

A master CARVER

Guest editor Kevin Alvitani talks
all things carving with world-
renowned master carver, Chris Pye

When I was asked to pick a carver to feature for this issue, one person instantly sprang to mind. I'm sure everyone will agree that Chris Pye is a household name in the carving world and I felt incredibly lucky that he agreed to be interviewed (I skipped around the room when he replied). His books were some of the earliest I owned on woodcarving and, coupled with his online teaching website, he really helped me develop my skills as I was learning to carve. Not only is he an incredible educator when it comes to carving, but he is also a true artist who creates amazing works of art, some of which seem to defy the material they are made out of.

How did you become a carver? What was training to be a carver like?

I wouldn't say I was 'trained', any more than a duck 'trains' to get on to water. Woodcarving wasn't even a twinkle in my eye when I conceded that, after four years as a medical student, I was going down the wrong path, and left. I had no idea what another 'path' could be and it was only by sheer accident (and very good fortune) that I met the master carver who became my mentor, Gino Masero.

My education up to that point had been scientific and I knew next to nothing about wood, except the 'growing on trees' part, never mind working it. I had, however, loved painting and making things, so I guess I was open to the idea of something art or craft-oriented. I was actually thinking of stone carving as I stepped into Gino's workshop...

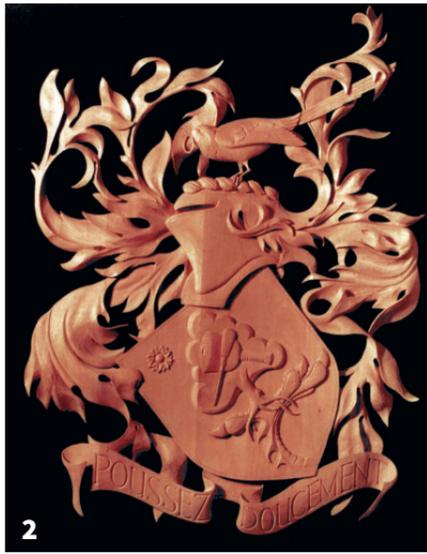
When I saw what he was doing and breathed in the heady aroma of limewood, well, I was like that duck, finding its pond and desperate to get swimming.

Carving is an odd, back-to-front craft. I had no experience of wood or chisels, nor training in art and design, but my brain just seemed to be wired for it, the whole thing. It was as if I knew about woodcarving before I knew about woodcarving...





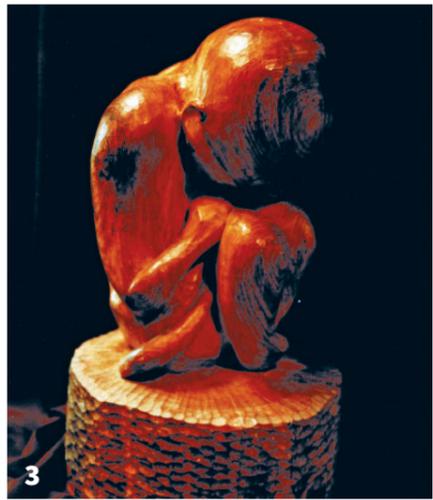
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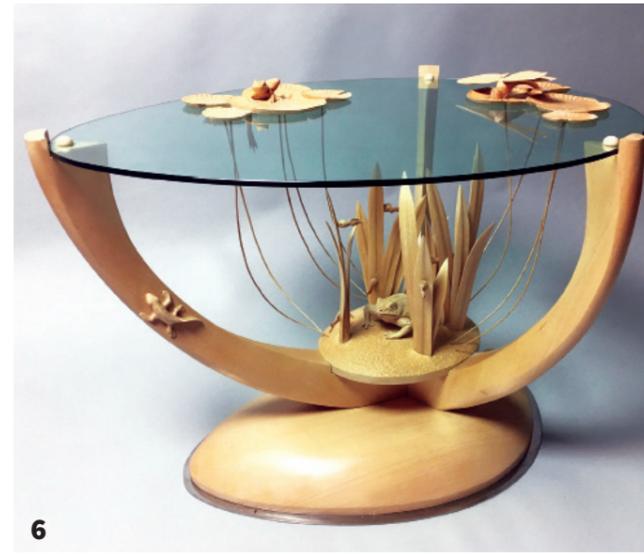


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1 This is me in 1975 carving an organ screen in pierced relief in my first workshop down a Cardiff backstreet 2 I designed and carved this limewood coat of arms exactly one year after I first picked up a carving tool. I see all sorts of faults with it now but rejoice in the young man who had a go 3 Another early piece: I sculpted this elmwood piece in 1976, while waiting for my son to be born 4 & 5 Details of Hanging Coat and Hat, carved in French oak



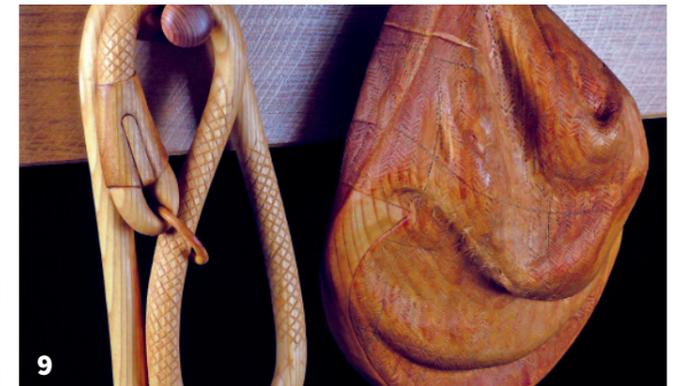
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6-8 Pond Table in limewood and willow, with toughened glass and stainless steel 9 Cap & Dog Lead carved in lime, box, oak and yew woods

At what point did you set up on your own?

Cutting a short story shorter, a year later and after obsessional study, practice at home and with advice from Gino, I took on a simple lock-up shop and started offering my services as a woodcarver. I put things I'd carved in the window and contacted as many people as I could think of for work. And, somehow, the duck started swimming. Looking back, I can't believe I did this. Luckily I was young and foolish.

Quite early on I got work incising house names into pre-cut boards for a firm that supplied them through garden centres all over the country. I was paid per letter. Painfully slow at first, before too long I had built up my speed and ended up carving hundreds of letters every week.

Something happened that was a revelation: lettering demands a high level of skill, both in the laying out and the carving, and I really worked hard at that. What I didn't realise was how this discipline – the demand for precise tool control, visualisation and repeated cutting – drove all my other carving skills to a higher level.

Other work came in: classical decorations and mouldings for a fireplace manufacturer, restoring furniture, commissions for organ screens or rocking horses, free sculpture and relief carving – all sorts of things. My rule was never to say no, which I didn't, even when I'd no idea what I was letting myself in for.

So, summing up, I see myself as self-taught but with a huge formative start in tools, sharpening, handling and the traditional carving 'process' from Gino Masero, with whom I continued to keep in touch until his death in 1995. I dedicated my first book to him and every time I teach I feel I'm a conduit for his knowledge and generosity of spirit.

What has shaped your carving style?

I carve by leaving my work 'straight for the chisel'. So the last caress of the gouge lies on the wood surface, like the brushstrokes of a painter. I rarely, and then discretely, use sandpaper – for a snail shell, say, where a polished surface is absolutely called for.

Working directly with the tools is how I was initially taught, an approach I'd loved since I first picked one up. It may seem a cliché but truly, as I carve, my tools become extensions of my hands. I don't think about them; they just appear in my hands as I focus on the wood and the forms I visualise beneath.

As to the design style of my carving, I've never specialised – unlike most of the other members of the Master Carvers Association (MCA) who are true experts in, for example, Rococo or Baroque. This has a lot to do with reproduction or restoration, and earning a living. Which is not to say that the MCA isn't full of wonderfully creative and talented carvers producing unique work. However, I've never tried to specialise myself and happily carved whatever unique style-free pieces clients have asked of me.

I was very keen on wood sculpture when I first took to carving. It was the sad time of the 'elm glut' and some wonderful stumps were to be had, but I couldn't see how I could earn a living from it.

I still retain a deep interest in sculpture, especially glyptic forms. When, for example, I carved a hanging coat with an accompanying hat – from one block of wood – it's the underlying sculptural forms I go after first and foremost, with the detail added to that. The underlying forms are the rhythms of the song; the details are the overlying melody.

Where do you look for inspiration for your next carving?

Over the years, almost all of my work has been commissioned, which means I've been given parameters. I love having a brief; it puts a fence around what would otherwise be the equivalent of a blank canvas, with its concurrent, what-do-I-do anxiety. I'll (almost) interrogate clients about what they have in mind; after all, they're the ones who'll have to live with the finished piece, not me!

On the other hand, I don't like too many constrictions, which is the main reason I dislike reproducing the work of others. What I want is a seed from which to grow my ideas and designs and – limits apart – I do like coming up with ideas, developing and working from my own designs.

To my mind, the pre-carving, creative bit is more important and usually more fun than the hard work of actually carving.

Where do you see your work heading in the future?

I've never seen myself as having a path or journey, as professed by many artists, but more and more I find I'm undertaking fewer commissions and carving just for myself. A good example would be my latest project, the Pond Table. The idea came to me as I canoed over a glassy morning lake in Maine. Looking down, I could see the bottom with reeds through which swam little fish, and I wondered if I could capture that sense in a glass-topped table.

What is your favourite wood to carve?

Air-dried, close-grained limewood is right up there at the top. I love the smell, the colour and the way shavings peel from a cutting edge. Limewood is justifiably well-renowned as the carvers' wood and takes fine detail. Very close is clean,

air-dried French oak. French oak is grown and harvested differently when compared with oak in the UK. It carves very well with a light, crunchy feel. The more open grain requires more robust details.

For my carving I need a bland wood to show off the lights and shadows of the forms; no knots or figuring. Both lime and French oak are really quite boring woods! Who makes a piece of furniture out of limewood? And you always want the silver rays or interesting knots in oak furniture. But for me, that's great; all the more of the boring stuff left for us carvers.

Knowing nothing about wood when I began carving, I needed to educate myself quickly. Finding samples of various woods was an obvious start, but I also collected their sawdust in jam jars and learned to distinguish different woods by their smell. Even now I could walk blindfolded into a workshop and know what wood they've been working with.

Do you use any tools with real sentimental value?

I have a couple of tools that Gino gave me. As you can imagine, these are quite precious.

Other tools I really love are the old ones, with the names of previous owners on the handle, sometimes half a dozen, one below the other. And then, look! There's mine at the bottom of the list. And I wonder who will have custody of the tool after me...

How many chisels do you own?

I've never deliberately collected tools but after nearly 50 years since I started professionally carving and teaching I've built up a ridiculous number: tools bought for myself as needed, or for my



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PHOTOGRAPH BY DJEHOUTY/CREATIVE COMMONS

classes here and in the US; tools gifted to me from retired carvers, or carvers' widows; tools I've designed for various manufacturers; tools I've forged for myself; tools I've reviewed for magazines, and so on. It's a long list. I'm not going to count them...

But tools aren't carving, are they?
 Many beginners get sidetracked into the tools, wanting to build up a 'set' before starting, and spend too little time using them at the bench. For nearly all my work I use a hard core of around 70 to 80 tools, and that's for everything, from lettering and mouldings to relief carving and sculpture.

As I get older, I use fewer and fewer tools, and look forward to swamping eBay with the rest.

How did the Covid-19 lockdowns affect you, your work or your carving?

Very little really, introvert that I am, tucked away on the border with Wales in rural Herefordshire. The sadness was not seeing friends and family.

How do you think you've influenced the world of carving over the years?

I've been teaching and writing about woodcarving for many years and more recently created an online woodcarving instructional site. This, I think, has been my best effort yet: if a picture is worth a thousand words, how about a moving one?

And I like to think I've passed on – given back? – what was given to me and much more, and enabled many people from around the world to feel the joy of carving and to become better carvers. From feedback I've had, I think I've been largely successful.

I think my original background in scientific methods has separated me from other teachers: I've been more able to analyse and clarify what I am doing, whether that's how to sharpen carving tools efficiently or the actual process of carving, and then explain it simply either in my books or for magazines, or directly with students.

My aim has always been to teach transferable skills. I've often thought I only have a few carving techniques – though I do them well – and I just apply them to different projects. That might seem a bit reductionist but, at a granular level, carving is a very simple thing to do. It's the mind behind the carving that separates us.

Here's the thing: I learned from Gino Masero, one of many unpretentious, unknown carvers. He learned from his own teacher who in turn learned from his. Who, in turn had learned from his, and so on.

Hold that heritage in your mind and let me add this:

In the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, stands a wooden figure of an Egyptian scribe called Ka'aper, carved in sycamore some 4,580 years ago. I saw the work many years ago in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Looking around the back I found gouge marks. And I immediately knew what I was looking at: the gouge would have been copper but I could name the sweep, and I could see the carver was right-handed by the way the facets were cut into the wood.

Here's what blows me away and why we carvers are so privileged: there is a real line, a legacy winding through history between that Egyptian carver, through ancient Greece, the Dark Ages, the Northern Renaissance, somehow, to my own teacher and to me. And on to anyone who has learned something for me, and passes it on.

Do you have any funny woodcarving stories?

So... I'm in the chapel in Clifton College, Bristol, on my knees and bent painfully forward over the seat of a fixed bench by the wall, straining towards its upright back. I'm incising a list of names, adding to a previously carved roll call.

It's a really awkward, twisted position from which to carve anything. And first I must carefully draw the names on to the dark, vanished oak, then cut directly into the bench itself. The newly cut letters stand out, white, against the dark brown varnish. So, really precise cutting with no second chances, but so doable.



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10 Carving of the ancient Egyptian scribe Ka'aper 11 Lettered bowl in lacewood featuring the words: Coming Around and Going Around 12 Horseshoe Crabtable. The full Latin name of the crab makes up the scuttling marks on the sand. Yew wood crab on a walnut tabletop 13 Merlin Hawk on Post, carved in lacewood 14 Baseball Cap carved in limewood

What I hadn't clocked was the big rack of organ pipes just above my head. Without any warning and just as I was cutting around the outer edge of a letter 'O', some mad organist started their day by crashing down on all the organ keys, one shattering chord just above me. Let's put it this way: I nearly disgraced myself as I jumped out of my skin. The gouge jerked out of the carved letter and scored a white gash across the dark wood...

It's sort of funny now but I stood there aghast, taking deep breaths and wondering what to do.

I was lucky in that I hadn't made the final cut around the outer edge of the 'O' so I had just enough spare wood to cover the big exit nick and, after burying the organist, I repaired the main edge of the letter. However, the white scratch still remained, distressingly and obviously my own work.

Stepping back I also noticed that years of use had left all sorts of other scratches on the bench. That was my way out.

I always take my oilstones with me when I'm carving on site and one of them had oily, black, metal gunge on its surface from when I'd sharpened a chisel. I scraped the old oil off, mixed in dirt from

beneath the bench and rubbed the concoction into the scratch line. The result looked just like some of the other marks and gashes on the bench. So all looked 'well', though I knew I'd got off lightly.

The work was inspected – they were very happy – and I just lied: 'Sorry. Nothing I could do about that old scratch; just had to work around it. What? Have I seen the organist? What organist?'

What hobbies do you have outside of woodcarving?

I've been playing 'clawhammer' banjo for the last six years. It's a beautiful old style that goes back to the instrument's African roots – as opposed to the Bluegrass (Deliverance) Scruggs-style with its frenetic picking, which I don't particularly like. I have an online tutor, practise every day and play with friends in a small band. We write and perform our own material now. I also love writing, haiku in particular:

shiny bevel.
 catch myself peering out
 smelling of limewood