

1997

The Library Inscriptions Carved by John Benson, 1992-1995: A Guide to the Nine Pieces

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The University of Rhode Island Library

Kingston, Rhode Island

Art for Public Facilities

The Library Inscriptions

Carved By

John Benson

1992 - 1995

A Guide to the Nine Pieces

1997

University of Rhode Island Library Plaza

The Narragansett Monolith

This roughly shaped 12-foot high granite block occupies the west end of the plaza in front of the library building. The block is inscribed

NIPPENOWANTAWEM
NIPPPENOWANTAWEM
MEQUAUNAMIINNEA
MEQUAUNAMIINNEA

[I Am Of Another Language]
[Remember Me]

The inscribed "words" are phonetic renderings of phrases in the Narragansett language (an Algonquian dialect) recorded by Roger Williams in his book, *A Key Into the Language of America*, London, 1643, selected from chapters entitled, "Of Eating and Entertainment" and "Of the Family Businesses," respectively (pages 9 and 41).

Each phrase is carved twice in raised letters of varying depth, which creates the effect of the words seeming to emerge from the face of the stone and then recede into it (symbolic of the emergence and decline of an indigenous people). The letter style is a rudimentary sans serif Roman with a cove-section profile and a slightly concave top surface. The monolith was conceived and carved by John Benson of Newport, Rhode Island

The block of Westerly Red granite, 4½ feet wide, ranges in thickness from nearly 3 feet at the base to 18 inches at the top. The stock came from the uppermost stratum of the quarry. The face of the stone is the exposed surface worked by glacial action in the last Ice Age. The upper portion of this surface was re-worked by the artist to accommodate the inscription. The right edge of the stone is a naturally occurring seam surface. The left and back surfaces of the stone were split and hand worked by Benson and the Westerly quarrymen. The carving was done near the quarry at the Bonner Monument shop. The piece was installed on the plaza on August 17, 1994.

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Front of the Library Building 1

West Facade

High on the front of the library, to the far left of the entrance, is the inscription

ENLIGHTEN THE PEOPLE...
AND TYRANNY AND OPPRESSIONS
OF BODY AND MIND
WILL VANISH LIKE EVIL SPIRITS
AT THE DAWN OF DAY

These words are from Thomas Jefferson's letter to Count Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, dated April 24, 1816 (paragraph 3, sentence 4). [*Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, 1798-1817*. Dumas Malone, editor. (Boston, 1930, page 186).]

The first line of the original text reads "Enlighten the people generally... ."

The area occupied by this and the corresponding inscription on the east facade is approximately 14 feet by 5 feet. The details of style and execution of the above are given at the description of the inscription on the east facade, which follows.

*

Front of the Library Building 2

East Facade

High on the front of the library, to the far right of the entrance, is the inscription

MY ALMA MATER WAS BOOKS
A GOOD LIBRARY...
I COULD SPEND THE REST OF
MY LIFE READING
JUST SATISFYING MY CURIOSITY

These are the words of Malcolm X (1925-1963) from his *Autobiography* (New York, 1965), Chapter 11. The quotation is extracted from the following consecutive sentences of paragraph 59 of that chapter:

I told the Englishman that my alma mater was books, a good library. Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read--and that's a lot of books these days. If I weren't out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity--because you can hardly mention anything I'm not curious about.

These inscriptions were carved in the black granite panels of the facade. The letter forms are sans serif based on the skeleton of the Roman majuscule. The carving was done by sandblasting through rubber stencil material applied to the stone surface and cut, in place, through full-size handdrawn paper layouts. All of this work was accomplished from the end of a sixty-five foot hydraulic boom lift. The carving was executed during October, 1992.

Outer Lobby Inscriptions 1

Over the inner entrance doors is a panel with the phrase

ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ

PSYCHES IATREION

[Healing-Place of the Soul]

The phrase was reported by Hecataeus of Abdera, a historian of the early third century B.C., to be an inscription on the sacred library of the tomb complex of Osymandyas (Ramses II), at Thebes. It is quoted by Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily) in his Library of History (Βιβλιοθηκησ Ιστορικησ), Book I, paragraph 49, line 3 (Loeb Library, Greek ser. vol. I, pp. 172-3.)

The surface of the panel of Indiana buff limestone, measuring 10 feet by 16 inches, was given a hand tooled texture. The style of the lettering is based on the classical Greek majuscule typical of the Golden Age. The letters were cut to an 85° angle and darkened by a coat of transparent gray stain.

This panel and the two adjacent panels were installed in late July, 1993.

*

Outer Lobby Inscriptions 3

High on the east wall of the outer lobby is a panel with the words

*Our lives flower and pass. Only
robust works of the imagination
live in eternity ...*

These are lines from Denise Levertov's poem "Art (After Gautier)," a free translation of Theophile Gautier's poem "L'Art," in *Emaux et Camees*, 1872. The poem was published in her collection, *With Eyes At the Back Of Our Heads* (New York, 1959, page 72).

This panel, like the one opposite it, is Buckingham slate, split from the same quarry block, with matched surfaces. The text is carved in a modern version of the chancery italic hand.

*

Outer Lobby Inscriptions 2

High on the west wall of the lobby is a panel with the words

PERO CHE TU TRASCORRI
PER LE TENEBRE TROPPO
DA LA LUNGI AVVIEN CHE POI
NEL MAGINARE ABBORRI

[Because You Try to Penetrate]
[the Shadows From Much Too]
[Far Away, You Confuse the Truth]
[With Your Imagination]

The text is from Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia--Inferno*, Canto XXXI, lines 22-24. The translation is by Mark Musa (Bloomington, Ind., 1971, page 255).

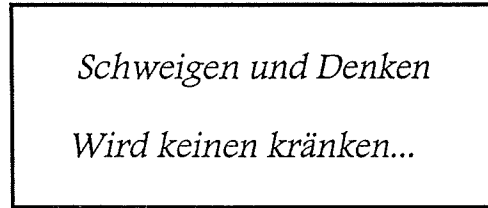
The panel, measuring 8½ feet by 3 feet, is dark grey Buckingham slate from a quarry in Arvonnia, Virginia. The letters are classic Roman capitals.

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Interior Inscriptions 1

Lobby Entrance

A panel mounted on the east wall of the library lobby, opposite the circulation desk, has the inscription



[Silence and thought]

[Harm no one ...]

These are the first lines from Epigram No. 97 of the poet Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827), *Gedichte*, Leipzig, 1837. He is best known for his “Die schöne Müllerin” and “Die Winterreise” poems set to music by Franz Schubert (D796 and D911).

The second part of the epigram is

Unbedacht Sagen,
Wer wollt' es verklagen?

[Thoughtless words,]
[Who wants to be accused]
[of them?]

The panel, measuring approximately 8 feet by 2 feet, is Dakota Mahogany granite. The polished surface was lightly sandblasted through a rubber stencil, to transfer the letter forms, and then carved by hand to create the shallow U-section of the letters. These are a Northern European version of the chancery italic hand, inspired by the work of the contemporary German calligrapher Friedrich Neugebauer. The panel was installed on September 2, 1995.

*

Interior Inscriptions 2

Lobby, West Wall

A painted wooden panel mounted on the lobby wall is carved with the words

*Come, and take choice of all my library
And so beguile thy sorrow ...*

These lines are from William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Act 4, scene 1, lines 34 and 35, a speech of Titus' to Lavinia after her mutilation.

The italic copperplate style calligraphy of Raphael Boguslav (a Newport, R.I. resident) was enlarged and carved by John Benson. The panel of medium density fiberboard, with a birch veneer, measures 10 feet by 2¹/₄ feet. The letters were carved to a 90° V-section and painted a darker tint than that of the panel surface, which matches the wall color. The piece was installed on August 28, 1995.

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Interior Inscriptions 3

Reference Index Area, East Wall

An imposing wooden panel is seen on entering the Reference area. It is inscribed with the words

GRAMMATA · SOLA · CARENT · FATO

[THE WRITTEN WORD ALONE FLOUTS DESTINY]

The Latin phrase is from the poem "Nullum opus exsurgit..." (line 3), by the 9th century abbot, Hrabanus Maurus. The translation is from Helen Waddell's, *Mediæval Latin Lyrics*, New York, 1977, pages 106-7.

The panel of Honduras mahogany measures 10 feet by 14 inches. The inscription was carved in classic Roman capitals by John Benson. The panel was installed on August 23, 1995.

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Descriptive text prepared by
K. T. Morse from a manuscript
by John Benson and published
sources.