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The types of François-Ambroise Didot and Pierre-Louis Vafflard. A further investigation into the origins of the Didones

In two articles Jeanne Veyrin-Forrer did pioneering work with her description of types cut at the initiative of the brothers François-Ambroise (1730-1804) and Pierre-François Didot (1732-93). She divided the work of François-Ambroise, which was done between 1780 and 1785, into designs according to the ‘première, deuxième’ and ‘troisième manièvre’ (illus. 1-3). These types had already been recognized as remarkable creations – particularly those of the ‘troisième maniévre’, a design which A.F. Johnson (1884-1972) suggested should be regarded as the first true ‘Didone’ or ‘modern face’, in that it had horizontal, linear and unbracketed serifs, a large contrast between thick and thin parts, and vertical stress. Ever since, the type has been regarded as the start of a fashion that impressed itself heavily upon international typography for over a century, and whose chief exponents were the Didot family and Giambattista Bodoni. When typecasting and composing machines were delivered with standard typefaces at the end of the nineteenth century, that one of these should be an ordinary ‘modern face’ was taken as a matter of course.

Despite the attention that has been paid to the work of François-Ambroise and Pierre-François Didot and their punchcutters Pierre-Louis Vafflard and Jean-Baptiste-François Gérard, there are still many unresolved questions concerning their type designs. What interests me most about the two brothers’ work is what François-Ambroise produced in his collaboration with Vafflard. Their work is original and varied. The three steps by which the Didot style was

3 The term Didone comes from the classification of Maximilien Vox (1963), which, like other classifications, is defective. In it, classes are related to persons (in the case of the Didones the name incorporates that of Bodoni, just as the Garaldes comprise Garamond and Aldus), philosophies, cultural history, morphology and technology. Modern face is the English name for what in German classifications is termed Klassizistische Antiqua, though it would have been more accurate to speak of Neoklassizistische Antiqua.
5 The name is variously spelt: Wafflard (Capelle), Wafflard (Vafflard) (Johnson), Waflard (Thibaudeau), Wafflard (Updike). As he himself spelt his name Vafflard (see illus. 9), this spelling is used throughout this article.
COMPARTIMENT d'ornements du genre de ceux auxquels on a donné le nom de Grotesques, et qui étoit peint à fresque dans le plafond d'une des galeries du précédent édifice. C'étoit dans celle qui fait face à l'entrée de la salle. Les plafonds des parties latérales ne différoient pas beaucoup de celui-ci pour la composition générale, et ne pouvoient varier que dans les détails. On voit au centre, dans une forme octogone, une figure ailée dont on trouvera la représentation plus en grand dans le morceau suivant.

1. The 'première manière'. From: Recueil des peintures (1782).