

# Der Steynmeß.



Ich bin ein Steynmeß lange zeit/  
Mit stangn/Winckelmäß vñ Richtscheit/  
Ich auffrichte Steinheuser wolbsinn/  
Mit Keller/gewelb/Bad vnd Brunn/  
Mit Gibelmauern von Quaderstein/  
Auch Schlösser vnd Thürnen ich meyn/  
Seh ich auff festen starcken grunde/  
Eadmus erstlich die Kunst erfund.

# DER STEINMETZ

## The Stonemason

by Tadeusz Wodarczak  
translated by Juliet Golden

**T**HIS GRAPHIC PORTRAYAL of Medieval stonework was made by Jost Amman, one of the best professional wood engravers in Germany during the latter half of the 16th century. It is from the "Eygentliche Beschreibung Aller" ("Description of All Professions") which was published in Frankfurt in 1568. It is contemporaneous with the Brother Book of the Guild of Workers in Stone, which appears on the following pages. Hans Sachs wrote the verse beneath the illustration. An English language reprint of the book has been published by Dover.

The image presented portrays the well-honed dexterity of workers who employed simple, handmade tools to create architectural masterpieces. The masons' total concentration and dedication, the freedom and elegance of their movements tell us we are witnessing the work of true masters.

The carvers, who, from specially prepared blocks of stone create fascinating and intricate architectural details, figure most prominently in the composition. Others, who often do the hardest work of all but whose work is not evident in the final product, are seen in the background. The masterfully presented scene – undoubtedly the work of someone familiar with the particulars of the craft, or someone extremely observant - serves as a primer on the techniques of transporting and cutting stone.

Everyone is totally absorbed in his work; perhaps they know they are being

"photographed". I would love to ask them what they are working on and where, in order to be able to go and see what remains of this job completed centuries ago.

Does the image portray a workshop providing services for some city or are we looking at the construction site of a cathedral or the palace of a prince? Most likely we are witnessing the building of a church or monastery. The site is surrounded by a high wall, beyond which no trees or other urban structures are visible. The wall is not defensive but seems to offer a haven for isolated contemplation rather than to guard property. I find it tempting to take an aerial view of the scene playing out before our eyes.

Here is the result of my "flight of imagination":

This is a large, well-organized building site. The stonemasons are only one part of a large construction team, which includes bricklayers, carpenters and blacksmiths who work side-by-side to ensure that all the elements designed by the architect fit together perfectly to create a beautiful whole.

Examples of such "family" cooperation by master craftsmen can be found all around the world. The organization of the building site has changed little throughout the ages. A 1912 German manual for stonemasons presents model plans for the organization of a stone carving workshop almost identical to the one presented in

this drawing. It even includes the same cart for transporting stone and tools similar to those shown in this woodcut. In a business where success was determined by the skills of the artisans and the strength of their muscles, the techniques and methods developed over thousands of years have hardly changed. The age of steam and electricity, the industrialization of the production of building materials and the mechanization of construction sites brought an end to the romantic "human" skills of creating beauty in architectural structures. However, I do sense that there is an ever-growing demand for "romantically" carved stone. It is for these romantic souls who want a little more than something created with the help of electric tools and pneumatic carving hammers that I will attempt to decipher what our brother stonemasons from a bygone age are doing in this tableau.

In the background four people are expending enormous efforts to move a large stone block on a two-wheeled cart. Somehow they are getting by. Fortunately, today we have hydraulic forklifts at our disposal, so let's not turn back the clock at this point; it's too much effort.

Closer up a workman is sitting on a stone cylinder and is creating the base of a column. Since we can't decipher too many details, and the man still has his work cut out for him, let's leave him alone.

# *Ich bin ein Steinmetz lange Zeit/ Mit Stangen/Winkelmaß von Richtigkeit!*

two smaller pieces. What a wonderful, calm and majestic silhouette! He is a master at breaking stone blocks. We can be absolutely certain that the stone will crack exactly where the master plans so that his colleague, the one in the round hat, won't have too much work to transform the split stone into a "slab", a block of stone whose dimensions are determined by the architect's structural drawings. Of course, today we can split stones and prepare large, flat surfaces by hand. We have better tools: electric drills, patented wedges and shims, wide carbide chisels, pneumatic solid tooth bush hammers and laser spirit levels, which facilitate "finding" the surface of the stone. We also have frame sawing machines and diamond blades used to cut slabs. We have the choice whether to toil or not to toil at this point in the job. I suggest not toiling and let the machines do their job, particularly since the two masters shown in the foreground will do the most important work from prepared blocks.

In the woodcut the two masters are positioned next to one another just for this "photo" session. Under normal circumstances their stones would be situated at least six feet apart. The master standing on the left employs a two-handed hammer-axe to shape a cornice. He strikes with care, using a precise pendular swing, to come as close as possible to the final surface of the stone. His right hand grips the end of the handle and keeps it close to the groin to stabilize the striking motion. The left hand guides the strikes, permitting the carver to remove the excess stone faster than with a chisel. The cornice profile shown here is almost complete, so we are probably seeing the stonemason making his final strikes.

The master seated on a one-legged stool will be responsible for putting the final touches on this piece of stone. In the meantime, he is in the final stages of carving out a profile in a sunken surface of the pedestal. The stone element he is working on has been carefully placed on wooden

beams. The beautifully made measuring tools placed in the extreme foreground of the woodcut suggest that perfection is the order of the day. This is the artisans' code of honor.

The seated master, with his rich attire and a measuring tool attached to his belt, is most certainly the leader of this group. He is the person who appoints tasks to be completed and monitors the quality of the work. He is responsible for the final outcome, which is why the final finish on the stone and the cleaning up of the inside edges are jobs performed by the master himself. The stones will take on his personality and will bear his signature. This man does not make mistakes. The master's motto: "Nobody corrects my work".

The use of a one-legged stool in stonemasonry is an old and all-but-forgotten invention. Maintaining balance while having only three points of support forces the stone carver to sit up straight and keep his head erect with each change in position. This posture also facilitates "sensing the plane" with the entire body. In this fashion the master works freely and confidently. In his left hand he lightly holds the chisel, "aiming" precisely at the excess stone that is about to be removed. In his right hand, he holds a round wooden hammer using a light grip. The evenly worn surface of the hammer shows that the master strikes the chisel with the weight of the hammer and not the strength of his arm. He also lightens his grip on the hammer with each strike, which allows him to slightly rotate the hammer in his hand before the next downward motion.

An old adage of artisans maintains that the condition of one's tools reveals the truth about their owners. The tools used by the masters here are absolutely beautiful. Both the two-handed hammer-axe and the chisel would have been custom made by master blacksmiths.

The eulogistic, rhymed text under the

woodcut is a wonderful ode to and ad for stonemasonry. Written in charming and mysterious old Middle German, here is how the text might read in prose form in keeping with its original intent and spirit:

*I've been a stone mason for a very long time.  
Using rods, an angle and straight edge  
I erect stone buildings properly  
With vaulted cellars, baths and wells,  
With venerably hewn stone facades.  
On strong and solid foundations  
I also build castles and towers.  
Our art was invented by Cadmus*

Yes, this was an art form developed not by virtuosi, but by stonemasons who passed on the know-how, the traditions and the mysterious nuances of their profession from generation to generation. We have yet to decipher all of the secrets of stone structures from the past. But our brothers somehow managed to build the pyramids, the temples of the Acropolis and Angkor Wat, the Colosseum, the Incan walls in the Andes, the cathedrals of Westminster and Cologne, as well as the monumental marble buildings in Washington D. C. What stone structures will our age leave behind? ■

[BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

[STONE FOUNDATION HOME PAGE](#)

*Last year at STONEWORK SYMPOSIUM 2003, Tadeusz Wodarczak, a Polish stonemason/stone carver who made a presentation on the subject of traditional stone carving spoke in some detail about the authenticity of this woodcut used as a graphic element on the flyers for that event. His elucidation was so interesting I asked him to enlarge upon the subject in this magazine and he has graciously complied. I am pleased to announce that Tadek, a Stone Foundation member, will conduct a stonecarving workshop at STONEWORK SYMPOSIUM 2004.*

*Thanks to Dirk Schmerschneider, Schlossbergmuseum, Chemnitz, Germany, for help in translating the verse.*