

Lettering and Society

Nicolete Gray

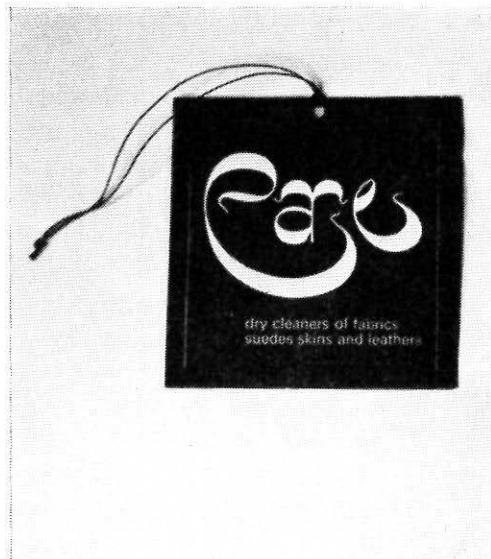
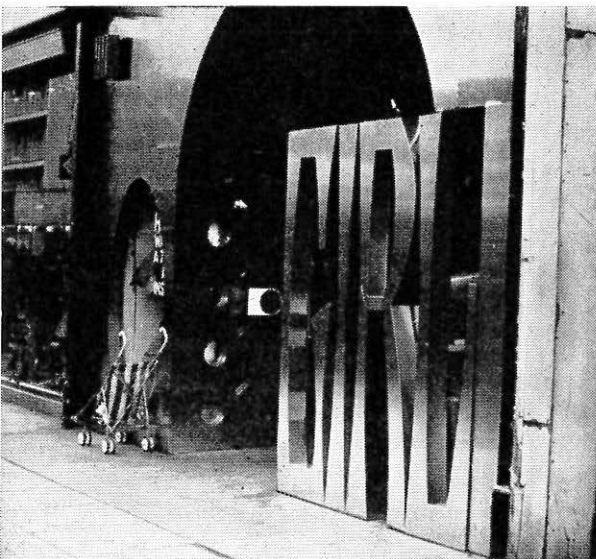
Lettering is omnipresent in our daily lives and takes a great variety of forms; it involves two different types of reading behaviour: private and voluntary, public and involuntary. There is little physical similarity between the two. Thought of as a medium, the physical qualities of lettering—colour, form and dimension—regain importance. Lettering can transmit not only the meaning of the words but also an attitude towards those words. Criteria for which public lettering should be judged are presented. Socially, public lettering should enrich our environment through creative variety of all appropriate letter styles. In lettering education both the application of geometric principles and the study of the past are important. The past can provide models, ideas, and inspiration toward the many directions lettering can be extended; no legible letter is obsolete.

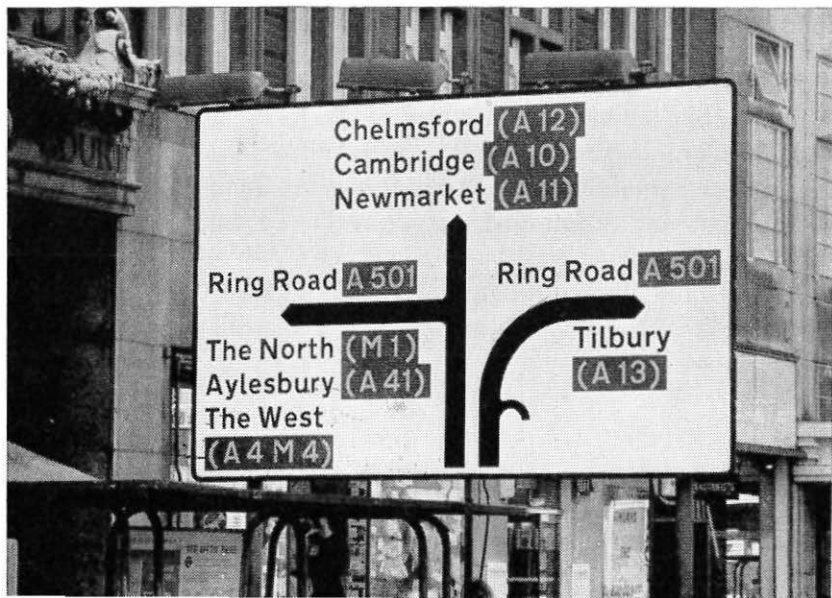
What is the place of lettering in contemporary society? Is this situation satisfactory? If not, what should and can be done about it?

The answer to the first question is, of course, that lettering is a means of communication and as such performs a vital social function. But this is not part of normal social activity; on the contrary, reading is a very private affair and the written word implies lack of contact. We write because we cannot or do not want to speak. The writing side is also a complex affair. There is the sense communicated; with this we are not concerned here. Whether what is written is socially or aesthetically desirable, whether advertising is ethical—these are questions we can leave aside. Then there is the person who initiates the communication, who may be different from the person who composes the actual words used and is almost certainly different from the designer who gives them a legible form. This written product, is however, received by an individual, and the criterion of the success and value of any lettering is, in the final resort, its impact upon individuals. I propose therefore to begin my inquiry on the side of the reader.

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What part does lettering play in the life of the ordinary city dweller? We probably find a newspaper on the breakfast table, and perhaps typed and hand-written letters. Going to work, shopping, or visiting we meet traffic signs and signing systems on buses, in the underground and supermarkets. Posters shout their message verbally and pictorially; even vans are labelled, and we recognise consciously or sub-consciously a house-style which we may meet again as a letterhead. At lunch time we distinguish the restaurant sign which we want from scores of surrounding shops and banks. If we buy something, its package or wrapping will be covered with letters. When we relax at home we may read a book or look at a magazine, and the jacket or cover will incorporate a letter design; and the magazine will certainly contain advertisements. Or we may take a record out of its lettered sleeve, or turn on the television and be met with the programme title sequence. Or we may go out, to find the town centre, and even the side streets, illuminated with letters in many colours, or dominating the skyline. Finally we are unlikely to get through the day without having to scribble something on paper. For most people lettering is not only omnipresent in everyday life but also takes a great variety of forms.

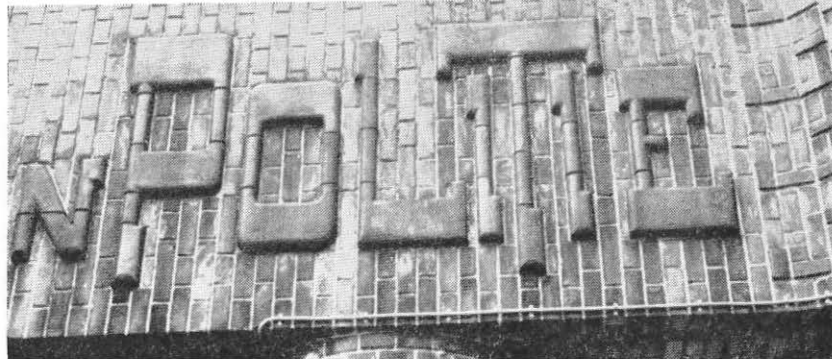






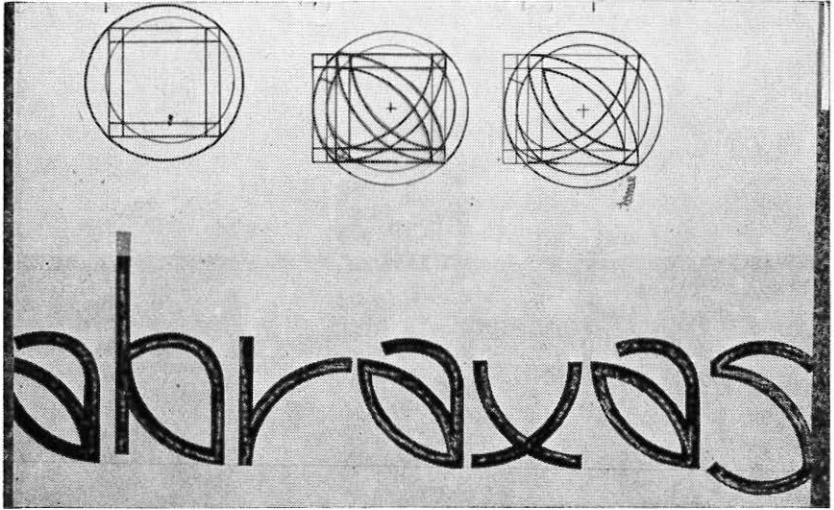
A consideration which is immediately apparent from this catalogue is that people are normally involved in two quite different sorts of reading. One is private and voluntary; we choose whether to make notes or write letters, whether or not to read a book, what book, and for how long. When we are tired of it we close the book, and its contents are seen no more. But the other, greater part of our daily reading is involuntary, if not actually against our will. Even book jackets and record sleeves are displayed in shops, and designed with this in mind. All this public lettering is thus a factor in social life in quite a different sense from ordinary reading and writing, and it is a new factor. It has become part of the environment and its problems. It is lettering for these new and various uses—as opposed to the design of text type-faces for books and newspapers—upon which I propose to concentrate.

First I would like to distinguish the differences a little further. Apart from the difference in use between private and public reading matter,



there is a physical difference. The characters which we write or which we read in books are normally small black marks on white paper. Those which we see displayed in advertisements, in shops, on the streets, or on the screen are made up of all sorts of sizes, mostly large or very large; in all sorts of materials: plastic, metal, ceramic, fibre-glass, etc., as well as paper; produced by many different sorts of process; and in many cases with the added dimensions of colour, artificial illumination, and movement.

Such physical differences can leave virtually nothing in common between the printed letter and the sky sign except a mental concept. This is a vital consideration to which I shall return. But first, to pursue the social problem. We all, I imagine, agree that public and display lettering everywhere leaves much to be desired. We accept that one of the things to be done is to educate public authorities—as well as those who commission and those who read—to discriminate between



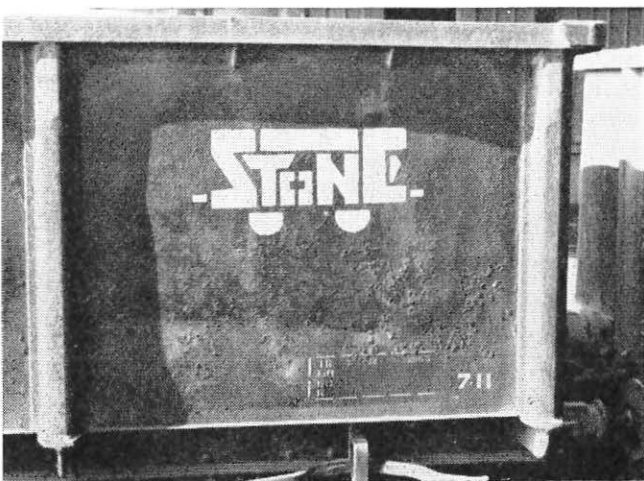
Student work: geometry as a starting point for invention.

good and bad lettering. We need to show them what good lettering is, and the ways in which it can enrich, instead of deface, our surroundings.

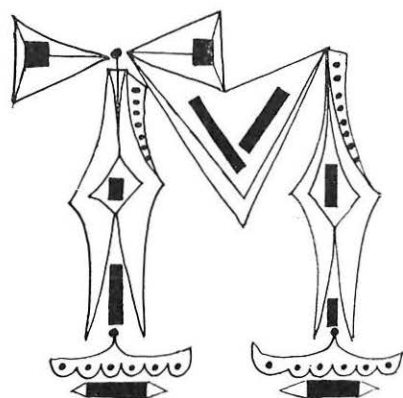
At this point, some may well protest that we have all been shown what good lettering is like. We have only to look at the best Roman inscriptions to see the most beautiful possible letterforms; and we have in this century seen their application to various modern needs by artists such as Eric Gill. Everything depends on how you think about letters. If you think of them conceptually—as signs which are individualisations of an idea in the mind, which are beautiful in so far as this idea is clear and correct, and its realisation is skilled—then perhaps we need only to maintain this revival. This is a classical way of thinking, and it undoubtedly produced very beautiful and sensitive classical lettering on classical buildings. But we no longer build in the classical style, and one has only to look at the roman letters produced in the form of perspex boxes, now to be seen in many streets, to realise that romans are not readily adaptable to all uses and materials. The classical idea that each letter has one perfect form is one which was arbitrarily tied at the Renaissance to the stone-cut monumental letter of the Romans. Perhaps if we detach it from this connection, it will still work today. It can surely be more logically applied to a sanserif letter

based on objective geometrical principles. The result is just one sort of letter applied to all purposes. Is this really what we want? To a certain extent, we have it already and can imagine the ultimate result. Surely it would not only become very monotonous but also unfunctional. Far from being more restful, one would be obliged to read everything, instead of being able to recognise the kind of product at a glance by its lettering style. The idea of a house-style, in itself restful and convenient, would disappear. In a station, how would directions be differentiated from advertisements? And why should the advertiser be deprived of this direct way of catching the eyes of indifferent readers? And most relevant of all to my mind, why should we deprive ourselves of the possibility of making our environment gayer and more lively?

It may be said that there is plenty of variety in sanserif as used today—in design, proportions, colour, etc. But in so far as this idea of variety has been accepted, the classical idea of lettering has been abandoned. Where then should variation stop? In this case we now have to find a different theory. If letters are not realisations of definite mental concepts, what are they? I should prefer to say that they are realisations of very *indefinite* mental concepts. Consider for a moment the multiplicity of signs and objects which we recognise as ‘A’ (and the paleographer can add another whole array). Surely the concept which enables us to read all these is very elastic. I suggest that it might be more relevant if we abandoned trying to define the nature of letters in terms of Greek philosophy and tried another approach. A momentary consideration of the analogy of the spoken word may be illuminating. In ordinary speech we seldom note the quality of a voice: we are primarily interested in whether what is said is audible and distinct. But we do also recognise that words can be shouted to attract attention, or can blare at us and become a menace; or they can be spoken or sung with such art as to give a whole gamut of entertainment from the trivial to the sublime. The possibilities of the art of lettering are parallel. I see letters as a medium by which the designer transmits not just the meaning which the words spell out, but also his attitude to those words. This may be completely impersonal, as in a directional sign, when it should be as clear and simple as possible; or the designer may make his point with a simple visual transference—fat letters to spell the word ‘fat.’ He may wish to evoke various connotations in



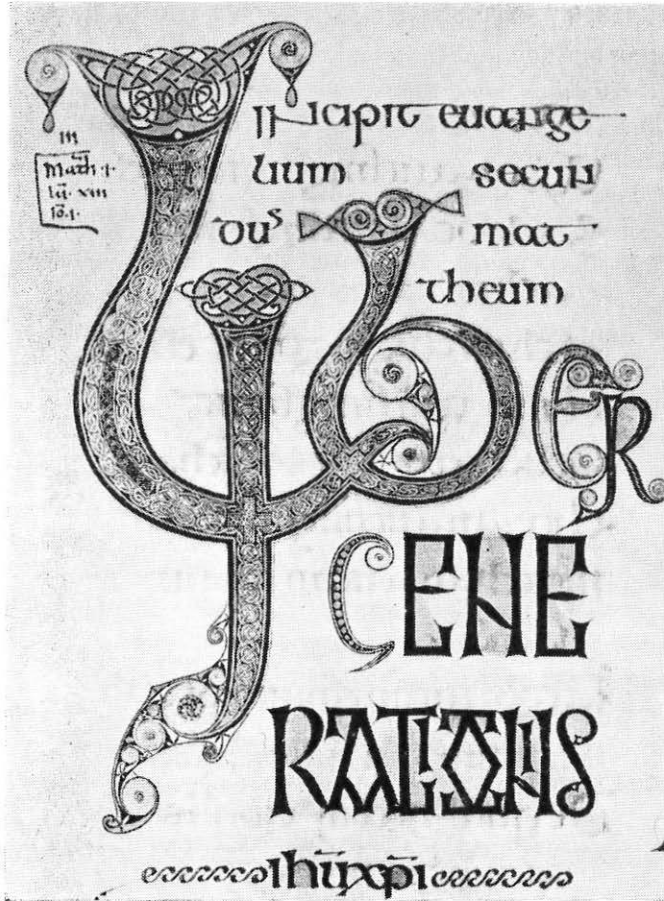
Literal suggestion, stencil on a railway wagon carrying stone.



Personal fantasy, drawing by Imre Reiner.

advertising scent or cigarettes; or the shape of the letters may be an opening into a world of fantasy, as with the nineteenth-century fairy story illustrators, or in a different way as devised by Saul Steinberg. Lettering may also be used to convey deep personal feeling, as by Rudolph Koch; or to give a sense of the sublime import of what is written, as by medieval artists copying the Gospels.

If letters are thought of as a *medium*, their physical qualities regain importance. The *whole* thing—colour, form, dimension—is important and integral, and they can all equally be used to fulfil the purpose in hand. The requirements of a technique, and the exciting possibilities which it may offer, can be incorporated into the basic conception of the job. And the way becomes clear for lettering to be thought of as a major abstract art which can, for instance, provide architectural sculpture or transform the city-scape by night. Finally this approach frees display lettering from the inhibiting influence of type-design. The only rational excuse for using, for other purposes, letters designed for one specific scale and technique, is the theory that all letters conform to one basic concept. The practical reasons why this is, in fact, so often done is that it is always cheaper and easier to specify type, and that so many excellent designers have been employed to design type-faces and their work is readily available; whereas few have been con-



Illustrations for this article are from the Central Lettering Record.

Sublime import, opening page of the Gospel of St. Matthew, from the Echternach Gospels.

cerned in designing for display techniques. This is surely a situation which we should try to remedy.

If letters are indefinite concepts, which are a medium for diverse purposes, how can we expect individuals or committees to discriminate between good and bad? And most important of all, how are we to train art students to master this medium?

For many years I have been trying to think out and check the criteria by which lettering should be judged. There are various definite factors: fitness for purpose, which includes legibility; fitness for the place and the material and the process in question; competence of

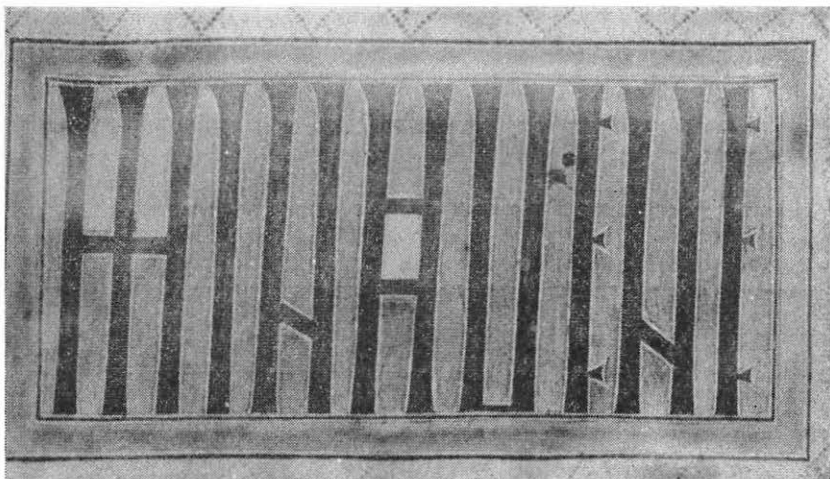
execution; judgement in details of design and spacing; sensitivity in delineation; feeling for individual letter character; originality. The relative importance of these factors varies with each particular job. There are, I believe, no more precise general principles which can be laid down so that lettering can be judged arbitrarily, without thought and knowledge. The application of an academic orthodoxy—which is so congenial to establishment thinking, creating a comfortable illusion of well-informed superiority—can only have a blighting effect, as we see in England in the control of church memorials and tombstones. What we want from those who commission and from those who may control lettering is an open mind, an awareness of positive possibilities, and if possible a little knowledge. The required action seems to be propaganda and education.

Finally, we come to the vital question of the training of art students in letter-design. To what end should such a training be adapted? Surely to meet the requirements of present-day society; again the sort of usages I suggested at the beginning of this article. For calligraphy in the sense of formal pen writing or illuminating, I see little place. Lettering as a personal means of expression is for the specialist; the sort of course which I envisage might lead to this, but it should be primarily directed to the commercial uses—or rather possibilities—of lettering. It has been my argument that lettering can and should be infinitely diverse. I do not mean by this that we do not need a vernacular. It is essential that there should be a current vernacular, which like the standard eighteenth-century house and the more or less standard modern building, provides a comparatively ordered and therefore restful background to living. I think that all students should know something about the principles and the history of sans-serif and roman letters, and be able to use them and to discriminate between good and bad designs, suitable and unsuitable usage. But beyond this, how are they to achieve versatility in this medium which is potentially so rich in scope and opportunity? If we expect invention and originality, how can such talent be trained and fostered? Current practice seems to consist in reviving designs from trendy decades of the recent past. This has reintroduced a few good designs but is obviously a barren and defeatist method.

There are two methods of approach by which the designer can expand his formal lettering vocabulary and find a training which will

discipline and enlarge his native invention. One is the application of geometrical principles, the other is the study of the past. I shall concentrate here on the second—though I should like to emphasise that I think that both are necessary. In our course at the Central School of Art and Design in London we use geometry in two divergent ways: as a principle for analysis, simplification, and clarification of ideas—and as a starting point for formal or expressive invention.

I am not a revivalist; I do not believe that you should use Roman Rustics today, any more than that we should build classical or gothic buildings. I do, however, think that no letter is obsolete which is legible, and that all forms are usable, *provided* that there is a good reason for their use. As I see the history of lettering, its pattern consists in a series of classical revivals followed by periods of experiment and invention when letters—as in the Pre-Carolingian, Gothic and Art-Nouveau periods—have burgeoned into all sorts of shapes. The successive classical revivals have meant that letters have never strayed so far from these prototypes that they have lost continuity, and become illegible and unusable. I suppose the most extreme examples of divergence are the great tangled baroque letters created by the Neudorffers and their contemporaries ca. 1600. And it is significant to note how usable these remain, for instance on record sleeves of seventeenth-century music. This example demonstrates my point of view. Both in its formal and expressive qualities such a letter corresponds to the design problem involved; the shape suits a square format, the swirling strands of its divided stem—now parallel, now interlaced, now branching into complex involutes—suggest polyphonic movement; the period suggestion is a secondary element. Could an effect of equal richness possibly be made from sanserif or roman letters? Or again, supposing it is an architectural problem requiring lettering which needs to work in with strong vertical features, a compressed sanserif may meet the case. But the more ruthless verticals of eighth-century Irish capitals, or even the brick and tile Kufic lettering on Islamic buildings, may suggest forms and treatment which could transform merely suitable (or unsuitable) lettering into a creative pattern. Or, again, suppose the problem is linear (a neon sign or a line which grows on the television screen); the handwriting of the contemporary student may not easily work up into lively movement, but he can find delightful convolutions in late Roman

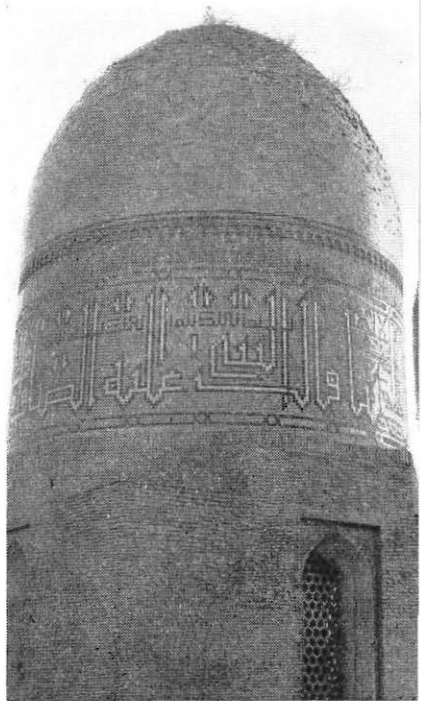


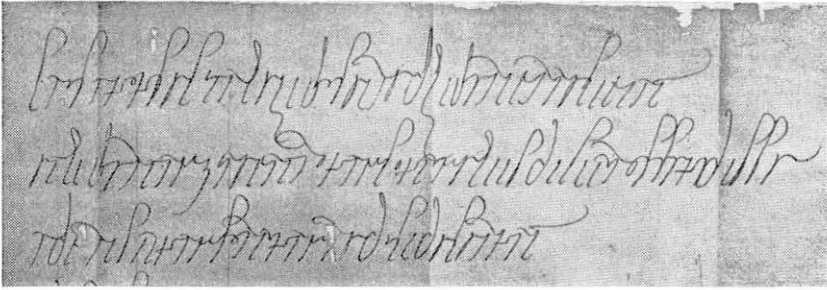
Eighth-century Insular capitals: "MINO VENE."

Neudorffer initial design.

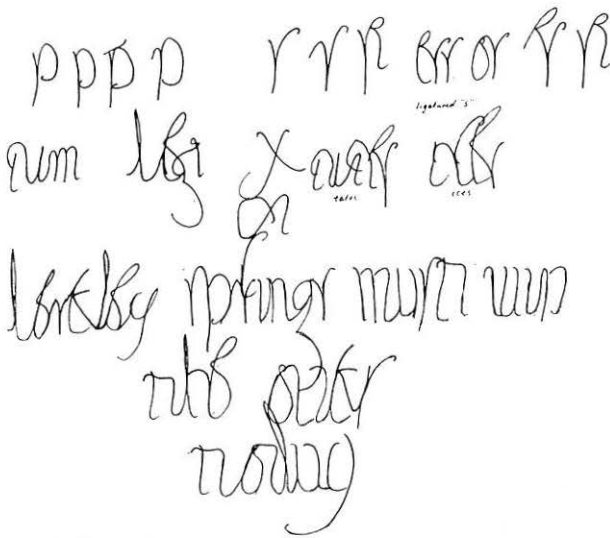


Kufic tile inscription,
Samarkand.





Detail of a fifth-century Imperial document.



Student study from late Roman cursive as preparation for neon tube sign design.



Student project, design for neon tube sign.

cursive script and in the books of the early French writing masters. The lettering work of the past is like a great store where the designer can search for forms of letters, ideas, and inspiration—according to his problems and his taste.

From my experience of teaching lettering for the last eight years in collaboration with Nicholas Biddulph at the Central School—and every year we have re-examined our ideas—I think that there are four things which such a course can and should teach.

1. It should teach students to draw, a particularly valuable contribution now that drawing from the life is out of fashion; to distinguish and master the line which can alter the character of a letter by a minimal movement; and, if time allows, to master more than one drawing instrument.
2. It should teach students to analyse existing alphabets, not just to recognise differences or learn the tricks of a style, but in order to find out the formal idiosyncrasies which create its character so as to be bale to abstract and transpose these into their own idiom.
3. It should teach students to think out design problems by integrating the conditions of material, purpose, wording, etc., with the formal and expressive qualities of letters which they create.
4. As a necessary tool for the third aim, students should have a wide vocabulary of letterforms, and know how to extend this vocabulary.

Much of this implies a considerable knowledge of past lettering. This should not, I think, be taught as the history of lettering or through obliging the student to master historic styles. It should be introduced at various stages in the course, to illustrate solutions to problems or to demonstrate the many directions in which lettering can be extended as an art. We have found our most essential teaching aid to be our Collection of photographs of examples of all sorts of lettering. We are constantly adding to this Collection which will, we hope, provide a great body of source material, not only for our students but for all designers of lettering.

This article has been adapted with kind permission from Nicolette Gray's paper given at the 16th International Congress of the Association Typographique Internationale, Copenhagen, August 1973. Its theme: Education in Letterforms.