

ZAPF SCHOLARSHIP IN ACTION

— by Elizabeth Blinn

In 2015, I was thrilled to receive a \$1,000 scholarship from the WCG's Hermann Zapf Education Fund to attend John Stevens' October workshop at the Cheerio Calligraphy Retreat in North Carolina. As I had outlined in my scholarship application, I wanted to study Roman capitals with one of calligraphy's contemporary masters.

While it turned out that the class had a slightly broader focus than expected—it was titled *Two Lines Interacting* and included but was not solely focused on classical Roman capitals—I learned a lot from John's workshop. Our four-and-a-half days went roughly as follows.

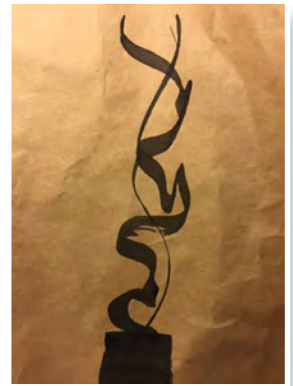
John opened class on Monday morning with some thoughts on calligraphy and teaching. He said that many classes focus primarily on letters and exemplars, and the main goal for students is to get each letter "right." The next level of teaching, though, is what to do with those letterforms, and the really hard stuff to teach is how to create, how to determine what to do with a blank page. These different levels of teaching relate to the form, rhythm, and movement that John writes of extensively in *Scribe: Artist of the Written Word*. When we study letters alone, John said, we're dealing with form and technique; when we put those letters together, we're dealing with rhythm; and when we place letters effectively on a page, we're dealing with movement. For us in the days ahead, John said he hoped we would get to what matters in calligraphy, make better use of our brushes, and have more confidence vis-à-vis where we place things on a page.

After this, we started working with our ½-inch, broad-edge brushes. John provided everyone with black tempera paint and Kraft paper—our substrate for most of the week—and we wrote block alphabets at about four inches high, using the full width of the brush for all strokes. This gave us a foundation in capital forms and some familiarity with our brushes, paint, and paper. In the afternoon, we moved on to Neuland. John had us write tightly packed blocks of text and told us to think about pairing pages of different textures—for example, Kraft paper filled with heavy Neuland alongside white paper showing a block of penciled, free-form capitals. As the day wound down, John taught us how to clean our brushes well without thickening the hairs at the ferrule or harming the fine writing edge.

On Tuesday, we focused wholly on Roman capitals. First we practiced basic brush strokes: horizontals, waisting on downstrokes, turning into and out of serifs. Then we worked through the whole alphabet. John would demo a few letters, send us back to our desks to try them, and about 20 minutes later call us up to his table again so he could demo the next letter set. This was a brisk pace for me, but John's course booklet included full-page images of the ductus for each letter, so I was able to use those images at my table to reinforce what John had shown us.

On Wednesday morning, John asked us to put our work from the day before on the center tables for critique. Each of us was asked to present our pages to the group, pointing out what we were happy with, what we were unhappy with, and any places where we had questions. John explained points of confusion and noted where each student excelled or needed more work.

That afternoon we jettisoned formal structure and worked on John's "sculpture" exercise: drawing two interacting lines, of any form and style, then painting a simple block base below them, as if they were a sculpture (one of my "sculptures" at right). John gave us thirty minutes to do thirty different versions of this idea, saying the goal was to get us to be free with our brushes and to think about ways to relate the lines to one another.

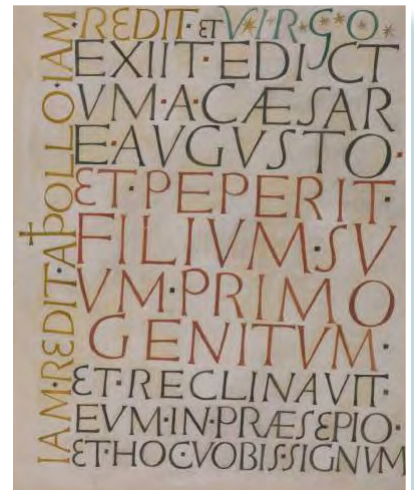


After that, we started working on the next iteration of capitals: monoline forms that maintained some of the Roman aesthetic but were looser, less round, slightly forward-leaning. John gave us a three-part assignment: first, to copy a pencil-written alphabet of his (below, left); next, to see

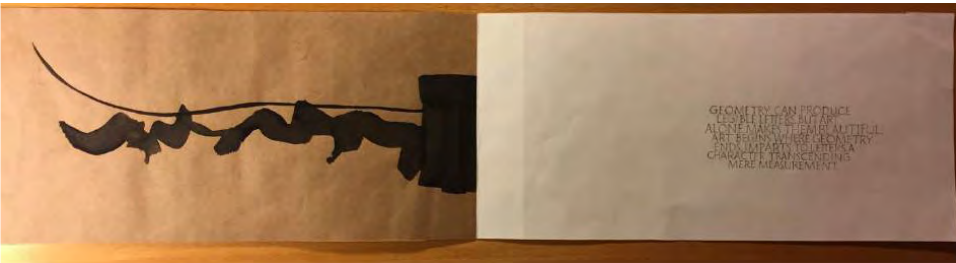
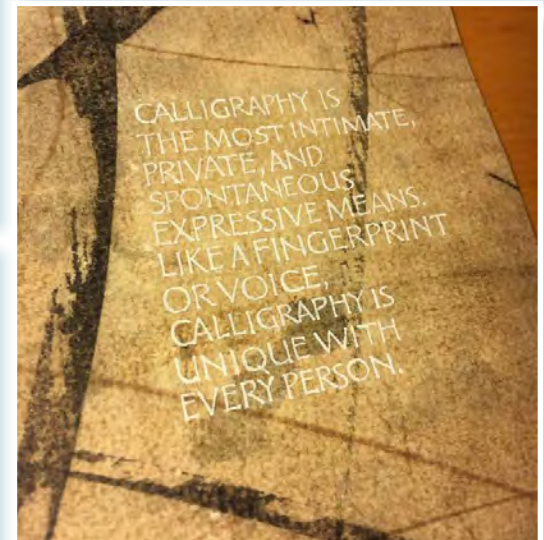
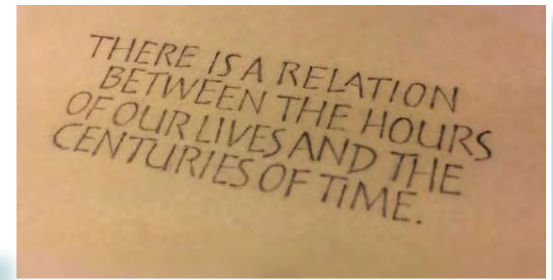
what happened to those letters when we used them to write a block of text—such as flattening curves, reducing width, and increasing slant; and finally to write another block of text in a layout either of our choosing or following one of a few examples John provided in the course booklet. When we were done with each step, John had us lay our work on the center tables for the rest of the class to see.



On Thursday, our last full day, we copied a piece by David Jones (below, right) that illustrated how three sizes of capitals could interact in a pleasing way, then went back to Roman capitals but created them with pointed and Rekab (or Sho-card) brushes. In the afternoon, John reminded us of the two-page spreads he'd mentioned earlier and said we should start thinking about pages we could pair together to create some final pieces, which we would present to the class the next day. Many of us worked into the night to continue pieces we'd started or design and create new ones.



Friday morning we all rushed to finish our two-page spreads. When class started at 9:00, John said we had until 10:30 to work, and then we would gather as a group for our presentations. I know I wasn't alone in feeling the pressure because when John, a few minutes after saying these words, added, "I do have one more exercise for you," the class laughed, as if he'd told a joke. In the end, I was able to pull together three basic two-page spreads (two of which are shown below). Other students created works that were more advanced.



Still, I got a lot out of this workshop. I learned how to properly care for and maintain lettering brushes. I discovered the Rekab brush and found that I can use one to make passable built-up capitals. I met calligraphers from around the world and was repeatedly inspired by their work. I realized that I really enjoy the less formal capitals we worked with on Wednesday, and since the workshop I've played around with informal styles in a number of pieces (right and below). And most of all, I was given the opportunity to see John Stevens demonstrate classical Roman capitals with an edged brush, to watch how he made each stroke of every letter.

For all of these reasons, I am deeply grateful to the Washington Calligraphers Guild—and to Gudrun and the late Hermann Zapf—for my 2015 scholarship award.

