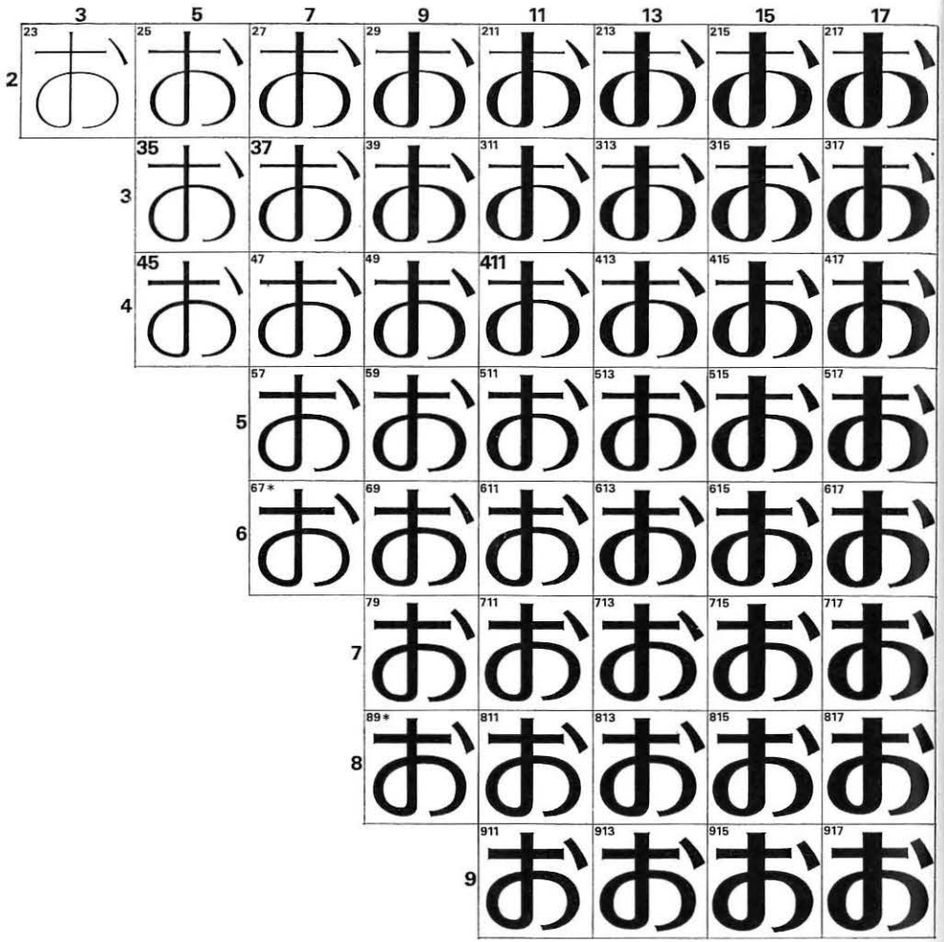


Figure 7. Numbers indicate the relative proportion of the widths of the vertical and horizontal lines to each other and to the width of the square, which is rated as 100. In Typos 35, for example, the horizontal lines are 3/100th's the width of the square and the vertical lines 5/100th's. Typefaces such as 23, 45, and 67 in which there is little difference between the widths of the horizontal and verticals blend well with Gothic type. Type with extreme differences of variety (such as 29) have been eliminated from the family. At present, four faces of Typos (35, 37, 45, and 411) are available; the asterisk on 67 and 89 indicates that these are now being designed.

Letterforms as a Medium for Artistic Expression

Hella Basu

Although the major function of writing is transmitting verbal communication, the variety and beauty of man's letterforms indicate several important non-verbal considerations. Pattern-forming properties of letterforms can be explored as artistic expression independent of verbal meaning, but optical elements must be related to verbal ones. The author's development of calligraphic "visual aids" for classroom use is described, and a selection of these is illustrated.

I. *Some Thoughts on Creative Lettering*

The common way of looking at writing is as a means of communication; indeed, in some people's minds that is its only function. The arrangement of letterforms into lines of manuscript or print, the combination of lines into pages, and pages into handy assemblies such as pamphlets and books is undertaken with very practical aims in mind —the passing of a message from an author to his reading public; it is irrelevant whether this author is a poet or an advertising copywriter.

Looked at in this light, it would seem that a standard letterform could be achieved which would contain all the elements of legibility that can be crystallized out of many centuries of use in handwriting and print from the results of scientific research. Such a letterform could then be used as a pattern to be universally applied to all types of print and imitated in handwriting with the necessary adjustments for the cursive element.

This exercise seems simple enough. Why then have attempts in this direction been unsuccessful so far? We still have little agreement between experts on which alphabet is most suited to the teaching of writing and reading in primary schools; we still employ hundreds of different printing types—ever increasing in number—a range much greater than is warranted by the functions of communication. Even after allowance has been made for the different conditions which exist

between display letterforms (which have to be assimilated fast and from a greater distance) and typography for reading large quantities of information at close range, we still cannot account for the issue, year after year, of scores of new typefaces. The demand created by changing fashions only implies that something in human nature responds to change and variety.

Much of the existing variety has grown organically over several thousand years with increasing velocity. It is well worth studying the development of letterforms to examine how they relate to the initial capacity of thought in a civilization, to the growing complexity of thought, and eventually to the varying trends of taste of a civilization. Variations reflect also the tools with which writing was executed on the changing vehicles which carried it—clay, papyrus, stone, slate, wax tablets, vellum, parchment, and eventually paper.

The letterforms we employ at present are "deteriorated" pictures—pictures which were originally independent of language, to be understood on the basis of optical recognition of the object itself. Deterioration took place as a result of greater speed of writing and having to use pictures of objects to represent abstract concepts; e.g., the sun to represent warmth.

This deterioration, however, turned out to be a positive factor. What almost started as a result of neglect and compromise developed into rationalization and organic development. Pictographic scripts developed into ideographic, syllabic and alphabetic (phonetic) scripts; the forms of the letters themselves were simplified and legibility gradually enhanced by the addition of punctuation.

Whether the alphabet we have now is the best that is possible is doubtful; whether it is even rational is questionable. But at no time in history has a panel of experts sat down to examine the task of international communication through letterforms, with the aim of constructing a system which would be best suited to reproduce the varying linguistic sounds. Letterforms in alphabets used around the globe have gradually evolved—stimulated by the varying needs of each civilization—rather than being created by thoughtful and rational intent. Evolution in all its manifestations invariably produces, eventually, something which is as nearly perfect as the complete absence of design intent and reasoning permits. That which fills a need—however unaccountable—survives; the futile and meaningless fades into

oblivion. That which survives is richer and normally far more diverse than would be necessary to perform a given function, and a balance is achieved by natural selection which in many cases exceeds the success of rationalization and intent.

Moreover, the range of choice created in the process of evolution fulfils a need for variety in human nature which so often embellishes our articles and concepts far beyond their functional requirements. So, independent of all aesthetic considerations, the range of letterforms which we have inherited is now capable of reflecting most of the manifold nuances in our lives—from the strong to the delicate, from the clinical to the joyful.

Something further has happened beyond requirements of communication, beyond the reflection of historical developments and its associated psychological features: letterforms have acquired pattern-forming properties which can be explored independently of any verbal meaning. Letters can be used individually—but more effectively in combinations—to give purely optical pleasure. These pattern-forming features are partly dependent on the letterforms themselves. The scripts of different regions of the world vary wildly in the textures of their patterns. Furthermore patterns vary in accordance with the normal arrangements in which given alphabetic styles are strung together to form sentences and paragraphs—horizontally or vertically —and completely unexpected things happen where, occassionally, both horizontal and vertical alignments have been ignored.

Letter design in itself is something quite different from letter combination. A letter all by itself, however beautifully it may be designed and executed, is as a person taken out of his social context. Letters are meant to live in families, that is in words and sentences. Their environmental structure is similar to that of the human scene in that the families, too, belong to wider groups and a state of competition exists inside the family structure as well as inside the group structure. Family loyalties outweigh group loyalties, and group loyalties are so strong that, for instance, inter-marriage is strongly frowned upon. Mixing of styles—common recommendation to the contrary—usually produces disastrous effects, but may, unexpectedly, result in strong and beautiful variations.

With all this in mind, we are now more conscious of the way in which letterforms can serve us towards a better and faster under-

standing of verbal meanings, as well as being in themselves a medium for artistic expression based on purely optical factors.

Critical appraisal of creative calligraphy in terms of definite standards is almost impossible because the criteria of judgment are too varied. Fashion plays its part, but rules are found faulty the moment they are formulated and none of them can ever be universally applied. Rational examination can filter out common faults and virtues, but the total pleasure or displeasure in viewing depends as much on the viewer, his background and experience, as it depends on the judgment (and luck) of the creating artist. It is only in the regions in which we have experiences in common that a pre-determined degree of joy can be established. That designer who manages to crystallize such regions most successfully has the widest appeal, while minorities with common specialized experiences may get a deeper satisfaction from designs which lie outside the reach of the majority. No universal value judgment can be applied.

In a medium such as calligraphy, which depends to a large extent on the verbal message it is intended to convey, freedom of creativity is somewhat restricted. Words and sentences have meanings which must not be ignored. Optical elements have to be related to the verbal ones, however disguised these may appear. Creative freedom exists only inside the limits permitted by the subject matter. As in illustration, stage production, and musical performances interpretation can become an art in itself in calligraphy, but there is no guarantee that even an interpretation which is completely valid in its own right would be universally acceptable. The less explicit a solution, the better is the chance of its success because it leaves much open to enlargement by the reader's imagination. This is particularly true where the text with which the design is concerned, is a poem which in itself is usually open to an infinite number of interpretations, and the pleasure which the reader gets from it will be in proportion to the wealth of his own inner life.

Where full harmony exists between the author, the artist and the reader, the total will become more than the sum of its components and the ultimate aim will have been achieved.

II. *Creative Lettering for the Classroom*

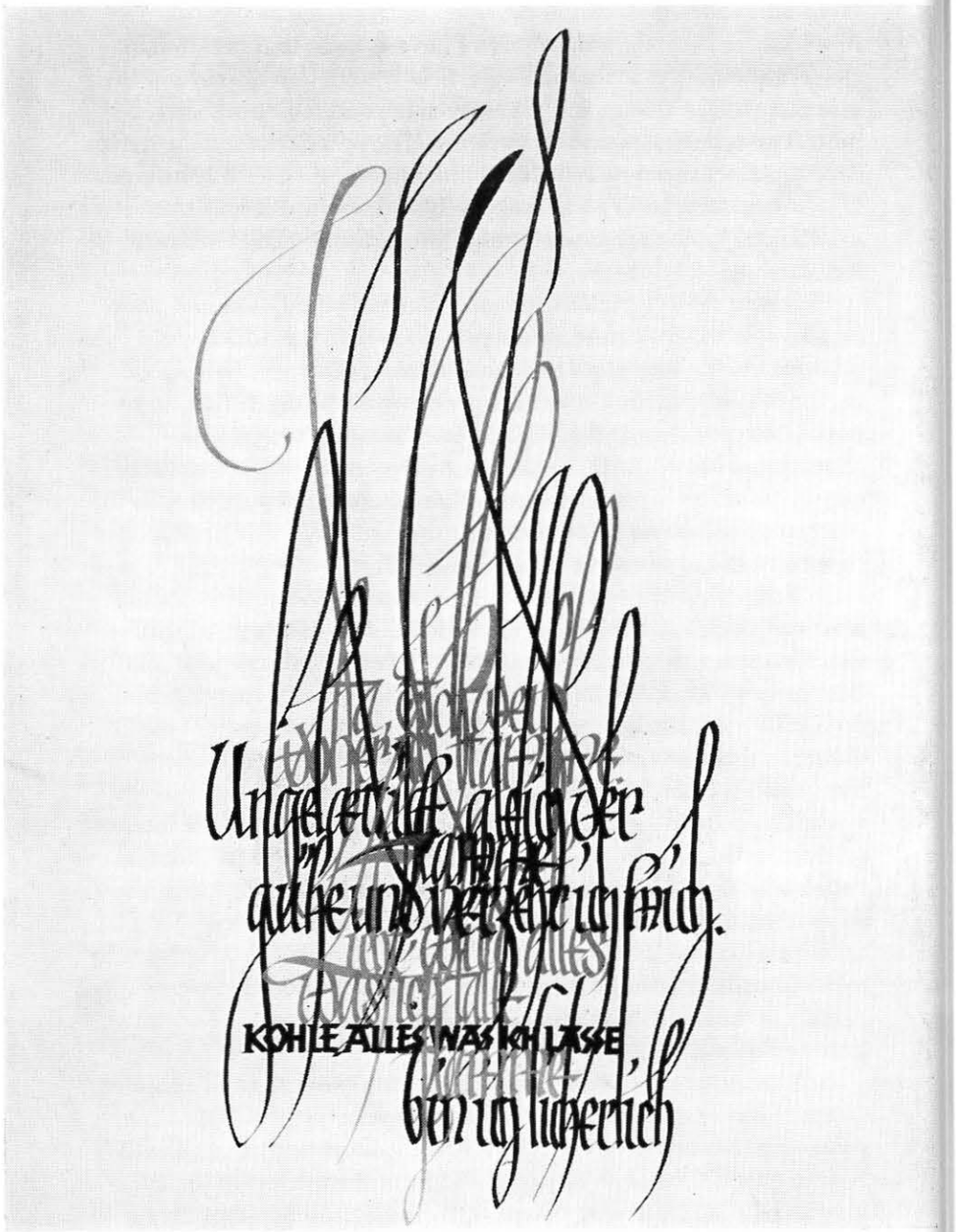
As a lecturer in typographic design I have to insist that my students concern themselves more than superficially with letterforms and their arrangements into lines and pages, even beyond their immediate impact on type design and typography. The practice of tracing letters from alphabet sheets does little towards encouraging a lively interest. On the contrary, by dealing exclusively with existing letterforms available in type, the range of possibilities is limited and enterprise stifled.

Unfortunately curricula and syllabuses as devised by course planners give far too little time for the practice of writing, which alone can produce the skill necessary to evolve lettering designs of flowing rhythms. Such practice in writing has other advantages. As it necessitates both patience and discipline, it is in itself of the greatest educational value. Furthermore it provides an easy way of working out relationships of text elements without constant dependence on the composing room and helps to explore the pattern-forming possibilities of letters and to evaluate the resulting degree of legibility.

In design, letters present themselves as valuable building stones which can be used to relate variants such as size, measure, weight, space, contrast, positioning, etc. They are emotionally neutral and therefore more suitable for the objective evaluation of elements than, for instance, illustrations which involve both the designer and the viewer in those aspects of stylistic criticism which draw attention away from the purely optical and spatial problems.

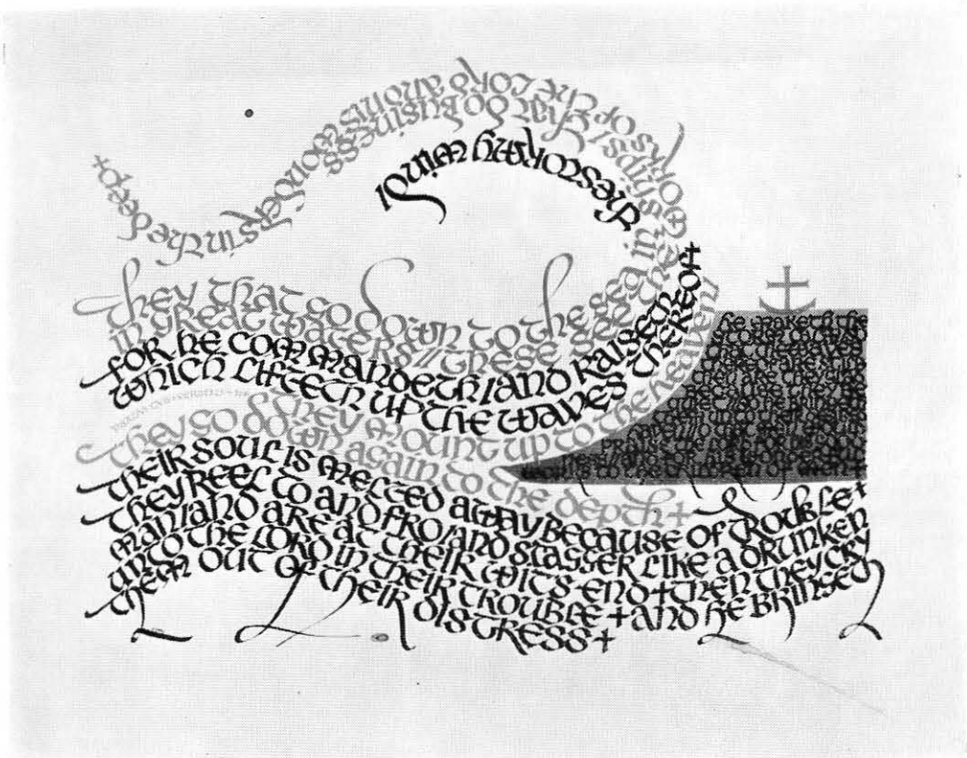
Confronted with the need to involve my students in a more intense study of lettering than alphabet tracing and the viewing of slides of the historical development of letterforms permit, I decided to devise some visual aids to demonstrate a variety of the problems, without taking up too much curriculum time. The results had to be sufficiently exciting visually for the students to take an interest beyond a casual glance, in the hope that their own imagination and sense of exploration would be stimulated.

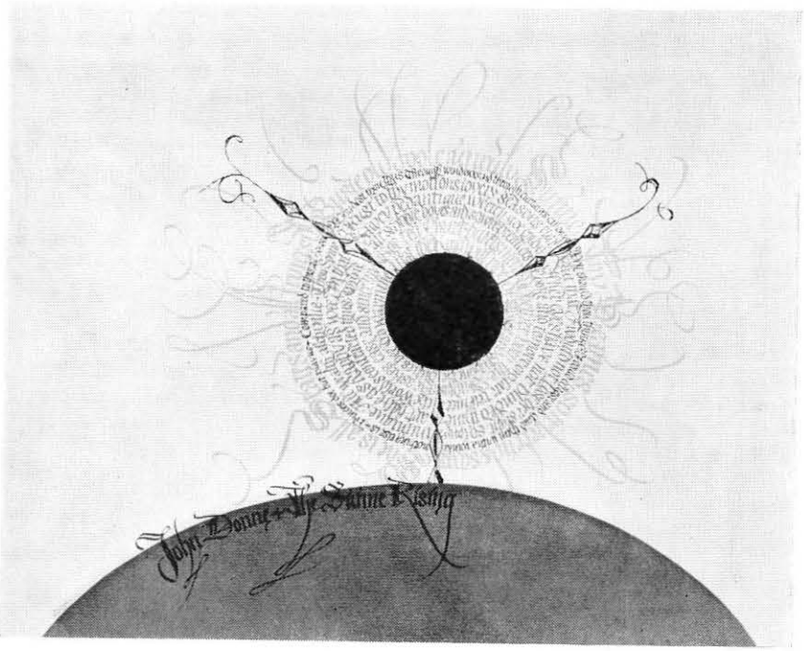
As I had to produce these visual aids in my own time and at home (where I have no access to type), I had to make use of calligraphy, drawn and cut-out letters. Each of these media presented itself with certain possibilities of its very own—some of them relevant to printing (such as the cramming of letters, vertically and horizontally,

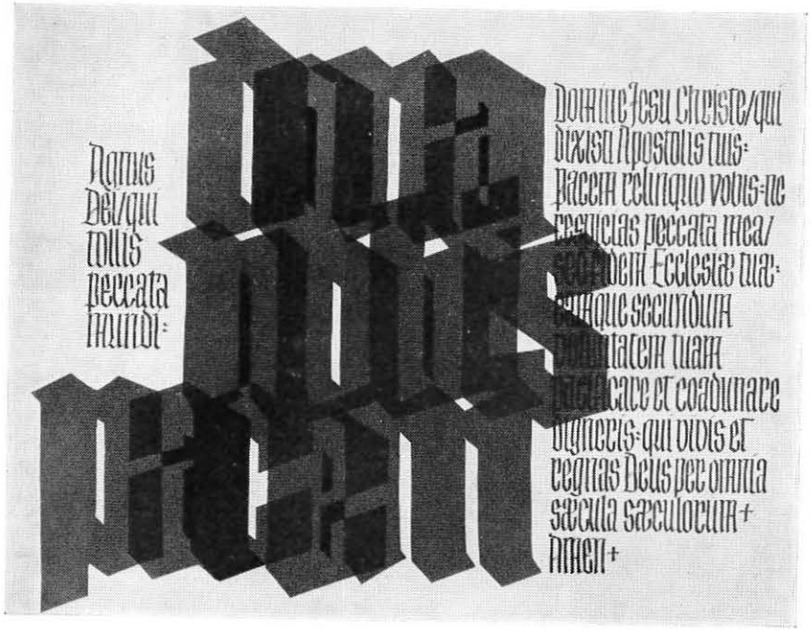


Surely I must be a flame, Nietzsche. Yes, I know where I come from. Dissatisfied, like the flame, I glow and devour myself. Everything that I touch becomes light, everything I let go of stays coal. Surely I must be a flame. Here is an aspiration towards excessive heights of perception and emotion—the pain and the glory of burning, the confusion of the vibrating particles, never again to be reassembled in just that order! What problems does a soul like that present to those who want to read it? You can't read it. You have to take it in with your senses and your enthusiasm. Color scheme: red, yellow, orange, black.

Psalm CVII, verses 23 to 31. "They that go down to the sea in ships . . ." get tossed high into heaven. So goes the writing. When "they go down again to the depth," the writing follows—an uncial majuscule which is here produced with the calligraphic nib held at an oblique angle, not horizontal as in most uncial manuscripts. When "He maketh the storm calm" the lettering flows quietly in horizontal lines, black over a sea in graded blues. The anchor cross, in orange, serves as symbol for the ship and for its safety.







The Sunne Rising, John Donne. One of the most charming of John Donne's poems—light-hearted, playful, and sparkling in wit. The circular arrangement suggested itself so obviously that I didn't struggle against it. With it I had to accept the colour scheme of golden yellow, orange, russet and (here comes the unexpected) blue for the center section to throw out all the more the brilliance of the outer rims. The seventeenth-century text willingly permits the decorative curls of the ascenders to liven up the empty background and to represent the radiation of warmth and light. The three verses had to be somehow separated, hence the three spearlike features in black, slightly reminiscent of markings on compass roses. This way the reader's eye does not have to follow the circle right around. The difficulty of the design lay in the varying length of the individual lines of the poem, which demanded very subtle adjustments in the proportions of the letters.

which some of the new photographic letter devices are also able to offer), others without any direct reference to printing (such as the exaggeration of extenders in calligraphy into outsize lengths and their use as decorative twirls. The overlapping of cut-out letters suggests the effect produced in printing by the use of full color and negative screen.

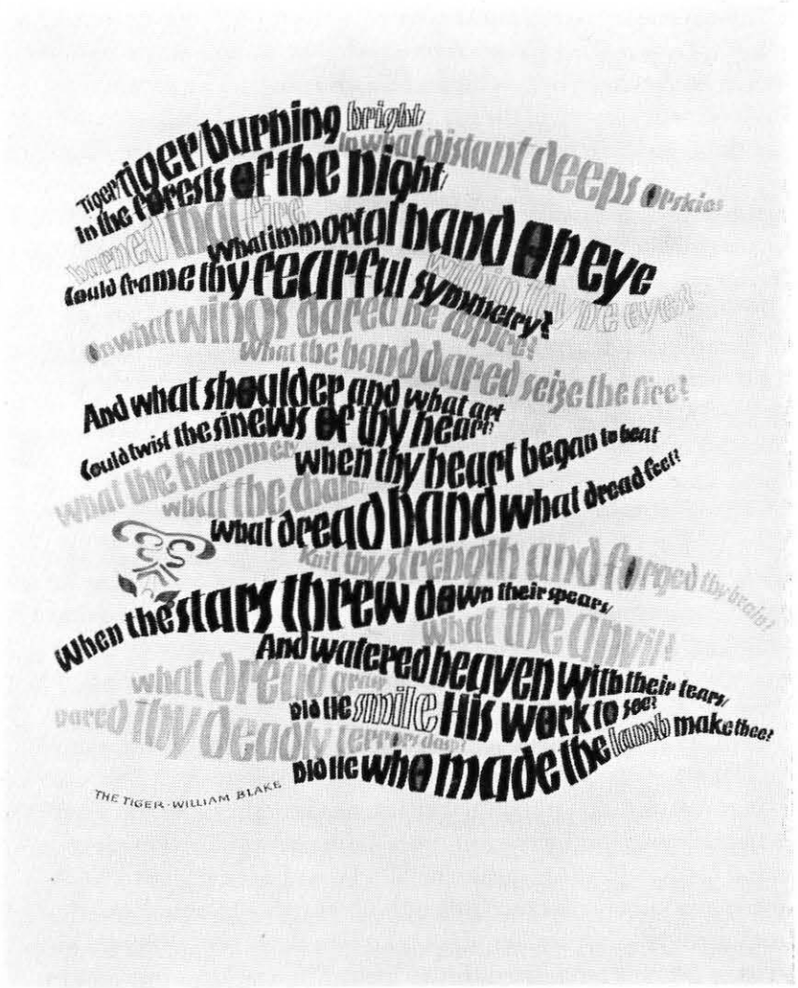
Hand-drawn letters can be infinitely varied in size so that a line can be gradually expanded, a method which printing does not permit nor even calligraphy where one is limited by the definite width of the nib. Even though this can be changed, a continuous progression is not possible.

Since color in the production of one-off hand drawn teaching-aids does not add to the cost, as it does in printing, I have made rich use of it (to the benefit of the originals but to the detriment of the black and white reproductions shown here).

Carried away with all these rich opportunities of embellishment, I sacrificed more often than seems fair the element of legibility which, in day-to-day lettering work, is so important. It must be remembered, however, that the student has ample opportunity to examine these

Dona nobis pacem. A design in brown, grey, and black to reflect in its elongated Gothic and Fraktur the vertical stresss of an imaginary cathedral. The use of tissue paper for the center feature has proved more successful than previous attempts in water color and gouache, partly because the texture of the paper provides a welcome, livening effect to the relatively large flat areas and partly because of the natural way in which the "overprint"sections deepen in colour. The text calls for overall restraint in letterform and arrangement—hence no further attempt at embellishment.

From *Hymn to God my God in my sickness*, John Donne. In this poem John Donne manages to face severe illness and the idea of possible death by associating afterlife with an experience of music—not *hearing* music but *becoming* music. So the whole design had to reflect music in immediate imagery, color, and style of lettering. A color scheme of analogous reds, pinks, purples, and oranges is assisted by a joyous minuscule with multi-line capitals and decorative extenders. The reader's eye follows the lines in natural sequence—left to right.



The Tiger, William Blake. The possibility of progressively increasing and decreasing the height of letters in a line is not available in type because of the restrictions imposed by the range of sizes available. Some photo-setting devices are capable of an infinite range of sizes, but the necessary adjustments are more complex than is warranted by results. Calligraphy, too, is limited in range because of the availability of nibs and brushes and the difficulty of pigment changeovers. Here a fine nib has been used for the outlines and the letters were then filled in by the brush. Color scheme: black and beige with green eyes looking out of the dark and purple pupils glowing.

elements in various examples of print. Also, the subject matters I chose for my writing pictures were such that immediate readability might indeed have been a distinct disadvantage. The personal involvement created in the gradual decyphering of the poems helps the desire to learn more about them. The visual experience gained by looking at the pictures is one of reviving a mental experience which one has already savoured and enjoyed in the past when reading the poem elsewhere. The trick of obscuring a message in order to enhance its interest is, of course, frequently employed in advertising.

To the student it is interesting to see how the pattern-forming elements in letter arrangements counteract rather than aid legibility. This realization helps him to make decisions on his treatment of printed texts. He learns to separate those texts which appear as decorative elements from the ones which require immediate assimilation.

The illustrations which you see here fulfil the purpose for which they were devised only partially. As I got down to the task, the subject matter itself made demands of its own. The texts which I chose for the experiments suggested their own solutions and limitations, so that I found myself to some extent in the position of the sourcerer's apprentice—no longer fully in control but at the mercy of the spirits he has invoked. Eventually I caught myself producing designs not for the sake of making a particular point but for the love of the thing itself.

The results are open to various criticisms. What isn't? The lettering expert will find that individual characters lack the precision which the craftsman who produces prototypes for mass reproduction must demand of himself; the historian will find that I have not strictly followed any known manuscript hands, although I have borrowed much from them; the interpreter of the texts may have very different ideas to those I have emphasized. I may have different ideas myself—tomorrow.

What you see is a plan, an idea, an impulse, some hours of joy and expectation, a mental apprehension of the unforeseen and unexpected and a reverence for that section of the past which presented us—in love and patience—with visual thoughts of beauty.

Cresci and His Capital Alphabets

Donald M. Anderson

Renaissance art was marked by a vigorous adaptation of classical themes, and in restyling roman capital letters no one approached the excellence of Giovan Francesco Cresci. In *Il perfetto scrittore, parte seconda*, published in 1570, Cresci mastered the combination of classical elements with his own refined style. In contrast to those who were obsessed with *divina proportione* and who sought to interpret the roman letters through compass and rule, Cresci's alphabets were derived from ancient sources such as the inscription on Trajan's column. The drift in Cresci's thinking toward a closer allegiance to the classical letters is shown through his selection of proportion; his serifs show modification to forms closer to calligraphy.

It is now just 400 years since Giovan Francesco Cresci's *Il perfetto scrittore* first appeared in Rome. And yet there is little knowledge about Cresci's life that adds significantly to that which can be deduced from his published works. As indicated in the title pages of *Il perfetto scrittore*, Cresci was a citizen of Milan. His family was well connected. A. S. Osley (1968), working from the few clues available, believes the date of Cresci's birth was near 1534. A youthful Cresci appeared in Rome early in the 1550s and was appointed scriptor to the Vatican library in 1556; a second appointment with the Sistine Chapel came four years later. In these appointments Cresci no doubt sharpened his skills in the Chancery cursive style of writing in development before 1500 and featured in the writing manuals of Ludovico degli Arrighi, Giovanantonio Tagliente, Giovanbattista Palatino, and others. A good many plates in Cresci's first writing manual were devoted to the *cancellaresca*, and his reputation as an innovator in this form brought him into a rather bitter word confrontation with an older expert, Palatino—but that is another story.

The first of Cresci's manuals, *Essemplare di più sorti lettere*, was published in Rome in 1560. If, as seems reasonable, the 53 plates of *Essemplare* were in preparation for a year or two, Cresci might have