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The Spencerian Key to Practical Penmanship  
Prepared by HC Spencer (1875)

## CHAPTER 1.

### THEORY OF PENMANSHIP.

THE theory which explains and limits the practice of Penmanship, and at the same time serves as a suitable measure of attainment in the art, is exceedingly simple. Its primary feature is that with the penman, as with the painter and the sculptor, there must ever be as the indispensable condition of any eminent success, a clear and vivid perception of those forms and combinations which he undertakes to reproduce in the exercise of his art. In other words, he must have a definite ideal.

This, indeed, is what takes Penmanship quite out of the circle of arts merely mechanical. This gives it dignity as an intellectual pursuit. This imparts to its prosecution something of that generous impulse that inspires the votaries of the other arts. It matters not, indeed, for all ordinary purposes, whether the penman's ideal or model be an original conception or something generated in the brain of another. Whatever its origin, however, it must be as clear to his own mind as if a creature of his own imagination. This is an essential preliminary; for every defect of conception will show a corresponding defect of execution. Penmanship, thus regarded, immediately takes rank among the finest of educational agencies. It puts into full requisition all the higher powers of the mind. Under this impulse the faculty of perception is called into vigorous exercise, memory is made more tenacious of its treasures, judgment is at work in determining relations, proportions, and distance; while taste, ever alive to the forms of beauty, whether in nature or in art, is busy with all those nicer discriminations of shade, color, outline, and finish which awaken so powerfully the sense of pleasure.

No education, therefore, we venture to affirm, can be considered complete which does not include a knowledge of this art, both theoretical and practical. Theoretical, we say, as well as practical; for any course or system of instruction in the art that barely furnishes copies for imitation, without revealing the principles that enter into their composition, fails utterly to meet the mental requirements of more than about five in a hundred of those for whose use or benefit it is professedly intended.

How could this be otherwise? The vast majority of persons, it is well known, are naturally so deficient in the power of imitation that any attempt to make them skillful penmen without resort to minute description and close analysis, must, from the nature of the case, terminate in failure. This fact is instructive. It suggests the kind of teaching which alone promises success. Accordingly, the theory which we are here considering recognizes these original differences of mental constitution. It proceeds upon the assumption that in teaching this art analysis is necessary as well as synthesis.

The methods indicated by these two words, though precisely opposite in process, both presuppose in the things to which they are applied some particular law or principle of combination in the parts of which it is composed. It is, therefore, not any breaking up or separation of a thing into its parts or constituent elements that constitutes what we call its analysis. The separation must proceed upon some principle, or, at least, in such way as to reveal in the process the nature of the several constituents engaged in the combination. Analysis so conducted is a luminous teacher. It takes things apart, not out of mere childish curiosity, but in order to show how they are held together. It is, indeed, the very key to synthesis. This is the process which takes away from complexity all its forbidding aspect, and invites even the most timid aspirant in art to the free and fearless exercise of his powers.

If in Penmanship, as in other arts that engage the understanding and appeal to the decision of taste, the student is desirous to go beyond the models furnished to his hand, and seek the origin of those forms and combinations which he is called upon to analyze and reproduce in his practice, he will be led immediately to the study of Nature. There they may be seen in infinite diversity of combination. There all the elements of all the letters, in ways without number, enter into the composition of countless objects fitted to delight the eyes of the beholder. The broad and beautiful landscape, that loveliest picture in the gallery of nature, is

full of them. Rock, valley, hill, lake, mountain, and river, waving fields and majestic woods, with all the endless intermingled variety of life and motion that serve so vividly to awaken the sense of beauty, and throw over the spirit the spell of enchantment, all and each abound in originals to him that has the eye to discern them. Would you copy these originals? It is not enough for that purpose merely to take synthetic views to regard objects or any grouping of objects as a whole. They must be dealt with analytically. Their several features must be examined in detail. The lines that bound them, curved or straight, their points of contact and intersection, with all their close and mutual relations, must engage your attention and fix themselves firmly in the mind.

But there is another feature in the theory here under view which is essential to complete success in the practice of the art. The muscles of the arm, hand, and fingers, that is, those muscles which are chiefly concerned in the production of written forms, are well known to be under the direction of the will. They are capable, therefore, of being trained. They may be made, through the medium of the nerves, those mysterious channels of motion and sensation, to work, in such a matter as penmanship, with the utmost precision. How to train the muscles, therefore, and make them habitually efficient in the business of writing, is manifestly among the things indispensable to all worthy proficiency in the art.

The fair inference from the observations which we have submitted on the theory of Penmanship, and the only one, in fact, which deserves attention, is that no system of writing which ignores the scientific basis of the art, and therefore fails, in teaching it, to supply the means of study and practice which alone are suitable to the dignity of an intellectual pursuit, is worthy of the slightest consideration.

Assuming this to be the correct view of the subject, we offer in the following pages a course of instruction founded distinctly upon it. We offer it, however, as no mere experiment, but as a thing already experienced. If the student, whatever his capacity, whatever the original bent of his mind—for we admit flat

"With wise intent

The hand of Nature on peculiar minds  
Imprints a different bias"-

if the student will but be careful to secure suitable models for imitation, subject them rigidly to the test of analysis, and make them his own by careful reconstruction, training the muscles chiefly engaged in the work to the ready and accurate performance of their office, and doing all under the inspiration or impulse that belongs to a liberal art, he can not fail of the highest measure of attainment of which his natural powers are capable.