

# An Inside Look from the Convention Exhibit Floor

By Dan Bellan, CM, a partner of Bordignon Marble and Granite, Vancouver, Canada

“New Beginnings – Coming Together for the Next Century” was the theme of the 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention and Monument Industry Show. The context of this article is meant to encourage MBNA members who usually don’t participate in the full convention, which occurs every two years, to do so. I spent three full days checking out the exhibitors and floor displays, and just maybe there is a new page is about to be turned in our industry.

## Technology

By education, and in a past life, I was schooled and worked in the technology field of chemical engineering. By choice, some 14 years ago, I opted for the career path of a monument builder – working up from dry-and-wet drilling, to sandblasting outside and inside the blast booth, setting stones in the field, rendering and etching designs by hand and then by computer, selling products, becoming a certified memorialist, and most recently, a partner in a monument company. Even after all this time, my mathematical background influences how I approach this business, and as a result, I always like to know how things work.

Let’s face it: Any monument builder or memorialist must have a thorough working knowledge of what tools do what and should know how to use them. Starting with the nuts and bolts of the show, that’s what I refer to as the industry roots or moving parts component, my first quest was seeking the exhibitors that supply the tools and technologies we rely on for our day-to-day operations—the tools that get the job done.

Because most of us work with stone almost exclusively, it’s good to know the basic tools for our day-to-day operations don’t change very much. The only upgrades are typically ergonomic or at the alloy level. Roughly 15 percent of the floor, or 13 of 84 exhibitors, displayed the tooling or moving-parts component. I was impressed by the solid representation and accessible displays of items such as chisels and small hand tools, profiling sets, material handling and lifting devices, nozzles, plotters, cranes, etc. by Bicknell, Granite City Tool, 3M and Anchor had answers to all the stencil questions you could ever ask. Miles Supply also presented a long list of useful tools.

Most monument shops are improvisers by necessity. For example, we have either designed and constructed our own carving booths or purchased a factory-made booth.



Bicknell Supply Co. manufactures stencil-cutting machines and ABC automatic sandblasters.



Miles Supply Co. brought its latest manual sandblast machine which includes the abrasive recovery system. This is the only sandblast machine on the market where the operator actually can move with the curtain and be in the comfort of a seat. The room can blast 7 feet horizontal and 4 feet vertical, and retails for \$19,500.

Personally, I have worked with both automatic curtain booths and have designed my own carving booth. It was good to see the display from Hirons Memorial Works where the all the component parts of their ready-to-assemble booth were visible, the curtain system, wall and floor construction, as well as a cross section of the abrasive recovery cycle. If your company is considering upgrading the carving booth, it is almost mandatory to see this technology live rather than in a catalog, because we all need to be self-reliant when it comes to maintenance issues for our systems. Even if you don’t end up buying a factory-made booth and end up designing a booth big



*Hiron's introduced its Stone Setter, a powered trailer designed to lift and carry monuments.*

enough for a forklift to enter it like I did, it would be invaluable to compare and discuss the design ideas and energy that go into manufacturing a constructed booth.

If getting into high-tech CNC etching is your thing, it would only make sense to see the physical capabilities of a laser-etching product like the Vytek L-Star system, operating in real time, before committing to the purchase. Or if it's time to consider investment into a crane system for the delivery truck, and you're wondering about the specifications of hydraulic capacity, outrigger spread, or just plain want to know the lifting speed at that extended outreach, it just good to know that HIAB and Fischer Crane has representatives at the show that can answer



*Vytek showcased its L-Star line of large format CNC laser-engraving equipment.*

these questions. The real benefit is that you will find association members who use these machines daily and are more than happy to share specific tips and stories related to the material handling of our products.

These are just a few examples of the technology, but overall the depth of technical knowledge from the exhibitors impressed me. And that's critical. In the long run, making a correct, informed decision when purchasing tools and technology usually means the difference between running a business with a solid profit margin.

## Medium

The usual mediums used throughout our industry are granite and bronze. There were a good variety of products, both domestic and imported. Some suppliers showcased accessories such as ceramic and stainless-steel photos, keepsakes, add-on vases and votives.

On the granite end of the supply chain, the visible wavelength spectrum was fully accessible. If your firm was looking for a supply of classic stone products like Barre or Georgia grey, this floor had many North American suppliers addressing those sources, with support through Barre Guild and Elberton Granite Association (EGA). In fact, getting to know what materials local suppliers provide is probably one of the best things about the tradeshow. Understanding the role played by both Barre Guild and EGA also critical to anyone in this business because of the time, energy and continuing support these associations have contributed to building this industry into what it has become today.

Other important aspects about the show were the accessibility of specialized products. Let's say your marketplace offered the opportunity to provide a family mausoleum. A lot of us who have never experienced designing at that architectural level couldn't do it without the assistance of some serious experienced suppliers. Royal Melrose/Cold Spring Memorial Group is one of the suppliers that had materials and full support available to answer your questions about manufacturing, costing and installation of a family estate mausoleum if that is a product you would ever need. Keystone Memorials and Royal Melrose Granite are also great resources.

But if you were looking for a color of granite for a client or for your display that you might not think exists, your online and literary research would more than likely lead you to a country like India or Brazil, a location where the



*Granite Tombstone Products Inc. caters to custom designs, masoleums and columbariums.*

mantle of the earth provides a very diverse color palette of granite. For example, a new exhibitor at the show, Granite and Tombstone Products Inc., with operations in south India displayed a colorful assortment of sample squares in many colors like green and gold that might address your color research questions.

Traditional bronze memorialization products such as flat-grass markers were showcased through the displays from the big foundries like Matthews and BLP. Strassacker bronze from Germany displayed the more artistic and sculptural bronze elements, and other domestic niche suppliers like Metallic Arts showed products more relevant if your company were bidding on tenders that might require the loose bronze or aluminum-alphanumeric component for simple-dimensioned stone signage.

A good representation of ceramic photo components were shown by Paradise Pictures, who displayed a four-color porcelain process and other suppliers like PSM, Phoenix, Photo Porcelain Dominic showed stainless-steel products and keepsakes.

## Innovation

The last and probably most important inclusion or experience at any tradeshow exhibit is the creative aspect — seeing what new products are being offered.

To provide standard, generic, inexpensive products and remain in business, a supplier has to be good. To respond to the demands of our changing business of memorialization, a supplier has to be very good. The last category is the table we all want to be sitting at, and that is working with exceptional suppliers who anticipate and create trends in memorialization. Fortunately, the floor had suppliers that covered all these categories.

Classic granite designs and shapes, what I refer to as the bread and butter for most monument shops, were predominant, as would be expected. Beyond the ever-present polished serp and oval tops and floral-shape carving, some traditional granite exhibitors like Keystone Memorials went further by displaying a fully hand-textured granite tablet tooled with a 16 pointer. If you wanted to see granite sculpting on display, Buttura & Gheradi artisans showed an impressive sculpted Barre grey angel, and also displayed a tablet with traditional screen carving, an effective textural detail seldom seen or used today. If you had never seen large-scale etchings on black-granite panels and had a burning curiosity to know what they really look like and feel like to the human hand, then you should know that the display from Laser Imaging and Design would satisfy that curiosity.

Other exhibitors like Johnson Granite displayed unique pieces of stonework created by designers like Charlie Hunt, AICA, Hunt Memorials Inc., and others from the Rock Camp that Johnson hosts in conjunction with Eagle Granite. I know it's not really the function of a tradeshow exhibitor to act as an educator, but in this case, stopping by the booth and looking at unique pieces of stone makes you ask the question, "Who's doing that stuff?" Once you ask these questions, you start to become informed and then can decide whether the course might be what you'd like to get involved in.

Then there is that elite group of suppliers that commit resources and talent to research and development. They create product lines that embody the most important aspects of our industry and tell us a story. Who are these suppliers? Well, that's something you will have to go and search out for yourself. Believe me, you'll be glad you did. ■

# 'Double Wow of Design' makes Attendees Do Double-Takes

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Jeff Anderson, CM, AICA, Anderson Memorials; Brenda Hickerson, CM, AICA, Willis Granite Products; and Michael Feinberg, CM, AICA, Peter Troost Monument Co.'s presentation, "The Double Wow of Design," focused on why we should never think about the memorial as a commodity.

Probably one of the best features of any full MBNA convention are the seminars that supplement the floor displays. It's here where we get the real goods on our industry. When *MB News* initially asked me to cover the "Double Wow of Design" educational session, the first thought I had was, "Wow, that's a pretty cool invitation," but that was only a wow in its singular form. By the time the conference rolled around, I was looking forward to finding that second wow to see where that next level was.

The moderator of the panel seminar, Michael Feinberg, CM, AICA, Peter Troost Monument Co., started by inaugurating the seminar as a production of MB University. They all had one common message, "When you really listen, you really hear the story." When you really begin to know the story, you can properly explain to the family what you are capable of creating. The seminar emphasized the importance of why we should never think about memorials as a commodity and how that mindset makes our business more profitable.

Brenda Hickerson, CM, AICA, Willis Granite Products, was the first speaker. Hickerson was quick to point out that story telling and differentiation is the key concern her firm emphasizes when it approaches memorialization. Some of the design techniques used by the firm, and emphasized on screen, were the use of textures for effect and striations to make the piece look bigger than it is. Other examples were creating various community

monuments for places no longer in existence. Towns and settlements that have since vanished from maps have been brought back into the historical and cultural fold vis-à-vis the monument and are now stopping points on the roadways.

Another impressive project was the creation of granite spires for the Oklahoma Centennial Fountain at the United Way Plaza that mimicked the flow of water. The original concept, as mapped by the corporate donors, was to have two huge, granite billboards with the names of major donors appearing in big four-inch lettering. If the billboard design was successful, it would have been placed in the center of the plaza obscuring the view of the fountain and the surroundings, conflicting with the open space of the plaza. Hickerson's sister Linda, the designer at Willis Granite Products, devised the idea to outright reject the billboard idea and to replace it with slender stone spires that mimic the flow of water – complementing the surroundings rather than working against them. The donors' identity was cut into the stone creating a more inviting format for the public. In the end, a piece of art was realized in the plaza, rather than an obscene advertisement for Oklahoma's prominent citizens.

But rather than dwell on technical details about the designs that appeared on screen, Hickerson told a story about an Oklahoman who was fond of the culture he lived in. The man was buried in a simple pine box and covered in an Indian blanket. Although the family had money and were shown all the fancy modern caskets in the funeral home, they opted for a simple, ordinary pine box. In the end, the family chose instead to put their money and energy into the persistence of memory, which ended up being a uniquely designed piece representative of the person's life. This was a good story to hear, showing the importance of who was really listening.

Jeff Anderson, CM, AICA, Anderson Memorials, the second speaker, emphasized the many important aspects of design and selling techniques. Anderson says we all have our own process for coming up with designs, but there are always two streams we swim in. The first stream is making the conscious decision to categorize our finished product as a commodity. This stream we all know as the standard catalog design, which is easy to sell, easy to produce and is an effective tool used to train sales staff.

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The second stream is creating a custom piece or a one-off. The custom stream, the preferred goal, is obviously dedicated to creating unique designs that takes away the cost comparison and offers potentially more profit.

Anderson's process starts with the interview, a couple of hours spent with the family meant to screen-out the tire kickers and qualifying the prospects. Once he's comfortable with the prospects and their story, Anderson proceeds to create some designs, suggest the medium, discuss the cost and then if the family likes the drawings and wants to know more, he'll ask for a 10 percent deposit on the drawings. Using this selective sales technique, Anderson essentially controls the way the interview will go. The prospects either commit or walk. And by this time, they usually commit.

The main message from Anderson is to quit talking about the stone and start talking about the life. And why would we want to do that? Because the stone is the least important part of the process. Anderson asked these two questions, "How can we paint a picture of someone if we don't know them?" And, "If the memorial doesn't symbolize the life of the deceased or tell the story, what value does it really have?"

To give a great example of what Anderson was really getting at, I'll tell his story of how he helped a community memorialize the life of a young boy. As we all know, when a child passes, it is a very traumatic event, not only for the family but also for the young friends of the child. After listening to the stories, Anderson decided to create a monument that acts like a time-capsule yearbook by getting all the friends of the young boy to write something in their own handwriting about his life and then signing it. After getting all the writings, Anderson etched them into a tablet in polished black granite. The net effect was that the tablet became a signed monument of memories, each memory captured by the handwriting of a child.

Feinberg was the final speaker. He started his story by saying that when he gets up in the morning, he can't wait to start learning about what he can create. And that's after already spending 38 years in the industry. Right off the bat, he hit the right chord with me because that's the kind of spirit I like to hear. In the same vein as the previous two speakers, Feinberg reiterated the need to pay particular attention to qualifying the client, understanding

what the family is all about, working within their budget and making sure the final creation is not viewed as a commodity – understanding what the perceived value is.

Given the fact that the greater Chicago area is the marketplace, Feinberg has the unique advantage of being in a culture that seriously takes cemetery art to a new level. And when his slide presentation started, I recognized some of his pieces that have appeared in *MB News* and *Stone in America* throughout the years. With the level of talented designers and sculptors that influence one another in the Chicago area, I could see many of the influences of that have rubbed off on Feinberg, but the final compositions were uniquely his. I paid particular attention to his use of hand lettering in the examples, which showed how well-designed letters draw the eye into the overall composition. Feinberg also provided examples that incorporate the use of sculptural elements to tell the story.

Another important bit of advice he offered was the need to dissuade families from wanting to put too much information on the monument, creating what he termed the glop-job. We have all seen examples of monuments with way too much information on them that end up as eyesores in the cemetery because they are poorly balanced from a design perspective. When we see such poor design, it is usually accompanied by substandard detailing and finishing, pieces produced by the hacks in this industry. Feinberg emphasized that our role as designers is also to educate the family when it comes to these important matters, the net effect being how we create the perceived value. Overall, the theme was balance and simplicity, freshness, and to keep in mind that it's us, the memorialists, the designers who should decide the material, the style and the finish. After all we're the experts, and what he said sounded good to me.

The fact is that we're not all going to become a Ray Mozoliauskas, a Harold Schaller or a Günther Lang, but by understanding our life story and others' life stories, we can find our own voices. That is the first step. When we consciously think and act on the saying, "Helping ourselves by helping others," that's when we start the deceleration of the trend toward commoditization of memorialization, the culprit which when left unchecked will take the beauty, the art and the life out of this industry. ■