

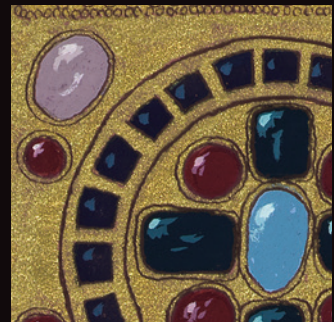
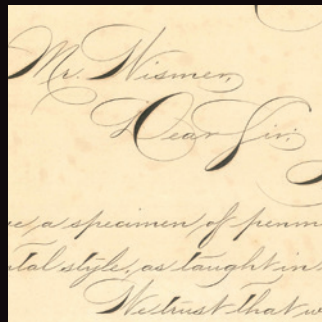
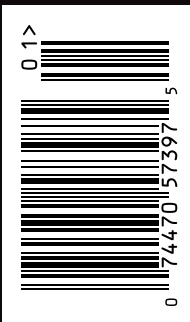
Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 28:1 · Tarek Benaoum at Mama Shelter and beyond · Michael Sull extols the virtues of American handwriting
Denis Brown's ambitious project in Beijing · Calligraphy and the opera: a lifetime project



Detail from THE STREET OF LETTERS · Silvia Cordero Vega

\$14.50



Letter Arts Review

Letter Arts Review
Volume 28 Number 1
Winter 2014



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Denis Brown
Chrysanthemum

TAREK BENAOUUM CALLI-GRAFFI

By Baptiste Goulté · Who has never known the secret desire to inscribe, to carve, to paint, to “bomb” one’s most intimate thoughts on a wall in front of the whole world? One young man entertained this desire in a specific place: Paris. Specifically, the 20th arrondissement.

People generally call this *tagging* or *graffiti* without making any distinctions, and they often do so with disdain. *Graffiti* is originally an Italian word signifying *carved drawings*. It now refers to the work of largely urban artists working in the streets. As for *tag*, it is a sign, a kind of signature, recognizable among the street artists who refer to themselves simply as *writers*. In this there is nothing pejorative; one can even see a deep family resemblance between graffiti and the principal themes of Letter Arts Review.

Beginning in the 1990s, this young Parisian man was animated with the desire to blend self-expression and lettering. He did not consider graffiti an act of delinquency or a rebellion against authority (well, perhaps a little), but as a form of self-expression, a cry to the world. An admirer of the masterpieces of his graffiti forebears, the adolescent practiced under the pseudonym Clone. He worked in the street, on the roofs, on the railroad banks—and in a parking garage where he found the surface he

had dreamed of, a dozen meters wide.

This young man, who answers to the name Tarek Benaouum, was born in 1978 and is of French-Moroccan origins. Tarek pursued his path with his traveling companions: *lettering*—calligraphed, tagged, graffitied, and *the wall*—the vertical surface, which challenged him to learn how to dominate a space. And it was because of these two companions that one day Tarek was commissioned by a Parisian hotel, Le Royal Monceau. They were looking for a “hand” to execute a complex but ephemeral installation of signs to help revelers find their way around an event called the Demolition Party. Using a combination of markers and brushes to write a Chancery Italic, the artist found himself in a room at the hotel, working. Philippe Starck—the protean creator who was in charge of the interior design of Le Royal Monceau—was impressed, and seeing the signature of the artist, Starck sought him out. He asked Tarek to take part in another adventure: the Mama Shelter hotels. Starck, who in Tarek’s words is a “very human visionary twenty years ahead of everyone else,” holds the skill of lettering in high esteem.

And for lettering—Tarek Benaouum imbibed its DNA from the best practitioners. “The vibrations expressed by the marks of [the French

Opposite:
Tarek Benaouum at work.

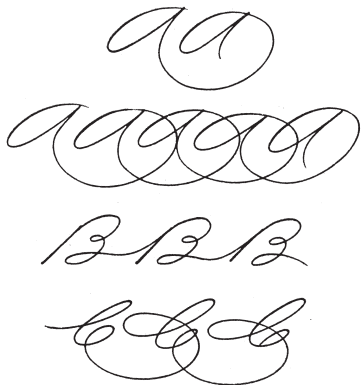
Following pages:
The restaurant at
Mama Shelter
Bordeaux.



AMERICA'S SCRIPT

The boy with a good handwriting is not caught in the clutch of poverty. He has outgrown the remotest chance of failure. Good writing should be the rich inheritance of every boy who lives in America. When you possess good writing you have a legacy that's worth while.

The photographs of original documents were provided by Michael Sull. The pen exercises, advertisements, and marginal texts have been taken from issues of the *Western Penman*, the *American Penman*, and the *Penman's Art Journal*, dating to the first decade of the twentieth century.



By Robin Sutton Anders · Take a look at most modern writing—handwritten notes taken in college English courses, well-wishes on greeting cards, scribbled grocery lists—and you'll find little connection to the delicate etchings evidenced in the work of America's great penmen.

Despite the remarkable distance between artful scripts of the 1800s and today's cursive, IAMPETH master penman Michael Sull notes a shared objective. "When we express ourselves with the written word, we emulate our thoughts," he says. "That's always been the case. Handwriting is as singular as the breath coming out of your body; it's you, it's unique, and it cannot be duplicated by anyone else."

With a continued mission to promote the value of the written word and to reinforce its role in shaping America's culture, Sull recently published *American Cursive Handwriting* and is now working on a PBS documentary on the history of handwriting in America. Here, Sull shares his insights and explains why handwriting still matters in a digital age.

QUESTION: You're making a movie about the history of American handwriting. Why is handwriting a big deal to us, as a nation?

ANSWER: Handwriting was the biggest impetus

for us becoming a literate country. When the United States was founded, everyone wrote in English Copperplate, or English Roundhand script—a handwriting settlers brought with them from England. The English wanted the American education to be similar to what was common and promoted in England, in terms of religion, agriculture, and education. Part of that education was the Copperplate handwriting.

Q: English Copperplate is a beautiful script. Did everyone in America have such beautiful penmanship back then?

A: If you see examples of a calligrapher writing in Copperplate today, it's beautiful. But if you look at the Copperplate that most ordinary Americans were writing in the 1700s, it looks more like a legible chicken scratch. They had to make a living with farming and agriculture, and there wasn't as much of a reason to correspond. They wrote, and they learned this Copperplate to some extent, but for the average American, it wasn't a formal part of their education.

By the time we became a nation, we'd developed a new level of literacy. Even though we were still colonists, our education system had developed, allowing our founding fathers to develop a sense of propriety with correspondence

At work in Beijing

DENIS BROWN TACKLES ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS
PROJECTS OF HIS CAREER FOR A HOTEL IN BEIJING.

All the photographs illustrating this article are by Denis Brown.

Opposite: A detail from The Rose of Time. See pages 42-43 for an image of the full piece.

By Holly Cohen · In September 2010 I had the privilege of meeting Chinese avant-garde painter Xia Xiaowan in his studio at the Songzhuang art colony in the eastern suburbs of Beijing. I was introduced by my brother and his colleagues, two artist representatives from the United Kingdom who run a Beijing gallery. Xia's figurative works on layered glass seemed to defy traditional painting with their dreamlike translucency and three-dimensionality. I was immediately reminded of Irish calligrapher Denis Brown's innovative use of layered glass on which he engraves lettering. My impromptu studio visit would eventually be the genesis of an art commission for Denis, one that would lead him to visit and work in China.

As calligraphy is a revered and ever-developing practice in China, I suggested to the art agents that, when next in Ireland, they might want to reach out to Denis, one of the most cutting-edge of the Western practitioners of the art form, who studied traditional calligraphy at the Roehampton Institute and is a Fellow of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators in the United Kingdom. They visited Denis at his studio in Dublin a year later and were successful in securing him a commission for the Beijing Rosewood, a new five-star hotel in the center of the capital. He completed the commission in

December 2013. I asked Denis about the project. What follows is a portion of our conversation, conducted over a series of e-mails.

HOLLY COHEN : Congratulations and welcome home! Let's jump right in. Can you tell us the story behind this monumental series of artworks you created for the Beijing Rosewood, from the initial proposal in Dublin to its completion in Beijing?

DENIS BROWN : Arts Influential China, a gallery and art agency based in Beijing and directed by Emily de Wolfe Pettit, initially became interested in my work after you met with them and recommended me to them, Holly! I understand that your brother Andy and you visited them on a trip to Beijing several years back. I received a message from Emily saying that she and her partner, Christopher Atkins, were in Dublin and wanted to visit. It must have been at least another year before Emily and I began discussing my participation in making art for a new five-star hotel in the center of Beijing, and for which she was managing the commissioning of hundreds of pieces of art, all from Chinese artists, apart from those I would make.

In the end, those included a series of 12 floor-to-ceiling works to be installed into the

OPERA MOMENTS



By Christopher Calderhead · Julio Vega is a graphic designer who lives and works in New York. He is also a skilled calligrapher who is left-handed. In November 2013 he presented a series of broadsides entitled Opera Moments at a meeting of the Society of Scribes. I asked him if we could showcase them in Letter Arts Review, and he agreed. What follows here is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by telephone.

CHRISTOPHER CALDERHEAD : *When did you start making this series of opera pieces?*

JULIO VEGA : I started the series when I was in college. I went to Cooper Union in the 1970s, where I studied painting and graphic design, and then I decided to focus on graphic design. While I was there I studied calligraphy with Don Kunz for three years, and I learned many scripts. We studied Humanist, Italic, Rustics, Uncials, Semi-uncials, and Gothic. I don't think I learned Bâtarde with him. I did that on my own.

The second year I was at Cooper, I remember there was student art exhibit and one hallway was dedicated to calligraphic work. I remember seeing one piece. It was Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. I don't know who did it. I believe it was written in Bâtarde. It was in pastel colors. The text consisted of an introduction that described

the setting of the play, and the calligrapher wrote out a dialogue between Romeo and Juliet—the balcony scene.

It was simple—just writing on paper. It was so simple yet so powerful. I was captivated

That piece is the reason I would continue to take calligraphy. I thought to myself, I have to continue this. I have to explore this.

The third year that I studied calligraphy, Don Kunz gave a class assignment for the advanced students, those who had done all the scripts. He said it would take about 6-10 months. We could use any format and tackle any subject. But we had to use a variety of scripts.

I decided to take on opera as my theme, which was actually something that I had never cared about. This project was the first time I was exposed to opera. I went to the public library and borrowed a recording of Maria Callas—I think—in Carmen.

So what I decided to do with this project was to take a little section of an opera, and then add a little set-up that explained who the composer was and what the opera was about.

I decided I would write each excerpt in a letterform from the period in which the opera was set. Then I would embellish it with a style from that period.