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A LOCAL IDIOM FROM THE NETHERLANDS  
BRUIN CAFÉ LETTERING IN AMSTERDAM

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Collecting vernacular or found lettering is in these days. Take for instance the Thames & Hudson's *Street Style* series or the mexican *Sensacional*. However, this kind of glossy publications mostly suffer from major flaws that make them of little use for serious research: superficial picture editing, ambiguous image crops and shallow accompanying texts, if any.

As a typographer and design historian it looks obvious to me that merely collecting pictures, fascinating as it may be, is not enough. Taken out of their specific context, without any serious attempt to describe & understand these artefacts within their original framework of production and use, such examples are but “graphic souvenirs” for coffee tables.



If you have ever walked through the streets of Amsterdam, you may have noticed on shop windows a rather peculiar style of lettering, which is a typical feature of the city's *bruin cafés*, or “brown coffee shops.” By looking at these examples, I will hopefully be able to illustrate the points made above.

These examples, shown here in random order, were taken throughout Amsterdam. As you can see, a recurring element on many windows is the italic script, often mixed with swash capitals. Sometimes the lettering is accompanied by a simple illustration, but mostly it is purely calligraphic.

These recurring features obviously point to a single hand. Not that all coffee shops windows around Amsterdam were done by the same individual, but this lettering artist must have been responsible for a great number of them, which stand out for the quality of the letterforms. Clues were unmistakable: details such as the construction of key letters (*g, s, f, r, H, B*), the delicate contrast, the typical swashes, the rhythm and flow of the script.

For comparison, let me show you a couple of different styles: in the first example, the style is similar but not

quite the same: an italic cursive is used, but with less flourishes, letters are blacker in colour, display more contrast between thicks and thins, and the construction of some letters –such as *a*, *s*, *f*– is also different. The second example uses a variety of broken script (blackletter) known as *batârde*, with elaborate swashes in a second colour. The first object of investigation is the context of production. Thus my friend Ramiro Espinoza (a former colleague at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague) & I started the stubborn research, which lasted a few months, to track him down by asking at every café apparently painted by him.



De Pijp, a historical district dating from the end of the 19th century, has retained much of its working class flavour as well as community. This is where Leo Beukeboom was born to a catholic family (1943), and still lives as a true Amsterdammer. We were thus able to draw a portrait of this lettering artist, his education, his career, his practice, his references, etc.

Basically self-taught (although he owns a diploma

in layout from a public school, 1961-62), a lettering artist by trade, Leo Beukeboom worked mostly for Heineken from 1967 to 1989. In some 30 years of activity, he has developed a very coherent style of lettering for most of Amsterdam *bruin cafés*. Large breweries in the Netherlands used to sponsor the shop lettering on condition that their mark appeared on the window too, next to the coffee shop's name and telephone number. This trend came to a halt in the late 1980's due to a change in management policies (costs optimization), forcing café owners to pay for themselves to have their windows decorated.

Beukeboom did not only shop windows, but also shop fascias, vans, market place stalls, panels for disparate businesses. And although his most 'personal' style is the italic swash cursive, he used to paint all sorts of letters, from garamondesque roman to various other styles, including sans serif, blackletter, and many more.

His equipment was rather basic: a bike (later a motorbike), a ladder, a small box containing paint, thinner, brushes (pointed and flat, typically with long hairs), and a piece of chalk – the simple tools of the lettering artist. A stubborn

loner, he always refused to take apprentices. He claims his way of running the business was also informal: craftsman and client would talk over a glass of ale, he would rough out some sketches on paper until the client was satisfied; he would then first trace the guidelines (baseline, x-height and caps line) with the chalk and sketch in the letters for layout purposes as well as to check letterspacing, before taking the brush. The letters were usually painted on the outside of the window pane: good quality paint can last for at least ten to fifteen years, whereas on the inside moisture, grease and smoke (especially in cafés and restaurants) attack the paint more quickly. This last detail is interesting to compare with Quebec where, probably because of the harsher climate, the lettering is often done on the inside, which means that the letters have to be drawn in reverse.



Jan van de Velde, swash italic capitals from *Spieghel der Schrijfkonste*, Rotterdam 1605

Sign painting or lettering in general is on the verge of extinction as a trade – not only in the Netherlands – because of technological changes brought about by the advent of the computer and die-cut vinyl letters. Yet, this peculiar lettering style associated with coffee shops constitutes a strong visual presence in Amsterdam’s urban fabric. Moreover, it is based

on a local tradition, that is on the best examples of Dutch mannerist calligraphy, which flourished in the 17th century, known as the country’s *Gouden Eeuw* or Golden Age. One obvious reference is the master calligrapher Jan van de Velde, whose work was widely reproduced in various editions of copper engravings between 1605 and 1622. The connection is not only apparent, but Beukeboom himself is proud to admit the influence of Jan van de Velde and other calligraphers of the same period in the elaboration of his own lettering style.

As a conclusion, vernacular and architectural lettering are typographic artefacts and as such should be approached in a wider perspective. One in which research provides information on their production and use, helps putting them in perspective, establishes links between facts – perhaps anecdotal or micro stories, which nonetheless constitute the building blocks of the larger canvas that is history, which should aim at describing & making sense of these letterforms.