

TIPS FOR GETTING THE MOST FROM SoS WORKSHOPS AND CLASSES

by Carmen Yount

[Ed. Note: Carmen wrote this article for the SoS Newsletter in 2001. We recently re-read it, and thought her advice was so useful that we should re-print it! Good advice ages well. Carmen is a graphic designer now living in the state of Washington, and has a certificate in natural science illustration.]



Sheryl Nelson found copying precisely and the broad-edged pen a real challenge! She is now committing Carmen's rules (specifically #1, 3, 4 and 7) to memory.



Another variation on the vase by Carmen Yount



The vase revisited by Chi Nguyen



Alice's drawing of flowers using a broad-edged pen—to be copied exactly during the workshop.

Nineteen people crowded into an SVA classroom for a day of calligraphic drawing with Alice. I was one of those students, and I learned a lot that day from a teacher I admire and respect. But let's face it, I didn't learn how to draw. That will take a lot of practice on my part (not to mention a few more drawing classes.) Alice makes you think, though, and I ended up coming away from her workshop with a couple of new skills and a few ideas.

1. Get to know your tools. Broad-edged pens can do a lot, but don't expect them to make copperplate forms the way a pointed pen does. Ward Dunham says, "In the long run, the tool itself will teach you all you must know about what it can, and cannot, do!"

2. Take care of your tools. Alice has had some of her tools for many years and they write better now than they did when she got them because she keeps them clean and treats them with respect.

3. Take control of your tools. Once you know what the pen can do, it's up to you to decide how you want to use it. If it doesn't work the way it should, fix it. Much of the time, the fix doesn't require a large investment of time or money. Alice showed us how to use an inexpensive jeweler's saw to make a Coit pen write on its corners. Now that is a bit of information I'll have forever, and I never would have found it in a book.

4. Be consistent. When learning to use or manipulate a broad-edged

pen, consistency of angle and motion are essential to making balanced letterforms, lines, shapes, etc. One of the first things our eyes look for is consistency, and if we don't see it immediately, something is "off."

5. When a teacher talks about process, LISTEN. Alice doesn't pick up a pen and draw a finished image in ten minutes (usually). She studies the form she's drawing, looks at it in different ways, and tries different approaches until she finds a solution that works. If the execution doesn't work out the first time, she tries it again, and again...until she is satisfied with the results.

6. Don't be afraid to try something new. As the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki said, "In the beginner's

mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." Trying a new skill is challenging and a bit unnerving, especially when it is in the context of a workshop with a teacher of some distinction. Do not be intimidated. If someone you want to study with is teaching a workshop, sign up for the workshop. You will learn something useful, and it's a great chance to spend time with a teacher you might not otherwise get to know.

7. Don't expect perfection in one day. This is the companion tip to #6. For instance, Alice has been a working calligrapher for a long time and is well known for her ability to draw with a broad-edged pen. I would not have thought to draw with a broad-edged pen until recently, so there is a better than even chance that I will not be able

to draw as well as Alice...at least not for a few years. Stan Knight said it very well in his versals workshop: "I'm not teaching you how to make versals; I'm teaching you to know how to make versals." Enjoy workshop instruction for what it is: a starting point. Then be patient. To really get something from what you did in class, you'll have to do some exploring on your own.

8. If your lettering is weak, no amount of decoration will make it stronger. That said, exercises that help you to familiarize yourself with the pen might help improve your lettering. Try drawing with a broad-edged pen, painting flowers with a flat or pointed brush, making italic letters with a pointed pen. Play. You might get some interesting results.

9. Take time to talk to and learn from your fellow students. You never know who your classmates will be. I got to sit next to Emily Brown Shields during Alice's workshop and enjoyed every minute of it. Emily is a smart, experienced calligrapher whose work is both inspiring and playful. She gives great advice and she's a very nice person.

10. Have fun. Relax. You do not have to be perfect, which is a good thing, because making beautiful letters is difficult; it takes a lot of time and discipline to learn to do it well. Society of Scribes workshops and classes are an excellent – and fun – way to learn more about the art and craft of calligraphy.