Definition: **calligraphy** from *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Graphic Design and Designers*

‘Beautiful writing’, derived from the Greek words *kalli* and *graphos*. The craft of calligraphy requires an understanding of formal penmanship and a respect for traditional materials and tools. The classic text on Western calligraphy is Edward Johnston’s *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering* (1906). A new generation of practitioners in Europe and the US is now challenging the emphasis on medieval standards and exploring new forms of expression. Great 20th-c. calligraphers, in addition to Johnston, include Rudolf Koch, Imre Reiner, William Addison Dwiggins, Berthold Wolpe, and Herman Zapf.

Summary Article: calligraphy

from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(kəˈlɪɡrəfē) [Gr.,=beautiful writing], skilled penmanship practiced as a fine art. See also inscription; paleography.

**European Calligraphy**

In Europe two sorts of handwriting came into being very early. Cursive script was used for letters and records, while far more polished writing styles, called uncial, were used for literary works. Both styles can be seen in papyrus fragments from the 4th cent. B.C. After the 1st cent. A.D. the development of the half uncial or minuscule letter from the Roman capital gave rise to an extraordinarily beautiful and long-lasting calligraphy.

As tools and materials of high quality came into use, masterpieces of calligraphic art were produced, e.g., the Irish *Book of Kells* (8th cent.; Trinity College, Dublin; see under Ceanannus Mór) and the English *Lindisfarne Gospels* (8th cent.; British Mus.; see Holy Island). Carolingian minuscule script and its splendid and complex derivative, known as Gothic, were the principal calligraphic styles from the 9th to the 14th cent.

The humanistic handwriting style of the Renaissance, a deliberate imitation of Carolingian minuscule, was both aesthetically pleasing and extremely legible. The Italian manuscript copyists of the middle to late 15th cent. produced many glorious calligraphic works. Among the best known of these masters were Matteo Contugi, Gianrinaldo Mennio, and Pierantonio Sallando. Alphabet design became a subject of study, and several technical treatises were published on writing styles.

By the late 16th cent., with the secure establishment of the printing press, the art of calligraphy declined generally throughout Europe. Penmanship of a relatively inferior sort was taught in elementary schools in England and in the United States until the late 19th cent. The 20th cent. has experienced a revival of interest in the art, influenced by the work of Owen Jones and William Morris. Fine calligraphy is currently taught in art and craft schools and is exhibited in museums.

**Asian Calligraphy**

In the East calligraphy has been consistently practiced as a major aesthetic expression. In China, from the 5th cent. B.C., when it was first used, calligraphy has always been considered equal, or even superior, to painting. Chinese calligraphy began with a simplified seal script, known as “chancery script,”
in which the width of the strokes varies and the edges and ends are sharp. The perfection of the brush in the 1st cent. A.D. made possible the stylization of chancery script into “regular script,” distinguished by its straight strokes of varying width, and clear, sharp corners, and a cursive “running hand.”

The Japanese value calligraphy as highly as do the Chinese. They began to practice it only in the 7th cent. A.D., with the introduction of Buddhist manuscripts from China. Kukai, c.800, invented the syllabic script, which was based on Chinese characters.

**Arabic Calligraphy**

The art of calligraphy is also practiced with the limited letter alphabet of Arabic. Because the Muslim faith discourages pictorial representation and reveres the Qur’an, the Islamic peoples esteem calligraphy as highly as do those of East Asia. The earliest Islamic calligraphy is found in the beautiful Qur’ans, written with black ink or gold leaf on parchment or paper in formal, angular script. Begun by the 8th cent., this script was fully developed by the 10th.

Elaborations, such as foliation, interfacing, and other complexities were invented later, but they are used only for decorative work. Qur’ans continued to be copied in austere and monumental letters. In the 12th cent. rounded cursive style was invented and spread throughout Islam. Many different cursive scripts developed thereafter. In Islam calligraphy decorates mosques, pottery, metalwork, and textiles, as well as books.

**Bibliography**

See Child, H., Calligraphy Today (1964, repr. 1988);.
Miner, D., ed., 2,000 Years of Calligraphy (1965, repr. 1972);.
Baker, A., Calligraphy (1973);.
Standard, P., Calligraphy's Flowering, Decay, and Restoration (1977);.
Z. Ouyang; W. C. Fong, Chinese Calligraphy (2008);.

**APA**

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**


*The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018*
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA