Spotlight on Fran Sloan

By Julie Lay

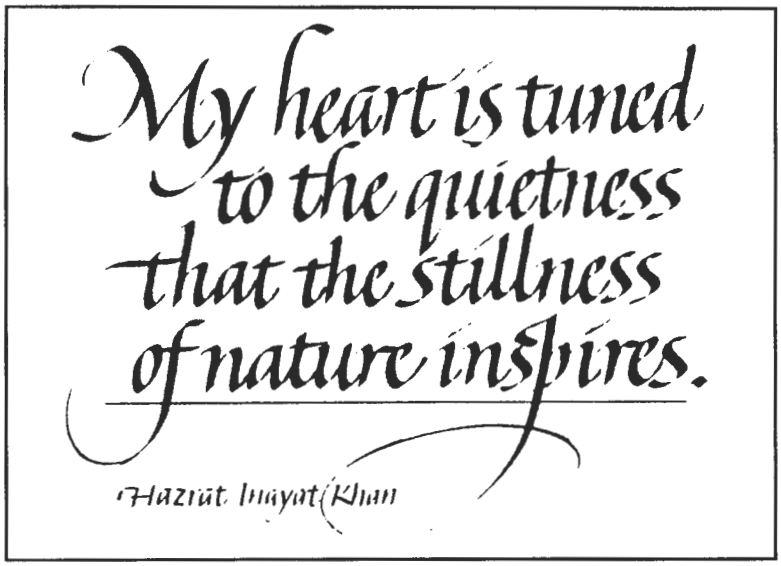
As you pull up to the curb and get out of your car, your eye is attracted to the sign beside the door "Studio's downstairs, come on down." This is the home of Ampersand Studio and it's creator, Fran Sloan. Many of us know Fran (formerly Fran Strom) from the numerous classes and workshops she's taught throughout Portland and the United States. Founding member of the Valley Calligraphy Guild, long time member and past president of the Portland Society for Calligraphy, educator and artist; Fran's skills and accomplishments are many and varied. Her calligraphic works appear in private collections, commercial designs, the Red Rose catalog, cable television, and on video. Fran is truly a lady of many talents.

Fran first studied calligraphy as a student of Portland calligrapher, Barbara Getty. "I was teaching at Aloha Park Elementary school and Barbara was one of the first grade teachers. . . . Over in the faculty room we would see these little signs and I remember specifically one sign that said "Color Your Day Happy". It was done in Barbara's uncial and every letter was a different color. We all looked at that and said "Oh, how can anybody be so artistic!"

Barbara and Fran became friends and one day, upon seeing Fran's handwriting on the classroom chalkboard, Barbara offered to help Fran improve her handwriting by teaching her calligraphy. In 1972, Fran became pregnant with her daughter Lori and was forced by the customs of the day to quit teaching. Since she now had time on her hands, she took a calligraphy class from Barbara. "I, of course, thought, OK, one term. I'll know calligraphy." But Barbara kept enticing her with what they would study the NEXT term. Then, Barbara brought her teacher to class--Lloyd Reynolds. Barbara said "He's here to talk to you a little bit about what calligraphy is." Fran recalled, "He started talking and I felt completely hooked . . Lloyd talked about history. He said this is what the Tao is. This is what the meaning of this symbol is. These letterforms came to us through these writings. It was like magic to me. I was just transfixed by the richness, the heritage of calligraphy. It wasn't just a flash in the pan hobby it was a deep rich spiritual based art form." Fran credits that realization as a momentous crossroads in her life. Previously, Fran had never felt especially gifted in art and had thought that because her handwriting was so poor learning calligraphy would be impossible. Meeting Lloyd Reynolds changed that. "I have since learned that what happens in our lives has less to do with what's out there and a lot to do with your own decisions. That when you decide you can do it, you can. And when you decide you can't do it, you can't." "The excitement for me was to have teachers that were really bringing a depth to the art, not just how does your painting look when it's done but rather how do you feel when you're doing it, how are you involved, and that was a deeper, personal thing than a craft or a hobby." Fran believes that the current debate over whether calligraphy is a craft or an art misses the point. "It's such a silly debate. I don't think it matters but, in defining what calligraphy has meant to me, it's definitely both. It's the craft, the

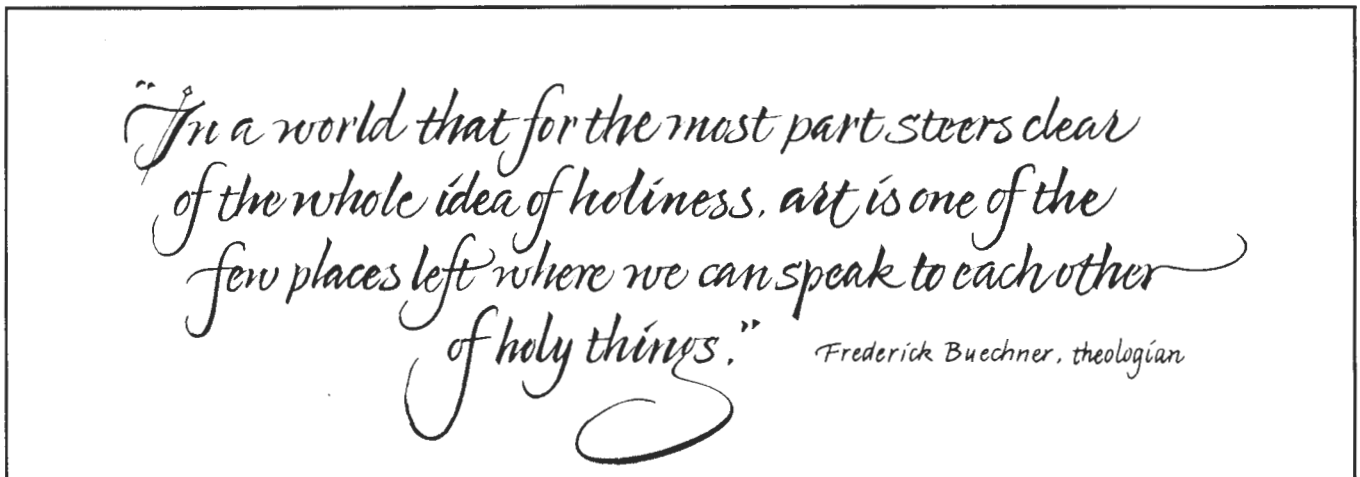
fun of making something with your hands and the art is going deeper, towards the heart level, and being fully involved. I've seen people do crafts where they can watch TV and knit at the same time and to me that's craft. When you are fully involved in it and completely immersed, then that is the art."

After two years of study in Portland, Fran moved with her family to Eugene where her former husband set up his practice. Not knowing anyone was very hard for Fran. She knew that she wanted to keep studying and practicing calligraphy but knew no one else in the Eugene area to work with. Finally in an attempt to cultivate some interest in calligraphy in the Eugene area, Fran persuaded the River Road Park and Recreation staff to let her teach a class. "I really felt incompetent in the knowledge of calligraphy to teach anybody, but I began teaching because nobody else was, and I felt that was a good way for me to keep up my own skill. I could certainly teach beginners." The interest generated in the students of that first class grew and grew, until eventually Fran had seven classes going in the Eugene area at once. During this time, Fran studied and attended any workshop she could in an attempt to keep ahead of her students growing skills. The list of her teachers is long and impressive: Barbara Getty, Lloyd Reynolds, Bettye Lou Bennett, Lois McClelland, Jaki Svaren, Fr. Edward Catich and many others. "I was just trying to learn all I could so that when I got home I'd have more to give my students." Finally Fran realized that "if we had teachers come to us, then my students could learn first hand instead of my translating it." Out of that realization the Valley Calligraphy Guild was born. "We started a group that was based on having fun together . . . we grew our guild as friends, and it's still a place that I feel very close to the people because it was such a wonderful group to work with."



A divorce eleven years ago, Fran says, brought with it the realization that she needed to have a career and that teaching part time and the amount of freelance work available in Eugene were not enough to satisfy this need. At the same time, the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts in Portland was seeking a replacement for Lois McClelland who had passed away due to cancer. Fran was so determined to obtain the position that she packed up her daughter and moved back to Aloha. Having been a student of Lois's, Fran felt that she had a strong possibility of being chosen since she could carry on Lois' tradition at the school. "Apparently my teaching style was compatible with the way Lois had taught and I'm proud of that. She was fabulous." Then because of a difference in philosophy about the direction and place of calligraphy under the new accreditation program, Fran decided to leave the school after 5 years and open her own calligraphy and design studio. Fran believed that there were more possibilities available in regards to calligraphy than could be offered within the structure at OSAC.

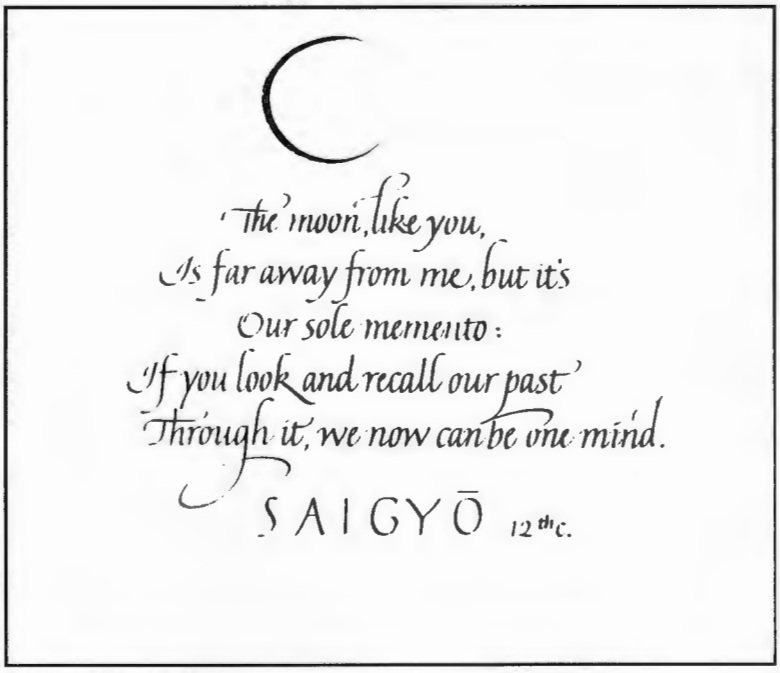
At the same time (1988), Fran was encouraged by Helen Matthews and Cathy



Fickenscher--the owners of Pensations, a store devoted to calligraphy located in Eugene--to make teaching videos. Helen knew of a video producer and arranged for Fran to discuss the project with her. All Fran needed to do was to raise the money necessary to produce the video. "I sent a letter to personal friends asking them to invest in this company I'm starting called "Aha! Calligraphy". It's that Aha! That excitement of calligraphy that I want to get in these teaching tapes and I wanted to have books to go with them . . . we filmed for a week and got enough film for three videos." While working on the materials for the videos, Fran received an offer she couldn't refuse; to rent the top floor of a building in downtown Portland from a client who's gallery occupied the ground floor. "This dream just popped up. I jumped in and resigned from OSAC, spent the summer cleaning . . . and opened up in the fall of 1989. I decided to call it Ampersand because I wanted it to be inclusive; calligraphy & design & book arts & graphic design & freelance work & classes &, &, &, . . ."

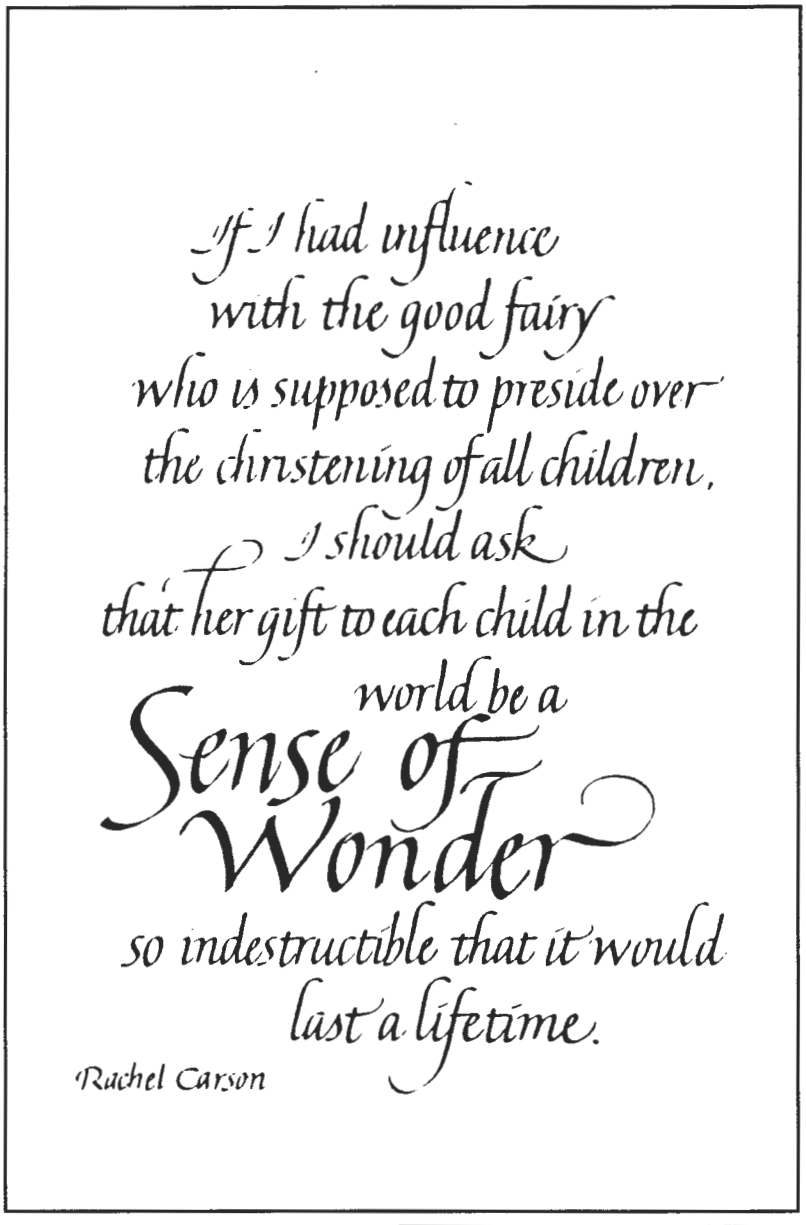
Last year Fran moved her studio to it's new location at 1603 SW Custer Drive, just off of Barbur Blvd., in Portland. Besides the relocation of her business, Fran Strom also changed her name to Fran Sloan after marrying a wonderful man named Ron. Fran says that one night, Ron came over to see her with a list and asked her to read it. As she read it, Ron asked if she realized that there was a special someone they both knew that matched the attributes on the list. "That's you, Fran," she recalls him announcing. "I said 'what you don't know is that I also have a list" and I pulled out my list of ideal qualities in a companion and showed it to him. He isn't in calligraphy but that's OK." Calligrapher or not, I have no doubt at all who is Fran's number one fan. "This last year has taken a big turn in my life, now that I'm married and in a new studio that's so easily accessible, I've finished the videos, published them, taken orders for them . . . business stuff! When do you do your artwork!" Ron has joined Fran in her business ventures, taking over and developing the marketing and shipping aspect.

Besides the many classes, workshops, and freelance assignments, Fran has entered the publishing industry. "Teaching is still a big part of my life. . . but about half of my business is my products." Fran has available on the market three video tapes and two of the accompanying books and is currently working on the third book, Pen Calligraphy, which should be available in the fall of 1994. The videos and books currently available are Flat Brush Writing and Pointed Brush Writing. Fran's purpose in producing her own teaching materials was to provide students with more than just a model sheet. The books are designed to hang from the writing board so that the models are right before the students eyes to enable them to follow the guide easily. Fran self publishes and she and Ron are considering publishing other people's books. Through producing her own books, Fran has learned much about book layout and has accepted commissions to design books for others. One of the projects that Fran and Ron are seriously considering taking on is the production of A BOOK OF LETTERS TO MYSELF, a collection of the first day of issue stamps and envelopes designed by Alan Blackman. Right now Fran is trying to determine the amount of interest in the calligraphy community in this type of collection, so if you would be interested



please let Fran know.

Besides calligraphy, teaching, writing, producing, and publishing, Fran is currently turning to one of the basics--drawing. Influenced by the current works of her friend, San Francisco calligrapher Georgianna Greenwood, Fran has returned to the fundamental skills of painting and drawing. Fran has worked with watercolors for years but is currently fascinated by combining painting, paste work, collage and calligraphy together and would love to venture into the area of large format, public artworks.

"The last calligraphy conference was a huge awakening for me. I got to take this class where we worked with paste. I've only done paste in traditional book cover design and I started using paste in a painterly way; putting gold powder in it, combing it and that opened up a whole new realm for me." "Its really been a challenging experience. I don't feel at all comfortable yet in what I'm doing . It all feels new and yet it doesn't feel frightening at all. I think that is what happens to any artist that is really growing a little bit . . . you start getting these nudges that say come on, come on and there's some fear involved and there's also this feeling of what is there to fear? I don't have to show any one this work . . . I can burn it!" People get worried about starting and I don't think that's a problem at all--I think finishing is much harder than starting."

Fran has always loved bird watching, something that Ron also enjoys. "Bird watching, to me, has come to be a meditation," Fran never dreamed that she would spend time drawing the birds that she loves to watch. "This year I've stared drawing them. I've always loved to write with quills but I never thought about drawing the quills." Fran feels that drawing and painting are very much an integral part of calligraphy, which is one of the reasons why she is so fond of teaching the history of alphabet development. "Before we had the alphabet we had pictographs. They were drawings done on cave walls, stones, and on slates." It is by drawing that Fran feels that students learn to develop the hand and eye co-ordination so necessary in calligraphy. The skills learned by drawing shapes, whether they're feathers or alphabets, cross over to all art forms. "That's where the basics come in and I think that students that want to improve need to go back to drawing before they master a new alphabet, and get better at seeing and relating that hand eye coordination." Both Fran and her husband believe that growth, whether artistic or within personal everyday concerns, is a matter of self discipline. "How you become better is a matter of doing the basics over and over. Peruse over all the field until you reach that point when you say, 'it's time to go back and do the basics over again'. That's how you grow. Instead of staying with things that are fascinatingly new, have the self discipline to do the same thing over. Master it. Go back and struggle. All pros do that," Ron pointed out. Fran, agreeing added, "Unless you allow yourself to feel a little uncomfortable and do it anyway, you don't really get to experience the fullness of your art form that you could. Uncomfortable isn't bad, it's really good."