

Carved Stone: Maine Artists

Justin Wolff

Basalt, marble, slate, alabaster. Absolute Black granite from South Africa and Jonesboro Red granite from Downeast. Though the stones featured in this exhibition come from all over the world, the talent is local. Maine is a rockbound state: igneous rock fringes our coastline, granite rings our many islands, and stone walls enclose our pastures and properties. And just as Maine's landscapes have been formed and populated by the rock debris of glaciers, so has its economic, social, and cultural history been shaped by stone. Thousands of years ago the region's earliest inhabitants moved large rock chunks and manufactured chert scrapers and points for practical purposes. The area's early colonists designed plotted cemeteries where carved gravestones marked the dead. By the time it became a state, in 1820, Maine had a reputation for quarrying exceptional granite coveted by architects and sculptors. Today, of course, Maine artists use stone from everywhere to produce remarkable sculptures, ranging from small slate abstractions to massive granite installations.

Humans have always worked with stone in this region. A 10,000-year-old rock meat cache in northwestern Maine is among the oldest surviving human-built structures in North America. The cache, discovered in the 1980s on the eastern shore of Aziscohos Lake in northern Oxford County, kept bears from stored meat. After digging a deep cavity in the silt, the builders likely dragged and rolled the large 225-pound stones to the site and fit them together to form a seal. The cache could store the flesh of a dozen caribou, likely deboned with the fluted projectile points and quartz scrapers found nearby.

Engineering, craft, and stonework also came together in the region's Puritan cemeteries. In the 17th and 18th centuries Puritans, who rejected churchyard burials as papist, prospected for secular plots suitable for leveling and draining. They then fenced the burial grounds and erected carved stone slabs to mark the dead. Anonymous artisans such as "The Stone Cutter of Boston" and the "Charlestown Carver" produced some of the most haunting objects in American history. Cutting into slate, granite, and marble, each gravestone carver fashioned distinctive takes on a standard iconography: willows, urns, skulls, and winged death's heads. Whether located by highways or in deep woods, these tilting gray slabs are poignant reminders of both long-lost lives and our common fate.

Some of the stone in this exhibition is Maine granite, which has a particularly important role in Maine's industrial and cultural histories. By 1812 Blue Hill quarries were exporting granite for use as ship ballast, and in 1820 Hallowell quarries produced key structural elements for Boston's Quincy Market. The granite industry in Maine soon exploded and during the decades after the Civil War, when Beaux-Arts classicism was the nation's official architectural style, Maine quarries produced granite for the foundations, façades, and décor of the New York Custom House, the White House, and the Brooklyn Bridge, among many other iconic structures.

New England granite originates from deep within old mountains and is exposed by glacial erosion. As Maine historian Lawrence C. Allin has explained, the major quarrying regions in Maine—the Hancock County coast, Vinalhaven, Deer Isle, and Hallowell—contained granite with coveted color, durability, and "readiness to receive a polish." Some quarries were reputed for a "gray and green granite," others for "pink-gray" stone, and "the best sites contained fine-textured stone, lying in well-defined, even sheets ranging from one to thirty feet thick" (276-77). Among other advantages of the state's granite industry were the relatively shallow depth of the desirable rock and the proximity of the quarries to shipping harbors.

Needless to say, quarry operations and labor were intensive. Allin paints a vivid picture of a bustling workforce employing creative ingenuity and brute strength to get the stone. "At first," he writes, "the rough stone was cut with hand-held drills or split free with steel wedges and sledge hammers. Pinches, or long iron

bars, were used to carry the blocks about the quarry, and workers shaped the stones with hammers. Eventually, quarry operations employed blasting powder and later dynamite to dislodge the stone; steam engines to run the water pumps, cranes, pneumatic drills, and jackhammers; cable cars to move granite to the cutting and polishing sheds; and locomotives to carry the finished stone from the sheds to the wharves” (277).

Quarry workers included skilled artisans who cut construction stones, day laborers who handled the rough blocks, and sharpeners and blacksmiths who maintained the tools. The work was demanding. To manipulate a stone’s cleavage (also called “rift” and “grain”) required intimate knowledge of rock jointing, technical and mechanical expertise, and artistic instincts. And quarry work was dangerous. “Workers were surrounded by huge, moving blocks of granite, highly stressed steel cables, and frequent blasting.... Moreover, work in the polishing sheds was accompanied by a fine granite dust that resulted in a debilitating condition called ‘white lung disease’” (279). But to the industry’s customers—the government agencies, insurance companies, architectural firms, and millionaires—the beautiful stone was worth any price. Upon visiting a quarry in Penobscot Bay in 1872, the Scotsman Robert Hall remarked, “The stone is all cut to perfection ... and fitted with an exactness that was not surpassed even in the day of Solomon’s Temple. The columns, caps, pilasters, architraves, are all carved and embellished with the most elaborate designs.”

Maine’s granite industry declined steadily after 1900, when architects and engineers started using more versatile materials, such as steel and terra cotta. But Maine stone, especially granite and slate, has found new life in the ingenious collaborative constructions of dedicated artists. As this exhibition testifies, the expressive and monumental characteristics of Maine stone—now quarried in only a few locations, including Crotch Island in Stonington, Jonesboro, Orland, and Sullivan—are sustaining a diverse contemporary art scene. The Schoodic International Sculpture Symposium, developed by Jesse Salisbury, fomented this renaissance. From 2007 to 2014, five symposia brought together local, national, and international artists to collaborate on a single piece of public sculpture produced from Maine granite. The finished works now form the Maine Sculpture Trail, an outdoor exhibit of 34 sculptures spanning over 273 miles of Downeast coastline. Equally important to the development and sustenance of Maine’s contemporary sculpture scene is Greg Ondo, Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Maine and co-curator of *Carved Stone*. For years Professor Ondo has maintained a vibrant sculpture studio on campus; mentored hundreds of students, several of whom are featured in this exhibition; and produced his own monumental work.

Much of this work would not have been possible without the generous support of patrons such as Jane and Kelly Littlefield, owners of Littlefield Gallery in Winter Harbor, Maine. This exhibition extols the cultural benefactions of the Littlefields, the Schoodic Symposium, the Department of Art’s sculpture programs, and the industrious creativity of Maine’s contemporary sculptors.

Works Cited:

Allin, Lawrence C. “Creating Maine’s Resource Economy, 1783-1861.” In *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present*. Edited by Richard W. Judd, Edwin A. Churchill, and Joel W. Eastman. Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995, pp. 262-88.

Robert Hall quoted in *A Day’s Work: A Sampler of Historic Maine Photographs, 1860-1920, Part II*. Compiled and annotated by W. H. Bunting. Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, Publishers, 2000, p. 40.

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