

Playful letters - Carrie Inai

by Leslie Cropper

It is important for all calligraphers to have a solid grounding in the fundamentals of good letterforms. The discipline to maintain pen angle, slant, spacing and proportion, etc. is necessary to have good looking letters. Rigidly adhering to the rules sometimes results in letters that look less than lively. This workshop was all about playing with letterforms to make them more expressive, relaxing the rules and having some fun.

The ability to write an emotion is as great an addition to one's repertoire as the ability to write in different styles. Calligraphers are artists who interpret an author's words. The premise of the *Playful Letters* class is to use letter style to reflect the emotion of the words being written. The lessons learned in this class got us thinking about letterforms in a different way. Carrie advised us to read through a text and distil the essence, pick out key words and make them focal points. The rest of the words are subordinate. If you don't feel connected to the words, choose something different to write. Your work will be more successful if it has meaning for you.

Using Neuland, a style invented by Rudolf Koch, as a jumping off point, Carrie gave us a quick lesson in the fundamentals. Using 0° and 90° pen angles and writing at 3½ pen widths we covered the four basic strokes to complete the alphabet. This alphabet is a fight between black and white, with black being the winner when written successfully. Carrie advised us to look at the white of what is left after making a letter. If the white looks right the letter will be right.

After this warm-up, Carrie showed us ways to change the alphabet. She included her "Carrioka", a style she created, and we looked at the work of David Howells, which combines the heavy strokes of Neuland with strokes made at 90°. We dabbled with cuneiform letters which are made with a broad-edged nib using only the very edge. This mimics the way the ancients used a stylus pressed into clay to make their letters. At this stage we spent some time making new tools using tongue depressors, Stim-U-Dents, and dollhouse shingles, and introduced them to our growing repertoire of letters.

Pen manipulation is one of the methods used to change a letterform. Carrie recommended that we

start off using a large (3/8" or 1/2") automatic pen because it is easier to manipulate. Carrie holds her pen the way one might hold a brush when painting letters in the Oriental style. Resting the heel of her hand on the page, she holds the pen between the pads of the thumb and middle finger, at an angle almost perpendicular to the page. These fingers control the pen while the index finger and the ring finger are used for support. Keeping a light touch is a key component to successful manipulation. Rolling the pen between just two digits allows one to easily change pen angles between 90° and 0°. We could now twist the pen to change the pen angle within a single stroke.



Lynn Slevinsky—Neuland and Cunieform



Kerri Foster—Stim-U-Dent

On Sunday, after an instructive slide show, Carrie started us off with a fairly disciplined study of Italic. We wrote the word “minimum” as beautifully and carefully as we could, and then analyzed what we had written. Spacing, the shape of the arches, pen angle measured at the bottom of each downstroke, and where strokes branch must be consistent for the calligraphy to look its elegant best.

We changed the feeling of the letters by changing the width, weight, pen angle, and slant. Exercises to change the shape of the letters started to add character. Once we knew what makes a truly beautiful Italic we grabbed our automatic pens and went to town, playing with the letters. Using manipulation to write the Italic letters made them very lively. Variety is fundamental when making letters playful.

We used our newly acquired skills to make a perpetual calendar, based on a no-glue, no-sew, accordion-fold book design. We painted the covers and wrote the names of the months on separate cards. The cards fit into the pockets on each page and when turned over reveal the days of the month.



Carrie asked us to think of a word that made us feel happy and then generously wrote each person’s word on their own page. The results were spectacular! Each of us went home with a truly inspirational page to remind us of this fantastic workshop.



Leslie Cropper—Perpetual Calendar

Samples below are words Carrie scribed.

