

THE ART OF *Calligraphy*

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'Like dance, the pleasure that calligraphy gives the eye lies in the excellence and aptness of its rhythm and gesture.'
(Andrew van der Merwe)

The ancient tradition and art of calligraphy came under the spotlight earlier this year (April), when the Cape Friends of Calligraphy celebrated their twentieth anniversary. Beautifully-written work of local calligraphists were exhibited in various libraries, such as Fish Hoek and Meadowridge. Calligraphic art of exceptional quality was also exhibited in the Sanlam Gallery, Bellville. The exhibition consisted mostly of local talent with few contributions from Belgium, the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA). During the month of April accomplished calligraphers passed on their skills at workshops across the Peninsula. To coincide with the celebration, the South African National Library arranged a guided tour for visitors to view the exhibition of Medieval manuscripts (dating from 9 A.D.) in its holdings.

The Cape Friends of Calligraphy was started in 1984 to promote the art of beautiful writing. Interest in and enthusiasm for calligraphy have been encouraged, workshops and seminars arranged and regular publications distributed. The Friends have formed strong links with other calligraphic groups and societies within South Africa and abroad. Anyone interested to join is welcome - there are no requirements regarding writing skills or experience.

The term calligraphy originated from two Greek words, meaning *beautiful* and *writing/drawing*. Calligraphy does not necessarily have to be beautiful to be of quality, but according to American calligrapher, Julian Waters, 'true calligraphy visually captures the spirit of the text'. It differs from art in that the calligrapher 'get urges to paint things people say' (Andrew van der Merwe). 'Geometry can produce legible letters', according to Paul Standard, 'but art alone makes them beautiful. Art begins

where geometry ends, and imparts to letters a character transcending mere measurement.' Calligraphy is 'structured movement, not static form' (Andrew van der Merwe). Modern calligraphy also celebrates art for its own sake, where the letters may become indecipherable, or an alphabet on its own is arranged beautifully, when other criteria than communication take preference.

Lettering refers to drawn, built-up or retouched forms. These include logos, headlines and most work for reproduction. After many rough sketches a logo may be freely executed in pure, calligraphic strokes and afterwards carefully modified so that the different elements balance well. Forms may be *built up* (additive) to produce a sculptural effect, or *retouched* with white paint (subtractive) to conceal parts of the letters, to reach the desired effect. Lettering may also include monumental carving, typeface design and calligraphy.

History of calligraphy

Before the printing press was developed, each copy of a book was written by a scribe in a scriptorium. All documents, letters, maps, labels, inscription, gravestones and books were originally written, decorated, painted and engraved by hand. Letter forms were shaped by the tools used to make them: stylus on wax or clay, chisel on stone, reed or quill and ink on vellum or parchment or, more recently, the flat brush on paper. A rich heritage of lettering styles resulted.

Main styles of calligraphy

Western (Roman)

The art of calligraphy started as pictures on cave walls. These representations of objects and symbols developed into the stylised hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, used around 3500 B.C. The first alphabet was developed by the Phoenicians around 1000 B.C. and passed on to every port by this seafaring nation. The alphabet was further developed by the Greeks, and then the Romans, around 850 B.C. As the Roman empire spread over most of the Western world, Latin as the official language became the language of the churches of Europe in

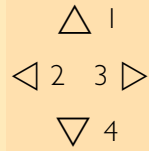
the Middle Ages. Monks transcribed texts from the Bible into decorative books for high-ranking church members and royalty. (Business documents were not decorated.) Because paper was expensive, the narrow, Gothic style was developed to enable scribes to fit more words on a single line.

The printing press was invented in the fifteenth century, using the Gothic script. Books could be duplicated much faster, but handwriting skill was still in great demand for everyday letters, formal correspondence and invitations. During the Renaissance calligraphy flourished alongside the arts. The Italic script was developed at this time and became popular throughout Europe.

Initially the bulky printing press produced course letters. With the development of copperplates for printing in the 17th century, finer lines, better suited to the Italic script, could be printed. As a result, penmanship declined steeply.

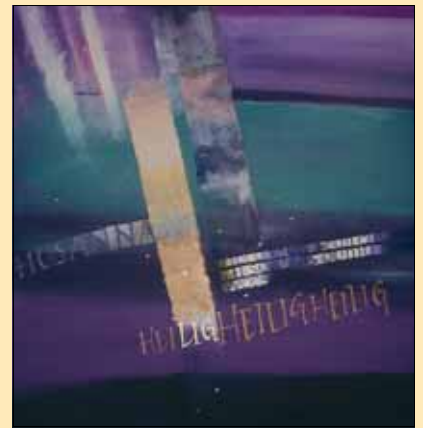
During the 19th century the flat-edged pen was replaced by the steel pen and fountain pen. The rounded tip of these pens made the special curves of calligraphy more difficult to achieve. Fortunately the decline in the skill of calligraphy was turned around when William Morris reintroduced the flat-edged pen and elevated writing to an art form. Calligraphy died as a craft and rose as an art. Morris pointed out that calligraphy expresses the 'humanity of the maker and truth of the materials'.

The variety of scripts, lasered electronically in an instant by the computer of the 20th century, once again provided competition for calligraphy. Yet letterforms on computers are still designed by humans. Accomplished calligrapher, Julian Waters (USA), teaches letterform design to graphic design students, combining both calligraphy and digital design. Many typefaces on our computers were designed by Herman Zapf (USA). For the user, however, the computer is just another tool, which cannot be manipulated to capture the impulses and emotions of a moment. Calligraphic script, however, is flourishing today, with calligraphic societies throughout America and Europe. While machines do the boring



Medieval illuminated manuscripts at the South African National Library

1. **Gospel book**, 9th century, in Latin on vellum (28 cm), copied in an area West of Paris; possibly linked with the great Carolinian Centre of Tours, between AD 875- 900. A thesis was based on this book, by RJJ Grove
2. **The Bible** in Latin, 14th century, probably Scandinavian origin
3. **Lindesfarne Gospels**, by Janet Backhouse (book). The original is in the British museum and the library has a copy on CD-Rom
4. Facsimile dated 1789



Above: Heleen de Haas. **Heilig, Heilig, Heilig**. Mixed media, handmade paper and gold leaf on canvas

Left: Exhibition of calligraphy at Fish Hoek Library

Below left: Andrew van der Merwe. **Veld collections**. Decoration on porcelain ware in Goggagoed range

Below: Dick Beasley (USA). **Alphabet design**. 1991. Water colour, gouache and water proof ink



work, handwriting has become associated with festivity and pleasure. (This was evident during the workshops, where activities such as 'writing on the beach' were offered.)

Arabic

The cursive Arabic script is written from right to left and formed by eighteen distinct shapes, which combine to produce twenty-eight letters. Although it developed differently to Western calligraphy, Arabic letters had many of the same Greek and Phoenician influences. There are six major scripts in Arabic calligraphy that represent the various artistic styles: Farsi, Naskh, Kufi, Deewani, Req'aa and Thuluth. Calligraphy has played a major roll in Islamic art as a result of the ban on depicting animals and humans.

Chinese

The Chinese developed a complicated writing technique with more than 1 500 characters around 1500 B.C. The unique symbol for each word used, was more difficult to mechanise than the Western alphabet, so that calligraphy remained a traditional art form for centuries. The Chinese calligrapher, Wang His-chih, echoes the respect Chinese have for this craft, saying calligraphy expresses itself above all forms and gestures, elevating the soul and illuminating the feelings. Extensive practice and meditation precede the seemingly spontaneous brush strokes made by Chinese calligraphers.

Modern calligraphers start with many years of historical study and technical practise. They learn from both historical scribes and modern day experts, keeping up with developments in the field. Although it is important to learn from the past, the final product must be relevant to today's world. Knowledge of fine arts, music and graphic design is necessary as well. Many artists do much mental pre-planning to fully understand the text, before deciding how to display it in its full beauty. After much trial and error and practice, the final product is often done spontaneously and in quick gestures, as the Chinese calligraphers do.

An artist's skill and personal style develop through hard work and dedication. According to Andrew van der Merwe it takes the same time and discipline to become an accomplished calligrapher than to play the violin well. Most people can learn to do calligraphy, as long as they have the necessary patience and determination.

The materials used in modern calligraphy push the boundaries of this art far wider

than the traditional craft suggested. Calligraphers participating in the exhibition at the Sanlam Art Gallery used oils, gouache, gold leaf on textured and raised chalk ground, and gesso on masonite, india ink, coloured pencils, acrylic on primed cotton canvas, glazes to scribe letters on pottery, et cetera.

The Cape Calligraphy Teachers' Guild was formed to raise standards of teaching calligraphy. Teachers benefit and are inspired by being exposed to new insights and the experience of other teachers in the field. During the celebrations in April, some of the workshops offered were held in the calligraphers' studios. They included Hilary Adams (Constantia); Di Breeze (Fish Hoek); Hette Coetzee (Bellville); Heleen de Haas (Eversdal, winner of several international awards and co-editor of the **Calligrapher's teacher's manual** - she also does calligraphic murals); Rika Potgieter (Kuilsrivier); Linda Sealy (Founder member of Cape Friends of Calligraphy and Teachers Guild); and Andrew van der Merwe (Plumstead). Many of them are involved in freelance work, for example, commercially-applied lettering and calligraphy (branding, packaging, book covers), citations for political figures, awards for businesses, heraldry, et cetera.

At a time when a great deal of writing is done with the computer or printing press, calligraphy is very much alive as an art form, creating beauty and feeling through the creative arrangement of curves, spaces, colour and rhythm of lines. In the visual expression of words, the calligrapher applies both precision and spontaneity; both heart and mind, discipline and freedom and the result can be static or dynamic. The uniqueness of calligraphy elevates it above normal handwriting or print. The contemporary calligraphist has the freedom to interpret letter shapes of the past in a new, fresh way.

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