


As a reflection of current tendency of contemporary western calligraphy: A Montreal urban art collective “garbage beauty”

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Abstract

Today, western calligraphy is performed as an art form with new dimensions, creating a rich diversity in the contemporary mindset technically and conceptually. Understanding the current tendencies is involved in interpreting the traditional aspect and how it is projected through today’s practices. The aim of this study is examined through the work of Montreal-based urban calligrapher Garbage Beauty, who employs discarded objects on the streets as platforms for calligraphy practices by blending them with creative applications. The paper proposes to frame the contemporary mindset by examining Garbage Beauty’s works, which are inspired by the tradition fused with today’s attitude, and gain insight into the contemporary intentions of western calligraphy. The literature was reviewed in the context of the traditional western calligraphy with collected data. The works of Garbage Beauty are selected to provide a variety that enables a technical and practical examination and discussion that provides the traces from the past and the present to be located. It can be claimed that western calligraphy is no longer utilized just as a functional entity but also performed as a way to experiment and express emotions. It is seen that there is an established and preserved link with the appreciated convention of tradition fused with the contemporary mindset, which is observed by considering the literal meaning of the word calligraphy and the contemporary perception of its attributed features.

Keywords: Garbage Beauty Collective, Calligraphy, Conventional, Contemporary.

INTRODUCTION

Western calligraphy is based on the Latin writing system. Western as a term is used for all languages written with Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic alphabets. Latin and Greek were developed from a script with neat handwriting used for mercantile purposes to produce technically perfect works which eventually turned into artistically inventive outcomes. Latin-based scripts are divided into two categories, namely formal and informal scripts. While formal scripts were used as instruments of authorities, informal, i.e., cursive scripts were quickly written scripts for everyday use (Harris, 1995: 6).

Western calligraphy tradition covers the time period that may roughly be started with the Roman period -the Trajan Column of the first century- and had reached its pinnacle level in the Middle Ages till the innovation of the movable type by Johannes Gutenberg in the fifteenth century (Brown, 1993: 14-15).

It was the period when western calligraphy was employed for functional reasons, namely copying, preserving, and conveying the text, and it evolved both according to the facilities and limitations of the time and current needs. This means that the history of the western calligraphy tradition is directly related to the manuscripts demanded by the Christian Church during the Middle Ages, and with the growing demand, also depending on the tools used, the transformation of the styles can be seen through these manuscripts.

One of the main concerns was to create legible and readable writings that would serve for monasteries, and later, for the universities and nobles who desired to possess a luxurious version of manuscripts that would reveal their wealth (Mediavilla, 1996: 7-11). This issue is also underlined as “working as clearly as a signature” (Jackson, 1981: 62), which eventually constructs basic letter shapes that could be easily produced, read and understood.

Throughout the calligraphic history, scripts have undergone significant changes and transformations; a great variety of new styles have emerged and developed for particular purposes, and also profoundly influenced by the needs, technical advances in writing surfaces (such as clay, stone, wax tablets, wood, metal, papyrus, parchment or vellum) and writing materials (such as reeds, chisels, quills, broad nib pens). Moreover, the perceptions of different historic periods about “content” and “context”, regional and national variations, political and geopolitical factors, and also invaders who bring their spoken and written language as a part of their culture for instance, had affected the form of the letters.

It is also necessary to mention the laborious journey of the scribes, who had to exercise constant training and practice processes in order to be a master in calligraphy. The western calligraphy tradition has been conveyed from masters to apprentices for centuries through a seven-year calligraphic training which covered the rules, methods, and techniques passed from person to person based on personal interaction. Calligraphy training entails mastering the skills, which refers to learning the manipulation, control, and domination of tools -such as quill pen, bamboo or metal nib with the ink, and learning how to prepare the materials -the vellum for instance-, and also organizing the layout, spaces between the words, lines which mean the overall page of the manuscript (Clemens and Graham, 2007: 3-48).

Figure 1 illustrates a young apprentice Everwinus, studying under the supervision of master Hildebert. He was portrayed as if practicing arabesques with a brush, whilst his master scribe attempts to throw a stone or a sponge (Jackson, 1981: 84) at a mouse due to disturbing his labor. The written text stated the curse “pessime mus, sepius me prouocas ad iram; ut te deus perdat”, the master directed and translated as “you worst of mice, too often do you rouse me to anger; may god destroy you” (Clemens, and Graham 2007: 99).

Figure 2 demonstrates one of the scribe’s posters as an earlier surviving example of belonging to the 15th century, with all the scripts that he was capable of. Such specimens were prepared in order to demonstrate the scribe’s skill. To let the customer pick one of the styles that he was capable of, he would prefer to attach it to inns, church doors, and his temporary residence (Hamel, 1992: 30).



Figure 1. Scribe Hildebert cursing the mouse because of stealing his cheese

Figure 2. Parchment handbill advertising the skills of the master calligrapher Johannes von Hagen of Bodenwerder-on-the-Weser, Germany, c. 1400 (540 x 350 mm).

For a long time, the monk scribe was responsible for all levels of the book production. Considering the growing demands of the handwritten text, the medieval monk had to work in collaboration with a layman who was not an actual member of a guild. As can be seen in Figure 3, for the process of the production of the medieval book, first, the parchment maker is supposed to prepare the parchment; he soaks the skin, stretches it into a wooden frame, and scrapes it with a half-moon knife. Next, the dried parchment cutting to size is trimmed,

and he scored the lines for lettering in preparation for the scribe. The newly sharpened nib of the quill is prepared with a critical eye. When the bounded book is ready, the scribe starts to write. The text should be planned in detail, considering spaces left for the illustrator's work and illuminator. After completing the handwritten text, the leaves of the manuscript are placed in order for stitching together. Sewed pages are ready for the preparation for its cover, then clasps and bindings are fixed; hence the book is ready to display (Jackson, 1981: 68-69).



Figure 3. A process of manuscript production

When all the preparations were done, the scribe was ready to write. Since the readability and clarity were the musts, the scribe had to avoid any kind of writing mistakes. The mistake maker is described with a memorable anecdote of a scribe, illustrating the general view on a specific occasion. One of them, so-called *Chuck*, the most common label, refers to one who takes his duty home and brings it back without completing, assuming that it “covered a multitude of sins”. A *Royal Chuck*, the extreme of this crime less than a felony, is used to describe the one who takes his duty home and brings it back in the morning without unrolling. The next one, *Grass*, was used for the scribe who works in a bad manner in general. The author also mentions the intention of covering the mistakes and finding some viable excuses -it is maybe because they wanted to maintain one's prestige among the connoisseurs in the guild- also reminding us the list that aforementioned complaints of the same scribe can be seen as a left mark of their existence as a nameless scribe. The list of excuses for “Chucks” throws a pathetic light on the domestic arrangements of some of the nineteenth-century Law Writers: for example, “Been very sick all night. The brokers were put in for debt. So cold I couldn't hold the pen.” But: “I could not go on as I had left my knife at the office” has a solid ring of practical truth about it” (Jackson, 1981: 148).

To sum up, it can be claimed that the western calligraphy tradition is the accumulated knowledge that serves for functional reasons that cover the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills which require constant practice. The main aim is to focus on the message/text and find a way to preserve, copy and convey depending on the conditions, technical possibilities, and cultural and religious features of the time and the region.

Looking through the word calligraphy in the etymological sense considering western languages, the following explanations are always encountered that derived from the Greek word *kaligraphia*, *kallos-* (καλλος) meaning “beauty,” and *-graphein* (Γραφειν) meaning “to write,” commonly translated as “the art of beautiful writing” or “the art of writing beautifully” in the English language. However, the word is so much controversial that it needs to be discussed from various perspectives by considering the words beauty and writing, as well as the time when, how, and what reason calligraphy was employed and performed in the West.

First of all, it has to be considered that the concept of beauty in the Middle Ages actually refers to the intelligibility of moral harmony of the daily emotions within lived experiences (Eco, 1986: 4-5). On the other hand, *graphein* (writing) is an activity that cannot be limited with the act of the hand that writes ABC but also has to be included in the act of digging, scraping, and drawing lines (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Furthermore, art concept of the Middle Age was far from the creative concept and aesthetic enjoyment in

today's sense. These manuscripts were handwritten and bound books which were eventually products that had certain functions. Hence, traditional western calligraphy -in other words the ancient writing style- requires certain skills, such as learning the construction of the styles, knowing the materials, and dominating them to manipulate without reflecting any personal interpretation on the text content. That means there was no space to experiment and express individual feelings on the pages of ancient manuscripts.

To sum up, western calligraphy traditions were employed as a craft used to satisfy the needs of the time; hence, the scribe did not have room for self-experiment or reflecting any type of individuality. They had to act as "servants of texts" (Stevens, 2013: 25). Considering the almost two thousand years of its' history with its evolution and transformation in respect of the crucial breakpoints, it would not be wrong to say that western calligraphy has started to be considered as a space of an artistic platform by scribes after the invention and dissemination of movable type.

Current Tendencies in the Realm of Western Calligraphy

Here, the current tendency primarily covers the 21st century because artists created their calligraphic works with a different attitude. It can be claimed that with the growing interest, western calligraphy has started to be employed as a platform to convey personal understandings of writing and calligraphy that contains various inspirations, which was also affected by new technical opportunities, fused with the background of the contemporary artists. Rather than being "servant of the text" (Stevens, 2013: 25), which means using the calligraphy as a tool that serves the convey, preserve or copy the written text, western calligraphy artists have started to prefer to focus on themselves as artists with the motivation of demanding a different kind of reading that is far from the literal meaning of the western writing concept that has a certain function.

One of the significant shifts can be observed through the visual interpretation of the calligraphic work as well as the concept behind the projects, which are mostly performed as an act. Calligraphy has become a performance of the contemporary calligraphers inspired by the past and the present and probably projecting the future of the western calligraphy understanding through practical and conceptual experiences. That means highly individual attitudes are preferred to underline the individuality of a calligrapher as an artist, which seems thrilled to reveal the accumulated knowledge and experience in the realm of western calligraphy. Beyond the literal text, contemporary calligraphers have started to seek ways to use calligraphic works that express the feelings and emotions of the writer, which enable the western calligraphy to be assessed as an art form, and also creates an ambiguity in terms of the definition and the attributed notion of the western calligraphy tradition. While some artists prefer to eliminate the text, the word, or even the letter from their work, just focusing on the strokes and strikes -a gesture of the tool and the hand- calligraphic works become closer to abstract forms. However, here, it should be underlined that contemporary calligraphy cherishes the tradition, and the technical and practical knowledge of the past since it is an accumulated form of art that even the contemporary calligrapher is supposed to be aware of. All of these features are rich sources for contemporary artists, which may enable the creation of something beyond the text.

Apart from the experimental artists in the realm of calligraphy, there are various calligraphers that prefer to stick to the fundamental notion of western calligraphy -servant of a text through the readable texts- but still prefer to fuse it with their personal experiences, such as graphic design, graffiti or urban arts. Primarily focusing on the distortion and transformation of the styles inspired by ancient scripts, the concept is rethought, and the notion seems to be expanded. That means what is encountered is, once again, a calligraphic work, which is beyond the literal meaning of the text. The Montreal-based urban calligraphers of Garbage Beauty use the western calligraphy and create their own attitude and understanding of western calligraphy melted into the urban act.

Garbage Beauty with Beauty on Garbage

Living in a society means to be surrounded by writings in the form of advertisements, posters, shop signs of all shapes and sizes etc. Individuals are so used to see them that it is not surprising for them to ignore these scripts after a certain point. However, seeing some writings in the least expected places captures the attention of almost every passerby. The works of the Montreal-based urban calligraphers of Garbage Beauty are significant examples that draw attention to their contemporary western calligraphic attitudes, which are

embodied on the surface of everyday objects left on the streets from all over the world (Ugolini, 2013), namely Paris, Miami, New York City, Toronto, Québec, Montréal, Austin, New Orleans, Detroit, Berlin, Amsterdam and Brussels since 2010 (Mumtli, nd.). These are discarded objects, basically garbage that people do not need or want anymore. Garbage Beauty interrogates the common perception and aims to save the beauty of these garbages in a way that they are used as canvases that sometimes carry a certain message to passersby. In other words, Garbage Beauty delight the people again with their retouch even on the humblest objects of everyday life.

Here, various works of Garbage Beauty are selected to show the variety of the goods, how the group prefers to employ the calligraph, and how they decide on the concept, the word written on the discarded image - garbage. All these works cover the same concept, which is underlined before as being willing to target the common perception in terms of unwanted/unneeded object -not beautiful anymore in a sense- that is transformed through the performed calligraphy as a retouch into something desired. Figure 4 illustrates one of the examples, which exhibits a script on a washing machine left on the street. It can be observed that it is covered with various letters and words written with the blue marker as if the washing machine is bombed like graffiti writers bombard the walls.



Figure 4. Washing machine

Examining the style of the letters on this washing machine as can be seen in Figure 5, and the certain calligraphic style that inspires Garbage Beauty, the way they adopted and stylized it can be examined through the details as pointed with the red circles in the Figure 5.

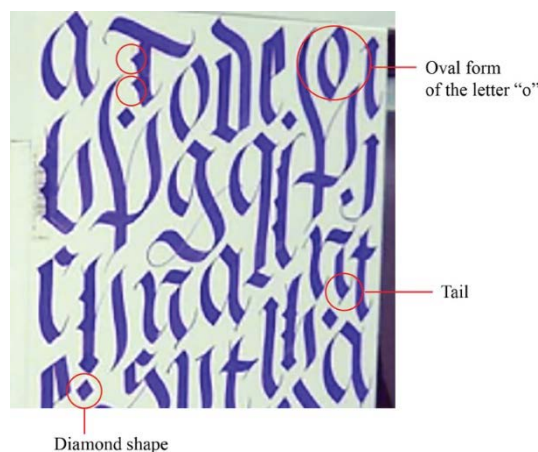


Figure 5. Details extracted from Figure 4

The overall forms of letters carry the same characteristics, such as the basic diamond shape used to begin the first stroke of the letterform and serifs and dots. The other basic characteristic is that the overall forms consist

of curves but mostly broken strokes with highly contrasted lines and tails. It may be hard to determine which ancient style inspired the calligraphers to catch the attention of the uninformed eye; however, when it is investigated, it will be observed that the style has many common characteristics with *the fraktur* hand, which is a part of the gothic family, mostly used between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The gothic writing system is a style characterized by its dense and compressed forms that fold the text woven-like textural composition, which makes the text hard to read. The pre-gothic forms started to appear in the 12th century, mostly in France, England, and Germany, and were used till the 16th century. *Fraktur* (L. *fraktus*, broken), as a gothic hand, can be observed in Figure 6 and Figure 7 with the detailed example extracted from the book entitled *Kunstrichtige Schrei*, published in 1709 by a master scribe and arithmetician, Adolph Zunner (c. 1696-1752). It is identified with the forked ascenders, a more rounded and less angular appearance than the formal gothic hand.



Figure 6. *Kunstrichtige Schrei*, 1709

With a closer examination of Figure 7, basic characteristics that can be encountered on the washing machine - the diamond shapes, highly contrasted lines and tails, the broken and curved forms-, the overall forms of the letters are similar to the *fraktur*. It means that Garbage Beauty is inspired from one of the ancient writing styles, namely *fraktur*, and prefers to employ it in order to beautify the discarded object and eventually to make them beautiful again.



Figure 7. Details extracted from Figure 6

Here, apart from referring to the past and the western calligraphy tradition, the significant issue that is needed to be underlined is the concept that is focused on beautifying. As mentioned earlier, calligraphy as a term, points to the term beauty with the term *kallos*. Common appreciation without detailed examination may be referred to a general understanding of the word, which points to a pleasing feeling. However, as underlined, with the function of the ancient writing, hence calligraphy, the beauty comes with the functionality, legible and readable text that is written with well-constructed letter forms depending on characteristic styles that belong to certain time periods and regions. By emphasizing the *beauty* term, Garbage Beauty seems to indicate this issue and tries to orient the viewers to rethink.

Apart from that, another noteworthy issue is selecting the *fraktur* as a gothic hand. It should be underlined that *fraktur* was attributed with ideological implications in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries. *Fraktur* had

mostly used works that were written in German languages, which created the polarization. During the 19th century, with the rise of nationalism, it was assessed as a German-style; hence the National Socialist German Workers' Party preferred to employ it as a style for their propagandas till the Nazis banned it in 1941 with the accusation of being Jewish (Kellerhoff, 2021). With this tricky reputation, stiff form as well, *the fraktur* style may seem to be chosen on purpose to reflect the beauty inside the unwanted, discarded object that leads to reconsideration.

Another example can be observed in Figure 8, a sofa left on the street, written *Pendant que tu rêves dans ton canape nous on reve d'un canape* in French by a white marker with the same stylized form of *fraktur*. The message can be translated as “while you dream in your sofa, we dream of a sofa”.



Figure 8. A sofa

Here, apart from the concepts that are mentioned earlier through the word beauty and *fraktur*, Garbage Beauty seems to decide to give an actual message to consider. And the last example can be observed in Figure 9, a commode, written *on est sur la meure longueur d'onde* in French which means: “We’re on the right wavelength” by a white marker with the same stylized *fraktur*.



Figure 9. A commode

Here, what also takes attention is that the group prefers to employ the heavy decoration that can be seen in the example observed through the book *Kunstrichtige Schrei* mentioned in Figure 6. The sideways of the applications of the letters also create a pattern that can be appreciated as a decoration that marks the usage of the letter as an image. While they prefer to write a message as a readable sentence on the front piece of a commode, they utilize same style letters and arrange them on the sides of the commode, which creates a patter that is created with a stack of letter, but still, can be recognized through the letterforms.

CONCLUSION

Western calligraphy redefines and regenerates itself in a continuous movement with a highly dynamic structure that is produced by unique individual approaches. Its context and content have been adopted and adapted from the past and fused with the present in an accumulated manner in the current position of art and design.

Montreal-based urban calligraphers group Garbage Beauty's calligraphy, applied onto discarded objects on the streets, takes the attention and surprise of passersby, and even provokes them to recollect their trash. By writing poetic, sometimes sarcastic messages, or even slang words with calligraphy, Garbage Beauty conduces people to rethink and consider the garbage as a piece of artwork which inholds the "beauty". While their works refer to the literal meaning of the calligraphy through the *kallos* and *graphos*, Garbage Beauty seems to convert the usage of these terms and project them to discarded objects, which are transformed once again into desirable and beautiful belongings. They prefer to do it in an unexpected and surprising way, as a performance on the streets. Moreover, utilizing one of the traditional styles of calligraphy *-fraktur-* and stylizing and applying it in their own way show that they are inspired by traditional styles, which cover one part a rigid, and the other part more flexible, curvy forms of letters. These features seem to give them much more possibility to create through the employed letterforms that can be easily practiced.

Historical references in the realm of western Calligraphy can provide possibilities in various ways for contemporary artists who are eager to build a harmonious interconnection between the past and the present. They can serve as inspirational sources, not only as contexts but also as techniques and writing instruments that were used in the pre-printing era and can provide an opportunity to experiment the search for expressiveness. Even though these instruments and techniques are ancient, they still preserve the aspect of being experimental for contemporary artists, particularly in the process of ideation and creation.

The works of Garbage Beauty that are examined here give clues about the contemporary tendencies in the realm of western calligraphy, in which ancient writing styles no longer serve as a servant of the text. In other words, they reveal the fact that western calligraphy goes beyond functionality or needs. There is an inevitable shift both in the visual interpretation of western calligraphy and the appreciation and understanding of it. There is more individuality in the artists, who actually perform calligraphy as an act that is a form of art that can convey or express the artist's feelings. However, it should be underlined that this situation does not mean producing calligraphic works by completely moving away from or even rejecting past traditions because calligraphy is an accumulated knowledge and technique that always includes and cherishes the past to go beyond. Everything can be an inspirational source for the contemporary calligrapher, who is aware of ancient styles, techniques, methods, materials and historical evolutions of the western calligraphy that leads the enhance and the vision of the contemporary calligrapher, who is willing to express individual understandings and appreciations of the western calligraphy. In that continuum, the current state of western calligraphy forces us to take into consideration and reassess western that is enriched with contemporary tendencies.

Authors' Contributions

There is a single author in this paper who contributed 100%.

Competing Interests

There is no potential conflict of interest.

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