

Lettercutting in stone: a précis

You will need:

Faber Castell 'Albrecht Durer' aquarelle pencils: weiß; Elfenbein ivory; warm grey.

A lettercutter's dummy (or hammer)

Lettercutter's chisels: 4, 6, 8 mm

A diamond pad to sharpen the chisels

A spray can of fixative or retouching varnish

Some small pieces of Mintaro slate or other stone

Drawing the text

Polish the slate with wet and dry paper (180/240/360/400/600/800/1000) and allow to dry.

If using slate, draw with Faber Castell aquarelle pencils; if using sandstone, draw with 3H to 5H graphite.

Draw freely. With Roman letters, keep spring in the letter stems by having them a little finer in the middle than at top and bottom.

While many artists draw text on paper and transfer it to stone with carbon paper, I prefer to work out a scheme and draw freely, in one operation, on the stone. You can rub out lines with a little water and re-draw. When you are satisfied with the drawing, a spray with fixative or re-touch varnish will hold the drawing, even outdoors, for a long time.

Cutting the letters

Begin to cut at the point of a serif, and travel as far as you can. Open up a modest ragged trench down the centre of the letterform. This is the key to your next journey with the chisel. You are not yet trying to make a perfect, finished cut: to expect that too early is only to be disappointed.

Work with a simple, musical rhythm. You will find your own, and it will immediately help you to cut the stone more fluently and effectively.

Put aside all your other commitments. Give the hour, the day, the week, entirely to your lettercutting. There is no higher use for that time.

If it's not working, if you don't have the strength, concentration or attention span, go away and do something else altogether. When you come back, the stone might be in a better mood.

V-cut letterforms will be roughly an equilateral triangle in section, and so always in proportion to the width of the letter form at that point.

Consider how you hold the chisel and dummy. A looser grip on the chisel will be more effective and comfortable. On the first day's work, your wrist and fingers will probably be sore, but this will quickly pass.

Everyone experiences some disappointment with their first work – stone chips blow out, the chisel cut drifts off-line from the letter, forms seem ragged. Don't be discouraged, it happens to everyone at first, and your self-critical faculties, which may make you feel challenged, are guiding you towards higher, greater and more individual achievements in stone.

Like teaching and many other activities that bring personal growth, the more you do, the better you get.

The finished cut letter should not necessarily be smooth: a gentle corrugation, recording the rhythmic blows of the dummy, is a texture which records, like a seismograph, the process of making.

You can do many decorative finishes – white gold, yellow gold, artist's oil paints. It's all very tempting, but the freshly cut bright stone of a cut letter in slate is very appealing. Maturity brings a more cautious attitude to decoration of the cut letter, and a finer judgement of where it is, and is not, appropriate.

Whether you know it or not, you are sharing in the classical past when you begin this work. You are experiencing something very close to what thousands of craftspeople in ancient societies experienced. You are also joining a modern fraternity who enjoy the great pleasure of making text speak in stone. That is where your readings begin, and the small library on lettercutting and inscription you will have one day.

Genres

In quite a short time, you will be able to cut a letter, a word, a whole text in stone.

What, then, are you going to say?

For many lettercutters, their work is defined by instructions and commissions received from clients. For others, who learn to generate their own ideas and texts in the same way that visual artists generate new work, the process can be very much more exciting.

Soon your family and friends will always think of you when they need an inscription or when they see a beautiful one to tell you about. You will be a lettercutter.