

Reading Proposition
An installation
by Helmut Völter

Table 1
Pictures of Plants

National Art Library, V&A
September 18, 2016



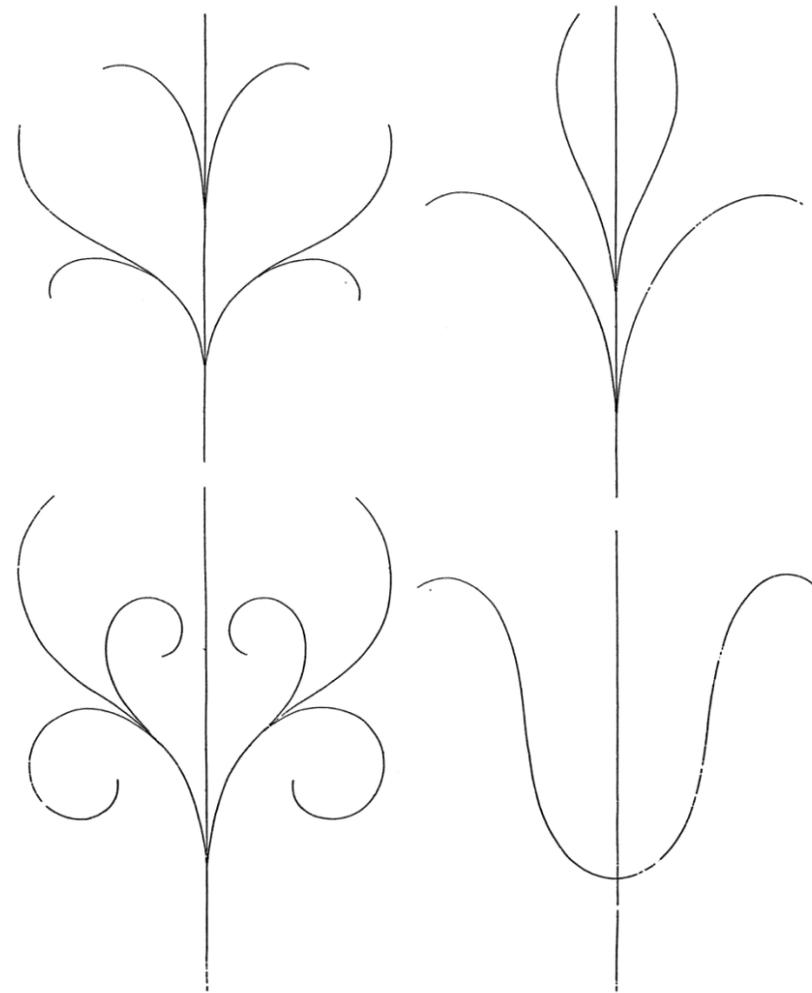


Table 1, *Pictures of Plants*, is about different ways of representing plants in an image. Artists as well as scientists have not only developed a great number of techniques but also different attitudes towards precision, realism, abstraction, idealisation, and beauty. However, nearly no image on this table can be classified as purely artistic or scientific: on the one hand, the process of making an scientific image always demands many aesthetic decisions; and on the other hand, many artists relied on botanical knowledge and their own observations of nature to produce their artworks and designs.

6 *The Drawing Book of the Government School of Design*, book by William Dyce (1842) William Dyce' outlines were meant to teach drawing and ornamental designs. Their extremely reduced forms illustrate how little visual information we need to recognise a plant.

1 *Dandelion*; cyanotype by Anna Atkins (1854) When Anna Atkins produced this cyanotype of a dandelion, she was not only a pioneer in the history of photography, she also broke the rules of how to do a botanical illustration. Botanists concentrate on the aspects of a plant that are common to a whole species; Atkins radically showed one individual plant with all its random and accidental features, such as the bends of the stem in the middle.



7 Seed package for Phlox and other flowers (c. 1935–40)
The illustrations on this package show a nearly geometrical idealised flower.

4 *Dandelion and Diplodonia*;
photographs by Henry Irving
(c. 1900)

Henry Irving's photographs of plants were used as educational material for artists as well as in botanical publications. In these two images, the sophisticated lighting portraits the plants as if they were actors in a glamour film.

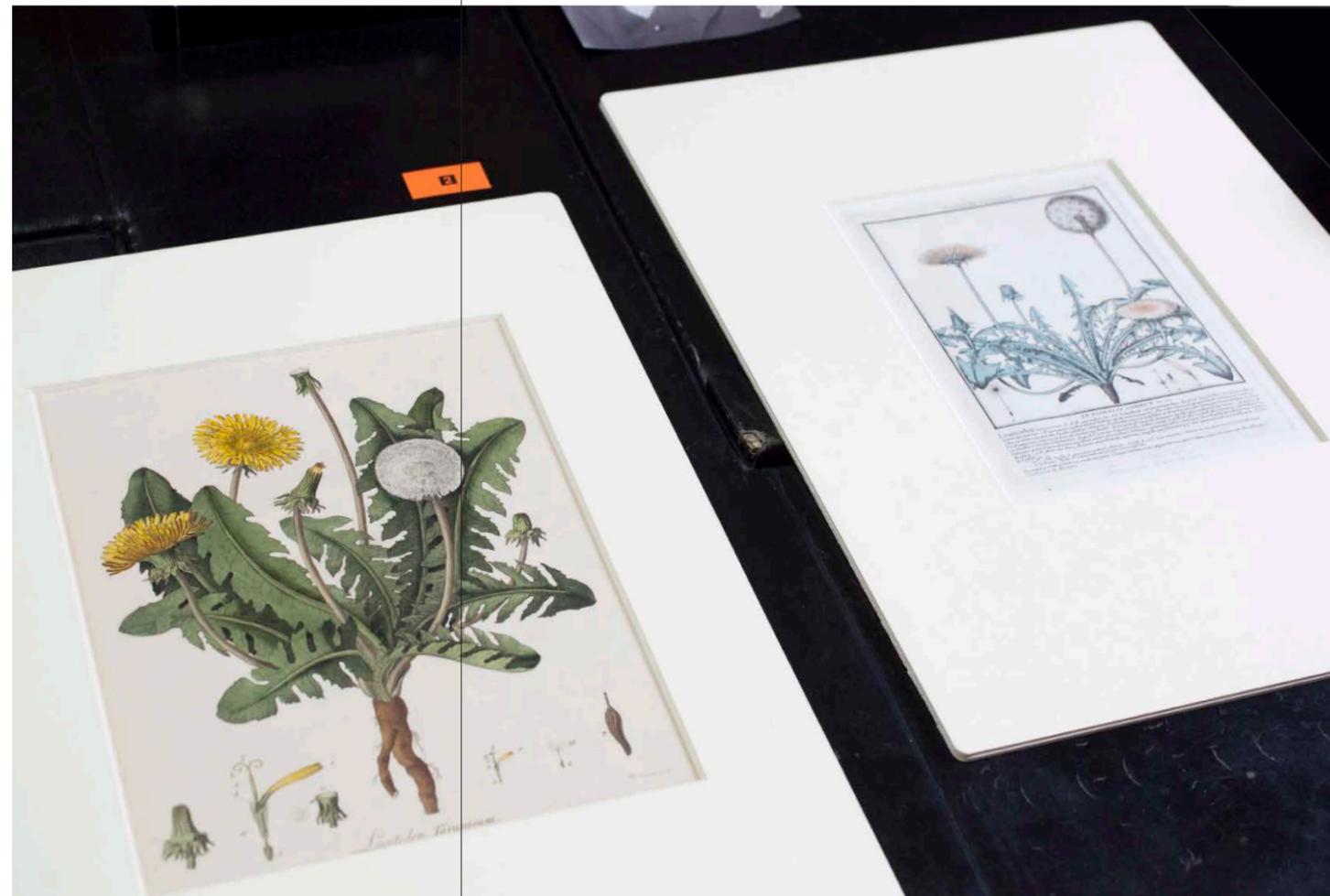


2 *Dandelion*; engraving based on a drawing by William Kilburn for William Curtis's *Flora Londinensis* (1777–98)

William Kilburn's illustration of a dandelion shows what only a drawing is able to do: the different stages of blooming are combined into one picture. As in Bulliard's illustration, the composition is well-balanced, showing a nearly symmetrical plant and stems with elegant curves.

3 *Common Dandelion*; engraving based on a drawing by Pierre Bulliard (1780–95)

Pierre Bulliard was a master of precise botanical illustration. In his depiction of a dandelion, he also visually plays with the black frame around the image of the flower: some leaves go behind it, others seem to lean against it. The flower in the upper right fits perfectly into the corner.





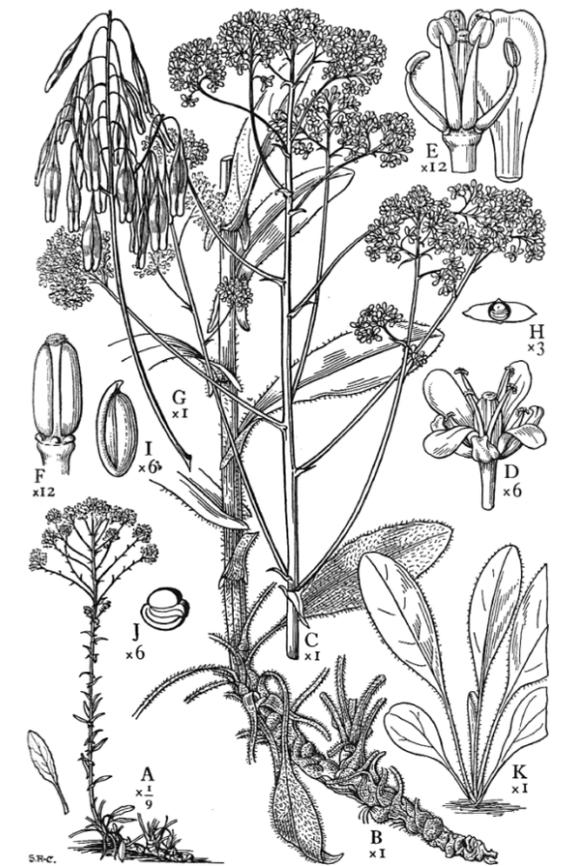
10 *Wildflowers of Britain;*
transparencies by Roger Phillips
(1977)

For his guide book on wildflowers, Roger Phillips took his own photographs. It is interesting to see how his arrangement of flower parts on a neutral background imitates the composition of botanical drawings on a book page.

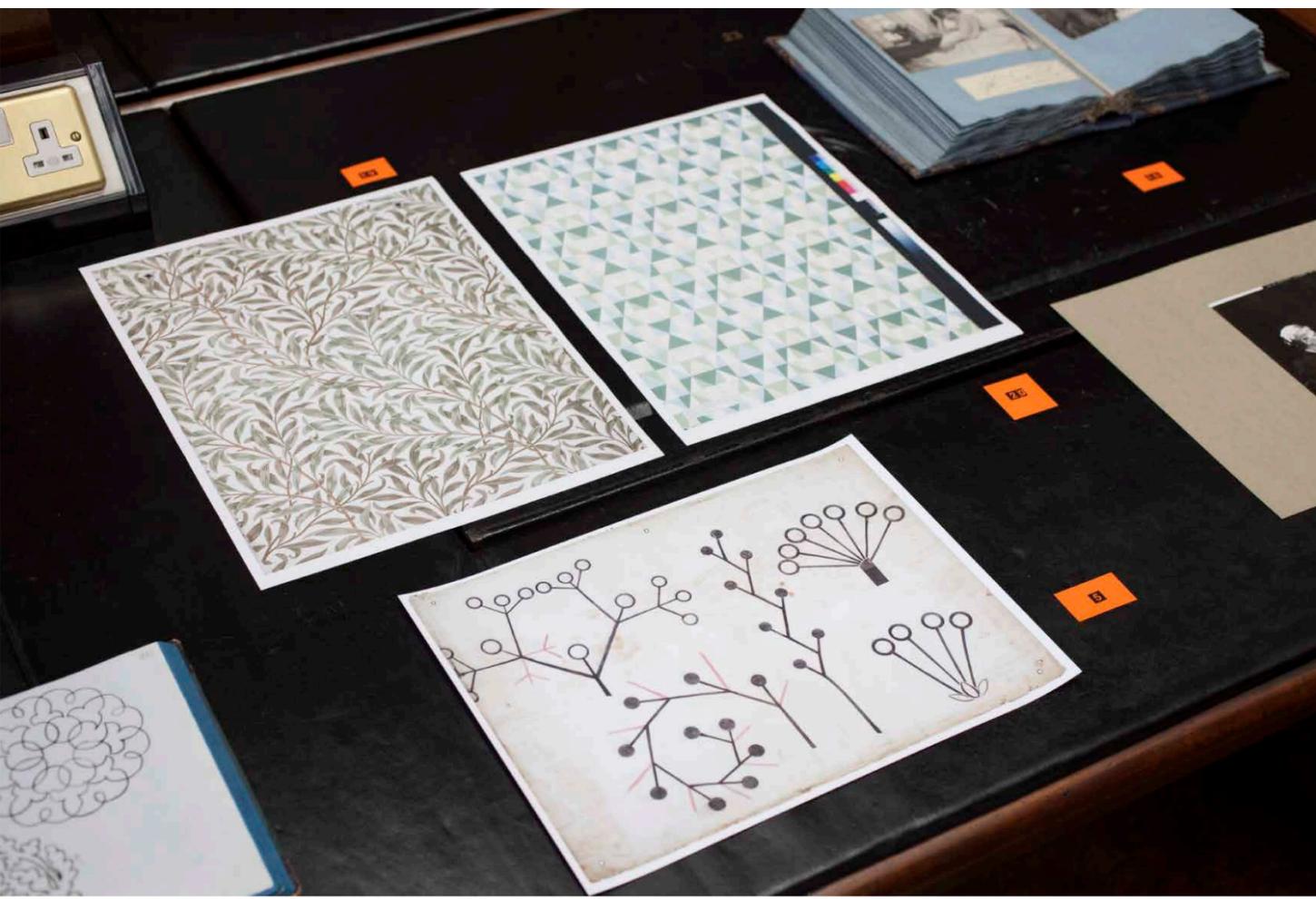


8 *Drawings of British Plants;*
book and illustrations by Stella
Ross-Craig (1948)

Stella Ross-Craig's illustrations make no use of color and put an emphasis on a clear outline rather than on photorealistic illusion. Her meticulous compositions combine different phases of blooming as well as different parts of the plant in different scales, allowing a maximum of information for the trained eye.



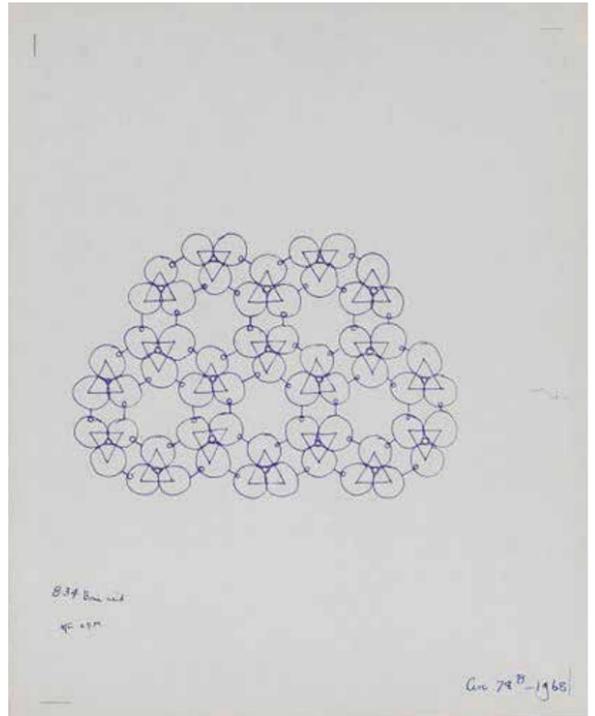
Isatis tinctoria L. Dyer's Woad
A, flowering plant and one of the large basal leaves; B, lower part of plant; C, part of inflorescence; D, flower; E, petal, and flower with sepals and petals removed; F, gynoeceum, nectariferous glands, and upper part of pedicel; G, fruiting branch; H, transverse section through middle of silique; I, seed; J, transverse section of seed; K, seedling.
Petals yellow.



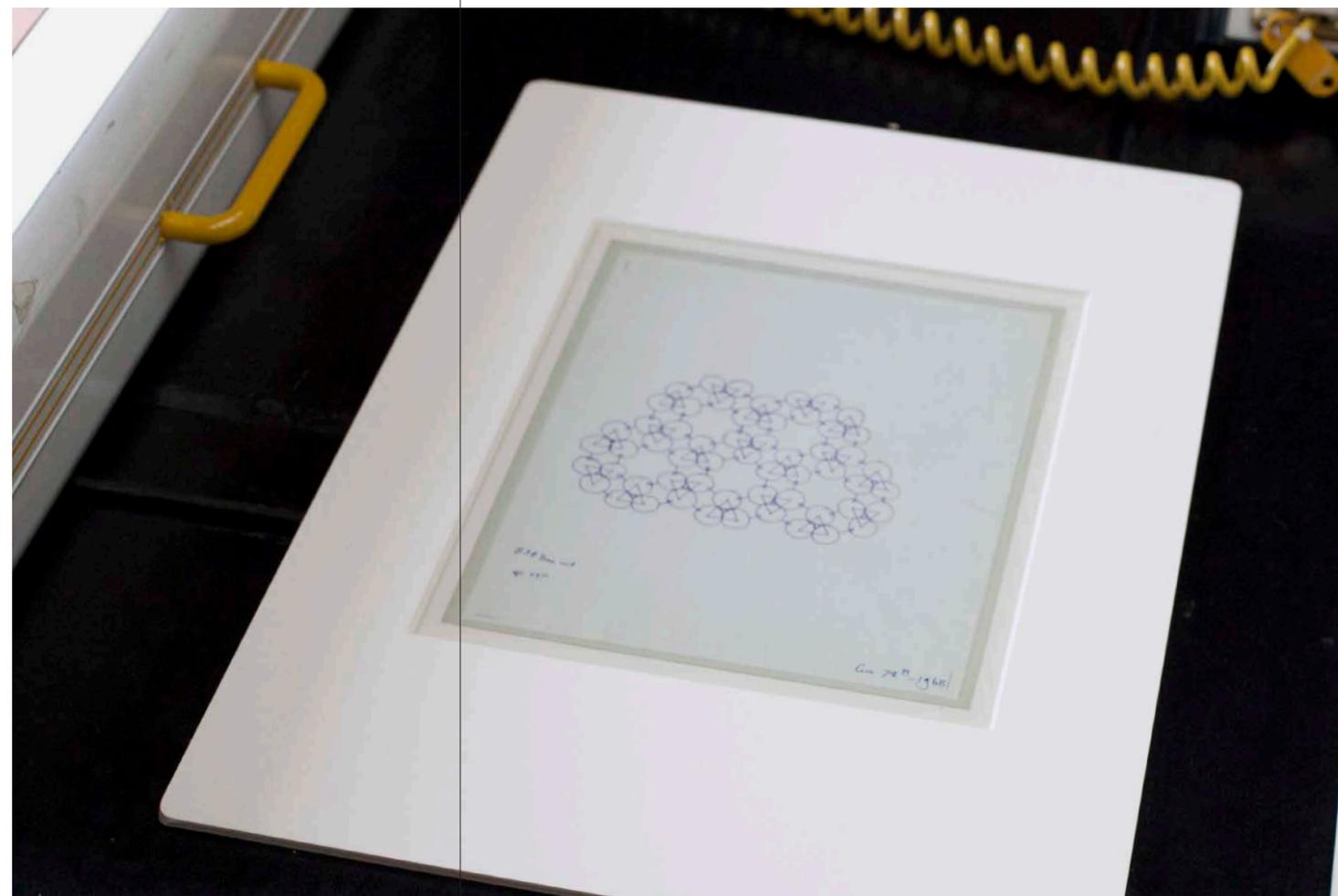
19 *Willow Bough*; wallpaper design by William Morris (1887)
 William Morris based the design for this famous wallpaper on a direct observation of a willow tree he found on a walk with his daughter. What is interesting here is that he did not idealise the plant into a perfect specimen, but kept the wrinkles and creases of the individual plant.

5 *Educational diagram*; drawing by Christopher Dresser (1854–56)
 Christopher Dresser was an artist as well as a botanist. For him, a floral ornamental design must be based on botanical observations. This diagram was used by him to teach design students. The geometric structures were both scientific knowledge as well as the base for ornamental design.

20 *Design 706*; wallpaper design by Frank Lloyd Wright (1956)
 It is not known what inspired Frank Lloyd Wright for this geometric design. The range of colors suggest that it might be based on plant forms.



14 *Boric acid*; drawing by the Crystal Design Project (1951)
 It was not only plants that inspired artists to create designs. This drawing of the crystalline structure of boric acid was intended to be used as a base for textile designs for the Festival of Britain in 1951.



12 *A Few Leaves from the Newly-Invented Process of 'Nature-Printing'; nature print by Henry Bradbury (1854)*

Just as Anna Atkins, Henry Bradbury wanted to overcome the insufficient and subjective hand of the artist. His technique of 'Nature-Printing' meant that real plants were used as printing blocks.



9 *Some Japanese Flowers;* collotypes after photographs by Kazumasa Ogawa (1894)

The colors in Ogawa's pictures were added using lithographic overprinting. Although they are close to the natural colors of the plant, their intensity gives them a surreal atmosphere.



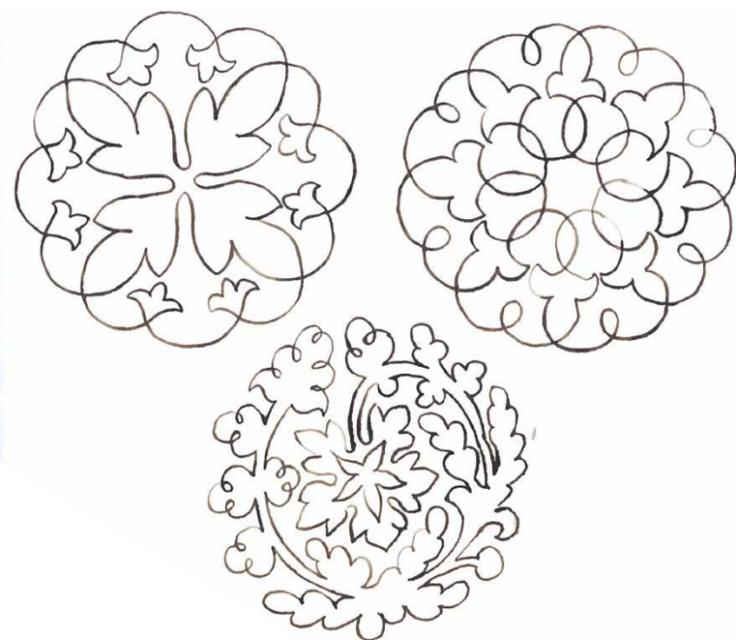
16 *Young Man with a Flower*; photograph by Sedou Keita (1958)



15 *Portrait of an of lady with flower and plant book*; anonymous photograph
Although we do not know how and why this photograph was taken, it clearly seems to be an allusion to the famous portrait of the explorer and botanist Alexander von Humboldt in the same pose.



17 *Portrait of Count Stenbock*; photograph by Frederick Hollyer (1886)



18 *Portrait of Mrs Patrick Campbell; photograph by Frederick Hollyer (1893)*

13 *Embroidery design; drawings by Sarah Bland (c. 1836–54)*
Sarah Bland, who was of nearly the same age as Anna Atkins, used her own botanical observations to develop these ornamental patterns for embroidery.

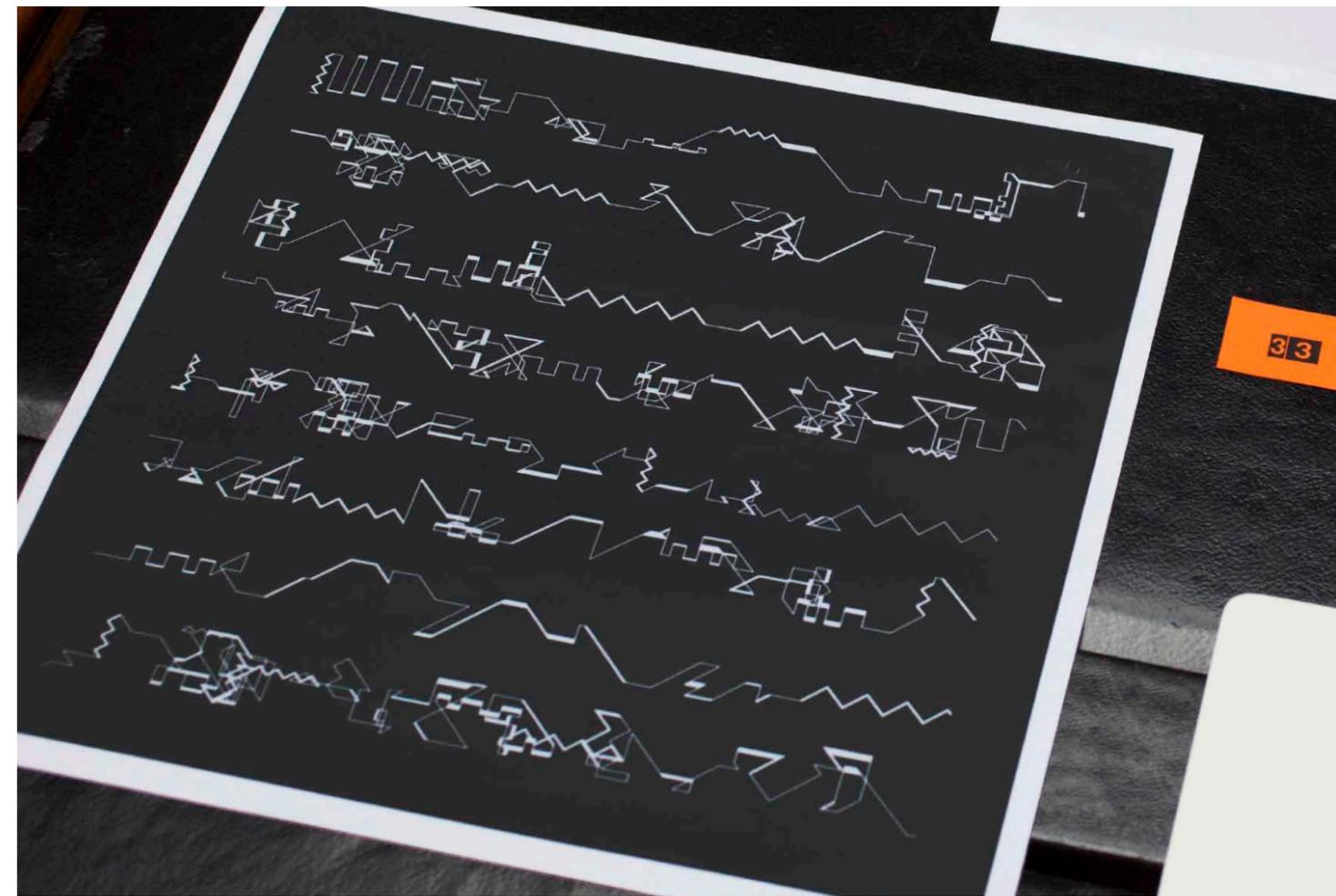
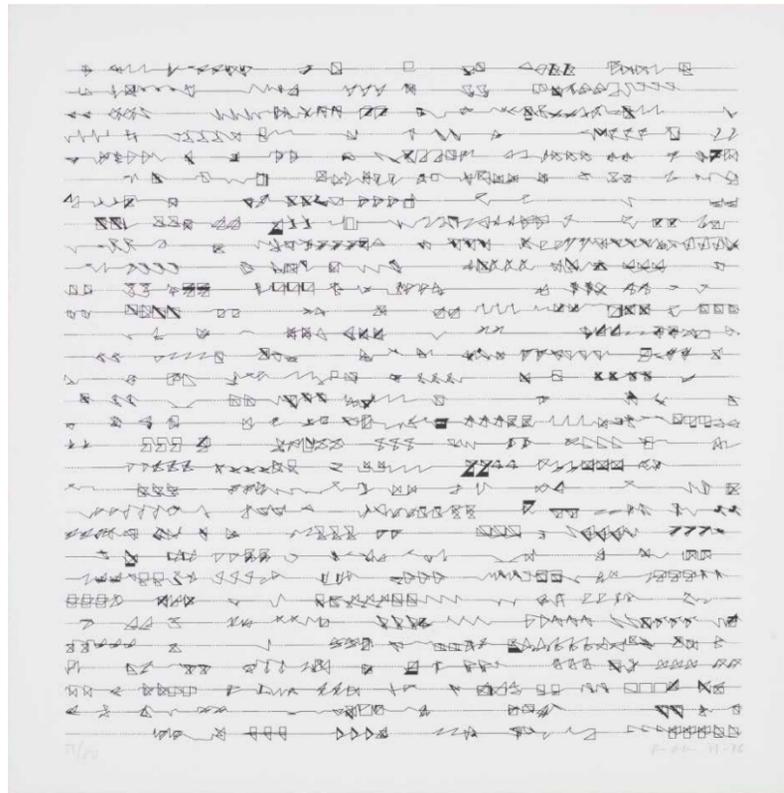
Reading Proposition *Table 2*
Writing





Writing does not only mean conveying a message. It is also a gesture: the movement of the arm, the hand holding the pen, the posture of the body. It is also the creation of a form, consciously in the case of the calligrapher, unconsciously in the case of a child scratching a graffiti into a wall. And it also means, at least in the analogue form of writing, to alter the material onto which one writes: the ink sinks into the paper, the wall is scratched.

22 *Graffiti, Enfant à la Sauvette*;
photograph by Brassäi
(c. 1930s–50s)
A boy scratching into a wall.



33 *Scratch Code*; screenprints of computer generated drawings by Manfred Mohr (1970–76)
Manfred Mohr experimented with the aesthetic potential of computers. He wrote programs to generate ‘unpredictable’ drawings without the interference of the artist. This series is called *Scratch Code*, maybe alluding to one of the earliest form of writing (scratching into a wall) and suggesting that the randomly generated forms could be decoded and read.

24 *Graffiti*; book with photographs by Brassai (1960)
Brassai began in the 1930s to photograph graffiti on the walls of Paris.



28 *Street level*; photographs by Robert Brownjohn (1961)
Graphic designer Robert Brownjohn had a keen eye for the accidental typography of the street. His photographs are not about the written messages, but about the form of the letters.



25 *Shot marks of a military execution*; photograph by Benjamin Stone (1900)
The marks in this wall were not written, but they can be read. The photographer claims that these are shot marks of an execution.



37 Cracks in the painting 'The Last Supper' by Benjamin West; photograph by Charles Thurston Thompson, annotations by Richard Redgrave (1860)

This photograph was made to document the condition of a painting. The cracks are no readable message, but the split surface recalls a wall scratched with graffiti.



26 Graveyard of Newgate Prison; photograph by Benjamin Stone (1902)

In his description of the photograph, Benjamin Stone does not mention the carved letters in the wall. Because of the erosion of the bricks some letters have already disappeared, making the message hard if not impossible to read.

23 Graffiti, Magic; photograph by Brassai (1933–1956)

This image does not show any legible letters, but rather the abstract, superimposed lines of many graffiti. It remains unclear if the lines were once part of written messages or images, or just random scratches.

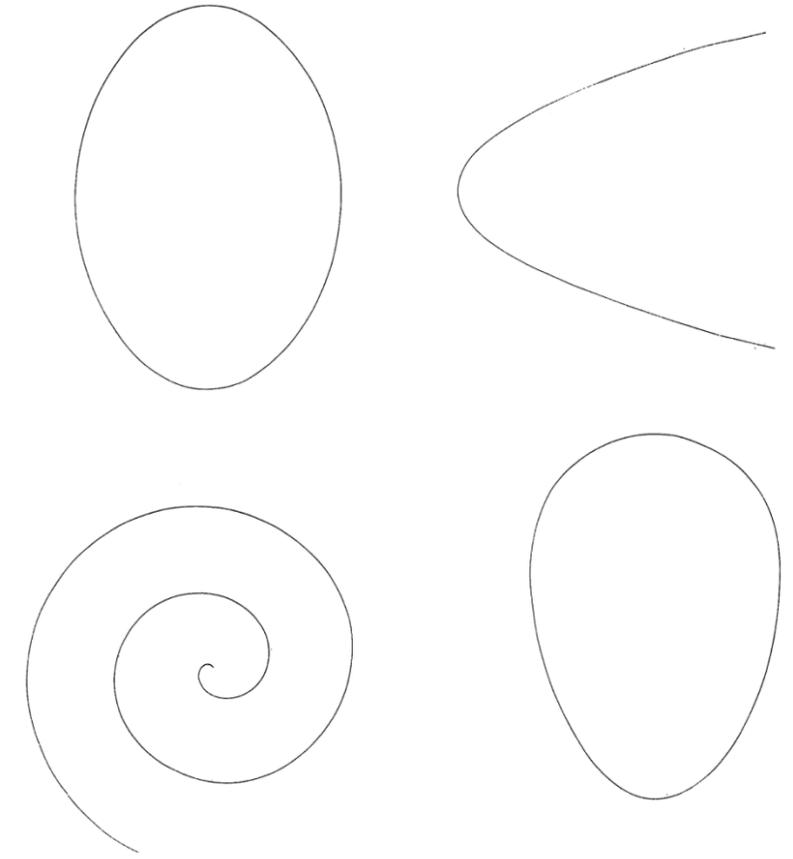


38 *Outlines of an ornament*; lithograph based on a drawing by William Dyce for his book *Elementary Outlines of Ornament* (1842–43)

William Dyce reduced the forms of plants to such simple and geometric forms that they could also be the designs of letterforms of an unknown and fictitious alphabet.

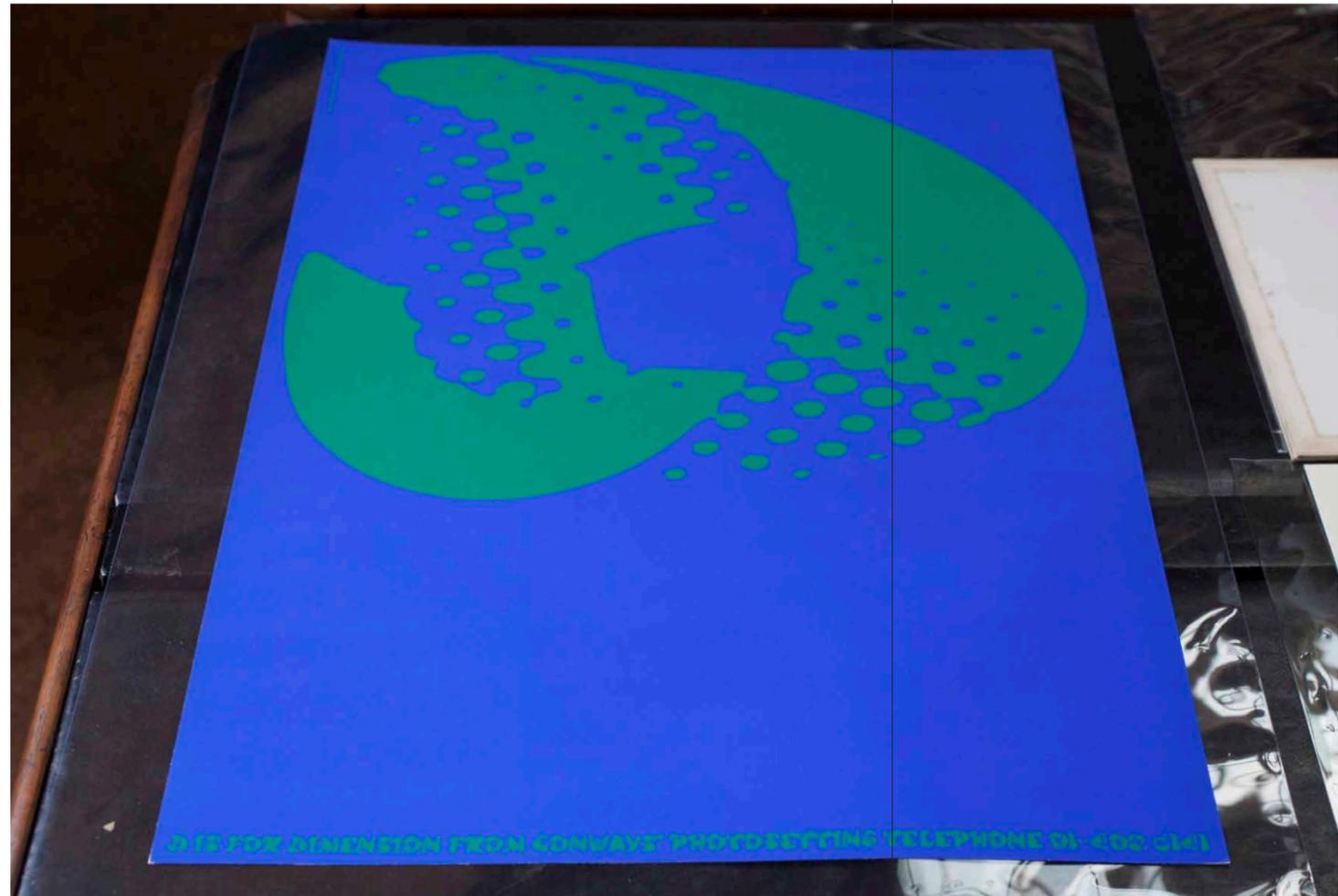
41 *Amphitheatre at Muyu-Uray, Peru*; anonymous photograph (1931)

The view from the aircraft reveals this landscape marked and scratched by paths and the rows of the amphitheatre.

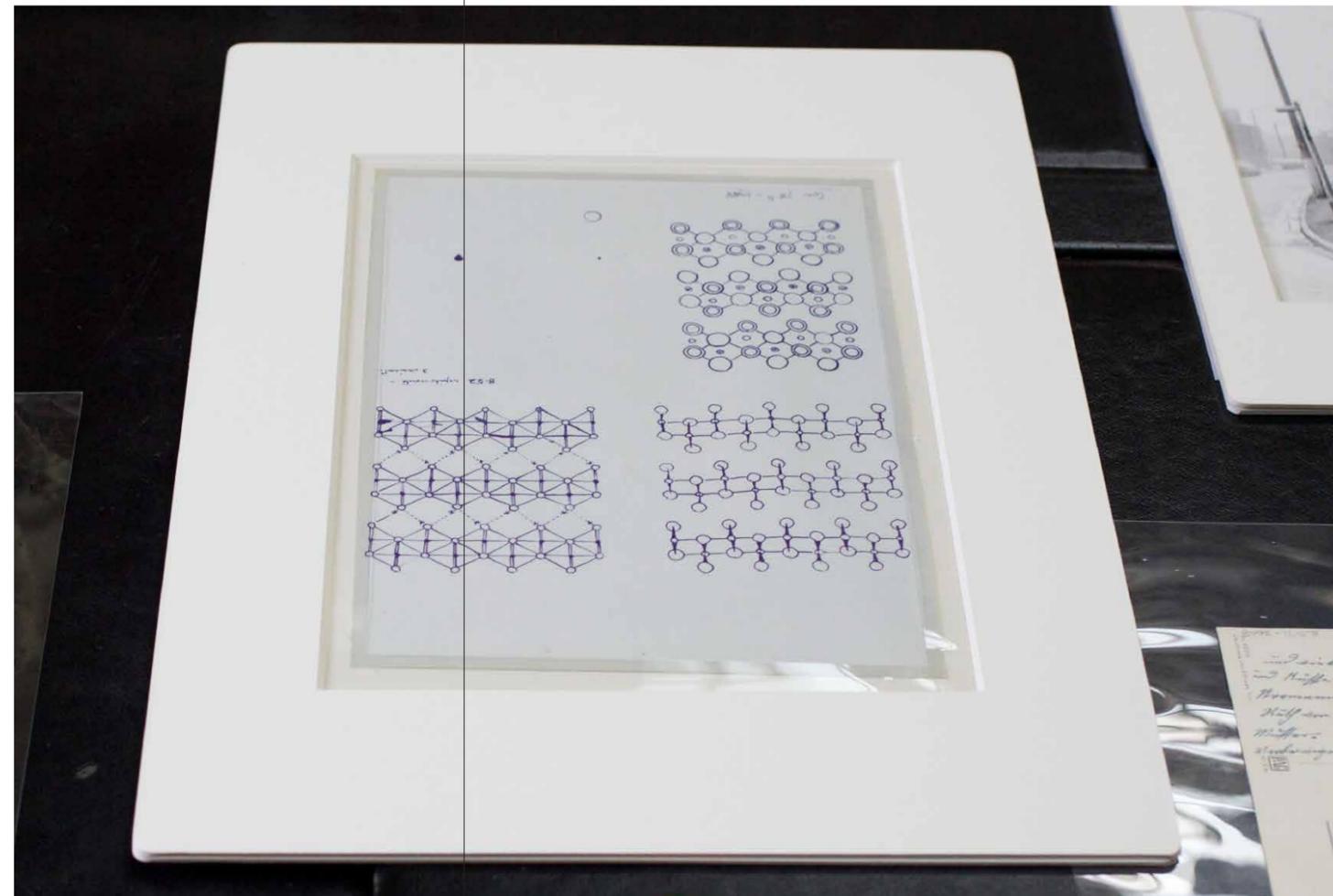
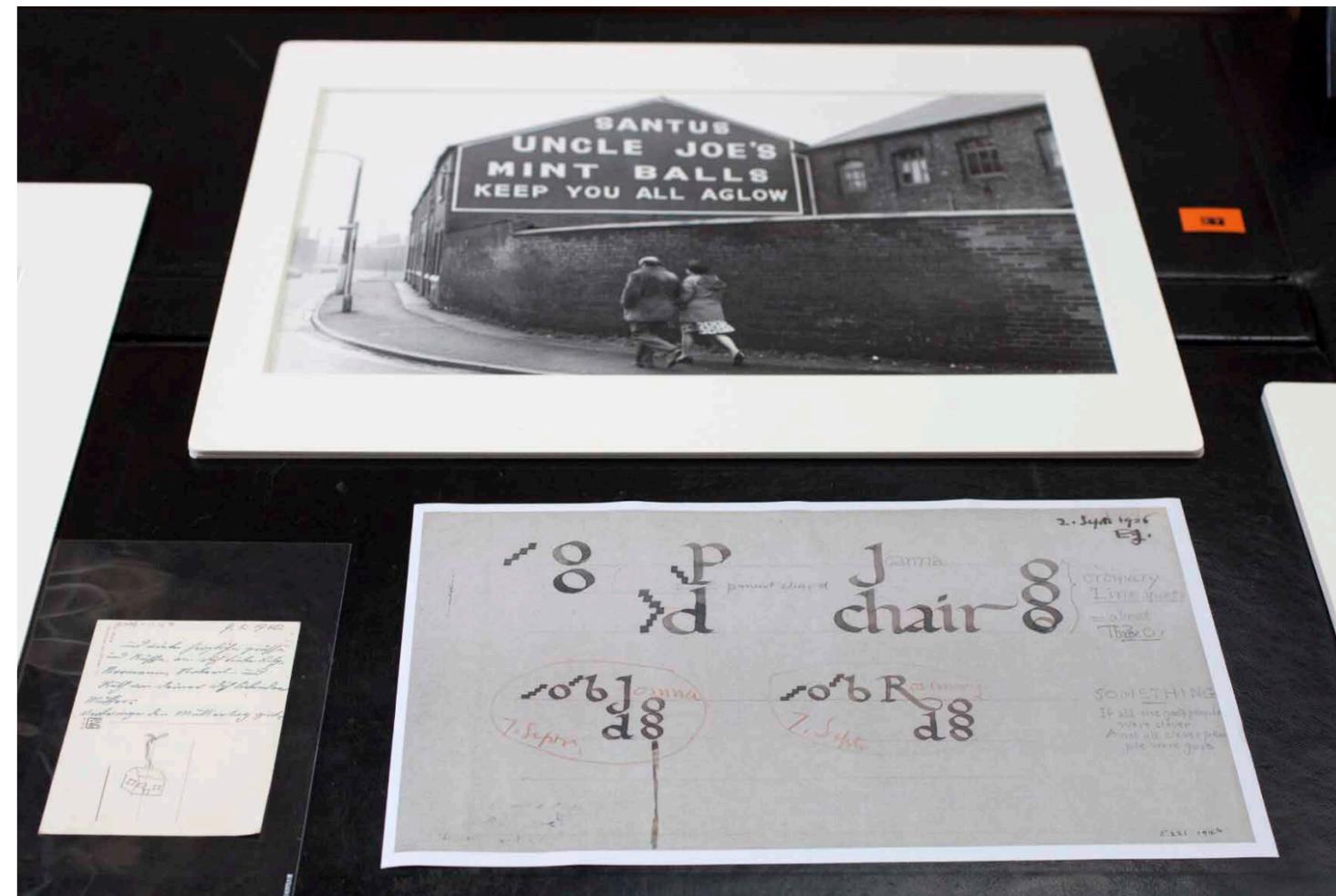
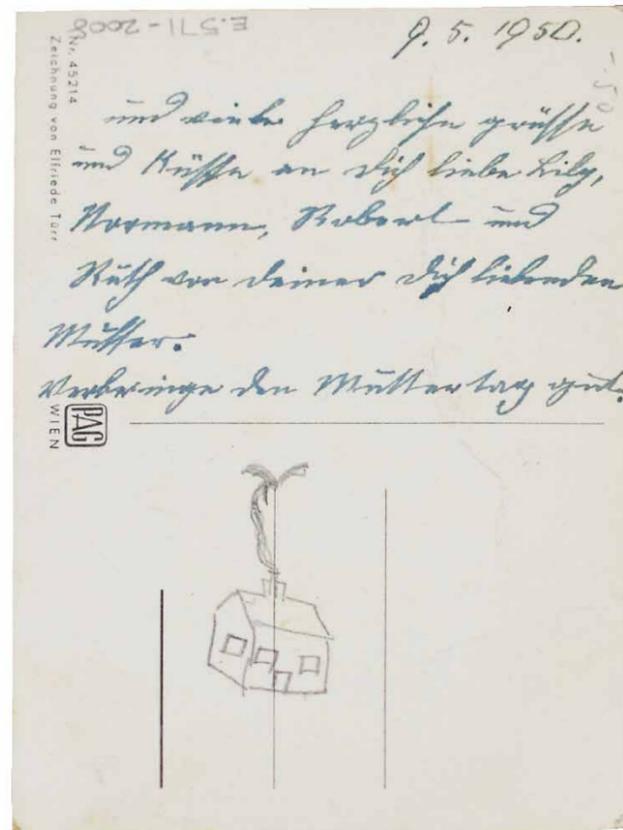


32 *A–Z Poster Alphabet (D)*; screenprint by Colin Forbes (1973)

Colin Forbes chose a design for the letter D that is both futuristic and difficult to read.



36 *Mother's day; greeting card*
 The 'Sütterlin' style of handwriting was taught in German schools until the middle of the 20th century. Today, it is for many near to unreadable.



27 *Wall advertisement, Wigan; photograph by Daniel Meadows (1976)*
 Daniel Meadows took this photograph of an advertisement that relies only on a written message, without any image or even any attention to the design of the letters.

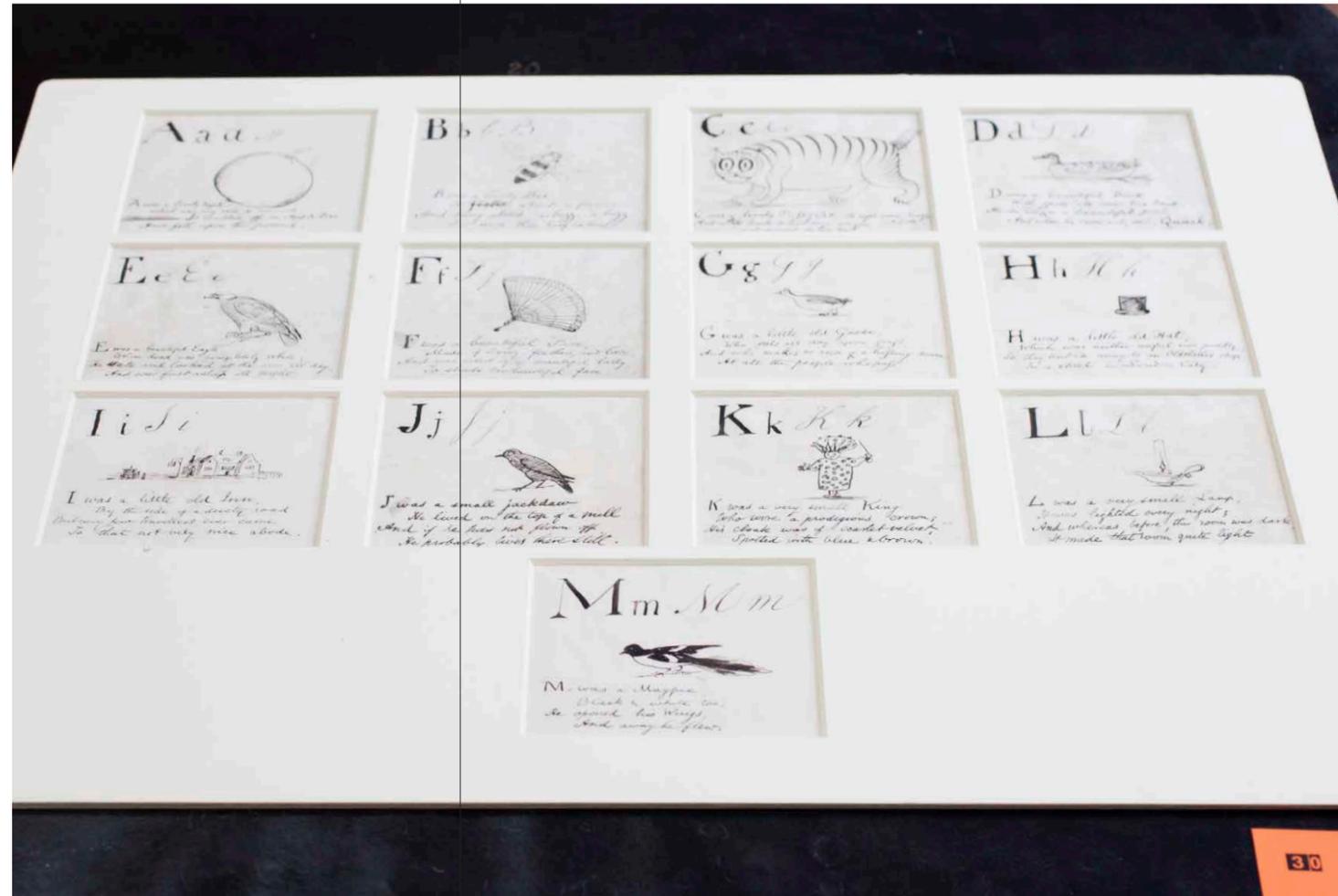
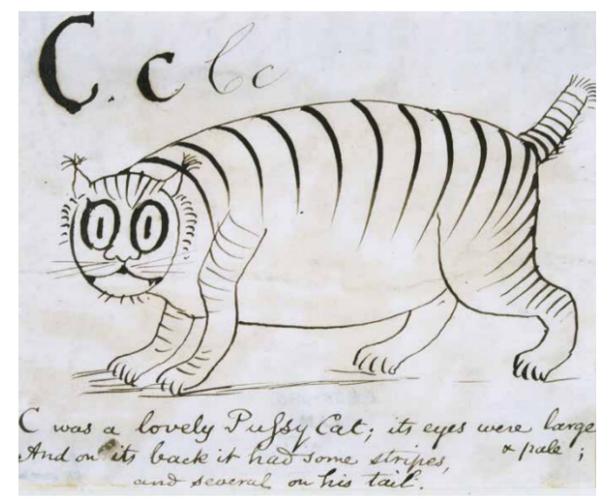
29 *The Formation of the Roman Alphabet; drawing by Edward Johnston (1926)*
 Edward Johnston is most famous for developing the typography for the London Underground. Here, he explains how the letter forms of the Roman alphabet evolved.

39 *Lepidococite (3 variations); drawing by the Crystal Design Project (1951)*
 These drawings are studies for ornamental designs based on the structure of crystals. Don't they also seem to be attempts for musical notations, for a language of rhythms and harmonies?



40 Portrait of Juliana Horatia Ewing; photograph by Frederick Hollyer (1884)
 Juliana Horatia Ewing was an author of children's books. The posture of her body reveals her concentration on her writing.

30 Nonsense Alphabet; drawings by Edward Lear (c. 1880)
 The most interesting drawing of Edward Lear's Nonsense Alphabet is the Letter C: The stripes of the cat all recall the form of the letter C—thus, Lear can, in a nonsensical way, explain the origin of the form of the letter C by its relation to striped cats.



31 *A-Z of a Miner's Wife*;
screenprint by Normanton and
Hand print and Altofts Miner's
Support Group (1985)

There is no rational reason for the
order of the letters in the alphabet
and yet, an arbitrary alphabetical
order can be used to create a political
message.

35 *Scribble*; jumper design by
Artwork (Jane Foster, Patrick
Gottelier) (1979)

Doodles that might have been made
absentmindedly, between phases of
writing.



Helmut Völter is an artist and
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Reading Proposition was made with
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Zorian Clayton, Jon Delgado,
Penelope Hines, Hannah Howrie,
Melanie Lenz, Ella Ravilius,
Catherine Troiano, Kate Quinlan
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