

1. Introduction

The author's vision was to share skills and ideas between makers from different making traditions, typical of Icelandic culture, with the aim to develop an artefact suitable for collective batch production in Iceland, with a strong cultural identity that would demonstrate future potential for Iceland's indigenous making traditions. The following describes the events and findings that led the author to put forward the research proposal to BCUC.

1.1. The Author's Background

The author has been running a business since 1997 as a furniture designer/maker based in the Scottish Borders. Throughout his childhood he has made experimental objects such as wooden boats with nails and scrap wood in his father's garden shed. Learning to respect the traditional practice of making things; he looked to historic, contemporary objects and makers as a source of inspiration. Throughout a period of higher education there grew an understanding of the world by reflection through drawing, making and writing. Pursuing a degree course focused on English traditional furniture making which complemented his interest in traditional making practice, he was finally awarded a BA (Hons) degree in Furniture Design and Craftsmanship, from Buckinghamshire College. After graduation in 1997 he found workshop space in the Scottish Borders and started a business with a determination to manage my own business affairs and design and make furniture from wood. A variety of commissions from public and private clients were completed. One commission marks the beginning of the relationship between Iceland and the author. This commission was from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and was to design and make a chair for the Icelandic Parliament Speaker. The chair was a gift from the Scottish Parliament Speaker to the Icelandic Parliament Speaker, to mark the 1000th anniversary of Christianity in Iceland, in Reykjavik, Iceland, on 1st July 2000.

1.2. The Icelandic Parliament Speaker's Chair Commission: The Projects Background

The design brief for the chair given as a gift to the Icelandic Parliament Speaker, came from Tom Burnham, the UK Trade Promoter for the Nordic Region. Tom Burnham worked for the then Trade Partners UK and now UK Trade and Investment. This is a joint agency reporting to the Department of Trade and Industry and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The brief was to design and make a chair that expressed the Icelandic culture, that would be suitable to replace the existing Icelandic Parliament Speaker's Chair, which retained the Danish coat of arms, a symbol of Danish Rule before the independent republic of Iceland was established in 1944¹. The author started the design process by researching the history of Iceland, looking for a typical craft tradition² of Iceland and the Nordic region that could be translated and used to make a chair, along with historical evidence that would link a chosen craft tradition to the history of Iceland. As a designer/maker the author finds visual information and observation are essential references for making things.

Historian Gwyn Jones, in 'A History of the Vikings' described how Iceland was colonized by the Vikings and the original settler, Ingolf Arnerson, is described as a Norwegian Norseman (Viking), in the Viking age sailing to Iceland around 870 AD to find a new home and land of his own³. It was from this book that the illustrations and plate of the elegant Viking ship found in Gokstad (Fig. 1) in Norway struck the author as an obvious cultural symbol of Ingolf's time. The Gokstad ship symbolises to the author the importance of hand skills, material knowledge, and the high status of wood within the Nordic culture.

¹ G. Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, C.Hurst & Co., London, p. 322.

² craft tradition – methods of making artefacts by hand that are handed down through the generations specific to a region or culture.

³ G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, second edition, 1984, p. 275.

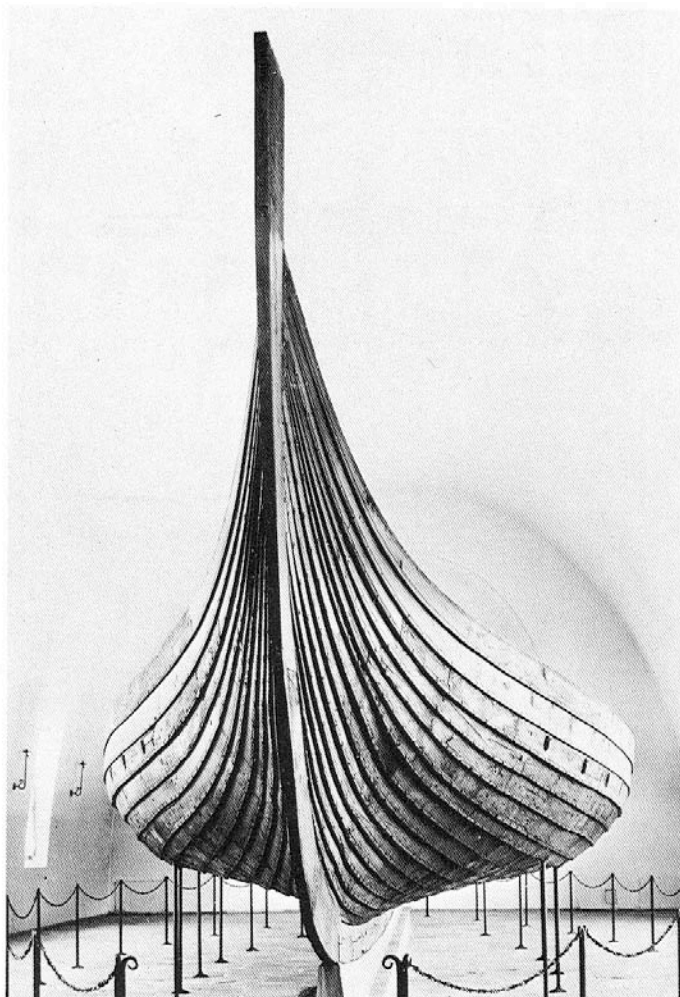


Fig. 1 The Gokstad Ship.

In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, Jan Bill, Research Fellow at the Centre for Maritime Archaeology, National Museum of Denmark, Roskilde, wrote that;

Although shipbuilding traditions in Viking-Age Scandinavia were not fundamentally different from those in other parts of northern Europe, archaeological evidence shows that Viking Ships were lighter, slimmer, faster, and thus better sailers than the heavier vessels used by the English and presumably, the Franks at that time.⁴

The Viking ship is unmistakably related to the foundation of Icelandic history. The author saw this as a starting point and opportunity to explore the

⁴ J. Bill, 'Ships and Seamanship', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. P. Sawyer, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p. 182.

technology of Viking shipbuilding to influence the design and making of the chair. The process of using traditional craft methods of manipulating materials with hands and hand tools, relatively uncommon to furniture making, was already a familiar method of creating innovative furniture designs by the author. Two examples made by the author as an undergraduate at BCUC that illustrate the use of traditional making methods not normally related to making furniture, are the cherry picking ladder writing desk (Fig. 2) and coat rake (Fig. 3, page 21).



Fig. 2 Cherry picking ladder writing desk, made by the author, 2000.

Hand skills used to make this ladder include: ladder sides and rungs shaped and finished with a drawknife; splitting of the Oak rungs with a froe.



Fig. 3 Coat rake, made by the author as undergraduate, 1996.

Hand shaped and finished with a drawknife and made from green (unseasoned) Ash.

Following some brief sketches of ideas for the Speakers Chair (Fig. 4, page 22), that might express the ship building methods of the time the author looked for a practising boat builder who was prepared to share his practical knowledge and help resolve the sketch design. The first boat builder to be found who was making boats in the Nordic (Viking) tradition was Peter Matheson who was building boats with the Galgael Trust in Glasgow. The author visited him and received a practical and demystifying demonstration of the elements of boat building required to complete the design of the Speakers Chair and make it. Working with Peter Matheson, a master boat builder, alongside the boat he was in the process of building, was a deeply rewarding and stimulating experience. Peter Matheson's explanation, with hand gestures, of how to handle the tools, and the half built boat constantly being referred to for explaining the making methods required for the

Speaker's Chair design, was a 'learning to make' experience never before received with such effectiveness.

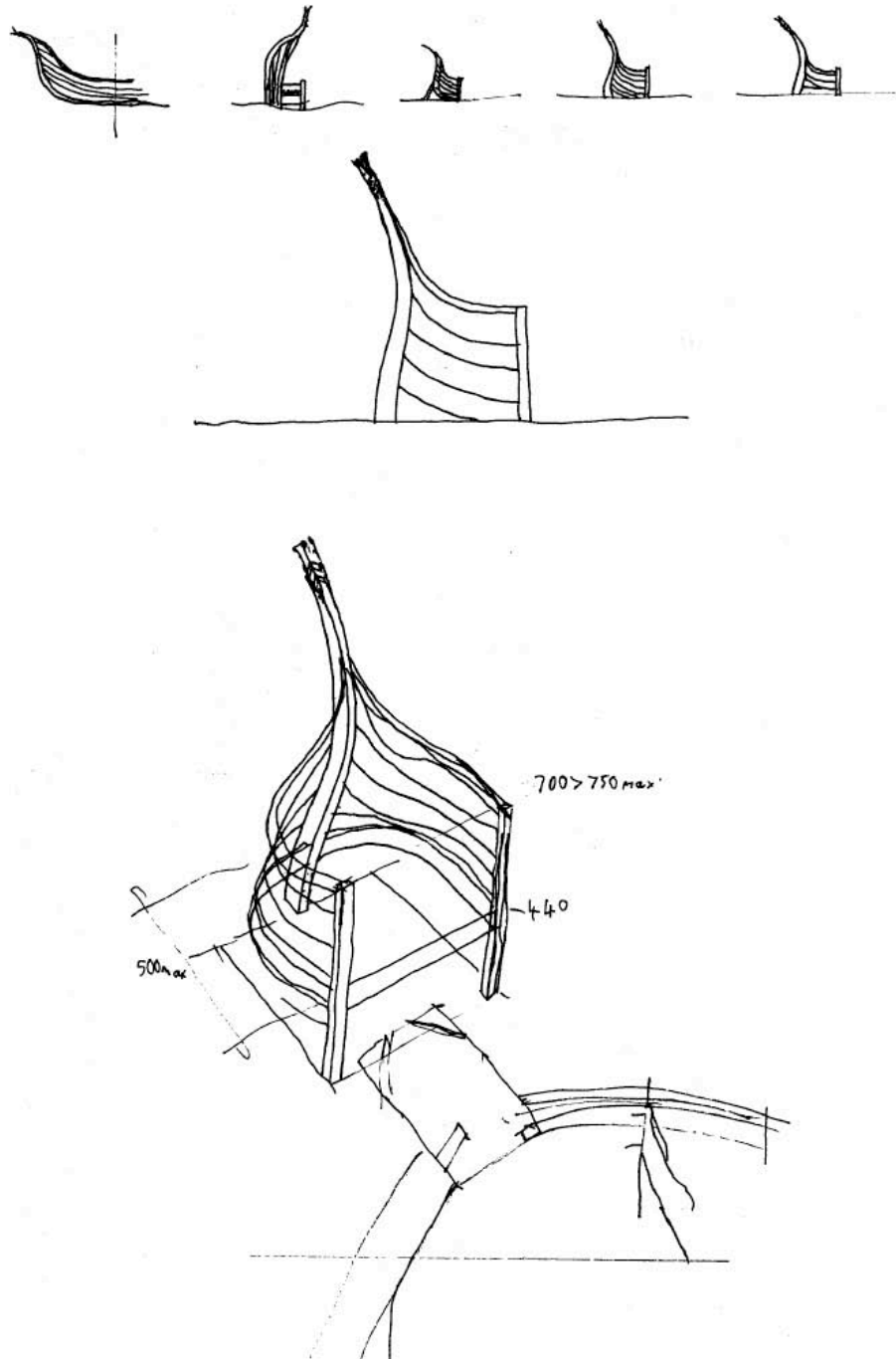


Fig. 4 First sketch design of the Iceland Parliament Speakers Chair.

During the process of making the final chair the author felt overwhelming confidence in his hands.

“My hands were making the chair by themselves, like a reflex, without consciously controlling them. I have experienced this feeling of my hands working automatically at complex but repeated tasks and been impressed at their skill, but never have they operated in such a way while carrying out a making task so unfamiliar to them.”

While this experience of hands having a mind of their own, may sound a little strange to non-makers, it is probably familiar to most well practised makers. What it suggested to the author was that elements of the boat making process demonstrated by Peter had come through generations of boat builders in the same way. Having completed the Speaker’s Chair with the help of Peter’s demystifying explanation, the author felt he had no ownership of the skills required to make the chair and therefore could not call the chair a product of his own. Hence when visiting the Icelandic Parliament the following year to see the Speakers Chair in situ, the author, when asked to sign the visitors book as the maker of the chair, signed on behalf of generations of Scottish makers, by signing the outline of his hand “Scottish Makers”, (Fig. 5).

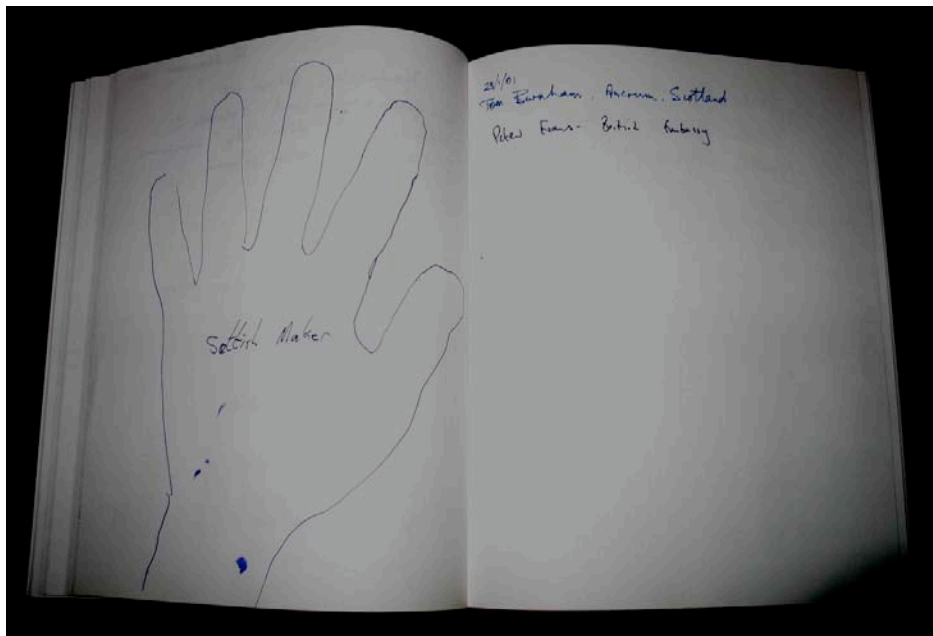


Fig. 5 Hand print signature by the author in the Icelandic parliament visitor’s book.

The Icelandic Parliament Speaker’s Chair commission (Fig. 6), demonstrated the author’s ability to physically imitate another maker’s physical actions and

description of their specialised discipline, and to reinterpret this tacit and visual knowledge into the design and making process of his own discipline.



Fig. 6 Icelandic parliament speakers chair.

It was felt by the author that, because he had been working for some time as a professional furniture maker in wood and was well practised at making within his own discipline, his abilities, as an observing apprentice, were greatly enhanced. The potential for innovation by cross-referencing making methods by brief apprenticeships with other makers was an opportunity the author wanted to explore further. This self awareness of the author's making

and imitating abilities had not been realised in this way before, and recognition of the intelligence that lies within the hands of the maker was unfolding. This is not to say that the author fully understood his imitating and making ability or the implications of it, only that he recognized it as a practised skill in its own right, with future potential and that the artefacts made represent very complex creative journeys, full of meaning. Frans de Waal, Professor of Primate Behaviour at Emory University, wrote that;

Imitation is seen as one of the highest cognitive feats. Think about it: how does one get from watching another individual's actions to performing the same actions for the same purpose? Imitation requires that visual input is converted into motor output, telling the body to re-enact what the eye saw.⁵

The design of the Iceland Parliament Speaker's Chair was led by the making process, using the methods of traditional making processes as a decorative element to convey cultural meaning. Visual and physical communication has led the development of traditional making practices over generations, making them undoubtedly part of most cultures, embedded in remnants of traditional making practice, artefacts of the past and our environment. Deborah Schneebeli-Morrell, a maker who works in paper maché, spoke at the Ideas in the Making: Theory and Practice Conference at the University of East Anglia, 1998, wrote in her paper.

'That somehow vital knowledge and intelligence and even perhaps ancestral history is carried through manual work'.⁶

To explore further new skill in imitating crafts of the past and to influence one-off designs that carry cultural meaning, potential was seen in the possibility of influencing industrially made products. From the development of these new skills an idea for a project was forming. For the maintenance of cultural continuity, traditional practice can play a role in the forming and influencing of the modern industrial process and industrially made product.

⁵ F. Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master*, Penguin, St Ives, 2001, p. 219.

⁶ D. Schneebeli-Morrell, 'She's Clever with Her Hands', in *Ideas in the Making: Theory and Practice*, H P. Johnson, Crafts Council, London, 1998, P.49.

The modern maker, with knowledge of traditional practice and an understanding of areas of industrial production, can rapidly make innovative demonstration artefacts, challenging design for industrial practice. Making demonstration artefacts almost entirely by intuition and a creative making process provides artefacts that could be exposed to a potential buying audience for assessment. This assessment would consider its viability as an industrially made artefact and its success at carrying cultural content, and it would also stimulate the market to consider alternatives to the norm and the value of cultural content in repeat production artefacts.

The Parliament Speaker's Chair commission inspired the author with a growing interest in Icelandic culture and its economic climate and it created an opportunity to develop a project in partnership with Icelandic makers. The author's vision was to share skills and ideas between makers from different making traditions, typical of Icelandic culture, with the aim to develop an artefact suitable for collective batch production in Iceland, with a strong cultural identity that would demonstrate future potential for Iceland's indigenous making traditions.

In January 2001 the author made a trip to Iceland⁷ to propose a project to Icelandic makers from different fields, government development agencies and other relevant bodies, to gauge their interest and potential commitment in participation and support of the proposed project. The proposed project was to develop a new export from Iceland. To do this the author proposed to select a group of Icelandic makers from different disciplines who could share their skills and workshops, and with them he would design and make a demonstration artefact. He would then propose a production process for the artefact in Iceland, and test the market for the artefact. The project was received with support from the East of Iceland Development Agency, who were prepared to fund some internal travel expenses of the author's to complete the project. Icelandic makers also offered their support for the

⁷ This trip was made, as part of an organised Export Explorer Mission, subsidised by the British Government Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

project and agreed to share their facilities and traditional Icelandic making skills, to make a demonstration artefact in collaboration with the author. Further funding and support was gained in the UK in the form of a bursary to complete the project as a PhD with Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC).

Iceland was an attractive place to carry out the project because:

- Iceland has a living indigenous making heritage, tied to Nordic traditions.
- Iceland as a member of the Nordic community has a sympathy and commitment to support a project that aims to preserve and promote its cultural heritage.
- To minimise the mass depopulation of rural communities, as agriculture becomes less and less profitable, diversification is required.
- Their reliance on fish exports forces them to look at diversification.
- Oak and aluminium were materials processed with renewable geothermal and hydroelectric energy and ready for use in large quantities in Iceland.
- Icelanders are familiar with distance communication, via the internet.
- Icelanders are familiar with the English language, using it for most international communication.

The proposed project included a design brief for a dining room table and chair. The choice to design and make a dining table and chairs was made because they are typical domestic artefacts of the West European home, and were familiar commissions in the author's professional furniture making experience. A dining room table and chairs would be familiar as artefact

types with all the makers participating in the designing and making process. The following was the proposed design brief:

- Artefact to be a domestic dining table and chair.
- Its design to be influenced by the traditions of Icelandic making.
- To carry or represent in the nature of its design, Icelandic culture.
- Made from oak and aluminium.
- The artefact to be sold to the home market and exported to other Nordic countries.

1.3. Project Overview

The ambition for the project was to design and make a dining table and chairs in partnership with Icelandic makers, physically involving and sharing the whole process with them. The author saw the project as an opportunity to explore the potential for makers across different disciplines and levels of expertise to learn from the experience of sharing physical and cultural making knowledge. The author positioned himself as the medium and facilitator to a selected group of 6 makers from different disciplines and Nordic locations. Taking a role as apprentice, he physically worked for each of the selected makers for 1 to 2 weeks, empathising with their work while making alongside them, responding to their materials, watching their hand control, emulating it and learning from them. While working as apprentice to the makers their potential input into the making of a table and chairs was considered through experimental making, discussion and reflection. These learning experiences and the work of each maker were then considered while drawing up design proposals for a table and chairs. These designs aimed to reflect the work of the selected makers. Having gone through a process of amending the designs on paper with the selected makers the author travelled to Iceland to make the table and chairs. In the workshops of Gretar Mar Thorvaldsson, Geir Oddgeirsson and Fjolinir Hlynsson (joined in Gretar's workshop by Thorhildur Thorgeirsdottir another of the selected makers from Iceland), the table and chairs' design developed considerably during the making process, and the final table and chairs were made. The author and the selected makers physically shared the making process, and, during this physical interaction and discussion, the influence of the non-present makers was shared also.

This process of interaction to design and make the table and chairs was primarily a physical and visual one with some discussion. To capture the process of interaction different media and methods were used including:

- Digital video recordings - these were made during the author's apprenticeship with each maker as formal interviews and at moments where design decisions were being made during the making of the table and chairs.
- Audio recordings - conversations on the telephone, face-to-face meetings and the author's personal reflections were recorded throughout the project.
- Still images - were taken to reference artefacts and moments of the designing and making process.
- Artefacts - were made throughout the project and can be considered as the outcome of shared experiences and shared experimental making. These include: experiments made during the two-week apprenticeship to the makers; models, full scale mock ups and more experiments made in preparation for the design proposal; finally the table and chairs made in Iceland with the selected makers.

The above can be seen as references to the shared physical making experiences of the author and the selected makers. These references when reviewed by the selected makers having completed the project and other makers outside the project will serve as the most appropriate medium for reflection. They also serve as important references within the presentation of the project thesis.

The table and chairs, along with DVD presentations of the audio and visual reference material recorded during the author's apprenticeships and the designing and making of the table and chairs, were exhibited at the following six venues in the four countries from which the different participants came from:

- HANDVERK OG HÖNNUN (Handwork and Design), Reykjavik, Iceland. 14 August - 20 August 2004
- Gunnarsstofnun, Egilsstaðir, Iceland. 22 August - 29 August 2004
- Faroes Crafts Society annual show, Tórshavn, Faroe Islands. 4 September - 7 September 2004
- Shetland Museum, Lerwick, Shetland. 11 September – 16 September 2004
- The Lighthouse Design Museum, Glasgow, Scotland. 21 September – 24 September 2004
- The Viking ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark. 29 September – 4 October 2004

The exhibition shared with a broad audience the outcomes and activities of the project. Feedback from the exhibition audience was recorded via questionnaires and used to reflect on, and assess, the project's success in developing a table and chairs suitable for repeat production in Iceland raising support in the broader community for the activities of makers and outcomes of the project.