

City&Guilds  
of London  
Art School



# Material Matters: Wood

The Art School's new annual programme, Material Matters, sets out to explore a specific material through a range of approaches: from exhibitions to lectures; pecha kucha to symposia; and from commissioned essays to interviews.

For this inaugural year, 2016/17, the Art School has chosen to focus on wood. As an invaluable material for artists, designers, craft specialists and architects, wood has been used through millennia to make every kind of artefact from the most essential to the most ritually significant. With over 100 different types of wood harvested across the world, its cultural and historical impact is profound and enduring.

To start our thinking about wood we invited three of the Art School's expert practitioners – Gerry Alabone, David MacDiarmid and Dick Onians – to engage in a conversation facilitated by Principal Tamiko O'Brien. The following is an edited transcript of their discussion.



GERRY ALABONE is a specialist conservator and currently Senior Conservator (furniture and frames) at the National Trust. Since 2009, Gerry has been Joint Chair of the Gilding & Decorative Surfaces group (Icon). He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Gerry is Senior Tutor for Wood and teaches within the Conservation Department.



DAVID MACDIARMID trained in Architectural Design as well as studying Fine Art at the Art School (MA 2012). He is a practising artist, has shown widely and been a recipient of a range of prizes as well as prestigious residencies, including the Chisenhale. David runs the Art School's wood workshop and heads up the Artist in Residence scheme in collaboration with Robin Mason (Head of the Fine Art Department).



DICK ONIANS has been a practising sculptor since 1968. His work is in numerous private as well as public collections and he has won prestigious prizes and commissions as well as authored a number of important publications on woodcarving, now considered essential reading for anyone aspiring to work in this specialist area. Dick is one of the main tutors for woodcarving in the Historic Carving Department.



## Each participant selected a wooden object to help start the conversation:

**DAVID MACDIARMID:** The wooden object that I brought in is something that I made for an exhibition last year. It's created from three pieces of beech and one piece of oak that have been joined and then turned. I am interested in the relationship between science and geometry and hand-skills. I was thinking about sound waves at the time, and peaks and troughs of the waves, and then translating them into form. It also relates to my research into 'atomic' era design motifs.

**GERRY ALABONE:** It's a lovely thing. When I first saw it I was reminded of 'Continuous Profile' at the Imperial War Museum, where Mussolini's profile was used to form an object expressive of dynamism and futurist ideology. But this is a much more complex shape; it's made of two different types of timber but it is turned quite seamlessly, that is some very slender turning and lots of different shapes and asymmetry. I brought in an old object, something I found. This is lime, and laminated like yours, but then carved. A little

cherub's head with two wings, the tip of one wing has been lost. I found it when clearing a frame maker's workshop a few years ago. It has been gilded, but the gilding has suffered badly from misuse. The carving betrays the wood's character and you can still see the marks of the chisel and the undercutting at the back. Wood that is well looked after can stay in pristine condition, and obviously waterlogged wood survives through millennia. It is often the surface which suffers more than the material itself.

**DICK ONIANS:** I have an image of one of my sculptures – a horizontal Moebius which is a visual pun on infinity. It is carved in walnut. A resin cast was chosen for their collection by the Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences in Cambridge. This is one of my pieces on the theme of endlessness and regeneration. The walnut wood has qualities which confer strength even on the short grained ends and the figure is quiet enough not to interrupt the flow.



GA: Looking at the objects we have here, they all show beautifully the capabilities of wood, and why it is such a versatile material that can be so meaningful to us in so many ways.

DM: Wood is an umbrella term for such a range of materials – it covers everything from load bearing beams, to paper making; you have craft, art and the longevity of making throughout history and cultures as well. I like the inter-linkages when thinking about one material. For example: the Wright Brothers' first plane was made of canvas and wooden structures, which are similar to a canvas and stretcher used for a painting.

GA: That's interesting – one thing that struck me on a visit to a restoration project in Brighton recently was how the houses were built by people who knew the properties of their timber so well that they could build supports going right up through a late-18th or early-18th century house. But now pine isn't beautifully slow grown, as it was a few hundred years ago. New pine timber simply would not be strong enough; it isn't capable of withstanding the same load. So therefore it's against building regulations to replace pine with pine – it's actually illegal to restore and conserve those buildings using the same material!

DO: As supplies of traditional timber for construction have dwindled such timber is now stress graded. Wood for special uses such as for sports goods, musical instruments and boats is selected by experienced users and where suitable supplies have dried up, timbers discovered by the destruction of the rain forests are used as substitutes. Advances in adhesives have made laminated timber more feasible. Chemically bulked or altered timber is now used in many fields including conservation. This is how the industry has found alternatives to the slow growing techniques of former times – the expert knowledge once required of the forester is being substituted with the expertise of the chemist.

TAMIKO O'BRIEN: Last year I visited a building in Japan made from two traditional wooden houses that had been taken apart and transported from different regions and then 'married'. The roof

shapes reflected the fact that the wood for each had grown in totally different conditions. The timber for one was from a mountain area with heavy snow, and the weight of the snow on the trunk (growing up at an angle) had formed a particular bend. The shape of the roof was formed of this naturally made curve (from the weight of snow) and it worked perfectly to form the roof shape to ensure the snow fell off after a certain depth.

GA: Perhaps things are changing, but maintaining the original material, rather than the concept of the original building with renewed material, would have been seen as very eccentric in Japan. The more traditional approach there to conserving buildings made of timber would be to knock down and build anew. That has been a tradition in temples and houses where the making itself – the craft – is preserved, more so than the object.

TOB: Professor Yabuuchi (from the Historic Sculpture Conservation Lab at Tokyo University of the Arts) told me about a specialist in Noh Theatre masks who visited Canada and was asked to propose a treatment for a Noh mask from the 18th century. Of course as an expert he proposed remaking a missing section and was shocked that they just wanted it stabilised! There he was, a rare person with this embodied knowledge and skills and they didn't want him to touch it.

DO: I understand Professor Yabuuchi's point. Woodcarvers look with interest at functional pieces of furniture being conserved to exhibition standard in a museum, when usable replicas could be made by them – it's their livelihood. We also need to ensure that these skills are kept alive and thriving.

TOB: I wondered if you each had a memory of the first time that you understood wood as a material? Or if there was something made of wood that has been particularly significant to you over the years?

DM: My great-aunt had a top floor apartment in a Victorian building in Glasgow with a large stained glass door. As a child I was fascinated by the wood surround that was burr walnut and very

fine – but at some point I realised it was actually trompe l'oeil, and then I realised the storm doors were not oak but also painted. If you looked closely you could see the tiny brush marks. That material trickery, or fakery, or just representation of something as something else got me really interested. I was fascinated that certain types of wood were so valued that they were copied.

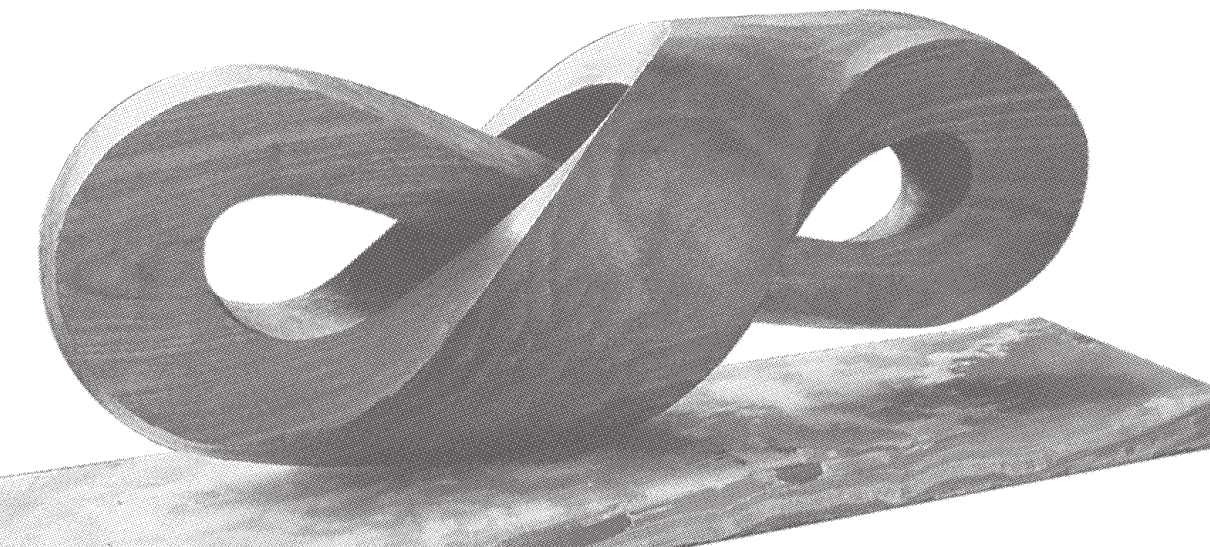
GA: I've always been interested in how things change and evolve over time. For example, when you look at a paneled door, you can appreciate why the ornaments and the construction come about from pure expedience of using timber and how the beauty of traditional form is dictated by the material. It's about making good the limitations of the material, and how that betrays itself over time, and how it changes and gets repaired. Just look at the door in the corner of the room there. Although it is ladled in countless layers of paint, the wood structure still insists upon betraying itself. It is a sort of battle between what you want to see and what you don't, and how much you think about where the value lies. It is a beautiful thing to be involved in a mixture of courses like this at the Art School, because all of these things mesh together very much in the objects we have brought in.

DO: There were many wooden objects in our home, mostly collected by family in travels in the East and Europe – but towards the end of the Second World War my father returned from London one evening unwontedly in a taxi with

a large carving of a Chinese war god with attendant demon. It was assembled from parts of tea root with a strong contrast between the finished polished carved parts and places where the surfaces had been exposed after removal of the bark. British carvers tend to finish work all over, but I have seen Japanese students incorporate very effectively natural features without attempting to disguise them. That combination of the crafted and the raw has always interested me.

TOB: Now that we live in a flat-pack, post-digital age, it seems that how things look, or even how things look to the camera, has a great deal of authority. Of course, people are still interested in materials, and things that have a rigour or substance to them, and that's something that we really focus on here.

GA: I was working on a conservation project in the Houses of Parliament recently and they have a display of tallies. Tallies were sticks of wood with notches cut to record some aspect of business. The stick would be split into two along the grain, so that each person would have half of a stick with common notches, evidence of their business dealings, because when it came back together the grain would match, the notches would match and the stick would be made whole. It struck me that whatever technology we wish to apply to a similar situation today, nobody could make something as perfect as a broken stick going back together along the grain.





TOB: That makes me think about how objects achieve a certain status. Firewood was once a plant stem and is the same stuff that is used for furniture, or sculpture – some of it gets to be something that lasts and is preserved, and some of it gets to be matchsticks, disposable chopsticks, kindling.

DM: Yes and then of course wood can be a historical record as well – the wider rings are the wetter years, and the narrow rings are the drier years. They hold valuable information.

GA: Some work has been done on a settlement in Jamestown in the US, where it has been determined that the suffering experienced there was due to extraordinary weather conditions. Historians worked this out by looking at the trees from the early 17th century: taking cores out of living trees, they are able to understand the history of the area. The trees that the settlers would have known are informing us about the weather at the time.

DM: Interesting! I think that during Cromwell's time there was a big tree planting initiative across England, because they needed all the wood for

the ships. Also during the First World War, particularly in Scotland, all the country estates were asked to donate natural forest wood for the war effort as well. So the land was used as this store for times of need.

GA: And Ireland is called the 'Emerald Isle', and not the 'Wooded Isle', because the trees, in large amounts, were taken by the Royal Navy. That was a large part of the way that Ireland, from the 17th century onwards, was used as a resource and not taken in a sustainable way. Commissioners would ride around on horseback selecting and requisitioning timbers. They could interpret a living tree's capabilities, in terms of use as converted timber for a ship for example. More recently, Oxbridge colleges have been repairing their buildings by using timber from their own woodlands that was planted hundreds of years ago for that very purpose, which is lovely.

DM: There is another thing I was thinking of, which again centres on elderly relatives and trying to escape them! There was a neighbour of my grandmother, and her father was a carpenter for one of the shipping lines in Glasgow. She had all this furniture that he had made. He came home

every night with pieces of tropical hardwoods from fitting out these great transatlantic ocean liners. These pieces had the finest marquetry – he used gramophone needles as his pins because he liked the weight of them. Making for yourself can be quite different from making for someone else. I know when I make for myself, it can be as intricate and ridiculous as I can possibly get away with. What would you say are your ‘indulgent’ projects?

GA: I suppose, like all of us at the Art School, we are lucky enough to carry out our passion as a vocation. Presently my indulgence is researching the objects that I am working on, to an extent that won't necessarily assist their treatment. I find that particularly rewarding. Objects can be made out of a single tree from a single wood yard and through analysis you may be able to link different objects by looking at tree rings, work out felling dates, that kind of thing. That really helps you feel emotionally connected to the making of these objects and the stories, and the incidental qualities that you can now read hundreds of years later. You don't necessarily need to know all that, but it is rather lovely and interesting to be able to do so.

DO: I totted up the other day the woods that I have carved – at least 70. When one works with a wood, it does not behave the same way as all pieces from the same species or even from the same tree, but one begins to know the smell, the feel and the working properties, quite apart from the figure and colour which are what most of us see at first. Learning to handle each type of wood, and the very individual piece of wood, requires a sensitivity and type of listening, looking, thinking through making. That is highly enjoyable and seeing the way that ideas translate in to a physical form through this collaboration with the material is always a delight.

City & Guilds of London Art School is a not for profit, specialist higher education institution dedicated to educating the artists, carvers and conservators of tomorrow. With a history dating back to 1854, we are committed to the idea of ‘learning through making’. An emphasis on material understanding, traditional skills, experimentation and research, combined with contextual art historical education, underpins our teaching.

Students benefit from working in a small community with a generous tutor-to-student ratio, with teaching from artists and practitioners at the top of their professional fields. Students have their own dedicated workspaces as sites for creative endeavour and exploration of skills, as well as access to specialist technicians and workshops.

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