

# From design to the wood(s). A case study between craft practice, art and design.

*Do design para a madeira como  
matéria.*

*Um estudo de caso entre prática  
artesanal, arte e design.*

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DOI:  
10.48528/pbag-9511-27

**This paper documents an artisanal practice located in Northern Portugal which combines endangered traditional Portuguese crafts such as carpentry, carving, and inlaying, with architecture, art, and design.**

**As a case study, this paper analyses the career and professional practice of Frederico Burmester – carpenter, carver, and sculptor. Burmester works in cabinetmaking and high cabinetmaking, contributing as a trainer/master of this art from his established workshop. He is also dedicated to his independent activity from design to production, conservation, and restoration of objects, furniture, and heritage buildings.**

**Burmester’s activity is informed by continuous learning and training, deeply marked by an artisanal practice and scientific knowledge about raw materials and tools.**

**It is argued that these traditional techniques are in demand by various types of audiences; are being recognized by local urban communities; and are part of a more sustainable concept of living, working, and producing.**

**The methodologies used were a combination of ethnographic interviews, observation, image analysis, and cross-referencing of the data collected with a literature review. The non-participant observation was carried out in the context of a workshop with two groups of professionals from the decorative picture-framing industry. The use of video is to be expected as a tool for the presentation of these findings. Audiovisual data was also recorded, which will culminate in a short documentary film at a later stage.**

*Este estudo documenta uma prática artesanal localizada no Norte de Portugal que combina ofícios tradicionais portugueses ameaçados – a marcenaria, a talha e os embutidos – com a arquitetura, a arte e o design.*

*Na presente comunicação, analisa-se o percurso e prática profissional de Frederico Burmester (Porto, 1958) – marceneiro, entalhador e escultor - como estudo de caso. Frederico Burmester atua no domínio da marcenaria e alta marcenaria contribuindo com o projeto, conservação e restauro de objetos, mobiliário e edifícios patrimoniais.*

*A atividade de Frederico Burmester é informada pela aprendizagem e formação contínua, profundamente marcada pela prática artesanal (saber-fazer) mas também pelo conhecimento científico (saber-saber) sobre matérias-primas e artefatos. Argumenta-se que estas técnicas tradicionais estão a ser procuradas por vários tipos de público; são reconhecidas por uma comunidade local urbana; e inserem-se numa concepção de estilo de vida mais sustentável de viver, trabalhar e produzir.*

*Utilizaram-se como metodologias a entrevista etnográfica, a observação, a análise de imagens e o cruzamento dos dados recolhidos com revisão da literatura.*

#### **Keywords**

Cabinetmaking;  
Crafts;  
Knowledge Transfer;  
Material Culture;  
Intangible Heritage.

#### **Palavras-chave**

Marcenaria;  
Ofícios Tradicionais;  
Transferência de Conhecimento;  
Sustentabilidade;  
Património Imaterial.

*A observação não participante foi realizada no contexto de um workshop a dois grupos de profissionais da indústria de molduras decorativas. Foram realizados ainda registos documentais audiovisuais, os quais serão base de um vídeo a produzir futuramente.*

## Introduction

The present article argues that the history of craftsmanship and the complex traditions out of which contemporary craftwork has emerged have been neglected in comparison to the amount of attention given to modern design objects (Frayling, 1986, pp. 13-27). Currently, this approach is under revision. This study is grounded in previous studies referring to the need to document the specialized craft-based knowledge present in the Portuguese context (Albino, 2017; Gomes, 2018). Recently, Alvelos & Chatterjee (2021) pointed out that the value proposition of crafts should be scrutinized beyond the attributable physical and/or material worth of the produced objects as the global-economies move towards knowledge-based paradigms.

In *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (1968), David Pye stated that the aesthetic quality of our environment depends as much on its workmanship as its design, and explained the undefined limits between workmanship and design. Glenn Adamson (2016) defended that the post-disciplinary world devoted fewer resources to the development of particular skills and that this attitude has caused specific craft-related training in higher education institutions to disappear.

Reconnecting the Crafts with Design has been widely considered a current strategy to increase the economic value of the territories and its human resources (Albino, 2014; Brown, 2014; Krucken, 2009). There is a sense of change in this paradigm, not only in the designers' attention to craft practices but also in the academic field, where more and more research is being done on the subject. Therefore, one of the current challenges is to ensure the continuity of traditional crafts through educational institutions (Alvelos & Chatterjee, 2021; ID+, 2018-2021) and the integration of this knowledge into the Design curricula. Different public entities are also heavily investing in developing different strategies to promote the crafts sector among young generations (Epinay, 2022; Leboucher, 2022). It is argued that one of the ways to do this is by broadcasting successful case studies and viable paths in educational training, and consequent satisfactory professional insertion, particularly among young people who may want to pursue a career in this field (Vogt, 2022). Our work documents a case study, an artistic practice located in Northern Portugal, that combines Sculpture and Design with endangered Portuguese traditional crafts – an example of integration of this topic in our research project. Our aim



**Fig. 1**

Frederico Burmester during the interview held in his workshop, April 28, 2022. Author's photography

was to conduct an ethnographic interview with Burmester and to collect his first-hand testimony, describing an ongoing evolutionary process to master the art of woodworking.

## Methodology

The work is the result of the ongoing research A future for traditional crafts driven by design practices: towards a practical methodology, which is being undertaken as part of the doctoral program in Design at the School of Fine Arts at the University of Porto. The research project aims to develop an overarching framework for creatives and designers that want to contribute to the reactivation and viability of traditional techniques in local contexts.

This paper provides a critical overview of Burmester's journey and points out some of the challenges present in this specific context. It is part of a larger work plan that aims to describe the craft practitioners, their connections, philosophies, training, and workspaces to understand the context of Northern Portugal and the resources present in this same territory. Burmester's work is located at the intersection of two of the domains addressed by our research: which are artistic practices and traditional craft techniques.

An interview was conducted with the artist in April 2022 in his workshop, Bancada 9. Non-participant and direct observation methods were used, including visual analysis through photography and video records, crossing the results with literature review (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Rose, 2008).

The interview followed Spradley's use of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview (Figure 1) to give us qualitative data for our ethnographic study (Spradley, 1979). The interview audio was recorded with the participant's consent. The observation (Figure 2) was carried out for sixteen hours in May 2022, spread over two days, in the context of a workshop, which consisted of two groups of professionals from the decorative picture-frame sector, witnessing Burmester's teaching methodology. We also had the opportunity to record – through photography, video, and field notes – different data such as the nomenclature of the techniques used, tools, materials, and testimonies of the trainees.

## Findings

Continuous learning and training focused on wood-specific crafts

The present study found evidence for a form of continuous learning/training around a single material – wood – based on both personal and professional experiences as



**Fig. 2**  
Author's observation during a workshop held by Frederico Burmester on cabinetmaking level I, May 10, 2022. Author's photography

well as other theoretical contributions related to art, design, science, and visual culture.

Burmester considers himself a wood carving specialist because, as mentioned many times during his interview, wood was his focal point his entire career (Burmester F., personal communication, April 28, 2022). His educational and professional background proves his commitment to this specific material. This fact has led him to a path of ongoing education and training for more than forty years, during which he has dedicated himself to the design, production, conservation, and restoration of heritage objects, furniture, and buildings (Bancada 9, n.d.).

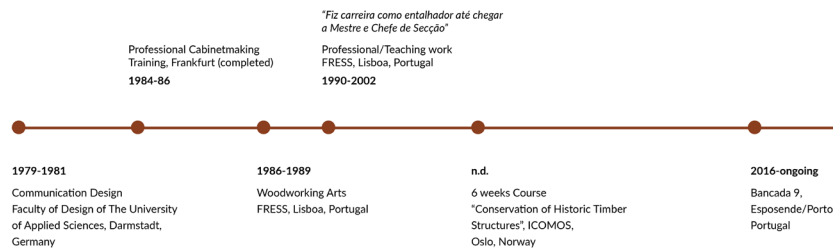


Fig. 3

Frederico Burmester Timeline: Ongoing education/training informed by practice over time. Author's graphic, 2022

The artist's academic and professional choices (see Figure 3) revealed a peculiar path; from the circumstances that led him to decide to drop out of the Communication Design at the Faculty of Design of the University of Applied Sciences in Darmstadt; to undergo professional training in Cabinet Making in Frankfurt (1984-86); to enroll the Cabinet Making/Carving course which he completed in 1989 at the School of Arts and Crafts at Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation (FRESS), where he made a career as a carver. The continuous practice of his art, the improvement of his technical work, and the fact that he became a wood carver specialist working at FRESS, allowed him to have a diversity of projects and meetings, both at a national and international level.

One of the findings of this study is Burmester's commitment to the craftsmanship<sup>1</sup> (Sennet, 2009) and the theoretical framework that accepts that "workmanship is interpretation"<sup>2</sup> (Pye, 1968). In each project – besides the strong technical component that allows him to make the best use of the material – there is an artistic dimension, said to be the essence of his speech and the subjective and artistic component of his work. This chosen path required an evolutionary and long-term process. The notion of extended time gives us the proper context to Burmester's working career.

<sup>1</sup> Term used by Sennet to describe the basic human impulse/ desire to do the job well or perfectly (Sennet, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The term workmanship considered as Pye described: "the application of technique to making, by the exercise of care, judgement, and dexterity" (Pye, 1968, p.22-23)

The need for scientific knowledge when it comes to raw materials and knowledge-based artisanal practice

Another finding is that in this craft practice, the know-why learning (Garud, 1997, p. 86) has vital importance for the exercise of crafts excellence. Burmester refers several times that, as a teacher at the FRESS Materials Laboratory – having access to theoretical and scientific knowledge about raw materials – made him evolve faster in his practice (Burmester F., personal communication, April 28, 2022). In the same line with the idea of what is usually known as “skill is knowledge” (Pye, 1968, p. 23) and because wood is an unpredictable material (Pye et al., 1986), Burmester mentions that he usually likes to talk about the characteristic aspects of wood with his students, because he believes that, that kind of knowledge helps a craftsman to advance much faster in his craft (Burmester F., personal communication, April 28, 2022).

He noted that one of his wishes is to begin to record in written form the terminology and etymology related to his craft practice (Burmester, F. personal communication, April 28, 2022). We found during our observation that Burmester insisted on his wish to keep passing this kind of information to his trainees, in oral form during the execution of the practical exercises (see Table 1).

Burmester states that, currently, his workshop has all the manual tools he needs for his practice and for his teaching sessions (personal communication, May 16, 2022). Through the data collected during the observation, he uses a great number and diversity of instrumental artifacts. We hypothesize that this involves a great number of time and energy to research, source, collect, manage, and maintain all these tools by a single person (Figures 4 e 5).

### Craftsmanship, Design, and the Arts

From our results, it is clear that there is a need to celebrate craftsmanship amongst the general public as well as professionals and within the superior education curricula of Art and Design. Alvelos & Chaterjee (2021) argue for further considerations of the value of crafts and how specialized skills could be key to shaping economic systems based on tacit knowledge and creative activities. They also argue for practice-based learning of craft techniques in design schools as a method leading to a pedagogy of valorization based on unmediated experience – and the consequent replicable pathways to confirm the validity and applicability of traditional industries. This is consistent with other recent arguments showing that we should celebrate artisans as designers (Raphaele & Lawson Jaramillo, 2020). This discussion goes beyond a school of thought that places the designer only as a mediator between the craftsman and the consumer (Craft Revival Trust & Artesanías de Colombia, 2005).

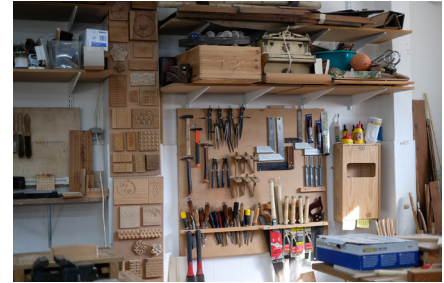


Fig. 4

Frederico Burmester work tools and workshop space, Bancada 9, April 28, 2022. Author's photography



Fig. 5

Frederico Burmester and his trainees from the firm Moldura Minuto during the workshop, 10 May, 2022. Author's photography

Burmester soon understood that what interested him the most was to continue learning everything possible about wood, within the basic principles he had acquired.

**Table 1. Lexicon registered through ethnographic observation (a)**

| <b>Artifacts/Artefactos</b>                |                                    |                                 |
|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Marca-malhetes</i>                      |                                    |                                 |
| <b>Materials/Materiais</b>                 |                                    |                                 |
| <i>Acetato Polivinilico</i>                | <i>Madeira de Castanho</i>         | <i>Madeira de Pinho</i>         |
| <i>Madeira de Azinho</i>                   | <i>Madeira de Cedro</i>            | <i>Madeira de Pinho de Riga</i> |
| <b>Techniques/Técnicas</b>                 |                                    |                                 |
| <i>Afiar</i>                               | <i>Furo e respiga a 45 graus</i>   | <i>Pôr nas linhas</i>           |
| <i>Afiar a frio</i>                        | <i>Limar</i>                       | <i>Recorte</i>                  |
| <i>Aplaiñar</i>                            | <i>Malhete caudas de andorinha</i> | <i>Respiga</i>                  |
| <i>Encaixe</i>                             | <i>Malhetes</i>                    | <i>Rodear</i>                   |
| <i>Encaixe Lamelo</i>                      | <i>Marcação</i>                    | <i>Serrar</i>                   |
| <i>Finger joints</i>                       | <i>Perfilar</i>                    |                                 |
| <b>Tools/Ferramentas</b>                   |                                    |                                 |
| <i>Colagem</i>                             | <i>Maceta de talha</i>             | <i>Serrote Faca</i>             |
| <i>Formão</i>                              | <i>Raspador</i>                    | <i>Serrote Japonês</i>          |
| <i>Graminho</i>                            | <i>Serra de armas</i>              | <i>Serrote Kyoba Komane 240</i> |
| <i>Graminho</i>                            | <i>Serra de Fita</i>               | <i>Serrote Português</i>        |
| <i>Maceta de marceneiro</i>                | <i>Serra de Rodear</i>             |                                 |
| <b>Other expressions/Outras expressões</b> |                                    |                                 |
| <i>Acastelados</i>                         | <i>Desenhos</i>                    | <i>Pentear as fibras</i>        |
| <i>Alta Marcenaria</i>                     | <i>Destemperar o aço</i>           | <i>Pôr nas linhas</i>           |
| <i>Canto</i>                               | <i>Face</i>                        | <i>Tafife</i>                   |
| <i>Casar as frentes</i>                    | <i>Fenda</i>                       | <i>Talha</i>                    |
| <i>Cauda de Andorinha</i>                  | <i>Folha desenrolada</i>           | <i>Talhador</i>                 |
| <i>Climatologia</i>                        | <i>Folhas casadas</i>              | <i>Topo</i>                     |
| <i>Cómoda</i>                              | <i>Graminhar a linha</i>           |                                 |
| <i>Corporações</i>                         | <i>Malhete</i>                     |                                 |
| <i>Costurado</i>                           | <i>Marceneiro</i>                  |                                 |
| <i>Dendrocronologia</i>                    | <i>Ofícios</i>                     |                                 |

a. We chose to document the terms used in the original recorded language.

For Burmester, wood carving is a relationship with the raw material and to get to know it well, there is nothing better than understanding it through a more technical approach to design. He admitted that his initial intention, perhaps, was to become a sculptor. Adamson (2016, pp. 73-78) stated that today so-called “post-disciplinary environment artists” feel freer to use a wide range of materials and techniques,

**Tab. 1**

Lexicon registered through ethnographic observation (a)



**Fig. 6**

Preparation drawings at Frederico Burmester workshop, Banca 9, Porto, April 28, 2022. Author's photography



**Fig. 7**

Drawing of the side of a D. José table in rosewood at FRESS, April 2, 2018. Author's photography

while the students learn skills in very amateurish production values. Burmester seems to agree with this point of view as if something has been lost. He referred that the current state of the art is very different from when he started his studies, he mentions that “sculpture is a much broader concept than the traditional one I fell in love with”. For Burmester, the concept of sculpture is a classical one, being, first, a relationship with the material. For this reason, he believes that “to know the material nothing is better than entering through a technical door” (Burmester F., personal communication, April 28, 2022).

According to Burmester, mastering drawing is also critical in getting to be a good woodcarver (see Figures 6 and 7). Burmester stated that currently, at FRESS, the master that used to be the *drawer* died, and now, when new models or replicas are commissioned, these can only be done by hired independent artists (architects, painters), who have been in the school and collaborate occasionally with the Foundation. These results demonstrated a potential need for Specific-Drawing skills for the traditional crafts in the curricular units of Arts and Design in higher education. However, a more systematic and theoretical analysis of the relationship between Drawing and traditional crafts is required for future research.

### A dialogue between low technology and high technology

One of our research questions is whether the correlation between machine work and manual labor can help small and medium-sized industries and manufacturers recover some of the traditional craft qualities of technical exploration and creative workflow. European policy guidelines point out that “the combination of old craft techniques with new cutting-edge technologies opens up new dimensions and opportunities for the preservation and restoration of cultural assets as well as for new high-quality products and services on the market” (European Commission, 2021).

Our observation during the Bancada 9 workshop for the two groups, showed that the national mass production industry is starting to recognise the value of the a traditional craft practice as a differentiating factor, by the means of offering industrial workers initial training in traditional woodworking<sup>3</sup>.

When it comes to the use of high technology, Burmester prefers a more classical approach to this. He mentions the importance of using new technologies indeed, but only to reduce time in tasks that are not yet fundamental to be done by hand. He doesn't exempt his students from initially showing them the entire manual process, without – what he calls – “auxiliary tools”. The idea that has emerged, from the arts and crafts movement, this notion that craftsmanship was the separation between hand-made and machine-made, was denied by David Pye (1968, pp. 13-27) proposing the terms *workmanship of risk* and *workmanship of certainty*. Burmester also frequently uses the words ‘risk’ and ‘error’. He mentioned that he

<sup>3</sup> Burmester referred that workers who particularly distinguish themselves and show special interest in the training will be offered further training at more advanced levels.



is always very interested with his students in working ways to discard errors during the production process.

### Sustainable conception for living, working and producing

In this section, we documented the data recorded about craft and sustainability issues in regards to the way Burmester ran his activity and designed his small business.

Burmester does not deliberately consider the issue of sustainability when it comes to sourcing raw materials. He does not consider it a problem, since the size of his production is considered minimal (*Burmester F., personal communication, April 22, 2022*), and he often ends up recycling materials he finds. He has also addressed issues such as the need for wood conservation and preservation in the construction and rehabilitation of buildings in Portugal (according to his experience in Norway); and the use of non-toxic products for finishing his pieces. Woodland's sustainability and the need for starting to create a new relationship with all green living heritage are topics he is currently interested in.

At the present time, knowledge transmission is the focus of Burmester's activity in the workshop/atelier *Bancada 9*. Following the start of the project *Bancada 9* on the country estate belonging to his family in Esposende, north of Porto, he moved his workshop to a more urban context, in the center of the city of Porto. This decision allowed him to reach a large and diverse audience and ensure the sustainability of the *Bancada 9* project (*Burmester F., personal communication, April 22, 2022*). Burmester kindly welcomes all kinds of people in his workshop, from any background. It is not necessary to have any kind of prior knowledge about the material.

Burmester noted that he enjoys keeping in touch with his trainees, and usually makes himself available to help they might need, such as by keeping his own tools in the workshop, to create opportunities for interaction. He advocates the need to design a community to promote local and dynamic networks, as a way to boost new knowledge.

Through collaboration with the Gambiarra project, Burmester, together with Cristina Coelho, produces workshops with young children, usually from their Atelier-Casa.

## Conclusions

In summary, this paper argues that documenting artisanal practices can help to promote citizen awareness in regards to heritage crafts, given that traditional techniques are in high demand by various types of audiences, as well as already being recognized by the local urban community, and by being a part of a new approach to a more sustainable way of living, working, and producing. Future



**Fig. 8**

Frederico Burmester show us a drawing and a sculpture prototype from a special project, April 28, 2022. Author's photography

research should consider:

- Due to the lack of substantial investigation about the contemporary Portuguese crafts scene, and a deficiency of published scientific papers, it is very important we keep expanding our studies in this field in order to deliver production detailed further reports;
- Validation of conclusions that can be drawn from this study in an educational context;
- Proposal for integration of craft-based knowledge in Higher Education curricula.

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