



The Formation of Character

David Skinner

My favorite story about handwriting does not appear in Kitty Burns Florey's winsome history. It comes from the annals of American art, though like many of the stories Florey tells in her book, *Script and Scribble*, it is about presentation.

Thomas Eakins is perhaps best known for his paintings of taut-bodied rowers on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. Less known about him is that his father was a master penman who would put the whole family to work during diploma season. Thomas was his able protégé, and the boy's lessons in script and calligraphy deeply influenced his orderly approach to fine art. These skills also came in handy when his interest in painting led him to Paris, during the heyday of Impressionism, where he sought training at the *École des Beaux Arts*.

Eakins was a cultured young man but not a wealthy one, so crossing the Atlantic to study painting was quite an undertaking. Once he arrived in Paris, however, it appeared that the whole trip might have been for naught. Contrary to what he had

been told, enrollment at the academy for the coming year was rumored to be limited, and it was also said that no Americans were going to be accepted. And just to apply, Eakins learned, he needed a recommendation from the American envoy, though at the legation a toadying assistant told him he would get nothing until some other (wealthier and better-connected) Americans were assured admission to the school. But unlike those other applicants, Eakins could

not afford to wait around for a year in the hope that a spot would finally open up.

Fortunately, the American envoy returned and recommended everyone who was waiting, Eakins included. And yet another approval was needed as well, one that could only come from the French minister of culture. It might have been just a matter of bureaucratic procedure at this point, but Eakins was not willing to leave the matter to fate. He sat down with pen and paper and drew an exuberantly royal-looking calling card in his best Spencerian hand and, feigning ignorance of French, he bluffed his way past the ministry guards and then

*Script and Scribble:
The Rise and Fall of Handwriting*
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into the minister's outer office, where he was not actually received but he was able to make himself known to the minister who, through his secretary, expressed an interest in why he'd come. This cleared the way for Eakins to send a letter stating, in good classroom French, his reason for being there. Shortly afterward Eakins was enrolled in the academy along with several Americans who partly had him to thank.

Much more frequently than the beginnings of artistic glory, however, what is associated with penmanship is drudgery. Florey recounts her early practice drills at a Catholic school in Syracuse, New York, and how it wasn't until high school that the nuns allowed the students to write with a ballpoint pen. Her non-personal history, snappily written in similarly cheerful prose, begins with the Sumerians, who in the fourth millennium B.C. drew pictures on wet clay with a stylus. Three millennia later the Phoenicians discovered an alphabetical system of symbols (twenty-six of them, as it happens) that represented sounds. The Romans, in addition to the capital letters they famously chiseled in stone, also used a proto-cursive style that was more amenable to dictation and note-taking, but not on papyrus until the fourth century A.D.

Good handwriting is one of those civilizing achievements that, like dressing or cooking well, takes the work of necessity and saves it from

becoming mundane. It depends on a willingness to perform small tasks well, a way of doing things that need not be explained to those who designed and printed this deceptively simple-looking book. The type is generously spaced and the pages have been made wide enough to accommodate playful marginalia written by the author. Illustrations of key scripts are included, which is crucial in this case, but the scripts are numerous enough to have required more than a little work. Some minor layout errors in Chapter One serve to remind why trade publishers often choose to bundle key images in a middle insert, the easy way out. That the text's few references to recent events are perfectly up to date suggests everyone responsible was keeping an eye on the calendar.

Lettering with a rightward slant and connecting "ligatures" arrived with the introduction of italic, which emerged toward the end of the fifteenth century as a humanistic reaction against more formal Gothic lettering (think of the *New York Times's* masthead) and the monotony of Roman type. Around this time, handwriting faced its greatest challenger, the printing press. Scribes threatened with economic obsolescence turned to handwriting instruction as a way of making a living. Says Florey, "Professional penmen were now teachers and craftsmen more than innovators: their task was to

refine, sustain, and disseminate their skills.”

Modern cursive writing in a round-hand that finds its basic shape in the letter O emerged as the popular style in England and America in the eighteenth century. Useful for business and private correspondence, “copperplate,” as this handwriting is generally known, allowed for a range of styles from the puritanically simple to the fancy-pantsed and filigreed. Copperplate was the script used on the Declaration of Independence, though well before 1776 good handwriting was taken as a sign of learning and gentility. Florey notes that decades earlier, when he founded the Academy of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania), Ben Franklin insisted that young men seeking admission must “write in a legible hand.”

But the golden age of penmanship did not begin until the nineteenth century. Platt Rogers Spencer, Florey reports, lacked the money to buy paper but his passion for handwriting was so great he practiced “on leaves and bark, in the snow, and on the sandy beach of Lake Erie where sometimes his obsessive script would stretch for half a mile.” Founding a chain of business schools, Spencer promoted his variation on copperplate into the official handwriting style of government clerks and into the upper-class script of the day. Writing of the numerous people who took up handwriting after Spencer’s death

in 1864, Florey says “they learned to train the mind by disciplining the hand.” Although Spencer’s style came to be supplanted by the Palmer Method, among others, it lives on in the ubiquitous logo for the Coca-Cola company.

A. N. Palmer, like many handwriting reformers who preceded him, wanted to simplify penmanship. An office clerk, he had to write for hours a day and found the elegant Spencerian hand time-consuming and difficult to maintain. He described his own later style as rapid and plain, and he marketed it to people engaged in business. It became, of course, the dominant hand of the twentieth century, and today people look back to its reign as its own golden age, when American society enjoyed some degree of consensus on the importance of teaching such skills. But handwriting was under siege even then, with the introduction of the typewriter—a personal printing press. In Mark Helprin’s *Soldier of the Great War*, fountain-pen-wielding legal scribes, like their medieval predecessors, must find new work when typewriters invade the ranks of their gentle profession.

One of the more entertaining chapters in Florey’s book concerns the quack science of graphology, which proceeds from the not irrational idea that something of a person’s character is betrayed by his handwriting. “The slightest movement

of the pen is a vibration of the soul,” said Abbé Jean-Hippolyte Michon, a French priest and moral reformer in the nineteenth century. Florey further reports that Alfred Binet, who came up with the Stanford-Binet IQ test, believed in graphology’s potential for self-revelation. In the United States, graphology was a form of pop psychology and its insights peppered newspaper columns and books like Milton Bunker’s *What Handwriting Tells You About Yourself, Your Friends, and Famous People*, published in 1939. Bunker was especially wary of hooks in handwriting, for he said they betrayed an acquisitive and manipulative character. Inversely, Bunker thought one’s character could be improved by working on one’s handwriting. Today, says, Florey, graphology is an accepted part of the popular wisdom in Europe, but disdained by science and the courts. In the United States, its powers are thought roughly equivalent to astrology’s, even as American graphologists look to more conventional methods to supplement their analyses.

And yet why shouldn’t handwriting be related to character, if not exactly a window onto the soul? The heart-dotted *i*’s of little girls, the rushed script of inveterate notetakers, the overwrought orderliness of the clinically insane—how many times has a piece of handwriting said far more than intended? And what of the more self-conscious lettering styles of the artistically inclined, the

square constructions of the architect’s hand, or the calligraphic hand of some professional writers? I once saw a letter written by Tom Wolfe, which was as lovely and dandified as his trademark white suits. Eakins, of course, wrote with a distinguished hand, serious, apt to show flourishes, but never flowery.

Speaking of the imagistic power of handwriting, a scholar of Islamic art once said to me, “Calligraphy is discipline for the soul.” Needless to say, I am sympathetic. Recently I undertook to improve my own handwriting, not for aesthetic reasons, but because I am an editor and I wanted my colleagues to better understand my notations on manuscripts and galleys. After numerous hours of practice, I can write again in the somewhat girlish-looking Palmer Method I learned in Catholic school. It’s a little like a slob deciding he’s going to dress up for once, but then finding that the only nice clothing he owns is the suit he wore to receive First Communion. So my new handwriting reveals none of the panache I like to think I bring to other pursuits, nor does it reveal my intelligence quotient or personality type—and yet it does speak to my awkward though sincere effort to be understood.

Florey excels at collecting literary and cultural tidbits to help tell her story. The book’s author bio says she is a veteran copyeditor, but it’s

easier to picture her at a magazine as the staff expert on sidebar-writing. Perhaps my favorite is on page 41:

In Thomas Harris's *Hannibal*, Hannibal Lector is said to have copperplate handwriting. A character named Dr. Doemling comments: "You see that sort of handwriting in medieval papal bulls." But copperplate, of course, was a far latter phenomenon, unknown to medieval prelates.

This approach serves her less well, however, on the subject of education, where she reports that handwriting instruction is in decline, and sometimes shorted in deference to "keyboarding." This is probably true, but there is something trite about Florey's thoughts on the schools. She purveys without question second-hand truisms about No Child Left Behind and seems to be unaware of the tension between her support for both more laptops in the schools and, simultaneously, efforts to improve handwriting.

Worse, she makes little effort to provide a detailed account of exactly how much handwriting instruction is offered in the schools today, which admittedly could be a demanding research task in its own right. She

relates that "in the 1950s, the average time spent practicing the Palmer Method approached two hours a week. Now the average is more like fifteen minutes a day." But is this unsourced assertion really so telling? It merely says that in the Fifties, schools spent *less than* two hours a week on handwriting, but today they spend *about* one hour and fifteen minutes a week. Is this really a big difference?

It is also unfortunate for her argument in favor of handwriting instruction that Florey stands firmly against those classroom drills that are always being castigated as rote and not at all fun. Those are precisely the kind of exercises that lead to good handwriting; high achievement often rests on a seemingly irrational bedrock of time-consuming, mind-numbing labor. Or, as Samuel Johnson once said in a different context: "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."

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