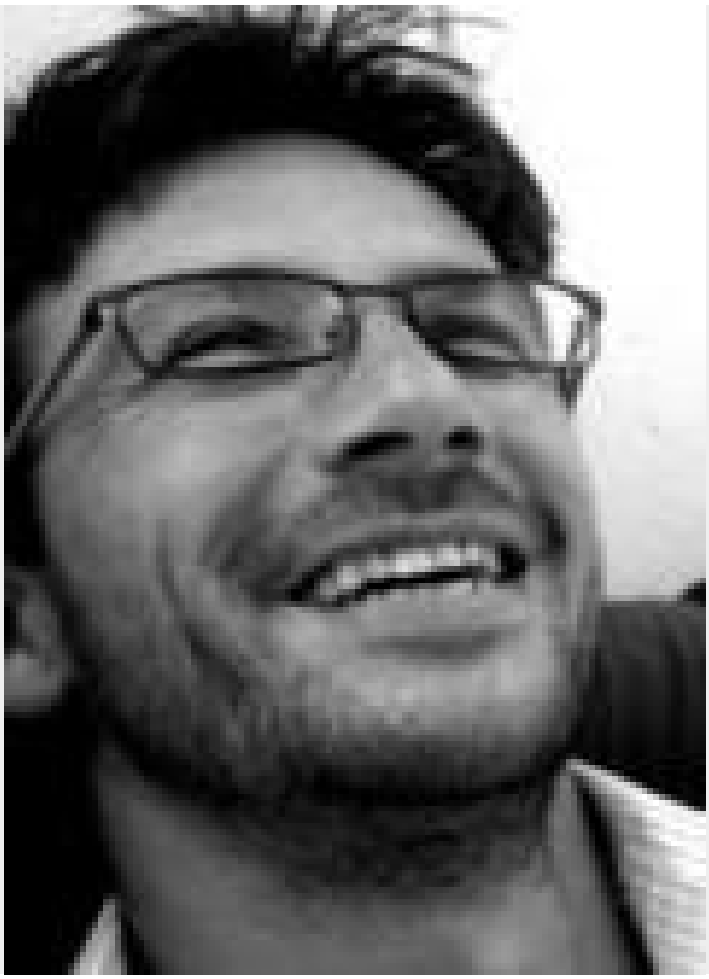
ART OF CALLIGRAPHY - SCRIPT IN ITS PUREST FORMS

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Category: Opinions

Ruben Malayan, Yerevan, 30 November 2010

Calligraphy (Greek: kalligraphía — neat handwriting, from κάλλος — beauty and γραφή — writing), the art of beautiful and legible handwriting born to encode and decode speech in a visual form.

"There are five virtues; if they do not exist in writing, it is a hopeless business to be a master in writing by reason only: Precision, inquiry in writing, goodness of the hand, patience in labor and perfection of writing tools. If you lack one of these five virtues there will be no use, even if you try for a hundred of years." **Unknown calligrapher**

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Two years ago I had a request from the Editor of upcoming “Encyclopedia of World Calligraphy” to contribute to the edition by drawing samples of Armenian script. When I asked what exactly would this request imply I was told that they needed all four major scripts executed with sequence of strokes (i.e. the direction of writing). For over three month I have spent nights drawing letters, digging out anything I could find on my bookshelf, only to discover that calligraphy as discipline was a rare find in the rich legacy of Armenian culture. How come, I said to myself, how could it be that we have so little written about it? We have studies of paleography (science of writing) but practically nothing on calligraphy (art of writing).
So why calligraphy as an art form did not evolve within Armenian cultural tradition? Was it because at the time of the creation of the Alphabet the art of writing had a very practical purpose? Why for centuries did it stay confined to the boundaries of manuscript art? A dominant part of Western medieval culture, a lifestyle in the Far East (Japanese have calligraphy as a compulsory subject in schools), in Armenian tradition it is certainly one of the least explored and studied areas. What was different about us?

The material I had access to only scratch the surface. But one source of information was close and accessible: Gulbenkian Library in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. Thousands of printed books in the library and some incredibly beautiful manuscripts sadly locked up in Edchmiatzin chapel; I have never seen them and the chance that they would allow me to come

anywhere near it was faint. Yes, it is a very complicated reality and we are not champions when it comes to sharing our own legacy, even among each other. So I turned my eyes to Matenadaran. Last year exact same time I came over, with intention to find out as much as I can and to collect material. Interestingly what I was looking for was not in Matenadaran, but in the Literature and Art Museum. I found out that that we did have Calligraphy as a subject of study as part of Classical education before Genocide, and that there are few precious schoolbooks that survived. They were published in Nor Nachijevan (1870), in Venice (1834) and Tiflis (1884).

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Beautiful writing is art. There is no doubt in my mind about that. And perhaps the reason why we have difficulties with contemporary Armenian lettersets is because we do not build our today practice on top of what we have known and forgotten. I was deeply convinced that our letters were meant for more than just communicating written words. Their complexity and simplicity is puzzling. Their origins are obscure; despite a largely accepted consensus over the origin of most of Armenian letters, interesting discoveries are still being made, and everything can change overnight. The discovery of the Armeno-Greek papyrus is a prime example of that. Its the oldest surviving example of Armenian handwriting. No other papyrus with Armenian characters is known. Dated on historical grounds around 6th century, its written in Greek using Armenian letters, but what letters? Its clearly not Mesropean Erkata'gir. It was believed that this type of script was not used prior to 11th century. So in few words, the question over linear evolution of Armenian script is open for debate, and its only logical to assume that the lack of evidence of early use of Bolor'gir, Notr'gir and transitional scripts is explained by the unforgiving historical circumstances: over 10.000 manuscripts were burned by Seljuk Turks in 1070 after a 40 years siege of capital Kapan of Suinik province of Armenian Bagratuni kingdom.

When I began the examination of writing systems prior to creation of Armenian alphabet what drew my attention was ancient Egyptian demotic script because of close resemblance of some of the characters to Armenian Bolor'gir – and I knew that during his research Mashtots visited Alexandria where demotic script was still in use 2 centuries prior to his arrival. Exclusively for religious texts. And of course the immediate purpose of alphabet invention was the translation of Bible to Armenian. Its quite logical to assume that Mashtots should have seen examples of demotic writing, but did he make use of them? What clear is that Mashtots had an apparent intention of orienting Armenians Westward, so the aesthetics of Angular Erkata'gir resemble graceful Greek and Roman inscriptions, letters are large, erect, clearly separated. As a script, its drawn, not written and is not suitable for fast correspondence as it takes a lot of space. It would be very unlikely that a man with such profound knowledge and awareness as Mashtots, would limit himself by creating only one type of script making, may I say, a very unpractical decision.

Armenian letters reveal a complex system of thought at the time of their creation in the 5th century. Interlinked with mathematics, metaphysics and philosophy, our Alphabet remains an enigma. Many

questions remain unanswered, but by drawing attention to these historical puzzles we may create conditions for further investigation and analysis of our profound cultural heritage.

Metaphysics and philosophy of the letter form

When we consider the letters, we find their patterns in our memory. We visualize their style. It 's much like a musical melody, which naturally and simply finds an emotional response in us, where all elements play a role: rhythm, composition, balance etc. A hand-written sheet has individuality and a much greater energetic charge than a printed one. Beautiful writing always means illustrative and individual expression of thoughts, emotions, feelings and aesthetic views. To some extent, logic is an art devastator and where the logic begins, there art comes to an end. Art and Calligraphy, in particular, a category of metaphysical feature, and detailed explanation prevents from understanding the essence of a question. Possibly, only retrospective analysis of Calligraphy can comply with logic.

Technique

The art of Calligraphy should be as pure and error-free as the performing musical art, in which an error cannot be corrected because it has already occurred, and the only way to prevent it is absolutely error-free master work based on constant training and experience.

The beauty of this craft is in the composition of the build-up, different repetitions, layers, rhythmic intertwining, interaction of large and small scale of forms, use of surface finish, the nature of tempo, speed and movements of the form, continuity of author improvisation. It fosters the sense of lines, forms, texture, space, and rhythm. On the other hand it demands a considerable amount of inner efforts, but the results are irreplaceable in cultivation of such qualities as diligence, preciseness, patience, attention, moderation. Regular classes with calligraphic pen and brush help to cope with laziness, develop a quick eye, ability to concentrate and think logically. Finally, all the above mentioned factors, in their turn, contribute greatly to the development of artistic thinking and imagination. One of the key areas of importance in Calligraphy is the crispness of stroke endings. When there is doubt in your mind, your brush strokes look dull. During Calligraphy practice, you should be so concentrated on each stroke that all thoughts on work disappear from your mind, helping you achieve a healthy state of spirit. The action of drawing a brush stroke demands confidence. When any other thoughts are occupying your mind, a perfect line is unattainable.

Calligraphy is the womb of letters, their place of origin, the place where new characters develop. Striving for emotional and graphic expressiveness of a sign was typical of the ancient writing tradition.

Importance of the writing tradition in the post-modern age

The ancients have recognized the importance of Calligraphy in forming and development of human personality. It develops fine motor skills and positively influences the imaginative thinking. A letter

and a word are closely connected with each other. There are no insignificant things in any written letter; everything is important there: melody of a line, strength of pen pressure, length of a stroke. Writing and lettering stimulate the perception of graphical composition.

Absorbed by scientific and technical achievements of computer age, we have somehow lost and forgot something substantial, which is inherent into a person in the first place and played a major part in his evolution – the graphic form of language. The dialogue as to what came first – a verbal word or a graphic sign – is still not over. Obviously, the right statement is that this phenomenon has always been a dual one. It won't be an exaggeration to say that what the speech is, is the writing, and vice versa. Just one example: such subject as rhetoric was eliminated from the school curriculum; and Calligraphy disappeared some time later. Gradually the meaning of the word and the thought devalued.

The appearance of a ball pen in 1968 killed the rest of traditions and lettering culture, and led the modern society to the total dysgraphia. Today children write anyhow, holding pens as they want. As a result the young generation has poor word stock, cannot express thoughts and ideas both in oral and written forms. The ball pen not only hinders hand muscles movements but also slows down the process of thinking and imagination. No wonder that from year to year the level of background of the undergraduate students deteriorates. It is getting more and more difficult to find such students who are really capable of creative work.

Physiologists and teachers of the XIX th century noticed that Calligraphy positively influenced the sensory organs of a person, developed and strengthened his/her character. They believed that "Calligraphy is a medicine and training for human brains and soul." Long-term researches and development of methods of preparing specialists in the sphere of high technologies showed that Calligraphy is the most effective way for reaching these purposes; it broadens wide range of psychophysical peculiarities of students. In fact overtly or covertly Calligraphy interacts with other disciplines during the educational period in school. A teacher influences a student, forms his/her character, way of mind and inner world.

Conclusion

My conviction is that at the current circumstances we must use all available means to revive our calligraphic tradition. With abundance of talent but no cultivation or tradition, our children will never fully realize their artistic potential. Primitivism and functionalism emasculated the culture of communication. They denied the graphic writing the opportunity to improve artistically, and a person, to improve spiritually, by the simplest means, using paper, ink and a fountain pen or a brush only. Art of beautiful writing is the link to our past and with the attention it deserves it can help to shape our future as the nation of rich artistic heritage.