

Crafting Welsh Identity: Exploring Traditional Woodworking and its Cultural Significance in Wales

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This essay is an exploration of the craftsmanship and cultural identity in Wales, with a specific focus on woodworking as a craft. I seek to embark on a journey delving into the profound connections between Welsh identity and the craft of woodworking, unravelling the historical, social and symbolic importance this ancient practice holds within the Welsh Culture. By delving into the meticulous work of chisels, planes, and the skilled hands that sculpt the wood, we uncover how this craft extends beyond skill, becoming an expression of nurturing the core of Welsh identity. Wales celebrates a distinctive range of crafts and therefore I aim to explore diverse forms of woodworking, encompassing love spoons and bardic national Eisteddfod chairs with the influence of artists like David Esterly and Henry Williams. Within these case studies I wish to focus on the purpose of design, symbolism and motifs ingrained within these creations. This intertwines the close link in the significance of folklore and identity. The profound heritage and material culture ingrained in Welsh traditions plays an integral role in shaping the distinct identity of its people. Being a Welsh woman, born and bred, growing up in such a community where craft was at the heart of Wales, has shaped who I am today as a maker. I am very passionate about Welsh culture and seek to unfold and showcase the true magic of craft within Wales. I wish to uncover the hidden treasures within Wales and to celebrate the richness and importance of traditional art. In the intersection of design and national identity, Wales serves as proof of the close bond between craftsmanship and a nation's character.

When thinking about Welsh culture, the first few aspects that come to mind are castles and rugby, from love spoons to Welsh costumes and Welsh blankets. These are cultural elements that form the culture of Wales. Raymond Williams, one of the most influential cultural theorist and Welsh socialist of the 20th Century explains that “culture is ordinary.” (Williams and Williams, 2021, p.6). He grew up in Wales and dedicated his studies to examining the relationship between culture, society and politics. His understating of this connection unveiled that culture is not exclusive but rather a part of everyday life that shapes one’s identity. Culture is tradition and traditions are a form of identity. It is important to understand the culture of Wales and how culture and traditions are closely linked. As for Wales itself, “visual art provides us with a riveting record of its serial transformations of identity.” (Lord, 2016, p.6) The visual arts in Wales serve as a vivid and tangible representation of the true essence of Wales and how the Welsh have contributed to much broader movements. John Rowlands and Eric Rowan explain how Wales is a “remarkable growth of the visual arts” that have “unparalleled opportunity and encouragements” to connect as part of a culture society. (Williams and Williams, 2021, p.6). To support this statement, we can see that the famous Welsh painter, Kyffin Williams explains the term traditions as a way to “inspire the new while holding to the excellence of the past.”. (Chao Ma, 2021, p.152) He metaphorically compares Wales to a big, old, favourable coat, and when explored further into each pocket, that is when the unforgettable magical experiences await discovery. The Welshness is contagious and holds many opportunities to unite as a nation through the way we appreciate and value our visual arts. This leads me to explain in further detail how Wales plays as a national character in society.

The book *‘Design and National Identity’* explores the relationship between design and national identity. It sparks an interest in how design and aesthetics intersect with broader questions of culture. Many theorists are explored within this book such as Pierre Bourdieu and Tony Bennett and in particular Johann Gottfried von Herder. His way of thinking regarding national identity took an interest of mine as he highlights four key principles of primordialism:

- belonging to a nation is a process of socialization;
- there is a national canon: it is not the case that any cultural product of a nation can be considered national art;

- every nation is unique, and this uniqueness is reflected in its national character;
- cultural expression in general and design in particular reflect this national character.

Analysing the cultural production of a nation reveals its specific national character.

(Gimeno-Martínez, 2016, p.31)

Primordialism as a theoretical concept explores the idea of deeply ingrained, ancient and unchanging characteristics whilst understanding the concept of national character. Johann Gottfried von Herder once said: “When all the world will have one tongue and language and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. National characters, where have you gone?” (Herder, 2004, p.65) It reflects the importance of preserving the diversity of national cultures to maintain the national character that thrives through a single language. This concept of national character can be seen clearly when describing a place like Wales. National character personalises a space and place in which one can truly identify tradition and heritage history. Wales can truly reflect Herder’s quote; “all nations, each in its place, should weave.” (Gimeno-Martínez, 2016, p.41) The woven close-knit community that Wales has can be demonstrated through strings of national identities. Despite this, the development of a nation’s art can be of history, that one can remain loyal to their indigenous artistic heritage, only then can traditions be found. How each nation expresses itself gives them a form of identity that should stand strong. Prevent the dying language, culture, traditions and heritage, as there will no longer be a national character to reflect upon. Our job or our privilege is to maintain and strengthen our nation’s character for the longevity of our generations. Let our youths play a part in that character to showcase the talent within one nation. The community is the heart of artistic creativity. How Wales is described as a character, as a form of which one can fully play in a role given to perform. The community of arts and crafts is deeply embedded within Wales’s national identities and can be seen reflected in the artists chosen to represent the craft of woodworking.

In this section, I aim to illustrate the craft of woodworking, emphasising its significance within Welsh communities. Furthermore, providing an insight into how woodworking serves a purpose in Wales underscores the importance of design principles in the crafting process. Jenkins and Davies are both influential woodworkers who wrote the book ‘*Crefft y turniwr coed*’. The book emphasises that the craft of woodturning had a widespread presence, with woodturners playing a vital role within the rural communities of Wales. This ancient

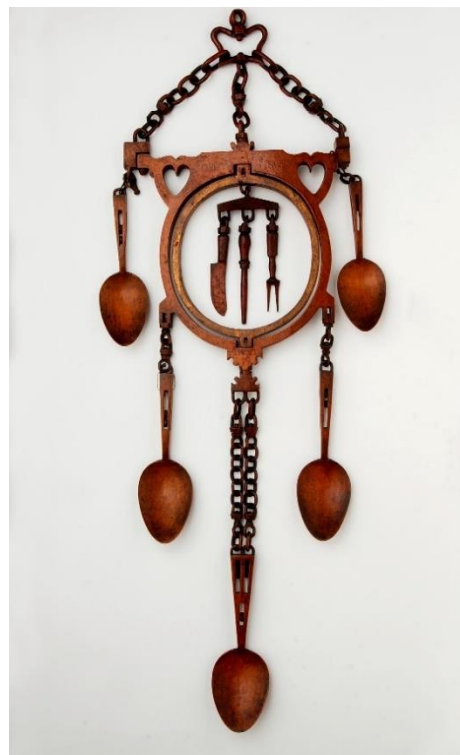
tradition provided the community with essential items that were used as part of the daily running of the farm and home life. Wood turners supplied dairy ware such as cream ladles, milking stools, pulley blocks and many more. Kitchen products such as bowls, tables and spoons played an important role in tradition within the Welsh households. They strongly believed in eating the traditional cawl; a unique broth consisting of bacon, leeks and vegetables. They followed their cultural requirement to eat the cawl, “traditionally with a wooden spoon, from a wooden bowl”. (Jenkins and Davies, 1973, p.8). The sense of tradition in their routine within the Welsh household holds a strong commitment to their heritage and culture. It is truly captivating to witness the correlation between craftsmanship and practical use, showcasing the enduring essence of a true craft rooted in Welsh tradition.

To demonstrate the power of the craft, the Welsh designed and crafted objects such as bowls, spoons and tables, to give a purpose in design. “The true craftsman’s pride is creating something useful, but creating with beauty and good taste.” (Jenkins and Davies, 1973, p.2). It brings purpose to art and crafts and holds much joy to the rural craft community of Wales. These objects can be used in their daily life and can be foreseen as a skill to their craft. From sourcing materials to the craft of making and for use and purpose to their craft. All stages show the unique principle of design and craft in Wales, and this proves how culture-driven and heritage-embedded Welsh makers are. The relationship between craft and purpose in design can be seen in the book *‘Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy’* as it shows the “understanding of design’s powers of world-making.” (Fry, 2020, p.241) Our sensory and cognitive processes shape how we understand and interact with the world and therefore our perception and experiences of Wales are unique to each individual. Designing for a purpose allows using what has been created as it is designed to “remain open, ongoing and active.” Once a handmade object has been created, its story doesn’t end there, there are endless opportunities to use, exhibit, showcase or preserve these artefacts. As a prime example, the wooden spoons and bowls can be of use to many and how they “act in and on our world through that which is designed.” (Fry, 2020, p.241). Woodworkers would gather their source of raw material around their rural community, keeping the sense of heritage at the heart of design. Sycamore trees grow well in West Wales, especially in farm hedgerows, natural forests, animal shelters and on the banks of streams. (Jenkins and Davies, 1973, p.6). The agriculture of Welsh farms plays an important role in resourcing materials as it holds

such power of richness being pure nature and locally sourced. Having grown up all my life on a farm, sourcing materials for my craft has been such a pleasure and holds so much connection to the traditional Welsh farms. Each finding is unique and cannot be found anywhere else and that's the true beauty that lies within culture, heritage and craftsmanship.

Once the material is gathered and sourced locally, the farmers of the community would work their magic in creating craft. The hobby of wood carving for makers would take place in their spare time out in the farm sheds during cold winter evenings. Crafting these wooden items would solely be done by carving by sight, with no measurement nor instructions to follow. (Jenkins and Davies, 1973, p.18). Their ability to craft without relying on pattern is a skill of its own, to master the intricate and elaborate in design. It showcases their commitment and knowledge of the craft and emphasises its artistic and traditional value.

An object that portrays purpose in design for Wales is love spoons which are stored and exhibited in St Fagans.





Figures 1,2 and 3 St Fagans Museum Wales- Collections Online

Lovespoons are “an ornately styled wooden spoon, sometimes with a double bowl, traditionally carved (especially in Wales) for presentation as a love token” (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). ‘*Llwyau Caru*’ is the beautiful translation of love spoons in Welsh. Figure 1 is the oldest surviving love spoon carved by Joseph Jones which dates back to 1667 as it is carefully preserved and stored in the Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans Cardiff. The primary objective of a traditional Welsh love spoon is to intricately carve patterns from a single piece of wood. As the love spoon maker was often its giver, there was extreme care and thought went into the creating and making of one. This approach aimed to highlight the depth of sentiment and craftsmanship within each aesthetically pleasing love spoon that holds practical purposes in the Welsh household. Witnessing the voyage of handmade objects is truly exquisite, observing both its crafting journey and seeing where it will be taken in the future.

St Fagans National Museum provides “extremely valuable support to national and local groups of craftsmen.” (Williams-Davies, 1989, p.217). From the objects and craft tools at present, St Fagans showcases over sixty-five crafts of traditional Welsh society. Raymond Williams, in his statement, “Where is it now, this Wales? Where is the real identity, the real culture? Walk around the Folk Museum at St Fagans.” (Williams and Williams, 2021, p.52) His reference to the Museum shows the accessibility to connect in such a community, full of rich collections, research and displays of rural crafts. The heritage and skill are shown displaying the maker’s true, original tools used to handcraft our artefacts today. St Fagans stands strong in their motto “*I ddysgu’r byd am Gymru, a’r Cymry hwythau am wlad eu tadau*, to teach the world about Wales, and the Welsh people about their own fatherland.”

(Peate, 1965, p.316) It is an honour and privilege to have such a resourceful hub of Welsh history right at our doorsteps.

In this section, I wish to identify the motifs and intricate carving patterns in love spoons. The book *'Lovespoons from Wales'* explores the significance of love spoons and their motifs alongside numerous examples of found love spoons in Wales. (Perkins, 1989) Crafting love spoons evolved into a form of artistic expression that cherished mementos and desirable keepsakes to Welsh people. The tradition and the token of affection that has been passed down through generations and a part of Welsh culture for centuries. As a surface pattern designer, I was truly in my element looking through collections of past and present love spoons. The range of different carvings and motifs that stand together on a spoon is beautiful to appreciate. Each love spoon has intricate features that include slotted handles, chain links as well as meticulously carved motif patterns and unique initials. Miranda Green claims that "each ornamented object was individually crafted" (Green, 1996, p.17). The patterns, designs and motifs included in love spoons are an enhancement to the visual appeal of the object. It plays a role in giving the object a sense of overall value and appreciation, which goes beyond the beauty and richness of its appearance.

The Welsh believe that love spoons bring love, luck and different characteristics into their life. Woodworking is deeply interwoven within the Welsh culture, identity and folklore. It plays a significant role in shaping the Welsh and how they are well-known in the cultural heritage of Wales. Learning that each motif has its own meaning and symbolism behind every carved design gives a purpose and sense of connectivity to each personalised spoon. The designs, carvings and motifs reflect regional styles and cultural symbolism therefore I seek to explore the symbolism within love spoons.

Stéphane Mallarmé defined symbolism as "the art of evoking an object little by little so as to reveal mood." (Chadwick, 2017, p.1) As portrayed in the crafting of love spoons, the encapsulated mood is reflected as romance, sentimentality and affection. This can be captured in the motif symbols carved within the wood. These symbols fully encapsulate the richness and depth of the underlying meanings within these carved motifs. Considering the arrangement of symbols on love spoons, as they are grouped into trios, provides the chance to select the most meaningful symbols that depict romanticism. "Symbolism is an attempt to penetrate beyond reality to a world of ideas, through emotions" (Chadwick, 2017, p.6)

Corresponding to this being said, emotions are also a key fundamental aspect in reading signs and symbols as each meaning has a sense of emotion attached to its side. The attachment to each symbol allows certain symbols to work closely together and others to create tension between those put together. That being said, symbolism functions as a means to go beyond the surface of reality and explore further into a realm of abstract ideas. The utilization of symbolism is seen as a method to present ideas, qualities or concepts that can be explored in different ways. Symbols are often tangible objects, images or words that carry a deeper meaning beyond literal interpretation. Hidden meanings, messages and emotions are a conversation to be unfolded whilst discussing symbols. These symbols are layers of communication to be had within literature, art and religion that certainly evoke a richer understanding of symbolism.

Here I have selected symbols from love spoons that truly illustrate the true meanings of symbolism:

- **The heart**-is the universal symbol of love. A sign of passion and strong emotion (0.04)
- **Paisley**-represents the soul and deep affection (0.26)
- **Balls carved within cages**-indicates the number of children desired by the carver (0.37)
- **Chain links**- indicates loyalty and faithfulness (0.50)
- **Diamonds**- represent a wish for prosperity and good fortune (1.01)
- **Wheel**- symbols represent a vow to work hard and to guide a loved one (1.25)

Video (Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales, 2022)

“Symbolism is shaping an identity for itself” (Chadwick, 2017, p.6) These symbols are a start to a conversation that one can explore further into true meanings. At first glance., one might not think anything of carved patterns, but there is also a fundamental meaning underneath the core symbol. In recent years, the symbolism depicted on the spoons has undergone alterations with “the introduction of Celtic and national emblems, such as daffodils and dragons, a means of expressing Welsh identity. This contrasts with the previously romantic sentiment, such as hearts, diamonds and wheel motifs.” (Amgueddfa Cymru) (2012).

from wood carving. He wishes to reinforce that by the skills he taught himself. Esterly states that “skill is obedience, an obedience to a master and to the age-old principles of the craft.” (Esterly, 2013, p.26) The wood teaches you about itself and how one can adapt its materiality and characteristics, through interpretation and knowledge called skills.

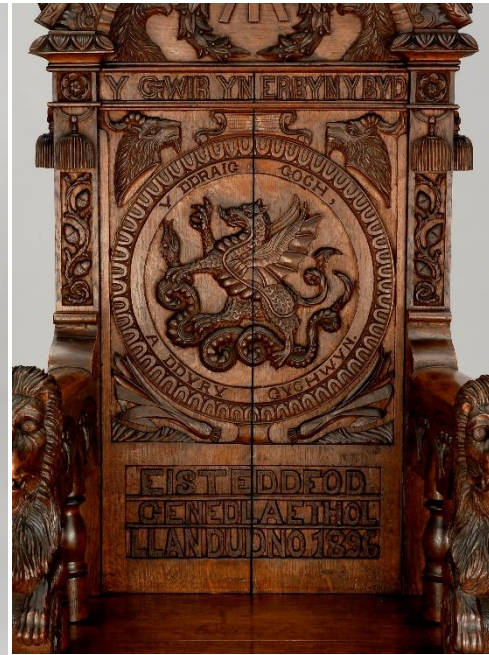
The artwork of ‘Dr. Compton’s Letter Rack’ is crafted in a way that the letter rack is the bone structure of the piece. The racks are like “the unavoidable permanent qualities of life- birth, death, body, mind, pleasure, pain.” (Crystal Bridges, 2019) He delves into the craft with his whole body from mind to hand, with two hands in full play. How his body has been carved and shaped in place due to the years of making, shows a true representation of his craft. How his “torso is twisting in this contrapposto way” adds a sense of naturalism and dynamism to his figure about his artwork. (Lambert, 2013). This artwork is an “imitation and illusion made from technique and genius, and on the strange physical and mental immersion that enables the transmission of vision from brain to hand, tool to wood.” (Seelye, 2019) Esterly has lived his life by the connection between brain and hand which can be related to Frank Wilson’s belief that “mind is hand and hand is mind” (Ingold, 2013, p.112) From each memory of a chisel stroke to mind and judgement, the propulsive and restraining hand plays an important role in carving. The hand is active in which force can be applied in the precision of making, whilst having control and energy whilst in the process of movement and tension applied to the hand.

Esterly’s work holds an illusion of hidden treasures within the piece, as carved objects lay deep within the art. His art is a “pleasure of illusion” with its monochromatic medium, fluency and realistic limewood carving. (Garner, 2013) The longer you look at this piece of art, the more you discover the story and a sense of belonging to his work. To think that this is only wood and how he has “turned dead wood into objects that more than mimic nature, that have the sheen of life” (Gardner, 2013) The beauty of this craft is, that is hard to believe how realistic and intricately carved each detail is, which makes up an object. ‘*Ways of seeing*’, Berger discusses the role of objects within the realm of art in visual culture. Exploring the meaning of objects and how our perceptions are influenced by cultural and social influences. This book seeks to challenge traditional notions of criticism and how objects are interpreted. (Berger, 2008) Esterly’s work is considered an original and valuable collection of objects, that symbolise an object of culture. Berger explains how an original

object can hold authenticity and cannot be reproduced as it changes the status and value of the object. The hours spent making each mark and the inspiration that comes with the art of making. The focus behind his work is to create a narrative out of a person's possessions and to carve and showcase the most meaningful objects through the craft of woodworking.

Woodturner David Pye states "Art is wonderful, craft is admirable and design is teachable (Pye, 1986, p.11) as he takes pride in his wood-turning hobby. Art is subjective and can be created through emotions and experimentation. Craft is a value of craftsmanship that should be respected within a culture and expressed through individuality. Design can be interpreted through design principles and methodologies and transferred through training and experimenting. On one hand, I do agree that beauty is seeing "the way tools actually work", but on the other hand, the skill and knowledge a maker holds shows true craftsmanship. (Pye, 1986, p.11). Staying true to your craft and also working alongside the material. Using the material culture and object qualities as an advantage to create delicate and precise designs. The continuous dedication towards a craft can be a fulfilling hobby and a celebration made simply by "marks of the dextrous hand". (Pye, 1986, p.15). Manual precision and coordination are required with the skill of woodworking. Craftsmanship at its best can be seen within the aspects of the carved bardic Eisteddfod Chair.

The Eisteddfod is an important contemporary role in Wales that provides an annual week-long festival of cultural celebration, being the most significant event of its kind. It is known as the hub of Welsh culture, as craftsmanship is always present. The 'Pabell Gelf' joins all national crafts, gathering them in one space and place where richness lies within. The book *'The visual culture of Wales: Imaging the nation'* wishes to define Welshness by recognising the importance of traditional crafts as a nation. Wales served as an emblematic representation of a unique, present-day identity. The significance wasn't limited to just national symbols; it encompassed national art, music, and literature, which were deemed essential for those seeking nationhood. (Lord, 2000, p.247). In this section, I wish to present the woodcarving of the bardic Eisteddfod Chairs and delve deep into the importance of this piece of work.



Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8- St Fagans Museum Wales- Collections Online

Every year, each Eisteddfod sees the creation of a unique bardic chair being crafted. Many amateur or professional craftsmen hope to be commissioned on the making of the chair. The Eisteddfod Chair is a pivotal moment in the Welsh Eisteddfod heritage, whereas winning one of these hand-crafted chairs is considered a great achievement in Welsh culture as a sign of excellence and contribution to the arts. Myrddin ap Dafydd, a Welsh writer and chaired bard states “I love the fact that encouraging conversation is being done via a chair which links in so well with the National Eisteddfod for which chairs are hugely symbolic.” (Evans, 2019) His belief is promoting social inclusion and discovering natural artistic talents for each chair. Whilst researching the archive of Chairs throughout the years, this specific

chair took an interest of mine. It was carved by Henry Williams in 1896 with very intricate carvings of motifs and emblems that are hidden within the grains of the wood. The front of the arms features lions, whilst the back panels display a dragon encircled within a roundel. Two harpists are hidden within the ornamental decoration at the top of the chair to adorn the shape and structure. (St Fagans, 2023) This chair is aesthetically pleasing and holds many stories to uncover.

Watching Antiques Roadshow on BBC One, they discussed the five Eisteddfod chairs won by Niclas Y Glais, Aberystwyth. The chair is a very “potent symbol” that has been happening for thousands of years in the Bardic tradition of poetry and literature. (BBC, 2012, 1.12) Seeing the contrast between the national and regional Eisteddfod chairs was an eye-opener, as the regional chairs had a focus on using refurbished and recycled furniture. These chairs have the power to represent the concept of heritage in ways that embody broader ideas or beliefs. The focus is to carry cultural, emotional and ideological weight which evokes the audience to react and understand the narrative behind these state of art pieces. These chairs are symbols that deeply resonate the Welsh romanticism and traditions, “by its folklore, and the soul of its crafts’ warmth of Wales.” (Welsh ‘Plural’, 2022) They are thrones, that belong to the legacy of Wales and truly represent the folklore and Welsh romanticism.

During the Romantic era, there was a surge in interest in folklore, local culture and the celebration of national identity. The Eisteddfod embodies these romantic ideals by providing a platform for Welsh artists, and therefore I wish to discuss the influence of theorists Elliott Oring and Richard Bauman. Oring states that folklore “is at its core an investigation of how people in their everyday lives shape deeply felt values into meaningful forms.” (Oring, 1994, p.211) Eisteddfod is a form of expression that has its own identity. Folklore and Identity have a very close relationship with one another using social contexts. Every case study discussed in this essay from love spoons to bardic chairs, they are a true representation of folklore and identity in Wales. The first appearance of the term identity was discovered by Richard Bauman with a focus on three underlying concepts within identity such as individual, personal and collective identity. The concept of identity can be rooted in an individual’s psyche, which is not only based on external factors but is shaped by something internal and psychological. Identity can be one’s sense of self and is influenced by their inner thoughts and feelings through different experiences. (Bauman, 1971) Each crafted artefact present at

the Eisteddfod is not only an aesthetic creation but also a powerful instrument that shapes, reflects and perpetuates the diverse facets of human identity. It focuses on offering insights into the intricate interplay between creativity, cultural expression and the formation of identity within folklore societies. Each artefact is the culture of Wales and holds much importance for heritage and identity as a nation.

To conclude this essay, this statement defines my discussion: "Wales is a singular noun but a plural experience." (Welsh 'Plural', 2022). The essence of Wales holds many treasures and beauty. Craft in Wales is an experience of its own and I hope that this essay has given an insight and experience of what Wales has to offer. Love spoons with their symbolism and purpose have proven to be more than just an object- they are embodiments of affection, history and regional motifs. Love spoons are a skill that has been passed down through generations and has adapted through time for individuals to put their own identity on it. Love spoons "despite its simplicity, has been an article of great importance in Welsh peasant life." (Jenkins and Davies, 1973, p.20). It has proven to have already served as a source of inspiration that has sparked interest for many different artists. Taking woodworking as a craft in Wales, it is of paramount importance that the historical tradition of the past can ignite creativity in the present and beyond. The Eisteddfod bardic chairs stand as monumental symbols of Welsh artistry. These chairs, each a masterpiece, encapsulate Wales's romanticism and cultural depth, echoing tales of heritage and creativity. I aim to honour the past but also serve as an inspiration for future generations. A form of celebrating Welsh traditional craft and the uniqueness that one nation has to offer. Craftsmanship is more than the art of making; it is a conduit for preserving heritage, identity and tradition. Woodworking itself is a level of mastery that material culture itself provides "a picture of what human beings are capable of making." (Sennett, 2009, p.23) These human beings are the people of Wales, made from the hands of the Welsh. These artefacts presented are a living emblem of the Welsh identity, a mark in history as a way of preserving Welsh culture. Each stroke, motif, and chair carries a legacy- a testament to Welsh identity crafted in wood. Visual communication is vital for a nation's essence of storytelling and fantasy that holds deep in the grains of folklore. Researching further into the craft of Wales has truly made me proud to be Welsh. In the practice of my making, I always seek to carry an influence from Wales through my work as it holds deeper meaning and influence behind

my work. Having that connectivity can enhance one's relationship with a nation, to add to the hub of creativity that Wales holds. The preservation of time-honoured craftsmanship needs to be celebrated in the culture and heritage of Wales. This highlights the necessity of blending tradition with innovation to ensure the craft's enduring significance.

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