





Having trained as a carpenter, Ernst Gamperl quickly became bored of carving furniture from boards of pre-cut wood, so he headed outdoors to the forests of the Bavarian Alps to find inspiration amongst its fallen trees. Ernst's gambit paid off—for in the 25 years since, he has been crafting giant vessels, vases and pots from the remains of ancient beeches, oaks and maples, and forging a deep understanding of how each lives and behaves under the strings of his bow and lathe. Here the winner of the 2017 LOEWE Craft Prize discusses the dialogue between mind and material, time and trees, and Japanese and German connections to nature.

*How much of your work is about time?*

Time is at the essence of my work. They are all carved out of massive tree trunks—they are not glued together—always from naturally grown, and fallen, trees. Since 2005, I've been counting the rings of wood to get an approximate age of the tree trunks I use, as a kind of artistic signature. The age of the tree is very important: if it's standing, singular, in the ground somewhere against the wind for 150 years; that makes a difference compared to whether it was standing against the wind for only 50 years. You never know how it works, but time does influence the final shape of the object.

*Can you impose an idea for an object on a piece of wood, or do you have you let nature guide its final form instead?*

When I have an idea, I try to find the right trunk and then cut a piece out of it. Then I put it on the turning lathe, where I may spot a certain detail which I hadn't seen in the material before—it may be that with the help of this detail, I change the shape and accentuate it in a way which I hadn't planned before. At other times, I may have a trunk whose forms directly inspire the shape of the finished object. It's always a dialogue between the material and the will of creating.

*Are you conscious of Far East-Asian aesthetics when you're carving your vases and vessels, or is this simply a superficial coincidence?*

People often ask me this when I am in Japan, especially when I took part in an exhibition with Tadao Ando and Issey Miyake. I think it's because of the Japanese peoples' connection to nature. It's linked to the wabi sabi philosophy where you can see traces of the wood's life before I laid my hands on it—though my forms are never something you would find in Japan. I think this connection is also found in the Shinto religion, which is very nature-based; they impart their prayers upon trees. And before the Christians came, we had our sacred trees in Bavaria too. This history is in the roots of where I come from, and so I think this is the connection between Japan and myself.

*William Morris described the Arts and Crafts movement as celebrating the making of things that are beautiful yet useful. How do you define craft?*

I see it like music. If you play an instrument, you first have to learn the techniques. Once you have the techniques completely within yourself, only then can you express the spiritual part. In the field of craft, if you don't know the technique, then you're always stuck in this kind of material process. But if you really know your techniques, then you're not thinking any more; it's like you're dreaming, and you can start to achieve the spiritual practice of the craft—this is the high mastership. If you are able to do this, you can see the spirit in other works, and you get goosebumps when you do.



Ernst is standing in front of a part of the tree giant which he calls "Tree of life" talking about his plans and ideas for this enormous tree.





Ernst is working with part of the tree giant which he calls "Tree of life".





Shaping the outside of a bowl on the turning lathe.





Hollowing out the inside of the bowl on the turning lathe.





Detail of the finished shape.





Objects in the exhibition room.