

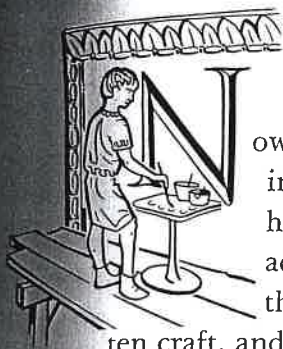
THE ORIGIN OF THE SERIF
BRUSH WRITING &
ROMAN LETTERS

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Painting V-cuts



ow the significant, external mark that sets off the craft of the inscription cutter is the chiselled V-cut. The cutter can hardly be blamed if he allows his V-cut to stand alone, unadorned. Cut letters, if gilded or painted, tend to fall from their unique position as part of an ancient, all-but-forgotten craft, and become part of the common sign painter's domain, there to serve along with neon, plastic, sheet metal, and gold leaf signs—merely as one among many.

It may shock stone letterers to be told that, historically considered, the V-cutting of letters is merely one of several steps to the completion of the inscription sequence; that the V-cut is a means and not an end; that the V-cut is but the basis for painting or gilding. To prove the point let us look for a moment at the Trajan Inscription and Column in Rome.

Many, even some art historians and teachers, are not aware that originally the entire Trajan Column from top to bottom (including the near-800-foot long spiral bas-relief scroll that makes 23 turns from base to Column top) was polychromed. On the underside of the abacus one can see traces of green, blue, red, and gilt. The Column was surmounted by a *gilded* bronze statue of the Emperor Trajan. Traces of various colors can be seen in the long scroll and particles of red-orange coloring are still visible in the letters of the Inscription at the Column's base.

As a rule Roman inscriptions, even the ancient ones, after being cut were painted with red-orange pigment, usually *minium* (red oxide of lead, that is, Pb_3O_4) or red mercuric sulphide, (vermilion, that is, HgS). Pliny mentions this (H. N. xxxiii, 122; “. . . minium in volumi-

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num quoque scriptura usurpatur clarioresque litteras vel in aere (Mommsen in muro) vel in marmore etiam in sepulcris facit.") That is, 'vermilion is used for bookhand script; moreover it makes clearly legible letters on walls (bronze) and marble, even tombs.'



Purpose V-cut serves



ventually the question will suggest itself; if it is true that V-cuts were promptly painted over as soon as they were chiselled, what purpose, then, did the chiselled V-cut serve?

The answer is that the V-cut helped to preserve the original writing of the inscription. Chiselling is the shield protecting the fragile writing from its natural enemies, abrasion and erasure by windblown sand, by sun and rain. The ancients knew that surface writing on stone was easily and quickly effaced.

In proof, we look again at the Trajan Inscription, written, chiselled, and painted eighteen and a half centuries ago. One-half of the projecting cornice which protected the Inscription has been broken away. The extreme left third and right sixth of this protective cornice is still intact. The letters underneath the broken-out portion of the cornice are most eroded and damaged. Those areas on the left and right ends of the Inscription, through the centuries protected by the cornice, give us letters today that are sharper, better preserved and more informative. Without doubt, then, the function of the overhanging cornice is to *preserve the letters* from damage and effacement.

Now cutting the inscription letters into the stone puts them beyond those weathering agencies of rain, hail, wind, and sun, ever working to erase them. This practice was not peculiar to the Romans. It was commonly used by the earlier Sumerians, Assyrians, and Egyptians. In effect, then, *chiselling* is insurance, a *protective cornice* for the survival of inscriptions.

Chiselling therefore is wholly ancillary to writing and lettering. It is the supporting buttress to the written inscription which is the all-im-

portant element. But the 'cornice' is meaningless if what it protects can be seen only with difficulty — hence the need for painting the 'cornice.'

The whole inscription-making process evolved easily, naturally and simply. First came the writing on the stone, next the V-cut, chiselling away the writing and thus 'cornicing' it into the stone, and finally the repainting of the V-cut to restore the original writing — that is, 1) writing; 2) chiselling; 3) painting.

Making a comparison with the craft of enameling one can say that the chiselled V-cut stands in the same relationship to the inscription it carries that the cloison (cell partition) has to the colored enamel it



Fig. 69. The Trajan Inscription in Rome showing the cornice (and its broken out section) that originally protected the chiselled letters.

holds. Deprive this cell of its coloring enamel and serious damage is done to the design. Take away the re-painting from chiselled letters and a like damage results. Unpainted, chisel-cut letters are as unnatural as cloisons without enamel.



Fig. 70. A photograph taken in 1897 before the Trajan Inscription was scrubbed with acid to remove the weather staining, moss, and soil crusts caused by the broken-out section of the projecting cornice. The acid cleansing was done in the interest of the tourist trade.

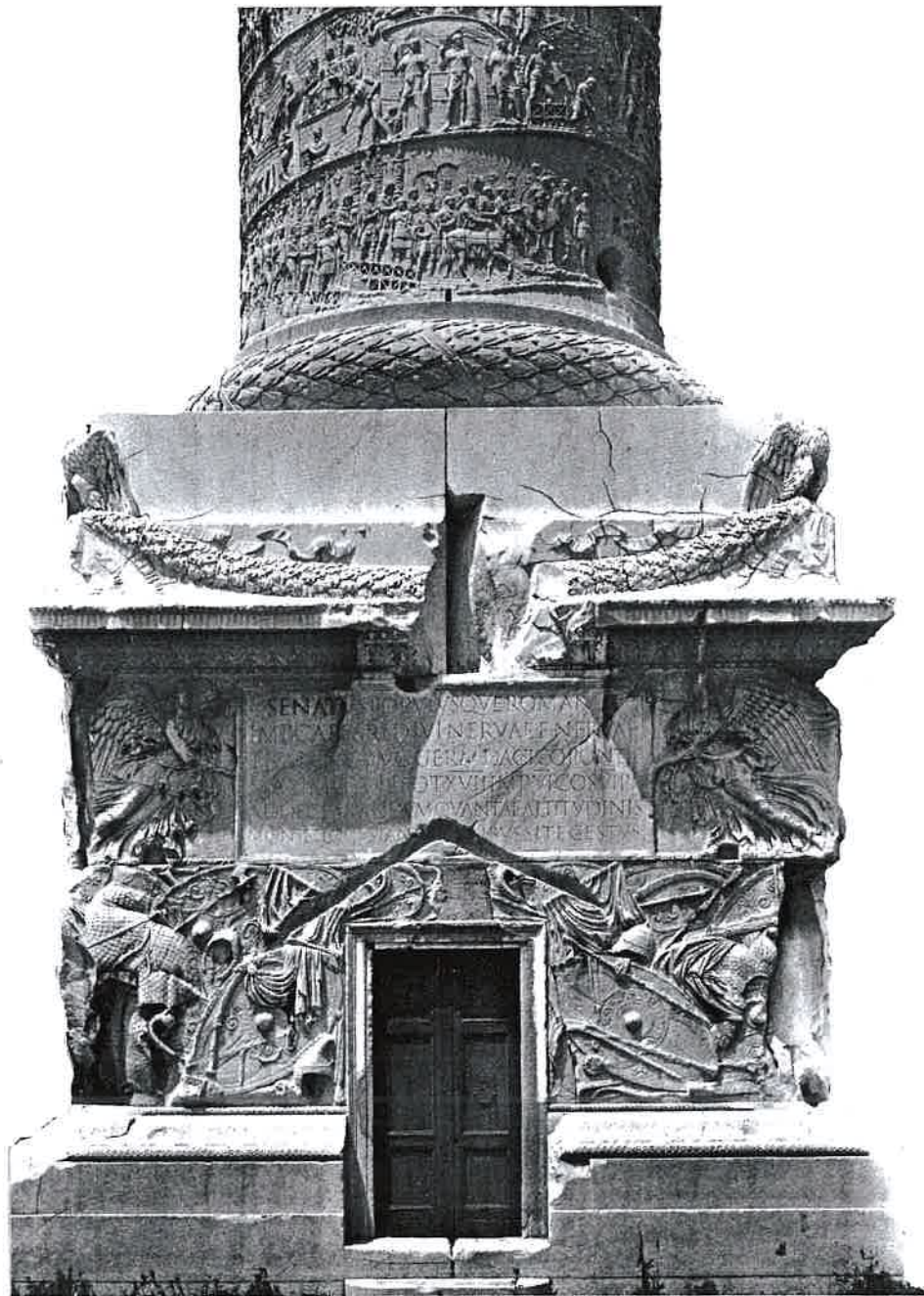


Fig. 71. The Trajan Inscription as it appears today.