Edward Johnston

Born 1872. Designer of the London Transport typeface.
Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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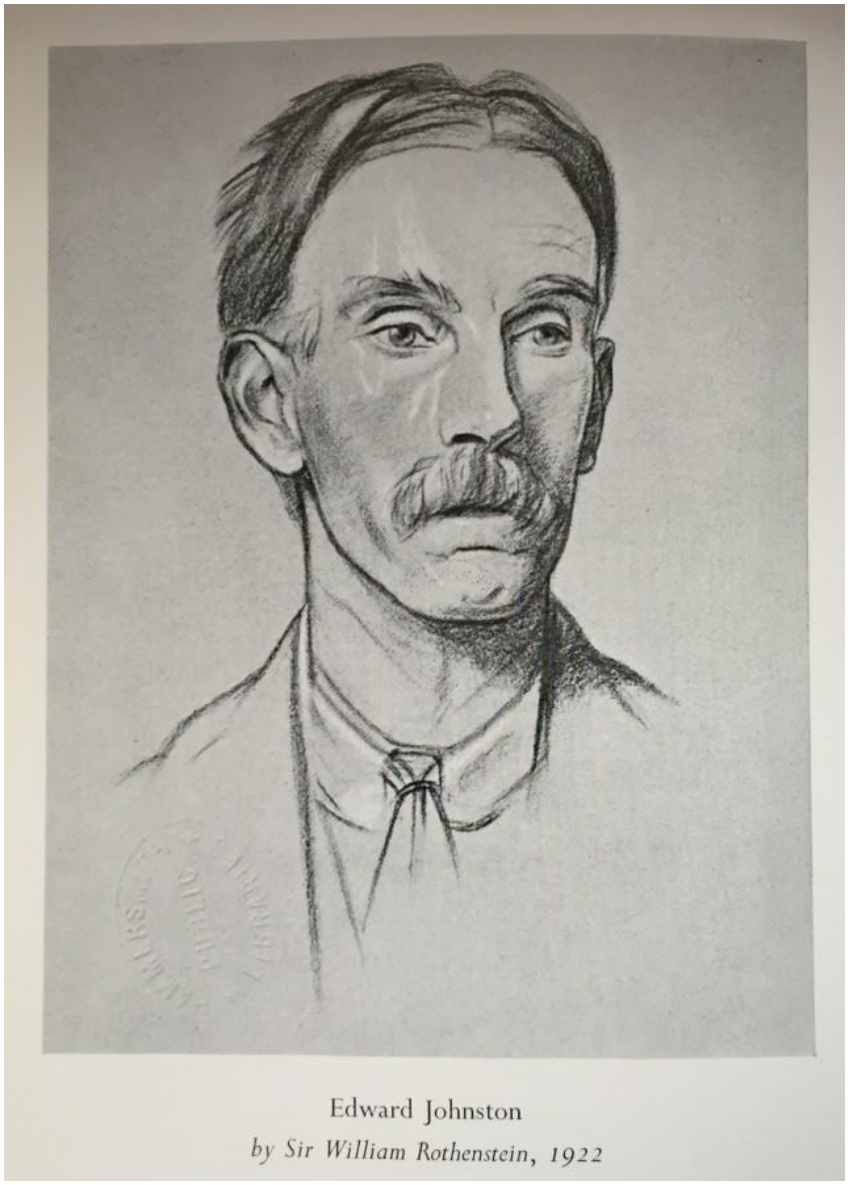
1. Introduction

This introduction to Edward Johnston by Fiona Fowler was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Hammermsith & Fulham Library & Archives Service blog.

Edward Johnston was born on 11 February 1872 and is often regarded, with Rudolf Koch, as the father of modern calligraphy.



Edward Johnston
by Sir William Rothenstein, 1922

Johnston has been credited with reviving the art of modern penmanship and lettering through his books and teachings. His book *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering*, 1906, sparked a renewed interest in the art of calligraphy. Inspired by William Morris's admiration of medieval manuscripts, he studied historic calligraphic scripts and devised the simply crafted round calligraphic handwriting style, written with a broad pen, known today as the foundational hand.

This is written in 'Foundational Hand'
which was devised by Edward Johnston
from a tenth century English Carolingian script

He is probably most famous for designing the London Underground typeface. In 1913, Frank Pick commissioned him to design a typeface for the Underground, and the simple and clear sans-serif Johnston typeface was the result. It was used throughout the London Underground system until it was re-designed in the 1980s.

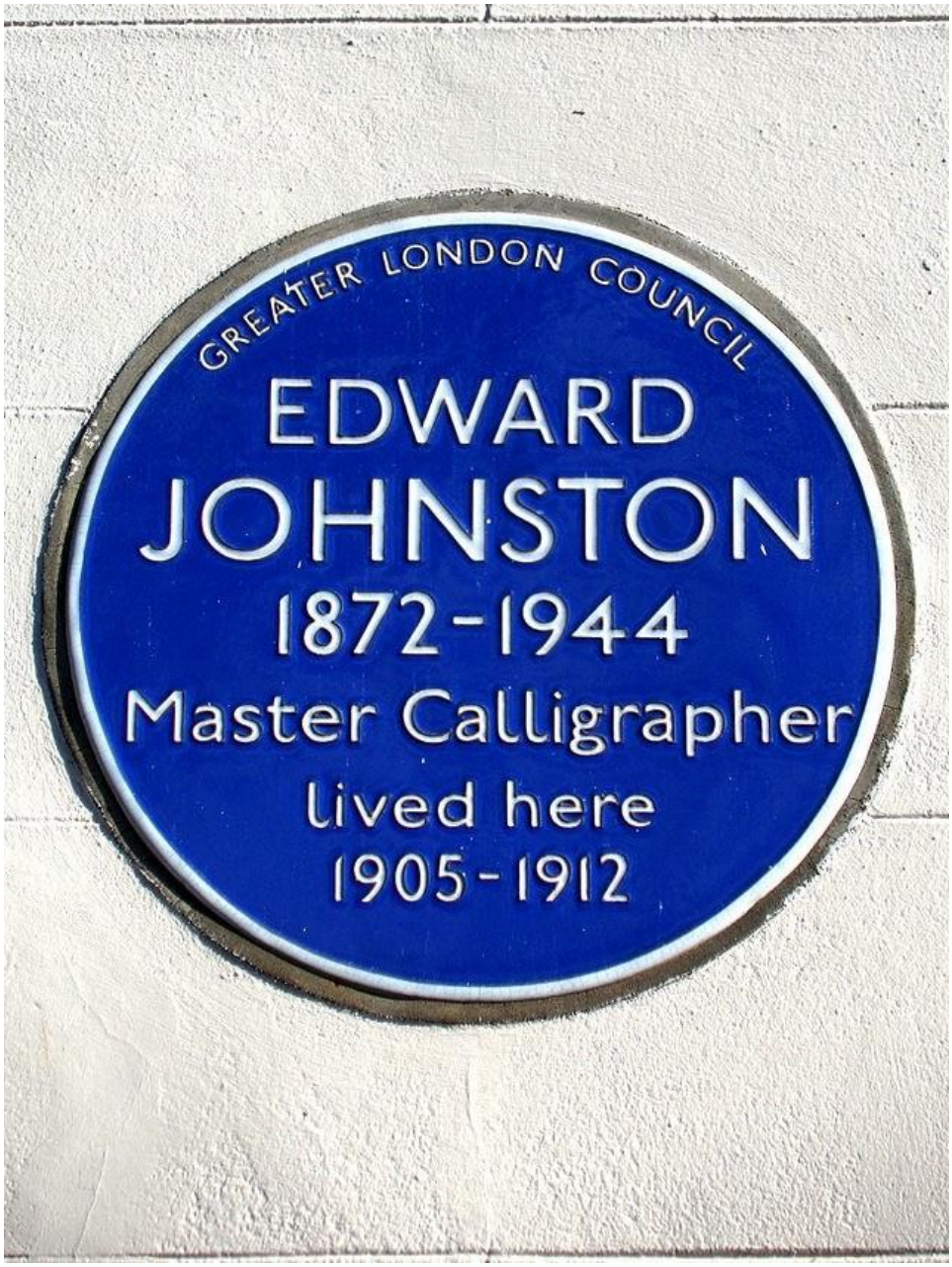
ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklm
nopqrstuvwxyz
1234567890

Not all his students were happy with his decision to create a sans-serif design for the Underground, in a style thought of as modernist and industrial. His pupil Graily Hewitt privately wrote to a friend:

In Johnston I have lost confidence. Despite all he did for us…he has undone too much by forsaking his standard of the Roman alphabet, giving the world, without safeguard or explanation, his block letters which disfigure our modern life. His prestige has obscured their vulgarity and commercialism.

As well as the typeface, Edward Johnston also designed the famous roundel symbol used throughout the system:

Both practitioner and teacher, Johnston mentored many famous calligraphers and type designers including Eric Gill and Anna Simons. His link with Hammersmith and why he is included in the Hammersmith & Fulham Archives is that he lived at 3 Hammersmith Terrace from 1905 to 1912. Near neighbours were Emery Walker and Douglas Pepler.



Note that the font used on this plaque is not “English Heritage’s own unique font” to quote English Heritage but London Underground’s New Johnston sans serif, the 1979 version of the font designed by Johnston and introduced in 1916. Three other Underground-related blue plaques use this font: Frank Pick, Lord Ashfield and Harry Beck.

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2. The London Transport Typeface

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the London Transport Museum at www.ltmuseum.co.uk.

The Johnston typeface was created a century ago for London Underground by Edward Johnston. Since its introduction, this lettering has come to represent not just London's transport but the idea of London itself.

Bus stop flag; London Transport buses stop here, circa 1934

Early years

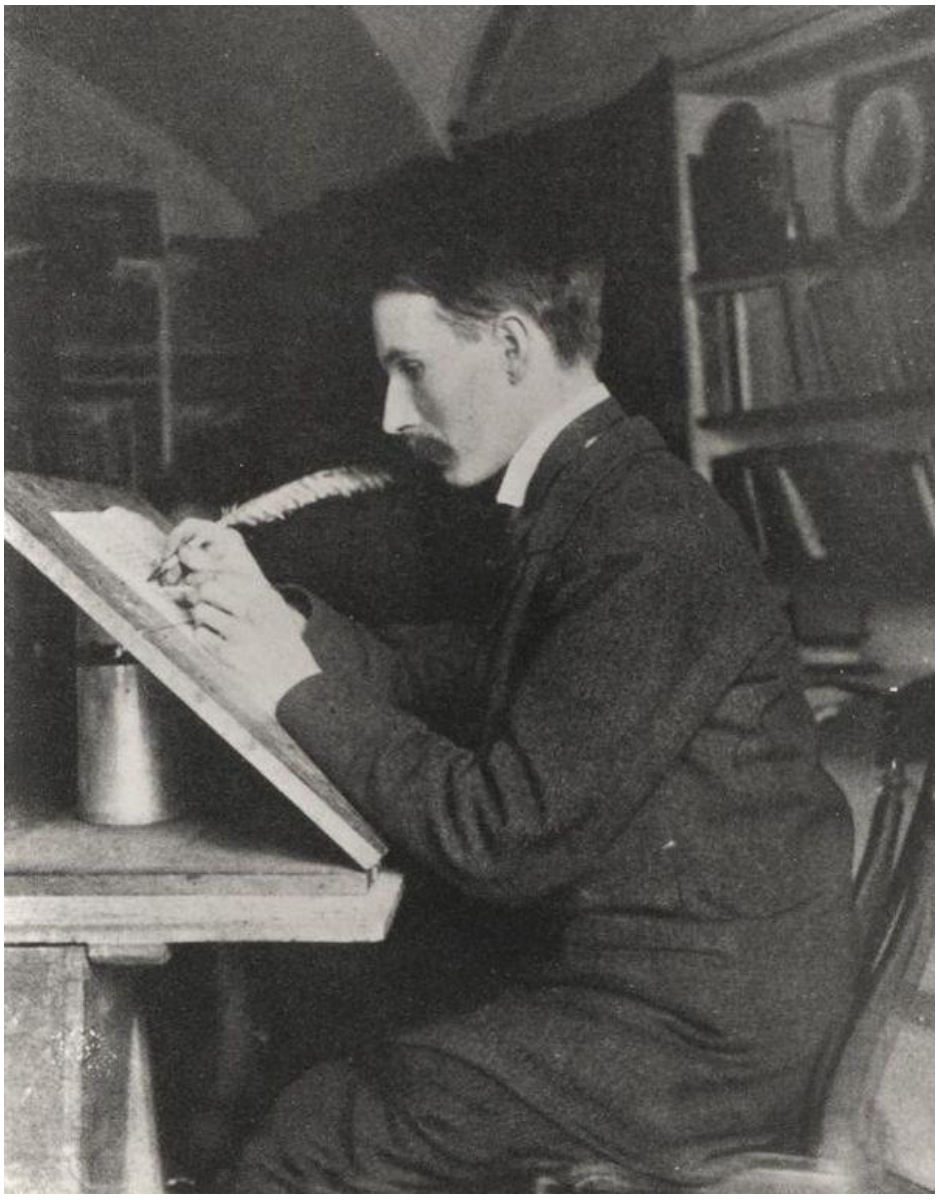
Edward Johnston, the son of Scottish settlers, was born on their remote ranch in the province of San José, Uruguay. The family returned to England when Johnston was three years old. A creative child, he was

absorbed by the popular Victorian hobby of ‘illuminations’, the copying of texts in the manner of a mediaeval manuscript.

Career

Johnston had initially enrolled at Edinburgh University to study medicine, but in 1895 he abandoned this field in favour of working in the arts.

On arrival in London, Johnston had what he described as the ‘miracle of his life’ when he met William Richard Lethaby, the founding Principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts. After seeing samples of Johnston’s written illuminated work, Lethaby commissioned a work from Johnston and urged him to study manuscripts at the British Museum. When Johnston delivered his commission, he was astonished to be offered a post teaching illuminating at the Central School.



B/W print; Edward Johnston, typographer, (1872-1944), 1902

B/W print of Notice: Arts & Crafts Exhibition, in Johnston type, October 1916

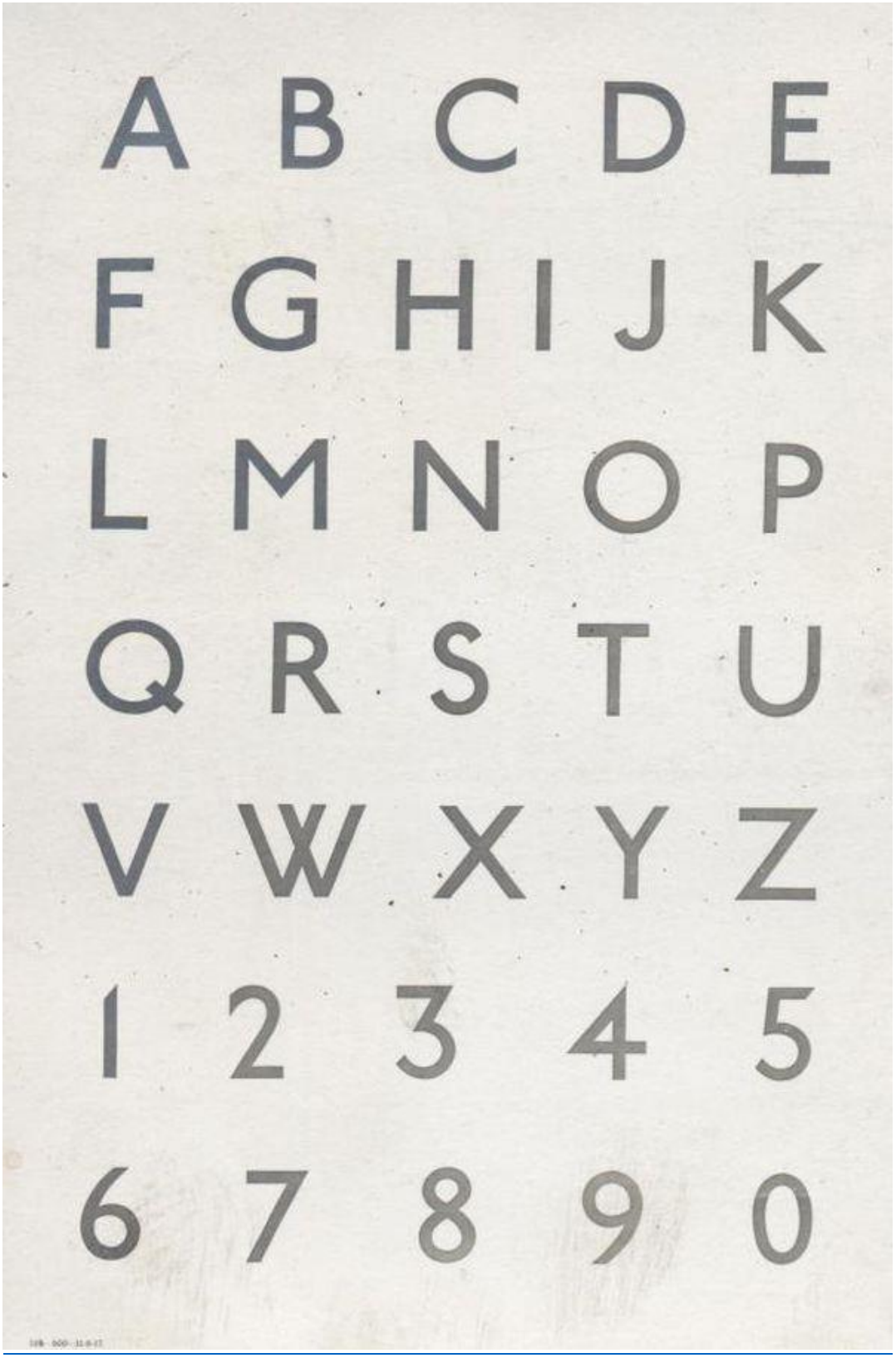
London’s lettering

b/w glass neg, Westminster station, 1897

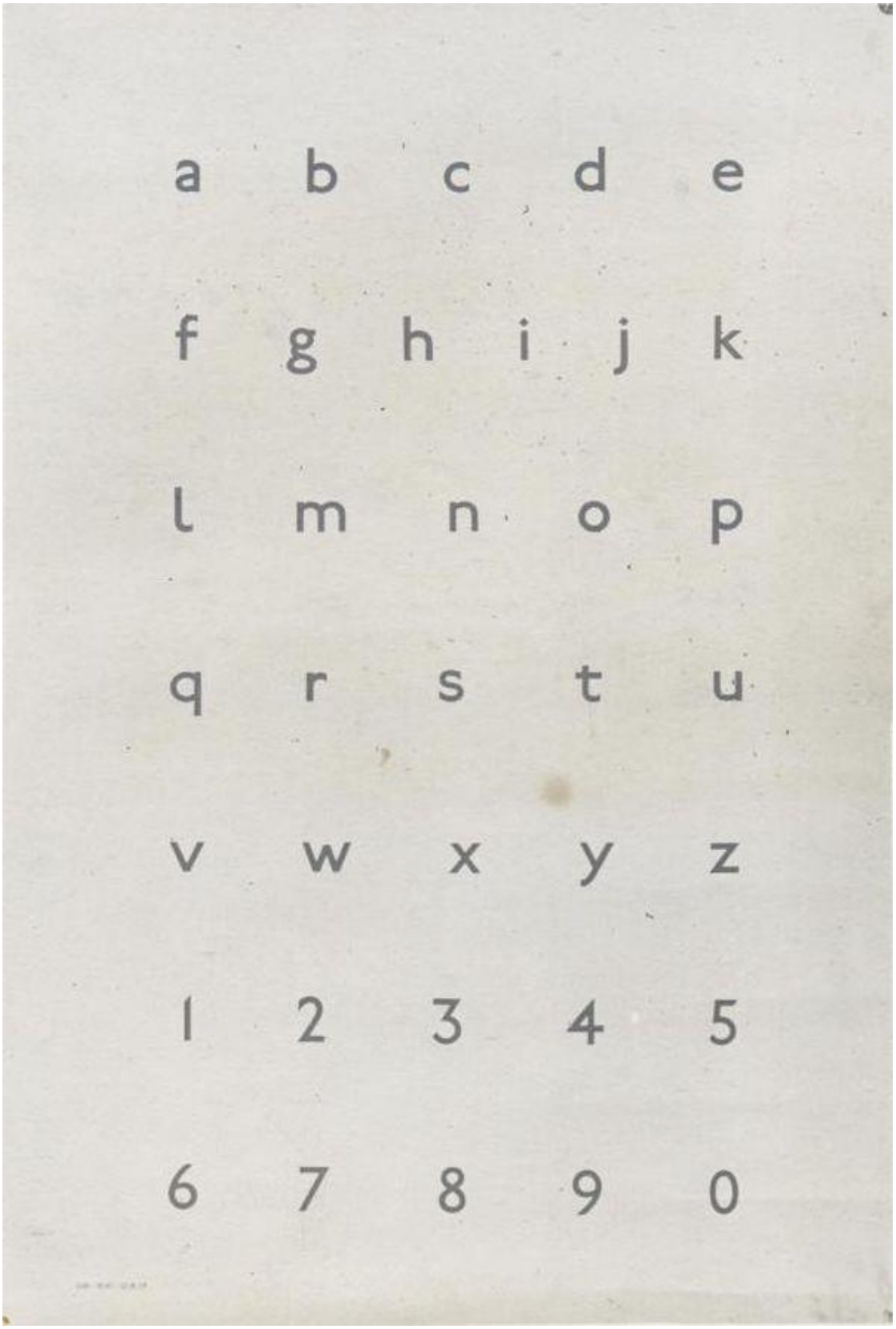
In 1913, Johnston met Frank Pick, Commercial Manager of the London Underground Group. This meeting ultimately resulted in the commissioning of Johnston’s Standard Block Lettering for the Underground and the London Underground ‘bullseye’ symbol.

Pick’s immediate objective was to drive up fare income. He set about making the Underground more attractive to passengers by publicising it more effectively, by making its stations easier to identify, as well as by making the system easier to use and to navigate in order to encourage repeat business.

It was with these principles in mind that Johnston submitted the first examples of Johnston Capital letter block letter type to Pick, in February 1916.



B/W print of Notice: Standard Alphabet - Johnston Type, 1917



B/W print of Notice: Standard Alphabet - Johnston Type, 1917

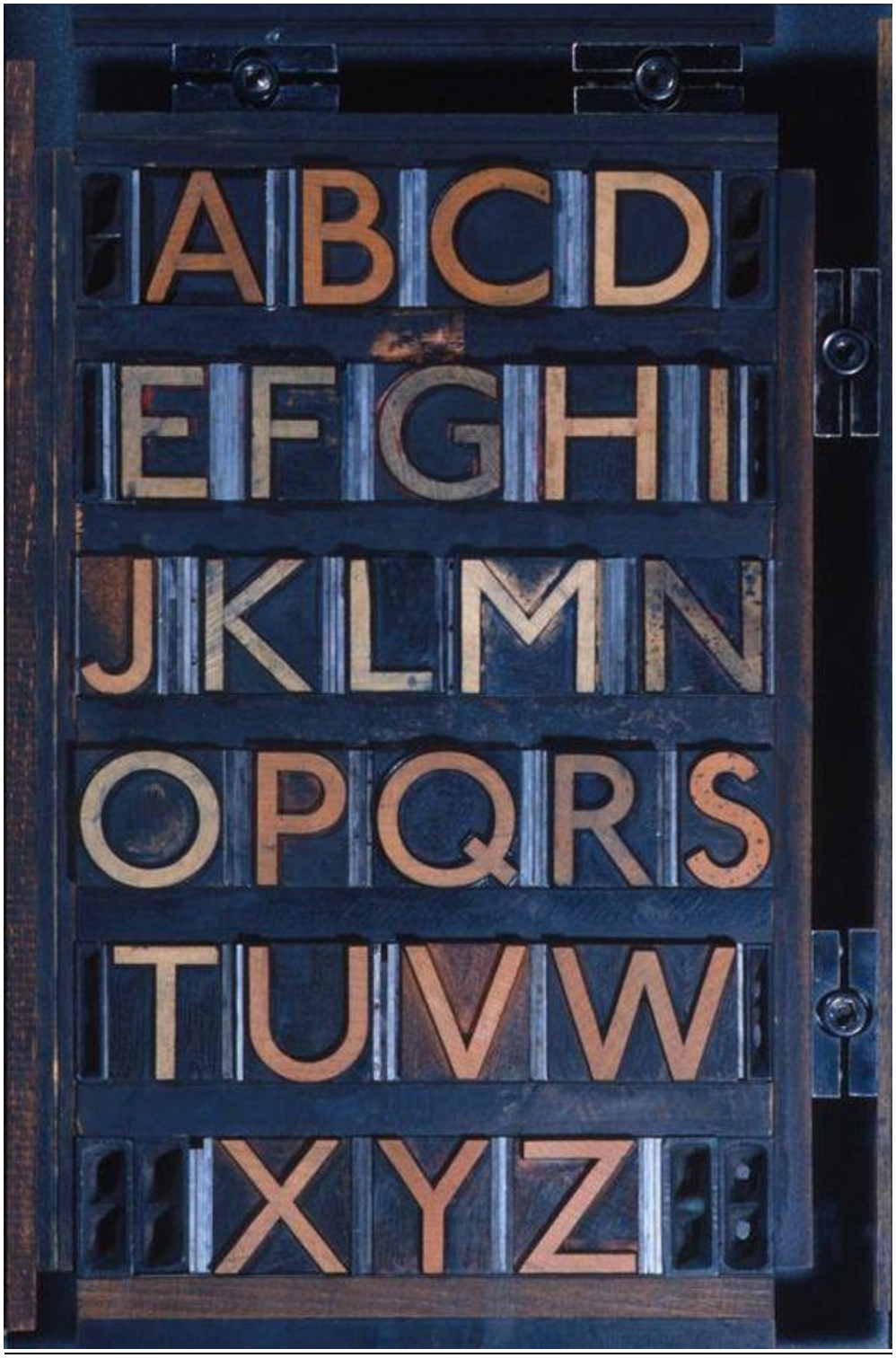
b/w glass neg, Exterior of Westminster Underground station by Topical Press, 1924

The first use of the Johnston typeface was in wooden block prints for posters. The sans serif type, characterised by the absence of little strokes (serifs) around individual letters, was soon used in signage in the development of the new Tube extensions and station refurbishments in the 1920s and 1930s.

Colour transparency; Edward Johnston's design drawing for the Underground bullseye c1925, Hugh Robertson, 2001

At the turn of 1916-17 Pick asked Johnston to redesign the trademarks for the Underground Group including the bullseye logo that Pick had first initiated in 1908. Johnston refined this to the now familiar branding of the bar and circle we still see today, which is recognised the world over.

Johnston's legacy



Printing type; A full alphabet of Johnston wood letter type, 1947

Printing type; Johnston wood letter type contained in a printer's chest, containing 20 cases, and formes set for print, as used by the Bournehall Press, 1916-1979

In the 1970s, London Transport examined the suitability of continuing to use Johnston's san serif or replacing it. In 1979, Eiichi Kono, a young Japanese designer working for Banks and Miles, revised the original Johnston with slight changes to the proportions to some of the letters and created bold and italic fonts.

In 2016, Monotype was commissioned to review the typeface again. Monotype Director Nadine Chaline and Senior Type Designer Malou

Verlomme focused on revising the iconic lettering in light of digital developments and additional symbols that have become commonplace in the 21st century. The result - Johnston100 - has been rolled out by TfL since 2016.

Despite these changes, the importance of Johnston's contribution to London's transport system is clearly demonstrated in the memorial that was installed at Farringdon Station in 2017. Designed by Fraser Muggeridge, the memorial is an unapologetic celebration of Johnston's typeface, which has become a classic of wayfinding design and modern lettering.

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3. Writing on Calligraphy

This chapter was extracted in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Project Gutenberg record of Edward Johnston's 1906 book Writing & Illuminating and Lettering.

THE ARTISTIC CRAFTS SERIES OF TECHNICAL HANDBOOKS
EDITED BY W. R. LETHABY

WRITING & ILLUMINATING, AND LETTERING

A SCRIPTORIUM

This drawing (about two-fifths of the linear size of the original) is made from a photograph of a miniature painted in an old MS. (written in 1456 at the Hague by Jean Mielot, Secretary to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy), now in the Paris National Library (MS. Fonds français 9,198). It depicts Jean Mielot himself, writing his collection of Miracles of Our Lady in French. His parchment appears to be held steady by a weight and also by (? the knife or filler in) his left hand—compare fig. 41 in this book. Above there is a sort of reading desk, holding MSS. for copying or reference.

WRITING & ILLUMINATING, & LETTERING
BY EDWARD JOHNSTON. WITH DIAGRAMS & ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR & NOEL ROOKE
8 pp. EXAMPLES IN RED & BLACK AND 24 pp. OF COLLOTYPES

PUBLISHED BY JOHN HOGG
13 PATERNOSTER ROW
LONDON 1906

Editor's Preface by W. R. Lethaby

In issuing these volumes of a series of Handbooks on the Artistic Crafts, it will be well to state what are our general aims.

In the first place, we wish to provide trustworthy text-books of workshop practice, from the points of view of experts who have critically examined the methods current in the shops, and putting aside vain survivals, are prepared to say what is good workmanship, and to set up a standard of quality in the crafts which are more especially associated with design.

Secondly, in doing this, we hope to treat design itself as an essential part of good workmanship. During the last century most of the arts, save painting and sculpture of an academic kind, were little considered, and there was a tendency to look on "design" as a mere matter of *appearance*.

Such "ornamentation" as there was was usually obtained by following in a mechanical way a drawing provided by an artist who often knew little of the technical processes involved in production. With the critical attention given to the crafts by [p-viii]Ruskin and Morris, it came to be seen that it was impossible to detach design from craft in this way, and that, in the

widest sense, true design is an inseparable element of good quality, involving as it does the selection of good and suitable material, contrivance for special purpose, expert workmanship, proper finish, and so on, far more than mere ornament, and indeed, that ornamentation itself was rather an exuberance of fine workmanship than a matter of merely abstract lines.

Workmanship when separated by too wide a gulf from fresh thought—that is, from design—inevitably decays, and, on the other hand, ornamentation, divorced from workmanship, is necessarily unreal, and quickly falls into affectation. Proper ornamentation may be defined as a language addressed to the eye; it is pleasant thought expressed in the speech of the tool.

In the third place, we would have this series put artistic craftsmanship before people as furnishing reasonable occupations for those who would gain a livelihood. Although within the bounds of academic art, the competition, of its kind, is so acute that only a very few per cent. can fairly hope to succeed as painters and sculptors; yet, as artistic craftsmen, there is every probability that nearly every one who would pass through a sufficient period of apprenticeship to workmanship and design would reach a measure of success.

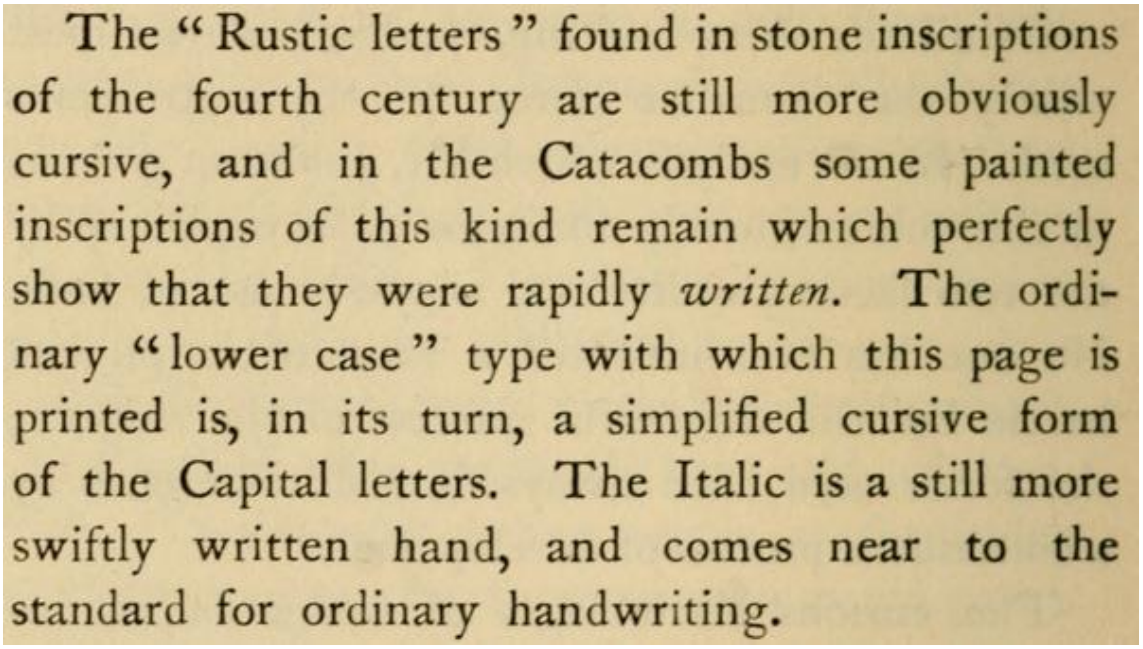
In the blending of handwork and thought in [p-ix]such arts as we propose to deal with, happy careers may be found as far removed from the dreary routine of hack labour as from the terrible uncertainty of academic art. It is desirable in every way that men of good education should be brought back into the productive crafts: there are more than enough of us “in the city,” and it is probable that more consideration will be given in this century than in the last to Design and Workmanship.

Of all the Arts, writing, perhaps, shows most clearly the formative force of the instruments used. In the analysis which Mr. Johnston gives us in this volume, nearly all seems to be explained by the two factors, utility and masterly use of tools. No one has ever invented a form of script, and herein lies the wonderful interest of the subject; the forms used have always formed themselves by a continuous process of development.

The curious assemblages of wedge-shaped indentations which make up Assyrian writing are a direct outcome of the clay cake, and the stylus used to imprint little marks on it. The forms of Chinese characters, it is evident, were made by quickly representing with a brush earlier pictorial signs.

The Roman characters, which are our letters to-day, although their earlier forms have only come down to us cut in stone, must have been formed by incessant practice with a flat, stiff brush, or some such tool. The disposition of the thicks and thins, and the exact shape of the curves, must have been settled by an instrument used rapidly; I suppose, indeed, that most of the great monumental inscriptions were designed *in situ* by a master writer, and

only cut in by the mason, the cutting being merely a fixing, as it were, of the writing, and the cut inscriptions must always have been intended to be completed by painting.


The "Rustic letters" found in stone inscriptions of the fourth century are still more obviously cursive, and in the Catacombs some painted inscriptions of this kind remain which perfectly show that they were rapidly *written*. The ordinary "lower case" type with which this page is printed is, in its turn, a simplified cursive form of the Capital letters. The Italic is a still more swiftly written hand, and comes near to the standard for ordinary handwriting.

All fine monumental inscriptions and types are but forms of writing modified according to the materials to which they are applied. The Italian type-founders of the fifteenth century sought out fine examples of old writing as models, and for their capitals studied the monumental Roman inscriptions. Roman letters were first introduced into English inscriptions by Italian artists. Torrigiano, on the tombs he made for Henry VII. in Westminster Abbey and for Dr. Young at the Rolls Chapel, designed probably the most beautiful inscriptions of this kind to be found in England.

This volume is remarkable for the way in which its subject seems to be developed inevitably. There is here no collection of all sorts of lettering, some sensible and many eccentric, for us to choose from, but we are shown the essentials of form and spacing, and the way is opened out to all who will devote practice to it to form an individual style by imperceptible variations from a fine standard.

Writing is for us the most universal of the Arts, and most craftsmen have to deal with lettering of a more formal kind. It is a commonplace of historical criticism to point out how much the Italian artists owed to the general practice amongst them of goldsmith's work, a craft which required accuracy and delicacy of hand. We cannot go back to that, but we do need a basis of training in a demonstrably useful art, and I doubt if any is so

generally fitted for the purpose of educating the hand, the eye, and the mind as this one of WRITING.

W. R. LETHABY. *October 1906.*

Author's Preface by Edward Johnston

WRITING

The arts of WRITING, ILLUMINATING, & LETTERING offer a wide field for the ingenious and careful craftsman and open the way to a number of delightful occupations. Beyond their many uses—some of which are referred to below—they have a very great educational value. This has long been recognized in the teaching of elementary design, and the practice of designing Alphabets and Inscriptions is now common in most Schools of Art. Much would be gained by substituting, generally WRITING for designing, because because *writing* being the medium by which nearly all our letters have been evolved from the Roman Capital, the use of the pen—essentially a letter-making tool—gives a practical insight into the construction of letters attainable in no other way. The most important use of letters is in the making of books, and the foundations of typography and book decoration may be mastered—*as they were laid*—by the planning, writing, and illuminating of MSS. in book form. Of this a modern printer says:

"In the making of the Written Book, ... the adjustment of letter to letter, of word to word, of picture to text and of text to picture, and of the whole to the subject matter and to the page, admits of great nicety and perfection. The type is fluid, and the letters and words, picture, text, and page are conceived of as one and are all executed by one hand, or by several hands all working together without intermediation on one identical page and with a view to one identical effect. In the Printed Book this adjustment is more difficult. . . . . Yet in the making of the printed book, as in the making of the written book, this adjustment is essential, and should be specially borne in mind, and Calligraphy and immediate decoration by hand and the unity which should be inseparably associated therewith would serve as an admirable discipline to that end."

And though calligraphy is a means to many ends, a fine MS. has a beauty of its own that—if two arts may be compared—surpasses that of the finest printing. This in itself would justify the transcribing and preservation of much good literature in this beautiful form (besides the preparation of "Illuminated Addresses," Service Books, Heraldic and other MSS.) and make the practice of formal writing desirable. And furthermore as the old-fashioned notion *that a legible hand is a mark of bad breeding* dies out, it may be that our current handwriting will take legibility and beauty from

such practice. And even the strict utilitarian could not fail to value the benefits that might some day come to men, if children learnt to appreciate beauty of form in their letters and in their writing the beauty of carefulness.

ILLUMINATING

Of the practice of ILLUMINATING—properly associated with writing—it may be observed that, among various ways of acquiring *a knowledge of the elements of design & decoration* it is one of the most simple and complete. Moreover, a fine illumination or miniature has a beauty of its own that may surpass the finest printed book-decoration. And pictures in books may be as desirable as pictures on the wall—even though like the beautiful household gods of the Japanese they are kept in safe hiding and displayed only now and then.

LETTERING

Magnificent as are the dreams of a fine Decoration based on lettering, the innumerable practical applications of LETTERING itself make the study of *Letter-Craft* not only desirable but imperative. And perhaps I may here be permitted to quote from *The Athenæum* of Feb. 3, 1906, which says of "the new school of scribes and designers of inscriptions"

"These have attacked the problem of applied design in one of its simplest and most universal applications, and they have already done a great deal to establish a standard by which we shall be bound to revise all printed and written lettering. If once the principles they have established could gain currency, what a load of ugliness would be lifted from modern civilization! If once the names of streets and houses, and, let us hope, even the announcements of advertisers, were executed in beautifully designed and well-spaced letters, the eye would become so accustomed to good proportion in these simple and obvious things that it would insist on a similar gratification in more complex and difficult matters."

Yet *Ordinary Writing* and even scribbling has had, and still might have, a good influence on the art of the Letter maker, and at least the common use of pen, ink, & paper makes it a simple matter for any one to essay a formal or 'book' hand. A broad nib cut to give clean thick and thin strokes (without appreciable variation of pressure) will teach any one who cares to learn, very clearly and certainly. And though much practice goes to the making of a perfect MS., it is easier than people suppose to make really beautiful things by taking a little pains. As "copy book" hands simple, primitive pen-forms—such as the Uncial & Half-Uncial afford the best training and permit the cultivation of the freedom which is essential in writing: they prepare the way for the mastery of the most practical characters—the ROMAN CAPITAL, roman small-letter, & *Italic*—and the ultimate development of a lively and personal penmanship.

MODERN DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING & ILLUMINATING

Developing, or rather *re*-developing, an art involves *the tracing in one's own experience of a process resembling its past development*. And it is by such a course that we, who wish to revive Writing & Illuminating, may *renew* them, evolving new methods and traditions for ourselves, till at length we attain a modern and beautiful technique. And if we would be more than amateurs, we must study and practise *the making of beautiful THINGS* and thereby gain experience of Tools, Materials, and Methods. For it is certain that we must teach ourselves how to make beautiful things, and must have some notion of the aim and bent of our work, *of what we seek and what we do*.

Early illuminated MSS. and printed books with woodcuts (or good facsimiles) may be studied with advantage by the would-be Illuminator, and he should if possible learn to draw from hedgerows and from country gardens. In his practice he should begin as a scribe making MS. books and then decorating them with simple pen & colour work. We may pass most naturally from writing to the decoration of writing, by the making and placing of *initial letters*. For in seeking first a fine *effectiveness* we may put readableness before "looks" and, generally, make a text to read smoothly, broken only by its natural division into paragraphs, chapters, and the like. But these divisions, suggesting that a pause in reading is desirable, suggest also that a mark is required—as in music—indicating the "rest": this a large capital does most effectively.

A technical division of illumination into *Colour-work*, *Pen-work*, and *Draughtsmanship* is convenient. Though these are properly combined in practice, it is suggested that, at first, it will be helpful to think of their effects as distinct so that we may attain quite definitely some mastery of pure, bright, colours & simple colour effects, of pen flourishing and ornament, and of drawing—whether plain or coloured, that will go decoratively with writing or printing. This distinction makes it easier to devise definite schemes of illumination that will be within our power to carry out at any stage of our development. And while the penman inevitably gains some power of pen decoration it is well for him as an illuminator to practise in bright colours and gold; for illumination may be as brilliant and splendid in its own way as stained glass, enamels, and jewellery are in theirs.[1] At first, at any rate, hues that have the least suspicion of being dull or weak are to be avoided as though they were plainly "muddy" or "washed-out." The more definite we make our work the more definitely will our materials instruct us; and such service must precede mastery.

MODERN DEVELOPMENT OF LETTERING

Referring again to good LETTERING: the second part of this book deals with some of its *Qualities*, *Forms*—the Roman Capitals & their important pen-derivatives—and *Uses*. It is written largely from the penman's point of view,[2] but a chapter on inscriptions in stone has been added and various types and modes of letter making are discussed. The essential qualities of Lettering are *legibility, beauty, and character*, and these are to be found in numberless inscriptions and writings of the last two thousand years. But since the traditions of the early scribes and printers and carvers have decayed, we have become so used to inferior forms and arrangements that we hardly realize how poor the bulk of modern lettering really is. In the recent "revival" of printing and book decoration, many attempts have been made to design fine alphabets and beautiful books—in a number of cases with notable success. But the study of Palæography and Typography has hitherto been confined to a few specialists, and these attempts to make "" books often shew a vagueness of intention, which weakens their interest and an ignorance of *Letter-craft* which makes the poorest, ordinary printing seem pleasant by comparison. The development of Letters was a purely natural process in the course of which distinct and characteristic types were evolved and some knowledge of how these came into being will help us in understanding their anatomy and distinguishing good and bad forms. A comparatively little study of old manuscripts and inscriptions will make clear much of the beauty and method of the early work. And we may accustom ourselves to good lettering by carefully studying such examples as we can find, and acquire a practical knowledge of it by copying from them with a pen or chisel or other letter-making tool. A conscientious endeavour to make our lettering readable, and models[3] and methods chosen to that end, will keep our work straight: and after all the problem before us is fairly simple—*To make good letters and to arrange them well.* To make good letters is not necessarily to "design" them—they have been designed long ago—but it is to take the best letters we can find, and to acquire them *and make them our own*. To arrange letters well requires no great art, but it requires a practical knowledge of letter-forms and of the rational methods of grouping these forms to suit every circumstance.

THE SCOPE OF THIS HANDBOOK

Generally this book has been planned as a sort of "guide" to models and methods for Letter-craftsmen and Students—more particularly for those who cannot see the actual processes of Writing, Illuminating, &c. carried out, and who may not have access to collections of MSS. Much of, if not all, the explanation is of the most obvious, but that, I hope, gives it more nearly the value of a practical demonstration. In describing methods and processes I have generally used the present tense—saying that they "*are*—": this is to be taken as meaning that they *are* so in early MSS. and

inscriptions, and in the practice of the modern school of scribes who found their work on them.

Regarding the copying of early work it is contended that to revive an art one must begin at the beginning, and that, in an honest attempt to achieve a simple end, one may lawfully follow a method[4] without imitating a style. We have an excellent precedent in the Italian scribes who went back 300 years for a model and gave us the Roman small-letter as a result. The beginners attitude is largely, and necessarily, imitative, and at this time we should have much to hope from a school of Artist-Beginners who would make good construction the only novelty in their work.

We have almost as much—or as *little*—to be afraid of in Originality as in imitation, and our best attitude towards this problem is that of the Irishman with a difficulty—"to look it boldly in the face and pass on"—*making an honest attempt to achieve a simple end*. Perhaps we trouble too much about what we "ought to do" & "do": it is of greater moment *to know what we are doing & trying to do*. In so far as tradition fails to bound or guide us we must think for ourselves and in practice make methods and rules for ourselves: endeavouring that our work should *be effective* rather than have "a fine effect"—or *be*, rather than appear, good—and following our craft rather than making it follow us. For all things—materials, tools, methods—are waiting to serve us and we have only to find the "spell" that will set the whole universe a-making for us.

Endeavouring to attain this freedom we may make Rules and Methods serve us, knowing that Rules are only *Guides* and that Methods are suggested by the work itself: from first to last our necessary equipment consists in good models, good tools, & a good will. Within the limits of our craft we cannot have too much freedom; for too much fitting & planning makes the work lifeless, and it is conceivable that in the finest work the Rules are concealed, and that, for example, a MS. might be most beautiful without ruled lines and methodical arrangement.

But the more clearly we realize our limitations the more practical our work. And it is rather as a stimulus to definite thought—not as an embodiment of hard and fast rules—that various methodical plans & tables of comparison & analysis are given in this book. It is well to recognize at once, the fact that mere taking to pieces, or analysing, followed by "putting together," is only a means of becoming acquainted with the mechanism of construction, and will not reproduce the original beauty of a thing: it is an education for work, but all work which is honest and straightforward has a beauty and freshness of its own.

The commercial prospects of the student of Writing & Illuminating—or, indeed, of any Art or Craft—are somewhat problematical, depending largely on his efficiency & opportunities. There is a fairly steady demand

for Illuminated Addresses; but the independent craftsman would have to establish himself by *useful* practice, and by seizing opportunities, and by doing his work well. Only an attempt to do practical work will raise practical problems, and therefore *useful practice is the making of real or definite things*. In the special conditions attaching to work which the craftsman is commissioned to do for another person, there is a great advantage. And the beginner by setting himself specific tasks (for example: making a MS. book for a specific purpose should give reality to his work.

Although the demand for good work is at present limited, the production of good work will inevitably create a demand; and, finally, the value of Quality is always recognized—sooner or later, but inevitably—and whatever "practical" reasons we may hear urged in favour of *Quantity*, the value of Quality is gaining recognition every day in commerce and even in art, and there or here, sooner or later we shall know that *we can afford the best*.

EDWARD JOHNSTON.

October 1906.

My thanks are due to Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, to Mr. Emery Walker, and to Mr. George Allen for quotations: to Mr. Graily Hewitt, to Mr. Douglas Cockerell, to Mr. A. E. R. Gill, to Mr. C. M. Firth, and to Mr. G. Loumyer, for special contributions on gilding, binding, and inscription-cutting: to Mr. S. C. Cockerell for several of the plates: to Mr. W. H. Cowlishaw, to the Rev. Dr. T. K. Abbott, to Dr. F. S. Kenyon of the New Palæographical Society, to the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Hastings, to the Secretary of the Board of Education, S. Kensington, to Mr. H. Yates-Thompson, to Mr. G. H. Powell, and to others, for permission to reproduce photographs, &c.: and to Mr. Noel Rooke and G. J. H. for assistance with the illustrations and many other matters: I should like, moreover, to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. W. R. Lethaby and Mr. S. C. Cockerell for encouragement and advice in years past.

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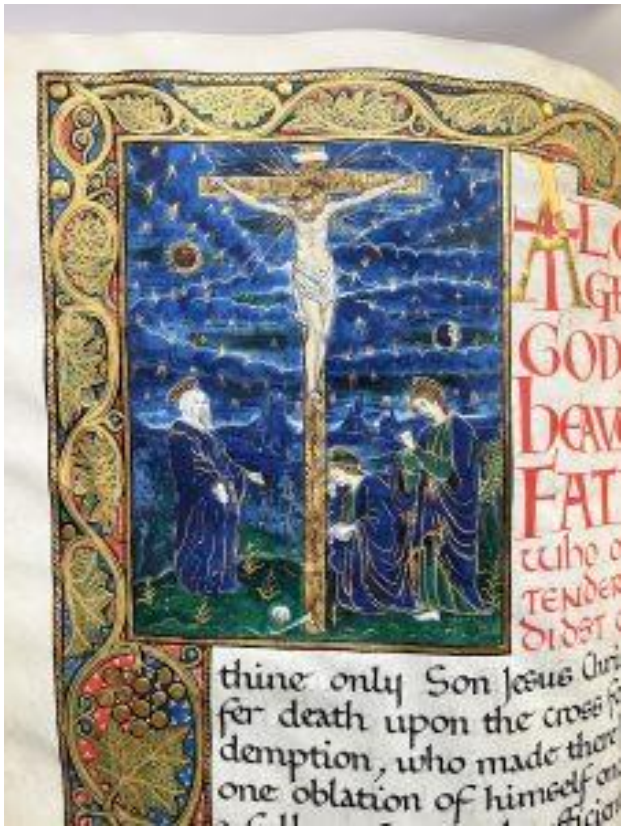
4. A Calligraphic Masterpiece

This chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of Patricia Lovett, at www.patricialovett.com. It describes just one book as an example of Edward Johnston's outstanding calligraphic work.

Sometimes the most chance encounters bring rich rewards! At a recent Christopher de Hamel lecture at the British Library, I overheard the words 'Edward Johnston', and my ears pricked up. It turned out that a church on the south coast had an illuminated book of the Communion Service written by the great calligrapher in 1902.

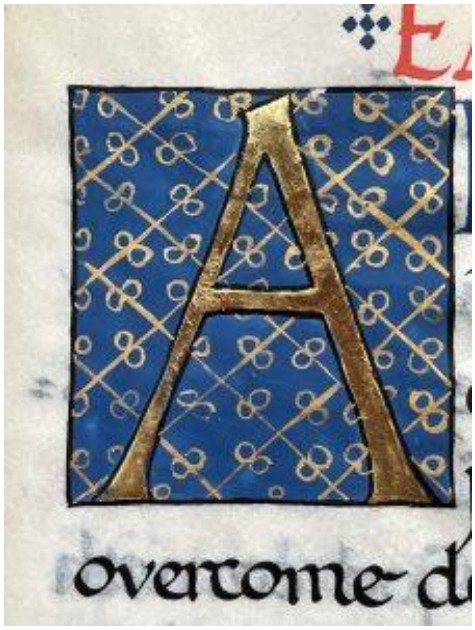
The photos I was shown looked amazing and I arranged to go and see the book as soon as I could. It truly was wonderful and such a thrill to see page after page of Edward Johnston's writing and illumination.



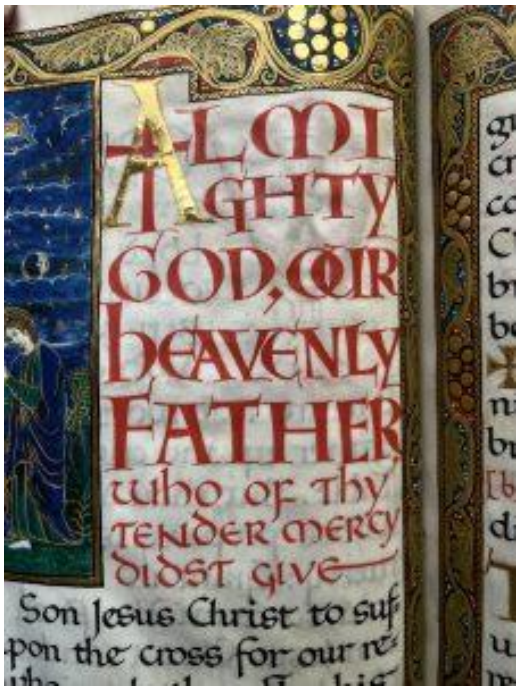
The note at the back (see below) explained the production of the book and that the hands and faces in this crucifixion scene were painted by ‘my friend E G Treglown of Birmingham’. Note the border decoration of a waving pattern of vine stems and leaves with bunches of grapes, reflecting John 15 ‘I am the vine: you are the branches’. The gold here is shell gold – gold powder in gum Arabic base – with raised gold leaf grapes.

A paragraph in Priscilla Johnston's book about her father notes that ' G B Gabb, a surgeon … accordingly commissioned Johnston to write out the Communion Service. The terms of the agreement were that he was to 'make the most gorgeous book within his power' and ask for money whenever he wanted it'. What a commission!

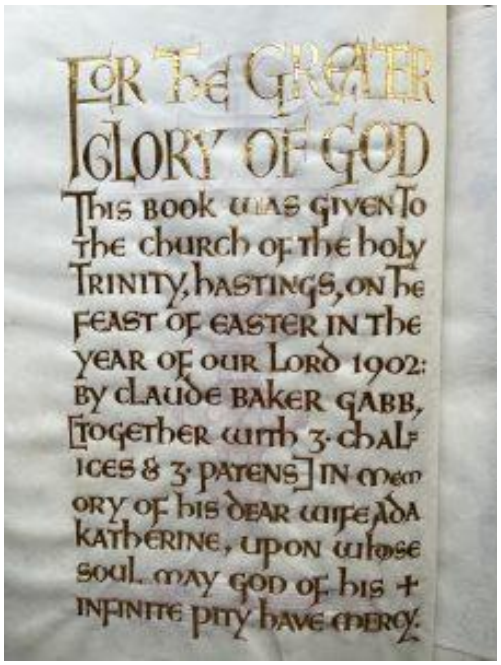
The lavish use of gold leaf here and above, (where shell gold as well has been used in the border,) are certainly testament to the gorgeous nature of the book! Johnston used 'Reeve's raising agent' as gesso. I haven't been able to find out anything about this raising agent and would be grateful if anyone reading this can shed any light on it. It is a much deeper red than the pink colour made by the addition of Armenian bole to gesso today.



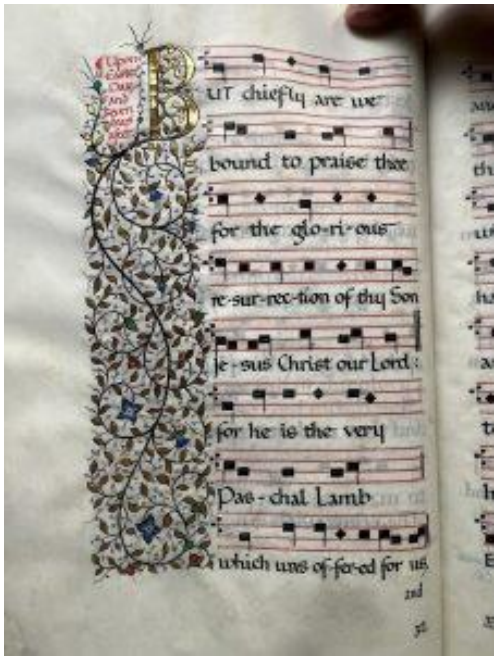
The decorated initials are particularly fine as can be seen here. A raised gold leaf initial A with first a background of ultramarine and shell gold applied in straight lines with a ruler, with circles along the lines on the left, and then a similarly raised gold A with an ultramarine background and a swirling foliage pattern in green and red with the addition of white dots.



As would be expected of Johnston the initial letters are particularly fine as here, although the red gold cross behind the raised gold letter A may not be a complete success, but all is forgiven by the surety of the strokes in the versals!



This glorious page of raised gold letters absolutely shone in the light and would lift anyone's heart and spirit. It really is a tour-de-force.

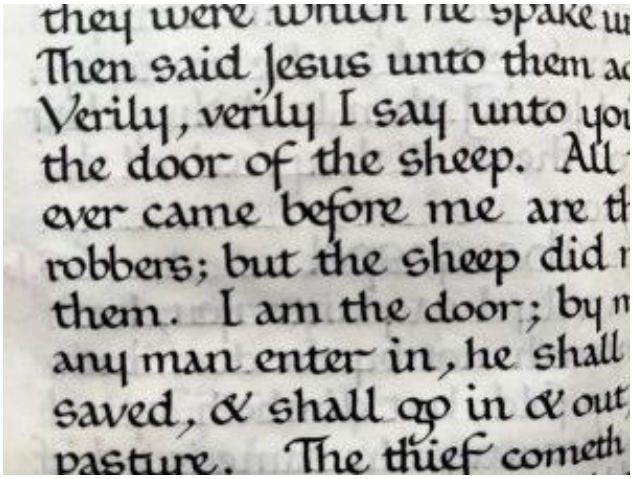


The book also contains music for the service as here with an impressive decorated border of raised gold leaves and blue cranesbill. The main wavy line going through the image is drawn with a firmness of the master. I think Johnston would particularly have enjoyed creating the squiggly fine black lines of decoration.

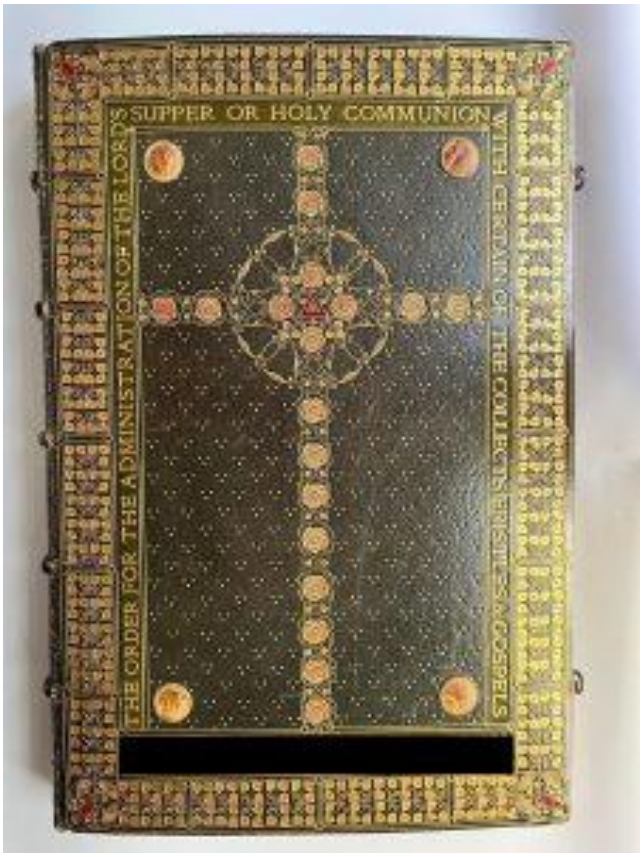
That same firmness of line is shown here in this red vermilion decorated

chalice; many would envy that sureness of stroke. Interestingly, it looks in places that Johnston may have used a broad edge calligraphy nib for some of the strokes. Note how the furthest left curved line to the base gradually changes from a thicker line to thinner, and also the thin and thicks on the two circles in the oval shape halfway up.

The lettering, as Johnston explains in the note at the back, is based on tenth-century manuscripts. We know that he was introduced to these by Sir Sydney Cockerell, particularly the Ramsey Psalter (BL Harley 2904) which Johnston studied and then developed into his Foundational Hand. The tail of the letter g extending to the right is very much one found in the Psalter. The tenth-century Benedictional of St Æthelwold, written at about the same time and probably at the same location, has a similar style of writing, but here the tail of this letter is dealt with more successfully. Now, dare I say this, *pace* calligraphers, but Johnston does need to work more on his letters s where almost invariably the top bowl is larger than the bottom (it should be the other way round to prevent the letter looking top heavy).

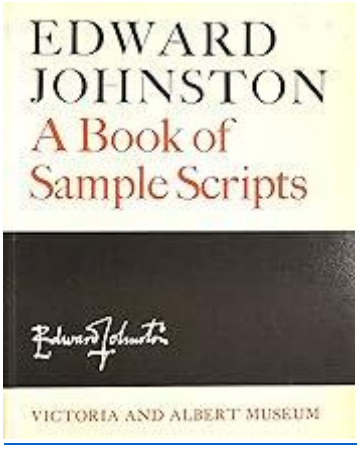

they were which he spake u
Then said Jesus unto them a
Verily, verily I say unto yo
the door of the sheep. All
ever came before me are th
robbers; but the sheep did
them. I am the door; by m
any man enter in, he shall
saved, & shall go in & out
pasture. The thief cometh

And traditional to the period of study, Johnston used a blind point to rule the lines, where the furrow on one side of the page created a raised line on the other. On the left-hand image there is a faint black baseline where some of the ink on the opposite page has rubbed off on the raised skin.



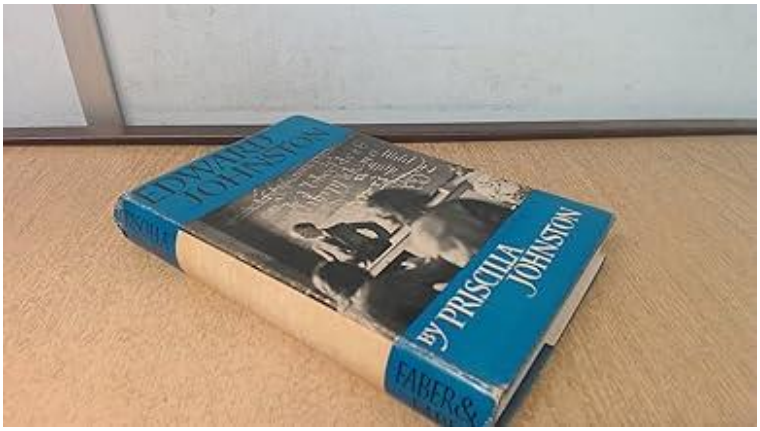
The gold tooled cover is just magnificent – produced by Douglas Cockerell, probably the most famous bookbinder of his time, and brother of Sydney.

5. Books by and about Edward Johnston

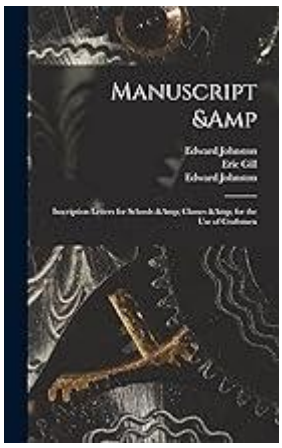


Edward Johnston's Book of Sample Scripts by Victoria and Albert Museum | 1 Dec 1966

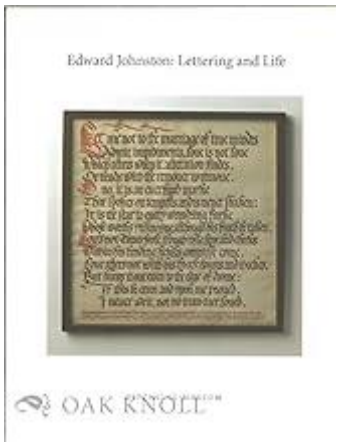
Writing & Illuminating & Lettering: The Artistic Crafts Series of Technical Handbooks by Edward Johnston and William Skeen | 4 Nov 2008



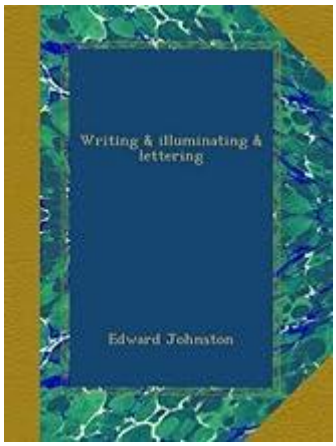
Edward Johnston by Priscilla JOHNSTON and With B&W illus. | 1 Jan 1959



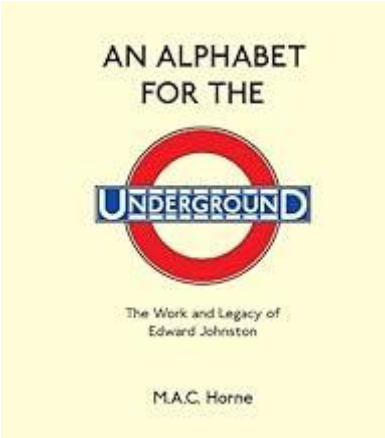
Manuscript & Inscription Letters for Schools & Classes & for the Use of Craftsmen by Edward 1872-1944 Johnston, Eric 1882-1940 Gill, et al. | 9 Sept 2021



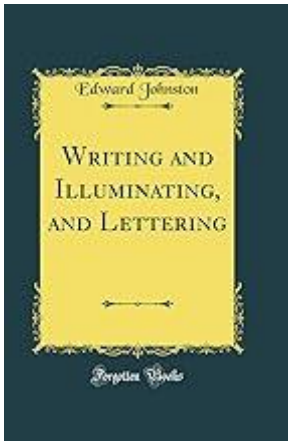
EDWARD JOHNSTON: LETTERING AND LIFE.by Ewan. Clayton | 1 Jan 2007



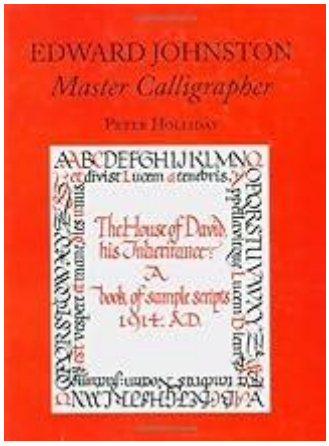
Writing & illuminating & lettering by Edward Johnston | 31 Aug 2012



An Alphabet for the Underground: The Work and Legacy of Edward Johnston by M.A.C. Horne | 28 Oct 2022



Writing Illuminating,& Lettering (Classic Reprint) by Edward Johnston | 22 Jul 2016



Edward Johnston: Master Calligrapher by Peter Holliday | 30 Sept 2007
