

THE @ SYMBOL

SELECTED BY
PAOLA ANTONELLI | **THE @ SYMBOL** | REDISCOVERED BY
RAY TOMLINSON

The @ symbol has a long and disputed past. Some linguists believe that it dates back to the sixth or seventh century, an adaptation of the Latin preposition *ad*, meaning “at,” “to,” or “toward.”

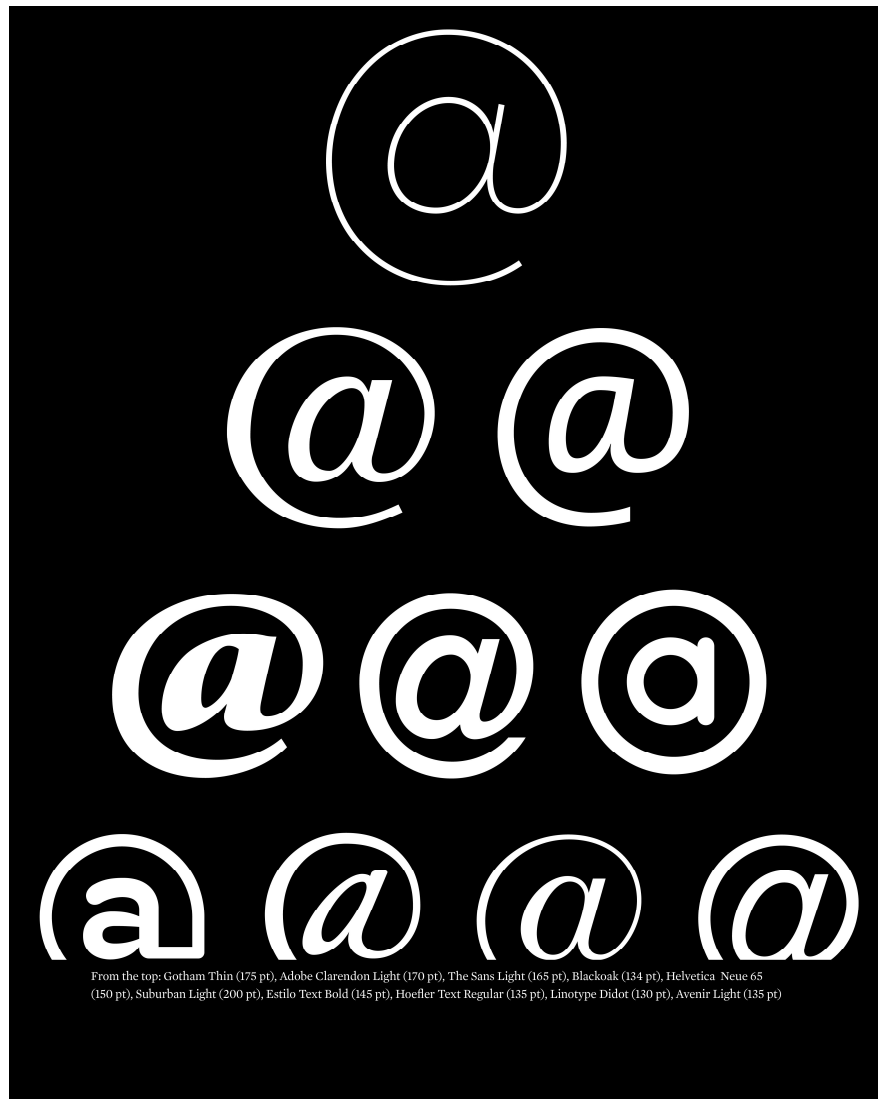
The @ ligature would have been formed by scribes in an attempt to lessen the number of pen strokes, exaggerating the upstroke of the letter *d* and curving it over the *a*. Others believe that the symbol has a later genesis in sixteenth-century Venetian trade, citing commercial documents where @ was used to mean amphora, a standard-size terra-cotta vessel employed by merchants that had become a unit of measure.

From the eighteenth century onward, @ meant “at the price of,” similar to the Norman French use of à, which, incidentally, might be another source for @’s shape, with the grave accent eventually becoming @’s curl.

Due to a culmination of all these influences the @ symbol was known as the “commercial a” when it appeared on the keyboard of the American Underwood typewriter in 1885, and it was defined as such, for the first time, in the *American Dictionary of Printing and Bookmaking* in 1894. From this point on, the symbol itself was standardized both stylistically and in its application.

In January 1971, @ was an underused jargon symbol lingering on the keyboard. By October, Ray Tomlinson had rediscovered and appropriated it, imbuing it with new meaning and elevating it to the defining symbol of the computer age. He chose the @ for his first email because of its strong locative sense—an individual, identified by a username, is @ this institution/computer/server, and also because... it was already there, on the keyboard, and nobody ever used it. The appropriation and reuse of a preexisting, even ancient, symbol already available on the keyboard is an act of extraordinarily elegant and economical design.

Paola Antonelli is one of the world’s foremost design experts and was recently rated as one of the top 100 most powerful people in the world of art by *Art Review*. She is a senior curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. The recipient of a laureate degree in architecture from the Politecnico di Milano University in 1990, Antonelli has curated several architecture and design exhibitions in Italy, France, and Japan. She has been a contributing editor for *Domus* magazine (1987–1991) and the design editor of *Abitare* (1992–1994).



WORK TO BE DONE

- 1/ Does the @ symbol have a recent history?
- 2/ Who was the first person to have used the @ as a computer symbol?
- 3/ What is the relationship between the @ and Italy?
- 4/ Using a dictionary, try to find the correct meanings of the following words in both English & Arabic: linguist/ ligature/ scribe/ lessen/ genesis/ vessel/ measure/ culmination/ keyboard/ typewriter/ jargon/ locative/ appropriation/ elegant.