

A Note From A Wood Tinker

Grinling Gibbons.

Not a common name, nor one that a fellow is likely to forget. More like a P. G. Wodehouse character... Bertie Wooster, Grinling Gibbons, Pongo Twistleton, Jeeves.... They all fit, don't they? Then again Gibbons was British and he became famous as a woodcarver.

In 1689, Sir Christopher Wren designed a home for the king and queen of England during the coregency of William and Mary. The Hampton Court Palace of Henry VIII was reconstructed. New wings were built, one for each monarch. In the King's wing, the space between the floor joists was filled with thousands of seashells dredged from the Thames River. These shells were used by Wren to deaden sound between the uppermost floor and the King's apartments below. Three centuries later these shells acted as a firebreak. They retarded a fire started by an elderly widow's bedside candle on the upper floor and in doing so (1) saved the intricate architectural carvings of Grinling Gibbons from total destruction, and (2) led American carver David Esterly to a restoration adventure.

The restoration took Esterly to Hampton Court where he worked for a year with a small team of carvers and conservators. Esterly kept a daily diary of his work to repair and replace the damaged Gibbons carvings. His diary filled three notebooks. These notebooks were used by Esterly two decades later to write about his experience in *"The Lost Carving - A Journey to the Heart of Making."* This autobiographical look at Esterly's life is propelled by the March 31, 1986 palace fire and subsequent restoration that was completed in 1990. It is punctuated by a sketch of Esterly's early life and a note of the 1998 Grinling Gibbons exhibition curated by Esterly on the 350th anniversary of Gibbons' birth.

Not your typical carving book, not a typical Wood Tinker article, and not a typical carver. *The Lost Carving* is an interesting book about two carvers. The first is Grinling Gibbons whose life is recounted by David Esterly, and the second is Esterly himself, who admits to being haunted by Gibbons life and work.

David Esterly was a perpetual student; with passions for poetry and philosophy. He gathered one BA from Harvard and another from Cambridge, which he then topped off at Cambridge with a PhD and dissertation on Yeats and Plotinus, who Esterly calls "the third great ancient philosopher, after Plato and Aristotle." While studying at Cambridge in the 1970s Esterly's fiancée prompted his visit to St. James Church near Piccadilly in London to view Grinling Gibbons' first carving for a Christopher Wren building. There Esterly was entranced by a "shadowy tangle of vegetation carved to an airy thinness." This was the seed of what became his future life. After six years at Cambridge, Esterly returned to America, and doctorate in hand, turned to working on beer trucks, boxcars, warehouses and moving vans as a Teamster union laborer; then later he went back to London and an office job. In London he decided to write a scholarly book on Gibbons and began research.

"One day it occurred to me that you couldn't fully understand how Gibbons developed his style unless you understood something about his tools and his medium. I made a note to try to find an art historical study on woodcarving techniques. In the meanwhile, just to divert myself, I thought I might as well get some chisels and wood and see what carving felt like,"

That was the beginning. The Gibbons book idea faded and was postponed to the long distant future while Esterly's life as a woodcarver began. Esterly describes the act of carving, the tools and his

fascination with Grinling Gibbons work, which he tried to emulate and in doing so became an expert on both carving and Gibbons. In turn, this led to publications in magazines, and ultimately to Esterly's commission when fire struck the Hampton Court Palace. By then Esterly had married his fiancée and with their 7 year old daughter Flora, they were living in upstate New York. Esterly was a professional woodcarver working in the style of Grinling Gibbons.

How does this book about Grinling Gibbons, one of history's great carvers, read? It is certainly not everyone's cup of tea, so let me present a few excerpts to attract or repel you.

"And I was beginning to have bad dreams. One in particular makes the hair on my neck stand up even now, decades later. Out of the clouds one restless night there swam into view old pale carvings high up on a wall in a great room. I walked about, looking at them with indescribable emotion. Suddenly the scene altered and there were flames, flames enveloping the carvings. I looked on mired in guilt and dread. Whose carvings they were I knew, and who'd set the fire I also knew.

I was awake, but the dream seemed to continue. Down the hill, out of the mist, trotted a ghostly coyote, the eastern version, the kind with wolf blood in it. It stopped at the fence, twenty feet away, and sat down. Burning yellow eyes stared at the human face in the window, locking me in an unwavering gaze. A minute or so passed. Then the creature turned, and walked away toward Swale Pond bounding the field on the north.

I don't believe for a moment in the prophetic power of dreams, and even metaphorically I'm not an arsonist. As for the coyote, well, the feckless farmer had just dumped a cow carcass over the bank by the pond, and the coyote was headed to breakfast. That's all. I shouldn't have mentioned it.

And I wouldn't except for the terrible coincidence that followed a few days later. It was the morning of Easter Monday. I was at my workbench finishing a bunch of grapes when my hands suddenly froze. Over the radio was coming news of a devastating fire at a British royal palace. I put down my chisel to listen. Henry VIII's palace at Hampton Court, on the banks of the Thames ten miles upstream from London. I thought quickly. If they're talking about Henry VIII, it must be the sixteenth-century part of the palace. But it was hard to imagine that brooding pile of stone and brick catching fire." pages 14-15. [This was the fire that damaged Gibbons' carvings.]

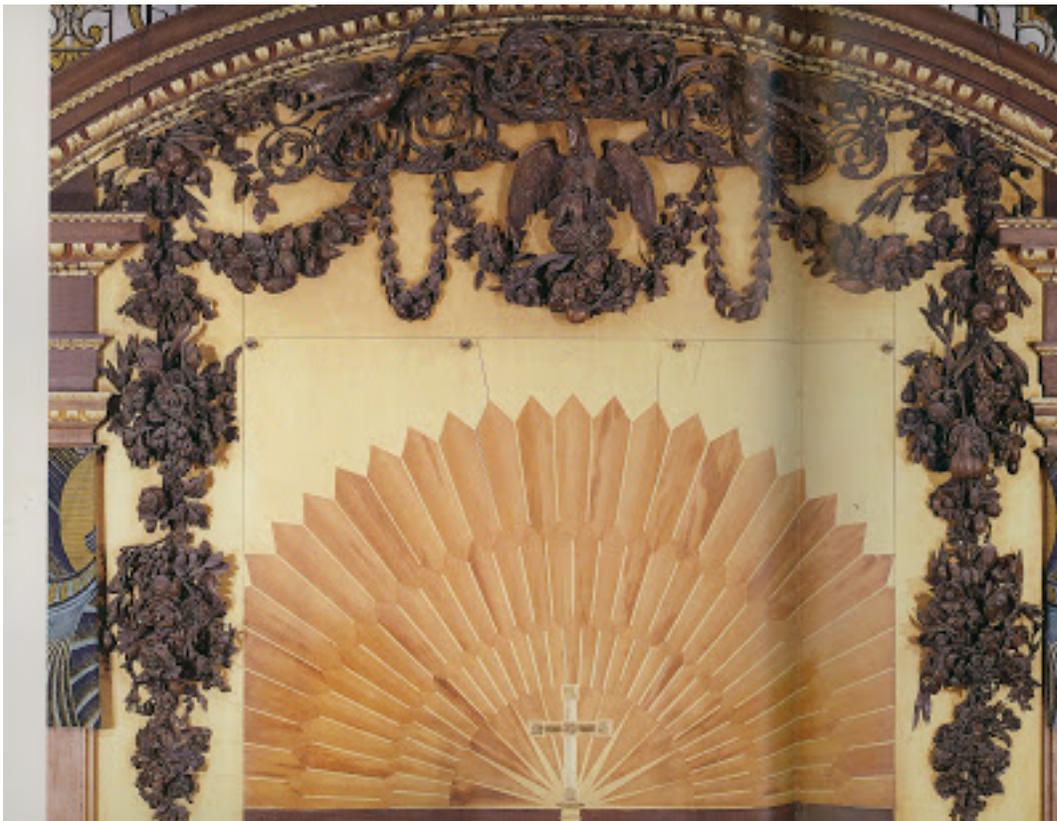
"A carver's objects of virtu should seem struck off like trifles. Renaissance courtiers strove for sprezzatura, that nonchalance that makes great accomplishments seem like child's play. (You can bet that out of sight of the Urbino Court they struggled mightily with their horsemanship and their poetry.) Sprezzatura is the reigning principle in a good piece of carving. The poignancy of the admiring gaze: struggles go without praise, because if they're successful they disguise themselves in a cloak of effortless." p. 119.

"Artist's seize upon Plotinus because they're inclined to regard their creative experience as a general account of reality. They want to turn it into philosophy, and the philosophy they want

to turn it into seems to resemble Plotinus's. "We know everything because we have made everything," declares Yeats. Everything in the *universe*, is what Yeats is claiming. Everything in my *poem* (or novel or sculpture or music), is what he might more truthfully say. With a chisel or pen or brush in hand and your work before you, oceanic dreams, preposterous in real life can come true. You can be one with what you see, with a seeing that melts into making. That's business as usual at the workbench. It passes almost without notice, until you think about it. You don't even have to be at a workbench. If you perceive a work of art intensely enough, its sea will flow in your veins, and you'll see as its maker saw." p. 220

Of course, there what have I done? Picked passages with no overt mention of Gibbons, yet they do get at what Esterly feels about Gibbon's work and there are plenty of details in the book on Gibbons work and life as well as the restoration process and its politics and equipment and discovered history.

One anecdote is a debate over whether to restore the carvings to their original appearance or to that of a later time. This question can arise in any historic restoration. In restoring an historic house, how far back do you take the restoration? Before an addition or closing up a fireplace? These carvings were made in the 1600s and over centuries changes did occur. For example, in Victorian times "brown" wood was popular and the carvings were turned brown. So Gibbons carvings years later were presumed to have been brown all along because that is all many had ever seen. Esterly argued for the purity of Gibbons vision and for restoring the carvings to their original white lime appearance, but he lost out (at Hampton Court at least) to the Victorian notion that all wood is "brown."



What Esterly saw when he became entranced by Gibbons St. James carving in London.



The St. James carving after conservation and being lightened.

Another discovery was Gibbons' use of Dutch rush, also known as scouring rush. It is a species of the horsetail plant family. A high silica content in its stems made Dutch Rush useful to scour pots and pans. Gibbons' work pre-dated the use of sandpaper. The scratch pattern uncovered during the restoration process matched the pattern of tiny scratches made by stems of the Dutch rush plant indicating it was used to "sand" the wood.

The restoration work and subsequent exhibition of Grinling Gibbons' carvings at London's Victoria and Albert Museum revived interest in the highly intricate ornamentation produced by the Gibbons workshop (he employed a team of craftsmen.) That interest continues today. The Wood Tinker is a happy subscriber to "Woodcarving" magazine, published in England (available at Barnes & Noble.) In the 2017 Sept/Oct issue is shown a modern copy of Gibbons' Point Lace cravat amongst other articles (including intricate spoon carving, Icelandic carving, mallards, a neo-Renaissance mirror frame, and a series on chip carving.) In the March/April issue how to carve a Gibbons flower is promised. For more on David Esterly's work visit his website: <http://www.davidesterly.com>



Grinling Gibbons



Point Lace Cravat carving

Gibbons carvings were often done in layers and then assembled. Here is an example of a David Esterly designed carving showing first a layer and then its assembled whole:



In concluding I leave you with two final excerpts to show that Esterly does indeed write about the act of carving itself. The first excerpt recounts his initial exploration with carving tools, and the second is an explication of carving technique during the Grinling restoration.

"...Odd I thought, that the handle is only large enough to accommodate one hand. Maybe woodcarving chisels were originally designed to be used with a mallet, and have retained this one-handed form. But I was pretty sure that woodcarvers --especially those who work with softer woods like lime-- spend most of their time without a mallet, plying the tool with their hands alone. And because the wood is clamped to the bench, this isn't like whittling, where one hand holds a knife and the other the material.

But if you're going to hold the chisel in both hands, then where does the second hand go? Why hadn't they made the handle long enough for two hands? I tried putting one hand on top of the other. That way both would be on the handle in some sense, and they could exert their strength together. But this was like driving a car from the back seat. There was plenty of power, but the blade kept skittering off the wood. It didn't work, pointing the tool from the rear and using the power of both hands not only to propel the blade but guide it, too.

Instinctively, I shifted the top hand forward, grasping the steel shaft itself, in front of the other hand and close to the blade edge. Instantly I gained control over the chisel. Again and again I dug shallow experimental valleys in the wood. Other revelations came. The front hand now ceased to provide propulsive force for the chisel. Quite the opposite. The rear hand was providing all the power, and the front hand was actually *resisting* that momentum. In fact this was how I was controlling the blade: one hand pushing against the other...." p. 55

"When the carving grows still more delicate and smaller in scale, then sometimes even the propulsive hand shifts its position to take further advantage of the finger's sensitivity. Instead of grasping the handle in a handshake-like grip, with the butt end buried in the palm, it holds the handle as if it were a pencil: a three-point grip between the thumb, the index finger, and the side of the middle finger. As a surgeon holds a scalpel. Small gouges and chisels have commensurately narrow handles so they can be held comfortably this way...

It was once part of a camshaft, attached to a powerful engine, but now the propulsive hand is happy to move the blade in tiny strokes. Holding the gouge like a pencil, steadied by the other hand's fingers on the shaft, it can operate with a draftsman's precision.... p. 189

And there you have it. A book which weaves together Grinling Gibbons, David Esterly, and the heart of carving. *The Lost Carving* is put together with a draftsman's precision, yet it seems effortless... Esterly's *sprezzatura*.

