

Lift and Separate

graphic design
and the vernacular

quote

unquote

RST?)

ERS?

T Y P E C A S T

meaning, culture, and identity
in the alphabet omelet (¿which came first?)

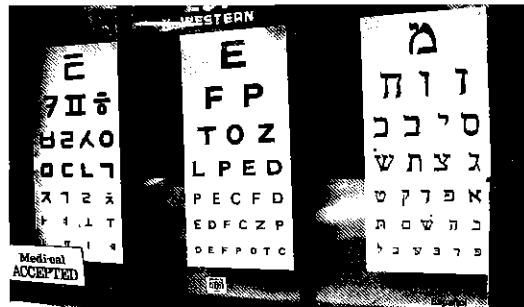
Sojin Kim & Somi Kim

a
[Western Avenue, Koreatown]
Eye charts using Korean,
Roman, and Hebrew letters are
displayed in the office window
of Dr. Walter S. Kim, O.D.

b
[Alameda Street, downtown
Los Angeles]

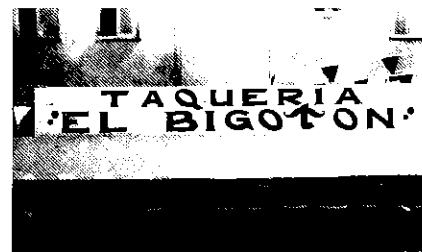
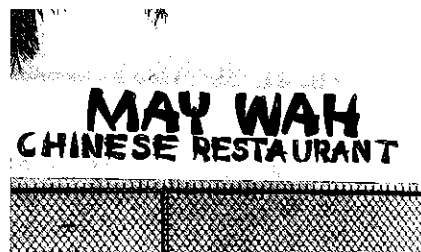
c
[Beverly Boulevard at
Normandie Avenue, Koreatown]

d
Azteca,
Xerxes.
From Dan X. Solo, *Special-
Effects and Topical Alphabets*
(1978)



Rapidly increasing global interdependence has made it more and more clear that neither "we" nor "they" are neatly bounded and homogenous as once seemed to be the case.... All of us inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power, and domination.

Renato Rosaldo, "Border Crossings," *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 217.



AZTECA

XERXES

[Pico Boulevard, near La Brea Avenue, mid-city] Billboards and store signage

b
Arabesque, Patent Type Foundry, London, 1851.
Mikita, Bruce, New York, 1867.
Japanese, Reed, London, c. 1885.
Corsican, Reed, c. 1895.
Rhodesian, Figgins, London, 1895.
 Reproduced from Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces* (1976)

PRIVIER HARMONIUM TEA CONCERT

Northern

1.

Driving through parts of Los Angeles is like driving through a specimen book not only of lettering, type, and sign-fabrication methods but also of an extensive array of alphabets and transliterations. Whether one is attracted or repelled by the visual and linguistic babel, it is impossible to ignore the barrage of street level media: billboards, store signs, posters, and graffiti compete for our attention. Incongruous juxtapositions are commonplace; hybrid forms arise from proximity and inevitable cultural exchange. Pre- and postindustrial technologies coexist and inform each other.

The multivocality of contemporary Los Angeles is reflected in the design and use of written language on commercial signage. This essay focuses on the cultural connotations of letterforms on the signage of a selection of businesses.¹ The verbal-visual landscape created by these signs results from an often self-conscious, complex process involving refractions and appropriations of circulating stereotypes and cultural references. Rather than identifying a distinct "vernacular," we are focusing on the processes by which any identifiable social group may appropriate aspects of the idioms specific to another.² Here such processes of inter-reference involve the use of (literally) different languages and occur across different social contexts.

2.

Commercial signage is arguably the part of the designed environment with the broadest audience. A function of commercial signage is to convey information about a business that will

draw potential customers from passersby. Exterior signs, therefore, may reflect the proprietor's self-conception, as well as his or her perception of customer expectation and association regarding the type of business represented. The assumption underlying this is that there are certain popularly recognized and repeated conventions of representation with which both parties are familiar. For example, the cultural affiliation of a business is manifest in particular color schemes (e.g., red, green, black) and pictorial images (sombrosos) or through architectural details (pagodas). Our focus here is on cultural references and inferences by means of the typography of signs.

The manner in which cultural groups are typographically referenced in signs depends on the connotative as well as denotative value of written forms. From earliest times the inscription of language by human hands involved practices in which value and meaning were assigned not just to *what* was written but to *how* it was written. During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, letters were used as "vehicles of imaginative expression," taking different directions, such as rustic twig type and pictorial alphabets on the one hand, and a form of gothic revival (which precipitated experimentation with the actual structure of the characters) on the other.³ A number of the alphabets developing out of this period were those that were designed and named to represent various "others" on the basis of stereotypical, non-Western ornamental devices or characteristics from non-roman alphabets. Notable fonts with exotic inspiration include *Moslem*, *Mexican*, *Assyrian*, *Cuban*, *Corsican*, *Rhodesian*, *Minaret*, *Karnac*, *Coptic*,



¹For treatment of the linguistic aspect of signage, see Johanna Drucker, "Language in the Landscape," *Landscape* 28, no. 1 (1984): 7-13.

²In our discussion we try to avoid a hierarchical categorization of these social groups such as professional or amateur, high or low, official or folk.

³Nicolete Gray, *A History of Lettering: Creative Experiment and Letter Identity* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1986), 174.

a
(Glendale Boulevard,
Atwater Village)

b
(Sunset Boulevard, Echo Park)

c
(Glendale Boulevard,
Silver Lake)

The lettering of the three signs
exemplifies roman fonts that
derive their shape from non-
roman alphabets.



d
Timbuctu. From Dan X. Solo,
*Special-Effects and Topical
Alphabets* (1978).



timbuctu

and *Nubian*. Most of these alphabets include some "exotic" embellishment that speaks more of a departure from British or American tradition than an appropriation of specific cultural sources.

In 1867 one of the earliest pseudo-Japanese fonts was patented in America. This alphabet, now known as *Mikita*, consists of three-dimensional letterforms suggestive of wood or lacquer work. Rather than actual mimicry of other alphabets, the first fonts that drew on the Far East in their letter structure were more reflective of concurrent art/design movements (artistic printing, the aesthetic, arts and crafts, international symbolist, art nouveau).⁴ Informal writing styles and brush scripts, particularly Chinese and Japanese, also began to affect character shapes. Around 1885, a font called *Japanese* appeared in England, perhaps the first font to allude directly to Japanese or other East Asian culture through the design of letters that evoke the calligraphic brushstrokes of Asian writing.⁵ Despite the visual integrity and ingenuity of many of these alphabets, Western letterers' mimicry of calligraphic strokes used by other writing traditions inevitably fails to refer correctly to the *ductus*, or order and direction of strokes, of the different traditions.

This means of referring to Asian culture through a distinctive process of writing persists today in signage and collateral pieces of Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian businesses. The use of pseudo-Asian type by a business not culturally specific often signifies the cultural origin of the proprietor, as in the florist sign in Atwater Village (an area between Silver Lake

and Glendale, northeast of downtown Los Angeles). Other current day "non-Western" roman alphabets include Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew versions. Also extant are typefaces that refer to culturally specific materials, such as the font *Confucius*, reproduced in Dan X. Solo's *Special-Effects and Topical Alphabets* (Dover Publications, 1978), which refers to Asian culture through the rendering of letters made of bamboo. Likewise, the Tiki style so popular in the 1950s used a palette of forms that look as if they were carved from materials such as bamboo or driftwood to convey an atmosphere of paradise to hordes of barstool travelers.

As a material-specific example, the Dutch Bakery in Atwater Village achieves a rustic, homemade effect through the representation of letters as if they were constructed from slats of wood. The slats may suggest windmill vanes and are irregularly pieced together, a far cry from the intricate wood letters of previous centuries but communicating a similar sense of the picturesque. Another example tangential to this category is the hand-painted sign of El Bigoton, a taqueria located on the eastern edge of Koreatown. The crossing of the *t* with a mustache is a humorous, rebus-like reiteration of the restaurant's name that transfers a cultural stereotype onto the identity of the food stand.

3.

Whether one speaks of theft, borrowing, appropriation, or adaptation, the fact remains that many so-called "new" type designs emerge from elements of extant alphabets or styles either displayed in specimen books or manifest

⁴ Ibid., 175.

⁵ *Mikita* was produced by the type foundry D. & G. Bruce, New York, 1867, and offered as *Novel* by the English type foundries Austin Wood, c. 1868, and Figgins, c. 1883. A face called *Chinese* was offered in a supplement to the Bruce specimen book in 1879. *Japanese* was produced by the English type founder Sir Charles Reed, c. 1885. See Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 101, 220.

[Sunset Boulevard, Echo Park]

[Glendale Boulevard,
Atwater Village]

The letterforms on these signs
are constructed from materi-
als that have cultural
connotations.

[Beverly Boulevard, northeast
of Koreatown]

The type used for the name
matches Photo-Lettering's
David Bold from the *One Line
Manual* section "Art Nouveau
High-Key Ornamented
Xenotypes." Many Mexican and
Central American restaurants
use typefaces with similar
ornamental features.

Confucius. From Dan X. Solo,
*Special-Effects and Topical
Alphabets* (1978)



CONFUCIUS

⁶The question of typeface authorship is not a new one. George Bruce, type founder, remarked in 1851 after the introduction of electrotyping: "Any article that is saleable, and got up in good taste by one type founder, is instantly electrotyped and cast by others; for there is no law to protect the peculiar property of the original producer..." (Ibid., 119). In the introduction to *American Alphabets* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), the editor, Paul Hollister, wrote, "German designers cry 'stop thief' to Yankee type-mongers, while Yankees cry 'you stole first.'" (10)

⁷Conversation with Dan X. Solo, November 20, 1992.

⁸Gene Conti, et. al., *Photo-Lettering's One Line Manual of Style* (New York: Photo-Lettering, Inc., 1960-88), 377-79 (emphasis added). The texts of the one-line samples reflect cultural stereotypes: "Squaw better paddle her own canoe" (*Apache*); "Oriental alphabet VELY GOOD" (*Bartuska Nisei*); "Mosques sultans harems" (*Papirtis Shish-Ka-Bob*); "One quart of Russian Vodka" (*Papirtis Kremlin*).

in various printed ephemera or environmental graphics. Design patents were less frequently granted for typefaces after the turn of the century and today only the name of an alphabet can be trademarked, testimony to the continuing ambiguity of type design ownership or authorship.⁶ Dan X. Solo of the phototypesetting house Solotype Typographers in Oakland, California, describes some of his fonts as original designs and others as redrawings based on old sign-painting manuals and partial showings in *Photo-Lettering's One Line Manual of Styles*, first published in 1960. In one example, Solo based the letters of *Ideograph* on *Photo-Lettering's Japanese* by Charles Papirtis, but took the figures from a face called *Mandarin* from an Arizona-based type founder named Charles Broad, who had the matrices for the font made in Japan (despite the name!). Solo's *Azteca*, included in several of his Dover collections, was based on the letters of an unidentified Southwestern hotel brochure. Every October, Solo closes down his shop and searches the world for "new" typefaces. He emphasizes the difficulty of dating many "topical" alphabets due to the reworking of forms through generations of lettering and sign-painting manuals and, no doubt, other typographers like himself who have remade existing fonts into "new" originals.⁷ Digital technology, which has made typesetters of us all, has brought ownership questions to the fore with font companies establishing 800 numbers for bounty hunters to turn in individuals or companies who use pirated fonts.

Although certain alphabetical styles may be popularly recognized as references to

specific cultures, lifestyles, and values, their meanings are not static and consistent. Meanings circulated through signs are variable and depend upon the parties involved. And it is not so much an issue of "high" vs. popular culture so much as the gaps and intersections between different cultures or social groups. In some cases, fonts originally based on ideas of one culture could easily be reinvented in the guise of another. These styles as well as those designed to represent other varieties of non-roman alphabets have continued to be appropriated and adapted, more recently from lettering and sign-painting manuals integral to the predigital commercial art industries in the first third of this century. Phototypesetting houses such as Photo-Lettering, Inc., in New York, and Solotype Typographers in Oakland, have built their font libraries on the work of letterers.

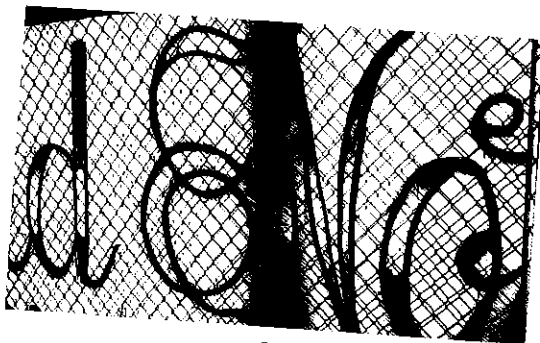
Culturally thematic alphabets were not initially directed toward their cultural sources. The "Foreign" section in *Photo-Lettering's One Line Manual* includes the statement: "English speaking foreign alphabets—these designs, used with appropriate copy, are highly successful in establishing national identity. If you can't speak a foreign language you can at least get the thrill of writing one (in good old English)."⁸ In a sense, culturally thematic alphabets are the visual equivalent of accented spoken English. Such lasting Los Angeles tourist attractions as Graumann's Chinese and Egyptian theaters, and Yamashiro's restaurant attest to the continuing appeal of such homogenized and familiar representations of foreign cultures.

[Sunset Boulevard, east Hollywood]

[Sunset Boulevard, Silver Lake]

[Sunset Boulevard, Echo Park]
Detail of mural by Peter Q.

[Hobart Boulevard at Pico Boulevard, south of Koreatown]



While initially springing from the Western designer's view of the "other," these typographic forms have been appropriated by the increasing number of immigrant-owned businesses and used as self-representation in the commercial realm to render the various groups easily recognizable or to appeal to the American appetite for the exotic.⁹ The catch-all term "chop suey type" seems appropriate: the dish "chop suey" (from Cantonese *tsap sui*, "mixed pieces") was a Chinese-American invention tailored to the American palate while retaining the appearance of being Chinese. There is at least one typeface actually called *Chop Suey*. It appears in *ABC of Lettering* by Carl Holmes and was redrawn as *Fantan* by Dan X. Solo.

The style of lettering used in the signage of a business may reflect not just the owner's ethnic or cultural affiliation but the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood as well. Mayesh Flowers, whose sign is spray-painted on the wall of the store, is located in Hollywood, at the border of the Silver Lake district. The neighborhood includes several ethnic groups and has a moderate share of gang activity, apparent in the preponderance of tagging and graffiti on such surfaces as storefronts, the walls of homes and apartments, and parking structures. The graffiti-style announcement of Mayesh was applied prior to the store's purchase three years ago by its present owners, who are not very attached to this sign and plan to replace it sometime in the future. (Countless other businesses in the city must also retain the signage of previous owners due to economic constraints, which potentially could lead to unexpected hybrid forms.)

The original owners of Mayesh probably commissioned their sign because it represented a tradition of lettering in popular circulation in this neighborhood. Several miles down Sunset Boulevard from Mayesh is a mural that was painted in 1989–90 and signed by Peter Q. The style in which the images and letters are painted is in the tradition of graffiti art and inscription, and the message along the base of the piece reads—in the same hand as that of the Mayesh sign—"Try to express yourself artistically and not destructively."

It is not always easy to ascertain the direction from which the influence of a form occurs, or even what its specific derivation is. Midway between the Peter Q. mural and Mayesh is Jose Roque Body & Paint, also on Sunset Boulevard (in Silver Lake). The wall surrounding the garage and business grounds was also painted and lettered by Peter Q. and company. All of the letters are executed in variations of gothic style.¹⁰ The same style of lettering is identified by Jerry and Sally R. Romotsky in their study, *Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy* (1976), as one of three alphabet styles regularly employed in the *plaqueasos* (graffiti insignias) of Chicano youth in Los Angeles. They suggest that this style, referred to as "Old English" and essentially the equivalent of gothic, is the most generally admired and used as a means of asserting a sense of prestige or dignity.¹¹ In fact, gothic letterforms are still frequently inscribed on walls but not so much in individual tagging as in the more monumental pieces announcing the name of a gang or in those murals which commemorate fallen gang members.

⁹Non-Asian sign shop owners have perpetuated (and may continue to perpetuate) the use of "appropriate" culturally thematic fonts by providing them without the request of the client.

¹⁰We are using "gothic" in its earlier sense as a form of black letter type rather than the sans serif typefaces now more typically associated with the term.

¹¹Jerry Romotsky and Sally R. Romotsky, *Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976), 21.

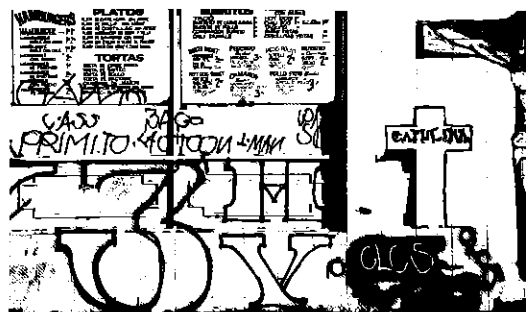
a
[6th Street, east of Alvarado
Street, near downtown
Los Angeles]

b
[Sunset Boulevard, Echo Park]

c
[Beverly Boulevard at Virgil
Avenue, south of Silver Lake]
This mural is painted on the
back wall of the parking lot of
a Mexican restaurant.

d
[Melrose Avenue] On Melrose
Avenue, a commercial
strip characterized by trendy
boutiques and eateries,
graffiti forms are used
by businesses to sell fashion
accessories derived from
street fashion and culture.

The examples here and on the
facing page suggest the way
in which different styles or
traditions of lettering may
facilitate inform one another.
Peter Q.'s work and the sign
for Yonada derive their style
from graffiti. Scorpion Tire
and the Mexican Culture mural
were applied by a brush (not a
spray can) and use gothic
lettering. Examples of gang
graffiti show spray-painted
gothic lettering.



Gothic letterforms frequently are found on hand-painted signs on businesses and buses in Mexico. Scorpion Tires is located on the same strip of Sunset Boulevard as the previous examples. The name of the business is hand-painted directly onto the side of the building in gothic letters. While Peter Q.'s lettering style is clearly working from the tradition of graffiti as indicated by his medium (spray can) and other examples of his work in the neighborhood, Scorpion Tires' brush-painted sign does not directly reference graffiti style. What is uncertain is the relationship, if any, between Scorpion Tires' and Peter Q.'s lettering (and by extension, Chicano gang graffiti) and their respective genealogies.

4.

The ethnic diversity of Los Angeles may be immediately discerned in certain mini-mall directories that consolidate multiple languages and alphabets onto a single structure. Signage of a given area may reflect the types of groups that come in contact with one another at the site of these businesses. The signs in certain neighborhoods graphically demonstrate that Los Angeles is not just a city of physical intersections, but symbolic ones as well, where different languages and cultural groups oftentimes intersect and juxtapose one another. The manner in which two languages are situated in a sign reveals the way in which a business imagines others will identify it. Varying degrees of proficiency in different languages are also reflected in signs.

On most of the business signs in Koreatown, English names are accompanied by

their transliteration into Korean. The function of the Korean writing on these signs is primarily linguistic, not graphic. In contrast, the use of a lone Chinese character on a sign that bears the English words "Chinese Restaurant" or the inscription of a business name in chop suey type has a visual, non-verbal significance. The "foreign" flourishes on such signs serve to reinforce both the cultural expectations of the potential customer and the cultural authenticity of the business. The use of this lexicon of cultural representation may demonstrate an awareness of the circulating stereotypes and the efficacy of using an existing visual vocabulary.

The next two examples of signs do not merely juxtapose, but integrate two alphabets. In these signs, the non-English words function abstractly as supporting design images rather than as literal translations for the English speaker. Miro is a Korean restaurant located on La Brea Avenue south of Wilshire Boulevard, an area dominated by car dealerships or repair shops, occasionally interrupted by miscellaneous, culturally non-specific businesses. The design of the sign emphasizes the roman characters "miro." Interspersed among these four letters are the corresponding Korean phonemes. Due to their geometric shape, arrangement, and small scale, it would not necessarily be apparent to a non-Korean reader that these represent a word. The Korean-American owner of Miro studied graphic design at Otis School of Art and Design and codedesigned the sign of his restaurant. He describes the idea behind the design and the restaurant as representative of the situation of Korean Americans

a
[La Brea Avenue, south of
Miracle Mile]
The shapes between the roman
letters and inside the o make
up the Korean transliteration
of the name "Miro."

b
[Sepulveda Boulevard, Culver
City] The shapes supporting
palm trees form the Arabic
transliteration of the name
"Sabrina."

c
[Hollywood Boulevard,
Hollywood] A Thai restaurant's
sign juxtaposes its name,
Sanamluang, in Thai letters
with the words "Thai Fast
Food" in a form of chop suey
type. Chop suey type mimics
Chinese or Japanese
calligraphy.

d
Siamese.
From Dan X. Solo, *Special-
Effects and Topical Alphabets*
(1978)



(the food served is a fusion of Korean and Western styles).¹²

Another example of this visually qualified interlinguistic play is the sign for Sabrina Restaurant and Middle East Center on Sepulveda Boulevard in an area of Culver City not characterized by the presence of other such businesses. The name "Sabrina" is given centrality, while the transliteration in Arabic is made abstract by its rendering as a landscape. The shape of the Arabic script in Sabrina also suggests the long history of calligrams and visual puns in Arabic calligraphy.

5.

Digital technology has produced a typographic renaissance that rivals the eclectic search for novelty of the nineteenth-century jobbing typefaces. Availability of software and hardware has radically changed the graphic design profession; the perforation of the envelope of professional exclusivity in the latter decades of the twentieth century is reminiscent of the blurring between "high" and "low" art and design of the previous fin-de-siècle.

Blurring between visual forms is also occurring among different cultural groups. The ascendancy of "multiculturalism" in school curricula and in the mass media signals at least a superficial awareness of cultural plurality. The use of a form of chop suey type by Sanamluang, a Thai restaurant located in a mini-mall on Hollywood Boulevard, suggests that recombinations of existing alphabets may be catalyzed by the changing demographics of the city. More recent immigration from a variety of origins may

perhaps lead to the proliferation of new forms, as new arrivals or American vendors find few roman alphabets representative of those cultures. It remains to be seen how the presence of non-roman alphabets will continue to affect the development and use of roman typefaces and how, in turn, the design of foreign alphabets and lettering will be affected by an increasingly multilingual context. The proprietors of Ocha, a Thai restaurant located in Koreatown, have juxtaposed Thai and roman versions of the name on their signage with a stylistic continuity in the design of both alphabets' letters. Han's Tires, a Korean business located in Koreatown, also juxtaposes the name of the business in two alphabets; the Korean is a phonetic transliteration of the English name. The last triangular character in the Korean portion is the equivalent of the English phoneme s. This is not the usual way that the plural is indicated in Korean. Additionally, this shape resembles a roman cursive s, imposing a symmetry between the Korean and English words.

As readers and designers of a writing system used by multiple nationalities worldwide, we may never be able to see any written forms except through a filter of the roman alphabet. We view other alphabets with disbelief and wonder (*how can anyone read that?*); unimpeded by meaning our eyes glide effortlessly around the characters. The anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer propounded the necessity of "bifocality," "seeing others against a background of oneself, and oneself against a background of others."¹³ Miro and Sabrina are very literal examples of this idea of bifocality in that one language visually backgrounds the

¹²The name of the restaurant can be read in multiple ways according to one's point of reference. English speakers assume the name refers to the artist. Korean speakers assume one of two possible meanings for the word's Korean translation: *beautiful road* or *labyrinth*.

¹³Michael M. J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," in James Clifford and G. E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 194-223.

a
[Vernon Avenue, Koreatown]

b
[Western Avenue, Koreatown]

c
[North Broadway, Chinatown]
The stylized Chinese characters, which translate as "yes" or "okay," mimic the roman letterforms of "Go Go Go."

d
[Western Avenue, Koreatown]
Mini-mall directory displaying four languages.



other, while the individual reader's literacy to some degree determines which is foregrounded. In essence, all of the examples we have cited reflect this process. Whether letterforms mimic a non-roman alphabet, resemble a material (wood, bamboo), refer to a certain writing tradition, or juxtapose different alphabets, the reading of the type on signs such as those described here is informed by the particular bifocality of the reader. As the need for multilingual information increases, designers may find it useful to examine and question circulating patterns of cultural representation in all media, the better to read and be read.

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