

## SASKATCHEWAN CRAFT COUNCIL

### CALLIGRAPHY

#### CRITERIA

##### ***DEFINITION***

Calligraphy is the art and craft of beautiful writing. It is from the Greek – calli (beautiful) and graphien (to write). It is the art of communication with letters and words. The study and practice of calligraphy is disciplined and precise. The calligrapher pays careful attention to the proportions of letters, their spacing and arrangement of writing on the page. It is usually not handwriting as many think it to be, although handwriting may be beautiful, graceful and indeed calligraphic. Knowledge of historical and traditional styles of lettering serve as a starting point from which more contemporary hands (modern lettering styles) evolve. Sharpness, unity and freedom in the creation of letter forms are essential goals.

Hard or soft writing tools and the proper use of various instruments such as: the reed, quill, metal-edged pens and brushes of many shapes are technical skills which are mastered by the calligrapher. Technical knowledge alone however does not result in a calligraphic masterpiece. The careful communication of letters alone or words of a text must be transcribed in such a way as to be true to the author of the text and evoke a response from the viewer. This can be done successfully with an appropriate lettering style, writing tool, choice of paper, the use of colour and design and layout.

Words are usually the medium of expression for a calligraphic piece but do not necessarily have to be clear or legible. If the intent of a piece is to convey information, legibility is vital. If the focal point is design, legibility is not a necessity. By using a more contemporary hand, the overall visual appeal turns into an abstract form and thus colour, composition, layout and design play a more dominant role.

##### **TOOLS, MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES**

Virtually any craft or art media can incorporate calligraphy. The materials and tools influence the mark of a letter; the interaction of writing implement, base medium and pigment all affect the final appearance of the piece. In a finished work the quality of the mark is important. It need not be judged solely on the writing implement used.

The following list includes tools, materials and techniques which are used by the calligrapher. The paper, writing style, writing instrument, ink or paint, technique and layout and design are all factors relevant to the evaluation of a calligraphic piece of artwork.

## **BASE MEDIUM**

### ***Paper***

The choice of paper is determined primarily by the purpose of the piece. For example, ceremonial or special occasion documents which must withstand the test of time, should be of high quality. Art papers with a high rag content are usually selected as well as real vellum or parchment. Another important quality a paper must have is that it will not bleed or feather when a writing tool loaded with ink makes contact with the surface. An exception to this may be when the content of the piece is one where the calligrapher wishes it to bleed for visual or artistic effect. With the appropriate selection of paper for a piece of calligraphy the design and effect of calligraphy can be greatly enhanced.

### ***Rag Paper***

Paper made with a rag base (pulped from cotton, linen or hemp), and is the most durable. These can come in the hot pressed or cold pressed forms.

### ***Parchment/Vellum***

Prepared from animal skins and are very durable as well but are sensitive to climatic conditions, if not prepared or stored properly. Sheep, calf and goatskins are the most commonly used but almost any other animal skin can be prepared for calligraphic writing including for example, deer, antelope, and even seal.

### ***Handmade and Japanese***

Usually are soft and metal pen nibs oftentimes do not work well with this surface. They tend to get caught up within the delicate fibres. Various brushes are then used because they are able to ride over these surfaces more easily.

### ***Papyrus***

Made from the rush plant, as well as other plant material, papers (not other handmade where the pulp mass is mostly of paper or rag material) are also used. They are delicate in nature and care in the proper selection of a writing tool must be taken.

### ***Commercial***

This grade of papers comes in a variety of weights, textures, sizes and colours. Once again the higher the rag content, the longer the piece will last. Illustration and foam core boards which are acid free are also used for more permanent calligraphic pieces in the area of signage and posters.

### ***Fabric***

Fabric can also be written on. Normally the fabric is not washed so that the manufacturer's chemicals which are present within the fabric remain there. This aids the different inks or paints to remain upon the surface. Acrylics are used mostly in this situation, especially if the fabric will be wearable. Calligraphic letterforms can also be engraved, etched in or cut out of wood, stone, glass, ceramic, metal, etc.

## **WRITING INSTRUMENTS**

The instrument a calligrapher chooses to use is a significant factor affecting the work. The actual shape and texture of the pen or brush affects the appearance of the writing.

### ***Square-Edged Pen ( Also called Broad-Edged, Chisel-Edged )***

This type comes in many different sizes and shapes. It has a writing edge instead of a point. They can be wide, narrow or split and made of brass, nickel, chrome, gold-plated or of a base metal combination. The thick and thin strokes of a calligraphic hand, is achieved by a square-edged pen. The angle and pressure in which it is held is also significant because this determines where the characteristic thick and thin strokes fall. The hand is often lifted frequently when using this tool and it can take a number of strokes to complete a letter. This is one major significant difference from everyday handwriting.

### ***Natural Materials***

Materials such as reeds or quills (goose or turkey) are used frequently. Skill and experience in preparing a tool made of these materials are required. Preparing a writing tool from scratch brings the calligrapher in closer contact with the writing surface and the tools and this is a rewarding and aesthetically pleasing experience.

### ***Fountain***

These pens are primarily designed for everyday handwriting. They are however available in different size screw-in nib units and have been used successfully by beginners and experienced calligraphers for finished work.

### ***Fibre Tipped and Technical Pens***

These are also used. Their use is usually in the practice area or for more detail work required in very small lettering or illustration work.

### ***Pointed or Chisel-Edge Brushes***

These are also used. Brushes are soft and flexible and require a different application and considerable dexterity. Arm and wrist movements control the brush in the writing of large letters. Brushes are versatile because they can go beyond the size limitations of metal edge pens and be used for very large work or for writing surfaces which are more soft, spongy or heavily textured. The final appearance of brush work can be clean and crisp or abstract depending upon how much ink or paint is on the brush and what surface it is used upon.

### ***Ruling Pens***

These create strokes similar in appearance to the pointed brush. The ruling pen is a rigid tool while the brush is flexible.

## INKS AND PAINTS

1. Inks must flow easily without clogging the pen. A good soluble black carbon ink is usually preferred.
2. Waterproof inks tend to be too thick and do not flow easily from the pen. They also air dry rapidly.
3. Coloured inks do not have the covering power required and may not dry evenly.
4. Poster colours and students watercolours are suitable for colour work, especially for practice writing.
5. For finished work, artists' watercolours in cakes, pans or tubes may be used or Designers' Gouache, which is more opaque.
6. Artists' pigments (dry ground) are for those involved in manuscript work. Dry ground pigments are suitable for flat work such as initials or heraldry where brilliant colour is desirable. Pigments are superior in their opaque qualities, brilliance of hue and luminosity. These powders are pure pigment and will need the addition of a suitable medium and binding agent before used. A calligraphy purist involved with traditional calligraphic pieces uses these pigments only. The knowledge and preparation required in using this material takes experience and expertise.
7. Natural made inks from plant material or berries are possible but a question of permanence arises.

## TECHNIQUE

It is the fluid quality of a pen or brush which distinguishes the calligraphic form from its mechanical counterpart. The writing tool itself and what angle it is held at affects the overall appearance of the letterforms. Change in weight, height or colour all combine together to create texture and introduce movement. Factors of legibility are dependent on unity and rhythm. Abstract letterforms give contrast and visual appeal of line and mass. **As each person's handwriting is different from another's, such is the case with a calligrapher. The script learnt may be the same one but each calligrapher imparts his or her own style or interpretation of the style and this identifies their individuality and character.**

In addition to the main theme of technique which basically refers to how a writing tool is used by the calligrapher and how it is applied, there are additional techniques used to embellish or enhance a piece of work. All of the techniques listed below are specific to those within the practice of calligraphy.

### ***Hand Embossing***

Embossing is the raising or depressing of an image or letter on paper or leather. Usually a cardboard cut out of the letter or image is used and a bone folder carefully guides the paper or leather around the edge of the shape.

### ***Marks on Paper***

Dominant stroke by a wet or dry brush adds life and texture to a piece of text. Sponges or other such devices are used to also create an interesting background.

### ***Watercolour Washes***

A graduation of a single watercolour wash or variation thereof can add an interesting background for calligraphic text as well. Drops of colour added onto a wet watercolour paper and left to run is another technique.

### ***Resist Methods***

The actual blocking out of letters or images within a watercolour wash is popular with calligraphers. Masking tape, frisket films or masking fluids are normally used.

### ***Ornamentation***

Usually applied as a border design to embellish text and make it stand out. Calligraphic tools can be used for these letters or shapes which are repeated. Freehand ornamentation (drawings or paintings) can also be effective and must be placed tastefully within the text or around it. The two must meld together into a nice whole.

### ***Decorative Papers***

The use of marbled, handmade or paste papers offer an interesting background to calligraphic text. Many calligraphers learn these techniques to enhance their calligraphy. These skills require more learning and training to achieve optimum results.

### ***Gilding***

The use of gold with calligraphy is used for traditional pieces as well as contemporary work. Gold can be used in the powder form or leaf form. Powdered gold sits on a carefully prepared surface and is flat in its final appearance. Leaf gold is used for a raised effect. Gum ammoniac is one base for raised gold. It is easier to use than its counterpart – gesso. There are more steps involved with the gesso technique which is more temperamental. The gesso surface allows the gold to be burnished with a burnishing tool. The illumination quality of burnished gold on a gesso base is outstanding and has not changed much since medieval times.

### ***Illustration***

A visual aid as in a hand drawn form, sketch or painting can enhance a calligraphic text greatly and bring the audience closer to the words. It is important to note that both text and illustration must work together. One must not overwhelm the other. They should compliment one another and not over shadow one another.

## **LETTERFORMS**

### ***Importance of Historical Context on Calligraphy Today***

Calligraphy has an ancient history. Over the past two thousand years our western writing has evolved from classical inscriptional Roman letters. Their strong, graceful, well-proportioned forms have served as primary models and inspiration for fine letter design ever since their development. From the Roman capitals, other historic scripts were derived. Sound letterforms are based on the visuals of five of these historical styles: Roman capitals, uncials, foundational, gothic and italic (see attached references, Calligraphic Exemplars). Calligraphers must understand the basic structural design, proportions and inter-relationships of letters of the historic hands to add their own

creativity. Study and experience with historic alphabets develops perception, visual discrimination, and aesthetic awareness of the harmonies lines, arcs and angles required for sound letterforms. This study and experience provides a springboard for personal expression and contemporary forms.

### ***Components of Sound Letterforms***

Letters are related to each other by shape. Each lettering style has characteristics and proportions in common that provide unity and consistency throughout the hand. To understand letterforms, awareness of the form/angle/weight complex is required:

The shape of the letter 'O', whether round, elliptical or angular, is the basic form in an alphabet. Other letters derive their proportions from the letter 'O' (see attached references, card nos. 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18). Forming 'O' establishes:

- the structural shape of letters.
- the angle of the pen.
- the letter width and body height.
- the slant of letters.
- the weight of pen strokes.

Other letter parts match the 'O' and have continuity throughout a hand (e.g. bowls, arches or shoulders, crossbars, ascenders, descenders, serifs, etc. See attached reference, "Parts of a Letter"). The number, order and direction of the pen strokes and speed at which they are written affect the appearance of each alphabet.

Standards of balance, proportion and quality letters are evident in good calligraphy. Spatial relationships within and around letters are equally important. The piece will have an overall uniform tone resulting from pattern, rhythm, texture repetition and consistency. Every mark made has a purpose.

Although the design of a piece may be strong, weak letterform should not be hidden behind glitzy embellishments or flamboyant and poorly executed flourishes. Successful flourishes should be elegant, look spontaneous and maintain the basic letter shape. They should be flowing, smoothly-arched, natural extensions of the letter. Is the piece enhanced by the flourish or better served without it? Hallmarks of flourishes to be avoided are: excessive use, ugly shapes, tight curls, cramped appearance, contrived squiggles and straight lines.

### **LAYOUT/DESIGN**

Design and layout in calligraphy is of a very specific nature. It is primarily concerned with the visual arrangement of words, the synthesis of visual and verbal qualities. The letter style should match the mood and influence of the words in the text, and make the writing interesting (the intent of some work may be to disturb, not to please) to the viewer. The decision of style should be appropriate to the function of the piece. Contrast in size of writing, colour and decoration all bring life to the page. The shape of the letters is of primary concern and the space it occupies. The

white, negative space is also of consequence and should not be neglected. The calligrapher wants to achieve harmony and the text must be optically balanced. In an abstract piece, the text can overlap but once again this must be tastefully done and with control. The technical skill in calligraphy is not enough to arouse interest from the viewer. There must be an intimate involvement with the text and this emotive connection allows the freedom to use some of the techniques known to the calligrapher to make a piece come alive.

Knowledge of design and layout is critical in the final arrangement of words. The calligrapher is a craftsman possessing many skills in the creation of letterforms but he is also an artist where colour, textures, shapes and his personal involvement with the written material come into play.

**Each calligrapher has their own style and it is this factor which distinguishes calligraphers apart. Each calligraphic hand is unique.**

However, do not construe the preceding two sentences to mean that any letter made is above reproach and is made well simply because it is ones' personal interpretation of a hand. The importance of the well-proportioned, structural framework within letters cannot be ignored because weak letterforms will be the product.

### **LETTERING STYLES**

There are many styles of lettering available to the calligrapher. More traditional styles are precise, even in weight, texture and construction. Freeform or abstract letterforms can be illegible but still a uniformity in appearance and texture must be present. There must be an overall presence of rhythm within a piece whether it be traditional or modern. A modern day calligraphic hand evolves from traditional forms and exhibits much practice and expertise. A sample sheet of the more common styles are enclosed for reference purposes regarding their names, structural qualities etc. **It is important to note that these exemplars demonstrate just one way of writing a particular style. There is a wide margin and variety within these common styles. Also, a calligrapher imparts his or her own individuality when writing these styles. Therefore it can never be exactly the same.**