



MASTER CRAFTSMAN

BY DENZIL WALTON

In the 17th century, the Belgian town of Liege became highly prosperous through its coal mining, metal processing and glass refining industries. Over the years, it evolved into a fashionable residence for princes, aristocracy and wealthy merchants who could spend lavishly on expensive furniture. As most skilled craftsmen from the surrounding regions were invited to work there, the city soon became famous for furniture characterized by beautifully and delicately carved decoration. Three hundred years later, Liege-style furniture is still being created and carved to the highest levels of quality.

From his workshop in Maaseik, Belgium, Patrick Damiaens 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 studied three years at the Don Bosco Institute in Liege, where he learned the complex trade of ornamental woodcarving. He spent six years studying furniture-making and one year woodcarving in his hometown of Maaseik. Today, Damiaens is the only full-time ornamental woodcarver in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking half of Belgium.

Patrick works in close cooperation with four colleagues: a staircase-maker, two cabinet-makers and a furniture restorer. Between them, they turn planks of rough French oak into stunning cupboards, chests of drawers, wardrobes, door frames, staircases, stereo cabinets and decorative panels. "We can make and decorate virtually any item of furniture," Damiaens exclaims enthusiastically.

To make an item of Liege-style furniture is a highly complex process. The preparatory technical drawings can take a full month and every item of furniture 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 created by Damiaens himself. This is then presented to the customer.



Patrick Damiaens, ornamentalist
in his studio

The final technical drawing is redrawn on 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 (apart from one to sharpen his tools). He skillfully manipulates a router to remove the bulk of the wood surrounding the design, after which the actual hand carving can begin. With respect, patience and much artistic craft, Damiaens carves each motif until he finds the right expression and character. Once the carving is completed, the panel is returned to the cabinetmaker to be treated and incorporated into the intended piece of furniture, be it an 18th century reproduction piece or an individual creation.

Damiaens is enthralled with the variety of projects he is asked to undertake, as well as the larger pieces of furniture which easily take eight months to a year to complete. For a German client, he is currently building and decorating a Georgian-style library. In between these large projects, he carves and decorates a range of smaller, custom-made commissions.

Damiaens likes to challenge himself with exciting new carving designs. Most recently, he is utilizing the style of 17th century English woodcarvers, who created wonderful trophies and exquisite cascades of flowers, fruit and leaves, which are applied to paneling, walls and even chimneys. So detailed and refined are these carvings that in certain light they look natural and lifelike, and have been likened to lacework.

"I still try to add a personal contemporary touch to these high-relief carvings," explains Damiaens. "I see them as my children."

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Patrick Damiaens often studies the displays at the D'Ansenburg Museum.