

## **FROM WRITTEN WORD TO ART / CALLIGRAPHY**

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### **Abstract**

Visual information is the oldest recorded document of human history.

While cave drawings and paintings are treated as the earliest evidence of human activity, the written word was born years later after a long and complicated process of development.

The letters that are the basic elements of communication today have gone through a long process of evolution. Writing, which is undoubtedly the greatest invention of mankind, translated everything spoken into a visual representation.

The evolution of letters and writing systems has been driven by the human need to convey ideas, to record and store information, and by the need to express and communicate. The fundamental purpose of writing is, in fact, the transmission of information.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the integration of computer technologies has brought forward textual information to every aspect of daily life. This has led to an increase in interest in typography in many areas of visual communication, where text and letters play a central role in disseminating social trends and reflecting the spirit of the time.

Today, when we are so accommodated with the written word and when the written word is no longer marked down by the pen, but by the digital "bits", it must be remembered and clearly stated that it was manual writing that preceded typography or mechanized writing.

*Keywords:* writing, letters, calligraphy, typography

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **The Origin of the Written Word**

Visual information is the oldest recorded document of human history.

While cave drawings and paintings are treated as the earliest evidence of human activity, the written word was born years later after a long and complicated process of development.

The letters that are the basic elements of communication today have gone through a long process of evolution ranging from pictograms, that were merely symbols of everyday life, to Egyptian hieroglyphs which incorporated symbols that embodied thoughts or ideas and not coincidentally were called ideograms, and through phonograms to the symbols of the first alphabet.

The Phoenicians are credited for the development of the first alphabet, the first system of symbols we know today as letters. With the power shifts around the Mediterranean, the Greeks, Etruscans, and later the Romans, modified this alphabet, creating the alphabet of letters that we still use today.

Writing is undoubtedly the greatest invention of mankind.

Without it, neither history nor civilization would exist. Various tools and techniques were used to preserve the written word, and for thousands of years, mankind left its mark on cave walls, clay, stone, parchment, papyrus, paper, etc.

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## **2. From The Written Word to Art**

The tendency to elevate the written word to the level of fine arts resulted in the birth of calligraphy.

Words in art should be seen in the context of a broader concept of signs and symbols.

Writing is a visualized language and as such makes us approach words first visually as certain forms and then through reading to arrive at the meaning or concept behind them.

Written words can never be exclusively semantic, they are also visual symbols.

The word style itself derives from the Latin word *stylos* which means *writing tool* and as such illuminates the fact that even drawing and painting are in a way writing forms, leaving traces. Therefore, we can rightly conclude that calligraphy is one of the oldest artistic and literary forms.

The art of calligraphy has always been part of the heritage and culture of civilizations and religions around the world.

Historically, calligraphy has played more roles by maintaining the balance between the practical transmission of textual information and the creation of aesthetic impact through the calligraphic brush or pen and the color of the writing.

Through its form, writing style, the way of maneuvering the calligraphic pen or brush, calligraphy as an artistic medium, in addition to the text, also conveys to the audience the character, feelings, culture and the spiritual world of the artist.

And not coincidentally, calligraphy is as much about the art of beautiful writing as it is an indicator of the spiritual, moral and cultural development of a society. It is a unique art of expression and discipline very rich in content, which includes the evolution of writing systems, rules and techniques of writing, tools, its history, and the most famous calligraphers of different periods and civilizations.

The finesse and spirituality of this ancient artistic practice have held the human imagination captive for centuries. Simple, in terms of necessary materials, and very complex in multitude, infinity of expressions, calligraphy remains the finest and most sophisticated manifestation of the written word.

## *2.1 Calligraphy*

"Calligraphy is the art of the line in relation to the shape of the letter, the appearance of the word and the design of the page." - Arnold Bank

Calligraphy is an independent artistic genre that combines general and specific features. General characteristics include line manifestation - continuous and intermittent, fast and slow, powerful and light. These characteristics are similar to the rhythm of the music, the movement of dance and the structure of architecture.

The textual dimension that is presented through the letters is the specific feature that makes calligraphy special compared to other visual arts.

Although the aesthetic effect of calligraphy is not determined by understanding the text, the most popular calligraphic works always combine the shape and appearance of the letters with their meaning.

The main distinguishing factor of calligraphy from other arts is its textual origin. Calligraphy, although based on text, and although as an artistic expression reflects the spirit of the text, the work of the calligrapher is not to offer the text as simple writing, he or she interprets it creatively, trying to make the work speak first to the eye and then convey the textual content, if one exists; therefore, its main preoccupation is the visual impact.

Like other visual artists, painters and sculptors, calligraphers use line, shape, color, space, texture, and design principles as visual elements. The special element that is added to the calligraphic composition is the word.

Graphically, calligraphy is compared to painting in its ability to express ideas and emotions through the rich variations of line, shape and composition.

As an abstract art, it displays the rhythmic and harmonious nature of the art of music.

From a practical point of view, it is a written language, while from a philosophical point of view, it is neither painting nor writing, but it goes beyond both.

Defining a subject has a crucial impact on how its study or research proceeds. Normally, that definition may change over time for both the individual and a discipline in general.

Picasso did not remain in the Blue period forever, even modernism did not stagnate, but evolved to another stage called postmodernism. Thus, even the definition of calligraphy may not always remain the same.

Living in a time when visual artistic production is divided into fine arts and crafts, it must be clearly stated that calligraphy ranks in the first group.

Calligraphy is a fine art that consciously uses letters, their form and flow to express either pure verbal or visual meaning or something between verbal and visual. The form of the letters carries the verbal meaning through words and text. Their flow materializes rhythm, movement and gesture. Together, they communicate the spiritual world of the artist. They channel the flow of his thoughts and emotions.

Because landscape, portrait, and calligraphy abstraction are the letters-symbols of writing, they can also be treated as metaphors of the semantic aspect; just as writers use words descriptively, ironically, or satirically, so does calligraphy maneuver with the meaning these symbols provide.

Calligraphy is a type of meditation. The physical act of holding and moving the calligraphic pen or brush across the paper is a unique pleasure. During the act of creation, this practice requires patience and discipline, a balance between control and freedom, order and dynamism, and engages the intellect in a meditative aspect.

In addition to requiring knowledge of alphabets and measurement accuracy, it promotes the idea of balance and proportions and makes it possible to create meaning for form/shape.

## *2.2 Chinese Calligraphy*

"If I had been born Chinese I would have been a calligrapher, not a painter." - Pablo Picasso

Calligraphy is part of the heritage and culture of civilizations around the world, especially Oriental ones. Chinese and Arabic calligraphic traditions are the two most refined manifestations of the written word.

Although many societies have a tradition in creating calligraphy, very few of them can compete with Chinese calligraphy and its achievements, mainly thanks to their brushes, color of the writing, and the paper quality.

For thousands of years, calligraphy has been the defining feature of Chinese culture and the highest and most valued form of Chinese art. Regarded as one of the three artistic perfections, along with poetry and painting, calligraphy both in the past and today continues to have an almost sacred cultural position in China. It has elevated the importance of artistic creation in general to an extremely prestigious cultural level.

Chinese calligraphy is characterized by a variety of different artistic techniques and trends, ranging from traditional ones with stricter forms and rules to expressive and sometimes very abstract styles, where the word and its meaning are not essential. One of the most unique qualities of Chinese calligraphy is actually the fusion of verbs and visuals into one entity.

The history of the development of Chinese characters is not simple and coherent. Different letters and styles have been adopted in different regions of China, under different rules and periods. The history of Chinese characters is a long process of standardization but at the same time the search for alternative ways to express ideas and feelings through various calligraphic styles.

In general, Chinese calligraphy can be divided into five main styles: Zhuan Shu, the oldest style of Chinese calligraphy, Li Shu - clerical style, dominant during the Han dynasty, Kai Shu - the standard form of Chinese writing, Xing Shu - the semi-cursive and Cao Shu - Chinese italic style, mostly used by calligraphers for abstract works, but also encountered in everyday use. All of these styles contain sub-categories.

The division into just five styles is a simplification of a diverse system of Chinese writing. Modern Chinese calligraphy, unlike the traditional one, is closer to the western world and this comes as a result of changes in both Chinese and Western aesthetics. The impact has been reciprocal and it is no coincidence that many of the masterpieces that have presented revolutionary calligraphic writing styles have been so admired that they have been set as new standards and forms to be copied by future generations. Despite this fact, the classics in China tend to persistently preserve the old calligraphic values. Neo-classics seek to revive and refresh the ancient tradition. Modernists radically explore the structure and content of calligraphic art, while avant-garde seekers seek new forms of expression beyond conventional thinking.

Today, calligraphy is a symbol of tradition and culture not only of China but also of Japan, Korea and to some extent Vietnam.

### *2.3 Arab Calligraphy*

Calligraphy is the unique gem of Arab culture.

While many religions have used figurative images to convey the core of their beliefs, Islam has used the shape and size of letters and words.

Due to the potential implication of idolatry and image worship, early Islamic theocracy used calligraphy as a means of transmitting Islamic knowledge, creativity, and visual expression.

Islamic art and culture are heavily influenced by both the meaning and the form of the written word. Even before the birth of Islam, the written word had great significance in Arabic culture, but with the birth of Islam as a religion, it became a symbol of the Islamic faith and civilization.

The aesthetic principles of Arabic calligraphy are a reflection of the cultural values of the Islamic world. With its roots in the holy book of the Qur'an, Arabic calligraphic practice replaced the power of icons in other faiths. Some of the most beautiful Arabic calligraphy can be found in the Qur'an itself.

Arabic calligraphic practice is multidimensional and has universal application. It is ubiquitous in Islamic arts and culture, in books, visual arts, architecture, textiles, accessories, etc.

Arabic letters have reached a high level of sophistication. Arabic script varies from the cursive Naskh and Thuluth styles to the Kufi angular style. Also popular are the Deewani and Riq'a styles mostly used by Ottoman calligraphers and the Taliq style which is believed to have been developed by the Persians and is also known as the Farsi. These main styles also have their variations which are used depending on the purpose of the dedication.

Different classic styles of Arabic letters offer countless opportunities to artists.

Contemporary designs indirectly use these styles to create abstract art, as a postmodern interpretation of letters and words in order to overcome language barriers and spread the influence to other arts and cultures outside the Arab world.

Arabic writing, expressed through the beautiful art of calligraphy, has conquered other visual arts as well.

#### *2.4 Western Calligraphy*

Oriental calligraphy has no Western equivalence. Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between western and eastern calligraphy.

In the west, calligraphy has had more of an esthetic purpose, or beautiful writing, arranging letters according to predefined rules and decorating them. Western calligraphy has been executed more often by masters who in the past were mostly monks, than by real artists. This does not mean that there were no expressive calligraphic forms, but the people involved in this artistic practice were not regarded as established artists.

The meeting point of East and West in terms of the art of calligraphy came about when calligraphy began to be viewed not only as a means of communication but a means of artistic expression. The path of development from the first primitive signs to the first system of letters known as the alphabet took thousands of years.

The Greeks and Etruscans paved the way for the creation of the Latin alphabet by modifying the Phoenician alphabet, consequently the European one.

The foundations of this alphabet were laid by the Romans. The Romans sophisticated the art of writing and developed certain writing styles which they used depending on the purpose.

Roman letters are engraved on ancient architecture and monuments. These inscriptions are a testament to the beauty and strength of the written word. Known as monumental or imperial capitals, they are the forerunners of the "capital" letters we use today. Square capital is a variant of monumental capital which was used to write on parchment. It is a typical example of how changes in tools and materials provoke changes in the form of letters. Rustic capital is essentially the first condensed font structure designed to save parchment and font color.

The medieval years witnessed the fall of the Roman Empire. Only Ireland escaped the barbaric invasion and created magnificent manuscripts such as The Book of Kells. The following years were dedicated to creating the manuscripts, which were of extraordinary value and were the property only of the monasteries and royal courts and you could rarely see them outside their doors.

The written word was reserved only for privileged classes. The proliferation of manuscripts resulted in the development of looser writing styles known as uncial, semi-uncial, and then the Carolingian minuscule which is very important because it forms the basis of the minuscule or lowercase letters we use today, then later Gothic writing which in addition to uppercase and lowercase letters, incorporated layout through columns and margins, Textura style that was dominant in the Gothic period, Italic style, etc.

In 1445 in Mainz, Germany, Johann Gutenberg changed the course of the written word. Although Gutenberg is credited with discovering the metal letters and the press, he actually

made very practical a technology that had been practiced for thousands of years in China and at least a few decades in Europe.

He perfected the font system, and for the first time, a technical system designed for mass production was added to what would be called the publishing industry. The following years after 1445 witnessed an expansion of the mechanized printing of books throughout Europe. It was this period when mass education actually began. Mechanized writing followed which was the derivative of the combination of early writing.

Another characteristic that constitutes the basis and general flow of western calligraphy is the writing with the wide-tipped pen which during the act of writing the letters produces transitions from thick lines to thin lines and vice versa. The ornament and illustration were in most cases in function of the text.

### **3. Calligraphy Today**

Times change and consequently the art of calligraphy also changes.

Contemporary calligraphers can be found all over the world today. Their styles vary from traditional calligraphic writing to abstract calligraphy, which we often refer to as contemporary calligraphy because it is in harmony with the philosophy of contemporary time.

There are three basic interpretations of contemporary calligraphy today.

The first interpretation is known only as calligraphy, the second as modernized calligraphy and the third as contemporary art.

If contemporary calligraphy is seen as modern art that uses calligraphy as a method, then neither should the question of being a calligraphic work be discussed. The trend of contemporary calligraphy since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and forward has been the appreciation of the beauty of calligraphy more in terms of form than content. Chinese calligraphy has introduced the idea of visual abstraction and spontaneous expression of content at a very early stage in the development of Chinese art, but the contemporary tendency goes even further, to the total exclusion of content thus approaching abstract painting.

Contemporary artists have differing opinions on the dilemma of whether or not contemporary calligraphy should be readable. Some argue that modern calligraphy should offer the aesthetic pleasure of the idea and not just the written text.

According to them, it should go beyond the framework of conventional definition and enter a new path of "conceptual calligraphy" which should penetrate the psychological and cultural depths of contemporary society.

The works of these artists incorporated calligraphy into new art formats, such as performance, installation, video art, etc., directly challenging the traditional calligraphy approach. There are also contemporary artists who insist that letter writing should have concrete meaning and poetic flavor. According to them, the meaning of words is an important inspiration in creating contemporary calligraphy. Experimenting with pseudo-letters only mimics the structure of real letters. For these calligraphers, it would be disappointing to transform calligraphy into another form of abstract art. According to them, to be called a

calligraphic work, it must contain legible words. In contrast, such works can only be called calligraphic images, and no distinction could be made between abstract painting and genuine calligraphy.

It is too early to give definitive definitions of contemporary calligraphy. It is also too early to predict whether calligraphy will experience its renaissance or get lost among the new trends in the art world.

The application of new methods, even digital tools do not necessarily make contemporary calligraphy. What matters is the approach and how calligraphy contributes to contemporary culture. It is indisputable that in addition to cultivating the very individual forms and expressions that calligraphy promotes, it needs to be more open in concept and content to respond to the needs of the times.

What is evident, is that calligraphy today has become a more vivid means of personal expression, with feelings being transmitted more directly than in past centuries. The content is also easier to understand. Whether traditional or contemporary, calligraphy has been and continues to be a source of inspiration for other forms of visual arts.

Many artists use calligraphic elements in painting, sculpture, photography, etc., and on the other hand, many calligraphers use composition, colors and techniques of other artistic forms. Two-way communication results in impressive works.

Many world-famous artists such as Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Hartung, Dotremont, Alechinsky, Brody Neuschwander, etc., have fallen prey to the charm of calligraphy, especially the Chinese one.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“The history of typography reflects a continual tension between the hand and machine, the organic and geometric, the human body and the abstract system. These tensions which marked the birth of printed letters over five hundred years ago, continue to energize typography today.”<sup>1</sup> Llupton (2010) cited in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of *Thinking With Type*.

Living in a visual century, in an age where information circulates and spreads rapidly, even non-verbally (especially through images; photography and film), understanding visual communication is essential. Developing visual sense is something similar to learning a language that has its own alphabet, vocabulary, and syntax.

Graphic design is a process (form) of visual communication where, through typography and image, information is conveyed, a message is communicated.

When this communication is based on the written word, it should be emphasized that whether it is readable writing or not, aesthetic or functional, whether it is a language we know or a codified one, it is the calligraphic expression that reveals the endless capacity of the exploration of the line, sign and gesture.

The creation of the World Wide Web revolutionized the way we communicate through the written word. Whether it is a calligraphic expression or mechanized writing, letters and words

should not be treated only as such, but always in the context of content and general appearance.

Even in the age of computer technology, where hand and body experiences seem to be unnecessary, calligraphy enables the cultivation of a balance between mind, body and inner energy.

Everything in the world consists of waves and vibrations. The power of calligraphy stems from the infinite potential of individual expression. A single calligraphic line can express the most varied emotions.

Consequently, the old Chinese saying: “The writing stops, but the meaning of what is written continues. The brush rests, but its power is infinite and eternal.”

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