
Towards a Canon of Egyptian Calligraphy

by Reference to Calligraphy in East Asia

Thomas Hare

The study of ‘Egyptian calligraphy’ offers unique opportunities as a new intellectual discipline, and at the same time raises several interesting and fundamental challenges. What constitutes calligraphy? How do we know it when we see it? In addition to the aesthetic response it invites, what social and political roles does calligraphy play? To what degree can we claim ancient Egyptian antecedents in recognizing this aesthetic response, and what difference does it make whether these antecedents exist or not?

In a helpful review of the use of papyrus in Pharaonic and Post-Pharaonic cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Richard Parkinson and Stephen Quirke remark on systematic revisions which take place in the forms of hieratic signs from the reign of Thutmose III on. ‘The handwriting, appears swifter and more floridly calligraphic, although calligraphy does not seem to have existed as an art form distinct from fine handwriting.’¹ The conundrum they point to, that handwriting becomes more floridly calligraphic even though the very existence of ‘calligraphy’ can be doubted, nicely encapsulates some of the issues we face in considering ‘ancient Egyptian calligraphy.’

My assumption is that such ‘Egyptian calligraphy’ does exist, in that there are a great many examples of ‘beautiful writing’ extant from Pharaonic and Ptolemaic times, but even in arguing for the existence of calligraphy, for the purposes of this presentation, I will make a distinction between the aesthetic values exemplified in most hieroglyphic Egyptian and those in a putative Egyptian calligraphy.

My reasons will be developed in the course of the paper, but let me say at the beginning, in excluding from consideration carved and ‘painted’ hieroglyphs, the last thing I intend is to deny their beauty. It is clear from the preponderance of work on ancient Egyptian writing, that hieroglyphs have been widely appreciated aesthetically ever since the time they were first created. Far and away, the majority of aesthetic consideration afforded Egyptian writing has been directed toward hieroglyphs. I will, however, relegate that interest to the related disciplines of epigraphy and paleography, rather than to ‘calligraphy’ as such, because they do not reveal a characteristic of calligraphy which seems to me essential. That characteristic is gesture.

‘Calligraphy’, first, deserves some definition and specification. There are various different ways to go about this. To make a pedantic beginning, one has recourse to dictionaries. Thus, in the Oxford English Dictionary, we find calligraphy defined as ‘1. Beautiful or fair writing as a product; also, elegant penmanship as an art or profession.’ In 1632, Ben Jonson has a character in one of his plays report, ‘I have to commend me my calligraphy, a fair hand, fit for a secretary.’² remarking thereby both on the artistic quality of writing as well as its legibility, and fitness in the employment of a secretary.

A little more than a century later, calligraphy is noted as a characteristic of writing in the past,³ and by 1866, it is said to have disappeared.⁴

In some occurrences, calligraphy is separated from a particularly aesthetic function, and assimilated to handwriting in general, or a particular style

of handwriting, or, importantly, to a particular ‘person’s characteristic handwriting or ‘hand’,⁵ in an insightful figure which weds identity to gesture to its manifestation as writing.

In many examples of usage in English, the focus of calligraphy is not only the beauty of a given example of writing, but also the skill of the writer, and the presence of an individual hand. As far as I have been able to ascertain, examples in French (*calligraphie*) and German (with the calque, *Schönschreibekunst* as well as the loanword *Kalligraphie*) follow the same pattern.

Although ‘calligraphy’ is, of course, a European word, it is probably fair to say that calligraphy has played a relatively minor role in the history of the visual arts in Europe and the Americas (post-Columbus). The tradition of Arabic calligraphy is far more highly ramified and consciously articulated as an element of Islamic art than writing is in the West, and if we move yet further east, to China, the history of calligraphy, as fine and beautiful writing, reaches back at least to the early centuries of the Common Era.⁶

In this paper, my aim will be to illustrate the canon of East Asian calligraphy because of its long self-conscious history as an aesthetic activity and intellectual inquiry, and then to investigate what general parameters it establishes for ‘calligraphy.’ Then I will formulate questions about calligraphy which might be applicable to the nascent discipline of Egyptian calligraphy.

In considering calligraphy in East Asia, we can speak of a canon of calligraphy. Why ‘canon?’ Largely because canon represents evaluative judgments which assume broad cultural assent, it implies a set of cultural practices with both the production and the transmission of aesthetic standards, and it focuses on individual performance toward a recognizable cultural end.

A canon of calligraphic practice implies, of course, standards of legibility, but to be able to read a calligraphic text is only a base from which the consideration of calligraphy begins, and in addition to the legibility of the object, we find extensive judgments about personal achievement in writing. In East Asia such aesthetic judgments have even been accounted moral or ethical attainments, or an index thereto.

The canon of calligraphic excellence achieves broad cultural consensus founded, first, in the recognition of a typology of calligraphic styles. The styles are readable not only for linguistic content, but also in registers related to decorum, historical and social context, intellectual affiliation, and position in a lineage or broader cultural stream.

Additionally, the calligraphic canon in Chinese and related East Asian writing establishes a set of practices. The calligraphic styles of particular individuals become hallmarks not only of their own artistic identity, but also standards to which other writers aspire. Individuals are expected to achieve competence in numerous styles, even though in the end they may be recognized primarily on the basis of their skill in one particular style.

The various calligraphic styles as well as their individual manifestations are, of course, intimately linked with the material supports and instruments through which the calligraphy is effected. Historically, East Asian writing began with the incision of archaic graphs in animal bones, in tortoise shells and other organic materials using sharp tools. The individual graphs were created with strokes of uniform thickness and, in some cases, reference to objects from the real world, represented individually or in groups indicating a logical relationship or a combination of phonetic and semantic class.

With the development of bronze casting technology, these graphic forms were adapted and

standardized for incision and casting in a wide variety of bronze articles in laborious and expensive processes, and for some time, writing seems to have been an activity with high cultural capital and more ritual than practical significance. Before long, though, more practical means of writing were developed to allow the transmission of ephemeral information. In China, this was accomplished on wooden slips with early brushes. The change from incision and casting to painting or brush writing had a profound effect on the appearance of the graphs, and laid the ground for calligraphy as a high art in East Asian culture.⁷

The historical development of writing has influenced the calligraphic canon, but it is not the primary differential for calligraphic types: the spectrum ranging from zhenshu to xingshu to caoshu is central and although it shows a progressive cursivization in forms, that cursivization does not directly reflect

historical development.⁸ Zhenshu is actually later in historical development than caoshu, but all the same, it has become the standard form, both pedagogically and commercially. Xingshu seems in many ways a compromise between zhenshu and caoshu, and it is difficult to identify a clear point in the spectrum when one style ‘changes’ to another (although there are many discrete examples which unambiguously exemplify one specific style of writing.) (Fig.1).

The choice of whether to use zhenshu, xingshu or caoshu to write a given text rests only in part with the writer. In certain contexts, most clearly in the copying of Buddhist scriptures, certain script forms are the norm, and it is highly unusual to find exceptions to that norm until several hundreds of years into the practice.⁹ Some influence here must be attributed to pragmatism. In writing certain kinds of informal practical texts, writers paid little attention

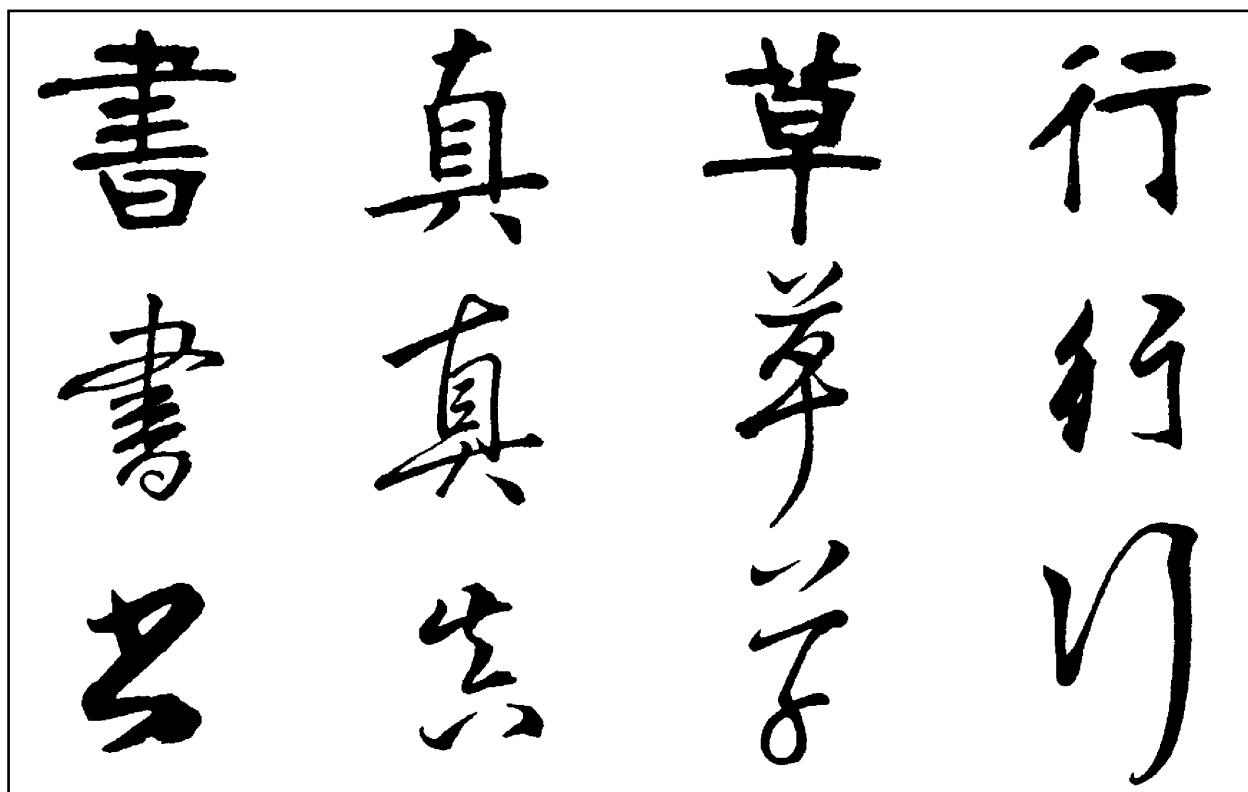


Figure 1. Comparison of Standard Script Forms in Chinese. The graphs, from left to right, for ‘write’ and the standard script forms ‘zhen,’ ‘cao’ and ‘xing’ are shown in progressive degrees of cursivization, from top to bottom. (Graphs from Takatsuka Chikudô, *Shotai*

to aesthetics and formalism and wrote quickly and without aesthetic concern.

But the use of cursivized script forms is by no means always a matter of practical expedience. Certain highly valued and conspicuous forms of cultural expression were cast in both xingshu and caoshu, and in the development of the script, it became possible to relegate formalism to a secondary position and place expressionism in the central position. This is most obvious in the eccentric style of caoshu called kuangshu, 'crazy writing,' where legibility itself is a secondary concern, and the writer's untrammelled impulse is given full allowance. The most celebrated example of this form of Chinese is the personal testament of the monk Huaisu.

We can already discern in the contrast between the orthodox and minutely controlled zhenshu of Buddhist scriptures and the wildly eccentric and expressionistic script of the personal testament of Huaisu (725-85) that a primary factor influencing script choice is context.¹⁰ The material interface in any given example of writing has a strong influence on the type of script used and whether it is written with a small brush of delicate hair or a larger one of coarser hair or even split bamboo.¹¹ Documents related to government administration favor legibility and orthodoxy, and zhenshu is the standard there. In some cases legibility outweighs all other factors, and little aesthetic motivation is apparent, but in other cases, when the document, however official and formal, is also reflective of the engagement of persons of high status, an aesthetic element is also prominent in imperial rescripts and the like.

Texts of a more explicitly aesthetic nature, collections of poetry, colophons on paintings, literary essays, and the like, call for a less rigid and unforgiving script form than zhenshu, and are often written in xingshu or caoshu. Later in the tradition, the archaic forms of seal script (jiagu wen, jin wen and zhuan

wen) and scribal script (lishu) were also resuscitated for use in a range of contexts.

At this point it will serve our purposes to look at a specific example of Chinese calligraphy, rather than continue in a general examination. (Fig. 2). I have chosen for this purpose a piece in the Princeton University Museum known as 'Xingrangtie'¹² from two of the more prominent graphs in the text. The piece is attributed to the celebrated fourth century calligrapher, Wang Xizhi. His status is unparalleled in East Asian history. As Prof. Wen Fong has pointed out,

*'Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi were considered paragons of calligraphic art. The elder Xizhi was thought 'a model of judiciousness, keen perception, and profound learning,' and his son Xianzhi was considered to '[epitomize] brilliant insight and intuition.'*¹³

Wang Xizhi's calligraphy serves even today as an ideal toward which ambitious calligraphers aspire. Only two lines of the Xingrangtie scroll are attributed to Wang Xizhi; the other rather extensive passages on the scroll are all by other writers, and all of these extra comments relate to Wang Xizhi's two lines, as colophons, expressions of admiration or claims of ownership.¹⁴ In addition to the writing on the scroll, there are some eighty-seven seal impressions in red ink, again, marks of ownership and appreciation extending through a full nine centuries. The piece has been owned by three Chinese emperors, among them Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-25) of the Song and Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-95) of the Qing.

What was it that engaged the interest of such a range of collectors and connoisseurs? There is, of course, a political dimension to this appreciation. Wang Xizhi was a member of an influential family in Northern China during a period of political change and conflict, and his family played an important role

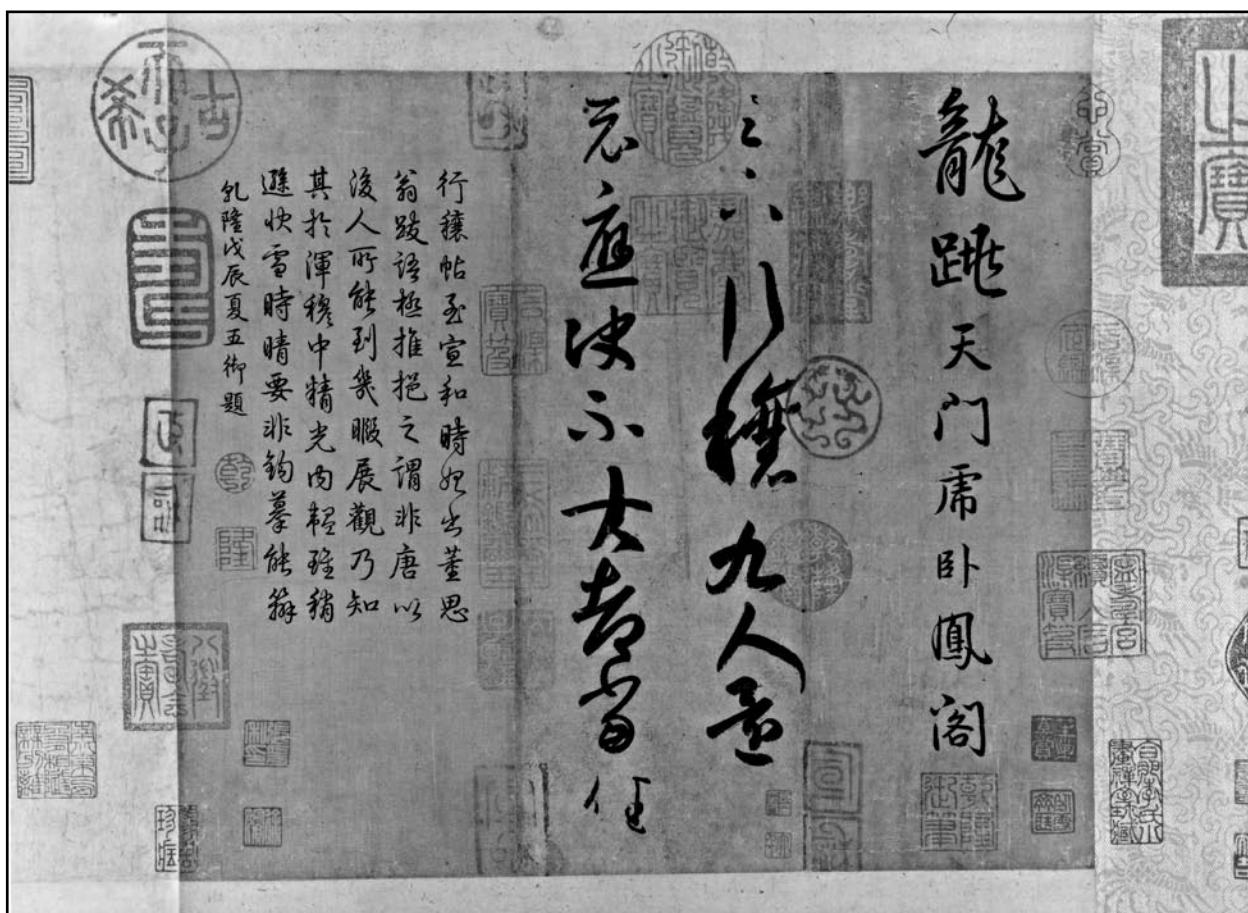


Figure 2. Xingrangtie by Wang Xizhi The central two lines alone are attributed to Wang Xizhi. The other writing consists of statements by later owners of the piece, and the seal impressions (in red in the original) also attest to the provenance of the piece. (Princeton University Art Museum, Bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951. Photo by Bruce M. White. Used by Permission.)

in founding a new dynasty, the Eastern Jin (317-420).¹⁵ He himself held various government positions. Thereafter, Wang's position as a great calligrapher was solidified by the Tang Emperor Taizong (598-649), and he continued to be revered into the Song dynasty.

But even in acknowledging the role of political patronage and imperial recognition in the creation of Wang's reputation, I would insist on the aesthetic value of his work. The numerous colophons and commentaries on the scroll itself attest to the aesthetic appreciation of its many owners, but their comments tend to be metaphorical and abstract.

The Qianlong Emperor made his own bold inscription to the right of Wang's text, reading 'a dragon dances before the gate of heaven, a tiger crouches at the phoenix pavilion.' In this, Qianlong quotes an earlier emperor, Liang dynasty Emperor Wu (r. 502-549), who used the phrase to describe another piece of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi.

In a similarly indirect way, a celebrated calligrapher, painter, and critic of the early seventeenth century, Dong Qichang (1555-1636) asserts that Wang's two lines here are 'worth more than thirty-thousand other scrolls.' In doing so, he is quoting a famous poet who was, for his part, referring to another highly prized

example of calligraphy, but many would agree that this comment is apposite to the Xingrangtie as well.¹⁶

A modern scholar of Chinese calligraphy discusses the virtues of Wang's calligraphy here as follows:

*The brushwork on this scroll has warmth and substance. It doesn't reveal the brushtip or stroke corners. In the past, one has found in it a taste of the sealscript of Tai Shilin of the Zhou Dynasty. The graphs for 'xingrang' for 'jue' for 'dudang' and the like present an enchanting sight. In the turning of the strokes one best observes traces of [Wang's] untrammeled nobility.*¹⁷

Comments such as these, though they encourage us to pay attention to Wang's calligraphy, do little to guide our appreciation in a specific way, but it is important to make concrete observations about the piece and describe how it has achieved its illustrious aesthetic status. It is praised for spontaneity, individuality, and fluidity, and within a cultural context which places a very high value on decorum, propriety and intelligibility, it is noteworthy that Wang Xizhi's text here manifests a degree of admirable eccentricity.

In specific terms, the piece exhibits a significant range of variation in the size of its graphs, in stroke thickness and ink tone although this is difficult to discern in reproductions. The spacing of the individual graphs is dynamic, and although a perfect balance is maintained vertically, in the horizontal dimension the graphs do not occupy predictable parallel boxes, but rather show, each one of them, an individual and unique command of surrounding space. The result creates a beautiful sense of balance and grace in movement. If this is not immediately apparent in its own right, it becomes clear when Wang's text is compared with the Qianlong Emperor's inscription just to the right. That inscription-the one which reads 'a dragon dances before the gate of heaven, a tiger crouches at the phoenix pavilion- is written in eight

graphs in the running style, fluent enough, to be sure. The variation in size among those graphs, however, is not balanced throughout the full line, but is, rather, awkwardly proportioned: the first two graphs are large and the remaining six unconvincingly smaller. The execution of the individual strokes is technically skillful, but seems precious and crabbed in comparison with Wang's two lines. Qianlong's text is, moreover, out of balance vertically, tilting to the left.

'Spontaneity' is a difficult thing to judge in concrete terms, but it is highly treasured in East Asian calligraphy, no doubt in large part because the materials with which writing is accomplished do not allow hesitation. The paper is absorbent and any hesitation in the stroke is likely to produce a puddling or blotch in the writing. Additionally, the Chinese brush is constructed in such a way that the placement of the brush tip, the manipulation of the body of the hairs in the brush, the twisting of the shaft, the extent of pressure upon the hairs-all these things are likely to produce a discernible effect in the written graphs. Additionally, the pool of ink in the brush is diminished as the writing proceeds, and in some cases, the ink tone changes significantly in response to the amount of ink remaining in the brush. This allows a careful observer to trace the movement and speed of the original act of writing in such a way that the performative act of the writing can be reenacted in the viewer's apprehension of the piece. This is probably at least in part why 'spontaneity' can be identified in the object and appreciated as one of its defining characteristics.

In East Asia, calligraphy is widely understood to have an ethical dimension. It is read as an index of the writer's identity, revealing not only technical skill but also resolution, insight, self-awareness and cultivation. Thus, within cultures where the process of learning to write is complex and exceptionally time-consuming, and subject moreover to strict cultural

conventions and standards, in the end, submission to the conventions is to be seen as a means toward the cultivation of a strongly individual and ethically upright identity. As scholar and curator Wen Fong points out,

*'learning calligraphy has more to do with what one studies to be than with what one studies. To learn calligraphy from either a living or an ancient model is to perform a physical act generated from within: to do it well, one must first know oneself. Therefore the wise student aims not for slavish imitation, but for spiritual responses (shen-hui) to his models, and of the growth and cultivation of the self through art.'*¹⁸

What can a comparison with Chinese calligraphy such as I have just undertaken tell us about a putative Egyptian calligraphy? First we must recognize a couple of significant differences:

In ancient Egyptian texts, there is, apparently, no clear and explicit acknowledgement of the beauty of 'calligraphy' (in the particular since I have adopted for the term in this paper). There are certainly explicit acknowledgments of the beauty of carved and painted hieroglyphs. They are, after all, *mdw-ntr*, 'the speech of god.' References to the aesthetic qualities of calligraphy, however, that is to say, the qualities of cursive hieroglyphs and, more importantly, hieratic, have been very difficult to identify. It is apparently even difficult to identify a word the ancient Egyptians may have used to refer to the writing forms we call 'hieratic' and 'demotic.' The term *sfdw* may refer to hieratic,¹⁹ but it might alternatively have reference to the material support (a papyrus scroll) upon which hieratic writing is performed rather than the writing itself. Any explicit ancient Egyptian reference to the aesthetic quality of handwriting seems all the more elusive.

And yet, there is no lack of implicit awareness of a range of 'calligraphic' (i.e., handwritten) styles.

These range from, on the one hand, the varieties of 'cursive hieroglyphs' in various funerary papyri to the dramatically simplified and cursivized graphs of several types of hieratic.²⁰

The celebrated *Papyrus of Ani* itself contains at least two distinct styles of cursive hieroglyphs. In one, found in the introductory hymns to Osiris and Re, the graphs are written in an exacting form with extensive detail. The owl and quail chick, for instance, show individually delineated tail feathers and other features, the reed graph (for the consonant 'j') has its grassy frond carefully drawn. (Fig. 3)

A second style of cursive hieroglyphs, exemplified in the text of ch. 17 of the Book of the Dead, is much closer to hieratic. The owl glyph is reduced to (apparently) three strokes of the reed pen, the quail chick is similarly schematized, its head turned into a simple hook and its legs, a couple of simple fluent strokes. The reed for consonant 'j' is radically simplified along the lines of hieratic.

In hieratic, there is a wide variety of written styles, distinct according to both purpose (literary hieratic, administrative hieratic, 'abnormal' hieratic,

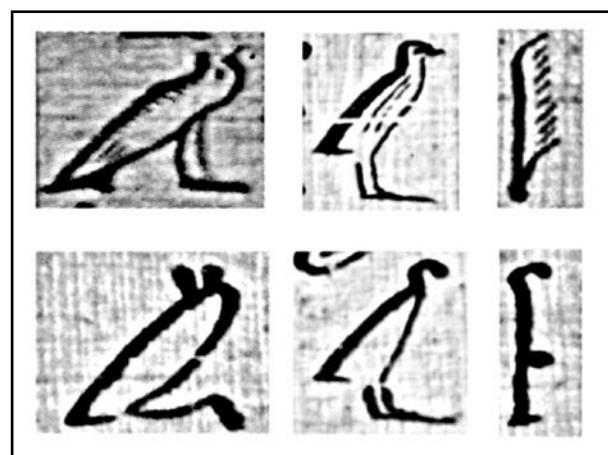


Figure 3. Different Versions of Cursive Hieroglyphs from *Papyrus of Ani* The graphs for the phonetics 'm,' 'w,' and 'i' from the *Papyrus of Ani*. The top row is of the sort used in the introductory *Hymn to Osiris* and *hymn to Re* whereas the bottom row is from *BD* 17.

etc.) and chronological context. (And in some cases it shows geographical distinctions as well.)²¹ In this range of difference, cursive hieroglyphs and hieratic show a diversification similar to that exhibited by Chinese zhenshu, xingshu and caoshu, and there is, moreover, a frequent correlation between the purpose for which a text was written and the explicit visual form its graphs take.

Thus, numerous early administrative documents from el-Lahun and Hatnub, to mention two examples, show individually discrete graphs, sometimes in vertical columns (rather than the horizontal columns which become the standard later), with few ligatures and clear decisive strokes showing considerable variation in stroke thickness. On the other hand, several important literary manuscripts, such as the Berlin papyrus of the *Tale of Sinuhe*, show calligraphy of a regular, flowing and strongly cursivized character, with frequent ligatures and a high degree of standardized stroke abbreviations.

Hieratic on ostraka generally show fewer aesthetic pretensions, although in some cases, it too is graceful, balanced and neatly written. Administrative hieratic shows a yet more extreme cursivization, with frequent ligatures in commonly used groups of graphs (such as in dates) and a greater horizontal elongation of strokes. Variation in graph size is less dramatic in most Egyptian handwriting than in Chinese calligraphy, but it does occur in certain intriguing cases (one of which we will look at more carefully below), and it may serve a semantic as well as an aesthetic role.

In East Asia, the use of coloured inks is rare in calligraphy whereas in many Egyptian manuscripts, the colour red is frequently used, often with some sort of specific meaning. Parkinson and Quirke note that in accounting papyri rubrics sometimes mark distinctions in the commodities notated whereas in medical papyri it is, sometimes, quantities of ingredients which are written in red. Sometimes

insertions, corrections or replies to a text were written in red and, most interesting of all, in certain religious texts, the names of demons are written in a ‘baleful red’.²²

Let us turn now to a some specific examples. I have chosen the Papyri Sallier to illustrate some of the features of hieratic writing which seem to me indications of explicit aesthetic concern, and therefore implicit acknowledgement of a role for calligraphy in ancient Egyptian writing.

The Papyri Sallier are conventionally divided into four specific scrolls. The first contains the *Teaching of Amenemhet* and the story of *Segegenre' and Apophis*, the second a continuation of the *Teaching of Amenemhet* as well as the *Teaching of Kheti* and a version of the famous *Hymn to the Nile*, the third an account of the *Battle of Qadesh* of Rameses II. The fourth records a day-book and, on the verso, a school text.

First, let’s consider a leaf from pSallier II. As elsewhere in the Sallier papyri, the block of text here seems to show corrections. Apparently, a master scribe has added superior versions of certain graphs in the margin above the extended block of text written by a student. (I will use these terms ‘master’ and ‘student’ here only heuristically.) (Fig. 4.)

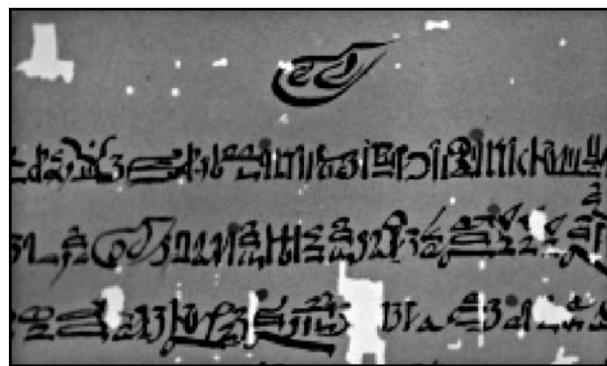


Figure 4. Marginal Graph from pSallier II The ‘Master’s’ version of the graph for ‘crocodile’ written in the upper margin to correct a ‘student’ version (toward the left side of the second line). (*From Select Papyri in the Hieratic Character*, published by the British Museum in the nineteenth century.)

'Corrections' like these are evident in pSallier II and III, and particularly common in the pSallier IV, but if they are indeed corrections, then they are a rather unusual variety of correction. In most cases they do not seem to correct the meaning of the text, i.e., the content proper, by, say, striking though a mistake and adding a more grammatical or better spelled improvement or correction thereto. In these cases, it is apparently not usually a departure from idiomatic usage or a solecism or dittography or other technical fault which is being corrected, but rather, an aesthetic redirection. Consider another example here, from the beginning of pSallier III. (Fig. 5)

The two instances of the graph for horse in the 'student's' text are, to be sure, clumsy and ill-proportioned, compared to the 'master's' versions. Yet the student is no mere novice. He has a fluent and assured hand, evidenced in, for instance, the flourishes he takes advantage of with graphs which terminate in a downward stroke to the right (as in the graph for the consonant 'k') or extended conspicuously to the left (as in the graph for the consonant 'f') or, with somewhat less panache, in initiatory strokes from above the line to the right in

the first graph of the word *w3st* or in the logograph *m8c*.

There is, overall, a fine balance to the page as a whole, the lines are even, the block of text is well proportioned and individual strokes are gracefully modulated for the most part. Sometimes a graph shows particular vigor and dynamism: the determinative for the word *phrr*, for example. (Fig. 6)



Figure 6. The Word pHrr from pSallier III (*From Select Papyri in the Hieratic Character*, published by the British Museum in the nineteenth century.)

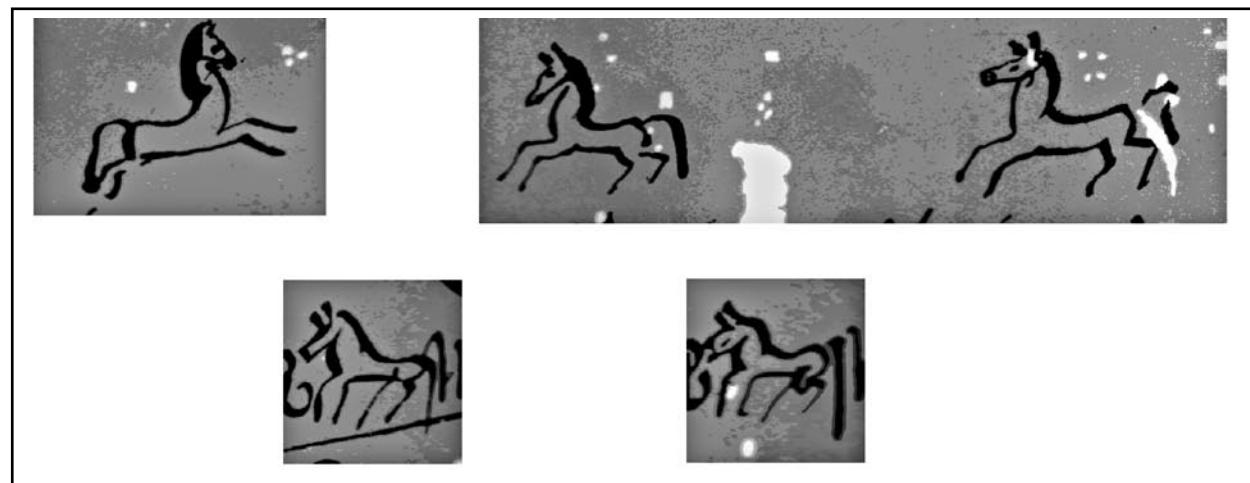


Figure 5. Graphs for 'Horse' from pSallier III Three examples by the 'master' in the upper row, two by the 'student' in the lower row. (*From Select Papyri in the Hieratic Character*, published by the British Museum in the nineteenth century.)

Some graphs exhibit ‘eccentricities.’ Perhaps they should be called hallmarks of the student’s style rather than ‘eccentricities’ because they are aesthetically successful. The graph *qk*, for instance, as we see at the end of the seventh line, seems to be one of the student’s favorites, and is also to be found elsewhere in pSallier III as well as in pSallier II (which I believe to be in a different hand).²³ (Fig. 7)

But to return to the point I was making earlier: the student’s horses are awkward. The first is too heavy at the front, with more the build of a boar or hyena than that of a horse. The second, too, though somewhat more successful, is still too heavy in the neck and weak in the haunches. The master’s corrections, on the other hand, are graceful and closely observed graphic representations of a horse’s physique. They have movement, and retain iconicity, even as the transfer to gesture is confident and attractive. The example to the left recalls relief sculpture, as in, for example, the Qadesh reliefs of Ramesses II at Karnak. All the same, the natural variation in the end of the pen or brush is visible, and shows a gesture, the trace of performance.

In ancient Egyptian papyri such as pAni and pSallier, then, we find not only evidence of a diversity of script styles and responses to writing tasks acknowledging context, but also an implicit interest in aesthetics and a trace of performance. All these features make a fit comparison with the calligraphic traditions of East Asia, and promise further benefits from the study of hieratic and cursive hieroglyphs for their aesthetic qualities, over and above their content per se, and their literary and historiographical value.

What about the ancient acknowledgement of such aesthetic value? I remarked earlier on the evaluative judgments in East Asia which assume broad cultural assent and imply a set of cultural practices and focus on individual performance toward a recognizable cultural end. Here, in the case of Egypt, we await further. All the same, though, we can recognize the efforts of scribes and their masters to produce a not only legible but pleasing result in writing, and at the same time point to the pride a handful of individuals express in colophons to their work. In the papyrus we have looked at most carefully here, pSallier III, for example, the scribe Pentwere’ concludes his work with the following comment,

This writing [was written] in the year 9, second month of summer, of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usermare-sotpenre’, the Son of Re’, Ramesse, Beloved of Amun, given life for all eternity like his father Re’.

[It has been brought to a successful conclusion] through the agency of the Chief Archivist of the Royal Treasury, Amenemone, the Scribe of the Royal Treasury, Amenemwia, and the Scribe of the Royal Treasury,...Made by the Scribe Pentwere.’²⁴

Pentwere, here, shows his pride in accomplishment only lightly, but gives us a perspective on his engagement in the project, nonetheless. Perhaps further discoveries will afford us a more detailed

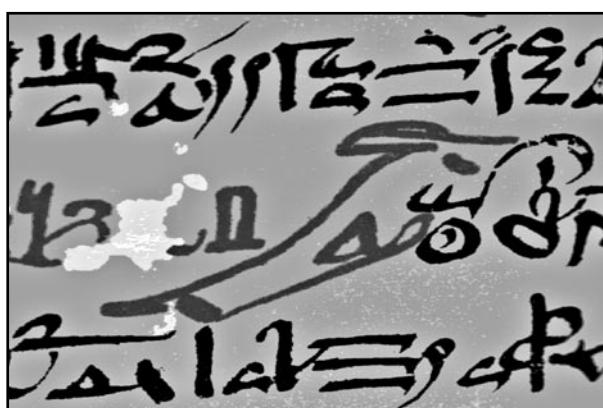


Figure 7. The word *oq* from pSallier II. The graph for cormorant is characteristically oversized in many New Kingdom papyri. In this case, it and several graphs following it are written in red. This example is from pSallier II, text block 13, line 6. (Again, from *Select Papyri in the Hieratic Character*, published by the British

perspective on what scribes like Pentwere thought of beautiful handwriting. In the end, though, the recognition of the aesthetic value of this calligraphy need not depend upon an ancient Egyptian precedent. It resides with us as readers of these texts, and offers us the encouragement to make their beauty better known and to acknowledge the gestural vitality which enlivens their age-old performances even today.

Endnotes

- 1- Richard Parkinson and Stephen Quirke, *Papyrus* (London, 1995), 27-8.
- 2- *Magnetick Lady III:iv.*
- 3- *Chambers Cyclopaedia Supplement*, s.v., (1753). ‘Calligraphy made an article in the manual labour of the antient monks.’
- 4- *Felton, Ancient and Modern Grammar, I* (1866), xii-498. ‘The age of calligraphy is gone.’
- 5- *Milton Colast*, (1645). Wks. (1847): 221-2. ‘A divine of note had stuck it here and there with a clove of his own calligraphy, to keep it from tainting.’
Household Words. XIII (1856), 240, ‘His calligraphy suggests the skating of an intoxicated sweep over a sheet of ice.’
Gullick and Timbs Painting... (1859), 100. The study of the calligraphy, or penmanship, of ancient mss. 1880 Earle, Philol. E.T. §99. ‘In the eleventh century the fashion of our calligraphy was changed.’
- 6- Robert Harrist, ‘*A Letter from Wang Hsi-chih*,’ In *The Embodied Image. Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection*. (Princeton, 1999), 241.
- 7- In many ways, my comments here will apply to Korean and Japanese writing as well as Chinese, but there are, in the former two cases, numerous exceptions to some of the things I’ll talk about. Space limitations prevent me from elaborating on all these exceptions.
- 8- The historical development of Chinese graphs had an important influence on the typology of graphs available to the calligraphy, but history was not a controlling factor for this typology. In historical terms, the highly cursivized system of caoshu ‘grass writing’ developed with the inception of writing on wooden slips with brushes, and was parallel to the later evolution of the graphs used on bronzes, but the typology which took hold ranges from, on the one side, a historically newer style of script, called alternatively kaishu ‘orthodox script’ or zhenshu ‘true script’ to the other side where caoshu represents a cursivization of zhenshu. In the middle is a less cursivized, but nonetheless flowing script called xingshu, ‘running script.’
- 9- Exceptions come, not surprisingly, in the context of Zen, where nonconformity is highly valued, ending at the asymptotic limit of calligraphic expression, the ensō.
- 10- Some would say ‘decorum’ rather than context, but to me ‘decorum’ seems too narrowly connected with politeness and conformity to encompass the flexibility of calligraphic usage from case to case.
- 11- East Asian brushes are made from various types of animal hair, often with many different types of hair represented in a single brush.
- 12- The actual content of the Wang Xizhi text has proved difficult to understand. The piece is commonly referred to by two prominent graphs in the first line, xing and rang, and is thus named the Xinnrang tie, or ‘Xingrang scroll,’ usually translated as ‘A Ritual for a Good Harvest,’ but the Japanese scholars Morino Shigeo and Satō Tokiyuki understood ‘rang’ as a place name. Following them, I prefer to read the title as, ‘Gone to Rang.’ Given that understanding, Wang’s text on the scroll might be understood to mean ‘Sir, you have long since gone to Rang. Has [a certain] person acquiesced or not? It is important to consider whether a person appointed to the province is fit [to serve]. If he is fit, then it is best to appoint him at once, and that’s that. Let me know how things stand.’ My translation of Morino and Satō’s reading of the Chinese text, from *Wang Xizhi zenshokan* (Tokyo, 1996), 326-27.
- 13- Wen C. Fong, et.al., ‘*Images of the Mind*,’ *Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting at The Art Museum, Princeton University*. (Princeton, 1984), 74-5.
- 14- Even the two lines attributed to Wang Xizhi in this piece are not actually in his hand, but are, rather, meticulously executed tracing copies from, probably, the Tang Dynasty. Apparently no originals in Wang’s hand have survived.
- 15- The dynasty in question shows us, moreover, the earliest clear development of an art market for calligraphy, even if handwriting had apparently been appreciated even earlier in Chinese history. See Robert E. Harrist, Jr. *A Letter from Wang Hsi-chih and the Culture of Chinese Calligraphy*. 241.

- 16- This is to be found in the second of 4 colophons. It quotes a poem by Su Dongpo (1036-1101). Shen C. Y. Fu, *Traces of the Brush* (New Haven, 1987), 241.
- 17- Liu Zhengcheng, ed., *Zhongguo shufa quanji*. vol. 19:360 (Beijing).
- 18- Wen C. Fong, et.al., *Images of the Mind, Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting at The Art Museum, Princeton University*. (Princeton, 1984), 74-5.
- 19- Rainer Hannig, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen, Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch*. (Mainz, 1995), 818.
- 20- I have excluded demotic here, for pragmatic reasons.
- 21- The table in Richard Parkinson and Stephen Quirke, *Papyrus. Egyptian Bookshelf* (London, 1995), 25, is very helpful in making these discriminations.
- 22- Parkinson and Quirke, *Papyrus*, 45.
- 23- This graph is often oversized and executed with a dramatic diagonal stroke to the lower left in papyri of the New Kingdom and XXI Dynasty. It is far less conspicuous in Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and Late Period writing, at least in so far as it is exemplified in *Georg Möller's Hieratische Paläographie*. 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1912).
- 24- Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II*, (Berkeley, 1976), 72.