

LETTER FROM HERE

WHERE IS HERE? EVERYWHERE. NOWHERE. OUT THERE.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2010

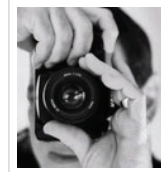
What's that big sculpture in front of the Madison Public Library downtown?



It's called [Hieroglyph](#) , and it's a bronze sculpture by artist O. V. Shaffer. (This is a detail; click [here](#) for full view.) Located in the courtyard at the entrance of the Madison Public Library downtown, it's always been one of my favorite works of public art in Madison -- a sentiment that is not universally shared, however.

In an interview with the Wisconsin State Journal in 1964, O.V. Shaffer explained his work:

ABOUT ME



MADISON GUY
MADISON, WISCONSIN,
UNITED STATES

Miscellaneous
reflections and

photographs by Peter Patau, a writer
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Today's libraries have many functions, but the greatest is to safeguard and make available man's thoughts and ideas from earliest recorded time to now. The library that preserves the past is the inspiration and the seedbed of the future.

The sculpture attempts to symbolize this timelessness of knowledge and suggest the mysterious quietude of a seeking spirit. It is as though the past and the future of mankind were contained within these 'walls.'

A large undeciphered form looms flat and bold as one approaches from the steps, even tipping slightly forward as he walks beside it. On either side, a large crevice opens up, suggesting the canyon walls and caves upon which man has recorded in painting and hieroglyphics a part of what he knew.

The side facing the window wall is reminiscent of pillars and curved capitals or monuments, implying another kind of knowledge. Moving between these two forms is a figure which seems to become a part of the sculpture.

On the other side, another figure appears to emerge from an opening, yet it is also a fragment or frieze, symbolic of the 'voices of silence' which come down to us from past civilizations and still 'speak.'

A lot of readers didn't buy it. Scroll down [this page](#) of the library's history to see the controversy that ensued. Then, as now, public art does not lack its vocal detractors.

POSTED BY MADISON GUY AT 4:01 PM PERMALINK

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