

Dutch Chocolate Letters

by G. W. Ovink

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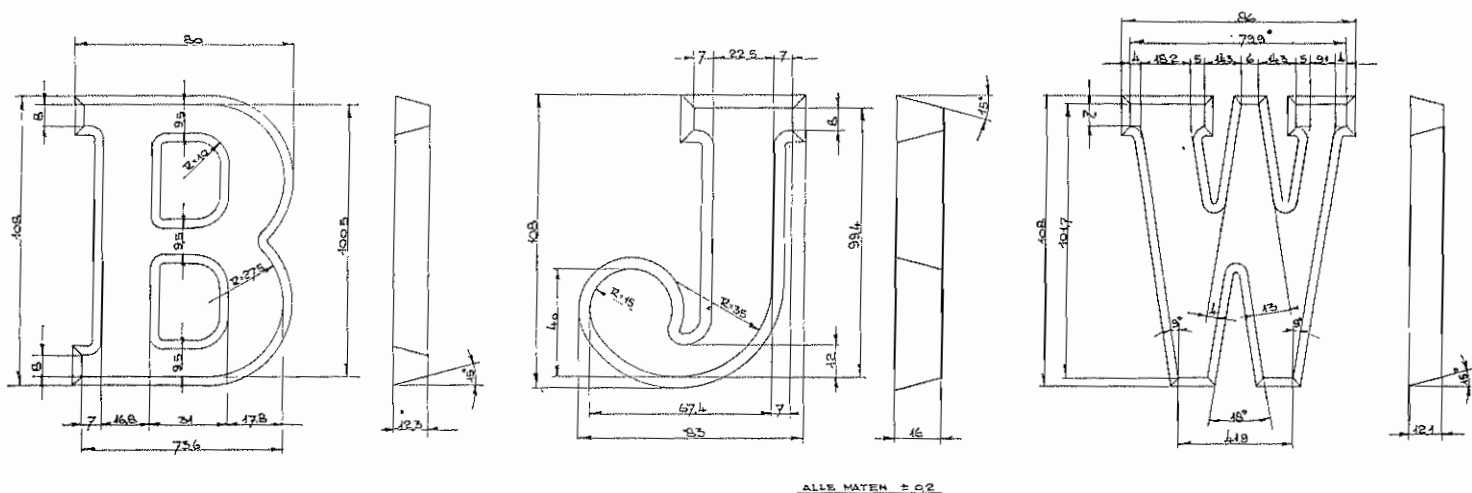
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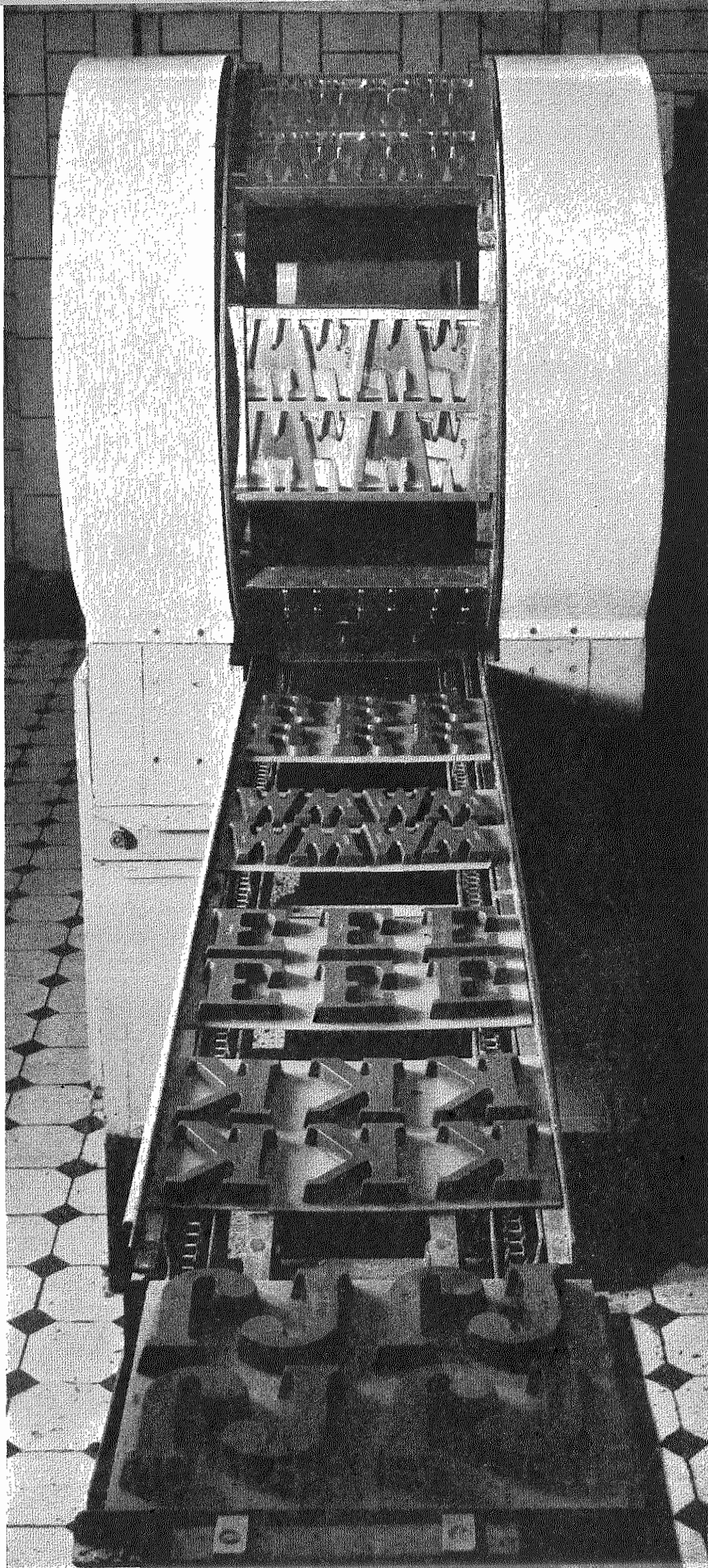
When the Dutch want to use a superlative for large and bold typefaces, they call them either 'cow letters' or 'chocolate letters'. The first term indicates the largest and fattest object the Dutch are familiar with, and the second the largest and tallest letters they are accustomed to handle, be it only once a year. At the request of the Editor of *TYPOGRAPHICA* I have prepared this short essay on these chocolate letters, their history, forms and use, which has turned out to be (to complete the quotation of Updike's title) a study in survivals.

On one single day in the year, the merry celebration of the anniversary of St Nicholas, the 11,000,000 Dutch people consume more than 4,000,000 chocolate letters, each of them from three to nine ounces in weight, and four to eight inches high. In Holland Christmas is predominantly celebrated as a religious feast, St Nicholas (as the eve of his anniversary – the fifth of December – is called for short) remains the day for hilarious children's parties and family gatherings at which gifts are exchanged with a great deal of moralizing versification and practical joking. And custom demands that every member of the family receives at least one of his or her initials in chocolate letters (besides huge quantities of other sweets).

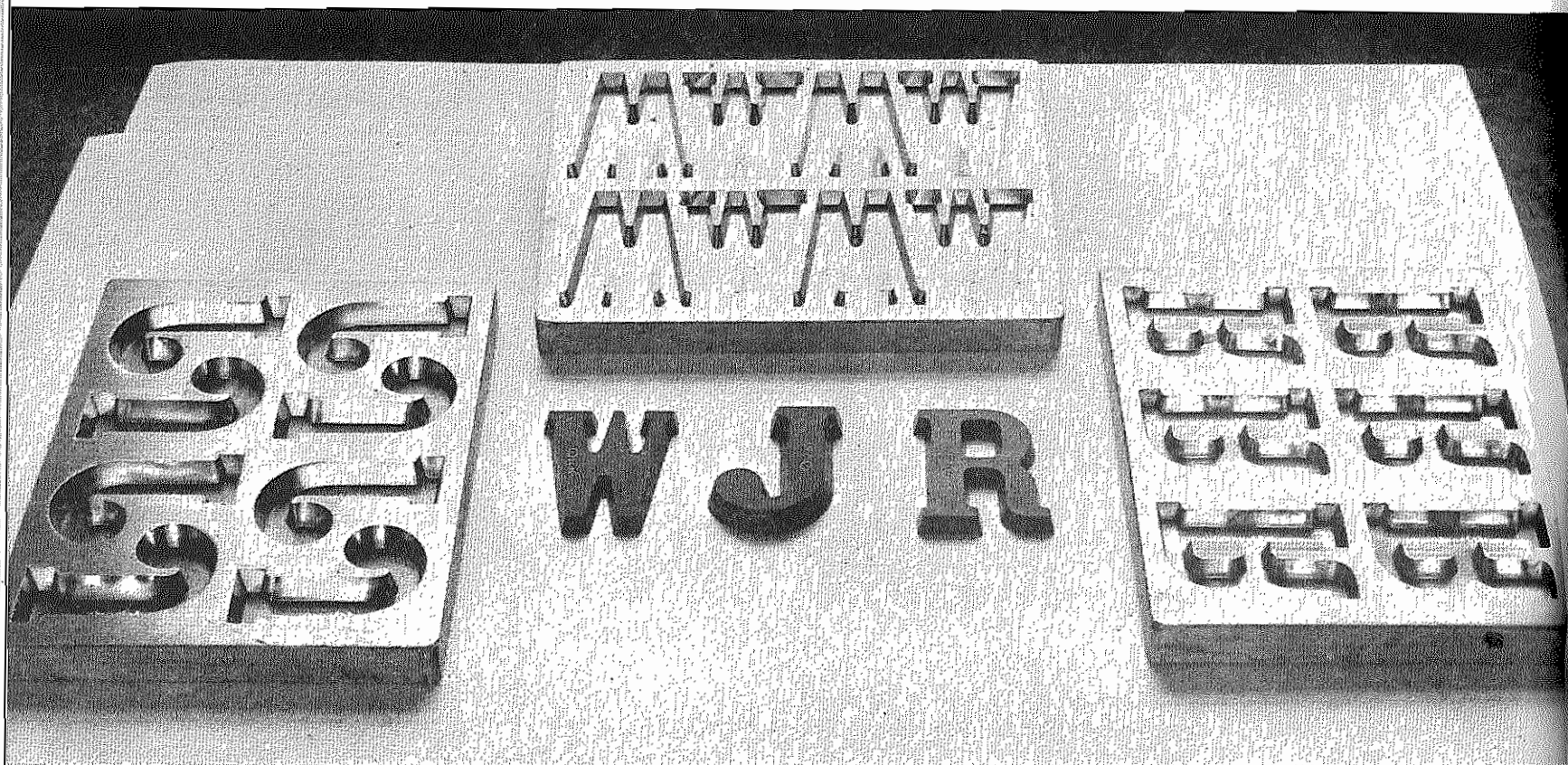
St Nicholas, the Holy Bishop of Myra, is the patron saint of seafarers, and therefore of many harbour towns, including Amsterdam. He was also revered as a marriage-maker, so the sweets offered on his anniversary always include various honey cakes baked in the shape, up to life size, of men and women (the lovers), sugar hearts, etc. Then, of course, he comes to reward good children and to admonish the naughty ones: his Moorish page, called Black Peter, carries one sack with sweets and another to carry bad boys back to Spain, if a punishment with the rod should be insufficient. The official entrance of the Saint in Holland takes place

Drawings for the making of moulds, showing how an equal chocolate content for every character is obtained and the typical profiles which ensure a regular flow and cooling of the chocolate mass.





View of the continuous casting process with moulds as shown overleaf. The letters leave the cooling station and are being separated from the moulds.



Moulds for four-inch letters, each weighing 75 grammes, showing differences in height, which help in equalizing the weight of a J and a W.

in the capital, Amsterdam, where he arrives in tunic and mitre, white beard and staff, on a white horse on the deck of a steamboat, landing in front of the St Nicholas Church, where he is officially welcomed by the City Council before his first ride through the city. In the evening St Nicholas rides with Black Peter on horseback over the rooftops and drops his presents through the chimneys of every house in the country.

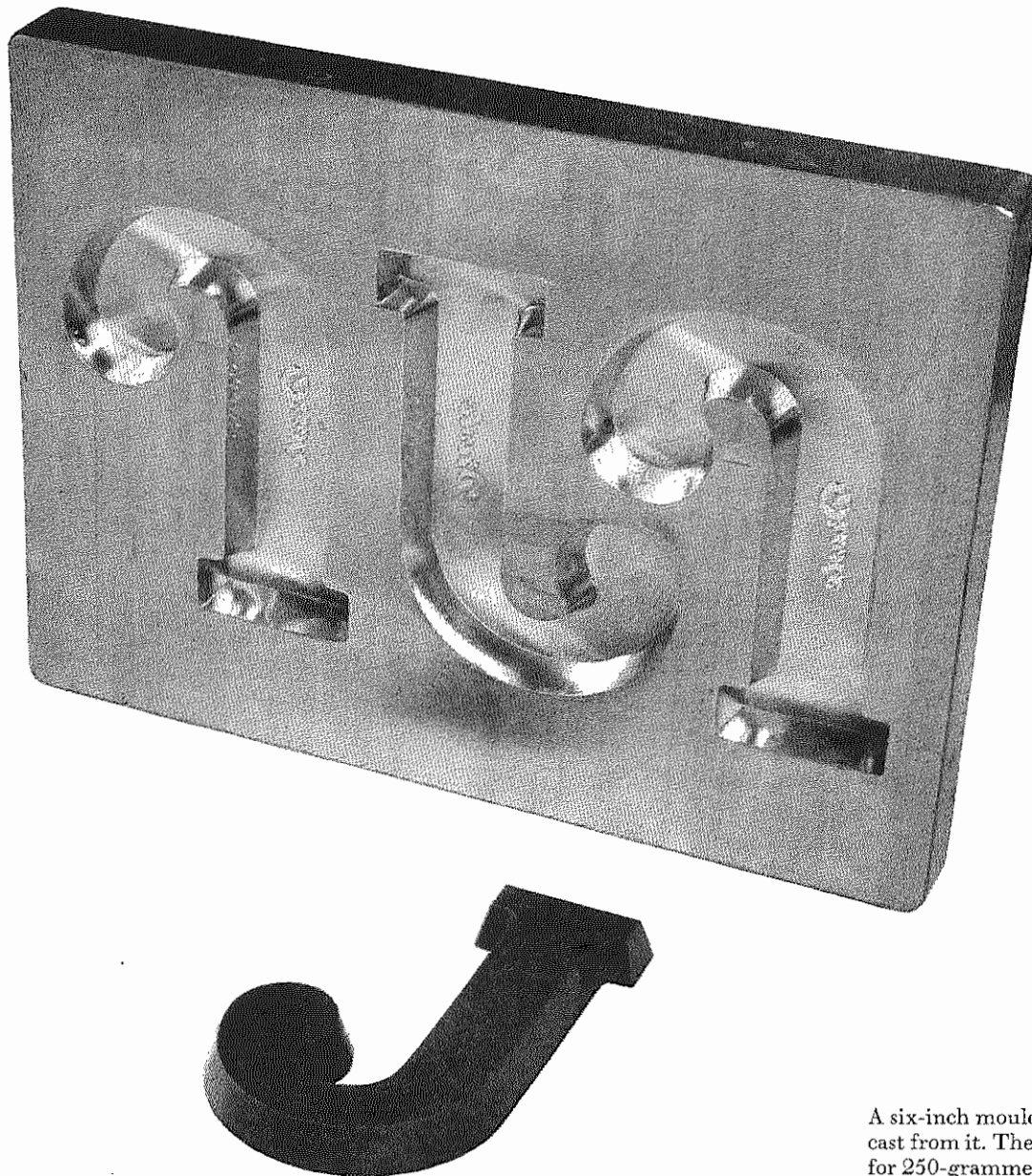
The first official record of the celebration occurs in accounts of the city of Dordrecht in the year 1360, mentioning the cost of festivities organized for school-children. After the Reformation the celebration of the Saint's anniversary shook the conscience of the Protestants: several cities condemned it as superstitious, as an evil remnant of popery, and the fabrication of sweets with traditional shapes was forbidden as inducing to idolatry. Of course, these fears of misguided religious sentiments as a force behind the popular feast were ridiculously far-fetched; the well-known picture of Jan Steen in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam amply shows the worldly spirit in which the day was celebrated at that time. The Protestant theologians of the seventeenth century could do as little harm to the popularity of St Nicholas as the nineteenth-century scientists who unmasked him as a Christianized Wodan, complete with the horse Kleipnir and the spear Gungmir, and Black Peter as the faithful Eckart.

The presentation of letters on St Nicholas is already mentioned in the early nineteenth century; probably it constituted a part of the amorous implications of

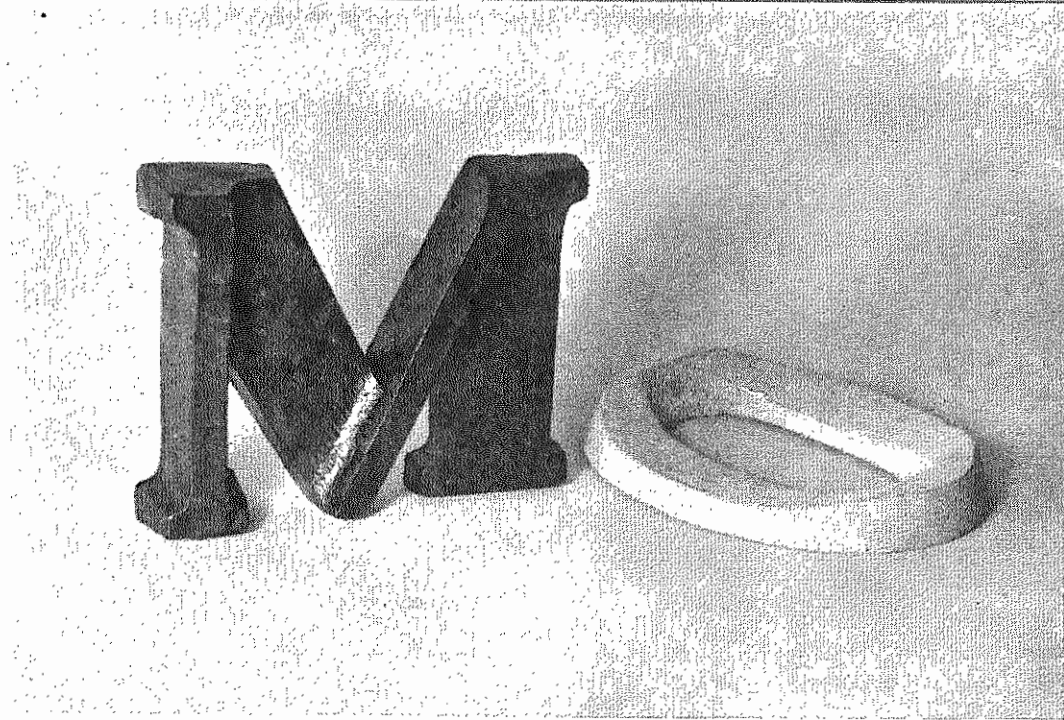
the gifts, which thus become – to use a term of modern sales promotion – more ‘personalized’. They were then solely baked in pastry, as they are still produced on a large scale today, constructed of thick bars with ground almond fillings, measuring about twelve inches. Solid chocolate was unknown at that time; it was not developed until later in the century and, as far as I can make out, it was not cast in fancy shapes until the nineties. The Dutch chocolate industry being highly developed – soluble cocoa powder was invented by Caspar van Houten in the year 1828 – the use of chocolate for the traditional St Nicholas letters was an obvious move.

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Today Holland is still the only country where these chocolate letters are made; exports are growing, but only to Dutch settlers in USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, etc., who cling to their old customs, and St Nicholas is the one and only day on which they are bought. In order to build up sufficient stocks for that day, production in the chocolate factories starts around Easter and is carried on until the end of November. The letters are produced according to a certain fount scheme,



A six-inch mould and the 150-gramme letter cast from it. There are also eight-inch moulds for 250-gramme letters.



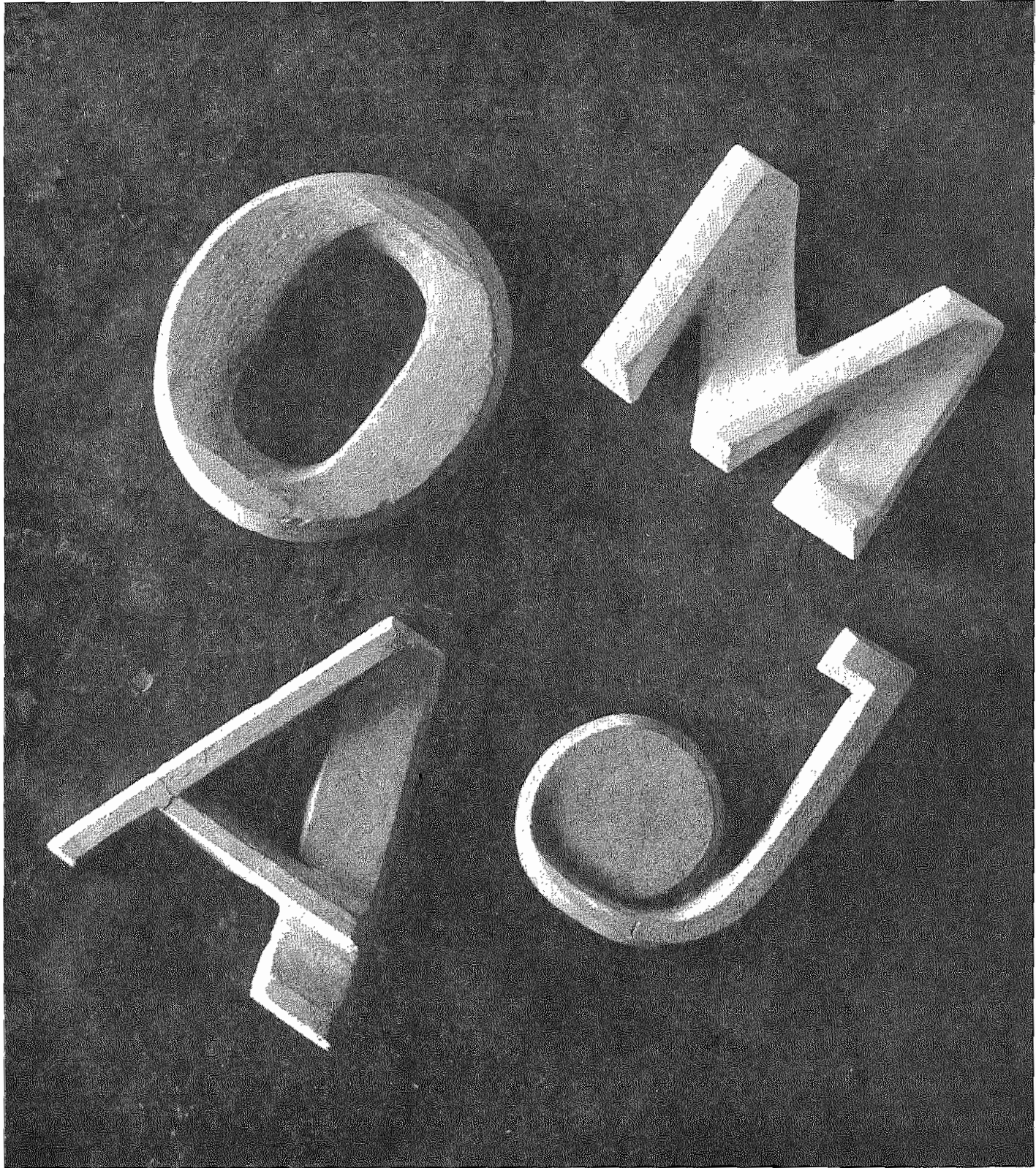
like printing types. The J occurs most frequently, because the names equivalent to John, Johanna, James, and Jack (plus their variants) seem to be the most popular. Next comes the M, which is in steadily increasing demand, especially since two of the Dutch royal princesses were christened Margriet and Marijke respectively. Third is A; apparently Anna is less popular than Mary and the names of the princesses. If the demand for J is put at 200, the fount scheme presents the following picture:

200	J
165	M
155	A
125	H
100	B C G T W
66	D E F K L N P R S V
33	O

Only at special request I U Q Y Z

The moulds in which the letters are cast are made exclusively by one factory, the Vormenfabriek in Tilburg, which is one of the largest manufacturers of moulds for the chocolate industry in the world. Formerly they were produced by soldering strips of tin plate together; nowadays galvanic processes are used. Casting chocolate is an exacting process. Both the fluid chocolate mass and the mould have to be kept strictly at a constant temperature of 32°C; any deviation in temperature will cause irregularities in the flow and cooling of the mass, which in turn will result in cracks, streaks of different colour, uneven surface, etc. Narrow counters with sharp angles, such as in M W K, etc., will have the same effect: they obstruct the flow of the chocolate and withdraw relatively more of its temperature. At such critical spots in the mould the sidewalls are rounded off and they are given a much more pronounced conical shape. The bottom of the mould, which forms the face of the letters, is finely ribbed nowadays in order to provide a more regular cooling; incidentally this delicate ripple pattern makes the letter look less hard. Structurally weak characters (such as the K, the limbs of which were prone to breaking when the letter was ejected from the mould) receive disproportionally heavy limbs. This is deplored, but accepted; artistic considerations count less than the percentage of loss through breakage and anyhow the letter, being so delicious, is very short-lived.

Models in clay for a new type of chocolate letter, designed by Simon Pronk (copyright reserved).
Height about three inches; weight 100 grammes.



The most important factors in the design of the chocolate letters, however, are not the casting techniques, but the sales tactics. As every member of the family must have his or her own initials, the demands of justice (and peace in the household) require that everybody receives the same amount of chocolate. Not only must it *be* the same, it must also *look* the same, and moreover it must look like a *large* amount. The chocolate manufacturers implore the mould-maker to supply these uniform weights, which simplify their accounting and packaging problems and which provide the only right solution for the harassed housewife who must ensure that James does not feel cheated in comparison with William and Mary.

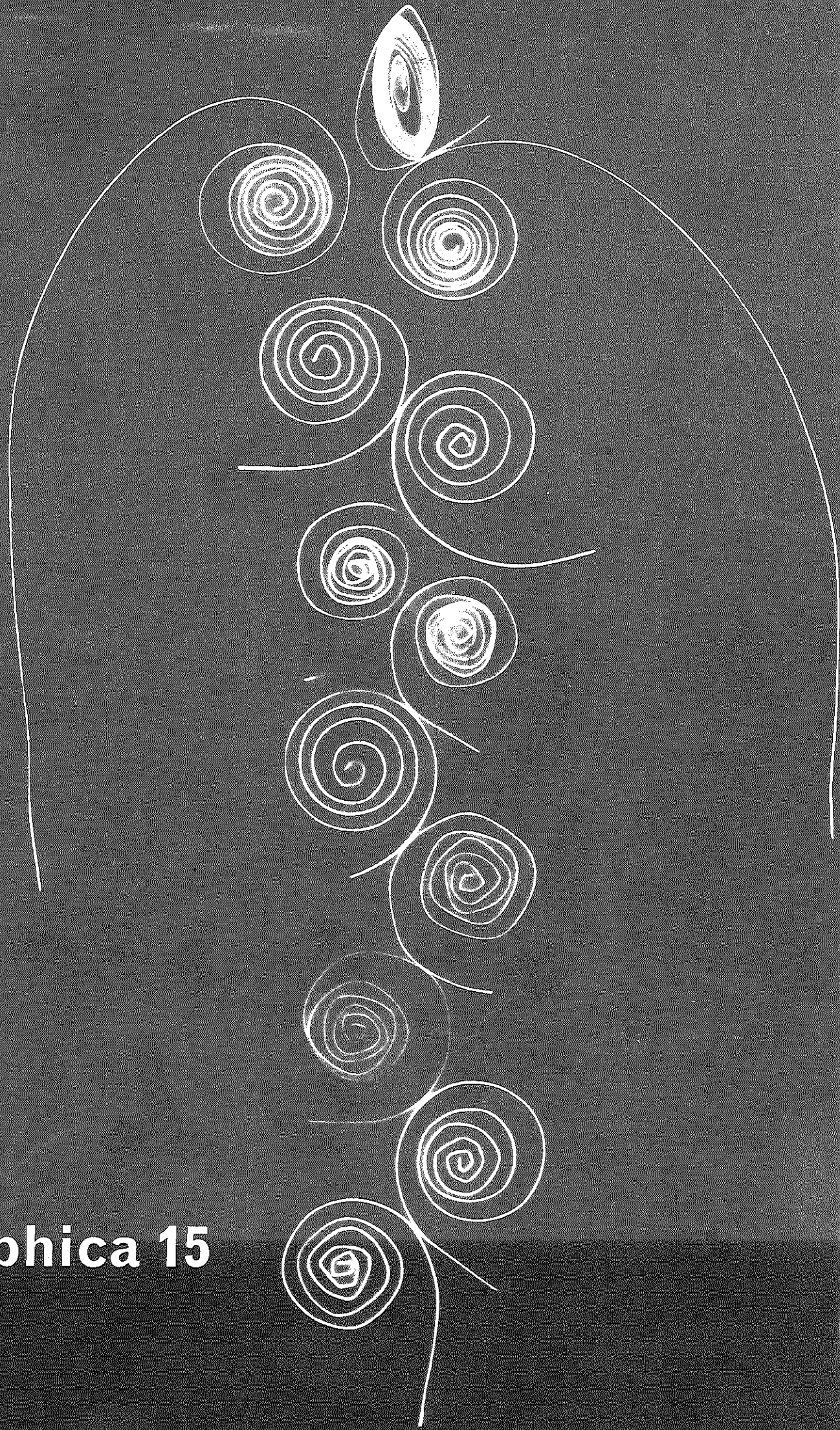
This is a serious problem for the mould-maker. He solves it in the same way as the typewriter: by condensing the wide letters and expanding the narrow ones. Also he makes the former less high than the latter. The contents of the mould have to be calculated very accurately in order to obtain the weight desired; this also depends on the specific gravity of the chocolate used, which varies for every manufacturer.

But it is impossible to achieve standard weights without resorting to grotesque distortions, so usually the J is lighter than the others; sometimes W and M are heavier. This is perhaps the main reason why the regular manufacture of the I has been discontinued – the Isaac's and Irene's could never forgive that their letters were the smallest and cheapest of all, nor could the purchasers of the household foodstuffs ever overcome their feeling of guilt in this respect. One manufacturer has evaded the problem by inserting solid, square blocks of chocolate in cardboard boxes, with the lids of the boxes cut out in the shape of a letter, but this clever solution is regarded as cheating: one should get a real letter.

Formerly the usual shape of chocolate letters was sans-serif. The mould-maker called it 'bamboo', because the characters, including the round ones, were built up from straight pieces, semi-circular in cross-section – easy to make by sawing tubes in two, though difficult to keep flawless in the joints. Since the thirties the favour of the public has shifted towards narrow bold Egyptian, trapezoid in cross-section, which looks much heavier than sans-serif; it is now the standard design of practically all the chocolate manufacturers.

Still, in this field of fancy sweets there is a constant drive for novelties. Progressive industrial designers have tackled this national problem. One of them, Simon Pronk, has come up with an interesting solution, in which the flat shapes have been replaced. The various parts of the letter have been put at different levels, providing an attractive play of lights and shades. Pronk has balanced the weights in such a way that the letters can stand upright without toppling over, the bottom sidewall being as little conical as the casting process will allow. The design has not proceeded beyond the experimental stage; for one reason because the models, being so deep, are less high than the current Egyptians and therefore have less 'sales-appeal'. But they show, as Maximilien Vox has done too, how three-dimensional letter designs offer many possibilities of fascinating shapes and patterns. If these can be combined with the right impression of size and weight, they might lead to great developments in chocolate typography.

The author wishes to express his thanks for the kind assistance lent him by the managements of Droste's Chocolate Works in Haarlem and of the Vormenfabriek in Tilburg, and by Mr S. Pronk, Broek in Waterland.



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