

# 6 fears and myths about

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**AFTER THE MODERNISM** that followed the war, no one expected we'd see hand-carved ornamentation in our architecture again. Yet here it is. We're enjoying a resurgence in classical decoration – whether it's a restoration of a 400 year-old church, a brand-new chapel with a Gothic organ case or a Louis XIV-style library for a billionaire's London penthouse.

Large architectural firms are increasingly winning projects requiring hand-carved woodwork. However, many of these companies – especially those more experienced in modern styles – know little about classical decoration or the ornamentation industry as a whole.

They might not know that woodcarving workshops still exist. Worryingly, they might tell their client that a Gothic organ case can't be done because they themselves don't know it can be done. Or, they might assume that a carving workshop that employs centuries-old tools and techniques is unable meet the modern demands of a large-scale project.

However, there are woodcarving companies and individuals who have the experience to tackle large ornamentation projects. And it's our job, as an industry, to convince these architects that we woodcarvers can do the work efficiently, professionally and to the highest-possible quality. So, let's start by allaying a few myths – and fears – about our industry by giving an idea of what you can expect from an experienced classical carving firm.

## **'No one knows how to carve by hand anymore. Surely they use machines.'**

Many woodcarvers still use hand tools exclusively – and they don't do it because it's cute. They do it because it's still the most efficient way to create the most beautiful and historically accurate decoration. Finding someone who makes a living as a classical carver can be difficult, but they are out there. The City & Guilds of London Art School, where I studied many years ago, continues to teach young people how to carve by hand.

In some cases you'll find furniture makers who can do it. But be careful: a woodworker might know how to use mallet and chisel, but without the proper training, he or she won't have sufficient knowledge of the classical styles. It takes years of study to understand the nuances of high-quality carved decoration; some of the best carvers I



know worked for at least 7 years before they really felt comfortable communicating these subtleties.

If you're looking for woodcarvers who still use hand tools and can produce the highest-caliber work, start by contacting the Master Carvers Association, which is a network of around 40 highly experienced carvers who work in wood, stone or both. You can find a selection of MCA members in this magazine's 'Church & Heritage Supplies' classified listing – look for the MCA logo.

## **'The carver won't have the historical knowledge to fully understand the style.'**

He or she may not, unfortunately. And some of these people write books on woodcarving. Before you hire a carver, first spend some time educating yourself. Study exceptional examples of hand-carved

decoration, such as Luke Lightfoot's work at Claydon House and, of course, anything at Versailles. Attend workshops hosted by organisations such as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in the UK and Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (ICAA) in the USA.

Then take a good look at your carver's previous work. A quality woodcarver should be well versed in all the styles and, at the very least, be able to tell the difference between rococo and French Baroque, or Gothic and Renaissance, or Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

## **'The carver won't understand our complicated technical drawings.'**

Most carvers are not old men holed up in a barn with a gas lamp. Modern architectural carving companies, whether