

Feeling It: A WORKSHOP WITH GINA JONAS • BY LINDA RACE

From: thomas ingmire
Subject: Gina Jonas workshop
To: linda race

Hi Linda,

I hope all is well with you. I suspect you get the information on workshops so you know about this one. I have been pretty much responsible for getting FOC to invite Gina..... Besides being a real character as a person, I think Gina has something very special to offer students, whether beginning or advanced. I am signed up....my first workshop in 30 years.....

I believe there are a few spots left and I told Megan that I would try to encourage persons who I thought might be interested in the workshop. You were at the top of my list. It would be nice to see you there,

Best Wishes, Thomas

WHAT A SURPRISE AND DELIGHT it was to get this email from Thomas Ingmire. I had to find out more about Gina Jonas—I have to admit I did not know much about this teacher before getting the flyer or Thomas' email. I found an article by her about a Cheerio camp with Brody Neuenschwander online, but she was still a bit of a mystery to me. Thus it was that I came to sign up for the Gina Jonas workshop last April at Atelier Gargoyle in San Francisco's Mission District. I was soon to meet a most powerful, inspirational and passionate calligrapher as well as a spirited and witty personality.

Prior to the workshop, Jonas requested that we read her book *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey* and a brief article she had written, 'Calligraphy As A Spiritual Way.'

"Since my early days as a calligrapher, calligraphy has meant more to me than 'beautiful handwriting.' Hints about the nature of this 'something more' came from my first teachers, Lloyd Reynolds, who instructed me in the classroom, and Edward Johnston, whose books I read. As a student of Lloyd's I took to heart his citation, 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing' and

his compelling words, 'Caress the letters lovingly onto the page.' Equally striking as his ideas, Lloyd's own italic handwriting seemed to actually embody the intangible qualities he prized so highly: vital force, rhythm, harmony and life-movement...Indeed, written symbols drawn by his hand seemed to celebrate life just as vividly as they communicated information! Moreover, the very same qualities of vigor and energy were, I believed, those to which Edward Johnston referred when he declared: 'Our aim should be to give letters life that we ourselves may have more life.' Thus, from these two seminal teachers I derived the view, if stated by neither explicitly, that letter-making was a larger, more meaningful endeavor than I had at first imagined: an undertaking by which one infused form with the energy and sensitivity of one's own vital life spirit."

This is the beginning paragraph from Gina Jonas' 'Calligraphy as a Spiritual Way'. It captures the early turning point at which her approach to calligraphy forced her to question the limits of its meaning and practice. Jonas came to practice this way over many years of work, self-examination and self-training. She also began to incorporate 'mindfulness' and meditation concepts as ways to increase her calligraphic sensitivity for use in her work. Jonas gathered her experiences into a 'calligraphic way': using the interplay of mind, body, tool, and surface as an interactive awareness that has become a philosophy, a way to work and to teach. Jonas' 'way' into calligraphy is one that sets you free to not only understand the historic methods and hands but to develop individual self-expression. Based on her experiences she views it as one that can be used 'for artistic and spiritual growth—the enhancement of both calligraphic skills and self-awareness...'

Gina Jonas' slight figure, dark hair, studious look is a deceiving cover for a powerfully centered individual, calligrapher and teacher. Her method challenges our thinking of calligraphy. What she is trying to do is to get us to 'experience' calligraphy as a process and not just a product. She began our class by saying that calligraphy is more than writing—it is a living form. How do we work when we work with energy as it relates to form? To paraphrase, our practice should not just be about copying, it should be an interaction of body, mind, tool, and surface. Where is the life when just understanding the ductus? Jonas encouraged us as artists to have more than an intellectual awaken-



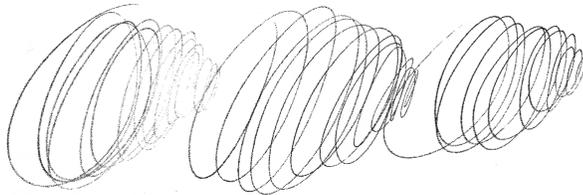


ing, perhaps awoken actual emotional feelings. What does that mean for a calligrapher? Movement is inseparable from touch. Jonas wanted us to experience the feedback: the information, the response we got back from increasing our sensitivities to those interactions. And from those interactions she wanted us to experience a ‘flow’ in our practice and work.

Each section of the workshop used table demonstration time where Jonas described her experiences while demonstrating how she works. She did this with a mix of humor and earnestness while she explained the specific exercises we would practice immediately after. The exercises were based on the tools of pencil, pen and ink, how we used our bodies, and what we may be expected to feel during the practice of the exercises. A natural comedienne and wit, Jonas would pick up a giant cardboard pen nib to show us how the nib might work or not.

PENCIL EXERCISES:

It was suggested that we use a mechanical pencil as the tool to loosen up with because we would not have to stop our movements to sharpen a pencil—we could continue our meditative style exercises with a click of the pencil without worry.



We were instructed to make gestures in the air before we moved the pencil to the paper. The marks we made were clockwise and counterclockwise in circular as well as spiral motions. Simultaneously, we were to notice how our shoulder moved, and on down through the upper arm as we made these gestural marks. Other gestural marks were vertical arcs and lines, shallow horizontal arcs and lines, and interlace patterns or loops (flourishes). As we made our marks we noticed what Jonas called ‘recoil,’ a pendular movement back and forth, a change of direction and pressure, how our shoulder, arm, fingers became sensitized to the movement, feeling the changing dynamics, and the nuances of pressure and release against the paper with our tool.

PEN EXERCISES:

After warming up with the pencil exercises, we used the same sorts of techniques to explore the nib pen. In these exercises we concentrated on the marks made from this tool. First, Jonas had us work with the thin edge of the nib as it parallels the stroke direction. She pointed out how the ink released when we pushed up with the thumb and pulled down with our index finger as we moved the shaft of the staff (penholder). The marks we made with the thin edge of the nib related directly to drawing, as we used it to make squares, triangles, crisscross, and oval shapes and marks.

We explored the broad edge where the nib edge is perpendicular to the stroke direction. With the broad edge we worked on directional movements similar to those that we did with the pencil exercises, horizontal and vertical movements for straight lines and arcs,



pendular movements, stroke panels where we pulled out shapes from lines of ink. Finally we worked with the pen corners, mainly as a drawing tool pulling from puddles of ink, but in this exercise we sensitized our fingers with each corner we used. The broad edge nib as a tool gave us a huge territory for exploration, and Jonas had us playing with 'bowing'—where the pen derived its movements from a stringed instrument, motion with feeling—a place where gesture would develop from working with the forces of the stroke and where this might lead one. Exercises developing gesture used the broad edge on its own, drawing with the nib corners and other pen manipulations, making a variety of shapes based on curved strokes, and pen turning.

One of the most interesting exercises was based on using the pen angles, especially the one Jonas called 'pen angle determines stroke weight'. In this exercise the thin edge of the nib was used to make quick angle marks from 0 degrees to 90 degrees. Then, aligning the pen nib to the line angle, pulling strokes downward. By doing these movements we saw the angles we could use to vary the stroke width, and notice the stroke weight/value that 'colored' the text we were making. This was what Jonas called a 'palette' of angles that could be used to create swatches of 'colors' or tonalities, gradations based on line weight.

After this there were exercises called 'nib descending a square' and 'pen scales' that emphasized finger dexterity by the use of variations of stroke thickness



All written images in this article are from Gina Jonas' book *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey*, available from John Neal Bookseller, www.johnnealbooks.com, or Paper and Ink Arts, www.paperinkarts.com

from hairline to thick. We also worked with using the partial edge of the pen nib to make transitional thick-to-thin and thin-to-thick marks. One of the most difficult exercises was working with pen turning. We practiced what Jonas called 'fixed pivots' and 'turning from motion.' The pen turning exercises used shapes that would be the basis for the various parts of letterforms. The final exercise was to use all the pen angle exercises to develop letter design experiments. The marks we made in working with our tool could now be used in all its variations to explore traditional hands, but especially, our own invented scripts.





At the end of the workshop we sat with Jonas to discuss what we had done. What had we experienced? Jonas explained that our class was her first opportunity to teach the methods described in her book, *Finding the Flow*. Jonas wanted to try to get under the medium to find expression, gesture and motion; to awaken a sense of 'feeling' within us. She wanted to add the kinesthetic sense of movement and touch to the visual.

We also discussed the notion of process versus product, calligraphy as art or craft; as practice, 'a daily zen' adding to the senses and the body. The eye is complimented, bringing more life to it. Jonas looked at the full continuum when thinking about calligraphy. She challenged us to be experimental, use our own expression and not just reproduce perfect letterforms. Jonas encouraged discussions about calligraphy and felt that it is important to keep the conversation going.

The ideas presented in the workshop are directly distilled from Jonas' book, *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey*. Her introduction to the material in the book is a fine example of an artist writing about her philosophy and approach as it relates to calligraphy. Jonas' writing is insightful in explaining the development of her methods. It offers a plan for how to use the exercises in the book, and states that the objective of the book is that it be used as a guide, as 'inspiration and encouragement to the student' as well as a way to find and experience 'flow' while in the practice of the craft and art of calligraphy. The exercises that were presented during the workshop are in the book, as well as more examples of pen stroke exercises and invented letterforms. There are also sections such as 'At the Writing Desk/Board' and 'Holding the Pen' illustrated with color photographs that would be beneficial to a beginning calligrapher. I would recommend Jonas' book *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey* to calligraphers regardless of their experience level.

Linda Race has been involved with the Friends of Calligraphy since the early 1990's as a council member, lecture coordinator, and girl Friday. Her first teacher was Carla Tenret. She doesn't practice nearly enough because she is distracted by artist books, printing without a press and poetry—as well as writing this article for Alphabet.

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