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A Conversation with Canadian Calligrapher Georgia Angelopoulos

By: Joy Deneen

January 24th, 2019

Today our faculty interview series brings us to the west coast of Canada, as we speak to [Georgia Angelopoulos](#) of British Columbia. With a background in art history, Georgia's calligraphy and illuminations are deeply influenced by historical manuscripts, ancient techniques and her Greek heritage. Her work has been featured in [The World Encyclopedia of Calligraphy](#), as well as *Letter Arts Review*, *Bound & Lettered* and [UPPERCASE magazine](#). Read on to take a peek into Georgia's studio and learn more about her calligraphic journey, as she shares memories from her early childhood and teenage years.

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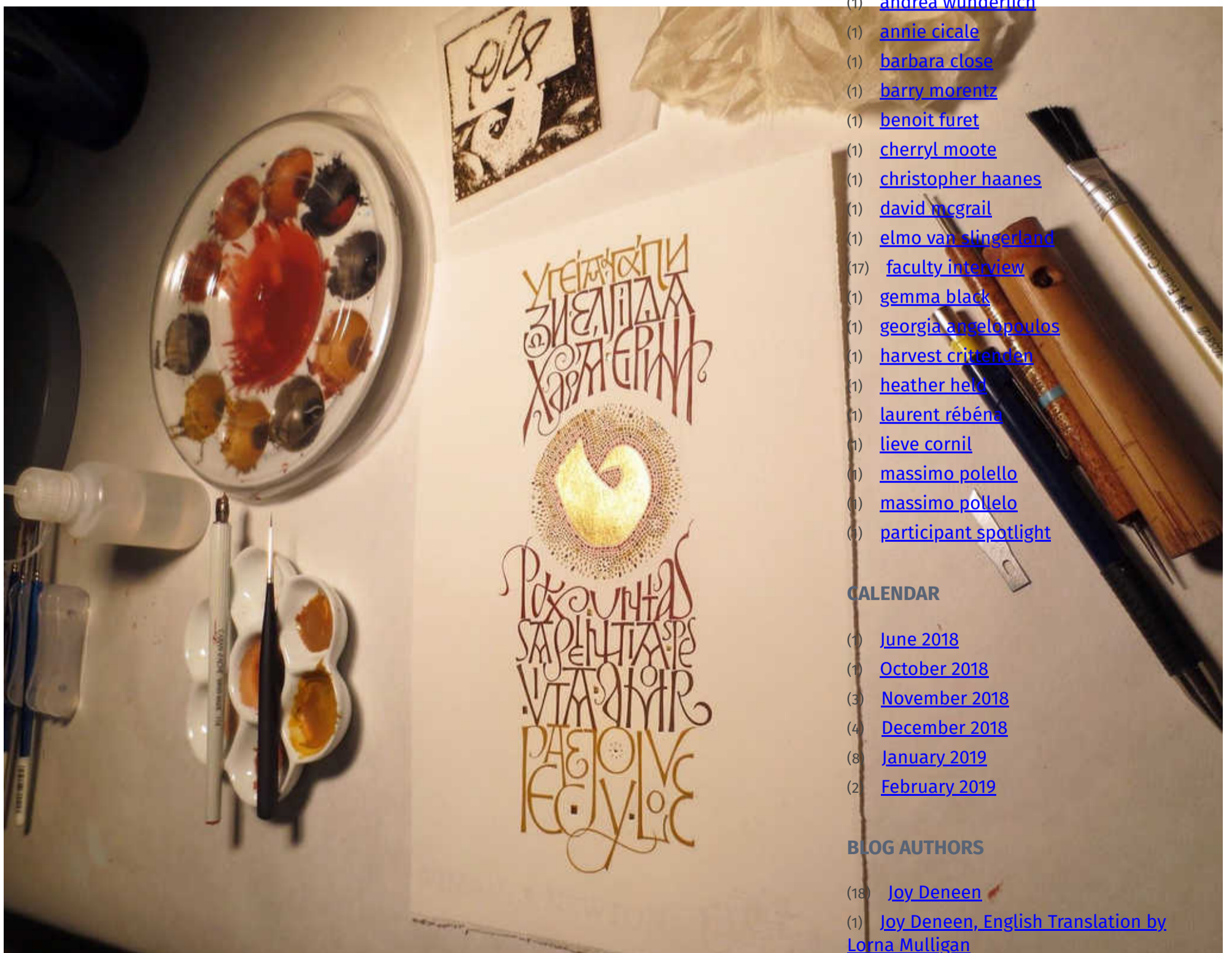
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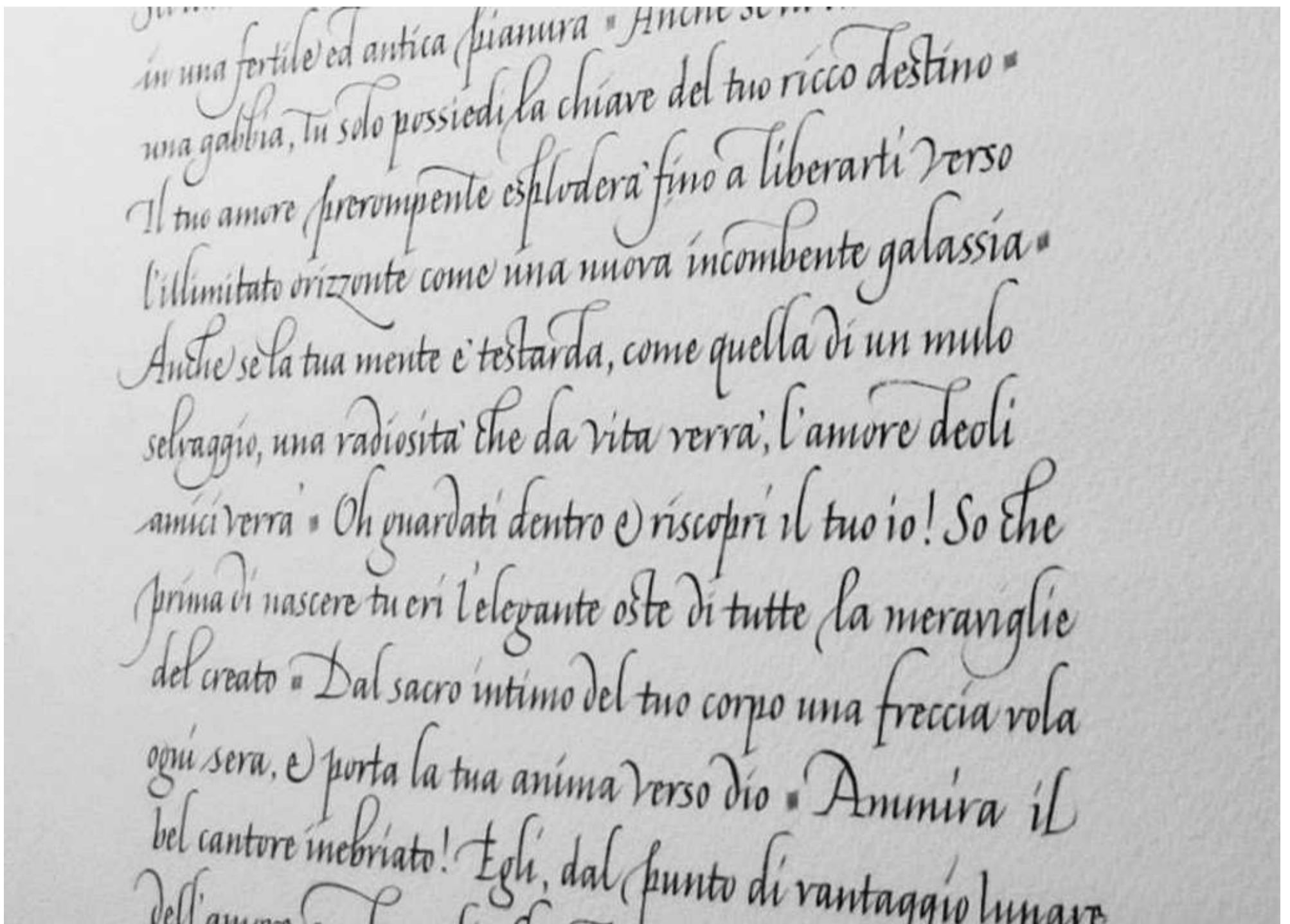
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Where did you grow up and what first sparked your interest in letters?

I was born in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, five years years after my parents emigrated from Greece in 1955. We moved to Vancouver Island when I was six; I loved going to school and enjoyed learning to print, read and write most of all. My English teacher in junior high (Peter Seale) had a fine Italic hand and was actively involved with the [Society for Italic Handwriting](#). He graced all the chalkboards enveloping his classroom with his elegant Italic and watching him write struck me in a very strong way.

Peter stood when he wrote, and he wrote quickly. His movements had the quality of a dance with the added bonus of being recorded visually. I remember waiting for him to write words that had p's in them so I could watch him make those sweeping flourishes... it seemed such a shame to wipe it all off. A week into the first semester he called me out for not paying attention to the lesson, telling me to come see him after school. Rather than dole out a punishment he gave me an Osmiroid fountain pen, ink and his Italic handbooks. He tutored those of us interested gratis after school. No doubt his Oxford Don stature, finely tailored linen suits, silk ascots and the pith helmet he wore on Fridays contributed to making Italic even more marvelous.

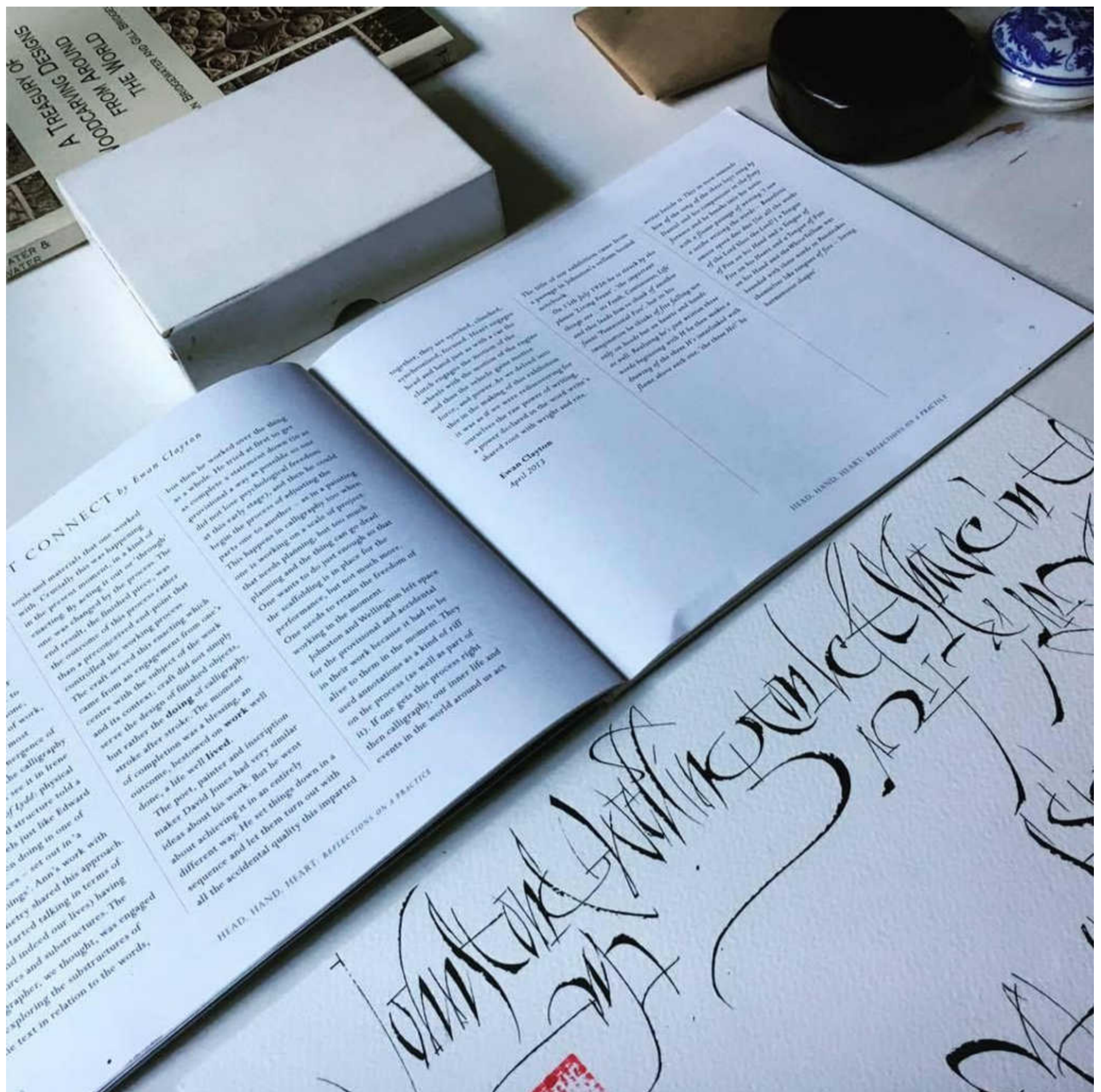


What is the first hand that you learned, and which hands resonate with you most today and why?

Apart from Italic handwriting, the first formal script I learned was Edward Johnston's Foundational hand. My high school Art teacher, Michael Hemming, was trained by William Smith (a pupil of Edward Johnston) who taught him calligraphy and heraldry in the UK.

Italic resonates with me most – handwriting, formal and “gothicized”. It feels very

natural to me to write this way even though Michael still says I haven't quite "got" the gothicized yet (and he has a point). I associate these scripts with beloved and respected teachers, making them even more poignant.



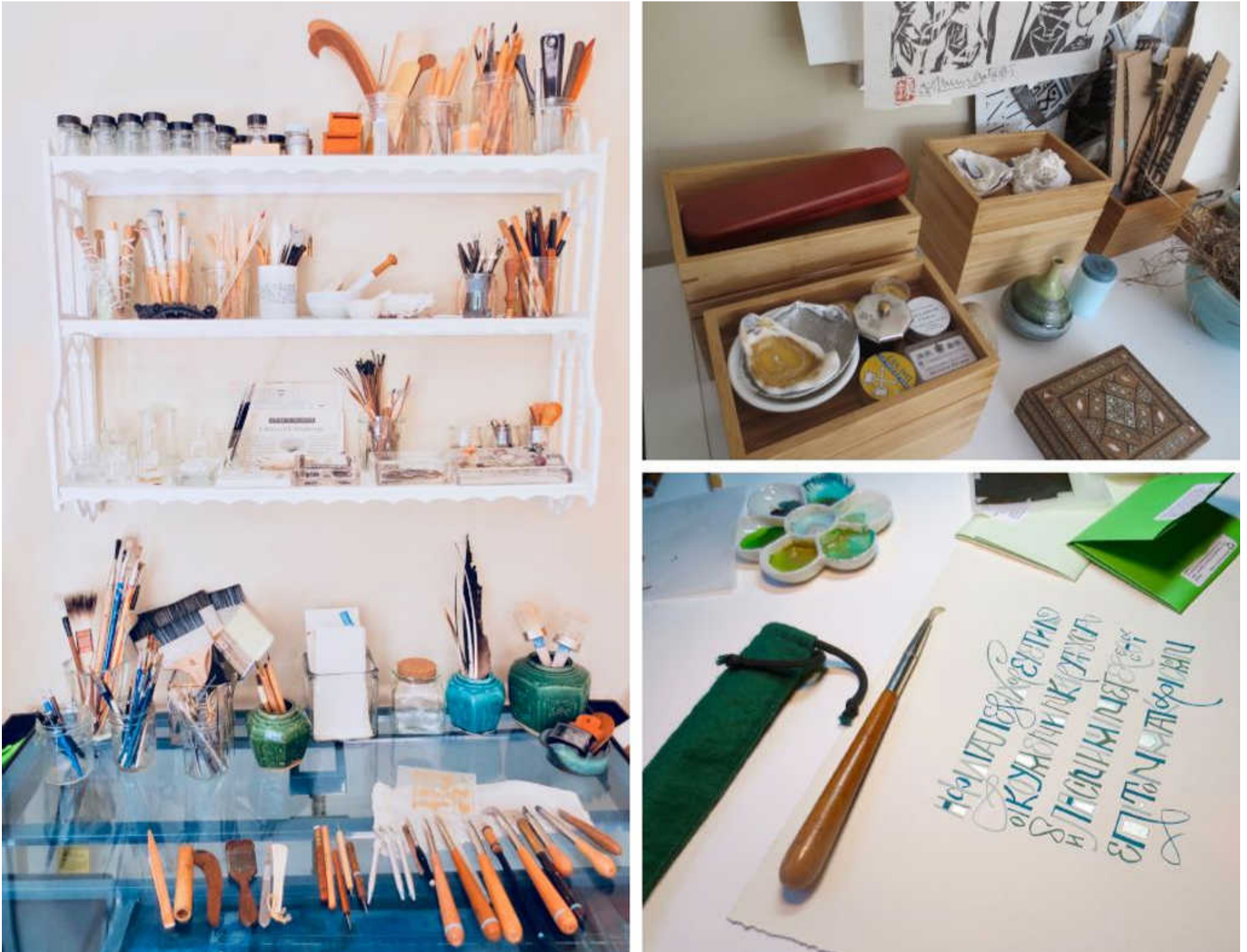
Which teachers have made the deepest impact on you and your work, and why?

Peter, Michael and Waine Ryzak, my junior high school art teacher, were the most pivotal teachers for their knowledge, passion and mentorship. Without them, I would not be writing this. Peter taught me about culture, the value of a broad education and how a fine hand was more than fancy writing. Waine opened up the world of Arts & Crafts by teaching spinning, natural dying, weaving, batik, stained glass, raku, textile arts as well as calligraphy. And I am still absorbing Michael's wisdom about art, art history, lettering arts and teaching.

All exemplified a thinking approach to living and creating. They fostered a good work ethic and transmitted important values and ideals – respect for one another despite differences in point of view, humility, generosity, integrity, striving for excellence and appreciating it in others, understanding the tradition you are working in and finding your place in it, helping others to do so where you can. Moving the tradition forward

and building from the work of others gone before is important to me because of them. Always encouraging and supportive, they trusted me to do my own thing. Each was strict, liberal and critical. I'm grateful for that as it's helped me grow and have more confidence in my own judgment of the work I do.

I have found a similar spirit in so many of the teachers I've studied with over the years that it's hard to single out just a few – Ann Hechle, [Ewan Clayton](#), [Peter Thornton](#), Yves Leterme, Joke Boudens and Sue Hufton, and many more. Peter's sharp eye, uncannily accurate observations, critiques and generous advices have improved my work and I'm grateful for his good influence in the lettering arts world. I will add artist and gilder Anthony Thorn, who with teachers like Ann and Ewan, ask good and difficult questions such as, "What is your utterance?"

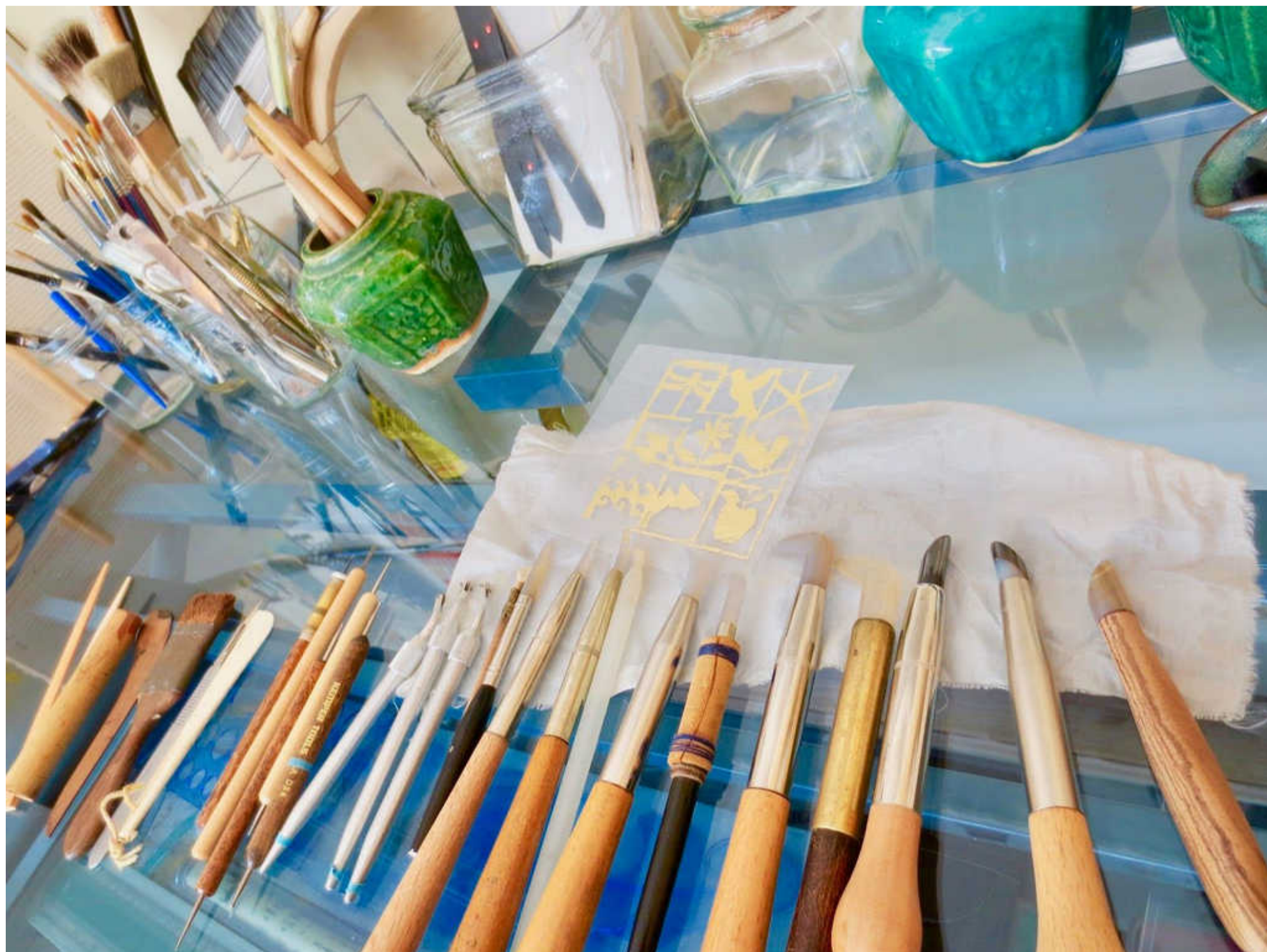


Where do you create, and how have you organized your work space? What is your best time of day, and do you prefer to create in silence or with music in the background?

I have a small studio of my own now that my daughters are grown and have left the nest. It has a big window overlooking a Garry Oak Meadow that is home to deer, squirrels, and many species of birds. My worktable is an old pine kitchen table and most of my supplies are stored in an upcycled pie safe. I have a drafting table but it's mostly used for putting interesting things on. There is also an old Pembroke table for cutting paper and fabric and the slant board I made in high school. It's very simple and mostly white and I'm very happy in it.

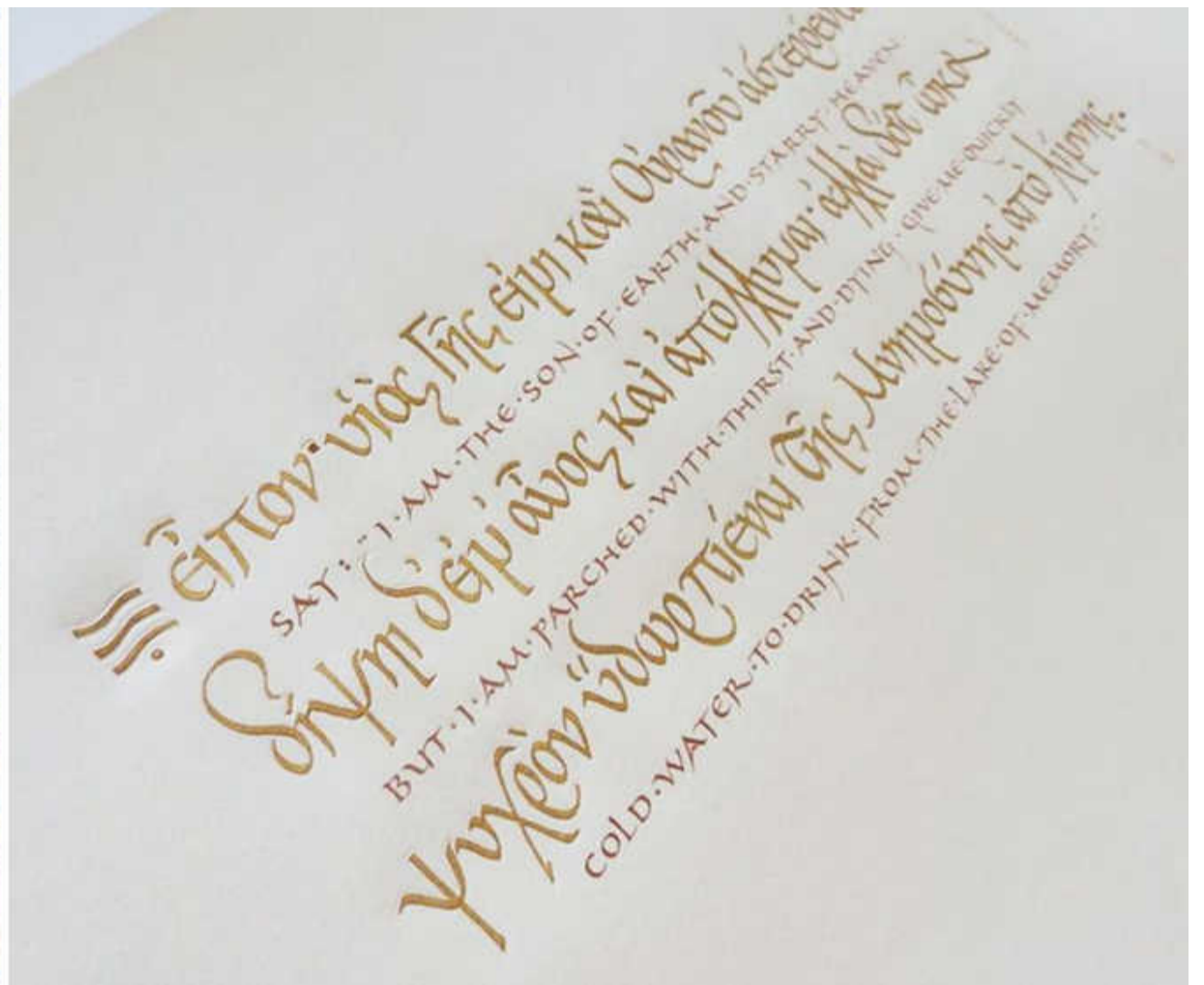
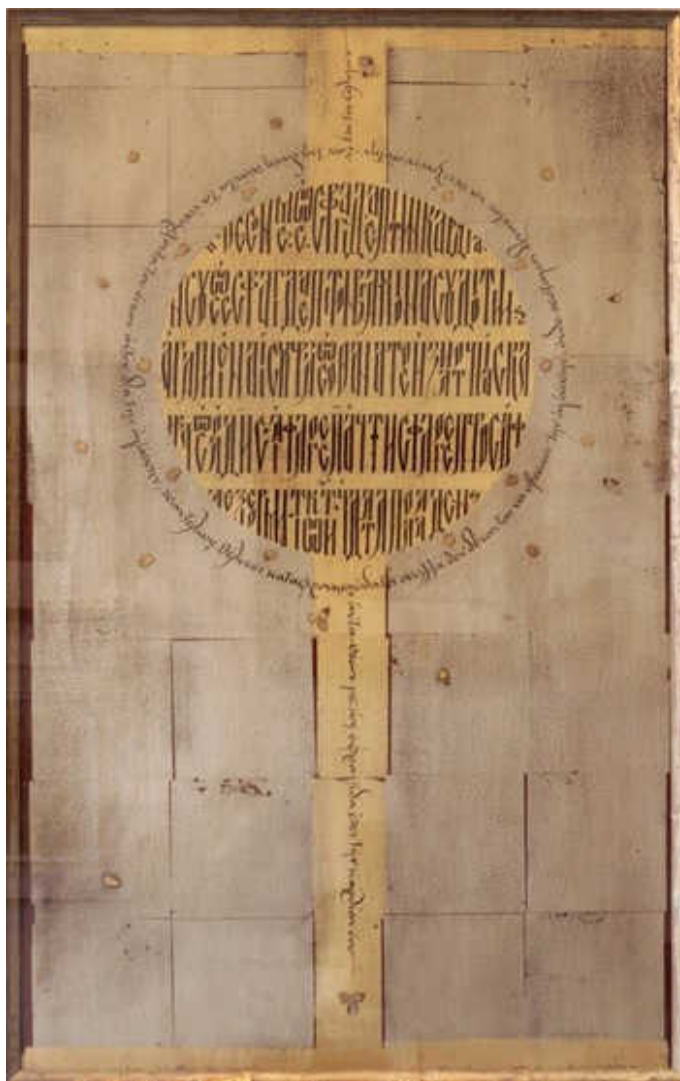
Most days start at three or four o'clock in the morning when the world is quiet, the dogs aren't barking and no one needs me. I always start with something I want to write – usually a bit of text from a book I'm reading or that I want to reflect on. Then I get into more disciplined practice or study, even if I'm not warming up for finished work.

If I come to my table distracted, certain kinds of instrumental music help to ground me. Usually I listen to chant that is centering or early/classical/international music. When I'm gilding, I tend to listen to medieval Byzantine music and I understand why now: my first experience with gold as a child was in a Greek Orthodox church – gleaming icons and iconography on every surface, candles flickering and the heady scent of frankincense was powerful. It was other-worldly and magical – and still is.



What are three of the most essential tools for your calligraphy practice and why?

I would despair if I lost my favourite vintage Parker fountain pen – honed for and gifted to me years ago by Michael. Next is the vintage flat sable brush that I use for gilding given to me by an Italian iconographer whose eyes were failing him. Then there's an old tool fashioned as a stylus by superscribe Fred Salmon. It's made from an old tack and a wooden pencil extender. I use this to finely tool gold.

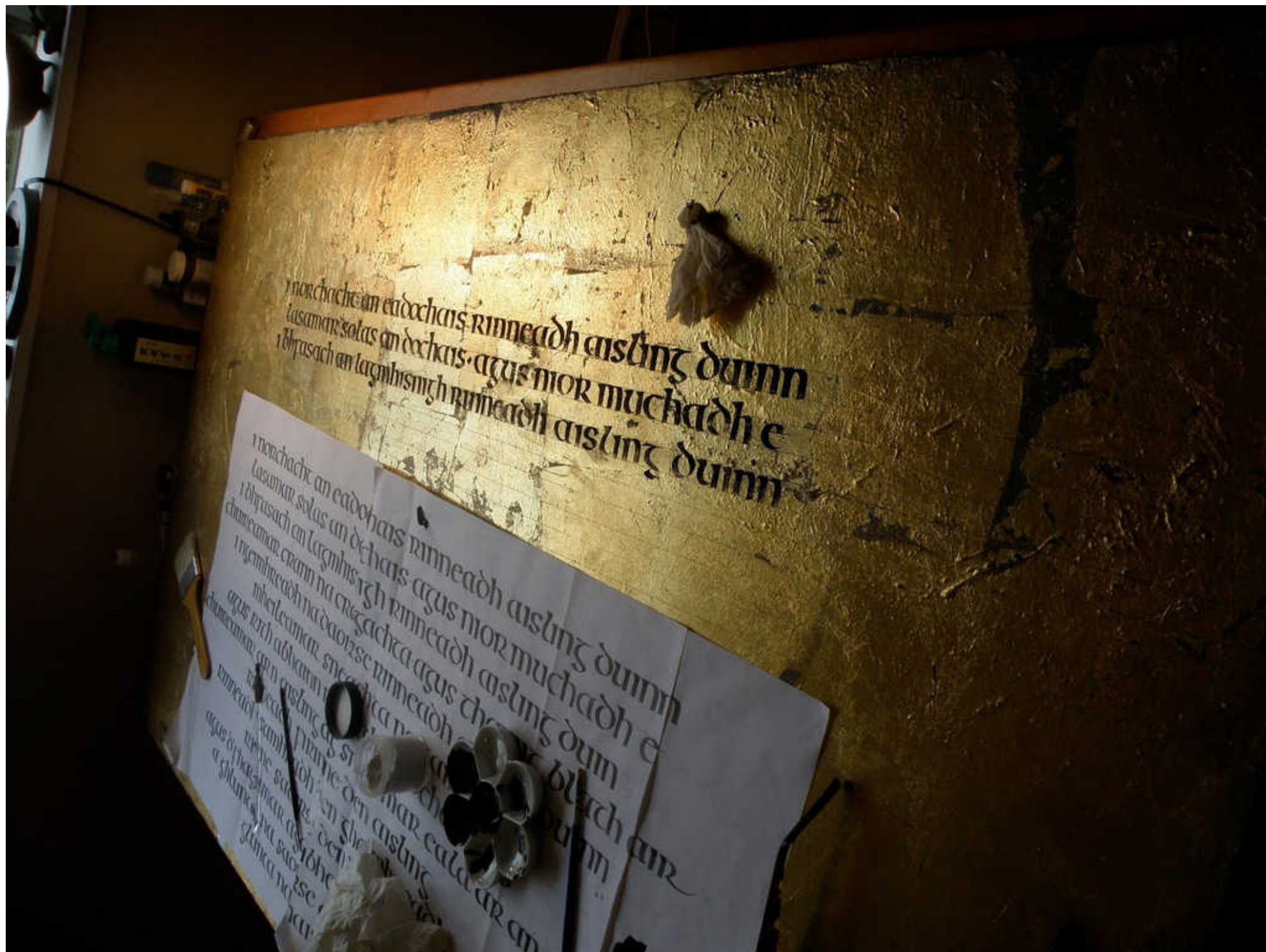


You have written that you are able to “explore and bridge the richness of cultural identity” through both English and Greek letterforms. Where have these explorations taken you, and how do you find that your heritage informs your work?

Before my first trip to Greece in 1970, my father told me that being Greek is my ‘identity’ (‘ταυτότητα’) and that I should study Greek history, language and culture to keep that rich connection alive. He also taught me about his uncle who was an artist and whom he loved and respected enormously. (He also did some wonderful lettering and iconography.) I took it all very seriously. In 2007, I turned my attention to the study of historical and contemporary Greek letterforms and styles of writing. Though Greek was my first language, English was the language I first wrote so it did not come naturally.

It was a huge challenge when Christopher Calderhead then asked me to create a contemporary Greek broad pen exemplar for the [The World Encyclopedia of Calligraphy](#). The Hellenic writing tradition was severely interrupted if not broken, and examples of historical scripts came mostly from books on palaeography and visits to museums. I found some questionable exemplars on the Internet, but there is no book or manual on Greek calligraphy. It was obvious that I needed to get to Greece, because there was much to learn and to be done. I taught in Athens and Thessaloniki in 2014 and since then I’ve gone back at least twice a year to teach and study, save this past year due to health challenges. Meeting and teaching people with very diverse backgrounds (archaeologists, conservators, bookbinders, architects, philosophers, educators, palaeographers, lawyers, type designers, graphic designers, tattoo designers, graffiti artists, etc.) has been a huge eye opener in the way I think about what I do.

I seemed very odd to my Greek students, but I felt I had a good grounding in calligraphy and something useful to bring to the table. To my surprise, everywhere I’ve travelled students were warm, welcoming and helpful and I finally felt I fit in to it all somehow. These positive exchanges resolved that sense of confusion that many second generation children experience – of not really belonging here or there.



In Process. Collaborative work with Miles Lowry. Poem by Liam Mac Uistin. Large wooden cradle painted with oils, then gilded and written on with Holbein Acryla Gouache.

What has been one of your most meaningful commissions or projects? What made this project particularly special, challenging or rewarding?

Almost all the work I've taken on has been very gratifying, so it's hard to single out one project. Apart from making formal documents such as Freedoms or Rolls of Honour and such, I often get asked to write texts in both English and Greek that are meaningful to my clients and often to me. I especially love commissions from Classicists.

One project that was very challenging was making two very large donor panels on paper for a beautiful Melkite church in the United States. The panels were to be framed and positioned on either side of a very large icon in the traditional Byzantine style. I knew at once that any script I had up my sleeve wouldn't fit, and that I needed to invent one that had the right feeling, was readable and would harmonize with the space and the cultural heritage of this community. There was a boggling amount of information to organize and balance so I make the panels look like pages from a Byzantine manuscript. I was happy to work with an architect who trusted me and gave me the time and freedom to get it right.

I also enjoy collaborative work with artist [Miles Lowry](#), whom I've known for ages and who had the same teachers I mentioned. We share many interests and passions; making art together always yields unexpected results and really challenges me for having to work with unfamiliar media as well as scale. We approach the work every time with enthusiasm and a good balance of experimenting, making, responding and researching.



You will be teaching a five day class entitled [“The Design Process with William Morris.”](#) What knowledge and skills will students gain after participating in these classes, and how would you describe your style of teaching?

Firstly, I hope to convey why William Morris is relevant to us in the 21st century. His beliefs about art, craft and nature are compelling and enduring and we will be responding to nature rather than copying, as he advocated. Using materials that evoke his aesthetic (red earth, indigo, natural earth pigments) and drawing from nature will hopefully build confidence and nourish new possibilities for combining illumination and calligraphy. Looking at his substantial output of handwritten and illuminated books, his designs for wallpaper and such, as well as the books he published and the type he designed for them will hopefully furnish inspiration and a jumping off point for individual work.

I’m not sure how to describe my style of teaching, save that I always have to be mindful of striking a good balance between theory, history and practice. Since my background is in art history, I’m very drawn by the history and evolution of letters and script and believe that understanding it makes the experience and practice of calligraphy richer. Since I never intended to teach, Fred Salmon gave me an article that Marsha Brady had written about how to teach calligraphy well and I refer to that for good and sensible advice.

Though I try to follow a class plan, I find each teaching experience unique which means I must be flexible. The workshops are structured enough so that most core information is conveyed, but I always leave room for dialogue and the impromptu. Most importantly, I hope to facilitate a good and meaningful experience all ‘round. Many of the workshops I’ve taken have been transformative, life enhancing experiences and I hope to achieve that for my students.



How would you describe the calligraphy community in British Columbia and Canada as a whole? What does community mean to you, in the context of the lettering arts?

One of the reasons I returned to the island is because of Victoria's [Fairbank Calligraphy Society](#). I was part of it since it was founded in 1976, and the group often met in my high school art room with Michael as one of the founders. The society is strongly Edward Johnston-based, with another founder who was Johnston's student (Esmé Davis). Importantly, she set up a Bursary for members to use to travel to study and without that I studying overseas would have been impossible. Another founder, Ann Tresize, was a student of Mercy Hunter who was one of Johnston's students. Alfred Fairbank gave his name to our group, so our focus is also Italic handwriting.

Our island has a very healthy calligraphic community but I wouldn't say that ours or any other guilds in Canada did not share similar challenges – getting volunteers to fill positions, reaching out to community, having time for all to follow their own Muse or get the kind of teaching all levels need, etc. I have learned so much from pillars like Lorraine Douglas, Christiane Lenz and Alice Young. We keep up the core belief in sharing what we know and helping one another whenever we can. That's pretty special to my mind.

There is another wave of interest in calligraphy and the lettering arts, so that is something to step up to. I think groups are most successful when they adapt to the times without compromising their original intention/mission too much.

I have taught in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, so there are other guilds I look forward to meeting this year at Bishop's. Our community is hugely important to me. We all know the strong bond and kinship that occurs when like-minded creatives come together with goodwill. These kinds of friendships are often enduring, abiding and deeply satisfying.



Outside of calligraphy, what are some of your other interests and hobbies? What might be something about you that people would be surprised to learn?

Working with textiles and natural fibres – sewing, quilting, needlepoint, embroidery – is a pleasure for me, evoking fond memories of doing needlework with my mother as a young girl. Equally, cooking good food, keeping a warm home that is a creative sanctuary, and making a garden are pleasures that are deeply gratifying.

Persistent interests include art history, history, philosophy, music, reading and studying about things that move me or arouse strong curiosity. Increasingly, most of my paths lead back somehow to letterform in some way, shape or form. Or, the opposite is true: that the love of letters opens up a world of interests and rich opportunities for learning and growth. I think on letters as fascinating artefacts in themselves and derive almost as much pleasure from studying them as making them.

It may surprise that while I was raising my three daughters and moving around a lot for twenty years, I did very little calligraphy. Michael, Peter and I kept a lively Italic correspondence over those years and they sent me the Society's newsletters, examples of their writing (and Fred Salmon's) and books to keep my interest kindled until I had the time to get at it again.

Georgia Angelopoulos

Canada



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