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Letter Arts Review

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2 Editor’s letter: Cultures and crossroads
By Christopher Calderhead

4 Cover artist: Lynne Yun
By the artist

6 Reading the future
By Lieve Cornil

24 Two lettering artists in conversation
By John Neilson and Gareth Colgan

44 A visit to Letterform Archive
By Christine Colasurdo
The editor’s letter · Cultures and crossroads

A few years back, I published an article in Letter Arts Review about Timbuktu.* At that time, the ancient city, with its centuries-old libraries of Arabic manuscripts, was under occupation by rebels who destroyed shrines and monuments and threatened to burn what books they could find. Luckily, the custodians of the collections either hid most of their books or evacuated them to Bamako, the capital. The rebels would eventually be forced from the city by a French tactical army unit.

I ran that story because Letter Arts Review is an international magazine, and under my editorship I have tried to make sure our coverage is as broad and global as it can be. Within the constraints of a limited budget and the barriers of language, I’ve been able to publish articles about lettering artists and traditions not only from the developed Western world, but also from Russia, China, India, Japan, and the Middle East.

But I also published that article because I believe firmly in building bridges across cultures, finding points of commonality in societies radically unlike my own. If the forces of retrogression and ignorance attack the heritage of Timbuktu, they attack something that I, too, hold dear. And if the libraries of that faraway city are burned and sacked, then we are all impoverished.

One may say that a magazine on the lettering arts is such a niche publication that it can have little bearing on the wider conflicts engulfing the world. But it seems to me that to engage with calligraphers and lettering artists around the globe does inherently reflect a set of values that we have to defend and speak up for. If we can value works created in all the writing systems of the world, then we necessarily stand for building understanding, practicing tolerance, and encouraging the cross-fertilization of cultures.

There are rising voices that seek to shut those values down, to enforce narrow versions of national or ethnic identity. They are not new—they have always lurked at the edges of our societies—but they are increasingly vocal. I can attest, since I have many friends from the former Yugoslavia—Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and Macedonians—that such ideas, when put into action, do not end well.

What was one of the greatest cultural crimes of the Yugoslavian civil wars? The shelling and destruction of the Bosnian national library in Sarajevo. Two million volumes, many of which were irreplaceable, went up in smoke.

Many of the greatest eras in human civilization show the importance of cultural cross-fertilization. The Rosetta Stone (an image of which is shown opposite) is, for me, the perfect symbol of this. The same text appears twice in Ancient Egyptian, written in formal hieroglyphics at the top and in the more cursive demotic in the middle. It then appears in Greek at the bottom. Carved in 196 BC to commemorate a decree concerning the pharaoh Ptolemy V, the stone reflects the polyglot richness of Alexandria, a city that stood at the crossroads of the ancient Mediterranean world. The fact that it was later unearthed by a French expedition and provided the key to the decipherment of hieroglyphics by Jean-François Champollion only adds richer layers of history to the artifact, as it speaks to us from across the centuries. The stone now stands in the British Museum.

The history of the Rosetta Stone is, of course, not entirely one of generous intercultural exchange. There is imperialism, starting with Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt and the subsequent establishment of the Greek-speaking Ptolemaic dynasty. And the colonial rivalry of the French and British in Egypt is also a part of the story. Cross-cultural contacts are not easy or simple. To encounter the other and enjoy a fruitful exchange entails risk and requires hard work on both sides. But the stone does, nonetheless, stand as a symbol of societies coming together and producing a rich synthesis of ideas and cultures.

Those of us who believe in reaching beyond the narrow confines of our own societies, who see value in other cultures and languages, are called on to continue the hard work of breaking down boundaries. And this task is especially urgent in the world in which we now live. ◆

* “Conversation: Alexandra Huddleston on the threatened heritage of Timbuktu.” LAR 27:3

OPPOSITE: An engraving of the Rosetta Stone. This image is a composite of three plates from Description de l’Égypte: ou, Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, Paris: impr. impériale, 1809-1828. The plates are taken from volume V. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.
Considering what this project could mean to our students, I offered the organization our full support to the project. Here was an opportunity with huge educational value. For one, it allowed the students to take part in a real project that included a thorough research component. It also provided an opportunity for an exchange between art schools and the possibility of exhibiting the work on an international level. Finally, it gave students a chance to fully work through a design project from concept to actual visual output.

Although the planning was tight, and the regular teaching program would have to be adjusted, all our faculty were excited to give the students this wonderful opportunity to find out what a real design project could look like. Little did we know our students were going to learn much more than that.

We had a few minor issues to sort out, however. We, and the other schools, were hoping to get a tight brief describing how to approach this project, but we all were left somewhat in the dark. The organizers said each school would keep its freedom in structuring the project, but they hinted that students should have the opportunity to discover the traditional book arts and crafts: calligraphy, typography, papermaking, and book-binding. These parameters had to be included in the final pieces. This gave us at least a starting point. But beyond that, the instructions were not fleshed out. Furthermore, clear planning and much needed communication between the organizers and the schools faltered halfway through the project, forcing us to take matters into our own hands and find our own way of guiding our students.

We were convinced that, no matter what, this project remained an extremely interesting opportunity for the students to learn, to grow stronger, and to fight for their concepts and designs. If we wanted the work to be selected for this possible exhibition, we needed to come up with a strong concept, bringing content and form together.

When we explained the project to the students in the autumn of 2015, we could see the excitement—and the doubt—in their eyes, but they all agreed to participate. We showed them the research questions, gave them time to think about these, and asked them to present their conclusions one month later.

It came to a surprise to us that almost all students came to the same conclusions. Although most of them used e-readers as well as printed books, they felt that reading a paper book was so much more than just reading content. Almost all of them mentioned that reading a physical book was an experience where different senses

At the top, mock-ups for the brass project before it was laser cut. In the middle, the finished project, photographed to show how the material captures the light. At the bottom, the finished object on display on a wooden plinth. The book-object’s approximate dimensions are 15 × 48 × 9 centimeters.
When I asked the British lettering artist John Neilson and his Irish colleague Gareth Colgan to work up this article for Letter Arts Review, I proposed something novel: to frame it as a conversation. It seemed to me that it would be interesting to listen in on two accomplished and thoughtful lettering artists discussing their work and reflecting on their approaches to making things. They did not disappoint. This is an edited transcript of their conversation.

—The editor

**JOHN NEILSON:** We both arrived at Roehampton Institute to study calligraphy at the same time in 1989. My first impression of you was that, although you were the youngest (by far) in the class, you already seemed frighteningly expert. I think you'd done calligraphy at school?

**GARETH COLGAN:** I had, yes. My twin sister had done some before me, and I thought I'd like to try it. I discovered that the art teacher Tim O'Neill was seemingly the only person in Ireland who knew anything about the subject. I remember very distinctly my first meeting with him when I was about fifteen. He was on his way to the art room, and I interrupted him to ask if I could talk to him. I brought a sheaf of papers the following day, offcuts that I had written on, and I showed them to him, and he seemed to see something in them. After that he gave me jobs to do. I found I enjoyed the physical business of writing and the handling of text so much that I made up a chipboard desk with a tin of baked beans for support, and I used to bring it with me on holidays, to the consternation of my parents, and do calligraphy in the caravan—I was that hooked.

**JN:** How do you think all that calligraphic education has informed what you do now?

**GC:** I think that the study of historical scripts gives you a formal vocabulary, which is connected culturally to certain aspects of place and time.

**JN:** That means there's no such thing as a “neutral” letterform, and you're making a statement whatever type of lettering you're using.

**GC:** Yes, and the question then is how intelligent and informed that statement is. I remember one of our teachers, Ewan Clayton, saying to me many years ago that the Roman classical capitals had a negative air of imperialism about them, and I disagreed. But I don't disagree now; they do have that air about them. It's much more obvious
sorts of things—maybe it’s nothing to do with the pen—but I think the fact of actually making the letters in real time, having to make split-second decisions about where the pen is going to go, must sharpen up your act no end.

GC: Also learning the fact that it is a rhythmic activity, which helps with spacing.

JN: Can we get a bit more specific now about the process of actually making our work? Do you have to get yourself into a particular mood when you’re executing the final version, in the manner of Asian calligraphy? Or is it a more deliberate process, where you’re designing it and then the execution is more mechanical?

GC: Nearly all the work has been done before the ink goes onto the paper. In Asian calligraphy, the emphasis is on the execution, which is the culmination of a rigorous training building up to that moment of writing. And there is an immensely richer repertoire of graphic forms than in the West. In my pieces, the execution does have to be skillful (though I am very far from being a virtuoso penman, like my friend Christopher Haanes, say), but the composition I don’t have to worry about because it’s already been done. When I’m executing it, the final drawing is underneath the piece of paper I’m actually doing the piece of calligraphy on, it’s right there, and I’m just following the drawing with a quill. But nevertheless the mark must be lively as well as precise.

JN: So there is an element of directness in the mark.

GC: Yes, and I do get nerves, “performance anxiety,” when I’m doing the final piece, but much less so than I used to because I know the thing is worked out.

JN: At the back of what I’m saying is the contrast with lettercarving, where once you get into actually carving it, you really could be thinking about something completely different. It’s not that every little mark of the chisel is informed by the meaning or mood of the piece.

What about formal influences? There’s quite a variety of shapes and forms in what you’ve been doing in the last few years, though one can see a family likeness through them. Is it possible to isolate any specific influences on letterform?

GC: I would say one not particularly obvious influence is that of our delightful Belgian friend Kristoffel Boudens.
Hechle in the 1970s. His personal collection was first exhibited at Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1989 and was reviewed in Letter Arts Review (then titled Calligraphy Review).

Saunders’ life and professions have mostly centered on calligraphy, type, and books. He taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and at Tufts University. He then entered the publishing industry with his imprints Alphabet Press, Picture Book Studio, and Rabbit Ears Books. In recent years, he has worked as a management consultant.

The idea for the archive began around 2012 when Saunders showed his collection to his intern Tânia Raposo and her friends, who were students of type design. “I could see that there was a substantially underserved audience for the material,” he explained. The archive incorporated in 2014 and opened a mere seven months later. It now contains roughly 40,000 pieces and is continuing to grow. “Windfalls are coming in,” according to Saunders. “We’re enlarging our physical space to accommodate new donations and acquisitions.”

On the sunny morning I arrived at 1001 Mariposa Street, I half-wondered if I had the correct address; the front door was fairly nondescript, with little signage. But once inside and up a few flights via the elevator, I could see that an expansion was in the works. Former Executive Director Simran Thadani enthusiastically showed me around, pulling books off shelves and gingerly taking pages out of flat files. Within minutes, I was visually taken aback by the archive’s depth and breadth—so many journals, posters, and books in such a small space. But it was when she opened a plain cardboard box that I found myself overwhelmed. My eyes teared up at the sight on the table in front of me. “This just came in from Seattle,” she explained. “His granddaughter had it in the basement for years and decided it was time to find a permanent home for it.” The drab, worn box was packed full with the personal tools of Speedball pen inventor Ross F. George.

Having grown up three hours south of Seattle in Portland, I first learned calligraphy at age 12 with a Speedball C-2 nib. For years, Ross George’s Speedball Textbook was my bible. I had always wondered about the mysterious man behind the little book that seemed so cheery and encouraging to a young artist. Standing that day in the archive, I found it moving to see his toolbox, a personal object that so strongly reflected his personality.

It was an awkward moment, welling up in front of someone I had just met. “I first learned calligraphy from a Speedball Textbook,” I explained.