

CALLIGRAPHY
MAGAZINE

Studies

By David Comberg

From the calligraphy of a peacock feather to the scribbling of a college roommate, a Philadelphia student-workshop focuses on letterforms and digital type.

Philadelphia. Nine a.m. Sixth-floor design studio. Type designers Matthew Carter, Tobias Frere-Jones, and Cyrus Highsmith are assembled on one side of a long table. They are poised to review proposals from 18 junior graphic-design students at The University of the Arts (formerly Philadelphia College of Arts). The outcome of the review will provide a roadmap for each student on how to proceed. Their assignment is to design as much of a complete typeface as they can in the next three days.

Jene Conrad, the first student to present, proposes a lower-case sans-serif face that he began in a type design elective earlier in the semester. Impressed with the advanced state of the work, offered as hand-drawn forms copied onto large sheets, the visiting critics encourage him to go forward and complete the capitals, if possible.

Student Alla Lapin's proposal is based on calligraphic letters written with a peacock feather that she has converted into a writing instrument. While the reviewers express concern about the thin and irregular letters, Highsmith nonetheless likes them and says she should proceed, balancing the regularity necessary for a typeface with the irregular beauty of the original marks she has presented.

Sean Nitchmann presents a small scribbled note from his roommate as the inspiration for a new script font. After a few minutes of analysis and appreciation of the idiosyncrasies of the letterforms in the note, the panel approves his plan—cautiously.

Intensive workshops in the university's graphic-design program have been held for the past 25 years, with visiting designers including Katherine and Michael McCoy (the first workshop, 1977), Wolfgang Weingart (1989, 2001), April Greiman (1998), Lucille Tenazas (2002), Richard Eckersley (2002), and most recently, Scott Stowell. The workshops expose students to a wide variety of philosophies and subject matter, and the selections of visiting designers complement the distinctly Swiss-mod-

ernist methodology and pedigree of the faculty, nearly half of whom studied in Basel. Among other areas of emphasis, the program focuses on drawing, hand-drawn lettering, formal writing, and digital type design, enabling students to develop their capacities in these forms to professional standards.

But this workshop, held in April 2003, is the first devoted entirely to designing a typeface, and the first with three visiting designers. (A fourth designer, Jonathan Hoefler, a partner with Frere-Jones at Hoefler & Frere-Jones Typography, joined the group for the critique on the final day.) All the students have

taken at least one required letterform design course prior to the workshop, but few have extended that study so far as to produce a digital typeface. One of the first hurdles is developing proficiency in Fontographer, the software they will use to build their font.

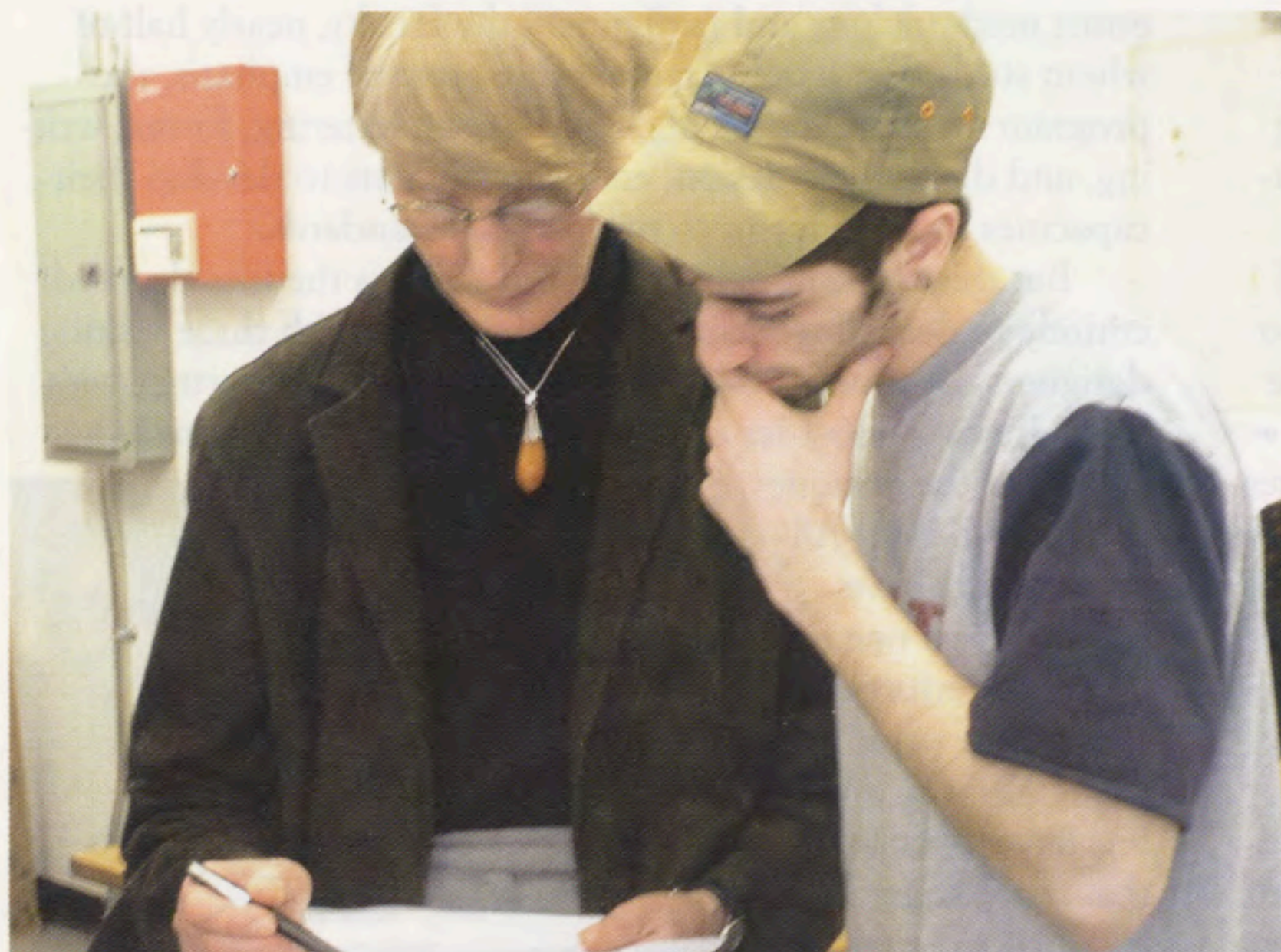
By the end of Day One, nearly all the students have digitized their drawings and are forming initial sets of control characters in Fontographer—lowercase *n*, *o*, *p*; capital *H*, *O*, *D*—to begin the building process. After these are drawn and tested for compatibility with each other, they become the yardstick for every subsequent character.

The large computer lab has become quiet, and Frere-Jones, who attended Rhode Island School of Design and graduated in 1992, explains his views on the purpose of the workshop. "The objective is to inform designers," he says. "They should develop an appreciation for typefaces through the process of designing them and should be able to recognize things about letters and



Above: Type designers (left to right) Cyrus Highsmith, Matthew Carter, and Tobias Frere-Jones review a student design proposal.

“The computer enables you to make things quickly, but the important issues in type design remain the same as those faced by the stonecutter and sign painter.”



Left: Inge Druckrey, who organized the workshop, consults with one of the students.



typefaces that they wouldn't by just choosing type off the shelf. Actually, this is helping them to become type snobs. Over the course of three days, they should be able to begin to discriminate between good and bad letterforms and letterspacing. The computer enables you to make things quickly and with what appears to be a high degree of finish, but the important issues in type design remain the same as those faced by the stonecutter and sign painter—some designs, and designers, are better than others.”

Carter, the senior critic and a principal of Carter & Cone Type in Cambridge, Massachusetts, agrees. “The objective of the workshop is not to create type designers,” he says. “In all my years of doing this at Yale, we've never produced a type designer. The purpose is to create better graphic designers.”

Two students interrupt the conversation with questions about inter-letter spacing and the possible forms of the descender on a lowercase *g*.

Another student who has settled on an initial set of test characters is showing them to Highsmith, a senior designer at Boston's Font Bureau in Boston. Highsmith explains his design process and some ideas on spacing. “I start with a lowercase *n* or *b* and set a comfortable rhythm,” he says, looking over the laser print before him. “It's like tuning a guitar—adjusting the

sharps and flats until you zoom in on the right harmonic.” When talking with other students, he asks them whether they envision their typeface being used as a text or display face. He listens carefully to the answers and suggests they set some test parameters for inter-character spacing. “You start somewhere and go back and fine-tune.” The spacing is as important as the letterforms, Carter adds, advising the students with one of his many aphorisms: “One has to assume that an alphabet must work for words not yet invented—it's all about the relationships. What we're looking for is a beautiful group of letters, not a group of beautiful letters.”

By Day Two, nearly everyone is printing from Fontographer, and a steady stream of students is waiting to have their font designs reviewed. As Carter marks up one of the prints, he reflects for a moment on his own career, which has spanned at least three technologies—metal, photocomposition, and digital. “The revolution was the printer, not the computer,” he says. “The laser printer enabled a designer to see immediately what the letters looked like, alone and in combination with others.”

Questions of form and space dominate the issues the students face as they begin to settle on digital versions of their original concepts. There is a slightly tense mood in the room as Carter announces to the group that they've got to move quickly

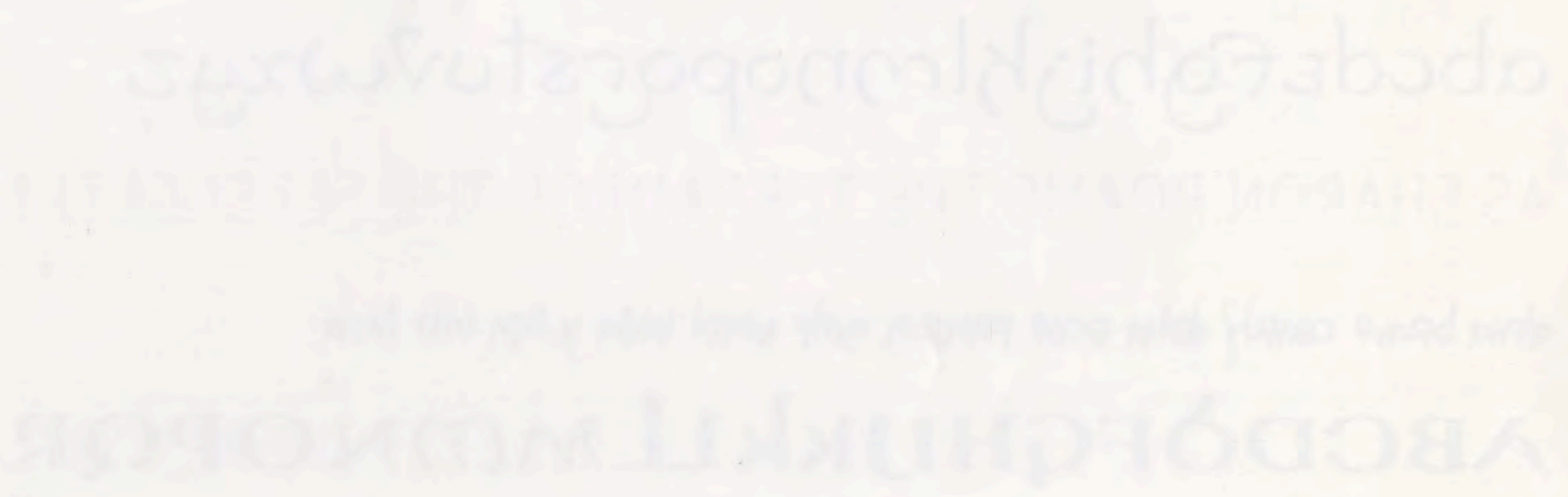
but deliberately to be ready for the critique on Day Three. Frere-Jones adds that he needs to see more proofs of concepts. "Before long," he says, "you're going to have a lot of things to manage—weights, side bearings, alignments, curves. Work on small groups of letters to prove that your concept will hold up—we need to see more studies like *NN, BN, ON, BO, OO*—a story of square and round things." Carter adds to this requirement: "We need to see enough DNA in these to judge how the alphabet might evolve." Highsmith advises the students to make decisions on what looks right, not what is supposed to be right. Carter again gets the final word: "The eye must overrule what the numbers say." He then repeats the contract the students agreed to the day before: "In the critique tomorrow, you'll pin up your original sample, a full set of all your designs, and a sample setting in the form of a poster or personal sample. We want to leave you on Friday with enough information to complete the font on your own."

The final critique begins just after noon on Day Three. A large studio is crowded with students, faculty, and the visiting critics, including Jonathan Hoefler. The walls are covered with each student's initial plans for his or her typeface, laser-printed

pages illustrating the design development in multiple sizes and arrangements, and a final application of the new design. The designs include License, Lauren Cannizzaro's adaptation of the lettering on Pennsylvania license plates; Angela Bergdoll's sci-fi, retro display font, Planet; Carrie Paul's East/West hybrid, Oriental; and Hilary Sedgwick's sensual calligraphic font, Madrassa.

Jene Conrad's Jene typeface receives high praise despite his own admission of its problems. "I know there are still some issues with the strokes," he explains during his presentation. But Hoefler acknowledges the work that went into its development: "It's a nice face. The *G* stroke could be more upright—in the middle of a word, it might create difficulties—but it's a very lively font. The different weights in the *H* and *M* are particularly well done." Carter agrees, saying: "I'm glad you went with the more typographic version rather than the calligraphic. There are a lot of individualistic characters. With a little work, you will have a usable face."

Alla Lapin's Feather, begun in another class as a set of initials drawn with her peacock-feather pen, was also praised despite early doubts about its transformation from handwriting to type. "It came out better than I thought," Carter proclaims. "It has a very



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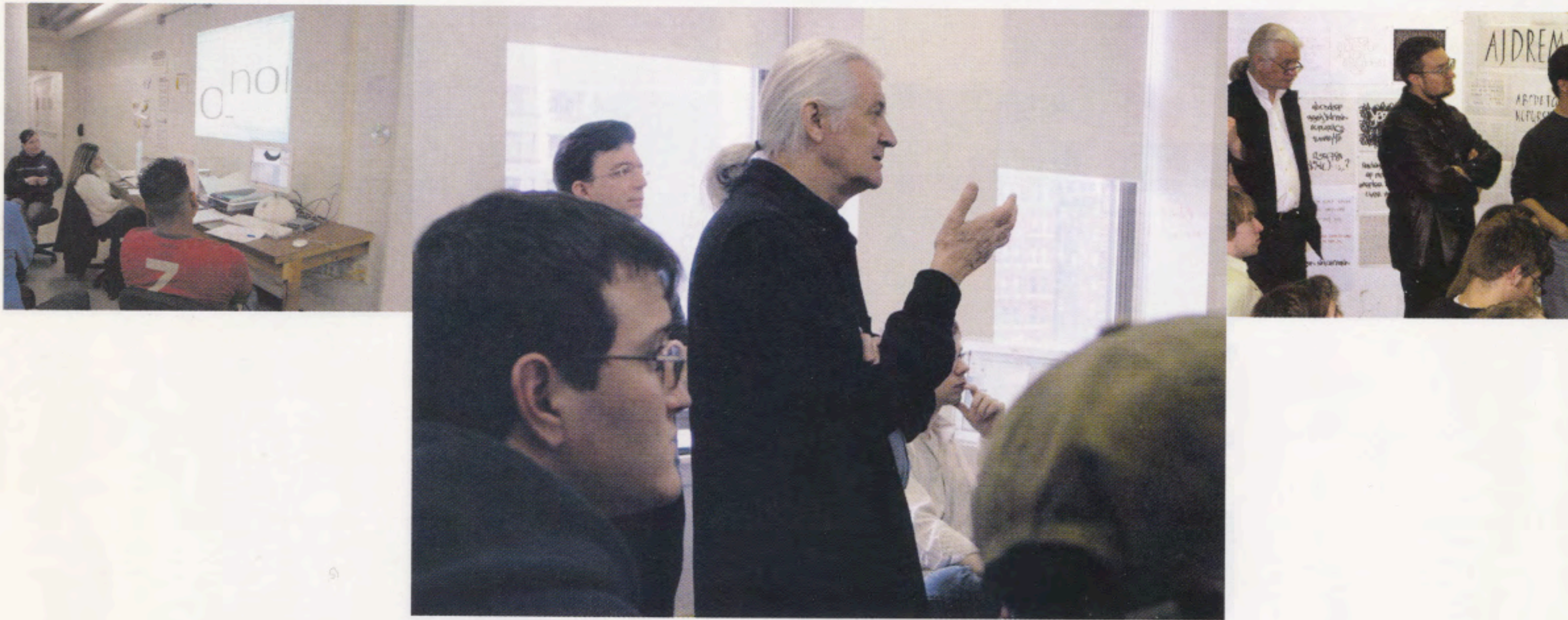
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“What we’re looking for is a beautiful group of letters, not a group of beautiful letters.”



1. Oriental by Carrie Paul.
2. Jene by Jene Conrad.
3. Zimmer Bold by Kyle Zimmermann.
4. License by Lauren Cannizzaro.
5. Remont by Andrew Rementer.
6. Planet by Angela Bergdoll.
7. Madrassa by Hilary Sedgwick.
8. Feather by Alla Lapin.
9. Jean Jacket Marker by Sean Nitchmann.
10. Uncial by Crystal Matinelli.



nice texture and a pleasant feel that it is drizzling downward.”

Sean Nitchmann’s Jean Jacket Marker, inspired by his roommate’s quirky handwriting, prompts a strong reaction from Hoefler: “It’s fantastic. Amazing. It does not reveal itself as a font.” Nitchmann discloses that he tested the design with his roommate: “I left some samples around the apartment and he thought he had written them.” However, Frere-Jones criticizes the *S* as too large. Nitchmann agrees and adds that the *y* is also still a problem. “Continue,” Frere-Jones concludes.

The organizer and coordinator of the three-day type workshop was Inge Druckrey, professor in the graphic-design department of The University of the Arts. Druckrey, whose teaching focuses on letterform design, type design, and design fundamentals, has done extensive research on the influence of lettering artists on modern typography and design. Currently, she is completing a study of lettering designer Anna Simon, a student of British type-master Edward Johnston.

The type workshop exemplified the department’s philosophy of integrating traditional manual skills with digital technologies to create a new digital design craft. Designers who can successfully navigate both paths are deemed more likely to bring to their work the historical context often absent from programs that emphasize a primarily digital curriculum.

In the end, the workshop was not an exercise in the historical and cultural tradition of writing, lettering, and type design. Rather, it offered fresh interpretations of the shapes of roman letters, as well as an introduction to the underlying, consistent form language of any typeface—the DNA, as Carter calls it—the basis for coherent word pictures and pages of text.



David Comberg practices design in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches at The University of the Arts and the University of Pennsylvania. He wishes to thank Inge Druckrey, Peter Bain, and Charles Bigelow for their help in preparing this article. For additional information, visit uarts.edu/gd.