A Brief History of Penmanship on National Handwriting Day

Introduction

Today is National Handwriting Day, a time for acknowledging the history and influence of penmanship.

Borrowing aspects of the Etruscan alphabet, the ancient Romans were among the first to develop a written script for transactions and correspondence. By the fifth century A.D. it included early versions of lowercase letters and sometimes flowed like modern cursive. After the Roman Empire fell, penmanship became a specialized discipline that primarily blossomed in monastic settings, specifically the medieval scriptoria that churned out Christian and classical texts across Europe. Styles varied widely by region, however, so in the late eighth century Charlemagne tasked an English monk with standardizing the craft. Influenced by Roman characters, Carolingian miniscule was designed for maximum legibility and featured lowercase letters, word separation and punctuation.

As the price of parchment and demand for books soared in the later Middle Ages, a denser style of writing evolved for European languages. Johannes Gutenberg used this Gothic approach for his printing press in the mid-15th century. Italian humanists soon revolted against the heavy look by reverting to a more Carolingian script and inventing a cursive form of it, known as Italic. Elegant handwriting emerged as a status symbol, and by the 1700s penmanship schools had begun educating generations of master scribes.

During the United States' infancy, professional penmen were responsible for copying official documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Among amateurs, meanwhile, signature handwriting styles became associated with various professions and social ranks; women and men were also expected to embrace flourishes unique to their sex. In the mid-1800s an abolitionist and bookkeeper named Platt Rogers Spencer attempted to democratize American penmanship by formulating a cursive writing system, known as the Spencerian method and taught by textbook, that many schools and businesses quickly adopted. (Ornate and sinuous, it can be seen in the original Coca-Cola logo.)

By the turn of the century, an approach introduced by Austin Norman Palmer replaced the Spencerian method in American classrooms, where students learned to form loopy characters between horizontal lines on chalkboards; its predecessor, D'Nealian script, originated in the 1970s and was designed to ease the transition from printing to cursive writing. Another handwriting style, developed by Charles Zaner and Elmer Bloser for elementary-aged children, dominated textbooks for much of the 20th century.

As typewriters and word processors swept the business world, schools began to eliminate penmanship classes, and by the 1980s many U.S. children received little formal training. (This was not the case in many European countries, where students are given rigorous handwriting instruction to this day.) While penmanship studies haven't completely disappeared from the American curriculum, schoolchildren today spend more time mastering typing and computer skills than the neat, standardized cursive of their parents and grandparents. As early as 1955, the Saturday Evening Post had dubbed the United States a "nation of scrawlers," and studies show that handwriting abilities have largely declined since then.

Bemoaned by many (but not all) educators, the loss of penmanship as a requisite skill inspired the Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association (WIMA) to create National Handwriting Day in 1977. According to the group's website, the holiday offers "a chance for all of us to re-explore the purity and power of handwriting." How can you celebrate? The WIMA suggests you pick up a pen or pencil and put it to paper—so get off the computer and start writing!