



## LIFE IN THE MARGINS

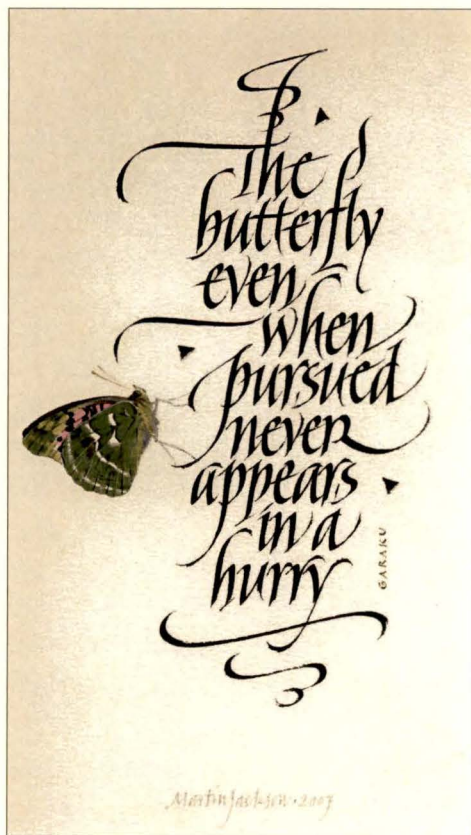
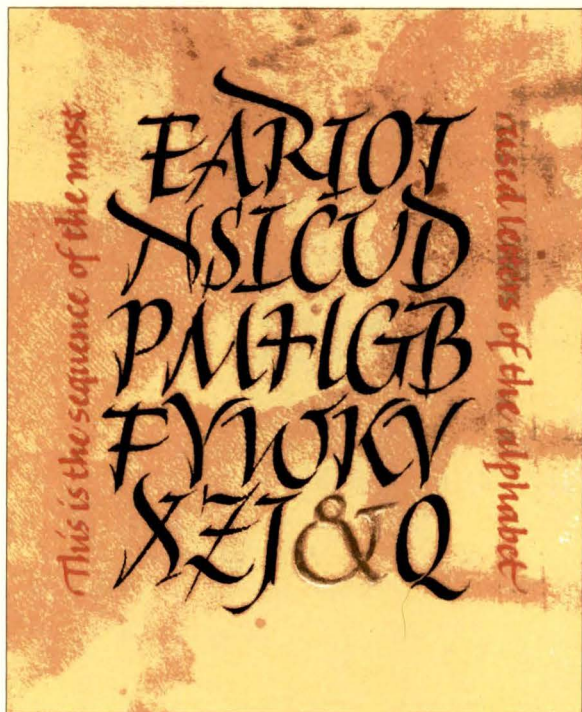
*Martin Jackson is a rare breed. For over 50 years he has made his living as a professional calligrapher, employing the self-taught skills of medieval scribes in a globalized world where mechanized type is king. Artistry, craftsmanship and the rush that comes from making a nice letter were some of the topics MARLENE CHAN discussed with him at his home in Vancouver.*

Wherever Martin Jackson travels, he takes along his lifelong interest in butterflies and their habitat. This was quite literally the case the first time I encountered him, at an international lettering arts conference in Lethbridge several years ago. He had been incubating a batch of Mourning Cloak pupae, which were due to emerge during the time he would be teaching at the conference. So he brought them along, he said, “to allow me to release them quietly into the wild. However, word got around that this was going to happen, and many of the workshop participants were gathered outside my classroom to watch. It’s become a ‘moment’ that still follows me around!” Having witnessed it myself, I can verify it was only the briefest of moments, but an experience never to be forgotten—a (literally) transformative event that could be classified as performance art.

The depth of Martin’s knowledge on a variety of subjects—including the history of writing, historic scripts, scribes, medieval manuscripts, butterflies, and indigenous plants and flowers—is rivalled only by his wit and humour. As the keynote speaker at that 2004 conference in Lethbridge, he entertained the audience with his description of the life of a particular medieval monk that he fantasized or fictionalized, and subtly compared to that of a modern scribe (not unlike himself or one of us in the audience), based on remnant pages of a book that he claimed to have discovered while on a holiday in Spain. Truth, fact, fiction, lies and memory were melded together beautifully, weaving empathy, humanity and weakness into the tale as only Martin can do.

On another occasion in Ottawa, his storytelling ability again came to the fore as he related what one imagines (incorrectly, as it turned out) to be the most lucrative commission in the lifetime of any calligrapher, producing all the calligraphy for the wedding reception of Bill and Melinda Gates. The irony of working for such a digital technology innovator and the comedy of Martin’s involvement in the project were delightfully entertaining. It is but one of many stories that only Martin can tell...





A “new” alphabet created by Jackson, written on vellum salvaged from a damaged 17th century Spanish manuscript.

*I think that I understand your resistance to being called an artist. I once heard the Governor General’s Award-winning visual artist Kai Chan describe himself as a “maker of things,” while further acknowledging that he had stolen the phrase from the fashion designer (and artist) that he most admires, Issey Miyake.*

Yes, I can relate to that. I have never considered what I do as a calligrapher as art. I am very comfortable with being a “craftsperson.” I was not born with a great deal of artistic talent, and whatever skills I have are skills that I have learned over many years.

*You have a lot in common with a practising artist, though. Every time you face that white (blank) page and put pen to paper, it is a risk-taking, creative act; it is the beginning of the same creative process experienced by any dancer, painter, sculptor, actor/performer, composer or architect.*

I still get a nice “rush” when I make a nice letter or two. There is something so basic about ink and paper. I am quite a

“traditional” calligrapher in that my tools are the traditional ones of Mitchell, Speedball and Brause nibs, Chinese ink, gouache and good-quality paper. I do use quills, reeds and vellum for certain pieces, and various homemade tools for some techniques.

It is as much about the space between the letters as the marks themselves. It is the play between the notes and the silences [i.e. white space] that is as important in a musical score and to the musician... at least as important as hitting the right note itself, as the “trace” left behind. Not to forget the life in the margins!

The initial creative process can be both exciting and frustrating. It depends on how quickly I can arrive at a solution. Sometimes an idea will just fall into place and other times nothing will work. I will do many, many preparatory designs until I am totally happy with the result. The final piece should be a joy to complete. It is a good thing there are deadlines though, because satisfaction is





a relative thing and perfection is never really attainable.

*Where did you train to be a calligrapher?*

I am self-taught. When I was 14, I saw a letter written by an uncle to my parents. It was the most beautiful writing I had ever seen. My mother told me that it was called “italics” and uncle Geoffrey “did” calligraphy. From that moment, I knew that was how I wanted to write. I took that letter and I copied it over and over again. For about two years, this letter was my only reference until I discovered a small book by the wonderful Tom Gourdie and I felt I was learning all over again, following his instructions.

After my high school years in Sheffield, England, where I was born, I joined a design studio as an apprentice. All the artists in the design studio were skilled at lettering, so I quickly acquired a love of letters and typography.

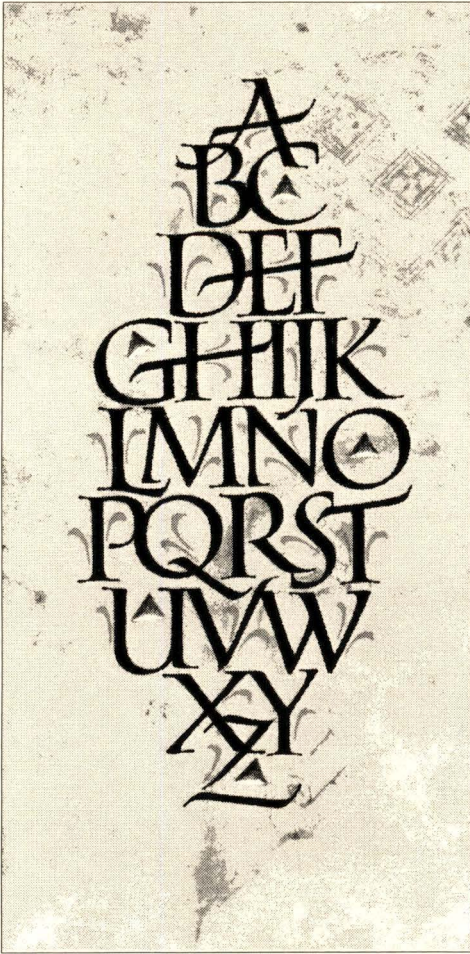
I did attend art school two nights a week, but all I remember is learning how to sing three-part harmony with two other students! I also spent two mandatory years in military service in the Royal Air Force.

*As a teacher, you are much in demand and flew more than 90,000 kilometres last year! What can you say about students of calligraphy today? What is the future of the craft?*

About once a year I am asked to teach graphic design students in their first year at a college in Vancouver. This is a rare opportunity and does not happen often enough. I always make this a priority. There should absolutely be more time devoted to hand lettering. It seems only to happen with teachers already placed in the schools who acknowledge the importance and history of hand lettering to an in-depth education and understanding of typography. They also have to be confident enough to seek out someone like myself with the skills to teach it to the students.

I learn as much from students as they do from me. My best teaching experiences have been in Japan with Japanese students. Perhaps it is because they grow up with a time-honoured reverence for calligraphy as an art form and yet also thrive on the freedom of my approach. I tell them that they needn't worry about emulating considered masters of calligraphy. “Your goal is to be your own best calligrapher.”





*Some of the original decoration on the 350-year-old piece of vellum used in this piece can still be seen at upper right.*

Perhaps the fact that calligraphy is not taught as a required course in design schools is problematic for the reason Donald has so simply and profoundly indicated. Operating computers cannot provide the same aesthetic experience as working with pen and ink to make letters. The “wetness” is fundamental to a design learning experience, an appreciation of the craft of calligraphy. Making mistakes and learning how to correct them are a vital part of the experience.

The computer is both a blessing and a curse. A curse in that there are so many “calligraphic” computer fonts available, taking away much of the work previously done by hand. Computers are at the same time a blessing in that through my Web site people see the type of work that I do and hopefully they may commission me to do a piece.

*I have one last question, Martin. I knew about your butterfly interest but I had no idea you had such an extensive collection. What is happening next with this other passion?*

My wife Patsy will tell you that there is not a thing in our garden, which covers the entire front yard, that is not about feeding butterflies at some stage in their life cycle. She and I have been trying for many years to drive to the Arctic Circle, to Inuvik, mainly to collect butterflies on the Dempster Highway. We have collected many times up the Alaska Highway but never gone all the way to the top. We are planning to do it this year.

*To see more samples of Martin Jackson's work, go to [www.martinjacksoncalligraphy.com](http://www.martinjacksoncalligraphy.com). The 27th edition of the International Lettering Arts Conference, Island Magic, will be held July 21–27 in Duncan, BC.*

*Donald Jackson, former calligrapher to the Queen of England, has stated clearly his problem with technology. He said: “It is not wet.” Martin, are you (and all contemporary calligraphers) not somewhat of a living anachronism?*

Donald Jackson has been a major influence and inspiration. He is, for me, the complete calligrapher. He has such mastery of all the skills necessary to produce work at the highest level. His Web site on the making of the St. John's Bible, the first handwritten bible in our time [see [www.saintjohnsbible.org](http://www.saintjohnsbible.org)], is fantastic. No one has accomplished such a thing since the invention of the printing press over five centuries ago, hand lettered and hand illuminated using vellum, quills, natural handmade inks and hand-ground pigments, gilded with gold and silver leaf.