Humans have an urge, even a compulsion, to mark meaning through visible graphs. These signs range from coats of arms to emojis, potter’s marks to gang signs, and Paleolithic graphs to ISOTYPE or other cross-linguistic vehicles for communicating ideas. All can project meaning directly, without necessary recourse to language. For all their importance, however, there is little of a comparative nature to probe their use, meaning, makers, setting, and variance, or what they share as an expressive potential of all humans. In this conference, specialists in diverse scriptural and semiological systems explore semasiography, the phenomenon of non-linguistic forms of graphic communication organized into patterned, often codified ways. Talks address the techniques and systems employed in such mark-making, the media and modes of representation, and the uses and limitations of symbols and graphemes. The overall objective is to underscore the vitality of such visible signs at all times and periods, and to delight in their wondrous variety.

The Program in Early Cultures at Brown, directed by John Bodel and Stephen Houston, fosters collaboration, critical exploration, and interdisciplinary scholarship on the comparative study of early civilizations.
Friday, November 4
Smith-Buonanno 106

4:00 - Welcome and Introduction to conference (John Bodel and Stephen Houston)

Session 1: Marking Meaning (John Bodel presiding)

4:30 - “Making the First Marks: Early Homo sapiens and the Development of Graphic Mark-making during the Late Pleistocene Period”
Genevieve von Petzinger (University of Victoria, British Columbia)

5:15 - “Explaining the Curious Ubiquity of Graphic Numeration”
Stephen Chrisomalis (Wayne State University, Detroit)

6:00 - Reception

Saturday, November 5
Smith-Buonanno 106

Session 2: Making Marks in Early Civilizations (Jeffrey Moser presiding)

9:00am - “Marking and Writing in an Egyptian Workmen’s Community (ca. 1450-1070 BCE)”
B. J. J. Haring (University of Leiden)

9:45: - “Primordial Signs and Inscribed Bodies: Reading Images of Script in Late Assyrian Scholarship”
Matthew Rutz (Brown University)

10:30-10:45 – Coffee break
**Session 3: Makers’ Marks and Manufacturing** (Stephen Houston presiding)

10:45 - “The Semiotics of Signa or the Significance of Symbols in Roman Stamps”  
*John Bodel (Brown University)*

11:30 - “Where Credit’s Due: Andean Makers’ Marks and a Theory of Bureaucratic Games”  
*Howard Tsai (University of Michigan)*

12:15-2:00 - Lunch

**Session 4: Divine Signs** (Matthew Rutz presiding)

2:00 - “Early Medieval Monograms (c. 300–900 CE): From Producers’ Marks to Liminal Graphic Devices”  
*Ildar Garipzanov (University of Oslo)*

2:45 - “Bolivian Marks in 3D: Inscribing Daily Life into Catholic Prayers”  
*Berenice Gaillemin (LabEx TransferS, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, LAS, Paris)*

3:30-3:45 – Coffee break

**Session 5: Marking Identity** (Sheila Bonde presiding)

3:45 - “Family Crests and Family Identity in Warrior Japan”  
*David Spafford (University of Pennsylvania)*

4:30 - “Chicano/a Placas: Aestheticizing and Politicizing Territorial Demarkation”  
*Stefano Bloch (Brown University)*

5:15 - Concluding Discussion and Final Remarks (John Bodel and Stephen Houston)
SPEAKERS

Stefano Bloch is an urban geographer specializing in social and spatial theory, cultural criminology, subcultures, and identity. He is an expert in the identification and contextualization of contemporary gang and non-gang graffiti and the use of ethnographic research methods. He is currently a Presidential Diversity Postdoctoral Fellow in Urban Studies and teaches social and physical geography at the state prison in Rhode Island and a course called “Crime and the City” at Brown.

John Bodel is W. Duncan MacMillan II Professor of Classics and Professor of History at Brown University. He specializes in ancient Roman history, epigraphy, and Latin literature, and has particular interests in writing systems, ancient slavery, funerals and burial customs, Roman religion, and the Roman novels. Much of his research involves inscriptions, and since 1995 he has directed the U.S. Epigraphy Project, the purpose of which is to gather and share information about Greek and Latin inscriptions preserved in the USA (http://library.brown.edu/projects/usep/collections). His books (authored, edited and co-edited) include Roman Brick Stamps in the Kelsey Museum (Ann Arbor 1983), Epigraphic Evidence. Ancient History from Inscriptions (London 2001), Dediche sacre nel mondo Greco–Romano: Diffusione, funzioni, tipologie, with Mika Kajava (Rome 2009), and Ancient Documents and their Contexts, with Nora Dimitrova (Boston and Leiden 2015).

Stephen Chrisomalis is an associate professor of anthropology at Wayne State University. His research focus is on the comparative analysis of number systems and the anthropology of mathematics. His book, Numerical Notation: A Comparative History, was published by Cambridge University Press.

Bérénice Gaillemin is Doctor in Ethnology, from the University of Paris 10 Nanterre. Her PhD dissertation, entitled “L’art ingénieux de peindre la parole et de parler aux yeux”. Elaboration et usages des catéchismes en images du Mexique (XVIe-XIXe siècles), supervised by Daniele Dehouve (CNRS), was defended in 2013. She regularly does fieldwork in Bolivia and since 2012 has been pursuing a comparative perspective. She has been teaching Nahuatl language since 2004 (INALCO) and recently taught a class about Amerindian Languages, cultures, and societies at the University of the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3). She is a member of the Cesor (Centre d’Etudes en Sciences Sociales des Religions) and EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. As a member of the LAS (Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale, Paris), she currently holds a postdoctoral fellowship in the Laboratoire d'Excellence (LabEx) TransferS.
Ildar Garipzanov is Professor of Early Medieval History at the University of Oslo. His research evolves around the cultural history of late antiquity and the early middle ages, with a particular focus on material and visual aspects of symbolic communication. He currently leads a research project Graphicacy and Authority in Early Europe: Graphic Signs of Power and Faith in the Early Middle Ages (c. 300–1000).

Ben Haring has studied Egyptology in Leiden and Heidelberg. After graduating he became a lecturer at Leiden University, his research focusing on Ancient Egyptian sources for social and economic history, resulting in e.g. his monograph on temple economy Divine Households, based on the author’s PhD research, 1997, and the online search tool The Deir el-Medina Database, with co-authors, 1998-2012. More recent research focuses on writing, visual communication, and their social importance. This research includes the hieratic sources from Deir el-Medina (e.g. on local writing and literacy: Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 46, 2003; Writing in a Workmen’s Village, with Koen Donker van Heel, 2003), hieroglyphic palaeography (e.g. The Tomb of Sennedjem, 2006), marking systems in Ancient Egypt and elsewhere (research project ‘Symbolizing Identity’ at Leiden University, 2011-2015; monograph in press), and the early alphabet in Egypt and the Near East (e.g. on the halaḥam letter order: Journal of Near Eastern Studies 74, 2015).

Stephen Houston serves as the Dupee Family Professor of Social Sciences at Brown University, where he also holds an appointment in Anthropology. A specialist in Classic Maya civilization, writing systems, and indigenous representation, Houston is the author of many books and articles, including, most recently, Temple of the Night Sun (Precolumbia Mesoweb Press), The Maya (with Michael Coe, now its 9th edition), and The Life Within: Classic Maya and the Matter of Permanence (Yale University Press), winner of a PROSE Award in 2014. Houston has been honored with a MacArthur, along with other fellowships, including a Guggenheim. His current projects concern the central role of young men in Classic Maya text and image, the lives and roles of Maya sculptors, and reports on two large-scale excavations, one at the great dynastic center of Piedras Negras, Guatemala, the other, El Zotz, in the same country. In recognition of Houston's scholarship, the President of Guatemala awarded him, in 2011, the Grand Cross of the Order of the Quetzal, that country's highest honor. He is a summa cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania; his Ph.D., awarded in 1987, is from Yale.

Matthew Rutz is William A. Dyer, Jr. Assistant Professor of Humanities in the Department of Egyptology and Assyriology, Brown University. He received his PhD in Cuneiform Studies (Assyriology) from the University of Pennsylvania in 2008, and before coming to Brown in 2009 was a postdoctoral researcher with the
Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (RINAP) Project, a multi-year research program at the University of Pennsylvania funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He specializes in the languages and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq, Syria) with an emphasis on Akkadian (Babylonian/Assyrian) documents from the late-second and first millennia BCE, ancient Mesopotamian intellectual and religious history, the social and political history of Late Bronze Age Syria, Babylonian literary and scholastic texts from the site of Nippur (Iraq), and the study of ancient texts as archaeological objects. He is the author of Bodies of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Diviners of Late Bronze Age Emar and Their Tablet Collection (2013) as well as numerous articles, and together with Morag M. Kersel he co-edited Archaeologies of Text: Archaeology, Technology, and Ethics (2014).

Born and raised in Italy, David Spafford received his Ph.D. in Japanese History from Berkeley in 2006 and now teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, A Sense of Place: The Political Landscape in Late Medieval Japan (2013), was the product of a long-held interest in local identity and the creation of attachment to place. In his current project, tentatively titled The Corporate Warrior House in Japan, 1450-1650, he turns from place to kin in search of the bonds that held Japanese society together.

Howard Tsai is lecturer at the Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies at the University of Michigan. He directed the excavation of Las Varas, an 11th-century village in northern Peru, as part of his investigation of prehistoric interaction, exchange, and ethnicity in the chaupiyunga zone of the Jequetepeque Valley. The results of his work at Las Varas will be published in his upcoming book Las Varas: Ethnic Groups and Boundaries in the Ancient Andes.

Genevieve von Petzinger is a paleoanthropologist in the final year of her doctorate at the University of Victoria in Canada. Her main area of interest is European Upper Paleolithic (Ice Age) rock art, in particular the geometric imagery, and how the development of this graphic practice can help us better understand the evolution of modern cognition and symbolic thought in early human populations.
ABSTRACTS

Stefano Bloch, “Chicano/a Placas”

Like “graffiti art,” gang writing is aesthetically grounded as its practitioners adhere to conventions for style, and to a lesser degree rules for appropriate placement. While gang graffiti is far more explicitly utilitarian than non-gang graffiti—as it is used to indicate a specific ‘hood, as well as memorialize killed and jailed friends or make a declaration of superiority, rivalry and fraternity—it nevertheless utilizes traditional letter forms that derive from classical calligraphy, Old English and pre-Columbian glyphs that have been refined in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York since at least the 1930s. I will focus on the aesthetics and politics of Chicano/a gang graffiti, discussing how the writing on the walls is about far more than territorial demarcation and evidence of violent criminality.

John Bodel, “The semiotics of signa or the significance of symbols in Roman stamps”

Fired clay products were ubiquitous throughout the Roman empire during the first three centuries CE, and the manufactories that produced them were as varied in their internal organization as the uses to which the products were put. Some were simple, individual workshops; others were large industries with complex systems of production, transport, storage, and distribution. Characteristic of many of the various clay-manufacturing enterprises operative throughout this period was the practice of stamping certain products with marks indicating something about the origin, manufacture, distribution, or intended purpose of the product. Most stamps were textual, but in some the text was accompanied by symbols or figures, or was displayed in or within a distinctive shape, and in others shape alone conveyed whatever message was intended.

This paper begins with a brief survey of the range of relevant material to be considered, acknowledging the unevenness of our knowledge about how the stamps were deployed and what sort of institutional organization they represent, and then proposes a basic classification of the types of symbols, figures, and shapes employed before attempting a preliminary analysis of the significance of the ways the non-verbal signs are used. Attention is focused on the Roman brick industry of the Tiber valley, which presents the richest vocabulary of signs and the most well documented history of their development.
Steve Chrisomalis, “Explaining the curious ubiquity of graphic numeration”

Numerical notation is a complex, structured semasiographic activity that has developed alongside most phonographic script traditions. Where humans have developed numerical notations, they usually have developed scripts, and vice versa. This coevolution is seemingly redundant, because phonographic scripts are also capable of expressing numerals lexically. Most other specialized domains, such as kinship, color, or time, do not have special representations. Why, then, do numerals so frequently have their own structured complex semasiography?

Historical, cognitive, and functional explanations are considered and shown to be, at best, partly correct. Two new suggestions are raised. First, the affordances of the body (e.g., the fingers) and of panhuman activities (knotting, cutting) facilitate an emergent iconicity of which one-to-one correspondence in notation is a predictable outcome. But because this process is panhuman, a further explanation is needed to explain the complex numerical notations found only in state societies. The analogical extension of the modular organizational logic of state societies may help explain the widespread practice of ways of decomposing and recombining numbers graphically in various early states.

Berenice Gaillemin, “Bolivian Marks in 3D: Inscribing Daily Life into Catholic Prayers”

During Lent, in several Bolivian communities surrounding the town of San Lucas (dept. of Chuquisaca), the fundamental texts of the Christian doctrine are transcribed through logographic and phonographic signs. These artifacts are used for the collective teaching of Catholic prayers in Quechua. At the end of the Easter celebrations, they are discarded.

In light of data collected on fieldwork, I propose to examine the fabrication and use of these media which present another singularity: it is not only pictographic but also tridimensional. In these catechisms, each word or syllable corresponds to a clay figurine or other objects. In a spiral pattern, they are placed on a circular disk made with fresh clay arranged on the ground. In this paper, I will explore the fact that, even if most of the three-dimensional signs are made to transcribe a text for its memorization, the pragmatic use of this writing provides the students with more than a religious text transcription.

Several signs are made to guide the reader, others stimulate his memory through a playful arrangement while the pious attitudes of the figurines are conveying religious emotions. The materiality of the text itself, as well as the materials chosen to express several ideas, reflect a specific way of marking the daily life by an artifact which aspect reveals and coincides with the identity and the natural landscape where the inhabitants live.
Ildar Garipzanov, “Early Medieval Monograms (c. 300–900): From Producers’ Marks to Liminal Graphic Devices”

Greek monograms, usually composed of a few letters conjoined within one graphic structure, appeared on coins and pottery in the Hellenistic period, where they primarily functioned as graphic marks referring to lower officials or masters responsible for their production, and the practice of such monogrammatic stamps on mass-produced objects continued into the Early Imperial period. The use of monograms on various material artifacts became ubiquitous in late antiquity when they began to be stamped, carved, inscribed, and drawn in new media, namely manuscripts, public monuments, silverware, ivory diptychs, belt buckles, weights, seals, and so on. The change was not exclusively quantitative: their functions and linguistic content also radically expanded. The nascent early medieval monograms were often composed of many letters and even several words, and they encoded the names of late Roman emperors and nobles, and early medieval kings and bishops, as well as acclamations and ritual phrases. Not unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs, occult characters, and gnostic seals, they began to be perceived as liminal graphic devices with extra-linguistic properties, apt to communicate with the transcendent forces and to provide an efficacious graphic form to humble requests addressed to divine powers. My presentation will overview this late antique transformation that allowed monograms to become visual markers of secular authorities and graphic symbols of social status for late Roman and post-Roman elites in the Mediterranean world.

Ben J.J. Haring, “Marking and Writing in an Egyptian Workmen’s Community (ca. 1450-1070 BCE)”

Marking systems appear to be as old as writing in Pharaonic Egypt, and from the start, individual marks were influenced by the hieroglyphic sign repertoire. The invention and growing use of writing did not push back marking systems, but rather stimulated their development and use. Although the need for marking systems might seem to us to be particularly urgent where writing is hardly present, or not present at all, the fact is that even communities with a relatively high degree of literacy could use marks intensively, and be very creative in their development. The marking system used by the royal necropolis workmen of the New Kingdom is a particularly well documented example of this phenomenon.

Matthew Rutz, “Primordial Signs and Inscribed Bodies: Reading Images of Script in Late Assyrian Scholarship”

By the 7th century BCE Mesopotamian cuneiform writing was already well over two thousand years old, and there is ample evidence that certain scribes in ancient Assyria and Babylonia (northern and southern Iraq) were not only well aware of its hoary antiquity but also actively engaged in using earlier versions of the script for their interpretive projects. In this period the script ecology of the
Assyrian empire consisted of Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform as well as various alphabetic and hieroglyphic scripts, and each was deployed using its own conventions, including different writing implements, media, textual genres, audiences, and social contexts of circulation. Within this web of writing practices there emerged two textual genres in which ancient scholars explored the para-linguistic and symbolic attributes of cuneiform signs: sign lists and divinatory compilations. Using evidence from the imperial cities of Kalhu and Nineveh I will look at the ways in which scribes sought to exploit the visual appearance of cuneiform signs as images that could be drawn in schematic reference lists or discovered as ominous signs on the bodies of humans or animals.

David Spafford, “Family Crests and Family Identity in Warrior Japan.”

Much like medieval European nobles, Japanese warriors developed, over the course of several centuries, an elaborate system of family crests. Spurred by the need to make themselves visible and recognizable to allies and followers on the battlefield, warriors affixed insignia on banners and badges, on palanquins and tents, but eschewed the “quasi-naturalistic” coats of arms of their European counterparts in favor of stylized marks that were, in many instances, close relatives of the logographic script used in much of East Asia. As single families grew apart over the course of the generations, giving way to senior and junior lineages, and sometimes rivals houses, so too did their crests evolve to reflect both affiliation and distance. Any autonomous house was, in principle, free to devise its own crest, but custom dictated that (much like modern trademarks) existing crests not be replicated or appropriated—except when the destruction or subjugation of a house made its insignia fair game. In my presentation, I shall outline the mechanics and functions of crests, while also attempting to inscribe their use within a broader social and semasiographic practice that privileged the visualization of ties of kinship and patronage in several different (and generally unrelated) contexts.

Howard Tsai “Where Credit’s Due: Andean Makers’ Marks and a Theory of Bureaucratic Games”

Less glamorous than pottery or architecture, makers’ marks belong to that “cinderella” class of material culture which archaeologists often ignore. This is unfortunate, since the analysis of makers’ marks can be invaluable for understanding the organization and administration of labor. In this talk I survey the use of makers’ marks in the Andes from the ethnographic present to the archaeological past. My research on adobe bricks and makers’ marks from the north coast of Peru has led me to a theoretical consideration of the co-development and feedback between administration, accounting, and evasion.

Is feet-dragging behavior simply “resistance” by reluctant subjects? I believe the growth of bureaucratic and accounting technology is better theorized as an escalating arms race between tribute- or taxpayers, local leaders (e.g., village
headmen), mid- to high-level administrators, and the uppermost echelon of the state, the royal house. Tracking the evolution of makers’ marks and state accounting would allow us to reveal the longue durée of cat-and-mouse mind games played by those who want to capture labor versus those who wish to contribute as little work as possible.

Genevieve von Petzinger, “Making the First Marks: Early Homo sapiens and the development of graphic mark-making during the late Pleistocene period”

For much of the twentieth century, it was presumed that the earliest graphic art – both portable and parietal – dated to around 35,000 before present (BP), with western Europe being one of the first regions where this practice developed. However, in recent decades there have been a number of finds in southern Africa that suggest the presence of a mark-making tradition starting around 100,000 BP (e.g., Blombos Cave, South Africa; Swakop Valley, Namibia – Henshilwood et al., 2009). These earliest examples are all non-figurative in form (simple motifs, single or repeating abstract shapes, etc.), and over the following millennia, there appears to be a trend towards increasing complexity and potential inter-generational use of the same markings (e.g., Diepkloof Rock Shelter – Texier et al., 2013). Around 60,000 years ago, the major waves of out-migration from Africa began, and it may well be that this graphic tradition travelled with different groups as they spread throughout the Old World.

Europe currently has one of the most complete records of human artistic activity from the end of the Pleistocene (known as the Upper Paleolithic and dating to between 10,000 and 40,000 BP). During this period there is an exponential increase in the amount of symbolic artifacts being created, as well as an expansion in artistic subject matter to include both figurative (animals and humans) and non-figurative (geometric) imagery. While all of the art has the potential to improve our understanding of the development of graphic mark-making, the specificity of individual geometric shapes combined with the number of different signs from this period (32 repeating signs plus a handful of outliers), offers an unusual window into the cognitive capacities of these early people. By looking at spatial and temporal changes in the popularity of individual sign types, it may well be possible to track both inter-regional connectedness and instances of cultural divergence, as well as gain new insight into the development of symbolic thinking and the potential beginnings of graphic communication taking place during this time.