

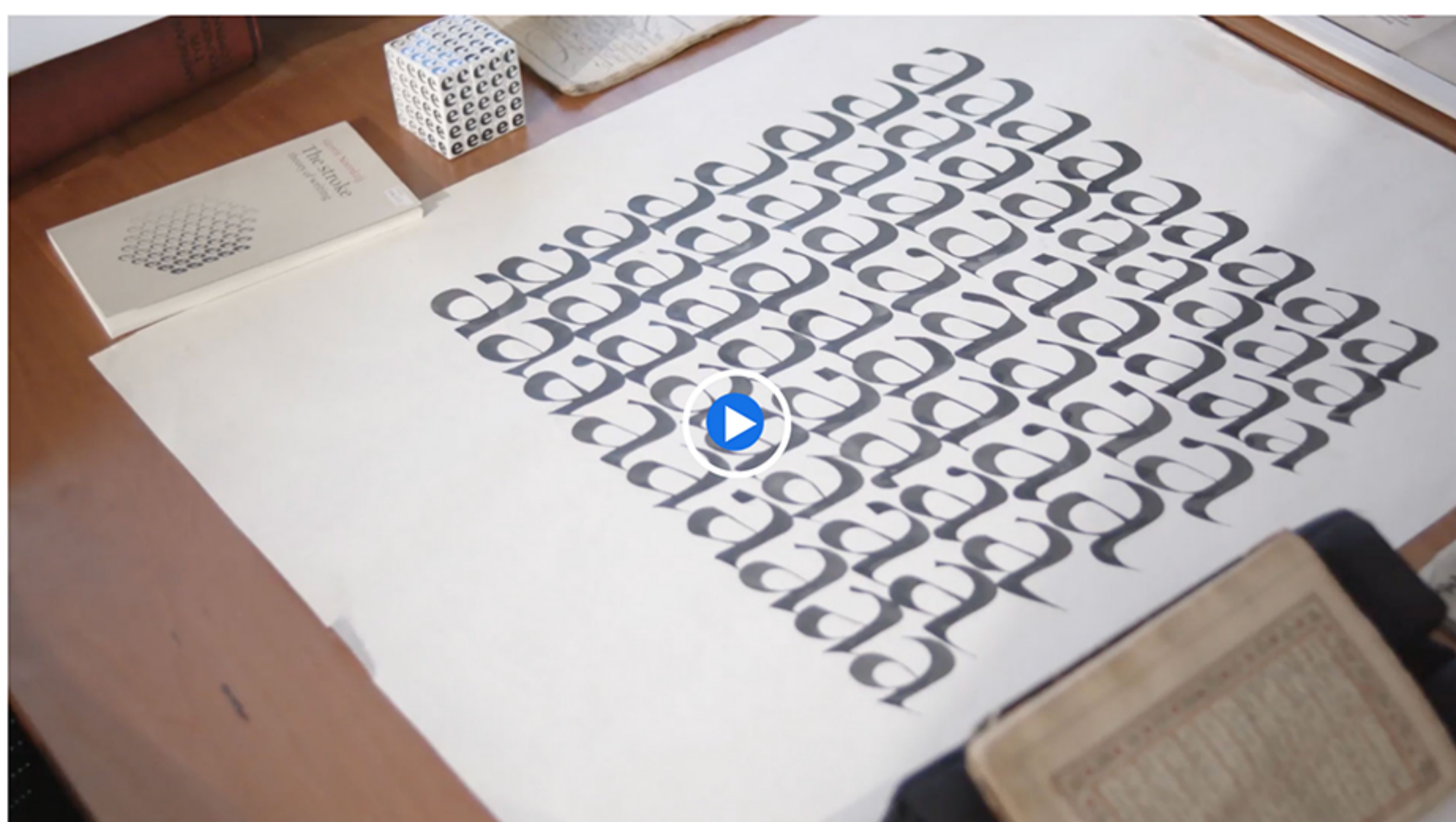
Saving Design

Letterform Archive is a one-of-a-kind institution that is preserving the history of graphic design for us all.

By Terri Stone

In some ways, graphic design has never been more accessible. You only have to type a term into a search engine to get pages of results: wiki entries, Pinterest boards, and so on. But a 1080x1080 JPG can't compare to holding a printed type specimen in your hands, and there's so much missing from the Internet. That's why [Letterform Archive](#) is important.

The Archive is a non-profit, special-collections library in San Francisco. Its employees guide visitors through the thousands of objects. Unlike most other libraries of this kind, you can actually touch the items, even parchment from the 1400s. You can't do that on Google! (For those who can't visit in person, there's a growing [digital collection](#), printed books, and even a few posters, [totes](#), and [scarves](#).)



"Our scope is things with letters on them. We have everything from a cuneiform tablet to seven-by-two-foot movie banners."

The Archive houses everything from books to banners, periodicals to posters. "Our scope is things with letters on them, and that can cover quite a wide gamut," says Stephen Coles, associate curator and editorial director. "There is the factor of space and what's practical to store and to show, but we have everything from a cuneiform tablet all the way up to seven-by-two-foot movie banners." For some examples, you'll find not only the finished piece, but also related process material, such as sketches, iterations, or comps for clients.

"The collection was originally only 15,000 pieces," notes librarian Kate Long. "Now we have more than 50,000 pieces, which as the person who does a lot of the cataloging is overwhelming sometimes, but it's also really exciting that all of these things can be in one place for people to find and explore."



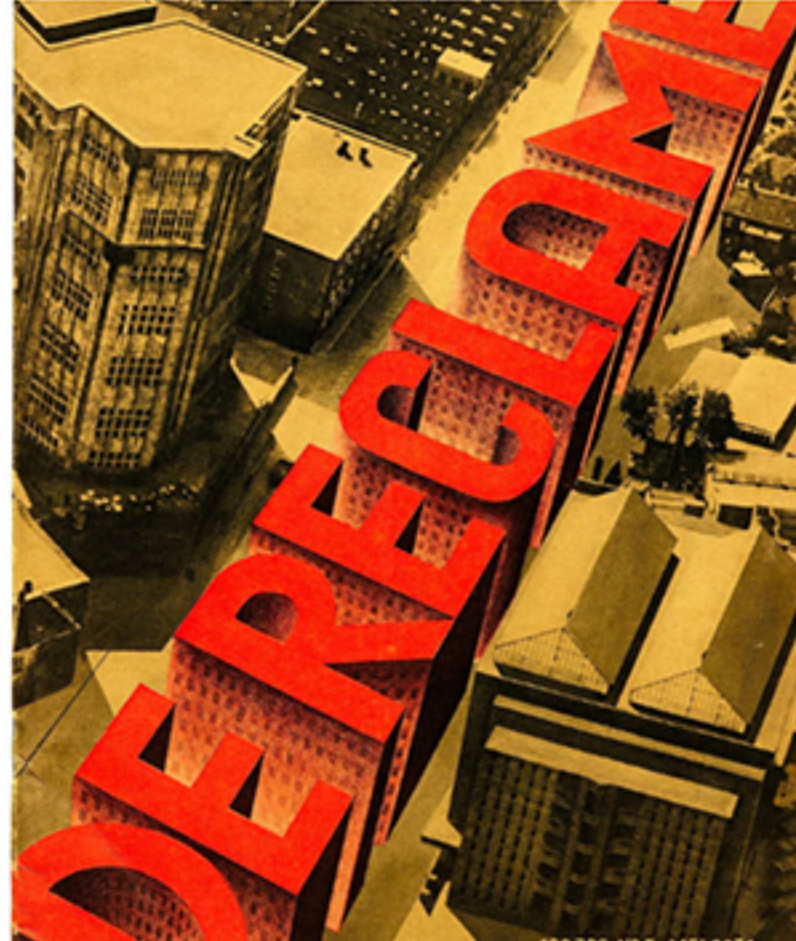
The Letterform archive needs you. [Be Extra Bold](#) and become a member today.



The Archive's collection has grown from 15,000 objects to more than 50,000 and includes work-in-progress material as well as final printed pieces.

Visitors seek out the Archive for various reasons. "Maybe they're working on a branding project," explains associate publisher Lucie Parker. "Maybe they're doing a school assignment. They schedule an appointment, tell us what they're into, and our team figures out what we think would make them happiest."

"We try to take this collection and literally get it in as many hands as possible," adds Johnny Avot-Smith, director of development and operations. "We teach classes, and we give tours where people can actually touch and feel the paper texture on everything from a medieval manuscript to a modern type specimen that was printed a couple days ago."



These three samples from the Archive span decades, nations, and styles.



Looking for a standards manual for Helsinki City Transport? The Archive has you covered.

The small but dedicated staff deeply believe in the Archive's mission. "Written language is all of our heritage," says Parker. "These designed pieces, even though they were made by all kinds of people at all different points in history, belong to all of us as a species. It's important that people be able to come and understand the different ways stories have been told via design over the centuries. We really want to help make the next generation of designers."

Letterform Archive and Adobe will soon join forces to bring the archive to you in the form of a regular column on the Create website. Check back in December for the first installment.