



# a reflective craftsman



WINTER 2007 ISSUE 4 RESEARCH REPORT FOR THE WORK OF DR THOMAS HAWSON DESIGNER/MAKER

**Thomas Hawson was awarded Doctor of Philosophy by Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, Brunel University on 9 October 2006. This award was given for his 4 year project with Iceland and submission of his thesis, titled:**

## Contemporary Craft in Iceland: Communicating Culture Through Making

### Abstract

This doctoral project develops an interdisciplinary collaborative approach to furniture designer/maker practice. At its core is a practice-based framework that can be used to assess and reflect upon the tacit, primarily visual nature of makers' knowledge and the way that this can be communicated in order to develop design outcomes.

The enquiry takes as its focus a two-year collaboration between the author – a British-based furniture designer/maker – and six indigenous Icelandic craft practitioners in which the ultimate goal was the creation of artefacts that, it was hoped, would be expressive of Iceland's native craft traditions. During the 'Iceland Project,' as it came to be known, interaction between and among participants was grounded in a predetermined plan developed democratically through consultation and dialogue. The success and value of the project was subsequently assessed through public exhibition, market and peer review.

The project successfully develops a contemporary reinterpretation of indigenous Icelandic craft-making knowledge and demonstrates this through the making of artefacts imbued with recognized cultural status. It also extends furniture designer/maker research by developing an innovative practice-based method of collaboration rooted in the multimedia archiving



PhD project table and chairs made collaboratively with Icelandic craft practitioners.

of the making process which can then be used to illuminate and facilitate future practice.

The project is a scholarly display of makers' knowledge: the process is shared democratically among peers; the decisions that articulate design and methods of making are reviewed; and inter-subjective outcomes are generated. To facilitate learning from designer/maker practice-based research, the creative narrative is necessarily articulated through visual media and artifacts.



PhD project chairs.

## Summary of Exhibition Process and Information Gathering

The exhibition of the project's dining table and chairs, designed and made in partnership with the six selected Icelandic and Nordic makers, went on tour from Iceland to Denmark between 14 August 2004 and 8 October 2004. The exhibition went to the following six venues:

HANDVERK OG HÖNNUN (Handwork and Design), Reykjavik, Iceland.

Gunnarsstofnun, Egilsstaðir, Iceland.

Faroese Crafts Society, Torshaven, Faroe Islands.

Shetland Museum, Shetland, Scotland.

The Lighthouse, Design Museum, Glasgow, Scotland.

The Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark.

During the exhibition tour, a survey was conducted on the visitor's response to the dining table and chairs. The raw data from this survey was analysed and the results show that the table and chairs were thought to express Icelandic and Nordic culture well, a mean answer of 4 on a scale of 1(not at all) to 5(very well) was given, and a mean 70% felt that products with Nordic cultural identity had added value.



Exhibition at Roskilde Viking Ship Museum.

### Extract From Thesis Conclusion

The visual and oral data (on DVD and CD discs) presented with this thesis have uses in further research as references to the different makers and their disciplines. The data from the exhibition tour survey will have applications, particularly for Icelandic craft organisations, for interpreting the Nordic communities reaction to the project and their perception of craft traditions and cultural values.

Having completed the project the author is inspired to continue developing his skills at initiating projects to work in partnership with makers from different disciplines, and in reinterpreting traditional making skills in his own work.



Exhibition in the Faroe Isles.

## Acknowledgements and Thanks for Supporting the Project and Thesis Writing.

Without the enduring patience and willing commitment made by the makers who shared their skills, time and workshops with me, this project could not have happened. I am indebted to Fjølur B. Hlynsson, Þórhildur Þorgeirsdóttir, Grein Oddgeirsson, Gretar Mar Thorvaldsson, Biger Andersen, Ása Hátún and many more makers who did not get directly involved in the project, but gave me their time, knowledge and enthusiasm.

My first supervisor Dr Simon Thorne must be thanked for considering the project proposal as a PhD, supporting its progress with enthusiasm, patience and concise criticism of my writing. My second supervisor Professor Polly Binns has shared her

experience of writing about making and the visual world and together with Simon helped develop the structure of this thesis.

I am also indebted to Tom Burnham, the UK Government's Trade Promoter for the Nordic Region (at the time of starting this project) and friend. From the beginning of my relationship with Iceland he has given me confidence in my ideas and helped realise some of them, with assistance and advice.

Thanks is due to Elsa Einarsdóttir, Trade and Investment Officer, in the Commercial Section of the British Embassy Reykjavik, for being a reliable contact throughout the project, providing valuable information,

advice, translations, and personal support. I was honoured by the British Ambassador Alp Mehmet, for his generous support of the project, and for providing a reception and speech at the opening night of the exhibition tour in Reykjavik.

Thanks go to Odinn Gunnar Ódinson at the East of Iceland Development Agency for providing some travel expenses and the first support for the project in Iceland. Thanks also go to the makers Hlynur Halldórsson (father of Fjølur B. Hlynsson), the partners at Malmsteypan HELLA and Geir Oddgeirsson, who all agreed to play a part in the project at the beginning.

I must give warm thanks to Gisli Thor-

steinsson, Assistant Professor of Craft Design and Technology, at the Iceland University of Education, for sharing with me his broad knowledge of the craft culture in Iceland, organising and accompanying me on tours of makers' workshops, museums and exhibitions, providing translations, accommodation with his family and the use of a car. I owe much to Gisli's generous and enthusiastic support and friendship.

I thank Sigrun Kristjansdottir, curator in the Ethnology and Inga Lára Balduinsdóttir, photo librarian from the National Museum of Iceland, for giving me books, advice and finding photos for my specific needs. Warm thanks goes to Thórhur Tómtsson, curator of the Skogor Folk Museum, for sharing his unique insight into Icelandic crafts and his generous hospitality. The librarian at the Icelandic National Library, Guthrún Eggertsdóttir, I thank for providing exceptional service, advice and arrangement of meetings.

The curators of the exhibition tour venues must be thanked for their patience and sympathy for the project, Sunneva Hafsteinsdóttir and Fjóla Guðmundsdóttir at Handver Og Honnun (Handwork and Design) in Reykjavik, Skúli Björn Gunnarsson at Gunnarsstofnun, East Iceland, Randi S. Vang from the Faroes Crafts Society, Tommy Watt at the Shetland Museum, Lucy McEachan at The Lighthouse Design Museum in Glasgow and Søren Nielsen (head of the Boat Yard) at The Viking ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark. Randi S. Vang must also be thanked for providing accommodation and warm hospitality.

My father, Timothy Hawson, must be thanked for instilling into me at an early age the virtues of craftsmanship and patient observation. I know he will appreciate the acknowledgment and clear visual presentation of the skills of makers. My mother, Sue Hawson, can also be thanked for agreeing once again to do my proof reading.

The hospitality and friendship given to me by Halla Bogadóttir minutes after meeting me off the street in her goldsmith shop in Reykjavik, was most gratefully received. I owe thanks to Kate and Robert Neil for repeatedly providing at short notice, sustenance, entertainment and hospitality in their London home on visits to meet my supervisors. Robert has also shared his knowledge of documentary filming and editing and Kate her professional writing skills reading and correcting my text. Dan Malsen, film-making professional, can be thanked for providing me with a crash course and technical backup in digital video and editing.

Many times and for some weeks I have been resident at Mithus, the farmstead and family home of Fjolinir B. Hlynsson's parents, Edda Kr. Bjornsdóttir and Hlynur Halldórsson and I am very grateful to them for making the East of Iceland feel like home.

Thanks go to the support and funding for the project from Buckinghamshire University College, Brunel University and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Finally I give deep gratitude to my wife Jenny and son Fergus for their enduring encouragement and support. Jenny's company during part of the nine-week exhibition tour, marketing experience, and assistance with data collection, data presentation and comments on my first drafts was much appreciated.



Tom on-top of his truck in the East of Iceland Highlands.

## What Dr Thomas Hawson can share with postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Having been recently awarded with his PhD, Tom is available to provide presentations and workshops on his designer/maker practise-based Iceland project. Presentation and demonstration requests are welcomed from academic institutions and other bodies. Tom is willing to provide presentations and workshops on any specific aspects of his research project or working experience as a furniture designer/maker since 1997.

Presentation and workshop ideas for postgraduate students, include:

**Inventing Methods out of Practice.** How the project methods evolved out of Tom's designer/maker practice.

**The Iceland Project Story,** with slide show. How the project started, how it developed and the outcomes.

**Capture, Presentation and Referencing of Video Interviews,** for shared reflective practice, including workshop of on-the-road use of photography, film and audio devices.



Interview at Roskilde Viking Ship Museum.

Please do not hesitate to contact Tom to discuss any opportunities for him to share his recently acquired research knowledge or experience as a furniture designer/maker. Please review Tom's CV on the background page of his website ([www.thomashawson.com](http://www.thomashawson.com)) for previous experience. References can be provided and appropriate fees for presentations and workshops are negotiable.

# New Website, with thesis, data and films.



Dr Thomas Hawson  
Designer/Maker/Artist



*Thomas Hawson  
Designer/Maker*

Tom has published his thesis and related data and films on his website ([www.thomashawson.com](http://www.thomashawson.com)), making it easy to find references and to refer to the Iceland project findings. The thesis will be especially useful to practice-based researchers in the visual arts but also to crafts practitioners or designer/makers interested in reflecting on their own practice and that of others.

The data gathered from the international exhibition tour questionnaire (sample size of 87) is available for anyone interested. Interested parties would include anyone interested in the North European furniture market and with a specific interest in the continuity of traditional crafts through contemporary reinterpretation.

It is hoped the films will give outsiders to the crafts an insight into the working lives, motivations and background of crafts practitioners. The films also provide practicing crafts people with a means of reflection, comparing thoughts on their own work with that of others, providing a valuable means of reflection in an often-isolated working life. The films demonstrate the positive experience enjoyed by the participating makers in the collaborative and democratic design and make process. This it is hoped will stimulate other crafts practitioners to find or create their own cross-disciplinary collaborative projects.

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Website Front Page [www.thomashawson.com](http://www.thomashawson.com)

## Full Time Mill Renovations

Tom is now working full time renovating the mill at his home, into a studio in which he can develop his practice as a designer/maker/artist. The opportunity to have his own equipped studio and workshop is something he has been dreaming of for some time. Unfortunately the completion of this project is not expected until 2009. All the work is being designed and carried out by Tom with assistance in labour from his father Tim and anyone willing to lend a hand. A start has been made in preparing the ground floor for woodwork machines, with which all the windows, doors and fittings will be made by Tom. This is a long-term project, which Tom believes to be the best way of achieving what he wants with value for money.



Tom and Tim at work in the Mill.

# What do you think about Children and Sharp Axes!

What is your reaction, when I show you these pictures of children as young as 7 years old, in school groups of 12 at a time being taught how to square and shape a piece of green oak with a sharp axe at the Viking Ship Museum in Denmark? These practical hands-on workshops happen daily at the Danish museum and the only accidents recorded so far, are those of the tutors, cutting themselves when they come to put away the tools at the end of the day.

Tom has demonstrated at his local primary school and provided a practical spoon making and whittling workshop in Shetland. A stick was transformed into a spoon using axes and knives, as in the Nordic tradition. It has been a well received experience for participants, in the hands-on-desert of the information age. Tom is presently developing his skills in knife making, forging and tempering to provide combined workshops in tool making and whittling. What age group do you think these workshops would appeal to?

Where are the hands-on experiences for our children?



Axe work at Roskilda Viking Ship Museum.



Tom demonstrating spoon making at local school.



Axe work at Roskilda.



Shetland whittling workshop.

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