

Lettering by modern artists

Author

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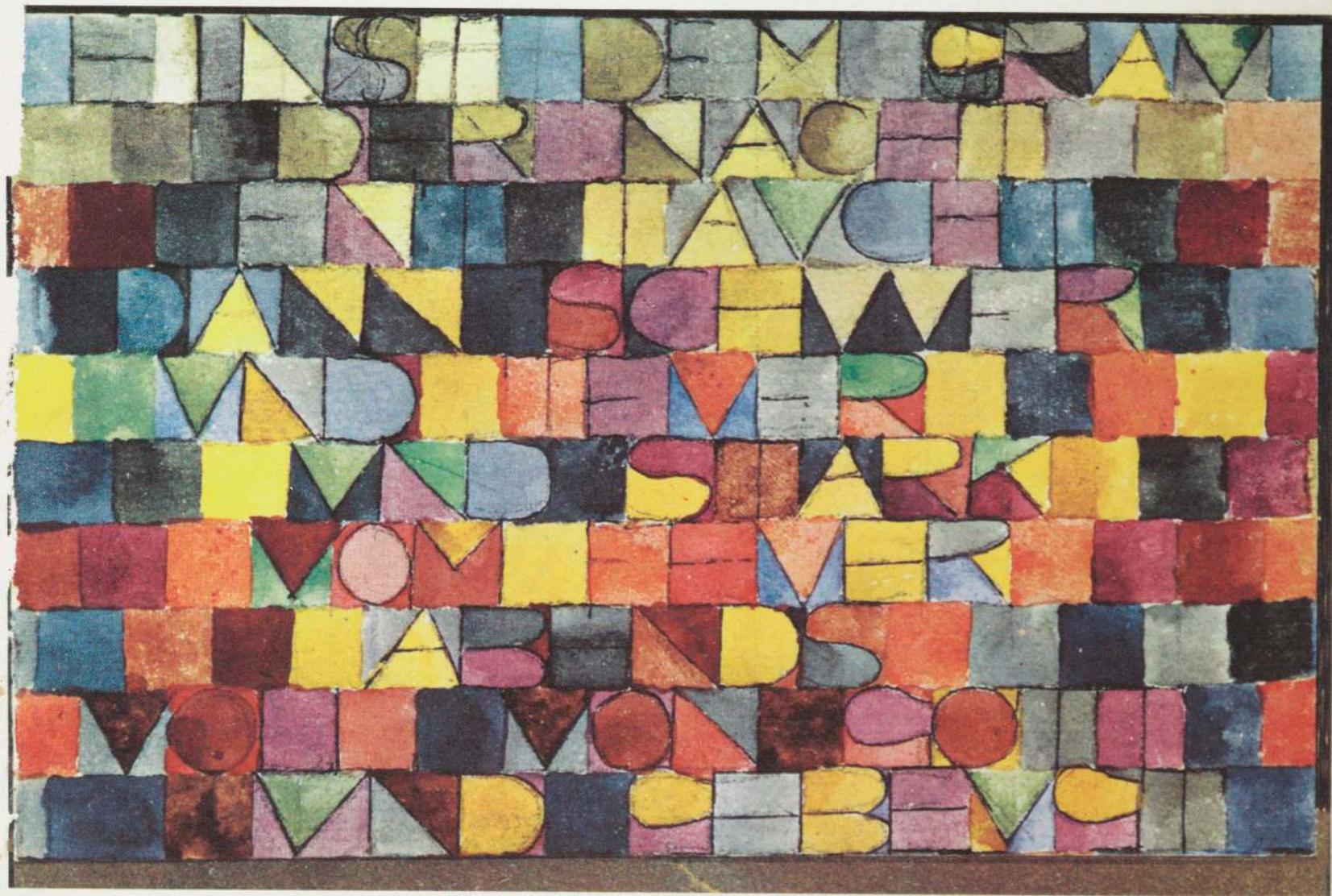
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primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.



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LETTERING BY MODERN ARTISTS

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In 1962 the Department of Architecture and Design organized an exhibition "Lettering by Hand" which was shown in the Museum from November 5, 1962 to January 6, 1963. In response to the interest in this exhibition, an enlarged version was later prepared for the International Program of The Museum of Modern Art. This publication is based on both these exhibitions. On behalf of the Museum I wish to thank the artists, collectors, galleries and institutions which have permitted us to reproduce their work; also thanks to John Massey for the lucid design which he has brought to this publication.

Mildred Constantine
Department of Architecture and Design

PAUL KLEE Switzerland 1879-1940

"Einst dem Grau der Nacht enttaucht" No. 3, 1918,
watercolor on paper and cardboard, 9 7/8 x 5 7/8"
Collection: Klee-Siftung Kunstmuseum, Basel

"Once emerged from the gray of night" is one of many script pictures by Klee inspired by Chinese poems. Although they are set within rows of colored squares, line and color cause the single letters and words to merge, making a pictorial whole. Difficult to "read" and "decipher," the meanings of half-obscurd words affect the observer's response.

(Front cover: detail of top composition - Back cover: detail of lower composition)

LETTERING BY MODERN ARTISTS

The twenty-six letters of our Western alphabet have a long and rich tradition of use in works of art. The individual letter has been used for its intrinsic qualities of line and pattern, and words for their literary meaning as well as for their visual beauty.

The use of lettering in works of art is not a Western invention. In Iran calligraphy was considered an art form as exalted as painting, partially because religion prohibited representational art, and in the ninth and tenth centuries calligraphy flourished. The Kufic script was frequently woven into fabrics, and excerpts from the Koran were used extensively as decoration on pottery (page 6); poetry and religious writings were exquisitely rendered with a broad reed pen on parchment and paper. It has been said the same artist could work in more than one of these crafts. The union of religious and esthetic thought, and the skill of the calligraphers, demonstrates that the useful object need not be artless. In the Middle Ages writing was considered an art to be practiced only by a few. Scholars, artists and craftsmen were engaged by the Church in the writing and copying of manuscript pages. The Celtic illuminations of the seventh and eighth centuries, best exemplified in the "Book of Kells" (page 6) illustrate an imaginative and intricate linear design enriched by glowing color. During the early Renaissance, as the Western World was seeking to invent and refine letters, many treatises were published concerning the multiformity of the Roman alphabet. By 1522 a working manual of models and instructions was prepared by Ludovico degli Arrighi.

Monuments and sculpture bore inscriptions; sometimes single words and sometimes entire phrases appeared in wall paintings, altarpieces and portraits. Such artists as Andrea Mantegna introduced the epigraph into painting (page 8). Fragments of writing were used to suggest complete messages, evoking reactions to support other elements in the composition.

With the advent of printing, letter forms which had been hand cut, freely carved, freely drawn, painted and written were used as models for wood and cast metal founts. It is not surprising that many of the characteristics of hand lettering should have been carried over into printing, but what might not have been anticipated was that as literacy increased and printed texts were distributed throughout the Western World, printed letters in turn began to influence writing. Calligraphy became traditional and inflexible, limited to standard "penmanship" forms. By the beginning of the twentieth century the typewriter began to be widely used,

and by now even the hasty personal scrawl has all but disappeared. It has remained for twentieth-century artists to break with the standardization of the machine and to reintroduce writing and the word as an intensely personal experience within the visual arts. From the 1890s to the present artists have merged image and letter forms with a range of styles as varied as the media in which they have worked.

In the posters of Pierre Bonnard, the bookbindings of Henry van de Velde, even in decorative objects such as jewelry and vases, the cursive letter forms of the Art Nouveau style are a natural accompaniment to the flowing linear style of the period (pages 7, 30).

Beginning around 1910, the cubists, notably Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, disintegrated and dislocated the recognizable elements of objects and figures. They then incorporated into their abstract compositions "real" elements as commonplace as newsprint, song sheets, titles of periodicals, names and playing cards (page 24). Their interest in letters and words included legibility as well as other qualities of design. Kurt Schwitters produced collages made with such disparate ephemera as paper wrappers, announcements, tickets, stamps, and handwritten personal notes. These discarded fragments of everyday communication were transformed by Schwitters into compositions of great originality and dignity. In the work of Fernand Léger the power and hardness of the machine world is reflected in letters, as well as in human figures, equally impersonal and sharpened by the brilliance of his pure colors (page 15). Numerals were among the favorite symbols to be used by Paul Klee (for example in "Scherzo with 13"), with emphasis on their shape and proportion. This interest in numerals manifests itself again in more recent times, as in Charles Demuth's "I Saw the Figure Five in Gold" (1945) and Jasper Johns' "0-9" (1960) (page 35). In these works, at times pure ornamentation is the purpose, sometimes communication; at times the forms are completely integrated and related to each other; sometimes they are only loosely allied.

In the early part of the twentieth century Guillaume Apollinaire, who participated as a critic and a poet in the formation of the modern movement, arranged the lines of his poems in pictorial images, thus transforming his written text into a picture of a thing. This was characteristic even of his personal communications, in which he exploited the pictorial qualities of letter forms without prejudice to the content of the message.

Lettering as it was incorporated into the experience and esthetic of the Bauhaus took on diametrically opposed expressions. Among the Bauhaus teachers, Paul Klee, Johannes Itten, Marcel Breuer and Herbert Bayer created announcements and posters in which fanciful freely shaped letters were improvised with festive variations. Even the inclusion of archaic and complicated German scripts was considered permissible (page 23). In later developments of such letter forms as Herbert Bayer's "Universal Type" (made up of arcs, angles, vertical and horizontal lines) and Josef Albers' stenciled letters (made up of squares, triangles and segments of a circle) Bauhaus letters were ostensibly designed for clarity and their forms were considered appropriate to mechanical printing.

The varied use of hand lettering by modern artists and designers can be seen in posters, books, bookbindings, advertisements, signs, and prints and drawings, as well as in painting and sculpture. Their concern has been with exploiting the recognizable structure of letters and words. They are also concerned with the abstract form which absorbs and eliminates the words. Their approaches are as meaningful as were those of the Cubists whose incorporation of readable letter forms balanced otherwise "unreadable" subjects. The handwritten compositions produced by artists in the last two decades, on the other hand, may be reactions against the atmosphere of automation.

The subject matter with which they work is also varied. Hans Schmidt, a young German designer, has given individual graphic expression to each of his selections from the Bible: the passage from the Book of Matthew is almost musical in its visual cadences (page 18); the verse from the Song of Solomon is as sturdy as a woodcarving (page 26). Poetry both old and modern is interpreted by modern painters in compositions which bear little relationship to the illuminated manuscripts of the past. Paul Klee's transcriptions of Chinese poems seem like mysterious improvisations of visible and invisible elements (front and back covers). Elise Asher's tapestry in paint uses the poem of Stanley Kunitz with little concern for the "readable" (page 12); while Ulfert Wilke's "Seelen" (Souls) (page 21) provides a clue to the meaning of the poem through the atmosphere created by color and line.

Collaboration between modern poets and artists has produced one remarkable project in which handwriting is a dominant characteristic. Twenty-one artists "illustrated" twenty-one poems in a portfolio published in 1960; each of the poets has either handwritten or designed the

arrangement of his poem while the artist has decorated the page. In the example of the poem by Philippe Dotremont, the painter Alechinsky has contrasted the clarity of the poet's hand with his own intricate calligraphy (page 16).

The signature of an artist can be a kind of subject matter, whether as an integral part of a composition or as a single work of art. In the examples of Emile Gallé and Yves Tanguy (pages 32, 33) the lettering is completely characteristic of the artists' styles. Mark Tobey, on the other hand, has produced many single paintings of his signature in a style which is more fluid than the "white writing" by which he is known (page 14).

The sculptor has also given many expressions to letter forms. A late-nineteenth-century café sign is full of flourish and movement (page 10); the tightly looped letters of Chryssa's sculptured poster in neon tubes "Times Square" (page 19) contrast with her more formal interpretations in metal which are based on typographic forms; David Smith's "24 Greek Ys" (page 28) and Ben Shahn's "Letter Arrangements" (page 27) each demonstrate a completely logical although unexpected rhythmic variety and movement.

This conscious reaction against classical forms, and the need for free expression in writing are not limited to the Western World. By the ninth century Japanese calligraphy had acquired those national characteristics which distinguished it from the Chinese on which it was based. Calligraphy in Japan has been a separate discipline, like that of painting, as well as communication. It was, and is, an art without a Western equivalent, but the variety and elegance of its many expressions have been a source of inspiration to our Western artists. At the same time, Japanese calligraphy has come closer to Western painting during the last two decades. The calligraphers have sought to exploit the abstract pictorial qualities of the written symbol in much the same way that Western artists have used the human figure, still life and the landscape in the construction of abstract images. As in the work of our Western artists, letter forms are often read only with the greatest difficulty, and the observer is often required to sense rather than read the feelings described by the words.

The illustrations in this book suggest the widespread use of lettering in modern Western art. They bear witness to the unlimited interpretations and purposes of the modern artist.

Mildred Constantine

THE CHI RHO PAGE of the St. Chad Gospels

Celtic illumination, 8th century, A. D. (?)
Collection: Litchfield Cathedral, Staffordshire, England

The book of the St. Chad Gospels was produced by Irish monks in a script developed in the 5th and 6th centuries. Written with a very broad quill, the heavy, rounded letter forms and decorative over-all patterns are uniformly flat and linear, enriched by glowing colors.



NISHAPUR BOWL Iran 10th century

6

Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Wilkinson, New York

The Kufic script, a formal and angular letter, was particularly well suited as decoration on pottery. In this example (an excerpt from the Koran) the letters are placed with the stem rising from its base on the rim and pointing toward the center. Alternatively, letters could start from the center pointing outward, the choice being left to the calligrapher.



Binding for "Ecce Homo" by Friedrich Nietzsche, 1908, book size, 9 7/8 x 7 3/4"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Van de Velde was a painter, architect, and a particularly ardent advocate of the applied arts. In this design for a bookbinding the letter forms are harmonized within a circle, enlivened by the breaks into and out of its contours.



"Rolled Up Voyage" 1963, graphic design, 23 3/4" diameter
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

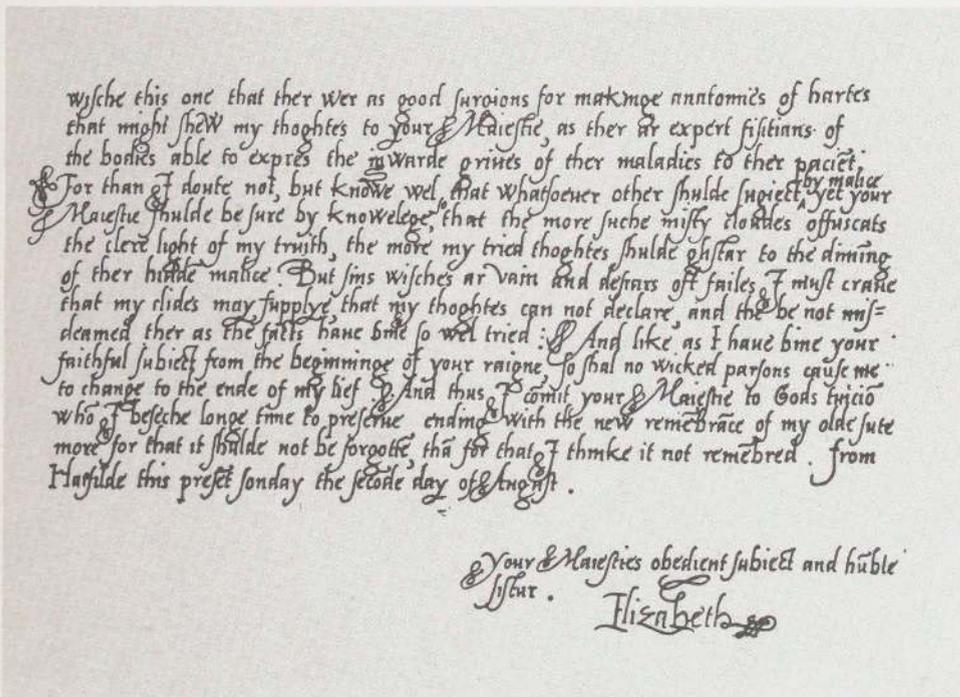
Endless words, some with meaning, are composed within a circle. The letters are adapted from typographic fonts, but the spacing, shifting of weights and changes of scale produce the illusion of a spinning target with the eye coming to rest in the center.



Hatfield, August 2, 1556

Collection: British Museum, Lansdowne M.S. 1236, f. 37

The skilled uniformity of letters and lines is relieved somewhat by the decorative initial letters, brought out into the margin, and the flourishes on single letters whether they appear in the middle of words or the middle of sentences. Since there were no fixed rules regarding decoration, flourishes, or even spelling, Princess Elizabeth indicates a respect for discipline while enjoying the idiosyncrasies of youth.



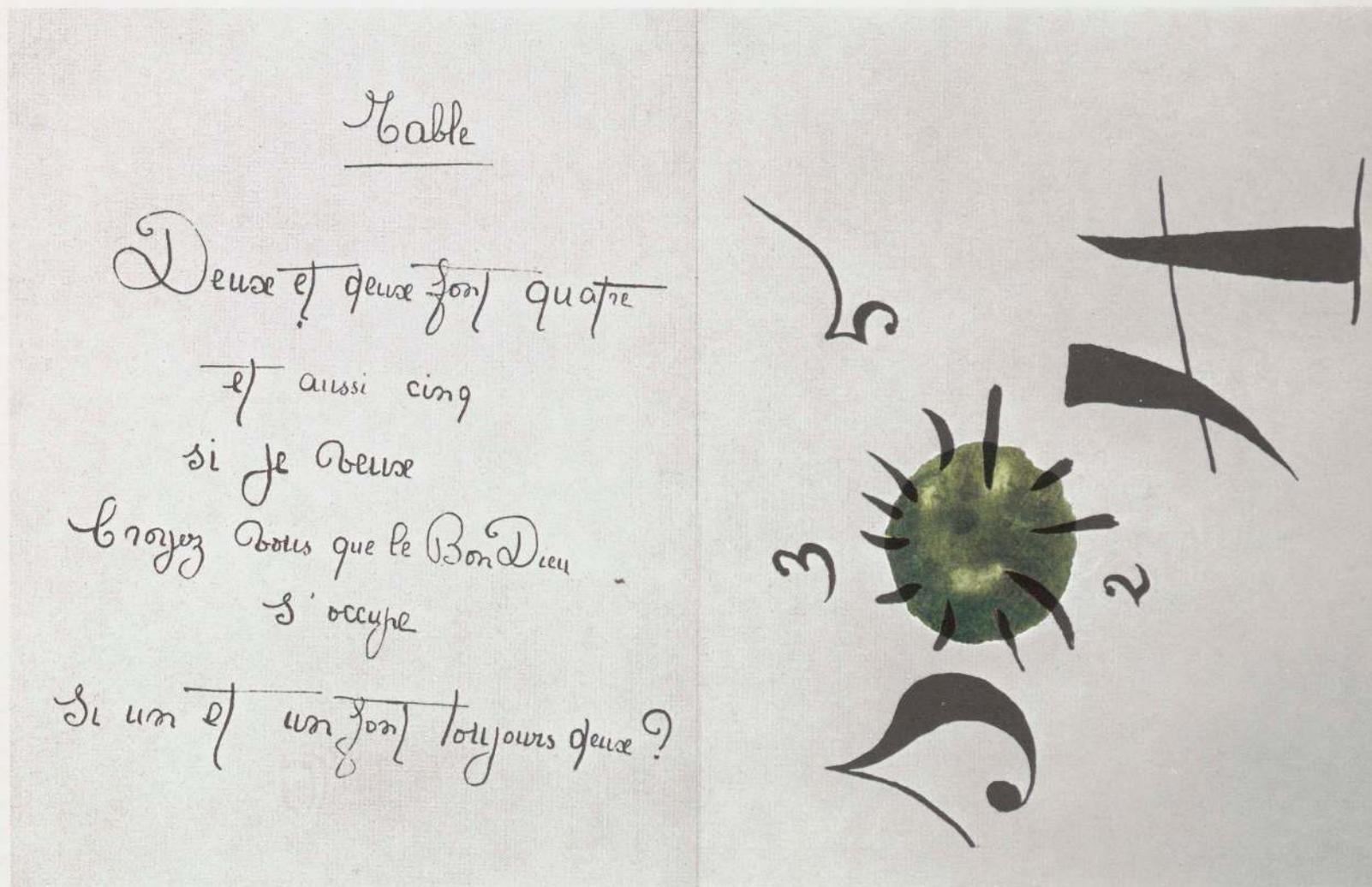
Epigraph on arch in "The Judgment of St. James", c. 1454, detail of fresco Eremitani Chapel, Padua

Lettering was used in frescoes, altar paintings, and in the miniatures of Mantegna. The tombstone, with its partially obscured lettering is an important compositional element even though not directly related to the subject of the fresco.



Pages from "Il Etait une Petite Pie" by Lise Hirtz, 1928,
book size, 13 3/8 x 10 1/4"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

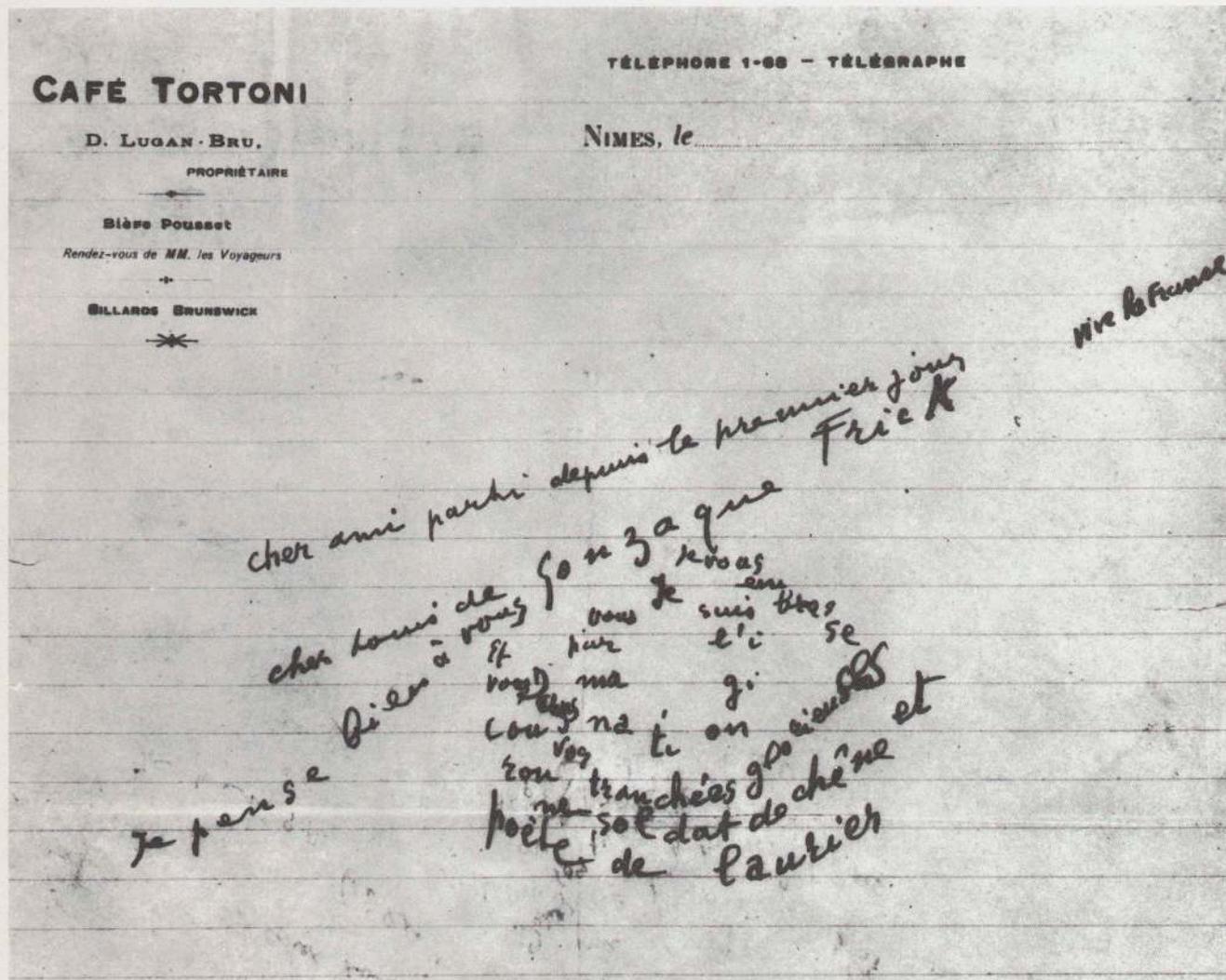
Miró has drawn, rather than written, the lines on these two pages. The deliberate, rounded letters are distinguished for their clarity, yet each page has its own quality—the verse being even and orderly while the numerals and letters on the right are more freely drawn with highly contrasting thick and thin elements.



Letters, circa 1915
Collection: Edouard Champion, Paris

Apollinaire was concerned with the word structure of his poetry as well as with the placement of the words on the written and printed page. Here, in informal notes on the stationery of the Café Tortoni, he consciously writes on the diagonal against the printed horizontal lines, and then creates an abstract shape with a cluster of words.

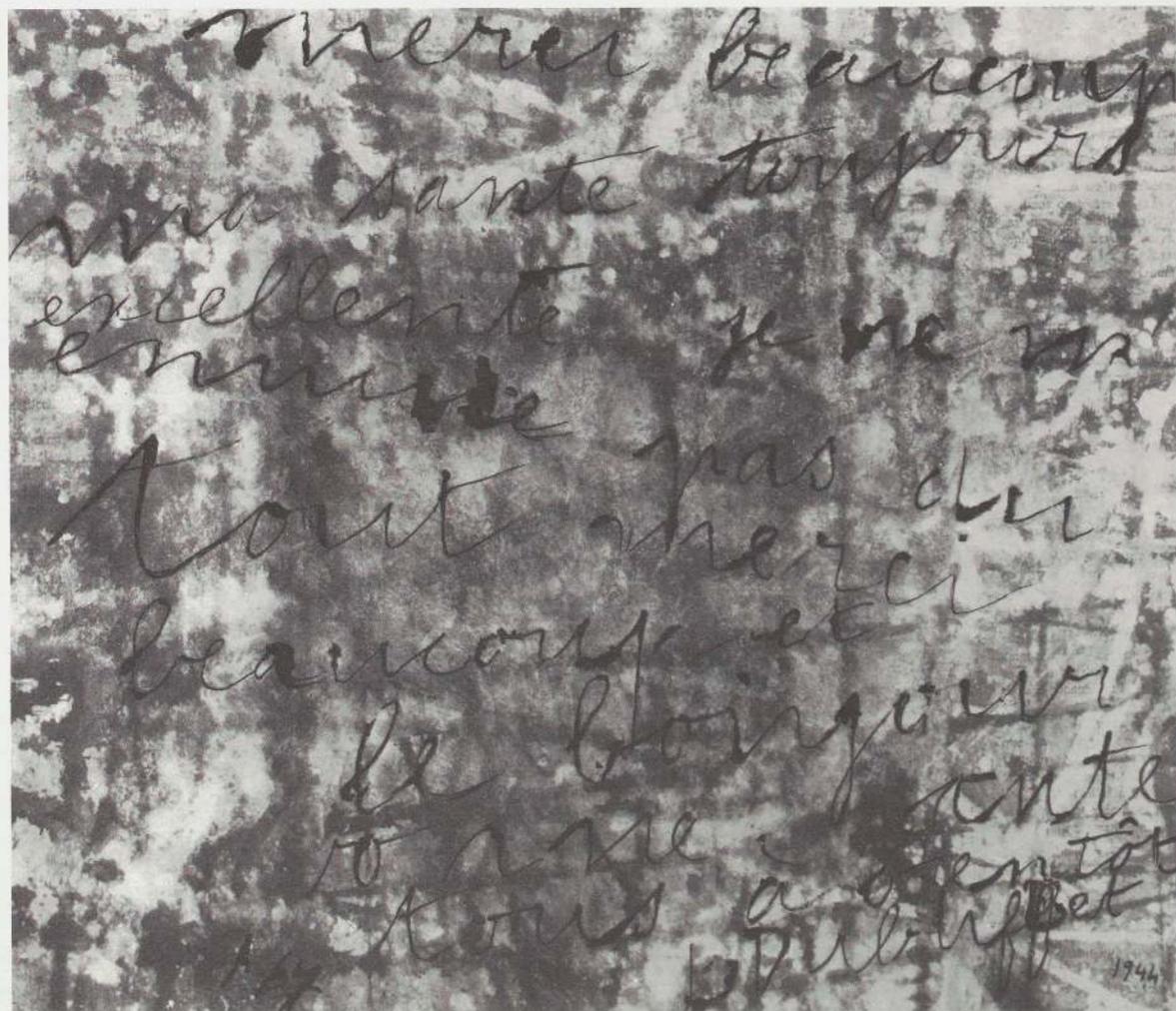
In the letter on the right, words are grouped to form pictures of a pipe and a horse's head. The poem at the bottom is written in the form in which his best known work, "Il pleut," was also composed and published.



JEAN DUBUFFET France

"Merci beaucoup ma santé toujours excellente..." 1944, gouache and ink, 9 x 10 5/8"
 Collection: Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York

A tender message is written across an untidy surface of crisscross wall scratchings. The combination of media, gouache and ink, serves well to suggest the washed-out paint on city walls. In this work as well as in the Gaul, inspiration comes from the graffiti which are part of the urban scene.



"Signature Number 1" 1961, oil, 8 1/2 x 11 5/8"
Collection: The artist

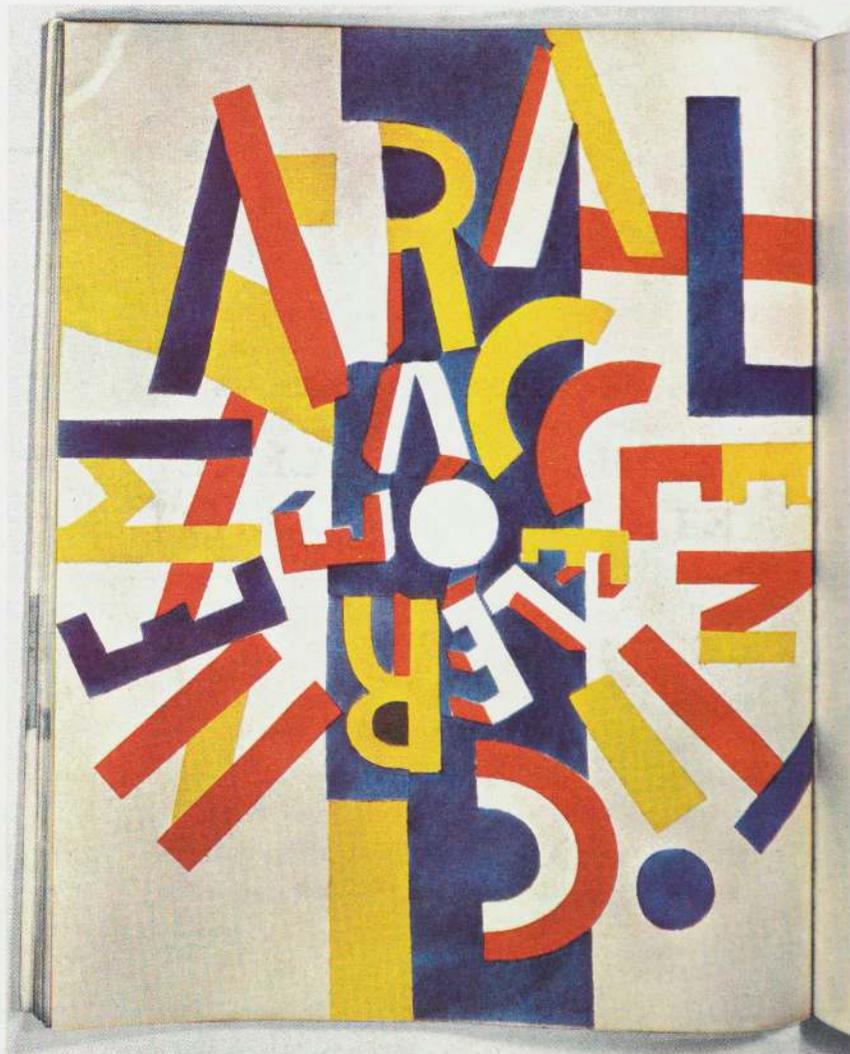
As the title of this painting indicates, the artist has created a number of works which are single signature paintings and not details of a larger painting. These illustrate his concern with the form and composition of letters. In this painting, the letters appear to ebb and flow in the same way in which patterns of water appear on a background of earth, the cool liquid blues and grays giving emphasis to the quality and movement of water. The letters themselves are unlike Tobey's characteristic calligraphic thin lines and strokes, being more cursive, continuous images.



FERNAND LEGER France 1881-1955

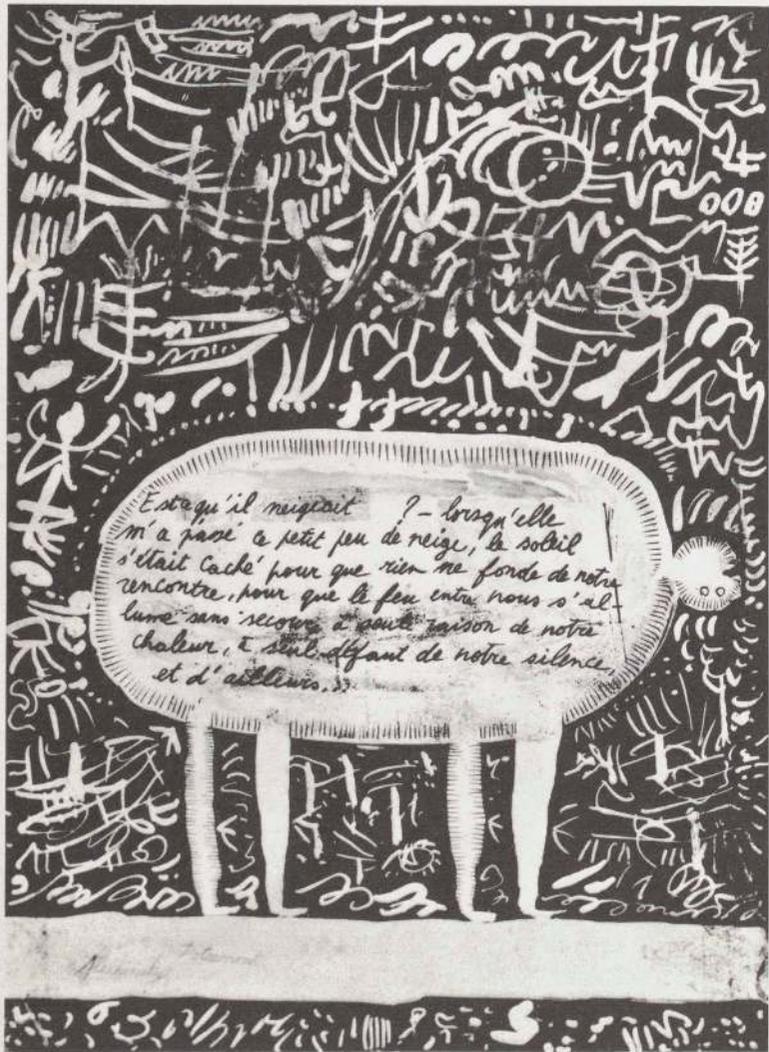
"La Fin du Monde" illustrated page, published by Les Editions de la Sirène, 1919,
book size, 12 7/16 x 9 7/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Letters, made up of broad stripes, are placed on the flat bands of color. The eye is carried in a clockwise movement, pivoting around the large white dot in the center.



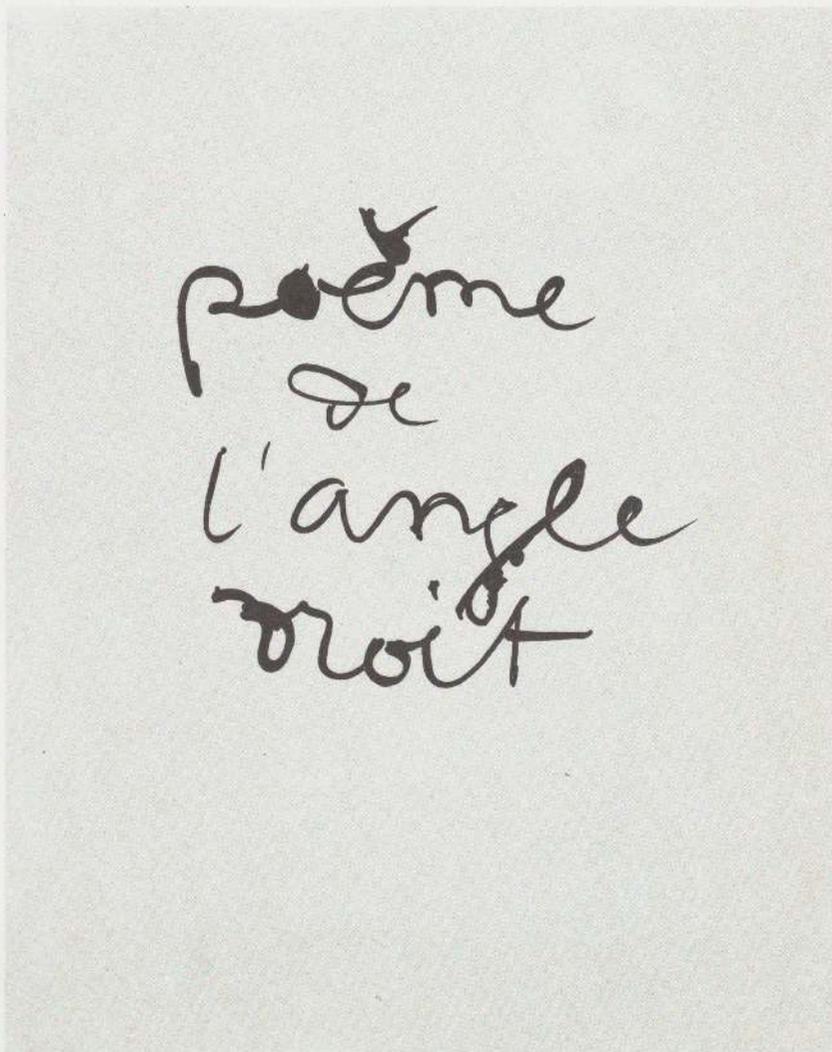
Poem by Dotremont from portfolio "21 Etchings and Poems" published by Morris Gallery, New York, 1960, etching, 13 5/8 x 9 5/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

The poet's writing, within a balloon-like figure, is surrounded by Alechinsky's erratic doodles, which appear like spontaneous penmanship exercises. Alechinsky is one of twenty-one artists whose work has been used to illustrate a poem. In each case, the poet was asked to handwrite or design the arrangement of his own poem while the illustrator "decorated" the page.



Half-title page "Le Poème de L'Angle Droit" 1955
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

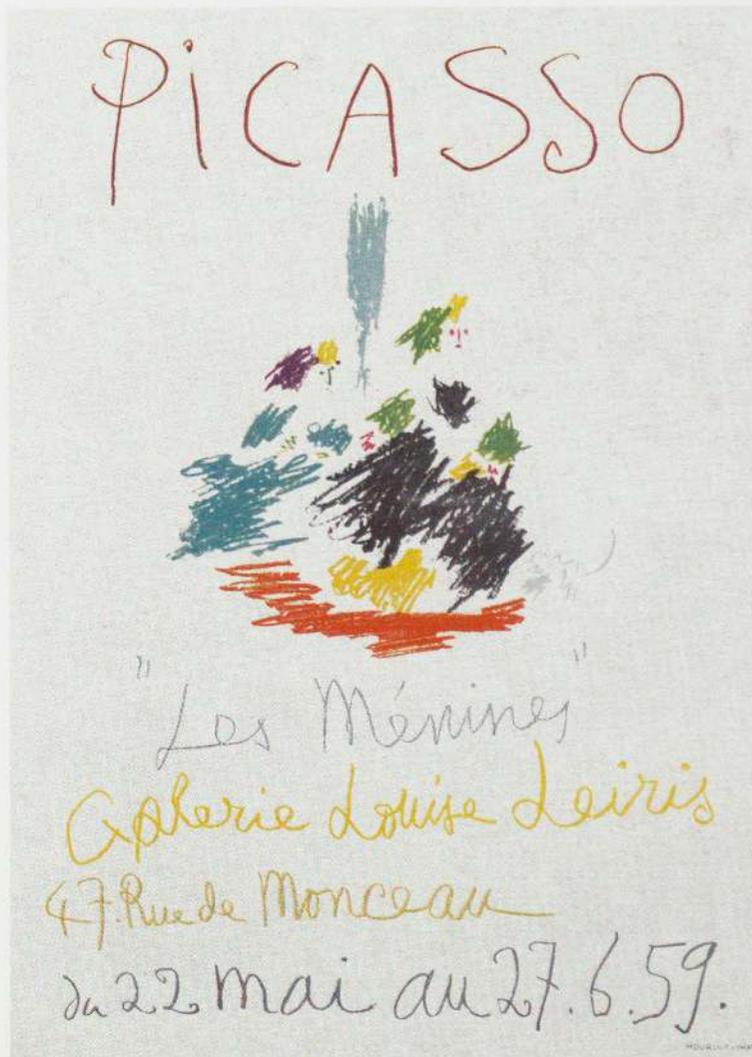
The letters indicate neither painstaking deliberation nor rapid notation, but look as though Le Corbusier chose this composition after just the right amount of studied carelessness had been achieved. Similar characteristics appear in the handling of handwritten block letter forms in the same volume.



PABLO PICASSO Spain, now in France

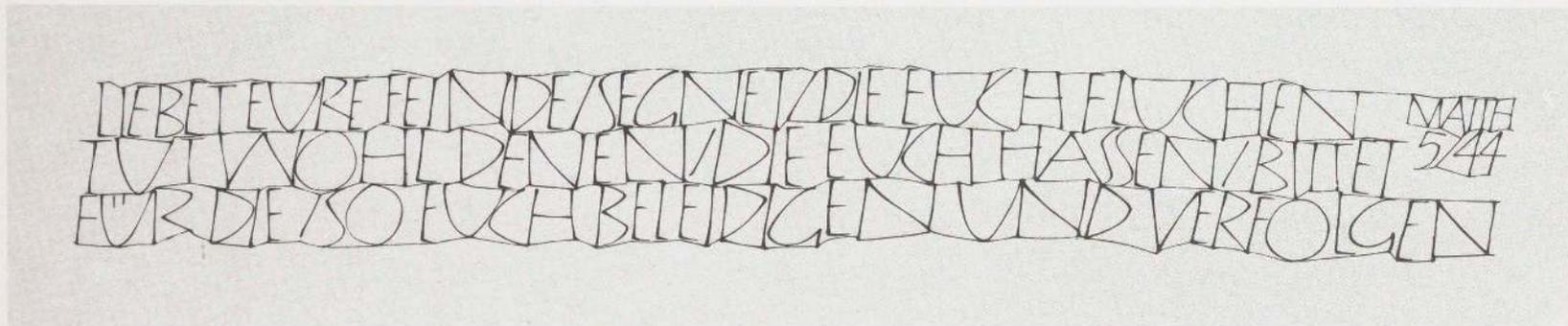
Poster for exhibition "Les Ménines" 1959, 26 3/8 x 18 3/4"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Designed for his exhibition of paintings based on the famous Velásquez "Las Meninas" (Maids of Honor), Picasso drew deliberately clumsy, childlike printing and writing which are complemented by scribbled lines and simple colors in the illustration.



"Liebet Eure Feinde..." 1962, woodcut, 2' 11 7/8" x 18' 5/12"
Collection: The artist

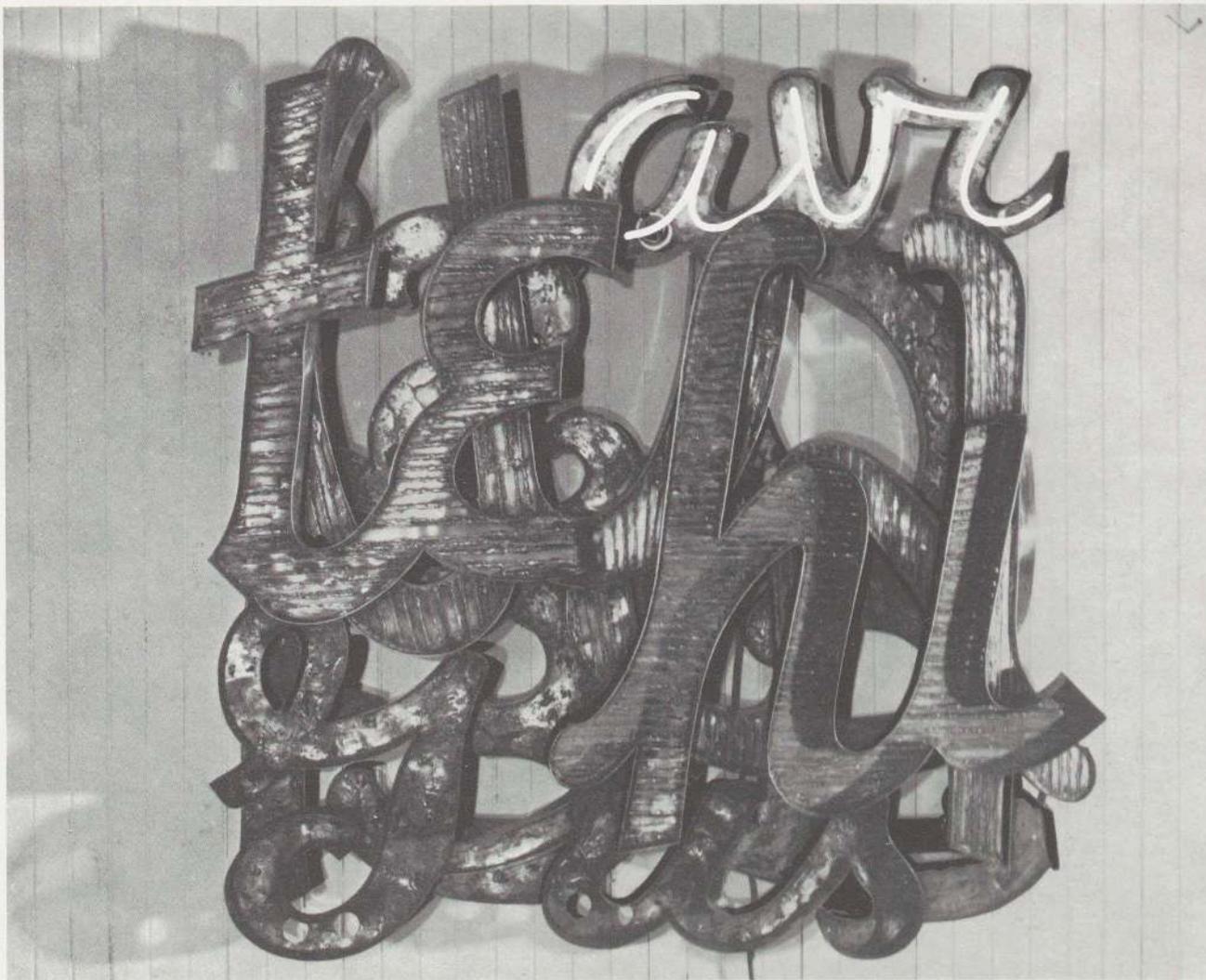
The enormous size of this woodcut partially accounts for its effectiveness, since the lightness and delicacy of the lines is in contrast to the overall scale. Lack of uniformity in spacing and the decorative use of ligature make the words from the Book of Matthew resemble a frieze.



CHRYSSA USA

"Times Square Sky" 1962, neon sculpture, 60 x 60"
Collection: Cordier Ekstrom Gallery, New York

The artist has made extensive use of signs in her sculptures. Here the essence of city lights at night is captured in a mélange of tightly intertwined words, accented by the neon-lighted "air" at the top.



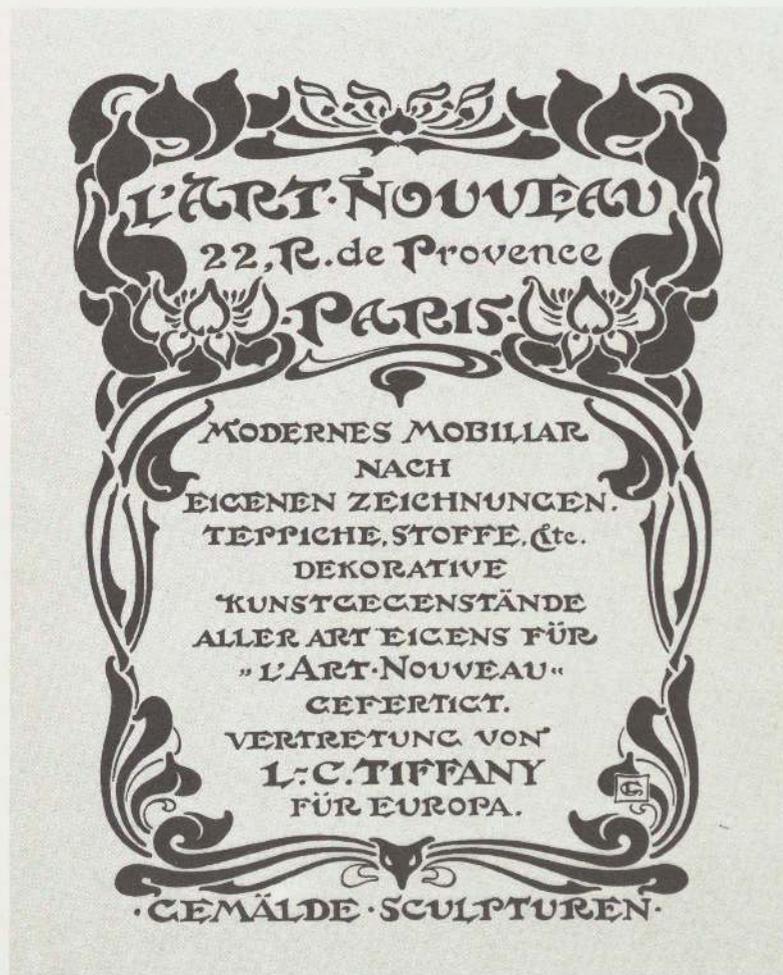
"Visa" 1951, oil, 40 x 52"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

"I very often use words in my pictures because they are a part of the urban subject matter." Davis utilizes calligraphic, block, sans-serif and elongated decorative letter forms, each word becoming a different subject for the artist, "as real as any shape of a face or tree."



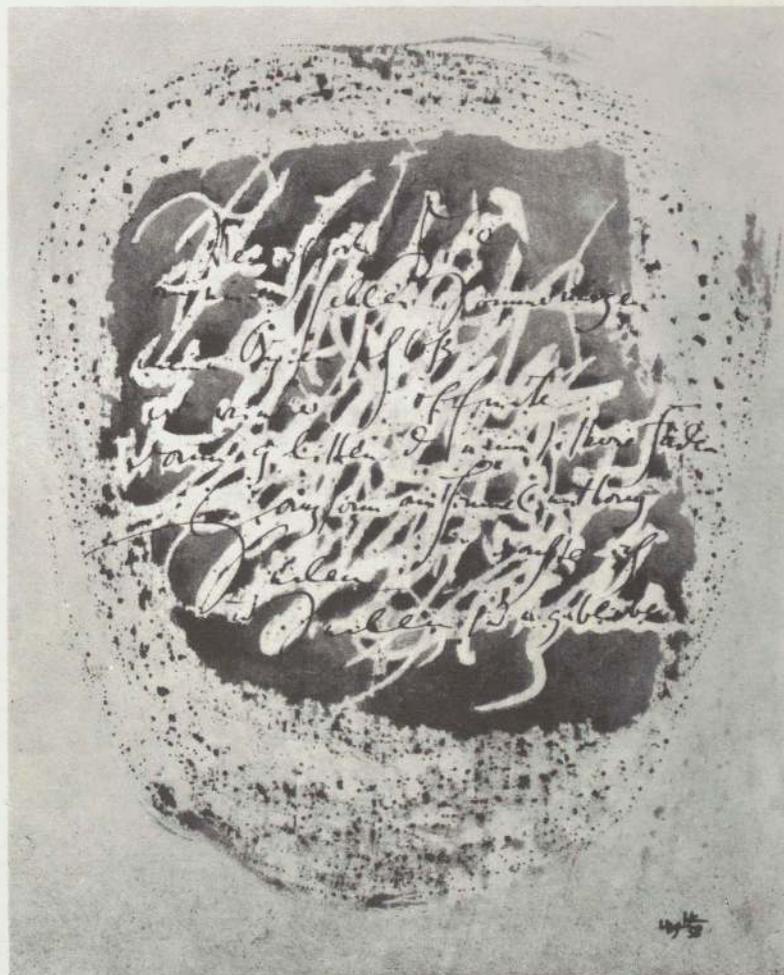
Advertisement for Bing's "L'Art Nouveau" from *Dekorative Kunst*, 1898

The arabesques of the letters, with their whiplash serifs, are a major element of Art Nouveau design. The page is adorned with a frame of swelling and thinning floral forms.

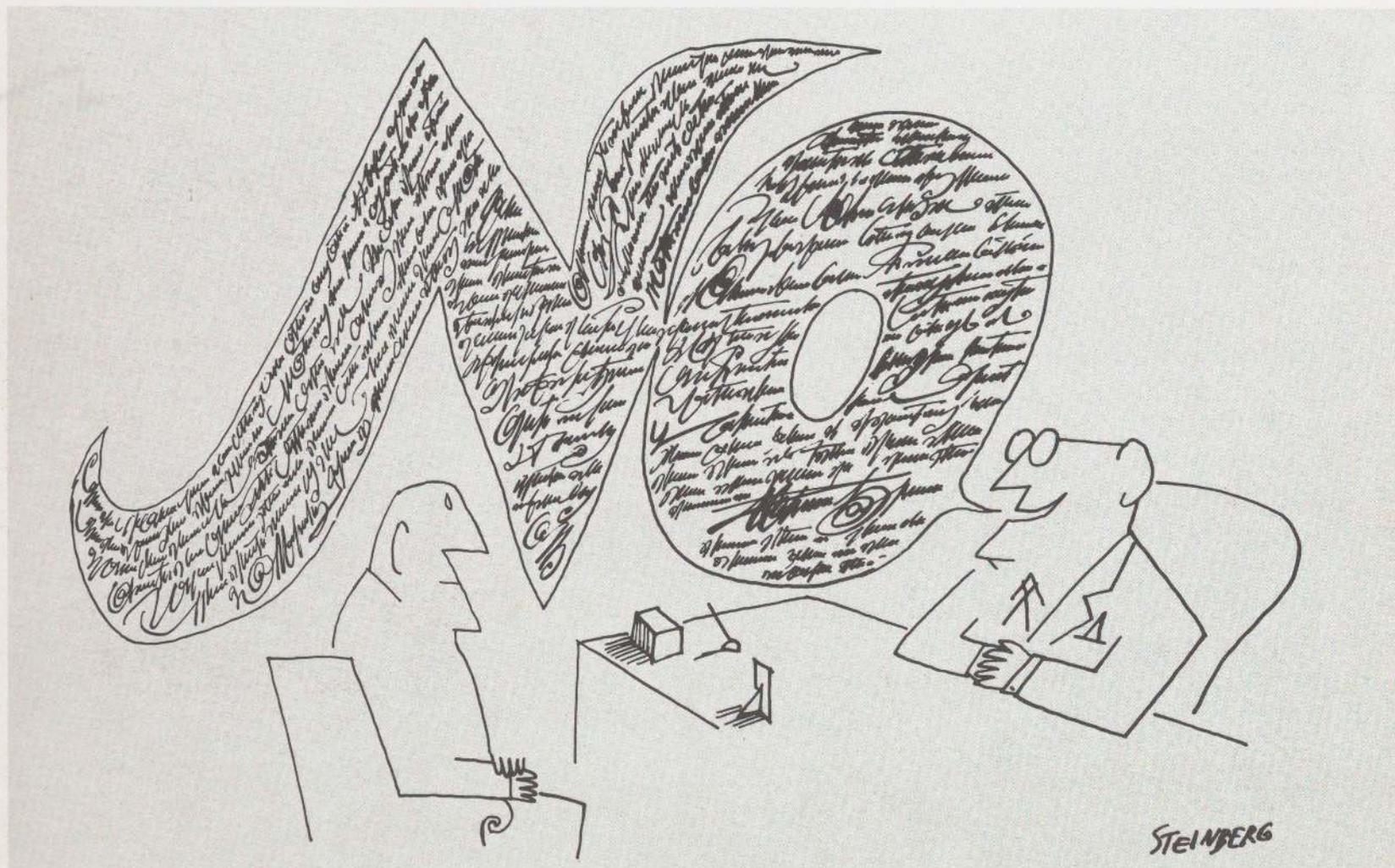


"Seelen" (Souls) 1958, ink and watercolor, 11 3/4 x 9"
Collection: Kraushaar Galleries, New York

Although the writing is fragile and tenuous, there are more than fragmentary clues to the meaning of this poem. The halation and the nebulous blue background on white paper set off the delicately etched black ink letters and heighten the aura of mystery.



"No" 1961, ink drawing, 14 1/2 x 22 5/8"
Collection: Mr. Frank Weil, New York



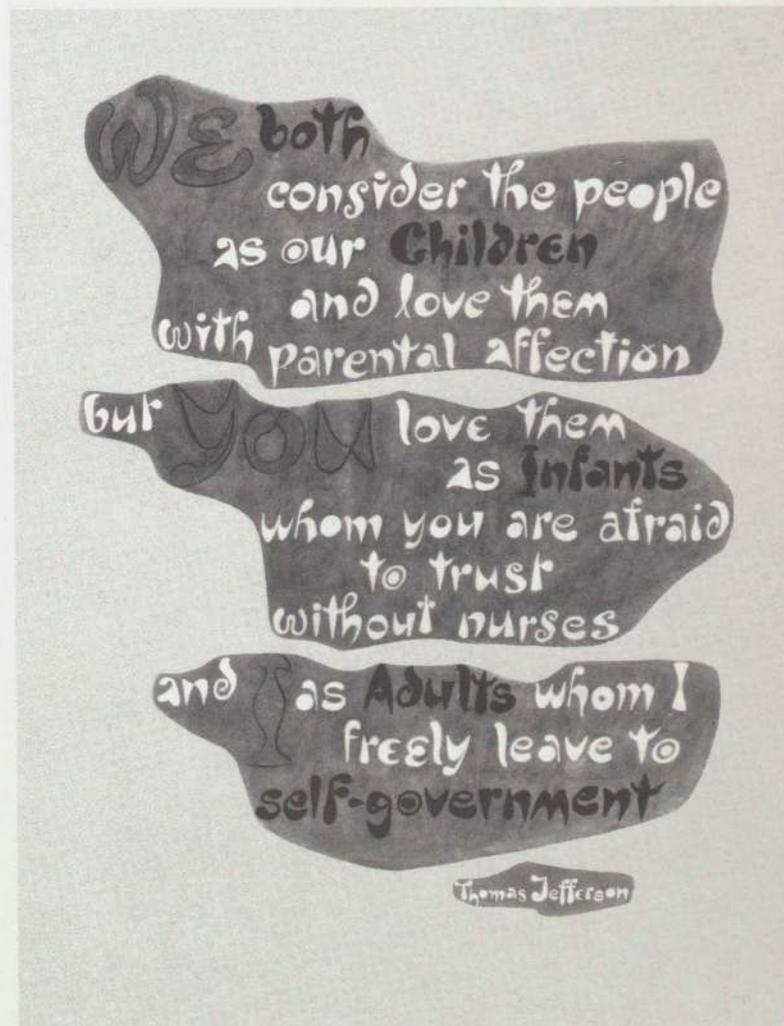
"Greeting and Hail to the Hearts..." 1924, color lithograph, 13 15/16 x 9 7/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Within the framework of a delicately outlined heart, cross and seascape, Itten has combined letter forms and symbols. The letters include Gothic typefaces, German calligraphy and Suetterlin script, which had been taught in the elementary schools in Germany. The heavy forms of the characters are relieved by gay, light colors.



Original design for "Great Ideas of Western Man" series, 1952, tempera,
13 7/8 x 10 5/8"
Collection: Container Corporation of America

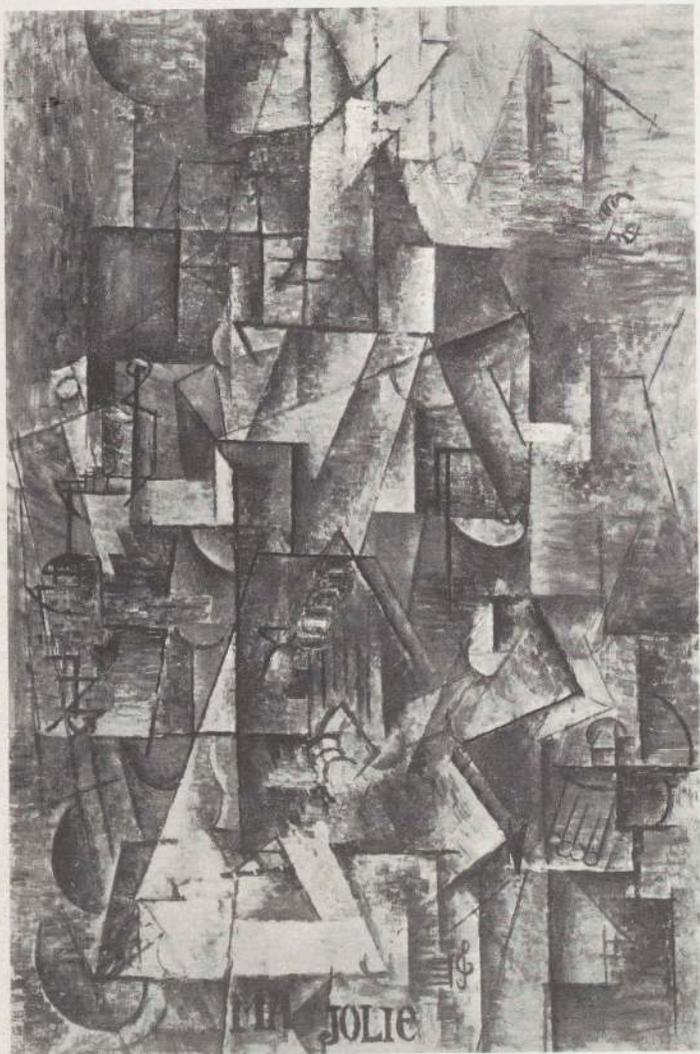
Although famous for his use of crisp sans-serif typography, Bayer here uses a fluid calligraphic style which is contained in free form areas.



PABLO PICASSO Spain

"Ma Jolie" (Woman with a Guitar) 1911-12, oil, 39 1/8 x 25 1/4"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

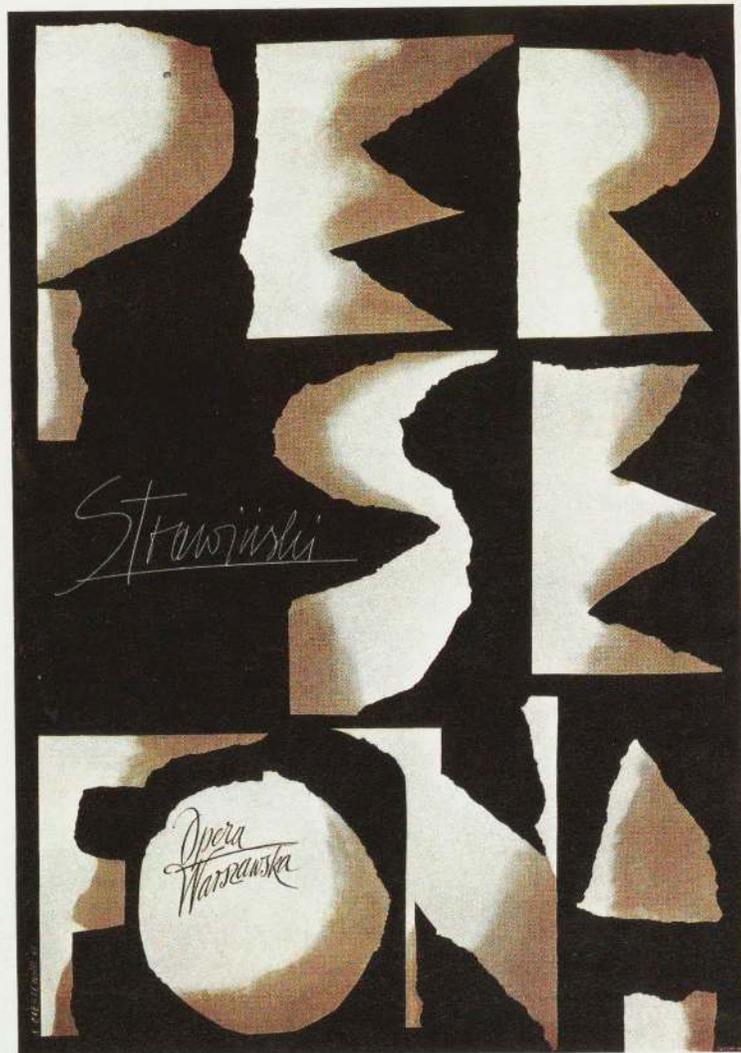
The title of a popular song and the musical clef sign are the only recognizable details in this cubist abstraction.



ROMAN CIESLEWICZ Poland

Poster for "Persephone" 1961, 37 3/8 x 26 3/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Torn paper letters with jagged edges suggest the tone and texture of much of Stravinsky's music, although not necessarily of this particular work. Shading helps to lift the letters away from their background.



JAMES VALKUS USA

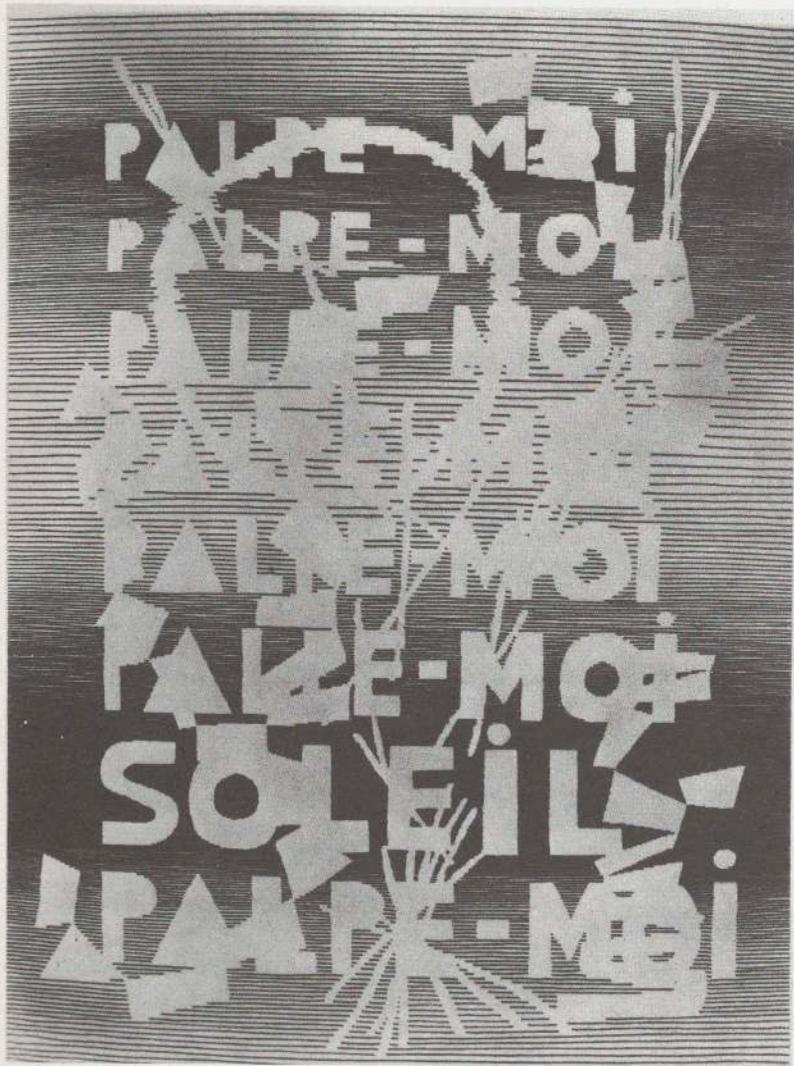
Design for title page "The Living City" 1962, paper cutout, 40 x 30"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

A jewelry-like effect is created by the rhythmic plaiting of rounded letters. The juxtaposing and overlapping of one color, opaque and transparent, illumines and lends movement to the composition.



"Palpe-moi soleil" 1960, watercolor, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2"
Collection: Gallery Denise René, Paris

Black lines drawn on white paper serve as a background for this work—the letters being formed by breaks in the lines. Both background and letters become heavier toward the bottom and then appear again to lighten.



"Hohelied II" 1959, woodcut, 67 3/4 x 24 3/4"
Collection: M. Constantine Bettelheim

When the eye becomes accustomed to the cuneiform-like stylization of the Roman alphabet, the verse from the second chapter of the Song of Solomon can be read.



Sacco-Vanzetti letter, "If it had not been for these thing..." 1958, serigraph, 15 1/4 x 20"
Collection: Miss Judith V. I. G. Bettelheim, New York

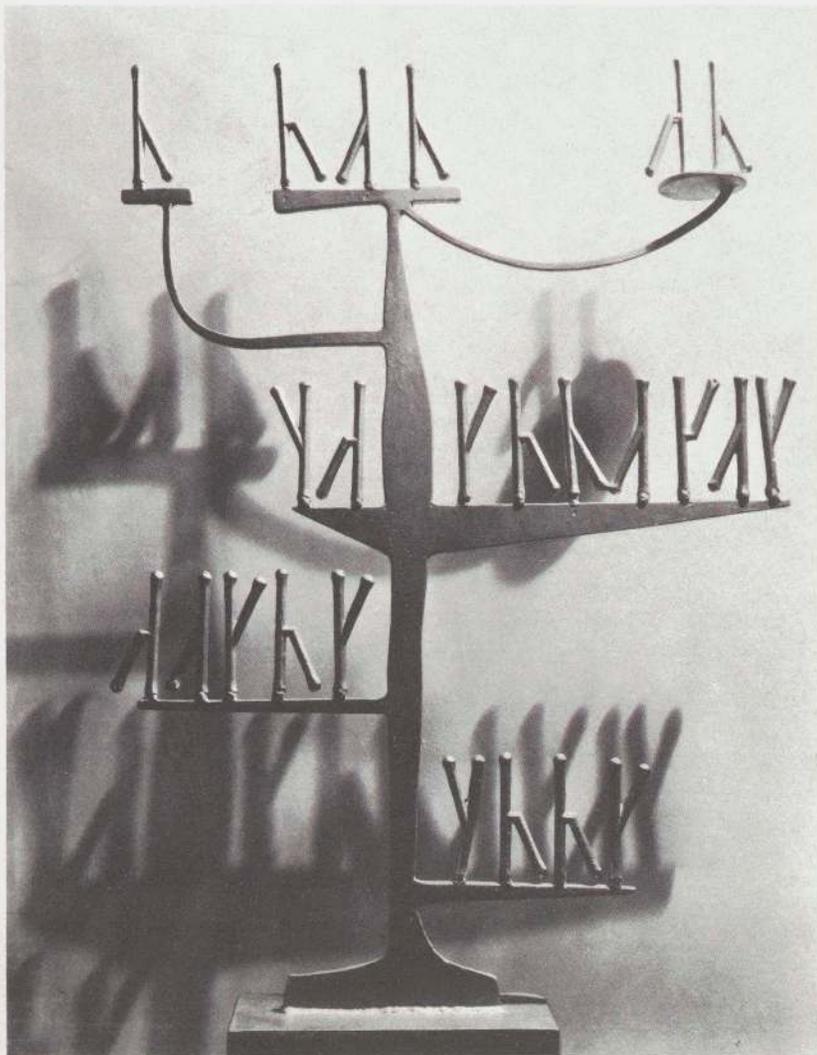
An unorthodox balance of light and dark, of thick and thin lines, emphasizes the pace, rhythm and meaning of these words. The untutored grammar and spelling is accompanied by a staccato rhythm, projecting the state of mind of the writer.

IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR THESE THING,
I MIGHT HAVE LIVE OUT MY LIFE TALK
ING AT STREET CORNERS TO SCORN-
ING MEN. I MIGHT HAVE DIE, UN-
MARKED, UNKNOWN A FAILURE. NOW
WE ARE NOT A FAILURE. THIS IS OUR
CAREER AND OUR TRIUMPH. NEVER IN
OUR FULL LIFE COULD WE HOPE TO
DO SUCH WORK FOR TOLERANCE, FOR
JOOSTICE, FOR MAN'S ONDERSTANDING
OF MAN AS NOW WE DO BY ACCIDENT.
OUR WORDS - OUR LIVES - OUR PAINS
NOTHING! THE TAKING OF OUR LIVES -
LIVES OF A GOOD SHOEMAKER AND A
POOR FISH PEDDLER - ALL! THAT LAST
MOMENT BELONGS TO US - THAT
AGONY IS OUR TRIUMPH.

Ben Shahn
May 1958

"Twenty-four Greek Ys" 1950, forged steel, painted, 43 3/4" h.
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

The Ys are a pictorial arrangement of lines in open space, and suggest the choreography of a march or a dance.



ULFERT WILKE USA

"Glyph" 1960, bronze, 19 x 30"
Collection: The artist

This modern abstract relief is reminiscent of an ancient cuneiform tablet with its arrow-headed letter forms. There is no message to be read. To the observer it may appear like a page of Braille with its tactile, three-dimensional qualities.



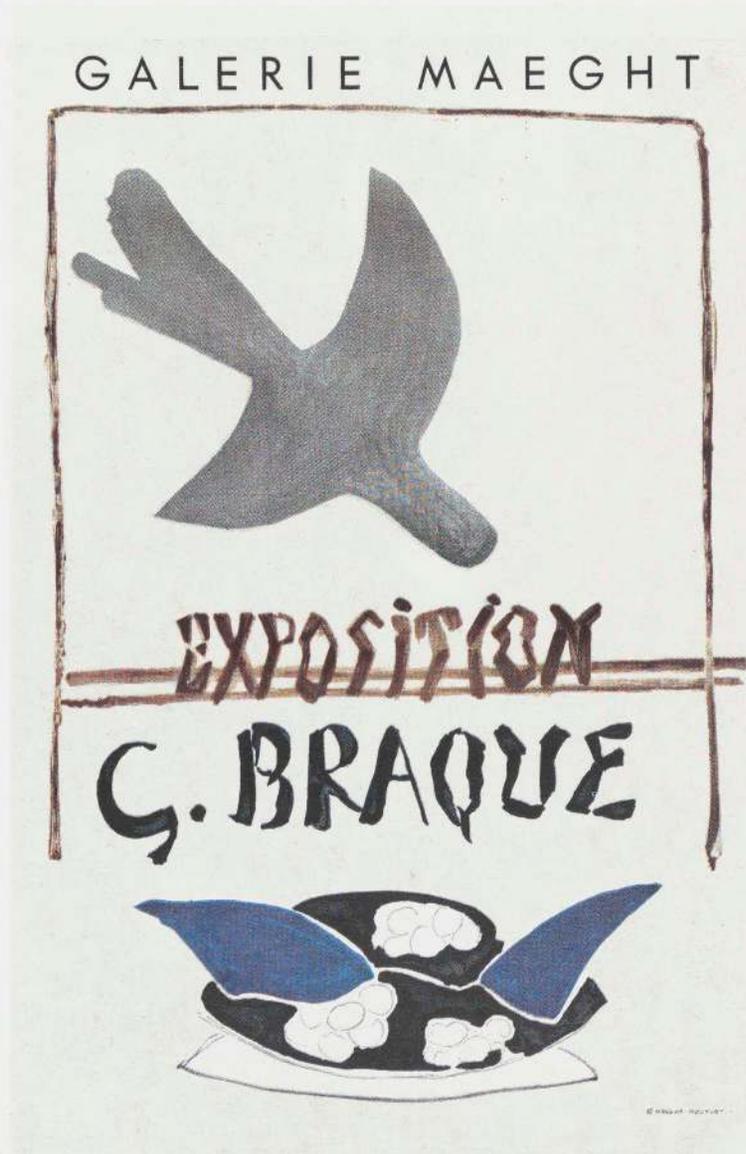
"La Revue Blanche" 1894, poster, 29 3/4 x 23"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

The flat, decorative patterns of this poster recall Japanese woodcut technique, even in the integrated use of the letters. Elongated outline forms and silhouetted figures reinforce each other with their colors and rhythms.



Galerie Maeght exhibition poster 1959, 28 5/8 x 19 3/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Lettering is again an integral part of the total composition, each element appearing as it might be viewed through a window and the broken forms of the lettering as they might appear through glass.



"Ballade au Duc de Bourbon," page from "Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans" 1950, color lithograph, 16 1/8 x 20 7/8"
 Collection: Museum of Modern Art

Matisse has said that his goal in illustrating books was to make "not simply a visual balance" but that he wanted the spectator "to be interested as much by the white page, the one with the etching, as by the expectation of reading the text." Spontaneous, flowing line is characteristic of both drawing and script.



ANONYMOUS

Café sign, circa 1900, bronze, 17 7/8 x 25 1/2"
Collection: Mr. Joseph H. Heil, New York

Surprising and fanciful ligature and emphatic thicks and thins of the letter forms give this bronze Art Nouveau sign a sculptural quality.



EMILE GALLE France 1846-1904

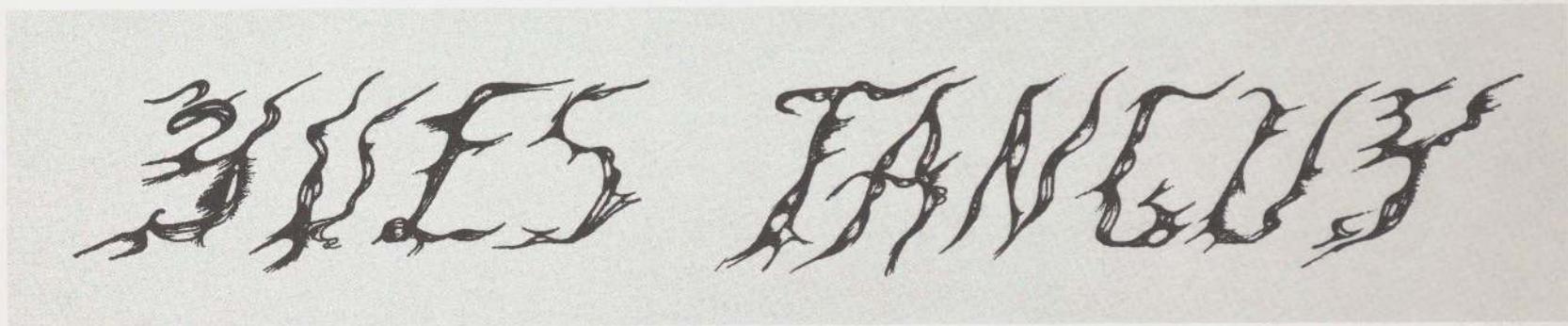
Detail of a vase
Collection: Mr. Joseph H. Heil, New York

The artist's signature is placed on this glass vase as another decorative element of attenuated line and rich surface. A soft, white background, blue flowers with green centers and the glowing black of the raised signature blend harmoniously.



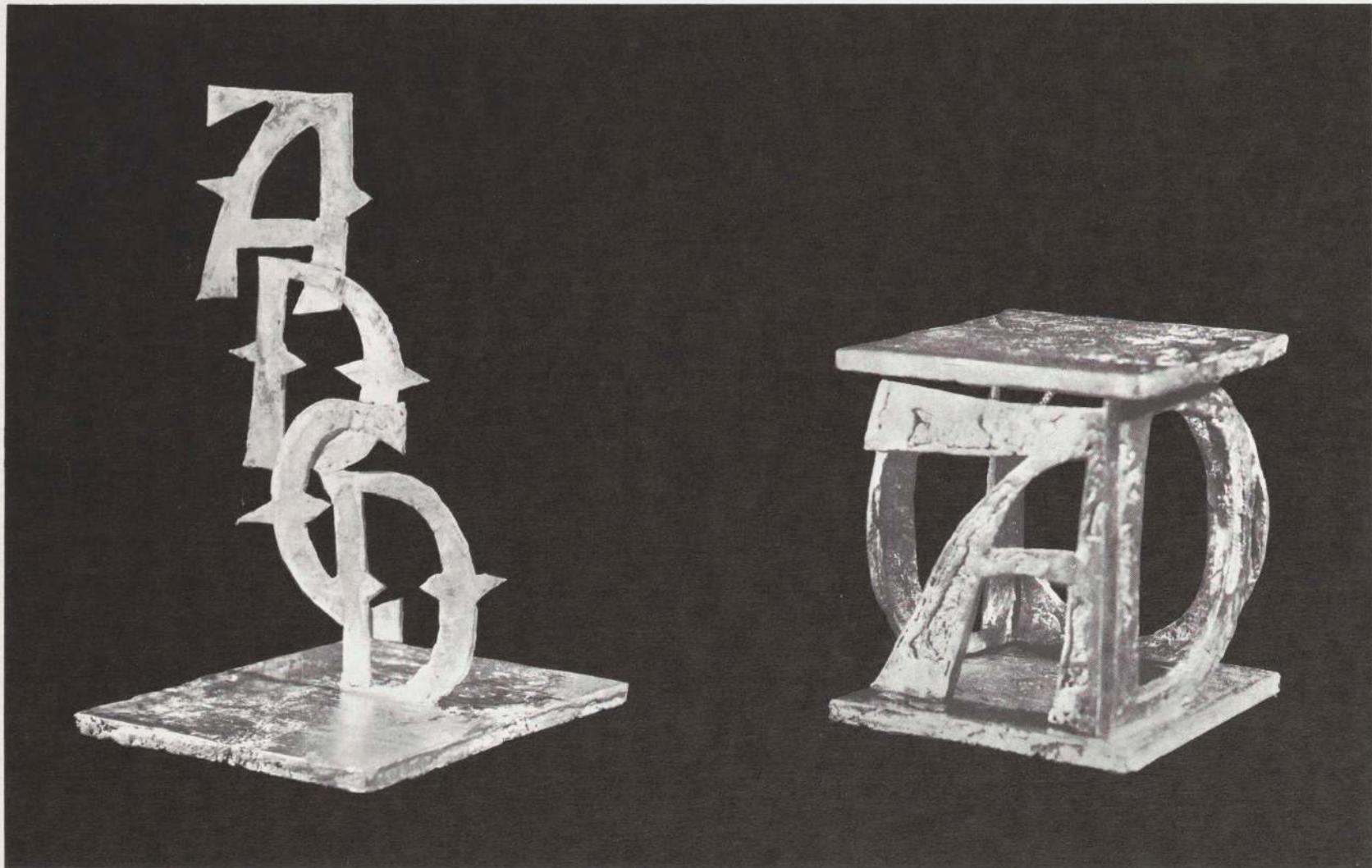
Title page for exhibition catalogue, 1963, 8 x 12 3/4"

The drawing in this signature is related to the organic, curvilinear forms of Art Nouveau. The lines seem to wander (as in the Gallé signature on the left) but Tanguy has produced, within strict margins, intricate and precise letter forms which look like well-controlled seaweed.



"Arrangement of Letters", "Letters in Cube" 1958; cast silver, gold wash; 3 1/4 x 2 x 1 7/8", 2 1/2 x 1 7/8"
Collection: Museum of Modern Art

In this diagonal arrangement of letters each shape is well defined, and special interest is created by overlapping which produces contrasts of solids and voids. The rich texture of both pieces lends ornamentation to these sculptures, the only ones thus far produced by the artist.



JASPER JOHNS USA

"0-9" 1960, charcoal on paper, 29 x 23"
Collection: The artist

The ten numbers are drawn with one image superimposed on the other. The resulting interplay of line, tone and shape creates a sweeping image, intricate yet uncluttered.

