

## SCOTT BOYD: ENDANGERED ALPHABETS

The Endangered Alphabets Obelisk sculpture incorporates characters, symbols, and scripts drawn from the writing systems of living yet endangered languages from around the world, inscribed into the four sides of a 10-foot high obelisk. Due to shifting tides in politics, migration, armed conflict, and developmental pressures, many of these inscribed writing systems and languages are on the verge of disappearing. In fact, some can now only be spoken and/or written by as few as five people. The Obelisk itself is made from the wood of an ash tree—a tree central to the native Vermont Abenaki story of creation. The ash tree is now endangered throughout the Northeast due to the Emerald Ash Borer beetle.

Initially, I became interested in endangered alphabets when I attended a presentation by Tim Brookes, the founder of the [Endangered Alphabets Project](#), a Vermont-based nonprofit organization that supports endangered, minority, and indigenous cultures throughout the world by preserving their writing systems. In an effort to learn more about Endangered Alphabets, I discussed my project with Brookes, and he graciously offered to assist me in researching the alphabets to include with my sculpture.

For his mission's inspiration, Brookes cited the United Nations' [Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#), which states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and literature, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places, and persons."

On one side of the obelisk, I included Article 1 of this U.N. Universal Declaration, which reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Here are some of the endangered alphabets inscribed on the obelisk (from [omniglot.com](#)):



**Nüshu** is a syllabic script created and used exclusively by women in Hunan Province, China. The women were forbidden formal education for many centuries and developed the Nüshu script in order to communicate with one another. They embroidered the script into cloth and wrote it in books and on paper fans.

It is no longer customary for women to learn Nüshu, and literacy in Nüshu is now limited to a few scholars who learned it from the last women who were literate in it. However, there has been a revival of interest in Nüshu, and a number of women are studying it and using it again.

The **Tifinagh** alphabet is thought to have derived from the old [Berber script](#). The name Tifinagh possibly means “the Phoenician letters,” or it might come from the phrase tiffin negh, which means “our invention.”

Versions of Tifinagh are used to write Berber languages in Morocco, Algeria, Mali, and Niger. The Arabic and Latin alphabets are also used. The modern Tifinagh script is also known as Tuareg, Berber, or Neo-Tifinagh, to distinguish it from the old Berber Script.

In 2003 Tifinagh became the official script for the Tamazight language in Morocco. It is also used by the Tuareg, particularly the women, for private notes, love letters, and in decoration. For public purposes, the Arabic alphabet is normally used.

Public use of Tifinagh was banned in Libya by Colonel Gadhafi's government. However, it is now used once again.

The **Samaritan** alphabet was derived from the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet. According to the Bible, the Samaritans came originally from Mesopotamia, then moved to Palestine at the beginning of the first millennium BCE and adopted the Jewish religion and culture. The Samaritans themselves claim descent from the northern tribes of Israel.

Samaritan Hebrew is a descendant of Biblical Hebrew used by Samaritans as a liturgical language. At one point, there were only 114 Samaritans who could speak and write Samaritan. The Samaritan alphabet is still used by Samaritans in the city of Nablus and in the Samaritan quarter of Holon. There are currently just over 700 Samaritans.

The **Cherokee syllabary** was invented by Chief Sequoyah of the Cherokee and developed between 1809 and 1824. At first, Sequoyah experimented with a writing system based on [logograms](#), but he found this cumbersome and unsuitable for Cherokee. He developed a syllabary that was cursive and hand-written, but it was too difficult and expensive to produce a printed version, so he later devised a new version with symbols based on letters from the Latin alphabet and Western numerals.

By 1820, thousands of Cherokees had learned the syllabary, and by 1830, 90% were literate in their own language. Books, religious texts, almanacs and newspapers were all published using the syllabary, which was widely used for over 100 years.

Today the syllabary is still used; efforts are being made to revive both the Cherokee language and the Cherokee syllabary, and Cherokee courses are offered at a number of schools, colleges and universities.

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Combining text with an obelisk can connote many things—a public record, a story, a punctuation of time, a memorial to a person or an historical event, or perhaps even a prophecy. The obelisk is, at once, a symbol of life and death.

Creating a large obelisk intrigued me as it connected me to a multicultural tradition of archaic symbolism tracing back through the ages to the early Egyptians and beyond. The act of bringing an obelisk into being also connects me to my own work in a spiritual sense.

Having never created an obelisk sculpture before, I started my obelisk adventure by talking with and learning from other artists, designers, researchers, readers, and writers, as well as craftspeople in tree logging, milling, sign-making, bear carving, fine-woodworking, sand-blasting, memorial making, and curiosity seeking, as well as the town-engineer. Their responses were mostly very enthusiastic and generous, in terms of time offered to assist. Just in describing this Endangered Alphabets Obelisk project, I found a curious audience identifying with the desire to connect and communicate inherent in us all.

This sculpture is a new direction into the “literally literal” for me, in contrast to my previously abstract and site-specific artwork. In addition to making sculptures, I write poetry, so there’s a connection here to the form of writing itself, as well as the intangible force behind the form that writing takes, that adds to the meaning of poetry.

As human beings, we identify with the need and desire to communicate, and we have an impulse to preserve and give attention to those alphabetic tools that allow us to communicate over the ages. Having these endangered symbol systems set into an obelisk reminds us about those conveyors of knowledge and their fundamental importance in carrying forward and keeping alive the creative wisdom of different cultures and peoples—no matter how small in numbers they may be.

— *Scott Boyd*