

OBJECTS

RAREFIED CREATIONS ENRICHING AND BEAUTIFYING OUR WORLD



The Art of Craft

The Wood *Whisperer*

In the lush forests of southern Bavaria, German artist Ernst Gamperl embarks on a captivating artistic journey that integrates nature into the creative process. By Hiroko Kamogawa



I am not forcing a shape I want out of it – it is a dialogue,” says Ernst Gamperl as we walk through his airy studio, suffused with crisp Alpine sunlight. Pointing at a magnificent piece of oak, he explains: “This is a new piece, and I am trying out a few new techniques on it.” Gently stroking the belly-like swelling on one side of the asymmetric

vessel, he compares and contrasts another piece made from the very same oak trunk. Their only resemblances, Gamperl points out, are the dusky tint induced by patination and their rough size, around 50 centimetres in height, but otherwise, they are astonishingly different pieces, products of chance.

Initially trained as a furniture maker, Gamperl still uses a lathe to create his works, which now sell across the globe at leading design galleries. “I felt that something was missing for me in furniture making. I couldn’t tell what it was then, but working with planks and straight panels made me feel like something important was absent,” he recalls.

“Try holding it,” Gamperl instructs, as he lifts one of the oak pieces and hands it over. It’s deceptively light because the wood has been made so thin on the lathe. Gamperl’s steady hands make magic with a chisel, an extremely delicate process that could go wrong at any moment as the wood rotates on the lathe. He utilises a whole range of handheld tools – some of which he creates himself – for the first steps on the lathe, which results in a symmetrical object. Gamperl explains that preparing a large trunk for a lathe is a physically demanding, tough process that requires an unfaltering confrontation with the raw material. Cutting a trunk into smaller pieces, the process he calls “finding shapes”, inevitably determines the eventual size of each piece – and that is when Gamperl’s extensive knowledge of wood mingles with “chance” elements of nature.

“This is sapwood here. Sapwood is the soul of the tree,” Gamperl intones with genuine affection. “That’s where the elements from the ground travel, and the density becomes unique. In some cases, it turns rotten [after it falls from the tree], and it needs to be simply curved away. But sometimes, like in this piece, I saw that it could add uniqueness to its final form, so I have decided to keep it. You see, we don’t get to see the inside of a big trunk that weighs tons, so what is going to happen is always unknown till it is cut into smaller pieces. We just never know what to expect – and that is where a chance lies.”

Steeves Danguy, Gamperl’s loyal assistant (loyal indeed: he happily comes to work as early as 5am, of his own accord), who helps with preparing large trunks for woodturning, agrees: “Working with Ernst is great. Everything is different, every day,” he enthuses.



From top: one-metre tall objets d’art on display at Gamperl’s studio; a tactile oak vessel with sapwood; opposite page: Ernst Gamperl in his studio

Gamperl always uses ethically sourced trees – ones that have fallen or died of old age – and all the wood is “green”, retaining its moisture, which dries out during production. The shrinking that happens as the water evaporates from the wood becomes part of the artwork, each one slowly becoming asymmetric and eventually, breathtakingly organic. If there are fissures, he embraces them by fitting butterfly joints – another exchange with nature in his creative process.

“They are open wounds that celebrate the imperfect, the vulnerable,” says Sarah Myerscough, the managing director of Sarah Myerscough Gallery in London, who has worked with Gamperl over the last 18 years. “His works have taken woodturning as a traditional craft practice into the realm of fine-art sculpture, pushing the technical limits of the craft, the material and the form – from vessel to biomorphic organic sculpture – to create new sensibilities and considerations in the crafted arts.”

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In contrast to how Myerscough rates his skill and vision, Gamperl remains remarkably unassuming. “I usually spend a great deal of time at first to learn about the trunk I am using, for accurate results,” he explains. “Pieces taken from the same trunk are like children from the same family. They are all different, you need to learn about each one of them differently as they never develop the same way.”

The series of work that best embodies his approach is *Tree of Life*, an awe-inspiring project consisting of 67 pieces stemming from a single tree. Mother Nature took the first step, when a 230-year-old oak tree was uprooted by a storm in 2008, kicking off the epic creative journey lasting an incredible 10 years. The tree’s sheer size and volume, ranging up to 2.7 metres in diameter and weighing more than 24 tonnes in total, demanded the initial cutting process to take place where the tree had fallen, in Rott am Inn in Bavaria. The wood was then transported to Italy, where he was based at the time, and the project was finally brought to completion in the tree’s native Bavaria, where Gamperl continues to live and work.

“This studio used to be a chicken shed, and it really needed a lot of work,” says Ulrike Spengler, who is responsible for archiving and publicity of the studio. Over the years, Spengler and Gamperl planted countless trees of various sorts in the vicinity of the studio, thoughtfully complementing his approach to his art – embracing the cycle of nature and his own humility in relation to it.

“Vessels are empty, but always contain a story,” says Gamperl, referring to another body of his work, *Houghton Oak Project*, the four-year-long project started in 2018 from a dying 310-year-old oak tree on the grounds of Houghton Hall, the impressive Palladian mansion built for the first British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. After Gamperl completed 21 vessels, the entire body of work was exhibited in Houghton Hall in 2022, a symbolic homecoming. “I considered placing the works on plinths, but in the end, I decided to place them simply on the floor, closer to the ground where they came from.”

Another exhibition at Sarah Myerscough Gallery is in the pipeline, towards the end of this year. “I am excited to host his first solo exhibition at the gallery at a moment when, culturally, we can celebrate a deep admiration for material and heritage craft processes,” says Myerscough. She notes that Gamperl’s works can serve “as an embodiment of our connection to the natural world and belief in the authenticity and integrity of place, material and process to create the sublime in art”.

The base of every vessel adorns Gamperl’s mark and archival numbering, the year the work was made, and the approximate age of the tree used. It is Gamperl’s courtesy to the wood, his “collaborator”, which was alive long before any of us were ever born. This profound respect for the cycle of life resonates in Gamperl’s studio, where the past becomes present, and nature continues to thrive. ernst-gamperl.de



From top: the intense scent of wood instantly fills the studio as the lathe turns; three smaller pieces made from offcut; hand-carved archival details; opposite page, from top: hollow fissures with butterfly joints; Gamperl inspects patinations.