

A close-up photograph of a wooden surface, likely a piece of plywood or a similar material, showing a distinct wavy grain pattern. The wood grain is light brown and runs diagonally across the frame. A prominent, dark, wavy line runs through the center, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the wood.

THE  
CARVING  
of the WOOD

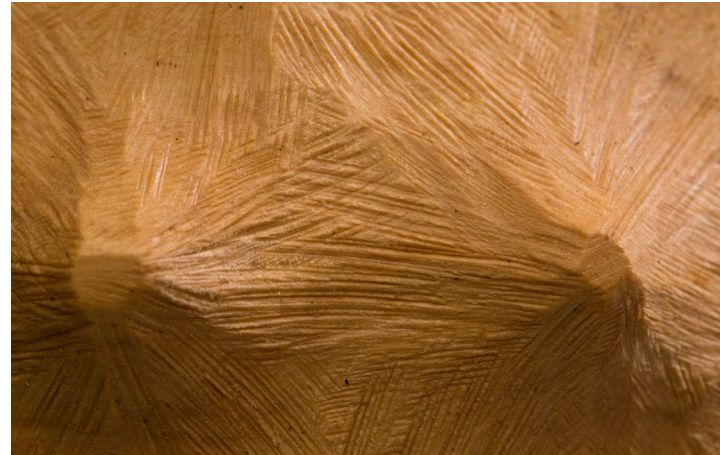
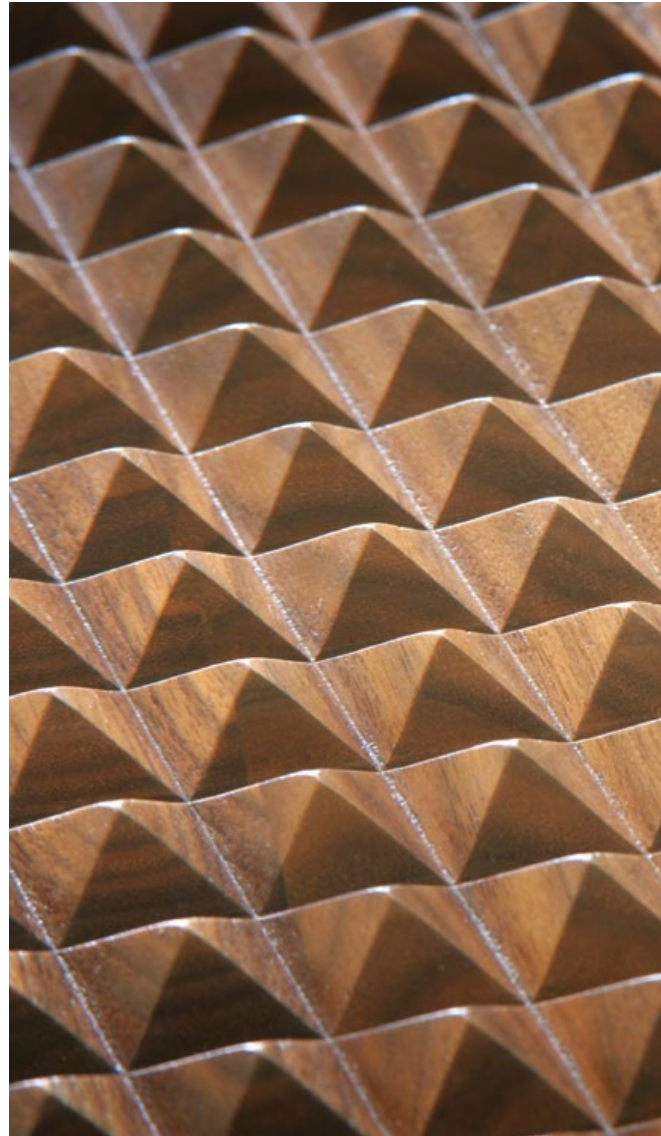


CRAFTS  
STUDY  
CENTRE

**UCA**  
university for the **creative arts**

THE  
**CARVING**  
of  
the **WOOD**

An exhibition of work by David Pye, Nick Barberton,  
Matthew Burt, Gaynor Dowling, Eleanor Lakelin,  
Malcolm Martin and Keith Rand.



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*Above: Clockwise: work by Matthew Burt, Eleanor Lakelin and Malcolm Martin & Gaynor Dowling.*

*Cover: David Pye bowl (detail), Crafts Study Centre collection.*





David Pye bowl, Crafts Study Centre collection. Photo by David Westwood.

## FOREWORD

When I began to write this introduction to *The Carving of the Wood* a vivid childhood memory of my father making wooden toys came to mind. It then struck me that a similar feeling must connect many human hearts through time and across continents.

The history of artisanal practice and the associated skills that flooded into England during the seventeenth century intrigue me a great deal. Sir Christopher Wren employed many Huguenots to work alongside Grinling Gibbons on the woodcarvings at St Paul's Cathedral. After the great fire, Huguenot skills were in high demand. These artisans had the ability to carve lime wood so thinly it took on the appearance of parchment paper or, in the case of Gibbons, Venetian lace. Their craft also went hand in hand with a spirit of enterprise and, what is less well known, in 1694 one tenth of the funds invested to set up the Bank of England came from Huguenot endeavor.

The Crafts Study Centre is home to an important group of artefacts by David Pye, sensitively celebrated in this exhibition. His work, like that of Wren and the Huguenots, promoted the 'appearance of things'. I was fortunate enough to witness a demonstration by the great man of one of his deceptively simple fluting engines in the Royal College of Art furniture design workshop.

We find a perfect example of ekphrasis in David's work. It is no surprise that Peter Dormer felt Pye's writing to be his most important legacy and the turned bowls to be eloquent examples of his philosophy. Dormer saw these carved wooden vessels as rhetorical devices. The appearance of a crafted object was firmly set against the bland modernism David Pye railed against. In his 1968 book *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, Pye reminds us that:

*In free workmanship, the flat surface is not quite flat, but shows a faint pattern of tool marks. The effect of such approximations is to contribute very much to the aesthetic quality in workmanship which I shall call diversity.*

He suggested that design could be conveyed in words and drawings whereas workmanship could not. Distinguished contemporary designers such as Jay Osgerby, Edward Barber and Mark Newson



*Matthew Burt Canti-11 table, Crafts Study Centre collection. Photo by David Westwood.*

do not recognise such a narrow definition, they explore conceptual ideas through making prototypes or by experimenting with materials: for them legitimate acts in their own right.

Much closer to Pye's way of thinking was the Italian furniture designer, Vico Magistretti, who suggested that a good design idea could be explained on the telephone. But this overlooks the fundamental role played by the Milanese artisan who turned his telephone discussions into exquisite objects. From today's perspective at the beginning of an age of revolution in digital making, Pye and Magistretti appear to have missed the vital connection between designing and making as interdependent ways of thinking and working.

I am delighted to report that the same cannot be said for the contemporary practitioners selected to take part in this latest exhibition. Here we have fine examples of diversity by a rare group of makers. These carvers bring a warm 'smile to the mind' as did my Huguenot father many years ago, when I was a child.

Robert Pulley  
Head of School, Craft and Design  
University for the Creative Arts





Kristina Madsen. Photo by permission of Kristina Madsen.

## THE CARVING OF THE WOOD

Since pre-historic time man has decorated surfaces with paint, carving or burning. It speaks to us on a basic human level; that is to make something our own. This decoration is done to reflect our status, our technical ability, even our whims. Wood has always held a special place with mankind. It is readily available (in most places), varies from soft and easily manipulated to incredibly hard and almost impossible to alter. Wood, like clay, is used for many domestic activities including food preparation, storage and serving, for musical instruments and toys and for every type of furniture. Surface decoration is used to enhance the shape and surface of the material and since the time of the Egyptians there is an unbroken history of manipulating wood.

In the 20th and 21st century several masters of this art come to mind. David Pye was a subtle and sophisticated, and a somewhat cynical, but true philosophical maker. He dealt with aesthetics and worked by focusing literally on the physical activity of making. Although well known for bowl-like shapes and boxes, each a jewel, with subtle decoration that shows great thought. Pye was perhaps best known for his writing: *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, a staple resource for many wood workers. It is a book about the nature of work and design as it relates to wood.

Pye has either directly or indirectly influenced all the subsequent artists we will consider. A furniture maker of great consequence is Kristina Madsen. I want to talk about her work while considering intent. Kristina as you can tell by the image decorates surfaces in a most deliberate manner. While the form of the furniture is elegant and beautiful, it is the surface that you will notice first and be completely intrigued by. Madsen herself states:

*As the carved surface has become more and more important to my furniture design, I have begun to view my work as a study of pattern, with furniture as its medium. (www.pritameames.com)*

Madsen's surfaces do indeed have a fabric like appearance, due as much to the intensity of the decoration and the fineness of the intaglio carving. Her experience in the South Pacific has also



greatly informed her work, but not through appropriation as much as having absorbed the cultural aspects of the carving.

Madsen's surface decoration is put upon furniture of a superior quality; yet, it is difficult to think of anything other than the surfaces when interacting with the work. Madsen's surfaces are almost intoxicating in their detail and their completeness. The work depicted here was completed in 2013. In many ways, it is difficult to think about surface decoration being more sophisticated, it also related directly to the Pye philosophy about the nature of work.

Another furniture maker who uses surface decoration is Peter Pierobon who works in Vancouver, Canada. His work, which strives to merge the influences from indigenous cultures with a more western ideal, is illustrated in the large wall disc, Sign Language. In some ways, it isn't so different from Madsen's influence from her time in the South Pacific. North America's First Nations Peoples, long admired for their wood surface decorations, also played a role in Pierobon's early influences as he grew up in North Vancouver. Likewise, Sign Language, illustrates a different decoration method, that of carving away until the images remaining are a sequence of hands busy at work illustrating international sign language. But the image, of a language, could be a reference to the native populations who have long struggled with communications with the outsiders pushing into native territories.

Surface decorations is accomplished from addition of material, i.e. paint, or a reduction process, i.e. carving or turning. Pierobon employs both, as do most artists who decorate the surface of wood. Even if the wood is undecorated one must get to a point of satisfaction with the object. With Sign Language one sees both paint, carving and turning all with the space of a single work. ([www.peterpierobon.com](http://www.peterpierobon.com))

Jon Brooks, a furniture maker and sculptor from New Hampshire, uses nature to predetermine the shape of his work. Like many current US furniture makers and sculptors, the allure of natural wood is very strong. Having been influenced by Henry Moore and Constantin Brancusi, Brooks has been shaping furniture and creating sculpture for many years. Pierbon and Brooks share a fascination with decoration utilizing hieroglyphics-like symbols but Brooks is much more dedicated to the natural form of wood and he gets it directly from the forest around his house.



*Sign Language by Peter Pierobon. Photo by permission of Peter Pierobon.*





*Black & White Juxtaposition Randy Shull. Collection of Wells Fargo, Charlotte, NC. Photo by David Dietrich.*

Brooks uses traditional woodworking techniques to join the work together and while it might be a stretch to say his work is functional, the furniture form is very important in his work. Because of the use of natural forms, his work becomes very anthropomorphic and playful. The surface decoration certainly plays into enhancing this playfulness and in a way leads the eye. In a sense reduction plays a part when he strips the bark away to give the work a more pure sense of form. It also provides a better surface on which to work. ([www.jonbrooks.org](http://www.jonbrooks.org))

Another artist that is all about surface is Randy Shull. He has certainly done a lot of reduction decoration with carving. For his two dimensional work he is fond of gouging the surface, almost always plywood, and creating an almost 3-D surface. The image pictured has a simple black and white but radical surface with deep gouges and the abstract images coming from this treatment. In this piece and much of Shull's work, he places a simple furniture piece to challenge the viewer. It is a radical method to manipulate the surface but gives Shull the unexpected and shock factor that is appealing. Shull works in a variety of media, including furniture, 2-D painted and carved pieces, landscape and architecture. His longest running body of work is heavily painted then scraped back, a true reduction, to achieve and reveal what he calls the archaeology of the process.

Many things influence Shull's work but travel and Latin culture, in particular the Yucatan, provide endless ideas for his carving, his furniture and his architecture. In each the "surface" is paramount. In Shull's work color plays a more important role than other artists in this essay. Unlike a number of artists who use wood, wood is but a surface that Shull will manipulate; sometimes paint, sometimes destroy and sometimes, in the case of Baltic birch plywood, utilize the laminations to achieve his desired surface results. ([www.randyshull.com](http://www.randyshull.com))

The final artist to discuss is Bob Trotman, a self-taught sculptor working in North Carolina. His surface treatment is all reduction in that he is primarily a carver. His work is frequently painted with highlights but the impact comes from the carving. A diverse range of objects including 'show figures' routinely seen outside 19th century store fronts has influenced Trotman. Yet his work is far from those innocent figures as he works to include strong political elements and often explores such subjects as paradox as power and privilege in society. His work is conceptually deep and provokes thought about the society in which we live.





Left : Ladderman (detail) by Bob Trotman. Photo by Bob Trotman.  
Right: Dancing with Yellow Chair by Jon Brooks. Photo by Bill Truslow.

Dealing with the surface specifically, he depends on a smooth highly wrought surface as the figures are quite realistic. Though stationary, the figures are usually in action. They are jumping, falling or soaring. The surface treatment is part and parcel to the expression of the wood when employed in this manner. ([www.bobtrotman.com](http://www.bobtrotman.com))

Brooks and Shull are both graduates of Rochester Institute of Technology and studied in a school whose major professors included Wendell Castle, Doug Sigler and Bill Keyser. I think one of the better statements is that their work is not so strongly influenced by these well known makers, but rather, they have gone from RIT and created an identity all their own. Pierobon attended the Wendell Castle School that was open in the early 1980s. Madsen attended the Leeds Design Workshops in Easthampton, MA while Trotman is self-taught. Consequently you can see a design affinity amongst the RIT grads, an affinity for Castle's design in Pierobon's work and a more individual design approach with Madsen and Trotman.

Surface is akin to a signature and we can see distinctive traits in each of the surfaces created by these makers. These artists demonstrate turning, carving, painting and paint manipulation to achieve their idea of a perfect surface. I would like to thank Pritam and Eames of East Hampton, NY and each artist's website for information used in this brief essay.

Andrew Glasgow

Andrew Glasgow is retired Executive Director of the American Crafts Council





ARTISTS  
and CURATORS  
STATEMENTS





*Bowl (detail) by David Pye, Crafts Study Centre collection. Photo by David Westwood.*

*Work on previous page by Nick Barberton (detail). Photo by David Westwood.*

## DAVID PYE

David Pye, writer, designer and Professor of Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art (1964-1974) wrote in the often referenced book *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* that:

*In work like carving, where it is possible to improvise as one goes along, the opportunity to invent according to one's fancy does indeed give pleasure, if pleasure is the right word for forgetting oneself, and all the world, and time.*

The place of work is experimental, joyful and deeply personalized.

Wooden bowls and platters by David Pye in the Crafts Study Centre collections were carved on a fluting engine that Pye designed and made in the late 1940's. These works, elegant, composed, literate have entered the canon of museum craft collections and were exhibited to acclaim in the retrospective touring exhibition *David Pye Wood Carver and Turner organised* by the Crafts Council in 1984.

These works stand at the forefront of this exhibition: a kind of sentinel for the consideration made by a group of makers who have themselves admired David Pye. They have also carved wood using a variety of methods from the analogue to the digital, for purposes that are functional, symbolic and even votive.

Simon Olding  
Director, Crafts Study Centre



## NICK BARBERTON

Way back both in history and geography, I read an article in Crafts magazine. It was about David Pye and the sublime bowls that he was carving. I had recently left my salaried job as an industrial designer and was working as a furniture maker in Hout Bay near Cape Town.

My skills were not high but my enthusiasm made up for it. A few years later in our rented room in the Netherlands where I was building traditional sailing barges, I carved a round fruit bowl on my Workmate, with radial grooves running to the centre in the style of David Pye. In the fullness of time I worked for myself again. I also went back to carving bowls. I had David's book by then. I also had my own ideas and was more concerned with the beauty of special pieces of wood rather than executing the workmanship of certainty that David Pye achieved with his marvellous fluting engine.

My vessels have grown bolder, more African, my shapes geometric, often wall art rather than fruit bowls. The patterns that I impose have their own conversation with the grain of the wood. Sometimes I will turn the wood to define the form faster, use an angle grinder on a gimbal to speed up roughing out. I enjoy seeing how the gouge handles the knot, backing off and trying it from a different angle. Light is just as important as wood and easier to carve. I enjoy the workmanship of risk.



*Details of work by Nick Barberton. Photo by Nick Barberton.*





*Pyramidalised Dresser by Matthew Burt. Photo by Ikon Studios.*

## MATTHEW BURT

I have been engaged in a fifty year love affair with timber. As a child I clambered upon it, fantasised amongst it and camped underneath it. I mainly fashioned it with a blunt penknife with which I split and whittled it. I bound it together with sisal baler twine and imagination. As a teenager I got up to unmentionable mischief beneath it, all the while its mysteries beckoning. My curiosity led me to seek out its mythical and biological secrets whilst studying botany and zoology at university.

What nagged away at me was a desire to fashion it with an expression of dexterity that matched my affection and admiration for it. The nagging led to a cabinet making apprenticeship. It seemed I was quite content to frame my intent with the functional remit of furniture. With a keen hunger I sought out fellow devotees which led me to Professor David Pye and his singularly apposite concept of 'The workmanship of risk'. I became smitten by the delicacy he imparted to timber, not by the cumbersome process by which he did it, but by the metaphor he laid upon it, the embellishment that brought out its soul.

I view timber as recycled sunshine and water, a gift of a material requiring only nurture to be there for us in the future. I seek to memorialise it and express its narrative through a broadened definition of texture. I sculpt, incise, stack and reconfigure it. I aim to add 'value' to it visually, metaphorically and literally, in some cases doubling or quadrupling its surface area, and then doubling it again with a visual pun. I aim to lay its 'beauty' before the observer or user, beautifully. The ardour of my love affair has not dampened.



## ELEANOR LAKELIN

**M**y work is lathe-turned and then carved off the lathe. Fascinated since childhood by the beauty in erosion and decay and specifically by the patina and layered texture of weathered wood, I concentrated initially on turning burred woods. The machined precision of concentric circles produced by a lathe contrasted with the organic chaos of the burr and highlighted the complexity of the natural structure.

The move towards carving was prompted by not wanting to be governed by finding a particular kind of material. All work in wood depends to some extent on the selection and properties of the material but I wanted to concentrate more on the form and to create textures that were reminiscent of natural forms but not a representation of any organism in particular. I am drawn to textures that are strange but familiar which transform vessels so that they look like they may have grown or been formed by nature but which are really an abstraction of textures, landscapes or fractal forms.

The technique of using a spinning burr to texture wood has been used for many years but seems to have been used to carve deeply first by Canadian Michael Hosaluk. It involves a small machine which is held in the hand like a thick pencil but which provides the power to spin a metal burr. The idea chimes well with David Pye's thoughts on free workmanship and the idea of "contrast and tension between regulation and freedom, uniformity and diversity". The burr becomes partly guided by the pattern as the texture deepens but there is no formal jig. It is largely workmanship of risk as there is only skill and experience to prevent the burr following the contours of the grain as opposed to the design intended.

I like the immediacy of this way of carving. The pieces are held in the lap with an idea in mind but there is no design sketched on the wood. The tool allows me to sketch a free-hand texture, to make marks in response to the shape and material. The irregularity is intentional. There is a consistency of pattern as in nature but there is also the possibility of something unexpected developing – the chance that a texture may change as work proceeds. The striations are not universally sanded out and on some pieces deliberately left to add to the layers of texture from pattern to grain.



*Work by Eleanor Lakelin. Photo by permission of Eleanor Lakelin.*





*Grand Still Life (detail), Malcolm Martin & Gaynor Dowling. Photo by Malcolm Martin & Gaynor Dowling.*

## MALCOLM MARTIN & GAYNOR DOWLING

We make sculpture in wood, from half-ton monumental forms for a secret garden, to vessels sewn together from sections of veneer weighing a few grammes. We work together on every stage of the pieces, and have been collaborating full time since 1997. What all our pieces share is the central role of the hand and of hand tools, primarily through carving.

For this exhibition we will be showing the largest still-life we have yet made, more than twenty individual vessels, using the forms, surfaces, patterns and textures we have explored and returned to over many years. In one sense it's like a pattern book, and in another sense a conversation between old friends. The pieces are all in solid oak, and show what can be done with a limited set of hand-gouges working across and with the grain.

The combination of these flattened frontal forms becomes a kind of drawing, a domestic table-top abstracted and made formal, and on this scale there is something of the monumentality of a temple pediment. Perhaps this is what is at the heart of the still-life tradition itself: finding something lasting in the middle of the flux of the everyday.



## KEITH RAND

As a student at Winchester School of Art, Keith became interested in constructing sculpture using found materials. After graduating he moved to Lumsden in Aberdeenshire to work at the Scottish Sculpture Workshop, a place where he could explore his ideas and gain skills while living and working among other artists who were also interested in sculptural matters. He was fortunate to find himself within an international environment where sculptors came to work, attend symposia and exhibit their work. Keith's sculpture began to attract interest and recognition from the Royal Scottish Academy; the Royal Glasgow Institute; collectors and galleries. Throughout his career he was regularly awarded major landscape and urban commissions, often those with an environmental or wellbeing focus.

Scotland provided Keith's first sustained experience of living close with nature and working with indigenous timbers enabled him to develop sculptural ideas and his growing awareness of environmental change. He became fascinated by boat building techniques and stave structures and acquired a deep knowledge of wood working tools. Using paring tools such as spokeshaves, travishers and drawknives for carving sections of timber, enabled him to attain fresh 'off the blade' surfaces and a range of marks which animated the sculptures. Some ideas were explored through the construction of vernacular furniture and allied sculptures.

Exploring what Keith termed 'peeling a log' he discovered a process that gave him thin staved elements, which could be reconstructed. He was always interested in surface qualities and experimented with iron solutions that reacted with the natural tannins in timber to create iron crusted drawings and patinas on the surface. Later he used bleaching solutions, as well as casein and pigments to extend his range of patinations.

Keith moved to the Dorset/Wiltshire borders and established a new studio. A relatively long and settled period enabled him to focus on creating a new and distinctive body of work that increasingly depended upon the tensile properties of timber. Walking among the grasses of the high chalk



Work by Keith Rand. Left: *Lamina Blue (detail)*. Photo by Joe Low.  
Right: *Anvil Ivy (detail)*. Photo by Sue Sieger.





*Senser - Cedar of Lebanon, Keith Rand.  
Photo by Joe Low.*

downlands and living within a naturalised garden he would gather grasses, leaves, petals and seeds to draw and study. The breakthrough came as he started to work with lime wood and other fine-grained woods. The bulk of timber was removed using chainsaws, followed by weeks or months of hand carving and surface finishing, often using tools that he made or adapted for the purpose. He developed a way of carving very thin sections that continually change in cross section through the different planes and which he was able to interlock. Keith created sublime semi-figurative sculptures redolent of plant and landscape features - purely by carving.

Within his sculptures are shapes, surfaces and hidden spaces that reference humanity, animals, birds and fragile habitats. His sculptural work is quite unique. Rand understood impermanence and change and sought to create sculptures and landworks that encourage people to look more closely at the natural world and to find a measure of stillness.

Annette Ratuszniak



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