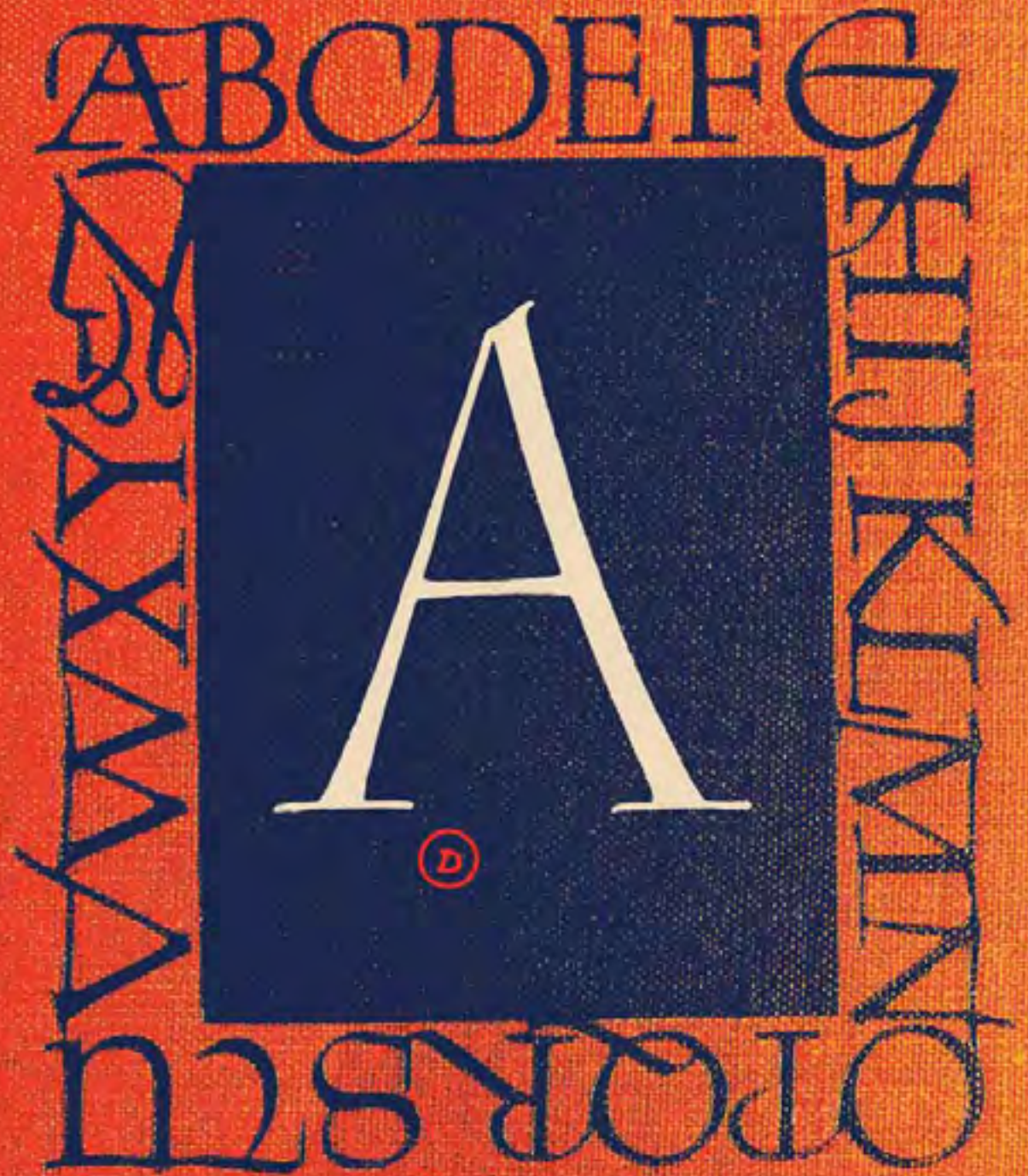


Alphabet

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IMAGINE YOUR LIFE BEING DIVERTED BY A LINE; following that line into a hostile political and social environment, surrounded by people whose language you do not speak, enduring an unimaginable loneliness in crowded, dirty conditions, and fighting to learn about that line from a man reluctant to teach you, in a society that nearly forbade him to teach at all. After slowly earning his willingness to share his secrets, you must commit to ten years' study. And you do. That must be some line.

After the line becomes part of you and is brought home, you find your fascination with it wants it to grow larger than your body can execute without injury while expressing all your visions of nature, art and music, at the same time as it is breaking past the limits of the line's traditions, now inviting scorn from two cultures, the one of your hard-won education, as well as your

home country's. But still, you and your passion for the line persevere.

Please excuse the overly dramatic opening, but this actually does describe Fabienne Verdier's fantastic

FABIENNE VERDIER

adventures and her commitment to her art. She was a rebellious French art student when her enchantment with the line forced her to follow it to the source. She graduated from École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Toulouse in 1983, but was disenchanted with her education. "The way we were taught to represent things," she said, in an article in *Kinfolk* magazine last year, citing geometric construction, the laws of perspective, vanishing points, "it was like a skeleton. It was too rigid. All those things trapped us. . . . It seemed dead."

She was awarded a scholarship to study traditional landscape painting in China at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, but in the early 1980s, this was a dangerous endeavor even with the seeming approval of the scholarship. Mao's Cultural Revolution had driven many traditional artists and teachers into disgraced retirement and the few still allowed to teach and practice were in precarious standing. "It was a great, great tragedy," she said in the *Kinfolk* article. "It took me a lot of time to find the last old scholars who hadn't been rehabilitated. And they were afraid to teach me anything at all because I was a foreigner, and because I was a woman on top of that. There were no women who practiced that form of art." She was treated with



suspicion and her fellow students ostracized her, and were even encouraged by the Communist Bureau to do so by a notice on her door.

She met calligraphy master Huang Yuan, but had to work for months, on her own initiative, copying characters and leaving them for him daily, before he would agree to teach her. "He told me he accepted to transmit his art to me, that he would request special authorizations, because of what he saw in my exercises, in my tenacity. Then he added that if I wanted to learn, it would be ten years or nothing. The culture was so complicated, it was the only way it would work. So I accepted. . . . I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

She traded in her Western way of painting on a vertical easel and made a 90° shift — painting with a vertical brush on a horizontal surface (usually the floor) and has worked that way ever since.

During her ten years in China, she managed to find other artists to teach her as well, but Huang Yuan was the only one approved to do so. The rest of her education there was clandestine. Her other teachers were all 80 to 100 years old—the revolution wanted to dismiss the traditions of the past and let them die out. These were the last masters.

Chinese writing is a form of abstraction founded in nature [see page 27]. In the short film, *Moving With the World*, she says, "When I paint a tree, I become a tree. When I paint water, I become water. The same with tectonic forces. It's something self-generating. I feel it powerfully in my heart, it comes out in abstract form." Later in the film, she relates what Huang Yuan told her: "You must allow yourself to be filled with the essence of what is alive within you. Perhaps one day poetry will emerge from your brush and you will have something to say."

Huang Yuan had started her training by allowing her to make only a single stroke, and never quite approving of her results. He was leading her to capture the *qi*, the vital energy of what each stroke represented. "I was perplexed by a form of simplicity that was so complex." After she returned home to France, Verdier



Left: *Cinabre et sérénade*, 1997, 77 x 55 inches.
Above: *Photo by Dolores Marat*.

PHOTOS BY RAOUL MARTINEZ

WC: Huxley House was on East 45th Street. It was in the same building as Continental Type Founders [important, early importers of European type], which was of interest because Continental was run by Melbert Cary, who was the one who suggested that I go to Offenbach and work with Koch. (Cary's widow is the one who gave a good deal [Cary's massive collection of printing books] to the Rochester Institute of Technology, [which became] The

requirements that I would not understand as well. But they were interested—the liturgical arts people—in what I had experienced because Koch was very active in church art and did a lot of work with it, and in fact was given a doctorate for his work with church art.

OO: Through Warren's concern with lettering I became very much interested myself and worked for a long time as a letter artist, freelancing with book publishers. I had become particularly interested in lettering—in letterforms and the evolution of the alphabet. When I started freelancing, I did more lettering than anything else. One of my first regular clients was Henry Quinan, art director of the *Woman's Home Companion*.

WC: We are now getting toward the end of what I call my lettering period with the production of this book [Chappell's *Anatomy of Lettering*, written as a tribute to Koch after his death]. I could feel that I had enough of the alphabet. And the establishment of my relationship with Boardman Robinson is just around the corner. I'm teaching at the League, wood engraving and decorative design. In the fall of 1934, Robinson came to New York, and we talked about what was next, and he said that they were building the Fine Arts Center at Colorado Springs and so he wanted me to come out there and be his assistant. In June 1935, Lydia and I left New York and lettering and headed to Colorado Springs. In the meantime, Oscar had come to work [freelancing] with me, and I turned over my *Woman's Home Companion* lettering and other typographic work to him.

A little later Oscar was anxious to go out and be with him [Robinson], too, so in 1938 he went out and spent at least a year and a half there.

Q: I presume that Oscar gave up this connection with *Women's Home Companion* to go do this?

Well, yes, he was doing quite well, because he's a prodigious worker, and he tended to work as much at night as in the day, and also he was active socially where printers and typographers got together. He was well known.

OO: Manuscript writing wasn't popular in the '30s, but it has become so in recent years. W. A. Dwiggins, one of the chief exponents of good letterforms, was

really more interested in design than lettering, so he has a wonderful feeling for letterforms as elements of design—he writes a beautiful hand. I think that Dwiggins's work for Knopf through the years is one of the things that has made Knopf an outstanding publisher. Dwiggins's feeling for space and design is magnificent.

There's another American calligrapher, John Benson, who practically nobody outside of the small group of letter enthusiasts knows—a stone cutter in Rhode Island. His shop, the John Stevens shop, has been continuously productive since the middle 18th century. He also teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design, and is really a wonderfully able person.

Those people were not active in New York publishing at the time I started, which was one reason there was a chance for a young smart-aleck like me to come in and get "the breaks." There were never any real problems in my career. We never made a lot of money but we always got along fine. A lot of my income came from jacket work—as a matter of fact, I should think the majority of it. I did practically no advertising, and the rest of my time was spent on book design. I did try some illustrations—got to think I was pretty good—and in 1938, I went out to work with Boardman Robinson in Colorado Springs, again as an assistant, to perfect myself, you see, so that I could be a great illustrator.

In one of the nicest ways possible, over a period of about a year and a half, he pointed out to me that I ought to stick to book designing.

[In a 1947 letter to Theo Jung, Ogg wrote, "How I envy your residence in Colorado. Perhaps the happiest years of our life were 1938 and '39 in Colorado Springs with Boardman Robinson."]

WC: Then [after returning to New York from Colorado], Oscar became involved with several publishers, and one of them was Crowell, and his friendship with Robert Crowell lasted throughout Oscar's life and rather late in his life he did his third book on lettering for Crowell. [The 26 Letters was published in 1948 by Thomas Y. Crowell Company. Chappell must have been referring to the third edition

here, which was released in the last year of Ogg's life. Crowell published all three.]

OO: At that time, the '30s, lettering based on traditional forms was pretty much unknown. The first book I know about for general consumption, which was intended to indicate to letter artists where the forms came from, was a thing I did in 1940 and published by Harper, a book called *An Alphabet Source Book*.

Everybody knows that the letters originally were something different from what they are now, but nobody had put the facts down in terms students and

THE ANATOMY OF LETTERING



Above: Just one of Warren Chappell's famous treatments of Horace's quote, "The written word remains."

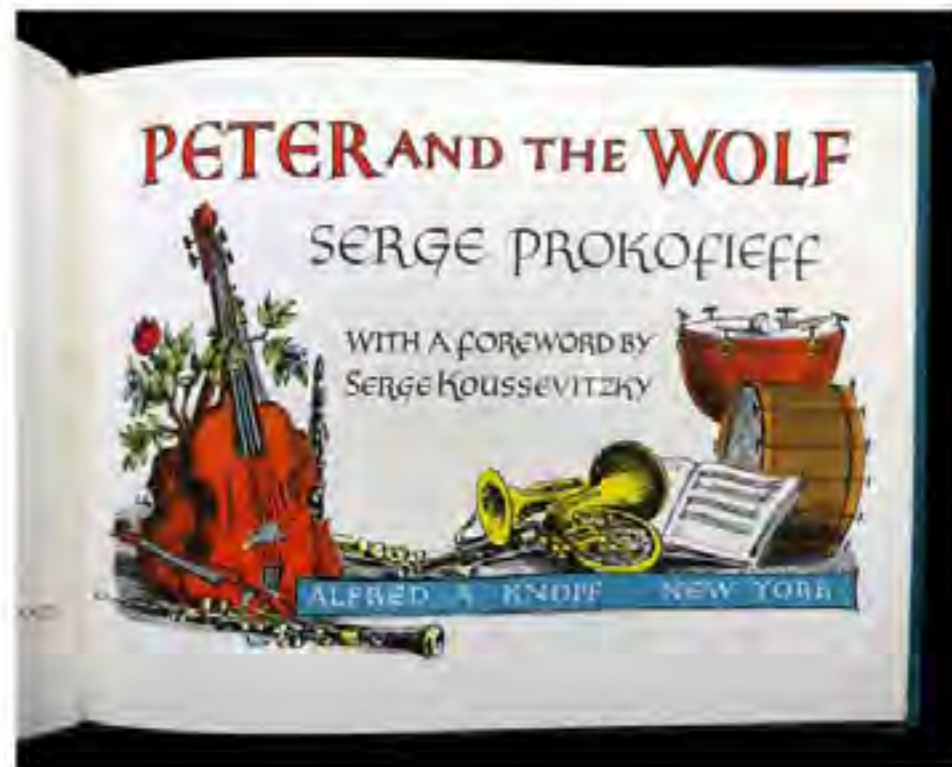
Opposite: Chappell's dedication to Rick Cusick, 1980, on the bastard page in his *The Anatomy of Lettering*.

Cary Library.) In that same building was Typographic Service, also one of the outstanding type houses (that is, for hand composition) in New York.

Oscar had opportunities to work for various clients of Huxley House doing outside work. He also did some things for the Catholic Church through their liturgical art society, because those who were running the society had approached me about doing work for them, and I felt that Oscar would be even better because he had become a Catholic when he married Margaret, and would know certain things about the

artists could really make use of. The notion behind the book—my philosophy of lettering, so to speak—is that since the alphabet's beginnings were calligraphic, its further forms should take calligraphy into account. In other words, distortion from the evolutionary form can go only so far and then the form stops being a letter—it stops, at any rate, being a good letter.

We also did a book, *The 26 Letters*, published by T. Y. Crowell in 1948, which told the story of the alphabet for young people. It's been extraordinarily popular. [Ogg also produced *Lettering as a Book Art*, published by McKibbin in 1949, and wrote the introduction of *Three Classics of Italian Calligraphy*, the 1953 Dover reissue of the writing books of Arrighi, Tagliente and Palatino.] [Continued on page 28.]



permits cleaning up and changing until everything is right. Manuscript writing, on the other hand, is very like playing the piano: if one doesn't practice every day, one doesn't keep his hand in. It isn't that a trained penman forgets, but he does lose control, and absolute control is necessary for beautiful writing.

WC: Oscar's class at Columbia was a very successful one. A number of good calligraphers who are working now studied with Oscar in that class. He liked it and I think that he would've kept it up if it just had not been too much, plus the fact that in 1951 he moved to Stamford [Connecticut]. Carrying on an evening class at Columbia was a little bit too much.

But his activity outside [the Book of the Month Club] continued. Oscar had, for instance, put together *The New York Times* printing museum. They have had one that Elmer Adler had set up, but they wanted to reorganize, and Adler asked Oscar to do it.

Q: This is the set of display cases they have in the building at 43rd Street?

Yes, and I'm not sure that is still going, but it was the kind of thing that he was doing. He was a member of the Grolier Club and the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the Society of Typographic Arts in Chicago.

Q: He was more of a clubman than you are?

Well, yes, very much, very much.

Q: This period of 1939, you were almost altogether engaged in designing books, isn't that right?

Oh yes. And after 1938 when I did *Trajanus* [the typeface he designed for Stempel in Germany], I didn't do anything with type until the 1950s.

In 1953 I was redesigning the essential publications of the Federal Reserve System, that came about simply because Harry Scherman [Book of the Month Club's founder] was a member of a group that was interested in economics, the Committee for Economic Development, and he told a Federal Reserve member to "just send your problems up to the Book of the Month Club and we'll take care of it for you." I don't know whether we did

mention the fact before that on this they were afraid that since Eisenhower was going to trim the budget and all that sort of thing, and make government free of government spending, they were afraid that they couldn't afford to pay anything for design, so I gave them my time. The essential publication of the Federal Reserve—the story of what the Federal Reserve System is all about—has a little note at the back thanking me for donating my services.

WC: In 1968 or '69, Oscar was asked to do part of *The Times* project on the history of printing, and we were to do it together, but Oscar backed out of that.

The subject was *A Short History of the Print of Word*, a book that was commissioned by *The New York Times*. The man who started the book division for the *Times* is named Alan Gilman. He has been in the book business for very long time and like so many others, he started out with Alfred Knopf. I was to do this with Oscar. He wanted Oscar to be in it, but Oscar backed away and felt that he was too involved with the Book of the Month Club to even think about it. But both [Knopf and Gilman] kept after me, and so I was essentially painted in and had to undertake it.



One of the things that would make this different from the kind of books that I would've done on my own would be handling of all printing, not just books. In other words, when and how did newspapers start? Magazines? Who started the first magazine? And it knocks your head off, practically, when you find out who did. Have you any idea?

Q: Benjamin Franklin?

No, Daniel Defoe. And in order to have something to keep the magazine going, he serialized *Robinson Crusoe*.

WC: [Speaking of Knopf] I remember one case where he said, "You know, there's only one thing I can't get into their heads down at the production department—if I'm going to lose money on a book, I'd rather lose money on a good-looking one. ..."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY WARREN CHAPPELL
(Courtesy of the Harrison Collection of Calligraphy & Lettering, SFPL)

Top: Peter and the Wolf, 1940, lettering by Hollis Holland, who worked with both Chappell & Ogg.

Right: Portrait of Alfred A. Knopf for the back jacket of his memoir, *Portrait of a Publisher*, 1965.

Opposite: From *The Proverbial Bestiary*, 1982, lettering by Rick Cutick.

