Nib Contact:

and The Case for a Touch-Sensitive Writing Board

By Gina Jonas

The Case

Even though Western calligraphers don't elevate their tools and materials to the revered status of 'treasures' as in China and the Far East, we do highly value our pen, ink and paper. However, in this article I will argue that without a fourth element—the touch-sensitive writing board—we unwittingly stunt the potential of the other three. While paper, visible to the eye, appears as the surface upon which pen and ink perform, the quality of that performance also depends upon the surface beneath it: that of the writing board. Together these surfaces interact with the hand-held pen in what I consider the heart of calligraphic experience: 'nib contact'. I will now argue that the experience of nib contact can be greatly improved by an effectively surfaced writing board, and, for this reason, an under-emphasized piece of calligraphic equipment deserves our utmost attention. The case begins.

Arguing from theory

I summon James Joyce to read from his novel, *Ulysses.*

Exhibit A: "Shut your eyes and see. Seems to see with his fingers. Touch. Fingers. Asking. Answer. Yes."

Let's first focus upon the last five words because they are particularly resonant with calligraphic implication. I will use them to show, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the relation of the calligrapher's writing board to nib contact.

Touch: Let's start with the meaning of 'contact': the act or state of touching or meeting. From it we clearly see that nib contact equals nib touch. (Note: touch is reciprocal with movement: nib contact generally implies movement.)

Fingers: However, it's via the fingers—those ultra-sensitive bodily instruments—that touch transmits 'calligraphic feedback' via tactile and kinesthetic signals. Given a choice, would you drive a car on an icy road at night? The pen, a calligrapher's vehicle, needs its own kind of traction to 'hold the road'. In place of well-treaded tires, though, a calligrapher generates traction herself, as she 'drives:' pulling the pen while applying pressure. This pressure varies in response to the 'calligraphic road,' that is, to the stroke as it changes in width. A calligraphic driver has the advantage of her own built-in instruments: primarily thumb and index finger.

Asking: In the course of strokemaking, when these fingers engage the pen in nib contact, are they not asking for surface information? As a questioning process, strokemaking has the potential to cultivate alertness, increase engagement, and stimulate rhythmical and gestural strokes!

Answer: If the fingers ask questions via nib contact—how much pressure? when do I release it?—how will they receive an answer? Both asking and answering, I've discovered, directly relate to finger sensitivity. With every increase in finger sensitivity I improve my ability to create friction and navigate via its signals. A well-surfaced writing board augments the quality of these signals because it promotes finger sensitivity!

Yes: Finger sensitivity can be developed by "pen-stroke technique" (see Note below) Engaging its exercises we may cultivate skill and confidence, and enhance calligraphic joy. Yes!

"Shut your eyes and see. Seems to see with his fingers." Since "to see" has the additional meaning "to understand," I hope the above exploration of nib contact has revealed how sensitive touch can facilitate a better understanding of strokemaking, and thereby, of letterform itself.

Summation from theory. Any element that heightens a calligrapher's tactile sensitivity contributes to the quality of calligraphic experience and letterform. By affixing one's writing board with a touch-sensitive covering (see Appendix), it becomes such an element.

Arguing from practice

Some board coverings elicit clearer, more subtle signals than others. For every level of calligraphic skill I recommend a cover surface with a high-level of touch sensitivity. For the beginner, such a surface encourages the development of finger sensitivity, for all others, it supports an ever-continuing process of cultivation. To proceed with the case.

I call upon Ewan Clayton to read from his book, *Calligraphy of the Heart.* Exhibit A: "I always write on a pressure-sensitive surface. I place some padding under my paper of sufficient thickness to give the surface a slight springiness. I use a pad of suede; felt or a thick pile of paper can also be good. I want a surface that will give a little under the pressure of the pen… A resilient surface like this feeds back more information about the quality of contact between pen and paper than a flat, unyielding surface. If you want to develop your understanding of contact this point is essential."

Exhibit B: Testimonials covering materials. Historical perspective: for centuries, western scribes wrote upon specially-prepared animal skins with the quill feather of a bird. Although my historic manuscript research has not yielded poems in praise of their nib contact, early scribes undoubtedly benefited from such contact as much as they took it for granted. Since the vast majority of contemporary calligraphers use paper and metal nibs, a suede-covered board may offer them a version of this experience and, perhaps, a new perspective on the calligraphic stroke.

On behalf of suede, or materials with similar resilience: the author. Imagine, if you will, a finger "writing" directly upon suede—skin contacting skin unmediated by a pen. Its strokes, conducted with pressure in a modulated, rhythmic manner, recalling body massage or stroking a cat. A question arises: can anyone describe the nature of a calligraphic stroke? If not, actual experiences as massage and animal petting may provide hints. Because of such hints, I have named one pen-stroke technique "massage." Through it we can enter the realm of contact pressure: applying and releasing pressure in the movement sequence of a stroke.

Note: Pen-stroke technique: based upon the edged pen's unique two-cornered design—would there be an edge without corners? By applying subtle pressure to one nib corner we may help to direct strokes and control the smoothness/roughness of their walls.

I call the principle underlying such finger-pen coordination "partnering:" a mental pairing of the right nib corner with the index finger and the left nib corner with the thumb. In the process of strokemaking each corner-finger partnership governs its corresponding stroke wall, e.g. the thumb-left corner guides the left wall of a stroke. (See Figure 1). Sensitized by partnering, a finger more easily applies a little extra nib-corner pressure to its stroke wall; heightened by a pressure-sensitive writing board, its feedback signals aid the mind in pulling its stroke!

Figure 1 Portable suede-covered writing board, atop drawing table, held in place by adjustable, screwed-in stops.

"Dynamics." Partnering prepares a calligrapher for "dynamics": the patterning of pressure and release. Its practice consists of exploring concentrated pressure through "spring point" technique and distributed pressure through "massaging the stroke." A pressure-sensitive surface supports the development of calligraphic dynamics. In my desire to grow as a calligrapher I created exercises for working with pressure which I published in my book, *Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey.* I much enjoy sharing such exercises in my workshops.

On behalf of cotton flannel: the author. On a visit to my local fabric store in search of board coverings, I selected cotton flannel and felt. After trying them at home I preferred the flannel, and especially liked the signals I received when placed upon my suede-covered board.

On behalf of velour paper: Tim Hall, professional calligrapher. "I like velour paper as a writing surface because of its bit of tooth. This provides resilience and counter pressure when the nib moves—it enhances the feeling of touch! I mount the velour paper to a mat board with spray glue, gently and carefully rolling it down from the top or middle to avoid bubbles. Since I often write on a slanted drawing table, this surface also holds the paper; an adjustable lip at the bottom of my table keeps the board from sliding off. Note: The velour wears down with use and needs replacing."

On behalf of pellon: Judy Detrick, professional calligrapher and teacher: "I recommend using two layers of pellon. Obtained at a fabric store, pellon provides a good padded underlayer and a non-skid surface. There are two types: with an iron-on backing (don't get that) and without the backing (do get that). I have told my students about it, so it's slowly getting around."

Summation from practice. To learn a skill/art we directly engage its tools, materials and forms to gain experience. Since we can't really know what we're doing except by doing it, experiment is essential for learning. Through experiment and experience, expertise develops!

The Verdict

…is yours! But, until you experiment for yourself, you don't have enough information! For this reason I offer the following notes on writing board construction:

Preliminary tests. Try the various covering materials before making a board. Choose size with purpose in mind, such as portability for workshops.

Board suggestions: Gator board (dense, lightweight and more durable than foam core), mat board (for velour paper), or, attached to foam core for a firmer surface.

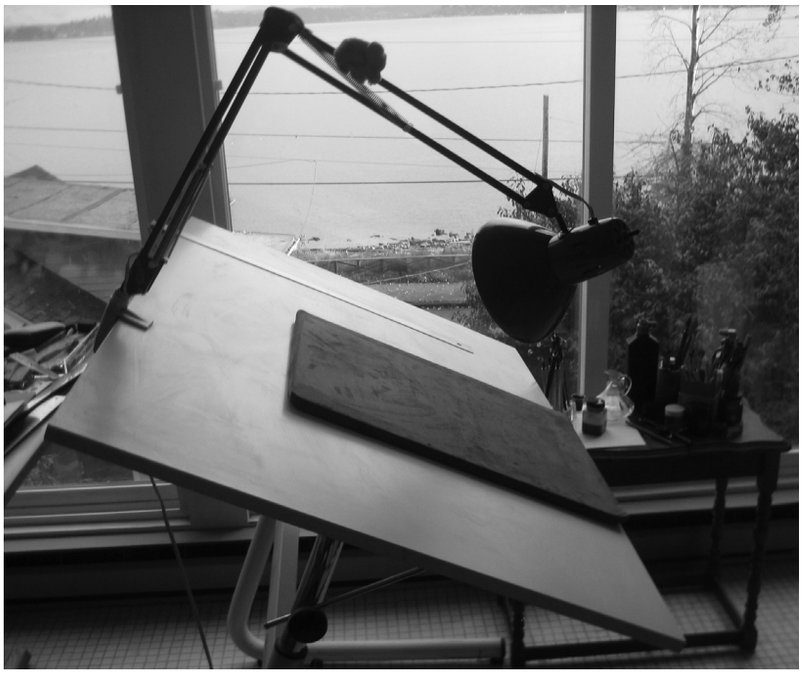


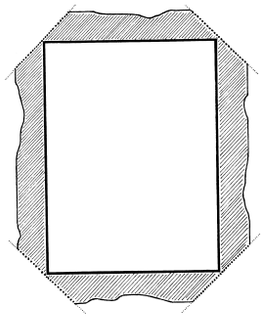
Figure 2: Writing board on drawing table: easily removable for some desk projects, and travel.

Obtaining materials: Gator board and velour paper are available at many art stores.

My own board's suede came from the scrap bin of a local leather store. Suede varies in thickness, quality and cost. If purchased by the square foot, a large piece might be shared.

Appendix: Make & Use a Writing Board

Materials: board, tape, covering, ruler, marking tool, scissors.



Schema for writing board construction: the cut skin, or other covering, in relation to the board, ready to be wrapped and taped.

Construction: cut board to desired size; cut covering 1½ inches – 3 inches larger, all the way around; cut off corners; wrap & tape!

Experiments: with paper thickness: for thin paper I use a "liner" paper (usually rough newsprint) between paper and board; with nib width: does a narrow nib on thick paper transmit board signals?

To cultivate finger sensitivity: find paper thickness and nib width combinations that allow and encourage maximum feedback from nib contact.

Gina Jonas *has been a professional calligrapher for 40 years and for many of these years has enjoyed teaching,including international conferences, weekend workshops and private lessons. She is the author of* Finding the Flow: A Calligraphic Journey *and* Hebrew Calligraphy Styles. *Her work has appeared in several* Letter Arts Review *annuals. Currently, it is Gina's passion to share the discoveries of her calligraphic journey: a holistic approach to integrating form and flow.*