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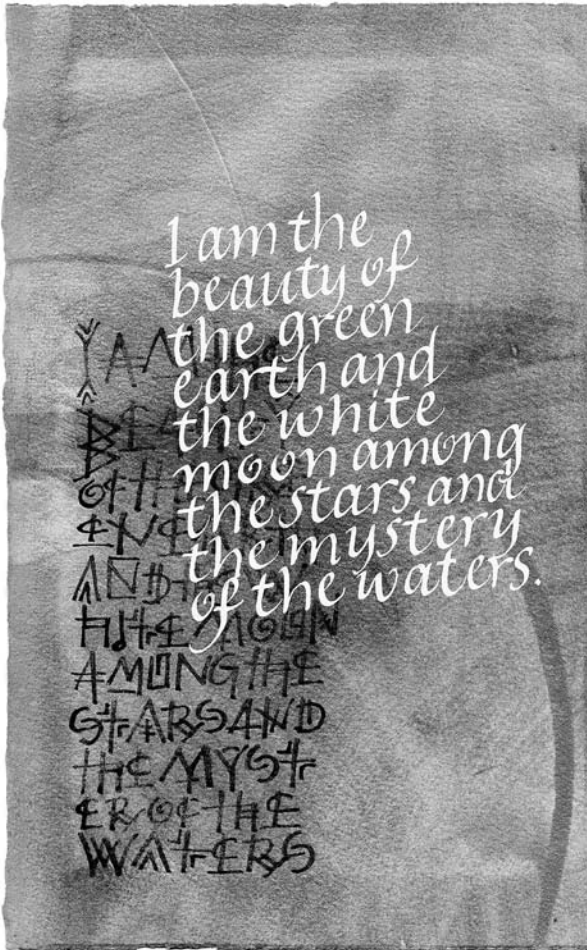
CARI FERRARO :

Contemporary Calligraphy Artists' Books

by Deborah Kogan

Contemporary book artists who make calligraphic manuscript books draw on a tradition of illuminated manuscripts that dates back to the middle ages. We often think of calligraphers today as making works consisting of single sheets—broadsides with beautiful lettering—that present inspirational quotations for framing and hanging on the wall. But the craft tradition of scribes, gilders, and painters who made entire medieval illuminated manuscripts continues to this day. Deborah Kogan talks to San Jose-based calligraphic artist Cari Ferraro, who provides an introduction to the world of calligraphic book artists and talks about the artists who have inspired and influenced her work. She also discusses the decisions that calligraphic artists need to make in marketing and selling their work.

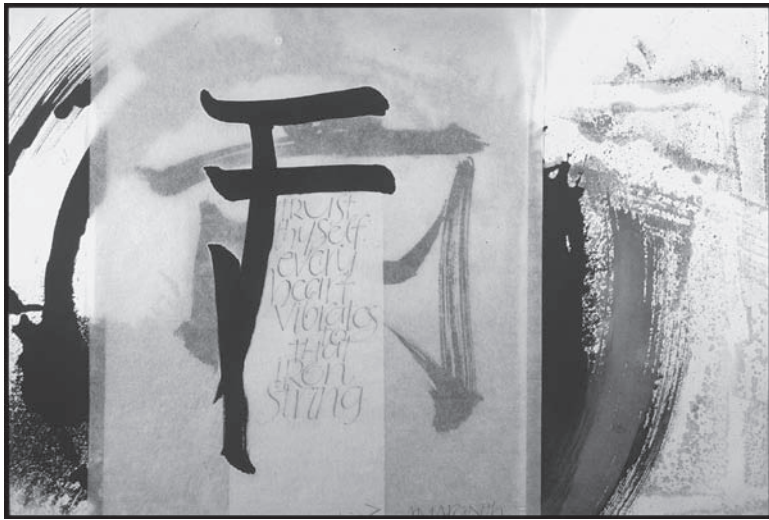
Page from
Cari Ferraro's *The
Charge of the Goddess*,
2003.



Calligraphic Training

Contemporary book artists who make calligraphic manuscript books draw on a tradition of illuminated manuscripts that dates back to the middle ages. Among the traditional skills passed down from one generation of scribes to the next are:

- How to form letters using a broad-edged pen, using the angle and direction of the pen stroke to control the width of the drawn line.
- How to gild 24-karat gold leaf to manuscripts to “illuminate” the letters.
- How to sequence the steps in manuscript illumination. First you write the text, then you apply any gold leaf, and then you add additional illuminations with paint. (If you were to apply paint before you added the gold leaf, the gold leaf would stick wherever there was paint.)
- How to mix your inks and paints, so that the process will be reversible until you have finished and proofed your work.
- How to use glair (egg white) to harden the surface of the paint to prevent the manuscript illuminations from smudging or off-setting onto the facing page as the pages are turned.
- How to register the lines on both sides of a manuscript page using pin pricks.



A piece by Suzanne Moore with visible “show-through.”

Then hours of practice and repetition are needed to master the letterforms and develop a personal calligraphic style. However, after having demonstrated their mastery of these traditions, the foremost contemporary calligraphic book artists have discovered that they have the freedom to break rules and innovate with new materials and forms when they choose to do so.

In keeping with its craft tradition, calligraphy is not generally taught at educational institutions in the U.S. An aspiring calligrapher can usually find beginning classes in lettering arts taught through a local community or adult education class. Many communities have calligraphy guilds that offer intensive weekend workshops with visiting instructors, for more in-depth training. Annual calligraphy conferences and other retreat opportunities offer a chance to study for up to a week with well-known calligraphers, and some master calligraphers offer private lessons. And finally, an assiduous calligrapher can teach herself quite a bit with some good instructional books. (See the resources list on p. 11 for suggestions about books, organizations, and classes for individuals interested in developing calligraphy skills.)

Cari Ferraro has been studying calligraphy and making calligraphic works since 1976, when her mother gave her a copy of Jacqueline Svaren’s book *Written Letters*. She enjoyed learning calligraphy, practicing the letterforms, and designing and executing pages that presented texts in new and different ways. Her motivation, she says,

was to “take words that were important to me and make them exciting enough for other people to want to read them, too.” Self-motivated study was extremely useful up to a point. However, as she became more interested in experimenting with her letter-making skills and designing and creating her own calligraphic books, it became more valuable to study face-to-face with contemporary master calligraphers in a studio setting.

Ferraro has taken workshops with a number of calligraphy instructors. One teacher who has been particularly influential is Suzanne Moore, an acknowledged calligraphy master—one of only three American calligraphers who have been invited to contribute to the St. John’s Bible. (See more about the St. John’s Bible project in the resources list on page 11.) One of the most important things that Ferraro learned from Moore was that “show-through” of the writing from one side of a sheet of paper inevitably influences the composition of the other side, introducing the possibility of subtle rhythms between the two sides of the sheet, in an almost subliminal interaction. She also learned to pay attention to the book’s rhythm, through the sequencing of pages and the flow of shapes in the form of text and images. (See photo, above left.)

Once the fundamentals of hand lettering and page layout have been mastered, calligraphers are freed up to experiment with tradition. One of the contemporary scribes who has pushed the boundaries of calligraphic art in his personal work is San Francisco-based calligrapher Thomas Ingmire. In the page spread pictured on the next page, he uses gestural marks that begin to challenge the legibility of the letterforms. Alongside the contemporary “explosion” of traditional book forms and structures by other book artists, calligraphers working today often experiment with legibility, sometimes layering their work for greater complexity, or offering purely gestural marks as the “text.”

Making Calligraphic Artists’ Books

Like several of the contemporary master calligraphers with whom she has studied

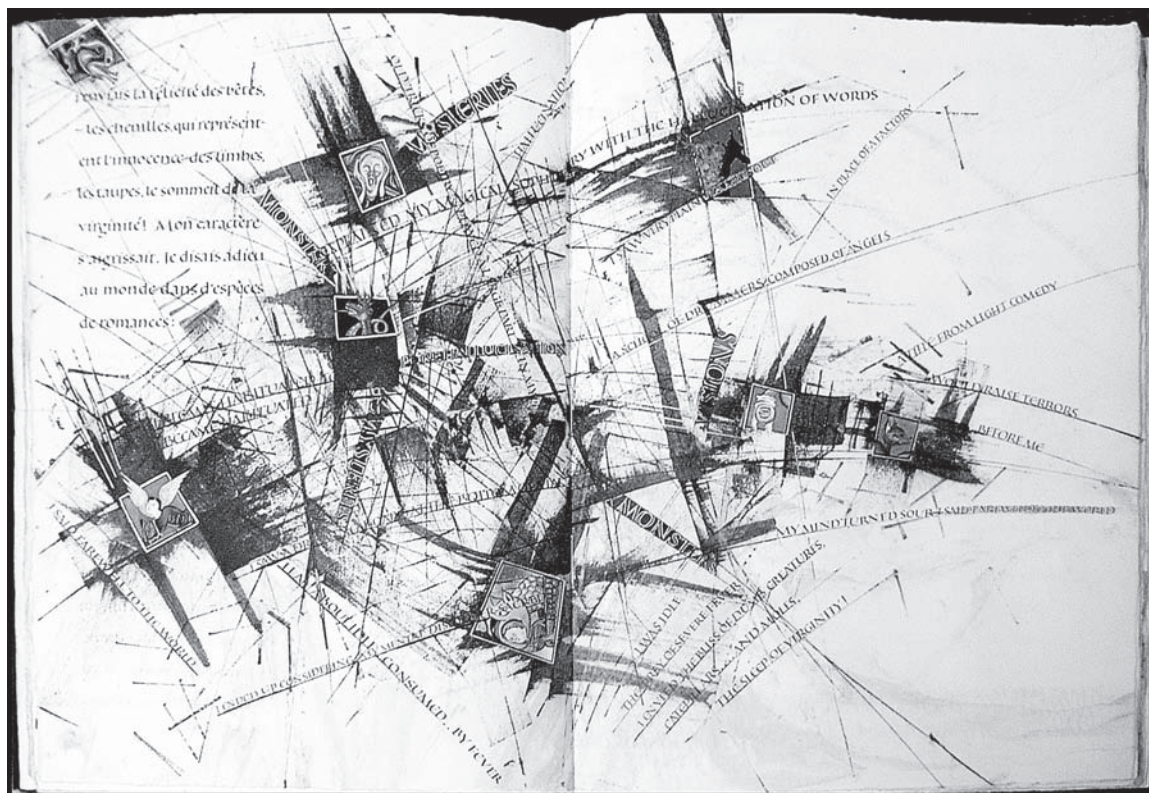
(including Suzanne Moore and Nancy Leavitt), Ferraro often uses pastepaper paintings as the ground on top of which she enters her lettered texts and painted flourishes. Pastepaper, which can itself be built up in multiple layers, can be used to create a sense of mystery and depth. The paste, which dries inert, allows the pigment to hold marks, so that calligraphy becomes ground as well as figure. Ferraro says, "Because I was so classically trained in traditional calligraphy techniques, it was enormously freeing for me to start making pastepaper paintings. Suddenly, I could go in and play and throw marks on the paper. It was so much more experimental than what I had been doing."

In developing her recent calligraphic manuscript books, Ferraro has selected texts that have allowed her to pursue her interests in women's spirituality. In *The Charge of the Goddess*, a highly personal unique book completed in 2003 made to support the liturgy in spiritual gatherings, Ferraro invented imaginary letterforms. Based on our current alphabet, but looking like they grew out of ancient runes, she used these letterforms to present an invocation authored by Doreen Valiente, an English woman who

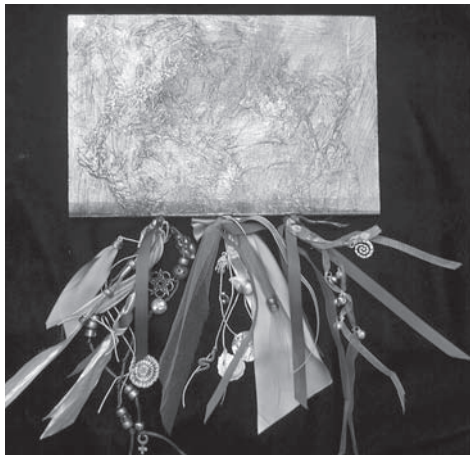
helped popularize new forms of goddess worship in the mid-20th century. Although the primary text is in English, Ferraro's invented letterforms make it difficult to read. To assist readers, Ferraro interwove the "ancient" text with a gloss (translation) inserted between the text lines. (See photo on p. 7, showing text and gloss.) The underlying pastepaper—decorated on front and back of each sheet—was developed specifically with this book in mind.

For the structure of *The Charge of the Goddess*, it was important to Ferraro to be able to attach amulets and talismans (an important nonverbal part of the book and the ceremonies it would be a part of) to the back of this spine. Ultimately, she decided to sew the book pages onto grosgrain ribbon tapes, and use these ribbons to attach the ritual objects to the back of the book. (See photo on the next page.) In a final step to unify the book, she dyed the individual lengths of the linen thread with which the book was sewn with watercolor pigments to match the color of the pastepaper ground on each page.

Ferraro also produces works meant for more public venues and for exhibition. Her most recent calligraphic manuscript book,



A page spread from Thomas Ingmire's unique book *Alchemie Du Verbe* (1988), part of the Richard Harrison Collection of Calligraphy and Lettering at the San Francisco Public Library.



Cari Ferraro, *The Charge of the Goddess*, 2003.

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More of Cari's work can be seen on her website, www.proseandletters.com.

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To learn more about modern lettering, be sure to check out *Kalligraphia*, the Triennial Membership Show of The Friends of Calligraphy, on exhibition in the 6th floor Skylight Gallery at the main San Francisco Public Library from June 4 to August 31, 2006.

The First Writing, was inspired by her visit to the Newgrange burial site in Ireland—which dates back to 3200 B.C. The text for this book is a short prose piece Ferraro wrote to promote a theory that writing first originated in Old Europe “to track the moon” and “inscribe spirit,” rather than as mere scribbles “devised by accountants” to keep track of commercial transactions in ancient Sumeria. In *The First Writing*, the pastepaper ground and written text become a visual metaphor for the as yet undeciphered writing on the cave walls at Newgrange and other ancient sites. Ferraro has chosen to issue this book as a digitally printed edition of 50 copies, reproduced from the scanned original work.

Marketing Considerations

In the contemporary world, production of entire books by hand is a labor intensive and, thus, expensive proposition. As a result, original calligraphic manuscript books, usually produced in unique copies or very small editions, are a luxury item in the book arts world. Ferraro says that a lot of calligraphic book artists sell only unique copies of their books, or very small editions of completely handmade books. She says that there is a

market for unique books like that, made by the acknowledged masters of calligraphy. Often these works are commissioned by institutions or wealthy collectors.

In contrast to calligraphers who sell only unique books, Ferraro has always been interested in making multiples of her work, to make them affordable by a wider audience. Her earliest reproductions of her calligraphic work were made with a color copier, for sale as cards. Improved digital technology—including scanners, digital imaging, and inkjet printers—have made it possible for Ferraro to make high-quality reproductions of her artist books in house, using an Epson printer with archival pigmented inks. If a particular page is larger than her scanner can accommodate in a single scan, she makes multiple scans and pieces them together in a seamless composite image on her computer using Photoshop. Ferraro says, “I think high quality multiples is the way to go, if you want to make sales and if you want to get your work out into the world.”

In her business providing calligraphy services, Ferraro usually receives commissions to make works to fit the specific needs of her clients. (Only some of these commissions would be considered fine art.) Her calligraphy business comes from repeat customers, word of mouth, and her website. Ferraro has had to develop a totally different approach to marketing her calligraphic artists' books. Ferraro says that her affilia-



Cari Ferraro, *The First Writing*, 2004.

tions with local book arts groups like Bay Area Book Artists (BABA) and PCBA have helped her find out about “what is going on.” One strategy that she has pursued to make her calligraphic books more visible and find customers for them is showing her work in book art fairs—primarily the annual BABA Books Arts Jam at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California. Another strategy that she has used to market *The First Writing* is to submit this work for inclusion in local and national book arts exhibitions. As a result of submitting her work for exhibitions, *The First Writing* was juried into three national shows last year. And finally, she says, “I’ve long been a believer in niche markets. So in the case of *The First Writing*, I brought the book to the attention of a women’s spirituality magazine which offered to review it in a future issue.” She is also thinking about buying an ad in that magazine, after the review of her book comes out.

Visiting staff at libraries with book arts collections to show her work is another strategy that Ferraro is beginning to pursue. The San Francisco Public Library has accepted her gift of a copy of *The First Writing* for the Richard Harrison Collection of Calligraphy, and she has an appointment to show her work to a librarian responsible for another Bay Area special collection that collects books made by women about women. “Marketing,” Ferraro says, “is an ongoing, many-pronged approach, unless you are lucky enough to have an agent handle it all for you. Until then, there are many different avenues to getting the books out there and you just have to be sensitive to them all.” ☺

Deborah Kogan visited Ferraro in her studio, asked lots of questions, and organized Cari’s responses into this article.

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Georgianna Greenwood hand-lettered the title for this article. All the images are reproduced with the permission of the artists and are protected by copyright. We also thank SF Public Library for permission to photograph a page from Thomas Ingmire’s book, *Alchemie du Verbe*.

BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

Jacqueline Svaren, *Written Letters: 33 Alphabets for Calligraphers*. Taplinger Publishing, 1986.

Gaynor Goffe & Anna Ravenscroft, *Calligraphy School: Learn as You Go*. Readers Digest, 1994.

Susan Hufton, *Step by Step Calligraphy: A Complete Guide with Creative Projects*. Sterling, 1997.

Annie Cicale, *The Art and Craft of Hand Lettering*. Lark, 2004.

Cari Ferraro, *Discover Calligraphy and Illumination*. Walter Foster Publishing, Fall 2006.

Letter Arts Review
www.johnnealbooks.com/lar
Quarterly magazine.

WEBSITES

The St. John’s Bible
www.saintjohnsbible.org
Commissioned by St. John’s University, this is the first hand-written illuminated Bible undertaken in the last 500 years.

Cari Ferraro: Prose and Letters
www.proseandletters.com

Jan Owen
www.janowenart.com

GUILDS

Friends of Calligraphy
www.friendsofcalligraphy.org
Based in San Francisco.

Pacific Scribes
www.pacificscribes.net
Based in Santa Clara County.

Cyberscribes
www.calligraph.com/cyberscribes
An online community listserv.

Association of Calligraphic Arts
www.calligraphicarts.org
A struggling US organization.

Society of Scribes and Illuminators
www.calligraphyonline.org
The older of two national calligraphy organizations in England.

Calligraphy & Lettering Arts Society, www.clas.co.uk
The newer of the two English calligraphy organizations.

CLASSES

Friends of Calligraphy
www.friendsofcalligraphy.org
Sponsors classes and workshops that are open to the public.

Roehampton University, London
www.roehampton.ac.uk/acprog-new/c/practicalcalligraphy.asp
Full-time, yearlong certificate program in practical calligraphy.

San Francisco Center for the Book
www.sfcbook.org
Periodically offers classes in calligraphy oriented to beginners.

COLLECTIONS

The Richard Harrison Collection of Calligraphy and Lettering at the Main San Francisco Public Library includes over 1,000 examples of modern calligraphy. The foundation of the collection are works collected and commissioned by Richard Harrison, a San Francisco calligrapher who donated works from his collection to the library beginning in the 1960’s until his death in 1990. To make advanced arrangements to view the works, call the Library’s Book Arts and Special Collections Center at 415-557-4560.