

West Dean College Scholars Lunch Speeches

7th February 2020

1. Francine Norris, Director of Education
2. Robert Mitchell, MA Conservation Studies in Metalwork
3. Eunjoo Lee, FdA Historic Craft Practices in Musical Instrument Making
4. Katerina Williams, Graduate Diploma Conservation Studies in Books

1. Francine Norris, Director of Education

Good afternoon Scholars, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today I would like to talk to you about the way that we balance the demands of a changing external context with the core of West Dean's educational objective, the preservation of craft skills.

The economics of craft disciplines and therefore their perceived value have been challenged for centuries. Successive debates and agendas have sought to define and redefine them recognising the precarious nature of skills and practices as the means of production changes. But craft is about more than the economic production of tools and artefacts and has proven resolutely resilient to obsolescence.

When Edward James first defined the craft objective for West Dean College in the 1930's, he was imagining a future where war would lead to the loss of a generation of artists and craftspeople and that with them there would be a loss of creativity, skill and knowledge. But in this respect James was politically as well as culturally motivated because not only was he concerned with the skills themselves and the aesthetically beautiful work they produced, but also what they represented. The skills of high-end manual craft practice had the potential to enable individual freedom, expression, empowerment and the ability to effect societal change. And it was these ideas that inspired the founding of the College as a community at West Dean.

James continued to draw on philosophical influences to shape the nature of the College and by the 1970's, the political and educational context had created new challenges for craft which meant that in the early years of the College

there was a focus on the experiential aspects of making as much as on the outcomes.

These two overarching agendas, one linked to activism and one to personal growth remain significant in the practice of craft today leading to increasing numbers of people participating and meaning that the motivation to learn and master a craft often extends beyond the straight-forward measures and metrics of economic worth on which the value of subject disciplines in education have been measured in recent times.

Against the backdrop of these grand overarching narratives however, it is certainly the case that individual craft practices move in and out of fashion making their preservation challenging. Across the education sector this has led to many course closures when student numbers take a dip. But trends are influenced by many factors some seemingly trivial like the sudden popularity of a tv show others more serious and long lasting such as global warming. And with changing trends new and often unforeseen applications for craft skills emerge. Through maintaining a breadth and depth of provision at West Dean we have been able to be responsive to these changes over the last fifty years but it does require us to sometimes hold our nerve.

In the last year we have been working closely with the Heritage Craft Association, who are responsible for monitoring the Radcliffe Red List of Endangered Crafts. This has required us to rethink how our skills base and expertise can be deployed in order to support the passing on of some very specialist niche practices. A good example of this was how our established track record in book crafts enabled us to run a course in October led by Martin Frost, the last commercial fore edge painter in England who was able to share his knowledge of this endangered craft with a full class of students for the first time.

A further example of this, and one we are particularly excited about, is fan-making; a craft practice that combines wood, paper and textile skills. We are currently developing a new programme working in collaboration with the Worshipful Company of Fan-makers and University of the Arts London to re-establish fan-making in the UK. There will be a design competition, a series of courses and a mini-conference aimed at exploring the re-newed potential for fans as a sustainable response to climate change and contemporary identity issues, a reinvention of the traditional craft of fan making for the twenty first

century. So remember, in a few years' time when fans dominate the fashion industry again and are the must have accessory at public events, you heard it here first!

So in order to preserve craft, we have to be open to its evolution and to understand the core practices of making with materials as having a wide range of applications that change over time.

Understanding this is central to development of the new workshops, or as we call them, “practice hubs” we are creating at West Dean as part of our strategic plan. These hubs are intended to future proof making at the College for the next fifty years and beyond, and so are designed to support the application of craft skills to our current fields of operation in the creative arts and conservation alongside providing the scope for their application in other fields and to as yet unknown opportunities and challenges.

I'm now going to introduce you to three of West Dean's current students, Robert Mitchell, Eunjoo Lee, and Katerina Williams who are going to talk about the craft skills they are developing and how they are hoping to apply them in their future careers.

2. Robert Mitchell, MA Conservation Studies in Metalwork

Hello all and thank you for coming, my name is Robert Mitchell, currently studying Conservation of Metals at MA level and I've been very lucky in my background from having exposure from a young age to the restoration of ancient metalwork thanks to my family having a business in this field, I was never pushed into conservation although I'm sure my parents are probably happy I chose to embark on this path.

After finishing my A-levels aged 18, I went straight to city and guilds of London art school and I'm sure some of you will also know this institution well, this course dealt mainly in conservation of wood and stone but over a 3 year BA it covered various techniques that can be applied to all forms of conservation from chemistry of cleaning to collections care and laser cleaning. City and guilds also gave me fabulous opportunities to work and gain experience in other institutions such as the royal collection, Westminster abbey and St.

Paul's cathedral and develop my hand skills on live object for clients such as Roehampton University in partnership with English heritage.

After city and guilds I worked for 4 years in the family business learning every day the restoration of ancient metal work for major London art dealers as well as Sotheby's, and after all this I'm now here working towards my MA and due to embark on another exciting placement at the royal navy museum at Portsmouth, but without having exposure to this world of conservation through my parents business along with the financial support of bursary's at both city and guilds and west dean I would probably not be standing here today.

However, for me at secondary education there was little emphasis on D&T and the arts, furthermore the teachers lacked the enthusiasm mainly due to the amount of disruption caused by my fellow classmates but without this initial step most young people don't even know that practical careers such as conservation exists. This ultimately leads to a lack of practical hand skills from an early age and consequently results in less interest in practical skills based subjects meaning that in some circumstances creative subjects are being cut at some schools. This is why it's important to spread awareness about this profession at a young age as quite simply the earlier you start the more time you have to experiment, make mistakes and ultimately become a better conservator. It's for these reasons why it's important to fund conservation programs so that other young people are made aware that there is this practical career path that they can take and that there is help and support in all areas for them to excel.

Thank you.

3. Eunjoo Lee, FdA Historic Craft Practices in Musical Instrument Making

Hello, my name is Eunjoo Lee. I am a final year student on the Historic Musical Instrument Making Course.

I am a great fan of classical music and I used to work in music promotion in South Korea. I also worked in the musical instrument industry and during this time, I discovered hand crafting process about musical instrument making which I found fascinating. So, I started to learn the basics of instrument making

as a hobby at the guitar workshop. I absolutely loved the wood crafting and especially when it is related to music and sound.

Since then, I have been dreaming that my hobby would become my profession. For that reason, I decided to come to the UK to study instrument making where history and craft are valued and people are particularly enthusiastic for sharing their knowledge in musical instrument making.

Following that, I completed a vocational diploma in violin making. However, I was particularly interested in the Baroque and Renaissance period of music and musical instruments... For that, I wanted to strengthen my knowledge of historical methods and materials. I discovered a course for making historic musical instrument at West Dean College. I was extremely thrilled to learn about viola da gamba.

The viola da gamba is an artefact with function.... It requires often multiple hand skills to be able to decorate a piece such as carving, marquetry, gilding and even tool making. In addition, the viola da gamba is not standardized in size or setting. Therefore, I needed to learn how to make all the instruments parts to be able to tune it and produce historically accurate pieces.

West Dean is such a unique place. Only here could I develop all those artistic crafting skills and have access to the specific facilities to be able to make such authentic instruments. Not only as a general experience but to the point of mastering those necessary skills.

I feel highly privileged that I was able to study at West Dean and I greatly appreciate the support from my funders who helped me to make it possible. After graduating, I'm looking forward to work in one of the best workshop as restorer while making viola da gamba from my own research.

I am delighted that I will be able to return my appreciation by sharing and contributing my knowledge and skills to our society and help to save the art of viola da gamba making to bring it back into our lives where the hand skills and artistry necessary to create these instruments can be seen and heard and better understood.

Thank You.

4. Katerina Williams, Graduate Diploma Conservation Studies in Books

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Katerina and I am currently a Graduate Diploma student in Conservation of Books and Library Materials. I will spend a few minutes today talking about my experiences here at West Dean, and how it has positively impacted my growth as a future conservator.

I'm originally from Trinidad, a small country in the Caribbean where I was raised in an environment, deeply rooted in a culture of making, and working with our hands. So it was only natural that my career path led me down the route of the arts.

Book conservation isn't necessarily considered a historic craft, but the hand skills and techniques that it comprises, are most definitely. I originally started off with a bachelor's degree in fine art and wondered how I could somehow transform these particular skills, and shape them to be conservation friendly. I had absolutely no prior experience in conservation, save for an internship in the textile conservation department at the Art Institute of Chicago, and a short course in paper conservation in Italy. That's where West Dean fortuitously fell into my lap. What? I didn't need 3 years' experience or even chemistry to apply? No way. So, I applied and was accepted and 5 months later, I was here with absolutely no regrets. According to approximately 99.9 % of people to whom I have explained what life at West Dean is like, the answer is usually, "Kat, you are actually attending Hogwarts!" And in a sense, West Dean is like that. There's a certain magic in the air. The tutors and the learning environment manage to mould and shape students of various backgrounds, into critically, ethically and creatively thinking emerging conservators.

Because of the heavy focus on practical work as part of the courses, I have had the opportunity to create historic bindings and to work on paper and board repairs; to conserve and treat clients' objects, learn from leading professionals in the field and of course, learn the conservator's balancing act of preventive and interventive conservation. This focus on the craft, on honing the technical skills required to successfully work on an object, has allowed me to not only gain a deeper understanding of the impact that the hand skills have on the object, but of the importance of the hand skills itself.

West Dean is a truly immersive environment that fosters a sense of community and collaboration, and it is this setting that allows one's practical and intellectual skills to develop. I have been given the most amazing opportunity to experiment with materials and ideas; small scale to large scale; from attempting to create almost every possible historic endband, to collaborating with like-minded others to instigate an eco-friendly movement within the labs. Not only is it my self-motivation and determination to progress in this field, but it is the energy and open-mindedness in creativity at West Dean as well as the absolute generosity of my funders, that have, and will continue to push me further; to push me further in developing and finessing my hand skills as well as viewing historical objects not just for their aesthetics, but, as a conservator, through their tangible and intangible characteristics.

My developed skills and this progression as a conservator, would not have been possible, if it were not for the education received at West Dean College.

Thank you.