

Graphic designer Donald Tarallo

Posted by: Briana Palma in Artisticamente, People January 31, 2013 0

Donald Tarallo is a graphic designer and assistant professor and presidential Fellow at Bridgewater State University. Since 2011, he has been researching Italy's contributions to graphic design and typography, dating from ancient Rome to modern times.

Tarallo has exhibited his findings at the Italian Consulate in Boston, Worcester Public Library and Italian American Cultural Center in Worcester. Here, he speaks about the inspiration for researching ancient inscriptions and typography (since they are technically considered different—typography was born with the invention of printing in the 1450s, but the Roman inscriptions are as far back as 62AD), the discoveries he made in Italy and the inscriptions you should look for on your next trip to Rome.



Don Tarallo (photo by Franz Werner)

Bostoniano: How did you first become interested in the typography of Ancient Rome?

Donald Tarallo: It started in China, actually. I was teaching there for a year and my students were very good at explaining to me the history of the Chinese characters and how they evolved over time. That made me think more about the alphabet I use, which is the Latin alphabet, and how it evolved through Rome to become a standardized set of forms.



B: Tell me about the research you did on the ground in Italy.

DT: My proposal [for the Marion and Jasper Whiting Fellowship] was to bring hands-on history lessons into my design classrooms. So I received a grant, I traveled to Rome and I spent nine days walking around the city, documenting the classic examples of Roman inscriptions – and of course, thousands of others that I wasn't expecting to see but I discovered along the way. Then I brought them back to the classroom and turned them into assignments: studying the letterforms and redrawing them and doing creative interpretations of them.

B: How did your students respond to the assignments created based on your research?

DT: I think the students loved it. ... To show close-up photographs of how the original person who cut these stones made mistakes and then corrected them, they just loved that. They re-drew them and then designed more letters based on what they were looking at. For example, they had to look at a letter R and imagine what a B would look like based on that. They had fun with it and it was a really interesting way to bring research and history into a practical design classroom. Normally it's just slide lectures, which can get really boring, so it's a way to bring history to life.



B: During your research in Italy, was there anything that surprised you?

DT: One of the main things was in Parma. I went to an archive and there was a printing press that was very primitive looking. It was the press of a very famous printer named Bodoni, who in the typography world is considered like a god. He designed this really beautiful typeface, which you'll probably see if you look on your computer. When you look at the typeface it's so delicate and so thin and beautiful and well drawn; you just imagine that he would have had extremely precise printing technology, but he had a very primitive wooden press. It was hard to imagine that somebody could do such beautiful things with such primitive tools.

Also, I think Rome in general is very rich. There were a lot of surprises. I went there with some things I knew I needed to document – everybody talked about them – and in that process, I discovered a lot more.

B: What are some of the examples of important inscriptions in Rome?

DT: The most beautiful inscriptions – it's agreed upon by a lot of experts in typography – are at the base of Trajan's Column, right in the center of Rome at Trajan's Market. There's this column there, sort of sunken below street level. It's very hard to see them straight on, but you can see them from an angle. Those are considered the benchmark of beauty in our uppercase letters. And there's a church, Santa Maria in Trastevere, which has a really interesting entryway that has a collection of different inscriptions from different eras, including examples of early inscriptions with Greek letters.



B: Now you're planning to return to Italy to teach in Siena this summer?

DT: Yes, it's a two-week intensive workshop. The students are going to study from my images and we're also going to go to the city archives in Siena and look at tablets with letterforms from the 1100s. Then we're going to design an uppercase font based on something unique about Siena. They'll probably be experimental, I imagine. Maybe a student is interested in the shape of a certain kind of cookie they see in Siena and they want to design a font based on the cookie. This is the kind of playful thing we'll do.

For more information on Donald Tarallo's work and the Experimental Typeface Design Summer Workshop, which is open to the public, visit www.tarallogdesign.com.

