



Artist Joon Thomas combines watercolor and Persian calligraphy in "I will greet the sun again" (left).

ART

Joon Thomas '81 began practicing the ancient art of Persian calligraphy during fifth grade in Tehran, Iran. Although most classmates forgot all about reed pens and ink bottles after completing course requirements, Thomas continues to work with the same tools every single day, six decades later.

Thomas, who uses the gender-neutral pronoun "they," says with a laugh: "At this point, I could do calligraphy with anything you handed to me."

Now living in Gainesville, Florida, Thomas has been working as a professional calligrapher, graphic designer, and artist since their college days, and has created calligraphic artwork for books, magazines, museums, logos, invitations, marriage certificates, honorary degrees, tattoos, and more.

Thomas, who attended Haverford as Stewart J. Thomas, applied to the college at the recommendation of family friend **Lewis Marshall Johnson '45**, a Presbyterian minister who also lived in Tehran, where Thomas grew up.

Formal programs to support international students did not exist in the '70s, but Haverford's Distinguished Visitors Program, which brings a variety of scholars to campus, served as a de facto counseling office for Thomas, who was hired to hand-calligraph posters publicizing the arrival of every visitor. It was their first paid position as an artist.

"Early on, I treated calligraphy as a side job, like it was too much of a privilege to get paid to be creative," Thomas says, recalling the many "real jobs" they cycled through, from managing a restaurant to serving as a personal assistant. "I would always be doing calligraphy on the side to support myself while working jobs that were supposed to be the money-making things.

And finally, I realized, 'Wait. This is my job.'"

While pursuing a bachelor's degree in history, Thomas also studied Chinese at Penn, later convincing renowned artist and lithography master printer Chen Lok Lee to take them on as a mentee in printmaking as well as Chinese painting and calligraphy. Lee helped to hone the artistic skills Thomas brings to work commissioned from around the world including calligraphy in a myriad of styles in over two dozen languages. Thomas also teaches calligraphy and leads workshops for various universities, libraries, and other organizations.

"In calligraphy, you need to be precise; you are not supposed to make mistakes. But you also have to create something that is alive and in the moment," Thomas says. "Especially in Chinese calligraphy, the emphasis is on how much energy and vitality, what we call qi, you put into the stroke. This matchup of precision and exactitude on one side and flow and dynamism on the other explains my approach to making art."

Thomas creates and displays work at Gainesville's Sweetwater Print Cooperative, a studio and gallery space they cofounded 30 years ago. Their latest exhibit, *Reaching for Justice*, was inspired by conversations about social justice and policing in the United States. (Before moving to Florida, they also helped to found Vox Populi, now the longest-running artist collective in Philadelphia.)

"Why are we staying alive? What are we struggling for? To enjoy creativity," Thomas says. "People want and need art, and it is empowering to recognize that your artistic talent has value, that it is an asset. Things got a lot better for me once I realized I could live my life being a creative person on my own terms."

More information: palmstone.com

—Karen Brooks

PHOTOS: DUNCAN HOLBY (KAUFMAN); RHEA THOMAS (THOMAS)