



# Letter perfect

Art professor brings into the classroom his work with Italian inscriptions

BY JOHN WINTERS, G'11

It was critique day in Donald Tarallo's typography class, and his students were gathered around him in a circle. In his quiet way, with the occasional humorous aside, the assistant professor of art examined their work with surgical precision. "Pay attention to the spaces in between as much as the lines," he said about one piece. Reviewing another, he explained how to find the "optical center" of a work to ensure the figure had an innate sense of balance.

The students' work was not the typical fare one expects art students to create these days. It was anything but contemporary. In fact, the models for this assignment dated back some 2,000 years. What the young artists had been asked to create was their own versions of letterforms from long ago in Rome and Pompeii. "I've always taught the history of graphic design, but I've never done anything with Italian typography," Professor Tarallo said.

He spent May 2011 in the two Italian cities researching uppercase, or majuscule, letterforms. The inscriptions he went in search of revealed the history of the Latin alphabet that had been memorialized by artisans dating back to about 79 A.D. – around the time the Colosseum was built. These letterforms evolved from Phoenician, then through Greek to Latin, and helped build and spread an empire. Yet, despite this long history, Professor Tarallo sees the study of centuries-old typography to be as relevant as ever. Whether it's in the study of the tools and materials used to create the forms, or their evolution, there remains a permanent connection between the medium and the aesthetics of letterforms. "It's fascinating because it's constantly evolving, and it's the most used alphabet in the world," he said.

In copying the forms and creating new ones, the students were learning not only about ancient letterforms but also how to break things down to the level of individual strokes and serifs, and to think hard about the architecture of these inscriptions. In short, the idea is that by looking back, they will become better artists and designers in the future.

The road to Professor Tarallo's latest passion ran through China, of all places. That's where he lived for several years and where he first became interested in letterforms. The experience taught him to view design and language in a new way. "My students there taught me about how Chinese characters developed over time, and that got me to thinking about the Latin alphabet we use and its history and evolution," he said.

For him, Italy was a logical place to start. Early Roman architecture contains a variety of inscriptions, each with something to teach us. In Pompeii, the goal was to find hand-painted type that had been preserved for centuries by the covering ashes of Mount Vesuvius. His travels also led him to discover inscriptions in mosaic, providing for him a strong link between the past and present. "I like to draw the parallel that these are like early forms of today's pixels," he said. "So I connected old techniques with new ones."

The pièce de résistance of the trip for Professor Tarallo was a church narthex (sort of an antechamber) in Rome that he stumbled into by accident. The room was filled with letterforms from various time periods. At that moment, more than ever, it became clear to him that the Latin alphabet exists on a continuum as a living and changing thing. "It was amazing to see in one room so many diverse approaches to these uppercase letters and to see the evolution," he said. "These days we're almost moving toward a language of pictures with the Internet, and there's the constant flow of new font designs. I wanted to give my students a perspective on it."

To capture the letterforms, Professor Tarallo photographed them. The images stand on their own as works of art, and, indeed, several were exhibited at the Italian Consulate in Boston. These were the same images used by his typography students to study and create their own versions in class. Their work was shown in BSU's Maxwell Library in March.

Bringing his findings into the classroom is an important part of this project, Professor Tarallo said. In fact, the funding for his Italian research, The Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation Fellowship, mandated the work be shared with students. His research in this area continues, as he plans to mount exhibits of his photographs and hopes to publish articles and, maybe, a book about his work.

It's clear that these millennia-old forms have had an impact on him that goes beyond erudition. "I'm constantly discovering the beauty of this craft and the importance of language and its visualization in the development of society," he said. "Without this we don't evolve." ■

◀ Professor Donald Tarallo (left) in Italy, and three of his photographs of ancient Italian letterforms

