

Writ Large

Mural making by Ann Miller

ALL IT TOOK was one public statement. In the Spring of 2004 I was being interviewed by a writer from the alumni magazine of my alma mater for a spotlight article covering my recent efforts to put calligraphy classes online through the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. As the interview progressed, I was asked whether I ever did murals and I responded half jokingly that most of my time was spent in the studio and I did not “do ladders.” Of course this comment ended up staring back at me in print, and made me begin to think of new ways to connect walls and paint.

Not long after the interview I received a request over the telephone for a mural.

My master’s degree in painting consisted of 6’x6’ canvases, so I am used to the larger arm movements, and have done some wall pieces and scenes over the years. I have also lettered and gold-leafed plate glass for retail signage and done a number of logotypes on glass windows. Unfortunately, the wrecking ball and a lobbed brick left the last two of my client windows in shards.

Over the past two years I have accepted three mural projects, all different in character. The first in April 2004 was for a baby’s room; the second was for a very large new library finished in March 2006, and the third was for a start-up business. I enjoyed all of them because I am happy when I am moving around and painting, and because I see how it should be for the client. I like the

challenge of tackling a large space, the precise measuring (thrill of not making a mistake), the color choices, and the development of the character of the image.

Mural for the Conways

The client wanted a specific mural for her new baby’s room, over the crib. She showed me a very old children’s book that her mother had had when she was a child, probably in the 1920s; it contained a charming illustration which formed the basis for the wall painting. This was the first mural I had done in quite a while. So I thought you would like to see some pictures of it, painted in three full days with acrylic tube paint and a variety of brushes on a freshly painted sheetrock wall. I scanned the book page, tiled it and printed it, taping it together to size. Then I made a large drawing on tracing paper placing the elements differently and adding some detail. I painted a portrait of the family dog Millie in the center of the layout and invented a boy running, expanding the background to accommodate the new proportion and size. It was such fun to paint this scene. It was also wonderful to visit it after two years and to get to know the bright two-year old who told me about his favorite things in the painting.

This turned out to be a truly enjoyable experience, which proved again that one should never say “never!”

Murals for Belmont Library

In fall of 2005 the City of Belmont, California, was looking for a calligrapher to write out a poem—praising the beauty of the city and written in 1967 by a beloved mayor of the town—to be displayed in the lobby



Above: Mural for the Conways. Details are shown on the facing page.

Main Image, left: One of the murals in the Belmont Library.

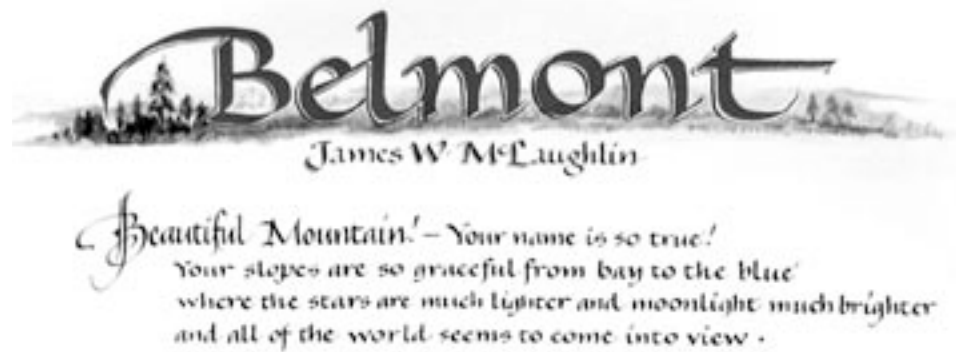
Interior and exterior views
of the new Belmont Library.
Field Paoli Architects, San Francisco.
Mark Darley, Photographer.
Images ©2006MarkDarley/Esto.



Mural in the
Library Director's office.



Belmont Poem,
Belmont City Hall.



of their city hall. I had to make a detailed proposal and appear at the City Council meeting to discuss my ideas and present an estimate. I did get the job and several days after the unveiling of the piece the Director of Finance for Belmont called and said he would like me to do the new Belmont Library murals. He had liked the little scene I painted behind the poem title. Is "yes" the calligrapher's favorite word?

For the people of Belmont the library project began in the early 1990's with an idea and over the decade much energy was spent in fund-raising and planning. Vinyl letters were considered but the alternative of calligraphy was much more attractive.

For me, the Belmont Library mural project began in earnest when I met with the architect, Mark Schatz, of San Francisco's Field Paoli Architects. We met at the new library, which in December '05 was about five months away from completion. I took a portfolio of work, my camera and a tape measure, and as we walked through the building I was impressed by its beautiful design, the sensitivity of the color in the interior design details, and also the size and height of the walls... how would I do this? Mark liked my work and we agreed on the direction to take. He gave me free rein in designing whatever I thought best, but we worked closely through about two months of planning to make sure all details were covered. I would have the use of scaffolding but did not have clearance to operate a motor-driven lift, so I would have to work around the stanchions and bars... I just hoped that everything would work well.

The library staff and friends had spent a great deal of time in choosing the words to go on the walls. Quotations with wide and classic appeal were selected, in English, Spanish and Chinese.

Here are the words I was given:
Margaret Fuller: If you have knowledge let others light their candles in it.
Francisco X. Alarcon: Los libros son pasaportes de talla mayor que nos permiten viajar a dondequiera, cuandoquiera, y sin dejar de soñar [Books are oversized passports that let us travel anywhere, anytime, and keep on dreaming].

C. S. Lewis: We read to know we are not alone.

Anne Fadiman: I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where edges meet.

Dr. Seuss: The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.

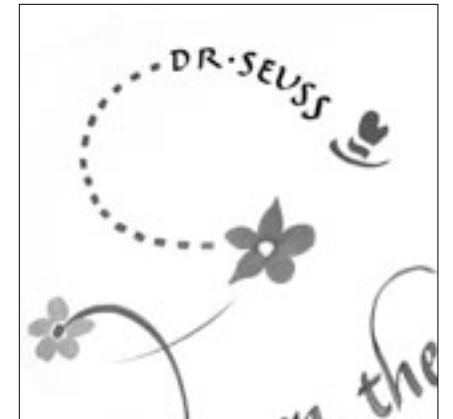
Chinese Proverb: A book is like a garden carried in the pocket—Chinese Proverb [plus the text in Chinese].

There were to be three walls that needed treatment; the first three were to go on the adult area wall, the second in the café, and the remaining two on the children's area wall.

From the photographs taken the first day and the interior elevations I made thumbnail drawings, schematics of the areas to be covered and began to think about the words, how they should look, and where they would be placed. I wanted the words to be inviting and to communicate clearly. I wanted the colors to be integral to the wonderful atmosphere that the architect had already created. I saw swatches of the carpet, studied the fabrics and wall colors, and absorbed the scheme.

For the first trials I used tracing paper on top of my scale drawing printouts to rough out the lettering. I scanned in all of the rough calligraphy ideas and layered them in Illustrator on the schematics. When I printed it out it looked pretty close to the design. It was enough to bring to the first meeting with the library committee, architects, interior designers, and the construction crew. First feedback was good and I proceeded to the second round, firming up the design, lettering and embellishment suggestions for each area.

The second meeting finalized the design concept and we all knew what the walls would contain... now all I had to do was produce the real thing. I went into the Cyberscribes archives and found some helpful information that Jenny Groat had written and I spoke with Carl Rohrs, Jane Dill and Gerald Moscato who shared their mural experiences. But I had many questions that only the doing would answer. I stewed a while over whether I had the right brushes, and bought a few more; ordered every color of LukasCryl that looked good,





Two tiers of scaffolding at the Belmont Library.

for I wanted a permanent matte finish; and assembled rolls of Saral, carpenter's tape, sponges and rags, bowls, charcoal, yardstick, a suitcase full of various implements and tools and a large bucket for water.

I began to look around for fonts to simulate my lettering in order to easily work with the spacing and manipulate size, weight, proportion and placement of the letters. This is an essential timesaver and allows for greater accuracy. With the elevation greyed out on the base layer in Illustrator, and the scanned calligraphy on the next layer, I created a third layer with the type superimposed over all, matching the calligraphy as closely as possible. When you blow up calligraphy from a 1/16" stroke to a half inch stroke or more, there is a logarithmic threat of losing correct spacing. It is the opposite from working large and reducing for precision (Work small and enlarge to expose error!).

The next step was to produce the templates to scale. Using Illustrator I superimposed—on top of my final draft calligraphy images—fonts such as Silentium Pro, Balzano Standard, and Ex Ponto to regulate spacing, manipulate arcs, customize ascenders and descenders, and apply color for the final drafts. I drew in some lines and shapes for leaf and vine motifs to suggest to myself where flowers and flourishes might go, and finished the design as far as necessary. At the 1/20th scale size, the fonts looked close enough to the calligraphy drafts.

The templates for the smaller quotes I tiled on my laser printer, taping or stapling them together. The larger ones were tiled on the wide format printer

at Kinko's; they were run out vertically to be taped to the wall in 44-inch by 10-foot strips. The area to be covered ranged from about 50 square feet for the café wall to about 400 square feet each for the north and east walls. The murals were to start at 8 feet off the ground and continue up to 16 feet and more. With two-tiered scaffolding I would be standing 12 feet off the ground. You can see that the scale of this requires some preparation, both mentally and physically.

I did a series of small trials with every size of brush from 1/4" to 2" wide, testing words of all heights. I taped them to the wall and stood back, checking legibility at each distance. This confirmed the brush size I would use once I was up close to the wall and unable to just step back. I found that slightly wider letterspacing is good when using a brush, to allow for legibility from a distance and to allow for slight variations in pressure.

With the black and white templates in hand I was ready for action and figured it would take about three days for each wall. One to mount the paper templates and transfer the letter outlines to the wall and two to do the lettering.

Centering the murals and leveling the baselines was challenging. The large rolls of paper are unwieldy and I took a lot of care to get the lines of text level and centered on the walls. Then the letterforms were transferred by taping carbon paper behind the templates and tracing the letters onto the painted sheetrock wall with pencil.

I worried a bit over the first strokes, feeling my way into the quote, and made more adjustments until the right brush and stroke width were found. A wet cloth was my eraser. I relied on the edge of the transfer drawing to guide my brush, and using spontaneity whenever possible. The paint worked well on the sheetrock but the drying time was fairly quick. The HVAC was being tested while I was doing the entire kids' wall, which made the paint dry very quickly and made corrections chancy at best. I used matte medium to slightly retard the drying time and I suppose I could have used a retardant. It went from really hot to really cold every 10 minutes for entire afternoon!

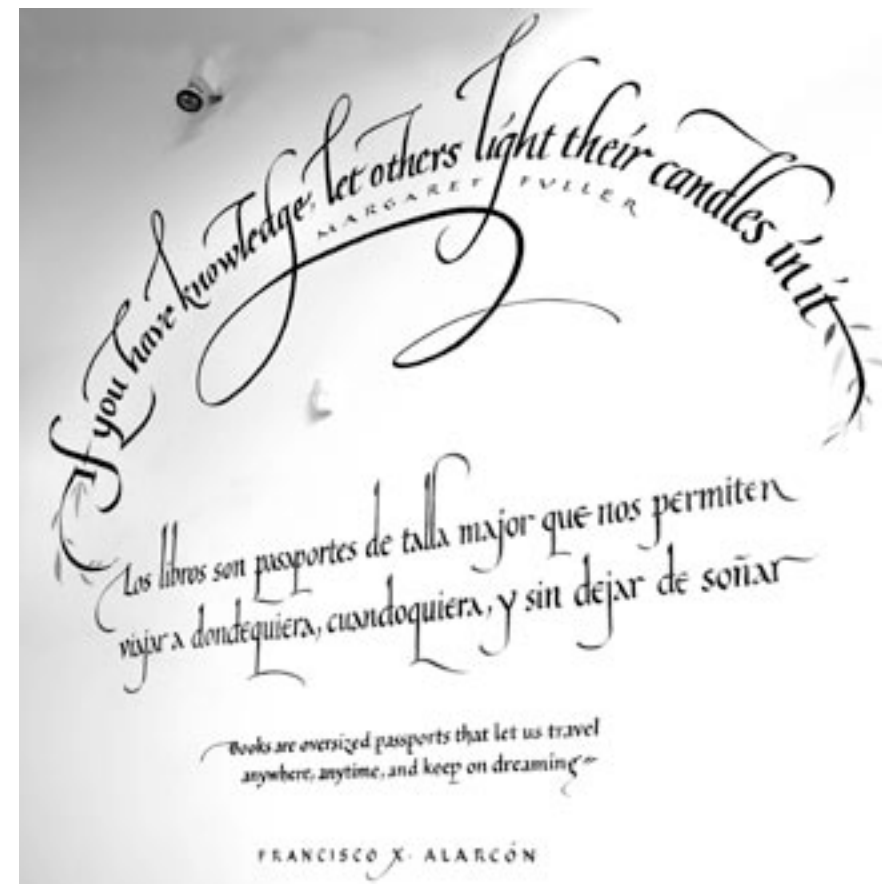
It seems obvious, but the movements required by brush on wall are much different than writing on a slant. There is the drip, the sometimes awkward arm angle, and the entirely different cone of vision. When working up close to the wall the letters in front are in focus and perspective, but you can't see the entire line of writing in the normal peripheral-vision way. For this reason it is important to know the material well beforehand. Then there is the problem of stepping off the scaffold to get a better view!

Andrew Mack Grey Quill and One-Stroke Brushes were excellent. Other good brushes were Winsor & Newton Series 995 1/2 inch flat sable, CreativeMark Kolinsky Acrylic Rounds, which hold a lot of paint and were great for long strokes, and perhaps my favorite for this project—the Perfect Balance Pure Red Sable Flat, which held the most consistent edge.

I love doing Chinese characters and large stroke paintings and am familiar with the construction of the basic eastern strokes and radicals. The first Chinese file was a low resolution bitmapped image so I needed to research it to the root; writing in a non-native language requires care. I needed the phonetic transliteration in order to look up the words, which are listed alphabetically. Fortunately, Mark Schatz was able to put me in touch with an associate who could provide the transliteration and proofread the Chinese. Then I consulted my own Pocket Oxford Chinese Dictionary and W. Simon's *How to Study and Write Chinese Characters* (Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd, London, 2nd rev. ed. 1967), where I found all the links. With the puzzle finally complete, I wrote out the characters with the brush after tracing them on the wall from my template. I arranged the characters with the large word meaning "book" on top, hoping to form a sort of Mycenaean Lion Gate over the doorway, to contrast with the almond shaped design of the Dr. Seuss quote on the same wall. I chose a non-traditional umber color for the characters to harmonize with the architecture and interiors and the other murals, to blend with the muted light yellow-umber walls of the large room, to contrast with the warm blue-



Wide format printout taped to wall.

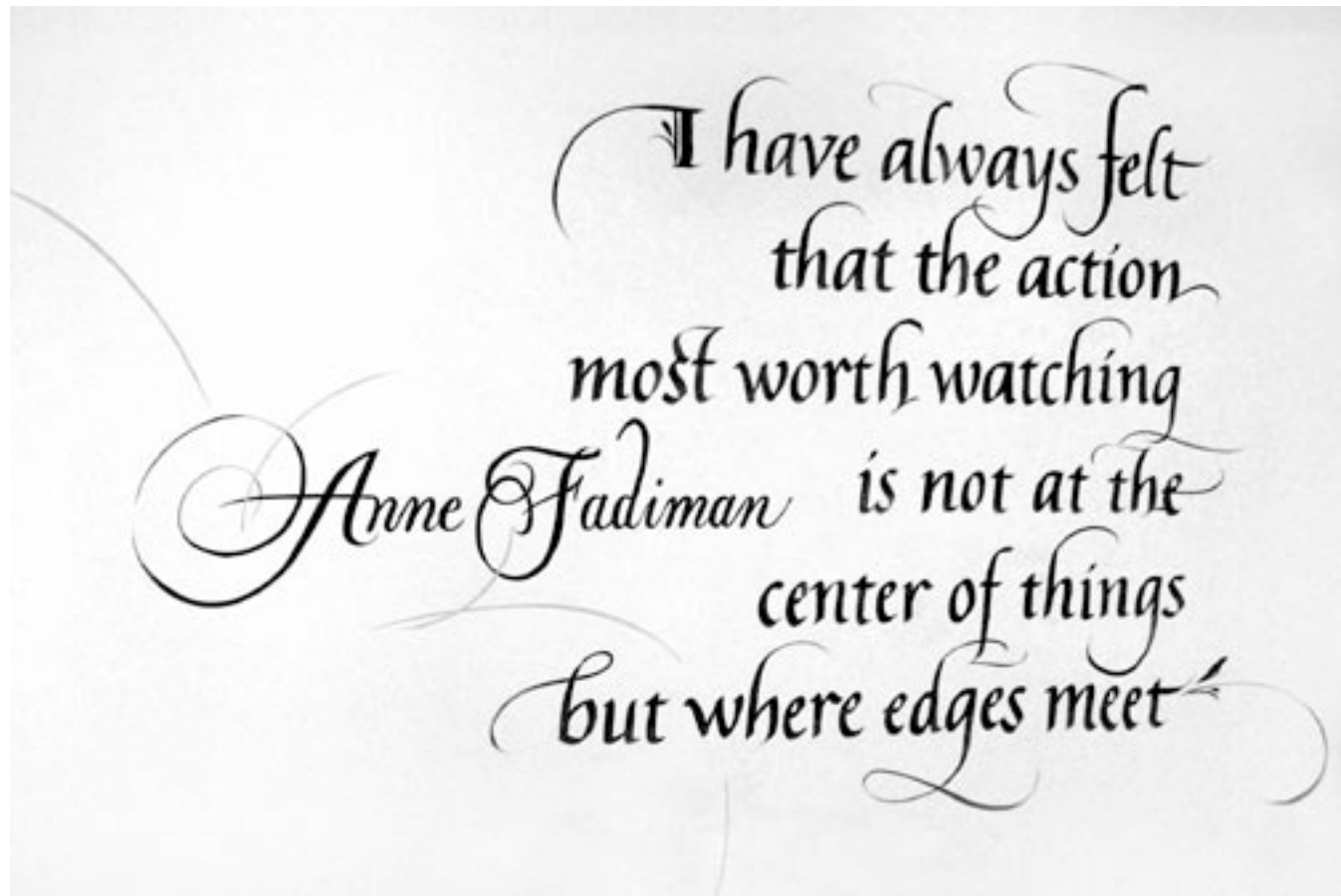


North wall composite in black, rust, raw sienna and dark moss.

Detail of North Wall.



Mural in the children's area.



Mural in the café.

A Chinese and English inscription over a doorway near the children's area.

書

像是裝在口袋裡的花園。

A book is like a garden carried in the pocket
CHINESE PROVERB

green walls behind, and to add to the gentleness of the children's area. For the English translation and the attribution I chose red and gold, auspicious colors in Chinese culture.

In all I spent about eleven days working from nine to five, climbing up and down the two tiers of scaffolding to check and recheck size, shape, color and perspective while working against the arrival of the furniture and laying of the carpets. It took a short while to get my scaffold climbing maneuvers down but I found all the good hand-holds. I used the yard stick a lot, with the level pressed against it, to determine baselines. This enabled me to walk the 16 feet from one side to the other drawing a straight line with vine charcoal. Of course, there is a little fence in between the pair of platforms, so there was a lot of climbing going from side to side, and you get used to the swaying.

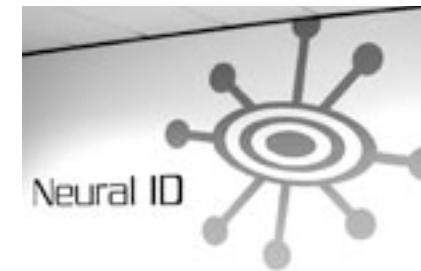
The café wall is close to the viewer and needed some precision. There is a certain pressure that is needed to lay down the paint without build-up rolling out at the edges, but coverage wasn't a problem. I enjoy the uneven texture of the paint when it is a natural by-product of the writing movement.

While I was working the director of the library asked me to develop another one for her office: "Reading is my passion." This small one took a day and was only six feet from the floor, so it needed to be more precisely painted. I did a rough draft in calligraphy and enlarged it in the computer, tiling a 6' long printout. I used this to transfer the image to the wall and created a full background for the letters.

This a fantastic project and I am proud to have been a part of it. I receive calls frequently from people asking for mural work and other calligraphy and design services, so I couldn't be happier.

Mural for Neural ID

This was done for Tim Carruthers, who has a startup business in my office building. The logo was scanned from his business card. A hard-edged mural can be done by applying low-tack frisket to the wall, taping the paper template in place on top and then cutting through both layers with a sharp blade. Incising slightly into the wallboard is helpful,



just to make sure the frisket separates cleanly when removed. After removing the stencil from areas to be painted, the outer edges are pressed down securely to create a tight seal and then paint is applied with sponge or small (3") roller. Two coats of acrylic paint will work well on sheetrock. Just be careful not to cut too deeply or the top layer of sheetrock covering can come loose. Another caveat is to brush or roll toward the center of the open area, never outward against the frisket edge. In intricate areas or corners it is a good idea to brush the paint on gently around the edge and then roll. Sponge brushes or paint applicators for stenciling are available also. After the frisket is removed the edges may be touched up with wall paint or carefully touched up with the blade. Touchup is important, and any thin areas should be corrected with the roller prior to removing the frisket. This operation is fairly routine for the artist, but it is a positive enhancement for a business and therefore nice to be able to offer. It is highly visible and has the usual challenges and advantages of any job done by hand.

Getting up close to creating form is always good, and every opportunity a treasure. It is great to have the chance to work on a shared end, to get to know others and their passions a bit better, and to make something that will speak to the next generation. I love what Kaz Tanahashi has done with his large enso and I love what Joachim Propfe has done with his incredibly beautiful mural work in Europe. I love what the group in Bruges has done with the carved calligraphic stone markers in the city. Working on a large scale puts you in the middle of your community with your hands on the wheel and it's an attractive force that overcomes the physical effort and keeps you dreaming of the next wall.

let us travel
dreaming"