

Stephen Houston

What writing looks like*

Beginning as puffs of air, channeled and shaped by the throat and mouth, words travel out from the body to reach other human ears. After cognitive processing, the puffs release their message, and communication ensues.¹ But words create their own problems. How is an assortment of meaningful exhalations, clicks, articulations, bellows, flutings, and affrications made more permanent and their recollection preserved beyond the memory of speakers and listeners? As many have observed, that is exactly what writing does. It takes ephemeral and invisible words and transforms them into fixed and visible graphs, to be seen as much as any picture.² The ancient Maya, endowed with a rich legacy of texts and images, left tangible evidence that they thought about writing-as-image, as physical objects ripe for representation, couched in ideas about the pictorial essence of script.

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1 “Communication” is sometimes not the right label. Speaking to oneself can be seen as a disorder in Western psychiatry, which orders up lithium and other drugs to control such an impulse. To more recent thinking, chatter without an audience helps to organize the brain and to direct the tasks we perform (Kirkham et al. 2012). Moreover, in communicating with others, lip-reading offers a non-phonetic option, provided that labial movement can be clearly seen (Auer 2010).

2 Tactile scripts like braille and the “night writing” of Charles Barbier de la Serre present another story of sensory messaging. They are, as relatively recent innovations, far more restricted in use (Weygand 2009, 39; 299).

What is ‘writing’?

Let us first reflect on a broader theme at Freiburg. The fact of the matter is that the ability to picture language creates its own kinds of play. Other graphic possibilities present themselves, other ways of linking with images. Added information becomes available. The claim that writing concerns only a phonic or linguistic message is a partial understanding at best, misleading at worst. Frolics with graphs, a luxuriation in their visible, material nature – these can be as important as any representation of sound. In larger scope, this play touches on an unavoidable debate, implicit in many presentations at the gathering behind this volume: does ‘writing’ need a reset as a concept and a label?

One perspective sees writing as an explicit, phonic recording, with a commitment to transparency and precise representations of sound. The language behind orderly marks is the target. Readers rather than viewers matter most, and complex meanings require specification in sound to be recorded effectively.³ Those engaged in the decipherment of ancient writing tend naturally to such convictions, which lend themselves to tangible, reproducible, and far-reaching results.⁴ But there is another set of ideas, that multiple graphic systems can exist all at once, that the targets are not languages per se but useable, accessible meanings. Such contents are equal in value – indeed, in moral weight – to alphabetized prose. To state otherwise is to engage, it is said, as among the Puritans of New England, in “denigration” and “repression of [...] dialogic potential”, thus ignoring “the non-alphabetic literatures of America’s indigenous peoples”.⁵

These views have merit yet they may also overstate their case. There are many systems of notation, often of impressive complexity. The inarguable fact is that their intricacy and ingenuity, be it of *wampum* or Marquesan tattoos (examples adduced by the author cited above), command respect and admiration. At the same time, an ethical critique of particular labels may assume that all such graphs and procedures are the same, regardless of time and place. This proclaims a doubtful homogeneity of human marks. From much evidence, graphs are heterogeneous. They are as informed by history or change as any other human activity. For example, the winter counts and other hide-markings of Plains pictography mentioned in the Freiburg gathering clearly shift under the influence of European graph-making, especially in narrative structure and the nominal tagging of figures.⁶ They were conceived both as meaningful marks, *wówapi* in Lakota, and as *aides mémoires* for recitative per-

3 See Sampson 1985, 27; see also Drucker 2014; Hudson 1995, 32–33.

4 E.g., Houston et al. 2001, 7–8.

5 Brander Rasmussen 2012, 78; 122; 139–140.

6 Howard 1960.

formance.⁷ Yet, in their formatting and use of graphs, winter counts and accounts of heroic deeds flourished and developed under the influence of non-indigenous collectors.⁸ Indigenous graphs are not so much hermetic in nature as conditioned by encounters with other systems.

As Bruno Latour notes,⁹ graphs transform a “mutable immobile” (speech) into an “immutable mobile” (marks that can be moved around but in more fixed or durable form; in this essay, Latour is concerned with two-dimensional paper generated by current scientific research, far less, say, with the audio recordings or petroglyphs that subvert his dichotomy). Alongside this transformation is likely to be, in all human messaging, a commensurate presence of doubt, a condition of not-believing, even counter-credulity. As a result, since most human messages requires a human messenger, there is space for an ‘authoritative witness’. By speaking or marking, that person claims certain things to be true. For Miyako Inoue,¹⁰ the profession and acceptance of truth also involves the ‘verbatim’, or, in sociolinguistic jargon, the “durable indexicality [that] materializes the social epistemology of evidence, accountability, and authenticity.” Code-breakers would put this in plain text as: “the person making the marks personally backs what is asserted to be true, by their status and role in society and by the palpable, visible testimony of those marks, there for all to see”. Latour himself saw that, by this means, “the few may dominate the many”,¹¹ although he consistently downplayed the hard work of building consensus (among the Lakota winter counts, to give one example, prior discussion and agreement underwrote the acceptance of true things).¹² As Inoue phrases it, those who are not accountable, who only copy what someone else says, are agentively “inert”. Verbatim acts can include: “(a) speech to speech (oral transmission of discourse such as myths and epics), (b) speech to text (parliamentary records, court proceedings, dictation), (c) text to speech (recitation, play script, scripted speech), and (d) text to text (medieval manuscript reproduction)”.¹³ These do not exist on their own. There has to be a larger circle of readers and listeners. And, presumably, the overriding ambition is to make information credible. To write or mark is to offer claims and lobby for their acceptance. A concrete durability enhances the effort.

There are many kinds of ‘denigration’, some more subtle than others. A proposal that images or semantically freighted objects are ‘writing’ is inherently a projection. It asserts that a Western concept of phonic writing must apply to all graphs. But do

7 Burke 2007, 1–2.

8 Burke 2007, 3.

9 Latour 1986.

10 Inoue 2018, 217.

11 Latour 1986, 27.

12 Burke 2007, 2.

13 Inoue 2018, 219.

notations need a text or incorporation into ‘non-alphabetic literatures’? Consider Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp’s dismay over a “textualist bias” and “discursivism” that “misjudges the epistemic power” of images.¹⁴ Then a final feature: the act of ‘reading’ may involve graphs that are only accessible through a mystic process of gnosis – that is, they were never intended to be ‘read’ other than by inspired revelation.¹⁵ Virtuous nomenclature is a commendable thing. But, in immediate practice, specialists may find it more useful to establish precisely how sound and meaning are recorded, how that content is assembled, elicited, evaluated, and by which acts of quiet reflection or public performance. Some marks have a determined, specified relation to isolable, reproducible sound. Others do not. The former still require brains (‘soft storage’) to process and contextualize records of sound and meaning, but the marks (‘hard storage’) have an undoubted fixity of phonic reference. By long convention and practice, this can be called ‘writing’.

What is ‘pictured’ writing?

How and when did phonographic writing operate as pure picture, and why should we study them? The answer to the second is clear: images of writing permit local views of practice, of such graphs in use, with particular kinds of equipment, people, and physical settings, along with glimpses of scribal roles, features thought worthy of note, and relative presence and absence of writing. Consider two relevant images. The first is an ancient Egyptian carving in granodiorite of the scribe Haremhab, from Dynasty 18, ca. 1336–1323 BC (**Fig. 1**).¹⁶ Two texts on this monument are legible but reveal a curious pivot of viewership. The inscription on the scribe’s lap, depicted as though a scroll, is a hymn to Thoth, deity of scribes, but situated so as to be ‘read’ by the image of the sculptor; in contrast, the text to the front would be scanned by those making offerings to Haremhab. The same pivot occurs on a more fragmentary monument from the same dynasty, a carving of the scribe Amenhotep that is now in the British Museum.¹⁷ The scroll is also ‘read’ by the courtier, but its text situates the monument socially (“a favor from the king”) and physically (the temple of Amun in Ipet-sut).

Yet another image is a relevant scene painted by Douris in Athens, at c. 490–485 BC (**Fig. 2**). In it, a schoolmaster holds a partly opened scroll, whose text reads: ΜΟΙΣΑΜΟΙ ΑΦΙΣΚΑΜΑΝΔΡΟΝ ΕΥΡΩΝΑΡΧΟΜΑΙ ΑΕΙΝΔΕΝ.

14 Krämer – Bredekamp 2013, 20–21.

15 Déléage 2018.

16 Scott 1989, 443–446.

17 #EA103; Scott 1989, 380–382.



Fig. 1: Haremhab as scribe of the king, Dynasty 18, reign of Aya or Tutankhamun, ca. 1336–1295 BC, Memphis, Ptah Temple, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. V. Everit Macy, 1923m Accession Number:23.10.1 (CCo 1.0).



Fig. 2: A schoolroom scene by the painter Douris, red-figure kylix, c. 490–485 BC, Athens; Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen 2285 (rendering by author).

Translations of this sentence seem to vary by the translator, but it concerns a Homeric appeal to a muse and a reference to a suitable place for singing by the banks of the fast-flowing Scamander.¹⁸ One theory suggests that we are looking at a bemused schoolmaster and a botched text from an “F” student: a subtle joke about dullards.¹⁹ A representation (a painting by Douris of a scroll and a schoolmaster) embeds a second representation (a record of sound and meaning in an addled text). But the eye darts between the two levels. It reads the text, yet it also depicts those phrases as something physical, an inking on papyrus that opens up within a picture.

Such an experience seems to have been the aim when Greek and Roman artists framed texts within paintings or mosaics. Circles, squares, rectangles, and borders of varying complexity housed texts yet also tagged them as mimics of physical objects:

18 Skamandros, the modern Karamenderes River in Turkey, Sider 2010, 543–547.

19 Sider 2010, 548.

the handled tablets or *tabulae ansatae* come to mind.²⁰ Deriving from votive plaques of wood or metal, such plaques were eventually employed to set texts apart within images, no longer three-dimensional but, as in mosaics, flattened out, ‘a work within a work’; colored frames or figural attendants to hold a text imparted the illusion of tactile separation from the background. In other instances, such as a vignette in an illuminated manuscript from c. AD 1450–1475, there can be a mind-bending mix: a representation of a representation of a representation.²¹ An image of a northern Italian apothecary’s shop shows jars rimmed with pseudo-Hebrew or pseudo-Kufic characters, the latter a simulation – a representation – of legible writing.

Some pictured texts come close to *trompe l’oeil*, that clever trick by which the viewer or reader is led to confuse and blur materials (e.g., *The Open Missal*, c. 1570, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, No. 1956.5, Brichacek 2012). In this way, a two-dimensional image triggers the perception of a three-dimensional object.²² Miriam Milman²³ explains how to activate the ruse: make the object as close as possible in size to the original it replicates; blend it into surroundings; limit depth; avoid live subjects that move; and create edges that do not compromise the deception. As one case of many, a painter, perhaps Ludger tom Ring the younger (1522–1583), created an open missal (a book for saying mass) that offers a tantalizing glimpse of a gilded page (likely a Crucifixion), surrounded by columbine, insects, corn flowers, and musical notation. The pages flutter slightly, about to be consulted, and a leather strap marks the first passage that is about to be read.²⁴ There must have been some market for these ingenious deceptions, for a nearly identical painting is in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (No. Cat. 00124048, Inv. 1890, 6191). Other than a possible signature under the music (“Ludevi rinki”) no part of the text is readable. The work itself may have been an amusing surprise that lay on a sloping stand in a bookseller’s shop.²⁵ Glossy and expensive, it hinted at knowledge that could never be accessed.

A later painting, by Laurent de La Hyre (1606–1656), also displays a text as though in three-dimensional space (**Fig. 3**). A literate audience was the intended target, one that would recognize the figure as a liberal art (Grammar), watering a

20 Leatherbury 2017, 546, 560–67. Images of writing differ from writing inserted into images. A good example would be mosaics from the Villa di Cicerone in Pompeii, late second century BC. Two contain, in small size, the name of the maker, Dioskourides of Samos, presumably as a mark of pride by this Greek artist and by his patron in securing such talent for the villa (Dunbabin 1999, 44–47). Yet the crediting is relatively unobtrusive, only a small part of the overall display.

21 Houston 2018b.

22 Houston 2014, 61–62; 147 fn. 40.

23 Milman 2009, 22–23.

24 Brichacek 2012.

25 Stirling 1952, 33.



Fig. 3: Allegory of Grammar, Laurent de La Hyre, 1650. Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery 37.862, Acquired by Henry Walters with the Massarenti Collection, 1902, CCo 1.0 Universal (CCo 1.0).

plant that is out-of-scene – thirsty growth stands in for young minds. On its ticker tape, there reads in Latin: “a meaningful utterance which can be written down, pronounced in the proper way.” The whole was inspired by an illustrated book, *Iconologia*, 1603, by Cesare Ripa.²⁶ It formed part of a larger set of seven half-length panels extolling each of the liberal arts. A bookish audience, smug its own accomplishments, would have appreciated the painting and wanted its message to multiply among the young. The letters seem to move in real space. They distort, and some of the letters disappear in part. The back of the text occurs too, the letters washed out in a brown-tinged reversal. An artful ploy simulates what the eyes might actually see in a hand-held scroll. Lurking behind are unanswered questions about who is supposed to be reading this or tome or who might have created it. Gendered comment

²⁶ Wine et al. 1993, 23–25.

enters into the picture for the somewhat earlier, paired paintings by the northern Italian painter Giovanni Battista Moroni.²⁷ A posthumous portrait showing the savant, Giovanni Bressani, arrays the books, inkwells, and quills of his life (1562, National Galleries of Scotland NG2347); yet a painting by the same artist of Contessa Lucia Albani Avogadro (*La Dama in Rosso*), a woman celebrated for her learning and elegant sonnets, simply shows her with a fan (1556–1560, London, National Gallery of Art NG1023).

Maya Picturing

The Classic Maya, my main focus in this essay, showed writing in the same way: as representations of representations, on physical objects in pictorial space.²⁸ For example, most Maya books are shown, as first suggested by Robert Sonin and amply documented by Michael Coe, in the form of leporellos or screenfolds.²⁹ A few are unopened or about to be read (**Fig. 4**). Others are folded up tidily, two pages viewable at a time (**Fig. 5**). An intriguing feature, not often noted, is that the books are being examined or painted in an impossible manner. The scribe sits perpendicular to the correct position for writing, for the folds are always *vertical* in a book, not horizontal as shown here. Doubtless this was for clarity of presentation. A scribe in front of a book would obscure it to the viewer.

Another feature is that, with one exception, such pictured books never disclose their contents. Viewers can readily identify a codex by its sumptuous jaguar-pelt covering and the thin, smoothed excellence of its page-edges (usually 4 to 10 visible, i.e., rather terse works by the standards of surviving examples). But they are not given any view of the glyphs within. The exception is late, a vessel from the final decades of the Classic period (a vase by the same artist may be found in the Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala, No. 5335).³⁰ It shows a mythic tableau of animals bringing offerings of food and drink that are presumably being tallied in an open book by two monkey scribes (**Fig. 6**). The deity receiving these treats may be a high god known to specialists as ‘God D’, but with unusual touches, for he is borne aloft by a coiled snake (on the combinatory complexity of this character).³¹ Unexpectedly, the book

27 Ng et al. 2019.

28 Left to the side is an unusual occurrence: glyphs that appear as objects when they are most unlikely to have been seen in this manner (e.g., K771, in which an “8 Ajaw” day sign ‘sits’ on a surface, much like seated figures – all supernaturals – posed nearby). Year-bearers, numbered days marking the shift of years, also perform in like way (Stuart 2004, fig. 4).

29 Coe 1973, 91; Coe 1977, 332–333, figs. 4–7.

30 Chinchilla Mazariegos 2005.

31 See Martin 2015, 214–215, fig. 37.



Fig. 4: Opossum scribe (**K'IN-ni ya-sa u-chu**) with Maya codex and vulture accountant (**k'a?-na u-su**) holding single sheet with numbers, perhaps a mythic Long Count date of 6.12.4.10.9 (BAMW Photography).



Fig. 5: Trickster rabbit-scribe, northern Guatemala/southern Campeche, c. AD 725. Princeton University Art Museum, y1975-17 (K511, photograph © Justin Kerr)

shows, at slight angle, in awkward display, some bars, cross-banded signs, and a few dots. These offer a casual hint of content, rapid flicks of ink to suggest writing, but



Fig. 6: Monkey scribes, scene of food tribute or serving, Peten, Guatemala, c. AD 800. (K3413, photograph © Justin Kerr).

not its detail. On present evidence, all such scenes are mythic, the participants gods or supernaturals. Not a one appears to be dynastic. Indeed, historical images are decidedly phobic about depicting books, despite the undoubted presence of many such tomes in Maya cities (a lone dynastic image may include a codex, but, oddly, it serves only as a support for the mirror of a preening lord, K6341).

Far more evident are glyphs on depictions of ceramics (**Fig. 7**). They appear where they should, as rim bands, but largely as pseudo-script, ovoids with thickened outlines and interior features in more delicate, thinner lines.³² They offer a graphic primer of what Maya scribes thought the formal attributes of writing should be. The tributary scene mentioned before revels in such labels on ceramics (**Fig. 8**). Each animal – as a whole, they constitute a near-complete typology of Maya mammals and quadrupeds – offers up a drinking vessel with prominent glyphs on the side visible to the viewer. The lucid presentation seems not to involve legibility,

³² Houston 2018b.



Fig. 7: Vessel with (pseudo-)glyphs, c. AD 700 (K2800, photograph © Justin Kerr).

however, for they appear to repeat pseudo-glyphs (a large sign with appended suffixes) that resemble the glyph for “sky,” *ka’n*. The scribe, a painter with a hand for inventive scenes roiling with energy, was probably someone with only a light grip on glyphic literacy. His two works demonstrate a familiarity with a few signs and their customary arrangement as suffixes and larger glyphs, but he had little understanding beyond graphic display. His writing was pure picture.



Fig. 8: Animals serving food, Peten, Guatemala, c. AD 800 (K3413, photograph © Justin Kerr).

The tenuous line between legibility and pseudo-writing is less a necessity than a strategy for other scribes, as in the fully literate Akan Suutz', a painter of a vessel now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2010.115.12, see also K1599). The main text on the vessel is legible, even bold and confident. This is someone who understood, as do illustrators today, the impact of the *la ligne claire*.³³ Small vessels throughout the scene have glyphs that appear to repeat, if with the usual alternation or juxtaposition of 'affixes' and larger signs. Yet there is also an expert execution of a "12 Ajaw" on a jar for pulque. That may correspond to a date of, in the Maya Long Count system, 9.17.0.0.0 (an ending for a 20-year span often commemorated with

33 Miller 2007, 17–18; 38; 243, first defined in 1977 by the cartoonist Joost Swarte in curating an exhibit in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Ajaw signs written in this way, without months), or, in the Western calendar, a Julian Date of Jan. 21, AD 771.

The lively scenes of marketing found in Structure Sub 1-4 at Calakmul, Mexico, offer both examples of glyphs painted on textiles (a possible **u chu-?**, *u chuy*, “sewing?”), but also, in another panel, a cup lifted to the lips of an atole drinker.³⁴ A different technique intruded here, “a minutely incised inscription” with **yu-li**³⁵ that may refer to atole or maize-drink, ordinarily spelled *ul*, or to the act of carving or incision itself, *yul-il*.³⁶ Post-fire texts do not occur Late Classic pottery, especially in such a prominent position, but, with this enhancement, the legible text evoked the direct action and presence of a scribe.

Glyphs on textiles afford an insight about gender. By common belief – the assertion is plausible yet hard to prove – most weavings were done by women.³⁷ Yet there is also overwhelming evidence that the scribes and literate sculptors were men.³⁸ The occurrence of pseudo-writing on some textiles, but legible texts on others,³⁹ may have several explanations. If an actual textile is being shown, then this may reveal variable literacy among those painting textiles. Note that few appear to be woven into the fabric, i.e., they were added later. Or, if the painter of the pot is the relevant party, then it simply speaks to their representation of textiles. The glyphs on a vessel from Tikal inspire confidence that literate productions appeared in some of these images, including a possible reference to a male youth (**ch'o-ko? CHAK-la-ya 'a?**).

A conundrum for any person looking at ancient art is that divide, at times close, at times yawning, between depiction and the depicted. These are no snapshots. They express a considered view of what to show and how to show it. But the occlusions, partly visible in several images, along with Laurent de La Hyre's, *Allegory of Grammar* (**Fig. 2**) reinforce a view that an ocular effect is being entertained here, that painters and carvers are displaying not what they know to be there but what they can see.⁴⁰ Occasionally, glyphs are obscured by another piece of cloth or ornament.⁴¹ The glyphs painted at the end of Classic period in the Bonampak murals refer explicitly to “cloth” in one case (**u bu ku**), but to secondary painting in another (**u tz'i ba-li**), to the medium of transmission, line-like paint applied after weaving, and to the intended display surface. These probably operated in a setting of tribu-

34 Carrasco Vargas – Cordeiro Baqueiro 2012, fig. 8, close-up fig. 33; Martin 2012, 64–65, fig. 6.

35 Martin 2012, 64.

36 Houston 2016, 424–425, fn. 9.

37 Halperin 2016, 435.

38 Houston 2016.

39 Laporte – Fialko 1995, 82, fig. 69.

40 Houston 2016, fig. 13.5.

41 See also a partial sculptor's name, in the Princeton University Art Museum 2012–78, Houston 2016, fig. 12.5, in a lead supplied by Bryan Just.

tary offering (hence the **T'AB-yi**, “raise up,” Room 1, Caption 5c; Houston 2018a, 152). Texts specified that someone painted them, that they were offered, and that the textile belonged to someone, perhaps a maker, perhaps an owner. This pattern has also been attested in a carving now in the Dumbarton Oaks collection, Washington, D.C.⁴² It refers to the painting on the cloth and to the ownership (or making) of that cloth, but by someone whose name disappears behind a (now-eroded) belt ornament. The statements are almost coy in providing the phrasing of possession but not any particulars about personal identity.

The art historian Meyer Schapiro paid close attention to pictured text in Western art. Some of his observations are parochial, as in his categorical insistence that writing consisted of “arbitrary marks” violating the “unified whole” of a pictorial work.⁴³ In the Maya case, sundering imagery and writing hardly makes sense for an iconically based script. But, to useful extent, Schapiro was concerned with the “material reality of the spoken and written word”⁴⁴ and with the problem of viewpoint. Was inserted text to be ‘read’ by a figure within a picture, a seated Evangelist examining a Gospel oriented to his ‘gaze’? Or was the pertinent observer ‘outside’, looking at that same Gospel but now laid out for clarity, not as any real book would be? Evolutionism creeps in: for Schapiro the latter was “an archaic object-oriented attitude”, to be contrasted with “the foreshortenings and overlappings that transform the constant shapes of objects”, crafting “an image coherent to the eye with a unifying perspective”.⁴⁵

‘Archaic’, ‘ordered’, ‘whole’, ‘coherent’, and ‘unifying’ are words of prejudicial intent. Schapiro’s voting record on these matters is clear. Yet pictured writing among the Classic Maya recalls similar patterns and a roughly parallel contrast of ‘attitude’. During a few decades in the Classic period, perhaps over a century, and in certain kingdoms or ateliers only, the need for presentational clarity gave way, in playful experiment, to what the eye could see, not what was known to be there. This process could be understood by the culturally laden term of ‘realism’, but it points more to a privileging of viewers, a means of summoning direct experience, and bringing observers into physical communion with acts on record. For the Maya, this led to what writing looked like.

42 Tokovinine 2012, 69–71, fig. 32; 33.

43 Schapiro 1996, 119.

44 Schapiro 1996, 120.

45 Schapiro 1996, 121; 132; 141; 181.

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