

# Education Resource Pack:

## From Nature

Ruthin Craft Centre

The Centre for the Applied Arts

From Nature

## Introduction

### **Natural Materials**

Nature has always provided both inspiration for subjects in arts and crafts and materials for making them. Since the earliest cave dwellers who carved animals into stone or painted with pigments obtained from plants and minerals, humans have continued to explore the resources of their environment in a quest to connect with nature.

This pack investigates a range of natural materials and their use for creative purposes along with representations and evocations of nature in arts and crafts. The pack is designed to support teachers and gallery educators in the planning, delivering and following up visits to Ruthin Craft Centre with a collection of activities, ideas and resources related to the broad theme of natural forms both as subject and materials for making. The workshops and practical tasks are suitable for all ages and can be adapted to your group's specific needs.

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## Beginnings

Every civilisation has a history of making, of carving, weaving, stitching, manipulating or modelling natural material. Even the earliest known communities would use the basic resources around them to create objects. Often these would take the forms of vessels, tools and utensils for everyday use, but sometimes, they would make ornaments for rituals or bodily adornment. Some early examples of manipulating materials include:

- Cave dwelling communities would carve figures, pictures and motifs into the surrounding rocks or grind pigments to make marks
- Other communities would use clay to form figures, tiles and vessels moulded in their hands and baked by the sun or in a fire.
- Wood was a material of choice for carving utilitarian objects, building houses or furniture and making objects such as toys, figurines, religious icons etc
- More developed civilisations began to capture human likeness in portrait busts and statues. They became more adept at carving and modelling different materials (for example stone, marble, clay, etc.)
- Fibre and reeds could be woven to make baskets, textiles, paper, matting and was also used in construction

The choice of materials initially depended on availability but later was increasingly selected for durability, monetary worth or ease of processing or working with.

As new materials and processes were made available, particularly following the Industrial Revolution in Britain, many natural resources were abandoned in favour of materials that were more cost effective to mass produce, or those that offered significant advantages over those obtained naturally (for example, spandex or lycra is a better material for sportswear than wool, linen or cotton; plastic is more versatile and cheaper to produce than wood for toys etc)

Natural materials therefore became associated with traditional 'crafts' and rural communities or specialist groups. In the twentieth century, there was a renewed interest in using natural forms in art. In sculpture, radical artists such as Brancusi, Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore led a revival in direct carving into stone or wood rather than casting their works into bronze (although they chose to cast many of their later works in bronze or other more durable materials, better suited to public display).

Later, groups such as

- Art Povera (eg Jannis Kounellis, Luciano Fabbro etc) rejected traditional 'fine art' materials for natural alternatives such as woollen fleeces, unfired clay, branches etc.
- Land Artists (eg Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy etc) also began to work with materials such as unfired clay, soil, pebbles, but included ephemeral materials such as ice, water and snow. Land Artists did not only use nature for creating art for a gallery environment, they

worked with nature, by radically altering the landscape. For example, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* 1970 was constructed in the Great Salt Lake, Utah from the surrounding earth and rocks; Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* 1977 captured the drama of natural forces by placing lightning conductors at intervals around a field in a remote desert location in New Mexico.

In the late twentieth century, there was also a greater interest in traditional skills. Disciplines such as weaving, ceramics, sewing were recognised as being equally as important as 'fine arts' ie sculpture and painting. For example, Tracy Emin has often employed hand-stitching into her work; Jake and Dinos Chapman create dioramas with hand-crafted plastic models.

Contemporary artists continue to work with natural forms, not only as a means of expanding the range of materials available or as a rejection of 'fine art' associations, but also to establish and reinforce links with the landscape and natural environment.

## Tasks

**Find out** about *Art Povera*, *Land Art*, *Environmental Art*, *Installation* and *Immersive Sculptures*. Discuss the materials these artists use. Watch videos of their works. Imagine how they would feel, smell and sound.

**Collect** natural materials such as twigs, stones, shells, feathers, leaves, seeds, cones etc. Use them to make an installation work in a corner of your classroom. You could embed the materials in sand or cement; stick them to wooden panels with glue; knit them into netting or textile frames; make 'nests.' Be inventive!

**Research** nature's artists! Find images of cliffs and rocks that have been eroded by the elements into interesting shapes and forms. Find examples of elaborate animal homes and nests ( eg weaver bird, beaver, termites etc). Watch a video of the amazing Bower Bird (eg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPbWJPSPdA> ). You could base an artwork on one of these examples.

## Further Resources

Beals, Sharon, *Nests*, Chronicle Books, 2011

Malpas, William, *Land Art and Land Artists: Pocket Guide (Sculptors)* Crescent Moon Publishing, 2013

<http://landartforkids.com/>

## Wood

Wood is a relatively cheap material, versatile and easy to work with tools. Due to its plentiful supply in most parts of the world, it has been used in the construction of homes, transport, furniture-making, baskets, musical instruments, toys, fuel, footwear, even early forms of false teeth...the list is endless! One of the disadvantages of wood, however, is that it is not as long-lasting as materials such as stone or metal; it can be affected by water, rot, insects and is highly flammable.

As a creative medium, wood was traditionally associated with crafts, folk art and mediaeval carving rather than 'fine art.' In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, sculptors such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth led a revived interest in woodcarving with their internationally acclaimed abstract works using natural materials. Hepworth valued wood for its aesthetic beauty and tactile qualities which she exploited in her work. She also selected tropical woods for their evocative or sensual power and linked their exotic scents to memories of particular places. She was also interested in the contrasting surfaces which could be created by applying matt white paint to the interiors of hollowed out forms and polishing the exterior to a high degree.

Other artists, for example David Nash or Georg Baselitz have exploited the expressive potential of wood. They have chosen to preserve its rough natural character, emphasising its grain, knots and blemishes rather than sanding and treating the surface. Wood may also be finished by staining, varnishing or painting the material. Besides giving it a smoother appearance, these processes help to preserve and protect the wood.

Different forms of wood craft include: carpentry, turning, joinery, cabinet-making, inlaying, marquetry, carving, sculpting with a chainsaw, wood-turning, basket-weaving etc . Contemporary artists continue to find new ways of exploiting this versatile material, as demonstrated in the *Carving out Space* and *Is it Wood?* Exhibition at Ruthin Craft Centre.

### Tasks

**Discuss** – wood and its use in everyday life (furniture, shelves, frames, chopping boards, pencils etc.)

**Make** a list of the different forms wood can take eg shavings, splinters, sawdust, planks, beams, twigs, branches, sticks, canes etc. Make a sculpture that combines some of these forms.

**Find out** about different types and forms of wood and how you can use them in arts and crafts. For example balsa, willow, cork, ice-lolly sticks, matchsticks etc

**Draw** a still life group composed entirely from wooden objects. Attempt to capture the character of different woods through their graining, texture and colour.

**Explore** the acoustic properties of wood! Play recorders, pipes, maracas, xylophones etc. Make your own percussion instruments from scraps of wood.

**Discuss wood** in mythology, folklore, literature and poetry – eg Celtic sacred trees, *Cad Goddeu*, Apollo and Daphne, Sherwood Forest, Babes in the Wood etc.

**Research** wood in art history (eg Picasso and Braque's depictions of wood-grain in their Cubist still life paintings; Anselm Kiefer's *Parsifal* paintings, Barbara Hepworth sculptures; Georg Baselitz carved figures; David Nash installations and land art works etc.

**Find out about wood** in Welsh folk history - eg love spoons, stick chairs, dressers etc – make sketches, copy the decorative carving, make your own designs.

**Design** a 'Green Man'!

## Further Resources

*Carving Out Space* Resource Pack <http://ruthincraftcentre.org.uk/learning/resources-2/>

<http://www.welshfurniture.com/contentpage1.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Man)

<http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Tr-Wa/Trees-in-Mythology.html>

## Work in Focus: Dail Behennah, *Caged* 2014



Photo: Jason Ingram

*My work is about line, light and shadow and I always try to bring to it a sense of calm, but not stillness.'*

- Dail Behennah

Dail Behennah was born in Bristol 1953. She studied Geography and Local History before taking a course in Basketry at the London College of Furniture. She describes her practice: 'My work fits uneasily within the framework 'contemporary basketry' but has been inspired by my training in that discipline, and I often use basketry materials and employ the vessel form'

In recent works, she has developed increasingly large installation works that respond to their surroundings, emphasising the natural properties of the materials. She has also used natural forms in her works, such as pebbles, twigs, shells etc collected on walks to remind her of a particular place. These bits taken from the landscape are often framed or enclosed by links in a handcrafted chain (See, for example *Abermawr Chain* 2014) or contained in a woven surrounding, as in *Caged* 2014. Here, blackthorn branches are contained by an open rectangular vessel, constructed from white willow, a form that is reminiscent of the loops in the chains she used to describe her walks.



Dail explains the significance of the material in this work:

‘I have loved blackthorn for years. Its sharp thorns grow almost at right angles to the branch, unlike hawthorn and other hedging species which hold their thorns at a more acute angle. The regularity of this growth habit echoes that of my habitual grid, and yet it is freer and more wild....In this piece I have tamed the thorns, which press against the sides of the cage, threatening to break free’

There is also a sense that the white willow, used for the basketry, has also been ‘tamed’ by the artist. It has been woven into a rigid, geometric structure that contrasts with the blackthorn branches it restrains. As with all of Dail’s work, there is also interplay between line and volume, object and space, light and shadow which activate and ‘bring to it a sense of calm, but not stillness.’

## Tasks

**Research** Dail Behennah’s work: her public art, architectural commissions and personal responses to the landscape. Discuss the significance of materials in her art.

**Take a walk** in the countryside, a park, along a beach or the streets around your home. Collect specimens such as pebbles, feathers, leaves, petals etc and incorporate them into an artwork that relates or maps out your walk. You could use loops in a chain, small boxes that are joined together, packets, or create a collage.

**Make** your own version of *Caged!* Enclose or contain a natural object, eg branch, feather, shell etc. Make the cage from matchsticks, cardboard box, balsa wood... be inventive!

**Sketch:** branches and twigs using a range of media, such as pencil, pastel, ink or charcoal. Try to make your lines spontaneous and free-flowing to capture ‘a sense of calm but not stillness.’ What do you think the artist means by this statement?

## Further Resources

[www.dailbehennah.com](http://www.dailbehennah.com)

[www.craftscouncil.org.uk/articles/behennahs-walk-down-memory-lane-2/](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/articles/behennahs-walk-down-memory-lane-2/)

[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-dail-behennah-contemporary-basket-maker/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-dail-behennah-contemporary-basket-maker/)

## Work in Focus: Laura Ellen Bacon, *Inundation* 2014



'I relish the opportunity to let a building 'feed' the form, as if some part of the building is exhaling into the work.'

- Laura Ellen Bacon

*Photograph by Dewi Tannatt Lloyd*

Laura is based in Derbyshire. Her works are often site-specific: created for settings, inside and outside, in both city and landscape. She has described how her art responds to the structural and spatial features of a particular place, in the same way that birds or insects work with trees or rafters of a building to create their nests. She also likes a structure to be 'host' to her sculptures so that they appear to be feeding from or growing out of them. Early works were built around existing dry-stone walls and they evolved to work within trees, riverbanks, hedges etc.

Laura also responds to the feeling or atmosphere of a particular site, so that she can endow her work with a sense of growth and belonging – as though it will naturally evolve into its surroundings. She says, 'The sculptures that I make have a closeness with a host structure or the fabric of a building; their oozing energy spills from gutters, their 'muscular' forms nuzzle up to the glass and their gripping weave locks onto the strength of the walls.'

*Inundation* was created for Ruthin Craft Centre in 2014. 'I wanted to create an immersive experience that spoke about both the material (willow) and the experience of making. The installation 'pours' from the gallery skylights to create a work that feels like it is consuming the gallery space.'

The title refers to the way that the work takes over the gallery and surrounds the visitors, heightening their awareness of the raw material. Laura says that it also describes her personal sense of 'creative inundation' when an artist discovers the means of personal expression in a chosen material.

*Inundation* has further associations, for the willow in this piece was originally from Somerset, an area that suffered the effects of severe flooding in the early part of 2014. The willow carries trace residues that were left by the receding waterline and although these marks could have been easily removed by the artist, she chose to leave them as they conjured up images of the natural disaster:

'thousands of willow stems standing stoutly in the floodwater, waiting quietly for the threatening water levels to drop. Throughout the whole period of flooding and amid all the anxiety and alarm, the willow was standing, still and quiet; I can imagine how cloudy and cold the water was, how immensely crushed the ground below must have been, how the daylight would be mirrored brilliantly between the willow stems.'

*Inundation*, was created with a 'waterline' to acknowledge the memory of the flooding, both in Somerset where the willow stood and also in Ruthin, which had also witnessed recent flooding.

## Further Resources

[www.lauraellenbacon.com/](http://www.lauraellenbacon.com/)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRQe7KgrX8g>

Bacon, Laura Ellen, *Forms of Intrigue and Woven Spaces*, J W Northend Ltd 2013

# Clay

The word ceramic comes from the Greek word κέραμος (*keramos*) used to describe potter's clay, tile or pottery.

*Ceramic: made of clay and permanently hardened by heat (adjective)*

*Ceramics: pots and other articles made from clay hardened by heat (noun) - Oxford Dictionary*

Fragments of ceramics, found by archaeologists suggest that humans have been making pots and figurines since before the Neolithic period: figures were discovered in the Czech Republic dating to 29,000BCE and vessels in Jiangxi, China from c.20,000BCE. These early examples were made from clay, sometimes mixed with other materials, and then hardened by fire or baked in the sun. Later pots were decorated, either before or after firing, and glazed to create smooth surfaces that were more durable and resistant to liquid. Ceramics today include not only domestic objects, but also industrial and building products, such as bricks, tiles, sanitary ware, disk brakes, dentistry and advanced engineering.

## Different types of ceramics

- Earthenware: pottery made from clay, often mixed with silica, quartz, feldspar etc. It needs to be glazed in order to make it watertight.
- Stoneware: heavy, opaque pottery fired at high temperature. It is non-porous so does not need to be glazed.
- Porcelain: A hard, white ceramic made by firing a pure clay (usually in the form of kaolin) and then glazing it – often called ‘china’ after its place of origin.
- Bone china: soft-paste porcelain composed of bone ash, feldspar and kaolin.

## Clay in Contemporary Art

Clay is one of the easiest materials to model with and most children have played with it at some time, even to simply form ‘snakes’ by rolling the material between their hands. Sculptors often make their ‘maquettes’ or models in clay before translating their designs into a more durable material such as stone or bronze. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, clay has been elevated from its humble crafts associations, to a material favoured by radical artists. Pablo Picasso was partly responsible for this renewed interest in ceramics when he set up a pottery studio in Madoura in the South of France following WW2. Other artists who work with clay include, Antony Gormley, Andy Goldsworthy, Emma Rodgers, Catrin Howell.

## Tasks

**Discuss** different uses for pottery in everyday life. How do shapes and materials reflect their uses? Make a list of as many examples you can find in your home. Make sketches or take photographs.

**Play with clay!** Find out how to soften the material and make it more malleable by manipulating it. Discuss how it responds to your body's temperature. Discuss how it requires all four elements to make a clay pot – earth (clay), water (to keep the material moist while forming the object), air (to dry the finished pot), fire (to bake and finish the work).

**Find** examples of ceramics based on or decorated with natural forms.

**Make** a pot from coils of clay and decorate it with your own design. Look at ceramics on display at Ruthin Craft Centre and in books or magazines for inspiration. If you do not have a kiln, use air-dry clay such as 'fimo' or 'das'. Experiment by pressing leaves, seeds, shells etc into the clay to create patterns and textures based on natural forms.

## Further Resources

Groom, Simon, *A Secret History of Clay – from Gauguin to Gormley*, Tate Publishing 2004

Leach, Bernard, *A Potter's Book*, Faber and Faber, 2011

Mattison, Steven, *The Complete Potter: The Complete Reference to Tools, Materials and Techniques for all Potters and Ceramicists*, Apple Press, 2003

[www.vam.ac.uk/page/c/ceramics/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/c/ceramics/)

[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/a-to-z-of-ceramics](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/a-to-z-of-ceramics)

<http://www.antonygormley.com/projects/item-view/id/245>

Work in Focus: Catrin Howell, *Portents* 2009



'Animals and the roles they play in mythology are a constant theme in my work. I am fascinated in the way they are used to convey narratives, both ancient and contemporary'

Catrin Howell

*Photo: Stephen Brayne*

Born in Wales, 1969, Catrin was brought up on a farm in Cardiganshire where her studio is still based. She studied at the University of Wolverhampton and Royal College of Art and has won many awards for her work, including the craft Gold Medal at the National Eisteddfod 1999.

The inspiration for her ceramics comes from the wildlife surrounding her home and the creatures of myths and legends that have fascinated her since childhood. The source for many of her works is the Mabinogion, a collection of eleven stories based on mediaeval Welsh manuscripts. In the story of Taliesin, the character Gwion Bach when pursued by Ceridwen, transforms himself into a hare, a crow and a deer in an attempt to escape. Catrin does not literally illustrate the narrative, but captures its magical and supernatural qualities in her strange hybrid creatures.

The title of *Portents* is ambiguous: portent may mean 'forewarning or harbinger of an event' but may also refer to 'an exceptional or wonderful thing.' Perhaps, the artist meant both definitions to describe these ceramic creatures. Moulded from earthenware clay, the heads are hollow and the viewer is aware of this as the eye sockets are wide and empty. We peer into their darkness and they return an empty stare. They are not lovable Disney characters, but something slightly unnerving and unnatural, despite the convincing modelling of their forms.

The artist's marks and fingerprints are visible on these heads, making you very aware of their materiality. You can see how she has squeezed the clay to form the deer's ears and those of the hare, which are in the process of changing into antlers - their resemblance to sprouting branches reinforces the sense of transformation. The emphasis on these natural materials also establishes a strong connection between the animals and their environment.

## Tasks

**Read** and discuss Welsh myths, legends and folklore. Create your own artworks inspired by these tales. How can you capture a sense of magic, mystery and the supernatural in your work?

**Make** models of animals and birds in clay – try to capture a sense of naturalism by studying the way they move.

**Design** hybrid creatures! You could look at Egyptian art or Greek mythology for inspiration. Be inventive!

**Study** the work of other artists who have captured animals in their work (eg Elizabeth Frink, Jo Taylor, Barry Flanagan etc)

**Make** animal masks! You could use papier-mâché or cardboard.

## Further Resources

<http://catrinhowell.com>

[http://www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/artist/catrin\\_howell](http://www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/artist/catrin_howell)

<http://www.mabinogion.info/>

Work in Focus: Gordon Baldwin, *Black Vessel Boulder Shouting1*, 2011



*'There's a meeting between what I make  
and those stones.'*

Gordon Baldwin

*Photograph Philip Sayer*

Gordon Baldwin trained as a painter but his career as a ceramicist spans over sixty years. He was appointed OBE in 1992 and an honorary doctorate by the Royal College of Art, 2000. His distinctive style combines abstract art with ceramics and he describes himself as a 'sculptural potter.' Through this medium he explores the expressive potential of clay. His 'pots' are usually hand-built with coils of clay which usually gives them an irregular shape, echoing the natural forms that provide his inspiration. The marks and colour are worked into the material as part of their evolution rather than applied as decoration afterwards. As in nature, they are an integral part of their form.

His first holiday with his wife and fellow artist Nancy in 1959 had a great impact on his work. Following the discovery of a peaceful beach at Porth Neigwl, he became preoccupied with landscape:

'There is a beach in Wales that I call the place of stones. It was found decades ago by a blind pin in a map. This chance event discovered me and chance has directed my projects and widened my horizons. In this place I looked for emotional correspondences. I listened to the sea alone and stared at the landscape, almost empty of people....Such places are best faced alone and now they are with me in my studio.'



The shapes, textures and colours of his *Objects for a Landscape* series are reminiscent of nature: soft undulating outlines; smooth surfaces as though worn by the sea; muted greys, blues and whites of the British climate; edges around openings are often crimped and brittle like broken egg shells. *Black Vessel Boulder Shouting I*, would look at home on his rocky beach, 'The Place of Stones,' with its shiny grey surface, that appears to have been worn smooth by weathering and the sea. The small opening, as the title suggests, seems to be calling – to the viewer or a response to the crashing waves?

## Tasks

**Make sketches** of natural forms, study their surfaces, forms, colours etc. Use your drawings to make a coiled pot or sculpture in the style of Gordon Baldwin. Find a photograph of his 'Place of Stones.' Visit a rocky beach!

**Take photographs** of the changing sky – fleeting clouds, sunrise, sunsets, vapour trails, rainbows, thunderstorms etc. Write down words that describe these effects of nature. Try to capture these moods, colours and forms in an abstract painting.

**Paint** a pebble! Turn it into a creature. Give it a character of its own! Be inventive!

**Write a monologue** for one of Baldwin's pots! Imagine what it would say if it could talk!

**Find out** more about Gordon Baldwin – what else has he made? Compare his work to that of other ceramicists and potters.

## Further Resources

Whiting, David, *Gordon Baldwin: Objects for a Landscape*, York Museums Trust, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exBjoomTCGs>

[www.marsdenwoo.com](http://www.marsdenwoo.com)

## Stone

Marble was historically the preferred material of sculptors, mainly due to the influence of ancient Greek and Roman art and the subsequent revivals in classical art such as the European Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classicism. For centuries, it was thought that the antique statues and architecture were pure white, but the ancient Greeks and Romans applied colour to their statues, and both the interiors and exteriors of their buildings were polychromatic. Paint on the outside of temples and on sculpture sited outdoors has disappeared over the years, due to exposure to the elements.

Mediaeval masons also coloured their stone: cathedrals such as Wells (opened in 1239) were originally brightly coloured, inside and out. With light streaming through and reflecting from the stained glass windows, they would have been even more awe-inspiring to worshippers of the Middle Ages. (see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/staticarchive/6e36cf955c435291b25aff65c822c24c0d9ce02d.swf> )

Modern carvers prefer monochromatic surfaces for their work, allowing the natural material to speak for itself. Without the distraction of colour, the character of stone, its texture, colour and composition are more evident. So too are the artist's marks: the incised lines, chisel grooves – the sculptor's equivalent to a painter's brush-marks. Modernist artists refer to this as 'truth to materials.'

In the late twentieth century, artists began to explore other ways of working with stone besides direct carving with tools. Richard Long, for example, made 'interventions' in the landscape such as *Snowdonia Stones* 2006. In this work, a series of vertical stone slabs were arranged like people in a remote location and his five day walk in the mountainous landscape was also recorded in photography. Long is also known for the installation works created for gallery settings, made from materials in their natural state. An example is *Blaenau Ffestiniog Circle* 2011 made from local slate, a material used for building throughout Wales. Communities have developed around quarries such as *Llechwedd Slate Mine* in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Long comments:

'I like the idea that stones are what the world is made of...I use stones because I like stones or because they are easy to find, without being anything special, so common you can find them anywhere.'

## Tasks

**Take a walk** around your local area. Make a note of different types of stone you encounter in buildings, pavements, sculptures, roads, paths, walls, bridges etc. Take photos, make rubbings – you can use these to make an artwork later. Find out about the materials – how they are formed, what they are used for etc. Is there a particular stone associated with your area?

**Research** ancient stones such as megaliths, standing stones, stone circles etc. Are there any nearby for you to visit?

**Recreate** cave paintings! Make a large rubbing of stone (eg from a wall, pavement etc) so that you have a textured base for your artwork. Use this sheet to draw or paint animals, plants and people with thick pastels, pencil, acrylics etc. You could copy some of the images from Lascaux, France or petroglyphs in Utah, New Mexico etc.

**Trace** or draw the outline of a mountain range from a photograph and use this to create an abstract painting. Replicate the colours and textures of the rock at different times of the day or during different seasons and weather conditions. Look at Paul Cézanne's paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire for inspiration.

## Further Resources

Goldsworthy, Andy, *Stone*, Viking, 1994

Mansell, Chris, *Ancient British Rock Art, A Guide to Indigenous Stone Carvings*, Wooden Books, 2007

<https://plainspeakingart.wordpress.com/2012/11/04/welsh-landscapes-from-turner-to-long-lightbox-woking-until-27-jan-2013/>

<http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/?lng=en>

<http://www.richardlong.org/>

## Work in Focus: John Neilson, *Ruthin Craft Centre Plaque* 2008



'Designing lettering for stone is not the same as designing a font for printing, and hand lettering allows constant variation of forms throughout a piece'

- John Neilson

John Neilson lives and works on the Powys/Shropshire Border. He originally studied calligraphy and learned letter carving under Tom Perkins in Cambridgeshire. He carves in stone and other materials and his work encompasses lettering and designing for architectural projects, monuments and memorials, public art and sculpture for displaying outdoors or inside galleries. The lettering in his work is either carved into the stone or made in shallow relief, by cutting away the material around the characters. Light and shadow play an important role in his work in defining the letters and creating mood in his more expressive artworks or a sense of *gravitas* in his memorials.

Lettering is an art with a long tradition, beginning with carved inscriptions for ancient monuments and buildings. It has retained its association with architecture and wording for sculpture, but was historically considered a craft rather than 'fine art', usually carried out by stonemasons. In

the twentieth century, the art of lettering at last received recognition, thanks to artists such as Eric Gill, Tyson Smith and Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose sculptures often incorporated inscribed words.

This plaque was created to commemorate the opening of Ruthin Craft Centre in 2008. It uses Welsh slate, in-keeping with the centre's architectural links to its location through the natural materials, shapes and textures of the building (see page 23 for further details). Neilson's hand lettering, with its variation of forms adds a human touch to the sign which is also appropriate for a craft centre.

## Tasks

**Find out** more about John Neilson – his public monuments, memorials and sculptural works.

**Experiment** with different fonts. Choose appropriate letter forms for: a line from a poem, a cv, a public notice and a shop sign.

**Discuss** the importance of font in public monuments and plaques. Why do people still prefer hand carved letters to printed ones for memorials?

**Invent a font** for your name that expresses your character! Make a personal plaque!

**Research** other artists who carve letters eg Eric Gill, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Gary Breeze etc.

**Take a walk** and find examples of carved letters in public places eg on civic buildings, monuments and memorials. Visit a graveyard and study the lettering and decoration on headstones. Make sketches, rubbings and take photographs.

## Further Resources

Perkins, Tom, *The Art of Letter Carving in Stone*, Crowood, 2013

<http://www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk/artists/browse/john-neilson/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGuz-oYbIRw>

## Mixed Media: Inspired by Nature and the Welsh Landscape

Wales is surrounded by hills and mountains and so it is inevitable that artists living and working here have responded to their shapes, forms, materials and textures in a wide range of styles and media. Some examples are given below:

**Pamela Rawnsley**, silversmith and jewellery designer, she lived for many years in Wales. Her studio looked out onto the landscape that had a great influence on the shapes and surfaces of her work. She was particularly concerned with evoking the changing moods and shifting light on the mountains, reflected in water and filtered through branches. The *Midwinter* series captures the cold air of the season in shivering silver and sharp edges. The interiors suggest changing light, and surfaces echo the effects of frost, ice and animal trails in the snow.



*Midwinter Series © 2015 Pamela Rawnsley*

### Tasks

**Find out** more about Pamela Rawnsley and her work. Make copies of her designs to help you create your own artwork.

**Think** about colour! What tones evoke different seasons, times of the day, weather, landscapes etc.

**Paint** a pot! Use a plain vessel as a vehicle for your designs based on natural forms.

### Further information

<http://www.caeraumetals.com/pamelarawnsley/aboutpamela.php>

**David Nash** was born in Esher, Surrey 1945 but spent most of his childhood holidays in Blaenau Ffestiniog where he now lives. His father owned a forest in North Wales, which he worked on and learned about planting and managing trees and also the different types of wood. His artistic ethos has been one of direct, physical involvement with this organic material and a response to the natural world.



*Ash Dome* 2005: In 1977 a ring of sapling ash trees was planted in a secret location in Ffestiniog Valley, North Wales with the aim of creating a dome-shaped space for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This drawing was made by Nash as a means of visualising how the trees would form this shape. This video documents the project and shows how the work has developed over the years: <http://www.culturecolony.com/videos?id=1126>

## Tasks

**Discuss** the drawing of *Ash Dome*. Before you tell the students what it is, ask them what they think it might be and why. Ask them to make a copy for themselves and to turn it into something else using coloured pencils eg a cave, a hut, a face... etc. Then watch the video!

**Compare** the drawing for *Ash Dome* with photographs of the completed work. How has Nash suggested space in his drawing? How has he imagined the growth of the trees? Using your imagination, make your own sketches for a similar project eg a dome of flowers, a willow tunnel, a grass wall....be inventive! You could ask the students to make a drawing of how they think the dome will look in fifty years time.

**Find out** more about Nash's sculptures. How do they relate to nature?

## Further Resources

Norbert Lynton, *David Nash*, Thames and Hudson, 2007

Carolyn Davies and Lynne Bebb, *David Nash: A Place in the Wood*, Gomer Press 2011

[http://www.kew.org/web-image/KPPCONT\\_060535?gallery=Ash-Dome-through-the-seasons](http://www.kew.org/web-image/KPPCONT_060535?gallery=Ash-Dome-through-the-seasons)

## Architectural Materials at Ruthin Craft Centre



Traditionally, the architecture of a community or settlement reflects the materials available in its locality, such as stone or slate that is quarried nearby, local clay tiles or bricks, wood where there is a forest etc. In the twentieth century, as transportation became easier and cheaper, a wider range of materials was available to designers.

In contemporary architecture there is a renewed interest in making buildings 'site-specific' by using local materials and reflecting the character of the surrounding landscape or cityscape. Ruthin Craft Centre was designed by Sergison Bates and opened in 2008. The project was to blend into its environs and convey the spirit of the Vale of Clwyd:

- Cast concrete walls are pigmented with a clay-red hue to establish a link with the sandstone of the area – seen in buildings such as Ruthin Castle. The name Ruthin comes from *rhudd* (red) and *din* (fort).
- Walls were cast on the ground and then tilted upwards into place. The imprint of surface textures tie the walls both visually and physically to the land around them
- Zinc panels of the angular roofs echo the shapes and colours of the hills behind them
- Wooden furniture designed by local artists, Jim Partridge and Liz Walmsley use natural materials found in Denbighshire. They describe their intention: to make “work with a strong but quiet presence in the landscape”.



- Gates designed by jewellery maker and metalworker Brian Podschies, made in stainless steel with a woven appearance which relates to crafts on display, such as textiles and basketry, but also to the Welsh tradition of weaving.

In 2009, the building was awarded both the Dewi-Prys Thomas Prize and RIBA award.

## Tasks

**Visit Ruthin Craft Centre** – as many different materials as you can – man-made and natural. Make sketches of the roofline and hills beyond it. Make rubbings of the textures you find outside the building. Take photographs of contrasting materials. Describe how the different material feel, what associations or memories they evoke.

**Walk** around Ruthin – or your own town and make notes, sketches and take photographs of architectural and natural materials. Find out about the history of the buildings – when were they built? Who were they designed for? What are they made from?

**Find out** about local materials eg Ruabon clay and bricks, Penrhyn slate, Welsh wool, glass, gold etc

**Download** a plan of Ruthin Craft Centre from Sergison Bates' website. Use it as a template for an artwork using appropriate local colours and textures. You could make a collage...or a 3D model!

**Make** a plaster cast of an area of ground – capture an imprint of the grass, grains of soil, sand, pebbles, footprints, tyre marks, animal tracks etc (there are numerous websites and videos on YouTube that demonstrate how to do this)

## Further Resources

[www.sergisonbates.co.uk](http://www.sergisonbates.co.uk)

[www.penmorfa.com/bricks/wales2.html](http://www.penmorfa.com/bricks/wales2.html)

[www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Ruthin/](http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Ruthin/)

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