FROM PICTURES TO LETTERS

Alphabets evolved from drawings into pictographs and ideographs
Hieroglyphics means ‘sacred carvings.’ Until 1822, hieroglyphics were thought to be pictographic.
THE ROSETTA STONE

Found in 1790 in Egypt, the stone contains three inscriptions of a single text, a decree of the priests of Memphis in honor of Ptolemy V. (196 BC).

The Rosetta Stone resides in the British Museum.
THE ROSETTA STONE

The text appears in hieroglyphs, Demotic and Greek, allowing Egyptologists in 1822 to decode hieroglyphics.
The Rosetta Stone

French scholar Jean Francois Champollion (1790-1832) realized the phonetic value of hieroglyphs; they have more than symbolic meaning and served as a ‘spoken language.’

ses tu baíu abta, hennu-nek baíu amenta
‘Follow thee, the souls of the east. Praise thee, the souls of the west.’
UNIVERSALITY IN LETTERS

To move from pictures to letters is to go from the specific to the universal. Letters can express abstract ideas.

SPECIFIC → UNIVERSAL

Cuneiform Tablet, Umma, Sumeria, circa 2100 BC
THE FIRST ALPHABETS

- Phoenicians developed first ‘Western’ alphabet in about 1100 B.C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used</th>
<th>Egyptian</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Phoenician</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Roman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3500 B.C.</td>
<td>1500 B.C.</td>
<td>1100 B.C.</td>
<td>600 B.C.</td>
<td>114 A.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Language
- Commerce
- To express ideas
SEEING TYPE AS LETTERS

Size, form and shape of each letter became important as letters became pure symbols.

ROMAN TYPE

- Romans used alphabet for ideas, literature.
- Roman letters, derived from stone carvings, are upright, with serifs and variation of thick and thin strokes.

Trajan’s column, Rome 116 AD
ROMAN TYPE

- Serifs: Chisel stroke used to finish letter
- Alphabet wasn’t printable until 2,000 years after reaching ‘modern’ form

The modern titling font Trajan was based on the lettering on Trajan’s Column in Rome.
THE SCRIBES

During medieval times, language was kept alive by religious scribes, who copied sacred texts by hand.

Their work influenced letter shapes.

Scribes created books by hand in ‘black letter,’ or ‘textura.’

Detail from medieval manuscript, France, Early 13th Century
Latin text; early angular Gothic script
TEXTURA TODAY

We attach meaning to type, to the shape of the letters. Textura, because of its connection with Nazi Germany, carries sinister overtones today.
INFLUENCE OF THE SCRIBES

Uncial, a more open style, is the precursor to lower-case letters.

To keep quills sharp and strokes uniform required skill and sensitivity.
SEEING TYPE AS LETTERS

- Gutenberg’s contribution was movable type.
- Gutenberg’s font had more than 300 characters to imitate textura style of the scribes.
Gutenberg’s legacy: hot-metal type setting

Because characters were carved in steel, hot metal strongly influenced type design for centuries to come
Gutenberg’s masterpiece was the 42-line bible

1,286 pages

48 survive out of perhaps 180
THE EARLY TYPOGRAPHERS

- Aldus Manutius founded Aldine Press in Venice
- His artisans advanced typeface design beyond imitating hand-drawn characters
THE EARLY TYPOGRAPHERS

- William Caxton printed first book in English; used the textura style
- By 1509, English printers were using Roman type, influenced by French typsetters