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ABSTRACT

Expressing concern that interest in hand lettering and calligraphy has diminished due to limited career applications, seventeen U.S. master calligraphers who teach or have taught calligraphy were interviewed. The calligraphers made six suggestions that have implications for educators: (1) italic based alphabets, rather than the current forms of penmanship, should be taught in elementary grades since there is some evidence suggesting that learning this calligraphy form improves self esteem and academic performance among young children labeled unteachable; (2) a clarification of calligraphy standards is necessary for the recognition of calligraphy as a unique art form; (3) calligraphy is a valid way to learn principles of design; (4) study of the historic development of letter forms contributes to general understanding of the history of Western Civilization; (5) calligraphy skills are a useful resource for professional work and contribute to a sensitivity of industry's needs; (6) calligraphy should be offered as an optional course in the foundation year program. (MM)

Looking at the Need for Courses in Hand Lettering and Calligraphy in Post Secondary Institutions Grants Art Degrees

By

Dr. Anne Gregory

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Calligraphy and lettering have the potential to be among the most important and interesting foundation courses in an art curriculum, but most artists and art teachers have found their own training in these subjects to be boring or without artistic relevance. Beginning students, considering the ready availability, versatility, and low cost of press-letter type and mechanical printing, may think it a waste of time to include such courses in their program of study. It takes good teaching from a person who has a skilled and sensitive hand and who understands the twenty-six letters as elements of design to demonstrate why art students should still be exposed to lettering and calligraphy early in their art training as part of their work in basic design. Included here are the ideas of recognized American graphic artists who use calligraphy and hand lettering in their work, and who some time during their careers have taught and lectured on these subjects.

One of the major objectives of teaching calligraphy is to keep the art form alive, and one of the reasons for interviewing contemporary graphic artists who do calligraphy is to learn from their mastery, since many of the best are retired teachers and the time to learn from their wisdom and experience is almost gone. Looking at the place in contemporary curriculum planning for courses in lettering and calligraphy and sifting through the ideas of scribes and applying them to art and design education was the basis for this research.

In New York City, only a few graphic artists now make their living principally from calligraphy and letter design. The need to know how to do good lettering and calligraphy as a skill has diminished, and few students will prepare for a career in this limited field. It is therefore not surprising that few are interested in ever taking courses in calligraphy and lettering during their art school training except as an elective subject. Because of the declining interest in these subjects as a priority for preparing for an art career, many art curricula have dropped them from their required foundation year course of study.

Conversely, however, the recent stir of interest in calligraphy as a popular art form has been fostered by groups in various parts of the United States such as the Society of Scribes in New York City, which currently presents exhibitions for the public and offers workshops.

The traditional concept of calligraphy and hand lettering as skills to be used only for formal occasions and special documents has been changed dramatically. Some calligraphers still are mainly commercial illustrators and compete to do work that collectors buy. Many allow calligraphy to influence their creative work and related graphic design. There is also a trend among these contemporary scribes to adapt their work to evoke the mood of the text being rendered. These graphic artists who use calligraphy in their work who were interviewed for this research believe that few of the many art schools in the country offer good training in this area of graphics and suggest a reintroduction of courses in hand lettering and calligraphy in art education curriculum focusing on their contemporary relationship to American graphic design and students' needs.

Included here are the ideas of seventeen major American scribes representing different areas of the country, who use calligraphy and hand lettering in their work and who some time during their careers have taught and lectured on the subject. They were questioned about their ideas on teaching, as well as about their own education and work. Those interviewed were selected on the basis of their recognized contributions as calligraphers and professional artists and they have all had work included in exhibitions and publications. Most have spent many years in the commercial art field as graphic artists and have developed courses and taught calligraphy and related graphic design in art schools and universities. Scribes who were interviewed included Alice Koeth, Paul Freeman, Frances Manola, Martin Oberstein, Paul Standard, Jeanyee Wong, and Lili Cassel Wronker of New York City; Howard Glasser of North Dartmouth, Massachusetts; Edward Karr of Boston, Massachusetts; Alexander Nesbitt of Newport, Rhode Island; Lloyd Reynolds of Portland, Oregon; Sheila Waters of

Gaithersburg, Maryland; James Hayes of Woodland Park, Colorado; Arthur Davies of Colorado Springs, Colorado; Maury Nemoy of Los Angeles, California; Thomas Ingmire of San Francisco, California and Arne Wolf of Berkeley, California.

Those interviewed appeared very concerned about the state of courses in calligraphy and related graphics in art school programs and they presented many good reasons why such courses should not be eliminated in a professional design program or any other kind of art curriculum. The following is a summary of the primary reasons derived from the interviews which might change the mind of art curriculum administrators about including such a course in their programs.

It was revealed that master calligraphers who teach are interested not only in the variety of post-secondary programs available to adults, but are concerned about how the alphabet is taught in the elementary grades. As a group they all believe that there is a need to reform these methods. Most of them favor teaching the italic based alphabet or a related simple modern hand in the early grades in place of the current American forms of penmanship. They recommended creating teacher-training programs in schools of art and education to implement a change in the way handwriting is taught as quickly as possible. Many have already contributed much time to assisting with programs for elementary age children and supervising pilot programs.

They agreed that being able to write well and legibly helps people of all ages develop considerable self esteem. A design course which includes a review of handwriting in a post-secondary foundation art program can contribute a lot to the improvement of the person's self image and perhaps help him later when applying for a job. Lloyd Reynolds had demonstrated this with his program for younger students in the Portland schools. He found that problem children in the schools who were labeled unteachable, learned the italic handwriting method and became model students. They were praised for their beautiful handwriting, and school administrators and teachers found it hard to believe that it had really changed them. Years ago when Reynolds started teaching italic handwriting to high school teachers, a number of them substituted calligraphy for the abstract design course they were

expected to teach because they could do much of the same thing and there was an added advantage.

> The child had a functional craft to work with at the time he was learning design. He could write out a science or social science paper, or a math problem and it would look good. He could hand them around and show the principal and it built up the child's self esteem (Gregory, 1978, p. 89).

What has worked with younger students certainly can hold true for older students.

All of the group interviewed believed that there must be greater clarification of what good calligraphy is. It must be defined with respect to contemporary movements in the arts and to commercial design fields, and it must come to stand by itself as an art form worthy of public exhibition. Currently, standards are nebulous and this is of great concern among those interviewed, especially since calligraphy has left the realm of the professional art school program and has now become popularized. Establishing clear standards and communicating them to calligraphers and teachers of the art is considered extremely important if quality of work is to improve. It is essential for those who study calligraphy to learn to distinguish good work from mediocre, and to develop ability for self-criticism. At the present time, some of the members of the Society of Scribes in New York City are making an effort to clarify standards and it is hoped they will be communicated to teachers of calligraphy courses in art curriculums.

Another good reason for including calligraphy and the study of letter forms in design foundation programs is that they are an excellent way to learn the principles of basic design. It is certainly not the only way, but as Alice Koeth, Sheila Waters, Jeanyee Wong and Edward Karr have discussed in their dialogues, all aspiring commercial and fine artists need to study some kind of letter design and calligraphy since it teaches valuable information about proportions, weights, and elements of basic design which transfer to other kinds of artistic problem solving. In commercial art one is still required to make rough layouts, and Karr stressed the importance of knowing the anatomy of lettering as it helps to develop taste that a good art director or commercial

artist needs. Although Alexander Nesbitt did not see students majoring in letter design or calligraphy as a subject, he sees it as a very valid approach to the study of design.

> The reason for dropping it out of a lot of college, university and fine art schools is not sound. They consider it as bypassed and that the computer is going to do all the typography to be done. Essentially they lose track of the fact that everything that is done except the photographic typography was drawn by an individual (Gregory, 1978, p. 90).

All agree that the study of calligraphy and letters helps increase the design vocabulary and artistic sensitivity of the student.

Another important aspect to consider is the contribution to the student's general understanding of the History of Western Civilization which such a course can make. As Martin Oberstein points out, the reason that he stresses the historical development of letter forms in his courses is that the student learns that during different periods of history some kind of letter form dominates.

> For example, in the 18th Century, British Roundhand dominated the scene, and like the later Spencerian script, finally disappeared. Since the 15th Century, the italic has been around and seems to have a contemporary appeal to each period. For a couple of centuries it did disappear from the limelight, but it never truly died...There is value in knowledge about something such as this which lives down over the centuries (Gregory, 1978, p. 88).

Lili Cassel Wronker and Sheila Waters also agree that there is value in learning something about the History of Western Civilization through historical study of calligraphy and letter development.

Calligraphy and related design courses can be a useful resource for the student's later professional work. To make the course meaningful to the student it must be taught to objectives which are sensitive to the needs of industry and the world of the future where the artist will work and perhaps teach. The course would be of no value if it concerned itself only with eclectic ideas and provided no practical application for the student upon leaving his program of study.

Howard Glasser agrees with this and feels that educational program planning must develop an awareness of what will happen in graphic arts of the future, and then teach to those objectives.

He observes that at both amateur and professional levels, calligraphic forms are backing the trends of current graphic art work. Viewing the whole contemporary publishing industry as finished, he feels that what the computer and technology has done is to make possible the way to reproduce things on equipment without much skill. A secretary in an office can do fairly good quality printing job on the new machines and people will want to learn how to do their own hand lettering and writing for reproduction.

> The long range future is much more imaginative than the kind of so called contemporary design ideas of our time that do not want to change...We will be bringing the art back to more of an every man activity where people will have the need to develop their own aesthetic...not on the amateurish level, to execute and to select really efficient, good and expressive graphics (Gregory, 1978, p. 91).

He believes there will be a greater need for people to learn graphics and this should be taken into account when planning future curriculums in art schools.

Several of those interviewed suggest that calligraphy and related design could certainly be offered as an optional course in the foundation year program. Paul Freeman and Frances Manola are two who felt that the course should be made available to the students, but as an elective option. Paul considered it a "loaded" question because of his own personal involvement in calligraphy and letter design.

> On a realistic level the answer to whether it should be a requirement has to be no. I do not believe a student should take anything he does not want to take. The thing they have to be given is the basic handwriting course, not letter design which comes later in their program. Calligraphy is not a child's game. You start painting at a certain age, but you do not see kids who paint letters. They paint cowboys and indians...Being involved with a letter form is very sophisticated. I think it should be an optional course, but it should be made available (Gregory, 1978, p. 91).

Frances Manola felt that the lack of interest administrators have observed in students toward calligraphy and related design was due mainly to the way the courses were being taught, and not the subject matter. All those questioned hope to see a reawakening of interest on the part of the art schools towards including a basic lettering and calligraphy course somewhere in their programs.

Reference

Gregory, E. A. Twelve selected American contemporary calligraphers: their teaching methods and philosophies (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College, 1978). Dissertation Abstracts International, 1978, 39, 3308A. (University Micorfilms No. 7822047).

Footnote

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