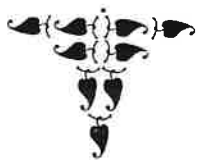


PACIOLI'S CLASSIC ROMAN ALPHABET

Stanley Morison

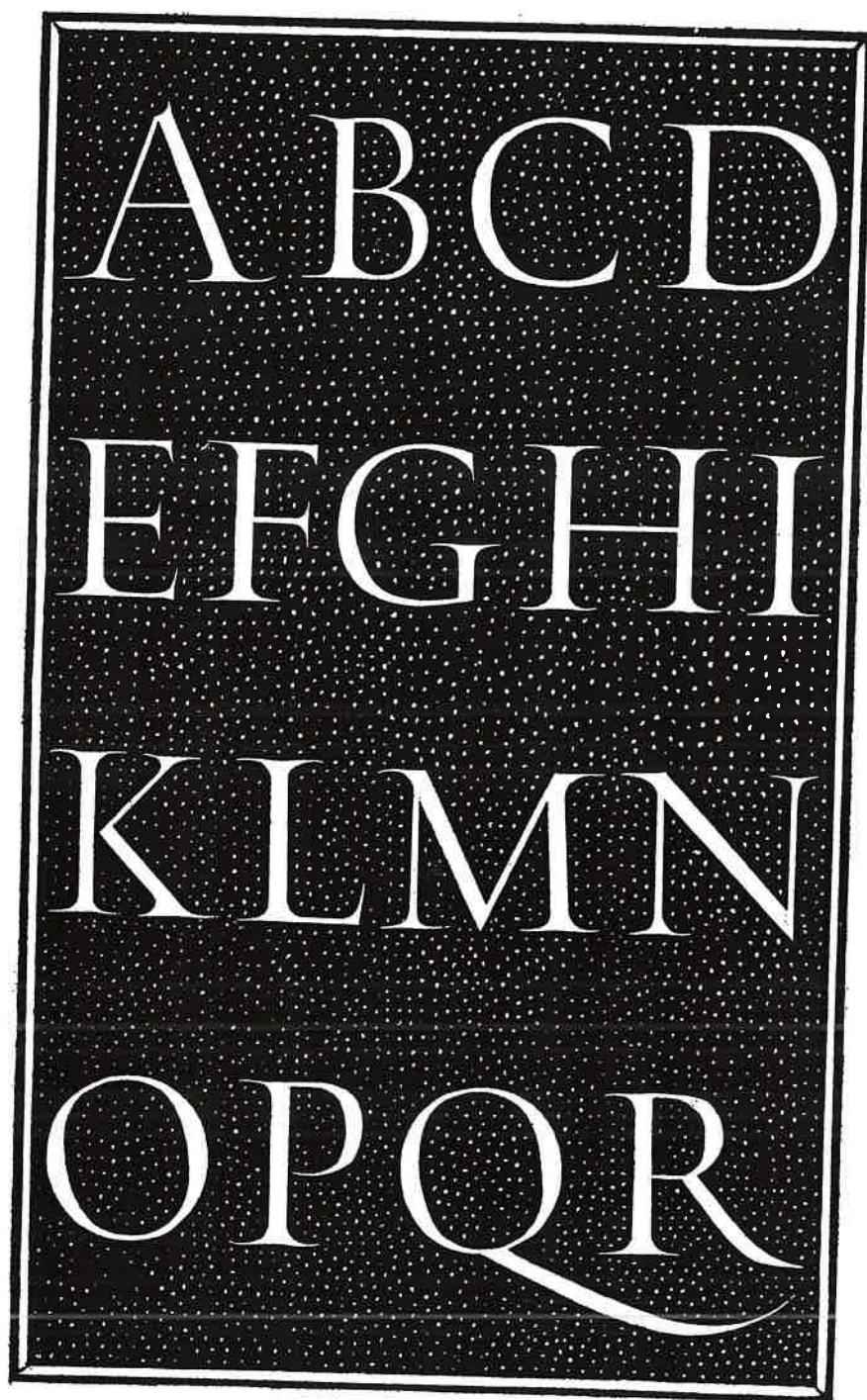


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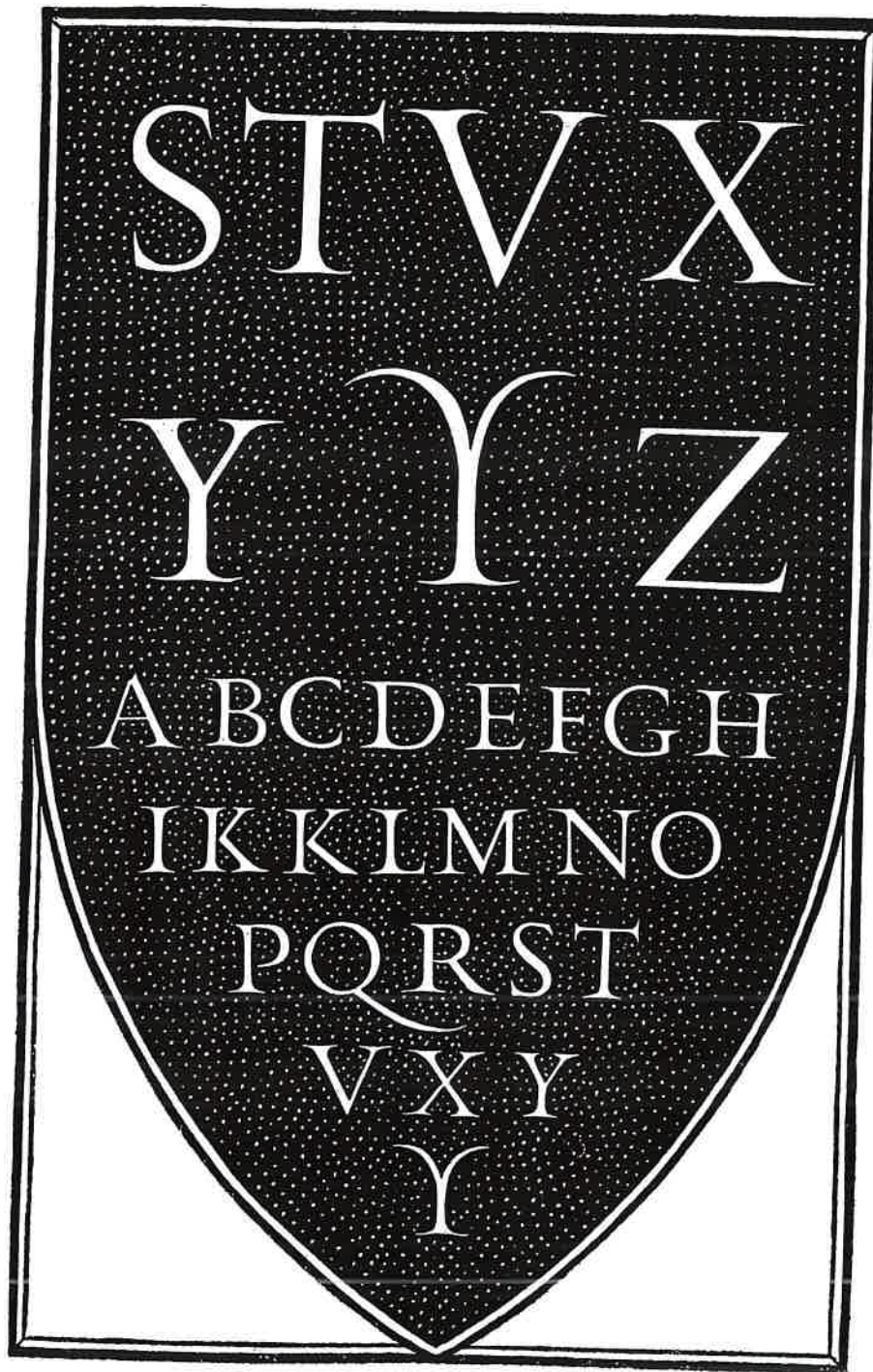
him, they did not do so literally. Few cared for the narrow orthodox classical E. Jenson's E was perhaps too wide. The form approved by the majority was E. The wide distribution of books naturally brought the printed letter to the first place as the norm of the alphabet. In consequence the penmanship of later periods increasingly departs from the classical or renaissance models. It seems to have been felt, too, that small letters require thicker stems, certainly thicker than a ninth or a tenth of the height.

Thus the development in typography during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries moved, without exception, towards an assimilation of the classical capitals as geometrically made, with the changes in scale necessitated by the reduced dimensions of which the growing technique of typographers permitted them the mastery. The smaller the letters became the less the need for the geometry and the less need for insistence upon the classical proportions; capitals became wider as the height was reduced. No doubt Nicolas Jenson saw the advisability to widen the narrow sorts while Francesco Griffo thought that this was necessary only in still smaller letters.

In calligraphy and in the applications of calligraphy which modern parlance describes as "lettering" the situation was at first slightly more favourable to the inscriptional letter. The first copybook compiled in the interest of non-professional writers and brought out by Ludovico Arrighi in 1520, set a precedent followed by two generations of writing masters by presenting students with a copy of the complete alphabet of roman letters. It seems, by the way, that the term "roman" originated at this time. Arrighi (Rome 1520) shows the capitals; Tagliente (Venice 1523) also, but Palatino seems the first (1545) to use the term "Lettere Romane" instead of "antique" or "antiqua" or "antiche" employed by Pacioli and other writers. But the roman letters given by Arrighi, though clearly classical, are put forward as the result of calligraphical, not of

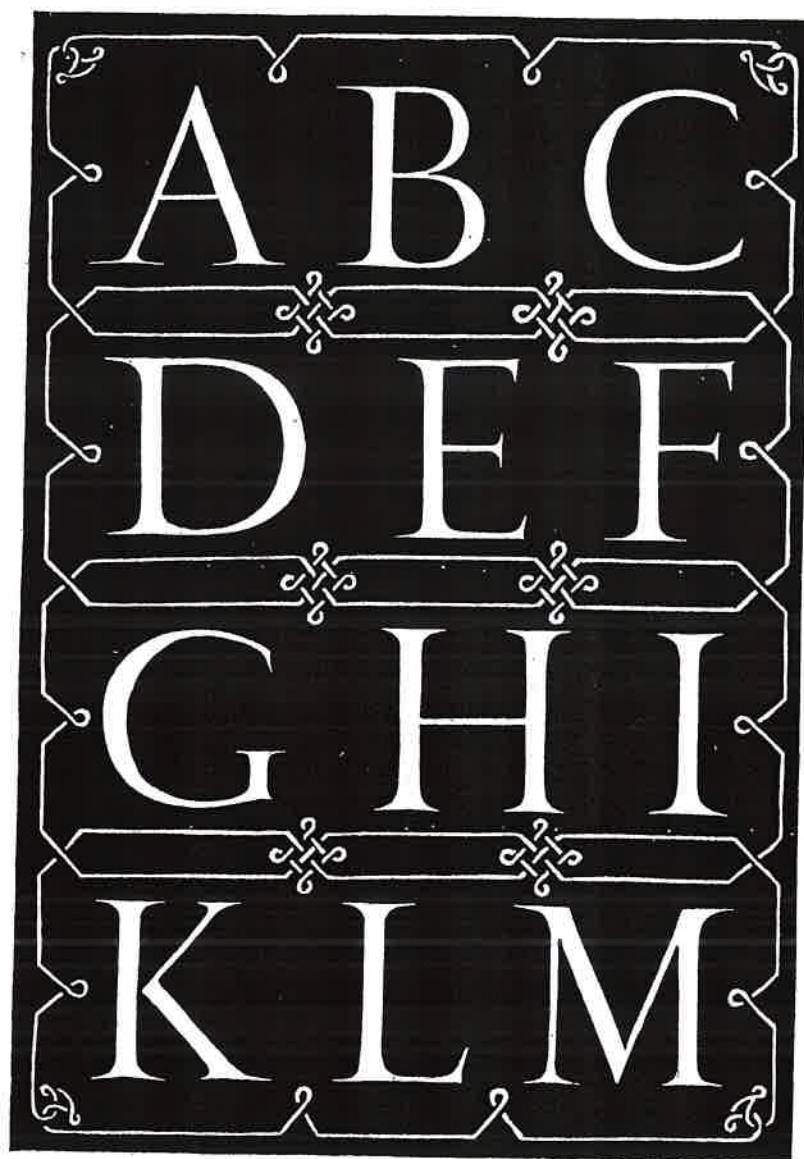


Giovanantonio Tagliente, Venice 1523



Giovanonio Tagliente, Venice 1523

geometrical skill. The models in books published by Arrighi's immediate successors, Tagliente and Palatino, follow the same lead. A Franciscan, Father Vespasiano Amphiareo, added

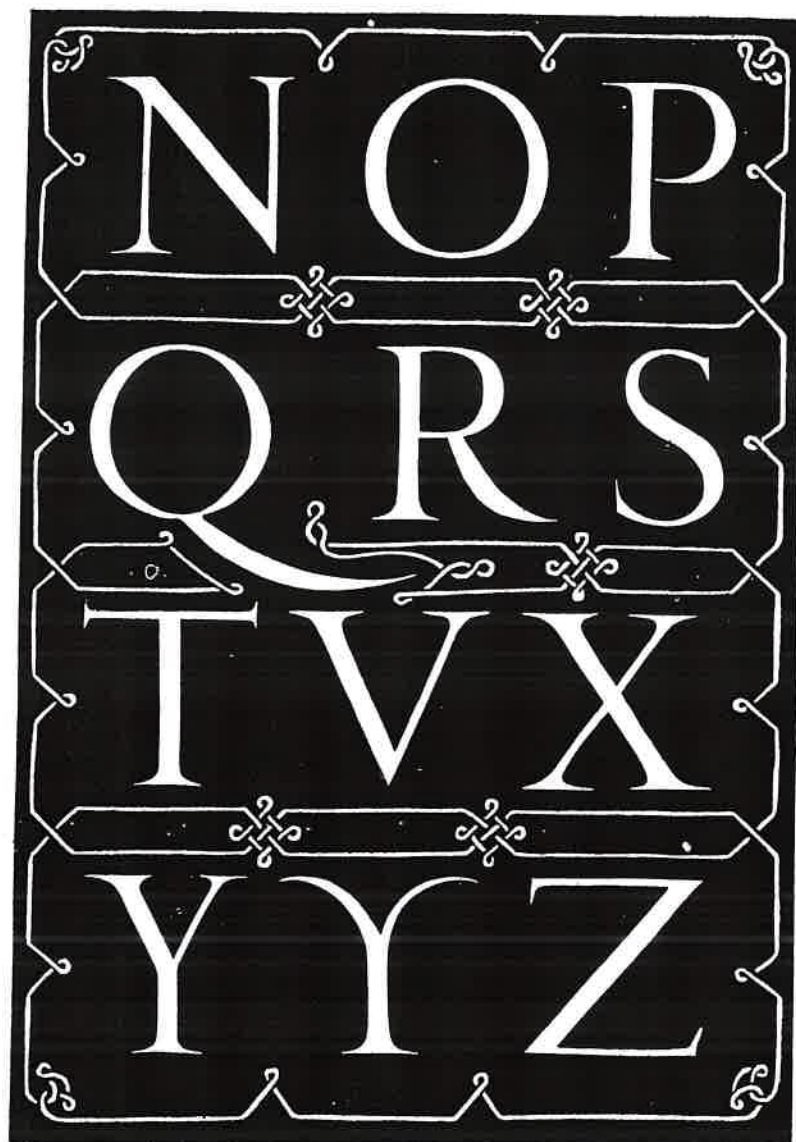


"Lettere Romane" by G. B. Palatino, Rome 1545

to his copybook, published in 1555, a set of roman letters constructed on squares cut into eighths. Later the calligraphers took to imitating the letters of printers.

Whatever the prejudices of calligraphers or typographers,

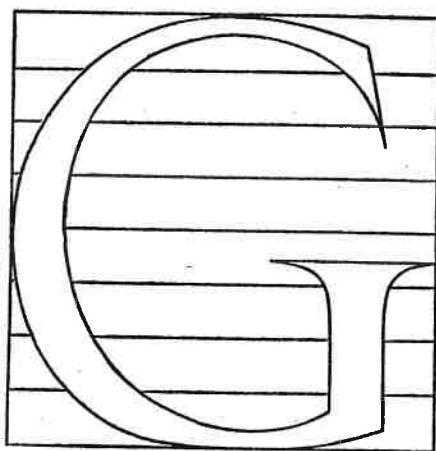
architects and sculptors viewed the old capitals differently. They were the first to imitate them and they still imitate them. There is a sarcophagus in the Church of St John Lateran dated



"Lettere Romane" by G. B. Palatino, Rome 1545

as early as 1447 carrying an inscription of six lines in classical lettering, though the forms are unseriffed. Thenceforward, architects approximated closer and closer in every detail to the antique models. It was precisely with such an intention

that Pacioli wrote supplementary portions of his *De Divina Proportione* addressed to Cesare de Saxo and their companions, "worthy stone-cutters and zealous followers of the craft of sculpture and architecture," and constructed his alphabet for their inspiration. The revival of classical studies and the place taken by the classics in the education of western mankind from the Renaissance onwards have perpetuated the



Amphiareo's method of constructing roman letters (Florence 1555)

authority of the Latin language as the timeless, universal and international medium. Conformably with this long-standing tradition, architects of permanent public edifices still choose the old roman capitals as the most consistent inscriptional alphabet. As long, therefore, as the Latin language holds its position as the international language of learning, so long will there be not merely an interest in but a use for the treatises on classical lettering such as Pacioli's.

The investigation of classical principles as they apply to lettering is, of course, a branch of the study of inscriptions, itself a branch of the study of palaeography. Scientific study of roman inscriptions was set on foot by Mommsen in 1847. His associate, Emil Hübner, produced, as part of Mommsen's corpus, his *Exempla Scripturae Epigraphica Latine*, comprising some 1200 drawings after inscriptions of the Imperial age,

and preceded by an introduction to their study, unfortunately without entering, in any detail, into the question of their geometrical form. Hübner is content to remark that their construction with the rule and compass is obvious. A French scholar, Antoine Boissieu, catalogued the inscriptions of the roman period discovered in Lyons. His volume was printed with great distinction in a series of new founts, the "Caractères Augustaux" cut by the typefounder, Francis Rey, for the press of Louis Perrin. These founts, undeniably handsome, are more satisfactory in the upper-case which most strictly followed classical rules. They had no more than a local success at the time, but they caught the eye of a London scholar who persuaded the Chiswick Press to purchase strikes of the capitals. In the 1850's these were known as Lyons capitals. The most recent example of the influence upon typographers of the classical models occurs in Mr Frederic Goudy's "Forum" and "Hadriano," both admirable founts of type. It would seem that, at intervals between the invention of decorative, grotesque, or at any rate individualist, letters, printers rediscovered the authority of the simple but grand lines of the old roman. But the true old roman letters were developed by and for sculptors and so their grandeur is not seen on the page of a book. Hence, let the printer use the letters if he can—yet they are not to be judged by their utility to him. This independence of typography and calligraphy is the old roman's best title to permanence. As they are older than printing, it is safe to say that they will persist long after new methods have superseded present methods of printing, or writing.

At the present time, lettering for commercial purposes is affected by a degree of individualism more extreme than that of the pre-war generation. Indeed, we have to go back a century—to the 1820's and 1830's—for parallel examples to the grotesque shapes paradoxically known to this generation of lettering "artists" and sign writers as "modernistic."

The proper matter for the old roman letter is an inscription in the Latin language; the proper position for inscriptions is, as Fra Luca points out, on architraves and stilobates or other positions where they may instruct the public eye. Moreover, as it is not possible to imagine the learned world forgoing the exactitude and international convenience of the Latin language in favour of any new substitute, it is likely that inscriptions, at least on academic buildings, will be written in Latin and therefore carved in the letter which Fra Luca recommended to his friends in the Borgo as

L'ALPHABETO DIGNISSIMO ANTICO.

