

Ten Years Later: An Illuminated Origin

CHARLOTTE DAWE catches up with book artist Kelly M. Houle, who is following in the steps of Alcuin with her illuminated edition of Darwin's seminal work.

IT HAS BEEN NEARLY 10 years since artist and calligrapher Kelly M. Houle of Mesa, Arizona began her journey towards making an illustrated and illuminated copy of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, first published in 1859. She originally anticipated completing the endeavour in 2019 or 2020 but the scope of the project means she is now giving herself another five years to finish the work.¹

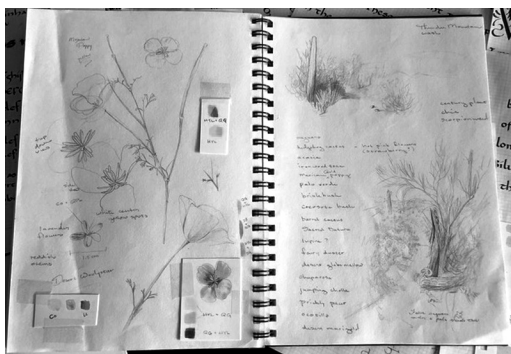
Despite having just one of the 14 chapters in a state of perfect completion, she says, "To me, it feels like I'm almost done." A self-admitted perfectionist, Houle feels that all the preparation, practice and deep thinking that she has been doing over the last few years have solidified and clarified her vision of what she wants to accomplish in the book as a whole and for each page specifically. "I have notebooks everywhere," she says, a large number of which are filled cover to cover with ideas, sketches, and thumbnail views of pages.

The first few years after she announced the beginning of this project did not go as planned: "I had every major family disruption you can have, all at once." This, combined with the

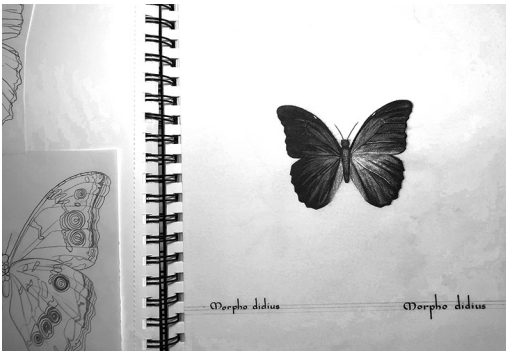
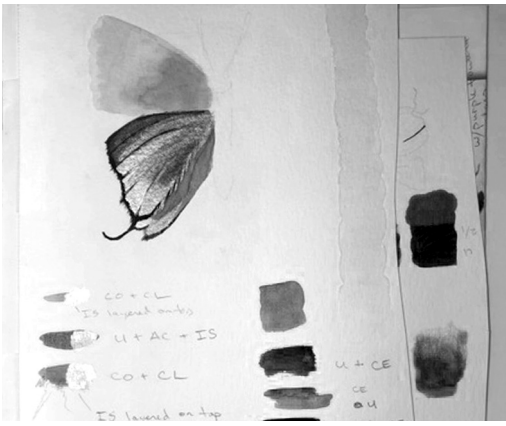
pressing demands to produce original work to send to her Kickstarter patrons meant that getting started on the *Origin* itself took a lot longer than expected. Despite being very grateful for the great support she got from this original Kickstarter campaign, she would not embark on another one. While there may be more fundraising ventures in her future, completing all the extra work that the first attempt entailed to her high personal standard meant putting off the *Origin* work too long to be viable.

Over the last 10 years Houle has not only been working on the project itself, but taking time to improve her artistry and calligraphy. After first having to abandon her Diploma in Botanical Art from the Society of Botanical Artists in London due to personal matters, she returned to it and completed the distance learning program in 2020. She felt that with so many people interested in her project she wanted to bring her painting and calligraphy skills to an even higher level.

Part of this desire meant solidifying what her personal script for this book was going to look like. After some experimentation she settled on a Carolingian-type script for the bulk of the lettering and a Roman mixed with Lombardic style for the capitals. For her, the choice of script is not just about aesthetics, but also historical themes. Calligraphy had become quite stylised and often very difficult to read by the time of Charlemagne, so much so that people on the outer edges of his empire would often claim by way of an excuse that they couldn't be in contravention of his new laws because they hadn't been able to read them. Charlemagne decided to put a halt to this trend before it could gain any more momentum and had his clerks develop a script that could be easily read by everyone. Alcuin of York was instrumental in developing this script which later solidified into the Carolingian miniscule. This



A page from Houle's sketchbook.
(All images courtesy of Kelly M. Houle.)



Top and bottom left: Sketchbook pages of blue morpho with iridescent highlights. Right: Houle adds iridescent highlights to a painting of a blue morpho.

moment in the history of written things becoming at once clearer and more accessible is something Houle wants to recall in her own script; this is a work she wants to illuminate for everyone, to make Darwin more accessible and more appealing to people who might not have read any of his works before. With this end in mind she has made the letters quite upright with not a lot of slant and increasing the line spacing to give the manuscript the legibility of a printed page.

Some of the tools and materials she is using have changed, but most have stayed the same from the beginning. The 22 by 30-inch hot-pressed cotton watercolour paper she chose at the start has proven to be a good choice. She experimented with other papers including vegetable parchment, but found that the cotton watercolour paper was the best at taking the paint the way she wanted it to as well as making crisp enough letters when applied with ink. Her main paint is Winsor-Newton transparent watercolour and the more opaque gouache. She uses M. Graham honey-based gouaches as well, and applies highlights and iridescence with Daniel

Smith iridescent watercolour and interference watercolour, which contain flecks of mica to realistically portray the glittering shells of beetles that look different when viewed from different angles.

When she started this project she was writing her letters with black gouache as it provided a strong look, but soon found that the effort of mixing the gouache to the right consistency for writing and keeping it there made the medium too time-consuming to use. Now she uses a variety of bottled inks that she has collected over the years. Her pen of preference—though she realises it is unpopular—is a fountain pen for the small letters and a Pilot Parallel Pen for the larger capitals. She tried dip pens and even quills in the early days of the project but found that a fountain pen was less drippy and led to fewer mistakes—and for the perfect finished project that she envisions, she cannot afford a single mistake. For the actual illuminated letters she uses John Neal Booksellers gold leaf sparingly, as well as shell gold. In her version, Houle sees the gold she uses is a direct corollary for the sun, giving life to all the plants and animals in her illustrations.

ATGGAGGGGGGGGGCCTTTCTGGACTCGCTCATTACGGGAGCATGCGTGGTCTTACCCTTGGCA



The frontispiece for Houle's Origin of Species.



A detail from the frontispiece for Houle's Origin of Species.

“We’ve kind of gotten away from recognising how dependent we are on the sunlight,” she says.

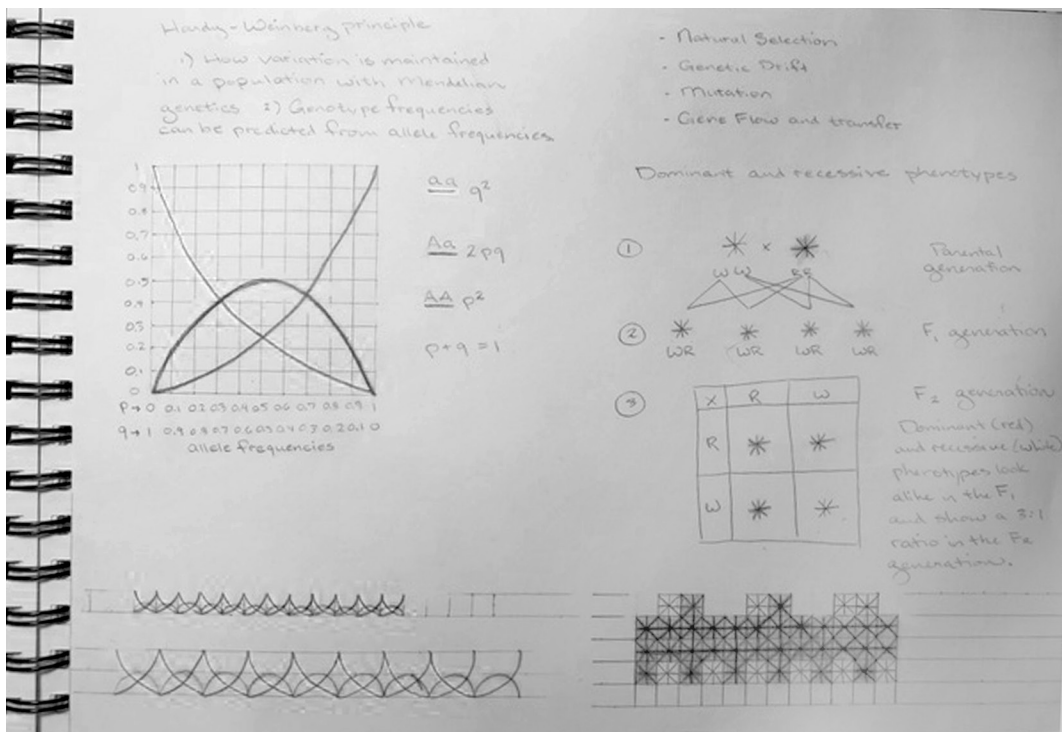
Houle has lived in four different houses over the past 10 years and set up her workspace differently each time, but thinks she’s now landed on the perfect setup to facilitate her routine. Every morning at around three or four o’clock, Houle rises to get in a few hours work before her son wakes up and the day begins. Much of the day is

consumed with being a mother and a math tutor, but two to four hours a day are still spent in her studio. Her system, for the safety of the project in progress and to reduce clean up, is to have three to four main workstations operating at once. The first station is dedicated to ruling the page, working out the layout and making soft lines on the page with a 6H pencil. The next stage is the calligraphy, as that is the part where it is easiest to make a mistake that could ruin the whole page. After that she moves to her painting station, and finally she does the gilding and iridescent colours. She likes to keep her workspaces as tidy as possible so that she does not get distracted.

A huge consideration when she embarked on this project was how to choose which things to illustrate. She does two different types of illustration in this book—the hyper-realistic and the stylised. The realistic drawings are scientific drawings of animals and plants, while the stylised illustration mimics the border decoration of older manuscripts. To Houle, the borders are not just decorative however—all of her choices are informed by a knowledge of the whole corpus



Houle's studio space.



A sketchbook page showing the working out of a border pattern using principles of biology.

of Darwin's work and even the work of some of his contemporaries. In a work published after the *Origin*, Darwin studied the spiral motion a plant follows as it grows towards the sun during the day. A page of Houle's work shows that same motion in the curling of the border vines. Near the end of the book she plans to have a monk in one of the corners working with pea plants as a nod to the work on genetics of Gregor Mendel, for which Darwin's works laid a foundation.

Choosing the subjects for her more scientific paintings was a more difficult matter. "At first I thought I needed to travel around and take pictures of things," she says, but after a while she came to the realisation that as Darwin's theories have an impact on how we view all of life, then the paintings could be anything, including things close by. Every subject she chooses she makes sure is related to Darwin in some way—using key word searches on the Darwin Online database she finds many of the plants and animals in her vicinity relate to things Darwin studied or theories he considered. "I'm not only interested in what Darwin saw, in what he noticed, but

in the implications for all other living things." On a larger scale, the book as a whole is held together by the chapter themes. "One chapter is all about pigeons ... that's the chapter where people get stuck," she says with a smile.

In terms of style, Houle wanted to evoke the feeling of the Art Nouveau movement. This was a style that was quickly sweeping the world by the end of Darwin's life, and one that nicely shows off some of Darwin's ideas. The movement was largely about a return to natural forms—letters that look like plants, nature breaking out of frames. "Not everything is contained and neat," she says, "things are wild—you had this feeling of motion." For her, this style embodies the conflict between decoration and utility, a struggle in her work as well, where the factual scientific drawings appear alongside wild, stylised border art. The Arts and Crafts Movement and the work of William Morris inspire Houle with the concept of things being "useful but beautiful." The peacock, Houle observes, also struggles between useful and beautiful—too utilitarian and it won't be attractive enough to find a mate to pass on



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*Studies of a C. atlas beetle (top) and
 night-blooming cereus (bottom).*

its genes, too beautiful and it will be weighed down with hindering feathers. Arguably it has already sacrificed much of its flight for beauty.

The text Houle uses is the first edition text that she had to read in an undergrad humanities course. She has looked at other editions, but prefers the raw first thoughts of Darwin before he was influenced by other people.

When asked about whether some people have given her a hard time about choosing to illuminate a scientific work, Houle responds that she hasn't received too much negative attention, but any that she has is the result of a modern tendency to ascribe holiness to anything written in calligraphy or adorned with gold. Pliny's *Natural History*, she reminds us, was readily available during the Renaissance with an illustrated border with white vines the dominant motif. Galileo's works were all in calligraphy, along with any scientific, mathematical, or even just clerical writing before the printing press. Gold and handwriting aren't even the sole property of Christians when it comes to

religious texts—Muslim and Jewish manuscripts were also produced in great numbers during the Middle Ages. “I’m aware that not everybody likes what I’m doing,” she admits, “but there are scientists out there writing papers about this all the time.” People are writing about Darwin’s theories every day in print, keeping them alive and growing—Houle’s work is doing the same.

The fate of the book is a noble one. The original version (predicted to be between 400 and 500 pages and either bound into several volumes or left loose) will be gifted to Down House, Darwin’s family home and a museum dedicated to his work. Houle hopes that the book will be shown by the museum and inspire visitors to take a greater interest in Darwin’s work, as well as potentially generate income for the museum and its projects. Apart from that, Houle hopes to get prints made of some or all of the pages to sell.

When asked if she would encourage others to embark on a similar project to the *Origin*, Houle’s first response was a joking “Nooooo!” which she amended by saying: “You can do it, but don’t tell anybody you’re doing it.” The pressure of public expectation can be distracting, she says. You’re better off just to put your nose to the grindstone and get it done. She wants to spread the message that hand lettering is still a viable medium, however, one that lets you connect with a work on a deeper level than a quicker method might. Her other advice is that making things by hand is becoming more and more important as these skills—which are being forced into obsolescence—are becoming rare, and even lost knowledge.

1. Kelly M. Houle’s work towards an illuminated edition of *On the Origin of Species* was first featured in Peter Mitham and Jonathan Shipley, “To Throw Some Light on *The Origin of Species*,” *Amphora* 160 (Spring 2012), 9–12.

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 ~ Charlotte Dawe is a Master’s student at the University of Victoria in Greek and Latin language and literature. She started studying calligraphy at age 12 under her mother’s tuition and has since developed a deep interest in the authentic reproduction of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts.