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Hand Lettered

Jennifer L. Shaw

University of Akron, jls340@zips.uakron.edu

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Hand Lettered

Jennifer Shaw

Honors Research Project in Fine Arts

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Artist Statement

Around this time last year, I discovered hand lettering on chalkboards around Folk for the NASAD accreditation show. I found these pieces to be particularly inspiring and wanted to learn how to create something similar. Having absolutely no experience with hand lettering I knew that this was going to be a long process. I tasked myself with creating 100 small pieces in varying styles to teach myself hand lettering. I was inspired to end the project with a large chalkboard mural about the school of art to then be donated to the school when the project is complete. The reason I chose to give the board back to the school is that I wish to see more artwork hanging in the halls. To bring hand lettering into the modern era of technology visitors to the exhibition can download the Layar App and hold it up to the board to view a time-lapse of the mural being drawn.

Typography has always been an aspect of graphic design that is especially interesting to me. Even before I knew what design was letterforms were always intriguing to me. As a child, I remember drawing words frequently in sketchbooks. However, it was not until spring of 2015 that I began to discover hand lettering. I immediately knew that this was something that I wanted to pursue and learn more about as I found the hand lettering around Folk Hall to be incredibly inspiring. The hand lettering I am referencing was found on chalkboards in various graphic design labs and is what ultimately made me decide to have my project end in a hand-lettered chalkboard.

As I began thinking about how I was going to turn this idea into a project, I knew it was going to be a long process. My limited experience with hand lettering, meant that I would have to do, much research and practice before I was ready to tackle the chalkboard. For this reason, I decided to create roughly 100 small hand-lettered pieces to document my learning process. I was predicting that this would allow me to build my skills slowly as well as experiment with different styles of lettering. At the end of this process, I planned to hand-letter a 4' by 8' chalkboard. I chose this medium because of my original inspiration but also because it was an opportunity for me to work in a medium with which I was unfamiliar. I was excited by the challenge of learning how to work with and control a new medium.

Another aspect I was eager to introduce into the project was interactive video. Because so much of the project is based in more traditional media such as

ink pen, marker, chalk, etc.,. I felt that video was an interesting way to bring the process into the 21st century. Before the project, I was familiar with the app "Layar," which is an augmented reality application. This app allows the user to use their phone to scan a piece of work and a video appears and plays over the piece. In addition, I felt as though this would be a fun way for the audience to see my process come to life.

Additionally I wanted to get my audience involved in the show by encouraging them to try hand-lettering themselves. On the far wall when you entered the projects gallery there were three smaller chalkboards hanging with instructions for the viewer to draw on them. Below each board I included a simple tutorial for the viewer on how to do a different style of lettering. My hope for this element was that at least one person would be inspired and walk away from the show wanting to explore hand-lettering themselves.

Ultimately, I identified three principle goals for the outcome of this project. My first goal was to learn a new skill that could give me a leg up on the competition I may encounter as I begin searching for full-time employment after graduation. At the time I proposed this project there were no classes at the university specifically devoted to this type of skill. My second goal was to improve my illustration skills, which, I felt could use quite a bit of work. Lastly, I wanted to create something that could be truly inspiring to at least one person. Often there is little to no artwork on the walls in the Graphic Design area of Folk Hall so I

wanted to take this opportunity to create something that would be permanent and inspire someone the way the original chalkboards inspired me in the beginning.

Once I had figured out exactly what I wanted to do to complete this project, it was time to begin researching hand lettering and learning about this art form. One of the first places I looked to for information was a book called, "*Drawing Type, An Introduction To Illustrating Letterforms*."¹ This book proved to be an incredible resource for me in starting the project. It featured work and interviews from 72 different hand-letterers and designers. These artists were separated into four different categories of type: hand rendered, vintage twist, playful type, and contemporary type. Having these examples of exceptional hand lettering on hand while I was working was a great way for me to reference different techniques and styles. What made this book particularly useful was the second section devoted teaching the basics of hand lettering. As I began, one particularly useful thing I discovered were the tear out tracing sheets in the back of the book. These sheets covered different categories and styles of type and were designed to be traced over. Completing this exercise multiple times built up my comfort levels with drawing letterforms. This also proved to be a good place to start the project, as it was a bit intimidating at first.

While I was able to use a lot of my graphic design and typography knowledge, this experience was still eye-opening for me. Throughout my course work, I have become very familiar with the different type families and how to pair

¹ Alex Fowkes, *Drawing Type: An Introduction To Illustrating Letterforms*. (Beverly: Rockport Publishers, 2014),

typefaces, but I had little to no experience drawing the type. As I worked on completing the small hand-lettered pieces, I found myself carefully studying the different types of letterforms in a way I had not previously done. After a while, I began to view the letters simply as shapes rather than specific characters. This realization helped me to expand my style of lettering as the pieces started to become more of illustrations rather than written type.

A large part of my hand lettering research included looking at the work of accomplished hand letterers and watching instructional videos online. As I worked through the project, I found that there were a few specific artists whose work I continued to go back to repeatedly. These artists were Joshua Phillips, Lauren Hom, Jessica Hische and Dana Tanamachi. While much of my inspiration came from women artists, it is worth noting that hand lettering is not just a women's field. There are plenty of men hand letterers such as Jon Contino, Dan Cassaro and Timothy Goodman to name a few.

As I began my research into hand letterers, I found that social media played a significant role in aiding that process. In this modern time, so many artists of all levels are sharing their work online for mass consumption. This allowed me to easily locate the work of many hand letterers from around the world. It was through this avenue that I discovered the work of Joshua Phillips, a hand letterer from Arkansas.

Phillips' hand lettering is most often in a stylized script that I found to be particularly interesting as I began my work. As I looked at his work, I studied each

letterform in an attempt to understand his process and how each shape was created. Examining his work also gave me a lot of insight into the process of creating complete lettered piece. Because Phillips shares so much of his process on social media, I was able to get a good understanding of how he worked and apply that to my process.

The second person who was a huge inspiration to me through out this process was Lauren Hom. I found that her style and use of color reflected my personal design aesthetic. Her work gave me a real frame of reference for the type of lettering I wanted to create as a part of the project. It was refreshing to find strong typography that inspired me, and was not script. Another reason that I gravitated towards Lauren's work was that she has done a lot of chalkboard lettering. Her work became a point of reference for me as I began sketching out my chalkboard layouts. Having her work to use as a guide gave me a realistic idea of how the medium would react and what sort of results I could expect to achieve.

Keeping with the pattern of chalkboard letterers, Dana Tanamachi is another letterer who provided me with a lot of inspiration. I knew I was going to be tackling a large-scale chalk mural and she often works on projects of that size. In preparation for my large chalkboard mural, I spent a lot of time looking at her murals and watching videos of her creating them. Her use of vibrant colors and illustrated elements in her design also attracted me to her work. As I worked through my smaller lettered pieces I quickly learned how important illustrative

elements could be to a lettered piece. They often help evoke a strong sense of personality in the piece and can make a design feel more complete to the viewer.

The last person who I continually looked to for inspiration was Jessica Hische. She is perhaps one of the most recognized people on this list, having won countless design awards and has been featured on Forbes 30 Under 30 twice. The range and quality of her work really inspired me to think outside of the box when it came time to begin my hand lettered pieces. In addition, she recently released a book, *"In Progress: See Inside a Lettering Artist's Sketchbook and Process, from Pencil to Vector²"*, that gave a lot of insight into how she worked. In this book she walks the reader through her entire process from picking out the right tools and materials to creating the final vector art. Seeing this helped me to figure out my workflow and to determine what tools would be best for my pieces.

Now that I have given some insight into my initial research and inspiration it is important to understand the history of hand lettering as an art form. The Cambridge Dictionary defines hand-lettered as "used for describing signs, etc. on which the words are drawn by hand, rather than printed."³ Based upon this definition it could be argued that hand lettering is one of the oldest forms of art. Some of history's most exquisite forms of hand lettering can be seen on manuscripts dating back to medieval times. Especially when looking at the initial letter of each page one can see the amount of detail and care given to each

² Jessica Hische, *In Progress: See Inside A Lettering Artist's Sketchbook and Process, From Sketch To Vector*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2015).

³ Cambridge Dictionaries Online. "hand-lettered."
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hand-lettered> (May 1, 2016).

letter. These manuscripts moved beyond their purpose of recording information and became a piece of artwork themselves. However during that time lettering by hand was the only option for physically recording information.

While this type of lettering is not what may come to mind for many people when thinking about hand lettering, it is important to understand where typography and lettering originated. The system of recording information can be dated back to the early Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. One of the most well known examples of this can be found in the caves of Lascaux.⁴ These early examples of recorded information and pictorial representations of language paved the way for the written alphabet that would be developed many years later. Around 400 BCE the Greeks developed the Classic Greek alphabet, which used some of the same letters as the Latin alphabet that is in use today.⁵ While the Classic Greek alphabet resembles our current system that is not where our Latin letterforms came from. Around 114 AD the Romans completed the Trajan Inscription, which has heavily influenced the modern alphabet we use today.⁶ It is important to keep in mind the fact that all of these inscriptions were done by hand because the technology to print text had not yet been developed. As the technology developed through the printing press in 1440, linotype machine in 1886, and inevitably the computer in 1951 the art of hand creating type fell out of

⁴ Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 5th ed. (Hoboken: J. Wiley, 2012), 7.

⁵ Alexander Nesbitt, *The History and Technique of Lettering*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1998), 7.

⁶ Alexander Nesbitt, 10.

favor. It was no longer became necessary to sit and create type by hand when it could be produced much faster with the assistance of a machine.

In recent years hand lettering has seen a significant rise in popularity, appearing in packaging, motion graphics, editorial design and much more. It is nearly impossible to walk past a magazine stand or even through a supermarket without spotting some form of hand lettering. This recent trend in design is a refreshing change as hand-lettered designs can create a completely different feeling and mood than typeset work. Keeping that in mind it is important to know when a hand-lettered design is appropriate to use and when it should be avoided.

Reflecting on the project and the process one of the most eye opening experiences was learning to control a medium I had not worked with in years. Coming into art school you take plenty of drawing classes where you work in pen, pencil and ink. After completing the first of many small pieces I quickly realized that the skills in those mediums that I learned early on in my degree program had diminished. However, I did find that a lot of the drawing skills I retained came into play, especially once I began to view the letterforms as shapes rather than individual letters.

When it came to inking my designs with Micron Pens, I found I had a lot to learn about how the paper reacted to the ink. At first, I worked purely on tracing paper and I learned an important lesson about patience and drying time. On multiple occasions, I smeared and ruined pieces by trying to fix things before it dried. After this had happened a few times I switched to drawing in a sketchbook.

Due to the porous nature of sketching paper solved my smearing problems but new problems developed with ink spreading. However, I had a much easier time adjusting to this and creating solutions.

As I explored this medium, I also learned a lot about my reliance on computers when working. I often found myself thinking "undo" when I made a mistake with pen. After a while that urge faded and I found enjoyment in working in a more traditional medium. I even began to look forward to the part of the day when I closed my computer and walked away from technology for a while to sketch.

When it was finally time to move on to the chalkboard mural, I found that there was an entirely different learning curve working in that medium. As I transferred my mural design to the board I discovered that the chalkboard much like the paper was not very forgiving when I made an incorrect mark. Even after erasing mistakes multiple times there was always a bit of chalk residue left on the board. This taught me that I was going to have to be much more precise and careful as I completed the board.

In conclusion I am so happy to have completed this project and built a new skill for myself. After completing this project I feel that not only have I learned about hand-lettering but I have improved my drawing and illustration skills greatly. I have a new sense of confidence when I begin a new project, whether it uses hand-lettering or not, that I can come up with a fresh and creative solution.

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