



The Aldus Society
PO Box 1150
Worthington, OH 43085
Aldussociety.com

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Calligrapher to Tell Rest of Story About Classy Handwriting Styles

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

A speech about calligraphy isn't always just a speech about calligraphy.

Ann Alaia Woods, a calligrapher, will speak to the Aldus Society at 7 p.m. next Thursday in the Whetstone library, 3909 N. High St.

"I think of Ann's talks as a little like going to the ballet," said Marcia Preston, programs director of the Aldus Society. "Ann just flits around up there and is so animated. The life she gives to what she's talking about, it's not dry at all."

At a society meeting last year, Woods discussed the first 1,500 years of hand-lettering in the western European tradition.

She will pick up her talk next Thursday, exploring the evolution of the craft since 1450.

"After the invention of the printing press, there was no longer a need for people who were solely copyists," Woods said recently.

Hand-lettering, however, never fell completely out of favor.

"The printing press led hand-lettering in other directions. There was more work done that was one-of-a-kind -- work that wasn't meant to be repeated on a mass scale. Hallmark still uses designers and then scans their designs into a computer. But the initial impulse (for the lettering) comes from the brain of the designer."

On other topics, Woods -- an instructor at the Columbus College of Art and Design -- will follow the course of hand-lettering from the use of quills to steel nibs and fountain pens -- and, "if I have time, maybe even a discussion of the ball point pen."

In the age of the e-book, Woods would seem to be an anachronism.

"The more we move toward machines, there is an eagerness on the part of individuals to create something that comes from their own hand, that is beautiful, that features words that are very meaningful to them."

In the age of e-mail, Woods would seem to be an anachronism.

"I still prefer a handwritten letter to a printed letter. People's handwriting is so telling of their mood. Were they anxious, hurried? Did they take their time writing?"

Writing by hand (and sending by mail) has another advantage, she said:

“You write a letter, and you let it sit. You think about it while you wait for a response. If we can respond immediately, perhaps our responses will be ill-considered?”

The history of calligraphers is one of upheaval, especially in the 19th century.

“It hit lowest ebb,” Woods said. “They were called scribes, and they worked in law offices and didn’t have the church behind them anymore. It was pretty grim.”

Their fortunes turned in the last half of the 20th century.

“Partially it’s our interest in Chinese culture -- an interest that began on the West Coast and has rubbed off in respect for calligraphers,” she said. “It’s not like we’re doctors or lawyers, but we’re not mere scribes anymore, either.”

Such respect pales in comparison with the Chinese attitude toward scribes.

“In China, calligraphers are treated like rock stars. If you travel to China and anyone finds out you’re a calligrapher, they run up to you and ask for your signature.”

Calligraphers don’t “make a million bucks,” Woods said, but they qualify as artists: “They say that music calms the beast. They say a picture paints a thousand words. But it’s still words we live by. Our alphabet still captures speech, and the calligrapher still captures our alphabet.”

Admission to the talk is free. For more information, call society President Geoff Smith at 614-292-5938.

* Sharon Draper will read from and discuss her books at 8 p.m. Thursday in the King Arts Complex, 867 Mount Vernon Ave., as part of the “Sister Talk” series.

Draper was voted teacher of the year in 1997 by the Council of Chief State School Officers and Scholastic.

She has written 11 books, including several titles for young adults: *Romiette and Julio*, *Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs*, *Lost in the Tunnel of Time* and others.

The first book in her Hazelwood High trilogy, *Tears of a Tiger*, won the American Library Association/Coretta Scott King Genesis Award for new fiction; and the sequel *Forged by Fire*, the Coretta Scott King Award.

In addition to her fiction for young adults, Draper has written a book of poetry for adults (*Butter Bones*) and two books for teachers (*Not Quite Burned Out but Crispy Around the Edges* and *Teaching From the Heart*).