

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

I think it was the self-portraits from around 1628-29—primarily head and shoulder views facing right, with the bust at a sharp angle to the picture plane—that first gave me the idea. The idea that, without fetching all that far, the silhouette of a head-and-shoulders portrait, especially if the head is round and the hair bushy, or topped by a beret with an arching plume, offers a good visual analogy to the capital letter "R." The figures here show two self-portraits both dated around 1629: one in the Rijksmuseum (original of Br. 1) and the other (reproduced above an "R" brushed in 1631) in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (Br. 8).

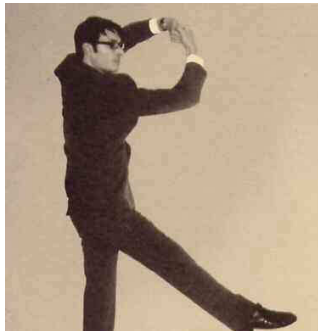
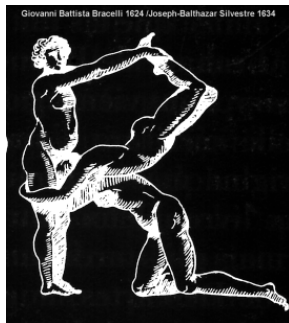
Many years later, consulting a non-esoteric book on the Origins of the Alphabet (Joseph Naveh, Jerusalem Publ. House, 1975), I read that the Latin *R*, the Hebrew *resh* and the Arabic *ra* all stemmed from Proto-Canaanite and Proto-Sinaitic pictograms depicting a human head. The name of the Aramaic letter *resh* (related to the Greek *rho*, pronounced *ros*) also meant "head." How conjectural these derivations are, I don't know, but the coincidence lends credence to the association of the letter and the image.

Many more years later, I happened upon the catalogue of a British academic publisher called Routledge whose logo consists of an "R" with a double, contrasting silhouette of heads in profile. *How would you go about proving that Rembrandt did not play such games with form?*

A quick sketch of a head does not require many more lines than do most letters of the alphabet; seventeenth-century calligraphers used a lot more lines in their ornamental flourishes. Rembrandt, who had learned the art of writing at school before that of painting, seems to have had no difficulty transposing simple letter forms into figures or more complex forms.



ADDENDUM



Top: left, 15th cent., Germany; right, 14th cent.(?), France(?)

Middle: left, 17th cent., Holland; right, 18th cent., France

Bottom: left, 21st cent., Germany; right, 21st cent., Germany

In my efforts at finding a publisher for this manuscript, I traveled to the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2005. The first thing I did was to go to an information desk, where I happened to find a colorful postcard at my feet. It was an advertisement for an illustrated alphabet; that is, pictures illustrating a word using the same form as the letter it begins with (here, the letter "R" for Räuber, or robber). I found this a very good omen and made it a point to visit their stand. This turned out to be the last thing I did at the Buchmesse. Here is their link: www.buchstabilder.de.

On the way out of the Fair, I could not resist browsing among the stands of second-hand books. There I found some facsimile editions of two old books presenting alphabets based on figures: one with floor-plans of palaces and the other using human figures and ornaments. The first was Johann David Steingruber's Alphabet Architektur from 1773 and the second, Theodor de Bry's Neiw Kunstliches Alphabet, published in Frankfurt, in 1595. I bought the second, even though Mannerist aesthetics have never been my thing.

This purchase led me to contact one of the editors of the re-publication, Fritz Franz Vogel, who gave me a bibliography. In this way I finally came upon ample evidence of the close relationship that seems always to have existed between the visual worlds of letters and figures. Only it seems to have been relegated to the netherworld of the Applied Arts and Design, far from the edifying concerns of High Art and the more serious issues of Art History. This is a strange sideshow of the classic opposition between word and image.

It should be noted that letter-images are at one extreme of a continuum that stretches between apparently abstract signs (like letters) and, to quote a Disney commercial, "Rembrandt perfect" figures. Rembrandt's sensitivity to the interplay between graphic and illusionistic forms lies near the middle and was probably unconscious, an intuitive part of his aesthetic sense. Here are a few more examples of these visual games.

ADDENDUM 2

The illustration opposite shows the "illuminated" initial letter "R" of the word "Regnante" (ruling) in a South German manuscript of the New Testament(?). In addition to the fantastic ornaments, we see the seated figure of a monk who seems to have just inscribed his name in block letter: "FR. RUFILLUS." This is Frater Ruffillus, the friar who was probably responsible for both the calligraphy and the illumination of this manuscript (the knife on the bench was used to sharpen the stylus).

The beautiful thing about this find for me is that it combines: the letter R, an artist whose name begins with an R, and a self-portrait—in the act of signing, no less. Here was an artist who had enough of a sense of his own worth to "sign" his work, as well as to perpetuate his likeness for posterity.

Granted this self-image is tucked away in a book of hundreds of pages, but if this "self-awareness" of the artist as such was already present in a monk of the 12th century, then it is no wonder that it attained the degree it did in Rembrandt four hundred years later, via the Italian Renaissance and the Reformation. And Ruffillus was not alone. There are enough self-depictions of monastic artists—including nuns!—from the late Middle Ages, often combined with ornamental initials, for historians to suppose that self-portraiture was (re)born in the margins of illuminated manuscripts; that is, in close connection with the written word.

