



On the Beauty of Handwriting, or What We Can Learn from Others

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A contribution by Sandra Anusiewicz-Baer



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The subject of the exhibition was calligraphy - a seemingly neutral matter, directed primarily toward satisfaction of aesthetic sensibility and toward perception by the eye of the beholder. But the exhibition did not deal with calligraphy alone. What was written here contained nothing less than the religious foundations of our civilization: excerpts from the three great holy books of the monotheistic world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Thus, with the help of calligraphy, the artists carried the visitor off into the universe of their particular religion, only to let them realize afterwards that although the language might be a foreign one unfamiliar to them, the myths and stories expressed by means of pen and ink all spring from a common origin.

In an era that, egged on by the cartoon controversy, likes to posit insuperable rifts between cultures, the calligraphy exhibition successfully produces evidence to counter that opinion. That is reason enough to take a closer look at the exhibition and its context. Who knows, the example of the JCCSF and the commitment of Lenore Naxon may encourage others to follow suit.

Art as a vehicle for world peace

Admittedly, the conditions are optimal. Only a very few Jewish community centers - especially in Europe - have available anything near the monetary and professional resources of the JCCSF. It is the oldest Jewish community center on the West Coast, and the community has been in existence for almost 130 years. The center itself is located in a brand-new building, which is equipped with a theater that can seat 450 people, among other features. Lenore's annual budget has room for five or six exhibitions. Regardless of the differences in resources, however, I think that anyone who wants to mount exhibitions in Jewish community centers can learn something from San Francisco's example. It has a lesson to teach about the contribution that a community and an exhibition can make to a city's cultural landscape and to the coexistence of different cultures and religions.

For decades, the events put on by the JCCSF have been part and parcel of the city's palette of cultural offerings. The community center takes an intercultural and interreligious approach and is open to all. The numbers of visitors say it

clearly: 50 percent of all visitors are non-Jews. Thus the question that is always at the center of every decision is this: What contribution can the JCCSF make to the City of San Francisco and its inhabitants as a whole? The goal is to keep making the community center a (Jewish) place where people of all different kinds can feel comfortable. The credo of the JCCSF could also be formulated this way: create positive experiences as a basis for peaceful coexistence and respectful relationships. For Lenore, therefore, it was clear from the outset that she had to bring the calligraphy exhibition from the East Coast to the West Coast, since its content was an absolutely perfect fit for the JCCSF's orientation. She says herself, "This exhibition is the perfect vehicle for expressing the JCCSF's and my personal hope for and commitment to the arts as a vehicle for world peace."

To preserve this informal opening to the outside world, you need a strong self-image. This means you need a clear idea of who you are and what you stand for. Only then can the encounter with other religions and cultures be experienced as an enrichment, not as a threat. For this purpose, you need a Jewishness that can unhesitatingly be integrated into the

city, without having to fear that this integration will lead to its disappearance.

It is especially true for the Jewish communities in Germany that many are still in search of their self-image. They are communities in transition. In recent years their membership has increased tenfold owing to the influx of Russian-speaking Jews. Some are entirely new creations. Their members, who all come from the former Soviet Union, first have to learn the foundations of Judaism. At the moment it is hard to gauge how these communities will develop in future. In these circumstances, it seems understandable that the conflicts revolve around the communities themselves, and dealing with the non-Jewish environment is not the most urgent problem. Possibly, however, opening the communities to the non-Jewish world around them could stimulate internal discussion of the community self-image and thus help the members arrive at a positive Jewish identity.





A new Torah for everyone

The calligraphy exhibition not only fit into the JCCSF's overall orientation, but also could be simultaneously linked with the celebration of another significant event. A member of the community had donated a new Torah scroll to the center's synagogue, and it was to be presented on Simchat Torah. Thus the subject of the exhibition offered a suitable context for the formal

presentation of the new scroll. Instead of taking the scroll out of the Torah Ark, as is customary, only for liturgical use in the religious service, the dedication of the new scroll could be made into an event of universal value for all of San Francisco. Most visitors had never seen a Torah before. They thought it was interesting and exciting to approach this holy object not only on

an intellectual level, but as something quite tangible. The opportunity to closely examine the parchment was an unforgettable experience for many.



Writing and building bridges

Three calligraphers who are friends, three different religions, three distinct styles of writing, and several languages - those were the ingredients of which the calligraphy exhibition was made up. Neil Yerman, Karen Gorst, and Mohamed Zakariya - a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim. They write in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, English, Spanish, and Latin and function in multiple ways simultaneously: as builders of bridges from the past to the

present, from one religion to another, and from expert to layman.

What they write is part of the inventory of religious literature, such as the theme of Moses and the burning bush. This central story can be found in all three holy books. But instead of having to open the Koran, the Old Testament, and the New Testament separately, Neil, Karen, and Mohamed bring the texts

together to create a new concept. For the exhibition, they write it jointly in the language of their respective sources on a single piece of parchment. Neil wrote the passage from Exodus 3:1-15 in Hebrew, Karen used the Latin text of the Vulgate (Exodus 3: 2-16) as a model, and Mohamed based his work on the version from the Koran, the sura Ta Ha, verses 9-14.



We could cite several additional examples of stories, expressions of praise, and myths from the religions of revelation that the artists presented in a parallel manner in this exhibition. The beauty of the letters could not escape even a visitor who was unfamiliar with all the sources. The artwork and its effect on the visitor were like a melody that you hum along without knowing the words, simply because it is immediately pleasing to the ear. Not without reason, Mohamed once described calligraphy very aptly as "music for the eyes."

Mohamed Zakariya is one of the great masters of Islamic calligraphy. His passion for this art form began when he was just 20 years old. It was pure chance. Or was it destiny after all? One day when he was walking past an Oriental rug store in Santa Monica, California, a framed piece of calligraphy hanging on the wall caught his eye. Attracted by the beauty of the script and gripped by an urge to try something of the kind, he started to read about the history of calligraphy, its techniques, and the various styles of writing, as well as to learn Arabic. His studies took him to Tangiers, Morocco, and to the British Museum. In the 1980s he received an invitation from the

Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture in Turkey, where he was taught by the most famous Turkish calligraphers. Today he himself leads workshops and gives numerous lectures. In 2001 Zakariya designed and did the calligraphy for the first American postage stamp to honor an Islamic holiday. A part of his art consists also of making the traditional materials that a calligrapher needs for writing, such as paper, ink, and quill. The artist carves his own pens out of dried reed. The ink is made from soot, by burning linseed oil and kerosene and grinding the product for thirty hours while adding water. The unique paper is made in a complicated, time-consuming process, in which it is dyed, enameled, and polished by using special techniques.

Neil Yerman is a sofer, a Torah scribe. In addition, however, he is a calligrapher, an artist, and an educator in equal measure, always seeking to explain his work, let others share in it, and thus keep alive a heritage that is a millennium old. Thus for him, his work is not finished when he has written the last letter of the Fifth Book of Moses on the parchment. Yerman is renowned for also putting together a complete educational program that accompanies the

dedication of a new Torah scroll. He elucidates the steps of the production process and explains which letters of the Hebrew alphabet can bear the so-called crowns, the only decoration permitted in the scroll. Many people may think the sacredness of the Torah is incompatible with its apparently profane use as a means of demonstrating the beauty of Hebrew calligraphy. But Yerman is convinced that physical proximity to the scroll in no way diminishes the force of the Torah's aura. On the contrary, it reveals the power and strength of the written tradition: a tradition that demands the same unconditional devotion, persistence, and concentration of each Torah scribe anew each time; a tradition that has played a decisive role in determining the survival of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. Taking a close look at the wavy parchment, letting your eye follow the even pattern of the lines and letters, all this gives you a sense of the power behind this tradition and of the reasons why the scrolls are so valuable in every respect. In 2003 Neil Yerman received an award from the Academy for Jewish Religion for his outstanding contribution to Torah education.



Karen Gorst, the third member of the group, is one of the world's best-known calligraphers. In her specialized field, illumination of manuscripts and medieval books, she now is an indispensable source for historians and dealers in antique books. Like Zakariya and Yerman, she places great value not only on producing calligraphy, but also on sharing and passing on her

knowledge of its meaning and traditional process of creation. Her texts are usually written in Latin, English, or Spanish. After twenty years of tracking down medieval techniques, she now works as a teacher at the Center for Book Arts and Kremer Pigments in New York City. In 1992 Gorst joined with others to found the "Gabriel Guild" - an association of

artists, scientists, and researchers with a common interest in the technical and spiritual practices of the illuminators of medieval and Early Renaissance manuscripts.

The visitors

The calligraphic works were displayed in the KS Gallery of the Eugene & Elinor Friend Center for the Arts. As a part of the community center, the gallery is accessible to the public at no cost seven days a week, during the regular opening hours of the JCC. Thus dozens of visitors had an opportunity to view the calligraphy when they came to the center. In addition, the theater has performances five or six evenings each week. From the theater, which is located on an upper floor, you have a view of the gallery

and consequently of the art exhibited there. Thus additional visitors had a chance to enjoy the calligraphy.

Certainly, no one kept track of the exact numbers of visitors, but the fact that Muslim students came from Sacramento State University, 100 miles away, to see the exhibition stuck in everyone's mind, as did the visit paid by students of contemporary Islamic calligraphy at San Francisco State University. Thus Lenore and the JCCSF team were once again

confirmed in their conviction that they were on the right track with their integrative concept. The exhibition succeeded in bringing together visitors of many different sorts, regardless of their religious background or their ethnicity, and getting all of them enthusiastic about the same subject.

Organizational matters

How many people does it take to put together an exhibition of this magnitude? Lenore Naxon, as Director of the Eugene & Elinor Friend Center for the Arts, was responsible for coordinating the entire show. She established contact with the artists, and she initiated and organized the exhibition. In implementing her plan, she was supported by a professional museum team, which decided where and how the images should be hung. They were also responsible for mounting and taking down the exhibition, as well as for arranging the display cases. In addition, the team was reinforced by a graphic designer, who did the labeling for the exhibits and designed the exhibition guide. The exhibition guide contained short biographical sketches of the artists and supplied the texts of the calligraphic works in English translation. Information on the inks, paints, and other materials used, as well as the type of paper and style of writing used in each artwork, was

also provided. Many visitors surely were amazed to learn that Mohamed Zakariya used as many as five different gold alloys in his works - from 23-carat dark gold to 12-carat white gold. Since the works of calligraphy are available for sale, an additional page in the exhibition guide contained a price chart.

From the first contacts with the Interfaith Center in New York and with the artists all the way to the exhibition opening, a total of slightly more than ten months passed. In all, the direct preparations for the exhibition took half a year, with new projects for the art center having to be planned and implemented at the same time. In addition, in scheduling the exhibition, allowances had to be made for the artists' other obligations in regard to time. The exhibition itself ran for two and one-half months.



The supporting program

The exhibition was accompanied by three fringe events. The first of them was a short sampler course, intended as an introduction to the art of Hebrew calligraphy. In this four-hour introductory course, a local Torah scribe provided an overview of the various handwritten documents whose production in Judaism traditionally is the responsibility of a trained scribe (sofer). In addition to the scroll, these also include mezuzot, tefillin, and documents of divorce (gittin). In recent years, handwritten, ornately decorated ketubot (marriage documents) have enjoyed increasing popularity. The great responsibility of a sofer to the thousand-year-old tradition and the confidence the community must place in him were made clear. Every mistake, however tiny, caused by lack of concentration or by thoughtless copying of the texts would render them unfit for ritual use. In conclusion, the participants were allowed to try their hand at the art of calligraphy.

The second event invited people to meet the artists in person. The visitors had a chance to learn more about the tools and materials, as well as the different techniques and styles, of the individual calligraphers. Together, the three reflected on the spirituality inherent in their art, their responsibility as preservers and renewers of a long tradition, and the characteristics of their own inimitable styles.

In cooperation with the Master Institute for Works on Paper, a third event was held, in which Mohamed Zakariya presented his works in greater detail. The event was rounded off in proper style with a champagne reception, Turkish tea, and canapés. Thus there was something not only for the eye but also for the palate - a comprehensive sensory experience, calculated to transport the visitor to the world of the Orient. A further example of the way mutual esteem and cultural exchange can be expressed is found in the lovely idea of donating 10

percent of the evening's revenue to the Islamic Acquisition Fund of the Asian Art Museum.

All in all, the exhibition "Scripture as Art: Calligraphy in the Three Faiths of Abraham" was a convincing demonstration of how, despite all our differences, we can stress the things we have in common.

And for the visitors, perhaps, Lenore's wish and belief in art as a vehicle for world peace was realized to some extent. With this in mind, let us state our hope that many more people will respond to the summons of the Persian poet Rumi, which Mohamed Zakariya rendered in calligraphy: "Just come, just come, whatever you are, just come to us."



My warm thanks go to Lenore D. Naxon, whose enthusiasm for the calligraphy exhibition was contagious, and who took the time to answer all my questions fully.