

Letters, Art, and Children

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Letterforms provide a natural and useful medium for teaching visual awareness, creativity, and many basic art education ideas to young children. The work of English children is illustrated showing their experimentation with letter symbols, handwriting, word shapes, and printed textures.

To be in at the beginning of the child's education in the field of visual awareness is both a privilege and a challenge. As a graphic designer as well as a teacher I have found letterforms a most natural and useful aid in teaching many art basics, not only with the older student but also with young children. Those who are a little unsure of themselves when it comes to producing original designs, seem reassured and stimulated when using familiar letterforms as the initial impetus.

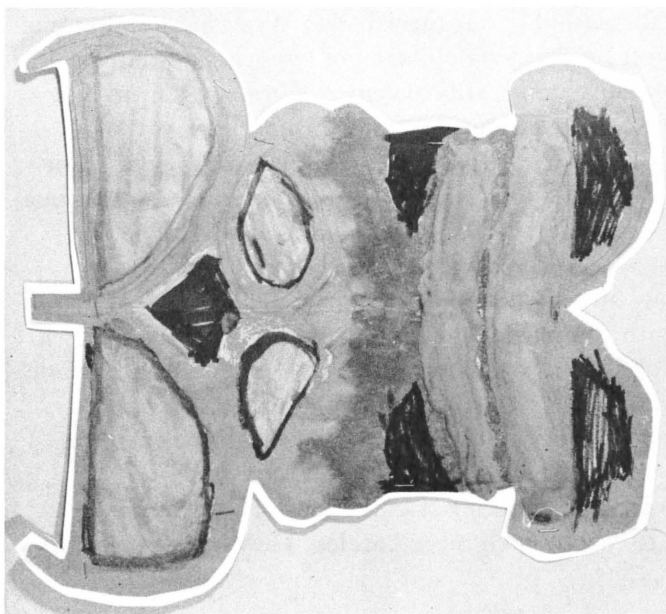
The gradual formation of our present-day Western alphabet is a fascinating subject for study by children of ten years and upwards. What if there were no universally accepted letter symbols to link as words? How have we progressed from the earliest forms of communication, and why are we back to picture symbols in some circumstances? Children can look at early communication without letter symbols—scratched messages, beads, smoke signals—comparing these with contemporary designs made for a society where technology and science have outpaced our mastery of many languages, or with explicit hobo signs. They can compare Eastern and Western alphabets, looking back also to hieroglyphs and runic symbols, following through until they reach the vital stage of the syllabic and phonetic systems and the twenty-six miraculous marks.

The children see that letterforms can identify, inform, perpetuate, decorate—and much more besides. They can also see that

letterforms, when used well, are fine examples of functional design, often with the added bonus of beauty and elegance. Given a bare wall, many are tempted to decorate it—with slogans, names, initials, and worse!—carved initials appear on any receptive surface. “I have been here. . . .” Our names, our identity are so important to us. Belonging, too, is vital and letterforms appear frequently and effectively in heraldry, badges, banners, and monograms.

Jane

Names and initials. Above, Jane signature, 4 years. Below, David, blotted name, paint and crayon, 6 years.

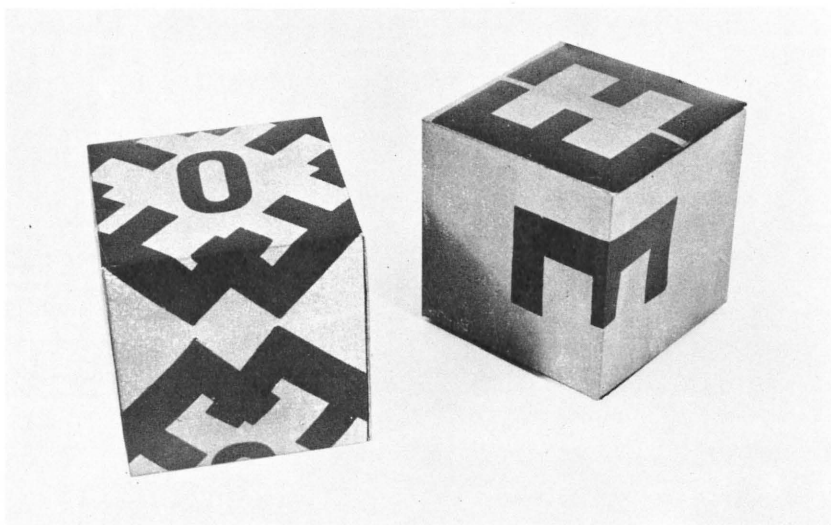


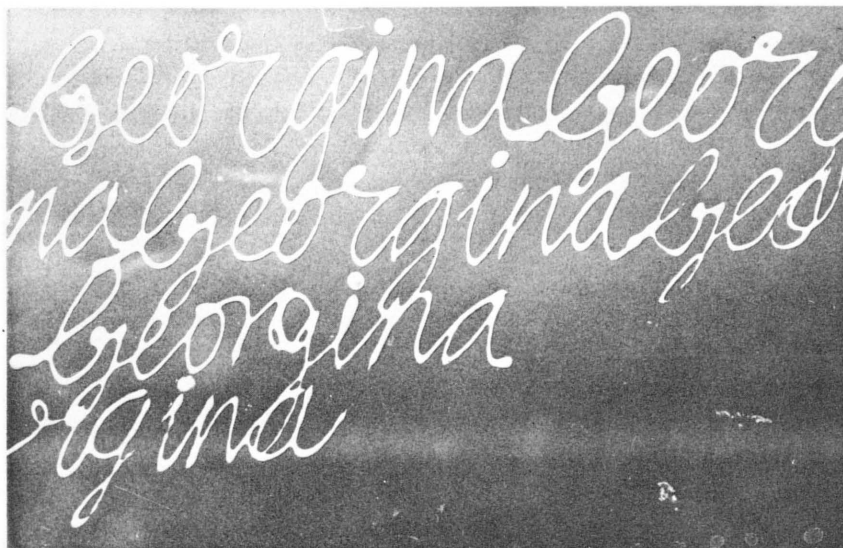
Writing and drawing employ similar physical actions, and the first attempts at controlled drawing are often the act of writing our own name. From this wobbly beginning starts a progression of activities becoming more and more sophisticated. The work shown here is by children of varied ages and abilities. There are simple “blot-names,” tonal exercises, leading to activities designed to stretch the student, such as legibility problems and alphabet design.

Children must be helped towards becoming discerning adults. Helped, too, to resist the bombardment of the mass media. As Colin Blakemore said in the 1976 BBC Reith Lecture, *The Mechanics of the Mind*: “The stentorian voices of the mass media are more universally powerful than the indiscriminate persuasion of a mind-altering drug.” Teachers of children must work towards creating a society of discriminating adults, who can not only tell the bad from the good but also the tasteful from the tasteless, and who will demand integrity as well as good presentation. The medium of the letter, when used with sensitivity and respect, is a remarkable ally.

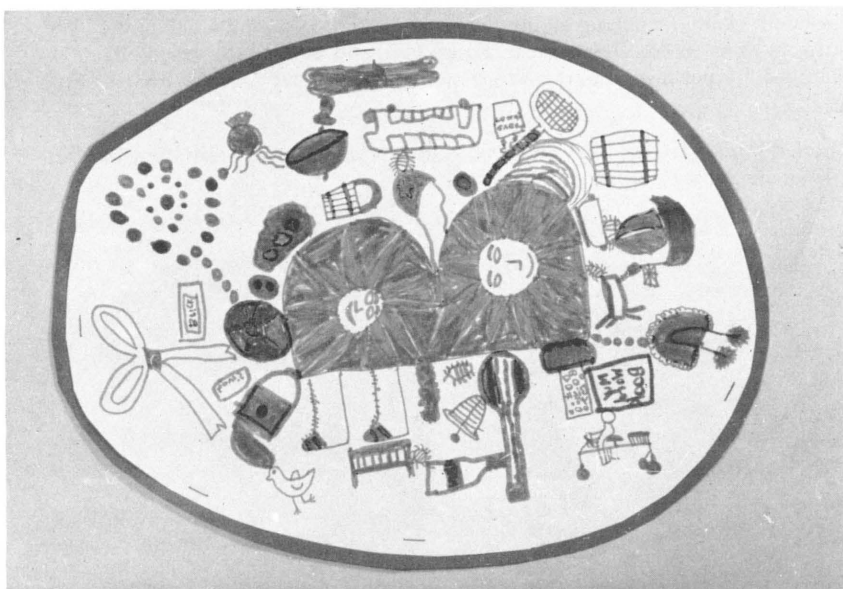
I should like to thank all the children with whom I have worked in Kent and London schools and to pupils at Forest Hill School for Boys, London; also to my husband, Colin, for taking all the photographs and supplying much of the artwork from his Art Department, Forest Hill, and to my publisher, B. T. Batsford, for permission to reproduce pictures from *Using Letters in Art and Craft*.

Printed initials are used in various ways to experiment with positioning on the planes of a box, 16 years.



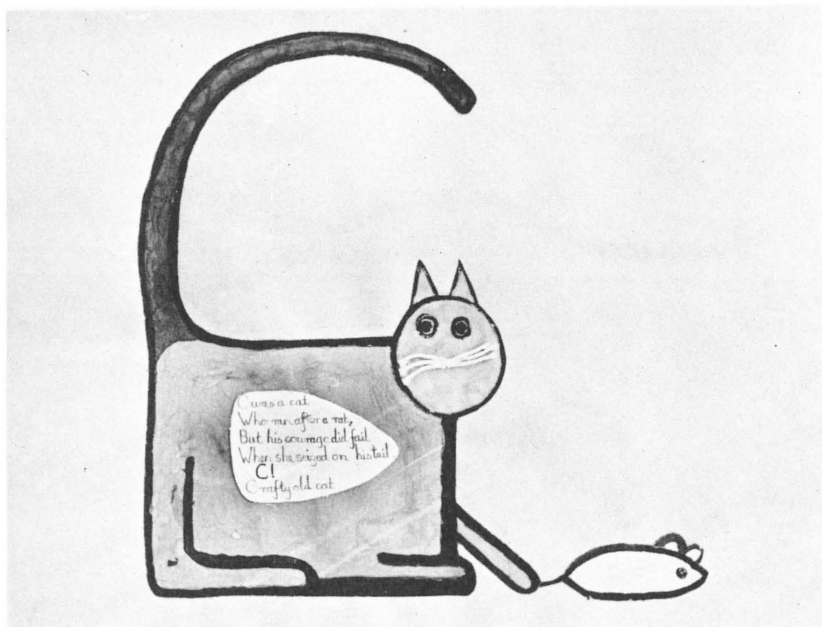


Above, trail writing on construction paper using flour and water paste, 13 years. Below, central initial B surrounded by drawings of objects that start with that letter, simultaneous work by two children in two colors, felt-tipped pens, 12 years. (This has proved to be very helpful in developing word lists for slow readers.)



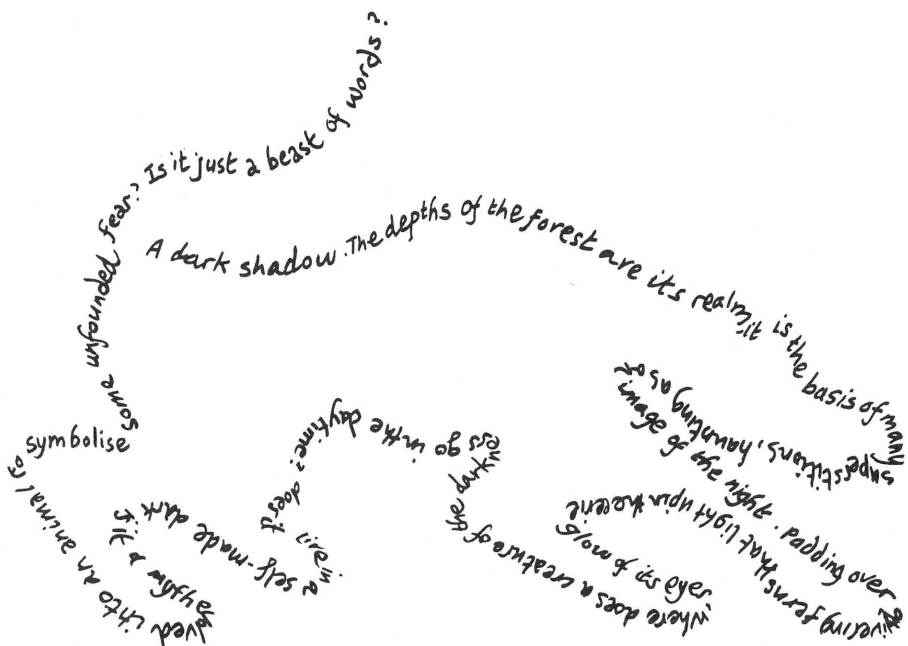
BECKON

Above, the word “beckon” in cut paper performs its own action, 15 years.
 Below, a combination of paint and collage illustrating “C for Cat” from one of Edward Lear’s Nonsense Alphabets, 11 years.

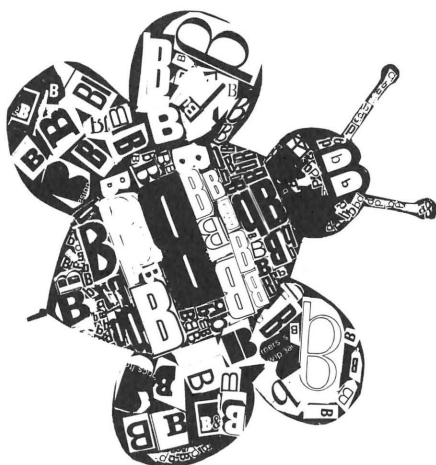
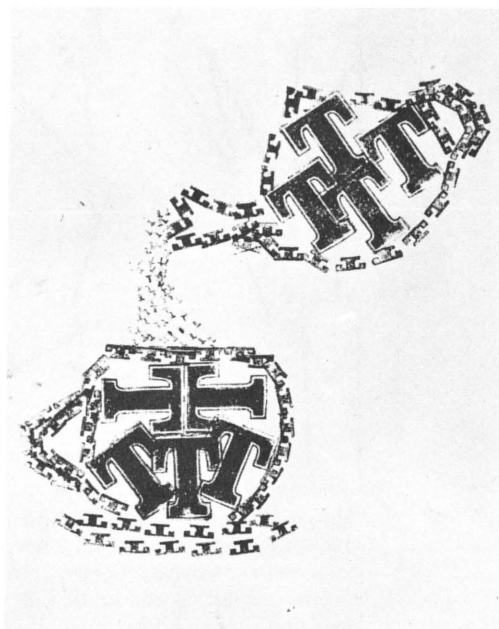
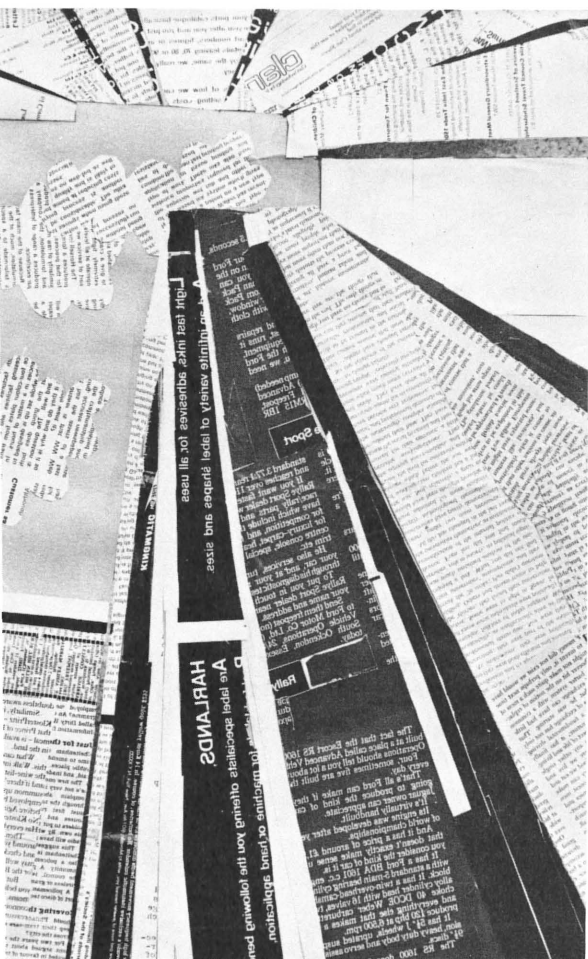


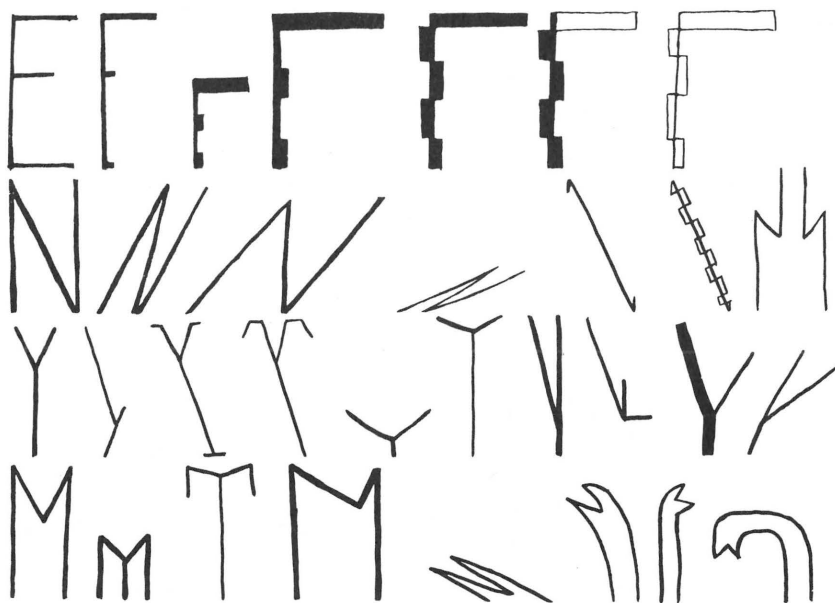


Above, hissing cat made of S's, 14 years. Below, true calligram (shaped writing) from original creative writing, 15 years.

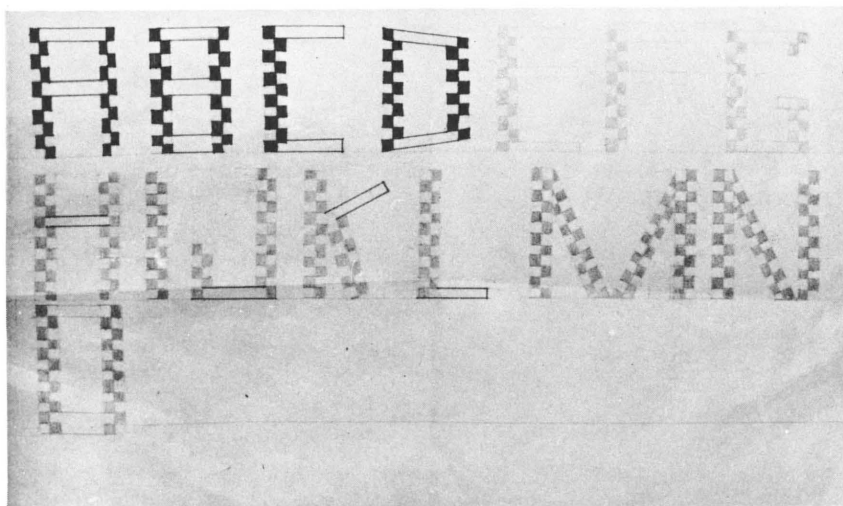


Right, “T-time” is made by printing three actual blocks of letterform T, wood
and metal, 13 years. Right below, first letter of the name used to form a bee,
collage, 15 years. Below, skyscrapers, view from the street in New York taken
from a color transparency, collage, 14 years.





Above, after collecting and studying many letter designs and typefaces, children chose single letters and from a norm tried distorting them until they ceased to be recognisable, 14 years. Below, a progression from this was to select one of the midway variations and to try and make an entire alphabet with some degree of uniformity. The children soon discovered this to be a most sophisticated and difficult task, 15 years.



Personalised alphabet and numerals
developed from a theme.

Left, wild flowers, 15 years;
below, cuisine, 15 years.

