



Merry was my way when I flew to England last summer to see my artist book, *The First Writing*, in the *Alphabets Alive!* exhibit at Oxford University in the fabled Bodleian Library. In my long career of making fine letters and binding them in handmade books, such an honor never crossed my mind. The Bodleian Library was familiar to me only

from years of studying glossy reproductions of medieval illuminated manuscripts that frequently referenced this name as their source. These facsimiles were my models and my inspiration. Even if my creations wouldn't look quite like this, perhaps they would feel like this when someone read them. Early on, that became my dream: to make prayer books as beautiful as these for my world.

ANCIENT HERSTORY

BY CARI FERRARO

The fulfillment of a dream I never knew I had first appeared as an email in November of 2021, generated by my website contact form. A gentleman by the name of Robert Bolick identified himself as being based in the UK and said he wanted to purchase my work, *The First Writing*—and perhaps also *A Goddess Alphabet*, if I were “willing to part with it.” He was preparing a 2023 exhibition for the Bodleian Library about alpha



of them had originally been printed with a background of vibrant deep blue (*berurin-ai*, or simply *bero*—Berlin blue, also known as Prussian blue, which had been recently introduced by Dutch traders to Japanese artists at the time), which the second edition eschewed.

But the biggest difference for us is the slight dissimilarity in the calligraphy between the original and newer sets. It couldn't possibly have been written, could it? First, even though it is so delicate and flowing that it's hard to imagine it being cut when the movement of the brush is felt

so powerfully, all the calligraphy in his block-printed books had been carved and all that varied and wild nuance had been captured. But if it was printed, why was the writing different in the later edition? And if it was written, who was this later, anonymous, scribe? My first letter to Wayne, even before the idea of this article had occurred, was to find out the answer to, "Written or printed?"

This concise education was his reply: "The calligraphy that appears on his prints is all printed. It is part of the line block used for the printing. As you may be aware, the prints are made from numerous carved woodblocks, one for each color, that are printed in precise registration. It is important to note Hokusai did not carve the blocks or print the works. He only designed the compositions. The carvers were very skilled artisans who apprenticed in their teenage years and carved blocks

Bullfinch & Weeping
Cherry, c. 1834.

