



THE RISE OF HAND LETTERING

It seems like they're everywhere these days: handwritten quotes from poets or philosophers, made by illustrators in the loveliest lettering, on blogs or on Instagram, or on local café blackboards. Why is hand lettering suddenly so popular? And is it something you can learn to do?

Much of what makes life beautiful begins with letters, because letters form words, and words make sentences. And how many wonderful phrases, sayings, and quotations are worthy of sharing with the world? It could be a whole love letter or a poem, or simply one fine word. Not printed in a standard computer font, but hand drawn, preferably in elegant typography. No handwriting is the same, and that makes any written message so much more personal. All those words, phrases, and quotes are made up of letters: no matter how different our languages are, Western languages – with a few exceptions – are based on the same 26 letters.

That's why letters deserve some attention. And they're getting it, more and more. Anyone who keeps an eye on blogs, Instagram, and Pinterest has already noticed it: hand lettering is a trend, especially among illustrators and crafters. These days, you see people everywhere drawing incredibly beautiful and really sophisticated letters by hand.

One person who has undoubtedly given hand lettering a particular boost is American illustrator Lisa Congdon. On January 1, 2012, she started a blog. Every day for 365 days she posted a handwritten text, a quote, or sometimes just a single letter. Every now and then, she posted something that followed the official rules of calligraphy, but other posts were based on vintage letters and sometimes her own designs. Drawn with brush and ink and with pen, too.

BACK TO THE GOOD OLD WAYS

When you look at Congdon's letters blog, sometimes it feels as if you're looking at theater on paper. A quote from the Russian author Anton Chekhov? Lisa's handwriting brings it to life and makes it personal. Everything you see – her use of color, the size, shape, and thickness of the letters, and the illustrations she includes – all indicate that the text was drawn with great attention. And, naturally, ➤



Valerie McKeehan specializes in hand lettering using chalk on chalkboards

“The fun of working by hand is that the letters turn out different every time”

that makes you, the reader, take the time to read the quote with greater attention – the design is a tribute to the content.

Why is lettering suddenly so popular with illustrators? “In a way, it’s simply a reaction to all the years we used computer fonts – roughly from the ’80s to the beginning of this century,” observes Congdon. “Now we’re going back to the hand lettering we used to do back in the ’80s.”

American typographer Valerie McKeehan – a specialist in chalk lettering – believes in the singularity of handwritten messages. “Handwritten text has personality and charm, and I think that explains its popularity, especially if you compare it with digitally generated text that’s a bit boring and sterile,” suggests McKeehan. “Certainly, hand lettering goes well with the growing popularity of the DIY culture.”

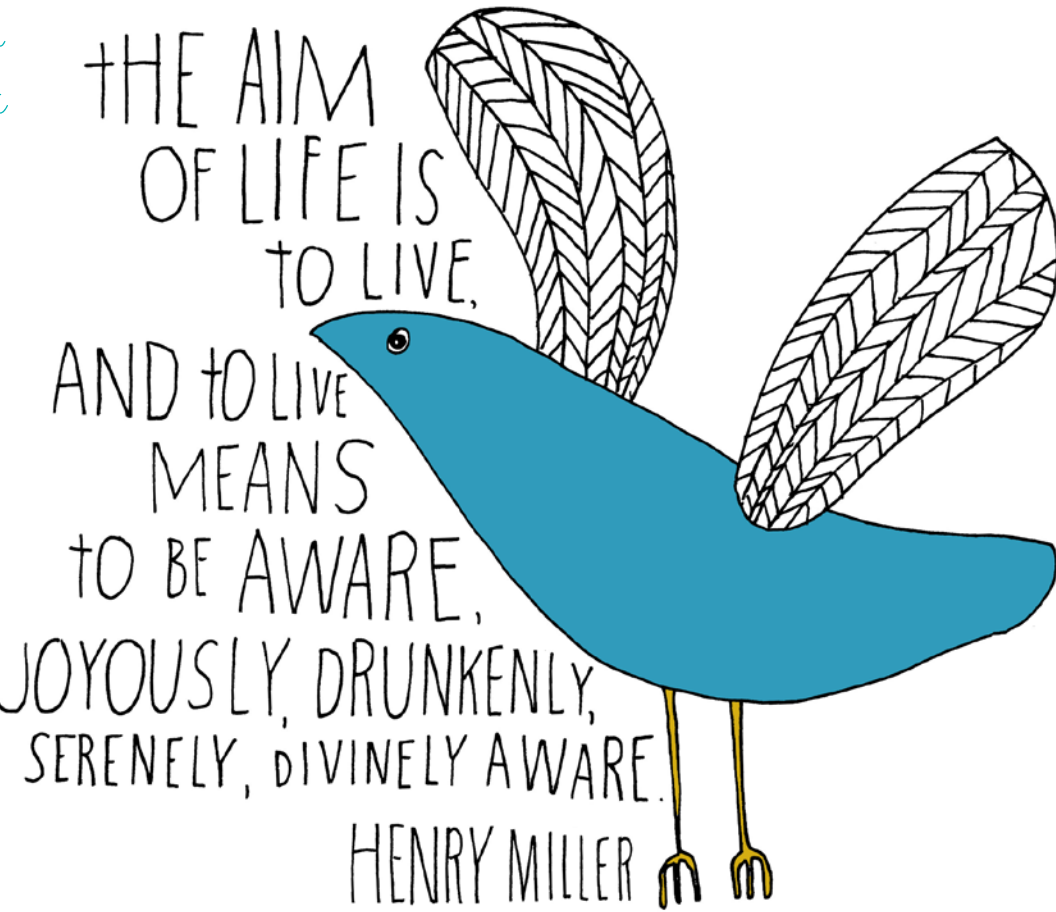
Faythe Levine traveled the length and breadth of the United States and made *Sign Painters*, both a book and a movie, about artists who are still painting advertising or signage by hand. It’s full of interviews with people who work on billboards or on stone walls. It’s a trend that’s returned, not just in America but all around the world – even in China – recalling an era when life was slower and all the signs were made by hand.

Yet the illustrators’ love of letters is not just a recent phenomenon. “My love of typography goes a long way back,” says Dutch illustrator Judith van der Giessen. “Lettering can remind you of that one name, that beautiful book, or inspirational quote. The fact that it has a personal value for everyone makes it beautiful.”

McKeehan fell in love with lettering because she took pleasure in the idea that she was able to draw something beautiful while conveying a message at the same time. “Words already have their own meaning, and just by giving a word a nice shape, you can emphasize the meaning even more,” she says.

MAKING AN IMPRESSION

Congdon thinks that letters are the most important symbols in the

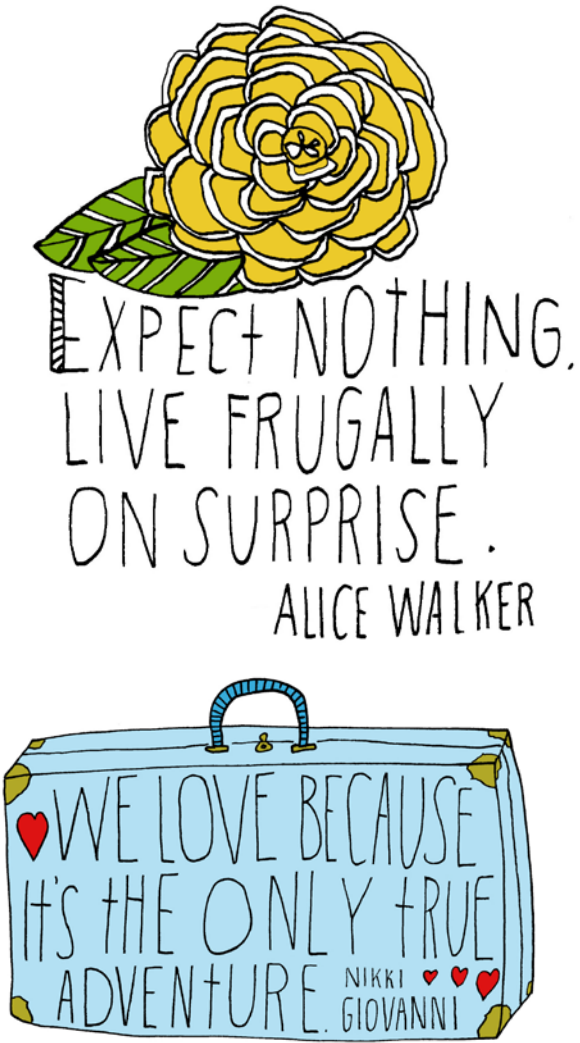


Artist and illustrator Lisa Congdon makes posters out of quotes from famous artists and thinkers, like those on these pages.

world. “They are so ordinary, in fact, everyone knows them,” she says. “You can express literally everything with them. I express myself through the letters I draw. Yes, that’s one of my most cherished activities.”

The book *Scripts: Elegant Lettering from Design’s Golden Age* by Steven Heller and Louise Fili is packed with inspiration for letter lovers. The period from the 19th Century to the mid-20th Century was the heyday of the handwritten letter: printed letters, based on handwriting. Of course, it’s cheating a bit because a printed letter – although based on the manuscript letter – is not handwritten or drawn. That doesn’t mean you can’t be inspired by the lettering on the vintage movie posters, ink pots, paint cans, orange wrappers, powder boxes, soda labels, biscuit tins, wedding announcements, and butter wrappers that abound in the book – the one letter more graceful than the next.

Modern-day illustrators are often inspired by vintage letters. Van der Giessen says she spends a lot of time leafing through old magazines and newspapers as well as visiting museums, flea markets, and vintage shops. Congdon is influenced by the lettering in old advertisements and sign boards, she says, and McKeehan finds that all kinds of vintage designs – like a floral print on a second-hand dress or the illustration on a vintage cocoa tin – can inspire her. McKeehan sometimes reads a quote or hears a poem and knows at once how she would want to do draw the lettering. “Some



DO-IT-YOURSELF TIPS FROM LISA, VALERIE, AND JUDITH

- * **Lisa Congdon:** “Take a class. It helps you to understand how the professionals work. But it’s not entirely necessary. There are lots of books that can help you. My favorite is the ‘Little Book of Lettering’ by Emily Gregory, which is full of great ideas. And practice. Make time to practice every day, so that you’ll develop your own style over time. Find poems and quotes that you like, and use them to practice your lettering.”
- * **Judith van der Giessen:** “Just start and don’t be afraid to make mistakes, because often they’re fun! Find materials that suit you best, from pen to ink, and choose a favorite letter or text. A good book for practicing different fonts is ‘Draw Your Own Alphabets: Thirty Fonts to Scribble, Sketch and Make Your Own’ by Tony Seddon. You can letter your text in different fonts and combine them in a beautiful whole. Do lots of sketches; try things out. That’s how you’ll come up with the best designs.”
- * **Valerie McKeehan:** “A good way to start is to study different fonts and trace over them so you can feel the different shapes. If you first imitate or copy fonts, you’ll make progress and at a certain point you can then add a personal touch. Once you’ve mastered all these different letters, then it’s easier to develop your own style and do more complex lettering.”

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

In the past, lettering style was heavily influenced by the type of materials used for writing. The Romans wrote with a reed pen on scrolls of papyrus. Because papyrus was rough material and the reed pen wasn’t really suitable for the surface, handwriting wasn’t terribly precise or sophisticated. Parchment (made from animal hide) was used increasingly from the year 300. The surface of parchment was smoother, making handwriting more refined – and that was helped along by the quill. Incidentally, it was usually only Christian monks who could write. Because the intention was to spread Christianity, many monasteries had scribes. Writing was a real craft that was also performed by the guilds. It became the custom to decorate writing. A wonderful example is the Irish “Book of Kells”, a book of illuminated biblical texts. They say that a monk could spend a lifetime writing and decorating one page. Later, during the Renaissance, the first scientists began to write, and Gothic letters were replaced by italics (the humanistic script), which was easier and faster to write. Printing emerged around 1500 and the craft of writing faded away. From then on, printing fonts had to be designed and this created a new profession: graphic design.

“Words have their own meaning, and by giving them a nice shape, you emphasize them even more”



quotes are just screaming to be drawn,” she says.

To get the hang of drawing letters takes lots of practice, says Congdon. She started her letter blog as a perfect way to practice and experiment with her own style. That daily exercise ensured that she made progress and mastered the art. Through that work, her hand-drawn letters have become an important part of her career as an illustrator.

Van der Giessen and McKeehan both took calligraphy courses, but they say it wasn’t essential. “I just started working with materials and techniques that I like – carbon paper, ballpoints, markers, fine-liners, pencil, paint, ink, and stamps,” says Van der Giessen. “The fun of working by hand is that the letters turn out different every time.”

AS EASY AS ABC

Van der Giessen doesn’t have a favorite technique; she says she finds it exciting enough to find the proper technique for the right illustration. She uses lettering as a “snack” (an in-between step): sketching letters often helps her find new inspiration for other projects or assignments. And Congdon still draws letters every day. “Just by writing in my diary, for example,” she says. “Taking the time to set a letter down on paper always puts me in a good mood.”

Is there such a thing as a “hard” letter? Or an “easy” one? Sure, though obviously it’s different for everyone. Congdon finds the letter Y the least fun to draw. R is her favorite “because there are so many crazy ways to draw it.”

For Van der Giessen, J (for Judith) tops her list of favorites not only “because it’s the first letter of my name, of course, but also because it combines well with others and is a long letter.” Van der Giessen doesn’t find any letters annoying but McKeehan does. “The M, because it requires a certain symmetry that I find hard. The capital L, however, is my favorite letter to draw. I really like giving an oblique L a kind of swirly curl.” ●

Judith van der Giessen illustrates her own positive messages using bold hand lettering

READING AND LOOKING

danatanamachi.com is a beautiful site created by American lettering artist Dana Tanamachi, full of videos of her at work. For example, when you watch “Flourish,” you’ll see that lettering is a skill that demands a tremendous amount of technique.

SIGN PAINTERS

Faythe Levine (who wrote the book “Handmade Nation”) and Sam Macon zoom in on sign painters across America: the people who hand-paint billboards and signage. Here, too, it’s clear how much technique and artistry are involved. They also made a film, “Sign Painters:” signpaintermovie.blogspot.nl.

- * Lisa Congdon: lisacongdon.com/blog/category/365-days-of-hand-lettering
- * Judith van der Giessen: judithvandergiesen.blogspot.nl
- * Valerie McKeehan: lilyandval.com