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US limewood carver David Esterly whose master died 300 years ago

Jonathan Foyle

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David Esterly in his studio in Utica, New York

Something is whittling away at David Esterly. Almost as soon as we speak, he tells me that “craft” is often seen as inferior to “art”, his ultimate concern. And so, is “artisan” really the right term for him? This restless questioning and philosophising is ingrained in the wood he shapes into objects, ideas and memories.

Esterly is a supremely accomplished limewood carver in the tradition of the Anglo-Dutch master Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), who pioneered limewood carving in place of oak to transform English Baroque interiors. You might presume that this genre of garlanded tulips, violins, lace and ribbons framing altarpieces, overmantels and doorcases went out with the fashion for periwigs, so that there would be few followers of Gibbons to rustle up much of a comparison. Yet Esterly, who carves, ponders and carves again long into the night at his home workshop near Utica, New York State, is an evolution from

Gibbons, and an artist on his own terms. He categorises the creative process into two types: “Type 1” is about ideas leading to eureka-moment discoveries; “Type 2” refers to invention through the constant process of making. Esterly says his work is about “Type 2 creativity”.

In his book *The Lost Carving: A Journey to the Heart of Making* (2012), Esterly explains his epiphany in a London church, far from home. He was raised in Akron, Ohio, until the age of 11 when his family moved to California. After a Harvard education he progressed to Cambridge university in England, and pursued a career in academia. But one day, his partner, Marietta von Bernuth, showed him Christopher Wren’s St James’s Church in Piccadilly. He describes being thunderstruck by Gibbons’ reredos, seeing soft organic forms almost impossibly extracted from the hard organic medium of wood: “The sickness came over me [. . .] Don’t ask. I haven’t a clue. It’s what I still feel in the presence of great limewood carving.”

Esterly presumed he needed to write about Gibbons from an academic perspective. But it was a long view, too distant to see the processes that informed the master’s aesthetic. He retreated to Sussex to experiment with carving bright English limewood, using gouges (curved blades) and chisels (straight blades), to find the origin of his “Type 2 creativity”.

“Limewood is an extraordinary and inimitable medium. I was fascinated by its possibilities,” he says. The dense and crisp grain enables such deep undercutting and thin edges that forms can seem to float and dance. Through this practical experience, he switched from being an observer of Gibbons to a pupil in the “school of Gibbons”. This was the start of a long journey, and opportunities for commissions were seldom predictable.

One came on the evening of March 31 1986 when a fire broke out at Hampton Court in Surrey. Blazing beams and glowing plaster crashed down into William III’s enfilade of oak-panelled state rooms, fitted out in about 1699 and enlivened by Gibbons’ limewood carvings. Luckily, although a number were blackened, only one was destroyed. A carver was needed who could match Gibbons’ exceptional work and Esterly lobbied for the role. As he worked, he sensed the judgment of the master somewhere over his shoulder.

“I thought what I had to do was get into his mind. But it was a dead end. I couldn’t see where the ideas were leading. I remember one dark night that I realised that this piece would tell me what to do, if only it were mine.”

With just a grainy photograph to go by, he encouraged his own artistry to dictate form and detail. Now the spell of mere imitation was broken, and the master’s glare retreated.

Still, Esterly uses tools and materials Gibbons would recognise, so it was important to imbibe and develop the master’s old, hard-won techniques. It was also crucial to identify the changes time had wrought. Esterly found that the familiar darkness in Gibbons’ work was the result of oxidisation and dark varnish, thwarting the original light appearance. “Documents revealed that Gibbons was paid £100 a year to keep his work pale.



'Botanical Head'

£100, then! But what did he do? It must have been some kind of bleaching.”



'Musical Trophy', one of Esterly's limewood carvings

The natural whiteness of lime casts the subtlest of shadows: this, Esterly contends, is key to its proper effect. He leaves bare the surface of his works — no wax or varnish. It is an aesthetic which caught the imagination of his US clients who pay six-figure sums for one-off pieces, displayed not as architectural fixtures but as artworks.

Esterly has achieved efficiencies by improving on the master's techniques. At first glance, Gibbons appears to have created incredible complexities from a single piece of timber, but in fact he overlapped several layers of limewood, each of a manageable thickness of two to three inches, and nailed them together. Esterly follows that example, but swaps the nails for modern wood glue, while old frame saws have been replaced with band saws. Yet his biggest innovation is choosing Adobe Illustrator in place of hand drafting, which allows him to inspect and adjust each three-

dimensional concept in ways that Gibbons never could have conceived.

Through this modernising process, Esterly developed more freedom and confidence to carve contemporary objects, investing his traditional techniques and materials with a new vitality. But it took another London epiphany to launch his current métier.



A letter rack, or 'quodlibet', inspired by the 17th-century paintings of Cornelius Gijsbrechts

In 2000, he visited an exhibition of Cornelius Gijsbrechts, a 17th-century Flemish painter of letter racks. These latticed strings nailed to walls were called *quodlibets* (“whatever you wish”) for the personal bric-a-brac they held. Esterly realised

that “private things that mean a lot to people are haunting to the rest of us”. He also recognised a market in the intensely personal expression of these trinkets.

Now, he cuts three-dimensional limewood letter racks, carving artefacts to illustrate his clients’ lives: letters, flowers, jewellery, a dummy, a bag of skittles, fragments of transient existence. In one example, “as soon as I’d finished carving an iPhone 4, the iPhone 5 was launched. It immediately became historic”. These physical biographies are now his main business, his current letter rack being cut for a patron of the Burning Man festival in Nevada.

Ultimately, we agree that the key to Esterly’s work is not so much history as time. He took a defunct 300-year-old pursuit and made it sing again.

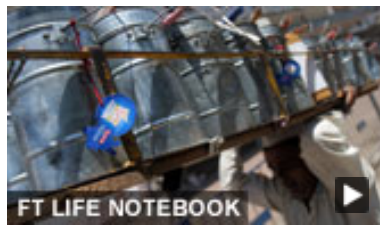
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