

NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE —WRITING / SCRIPTS

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Overview Writing can be generally considered to be aligned with the production of written discourse, which could be in early civilizations, the concept of petroglyphs and earthworks, but at later times produced in different forms, with different materials and even different purposes. For that reason, it may be more accurate at times to consider this highly illustrative type of writing to be a kind of script, and at its core are the signs and symbols that produce meaning. Writing in North America was shaped by the need to communicate and the materials and distribution methods available at the time. One characteristic that all the forms have shared is the idea that they are intended to inspire active incorporation in everyday life and also to express, shape, and touch lives. Thus, from the writings on rocks, in caves, and on the desert floor, to graffiti and street murals in the “street galleries” of the New York streets and subway, writing in North America has maintained a vibrant and relevant position in the lives of the people.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis were known for their rapid progress from the Bering Straits all the way to what is now the Mexican border. They were on the move, and probably too busy to do anything significant in terms of developing elaborate writings, etc. However, even though they spent most of their energy producing highly technical arrows, points, awls, and implements for hunting and everyday life, they did spend some energy in creating petroglyphs which they carved into the walls of certain particularly spacious and accommodating caves. Their geoglyphs could be considered the kind of semiotic script that communicated narratives and were used in conjunction with rituals. The writing included animals, hunting scenes, straight lines, and geometric figures. They also created large geoglyphs in the desert near what is the California / Arizona border just north of the Mexican border east of the Big Maria Mountains along the Colorado River. The most famous geoglyphs are called the Blythe Intaglios. There are more than 200, and they include human figures, spirals, two four-legged animals. They were not discovered until 1932 by a pilot, and they are best viewed from the air, which makes one curious about who the designs were created for. Were they made for the pleasure of the Sky Gods? The longest human figure is 171 feet long, and the smallest is 95 long.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Not much of the Pueblo writing has survived, primarily because the writing that they did was largely in the form of sand art, which is designed to be ephemeral. However, they made great use of signs and symbols. Some of the writing made its way into meaningful patterns in blankets and rugs, which achieved a complexity that approached that of a formal set of hieroglyphs. Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo used crushed stone, shells, flowers, crushed insects, and more to create elaborate sand paintings that could be 5 or 6 feet in diameter. They were created to be considered as a part of ceremonies, and in particular, in the healing of the sick (in body and in spirit). The Native Americans considered the communication as a natural part of life. Further, there is a sense that all expression is considered to be a part of the sacred, just as all of nature is considered to be animated by the gods. In the case of the Navajo Indians, the sand paintings were begun in the morning by the medicine men, who create the work to honor the gods. The underworld is represented in the middle, the sun and different gods surround it, the roots of the four sacred plants are also included. The stories change, and the medicine men repeat certain patterns to focus the mind on the kind of healing that is desired. The painting is destroyed at the end of the ceremony.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Signs and symbols were worked into the materials used by the Eastern Woodlands civilizations. Writing took the form of wampum and designs in blankets and beadwork, which expressed identity, tribe, as well as the form of beliefs having to do with creation stories and what could be described as beast fables illustrative of human attributes. Wampum was fashioned from beads and the patterns included squares, lines, leaves, humans, birds, circles, triangles, diamonds, all arranged in different types of patterns. Each tribe’s wampums were different. For example, the Pequot

wampum belts often tell a story. For example, they can include depictions of human beings holding hands and after a series of animals and triangles symbolizing travel, hunting, and the resolution of conflict.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Political broadsides and pamphlets: In the years approaching the Revolutionary War, a unique type of writing / printing emerged. It was called a "broadside" and it was a one-page political poster that was designed to be nailed to prominent locations where it would have maximum impact. Inspired by the broadsides in England, the American broadsides were unique in their designs and use of symbolism and different fonts. They were highly effective as propaganda.

Calligraphic documents –Inspired by the elaborate calligraphy of Europe, the American documents of historical importance were, without exception, executed in a prodigy-level calligraphy, thus rendering the document something on the level of fine art. An example is the Declaration of Independence, which has been reproduced many times as a work of art to display in government buildings and in conference rooms.

Early printing press and the development of fonts: It is often overlooked as a bona fide aspect of art, but the printing press relied on the development of unique fonts that would be effective in attracting attention. Fonts were often named after the printing press that made them famous, and they were used to create a kind of brand recognition that connoted reliability and veracity.

Nineteenth Century

Newspapers:Writing was not just about the stories themselves. Instead newspaper writing was about the unique form of the layout which communicated a great deal about the relative importance of a story. The juxtaposition of stories and images also led to a new way of interpreting facts and forming meanings. Interestingly enough, the juxtapositions that we see in the newspapers of the 19th century are echoed in the film techniques used in the early 20th century, in which by virtue of the juxtaposition certain meanings are assumed and impugned.

Lending libraries: Writing took a new direction with the advent of lending libraries, as novels were issues in three separate volumes, with a specific tradition as to the number of illustrative plates and the length of the chapters, most of which appeared first as serialized features in newspapers. It was not too surprising to see that the most successful of these were "sensation" novels, which dealt with secrets, mysteries, and suppressed passion, all of which appealed to the 19th century audience.

Dime novels: Typically printed with a mustard-yellow cover, the "Dime Novels" sold for 10 cents. They were not actually a full novel, but more accurately speaking, a novella designed to be devoured in the dull commute on a train going from the suburbs to downtown. The "dime novel" was an engineered production with just the right amount of text, balanced with engraved plates each 20 or 30 pages, and then bound in a recognizable color and design, as to assure the reader that it the purchase would assure hours of escapist pleasure. The Dime Novels were almost always rooted in the Wild West, which was the convenient "exotic" for city-dwellers tired of their fetid, crowded apartment buildings and hard, dark factories.

Twentieth Century

Comics: One of the most dramatic changes in writing in the 20th century was the advent of the comic, which quickly attained status as a bona fide mode of telling a story and developing an ongoing narrative. One of the first of the comics involved Steamboat Willie, which morphed into Mickey Mouse. But, much more complex narratives were explored by Chester Gould, from Pawnee, Oklahoma, who wrote and sketched the graphic novels / comics series, Dick Tracy. Dick Tracy, who was a variant of the hard-boiled detective novel, changed the landscape of the comic / graphic novel forever, and opened the door for the existential explorations and a heuristic that focused on an identity in flux, a deep insecurity triggered by questions of whether or not the self actualization of modernity is actually possible.

Newspapers: Without a doubt, the writing that had the most impact in the early to late 20th century, where the meaning of an article was less about the words and more about the layout and placement in the newspaper, as well as the juxtaposition of images (photojournalism), diagrams, logos, and other non-textual elements that contributed semiotic (sign) meanings.

Limited edition poetry chapbooks: A chapbook was a small book with less than 20 pages. It often featured wood-block prints and hand carved calligraphic elements. It made many works of poetry not just about the words, but also of their physical appearance, and the aesthetics. The work of H.D. was issued in hand-made chapbooks. Later, artists including Cy Twombly would blur the boundaries of text, art, and language itself with his cursive-inspired loops and writing which may or may not be fully decipherable. Indeterminacy was a key element in the art production.

Graffiti: Allen Ginsberg's ground-breaking long poem, "Howl," brought the street to the salon, and pushed Walt Whitman's urgent thumping chaos of prose poetry into the fearful yet rebellious heart of the mushroom-cloud consciousness of the 1950s. Later, the calligraphic expression of the street took its shorthand rage and joy to the walls, streetcars, and defenseless metal of subway cars. In the 1980s, graffiti was recognized as an art form and many galleries began to show their art as a form of pop art or street art. It had a special cache, and the earliest artists were in New York City, where the elite galleries existed alongside examples of the graffitied subway cars, buildings, and fences. The "street galleries" were often featured in Sunday arts supplements in the *New York Times*. The first to achieve acclaim (and to sell their work for thousands of dollars) were Jean-Michel Basquiat whose work was considered neo-expressionist and Keith Haring, whose work was more Pop Art. The most influential graffiti artist working today is Banksy, whose identity is not known. Banksy does include writing, but also incorporates street murals that include a number of visual allusions and puns. Lady Pink, the "first lady of graffiti," for being one of the first to be active in the early 1980s subway graffiti subculture, lives and works in New York City. She also blends writing / graffiti with murals, many of which are known for their effect *trompe l'oeil*.

Discussion/Questions

1. If we consider the early petroglyphs of the Clovis peoples and the mysterious geofoms that resemble the Nazca Lines to be a form of meaningful written discourse, we can say that they wrote in order to communicate. But, what were they communicating? What were people trying to communicate? Who were they communicating to? In the case of the Blythe Intaglios (the geoglyphs), they were best viewed from the sky, or perhaps an overlook from a nearby mountain. Describe the glyphs and propose meanings and human interactions with them.
2. For the indigenous peoples, the ability to tell a story and also to explain our relationship to the earth, the sky, animals, people, and the Great Spirit was very important, not just in religious ceremonies, but also in everyday life. For the people of the Desert Southwest, the stories that were told by means of sand painting instructed the people of their beliefs, values, and also the proper way to interact with the physical and spiritual world. Describe how the discourse by means of creating meaningful patterns that are intended to interact with you (rather than being passive transmitters of meaning) might take place. For example, you might describe the reasons for creating a wampum belt or a sand painting.
3. In the 19th century, the writing styles and forms reflected the impact of new technologies. For example, the "dime novels" were inexpensive and were intended to be purchased by people taking a train who wanted something to amuse them during their journeys. Describe the kinds of writing you might find in a dime novel and explore the importance of including illustrations and developing an appealing book design. Also describe the newspaper layout and what the organization and design of the newspaper meant to the reader.
4. In the twentieth century, technology and urban living put pressure on discourse (writing). Old forms suddenly were too slow to produce or required too much time to fully interact with it. Describe how comics, graffiti art, different types of fonts, newspapers, posters, and broadsides found ways to communicate in a world of diverse people, emerging technologies, and the fast pace of life.

Readings

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