AN ICON YOU SHOULD KNOW...

Tobias Frere-Jones

American type designer and teacher, born 1970

Tobias Frere-Jones is an American type designer. He draws the letters other designers use, such as Interstate and Gotham. Many of his typefaces start with lettering he found around him, like road signs and the signs on old buildings. He has taught type design at Yale since 1996 and now runs his own company, Frere-Jones Type. Read this page in about five minutes, then use the links at the end to look deeper.

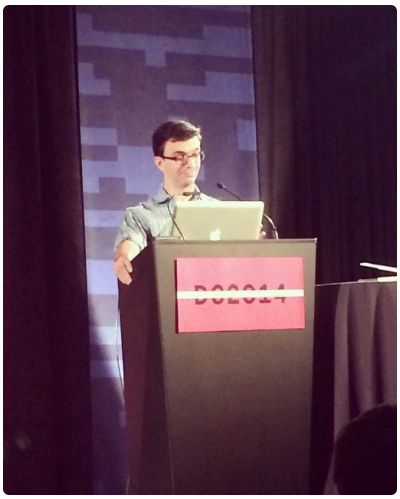
FURTHER LOOKING

Frere-Jones Type: His company, with his typefaces and blog. frerejones.com

Frere-Jones Type: Designing Gotham, the story of how Gotham was made. frerejones.com

ACLU: The 2017 design handbook, with the new logo. aclu.org

Video: In Letters We Trust



Tobias Frere-Jones. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0. Full credit on page 3.

01 Fact Sheet

1970	Born August 28. He grows up in Brooklyn, New York.
1992	Earns a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and joins the Font Bureau in Boston.
1993	Starts Interstate, a typeface based on American highway sign lettering.
1996	Joins the faculty of the Yale School of Art to teach type design.
1999	Moves back to New York to work with type designer Jonathan Hoefler. The firm is renamed Hoefler & Frere-Jones in 2005.
2000	Designs Gotham, first made for *GQ* magazine.
2006	Receives the Gerrit Noordzij Prize for type design.
2013	Receives the AIGA Medal.
2014	Leaves Hoefler & Frere-Jones and starts his own company, Frere-Jones Type.
2015	Frere-Jones Type releases its first retail family, Mallory.
2017	Draws the new logo for the American Civil Liberties Union.
2019	Wins the National Design Award for Communication Design.

Life and career Milestones tied to the key works

THREE KEY WORKS, PAGE 2

1993
Interstate

2000
Gotham

2017
ACLU logo

02 Three Key Works

The three works below are shown in openly licensed type samples and a public domain logo file. Each one started with letters he saw out in the world.

1993: Interstate

Highway signs turned into a typeface

Frere-Jones designed Interstate at the Font Bureau between 1993 and 1999. It is based on the lettering drawn in 1949 for the road signs of the Federal Highway Administration. He refined those sign letters so they also work in print and on screens. Interstate became one of the most popular typefaces of the 1990s, and the Museum of Modern Art has held it in its collection since 2011.

LOOK FOR Stroke ends cut at an angle | Open shapes, even in bold weights



Interstate, 1993. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0.

2000: Gotham

Lettering from old New York signs

GQ magazine asked for a new sans serif that looked fresh and geometric. Frere-Jones walked Manhattan with a camera, studying the lettering on older buildings, especially the sign on the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Gotham came out in 2002 through Hoefler & Frere-Jones. Jesse Ragan helped design it. The Obama presidential campaign used it in 2008.

LOOK FOR Broad letters with a tall x-height | Wide openings in letters like c and e



Gotham, 2000. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

2017: ACLU logo

Four letters that stand together

In 2017 the American Civil Liberties Union rolled out a new look made by the design studio Open. Frere-Jones drew the new logo, which replaced one built around the Statue of Liberty. The ACLU design handbook says the logo was partly inspired by an old one from its archives. The tight, heavy capitals stand for a simple idea: out of many, we are one. The logo comes in red or blue, and staff are asked to use each about half the time.

LOOK FOR Heavy capitals set very close | No symbol, just the letters

See the ACLU Design Handbook →



ACLU logo, 2017. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

TRY THIS

Take a photo of old lettering near you, such as a shop sign or a building name. Draw five more letters that look like they belong with it.

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REFLECT

Think About It

He found Gotham in old building signs. What lettering on your street could become the start of a typeface?

03 Sources

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Tobias Frere-Jones. *ACLU logo*. 2017, via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain as a simple text logo (tagged PD-textlogo on Commons). The ACLU name and logo are trademarks of the American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed 26 Nov. 2026. Rendered from SVG.

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