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WRITTEN SIGNS

Written signs, which originally reproduced the environment pictorially so as to convey concepts, passed through the stages of symbolic letters to change into the temporal graphic signatures of sounds. Our task today is to grant letters their legitimate place in the history of art and to create a dictionary of symbols so as to decipher the phenomena of art and, in general, of the human psyche whose most complex movements are expressed with the aid of symbolic signs.

ALPHABETS

A system of graphic designations of the sounds of speech by means of which human thought, translated into verbal speech, can be consolidated in a visual form. The number of alphabetic signs (letters) varies from people to people, depending upon the number of sounds peculiar to their speech. The alphabet derives from ideographic signs (q.v.) which, at the dawn of cultural history, served to express not sounds, but entire concepts. By means of a successive process of evolution, ideographic signs began at first to express a single word, then a syllable (syllabic signs), and, finally, sound; in this way, they turned into letters.

The origin of almost all existing systems of alphabet is the Phoenician-Hebrew one which goes back to X-IX B.C. In turn, this also finds a prototype in one of the written systems of ancient times with their ideographic-
syllabic-phonic mix. The written system of Egypt can serve as an example of the cuneiform characters of Assyria and Babylon and the characters of Cretan-Aegean and Hittite cultures. Subsequently, the Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet broke up into four independent groups that modified the alphabetic signs depending upon the phonetic demands of the language and artistic style germane to a particular nation and particular era. These groups are: I. Semitic, consisting of the family of the Semitic and South Semitic alphabets: Ancient Hebrew, Arameic, square character Hebrew, and other alphabets relate to the former; in the meantime Arabic writing developed out of this via the Syrian alphabets which in turn produced the Persian, Turkish, and Afghan alphabets. On the other hand, hence also derives the branch of the Tatar-Uighur and Turkic alphabets which molded the Mongol and Kalmyk alphabetic signs. Finally, the South Semitic family gave rise to Ethiopian and Abyssinian scripts. One of the branches of the South Semitic alphabet, i.e., the Sabaean alphabet, was the forefather of the Indian group, i.e., II, which then broke up into alphabets of the Devanagari adjacent to the Tibetan, Bengal, and Kashmir scripts and Nepalese, whence emanated the Cingalese, Siamese, Javanese, and other alphabets. The Iranian group, i.e., III, which was influenced by Persian icon-painting, is now represented by the Georgian and Armenian alphabets. The European group, i.e., IV, divided into two branches via the so called original Cadmean form of Greek script: the first, Eastern branch of the Greek alphabet (Ionic or Athenian) then gave rise to the Ancient Slavic alphabet which then turned into the contemporary secular Russian, Serbian, and Bulgarian alphabets. The second, Western branch (Chalkidike) evolved into Latin via the group of Etruscan alphabets, whence came all contemporary European alphabets.

During their historical development alphabets interacted and influenced each other in various ways. Consequently, establishing the derivation of each alphabet is a very complex task, especially when we lack the necessary written monuments. An essential condition of cultural development — being the sole means of consolidating and conveying cultural values for future generations — alphabets also possess the ability to absorb and reflect the artistic peculiarities and styles of a particular era or nation. Consequently, from an esthetic viewpoint, each distinctive alphabet can be assessed on the grounds of its different kinds of writing adapted to different aims and integrated totally and artistically into the object upon which they are inscribed.