

# To be shaped by the wood

**B**ending over the carvings of Grinling Gibbons, taken down for restoration after the fire at Hampton Court in 1986, the wood-carver David Esterly noticed how meticulously executed they were, even in places that were hidden to a viewer. Such care, he acknowledges, is a mark of diligence in a carving – you can never be sure “what angle the world will take on it”. It is also a matter of daring:

paring stems to an ever more dangerous thinness. Undercutting yet more radically beneath them, even at risk of hearing that appalling crack. Excavating farther and farther down, so that you make full use of the full thickness of the board. Continuing a spray of forget-me-nots into still gloomier depths, into corners where they’re unlikely to be seen.

Esterly’s own engrossing memoir follows this model, excavating the layers of time in his own career and that of Gibbons, plunging into the obscure corners of aesthetic debates, playing with images and ideas in an attempt to translate the craft of carving into words, as Gibbons translated the ripeness of a peach into wood. And just as Gibbons’s static ropes and swags and sprays twist and overlap and seem to move, so Esterly’s linked narratives curl and return, while propelling the reader onward. The first timeline is seemingly simple, follow-

JENNY UGLOW

David Esterly

THE LOST CARVING

A journey to the heart of making

288pp. Duckworth Overlook. Paperback, £9.99.

978 0 7516 4919 0

US: Penguin. \$16. 978 0 14 312441 2

ing the writing of this book in his home in the Adirondacks as the seasons change and Esterly works on a variety of carvings. Beside him on the workbench are his tools, 130 chisels and gouges, their place memorized over time so that his hand goes out instinctively to the one he needs. He gives it a “little gunslinger’s twirl” and the handle drops into his palm. Now comes the first stroke, the action, the sound of the wood, the twist of the body. This is the first stage of several parallel journeys into the art, and heart, of making.

The second narrative moves back in time to the point in his career, after fifteen years of trying to emulate Gibbons, when he had reached international renown but was beginning to see his hero less as a master than a monster, an incubus, a threatening figure blocking his way. A prophetic dream of fire is followed the next day by the news that the upper floor of Hamp-



David Esterly

ton Court’s South Wing is ablaze. Flames ripped through the King’s Apartments, built for William III by Christopher Wren, and among the casualties were Gibbons’s late masterpieces, overmantels and door drops, shimmering lime-wood against dark oak. Eventually, after a frustrating row over whether only British carvers should restore British treasures, Esterly not only provided the brief for the restoration, but – setting aside his ban on reproduction – carved the replacement for the most severely damaged piece, a seven-foot-long “drop” framing a door. In this intensely physical, almost tactile, book, Esterly’s time at Hampton Court inhabits its own physical form, enshrined in three yellowing notebooks kept at the time, “rafts on the sea of memory”, carrying Esterly back. “In the notebooks,” he writes, “time has stopped and I can dawdle in it.”

His literary return to this time, however, has begun much earlier in the memory of his flight to England to undertake the restoration. As the plane swoops in over Sussex, curving up to the Thames estuary and then west over London, he glimpses particular places that allow him to go back still further, sketching Gibbons’s career in the late seventeenth century and his own in the twentieth. Both are stories of sudden turns, checks and balances, spurts of fortune. Born of British parents but brought up in Amsterdam, Gibbons was spotted through a cottage window in Deptford by John Evelyn, who saw him working on a detailed wood relief of Tintoretto’s “Crucifixion”. But Evelyn’s introduction to Wren and Charles II proved fruitless, since the King refused to buy work that might link him to Catholicism. In response, Gibbons turned from incendiary religious themes to the safer vegetable world. Ten years later he was back at court, providing intricate decorations, of fruit and flowers, shells and swirls, so delicate that they seemed to tremble in the breeze.

Cunningly, Esterly presents his own trajectory in terms of similar moments when life turns on its head: a day at Cambridge drives

him to cast aside plans to study in Germany; six years later, gazing out over the Fens, after finishing a dissertation on Yeats and Plotinus, he feels “desperate to swim back to shore, to clamber out of the mind and into the body again”. Back in the United States he works as a truck driver and in a Boston ear-plug factory (“the machine was so loud you had to wear ear-plugs to operate it”). Then comes the ultimate, awe-struck moment, when he sees Gibbons’s miraculous cascading swags of fruit and flowers over the altar at St James’s, Piccadilly, and decides that he must write about him. This, however, is not enough: to understand Gibbons’s art he must work the wood himself. He learns to carve.

The Hampton Court story, too, contains these moments of surprise, jumps in perspective, sudden accidents. Standing on a scaffold on his first day of work, examining the arching tulips and crocuses, he reaches out to hold a stem – a little wiggle, he thinks, will reveal that these are nowhere near as delicate as they look. “At first pressure, a quiet snap. Gibbons’s twig came away in my fingers.” For years the memory could put him into a sweat, but he comes to see it as “the casualty of a greedy desire to make the carving yield up its secrets as quickly as possible”. Breakages, he continues,

are powerful pedagogical devices. If you penetrate the bitter rind of these disasters you can relish them for the instruction they provide. That sickening snap is a cry from the wood: *Don’t do this! Do you think you can get away with it? You don’t understand me.* The wood is teaching you about itself, configuring your mind and muscles to the tasks required of them. To carve is to be shaped by the wood even as you’re shaping it.

This passage segues into a meditation on accident, on trial and error, on the virtues of transgressing limits, on bad design and the way that follies and breakages can also lead “to their own kind of redemption”. Disaster can be a fine designer: the loss of a petal can give space and air, “An injection of realism, the kind of damage that might happen to a living plant in the real world”.

At Hampton Court the discoveries continue, giving rise to new, obsessive quests and hunts and arguments. First comes the “spine tingling” revelation that the “drops”, the swags that flow down each side of the door, are misplaced. Some are not only in the wrong position, but actually upside down. “Bunches of berries were thrusting upward in defiance of gravity”, and had been for years, unnoticed by scholars, curators and visitors. The realization that lime-wash was used to lighten the wood in the late eighteenth century leads to much debate as to whether this should be used again. Then Esterly’s long-held and loudly proclaimed belief that Gibbons used no abrasive to smooth his work is embarrassingly negated by the discovery of distinct striations. What abrasive could Gibbons have used, as sandpaper had not yet been invented – was it dogfish skin, or the dried plant “Dutch rush”? Yet another intense, dogged quest begins.

The book bristles with energy. There are moments of rapturous physical delight, at the fine sheen on a Gibbons leaf, at the mist rising from a river in the snow, the moon disappear-



*African Arts* presents original research and critical discourse on traditional, contemporary, and popular African arts and expressive cultures.

Since 1967, the journal has reflected the dynamism and diversity of several fields of humanistic study, publishing richly illustrated articles in full color, incorporating the most current theory, practice, and intercultural dialogue.



ing behind a hill, the hot summer sun through the workshop window. There are moments of quiet, as Esterly carves while his wife Marietta restores porcelain figures, or when he talks to old carvers, or plunges happily into technical shop-talk with his colleagues in the Hampton Court workroom. But these are balanced by outbursts of tetchiness. He bridles with a craftsman's dismay at conceptual artists who employ untrained workers and condescend to skill: "the adjective 'mere' attaches to it like a barnacle". He remembers the anger he felt when the guest list for an opening party omitted the carvers. He still fumes against the officials who seemed to block his way. My favourite among these – and there are many – is when he comes across Simon Thurley, then working for Historic Royal Palaces, standing in a trench searching for medieval kitchen foundations, and bombards him with his latest ideas. Thurley's response – that he can't entertain such ideas while standing in a ditch thinking about ovens – is the nearest we come to an acknowledgement of how difficult, as well as inspiring, Esterly could be to work with.

Over time a new project began to dominate, the idea of staging an exhibition. In the story of how he pursued this, Esterly almost mimics a seventeenth-century artist – courting patrons, flung into an atmosphere of politics and courtly contacts, of dinner parties where a host can pick up the phone to speak to a minister or a hostess can have a word with Prince Charles. It takes long years for the project to come to fruition, in the first-ever Grinling Gibbons exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in 1988, with Esterly's accompanying book, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving*.

*The Lost Carving* is a compelling personal story, but it is also a meditation on making, on imitation and illusion, technique and genius, and on the strange physical and mental immersion that enables the transmission of vision from brain to hand, tool to wood. Gibbons stalks the book, but so do David Esterly's intellectual and poetic mentors, Yeats and Plotinus, whom he echoes in his use of sensory metaphors, and "his sudden flashes of vision – the sense of great doors suddenly flung open". This is an illuminating and exhilarating book, as intricate and wonderfully engaging as the carvings that lie at its heart.

# Still a living language

J. MORDAUNT CROOK

Paul Binski

GOTHIC WONDER

Art, artifice and the decorated style, 1290–1350  
448pp. Yale University Press. £40 (US \$75).  
978 0 300 20400 1

Michael Hall

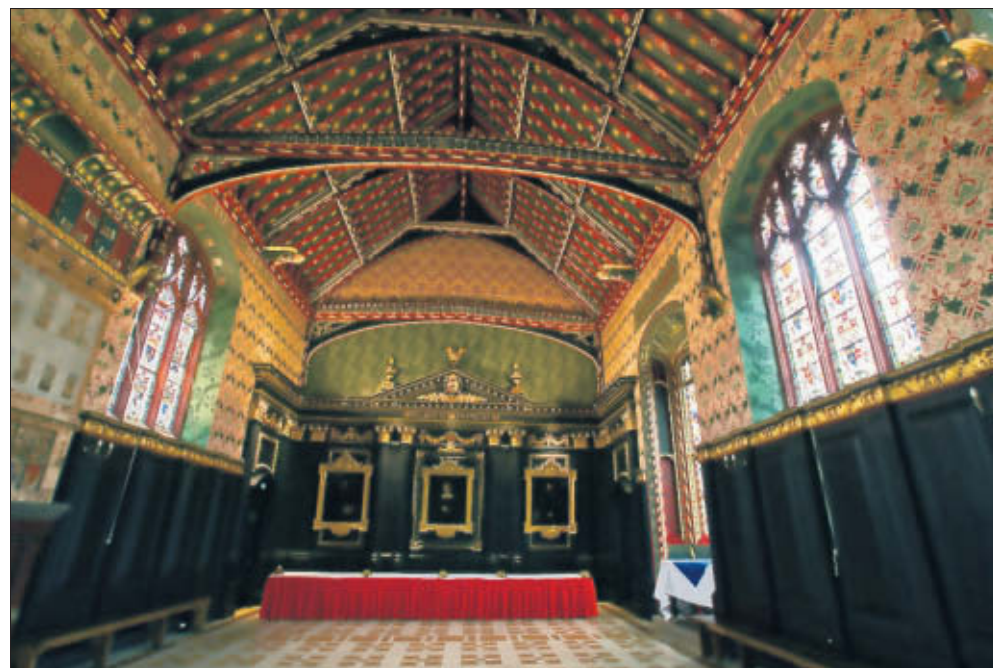
GEORGE FREDERICK BODLEY

And the later Gothic revival in Britain and America  
508pp. Yale University Press. £50 (US \$85).  
978 0 300 20802 3

Style in architecture is simply a way of building codified in imagistic form. Its process of evolution – from structure to image of structure – can be as fast as a generation or as slow as a millennium. But change is always there, nowhere more strikingly than in Gothic: a story of endless invention and reinvention. Two lavish new books – nearly a thousand pages, double-column – interrogate this process of perpetual growth. One deals with Gothic, one with Gothic Revival. The results are not quite what we might expect.

At the start of *Gothic Wonder*, Paul Binski nails his methodology to the mast: midway between "the British school of empirical enquiry" and "the various modes of ideological and moral interpretation". "The empirical school", he explains, "is inattentive, the schools of ideology and morality excessively attentive, to values. . . . Neither has been especially interested in experience [and] neither gives a complete or satisfying account of the powers of art." Hence Binski's emphasis on "wonder"; on "the aesthetics of captivation"; on that "exquisite calculation of effect . . . needed to transform materials in order to produce outcomes apparent to the senses".

The resulting text is dense, allusive and not easily summarized. Its emphasis is contextual rather than archaeological; synoptic rather than exploratory. Even so, *Gothic Wonder* is a highly personal interpretation of the com-



The Old Hall, Queens' College, Cambridge, restored by G. F. Bodley in 1862

municative power built into "the rational artifice" of the Decorated Style. Beginning life as a series of Oxford Slade Lectures, the narrative makes severe demands on the reader. Still, its analyses can be compelling. Two examples will have to suffice. Both convey the flavour of Binski in full flow: the Octagon at Ely and the tomb of Pope John XXII at Avignon. In the first, ornament communicates the wonder of tectonic form. In the second, ornament takes on some of the spatial attributes of architecture itself.

The story of the collapse of the Norman crossing tower at Ely Cathedral in 1322, and its reconstruction as a soaring octagon during the following eighteen years, is an enthralling piece of architectural history. Binski does it full justice. We know – or think we know – its authors and chief executants: Alan of Walsingham, sacrist and goldsmith, *fons et origo* of the whole project; John Ramsey I of Norwich and Westminster, scion of a family of Court masons; William Hurley, Court carpenter of London, later Chief Carpenter to the King's Works south of the Trent. It was Walsingham who set out the plan. It was Ramsey who (probably) constructed the masonry infrastructure. But it was Hurley, the master carpenter, who achieved the miraculous timber vaulting, the luminous lantern of the octagon itself. We know their sources of inspiration: the vaulted chapter houses of York and Wells; the fenestration of St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster; and – at least in terms of height and illumination – the Pantheon at Rome and the Baptistery in Florence. We even know their secrets of construction: Hurley's timber lantern (weighing 450 tons) is raised on the hammer-beamed principles of Westminster Hall. But all these, Binski admits, are mere details. "The significant point", he suggests, is that "a redacted version of French Rayonnant [Gothic] . . . was used to express an architectural conception beyond anything hitherto seen in England."

It must have been the wonder of the age. "Europe's loftiest dome" shuddered during services with organ thunder and polyphonic chant. Stained glass and sculptured carvings

told the story of its patronal legends and its founders' munificence. And "when the bells ring", noted Thomas Fuller in 1662, the very "wood-work thereof shaketh and gapeth (no defect but perfection of structure) and exactly choketh into the joynts again".

The tomb of John XXII at Avignon is of course much smaller – almost a miniature by comparison with Ely – but a miniature loaded with meaning. Pope John (d.1324), we discover, was a lawyer, an ascetic and an intellectual; Italian by birth, French by training, English by avocation, Gothic by instinct. An Italian poet, Petrarch no less, was his protégé; but an English cleric, Richard of Bury – author of the *Philobiblon* and a future Bishop of Durham – was his cultural patron. Indeed, Richard – Petrarch called him an "ardent mind" – emerges here as the key to the whole operation, the link between Westminster and Avignon; between the Humanists of the Roman Curia and the Kentish masons of the English Court.

Pope John XXII achieved at least one rare distinction: he was the only pope of the Middle Ages to be given an "English" tomb. But who designed it? There is no documentation. The field is open to speculation. The story of its composition – composed, surely, rather than merely constructed – is complex. There are decorative elements here with echoes from as far away as Trondheim Cathedral in Norway. But the overall theme, in ornament and structure, is English: Decorated English. The Eleanor Cross at Gedington and the Bishop's thrones at Exeter and Wells are certainly relevant here, plus a clutch of English tombs: Crouchback and Aymer de Valence at Westminster, Pecham at Canterbury, Aigueblanche at Hereford, and Edward II – definitively – at Gloucester. But the provenance of this papal tomb at Avignon is ultimately Canterbury and Westminster. The materials are a magical blend of alabaster and freestone. And the details add up to a veritable index of English Gothic forms: spire and gable, cusp and ogee, canopy, arcade and tabernacle; leaping and jostling upwards in sinuous pyramidal masses.



## Call for sessions

**AAH2016**  
**Annual Conference**  
University of Edinburgh  
7 – 9 April 2016



Highlighting the diversity, scope and importance of art-historical research and its application today.

Academic Session proposals in by 20 April 2015.

For more information visit

[www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference](http://www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference)