

# Handwritten Letters in Humanist Cursive Book Hand

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## *WHAT, WHERE and WHEN:*

- Letters to family members written in a humanist cursive script. It is a less formal version of the humanist hand seen in manuscripts such as Books of Hours.
- This type of script is found in many parts of what is present-day Italy, but many examples are from Florence.
- Humanist miniscule was developed in the first half of the fifteenth century, and lasted well into the sixteenth.

## *MATERIALS:*

- Linen rag paper
- Oak gall ink
- Quill pen

## *PROCESS:*

- Cut paper to size
- Mark writing lines lightly with pencil and ruler
- Write letters
- Erase lines

## *SOURCES:*

- Alexander, Jonathan J.G., ed. *The Painted Page : Italian Renaissance Book Illumination 1450-1550*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994.
- Brown, Michelle P. & Patricia Lovett. *The Historical Source Book for Scribes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1999.
- De Hamel, Christopher. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators*. Toronto ; Buffalo : University of Toronto Press, 1992.
- Gregory, Heather, ed. *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1997.
- Harris, David. *The Art of Calligraphy: a Practical Guide to the Skills and Techniques*. New York: DK Publishing Inc., 1995.
- Wieck, Roger S. *Painted Prayers : The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1997.

Italian Humanist scripts began to develop early in the fifteenth century, or even possibly in the late fourteenth. Humanist scholars who were looking to the classics and the Roman world for their inspiration developed the hand as a way to get away from the heavy Gothic styles that had dominated Western Europe for a couple of centuries. Two separate styles emerged in Italy; one was a rotunda style which retained some characteristics of the Gothic hand, and the other came to be known as the Humanist hand. It actually shares some traits with the ninth century style known as Carolingian miniscule.

The formal style of Humanist miniscule is very clean and elegant looking, and it is what the earliest type styles for printing presses were based on. However, there are also examples of what Michelle Brown terms “Humanist Cursive Book Hand.” This is a less formal, faster style of writing, where the letters tend to flow into one another, somewhat muddying the clean appearance of the script. This is the script I chose to use for my persona’s letters, as it was used in period for less formal documents (secular manuscripts, letters, legal papers).

I used an example in *The Historical Source Book for Scribes* as my exemplar, using the text as a reference for forming my letters. This proved a bit of a challenge, as I have not found a standard exemplar, such as those in Marc Drogin’s *Medieval Calligraphy* or David Harris’s *The Art of Calligraphy*. I encountered some problems forming the letters as I wanted, because the paper I used was rougher than I had expected. The ink did not bleed, but the letters did not come out as crisply as I had hoped. I also encountered some problems with ink “blopping” (that being a highly technical scribal term) and smudging. I decided not to sweat it too much, as the paper wouldn’t hold up to my normal method of removing mistakes, which is scraping the ink off and burnishing over the rough spot. This works well with parchment and pergamenta (a vegetable parchment substitute) but not with lighter paper. I’m also fairly certain that such problems would have been common in period, and have even found an example or two with smudges. I also simplified the script a little bit to make it more legible to modern eyes, but also tried to keep it true to the look of the original sample I was using as a reference.

I used a linen rag paper for my letters, as paper was readily available at that time and parchment would have been too expensive for such use. Paper is more accessible to me than parchment as well. The ink I used was iron gall ink, though it was commercially prepared. I have made similar ink before, but I had run out and I did not have the time required to make more. I also used a quill, cut into a pen, for writing. Again, I have cut my own quills before but this time I used a commercially prepared one, for the same reason.

#### ***SOME NOTES ON THE LETTERS:***

The format of the letters is patterned from Alessandra Strozzi’s letters, which have survived to this day. The recipient is rarely addressed by name, though the letters I have written are

intended to be addressed to Giuliana's sister, Buona Salviati, who has married and lives in Siena. The closing of each letter is also based on Alessandra's writings.

*Letter 1 (the gamurra letter):*

- The Orsinis were an actual Roman family in 1470's Italy. Clarice Orsini married Lorenzo de' Medici in 1469, and other members of the family certainly intermarried with the Salviati family, for instance. The names Tommaso and Marciano are fictional, however.
- Giuliana's dowry is reasonable for a fairly wealthy family. Clarice Orsini's dowry was worth 6,000 florins in gold coins, clothing and jewels; by comparison, an artisan's daughter was considered very well off if her dowry was 250 florins.
- Antonio Pollaiuolo was a Florentine painter in the 1470's. Several of his portraits are of young women wearing their finest clothes; these are marriage portraits that show off the wealth of the family.

*Letter 2 (the Book of Hours letter)*

- Marciano's cousin is fictional, but recipes for skin remedies still exist. Some were fairly harmless but others called for toxic ingredients such as lead or mercury. Jacqueline Herald mentions these in *Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400 - 1500*.
- Vespasiano was a prominent book seller in Florence at this time. He procured and sold books and also employed a number of scribes ("scrittori") to make books that were commissioned through him. He sold books to very wealthy and powerful patrons, including kings and popes.
- Saint John the Baptist (San Giovanni) is the patron saint of Florence. His feast day, June 24, was the occasion of great celebrations.

*Letter 3 (the recipe letter)*

- The Ponte Vecchio is still standing in Florence and is still the main path over the Arno river.
- Niccolo Bellini is a fictional person, but there were dealings between the Doge's council in Venice and the Signoria, which was the highest governing body in Florence.
- The white torta contains lard, eggs and butter, which are all animal products and thus would not have been eaten during Lent. Giuliana and her contemporaries would have been vigilant about observing the fasting rules for this time period.