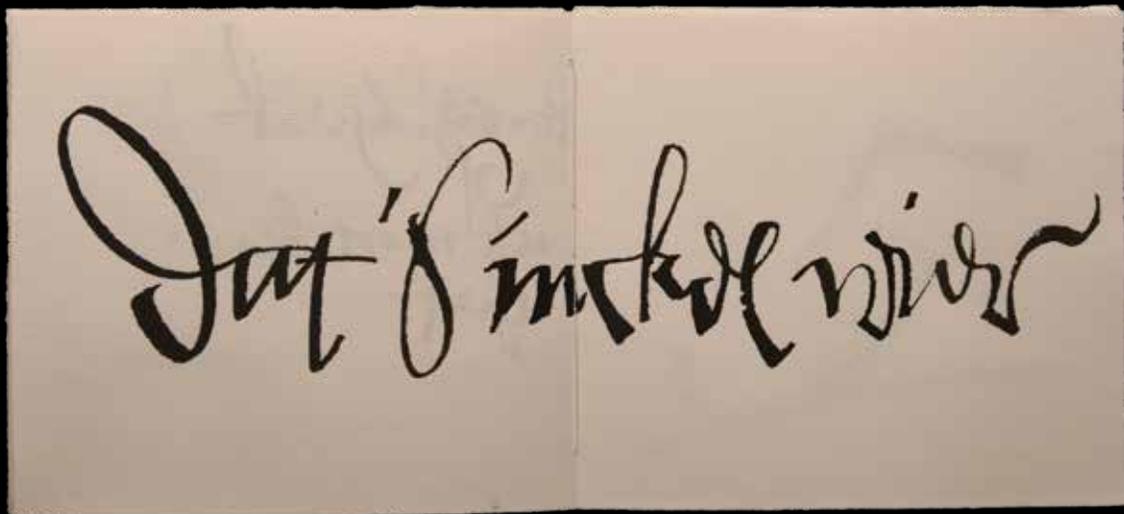


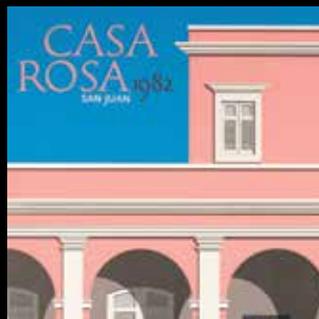
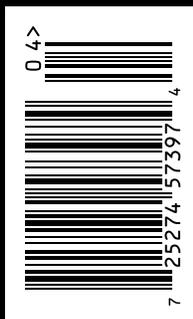
# Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 32:4 · Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord explores the natural world · Inscribed artifacts  
The graphic work of Luis Abraham Ortiz · Birgit Nass and Yuko Wada visually rhyme



WOBBELKE · Baukje Scheppink

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*A wood engraving by  
Luis Abraham Ortiz.*



Opposite: Bronze letters on the west front of the Hall of Fame for Great Americans at Bronx Community College, 1900, designed by Stanford White. The strongly looped tail of the **R** may derive from the architect's study of Italian Renaissance lettering.

Opposite, superimposed on the photograph: Four **R**s in Stevens Titling, showing glyphs with progressively longer tails.

Right: Manuscript illumination with the Annunciation in an initial **R**. From a gradual, Switzerland, ca. 1300. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Top right corner: A capital **R** from a treatise on handwriting, France, 18th century. The tail is abbreviated, but the swash that emerges from it is quite generous.

Far right: An **R** from Stevens Titling. The beautiful inflection point where the tail meets the bowl is indicated with an arrow.

The sixteenth-century lettering theorist Geoffroy Tory, quoting eminent ancient authorities, posited that the **R** was the *litera canina*—the canine letter. Describing the snarling of dogs who bare their teeth and growl before biting one another, he perfectly evoked the rolling sound of the **R** in Romance languages. He went on to explain how the ancient orators, disliking the guttural,



animal sound of the letter, often replaced it with an **s**-sound. Oddly enough, when he explained the structure of the written capital, he omitted entirely any discussion of the tail, arguably the most canine aspect of the letterform.

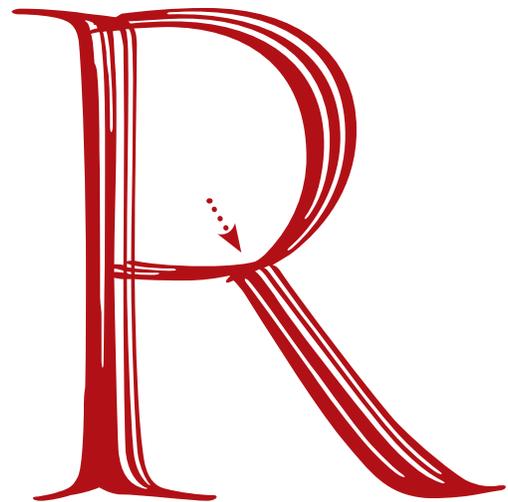
He simply said that the **R** is made of an **O** (the bowl) and an **I** (the stem). And though he did point out that the **R** is as wide as it is tall (a function of the length of the tail), he neglected to explain why this should be.

The tail of the **R** has presented challenges to lettering artists throughout the history of the Roman alphabet. Should it spring directly from the juncture of the bowl and the stem? Edward Johnston thought this was normative (See page 250 of *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering*). Or should it join to some point along the bowl, as we see in the Trajan Inscription? (Johnston does

allow for this possibility, but warns that “greater care in construction will be necessary.”) More vexing, however, is the simple fact that the tail wants room, making spacing difficult. Unless your capital has a lot of space around it, the tail of the **R** is likely to fight with the letter that follows. Throughout the centuries, lettering artists have invented many forms of the tail of the **R**, trying to domesticate its tendency to play alpha dog in a line of writing.

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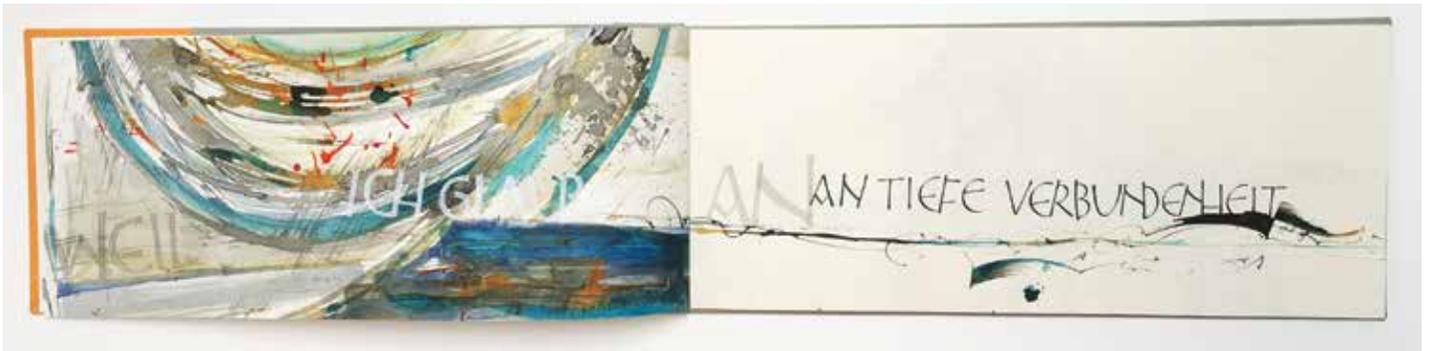
I blame Trajan. Not the emperor—Caesar Divi Nervae Filius Nerva Traianus Optimus Augustus—or the typeface designed by Carol Twombly, but Trajan, a shorthand for the style of Roman Imperial Capital epitomized by the famous inscription. It's the Trajan **R** that sets



the pattern for a broad, assertive tail.

I'm not one to put Trajan on a pedestal, or to hold it up as the Platonic ideal of the roman alphabet, but it is an exquisite style of lettering that has inspired repeated revivals. The Carolingians rediscovered Trajan forms in the ninth century, and then it was revived again in the Italian Renaissance, in the Italian Baroque period, and in the twentieth century.

It is perhaps odd that a brush-made, carved form of lettering should have had such an impact on the lettering of books, both calligraphic and



Andrea Wunderlich  
 Unromantisch  
 (Unromantic)

By Christopher Calderhead · What happens when lettering is applied to physical objects? How does the material of the artifact affect the shapes of the letters, and how does the arrangement of lettered texts respond to the form to which they are applied? I asked a group of sophomore design students to mine online public collections for objects that prominently displayed lettering, and I present here a sample of what they discovered.

All the artifacts shown here come from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, with the exception of the Chinese dentist's sign on page 28, which comes from the Wellcome Collection in London. The size of each object is indicated in centimeters. Each caption is signed by the student who selected the item described; these captions have been edited. In addition, I have added my own occasional notations in gray italics.



# INSCRIBED ARTIFACTS

## ② Bowl with Inscription

Nishapur, Iran, late 9th to early 10th century  
Earthenware; plain white slip with black slip  
decoration under transparent glaze  
The text translates: “Sovereignty is God’s.”

### Lettering follows the contour of the object

I was drawn to this piece because of its form. While it was originally a bowl, forming a complete circle, the shattered piece acts as a white band that frames the inscription nicely. The fact that the lettering is curved along this band adds a movement to the piece that I don’t think would have been as evident when the bowl was intact.

—Francesca Mahaney

## ③ Finger Ring

England, 14th century  
Gold and sapphire

The visible inscription on the hoop reads:  
RUTILANS EBORACI, which translates as  
“Rufus (?) of York.”

### Scale and material shape letterforms

I imagine carving letters on rings is pretty difficult, so that is the main reason I am impressed with this work. The sapphire contrasts beautifully against the gold. —Emily Zhang



The word Maria is inscribed in Gothic minuscules with a Lombardic capital.

The inscription on the hoop mixes minuscules and majuscules. The letters have slab serifs—rather unusual for the period.

# Luis Abraham Ortiz

## An Extraordinary Craftsman

*By David F. Gasser* · Luis Abraham Ortiz is a Puerto Rican artist and teacher who trained as a sculptor and who has gone on to distinguish himself as an exacting master of silk screen, lettering art, and stone cutting. His diverse set of creative skills has developed over an active career that spans almost five decades and shows no signs of slowing down.

Ortiz was born in 1946 in Aibonito, a small town nestled in the Sierra de Cayey, part of the mountainous area that runs through the center of Puerto Rico. As a young boy, Ortiz was drawn to art and music, availing himself of all courses available at his small elementary school. During student art exhibitions, there were not-infrequent occasions when he simultaneously won first, second, and third prizes for his paintings and drawings. When his family no longer had the means to pay for his private music lessons, he concentrated on the visual art courses taught at school. Although he was also interested in sports and physical education, Ortiz's artistic talent landed him a scholarship for undergraduate study at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (School of Fine Arts, now known as the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico) in San Juan, and he left Aibonito in 1966, charting his future course.

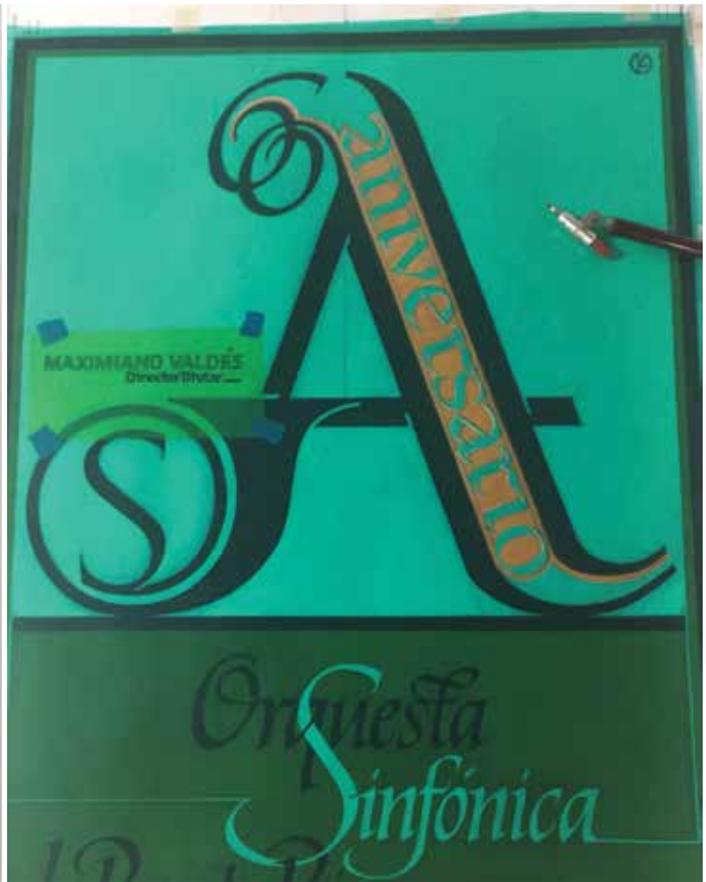
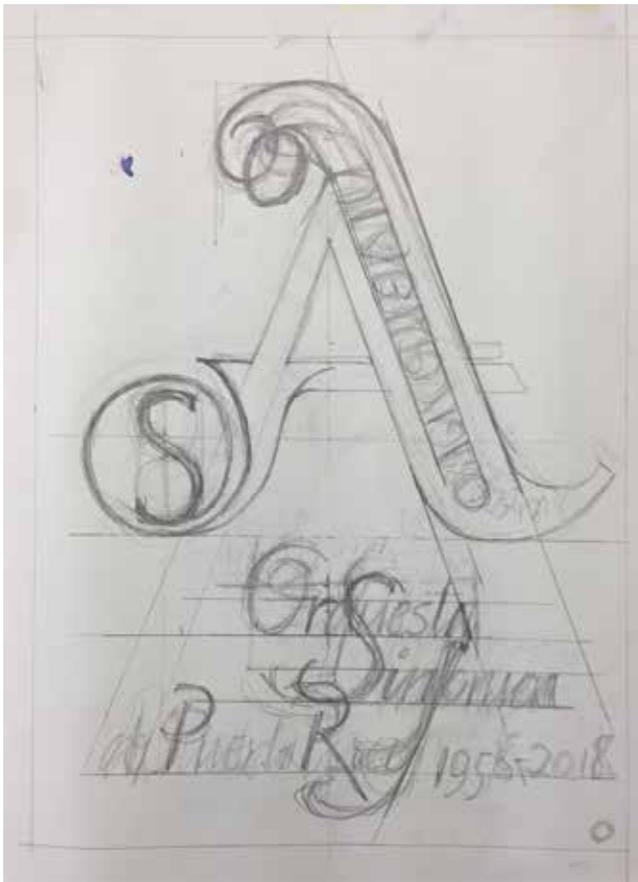


Upon entering the Escuela de Artes Plásticas, he met Lorenzo Homar, considered one of the most influential Puerto Rican artists of the twentieth century. Homar directed the graphics section of the community education division at the school and the graphics section of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (Institute of Puerto Rican Culture). He was a skilled artist and designer across a number of media, including painting and drawing, engraving, and the

*Opposite: A poster by Luis Abraham Ortiz promoting his solo exhibition at the Universidad de Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. The show later appeared at his alma mater, the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño in San Juan.*

*Above: Luis Abraham Ortiz at the exhibition in San Juan.*

*All the photos in this article are by David F. Gasser, unless otherwise noted.*



This page: Steps in the process of producing a serigraph poster. Top left, a pencil sketch. Bottom left, a tight gouache sketch. Above, the stencil in the process of cutting.

Opposite: The finished poster.

# VISUAL



Left:  
Yuko Wada  
*Evocative*  
Sumi ink, beeswax, and  
natural pigment on  
paper  
40 × 30 centimeters

Opposite:  
Birgit Nass  
*Whispering Lines*  
Mixed media and collage  
on bamboo poles  
Each pole is between 150  
and 190 centimeters tall  
and 15 centimeters in  
diameter.

The text is “*Whispering Lines*,” a series of twelve short poems by Stephanie Freienstein.

By Christopher Calderhead · A great deal of lettering art passes through my inbox, and I am often struck by visual similarities in work by different artists. I think of these as kinds of visual rhymes, where similar qualities of line and palette echo each other.

Recently, works by Yuko Wada (Yokohama, Japan) and Birgit Nass (Brietlingen, Germany) struck this chord for me. Though separated by thousands of miles, these two artists are exploring similar realms, and their work, shown here side by side, creates a satisfying and harmonious pairing.

The images shown here from Birgit Nass are of a single piece composed of a group of bamboo poles. They can be arranged and rearranged in different combinations. Yuko Wada is represented here by three different pieces.

Although the works by the two artists are radically different in scale and materials, they share an interest in the use of texture, their muted color range, and an exploration of line.