



Finished Gothic leaf next to the original



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM BARSLEY

THE DIARY

of a student woodcarver

William Barsley continues his series by telling us about his journey in woodcarving

This series follows my journey as I undertake a three-year diploma in Ornamental Woodcarving and Gilding at the City and Guilds of London Art School (www.cityandguildsartschool.ac.uk) striving to turn my passion for woodcarving into a full time profession.

Schedule

It's now been two months since I started the course and I have to admit, I am absolutely exhausted! The course schedule is Monday–Friday, 8.30am–5pm, usually with two evenings of life drawing each week. This may not sound too strenuous, particularly as it's doing something I absolutely love, but I've found the process of learning can require an incredible amount focus and energy. I've come to think of the course a little like training for a sporting event, day-by-day increasing my stamina and ability to focus for longer periods of time and building up my skill, through not only repetition from hours of carving and drawing, but also through analysis and critique from tutors and classmates. In this sense, the course is exactly what I've been after, and is living up to its reputation of providing high class, quality tuition in historic ornamental woodcarving and gilding.



A sustained shading exercise of a Gothic ornament

Learning

An important part of this learning is the study of traditional English and European carving, in particular knowing about the different decorative styles and periods. In the first year of the course, every Wednesday we have lectures from experts on history of art, architecture and decorative styles learning about the Gothic period, Romanesque, Rococo, Baroque, etc. all to help us identify old carvings and enable us to learn from the carvers of the past. While documenting carving in Asia as part of my Carving Countries journey (www.carvingcountries.com), I visited the home of a famous Malaysian woodcarver called Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussien, who wholeheartedly believed in

the importance of knowing your own roots and history of carving before striving to progress the craft yourself. This lesson stuck with me ever since and, as such, it's been an absolute joy learning about my own country's history of woodcarving.

The gothic era

At the moment, my favourite period by far has to be the Gothic, which, in England, can be classified into three main periods: the Early English (c.1180–1275), Decorated (c. 1275–1380) and Perpendicular (c. 1380–1520). The style first developed in France around c.1140 in the Basilique Saint-Denis near Paris and is distinguished in its architecture by its use of pointed arches, vaulted roofs and buttresses, all ground-breaking

techniques at the time. In terms of carving, I personally love the vitality of Gothic work, the fun and the humour in a lot of their carvings from gnarly grotesques to cheeky misericords that hide under choir stools such as those found in Exeter cathedral.



The History of Architecture tours held at The British Museum



Start of the process



Begin by planing off the rough surface of the oak



Putting the finishing touches to the leaf

Around the time that we began learning about the Gothic period, we started carving a traditional gothic leaf taken from a misericord at Lincoln cathedral. The gothic leaf was by far one of the toughest carvings I've done so far; the combination of carving hard dried oak (*Quercus robur*) while trying to achieve the smooth curves of the design was a real challenge. Much of the work of a professional woodcarver can be in restoration and, as such, this was an exercise in helping us to train our eyes

and make an exact replica of the carving down to the millimetre. Our tutor, Robert Randall, who used to be a former student of the college and now runs a professional carving company with his former peer Ashley Sands (www.sandsandrall.com), found us a great piece of oak for the project. What I hadn't realised about oak was the beautiful medullary rays it can have, which are often perpendicular to the tree rings and are the channels through which sap is transported through the tree.

was to think about the edge of your work. It obviously depends on what you're carving, but often work may be displayed on the wall and would be viewed from the side. In this piece, I included a small Gothic motif running

around the edge, which I felt gave the carving an extra little something to catch people's eyes and bring it to life; hopefully in a similar way to old Gothic carvers may have done hundreds of years ago.

DID YOU KNOW?

Medullary rays can give a clear indication of how your wood has been sawn. For example, in quarter sawn timber, the medullary rays are parallel with the surface of the wood and, as such, not only give a beautiful wave-like effect, but also show that the grain in your timber is running flat and thus often good for carving.



Medullary rays in the oak



Low profile of Gothic leaf, highlighting the ridges and curves

The Gothic leaf slowly took shape over three days of carving, and besides being a challenging design, it was also a great lesson in improving our sharpening techniques as the hard oak really blunts your chisels after a while. One great lesson I learnt with this piece



Original Gothic oak leaf cast from Lincoln Cathedral

TOP TIPS FOR CONCENTRATION

1. What you listen to can have a huge impact on your carving

Like many carvers I've met, I love listening to music while carving and find it can really boost my focus and energy at times. However, since starting the course, I've realised that it can also be quite distracting and can disrupt my focus. One of our tutors often talks about this point and says he prefers to carve in silence or with the radio just quietly burbling in the background. The art of finding that perfect 'zone' where you are wholeheartedly focused on your work is so important when trying to carve to the highest level, and what you listen to can have a big impact.

2. Take a break before your work does!

Like many carvers, I tend to get absorbed and lost in the process of carving finding that hours can fly by in what seems like seconds, meaning I often forget to take a break. It can be so hard to stop sometimes however, in the past few months I've found myself making silly mistakes when my concentration has begun to wane, making cuts that I wouldn't usually make or not keeping my chisel as sharp as they should be. Forcing myself to take a simple five minute break every now and again has really helped, although it's not been easy! ▶

Next time...

William Barsley will be talking about his challenges of learning to draw, an important part of the course and an essential skill to master.