



Death, Be Not Staid

*HOW PERSONAL SHOULD A FINAL RESTING PLACE BE?
TWO MEMORIAL DESIGNERS TALK ABOUT THE BRAVE NEW
WORLD OF HEADSTONE CARVING.*

By Steven Heller





1

Before Paul Rand died in 1996, he asked the Swiss designer Fred Troller to make a headstone for him that would transcend the usual clichés. The resulting monument comprises two heavy stone cubes. The top cube is turned on its axis and carved with Rand's name and dates in sans-serif letters, evocative of the designer's quintessentially modernist sensibility; the bottom cube is inscribed in Hebrew. The memorial stands out among rows of traditional tombstones in the Connecticut cemetery for its economical beauty, subtle ingenuity, and elegant typography. Troller also designed the layer of specially polished stones placed around the base for mourners to place them on the gravestone in the Jewish tradition.

Drive past a graveyard and you'll often find a sameness among the markers, with a few ostentatious displays that speak more of wealth than of sentiment. In 1994, the architect Ali Weiss founded a company called Living Monuments to address what she saw as an industry short on aesthetics and individuality. Her stones are histories rather than listings, with a 500-word biography of the deceased in 20-point type on a rotating element of the customer's choice. "I think baby boomers are going to take back control of the death-care industry," she said in an interview with *The New York Times*.

It's an understandable wish to give our loved ones a fitting remembrance—or to design one for ourselves. These days, thanks to new laser and digital technologies, you don't need to be a pharaoh or a president to have a distinctive tribute. Increasingly, people stipulate in their wills how, where, and even by whom their monuments will be designed. Designers and manufacturers, responding to the call for customization, are making memorials that mirror the eccentricities and personal mythologies of the person who has died, and are reimagining what we've come to think of as "traditional" typefaces, images, shapes, and even materials for memorial sites.

Headstones are still, for the most part, designed by monument-engraving companies. The craft of traditional hand letter cutting still thrives in Europe, but it's waning in the United States. Perhaps inevitably, new technologies are entering the market. In 2004, a company called Vidstone began marketing the Serenity Panel, a 7-inch solar-powered screen mounted on the front of a tombstone, which plays a loop of music and video. Another significant trend to modernize gravestones involves images etched from photos via computer scans—including Disney characters, Chevy trucks, and wild typography, such as the dreaded Comic Sans.

Not everyone in the industry approves of these developments, of course. The problem with personalized headstones is that "one person's dream is another person's nightmare," Robert Fells, general counsel for the International Cemetery and Funeral Association in Virginia, told *The Boston Globe*. Given epitaphs like "Who The Hell is Sheila Shea" and "Piping Plovers Taste Like Chicken," one can see what he means.

With options like these—amid an industry suddenly rife with beer-can coffins and sports-logo linings—where is the line between solemnity and silliness? How do designers in this field mediate between old and new, and what are the limits of taste? I asked two

Drew Dernavich:

“You don't want these stones looking like bad PowerPoint presentations, with eight different fonts on the same page.”

1
Paul Rand's
memorial, designed by
Fred Troller.

tombstone designers how they practice their craft, and about their own personal and imposed guidelines.

CHEMICALS, SUNDIALS, AND MARTIANS

Ken Williams, 65, a letter carver and retired design teacher at the University of Georgia in Athens, began letter cutting out of his interest in history, and maintains a sense of tradition in his work. In the late '70s, while in southern Tuscany, he started spending time at a stone yard, bought chisels, and started trying to cut his own letters. After eight years, he had mastered the craft. "There's not much call for cornerstones anymore," he says, "but as I got older, more of my friends were dying, and I started cutting their monuments."

Williams began his practice by replicating 2,000-year-old Roman capitals, cut into stone. "It is almost impossible to beat. I will never master the nuances—you just keep noticing new things. I like to try to form the letters with a brush instead of copying a typeface. And I like to contrast the caps with the chancery hand. They are both elegant: one more formal, one more organic. Stone and hand-cut letters from the Roman or Renaissance periods seem magical."

One of his favorite projects to date is a pair of sundials commissioned by two colleagues who had lost their parents. They asked to use stones from Italy, since the parents had spent time there. Because the monuments would be placed in memorial gardens rather than in cemeteries, they asked that the works incorporate St. Francis's canticle extolling Mother Earth, Sister Moon, and Brother Sun. For the gnomon, the shadow-casting part of a sundial, Williams had to figure out how to photo-etch on both sides of a piece of brass. "If OSHA had only known what chemicals I was using in the university's darkrooms, I would be in jail," he jokes.

He's also seen the longing for eternal individualism meet with less positive results. Williams was once cutting in a stone shed in Elberton, Georgia, when a truck delivered a number of huge, weathered pieces of stone cut in strange semicircles and triangles, with sandblasted lettering all over them. He asked what the stones were for, and the deliverymen told him they were for an eccentric doctor who had designed his own monument. To Williams, it looked like a spaceport for Martians. Days after the doctor's death, the widow called the stone shed to haul away the amazing object and cut him a regular stone. "So I guess what you try not to do is make such an ungodly mess that the survivors will rip it out of the ground," he says.

LED ZEPPELIN, HORSE RACES, AND ANGELS

Drew Dernavich, 39, is probably best known by *New Yorker* readers for his dryly witty cartoons signed with an upper- and lowercase, woodcut-style "Dd." But for 18 years, he has etched type and imagery into almost 1,000 gravestones.

His uncle owned a company that imported granite into the United States from India, China, and Africa and sold it to monument shops and retailers. Unlike the lighter granites from North America, these stones were dark and richly colored when polished, and the company was looking for somebody who could etch portraits and realistic

2
A solar-powered Serenity Panel screen from Vidstone can play short videos as a tribute to one's loved one (or pet).

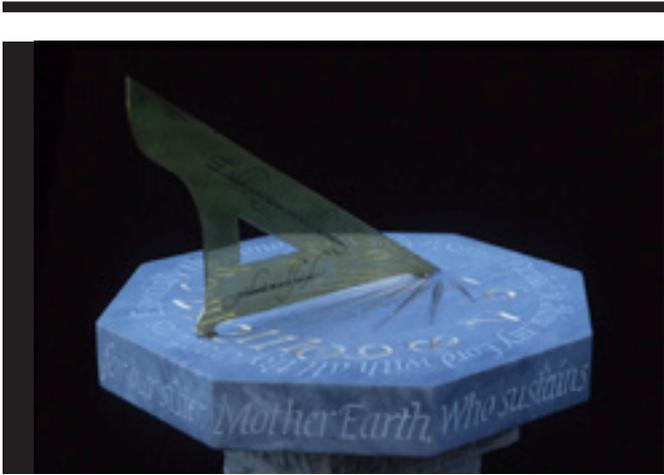
3
A young man's gravestone in Baarn, The Netherlands.

2



3





5



6

scenes onto them. Dernavich had just graduated from college and was eager to use his art skills, so his uncle gave him the job. (He notes that many of the artists within the granite industry come from inside the field itself.) Dernavich worked for his uncle’s company for a few years and subcontracted with many other monument sellers in New England and New York, traveling to either retail shops or manufacturer warehouses. By 1998, he had narrowed his clients down to six or seven dealers around Boston.

Dernavich had done intaglio etching while in school, so the approach of drawing white on black was familiar to him, although the specific instruments were not. His tool of choice became the Dremel engraver, which vibrates enough to carve a line into the surface of a stone while still allowing for a lot of control. “It was the easiest thing to use and to travel with, although it took a long time for it to feel as comfortable as a pencil did in my hand,” Dernavich says.

It’s quite possible, these days, to have a stone on which nothing has been done by hand. Now, often, the stones are quarried and cut by machines, polished by machines, and carved and lettered by machines following programmed templates or rubber stencils. In fact, Dernavich says, there are probably more programmers in the business than stonecutters. The art of etching is following suit, because scanned images can now be etched onto stone cheaply and easily by a laser. Until the technology improves, though, the etchings will often lack contrast and look flat and blurry—“almost like a bad photocopy, but on a permanent piece of granite,” Dernavich says.

As for the type, traditional stonecutters working with chisels usually chose Roman fonts, which “carve well,” Dernavich says. These days, with computers, “a lot of folks come in with their own font requirements —‘My last name in Palatino, the dates in Helvetica.’” There are also practical concerns: “Say that you put in a stone for your father 20 years ago, with your mother’s birth date only. Now your mom dies, and you need to complete the death date. You don’t want these stones looking like bad PowerPoint presentations, with eight different fonts on the same page.”

That doesn’t keep people from being creative. Dernavich has etched Red Sox, Patriots, and Celtics logos; bucket loaders; Italian restaurants; Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium; the Tasmanian Devil, Snoopy, and Pikachu; cans of Budweiser and bottles of Southern Comfort; winning Bingo cards and scratch tickets. He did a horse-race scene in which the scoreboard in the background showed that the person for whom the stone was created had won, and the familiar Led Zeppelin winged Apollo from the band’s Swan Song label. “It was for a kid in his twenties, and I remember



7

his buddies coming by and thinking it was awesome.”

Despite all this free expression, headstone design does have limitations. Many cemeteries are now battling with both families and monument shops over issues of text and image choice—predominantly Catholic cemeteries, some of which do not allow portraits or nonreligious scenery or phrases. Still, families often ask the shop to sneak in an image of their loved one surreptitiously. If an angel happens to bear the exact likeness of the deceased, well, who can say what an angel really looks like?

It is, of course, the grieving who will see a headstone, and there are limitations there, too. “I always tell customers that if they give me a good picture I can make it look ‘just like the person,’ but we’re seeing two different things,” Dernavich says. “I’m seeing a photo of someone I never knew, and they’re seeing an image loaded with love, grief, history, meaning, and context. So there have been instances where I’ve captured an exact likeness—in my eyes—only to have a family tell me that it looks nothing like the person.” What about his own plans for the faraway future? “If I do get a slab, I’m pretty sure I just want a big gray boulder with a nice chiseled name on it—maybe a verse. No images.” **P**



8



9



10



4
The hands and tools of headstone designer Ken Williams at work.

5, 6
Detail from a sundial memorial by Williams; one of his headstones.

7-9
Gravestones, based on photographs and etched by cartoonist and headstone designer Drew Dernavich. Dernavich used Adobe Brush Script for “Gone Dancing.”

10
One of Dernavich’s stones in progress.