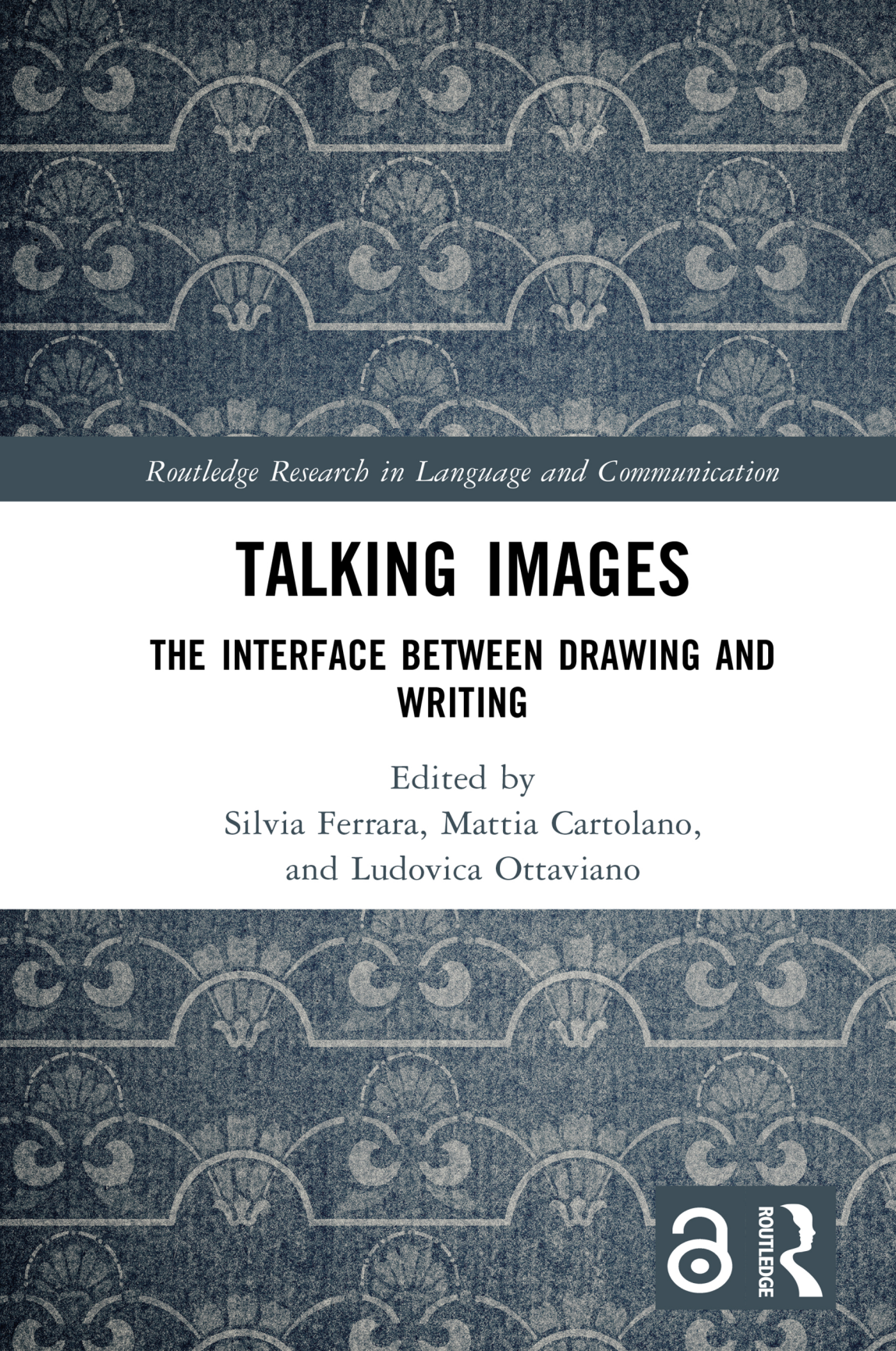
Routledge Research in Language and Communication
TALKING IMAGES
THE INTERFACE BETWEEN DRAWING AND WRITING
Edited by
Silvia Ferrara, Mattia Cartolano,
and Ludovica Ottaviano
ROUTLEDGE

Talking Images

This innovative collection offers a holistic portrait of the multimodal communication potential of images from the Upper Paleolithic through to today, showcasing image-based creativity throughout the centuries.

The volume seeks to extend the boundaries of our understanding of what language and writing can do to show how language can be understood as part of broader codes, as well as how images and figural objects can contribute to meaning-making in communication. The book is divided into four parts, each exploring a different dimension of the interplay between representation, symbolic meaning, and perception in the study of images, drawing on case studies from around the world. The first part looks at cognitive approaches to the earliest symbol-making while the second considers the interaction between images and writing in early scripts. The third part addresses images outside their boxes, showcasing how ancient communication devices can be reinterpreted. The final part features chapters reflecting on embodied semiotic approaches to the representation of images.

This book will be of interest to scholars in semiotics, archaeology, cognitive psychology, and linguistic and cultural anthropology.

Silvia Ferrara is Professor of Philology and Civilizations of the Aegean and Pre-Classical Mediterranean in the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies at Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Italy.

Mattia Cartolano is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies at Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Italy.

Ludovica Ottaviano is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies at Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Italy.

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Talking Images

The Interface between Drawing and Writing

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List of Contributors

Joachim Bauer is Professor of Psychoneuroimmunology at the University of Freiburg and guest Professor at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin since 2017. In parallel to clinical trainings, he did research in immunology, psychoneuroimmunology, and social neuroscience.

Marion Benz, PhD, is an editor at the Archaeological State Department Basel. Marion is a prehistoric archaeologist, specialized in early Near Eastern Neolithic archaeology and social anthropology. With Joachim Bauer, she developed a pioneering approach to interpreting prehistoric imagery by integrating recent findings from social neuroscience and iconology.

Mattia Cartolano is a Post-Doctoral researcher at the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna for the project INSCRIBE – Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings. He carries out his research activity in the field of Neolithic and Cognitive Archaeology.

Roma Chatterji is former Professor at the Department of Sociology of the Delhi School of Economics. Her research interests include illness narratives, the sociology of art, and folklore in India.

Silvia Ferrara is Professor of Philology and Civilizations of the Aegean and Pre-Classical Mediterranean in the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy Professor of Philology and Civilizations of the Aegean and Pre-Classical Mediterranean in the Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy and PI of the ERC project INSCRIBE – Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings.

Adriana Iezzi is Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna and PI of the ERC project WRITE – New Forms of Calligraphy in China: A Contemporary Culture Mirror.

Kathryn Kelley is a Post-Doctoral researcher at Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna for the project INSCRIBE – Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings. She is an Assyriologist specializing in the earliest Near Eastern writing systems, with an interest in emerging technologies to the study and documentation of cultural heritage.

Massimo Leone is Professor of Philosophy of Communication, Cultural Semiotics, and Visual Semiotics at the University of Turin and PI of the ERC project FACETS – Face Aesthetics in Contemporary ETechnological Societies

Mallory E. Matsumoto is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. She is an archaeological and historical anthropologist whose research addresses language, material culture, and religion in the Maya region of Mesoamerica.

Ludovica Ottaviano is a Post-Doctoral researcher at Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna for the project INSCRIBE – Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings. She carries out her research activity in the field of ancient Chinese scripts.

Claudio Paolucci is Professor of Semiotics and Philosophy of Language at Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna and is president of Italian Society of Philosophy of Language.

Christopher Pinney is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture at University College London and was PI of the ERC project Photodemos/Citizens of Photography (2016–2022).

Enza Elena Spinapolice is Associate Professor in Palaeolithic Archaeology at Sapienza University of Rome. She is currently leading projects in Europe and East Africa.

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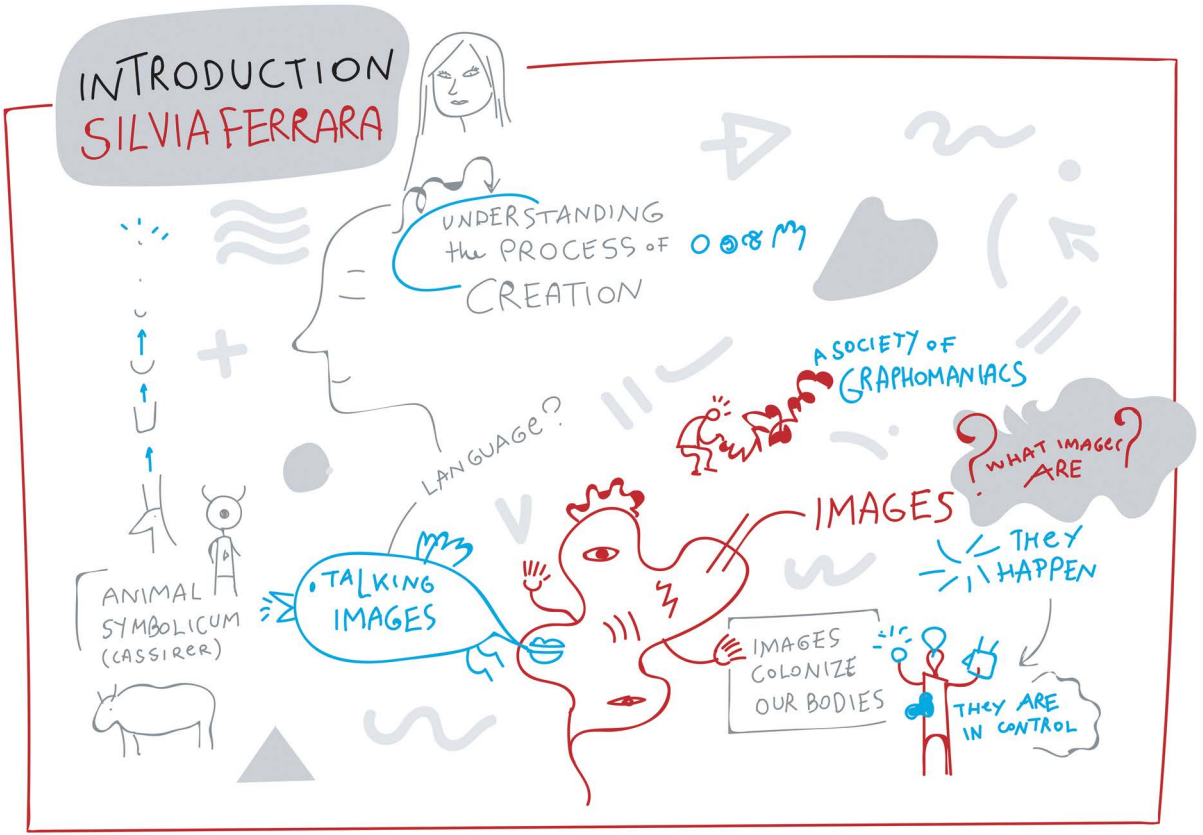
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Introduction

Can Images Talk?

Silvia Ferrara and Ludovica Ottaviano

Images and writing belong to different realms, whereby by writing we refer to the script or system that notates language, rather than text. If writing can be made of pictures, it is all too often treated as an instrument whose *raison d'être* is the mere recording of sounds (Daniels 1992; Gelb 1963; Sampson 1985). By the same token, not all images become writing by necessity or inevitability, and when they do, the moment in time when an image becomes a sign is shrouded in mystery. This book taps into the territory in which both realms tread, and delves deep into the interstices of their confines, to explore how, in our history and prehistory, we have used images as if they were writing and writing as if it were pictures.

Our exploration is inspired by the concept of the 'Pictorial Turn' (Mitchell 1995, 2015), a critical reassessment of visual culture that challenges the supremacy of textual/linguistic media over the visual, by highlighting the hybrid nature of media, combining sound, pictures, text, and images. With this in mind, the volume aims to trace the nuances existing in these relations, their stark divisions and contextual hybridity, the situations in which the two coalesce or confront each other, by embracing their role in cognition, memory, and communication. Rather than the image-text relations ranging from discontinuity to integration and interaction (Mitchell 2015), we have explored image-writing relations. However, in a way similar to Mitchell's, we have aimed to go beyond the idea of picture as a material object that does not transcend its medium. We have favored cases in which pictures are freed of the shackles of their contingency, to treat images that can be seen in memory and metaphor; in discourse, cognition, and imagination; their relations to writing; their interplay in norms; and relations of designation, description, and classification. In certain respects, as much as image-text can be complementary, so can images and the shapes of writing.

In this, language plays a part in the endeavor, to be sure, but we have tried to avoid giving it pre-eminence or to skirt it altogether, as if it were, somehow, parasitical to the effectiveness of images as standalone communicative devices. It is true that in the last two decades, studies of scripts,

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ancient and modern, have moved away from a strictly language-bound appreciation of writing, focusing instead on the social practices, the cultural meanings, and the cognitive dimension of what writing can represent, especially in all its non-alphabetic varieties and its non-linguistic modes of expression (Houston 2004; Houston and Stauder 2020; Overmann 2016; Zsolnay 2023). The result is that we can now, with less epistemological panic than a generation ago, be at ease in claiming that what writing can do is much more than recording the sounds of a language.

The purpose of this book stems from that prompt and in a way subverts the agenda: Can images do what writing does as well as writing does it? In a way, scholars of scripts have oftentimes overstressed and magnified the efficiency of scripts as the be all and end all of codified systems, assuming that scripts provide accurate transmissions of meaning and the specificities of a message in a more complete and faithful way (e.g., Coulmas 2003; Daniels and Bright 1996; DeFrancis 1989) than any other means of communication. This is a fallacy, strengthened by the fact that scripts as things transmitted and adapted can present deficiencies, redundancies, or can be ill-suited for the notation of specific languages.

This book first challenges the divide between art and writing, icons and texts, orality and literacy, picture and picture-writing, and then lays the groundwork for blurring the all too often set and rigid lines of partition between them, in the hope of opening avenues toward more nuanced approaches to the many ways in which we, as humans, leave traces behind. The result is that this book is only *prima facie* about the visualization of symbols. What we aspire to show is the array of codified gestures *through symbols*, the processes of engagement and perception *of symbols*, their logical ordering, their flexibility, hybridity, immediacy, and, ultimately, their prompt from imagination.

This book is, therefore, not about polarizations, nor is it about oppositions, that of images that move into the realm of iconic signs and into writing, versus tangible pictures (Elkins 1999) that fail to evolve into proper writing. In the chasm between literacy and everything else, we question the idea that the conceivable alternative of images remains that of maturing into art. This perspective is bound to underplay their eloquent and expressive potential. In reaction to this, our primary goal is to move beyond the binary notion of either/or. Indeed, there are immense and layered nuances of intermediate situations, as Severi would claim (Severi 2015, 13), in which no exclusive use of the spoken word nor that of the linguistic sign dominates. Addressing this problem and the 'teasingly schematic' (Wengrow in Severi 2015, xv) anatomy of separations – the oppositions of words/images and writing/art – requires that we see all this in action, crucially embracing a layered approach, incorporating semiotic, archaeological, cognitive, and anthropological perspectives.

Also, purely linguistic signs and images in their concrete configurations are imbued with an aesthetic flair. They are forms of the sensible; they are audible and visible, heavily implicated in bodily enactments. If speech is universal and every community has a fully developed spoken language, similarly, images are also pervasive in all cultures and at all times – in a spectrum of representations from the earliest symbol-making in Upper Paleolithic times to the contemporary pop cultural practice of graffiti art. This has been integral to human social practices, relational properties embedded in our deepest cultural evolution. Thus, their implication with cognitive mechanisms, negotiating physicality, engagement with the physical environment, and mental processes (perception, inference, remembering, and the carrying out of an intention) is an essential feature that needs to be addressed.

Images do not work in a vacuum, but are often ingredients of composite associations (Wengrow 2014) and of the relationships between the parts to the whole, for instance, the idea of the face for the whole body, or the idea of the body as image, which has been the focus of many but not all societies (Descola 2021). This implies, almost by definition, the potential of compositionality and the rearrangement of components to create metaphorical or unexpected representations, that are images or pictures of a different, abstract kind, even impossible in reality or fantastical. This potential for abstraction offers clues into how our imagination and the ability to create symbols can take center stage, as the resulting association of combinatorial entities at work together.

And even if writing, strictly defined, belongs to a more circumstantial, situated realm, more prone to pre-conditions or more rigid in compositional force, it still can work in ways that are equally metaphorical or combinatorial, especially in its primordial iconic nature. However, as opposed to images, it is neither innate, nor is it universal. It is not part and parcel of our biological architecture, and historically speaking, it is relatively rare, emerging only in the last few thousand years. Its development was neither predictable nor expected, yet it occurred more than once in our evolution, as an original and independent creation. Writing consists of stable, conventional mappings between symbols and meanings, with systematic sound notation as the guiding system. Its earliest forms are enduring images (Morin, Kelly, and Winters 2020) that, in cultural evolution become more compressed and schematic in shape (Kelly et al. 2021). But their inherent iconicity is a vestigial residue that lingers, although not readily apparent in most of the scripts in use today.

In this property, their distance from iconography and art in general is less apparent than hitherto assumed. Indeed, even in the past, writing systems like the Chinese script or the Egyptian hieroglyphics show that semantic information is intricately embedded *within* the characters, altogether

merged *with* and *hybridic to* their shapes. This embedding makes a semantic route to meaning more viable than in alphabetic languages, offering an alternative that goes beyond systematic phonetic decoding (Handel 2015; Perfetti and Harris 2013). Evidence supporting this can be found in psycholinguistic and neurological imaging studies, which show significant differences in how the brain processes written Chinese compared to other writing systems (Perfetti and Tan 1998; Zhou et al. 1999).

The binary oppositions of words/images and reading/seeing are also to be dispelled empirically. Elkins argues that there are no pure acts of 'reading' or 'viewing'; a close examination of a visual artifact often reveals mixtures of both (Elkins 1999). He suggests that any act of reading relies on a finite number of customs and strategies, which are also often at play when we look at things. Conversely, the ways we look at images – varying in order, speed, and method – often come into play when we read. Elkins claims that 'pure writing' does not exist (see also Robertson 2004), as each writing system incorporates pictorial elements, such as calligraphic forms, cursive scripts, and even the pictorial nature of letter shapes.

What, then, is the significance and role of these images? Several examples illustrate how systems of symbolic, codified images can be utilized by people who do not share a common language. These graphic codes have existed both before and after the emergence of writing and have accompanied oral traditions. This raises another question: What distinguishes more codified forms, such as semasiography, from less codified ones? According to Morin, the emphasis should be on the importance of conventional (or standardized) mappings between symbols and meanings. In this sense, semasiography and writing systems are highly codified, whereas visual art forms like paintings, graffiti, comic books, and so on, are not (Morin 2023).

The anthropological perspective on images offers a methodological approach that allows us to transcend the binary architecture of oppositions expounded above, thereby opening the horizon of possibilities (Severi 2015). As Belting proposes, images are embodied in a medium and take place in our living bodies as they are generated and experienced in our bodies. Across all times and places, images are more than the product of perception and are always the result of personal and collective knowledge and intention. Emerging from a symbolic cycle of creation and perception, they mutually influence each other, shaping our understanding of and interactions with the world (Belting 2011). In this context, Belting suggests that 'images are in control' as they colonize our bodies, shaping and reflecting our history and nature. Furthermore, images are also temporal; as societies evolve, they discard outdated versions and create new ones, mirroring changes in self-perception and societal values.

Though the multi-modal, multi-layered architecture of images across cultures, we can explore their many roles in transmitting and communicating

not just information, making its retrieval possible, but also delve deep into their involvement with memory and emotions. This approach challenges the conventional Western dichotomy between 'aesthetic' or artistic 'objects' and language, recognizing the possibility for open-ended situations in which images can express their communicative, emotional, and intimate potential independently, yet beyond any close shackle to language.

This is even more true today, if we consider the digital use of images in communication that has taken prominence, with modes of communication such as emojis, which have become almost conventionalized, and, for the most part, cross-cultural. As suggested by Morin, ideography (or semasiography) may be a viable option (Morin 2023). Thanks to digital communication, graphic signals are indeed becoming as fast and effortless to send as spoken words or gestures. The amount of information which participants in a digital interaction can share has, as a result, exploded, to the point that it can rival the exchange during face-to-face, synchronic verbal communication. If the continuous use of emojis, gifs, and other digital images lays the groundwork for a potential standardization with precise, shared, and cross-cultural meanings, then these visual forms can constitute a novel and reenacted recipe with which we can, and perhaps will, communicate in the future.

Therefore, this volume delves into the *mise en scene* of how images can talk, examining the ways in which they can create, hold, and convey enduring meanings. The authors investigate the nature and function of images as visual signs, defining what constitutes an iconic sign and, crucially, what does not. The interaction of images with other forms of communication, such as writing and speech, is also a key focus. Our exploration will highlight the remarkable ability of images to directly engage human emotions, narrate complex stories, and deliver messages that transcend the barriers of language and literacy. Simultaneously, we will explore how the effectiveness of image-based communication depends on a delicate balance of representation, symbolic meaning, recognizability, cultural preferences, and individual or collective perception. These elements are vital to determine how value can be attached to an image, and to what extent its meaning can be standardized, perceived, and transmitted. Ultimately, our goal is to trace the connections between images, marks, symbols, language, and writing, how they interplay, and if they do so successfully.

Images, Symbols Inside and Outside the Boxes: Structure of the Book

Talking Images is divided into four parts, each exploring a different aspect of the relationship between images, representation, symbolic meaning, and perception. From the earliest symbol-making to the interplay with writing

systems, from the reinterpretation of ancient communication devices to modern semiotic approaches, this book offers a comprehensive examination of the communicative power of images.

The first part, **The Earliest Images, Symbols, and Cognition**, embarks on a journey back to the origins of human symbol-making, looking into behavioral modernity of the first *Homo sapiens* and human representations from the Holocene period. In 'Marks, Signs, Symbols: Behavioral Modernity and the Early *Homo sapiens*' (Chapter 1), Enza Elena Spinapolice scrutinizes the archeological evidence of geometric engravings related to the African Middle Stone Age, from ~110 kya BP to ~63–60 kya BP, associated with the emergence of early *Homo sapiens* in the continent through a strictly archaeological approach which acknowledges the centrality of the material aspects.

The following chapter, 'Between Nature and Culture: Interpreting Changes in Human Representations During the Early Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia' (Chapter 2), by Marion Benz and Joachim Bauer, charts the continuities and changes in human representations as societies transitioned from hunter-gatherer bands to sedentary farming communities in northern Mesopotamia, from the 11th to the 8th millennium BCE. The interdisciplinary approach they embrace weaves together insights from various fields, from neuroscience to prehistoric studies, painting a vivid picture of the cultural transformations that accompanied these societal shifts.

When Images Interact with Writing, the second part of the volume, navigates the complex intersection of visual images and the development of writing systems, using examples from ancient Iran and the Classic Maya civilization. This section highlights how the emergence of writing systems was deeply intertwined with imagery, blurring the lines between seeing and reading. Kathryn Kelley's chapter, 'Images Hidden in Script: The Invention of Writing in Ancient Iran' (Chapter 3), argues against a stark separation between visual icons and written symbols, using the proto-Elamite script (c. 3200–2900 BCE) as a case study. Kelley proposes that this ancient script was an amalgamation of visual traditions, crafted to convey information within an exclusive circle of literates, while simultaneously drawing on broader visual cultures.

In 'Emblem Glyphs: Orthography and the Political World of Classic Maya Scribes' (Chapter 4), Mallory Matsumoto delves into the political iconography of the Maya civilization during the Classic period (250–900 CE), positing that emblem glyphs were not just linguistic markers but were also composed with a keen graphic sensibility, reflecting and reinforcing political identities and hierarchies.

The third part, **Images Outside Their Boxes**, transcends traditional boundaries to explore how images function outside their contexts and mediums, including 19th-century interpretations of non-European writing

systems and the storytelling methods in comic books. Christopher Pinney's chapter, 'Europe's Other Writing: "Ominous Hieroglyphics" and Belated Ekphrasis in the 19th Century' (Chapter 5), guides readers through the peculiar world of English almanacs, where Egyptian hieroglyphs served as cryptic forms of knowledge and communication, part of a 'other' visual lexicon. These 'ominous hieroglyphics', Pinney suggests, constituted an alternative network of visual discourse, revealing much about the cultural undercurrents of the time.

Roma Chatterji's 'Aghori – The Voyage of an Anti-Hero: Comic Book Images and the Art of Storytelling' (Chapter 6) discusses the unique multimodal narrative power of comic books. Chatterji's analysis sheds light on the sophisticated visual strategies that comic book artists employ to engage readers, from the lettering with the graphic power to convey emotions to the dynamic sequencing of images.

Finally, the fourth and concluding part, **Representing Images through Lines, Bodies and Language**, interprets the transformation of images through a spectrum of expressive forms, including calligraphy, facial tattoos, and the semiotic evolution from expressive to denotative signs. Adriana Iezzi's chapter, 'Art from Calligraphy: Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images, Performative Actions, Design Products, and Graffiti Works' (Chapter 7), ventures into the dynamic realm of Chinese calligraphy. Iezzi highlights how this form of art, inherently multimodal, has undergone a contemporary metamorphosis, displaying its versatility and influence across various domains of visual and performing arts.

In 'Facial Scripts: The Semiotic Journey of Maori Tattoos from Colonial Gaze to Cultural Revival' (Chapter 8), Massimo Leone offers an examination of the archaeology of the Maori facial tattoo, Moko, tracing its trajectory from its ancestral roots, through colonial fascination, to its digital manifestations through facial filters. This analysis provides a window into the Maori's rich cultural tapestry, underpinning the dual role of the Moko as a script and a medium for personal and collective expression.

Concluding the fourth part of the volume, Claudio Paolucci's 'From Expressive Sign to Denotative Sign: On Some Semiotic Passages Connected to the Invention of Writing' (Chapter 9) questions the semiotic shift from expressive to denotative signs within the context of the development of writing. By examining the diagrammatic relations inherent in expressive signs, Paolucci elucidates how these relations facilitate the emergence of denotative signs, offering a nuanced perspective on the semiotic underpinnings of writing.

With this structure, *Talking Images* aims to offer a comprehensive and insightful examination of the communicative power of images across time and cultures. By weaving together archaeological, anthropological, cognitive, historical, and semiotic perspectives, the volume not only enriches

our understanding of visual culture from its prehistoric beginnings but aims to open new avenues of contemplation, into a future, a world, that is increasingly multimodal. While the trajectory is willfully launched towards a more ethereal, intangible sphere, we still wish to show the enduring force of images in shaping human thought, culture, and identity, inviting readers to reconsider the visual underpinnings of communication in a new, agile, unexpected, but still powerful light.

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Part I

The Earliest Images, Symbols, and Cognition

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1 Marks, Signs, Symbols

Behavioral Modernity and the Early *Homo Sapiens*

Enza Elena Spinapolice

Introduction

The way in which we differ from other living beings lies at the heart of questions about our past and our origin as a species. Over the last 30 years, the debate on the origin of modern human behavior has been central to archaeological research around the early *Homo sapiens*. Since the late 1980s (e.g., Mellars 1989; Mellars and Stringer 1989), a model has emerged that has seen a clear separation of our species from others in our clade. This separation is based on our ability to produce 'symbolic behavior', traces of which were initially found most prominently in the European Upper Paleolithic (Davies 2019), described as a "great leap forward" (Diamond 1992).

Over time, the distance from other species has narrowed, and currently the model, according to some, aims to extend the concept of 'behavioral modernity' to Neanderthals and possibly the entire *Homo* genus (e.g., Joordens et al. 2015).

The purpose of this article is to review the early geometric representations associated with Early *Homo sapiens*, particularly in Africa, in light of this debate. It aims to test their utility within the current paradigm, considering a theoretical framework and an approach tied to material culture (Spinapolice 2020, Basell and Spinapolice 2024).

Indeed, various theories have directly linked identifiable elements in the archaeological record to cognitive-behavioral traits and skills characteristic of *Homo sapiens* (e.g., Wadley 2013).

The current model is not based on the Upper Paleolithic revolution evoked by Paul Mellars in the 1980s but on a gradualist approach grounded in the African record. This approach was postulated in the well-known article, 'The Revolution that Wasn't' (McBrearty and Brooks 2000), which contributed to abandoning a strongly Eurocentric perspective on the origin of *Homo sapiens* behavior. This gradualist perspective is considered somewhat cumulative, encompassing abstraction, symbolism, language, and art.

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On the other hand, the archaeological signature of these behaviors is not always regarded in the same way, and the list of traits related to 'modern behavior' is subject to continuous changes. In the recent article 'The Revolution that Still Isn't', Eleanor Scerri and Manuel Will (2023) critically review the data from African archaeological research over the 20 years since 'The revolution That Wasn't'. Simultaneously, they update the list of distinctive traits of behavioral modernity. This list includes signs, engravings, patterns, and art that, through the representation of identity (individual or group) and the creation of visual codes, lead to the inference of abstract thinking, the codification of intragroup differences, and potentially the presence of symbols and language.

This cumulative set of archaeological and behavioral elements converges into a 'package' considered 'modern', representing the signature of our species. However, from the recent review, it has emerged that this modernity package is not so much cumulative and linear as the result of an asynchronous and scattered path of innovations (Scerri and Will 2023). Trajectories appear geographically and chronologically discrete and, consequently, historically contingent.

The debate on behavioral modernity, however, presents some structural problems, recently summarized in an article by Meneganzin and Currie (2022). The model is empirically derived and has inherent ambiguity due to the lack of a solid theoretical foundation.

Where do the early engravings fit into this model, and how are they interpreted?

In the debate on the origin of modern behavior, all manifestations considered non-functional are automatically associated with the realm of the 'symbolic'. This includes the artifacts discussed in this article, i.e., those featuring geometric engravings.

Linking modern behavior exclusively to what is labelled as 'symbolic', including the earliest instances of traced traits, reflects a circular reasoning that, in my view, has confined the scientific community for the past three decades. Archaeological processes are slow and complex, and as suggested by Scerri and Will (2023), they are multifaceted and require articulated explanations.

As a result, the 'Rubicon' model based on presence/absence (Meneganzin and Currie 2022) is not adequate to account for the multiplicity perceived in the known archaeological record over a broad chronological and geographical range. The Rubicon model urges us to establish a boundary, which may coincide with the first traced mark or the first series of marks, but when can we instead associate meaning with these early traits? To quote Penny Spikins, 'Modernity is better understood as a spectr*um*' (2017).

Here, I will review the main artifacts featuring geometric engravings related to the African Middle Stone Age (Figure 1.1) and their related

Figure 1.1 Map of the main sites mentioned in the text.

patterns (Figure 1.2), archaeologically associated with the period of the emergence of early *Homo sapiens* at the continental level. The artifacts will be first described and analyzed strictly from an archaeological standpoint; then their current interpretation will be discussed; and finally, interpretative paths will be suggested in light of an epistemological approach.

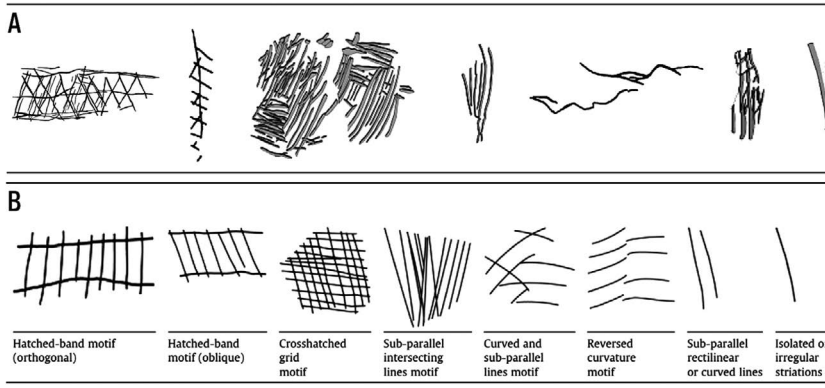

Figure 1.2 The main types of engraving patterns on the Ochre (A) and on the Ostrich Eggshells (B). Modified after Hodgson (2014) and Texier et al. (2013).

Main Archaeological Evidence

- Diepkloof (from ~110 Kya BP)

One of the key sites in the African Middle Stone Age (MSA) is the Diepkloof rock shelter (Western Cape, South Africa). Here, engraved artifacts first appear in the MSA Lynn (around 100 kya, Tribolo et al. 2013), yielding one of the oldest abstract engravings discovered in Africa – a rhomboid marking on the cortical surface of an ungulate long bone shaft (Parkington and Porraz 2023; Porraz et al. 2021). This abstract shape likely constituted part of a broader geometric pattern, as suggested by two additional interrupted incisions that extend the motif in a geometry conforming to the rhomboid. Additionally, Texier et al. (2010, 2013) report engraved ostrich eggshell (EOES) containers dated between 100 and approximately 52 kya. Diepkloof yields 408 pieces with engravings (total 37,534, around 9%, but in associated levels, a maximum of up to 4.4%). This is the earliest known occurrence of containers.

- Klasies River Cave (100–85 Kya BP)

The Klasies River complex is located on the Tsitsikamma coast in South Africa. Here, the fragment of an ochre pebble with a sequence of subparallel linear incisions was recovered from the MSA II levels of Cave 1 in South Africa, dating between 100 and 85 kya. The incisions were produced by a lithic point and may represent one of the oldest instances of deliberate engraving (d'Errico, Moreno, and Rifkin 2012).

- Blombos (~77–73 Kya BP)

One of the most iconic sites that has yielded cross-hatched incised patterning on ochre is Blombos Cave, on the southern Cape of South Africa. This site has been at the forefront of the debate on modern human behavior regarding the emergence of symbolic thought. From the MSA levels, more than 8,500 ochre fragments have been recovered, with 15 showing engravings. Two of these, dated to 77 kya, have received significant attention for their cross-hatched pattern. Extensive microanalysis has been conducted on these two pieces, proposing that these abstract patterns are designs, 'representing a material expression of the same symbol' (Henshilwood and d'Errico 2005). Blombos Cave has also yielded what is considered the oldest drawing, a cross-hatched pattern drawn with an ochre crayon on a ground silcrete flake from the MSA levels (73 kya) (Henshilwood et al. 2018).

-Sibudu (~77 Kya BP)

Sibudu cave is located approximately 40 km north of Durban, South Africa. In this highly significant site, incised pieces are rare, but they are more common in the industry preceding the Still Bay (~77 ka BP) than in the rest of the sequence. Some pieces show deliberate engravings (Hodgskiss 2013), notably a fan-shaped engraved dolerite. Markings acquired during ochre powder production are more numerous overall. The powder was primarily produced from bright red pieces, but the engravings were mainly executed on brownish-red pieces.

-Klipdrift (~63–60 Kya BP)

At this site located 150 km east of Cape Town, 95 fragments of clearly and deliberately EOES have been identified (Nel and Haaland 2023). The designs are variations of sub-parallel lines and cross-hatched patterns, similar to those reported from Diepkloof. The EOES is spatially distributed across the area where the Howieson Poort (HP) levels were excavated (4.75 m2) and up to 50 cm below the surface (Henshilwood et al. 2014).

-Klein Kliphuis

A single piece of engraved ochre was recovered from an HP context at the rock shelter Klein Kliphuis. The ochre was associated with a mixed assemblage of HP and post-HP artifacts, suggesting that it is substantially younger than similar finds at Blombos Cave. The ochre is ground and fractured, engraved in a cross-hatched pattern with two horizontal and five oblique lines. The artifact has three faces, one striated, another scored, and the third exhibiting signs of having been fractured (Mackay and Welz 2008).

-Palmenhorst/Rössing, Namibia

Palmenhorst/Rössing is an open-air site in the Swakop Valley, Namibia. In the MSA levels,a rounded pebble (80 × 80 × 52 mm) was recovered. It had one plane face into which 'a pattern of criss-crossing lines has been pecked' (Wendt 1975). After the engraving was completed, up to five flakes had been struck at one end, transforming the pebble into a core. The artifacts were located around several huge granite boulders, and no artifacts other than those of MSA were found.

-Muden

From the vicinity of Muden, in KwaZulu-Natal, an engraved shale flake depicting a cross-hatched pattern and donated to the Archaeological

Survey was discovered in 1956. Described as a 'typical MSA flake' (Malan 1956), it is 8.5 cm long, 6 cm wide, and 1.4 cm thick (Anderson 2012).

Patterns

Texier et al., in 2013, identified seven patterns in the EOES, along with a pattern related to incomplete engravings (Henshilwood et al. 2014; Texier et al. 2013):

1 Hatched Band (Orthogonal and Oblique)
2 Crosshatched Grid
3 Sub-parallel Intersecting Lines
4 Curved and Sub-parallel Lines
5 Reversed Curvature
6 Diamond Shaped (only at Klipdrift)
7 Sub-parallel Curved

At Diepkloof, each OES fragment contains only one pattern, although the fragments are very small. Pattern 1 is found only in the lower part of the sequence, while pattern 3 is found only in the upper part of the deposit. The patterns at Blombos and Diepkloof are remarkably similar, both in terms of composition and their temporal evolution (Tylén et al. 2020), even though the two sites are more than 400 kilometers apart, with no evidence of contact between the hunter-gatherer bands occupying the sites.

Both at Blombos and Diepkloof, there seems to be a trend toward complexity from the older to the more recent layers, where simpler patterns appear to precede more complex ones. According to Tylén et al. (2020), this is an example of cumulative culture, reflected in compositional development from simple configurations of parallel lines to complex cross-hatchings, characterized by greater symmetry and cardinal and diagonal lines.

The early geometric manifestations primarily consist of incisions, with the notable exception of the 'drawn' fragment from Blombos (Henshilwood et al. 2018). The cross-hatched pattern here is strikingly similar to those incised on ochre and OES but is achieved with an ochre crayon on stone. The raw materials and patterns intertwine, demonstrating complex relationships.

Interestingly, from the site of Apollo 11 in Namibia, the earliest elements of African 'figurative art' from MSA levels were likely produced with ochre crayons, while the ostrich eggs with cross-hatched incisions come from Late Stone Age (LSA) levels (Ossendorf and Vogelsang 2023).

Cognitive Aspects

After, Pearce and Morris, the founders of semiotics, there are three types of signs: (1) The icon, which has a relationship of similarity with the referent;

(2) indices, which have a relationship of contiguity with the thing signified; and (3) symbols, which are linked to meaning through a conventional relationship. Additionally, symbols as such can be defined as signs with various and sometimes unknowable dimensions of meaning, according to a distinction introduced by Kant. According to Kant, the symbol inherently carries vagueness and allusiveness and is not a mere codified sign.

Pierce's (1982) definition of a sign is 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'.

MSA geometric representations are, according to Henshilwood (2009), a symbolically mediated behavior, and according to Lynn Wadley (2001), a mean of accumulating information externally to us (see also Kuhn and Stiner 2007), drawing on Wobst (1977) as well.

The current interpretation of the first MSA engravings primarily proposed by Hensilwood (Henshilwood 2007; Henshilwood and Dubreuil 2009; Henshilwood, d'Errico, and Watts 2009), is not only that these signs are symbolic but also that they express 'social allegiance'.

After the interpretation from Francesco d'Errico and his colleagues, the engravings are used 'symbolically', i.e., to 'communicate a meaning distinct from their possible iconic referent' (Mellet et al. 2019, citing Pierce 1982). This interpretation is based on the fact that (1) these representations were intentional and (2) these representations did not serve any apparent utilitarian function.

According to Anderson (2012), cross-hatched representations do not refer to abstract patterns but are directly linked through brain plasticity to the perception of the world. The patterns would, therefore, be directly derived from the world surrounding the MSA hunter-gatherers. Anderson proposes two possible explanations: that they refer to woven fibers (such as those used to transport ostrich eggs) or that they mirror forms of erosion visible in the mineral territory. According to Hodgson (2006, 2014, 2019), the representation of linear features is based on the recognition of elements that are privileged by the visual cortex, with an aesthetic or 'proto-aesthetic' motivation that would have stimulated the visual cortex. The early non-functional signs might not be representative or symbolic but could be closely tied to how the visual cortex processes visual information. Therefore, the early incised patterns would have the same origin as letters, and the early geometric signs would be proto-aesthetic rather than symbolic.

The function of these incisions has also been tested through a neuroimaging program to map the brain areas involved in their perception (Mellet et al. 2019). The experiment involved presenting geometrically organized and unorganized line patterns to 27 WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) subjects and showed, as expected, that the represented objects are perceived as organized even by modern

humans. In my opinion, this experiment presents several problems, both in its practical organization, with Western subjects accustomed to much more complex stimuli, and in the research question to be tested, which, in my view, is not formulated clearly. Hodgson (2019) also points out that this experiment conducted on literate subjects is not reliable. Why shouldn't the brain recognize geometric lines as organized? Furthermore, according to Tylén et al. (2020), some of these early incisions would not be 'symbolic' because they are not recognizable according to a neurovisual resonance test (NRT). These empirical studies have thus reached opposed conclusions and have subsequently been the subject of intense debate (e.g., Hodgson 2019; Mellet et al. 2019). Tylen et al.'s (2020) results support Hodgson's viewpoint, predicting that the Blombos and Diepkloof incisions were made with aesthetic intentions and functioned as decorations. However, there was also evidence that they evolved to become easier to remember and reproduce, suggesting that they were subject to adaptive learning pressures.

According to Hodgson (2019), early humans who produced the first patterns could not benefit from a neural network already tuned to simple but purified patterns in the fusiform gyrus. This implies that they could not assign a semantic meaning to geometric traits but only a 'pre-semantic' one. One of the criticisms of this approach, made by Mellet and colleagues (2019), is how agency is then generated from this pre-semantic process. If these processes were set in motion simultaneously, directly in a semantic phase, the process would be more immediate. Early humans already had the motor and cognitive abilities to mark bones unintentionally during butchering for more than two million years.

Indeed, some geometric features could constitute the 'building blocks' or 'elementary particles' from which all geometric figures emerge (Hodgson 2003, 2005, 2019). These early geometric signs were chosen because they resonate with the elementary characteristics that the early visual cortex is predisposed to process, and they are often processed without conscious registration. These 'primitive geometrics' refer to basic lines and shapes processed by specialized neurons and form the basis for perceiving more complex shapes. By incising basic geometric patterns on stones, shells, and bones, archaic humans were thus 'enunciating the elementary particles of form in a tangible and purified format'.

Amalric et al. (2017) further demonstrated that these simple geometrics, while easy to learn, recognize, and remember, are optimal for laying the foundations for more complex geometrics, as evidenced by their presence in hunter-gatherer societies and preschool-aged children (Dehaene et al. 2006). Primitive geometrics are thus considered universal and have crossed the Rubicon of awareness to be ultimately represented through

incisions. Later, according to d'Errico and Colagé (2018), this gave rise to an exaptation that led to symbolic behavior.

Finally, Malafouris's interpretation of these signs (2021) lies in an enactive-ecological perspective that could be summarized as 'the sign for the sign': the meaning of the traits lies in the traits themselves, in the intention, and the implementation of this activity.

Hodgson (2014) pointed out that the engravings found on OES exhibit greater systematic organization compared to those on ochre. However, positing a broader social function for these engravings is not warranted. The patterns may have primarily functioned as a means to enhance the visual appeal of the object for the individual responsible for their creation.

Nonetheless, if these representations had a personal rather than a collective meaning, which is entirely possible, then they cannot be taken as references to signal social norms, as emphasized by both Lambros Malafouris (2008) and Wynn and Coolidge (2007). Hodgson (2014) underscores that due to the small and inconspicuous nature of these lines, their utility as a matrix for indicating group affiliation is doubtful. The faintness of these signs suggests they might be insufficient in conveying pertinent social information. As Carr (1995) notes, for marks to effectively signify group affiliation, they need to be highly visible to prevent potential costly social misunderstandings.

The reality, which we may need to accept, is that there is no way to know whether these signs have an individual or social reference. Given their limited distribution and standardization, on the other hand, I would lean toward an individual interpretation.

Davidson recently (2023) proposed a model in which the archaeostory of art goes through three phases: In the first, there are marks by adding ochre or removing material to create something that could become symbols; in the second, true symbolic communication begins, and in the third, images with broader meaning are created. Leaving a mark (phase 1) is a purely physical fact, communicating through symbols (phase 2) is purely mental, and creating art (phase 3) requires a combination of the first and the second, a physical and mental process. Marks can be made without implying meaning, symbolic communication can occur without marks, but art cannot be made without marks and symbolic communication.

Interpretative Pathways

To overcome the interpretative impasse surrounding these crafted artifacts, one potential approach is to retreat to their purely archaeological dimension and attempt to reconstruct their significance and societal placement

from an emic perspective. This doesn't necessarily require invoking the 'material engagement theory' proposed by Lambros Malafouris, though it is useful. Archaeology fundamentally involves the study of material culture, and acknowledging the centrality of material aspects is essential, given the nature of the data under analysis.

> It has often been suggested that we cannot dig up a social system or ideology.
>
> Granted we cannot excavate a kinship terminology or a philosophy, but we can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioural elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems. The formal structure of artifact assemblages together with the between element contextual relationships should and do present a systematic and understandable picture of the total extinct cultural system.
>
> Binford (1962)

As often happens with so-called 'artistic' manifestations, the non-functional aspect tends to take on a prominent role in debates and publications. It is easy to forget that, in many traditional societies, separating function from decoration does not make much sense. In my opinion, this separation is a constriction, unless we place it within a specific discourse with well-defined boundaries. To overcome this impasse, I propose analyzing these artifacts within the archaeological record and suggesting a potential model for testing that includes the association of these objects and their 'decoration'.

The engraved artifacts of the African MSA can be divided into four units based on the raw material, as previously proposed by Anderson (2012): (1) Ochre, (2) OES, (3) stone, (4) bones.

Ochre

Ochre represents a central topic in the debate on the so-called 'behavioral modernity' (Hodgskiss 2023). Dapschauskas et al. (2022) propose a model for the progressive intensification of ochre use, with the initial phase starting as early as ~500 kya, followed by the emerging phase (from ~330 kya), culminating in the habitual phase from ~160 kya. This should correspond to an intensification in use and, consequently, in the number of finds.

Numerous pieces of ochre show clear signs of anthropogenic modification, such as the presence of facets and striations (e.g., Mauran 2023; Rosso, Regert, and d'Errico 2023). Others exhibit signs of rubbing on soft materials (skins?), and some display incisions. Among these, some present

'scoring', : simple, unbroken, and shallow straight lines, varying in depth (Dayet et al. 2013; Henshilwood et al. 2009; Hodgskiss 2013; Hodgskiss and Wadley 2017; Watts 2010). Some ochre fragments are defined as true crayons due to their pointed morphology (d'Errico et al. 2003; Henshilwood et al. 2001; Rifkin 2012; Watts 2002).

The systematic use of ochre is considered a key indicator for inferring cultural complexity and the origin of symbolic thought (Rosso et al. 2022). However, ochre serves a variety of functional and utilitarian purposes: In the archaeological record, its use has been proposed as an ingredient in adhesives (Hodgskiss 2013; Kozowyk, Langejans, and Poulis 2016; Wadley, Williamson, and Lombard 2004), a component of leather tanning compounds (Rifkin 2011), insect repellent, sunscreen (Havenga et al. 2022; Rifkin et al. 2015), or antiseptic (Buthelezi-Dube et al. 2022; Velo 1984). In other cases, it has been interpreted as a pigment for body painting for 'ritual' performances (Watts, Chazan, and Wilkins 2016).

The idea that the earliest use of ochre had multiple functions is supported by ethnographic evidence (Rosso et al. 2022). In my view, a key point to emphasize here is that it is not necessary to impose a dichotomy between functionality and symbolism. Instead, it would be more appropriate to assess the impact of this process on society as a whole. In some long stratigraphic sequences, such as Rose Cottage Cave (Hodgskiss and Wadley 2017), multiple uses are clearly evident. At Rose Cottage Cave, traces of use indicate processes of rubbing and grinding, along with occasional incisions. Rubbing is associated with use on a soft surface, such as skin (for coloring or protection, for instance, from the sun, insects, or bacteria). Indeed, red powder residues on perforated shells from various MSA African sites appear to result from their rubbing against skin or clothing (Bouzouggar et al. 2007; d'Errico et al. 2005). Furthermore, mineralogical and chemical analyses of ochre fragments from Diepkloof revealed a preference for rocks rich in hematite, which are unsuitable for adhesive production (Dayet et al. 2013). Strangely, traces of ochre constituting parietal or portable art are nearly non-existent at this stage, excluding the possible ochre spot found on a pebble at Porc Épic (Rosso et al. 2022), the depicted stones from Blombos (Henshilwood et al. 2018), and of course the figurative, non-geometric slabs from Apollo 11 (as far as 40 kya) (Ossendorf and Vogelsang 2023), which can be the first example of prehistoric art in Africa.

One of the less-explored aspects of ochre use in the MSA is that its processing, as demonstrated by workshops found at sites such as Blombos and Diepkloof, is linked to a domestic space. The production of pigments from raw material is a composite activity that probably could only be carried out on-site and required a diverse set of tools, including grinders, pounders, containers, and so on. At Blombos, signs have been identified on a grinding stone fragment, which also had ochre residues, indicating its

likely use for grinding pigment. An 'ochre workshop' has been identified, and some liquefied ochre-rich mixture was stored in two *Haliotis midae* shells (Henshilwood et al. 2011). At Diepkloof, a single *chaîne opératoire* linked to the ochre workshop has been discovered (Dayet et al. 2013). At Sibudu, an analysis of residues on a flake originating from a layer dating back to 49 kya reveals a combination of ochre and casein derived from milk, likely obtained through the hunting of a lactating wild bovid (Villa et al. 2015). This liquid mixture, consisting of powdered pigment blended with milk, is interpreted as a coloring agent. The utilization of milk in a pre-domestication context is remarkable, highlighting the association of diverse and complementary skills related to dye use. At Blombos, it is believed that the two fragments with cross-hatched patterns were created by two different individuals (Anderson 2012). Furthermore, at Sibudu, ochre is attested as a binding agent for hafting tools in the HP levels (Lombard 2006), and seven tools show stains related to ochre processing dating to around 77 kya (Wojcieszak and Wadley 2019).

These occurrences suggest that the *chaînes opératoires* related with ochre were not individually managed but shared within the band and extended for procurement within a large territory. Considering these intricate *chaînes opératoires*, it is reasonable to anticipate that materials related to this process would be found in residential sites, possibly featuring structured and specialized activity areas. How do ochre blocks with incisions fit into this discussion? How do blocks exhibiting 'scoring' – simple and superficial marks – differ from those incised with intricate patterns, as observed at Blombos? Is there a potential association with personalization, indicating specialization and the involvement of a specific individual in conducting this activity?

In terms of the simpler marks, often referred to as 'scoring', these could serve a utilitarian or functional purpose, possibly used by individuals to mark specific pieces of raw material. Conversely, the more intricate marks may signify 'curated' objects, suggesting a prolonged use-life and a detachment from the immediate utilization of raw material. The absence of these cross-hatched marks in strictly contemporaneous layers makes it less likely that they function as signals. Their rarity and henceforth association with a small percentage of the band's total population at once also diminish the likelihood of signaling. It is plausible that these marks resemble those created using color as a medium on the skin, clothing, or ornaments, as evidenced by the drawings from Blombos. However, the recurrency, uniformity, transmission, and meaning of such behavior remain uncertain at this point. Promising avenues for further exploration include a focus on the spatial aspects of the ochre operational chain, identifying workshops, and examining patterns related to the frequency of these behaviors and the individual's number involved at a given time.

(Engraved) Ostrich Eggshells (EOES)

Ostriches and their eggs are still a significant component of everyday life among hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari, including the !Kung, G/wi, Ju/'hoansi, and Haillom (Diehl, Keller, and Hodgkins 2022).

The EOES can be considered as a 'subgroup' of the OES, and from this perspective, I find it noteworthy that the two sets of evidence have generally been treated separately. The discussion on OES has, in my view, been somewhat prematurely overlooked, as noted before by Collins and Steele (2017). Many sites lack an exact count of fragments, hindering the calculation of MNI (minimum number of individuals). The Diepkloof Rock Shelter sample has been analyzed to the highest resolution. However, here, although an MNI of 45 decorated eggs has been calculated (Texier et al. 2013), the total number of eggs remains unknown and unrelated to the engraved ones. Additionally, systematic refitting efforts are rare in my knowledge, with occasional attempts, as seen in Texier et al. 2010, limited to decorated fragments. Additionally, eggs are only rarely associated with ostrich bones.

On the other hand, there are studies on the nutritional aspects of eggs (e.g., Diehl et al. 2022), even based on actualistic practices, demonstrating how these archaeological remains can be used to predict the use of fire for cooking. The presence of ostrich eggs in the archaeological record is indeed very ancient, dating back to the Oldowan (Roche et al. 1999), and the first ones showing signs of burning (and potential cooking) come from Zhoukoudian (Boaz and Ciochon 2004) and later from the MSA of the Western Cape, where engraved eggs also originate. At Ysterfontein, along the West Coast, over two kg of OES fragments have been recovered from layers dated between 33 and 70 kya, in association with lithic tools, fire structures, and other likely food remains (Halkett et al. 2003).

A recent assessment of the importance of ostrich eggs as a valuable source of energy was conducted by J. Hodgkins and colleagues (2018). It represents a predictable and seasonal nutritional resource, available for an average of three months a year (Sebei et al. 2009): Collection can be done throughout the period from laying to hatching, but it is simpler within the first 18 days, i.e., before they begin to be incubated (Hodgkins et al. 2018), also because during this period, they are still liquid; the eggs are then edible for about a month. The article by Hodgkins et al. (2018) also highlights how the South African grassland ecosystem constituted the ideal environment for ostriches during the Pleistocene and was undoubtedly a preferred hunting ground for humans and carnivores. In contemporary populations, eggs are generally cooked whole, either by placing them in hot ashes (Cott 1953) or by emptying their contents onto warm ground (Wannenburgh, Johnson, and Bannister 2000). I wonder if direct cooking,

altering the external surfaces of the egg, is incompatible with reuse as containers and, consequently, their use as a support for geometric lines. Texier and colleagues (2010, 2013) demonstrated the presence of colors produced by thermal alteration on the external part of the eggs.

It is interesting to observe that while nutritional input has a central importance, however limited to the seasonal cycle of hunter-gatherers, the use-life of each OES is certainly much longer, potentially spanning across generations.

Moreover, the *chaînes opératoires* involving ostrich eggs are extensive in space, encompassing procurement (strictly seasonal), short-term utilization as food, likely involving perforation with stone tools, and subsequently, their reuse as containers. Decoration probably occurs in this stage when the object becomes 'curated', and the prolonged use life aligns well with personalization. This is in accord with the scattering of the containers (and their fragments) across multiple sites, potentially logistically structured and/or with specialized areas.

The perforation seems to be done with a series of techniques in succession (drilling, incising, punching, grinding, hammering, etc.). In a collection of 16 perforated ostrich eggs, 4 have an opening on the longitudinal axis, 10 on the equatorial axis, and 2 on an oblique axis (Texier et al. 2013).

These containers could have been employed for transporting or storing liquids strategically, allowing for deferred consumption (Humphreys and Thackeray 1983; Jerardino et al. 2009; Kandel 2004; Lee 1979; Parkington 2006; Schapera 1930; Silberbauer 1981; Tixier 1976). While ethnographers often highlight their use for carrying and storing water, references to other contents, both liquid and solid, are also present (Lee 1979), such as ground specularite, OES fragments, and ant larvae (Collins and Steele 2017). As noted by Lee (1979), with careful handling, a container can endure for several years, and among the contemporary !Kung, married women typically possess a set of five to ten containers (Texier et al. 2013).

This occurs at the logistical mobility level; however, it is possibly within this phase that a broader circulation can be inferred. In fact, contemporary South African hunter-gatherers have revealed that OES containers constituted significant items within an exchange and gift network (Wiessner 1986), with deferred consumption widely associated. Hodgkins and colleagues' work in 2018 also demonstrated that some fragments of OES from Pinnacle Point dating back to 80 kya had a distant geographical origin, aligning with this model. I propose that the geometric patterns on OES must be linked to this phase. Undoubtedly, these objects held prestige and were sought after, serving as crucial tools to cope with environments lacking regular water sources.

OES caches are relatively common in South Africa (Henderson 2002 and references therein), some of which are Pleistocene, and they align well with this model. Therefore, we can hypothesize that these containers were

regularly left at strategic points as a supply, primarily for water. This introduces two intriguing possibilities for further exploration. Firstly, decorated ostrich eggs may be associated with logistical mobility, with only a small part of the object's use-life occurring at the residential site. Notably, at Diepkloof, their connection with the long-distance transfer of lithic raw material has been observed (Texier et al. 2010).

The second possibility is that, in this context, geometric patterns could serve a recognition function. However, it remains unclear whether the signs are linked to the individual who concealed them or signal the social group to which they belonged, aligning with the model proposed by D'Errico and Hensilwood. Personally, I am inclined toward the former solution, supported by evidence from the ethnographic record (Wannenburgh et al. 1980) and the absence of standardization in these geometric signs. Additionally, if it extends beyond group affiliations, the exchange of EOES would argue against signaling. Conversely, the strong resemblance of some signs to those found on ochre might indicate a transversality that goes beyond the individual, reaching the level of the social group, assuming contemporaneity is confirmed with precise context-based studies.

Stone

The third material bearing engravings in the African MSA is stone, and in such instances marks etched onto stone are relatively infrequent and ambiguous. At Palmenhorst (Anderson 2012), a pebble approximately 8 cm in size was unearthed, featuring incisions on the cortical part characterized by parallel vertical and oblique lines framed at the top and bottom by a horizontal line. While Anderson (2012) notes the visual resemblance of this artifact to those from Blombos and Klein Kliphuis, I find the most intriguing aspect to be that this pebble was subsequently chipped, partially erasing the engraved motif. This strongly suggests that (1) the engraved motif does not carry any inherent symbolic meaning in the sense of being ineffable or mysterious, and (2) the distinction between 'engraving' (i.e., 'symbolic') and function is artificial and a construct of our interpretative framework.

The case of Muden differs, as the prevailing interpretation is that the lines were incised after chipping but before the formation of the patina (Anderson 2012). However, given that this finding is from a surface context, its significance is somewhat limited. Anderson also reports another pebble with incisions, used as a core, also from a surface context, in the gravel deposits of the Mkomanzi River.

Another intriguing aspect is that among the marks, the 'cross-hatched' motifs, previously observed on ochre and EOES, predominate. I propose that these stone objects could be part of a logistical circulation of raw

materials, subject to targeted procurement and possibly concealed in caches, akin to EOES. In this context, the markings on the cortex may serve to signal ownership, either at the individual or band level, of such raw material. These occurrences are associated with open-air sites, aligning well with the proposed model.

Bones

In the South African MSA, there is evidence of bones engraved with geometric patterns. The first is a bone with a series of sub-parallel incisions from the MSA levels of Blombos (d'Errico et al. 2015). From Blombos, evidence of a retoucher with a series of incised lines and two bone fragments with possible incisions has also been published (d'Errico and Henshilwood 2007). Additionally, a bone fragment marked with a 'cross-hatched' motif, published in an article titled 'Experiment Preceeds Innovation', comes from Diepkloof. According to the authors, this abstract representation is the oldest in Africa and predates the innovation burst characterizing the HP and Still Bay levels (Porraz et al. 2021).

It has not been possible to successfully identify any refitting, making it challenging to determine whether the bone was a utilitarian or non-utilitarian object. Nevertheless, two arguments can be advanced: (1) there is an absence of additional intentional transformations or uses on the engraved bone fragment, and (2) no worked bone has been uncovered in the pre-Still Bay and Still Bay faunal collection from Diepkloof thus far. These considerations led the authors to exclude utilitarian aspects.

These pieces of evidence are intriguing due to their association with various types of bone industry and modified bones, which are not explored here, and because they are linked to relatively ancient phases. They seem to represent unstructured geometric features, and it is not surprising that they were found on butchered bones. As mentioned earlier, butchering with stone tools often leaves traces and striations on bones, and the understanding of this process was likely deeply anchored in the cognitive repertoire of MSA humans. There is no direct relationship with other evidence, nor any form of recursivity or standardization.

Discussion

I have outlined the main themes related to behavioral modernity through the presence of objects featuring geometric markings in the archaeological record of the South African MSA and proposed some archaeology-based interpretative pathways.

Starting with the concept of behavioral modernity itself, I am interested to note that despite being the most adopted approach, a conception based

on a list of characteristics to identify behavioral modernity, in the absence of well-defined thresholds, contains an intrinsic problem of relativism (Garofoli 2016). This is demonstrated by the fact that among the numerous lists published since the 1980s, it is very difficult to find two identical ones. In some way, these lists should capture the essence of 'what it means to be human', but in this way, the behavioral variability of hominins from the end of the Middle Pleistocene is analyzed through direct comparison with contemporary human behavior (Scerri and Will 2023). This is also a problem, because we start from the assumption that there exists an eternal and immutable 'human nature'. Artifacts considered 'modern' have been taken as evidence of the existence of a modern mind in their makers. Such an inference is implicitly justified by referring to the principle of uniformity among living populations (Conard 2010; Garofoli 2016). Projected onto the archaeological record, instances of material culture that fall into the list of 'modern behaviors' are considered as evidence of the existence of a modern cognitive architecture in these extinct populations. We witness here the presence of a circular reasoning that cannot be helpful in interpreting instances of past human behavior.

Another critical element in the current approach to behavioral modernity is the Rubicon model (sensu Meneganzin and Currie 2022), which identifies the presence/absence of a trait as a cognitive-behavioral leap. In my opinion, not considering the frequency of a behavior and limiting it to mere presence or absence is highly restrictive.

Garofoli (2016) has suggested that we can begin to think about cognitive archaeology without the concept of behavioral modernity. I would go further to say that we can think about the archaeology of early *Homo sapiens* without the concept of behavioral modernity. The current use of behavioral modernity in archaeology relies on a series of arbitrary categories and unjustified inferences. This is particularly evident in the current interpretation of early incised marks, the subject of this work.

To go from the engraving to the 'modern behavior', there are at least three interpretative leaps: From trait to mark, from mark to symbol, and from symbol to an indication of behavioral modernity. In reality, each of these steps needs to be analyzed in its own context and tested before moving on to the next.

Ultimately, there is also a confusion over the term 'symbolic'.

As previously highlighted by Hodgson (2014) and Malafouris (2021), one of the major problems related to the interpretation of engravings in the MSA is the ambiguity with which the term 'symbolic' is employed. 'The Blombos engravings and shell beads are a priori assumed to be indicative of fully symbolic behaviour when there may be different levels of arbitrary reference accorded to such items' (Hodgson 2014).

Not only that, often there is a selective and partial, if not instrumental, use of semiotics and Peircean thought. For instance, there is a substantial

equivalence drawn between the sign and the symbol. The symbol inherently contains an indirect, implicit message, unlike the sign, and needs to be interpreted within a specific semiotic theory (Todorov 1977). Chase (1991) had already noted that for something to be symbolic, the drawing must have a cognitively constructed and conventionally maintained relationship with something else, whether physical or conceptual.

Symbols derive their meaning from a set of arbitrary social conventions. Pierce, in alignment with Saussure, contends that any signifier has the potential to become a completely arbitrary symbol. The key determinant of meaning lies in how an interpreter projects significance onto the signifier.

This gives rise to the problem consistently overlooked in the current interpretations. Every sign has the potential to be symbolic, but this potentiality is contingent upon the interpreter's perspective. The current approach lacks an emic standpoint, one that starts from the social subject (i.e., the Pleistocene hunter-gatherer) and can determine whether a sign is considered symbolic or not. Instead, we persist in an etic approach, where we, as humans of the third millennium, 'forcefully' impose interpretations onto the given signs. Without the social element, the interpretative 'key', we find ourselves unable to definitively state whether an incised trace on ochre or an ostrich egg qualifies as a symbol. Paradoxically, the social world of MSA hunter-gatherers could have been infused with symbols that did not leave a material trace and for which we lack an interpretative key. From my perspective, it is impossible, or at the very least improper, to speak of a symbol in the absence of such a key. I could reverse Peirce's famous quote, 'Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign' (Peirce 1931), and say, 'Everything is a symbol if interpreted as a symbol'. Meaning was arbitrary in the past as it is in the present.

The discussion of symbols could be paralleled with that of 'style', which played a significant role in processual archaeology but fell out of use, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Wilkins 2010). Wobst (1977) combined the concepts of function and style, suggesting the intentionality of signaling one's social identity to a different group. Polly Wiessner later (1986) differentiated style that conveys social identity (which she calls 'emblemic') from individual style (which she defines as assertive). What do the early geometric depictions refer to? Like others before me, I believe these are an individual, not a group expression, given their limited redundancy in the archaeological record.

Creanza, Kolodny, and Feldman (2017) proposed a model suggesting that the transient nature of these 'modern' behaviors is due to the populations in which they occurred being too small and disconnected from one another to stably maintain complex culture.

How effectively we can differentiate between social groups based on their material culture is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this article.

However, it is worth noting that Polly Wiessner has identified a correspondence of over 90% in the material culture of San groups in the Kalahari (Wiessner 1986). Material culture has a strong connection to adaptation to environmental conditions, but where does what is commonly called 'symbolic culture' fit into this discourse? To what extent are the traits repeated in the engravings of the African MSA shared among different groups? Should they be connected to social networking, or are they spontaneous expressions, and why? The simultaneous presence of signs at the same sites/levels (e.g., at Diepkloof ochre/EOES) is intriguing, although the exact contemporaneity is yet to be conclusively proven. It illustrates the authentic proficiency of these hunter-gatherers in creating signs on diverse surfaces, indicating a complexity arising from individual and social instances—likely diverse but potentially converging into a common expression. However, if the signs were unequivocal symbols for signaling, they would ideally be superimposable or, at the very least, closely resemble each other. They should be conspicuously discernible, particularly to individuals external to the social group.

Another bias inherent in the current discussion on 'behavioral modernity' is the systematic distinction between functional and symbolic aspects. This division, originating from the Western Enlightenment tradition, may not seamlessly apply to the past. In traditional societies, the delineation between these categories is considerably more nuanced, as highlighted by Malafouris, who underscores the semiotic co-emergence of the signifier and the signified (2013). One of the primary shortcomings in current interpretations is the separation of sign production (making marks) from its environment, technique, and material (Malafouris 2021). The sign is itself an artifact, the outcome of planning and predetermination, akin to the production of a lithic artifact or the weaving of a fiber. Malafouris argues that, from a semiotic perspective, all marks are material signs, signifying the action or movement – whether intentional or unintentional – that brought them into existence. We could say that the hand is the primary tool in creating signs. This is unsurprising, considering the long tradition of eye-hand coordination and careful engagement with material, likely originating with stone tool production or even earlier, with anvil percussion (Bruner et al. 2018; Bruner, Fedato, and Spinapolice 2016; Bruner and Iriki 2016; Malafouris 2021; Spinapolice 2021; Wynn et al. 2020).

Lastly, the current debate lacks a profound reflection on the epistemological aspect, the theoretical decision on 'what we want to demonstrate' through our list of 'modern' traits. The examination of the collective grouping of these motifs, spanning both geographical and chronological distances, invites scrutiny. It prompts us to ponder whether there exists a genuine shared trajectory among these signs or if they are more akin to a process of discovery and rediscovery, following internal structures of our

brain. This perspective challenges us to consider whether the codification and cultural transmission of these motifs might not only necessitate more time but also a different societal milieu. This raises questions about the dynamic nature of cultural evolution and underscores the potential influence of societal contexts in shaping the persistence and transmission of specific behaviors or symbolic expressions.

We know that transmission occurs through the intersection of two mechanisms, that of 'trial and error' and that of imitation and (over)emulation (Di Paolo and Di Vincenzo 2018).

As Malafouris points out, the relationship between the sign and 'abstract representation', between this and symbolic behavior, and between the latter and behavioral modernity, says more about modern archaeologists than it does about the MSA people who produced those signs. John Shea had already addressed this weakness in his well-known article from 2011, '*Homo sapiens* Is as *Homo sapiens* Was', contrasting behavioral modernity, understood as an archaeological construct, with behavioral variability which has biological and ecological roots.

Is our insistence on uniqueness a pre-Darwinian residue of being placed at the top of the hierarchy of living beings? What do we mean to demonstrate? Are we seeking an unchanging uniqueness of *Homo sapiens*, perhaps even eternal?

Our quest is to unravel the essence of our identity, undoubtedly. We strive to revisit the milestones that have led us to the present moment. Our intention is to grasp the juncture at which we diverged from other creatures in a manner that defines us as distinctly human. Yet isn't the dissemination of a particular behavior the heart of the matter? Doesn't its accessibility to the entirety of humanity, rather than its isolated occurrence, make the real difference? Doesn't this behavior, whether it involves marking a trait on an ostrich egg, a stone, or a rock wall, attain significance only when it becomes a shared practice embedded in cultural tradition? It is at this point that it allows us to encode, standardize, and truly assimilate it into our cultural fabric, enabling us to transcend its mere occurrence.

McBrearty and Brooks's model is compatible with the idea of cumulative culture for the whole humankind that took us from bifacial tools to space exploration. However, our perception of cumulative culture is distorted by the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record (Ghirotto, Spinapolice, and Meneganzin 2023), which, when analyzed accurately, turns out to be mosaic-like, with very few elements of continuity, as excellently demonstrated by Scerri and Will (2023).

It is only by analyzing these mechanisms in the available archaeological record that we will progress in our understanding of behaviors that we now classify as 'symbolic'.

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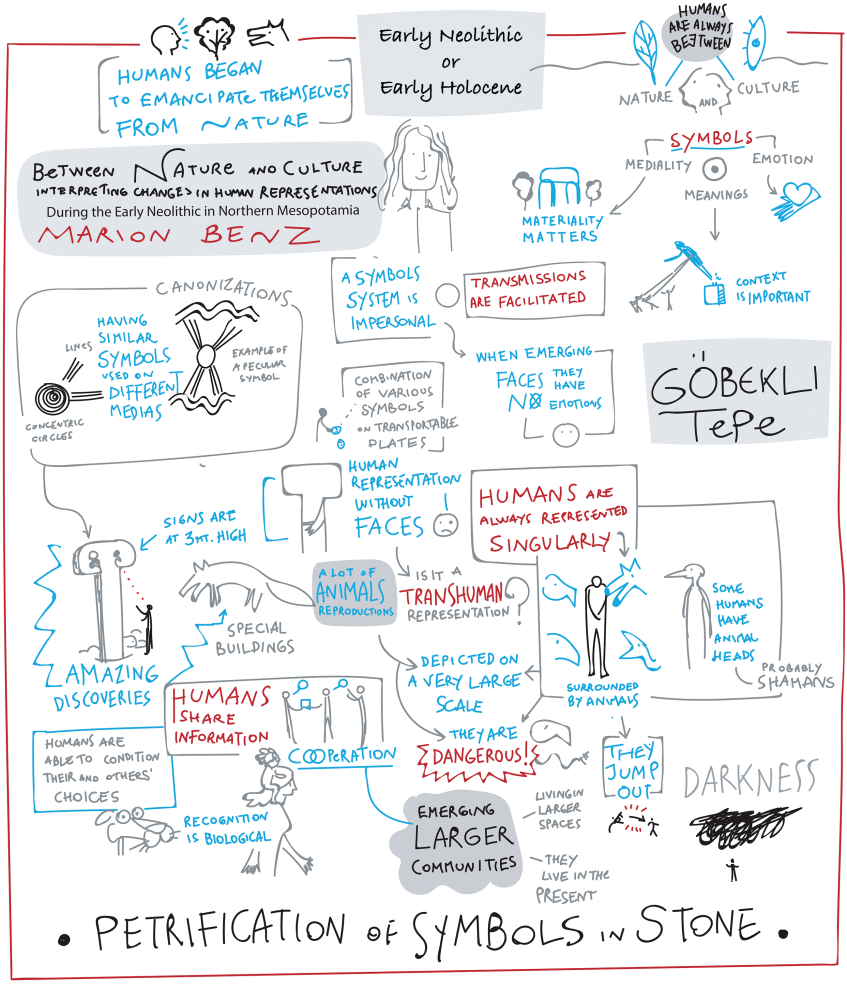
Early Neolithic
or
Early Holocene
HUMANS BEGAN TO EMANCIPATE THEMSELVES FROM NATURE
HUMANS ARE ALWAYS BETWEEN
NATURE
AND
CULTURE
BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE
INTERPRETING CHANGES IN HUMAN REPRESENTATIONS
During the Early Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia
MARION BENZ
SYMBOLS
MEDIALITY
EMOTION
MEANINGS
MATERIALITY MATTERS
CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT
CANONIZATIONS
HAVING SIMILAR SYMBOLS USED ON DIFFERENT MEDIAS
LINES
CONCENTRIC CIRCLES
EXAMPLE OF A PECULIAR SYMBOL
A SYMBOLS SYSTEM IS IMPERSONAL
TRANSMISSIONS ARE FACILITATED
COMBINATION OF VARIOUS SYMBOLS ON TRANSPORTABLE PLATES
WHEN EMERGING FACES THEY HAVE NO EMOTIONS
GÖBEKLI TEPE
HUMAN REPRESENTATION WITHOUT FACES
HUMANS ARE ALWAYS REPRESENTED SINGULARLY
SIGNS ARE AT 3MT. HIGH
AMAZING DISCOVERIES
SPECIAL BUILDINGS
A LOT OF ANIMALS REPRODUCTIONS
IS IT A TRANSHUMAN REPRESENTATION !
SURROUNDED BY ANIMALS
SOME HUMANS HAVE ANIMAL HEADS
PROBABLY SHAMANS
DEPICTED ON A VERY LARGE SCALE
HUMANS SHARE INFORMATION
COOPERATION
HUMANS ARE ABLE TO CONDITION THEIR AND OTHERS' CHOICES
RECOGNITION IS BIOLOGICAL
THEY ARE DANGEROUS!
THEY JUMP OUT
DARKNESS
EMERGING LARGER COMMUNITIES
LIVING IN LARGER SPACES
THEY LIVE IN THE PRESENT
• PETRIFICATION OF SYMBOLS IN STONE •

2 Between Nature and Culture

Interpreting Changes in Human Representations During the Early Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia

Marion Benz and Joachim Bauer

We suggest that the observed changes in media expression reflect a need to facilitate social life in permanent large-scale communities. The imagery appears to have its roots in hunter-gatherer concepts and does not imply the emergence of new mental capacities. However, the new mediality had significant impacts on the relationship between humans and their environments, as well as on social life within these increasingly larger groups.

Introduction

In the 1980s, when the first monumental stone pillar buildings were uncovered at Nevalı Çori, the prevailing paradigm regarded southeastern Anatolia as a secondary center of Neolithization, with the Levant being the primary focus (Cauvin 1997).[1] However, despite earlier important excavations (e.g., Çanöyü, Abu Hureyra, Halula), it was only through the excavations at Göbekli Tepe, which began in 1995 and were led for almost two decades by the late Klaus Schmidt, that it became evident that northern Mesopotamia was an early Neolithic center in its own right (Clare 2020; Schmidt 2011)[2].

Data obtained from this site and other rescue excavations conducted for the Ilisu Dam project and on the Middle Euphrates (e.g., Coqueugniot 2014; Karul 2011; Miyake 2013, 2016; Miyake et al. 2012; Özkaya and Coşkun 2011; Özkaya, Coşkun, and Soyukaya 2013; Stordeur 2015; Yartah 2013) extended the timeline of early permanent settlements as far back as the 10th millennium BCE (Benz et al. 2012, 2015). Furthermore, it became apparent that the monumental representations found at Nevalı Çori were not isolated occurrences but part of a long-term development of an emerging canonized symbolic system. Almost identical motifs and combinations of motifs were discovered from the easternmost part of Anatolia to the middle Euphrates and to the west of it, notably at the renowned site of Tell Qaramel (Benz and Bauer 2013; Karul 2011; Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2007; Mazurowski and Kanjou 2012). Echoes of these multimedia motif combinations can be found at sites dating back

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to the 8th millennium BCE in Central Anatolia, albeit in a different social context (Benz and Bauer 2021; Hodder and Meskell 2011).

However, despite the remarkable emergence of novel media practices, perhaps the earliest instance of medial convergence ever observed (cf. Bracker 2018), systematic analyses of this phenomenon have long been absent. Investigations on the Neolithic imagery from Southwest Asia were largely confined to semiotic interpretations (e.g., Morenz 2014; Morenz and Schmidt 2009; Peters and Schmidt 2004; cf. Watkins 2010).

This is all the more surprising, as Colin Renfrew (1998) emphasized the importance of material culture as an external storage device.[3] Expanding on Merlin Donald's cognitive evolutionary model (1991 [2001]), Renfrew suggested introducing an intermediate stage – which he identified with the Neolithic – between Donald's 'mythic culture' of early Homo sapiens and the 'Theoretic cultures using sophisticated information retrieval systems. . . usually in the form of writing, frequently in urban societies' (Renfrew 1998, 4). While the linearity of this evolutionistic concept may be criticized, subsequent discoveries in Southwest Asia, along with ongoing discussions, appeared to support his ideas. Our approach tries to provide an integrative comprehensive study on the early media systems drawing from new insights in social neurosciences, specifically examining the interplay between collective memories, emotions, and social practices.

In this chapter, we will begin by providing a brief overview of our methodology. For a more comprehensive description, interested readers are referred to earlier publications (Bauer and Benz 2013; Benz 2017a, 2017b; Benz and Bauer, 2021). Subsequently, we will focus on the evolution of human representations across various media from the 11th to the 8th millennium BCE. This case study serves as the foundation for a systematic analysis of the medial aspects of this topic, placing it within the broader context of the emergence of permanent sedentism.

As a conclusion, we will hypothesize that the early Holocene communities in northern Mesopotamia indeed established an extensive communication network characterized by standardized recurring combinations of signs, possibly even symbols.[4] This network bridged anonymity and fostered relationships across a vast geographical area, in the absence of daily personal encounters. However, it is important to note that early imagery was deeply rooted in the intimate connection between humans and animals, with depictions of humans being rare and portrayed as a small part of nature. The abstractions found in these depictions do not seem arbitrary; they represent abbreviations and selective representations of ritual experiences. Rather than signifying the emergence of a new mental capacity, we argue that this imagery developed organically through and was deeply grounded in daily and ritual practices, involving 'simplification' and 'schematization' (Sütterlin 2003, 147).

The central question is why this widespread and pervasive use of images became necessary and remained successful for an extended period (see also Junker 2012). With the monumentalization and petrification of this imagery, human groups created anthropomorphic representations that surpassed the animal world, signaling their gradual emancipation from nature. The introduction of this new mediality potentially had a profound impact on collective memories, the formulation of doctrines, and how people managed their lives within ever-expanding communities. In our perspective, this era may have marked a significant shift in perception and in how individuals conceived of their social and natural environments.

Method and Materials

Our approach aligns with the critique of the iconic turn, which suggests that the social significance of a representation is not solely determined by the content of images. Instead, it recognizes that the imagery itself holds a presence within the community, influencing and being influenced by the people (Boehm 2010; Gell 1998; Merleau-Ponty 1964[5]; Sauerländer 2012). This concept of images having an emotional impact dates back far beyond the iconic turn, reaching into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in seminal works such as Aby Warburg's 'Schlangensymbol' from 1923 (1996). However, our approach differs in a crucial aspect: We do not aim to uncover subjective feelings but rather to explore emotional reactions and the potential social impact of medial systems.

Therefore, we suggest three areas of inquiry to fully grasp the significance of symbolic systems:

- Content: This aspect delves into what is being represented.
- Mediality: This investigates how a symbolic system is conveyed and the ways in which individuals engage with it.
- Emotional Impact: This dimension concentrates on the emotional atmosphere in which entities are depicted, along with the emphasis placed on and/or the selection of particular elements.

These three domains are deeply interconnected with the sociocultural context in which they are embedded. They are both shaped by this context and, in turn, contribute to shaping it (Nünning and Nünning 2010, 16).[6]

For the first field of investigation, readers are referred to in-depth analyses of early Neolithic symbols (e.g., Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2007; Morenz 2014; Morenz and Schmidt 2009). Since our focus centers on the social impact, we are primarily interested in the second and third fields of investigation.

In our exploration of mediality, we draw from the medial investigations advocated by Wagoner (2010) and Nünning, Nünning, and Neumann

(2010). In the third field of investigation, namely, the emotional impact, we present new findings from social neurosciences (for a comprehensive explanation, refer to Bauer and Benz 2013; Benz and Bauer 2013, 2021).

Our basic assumption is that, over the past 11,000 years, evolution has not significantly altered our primary perceptions and emotional responses. Extensive and systematic studies on the relationship between emotions, environmental factors, and physical conditions since the 1990s have demonstrated that, despite cultural variations, we share the capacity to elicit emotional responses to specific stimuli (for references, see Benz 2017a). These responses are rooted in our basic neurological makeup and, under normal circumstances, are controlled by the neo-cortex (PFC) (Bauer 2019; D'Argembeau 2015; D'Argembeau et al. 2007; Kelley et al. 2002; Kitayama and Park 2010), which is heavily influenced by enculturation (for the impact of social contexts on the perception of faces, see e.g., Ardizzi et al. 2015; for the mutual relationship of enculturation and neurological development, see Bauer 2015, 2019).

Therefore, deducing a potential emotional background mood from the early Holocene imagery does not necessarily imply that individuals reacted in specific ways to the new use and type of images, but that some emotional reactions were more likely than others. The sociocultural context of encoded imagery is crucial for any interpretation (Pare 2012).

Three key human characteristics are relevant to this discussion:

- Neuronal Plasticity: The human brain's capacity for neuronal plasticity enables it to be significantly shaped by different environments, whether social or natural (Bauer 2019; Eisenberg 1995). This influence can have a profound impact on perception, decision-making, and memory, particularly during infancy.
- Theory of Mind: Humans possess a highly developed ability to consider and interpret the thoughts of others to a much greater extent than other primates. This includes the capacity to attribute symbolic meaning and agency to both individuals and objects.
- Empathy and Resonance (Bauer 2005, 2019; Meltzoff 2013; Waytz and Mitchell 2011): Grounded in the mirror-neuron system discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008), these capacities likely played a crucial role in early human survival and learning.

Over time, humans have refined these capacities, making them more advanced compared to other species. However, these traits have both positive and negative aspects. In small, egalitarian groups, they can be advantageous, but in larger, more sedentary societies, they open the door to manipulation and indoctrination. Projecting meaning and agency onto

objects can lead to anxiety about uncontrollable forces, such as punishing gods, ghosts, spirits, and ancestors. Empathy and resonance, essential for lasting, mindful, and resilient coexistence, can be misused by self-centered individuals, as suggested by Brian Hayden's concept of 'aggrandizers' (Hayden 2014; cf. contributions in Benz 2010).

It is also essential to note that the neoliberal idea of individualism, widely promoted by the market and influencers, appears to be an illusion, at least from a neuroscientific perspective. When we believe we are thinking solely about ourselves, neuronal networks associated with thinking about others are also activated (Bauer 2019; Jenkins, Neil Macrae, and Mitchell 2008; Krienen, Tu, and Buckner 2010; Ma et al. 2012; Mitchell, Macrae, and Banaji 2006). This suggests that we always consider ourselves as part of our social environments (Bauer 2019). Humans need social bonding not only during infancy but also throughout their lives. Social deprivation is experienced akin to pain and can result in depression, illness, and an elevated risk of aggression (Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams 2003; for a review, see Bauer 2008, 2011). It has been observed that people – consciously or not – assimilate with those around them (Haun, Rekers, and Tomasello 2014; Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin 2008) and adopt collective memories even if they contradict personal reminiscences (Edelson et al. 2011; Hirst, Yamashiro, and Coman 2018); these processes of assimilation enhance the likelihood of generating sympathy. This further amplifies the influence of significant individuals and the group one aspires to join.

The archaeological data on which our theses are based have been excavated in numerous old and recent archaeological campaigns. For a comprehensive online catalogue of symbols, please refer to Cartolano (2022).

It is important to note that our selection here primarily focuses on human representations, but this does not imply their greater importance. On the contrary, many of our ideas derive from the specific selection and style of animal representations (Benz and Bauer 2013, 2015). As we will demonstrate, early Holocene communities had a profound connection with their natural environments.

Our examples are drawn from various excavations spanning from east to west, including Güsir (Karul 2011), Hasankeyf Höyük (Miyake 2013, 2016; Miyake et al. 2012), Körtiktepe (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011; Özkaya et al. 2013), Göbekli Tepe (GT) (Clare 2020; Dietrich, Notroff, and Schmidt 2017; Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2007; Schmidt 2011), Yeni Mahalle and Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 2011), Jerf el Ahmar (Stordeur 2015), Tell 'Abr 3 (Yartah 2013), and Tell Qaramel (Mazurowski and Kanjou 2012). Additionally, we will mention examples from Karahan Tepe; however, due to ongoing excavations, they must await scientific publications before being conclusively included (Karul 2021; Altuntaş 2023; for the location of these sites see Benz and Bauer 2013).

A New Mediality and Imagery

During the earliest Holocene, between 9600 and 9200 cal BCE, representations of isolated humans on stone vessels and stone platelets are surrounded by a specific combination of animals. These are: Waterfowl (clearly identified only at GT)/birds, scorpions and snakes, both at GT and Körtiktepe (Figures 2.1 and 2.2), fox, bull, and boar (at GT and Karahan). Even in small depictions, the human figure wears headgear and a special long coat (Körtiktepe [Figure 2.3; see Özkaya and Siddiq 2021], possibly Hasankeyf Höyük[7]). This is all the more striking, as in other prehistoric schematic drawings anthropomorphic representations are reduced to their basic characteristics (Sütterlin 2003, 152–3).

Another example can be found on a small chlorite vessel displayed in the Diyarbakır Museum.[9] On this small oval vessel, a sequence of three isolated figures is depicted, each surrounded by snakes represented with

Figure 2.1 The combination of a human figure, snakes, birds, and concentric circles, sometimes accompanied by scorpions, is a recurring motif found on bucket-shaped chlorite vessels. Similar motifs are observed on a monumental stone pillar (P43) and a small shaft straightener from Göbeklitepe (see Figure 2.2). The most elaborate examples of these motifs can be seen at Körtiktepe, one of which is shown here (see Özkaya et al. 2013, 61). (Courtesy of V. Özkaya, photo: Körtiktepe Archive.)

Figure 2.2 This 5-cm large shaft straightener was found in an activity zone between domestic round dwellings, dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, during the 2015 excavation season. (Courtesy of L. Clare, photo: Nico Becker, German Archaeological Institute.)[8]

multiple zigzag lines and triangular heads, which are larger than the figures themselves and seem to crawl up the entire height of the vessel. The first anthropomorphic figure lacks any distinctive features, while the second figure wears a long coat with many stripes hanging from their extended arms, and the head is cut off by the vessel's rim. This second figure is separated from the other figures by three snakes on each side. The third figure is once again separated from the others by three of the mentioned snakes on one side and one snake on the other side. It is an oval-shaped creature with two stripes departing from its top, and there is no clear identification of a head. These stripes resemble the headgear seen in other anthropomorphic representations. The 'arms' of the figure are depicted as two double stripes, and instead of legs, a tail is depicted. This gives it a closer resemblance to a tortoise than a human figure.

At Körtiktepe and Hasankeyf Höyük, human representations are limited to bucket-shaped vessels (Figures 2.1 and 2.3). It is important to note that, with the exception of one vessel (Figure 2.4; Yartah 2013), human

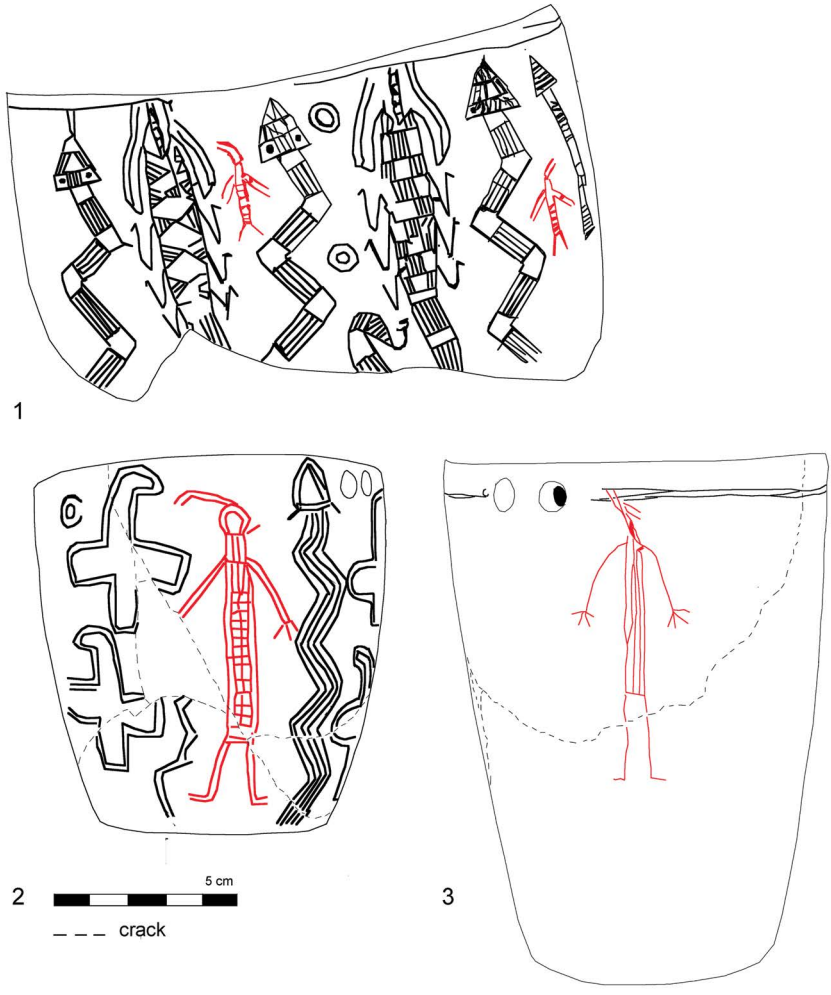

Figure 2.3 Schematic representations of humans on stone vessels from Körtiktepe. (Drawing: by the author; after Özkaya et al. 2013; Özkaya and Siddiq 2021.)

depictions are absent from the belly-shaped stone vessels. Instead, these vessels feature intricate patterns comprising snakes, zigzag lines, concentric circles, and stripe-shaded triangles. Occasionally, these patterns are combined with representations of goats or ibexes, as seen in studies by Coşkun et al. (2010) and, on less well-executed, possible slightly younger imitations, from Tell 'Abr 3 (Figure 2.4; Yartah 2013) and GT (Dietrich et al. 2017, Figure 2.5, 20, top left).

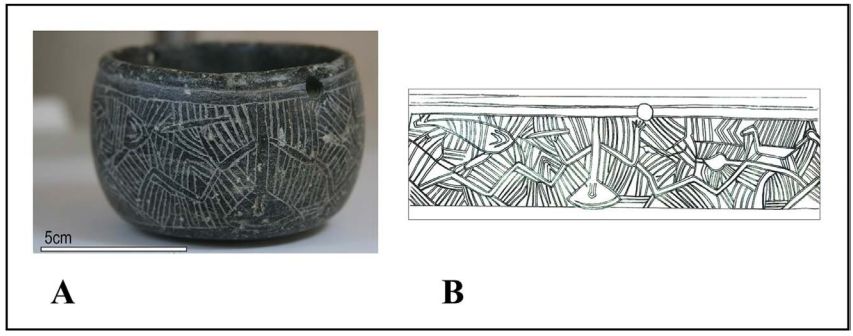

Figure 2.4 (a) Local adaptations of a motif combination from sophisticated belly-shaped stone vessels (chlorite and limestone) from Körtik Tepe on a small chlorite vessel from Tell 'Abr 3; (b) a drawing of the complete incisions the ca. 10-cm large chlorite vessel with the (supposed?) hunting scene. (Courtesy of T. Yartah.)

Figure 2.5 A recently discovered stone sculpture from Karahan Tepe. Similar to depictions on the so-called 'totem pole' from GT, a feline holds a human head in his paws. (Courtesy of N. Karul, photo: Bekir Köşker.)

Human representations on stone pebbles or recycled chlorite sherds are rare during the earliest phase, with the exception of the recently found exemplar from GT (Figure 2.2). Generally, representations are limited to scorpions, snakes, larvae, birds, horned quadrupeds (ibexes?/goats?/deer?), some kind of 'larvae', and abstract motifs (e.g., Özkaya et al. 2013).

At Göbekli Tepe (GT), foxes are frequently depicted alongside human representations on pillars, and some of these foxes are portrayed in remarkably relaxed positions. In contrast, felines and boars are often depicted in an aggressive and attacking stance, with bared teeth and an erect penis. Another recurring motif found at various sites, including GT, Jerf el Ahmar, and Karahan, is of birds with prominent curved beaks. These bird depictions vary in size, ranging from small figurines to approximately life-size architectural decorations.

The dating of a newly discovered sculpture from Karahan Tepe with a feline holding a human head in his paws is, to our knowledge, not precisely known (Figure 2.5).[10] However, it is one of the key findings concerning the differentiation between representations of humans and so-called 'superhumans' (Watkins 2019). This figure is comparable to the so-called 'totem pole' from GT and the sculpture from Nevalı Çori. These two sculptures show a 'bear' (?) and a bird, respectively, holding human heads in their pawns and claws (Hauptmann 2011, Fig. 24a/b; Schmidt 2011, Fig. 35). It is likely, that this kind of representation belongs to the later phase, represented by GT II and findings from Nevalı Çori (see below).

Some monumental stone pillars at Karahan Tepe, Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and possibly at many of the still-unexcavated sites surrounding the Harran Plain can be clearly identified as humanoid representations with hands, belts, loincloths of animal (fox?) skin, and collars clearly depicted but without representations of the face. Their heads are abstract, without any mouth, eyes, nose, or ears represented, just like a supporting bulk, possibly for beams of a roof. On the belts and the shaft of the pillars, signs of a sickle moon, an enigmatic H-shaped sign, a large disc[11], and zigzag lines – some of which represent snakes with triangular-shaped heads – can be found. Some of these pillars are cluttered with representations of various animals (Morenz 2014; Schmidt 2011).

During the later phase of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) and Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) periods at Göbekli Tepe (GT), there is an observed increase in stone pillars featuring human hands (pers. comm. Klaus Schmidt). Interestingly, the size of the pillars, in general, tends to be reduced during this period. While this later phase is clearly identifiable in the architectural sequences, it is challenging to securely attribute sculptural art and findings due to the fact that most of them were discovered within the filling or in secondary use contexts.

A monumental sculpture depicting a man gripping his phallus was uncovered at Yeni Mahalle, situated in the modern town of Şanlıurfa (Çelik 2011; Hauptmann 2011). According to the findings, it might be dated to the PPNA, but it is more likely from the early phase of the PPNB.

Similar to the early phase, humanoid pillars at GT, Karahan and Nevalı Çori are arranged in an oval or rectangle, often surrounding a pair of central humanoid pillars. This arrangement may have been influenced by constructional constraints for roofing, as suggested by Kurapkat (2015). Alternatively, it could reflect the activities of human assemblages within these unique buildings (Morenz and Schmidt 2009).

During this slightly later phase, schematic human representations on stone platelets are still rare, with only two known from Tell 'Abr 3, possibly three more, and two other potential depictions from Jerf el Ahmar and one from Tell Qaramel. Most of these representations are (intentionally?) ambiguous and could also potentially be interpreted as birds (Figure 2.6; for a summary, see Benz and Bauer 2021). However, as argued elsewhere (Benz and Bauer 2015), schematic representations of birds are different, sometimes being so simplified that they appear as only a cross (e.g., Özkaya and Coşkun 2011, Fig. 17, lower right side). Another stone

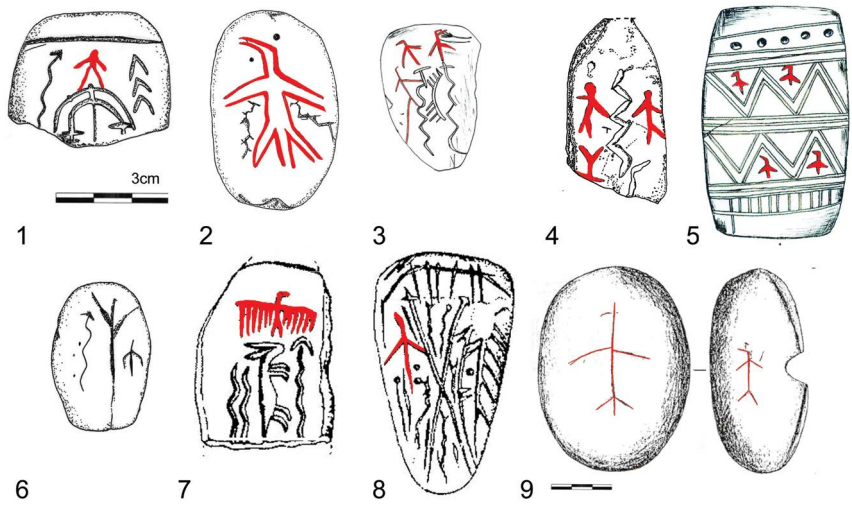

Figure 2.6 Representation of birds and/or humans with snakes on stone platelets and a shaft straightener/recycled stone vessel fragment, respectively: 1–5, Tell 'Abr 3 (Yartah 2013, 182.3, 185.3, 187.1–3); 6, Göbekli Tepe (Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2007, 107); 7–8, Jerf el Ahmar (Stordeur 2015, 4.3–4); and 9, Tell Qaramel (Mazurowski and Kanjou 2012, Pl. 72.2). Note that all are reproduced at the same scale, except N° 9. (Modifications by MB.)

platelet with a possible human representation was found by the team of Schmidt in the youngest occupation phase GT I, dated to the PPNB. Its depictions were interpreted as a bird, a snake, and a 'tree', alternatively as an 'arrow' or 'twig' (Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt 2007, 106; Schmidt 2007, 306).[12] However, in light of earlier motifs, the latter might represent a human figure too.

It is for the first time on the exemplars from Tell 'Abr 3 that potentially up to three individuals were depicted. Most of the human representations are combined with snakes, some also with birds, scorpions or quadrupeds, and other unidentified abstract signs. It should be noted that the attribution to the earlier or later phase is hardly possible, due to the secondary and unpublished contexts of most of these items.

Monumental sculptures from Nevalı Çori, likely dating to the PPNB period (referred to as 'Nevalıçorien', according to Hauptmann 2011, 97), were also discovered in secondary positions. The well-known oversized head with a snake was discovered 'built into the back of a wall of the niche' in Cult Building III (Hauptmann 2011, 96). As for the context of the limestone basin fragment, it has, to our knowledge, never been published (Figure 2.7), but it holds significant importance. In contrast to earlier depictions of isolated humans, the scene represents two individuals, regardless of their gender (they were interpreted as female due to their bellies and the possible absence of clear male attributes; Hauptmann 2011, 100).

Figure 2.7 Copy of a limestone vessel fragment found at the PPNB site of Nevalı Çori, depicting human representations engaged in a ritual or another communal activity. (Photo by MB.)

Figure 2.8 In the wall painting from Çatalhöyük, humans are still represented smaller than the aurochs, which is depicted in an oversized scale. However, compared to the early Holocene imagery with solitary humans surrounded by larger animals, this time the group acts together and successfully dispatches the animal. The protruding tongue of the animal possibly indicates its death or exhaustion. (Open source illustration: Omar Hoftun ©.)

The interpretation of the third figure in the middle remains open, whether it represents a shaman or a tortoise, symbolizing fertility, is a subject of discussion. For our purpose, it is worth noting that in this relief, two or three individuals are portrayed acting together.

As a final point of comparison, we contrast the isolated anthropomorphic representations of the PPNA and early-middle PPNB periods with the famous wall painting from Çatalhöyük (Figure 2.8; Cutting 2007 for the context see Hodder 2006). We have chosen this wall painting because it reflects many of the fundamental changes in human aggregations that occurred between the 10th/9th millennium BCE and the formation of agglutinated, permanent, large-scale villages in the 8th/7th millennium BCE.

While not every detail of this drawing is precisely replicated, it is sufficient for the focus of this contribution to highlight some key characteristics:

- The representation of the bull bears a strong resemblance to the depictions found at Göbekli Tepe on a stone pillar (see Hodder and Meskell 2011).
- Humans are depicted as smaller than the animal, yet they surround it as a group and are armed with weapons, marking a stark contrast to

representations of solitary human figures during the earliest phases of the Holocene.
- The hanging tongue of the animal conveys its exhaustion and submission.
- The individualistic style of the human figures suggests that there may have been no specific dress code, but that they represent a cooperating community of hunting people.

Summary and Discussion

The people of the early Neolithic period in northern Mesopotamia developed a complex network of signs, some of which undoubtedly held the status of symbols (Schmidt 2011, 52), even though their precise interpretation remains partially concealed from us. In terms of content, many aspects were likely closely linked to the 'ways of worldmaking' of preceding cultures. This is evident in the integration of solitary human representations in the animal world, as seen in the stone vessels of the early Holocene site at Körtiktepe, on the shafts of the stone pillars at GT, and on some stone platelets from GT and Jerf el Ahmar.

However, when it comes to the media and the emotional contexts being represented, this symbolic system represents a novelty. It effectively makes the 'invisible visible' (Benz 2017a) in a dual sense. It depicts mental templates and encoded concepts through various media, and by 'reading between the lines', the new media and the emotional impacts the imagery evokes provide insights into the social situation and changes that took place during the early Holocene in northern Mesopotamia.

Regardless of the precise content of the images, it is important to emphasize the following points:

1 The canonized symbolic system, as outlined by Köksal-Schmidt and Schmidt (2007), extended from the easternmost part of southern Anatolia to northwest Syria and possibly reached far into central Anatolia. Recent excavations have consistently reaffirmed this observation. This system was effectively petrified in stone, found ubiquitously across various media, and demonstrated convergence on different types of media. In other words, narratives, or parts thereof, were depicted in various forms of media.

   Given the recurrent combinations of motifs across different regions and the similar architectural styles observed in special buildings, we proposed in our previous work (Benz 2017a; Benz and Bauer 2013) that these narratives or ritual 'choreographies' were so well-known that abbreviated forms, such as a cross representing birds or even just a few signs, sufficed to activate mental representations of the entire story, social practices, or rituals.

2 The scale of media ranged from over-life-sized to miniature.

3 Their use was widespread; however, the possibility to interact with the media was reduced or demanded more efforts, compared to natural, organic, and perishable artifacts of earlier hunter-gatherer communities. The use of increasingly artificial shapes instead of the naturally shaped objects (shells, bones) has also been observed in ornaments (Benz, Bauer, and Gebel 2024).

4 This symbolic system, as deduced from archaeological records, does not appear to be connected to economic or administrative functions (Morenz and Schmidt 2009, 28).[13] Instead, the contexts and depictions suggest associations with educational, social, and ritual settings, above all burial rituals. Most of the signs are not arbitrary forms or figures but rather '*schematizations*' and '*simplifications*' of categorical perceptions (Sütterlin 2003, 147; italics ours).

5 Human representations can be categorized into three types: highly stylized depictions of social roles or practices (such as shamans, medicine men or dancers), schematic templates (like T-shaped faces, depictions of deceased individuals, and the recurrent motif of a 'man gripping his penis', the meaning of which remains unclear), and deliberately anonymous faces on stone pillars ('superhumans'). Isolated heads with schematic T-shaped faces were probably once combined with sculptures of the second type. Whereas the first type represents in most cases humans in motion, the latter two types are very static.

None of these representations exhibit individualistic traits. Neurological studies have shown that when identifying a person, the focus of attention is on the face, specifically the eyes. Eye-tracking tests with museum visitors have unequivocally demonstrated that pictures of faces and sculptures are among the most captivating exhibits (Rainoldi, Neuhofer, and Joos 2018). Christa Sütterlin (2003, 146–7) summarizes results from tests with macaque monkeys conducted by Charles Groß and colleagues, revealing that faces without eyes stimulate similar neuronal reactions as schematic faces.[14] The deliberate omission of eyes and faces, therefore, is highly significant. This stands in contrast to later human representations, such as the life-sized sculpture from Yeni Mahalle (Hauptmann 2011, Fig. 36), the famous 'Ain Ghazal figurines (Schmandt-Besserat 2013), or the plastered skulls from the Levant (e.g., Benz 2012; Kuijt 2008), which place strong emphasis on eyes, often marked by obsidian, cowries, or other shell and bitumen inlays.

6 Human representations on the oldest depictions found on stone vessels from Körtiktepe are depicted as smaller than animals and surrounded by them. Similarly, anthropomorphic representations on stone platelets, which are challenging to date precisely, are surrounded by and smaller than the depictions of animals. In most of these early depictions, there

are no representations of couples or groups of humans acting together. Instead, isolated individuals appear to be wandering or undergoing some form of metamorphosis.

These depictions could potentially signify two interpretations: One possibility is that they represent the path taken by a deceased individual, though the significance of the outstretched hands, long coats, and headdresses in these depictions would remain unexplained. Alternatively, and more likely, they may depict a 'shamanistic séance' or the like (Benz and Bauer 2015; Morenz and Schmidt 2009).

The depicted anthropomorphic representations demand a certain level of temporal, spatial, and typological abstraction. Also, they are not purely random, they represent an abbreviated form of nature blended with interpretations of roles and positions, as evidenced by the size and relation of the figures and the imaginative elements. All other human representations on stone vessels and monumental pillars are more or less strongly abbreviated. This suggests that they do not represent specific individuals, spaces, or moments in time, but rather convey social roles and relations between humans and animals. Art-ethologist Christa Sütterlin (Dossi, Sütterlin, and Eibl-Eiblsfeldt 2015, 310) suggests that such '[r]ole models point to something immortal'.

It is less probable that these depictions, with the one exception mentioned above from Tell 'Abr 3, represent hunting practices, given that the depicted animals do not appear to be the hunted species (for a differing viewpoint, see Ayaz 2023).

The representations from Göbeklitepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevalı Çori signify a shift in the relationship between animals and humans. The larger-than-life-sized sculptures and humanoid depictions on the monumental stone pillars represent a departure from the wild. While some of the pillars feature an abundance of animals, the humanoid figures retain dominance, if only by their size. The lack of faces and their monumentality do not allow an identification but give them an unreachable position, supported by the static, eternal posture, as if nothing could distract them. Trevor Watkins classified these figures as 'superhumans' (2019). With the recent discovery at Karahan Tepe, which depicts a felid holding a human head in its hands, the connection between humans and T-shaped pillars becomes evident. On the pillars, foxes appear to be under the control of these 'superhumans' and felids jump out of the shaft of these pillars. Ordinary people are meant to view felids and possibly foxes with apprehension or at least awe, as clearly depicted in the sculpture from Karahan (Figure 2.5; for a distinction between two types of human representations, see also Dietrich et al. 2017, 121).

The intentions behind this segregation remain open for debate. Was it a means to mitigate emerging conflicts or to make people abide by

certain rules of conduct (see Dunbar, Gamble, and Gowlett 2010)? Those who had the power to do this indirectly represented their power. If it was for instructional purposes, it created a 'teacher-student' dynamic. If it was for political reasons, it established a class of 'leaders'. If it was for spiritual reasons, it generated doctrines and ideological authorities (Christensen 2010). We remain uncertain whether these were specific individuals or a particular class of people, such as 'priests' (Özdoğan 2014), and whether they acted consciously or not.

Beside this novel way of emancipation from nature (or segregation according to Theweleit 2013), it is also the first time that humans (or 'superhumans') are represented as a group or a couple, as for example, on a small pebble from Tell 'Abr 3 and on the limestone vessel fragment from Nevalı Çori. While the latter scene echoes the metamorphosis of the human figure on the chloride vessel – mentioned above – from Körtiktepe, it differs in its representation. In this scene, either a couple or, if we consider the third figure also as humanoid, three individuals are depicted engaging in a dance or another communal activity together.

With the latest phase of investigation into the 8th millennium BCE, focusing on the enigmatic human representations found on the wall paintings at Çatalhöyük, a notable shift in the relationship between humans and animals emerges. In these representations, humans appear as a group, smaller in scale than the depicted animals, yet they surround and clearly play a role in causing the animal's demise. This departure from the previous portrayal of humans as deeply intertwined with nature, even within its dangers, signals a shift toward a relationship of dominance. This transformation marks the end of a liminal stage; it is the group that now firmly establishes itself as a self-confident agency, as opposed to isolated individuals being dominated by other agencies, whether natural or, if the animal depictions were intended as symbols, spiritual.

Furthermore, none of the human representations are identical to each other. While they adhere to a consistent style with long legs, dynamic poses, and simplified clothing, each design is unique. According to Sütterlin (2003, especially 148–151), this departure from representing standardized schemata toward distinguishing individual or group identities reflects a greater demand on cognitive capacities.

Conclusion

The observed changes in human representations thus encode one of the most fundamental changes in human social history: The transition from flexible hunter-gatherer-fisher communities embedded in their environments to large-scale permanent groups emancipating themselves from

nature. The earliest convergence of media, long before the Greek Classic (cf. Bracker 2018), probably did not cause this shift but did accompany and stabilize it. The conventionalized symbolic system and the media for transmission, which were independent of space, time, and people, facilitated living in permanent large-scale communities (Benz and Bauer 2013, 2021; Heinz 2009, 30–31; Sütterlin 2003). Actual personal encounters were no longer necessary to think the absent present. Instead, the idea of the other or a message from them could be symbolized in a shard, in a stone platelet, or in a specific place, e.g., in the monumental buildings with T-shaped pillars. The human capacity to project agency and identities on things made it possible to load anything with a symbolic meaning. These artifacts were thus more than just schematic abbreviations; they condensed idealized concepts and triggered memories of the whole story behind them.

Taken together, these devices constructed a mental 'roadmap' indicating what to remember, how to behave, what to believe, and, to a certain extent, how to feel. Evidently, it is impossible to determine who followed this 'route'. Whether bare teeth, sharp beaks, paws, deadly animals like vipers, and harmful creatures like scorpions were intended to convey power or induce fear can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The relationship between ordinary humans and certain animals was certainly not meant to be a pleasant one.

Moreover, the majority of the represented animals, birds, snakes, scorpions, felids, and spiders are, with few exceptions, not those which were tamed or managed (cf. Ayaz 2023) but clearly played an important role in the cognitive world of humans (Peters and Schmidt 2004, 4615), whereas representations of humans were rare during the early phase (see also for similar observations in late European Paleolithic art, Leicht 2009, 28). On the other hand, the 'superhumans' (created by humans!) dominated the animal world with felids, boars, and snakes surrounding or emerging from their bodies, which made them 'untouchable' for ordinary humans, thus further enlarging the mental distance between them and 'ordinary' people. As the anthropomorphic stone pillars exceed human size by far, it is more likely that participants of aggregations felt empathy with humans and not with 'superhumans' and that they regarded the 'superhumans' with respect and awe. If only a few were willing to accept this distinction (see Dietrich et al. 2017, 121) and the associated narratives, empathy and the wish to assimilate (see above, p. 4, for human mental dispositions of assimilation) possibly were incentive for others to join in, and allowed for ritual and mental *communitas* (Turner 2009), accepting the lead of the 'superhumans'. The feeling of awe is connected with the powerful and overwhelming, 'something *supernatural*' (Sütterlin 2015, 174).

It should be recalled here, that the emergence of/or necessity for such an intensive, ubiquitous, and monumental display of images rarely reflects a new invention or new cognitive capacities (Junker 2012), but most often

it results from an endangered status or a new status to be established and naturalized (Heinz 2009, 69–71, 114–5). Communities that are settled and that have found successful arrangements of living together hardly need such an offensive medial display (Benz and Bauer 2021). As argued elsewhere, the early Holocene imagery should not be viewed as a reflection of society but rather as the representation of a highly idealized world, if not one that no longer existed (Benz and Bauer 2013).

The suggestion that people used these media for the commemoration of sacred knowledge (Morenz and Schmidt 2009, 28) presumes a modern concept of actively promoting collective memorization. However, such a concept cannot be expected per se for an early Holocene context; rather, the creation of collective memories were promoted through encoding practices, standardization of rituals, above all burial rituals, and through the permanence of the new media and their sustained use over an extended period (Benz et al. 2018).

The exact 'priming' effect – the external manipulation of emotions (e.g., Kay et al. 2004) on Neolithic people – remains, of course, unknown. However, the aggressive attitudes, the focus on harmful animal parts, and the specific selection of represented animals strongly contrast with friendly encounters or representations (Benz 2017a). Modern tests with non-adults who grew up in socially threatening environments have shown a strong bias for perceiving faces as angry, coupled with a significant increase in heart rate, i.e., stress (Ardizzi et al. 2015). It can be suggested that the priming of emotions was not aimed at calming or relaxation. The processes of enculturation for non-adults in such a ritual environment more likely led to fearful[15] behavior rather than fostering self-confidence (for the long-lasting impact of enculturation and the influence of media use on cognition, see Bauer 2019, 2023). Given the absence of monumental stone architecture and standardized imagery in Epipaleolithic communities, it is likely that the emotional impact of the new media was significant.

The new way of creating *communitas* thus came at a high cost: Flexible roles were petrified in stone, and a canon of motifs, and possibly even narratives, was fixed, giving rise to lasting traditions, possibly coupled with emotional reactions of awe, if not fear.

The question of whether the division into 'superhumans' and humans mirrored social relations or served as incentives for emerging hierarchies remains a subject of debate (Dietrich et al. 2017; Watkins 2019). It should be remembered that the 'superhumans' were still created by humans themselves. Once living in larger communities was established, the offensive, ubiquitous, and monumental display of collective imagery became unnecessary. Small devices, daily practices, or household-based transmission of traditions might have been enough to confirm communal arrangements and rules (Hodder and Pels 2010; Özbaşaran et al. 2018; Schotsmans et al. 2021).

The medial devices supported not only new personal and spatial relations, but also new temporal concepts in which the past was re-presented in the present (Benz 2020; Benz et al. 2018).

It is self-evident that we do not know the narratives behind the standardized depictions. A purely pictorial transmission of motifs does not guarantee that an identical content was passed on. It might be possible that the narratives varied slightly and that in one region, a stone platelet with a human figure meant something different than in another region. An example of such a shift can be seen in the small imitation of a belly-shaped chlorite vessel with the depiction of a hunting scene (Figure 2.4; Yartah 2013, Fig. 194.3). However, the more standardized combinations of motifs were, the more likely it is that the stories behind them were part of collectively shared memories.

It is only with the next level of abstraction, namely writing, that the contents of narratives were fixed. Such standardizations and fixations are unfamiliar to hunter-gatherer communities, where personal presence and sharing are essential for coexistence and knowledge transmission (Benz 2010; Widlok and Tadesse 2007; for spirituality without doctrines, see Christensen 2007, 2010; Vitebsky 2001).

The new mediality allowed for the trespassing of thresholds to establish firm, lasting social relations beyond personal encounters, irrespective of space and time. This represented one of the fundamental human achievements for all future social developments. However, as abbreviated and schematic as these 'performing arts' were, abstractions on a higher level, namely administrative arbitrary symbols or characters, do not seem to have been part of the cognitive world of the early Holocene communities of northern Mesopotamia.

Notes

1 We are grateful to Silvia Ferrara, Mattia Cartolano and Ludovica Ottaviano for the opportunity to participate in the INSCRIBE Conference and to publish our approach to imagery interpretation in this important volume.
2 In former publications, it was written as Körtik Tepe (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011); however, according to the excavation director, it should now be written as one word (Özkaya and Siddiq 2021).
3 For similar argumentations see Assmann (1999, 19); Sütterlin (2017).
4 The distinction made in modern media studies is difficult to apply in prehistoric research, because we lack knowledge of which objects or signs may have carried additional symbolic meanings.
5 The term 'iconic turn' was coined as early as 1994 by Boehm.
6 Although we shift the focus on mediality, our approach is not as radical as suggested by Marshall McLuhan's dictum, 'medium is the message' (Sale 2010, 140), but it is more inclusive by combining content and mediality analyses with inquiries on 'how different ways of worldmaking impose structures, ascribe

properties, and disseminate particular versions, views, and values' (Nünning and Nünning 2010, 17).

7 The incision on a bucket-shaped chlorite vessel from Hasankeyf Höyük appears quite rough and is poorly depicted in the publication (Miyake 2013, 45, no. 1). Consequently, identifying the long coat and headgear of a human figure in motion becomes a challenging task. Enhanced research efforts are necessary to definitively identify the motifs on this vessel.

8 We are grateful to Lee Clare for providing additional unpublished information on the context of this artifact and for the permission to reproduce it (Karul, Gülriz, and Yavuzkir 2022, 54)

9 The publication of the Körtiktepe stone vessels is in preparation. All the more, we are grateful to Vecihi Özkaya for the permission to reproduce the photo (Özkaya et al. 2013, 61).

10 We are grateful to Neçmi Karul for allowing us to publish this photo (see Karul in press).

11 The two letter signs have been interpreted by Morenz as 'demographic name signs' recently (Morenz 2021, 21–28, 36–38); a discussion about this interpretation concerns the semiotic approach and is beyond the scope of this contribution.

12 The recently published reconstruction of the stone platelet from GT (Morenz 2021, Fig. 27) is very hypothetical and should be reconsidered in light of similar depictions from Jerf el Ahmar and Tell 'Abr 3 (Figures 2.6.3 and 2.6.8).

13 Serial representations of signs on a stone platelets from Jerf el Ahmar (Stordeur et al. 1996, Fig. 2c) and from Tell Qaramel (Mazurowski and Kanjou 2012, Plate 74,7) seem to be exceptional and were not part of a general symbolic (counting?) system. Similarly, the concentric circles and spirals depicted on various artifacts, particularly on the chests or bodies of animal figurines, appear to convey metaphorical meanings. However, it is highly likely that this symbolism originated from snakes, as evidenced by a stone platelet found at Körtiktepe, where the inner end of the spiral features the head of a snake (Özkaya and Coşkun 2011, Figs. 31–32). Another possible source of this symbolism could be the circular architecture of specific communal buildings, as suggested recently by Pamuk and Kaya (2022). However, when considered in the context of metaphorical meanings related to animals, this seems to be a less likely explanation.

14 For the importance of the face for identification, see also the discussion of Christa Sütterlin with Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt and the artist Ugo Dossi (Dossi et al. 2015: esp. 304–306).

15 For further references on the effects of fear on the behavior of people, e.g. a tendence to abide by rules, search for guidance etc. see Benz (2017a).

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Part II

When Images Interact with Writing


EMBLEM TO ICON
in Proto-Elamite Writing
KATE KELLEY
PROTO-ELAMITE
SUSA AND THE INVENTION OF WRITING
SOME FACTS:
LANGUAGE IS UNKNOWN
LARGE SIGNLIST
POOR STANDARDIZATION
SOME SIGNS REFER TO OBJECTS, SOME ARE ABSTRACT
PROTOCUNEIFORM PICTOGRAPHY
ABSTRACT DESIGNS
CROSSES
ARE THERE SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS?
SEALS AND SIGNS
MOUNTAIN
IMPORTANCE OF GOATS
NO WHOLE FIGURE
PARS PRO TOTO
COMPOSITIONALITY OF COMPLEX GRAPHEMES
SIGN FORMATION IS MORE INDIVIDUAL
SOME HOUSEHOLDS SIGNS?
DIFFICULTY IN DRAWING ON A SMALL SCALE
AN EARLY COLOPHON?
THE SLIPPERY SLOPE PROBLEM
SIGNS OF WALLED CITIES OR FESTIVALS?
OR SOMETHING ELSE?
PENDANT
ROLLOUT OF URUK
IMPORTANCE OF THE RELATIONS BEETWEN SEALS AND OBJECT DECORATIONS AND SCRIPT
THE MATERIAL WORLD

3 Images Hidden in Script

The Invention of Writing in Ancient Iran

Kathryn Kelley

The Proto-Elamite Innovation

The proto-Elamite script (c. 3200–3000 BC) from ancient Iran is often excluded from discussion of pristine inventions. Appearing perhaps a couple centuries after the earliest Egyptian and proto-cuneiform inscriptions, proto-Elamite shows evidence of some influence from proto-cuneiform, borrowing some signs and features. However, proto-cuneiform was itself at the time only beginning to develop the features of a true writing system. The ancient city of Susa in western Iran, where most proto-Elamite tablets have been found, has some of the richest evidence for the long development of accounting technologies leading up to the invention of writing in the ancient Near East. The path to writing in Susa is in this way both organic or 'pristine', as well as in some part stimulated. Proto-Elamite offers unique data on the moment of technological innovation at the end of the 4th millennium BC, and it demonstrates a relationship between early script and image that is distinct from its contemporaries.

Elkins (1999) interrogates a modern position that he describes as our 'word–image trance', that is, our illusion that 'reading' and 'seeing' can be pure acts in binary opposition. He cites Greek *gramma* ('picture, written letter, piece of writing') and *graphein* ('write, draw, sketch') as preserving 'a memory of a time when the divisions we are so used to did not exist'. This is not to suggest a clear evolution of conceptualizing writing in relation to other images; we can instead hypothesize a history full of twists and turns. However, the central place of iconic representations in all the world's so-called 'pristine' inventions of writing raises questions about the ways that reading grew out of ways of seeing. The constancy of iconicity in early scripts suggests that images of things are a powerful tool with respect to the cognitive processes that can lead to the invention of writing systems. Images may serve as cognitive affordances – that is, they point us to the meaning of signs. However, I suggest here that for proto-Elamite the image as affordance is a relatively muted feature.

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In comparison to Egyptian hieroglyphs and proto-cuneiform, the proto-Elamite sign set takes a different approach to iconicity, with large numbers of potentially non-iconic forms – geometric or highly schematic – often differentiated with many minor variations. The system also displays an aversion to certain iconic themes and a propensity to transform images borrowed from the rich corpus of seal imagery connected with the writing system. A few other features also signal proto-Elamite's distinctly exclusionary strategies with respect to script as image and script in combination with images.

"This Is Not a Picture"

Proto-Elamite seems to our eyes to be strikingly *writinglike*, to adapt a term from Elkins (1999), even while the underlying system may or may not in fact be strongly glottographic, that is, recording the words, sounds, or grammatical elements of language such that it satisfies the common modern definition of writing. The writing system developed at a time when cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs were still in their formative stages. All three systems were the result of experimentation with the codification of images to convey information. For proto-cuneiform and hieroglyphs, this ultimately led to glottographic notation, but in their early stages, many signs functioned ideographically (or in alternate terminology, displaying semasiography) to convey information. All proto-Elamite tablets are structured around numerical notations, and it is reasonable to hypothesize that, as a highly specialized ideographic accounting system (à la Morin 2022), proto-Elamite need have contained little or no linguistic coding.

We are poorly informed about the social contexts in which texts were available for reading or viewing. Both the state of decipherment and the almost total lack of tablets found in primary archaeological contexts (particularly from the most important site, Susa) hinder our understanding of possible archival practices. A mix of contemporary and later 3rd millennium evidence allows us to hypothesize that some texts were made as household records to be 'read' or checked at a later date internally by the scribal community that made them, while others might have been handled or seen by seasonal herdsmen, distribution recipients, or others. When archaeology does allow for comparison of tablet find spots and content, the possibility of diverse functions for proto-Elamite writing in different locations has been raised (Saeedi 2021). This crucial topic requires future elaboration. Some formal clues exist: The size and limited medium of proto-Elamite writing provide some hint at the audiences. Proto-Elamite writing was, so far as we know, limited to clay tablets that could be held in the palm of a hand, containing very small lines of text. This miniaturization – in fact a notable feature of the early literate Near East (Baines and

Dhazi 2024) may have contributed to a sense of exclusivity in the viewing or reading of a proto-Elamite text. Several visual aspects of proto-Elamite contribute to its writinglike appearance. These include its linear organization, uniformity and density, and a clear distinction between script and other images.

Linear Organization

Proto-Elamite is the earliest writing system to rigidly arrange signs in linear sequences, read right-to-left and top-to-bottom. This feature has been interpreted as a possible reflection of linguistic coding, but the argument is weak, since many glottographic writing systems without strictly linear organization are known; if linearity is not a necessary pre-requisite for glottography, then it is also not clear that it is a predictor of it. The impetus for the linear structuring remains to be understood – for example, it may reflect particular operating procedures in proto-Elamite accounting, differing in some way from the proto-cuneiform practices. The latter relied on sequential cases that could be subdivided below, so that a viewer moves their attention up-down and then right-left across a single line in a tablet.

Uniformity and Density

Consistency of sign size is a feature of many writing systems. Proto-Elamite signs are consistently sized, approximately a centimeter in height. Tablets display a particular density and regularity of symbol placement on a surface, with no interruption by other images and no spaces allowed until the text is finished, creating a striking visual effect. Empty space is allowed on many tablets outside the boundary of the text lines, but some tablets show a concern for defining this unused space as non-textual – specifically, not to be further inscribed – by using seals to occupy blank spaces on the reverse of a tablet below a summary line, or even to the left of a shorter summary (Figure 3.1b–c). This characteristically dense textual integrity is more emphatic than in proto-cuneiform, where sign arrangement within boxy 'cases' is not linear and regularly leaves surrounding space.

Separation from Other Images

As in neighboring Iraq, proto-Elamite was written on clay tablets that could also be rolled with cylinder seals leaving impressions of images. An intentional distinction is maintained between the graphic codes of seals and script in both the proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite worlds. This unmistakable distinction is all the more striking in light of their use on the same objects and their sharing of some shapes. A few isolated

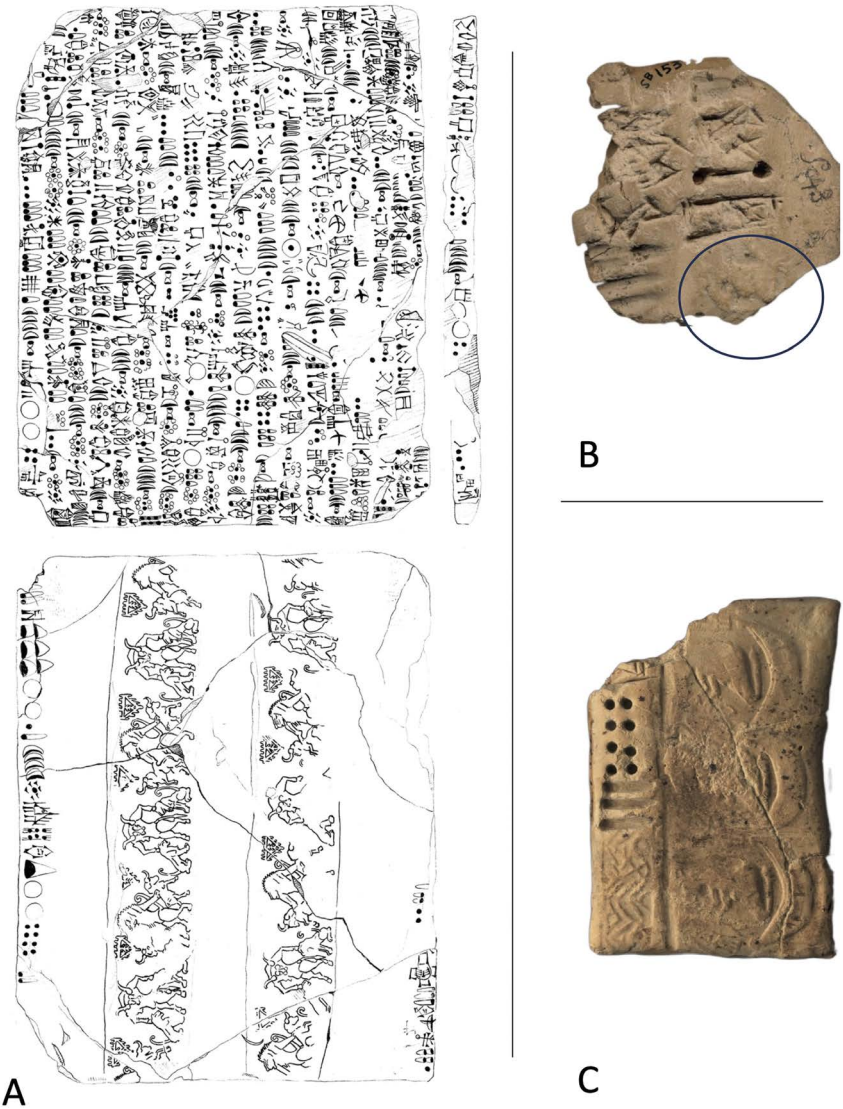

Figure 3.1 (a) Scheil (1905), MDP 6, 5242. One of the most complex proto-Elamite tablets. Text drawing by author, seal drawing by E. Miller. (b–c) Scheil (1935), MDP 26 Supplement, 5043 and Scheil (1905), MDP 6, 344. Seal impressions on tablets filling space at the end of text lines and covering large areas of non-textual space.

proto-Elamite signs appear on seals, but seals do not contain true strings of signs, with rare possible exception (e.g. MDP 6, 4998). However, this chapter touches on some evidence for a deep-rooted relationship between the two codes.

Seals and tablets are both miniature; larger incarnations of texts or signs are not known. No other objects are known to contain the script, although much of the visual world of proto-Elamite sites remains unknown. Lines of text have not, for example, been found on proto-Elamite pottery, another well-attested object type. Wall paintings and an architectural fragment from Tall-i Malyan include designs with clear relationship to several proto-Elamite signs ('traces in other media', below). Other important corpora which may have contained designs that influenced script are not archaeologically attested – among these are the textiles which historical evidence and seal imagery suggest were significant to proto-Elamite communities. We have no elaborate carved stone objects combining figural scenes and simple inscriptions such as in Egypt at this time. Proto-Elamite and proto-cuneiform are similar with respect to their near exclusionary use (so far as we know) on tablets, although a few stray proto-cuneiform signs are known on other objects including a pot and a clay rosette (Figure 3.8, Szarzyńska 2011).

The markedly compact and uniform nature of proto-Elamite and its clear separation from other image traditions may encourage the modern viewer to think of reading as opposed to seeing, but what did it encourage in a culture into which writing was being introduced as a novel technology? The use of space in proto-Elamite forces the eye to scan in particular ways. The standardized size in characters and lack of spaces in proto-Elamite discourages a gaze from drifting to more prominent features and may leave an undiscerning viewer disoriented and adrift, while the linear ordering demands a procedural, sign-by-sign, start-to-finish engagement with the text. All of this is only inviting to the informed interpreter of the signs and in particular the proto-Elamite counting systems.

Iconicity at the Dawn of Writing in Iran

Proto-Elamite uses over 1600 signs by current estimate, although this number might be reduced to fewer than 500 by discounting variants and combinations (Dahl 2002; Kelley et al. 2022). Current hypothesis distinguishes different types of signs (Dahl 2019): Numerical, object, owner or household, and syllabic. The existence of the fourth category, a set of syllabic signs, is especially uncertain. It has been proposed that these signs might record personal names.

The use of iconicity in proto-Elamite script itself has not been the subject of particular study, so what I present here is in some places treading

new ground, assessing overall trends in proto-Elamite strategies of iconic representation and including some proposals for understanding individual signs in relation to other media. A starting point for understanding iconicity in proto-Elamite is to take stock of the recognizable iconic themes and their prevalence in the sign list. Hundreds of proto-Elamite signs are difficult to interpret as iconic. It is a challenge – perhaps sometimes an insurmountable one – to understand when schematic forms have an iconic basis, or probably more accurately, to what extent their forms were understood as iconic in the eyes of scribes. For example, contextual clues indicate that the sign  M297 may refer to liquid measures, including beer, but how does this relate to its form, a six-sided rhombus with two parallel lines inside? Scheil interpreted it as a depiction of a jar with a 'conical base and lid', and similarly Friberg (1978) sees a 'keg' in the similar sign $M297_b$, whereas Meriggi (1971, 73) argues M297 is simply a hexagon, a geometric sign.

The Image Speaking Frankly

Around 130, that is approximately 10%, of proto-Elamite signs and variants can confidently be identified as depictions of vessels, and textual clues suggest that many other signs may also represent vessels in highly schematic form (e.g., Johnson 2015). The most common proto-Elamite sign, M288, is understood through context to be a 'grain container', although it would have been difficult to arrive at this interpretation through its form alone. Vessels are the largest single category of recognizable icon, which surely reflects the emphasis in proto-Elamite on tracking the movement of goods in vessels or the production of vessels themselves. This observation is robust, even though a few of the vessel signs are among the unconfirmed list of possible 'syllabic' signs. The proportion of vessel signs in proto-cuneiform is notably similar, just under 10% of the basic sign set, likewise the largest category of iconic theme. In both writing systems, vessels as counted objects display iconicity which seems to be operating openly, with little concern for concealment, although many added strokes or variations modify sign meaning in largely conventional ways that required learning. Similar strategies of embellishment are seen in other sign categories. Vessels are among only a very few depictions of real objects that we can identify. Other forms include plows, yokes, and products that may be cheeses or cakes. Of course, many more 'depictions' may have seemed natural enough to the proto-Elamite scribes, but their iconicity is not strong enough to speak across the ages. Some other depictions, such as mountains or mounds of goods, trees, and a 'reed pole' are recognizable mainly through comparison with seal imagery, and may be deliberate references to that imagery, as we will touch on further below.

Images of Humans

A notable characteristic of proto-Elamite's visual coding is its avoidance of depictions of humans, either whole or in part (Dahl 2023). This is not a hard rule: A singular depiction of a human hand is known in one tablet, clearly an experiment; and the common proto-Elamite sign M72 depicts a vulva (Figure 3.2b). However, it is possible that the iconicity of M72, borrowed from proto-cuneiform, was lost when it entered proto-Elamite, even if Susa itself attests to a pre-literate etching of a vulva on a lenticular clay tablet (Figure 3.2b). The same avoidance of humans and body parts is less true for neighboring proto-cuneiform, which includes some frequently used signs depicting hands, legs, and feet, although not whole human

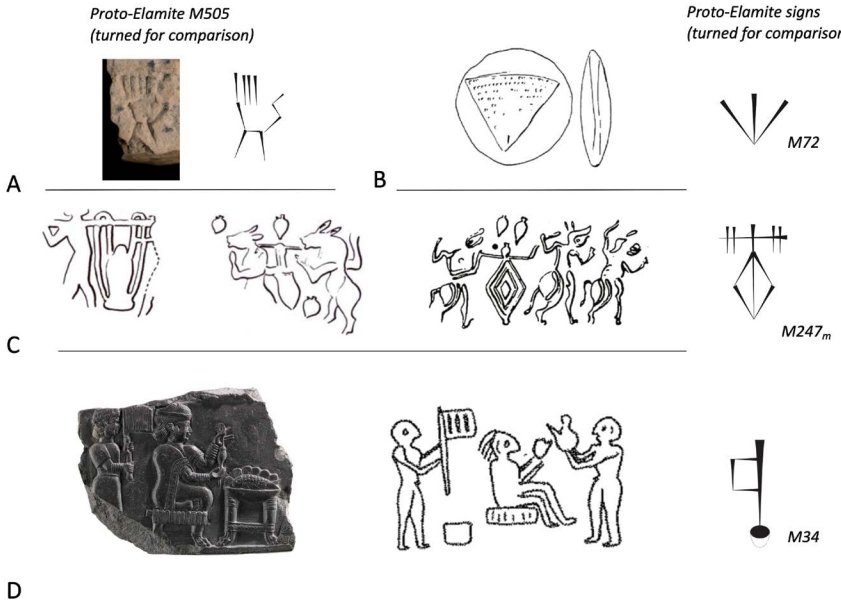

Figure 3.2 (a) Hapax – thus experimental – iconic 'hand' sign in proto-Elamite. MDP 17, 231 (Scheil 1923). (b) Left: Lenticular tablet from Susa with depiction of a vulva (Amiet 1971 fig. 71, no. 2); Right: proto-Elamite sign M72. (c) Left to right: Amiet (1972, 469); Amiet (1980, 573); Amiet (1980, 572). (d) Left: Neo-Elamite relief; https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010176914; Right: Cylinder seal from Uruk Rova (1994, 685). c and d show suggested identifications (c confident, d speculative) for two undeciphered proto-Elamite signs as representing humans in script, through comparison with proto-Elamite seals and images from other periods. All proto-Elamite sign images courtesy of J. Dahl and hosted by the *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (https://github.com/cdli-gh/proto-elamite_data).

figures. Human depictions are, by contrast, very plentiful in the signs of the Egyptian, Mesoamerican, and Chinese scripts. We might posit a simple proto-Elamite disinterest in recognizable human forms; however, the avoidance is paralleled in the seal tradition by a deliberate replacement of human figures with anthropomorphic animals. Cylinder seal depictions of humans at work from previous periods are transformed in proto-Elamite seals with lions, bulls, equids, or other animals on their hind legs. The case of workers carrying a vessel on a pole is illustrative (Figure 3.2). Prior to the proto-Elamite period, scenes of humans carrying vessels attached to poles were widely circulated. In the proto-Elamite period, we find bipedal animals similarly carrying a vessel in one seal, and a schematized vessel in another. This last example leads us to a set of proto-Elamite signs, especially $M247_m$, which can be identified as referential to this seal imagery, with the animal figures now extracted.

Humans themselves are thought to have been recorded using 'object' signs in script. Some of these signs have been interpreted as iconic depictions of tools associated with workers' roles (Dahl, Hawkins, and Kelley 2018), the clearest example being a yoke for agricultural laborers also found in proto-cuneiform. In proto-cuneiform, the lexical tradition and administrative tablets in combination give evidence of a persistent metaphor in sign construction in which an object stands for a person. Tools, other objects, and products were used to represent administrative or cultic personnel. While sometimes a rebus may have been at play in these designations, clear evidence for rebuses is very rare. The object-for-person metaphor deserves further theoretical prodding, which should consider cognitive foundations for sign-making including the role of metonymy and visual metaphor. But also, this script choice may be most fruitfully explained through its cultural setting, where writing found its main purpose in relation to the production and distribution of goods which were integral to a social index.

Was an object-for-person metaphor equally active in the less well-deciphered proto-Elamite script? On the hypothesis that some undeciphered signs participate in this metaphor, I suggest the possibility that sign M34 could be a 'fan' as the designation of certain personnel. Some tentative evidence to support this comes from a late-4th-millennium cylinder seal image from Uruk, showing an individual bearing a fan. This characteristic scene shows similarities with much later seals and reliefs known in both Mesopotamia and Iran (Figure 3.2).

Images of Animals

Not only humans, but also full-figure animals and animal heads are uncommon in proto-Elamite script. Although very common in seals, the

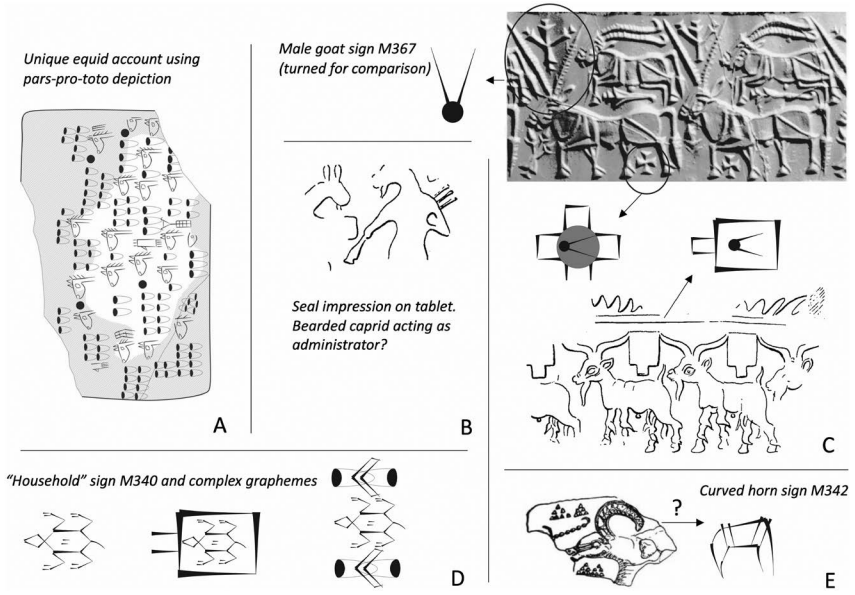

Figure 3.3 Animal depictions and schematic animal signs in proto-Elamite script. (a) MDP 17, 105, Line art by R.K. Englund *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (P008303). (b) Impression on tablet MDP 43, 1007. (c) Top: Cylinder seal; Wiseman 1962 Pl. 7a/British Museum 116720; Bottom: Sealed tablet MDP 43, 933 E) Sealing MDP 16, 120 (Legrain 1921).

script has no recognizable depictions of lions, cows, or bulls, either in full or part, yet schematic references may be hiding within the list. Recognizable depictions of equid heads were, in one single text, apparently used for counts of those animals (Figure 3.3). However, the irregular, clunky spacing of this text indicates its marginal position in scribal culture. There are very few other animal representations, and they may be non-literally employed, particularly the 'household' sign M340.

Sheep and goats are also commonly depicted full-figure, often acting as humans in proto-Elamite seal imagery. However, most of the sheep and goat signs in proto-Elamite appear to be derived from proto-cuneiform or proto-historic accounting traditions involving conventional or highly schematic forms. A meaning of 'male goat' has been proposed for sign M367, relying entirely on contextual clues in proto-Elamite, guided by basic knowledge of animal herding practices (Meriggi 1971, 56; Dahl 2005a, 91). Although other small livestock signs appear related in form to proto-cuneiform ones, M367 is not similar to proto-cuneiform $maš_2$ (male goat). However, I suggest that a proto-Elamite seal depiction supports the current interpretation of M367 as a schematic representation of a goat's horns (Figure 3.3c).

In many texts, M367 is used for literal counts of male goats, but in other texts, a literal interpretation is not so clear, and in fact would seem quite out of place. Some of the common household signs have M367 or another depiction of goat horns, M342 (Figure 3.3e) inscribed inside them. Are these to be taken as literal references to herding units? Seal imagery involving goats only rarely pairs with literal accounts of goats in proto-Elamite (Dahl 2019: 91). For example, the equid text in Figure 3.3A is sealed with the scene of bearded goats shown in Figure 3.4. Instead, seal imagery across southwest Asia is known to have well-developed symbolic significance, although we can only vaguely understand how these systems convey information on social identities, economic units, or otherwise. It is highly suggestive that some complex graphemes pairing household signs and caprid horns find parallel in seal imagery interspersing full depictions of male caprids with a single proto-Elamite sign or a symbol reminiscent

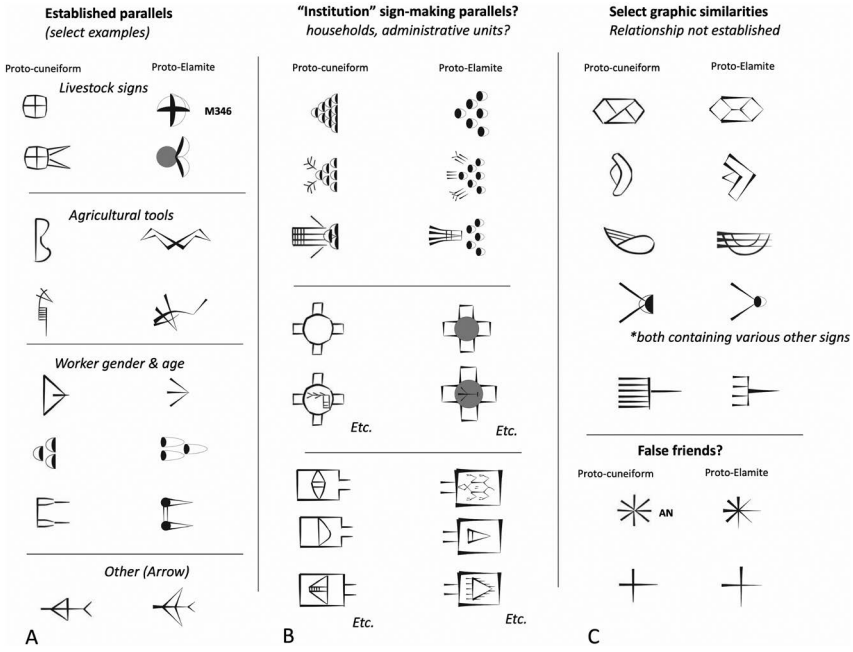

Figure 3.4 Left: some confident comparisons of proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite signs, after Englund (2004). Center: Variations on common shapes in some proto-Elamite 'institution' signs have suggestive parallels in proto-cuneiform signs. Top left: Examples of other graphical parallels between proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite signs. Bottom left: Some graphically similar signs in the two scripts are used in very different ways and are probably unrelated.

of one (Figure 3.3c): That is, signs depicting caprid horns could be used metonymically in reference to administrative activities or human authorities, paralleling the strategies of seal iconography. If this is true, the script sometimes uses *pars pro toto* representation to reference what appear as full-figured animals in seal imagery.

Animal signs and depictions of animals in proto-Elamite thus challenge a simple account of the function of iconicity at moments of script invention. Early Chinese script, for example, uses a depiction of an ox to record literal counts of oxen, and one might hypothesize that literal meanings were frequent among the pictorial signs of early phases of writing systems. In proto-Elamite we do not see literal iconic animal representations giving way to metonymic and rebus strategies only when things are more difficult to depict. Instead, proto-Elamite is very comfortable with highly schematic forms, and the evidence suggests greater emphasis on the incorporation of non-literal existing graphical codes and on using images as lock-and-key more than affordances. Arguably, scribes *could have* used simple, recognizable iconic representations to record small livestock, as indicated by their technical ability to depict animal heads and forms (Figure 3.3, left); but most often they relied instead on schematic forms and sometimes borrowed conventional forms (such as M346). Sometimes signs shapes were adapted from more visually accessible, naturalistic depictions on cylinder seals (M376, M342).

Iconicity and Glottography

What about iconicity in the proposed syllabary? The existence of a syllabary in proto-Elamite is not proven. A hypothetical list of syllabary signs (Dahl 2019) identifies syllabary candidates based on their use in certain locations within longer strings of signs. If the syllabary hypothesis is correct, then proto-Elamite provides a unique case study for the relevance of iconic depictions in a (semi)-pristine invented glottographic notation system. A review of the proposed signs shows that they don't appear to take a substantially different approach to iconicity than the remainder of the sign set. The list includes a few signs that can also function as object signs, and be understood as depictions of objects (a vessel, M263), numerical signs (M387, identical to the notation '100'), schematic depictions of trees and mountains that parallel common seal motifs (M254a, M240c), a possible conventional geometric symbol known from seal imagery (M48k), a scribal design (M102d), and many other forms that are more or less difficult to interpret. If this sign set does approximate a proto-Elamite syllabary, the system was not planned with a strong reliance on depictions of real-world objects to aid the reader through rebus, acrophony, or metaphor. Instead, it is a mixed group of signs from the system, with varying

levels of iconicity or schematism, some with relationships to other image traditions.

Migrating Images

Vessels may have served as important models for proto-Elamite sign forms, but if there are many other direct depictions of real-world objects, they are more difficult to recognize. A review of the sign list also suggests the importance of another scribal strategy: Quite frequently, sign forms in proto-Elamite drew on existing traditions of graphical representation. Below we begin to explore how some signs originated as – or indeed fed into the production of – *pictures* of *images* circulating in other media. Let us unpack this terminology, borrowed from Mitchell (2015):

> The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break or tear. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction—in memory, in narrative, in copies and traces in other media.

Identifiable sources for non-numerical sign forms in proto-Elamite include (1) *numerical signs* (pre-literate, proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite), (2) *proto-cuneiform signs*, and (3) *seal imagery*. Tokens – small clay counters – might be added to the list (Schmandt-Besserat 1992), although despite the large numbers of late pre-literate tokens found at Susa itself, the few possible examples of comparable forms (especially the 'sheep' sign as a thin cross) could feasibly have arrived through proto-cuneiform. Below we consider the way that two types of graphical systems, proto-cuneiform script and seal imagery, influenced or interacted with images in proto-Elamite. We then touch on the possibility of broader multimedia interactions with images in script.

Script to Script

My assessment is that around 30 signs, including complex graphemes, have parallels in the proto-cuneiform writing system that we can be relatively confident in, with around 50 more speculative comparisons suggesting themselves (examples in Figure 3.4). Only a small number of sign parallels between the two scripts have been discussed in the past decades of literature, and the complete sign lists have never been systematically compared. The most secure parallels belong to sets within particular administrative topics. Comparable signs may be executed in different ways in each script; for example, the sheep signs in proto-Elamite use the edge of a stylus tip also used for some numerical units, while the proto-cuneiform sign uses the normal stylus, rendering a more

square shape, and the proto-Elamite 'male' sign is inverted in comparison to the proto-cuneiform one. The signs for 'male', 'female', and 'young person' in proto-cuneiform have parallels that are similarly correlated in both scripts, proving that not only form but also some level of meaning was shared between these sign sets (Damerow and Englund 1989). Yet it is not clear that proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite scribes understood the sign forms as depictions in the same way.

Seals and Script

Some proto-Elamite signs are demonstrably related to designs or symbols also found on cylinder seals (Paladre 2022 fig. 4.82/4, 12 are identified as proven). Perhaps as many as a few dozen proto-Elamite signs are related to the designs often found in the distinctive 'piedmont' glyptic style (Pittman 1994 fig. 28–29), but also sometimes found in more naturalistic depictions in classic proto-Elamite seals. The piedmont style seals are known for their hatching and their emphasis on geometric designs, including crosses, multi-lobes, and rosettes, as well as schematic plant representations and depictions of animals. This style reflects the existence of cultural networks extending from western Iran, far to its west and north, but mostly excluding southern Mesopotamia, center of the proto-cuneiform script. The distribution tallies with a comparable lack of observable affinity between these seals and sign shapes in the proto-cuneiform script. For example, proto-cuneiform contains no shape among its set of over 800 signs that is convincingly similar to the variety of outlined crosses in proto-Elamite script and seals.

Chronologically, the piedmont style begins around the end of the 4th millennium and continues through the end of the proto-Elamite period. The full appearance of the style is contemporary to the proto-Elamite script, so we should consider a two-way interaction between script and seals, sharing a characteristic aesthetic. A few seals stylistically assigned to a transitional period (Susa Acropolis level 17) link Susa's pre-historic material with the earliest proto-Elamite material and show some shapes as isolated 'symbols' among herded animals. Some of the shapes resemble signs in the script, notably some signs thought to represent owners, households, or institutions (Figure 3.5).

In the classic proto-Elamite glyptic style, a very few isolated proto-Elamite signs sometimes appear – these are clearly 'signs' as such, in contrast to the ambiguous status of the shapes in the transitional period and piedmont seals. Prominent among these is M136, which is found in over a dozen variations and is thought to represent 'households'. The signs may be pictures of real-world 'banners,' but there is no hard evidence on which to base this. Sometimes M136 floats above the seal imagery, but once it is being carried by anthropomorphic animals as if it were a

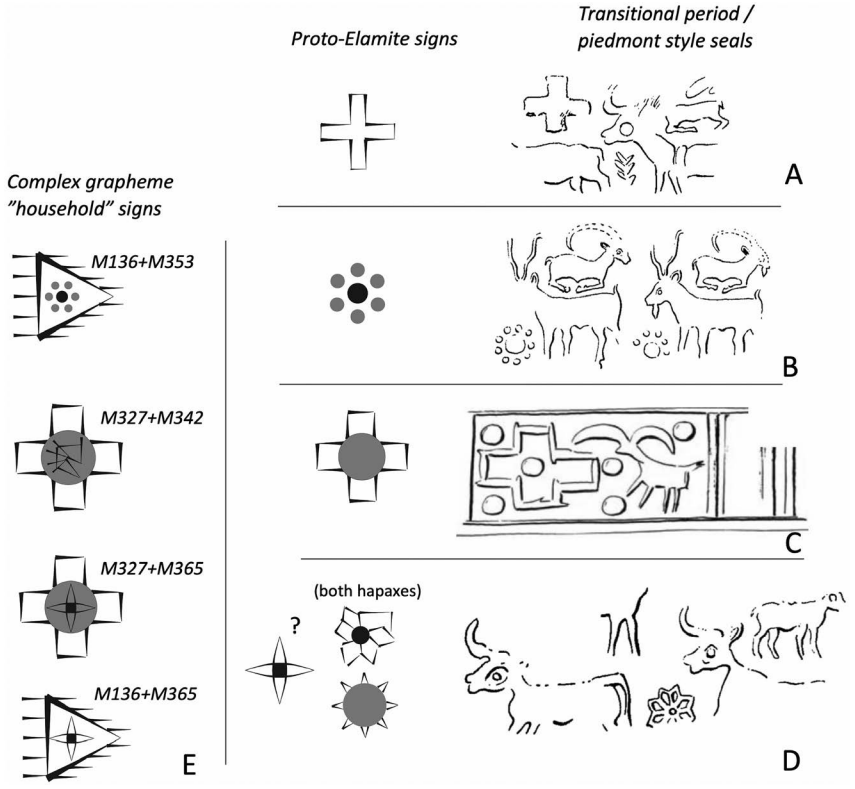

Figure 3.5 Some geometric shapes and other designs are found in both proto-Elamite seals and script. (a) Impression on a tablet MDP 43, 929. (b) Impression on a tablet MDP 43, 924. (c) Stone seal; Amiet (1980, 1686). (d) Impression on a tablet MDP 43, 926.

standard (Figure 3.6). M157 is another household sign that appears in seal imagery, clearly as a sign, not an object. It is placed 'in field' rather than being integrated with the world of the figures, suggesting its intrusion into the otherwise naturalistic code of the seals. The form can be filled with a variety of different things and in this way calls up the possibility of comparison with some rectangular proto-cuneiform 'frame' signs (see Figure 3.4b). We cannot say if M157 is a schematic representation of something in the natural or cultural world, such as an animal pen or a building plan; a geometric stamp seal from Tal-i Malyan might be a related representation, noting the form M158c (Paladre Vol. II pp. 110). For both M136 and M157, the placement of a single geometric symbol in field among scenes of animals recalls the transitional period seals (Figure 3.5). The status of these images as objects outside seals and writing remains ambiguous.

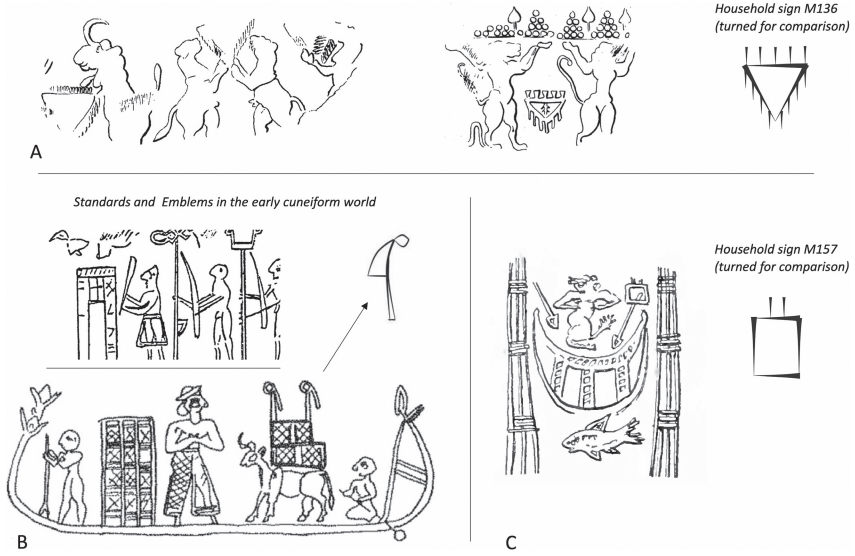

Figure 3.6 Symbolic objects and 'institutions' in the proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite spheres. (a) Left: MDP 43, 1011; Right: Amiet (1980, 577). (b) Top: Rova (1994, 818); Bottom: Rova (1994, 602). (c) Impression on a tablet MDP 16, 334.

By comparison, the proto-cuneiform script provides more suggestive evidence for the incorporation into its sign repertoire of real-world cult statues, standards, or other cult objects, such as architectural embellishments to represent deities and their associated institutions and cities (van Dijk-Coombes 2023). Some of these objects appear to be conventional symbols in circulation external to writing, and at the same time do not seem to be depictions of animate or inanimate objects of the natural world, with exceptions including a sun and perhaps a moon crescent. In contrast to most proto-Elamite symbols found in seal imagery (but see exceptions in Figure 3.6a), when cult icons or standards are shown, when cult icons or standards are shown in roughly contemporaneous Mesopotamian cylinder seal imagery, they are typically built into scenes in natural ways as objects carried by humans or installed on platforms in ritual scenes (Figure 3.6). Whether a tradition of cultic standards pre-dates writing is difficult to establish: The famous Inana symbol $muš_3$, although perhaps a depiction of a real cult object, a pole with a scarf (Steinkeller 1998), is known earliest to us by its incorporation into proto-literate writing and seals. Thus, while difficult to confirm, these kinds of signs may give us a glimpse at a symbol tradition – that is, elements of visual culture participating in the

construction of social meaning – which had an existence quite independent from writing but were at some point adapted into script.

While it may be hopeless to attempt to identify the geographic and material 'origins' of images, we can, on the other hand, better understand them through tracking stops along their migration. Two seal images – one from Uruk, center of the proto-cuneiform world, and the other from proto-Elamite Susa – illustrate a flow of images between these two regions with otherwise mutually exclusive script cultures. In each of these scenes with boat travel, a figure with arms placed at their chest (a bovine in the proto-Elamite case) appears in the presence of a symbol. For the Uruk seal, it is the symbol of the goddess Inana, and for the Susian seal it is the 'household' sign M157 (Figure 3.6). We should also note that in the Uruk seal two boatmen bear an oar at each end of the boat, while in the proto-Elamite seal, human figures are absent but oars appear floating in the field at each end of the boat. Both theme and execution details indicate that we are dealing with the migration and transformation of images here, in this case, between seal traditions of the neighboring regions of southern Iraq and southwestern Iran. Yet these two regions chose to develop their writing systems along independent lines, serving to define their respective cultural spheres, since they do not overlap in geographical spread.

How Close Were Seals and Script?

Script by its very premise is exclusionary: One must learn to read. However, in Mesopotamia and Iran, writing's growth in connection with sealing practices reinforces its nature as a technology that employed images to control access to goods and information, verifying a record to those who have access to the key for interpretation – physically as in a seal, or cognitively through recognition of a specific seal design or symbolic convention. Before the invention of proto-Elamite, seals were used to lock doors and seal containers, lumps of clay containing tokens, or tablets with numerical impressions. Beside their administrative uses, seals were also amuletic, and seal ownership was an act of participation in a shared graphical culture that contributed to the performance of social identities (Gorelick and Gwinnet 1990).

Generally speaking, the importance of the relationship between seal imagery, seal practice, and writing is well-known, but many fundamental questions remain regarding the interplay of these two related graphic codes. In particular, the overall significance of seal images to the creation of the proto-Elamite sign system remains to be weighed. The naturalistic elements in seal imagery are a very different graphic code from proto-Elamite signs, yet a close look reveals that the script may have been developed with considerable reference to seal images of both geometric and naturalistic styles, the latter sometimes referenced in reduced, often highly

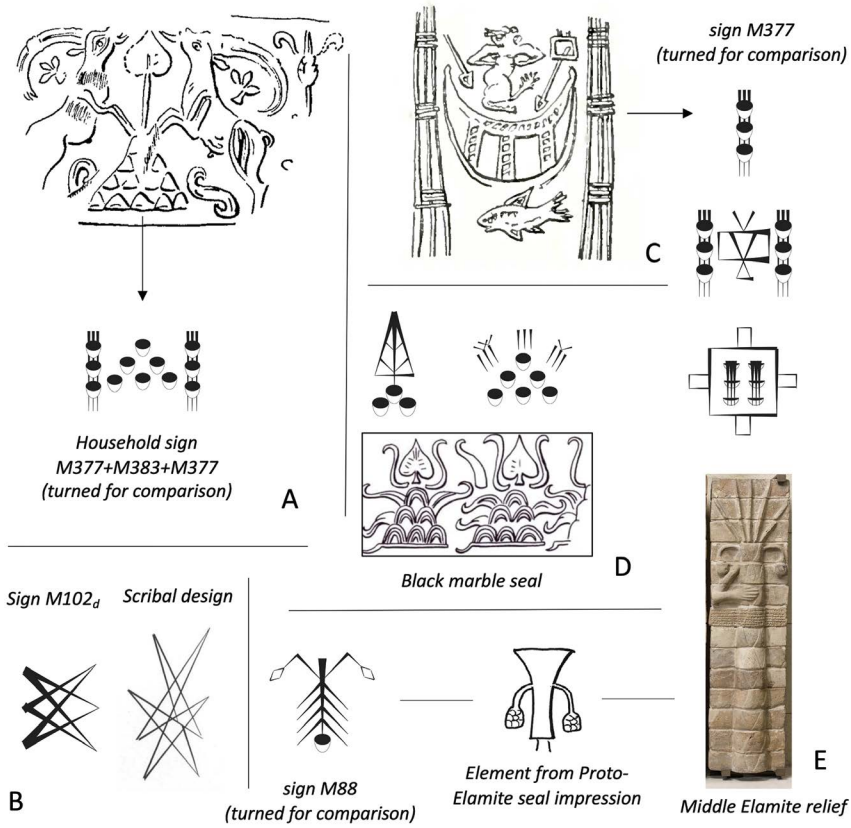

Figure 3.7 Symmetrical composition is a formal similarity between some proto-Elamite seal imagery and complex sign construction in the script. (a) Sealing MDP 43, 978. (b) Scribal design no. 3; Dahl (2012). (c) Impression on a tablet MDP 16, 334. (d) Black marble seal MDP 43, 977. (e) Element from Proto-Elamite seal impression MDP 16, 198 (Drawing by C. Florimont).

schematic form, such as the likely *pars pro toto* depictions of caprid horns discussed above. Dozens of signs show affinity to other naturalistic seal themes, notably the 'mountain' and 'tree' series (Figure 3.7 a and 3.7d), and it is possible that many more references lurk behind their schematic sign forms. For example, we may see a stylized date palm in sign M88, in comparison to a proto-Elamite seal image (for the seal image as a date palm see Dahl 2014), although a Middle Elamite monumental representation may attest to the basic iconicity of these forms (Paladre 2022; Figure 3.7). Sometimes pairings of geometric and figurative elements in seals appear to

correspond to complex graphemes in the script (compare the seal with the cross and goat to M327+M342, Figure 3.5).

In addition to common themes, a particular formal similarity suggests the closeness of relationship between seal imagery and sign formation: Namely, a subset of proto-Elamite seal images and signs share an interest in symmetrical composition (Figure 3.7). Two reed poles flank the boat in the aforementioned seal (Figure 3.6), whereas sign M377, probably mimicking this pole, sometimes appears doubled or framing other signs in complex graphemes. Other symmetrical constructions in seals and script involve stylized mountains and trees, sometimes flanked in the seals by rearing animals. Symmetrical forms are a strategy for composing complex graphemes in the script, Dahl's (2005b) A-B-A type. This type of symmetrical complex grapheme composition is not found in neighboring proto-cuneiform.

Another feature of proto-Elamite sign production which might indicate a conceptual relationship to seal imagery is the way that sign forms are presented with many subtle variations. This feature has complicated the decipherment process for over a century, as it makes it difficult to draw up a definitive sign list distinguishing allographs from distinct signs. However, the consistent rendering of individual variants of signs across tablets (and even across sites) speaks against understanding this feature entirely as a simple lack of standardization within the scribal community. Instead, we may consider the possibility that scribes transferred a principle well known in seal imagery into script: Widespread consistencies in style and theme paired with numerous alterations in minor details that (it is often hypothesized) served to differentiate one seal bearer's authority from another. A similar principle applied in proto-Elamite script could, by hypothesis, differentiate the so-called 'owner' signs. On the other hand, it is difficult to determine the extent to which minor differences serve to encode distinct information in either seals or signs.

Finally, a paratextual image tradition adds to the picture of the relationship between design and identity-marking in proto-Elamite. Over a dozen geometric scribal designs are found on tablets, used in similar ways to seals (Dahl 2012), marking the non-textual space usually on the reverse of a tablet (Figure 3.7b). Designed as simple visual puzzles with overlapping lines, their shape and use reinforce an interest on the part of proto-Elamite scribes in creating non-iconic images that would suit the exclusionary purpose of the writing system. These are normally rendered as 'non-textual' shapes, much larger than the script and outside of the text, but sign $M102_d$ appears to be a scribal design incorporated into the sign list, perhaps one more hint that the writing system may sometimes have been referencing owners, with shapes also representing their identity in seal or other image traditions contiguous with the script.

Traces in Other Media

Above, we have emphasized the circulation of images both within the proto-Elamite world and between neighboring regions, focusing on clay information technology systems and their associated seals made from stone and other materials. The possible proto-Elamite 'banner' M136 and the proto-cuneiform 'standards' signs raise the possibility that scripts were also interested in representing cultural objects in their world that might have had their origin outside the administrative toolkit, which may have been conventionalized to some degree independently from script, as symbols associated with cults, households, or other social identities. A hint at a broader multimedia sharing of images has been identified in the case of the proto-Elamite murals at the city of Tal-i Malyan, sitting in a valley among the Zagros mountains of southwestern Iran (Dahl 2012). There, crosses recalling signs M325 or M327 and, more distinctly, quadrilobes similar to M365 appear among geometric step-like constructions resembling the 'mountain' motifs of seals but in more geometric form, with some similarity to proto-Elamite signs, including $M393_b$. A fragment of a decorated vase from the site also includes a stepped shape (Álvarez-Mon 2020, 72–3; Paladre 2022 vol. II, 275). In a similar seal scene known by its impression at Susa, anthropomorphic lions with arms in ritual pose approach stepped shapes resembling the Tal-i Malyan reliefs.

We consider one other example here to highlight the way that images reflected in script may have permeated society well beyond the traces of clay administration typically available to us. Can we draw meaningful parallel between group of cross-shaped pendants found in the grave of two children at Susa (Mecquenem 1934, 1943) and the fat cross signs of series M327, such as M327+M365 (Figure 3.8)[1]? Among the little archaeological information we can recover for the pendants is that the graves date approximately to the proto-Elamite period, and the children wore necklaces of pearls along with the pendants.

Any relationship between such a decorative object and a proto-Elamite 'household' sign is, of course, likely to be tenuous. The frame shape M327 in proto-Elamite can be filled with different shapes. Curiously, these sets are notably similar to a few proto-cuneiform signs with contested iconicity (Figure 3.8, also Figure 3.4). While comparison of shapes alone is not sufficient to establish a true migration of images between scripts, in this case each shape appears as frame to other signs, and crucially, both the proto-Elamite and proto-cuneiform sets are used in tablet lines where household, administrative unit, or other document summary information is expected. Thus, clues from tablet format reinforce the possibility that these representations in script share some common basis, transformed as it may be in each direction.

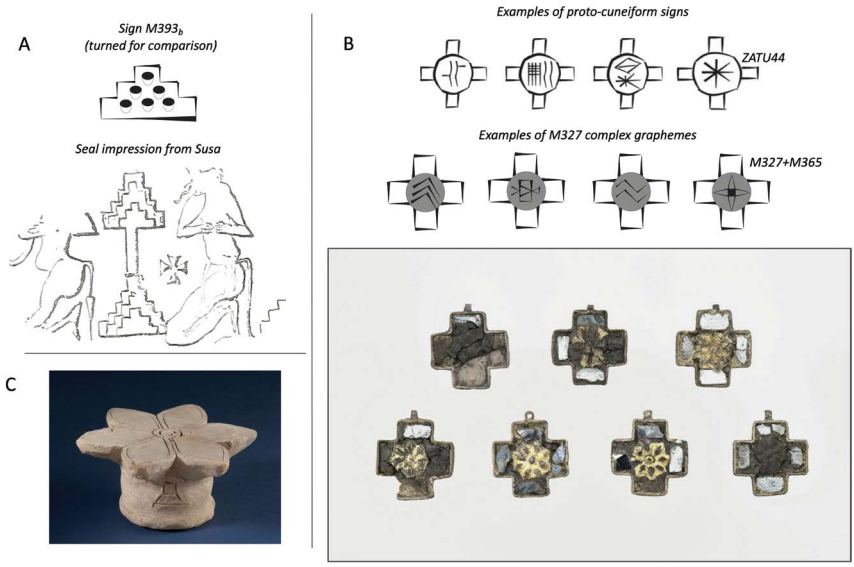

Figure 3.8 Image migration through multimedia. (a) Seal impression from Susa MDP 16, 263. (b) Top: Select examples of comparable proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite complex signs built on a cross with a circle; Bottom: Pendants from the grave of a child; Mecquenem (1943, 15). (c) Clay model of a rosette from Uruk with proto-cuneiform sign inscribed on the side; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/.

The motif inside the pendant cross also has a strong multimedia and inter-regional presence: The rosette is known through piedmont glyptic of the proto-Elamite world and also in other material representations in the proto-cuneiform world, including seal impressions on tablets from the site of Jemdet Nasr, inlaid vessels from Uruk, and a clay model also from Uruk, inscribed with a proto-cuneiform sign (AB) related to cult institutions (Figure 3.8). Notably, a rosette does not appear in proto-cuneiform script, unless the 'star/god' sign AN (ZATU31) is understood as a schematic representation (Moortgat-Correns 1994), but this remains in the realm of speculation. In proto-Elamite, the shape is known in seals, but only a few very rare and seemingly experimental rosette-like signs are found in script (Figure 3.5). We might speculate that rendering eight pedals in miniature in clay was laborious, and scribes perhaps turned to simpler forms such as M365. However, these details of image migration are largely out of reach for us. Instead, I suggest that the pendants with their possible correlations in script encourage us to consider the complex relationships between signs, other visual media, and social identities. Both proto-cuneiform and proto-Elamite writing systems were used to track the

movement of goods in relation to members of society, and fixing visual representations of social identities at different levels must have been a key problem in script invention.

Icons, Emblems, and Other Designs: Representing the Social World in Script

Despite achieving a high level of technical mastery and standardization in some respects, the proto-Elamite script was abandoned after a few centuries. There may have been multiple reasons for the failure of the writing system. Among them, we should consider the fundamental problem of representing the social world in visual form in a way that facilitated the underlying economic exchanges represented by the texts. Proto-Elamite is a novel example of a complex graphic recording system that made important moves toward writing as we know it in an environment with no robust exposure to glottographic writing, and it is not yet certain whether scribes landed upon a strategy of coding the sounds of language in order to write names of persons or group identities.

Many signs can be shown to draw on inherited images, showing that pre- and proto-historic image-making traditions fed into the invention of writing in early Iran. These include not only the rich corpora of seal traditions circulating inter-regionally but also the proto-cuneiform writing system and perhaps other media. The presence of hundreds of variously iconic, schematic, and geometric signs in proto-Elamite suggests a broad incorporation of images from society. At the same time, readily recognizable iconic depictions of things appear only to a limited extent, especially for vessels, while humans and animals (common icons in other early writing systems) are absent or rare. So far as we can tell, literal use of icons apart from vessels is particularly limited. While some or even all schematic forms may be fundamentally based on depictions of things, including pictures of images circulating in other media, there appears to be no great emphasis on making these depictions accessible – and perhaps the contrary. The medium (miniature representations made with a stylus on clay) may have necessitated a certain level of schematism – consider the recognizable but abandoned experiments in depicting a hand, a rosette, and equid heads – but the resulting restricted accessibility of the images in proto-Elamite was, ultimately, an intentional design feature.

To a considerable extent, this may reflect the influence of clay sealing practices on the invention of writing in Iran. The writing system, like seal iconography and sealing practice, developed as an image-based technology concerned with admitting a limited set of encultured participants, in order to control access to information about the distribution of goods. As with seals, proto-Elamite may have used images as lock-and-key devices.

In fact, some, and perhaps many, sign shapes and collocations were crafted in reference to the seal tradition (though the influence was surely to an extent in both directions), and this may reflect not only artistic influence but functional referencing of particular seal-bearing administrators or households. Arguably, many icons, such as those that may have referenced seal iconography in reduced form, were not so much cognitive affordances as they were visual puzzles keeping information safe in plain sight.

Proto-Elamite 'writing' was indeed an innovative technology, integrating, in a strict linear format, a system of numerical calculation with newly created, non-numerical signs that were nonetheless often drawn from existing image traditions. A preference for adapting pre-existing images may reflect scribal attitudes to the power of images in society and the place of their script as a repository of cultural symbols. Despite the efforts scribes made to visually order lines of text, presenting script as a phenomenon distinct from seal imagery, perhaps – though we only speculate – this museum of images transformed into 'signs' did not manage to make the conceptual leap from the curation of images, emblems, and designs to a system of glottographic notation. For now, the question of glottography remains open. It is hoped that the assessment of the visual dimensions of proto-Elamite writing provided here offers greater nuance on how societies of the late fourth and early third millennia were exploring new ways of 'seeing' that form the backdrop for the transformation of symbol systems in the following centuries into technologies of 'reading' which spread across the region.

Note

1 I would like to thank Jacob Dahl for bring these objects to my attention.

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4 Emblem Glyphs

Orthography and the Political World of Classic Maya Scribes

Mallory E. Matsumoto

The Classic Maya (250–900 CE) lowlands in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and western Honduras and El Salvador were dotted with dozens of independent but interconnected polities, each ruled by a divine king (Figure 4.1). The king was identified with a so-called emblem glyph, a privileged rank that was reserved for the dynastic ruler (Berlin 1958; Marcus 1976; Mathews 1991; Tokovinine 2011). Literally translating to 'holy lord of [polity]', the title usually consists of the prefix *k'uhul* ('holy, divine'), the core term *ajaw* ('lord'), and a polity-specific name or 'emblem' (Figure 4.2). In some cases, however, the *k'uhul* prefix was omitted as a sign that the *ajaw* in question – and, by extension, the dynasty that he represented – was not powerful or influential enough to merit the 'holy' modifier. Although most emblem glyph-bearers were men, the *k'uhul ajaw* title was occasionally modified with the female prefix *ix-* to denote a ruling lady.

Emblem glyphs are important indices of Classic Maya political hierarchies, allowing epigraphers to tracing dynastic lineages and inter-polity relations. In contrast to a dynastic king identified by an emblem glyph, rulers of subordinate centers generally bore lesser rankings such as *aj-chak wayib/wayab* ('he of red dreaming place; red/great dreamer'), or the undeciphered title *sajal* (Beliaev 2004; Parmington 2003; Schele and Freidel 1990, 252–302; Stuart 1985, 2013). Possessed titles like *y-ajaw* ('his/her lord') or *u-sajal* ('his/her *sajal*') made some local nobles' vassal status even more explicit in relation to their dynastic overlords (Houston, cited in Grube and Martin 1998, 113; Lacadena García-Gallo and Ciudad Ruiz, 1998, 42–45; Mathews and Justeson 1984, 229). Only the *kaloomte'* title, whose semantic interpretation remains debated, was more prestigious than *k'uhul ajaw* and thus applied to only a minority of kings entitled to an emblem glyph (Martin 2020, 77–83; Stuart, Grube, and Schele 1989).

In reconstructing Classic Maya political history, the presence versus absence of a full emblem glyph – in other words, whether the local ruler was a 'holy lord' or bore a lesser title – distinguishes subsidiaries centers

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Figure 4.1 Map of the Maya lowlands, indicating archaeological sites mentioned in this chapter. (Compiled by the author in ArcGISPro. World Imagery [WGS84] basemap copyright © 2023 Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community.)

from sites that may have been conquered or otherwise subordinated to another polity at one time but maintained their own dynastic rulers and thus a baseline level of political self-determination. The site of Bonampak in the western lowlands, for instance, was controlled at intervals by Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, and possibly Tonina, and its hieroglyphic and iconographic culture displays prominent influence from Yaxchilan in particular (Figure 4.1). However, its rulers still used a full emblem glyph and exercised moderate political influence in the region throughout the Late

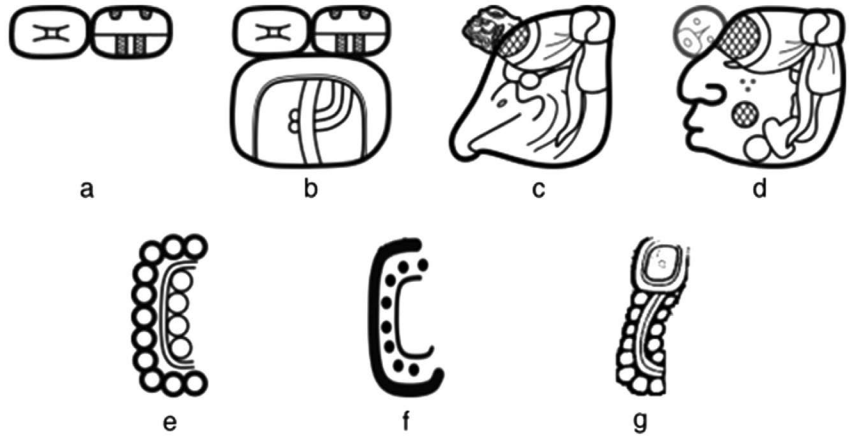


Figure 4.2 Logographs commonly used to write Classic Maya emblem glyph titles (*k'uhul ajaw*, 'holy lord'): (a) T0168bt **AJAW**, (b) T0168bv **AJAW**, (c) T1562st **AJAW**, (d) T1515st **AJAW**, (e) T0032vl **K'UH**, (f) T0032ms **K'UH**, (g) T0032vl (with distal infix) **K'UH**. Drawings by Christian Prager (CC BY 4.0) (a–f) and Nikolai Grube[1] (g); (f–g) modified by the author.

Classic era (Arellano Hernández 1998; Bíró 2007; Mathews 1980, 1993). In contrast, dynastic rulers at another western polity, Sak Tz'i', never prefixed *k'uhul* ('divine, godly') to their *ajaw* title. Yet according to inscriptions from across the region, Sak Tz'i' maintained significant cultural and political agency throughout the polity's recorded history, even when its kings were defeated or captured by Piedras Negras, Tonina, or Yaxchilan (Bíró 2005; Golden et al. 2020).

This chapter considers hieroglyphic representation of emblem glyphs as a graphic expression of political identity. I propose that an emblem glyph's sociopolitical associations influenced how Classic Maya scribes wrote the titles in their inscriptions. I begin by contrasting Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, rivalrous neighbors in the western lowlands with a well-documented history of (often antagonistic) interactions (Figure 4.1). I identify differences between the kingdoms' scribes in representing emblem glyphs with respect to allographic or stylistic variation of specific hieroglyph or grapheme, and substitution or alternation between multiple graphemes with the same linguistic value. Patterns in emblem glyph composition suggest that Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras scribes were cognizant of their distinct writing practices and correlated them with the respective kingdoms' unique political identities.

Subsequently, I expand discussion to consider emblem glyphs recorded in inscriptions from dozens of sites across the Maya lowlands. Here, I focus

on a third component of the title's composition, namely ordinatio, or the spatial arrangement of component hieroglyphs within an emblem glyph. Continuities in the internal structure of specific emblem glyphs in local and foreign inscriptions, together with patterns in allographic and graphemic variation, indicate that scribes conceptualized emblem glyphs as compositional wholes rather than as collections of separable components. Such orthographic continuity would have reinforced quick recognition within a passage of hieroglyphic text among the privileged who could read. It also made hieroglyphic form a communicative complement to linguistic content and thus a salient vehicle for communicating political identity among Classic Maya scribes and readers.

Emblem Glyphs Variation Between Rivals: Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan

Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan are an excellent case study for introducing scribal variation in emblem glyphs. Not only are the kingdoms' corpora of hieroglyphic inscriptions extensive, including 184 texts considered in the following analysis, but their political histories are unusually well-documented. The two neighbors, located fewer than 45 km apart on the banks of the Usumacinta River that today separates the modern nations of Guatemala and Mexico, were military and political rivals whose most consequential confrontations resulted in sequestration of the opposing king or an heir. Piedras Negras achieved this feat in the early sixth century and again in the mid-eighth century (Martin and Grube 2000, 141, 151). Yaxchilan, in turn, celebrated captures of Piedras Negras rulers in the mid-fifth century and again in the early ninth century, the latter being Piedras Negras's last known dynastic king (Martin and Grube 2000, 119, 137). Still, defensive fortifications erected in the intervening border zone indicate that tensions between the kingdoms had consequences for the wider population, not just the royal families (Golden et al. 2008; Golden and Scherer 2013; Scherer et al. 2022).

The divergent political identities were also expressed in hieroglyphic inscriptions that dynastic kings commissioned from local workshops. Most markedly, scribes at Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras differed substantially in how they wrote the relatively common title *ajaw*. T0168bt was the principal logograph used to denote the *ajaw* title in all contexts, not only in emblem glyphs (Figure 4.2a). But scribes from the rival kingdoms favored allographs that contrasted in the position of T0168bt's two rounded elements: One with a pinched quadrilateral in the center, the other with vertical stripes along the top and bottom and a horizontal line through the middle (on the left- and right-hand sides, respectively, in Figure 4.2a). Alternating their relative order was a form of allographic

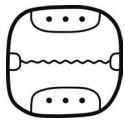
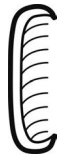
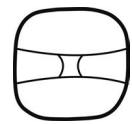
Figure 4.3 Local emblem glyphs recorded at Piedras Negras (a–b) and Yaxchilan (c–d), plus a Yaxchilan emblem glyph written at Piedras Negras (e). Numbers in parentheses indicate the text's dedication year (CE). Details of images by the author (a–b, e), Teobert Maler, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (c–d). Photos (a–b, e) courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.

variation that altered the grapheme's visual form without changing its linguistic value. At Yaxchilan, most occurrences of T0168bt feature the striped element on the left (56.7%, n = 174) (Figure 4.3c–d). That allograph was a small minority at Piedras Negras, however (4.4%, n = 6). There, scribes preferred to represent the striped element on the on the right (60.6%, n = 83) (Figure 4.3a–b, e), an option that was correspondingly unpopular at Yaxchilan (23.8%, n = 73).

Another locus of orthographic variation was the combination of logographic and syllabic hieroglyphs in writing *ajaw*. Throughout the history of Maya hieroglyphic writing, scribes often complemented logographs, which denote both a semantic value and a phonetic value, with one or more syllabic signs to cue readers to the correct pronunciation. Although

most *ajaw* spellings at Piedras Negras consist of an unaccompanied **AJAW** logograph (71.7%, n = 134), scribes sometimes added at least one phonetic complement (24.6%, n = 46), most commonly a suffixed syllable **wa** (Table 4.1). At Yaxchilan, in contrast, scribes strongly preferred purely logographic spellings (80.3%, n = 302) over spellings with one or more phonetic complements (18.1%, n = 68). Greater emphasis on phonetic transparency at Piedras Negras extended to fully syllabic renderings of *ajaw*, where four phonetic spellings of a possessed version of the *y-ajaw*

Table 4.1 Classic Maya logographs (readings in UPPER CASE with 'gloss') and syllabic hieroglyphs (readings in lower case) mentioned in the text, sorted alphabetically and identified by T-number in parentheses.[2] Drawings by Christian Prager (CC BY 4.0)

 **BAAK** 'bone' (T0570st)	 **bu** (T0021vl)	 **CHAN/KAN** 'sky' (T0561st)	 **CHAAN/KAAN** 'snake' (T0764st)	 **ka** (T0738bh)
 **ka** (T0025st)	 **ku** (T0528st)	 **la** (T0178bh)	 **mu** (T0019vl)	 **MUT** '?' (T0569st)
 **o** (T0099ex)	 **o** (T0099hc)	 **pa** (T0586st)	 **pa** (T0586hc)	 **PA'** 'split' (T0299ex)
 **PA'** 'split' (T0299st)	 **pi** (T0177br)	 **po** (T0622st)	 **wa** (T0130bh)	 **?** (T1538st)

title outnumber Yaxchilan's two attestations. Still, purely syllabic *ajaw* references are quite rare at both sites, representing just 2.1% of spellings at Piedras Negras and 0.5% at Yaxchilan.

The graphic divergence in *ajaw* spellings between Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan scribes symbolized relations between the title's human bearers, which were often uneasy at best. Unsurprisingly, the differences also extend to emblem glyphs, the highest-ranking iteration of a Classic Maya *ajaw*. In the polity-specific title, scribes at the rival centers demonstrate even more striking graphic tendencies than across *ajaw* spellings generally. Writers at Piedras Negras favored single logographs over more transparent **AJAW**-**wa** spellings in emblem glyphs (63.3%, n = 38 vs. 35.0%, n = 21), regardless of whether the human referent was a king at Piedras Negras or another polity (Figure 4.3a–b; compare Stela 8, blocks A24, B10, B13, D5, N2, V2, X16, in Stuart and Graham 2003, 46). Yet the preference for purely logographic *ajaw* spellings was even stronger at Yaxchilan in the same context (84.2%, n = 139) (Figure 4.3c–d). There, just 12.7% (n = 24) of emblem glyphs feature a phonetic complement **wa** (Lintel 1, blocks H1–I1, in Graham and von Euw 1977, 13).

Differences in scribal practice are apparent in other components of emblem glyphs as well. Scribes at Piedras Negras were more willing to experiment when writing the *k'uhul* ('holy') prefix, particularly by using a wider variety of **K'UH** logographs (Figures 4.2e–f, 4.3a–b, e) (Matsumoto 2021: Table 5.3). At Yaxchilan, however, scribes strongly preferred one specific form of **K'UH**, namely T0032vl with a distal infix (Figure 4.2g). The allograph is attested earlier there than at Piedras Negras and remained by far the most popular among Yaxchilan scribes across all contexts, including emblem glyphs (Figure 4.3c). Emblem glyph orthography was more conservative in the Yaxchilan kingdom with respect to logographic substitution for *ajaw*, too. Of some 200 emblem glyphs recorded at Yaxchilan and the kingdom's subsidiary centers, just three are written with an **AJAW** logograph in the form of a vulture head (Figure 4.2c; Lintel 26, block X1, in Graham and von Euw 1977, 57). All others feature T0168bt, the most common **AJAW** logograph across the Classic Maya lowlands (Figures 4.2a, 4.3c–d). Among approximately 60 total emblem glyphs written in the Piedras Negras kingdom, in contrast, there are at least three examples with the vulture head variant and one with a human-head variant (Figure 4.2c–d; Panel 2, blocks N1–N2 and Panel 4, blocks P2–P3, in O'Neil 2012: Fig. 4.4b).

Scribes at each kingdom similarly diverged in how they arranged an emblem glyph's component hieroglyphs, particularly with respect to the *k'uhul* prefix. At Piedras Negras, scribes rendering their polity's title usually positioned the prefix, in the form of a shortened **K'UH** logograph (T0032ms), in the upper left corner (97.0%, n = 47) (Figures 4.2f, 4.3a–b).

Scribes working at Yaxchilan, in contrast, preferred to write the local emblem glyph with the longer **K'UH** logograph described previously occupying the entire left side (70.3%, n = 109) or, more rarely, the full width of the top (29.7%, n = 46) (Figures 4.2g, 4.3c–d, compare Figure 4.3b). The T0032vl logograph with a distal infix, in contrast, was almost never used to write the local emblem glyph at Piedras Negras (compare Figure 4.3e), although appears elsewhere in the site's hieroglyphic corpus (Stela 12, block D6, in Stuart and Graham 2003, 62).

Another disparity in emblem glyph composition is specific to one of the two emblems for the Yaxchilan polity, *pa'kan* ('split sky') (Figure 4.3c–e; Martin 2004). At Piedras Negras, all three hieroglyphic references to the rival dynasty's emblem glyph represent the logograph **PA'** 'split' as curls or tendrils (T0299ex) emerging from the top of the logograph **CHAN** ('sky') (Figure 4.3e; Table 4.1). That form is not written in over 100 attestations of the name *pa'kan* in the Yaxchilan kingdom, however, where **PA'** is instead legible only as a cleft (T0299st) in the top of **CHAN** (Figure 4.3c–d; Table 4.1). The distinction applies generally to representations of the *pa'kan* emblem, in fact; the curls (T0299ex) tend to feature in mentions abroad but not at home, where writers preferred the cleft alone (T0299st) (Martin 2004, 1). In rendering the *pa'kan* emblem, then, scribes patterned graphic expression onto political affiliation based on their position vis-à-vis the Yaxchilan polity. By visually distinguishing their hieroglyphic representations of salient titles, scribes at Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan simultaneously represented and reinforced their communities' distinct sociopolitical identities. As with all other orthographic alternations discussed here, however, none of these changes influenced the titles' semantic or phonetic value. The consequences were purely graphic, not linguistic.

Emblem Glyph Ordinatio across the Classic Maya Lowlands

The previous examples suggest that Classic Maya scribes attended to distinctions in hieroglyphic practice with respect to emblem glyph representation. In the preceding section, I proposed that significant differences in emblem glyph composition – most notably grapheme choice and allography – between the Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras kingdoms represented a graphic strategy for emphasizing political identity and difference. The remaining discussion focuses on another feature, ordinatio, in emblem glyphs from across the lowlands. Ordinatio is especially salient for visual perception because the relative arrangement of component signs arguably defines an emblem glyph's visual form more than any other feature besides the polity-specific emblem. Additionally, ordinatio reflects several scribal choices about emblem glyph orthography, including logographic substitution for *ajaw* and *k'uhul* and phonetic complementation.

Based on a sample of over 950 emblem glyphs representing more than three dozen distinct polities, I suggest that Classic Maya scribes tended to maintain relatively consistent ordinatio in rendering a given emblem glyph across time and space, even when the title denoted a non-local polity. At the same time, they targeted specific hieroglyphic components for differentiation that did not significantly change the title's general contours. In theory, Classic Maya scribes could alter any of the aforementioned elements to visually distinguish one emblem glyph spelling from another without affecting its linguistic reading. In practice, however, they most often varied the form of the prefixed **K'UH** logograph and the internal composition of the polity-specific 'emblem'. These changes had limited impact on the emblem glyph's overall structure because they did not consistently require scribes to add, subtract, or rearrange elements. In contrast, logographic substitution for *ajaw* and phonetic complementation, two features more decisive for emblem glyph ordinatio, remained relatively constant across emblem glyph spellings.

Local Emblem Glyph References

Consistencies in ordinatio are apparent across emblem glyphs written at most major polities. For example, almost all local emblem glyphs of the Baakal and Sa'al dynasties based at Palenque/Tortuguero and Naranjo, respectively (Figure 4.1), feature the **K'UH** logograph—often T0032vl with a distal infix—on the viewer's left-hand side (Figures 4.2g, 4.4a–d). The emblems of these and many other Classic Maya polities often bore the toponymic suffix *-Vl*, typically written with the syllable **la** (Table 4.1; Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2001; Lacadena García-Gallo and Wichmann 2019, 191–8; Tokovinine 2013, 8). When they explicitly indicated *-Vl* in a Baakal or Sa'al emblem glyph, scribes consistently subfixed it to the respective polity's emblem, to the right of the *k'uhul* prefix (Figure 4.4b, d). Much less commonly, the suffix occupies the bottom left corner or fills the entire base of the emblem glyph (Palenque House A, Pier A, block D8, in Robertson 1985:Figs. 17–18). At Quirigua, in turn, the most common local emblem glyph resembled the Baakal and Sa'al titles in ordinatio, with the **K'UH** logograph on the left and a syllabic sign sometimes under the emblem on the right. There though, the optional syllable tended to be **wa** as a phonetic complement for **AJAW**, the latter typically written with the logograph T0168bt (Figure 4.4e).

Pomona was a minor political center in the western lowlands whose kings bore an emblem glyph but never wielded the same degree of influence as the lords of nearby Palenque or Piedras Negras (Figure 4.1). Pomona scribes tended to render their local title with the same **K'UH** logograph on the left and the **AJAW** logograph in the upper right corner, as at Quirigua,

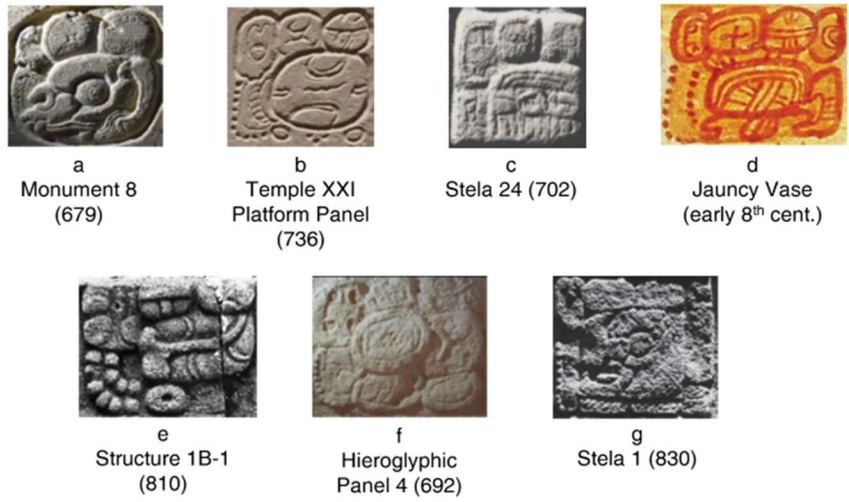


Figure 4.4 Local emblem glyphs in texts composed at (a) Tortuguero, (b) Palenque, (c–d) Naranjo, (e) Quirigua, (f) Pomona, (g) Panhale. Numbers in parentheses indicate the text's dedication year (CE). Details of images by the author (a, b), Teobert Maler, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (c), Justin Kerr, K4464 (d), Carnegie Institution of Washington (e), INAH-Museo de Sitio de Pomoná/Ignacio Guevara (f), Karl Herbert Mayer (g).

Palenque/Tortuguero, and Naranjo (Figure 4.4f). More notably, though, they were relatively consistent in arranging the syllabic components of the polity's complex emblem, positioning **pa** (T0586st) above **ka** in the middle and **bu** over **la** on the right-hand side of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.4f; Table 4.1). This internal layout is even replicated as late as the early ninth century on Panhale Stela 1, where the syllable **pa** takes the form of an anthropomorphic head variant (T0586hc) that is also attested at Pomona (Figure 4.4g; Table 4.1; Tablet of the 96 Glyphs, block I7, in Stuart 2007, 64). In fact, Stela 1 is believed to be the last monument dedicated by a fading Pomona dynasty after it had relocated to a more defensible location at Panhale in the Terminal Classic era (Guenter, cited in Anaya Hernández 2006; Martin 2020, 284–5).

Not all emblem glyphs were subject to the same regularity in internal composition, however. Two major Classic Maya polities where scribes frequently varied the ordinatio of their home emblem glyph are Tonina in the highlands of Chiapas and Copan in the southeastern lowlands (Figure 4.1). Scribes at both centers generally preferred to place the *k'uhul* prefix on the left-hand side of the emblem glyph. They were less consistent, however, in ordering the multiple hieroglyphic components of their polity's respective emblems. In local renderings of the most common of Tonina's

Figure 4.5 Local emblem glyphs recorded at Tonina (a–d) and Copan (e–h). Numbers in parentheses indicate the text's dedication year (CE). Details of images by the author (a, e, g), Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia de México-Museo Nacional de Antropología (b), Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia de México-Museo de Sitio de Toniná (c–d), Justin Kerr, K2893[3] (f), Linda Schele © David Schele (h).

three emblem glyphs, *k'uhul popo' ajaw* (Martin 2020, 74; Mathews 1982, 901), the syllabic hieroglyph **po** consistently occupies the center of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.5a–b, d; Table 4.1). The accompanying syllable **o**, in contrast, was more flexible in form and placement. Although scribes usually postfixed or subfixed **o** (T0099ex) to **po** (Figure 4.5a–b, d), they occasionally infixed the latter into an avian head variant of the former (T0099hc) (Figure 4.5c; Table 4.1) or elided the syllable **o** completely (Monument 182, block Q, in Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2019: Fig. 10). More rarely, they wrote T0099hc in the center and relocated **po** below the *k'uhul* prefix, on the left-hand side of the emblem glyph (Fragment, block pBp3, in Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2019: Fig. 3).

Scribes at Tonina were also relatively open to varying the shape and position of the *k'uhul* prefix in the local emblem glyph. Often, the prefix occupied the left-hand side of the emblem glyph, usually in the form of T0036vl with a distal infix (Figures 4.2g, 4.5a). On some occasions, though, they inverted the **K'UH** logograph so that the infix occupied the bottom left corner (Figure 4.5b–c), or they rotated it to stretch horizontally across the top of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.5d). Less commonly, scribes used a smaller logograph (T0036ms) and limited it to the top left corner of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.2f; Monument 104, block I,

in Graham and Mathews 1996, 127). There was, in fact, a chronological component to this variation in emblem glyph composition at Tonina – the form with a central or subfixed syllable **o** is common throughout the Late Classic period (600–820), whereas examples with the **K'UH** logograph's distal infix positioned in the bottom left corner cluster in the eighth century (Figure 4.5b, d). Nonetheless, the title *k'uhul popo' ajaw* was never written at Tonina with ordinatio as consistent as in local emblem glyph spellings at Palenque, Piedras Negras, or Yaxchilan.

As at Tonina, scribes at Copan preferred to insert the *k'uhul* prefix in the left-hand side of the emblem glyph and the **AJAW** logograph in the upper-right corner. But they were less rigid in arranging the polity-specific emblem, which usually consisted of a central, undeciphered bat-head sign (T1538st) with an infixed or conflated **ku** syllable and another hieroglyph for the syllable **pi** (Table 4.1; Boot 2009; Grube 1991, 228; Stross 1989). The syllable **pi** was usually subfixed or postfixed to the undeciphered bat-head hieroglyph (Figure 4.5e–f), although scribes left it out entirely on some occasions (Figure 4.5g). The syllable **ku**, in contrast, was almost always infixed in the bat head (Figure 4.5e–g), unless it was omitted (Figure 4.5h). In some Early Classic texts at Copan, scribes postfixed the syllable **pu** to the bat head sign, sometimes instead of **pi**, when writing the local emblem glyph (Table 4.1; Sculptured Step, Structure 10L-11-Sub-12, block G2, in Prager and Wagner 2017: Fig. 1). This latter spelling was short-lived but suggests that the bat-head hieroglyph functioned as a logograph and that its phonetic value includes a consonant /p/ and, perhaps, a complex vowel.

Foreign Emblem Glyph References

Another variable shaping emblem glyph composition was political context, namely whether scribes were writing the local emblem glyph, as in the examples discussed above, or that of another polity. Notably, stability in ordinatio is apparent even in foreign emblem glyphs, that is, in hieroglyphic references to a polity other than the one where the inscription was produced. Thus, it seems that ordinatio was a salient component of how Classic Maya scribes learned and wrote these political titles. Unfortunately, foreign mentions of Naranjo, Quirigua, Piedras Negras, Pomona, and Tonina emblem glyphs are too scarce to detect any meaningful patterns. The limited external citations of Copan emblem glyphs, in turn, reflect a diversity in internal composition comparable to records at that dynastic center (Quirigua Str. 1B-1 step, block X, in Looper 2003; Quirigua Alt. L, block G1, in Prager et al. 2019, 98; Río Amarillo Alt. 1, block I1, in Schele 1987: Fig. 2; compare Figure 4.5e–h). The more illustrative cases are Yaxchilan and the Baakal, Kaanul, and Mutul kingdoms, which are referenced often enough by peers to demonstrate that trends in emblem glyph ordinatio persisted across scribal communities.

Yaxchilan provides a particularly clear-cut example because the ordinatio typical of local emblem glyph representations also characterizes foreign references. Importantly, this scribal consistency applies not only at sites within the Yaxchilan kingdom like Dos Caobas or El Kinel, but also at Bonampak, an occasional foe of Yaxchilan (Figure 4.6a; Bonampak Sculptured Stone 4, block I6 and Dos Caobas Stela 1, block pK1,

Figure 4.6 Foreign references to the emblem glyphs of the (a) Yaxchilan, (b–c) Baakal, (d–h) Mutul, and (i–q) Kaanul polities. Numbers in parentheses indicate the text's dedication year (CE). Details of images from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (a), Ivan Šprajc[3] (b), Linda Schele © David Schele (c, g, m), Teobert Maler, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (d, k, q), the author (e, h, j), Justin Kerr, K9197[3] (f), Justin Kerr, K9055[3] (i), Cleveland Museum of Art (l), Ian Graham[4] (n–p), Karl Herbert Mayer[5] (q). Photos (e, h, j) courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala.

in Stuart 2007, 30, 43). Local adaptations are apparent at rival Piedras Negras, however, where scribes maintained the Yaxchilan emblem glyph's typical ordinatio but used an infix-less form of T0032vl **K'UH** (Figures 4.2e, 4.3e; see also El Kinel Monument 1, blocks A7 and B1, in Houston et al. 2006: Fig. 6). The latter choice aligned with the general preference at Piedras Negras for a simple **K'UH** prefix without an infix (compare Figure 4.3a–b, e).

Of all Classic Maya polities in the western lowlands, however, the Baakal kingdom accumulated the most outside emblem glyph references (Figure 7b). In this case, too, scribes elsewhere generally reproduced the ordinatio typical of local monuments at Palenque and Tortuguero, even if they were working at a center whose own emblem glyph featured a different internal composition (Piedras Negras Stela 8, block W11, in Stuart and Graham 2003, 48). There were anomalies, however, with perhaps the most unusual appearing on Copan Stela A. There, scribes subfixed the syllable **wa**, a phonetic complement for **AJAW**, under the logograph **BAAK** ('bone'), the primary component of the Baakal emblem (Figure 4.6c; Table 4.1). This composition was rare but not unprecedented at Palenque, where it appears on the early seventh-century Palace Tablet, for instance (block Q1, in Robertson 1985: Figs. 257–258). Still, foreign scribes were more likely than scribes at Palenque or Tortuguero to include a phonetic complement **wa** for **AJAW** under or to the right of **BAAK** in the emblem glyph (Tonina Monument 107, block pA, in Graham and Mathews 1999, 137; Piedras Negras Stela 8, block W11, in Stuart and Graham 2003, 48).

Ordinatio of foreign emblem glyphs was also affected by scribes' decision to include or omit the *k'uhul* 'holy' modifier. As previously noted, some Classic Maya polities were governed by lords who were never elevated above basic *ajaw* status. These rulers were consistently less powerful than, and often subordinate to, kings designated as holy lords (*k'uhul ajaw*). Yet even in the case of dynasties whose use of a full emblem glyph is well-documented, foreign scribes did not always include a *k'uhul* prefix when referring to them in their own inscriptions. Here, too, different scribal approaches are evident between Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, for instance. At the former site, local scribes consistently denied foreign lords from Calakmul, Tikal, Piedras Negras, and elsewhere the more elevated *k'uhul* prefix as early as the Early Classic period (Lintel 35, block C7 and Lintel 37, blocks B6 and D8, in Graham 1979, 79, 83). At the latter, in contrast, scribes did acknowledge the rulers of polities like Palenque and Yaxchilan as *k'uhul ajaw* (Figure 4.3a; Stela 8, block W11, in Stuart and Graham 2003, 48).

At other major lowland polities, scribes tended to behave more like those at Piedras Negras by maintaining the *k'uhul* prefix in foreign emblem glyph references. Another pair of rivals, Quirigua and Copan, illustrates

that this practice could persist even in the wake of a major confrontation. In both kingdoms, scribes regularly granted full recognition to local and foreign kings alike with the *k'uhul* prefix, including in references to each other – even after a flip in power dynamics in 738, when K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Yopaat of Quirigua, which had long been the smaller of the two polities, captured and beheaded Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil of Copan (Marcus 1976, 135–8; Martin and Grube 2000, 218–9; Riese 1986). By consistently including the *k'uhul* prefix in the emblem glyph of the neighboring king, scribes on both sides signaled a lingering, mutual respect in their hieroglyphic narratives that was not guaranteed in Classic Maya geopolitics.

The Mutul and Kaanul Dynasties

The Mutul and Kaanul dynasties based at Tikal and Dzibanche/Calakmul, respectively, were the two most dominant political forces in the Maya lowlands, jockeying for hegemonic influence in the Central Peten and beyond over generations (Martin 2020; Martin and Grube 2000). It is unsurprising, then, that the polities were cited in foreign inscriptions far more frequently than any other (Martin 2020: Fig. 76). The unusually robust corpus of emblem glyph attestations includes ample examples from both dynastic centers, their subordinate sites, and other polities with which they clashed. As such, the Mutul and Kaanul emblem glyphs provide an especially compelling testament to the clear scribal preferences that crystallized over the Classic period, presumably through ongoing exchange among scribes that facilitated in wide but decentralized dissemination of norms in emblem glyph representation.

Phonetic Complementation

For the most part, Mutul scribes rarely included phonetic complements when writing their own emblem glyph. Occasionally, they included a **wa** suffix for **AJAW**, usually subfixing the syllable below the **MUT** logograph, whose semantic gloss remains uncertain (Stuart 1993, 2023). Instead, the most frequent syllabic component was the toponymic suffix *-Vl*, usually as a syllable **la** subfixed to **MUT** logograph. Spellings with a phonetic complement **wa** but no suffix *-Vl*, in turn, were extremely rare, at least at Tikal. They were more common at Dos Pilas and Aguateca, the seats of a breakaway branch of the Mutul dynasty that had been founded in 677 (Houston 1993, 97–102). They also appear in references to that Mutul faction at other sites in the Pasión region (Figure 4.6f). Addition of the syllable **mu** as a phonetic complement for **MUT**, however, was a late development largely limited to Mutul emblem glyphs written at La Amelia, a minor site in the Pasión area (Panel 1, block C4, in Prager et al. 2019: Fig. 5).

Kaanul scribes, in contrast, uniformly prefixed a phonetic complement **ka** to the **KAAN** 'snake' logograph, even at the Early Classic capital of Dzibanche, before the dynasty relocated to Calakmul in the mid-sixth century (Grube 2004; Martin 2005). For the syllable, they consistently wrote the fish fin variant of **ka** (T0025st) (Figure 4.6i–j; Table 4.1). Substitution of a fuller-bodied fish-shaped hieroglyph with the same syllabic value (T0738bh), in contrast, was rare and exclusive to foreign inscriptions (Figure 4.6l; Table 4.1). Preference for the more compact T0025st may have been conditioned by the space constraints of the emblem glyph. It is noteworthy, though, the centuries-long trend of writing the pre-posed complement in the Kaanul emblem began well before the linguistic shift from **k* > *ch* that motivated Late Classic scribes across the lowlands to make the updated pronunciation explicit with a syllabic complement (see Law et al. 2014, 361–2). Thus, the persistent preference over more than two centuries for a phonetic complement **ka** generally and the fish fin variant specifically in the Kaanul emblem glyph suggests scribes' attachment to the spelling's graphic form as iconic of dynastic identity, beyond its phonetic transparency.

In contrast with scribes' regular use of a pre-posed **ka** with **KAAN**, other forms of phonetic complementation remained strikingly rare in the local emblem glyph at Dzibanche and Calakmul. The *ajaw* component, in contrast, was almost never accompanied by a syllabic hieroglyph in this context. Just two legible **AJAW-wa** spellings in a Kaanul emblem glyph originate from Dzibanche, suggesting that the spelling was limited to Early Classic texts (Monuments 8b and 13, block B3, in Nalda 2004, 39, 46). Kaanul scribes also eschewed a post-posed complement **nu** in their emblem glyph even as they wrote the disharmonic spelling **KAAN-nu** in other contexts (see Martin 2005, 5n2). It seems, then, that any sociolinguistic consciousness informing local spellings of the Kaanul emblem was fixated on the initial consonant /k/, not the quality of the internal vowel.

Logographic Substitution

Extant texts from Tikal and Calakmul/Dzibanche suggest that scribes were relatively consistent in composing their home emblem glyph, especially in comparison to their peers outside the Kaanul and Mutul polities. The most regular hieroglyphic component, as across all Classic Maya emblem glyphs, was the core *ajaw* title. At both Calakmul and Dzibanche, scribes consistently wrote only the most common **AJAW** logograph (T0168bt) in their emblem glyph, even after they had introduced the vulture and anthropomorphic head variants to write *ajaw* in other contexts (Figure 4.2a, c–d). The same pattern is apparent at Tikal, where almost all local emblem glyphs are written with T0168bt (though see Stela 5, block D9, in Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 8a). It even persisted among scribes working

in the breakaway Mutul capitals of Dos Pilas and Aguateca starting in the late seventh century.

Scribes at both Kaanul centers were rigidly consistent in writing the *k'uhul* prefix in their emblem glyph, too. Local emblem glyphs at Dzibanche feature the truncated logograph (T0032ms) in the upper left corner of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.2f; Monument 15, in Nalda 2004, 48), an arrangement that scribes maintained after the move to Calakmul (Fragment 39, in Martin 2012). In other, lesser local titles like *k'uhul chatahn winik* or *k'uhul sak wayis*, in contrast, Kaanul writers experimented with a fuller **K'UH** logograph, T0032vl with or without a distal infix (Figure 4.2e, g; Calakmul Stela 51, blocks G4 and I4, in Martin, Houston, and Zender 2015: Fig. 2a). Mutul scribes likewise preferred the T0032vl allograph, especially with a distal infix, for their own emblem glyph (Figure 4.2g). This strong predilection is not just characteristic of local renderings of the Mutul emblem glyph but also reflected in non-local references (Figure 4.6d–e, g). Still, scribes working outside of Tikal – including those at Dos Pilas and Aguateca – were more willing to experiment with alternative **K'UH** logographs and to reposition them within the Mutul emblem glyph (Figure 4.6f, h). For the Kaanul emblem glyph, in contrast, even scribes writing outside of Dzibanche or Calakmul did not vary the **K'UH** logograph as frequently, perhaps reflecting the need to accommodate the phonetic complement **ka** in the polity's emblem (see below).

Scribes could employ one of several **MUT** logographs to record the Mutul emblem, and their choices pattern according to time period and production locale (Figure 4.6f; Table 4.1; see Matsumoto 2021, 269–92). However, logographic substitution did not significantly impact the larger emblem glyph's ordinatio. For the emblem of the Kaanul polity, in turn, **KAAN** was only written at Dzibanche and Calakmul with the snake-head logograph (Table 4.1). Apparently, identification with the iconic referent was strong enough among Kaanul scribes to discourage the same graphic play with homophonous logographs that was permissible in other semantic contexts (compare Houston 1984). Logographic consistency is apparent in external references to the Kaanul emblem glyph, where the serpentine form overwhelmingly predominates (Figure 4.6i–q). Very occasionally, however, scribes working outside of Dzibanche and Calakmul conflated **KAAN** with the anthropomorphic **AJAW** logograph to create a composite head variant at the center of the Kaanul emblem glyph (Figure 4.6j–k; compare Figure 4.2d).

Ordinatio

What semantically distinguished one *k'uhul ajaw* from another was the polity-specific emblem at the center of the title. In theory, then, scribes

were free to reorder an emblem glyph's internal elements. They could, for instance, adapt a foreign emblem glyph's layout to the familiar structure of their local one. In practice, however, most external references to Mutul and Kaanul emblem glyphs replicated the ordinatio typical of inscriptions from those polities' capitals. It thus seems that scribes across the lowlands learned to write emblem glyphs as compositional wholes. Despite ordinatio having no bearing on an emblem glyph's linguistic reading, scribes considered the feature salient to the title's sociopolitical significance.

For the Mutul polity, most emblem glyph citations outside Tikal replicate the ordinatio found at the dynastic center. In the typical arrangement, the *k'uhul* prefix occupies the left side of the emblem glyph and the **MUT** emblem the center, with the logograph **AJAW**, usually T0168bt, sitting atop the emblem (Figure 4.6d; Table 4.1; compare Tikal Stela 9, block B7 and Stela 22, blocks A4 and A8, in Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Figs 13, 33). If scribes indicated the toponymic suffix *-Vl*, they usually subfixed the syllable **la** below **MUT** (Figure 4.6e). Likewise, if they included a **wa** phonetic complement for **AJAW**, at Tikal and elsewhere, they usually limited it to the right-hand side of the emblem glyph, below the **MUT** logograph. Only at Copan does the syllabic hieroglyph **wa** extend the full width of the base into the lower left corner of the Mutul title (Figure 4.6g). Scribes sometimes even rotated the *k'uhul* prefix and moved it to the top of the emblem glyph, a variant most common in local and foreign references to the Mutul faction at Dos Pilas and Aguateca (Figure 4.6h; Dos Pilas Panel 19, block M1, in Prager et al. 2019, 49).

The relatively consistent ordinatio in foreign citations of the Kaanul emblem glyph is especially noteworthy because external references to that polity vastly outnumber those to any other in the Classic Maya lowlands, including the Mutul polity (Martin 2020, 309: Fig. 76). Scribes usually replicated the ordinatio that was typical of inscriptions from Dzibanche and Calakmul, regardless of their own polity's relationship with the Kaanul dynasty. The usual layout featured the *k'uhul* prefix and phonetic complement **ka** sharing the left side (Figure 4.6i; Table 4.1; compare Calakmul Fragment 39, block pA2, in Martin 2012, 160; Dzibanche Monument 13, block B3, in Nalda 2004). The emblematic **KAAN** logograph, topped by T0168bt **AJAW**, occupied the central and right sections of the emblem glyph (Figure 4.6i). A syllabic hieroglyph **la** for the toponymic suffix *-Vl* was, if written, usually positioned at the bottom of the title, below **KAAN** (Figure 4.6k).

Still, Kaanul emblem glyphs in foreign inscriptions demonstrate more diversity in ordinatio than the titles of the Mutul, Yaxchilan, or Baakal dynasties. Phonetic complementation of *ajaw* was much more common outside of Calakmul and Dzibanche, with scribes usually inserting a syllable **wa** below the **KAAN** logograph (Figure 4.6j–k, m). More rarely,

they postfixed **wa** directly to **AJAW** (El Palmar Hieroglyphic Stairway, Step V, block R, in Tsukamoto and Esparza Olguín 2015: Fig. 12). Much variation in Kaanul emblem glyph ordinatio, however, can be attributed to scribes' efforts to accommodate **ka** as a phonetic complement for **KAAN**. In external emblem glyph references, the syllable appears in several positions unattested in texts at Calakmul or Dzibanche. Some writers inserted it between the logographs **K'UH** and **KAAN** (Figure 4.6n). Others maintained the **ka** hieroglyph's shared position on the left with **K'UH** but positioned the former above, below, or even infixed inside the latter (Figure 4.6m, o–p). In another unusual approach, a few foreign writers placed **ka** above **KAAN** and sometimes even above **AJAW** in the emblem glyph (Figure 4.6k, q).

It is possible that flexible positioning of the **ka** phonetic complement in foreign representations of the Kaanul emblem glyph, especially in the western and the southeastern lowlands, may reflect Late Classic progression of the sound change **k* > *ch* across the lowlands (compare Law et al. 2014, 363–364). In other words, scribes may have increasingly regarded the pre-posed syllable as a linguistically useful indicator of pronunciation, not (only) as a graphically integral element of the Kaanul title. Notably, however, in a sample of more than sixty local and foreign citations of the Kaanul emblem glyph, none clearly lacks a phonetic complement **ka** altogether, and the only potential counterexamples are all badly eroded (e.g., El Peru-Waka' Stela 43, block pI2, in Kelly 2019: Fig. 7.2). Clearly, then, Maya scribes considered **ka** a critical component of the title throughout the Classic period. The phonetic complement's presence was graphically salient, even though it was linguistically optional.

Conclusions

The Classic Maya title of *k'uhul ajaw* designated a polity's supreme king and distinguished the bearer from rulers of lesser polities who were only granted the unmodified title of *ajaw*. Close paleographic and orthographic examination of these so-called emblem glyphs provides a glimpse into the intersection between (regional) political relations and (local) hieroglyphic practices. The case of Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras reveals how local scribes systematically maintained certain hieroglyphic features, including the **K'UH** logograph and phonetic complementation, when writing their own emblem glyphs. Moreover, by varying allographic representation of the most common **AJAW** logograph, they extended their respective kingdoms' orthographic distinctiveness beyond the polity-specific emblem glyph to other forms of the *ajaw* title.

Expanding consideration of emblem glyph representation to other lowland polities, in turn, indicates that for the most part, foreign scribes

writing another polity's emblem glyph tended to maintain the ordinatio typical of inscriptions from that polity. The largest datasets for external emblem glyph references belong to the Mutul and Kaanul dynasties, the two most powerful in the Classic Maya lowlands. Of these, Mutul emblem glyphs display the most consistency in graphic representation across the lowlands, although meaningful variation is apparent between the Central Peten and Pasión branches of the Late Classic Mutul dynasty that could not be addressed here (see Matsumoto 2021, 269–92). Local and foreign citations of the Kaanul emblem glyph, in turn, diverge primarily in the positioning of the *k'uhul* prefix and the **ka** phonetic complement. Yet patterns in this variation are difficult to identify. The range of anomalous ordinatios in foreign references is probably in part statistical, a simple function of the Kaanul emblem glyph being the most widely and frequently recorded in the Classic Maya corpus. Another factor may have been political, given that many unusual compositions post-date Calakmul's seventh-century fluorescence (Figure 4.6m, p–q). The alternative ordinatios could reflect a decline in Kaanul influence on scribal practices outside of its own dynastic center that paralleled the polity's waning political power.

Ironically, perhaps, the atypical ordinatio of some Kaanul and other emblem glyph representations also attests to the script's inherit flexibility, which allowed Classic Maya scribes to reorganize a hieroglyphic sequence's internal components without altering its linguistic reading. Scribes in multiple times and places certainly exploited that flexibility in a wide range of textual contexts. In the case of emblem glyphs from polities like Tonina, Copan, or Pomona, it seems that they never established a clearly favored internal layout. But in these instances, the polity-specific emblem is also more internally complex, with at least three distinct hieroglyphs, including at least two syllabic signs. For simpler emblem glyphs, in contrast, scribes across the lowlands largely limited their experimentation with the ordinatio of foreign emblem glyphs. Instead, they reproduced the compositional preferences typical of inscriptions from the home polities.

Such norms were, I suggest, the result of scribes learning and transmitting each emblem glyph as an ordered (graphic) assemblage rather than as a collection of disarticulated (linguistic) signs. Considered together, hieroglyphic representations of emblem glyphs indicate that the multipartite titles were transmitted wholesale and not as a collection of alienable parts, both within and between scribal communities. Emblem glyphs' visual association with a polity went beyond the unique 'emblem' itself to encompass orthographic practices (e.g., use of phonetic complements or the toponymic suffix *-Vl*), the relative position of the hieroglyphic signs, and, to a lesser extent, logographic substitution for *k'uhul* and *ajaw*, the two emblem glyph components that remained constant across polities.

There was, of course, a linguistic component to every emblem glyph. Scribes and readers would have been made acutely aware of it every time that one was read aloud (see Houston 1994, 29–31). Some phonetic complements, like a **mu** prefix in the Mutul emblem glyph, were late additions found only in foreign texts and may well represent reactions to local linguistic developments. Nonetheless, the consistent presence of a **ka** syllable in Kaanul emblem glyphs was, to judge from its chronological and geographic distribution, not only intended to specify pronunciation. Indeed, it may have only assumed this role in the Late Classic period, and then primarily in the western and southeastern regions (Law et al. 2014, 363–4). Political identity was, at least for Classic Maya scribes and elite readers of their inscriptions, inherently tied to hieroglyphic composition as well.

Local scribes, particularly those working under royal patronage, may have been discouraged from experimenting with their polity's emblem glyph because of a close association with the political identity that it conveyed. When composing another polity's title, in turn, they may have simply reproduced the graphic contours that they had been taught. Or, perhaps, they consciously maintained them in acknowledgment of the title's political referent. Scribes who did deviate from an emblem glyph's typical graphic form, in contrast, would have been aware of the visual difference that their decisions generated. Perhaps they were exercising their creativity as artisans, or, for those writing a foreign emblem glyph, experimenting orthographically to signal the corresponding polity's otherness. In many cases, though, the emblem glyph in question may simply have represented a polity with too little political influence to be cited widely and to have its hieroglyphic representation normalized among scribes.

In sum, scribes working across the Classic Maya lowlands located the *k'uhul ajaw* title's meaning not only in the central, polity-specific emblem but in the graphic context in which the emblem was embedded. Ultimately, consistency in formal composition would have facilitated quicker recognition of specific polities' emblem glyphs, strengthening the title's graphic association with a particular political identity (see Chee et al. 2000; Nakagawa 1994; Sakurai et al. 2000). Such visual cuing would have been especially important in a society like that of the Classic Maya, where few were equally competent in reading and writing and the graphic salience of some emblem glyphs, like the Kaanul title with its prominent snake head logograph, was rooted in the emblem's iconic relationship to the referent (Houston 1994, 28–9, 34–5). Maintaining an emblem glyph's graphic form thus expanded potential readership beyond the small circle of those able to write and decipher the hieroglyphs to a greater segment of the population impacted by the political relations that the emblem glyphs conveyed.

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Notes

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Part III

Images Outside their Boxes

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5 Europe's Other Writing

'Ominous Hieroglyphics' and Belated Ekphrasis in the 19th Century

Christopher Pinney

> Herbert, the revolutionary, never began a number of his news sheet Le Pere Duchene without introducing a sprinkling of obscenities. These improprieties had no real meaning, but they had significance. In what way? In that they expressed a whole revolutionary situation. Now here is an example of a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language, which is both History and the stand we take on it.
>
> (Barthes 1967, 7)

This chapter focuses on a 19th-century set of 'ominous hieroglyphics' issued as frontispieces to an increasingly popular annual astrological almanac published in London. These images were offered as opaque visual prognostications which were 'made to talk' in the following year's publication through a belated ekphrasis in which their uncanny ability to predict what was yet to be was confirmed. These almanacs, which first appeared in 1826, deserve to be positioned within a fluctuating history of enthusiasm for astrology: after languishing for a century and more, English astrology effloresced in the mid-1820s but remained metaphorically 'underground', evidence of Europe's 'other mind' (Uberoi 1984) and the vitality of conjectural and divinatory modes of thought (Ginzburg 1988, 109). Consequently these 'talking pictures' with their complex emblems and hieroglyphic allusions should be positioned within history, within a centuries-long debate in England about the proper relationship between visual form and writing.

'Enigmatic' and 'Preposterous'

Set within this longer history, these 'ominous hieroglyphics' may appear surprising, for critical opinion had weighed in heavily against what we might term their 'concatenational' or para-linguistic visuality. Dana Donald, who has provided a brilliant philosophical and historical positioning

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of these issues, traces the suspicion of emblems to the influence of John Locke. His 'emphasis on the primacy of sight in cognition invalidated a form of imagery characterized by hybrid forms and juxtapositions of disparate objects whose significance had to be inferred through information (often puns on names or obscure items of myth or folklore) extraneous to the image itself' (Donald 1996, 46).

In the early 18th century, Lord Shaftesbury was one of a number of writers who directly rejected the heritage of Cesare Ripa and inveighed against emblems, pointing to their 'ambiguity and mutable character and in particular, the scope which they offered to the spinner of esoteric fantasies indifferent or inimical to the purposes of lucid public communication' (Donald 1996, 46). Joseph Spence in *Polymetis* (1747) had pointed to Ripa's *Iconologia* to illustrate 'the defects of the modern artists, in allegorical subjects' (cited by Bath 1994, 257). What Shaftesbury termed 'False, barbarous' emblems fused pure image with word and were memorably condemned as 'enigmatical, preposterous […] pretending. Egyptian hieroglyphics. Magical, mystical, monkish and Gothic emblems' (cited by Donald 1996, 46; see also Bath 1994, 256–57). As we shall see, these might all serve as useful terms to describe the work of 'Raphael,' which will largely concern us below. Raphael would elaborate a counter-public, one grounded in apocalyptic mysticism and lacking the critical rationality envisaged by the Enlightenment.

This suspicion of the contaminating effects of interpretability was also apparent in anxieties about punning. Larwood and Hotten, in their 1866 history of signboards, note that from the 12th to the 16th century punning was widely celebrated and found its apogee in the works of Shakespeare with their 'puns and plays upon words'. But subsequently there was a 'dégout', evidenced for example in the *Tatler* of 1709's description of punning as an 'enormity' and the observation that 'he cannot be a man of honour who is guilty of this abuse of human society' (1866, 469).

Larwood and Hotten link punning to the art of the rebus and provide numerous examples of signboards that mobilized this fusion of the visual with sound (1866, 471–75). All these elements – emblems, allegory, rebuses, and signboards – were united in William Hogarth's etching *The Times* of 1762 (Figure 5.1). This was produced in the same year that Hogarth mounted an exhibition of the fictional Society of Sign Painters, which was itself a response to an ordinance – the Westminster Paving Act – demanding the removal of projecting signboards from the streets of London. Many of these 'illegal' signs were displayed in the Society of Sign Painters' exhibition. Hogarth's print, intended as a critique of the dilapidation that followed the Seven Years' War, depicted London as a chaotic public space disfigured by signboards illustrating among other subjects the Castle Inn and the Patriot's Armes. It establishes a framework, both visual,

Figure 5.1 William Hogarth. *The Times, Plate 1.* Engraving 1762. Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.

semiotic, and ideological, fragments of which can be glimpsed in the 'ominous hieroglyphics' that feature in the remaining sections of this chapter.

At this point we need to confront the complexity of this para-linguistic visuality and its *pharmakon*-like simultaneous invocation of opposites. 'Pharmakon' is the term used by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, and it catches Jacques Derrida's attention because of its fluidity and reversibility. In a resonant passage, Derrida points to the way in which 'in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indetermination, or overdetermination, *but without mistranslation*, permitted the rendering of the same word by "remedy", "recipe", "poison", "drug", "philtre" etc'. This double-ness, Derrida continues, '*is a difficulty inherent in its very principle*, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already […] in the tradition between Greek and Greek' (Derrida 1991, 71, italics added). The *pharmakon* phenomenon that concerns me invokes both the subaltern idioms of a street-level *argot plastique* and also a sacerdotal elitism. It is also simultaneously 'English', assertively localizing and also transregional,

even global, in its mobilization of the perfume of the East. Finally, it both celebrates the hybridity of the bimedial conventional visual and writerly spectrum, and at the same time aspires to embody an Adamic, natural language (Bath 1994, 52).

Raphael's Prophetic Messenger

It was in the 1820s that an 'Eastern' exoticism infiltrated the very heart of Europe, which mobilized the potent visuality of writing. Its chief agent was unlikely: Robert Cross Smith, born in Bristol in 1795, an erstwhile carpenter, whose astrological nom de plume would become 'Raphael' (Howe 1964, 11). *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger* would become the visually most inventive of all almanacs, although others, such as the much earlier Moore's *Vox Stellarum* (see Donald 1996, 57 for an illustration of Moore's from 1765) and Zadkiel's much later publications also offered images as signs of the future. Raphael's almanacs were striking for the prominence given to a 'prophetic hieroglyphic' published as a frontispiece to each annual issue. This 19th-century usage echoes Walter Benjamin's sense of a 'picture-writing' descended from the great Renaissance text *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Large, fold-out, hand-colored copperplate engravings and lithographs offered visual predictions of what would happen in the year ahead. They also served as marketing tools, for the reader would only be able to decode the 'truth' of these prognostications if they bought the subsequent year's publication (where 'all was explained'). These images, of which there is a significant corpus, have never been discussed in any detail (they feature fleetingly in histories of European astrology).

The hieroglyphic usually features in history as emblematic of the difficulties, but most importantly, the possibilities of the translation of the visual into language. The history sketched here emerges from a moment when the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone seems to open up the utopian possibility of translatability in general. Indeed, it has been argued that the Rosetta Stone's mystical attraction reflects a desire for the translatability of everything, including material forms. In this reading, the Stone is to be understood as an object that provides its own caption (Beard 1992; Ray 2007, 5).

In occult and apocalyptic literature, such as William Cunninghame's *Apocalypse* of 1817 (2nd ed., date of first edition not known) hieroglyphics are 'seals' of a future to come. The seven seals of Revelation are to be understood as akin to locks, guarantors of the closure of the text (it was secret knowledge known only to God, hence its un-polluted authority). The history sketched here, however, points in the opposite direction, toward a practice in which the image is produced precisely because of its ability to escape the syntactical[1] certainty of language.

Astrology, whose appeal in the Middle Ages had been confined to court circles, found new audiences in the 17th century through works such as

William Lily's *Merlin Anglicus Junior, The English Merlin Revived*. Sales of almanacs were greater than those of the Bible (O'Connell 1999, 21), and by the end of the 18th century (at a time when the population of England was smaller than 10 million), half a million almanacs were sold each year (O'Connell 1999, 22). A proliferation of titles gave way at the beginning of the 19th century to the supremacy of Francis Moore's *Vox Stellarum*, aka *Old Moore's Almanac* which had since the French Revolution 'introduced illustrations symbolizing millennial ideas and promoting political radicalism' (O'Connell 1999, 22).

Robert Cross Smith, a self-educated plebeian, who chose to cloak himself in Cabbalistic mystery, would issue the first of what finally became known as *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger* in 1826 (Curry 1992, 47–52). The issue rapidly sold out, necessitating a reprint, and by 1831 he was able to claim sales of 8,500 at a time when Moore's was selling 270,000 per year (Curry 1992, 52). Curry suggests that the audience for Raphael's 'overblown occult romanticism' would have been what he calls 'semi-erudite', and quite distinct from the rural laborers and urban working classes who enjoyed Moore's publication. Curry identifies Raphael's likely consumers as an audience in retreat from the 'successes of secularism, whether as political radicalism, philosophical utilitarianism or science' (1992, 53).

Raphael (Robert Cross Smith) died at the age of 36 in 1832, and control of the *Prophetic Messenger* passed briefly to the astrologer 'Dixon' before passing to five more 'Raphaels' (Curry 1992, 58). Sales would steadily rise to about 100,000 by mid-century and (depending on your sources) either 150,000 or almost 200,000 by 1900 (Curry 1992, 60).[2] Given the rapid turnover of 'Raphaels', I invoke the name here as a continuing brand and indulge the fiction that they were a single author. Consequently, in this chapter I refer to a singular 'Raphael' when in fact the name conceals a diverse number of practitioners.

Figure/Discourse

These almanacs have caught my attention and are relevant to the themes of the present collection for the clarity they bring to the question of the semantics of the visual and of language, and of the potential of the visual as a vehicle for a kind of predictive writing sufficiently generous to be subsequently overwritten by a more conventional form of language delivered in a belated ekphrasis, which featured in the following year's almanac. Raphael would come to term these images 'ominous hieroglyphics', and in Jean-Francois Lyotard's terms we can understand them as mobilizing a transition from 'figure' to 'discourse' (cf Carroll 1987). In Carroll's exceptionally clear exposition of Lyotard's binary, 'figure' denotes a field where 'meaning is not produced and communicated, but intensities are felt'. 'Discourse' by contrast signifies what is 'used-up […] and limited to what can be *read*,

identified, and given meaning within a closed linguistic system' (Carroll 1987, 30–31). The 'picture-writing' of the frontispieces offered a broad figural latitude which the 'word-writing' of the subsequent ekphrasis was able to narrow. The beautiful annual hieroglyphics gave Raphael's publications their unique character and were central to a clever piece of marketing. They were offered as hostages to the future, pregnant spaces of interpretability whose precise meanings would be revealed after the event in the following year's almanac. Of course, the reader was obliged to purchase the following year's publication if they wanted to benefit from such revelation.

Billed as an 'Original, Entertaining, and Interesting Melange', the 1827 almanac featured a 'Large Coloured Hieroglyphical Frontispiece' (Howe 1964, 10). Howe reproduces an image of the 1827 title page bearing a British Museum stamp, but I have been unable to locate this copy in the present British Library. However, copies of the following two year's frontispieces are available, and it is apparent that they lack the distinctive apocalyptic aesthetic that characterizes later issues.

The 1830 almanac announced the 'remarkable fulfilment of the predictions prefigured in the hieroglyphic for 1829', an image that has only recently been possible to source (Figure 5.2).[3] The hand-colored image (Figure 5.2) is strikingly simple when contrasted with the complexity of subsequent frontispieces. There are ten identifiable motifs or elements: In the foreground is a winged figure bearing a flag on which is written 'Hispaniola Resurgam', a ram and snake on a tree trunk, and a ship of war whose rear sail is also a horoscope nativity. Further back and depicted in a much smaller scale are a figure in a cassock holding a sword and flag on which is inscribed 'Religious Liberty', Britannia, and a sleepy lion, a flag on which is written 'Portugal', a horse-mounted officer inspecting a line of troops, a twin-domed mosque on fire, a firing squad discharging their weapons, a lone horseman waving a flag on which is written 'Pax', and an upside-down crown plummeting to earth.

Belated Ekphrasis

Raphael's exegesis provides ample testimony of both the extent to which certain simmering political events could be safely predicted and also of the way in which the visual offered a productive indeterminacy, a field of interpretative possibility available for sculpting once the actual events that they supposedly prefigured were known. Hence, Raphael claimed a presentiment of 'The Catholic Bill and its contingencies' in 'the symbol of *a monk wearing a mask, with a flag in one hand, having thereon the words* RELIGIOUS LIBERTY; in the other hand, a sword: while at a distance off *a lamb is seen, advanced in growth and pawing in triumph*; at his feet a serpent, monk's cowl, and the various insignia of Popery – plainly prefiguring *the fashionable apostacy* of the times, and the *mask* under which

Figure 5.2 Hieroglyph for the Eventful Year 1829. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*. Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

the Catholics obtained Government to sanction their menacing petitions' (Raphael 1830, 7, italics in original).

Raphael's description of the success of his 'Omens relative to Spain' illustrates a spectrum of interpretability from the denotative to the connotative. A 'celestial figure . . . seen holding a banner, with the words "*Hispaniola*", the appellation of Spain, first *pointing to a tomb*, which denotes the death of the Spanish Queen that took place' seems impressively precise (although an ailing monarch is quite likely to die), whereas the claim that the banner on which is written '*Resurgam*…denote[s] the efforts now made by Spain to assume her former dominion in the New World – witness the famous *Mexican expedition* now approaching the shores of the South American regions' seems more contentious. Nevertheless, Raphael proclaims his belief that 'the *literality*[4] of these portentous omens are too obvious to be explained away on any other principle' before then drawing attention to his wonderful escape clause: 'There are also others which I leave the reader to decipher by *the events that have*

yet to follow'. Raphael's retrospective ekphrasis has nothing to say about the majority of this year's image's motifs, since presumably there were no events that could be obviously mapped onto burning mosques, firing squads, etc. In the 1843 issue, this escape clause is presented more poetically: 'the remaining events…are still hidden in the womb of time' (1843, 71). Because each new almanac went to press between September and November each year, a significant number of unfulfilled prophecies could be assumed to prefigure events which were yet to pass.

The 'Hieroglyphic For the Eventful Year 1830', by contrast with earlier images in the almanacs, exhibits in full the complex visual forms that would continue to be developed for much of the rest of the 19th century. Along the top of the image was proclaimed 'Herein the Aspects of the Heavens learn, And of the times the mystic Signs discern', and in the main part of the image was presented a dramatic collage of visual prognostications, replete with a scattering of the aforementioned 'mystic Signs' (Figure 5.3). The visual prophecies are all highly dramatic and

Figure 5.3 Hieroglyph for the Eventful year 1830. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*. Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

rather general and include naval battles, agricultural distress, exploding volcanoes, cities ravaged by fire, a funeral procession, a notice concerning the eclipse of the moon in September 1830, a crowd demonstrating their support for 'Reform', and a learned astrologer/scientist with a telescope and globe who points to a vast book recording that 'Furious Mars, Warns of danger From afar'! All this unfolds beneath a cherub who unfurls a cartouche on which there is a flaming torch and four mystical signs above the date 1830.

The astrologer/scientist wears a cummerbund adorned with the name of 'Raphael' and bears considerable similarity to the figure captioned 'Raphael in Italy', who appears in the elaborate frontispiece to *Raphael's Witch or Oracle of the Future* (1831). In this image, titled 'The Tablet and Questions & The Cabalistical Tablet of the Stars' (Figure 5.4), Raphael is seated in front of a vast telescope and surrounded by the tools of his astrological and alchemical trade. Witch has an intriguing etymology, being 'derived,

Figure 5.4 'Raphael's Witch' Or 'Oracle of the Future'. Engraving c. 1831. Author's collection.

John Brand notes in his 1810 annotations on Henry Bourne's earlier text, 'from the Dutch Witchelen, which signifies *whinnying* and neighing like a Horse: In a secondary sense, also to *foretell* and *prophecy*; because the Germans as Tacitus informs us, used to divine and foretell Things to come by the *whinnying* and *neighing* of *their Horses*' (Brand 1810, 353). Raphael's raison d'être was 'witchery'. As he wrote in the 1830 almanac: 'I behold (in a dark vista of the future, which science illumines) the sea foaming and raging with fury; the earth quaking; rivers overwhelming their bounds; torrents roaring; the winds of heaven let loose to work his work of vengeance' (1830, 17).

The following year's frontispiece (for 1831) further intensifies the sense of gloom and foreboding (Figure 5.5). A skeletal Father Time stands on a coffin on which is inscribed 'Lo The Time Will Come'. Cities blaze, naval battles rage, and a hand reaches down from the sky, bearing a cartouche on which is written a long text that concludes: 'Death a mighty state will

Figure 5.5 Hieroglyph for the Eventful year 1831. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*. Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

pain, Armies press the fertile plain, England will a boon receive, But the star of France will grieve, Oft the funeral knell will toll, Oft the [illegible] thunder roll, Monarchs tremble Nations mourn, Ocean[s] rage and cities burn, Gazing with a prophets eye, Thus hath Raphael read the sky'.

The following year's almanac, published in November 1831 presented the previous edition's hieroglyphic as a prediction 'relative to the March of the fearful Cholera Morbus'. Reading the image retrospectively with the benefit of a largely unfolded year, Raphael urges the reader to 'take into thy notice…the fearful Signs in my Hieroglyphical Omens for the year 1831. The Trio of Coffins, Enthroning of Death, &c., and thou wilt be enabled to establish Astrological foresight beyond the shadow of a doubt. Alas! Gentle Reader! TOO TRULY has thy friend Raphael's Predictions, in this instance, been fulfilled'!

Raphael sought authority from the invocation of a consciously obscure form of signification, from a quasi-priestly intentional obscurantism whose enemy was plain language. The large fold-out plate in *Raphael's Witch* included at its center 'the Cabbalistic Alphabet Whereby Many Hidden Secrets Are Discovered' (see Figure 5.4). The mythic charter for this obscurantism was to be found in the greatest of English astrologers, William Lilly, whose 1651 hieroglyphic of the Great Fire of London was reproduced in the *Prophetic Messenger* for 1845 (1844, 49, see Figure 5.6), together with an account of Lilly's testimony to a committee of the House of Commons subsequent to the fire of 1666, which his hieroglyphic was taken to have foreseen. In his evidence, Lilly said, 'After the beheading of the late king, I was desirous […] to make inquiry by the art I studied what from that time might happen unto the parliament and nation in general. At last, having satisfied myself as well as I could, and perfected my judgement therein, I thought it most convenient to signify my intentions and conceptions thereof in forms, shapes, types, hieroglyphics, &c., *without any commentary*, that so [sic] my judgement might be concealed from the vulgar, and made manifest only to the wise…' (1844, 50; italics in the original).

This concealment of signs from the 'vulgar' was the subject of humorous critique in a satirical commentary published as *Blackwood's Comic Zadkiel* in the mid-1850s. One section titled 'Personal Diary of Mr Septimus Ivins' describes a baffled recipient of communications from Mr. Raphael: 'Mr. Ivins receives a letter from the sage, wherein he is informed of "benefic and malefic influences", trines, sine, squares, radices, horary figures, symbols, and a great many other things, which serve to place Mr. Ivins in a complete fog […] He consults his bosom friend, Mr. Muddlenut who is thrown into convulsions at the very sight of the letter. What can Raphael mean by […]'. There then follow the astronomical signs for the Sun, the Moon, Herschel (which would subsequently be named Uranus), Mars, and Mercury (*Comic Zadkiel*; n.d., 13, see also Raphael 1847, 16). Raphael

Figure 5.6 *Facsimile of William Lilly's Hieroglyphic of the Great Fire of London*, 1666. Engraved plate from *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger* (1845, 49). Author's collection.

placed his signs in difficult, ambivalent *pharmakon*-like territory, caught between a deliberate obscurity ('concealed from the vulgar') which would have appealed to Lilly, and also a stark clarity where predictive meaning was so obvious and transparent that linguistic exegesis was unnecessary.

The choice of 'Raphael' as an authorial device suggests a genuflection towards the Kabala, and the 'East' in general performed a crucial role in the projection of the *Prophetic Messenger*'s authority: Raphael was also advertised, from the 1830s through to the end of the century, as the author of a publication called *Pythoness of the East* (Raphael 1894), which claimed to be based on a found text 'formerly in the possession of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Josephine'. The 'Pythoness of the East' and

Raphael's nominalist appropriation of a Jewish identity point to the Prophetic Messenger's role as an agent of cultural critique and the 'other mind of Europe'. This echoes the earlier role of Confucius and China in 18th century cultural critique as argued by Wittkower: '…Sinomania in 18th-century Europe allows some insight into the nature of this kind of quest. Thinkers of the Enlightenment embraced Confucius' moral philosophy which, based upon reason and tolerance, seemed to offer a better foundation for a harmonious communal life than a revealed religion with its fanaticism, obscurantism and intolerance' (Wittkower 1977, 14)

The Orientalist linkage between the East, prophecy, and the future, was most clearly stated in the 1854 tract *A Plea for Urania,* which was written in opposition to Justice Leatherhead's proposal that astrology be outlawed. In defense of his science, the anonymous author extols 'the East' as the location in which astronomy and astrology have only recently begun to separate and the 'source of all laws, religions, sciences, and modes of government'. Most significantly for our present purposes, the East offered a door into futurity: 'the East has attractions for all. Its fascination is made up of the past, the present, and what is probably *to come*'. Raphael fused an Eastern mystical futurity with a form of visual conjecture (prefiguring Carlo Ginzburg's usage) with the hieroglyph as a device: 'We have instanced the Egyptian hieroglyphic as the root or source of all pictorial devices of which the signification is obscure, or conjectural . . . ' (1845, 46).[5]

Given that Raphael's hieroglyphics appeared a few years after Champollion's 1822 translation of the Rosetta Stone (building on Thomas Young's earlier work on the demotic passages; Wood 1954, 206ff.) we might be forgiven for assuming that Raphael's usage reflected popular enthusiasm for the mysteries of Egyptian picture-writing. As Raphael's own words indicate (see the previous paragraph) he himself occasionally privileged the Egyptian connection. However, Raphael's usage owed more to the Renaissance fantasy of picture-writing descended from Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili,* first published by Aldus Manutius in 1499 in Venice (Colonna 2005).

Walter Benjamin invokes the hieroglyph several times in his writings. In 'The Antinomies of Allegorical Exegesis', written in 1925, the term names the Baroque emergence of the visual as a mode of revelation. 'If script is to be granted a sacred character […] then it will press toward complexes, towards hieroglyphics' (2008b, 176). In 'A Glimpse Into the World of Children's Books', an essay written in the following year, Benjamin describes the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* as providing the 'patent of nobility' for Renaissance hieroglyphics, whose 19th-century offspring were the rebuses, the picture-writing (*Bilderschrift*) or 'puzzle pictures' for children which so interested him (2008a, 230).

The frontispiece for 1835 presented seven vignettes radiating around a central image of Britannia astride her lion conversing with Hermes.

Figure 5.7 Hieroglyph for the Eventful year 1835. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*. Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

Clockwise the images depict a collapsed woman being attended to by a mysterious group, a train accident, the crowning of a monarch by an angel, an astrologer's study (very reminiscent of the depictions of Raphael's own work environment – see Figure 5.4, above), a horse-drawn hearse passing an impressive building, a woman with a harp, and a group of bird-masked figures in what appears to be a masque or a scene from a theatrical play (Figure 5.7).

Raphael's decoding of these visual prognostications in the almanac for 1836 totals two short paragraphs, which read:

> In the top of the page is depicted, explosions, steam-carriages, dead men and horses. OBSERVE what is foretold; the horrid INFERNAL MACHINE,[6] the Explosion of the ARSENAL at MUNICH, and the dreadful accidents in England from STEAM-CARRIAGES, &c.
>
> The next, people starving and sick; persons hurrying to their assistance. Remember the STARVING IRISH; famine, death and misery, their companions, and HONEST DAN'S political endeavours for their relief. Let us proceed to ALEXANDRIA' the HORRID

> PLAGUE, thousands of victims daily, and the PHILANTHROPIC, MANLY, and MERITORIOUS endeavours of the FRENCH FACULTY to assist the sufferers. In the right side of the page, what can more truly depict, the congratulations offered to the FRENCH KING after the cowardly attempt on his life. The centre piece is sufficient to show the POLICY of RUSSIA towards ENGLAND, which the meeting at KALISCH has pretty well proved. Look at Britannia attacked by Foreign Rogues; and remark the triple alliance of Russia, Austria, and Prussia, and the deceptive conduct of France on the occasion; remember the men have cock's-heads. Benefits are also denoted to Ireland.
>
> (1835, 45)

The 1841 review of the pictorial divination offered by the 1840 frontispiece is, by contrast, extremely detailed (Figure 5.8). 'Although,' Raphael began, 'the hieroglyphics […] are known to have been singularly accurate

Figure 5.8 Hieroglyph for the Eventful year 1840. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*. Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

predictions for the coming year, none have had a more marked fulfilment than that in our last Almanac' (1840, 61). Once again, Raphael notes the self-evidence of the visual evidence (its 'literality'): 'So evident, indeed, are the allusions, now the events have passed that it is hardly necessary to state them…' (1840, 61). The first predictive triumph is to be found at the top left wherein is depicted 'a battle in an eastern country, as shown by the cupolas on the buildings and the dresses of the combatants. That Egypt is concerned is evident from the pyramids being introduced. This prediction has been accurately fulfilled, not only in its spirit by the continued animosity between Turkey and Egypt, but also in the letter by the insurrection in Syria, and the formidable revolt of the Druses, which is not at the present moment completely subdued' (1840, 61).

Below that vignette is a shipwreck which the text for 1840 links to four maritime tragedies. Below that, in turn, is 'Death standing over a coffin which bears the royal crown'. This is retrospectively related to a large number of sovereigns who have 'been carried to the sepulchres of their fathers' (1840, 61). Underneath the horoscope in the center of the plate is shown a farmer giving thanks to heaven for a 'bounteous harvest'. On the left of this vignette, an English village is shown suffering the effects of an earthquake, and this is fused in the subsequent textual rationalization with 'the destruction of the celebrated Mount Ararat, and the loss of many lives in the surrounding villages' (1840, 61).

Beneath this scene is 'a lawless assembly opposed by the military'. Marvelously drawn and bringing together a number of complex elements, the vignette clearly depicts the public space which is frequently invoked in Raphael's hieroglyphics. In the middle, a surging mass of protestors are shown in front of a somber line of gallows from which hang several bodies. The retrospective text for 1841 pointed to 'the riots in Monmouth […] and the disturbed state of South Wales' which are 'too well remembered by our readers to require any remark' (1840, 61)

What makes these hieroglyphic frontispieces much more than a matter of antiquarian interest is their foregrounding of questions of interpretability. Clearly the challenge to the creator of the hieroglyphic involved the production of images which were both seemingly predictively specific – mobilizing the concrete certainty of mimesis – but which were *also* sufficiently vague that they would not become hostages to fortune.

We can see further evidence of the ambivalence of the visual, and the reliability of various probable events in Raphael's 'Explanation of the scenes in the hieroglyphic of 1841' (Figure 5.9) published in the 1842 *Prophetic Messenger*. Rather unusually, Raphael is able to rationalize most of the elements of the hieroglyphic (excepting the central motif and the vignette to its left). The building site at the top left is explained as a presentiment of the number of new Catholic buildings erected; the top center vignette

Figure 5.9 Hieroglyph for the Eventful year 1841. Published in *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger.* Hand colored engraving. Author's collection.

depicting courtiers flanking a veiled throne is explained as 'emblematic of the recent occasions which have rendered it necessary for our Court to go into mourning'.

The top right scene requires a more elaborate exegesis. Described as a 'lion and cock, in a menacing attitude', these are, Raphael continues, emblems of France and England and 'no one who has read the public journals, detailing the warlike preparations in both countries…can doubt the application of this part of the hieroglyphic'. The eagle on the rock, he continues represents Russia and 'shows the wily policy of that country, ready to seize upon the slightest opportunity afforded by either country'. The scene below this, which one might suppose to depict the poor desperately catching stray grains of wheat (the protectionist Corn Laws, which inflated the price of wheat, would not be repealed until 1846), is said, after the event, to represent 'an English porter, carrying out bales of gold to foreigners; otherwise it is typical that immense sums of gold should be drained out of this country and expended on foreign shores'.

After a brief explanation of the right-hand corner scene, Raphael concludes his tour by noting that 'At the bottom we observe Mars and Bellona in their war chariots followed by Disease and Death. In the perspective we observe ships of war engaged in action; while on the margin of the sea are seen factories and the implements of commerce. This has reference to our warlike proceedings with China, arising from the treacherous proceedings of the Chinese with our countrymen, respecting our commercial relations with the Celestial Empire' (Raphael 1842, 67). The First Opium War (1839–42) was already unfolding when the original hieroglyphic was composed and the modern viewer beholding that quayside scene at the bottom left of the image is likely to find nothing either denotatively or even connotatively 'Chinese' there.

The Hieroglyphics' *Argot Plastique*

The preponderance of public spaces in the frontispieces as a corpus is striking: Private space as the locus of interiority is rare (and almost entirely confined to images of Raphael himself depicted in his astrological study writing mystical symbols or peering through his telescope).

The proliferation of public signs is noteworthy: Flags, horoscopes on poles, cartouches unfurling from the sky all add to this sense of the archetypal chronotope of these prints as being public space as the setting for the revelation of archaic visual signs that aspire to a natural, Adamic language. Here we might make a connection with the highly fruitful observations of Diana Donald concerning what she terms the 'emblematic mentality' of Georgian caricature (1996, 50). Much of this visual culture was the product of 'an authentic popular culture' that demonstrated 'a relish for emblems, unabashed by the strictures of the literati and the scorn of polite society' (1996, 50). Stressing the remoteness of these 18th- and 19th-century images from Ripa and Alciati, Donald sees these new emblems as 'newly born creations of the *argot plastique* of the streets, the common language of crowd ritual, woodcut broadsides and cheap ballads' (1996, 50). Symbols such as the jackboot and the number 45^{7} acquired an 'almost cabbalistic sense of potency' (1996, 50).

Donald amplifies her observations in an argument for the distinctiveness of caricatures' celebration of the 'language of the common people' (1996, 56). She describes an emblematic art of the streets, which was 'virtually untouched by connoisseurial notions. Shop signs, bill headings, coins and trade tokens, funerary monuments and gravestones, playing cards, fraternity banners and popular heraldry; all share with the ballad sheets […] the emblematic habit of mind…Many of these forms spoke a political language, succinct and deliberately cryptic like that of the prints' (1996, 57).

Donald's description resonates richly with the visual strategies of the Raphael frontispieces, although we should also note some differences. Although, like the Georgian caricaturists, Raphael mobilizes an 'art of the excluded' (1996, 51) he does not invoke the common language of the crowd; rather, he mobilizes an exotic esotericism, a specialist hidden language which can crack open the secrets of futurity. He does not appeal to 'crowd ritual'; rather, crowds emerge as forces that portend the confusion and transformation upon which his science thrived.

Invention of the News

Raphael's 1832 almanac described the contents of the hieroglyphic as 'Remarkable Events, Celestial and Terrestial, Podigies, Revolutions, Insurections, Outrages, Convulsions of Nature, Political Occurrences, Remarkable Deaths etc.'. This list encompasses many of the topics that feature as staple ingredients of modern 'news'. However, if we are nevertheless able to detect what would later be extracted and secularized as 'horizontal' narratives, we should be clear that in Raphael's worldview the 'Terrestial' is always causatively linked to the 'Celestial'. This is an interrelation, an aspect of providentialist cosmology that is perfectly captured by Auerbach: 'In this conception an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now. The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan…' (Auerbach 1953, 490). Raphael's hieroglyphic frontispieces are the origin of the news, a space where the messianic and the contingent jostle together in a 'oneness within the divine plan' that is also alert to contingency and the onward flow of history.

Raphael eschewed the easy semantic transparency of writing in favor of an esoteric figurality. The runic obscurity of Raphael's signs was intended to foreclose rational scrutiny and can be seen as aiming at precisely the opposite of Jack Goody's vision of a writing which fosters the growth of criticism. Goody's 'specific proposition' was that 'writing, and more specifically alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form: this scrutiny favoured the increase in the scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, scepticism, and logic to resurrect memories of those questionable dichotomies' (Goody 1977, 37)

These subaltern circuits bring to mind Ernst Bloch's recuring preoccupation with fairs, colportage, and fairy tales (1991, 341). Subalternism here derives not from mere precarity but through circuits of travel, enchantment, and representation. Bloch was fascinated by the closeness of

colportage to the fair (1991, 341), both being rooted in itineracy: 'Long journeys […] are essential to colportage; it by no means earns its living honestly at home' (1991, 341). Furthermore the dream of colportage is 'never again to be trapped by the routine of daily life' (1988, 183) colportage allows 'proletarians to dream lustre in advance' (1991, 341).

Ernst Bloch never clearly defines 'colportage,' but he uses the term to connote unofficial culture, an agent of unregulated 'barefoot' (Ramaswamy 2010, 35) publication and unregulated distribution. Moving far beyond the dictionary definition of the colporteur as the itinerant seller of chapbooks, broadsheets, popular religious works, and pictures, the colporteur symbolizes for Bloch the tenacity of wild fairy tales, extravagant travel narratives, and an aesthetic disparaged by the bourgeoisie, a space of contradiction and incipient messianism captured in his memorable section heading in *Heritage of Our Times*, 'Jugglers' Fair beneath the Gallows' (1991, 75).

An Anthropological Epilogue: The 'Wondrous Double Art'

Raphael established his authority not only through an obscurity of language but also through a systematic exoticization of knowledge, placing its location at the greatest possible historical and spatial distance. This is perhaps most strongly expressed in his text *The Pythoness of the East*. We might think of this strategy as the 'anthropological reflex' wherein a desired state of affairs is legitimated through its being located in an actually documented historical or contemporary cultural practice.

The anthropologist E. B. Tylor is remembered for elevating literacy as the defining mark of Civilization as opposed to Barbarism. Yet in an almost Latourian, fashion he was enthused by the magical technology of primitive proto-writing whose enchantment and significance he felt had been dulled by familiarity. 'Taught as we are to read and write in early childhood', he told the reader of *Anthropology* (1881), 'we hardly realize the place this wondrous double art fills in civilized life, till we see how it strikes the barbarian who has not even a notion that such a thing can be' (1881, 167). Barbarism emerges in Tylor's account not simply as a place of lack but also as a zone of innocence with lessons for the jaded beneficiaries of Civilization.

In ways that prefigure Robert Flaherty's staging of what Michael Taussig called the 'mimesis of mimesis' in his film *Nanook of the North*, Tylor documents (and embraces) ethnographic accounts that reveal the true magic of writing. Flaherty's 1922 *Nanook* features a celebrated scene with a phonograph. Taussig describes Nanook's 'look of wild disbelief on hearing sound emerge from the white man's photograph' and his subsequent attempt to eat the shellac disk being played upon it. The audience is invited to read

this as Nanook's performance – his actions, his response. Taussig, however, rightly insists that this is a contrivance not by the 'primitive' Nanook but of the primitivist filmmaker Flaherty. It is a 'set-up job: Mimesis of mimesis' (1993, 200). The audience desire for such enchantment, Taussig suggests, demonstrates that 'we have never been modern' (Latour 1993).

The mix of the phonograph, mimesis, and magic had also featured in Tylor (1881) text *Anthropology*. There he noted the 'curious contrast' between the phonograph and a South Sea Islander's amazement at a 'talking chip'. The chip was a piece of wood upon which the missionary John Williams wrote a request in charcoal for a woodworking tool he had forgotten. He asked a 'native chief' to take this to Williams' wife and, Tylor records, the Islander was 'amazed to find that the chip could talk without a mouth [and] long afterwards carried it hung by a string around his neck and told his wondering countrymen what he saw it do' (1881, 167). The recently invented phonograph with its strip of foil, whose indentations replayed the sound previously inscribed upon it, made the South Sea Islander's understanding of the technology of reproduction – the 'talking chip' – 'hardly unreasonable' (1881, 181).

Seventy-five years later, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* would provide a different conclusion about the role of writing in non-literate contexts. In his celebrated chapter 'The Writing Lesson', Lévi-Strauss describes his experiences among the Nambikwara in Brazil and the corrupting role of a kind of picture writing. Levi-Strauss distributed paper and pencils with which the Nambikwara initially did nothing, but then some began to 'write', or rather to produce lines across their pages in imitation of the ethnographer with his notebook. A Nambikwara chief had 'further ambitions' and joined the ethnographer with a writing pad producing 'wavy lines on his paper' in response to Levi-Strauss's questions. 'Each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously, as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page […] there was a tacit understanding […] that this unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher' (1984, 388). Subsequently the chief attempted to read to the Nambikwara, a 'farce' that went on for two hours and which Levi-Strauss interprets as an attempt to demonstrate his alliance with the white man and that he 'shared his secrets' (1984, 389). That night Levi-Strauss sleeps badly, tormented by the 'extraordinary incident'. 'The Nambikwara had learnt what it meant to write! But not at all, as one might have supposed as the result of a laborious apprenticeship. The symbol had been borrowed but the reality remained quite foreign to them' (1984, 290).

Like Levi-Strauss, E. B. Tylor saw the advent of writing as the crucial marker of the transition from Barbarism to Civilization and noted the 'low condition of tribes still living without' writing (1881, 179). However, far from seeing (as did Levi-Strauss) writing as the harbinger of civilizational

destruction of a utopian primitive equality, he celebrates the survival of a primitive mimetic iconicity in the midst of an increasingly symbolic 'civilization' through examples such as the 'T-square' and 'S-hook'. These demonstrated, he concluded in *Researches in the Early History of Mankind*, that 'even in the midst of the highest European civilization, the spirit of the earliest and rudest form of writing is not yet quite extinct' (1878, 105). The Nambikwara could also be understood to stage the same Nanook-like enchantment that so (surprisingly) fascinated Tylor. Just as Raphael's 'Ominous Hieroglyphics' were underpinned by the exoticism exemplified by the 'Pythoness of the East', so Tylor's evolutionary anthropological survey, ranging from picture-writing to printing, was intended to make the familiar 'strange' and conjure Europe's other writing through ethnographic examples. Tylor, despite his evolutionism, would have celebrated rather than bemoaned Nambikwara writing – and perhaps also Raphael's 'ominous hieroglyphics' – for their rediscovery of the magical 'argot plastique' of writing.

Notes

1 What Umberto Eco termed 'syntagmatic concatenation imbued with argumentative capacity' (cited in Burgin 1982, 38).
2 Heywood, writing in 1900, gives the figures during the previous five years of 158,000 to 162,000 (Heywood 1900, n.p.).
3 The British Library catalogue lists Raphael's almanacs from 1827, but many issues seem to have been lost and many are very damaged.
4 Raphael claims a kind of ocular self-evidence for his predictions: In the 1841 issue, commenting on the previous year's hieroglyphic's predictions, he writes: 'An explanation of the plate is almost casting a doubt upon the powers of observation of our readers . . . ' (1841, 67). The term 'literality' used by Raphael (and derived from Biblical hermeneutics) in fact names what might more properly be termed 'imagality'.
5 Article in the 1845 *Prophetic Messenger* entitled 'On Hieroglyphical Devices, with Illustrations from Rare Examples' p. 46ff.
6 The 'infernal machine' was a complex homemade ballistic device with which Giuseppe Marco Fieschi attempted to assassinate King Louis Philippe of France on July 28, 1835.
7 Signifying the Earl of Bute and John Wilkes' *North Briton no. 45*. See Donald (1996, 50–60).

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6 *Aghori* – The Voyage of An Anti-Hero

Comic Book Images and the Art of Storytelling

Roma Chatterji

Aghori – The Story

A form of narrative art, comics consist of a montage of words and pictures arranged in a sequential series of panels, each of which presents itself as an event before the reader.[1] As an event-based medium with a grid-like arrangement of panels, gutters,[2] and frames that create a staccato and discontinuous rhythm, they are eminently suited to adventure stories, which are indeed the form in which they are popularly known. Everything on the comics' page is an image. The letters with variable shapes and sizes that suggest pitch and emotion; the panel borders, their shapes, and the gaps between them; and even the layout are all part of the process of visual storytelling. How they do this, i.e., the ways in which these structural elements work together to project mental images for the reader, is a subject that this essay addresses through a short story published by Vivek Goel, an up-and-coming Indian comics publisher.

The Aghoris are a renunciatory sect, followers of the dark left-hand path of worship (*vamachara*) that includes ingesting polluting substances, necrophagy, and meditating in cremation grounds.[3] Their practices are based on a philosophy of non-attachment and non-discrimination toward all things, recognition of the all-pervasiveness of the divine, and the unity of creation and identification with the cosmos (Parry 2008). Weaving an adventure comic around the figure of an Aghori could, at first sight, be thought of as India's claim to the horror genre that has found a niche readership in the mainstream Western comics market. But unlike zombies, vampires, and other fantastical figures, Aghoris are flesh-and-blood people who are part of the social fabric of India. But apart from a desire to profit from the current popularity of horror fiction, the subject enables the creators to juxtapose several different registers of experience in their story and to move between myth, fantasy, and events in the real world.

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Conceived as a 15-issue series with three separate story arcs, *Aghori* is one of the most popular series from Holy Cow Entertainment. Written in English and printed on good-quality art paper, the series is aimed at a mature audience that has been exposed to Western comics. The story charts the journey of Vikram Roy, a successful business executive in India's financial capital, Mumbai, whose life takes an unexpected turn when he meets a strange woman, whom we learn later is a denizen of hell. He is possessed by evil forces who lead him to murder his own kin. A fugitive from the law, Vikram becomes a nameless figure in Mumbai's underworld until he meets a stranger who sets him on the path to redemption. The series recounts his adventures as an Aghori ascetic who returns to the mundane world and has adventures both in this world, battling social evils, and in the various realms of the netherworld, where he meets ghosts, ghouls, and also various characters from Indian mythology. In this essay, however, I shall not be discussing the series as a whole but a short story that fleshes out a part of Vikram's journey, which is not detailed in the larger series and is woven around a very minor character – his crow companion, who acts as his herald when he returns to Mumbai as the Aghori Vira.

Vikram's Lost Years

Set in a cremation ground on the banks of a river in a remote jungle, the story fills a gap in the main story arc – the period between his life in the Mumbai underworld and his transformation into the *sadhu* (ascetic) Vira. The story begins somewhat elliptically, as if a conversation that was broken off is being resumed after a pause. Thus, 'There, at the edge of all things is a lone tree…'. The caption heads a splash page that depicts a solitary tree, its bare and twisted branches, silhouetted against a full yellow moon. As our eyes travel down the page, we see the sentence continued in another caption box positioned at the bottom right-hand corner of the page, 'bare and cold with bark tearing off like an old scab' (Goel and Ram 2016: unpaginated). Whose voice is this, and why is the tree significant? Does it tell us something about the subject of the story? To find the answers to these questions, we have to go back to the first issue of the main series, to the point when the fugitive Vikram finds himself on the pavement next to a vagabond, a man who seems to be able to read his mind and sends him on a quest to find his soul.

Following the title page is a page that is divided into three horizontal panels (Figure 6.1).

The topmost panel repeats the figure of the tree and moon, but now the bare branches of the tree are covered with shadowy birds. Again, there is a single line of text, carried over from the title page: 'But the tree is not

Figure 6.1 Something Befriended, unpaginated, courtesy Vivek Goel.

dead'. As the reader's eye travels down, it is suddenly arrested as the scene shifts to a close up of the head of one of the birds – a scrawny crow, its damp feathers ruffled, its beady eye staring out into space and the lines, 'Look closely and you will see that it is brimming with life' (Figure 6.2).

It is sandwiched between the top and bottom panels which both repeat the tree-moon theme – their delicate beauty, reminiscent of a Japanese woodcut print, a dramatic contrast to the raw vitality of the ugly crow. It is in this panel that Vikram makes his first appearance – in a small inset

Figure 6.2 *Something Befriended*, unpaginated, courtesy Vivek Goel.

we see his naked feet trampling the twigs that have fallen from the tree. The reader realizes suddenly that he or she is in the middle of Vikram's quest. Only after turning the page does he or she learn about the object of the quest:

> 'Go there and find me four things'.
> 'Find me something broken'.
> 'Find me something mended'.
> 'Find me something gained'.
> And in an echo of the title page – 'Find me something befriended' Goel and Ram (2016)

It is only at the bottom of the page that the speaker is revealed as a hemp-smoking *sadhu*.

The story's prequel is set apart from the main narrative not merely by the disjunctive effect of the title page but also by the change in speaking style. A shift to a mundane conversational tone and speech balloons marks the main story and distinguishes it from the sonorous, rhythmic, emboxed lines of the first two pages. The reader infers that Vikram has reached the threshold of the netherworld, where lost and broken souls are ferried across the river between the world of the living and the dead. His task is to save one soul among the many that are ferried across by the crows who are the messengers for the dead. The souls themselves seem fragile, shaped like ragged strips of fabric – uncannily reflecting the line in the rhyme 'Find me something broken. . . something mended' (Figure 6.3).

Is it Vikram's task to mend the broken soul like a seamstress mending a torn garment? By saving a lost soul, did he mend the soul or did he mend himself? The question is left unanswered as the scene shifts abruptly from the riverbank to the *dhuni* (the site where the hemp smoking *sadhus* gather) of the vagabond/ascetic who sent him on his quest. 'What have you gained?' the ascetic asks. 'Purpose'. 'And at last, what have you befriended'? 'I met a strange thing', Vikram replies, 'a blackbird. He says his name is Kaag (crow)' (ibid.). The story ends with two large panels at the bottom of the page, dominated by the image of a large crow perched on Vikram's shoulder. The colors gray, yellow, and black, used for both Vikram and Kaag, make the figures indistinct, and it seems as if they are fused together – part human and part bird.

Figure 6.3 Something Befriended, unpaginated, courtesy Vivek Goel.

Pictures, Words, and Images

The Sanskrit word 'chitra' does not distinguish between a picture and the more abstract mental image that can be interpreted differently by the different forms of art (Nardi 2006). Many centuries later, the art historian Hans Belting (2011) seems to echo this idea when he suggests that pictures are the medium through which images are projected. To understand *what* a picture says, it is necessary first to understand *how* it does so. It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to describe the architectonics of the comics' page.

Comic books have a distinctive chronotope that collapses time into space. Duration is suggested by the sequential arrangement of panels and the empty gutters between them. There is a tension between what the artist chooses to present in the panels and what is left out – that is, left to be inferred by the reader in the blank space of the gutter. It is this play of presence and absence that enables temporal disjunction in the narration, since past, present, and future can be spatially juxtaposed in a nonlinear fashion (Chute 2016). To exemplify this point, we now return to the story – to the first few pages of the book.

The words in the caption boxes are part of what is called 'the voiceover' in cinematic language. It is an anonymous voice and comes from a different time and place from that of the figures that we, the readers, see depicted in the panels. But these are not the only words that we see. We also see onomatopoeic words or sound images: The cry of the crows, the crackle of twigs, snapping under what we assume to be Vikram's bare feet, and the loud splash of water as damned souls plunge into the river of death. There are two kinds of spatial and temporal disjuncture that we experience. One, that between the words of the distant narrator in the caption boxes and the sound images that are embedded in the pictures; and two, the shifts in perspective that mark panel-to-panel transitions. According to the comics artist Scott McCloud, panel-to-panel transitions serve to establish mood and the sense of place. They tend to freeze time so as to enable a moment of quiet contemplation (1993, 79). Thus, from the silhouette of the bare tree on the splash page, we move to the next page, which offers a truncated view of the same tree, its branches now covered with roosting birds. We know that they are crows because of the cawing sound images embedded in the panel. The following panel zooms in on the head of a scrawny crow, to be followed by another glimpse of the tree in the last panel at the bottom of the page, which includes a small inset panel that depicts Vikram's bare feet as he seems to be walking toward the scene that we have just left. This small panel depicts an event that is in a different time frame from the rest of the page. We suddenly realize that the tree and birds that dominate this page are illusory – images conjured

up in Vikram's mind as he journeys toward the river of lost souls. This is confirmed when we turn the page and are confronted with a montage made up of fragmentary moments of his journey. The narrator's voice that continued in the caption boxes until we reached the title page now stops to give way to dialogues. We, the readers, now know that we are in the present, since the captions are replaced with speech balloons.

Comics give us a distinctive kind of synesthetic experience by transforming sounds into visual images. Will Eisner, the influential comics creator and writer, says that speech balloons try to capture the 'ethereal elements of sound', as words travel on the breath that emanates from the speaker's mouth (1985, 26). Onomatopoeia and the words in the speech balloons are part of the actions and events depicted within the panels. The captions are not. They come from some distant, indefinable time and, in the grammar of comics, they are used to connect events that are temporally and spatially disjunct or to convey symbolic relations and ideas. In many comic books, it is the lettering that distinguishes different types of sounds and utterances. Words in caption boxes are usually written in small and even letters, denoting distance and anonymity. Onomatopoeic words and utterances in speech balloons are shaped to reflect the sound of voices – of pitch, intensity, and volume. In this book, apart from onomatopoeic words, it is color rather than the size and shape of the letters that distinguishes captions from first-person utterances. Mauve is used as the background color in the caption boxes to create the impression of distance and white in the speech balloons to suggest immediacy.

But is color sufficient to capture the quality of speech in the lettering, especially as the artists have shunned the more conventional use of variable fonts to convey the aural quality of sound? It is through the careful positioning of text on the page that they manage to achieve the quality of aurality – the movement of sound and its evanescent quality that is captured by the ear only after it has left the mouth of the speaker. The fragmentary and staggered utterances on the comics' page convey the impression of a human voice that pauses to take breath between the spoken words. The impression that words are moving in tandem with the eye as it roams over the bleak landscape is conveyed by the page layout – the succession of panels depicting different perspectives of the scene and the voiceover that connects them. Each caption contains a fragment of an utterance that takes up and follows from the utterance positioned in the previous panel only to peter out, as if waiting for the next part of the utterance to follow. No scene is depicted in totality.

The colors – red, black and blue-gray in the first part of the story – are used indiscriminately for all the objects presented in the scene, enhanced by the black gutters between panels. The phenomenologist Eugene Minkowski (1970) distinguishes between dark and light spaces – the

Figure 6.4 Something Befriended, unpaginated, courtesy Vivek Goel.

former experienced through sound and touch and the latter through sight. Objects in dark spaces lack coherence. They are grasped rather than seen – partially and indistinctly since there is no sense of a horizon against which objects may be grasped in totality. Objects approached through sound as we approach Vikram and the subjects he encounters on the banks of the river of Death seem alien, as if they come from somewhere else. There is an elsewhereness to sound, since its source in the darkness cannot be distinguished easily. Thus, Vikram too, the only human in this bleak landscape, seems to merge with the trees and the rocks, his matted hair taking on the texture of bark, the whites of his eyes the only indication that the image is that of a sentient being (Figure 6.4).

It is only toward the end of the story that Vikram's image is clearly revealed – not completely but again in fragments. We see his extended arms outlined in bright yellow and then his face and shoulders, upon which sits a large black crow, its wings outstretched, and read the words:

> 'What have you gained'?
> 'Purpose'.
> 'And who have you befriended'?
> 'A blackbird named Kaag'.
> (Goel and Ram 2016)

Why is the word 'blackbird' used here rather than the more specific 'crow'? Crows are a dominant image in the book and are seen on

practically every page, sometimes in silhouette, carrying the souls of the dead across the river or nesting on the bare branches of a tree, but also as a skeletal crow-like figure with an enormous beak and twig-like fingers, the ferryman, the leader of the crows and their spokesman. Crows are the link between the living and the dead in Hindu mythology, considered to be the spirits of ancestors by some, which is why the choice of the word 'blackbird' seems curious (Dange 2002). Is it because the presence of the word, along with the sonorous and rhythmic quality of these lines, traces a link to the past – to nursery rhymes learned in school? 'Sing a song of six pence', the rhyme in which blackbirds figure prominently, refers to turbulent events in English history – to the forced dissolution of rich Catholic monasteries by King Henry VIII, the consequent enriching of the royal treasury, and the beheading of his second wife, Anne Boleyn (Opie and Opie 1997).[4]

The book's appearance, its aesthetic feel, is very different from what one usually associates with action comics, since motion lines and onomatopoeia are used sparingly. Vivek Goel, the penciler[5] and owner of the publishing house Holy Cow Entertainment, wanted a cinematic look for the story, with strong imagery and a minimal use of text. Unlike the detailed line drawing that is characteristic of most Indian comics, Goel's drawings look like wood-block images that he enhances with heavy black outlines. The colorist, Saumin Patel, who is a well-known comics artist in his own right, used a limited palette, primarily black, blue-gray, and dark red for the scenes set along the river of Death, and black, yellow with a few patches of brown for the scene of Vikram's return. The prequel, however, presents the full range of colors used throughout the book, condensing within it all the emotions that will be unpacked in the succeeding pages. The wood-block effect is enhanced by the use of color patches in varying shades of maroon and gray that break up the monotony of the dull blue sky and the red river. Apart from their atmospheric effect, the colors give emotional depth to the narrative. Blue, generally thought of as a heavenly color, sinks into darkness in the river scenes where it is juxtaposed with black and seems to reflect the grief of the dead, a grief that far exceeds what is considered to be human, while the turbulent river, the color of blood, expresses their frenzied anguish (Kandinsky 1946). Yellow is used to mark Vikram's return to the land of the living – to the *dhuni* of the ascetic stranger who had set him on the path of renunciation. The ascetic is shown sitting next to what may be a funeral pyre, the light of its fire casting his figure in shadow. The progression of colors is used here to link the images and their panels in a sequential series. This non-narrative ways of linking panels in a series is called 'braiding' by the semiotician Thierry Groensteen (2007) and is considered to be an essential feature of the grammar of comics. It is to this feature that we now turn.

Sequence, Page Layout, and Visual Narration

Scott McCloud describes comics as the art of intervals (1993, 83). Far from producing a continuity that simulates reality, the comics' narrative is full of gaps. It is the reader who, by imaginatively projecting him- or herself into the fictional world of the story, helps produce the diegesis that will link the panels into a narrative whole. While the figures themselves are still, movement is suggested not only through the use of motion lines and onomatopoeia but also through the arrangement of the panels in sequence. This arrangement of panels rhythmically distributes disparate moments in the story to produce a cadenced reading, as the reader's eye crosses from one panel to the next (Groensteen 2007). In a comic book read from left to right, the panel at the upper right-hand corner of a page is significant in that it may mark a change of scene or a dramatic shift in the story. Similarly, the panel on the lower left-hand corner of the page often marks a moment of suspense – sufficient to stimulate the reader to flip the page. Thus, if we turn to the page that immediately follows the introductory double page of the prequel, we see a long vertical panel with a full body image of Vikram setting out on his journey. Adjacent to it and running alongside it are two smaller panels and a longer horizontal panel at the bottom of the page that show the passage of time – moments of stasis when he breaks journey to rest, start a fire, and light his *chillum* (pipe) (Figure 6.5).

All the panels are united by the common color scheme of red, dark blue, and black. The significance of the end panel that will lead the reader onto

Figure 6.5 *Something Befriended*, unpaginated, courtesy Vivek Goel.

the next page is enhanced by a closeup of Vikram's face framed by a patch of yellow and a long grey plume of smoke that we presume is emanating from his *chillum*. The grey plume broadens into a cloud on the following splash page, which frames a large picture of a crow with flapping wings. It seems to be fused with the trunk of the old, wizened tree that we saw on the preceding page. The figure of a *sadhu*, presumably Vikram, his face and torso lit by the fire in his *chillum*, is seen reclining against the base of the tree. This is the title page where the story of Vikram's adventure actually begins.

The two splash pages in this book are both meta-representative images in a sense (see Figures 6.1 and 6.5). The first is through the color palette that depicts the full range of emotion and mood in the narrative – all the colors used in the book are present in the image of the tree lit by the glow of the full, yellow moon. The second does so by synchronically bringing together all the major figures that are foregrounded in the story – the tree, crow and Vikram. Nuances such as the selection of a particular color scheme or the affective appeal of a particular word such as 'blackbird' do not necessarily carry informational or even symbolic value. They frustrate readerly intention. They could be thought of as carrying what Roland Barthes (1977) calls 'obtuse meaning' and are part of what could be thought of as the counter-narrative.

In Indian aesthetic theory, *dhvani* or suggestion refers to the hidden intention of a work of art, that is, to the capacity to communicate what is not directly expressed or depicted. Anandavardhana, a 9th-century philosopher, was amongst the first scholars to emphasize the distinction between recounting, describing or explaining, and suggesting. Apart from the function of denotation (*abhidha*), words also have the power to convey imaginative and aesthetic expression through suggestiveness, he said. Such expressions can only be conveyed indirectly and are in fact spoiled if they are sought to be conveyed directly (Masson 1973). While being concerned largely with poetic expression the theory of *dhvani* can be productively extended to the study of artworks more generally. Anandavardhana distinguishes between three different ways in which words in poetry may be used – the conventional and referential mode known to all language users (*vacyartha*), the indirect and figurative mode through metaphor (*bhakta*), and finally, *dhvani*. *Dhvani*, according to Anandavardhana, is at the essence of the creative process and rescues art from mere representation and ornamentation (Krishnamoorthy 1974). The theory of *dhvani* is primarily concerned with poetic speech and its basis in sound. The sounds that impinge on the ear are different from that which is actually heard and given meaning. What is heard as meaningful is determined by the expectations of the auditor and his or her past experiences. By allowing us to focus on sound or the physiognomy of words, *dhvani* allows us to go beyond the

surface meaning of words to their hidden poetic meaning. In this comic book, it is color and shape that play the role of sound in poetic speech, creating suggestive meanings that generate friction within the narrative between the referential meaning of images and what else might be suggested through the ways in which they are portrayed (Lall and Chatterji 2015).

Unlike conventional approaches to comics' art that perceive it as primarily realistic, the images in this story, apart from their representational value, are also thought of in terms of line, color, and texture that come together on the comics' page to generate a field of sensations and emotions. Figures are disaggregated to become colored shapes and vectors of movement. Unlike auteur-driven graphic novels where the creator is a single person, commercial comics distribute the work of production to different people. Thus, even if a single person is both writer and artist, the artwork is still disaggregated so that the inking and coloring will be done by different artists. This means that the finished artwork in a comic book may end up looking very different from the way that it was originally conceived by the penciler (the artist who drew the pictures), since each artist will add another layer of interpretation to the work, often obliterating nuances in the pencil drawings. In the case of *Something Befriended*, however, Goel's intentionally rough and seemingly unfinished line work enables Patel's colors to speak.

Once color and the suggestion of sound are included in the book, it opens itself to a multitude of connections with other stories and with anterior memories that invoke or suggest elemental emotions such as fear, sorrow, and joy. These emotions are not invoked by the plot but rather by the many ways in which the narrative acquires flesh – by the subliminal affects created by the architectonics of composition such as page layout, color palette, the physiognomy of the words, and above all, the intentional depiction of counterintuitive imagery that fuses Vikram's body with the birds, trees, and rocks. All these devices are used to place the comic book within a semiotic field – a lineage and a universe that far exceed what is explicitly conveyed by the storyline. '*Vasana*' is the Sanskrit word for latent memory traces. Such memory traces enhance aesthetic appreciation by awakening latent impressions – past associations that may linger in the subconscious. Such memory traces enable the reader to immerse him- or herself in a fictional story world far removed from everyday reality (Dange 2002; Gnoli 1985). In a similar vein, the contemporary philosopher Julia Kristeva speaks of the pre-symbolic aspect of the word, which disturbs the present sense of a text, disrupting its meaningful order and suggesting a 'future anterior' – a virtual dimension that stretches back to an infinite past and reaches out to a possible but indeterminate future (1980, 10).

While Kristeva's examples are from literary texts, we find that her ideas are also exemplified in the narrative techniques used by comics. We have discussed sequence as an essential component of the structure of comics

storytelling; serialization too has shaped the ways in which such storytelling occurs, especially in the case of commercial comics. The development of long story arcs that serialization enables leads to the development of multiple characters and to a comics universe within which they can be located. Vivek Goel, when interviewed, was clear that he was interested in developing the Holy Cow universe[6] and creating characters that could be fleshed out over time as they circulate across different story arcs.[7] Vikram's crow companion is one such character, appearing as a minor character in the main *Aghori* story arc where he is depicted as a companion to Vikram, seen perching on his shoulder when he returns to Mumbai as a *sadhu*. *Something Befriended*, a discrete story located within the *Aghori* universe, fills a gap in the main story arc. Unlike stories that are organized in terms of plot with clear-cut beginnings and endings, this story begins in the middle of things, a backward look at an episode that is assumed to have occurred in a previous story (Wandtke 2012). Commercial comics are usually the work of a collective authorship, as we have said, and develop into 'thick texts' as due to the demands of episodic publication, numerous artists and writers work on the stories simultaneously and contribute to the development of each character over time (Kaveney 2008). Serialized stories develop a thick texture of referentiality as backward loops are used to reshape the direction in which a story may be moving. Such forms of looping may be used to amplify a story but also, as we see here, to flesh out characters that have story-able potential.

As an art form that is 'subtractive in nature, comics play on the dynamic relationship between perceiving and projection so that two-dimensional images are presumed to have depth and movement and flat letters to evoke sound and speech (McCloud 1993). Projection assumes the active gaze of the reader who is encouraged to draw on knowledge culled from diverse fields to interpret the images on the comics' page. Creators make assumptions about how readers will interpret what they see based on well-established rules of composition. However, sometimes creators choose to go against convention and create images that are deliberately ambiguous. The creators of *Something Befriended* have made radical choices not only in the selection of hero and storyline when compared to other mainstream Indian comics that are based on mythology and adventure, but also in their choice of a non-representational, fragmentary style of drawing and minimalistic color scheme. Readers will have very different ways of receiving these experiments. To judge by fan reviews of the book, some have been appreciative of their novel experiments while others have been critical of the artwork (Goel and Ram 2016). To convey the impression of coherence and meaningfulness, to create a narrative out of fragments and to present a full-bodied sensuous world based through a mono-sensory medium is a challenge that comics creators face with every new story that is published.

While the conventions of the medium, its syntax and grammar, are familiar to readers, it is the ability to experiment with these conventions that distinguishes some works from others. Unlike graphic novels that are considered to be literature and are in a sense licensed to freely experiment with the medium, Holy Cow Entertainment publishes comic books that are commercial, with subjects that move between adventure-themed stories and mythology, both genres with long-established conventions. Experimentation within these genres faces the risk of readers' rejection and is therefore more difficult to carry out. Comics in India have long been considered to be a lesser art, targeted at an audience of children. It is admirable that publishers such as Goel are able to risk bridging the gap between commercial adventure comics and graphic novels – a sign perhaps that the Indian comics reading public is finally coming of age.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Vivek Goel and to Holy Cow Entertainment for permission to reproduce images from the comic book *Something Befriended*.
2 'Gutter' refers to the gaps between the panels.
3 *Vamachara*, the tantric path that involves breaking social taboos, is opposed to *dakshinachara*, the right-hand path that is the conventional path followed by most Hindus.
4 Sing a song of six pence,
A pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Backed in a pie.

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing.
Now wasn't that a dainty dish,
To set before the king.

The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money.
The queen was in her parlour,
Eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes,
When down came a black bird,
And pecked off her nose.

According to the folklorists Opie and Opie, the blackbirds in the poem refer to the Catholic monks, the queen is likely Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and the maid is probably Anne Boleyn, who was beheaded. The number 'four and twenty' is connected to the Reformation and the printing of the English Bible, with 24 letters, and 'a pocket full of rye' may refer to an older unit of measurement (Opie and Opie 1997, 394–5).
5 The penciler is the artist who draws the figures. The inker, colorist, and letterer are the other roles that artists have in comic book production.

6 The term was first used by Marvel Comics, who used the word 'universe' to refer to all the characters in their comics and their interconnected story worlds.
7 I interviewed Vivek Goel at the Delhi Comic Con in December 2019.

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Part IV

Representing Images through Lines, Bodies and Language

ART FROM CALLIGRAPHY

Chinese Writing Turns into Artistic Images, Graphic Motives, Choreographic Gesture and Graffiti Tags

ADRIANA IEZZI

REDEFINITION of CONTEMPORARY CHINESE IDENTITY

IT IS MADE WITH • INK • BRUSH • PAPER

ONLY TWO COLORS BLACK • RED FOR AUTHOR SEALS

WHITE

POETRY CALLIGRAPHY PAINTING

3 PERFECTIONS

CLASSICAL RULES

CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECT

REPRESENTATION OF UNIVERSE DYNAMISM

POLITICAL ASPECTS

GOVERNMENT INSTRUMENT ← → CHANGING OF SOCIETY

FLOW

CALLIGRAPHER IS A CHANNEL FOR QI ENERGY TO FLOW

New FORM OF CALLIGRAPHY

POETRY IN FORM OF LANDSCAPE

MOUNTAIN MONKEY

3D CALLIGRAPHY

deer wave FISH PLANTS

PICTOGRAPHIC CALLIGRAPHY

BIRDS

A MAO'S SENTENCE FREE BIRDS

LANDSCRIPT XU BING

CHARACTERS INSTEAD OF THEIR ICONIC REPRESENTATION

NEW SQUARE CALLIGRAPHY

WORDS ARE IN SQUARE

GRAPHIC DESIGN

A BODY IN MOTION

Beijing 2008 PARALYMPIC GAMES

FASHION DESIGN

INSPIRED BY CALLIGRAPHY

PERFORMING ART

INKED FACE

IDENTITY DISAPPEARS

MUSIC

CURSIVE SCRIPT

BALLET

GRAFFITI ART

7 Art from Calligraphy

Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images, Performative Actions, Design Products and Graffiti Works

Adriana Iezzi

Introduction

> In China, anything which can claim to be a work of art has some connection, obvious or subtle, with calligraphy.
>
> Chiang (1973, 239)

'Calligraphy' (*shufa* 书法) has always been a central tenet of Chinese civilization and 'the chief of all the arts' (Chiang 1973, 239). In China, it is much more than the art of producing beautiful writings by hand, but it represents one of the most important art forms that have been practiced and appreciated in China from ancient times until now. It was one of the so called 'three perfections' (*sanjiue* 三绝), together with painting and poetry, the art forms that every educated official in China was expected to master in the past (Sullivan 1974) and one of the four traditional skills that cultivate the minds of the literati (Li 2009, 1).[1] Owing to its strict connection with the literary tradition and the classical writings, calligraphy has consistently contributed to the continuity of Chinese artistic and cultural tradition for about one and half millennia. Being based on the Chinese characters, a fundamental identity factor for the Chinese that retraces the whole history of China,[2] it is an art that is strictly linked with the notion of national, cultural, and personal identity (Pellat, Liu, and Chen 2014, 29). Being closely connected to a logographic writing system, it has an aesthetic characterization and ornamental beauty that no other writing system possesses. Most of the characters, in fact, are indeed graphs, but originally they were drawings, images, which therefore easily lent to creative artistic manipulation. Because the content of each calligraphic work is a meaningful text, in each calligraphy the artistic expression and linguistic communication perfectly match and blend into each other, configuring calligraphy as the maximum vehicle of self-expression for Chinese artists.

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From a philosophical point of view, calligraphy is a means of representation of the universal dynamism as a reflection of the 'flowing energy' (*qi* 气) that permeates not only the macrocosm but also the natural microcosm and the human body (Liu 2000).[3] Calligraphy also affects the political and social sphere, representing a political instrument of social control and an implement of social cohesion for the political and cultural élite of the Chinese literati in imperial China (Ledderose 1986), an emblem of the ruling class and its authorities (Kraus 1991) and a sign of power, personality, authority, glamour, and national belongings for today's cultural economic élite (Yen 2005, 15–32).

Another characteristic of Chinese calligraphy is the powerful and extremely coherent tradition of its practice:[4] from the fourth century onwards, classical models were canonized, and aesthetics and stylistic standards were established so that traditional calligraphies seem to all be very similar to an untrained eye.[5] It was only by the end of the nineteenth century that the impressive stability and cohesiveness of this art began to fade (Xue 1998), and in contemporary times, in particular from the mid-1980s, thanks to the uneven growth of the new commercial economy and the new politics of the Communist Party, which 're-opened' China to the rest of the world and to a free confrontation with its past tradition, calligraphy has undergone a radical change and exploded into a plethora of different forms in all fields of visual and performing arts, entering the international contemporary art arena (Iezzi 2013a). Calligraphy has been contaminated by other artistic forms, modifying its rigid rules, forms, tools, materials, aesthetic canons, and conceptions, sometimes even being unrecognizable. In this context, Chinese writing turns into pictorial images, performative actions, design products, and even graffiti works.

Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images

The first examples of innovative ways to use Chinese calligraphy in contemporary artworks are those in which Chinese writing turns into 'pictorial images'. This means first the rework of Chinese characters based on their pictographic forms so that they do not seem to be characters anymore but primitive and stylized images of what they represent, such as animals, objects, and persons. This is possible because 'many early written signs in Chinese originated from sketches of objects, thus they bore a physical resemblance to the object they represented, like pictures, which is why they were called pictographs' (Li 2009, 75).

An example is the work entitled '**Horses**' *Ma* 马 (1990, Figure 7.1) by **Gu Gan** 古干 (1942–2020), one of the first Chinese artists who experimented with new forms of calligraphy starting from the mid-1980s. In this oeuvre, the artist wrote the character *ma* 马 (horse) several times, using

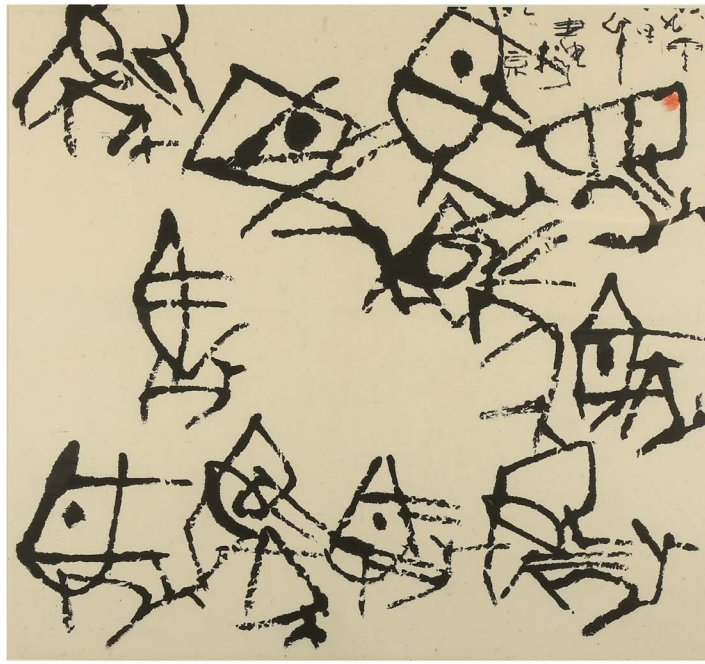

Figure 7.1 Gu Gan, *Horses*, 1990, ink on rice paper, 70 × 66 cm. Courtesy of the author.

its pictographic forms, and arranged the 11 pictographic versions of the character[6] freely on the sheet of paper in order to recreate the pacey movement of a herd of horses. As a result, the viewer can appreciate the naïf representation of the primitive fears, even if does not know that they are actually Chinese characters.[7]

Using a similar conception, **Luo Qi** 洛齐 (b. 1960), another leading figure in the panorama of the modernization of Chinese calligraphy, from 2004 to 2009, created three different series of artworks in ink and color on paper entitled '**Godbird Series**' (*Shenniao xilie* 神鸟系列, Figure 7.2), '**Godfish Series**' (*Shenyu xilie* 神鱼系列) and '**Flying Fish Series**' (*Feiyu xilie* 飞鱼系列) reworking the ancient pictographic forms of the characters *niao* 鸟 (bird) and *yu* 鱼 (fish) with an increasingly greater degree of abstraction.

In the first artworks of these series, the analogy with the pictographic forms of the related character is very strong, but then it becomes increasingly tenuous in favor of a greater resemblance to the real images of birds and fish or to their conventional way of being drawn. In the last examples, they turn into compositions of lines that only vaguely recall the shapes of

Figure 7.2 Luo Qi, *Godbird Series*, 2004–2007, ink and color on paper, 68 × 68 cm (each). Courtesy of the author.

birds and fishes.[8] Furthermore, in the last series, the 'Flying Fish Series', inaugurated in 2009 and composed of 38 works, the artist fused together the ideas of the first two series in the new concept of 'flying fishes' (*feiyu* 飞鱼) that are fantastic creatures who blend together the characteristics of the fishes and birds painted previously, adding conventional elements and shapes such as hearts, crosses, dots, flowers, triangles, etc. In these three series, there is a fusion between different levels of representation: the archaic forms of the characters, the stylized drawings of real images, the linear abstraction, and the rework of conventional elements. The aim is to connect these various levels in order to create a new language that gives infinite possibilities of representation of the same subject. This is the idea of 'combinatorial and asymmetric modularity'[9] which characterizes much of Luo Qi's artistic production and can be found in two other series based on the rework of Chinese archaic characters named 'Love Writings' (*Qingshu* 情书, 1990–2002)[10] and 'Sound Images' (*Shengyin de tuxiang* 声音的图像, 2023). In these two series, Luo Qi created a childish, archaic drawing writing, in which the characters have been heavily reshaped and contaminated with simple figurative elements. This non-formalized 'writing' is no longer linguistically readable, but visually appreciable, opening itself to universal aesthetic enjoyment.

The 'pictographic' approach used by Gu Gan and Luo Qi was transported to the third dimension by **Xu Bing** 徐冰 (b. 1955), another

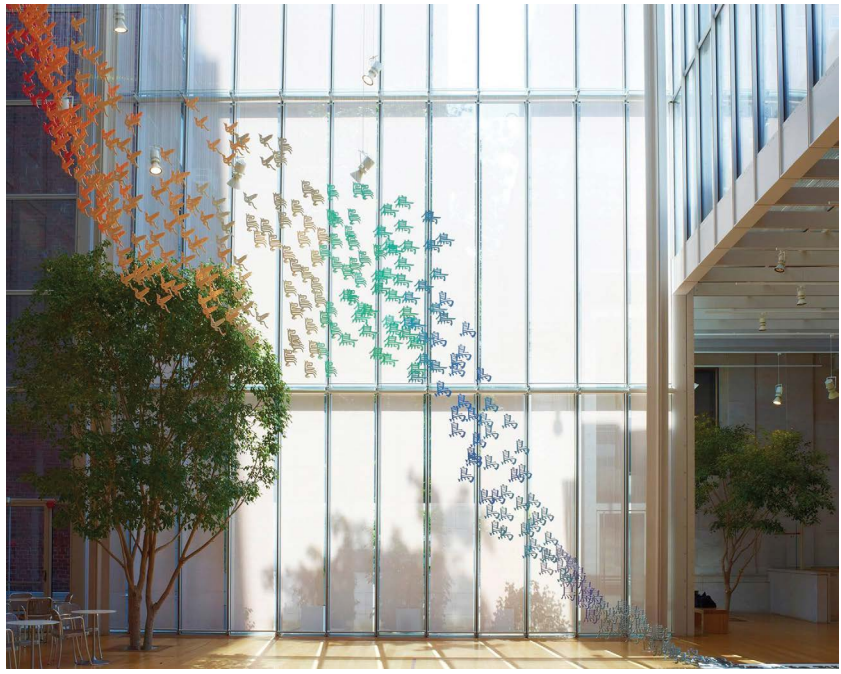

Figure 7.3 Xu Bing, *The Living Word*, 2011, installation, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. © Xu Bing Studio.

revolutionary artist in the field of contemporary calligraphy, in an extremely suggestive installation called '**The Living Word**' (*Niao fei le* 鸟飞了, 2001, Figure 7.3).

This is an installation composed of a series of plexiglass cutouts of the various forms of the character *niao* 鸟 (bird), from the most ancient form in 'oracle bone script' (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文) to the modern standard, in which each form is rendered with a different color.[11] The character hovers from a platform placed on the ground, with the transcription of the dictionary definition of the word *niao* (bird), breaking away from the confines of the literal definition and taking flight through the installation space. Rising into the air, the character gradually changes from its simplified modern form to non-simplified traditional forms written in different calligraphic styles, and finally to the ancient Chinese pictograph for 'bird'. The flight of this character is a journey back in time and space that retraces the whole history of Chinese writing from its roots. Its rainbow colors create a magical and fairy-tale quality. This installation is a flying 'flock of birds' and at the same time an 'animated writing': the linguistic sign frees itself from the preceptive constraints of writing to transform itself into something else,

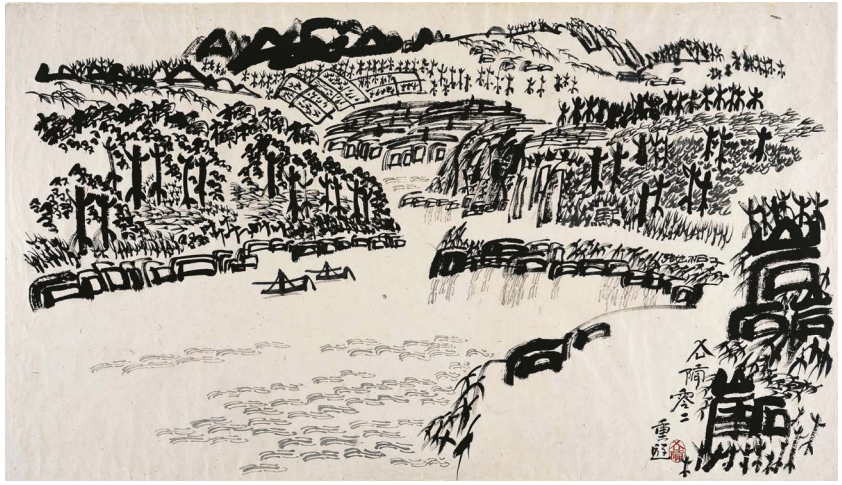

Figure 7.4 Xu Bing, *Landscript*, 2002, ink on paper, 99.5 × 174 cm. © Xu Bing Studio.

into something more alive and truer, and it does so simply by recovering its original form. It is a game made possible only thanks to the formal evolution of Chinese writing which, thanks to its peculiarities, and in particular to its pictographic nature, can come back to life.

In another series by Xu Bing entitled '**Landscript/Read View**' (*Wenzi xiesheng* 文字写生/*Du fengjing* 读风景, 1999–ongoing, Figure 7.4), the artist used Chinese characters as pictorial elements to arrange landscape paintings. In this way, characters for 'stone' (*shi* 石) make up images of rocks; the character for 'tree' (*mu* 木) makes up trees; the character for 'grass' (*cao* 艸) grass, for 'leaves' (*ye* 叶) leaves, for 'clouds' (*yun* 云) clouds, and so on. The characters that vary from regular and cursive scripts to simplified forms as well as such archaic forms as bronze and oracle-bone scripts are the ones he uses the most because of their pictographic value. In this series, started in 1999 when the artist went to the Himalayas sketching natural 'scenes' with Chinese characters, Xu Bing transforms visual images of landscapes into linguistic forms, inviting the viewers to reassess the distinctiveness of Chinese culture hidden within traditional landscape paintings, and offers a unique approach to 'read a scene'.[12] Chinese characters, becoming pictorial elements, regain their value as semantic elements.

Another artist of the calligraphic avant-garde who also focuses on the creative re-elaboration of the pictographic sign is **Pu Lieping** 濮列平 (b. 1959). In some of his works, for examples, he intersected pictograms, rewriting them repeatedly in an increasingly creative way in order to create organic compositions of great liveliness and calligraphic vividness.[13] In

Figure 7.5 Pu Lieping, *Knowing and doing*, 2011, ink and colors on paper, 65 × 65 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

another set of artworks (Figure 7.5), Pu Lieping refers to a particular form of seal script called 'bird seal script' (*niao zhuan* 鸟篆) that is a kind of artistic script in common use during the late Warring States period (475–221 BC), characterized by avian elaborations decorating each character. In this script 'the lines are gently and intricately curved and decorated with bird design' (Ouyang and Fong 2008, 85), the strokes are replaced by bird shapes, and the writing possesses a unique decorative style. Taking inspiration from this particular script in the artwork '**Knowing and doing**' (*Zhixing* 知行, Figure 7.5), Pu Lieping transcribes the two characters of the title, transforming the strokes of each character into heads of birds, bodies of fishes, profiles of horses, swimming turtles, flower stems, and corollas, depicting an imaginative natural scenario that seems to have nothing to do with Chinese characters.

All the artworks analyzed above are examples of what can be defined as 'pictorial calligraphy' (*huihua shufa* 绘画书法) or 'pictographic calligraphy' (*xiangxing shufa* 象形书法),[14] a form of visual (ri)elaboration of Chinese characters based on their pictographic forms, sometimes incorporating the use of colors. The first important examples of this type of calligraphy date back to the **'First Exhibition of Chinese Modern Calligraphy'** (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa shouzhan* 中国现代书法首展), held in October 1985 at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing, which represents the birth of 'Chinese Modern Calligraphy' (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法)[15] and of the Modernist calligraphic movement.[16] The 72 artworks displayed were neither calligraphies nor paintings (Liu 2000, 33), but they were something that participated both in calligraphy practice and painting conceptions.[17]Among them, there are several calligraphies composed of pictographic forms, such as *Tiandao chou qin* 天道酬勤 ('God help those who help themselves', 1985) by Li Luogong 李骆公 (1917–1992), a forerunner in the use of pictographic forms,[18] and *Jia shan ting yu* 家山听雨 ('From my refuge in the mountains I hear the tinkling of the rain', 1985) by Huang Miaozi 黄苗子 (1913–2012), another leading figure of the modernist calligraphic movement. There are also artworks in which the pictographic characters create real visual images, such as *Buxing* 步行 ('Walking', 1985) by Ma Chengxiang 马承祥 (b. 1937), composed of the two characters of the title '步' and '行' reproduced in their bronze script forms which consist of two footsteps at the intersection of four roads  ; *Chun* 春 ('Spring', 1985) by Zou Hanqiao 左汉桥 (b. 1946), in which the character '春' is reworked starting from its seal form  , which represents 'vegetation' *cao* 艸 reviving under the influence of the 'sun' *ri* 日; and, finally, *Yue zhou* 月舟 ('Moon and boat', 1985) by Xu Futong 许福同 (b. 1944) in which the two characters of the title in bronze script (and ) compose a night seascape. As demonstrated in these last examples, a 'pictorial approach' to calligraphy not only means the use of pictographic characters but also a new disposal of the characters in the composition as elements of a painting. The most representative example in that sense shown in this exhibition was the artwork entitled *Li Bai shi* 李白诗 ('Li Bai's poem', 1985) by Su Yuanzhang 苏元章 (1924–2002). In this oeuvre the artist transcribes a poem by Li Bai, China's most famous poet, using calligraphic forms and characters disposition to mimic the forms of the landscape painting described in the poem[19] so that 'the image, essentially pictorial in structure, is organically united with that of the poem' (Zhang 1998, 15).

Starting from these first experiments, there are many artists who have continued this type of research,[20] like those mentioned above, and many others who opened new paths for experimentation, (1) turning calligraphy towards abstract art with artworks focused on the expressiveness of the calligraphic line, but where Chinese characters are no longer recognizable,[21]

(2) using new tools, from a corn broom to an augmented reality headset with related touch controllers,[22] (3) using new supports/materials to create mixed media or multimedia artworks, from calligraphic collages and combining paintings to digital works.[23]

The use of **digital art** applied to 'pictographic calligraphy' was indeed pioneering in the history of Chinese contemporary experimentation and goes beyond national boundaries. The first example of 'pictographic calligraphy' in digital form was in fact the cartoon titled 'Thirty-six Characters' *Sanshiliu ge zi* 三十六个字, designed in 1984, one year before the First Exhibition of Modern Calligraphy, telling a story using 36 movable pictograms shaping in calligraphic forms.[24] The transposition of pictographic calligraphy in digital form was moreover the source of inspiration of an artwork titled 'Passo 1' (Path n. 1, 2018) made by a foreign artist, the Italian Guido Ballatori (b. 1983), who edited a video (the digitalization of a paper flipbook) in which the artist creatively animates the two characters *Mo* 墨 'ink' and *Yue* 樂 'music', the title of the exhibition in which the work was exhibited,[25] taking inspiration from the pictographic form of the component parts of the characters and creating a story.[26] Another important experiment in that sense was the animation "The Character of Characters" (*Wenzi de xingge* 汉字的性格) by Xu Bing, a video commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 2012 inspired by a calligraphy masterpiece by Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254–1322). In this video, calligraphy strokes were transformed into figurative elements, characters became visual signs, calligraphic practices and conceptions were transposed into stories, and also the similarities between painting and calligraphy were embodied into animated symbols.[27]

As declared by Liu Zijian (1999):

> Early works of modern calligraphy, such as the works of artists like Gu Gan and Li Luogong, demonstrated a tendency to simulate painting by trying to symbolize Chinese characters. People feel a certain element of freshness in such works because they look more like paintings. […] The purpose is to seek visual effects and weaken the recognizability of calligraphy. Traditional calligraphy as a complete writing system has its inaccessible classical nature, which is already impossible to be repeated in a changed cultural context. Calligraphy can be a live source for new art only when it suspends the consistent thinking that writing and recognizability of characters are essential in calligraphy, and rather chooses to develop towards visual art and seek roads beyond the edges of traditional calligraphy.

Starting from being something to refresh Chinese calligraphy from within, 'pictorial/pictographic calligraphy' makes Chinese calligraphy not

only easier to read and more accessible to a wider audience but even more easily usable abroad, still referring to something extremely identifying: the pictographic nature of Chinese writing. The eternal struggle between 'local' and 'global' that characterized the recent history of contemporary Chinese calligraphy seems to be resolved in a glocalization perspective (Wu 2008) with reversed roles in which it is the local that acts on the global.

Chinese Writing Turns into Performative Actions

The use of calligraphy in contemporary artworks goes beyond the production of material visual artworks but results also in performative actions, such as artistic performances, contemporary dance ballets, and musical executions. Calligraphy shares the idea of rhythm, dynamism, and harmony with these art forms. In writing practice, in fact, the artist manipulates and elaborates on the balance between opposites, a reference to the Daoist philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, emphasizing diversity within parts and the harmony of the whole, creating the rhythm of movement and generating an innate flowing vitality so that 'the beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, like the coordinated movements of a skillfully composed dance' (Li 2009, 179).

The most famous example of the use of calligraphy in a **contemporary performance** is Zhang Huan's **'Family Tree'** *Jiapu* 家谱 (2000, Figure 7.6).

In this performance, **Zhang Huan** 張洹 (b. 1965) invites three calligraphers to write words and phrases on his face. He tells them what they should write and to always keep a serious attitude when writing the texts even when his face turns dark. His face follows the daylight till it slowly darkens. At the end, his identity disappears. Most of these words and phrases derive from the ancient Chinese art of physiognomy, which seeks to map personality traits and divine the future based on one's facial features and/or cultural or political associations, such as the four characters on his forehead that refer to a well-known fable often invoked by Mao Zedong entitled, 'The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountain' (*Yugong-yishan* 愚公移山).[28] But rather than elucidate Zhang's character and fate, these traditional divinatory marks ultimately obscure his identity beneath a dense layer of culturally conditioned references. Because both his body and mind have been conditioned by his race and his upbringing, Zhang's autonomy as an individual is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by his heritage (Hearn 2014, 66). Words and calligraphy, instead of helping the artist to know better himself and its culture, obscure his identity and are means of personal and cultural disorientation.[29]

This performance is directly linked by another famous work by **Qiu Zhijie** 邱志杰 (b. 1969), a leading figure of the contemporary calligraphic movement, titled **'Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times'**

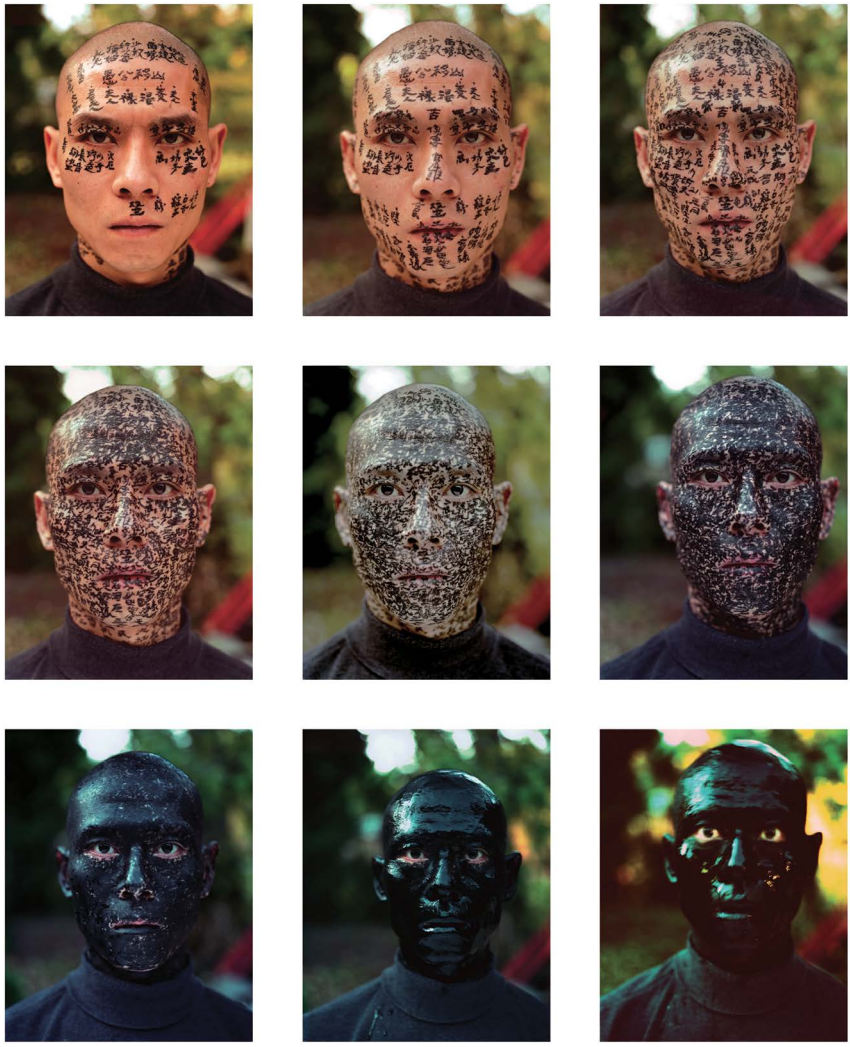

Figure 7.6 Zhang Huan, *Family Tree*, 2000, 9 photos of the performance, 224 × 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

(Chongfu shuxie yi qian bian Lantingxu 重复书写一千遍兰亭序, 1990–1995, Figure 7.7).

The 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' is the most famous calligraphic piece of the Chinese history, written in 353 by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), the father of Chinese calligraphy, and it has been copied repeatedly by all those who wish to learn the rudiments of calligraphic art. To denounce

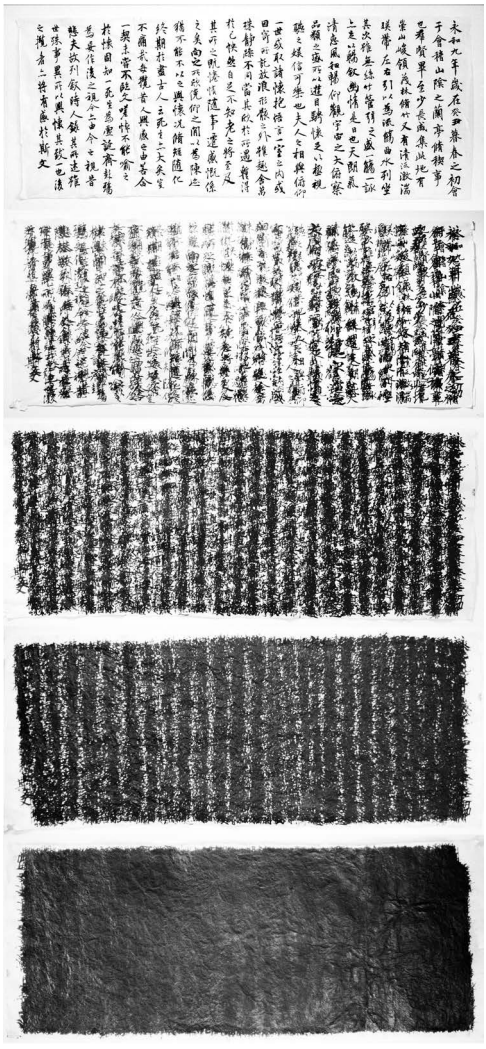

Figure 7.7 Qiu Zhijie, *Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times*, 1990–1995, five chromogenetic prints, 49 × 99 cm (each). Courtesy of the artist.

the senselessness of the calligraphy teaching method, based on the slavish reiteration of what already exists, which completely kills any form of individual creativity and expressiveness, Qiu Zhijie decided to dedicate three years of his life to copying this work, repeating the operation a thousand times on the same sheet of paper and documenting his work through a video. By continuing to overwrite, even once the surface was completely

blackened, Qiu Zhijie arrived at the total annihilation of the work. Calligraphy so becomes a metaphor for social orthodoxy and cultural reproduction, reducing culture to a mere mechanical practice, in which there is no possibility of criticism and renewal.[30]

There are also two female artists who took inspiration from Qiu Zhijie's performance, Ni Li 倪立 (b. 1989) and Wu Xixia 吴析夏 (b. 1993). On April 28, 2018, during the finissage of the exhibition 'The Music of Ink' held at the Braidense National Library in Milan (21 March – 28 April 2018), **Ni Li** held a performance entitled **'Calligraphy and Thousand Character Classic Thousand Character Classic'** (Figure 7.8) that consisted of the repetitive writing of another classic of Chinese calligraphic tradition, the 'Thousand Character Classic' (*Qianzi wen* 千字文)[31], on a big white panel until its surface was completely blackened by the calligraphic strokes.

Otherwise, in 2021 in Macau **Wu Xixia** held a performance entitled '**Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Time**' (*Shuxie Lanting xu yibian* 书写兰亭序一遍). She entered in an airtight inflatable sphere that symbolizes the uterus and begins to write the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' replacing the different forms of the twenty *zhi* 之 characters present in the poem with red-ink male phalluses. During the writing process, the oxygen inside the sphere is gradually depleted, infusing it with carbon dioxide. Just before suffocating, the artist will ask for help to get out of the sphere.[32]

Figure 7.8 Ni Li, *Calligraphy and Thousand Character Classic Thousand Character Classic*, photograph of the performance, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

In both performances, a mechanism of reapproval of the calligraphic tradition, characterized by masculine supremacy, is put into action by the female counterpart. In the first example, there is the denunciation of a dull tradition based on the mechanical and repetitive gesture; in the second case there is the open denunciation of a patriarchal and chauvinist culture symbolized by calligraphy and in particular by 之 *zhi* character, which has deprived women of any possibility of self-expression.

The four performances are all attempts to deconstruct the calligraphic tradition,[33] and in particular, the first three are example of the so-called 'anti-calligraphy' (Jiang and Wang 2005; Qian 2000; Qu 2008[34]; Zhang 1999) because they produce a subversion of traditional calligraphy and a sort of negation of it.[35] They can be defined as a form of 'blackened calligraphy' or 'performance of blackened calligraphy'.

Starting from the assumption that calligraphy is 'the dance of the wrist and the ink' and its aesthetic is directly linked to the conception of the 'physical execution' of harmonic movements (Kao 1991, 74–83), calligraphy has also become the source of inspiration for Chinese **contemporary dance** companies, choreographers, and dancers.[36] The most important example is '**Cursive: A Trilogy**' *Xingcao sanbuqu* 行草三部曲 (2001–2005, Figure 7.9) by the **Cloud Dance Theatre of Taiwan** (*Yumen wuji* 云门舞集), a dance company funded by Lin Hwai-min 林怀民 (b. 1947) in Taipei in 1973. The trilogy is composed of three different ballets: 'Cursive' *Xingcao* 行草 (2001, Figure 7.9), 'Cursive II' *Xingcao er* 行草二 (2003)[37] renamed 'Pine Smoke' (*Song yan* 松煙) in 2012, and 'Wild Cursive' *Kuangcao* 狂草 (2005). [38] This cycle focuses on the cursive style of calligraphy, known for its swirling and surprising nature. Its meandering, energetic, and flexible lines shift between continuous and compact to disconnected and loose ones, marked by its sudden and unpredictable variations, with its dynamic and easy movements, it resembles the representation of an overwhelming dance captured on paper, which is precisely what it turns into. What the choreographer wants to capture, in fact, is 'the concentrated energy with which the calligraphers "danced" while they were writing', that he recognized as a 'common element' of all the masterpieces of Chinese calligraphy (Schmidt 2006).

In *Cursive I* (Figure 7.9), the dancers experience the kinetic energy arising during the act of writing and follow the diverse ink flows. Following the energy assimilated from the traditional calligraphies projected on the stage, the dancers try to reproduce with their movements the dynamism of calligraphic lines, to animate the written signs and to mimic the dialectic of *yin* and *yang* and the harmony that arises therein.[39] The movements of the dancers' bodies all originate from the inside out, just like calligraphy, which emphasizes the movement of the brush in contact with the air, leaving empty spaces around. Also, the music composed by the internationally renowned composer Qu Xiaosong 瞿小松 (b. 1952), in which several drums contrast to a single cello, is full of empty spaces to merge

Figure 7.9 Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, *Cursive I,* 2001. The dancer Chou Chang-ning moves her body in front of the calligraphy *Pan* 磐 (hard stone) by Tong Yang-tze. (Photo by Liu Chen-hsiang. Courtesy of the dance company.)

calligraphy and dance movement into a unique flow. Like ink on rice paper, the dancers wear black costumes and perform on a white stage. The fusion with contemporary calligraphy materializes in the ninth of the ten chapters of the ballet when the dancer moves in front of a panel with the character *pan* 磐 (hard stone) written in cursive script by the famous female contemporary calligrapher Tong Yang-Tze 董陽孜 (b. 1942) (Figure 7.9). The dancer is wearing a long black dress with 510-cm long sleeves (a reference to Chinese opera) and moves the heavy, long sleeves to evoke weightlessness, like a 'flying dragon and a dancing phoenix' (*long fei feng wu* 龙飞凤舞)[40] moving like a brush on the soft rice paper.

In *Cursive II*, the reflection is on the 'colors' of calligraphy, on the five different shades of black ink that can be identified in calligraphic artworks, and in particular with the lighter nuances of color found in this artform. The choreographer himself paints with the bodies of the dancers on the background of enlarged sections of photos of white porcelain from the Song dynasty (960–1279) and on the notes and long silences of the 'Asian period' of John Cage's experimental music.

The aesthetic and lyrical abstraction already very present in *Cursive II* becomes even more evident in *Wild Cursive,* a hymn to movement improvisation and free expression, which are the elements from which the wild cursive calligraphic form arose. This loose, unrestrained, and extemporaneous script arose in fact from the hands of two extraordinary performers, Zhang Xu (675–750?) and Huai Su (737–789), the first two Chinese calligraphers who turned calligraphy into a dancing performing action, inspired by Madame Gongsun's Sword Dance. In Lin Hwai-min's choreography, on the background made of strips of white rice paper stained by signs and drops of black ink during the performative action, the dancers dressed in black move their bodies freely as powerful brushes that create wild cursive calligraphy on the notes of music composed by the young Taiwanese composers Jim Chum and Liang Chun-ma, which largely consists of hard drumbeats and wind noises.

The strict correlation between **music** and calligraphic principles[41] has also influenced the artistic activities of composers inspired by the calligraphic gestures, calligraphers who conform their artistic conception to music principles, and both musicians and calligraphers who work together in the so-called 'musicalligraphy performances'. The first example of a contemporary composer inspired by calligraphy is the Sino-American **Chou Wen-chung** 周文中 (1923–2019), who in 1964 composed the classical piece entitled '**Cursive**' [42] inspired by cursive style. As he explained:

> Cursive refers to the type of script in which the joined strokes and rounded angles result in expressive and contrasting curves and loops [and musically the cursive concept influences] the use of specified but indefinite pitches and rhythm, regulated but variable tempo and dynamics, as well as various timbres possible on the two instruments [I used in the composition, the piano and the flute]. The piano serves as reflection of the flute by "extending" its range into the lower register and by matching the flute's varied timbral resources, such as microtonal trills and flutter tonguing, using plucked piano strings and foreign materials between these strings.[43]

A more recent example is the musical piece '**Song of Ink**' (2022) by the Chinese composer **Chen Yeung-ping** 陳仰平 (b. 1983). It is a piece for

flute, violin, *qin*, *pipa*, and piano, inspired by a set of monumental calligraphies[44] displayed in the Main Hall at M+ (a contemporary art museum in Hong Kong). The five calligraphies were made by Tong Yang-tze in 2020 for the opening of the museum and conceived as a sort of site-specific installation; they are written in a mix of running and regular scripts in an extremely free and dynamic disposal arrangement, typical of the artist's style. The text of the five pieces is: 'the movement of heaven is powerful' (*tian xing jian* 天行健), 'renew oneself daily' (*ri xin* 日新), 'delight in the existence of heaven and understand its order' (*le tian zhi ming* 樂天知命), 'at the auspicious moment, act without delay' (*jian ji er zuo* 見機而作), and 'embracing the way of heaven brings progress' (*he tian zhi qu, Dao da xing ye* 何天之衢, 道大行也). These expressions are excerpts from the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*)[45] and aim to open the viewer's mind to philosophical reflection on the meaning of human life, world existence, and the relationship between human and Heaven. The musical piece is also divided into five sections that represent the personal response of the composer to the texts of calligraphy. The five sections are 'Heaven' (*Tian* 天), 'Human' (*Ren* 人), 'Self-awareness' (*Zizhi* 自知), 'Overcome ego' (*Zi sheng*自勝), and 'Unity' (*Heyi* 合一). As he said:

> Calligraphy is like music; its lines are what stimulate me greatly. This composition, *Song of Ink,* captures the singing qualities and dynamic of the ink I have perceived from Tong's work.[46]

This is the first example of a musical composition directly inspired by contemporary calligraphy.[47]

There are also examples in which calligraphy, music, and dance work together to create multimodal and extremely captivating **'musicalligraphy-dance performances'**. One recent example is **'Sound MAP (Musicalligraphy Augmented Performance)',**[48] a multidisciplinary performance of calligraphy, music, dance, and augmented reality that was held on 12 October 2023 at the Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica in Bologna during the opening of the exhibition 'Sounds of Ink: Luo Qi and 30 Years of Calligraphyism' (12 October – 5 November 2023). The performance involved two calligraphers, Luo Qi and Silvio Ferragina (b. 1960), the pianist and impro-performer Giusy Caruso (b. 1976), the contemporary dancer Agnese Gabrielli (b. 1997), and the Chinese composer Zhang Zhenzhen 张桢珍 (b. 1987), with the technological support of the Milan-based firm LWT3. The performance was divided into three main parts: in the first part, starting from the silence, the pianist began to 'act' on the piano, firstly plucking the piano strings and creating distortion effects on them and then doing improvisations using both keyboard and strings; her gestures were inspired by the gestures of

the calligraphy master Luo Qi, who meanwhile wrote on a rice paper scroll sticking out of the piano the four characters of the title of the exhibition (*shuimo shengyin* 水墨声音), using his personal style. When he finished, he began to 'translate' the music into concatenations of calligraphic signs inspired by the oldest Chinese musical notation system, the 'Dunhuang music score' (*Dunhuang yuepu* 敦煌乐谱),[49] reshaping it according to his personal and original interpretation and transforming it into a 'visual and visible musical score', strongly rhythmic and dynamic, with an inextricably calligraphic thread.[50] In the second part of the performance, the pianist played the contemporary piece 'Shadows' (2012) by the Chinese composer Zhang Zhenzhen, interacting with the improvisation of the dancer who moved her body in consonance with the music rhythm and the pianist's gestures. In the last part of the performance, the Italian calligrapher Silvio Ferragina wrote the 18 characters *Fu zhi zai shan shui, qin biao qi qing, kuang xing zhi bi duan, li jiang yan ni* 夫志在山水, 琴表其情, 况形之笔端, 理将焉匿 ('If it is possible for a man's impressions of mountains and rivers to find expression in his lute playing, how much easier it must be to depict physically tangible forms with a brush, from which no inner feeling or idea can be successfully hidden'[51]) from the classical literary work entitled 'The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons' (*Wen xin diao long* 文心雕龍) by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522), using seal script and its pictographic forms. The text creates a similarity between music and the art of the brush which, thanks to their expressiveness, transform every type of vision, feeling, and human idea into art. The interaction between these two art forms is exactly what was acted out on stage: while the calligrapher was shaping the 18 characters on a 15-meter-long scroll placed at the center of the room, the pianist was playing a musical score (also with improvisations) that was the translation in music of the strokes of those characters. This translation follows the strict rules of a sophisticated mathematical system called 'Musicalligraphy Project' (2013–ongoing) designed by Silvio Ferragina that converts the strokes of the characters and the blank spaces between them into musical notations and pauses.[52] In this way, for the first time the calligrapher and the musician play the same 'musicalligraphic score'. In this last part of the performance, technology was also part of the action: while the calligrapher was writing, the characters he wrote were projected on a screen placed in the background of the stage. Thanks to a sensor placed on the brush, the movement of the calligrapher's wrist interacted with the projected characters that were deformed on the basis of the calligraphic gesture. The pianist also had a sensor on her wrist that modified the movement of the projected characters in accordance with her gestures, generating electronic sounds. In this performance, all the actors performed and embodied the strict correlation between Chinese

writing, gesture, music, and visuals, creating a real osmosis among calligraphy, music, and body movement, and demonstrated the creative potential of Chinese calligraphy art even through the use of augmented reality.

Chinese Writing Turns into Design Products

In contemporary times, Chinese calligraphy and writing are also systematically used in the field of decorative and applied arts due to the fascination they still have in Chinese people. Chinese characters and calligraphic lines lost their direct connection with the linguistic meaning to become decorative elements; graphic motives; captivating shapes used for commercial scope, for example on ceramics or design products, in particular graphic design, fashion design and industrial design products; and also modern architecture design.

Among all these manifestations, the use of Chinese writing and calligraphy in **logo design** is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how Chinese characters, even individually, can be easily manipulated to create something visually appealing and usable far beyond national boundaries. Among the numerous logos made of Chinese characters and reproducing the calligraphic strokes,[53] one of the most representative example is the **logo of the Paralympic Games 2008**[54] (Figure 7.10), designed by Paul Liu, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who applied traditional calligraphic art elements and transformed the Chinese character *zhi* '之' into a human shape in motion, implying the tremendous efforts a disabled person has to make in sports as well as in real life.

The character *zhi* '之' means 'birth, life', as well as 'arrival' and 'achievement', and in fact its shape is made of twists and turns, which implies the process of achieving goals and the life of human being. Its original form (𠂤) is from *zhi* 止 'foot', with a 一 line below it, so the character also means 'to go'. Its shape in fact seems to recall that of a person with a head (the red dot), arms and torso (the blue line), and a single leg (the green line) who is running, to symbolize the paralytic condition of some of the Paralympic athletes who, despite their condition, 'go, proceed, are in continuous movement', going beyond human limit. The use of running script (*xingshu*) to shape this character accentuates this idea of movement. The whole character embodies the Paralympic motto of 'Spirit in Motion' and was dubbed 'Sky, Earth and Human Being' (*Tiandiren* 天地人) because it reflects the integration of heart, body, and spirit in human beings and of human spirit and natural world, which is the core of the philosophy of Chinese culture. The three colors in the logo in fact represent the sun (red), the sky (blue) and the earth (green), that when integrated shape the human figure. The words 'Beijing 2008' under the character are also written in a calligraphic font similar to the character *zhi* and recall the lower part of

Figure 7.10 The logo of the Paralympic Games 2008. © International Paralympic Committee.

the logo of the Beijing Olympic Games.[55] In the Olympic logo, there is also a strict correlation with Chinese writing and calligraphy: the shape of the athlete in motion resembles the character *jing* 京 'capital' in its seal script form, standing for the name of the host city (Beijing), and reproduces the typical Chinese red seal that is always composed of Chinese characters written in archaic styles and represents the artist's sign.[56]

Fashion design is another fertile ground for the interaction between calligraphy and applied arts.[57] An extremely interesting example in this field is the cross-media experiment called **'From Ink to Apparel – A Crossover between Calligraphy Art and Fashion Design',**[58] a cycle of three exhibitions organized by the calligrapher Tong Yang-tze in Taipei, in which calligraphy became the source of inspiration for talented young fashion designers. The first edition was held in 2016: for the exhibition, Tong Yang-Tze invited six up-and-coming Taiwanese fashion designers (Apu Jan, Shao-Yen Chen, Yu-Ying Chou, Kilin Chen, Shun-min Wang, and Pei Chieh Chen) to create dresses taking inspiration from twenty of the 100 calligraphies that comprised her previous exhibition, entitled 'Silent Music'.[59] In 2007

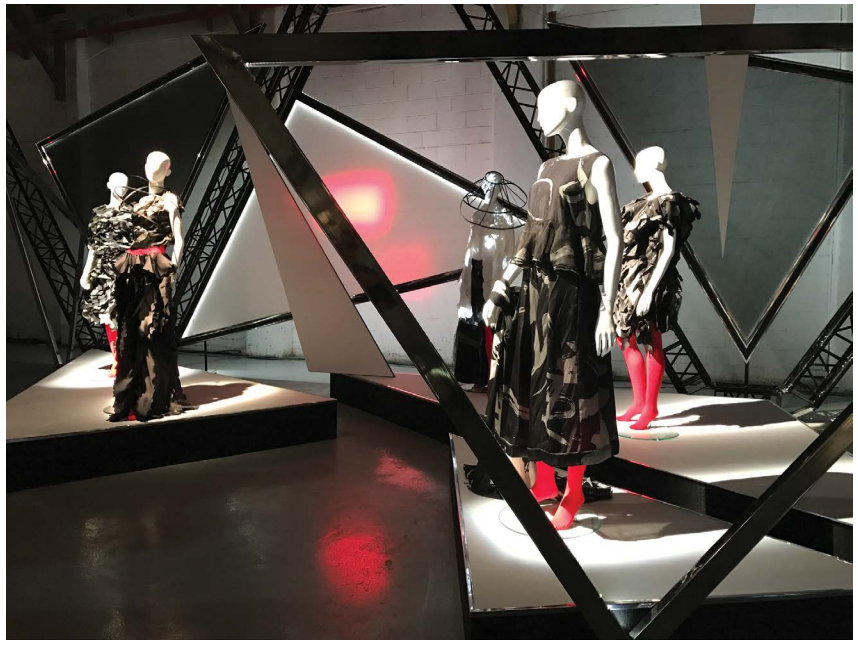

Figure 7.11 The dress collection made by Polly Ho for the exhibition 'From Ink to Apparel II' (2017). Courtesy of the artist.

she repeated the experiment involving the Hong Kong fashion designers Polly Ho and Otto Tang and the designer Yi-Fen Tsai, in addition to three veterans of the original exhibition. About the concept and realization of her collection (Figure 7.11), Polly Ho affirmed:

> My inspiration comes from Ms. Tong Yang-Tze. I tried to focus and explore her masterpieces. Tried to discover the possibilities of her brush strokes, try to make some collage from her enlarged strokes. I found out the silhouette of her strokes are so strong and complicated. To express the feeling of these complicated strokes, I cut the silk fabric with many layers eventually; each layer is coming from the line of her strokes. I applied these straps of her stroke lines, using 3D draping on the dummy to make a top. And then I applied the same technique on the rest of the outfits from simple layers to complicated layers. And I also developed a print from the collage of Ms. Tong's brush strokes, and then I printed on 3 different silk materials to express the soft and strength of the brush strokes. Moreover, we added some circular shapes and try to explore the lighting spot on the clothes to reflect the layers of the strokes in a different way.

In the last edition of 'From Ink to Apparel' in 2018, Tong Yang-tze finally invited three designers from Taiwan (Chou Yu-Ying, Chen Shao-Yen, and Tsai Yi-Fen), two from Beijing (Li Ying-Jun, and Zhou You), and one from UK (Pan Bernice) to work on a single character *wu* 無 (emptiness), written by her in different calligraphic styles, to create dress collections.

The main aim of the 'From Ink to Apparel' experiment is to make the art of calligraphy easily accessible to the general public through a language that is easily readable and extremely captivating as fashion design, closer to everyday practice and with possible commercial implications, and it is also a way to show many possibilities inherent within the calligraphic art, to show its creative potentiality in contemporary times, blending with an artform originated from the West and making sure it doesn't die.[60]

This is not the first time that calligraphers collaborated with fashion designers,[61] but is the first time that this collaboration is on large scale, involving around 20 fashion designers, generating lots of different collections for a total of around 100 dresses, attracting a very large audience[62] and abundant media attention.

Contradicting the theory of the skepticism of commercialization that usually sees commodification and commodity images as processes that degrade traditional cultural forms,[63] the application of Chinese writing and calligraphy to logo and fashion design reflects the cultural 'Chinese' connotation of the design works, transforms Chinese characters and calligraphic strokes into captivating, desired design elements, and enhances and improves Chinese design to an international level.[64]

Chinese Writing Turns into Graffiti Works

Probably the most unusual and unexpected use of Chinese writing and calligraphy in contemporary artistic expression is in graffiti art. However, in China writing and calligraphy are everywhere, especially along the streets, for example, in the calligraphic 'signboards' located on every government, institutional, and religious building; in the commercial, road, and advertising signs; and even on walls in the scrawled advertisements by the migrant workers.[65]

'Graffiti art' (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) appeared in the Chinese cities in the mid-1990s, becoming popular in the mid-2000s, declining since the mid-2010s, and experiencing a new flowering in the post-COVID era.[66] Even if most of the Chinese crews/writers were deeply influenced by the Euro-American tradition of graffiti, using the Latin alphabet, English language, and Euro-American styles, there are some others[67] that encourage a process of "Sinicization" of graffiti art (Valjakka 2016), in order to create a 'Chinese graffiti style' (*Zhongguo tese de tuyayishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (Iezzi 2019b). This means the use of Chinese characters instead of

Latin letters to shape writing pieces, creating 'charactering' pieces instead of 'lettering' pieces, and the reference to other Chinese cultural elements, such as the insertion of calligraphic inscriptions and the use of calligraphic lines to write graffiti tags.

As to **graffiti tags**, for example, there are numerous Chinese tags of the Kwanyin Clan (**Guanyin** '觀音/观音'), one of the most important Beijing crews,[68] usually written with a style very similar to running or cursive scripts and using the spray can as it were a brush, blending the spray or moving the can closer and further away from the wall in order to create different thicknesses of the lines.[69] A particular interesting example is in Figure 7.12; in this tag, the artists reproduced the regular thickness of the lines typical of the calligraphic 'great seal style' (*dazhuan shu* 大篆书) and wrote the two characters using their pictographic forms, using an approach similar to 'pictographic calligraphy' (see Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images Section). They in fact transformed the right part of the first character *Guan* 觀 into a face with two big eyes – the meaning of the character is, in fact, 'look at, watch, observe', and the lower part of the second character *yin* 音 into an open mouth – the meaning of the character is, in fact, 'phone, sound'.

As to **calligraphic inscription**(s), representative examples are in the huge graffiti piece '**Joy in bottle**' (Figure 7.13) made by the ABS crew (an

Figure 7.12 Kwanyin Clan, *Tag Guanyin* '觀音', spray paint on wall, Sihui: Beijing, Photographed by Llys on 3 March 2007. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

Figure 7.13 ABS crew et al. (Max, Jer, Way Fan, Bllod Bro, Spade, Kayo, Thorn Donis, Neon, Deb.Roc.Ski etc.), *Joy in bottle*, 19–21 May 2018, spray paint on wall, Berlin, *Berlin Mural Fest*. Courtesy of the artists.

important Beijing crew)[70] with other Chinese and foreign writers during the Berlin Mural Fest in 2018. In this work there are: (1) an inscription that listed writers' cities of origin,[71] as a modern colophon of travelling artists, and (2) another inscription with the big writing '*Po fanlong* 破樊笼' ('The birdcage has disintegrated') and the description of the main features of Chinese dragons that 'summon wind and rain and are omnipotent' ('*hufenghuanyu, wusuobuneng* 呼风唤雨, 无所不能')[72] that references the gigantic and fierce red Chinese dragon painted on the whole wall.[73]

As shown in this example, the calligraphic inscriptions in the graffiti pieces can be used as colophon, as in the calligraphic tradition, or to explain the meaning of the work, as in the Chinese painting tradition. There are also inscriptions made by the Kwanyin Clan where the reference to calligraphy is even deeper because the content of these inscriptions are Chinese poems, the traditional content of Chinese calligraphy.[74]

As to **'charactering' piece**, one representative example is **Qingwu tuya** 请勿涂鸦 (Please no graffiti, 2020, Figure 7.14) by Corw and Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528),[75] the father of Beijing graffiti.

The piece has a distinctly political orientation, as it was created on Jingmi Road, Beijing's most important hall of fame for some time now, and once home – as Li Qiuqiu himself says[76] – to numerous graffiti. Later, these were all buffed by the government and replaced by a long, grey, and anonymous wall dotted with the black stencil inscriptions *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 ("No graffiti") posted by the government itself. As an act of

Figure 7.14 Li Qiuqiu e Corw, *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 (*Please no graffiti*), 2020, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Jingmi Road. Courtesy of the artists.

protest, Li Qiuqiu and Corw decided to paint graffiti with the same text but using bright colours and fun animations so as to brighten the blank wall that had once been the heart of a shared creativity. As a result of this act of artistic rebellion, many other writers followed suit, once more filling the wall with graffiti: a fine example of a peaceful protest with spray cans. The political use of Chinese writing is so reactivated not as form of control and power as in the past but as form of protest precisely against that control and power exercised from above.

Conclusion

The artworks analyzed in this chapter show how Chinese calligraphy is still extremely productive in contemporary times and has succeeded in giving life to new artistic expressions born from the encounter of calligraphy with other artistic forms. It is the case of the 'pictorial/pictographic calligraphy' born from the encounter with painting, the 'performances of blackened calligraphy' born from the encounter with performance and conceptual art, the contemporary dance and musical pieces inspired by calligraphy as well as the 'musicalligraphy-dance performances' born from the encounter with dance and music, the logos made of Chinese characters and the fashion collections inspired by calligraphic strokes born respectively from

the encounter with logo and fashion design, and the 'charactering pieces', calligraphic graffiti tags and inscriptions born from the encounter with graffiti art. These artistic expressions cannot all be defined as 'calligraphy' because they do not respect all the calligraphic principles, but they can be defined as '**art from calligraphy**'[77] because they take inspiration, lifeblood, techniques, styles, contents, materials, tools, and/or aesthetic and philosophical conceptions from calligraphy.

Through these expressions, calligraphy has merely expressed qualities already inherent in it: with painting, calligraphy shares techniques, tools, materials, training, philosophical, and aesthetic conception, and the fact that 'the earliest forms of the written characters can be regarded as pictures' (Chiang 1973, 226), so calligraphy and painting can be seen as 'branches of the same art' (*ibid.*). The rhythm, dynamism and harmony of calligraphic strokes and gestures reveal the 'performative quality' of calligraphy. Being based on a highly graphic writing made of sets of meaningful lines easily recognizable by Chinese people/consumers, calligraphy is ideal for decorative and applied artistic productions. Like graffiti art, it has always been a 'public art' visible in the public spaces and walls. For all these reasons, in contemporary times Chinese writing could be transformed into pictorial images, performative actions, design products, and graffiti works. In doing so, calligraphy opens itself to a broader understanding, being easily readable also to a non-Chinese audience and creating artistic expressions that exist comfortably within the global art world while remaining indelibly Chinese.

Regarding the development of contemporary Chinese art as a transformation of China's cultural heritage from within and from without in order to create a globally comprehensible language (Gao 2011; Hou 2002; Wu 2013), calligraphy is certainly part of this development.

Notes

1 The other three abilities were the ability to play *qin* 琴 (a stringed musical instrument), *qi* 棋 (the board game called 'Go') and to produce *hua* 画 (paintings) (Li 2009, 1).
2 Chinese writing; it is the oldest writing system still in use today.
3 In a calligraphic work, in fact, we can admire and enjoy the reverberation of this vital energy and universal impulse since the calligrapher, thanks to the cultivation of his own psychophysical unity (*xin* 心), is able to guarantee the openings that allow the flow of *qi* through his arm, his wrist, the brush, and reverberations in the calligraphic lines, showing in his works the evident signs of such a completely obstacle-free flow (Pasqualotto 2007, 105–27).
4 The four writing instruments are paper, writing brush, ink stick, and ink stone, the so-called 'Four treasures of the study' (*wenfangsibao* 文房四宝); the colors are black (the ink), white (the paper), and red (the seal that is the artist's signature); the three major components of a calligraphic piece are the main text in

the center of the piece, inscription(s) on the sides, and seal(s) (Li 2009, 157–8); the disposal arrangement of the text is in columns, and the text must be read from top to bottom and from right to left; the five main calligraphic scripts/styles are: seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆书), clerical script (*lishu* 隶书), regular script (*kaishu* 楷书), running script (*xingshu* 行书) and cursive script (*caoshu* 草书); the contents of calligraphies are usually poems and literary texts; the calligraphic training is based on tracing and copying from models of calligraphy masters.

5 In this powerful and extremely coherent tradition there are, however, some examples of the emergence of innovative elements, always being indicators of ongoing cultural changes, such as the emergence of 'wild cursive script' (*kuangcao* 狂草) in the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Schlombs 1998), the diffusion of Chan Buddhist calligraphy in the Song dynasty (960–1127) (Harrist and Fong 1999), and the advent of 'Leninist/revolutionary calligraphy' during the Maoist period (1949–1976) (Kraus 1991).

6 The artist took inspiration from various versions of the character written in 'bronze script' (*jinwen* 金文), a variety of Chinese scripts written on ritual bronzes from the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 BC–1045 BC) to the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 BC–256 BC) and even later. To see the different 'bronze script' versions of the character: https://www.zdic.net/zd/zx/jw/%E9%A9%AC (last access 20.12.2023).

7 In a similar work entitled 'Deer crying' *Luming* 鹿鸣 (1990), Gu Gan followed the same process reiterating the pictographic versions of the two characters of the title *lu* 鹿 ('deer') and *ming* 鸣 ('cry') in order to recreate the din of a herd of wailing deer, also adding colors to accentuate the pictorial charge of the representation.

8 If we compare, for example, the work 'Bird 1–05' (2005) and the shape of the character *niao* '鸟' in bronze script (*jinwen* 金文), we see how the analogy between the two is very strong, as it is between the artwork 'Fish 7–07' (2007) and the form of the character *yu* '鱼' in small seal script (*xiaozhuan* 小篆, another archaic Chinese script), and between the work 'Fish 45–07' and the shape of the character *yu* in bronze script. If, however, we focus on other works in the series, such as 'Bird 3–05' (2005) and 'Fish 45–07' (2007), we instead see how this analogy with the archaic forms of characters is lost in favor of a greater resemblance to the conventional ways of drawing birds and fishes. Finally, in works such as 'Bird 07–42,44' (2007) and 'Fish 07–40,42,43' (2007) we see compositions of lines that only vaguely recall the shapes of birds and fishes (Iezzi 2019a, 249, 256, 258–67).

9 Although starting from the same module (the characters '鸟' and '鱼'), irregularity is formalized as a creative principle (each work is different from the others). In this sense, the form does not end in the original idea (the Chinese character), but continually evolves, because there is no specularity between project and execution. The work shows the possibility of an accepted, assimilated, even intentional asymmetry, participating in the mentality of modern art and modern world, made up of unexpected events and surprises (ibid., 256). This idea is borrowed from Action painting.

10 The reference is in particular to the artworks of this series he did in 1998 (ibid., 199–201).

11 The choice to create an installation, that is an art form halfway between sculpture and architecture, is also a point of contact with the art of calligraphy. There is in fact a strict correlation between calligraphy and both sculpture

and architecture that are 'plastic arts', as demonstrated by Chiang Yee (1973, 229–39). There are several contemporary artists that use calligraphy and Chinese writing in their installations.

12 Xu Bing's official website: https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/231?year=1999&type=year, last access: 21.12.2023. For more information about this series, see Vainker and Xu 2013.

13 For a detailed description of artworks of this kind, such as *Chun hu song niu* tu 春虎送牛图 ('The Year of the Tiger Follows the Year of the Ox', 2010) and *Qiu Yun* 秋韵 ('Autumn Rhythm', 2010), see Iezzi (2013b, 63–4).

14 There are several definitions proposed by art critics of this type of calligraphy: Zhang Yiguo (1998, 19) defines it as 'paintinglike calligraphy', Zhu Qingsheng (2000, 162) as 'current of calligraphy and painting/current of pictorial characters' (*Zi hua pai* 字画派), Chew Kim Liong as (2001) 'pictographic calligraphy' or 'painting-like calligraphy and calligraphy-dominated painting', Gao Tianming (2004, 190) as 'calligraphic painting/pictographic calligraphy' (*shufa huihua* 书法绘画), Chen Dazhong (2005: 96) as 'Pictographic transformation of Chinese characters' (*Hanzi huihua hua* 汉字绘画化), Liu Zongcao (2006) as 'Illustrated character-meaning creations' (*Tujie ziji shi de chuangzuo* 图解字义式的创作), Zhang Aiguo (2007, 158) as 'Painting of characters/Characters model in pictorial form' (*Hua zi xing* 画字型), Liu Canming (2010, 86–94) as 'Pictorialization of Chinese characters' (*Hanzi tuhua hua moxing* 汉字图画化模式), etc. The first to distinguish this tendency was Li Xianting (1991, 254–55), when he wrote that there are some artists that 'draw Chinese characters like pictures' (*zihua xiangxing* 画字象形, *ibid.*, 254).

15 For an explanation of the meaning of the label 'Chinese Modern Calligraphy', see Iezzi (2015, 206–8).

16 For more information about the Modernist calligraphic movement, see Barrass (2002, 162–93); Iezzi (2013a, 164–7).

17 The images of all the artworks displayed in the exhibition are visible in the exhibition catalogue (Wang 1986).

18 Li Luogong began this type of experimentation as early as the 1970s, together with Huang Miaozi and Zhang Zhengyu (1904–1976). His most famous artwork in that sense was entitled 'I Lost My Proud Poplar' (1973). In this artwork the Chinese pictograms that are the transcription of a poem written by Mao Zedong are arranged as in a Fauves painting. This artwork became the symbol of the exhibition organized in 1973 by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and the other members of the so-called 'Gang of Four' that gathered exemplary works of what they considered unacceptable in contemporary art.

19 For a detailed description of this artwork, see Zhang (1998, 15). Xu Bing's 'Landscript' series was probably inspired by this work.

20 Among them, the most important are Dai Shanqing 戴山青 (1944–2004), Wang Xuezhong 王学仲 (1925–2013), Xie Yun 谢云 (1929–2021), Deng Yuanchang 邓元昌 (b. 1939), Wang Naizhuang 王乃壮 (b. 1929), Peng Shiqiang 彭世强 (b. 1944), who took part in the First Exhibition of Modern Calligraphy, Huang Yao 黄尧 (1917–1987), Wang Yong 王镛 (b. 1948), Wang Tianmin 王天民 (b. 1944), Wen Bei 文备 (b. 1953), Wang Dongling 王冬龄 (b. 1945), Bai Di 白砥 (b. 1965), Tong Yang-tze 董阳孜 (b. 1942), Zhu Naizheng 朱乃正 (1935–2013), Xing Shizhen 邢士珍 (1936–2019), Ma Xiao 马啸 (b. 1962), Zhang Aiguo 张爱国 (b. 1967), Liu Canming 刘灿铭 (b. 1963), Yan Binghui 阎秉会 (b. 1956), Lin Xinchen 林信成 (b. 1952), Wang Gongyi 王公懿 (b. 1946), etc.

21 There are some artists, such as Pu Lieping, Wei Ligang 魏立刚 (b. 1964), Shao Yan 邵岩 (b. 1960), Luo Qi, Fung Ming-chip 冯明秋 (b. 1951), Qiu Zhenzhong 邱振中 (b. 1947), and Chen Guangwu 陈光武 (b. 1967), who greatly deform Chinese characters until they are (nearly) unrecognizable so that their works seem abstract, even if their starting point is Chinese writing (Iezzi 2013b, 54–75); and some others, such as Qin Feng 秦风 (b. 1961) and Zhang Dawo 张大我 (1943–2023), who use real 'abstract' calligraphic lines with no connection with Chinese characters as their stylistic signature (ibid., 76–84).

22 The corn broom was used by Pu Lieping in 2021 to write a poem by Liu Ji in the work titled *Wu yue shijiu ri* dayu 五月十九日大雨 ('Heavy Rain on the 19th day of the 5th lunar month'), while the augmented reality headset with related touch controllers was used by Wang Dongling in the same year to create a 3D virtual calligraphy. Other new tools are the syringe with a small ink tank using by Shao Yan, cigarettes or incense sticks using by Wang Tiande 王天德 (b. 1960), the flashlight using by Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969), etc.

23 The first calligraphic collages were made at the end of the 1980s, for example, by Wang Dongling using newspaper sheets, but it was only in 1998, with the foundation of the so-called 'School of the Academics' (*Xueyuanapai* 学院派) by Chen Zhenlian 陈振濂 (b. 1956) that a group of calligraphers focused on the creation of calligraphic collages and combined paintings; since then, every kind of support/material has been experimented (plastic, photos, human body, dresses, gunpowder, neon, etc.); as to digital support, after the first experimentations at the end of the 1980s to shape calligraphic strokes on a computer screen, the artist who best connected calligraphy to information technology, GPS technology, and even video games was Feng Mengbo 冯梦波 (b. 1966).

24 To watch the cartoon: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=7Mhz61n8To0 (last access: 09.01.2024).

25 The exhibition 'The Music of Ink – Calligraphies by Luo Qi and Silvio Ferragina in dialogue with the Chinese archive collection of the Braidense Library' was held at the Braidense National Library in Milan from 21 March to 28 April 2018.

26 For a detailed description of the video, see Iezzi (2018, 15).

27 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQ1mpKlIxhQ (last access: 12.07.2024)

28 As the artist said: 'This traditional Chinese story is known by all common people, and it speaks about a family story. It is about determination and challenge: if you really want to do something, then it could really happen. Other phrases are about human fate, like a kind of divination. Your eyes, nose, mouth, ears, cheekbone, and moles indicate your future, wealth, sex, disease, etc.' (Zhang Huan's official website: http://www.zhanghuan.com/worken/info_71.aspx?itemid=962&parent&lcid=193, last access 09.01.2024).

29 In 2001, Zhang Huan played a similar performance in Shanghai entitled 'Shanghai Family Tree'. In this performance, he posed with two other people – a man and woman – and their faces were also covered by Chinese characters. The meaning of this performance overwhelms the individuality, defining the person's association with society. In 2015, the artist played a new version of this performance entitled 'Family Tree 2015' during the live-art exhibition '15 Rooms' held in the Long Museum of Shanghai. The performance reproduced the writing process of the original 2000 'Family Tree', but, before the writing performance, Zhang Huan had interviewed 12 men and women born after 1990 to study the life and dreams of this new generation. Zhang Huan used the

answers given by the interviewees to write them on their faces until their faces slowly darkened.

30 After this experiment, Qiu Zhijie did a similar performance entitled 'Heart Sutra' (*Xin jing* 心经) in 1999, copying this ancient Buddhist text a hundred times until the page was completely obscured. The artist wonders about the veracity and reliability of a translated text like the Chinese Heart Sutra that represents a fundamental text for the spread of Chan Buddhism in China.

31 The 'Thousand Character Classic' is a Chinese poem that has been used as a primer for teaching Chinese characters to children from the sixth century onward; it contains exactly 1,000 characters, and it could be sung in a way similar to children learning the Latin alphabet singing an 'alphabet song'. It is also a phenomenon in the calligraphy realm that has been continuously composed by numerous famous calligraphy masters through the history.

32 Another similar performance titled 'Writing the Orchid Pavilion for the Second Time' (*Shuxie Lantingxu dierbian* 书写兰亭序第二遍) took place on November 27, 2022 during the Wuzhen Theater Festival. Wu Xixia wrote inside an airtight sphere placed in the water. In this performance, the four characters *Zhi hu zhe ye* 之乎者也 were written using *nü shu* 女书 (a 'secret' female writing), the character *ye* 也 is replaced with the female vagina symbol, and a long snake-shaped strip surrounded the sphere simulates the shape of an umbilical cord.

33 The reference is to the Derrida's notion of deconstruction. The four performances are also examples of two of the three categories into which artists who try to interconnect innovatively calligraphy and performance art can be divided: Zhang Huan and Qiu Zhijie are contemporary artists/performers who use calligraphy as a source of inspiration and a medium for their performative/conceptual works (other examples are by Gu Wenda, Song Dong, and Wu Wei), while Ni Li and Wu Xixia are female artists/performers who use calligraphy to 'give voice' to the feminine (other examples are by Echo Morgan and Li Xinmo). The third category is composed of contemporary calligraphers who try to transform calligraphic modes into a performative action to revitalize and modernize calligraphy (e.g., Zhang Qiang, Zhu Qingsheng, Shao Yan, Pu Lieping and Wang Dongling).

34 All these art critics proposed a different definition, Zhang Nan *fanshufa* 反书法 (1999), Qian Qinggui *feishufa* 非书法 (2000), Jiang Xu & Wang Dongling *feihanzi shufa* 非汉子书法 (2005), and Qu Lifeng *wuzishufa* 无字书法 (2008). The first to theorize this concept was Wang Nanming (Wang 1994).

35 Many other artworks by the avant-garde movement also belong to this category, in particular those by Bai Qianshen 白谦慎 (b. 1955), Gu Wenda 谷文达 (b. 1955), and Xu Bing made of unreadable characters. For more information, see Iezzi (2013a, 167–9).

36 After the first example of 'calligraphy-dance performance' held in 1983 at the Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium, starting from the idea of 'dancing ink' by the Chinese calligrapher Wang Fangyu 王方宇 (1913–1997) (Wang 1984), other examples are the dancing pieces 'Upon Calligraphy/Beyond Calligraphy' (*Linchi wu mo* 临池舞墨, 2005–ongoing) by the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, 'Cursive (Wild Grass)' (2006) by the Yin Mei Dance, 'Connect Transfer' *Lianjie zhuanhuan* 连接转换 (2004) by the Shen Wei Dance Arts, and 'Random Thoughts on Oracle-bone Inscriptions' (*Jiagu suixiang* 甲骨随想) (2001) by the dancer Huang Doudou 黄豆豆 (b. 1977).

37 For a detailed analysis of 'Cursive I' and 'Cursive II' see Ho I L. (2009).
38 The analysis is based on the vision of the three DVDs recording the three ballets: *Xingcao* 行草 *(Cursive). Part one of Cursive: A Trilogy* (2013), *Song yan · Xingcao er* 松煙 · 行草貳 (*Pine Smoke · Cursive II*) (2013), *Kuangcao* 狂草 (Wild Cursive) (2013).
39 In the second chapter of the ballet, for example, the dancer moves her body in front of a projection of the Chinese character *yong* 永 (eternal), a character that contains all the basic variations of brush strokes and gestural vocabularies commonly used in regular script, cursive script, and 'wild cursive script' (*kuangcao*) in Chinese calligraphy. The character is written stroke by stroke, and the order of the movement of the brush serves as a sequential score of the dancer's movement so that the dancer repeatedly writes/dances the *yong* character with her whole body.
40 This is a *chengyu* 成语 (a four-character idiom) that is a common expression to indicate a particularly vigorous, graceful and powerful calligraphic style. This expression also underlines the strict connection between calligraphy and dance at linguistic level.
41 Chinese calligraphy is 'a musical art' (Billeter 1990, 89). Similarities between calligraphy and music go also beyond the concept of harmony (*ibid.*, 89-107): tone color is like writing nature, acoustic quality is like quality of line, intonation is like accurate writing skill, volume is like writing intensity, tone range is like the comparison of writing changes, tempo is like pause and transition when writing, and rhythm in music is like the partial or entire arrangement of calligraphic works, also called 'rhythm' in Chinese.
42 To listen to the song, visit Chou Wen-chung official website: https://chouwen-chung.org/de/composition/cursive/(12.11.2022).
43 *Ibid.* In his late compositions (from 1990 to 2003), it is possible to recognize a correlation between his calligraphies and the musical gestures (Everett 2007).
44 To see the images of the calligraphies, visit the official website of the M+: https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/exhibitions/m-commission-tong-yang-tze/ (last access 10.01.2024).
45 The use of excerpts of Chinese classical texts as content of the calligraphies is a *leit motiv* in the Tong yang-tze's artistic production.
46 Official website of the US-China Music Institute of the Bard College Conservatory of Music, *Ink Art and New Music Project*: https://www.barduschinamusic.org/news/2022/ink-art-and-new-music-project (last access 10.01.2024).
47 This experiment is part of the 'Ink Art and New Music' project that is a creative exchange project among the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and M+, in collaboration with the Bard College Conservatory of Music (New York), that aims to explore the aesthetic commonality and discover the innovative potential of ink art and new music. During the second phase of the project, composers worked on new compositions inspired by individually chosen works from the M+ collection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ink art.
48 To see the edited video of the performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tXrIdYPCqM (last access 11.01.2024).
49 The 'Dunhuang music score' is a tablature-notation for *pipa* (Chinese lute) discovered in the Mogao Buddhist caves in Dunhuang (Gansu province) by the French sinologist Paul Pelliot in 1908. It probably dates back to the tenth century, and it is composed of 20 tablature symbols which are simple characters, radicals or phonetic symbols.

50 Luo Qi used the 'Dunhuang music score' to translate Italian famous opera and arias in a series entitled 'Writing Music – Silent Melodies' (*Xieyue – Wusheng zhi ge* 写乐·无声之歌, 2018–2023).
51 The translation of the 18 characters is by Qian Na and Ying Yuan Qian and Ying (2020, 77).
52 For a detailed description of the 'Musicalligraphy project', see Ferragina (2022, 70–89).
53 These logos can be divided into 4 categories: (1) logos related to international event held in China (i.e., for the Paralympic Games 2008, the Olympic Games 2008, and the Shanghai Expo 2010 inspired by the character *shi* 世 ['world']); (2) institutional logos (i.e., the logo of the China Railway made of the two characters *ren* 人 ['people'] and *gong* 工 ['work'], and the logo of the Hangzhou city in which the character *Hang* 杭 was transformed into traditional architectural elements); (3) commercial logos (i.e. the logo of the cosmetic brand 'Drawshine' [*Zhuangxie* 妆写] made of the pictographic form of the character *zhuang* 妆 ['woman's adornments'], and the logo of the 'Crafts on Peel' artisans' organization made of the character *shou* 手 ['hand'] that, being mirrored, designed the character *wo* 我 ['io']); (4) logos of artistic projects (i.e., the CAFA ART INFO that uses a font invented by Xu Bing and the WRITE project with the character *xie* 写 ['to write'] written by Luo Qi).
54 A brief description of the logo is available at the link: https://web.archive.org/web/20080720184339/http://en.paralympic.beijing2008.cn/graphic/n214342413.shtml (last access 11.01.2024).
55 To see the logo, visit the official website of the Olympics Games: https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/beijing-2008/logo-design (last access 11.01.2024).
56 There are many Chinese logos that reproduce the typical Chinese seal with the character(s) of the brand/institution/event precisely because the seal represents the artist's sign, so it is the way in which the artist is identified; the logo in fact is nothing more than the way in which a brand/institution/event should be easily identified.
57 In fashion design, calligraphy plays an important role as: (1) as a source of inspiration for both Chinese and foreign stylists (i.e. Christian Dior 1951, Coco Chanel 1956, Vivienne Tam 2013, Chloe Sung 2016, and Grace Chen 2021–2022), (2) because of several collaborations between 'modern calligraphers' and famous fashion houses/stylists (i.e. King of Koowloon and William Tang Tat Chi in 1997, Luo Qi and EFEN in 2008–2009, Xu Bing and Calvin Klein 2011), and (3) in the use of dresses as a new support for innovative calligraphies (i.e., in some works by Zhang Qiang, Wang Tiande, Shi Yu and Wang Xinyuan).
58 Tong Yang-tze official website: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
59 In 2016, Tong Yang-tze held the exhibition entitled 'Silent Music' inspired by the relationship between calligraphy and music in Belgium, associated with a music competition (the 2016 Queen Elisabeth Music Competition) and in Tapei, where she curated a crossover performance that involved jazz musicians and contemporary dancers. Using the artworks of this exhibition as source of inspiration for fashion designers, the cross-media experiment of 'From Ink to Apparel' involved three art forms: calligraphy, fashion design, and music, respectively a form of visual art, applied art, and performing art.

60 This last statement is reiterated by the artist in the video: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
61 See note 67 (2).
62 The number of visitors of the first two exhibitions exceeded 100,000: https://en.tongyangtze.com/crossitem?id=6 (last access 15.01.2024).
63 For example, in critical theory the thesis on 'the culture industry' by Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 (1944).
64 Guo Yaojie did a similar affirmation about calligraphy applied to graphic design Guo (2015, 287).
65 For more details and the significance of these scrawled advertisements, see: Parke (2018, 261–84). She defined this phenomenon as a 'public calligraphy performance'.
66 For a detail analysis of the diffusion of graffiti art in China and in particular in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, see: Bisceglia, Merenda, and Iezzi (2024).
67 The most important crews/writes are that seeking for a 'Chinese graffiti style', which means in particular the use of Chinese language in their works, are: the Kwanyin Clan, the Beijing Penzi, the Yellow Peril, MES, EXAS, Camel, ZEIT, and MAGE in Beijing; Iron in Xi'an; the OOPS crew in Shanghai; Touchy in Shenzhen; Xeme and Sinic in Hong Kong; Chen13 and Dohak652 in Guangzhou; the Kong2 crew in Changsha; Moon in Quanzhou; Mora in Canton; Gas and Reset in Chengdu; and Creepymouse and Blackzao in Taiwan.
68 For more information about the Kwanyin Clan, see Iezzi (2019b).
69 To see some examples of this kind of works: *ibid.*, 427 (432), 433.
70 For more information about the ABS crew, see Bisceglia et al. (2024, 93–111).
71 The content of the inscription is: 'Some people come from afar: Beijing, Tongchuan, Chengdu, Yinzhou, Wuhan, Chongqing. Greeting from China' *(You ming zi yuan lai: Beijing, Tongchuan, Chengdu, Yinzhou, Wuhan, Chongqing Laizi Zhongguo de wenhou* 有明自远方来 北京, 铜川, 成都, 银州, 武汉, 重庆来自中国的问候).
72 These are the last two lines of the calligraphic inscription.
73 There are actually two other brief inscriptions along the very long piece: one is the title of the work "Joy in bottle", and the other is the indication of the year of the execution of the artwork in Chinese (erlingyiba 二零一八,which means 2018) with the name of the festival in Latin letters "Berlin Mural Fest". All four inscriptions are dotted by red seals with the writers' tags so that they look like real traditional calligraphic inscriptions.
74 For a detailed analysis of these inscriptions, see Iezzi (2019b).
75 For more information about Li Qiuqiu, see Bisceglia et al. (2024, 56–69).
76 Artist's interview with the author, 13.02.2021.
77 The expression 'art from calligraphy' (*yuanzi shufa de yishu* 源自书法的艺术) was firstly used by the Chinese calligrapher and scholar Qiu Zhenzhong (Qiu 2004, 277) as an alternative to the definition 'Chinese modern calligraphy' (*Zhongguo xiandai shufa* 中国现代书法) to classify some of the new expressions of Chinese contemporary calligraphy. Qiu Zhenzhong divided the artworks into three categories that can be summarized as no-characters, abstract, and conceptual works (ibid., 278–79); created a sub-category called 'art from writing' (*yuanzi shuxie de yishu* 源自书写的艺术); and distinguished 'the art from calligraphy' from 'the art from Chinese characters' (*yuanzi Hanzi de yishu* 源自文字的艺术) (ibid., 283). The use of this expression in this chapter does not follow Qiu Zhenzhong's classification.

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MOLE, WRINKLES, GRIMACES AND SMILES
On the Semiotics of Facial Scripts
MASSIMO LEONE
FACE IS
A WEB OF LINES
TE PEHI KUPE
THE MAORI CONSIDER THE FACE A CANVAS
THE DISTINCTIVE MARK OF THE INDIVIDUAL
MELVILLE MOBY DICK
TATTOOS AS SIGN OF EVIL
INSCRIPTIONS
A DEADLY CHOICE
QUEEQUEG
CANNIBAL
FACE IS A LIFE DIARY
EVERY LINE ON HIS BODY IS REGISTERED IN HIS MEMORY
SIGNS ARE INSEPARABLE FROM THEIR FACE
SKIN IS ONLY THE OUTSIDE
INSIDE YOU COULD BE HONEST
CAPT. NORMAN COOK "REDISCOVERED" MAORI'S TATTOOS IN THE XVIII CENTURY
AMOCO
THE NAME FOR MAORI'S TATTOO MOKO
USE OF SPIRALS
SEE GOMBRICH ABOUT DECORATION
FALSE GODS? BUT CHRISTIANS SOMETIMES MARKS THEIR BODIES...
PAPATEA
PLAIN FACE IS A TERM OF REPROACH
NANAIA MAHUTA
A TATTOED FACE IN NEW ZEALAND PARLIAMENT

8 Facial Scripts[1]

The Semiotic Journey of Māori Tattoos from Colonial Gaze to Cultural Revival

Massimo Leone

> They call stigmata things inscribed on the face or some other part of the body […].
>
> (Aetius Amidenus, *Tetrabiblon* 8, 12)

Facial Misperceptions

'I was all eagerness to see his face, but he kept it averted for some time while employed in unlacing the bag's mouth' (Melville 1851; ch. 3: 'The Spouter-Inn')[2]: In a renowned passage excerpted from Hermann Melville's timeless novel, *Moby-Dick*, the impending unveiling of the features belonging to the 'barbaric' harpooner, Queequeg, serves as the locus of tension within the narrative. The focal point resides in the apprehensive anticipation experienced by Ishmael, the concerned protagonist, who finds himself eager to witness the countenance of his unfamiliar roommate at the Spouter-Inn. A nuanced semantic interplay, however, engenders an intensification of suspense. While Ishmael patiently awaits the revelation of Queequeg's still-concealed face, the harpooner, in a peculiar twist, directs his attention toward the act of unlatching the mouth of his own purse. Strikingly, in the very instant that Queequeg exposes the contents of his bag, the enigma surrounding his visage is simultaneously unraveled before the astonished gaze of Ishmael: 'This accomplished, however, he turned round – when, good heavens! What a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares' (*ibidem*).

The exclamation that escapes Ishmael's lips encapsulates his profound dismay upon confronting the countenance he ardently sought to decipher. Ishmael's eagerness to 'read' the face stems from his desire to discern the individual with whom he would be sharing lodgings and spending the night. Implicit in this endeavor is the expectation of encountering a

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spontaneous and genuine manifestation of character and intentions. Nevertheless, the moment the visage is unveiled, it immediately captivates the viewer with features that semiotics would categorize as 'plastic' in nature. First and foremost, the face exhibits a color distinct from that attributed to the 'white race'. Additionally, conspicuous dark squares occupy prominent positions on the countenance. Both these features evoke a foreboding sense, serving as ominous portents of future events: 'Yes, it's just as I thought, he's a terrible bedfellow; he's been in a fight, got dreadfully cut, and here he is, just from the surgeon' (*ibidem*).

In this instance, Melville — whether consciously or unconsciously — astutely extracts an inference from a longstanding visual imaginary which encompasses a semiotic framework pervading human cultures throughout history. The foundation of this framework revolves around what semioticians classify as a 'semi-symbolic system' (Leone 2004). The system comprises two contrasting elements: The unblemished, smooth skin, particularly that which adorns the face; and the marked, branded skin, characterized by incisions and cuts. The dichotomy between smoothness and striations often assumes a moral connotation, with an unscathed facial skin connoting goodness, while the presence of incisions signifies evil and violence. In this context, Ishmael instinctively interprets the prominent black squares on Queequeg's face as indicators of a dreadful roommate, hinting at his involvement in altercations and the reception of stab wounds, possibly in the recent past. Furthermore, the visage bears a striking resemblance to that of a person emerging from an operating room, prompting Ishmael to speculate on the timeline of these events. Yet this initial interpretation, influenced by the facial stereotypes ingrained in the broader culture, is soon superseded by a more meticulous scrutiny, as we shall explore in greater detail: 'But at that moment he chanced to turn his face so towards the light, that I plainly saw they could not be sticking-pasters at all, those black squares on his cheeks. They were stains of some sort or other' (*ibidem*).

Melville craftly portrays the gradual process by which Ishmael's gaze meticulously examines and unravels the enigmatic countenance of Queequeg. Initially, the conspicuous black squares are not immediately identified as scars; instead, they are considered to be potentially spontaneous stains. As the illumination intensifies and the object of Ishmael's gaze absorbs the augmented light, however, a subsequent interpretation unfolds. These markings are recognized not as inadvertent stains, but rather as deliberate and purposeful imprints. Intriguingly, they do not bear the characteristics of knife or scalpel incisions but rather resemble inked marks, suggesting a connection to a deliberate act of inscription: 'At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me' (*ibidem*).

Melville's deft choice of the term 'inkling' holds profound significance within its usage. This word conveys not only an idea or a tentative

hypothesis, akin to what Peirce would describe as an abduction; it also encompasses the concept and etymology of dye. Thus, what initially appeared as scars or stains is revealed to be the remnants of written expression. Consequently, the recognition of the written traces swiftly triggers a recollection within Ishmael's memory, invoking a process of reading and interpretation.

> I remembered a story of a white man – a whaleman too – who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin.
>
> (*ibidem*)

The human skin merely constitutes the outermost layer of an individual, while the true essence of a person's honesty transcends superficial appearances. Melville's enduring message continues to reverberate throughout the ages, anchored in the reality that the story in question had indeed been told, albeit in a reformulated literary form. Notably, in 2011, the comparative scholar Geoffrey D. Sanborn, formerly affiliated with Bard College and presently associated with Amherst, published the seminal work titled *Whipscars and Tattoos: The Last of the Mohicans, Moby-Dick, and the Maori*. Within this volume, Sanborn convincingly asserts the hypothesis that Melville's characterization of Queequeg draws inspiration from the biography of Te Pēhi Kupe, a historical figure featured in George Lillie Craik's[3] *The New Zealanders* (1830). Craik, a Scottish author who received his education at the University of St. Andrews and later, from 1849, served as a professor of English Literature and History at the University of Belfast, extensively contributed to the London-based Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. In 1830, although he had never set foot in New Zealand, Craik published *The New Zealanders*, a comprehensive account of the journey to Britain undertaken by Te Pēhi Kupe, a prominent Māori tribal leader, (Cope 1956; Ellis 2015; Haywood 2006; Sanborn 2005).

Te Pēhi Kupe[4] emerges as a prominent figure in Māori history, embodying the esteemed positions of both *rangatira* (chief) and military leader within the Ngāti Toa tribe (Klein and Mackenthun 2004; White 2011). His significant involvement in the Musket Wars, a sequence of intergroup conflicts spanning from 1807 to 1837 in what is now known as New Zealand, positions him as a central figure during this tumultuous era. A notable episode in Te Pēhi Kupe's life occurred in 1824, when he fearlessly secured passage on a ship bound for England. During his time there, he had the distinct privilege of being introduced to George IV, acquiring equestrian skills, designing his own *moko* (a traditional Māori facial tattoo), and having his portrait captured in paint, thus immortalizing his

visage for posterity. Here is what George Lillie Craik wrote about it in *The New Zealanders*, which was later Melville's inspiration:

> Some very curious information was accidentally obtained from Tupai on the subject of the amoco. The sketch of his head from which the accompanying engraving is copied, was taken while he was at Liverpool, by his acquaintance Mr. John Sylvester; and Tupai took the greatest interest in the progress of the performance. But he was above all solicitous that the marks upon his face should be accurately copied in the drawing.
>
> Craik (1830, 330)

The meticulous sketch referenced by Craik resulted into an exotic watercolor representation, currently housed within the collection of the National Library of Australia.[5] Executed around 1826 by the skilled artist John Henry Sylvester, this artwork masterfully captures the facial expression and upper body of Te Pēhi Kupe, lavishly adorned in the fashionable garments of the era. The depiction unveils Te Pēhi Kupe draped in elegant British attire that was characteristic of the time. Noteworthy attention to detail within the watercolor composition highlights Te Pēhi Kupe's selection of a distinguished black girdle, reminiscent of the middle-class gentlemen's fashion choices aimed at projecting an elevated social status through sartorial expression. Such endeavors often resulted in the emergence of the dandy archetype. Te Pēhi Kupe's ensemble further comprises a cotton shirt with a tall and erect collar, exuding an aura of sophistication. This is accompanied by a broad cravat, tastefully tied in a gentle bow, lending an additional touch of elegance to his ensemble. The coat he dons showcases padded sections at the chest and waist, while its high collar cascades in a shawl-like fashion, beautifully framing his face. Curly hair was highly fashionable during this period, and Te Pēhi Kupe's perfectly arranged chevelure reflects the use of grooming products such as pomade for smoothness and hold, as well as curling tongs, papers, and cloths to achieve the desired curls. The conventional and fashionable nature of the attire starkly contrasts with the exoticism of Te Pēhi Kupe's countenance. The composition harmoniously combines a traditionally posed figure with distinct New Zealander physical features, most notably exemplified by the exact rendering of his facial *moko*, or ethnic facial tattoo.

According to Craik, who describes the portrait séance in his book, Te Pēhi Kupe himself presided over the correctness of the painterly reproduction of his countenance: '[…] the figure, he explained, not being by any means a mere work of fancy, [but] formed according to certain rules of art, which determined the direction of every line. It constituted, in fact, the distinctive mark of the individual' (*ibidem*: 331). During that

period, it was widely recognized among the Māori that the facial *moko* held a significance beyond mere decoration; it served as a means of etching individuality onto one's visage (Howarth 2019; Te Awekotuku et al. 2007; Thomas, Cole, and Douglas 2005). From a contemporary semiotic standpoint, one could argue that, while British portraiture represented the face as a proclamation of uniqueness, the Māori perspective considered the face as a physical canvas for an enduring inscription of that very singularity. Whereas the British elevated prominent figures by immortalizing their faces on canvas, the Māori transformed notable countenances into intricate self-portraits, using their faces as living diagrams. Moreover, Craik's account of the meticulousness of Te Pēhi Kupe – whom the author calls 'Tupai' – in front of his own portrait is even more pronounced, focusing on one area of the image in particular: 'and one part, indeed, of that on his own, face, the mark just over the upper part of his nose, Tupai constantly called his name; saying, "Europee man write with pen his name, Tupai's name is here", pointing to his forehead' (*ibidem*).

Within the intricate diagram of the *moko*, the ethnic facial tattoo, resides an inscription that surpasses mere group membership or individuality, extending into a realm of indexicality that transcends comparisons to the iconicity of portraiture. In particular, the elaborate pattern of tattooed lines positioned on the forehead, just above the nose, assumes the role of a signature. Te Pēhi Kupe contends that this marking affirms not only the individual's uniqueness but also their spatial and temporal presence. It serves as a sign, asserting the social and physical existence of the individual before their interlocutors and community. It is conceivable that Te Pēhi Kupe remained unaware of the fact that the Greek term for face, '*prosopon*', along with numerous Indo-European linguistic expressions denoting the same facial region, precisely designate it as something exposed to the gaze of others, a '*visus*', as the Latins would have described it (Leone 2022). Moreover, this area between the forehead and nose assumes delicate and central significance within many cultures, contributing to the construction of singularity and establishing a connection with what would later be referred to in Europe as the 'self'.

In Craik's narrative, Te Pēhi Kupe's interaction with Sylvester's portrait extends beyond a mere inspection. Rather, Te Pēhi Kupe assumes an active role by offering himself as a model, painstakingly reproducing on paper the intricate web of lines that adorn the faces of his immediate kin. Through this act, he emphasizes the scriptural divergences that set these representations apart from the likeness captured in his own visage:

> Still further to illustrate his meaning, he would delineate on paper, with a pen or pencil, the corresponding marks in the amocos of his brother and his son, and point out the difference between these and

> his own. But it was not only the portion of the decoration which he called his name with which Tupai was familiar; every line, both on his face and on the other parts of his body, was permanently registered in his memory.
>
> (*Ibidem*: 331–2)

Te Pēhi Kupe demonstrates a remarkable capacity to recall every intricate detail of the tattoos that symbolize and simultaneously announce the presence of his beloved family members to the world. By committing these embodied facial diagrams to memory, he engages in an act akin to communing with his loved ones in absentia. While the renowned fable recounted by Pliny (*Naturalis Historia*, XXXV) traces the origin of portraiture in Greek culture as an iconic and visual response to the fear of death and the loss of the cherished countenance, the *moko*, or '*amoko*', functions as a mnemonic device in its own right. Yet, in the case of the *moko*, the semiotic gap between the signifier and the signified, the medium and the inscription, the expressive matter and the substantive content, in the terms of L.T. Hjelmslev, is considerably reduced. Whereas a portrait represents a beloved face, the *moko* re-presents or even presents it, as it becomes an inseparable part of the flesh that bears it. It is important to note that Te Pēhi Kupe reproduces the design of his own facial tattoo for the sake of European comprehension, as those within the Māori community and culture view the *moko* as indistinguishable from the very face it adorns. Indeed, Craik aptly adds: "We have already given a cut of the amoco of another New Zealand chief, as drawn by himself; and here is a delineation which Tupai made, without the aid of a glass, of the stains on his own face" (*ibidem*: 332).

It is at this juncture, within the pages of Craik's *The New Zealanders*, that an illustration emerges, likely observed by Melville and igniting his vibrant imagination, serving as a wellspring for the creation of Queequeg's character and visage (Figure 8.1).

The symmetrical arrangement of lines that encase the Māori's countenance may have been perceived by contemporary observers as mere adornments. These patterns, delineated in black on white and ink on face, appear to embody that 'sense of order' ascribed by Gombrich (1979) to the ultimate significance and evolutionary function of decoration in Western figurative culture. Decoration, according to Gombrich, serves as a visual medium to capture any deviance from the norm. In the case of facial *moko*, this anthropological function finds expression in capturing both individuality and the interplay of familial and communal bonds within a graphic configuration.

The distinction between European decoration and Māori *moko* becomes apparent when viewed through the lens of British observers, who often failed to recognize its significance. Reproducing the facial tattoo on paper, as Te Pēhi Kupe did, would mislead his British contemporaries, as

Figure 8.1 Self-portrait of Te Pēhi Kupe as reproduced by George Lillie Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830, 332); image in the public domain.

it divorced the *moko* from its embodiment, negating its distinction from portraiture and decoration. The *moko* occupies a unique position, existing neither as pure decoration nor strictly as a portrait. Instead, it serves as a form of decoration that simultaneously portrays and expresses the singularity of one's self. Operating as a plastic layer, it articulates identity, akin to the figurative layer within European visual culture.

While the British would inscribe visual singularity through the figurative realm, employing iconicity, the Māori would capture it within the plastic realm, utilizing a reference that, although symbolic, derives its semiotic power not from similarity but from contiguity. Indeed, the inseparability of face and facial writing underpins the semiotic force of the *moko*. The written elements are undoubtedly arbitrary, as Saussure would contend, given that there appears to be no discernible reason why a particular arrangement of curves on the forehead designates a family group or an individual. Nevertheless, it is precisely due to this arbitrariness that the conventional meaning of this reference is motivated through the techniques of writing and its incorporation into the tattoo.

Moreover, it is precisely because of the seemingly conventional nature of this diagrammatic portrayal that Te Pēhi Kupe astonished his British hosts by flawlessly reproducing his self-portrait without the aid of a mirror – the quintessential tool of European self-portraiture. This mastery of recall would allow him to render the lines of his *moko* on paper. Notably, Kraig employs the term 'stains' to describe this process, a term that resurfaced later, as we have previously discussed, in Melville's narrative.

Facial Misreadings

As scholars of European encounters with the indigenous peoples of what is now known as New Zealand have documented, facial tattooing immediately sparked the curiosity of early explorers. It is worth noting, however, that when the Dutch navigator Abel Janszoon Tasman[6] made the first recorded landing near the island on 13 December 1642 aboard the war yacht *Heemskerck*, his ship's artist and draughtsman, Isaack Gilsemans,[7] depicted the Māori in his drawing without any indication of tattoos, despite their hostile encounter with the vessel. This initial representation can be found in the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, now part of the New Zealand National Library.[8] Similarly, Tasman himself, in his logbook housed in the Dutch National Archives, makes no mention of tattoos.

It was not until over a century later, in 1769, that the subject of Māori facial tattoos caught the attention of the second European explorer to revisit the island, Captain Cook.[9] Upon the return of Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, to England in 1771, the phenomenon of Māori facial tattoos began to be enthusiastically discussed throughout Europe (Thomas *et al.* 2016). Various speculations have emerged regarding the reasons behind the emergence of facial tattooing among the Māori between 1642 and 1769, with the prevailing hypothesis suggesting a prolonged period of inter-group conflict within the island as a possible catalyst. In Captain Cook's logbook, the original of which is in the National Museum of Australia,[10] Māori facial tattoos are mentioned several times, beginning on October 8, 1769: 'The bodies and faces are marked with black stains they call amoco – broad spirals on each buttock – the thighs of many were almost entirely black, the faces of the old men are almost covered. By adding to the tattooing they grow old and honourable at the same time'.

Thus, the impression that the tattoos are 'stains' returns, probably also because they were observed from a distance, but perhaps and especially because a centuries-old prejudice weighed on their observation, as we shall see. The perception of spiral writing also returns, as well as some notes on where these tattoos are concentrated, the buttocks, the thighs, the faces in the case of the elderly, as well as observations that must have been derived from contact with the natives, for example, the knowledge that

this writing appeared as a sign both of advanced age and of honorability. But in another passage in the same journal, Cook's pen does justice to the elegance and meticulousness of facial tattoos, wittily comparing them to known decorative forms of Western art:

> The marks in general are spirals drawn with great nicety and even elegance. One side corresponds with the other. The marks in the body resemble the foliage in old chased ornaments, convolutions of filigree work, but in these they have such a luxury of forms that of a hundred which at first appeared exactly the same no two were formed alike on close examination.
>
> (*Ibidem*)

Striking in this note is the reference to the European ornaments in vogue at that epoque, and in particular to foliage in chiseled decorations and filigree convolutions; remarkable is also the emphasis placed not only on the symmetry of these facial patterns, but also on the fact that, in spite of first impressions, they are in fact all different from one another. Cook's journal also contains some drawings – the first ever produced by a European hand – of such tattoos. They attempt to render the impression of the Māori *moko*, depicting it as a kind of ink beard on a native face, whose features, however, are strongly Europeanized. Great is the difference between this depiction of Cook and the self-portrait of his own facial tattoo that Māori Pēhi Kupe will leave instead in London. It is perhaps interesting to note that this is an attempt to translate, by European means, the facial writing of the Māori, inevitably misrepresenting it but nevertheless managing to give a visual impression of it, just as on the written page a verbal ecphrasis is sought. As Eco will abundantly explain in *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), Europeans see what they know, and they draw what they see, sprinkling the faces of the Māori faces in their drawings with watermark spots. The draughtsman who accompanied Cook, Sydney Parkinson,[11] evidently had a more honed and technically alert eye, so that, in commenting one of the earliest visual representations of *moko* by European artists, he reports that 'as to the tattowing, it is done very curiously in spiral and other figures; and in many places indented into their skins which looks like carving, though at a distance it appears as if it had been only smeared with a black paint' (*ibidem*).

The notion of the spiral resurfaces, accompanied by the realization that these facial markings, are not mere drawings but rather engraved symbols, thus inviting a comparison with the art of engraving as a medium of visual representation also familiar in European contexts. In fact, according to Kraig's account, when Te Pēhi Kupe drew a parallel between his facial tattooing and writing, this comparison likely emerged from the intersection of Māori culture and European practices of identification through written

Figure 8.2 An autograph in the form of a reproduction of a facial tattoo, created by the Māori chief Themoranga using a pen aboard the ship *Active* on 9 March 1815; included in Robley (1896); image in the public domain.

means. An example of it is an autograph in the form of a reproduction of a facial tattoo, created by the Māori chief Themoranga using a pen aboard a ship named *Active* on March 9, 1815 (Figure 8.2).

Serving as even more compelling evidence of the encounter and syncretism of scriptural traditions are the contracts signed by Māori chiefs and Western settlers during those years (Figure 8.3).

Remarkably, these agreements were authenticated by the reproduction of the chief's facial tattoo on paper, serving as a signature or rather a stamp or seal. Edward Gibbon Wakefield,[12] one of the theorists of colonization and the protagonist of the systematic conquest of New Zealand territory by the British colonizers, mentioned and criticized by Marx in the first volume, chapter 33 of *Das Kapital*, recalls in his book *A View of the Art of Colonization*, published in 1849, that in the purchase of a territory near the Bay of Islands by missionary Samuel Marsden, contracts were signed not with a signature but with reproductions of the sellers' *moko*.

In the volume *Te Ika a Maui, or New Zealand and its Inhabitants*, published in 1855 by Richard Taylor, reverend of the Church Missionary

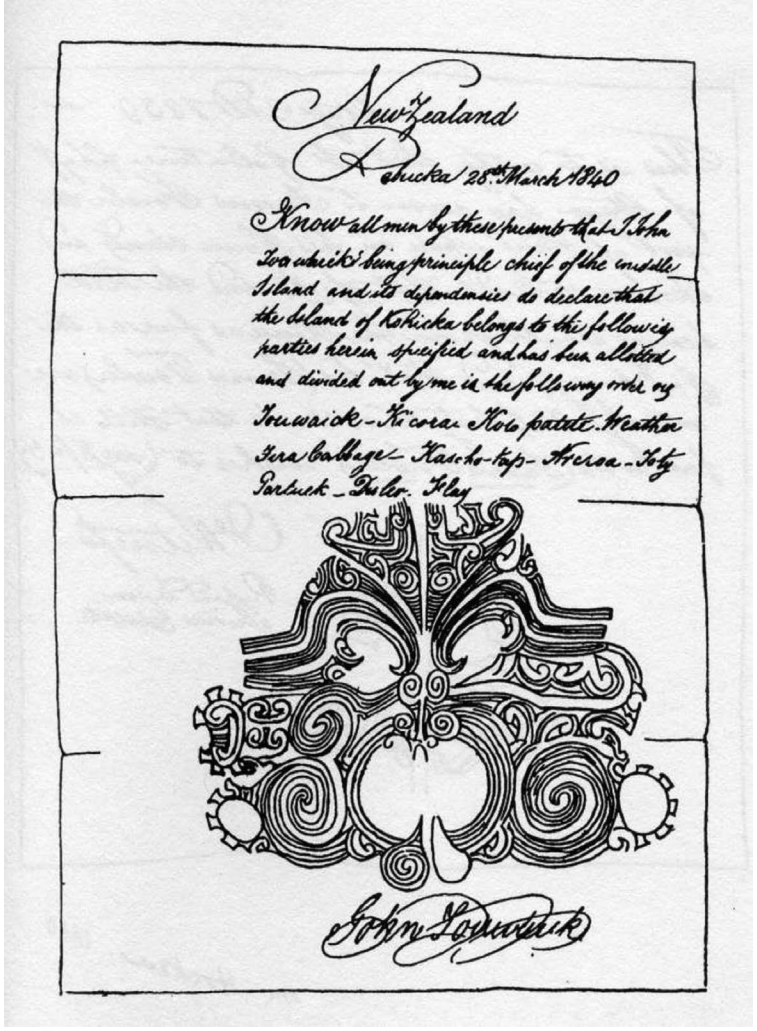

Figure 8.3 Example of contract signed by Māori chiefs and Western settlers; included in Robley (1896); image in the public domain.

Society (CMS) and a missionary to New Zealand, further use of facial tattooing is reported:

> The Māori used a kind of hieroglyphic or symbolical way of communication. Thus a chief inviting another to join in a war party sent a tattooed potato and a fig of tobacco bound up together; which was interpreted to mean by the tattoo that the enemy was a Māori,

> and not European, and by the tobacco that it represented smoke; the other chief, on receiving the missive, roasted the one (the potato) and ate it, and smoked the other (the tobacco) to show he accepted the invitation and would join him with his guns and powder.
>
> Taylor (1855, ch. I)

In the same book, after sketching a general anthropology of adornment, the Reverend emphasizes the negatively marked character of the tattoo-free face in Māori society: "But the grand ornament of all was the *moko* or tattoo; this was of general use. All ranks were thus ornamented; a *papatea*, or plain face, was a term of reproach" (*ibidem*).

Facial Stigmatizations

What a difference, then, with the connotation of tattoos in the coeval European cultures! Here tattoos were already known, to the inclusion of those on the face, but not in the same guise as in New Zealand. The first European author to mention tattoos is probably Herodotus himself in Book IV of the *Histories* (4.71.2), when he tells of the customs of the Scythians (Caplan 2000; Hambly 1925):

> Then those who receive the dead man on his arrival do the same as do the Royal Scythians: that is, they cut off a part of their ears, shave their heads, make cuts around their arms, tear their foreheads and noses, and pierce their left hands with arrows.

In this as in other passages by classical authors, both Greek and Latin, the incision of the skin, and in particular of the face, is usually associated with practices of self-mutilation – as we would say today – at funerary events as a spontaneous or ritual expression of participation in mourning. In order to fully understand the terror of Ishmael – whose name refers to the biblical and Jewish cultural context – in the face of the tattooed countenance of the Māori Queequeg, one must in fact go back to a cultural crossroads, both anthropological and semiotic, in the history of Mediterranean cultures, one in which the Jewish tradition, surrounded by peoples who would mark their bodies with cuts, tattoos, and other signs, differentiated itself from them, declaring them illegitimate and in fact connoting them as a symbolic attack on that notion of writing which, instead, founds the deepest sense of Jewish religiosity.

As is well known, the most peremptory condemnation of tattoos goes back to Leviticus 19:28, in that third book of the Pentateuch that the Jews calls 'וַיִּקְרָא", "Vayyīqrāʾ", 'And He called'. In the King James Bible, the passage is translated as follows: 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh

for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD'; yet more recent translations, and thus subsequent to the introduction of the term 'tattoo' in the English language, explicitly mention it, such as the New King James Bible, published in 1982, which renders the passage as follows: 'You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD'.

The term 'tattoo', or 'tattow', as it was referred to in the 18th century, derives from the Samoan word 'tatau', which conveys the meaning of 'to strike'. This linguistic borrowing originated from the Proto-Oceanic *sau_3, which specifically denoted a wing bone sourced from a flying fox and employed as an instrument during the tattooing process. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of the word "tattoo" can be traced back to Polynesian languages such as Samoan, Tahitian, and Tongan, with a corresponding term found in Marquesan as 'tatu'. Prior to the incorporation of the Polynesian word into the English language, the act of tattooing had been described in Western discourse using terms like 'painting', 'scarring', or 'staining'. The introduction of the Samoan word 'tatau' facilitated a more precise and culturally resonant designation for this practice, transcending the previous inadequate descriptors.

The Greeks would not have a specific word for tattooing. In the *Septuaginta*, the passage of the Leviticus is translated as follows: 'καὶ ἐντομίδας ἐπὶ ψυχῇ οὐ ποιήσετε ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν καὶ γράμματα στικτὰ οὐ ποιήσετε ἐν ὑμῖν ἐγώ εἰμι κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν'. Neither did the Romans. The Vulgate then translates into Latin 'γράμματα στικτὰ' as 'stigmata': '*et super mortuo non incidetis carnem vestram neque figuras aliquas et stigmata facietis vobis ego Dominus*'. The Hebrew original, 'קַעֲקַע, qa'ăqa', kah-ak-ah', appears only once in the biblical text, in this very verse, but it would be etymologically related to the term '*Qôwa', ko'-ah*', also designating the cut, but in the sense of geographic separation, referring to Koa, a region of Babylon.

Indeed, in the Leviticus verse, the reference to cuts on the body, tattoo marks, and separation converge to intimate to the Jews that if they intend to respect their God, they should not draw marks on their bodies, not even and indeed especially on the occasion of a mourning or funeral ritual. Commentaries on the verse are innumerable; referring to them all here would be impossible. One aspect of them must be emphasized, though. Those that precede Cook's return to Europe do not mention the practice of tattooing but rather the ancient custom of marking one's skin at mourning, common among many people of antiquity. Thus, the nonconformist British minister Matthew Henry,[13] of Calvinist theological observance, in his *Concise Commentary* (1706), writes:[14]

> There are some ceremonial precepts in this chapter, but most of these precepts are binding on us, for they are explanations of the ten

> commandments. It is required that Israel be a holy people, because the God of Israel is a holy God, ver. 2. To teach real separation from the world and the flesh, and entire devotedness to God.

In the *Complete Commentary* (1706), the same author specifies: 'Those whom the God of Israel had set apart for himself must not receive the image and superscription of these dunghill deities'. On the contrary, Charles John Ellicott,[15] a British Anglican pastor of Arminianist theological observance, in his *Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, published in 1897, shows that he was already aware of the practices of tattooing, certainly widespread throughout Europe from ancient times, but brought back into vogue precisely by the encounter of the English colonists with the indigenous peoples of New Zealand. Ellicott's commentary on the above verse reads:

> This, according to the ancient authorities, was effected by making punctures in the skin to impress certain figures or words, and then filling the cut places with stibium, ink, or some other colour. The practice of tattooing prevailed among all nations of antiquity, both among savages and civilised nations. The slave had impressed upon his body the initials of his master, the soldier those of his general, and the worshipper the image of his tutelar deity. To obviate this disfiguration of the body which bore the impress of God's image, and yet to exhibit the emblem of his creed, the Mosaic Law enacted that the Hebrew should have phylacteries which he is to bind as "a sign" upon his hand, and as "a memorial" between his eyes "that the Lord's law may be in his mouth."
>
> (Ellicott 1897: Lev 19:28)

Remarkably, the act of inscribing writing on the body through incisions is associated with the realm of idolatry, leading to an interpretation that views the use of phylacteries as an endeavor to reconcile the desire to inscribe religious affiliation on the body with the imperative to avoid transforming the body itself into a medium of writing. In this theological and anthropological context, a pivotal issue arises: The body should not serve as the locus for writing, as the domain of writing is intended to reside outside the corporeal realm, specifically within the sacred embodiment of the Torah.

As stated before, it is impossible here to make a list of all commentaries on this Biblical passage. At least one Catholic commentator, however, must be mentioned, to underline how the exegesis of the prohibition of marking the flesh would take a different direction depending on the semiotic

ideology that was inspiring the commentary. *Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary*, originally compiled by Catholic priest and biblical scholar Reverend George Leo Haydock[16] in 1811, to accompany the publication of the Douay-Rheims Bible text, comments on the passage as follows:

> *Marks,* made with a hot iron, representing false gods, as if to declare that they would serve them forever. (Philo) – The Assyrians had generally such characters upon their bodies. Philopator ordered the converts from the Jewish religion to be marked with ivy, in honour of Bacchus. (3 Macchabees) Theodoret (q. 18) mentions, that the pagans were accustomed to cut their cheeks, and to prick themselves with needles, infusing some black matter, out of respect for the dead, and for demons. Allusion is made to these customs, Apocalypse xiii. 16, and Isaias xlix. 15.

So far, Haydock lists the practices of marking the skin that were common in antiquity among pagans; but then he also allows himself to enumerate ways in which Christians themselves adopted similar techniques:

> Christians have sometimes marked their arms with the cross, or name of Jesus. (Procopius in Isai. xliv. 5.) (Calmet)—As St. Jane Frances de Chantal did her breast. (Breviary, August 21.) *Nomen pectori insculpsit.* St. Paul says, *I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body*, Galatians vi. 17. The Church historians relate, that St. Francis and St. Catharine received miraculously the prints of his wounds.

The distinction between these perspectives is not merely a matter of divergent intertextual paradigms of reference; it reflects an underlying semiotic ideology. Within Judaism, the sacred locus of God's Scripture resides in the text, specifically the Torah. Thus, any attempt to establish an alternative sacred scripture, one not contained within the text or engraved in memory but rather carved onto the skin and flesh, is viewed as an act of idolatry.

Christianity, on the other hand, encounters its distinction from Judaism primarily through the concept and doctrine of incarnation, wherein the divine word becomes flesh. This theological and semiotic ideology embraces the notion that the body can serve as a testimony to the divine word, as long as the signifier does not supplant the signified in idolatry. Consequently, the tattoos that Christians bear on their skin to express their faith are not inherently blasphemous, as they do not present themselves as writing per se, but rather as an embodied trace of the divine word and their unwavering faith in it.

This alternative semiotic and theological ideology also allows for a paradoxical variant, exemplified by the stigmata – a divine scripture directly

manifested upon the extraordinary body of the saint. In this remarkable signification, the boundaries between the corporeal and the divine converge, offering a profound testament to the interplay between the body, scripture, and the sacred.

Protestant commentaries therefore express a semiotic and theological sensibility that advocates, instead, a return to the Hebrew purity of divine scripture alone, in which revelation is manifested in the text and in its interpretation, while any surfacing of it on the skin is a form of idolatry comparable to that of sacred images or relics, and to be relegated, therefore to the chronological and geographical peripheries of the sacred, in the idolatrous practices of ancient pagans in remote times or in the barbaric customs of indigenous peoples of distant worlds.

As is often the case, the Jewish exegesis had already been reflecting on the issue, considering with a multi-voiced conversation the full range of alternative semiotic ideologies with which to interpret the issue of marks on the skin. As is well known, *Makkot* (in Hebrew: מכות) (in English: 'Lashes') is a tractate of the Mishnah and Talmud. It is the fifth volume of the order of Nezikin. *Makkot* deals primarily with laws of the Jewish courts ("beis din") and the punishments which they may administer. It may be regarded as a continuation of the tractate of Sanhedrin, of which it originally formed part. Section 21a of *Makkot* reads:

> R. Jose takes [the two terms used] – Seritah and Gedidah as having the same import, and in the case of the latter it is said "for the dead". Samuel said: One who cuts himself with an instrument is liable. An objection [against this] was raised from the following: Seritah and Gedidah are one [and the same] thing, save that Seritah is done with the hand, while Gedidah is done with an instrument!— He [Samuel] shares the view of R. Jose. A Tanna recited in the presence of R. Johanan: [One who cuts himself] for the dead, whether with the hand or with instrument, is liable [to a flogging]; [if he does so] as an idolatrous practice, if with hand he is liable, if with instrument, he is exempt. But, is it not written [of the priests of Baal] the other way about, and they cut themselves after their manner with swords and lances? – But rather say, "If with the hand, he is exempt, if with an instrument, he is liable".

Then an intricate discussion about the incisions on the skin is quoted from the Mishnah, the first major written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah:

> Mishnah. He who writes an 'incised imprint [in his flesh, is flogged]. If he writes [on his flesh] without incising, or incises [his flesh]

> without imprinting, he is not liable: [he is] not liable until he writes and imprints the incision with ink, eye-paint or anything that marks. R. Simeno B. Judah says in the name of R. Simeon [B. Yohai] that he is not liable until he has written there the name, as it is said: nor put on you any written-imprint, I am the lord.

Then the Gemara is quoted; as is known, the Gemara is an essential component of the Talmud, comprising a collection of rabbinical analyses and commentaries on the Mishnah and presented in 63 books:

> Said R. Aha the son of Raba to R. Ashi: [Does it mean, not] until he has actually inscribed the words, I am the Lord? – No, replied he, it means, as Bar Kappara taught, [viz.:] He is not liable [to a flogging] until he inscribed the name of some profane deity, as it is said: Nor put on you any written-imprint, I am the Lord, [that is,] "I am the Lord" and no other. R. Malkiah, as citing R. Adda b. Ahabah, said: It is prohibited to powder one's wound with burnt wood ash, because it gives the appearance of an incised imprint.
>
> […] One who incises a tattoo [receives lashes]: If he inscribed the pigment but did not puncture [the skin], or [if he] punctured [the skin], but did not insert the pigment [into the incision], he is not liable until he inserts the pigment and punctures [the skin, and the pigment must be] with ink, or with kohl, or with anything that leaves a [permanent] mark. Rabbi Shimon ben Yehudah says in the name of Rabbi Shimon [bar Yohai]: He is not liable until he writes a name [of idolatry], as it says: "You shall not make any tattoo on yourselves, I am the Lord" [taken to mean that he tattooed the name of idolatry. The halachah does not follow Rabbi Shimon]

The subtlety with which rabbinic sources discuss legal issues is always surprising, but the substance of the dispute is basically semiotic: There is disagreement over what and how many marks must be placed on the skin in order for one to contravene the prohibition of Leviticus; at one extreme, there is the position of those, like R. Adda b. Ahabah in the Gemara, for whom an attempt to heal a wound with burnt powder is sufficient to give a glimpse of wrongdoing, since this procedure would result in an impression of writing; at the other end of the spectrum, however, there are those, much more permissive, who argue that idolatry takes place only when someone intentionally tattoos the name of another deity on himself (but the Gemara is careful to point out that the Halakkah does not follow this interpretation, which is evidently too loose).

Conclusion: Facial Reappropriations

As scholars of tattoo sociology have noted, the biblical prohibition against tattoos appears to have significantly diminished in contemporary societies. Today, it is often the unmarked body, rather than the tattooed one, that stands out as unusual or unconventional. Yet, while the taboo surrounding tattoos has become more nuanced, the restriction on facial tattoos continues to persist. It is as if the face, more than any other part of the body, carries the weight of a longstanding semiotic legacy that warns against inscribing writing on the human body, lest it become a vessel for sacrilegious idolatry.

Although the association of the face with the dignity of the creator has been weakened in secular or post-secular societies, there remains a prevailing sense of sacredness, even within a secular context, that is intertwined with the face as a symbol of individuality. While writing on the face may no longer directly contradict the prohibition of placing the name of God or the sacred in any other space besides Scripture, it still appears to challenge the sanctity of the boundary where Western cultures traditionally locate uniqueness and individuality. Ancient biblical prohibitions, modernity's projections to an exotic and wild elsewhere, as well as the eternal discourse of discrimination and racism intertwine, then, in the modern affair of the *moko*, which oscillates between recognition, hostility, and commercialization.

As regards this last phenomenon, the exploitation of Māori facial writing has ancient roots. Already, Kraig in his book indicates that the Liverpool acquaintances of Pēhi Kupe were enthusiastic about his drawing: 'for a fortnight a great part of his time was occupied in manufacturing these pictures of the scars with which his face was impressed'. But already, in this first instance of diffusion of Māori facial diagrams, Te Pēhi Kupe was preoccupied with clarifying that, as Kraig writes, 'the depth and profusion of the tattooing, he stated, indicated the dignity of the individual'; during one of the exhibitions he performed for the enthusiasts of Liverpool, Kraig

> drew for Dr. Traill the amocos of his brother and of his eldest son, the youth whom, as has been already mentioned, he had left to command his tribe till his return. On finishing the latter, he held it up, gazed at it with a murmur of affectionate delight, kissed it many times, and, as he presented it, burst into tears.

That the British hosts and acquaintances of Pēhi Kupe were surprised with the emotional display was the consequence of a long history of divergence and also clash of semiotic ideologies, during which the Westerners had forgotten that images could not only signify and represent but also incarnate and embody, and that the facial diagram of a distant brother

could be revered in the same guise as Catholics would cherish their relics, or the idolaters condemned by Leviticus would inscribe in their flesh the names of the dead.

On the other hand, the post-colonial history of the *moko* has seen its progressive transformation into a feature of cultural belonging and revindication, appropriated as such by the later generations and also defended from episodes of commercial appropriation, including the artistic one. To mark a new conquest in the national legitimization of the Māori heritage, with the inclusion of the facial tattoo, in 2016 Nanaia Cybelle Mahuta became the first Māori woman to display a *moko kauae* in parliament and was subsequently promoted from associate minister of housing and Māori affairs to one of the highest ministerial portfolios, that of Foreign Affairs, a charge that she has been holding until the time this essay is written. 'Moko is a statement of identity, like a passport', Mahuta, from the Waikato-Maniapoto tribe, told the *Guardian* in 2016. 'I am at a time in my life where I am ready to make a clear statement that this is who I am, and this is my position in New Zealand'.[17]

Notes

1 This chapter results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649–FACETS). The final stage of writing this chapter was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sktodowska-Curie grant agreement (Grant Agreement N. 754340) at FRIAS, the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Freiburg.

2 English text from the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Hershel Parker, 3rd edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002; digital version.

3 1798, Kennoway, United Kingdom – 1866, Botanic Avenue, Belfast, United Kingdom.

4 Ca. 1795–1828.

5 John Henry Sylvester. C. 1826. *Portrait of the Maori Chief Te Pehi Kupe*; watercolor; 21.1 x 15.8 cm. Canberra: National Library of Australia; available at https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/891037 (last access: 9 September 2023).

6 Lutjegast, Dutch Republic, 1603 - Batavia, Dutch East Indies, 10 October 1659.

7 Rotterdam, ca. 1606 – Batavia, Dutch East Indies, 1646.

8 Isaack Gilsemans. 1642. *A View of the Murderers' Bay*; photolithograph; 29 × 43,5 cm. Auckland, NZ: Alexander Turnbull Library; available at https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23220299 (last access 9 September 2023).

9 Marton, Yorkshire, Kingdom of Great Britain, 7 November 1728 – Kealakekua Bay in present-day Hawaii, U.S., 14 February 1779.

10 Available at https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/endeavour-voyage/cooks-journal (last access 9 September 2023).

11 Edinburgh, 1745 – Batavia, 26 January 1771.

12 London, 20 March 1796 – Wellington, New Zealand, 16 May 1862.

13 Flintshire, Wales, 18 October 1662 – Nantwich, Cheshire, 22 June 1714.

14 This and the following excerpts all refer to Leviticus 19:28.
15 Whitwell, Rutland, England, 25 April 1819 – Birchington-on-Sea, Kent, England, 15 October 1905.
16 Lea Town, UK, 11 April 1774 – Penrith, UK, 1849.
17 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/11/first-woman-mp-maori-facial-tattoo-nz-parliament-moko-kauae

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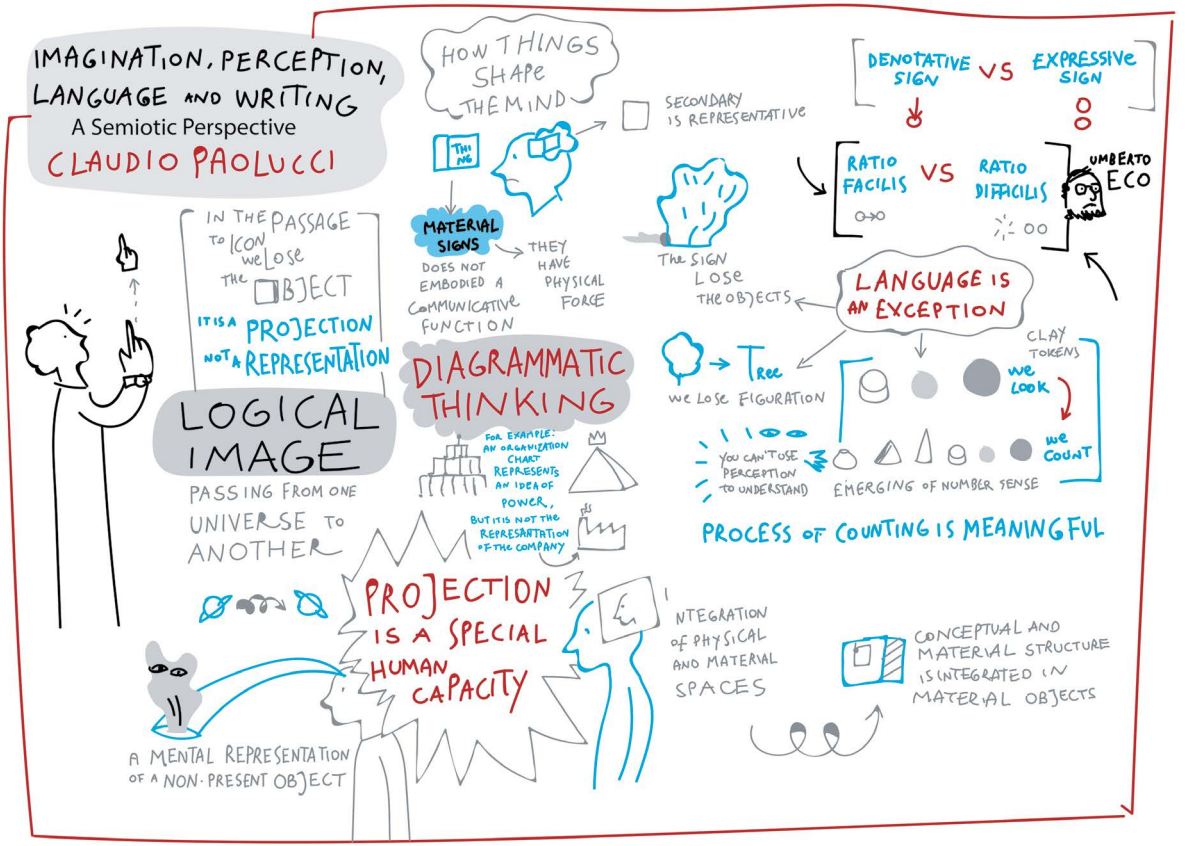
IMAGINATION, PERCEPTION, LANGUAGE AND WRITING
A Semiotic Perspective
CLAUDIO PAOLUCCI
HOW THINGS SHAPE THE MIND
SECONDARY IS REPRESENTATIVE
DENOTATIVE SIGN VS EXPRESSIVE SIGN
RATIO FACILIS VS RATIO DIFFICILIS
UMBERTO ECO
IN THE PASSAGE TO ICON WE LOSE THE OBJECT
IT IS A PROJECTION NOT A REPRESENTATION
MATERIAL SIGNS
DOES NOT EMBODIED A COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION
THEY HAVE PHYSICAL FORCE
THE SIGN LOSE THE OBJECTS
LANGUAGE IS AN EXCEPTION
LOGICAL IMAGE
PASSING FROM ONE UNIVERSE TO ANOTHER
DIAGRAMMATIC THINKING
FOR EXAMPLE: AN ORGANIZATION CHART REPRESENTS AN IDEA OF POWER, BUT IT IS NOT THE REPRESENTATION OF THE COMPANY
TREE
WE LOSE FIGURATION
CLAY TOKENS
WE LOOK
WE COUNT
YOU CAN'T USE PERCEPTION TO UNDERSTAND
EMERGING OF NUMBER SENSE
PROCESS OF COUNTING IS MEANINGFUL
PROJECTION IS A SPECIAL HUMAN CAPACITY
A MENTAL REPRESENTATION OF A NON-PRESENT OBJECT
INTEGRATION OF PHYSICAL AND MATERIAL SPACES
CONCEPTUAL AND MATERIAL STRUCTURE IS INTEGRATED IN MATERIAL OBJECTS

9 From Expressive Sign to Denotative Sign

On Some Semiotic Passages Connected to the Invention of Writing

Claudio Paolucci

Denotative Signs and Expressive Signs

In *How Things Shape the Mind*, a book that deals with the way in which the engagement with material objects shapes our cognitive skills and gives birth to cognitive leaps and cultural progressions, Lambros Malafouris (2013) tries a semiotic opposition between a *denotative sign* and an *expressive sign*. It is important not to connect this terminology to the classical semiotic one: 'denotative' has nothing to do with what Roland Barthes (1964) used to call "denotation", and "espressive" has nothing to do with what Hjelmslev (1943) used to call 'expression'. However, in my view, there is something important there. According to Malafouris, 'denotative sign' is somehow connected to 'linguistic sign' and, of course, to writing thought in its 'fully coded form', as Ferrara (2021) has claimed. On the contrary, 'expressive sign' is tied to material culture: According to Malafouris (2013), archeological objects are expressive signs.

I would say that the invention of writing, from a semiotic point of view, is somehow the passage from expressive sign to denotative sign, a passage that has nothing to do neither with the one from icons to symbols nor with the one from indexes to icons (or whatever the reader may know about the classical categories of semiotics). In my view, *the different inventions of writing have not very much to do with the passages from icons to symbols*: They call out something more complex and interesting that I will try to deal with. On this topic, Malafouris adds an important hint connected to his distinction: While *a denotative sign represents something* (and it can be easily claimed that icons, indexes, and symbols all represent something, since, according to Peirce (Peirce, 1967, 1976), they are ways in which signs stand for their object), *the expressive sign does not represent at all. It enacts*; it *does* something.

> The principal underlying assumption of my analysis is that, from a semiotic perspective, language and material culture differ substantially in respect of the cognitive mechanisms that support their semiotic

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> function. More specifically, my suggestion will be that the material sign does not primarily embody a "communicative" or representational logic but an enactive one. For material semiosis, meaning is not the product of representation but the product of a process of "conceptual integration" between material and conceptual domains. […] Material signs do not represent; they enact. They do not stand for reality; they bring forth reality.
>
> Malafouris (2013, 90, 118)

Since Malafouris (2013) claims that 'underpinning the suggested constitutive intertwining of cognition with material culture is the capacity of material things to operate as signs', I want to show how cognitive semiotics (Paolucci 2021) can work together with material engagement theory (MET), strengthen its own assumption and help MET achieve the building of this new enactive semiotics that aims to understand 'the semiotic basis of the relationship between cognition and material culture'. I will work on this crucial idea of the 'integration between material and conceptual domain', which is also something connected to the invention of writing, claiming that the passage from the expressive sign to the denotative signs – the passage from enaction to representation – is the crucial semiotic passage involved in the invention of writing.

> We need to address the question of how a sign emerges and acquires symbolic force – that is, the question of the becoming of the material sign, first as a real substantive entity and only secondarily as a representation or index. It is precisely this becoming that characterizes material engagement as a semiotic procedure.
>
> Malafouris (2013, 96).

This 'becoming' deals with the semiotization of material objects starting from a material engagement between an organism and its environment (see Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991 and, from the point of view of the inventions of writing, Ferrara 2021). So, it is important to ask what 'denotative' and 'expressive' signs are and what kind of becoming is involved in the passage from the latter to the former. According to Malafouris (2013), a denotative sign 'refers to something that exists independent of the sign itself', while an 'expressive' sign is a sign whose meaning can only be reached through the material object itself. For Malafouris, for example, a linguistic sign is 'denotative', while an archaeological find is 'expressive'. From a semiotic point of view, the distinction between denotative sign and expressive sign blends what the semioticians call 'substance of expression' with the signifier, that, according to semiotics, is the *form* of the expression, not its substance. This is when cognitive semiotics jumps in.

What Malafouris needs with his 'expressive sign' is (1) a sign whose meaning is inseparable from the material reality of the object, (2) a sign whose meaning is inseparable from the substance of expression, (3) a sign in which the relationship of signification is not between the form of expression and the form of content, (4) a sign in which the material substance of the plane of expression cannot be replaced with another material substance without changes in the meaning (for instance, in the linguistic sign, the expression 'bring me a pizza' said in spoken Italian, in written Italian, and in Italian Morse code always means 'bring me a pizza'). On the contrary, an expressive sign is a sign that does not allow for the existence of replicas or variations, because it is *a sign that changes its type when the token changes*. It is *that object seen as a sign*, not *that sign embodied in an object*. Indeed, with his idea of 'expressive sign', Malafouris shows that we cannot always get to the meanings without 'developing the way in which the figures of the signifier take shape from the material substrate of inscriptions and from the gesture that has inscribed them' (Fontanille 2004).

A Theory of Semiotics

With his distinction between denotative and expressive sign, it seems to me that Malafouris is trying to formulate in his own way the extraordinary distinction between ratio facilis and ratio difficilis developed in the theory of modes of sign production by Umberto Eco. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco (1975) tries to explain precisely how we produce a plan of expression in function of a targeted content through a material engagement with the world.

> In order to understand many other procedures in sign production let me outline, at this point, a distinction between two different sorts of type/token-ratio; I shall call them ratio facilis and ratio difficilis. There is a case of ratio facilis when an expression-token is accorded to an expression-type, duly recorded by an expression-system and, as such, foreseen by a given code. There is a case of ratio difficilis when an expression-token is directly accorded to its content, whether because the corresponding expression-type does not exist as yet or because the expression type is identical with the content-type.
>
> Eco (1975, 183)

In the case of language ('denotative sign'), there is a type of signifier already connected to a type of content through coding, so, in order to materially produce a sign, what is needed is simply to refer to the type of expression. In almost all other semiotic systems, there is no type of expression, and the expression of a meaning must pass through the material engagement with the world, with the aim of producing a signifier starting from the materiality of the objects.

For example, consider the case of a painter, who must convey a meaning that is only targeted ('sadness') through colors, shapes, and lines. In the case of painting, the painter does not have a grammar of types of preformed expressions at his or her disposal; he or she does not have the equivalent of a phonology for verbal language. In cases of ratio difficilis, the plane of expression does not have a preformed type. Contrarily to verbal language, there is not a set of grammaticalized forms to which we can appeal in the construction of the object that serves as the plane of expression, as it happens, for example, when we want a pizza and on the phone with the pizzeria we say 'bring me a pizza to Via Garibaldi', adapting our act of enunciation to the type of preformed expression of Italian. In cases of ratio difficilis, it is the exact combination of lines, colors, and shapes expressed through the gesture of enunciation that conveys the meaning of that picture, which is inextricably linked to that particular material substance, so that a copy would not have the same value. Hence, the inexistence of tokens in works of art: Perfect copies would not have the same value and the same meaning as the originals since they come from a different act of enunciation. The same thing happens with expressive signs, in which the plane of content cannot be separated from its significant materiality, and it is constructed through it. That materiality is the form of expression that brings forth the meaning of that sign: 'Material signs are not simply message carriers in some pre-ordered social universe. Material signs are the actual physical forces that shape the social and cognitive universe' (Malafouris 2013, 97).

In his table in *A Theory of Semiotics*, starting from the distinction between ratio facilis and ratio difficilis, Umberto Eco brings into play 23 types of material engagement (Figure 9.1), in which the plane of the signifier of a sign is produced starting from the gesture that brings forth meaning from the material properties of the object by shaping a pre-semiotic matter. It is an extraordinary theory, very fine in its distinctions.

Obviously, I cannot delve into its details in this chapter, but it is important to underline that language is a radical exception: Only verbal language, some formal systems of logics, road signs and very few other semiotic systems work through ratio facilis, while all the other semiotic systems work through ratio difficilis. So, it is important to understand what happens in this passage from ratio facilis to ratio difficilis, in this passage from 'expression' to 'denotation'.

The Passage from Expression to Denotation

The first thing that happens in this passage that it is worth to stress is that *the sign loses the object and its reference to its material reality* (that material object as sign) while it is somehow translated in a difference substance, *keeping the very same form of relation*. This is the crucial point from a

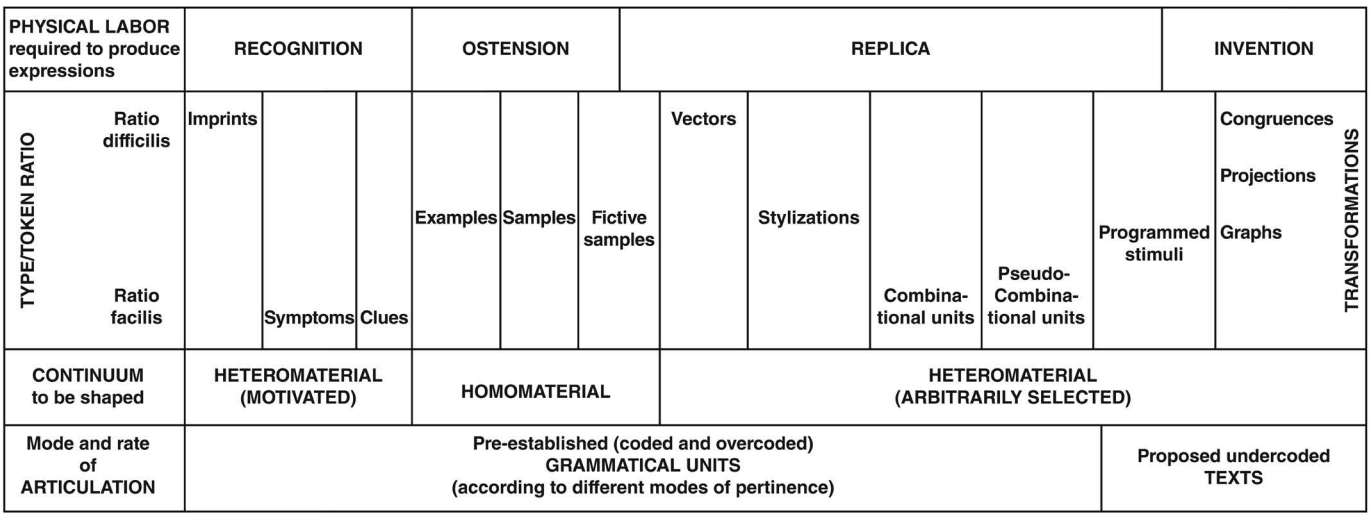

Figure 9.1 A typology of modes of sign production. From Eco (1975, 218), Table 39.

semiotic point of view: We move from that material object to another object of a different ontological type that keeps the form of relation embodied in the first one. So, from that object as a sign of the environment to another sign able to represent that very same environment while not resembling in any figurative way to the environment itself. In this way, the second thing that happens in the passage from expression to denotation is the loss of figurativity, the loss of resemblance. In my opinion, this double losing of the object and of the figurative resemblance between the signifier and the object is involved in the leap of the invention of writing, since it involves a radical change in the cognitive skills used to engage the first sign (the expressive sign: 'that object as a sign', a token without a type) if compared to the cognitive skills used to engage the second sign (the denotative sign: 'the sign as a type for its object'). We will see that, from a semiotic point of view, *we engage expressive signs through perception, while we engage denotative signs thorough reading*: Perception is involved in denotation for sure, but it is not enough to deal with denotative signs (Figure 9.2).

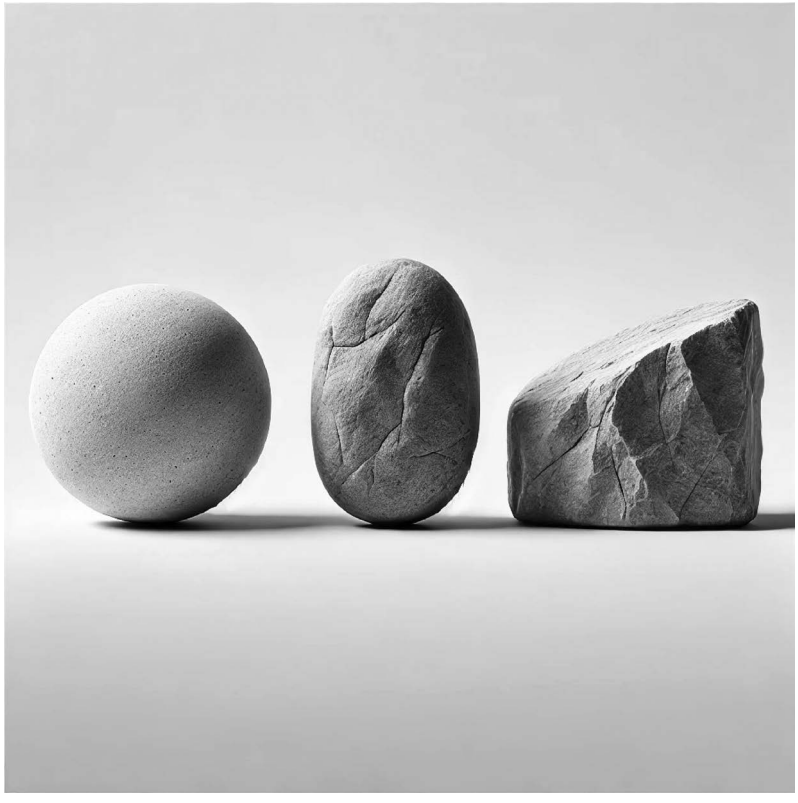

Figure 9.2 Exact numerosity directly perceivable. Image in the public domain.

Figure 9.3 Numerosity beyond the subitizing range of three or four. Image in the public domain.

We do not need to count in order to know that in Figure 9.2 there are three objects: We perceive them, embracing them in a single look through a 'basic number sense'. This changes completely when the objects become six or seven (Figure 9.3).

Here our cognitive operation is totally different: We did not have to look; we had to count. This cognitive skill is called 'exact number sense' and is typically human. However, it is not innate. Whether we share the basic number sense we have used in the first picture with pre-linguistic children and many other species, the development of an exact number sense is typically human, but it is not present in all communities and in all cultures, as shown in the studies of the communities of Pirahã and Munduruku of Amazonia. This is where MET becomes extremely useful: According to

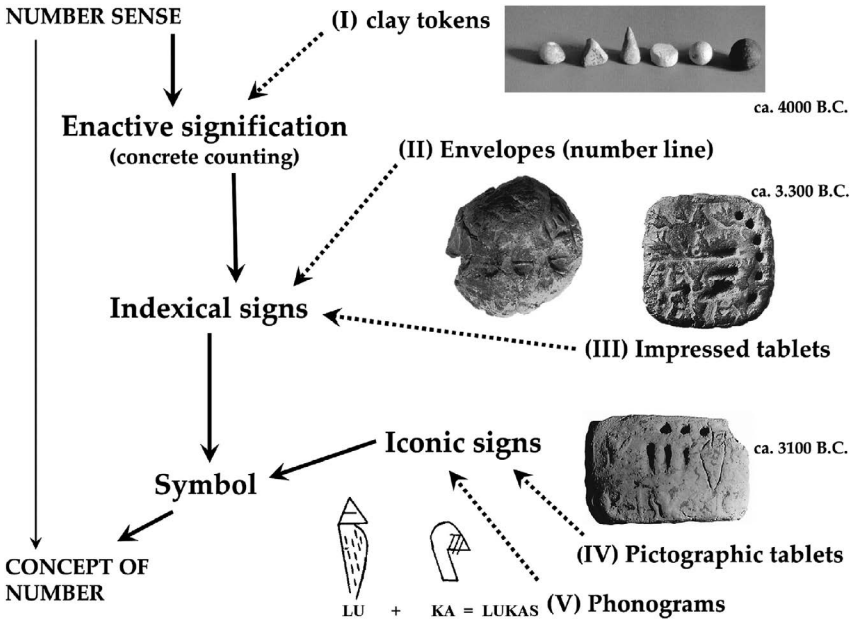

Figure 9.4 The emergence of number out of clay. From Malafouris (2013, 112).

Malafouris (2013), our exact numerical thinking and the very concepts of numbers develop in close contact with material culture and depend on the practice of keeping records of goods and their exchanges on material supports. Malafouris refers to the fundamental studies by Peter Damerow on Babylonian culture (Figure 9.4).

1 At a time when the concept of number did not exist, clay tokens were used to record different kinds of quantities and goods.
2 At a certain point, material culture replaces the tokens with envelopes or clay tablets, where the shape of the token was marked by impressing the tokens on the wet clay, leaving an indexical trace upon it.
3 With the formation of the city-state, the practice of impressing token-signs on clay tablets was changed to that of inscribing schematic 'icons' (i.e., pictographs) of the most intricate tokens. More important, plurality was no longer indicated by replicas of the token, but every sign was preceded by numerals, signs indicating numbers.

From a semiotic point of view, the one in point (3) is a passage from ratio difficilis to ratio facilis, from expression to denotation. Of course, there is also a clear semiotic passage from a proto-sign to an index and,

finally, to icons. However, this is not what really matters. In this passage, what really matters is the translation of a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional surface, of which the physical trace is kept only in the case of the index. *The passage to icons 'loses' the object* and its physical properties and *replaces it with another object with other physical properties of which it represents a projection and not a representation*. This projection is neither iconic nor symbolic nor indexical: It is diagrammatic (in the Peircean sense, See next paragraph),[1] because it keeps the form of relation between the quantities of the goods, but it loses any other property connected to the world of the goods. In doing so, it generates another world of meanings (the world of the numbers), which is connected to the first one only through the preservation of a form of relation regarding quantity. In this new world of numbers, one cannot reach the meaning through perception; one is literally not able to know anything about the quantity of the goods if one is not able to *read* the sign. In the first case, you can reach meaning through perception; in the second one, you need the skill of reading, a totally different cognitive skill, which we teach our children inside schools. As said previously, this skill is brought forth through diagrammatic thinking that makes us pass from ratio difficilis to ratio facilis, from expression to denotation. So, what is diagrammatic thinking, since it is so crucial for the cognitive skills involved in the invention of writing and counting?

Diagrammatic Thinking

Diagrammatic thinking is the projection of the very same form of relation from one material sign to another material sign without maintaining any type of iconic resemblance in this translation. In semiotics, we call this cognitive skill 'diagrammatic' because, for instance, in the diagram of company staff, you can directly perceive its hierarchy of power (the form of relation): A thing that would cost a huge amount of time if looked for spending time directly inside the company doing ethnography. However, *the diagram of the company does not look like the company* and, in order to see the representation of the power, you also need to *read the diagram*.

A diagram is a sign that displays features that remain only virtual in the object before the intervention of the sign and that only the sign is able to manifest. Indeed, the idea of a diagram is the idea that through the manipulation of a concrete material sign, you can perceive properties of the world that you cannot perceive if you look directly at the real object. For instance, through the manipulation of a map, though pins and sketches of the possible scenarios of the battle, you can see new war possibilities that you were not able to see while directly observing the land where the armies are. It is like in the film *Blow-Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni: When the protagonist is in the park looking at the real world, he cannot perceive the

murder that was happening there. But at home, through the manipulation of the pictures he has shot there, he could see – with the aid of signs – what he was not able to see looking directly at the world.

This means that (1) there are properties of the world that you can perceive only through signs and that (2) signs are 'material engagement entities' that reveal properties of other non-semiotic entities. Diagrammatic thinking shows that signs are material objects that can be manipulated, and, through manipulation, they can make new properties of the world emerge. A diagram is a filter through which it is possible to perceive otherwise unnoticeable properties of the object. In the case of the diagram, this filter is essentially cognitive, since the diagram is a logical image or a 'schematic image', as Peirce says (see NEM IV: 238). This is why Peirce claims that diagrams are schemata, in a Kantian sense, since they are sensory, observable, and manipulable tokens that embody logical and conceptual relations. In *Kant and the Platypus*, comparing Peircean diagrams and Kantian schemata, Umberto Eco (1997) gives us a precious piece of advice on this topic. He notices that the schema in Kant was an 'image' only in the sense of the *Bild* in Wittgenstein[2], according to which a proposition shares a common *form of relation* with the fact that it represents, but, at the same time, it differs from the fact in nature. *It is exactly this idea that is at the root of the Peircean conception of the diagram*. If you look at the diagram by Peirce of the sentence '*every mother loves some child of hers*', you can see a logical image, a *Bild*, a schema in which aesthetic elements embody or realize purely logical relations in observable and manipulable tokens that share the same form of relation (Figure 9.5).

A logical image of this kind is then completely neutral to the opposition between arbitrary sign and motivated sign (see Eco 1997, Chapters 2 and 5), or between symbol and icon/index, since the relations between the parts of the diagram are motivated by the form of relation expressed in the proposition. But it is only thanks to the conventional rules of the graph that they are expressed. Indeed, the diagram does not look like the proposition, but you can read the very same meaning in it. Both the proposition and the diagram are images of the object, since they 'show' its form of relation. In this specific and non-trivial sense, there exists an image of something only when there is something that is able to make us pass from one 'universe' to another, guaranteeing a possible commensurability between the two systems and operating as a translation between the two. For example when we speak of the 'image of a function' (its correspondence in another set) or when we say that 'the parliament is the image of the population', the parliament does not look like the population, but it keeps its form of relation in some respect or capacity. From a semiotic point of view, this idea of logical image or diagrammatic image is at the core of the

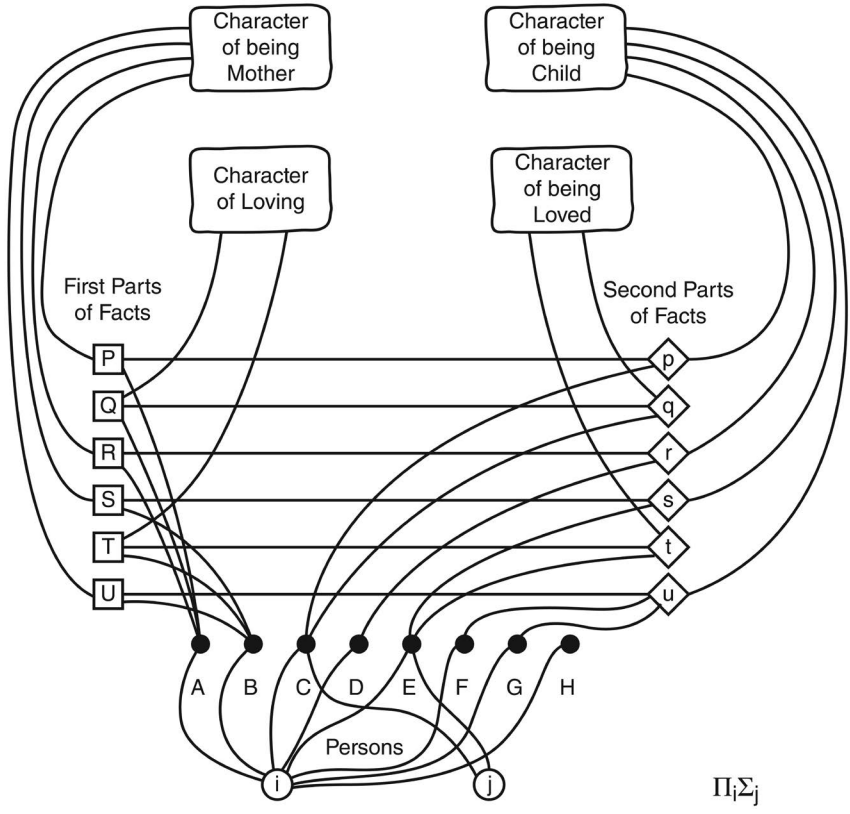

Figure 9.5 Example of a Peircean diagram. From Peirce (MS 410).

process of transition from expression to denotation, and so it is at the core of the invention of writing.

Material Engagement, Diagrammatic Thinking, and the Invention of Writing

One key claim of MET is that rather than ask about the role of the artifact in the hypothesized ancient society, how the artifacts might have been used, or the meaning that they could have inside a given culture, we should ask about the ways by which the artifact might have scaffolded human cognition, or expanded and enhanced the possibilities of cognitive tasks. We have seen the example of numerical cognition and how the concepts of numbers had been brought forth through material engagement with material signs. The main idea by Malafouris is that material culture can be an

input space of a blending machinery, like the one described by Fauconnier and Turner (2002): 'Physical relations can become proxies for conceptual relations, material anchors for conceptual blends' (Malafouris 2013, 104).

> My suggestion is that anchoring blends – via a dynamic network of integrative projections – may be seen as the prime operation of material engagement, by which conceptual and material structure is integrated in material objects. This blending of conceptual and material structure may also explain how material signs emerge and are constituted in action. In these cases, conceptual integration incorporates both physical and mental spaces.
>
> Malafouris (2013, 104)

However, the blending theory by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) remains a full formalist theory and the very same ideas of 'input space' and 'blend space' are completely disembodied entities. Making material culture a simple input space of a blending mechanism looks like a solution that weakens the revolutionary capacities of MET.

> Returning to our question about the causal role of this long-term process of material engagement in the development of exact numerical thinking, one could argue that essentially what happened was that the vague structure of a very difficult and inherently meaningless conceptual problem (counting), by being integrated via projection with the stable material structure of the clay tokens, was gradually transformed into an easier perceptual and semiotic problem. However, perceptual problems can be directly manipulated and manually resolved in real time and space. Thus, the process of counting, as an embodied and mediated act, became meaningful. The clay tokens brought forth the numbers by making the manipulation of their properties visible and tangible.
>
> Malafouris (2013, 114–5)

But this is exactly what we saw with diagrammatic thinking. In a very nice paper, David Kirsh perfectly highlighted these diagrammatic features of the concept of projection. According to Kirsh, projection is a special human capacity that provides the basis for sense making (2009). He defines projection as 'a way of "seeing" something extra in the thing present' and 'a way of augmenting the observed thing, of projecting onto it' (Kirsh 2009, 2310). It is similar and complementary to perception and imagery but also different from both processes in important respects. For instance, whereas perception is tied to and tightly coupled to what is in the outside environment (normally we cannot see what is not there), projection appears to

be less so. Projection goes beyond what is immediately perceived. More than 'seeing what is present', projection 'is concerned with seeing what is not present but might be' (ibid., 2310). It is a kind of perception of the virtual, in a literal sense. It 'offers a peek into the possible, into what could be there, or what might be useful if it were there, but is not' (ibid., 2312), although, as Kirsh also recognizes, enactive theories of perception (Noe 2004; O' Regan and Noe 2001) contain a projective component of 'seeing the future'. Similarly, unlike imagery, which is usually defined as 'a mental representation of a nonpresent object or event' (Solso 1991, 267, cited in Kirsh 2009, 2312), projection requires 'material anchoring' (Hutchins 2005, 2010) and scaffolding to which it adds mental structure and builds upon. Some form of external manipulable structure must be present to trigger and support projection, exactly like in the semiotic diagrammatic thinking, that, in order to use a very important definition by Malafouris, is a form of *thinging* more than a thinking: A thinking with the object through its semiotic capacity. And it is through this *thinging* that we bring forth the numbers and the letters in the reading-writing, ready to teach them to our children at school.

Summing up, the semiotic passage connected to the invention of writing is a transformation from the expressive sign to the denotative sign through a diagrammatic projection that 'loses' the object (that material object as a sign or as an expression), while keeping its form of relation. In this translation, we move from perception to reading/writing through projection, and we can see things that are visible only through the filter of the sign, which is exactly what writing does from a semiotic point of view.

Notes

1 On diagrammatic thinking, see Paolucci (2017; 2021, chapter 5).
2 For more on the connections between Peircean semiotics and Wittgenstein, see Fabbrichesi (2014).

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Epilogue

Images Talking Through Time and Space

Mattia Cartolano

The communicative power of images is extraordinary and exceeds our expectations. This volume has illustrated a vast range of methods and fields of experience through which images can talk and be irreplaceable forms of expression. Every time we delve into the study of visual art, iconography, and writing, we keep discovering the deepest roots of our visual perception and graphic communication. Since the Upper Paleolithic, we have been drawing and coloring images, carving figures, and producing symbols, but for many years these prehistoric artifacts have been underestimated and treated as mere cultural manifestations. Nowadays, thanks to recent research in the field of cognitive studies, we have come to terms with how influential the mental impression of images is in our cognition and communication, after centuries of using of glottographic writing made of letters and logograms, which were thought to be substantially divorced from artistic forms and figurative depictions. Writing was first invented in Mesopotamia and Egypt toward the end of the 4th millennium BC and later in other world regions, and has been used to facilitate communication in highly interconnected and large societies. In our social awareness of today, writing has become the predominant asset in graphic communication relegating other visual forms to lesser importance. This volume has brought our attention to reevaluating the importance of images and the prominent role they play as multimodal vehicles of communication and true wire between writing, human beings, and their visual perception.

Images as Bodies

We often make the mistake of conceiving images as detached representations and products of the mind rather than as entities that are part of the human world. Pictures, drawings, and figurative artifacts are not just an extension of our mental projections. This volume has demonstrated how images are so intertwined with us that the physical body itself can be a figure. The practice of drawing tattoos or coloring the skin with

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the intention of embodying a meaningful image is a cross-cultural feature observed in many living hunter-gatherer societies. Massimo Leone introduced us to this often-ignored practice of using the body as vehicle to express personal identity and a form of writing through Māori facial tattoos. Having an indelible drawing on their skin allows the Māori, an indigenous group of Polynesia, to gain a distinctive but nonetheless mutable mark through which individuals can express themselves. The image attached onto the skin is a true signature that not only identifies the individual but enables the subjects to emerge from their group and their cultural environment. The image in this case is literally embodied and clearly visible insomuch as it leaves a legible mark that everyone can readily acknowledge and recognize.

The body as a medium to express identities has also been explored by Adriana Iezzi, who examined it through the performance of the artist Zhang Huan. In this performance, the artist turns his face into a canvas for calligraphers to write on. This art, which is rooted in the ancient Chinese practice of physiognomy, involves interpreting personality and cultural or political connotations, and predicting the future based on facial traits. As the inscriptions accumulate, Zhang's face is completely covered in black ink, symbolically erasing his identity. As Iezzi highlights, the meaning of this performance is to draw attention to individual personalities overshadowed by their cultural heritage, which lays down unbearable layers of habituated customs. The case of Chinese physiognomy is another example of how embodied images touch on the key aspect of communal involvement of the self.

'Readable' marks and bodily experiences have also been noted in Paleolithic contexts. Although the interpretation of supposedly symbolic incisions is notably difficult and problematic, as highlighted by Enza Elena Spinapolice at the beginning of this book, image-making processes are surely significant at the individual and social level, especially if the body itself is involved and the evidence is archaeologically traceable, such as the use of colorant. Evidence of ochre in anthropogenic contexts appeared in Africa since the Paleolithic and, although body painting with ochre might have been used for more concrete purposes, such as insect repellent, sunscreen, or antiseptic, it can be equally seen as an expression of community and personal belief and identity. Therefore, colorants and their properties take on a value precisely in relation to their embedded significances and affordances. In this regard, Spinapolice invites us to review our terminology when analyzing ancient artefacts and their potential meanings, paying attention to prefixed concepts such as 'utilitarian' and 'non-functional'. Dichotomies such as these lead us away from a more appropriate understanding of image-making in prehistory. Rather than attempting to trace an evolutionary line of cultural development up to modern behavior through

the discussion of so-called symbolic objects, it is time to rethink our development from the Paleolithic in their archaeological context, looking at the manufacturing processes involved in the making of incised stones, seashell engravings, and the use of colorant, their potential individual influences, and social implications.

Face-to-face communication has been part of human methods of communication since deep history. Catching eyesight and interpreting facial expressions and body language have been essential characteristics of our species that have enabled synergistic actions and successful group cooperation. The visual reproduction of these body expressions, which increasingly appear as of the Neolithic period (ca. 9700–6000 BC) in south-west Asia, is promptly examined in the chapter by Marion Benz and Joachim Bauer. The extraordinary development of anthropomorphic images reflects the transformation of community consciousness regarding human power and control over natural forces. The emblematic example of domestication clearly indicates this pivotal development in human consciousness that is visible through images as bodies, the production of figurative objects that can reflect the changing human-environment relationship, and the potential effects of human agency toward nature. Neurobiological studies reported by Benz and Bauer have pointed out the key aspect that the variety of bodily expressions provides the range of emotional states that from early childhood we ought to learn, to recognize, and to reproduce in our communicative endeavors. The production of these images can therefore allow the group to strive, to grasp the natural forces at play, and to fully express human potential.

Images as a Source of Emotions and Vital Experiences

Fear, awe, exaltation, and other emotions are best represented with images like faces or naturalistic depictions, all the way to the use of emojis today. If it is true that long, highly detailed written descriptions can convey complex feelings, the immediacy of an image can reach the deepest realms of our perception, touching our emotions, which are ultimately the result of our cognitive attention. The Neolithic imagery from Upper Mesopotamia that Benz and Bauer relate can be framed with reference to mental affordances in which figurative artifacts are media devoted to the identification and embodiment of those emotions. Here, the learning process of what a community member can or cannot do and what is good/wrong, as well as their political involvement, are founded on those figurative expressions that are conveyors of vital matters in both prehistoric and modern societies. Images can be standardized so they can be manipulated and juxtaposed to different contexts. Benz and Bauer analyse a wide range of early Neolithic images of Northern Mesopotamia and reflect on the evidence of emerging

standardization, monumentality and ubiquity of figurative representations, arguing that the changing mediality is intended to prime emotional effects and create lasting collective and embodied memories, in order to strengthen group identities and a sense of belonging. Images, especially in illiterate communities, are not only the direct linking of ideas, they can be compressed to blend a multitude of concepts and, as Benz and Bauer suggest, to trigger memories influence perception, and vital social narratives.

The impact that images have on our social lives and culture is undeniable, and this influence is further revealed by the Chinese calligraphy, as illustrated by Adriana Iezzi. Chinese characters, originally icons of real entities can be artistically reproduced in varied forms that are recognized as calligraphy. This very ancient artistic production is not a simple expression of aesthetically appealing drawings but is a 'reflection of the flowing energy', an arcane belief in forces and agency influencing human essence. Not surprisingly, Chinese traditions of calligraphic practices have established conventional practices and canons to encapsulate and channel the flowing energy, which is something that writing with its linearity and rigid character fails to hold. As explained by Iezzi, calligraphy has also been involved in the social sphere and applied as an instrument for political reasons in recent times. Integrated with other forms of art, such as music and dance, the performance of calligraphy aims to influence community behavior, catching viewers' attention toward the essence of good, beauty, justice, and harmony that each community member should embrace, and to fight against those attitudes that aim to suppress the flowing energy and freedom. Images, hence, possess agency, rhythms, and forces capable of influencing the human dimension and are open to be used as tools to express inner emotions and to empower the self.

The perception of the energy flow transmitted by the images can also be recognized in the use of color coding, through letter shapes and time intervals of the figures. These aspects are outlined by Roma Chatteriji, who describes the image-making traditions in Indian comics. The narrative of Vikram Roy and his life journey as an Aghori, which Chatteriji presents, is revealed through a set of arranged visual rhetorical devices and drawing compositions in a way that effectively conveys the spiritual message and deep meaning that characterizes much of Indian popular culture. Variations in letter shape and size determine the pitch and emotion of the topics represented. The degree of emotional depth is also expressed by the colors along with the panel-to-panel transition, which sets the pace of the storyline. Finally, the omission of parts and the concealment of things from the visual frame is a further technique aimed at projecting the invisible into the readers' minds to a deeper and different meaning. It is through these compositional rules that readers can comprehend the vital matters at play and perceive them in their entirety.

Images at the Core of Writing

All primary scripts incorporate an iconographic substratum in their signs, and secondary adaptations of primary scripts preserve a residual iconicity. Their visual projections, arrangements, and distributions are reflected in the way ancient and modern societies approach graphic media, including writing. There is no doubt that images interact with writing and vice versa. However, assessing the reflexivity and shared influences of these vehicles of communication is rather complicated. Unraveling the intertwined relations between glottographic systems and images is what the authors in this volume have brought to the fore. The chapter by Kathryn Kelley on the invention of writing in Iran reinforces the often-neglected role that iconography plays in the inception of the first scripts in the Near East. For many years the origins of writing have been associated with administrative practices and urbanism in which scribes and rulers adopted arbitrary signs to sustain the management of the economy and state affairs. Within this sociocultural structure, theories of script formation were based on social activities and developments in which counting and bookkeeping (rather than iconicity and visual perception) were the major crucial points in the processes involved in the emergence of writing.

The contributions presented in Part II point in a different direction. Images and visual perception of real things assume a pivotal function in both the invention and development of scripts. Logograms and indexical marks develop from our visual perception of images, which is sometimes difficult to trace in the script, due to our limited knowledge of code-making and sign compression. This means that signs, indeed, are subject to phases of modification and stylization as a result of decades or centuries of use of those graphic symbols and other ancient cultural practices of which we are unaware. The case of proto-Elamite writing discussed by Kelley is illustrative, showing the extent to which highly schematic forms in that script may have underlying visual referents in real-world objects and also in the recreation of images from other traditions. The integration of iconographic shapes from other domains of visual culture into texts is an area of research that has yet to be thoroughly investigated. From this perspective, there is reason to believe that the adoption of graphic signs was not dictated solely by short-lived circumstances (such as the pressuring need for bureaucracy in the early urban centers), but rather by established traditions of image-making, including the imprinting of glyphic images through seals, as the core of the subsequent development of graphic media.

Further evidence of images at the core of scripts is shown by the use of emblem glyphs in the Classic Maya tradition to delineate political affiliation. Mallory E. Matsumoto describes how diverse groups of the Maya lowlands associate their affiliation through integrating and consistently

arranging given icons in hieroglyphic writing. Manifesting public belonging through writing, which finds similar parallels in other regions of the world, allows community members to not only express their thoughts verbally but at the same time display their identity and cultural practices. The key aspect emerging here is that political identity is immediately conveyed through easily recognizable compositions where writing and images follow systematic models and are harmonically integrated. The evidence provided by Mallory confirms the special function that images assume within an already-formed writing system.

Images Beyond Language and the Fear of Uncertainty

The awareness that images can say something that cannot be explained in words or are not in need of verbal support is well-attested, and this can be observed through artistic outputs such as Chinese calligraphy and prehistoric iconography. However, the ability to overcome language has often been felt more as a danger than an opportunity. Many of the issues related to the image beyond language can be framed within the countless modes of communicative application in which images are placed. The case of the 'other writing' in the '*Ominous Hieroglyphics*' presented by Christopher Pinney recalls the long debate about the relationship between visual characters and writing in 19th-century Britain. At the dawn of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone and the explosion of interest in hieroglyphics and their enigmatic significance, *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger,* discussed by Pinney, offers a perfect example of how images and writing not only merge effectively but also delineate the historical context of the debate in Western thought on the role of images that has inevitably influenced the way we think today. The irreplaceable ability to express thoughts that transcend language is obtained by connecting diverse sources of knowledge through figures, letters, and objects and blending them into a multifunctional image. However, the puns, mystical figures, and obscure enigmatic prophecies that appear portrayed in the almanacs are perceived as 'false, barbarous'. The anxieties about ambiguity can be connected to the unconscious concern about the uncertainty that images can convey. It is the fear of the *pharmakon* and the multivalent semiotic contribution that images can convey, which is something that writing does not contemplate. This has led our consciousness to rely on the less ambiguous system of writing at the expense of figurative depictions as a vehicle for multimodal communication.

Viewed from this perspective, it seems that our visual communication has gradually moved away from using images as communication models due to concerns about uncertainty in message transmission, of being afraid that pictorial depictions can irreversibly compromise the vital meanings

and cultural traditions we meant to pass on. Drawing from the false belief that writing can always transmit exact information without equivocation, thinkers of the Enlightenment have relegated the functional aspects of images and most importantly classified image-writing as problematic or vague. This has influenced our point of view of image-making, inevitably dissecting and distancing graphic media from the visual backdrop and signification that images can feed into.

The passage of acquiring an unambiguous system of signification is picked up by Claudio Paolucci, who discusses the adoption of writing from a semiotic point of view. He draws our attention to the key shift from symbol to writing, the step from expressive to denotative sign that, through the words of Lambros Malafouris, can be conceived as a transition from enaction to representation. Paolucci emphasizes this phenomenon as a loss, a marked distance from the object and its material reference to turn into a translated sign reproduction in which the relationship between the entities (semiotic and material) is maintained but their engagement is eliminated. The meaning obtained through bodily expressions and active engagement with materials can be achieved feasibly through images. As soon as denotative signs emerge, the communicative relations are filtered through diagrammatic processes – namely, constructing forms of relations among heterogeneous elements – in which the iconographic substrate of the sign and its rich background of meanings beyond language are stifled.

Talking Images, Anytime and Anywhere

In conclusion, we can emphasize that images are indeed multimodal message-conveyors and useful instruments in human communication that are sometime not fully appreciated or undervalued. The authors of this book illustrate different aspects of image-making, each highlighting the direct connection between visual culture and the cognitive architecture to which images are hinged to. Images as multimodal vehicles of communication can be well-integrated into other systems of human sensory dimensions, including taste, smell, and conceptual domains, such as metaphorical bridging, as outlined in the case studies provided in this volume. At different levels of human realms, images can speak and immediately imprint meanings by overcoming the limits of time and space and transcending the cultural structures that seek to filter or constrain their communicative capacity.

Being so interconnected to our perceptual world, images are everywhere as visible forms that our eyes and imagination can foresee. We have played with images, we have created worlds and cultures through images. We have done so in the past, and we will continue to do so in the future. Images are ready, as ever, to be used as effective conveyors and a clear

reflection of ourselves and our cultural environment that is in constant evolution. Visual culture has played a crucial role in providing the backbone of our cognitive support for navigating increasing complex social relations. As a limited organ, the brain finds external images a reliable and inexhaustible aid not only in making sense of its surroundings but also in successfully navigating its way through the entanglements of human-things relationships that, as Ian Hodder would say, unquestionably bind us to the material world. Images are representations that enable us to develop our cognitive potential; they are solid multimodal communicative tools and, like writing, they greatly facilitate our everyday verbal expression and memory.

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Note: Page numbers in italics refer to figures. Page numbers followed by "n" refer to notes.