

reprint

THE ART OF WORK

Stone Wallers Display Their Timeworn Craft at the National Gallery, Washington, DC

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Steven Allen, a champion dry stone waller in Great Britain, shapes some slate at the National Gallery for Andy Goldsworthy's sculpture "Roof."

ALL DAY LONG the wallers do their heavy labor. They hump their slabs of slate, and break the stone with hammers, and set it into stacks, and tomorrow in the morning they'll start doing it again. This turns out to be beautiful. Of all the sights on offer now at the National Gallery of Art few are more beguiling than standing at the window watching the wallers work.

Like the sculpture they're constructing — "Roof" by Andy Goldsworthy — the wallers at their walling make your thoughts go round and round.

"Roof" is the largest work of art commissioned by the gallery in a quarter-century. Its designer is an art star who, unusual for art stars, is as much admired by the broad art public as he is by the pros. The English wallers he has hired to build his dry stone sculpture are more than mere assistants. "Roof" pays homage to their muscles, their steadfastness, their history. To watch them is to know that they are core to what it is.

You think: This is oldest toil, old as a chipped hand-ax, old as Stonehenge, old as Clovis points, old as toil gets.

You think: Bad backs and squashed thumbs, black blood underneath the nail. Prisons once assigned work like this to convicts. Yet here in the East Building walling feels transcendent — as prideful in its craft, as stately in its rhythms, as resonant with references — as fine art is supposed to be, but only seldom is.

A glimpse is not enough. This takes observing slowly. Wander off a while, have a cup of coffee, take a look at Rembrandt. You have to let the hours flow to watch the stone form rising, and read the evocations that swirl around the scene.

Skills like these were common once. Not anymore. How long did it take to breed the Highland sheepdog, or evolve the Viking long-boat? Walling has that slowness deep within its pedigree. It, too, is a dying art. The wallers keep on working. The clouds of dust their boots disturb are gray as shreds of mist on rain-soaked British hills.