

# LETTERS THAT ROCK

## YUMI: Across Time and Space

by Lorraine Cockle

When Albert Park Elementary School sadly made the school closure list in 2006, they invited me to help the students create art projects to present to both of their new schools in the fall. The wish list included a decorated chair by each class for the newly-built Radisson Heights Elementary and a school “mural” of some sort for Sir Wilfred Laurier Middle School. My initial response to these requests was a classic case of approach-avoidance conflict, but I had been working at the school for the previous two years on other art activities, so already had fun getting to know most of the teachers and students. And I first met Principal Sharon Hanwell at Albert Park over 20 years ago when she was just embarking on her teaching career and I was breaking in a new position as an itinerant teacher for the gifted and talented. Though we had both moved on to other things, there was something very satisfying about coming full circle to be at Albert Park during its retirement year.

However, the small matter of that word “mural” tends to cause my brain to spasm. Now, please understand, it is wonderful to work with kids – but working with 25 of them on a group project is just not my favourite thing. Imagine 100 little bodies all jostling for space to make their mark, brushes loaded with bright paint, just waiting for contact with a new sweater or fly-away pigtail. Then there was the problem of coming up with something that students from kindergarten to grade six could be equally capable of completing that would not be considered too “childish” by the older junior high students. Finally, there was the obstacle of my non-existent shop skills for dealing with sheets of Masonite and framing materials – and little inclination for developing such skills. Over the years, it has become apparent that when I really do not want to do something, my brain starts casting about for alternate possibilities. While some people refer to this as “avoiding the issue”, “creative problem solving” sounds better to me. In any case, my solution to the mural problem was a triptych which was eventually entitled “Yumi: Across Time and Space”.

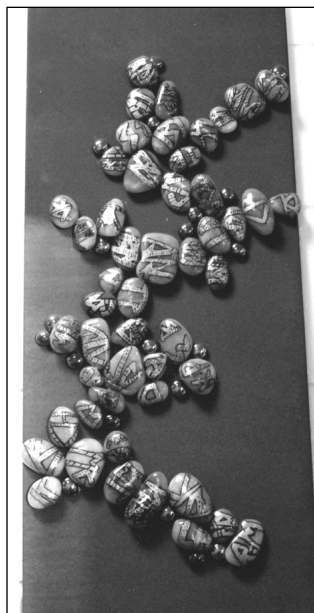
My first encounter with the original Yumi project was in Ken Vieth’s inspiring book, *From Ordinary to Extraordinary: Art and Design Problem Solving*. The Yumi (you-me) Sculpture Garden was created as a memorial tribute to Yumi, a Japanese exchange student, and consisted of a circle of large river stones, each of which had been painted with a design that incorporated at least one circle and a golden line which could visually and symbolically connect one stone to another, one person to another, one culture to another.

At Albert Park, the river stone project was inspired by ancient Greek inscriptions rather than Japanese traditions and much-smaller stones would be permanently fixed to one of three panels rather than arranged in a flexible and moveable circle. Nevertheless, the name Yumi had a lasting appeal and was retained for the project. After discussing early Greek inscriptions and examining the angular quality of carved letters, the students were given the following parameters for their individual contributions to the triptych.

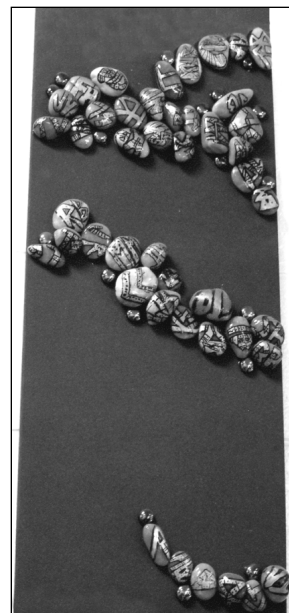
The individual pieces of the mural would be polished river stones (found in bags at various gardening centres or craft stores).

A pattern would be created on each stone using the initial letters of the artists’ first and last names. One stone per letter might be needed if the stones are small, otherwise both letters could be arranged on the same stone.

The letters were based on the Xerxes alphabet which was designed to mimic the simple angular letters used by the Greeks to carve their writings in stone. (Source: Dan X. Solo; *Special Effects and Topical Alphabets* in the Dover Pictorial Archives Series).



Left panel



Centre panel



*Right panel – detail*

Each letter could be stretched or squeezed as necessary to fit its stone in such a way that the beginning and ending strokes (at least) would run off the edge of the stone. These places would provide connecting points to join one stone to the next one.

Gold acrylic paint and Q-tips were used to draw the basic letter shapes.

When the gold paint was dry, a fine black Sharpie marker was used to outline each gold letter and to add simple line or dot designs to the letters.

The “mural” was assembled by having each artist connect his or her stone(s) to another stone by lining up the golden connecting points, so that it was possible to trace a continuous golden pathway through the stones that connect “you and me”.



*Left meets centre panel*

As the placement of stones progressed, there were many possible places to connect one stone to another. And the mural had three panels. Stones could be placed so that they lead toward the next panel, connecting “you and me” across space. Each panel also had a lot of vertical space so stones could be placed to make the vertical spaces more interesting.

The students were given some sheets of irregular stone shapes to practice on before choosing a particular stone and, while they were busy with this task my own “you-me” encounter began by calling upon Art Sanden, a former colleague at the Creative Arts Centre, to help me deal with my afore-mentioned “shop skills deficit”. Not only did he cut and mitre the edges of each panel, but he also cut keyhole inserts in the back of each piece to assist in

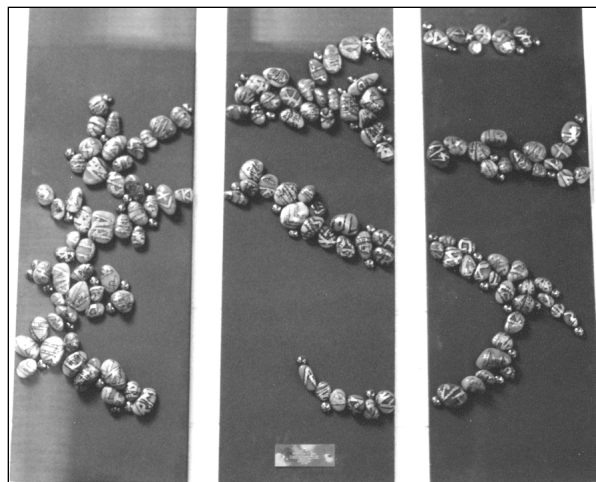
the hanging process. Each panel was finished with a double coat of Ralph Lauren’s suede paint in charcoal. My stone was placed against the far left side of the left panel and the rest was up to the children.

Watching the design evolve was an exciting process. Since there was no pre-planned pattern, it was interesting to see how chaos (whose stone will go where?) and order (the parameters for decorating and linking the stones) would interact. Some students came to place their stones at the same time so that they would be linked as “you-me” far into the future. Other students were intrigued by the spaces between the panels and one noted that each panel could stand for one of the three schools while the stone pathway connected them all together. It was not difficult for them to come up with a title.

If, like me, you have sometimes wondered whether the incursion of computers into elementary classrooms will contribute to the demise of the hand-written letter – fear not. If anything, the freedom to get written assignments done legibly and correctly on the computer can free children to see alphabets as beautiful art forms in their own right. Take a dash of Greek KALIGRAPHOS, a hint of Japanese YUMI, and add a few creative Calgary KIDS to make meaningful connections across time and space.



*Centre panel – detail*



*Three panels – plaque at the bottom notes the occasion*