

Why ecclesiastical carving is important to the work I do

By IAN AGRELL of Agrell Architectural Carving

⇒ **I GREW UP** in a small village in Somerset, where there is a rich history of woodcarving that includes some of my favourite examples of church architecture. Like many of the Norman churches in the area, ours was built in the thirteenth century on a site that would have been a Saxon church. The carving in this church is fascinating. The pew ends were carved in around 1500 and they inspired me as a small boy – in fact, I went on to become a Master Carver myself and now own and operate Agrell Architectural Carving, one of the world's largest hand-carving workshops.

Church woodcarving – in particular, the decoration on the pew ends and in the misericords – was of particular interest to me because it often described life in the village. You can tell by the often-comical carved scenes that the church was the village centre where services, meetings, festivals and dancing would have taken place.

I find working on a church project incredibly interesting. It's wonderful to have your work displayed in a public space rather than hidden away in private residences. It is also satisfying to work with the community on projects that are important to them and to consider the legacy that we are leaving behind. That's why it's crucial to produce work that will stand up to scrutiny – now and forever.

Just because carving has been produced by hand does not mean that it's any good. In addition, no matter what skills are brought to bear in a carving, it is equally as important



Jesus, Mary and Joseph sculptures hand-carved completely in the round (left) and part of a huge organ case constructed and hand-carved for the Cathedral of St. Paul in Minnesota, USA



that the carvers you employ understand structure and movement, and that they enhance their work with wit and ingenuity. If these skills are not shown in the final work, the result will look tired and lazy.

An artisan must exhibit skills that will impress fellow craftspeople and expect to be challenged and criticised. At the end of the day, the carver must stand by his or her

work – and to a larger extent, all the carved decoration in a project. Recently I turned down a church project when the builder asked us to carve the decoration that could be seen easily while he installed bad carving in areas that weren't as prominent – even though I offered to replace that work for free!

Finally, one should never accept poor workmanship simply as a means of saving time and money; instead budgets can be met by simplifying or removing decoration. However, it is important to note that simple decoration must be as well designed as more complex work.

If decoration is going to be used to enhance a religious space it should reflect the humanity and care of the craftspeople that produce it, together with the affection and love that the community shows for their place of worship. □

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A detail of angel wings for a pair of life-size figures adorning the organ case at the Cathedral of St. Paul in Minnesota, USA



A chancel screen inspired by a medieval rood screen constructed and hand-carved for the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, USA