

## Words in stone – a new tradition

The art of writing, using marks to send ideas from one person to another through time and space is an everyday miracle. Human speech is a remarkable gift, but speech encoded is a gift beyond that, and it has found expression in the great heartlands of world civilization.

Making those marks in stone with tools of stone or metals has given us documents from the ancient world which would never have been passed down to us in other ways. I want to tell you about carving letters in stone in my life, and the people who have done this in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century. Many of these letter-cutters look back to the Roman Empire for inspiration, and specially to inscriptions from the second century AD, when beautiful clear letters were being carved.

When the Roman Empire fell, words carved in stone were left throughout Europe and north Africa and the Middle East, in houses, market places, ruined temples and along the highways. But learning never disappeared completely, and was revived again and again.

Eric Gill (1882 – 1940) was a very spirited man who designed typefaces for printing, carved beautiful direct carvings of the human figure and religious subjects, and carved beautiful letters in stone. Many hand letter-cutters working today have a family or professional link with Eric Gill, and are influenced by his work.

Gill had been inspired by his teacher, Edward Johnston (1872 - 1944), in London, around 1906. Johnston designed the typefaces which are still used for the London Underground transport system. Called ‘sans serif’, because they are plain letters without the little ‘flicks’ called serifs, they are valued because they are very clear and easy to read.

Johnston and Gill thought that people no longer cared about beautiful letters, hand-carved inscriptions, directly carved sculpture and good design in the way that they should. In this they were partly inspired by William Morris, a designer, a socialist, and an idealist, who wanted to see hand-made and beautiful objects in everyone’s everyday life.

Gill and Johnston, and many other artists and craftsmen, invented a ‘new tradition’. By taking all that they saw as good from the past, and adding their own thoughts and discipline, they were able not only to ‘revive’ (bring back to life) the old traditions but to make something that had never existed before: students and assistants flocked to them.

Contemporary lettercutters in the English tradition are still few. Ken Thompson works in Ireland and carves figurative religious subjects as well as letters. The Bensons (father and son) at the John Stevens shop in Rhode Island (which has been operating since 1701) carve beautiful letters with an American flavour. Because the craft is taught in art colleges in England, there are more (about 150) practitioners there than elsewhere.

Richard Kindersley in London and the Cardozo-Kindersley workshop in Cambridge have trained many apprentices who are working all over the world. Often a three-year apprenticeship applies, but for an enthusiastic graduate a six-week internship can be the launching pad for a lifetime's work.

In Belgium and France 'graveurs lapidaires' or 'tailleurs de pierre' continue their tradition. About 25 lettercutters work in Paris.

When lettercutters are asked to do a text in a language they do not know, say Hebrew or Chinese, we will carve it faithfully as a graphic design, without comprehension.

Lettercutting is still a craft where knowledge is passed on from an experienced master to the student or apprentice, where a degree of humility is required, and not strongly individualistic romantic endeavour like contemporary painting. When the knowledge and discipline of letters and stone carving are mastered though, there is true freedom of expression, and things can be said in stone that cannot be by other media.

Carving letters in stone is a method to bring poetry, biographical information or public celebrations into public places. It is very powerful – at least as powerful as sculpture – and allows an artist to speak to future people about the times we live in and how we feel. This is because stone inscriptions will last a very long time, and like the Tang inscriptions in the Forest of Stone Steles in Xian, be an accurate text to refer to in the future.

Lettercutting in stone is important. It is not just about one language or one alphabet or writing system. Everyone should at least carve their own name in stone at some time in their life. It is an experience which will never be forgotten, and it is both about identity and achievement.

Lettercutting brings the mind and hands together in one task – it is both a path to learning and to physical ability. A lettercutter can sit quietly in their garden and think not just 'I made that', but 'I took words from air and made them stone.'