

# Designing Woman

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALICE

by JoAnne Powell

Bellport, Long Island, where I live, is not far from Alice's New York City, but it wasn't until June of this year, at the Calligraphy Connection at St. John's University in Minnesota, that I finally caught up with this elusive calligrapher. After a quick search among the 400 participants, I found her, at the most popular spot of any scribal connection—the dining room!

Since I had volunteered to be a monitor at Alice's workshop, we set off with portfolios, unfinished dessert still in hand, to hang an impressive collection of her original posters as illustrations for her *Signs of Alice* workshop. Alice was in a relaxed and expansive mood. While we sorted and tacked, she cheerfully answered my many questions, punctuated with personal reminiscences of her school and work days in *The Big Apple*.

*I've often hoped you would give workshops in New York, but it's rumored that you don't want to teach. You can't imagine my delight when I saw that you'd be doing some teaching at the Connection... a change of heart?*

No, I really don't think I've had a change of heart. I came here for the opportunity to visit middle America and to meet other scribes—the same reasons most people go to conventions. As for teaching, I personally never saw myself as a teacher. I found one-day workshops very frustrating, for me as well as for the students. I did the first two workshops for the Society of Scribes in 1975, on Roman majuscules (of all things!), but none since. I did do a ten-session course for about eleven spring semesters at the School of Library Service of Columbia University and these were happy mornings. The library students were super. I could always assign the most involved history reference questions for homework and expect really informed answers the following week.

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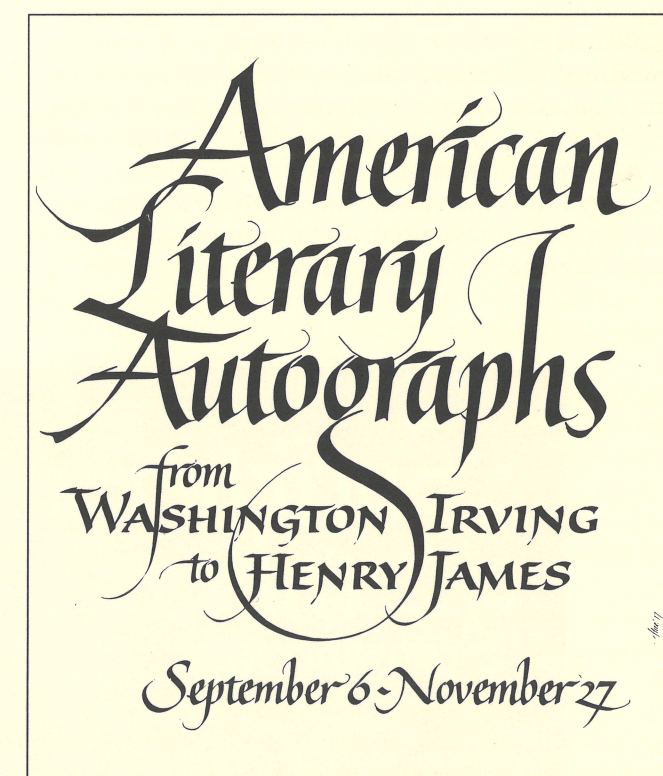
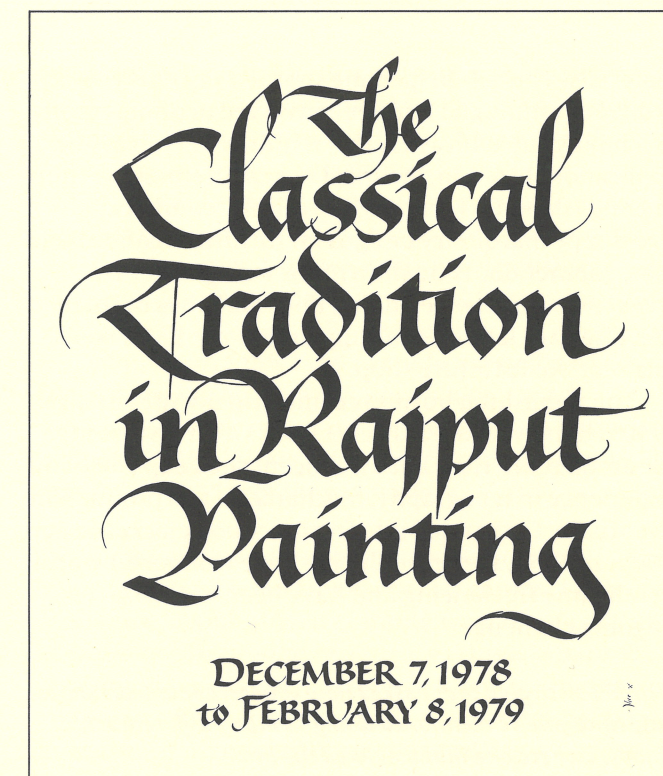
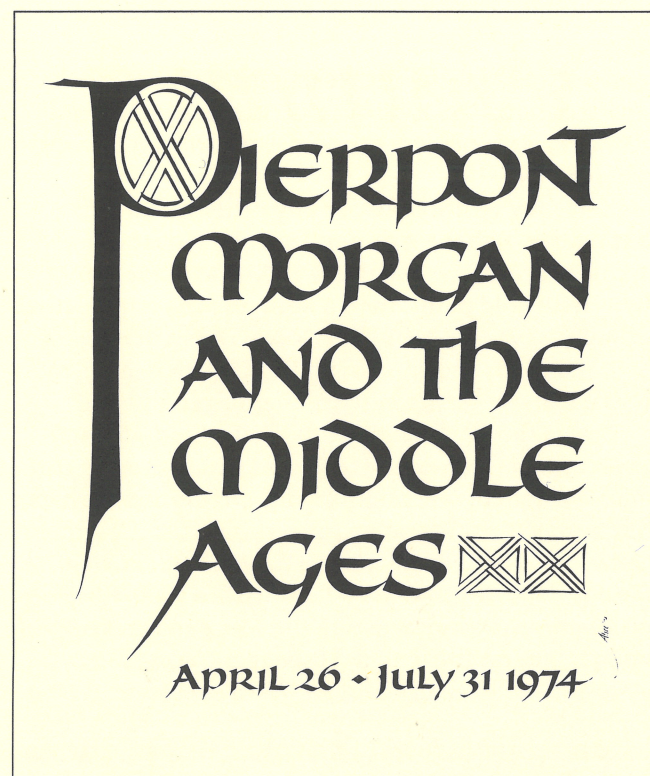
Of course, I do understand that finding proper instruction is the principal difficulty for anyone who is seriously interested in the lettering arts. I think the show-and-tell of workshops helps to fill some of the void and any exposure to a professional's work and method is good. Fortunately, for me, what I lack in talent I make up for in good luck. Through no design on my part my timing has almost always been very good, I've been in the right place at the right time, so-to-speak.

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During the Christmas Season of 1947, when I was working in Macy's photographic supplies department, I heard about a series of lectures on *The History of the Alphabet* given by Arnold Bank at the Art Student's League. I went—and walked into another world! Bank's history-packed running dialogue along with sheets filled with multi-colored letters was magnetic—an unbelievably exciting experience. Since then life with letters has never been dull—nor has knowing Arnold.

In January of 1948, I enrolled in Arnold's class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and stayed on for a few years. Classes were from 7 to 10 p.m. three nights a week: two classes of lettering and design and one of drawing. In some drawing classes we did life studies from a model in the classroom, in others we had assignments based on the magnificent collections throughout the museum. We were not allowed to cut these classes, Bank absolutely insisted on drawing!

During the years I was attending night school, commuting back and forth to Staten Island, my days were busy at a variety of jobs. After Macy's, I worked at a photographic copying and printing job in downtown Manhattan. It was very technical and very much my kind of thing. The items I copied were photos of nuts, bolts, trucks, jeeps, etc. for catalogs of army surplus



Posters for the Pierpont Morgan Library. Original size of lettering area 20 7/8" by 24 3/8".

materials. This job helped me sharpen my darkroom skills. For although I had been involved in photography as a hobby since I was 13, this required very exacting application. Later on, I worked in a cabinetmaking shop in Long Island City, cutting beautifully complicated free-shape marquetry designs for furniture, coffee table tops, cabinet doors or showroom wall panels. On weekends, I freelanced doing lines and lines of small greeting card lettering to supplement my \$35 a week salary at the furniture shop.

The publishing business came into my life early in 1950 when I worked at Pocket Books as an assistant to the art director. Here I had a concentrated exposure and experience in typography, mechanicals and production. Eventually I expanded into freelance book jacket design work. In 1953, I entered the big wide wonderful world of full-time freelancing and have been enjoying the ongoing challenge.

*Whew! I'm so glad that I asked how you feel about workshops! But, since you've mentioned doing so many different kinds of jobs, is there one that you liked the best?*

Sorry about my long winded answer. Someone once said of me, "If you ask Alice for the time, she'll tell you how to make a watch." Anyway, yes, there was a job that I liked the best. I really loved being in the wood-working shop. I always liked working with my hands, and producing something so solidly tangible was very rewarding. The creativity came in selecting the various woods to complement the design. A special bonus was being in a workshop filled with the delicious fragrances of the rare woods being cut. India ink and gouache don't do the same for my current space!

*I can easily see how your woodworking has affected your use of other materials. Do you design and cut out those beautiful polished brass letters that I've seen in the Morgan Library's exhibition room?*

Yes, but they're not brass, or any other metal for that matter. Believe it or not, I cut the letters out of styrofoam coreboard with a #11 X-acto blade, spray them with gold paint, then a light misting with leather brown to give that burnished look. The material is very light and easily mounted with double-stick tape. We have a stock of letters and use them over and over.

Once I did a special flourished italic for a *Sixteenth Century Italian Drawings* exhibition that was different. First, I designed a very tight layout on thin tracing paper, then projected this tracing in sections onto the core-board, cut and finished it in sections, and carried all the pieces of lettering and the 60" flourishes via the Lexington Avenue Subway down to the Morgan Library. Only when it was on the wall did I see it as a complete composition. It worked out well and everyone liked it.

*Wasn't that very risky? How did you know how heavy to make the thicks and thins?*

Early on I worked with Arnold on lots of various projects and learned plenty about problem solving. One commission that was especially interesting was his designing very large letters that would eventually be cast in aluminum and mounted in a free-standing style on the roof edge of a building. We cut a series of sample letters out of metallic coated illustration board, each with carefully determined, but different ratios of stems to hairlines, etc. Then, finding a fifth floor neighbor with windows facing an unobstructed two block view,



*Listing of Founding Members of the Society of Scribes. Original size of lettering area 23" x 7". Written with a reed and a quill.*

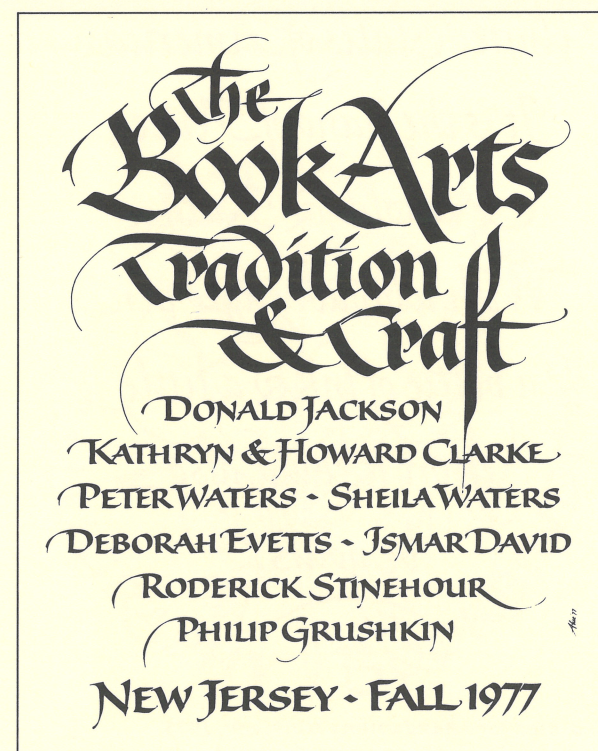
## SIXTEENTH CENTURY NORTHERN DRAWINGS

NOVEMBER 19, 1971 - JANUARY 22, 1972

*Poster for the Pierpont Morgan Library. Original size 20 3/8" by 12".*



*Personal greeting card for Valentine's Day. Original size 8 3/8" x 6 1/2".*



*Poster for "The Book Arts." Original size 18 1/2" by 23 1/2".*

we hung the model letters outside and below the windows. We made careful observations at various distances, between the apartment house and the East River, noting when the hairlines or serifs became too thin to hold the shape or were unnecessarily gross. We applied these observations to the finished drawings for the metal casting. I suppose this whole business is done by computer now-a-days, but Arnold's way was fun and educational, and was followed by lunch in Chinatown!

I don't make this kind of study every time I do a special display for an exhibition room. I made some similar tests at first, but now I pretty much know what will work. The letters are not very subtle when held in hand, but at 35 feet they work fine.

*Do you use any special guides for those long graceful curves?* No, everything is cut free-hand. Of course, I first do a same size layout, then a graphite transfer of carefully defined outlines—the rest is easy. This is where the marquetry cutting skills come in handy, one clean cut along each line—no going back, no retouching. If I spoil it, it means doing the job over again!

*Speaking of doing jobs over again. Do you sometimes have to redo a poster?*

Sure, if I'm careless enough to misspell a word, but rarely for other reasons. I make fairly careful layouts on thin yellow architect's detail paper first; this is the most important part—where the decisions are made. Many times a particular exhibition suggests the style of lettering to use and in writing out the copy it serves too as a "warm up" for the finished poster. At this point, I also determine the pen scales for the various lines of copy, using the same nibs I intend to use on the finish.

I then draw these guide lines on the back side of 3-ply kid Strathmore paper and use a lightbox to do the final rendering on the face side. With the thin tracing layout underneath, it's not too difficult to see enough image through the paper (with the guide lines on the BACK!) to make the final penwork look fairly spontaneous even though it had been carefully worked out—which, of course, one must do with lots of copy in a very controlled space.

*It's certainly wonderful to be able to handle these beautiful posters and have a good close look at how you do them. What sort of pens do you use for the large letters?*

For large writing I use Coit pens, most of mine are about 35 years old and behave nicely. I've recently worn out two of my favorite sizes and I'm now painfully breaking in some new ones. Happily I'm able to fit the brass nibs

into the old wooden holders, which are well balanced and feel comfortable in my hand. For smaller writing, I use Speedball C-0, C-1, or C-2 nibs. I find that these nibs flow well with the Winsor & Newton gouache I like to use. Incidentally, I almost always use the colors right out of the tube. First, because there's such a great choice of colors to pick from and secondly it's always comforting to know you'll have exactly the same color if you happen not to have mixed enough to finish the job. For black, I like the nice mat black of Pelikan Fount ink, left open for a while so it slightly thickens by evaporation.

As for having a close look, I realize the temptation, and it's a good opportunity to study technique on these original pieces, but please don't judge the generous letter spacing and heavy hairlines from nose distance. These signs are for quick street level communication, or to be viewed from the Madison Avenue bus, so this intention is an important factor in the overall design and particular rendering.

*When did you first become interested in lettering?*

As I recall, I was made aware of letters and handwriting through an eye opening sixth grade experience.

I can't remember a time when I didn't draw, mostly animals, trees, flowers, and anything Indian (American). I managed to draw my way through the first five years of grade school. My sixth grade teacher must have valued his eyesight, while reading my compositions, more than my drawings because at the end of the fall term my report card showed a big U (unsatisfactory) in "Penmanship." This did not go well with my father. He was a skilled craftsman, carried a micrometer in his vest pocket, had a meticulous handwriting and was a stickler for neatness. He said, "if you can draw flowers, you can draw letters." I quickly learned and have been learning ever since. By the way, I brought home an A in penmanship by the end of the spring term.

*Did getting an A in penmanship provide the incentive to study calligraphy? Or did you have some other experiences that interested you in the subject?*

My sixth grade experience certainly made me aware of letters, but who knew from "calligraphy" in the 30's in Staten Island! Later, I had a full vocational art training in Washington Irving High School in Manhattan. It was here that I was introduced to broad edged nibs and some of what they could do. Although we all studied lettering and layout, I was most often the one selected to do the extra curricular lettering jobs: posters, signs, or special citations. Vocational training was serious business in the 40's and we all worked very hard. So you see, I had a

*Italic handwriting.  
Created at the height  
of the Renaissance  
it was the hand of Petrarch,  
Michelangelo,  
& Queen Elizabeth I.  
This example was written  
in the midst of  
hectic preparations for the  
200<sup>th</sup> birthday of the  
United States of America.  
It is the hand of Alice,  
Arnold & Ruth.  
With a broad-edged pen,  
a bottle of ink & a little  
effort it could also  
be yours!*

*Original piece for a handwriting exhibition, 1975.  
Original size of lettering area 3 1/4" x 10 1/2".*

*Written with a Mitchell nib, eternal black ink on bond paper.*

good art education before I met Arnold, but it was with him that I met the "calligraphy experience" head on.

*You were fortunate to have that broad background—but do you think it's necessary for everyone to have that kind of training before studying calligraphy?*

No, not everyone, but some art training would be invaluable to most. Unfortunately, it's the lack of any kind of art training that gives a large part of the scribal community many anxious moments. Many scribes write beautifully in the small handwriting sizes, but it's very difficult to jump into a designer's world after ten weeks of "Beginning Italic" and expect layout solutions to leap off the page. Scribes should do more drawing and as much study of designing with type as possible.

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*How much of your income is earned doing calligraphy?*

Not very much. While I would like it to be more, I would estimate about 40% of my income is earned by pen pushing. My remaining income is derived from the other areas of graphic design—magazine production and book designing.

*I notice you sign your posters "Alice." How come you only use your first name?*

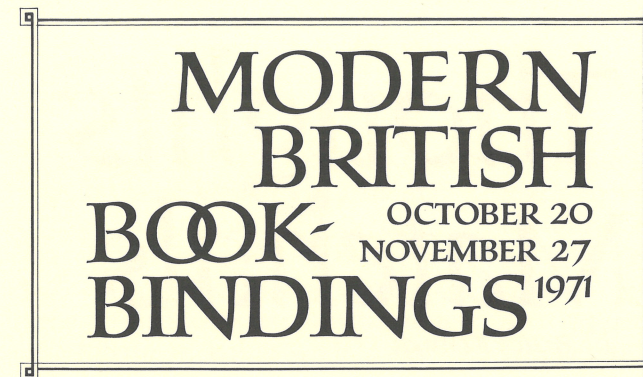
While I certainly don't equate myself with the genius of Vincent Van Gogh, I can appreciate why he signed his paintings simply "Vincent." Even my father and his brother couldn't agree on the pronunciation of KOETH.

*I notice a few signs here announcing Lotus Eaters exhibition... who are the Lotus Eaters, anyway?*

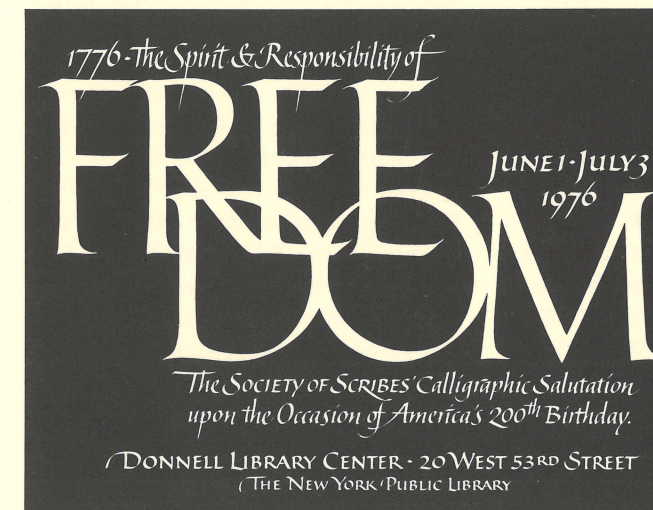
The Lotus Eaters are a small for-fun group of scribes and bookbinders. We meet occasionally to swap ideas and jokes at various New York eateries. We had our Fifth Anniversary get-together at the Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center. We haven't yet decided where we'll have our Tenth Anniversary bash.

Alice, it has been great spending this time with you, but people are arriving for your workshop, Good Luck!!

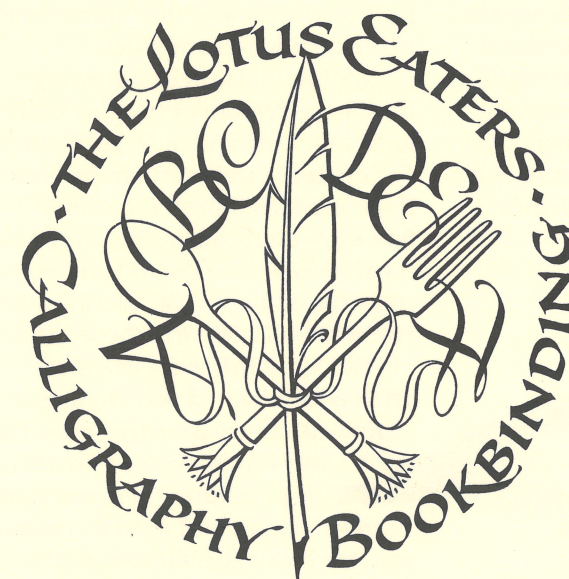
Thanks, JoAnne, for your help. I hope that I'll be able to show and tell enough sign-making information in a short afternoon. Workshops have a tendency to run overtime and I'd hate to make everyone late for dinner.



*Poster for the Pierpont Morgan Library. Original size 20 3/8" by 12".*



*Society of Scribes Exhibition, 1975, reduced.*



*Label design for Lotus Eaters. Original size 6 1/4" x 6 1/4".  
Written with a speed ball C pen and Pelikan Fount ink.*

*Thanks Marcy, xx Alice  
11.13.17*