

## LETTERING 'FOR GOD, FOR COUNTRY, AND FOR YALE'

### THE ARCHITECTURAL LETTERFORMS OF YALE UNIVERSITY

ON EVEN A BRIEF walk through Yale University's campus in New Haven, Connecticut, one notices that inscriptions and plaques are unusually ubiquitous.<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive survey undertaken in 1963 listed almost 600 inscriptions, which remains a reasonable estimate of the current total despite construction and demolition since.<sup>3</sup> Many architects, artisans, and school officials have contributed to this lettering abundance over Yale's 310-year history, but few have been as influential as James Gamble Rogers<sup>4</sup> and Anson Phelps Stokes.<sup>5</sup>

In 1917, the two corresponded about a new dormitory—to be named the Harkness Memorial Quadrangle—that Rogers was commissioned to design.<sup>6</sup> Ten days before the cornerstone was to be laid, Rogers wrote to Stokes, "There are two things that I dislike very much in architecture, not that they are necessarily bad, but they have been done so often."<sup>7</sup> The first was the constant emulating of Oxford's Magdalen College tower, which he avoided by modeling the Memorial Quadrangle's tower on that of St. Botolph's church in Boston. His second distaste was of "limiting ourselves for ornaments on our buildings, [sic] to the Yale shield and the bull dog," which had long been the essential symbols of the University. He continued, "The insignia does not necessarily have to be good, architecturally, for I shall take a poet's license in translating the forms into something that will suit our buildings." Stokes fully endorsed this idea of expanding the number of ornaments associated with Yale, and on the last page of Rogers' letter either he or his secretary recorded ideas for new symbols, including seals of colleges founded by alumni

and depictions of old Yale buildings. The ornamental program grew from these origins (a few quick notes) into a remarkable iconographic system. Rogers commissioned sculptor Lee Lawrie (1877–1963) to nearly saturate the walls of Memorial Quadrangle with inscriptions and ornaments evoking scholarly virtues, the infamous "secret societies," the college's early history, and prominent alumni such as Noah Webster and William Howard Taft.

Through the nineteenth century, most of Yale's architectural lettering served to identify buildings, aiding in navigation and emphasizing the structure's benefactor. Inscriptions were typically straightforward—e.g., "Leet Oliver Memorial Hall"—with no pretense of deeper meaning (fig. 26). Rogers and Stokes' scheme broke from this precedent. The inscriptions did label entries and gates, but their more crucial role was to instill a sense of Yale's history in the students who would reside in the complex (figs. 4 and 15).<sup>8</sup> Rogers designed fourteen more Yale buildings in as many years, and commissioned large amounts of lettering in most of them. Given the prevailing Gothic theme, the sheer quantity of blackletter used suggests a decorative purpose, that the pieces of lettering were props designed to evoke the authentically medieval edifices of Oxford and Cambridge. This was certainly one reason for their existence, but, like those in Memorial Quadrangle, most of the inscriptions and ornament of this period had a symbolic function. Avoiding the repetition of staid icons that Rogers disdained, the ornamental palette grew to include more idiosyncratic themes. In Sterling Memorial Library (1932), for example,

the relief above the entrance displays the history of writing, (fig. 5) while the Sterling Law Building (1931) features sculptures of a murderer, thief, police officer, and judge (fig. 7).<sup>9</sup>

The copious ornament Rogers favored went out of fashion as modernism became the campus's architectural mode in the 1950s. Modernist architects Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Eero Saarinen designed multiple buildings for Yale, none of which included lettering as a significant element—consistent with the general modernist discomfort with ornament. But by the new millennium, Yale had once again made letterforms essential to its architectural identity. A campus-wide signage system, developed by the design firm Two Twelve, centered on a custom Aldine typeface designed by Matthew Carter (fig. 8). Renovations to Kahn's art gallery in 2006 included the installation of a slate inscription and LED sign at the front entrance (fig. 9). And when the underground Cross Campus Library was revitalized and renamed Bass Library, the cornerstone on its elevator pavilions was inscribed with a prominent—and prominently Gothicized—"2007."

Today, Yale is preparing to build two new residential colleges as soon as fundraising is complete. Robert A. M. Stern Architects describes its designs for the colleges as "carrying forward the spirit of Rogers' Gothic." One hopes that this will include Rogers' affection for architectural lettering as well.<sup>10</sup>

BY REED REIBSTEIN





### Key to Yale University Inscription Locations

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|--|---|
| <b>1, 5, 16, 17</b><br>Sterling Memorial Library (with Printing and Graphic Arts Court), 120 High Street   | <i>Calhoun College</i><br>Elm Street                                |
| <b>3</b><br>Dunham Laboratory, 10 Hillhouse Avenue   | <i>Davenport College</i><br>248 York Street                         |
| <b>4, 13, 14, 15, 24, 28, 30, 35, 36, 37</b><br>Memorial Quadrangle (Branford & Saybrook Colleges), 74 High Street (Branford College), 242 Elm Street (Saybrook College) | <i>Jonathan Edwards College</i><br>68 High Street                   |
| <b>5, 10, 11, 12</b><br>Memorial Hall (between Commons and Woolsey Hall), College Street and Grove Street  | <i>Pierson College</i><br>261 Park Street                           |
| <b>6</b><br>Bingham Hall, 300 College Street   | <i>Silliman College</i><br>505 College Street                       |
| <b>7</b><br>Sterling Law Buildings (Yale Law School), 127 Wall Street  | <i>Vanderbilt Hall</i><br>1035 Chapel Street                        |
| <b>18, 19</b><br>Hall of Graduate Studies, 320 York Street   | <i>Memorial Gate, Memorial Quadrangle</i><br>(Branford College)     |
| <b>9</b><br>Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel Street  | <i>Phelps Gate</i><br>355 College Street                            |
| <b>20, 21</b><br>Briton Hadden Memorial Building (Yale Daily News Building), 202 York Street   | <i>Porter Gate</i><br>Elm Street                                    |
| <b>23</b><br>Ruttenberg Hall (Sterling Law Buildings) 133 Wall Street  | <i>Bass Library</i><br>110 Wall Street                              |
| <b>25</b><br>Sterling Quadrangle (Trumbull College) 241 Elm Street   | <i>Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library</i><br>121 Wall Street |
| <b>26</b><br>Leet Oliver Memorial Hall, 12 Hillhouse Avenue  | <i>Grove Street Cemetery</i><br>227 Grove Street                    |
| <b>27</b><br>Strathcona Hall (Sterling-Sheffield-Strathcona Hall), 1 Prospect Street   |   |
| <b>29</b><br>Berkeley College, Elm Street  |   |
| <b>31</b><br>University Commons, 168 Grove Street  |   |
| <b>32</b><br>Woodbridge Hall, 105 Wall Street  |   |
| <b>33</b><br>Sprague Memorial Hall, 470 College Street   |   |
| <b>34</b><br>Watson Hall, 51 Prospect Street   |   |
| <b>38</b><br>Yale School of the Fine Arts (Street Hall), 1071 Chapel Street  |   |
| <b>39–40</b><br>Connecticut Hall, 1017 Chapel Street   |   |





Fig. 2, opposite: Class of 1918 Plaque (detail).  
Fig. 3, above: Dunham Laboratory (1912).  
Fig. 4, below: Noah Webster, Memorial Quadrangle.  
Photographs by Soi Park.







Fig. 5, opposite: History of Writing: Cave Paintings to Cuneiform, Sterling Memorial Library (1930). Design by Lee Lawrie and Rene Chambellan.

Fig. 6, below: Charles W. Bingham Hall. (Designed by Walter B. Chambers, 1928). The textura lettering is deliberately broken in an attempt to give the inscription an 'archaic' appearance.

Photographs by Soi Park.



*“Rogers designed fourteen more Yale Buildings in as many years, and commissioned large amounts of lettering in most of them.”*





Fig.7 Judge, Thief, Murderer, and Policeman. Sterling Law Building (1931). Photograph by Soi Park.



### Yale Signage System, 2004

The diversity of Yale’s architectural lettering, though exciting visually, presented a problem: buildings were difficult for newcomers to the campus to identify. The signage system created by the design firm Two Twelve provided for consistent wayfinding while also developing a visual identity for Yale’s buildings. The main components were porcelain signs in the official “Yale blue” color and a custom typeface designed by Matthew Carter.<sup>21</sup> Carter, a senior critic at the Yale School of Art, based his “Yale Street” design on Francesco Griffo’s roman for Aldus Manutius’ 1495/1496 printing of *De Aetna*, a copy of which is in Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.<sup>22</sup> Carter found that techniques developed for small text applied to the challenging conditions of signage, such as a bolder weight, higher x-height, and wider spacing (see fig. 8). The University quickly embraced the typeface once Carter expanded it to include variants for print typography. With the type family freely available to Yale community members, Carter considers it to have gone viral on campus. Beyond the official signs and brochures, it can now be found on everything from trashcans to students’ essays.<sup>23</sup>

Fig. 8 Yale typeface, “street” version by Matthew Carter (2004). Photograph by Soi Park.

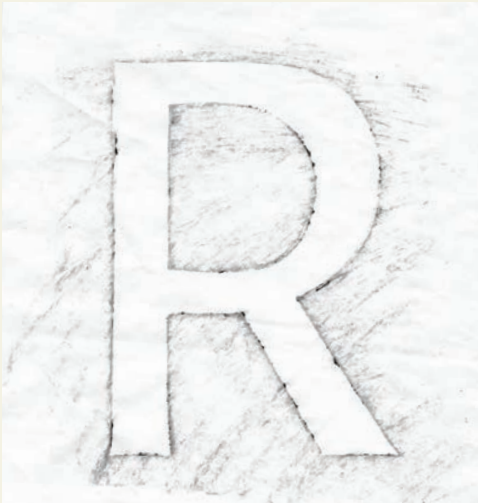


Fig.9 Rubbing of R from Yale University Art Gallery inscription by Paul Shaw.

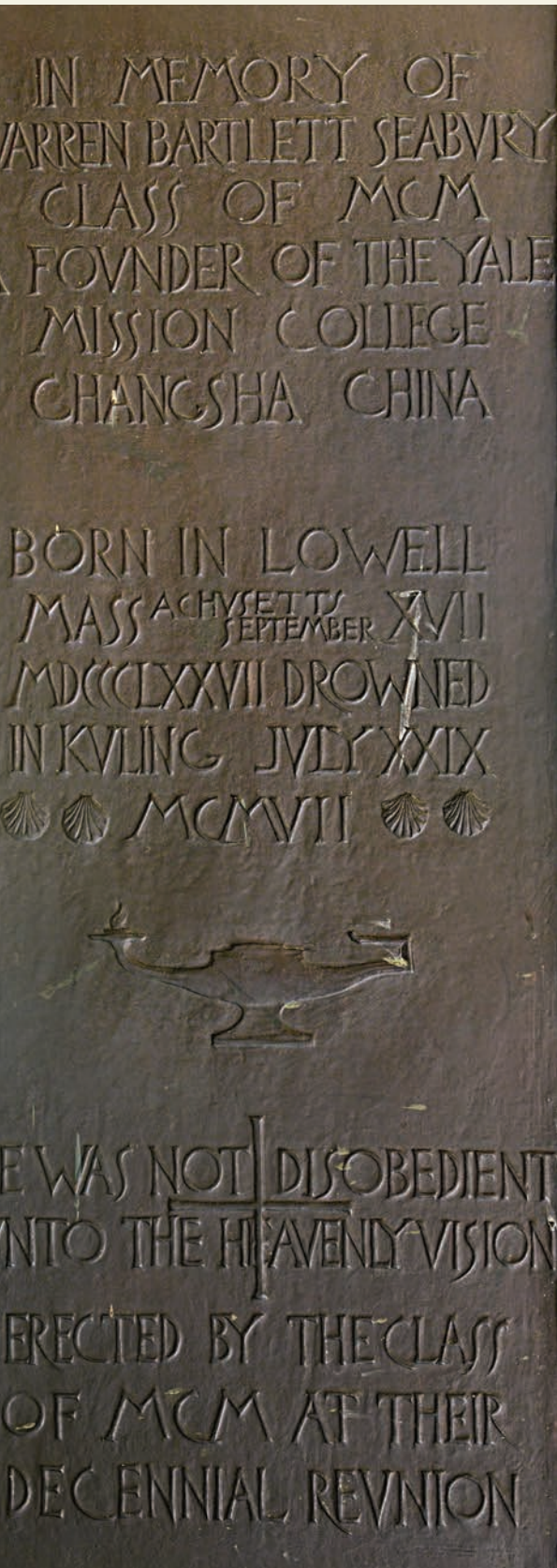
### Yale University Art Gallery, 1953

The design firm Open developed a signage system for the Yale University Art Gallery as part of the 2006 renovation by Polshek Partnership Architects.<sup>24</sup> The new sign facing Chapel Street (see fig. 9) combines a slate inscription by Nicholas Benson of The John Stevens Shop with a scrolling LED display highlighting current exhibitions, a unity of old and new materials.<sup>25</sup>

Fig. 9 Yale University Art Gallery (2006). Inscriptional lettering by Nicholas Benson. Photograph by Soi Park.







### Memorial Hall, 1901

In 1915, a half-century after the American Civil War ended, Yale dedicated two large marble tablets in Memorial Hall to the students and alumni who had perished in the fighting. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prevailing narrative of the war was of equivalence and reconciliation. The memorial committee avoided passing judgment on the defeated South by mixing the lists of Northern and Southern dead and eschewing the mention of slavery. In years since, Yale’s Civil War Memorial has expanded to include those who have died in other American wars, from the Revolutionary War to the Vietnam War, a result of what researcher Ali Frick calls the original memorial’s “anodyne character.”<sup>11</sup> Each additional tablet subsequent to the original two has attempted to match the Beaux-Arts script and capitals of the 1915 inscriptions. From a distance, the tablets look remarkably unified,

Fig. 10, left: Memorial to Warren Bartlett Seabury (1910). Photograph by Soi Park.

but on close inspection not every panel retains details of the original letterforms, such as the towering capital A and use of the long s (figs. 11–12).

The architect Maya Lin, who won the competition to design the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1981 while still an undergraduate, has written of the influence of Yale’s Memorial Hall on her design:

I had never been able to resist touching the names cut into these marble walls, and no matter how busy or crowded the place is, a sense of quiet, a reverence always surrounds those names. Throughout my freshman and sophomore years, the stone-cutters were carving in by hand the names of those killed in the Vietnam War, and I think it left a lasting impression on me . . . the sense of the power of a name.<sup>12</sup>

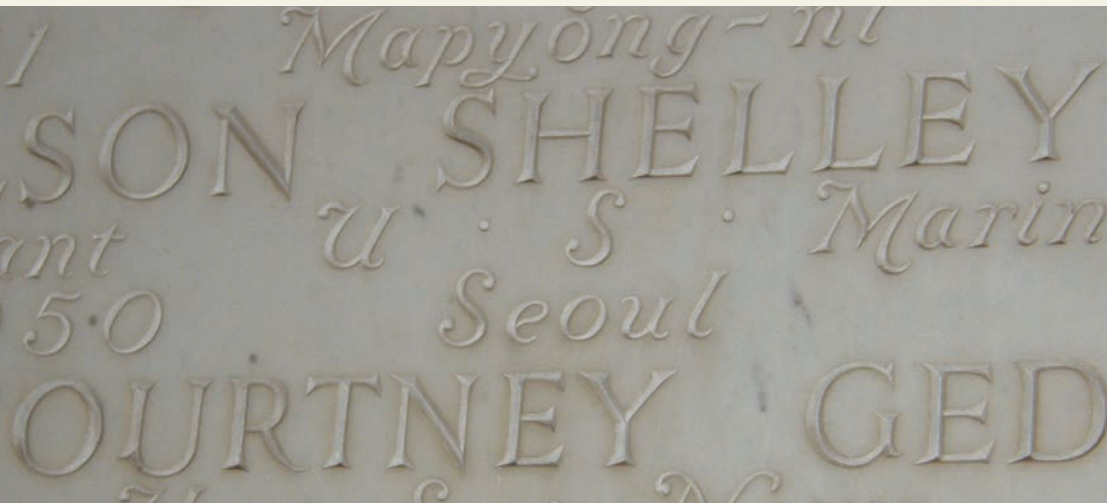


Fig. 13 Linonia Court. Photograph by Soi Park.

### Harkness Memorial Quadrangle, 1922

In an overt attempt to embed Yale’s history into Memorial Quadrangle, nearly every architectural feature was given an evocative name. The three larger courtyards were named after three towns integral to the early history of the school, while the three smaller ones were called Linonia, Calliope, and Brothers-in-Unity after extinct debating societies (fig. 13). The fourth courtyard was named Wrexham after the city where Elihu Yale, the institution’s namesake, was buried. The four common rooms were named for demolished campus buildings, and the ten gateways that linked the courtyards for figures who helped establish the college. Most numerous of all were the 37 entries, doors that led to multiple floors of student suites.<sup>13</sup>

All of these names were materialized in prominent stone inscriptions designed by Lee Lawrie, who later created Rockefeller Center’s

iconic sculptures. For the entry inscriptions, Lawrie indicated a given alumnus’s accomplishments through relief sculpture: e.g., an open book symbolizing Noah Webster’s creation of the first American dictionary (fig. 4). The style of the letterforms was less evidently related to the content, as Lawrie switched readily between Gothic and Beaux-Arts themes (figs. 14–15).

The two most prominent pieces of lettering in Memorial Quadrangle were almost certainly not by Lawrie, however. Blueprints indicate that the large blackletter memorial to Nathan Hale was by a designer in Rogers’ firm (fig. 15).<sup>14</sup> The same hand is visible in the inscription proclaiming Yale’s motto, “For God, for Country and for Yale,” located above Samuel Yellin’s elaborate wrought-iron gate.

Fig. 11, opposite, top: Detail of 1845 inscription, Memorial Hall. Photograph by Reed Reibstein.

Fig. 12, opposite, bottom: Detail of 1950 inscription, Memorial Hall. Photograph by Reed Reibstein.