

BEARDSLEY'S CAFÉ RESTAURANT



SECOND ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
27 JUNE 1977 NORTHAMPTON MASSACHUSETTS

Lance Hidy

PENUMBRA THE OFFSPRING OF TRAJAN AND FUTURA

LANCE HIDY

WHEN MY TYPEFACE PENUMBRA was published by Adobe Systems, in 1994, I wrote in the accompanying specimen book that Futura

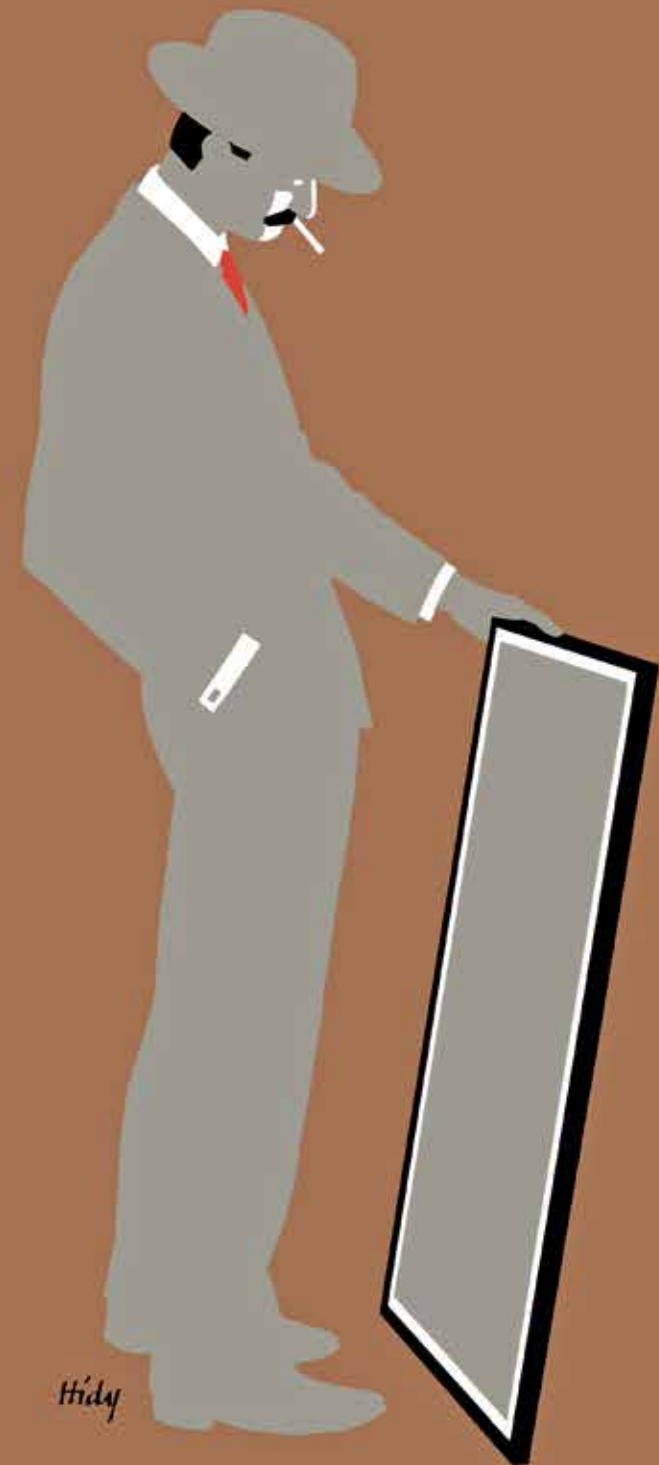
and Trajan [2] had influenced the design. In fact, my early attempts at poster lettering, in the late 1970s, were suggestive of those two letterforms. Be that as it may, the Trajan-Futura explanation of Penumbra's origin obscures the real story: the designs were inspired as much by images as they were by letters. Making and using letters and images had until then been two separate arenas in my career; in poster design, which would become a dominant medium in my work, I found the opportunity to integrate them. In the best posters, the image and the letterforms are "equivalents," to use Alfred Stieglitz's term for his first experiments in abstraction. Just as Stieglitz's cloud photographs were equivalents to his feelings of the moment, I wanted my letterforms to become the equivalents of my pictorial style. This was the quest that would lead me to Penumbra.

By the late 1970s, I had achieved some mastery of book typography, though I found that bookish typefaces were ill-suited to my posters. They were too complicated and stylized to be equivalents to the flat, hard-edged, photography-based style I was developing. The geometric simplicity of Futura was tempting, but I felt it was too industrial to accompany the organic contours in my poster art. I considered humanist sans serif faces such as Gill and Syntax, but they had aesthetic connotations that did not feel right, either. Typefaces are stamped with the personality of their creators, and colored by their times and places of origin. Using pre-existing types in my posters felt like wearing hand-me-down clothes. If I were to follow the example of poster artists I admired—Toulouse-Lautrec, Höhlwein, Cassandre, and Shahn—I would have to tailor the letterforms specifically for my poster art.¹ [1]

1 (opposite). Beardsley's Café Restaurant poster designed and silkscreened by Lance Hidy, 1978. The lettering was inspired by the Trajan inscription.

2 (below). Relationship of Penumbra to Trajan and Futura.

A E G H J K M Q R S
+ A E G H J K M Q R S
= A E G H J K M Q R S



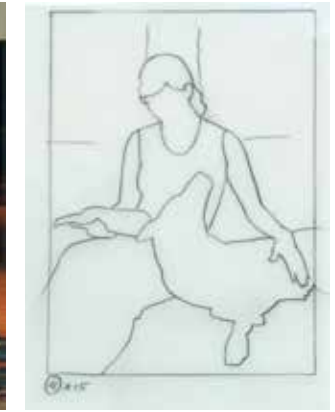
DOW AND
FROSINI ■
FRAMING
POSTERS &
PRINTS ■
BERKELEY
841-4402

Of the thirty-three posters I produced between 1977 and 1987, fifteen of them featured capital letters that were forerunners of Penumbra. [3, 4, 8–11] To understand the equivalence I sought for the letters, I should explain the thinking behind the artwork. [5–7] My poster images were composed of flat, hard-edged colors such as one finds in Egyptian wall painting, Greek ceramics, textiles, Japanese prints, and comic books. Bridging many subjects, centuries, and civilizations, the style I had cultivated was simultaneously old, at least in the flatness of the colors, and modern in my use of the camera to capture the fleeting gestures and subtle contours of my subjects. For example, after shooting 180 photographs of a woman and her collie, the chosen one was transformed into simple, flat shapes, minus the distracting details. The distilled essence of the photographic form and idea was retained without artistic additions. My style, if it can be called that, is the result of trying to have no style—only a pure, pictorial idea, simplified as far as I could take it.

NICARAGUA
MARYLAND
CHILDREN
BOSTON
CHILDREN'S
GRADUATE

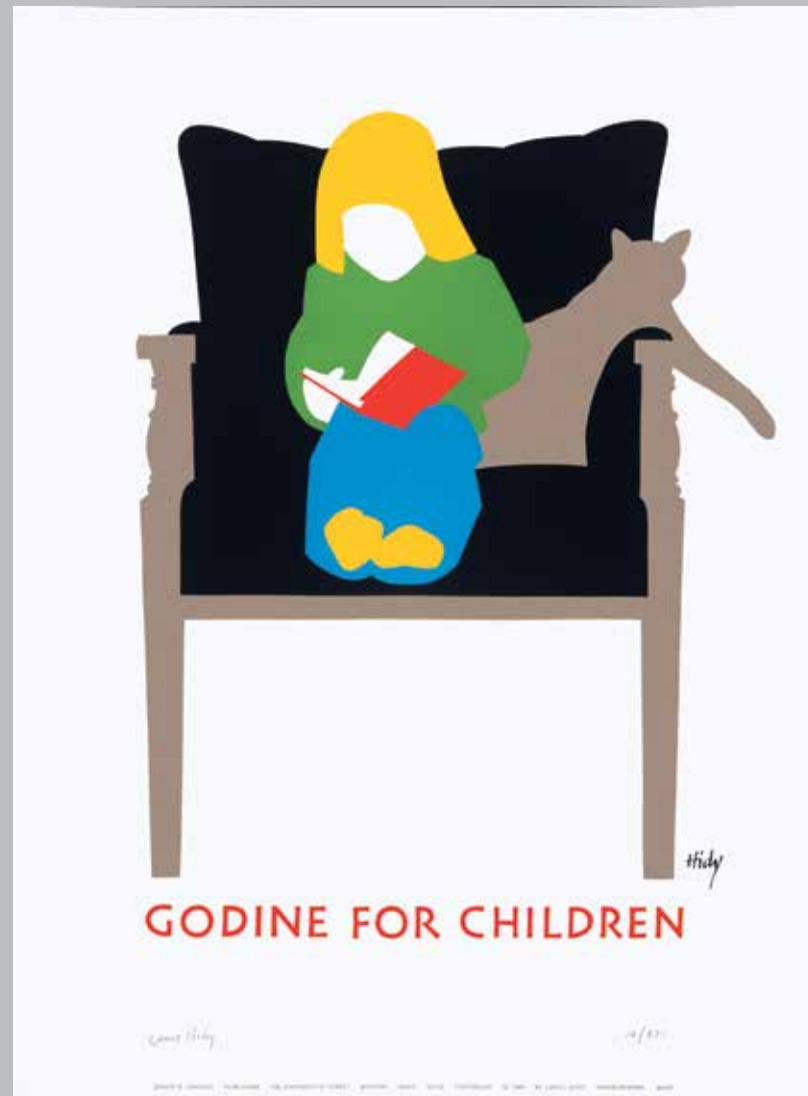
3 (left). Dow and Frosini Framing & Posters poster designed and silkscreened by Hidy, 1979. The lettering was traced from Futura.

4 (above). Samples of Hidy's poster lettering, 1977–1978, showing variations in weight, serif, and formality.



5, 6, 7 (clockwise from upper left). These three images show the sequence of steps that Hidy went through in the design of his mature posters: original photograph, outline drawing, and final design. Poster designed by Hidy for Davis-Kidd Bookseller, 2000; silkscreened by Robert Preston.



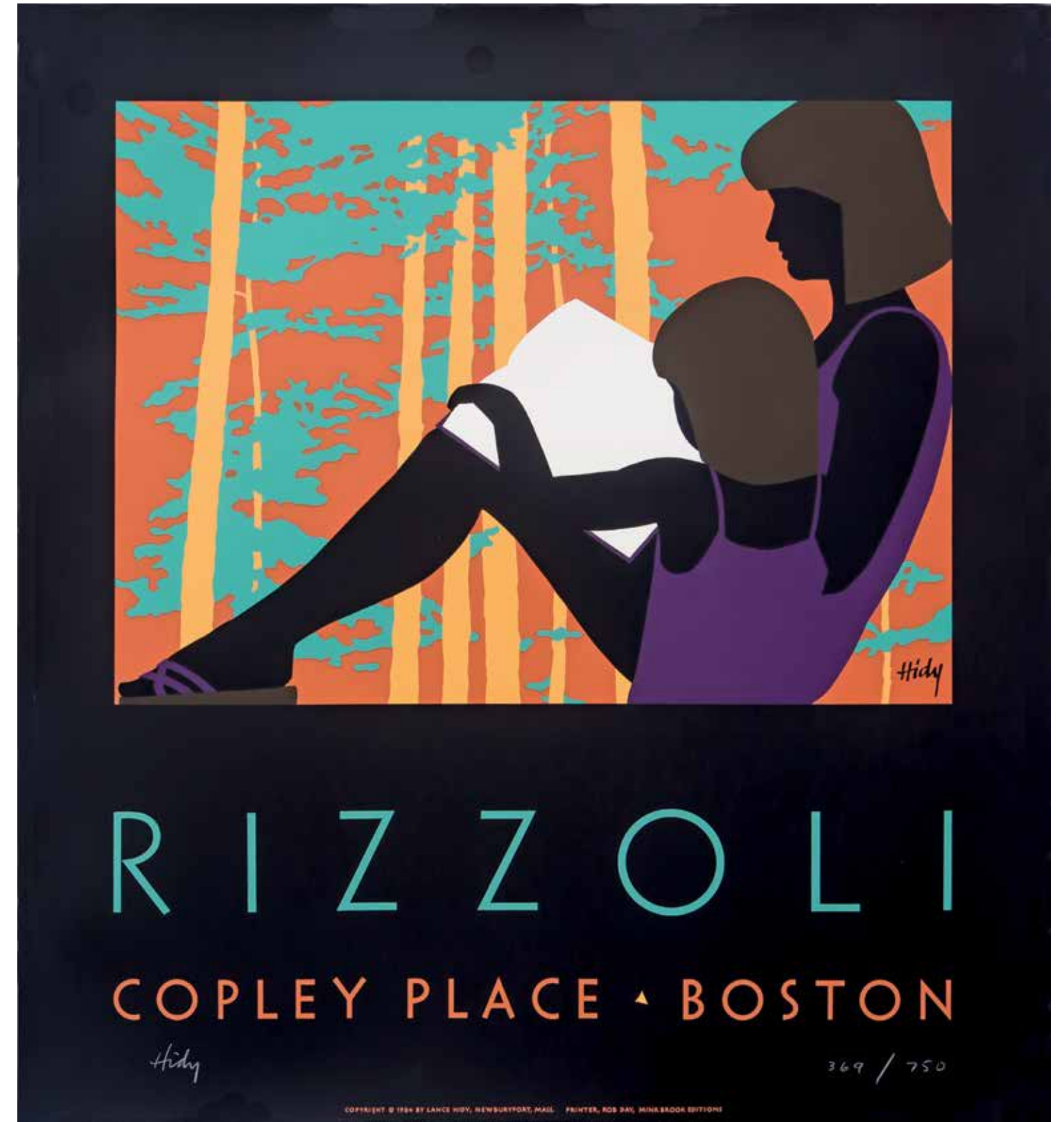


8 (above). Godine for Children poster designed by Hidy for David Godine, Publisher, 1982; silkscreened by Rob Day.

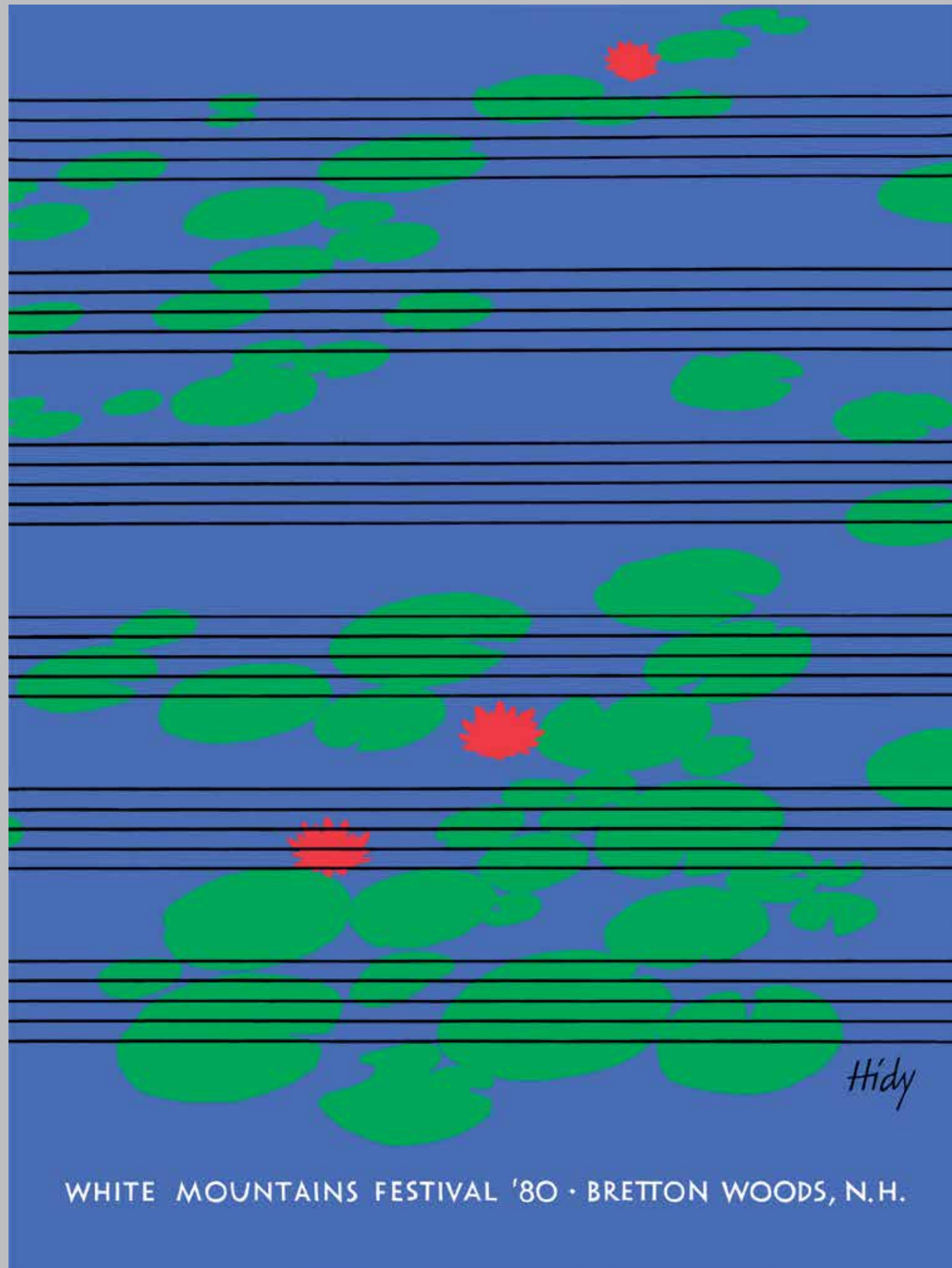
9 (below). Poster lettering by Hidy, 1985.

BLACK OAK BOOKS

1491 SHATTUCK AVENUE ◀ BERKELEY ◀ CA 94709



10 Rizzoli Booksellers poster designed by Hidy, 1984; silkscreened by Rob Day. The lettering for this poster and the "Godine for Children" poster (opposite), designed to blend in with the illustrations as "equivalents," were both precursors to Penumbra.



11 (opposite). White Mountains Festival poster designed and silkscreened by Hidy, 1980. The first proto-Penumbra lettering, it was written with a Speedball B-series nib, with the round corners squared off with a technical pen. The silkscreen mask was cut with a knife at actual size ($\frac{3}{8}$ " high).

12 (above). Gino Lee (left) and Lance Hidy (right) in 1994.

13 (above). Early proof (June 15, 1992) of Penumbra with interpolations. The four masters are marked in red and the interpolations are in black.



What letterform, then, would be the equivalent? It, too, would need to be distilled down to an essence, but still strong enough to be readable amidst the large areas of color. And I wanted it to have a living, organic quality like the contoured shapes drawn from my photographs—neither too mechanical nor industrial.

The first crude ancestor of Penumbra appeared as a single line of capitals in a lily-pad poster design of 1980. [11] Lettered with a round-nib Speedball B-series pen, the stroke endings were squared off with a fine-tipped technical pen. The small bowls of the *D*, *B*, and *R*, the sharp points on the angled joins, and the monoweight strokes would all survive, more or less, in the typeface I would make fourteen years later. The sloped sides of the *U* appeared in some of the posters but eventually were replaced with verticals. Over the next seven years I experimented with this basic idea, varying the weight, sometimes adding serifs or swelled stroke endings—all of which would be built into the typeface design, though my occasional experiments with irregular letter shapes and strokes would be left behind. [4, 9]

Sumner Stone, then director of type development at Adobe, was the first person to suggest making a typeface from my poster lettering. Ironically, by seating me on Adobe's Type Advisory Board and giving me access to the latest technology, Sumner unwittingly played a role in bringing my lettering career to an end.

As a consultant, I had access to the growing Adobe Type Library, including beta versions of the new line of Adobe Originals. While experimenting with the beta version of Trajan, my poster-lettering experience taught me that it was too thin to be very useful, at least for my kind of work, which was certainly not atypical of the way Trajan might be used by others. When I suggested making a bold version, the idea was dismissed at first as sacrilege. But after sleeping on it, the Adobe team reconsidered and decided to take my advice. (See p. 181.)

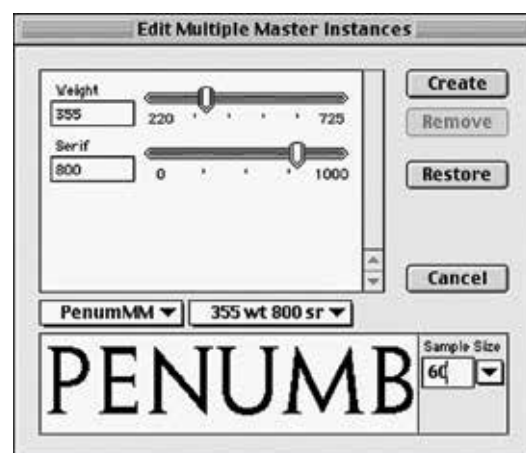
After Sumner left Adobe, at the end of 1989, his idea of making a typeface from my poster lettering continued to circulate among the Adobe Originals team. Robert Slimbach and Fred Brady were skeptical about the idea until I pointed out that there was a shortage of classically inspired display fonts that had mono-weight strokes, or at least minimally tapering ones. Other than Albertus, Open Capitals, Sistina, and Weiss Initials, what was there? ² Agreeing that Penumbra could help fill this void, they gave me a contract in 1992.

Adding Penumbra to the Multiple Master library created some excitement because, unlike the previous efforts that involved only the axes of weight and width, it was to be the first one with a style axis for serif. While other recent typefaces—Lucida, Scala, Rotis, and Sumner's own Stone family—included both a sans serif and a serif version of the same typeface, Penumbra was



14 (above). The first formal ink drawings of Penumbra, drawn on mylar (13/16" high). In red are the final Penumbra letters for comparison.

15 (right). Screen shot of the Multiple Master Font Utility. Weight and serif values were chosen with the sliders. After clicking the create button, this instance would have "355 WT 800 SR" added to its name. As new instances accumulated in the font menu, it was easy to be confused by all of the numbers.



designed to offer intermediate versions of serif.³ In all, I created four masters for Penumbra: sans serif light, sans serif bold, serif light, and serif bold.

My first step toward creating Penumbra MM was to hire Gino Lee (1962–2011), a brilliant Harvard student with a talent both for letterpress typography and for computer technology.⁴ It was he who did most of the digitization, while I did the art direction. At the Adobe team's suggestion, I produced ink drawings of medium-weight letters .8125 inches high—one set of sans, and another of serif. [10] The light and bold masters were to be extrapolated from these. Gino and I also kept samples of my old poster lettering on hand as a reference. Together, he and I converted the drawings to vectors, working in collaboration with the Adobe group that included Slimbach, Carol Twombly, Brady, and Jocelyn Bergen.

Penumbra MM had two variables: 506 increments of weight from light to bold, and 1,001 increments from sans serif to full serif. [15] Two sliders in the Multiple

Master utility allowed the user to potentially create more than a half-million variations of Penumbra—506,506, to be exact. Each user-created instance was given a cumbersome name with the numbers of the weight and serif coordinates. Trying to sort through them in the font menu could be perplexing. In retrospect, limiting the increments to ten or twenty per axis would have been sufficient for even the most demanding typographer.

Unfortunately, Multiple Master technology proved too good to be true, at least as a consumer product (Adobe and others still use it as an essential font development tool). The complex coding caused so many output failures that some printers refused to accept jobs containing MM fonts.

Therefore, none of us was surprised when the Multiple Masters were made obsolete by the new OpenType formats, which often add new sizes and weights to previously released designs. And so Penumbra was converted to a family of sixteen fonts: four serif variations, each with four weights.

[16] While this limited palette seems not to have hurt the popularity of Penumbra too much, the limited weight options can be frustrating to typographers. In particular, I miss the middle weight, halfway between the light and the bold. Fortunately there is a work-around in Adobe Illustrator. After setting the type in two weights, intermediate weights can be created using the blend tool. Serif variations can be interpolated with this method too.

An interesting postscript to the Penumbra story emerged from Sumner Stone's research into the origins of Roman capitals. I still remember his excitement when he first showed me pre-Trajan, Penumbra-like inscriptions with monoline strokes and serifs. These important letterforms had escaped my notice, including one example rather close to my home: the funerary relief of the Publius Gessius family (30–20 BC) in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. [17, 18] I must have seen it several times, so it is possible that its carved letters entered my unconscious mind.

THE PENUMBRA FAMILY



16 (left). OpenType version of Penumbra with sixteen variations replacing the original Multiple Master version.



17 (top). Recreation of the Publius Gessius inscription using Penumbra Serif Light.

18 (above). Part of the inscription on the funerary relief of the Publius Gessius family (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

1 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), Ludwig Hohlwein (1874–1949), A. M. Cassandre (1901–1968), and Ben Shahn (1898–1969)
 2 Albertus (Monotype Corporation, 1936–1940) by Berthold Wolpe; Open Capitals (Joh. Enschedé en Zonen, 1928) by Jan van Krimpen; Sistina (Stempel AG, 1951) by Hermann Zapf; and Weiss Initials (Bauersche Giesserei, 1931) by E. R. Weiss. The Weiss Initials comprised Series I

(Weiss Kapitale), Series II (Weiss Lapidar and Weiss Lapidar Mager), and Series III (Weiss Kapitale Mager) initials. Series II bears a resemblance to Penumbra.
 3 Lucida Serif (1985) and Lucida Sans (1985) by Charles Bigelow and Kris Holmes; Scala (1988; FontShop, 1990) and Scala Sans (FontShop, 1993) by Martin Majoor; Rotis (Agfa, 1989) by Otl Aicher (consisting of a serif, semi-serif,

semi-sans and sans); ITC Stone (International Typeface Corporation, 1987). There is also Ellington (Monotype, 1990) and Strayhorn (Monotype, 1995), a matching pair of serif and sans serif types designed by Michael Harvey that belongs to this period.
 4 Gino Lee also digitized the initial version of Zapfino.