

An Interview with Tobias Kaye by Satish Kumar

“God in Timber”

Finding the voice of the wood is fundamentally important

A chapter from the Resurgence anthology of Crafts articles published in the 1990s

Why did you want to become a craftsman rather than a businessman?

I was very rebellious as a teenager, and I found it very difficult to understand why the world was as it was, why people did what they did, how I was supposed to do anything in a world like this. After various short careers in cars, coffins and computers, and various excursions around Europe and the U.S. I found myself working with my aunt and uncle at Wynstone's school in Gloucestershire. At this school there was a recreational woodwork shop. One day I popped down to the workshop to make a little birthday present for my sister who was a student there. My uncle said "well, if you enjoy doing woodwork, would you like to do it with the kids?" I said, 'yes, I'll have a go.' It was just a matter of having fun.

I ran that workshop for three-and-a-half years and I realized that I was really enjoying turning wood. I began to take on little jobs, little commissions here and there.

You learned as you went along...

Yes, with the children, to start with. Indeed, yes. And then, once I set up my own workshop I quickly discovered that I wasn't as good as I thought I was, and when it comes to making a living from things, you have to get better and better. So I had already learned to listen to the wood and listen to the tools, and see how they liked to work together, and it was through doing that that I became better - and I'm still learning.

So, when you say, 'listening to the wood', what do you mean? How do you listen to the wood?

During the cutting process wood does make a noise and it's quite audibly perceptible that this noise is either pleasant or unpleasant. At the worst extreme the tool is chattering and squealing so much that it's deafening and it actually becomes difficult to hold it. And at the best the tool moves through the wood so smoothly that it feels almost as if it's greased. One of my students called it "the butter cut". When the tool is cutting in such sympathy with the wood that it just hisses through it, just moves with great ease through the timber.

Then the shape. You see, at the one end is craftsmanship, which comes from listening to tools and the wood and at the other end is art. And in between these there is a meeting-point where things of beauty are created. Bernard Leach in his Potter's Handbook said, "It's no accident that a jug is described as having a foot, a belly, a neck, a lip, a moutheverything we make is an image of the body". Now for me the body is a work of art, the artist of which is the individual soul. So I took Leach's

doctrine a step further and concluded that everything we make is a reflection of the soul. In the soul realm there are archetypes, there are images, and there are forms which can be brought into the material world.

And so, on the one hand, there's the struggle to find the right relationship with the **Material** and, on the other hand, there's the struggle to bring the perfect **Form** into the material. And the relationship between the tools and the wood serves the relationship between **Form** and **Matter**. Within the wood there is a penchant, an inherent liking or disliking for this form or that. If you take a wood like boxwood, it wants to be treated delicately. If you make a fairly clumpy form out of it, it feels wasted; whereas, if you take pine and you make a very delicate form out of it, it feels fragile, it doesn't feel right. If you make a good solid form out of it, it feels satisfying, it feels warm. So each wood, each tree and each part of each tree has its own penchant towards a particular type of form. Therefore, listening to the wood and knowing the wood and finding the voice of the wood are fundamentally important.

Sometimes, you even use the phrase "God in wood". What do you mean by that?

We are all created beings. Some people believe we are created by accident and some people believe we're created by consciousness, but one way or another, we are all created beings. Trees are also created beings. So within me there is something which is also in the tree. As we are created, we are also creators. The creative act is important to the human being. I feel as if wood is satisfied to have something created out of it.

Someone in Australia wrote a book about wood-turning called Wood Dreaming. He said, "when the craftsman or woman takes the wood and makes something out of it, it's the wood "dreaming"." There is something in the wood which dreams about having a new form. Trees are beings too. They are well rooted in service, their whole being is an act of service. It is the creative in me who meets the Creator in the tree. "God" in the soul meets "God" in matter.

You make a distinction between perfection on the one hand, and harmony on the other.

Within each soul there is a capacity to think, to feel, & to do, or act, Each has its own patterns, its own mysteries. But the mystery of action is perhaps the most difficult to penetrate. It's important that, when we act, we have the courage to act - not just to think or feel that we ought to act, but to act, to actually Do it. To act out of ourselves, not out of habit or convention but out of an inner perception of beauty or truth. To seek the truth is a task for our thinking. (it is seeking the truth, not finding it, that matters.) Within our thinking there's an element of perfection. Things are either right or wrong. If you look at technology which has been designed through human thinking, things are generally either right or wrong. But in human life things aren't like that. In human life we are all a mixture of wrong and right. It's often those things which we're wrong about which could be of most value, our very wrongness bears beautiful fruit. In my work I have discovered that if I want to make things perfect they don't serve the world in the same way as if I tried to make things harmonious. It's important that I am able to look at something I am making and know at what point it's important to say, 'well, one more cut might improve, but it also

might not. I'm leaving it there." So that step beyond perfection into harmony and into the acceptance of the rightful place of imperfection has been a good discovery for me.

You also talk about the hand and the machine.

If human beings don't make, then where is the Creator alive in us? If everything we are surrounded with is made by a machine, then the Creator in us begins to die. If we don't exercise "God" in us, the creative self, it will weaken and die. "God" is dying out of our society because we are not making things by hand.

But the problem is that in our modern society where most things are made by machine. Handmade things have become a luxury.

Wood-turning is coming back. By the 1970s you could count the creative wood-turners on the fingers. Now there are thousands of them. The hobby has just mushroomed in recent years.

A group of five of us creative wood-turners got together. It was one of England's leading turners, Ray Key who called us together - and he said to us, "look, it is in our craft, as it has been in most crafts, that we don't share our secrets with each other for fear that the other person will take our livelihood. But it doesn't have to be like that. If we all agreed to share everything, then nobody would be poorer; we would all be richer.' and he said, "I know this can work because they've done it in Ireland. And now they're doing it in America, and wood-turning has taken off there".

So, we agreed that we would all share everything we knew with any other wood-turner who was interested. We held a seminar, to which a hundred-odd wood-turners came. We said. "This is our idea. Who would like to join?" Within a year we had nearly a thousand members, and woodturning has just grown and grown since then. In Devon there are now five wood-turning clubs, and most of them have about eighty members, and they have a waiting list to join. And then there are many more who aren't members of these clubs. There is a resurgence of skills.

Are they things of daily use or are they ornamental objects?

I would say most of these amateur wood-turners are making decorative items to begin with. Quite a few of them do go down the road of marrying mass-produced items with handmade items. So they'll make a lovely frame for a mass-produced clock. Another example is the pepper mill, where there is a mass-produced mechanism inside, but the outside is still handmade. As these people get deeper into the craft they begin to leave the crutch of mass-produced bolt-on's behind and make more simple and even more practical things. Bowls, spoons, containers etc. There's no right or wrong in it. There's just this seeking for handmade items and through that a seeking for a contact with nature. Then also in seeking to express the creative within, these people begin to ask themselves how simpler forms can become art and then all kinds of development begins. The more people have been excluded from handmade items, the more desperate their need for nature has become. It gets to the point where the buyer at the crafts market prefers something which is badly made because it doesn't have that gloss of mechanized perfection on it. If it has got bits of bark still on it, they

think, "wow! Look! That's a part of a tree!", And they'll buy it. So, both needs are in there: the need for the handmade item and the need for the contact with nature.

In your own work you are doing your musical wood-turning.

Yes, I started off making craft-market items, decorative and functional. For me every bowl I made, was a sculpture;. A gallery owner said to me once, "what are you making, is it art or is it craft?", and I said, "well, the process is art; but the result is craft." "funny," he said, "because I asked Richard Raffan (a leading bowl turner In the 70s + 80s) the same question last week and he said "the process is craft and the result is art."

Looking at the way we work, I can see that. For Richard it was craft. He was making maybe twenty bowls a day, and sometimes he would say, "oh, that one's particularly beautiful; I'll put it on one side." The rest of them would go down the kitchen shop, and that special one would go down the gallery.

Whereas, I was making four bowls a day. I would struggle over every bowl to get the shape right, and I was seeking for a form on the outside which was harmonious, a form on the inside which was harmonious, that the relationship between the inside form and the outside form should be harmonious, that the relationship between the chosen forms and the timber should be harmonious. And I'd look at the final item and I'd say, "nice, but it's not art.' try again, try again. That pursuit of ridiculous perfection in art actually caused me such inner pain that I couldn't actually carry on. At that point somebody came to my workshop and said, 'I need feet for my sofas. The sofas I'm making cost a lot of money and I want really well-made feet. Would you like to make them?' I said, "yeah, you bet." And I got into making sofa feet, and he paid me well enough for those that I could go through the bad times, and I learned a lot more craftsmanship there, just making sofa feet. It's a great satisfaction to me that I have tried my hands at almost every aspect of wood-turning. And yet that intense struggle bore the most wonderful fruits. I began to notice that the bowls I was making had a rich acoustic response from the interior. Hold it to your ear and it sounded like a shell. Speak towards it and your voice was gathered up and returned to your ears in a rich way. Not just one bowl, many were like this. The pursuit of visual harmony had created forms that embodied an audible harmony. Exciting. But the question then raised it's head "what to do with this acoustic so that others could find it too". I could find no answer that pleased me till one night sitting down meditating, the image of a bowl with a string across it popped into my head. From there the Sounding Bowls developed.

Now at this point in my work there are three strings to my bow and each of them is equally important. One is the teaching: I do three day-courses twice a month and people come from all over the world, and most of them are retired or approaching retirement, and they similarly seek to find the creative in themselves. It's a great joy to me to help them kindle that creativity and to help them find a relationship with "God" in the timber.

Secondly, there's making the musical instruments, the bowls with strings on them, and these go out to music therapists mostly, and they're using them to heal all kinds of people. Hospitals in Japan, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and all over the U.K. are

using these Sounding Bowls. That is very satisfying for me. Making the musical bowls is also in itself is very satisfying. When a form takes music it begins to breathe.

And then there's the third string, Regular making. Just making. Be it dining plates, balusters, knobs for bureaux, legs for chairs. The importance with this is that I get to practice my craft, the relationship with wood, without any other issue over riding the simplicity of that relationship.

Do you have some kind of vision for Britain where craft, not only in wood but in other spheres as well, will become more mainstream, rather than just a luxury?

Satish, I don't know what's going to happen to our society. If we are to find a living relationship with handmade objects again we are going to have to want less. So long as we continue to want a plethora of personal possessions, there is little room for craft. I do have a vision for humanity, one which I hope to be playing a small part in, to be a small part of a re-touching between "God" in nature and "God" in us. Yes. So long as we continue to pursue our future through the machine, the path of nature and the path of humanity will continue to diverge. The only direction that can go is death. Death for nature and death for humanity. So if, through the tuition I offer, the instruments and sculpture I make (and the way in which I relate to my fellow human beings), people can see that two poles, nature and humanity, are striving to find harmony, that they themselves are part of this attempt at a cosmic marriage, then we have come a little bit closer to my vision of a happier future.
