

## WOODCARVER

# Out of the woodwork

Patrick Damiaens may be the last of a dying breed

Denzil Walton

A visit to Patrick Damiaens' home in Maaseik is a reassuring reminder that even in these days of mass-manufactured furniture, there is still a demand for the traditional skills of a master artisan.

Damiaens is the only full-time ornamental wood carver and sculptor in Flanders, a unique position of which he is immensely proud. "There are a few part-timers and hobbyists," he says, "but no-one who earns his living doing what I do."

What he does is certainly impressive. His specialty is carving the decorations on Liège-style furniture. This style arose in the 17th century, is characterised by delicately carved intricate decoration and drew Europe's top carvers and cabinet makers to the Belgian city. Today, Liège is still a key centre for those interested in learning the skill.

Damiaens himself was educated at the Don Bosco Institute in Liège, where he studied ornamental wood carving for three years. That followed six years studying furniture making at the Sint-Jansberg College in Maaseik, Limburg province, which included a one-year wood carving course.

He works in close cooperation with four colleagues: a staircase maker, two cabinet makers and a furniture restorer, all of whom work independently. Between them they are responsible for turning planks of rough oak wood into stunning cupboards, chests of drawers, wardrobes, door frames, staircases, stereo cabinets and decorative panels.

"If you have the budget, we could make and decorate virtually any item of furniture," Damiaens exclaims, leafing through his extensive portfolio. I point to a beautiful chest of drawers and enquire about the cost and delivery



No room for error: Patrick Damiaens (above and right), Flanders only full-time ornamental woodcarver, never makes a mistake in his finely detailed wooden reliefs



schedule. "The cost would depend on the amount of decoration you require, which determines how many hours I would need to spend on it. The waiting list for such a piece would be 12 months."

It seems a lengthy wait, but after Damiaens explains the process involved, it actually sounds quite reasonable. The preparatory technical drawings, for example, can take a full month, since every decoration is unique and requires a totally new set of drawings.

His first task is to make a rough sketch of the pattern, which might be based on an original item of furniture or be a Damiaens original, drawn in the Liège-style. This is then presented to the customer, and, after any necessary amendments are made, the final drawing is done tracing paper and pinned to the selected panel of wood. The design is then transferred onto the wood, which in most cases is French oak.

The next stage is the only time that Damiaens uses a machine. He manipulates an electric milling machine to remove the bulk of the wood surrounding the design, after which the actual hand carving can begin. He first uses a home-made scraper to remove the rough edges and excess wood missed by the milling machine, before bringing his vast collection of Swiss-made, razor-sharp carving chisels into action. Once carving is completed, the panel is returned to the cabinet maker, who treats it and incorporates it into the piece of furniture.

I ask him what would happen if his chisel should accidentally slip and slice off a fragile element, like, say, a butterfly's leg? In retrospect, it was like asking a Booker Prize winner if he ever misspells a word. "I don't make those kinds of mistakes," he says with a gentle smile. "I'm a perfectionist by nature."

One reason Damiaens never tires of his job is the variety of projects. Along with large items of furniture that take a year to complete, he carves and decorates a range of

smaller pieces, and, at the end of a long work day, he tries to find time to work on projects for his own house in Maaseik. He is currently building and decorating new kitchen cabinets, the like of which can definitely not be found in the IKEA catalogue.

Damiaens likes to set himself new carving challenges, his latest being an attempt to work in the style of Grinling Gibbons, one of his heroes. "He was a master wood carver from the late 17th and early 18th centuries. He was born in Rotterdam but spent most of his career in England," he explains.

Working mostly in lime wood, Gibbons is particularly well-known for his exquisite cascades of flowers, fruit and leaves, which were applied to furniture, walls and even chimneys. "So detailed were his carvings that, in certain light, they look natural and lifelike and have been likened to lace-work," says Damiaens. "I think he is the finest wood carver of all time."

With a backlog of orders extending well into 2009, Damiaens' future looks certain. However, the future of ornamental wood carving in Belgium is less secure. The Don Bosco Institute in Liège is finding it difficult to attract enough young wood carvers. Last year only four

students enrolled, and so far this year no registrations at all have been received.

Damiaens is saddened but not surprised at the possible demise of the course, which started in 1896. "We live in a world in which new technologies are quickly promoted, while traditional skills are often neglected," he says. "If the Don Bosco Institute has to close its wood carving course, it will be the end of a tremendous heritage in Belgium."

Thankfully, the skills can still be learned elsewhere in Europe, with the Ecole Boulle in Paris offering particularly good courses. Damiaens also likes to find out how other ornamental wood carvers in Europe are doing by visiting them when he's on holiday in their region. "I look them up in the telephone directory and visit their workshops," he says. "It's always a great encouragement to meet other artisans doing the same job I do. We may be a rare breed, but we're not extinct yet."



## Recognising an original Damiaens

Back in the 1980s, Patrick Damiaens saw a dragonfly carved into a Liège-style wardrobe. He'd never seen one before – or since – so decided to use it as his signature. "In years to come, people will be able to identify one of my carvings through the presence of the dragonfly."