

THE INK RUNS COLD

Calligrapher Owen Williams can trace his interest in letterforms back to grade one, and it eventually took him to London and a bachelor's degree at the famed Roehampton Institute. But in 2004 he returned to his hometown to set up a commercial workshop and has since expanded his craft to encompass working with native materials, which in Whitehorse means ice...

When did you become aware of the alphabet as more than just a method of direct communication?

My interest in letterforms developed gradually from early childhood. I can remember asking my grade one teacher why a single-barrel fountain pen and a double-barrel pen were different. Fortunately she didn't know, and this provoked my curiosity. Later, in the second grade, I found a small guide to italic handwriting and began to teach myself. In my early teens I became interested in the history of letterforms—this formed part of a general interest in history, art, and book-making. I was fortunate to have access to a well-stocked public library in Whitehorse. This had been set up in the early 1960s. The first books I read on the subject were classics from that period: Oscar Oggs' *The 26 Letters*, Anderson's *History of Written Forms*, and Fairbanks' *Renaissance Handwriting*. Through the bibliographies in the backs of these books, and interlibrary loans, I was able to read and research more widely. I think my reading has always related back in some way to that first question.

You studied calligraphy at the Roehampton Institute in London from 1994–98. Tell us a bit about how one actually studies calligraphy. Was it purely a technical program, academic or both?

I started at Roehampton on the old certificate/diploma course. The course had been established by the calligrapher Ann Camp—author of *Pen Lettering*—in the late '70s. It focused on the development of craft and design skills using the broad-edged pen with an emphasis on a structural understanding of letterform. The course reflected a particularly English approach to letter making, combining elements of Edward Johnston's late teaching with a classical understanding of design.

We started by learning how to write and arrange skeletal capitals. Careful attention was paid to letter proportions and spacing, word and interlinear spacing (leading) and the optical placement of the text on the page. We were then introduced to capitals, foundational—a specific variety of lowercase letter, italics and italic capi-

itals. These were initially written to a strict criteria, however once the basic concept for an alphabet had been understood we were encouraged to develop our own variations.

As students the shared criteria of the course provided us with a tool to evaluate and discuss each other's work. We became intensely aware of letter detail: how a pen entered and exited a letter, the angle of the nib when writing, letter proportion, structure and spacing as well as the overall texture of a piece of writing. Later, in the second year, we were introduced to more sophisticated methods of letter making. This included an introduction to pen manipulation and drawn lettering. This had the effect of not only increasing our technique but sharpening our eye.

While I was on the course it metamorphosed into a Bachelor of Arts program. Some of the tutors felt that as a practice calligraphy had become isolated from other contemporary crafts. The core elements of the certificate/diploma courses were retained, slightly reoriented, and augmented by a greater academic content. This included lectures and seminars on the history and philosophy of craft, several essays about particular aspects of craft process and a dissertation—I wrote mine about the letter carver Ralph Beyer. The result was a course that was more overly experimental and contemporary.

Whitehorse may not be the most obvious place for establishing a calligraphy shop. How did this come about? Is the nature of the business—the commissions you get—so international that where you work is immaterial?

I grew up in Whitehorse, so after training in England and living for a period in Japan, it seemed natural to return. I found in my first year back that I was eligible for a small grant from a federal program to set up business. This paid for one year's basic living expenses and gave me time to look into the practical elements of running a small craft-based business. One of the valuable aspects of the program was the feasibility study. The program officer gave me instructions to research the topic as thoroughly as I could within two weeks, an office with Internet access, and unlimited

ed long distance phone calls within North America. The program enabled me to make the shift from viewing my work from an amateur to a professional perspective. I had never, for example, needed to quantify an hourly rate. This process also allowed me to clarify what I wanted to do in my personal work—this turned out to be a combination of contemporary art and historical research.

At the moment, most of my commissions are local. These have been straightforward jobs such as envelope addressing, certificate infills and wedding invitations. I have found most of this work usually comes about through word of mouth. I also teach lettering locally through various community programs. And like many artists I take on part-time jobs. My usual standby is substitute teaching.

What role do you see calligraphy - or even just decent handwriting - playing in contemporary society?

I feel one of the central tasks of a contemporary calligrapher is to define the function of calligraphy for themselves. I value the craft's directness and simplicity, and its ability to sharpen the eye. More generally, as a discipline within the graphic arts (typography and graphic design) I think calligraphy—whether written with a broad-edged or pointed pen—undoubtedly forms a value approach to understanding letterform—especially when related to the processes of cutting and drawing letters.

Decent handwriting? Well, I think most of the methods that have been developed to teach handwriting are out of step with current educational values, and so the value of clear handwriting as a direct method of recording thought, as a straightforward tool for communication, and as an aid for developing fine hand/eye coordination is currently overlooked.

Tell us about one or two of the more challenging or monumental projects you've worked on.

The largest project I have completed so far was an installation called *Schriftkunst: A Battle between Black and White*. It involved writing the German word for letter art onto the walls of a gallery until the space was black. The idea was developed from a comment made by the German expressionist calligrapher Rudolf Koch. In explaining the idea of contrast in design, he described the process of letter making as a battle between black and white in which black must win. The project took a month working about six hours every morning.

Currently, and into this winter, I am working on a project called *I: The Multiplied Letter*. This work explores the idea of letterform as unique and multiplied objects through the process of making cast ice monoliths. The monoliths will be cast on site and placed within the natural environment in and around Whitehorse and Dawson City to form site-specific installations.

Tell us a bit about the sample of your work shown here and why you chose it.

This is a small piece of writing I made about a year ago after a day of concentrated formal writing. It explores structure and speed. I wrote it onto a scrap of legal size photocopy paper with a broad-edged brush and some left-over sumi ink. Shortly after making it I pinned it onto my notice board, where it has stayed. The paper is not stable, and I imagine that if I continue

to pin it up the paper will decay before the ink fades. I chose it because I feel it straddles the ground between my formal craft-based work and the more contemporary work I am pursuing at the moment.

