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# Women of Letters

## Fun with fonts

BY BRIDGET CALLAHAN | PHOTOS BY MEGAN DEITZ



**H**and lettering is nothing new. From English monks toiling over elaborate illuminated manuscripts to gorgeous Japanese kakejiku, humans have blended art and the written word for centuries. There is something magical about turning plain words into blossoms of curlicues and dips, which can elevate even the lowliest common noun.

But, recently, there's been a modern resurgence in hand-drawn prints and signs. Coffee and sandwich shops have always had a reputation for their elaborate chalkboards, but the trend has now spread to dive bars, bookshops, breweries, butchers – wherever a business owner is looking to add personality and color to their space. Etsy is bursting at the seams with elaborately lettered wooden plaques for hanging next to mailboxes and fireplaces. Interest in lettering as an art form has skyrocketed, on everything from invitations to table settings, take-home gifts, and seating charts.



Wilmington is, of course, a wedding town. Walk around downtown in early October, and the adventurous seeker can wander past no less than five weddings happening simultaneously. And, with this tulle and rose industry present year round, it's no surprise that among Wilmington's many artists, the hand-letters thrive. It's the kind of industry that attracts all kinds of backgrounds.

There are the formally trained artists, with years of graphic design and illustration background, like ELENA TROFIMCHUK. Then, there are the artists like BLAKE HELTON, who turned her hobby business into a full-time love, or SUSAN FRYT, who started lettering for friends and quickly picked up a reputation for being a mother-of-the-bride's dream.

"The bulk of the work I do is addressing these high-end wedding invitations that these young brides today purchase, like the William Arthur papers and the Cranes. They spend lots of money on these invitations, and they don't want to stick a label on it or take a ballpoint pen to it and make mistakes or destroy envelopes or write crooked," Fryt says. "Brides find ideas on Pinterest, send it to me, and we'll improve upon it. We'll make it specifically for their day."

Fryt is also known for her chalk lettering work on the boards at Bill's Front Porch restaurant and brewery and Fathom + Farm.

Chalk art has a way of picking up a following, and artists like Fryt and Trofimchuk, who does chalk art for tekMountain and Nutrition Revolution in addition to her graphic design business, often find themselves blurring the line between performer and artist.

Trofimchuk has a formal education in painting and had never even tried chalk lettering until tekMountain approached her. Now, her monthly calendar wall redesigns have become a kind of mini-event.

"It's a different emotion. For me, it's cool to draw while being surrounded by people, which is easier for me," says Elena Trofimchuk. "Painting is a much lonelier thing for me, and chalking is about communication. People watch you do it; the process is exciting for them. It boosts my mood, it's a kind of



## meditation. I see people's reaction, and it brightens up their day."

Helton, who owns SOUTHERN BEE DESIGNS, started practicing lettering in college for her sorority.

"I have a weird, competitive nature, so I had to have the best banner on campus," she says. "I didn't think I had any real art skill at the time. I actually went for journalism, because I wanted to become a writer, and I ended up becoming a writer in a different way," she says.

Helton quickly grew her part-time hobby into a full-time business. Now, in addition to lettering, invitations, and custom illustrations, she teaches calligraphy workshops for the aspiring newbie.



"A lot of the students are just interested in the art, which I'm excited about. So many people are starting to get a little burnt out on all the technology all of the time, and calligraphy is something nice and relaxing to do. You get to make something special," Helton says.

The beauty of unique hand-lettering, whether in chalk or ink, is its ability to elevate and personalize any object. Helton's newest project is what she calls "Love Stories," illustrations of a couple's lives together, important moments or places, tied together with elegant script. Trafimchuck, having now discovered her love of chalk, dreams of organizing chalk murals on the walls of downtown. (Someone get with her about that, okay?)

And, each wedding season, Fryt finds new ways to take pen to ... everything but paper.

"Sand dollars. Sea glass," she says, laughing. "Whatever they come up with, I can find a way to write on it."

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