

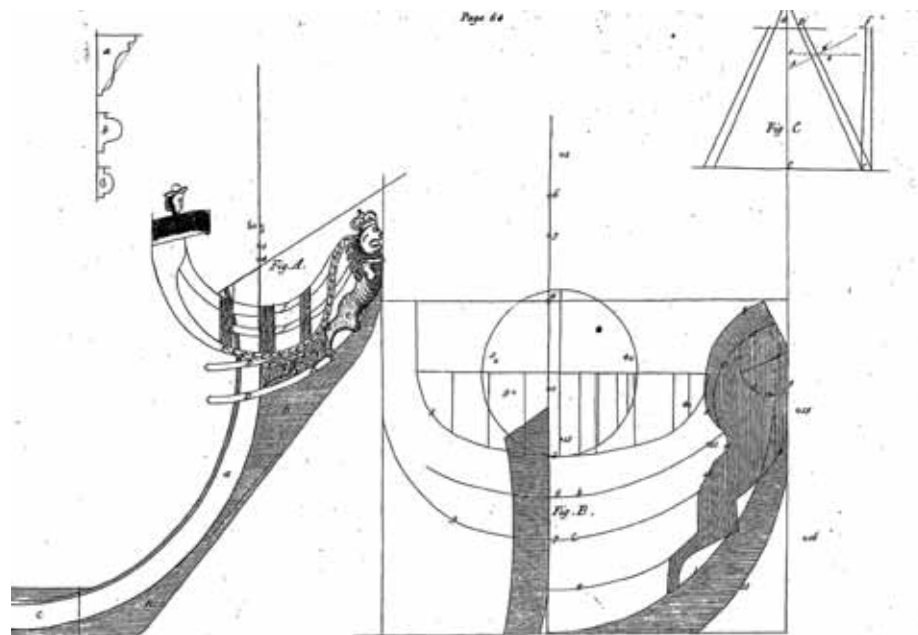
The tradition of vessel ornamentation has been practised globally and dates as far back as prehistoric times. What has been termed ‘the figurehead in its modern sense’,¹ that is, the painted carvings of animals, human figures and decorative work attached to the bows of vessels, is suggested to have emerged on the bow rams of naval vessels in the 1500s. This practice of adorning naval vessels is thought to have reached a ‘peak of elaboration’ around the year 1700.² The eighteenth century witnessed a decline in the scale and complexity of bow ornamentation, the result of a number of Navy Board orders. This decline was hastened in 1796 when an unpopular order was issued to cease the practice entirely except for scrollwork.³ Although the order was not strictly enforced, naval carvings were greatly reduced. The prevalence of figureheads on merchant ships in Britain, however, specifically those registered in London for foreign trade, increased until the first half of the nineteenth century before a dramatic decline after the mid-1860s.⁴ This decline coincided with the introduction of steam power, which resulted in changing hull forms and materials which were less suited to bow ornamentation.

Authors such as David Pulvertaft, Michael Stammers and Phil Thomas have undertaken valuable research into certain aspects of ships’ figureheads.⁵ However, several areas of inquiry deserve a more in-depth study, specifically the training of the ship carver; how the work was commissioned; the external stimuli that may have influenced carvers; the materials and methodology involved in the process; and, ultimately, how the ship-carving industry was positioned in the broader context of similar trades in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This article addresses some of these aspects of the industry, particularly the difficulty in classifying these artisans and their work; how the trade was perceived by their contemporaries; the carver’s experience while in training; and the creative process involved in the carving. Through an examination of contemporary trade books and an interpretation of the fees paid for indentures and wages for journeymen, the ship carver’s place in society can be better understood.

Writing in 1995, Thomas named close to 290 carvers who were active in Britain from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth century.⁶ The practice of ship carving was widespread and was, unsurprisingly, focused around shipbuilding centres. Despite the practice being so prevalent in Britain, figureheads and their carvers have not achieved the recognition nor academic interest that one might expect. In 1990 Hans Jürgen Hansen pointed out that ‘in not one single general work that deals with the history of sculpture

1. Figurehead construction instructions, from William Sutherland, *The Ship-Builders Assistant: Or Some Essays Towards Compleating the Art of Marine Architecture*, London, Printed for R. Mount on Tower-hill, A. Bell at the Cross-keys and Bible, and R. Smith under the Royal Exchange Cornhill, 1711

(photo: Max Planck Institute for the History of Science Library. CC-BY-SA)



have figureheads been mentioned or illustrated?’ This appears in part to be due to the fact that ships’ figureheads themselves, as well as those who carved them, are difficult to classify. Indeed, figureheads have recently been described as having a ‘slippery status’.⁸ Displayed as both folk art curios as well as significant sculptural relics of a rich maritime past, the interpretation of figureheads is certainly not fixed. The tradition was not an insular craft confined to a specific region, nor even a specific country; it was part of a larger practice that was evident throughout Europe, America and Scandinavia, and undertaken by professional carvers who specialized in this kind of work. Hence to describe these works as folk art does not seem accurate. Figureheads, from production to display, often undergo regular maintenance in the form of repainting, repairing or complete restoration. These alterations can sometimes diminish the quality of the work, and have a negative impact on the value placed on them, resulting in them being misinterpreted as crude works by unskilled carvers. An examination of the production and maintenance of ships’ figureheads illustrates the extensive work involved in creating and maintaining ship decoration.

The production and maintenance of ships’ figureheads

Ship carvings that are on display in Britain in private collections, museums and public places are often painted regularly, as they have been for centuries. It is worth bearing in mind that the high gloss, colourful finish that is evident today may be in no way related to their original colour schemes. Figureheads are often poorly repaired and even coated in fibreglass which, unsurprisingly, greatly disguises the quality of the original carving; this is an important

consideration when viewing these objects and in understanding the skill of those who carved them. Ships' figureheads did not have the intended permanence of marble and stone sculpture. These transient works had, in most cases, a short life and battled the elements head on. They were repaired and repainted along with the ship to which they were attached in order to increase their durability. Carvers must have been acutely aware of the relatively temporary lifespan of their work which was, in a sense, sacrificial.

Figureheads were almost exclusively made from wood. Aesthetically, the colour of the chosen wood was not important as the figurehead was painted, and factors such as the durability and workability of the material were more significant. Straight-grained wood was generally favoured for carving as it offered less resistance than knotty wood, and close-grained wood allowed for a sharp finish.⁹ Sources of wood for the ship carver varied over time and were affected by availability, fluctuation in transportation costs, the establishment of new trading markets, and political instability. These factors would have had an impact on the ship carver's profit margins, asking price and, consequently, on the successful completion of commissions. There are differing opinions as to which wood was predominantly used for figurehead carving. It is suggested by Thomas that in the seventeenth century, elm was the wood of choice for the carver.¹⁰ Elm was presumably used as it is malleable and because its grain structure makes it resistant to splitting. Elm successfully resists decay when kept wet; however, as L. G. Carr Laughton points out, elm, 'when alternately wet and dry soon becomes the consistency of putty' and it was, therefore, a poor choice for this particular type of carving, and was partly responsible for the ephemerality of these sculptures.¹¹

Laughton suggests that during the Restoration period and the early eighteenth century oak was regularly used. Oak was more suited to conditions at sea than elm and often 'outlasted the ship'. Oak was superseded by soft wood, specifically for naval figureheads.¹² This substitution was a result of the 1703 Navy Board order which 'stipulated the use of pine in lieu of oak',¹³ and of a further order in 1742 to lessen the weight of ships' carvings.¹⁴ By 1830 yellow pine was mostly used for their production. There is also evidence of mahogany and teak being utilized.¹⁵ Teak, considered 'the best wood to use around the water',¹⁶ was imported, mainly for hull planking, from Sierra Leone and India and began to be used in shipyards in Britain from around 1800.¹⁷ The softer woods such as elm and pine would have been easier to work with but would not have been as robust or as enduring as the narrow-ringed oak, teak or mahogany. Thomas suggests that there was a 50 per cent wastage involved in the carving of a block of wood into a figurehead and that often the figure was made up of a combination of wood types, for example elm or oak for the main body and pine for the extremities such as the arms.¹⁸ Of the 60 figureheads in the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich that have had their wood type identified, 51 are pine and the remainder are elm or a combination of hard and soft wood.¹⁹

Figureheads on display today have usually been restored, using modern paints, rather than conserved and preserved in their original state. Richard

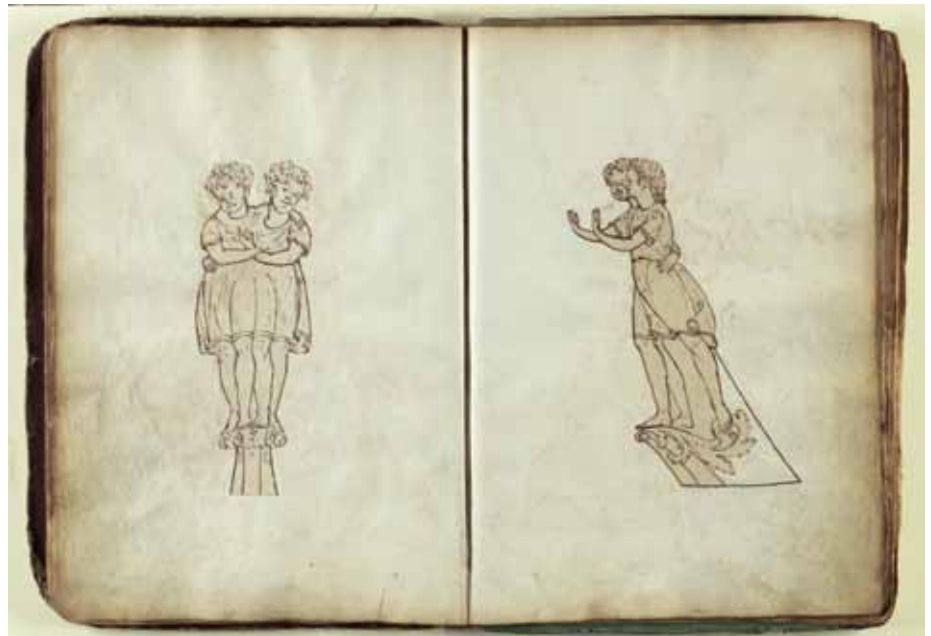
M. Candee explains that historic paints, unlike modern alkyd resin-based paints, 'flowed poorly and display more noticeable brush marks'.²⁰ One figurehead that has had its paintwork analysed is that depicting Queen Victoria which is located on a building facade in Aberystwyth in West Wales.²¹ During restoration work, the analysis of the paint, which was preserved under a 10–15 mm layer of tar, revealed approximately thirty layers, consisting of fifteen different colours which varied considerably from one another.

The use of more than one colour of paint on figureheads is thought to have been introduced in the mid-eighteenth century. It has been suggested that the frigate *Guadeloupe*, launched from Plymouth in 1763, was the first vessel to have a figurehead painted using a variety of colours instead of all gold or yellow, which had been the standard until that point. This suggestion appears in an article in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1825, in which the anonymous author, supposedly a Portsmouth dockworker's son, states 'The Guadeloupe Frigate, Capt. (afterwards Admiral) Cornwallis, was the first that had a painted side, and the figure head of various colours. We called her the Nancy Dawson. Turpentine sides and yellow heads were the general costume.'²² Both Morton Nance and Laughton discuss this reference.²³ Certainly, the *Guadeloupe* did undergo two separate repairs in Portsmouth. The first, in 1777, was described as 'between small and middling repair' and the second, in 1779, consisted of a refit and coppering of the hull.²⁴ It may have been during one of these repair works that the figurehead was painted 'various colours'.²⁵ The fourth-rate *Romney*, launched on 8 July 1762 from Woolwich,²⁶ may have had its figurehead painted in colours, as it was noted in the Navy Board In-letters on 7 April 1767 that 'Captain Corner, the Romney, Portsmouth. Request that his figurehead is painted in proper colours which cannot be done without an order.'²⁷ The vessel underwent what is described as 'small repair and fitted at Portsmouth (for £3,799.2.2d)' in March and April 1767.²⁸ It was during this time that the request to paint the figurehead was dealt with by the Navy Board.

Laughton suggests that a change in the painting tradition may have been a result of the Armed Neutrality of the Northern Powers against Britain in 1780 and the threat of disruption to the Baltic trade. This would have led to a scarcity of turpentine and rosin which were the ingredients used to coat and protect ship timbers up until that point.²⁹ Thomas notes that figureheads of what he calls 'deep sea ships' were painted plain white; by doing so 'any accusation of idolatry or superstition' was avoided.³⁰ Examples of white-painted figureheads can be seen in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, specifically the figureheads known as *Sercia*, *Friar Tuck* and the *Falkland*, which are on display in Tresco, Isles of Scilly.³¹

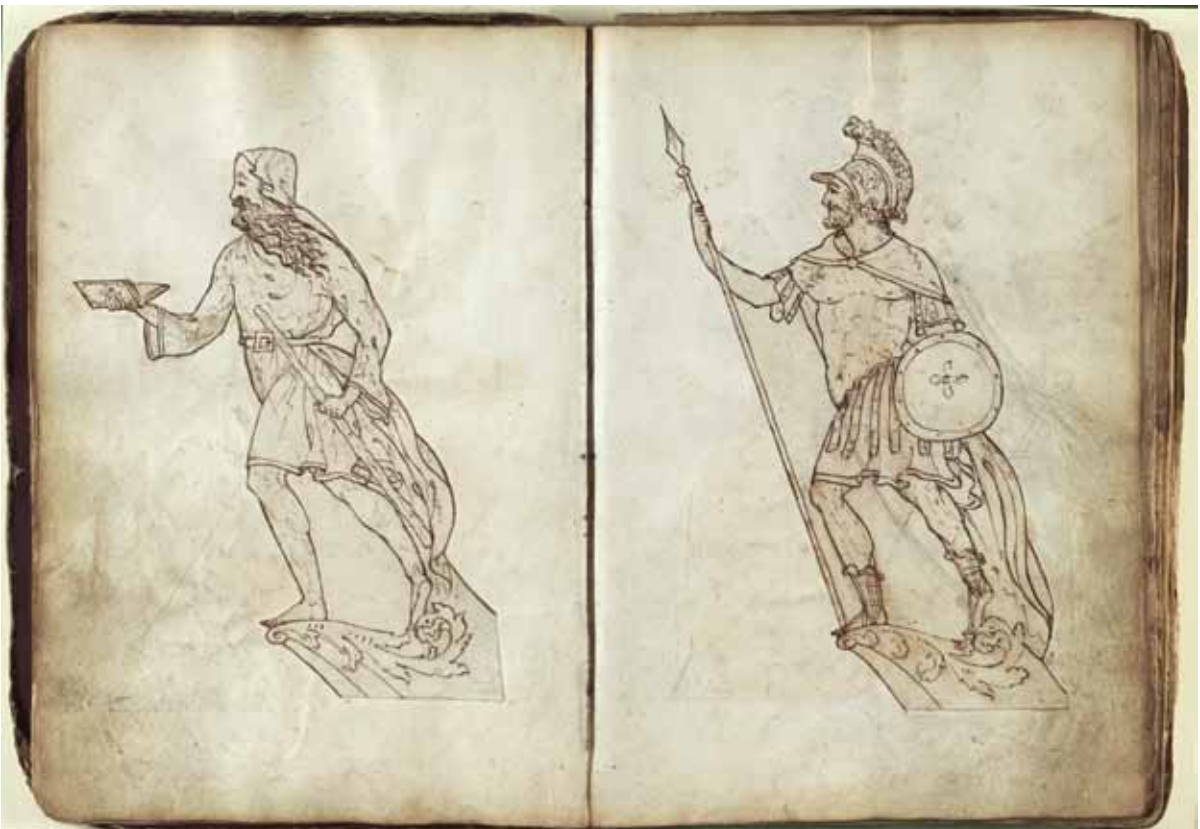
While a vessel was in use, painting and decoration would have been carried out annually to protect the wood and maintain the appearance of the vessel; the ship carver would have had no input into the ongoing maintenance of the figurehead. William Sutherland, in his eighteenth-century publication *Britain's Glory: Or, Ship-Building Unvail'd*, advises 'The Weather-work to be done once in Twelve-Months, if need require, for the Preservation of the Carved and the Quick-work'.³² In the naval dockyards this work was carried

2. Sketch possibly depicting the Dioskouroi, from the pattern book of R. Lee, c.1840. Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library
 (photo: Brownell Maritime Collection, call no. 736.13 L479 SpecColB)



out by a specific ship painter. In 1727 it was noted by Robert Campbell that 'he [the shipbuilder] has Painters peculiar to himself, but they work like the common House Painter, only are accustomed more than they to this kind of Work'.³³ Sutherland, who was employed in the Naval Dockyard in Portsmouth in the early eighteenth century, discusses those whose specific job it is to paint ships, noting 'what Necessity there is in painting Ships at Set Times, and by a Master Painter and his Crew, that are kept purely for that purpose'.³⁴ The painting of carved work was priced through measuring by the square yard, the very first application costing more than the subsequent refreshing. Sutherland explains 'For new Painting of all Friezed Work (which in this Place is meant of all Carved Work that is not otherwise specified) either in Ship or Boat work, measuring the same Mathematically with a Ruler, and not with a Line; the Allowance is for every Square Yard 14 Pence, and for Refreshing the same the Allowance is 7d. a Yard'.³⁵ The gilding of the vessel's carved work cost 4s. 5d. per square yard when Sutherland wrote his account.³⁶ Paint was used as a method of protecting the wood first and foremost and Sutherland highlights the importance of cleaning the wood and scraping off the old paint before a refresher coat is applied. Without doubt the sharpness of the carving would deteriorate over time as a result of these processes. Van der Horst sets out the paint colours available to the ship painter in 1729, as listed in the Deptford Yard letter book, including 'white lead, linseed oil, rapeseed oil, hempseed oil, Spanish whiting, chalk, gold colour, Venetian red, lamp black, Spanish brown, and port red'.³⁷

It is evident that the choice of materials for the production of figureheads was made purposefully and the maintenance of the carvings, specifically on naval vessels, was carried out routinely and systematically. Figureheads in Britain, although now lacking detail due to repeated scraping and painting, were carved to an established set of principles which were published in



3. Print of a druid, artist unknown, from the pattern book of R. Lee, c.1840. Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library
(photo: Brownell Maritime Collection, call no. 736.13 L479 SpecColB)

contemporaneous treatises on shipbuilding; the practice was learned through apprenticeships and the works produced by masters, skilled in their trade.

The training and status of the ship carver

It is worth noting how authors of relatively recent works on this subject refer to figurehead carvers. Throughout her study *Figureheads and Ornaments on Danish Ships and in Danish Collections* (1977), Hanne Poulsen describes Danish figurehead carvers as ‘sculptors’ and ‘artists’.³⁸ Hans Soop also refers to the creators of the *Vasa*’s carvings as ‘sculptors’.³⁹ Interestingly, these terms are rarely used when discussing British carvers. Neither Laughton, Thomas, Pulvertaft nor Peters uses the word ‘sculptor’ in their studies of British ship carvers and certainly few had undergone a fine art training. How eighteenth-century authors, such as Campbell and Kearsley, classified the ship-carving trade is useful in understanding how it was perceived by its contemporaries.⁴⁰ On the subject of figurehead carving, Campbell, in 1747, only briefly states, ‘He [the shipbuilder] has Carvers likewise, who never are employed in any other branch of that Art but in carving the Ornaments upon the Stems and Sterns of Ships.’⁴¹ Presumably, the point being emphasized is that ship carving was a specialized field in its own right. Documentary evidence suggests that ship carvers occasionally branched out into other areas of carving, even though, according to Campbell and Kearsley, ‘ship builder’, ‘ship carpenter’, ‘ship joiner’ and ‘ship carver’, as well as ‘house carver’ and ‘coach carver’, were all distinct and separate trades, requiring separate apprenticeships. The undertaking of non-ship-related work was presumably done in order to supplement their income. The ship carver R. Lee, for example, originally from Liverpool, described himself on his pattern book from c.1840 as a ‘ship, sign and ornamental carver’ and indicated that he could carve ‘figures & c., for Gardens, Pleasure Grounds, Halls, & c.’⁴²

The Board of Stamps *Apprenticeship Books*, which list payments of duty on apprentices’ indentures paid by their masters, contain no mention of ship carving as a distinct trade.⁴³ An examination of a representative sample, which included every fifth year from 1763 to 1808, revealed that ‘Carver’ was listed as a trade, as was ‘Carver & Guilder’, and in some cases the trade was listed specifically as ‘House carver’; but no listing of ‘ship carver’ was present at all. Known ship carvers are listed in the *Apprenticeship Books* and are described simply as ‘carvers’, like William Savage, listed in 1778.⁴⁴ Therefore, it appears that although ship carving was recognized as a distinct trade by authors such as Campbell and Kearsley, officially, for tax purposes, ship carvers were grouped together with carvers and guilders.

Campbell describes the manufacture of sculpture in great detail, referring to the use of metal, clay, wax and plaster of Paris, and he notes that ‘a Youth who is designed for this Business must have a natural Genius, which may be early discovered by his mimicking the Figures of Men and Animals in Clay, or other Materials’.⁴⁵ The author concludes that ‘The Statuary is a genteel and

4. R. Lee’s drawing of a figurehead depicting a druid, from the pattern book of R. Lee, c.1840. Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library
(photo: Brownell Maritime Collection, call no. 736.13 L479 SpecColB)

profitable Art, and is coming much in Repute in England.' He does not discuss wood carving under the section of his work titled 'Of Sculpture and Statuary, with their Dependants' and this indicates that he considered figurehead carving to be a component of the shipbuilding industry. He merely notes that the shipbuilder employs carvers who are specific to that trade.⁴⁶ Kearsley too notes that it is a laborious trade.⁴⁷

Evidence from the pattern book of R. Lee suggests that ship carvers did diversify into other types of carving, and it is also known that some carvers such as Grinling Gibbons started out as ship carvers and then left that trade to pursue a non-ship-carving career, as did the American sculptor William Rush.⁴⁸ It seems that a wood carver, not specifically trained to be a ship carver, was less likely to fall into ship carving than the other way around, but of course there were exceptions to this too. This may be a result of the specific technical knowledge required for ship carving or may indicate that ship-carving jobs were limited and therefore more difficult to come by. This phenomenon is evident from an interesting discourse between a Liverpoolian ship carver and the influential designer and wood carver Thomas Johnson, recorded in Johnson's autobiography, *The Life of the Author*, first published in 1793.⁴⁹ Johnson described in detail a dramatic episode when he was forced to flee from London to Liverpool. He happened across a ship carver called Prescott in his workshop. Johnson claimed that having shown the ship carver the carving work he was capable of, Prescott, who was impressed by the work, said 'he had nought but ship work, which would soon break my [Johnson's] catstick arms'.⁵⁰ Johnson stated that although, after a time, he learned the method of ship carving, Prescott would not allow him to work at it. Johnson did go on to carve a lion figurehead for the ship *Jenny*, presumably without the approval of Prescott. What Prescott understood, and Johnson learned, was that ship carvers worked within specific constraints dictated by the relationship between function and ornamentation.

Sutherland, in his 1711 publication *The Ship-Builders Assistant*, explained that 'For to see a head with all its Parts well and neatly formed, and a due proportion and Harmony between them, strikes with admiration the Eye of the Beholder.'⁵¹ The carving had to be accommodated within the lines of the ship so as not to disrupt the overall aesthetic and function of the vessel. Figureheads were frequently made with detachable elements that could be removed once the vessel left the harbour, allowing the ornamentation to become more streamlined when at sea. This principle, outlined by Sutherland, was learned by the ship carver as an apprentice and practised throughout his career (fig. 1).

The type of training a ship carver received is vital to our understanding of his status as well as the trade itself. Andrew Peters explains that in France, during the reign of Louis XIV, sculpture academies were established in Toulon, Rochefort and Brest to train men in the art of ship carving.⁵² Generally, ship carvers in Britain did not have the fine art training that their European counterparts had but undertook apprenticeships instead. A ship carver's apprenticeship would have taken approximately seven years to complete.

The parents of an apprentice ‘Carver of Ship-work’ in the year 1747 would have been required to pay his master a premium sum of £5–£10.⁵³ This was approximately one month’s wages for a craftsman at that time.⁵⁴ The parents of an apprentice ‘statuary’ or sculptor during the same period would be required to pay comparatively more, somewhere in the region of £10–£50.⁵⁵ These sums are indicative of the fees a fully trained master in that trade might command, suggesting that the work of a trained sculptor was valued much more highly than that of a ship carver. Usually, the eighteenth-century apprentice would have been expected to work long hours, many trades requiring a twelve-hour day or longer; Campbell states that ship carvers work ‘by Tydes’ and therefore their work hours would vary considerably from week to week.⁵⁶ However, much of the ship carver’s work, specifically the carving of the figurehead, would be carried out in a workshop, and it would only be permanently fixed to the vessel on completion: consequently it would be largely unaffected by the tide. Repair work to existing carvings, which would be done in situ, may on the other hand have been affected by the tides.

When the apprenticeship was complete, the carver became a journeyman and could obtain work wherever he wished.⁵⁷ This period would have given the journeyman the opportunity to learn different methods of production and make contacts while working for various masters.⁵⁸ Evidence supports this, as we can see in the case of the ship carver James Brooker. Brooker, born in 1816, is known to have worked in Maryport, Cumbria from 1842–53, in Glasgow from 1853–54, and in Sunderland from 1855–59.⁵⁹ Kearsley seems to insinuate that journeymen could be a bad influence on an apprentice, stating ‘Among the temptations a young man may meet with from journeymen, gaining a habit of drinking may be none of the least.’⁶⁰ In 1787 Kearsley notes that a journeyman ship carver received between 14s. and £1 4s. a week without board. This is substantially lower than a statuary in the same period who would have received between £2 2s. and £3 3s. per week without board.⁶¹

There were four ways a man could become established as a master of his trade after training was complete: ‘by marriage, inheritance, purchase or setting up’.⁶² Marriage and setting up as a master were intrinsically linked. To set up as a master ship carver in the mid-eighteenth century, Campbell suggests that a sum of £50–£200 was required,⁶³ and Kearsley suggests a similar figure of £50–£100. The estimate given by Campbell is quite substantial and would be the equivalent of four years’ wages for a journeyman ship carver. Setting up would involve purchasing tools, a workshop and materials as well as advertising and other initial costs. The funds to set up as a master were often acquired through marriage, from the bride’s dowry.⁶⁴ These costs, of course, would be reduced to nothing if the apprentice was to marry the master’s daughter, as the workshop would already have been established. A master needed a partner who would contribute to the production and marketing side of the business, while also running the often complex household of apprentices, journeymen and servants.

As a response to inevitable fluctuations in requirements, and due to the need for custom-built figureheads to fit specific vessels, carvings were usually

commissioned on an individual basis. Some carvers were known to stockpile their carvings in quieter times. One example was that of Archibald and John Harriott of North Shields who, in 1843, advertised immediately available male and female busts as well as a range of other carvings.⁶⁵ This method may have been used occasionally for merchant vessels; however, it was not suitable for naval vessels, which went through a commissioning process and would not have utilized this off-the-shelf option. When a naval ship was under construction, the resident figurehead carver in the dockyard would create a proposed design and produce a cost estimate which would be approved or rejected by the Surveyor of the Navy. Pulvertaft explains this commissioning process in great detail in his work *Figureheads of the Royal Navy*.⁶⁶

A different approach was taken in Denmark where 'contemplated designs for [naval] figureheads were executed by the sculptor in wood and wax on a smaller scale and then, after receiving the construction commissions and the King's approval, they were carved full size'.⁶⁷ There are as many as fifty examples of these 30–40 cm high wax maquettes in the Naval Museum in Denmark, dating from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁸ The Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel, while working for the court in Stockholm, is known to have made wax models and designs for figureheads.⁶⁹ Both the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam have examples of figurehead models from the eighteenth and nineteenth century.⁷⁰ This method, except for one known exception, was not used by British ship carvers. Three examples of wooden figurehead models exist in public collections in Britain; however, only one of these can be truly called a maquette. The *Queen Charlotte* limewood maquette was carved in Chatham Dockyard in the late 1780s by an unknown carver, for the approval of King George III.⁷¹ The figurehead was for the first-rate, Royal George Class *Queen Charlotte*, which was launched on 15 April 1790.⁷² The second maquette-like carving is the intricately carved model of the figurehead of HMS *Victory* (1765).⁷³ The model measures 176 × 195 × 65 mm and is comprised of separate pieces of boxwood glued together. The model was carved by the ship carver William Savage in 1801–02, which coincides with a period of extensive repair work undertaken on the *Victory*, including a new figurehead. This model, therefore, postdates the carving of the original figurehead; hence it cannot be described as a maquette but is rather a small-scale copy of the actual figurehead. The third model is of the figurehead of the *Durban*, also known as the 'Zulu Warrior', in the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.⁷⁴ The model measures 305 × 114 × 76 mm and was carved c.1870 by the ship carver Nehemiah Williams. It is not known whether this was carved before or after the actual figurehead of the *Durban*.

There are theories as to why the making of maquettes was not part of the process of ship carving in Britain. The cost of their production has been suggested, as has the possibility that they may have existed but were not retained.⁷⁵ Andrew Peters suggests that one reason why this practice was not followed in Britain may be that the subject matter of naval figures was standardized much earlier than in other countries, which dispensed with the

need for a maquette to try to ‘sell the design’ to the Navy Board.⁷⁶ This may explain the absence of seventeenth-century maquettes, when the subject rarely varied from a crowned lion. However, the drawings submitted to the Navy Board from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as illustrated by Pulvertaft, vary considerably in subject, and yet three-dimensional maquettes were apparently not created. Peters also suggests that those maquettes that do exist are from the professionally trained carvers.⁷⁷ There may be numerous reasons why figurehead models were not made in Britain, but the principal one may be the type of training ship carvers received. As ship carvers in Britain trained as apprentices rather than in academies, learning by doing under the close eye of the master, this perhaps meant that the time-consuming activity of carving a maquette was deemed unwarranted and was not taught. It would seem that instead of maquettes, British carvers used pattern books to present their work to prospective customers.

Ship carvers’ pattern books

At least four sketchbooks or pattern books have survived from the ship carvers of the nineteenth century. These are A. P. Elder’s sketchbook, 1855; R. Lee’s pattern book c.1840; George Tate’s sketchbook c.1855–65; and the sketchbook of American ship carver William Southworth c.1880.⁷⁸ These sketchbooks give an insight into the creative process behind the finished figureheads as well as how the work itself may have been offered to those interested in commissioning a carving.

The pattern book of R. Lee contains drawings of figureheads that have been cut out and stuck to its pages. The subjects of these figureheads include figures from classical mythology, such as the Dioskouri; the club-wielding Hercules; medieval knights and ladies; and gentlemen in contemporary dress (fig. 2). Although these drawings provide an interesting insight into the work the carver was capable of, or at least what he offered, it is the grangerization that shows how these ideas were formed. Lee included ten prints in his book: a print of Sir Thomas Hardy after Richard Evans; a print of the prophet Mohamed, after Woodforde and published by Longman & Co.;⁷⁹ a print of ‘The Kings of England’ by M. Page; a druid, with Stonehenge in the background; a frontispiece depicting people from different parts of the world in what was imagined to be their native dress as well as mythological scenes with Neptune and angels; and a print of a cherub and a crest. It is quite evident from his drawings that he took inspiration from these sources, altering the posture of each copied figure to create the forward-leaning pose of the figurehead. This influence is particularly evident in the case of the druid and also a blackamoor-style figure in a feathered headdress, a figure associated with the tobacco trade. The print of both the druid and the man in a feathered headdress share obvious similarities with Lee’s own drawings and were clearly the inspiration for these specific illustrations (figs. 3, 4, 5, 6).

A. P. Elder’s sketchbook contains 50 figurehead drawings as well as



5. Print including a blackamoor style figure, from the pattern book of R. Lee, c.1840. Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library
(photo: Brownell Maritime Collection, call no. 736.13 L479 SpecColB)

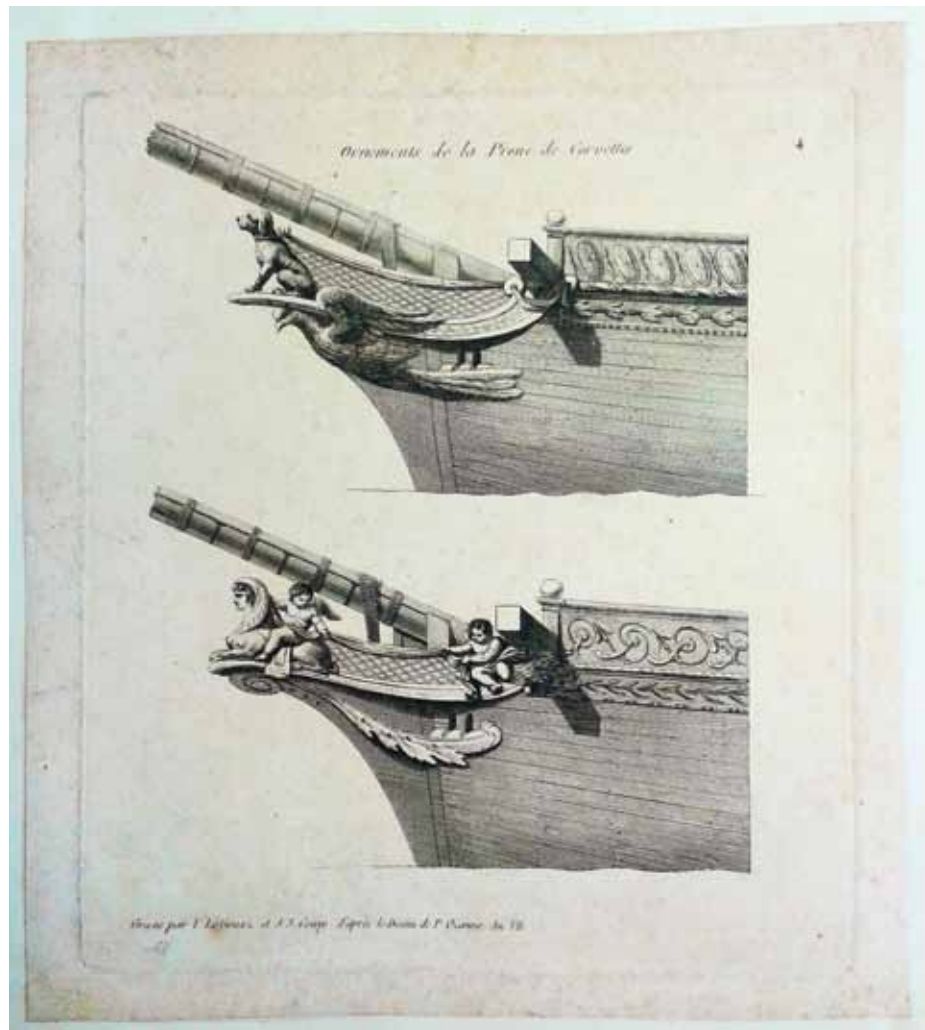
drawings of other types of ship carvings. Most noteworthy perhaps are the last few pages of the sketchbook. Similarly to the prints in Lee's pattern book, these pages have copies of prints depicting four figureheads by the French marine artist Pierre Ozanne (1737–1813) stuck to them. The presence of Ozanne's prints in Elder's sketchbook suggests that, unlike Lee who tended to look to British artists to emulate, Elder admired and possibly took inspiration from continental practices (fig. 7). It would seem he was by no means the first to do so. *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* by William Falconer (1768) states that 'The heads of many of our ships of war have undoubtedly great beauty and propriety; and candour must acknowledge that some of the most elegant and judicious have borrowed from the French designs, which are never left to the invention of illiterate mechanics.'⁸⁰ Many of the ship carvers of eighteenth-century England may well have been illiterate, as half the population of the country is thought to have been at this time.⁸¹

Falconer's critical opinion of ship carvers in Britain indicates the disparity between their status and that of ship carvers on the continent. It also aligns with a wider trend during the mid-eighteenth century towards improving the quality of manufacturing. Anne Puetz suggests that from the 1730s onwards, there was a demand for artisans to improve the design of products made in England in order to compete with goods, specifically luxury items, manufactured in other countries such as France.⁸² Although figureheads would not have been considered luxury items, those who carved them may have been influenced by the published works on ornament, beauty and drawing that were aimed at furniture makers and students of private drawing schools. These schools were established in response to a 'need for instruction' for designers to improve the quality of their designs in order to compete internationally.⁸³ In the shipbuilding industry too, publications such as William Sutherland's *The Ship-Builders Assistant* and *Britain's Glory: Or, Ship-building Unvail'd* aimed to improve the skills of the shipbuilder and carver. In the nineteenth century works such as *A Handbook of Ornament* contained illustrations of lions and eagles as well as mythical beings.⁸⁴ The accompanying explanations regarding the symbolism of the motifs gave the artisans a deeper understanding of what it was they were carving.

From an examination of trade books and contemporaneous writings, it appears that figurehead carvers in Britain have always been somewhat marginalized and perhaps misunderstood. As well as resulting from a lack of imagination in those who commented on them, this may have been fuelled by the carvers themselves who, as is evident from Johnson's *Life of the Author*, enveloped their skills in a certain amount of secrecy.⁸⁵ The difficulty in the classification of figureheads as works of craft, industry or art has resulted in variations in how they have been interpreted and exhibited in Britain over the last few centuries. Figureheads on display today have often undergone what Martin Myrone refers to as an 'act of trans-valuation', whereby they have been removed from their original context and often heavily altered.⁸⁶ The ongoing maintenance, repainting and restoration of figureheads, although sometimes done quite sensitively, is undertaken in a way that would not

6. Lee's drawing of a figurehead wearing a feathered headdress, from the pattern book of R. Lee, c.1840. Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library
(photo: Brownell Maritime Collection, call no. 736.13 L479 SpecColB)

7. Ships' figureheads, after Ozanne, from the sketchbook of A. P. Elder. National Maritime Museum, London, ID number PAG365 (photo: National Maritime Museum)



be considered acceptable for other museum objects or artworks, which are usually conserved rather than restored. It could be argued that this treatment of figureheads adds to the difficulty in interpreting these carvings and classifying their makers. The varying interpretation of figureheads has led them to be displayed as popular art⁸⁷ and as folk art along with artefacts such as pin cushions and prisoner-of-war bone carvings,⁸⁸ while they are simultaneously displayed in Britain's National Maritime Museum as emblems of Britain's maritime heritage.

Hansen, writing in 1990, suggested that less is known about the production of ships' figureheads than any other realm of sculpture. Although subsequent work on the subject has arguably improved this situation, the fact remains that figureheads and their carvers are not subject to scholarly examination in Britain as they are elsewhere. The practice of figurehead carving was, and still is, difficult to classify, positioned somewhere between art and the more laborious trades. Ship carvers in Britain were formally trained through apprenticeships and usually worked exclusively on this type of specialized carving which was commissioned on a ship-by-ship basis; yet they were

held in less regard than their European counterparts with their fine art training and elevated status, both by their contemporaries, such as Falconer, and by more recent authors on the subject, who differentiate between the ship 'carvers' of Britain and ship 'sculptors' elsewhere. Their work, however impermanent, embellished ships that were engaged in long-distance trade and overseas conflict and were visible to the inhabitants of ports from Nova Scotia to the Bay of Bengal and beyond, until the end of the great age of sail. The standard and quality of carvings certainly varied; however, the legacy left behind by the specialized carvers who created them gives a unique insight into Britain's relationship with the sea in a tangible and evocative way.

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2. Peter Norton, *Ships Figureheads*, Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1976, p. 65.

3. L. C. G. Laughton, *Old Ships' Figureheads and Sterns*, Burt Franklin, 1973, pp. 5 and 6.

4. In 1787 51% of vessels registered in London for foreign trade had figureheads; by 1857 72% of vessels had figureheads; but by 1887 only 28% of vessels had figureheads (including scrollwork). Evidence from the Registry of Shipping and Seamen, The National Archives (TNA) Board of Trade, BT 107 and 108.

5. David Pulvertaft, *Figureheads of the Royal Navy*, Barnsley, Seaforth, 2011; Michael Stammers, *Figureheads and Ship Carving*, London, Chatham, 2005; P. N. Thomas, *British Figurehead & Ship Carvers*, Al Brighton, Waiane Research, 1995.

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9. Jay S. Hanna, *Shipcarver's*

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10. Thomas, as at note 5, p. 15.

11. Laughton, as at note 3, p. 19.

12. Laughton, as at note 3,

pp. 18–19.

13. Andrew Peters, *Ship Decoration 1630–1780*, Barnsley, Seaforth, 2013, p. 128.

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15. Thomas, as at note 5, p. 15.

16. Hanna, as at note 9, p. 6.

17. John Greenwood Brown Hutchins, *The American Maritime Industries and Public Policy, 1789–1914: An Economic History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1941.

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21. Richard Hunter, 'Victoria restored', *Sea History*, 94, 2000, pp. 32–33.

22. Anon, 'Singularities from boyhood to age', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1825, pp. 130–31.

23. R. Morton Nance, 'Quicksilver, carvedwork and painting of ships, c.1760', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 10, 1, 1924, p. 89; Laughton, as at note 3, p. 269.

24. Rif Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail, 1714–1792: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates*, Barnsley, Seaforth, 2007, p. 231.

25. Anon, as at note 22, pp. 130–31.

26. Winfield, as at note 24, p. 155.

27. The National Archives (TNA), ADM 106/1151/111, 7 April 1767.

28. Winfield, as at note 24, p. 155.

29. Laughton, as at note 3, p. 269.

30. Thomas, as at note 5, p. 12.

31. National Maritime Museum (NMM), FHD0005, NMM FHD0027 and NMM FHD0026.

32. William Shipwright Sutherland, *Britain's Glory: Or, Ship-Building Unvail'd. Being a General Director, Fr Building and Compleating the Said Machines ... The Second Edition*, London, A. Bettesworth, 1729, p. 193.

33. Robert Campbell, *The London Tradesman* [1747], Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1969.

34. Sutherland, as at note 32, p. 191.

35. Sutherland, as at note 32, p. 192.

36. Sutherland, as at note 32,

p. 193.

37. A. J. van der Horst, 'Painting and preserving the ship in the 17th and 18th centuries', *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 30, 2, 2001, p. 274.

38. Hanne Poulsen, *Danish Figureheads and Ornaments on Danish Ships & in Danish Collections*, Copenhagen, Rhodos, 1977.

39. Hans Soop, *The Power and the Glory: The Sculptures of the Warship Wasa*, Stockholm, Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 1986.

40. Campbell, as at note 33; and George Kearsley, *Kearsley's Table of Trades, ... Shewing at One View What a Master Requires on Taking an Apprentice, What a Journeyman Can Earn, and What Sum Is Required to Set up as Master in Any ... Trade, Etc*, London, 1786.

41. Campbell, as at note 33, p. 299.

42. R. Lee's Pattern Book, kindly brought to my attention by Richard Hunter, is part of the Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library, call number 736.13 L479 and is accessible at <http://pplspc.org/rlee/#page/2/model/2up>.

43. TNA IR1.

44. TNA IR 1/29 City (Town)

Register 1 May 1776–31 August 1778, 335.

45. Campbell, as at note 33, p. 136.

46. Campbell, as at note 33, p. 299.

47. Kearsley, as at note 40, p. 20.

48. On Gibbons, see Geoffrey Beard, *The Work of Grinling Gibbons*, London, John Murray, 1989, p. 11, where he quotes George Vertue's comment that Gibbons 'settled with his Family at Detford [sic] and follow'd ship carving'. On Rush, see *William Rush: American Sculptor*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1982.

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50. Simon, as at note 49, p. 43.

51. William Sutherland, *The Ship-Builders Assistant: Or Some Essays Towards Compleating the Art of Marine Architecture*, London, Printed for R. Mount on Tower-hill, A. Bell at the Cross-keys and Bible, and R. Smith under the Royal Exchange Cornhill, 1711, p. 62.

52. Peters, as at note 23, p. 39.

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54. Calculated using Clark's estimate that the daily wage for craftsmen in 1740–49 was 20.6 pence. See Gregory Clark, 'The condition of the working class in England, 1209–2004', *Journal of Political Economy*, 113, 6, 2005, p. 1325.

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56. Campbell, as at note 33, p. 332.

57. Stammers, as at note 5, p. 98.

58. Geoffrey Crossick, *The Artisan and the European Town, 1500–1900*, Aldershot, Scolar, 1997, p. 8.

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pp. 106–07.

60. Kearsley, as at note 40, p. 39.

61. Kearsley, as at note 40,

pp. 20–21.

62. Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600–1914*, London, UCL Press, 1996, p. 229.

63. Campbell, as at note 33, p. 332.

64. Crossick, as at note 58, p. 10.

65. Stammers, as at note 5, p. 97.

66. Pulvertaft, as at note 5, p. 85.

67. Poulsen, as at note 38, pp. 21–22.
68. Poulsen, as at note 38, pp. 21–22.
69. Hansen and Hansen, as at note 7, p. 30.
70. Hansen and Hansen, as at note 7, p. 31.
71. This artefact is part of the model collection of the Historic Dockyard, Chatham. Ref: 2005.0040.01 MOD 45, http://www.thedockyard.co.uk/Collections/Collections_Gallery/CollectionsPhotoGallery.html
72. Winfield, as at note 24, pp. 371 and 381.
73. This artefact is part of the collection of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM): ID number SLR2530.
74. This artefact is also in the National Maritime Museum's collection: ID FHD0118.
75. Personal communication with Richard Hunter, 6 January 2015.
76. Personal communication with Andrew Peters, 2 June 2014.
77. Personal communication with Andrew Peters, 2 June 2014.
78. A. P Elder's sketchbook is in the collection of the NMM: ID number PAG3651. R. Lee's Pattern Book c.1840, Brownell Maritime Collection, Special Collections, Providence Public Library, call number 736.13 L479. George Tate's sketchbook is in a private collection. William Southworth's sketchbook is in the collection of the Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, USA: ID number 1989.105.118.
79. This picture may have been printed in *Mahomet the Impostor ... As performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Printed...from the prompt book. With remarks by Mrs. Inchbald*, 1806. The same image was used as a frontispiece for the 1900 publication *The Life of Mohammed* by George Bush.
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