

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY OF SCRIBES

Society of Scribes & friends

AN EXHIBITION OF
CALLIGRAPHY
& ILLUMINATION

December 1975 • January 1976

PENTALIC CORPORATION • NEW YORK • 1975

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY OF SCRIBES & FRIENDS



Once upon a time there was a little boy whose parents expected big things from him. They wanted him to grow up with legible handwriting. They wanted him to grow up to be a magnum not a minuscule. Everyday he practiced writing. His handwriting was so good they gave him a gold star. When he saw the star glitter and shine he became entranced. So he grew up to be an illuminator. His name is Donald Jackson. Donald became Scribe & Illuminator to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second's Crown Office of The House of Lords. A once upon a time story must have a queen and there she is.

Meanwhile, back in America there was another little boy. He was busy learning everything there was to learn about inks. The first thing he learned was not to drink it. Then he learned not to spill it. Ink makes stains on the rug and also in shirt pockets.*

Soon he learned paper and pens went well together and his horizons grew. So did he. This is Louis Strick, President of the Pentalic Corporation. He also grew up to be an angel and when people talk to him they look over his shoulder to see his wings. This is turning out to be a fine once upon a time story indeed.

One day Donald and Louis met over tea and crumpets. They made a momentous decision. It led to the birth of the Society of Scribes. It led to hard work and a great deal of faith. It led to this exhibition and catalog.

Louis founded the Calligraphy Workshop in New York City on Fifth Avenue south of Saks and Bonwit Teller. Donald promised he would come from London and teach the first Workshop in Illumination. One, for three weeks and a Mini-Workshop on a weekend. This for people who couldn't take three weeks away from other games like working for a living or taking care of families.

Donald arrived and was detained at Customs. They tried to send him back to England. He was carrying fists full of goose feathers and turkey quills, gold leaf and the dreaded Chinese stick ink. You know what happens when you try to explain to people what calligraphy and illumination are. I tell people I am a jet pilot or a piano player, it's easier. Customs was finally convinced that Donald was not trying to re-colonize the Americas for Queen Elizabeth. But I'm still not so sure.

Word spread (better word should spread than ink should spread) about this Workshop. Twenty people signed up at once. They used ball points and pencils. When they signed out each and everyone used a quill.

Who came? Calligraphers came. An artist came. Teachers and a principal came. A thug came and a policeman came. They came from all over.

We went back in time and space using materials and techniques untouched by the centuries. We mixed gesso, watched the frail sheets of gold leaf waft in the breeze and oh how they could waft. We slept on gilders' cushions and played in the sand we used to prepare our vellum. We splashed stick ink and cut capers and quills, chewed gum sandarac and gum ammoniac. We didn't want it to ever end.

We had supported each other through the heartache and disappointment of gesso that crumbled to the touch, gold that would not stick, quills that wouldn't write and quills that only would make puddles.

Donald was an expert in child psychology. One day as we were sitting over a cup of coffee he dipped his spoon in the coffee and wrote on the table cloth in perfect Italic, "impossible to form a calligraphy group in New York". I took the table cloth home, after asking Donald to sign it. I swore we would make him drink his words. The child psychology worked.

A small meeting was held at Lili Wronker's home and Lili sent out postal cards inviting the Workshop members to the first meeting on September 14, 1974. Who came? The Founding Members of The Society. Who are they? Elizabeth Boucher, Carlos Byron, Cherie Cone, Abigail Chapman, Peter Chronis, Bob Hostetter, Sigfried, Leona Kaufman, Alice, Frances Manola, Clark Mills, Polly McFarlin, Emily Shields, Milly Van Leuven, Nancy Westheimer, Lili Wronker, Emanuel Weiner and myself. Everyone came except Ward Dunham. The "thug" had left town.

We were all so happy to see each other again. Everyone had cared enough to be there. We decided not to structure the group too tightly. In an age of computers and conglomerates we would form a little island of serenity away from rigid rules and impersonal regulations. Little did we know. We knew what we did want. We wanted to learn and to do. We wanted lectures, demonstrations and a place to exchange ideas and information.

*Please refer to Ludwig Putershein, O.B.C. President of The Order of The Black Chrysanthemum.

We would have a Newsletter, exhibitions and a working relationship with already existing societies. But first we had to have a name.

C.I.A. was suggested, Calligraphers & Illuminators Association. The original C.I.A. objected. So did we. For three months we made lists of possibilities. We were more than calligraphiles. We were not all calligraphers and illuminators. But we were all scribes. So was born the SOCIETY OF SCRIBES.

Louis Strick offered us the use of the Workshop on weekends for our meetings and Cherie Cone began to gild his wings.

We took a post office box as a mailing address. We set the dues and now we were prepared to invite other scribes to join us. It was January of 1975.

We held meetings every month. Bob Hostetter had shown slides of his visit to the Band Factory where vellums and parchment are prepared. Sigfried showed slides of Persian Illuminations. I wrote out a report in Legend for the Newsletter and organized a scriptorium to color in the xerox pages with Magic Markers. This is now a collector's item and can be found with old theater programs and prom books in dark closets in Westchester and Brooklyn Heights. Alice gave a lecture and demonstration on the making of a calligraphic poster. William Metzger came as a guest lecturer and filled the workshop with examples of his art of heraldry. Clark Mills gave a demonstration on mechanicals. Two robots and an Erector set tried to become members. But this is not what kept the Society going. This is not what attracted new members. The truth is that Polly McFarlin was bringing her homemade cookies to the meetings. We would travel through snow, rain and sleet for those wonderful cookies.

Then the call went out for a letterhead for the Society. It was more like an echo. Bob Boyajian answered, again and again. His designs came in first, second and third in an open competition.

The month of June came to New York. So did Donald Jackson. We appeared on television and radio demonstrating calligraphy. It was difficult on radio but we managed. Donald lectured at the Donnell Library Center to an overflow crowd. From this lecture and the media exposure the membership went from 60 to 120 members. Donald gave a Workshop for the Society in quill cutting. For two days we learned to do what every school child had to do less than 100 years ago, to sharpen a . . . knife to cut a quill to do their writing. So that is why it is called a pen knife.

Scribes were sending in requests for membership in the Society. Elizabeth made endless trips to the post office to pick up the mail and answer the question Postal Workers asked, "Why is your mail so fancy and everyone else's is so plain?" Letters came from everywhere. They were written in Italic, Uncial, Roundhand and a popular style called Scribble Illegibus. Yes, requests for membership continue to come in typed. Molly Marsh makes up for this by sending consistently beautiful envelopes on every occasion she has to correspond and always brightens our day.

By October 30, 1975 there were 175 members. Ina Finnin left full time employment to write out the membership list in Italic.

Our dreams were coming true. The Newsletter remains informal and contains book reviews, workshop reports, notes on the meetings, samples of members' work and as much information on related activities as we receive.

A Position Paper was sent to publishers, museums, institutions of learning, and other Societies detailing ground rules for the use and treatment of calligraphy. To show we meant business the letter was typed. A second Paper was published detailing the scribe's responsibility regarding the printing and publishing of his work. This was done by Alice in Italic.

In September we inaugurated a series of on-going One-Day Workshops. The members of the Society who are teachers and experts in specific areas are the instructors. We make available to the membership one day workshops in illumination and calligraphy. Classes deal with Roman, Italic, Uncial, Hebrew, Left Handers' Problems, Roundhand, Engrossing, Quill Cutting, Drawing, Ornamentation and Trailers.

We had talked about an exhibition and when Abigail Diamond Chapman told the membership that she had approached THE BERGEN COMMUNITY MUSEUM OF ART AND SCIENCE about an exhibit, we immediately appointed her the Exhibition Chairman and all eyes turned to New Jersey.

The exhibit was set for December 3rd to January 10, 1976 and there was only six months to make it a reality. We visited the Museum and were delighted by the gallery space available. It is perfect for calligraphy and illumination.

Committees met, letters went out, the phones rang and rang. In studios all over the country scribes waited until the last minute to create their exhibition pieces.

A Screening Committee was elected to select all the original works submitted for this exhibit. They are: Alice, Jeanyee Wong, Peter Chronis, Robert Boyajian, Edward Karr and myself.

Every member who submitted work has been included with at least one example. Many beginners did not feel they were ready to exhibit. Others did. They were rewarded for their daring by being hung.

Seeing the work of neophytes hanging alongside the work of calligraphers with thirty years of experience is appreciated by the knowledgeable viewer. To the layman it may be confusing. There is an uneven nature to the exhibit that gives a clear picture of the Society and the state of calligraphy in general. This was intentional and serves a definite purpose.

We invited a few "Friends" to exhibit with us. It was impossible to imagine a contemporary American survey without Lloyd Reynolds, Arnold Bank and Ismar David; also William Metzger, Howard Glasser, Philip Grushkin, Alf Ebsen, Byron Macdonald and others. The others could not accede to our request to exhibit and we are aware of the loss.

It is time for the ending that goes, "...and they lived happily ever after" and we hope this is the case. Though we are really just at our rude beginnings. There are so many people to thank for their help with this exhibit and catalog and making the Society function and grow that it is impossible to list them all here. We thank the Director and staff of The Bergen Community Museum for their considerations and all the Society members and everyone who took the time and effort to make their work available for the exhibit beyond the people who have already been mentioned.

We look forward to continuing our efforts to enrich life with the use of the written word in its most beautiful form, calligraphy and illumination.

Paul Freeman
Chairman, Society of Scribes

