

The promotion of writing and writing equipment

by David Jury



Until the 1880s, when the typewriter began to take over much of the mundane recording of day-to-day business activities⁽¹⁾ handwriting that was clear and accurate was the skill required for virtually every kind of commercial activity. The entire prosperity and lucrativeness of a merchant's business depends upon the regular and accurate keeping of the books⁽²⁾. Such skills stood the clerk in good stead and he was assured of regular if modestly paid employment. This lasted until the latter part of the 19th century when the arrival of the typewriter, the free state education system, and competition from lower-paid (predominantly female) workers combined to destroy the status of the clerk.

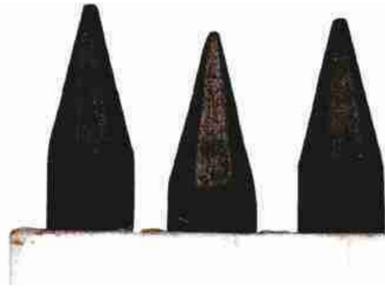
The enthusiasm from within the business sector for the typewriter was such that the distinctive visual appearance of typed correspondence quickly came to represent the very process of commercial enterprise. This remarkable success was achieved despite its renowned technical foibles and crude aesthetic. The essential factor was that the typewriter and its female typist were perceived as efficient, attractive and modern. Together, they represented the future, whilst the pen and the clerk 'miserable little pen-drivers, fellows in black coats with inky fingers and shiny seats on their trousers..' represented the past⁽³⁾.

Previously, the advantage of handwriting over existing print processes had been speed. Records of transactions could be done on a daily basis at relatively little cost and at a convenient time. After the commercial introduction of the typewriter in the 1870s, speed could no longer be described as the prime requirement of handwriting. And, once there was no longer a job specifically dependent upon *writing*, then the point - the very purpose of writing - changed. It was no longer the sole, nor the superior, method for business correspondence. It was not even retained in many cases, for the recording of facts and figures⁽⁴⁾. Instead, it was felt that clarity, quite consciously at the expense of individuality - essentially establishing a standard uniform for all business communication - was preferred to the idiosyncrasies of handwriting, which for some might be perceived as pretentious, even deceitful. In other words, handwriting was not 'business-ike' any more.

If writing, produced for the purposes of recording and communicating information for others to read, was no longer necessary or even desirable, what was handwriting for? Of course, handwriting for casual (informal) or recreational purposes, the ability to make a note, an aide memoire, would still be required, but such ephemeral functions - no longer 'communication' as such - were considered by many to be depressingly inappropriate for an activity, indeed an art, with such a rich and cultured history. It was not surprising, therefore, that by the end of the 19th century, under the influences of John Ruskin, William Morris, and the Arts and Craft Movement, the need to impress on educators the value of using handwriting as an expressive outlet at school was being vigorously called for⁽⁵⁾. The nature of penmanship had been somewhat subsumed by the needs of commerce. There were certainly some who felt that since a machine could now take over essential but mundane office tasks, why not take this opportunity to 'liberate' handwriting, give it back its humanistic potential?

During the 19th century, the pen itself also underwent several radical changes. Prior to the 1830s, the quill had remained the universal writing instrument in Western cultures for centuries. The natural goose feather is remarkably flexible, enabling the writer to produce an extraordinary range of line widths simply by varying the pressure of the pen-nib on the paper (see the signature below). This flexibility not only provided the opportunity for the writer to add expression to the written word, it also made the quill far easier to use and particularly forgiving of a tired hand. Its disadvantage was that because it had a relatively short lifespan (despite constant re-cutting) millions of goose feathers had to be imported each year at enormous cost⁽⁶⁾.





1/4 -dozen
Fate's

for iKe new
Everpointed
Pencils M 25.

The 19th century saw an ever increasing amount of business correspondence, banking, and accounting¹. The needs of business had initially provided a huge market for the providers of quills (whilst schools, generally, had to use far cheaper slates and pencils) and, as a result, attempts to mass-produce a 'quill nib' were made. These 'luxury', yet high-volume items (typically sold in set quantities for use with holders, which were bought separately) were pre-cut and intended to be discarded rather than re-cut - a time consuming and, therefore, costly process. For a brief period, these shared the market with a new, but rather utilitarian option, the steel pen. Although initially very unpopular, (with clerks at least, employers liked the idea of their employees no longer spending half of their time re-cutting their quills) the metal nib quickly improved, and, as a consequence, the sale of quills fell sharply.

(Note: the word 'pen' had originally referred to the quill feather, whilst the 'nib' was the shaped and sharpened end when it had been cut for writing. Later, when mechanized production of the steel nibs was developed, these were, confusingly, also called 'steel pens', as well as 'pen nibs'.)

Once the considerable technical problems of pen-nib manufacture had been solved, a plethora of manufacturing companies, distributors, trade names, and range names fought with flair and ingenuity to catch the eye of potential customers. Competition was fierce but the profits were worth fighting for. The production numbers, for example, of Gillot's steel-pen factory alone, are staggering: in 1842 seventy million pen-nibs were produced; eight years later, annual production had more than doubled.

The earliest containers for pen-nibs were made entirely from metal, and took various physical forms with the maker's name and other information embossed, usually on the lid. As production increased and the price reduced, these elaborate metal containers were replaced by small, simple, card boxes, generally covered in a plain or patterned paper onto which a label would be pasted.

For the most part, pen-nib box labels were printed from steel or copper plates, which meant that all the artwork, including the letters, was drawn and engraved by hand. Occasionally, two printing techniques might be employed, the most common being an engraved illustration coupled with letterpress type. The small scale of these labels, often requiring copious amounts of information, was standard fare for the 19th century printer. Trade cards, tickets, as well as labels for wine, tobacco, tea and other goods had been commonplace for more than a hundred years⁽⁸⁾. But what makes pen nib labels stand out from other commercial artwork done by engravers and printers at this time is the nature and fierceness of commercial competition, combined with the technical means allowing unfettered creative solutions. The results provide a miniature gallery of extravagant and inventive letters and blazing colours, their sophistication demonstrating the considerable flair of the jobbing printer in the latter half of the 19th century.

Attempting to obtain the right balance of attraction and the maintenance of the integrity of a product's heritage is a particularly modern design problem. It is apparent that the need for nib boxes to attract meant that it was quickly and unanimously recognised that fine copperplate lettering - still generally presented as the ideal model for handwriting - could not be used on pen-nib labels because it lacked the visual 'presence' required to attract the eye in the busy environment of a shop window or counter. As a result, adapting letterpress display typefaces became the norm, and the extent of the 'adaptation' was entirely dependant upon the inventiveness of the designer/engraver/printer.

The concept of the 'display' face had been around since almost the beginning of the 19th century, from typefoundries, such as Thorowgood and Figgins in London, who famously produced fat faces, dropped shadows (or 'shaded'), outlines, grotesques etc. These were the models engravers would use when drawing their own letter designs. The freedom to draw entirely unique letters and make any adjustments/distortions necessary for the label design to function fully must surely have been a liberating experience for anyone who was aware of the constraints of letterpress at that time.

The descriptions on box labels for pen-nibs also reflected the intense competitiveness of the market. The rigidity of the early metal nibs encouraged later manufacturers to stress the flexibility of their product. So-called 'Elastic' pens were



4.1

1 Goose-feathers were imported principally from Canada (Canada Geese!) Northern Europe, and Russia. Quills (for right-handed writers) were made from the main feathers of the left wing because their arched shape best suited the angle and action of the writer. (Left-handed writing was considered dysfunctiona and quite forcibly deterred at school, so there was little demand for quills from the right wing of the goose!) Contrary to numerous, generally romantic, illustrations (see figure 22) the natural feathering was usually trimmed away because it got in the way of cuffs and sleeves. The style of trimming, also known as 'dressing', became something of a fashion statement. The card container is approximately 8.5cm wide at the base

2 The flexibility of the quill gave the writer a remarkable range of line thicknesses, certainly far more than any nib or pen manufactured since. This is the signature of Sir Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
3 Box containing three black leads (described as a quarter dozen). The box has quite an elaborate internal construction with each lead fitting tightly into its own rigid compartment. The outside of the box is covered in a gloss black paper with a printed label pasted on top. It has a slide on lid. Circa 1900. The back of the box has a small, green shop label attached, which reads: 'Lechertier Barbe Ltd. Artists' Colourmen, (72 years at 60 Regent Street,) 95 Jermyn Street, Regent Street, London, S.W

4 Embossed, metal boxes of various forms were initially used to hold pen nibs. As nibs became cheaper to produce, these elaborate containers were replaced with boxes made of card. The Turner & Co box is post 1862. The larger, Perry and Co box, originally had a bright red background, most of which has since been rubbed away. The smaller tin is 6cm, the larger 7cm. In the 20th century, simple metal boxes were used again, this time with information printed in several colours on the surface
4.1 The design of this cylindrical container was patented in 1858 by Hinks & Wells. It is approximately 6cm diameter. It is opened by a sliding 'door' on its side



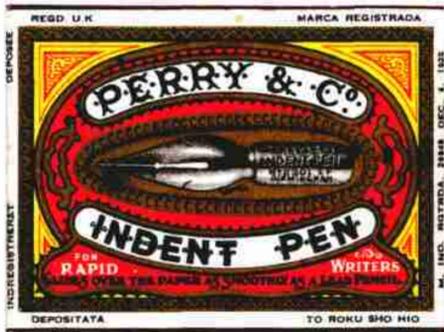
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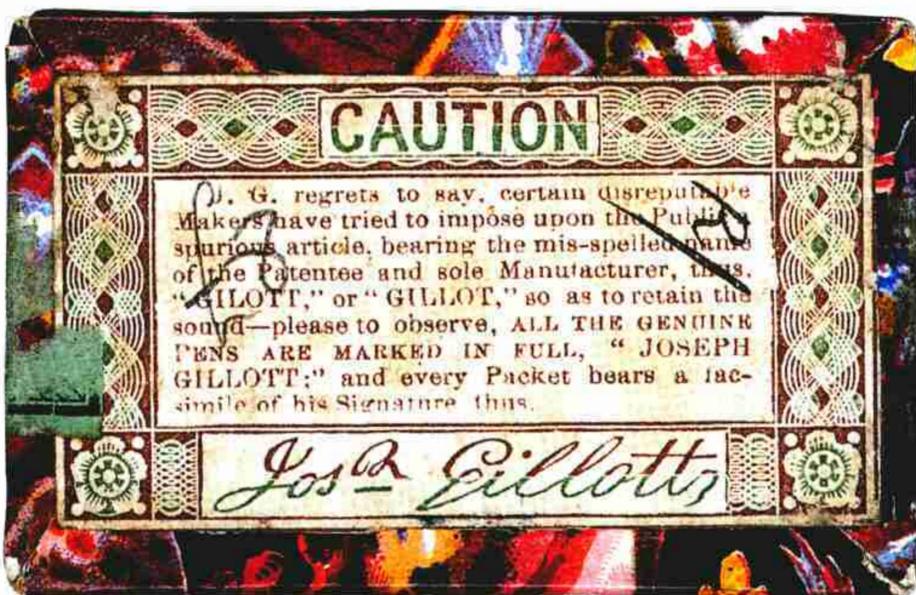
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11



12



13



13.1

ORNAMENT

N9 5007 3 mm



BRAUSESC?
ISERLOHN

14

5 British pen nib boxes from Hinks Wells & Co of Birmingham. The Rifleman Pen. Links to professions were common but often obtuse
5.1 Royalty was a very common marketing ploy and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee would be too good to miss
5.2 'Latem' is 'metal' backwards! One gross is [144], 6 Pence is 2.5p today
6 The Perry and Co Indent pen, 'for rapid writers, glides over the paper as smoothly as a lead pencil'. The term 'indent' refers to indentures (legal documents) which are generally long and complex, the suggestion, therefore, being that this is a longer-lasting pen
6.1 The Invincible pen is a reference to the battleship of the same name.
7 An Italian box from 1936

Dynamic, potent, nationalistic: from the period in which the Fascist Movement was growing in influence.
8 A Portuguese box. 1905. The general appearance of the pen nib varied little and so there was, usually, little point in depicting them on the box. However, this illustration clearly shows the 'cup' designed to allow the nib to retain more ink and also the texture on the nib from the grinding process designed to make the nib flexible and also to ensure the ink is held
9 Mayers & Son Ltd. The 'carbon pen' does not refer to the material with which the pen nib is made, but describes its purpose. 'Carbon' refers to carbon paper, the nib being made stronger to allow the user to put more pressure on the paper

enabling a copy or perhaps two copies (each copy requiring a sheet of carbon paper) to be made
10 An early twentieth century box from Joseph Gillott. Nibs for use with coloured inks were coated with stainless steel because of the corrosive nature of coloured inks
11 An elegant Swiss box. However, it is almost certain that the nibs were manufactured elsewhere, and very likely in Birmingham
12 German box from Herman Muller & Co, based in Leipzig, circa 1920-40
13 The bottom of the box (13.1) has an elaborate label, warning the purchaser 'that certain disreputable makers have tried to impose upon the Public a spurious article...' It was printed using 'compound-plate

printing', an anti-counterfeit method enabling two colours to be printed from one, interlocking plate
13.1 One of the earlier boxes from Joseph Gillott. These early boxes are distinctive because of the striking, patterned paper Gillott's bought in to cover their boxes over which was pasted a simple label. The patterned papers changed as and when each batch was used up. The subject or images on the paper appears to have been of little importance. This box, for example, has a marine theme!
14 German box from Brause & Co. The broad 'spade' on the end of the nib designed to provide a broader line. Such a nib uses more ink and so the 'Ornament' was sold with a cover 'reservoir' enabling it to hold more ink

common, followed, predictably, by 'double-elastic' pens. 'Ladies' pens offered 'ease and grace' as did 'round writer' and 'round hand' pens. Other products suggested professional expertise such as: 'Banker's favourite', 'Reporter', 'Counting house', 'librarian's', 'Post Office', 'legal', 'Rifleman' and 'Scholastic'.

The small size of the product (a typical box containing a gross [144] of pen-nibs, would be approximately 40 x 55mm) was surely another incentive for the elaborate and often colourful label designs. Part of the allure of these labels today is that they depict Victorian values and the popular aesthetic preference for complexity and ornament. The use of colour is not so much to provide order or structure, but rather to further enrich the label, to provide an intriguing, detailed, jewel-like and thoroughly attractive quality. The backs are often equally interesting, not only providing warnings to the buyer of fraudulent, sub-standard copies, but, occasionally, also the shop-seller's label and other clues of provenance.

There was, in fact, a fad for the microscopic. One of the ways this fad found expression was in handwritten miniature inscriptions, usually taking the form of a memento or

decorative keepsake to be carried in a pocket watch or brooch. Predictably, the most favoured text was the Lord's Prayer. The skill of the exercise lay not so much in producing legible characters at such a minuscule size, but rather, in arranging the text so that it occupied, precisely, the space available.

After the appearance of the typewriter, pen-nib labels became bolder and simpler. Lines and shapes began to take on more industrial forms, in an attempt, perhaps, to suggest the continuing relevance of handwriting in an increasingly mechanised workplace. However, well before the end of the 19th century, it was clear that the typewriter was having a detrimental effect on the sale of pen-nibs. But, whilst sales in the business sector were slowly falling away, schools, now providing compulsory education, were a growing market. This was not only the case for pen-nib manufacturers, but also for writing manuals, which evolved into 'writing copy books' and became established as an essential teaching aid.

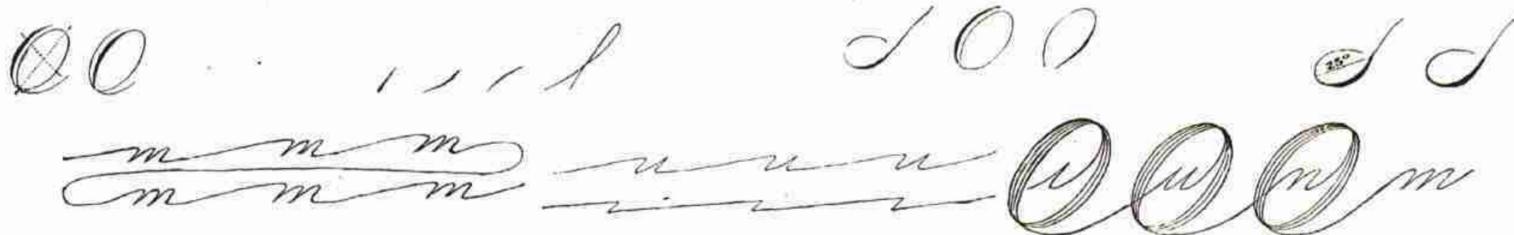
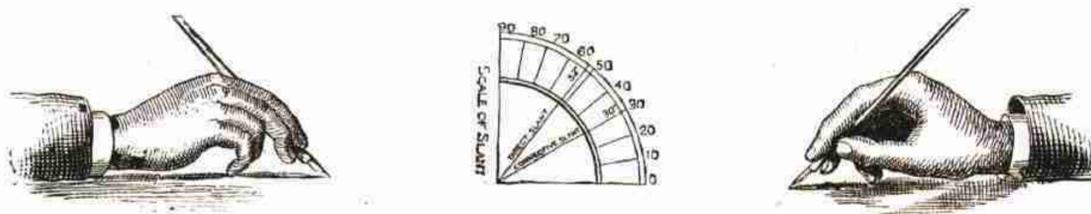
Originally, the earliest copy books simply provided examples of writing styles for the student to emulate. Many of these were produced by writing masters, among them the



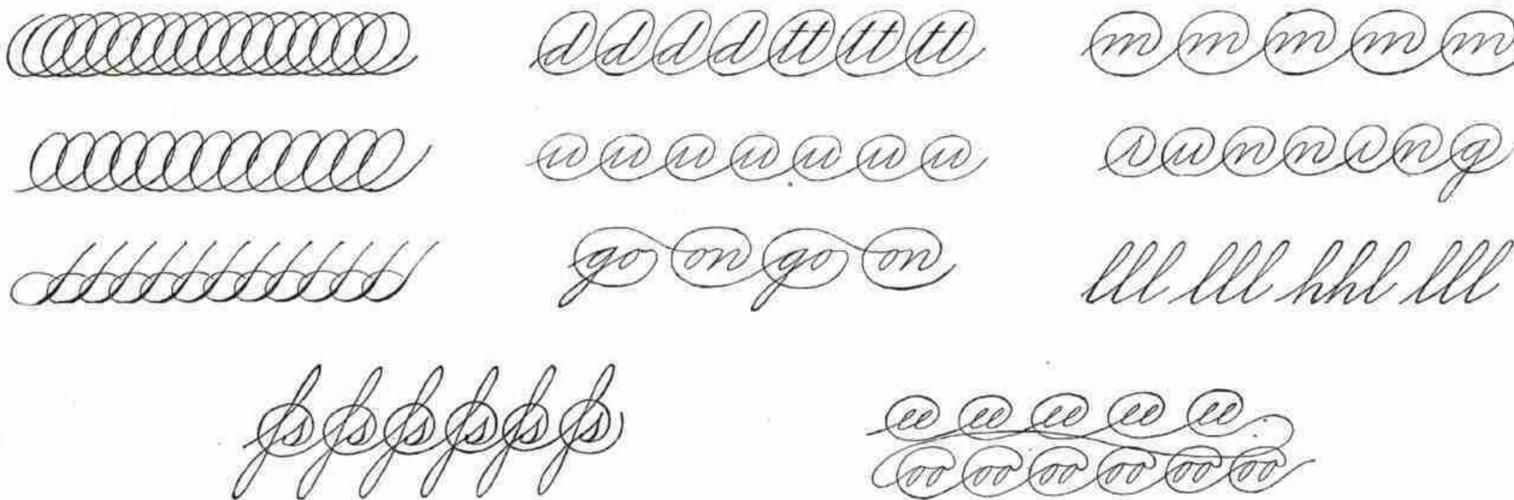
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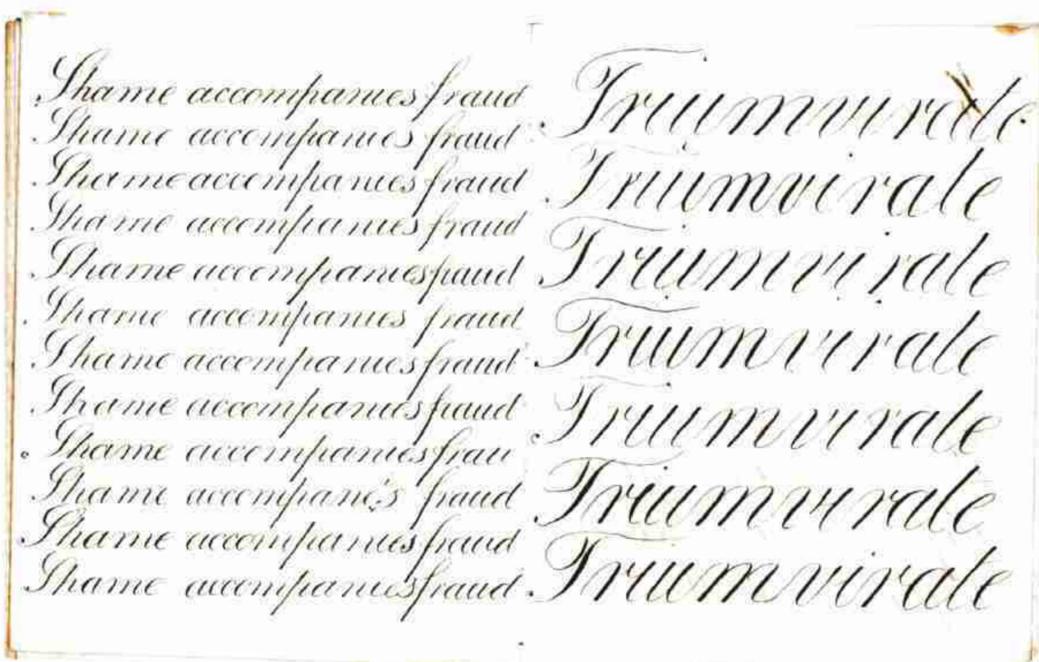
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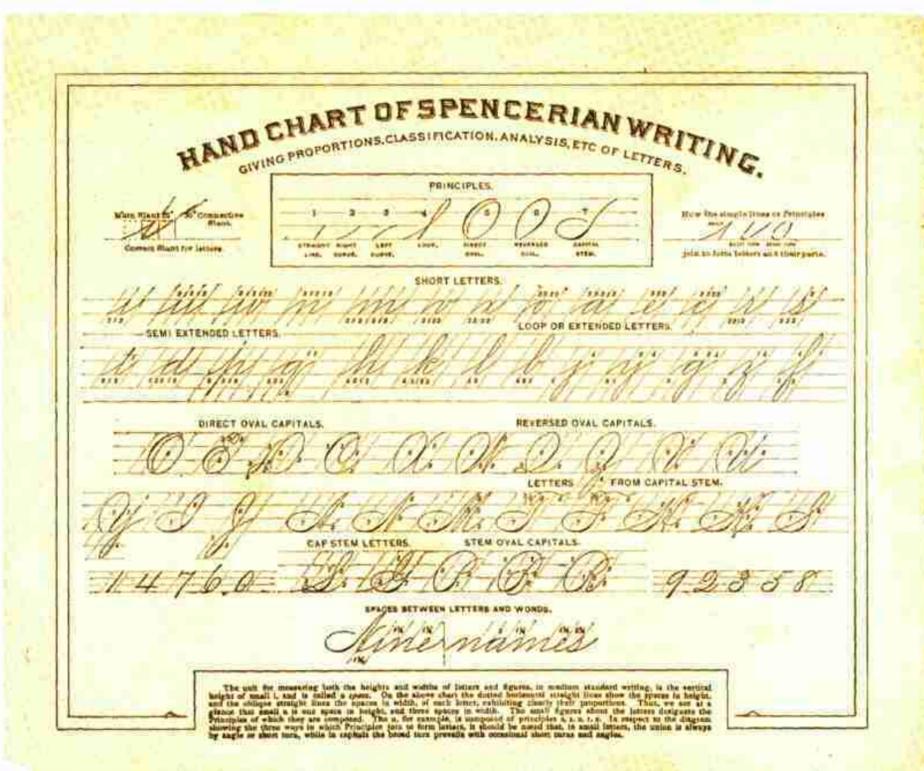
No. 1.—This slip shows both sides of the hand when holding the pen correctly, and contains the scale of slant, all the principles entering into letters, and a few of the simpler exercises. It is important that the learner should study this sheet carefully, and spend much time in getting the principles perfect.



No. 2.—Exercise movements and combinations for practice to give one a free use of the pen. These exercises should be made with the fore-arm movement, and never with the fingers. We mean by the fore-arm, resting on the table the fleshy or muscular part of the fore-arm and the nail of the little finger. This gives an easy rolling motion.



17



18

15 Two examples of miniature writing. The first is a curiosity, and appears to be a personal message, the size being a means of keeping the contents semi-private
 15.1 This text, circa 1920-40, taking up the space of a silver three-penny piece (the smallest British coin at the time) is the Lord's Prayer, four times. The diameter of the circle is approximately 1.5cm
 16 First two 'slips' from a British publication, 'Ames' Mastery of the Pen: a guide to self instruction in practical and ornamental penmanship', published by The Household Journal, London. Circa 1900. The slips were wrapped in a single sheet of paper which acted as a cover. The first slip demonstrates the position of the

hand, the angle of the slant required and some 'simple' exercises. The second concentrates on movement, emphasising the use of the forearm rather than the fingers. This publication was intended to be more than a handwriting manual. Later slips demonstrate how to draw various display letterforms and elaborate flourishes, a standard professional penman's trick, common on many security documents such as cheques, receipts and certificates. Such a document was aimed not only at the professional penman, but also the signwriter and the engraver. 21cm wide
 17 Two pages from a marbled covered, unprinted, writing book. There is a date, written in an adult hand, on the inside front cover which reads 14th

October, 1857, presumably when the book was bought or first used. The age of the child at the time is thought to have been twelve or thirteen. As was typical at the time, each page of writing, in a copperplate style, is given over to repeating a moral statement: 'Pride is unbecoming', 'Revere virtuous principles', 'Study contributes to improvement and happiness', and here 'Shame accompanies fraud'. Single page approximately 20cm wide
 18 The Spencerian system of Penmanship, by P R Spencer, published by the American Book Company, New York, Cincinnati and Chicago in 1888. This book was devised as a series (this being number 4) to be used as a 'common school course'. 22cm wide

Italians, Arrighi(1522XTagliente (1524) and Palatine (1540). Some of the books ran into several editions. By the turn of the 16th century, when Shakespeare wrote Love's Labour's Lost ('Faire as a text B in a Coppie Booke') the concept of the copy book as an exemplar was universally understood⁽⁹⁾. During the 18th century, the 'joined-up' copy book writing style, named copperplate, was developed as the definitive form for commercial transactions. The style originated in London (and to this day, is named der englischeschrift in Germany and Austria).

The 19th century 'writing copy book' is an adaptation of the earlier, Italian, copy book concept. The most famous of these is the wide-ranging British series of Vere Foster's Writing Copy-books. Whilst Arrighi had addressed the leisured and the literate, these pragmatic and relatively cheap copy books were aimed at the elementary school and the aspiring employee, covering specialities from 'Initiatory' to 'Shakespeare Quotations', from 'Plain and Ornamental' to 'Civil Service or Official' styles.

However, the first copy books specifically designed with spaces for the 'student' to copy the 'master's' writing style were published in America during the early part of the 19th century. Laning's New-Invented Copy-Book first appeared in 1815 in Philadelphia, offering an 'easy guide to the art of writing by dotted full guides, half guides, and blank lines for exercise'. There followed, at irregular intervals, a succession of such books, some, by the 1830s, designed specifically for use in schools. By the time Vere Foster's standardized range of copy books first appeared in the UK in 1865, the concept of the copy book as, essentially, a writing book was commonplace. A major feature of the Vere Foster books was the provision of prizes for handwriting competitions. Expenditure on these are said to have been the major cause for the financial downfall of Foster, a remarkably generous advocate of education for the under-privileged.

The rise in popularity for writing, boosted by rapidly improving standards of literacy, and, of course, the cheapness of the new, metal pen-nibs, was creating an ever-growing interest in writing skills for their own sake. Children were encouraged to practise their writing skills (and, simultaneously, demonstrating moral guidance, metaphysical reassurance as well as literary taste) by taking a blank, but often elaborately bound book, in which to write excerpts from the work of favourite authors. Such practices have probably been encouraged since the invention of writing, but certainly Renaissance students were required to record expressions and quotations as a repository for future use in composition and rhetoric.

Competition encouraged pen nib manufacturers to devise alternative methods of attracting attention to their products. The printed showcard, supplied by the manufacturer with the product attached, stemmed from the new-found principle of factory packaging and labelling. Shelf-stocks of labelled products were promotional displays in themselves, and products supplied in boxes would be placed directly on shop counters or in windows. This led to an innovation - the showcard - an item to be displayed on its own anywhere in the shop, with eyelets for hanging or a strut to make it stand. The showcard assumed an independent existence⁽¹⁰⁾.

A variety of nibs, purportedly for a range of differing functions, were first positioned and fixed onto 'display cards' in the 1850s by Joseph Gillot as a tentative experiment. Twelve 'Damascus Steel Pens' were presented on a red and blue printed card, measuring 95 x 145mm. Meanwhile, in New York, Simpson's 'Scientific Steel and Gold Pens', with 'an ink-retaining penholder', appeared on a display card, (215mm square) in the 1860s⁽¹¹⁾.

Retail selling was a growing phenomenon and the use of these combined 'show-and-display' cards, on which the product was generally threaded or pasted, would lead to a dramatic change in the shopping experience. Shops became inundated with cards displaying not only pen-nibs and pens, but also pencils, coloured crayons, erasers and geometry instruments etc. Other shops, for instance, ironmongers, would have cards displaying small household products - such as tap-washers, corn-cures, teapot spout guards etc - that had previously been considered too mundane to put on public display. Importantly, it was the manufacturer who was now controlling how the products should look at the point of purchase, and so everyday items were suddenly being carefully arranged on often elaborately designed cards encouraging the shopper to browse and take pleasure