

The Making of the "Numbers 6:24-26" Illuminated Manuscript

Steve Husting
June 2014

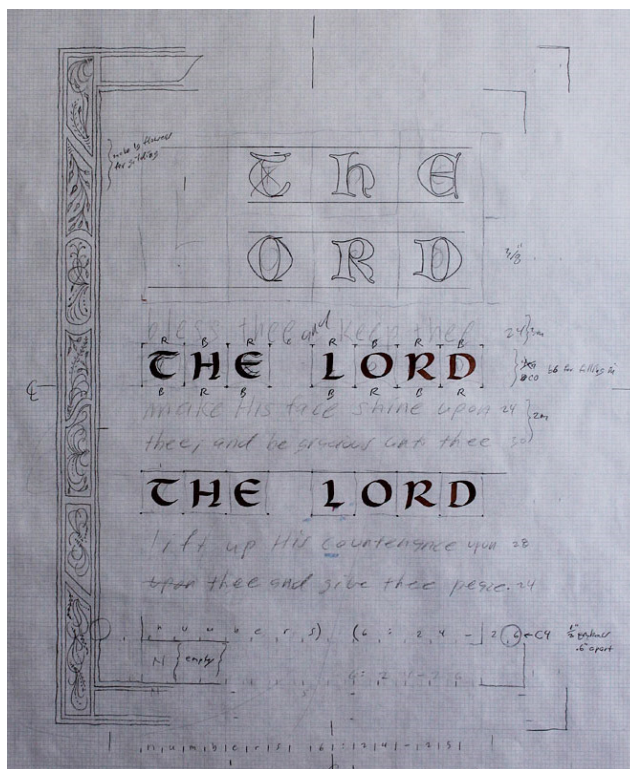
1 :: THE PASSAGE



It started with this biblical passage in Numbers where the Lord God told His priests what to say when they bless the people. I thought that the repetition of "The Lord" would divide up the art piece in a natural manner, so I started sketching.

This project will be 16 x 20" to submit to a calligraphy exhibition held in the Muzeo in Anaheim, CA in July 2014. I and others were invited to have artwork prepared for it, and I rose to the challenge with this project. I had been looking for an illuminated manuscript project ever since January 2014 when I saw amazing examples during a class walk-through taught by De Ann Singe at the Letters CA calligraphy conference.

2 :: THE SKETCH



I used grid drafting vellum paper to block out where the text and borders would go. As you can see, the borders here are entirely different than in the final piece. The decorations in the border are inspired by a flourishing workshop taught by Heather Victoria Held.

I did not draft out all the color and design choices in advance; I made it up day by day as I went along. Above, I just blocked out where the elements would go.

3 :: THE COLOR & DESIGN TESTS

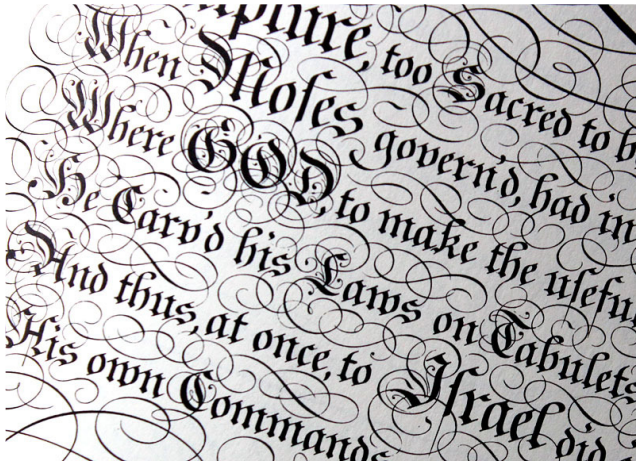


I had some slightly toothy Arches text wove white (actually off-white) paper on hand, so I decided to use it for the project. I understand that the best medium would be to use vellum and color it with gouache. But I did not have vellum on hand and wanted to use ink, which I was more familiar with at the time.

I tried writing the main body copy in several sizes of broad nibs to find the right size text that would spread across the work without extending past the firm left and right boundaries I had established.

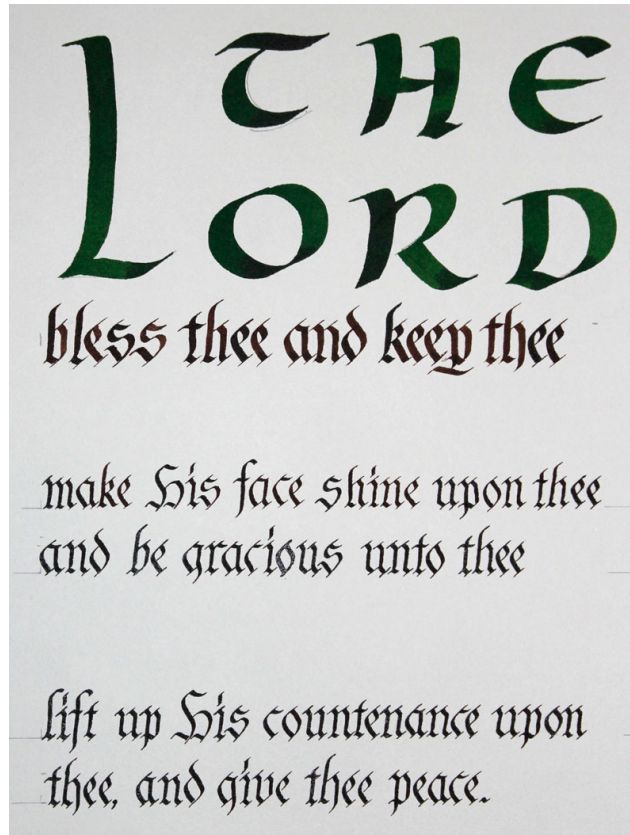
The tried various color schemes for the lettering and borders (pictured above). Some made it into the final piece. In most cases, the project was completed over a few weeks a few minutes a day, working on just one aspect of design each day. That gave me time to reflect on what shape I wanted the next design element to be.

4 :: THE INSPIRATION



The main body of lettering was inspired by *The Universal Penman*. These illustrations of excellent penmanship were compiled in the 1700's by George Bickham. Since I've never used that hand before, I had to practice it over and over until I was confident I could execute it satisfactorily. I had only a few weeks before the project was due.

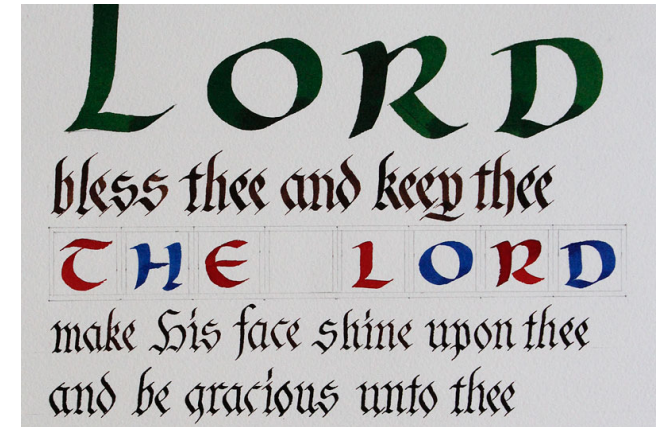
5 :: THE MAIN COPY



THE LORD at top uses 3/8" Horizon folded pen and is in the Uncial form.
The "bless thee and keep thee" is 3mm Brause nib.
The main copy is 2mm.
The verse reference (not shown) used a Speedball C4 nib.

Ink used was green and brown Speedball ink. The brown was very dark, so I suspect I had dipped a nib containing a bit of black accidentally at one point.

6 :: THE COLOR TEXT BLOCKS

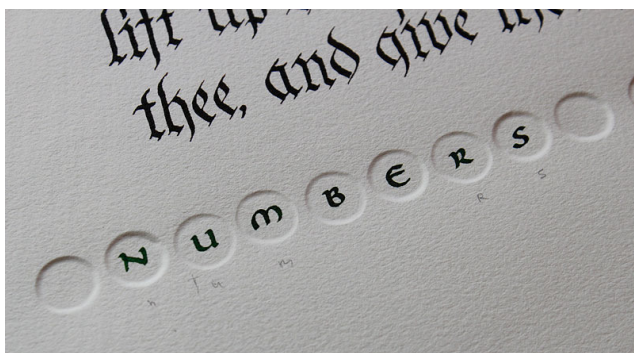


I added the blocks then centered the lettering inside by first writing them out on a separate sheet of paper, then tracing over them with a light table.

The ascenders and descenders of the brown text were left unfinished; the swashes would be added later.

The blue and red letters of THE LORD is 4mm Brause.

7 :: REVERSE-EMBOSSING



I decided to reverse-emboss the area where the verse reference would go. I slipped a drafting circle template underneath and burnished carefully to create the circles. I used 1/2" circles.

The circle template was first taped to a sheet of grid paper with marks on the grid indicating the distance the top paper would have to travel left or right to be correctly positioned for the next circle. I aligned the left page corner to the grid mark, aligned the left edge up with the grid to make sure it was straight, then burnished. Then I slide the page over six tenths of an inch, and repeated. So the circles turned out straight enough.

Unfortunately, I had measured from the correct spot on the draft copy to the wrong spot, with the result of the circles being off-center – too far to the right. So I added another circle at left to even it out. That actually worked out well for design; I simply added gold leaf to the middle and end circles for a centered design.

8 :: THE COLOR BLOCKS



I filled in the blocks with green and brown inks, using a Speedball C6 (small) nib. I used Sakura Gelly Roll metallic markers to add the gold accents around the blocks. The middle of the T above was left open to receive gold leaf later.

I couldn't slide the pen nib along a ruler to make the straight lines (the ink might transfer from the nib to the ruler edge), so I used a 1/2" thick piece of wood to offset the nib instead.

9 :: THE BORDERS



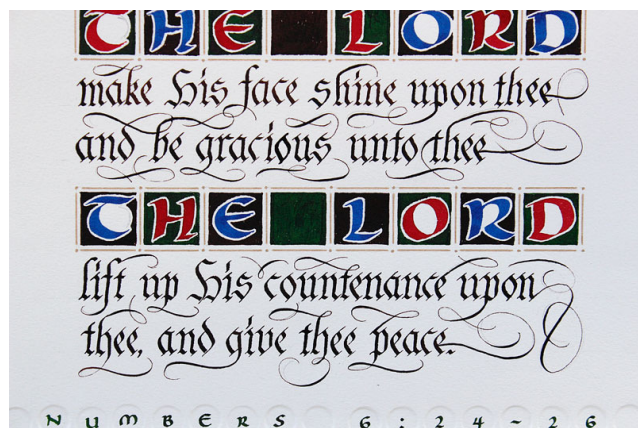
I designed the borders so I could duplicate them for each corner by flipping and rotating it. Because the rightmost reverse-embossed circle went too far (it should have stopped at the same edge as the blocks), I modified that area of the border to accommodate it.

I chose to add the border to the upper left and lower right only. It would allow me to get the project done sooner and on time.

When testing the creation of the border with a round Speedball pen, my arcs were shaky. So I switched to using a green colored pencil instead. Then I used a pointed nib with an oblique holder to make the flowery embellishments.

I used a tool that Heather Victoria Held used in her workshop, the heated foil pen. I positioned the gold foil on the paper, pressed the foil pen to it, and it left a spot of shiny foil on the page. So the borders have a bit of shine when the light hits it right.

10 :: THE FLOURISHES



I added the flourishes to the brown text after the borders were applied, penciling them in lightly first and tracing them. Again, they were inspired by *The Universal Penman*. The flourishes extended the body copy to the right so it lined up with the colored blocks.

The paper was toothy, so it was very challenging to use a pointed pen on it. I rotated the paper 90 degrees counter-clockwise and made the marks, lightly skimming the paper going up so the tip would not snag, then pressing down for the thicker strokes while pulling the pen toward me.

Good thing I had been practicing Copperplate over the last few months. It really helped me with the flourishes, especially keeping a very light touch on the rough paper.

11 :: DECORATIVE SWIRLS



My design goal for decorations around the large lettering at top had been up in the air until I decided to add swirls, which were inspired by the book, *A Passion for the Pen: The Art of Georgina Artigas* (see right column). I was horrified when I discovered that the perfectly square blocks around the letters encroached into the lettering below – the artwork below should have been 1/4" lower! I wanted to duplicate the dot and line pattern used by the colored blocks below, but there was no room for that now.

So the squares were cropped top and bottom and the swirls went into oblong shapes instead.

I wanted to use the hot foil pen again and add shiny red dots to the ends of the swirls. Unfortunately, the pen did not cooperate and the red dots were unsatisfactory. So I switched to the Sakura Gelly Roll metallic marker again. The red was close enough to the other red on the page. Then I added the blue marker as an afterthought, seeking to distribute a bit more of the blue of the blocked letters to elsewhere on the page.

12 :: TEXTURED BLOCKS



For texture, I added gold dots to the blocked letters with the Gelly Roll metallic pen. It was much easier using that than the foil pen, because placing the foil alongside the letters would have obscured the area and made accurate placement of the foil pen impossible.



Swirl idea is from the book, *Passion for the Pen: The Art of Georgina Artigas*.

13 :: NEAR COMPLETION



Here is the nearly finished piece before adding the gold leaf. Later I discovered a missing swash off the right of "bless thee and keep thee," which made the line of text off center. This photo shows the artwork before adding in that swash. As you can see with the other swashes, the text seems more centered in comparison.

14 :: THE INSTACOLL ADHESIVE



I poured a small amount of the Kölner Instacoll System Base adhesive fluid into a small container and capped the original bottle so it would not dry out. I added just a few drops of water and stirred.

I dipped a toothpick into the mixture and added it to the paper, then pushed the adhesive into place where I wanted it, going back and forth, adding more adhesive where needed.

15 :: APPLYING THE GOLD LEAF



After a time, I pulled out the Wehrung & Billmeier Co. 23K patent gold leaf book. It had 25 sheets of 3 1/2" square sheets of gold. It had to be handled carefully and with dry hands or the ultra-thin gold had a tendency to stick to the fingers. I simply dabbed the gold leaf sheet to the adhesive and it stuck.

Unfortunately, I had miscalculating the drying time and applied the gold leaf after the adhesive was nearly dry. I should have waited only 30 minutes before adding the patent gold. The adhesive edges were dry and the gold leaf did not stick there, so the edges are ragged instead of smooth. However, the roughness is not bad enough to fix.

I had used a \$3.00 cosmetics blush brush I picked up at Walmart to carefully flick the gold away from the letters.