

STUDIO ENGROSSING

While individual penmen promoted their skills through magazine and mail advertising, in public demonstration, and by means of written correspondence, engrossing artists tended to ply their trade from the more formalized aspect of a business, that is, a studio. At this point, before we delve further into the subject, let us take a moment to define a somewhat confusing issue among calligraphers: this being the difference between illumination and engrossing. By definition, Engrossing is an art form where a body of text, usually congratulatory or memorializing in content, is designed and ornamented with elaborate border treatments and decorative words and letters. Strictly speaking, illumination-as the action of applying burnished gold to the surface of the design or individual letter(s), is a technique commonly used in engrossing. When referring to illumination as the formal name for a style of decorative treatment rendered to a lettered text, it varies from engrossing in several distinct ways. These are:

Historical:

Illumination was a product of the Middle Ages in Europe, most generally referring to the 13th- 16th centuries. Engrossing as an art is primarily American in origin, dating from the late 19th century into the mid-20th century. In 19th-century England, the style of illuminating evolved toward engrossing as newer, non-gothic letterforms grew popular. However, engrossing reached its height as an art form and in popularity in America during the Golden Age of Ornamental Penmanship.

Styles of Decoration:

Illumination was characterized by very colorful detailed borders, boasting stylized floral patterns, imaginary animal and human forms, and often a single extremely ornamental letter. The text of illumination is usually in a heavy bodied Gothic, Celtic, or Uncial alphabet style. Decoration within the body tends to be minimal and of secondary importance to the complex border treatment. Also, the decorative imagery rendered in illumination is frequently of a religious nature.

Engrossing also boasts colorful, detailed borders, but the treatments tend to be somewhat delicate in nature, rather than the heavier-styled borders of illumination. In engrossed works of art, a greater variety of decorative techniques-more modern in origin-are used in the ornamentation. Watercolor washes and shading, stippling, crosshatching, shadowing, photograph illustrations, and hand tooling treatments, especially in gilded areas, are commonly displayed. While the techniques of filigree and foliation were used in illumination, their form took on a more graceful and delicate appearance in engrossing.

Purpose of Content:

Illumination was primarily religious in tone; symbolic illustrations reflected religious doctrine and biblical themes. Engrossing, as previously mentioned, was mainly of a congratulatory or memorializing nature.

THE PROMOTION OF ENGROSSING

Engrossers tended to be a combination of master penman, illustrator and designer. In addition, they frequently were experts in off-hand flourishing. This combination of skills rendered the engrossing artist as a fairly unique artist. In promoting their trade, individual engrossers and formal studios created elaborate advertisements which displayed the name of the artist/studio in a highly ornamental design. Appearing within the design were words stating all the various products and services the agency offered. As there were master penmen in the field of ornamental penmanship, so too, were there master engrossers. In fact, many of the distinguished engrossers were also highly respected master penmen.

At times, the multi-disciplined nature of engrossing caused a degree of bewilderment to exist among the artists in trying to explain their craft. This somewhat confusing idea was once expressed by the man who became known as "America's Dean of Engrossing," William E. Dennis. Dennis was the true epitome of the most skilled artist in all fields of penmanship. His penmanship, off-hand flourishing, engrossing skills and design abilities were of the first order. As a partner of Willis A. Baird, the acknowledged master of engrossers script-and a renowned master engrosser as well-their combined efforts produced some of the most magnificent art pieces of the Golden Age. Yet, while he was a famed authority on the subject of engrossing, Dennis wrote the following in a 1919 issue of the Business Educator: