About Us

The Professional School of Practical Stereotomy

The Professional School of Practical Stereotomy is a small private professional school, unique in the English speaking world, where students are given experience in the application of the historic, time-tested techniques of practical stereotomy – L'Art du Trait. Stereotomy employs working drawings to design and construct structures both simple and complex. It is an empirically based method that has been used for millennia in the design and construction of European cathedrals, fortresses, castles, including historically classified UNESCO world heritage monuments such as the Chartres Cathedral. Students of practical stereotomy become knowledgeable through hands-on experience of a process which makes the most complex designs very manageable. In truth, the experience of this approach not only provides students with new skills and enhances those they already possess, but in fact transforms them in a more profound way. They begin not only to do things differently and think differently, but indeed to see differently. To see now what before they could not see. The result of this experience is that students are now able to undertake with confidence projects they previously found intimidating or too complex to attempt.

We've stated that the school teaches techniques of practical stereotomy. To many of you, this might be a new term. So, what is stereotomy? If you looked in dictionary.com, you would see it defined as "the art of cutting three-dimensional solids into particular shapes". So, how does this relate to what we'll be doing?

In fact, what we will be doing as carpenters would be referred to more commonly as "L'Art du Trait". This term was first used by Les Compagnons Du Devoir, an ancient guild system of master craftsmen in France dating from before the 12th century. I first learned of L'Art du Trait and experienced its empowerment during my time in France becoming a member of this guild. L'Art du Trait is really stereotomy as it's used by carpenters. It is empirical knowledge, directly connected to practical work site issues, that has developed into a genuine intellectual discipline that cultivates the art of solving problems on one's own. In applying L'Art du Trait, you will learn to use full size, or scaled down, working drawings to produce structures. In our case, what we will be building most commonly are scaled down models, first of roofs and French Trestles, then of 3 dimensionally curved surfaces. People often consider these types of structures extremely complex and overwhelming because in their experience creating such structures involve a great many abstract complicated formulas and numbers. What L'Art du Trait does is make the procedure a concrete visual one rather than an abstract one. By using scaled down drawings, we will make the complicated abstract math completely unnecessary. By the end, students will find themselves designing and producing structures they didn't think they could by using the exact methods used by the master craftsmen who produced the very architectural masterpieces they admire when they travel in Europe. No calculators or computers needed! This is the beauty and empowerment of "L'Art du Trait".

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People often ask me the question, “Why not just use AutoCAD or SketchUp?” My response is that even the use of this type of software is limited by the capacity of the user. What the experience of practical stereotomy changes are the users themselves. It unleashes their own creative potential by developing their minds, which in turn increases the creativity of their use of such programs, should they choose to use them. If one considers an artist using different media, the artist chooses to use a particular medium because he requires it to express his creative vision. In a similar fashion, when we stimulate the creativity and expand the mental capacity of a craftsman, the technology he employs expresses his vision as well. As such, what he creates is not limited by technology, but rather the technology is at the service of the craftsman. The aim of our school is to expand minds, to inspire people. The ways they choose to express themselves are now limitless. They do not depend upon, but rather creatively use technology.

The very nature of “L’Art du Trait” requires that it must be learned experientially; that is, students learn by doing. With close one-on-one guidance from an instructor, from the beginning students work hands-on creating the drawings they will use to produce their first models. In this context, the teacher is not only an instructor but also a guide and mentor. To learn “L’Art du Trait” it is necessary that students take this hands-on approach, and consequently make mistakes and learn from them. Mistakes are a necessary part of the process and are not considered failures, nor treated as such. Students are encouraged to take chances and experiment, thereby learning and growing through trial and error. As you can see, our approach is a student-centered one; students, by grappling with the production of their own designs and models, come to see things they couldn’t see before. Consequently, this experiential methodology will be inherently satisfying to those who are already artisans and who seek to further enhance their skills and abilities.

The Professional School of Practical Stereotomy offers three levels of professional certification that anyone can challenge at any point. Our certifications are for those that desire personal growth and satisfaction, and character building where the individual fulfills a part of themselves that they intrinsically feel is missing in the craft.

I find the French historian, Francois Icher, in his book The Artisans and Guilds of France, summed up L’Art du Trait very well. “It was used during the construction of some of France’s greatest monuments, and it was perfected over time. For centuries, youngsters on the ‘Tour de France’ have been initiated into the mysteries of the trait in courses given by journeyman professors who are past masters of its subtleties. In fact, the working drawings used in realizing great "master pieces" of carpentry are just as remarkable as the artifacts themselves…The trait transforms the work as well as the worker. With support and supervision of his professor, the student thinks, reflects, and learns to envision differently.”

In 2009, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) placed “L’Art du Trait” on the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

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