LETTER ARTS REVIEW 323 · Lettering artists discuss the virtues of negative space
Mike Gold explores the wider dimensions of the calligraphic arts

ROBERT HENRI QUOTE · Mike Gold
Letter Arts Review
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20 Calligraphy is flourishing,
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A stone carved by
Kristoffel Boudens.
See his contribution to
“The Poetics of Space,”
beginning on page 4.

Mike Gold is this issue’s
cover artist.
By Christopher Calderhead - Twenty-five years ago, when I first studied Tai Chi, I was taught a gesture known as “holding the ball.” Imagine that you have in your hands an invisible sphere about the size of a basketball. You hold it directly in front of your body. Your left hand cups the ball underneath, while your right hand steadies the ball at the top. The metaphor of the ball perfectly positions your hands, one directly above the other, both of them gently cupped, following the contours of the imaginary sphere.

To think of the movements of one’s limbs not only as positive, active gestures, but also as responses to the space around the body, shifts your physical relationship to the world around you.

I came to use this idea in teaching Italic. Beginning students often struggle to make an elegant, forward-leaning o. The first stroke usually goes down fairly well, with a nice ovate shape, but the second stroke often goes awry. The beginner tends to make an awkward diagonal stroke—they plunge downward too fast. The result is a lumpen, unbalanced shape.

I found that if I told them about holding the ball, and demonstrated the hand gesture, I could then ask them to feel the invisible oval that is the skeleton of the Italic o. Now when they came to the second stroke, they could sense that it should spring upward and over the top of the oval, before pulling downward to meet the first stroke at the bottom.

In any lettering composition, the spaces between and around the letterforms are just as important as the letterforms themselves. Considering internal spaces within the letters, intervals between the letters, interlinear spaces, and the arrangement of blocks of text within a frame are crucial to making a successful piece.

I asked a group of lettering artists to reflect on the importance of the use of space in their work. Those who teach were also asked to comment on ways of helping students understand the dynamics of spacing.

The responses I received have been edited for space and clarity.

A carving by Kristoffel Boudens demonstrates his dynamic use of space.
For students who find it difficult to see and draw the negative space, I have found that the following process can be beneficial. These are exercises I do with my students.

Drawing the negative space between objects can be challenging. See the photo sequence on the previous page: By adding a contrasting background, or by taking a zoomed-in photograph, we take away the “meaning” of the objects by abstracting them (flattening them). Suddenly the negative shape becomes more legible, and students can “read” the shape and can draw it.

When trying to understand the negative space of the letter a, we can do the same thing and take away the meaning of the a by concentrating on the closed counter (see images above).

Copy the negative shape of the counter, so the hand understands how the negative shape is constructed without having to worry about the positive shape.

Look and compare the negative space of the written letterform and the drawn negative space. The drawing can help some students because it slows down the making process, allowing time for the eyes to get more familiar with the negative shape created by the pen.

When back to writing with a broad edge nib, concentrate on the same negative shape by looking at the corners of the pen, trying to forget about the black mark the tool makes.

Students repeat this exercise until they have grasped the relationship of positive and negative. They will then return to concentrating on the flow of their writing with a better understanding of how to focus on the white while making the black.

Liesbet Boudens · Reflections About Negative Spaces in My Lettering · In some of my work, there is (more or less) a 50/50 balance of letter and background. Surprisingly, the bold letters do
By Mike Gold - All you have to do is look on Pinterest, Behance, Instagram, and Dribbble to see endless images of lettering. It’s mind-boggling, numbing—there’s so much: everything from graffiti to calligraphy, bad lettering to good, historical to contemporary, abstract to traditional. Only a little ironically, I refer to Pinterest as the new Louvre. For better or worse, this new Louvre is unfiltered and un-curated, but it is accessible to all and does not require a trip to Paris. The amount of hand lettering being done today would have been unimaginable one hundred years ago. Why? There was no platform to show it because the technology didn’t exist, and only a small number of individuals were doing it. Graily Hewitt, who, along with his teacher Edward Johnston, was a major figure in the revival of calligraphy in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, referred to handwriting as “everyman’s craft.” In the digital world of the 21st century, calligraphy seems to have become everyone’s art.

I’ve titled this article “Calligraphy is Flourishing, More Than You Might Guess” because of the built-in pun, but also because it’s a conundrum. Hand lettering is flourishing, but our guilds and associations are losing members, the annual summer conferences aren’t as full as they used to be, and so many of us are getting older. Where are the young people? That’s the rub. The young people in the 1970s were forming guilds, holding workshops, and reviving a tradition that was in danger of disappearing.

By contrast, the young people today are in the streets and online creating new styles of lettering that we may or may not feel has anything to do with calligraphy. We have to follow those young people to see what’s going on in the world of lettering today. Young artists incorporating hand lettering into their work, whether they’re illustrators, lettering artists, or painters, don’t need validation from the established calligraphic community to thrive monetarily, teach, be recognized, make it into galleries or even museums, or simply ply their art.

Besides, calligraphic training, just like master penman training, is hard work and takes years to get good at. While traditional calligraphy might not be as prominent today, it is still influencing, in many ways and places, the work of artists doing all kinds of visual art. There are lots of people out there doing lettering and making art inspired by calligraphy who aren’t part of our community or who don’t easily fit in. Some are young, some are old, some have been involved in our community, some have not. Many don’t fit in to the way calligraphy was initially thought of.
a student of Poppl’s, when he visited the states several years ago. The ruling pen was a favorite tool of both of these masters. Chu Ko was another, a contemporary Taiwanese calligrapher, inspired by Picasso, who wanted to create expressive works of his time.

After Judy Melvin left Cleveland, I did further collaborations with a couple other colleagues at work, Terri Long and Le Buu.

Over the last fifteen years or so, I’ve mostly worked on my own, developing a practice that builds on the traditions of the past, influenced by art and artists of all kinds. Being a calligrapher in the 21st century, I have matured in my art at a time when calligraphers are moving calligraphy in new directions, creating new traditions, just as all artists have done over time. I still make beautiful letters and write out texts, but I also explore the abstract, the illegible, the conceptional—thinking always of what Joan Miró said: “If you have a preconception, any notion of where you are going, you will never get anywhere.” My passion is practicing calligraphy as an art form, in pushing calligraphy beyond the legible and functional. To do this, I’ve had to look at what we as calligraphers can do differently, which has meant changing rules and methods. For me, making contemporary marks and letters is only part of the challenge of making contemporary art. There is the task of making the marks mean something. I need to see the lettering as not just a means of conveying text, but also as a way to create mood, develop meaning, and provide a personal expression.

I find calligraphy is also a form of meditation and sometimes a spiritual practice. This is not unique to me. British journalist India Stoughton noted in an article written this past year that calligraphy was originally practiced by Muslims as a form of meditation by those seeking to capture the essence of universal harmony. Thich Nhat Hanh, probably the best known Zen master and peace activist in the world today, practices calligraphy in this way. Frederick Franck, an oral surgeon who worked with Albert Schweitzer in Africa before becoming an artist and Zen student, used drawing much the same way. It was his way to “see.”

A few things are clear to me: Letters always convey meaning, whether literal or subjective, and letters are design elements, forms to shape into a composition. And letters, like brushstrokes for the painter or notes for the musician, can be used to make works that are classical or abstract.
I hope the work of the five artists I interviewed for this article reflects some of the breadth of calligraphy and its related art forms out there in the world. There are artists I haven’t been able to cover here—José Parlá and eL Seed, for instance. In the future, I hope to venture even further afield and interview some of the exciting artists whose work grows out of the traditions of graffiti and street art.

Calligraphy is thriving more than you might guess because its animating spirit thrives in artists of all kinds. We see that in the hand-lettering world as more and more people turn not just to the keyboard and iPad Pro Pencil, but to the pen, brush, and spray can to write. Lettering by hand thrives because the computer and new technologies will never be enough. “Hand lettering,” says Diana Stetson, “will always touch our hearts as human beings.” She recounts the New York Times obituary honoring Robert Palladino, which noted the relationship between him and Steve Jobs: “Though Father Palladino demonstrably influenced Mr. Jobs, the converse cannot be said. To the end of his life, Father Palladino never owned, or even once used, a computer.”

There are so many young people out there doing lettering, mostly without traditional