Significance of the handwritten

by

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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INTRODUCTION

Handwriting is the visualization of the thoughts and experiences of the living. The writing itself conveys life, for each person has a unique hand. Digitally produced text, even when patterned after handwriting, does not reflect the same level of intimacy. Although the typed words may express strong emotion, we are left with no visual trace of human feeling; it is as though we have a record of what was said, but not how it was said.

The nuances of the written hand, with loops, tails, ascenders and descendents, can be aesthetically pleasing, and even to the untrained eye reflect characteristics of the writer. The traces inherent to handwritten text tell much more than the actual information contained in the document; the writer's hand gives us clues to their situation and temperament. The average person can, for example, sense the mood and aesthetic interest of the writer, judge writing speed by readability, and tell what type of tool the writer prefers. Such details are often ignored or nonexistent in contemporary times, as most of our documents are now processed and stored digitally. A graphologist can delve further into the writer's characteristics and psychological profile. Researchers and historians can also glean much from this visual evidence.

My intent is to present a case for the preservation of handwritten documents. The historical repercussions of undervaluing and disregarding conservation of handwritten papers are greater than we realize. My thesis, then, serves a dual purpose. It is both documentation for my thesis exhibition, and a plea for the preservation of handwritten documents. My
body of work, an installation of twenty-six mixed media works on fabric and handmade paper, will be exhibited August 2-4, 2001 in Gallery 181 of the College of design.
ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I view my thesis work, and records used as source material, as not merely an acknowledgement of my personal ancestry, but as a slice of more widely relevant history. The records are the content of my personal archives, and include letters, journals, legal documents, photographs, and ephemera. They are a written record of my personal history, but anyone could have this kind of record. The process that I have used in researching and assembling this exhibit is, I feel, what others can aspire to. Preserving and enhancing historical records by combining them with our own memories and personal history can ensure their survival for succeeding generations. My use of historical photographic images and handwritten text, in combination with oral history and self-generated text, has allowed me to create a comprehensive visual environment that evokes memories of my childhood and people important to my past. Like a string of pearls, each attached to the next, those people include not only my parents and grandparents, but their parents and grandparents, ad infinitum.

As personally satisfying and enjoyable as this work has been, the real value lies in its universal implications. We all have connections to past generations, memories and written records, and we all have a responsibility to preserve that history. Handwritten records can provide a humanistic view of the lives of the past, and of our lives as well. My work asks the viewer to consider his or her own history and connections to the past. It has given me an enhanced sense of identity, well being, and wholeness.
SOURCES OF IMAGERY AND INFLUENCES

Because they are so familiar and meaningful to me, I chose to use my written and oral ancestral records as the primary source of imagery for my thesis work. I see these letters and documents as an example of the sort of universal handwritten heritage we can all preserve and provide for generations to come.

Although I do not agree with some who say that handwriting is dying, I do see a need for serious reassessment of its worth. Handwritten text is the trace, left by human hand, which gives grace and amity to our often-impersonal world. By showing disregard for the importance of handwriting, we risk the loss of information and understanding gained by scholars, historians and artists who study the visual characteristics of writing as well as the data it conveys. Moreover, we risk the chance of losing the vestiges of those who have lived before us. By preserving handwritten documents for our own advantage and for those of future generations, we are ensuring the continuity of the human record. We must understand that favoring clean, digitally generated text over that written by human hand leaves us, sadly, without the visual evidence of mark making which makes history interesting and relevant.

The familiar is often comforting. That is because we make a connection between a known or previously known sight, sound, taste or feel and a level of pleasant knowing as opposed to the unpleasant unknown. So it is with handwriting. Any writing done by human hand has a touch of the
familiar. This is especially noticeable when compared to electronic
communication; an email message may be the result of two hands on a
keyboard, but an electronic font lacks the grace of the handwritten.
Especially familiar, however, is the handwriting of a close friend or family
member. Handwriting which is instantly recognizable gladdens the heart and
renews connections in a way that digital cannot, for handwriting is not simply
communication, but a trace of life. As such, consider the aesthetic treasure
and source of comfort we have in handwritten records.

I have just such a treasure. My maternal grandparents were worthy
caretakers of the records they inherited, and added many of their own. It was
my good fortune to inherit the lot. Because of the extensive handwritten
journals left by my grandmother, I remain connected to them. Whenever I
read from one of her journals or letters, written in her graceful, sweeping
hand, I can hear her voice and see her sparkling eyes. My grandfather’s
haltingly flowing script also recalls for me the large, rough hands and clear
blue eyes of a farmer with a penchant for horses, roses, and grandchildren.
Many of the writings predate my birth, so there is much to learn of their
history, and often of state and national history as well.

My grandmother kept journals detailing her everyday life and also
accounts of excursions with my grandfather. Often these contain not only the
minutiae of weather and daily activities, but also thoughts and opinions on a
wide variety of subjects. She was a master gardener and kept extensive
records of her planting and landscaping. She was also an avid birder, and
from 1920 through 1975 kept annual handwritten records of all the species she observed. An artist as well, she carved and sold wooden jewelry and miniature rooms. Her many customers included a man who wrote music for Hollywood sound tracks during the 1930's and 40's. She retained years of correspondence with this man and with other business acquaintances.

I am also fortunate to have letters written by two of my great-grandmothers, a great-grandfather, and a great-great grandmother. Although these ancestors were gone long before I was born, I know something of them, both from the information contained in the letters, and from the quality of the writing itself. The grace or lack of grace visible in the loops and ligatures of their words tells much about who they were.

This handwriting of a bygone era seems like a window to the past. Every grammar school pupil diligently practiced penmanship, as legible handwriting was essential for communication. An attractive hand was also considered a desirable social grace. As a handwriting historian has said, “To write legibly is civil and logical. To write with grace is friendly and generous, and adds a little to the virtues of civilized life” (Fairbanks, 75). Letters were eagerly anticipated and treasured. I am grateful that my family's letters and journals were passed down to me, for they give my ancestors an additional measure of identity. Moreover, they have given me an appreciation for the importance of both the rich heritage contained therein, and in its preservation.

What is now my personal collection of handwritten material exists because my grandmother had the foresight to retain what she had inherited,
add her own writings, and pass the legacy on to me. Having developed an interest in calligraphy and also in commonplace handwritten material, I have with age become more conscious of the need to preserve the written word from my pen and from those around me. I now realize that, along with the papers I have inherited, I also received the responsibility to care for them, add my own, and pass them on to my children and grandchildren. My family and I are a part of a continuum which, properly cared for, can go on for centuries. Growing up in rural northwest Iowa, I spent much time on my grandparents’ farm, poring over their old photos and listening to their stories. In the process of researching personal history and the importance of everyday life, I have been able to renew old connections and discover new ones.

"Letters", the novelist and biographer Nancy Hale wrote in a review of an edition of Mary Cassatt’s letters, “are the first and best repositories for the preservation of life, of life itself” (Thornton, 98). From reading my ancestors’ correspondence, I gain an insight into their everyday lives, and an idea of what was engaging and important to them. In a very practical way, I see from where I came. Along with other personal papers, they are the most accessible approach to a more-than-surface understanding of the past.

I have letters that tell of the difficulties of pre-civil war frontier life in gold mining country near San Francisco. I have a letter from Northern Saskatchewan in 1915 telling of the hardships of homesteading, with four young children, in that cold and desolate land. Only these letters, written in my great-great grandmother and great-grandmother’s hands, could give me a
sense of what life was really like for these women. While personal papers, including letters and diaries, can be mundane and dry, a well-written letter or entry can be telling and highly entertaining. My grandmothers’ letters tell of the frontier, longing for family left behind, the cultural advantages and disadvantages of their new home, scarcity of social activity and entertainment, and each women’s relationship with their husbands, my grandfathers.

Joyce Carol Oates has said, “Should you doubt you exist, you have only to write a letter: a personality will immediately define itself in the act of writing” (Sassoon, 119). Researchers, biographers, and historians are able to determine traits of character and idiosyncrasies from letters. An individual’s handwriting is a bit of a window to the soul. Writing is very individual, and no two persons write alike. My grandmother and mother, an only child, exchanged letters often after my mother graduated from high school and left home to work. Much of this period fell during World War II, and they discussed their hopes, fears, faith, philosophies and opinions of day-to-day events. These letters tell much about each woman and also about their relationships and ability to communicate. Often they mention my great-grandmother and her activities as well.

In this country, our most common penmanship models have been the romanticized Rogers Platt Spencer’s Spencerian script or copperplate hand, so typical of the second half of the twentieth century, and, more recently, A.N. Palmer’s more utilitarian hand. This was introduced just before the turn of the
century, and its derivatives, notably Zaner-Bloser and D'Nealian, are still in use today. All of these models have guided many young hands to write. The truly distinctive writing, however, goes beyond any model. These are the exemplary hands that are a pleasure to read, as they are highly legible yet lively and unique.

Handwriting often changes with maturity and experience. I can say that this is true of my own writing, and I have also observed such changes in my mother’s penmanship. Her early writing, during her teens, is a Palmer-esque cursive, which resembled her mother’s writing, though not nearly as graceful. As the years went by and she became increasingly independent, the daughter’s writing took on a distinctive print-writing character. Although she earned a Palmer award and pin in high school, her adult writing style evolved into one so distinctive that her training in penmanship could barely be seen. It is often said that the rudiments of a discipline must be learned before a student can know how to break the rules, and that seems to apply to handwriting. Some so keep the basic form of their early training that their writing resembles an elementary school model, while others change drastically with age, developing such a unique variation that any resemblance to the same model is abstract. As the poet Edward Young explained, “Imitators only give us a sort of duplicates of what we had, but the pen of an original writer, like Armida’s wand, out of a barren waste calls of blooming spring” (Thornton, 61).
I also possess my grandfather’s 1897 autograph book. This contains the autographs of my great-grandparents, great aunts and uncles, cousins, and close friends. The penmanship ranges from a childish scrawl to beautifully executed Spencerian script. The messages range from inane and jovial to heartfelt and uplifting. What could tell more about my grandfather’s childhood, along with the stories he told and surviving photographs? This is indeed a rich record. I also have my own 1955 autograph book, and I hope my children and grandchildren will cherish it as well. Autograph books are often, like mine, the property of children, and hold collections of the autographs of friends and family. They go in and out of vogue.

An entirely different genre, the collecting of famous autographs, dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, and actually reached its zenith during the Victorian period at the end of the nineteenth century. It continues even today. As Tamara Thornton relates, “Autograph collectors engaged in an almost mystical encounter with their subjects, savoring the greatness that emanated from the handwriting of remarkable individuals” (Thornton, 87).

The subjects who were hounded for their autographs were often unwilling, terming this activity “an exhibition of one’s private personality” (Thornton, 88). Just as the amateur photographer is willing to jump in front of a perceived celebrity to snap a shot, the autograph collector is sometimes willing to embarrass himself, antagonize his subjects, and risk injury or arrest. Sometimes termed “autograph vampire” or “autograph mosquito” because of their obnoxious tactics, these persons nevertheless serve a purpose. They
obtain autographs that may remain in private collections or find their way to public museum collections, where they may be viewed by future generations.

My own interest in calligraphy and handwriting coincides with the increasing usage of electronic communication. It seems that the resurgence of calligraphy during the last decade is in some part a reaction to the increasingly digital world around us. For myself, the digital has resulted in an increased level of appreciation for handwriting. In my artwork, I enjoy using my own handwriting and that of others, and like to combine various kinds of handwritings with calligraphy and sometimes computer-generated text. Through several methods of image transfer, I have included the writing of my mother, grandmother, and grandfather in calligraphic pieces.

An additional concern for historians and archivists is the unstable long-term survival of digital material. We are now aware that the latest generation of digital storage is considered safe for only ten years. Beyond that time, we do not know what will survive. If “The ability of a culture to survive into the future depends on the richness of acuity of it’s members sense of history” (Lukesh, 2), where will this digital deterioration leave us? Even if we are able to gain the ability to store digital records for long periods of time, the equipment needed to access the stored information may well become obsolete. Already it is known that federal census records stored digitally over the last thirty years are becoming inaccessible due to outdated equipment. Having accessed census records, via microfilm, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, I know that these have survived in their original
handwritten form. If our ability to maintain our culture depends on our understanding of history, will we perish for lack of information? Along with working to increase the viability of digital storage, we must recognize the relevance of retaining letters, diaries, and other handwritten documents of all sorts.

For centuries the correspondence of scientists, scholars and historians has been used to illuminate and understand events. Where will our understanding of this century and the next be if this rich source of information is no longer available? Scientists now know that a paper record has a much better chance of surviving than a digital record. Museums possess medieval illuminated manuscripts on vellum, which have survived intact for many centuries. Our own Declaration of Independence and Constitution, written on hemp paper, have survived quite well for over 200 years. In another 20 years, will our own documents survive for future generations?

While it is unrealistic to hope that we would revert to a handwritten world, it is certainly reasonable to try to achieve a balance. Personal records could contain not only processed documents and email correspondence, but handwritten documents and even ephemera such as lists, greeting cards, and recipes. Journaling should be encouraged, and, I believe, always done by hand. Many keep diaries and will continue to do so. Of both journals and diaries it has been said, “the cumulative effect of its entries adds color and a continuing thread of context to the dry facts of a given setting or period” (Thornton, 175). I have felt just such a sense of continuity while reading my
grandmother's journals. Though she embraced technology and used a typewriter and tape recorder occasionally, she always wrote her journal entries by hand. Computers should be viewed as a tool, rather than the sole means of recording information. Likewise, as British handwriting expert Rosemary Sassoon recommends, children should be allowed the versatility of training in both penmanship and keyboarding. This will give them the background to grow into adults who appreciate and can use both forms of text.
ACTUALIZATION OF CONCEPTS WITHIN PROCESS

During the first semester of graduate work, I began working with a process that has proven itself invaluable. This is cyanotype, which is a chemically sensitized imaging process first developed in the mid-nineteenth century, and is the basis of blueprint. I first used the process with watercolor paper, and later with textiles. The first piece of my thesis body of work, *A Good Man*, was produced using this process. Other pieces to follow, including the lining of the garment, *Topographical in Nature*, have been produced using this same method. Since I had been working with conventional black and white photography and alternate light sensitive processes for several semesters, this seemed a natural progression. Not only do I like the low-tech, high contrast images produced, but in addition I like the range of blues created by the process. Cyanotype gives a white image on a blue ground, which can be bold and clear or distorted and fleeting depending on the surface used, exposure time, and angle of the sun. Sun is used for exposure, and water as fixative.

Starting with *A Good Man*, I began using historical photographs from my personal archives. In addition to cyanotype, I have used various methods of photo transfer, including laser photocopy, disperse dye heat transfer, solvent, and Polaroid. Polaroid transfer, which is accomplished using a Vivitar Instant Slide Printer, allows me to print historic slides onto Polaroid film and then transfer them onto paper and cloth. *Light Me Up*, the paper light fixture central to the exhibition, contains several Polaroid transfers.
I have a rich archive of slides as well as black and white and color prints that I inherited from my grandparents. By matching the transfer process to the surface, I have been able to use these photographs in many different ways. Making the connection between the photographic image and the historic, oral or self-generated text then becomes the final compositional element. This has been an endlessly fascinating process.

The most recent transfer process I have used is digital inkjet transfer on fabric. The first piece produced by this method was *Topographical in Nature*, which was printed using a sixty-inch wide format printer. Given a choice of various cellulose fibers as a ground fabric, I chose a linen jacquard. This fabric has the additional element of a raised leaf pattern in the weave. I like the way this pattern catches the light and gives an additional level of interest and complexity to the garment. I see a connection between the complex nature of the layered images, colors, pattern of the weave, and my layered history of multiple generations and personalities. These factors contribute to the person I am, just as the garment is a composite of design elements, processes and materials.

The other medium I have used extensively this past semester is handmade paper. Extending an interest in papermaking initially pursued as an undergraduate, I have since learned new processes, expanded my repertoire of raw materials, and combined paper with photo transfer. The paper in *Big Boots* is made from abaca, which produces a soft, yet sturdy sheet. The paper used for *The Ear, Light Me Up* and many of the other paper
pieces are made from hemp. After the successful casting of covers and the formation of the small sheets for *The Ear*, I was encouraged to produce the thin sheets of hemp for the light fixture.

I chose hemp for much of my handmade paper because of its wonderful tactile quality. The strength of the fiber and its extraordinary archival quality were also a factor in my choice. Other than these aesthetic considerations, I had another very practical reason for using hemp fiber. I wanted to make a statement regarding the illegality of industrial hemp in this country. We should be taking full advantage of this strong, versatile and environmentally friendly crop. If we could increase production of hemp paper and textiles, old growth forests could be saved. The use of hemp would also eliminate many preservation problems, as it is durable and archival beyond most other fibers.

I have long had a strong interest in history, and in particular family and Iowa history. As expressed in this supporting thesis, I have a concern for the survival of personal historical documents. I have a wonderful source of inspiration and material in the collection of papers and photographs left to me by my grandparents, and I have only begun to use these in my work. Mindful of preservation, I have, for the most part, used archival materials and low-tech, historical methods. I can say with some certainty that most of these pieces will live into the next century.
CONCLUSION

All types of handwritten materials have their place in public and private collections. It is important that we retain and preserve what we have inherited, and that we are mindful of what we keep to pass along to future generations. Retention of these traces is necessary for a more complete historical understanding of our thoughts, our culture, and our very life. Lacking the visual evidence of handwritten records, our past is incomplete.

I have learned that in most Native American cultures there is no word for art. What we term art is so integrated into their everyday life that the two are inseparable, and so it is for me. My sources of imagery and inspiration are my everyday life and its ephemera, and the everyday lives of my ancestors. I have truly enjoyed researching and experimenting with combinations of old and new images and text. I have strengthened and increased my understanding of the spiritual connection I have, and we all have, to those who came before. "The far and away is always with us" (anon).

My graduate work has been an engaging and enjoyable journey. In the midst of work, research, and deadlines, my view of the path my work is taking has sometimes been obscured along the way. Now that it is nearing completion, I can look back and see the clearly visible trail, like a meandering blue thread.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Figure 1. *A Good Man*, 2000.
Mixed media on cotton fabric, 13" x 16".
Figure 2. Topographical in Nature, 2001. Digital print on linen, cyanotype, 32" x 44".
Figure 3. *Big Boots*, 2001.
Mixed media on handmade paper, 18" x 23".
Figure 4. *The Ear*, 2001.
Handmade paper, gouache, 3" x 5".