

# The Art of Subtraction

*No one has carved wood like David Esterly since...well, about 1700.*

by CRAIG LAMBERT



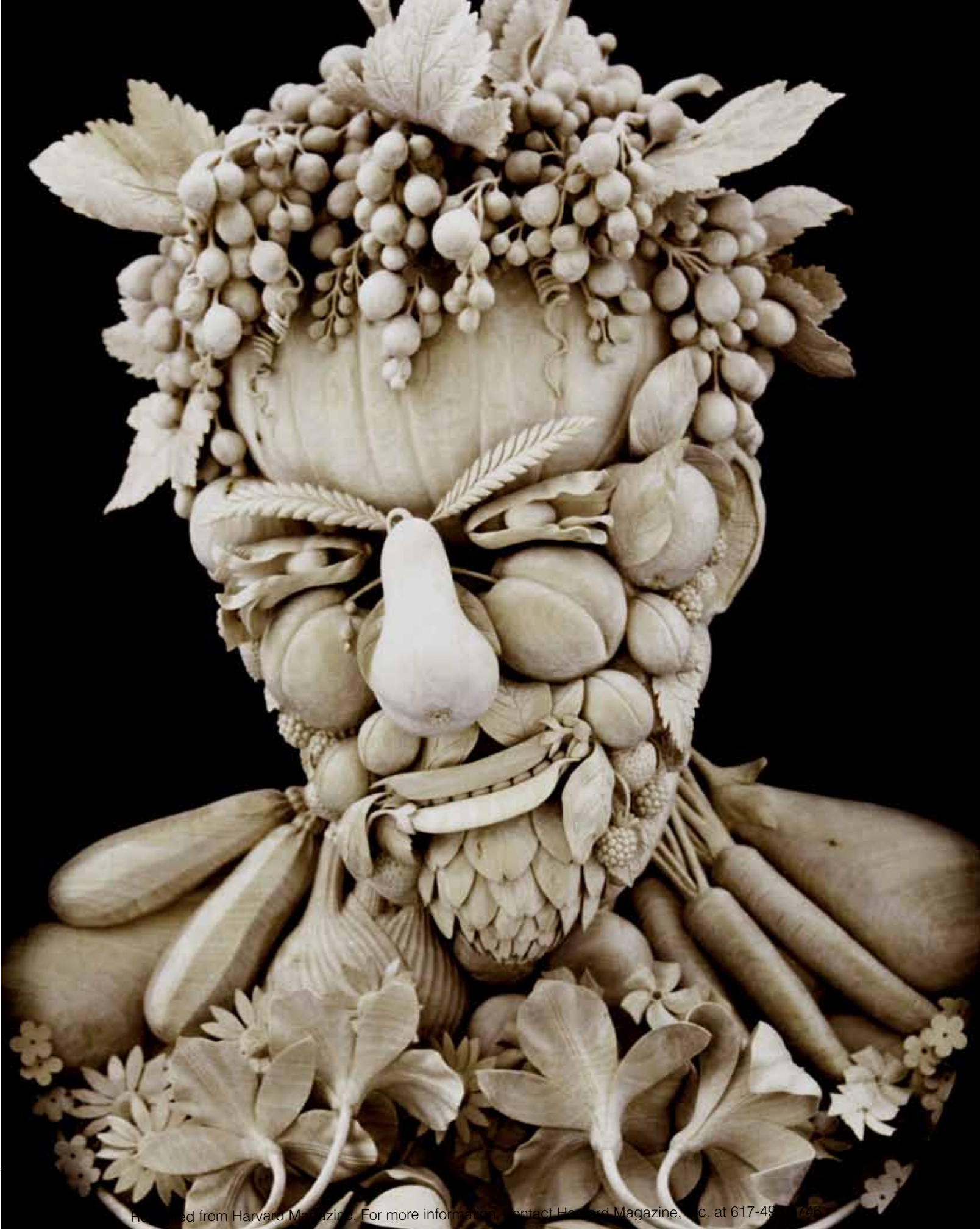
THE ROYAL PALACE of Hampton Court, built on the Thames nearly 12 miles upstream from London by Henry VIII in 1514, suffered a devastating fire on March 31, 1986. A bedside candle in the room of the elderly Lady Gale, a resident who perished in the flames, probably started the blaze. Grievously, the fire also consumed or seriously damaged some of the incomparable woodcarvings in the King's Apartments, an addition that Christopher Wren built for William III near the end of the seventeenth century. These delicate depictions of botanical subjects in wood, hung on walls and surmounting doorways and mantelpieces, were the masterworks of the final period of Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), the Dutch-born artist widely regarded as Eng-

land's finest woodcarver, a "golden codger, almost of the order of Samuel Johnson, Thomas Chippendale, Charles Dickens or William Morris," as David Esterly '66 puts it in his 2012 book, *The Lost Carving: A Journey to the Heart of Making*.

Given the British reverence for historical (and royal) heritage and the carvings' importance, there was no question that restoration would proceed after the fire. Miraculously, most of them had survived, despite damage, but one spectacular overdoor drop, a pendant of flowers and leaves, in the King's Drawing Room, had been incinerated. The problem was that in the nearly three centuries since Gibbons's time, such finely detailed, high-relief carvings in limewood (the British term for linden wood) had become a lost art. There had been "sorry attempts at

**Above, a work in progress on the carving bench; opposite, a botanical head (2001), after the painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-93)**







Gibbons revivals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: crude embarrassments, almost all of them,” Esterly writes. In 1986, a number of English carving conservators were working assiduously in limewood, but the artist to whom the British entrusted the restoration was a 42-year-old craftsman living outside Utica, New York, who had been carving limewood for about a decade: Esterly himself.

Then as now, Esterly was and is internationally regarded as the most accomplished practitioner of the “subtractive art” of limewood carving since Gibbons. Indeed, Esterly is something of an anachronism: he has devoted most of his adult life (“I work seven days a week, after dinner, all the time”) to chiseling soft, malleable limewood, a particularly receptive medium for these delicate renderings. Many of his pieces take a year or even two to complete: such carvings are a painstaking art that calls on skills cultivated over decades. Thus Esterly has created a magnificent, if small, oeuvre: his 38-year career has produced only a few dozen carvings, almost all in private collections.

They are not hidden from the public, though. This January, Esterly assembled 15 of his most recent works for an 11-day show at

**Esterly at his workbench, below, and, at right, attacking limewood with the two-fisted technique of woodcarving. Opposite, a foliage drop (2005)**

the W.R. Brady and Company gallery in Manhattan. Soon thereafter, the collection went on display for six weeks in an exhibit, *The Art of Subtraction*, at the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, an elegant museum in Utica designed by Philip Johnson '27, B.Arch. '43.

Borrowing the carvings from their owners, transporting the fragile works, and putting them on display was “an arduous undertaking,” Esterly reports. “It will probably never happen again.” Photographs, however, are viewable on his website ([davidesterly.com](http://davidesterly.com)).

Exhibits are challenging to mount partly because Esterly sells everything he makes: he cannot afford to own his creations. He works almost solely on commission (and never lacks for one), but given the labor-intensive nature of his craft, he is hardly getting rich, despite the six-figure prices his works command. His artistic approach, a modern version of Gibbons’s style, is “so time-consuming that other carvers avoid it like the plague,” he writes. “Carvers are starvers, the old saying goes, and Gibbons’s style, with its fineness and naturalism, its profusion of detail, and its arduous undercutting, is regarded by most carvers as a shortcut to starvation.” (Undercutting is carving the back side of figures or objects to heighten their delicacy.) He may be the only professional woodcarver ever to graduate from Harvard.

**I**N RETROSPECT, it seems that Esterly was born to carve limewood, but in fact he discovered his calling only after earning a doctorate in English literature. A native of Akron, Ohio, he is the son of Firestone executive James Esterly '33, a football star lionized for playing the second half of the Yale game despite breaking his back in the first. When David was 11, the family moved to Orange County, California, a place that didn’t resonate with the boy’s temperament: “I was very anxious to get out of Southern California.” At Harvard, he was “hugely intimidated by the prepies,” and pursued perfection of the work rather than the life—“I was a grind.” He wrote his senior English thesis on Yeats.

A Fulbright took him to St. Catharine’s College, Cambridge, where the students seemed “fantastically bright and affable, and exceedingly witty,” he says. “They had an amused relationship to life which I liked a lot.” His first meeting with his tutor was a watershed moment. “He diagnosed me immediately,” Esterly recalls. “He offered me sherry or whiskey—we had two. We talked about rowing, hunting, shooting, living in the countryside, Shakespeare. He gave me no assignment, and ended by saying, ‘This has been nice. Go out and get to know people here, join a boat club, row. Tuesday nights my wife and I are at home. Come back and let’s talk again in six weeks.’ I felt like a pit pony let loose from the coal mine. It was incredibly liberating.”





On track to become a literary scholar, Esterly wrote his dissertation on Yeats and Plotinus. Yet, “I wanted to do something physical,” he says, recalling Yeats’s admonition to “think in the marrow-bone.” He had daydreams of making furniture in Yorkshire, seeking Yeats’s “unity of being,” he says. “I wanted to integrate the intellectual, moral, and physical.” He moved back to Akron for a time to work as a teamster; then, in Boston, at an earplug manufacturer—“The machinery was so loud that you had to wear earplugs!” He also reconnected with Marietta von Bernuth, a porcelain restorer whom he had known in England, and the couple moved to London in the mid 1970s. Esterly got an office job and was “at loose ends.”

One afternoon, on their way to meet Esterly’s parents for tea at Fortnum & Mason, von Bernuth pulled him into St. James’s Church in Piccadilly, where he saw, on the reredos behind the altar, a tangle of vegetation carved to airy thinness by Grinling Gibbons. He was thunderstruck. “From a technical point of view, I didn’t believe wood could be handled in this way—it looked like a pliable substance you could model with your hands,” he recalls. “It was also a hyperorganic form of art, a botanical medium portraying botanical forms; it seemed to say something that couldn’t be said any other way. Mind and body connected.” His book elaborates: “The sickness came over me. It seemed one of the wonders of the world. The traffic noise in Piccadilly went silent, and I was at the still center of the universe....my tongue seem to be moving over carved ivory, cool and smooth. Don’t ask. I haven’t a clue. It’s what I still feel in the presence of great limewood carving.”

Yet that was not the real turning point. Esterly at first “assumed it was an academic interest—I thought I should write a book about Gibbons. I went to libraries.” Trying to understand how Gibbons invented this kind of carving, he got books on carving techniques, then bought some chisels and limewood. “I fastened the wood to a garden table, took a stroke, and the genie flew out of the bottle,” he says. “Very quickly I lost interest in writing about Gibbons.”

He and von Bernuth moved to a cottage on an estate in the South Downs of Sussex where, during the next eight years, penniless but in splendid country surroundings, he taught himself to carve. His only mentor, really, was the long-dead Gibbons. “So my instructor was trial and error, an exacting master whose teaching methods involved the cracking of wood and sometimes the spilling of blood,” he writes. “I learned that long grain was strong, short grain weak, end grain tough....I learned these things the way a carver has to learn them, in the muscles and nerves. There was plenty of feedback from the wood. The air was filled with its reports.” He recalls these years as one of the happiest times of his life.

At first he sat on a chair to carve, but the craft soon forced him to his feet. “Your whole body gets involved,” he explains. “Your torso is twisting in this contrapposto way.” A carver must work ambidextrously, and grip the chisel with both hands. (Strictly speaking, *chisels* have flat blades and *gouges*, which he uses 95 percent of the time, have semicircular ones. Esterly owns 130 chisels and gouges, most of them very old. Knives play no part in carving, though glue comes in handy on rare occasions.) With two hands in play, one hand impels the tool while the other resists the motion, giving the carver precise control. “You take the resistance of the wood internally,” Esterly explains.

High-quality limewood is essential. Anglophiles planted European linden trees in the United States around 1900, and Esterly has





tried linden wood from Central Park and from Newport, Rhode Island, but “the trees grow too fast in our hot summers,” he explains. “So the wood isn’t as dense, as crisp, or as strong”—and that is what allows the carver to radically undercut it. Undercutting is crucial: it is what makes the carved form very delicate—fashioning a flower petal, say, that’s nearly as thin as a real one. “Undercutting defines the edges of things,” Esterly explains, “and edges are extremely important in defining their forms.” Limewood enables this due to its “wonderful combination of strength and softness,” he says. “And its grain is mild, forgiving, and crisp.”

He imports his limewood from England. “The problem now is that they are worried about pests and won’t allow any hardwood into the United States unless it has been kiln-dried,” he says. “But kiln drying damages the carving properties. I have to get what amounts to a congressional waiver to import my limewood; I can import air-dried wood that I have to fumigate under complete supervision of the customs office. I would pay any amount for good limewood.”

**E**STERLY’S WORKROOM is right in his home. For a long time, he and his family have lived in a converted barn (“This place was built on a shoestring—everything here is salvage”) on beautiful country land north of Utica, the summer property of von Bernuth’s family. The couple married in 1980 and have a daughter, Flora, a Columbia graduate and literary scout in New York.

Of his improvement as an artist over the years, he says, “I never had a sense of getting better, but my earlier work gets worse and worse.” Carving, for him, is “a profession for high-functioning obsessive-compulsives.” He explains that “the first 90 percent you can do with 50 percent of the effort. The last 10 percent may take another 50 percent of effort. But that last 50 percent is what changes it into something good.”

For Esterly, conceptual art is unsatisfying because “conceptualists don’t care a lot about execution.” He calls his own work a compendium of sins against much of contemporary art. “First, it takes unabashed delight in beauty,” he explains. “It also delights in natural forms, realistically presented—that’s pretty bad. It doesn’t seek to upend a tradition so much as to establish a bond with the past, rather than a break with it. It uses a poignantly archaic medium, wood—I mean, really, *wood*? One of the worst things is that it’s free of irony, it’s sincere; ironic and jokester art is pretty much the norm. It doesn’t have an intellectual or conceptual agenda—it doesn’t project a critique or comment on a social problem. It’s made by hand, with no power tools. And it’s actually made by the artist.”

His time at Hampton Court was “when I really became a carver,” he says. The restoration allowed Esterly to finally escape the “anxiety of influence” from Gibbons. “It’s uncanny—serving an apprenticeship to a long-dead master, this great predecessor whom you revere and rebel against,” he says. At times, at the workbench, he could almost feel Gibbons’s presence. “He would

STEVIE POTTER





**Opposite, detail of a gardening overmantel (2007); at right, a musical trophy (2004) and, below, a wall-mounted letter rack, Quodlibet #1 (2012)**

seem to be saying, over my shoulder, ‘I’ve done that—but *here’s* how you should do it.’”

Esterly kept a daily journal during his year carving the restoration, a diary that became the springboard for *The Lost Carving* two decades later. The book narrates his evolution as a woodcarver and describes how the project crucially shaped his own artistic development. *Philadelphia Inquirer* reviewer Rita Giordano noted that even a reader who cared nothing for woodcarving could “still be absolutely in thrall to the lushness of Esterly’s language, his passion for creation, his reverence for the physical act of work. *The Lost Carving* is a study in the marvel—both the pain and the joys—of doing a thing well.”

In 1998, he returned to his beloved England to curate the exhibition *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, marking the 350th anniversary of the great carver’s birth. Esterly wrote a companion book of the same title, which has just been reissued.

In replacing the incinerated carving at Hampton Court, he at first tried to *become* Gibbons for a while. But it was hard to find the master’s underlying design. The palace authorities unearthed one glass-plate photograph from the 1930s, “but it was poorly lit and difficult to read,” Esterly says. He had to work up a design, but “a design will only get you so far, and that’s emblematic of how far designs in general will get you. After that, something else takes over.”

Midway through the work, “I looked down at this half-completed, unpromising carving, and suddenly I saw it with the same eyes as the guy in 1699,” he recalls. “I could see with complete freshness why decisions were made. At that messy halfway point, in mid course, the work will tell you what needs to be done next, if you’re open to it. The work will tell you where it wants to go. That halfway point is where the real creativity comes in, in the act of *making*. As observers of art, we pick that up—we mimic the creation of the work in hearing it, reading it, seeing it. That’s why, with the greatest art, you almost have the sense that you are making it yourself: you’re picking up the embedded creativity that occurred in the making of the thing. Inspiration comes in the business of making.”

Craig A. Lambert ’69, Ph.D. ’78, is deputy editor of Harvard Magazine.



STEVE POTTER