On Wednesday morning, John asked us to put our work from the day before on the center tables for critique. Each of us was asked to present our pages to the group, pointing out what we were happy with, what we were unhappy with, and any places where we had questions. John explained points of confusion and noted where each student excelled or needed more work.

That afternoon we jettisoned formal structure and worked on John’s “sculpture” exercise: drawing two interacting lines, of any form and style, then painting a simple block base below them, as if they were a sculpture (one of my “sculptures” at right). John gave us thirty minutes to do thirty different versions of this idea, saying the goal was to get us to be free with our brushes and to think about ways to relate the lines to one another.

After that, we started working on the next iteration of capitals: monoline forms that maintained some of the Roman aesthetic but were looser, less round, slightly forward-leaning. John gave us a three-part assignment: first, to copy a pencil-written alphabet of his (below, left); next, to see what happened to those letters when we used them to write a block of text—such as flattening curves, reducing width, and increasing slant; and finally to write another block of text in a layout either of our choosing or following one of a few examples John provided in the course booklet. When we were done with each step, John had us lay our work on the center tables for the rest of the class to see.

On Thursday, our last full day, we copied a piece by David Jones (below, right) that illustrated how three sizes of capitals could interact in a pleasing way, then went back to Roman capitals but created them with pointed and Rekab (or Sho-card) brushes. In the afternoon, John reminded us of the two-page spreads he’d mentioned earlier and said we should start thinking about pages we could pair together to create some final pieces, which we would present to the class the next day. Many of us worked into the night to continue pieces we’d started or design and create new ones.
Friday morning we all rushed to finish our two-page spreads. When class started at 9:00, John said we had until 10:30 to work, and then we would gather as a group for our presentations. I know I wasn’t alone in feeling the pressure because when John, a few minutes after saying these words, added, “I do have one more exercise for you,” the class laughed, as if he’d told a joke. In the end, I was able to pull together three basic two-page spreads (two of which are shown below). Other students created works that were more advanced.

Still, I got a lot out of this workshop. I learned how to properly care for and maintain lettering brushes. I discovered the Rekab brush and found that I can use one to make passable built-up capitals. I met calligraphers from around the world and was repeatedly inspired by their work. I realized that I really enjoy the less formal capitals we worked with on Wednesday, and since the workshop I’ve played around with informal styles in a number of pieces (right and below). And most of all, I was given the opportunity to see John Stevens demonstrate classical Roman capitals with an edged brush, to watch how he made each stroke of every letter.

For all of these reasons, I am deeply grateful to the Washington Calligraphers Guild—and to Gudrun and the late Hermann Zapf—for my 2015 scholarship award.