Methods of Research in Renaissance Manuscripts

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The use and study of manuscripts brings us into direct physical contact with the past, both enriching our original source material and opening new research dimensions and perspectives. Unfortunately, manuscript references in text editions or secondary studies are often wrong, incomplete, or antiquated. Meticulous, first-hand searching out of individual references is most important, as is direct inspection of the manuscript or its reproduction. Whenever practical, it is advisable to scan or read completely and systematically all available printed catalogues and handwritten inventories. Special difficulties in finding pertinent manuscripts—even in familiar collections—are discussed. Each manuscript is a unique research resource—deserving careful preservation, adequate cataloguing, and greater accessibility.

It is quite evident that manuscript research has occupied for a long time a very important role in many historical disciplines and in the study of many periods. To be sure, a good deal of work can be done on the basis of printed sources, and there have been many respectable historians who never made direct use of any manuscript source. Yet as Augusto Campana once said, a scholar who never uses manuscripts lives as it were on his inheritance *(vive di rendita)* and merely benefits at second or third hand from the work of earlier scholars. The use and study of manuscripts brings us into direct physical contact with the past which we are exploring; it not only increases and enriches our source material but it also broadens our outlook and opens up new dimensions and perspectives. I trust no one will object if I say that manuscript scholars constitute a kind of élite among the historians, and I apologize in case I have offended by this remark the liberal sensitivities of anyone. I remember that years ago an influential scholar stated that the study of manuscripts was unnecessary since all the important texts have been printed. This statement is evidently

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false, but I accept the challenge and should like to claim for those of us who publish inedited texts the magic power of conveying on the texts that intrinsic importance which they previously, while unpublished or even unknown, obviously failed to possess.

I should like to add that manuscript studies have made great advances in recent decades, especially in my area of interest. It is not only the greater facility for traveling, the progress of cataloguing, and the use of photostats and microfilms that have made these advances possible. There has also been a notable progress in palaeography, and the method, first practised by Giovanni Mercati and others, to consider a manuscript not merely as a statistical unit in the calculus of variants but as a historical individual with a unique character and physiognomy, has been extremely fruitful.

In line with my own work, I shall speak primarily of manuscript books rather than of archival documents (which present different problems and require different methods of investigation). Manuscript books have been studied for a variety of reasons, as we can see from the extant literature. Palaeographers have been concerned with the history of script as such, bibliographers with the methods of describing manuscripts and with the history of libraries. Others have studied the history of the book trade, or the history of book bindings. There has been great interest in the history of book illumination, especially among art historians. Yet the majority of scholars including myself has been interested in the content of manuscripts, and in the study and editing of texts as they are found in manuscripts. The textual interest in manuscripts includes by implication, as auxiliary, all other aspects of manuscript research including heraldry, for it is often important to identify the first owner of a manuscript through the coat of arms painted on its title page. The textual interest naturally varies according to the professional interests of each scholar. It may cover the various vernacular literatures as well as classical Greek and Latin, Byzantine, medieval and modern Latin literature, or historiography, or the history of the arts and of music, of the natural sciences, mathematics and medicine, of the occult sciences, of rhetoric and grammar, scholarship and philology, of jurisprudence, theology and philosophy, and of many more fields. My own interest in

manuscripts began with Marsilio Ficino and the Platonic Academy of Florence,[1] and gradually expanded to cover the history of philosophy from 1300 to 1600, including the history of scholarship, of rhetoric, and of several other disciplines. For certain subjects such as philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine, the history of schools and universities, the classification of the arts and sciences, and the translations and commentaries of classical authors, my curiosity has sometimes been extended back into the earlier medieval centuries and even into late antiquity, and forward into the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

In the course of my work, I have gradually developed a method of research that I was not taught when I was a student but that I learned partly from the example of other scholars and partly through my own experience. I hope this method has had some results, and I am sure it will have more when it is followed by other scholars in various fields. This method has its limitations, as I know perfectly well, and there are other methods that yield different results that I could not hope to attain with the one I practise and teach and shall try to describe. For example, the late Tammaro De Marinis looked at all manuscripts that had old bindings,[2] and in this way he discovered texts that had escaped my attention because the name of the author was unfamiliar to me and because the respective inventory failed to indicate the century of the manuscript. Giuseppe Billanovich and his pupils look at all manuscripts of a classical author such as Livy or Seneca,[3] and thus discover not only copyist's notes and glosses but entire prefaces, epigrams, and commentaries that would greatly interest me but that I could not possibly catch with my method or within the time at my disposal, for in many instances, the inventories indicate nothing but the classical author when listing the manuscript.

When we are trying to locate the manuscripts of a given text or author, it is logical to begin with the manuscripts mentioned in previous editions or studies. However, it is advisable to verify in each case the manuscript and its shelf mark through catalogues or inquiries. For unfortunately, manuscript references in text editions or secondary studies are often wrong, incomplete, or antiquated. Many scholars working with individual manuscripts are unbelievably sloppy in citing their shelf marks; shelf marks are

being frequently changed in many libraries; and many manuscripts and entire collections have been transferred or destroyed after the time when they were last used and cited. A manuscript in Berlin was cited with a wrong shelf mark by Theodore Mommsen,[4] and thus a later scholar cannot avoid disclosing to the informed reader, from the shelf mark he cites, whether he has seen the manuscript or merely follows Mommsen. In another case, I was assured by a distinguished scholar that a shelf mark he gave me for a manuscript in Florence was the only one cited in the scholarly literature, but it turned out that it was a distorted version of a shelf mark that had not been in use since about 1800, thus proving with nearly mathematical certainty that no scholar referring to the manuscript had ever seen it since that time. When I once caught another noted scholar at citing a wrong shelf mark, I was tempted to suspect that he had done so intentionally in order to trap those later scholars who would cite the manuscript after him, but without giving him as their source, without actually having looked at the manuscript. I mention these examples in order to emphasize the need for accuracy in giving the shelf marks of manuscripts. We should never assume that we can safely rely on the manuscript references of previous scholars.

Moreover, we should never feel sure that previous editors have exhausted the supply of manuscripts needed for the edition or study we are undertaking. Scholars of the past tended to be selective in the use of manuscripts, their opportunities for traveling were limited, they had no microfilms, and their resources in available printed catalogues were much smaller than ours. I remember a case where a modern editor asserted that a manuscript which Nicolas Heinsius claimed to have seen in Heidelberg must be considered as fictitious. One look at the printed catalogue of the *Palatini Graeci* in the Vatican showed me that Heinsius was right and that the manuscript still existed. The example merely shows what I knew anyway, namely that Heinsius knew more about manuscripts than any classical scholar of the nineteenth, if not of the twentieth century. The lesson is obvious, though uncomfortable: we should utilize whatever information we may derive from older editions or studies, but we must make a fresh start when trying to identify and to locate the extant manuscripts of a given text which we want to edit or study.

Such an inquiry must obviously begin with the printed catalogues of manuscripts and with their indices. For this phase of our work, we must have access to libraries which have a sizeable, if not complete, collection of the chief catalogues. Such collections are available in the Vatican, in Florence, Paris, or London, and in this country, in Boston, New York, and Washington. None of these collections is quite complete, though in some instances they have tried to supplement their holdings by acquiring some of the rarer catalogues in microfilms. The main purpose of my bibliography of catalogues was to make fellow scholars independent of the chance holdings of a given library and to remind them of the catalogues which they should try to look up.[5] This bibliography is, of course, far from being complete, and it is by now antiquated.

In using the indices of catalogues, we must look for our author under any possible form in which his name might be listed: first name, last name, place of birth, nickname, in Latin as well as in all the pertinent modern languages, especially his own and that of the author of the catalogue. We must also beware of certain tricks, for in many cases the index is not found at the end of a volume, but at the beginning or even in the middle, and often a volume has more than one index.

This procedure is never quite sufficient, for many important collections of manuscripts have no printed catalogues or no complete printed catalogues,[6] and many printed catalogues have no indices.[7] Yet most collections, and certainly all large collections, have handwritten or typed inventories or indices that can be used on the spot. In order to utilize these handwritten indices, we may either travel from library to library, which is pleasant and interesting but expensive and not always possible, or we may send a circular letter to the major libraries and to the libraries likely to have manuscripts of our author, and ask the librarians to check their indices and to report to us any manuscripts that may be of interest. We are likely to get an answer in the majority of cases, especially if we explain our project, write in the language of the respective country, and enclose international reply coupons. In the case of some very large and complex collections such as the Vatican Library, the National Library of Florence, or the British Museum, the search for the manuscripts of a given author may require a full

day's work or more, and hence we may have to hire a local research assistant for our purpose. In some instances, unpublished inventories and indices are available on microfilm in this country —especially at St. Louis University, at the University of Notre Dame, at St. John's University in Collegeville, and especially at the Library of Congress—and a visit to these libraries, or a correspondence with them, may be extremely helpful.

The method which I have described so far has its limitations, as we shall see, but it is a perfectly respectable procedure, and it is the only feasible method whenever we are concerned with only one text or author. I followed it when I edited Ficino, and it yielded several interesting finds such as the *Corpus* of Ficino's first translations from Plato and a number of previously unknown letters. What we fail to catch with this method, and this is quite excusable, are manuscripts in small uncatalogued or unindexed collections; manuscripts which contain our text without the author's name or with a wrong author's name; miscellaneous manuscripts not properly analyzed in catalogues or inventories; and occasionally manuscripts properly described in a printed catalogue but not properly recorded in its index.

Beyond the method which I have described so far, there is another and better one which I learned from Cardinal Mercati and from Ludwig Bertalot and which I began to practise early in my career as a manuscript scholar. This method is much more laborious and time consuming, but it yields richer and more complete results. On the other hand, this method is wasteful when we look for only one text or author, and it is worth the effort only when our search involves a broad group of manuscripts of a certain type or subject or period. The method consists in scanning or reading completely and systematically all printed catalogues and handwritten inventories that we can lay our hands on, from beginning to end. In this way, we overcome the lack or inadequacy of indices, for we hit upon the descriptions of manuscripts that are not reported, or not adequately reported, in the indices. We also come upon anonymous or pseudonymous copies of the texts in which we are interested, since we shall recognize them whereas the author of the catalogue may have failed to identify them. Moreover, we acquire a sense of the history and

physiognomy of a given collection that will teach us what we may or may not expect to find in it. Finally, we shall find authors and texts for which we did not look and whose very existence may have been unknown to us but which may turn out to be of great interest, either directly or indirectly, because of their personal connections or subject or literary genre, or because they fit into a pattern that we are trying to explore.

The last step of our inquiry, after the checking of indices and the scanning of catalogues, is the direct inspection of the manuscripts, or at least of their reproductions in photostat or microfilm. This is certainly necessary when we are editing a text, for we want to collate all extant manuscripts of the text, preferably for the whole text, but at least for certain passages in order to select the more important manuscripts when the extant manuscripts are too numerous to be collated in their entirety. Even when we do not wish to edit a text, the actual inspection of a manuscript is often necessary if we want to be sure of its content, or if we wish to verify certain details. When we inspect a manuscript, we may often find more texts in it than the catalogue indicates, or we may identify a text wrongly described in the catalogue. When a catalogue description is clearly wrong or incomplete, only the actual examination of the manuscript can tell us what it contains. Sometimes the inspection of a manuscript will disclose other features such as the identity of a scribe or first owner that the description may have failed to tell us. If we want to know whether a manuscript is an autograph or has autograph corrections, or whether it was written in a specific country or not, we shall have to look at it, except in the rare cases where we dispose of an excellent recent catalogue.

Now it is quite clear that we cannot possibly see all manuscripts that are of potential interest, especially when our interests are broad and encompass a whole period or genre rather than a single author or text. Our opportunities for traveling are limited, and so is our life. It is for this reason that I came to realize, when planning my *Iter Italicum*, that I could never hope to see all the manuscripts which I was going to list. I decided to see as many as possible, to be sure, but I was forced to select for inspection only those that came closest to my special interests, and those for which the catalogue descriptions impressed me as wrong or dubious, and

where only the actual manuscript could answer my doubts and satisfy my curiosity.[8] I found especially frustrating the cases where a collection lacked a topographical inventory and where I had to start from an alphabetical index. In such cases it is often impossible to reconstruct the content of a miscellany except by looking at the manuscript itself, and hence it is necessary to examine many more manuscripts than in libraries that have a good topographical inventory.

I should like now to point out some of the special difficulties which we encounter in trying to locate manuscripts pertinent to the subject we are investigating. First of all, besides the well known manuscript collections found in major or middle-sized libraries, there are many small collections that are not well known and difficult of access. We may not even know of their existence unless a local scholar or even a tourist or hotel doorman calls them to our attention. An important private collection is even described in a printed catalogue, but the catalogue has such a vague title that nobody can recognize the collection described in it unless he learns this indispensable fact from some outside source.[9] Manuscript books are not only found in public libraries, as well as in private collections and in bookshops, but also in archives, museums, and learned societies. I learned through a chance reference that a museum had an important manuscript collection that was apparently unknown even to the librarians and archivists in the same city. A friend told me repeatedly that another museum had some manuscripts, but my inquiries addressed to that museum remained without answer, and I was even assured by a local librarian that there were no manuscripts. Yet this year I read in the inventory of the local library that one of its modern manuscripts was copied from an old manuscript in that museum. Thus I finally know at least of one manuscript in that collection, and hope to find out next year whether there are others. For when I locate a manuscript in a collection of which I had not heard before, I act as the old gentleman who visited the Metropolitan Museum to see Rembrandt's newly acquired *Aristotle*, and then turned around and asked one of the guards whether they have got any other pictures in that museum. I tried to resolve some of these mysteries in my *Latin Manuscript Books*, but there are many more

that are still unresolved, or that at least I am unable to resolve.

There are other peculiar difficulties which we have to overcome. Any self-respecting large library has a number of collections that are kept separately from its main collection and that are known in Italy as *Fondi Minori*. A scholar who visits the library and checks its major collections is not always aware of these separate smaller collections, and nobody is likely to tell him unless he specifically asks about them. It took me many years and even decades until I learned of certain minor collections kept in libraries which I had visited many times and thought I knew reasonably well. A special trick which I also originally learned from Mercati is to start from an old inventory and then to identify as far as possible the present location of the manuscripts listed in it. It is through this detour that we often come upon interesting manuscripts that are inadequately described in the inventories currently in use. The concordance published a few years ago for Montfaucon's list of the *Reginenses Latini* is so valuable because it helps us to find the manuscripts which Montfaucon lists with numbers that are no longer in use, and it is even more valuable because Montfaucon's descriptions are often superior to those of the modern inventories, and because he often mentions texts that are skipped in these inventories.[10] This year, Mons. Ruysschaert identified for me several more of the manuscripts listed by Montfaucon, and one of them turned out to be a rich humanist miscellany to which the inventory dedicated only one line. I also scanned in the Vatican Library a group of eighteenth-century miscellanies by Galletti,[11] and the late copies contained in these manuscripts led me back to several early manuscripts which had escaped my attention, including one from the early sixteenth century that contained a number of unknown and extremely interesting texts.

This leads me to a subject to which I have alluded already before: many old catalogues and inventories, and many editions and studies, old or not so old, give shelf marks that are either wrong or incomplete or antiquated. There are many important libraries where the old shelf marks are causing trouble. In some cases, the only printed list for many manuscripts is quite old, and it often gives antiquated shelf marks, or no shelf marks at all. When a library later suffered losses, or when there is no concord-

ance for the old catalogue, it is not always easy or even possible to identify a manuscript listed in that catalogue. In another library, the shelf marks have not been changed, but the printed catalogue is incomplete, and a number of manuscripts, some of them listed and some not listed in the printed catalogue, were transferred some time ago to another library and have received new shelf marks. Another library has as its only key a handwritten inventory from the early nineteenth century that gives only shelf marks that turn out to be antiquated and also to be class marks common to many manuscripts rather than shelf marks distinctive of individual manuscripts (they may be compared to the class marks in the New York Public Library where a book within a group can be located only through the binder's title on its back which is indicated in the catalogue but often quite different from the real title). For a long time, there was no concordance between the old class marks and the new serial numbers used for the individual manuscripts of the library in question, and thus, the identification of each manuscript has been a subject of a separate investigation. Some years ago, just when a competent librarian had started with the useful job of compiling a concordance between the old class marks and the new serial numbers, the situation was compounded by transferring a large part of the collection to another library. A concordance between the latest serial numbers and the actual numbers was subsequently compiled and published, but in the cases where we know only the old class mark, the task of locating the manuscript in either library has remained as difficult as before. When I worked in the library, I was much helped by the librarians to overcome my difficulties and to identify as many manuscripts as possible, but I was looked down upon with great scorn by a scholar from South America who worked on the manuscripts concerning Latin American history that happen to have been well catalogued. The gentleman obviously felt that it was due to my incompetence when I had to struggle so hard while he had an easy going with his own research. I cannot help repeating what I wrote elsewhere: a manuscript without a correct and complete shelf mark is like a person without an address; it cannot be found except with the greatest difficulty. Hence I have always made it my special business to be accurate and meticulous in citing the shelf marks of

manuscripts, and I urge all fellow scholars to follow the same practice. I have been scolded as pedantic by more than one classical scholar, but I should like to retort that they should stop speaking of the Parisinus of Vergil when there are over thirty thousand Latin manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale alone, and probably several dozen manuscripts of Vergil.

I should like to describe next some of the typical results that we may expect from our investigations. They are roughly of three kinds. First of all, we may come across or discover new and previously unknown texts. They sometimes deserve to be edited, and always to be recorded and studied. Whether they should always be announced as news in a learned journal or even in a newspaper is a matter of taste and of circumstances. Opinions are, of course, divided as to what constitutes a discovery. A famous Italian scholar once criticized a young French colleague for having claimed the discovery of some manuscript texts although the manuscripts were duly registered in the handwritten inventory of the respective library and although their existence had thus been known to the director of that library.[12] Now I do not think that all library directors know, or should know, the content of all manuscripts in their collection, and hence I do not think it is a fruitful procedure for a traveling scholar, as I watched some scholars doing, to ask the librarian what manuscripts there are in his field of study, instead of looking himself at the indices and inventories. In any case, I do not think that the value of a discovery is diminished because the respective manuscript is listed in a handwritten inventory. On the contrary, I am willing to recognize as a discovery even a text listed in a printed catalogue and recorded in its index, provided that a scholar uses a manuscript for the first time and inserts it into the mainstream of research on the respective subject. If a manuscript has been cited before in the proper context, we can no longer speak of a discovery, but there is still some merit in editing a manuscript or in studying it more thoroughly even after it has been mentioned before.

The second result of our inquiry may be the discovery of additional manuscripts containing a text previously known. Such discoveries are the more important, the fewer manuscripts of the same text had been known before. It may be very important to

discover a second manuscript of a text previously known from only one manuscript, whereas it may seem less important when we find additional manuscripts of a text for which dozens or even hundreds of manuscripts had been known before. However, such additional manuscripts may have their special importance: they may contain significant textual variants or even author's variants, additional passages, prefaces, or epilogues; they may contain interesting dates, colophons, or notes, and thus tell us something about the date of composition of the work, or about the scribe and first owner of the manuscript; they may even supply a new and valid attribution for a text that had been before of unknown or uncertain authorship.

Thirdly, the discovery of additional manuscripts, even if they are unimportant for the text, may yield very interesting information of a different kind. The number of manuscripts of a given text provides us with a statistics of its diffusion, just as the number of printed editions does, and the information supplied by each manuscript about its own date and origin may help us to trace the diffusion of a text in terms of geography, of chronology, and of professional and social milieu.[13]

Manuscript research evokes a kind of passion or addiction, and hardly anybody who has ever tasted it is likely to relinquish it again. One factor is no doubt the close physical contact that manuscript research gives us with the object of our inquiry and curiosity. Another is the unending series of surprises that the study of manuscripts will bring us, because of the very fact that each manuscript is a unique individual rather than a member of a species as most printed copies are. Moreover, the constant accumulation and recombination of interesting details is inexhaustible, and apt to lead to ever new conclusions. The sum total of manuscripts scattered in the world form a kind of *Bibliothèque Imaginaire*, and in the fields known to me there is work for generations of scholars to come. Yet we depend on the careful preservation of these manuscripts which have suffered too many losses already during the past few decades; on the further progress of inventorizing and cataloguing them, for without that we cannot know of them or utilize them; and on their greater accessibility, especially in the case of small and private collections. We must also see

to it, for the continuation and progress of our work, that a sufficient number of younger scholars will receive the training which is needed for participating in this enterprise, and which will assure for them and for their work the kind of literacy that our field of study demands: languages, and especially Latin, and palaeography.

1. *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. P. O. Kristeller (2 vols., Florence, 1937, repr. 1973).
2. T. De Marinis, *La legatura artistica in Italia nel secolo XV e XVI* (3 vols., Florence, 1960).
3. G. Billanovich, "Petrarch and the Textual Tradition of Livy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), 137-208.
4. T. Mommsen, "Ueber die Berliner Excerptenhandschrift des Petrus Donatus," *Jahrbuch der Koeniglich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 4 (1883), 73-89, citing the MS as Hamilton 458. The actual shelf mark is Hamilton 254. Cf. H. Boese, *Die lateinischen Handschriften der Sammlung Hamilton zu Berlin* (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 125-130.
5. P. O. Kristeller, *Latin Manuscript Books before 1600* (3rd ed., New York, 1965).
6. Incomplete are the printed catalogues of V. Rose and F. Schillman for Berlin, and of G. Valentinelli for Venice.
7. The only complete indices for the Nouveau Fonds Latin and the Nouvelles acquisitions latines in Paris are handwritten or typed.
8. P. O. Kristeller, *Iter Italicum*, 2 vols. (Leyden, 1963 and 1967). I hope to publish two more volumes.
9. *Catalogo della Biblioteca di un amatore bibliofilo*, Italia (sic), s.l.a. The library described is the Biblioteca Durazzo in Genoa.
10. (J. Bignami Odier), *Les Manuscrits de la Reine de Suède au Vatican* (Studi e Testi 238, Vatican City, 1964).
11. The notes and excerpts of Petrus Aloysius Galletti O.S.B. (s. XVIII) are found in Vat. lat. 7854-8066.
12. A. Favaro, *Archivio Veneto* 25 (1883) 431-432, reviewing L. Mabilleau, *Étude historique sur la philosophie de la Renaissance en Italie, Cesare Cremonini* (Paris, 1881).
13. For a good example, see J. Soudek, "Leonardo Bruni and His Public: A Statistical and Interpretative Study of His Annotated Latin Version of the (Pseudo-) Aristotelian *Economics*," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 5 (1968), 51-136.

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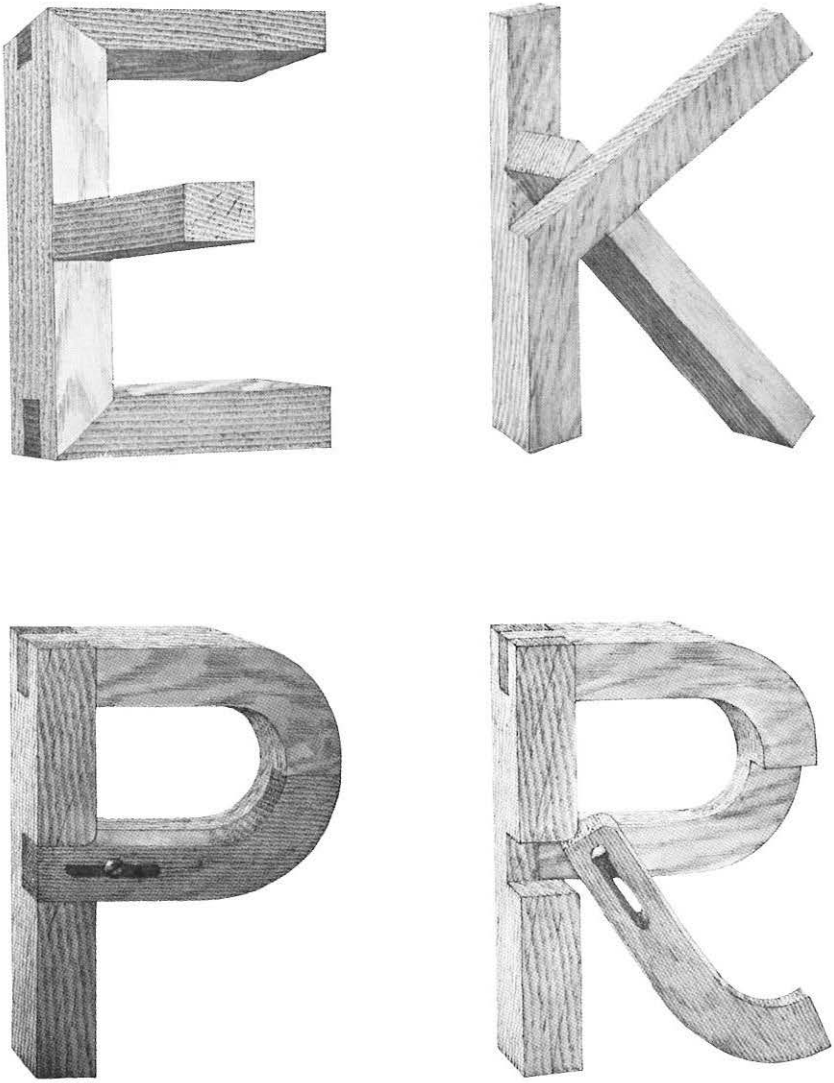

Excerpted from *Anno's Alphabet: An Adventure in Imagination*. Mitsumasa Anno's alphabet book is made up of paradoxical *trompe l'oeil* paintings full of superreal details of plausible impossibilities and visual puns. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company. $6.95.