The Scroll Unfurled - Ancient to “Vanguard”

Leslie C. Nobler

William Paterson University
New Jersey, USA
noblerl@wpunj.edu

Abstract
An historical understanding of the scroll is useful for creating within new textual genres. Books and text art-forms are destabilizing, energizing future possibilities. Yet we must look backward to the reasons this first information technology existed, as I do in my digital scrolls that report, communicate, purge, and narrate. In light of our changing "book landscape," we combine heirlooms, maps and artifacts with rounded and striped visual structures expressing the rich aesthetic of a fading old (slow) format. Where will the new and fast electronic formats lead our culture?

Keywords
Text, Scroll, Book, E-book, Digital Art, Artist's Books, Textile

Introduction
I use history, and books, intensively in my work in the realm of the artist's book – both the tangible and electronic. But I always use the newest digital tools and materials - so I had to ponder if there is a connection between the oldest form of information-recording and what is happening today. Out of concern about the possible demise of the physical book, I was compelled to explore its earliest roots.

There are a wealth of "connections" between the scroll – the oldest known book format, and present-day electronic books. Scrolls and hard drives and CDs are rounded - they spin and roll. We scroll on our electronic devices. We only read on one side of them; they are literally illuminated. Scrolls were one-sided – and were artistically illuminated.

Uses for, or the purposes of, scrolls over centuries of history have also informed my digital scroll-making. Like those before me, I dealt with human relationships in these scrolls. An early digital scroll expressed my search for strength during divorce, and in Partners the opposite is explored. Scrolls of the past recorded important life events. My Fly to Safed marks the occasion of a long awaited journey. Flow [below], combining transfer and direct ink-jet printing, is an imaginary, electronically-generated picto-

Figure 1. Flow; Copyright, the author/artist

Destabilization
In The Realm of the Circuit, Charles Traub and Jonathan Lipkin posit that books are repositories for thought, and therefore power – the power to spread ideas and knowledge, which in the final analysis leads to profit. Over time, they became more and more portable and easier to reproduce; the digital download-able book is just the next phase in this process. The authors argue that in the traditional scroll, and book, content is FROZEN. [1] It was made and scribed, or printed, and could not change. This is not true with artist's books and scrolls, at least those that are designed to change/morph physically and interactively, and certainly not true with e-books.

Books traveled – first along trade routes – and slowly. Now they can travel at the speed of light. And with such massive changes is this dynamic, like those that we see today, things can become “destabilized.”

There is a cultural rupture created by the possible (even presumed), slow and deliberate disappearance of the physical book. But the artist can help society confront this by a provocative analysis of 1000's of years of text, and by crossing from literature into other expressive spheres. As I use text, code, and relief picture-making, I have been investigating contemporary aesthetics within bookforms, recently the scroll, created both by hand and machine, and various hybrid techniques.

Scrolls as Fodder
This pivotal change and void (rupture?) moving from paper and print to ephemeral media is currently examined throughout the art world; many, like myself, use history to ground their analyses. Using new technology to make “old technology,” – the book, among the oldest technology, I focus on sacred and ritual books. The earliest sacred books were typically in the form of a scroll, and they shape the basis of my exploration. The scroll is round, fluid and continuous, and must be unfurled. It is also (oddly) quite linear – often stripped together, and “striped” also, hence I design imagery that goes around and/or emphasizes striping and concentric lines. Sacred scrolls were richly ornamented; their protection was critical so they were bound, buckled and enrobbed in beautiful containers.
The scroll was our original format of choice - a long rolled piece of parchment, paper, silk, etc. One gradually unrolled it, exposing one section at a time. Coiled into a round tube when closed, it worked "in-the-round," not unlike our vinyl records, CDs, DVDs and spinning hard drives. In today's world of iPads, e-readers, e-books and laptops, it feels like we've returned to yesterday. We read on only one side of a screen. We scroll through everything digital. Authoring, publishing, designing, and illustrating software all work on the premise of streams of information ~ upon which pages are IMPOSED, rectangles forced onto a flowing continuum (pagination). Using “forced” pages, new media/electronic artist Seth Ellis builds flowing scrolls bringing stories from the past to light. Ellis writes “My work is about finding new ways to tell stories – by making them site-specific, by creating them with randomizing programs, by asking other people living and dead for input. I’m interested in active, experiential reading.” [2]

Elements in my scrolls derive from 19th and 20th century ceremonial and everyday objects and texts. Vintage papers, lace, maps, and odd relics are utilized or referenced. Interested in using modern technology to reincarnate symbolically rich, historic art and artisanry, I mine visuals with ritual, religious or mystical significance, and symbolic heirlooms. Akin to Ellis, exploring historical, mythical and ethnic stories through the digital lens of today, combining hand with byte, is the heart of my studio practice.

The Narrative

The yellow round form in Flow is based on the filigree top of a Sabbath spice box from the 18th century, near the area in central Europe from which my great-grandparents emigrated; as I constructed this imaginary painterly scroll-letter to those ancestors, I found it important to layer many softly printed phrases and circular elements. Half-real scenarios evolve in my mind, related to journeys I take. For example, Caves and Flickers [below] is about a house of worship in an embattled town, and a downhearted man thinking of entering its doors for a "flicker" of hope.

Figure 2. Caves and Flickers; Copyright, the author/artist

In other works I may simply journal my travels, as I learn about distant places, their arts, culture, history, and social issues. In Open the Floe-gates, to the right, note the maps, suitcase and sense of antiquity. It also questions the future of the narrative on paper. So precarious is the future of the physical book, that Flow is apt for its title – a floating sheet of ice – ready to melt, crack or self-destruct, disrupt!

The Rolling, Scrolling “Book”

The scroll's beginnings and its amazing connections to the book of today were a far bigger "concept" than I would have ever thought. A large part of the reason for that is how much book arts today – both digital and tangible – actually harks back to, or relies upon, the legacy of the scroll. I got caught up in this thought when I first saw Anselm Keifer's life-sized work in the book and scroll art forms.

Viewers of Keifer's art interact with his huge sculptural books made of the most unique and unexpected materials. They are both light and leaden, furling and rigid, or frozen, perhaps as Traub and Lipkin propose. [3] Yet they had (and have) a beautiful and weathered lyricism to them, as they “rolled” through space at the Smithsonian.

Exploring history – through art history – and its social structures (with all their social inequities), and its ethnic “stories,” through the digital lens of today – with its evolving democratic global community, is essential to this body of work. Past cultures' stories, adapted digitally, wind through the coiled multi-substrate surfaces of my scrolls, Keifer's (though not digitally), and a group of like-minded artists that I identified and curated into two recent new technology art exhibitions. What will an unrolled scroll, scribed with leading edge tools, reveal? In the end, it is the story, concept, interactivity, and overall aesthetic experience that most matters.
The New Scroll – Group Exhibition

The show was titled The New Scroll – an old technology reinterpreted. Its first venue was the Hamilton Street Gallery, a pristine storefront gallery in Bound Brook, NJ. After that came Arts Guild New Jersey, an exhibition space and cultural center in a town aiming to become the regional arts district. With a little funding, a student-intern and two venues in place, I began carefully selecting art that made the right statement. I had previously searched all over, in various ways, to identify art-makers. Now this grouping of their works had to come together – and interrelate.

The gallerist and I wanted to show a broad range of materials and techniques, with an intensive focus on those with unusual contemporary twists on modern technology. The artwork had to have a visual narrative and/or use text. The list of those that work electronically comprised myself, Suzanne Stokes, Haley Nagy and Joohyun Pyune. Stokes is a (shadow-art) performance artist and printmaker, who expertly uses Photoshop to create serigraphs based on the performances – always with a richly choreographed story told in a vertical flow. Nagy is a book artist who uses electronically-controlled knitting to literally knit (revised) biblical words into her extra-long scroll installations. Pyune is a digital textile-print artist who uses all the art software and printing technology she possibly can to heat-transfer print sheer horizontal overlays that tell a story in three dimensions. All are interested in blending the old sources and techniques of their art with the newest ideas and processes in making their scrolls.

Bookforms and Possibilities

"Analog" book and scroll artist, Aimee Lee, states “I have adapted ancient techniques and materials in my art to revive and update tradition, and encourage the survival and evolution of the old ways, while adding layers of meaning to my practice." [4] Using digital tools to respect the vast knowledge of times past, making it relevant and accessible, is a common objective. Linking the past to the present intensifies the content, as seen in Flagging Helicopters [below], a scroll/work in progress. The story of a search for lost passengers from a voyage or flight that got inverted (note my upside-down triangular Dutch row-house rooftops) is told through the use of “mined” metaphorical scenes and symbols.¹ Often looking backwards, revisiting your roots, drawing from the depth of the past, is the optimal way to grow, using this future-minded medium. Here, vintage-style memorial flower wreaths and wedding band quilt patterns are rich symbols for all times.

After looking at the literary and pictorial heritage of the scroll, along with some strong artistic interpretations, one cannot help but question how that early technology will continue to influence the computer scroll-like products of today and tomorrow. Hopefully the viewer will consider how scrolls can now be made and rolled out/distributed – perhaps "democratically" worldwide, and definitely at the speed of light. Light itself, or its meaning of expanding knowledge [enlightenment], even tells a story; below left a detail of a collaged scroll combining an illuminated manuscript and an x-ray style photograph and right is section of a scroll using a still from illuminated light/shadow theater.

Stories about centuries-old ceremonies celebrating a new life, such as in the piece below left, can easily unfurl in a nanosecond. It continues that scrolls, such as these, can be experienced as non-linear in much the same way we/our youth adapt to/evolve new computing. The horizontal units of the pieces can rearrange, sometimes three-dimensionally. Then the layers of meaning might change too.

Figure 4. Flagging Helicopters 1; Copyright, the author/artist

Figure 5. Left: detail from Dutch Lace on Sabbath; Copyright the author/artist. Right: detail from Ascend (scroll); Copyright Suzanne Stokes

Scrolls Abroad

It is important to note that there are other attitudes about the contemporary scroll-as-art experience in different cultures. Chinese, Korean and Japanese artists still today use the beautiful silk scroll formats from long ago; many artists offer provocative, unusual new interpretations. On a recent research trip to Oslo, Norway I studied the work of digitally invested textile and book artists, all makers of scrolls, up close. Galleri Format, a leading Norwegian venue, was very informative in this regard.

There, I became versed in the work of Kari Dyrdal, who describes her encounter with digital tools as rich,
investigative, disruptive and constructive – all rather apt adjectives. Her work involves an intensive background in art traditions, yet it is innovative in its use of digital technology. While conceptual, it also strongly refers to substance and technique, which connects to a deep cultural appreciation for the heritage of the process, craft and its materials. The detail of a three-part scroll below, left, is especially rich in its use of fiber and computer print-dyes, while quite changeable – even destabilized – in terms of the position each unit holds both vertically (according to its state of “unroll”) and horizontally. It contains fairly illegible text as well. Notice its similarities to the piece on the right by Korean-born Joohyun Pyune, which also shows subtle symmetry within a transient sense of time and light. The digital medium is “perfect to visualize the ambiguity of the life experience.” [5] Once posted, these scrolls reach an internet audience in almost no time, and make an immediate, if not powerful, optical impression on the visitors at the public spaces in which they hang.

It is hard to discuss the modern scroll experience without including the ancient Jewish scroll, the Torah. It remains a vital part of the spiritual, literary, and aesthetic aspect of Judaic practice, comprising all elements of its crafting – the calligraphy, stitching, woodwork and ornamentation along with its musicality. Marvell Ginsburg writes that old Torahs that were dressed in jewel-toned mantles, topped by silver crowns, “looked like kings and queens,” [6] placing an anthropomorphic spin on the sacred book. Interestingly, they become damaged by NOT being unrolled for many years, as happened when the Nazis confiscated and ware-housed them. It is as if a Torah can only remain functional if “unroll”) and horizontally. It contains fairly illegible text as well. Notice its similarities to the piece on the right by Korean-born Joohyun Pyune, which also shows subtle symmetry within a transient sense of time and light. The digital medium is “perfect to visualize the ambiguity of the life experience.” [5] Once posted, these scrolls reach an internet audience in almost no time, and make an immediate, if not powerful, optical impression on the visitors at the public spaces in which they hang.

It is hard to discuss the modern scroll experience without including the ancient Jewish scroll, the Torah. It remains a vital part of the spiritual, literary, and aesthetic aspect of Judaic practice, comprising all elements of its crafting – the calligraphy, stitching, woodwork and ornamentation along with its musicality. Marvell Ginsburg writes that old Torahs that were dressed in jewel-toned mantles, topped by silver crowns, “looked like kings and queens,” [6] placing an anthropomorphic spin on the sacred book. Interestingly, they become damaged by NOT being unrolled for many years, as happened when the Nazis confiscated and ware-housed them. It is as if a Torah can only remain functional through the very act of repetitive interactive scrolling.

Yet, one can also wonder if there is another, radical, slower, more expansive or more illuminating way to “scroll” in future centuries. Should scrolling be more – or less iterative? One or two-sided, or multilayered? What might electronic or analog scrolling look like decades from now? How shall that quickly-fading first information technology inform us? Meditative concentration is required to truly “read” or discern the scrolls of The New Scroll. Focus is necessary to grasp the art. But when we only scroll faster and faster – where will that ultimately lead us?

References
3. Charles H. Traub and Jonathan Lipkin, In the Realm of the Circuit, 175
4. Aimee Lee, Personal Correspondence, 2014

Bibliography
Fraser, Lydia, By Hand in the Electronic Age (Washington D.C.: Textile Museum, 2005)
Lee, Aimee, Personal Correspondence & Artist Statement, 2014
Pyune, Joohyun, The New Scroll: an old technology reinterpreted (artist statement, Exhibition Catalog, Hamilton Street Gallery, NJ, 2014)

Author Biography
Leslie Nobler is a digital artist, creating artist’s books, surface design, and monoprints. Her recent work reinvents sacred books and ritual artifacts using alternative digital printmaking. Exhibitions internationally include New Jersey State, Noyes and Montclair Art Museums (NJ), Old-Main Art Museum (AZ), Athenaeum Museum (PA), Kemper Museum of Art (MO), Afrigraphics Pretoria, and Digital Art Awards/Australia and China. Nobler has had multiple inclusions in SIGGRAPH Art Galleries. She is an Art Professor at William Paterson University (NJ) and curator/ lecturer at universities, museums and alternative spaces. Her work is represented internationally in museum and university art/book collections, such as Sheffield University, UK. A recipient of Surface Design Association and Puffin Artist’s Grants, among others, she earned her BFA at University of Michigan, Stamps School of Art, MA at New York Institute of Technology and MFA at City University of New York - Hunter College.