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*Review: More Than Words
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Exhibition Review

More Than Words *‘Writing: Making Your Mark’*

26 April – 27 August 2019

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Curated by Adrian Edwards, *Writing: Making Your Mark* promises to encompass five thousand years of writing, from the earliest hieroglyphics and letter forms to modern electronic methods of communication. As a former typesetter I was fascinated by the exhibition’s theme but approached it with some concerns about how such a lengthy and complex timeline could be presented in an informative yet engaging way.

The exhibition follows a progressive journey through the origins, systems, styles, materials, and technologies of writing. Upon entering the visitor is greeted by a group of large, white geometric panels which are all blank with the exception of one that has a brief explanation of the exhibition, reminiscent of pieces of paper strewn across a table. While perhaps not the most colourful or dynamic entrance, it may have alluded to the materiality of writing and provided a subtle visual clue as to what would come in the exhibition. Initial impressions varied amongst some of the visitors I spoke to; they ranged from “perfectly fine” to “unclear directions and slightly underwhelming.” I suspect the emptiness of the panels may have left some visitors wondering how to navigate the exhibition; perhaps this space may have instead been more effectively used to inform the visitor.

The first object the visitor encountered in the origins of writing section was a huge Maya limestone stela from Pusilhà, Belize dated to 647 CE. This was a very interesting starting point as most visitors, myself included, probably expected to see some form of Eastern writing like Sumerian cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphics. The materiality of the carved stone and the monumentality of the piece set the tone for the importance of writing within various cultures. There was also a visual contrast between the flat worked surface of the stela and the rough-hewn back of the stone which emphasised the labour required in order to produce the writing on the other side. The labour of writing, both manual and mechanised, was a theme that was carried through the exhibition, from carving stone to designing typefaces.

Moving on from the stela the exhibition travelled back another 2,500 years with a tiny clay tablet holding a few lines of Sumerian cuneiform. The tablet was displayed alongside a stone engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphics, and an ox bone with Chinese characters, showing the differing writing media of other cultures.

In the section on writing systems and styles the exhibition showed the development of specialised scripts, from the Insular miniscule of the Anglo-Saxons, to the italicised humanistic cursive of the Italian Renaissance, designed for ease of producing multiple copies. Though seemingly unrelated in style, an illustration in the exhibition demonstrated how the letter ‘A’ evolved from a modified hieroglyph and its hieratic counterpart to its current Latin form.



Writing - Making Your Mark at the British Library © Tony Antoniou, British Library Press Release, 24 April 2019.

The need for “user-friendly” scripts, due to the rise in written documentation, was demonstrated in the manipulation of text into various forms of early shorthand. A ninth-century Latin psalter from Rheims, (London, British Library ADD MS 9046), contained shorthand in a style created by Tiro (d. 4 BCE), a slave of Cicero, and expanded upon until the twelfth century. The symbols were very angular and bore a resemblance to both the characters used in cuneiform and symbols used by modern stenographers. Therefore, in an effort to advance the capabilities of writing, the scribe of the psalter appears to have employed an earlier model. This comparison highlights the benefit of juxtaposing artefacts from different periods to demonstrate their commonalities and the simultaneous development of written language.

In general, the exhibition displayed pieces well, allowing ample space for each object, with clear, concise interpretation panels. However, the placement of some of the smaller items towards the back of cases made it quite difficult to pick out the features in the description. For example, the shorthand of the Tironian psalter would have been easier to see and appreciate if the manuscript had been closer or magnified for vision-impaired visitors.

The contrast between old and new worked well for the exhibition. A modern carving by Annet Stirling which showed a section of enlarged text from Jeanette Winterson’s poem *Whisper to My Soul*, was placed next to a small clay tablet incised with cuneiform. The lighting on the carving was particularly effective, highlighting the three-dimensional quality of the surface as opposed to the small impressed letters on the tablet. The viewer was presented with two objects that both delivered text but differed in materiality, scale, labour, and age. The comparisons could have still gone further: for example, a modern tablet next to the 1977 computer would have given a more contemporary angle to the technology section that started with the printing press.

While it is understandably difficult to curate such a diverse topic as ‘writing’, the exhibition missed an opportunity to explore text as image and image as text. More attention could have been given to the historiated initials of medieval manuscripts as combinations of image and text, or for a modern interpretation, the textual stylization of graffiti art. However, the sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript, the *Poems of Khamsah from India*, did show a scribe and illustrator working together surrounded by the tools of their trade.

Writing seemed to lose momentum in the final section of the exhibition which contained a looped video of adults and children talking about the act of writing and its relevance to them. This video did not effectively address the future direction and potential of writing, both in language and materiality. A timelier example might have been a display relating to emojis, text speak, or even graffiti. Despite its shortcomings though, the exhibition did successfully tackle the technical aspects of letter design and the diversity of materials. *Writing: Making Your Mark* effectively and thought-provokingly articulated the cross-cultural concept that writing is so much more than words.

The exhibition is not moving on to another location, but it is complemented by workshops at the British Library as well as pop-up events at local libraries throughout the country. Details of these events can be found in the accompanying programme (cost £7.00), on Twitter #MakingYourMark or on the British Library’s website, www.bl.uk/events/writing-making-your-mark.

***Writing: Making Your Mark* was on display at the British Library from 26 April to 27 August 2019. Curated by Adrian Edwards.**