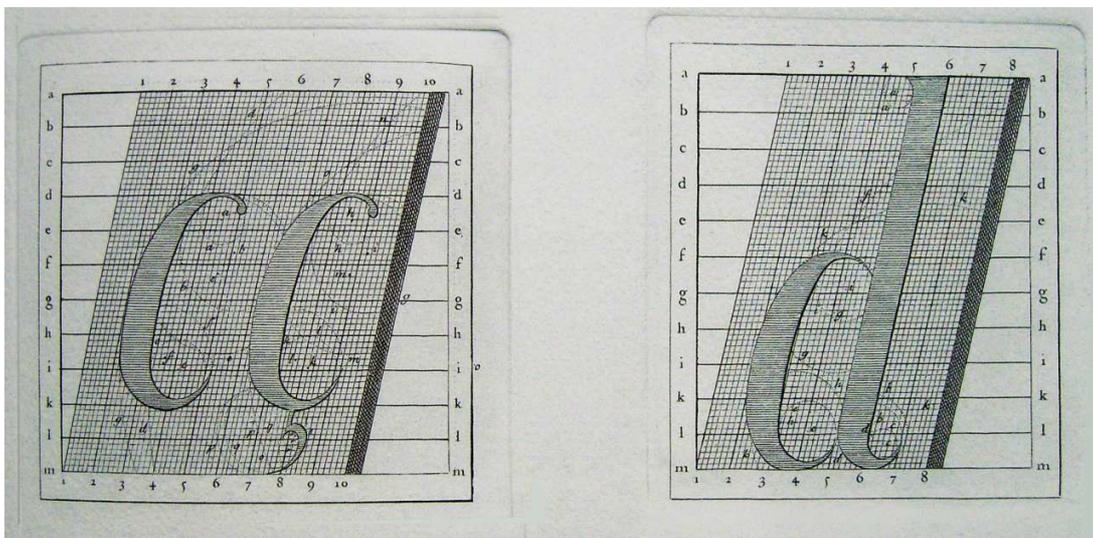
Some see this typeface as cold, perhaps at least partly because of its mathematical, rather than calligraphic, origins. Interestingly, Philippe Grandjean, who cut the punches for the Romain du Roi, did not follow the committee’s drawings slavishly. His subtle interpretation is credited with softening the look of the typeface and increasing its beauty.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

## The Italic

Italic type had its origin as typefaces that were entirely separate from any corresponding roman typeface, unlike today when the roman and italic versions tend to be paired with each other. As a result, italic type was not a “slanted” version of an existing roman typeface but a different face altogether.

However, in creating the Romain du Roi, the committee chose to do just that. Again using mathematical and geometric principles, the italic letters were carefully crafted as “leaning” versions of the roman letters. This was the beginning of a tighter pairing of roman and italic versions of the same typeface.



*ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ*  
*abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz*

## The first “digital” typeface?

Some have argued that the Romain du Roi, because it was constructed using a grid (pixels) and arcs of a circle (vectors), because the italic was a slanted version of the roman, and because Father Truchet wrote detailed mathematically-based notes on how letters were to be spaced and adjusted in proximity to each other (hinting), that this was the first digital typeface. It’s an interesting idea. It’s certainly arguable that the thought process that went into the design of the Romain du Roi prefigures the way type design software approaches type design today.

## Legacy of the Romain du Roi

The Romain du Roi was very influential. It was extensively copied, in France and elsewhere, and it influenced type founders not only in France but across Europe. With its variations in stroke thickness and its use of flat serifs with little bracketing, it was a precursor to the work of Didot and Bodoni, later in the eighteenth century, whose typefaces bring us fully into the era of Modern type styles.

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