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## Women in Calligraphy

By CJ Hollandsworth (gender female)

Is there anyone serious about calligraphy who has not winced when someone says, "Oh, calligraphy? My sister does that." Yet, a quick glance at the membership roles of any society quickly verifies that many more sisters are doing calligraphy than are brothers, husbands, and fathers. There is a tendency to look down on calligraphy as something only women are interested in, because it is viewed in the art community as little more than glorified handwriting.

This presents a tremendous challenge to the women (and men) who find in calligraphy a medium of expression that is complete, personal, and culturally grounded in 2,000 years of tradition. To rise above the classification of amateurism, it helps to know the origin of some of the problems we face. Without doubt, the majority of scribes in the manuscript era were men, notwithstanding many identifiable women. Why is it that now, in the midst of a tremendous flowering of interest in calligraphy, the main constituency is women?

The groundwork for the present-day operation of the calligraphy field was laid in the English Victorian era. William Morris, responding to a general perception of the decline in handicrafts and the ugliness of commercially produced household items, initiated what is now known as the Arts and Crafts movement. The primary focus of his work was the book and the home, which was now occupied by a new economic class of people. Wealth was no longer held in the hands of a very few-usually royal-persons. A strong upper middle class, in which the husband worked and the wife stayed home and ran the household and raised the children, was becoming firmly established. These women had a large amount of leisure time, a situation unprecedented for the gender. However, the climate of the time tended toward a view of women as "not serious" in any endeavor, and most women-whether they liked it or not were victims of that perception.

The Victorian era had an established notion of amateurism, which in many respects has been discredited in our times. For example, the first Olympic games in 1896 were dominated by the upper classes who made rules to prevent members of the "lower" classes- i.e., professional athletes who might win and shame the "gentlemen"-from playing in the games. An example of this pervasive and enduring attitude afflicting an American athlete was Jim Thorpe, who won the decathlon in 1912 but had his medals stripped from him because he had played minor league baseball. His medals were recently restored to him, posthumously.

This strong notion of amateurism, combined with a low expectation of and from women, worked to cause women of that period to aspire to few accomplishments. Of course, there are many notable exceptions, but, generally speaking, few women artists emerged from that period.

This is hardly surprising, in light of the emphasis of the Arts and Crafts movement on "craft" and not "art!"

Morris, who was one of the founders of the Socialist party in England, believed that all art should be swept away for a while, and handicrafts should be done in the place of art. He felt that art-individual expression was elitist, and that creative elitism had no place in the social system. It is ironic that exactly the opposite effect resulted from his approach: the creation of an elitist attitude among the practitioners of handicrafts.

The neo-Gothic or medievalist approach of the period encountered a problem endemic to amateurism: poor scholarship and the creation of instant authorities. With virtually no experience, training, or study, Edward Johnston was appointed by W. R. Lethaby, a former secretary to William Morris, to teach calligraphy at the Royal College of Art. When Johnston set about to codify his accumulated knowledge, after a lifetime of teaching, he took fourteen years to write the first chapter of *Formal Penmanship*, spending ten years on just the first section. Reviewing the book just the other day, I was amazed to see that every page dealt with the same subject: the importance of keeping the angle of the pen at a constant, unwavering angle while writing. After twenty-five years of teaching, he couldn't seem to go any further. Johnston was as much victim of the times as his students and those of us who still bear his legacy.

Even before Johnston's time, during the Victorian period, many women tried calligraphy, and ambitiously produced books and illuminations. Women were the primary target of the Arts and Crafts movement, because men had to expend their energy in the "real" world, learning a trade or profession that would support the family. The only way making medieval-style broadsides or books would support a family was if the practitioner taught others how to do it or if he joined an engrossing studio, which was not nearly so profitable or prestigious. An inbred field resulted, in which the teachers were not professionals, and the students could hope for a living only if they themselves became teachers. In such an atmosphere, artistic growth was impossible, and the field stagnated for nearly eighty years.

Since the 1970s, calligraphy has enjoyed an unprecedented growth in popularity. During the last eighty years, many people practiced calligraphy and were competent in the Johnstonian tradition. However, the rapid growth in interest must be attributed to the growing perception of calligraphy as a legitimate art form. We finally have the technical tools to develop what can prove to be one of the most important artistic movements in the twentieth century. However, in order to accomplish this, it is necessary to revise our approach to the learning and practice of calligraphy.

We can take some lessons from the Orientals, who have many celebrated and accomplished women calligraphers. The Oriental calligraphic tradition depended on each individual learning the foundations of the art the technique and the history-and then alone, without the need for continual workshops, cultivating the work as an extension of the individual and that of individual's perception of the world.

Most Oriental calligraphers of great merit were not professionals in calligraphy. They were philosophers, statesmen, and writers-learned people in every category of occupation. They looked upon calligraphy as an activity that helped them to grow in perception and was also a measure of their attainment of vision and understanding. This role can easily be transferred to Western calligraphy.

There are two choices now available to us: We can choose to overlook the highest expressions of our art, or we can confront the incredible challenges that lay before us. It is the nature of women to be conservative, to protect. Women, though, are also the inheritors of the highest creative principles through the potential of childbearing. Women are intuitive, perceptive, capable, and visionary-in many ways more so than men. As the group that is the most numerous, women can play an important role in the development of the art of calligraphy. This means women must consciously consider the instruction they receive and constantly question what they are learning.

How many workshops must one take until one attains knowledge about calligraphy? What is the key information that liberates the calligraphic artist to sit at the drawing table and confront the mystery of letterforms and creative expression? Must we be ever led by the hand of teachers who were in turn taught by other teachers who never found the end of the calligraphic rainbow? Oriental calligraphy had no perception of amateurism. Every aspirant to the art integrated it into their lives, lived and breathed calligraphy as they lived and breathed every moment, regardless of their primary occupation in life. We too can enjoy that level of involvement in calligraphy.

Calligraphy exists in the mind long before the pen touches the paper. Our calligraphy reflects our innermost being as well as the knowledge that we have attained. All women want to excel and to do meaningful things. Women are attracted to calligraphy for many reasons' but primarily because it offers them a way to express themselves artistically, without the sense of failure that academic drawing and painting engender. Women sense the cultural value of calligraphy and the approval value in learning a fascinating and impressive skill.

Let us work together to abolish the mentality of amateurism that is so stultifying in this great art form. We have in our hands the capability of levels of expression that are unknown to Western art. Everyone, male or female, can rise to their highest level, if only given the direction and the keys that will liberate them from the sense that they can never really learn anything on their own.

In our time, women enjoy a general acknowledgment of their basic abilities that has never existed before in history. We have the power, by producing valuable and meaningful work, to bring attention to our endeavors, but only the high quality of our calligraphy and the evident genuineness of it will accomplish this goal. Let's see to it that women are part of the forefront of this important movement.