

The Great Disconnect

The Screen is Not Your Friend

by [John Henry](#) (September 2023)



The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, Jean Siméon Chardin, 1766

The other day I reached for my yellow lined legal pad to put down some ideas as I was planning to be away from my desktop where I do all my writing. When I sat down to sketch some ideas out, I could only get 4 lines down before I realized I would have to edit by hand as there was no 'cut and paste.' But I also noted that my handwriting had become

indistinguishable and that the simple act of holding a stylus and pressing it on paper to make marks was something truly unique.



Writing with a pen or pencil on paper is considered by some to allow a more creative impulse to come through. When the first typewriter was introduced, many authors stiff-armed the technology. When the Selectrics and IBM ball typewriters were manufactured, many writers on manual typewriters refused to use them.

For thousands of years humankind has left marks on paper, wood, animal skins, stone, canvas, etc. that involved the act of the hand with a stylus or brush or bone or stick, impressing onto media. Medieval scribes turned the act of writing on paper into an art. It was not only the words that were important, the letters themselves were mini illustrations. The brilliantly decorated scripts were termed 'illuminated manuscripts' and had not only a characteristically large first letter in any chapter but flourishes in color and depictions of the characters in the story or message.

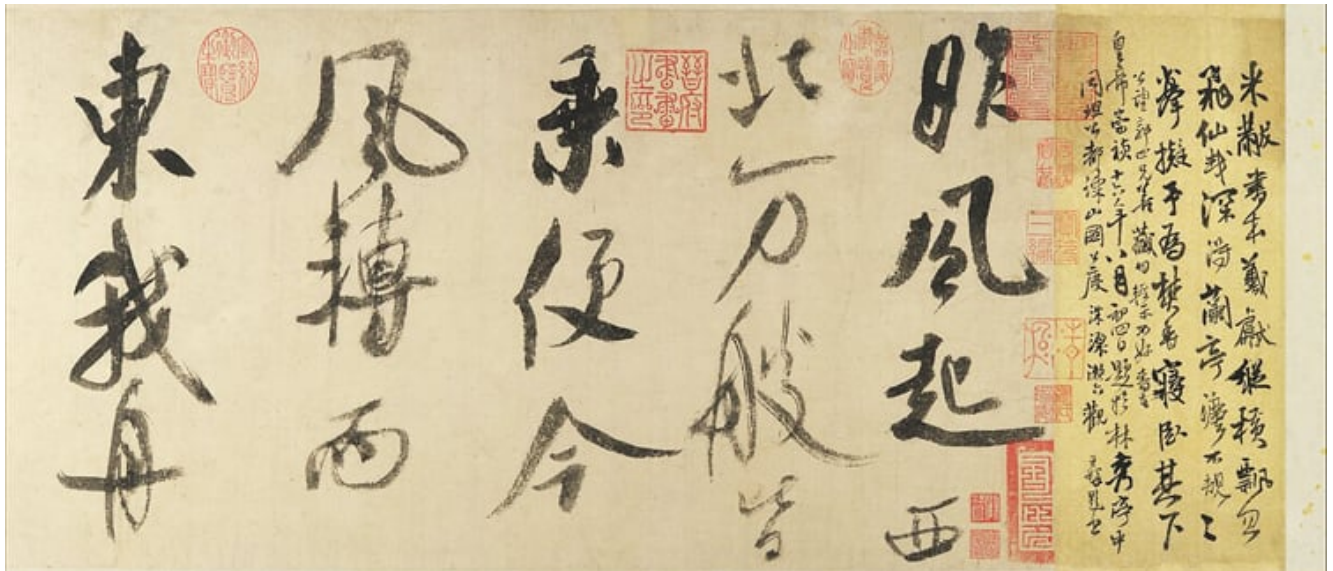


Book production of this kind continued for hundreds of years until moveable type (Gutenberg's Press) made the painstaking and artistic endeavor unnecessary, as the idea of book publishing for the masses was the principal objective.

Arabic script should be mentioned as well, a form of calligraphy that communicated a holy or solemn message and that only used natural forms for decoration, excluding human representation.



Chinese calligraphy became an artistic expression as well. There is great nuance between each character and the slightest gesture has implications. Writing in the modern world is a simple expediency in order to arrive at the most clear meaning as quickly as possible.



This basic kinetic and psychological gesture, somehow imprinted in our DNA, has been replaced by a disconnection of hand directly on media. And I think the after-affects have had severe consequences.

We used to handle bound books, felt the thickness of the page, noted how it was cut and bound, picked up the smell of the ink and the age of the volume, flipped through to any point if we wanted, or turned pages one by one, dog eared the pages that were most interesting, even marked them up with notes. We used to carry books in our hands. Books and magazines were handled routinely. We toted knowledge around with us, great and small. We didn't mind much the weight of several volumes.

Now we stare at pixels projected on a magically lit 'window'. We respond by typing electronic bits into computers which instantly become letters visible on backlit digital flat screens, originally on large fields, now handheld. Of course, we have access to mega-encyclopedia knowledge, facts and fiction, available in scant seconds by merely pressing our fingers onto a flat screen in a sort of digital dance.

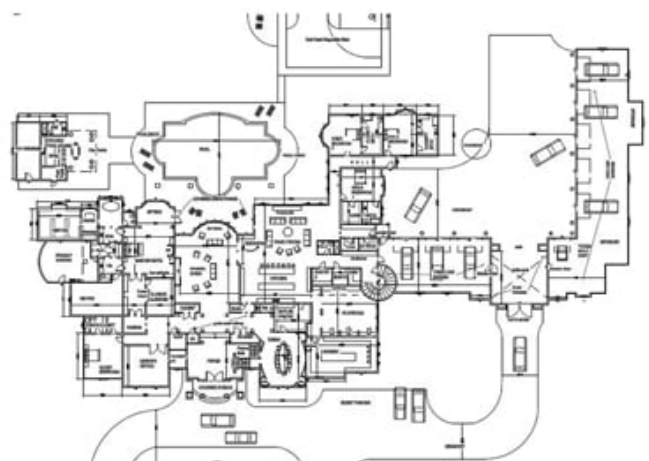
Gone are the reasons to go to a library. We can find nearly anything online. But some books are well worth handling in

person. Rare ones especially. There is an aspect of awe and wonder. And the occasion do this anymore has also gone by the wayside.

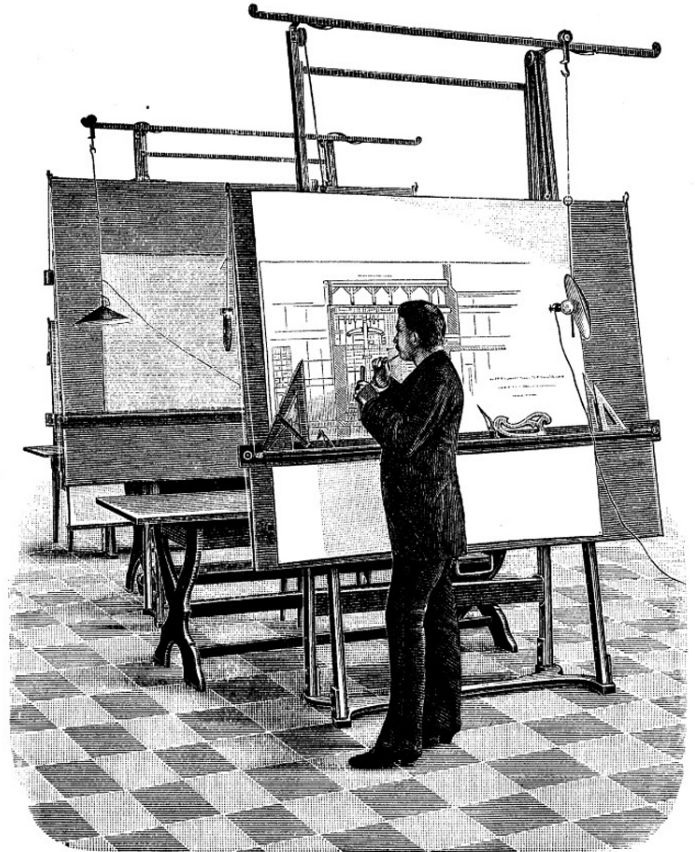
About 33 years ago I met with a couple who were interviewing me to design their house. He unfolded a sheet of paper on which was printed an apparently computer-generated floor plan. She then proudly displayed a watercolor of the house envisioned, created by her hand. Of course, I had to ask why they needed me. The husband replied sheepishly, "the plan won't fit the property".

I studied the sheet he had unfolded and noticed it was made up of several 8.5 x 11" pages of typing paper taped together. I asked who had designed the plan—had they already engaged another architect? He leaned back and smiled proudly: "I did it." I asked incredulously how he accomplished that and what his background might be. He was a used car dealer and had bought a \$45 consumer CAD program at Best Buy and, after a few minutes learning curve, managed to eke out a sensible design. My jaw dropped to the ground as I came to the realization that I was behind the curve ball and that if a novice could do this, well, I could.

(see below: left drawing is by hand, right was done on computer, my work)



I had resisted creating anything on the computer to this point as I hated computing in general as a matter of course and thought that the difficulty of using a machine to design houses would be too great to overcome. But I ran to Best Buy the next day and bought the program to see how it worked.



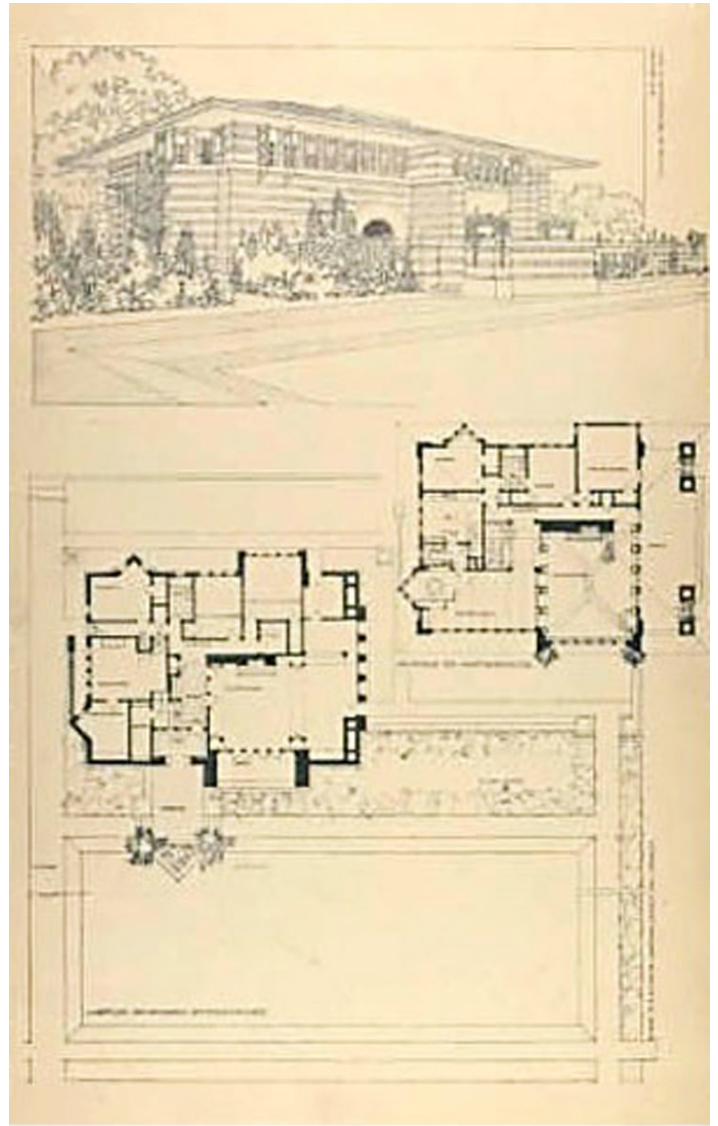
I am left-handed. Architects for as long as drafting tables and T squares have been used normally unroll a sheet of scratch paper or 'bum wad' that allows quick sketching for concept creation. Multiple overlays are used to keep the mental adrenaline going until some loose form or shape of what the mind is searching for comes to fruition. The computer CAD system does not really allow for this. It is completely rigid and 'final' about how it is used. Oh yes, there are some programs that will let you 'sketch' with a stylus on a screen, touch sensitive and variable brush, ink, marker options. There is even a program called 'squiggle' that artistically modifies every computer key stroke so that the work appears to be a creative first look, or hand sketch. But CAD replaces the kinetics of a hand on paper with a direct imprint.

As a lefty, I draw with the left hand and am right brained so to speak. My mouse though is on the right-hand side, like most computer keyboard and mouse setups. That meant, upon the first try at the consumer program I bought, that my right hand had to move a cursor indicating a pencil on paper across a small screen in front of me rather than looking down on paper. There was no tactile connection between hand and drawing surface! I was aghast.

The sense of scale especially was immediately lost. One line could be enlarged and reduced automatically on the computer. The mouse selected walls, windows, doors, plumbing fixtures, etc. from a menu. I spent twenty minutes trying to reorganize my paradigm and hated everything about the process. It was completely counter intuitive. I stopped and left the software on my hard drive and went back to the drafting board.

About three months later, I secured a new commission with the head of a rocket manufacturer in Central Florida. He was a younger engineer and preferred to email me rather than meet face to face during the entire design process. This also bugged me but I complied. After the preliminary discussions I received an email with a line drawing, obviously created with a computer, that indicated the preferred layout of his house.

Again astonished, I asked how it was done and apparently basic line or vector CAD programs were available at that point in time and he had simply drawn it out by himself. I was not tempted. About two weeks into the preliminary hand drawn versions, the family approved the schematic floor plans and I was working on the front façade when I received an email from him. They thought the central corridor was too narrow and asked to have it widened by one foot. This was about a 14,000 SF design and drawn hand on vellum. In order to manage that change I either had to erase by hand (I had a rotary electric eraser) half the plan and redraw it one foot over, or physically cut the paper along the corridor, redraw on another sheet and tape together, or some other laborious method which I stopped contemplating.



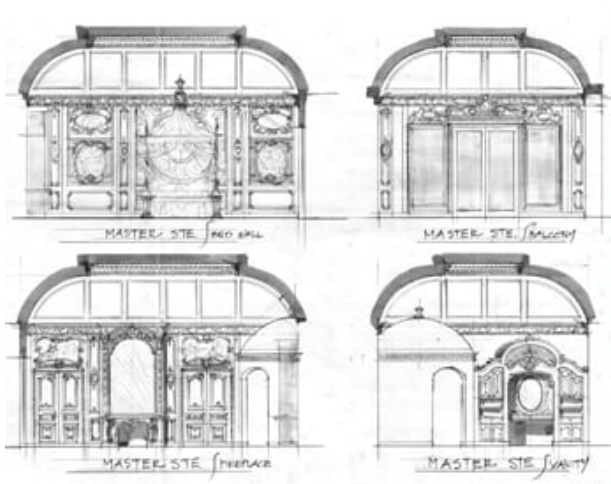
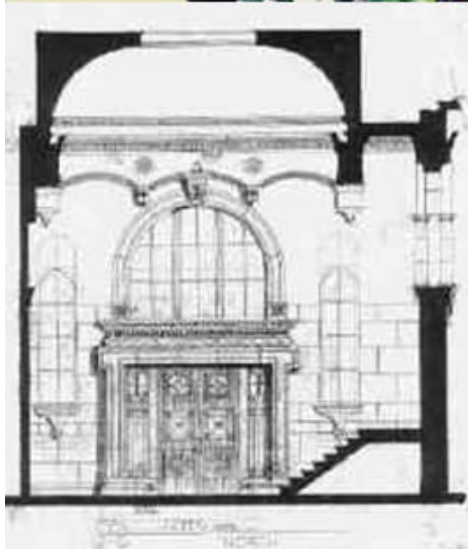
Frustrated, and hoping to find purpose, I opened the consumer software design program and in about 4 hours recreated the plan. To scale. With all windows and doors, plumbing fixtures and cabinets plopped in. That sold me. At least in creating the floor plans. I was also able to print as a pdf as soon as I had a 'draft' and email the results immediately for review. No trip to the blueprinter. Of course, that is another story. Those people are nearly out of business.

However, the CAD program I was using and most of the others at

the time could not create the impressionable, emotional, and evocative hand drawn facades I was capable of drawing by hand. They couldn't compare to any hand drawn architect's conception as they were totally void of inflection or character. In fact, to this day, I use an advanced version of the consumer program for floor planning and draw all facades (elevations) by hand—and interior elevations. Nothing I know can duplicate my hand work and rendering capability. The work of my predecessors (who designed with pencil on paper) are not only functional but artistic statements of intent.

The drawing to the right is Wright's.

(See the original my hand drawn elevation—for the project described above—and other samples, and here is a [link](#) to a short video of the final construction.)



My drafting group had also seen the light as their job was to translate my work into completed CAD output that had to be shared with engineers and other design professionals who got

on the CAD train. They also figured they didn't need to commute much more to the office as they could sit at home most of the time and do their work and simply post it in an email for comment or correction. Well, this I resisted but they won the war. It has been shown though that productivity is affected without direct 'supervision' and this dilemma has also contributed to the disconnect between human direct interaction not only in this field but in nearly all others. Psychological implications are still being studied.

The university syllabus includes life drawing and sketching by hand but now the push to be CAD proficient, a real crutch in my way of thinking, makes the 'old way' rather anachronistic. Licensing of architects is required mostly to insure public safety in commercial buildings. If you are wondering why our streetscapes have devolved into monotonous and banal groups of boring and emotionally void structures it is because of the computer.

In fact, if there were no computers much of the deconstruction movement in architecture, exalted by the current crop of art critics, would not be possible in either conception nor in their execution due to the complex software programs used.

Designs like the Bilbao Guggenheim and other like buildings with twisted forms in metal and glazing are simply not doable without computers. But the computer is most cleverly used to crank out the same saved digital details and components over and over in the preponderance of commercial work which accounts for their overall soulless ugliness and duplication.

This disconnect by the human hand directly onto media, the separation of people relying on computers in working environments, the alienation of all ages from each other using smart phones and simply scrolling on social media, has similar implications and most recently possibly more foreboding ones.

We are now seeing AI infested word salad monotony in writing and in all the arts. Musicians need not learn how to play an

instrument; they simply push buttons on a computer and assemble beats and melody. Vocalists even can be sampled and duplicated to sing from a simple script and score. Artists just type in what they have in mind and AI will generate the images for them. Writers can summon ChatGPT and have essays, books, commentary, news articles, automated email messaging, film and TV scores spit out within seconds.



Humans now interact with a machine first, or ignore others nearby, in order for other humans to reciprocate in some manner. While the telephone might be considered the first mechanical intermediary between face-to-face interaction (or writing letters before that) the current tech has completely divorced empathy for each other.

The quote under the title at top of this essay was something heard on talk radio a few days ago. The idea being that your screen 'friend' on Facebook was not really going to be there for you if you became really depressed and needed a heart-to-heart talk, or sick and needed help, had to go to the hospital or other appointment and was incapacitated, had to cry on a shoulder or needed a hug, needed a ride because your car broke down, etc.? Pecking on a keyboard for six hours every day into social media platforms has limited benefits and more negative consequences, too many to enumerate.

If you are staring at a screen all day long and feel depressed at the end of the day it is most likely that you did not get any in-person emotional or psychological reinforcement to keep

you going and maintain a healthy balance in your life. The younger generation is glued onto handheld devices. Work output is down. Learning is a distraction. Dating is skewed; marriage is one of too many options; social interaction is stymied or blunted. Scrolling for hours fries the brain. The end result is a complete breakdown of civilization as it unconsciously loses its humanity.

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John Henry is based in Orlando, Florida. He holds a Bachelor of Environmental Design and Master of Architecture from Texas A&M University. He spent his early childhood through high school in Greece and Turkey, traveling in Europe—impressed by the ruins of Greek and Roman cities and temples, old irregular Medieval streets, and classical urban palaces and country villas. His Modernist formal education was a basis for functional, technically proficient, yet beautiful buildings. His website is [Commercial Web Residential Web](#). John has been a regular contributor to NER and has written about his profession and other topics such as history, music, technology, and politics.

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