

Chapter One The Invention of Writing

The contemporary graphic designer is heir a rich ancestry - The Samaritan who invented writing, Egyptian artists who combined words and images on papyrus, Chinese block printers, medieval illuminators and fifteenth-century printers who designed early European printed books. The concept of art for arts sake, a beautiful object that exists solely for its aesthetic value, did not develop until the 19th century. Until then the images that people made were linked to their function in society.

Marks, symbols, pictures, or letters drawn upon a surface became a graphic counterpart of the spoken word or thought. The development of writing and visible language has its earliest origins in simple pictures. There is a close connection between drawing of pictures and the marking of writing. Early people used pictures as an elementary way to record and transmit information.

These early picture were made for survival and were created for utilitarian or ritualistic purposes. They may have been used to teach, or in a magical rite to gain control over the animal. The random placement and different scale of the animals in a haphazard placement show the prehistoric peoples lack of structure. They are called pictographs.

Pictographs were the beginning of pictorial art that evolved into writing. The images ultimately became the symbols for spoken language. By the late Paleolithic period, some Pictographs and petroglyphs had been reduced to the point of almost resembling letters. This is an example of petroglyphs found on rocks throughout the western portion of the United States. These figures are similar to other petroglyphs found all over the world.

Mesopotamia “the land between rivers” was a fertile plain, which lay between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Here ancient humans established a village culture. The leap from village culture to high civilization occurred after the Sumerian people arrived before 3000bc. Where they came from remains a great mystery.

The Sumerians invented a system of Gods, headed by Anu, who was supposed to be the God of the heavens. As a result an intricate system of god-man relationships was developed. City’s and social order rose and the invention of writing brought about an intellectual revolution that had a huge impact on social order, economic progress, and cultural developments.

The massive temple or ziggurat, which looked like a massive stepped building, dominated the city. Inside, the temple priests had enormous power as they controlled the inventories of the gods, king, and tended to the needs of the masses. Writing may have actually evolved because these structures contained an economic system that necessitated it. In this relief from around 500bc, scribes are shown listing the spoils of war.

On the right here, we see a clay tablet which shows how the Sumerian symbols for star, head, and water evolved from early pictographs and then evolved into a form of early writing called cuneiform. This early Sumerian clay pictographic tablet contained the beginnings for the development of writing. They are the earliest known forms of writing. It appears to list commodities by pictographic drawings and are accompanied by numerals and personal names. Information is structured into horizontal and vertical zones.

Pictographs eventually became a form of abstract sign writing called cuneiform. Cuneiform means wedge shaped, due to the marks made by their writing tools as well as the shape of the tools themselves. The original writing tool, a sharp pointed stylus was replaced with a triangular tipped one. Now the mechanics changed also, as the new stylus was pushed instead of pulled through the clay.

Ideas began to be represented by symbols (the sign for sun meant light or day) and picture symbols began to represent the sounds of objects depicted instead of the objects themselves. Cuneiform eventually became rebus writing. Rebus writing are pictures and or

pictographs representing words and syllables with the same or similar sound as the object depicted.

Pictures were used as phonograms or graphic symbols for sounds. The highest development of cuneiform was its use of abstract signs to represent syllables, which are sounds made by combining more elementary sounds. It was very difficult to learn. Writing took on important magical and ceremonial qualities. Those who could write were held in great esteem by those who could not.

The knowledge explosion made possible by writing was astounding. Libraries were organized and contained thousands of tablets about religion, math, law, medicine and astronomy. Literature sprang up in the form of poetry, myths, hymns, epics and legends on clay tablets. Chronicles of the reigns of the kings were detailed.

Society stabilized itself with the Standardization of weights and measurements and the rule of laws. The Code of Hammurabi is written in cuneiform on an 8 foot tall stele (which is an inscribed stone slab used for commemorative purposes). The stele has 282 laws and punishments listed. It was placed in a prominent place in the temple.

This is a picture of the stele bearing the code and of a detail of the code. Mesopotamian scribes had a delicacy in their strokes in a partitioned space. Two natural by-products of the rise of this culture were the ownership of property and the specialization of crafts and trades. To identify who made something (a pottery piece), establish ownership, or certifying commercial documents Mesopotamian cylinder seals provided a forgery proof method of identification or authenticity.

These small cylinders were rolled over a slab of clay or pressed into an object as a “trademark” of the owner. Many had holes in them and were worn around the neck or as a bracelet. Cutters of these seals developed great skill and a refined sense of design. These cylinders became prized as ornaments and status symbols.

With the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon came the last glory of Mesopotamian culture. Babylon and Mesopotamia fell to the Persians. By the time of the birth of Christ, great cities like Babylon were in ruins. The gift of writing was passed to the Egyptians and Phoenicia. The Egyptians evolved a complex writing based on pictographs and the Phoenicians replaced the complexity of the cuneiform with simple phonetic signs.

The earliest known hieroglyphs date from about 3100bc, during the First Dynasty of King Zet. The last known people to use this language were fourth century AD Egyptian temple priests. The current powers of this time, the Greeks and Romans, thought the symbols were of magical nature because their meaning was so closely guarded.

When early Egyptians scribes had a hard word to express in visual form, they probably devised a rebus, using pictures for sounds to write the desired word. In this square you have Egyptian hieroglyphs that illustrate the rebus principle—bee, leaf, sea and sun. In English this could mean belief and season.

The Rosetta stone was found in August of 1799 by Napoleon’s troops in the Egyptian town of Rosetta. It is a black slab inscribed in three different scripts: Egyptian Hieroglyphics, Egyptian Demotic script and Greek. It was realized that the inscription was probably the same in three languages. Jean-Francois Champollion did the major deciphering of the stone. In 1822 he had a major breakthrough that enabled him to build a large library of glyphs that was published in his Egyptian Dictionary and Egyptian Grammar books.

In this hieroglyphic we see Champollions alphabet deciphering on the cartouches of Ptolemy and Cleopatra. These are the approximate phonetic sounds. A cartouche is like a plaque which contained the glyphs of important names. By the time of the New Kingdom (1570-1058bc) their writing system had over 700 hieroglyphs. Over 100 of these remained word pictures (rebus) and the remainder became phonograms. Egyptians had a incredible sense of

design and their hieroglyphs were everywhere. They also painted them and used them as jewelry, tomb decorations, furniture adornment, utensils etc.

Papyrus came from a plant *Cyperus papyrus* that grew along the Nile River. The plant was utilized for many things in Egyptian culture. (sails, mats, cloth, rope, sandals)

The papyrus sheets were pasted together and rolled into a scroll. Those who could read and write, called scribes, were highly respected and afforded many privileges. You were identified as a scribe by the trademark wooden palette carried by a scribe.

Here you have the two depressions for ink cakes and in the middle you have a slot to hold your brushes. The palette has two areas to hold the ink cakes, a small bag to hold the ink cakes and a holder for the brushes.

Eventually a cursory hieratic script, a kind of pen stroke, a simplification of the hieroglyphic book hand, was developed for religious writings. A rush pen was used. From this an even more abstract form of script called demotic came into use for commercial and legal writing. These two scripts supplemented rather than replaced hieroglyphs.

In this picture on the bottom you see the hieroglyph for scribe, a drawstring sack for dried ink cakes, and a reed brush holder. This is shown in 4 different styles to illustrate the evolution of the glyph–hieroglyph, hieroglyphic manuscript hand and hieratic script and demotic script.

A preoccupation with death and a strong belief in the afterlife compelled the Egyptians to evolve a complex mythology about the journey into the afterlife. With the dawning of the New Kingdom papyrus manuscripts were brought into use for funerary texts. Scribes and artists were commissioned to prepare funerary papyri, called the Chapters of Coming Forth by Day. Also known as the Book of the Dead.

The book of the dead was written in a first person narrative by the deceased and placed in the tomb to help triumph over the dangers of the underworld. The artists who did these were called upon to foretell what would occur after the each subject died and entered the afterlife. A consistent design format evolved for the illustrated Egyptian papyri. And attention to the placement of text and illustrations was considered. Horizontal and vertical divisions enabled the functional integration of text and image to be aesthetically pleasing.

A person would commission a funerary papyrus or purchase a stock copy and have one's name written in the appropriate places. The buyer would select the number and choice of chapters, the quality of illustrations, and the length.

Originally the Egyptians used cylinder seals to mark items as pottery early in their history. Scarabs were eventually used. The scarab beetle was considered magical or sacred. In the Twelfth Dynasty carved scarab embalsms were used as identification seals. The bottom of the scarab was engraved with a hieroglyphic inscription. Sometimes this was mounted on a ring. Although little evidence of scarabs actually being used for sealing has survived, the scarabs value as a talisman, ornament and symbol of resurrection was probably a primary use. This culturally rich and wonderfully advanced civilization survived for over 3 thousand years. What are their visual communication legacies? Hieroglyphs, papyri and illustrated manuscripts. Their innovations paved the way for the creation of the alphabet and graphic communications in Phoenicia and the Greco-Roman empire.