

THE ORIGIN OF THE SERIF
BRUSH WRITING &
ROMAN LETTERS

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Letter cutting in stone



efore going further, a brief description of stone letter-cutting is in order. In giving my own letter-cutting procedure, I am aware that it is not universal, that other methods exist, and that some authors and letter cutters disagree with me.

In 1931 when I first began letter cutting I had only books to instruct me. The tilted stone position that Eric Gill advised did not seem comfortable to me. It presented too many problems, was difficult to maneuver and less satisfactory for safety of worker and stone. As a sign writer I usually wrote on the flat or on a slightly tilted bench—about 20-25 degrees from the horizontal. It seemed natural to me that the same position should be used for writing and lettering on stone. After trying the slightly tilted position, I adopted the horizontal for its comfort and ease. Moreover, cutting on the flat permitted me to shift the stone around into any position and thus to get the benefit of the contrast provided by crosslights when chiselling the channel of V-cuts. In 1936 I was sure of the advantages of this position when I saw letterers in Greece, Italy, and Germany cutting on the flat.

Most English cutters seem to prefer the stone in the upright position, while the few American and European letterers I know prefer it flat. Each has advantages. I have cut on-the-job, vertical murals and inscriptions and find upright cutting more difficult and physically tiring. Then too, upright cutting often forces me to cut left-handed and since I prefer right-handed cutting this may color my preference for the flat. Perhaps it is a matter of what we are habituated to. Will Carter, the very fine English cutter, is firm in his view that upright cutting is easier. But, preferences aside, cutters should know both methods of cutting.

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I suspect, although I am not sure, that Eric Gill's upright cutting determined the English letter-cutting stance. But many forget that Eric Gill was also a sculptor cutting figures in the 'round.' The stone is naturally fixed vertically so that the sculptor can walk around the figure while working on it, and also view it in the light and shadow of its normal, and final, vertical position. Gill became accustomed to working in this way and mounted all his lettering work upright, in like manner.

In cutting letters I find that I start with the stem, the letter's thickest element. The stem and stem-width largely determine proportions, establish the letter's vertical or slant orientation, and give the first, over-all approximation on spacing. The stems are the chief means for letter

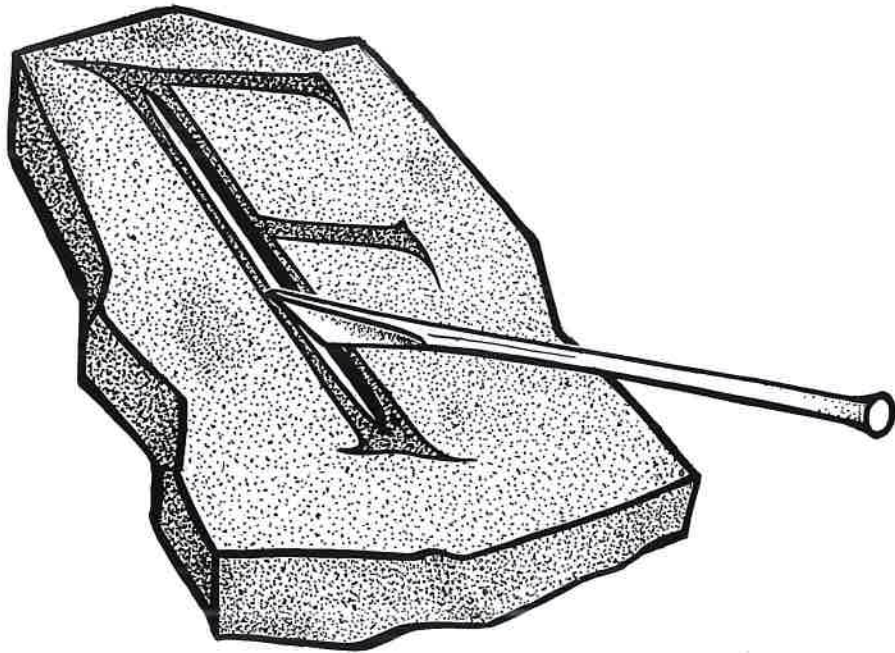


Fig. 83. Letter cutting in stone.

spacing and modifications of the letter to left or right can more easily be made with the thick stems. To begin, say, with the arm serifs of majuscule E would make impossible any change whatever in the width

of that letter, whereas beginning in the center of E's stem would enable the cutter, while cutting from the inside out, to correct his spacing and proportioning if necessary.

This is especially true when cutting quick letters from informal, roughly sketched layouts. Of course the rule for cutting thick stems first is not without exception; there are times when one cuts the thin before the thick. For example, one would cut the cross bar to majuscule T first (as one does when writing the letter) for reasons of space composition.

I find that I start at the center of the letter-stem and chisel out towards the edge. The chisel, held at a constant cutting angle, alternates cuts on each side of the V-cut channel until the letter edge is *almost* reached. At this stage, thin strokes, arms, cross bars, and thin curves are cut and finished. The chisel is generally held at a steeper angle in cutting serifs, especially for the initial cut at the tip where one needs a quick and exact 'bite' with the chisel. I find that I always cut serifs from their tips into the stems and arms of letters. The serifs are blended into the fillets and into the outer edges of the letters, which *then are finished*. In making round shapes I start with the thick swells which are analogous to the thick stem.



Fig. 84. Photograph of V-cut ridging in stone.

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I realize it is practically axiomatic to cut thins before thicks since cutting a thin arm into a finished stem would break out a part of the stem's V-cut wall at the juncture. The cutting method described above does not violate this axiom. The stem is begun before but not finished until after the serifs, fillets, bars, tails, and arms have been cut.

The distinctive and only contribution of the chisel is a tiny dentation or ridging caused by each mallet stroke on the V-cut sides. The harder the stone the finer is this herringbone or chevron striation. Light mallet taps cause smaller striations. In large outdoor letters (I have in mind some letters, 19" tall, which I cut in Monson slate) there are about twenty-five ridges per inch. In small delicate lettering there would be more. This chisel texture is highly desirable since it catches and reflects light. It is particularly good under gold or palladium leaf.

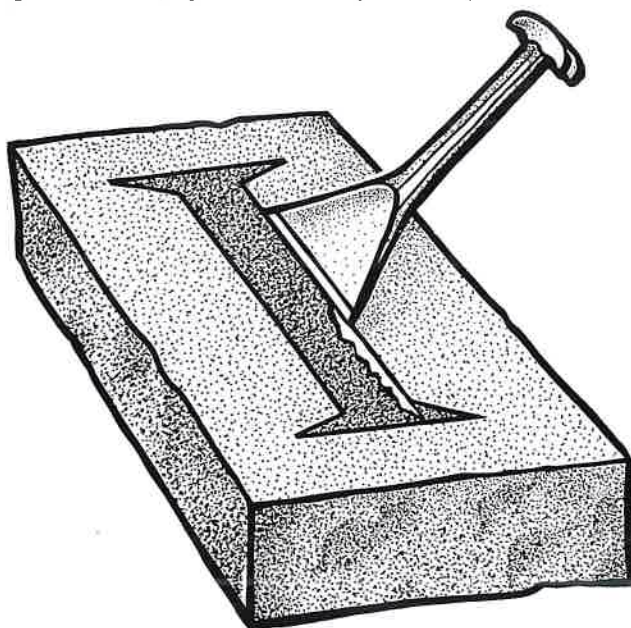


Fig. 85. A questionable cutting method.

I never have occasion to make chisel cuts from the edge of the V-cut to its root with the chisel held parallel to the edge of the straight letter parts as shown in figure 85. However I know that Greek letterers in the

Classic and Hellenistic ages did use this method, but *only* for letters about one-half inch tall, that is, the width of the chisel. But the Greek cutter had a very special, and excellent, reason (a tract in itself) for employing this procedure, the explanation of which need not detain us here. I have seen Italian and French cutters using this method, indicated in figure 85, for larger letters but their letters were wretched. It presumes that stems, arms, cross bars, and obliques are mechanically straight, whereas, in the best letters, 'straight' parts instead have a delicate, hardly perceptible curvature. Anyone insensitive to this curvature in 'straight' strokes would gravitate to the mechanical practice of figure 85. It is inappropriate since such a method cannot be used for round letters where instead one must adopt the V-cut ridging technique.

I know of no stone letterer who uses the V-shaped chisel (*veiner* or *parting tool*) to fashion the V-cuts of letters. I mention this because many readers unfamiliar with letter-cutting in stone but knowledgeable about the use of V-shaped chisels in wood carvings mistakenly assume that the V-shaped chisel also fashions the V-cut in stone-cut letters.



