

The Secret of the Skill of Madarasz

During second set of lessons in Madarasz writing that I took with Warner C Brownfield in 1968, he told me about the actual secret in his style. Brownfield had begged M to let B come down to Knoxville, TN for personal, in the house lessons, one on one. Madarasz refused B's request 2 times during the summer of 1909. Then he did say B could come. It was at this meeting that B was able to really watch and understand how the man wrote.

The skill involved 3 things, two of which everyone in professional penmanship knew they did, and the third Madarasz did for sure, but others may not have known they were doing.

First, on a page of professional ornamental penmanship a single line may contain 5 to 7 words. Those 5 to 7 words are 'created' not just written in a quick cursive form. The letters may look written cursorily but they are drawn carefully, but quickly. The forms are exquisite, even though the viewer thinks they may be commonplace. The forms are perfect samples of the letters of the alphabet. They letters themselves are so perfect the viewer does not know that they are.

That is the quality of a good penmanship, or any style of calligraphy--that it is instantly readable without the viewer even knowing that it is so very readable. The letters, drawn though they are, are not written slowly at all. There are no wiggily lines in the form of the letters. That means those guys wrote somewhat quickly for in faster movement the wiggily lines come out.

Second, the penmen slid the paper often, to the left, with their left hand. The left hand was always on the top of the paper, the forefinger and thumb forming a sideways 'v' around the pen nib of the writer. The professional penman would lift his pen nib off of the paper every two or three LETTERS, slide the paper left, write two or three more LETTERS, slide again, write two or three more LETTERS, slide and repeat. They wrote the entire line with SEVERAL lifts of the pen.

The pen lifts helped them keep uniformity of slant from the beginning of the line to the end of the line. If they did not slide the paper, the angle of slant for the line would change, just a bit, from the first letter in the line to the last letter in the line. The last letter would be more slanted toward the base line than the first. To most viewersthis fact may not be noticeable, but to those professional penman, it would be noticeable. Up to this time with Brownfield, I had thought the entire page, including its sentences were just hurriedly written. I was shocked to learn that seldom were those letters just hurriedly written but that they were created, even to the point that the right margins were vertically in line. I thought these fellows were cheating by lifting the pen. I did not really believe it until Brownfield gave me magnifying glass and there it was. Pen lifts all over the place, but to the naked eye, not detectable.

The third thing Madarasz did is the true secret. The above two items everyone in that day, in professional penmanship, did and knew that

they did it. They lifted the pen, slid the paper frequently for each line of perfect penmanship, both in business writing and ornamental penmanship. The third thing they did not know they did, even though they did it. And that is what Brownfield called the true 'Secret of the Skill of Madarasz.

I will relay the third technique after reviewing W C B notes just a bit. Although it is easy to write it down, the technique may be a bit confusing. Ddelby1@aol.com

Warner C Brownfield of Cleveland Heights, Ohio was the very last student of Louis Madarasz in June 1909. Madarasz had declined WCB request two times before WCB convinced the man to let him come to Bowling Green KY for personal, one-on-one lessons, across the table style. Brownfield said the man smoked when they took a break outside, M's very modest home.

Madarasz wrote very fast WCB noticed first. There was no time for slowness as those boys had to get out a lot of stuff every day. Besides teaching penmanship class, the penmen often addressed envelopes and wrote personal letters inviting students to attend the school. They would go to the post office with arm loads of envelopes each day. Most penmen who did a lot of work, wrote fast but not so fast that they lost control of the pen and its ink. Additionally, writing with speed kept the wiggles out of the lines.

Madarasz retained control of his writing with his little finger. Brownfield noticed that Madarasz would use a wonderful, fluid arm motion to make the capitals. In the small letters he would often extend his fingers up or down for the swelling loop letters. In order to get accurate, uniform letters Madarasz used his little finger for the support of his hand. At times the little finger would merely slide over the top of the paper, making every letter the pen nib made. Other times, as in small 'l' the little finger rested as if 'a nail were through it to the paper'. This little finger rest was his secret. It gave his hand a steadiness that helped him make such wonderful small letters and especially his small 's' which is a true font designer's delight.