

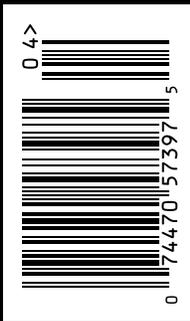
Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 28:4 · On the use of exemplars in teaching calligraphy
Sabah Arbilli explores the range of Arabic-script lettering · Sending poetry by post: an editioned project



THE HIDDEN DOOR (DETAIL) · Susie Leiper

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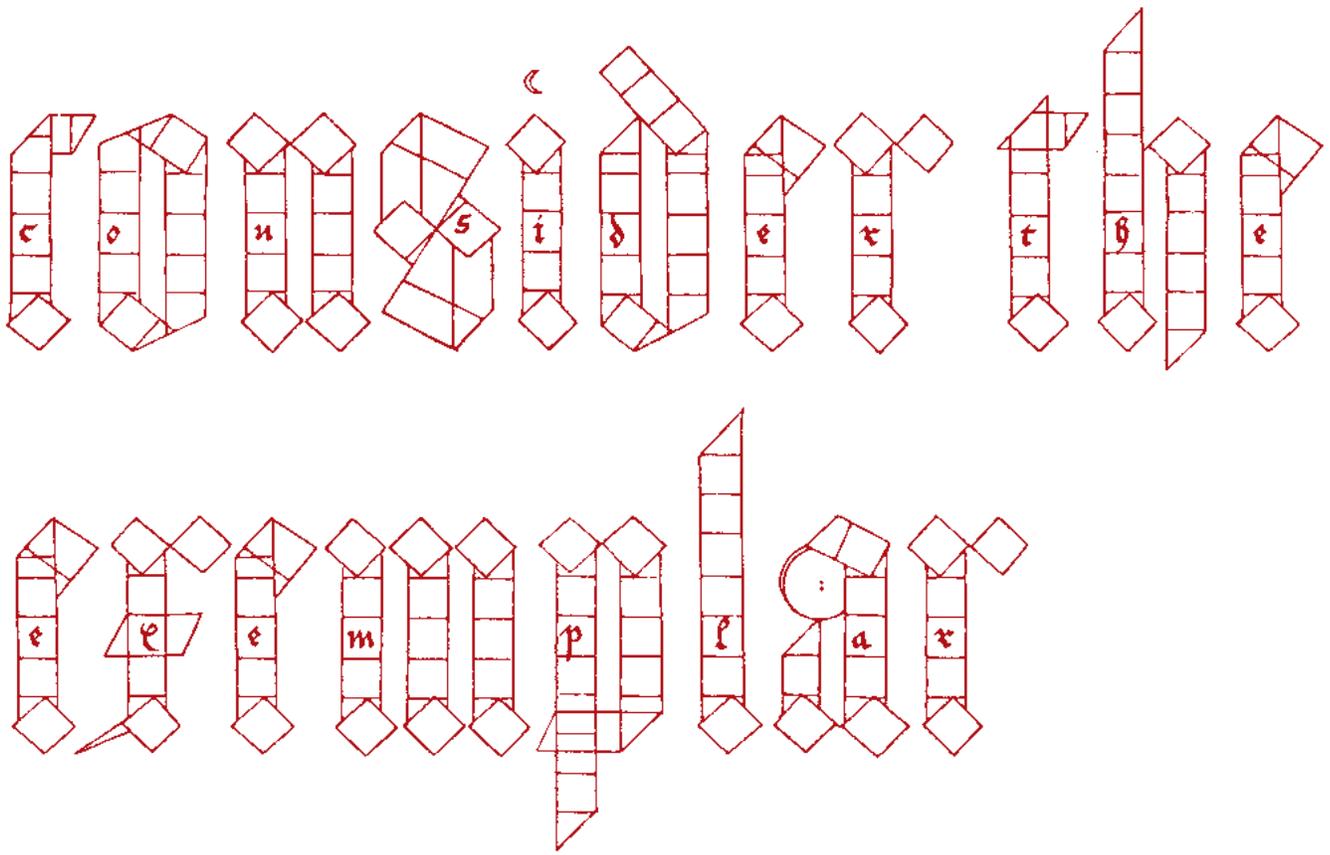


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- 2 The editor's letter:
Copyright and the calligrapher
- 6 Cover artist:
Susie Leiper
- 10 Consider the exemplar
By Christopher Calderhead
- 30 Sabah Arbilli
By Elinor Holland
- 46 Poetry by post:
An experiment in literature and life
By Laura Capp



By Christopher Calderhead · If you have ever taken—or taught—a calligraphy class, you are probably familiar with this typical pattern: The students arrive in the classroom and settle themselves at their desks. After a word of greeting and a few other preliminaries, the teacher hands out one or more photocopied sheets showing the letters of the alphabet written in the script that is to be studied. The lesson begins. The teacher walks the class through the basic strokes and talks about the formation of each letter, alternating between blackboard demonstrations and individual comments made to students as she goes around the room. All the while, the students use the photocopied sheets as points of reference, carefully positioning them above or to one side of the pads on which they are writing. At the end of the day, they take the photocopied sheets home with them to use for further practice and study.

This way of teaching calligraphy is so common that few of us question the practice. It's simply the norm. Teachers were taught that way, and they teach as they were taught. Students have come to expect a photocopied exemplar from each class they take.

Ever since artists and craftspeople have had students, they have produced models for students to emulate. But the modern photocopied

exemplar is very much a product of our time. It's predicated on the education pattern that became dominant in the 19th century, set up on industrial lines: a group of students assembles for a course with a specific duration, and the teacher delivers to each group of students the same basic lesson. The design of the lesson is refined by being tested and adjusted with each new batch of students.

This is not the only way to teach calligraphy. The old apprentice system, for example, was based on a completely different logic. In a pre-industrial workshop, the apprentice started young—as a kid, really—and was at first given menial tasks such as sweeping the floors, fetching supplies, and keeping the fire lit. But a good apprentice watched. He saw every aspect of a project from beginning to end. Slowly, bit by bit, the apprentice imbibed the entire ethos of his craft. As he developed, he could be given simple repetitive tasks—perhaps ruling lines or preparing vellum. And then, slowly, the master would initiate him into the skills of his craft. That kind of training was both gradual and highly personal, a direct transmission from the master to the pupil.

We do not have that kind of time, nor are we apt to make that kind of commitment. So when we take classes we want to have the skills we seek

Opposite: A scribal copybook by Gregorius Bock, ca. 1510-1517. Beinecke MS 439 General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

The letters in the heading above are composed from Albrecht Dürer's analysis of Gothic minuscules.

Please note that the contemporary exemplars illustrating this article are copyright to the artists.

Sabah Arbilli

By Elinor Holland · I met Sabah Arbilli in Kuwait in 2014 and was pleasantly surprised to discover that English was among the several languages he spoke. I had heard that he was one of the finest calligraphers working in Arabic script, and it was exciting to be able to speak with him.

His story, both personally and professionally, is extraordinary and unusual. I watched him create a piece in Kuwait that was not done with the usual pen and ink, but with large brushes and paint on canvas. Rather using than the traditional compositions that are produced by the ever-growing population of calligraphers in the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the rest of the Islamic world, Sabah worked in an abstract format, quickly and spontaneously, and he used his whole body. I was intrigued and discovered that he also had a collection of sculptural calligraphic work. Not the average Islamic calligrapher.

I dug deeper and found an amazing story of a man who began this work as a boy, and who smuggled himself out of a dangerous land as a young man, leaving his art behind, only to be brought back to it again on his own terms, eventually finding great success.

BEGINNINGS

Sabah Maghded Bapir, better known as Sabah

Arbilli, was born in Arbil, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. Though born to illiterate parents, he was drawn to lettering as a young boy. As a grammar school student, he had good handwriting and gained popularity through it. He found instruction books and copied from them and began to develop his skill. His friends and family encouraged him, and he was known as Sabah Khattat, Sabah the Calligrapher. His career began around the age of ten. Sign painting was a profession in his region, and he chose that as a starting point. His father, who worked as a taxi driver, took him to a sign shop. Sabah gathered his courage and announced that he was a calligrapher; he told them he needed work and was ready to start.

Amused as the sign painters were, they asked him what styles he did and brought him paper and ink and asked him to write. They were impressed and charmed by his pluck and gave him a job. However, the work they gave him ended up being cleaning and making coffee. His hope was that he would learn from them because he had big dreams of becoming a great calligrapher. This first job was disappointing and frustrating, and he left after a short time at the urging of his father who discovered that the sign painters were not paying him. He found another, better situation at a different sign shop, and Sabah says

Note: The illustrations in this article have been numbered using Arabic-script numerals.

① Fingerprint

The fingerprint piece is based on a phrase from the Qur'an in the chapter called Resurrection (75:4): "Nay, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers." (Yusuf Ali translation)

Through the repetition of the short verse in Arabic, Sabah created the image of a fingerprint.

AN EXPERIMENT
IN LITERATURE
AND LIFE

POETRY BY POST

Opposite: In a four-month-long project, book artist Laura Capp created a series of limited-edition broadsides of Midwestern poetry. The final broadside in the series was a poem by the former United States Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser.

By Laura Capp · Round about Valentine's Day every year when I was growing up, there arrived in the mail a stark postcard—black type on a white background with a single red heart sticker. The annual postcard was from Ted Kooser, a poet who lives in a little pocket of rural Nebraska not far from my own, and it bore something infinitely more valuable than the nineteen cents or so it took to arrive in our mailbox. What else, but a love poem? I read and reread those poems, tucking them eventually into various boxes and books over the years, only now and then to find them unexpectedly fluttering out of their hiding spots and delighting me once again with their gift: poetry, delivered right to your doorstep, to your lap, to your feet.

The enchantment of receiving—amidst bills, catalogs, and the usual dreck—artful, arresting language, at once surprising and familiar, at once mysterious and revelatory, has always stayed with me. You might say that red sticker adhered itself to my heart permanently; it mattered to me in an abiding way that was true of few other things. That allure of poetic language is largely what prompted me to study literature in college and in grad school. But there was also something particularly enchanting about the vehicle Mr. Kooser chose for his Valentine poems: the good,

old-fashioned postal service. His mailing list had grown to 2,600 individuals by the time he sent his last postcard in 2007, and yet not one of his recipients, I would hazard to guess, felt lost in the crowd. Each discovered her poem in relative privacy, perhaps walking the usual path, on a charcoal February evening, from mailbox to door; perhaps during dinner prep as she hurriedly sorted through the mail sitting on the kitchen counter, surrounded by the noise of a rowdy household; perhaps in the quiet of the morning over her cup of coffee, taken with just enough cream to make it a pretty color. Poetry in public is a beautiful thing, no doubt. But poetry in private? That, to me, is where the real magic happens.

These were the underpinnings for Poetry by Post, my recent thesis project for my master of fine arts degree at the University of Iowa's Center for the Book (UICB). Inspired by that long-lost experience of receiving poetry through the mail and in search of a way to accommodate my hybrid interests in literature, literary analysis, and book arts, I developed a four-month poetry subscription service that was scheduled to run from November of 2013 to February of 2014. I produced one mailing per month (give or take) that included a letterpress-printed broadside featuring a poem by a Midwestern writer and an accom-