

# We ♥ Dingbats

By Pamela Pfiffner

**Join us on a guided tour of dingbats, picture fonts, pi fonts, ornaments, and very special characters.**

The term “dingbat” entered my life with the 1970s sitcom “All in the Family,” in which Archie Bunker used the word to describe his wife Edith, a seemingly air-headed woman who was actually wise beneath her spacey demeanor. Years later I discovered Zapf Dingbats, one of the 35 PostScript fonts that came with the original Apple LaserWriter. Zapf Dingbats was a mystery to me. It contained no letters—only tiny pictures of checkmarks, boxes, stars, hands, and hearts—so how could it be a font? I didn’t know what a “zapf” was, but I assumed it was the name for the heart that looked like a flower with a vine-like stem (♥).

(I soon learned what, er, who Zapf really was, and when I met Hermann Zapf in person, I immediately knew that he was no dingbat.)

The novelty of Zapf Dingbats appealed to me, and I found excuses to insert Zapf’s pointing fingers into many documents. To do so seemed cutting

edge, especially considering that in the early days of desktop publishing, there weren’t that many digital dingbats. Most of the influential foundries that were converting their lead libraries into pixels and beziers put their energy into classic typefaces, not non-critical dingbats. Smaller, cheekier foundries who didn’t have to lug the baggage of typographic history filled the void. Some font snobs viewed these nouveau dingbats as another sign the apocalypse was near. Cats sleeping with dogs! Traditional letterforms communing with uncured pictures!

I straddled the line: I desperately wanted to be a font snob, but my head was turned by those cute little ‘faces. I loved looking at them and playing with them. Still, I didn’t know how to use them to good effect. I came to view illustrated fonts as frivolous rather than useful. Type dingbats became the Edith to my Archie. But like that sitcom couple, I can’t divorce my dingbats.



**Figure 1:** What would we do without friendly, familiar dingbats like the checkmark and hand (Zapf Dingbats from Adobe) and the smiley face and square (Wingdings from Microsoft)?



**Figure 2:** Fonts like Carta (globe and road sign), and International Pi (don't drink the water, and the Great Britain symbol), symbolize what they represent. Both are from the [Adobe type foundry](#).

### A 'Bat By Any Other Name Would Look As Sweet

I remain confused as to how the dingbat got its name. A "dingbat" is defined as a nitwit or empty-headed person (Edith!), an unnamable object, a typographic ornament, a type of apartment building, a thrown projectile, slang for male genitalia, and sundry insults. It's trickier to discover the origins of the word, especially as it pertains to typography. One intriguing idea is that it represents throwaway lead, with "ding" sounding like lead dropping to the ground and "bat" suggesting tossing or hitting.

The best guess as to how the dingbat got its name is tied to its most profound meaning of the word: a dingbat is something for which there is no word, akin to "thingamajig" or "doohickey." In other words, a dingbat is a typographical "whatchamacallit." What's certain is that printers devised dingbats as a way to fill out short lines of type. They had no purpose other than to take up space. In this interpretation it's easier to see the type dingbat's connection to the spaced-out housewife Edith.

Today, "dingbat" has become the default term to describe fonts comprised of symbols, ornaments, or pictures. Here's how I break them down:

**Decorative** elements that function as punctuation, such as a bullet to start a list or a checkmark to indicate a task ([Figure 1](#)).

**Symbols** that embody a person, place, thing, or concept in a single element, like map markers or informational symbols. Often called Symbol or Pi fonts ([Figure 2](#)).

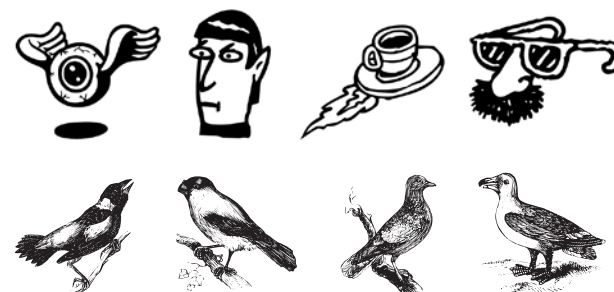
**Ornamental** flourishes that embellish text. Usually incorporated into the font family as Ornaments or Extras ([Figure 3](#)).

**Illustrations** that can stand on their own, like little pieces of clip art. These are often categorized as picture fonts ([Figure 4](#)).

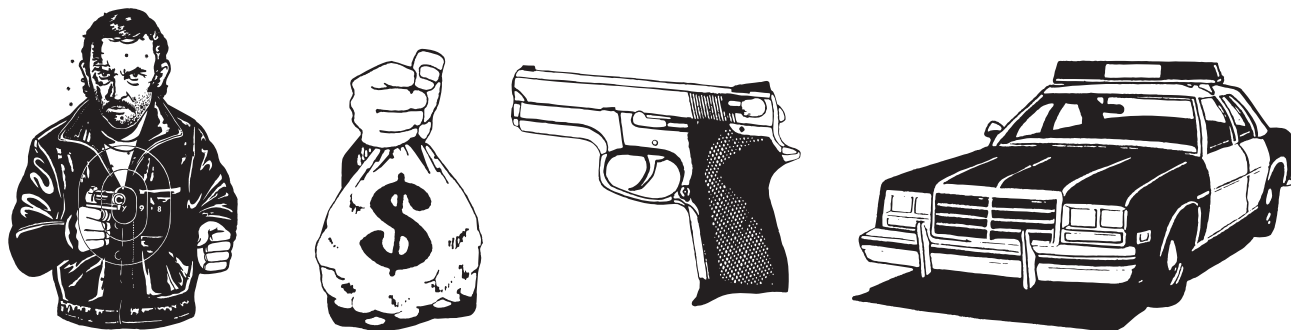
It's the illustration category that provokes the strongest reactions and gives dingbats a bad reputation in some type-abiding societies ([Figure 5](#)). Somebody call the serif!



**Figure 3:** Traditional ornaments infuse text layouts with elegance. From left: [ITC Bodoni Ornaments](#), [Font Bureau Ornaments Village](#), [Adobe Caslon Ornaments](#), and [P22 Arts and Crafts Ornaments Two](#). All are available from [fonts.com](#) as well as their respective foundries.



**Figure 4:** Dingbats encompass a wide variety of styles, from the cartoonish [ITC Fontonies](#) to the bookish [Birds A Font](#) by Emerald City Fontwerks.



**Figure 5:** Steer clear of dark galleys when Bad Hood Images are around. Sold as part of House Industries' [Bad Neighborhood](#) Collection.



I still think of dingbats as visual clues to text, such as the start of bullet list items, but in the hands of some designers, even this use of dingbats can also be art (Figures 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10).

At Sam's House of Appliances, you'll find:



**MICROWAVES!**



**WASHERS!**



**PROJECTORS!**

**Figure 6:** *Ampersand Appliances* can be a bullet substitute, although some of the home electronics are a bit dated.



**Figure 7:** A dingbat from a *Bad Hood* becomes a productive member of society by serving as the letter F.



**Figure 8:** Designer Roberto De Vicq created these illustrations entirely from dingbats. "Fear" uses *P22 Insectile Solid*, and "Revolution" uses *P22 Constructivist Extras*, both available from [Veer.com](http://Veer.com).



**Figure 9:** In the same vein as De Vicq's masterful illustrations, this typeface—cleverly named *KL Typefaces* by *Elsner+Flake*—consists of faces made of type. Look closely and you can see the characters that comprise each dingbat. I'm not sure how I'd use this, but it's nifty nonetheless.



**Figure 10:** Press the letters j, k, and l in *P22 Vincent* and you'll get a reproduction of Van Gogh's bedroom. P22 also sells dingbats for Leonardo DaVinci, Paul Cezanne, Claude Monet, and Paul Gauguin, among others. What could be artier?

A small corner of the 'bat house is reserved for designer dingbats, or picture fonts drawn with the distinctive stamp of the artist. Émigré is known for attracting talent like illustrator John Hersey, graphic artist Ed Fella, and designers Eric Donelan and Bob Aufuldish, who created the groundbreaking Big Cheese and ZeitGuys dingbats (Figure 11).

### Picture This

Picture dingbats range widely in both quality and subject matter, from the cute to the eccentric to “What were they thinking?” Commercial foundries—even those who might have pooh-poohed dingbats years ago—are a wonderful source of high-quality dingbats (the question of taste is another matter). The prices are reasonable and many are bundled with text fonts of the same family, thus guaranteeing harmony between letter and picture. Many commercial foundries also offer free dingbats to whet your appetite (Figure 12).



**Figure 11:** The slightly surreal [Big Cheese](#) (top) and [ZeitGuys](#) (bottom), drawn in 1992 and 1994 respectively, were early examples of artisan dingbats from Emigre.



**Figure 12:** Nerfect is a subversive little boutique foundry that offers close to three-dozen free fonts, including a handful of dingbats. Shown here are four flavors of [Crap\\*Magnet](#): from top to bottom, Original, Junior, Legacy, Returns!



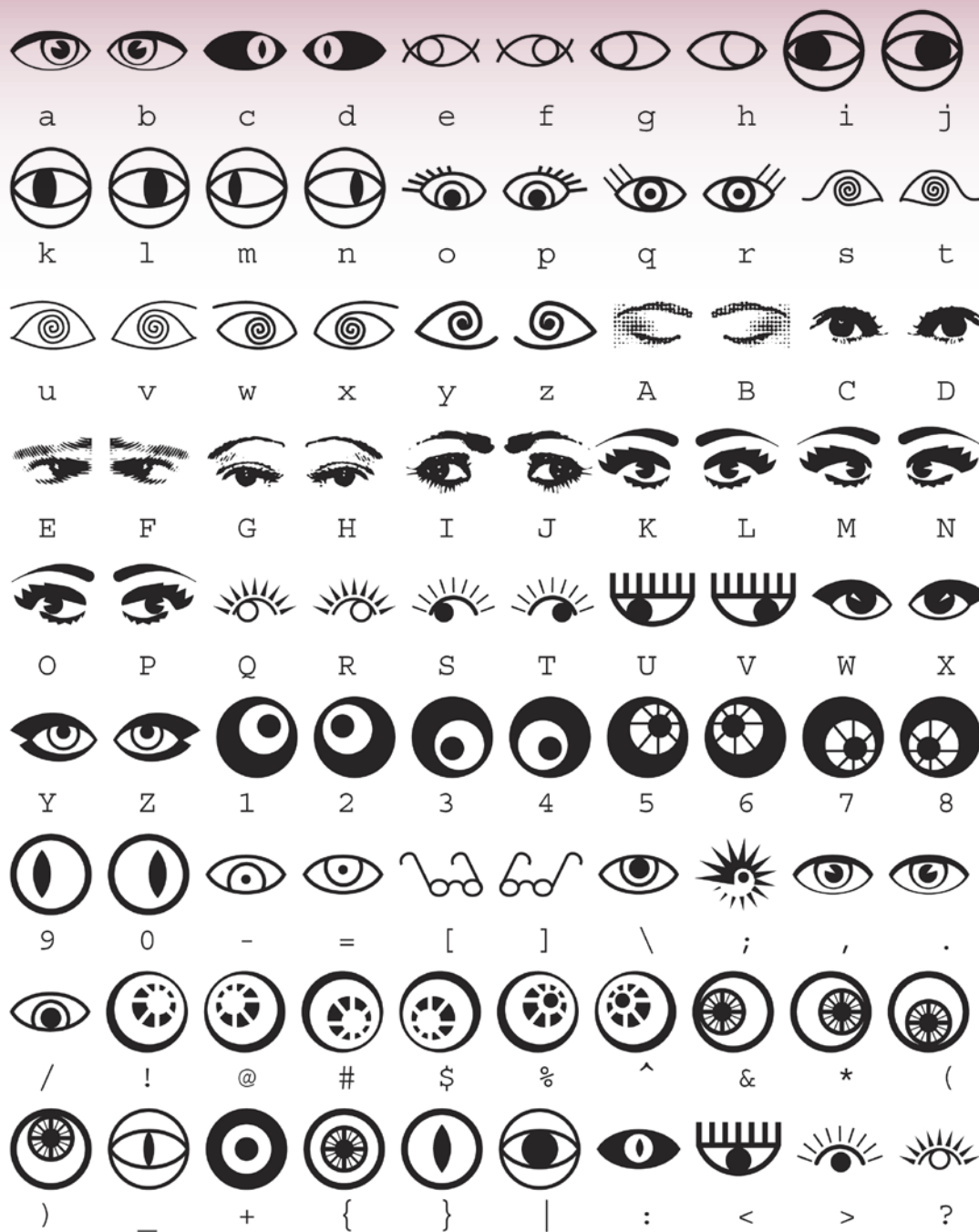
Most commercial Web sites—especially font amalgamators like [fonts.com](http://fonts.com) and [veer.com](http://veer.com)—include an on-the-fly typesetting feature so you can choose your own words to test the font, although with dingbats the letters hardly matter, especially because character maps are usually on the site.

Free fonts are everywhere online. You'll find the largest selection on sites like [Dingbat Depot](http://Dingbat Depot), [FontSpace](http://FontSpace), and [Fonts2U](http://Fonts2U), which offer thousands of free dingbats from enterprising designers. The quality and content vary wildly, from baby booties to explicit erotica. Note that some free fonts have use restrictions, and you may have to pay to use them in commercial designs.

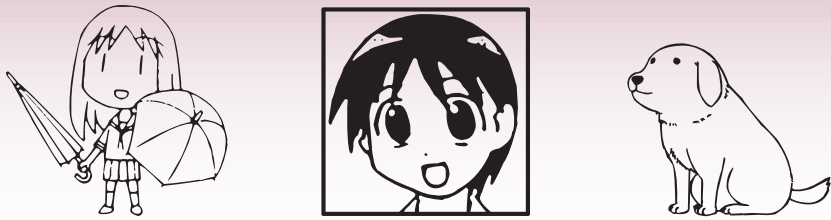
I've been looking at so many picture fonts while researching this article that I now have 'bats in the belfry. A few that caught my fancy are in [Figures 13 through 25](#).



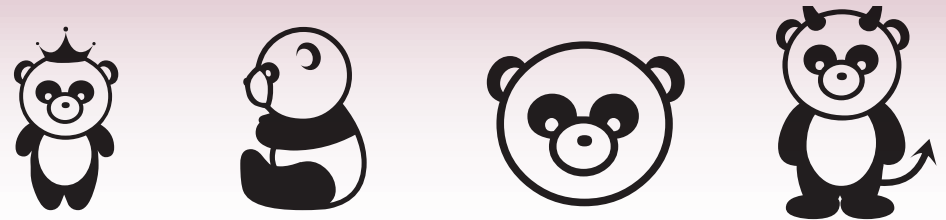
**Figure 13:** [Floralia](#) is a well-crafted, all-purpose ornament font. And it's free!



**Figure 14:** [Dingbatcave](#) was kind enough to send me this eyeiful of dingbats from its font [EyeEye Mate](#). The abstract quality of some of these eyeballs make them look like graphic bullets.



**Figure 15:** Prominent eyes are a major focus of anime and manga characters. Fans of that genre will find uses for [Aduzings 1](#), a free font by Kiyohiko Azuma. Animal sidekick is included.



**Figure 16:** I usually shy away from cuteness, but these free panda-bats have an appealing “Hello Kitty” vibe. And after the National Zoo’s giant pandas Tai Shan and Mei Lan’s departure to China, [Pandamonium](#) fills a void.



**Figure 17:** Given the name “[Comic Strip Exclaim Regular](#)” (Monotype Imaging), the rationale behind this font is pretty obvious, but it’d be cool to see it used in a poster for an opera performance. (Love the PFFF—a few more letters and my last name is a dingbat!)



**Figure 18:** We’ve all driven through towns like those you can construct with [Motorcity by Device Fonts](#). Despite the dead-ends and the roads that lead to nowhere, this font uses contextual alternates so that each glyph adjusts to the one next to it after deletion or insertion. You may need a GPS to figure it out, however.



**Figure 19:** This Device Font typeface is named [MenSwear](#).



**Figure 20:** These silhouettes of feisty femmes, from a free font called [Actionwomen](#), put the “ding” in dingbat.



**Figure 21:** This font from T.26 is called [Dingfatz](#), but perhaps as a nod to the early years it might have been called Zaftig Dingbats. I’d love to see one of these gals on a mudflap.



**Figure 22:** A “Dancing with the Stars” fan might get a kick out of [Tangomaniacs Day and Night](#) from Linotype. Some glyphs are a bit provocative, but then the tango is the dance of love.

Once you've installed your chosen font, open InDesign's Glyph panel to see what pictures are mapped to which keystroke (Figure 26). Like other fonts, dingbats are black and white vector outlines. You can apply any single color to a dingbat glyph.

Now if someone would just design an Edith Bunker Dingbat....

**Pamela Pfiffner** is a freelance writer and editor based in Portland, Oregon. She needs a job to finance her font habit.

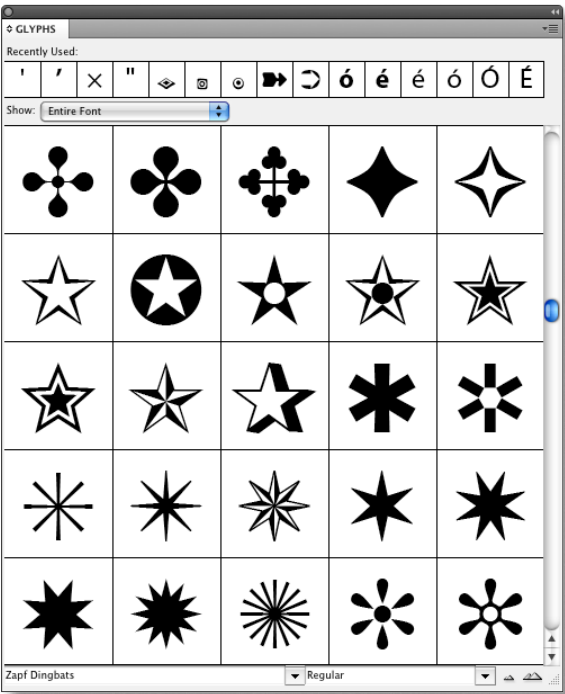


Figure 26: Zapf Dingbats show in InDesign's Glyph Panel.

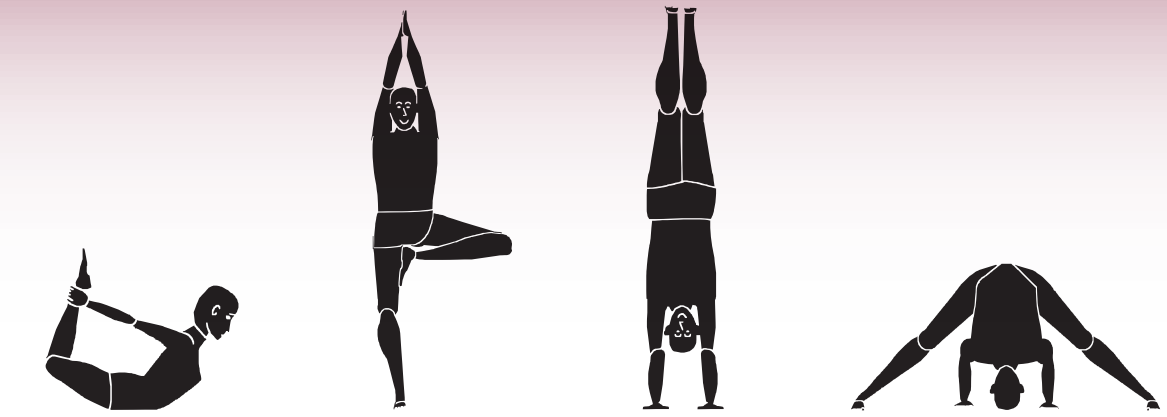


Figure 23: With yoga studios springing up like mushrooms after a rainstorm, I bet [YogaFont](#) appears on class schedules around the globe.



Figure 24: The glyphs in [B Movie Dings](#) might be tricky to use in the context of a larger illustration, but they'd be perfect for a Sweet 16 party or debutante cotillion.



Figure 25: The innocence in the faces of the [Class of 1964](#) by [Nerfect Type Laboratories](#) is so sweet, but you know that some of these kids didn't stay that way. I see a "Wanted" poster in this font.





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