Bringing calligraphy straight from Japan

ECU offering workshop again next semester

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Students had the opportunity last week to learn some of the basics of Japanese calligraphy from Nobuyoshi Asaoka, ECU’s newest Japanese instructor.

Students and other community members learned of calligraphy’s history and how it arrived in Japan. They were able to take a brush in hand and learn various strokes and techniques for calligraphy and, in the end, were able to paint the Japanese calligraphic symbol of their choice.

Calligraphy can best be described as artistic, elegant handwriting and can be found in many different cultures and languages. Originally from India, calligraphy was brought to China and Korea hundreds of years ago, and was eventually brought to Japan where it was practiced exclusively by monks. Today, Japanese students learn calligraphy from elementary school through high school. There are even private instructors and institutions available to coincide or go beyond the standard educational level.

Asaoka, or Nobu as he prefers to be called, has been practicing calligraphy for nearly 20 years and took private lessons from a mentor in addition to his school education. Originally from the city of Fukuoka, Nobu studied English at the University of Arizona (though he did not graduate from there), which gave him the opportunity, as he described it, to look at his home country from a different point of view.

“I was kind of amazed to find that lots of people are kind of interested in Japanese culture and Japan,” said Nobu. “Sometimes I found myself kind of ignorant about Japanese culture and stuff about Japan.”

Nobu returned to Japan where he began studying Sosho, an advanced style/form of Japanese calligraphy. Eventually Nobu came back to the United States and attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison, graduating over the summer with a M.A. in Japanese Pedagogy and Linguistics. He comes to ECU now as a lecturer, and teaching the Japanese language for the first time as an instructor instead of a teaching assistant.

The challenge of learning Japanese, according to Nobu, is that it is a very different language from most of the other foreign languages in the school curriculum, and there are very few opportunities to practice here on campus.

“I really want to provide lots of opportunities for my students to speak Japanese,” said Nobu. “I considered the fact that there are not many Japanese students...
on campus. So, I present that most of the students don’t have a lot of option to speak Japanese outside the classroom.”

Nobu hopes to develop a stronger Japanese language learning curriculum and program at ECU by focusing more on the speaking aspect in class and focusing outside of the book.

The calligraphy workshop is a part of that focus.

“I want my students who are taking Japanese to come to my workshop because penmanship has been very much appreciated in Japan,” Nobu stated. “Since I’m teaching Japanese, I feel obliged to introduce this aspect of Japanese culture. So, I want them to expose themselves to more aspects of Japanese culture. Also, I would like to attract more people to come and I hope they become interested in Japanese language, so that they may take Japanese language next semester perhaps. I’d like to also contribute to the community, not only the campus. The workshop is actually open to everybody, including the community.”

Those who missed the calligraphy workshop will have another opportunity in the spring semester when Nobu will hold another calligraphy workshop.

“I enjoy having the calligraphy workshop here because it also allows me to practice my own calligraphy,” Nobu said.

“To me, the best part of calligraphy is when you make a straight line; you’re not thinking anything. You’re just concentrating on making a straight line. My focus is only on that line… my mind is basically wiped out.”

Five facts about Japanese calligraphy

- The symbols for Japanese calligraphy are based on Chinese characters.
- The word for “calligraphy” in Japanese is “Shodo” meaning “the way of writing.”
- There are five styles of Chinese character calligraphy, and in Japanese they are known as: Tensho, Resiho, Kaisho, Gysho and Sasho.
- The tool used for calligraphy is an ink brush, and the work is often done on rice paper.
- Ninety-five percent of Japanese companies accept only handwritten résumés.

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