PSC Library

Portland Society for Calligraphy

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Betty Lou Bennett: Artist & Teacher

Artists rank among our most precious cultural commodities. Even more precious are those who not only produce art themselves but who also serve as teachers and mentors, thus stimulating and refining the creative impulses and talents of others. Such an artist-cum-teacher is Bettye Lou Bennett, whose most recent exhibition of work, "Painted Space," was seen at the Keizer Art Association, Salem, Oregon in a two-man show with Prindi Flug.

A thirty-two year residency allows Oregon to claim Mrs. Bennett; however, she graduated from the University of Illinois as a fine arts major in industrial design. Her first professional job came as an artist in small products for an industrial design company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bettye Lou Bennett's introduction to calligraphy was at OMSI in Portland. After her first class she went to The Portland Art Museum School to study with Lloyd Reynolds, who after a year's study suggested she teach at Portland State University. In addition to Portland State her teaching institutions have included Pacific Northwest College of Art (Portland Art Museum School), Portland University, Western State College at Monmouth, the Division of Continuing Education at Haystack, The University of Oregon, Pearson College in Victoria, Canada, and the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, as well as workshops in Oregon, Washington, and the Denver area. Her students are teaching where she taught, as well as upon other campuses throughout the United States and New Zealand.

Those who have followed her work are aware of the importance of two extended periods of living in Greece; the second visit included Turkey. Equally important is the Bennett's residence just south of Portland, Oregon, in one of the unspoiled natural settings of open fields, stands of evergreens, and meadows tucked between field and forest; here creativity comes from the soil as well as from the mind and the hands. This unique setting at the doorstep of a metropolitan community provides a solitude for study, contemplation, and creativity that is very important to Mrs. Bennett.

The impact of Bettye Lou Bennett's commissioned and free-lance work as a graphic artist is seen from the Pacific Coast east to Portland and south to Ashland. Her art pieces are found primarily in private collections, but The Smithsonian, The Portland Art Museum and some Northwest galleries have her work as part of their permanent collections.

A philosophy of individual expression is Mrs. Bennett's legacy to the art world and to her students. She constantly challenges the viewer or the artist to discover and express his own interpretation of space, empty and filled, line and color of the total project.

Lillian Pierce

Bennett: The Deceiving Surface

Another facet of Klee's work—which, incidentally, must have been part of the development of many painters—has to do with certain unexpected areas of paint which appear during the working of almost all pictures. These areas, although they combine the artist's own color and workmanship, are still unplanned, *and are sometimes almost mysterious to him . . . not many artists give serious thought to such accidental areas . . . to Klee, I believe that such unexpected areas—not only the good ones, but also the discomfitting ones—were matters for great exploration. He studied their pattern and their look to find out why they affected him as they did. Out of such areas he evolved his thousand-and-one styles, so unlike in texture and yet so unmistakably stamped with his personality. Herein, again, I feel that he has much to give to other artists—in that all his styles emerged* out of his own work.

Ben Shahn, "Paul Klee"

There is at base a contradiction in calligraphy. We find a striking phrase, an utterance we think memorable, a poem which touches our heart. We hope to set this down as obviously special, so that our reader will want to think about the text. We must both interfere with the reader's comprehension (after all, if we were merely engaged in *information science*, it would be far easier to type the silly thing out and pin it to the employee cafeteria bulletin board) and yet also try to facilitate it. I think this contradiction affects our work at the level of the individual letter: we carry around in our mind's eyes the image of a *perfect* letter and this inhibits the free motion of the hand and the sparkling gaiety with which one ought always to encounter our allies, the twenty-six letters. I remember once reading an interview with Pablo Casals in which he remarked that each morning when he first sat down to practice he was never certain the high D would be there. There's a delicious uncertainty in that remark which makes clear a whole attitude to one's work. One must always be willing to re-create, to make afresh, the tools and techniques of one's trade. This is not, obviously, an attitude which encourages a fussy perfectionism. Our goal should always be to give the reader a graphic image which carries him or her back through the marks on the page to the physical motion, the dance of touch and pressure, the sudden surprise of a brilliant improvisation which is the moment of artistic creation.

This is not to say that craft is not involved. It is only by diligent practice that one comes to those sublime moments of knowing that *this* is the right gesture. It does suggest that there is another calligraphy beyond the arid precisionism of trying to look just like a medieval monk.

Figure 1 is a tile from Bettye Lou Bennett's earlier show at the Hillsboro Public Library which exemplifies a number of the themes developed in Bennett's later work. Most obvious, of course, is the artist's return to one of her first professional interests, ceramics. But the tile also shows beautifully Bennett's interest in the brush—much of the work from the Hillsboro show was either completely brushwritten or contained brush elements—as well as making apparent her interest in viewer perception.

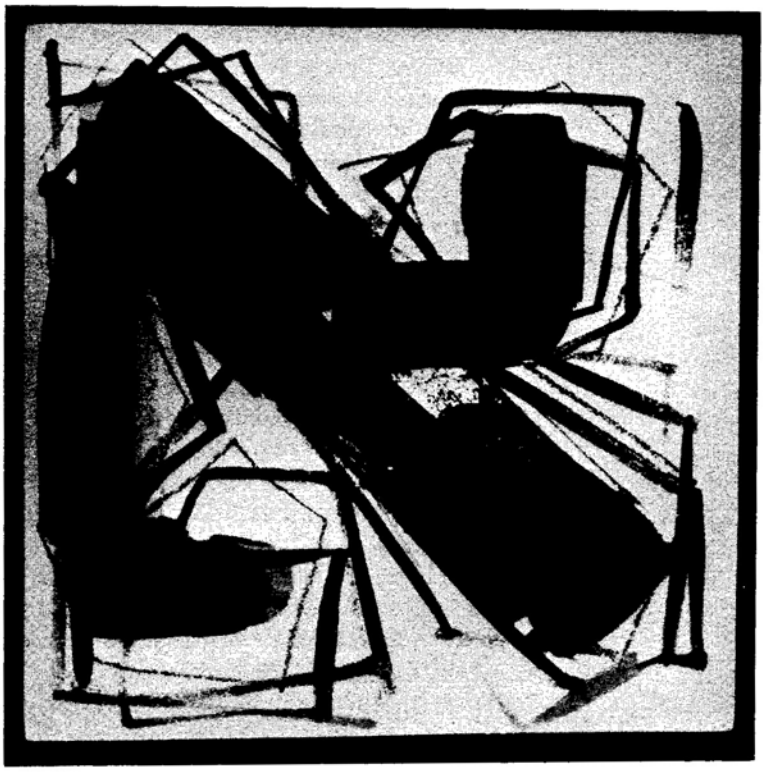


Figure 1 Bettye Lou Bennett

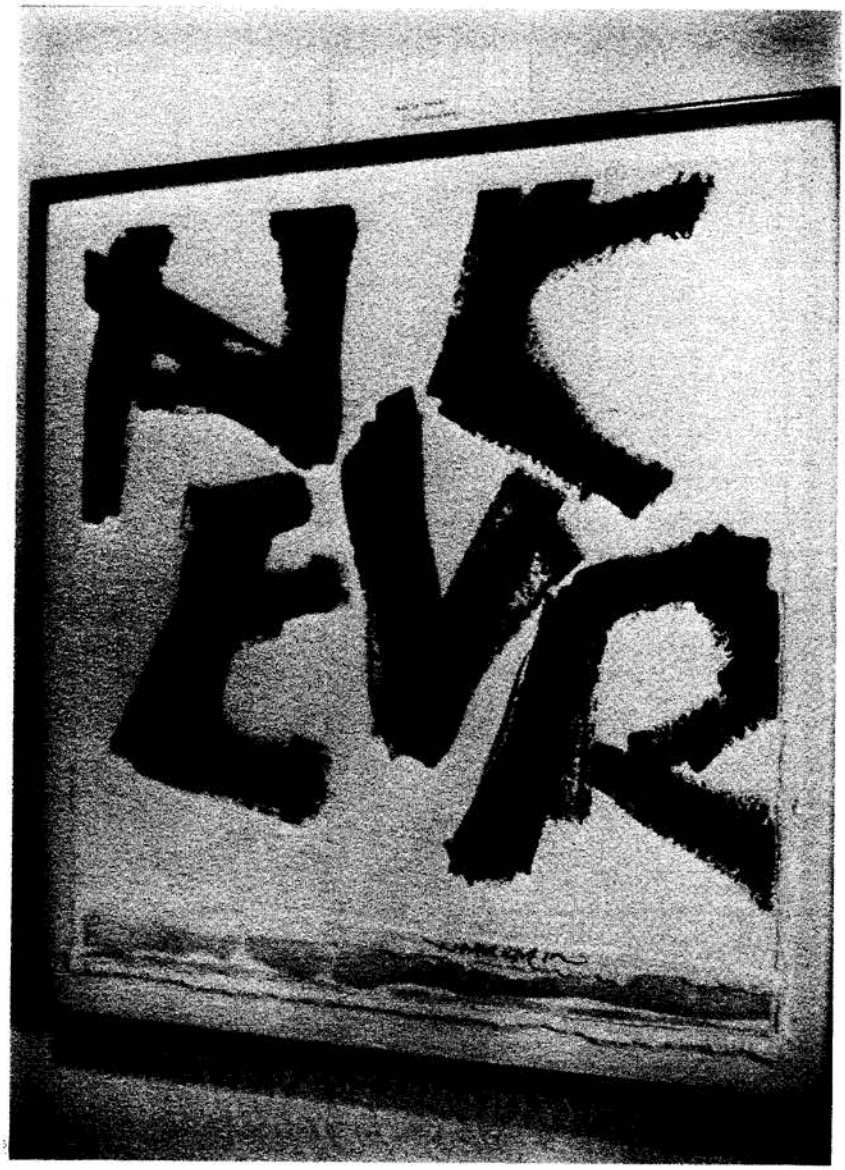


Figure 2
Bettye Lou Bennett

The viewer *absorbs* the tile in several stages: first the large form of the aleph which is the single largest compositional element, its size reinforced by the subtle interplay of color in the tile. But Bennett toys with our immediate response—that of clinging to the large recognizable form—by qualifying our recognition: she outlines several possibilities divergent from the more stable form of the large aleph, quick bold sketches of alternate forms and the presence of possibility is heightened in our awareness by the use of color. (Although the tile is a composition in neutrals, it is no more "colorless" than that other composition in neutrals, Whistler's "Arrangement in Black and Gray.") The conscious restriction of color makes us appreciate the complex variations of value all the more. The tile is bold in its simplicity—a simplicity which yields a final complexity to the patient viewer.

For those of us lucky enough to see Bettye Lou Bennett's earlier show the interwoven forms and themes of work in the recent show, "Painted Space," which hung at the Keizer Art Association Gallery through the month of October, were a powerful confirmation of tendencies developing in the earlier work. Bold design, strong forms and a vital relation with the viewer are always important parts of Bennett's work; the new work was no exception. It ranges from large broadsides

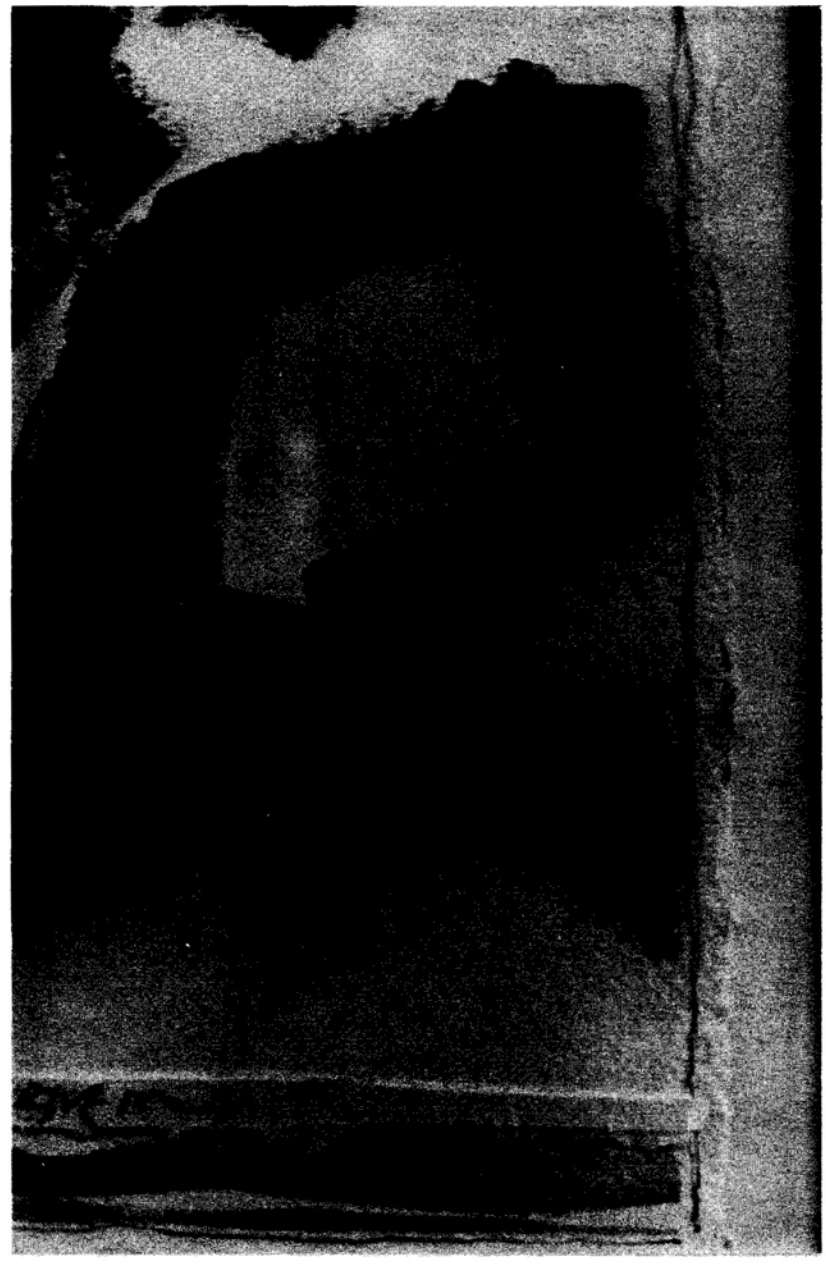


Figure 3
Bettye Lou Bennett

to witty spontaneous books to poured, framed ceramic tiles. (It is unfortunate that part of the impact of the show was lessened by the gallery staff's choosing to re-hang the works from Mrs. Bennett's original arrangement. The suite of works was originally intended to convey a message when read serially. The gallery staff re-hung the pieces to make traffic move more smoothly through the gallery and consequently the meaning of the text wrought among the pieces is lost.)

As the works were finally hung they were distributed by type among the gallery wall: one wall was large paper broadsides, one a collection of three ceramic tiles, and one corner was an arrangement of two framed paper pieces mounted around a glass bowl filled with small books. Despite this attempt to separate the works by *genre*, they were all clearly related in intention and method; both the large broadsides of Annie Dillard's poetry and the tiles, for example, toy with the notion of edges and boundaries, and there is a common interest in what we might call "levels of perception" in all the pieces.

Take, for example, the piece illustrated in Figure 2, which Bennett calls "Lear's 'Never'". The "surface" text, of course, is that vast moment of Act Five which is filled with Lear's protest at Cordelia's death. This "never" is the culmination of a network of negatives,

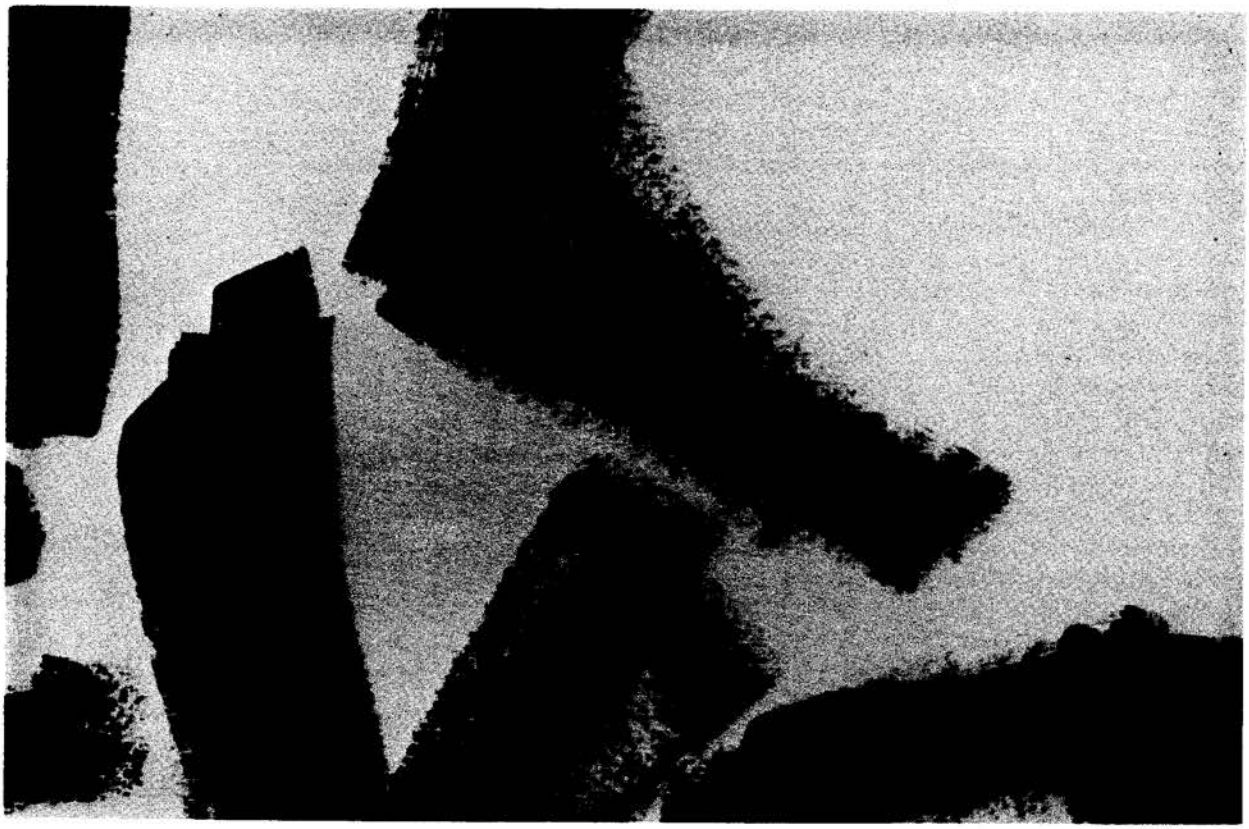


Figure 4 Bettye Lou Bennett

rebukes, and prohibitions which make the play a texture interwoven of emptiness. The landscape of *Lear* is bleak and grim, and perhaps nowhere else so much as in this moment of Lear's recognition that, stripped of rank, titles, and pomp as he is, now even the solace of Cordelia's presence has been ripped from him. But as we move closer to the piece, (Figure 3), we see that there is an ironic comment upon the surface text, a message of perseverance in the face of despair. We must move *within* the larger writing to perceive the additional text, and this alters our perception of the large brush-written letters, just as our understanding of the text's *meaning* is altered as we reflect upon the quiet but vital comment of the maxim written in Italic. In fact, many of the large pieces from the show work in this fashion: the "surface" text is altered and subjected to a *re-reading* as we move inward. (Another of the works, for example, has as its "surface text" the phrase DOWN OUT, which would usually be taken, I suppose, as an abbreviation of "down-and-out," and, hence, a statement about the used-up and indigent. But the ironic smaller comment affixed to the piece is an assertion about movement downward to the still unmoving center, that poise which is the source of all energy and creation, dynamic in its silence.) And, just as the pieces reflect on their own meanings as we move through the process of reading them, so, too, our progress toward them alters the image we perceive. Figure 4 suggests the way in which the letters become bold patterns of movement as we come closer to the piece; at a distance which renders the small Italic "comment" legible, the large brush-written capitals explode into a tracery of the kinetic energy which produced them.

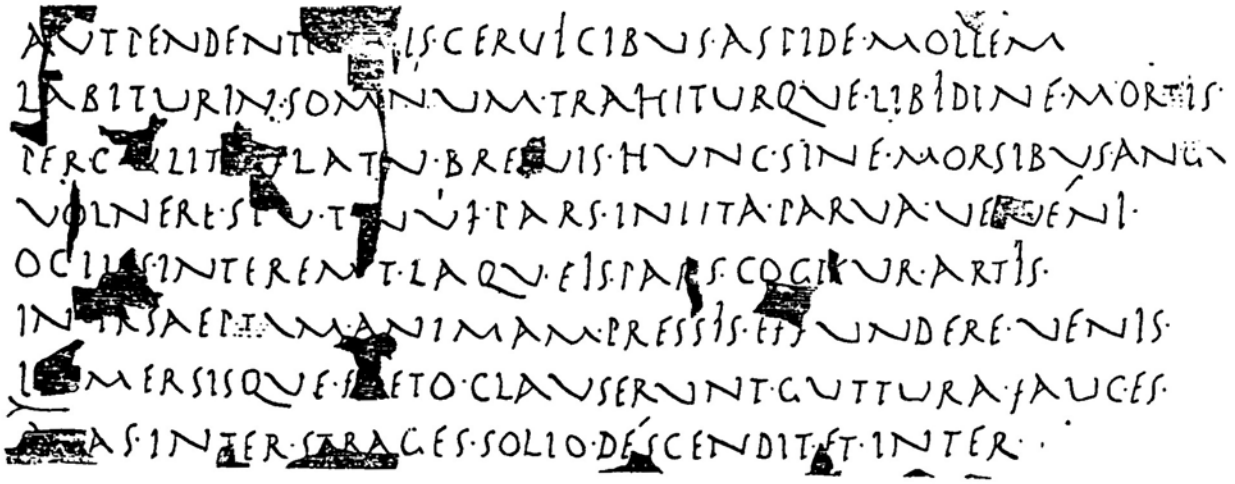
This is not an *easy* calligraphy for some people. The second time I visited the show, I overheard two women commenting on what they saw as the crudity of the forms in the large pieces—a remarkable misunderstanding, I think. The reason I used the headnote from Ben Shahn is that it talks beautifully about the emergence of certain forms from inside an artist's own production. And to those who know Bennett's work, the large brush caps are a powerful evocation of forms and movements she has been investigating for some years now. It is a mistake to think that these large pieces, and their large leters, were produced *casually*; if we pay

attention to the way in which pigment and medium have been carried across the surface, we realize that in these large pieces an absolute assurance has moved the artist's hand. At the same time that the work is personal and unique, however, it reflects both the tradition of American calligraphy and the concerns of contemporary art.

I once heard a lecturer rather self-righteously declare to the assembled audience that she had no training in art—shortly before assaulting them with judgments, caveats, fiats, and commands about what to do with *their* art. This seems to me little more than an alteration—perhaps well-meant—but still only an alteration of the modern misapprehension that in our urge to uniqueness, our post-Romantic hunger for originality, we pollute our self-expression by admitting to training in a tradition. (Or perhaps it's a variant of our current notion that any villain is less dastardly if only he confess his sin?) Let me suggest that, on the contrary, Bettye Lou Bennett is steeped in her awareness of her art and rich in its tradition. One of the reasons we have cause to rejoice at the presence of such a major aesthetic intellect as Bennett is her utter honesty—the stirring sincerity of all her pieces. (I think of the Classical Greek word for *sincere* which can be construed as "single, uniform, one.") The *stuff* of all her work is a dwelling on, a meditation upon *letter*. Here there is no uneasy combination of pictorial illustration, no run-on of realistically executed painting with a poem about the picture. This is an artistic venture which invites us inside the power of letter: letter as silhouette, as texture, as movement, as line. Letter forms are hue, value, intensity—and, conversely, hue, value, intensity serve to form new, vital shapes within Bennett's work.

Lawrence Wheeler

Bettye Lou Bennett



POEM ON THE BATTLE OF ACTIUM.—BEFORE A.D. 79

Bennett: Teaching as Learning

The course description in the Fall *Oregon School of Arts and Crafts Catalogue* read:

> A "free-form" class using a Rustic script from A.D. 79 as background for personal interpretation of letter style. Finished work presentation based on book form—traditional, commercial and contemporary shapes and materials.

The description of Bettye Lou Bennett's class intrigued me. I had never formally studied Rustic and I have always enjoyed design, so I signed up for the course. I had studied with Bettye about ten years before and knew she was one of Lloyd Reynold's students; over the years I had also seen Bettye's work grow and become more free and abstract.

Bettye's own work has led her to realize that lettering students must draw in order to train their eyes and create a design sensibility. She has felt for some time that it is vital to be able to see, draw and understand both the shape and gesture of letters. The calligrapher must develop sensitivity to the space around and between letters and lines. The white space in a lettered piece is fully as important as, if not more important than, the letters themselves. The presentation of letters must relate to the purpose of the piece. Thus, the layout and execution of a book must relate to the letterforms used in the book. Illustrations or graphic embellishments to a piece must likewise be related in form and gesture to the alphabet used.

These ideas were new to me and others in the advanced design seminar. Bettye's teaching style is such that all members of the group were pushed to think in new ways. The variety and individuality of final pieces from the class illustrates the value of the approach.

We began with the letters from the poem on the battle of Actium in 79 A.D. With Bohemia Works graphite pencil in hand we studied the letterforms, noting the gesture of the letters, the negative space surrounding letters, words, and lines. The use of pencil was a great help in focusing on the line quality of the letters—that is, their thicks and thins.

After studying the character of Rustic, we enlarged a phrase from the historical model. From this each person colored in the negative space to arrive at abstract shapes, which were painted with ink or paint on another sheet of paper. The original inked design was then used to create new design possibilities. For example, Patricia Grass took her original design (Figure 1) and Xeroxed it four times, overlapping it in various ways. She then xeroxed and reduced the resulting design. Finally, she took four reductions, pasted the pieces together, and touched up the design with black paint to tie the elements together. This design was Xeroxed onto rice paper which was folded into an origami card that was placed inside a folded paper container.

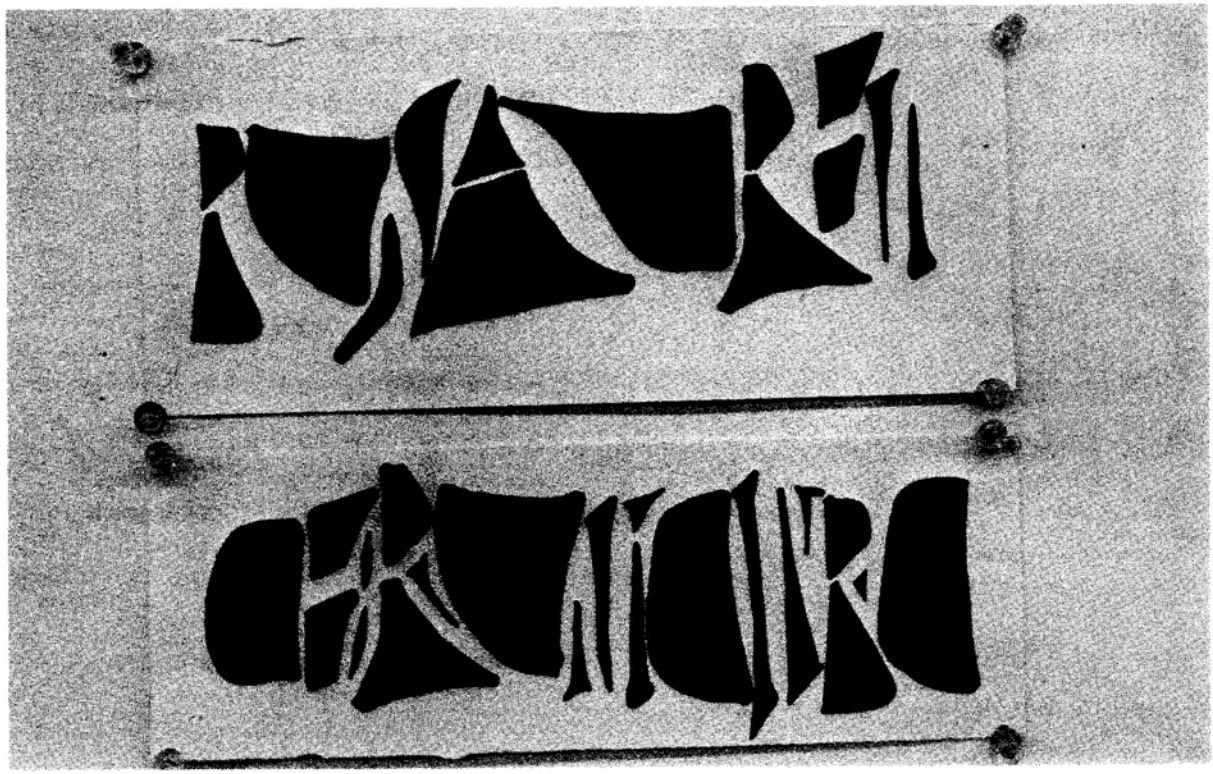


Figure 1

Patricia Grass from the Bennett seminar

Aphra Katzev's mouse design (figure 2) became a book (figure 3) as well as a framed piece, "In Baiting a Mousetrap." Ink, colored pencil and gouache were used to interpret letterform.

Origami was introduced in a film on Japanese children folding paper. This film led the class to teach each other ways to fold papers into containers, folders and books. The outcome of this was a variety of presentations, including Claudia Meikle's Snow Balloon. Claudia first did a charcoal drawing of her abstract design. (Figure 4) This was translated into gouache on an origami balloon from which a strip of florist's tape was pulled. Claudia then wrote words about snow on the tape. (Figure 5)

Colleen Cavin's original design led her to a contour drawing of the edge of her shape. This irregular edge became the shape of her cover and inside pages; the cover then had the same shape scored into the surface with a press-type stylus. (Figure 6)

A favorite assignment of the class was making individual books. Bettye gave each student two strips of paper an inch wide and one yard long, to be made into a book any way the student wished. An astonishing variety of interpretations resulted, such as Patricia Grass' palm-leaf book and Lillian Pierce's tiny book (Figure 7).

The class taught us a process-oriented method of working. Emphasis on process teaches that each step dictates the next. Thus, if a design is built a little at a time until the designer can do no more, the product will be unique and inventive. Awareness of the process leads the calligrapher to learn from his own work, which in turn leads to further growth and creativity.

Through this method of study, the student understands the essence and gesture of letters, and this knowledge enables the artist to create letters that have vitality. These letters will, as well, relate to other factors in the finished work, ensuring unity and integrity, and liveliness and originality. Ultimately the student learns to manipulate and create new letterforms and shapes with confidence while retaining the historical essence of the letters.

Ann Mueller

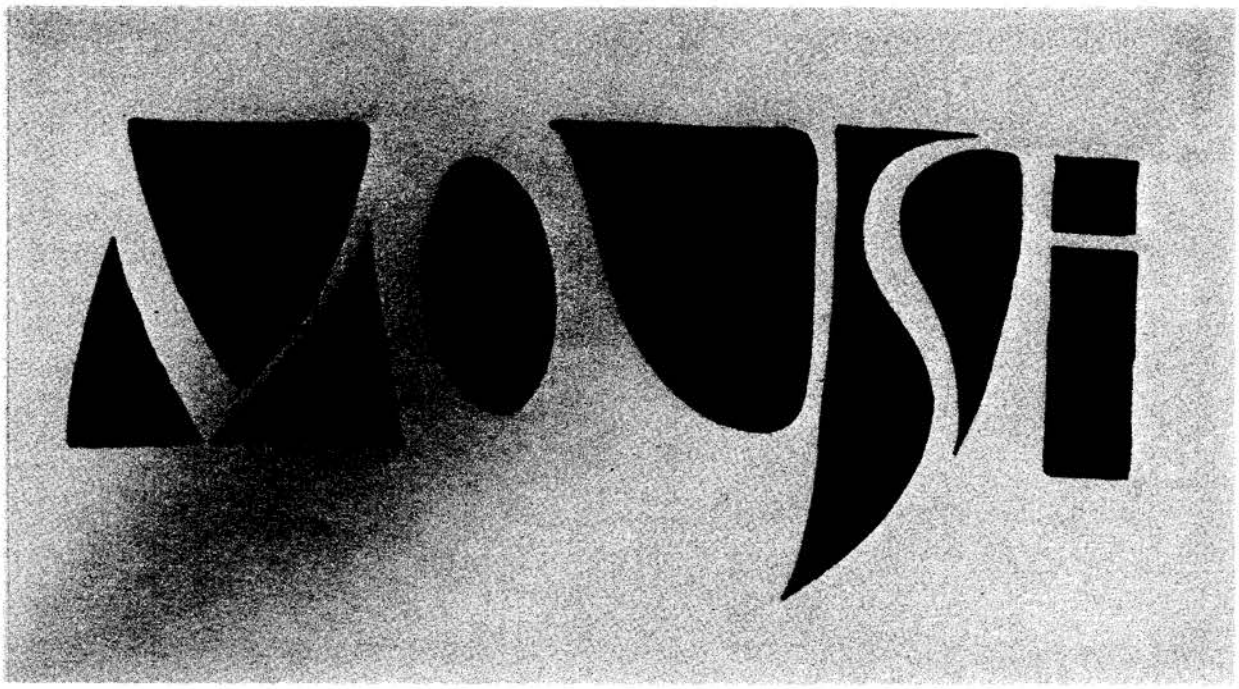


Figure 2 Aphra Katzev from the Bennett seminar

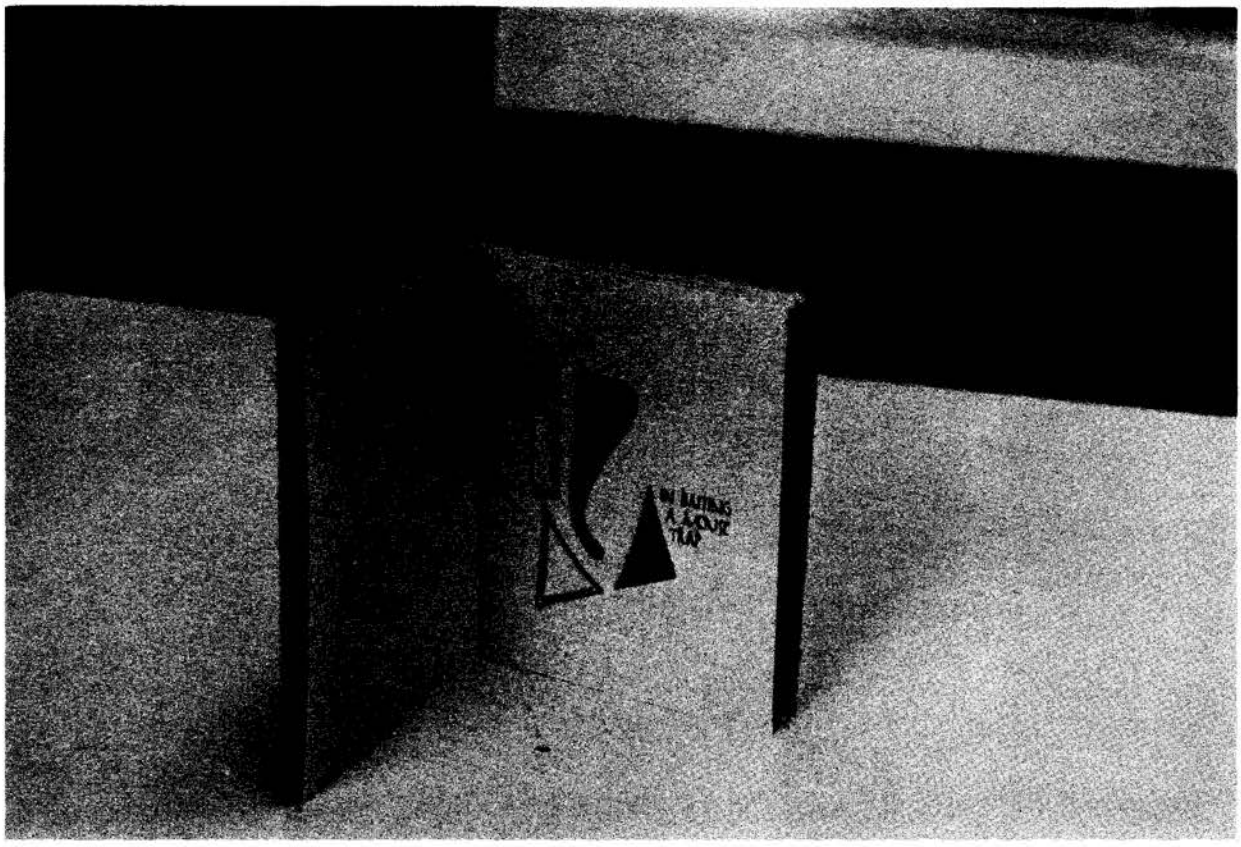


Figure 3 Aphra Katzev from the Bennett seminar