



Handwriting in America: A Cultural History

By Tamara Plakins Thornton

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Copybooks and the Palmer method, handwriting analysis and autograph collecting - these words conjure up a lost world, in which people looked to handwriting as both a lesson in conformity and a talisman of individuality. In this engaging history, ranging from colonial times to the present, Tamara Plakins Thornton explores the shifting functions and meanings of handwriting in America.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

It's so common to think of individual handwriting as distinctive that it's a surprise to learn that the notion of unique handwriting was unthinkable in America's colonial past. People learned a particular script, such as Court Hand or Round Hand, that reflected their gender, occupation, and status in life. A history of handwriting might seem like an obscure, academic subject, but this entertaining book smashes that assumption. Reading the story of how handwriting developed in the United States and its importance in society, may make you think twice about your penmanship the next time you pick up a pen.

From Publishers Weekly

This elegant study again proves that, in the right hands, a narrow topic is an excellent window into broad issues of social structure, education and popular culture. Historian Thornton (*Cultivating Gentlemen*) not only packs plenty of Americana into her history of handwriting but also relates trends in this country to European developments. In pre-revolutionary America, writing was an important skill for the elite: learned people knew five to eight handwriting styles, and hand-copied publications allowed antigovernment materials and pornography to escape censorship. The Victorian era saw penmanship classes conducted like military drills, the cult of autograph collecting and the rise of writing skills among women ("fair Scribblerinas," said one male scoffer). Idiosyncrasies in handwriting came to be seen not as deplorable but as a mark of individual uniqueness; people hired experts to analyze the handwriting of prospective employees, business partners and spouses; and a contest for the handwriting revealing the "most interesting personality" drew 300,000 entries. Crossing into the 20th century, we see the struggle of graphology to attain scientific respectability, the rise and fall of the Palmer instructional method and the recent revival of calligraphy as an art form. Thornton's high-quality scholarship will satisfy exacting academic audiences, and her graceful prose will charm and entertain the general reader. Illustrations.

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From Library Journal

In this scholarly study, Thornton (*Cultivating Gentlemen*, Yale Univ., 1989) offers an engaging report on script from the 18th century to the present. Our "increasing reliance on the telephone, typewriter dictating machines and electronic brains," commented the Saturday Evening Post in 1955, "would seem to be making handwriting as obsolete as smoke signals." Thornton traces the emergence of script as a medium intimately associated with the writer and the evolution of penmanship over time. Opposing the ubiquitous stream of print, penmanship pedagogues face down the machine by advocating handwriting as a cultural treasure as represented by the English and Crafts movement's dedication to preserving the art and craft of the medieval scribe. Thornton explores handwriting skills and the calligraphy revivals of penmanship. Amply illustrated, her work will introduce the student/scholar to the art and mystery of graphology and the cultural character of the past.

Richard K. Burns, MSLS, Hatboro, Pa.

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