Welcome to the Sign and Design Symposium. The event took place in the Music Room.
My name is Jan Ziolkowski. I greet you partly in my capacity as a professor of Harvard University, since I am colleague to one of the moving forces behind this event, to a moderator, and to a few speakers, and partly as a medievalist, because that predisposes me to an interest in the topic, but far more as director of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Dumbarton Oaks is well known to most but not all of you. Regardless of whether you have been here dozens of times or are paying your inaugural visit, I wish to welcome you heartily to a place that is touted as a paradise by many who spend time in it. I hope very much that we are poised for two and a half days of collegial camaraderie, intellectual fervor, and scholarly bliss.

We are here for an exploration that brings together a couple of areas or modes, the verbal and the visual, that are too often kept asunder. Our topic is “Sign and Design: Script as Image in a Cross-Cultural Perspective (300-1600 CE).”

The topic, relating to the fusion of image and letter, takes us back to glory days of Dumbarton Oaks, the early decades after its founding in 1940, when art and literature, art history and philology, ruled the roost, especially in Byzantine studies. I said “glory days” and not “the glory days,” out of a conviction that although we have our work cut out for us, we can make our own times as remarkable for art history and literature. Right now we are in a very special phase in this institution: talk with the staff and fellows, look at the books, dwell upon the special exhibitions, see the library, visit the gardens, and you will realize that magical things are happening.

One way to achieve the greater effect that many of us long to attain is to break out of the narrow specializations that the system of professorial advancement fostered in the second half of the twentieth century. For me as a medievalist it has been striking to see how often the greats of Byzantine studies—and because of the times, they were usually great men—walked both sides of the aisles, meaning perhaps especially East and West, medieval and Byzantine, but also meaning visual and verbal.
This symposium offers us a marvelous occasion on which to attain meaningful exchange across fields. The word *interdisciplinary*, so beloved of administrators and often so meaningless, is about ninety years old. Let us take the nonagenarian and give it new life.

We have gathered together Byzantinists who work with Greek, Pre-Columbianists with glyphs, medievalists with Latin, Islamicists with Arabic, Hebraicists with Hebrew, and scholars of the ancient Near East.

Our speakers and moderators reflect the aspirations Dumbarton Oaks has had since its foundation to serve four communities in the three fields for which it has existed, namely, Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies. Those four communities are international, national, DC-area, and Harvard University.

We can achieve all these aims and make magic things happen, but it will take work. Speakers have to stay on time, with the help of moderators. Like members of the audience, they have to listen carefully to each other. We have to be respectful of the expertise that everyone else has, but at the same time we have to muster courage to speak, to risk showing ignorance before those who know more, and to strive to think with new flexibility and openness about our own areas of expertise.

Marvelous things are going to happen. For them we owe thanks, for intellectual conception, to the organizers, whom at Dumbarton Oaks we call, in best Greek fashion, symposiarchs: Brigitte Bedos-Rezak of New York University and Jeffrey Hamburger of Harvard University.

Beyond them we are indebted above all to Francisco Lopez, in my office. The director’s office has been understaffed since the end of August. Francisco has stepped up in an amazing way to keep this symposium on track. He will be flanked by various other members of the Dumbarton Oaks staff, all of whom I will not name—but I hope they realize that I observe and appreciate. One other word of thanks is to the executive director, Yota Batsaki.

Often the appearance of effortlessness results from great effort. That is the case with events in this little Eden. The appearance of serenity is in some ways deceptive, since we are a bustling facility with a staff of 100, spread across ten departments. In addition to the scholarly areas of Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies.\(^3\)
Studies, we have libraries and archives, publications, finances, gardens, security, and facilities. We have a museum and gardens that are open to the public, and a large fellowship program. To reconcile all of these different operations and demands falls heavily on our Facilities and Security Staff, and I hope that you will be understanding of the complexities to some of the procedures and routes we follow.

But let me not end with the focus on practicalia. Between now and Sunday afternoon I want us to reach for new findings and insights. I want us to reevaluate old assumptions about our own fields in the light of the new ones to which we are exposed. In short, I want us to learn. The founders, Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss, who gave their beautiful gardens and their collections of equally beautiful objects, established this as a center for higher research so that all of this could happen.