

Destiny Carved in Stone

By Lynn Wasnak

Centuries before computer graphics and four-color printing, symbols were carved into rock to be read by future generations. But few artists today have actually grasped a chisel to do this work, and fewer still understand the theory and practice of lettercarving.

John Benson, a rangy New Englander in his late 50s, is a versatile exception. He grew up in an atmosphere of lettering and art. His father, noted calligrapher and lettercarver John Howard Benson, owned the historic John Stevens Shop in Newport, Rhode Island, founded in 1705, carving monuments and gravestones. Benson apprenticed under his father, who died in 1956, and other carvers there. (Apprenticing is the only way to learn, he says.) After training in sculpture at RISD, he returned to Newport to help his mother run the business. His first major commission, at age 25, was carving letters on the JFK Memorial. Since then he's built a reputation strong as his materials, designing and carving monumental lettering at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the National Gallery of Art, and the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, to name a few prestigious assignments.

Recently, Benson discussed his "job of a lifetime" ...the design and execution of inscriptions on the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The work was on Benson's drawing board from '91 through '97, but actually started much earlier. The FDR Memorial Commission, founded in the 1950s, took 20 years before approving noted San Francisco architect Lawrence Halprin's design of four outdoor walled sculpture-gardens in the mid-'70s. Benson had become friends with Leonard Baskin, the prominent sculptor, after helping him with type for a book. Halprin selected Baskin as one of his Memorial sculptors. When the subject of lettering for the memorial came up, Baskin said "Get Benson."

Benson accepted the FDR assignment with delight. In 1978 he drew preliminary sketches for the inscriptions, and traveled with Halprin to Cold Spring, Minnesota, to review how the selected stone—carnelian granite—would relate to the carving of the letters.

But then the Government balked at Halprin's cost-estimates, and the project came to an abrupt halt. "We were dashed," Benson admits. "But that's the way that stuff goes."

Quietly behind the scenes, Halprin continued to work with the Memorial Commission. Making adjustments, he got the price down to \$52 million. By 1991, the project was on again. “Halprin did not change the major concepts at all,” says Benson. “Everything you see is there because he wanted it that way.”

One cost-cutting decision directly impacted the inscriptions. “Originally, we had planned to handcarve every letter,” says Benson. But in reevaluating, Halprin began to see the inscriptions as two distinct types. One was the large, epigrammatic, eye-grabbing quote: ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!’ Then there were longer, more literate quotations. These could be sandblasted.

Sandblasting greatly reduced cost and made it possible to retain most of the inscriptions Halprin had conceived (22, including a 14-element timeline in Room 4). But the carnelian granite Halprin selected—a beautiful deep brickish, pinkish, or brownish red, depending on ambient light and treatment—was too rough to allow a rubber mat to adhere. So they specified smoother panels to be sandblasted by Minnesota’s Cold Spring Granite Company, under Benson’s supervision. The panels were then set into the rough wall.

The layout and stencil cutting for these long quotes was done on a Mac. Though small compared to the hand-carved inscriptions, the sandblasted quotes measure up to 15 feet long by 3 to 6 feet high, with numerous three- to four-inch letters. “It would have been incredibly laborious to do repeated hand-renderings of these things,” Benson states.

Letterform selection was critical. Benson’s first drawings utilized a Trajan-style letter, “the great, prototypical, elegant, second-century, high imperial Roman majesque,” he intones, sounding like the letterform itself. But at a design meeting with the architect, he realized they needed something less formal.

That made sense, because architecturally, official Washington is a white town—white or light pink, Benson explains. “Larry was going to put this brown thing in there, and it was rough, while official Washington is serene, smooth, symmetrical.” The Trajan style didn’t fit Halprin’s naturalistic design. So Benson went back to the Roman letter’s Greek roots, circa 190 B.C.—to develop the sandblasted letterform.

“Traditionally the role of lettering is to bring vitality to a flat surface, but in the case of the handcarved letters, the (granite) surface is so lively I had to make an attempt to stabilize it. And yet, because the lively surface surrounds the smooth panels, I had to make the lettering on the smooth panels extremely lively so they would generate a texture, that would reflect to some extent, the scale and nature of the texture on the split stone. Otherwise (the sandblasted panels) would be flat and dead... You can’t get a beautiful v-shaped cut in a sandblasted letter,” Benson points out. “You get... a raggedy u-shape. It’s like accelerated erosion.”

As source for the hand-drawn letters Benson chose Claudian inscriptions of about 50 A.D., sans-serif but with visible thick and thin strokes. He modified these with a u-shaped incision to relate the handcarving more closely to the sandblasted style. Finished, the two letterforms are virtually indistinguishable.

The handcarving layouts were repeatedly rendered on paper, then drawn with black marker on clear Mylar, so the granite could show through for positioning and

readjustment. In the spring of 1996, Benson, with colleague and carver Joe Moss, went to Washington D.C. to start handcarving. From a staging of ladders and scaffolding, complete with weather protection (it rains a lot in Washington), they set to work. “The stone was so rough I knew the letters would suffer tremendous distortion, once I painted them down,” he said. “It’s like painting on the side of a truck. The bumps in the stone were wild and wooly and all over the place. Come up at an angle, and you can’t read it at all.”

After positioning the Mylar, “a big greasy carbon paper, the funkiest, greasiest carbon paper you’ve ever seen,” was placed underneath. A rounded steel scribe, ballpoint-size, was scrubbed along the edge of the letters to trace an outline on the stone. Next Benson filled in the outlines with water-based poster paint. “I was about as far away as your computer screen.” They looked wonderful, Benson says, until he got down from the staging, where the surface distortion was apparent.

To make corrections, Benson played tourist, staring up, making notes, then washing off and repainting the letters. “In fact, I had to do that twice, because when I got back up on the staging, I often couldn’t bring myself to make the hideous change that the notes called for,” he says.

The carving itself was done with pneumatic hammers— miniature jackhammers beating on hand-held chisels. Benson detests these hammers, but time-constraints forced their use. For extra legibility, he handpainted both types of inscriptions with two coats of translucent gray-brown Lithichrome stain.

Since its unveiling in the Spring of 1997, The FDR Memorial has been acclaimed as a fitting tribute to one of the nation’s great presidents. “It benefited creatively from the prolonged thinking process,” he says.

Benson does more than carve letters on monuments. He’s featured on the AppleMasters web page (www.applemaster.apple.com). He also carves wood, designed patterns for bronze letter casting, and much more. His brother Richard, photographer and Dean of Yale’s School of Art, once said John “has the best hands in the world.” Several people say he’s “the best lecturer I ever heard” on subjects of calligraphy and type.

Once, printing and letter carving had virtually nothing to do with each other. They were rendered differently, for different purposes. Now, with computers, typefaces are used by stonecarvers all the time. But these are typefaces designed for small scale, black and white replication. “They’ve been digitized, cut with computer stencil cutters, and willy-nilly sandblasted into stone with no regard for the broadly different categories of visual requirement of these two very diverse media,” he states ruefully. “Type design is the Olympics of lettering. The computer has made it much too easy.”

More than 30 years of carving letters on headstones, among other tasks, gives a person plenty of time to think about what’s important. “Nick’s running the shop now,” he says, referring to his son, Nicholas. “He’s a wonderful cutter...he’s 35 and has been working with me since he was 15, so that’s 20 years. It takes about 10 years to be good enough to do it.” (Talent runs in the family. His son Christopher is a portrait and landscape painter in California.)

“I used to say that the two most exciting things in this business are finishing an old job and starting the next,” he adds. Now Benson is on to ‘the next.’ He recently moved into a new house, and he’s carving a piece of marble, “trying to get back into sculpture.”

(Sidebar)

(subhead) To Learn More:

Apprentice with a stonecarver. (In England, if you can’t find one here.)

Read:

Elements of Lettering (out of print, but possibly available in libraries) by John Howard Benson, John’s father. “A very good general lettering textbook.”

3 books from England:

Letters, Slate, Cut by David Kindersley

Carve Letters in Wood and Stone by Michael Harvey

Lettercutting, by Richard Grasby.

Articles on lettercarving appear occasionally in Calligraphy Review.