

An Interview With Master Illustrator, Sam Fink

On April 23, 2007, Brad Miner, author and editor-in-chief of *American Compass*, sat down to interview Sam Fink, ninety-year-old master calligrapher and artist. Sam has taken on no less a task than to recreate some of our civilization's most important documents. Last year, *The Constitution of the United States* was published by Welcome Books. *The Gettysburg Address* and *The Book of Exodus* were released this fall.

◇**Miner:** *Sam, to begin, please tell us about how you work.*

◇**Fink:** When I was in my prime, I would work as though it was my job. This was my self-inflicted job, and I did it for love. The work was my friend, and it kept me going. Before I retired, I worked as an art director for Young & Rubicam, a great advertising agency when it was in its heyday. I had a grand life, so the work that I did in the last thirty years is really an extension of my earlier work. Things are different today. Art directors now come to work without a pencil and paper, and they work from a computer. The man who hired me sixty-five years ago said, "I want to see how you think with a pencil," and that led to all of what I've been doing.

◇**Miner:** *Thinking about that time in your life when you were working in a pretty high-powered agency with very specific commercial ends in mind, how has it affected the way you now create the work that you do?*

◇**Fink:** I was already thinking about it then. I had a window shade, which I pulled down, drew a little face of Abe Lincoln, and then I copied the whole

Gettysburg Address on the window shade. Pull it down, you could read the whole thing. Let it up, you could only read the bottom half.

◇**Miner:** *How did you develop the talent that you now have?*

◇**Fink:** My father—a great, great father—used to watch me copy drawings out of the sports section. So I had a little ability, manual dexterity. He was the art director of a photo engraving shop where he lettered—they used airbrush—and they cut out things. He said, “I think I can get you a job as a messenger boy in the afternoon, and the rest of the day you’ll come to work with me. You’ll get a desk in front of where I am, and I will teach you what I know so that you will be able to earn a livelihood.” After two years, he said, “You have enough talent to go out and search the world for a job.” Well, as a messenger, I delivered proofs to advertising agencies. I saw these men and women sitting in their offices with the slanted table, big pencils, and chalk. I thought, “That would be a nice way to make a living.” So, to enhance my drawing, I enrolled at the National Academy of Design in the evening, then later to the Art Students League. During that time, I also took a course at Columbia University in English composition. I thought those would increase my luck to get a job. I had little experience, but I was determined. The one gift, I think, that I’ve been given was determination. When I made up my mind, that’s what I wanted to do—nobody’s going to stop me.

◇**Miner:** *Let’s talk now about the Gettysburg Address and about the last founder, as he’s sometimes known, Abraham Lincoln. What originally drew you, as an illustrator, to that particular speech that was given on November 19, 1863?*

◇**Fink:** The speech is so simple and dramatic, sentence by sentence. And so important that 270 words spoken more than one hundred years ago resonate today with such urgency and strength. There are thousands of stories of how this man put this cluster of words together. The theories didn’t matter to me. The idea of using the talent that I had gotten—what would I do? The thought came, “Why

don't you take phrase by phrase (I did this after the Constitution) and see if you can illustrate each phrase. 'Four score and seven years ago' is what he said, not 'eighty-seven years.' Poetry. How am I going to illustrate that phrase?" I asked myself—and then thought about the book of Exodus. I remembered Moses saying, "My brother Aaron is four score and three years old." "That's it!" I said to myself, "I'll have a Bible on Lincoln's head!" That got me off to the races.

◇**Miner:** *You know, of course, that on that day, Lincoln was there, more or less, as a ribbon cutter. Edward Everett, the great American orator, was there and spoke for two and a half torturous hours. Lincoln was supposed to get up and make a few perfunctory remarks about the dedication. He said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here," yet the great Everett's words are completely forgotten, and these three hundred words that Lincoln spoke have become all but immortal. Why has this endured for so long?*

◇**Fink:** When I would be working on the illustration for each phrase, there were days I cried. It's dramatic. It's forceful. It's memorable. It's full of everything that a man or woman would ever want to feel or be. Even as I begin to think about it now, I begin to well up. It captured me to the point where I couldn't stop.

◇**Miner:** *By my count, you were born in 1916, about fifty years after the end of civil war, and fifty years before the Vietnam War began. You were in your twenties during World War II. I believe you've lived in all or part of ten decades and through the administration of sixteen American presidents, not one of them as great as Lincoln. I'm sure that there will be some students interested in your advice to them about either art or Americanism?*

◇**Fink:** We take for granted our country. In my history, I had two sets of grandparents. One from Russia. One from Poland. They escaped oppression. They came here penniless in the mid-1880s. No money. Nothing. Each found a home. They raised six children in one family. Seven in another. My parents were born in America, and I went to school here. I had one grandmother who was

illiterate. I have a son now who has a PhD in Jewish history. I have cousins who built businesses. I thought, “It could only happen here.” We have had ups and downs. Weak presidents, assassinated presidents, presidents who were shot at and missed. We’re a young country and still growing. I came in today on the subway from Queens. I came early enough to see people going to work. Every denomination. There were Koreans, Japanese, Italians, Greeks. All kinds. They’re still flocking here. This is the place. Never take it for granted. There will never be another Lincoln, but there will be a guy who will come out of the woodwork somewhere who has courage, and he will be able to spread the word. These things are right here. Right in front of us.

◇**Miner:** *Sam, I would like to talk a little about The Book of Exodus and how it first began to take shape in your mind.*

◇**Fink:** I belong to a conservative congregation. One day the rabbi, for his sermon, talked about five books of Moses that were given to a young boy years ago as a gift for his bar mitzvah. This rabbi had, years later, found that same book at a used bookstore. It hurt him. Next to it was another book that came from Yemen. It was written by a man who copied the entire five books of Moses by hand. It took him a lifetime. The rabbi bought it, and it became one of his treasures. In certain times, it was a task that was put before a man to copy the entire five books by hand. I was in my eighties when I heard that sermon, and I thought, “That’s a nice task. I ought to do that.” I have a son who is a scholar living in Israel. I decided to make the paintings for my son and his sons and their sons.

I sat and thought about illustration. I thought, “The books should not be illustrated. They should not be made hard and fast that you could see Cecil B. DeMille taking the Red Sea apart. What can I do?” It took a couple weeks, and I said, “I got the answer. The sky. The beautiful sky.” It’s never the same, as the interpretations of Exodus are never the same. The sky could be forever—infinite and filled with variety. I counted out the chapters—forty chapters. If I painted forty skies and hid the words in the clouds, both in English and in Hebrew, that

would be a fun task to see if I could do it. Slowly and slowly, day by day, doing my work, I looked at the sky outside my house—night skies, dusk, dawn, electrical storms, the whole works. I concentrated, and when I finished, I felt like I had done something worthy. My mother lived in a home right in Great Neck. I used to see her every day. One day I sat by her bedside, and I had a little book of Psalms. I don't remember the number of this particular psalm, but having finished the work, sitting at my mother's bedside, the psalm said, "The power of God is in the sky." I don't consider myself a religious man in terms of going to church or synagogue. I go just to go, to belong. But this was sort of miraculous for me.

◇**Miner:** *There must have been some process, in order to make this book, to get all the paintings together again.*

◇**Fink:** Yes. That was fun. I called my son and said, "Will you lend them back to me?" He said, "Of course." So, I flew over to Jerusalem two years ago, just about at this very time. I took them all. When I got here, I took them to Lena at Welcome [Books], and it was thrilling for me. It's very personal. I believe when a person in my craft, or any craft, or any world, gets into something with all their heart, they become bigger than they actually are. When I look at what I've done—what's in the works now—I cannot believe that I did it. There was a fire in me that didn't let me sleep at night. I'd get up at night and go to where I worked, and I'd look at it and say, "I've got to change this. I've got to get a little more color in there. I've got to do something." I was driven. When I finished, I wasn't exhausted. I was just pleased that I had cut a deal. Nobody made me. Along the way, I got discouraged, but the other side of me said, "Get back to work, you lazy bum."

◇**Miner:** *I know that in Judaism, one speaks of a mitzvah, which is either one of the laws, or commandments, or a good deed done in fulfillment of one of those laws or commandments. Do you see The Book of Exodus as your mitzvah?*

◇**Fink:** Yes. *The Book of Exodus* is the escape from slavery. That's the main tenet of the book. Today, people around the world are enslaved. There are people in America who are enslaved. I read somewhere recently that the majority of people who work for a living are slaves. They dislike what they're doing, and they can't wait to reach the age of retirement. So, for me, the freedom is in the work, to love the work. To this day, I love work, I enjoy it—and I'm free.

About The Writer/Illustrator

Sam Fink is an original. A multitalented artist of inimitable range, he first learned to hand-letter from his father. For two decades he worked as an art director at Young & Rubicam. For the last twenty-plus years, Fink has been inscribing and illustrating great words, creating vibrantly illustrated texts of American history.

Introduce Your Students to the Masterworks of Sam Fink

The Book of Exodus

The Book of Exodus was originally conceived by artist and New York City resident Sam Fink as a gift to his family, now living in Israel. The book details the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, their harrowing journey with Moses out of Egypt, and the formation of the new laws established for them by their God. With forty-five original watercolor paintings of skies illustrating the meticulously hand-lettered Hebrew and English text, Fink brilliantly demonstrates his commitment to bringing history's most meaningful documents to life.

Welcome Books, HC, 978-1-59962-035-0, 88 pp., \$40.00

The Gettysburg Address

Originally published by Random House in a black-and-white edition in 1994, Sam Fink is returning to *The Gettysburg Address* to bring out this full-color edition, complete with original illustrations and hand-lettering. Taking the address phrase by phrase, Fink has highlighted through his artwork the essence of Lincoln's words and spirit on that day in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1863.

Welcome Books, HC, 978-1-59962-038-1, 88 pp., \$29.95

The Constitution of the United States of America

The Constitution of The United States of America, inscribed and illustrated by master calligrapher Sam Fink, brings to life the issues underlying the triumphs of this abiding document. Originally published in pen and ink, Sam has gone back to the original black-and-white art and painted it entirely, creating a full-color masterpiece.

Welcome Books, HC, 978-0-941807-99-9, 136 pp., \$34.95
