



Illustrated Letterforms: A Taxonomy of Graphemic Construction

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Abstract: Illustrated letterforms occupy a complex space between writing and image, combining graphemic structures with pictorial strategies that surpass conventional typographic classification. Rather than using typological or stylistic approaches, this article conceptualizes illustrated letterforms as graphemic constructions, in which the structural identity of the letter is determined by visual and pictorial operations. A taxonomy is proposed based on the specific operations by which letters are constructed. This study explores how illustrators and designers combine image and letterform into unified visual units, analyzing methods that preserve legibility while introducing visual, narrative, or symbolic elements. It covers diverse contexts—from manuscript traditions to modern graphic practices—focusing on operations that merge image and graphemic structure. Existing classification systems, especially in manuscript studies, often focus on narrative, iconographic, or stylistic criteria. This article emphasizes construction by operation, examining how graphemic structures are actively shaped by pictorial strategies. By shifting attention from style or function to operation, the framework offers a systematic way to describe and compare illustrated letterforms across media and over time. The taxonomy highlights varying degrees of integration between graphemic structure and pictorial elements, from decoration to full integration. This approach positions illustrated letterforms as a distinct area within visual-graphemic creation, emphasizing design, interpretation, and visual problem-solving rather than treating them as marginal or anomalous.

Keywords: classification; graphemes; graphic design; illustrated letterforms; illustration; letterform construction; lettering; visual culture

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1. Introduction

The alphabet did not originate as a purely abstract system but as a drawn and materially constructed form. Before becoming engravings, metal types, printed impressions, or digital files, letters were traced by hand and shaped by the interaction of tools, gestures, materials, and surfaces. This drawn condition represents a persistent dimension in the history of writing, continually shaping the conception and construction of letterforms.

Scholars have emphasized that letterforms are more than technical solutions to language problems. They are shaped by culture and history. Johanna Drucker (1995), for instance, frames the alphabet as a symbolic and visual artifact whose meanings extend beyond functional transcription, highlighting the cultural and historical contingency of letterforms. Similarly, Robin Kinross (2004) has shown that typographic practices are shaped by specific cultural and ideological conditions rather than constituting neutral or purely functional systems. These perspectives open the possibility of approaching letterforms beyond strictly typographic or reproductive frameworks.

Within this broader context, illustrated letters have persisted across historical periods—from manuscript traditions to contemporary graphic practices—yet remain comparatively under-theorized and are often approached through their decorative, expressive, or pedagogical functions. Existing approaches, particularly in manuscript studies, have developed descriptive frameworks and classifications for decorated, inhabited, and historiated initials, typically based on iconographic, stylistic, or functional criteria (Alexander, 1978; Brown, 1994; Kendrick, 1999). These frameworks offer valuable insights but focus more on representational or functional aspects than construction processes. As a result, less attention has been given to how graphemic structure and pictorial elements merge in letterform construction.

This article offers a complementary perspective by treating illustrated letterforms as graphemic constructions and focusing on the operations used to build them. It examines how illustrators and designers integrate image and letterform into a single visual unit, balancing legibility, representation, and structural coherence. In this sense, the study shifts attention from their functions, meanings, and stylistic features to the constructive processes that merge image and graphemic structure.

Central to this approach is the notion of drawing as a shared operational ground among lettering, illustration, and design. Here, drawing is a broader constructive and image-making process through which letterforms are visually configured across manual, photographic, digital, and material practices. Within graphic design, these processes operate across typographic, illustrative, computational, and spatial contexts. In typographic workflows, drawing typically serves as a preparatory phase focused on reproducibility and systemic consistency. In contrast, within illustration, drawing

remains evident as a process, retaining traces of material engagement and decision-making. Illustrated letterforms employ drawing as a fundamental structural practice that actively constructs the letter's identity, rather than functioning merely as decorative embellishment.

Through selected examples spanning manuscript culture, early print, and contemporary design, this article identifies recurring constructive operations in illustrated letterforms. Rather than offering an exhaustive survey, it establishes a framework for analyzing how letterforms emerge from the integration of graphemic structure and pictorial strategies across varying degrees of visual and structural interaction. In doing so, it positions illustrated letterforms as a relevant area of study grounded in design, interpretation, and visual problem-solving.

2. Terminological and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Grapheme, Letter, and Letterform

In the study of writing systems, scholars commonly distinguish between the grapheme, an abstract unit of writing, and its visual realizations (Sampson, 1985; Daniels & Bright, 1996; Coulmas, 2003). The *grapheme* is the minimal unit that distinguishes meaning within a writing system, whereas its visual realizations may vary across media, styles, and historical periods. In this article, the term *letterform* refers to the visual configuration through which a grapheme becomes perceptible, acknowledging that form is shaped by historical and cultural factors (Drucker, 1995).

This distinction is especially relevant for illustrated letterforms, where visual configurations may diverge significantly from conventional models yet remain recognizable. Rather than treating variation as deviation, this study approaches letterforms as constructions in which graphemic identity is preserved through structural cues, even when transformed by pictorial strategies. In this sense, legibility is understood as a negotiated condition that emerges from the interaction between structural stability and visual transformation (Bringhurst, 2013). Letterforms are treated here as visual configurations that may function as graphemes to varying degrees. Their graphemic status depends on whether their structural identity remains recognizable within a conventional writing system.

2.2. Typography, Lettering, and Drawing

Typography is typically associated with systems of reproducible letterforms, historically linked to printing technologies and, more recently, to digital type design (Kinross, 2004; Carter et al., 2015; Drucker & McVarish, 2013). Its analytical frameworks have often focused on classification, standardization, and optimizing readability across

contexts. Lettering, by contrast, refers to the drawing of letters as distinct visual constructions, often produced for specific contexts and not necessarily intended for systematic reproduction.

While typography and lettering differ in their modes of production and use, both rely on drawing as a formative process. In lettering, drawing typically remains visible in the final form, directly shaping the letter's identity and expression. In typography, drawing often serves as a foundational stage in developing letterforms, though its traces may be subordinated to standardization and reproduction. Illustrated letterforms foreground both the generative and expressive dimensions of drawing. Their construction depends on drawing not only as a generative process but also as a visible and constitutive component of the final form, carrying authorial, expressive, and pictorial qualities that may introduce narrative, metaphorical, symbolic, or ornamental dimensions alongside graphemic function.

In this context, drawing is understood as a broader process of visual construction shared across typography, lettering, illustration, and contemporary design. Following Ingold (2007, 2013), drawing is a process of making that unfolds through gesture, material engagement, and temporal development, rather than merely a representation. While typographic production begins in drawing, it may ultimately dissolve drawing within processes of standardization, whereas illustrated letterforms retain and foreground drawing as a visible and constitutive dimension of form.

2.3. Illustrated Letterforms as Graphemic Constructions

Illustrated letterforms are understood as visual configurations in which graphemic structure and pictorial elements are integrated into a single functional unit. This integration may vary in degree, ranging from additive strategies—where imagery accompanies a relatively stable letterform—to fully integrated constructions in which image and structure are co-dependent.

Such forms are well documented in manuscript traditions, particularly in historiated and inhabited initials, where image and letterform are structurally intertwined (Alexander, 1978; Brown, 1994; Kendrick, 1999). These historical examples demonstrate that the integration of image and graphemic structure is a recurring mode of visual construction.

2.4. Synthesis

Overall, these distinctions establish the conceptual framework of this study. By treating letterforms as graphemic constructions, distinguishing typographic systems from drawing practices, and emphasizing drawing as an operative dimension, the article shifts the analytical focus from classification to construction. This enables analysis

of illustrated letterforms based on how they are made, rather than on stylistic or functional categories.

3. Context: Historical and Analytical Approaches

3.1. From Pictorial Origins to Constructed Letterforms

The relationship between image and letterform dates back to the early development of writing systems, in which many signs originated as pictorial representations of objects and were progressively abstracted and conventionalized (Daniels & Bright, 1996; Coulmas, 2003). While these processes led to the stabilization of graphemic systems, they also show that writing emerged through transformations of visual form rather than from purely abstract principles.

The integration of letter and image becomes more explicit and systematic in late antique and early medieval manuscript traditions. From the 4th and 5th centuries onward, enlarged initials begin to incorporate decorative and figurative elements within the letter's structure. Early forms include letters enriched with filling ornament—vegetal, geometric, or zoomorphic motifs integrated into the letterform while maintaining its recognizable structure (Alexander, 1978; Brown, 1994). In some cases, these elements transform parts of the letter into figures or decorative forms.

This development marks a shift in which the letter functions both as a unit of writing and as a site of visual construction, with graphemic structure and pictorial strategies deliberately combined.

3.2. Manuscript Practices: Structure, Hierarchy, and Interpretation

In medieval manuscript culture, the integration of image and letterform became a sustained and highly developed practice. Initials—commonly described as historiated, inhabited, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, or foliated—demonstrate a wide range of strategies for incorporating pictorial elements into letterforms (Alexander, 1978; Brown, 1994).

These forms serve multiple functions. Structurally, enlarged initials mark divisions within the text, signaling the beginning of sections, chapters, or books. Hierarchically, variations in scale, color, and ornament establish relationships among textual units. Functionally, they act as navigational devices, enabling readers to locate passages within extended manuscripts in the absence of pagination. At the same time, they often incorporate narrative or symbolic imagery related to the text, functioning as sites of visual interpretation.

In many manuscript examples, pictorial elements function as structural components of the letterform rather than external additions. Human or animal figures may determine curvature, proportion, or internal articulation, shaping the letter from within rather than decorating its surface (Kendrick, 1999). This integration suggests that figuration operates as a constructive principle, establishing the letter's identity through visual and material constraints.

These practices show that combining image and letterform in manuscript culture is a deliberate, systematic visual approach that balances legibility with pictorial expression.

3.3. Print Culture and the Persistence of Illustrated Letterforms

With the transition from manuscript to print, the production of letterforms became increasingly standardized through typographic systems oriented toward reproducibility. Nevertheless, the integration of image and letterform did not disappear. Early printed books frequently left spaces for initials to be added by hand, maintaining continuity with manuscript practices.

Over time, printed initials and ornamental letters evolved through woodcut and engraving techniques, as well as through modular and composite printing processes that enabled variation in color and form (Drucker & McVarish, 2013). These developments show that illustrated letterforms continued to be produced within print culture, adapting to new technical conditions while remaining open to visual construction.

From the early modern period onward, illustrated letterforms expanded into a broader range of contexts, including emblem books, decorative alphabets, and pedagogical materials. In these contexts, letters function as visual and conceptual constructs, often combining recognizable letterforms with figurative or symbolic elements and extending beyond their role in structuring text.

There are multiple examples of similar construction strategies across different letters, indicating that these forms are part of broader visual logics rather than isolated instances. This points to the existence of implicit systems based on shared constructive principles rather than formal standardization.

3.4. Modern and Contemporary Practices

In modern and contemporary contexts, illustrated letterforms extend across multiple domains, including graphic design, illustration, advertising, and artistic practice. Alphabets and individual letterforms are reinterpreted through a wide range of strategies, incorporating human figures, objects, abstract shapes, materials, photographic elements, and digitally generated or three-dimensional forms. Contemporary practices have further expanded these constructive possibilities through computational, performative, and hybrid image-making processes that increasingly challenge stable

distinctions between typography, lettering, and illustration (Miller & Lupton, 1996; McNeil, 2017).

In these contexts, the letterform often functions as a constructed object rather than a fixed unit within a writing system. The problem is no longer just one of textual organization but of how to preserve graphemic recognizability while integrating visual, material, or conceptual elements. This tension between legibility and transformation underlies many contemporary approaches, in which the letter becomes a site for visual experimentation and design.

3.5. Existing Classification Systems and Their Limits

Across these historical contexts, classification systems have been developed to describe illustrated and decorated letterforms. In manuscript studies, terminology such as historiated, inhabited, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and foliated initials reflects attention to iconographic content, decorative motifs, and stylistic features (Alexander, 1978; Brown, 1994). In typographic and design-oriented frameworks, classification has often focused on formal characteristics, stylistic categories, and modes of production (Bringinghurst, 2013; Carter et al., 2015). These approaches provide effective tools for identifying and describing visual features in specific contexts. However, they primarily address what letterforms represent, how they appear, or how they function within particular systems. They do not consistently consider how constructive processes integrate image with graphemic structure.

From the illustrator's or designer's perspective, illustrated letterforms can be understood as the result of specific visual problems: how to construct a recognizable letter while integrating pictorial, material, or conceptual elements. In this way, letters that look different might rely on similar fundamental processes, whereas visually similar forms can be created using different constructive methods.

3.6. Positioning of the Present Study

This article considers illustrated letterforms across contexts as examples of visual construction, avoiding specific typologies such as historiated initials, decorative alphabets, or illustrated books, as defined by iconographic, stylistic, or historical categories.

The analysis focuses on how graphemic structures and pictorial elements are combined, rather than on medium, typology, or historical period. By emphasizing the process of construction over simple classification, the study highlights the maker's role, treating illustrated letterforms as the result of specific acts of drawing and visual problem-solving.

The proposed taxonomy complements existing classification systems by providing a framework for understanding how letterforms are generated, transformed, and stabilized through constructive operations across both historical and contemporary practices.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative methodology grounded in visual and structural analysis (Rose, 2016). Rather than attempting an exhaustive historical survey, it develops and tests an analytical framework by examining selected case studies from manuscript culture, print, and contemporary graphic practices, including digital and computational contexts.

Works were chosen because they clearly demonstrate distinct modes of interaction between graphemic structure and pictorial elements. The objective is to emphasize analytical contrast rather than statistical representativeness, so each case functions as a paradigmatic instance that clarifies specific constructive strategies.

The analysis focuses on whether pictorial elements generate, transform, or accompany the graphemic structure, and on how recognizability is maintained across varying degrees of integration. Attention is given to aspects such as structural continuity, proportion, spatial organization, and the relationship between positive and negative space, as these contribute to the letter's construction. Iconography, narrative content, and stylistic interpretation are considered only when they directly affect the letterform's structural configuration.

The proposed framework operates heuristically. Its goal is not to exhaust all possible forms of illustrated letters or to impose rigid categories. Instead, it offers a repeatable analytical approach grounded in a central question: how do graphemic structure and pictorial operations interact in the construction of the letterform?

5. A Taxonomy of Illustrated Alphabet Letters

Building on the conceptual and historical framework established in previous sections, this section proposes a taxonomy of illustrated letterforms based on structural and constructive criteria. Rather than organizing these forms by style, iconography, or historical period, the taxonomy focuses on how the image participates in the construction of the letterform.

The taxonomy is grounded in drawing and image-making as shared practices across illustration, lettering, typography, and contemporary design. It considers letterforms as constructed visual entities and focuses on the role of pictorial elements in shaping

their structure. Iconography, narrative, and stylistic interpretation are considered only when they directly affect construction.

5.1. Structural Operativity as Taxonomic Principle

At the core of the taxonomy lies a single operational question: Is the illustrated element structurally operative in the construction of the letterform?

Structural operativity refers to the extent to which pictorial elements participate in generating, maintaining, or transforming the graphemic structure of a letter. Assessing structural operativity is not always straightforward. In many cases, the constructive process by which a letterform was produced is not directly accessible and must be inferred from its visual organization. Pictorial elements may occupy a pre-existing graphemic structure, modify it, or contribute directly to its formation. As a result, structural operativity is best understood as a matter of degree rather than an absolute condition.

One useful heuristic is to consider what happens when pictorial elements are conceptually removed from the letterform. Rather than functioning as a rigid classificatory test, this procedure helps reveal the extent to which the letter's structural identity depends on pictorial construction.

5.2. Taxonomic Structure

The taxonomy is organized into three main categories based on the degree of structural dependency on pictorial intervention: non-form-generative, hybrid-generative, and form-generative.

Table 1 summarizes the taxonomy, defining each category and subcategory by its constructive criterion and degree of structural dependency.

5.3. Non-Form-Generative Letterforms

In non-form-generative cases, the structural framework of the letter remains independent of illustration.

Four main conditions can be identified:

- ▶ Adjunct: illustration is external to the letterform.
- ▶ Ornamental: surface enrichment without structural impact.
- ▶ Container-based: illustration fills a predefined outline.
- ▶ Transformative: the letter is visually reinterpreted while its structure remains intact.

These categories define forms in which illustration enriches or recontextualizes the letter without determining its structure.

Table 1. Structural taxonomy of illustrated letterforms.

Structural Category	Subcategory	Constructive Criterion	Structural Dependency
Non-form-generative	Adjunct	Illustration external to letter structure	Low
	Ornamental	Surface enrichment without structural intervention	Low
	Container-based	Illustration fills predefined outline	Low
	Transformative	Semantic or material alteration; skeleton intact	Low
Hybrid-generative	—	Shared structural responsibility (partial modification)	Medium
Form-generative	Figurative-constructive	Figures generate structure	High
	Object-constructive	Objects replace structural components	High
	Spatial/architectural-constructive	Spatial relations define geometry	High
	Material-constructive	Physical process determines form	High
	Abstract-constructive	Non-representational forms generate structure	High

5.4. Hybrid-Generative Letterforms

Hybrid-generative letterforms occupy an intermediate position. A recognizable structural framework remains, but pictorial elements intervene directly in its construction. Illustration and structure work together to produce the final form, establishing a condition of shared structural responsibility. Specific components of the letter—such as strokes, terminals, or counters—may be replaced, extended, or modified, while overall recognizability is preserved. Hybrid conditions may also emerge through the combination of different constructive strategies, allowing generative and non-generative operations, or multiple generative subcategories, to coexist within the same letterform. Similar combinations can be observed in manuscript traditions, where different modes of image–letter integration often coexist within the same form (Alexander, 1978; Camille, 1992).

5.5. Form-Generative Letterforms

Form-generative letterforms are those in which illustration is structurally responsible for the letter's existence. The letter doesn't pre-exist as a stable outline; it emerges from the constructive process itself.

Several constructive strategies may be observed:

- ▶ Figurative-constructive: human or animal figures generate structural components such as strokes, curves, and proportions.
- ▶ Object-constructive: objects or artifacts replace or constitute parts of the letter's structure.
- ▶ Spatial/architectural-constructive: the letter emerges from spatial relations, volume, or architectural organization.
- ▶ Material-constructive: physical processes such as cutting, folding, or deformation generate the form.
- ▶ Abstract-constructive: non-representational forms generate the letter structurally.

In all cases, illustration constitutes the letter.

5.6. Letter, Set, and Alphabet

The taxonomy treats the individual letter as its primary unit of analysis, while recognizing that letters often appear as part of sets or complete alphabets. Sets and alphabets may be structurally homogeneous, using similar constructive strategies across letters, or heterogeneous, combining different approaches. They may nevertheless exhibit strong stylistic, conceptual, or thematic coherence, even when relying on different constructive strategies across individual letterforms.

5.7. Legibility and Structural Tension

Across all categories, recognizability remains a necessary condition. The taxonomy assumes that a letterform must retain sufficient graphemic identity to be identified as a letter, even when pictorial elements play a significant role in its construction.

According to van Leeuwen (2006), legibility is understood as a culturally acquired competence rather than a fixed formal property. Recognition may therefore depend not only on the structure of an individual letterform but also on the context in which it appears. In sets and complete alphabets, relationships between letters can provide additional cues for identification, allowing more radically transformed forms to remain legible. This is particularly relevant in borderline cases, where a letter's recognizability may depend less on its individual form than on its participation in a broader visual system.

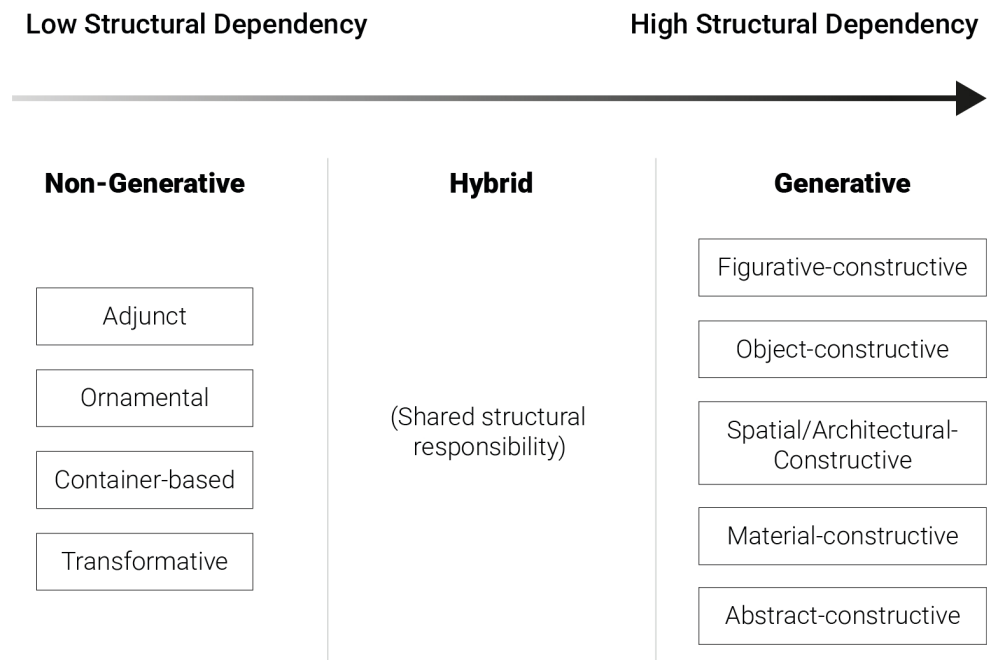


Figure 1. Structural continuum of illustrated alphabet letters. Diagram positions illustrated letterforms according to the degree of structural dependency on illustration.

5.8. Analytical Continuum

To clarify the relationships between categories, Figure 1 presents the taxonomy as a continuum of structural dependency.

The diagram positions illustrated letterforms along a gradient from non-generative conditions—where the letter remains structurally independent—to fully generative constructions, in which illustration determines or replaces its structure. Hybrid conditions occupy the intermediate zone, characterized by shared structural responsibility.

5.9. Scope and Limits of the Taxonomy

The categories proposed here should not be understood as rigid or mutually exclusive types. Illustrated letterforms often combine multiple constructive strategies, and borderline cases may occupy intermediate positions along the continuum of structural dependency.

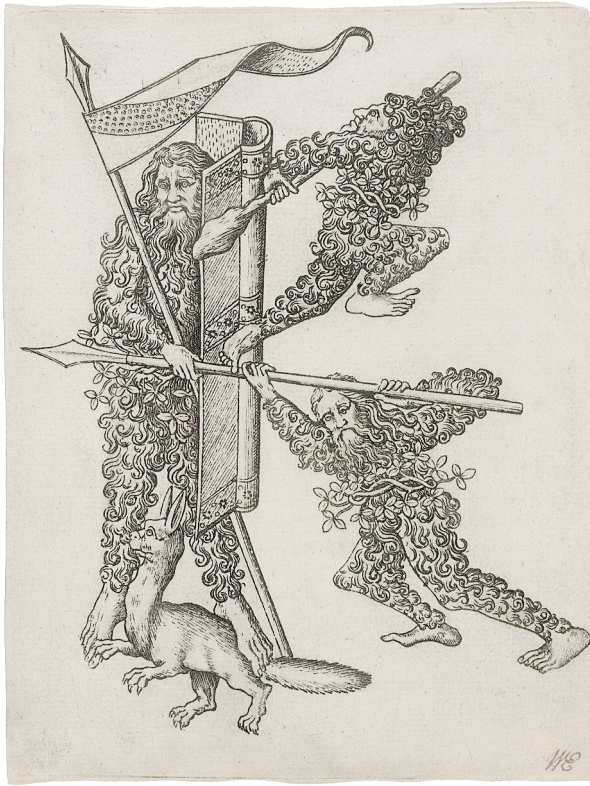


Figure 2. Master E. S., *The Letter K*, 1466–1467. Engraving. Form-generative and figurative-constructive letter in which human figures, animals, and objects collectively generate the graphemic structure through their strategic arrangement and simultaneously construct a narrative scene. Public domain.

6. Applying the Taxonomy: Structural Analysis of Illustrated Letterforms

The proposed taxonomy defines structural operativity as the primary criterion for distinguishing illustrated letterforms. This section applies the framework to selected examples, examining how pictorial elements contribute to the construction of letterforms across the categories of form-generative, hybrid-generative, and non-form-generative.

6.1. Form-Generative Letterforms

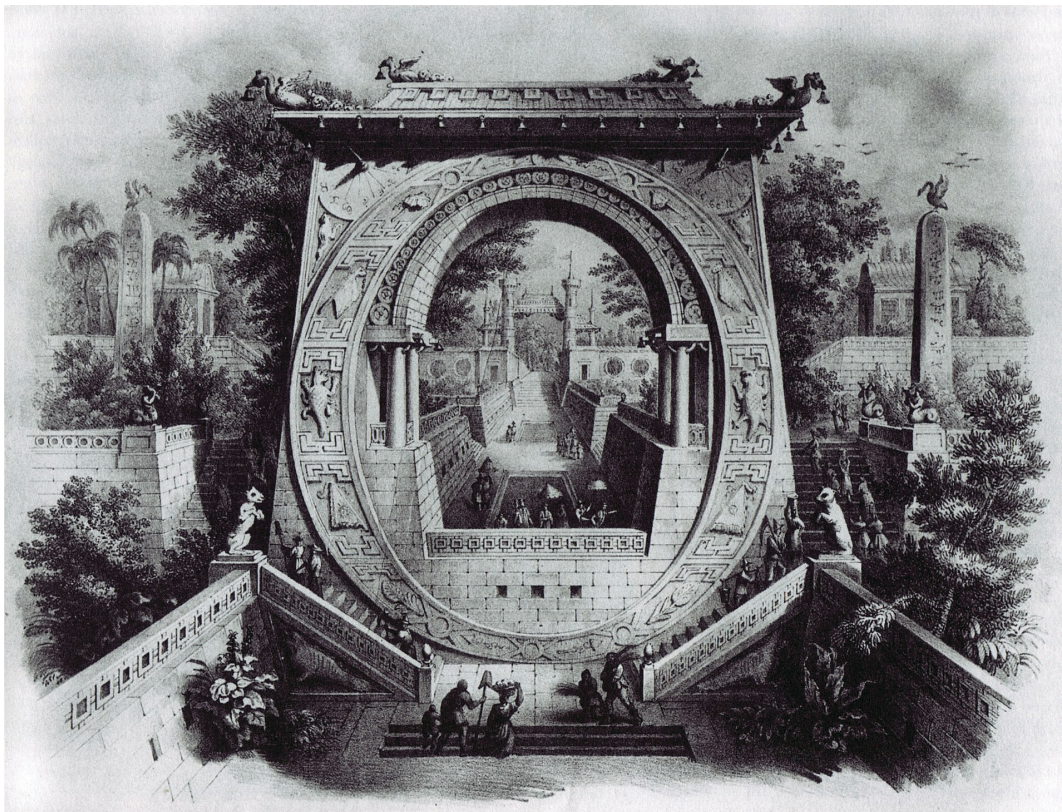
Form-generative letterforms are those in which illustration is structurally responsible for the letter's existence. The letterform emerges from the constructive process itself rather than from a stable, pre-existing outline, with pictorial elements generating its graphemic structure. These constructive strategies may arise through manual, photographic, digital, material, or computational processes.

Master E. S.'s letter (Figure 2) is constructed through the strategic arrangement of human figures, animals, and objects, whose combined configuration gives rise to the graphemic structure. The figurative elements remain recognizable and are not constrained by a pre-existing typographic outline. Instead, strokes, junctions, and proportions emerge from their organization, ensuring letter recognition while simulta-



Figure 3 (left). James Wojcik, *Alphabet Series*, 1988. Photography. Object-constructive letter assembled from photographed elements, in which material mass replaces the stroke and determines thickness and structural form. Copyright James Wojcik 2026. Used with permission.

Figure 4 (below). Antonio Basoli, *Alfabeto Pittorico*, 1839. Engraving. Spatial-constructive letter generated through architectural composition, in which built structures articulate stroke direction, counterform, and proportional organization. Public domain.



neously constructing a narrative scene. The letterform is therefore form-generative and figurative-constructive.

James Wojcik's sculptural letter (Figure 3) exemplifies object-constructive logic. Recognizable objects assemble into structural components, replacing the drawn stroke with material mass. Thickness and termination derive from the elements' physical properties. In this case, the letter N is constituted by the playing cards themselves and their spatial arrangement.

Antonio Basoli's letter (Figure 4) demonstrates spatial/architectural construction. The form arises from the organization of built elements. Volume and void determine proportion, and spatial relations generate counterform. Geometry is constructed rather than traced.

The letter in Figure 5 exemplifies material-constructive logic. The form emerges from the behavior of viscous matter. Gravity, tension, and cohesion determine thickness and curvature. The structure results from the process rather than from a predefined outline.

Casey Conchinha's letter (Figure 6) illustrates abstract-constructive generation through computational processes. The form emerges from layered trajectories and algorithmic



Figure 5. Foreal Studio, *The Sculpted Alphabet*, 2014. Digital 3D rendering. A material-constructive letter generated through viscous behavior, with thickness, curvature, and terminal formation determined by fluid tension and material cohesion. Used with permission of Foreal Studio.

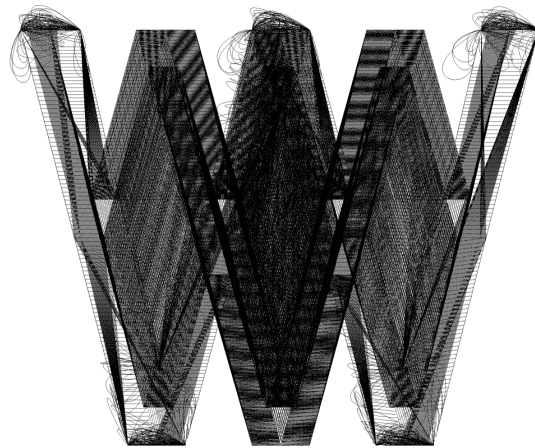


Figure 6. Casey Conchinha, *exp.01*, generative typography. Computational typographic experiment developed using Processing and the Geomorative library. An abstract-constructive letterform generated through procedural and algorithmic operations, in which layered trajectories and iterative repetition produce structural continuity and letterform emergence. Used with permission of Casey Conchinha.

repetition, generating stroke, density, and structural continuity. Rather than following a predefined typographic outline, the letterform is created through the behavior of the generative system itself.

Across these examples, structural responsibility lies in the constructive process itself, whether pictorial, material, or computational.

6.2. Hybrid-Generative Letters

Hybrid-generative letterforms occupy an intermediate condition in which part of the letter's structure remains recognizable while pictorial elements assume responsibility for other structural components.



Figure 7. *Bible de Saint-Sauveur de Majeure*, c. 999–1098. Illuminated manuscript. Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux. Romanesque historiated initial in which figural, zoomorphic, and vegetal elements shape the curvature and internal structure, contributing to the construction of the letterform. Public domain.



Figure 8. Lucas Kilian, *New ABC Booklet*, 1627. Engraving. Cleveland Museum of Art. Hybrid-generative letter in which figurative elements partially replace structural components while preserving the overall proportions. Public domain.



Figure 9. Miriam Martincic, *Barcelona*, 2023. Mixed media. Hybrid-generative letter in which illustrated elements modify structural components while preserving overall proportional coherence. Used with permission of Miriam Martincic.

The Romanesque initial from the Bible de Saint-Sauveur de Majeure (Figure 7) exemplifies this condition. Recognizable structural features of the letter remain perceptible, yet figural elements actively shape curvature, closure, and internal articulation. The final form emerges from the interaction of these two constructive contributions.

Lucas Kilian's engraved letter (Figure 8) similarly replaces portions of the structure with figurative and ornamental elements while preserving the overall proportion. Structural coherence results from the interaction between the underlying geometry and the pictorial insertion.

Miriam Martincic's letter (Figure 9) presents a comparable dynamic. The illustrated elements integrate into the stroke system, modifying the letter without fully dissolving its structure. The form remains recognizable while structurally transformed.

Hybrid letterforms make visible a negotiated condition in which structure and image co-operate. The letter is neither fully autonomous nor fully generated by illustration.

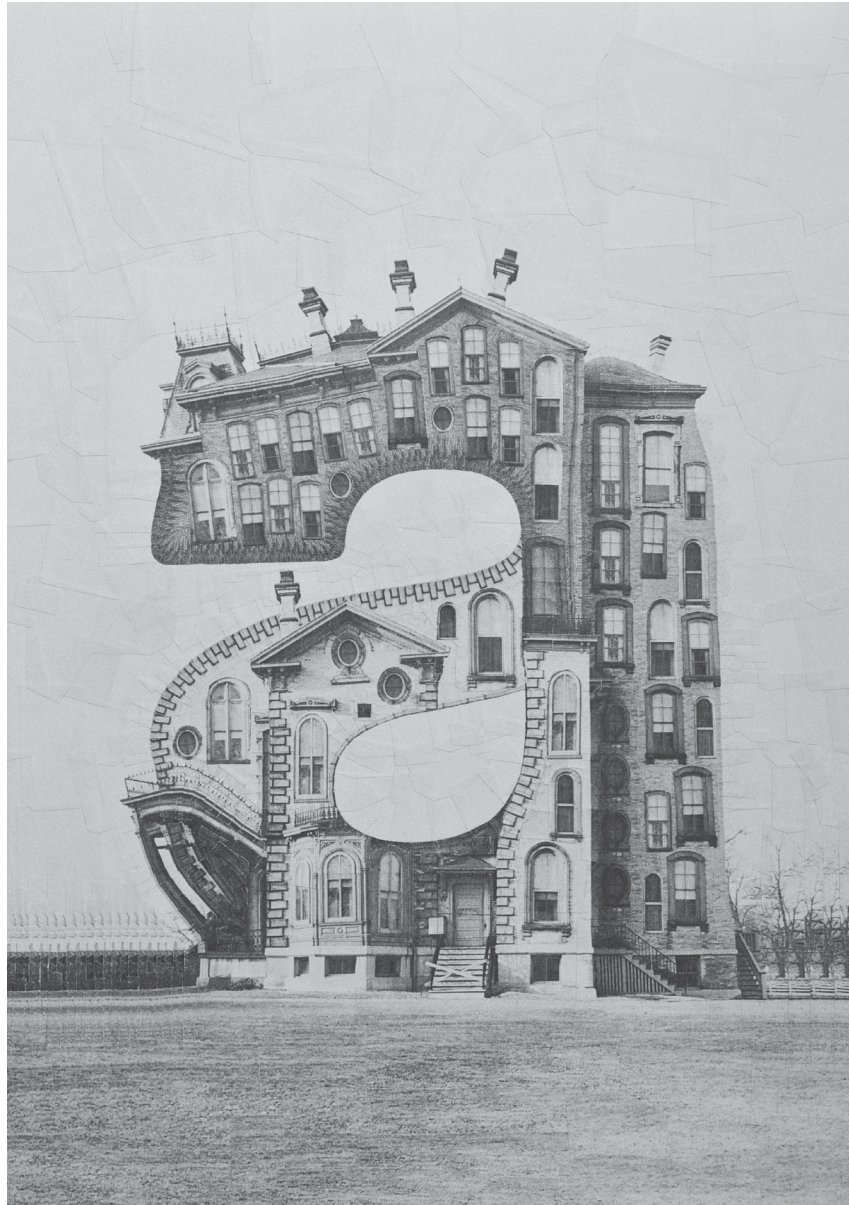


Figure 10. Lola Dupré, *Architecture Series*, 2016. Collage. Container-based letter in which a stable typographic outline functions as a structural boundary for internal collage imagery. Used with permission of Lola Dupré.

6.3. Non-Form-Generative Letters

Non-form-generative letterforms preserve the letter's structural autonomy. Illustration does not determine its construction.

Lola Dupré's letter (Figure 10) exemplifies container-based logic. A stable outline serves as a boundary within which collage imagery is inserted. Despite internal complexity, proportion and structure remain unchanged.

Mateusz Witczak's letter (Figure 11) functions ornamentally. Surface enrichment does not alter the structural organization. The underlying letter structure remains intact.

Andreas Scheiger's letter (Figure 12) demonstrates transformative logic. The form appears materially altered, yet its structural proportions remain unchanged. Transformation affects perception rather than construction.

Jean-Pierre Humbert's configuration (Figure 13) illustrates adjunct logic. Illustrative elements appear externally to the letter, without intervening in its structure.



Figure 11 (above left). Mateusz Witczak, 2025. Vector Illustration. Ornamental letter in which decorative detail enriches the surface without altering structural proportion or stroke logic. Used with permission of Mateusz Witczak.



Figure 12 (above right). Andreas Scheiger, *Evolution of Type*, 2014. Sculpture and photography. Transformative letter in which typographic form undergoes material metamorphosis while preserving its underlying structure. Used with permission of Andreas Scheiger.



Figure 13 (right). Jean-Pierre Humbert, *ABC Book*, 2011. Engraving. Adjunct letter in which external illustrative elements frame the letter without altering its structure. Used with permission of Jean-Pierre Humbert.

These examples clarify the distinction between structural intervention and visual enrichment. In non-form-generative cases, the letter remains structurally independent.

6.4. Systems and Sets

While classification operates at the level of the individual letter, illustrated letterforms frequently appear as part of sets or complete alphabets.

The alphabet attributed to L. E. M. Jones (Figure 14) constitutes a structurally homogeneous, form-generative system. A consistent, constructive logic underlies the entire alphabet, with letterforms emerging from the arrangement of landscape, architectural, and natural elements. Although individual letters differ in their specific configurations, they share the same generative principles and visual language. Antonin Caulo's alphabet (Figure 15) forms a homogeneous hybrid system. Figurative and structural elements interact consistently throughout the series.



Figure 14. L. E. M. Jones, printed and published by Charles Joseph Hullmandel, c. 1818–1860. Lithograph on paper. Structurally homogeneous form-generative alphabet in which landscape, architectural, and natural elements consistently generate letter structure across the set. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.



Figure 14 (continued)

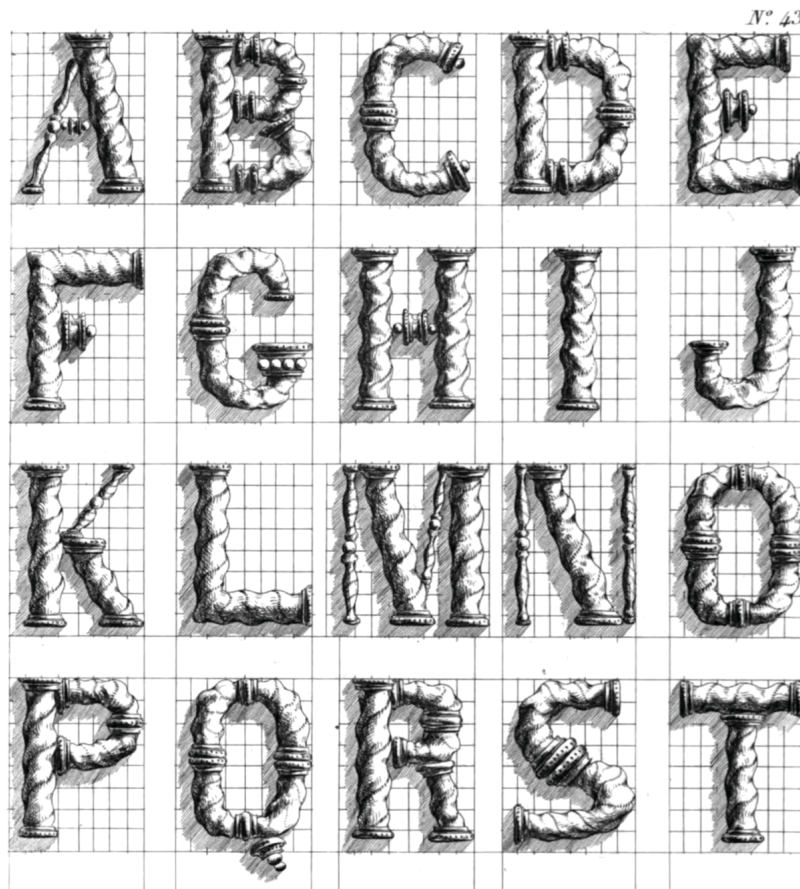


Figure 15. Antonin Caulo, *Nouvelle collection de lettres de différents genres...*, 1856. Engraving. A homogeneous hybrid-generative alphabet in which figuration and typographic proportion share structural responsibility across the set. Public domain.



Figure 16. M/M Paris, *The Miu Miu Type*, in *An ABC of Actions, Behaviors and Comportments*, 2018. Graphic design. Non-form-generative alphabet with consistent illustrative density accompanying stable typographic skeletons. Used with permission of M/M Paris.

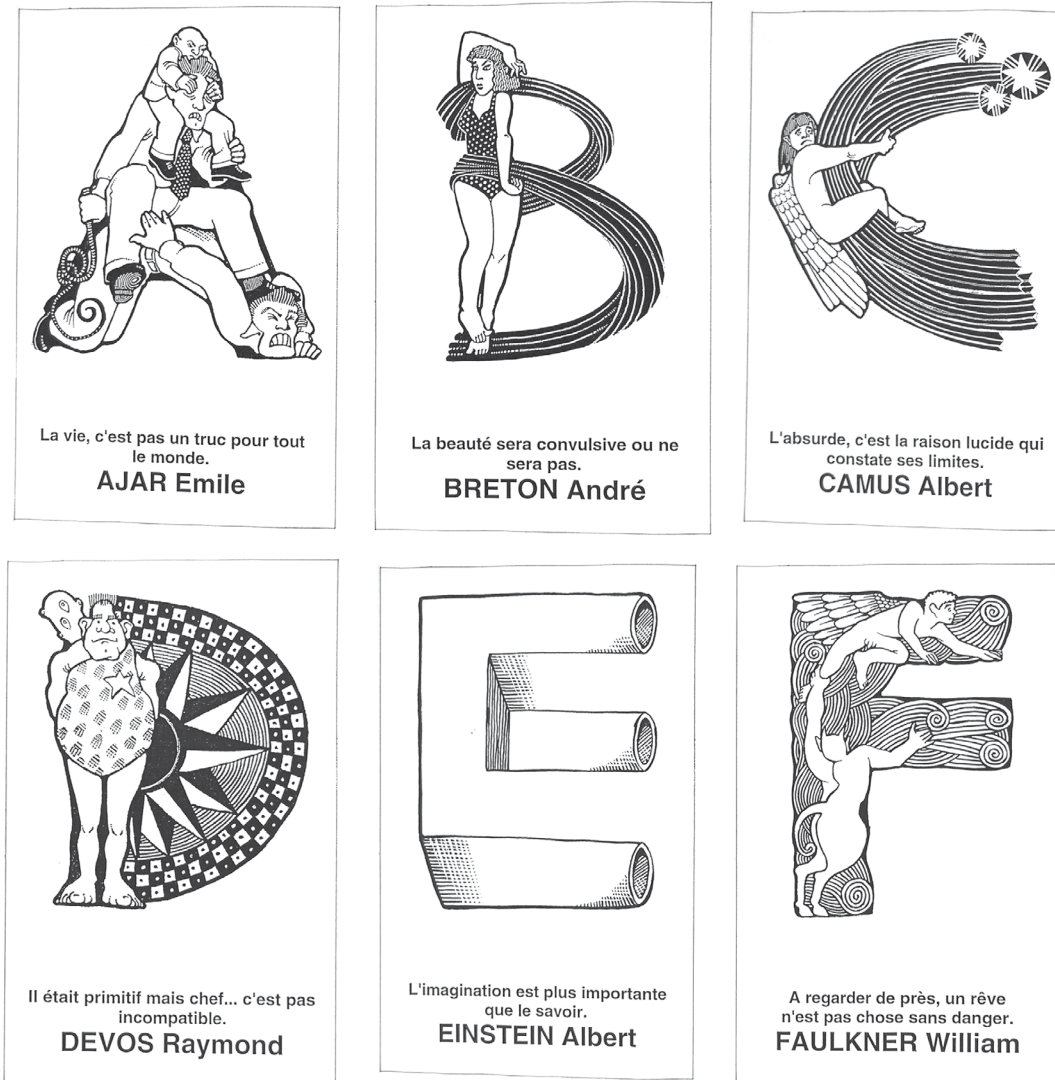


Figure 17. Álvaro Parés, *Abc Abscons*, 2006. Drawing. Structurally heterogeneous alphabet that combines generative and non-generative strategies across letters. Used with permission of Álvaro Parés.

The Miu Miu alphabet by M/M Paris (Figure 16) exemplifies a homogeneous non-form-generative system. The illustration accompanies the letters without altering their structure. Álvaro Parés' set (Figure 17) demonstrates structural heterogeneity. Different letters employ distinct constructive strategies, requiring analysis at the level of each individual form. Anthony Earnshaw's alphabet series (Figure 18) similarly combines multiple constructive logics. Stylistic coherence does not imply structural uniformity. Generative and non-generative processes coexist within the same alphabet, and several letters can be classified as hybrid forms.

These examples show that system coherence may operate independently of structural consistency. Classification must therefore remain attentive to individual constructions.



Figure 18. Anthony Earnshaw, *Secret Alphabet No. 2*, 1985. Lithograph. A structurally heterogeneous alphabet that combines generative, non-generative, and hybrid letter-construction processes within a coherent visual style. Used with permission of Gail Earnshaw.

6.5. Ambiguity and Limits of Classification

No taxonomy fully eliminates ambiguity. Borderline cases challenge stable categorization and reveal the limits of discrete classification.

Kelsey Robinson's letter (Figure 19) occupies a borderline position in which generative and transformative conditions coexist. Structural intervention is present, but not dominant. Sabeena Karnik's letter (Figure 20) occupies a borderline position between generative and transformative conditions. Although the letter is materially constructed through paper manipulation, its form continues to reflect a stable and recognizable typographic framework. Even within otherwise consistent systems, variation may still occur. Antonin Caulo's alphabet (Figure 21) contains moments that approach full generativity.

These cases demonstrate that illustrated letterforms operate along a continuum of structural dependency rather than within rigid categories. While the taxonomy provides consistent analytical criteria, some borderline cases inevitably remain open to interpretation.

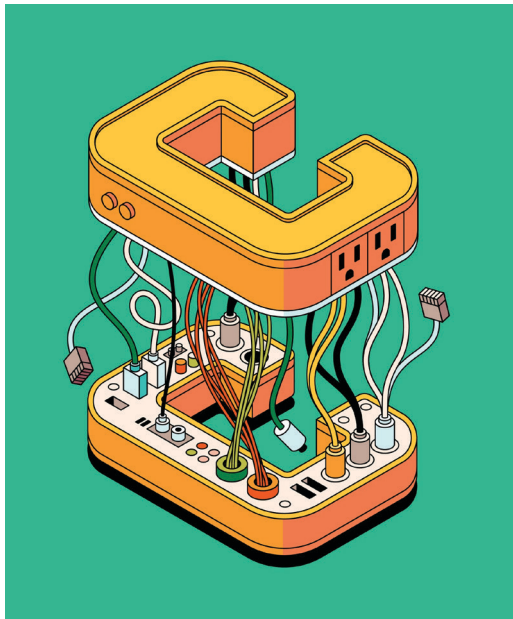


Figure 19. Kelsey Robinson, *36 Isometric Days of Type*, 2023. Vector illustration. Letter illustrating the limits of categorical classification. Structural additions provide significant visual information, yet the typographic form remains recognizable and largely autonomous. Used with permission of Kelsey Robinson.

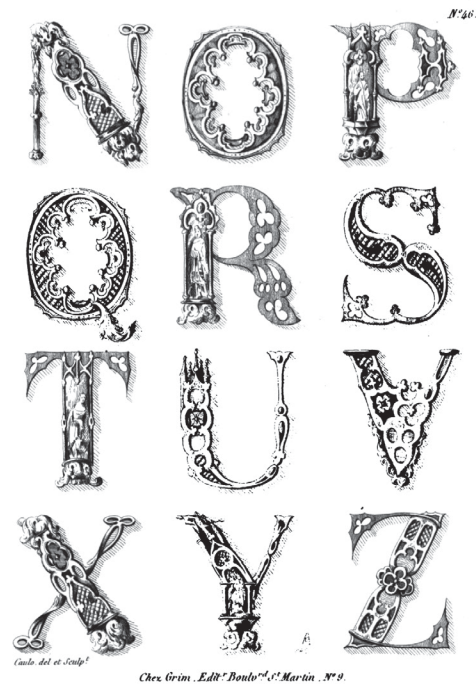


Figure 21. Antonin Caulo, *Nouvelle collection de lettres de différents genres...*, 1856. Engraving. Homogeneous hybrid-generative alphabet in which figurative and ornamental elements partially replace typographic strokes while preserving overall proportional structure. Public domain.



Figure 20. Sabeena Karnik, *Tropical Oasis*, 2016. Paper art illustration. A letter formed from layered paper elements arranged around a recognizable typographic framework, illustrating the overlap between material generation and structural preservation. Used with permission of Sabeena Karnik.

The taxonomy therefore functions as an analytical tool for assessing the distribution of structural responsibility, while acknowledging that classification remains interpretive and context-dependent.

7. Conclusion

This article has proposed a taxonomy and analytical framework for illustrated letterforms grounded in structural operativity. Rather than classifying these forms by what they depict or signify, it has focused on how they are made—the operations by which image and graphemic structure are combined into a single visual unit.

From this perspective, illustrated letterforms are sites of construction in which drawing actively participates in the production of the letter. The framework developed here directs attention to the processes by which letters are built and to the distribution of structural responsibility between graphemic and pictorial elements.

The taxonomy distinguishes three conditions—form-generative, hybrid-generative, and non-form-generative—understood as degrees of structural dependency on pictorial operations. These are best understood as positions along a continuum rather than as fixed categories. Their value lies in making visible how letterforms emerge through different constructive logics, whether through substitution, modification, or coexistence with a typographic skeleton.

Across historical and contemporary examples, similar operations recur: bodies become strokes, objects replace structure, space generates geometry, and material processes define form. These strategies persist over time, while the conditions for their production and interpretation continue to evolve.

Every intervention in a letter is a structural act. Even when the typographic skeleton appears intact, decisions about texture, material, or integration influence how the letter is constructed and perceived.

The taxonomy accommodates intermediate and hybrid conditions, reflecting the continuum of structural dependency that characterizes illustrated letterforms. As a result, classification remains interpretive and context-dependent. The framework functions as an analytical tool for assessing how structural responsibility is distributed across different forms of letter construction.

Future research may extend this framework to non-Latin scripts or to computational environments where construction is distributed across systems rather than confined to singular gestures. The underlying question, however, remains the same: how does the letter come into being?

Ultimately, illustrated letterforms foreground the alphabet as a constructed visual system. They reveal drawing and image-making as operative conditions of letterform construction and demonstrate the continuing role of visual invention in the formation of letters.

8. References

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