

Detail of the lettering. "You have given voice to words that chime across generations of consciousness." – Reggie Ezell

THE POWER OF WORDS

BY JANE EWING

Each fall the world's largest juried art exhibition, *ArtPrize*, is held in Grand Rapids, in West Michigan where Marijo Carney, Kimberly Dixon, Tina Lee-Cronkhite, Christine Orsolini, Karen Vosburg, and I reside. As calligraphic artists we have long been dedicated to building an awareness of calligraphy and, particularly, to presenting it as a revered and respected fine art. We came to realize that by participating in *ArtPrize* we had the opportunity to publicly integrate our calligraphy with a wide variety of art forms. This was the impetus for my five fellow scribes and me to embark on a collaborative effort to create a contemporary calligraphic art piece for entry in the competition. We adopted the name "Scribes Six" and titled our entry *The Power of Words*. We then developed a presentation packet and were accepted for the 2012 exhibition.

Collaborating

We found our two-year collaboration to be an extraordinary and productive experience. How could that have happened? Perhaps because we had much in common: each of us shares the same passion to study, practice, and write letters creatively, and we support others in this joy of expressing visual language. A shared quest has been to do good work and to share our knowledge and skills with everyone. Another element that connected us was our cumulative 150 years of experience in making calligraphic art. We've had formal training with master calligraphers nationally and internationally, and each of us has taught and tutored extensively. We have been juried into many exhibitions and published in *Letter Arts Review* and other publications. We could collaborate as equals. In addition,

each of our profiles includes service on executive boards of various calligraphy guilds, and we are currently members of Pen Dragons Calligraphy Guild in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and the Chicago Calligraphy Collective.

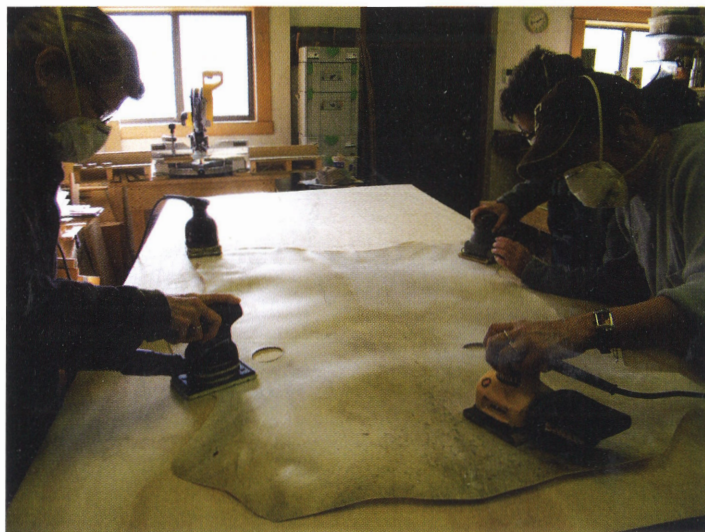
Surprisingly, though, the success of this collaboration can be attributed to the fact that each of us came to the project from different reference points. We were peers, but not equally matched in interests and in practice of particular lettering hands or tools. Our diverse contributions were channeled into developing the continuously evolving artwork, *The Power of Words*. We strove to be considerate, trustful, and courageous, which relieved anxieties and invited independent thinking and led to innovation. Commitment to the project and an urge for creative expression were our common denominators. Positive interaction was built on flexibility and consideration of all suggestions. Our confidence in each other grew as we spent time conferring, opining, and most importantly listening. Decisions made during our artistic journey were always determined by consensus.

Producing the Piece

While the initial meetings to plan our collaborative effort and creative adventure required little physical space, the making of our piece required considerable room. Good fortune led us to Marijo's studio and workshop in Schoolcraft, Michigan. There we had work space with large tables, a sink, a concrete floor, and abundant light (both natural and artificial), as well as a woodland view and a gentle breeze in warm weather.

From inspiration, false starts, and uncertainty, to rethinking and rewriting, our project was conceived and executed over a long time – two years. Selecting the vellum, sanding and dyeing it, choosing lettering styles, determining the layout, and finding the appropriate colors, inks/paints, and tools involved many trials and tests. Vellum was chosen to emulate the way our scribal ancestors created manuscripts and to hearken back to a simpler time, hundreds of years ago; we would use an ancient substrate for this modern work of art.

We did not have a model for a project of this scope and scale; we felt like pioneers. The prospect of preparing twenty-eight gallons of Brazilwood dye, properly coloring full-sized skins, and then lettering and gilding on them was daunting. The vellum would need to be a suitable size, texture, and type. After lively discussions with our vellum supplier about what skins they could and should ship to us, we made our choice. We ordered goat, calf, and deer – six skins in all and the largest sizes available. Three skins were acquired for experimentation and three for the final piece.



Sanding the skins to prepare the surface for lettering.

Sanding & Staining the Vellum

Sanding the skins was a group effort. The surface and thickness of each skin needed to be fine-tuned. We needed to make the surface receptive to ink, paint, and gilding materials. Equipped with electric hand sanders fitted with 220, 320, and 400 grit paper, we sanded until the surface texture felt right. We took the sanded skins outside and held them to the sun, allowing the light to rake across the surface to reveal unwanted shiny areas. There are no set rules and detailed guidelines for this method of preparation.

We stained two of the six skins burgundy in a bath of dye, using Brazilwood chips. (Purple-stained vellum was used from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance as a mark of luxury.) Filling as many cauldrons as we could muster, we simmered and stirred half a bag of chips (sixteen ounces) in one gallon of distilled water for six hours. One teaspoon of alum was added at the end of the cooking time. Alum, a mordant, assures that the dye adheres to the skin and,



Gauging the texture and thickness of the sanded skin in natural light.



Examining skins. Natural holes and veins in the skins reveal interesting characteristics.

therefore, does not wash away. The brew was stored in large jars in the back of our refrigerators to keep it from molding. In what container does one dye a full-sized deer skin? We poured twenty-eight quarts of the dye, six inches deep, into a child's plastic wading pool, submerged the vellum, and weighted it down with small, glass plates and jars. Every twenty minutes we massaged the surface of the skin with rubber-gloved hands and long-handled brushes while shifting the weights around to prevent pressure marks during the six-hour bath. The noodle-limp skin was removed to dry on a perfectly flat, paper-covered board. Industrial staples fixed near the edges secured the stretched skin to the board to prevent it from lifting and curling, but the skin had a life of its own. Marijo checked it the following morning, saw that it had pulled up from the board (attachments and all), and had to staple it again. We tested dyeing and lettering on pieces we cut from one skin and kept the other full skin for the permanent layout.

Choosing the Words

The quotations were chosen to address how words affect life's issues, and to engage the viewer and invite a personal interpretation of our work of art. We strived for compelling messages that would reveal something about the meaning of words without being sentimental and moralistic. The overlapping layout of the quotations resulted in a painterly, modern composition.

Writing & Gilding

With brushes and pens we applied inks and paints to the vellum. Japanese Sumi, hand-ground Chinese stick ink, walnut ink, colored pencil, and gouache were used to write the quotations onto the skins, each approximately three by



The submerged skin was weighted down with glass jars and panes and massaged with brushes and rubber gloved hands.



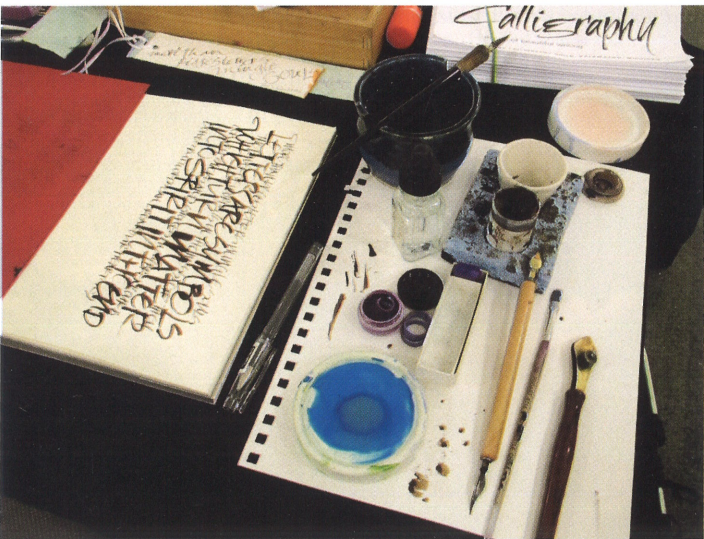
Lifting the limp skin from the dye bath after six hours of soaking.



Stapling the wet, dyed skin to the board.



Tools and materials used. Top from left: vellum, shell gold, stick ink, and stained vellum. Bottom from left: 23K gold leaf, gold gouache, agate burnisher, and various writing tools.



Supplies and tools. Archival materials were used in the project so *The Power of Words* will endure, just as *Books of Hours* created in the thirteenth century have remained exquisite after over 500 years.



Karen lettering on a natural skin.

four feet. Pure shell gold and 23k gold leaf were gilded onto many letters and embellishments for illumination. The technique of manuscript gilding is not experimental, but methodical. Applying 23K gold leaf over as many as six layers of Instacoll on a large scale took patience, skill, and a bit of courage (not to mention money).

Letters were executed in a broad range of styles, methods, and tools, reflecting highly personalized expressions of letter forms, from classical to contemporary. The text was written in a variety of hand-lettered scripts, including Gothic, Roman, Italic, and Phoenician. We were working on full skins, so the imperfections, such as veins and holes, could add character or they could be distractions. Because these flaws are in keeping with the nature of skins, we chose “character” and welcomed them, weaving our letters over and around them. The design evolved as we experimented with positioning and layering.

The Exhibition

To add dimension, the burgundy skin was positioned in three-fourths-inch relief over the inside edges and between the two natural skins. We chose French linen thread, in colors that matched both the natural and the burgundy vellum, to stitch the skins onto a wooden base. We layered the base with canvas, gesso, and also burgundy-tinted paint that simulated the colored skin. Heavy-duty needles were used to pull the thread through holes that were drilled into the skin and board with a Dremel electrical drill fitted with a #53 bit. The thread was in a cross-stitched pattern, the same way as buttons are sewn onto cloth. Loose threads were tied in square knots on the underside of the base.

“Years from now, eyes that are so used to a technological world will look upon your offering to them with reverence and wonder.”
 – Reggie Ezell



Scribes Six reviewing the layout for further improvements.



The Power of Words bolted into the wooden container

The finished piece measured 4½" x 8½". Jack Carney, Marijo's husband, custom designed and fabricated the base to support the vellum and also built a large wooden crate in which *The Power of Words* was secured for protection during transport.

ArtPrize 2012 attracted over 400,000 visitors to view artwork displayed by 1,517 artists from 46 countries. During the exhibition, which lasted for close to three weeks last fall, we demonstrated our calligraphic skills. We made letters and gilded (at a table near the wall where *The Power of Words* was



Scribes Six.

displayed) and talked with the public about the art of lettering and the creation of the piece, encouraging our audience to look closely at details of the writing of letters, as well as the tools and materials used. The positive response to our work and the interest in calligraphy generated was ample reward for being at the installation and for conceiving and finishing the piece. ☺

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