

## SEEN NOT HEARD: COMPOSITION, ICONICITY, AND THE CLASSIFIER SYSTEMS OF LOGOSYLLABIC SCRIPTS

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Aspects of visual code — features that writing can impart beyond the spoken word — were the subject of the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Oriental Institute Symposium, *Seen Not Heard: Composition, Iconicity, and the Classifier Systems of Logosyllabic Scripts*, March 1–2, 2017, organized by Ilona Zsolnay, 2016–2018 Oriental Institute Postdoctoral Fellow. Thanks to the generous funding of Arthur and Lee Herbst, this symposium enabled scholars from the fields of Egyptology, Sinology, Hittitology, and Mesoamerican, Cuneiform, and Sign Language studies to examine the visual and even tangible qualities of writing. Traditionally, writing — a graphic form of communication — has been approached as a vehicle for representing, and therefore conveying, the spoken word, an oral and aura form of communication. Even studies of pictographic, hieroglyphic, and logographic scripts — scripts that, at least initially, used image-based systems — have concentrated on the means and extent to which they signify units of sound (are glotographic), be these phonological units, entire objects, or grammatical infixes, and vocally denote grammatical structures. For *Seen Not Heard*, presenters' interrogations took innovative trajectories, incorporating methodologies more common to linguistics and semiotics, communication studies, art-historical analysis, as well as more traditional philology.

*Seen Not Heard* took place in Breasted Hall over a two-day period, with the bulk of the presentations given on the first day, and was organized into four broad topics: text as experiential; the iconicity, indexicality, and semantics of logographic signs and their assignments; classifiers; and the use of organization in indicating intent. Together, the



*Figure 1. Seen Not Heard presenters (photo credit: Bryce Lowry)*

*From the top (right to left): Jerry Cooper, Andréas Stauder, Guolong Lai, Zev Handel, Claudia Brittenham, David Schloen; Holly Pittman, Orly Goldwasser, Piotr Michalowski, Christopher Woods; Ilona Zsolnay, Elisabeth Rieken, Haicheng Wang, and Josh Roberson*

presentations demonstrated that to approach writing as a form of communication which is not simply a handmaiden to speech is to reveal its multidimensional aspects. Writing can be seen and touched; it can allure, envelop, and distance. Because of its pictoriality, writing can be used to give silent cues or reveal inaudible, assumed, or incongruous settings. Thus, the results of Seen Not Heard were riveting and enlightening and decidedly demonstrated that accounting for the materiality and visual nature of writing is as important for comprehending the messages and the societies that created and received them as are the linguistic texts borne through them.

The proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Oriental Institute Postdoctoral Symposium is set to be published by early 2019. For a more detailed discussion of the conference, see I. Zsolnay, "Seen Not Heard: Composition, Iconicity, and the Classifier Systems of Logosyllabic Scripts," *News & Notes* 234, Summer, pp. 10–13 (<https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/news-notes-quarterly-newsletter>).

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