

Culmination

Many talents go into producing a book, and Vancouver artist LUCIE LAMBERT appreciates all of them in a talk about her magnum opus, *Alphabets*.

CULMINATION IS THE WORD I am using for this talk. The culmination is current, it is fresh, it just happened a few days ago: the sale of my sole book *Alphabets*, completed and published in 2011. *Alphabets* comprises 52 poems, a title page, a bilingual preface, a dedication and a colophon. But it is also the repository of 28 of my original gouache paintings of gardens, of pages of Arabic letters repeated to create a pattern, of Chinese strokes dancing on the surface of paper, of evocations of manuscripts flourished with ornamentations, of references to nature in the form of fish and snails and flowers.

Its production took five years, in part, because of the time for me to draw each letter of the alphabet; the time for the poets, Robert Melançon and E.D. (Ted) Blodgett, each to write 26 poems accompanying the letters; the time for Reg Lissel to make the 70 sheets of paste paper; the time for Jason Dewinetz to come up with the design of the book and to print the text on his Vandercook press; the time for Alanna Simenson to create and fashion the book casing; the time for Alex Widen to transfer the digital text to polymer plates, replacing the traditional lead foundry type for printing letterpress.¹

My own ambition was to draw each letter of our alphabet in serif italic, inspired by the letterforms designed by Eugène Grasset in 1898. The letters would be large—5 × 8 inches. Writing in *The Elements of Typographic Style* (1992), Robert Bringhurst remarked:

It is true that most romans are upright and most italics slope to the right. ... [Italic] serifs tend to slope at a natural writing angle, tracing the path from one letter to another. ... Italic and roman lived quite separate lives until the middle of the sixteenth century. Before that date, books were set in either roman *or* italic, but not in both. In the late Renaissance, typographers began to use the two for different features in the



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The letter e in Alphabets.

same book. Typically, roman was used for the main text and italic for the preface, headnotes, sidenotes and for verse or block quotations.²

The drawings of letters would be paired with the work of others, both directly and as part of the production process. Many of these collaborators were working in different locations: Robert Melançon in North Hatley, Quebec; Ted Blodgett in White Rock, B.C., Jason Dewinetz in Vernon, B.C.; Alanna Simenson had her working space at Barbarian Press in Mission; Reg Lissel had his studio in Vancouver's historic Chinatown, Alex Widen in Clinton, B.C. Ryan Mah, the photographer, Sheila Martineau, the designer of the marketing slideshow for *Alphabets*, David Leith, my web designer, and I, all live in Vancouver. Publishing a book requires coordinating the contributions

of many excellent collaborators to achieve the desired result of a unified piece of art.

Robert Reid, the legendary book designer and widely regarded as the founder of the private press movement in Canada, wrote in the colophon of his seminal publication *The Fraser Mines Vindicated* (1949):

Fine books have literary value, and they have commercial value, but it is their value as works of art which distinguishes them from other books. This intangible, aesthetic quality is not easily obtained. The designer's use of binding materials, of type, of paper and of inks, all contribute to the feeling of luxuriousness and of fineness. There is another element, **personality**, without which a book is lost. It results from the designer imparting something of himself into books—his love for fine books, his consequent sincerity of purpose, his grasp of the elementals of the printing craft.

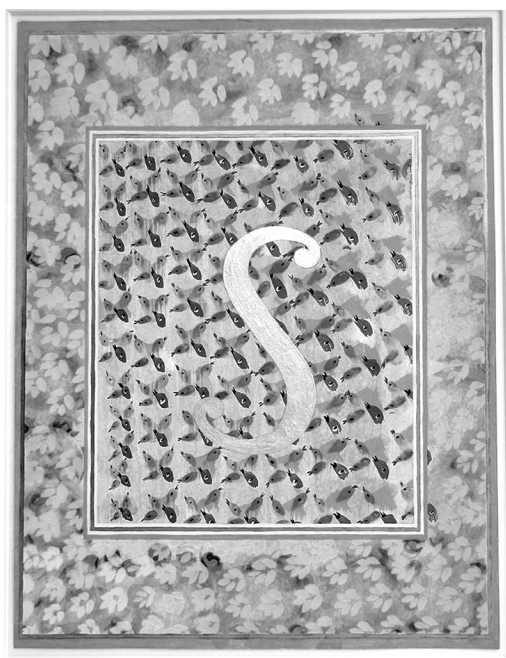
This tapestry of many hands working together finds its form in *Alphabets*, now in the collection of the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art (www.biartmuseum.org) on Bainbridge Island, Washington, due to four generous donors and



Alphabets book casing designed by Alanna Simenson.

patrons: Cynthia Sears, Béla Szigethy, Réjean Beaudoin and Zoltán Szigethy. I have deep, heartfelt gratitude for their appreciation and support.

The Bainbridge Island Museum of Art was founded by Cynthia Sears with special focus on the art of the book. The 1,900 artist's books Sears donated to the museum are its core, and are exhibited on a revolving basis.³ *Alphabets* is one of several gems in the collection and will also be joined by 10 of my other livres d'artiste that Sears



The letters s and k in Alphabets.



Alphabets on display at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art. (Jesenka Curak photo)

has purchased with the intent of donating them to the museum. *Alphabets* has no better home than in the context of Cynthia Sears’ collection, the centrepiece of the museum’s collection.

Alphabets is a mostly West Coast production which has found a home in a unique museum dedicated to the art of the book. The Bainbridge Island Museum of Art is not the Library of Congress or the Boston Athenaeum, but it acquired my magnum opus, ensuring it will become visible, displayed, filmed and therefore will be accessible to those interested in the field of book arts, of literature, of crafts and history. Creation of *Alphabets* capped my half-century work of 12 livres d’artiste.

NOTES

1. “Before desktop publishing, type foundries manufactured and sold metal and wood typefaces, and matrices for line-casting machines like the Linotype and Monotype machines designed to be used by letterpress printers” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type_foundry).

2. Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (Point Roberts, WA/Vancouver, BC: Hartley & Marks, 1992), 53–54.

3. *Alphabets* was featured at the museum in late 2019 and early 2020. Lucie Lambert discusses the background and creation of *Alphabets* with museum guests in a video available at <https://youtu.be/AoOJAsre2C8>.

✦ This is an edited synopsis of a talk originally delivered to the Alcuin Society in Vancouver, B.C., on April 11, 2019.

~ Lucie Lambert is a book artist, printmaker and publisher of Les Éditions Lucie Lambert, which produces collaborative works between herself and acclaimed poets. Her books are in more than 50 national libraries, museums and university rare book collections throughout Europe and North America. The full range of her artistry in various media, as well as a slideshow on *Alphabets*, can be seen at www.lucielambert.com. She is based in Vancouver.