

Every tool imparts its own personality when the medium flowing from it touches the surface – in our case, usually paper. Below is a review of basic pens (the heart of calligraphy) and touches on modern/experimental tools as artists creatively expand the looks of hand lettering. The following by no means exhausts usable tools, but is a guide for our western history of mark-making, with emphasis on nibs modern scribes employ.

TOOL HISTORY – WESTERN CIVILIZATION

The primary tool of classic calligraphy is the chisel edged pen; today’s metal rendition is an outgrowth of previous tools; when held at a particular angle, actually ‘make the letters’: papyrus reeds cut flat across at one end, cut quills used during “the great age of manuscripts” (the ultimate light-as-a-feather writing tool, from geese, turkeys, crows, etc.), and finally morphing into metal renditions of the above. (Extensive information on the aforementioned tools is available in our Library and online.) Calligraphy experienced a resurgence of interest with Edward Johnston at the turn of the century, the signpainting industry, and English scribes bringing their expertise to the United States in the mid-70s. This, in turn, advanced the growth of calligraphic societies throughout the United States.

CHISEL-EDGED NIBS

Everyone should learn lettering with a dip pen (nib + holder): this is the only way to learn the nuances of historical lettering styles (titling and book hands), as these metal nibs are more flexible, more easily honed/sharpened, and will respond to the pressure/non-pressure needed when writing than the fountain pen versions. Dip pens also allow a variety of media to be fed through the nibs.

Nib Mechanics:

Reservoir on top or bottom of nib, depending on brand.

Nibs fit into pen holders:



Nib Sharpening: To keep nibs sharpened, use 600-800 grit sandpaper to sharpen nibs. Consult a Guild member for information on proper sharpening.

Chisel-Edged Fountain Pens:

With the popularity of calligraphy in the mid-70s, metal dip pens became modern man’s answer to the quill. The fountain pen industry saw an opportunity to market to aspiring calligraphers by producing fountain pens w/chisel-edge nibs. Despite the convenience of continual ink flow (sometimes), they were designed for small writing, i.e. lettering writing. The metals in these nibs are not manufactured with the same consistent gauges of metal manufactured by companies who do so for fine work, nor can they be honed as successfully. The other disadvantage is that only bottled ink (usually dye-based) can feed through the bladder or cartridge. Because most inks designed for fountain pens are dye-based, they can feather on inexpensive paperstock. Colored inks are often fugitive (not lightfast), so not suitable for professional/archival work.

POINTED NIBS

The French are credited with the first metal nib to emulate an almost pointed-cut quill. The result of this version, coupled with the printing press and spread of knowledge throughout western Europe, brought about a new industry – the writing master. As the printing press took over the documentation originally relegated to the scriptoriums, many scribes found themselves out of work. Hence, the writing masters, their exemplars and copy books. One shining example is *The Universal Penman*, by George Bickham. The pointed pen has long been employed in commercial certificate work, and since the turn of the century, in US commercial engrossing studios, but has seen a major revival today in traditional Copperplate and it’s ‘modern script’ versions.

Pointed nibs fit into pen holders:

- right-handed scribes usually use an off-set holder
- left-handed scribes have options of a straight or off-set holder, depending on paper position



nib/holder photos courtesy Paper & Ink Arts

With the popularity of the pointed pen, several of our Guild’s ‘Hire a Calligrapher’ scribes, who predominantly

use pointed pens for their work, offer some of their favorite nibs:

Janet Henderson Brown:

My preferred modern nib for the last 4 years has been the Japanese Tachikawa G. I use this nib for practically everything. It is the perfect marriage between the Nikko G and the Zebra G. The Tachikawa G provides beautiful, thin hairlines that make Spencerian lettering sing and is also able to provide larger swells for shades as it is more flexible than the Nikko. This nib has also proven to be very durable with iron gall ink which is inherently corrosive to nibs.

Years ago, I became intoxicatingly fascinated with the vintage Esterbrook 356. This nib is an extremely fine, small nib with extra flexible action and has a bronze finish. However between the rarity and expense, the chase for vintage nibs can be a rabbit hole and is not something that I engage in at the same level as before. All the same, this nib is definitely a favorite.

Terry Hausner:

I use the Brause 513, Gwen Weaver's fav and the Gillott 303 for the shimmery envelopes. May be called Stardust. It is so slippery that the finer and sharper nibs will give you a true thick and thin. The 22s etc. write giving only heavy strokes with no hairlines.

Gillott 1068 works well if the paper is somewhat soft. The 22s etc. often get too heavy so moving to the 1068 will bring in the hairlines. Often use the 1068 on Cranes so I can get the really nice somewhat heavy down and great hairlines.

Letterpress envelopes do well with the Brause EF66 since it's not too sharp yet flexible enough to make the thicks and thins. It moves well over the softer fibers. Sharper points like the 404, 22 and 56 will stick and splay ink.

Pat Leith:

My very favorite nib is the Nikki G and is the only one that I've used for years. I have a heavy hand and I can still get delicate strokes. Another that I used to use is the pumpkin nib, but it can't take as much pressure if you have a heavy hand.

Maureen Vickery:

My favorite nib for metallic ink is the Leonardt 40 because I can achieve good hairlines with it; the hairlines tend to disappear on me if I try to use a Zebra G or Nikko G with metallic ink.

I also like the Brause EF66 for addressing envelopes in metallic ink, gouache, or sumi ink. This nib is flexible and allows me to achieve thick downstrokes while writing fast. Time is money when addressing envelopes!



*** PREPARING NEW NIBS *
* CLEANING & STORING NIBS ***

Prepping New Nibs: Manufacturers coat nibs with oil or lacquer for shelf life. Ink will not flow properly if this protective coating is not removed. Use of a toothbrush and various 'cleaning techniques' used by calligraphers:

- mild dishwashing liquid
- gum arabic
- wet nib rubbed w/soft white eraser; wiped w/tissue
- passing lit match gently across the nib – Michael Sull does this. Caveat - hovering over nib can distemper metals

Nib Cleaning During Use: dip nib into water container and use cotton cloth, chamois, or lint-free paper towel to remove thickened/dried medium from nib frequently. Pushing a pointed nib into a potato cleans off built up ink on nib. Caveat - this technique could force tines in directions not designed for and may result in a ruined nib.

- Nib Cleanup:** cleaning process depending on ink:
- water soluble: mild detergent
 - waterproof: Windex / other commercial pen cleaners
 - wipe off nibs / when dry, store in container of choice.



NIB INFORMATION - Chisel-Edged (most popular)

BRAND	CHARACTERISTICS	COMMENTS
Quills	ultimate writing tool; responsive to pressure	available uncut and cut; best for vellum
Speedball	reservoir positioned on top of nib; Styles: A, B, C, D; Sizes from large-small various options 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5½, 6	Sturdy nib; larger sizes good for learning letters; indestructible; RH and LH versions
Brause	reservoir positioned on top of nib; brand preferred for smaller writing Sizes from small to large: .5, .75, 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3, 4, 5mm	Stiff nib; slight right cant to nib; RH and LH versions
Mitchell Rexel Roundhand	triangular reservoir clips on bottom; large to small: 0, 1, 1½, 2, 2½, 3, 3½, 4, 5, 6	Flexible nib - preferred for pres- sized letters; RH and LH versions

NIB INFORMATION - Pointed (most popular)

BRANDS

The assorted brands - Brause, Gillott, Hiro, Hunt, Mitchell, Nikko, Zebra, Leonardt, etc. - feel differently and exhibit different results. Refer to suggested testimonials on page 2 for particular brands as a beginning for selecting a variety of nibs. And... it's best to order a couple of the same nibs in case one that you like gets damaged. *John*

Neal Bookseller and *Paper & Ink Arts* offer nib sample kits, along with more information on individual nibs. Information on ink will be explored in Part 3 of "*The Write Series*", but also consult the above vendor websites/catalogs for inks that work best with pointed nibs.

MISCELLANEOUS TOOLS

NOTE: The list of lettering tools is quite extensive, and new products continually come to market. Below are some of the popular tools lettering artists employ:

Pilot Parallel Pens - a smooth-writing cartridge based pen that professionals and newbies alike have come to love. Pens are available in straight cuts, left-handed versions, radius and scroll cuts. Advantage: smooth writing; Disadvantage: uses cartridge fountain pen ink. Some people use the pens dry and dip into preferred medium.

Automatic Pens - available in straight and scroll versions, these dip pens are sized for larger writing; good for learning pen twisting without catching in the paper.

Suede Pens - similar sizes to Automatic Pens, but the suede covering allows for solid and drybrush effects.

Ruling & Folded Pens - this market continues to grow. From the draftsman's simple ruling pen, picked up by lettering artists for spontaneous, quickly written forms, to the morphed variety of options, these pens look different and provide different effects depending on the artist's use. Refer to the Resources section for mail order sources.

Pointed Brush Pens - the popularity of informal brush work in advertising headlines in the last 20-25 years lead the lettering community to emulate the informal look that these tools generate. A variety of pre-loaded ink brush pens, including those by Kuretake, Pentel and Zig, advertise acid-free, archival, permanent and lightfast black ink.

Artist Pointed and Flat Brushes - used by painters and signpainters. The selection of brushes and preferences varies widely. Purchase professional brands – when cared for and cleaned properly, good brushes will last years.

Water Brushes - popularized by watercolor artists, these nylon-bristled brushes attached to a hollow barrel can be filled with water, pressed to release water through the brushes, and can be used to either dip into paint or liquify water soluble colored pencil work for a watercolor look.

Pigma Micron Pens - by Sakura, manufacturer of a myriad of marker styles. The black and colored monoline pens are archival, permanent and waterproof when dry. They are available in a variety of sizes, the black pens from .005, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 mm. Also available: PN pens (plastic nib) and brush pens.

Chisel-Edged and Pointed Markers

NOTE: Chisel-edged markers will NEVER be successful in achieving the thick-thin look when writing small. The basic manufactured end result of these markers prevent thin/sharp marks and hairlines, especially when written on inexpensive papers without proper sizing. They are listed in this article as tools, but more information on the fluid used in these items appear in Part 3 of "*The Write Series*", dealing with inks, gouache, watercolor and other media.

RESOURCES

LOCAL - Houston Area:

Hobby Lobby
Michael's
Texas Art Supply - 3 locations
Art Supply - Main Street
Jerry's Artarama - Taylor Street

Calligraphy Mail Order Supplies:

- the best tool sources with helpful descriptions
* John Neal Bookseller (JNB)
johnnealbooks.com
* Paper & Ink Arts
paperinkarts.com

Experimental Tools - try:

* branches, stimulents, shells, plastic kitchen utensils, credit cards, cardboard squares, etc. for making unusual marks –and they don't cost ANY money!

* *Print out chisel-edged Nib Comparison Chart from Members Only section of the Guild's website **