

The image features a photograph of the Hollywood sign on a hillside, with a radio tower visible in the background. The text 'Calligraphy's Role in HOLLYWOOD' is overlaid on the image. 'Calligraphy's' and 'Role' are written in a white, elegant cursive script. 'in' is written in a smaller, simpler cursive font. 'HOLLYWOOD' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The entire image is framed by a blue border.

Calligraphy's Role
in **HOLLYWOOD**

A look at handlettering
and calligraphy in particular
in the film industry

by Jill Bell

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Calligraphy's Role in Hollywood

by Jill Bell

Finding delectable examples of calligraphy and handlettering is not just a pleasure but a compulsion for those of us who have done any lettering. However, discovering who dunnit can be a real mystery, particularly in Hollywood. The film industry is enormous and multifaceted and produces a profusion of promotional and packaging materials for each and every film. And that's just the beginning. There are the titles (title sequences or credits) within the movies themselves, trailers (previews), there are props (properties, objects used within the filming), as well as action sequences featuring a writing hand. And don't forget all of those fabulous Hollywood parties!

It has jokingly been said that everyone in LA is "in the biz" and like most jokes, it has a bit of truth to it. Whether you own a boutique or a restaurant, are a lawyer or a working calligrapher in Los Angeles, it is highly probable that you have done film industry work of some sort.

Even though my favorite calligraphy-laden movie is a British film, *The Pillow Book* directed by Peter Greenaway, this article will focus on the American motion picture industries ("Hollywood") to the exclusion of other entertainment industries and foreign films. *The Pillow Book* is a rather exceptional example anyway and is atypical of lettering work in the industry as the movie is about a calligraphy fetish and therefore employs calligraphy as a motif.

Keeping ahead of the Joneses

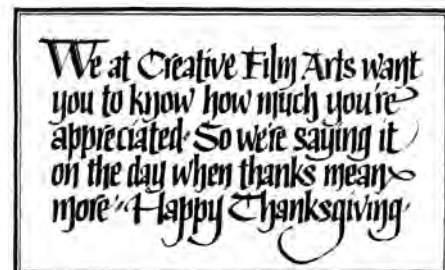
The largest quantity of actual calligraphy work in Hollywood takes place in the invitation and certificate sector, just like most cities. Film industry people throw some of the biggest, best and most dramatic parties this side of carnival in Venice,



Maury Nemoy, Columbia Pictures invitation in calligraphy, 1969

You are invited to a
Celebration Wrap Party
for the Vince Neil music video
SISTER OF PAIN
Saturday, May 1, at 9 p.m.
at the home of
Peter and Coco Conn
2207 Willett Ave., Hollywood
(near Franklin and Gahuanga)

Jill Bell, brush lettered invitation for a music video wrap party for Vince Neil, formerly of Motley Crüe, 1993. Lettering style was the basis of her font *Hollyweird*.



Harold Adler, Thanksgiving card done in calligraphy for his studio group.

with many of the glitterati trying to do something more glamorous, attention-getting and unique than everyone else. There is a constant stream of extravagant invitations, envelopes, and place cards to be done and a number of businesses that specialize in custom-made invitations keeping any number of calligraphers busy, albeit at below the going market rate (mark-ups you know). I have always enjoyed the jobs which included being a calligrapher on location at one of these extravaganzas, distributing and adding place and escort cards for the likes of Barbra Streisand and Bob Hope, Michael Milken and Bill Clinton. Where else but at Bob Hope's 90th birthday party would I ever have had the chance to meet four US presidents* (or Bob Hope and Milton Berle)? But it's really not all that glamorous: you're on par with the coat-check person and the valet parking attendants.

The film industry supports a huge hierarchy of peripheral businesses and all of these adjunct companies have logotypes, invitations and/or certificates to do as any business might. Both the city and county of Los Angeles have a staff of full-time calligraphers that crank out certificates for every noteworthy luminary, place and event. The city is brim-full of pomp, awards and great calligraphy.

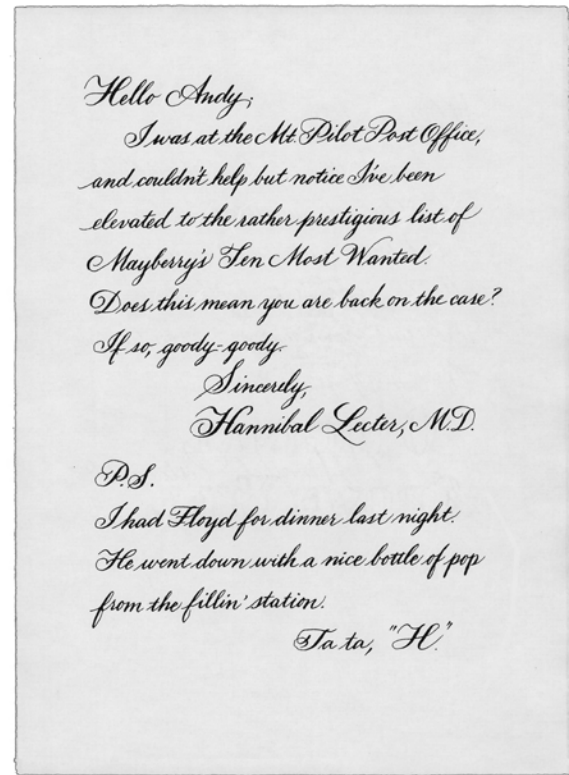
Prop maker and hand-double

Every handlettered journal, letter, scroll, or diploma that you see in a movie or television program was created by someone and there's a good chance it was a calligrapher. Likewise, most hands that you see writing are hand-doubles and many Los Angeles calligraphers have had their hands appear in various productions. It is absolutely amazing how much money is spent on a simple letter that only appears on screen for a few seconds (or how long you can spend making it look just right). These people just don't think the same way as

* Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush Sr.



Jill Bell, brush written and drawn logo with type for the industry (Paramount), 2000.



Jill Bell, freely written copperplate letter that was a prop for a television skit on Mad TV, 2001.



One-off showcard by Batiste Madalena, 1926. From 1923 to 1928 Madalena painted almost 1,400 showcards for a theater owned by George Eastman in New York. When the theater was sold in 1928, Madalena happened to discover hundreds of his posters in the trash behind the theater, and rescued them in the pouring rain. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has 102 of his art-deco masterpieces.

print people do either: they want to know what your 'day rate' is and frequently want you to work (usually inconveniently) on the set.

The Golden Age of Cinema and the golden age of handlettering

During the silent film era most of the posters were one-off showcards, created for a particular theater by local signwriters using stills (photos) of the stars provided by the studios. Unfortunately, most of the them were tossed away long ago. Some of the surviving cards are beautiful examples of sign writing at its best.

Throughout the Golden Age of Cinema (1930's-1950's), most of the promotional materials created for a movie including posters, lobby cards, and press books were exquisitely illustrated and hand-lettered pieces revealing their showcard origins. They were printed, often hand-tinted, and were sold or rented to theaters by the studios. Renown artists such as Norman Rockwell, Antonio Vargas and Al Hirshfield where among those who illustrated them. Of course there are scant or non-existent records of all the other anonymous artists, photographers and graphic designers who worked on them. Still, this was truly the golden age of handlettering in the industry as well and the cards and posters were often beautiful and skillful (although sometimes garish, maudlin and silly) works of art, many of which are worth thousands of dollars today.

In the beginning (of the film that is)

In the Golden Age of cinema the main title sequences were frequently highly calligraphic, handlettered affairs as well. They were often knocked out in a rush as a film neared completion and began post-production by a number of different lettering artists working together at studios or title houses. These titles were pretty staid affairs compared to what we are used to seeing today, but anyone who appreciates calligraphy is bound to be totally awed by the



Lobby title card for Casablanca, 1943. All but the tiniest type at the very bottom is hand-lettered. Lobby cards generally were 14 x 11 and there were usually 8 to 20 of them with a different scene from the movie on each and a title card. They were displayed in the lobbies of theaters into the early 50's.



Photo by Jill Bell

Harold Adler and the title cards he lettered with white paint on black boards in 1964 for a trailer for Becket (photo taken November, 2000).



Photo by Jill Bell

Harold Adler, title card for film hand-painted in full color, on glass in 1956.

skillful, handlettered titles in nearly every old movie*, as well as those done for early television. Typesetting titles was always an option, but in the days of metal type it was slow, costly and difficult to produce by comparison. Now it's just the opposite.

Titles were primarily lettered in white on black cards which produces the most visible and dramatic effect to an audience in a darkened room, or were hand-painted on glass allowing film elements or graphics to be shot or composited behind them. This method was still employed in to the 70's as the black cards and glass were gradually replaced by stats, film, phototypesetting and more advanced optical methods.

The early electronic character generating technologies were clunky and limited to a few fonts and sizes. But they were a fabulous development for news and sports broadcasts. Robust and readily-available computers finally enabled type to easily be used in a controllable, designerly fashion on screen and computerized animation and 3-D effects flourished in the 90's. There are still handlettered titles being done, although far less frequently, and they are usually created to achieve a unique style or a personal effect.

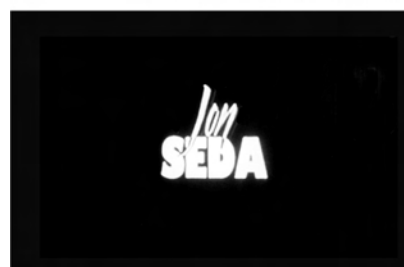
The person or company who is credited for "titles" or as "title designer" at the end of the film is the designer of the title sequence, and only rarely the creator of the actual lettering. The title designer selects the type of lettering, how and when it will go together with graphics or film elements, storyboards the concepts to develop the progression, and is responsible for setting the initial tone and feeling for the film, as well as informing the audience about who created it.

In the 1950's Saul Bass changed the face of main title sequences by treating them as something other than a list of names, adding graphic elements and actually designing the frames sometimes creating an abstract though adjunct tale. Titles

* Some titles such as those in *My Man Godfrey* (1936) still amaze me with how innovative they could be.

PRODUCTION MANAGER **Ron Waller**
 TITLE DESIGN **Maury Nemoy**
 PRODUCTION LIASION **Vic Hanson**
 SOUND **Michael Moore**
 SCRIPT GIRL **Patricia Foster**
 EDITING **Noel Black**

Maury Nemoy lettered and designed the title sequence for *Skaterdater*, a 1965 film about skateboarders. It's rare to see both title design and lettering by the same person.



Pablo Ferro, title designer, combined type with two handlettered styles done by Jill Bell, 1996.

These titles have a similar feel to the main titles he did for *To Live and Die in LA*.

became a respected art of their own within the industry. After creating the titles for the movie *Seven* in 1995, Kyle Cooper and his company Imaginary Forces became the latest, hot title designers by creating trendy, computerized main title sequences (think MTV).

Aside from a few exceptional cases where a powerful and commanding director/producer branded their film with a total look, the graphic style of the title sequence is usually completely different from the style of the poster for the same film with good reason: they are art directed and created for different purposes by different people in different phases of production and promotion. This has been the case throughout film's one-hundred year history as the trailers, posters and marketing pieces are meant to lure people into the theaters, while the opening sequence of the film sets the ambiance for an already enlisted audience. The opposite is true in television where the opening sequence has less than a minute to grab and keep the audience from channel surfing.

Two pioneering hands in the industry

While there were and are many people lettering in the industry who are now forgotten or who work in relative obscurity, there are two rather outstanding gentlemen whose lettering careers run the gamut of work in Hollywood and serve as a wonderful example of every aspect of this article.

Maury Nemoy and Harold Adler not only did huge quantities of handlettering in the film industry during their careers, but they were also a major impetus and guiding light in calligraphy's development in this city. Both were members of the fledgling Society of Calligraphers of Los Angeles (1949-1953), a small group of about 20 working professionals in related fields that met monthly at one of their homes. And both were charter members of the still extant Society for Calligraphy



Jill Bell, logotype for television program, 1997



Jill Bell, logotype for television program, 1993



Harold Adler (and/or Maury Nemoy) for Saul Bass, 1955



Maury Nemoy (for Saul Bass) 1957

founded in 1972.

Adler and Nemoy were friends, born just months apart, who moved to Los Angeles from the Chicago area together and studied design and lettering at Frank Wiggins Trade School (which later became LA Trade Tech). This school has trained a number of LA's finest graphic design and lettering professionals including Doyald Young, and to this day still provides the industry with signpainters, graphic artists and the like. They both began doing show-card work in the industry in the 30's, and worked wielding pen and brush their entire lives.

To this day Nemoy, who passed away nearly two decades ago in 1984, is still given special recognition by the Society for Calligraphy for his contributions as he taught calligraphy from the 50's on at UCLA and mentored so many over the decades.

Adler, who passed away in 2002, was 89 and still active handlettering movie titles and doing other work. Adler is the lettering force and look behind many of Saul Bass's famous title sequences including those for Alfred Hitchcock, *The Seven Year Itch*, and *The Man With the Golden Arm*.^{*} In their book *Type in Motion*, Jeff Ballantoni and Matt Woolman said that Adler, "the father of title design, paved the way for Pablo Ferro and Saul Bass and.... influenced a growing number of young title designers today." Ferro, probably the best and most renown title designer today and a frequent collaborator with Adler, said "Harold made me look good."

Both Adler and Nemoy created a huge volume of film and television related lettering including numerous logotypes, collateral, invitations, and announcements as well as having handlettered titles for hundreds of films each. Calligraphy was at the foundation of their lettering skills and frequented their repertoire.

^{*} There is some evidence that Maury Nemoy worked on the logo and/or titles of these two films as well.



Harold Adler, Logotype and titles, 1954



Maury Nemoy



Harold Adler, 1962



Maury Nemoy, 1962

Really Big Business

After the studio system and its oligopoly were broken up by anti-trust laws in the late 40's, there were a multitude of other factors that also forced pervasive change on the industry during the 50's, notably the effects of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee, the spread of television, and competition from European films.

In the 60's large conglomerates started buying studios and other media companies. The power the studios previously held was appropriated by the stars and their agents, distribution companies and the multi-national conglomerates. Today Disney is the only large studio that remains independent. If film was a big business before, it is even more so now.

Another significant change that occurred in the industry was the acceptance of film as an art form and the number of directors educated in film schools during the 70's including Coppola, Lucas, Scorsese and Spielberg. As independent film making became more common, the big studios shifted their focus and also become vehicles for distribution, multi-media companies, and began to focus on producing blockbuster movies, which often includes advertising, merchandising and licensing before filming even begins.

Marketing movies and the logotype

Producing, promoting and packaging a movie is a huge, expensive and time consuming project. The producer is in charge of making the film and its initial marketing phases and then the distributor takes control of the film. Locating a distributor for a film is often the first and most important step to obtaining money to finance it. If financed independently, finding a distributor is a mandatory step upon the completion of the film. It is amazing how many costly films die at this point, some of which are resurrected for cable, video/DVD release.

The first packaging, look and logotype



Harold Adler, handlettering freely done with a brush, Saul Bass, title design, 1955.

given to a film will probably be the pre-sell or teaser designed to attract a buyer or distributor who will then repackage it and do the major marketing and licensing. There are film festivals, parties and all sorts of elaborate goings-on to attract distributors. Selling and distributing television programming to various stations nationwide is no less complex.

Once a distributor is found, the primary marketing campaign begins. The look and feel created for the film at this stage is often beyond the control of anyone involved in actually making the film.

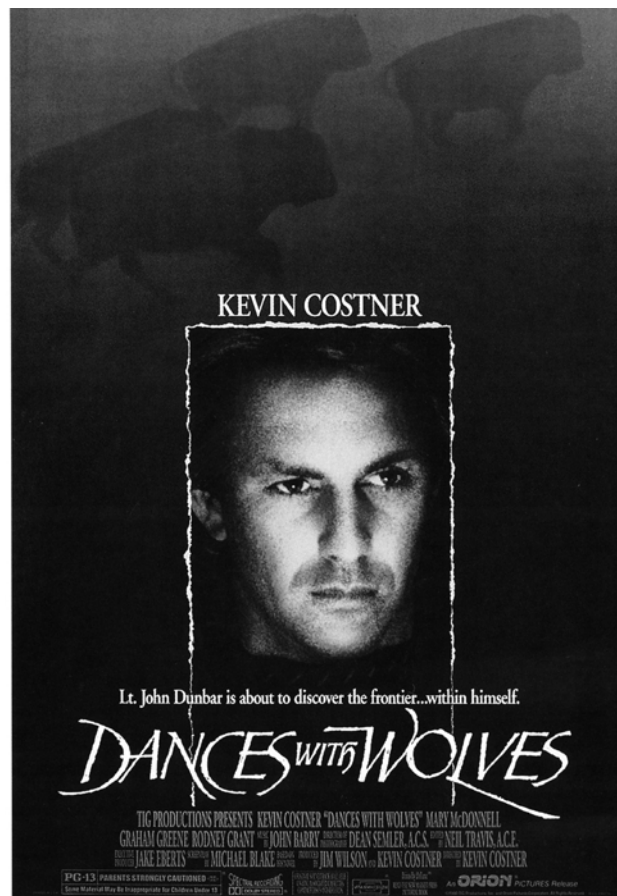
The key art is the film's poster and it basically establishes its brand identity and the primary look that much of the print collateral will have. Quite a bit of the design of the poster is contractually arranged prior to commencing filming and the poster is as much a legal document as a piece of art, with different credits being placed in a specified order, location and of predetermined sizes, including the relationship of the size of the logo to the size of the credits (this has been true since the earliest days of cinema).

Frequently, no expense or exploration is spared at this point as this is the face and positioning that the film will present in print to the public. For a major motion picture, up to 100 or more fully developed, highly refined, full-color posters which look like finished art but are only comps (comprehensive sketches) with just as many accompanying logotype treatments may be presented by numerous design and advertising agencies competing to be awarded the key art for one film. It is quite possible to be asked to do comps of the same logotype by different agencies.

The bigger the money and the production and the more people involved, the less likely any one comp done of a movie logotype will make it past these huge presentations made to win the key art and collateral. Of course this is true of any art or design

THE
DEVIL
AND
DANIEL
WEBSTER

Jill Bell, pre-sell logotype for producer, director and star Alec Baldwin's film, 2001.



Tim Girvin, logotype for Dances with Wolves key art, 1990.



Concurrent poster for the German market. Although the lettering generally reflects Girvin's style, it lacks the warmth, and texture of the original. Notice the difference in the film's positioning in the two markets: the American approach is that this is a dark, psychological film, the German one shows that this is an American cowboy and indian movie, with the indian dominating the poster, even though behind Costner.

that has to go through layers of committee approval, or any bid to win an advertising campaign. Things also get safer and more conservative in the process. Fairly frequently a logotype design from a comp will be used but the final art will be set in type by the agency, less frequently it will be finished by someone else. And to top it off, if it is actually used, the producer or creative director from the agency will undoubtedly get credit for designing it. If the huge quantities of lettering artists who worked on films in the past have fallen into anonymity it is because it is an anonymous part of the film making machinery.

Before beginning work on a movie logo (or lettering for titles), the creative director will occasionally provide a preliminary cut of the film on VHS tape or the script to read, but more often it's just a few sentences about the film from someone who has never seen it. Many times a lettering person is called just before a presentation when an agency suddenly feels that they omitted and need a handlettered approach to the logo to show, or just before the agency creating the key art goes to press and someone says they don't like the logo.

The key art is developed into a loose identity program and is applied to everything from press kits and standees for theater lobbies, to t-shirts and cups. It is presented along with the film to two primary but distinct markets: domestic and international. It is quite possible for a film to have two dozen different packagings created for various foreign film markets alone. Other countries (the French are renown for this) may completely redesign everything themselves. After the film's release, comes yet another follow-up campaign, with quotes from reviewers, a repositioning of ads and, infrequently, a re-editing of the actual film.

The distribution and repackaging, or 'repurposing content' sequence continues as the film goes on, in approximately this

JOHN WAYNE
RED RIVER

**SEVEN FACES
OF DR. LAO**

*★ An ★
American ★
in Paris ★*

Devils Disciple

*"Charlie Chan
in the
Secret Service"*

Jim Thornton, logotypes done for MGM's video releases of their film library.

**PLANET
GRANDE**

Jill Bell, film company logotype for Planet Grande Pictures, 1997.

order: pay-per-view, subscription movie cable channels, video and DVD (with its own additional documentation and graphic needs), cable, domestic and international television and a director's cut. And then there's licensing and merchandising (the products), the soundtrack on CD, and (hopefully) an Oscar campaign. The packaging of older films usually gets a facelift with a new look and logo when re-released, whether at the theater, on television, video or DVD. Although one contiguous look may be established, more frequently a film ends up with any number of logotypes and packaging designs as there are so many different stages, markets and aspects to be dealt with.

And nominated for his starring role in the logotype category...

When it comes to contemporary movie logotypes, the calligraphy vogue of the last three decades has definitely made an impact on the look of lettering in the industry, as it has in all of advertising. Many who started out doing calligraphy in the 70's on the winds of the hippy arts and crafts movement ended up with careers in the field. Margo Chase, who began her art career as a medical illustrator, said her mom was a calligrapher. Chase did the logotypes for *Dracula*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. But one person certainly stands out for creating effective movie logos that retain a calligraphic feel and that is Tim Girvin.

After spotting the work of Girvin in a magazine in the late 70's, producer and director Francis Ford Coppola hired the young Seattle graphic designer to create the logotype for *Apocalypse Now*. Girvin's been in demand ever since and his subsequent work graces some of the best motion pictures in the last two decades including: *Dances With Wolves*, *Legends of the Fall*, *The Unforgiven*, *Glory*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *The Hunt for Red*

Cecil B. DeMille's
The Ten
Commandments

CECIL B. DEMILLE'S
THE TEN
COMMANDMENTS

CECIL B. DEMILLE'S
THE TEN
COMMANDMENTS

CECIL B. DEMILLE'S
The TEN
COMMANDMENTS

Richard Stumpf, comps along with the selected logotype (top) for film's re-release in the 80's. Used on subsequent packaging such as video and DVDs.



Jill Bell, lettering done on a hand model's hand for a Jack in the Box commercial, 1992.

October, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *The Matrix*. The majority of his logotypes and marks are informed by pen and brush and retain the elegance, skill and life of his hand.

And so it goes

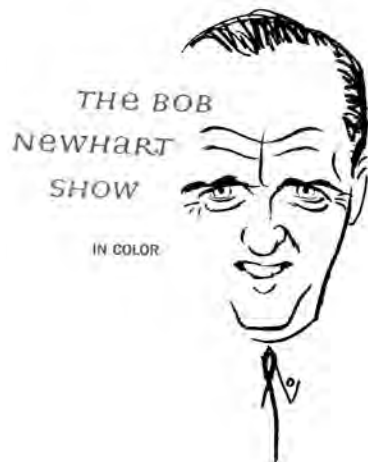
As one designer told me “with 25,000 fonts, who needs handlettering?” Of course digital lettering and computerized effects continue to gain control of the market in Hollywood as elsewhere. If you want to do title design these days, you will undoubtedly be advised to learn Adobe After Effects, not to go to LA Trade Tech. It is unfortunate that lettering and typographic skills are getting shelved along the way by both educational institutions and industry. No building will succeed without a foundation. But it’s also undeniable that there is a huge interest in letters these days, even if it takes the form of graffiti, trendy computer effects, garage fonts or simply a fascination with all those typefaces available on our computers. Inevitably, tomorrow’s lettering stars will be those who have both roots and wings, as the saying goes.

And as for calligraphy, while not a dominant force in lettering in Hollywood, it is still alive and well and probably always will be.

Jill Bell grew up in Culver City where she snuck on to the MGM and Desilu lots as a kid, was first proposed to by the son of Nicholas Ray (director, *Rebel Without a Cause*) and Gloria Graham (Oscar, best supporting actress, *The Bad and the Beautiful*), her daughter married a Zanuck (20th Century Fox mogul), she worked briefly for Saul Bass in the 80’s, and has affectionately named one of her typefaces *Hollyweird* (replete with stars, dollar bills and AA symbols). Oh yeah, and she’s done a lot of lettering for the biz.



Jill Bell, freely-written italic calligraphy for main titles of feature film *Kimberly*, a romantic comedy, 1998.



Maury Nemo's lettering on publicity materials for Bob Newhart's television show which ran through the 60's and 70's.

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