

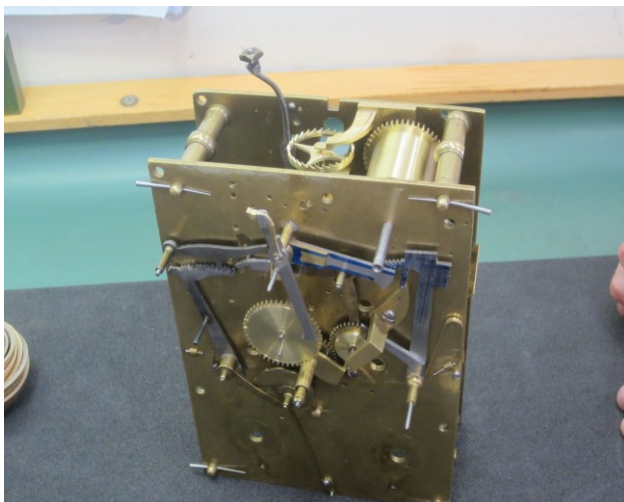
WEST DEAN COLLEGE: A GEM IN THE WEST SUSSEX COUNTRYSIDE AND A BASTION FOR THE PURSUIT AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SKILLS IN THE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF FINE ART OBJECTS, AND THE CREATIVE VISUAL ARTS.



Originally the private estate of Edward James, a 20th century philanthropist and patron of the Arts, the mansion, art collection and the 100 acre grounds were made a charitable trust (The Edward James Foundation) in 1964 to ensure that traditional craft practices would not be lost. The College is now affiliated to the University of Sussex.



The College teaches practical artisan skills in Furniture, Ceramics, Musical Instruments, Horology, Metalwork (including jewellery), Books and Manuscripts, where the focus is, variously, on conservation and restoration. Students are assessed for practical skills and are taught in well-equipped workshops. There is also a programme in the Creative Visual Arts.



Students can study for graduate or postgraduate diplomas. Practical projects, such as the restoration of this antique clock mechanism are the central focus, but more academic elements are included. An MA in Collection Management is also offered. Staff/student ratios are very favourable and bursaries are available. Competition for places is fierce.



Antique items are offered to the College for restoration by museums, libraries and private individuals, and after their initial technical training each student will receive one or more of these to work on. Some restorations are done collectively. Workshops are well equipped, with every kind of traditional and modern tool available. Workshops open for most of the day and the evening.



In 2017/18 The Arts Society Sussex Area awarded a scholarship to Stephen Loader (pictured) to assist his studies for a foundation degree in Historic Craft Practices (Horology). Here he talks to Gillian Baker, Area Young Arts Coordinator about his project of restoring an old carriage clock and explains how he has designed new cutting tools, to make new parts which accurately engage with the existing mechanism.



Rosie Blay (pictured) also received a scholarship from The Arts Society Sussex Area in support of her study for a graduate diploma in Conservation of Ceramics. Project work typically includes the reconstruction of broken porcelain, using resins to bond the pieces and replace missing fragments, as well as colour matching against original pigments used in decoration.



In 2018 we reverted to offering a single Scholarship, but increased its value to £4000. The recipient, selected by West Dean, but approved after dialogue with TAS Sussex Area, is Samuel Matthews, who is studying furniture making and restoration. Samuel has been an enthusiastic wood carver since the age of 13, and has achieved tertiary education qualifications in woodwork skills. Now he tops this off with the rounded and career-creating postgraduate qualifications which West Dean provides. Here we see Samuel at his workshop bench with his current project piece (see below).



The course begins with basic wood-carving and wood-working skills. Here the students carve letters into wood blocks. The mountain range (lower middle) is one of Samuel's pieces, illustrating his skills. The course then progresses to higher level skills. The furniture workshop itself is atmospheric (look at the background of the previous photo), with the aroma of freshly cut wood and rows and rows of specialist tools each in their assigned place on the racks.



An early challenge is to remake a piece of antique furniture. Samuel has been allocated a painter's portable easel, based on an early 19th century design. This is shown here, first realised in softwood. The piece has articulating brass joints in two places (the supporting frame itself and the fold-out tray at the bottom to support the canvas). Underneath there is a drawer intended to contain brushes and paints. Did Constable or Turner use such a device?



The final product has to be made in mahogany, and is shown here in its final stages of creation. The finish includes polishing of the wood into a classic hue and the addition of a brass lock, which protects both the opening of the box itself and the underlying drawer. The finish stops short of being French Polishing as strictly defined, in consideration of the fact that an easel will be immediately stained by paints!



The furniture workshop is atmospheric, with an aroma of freshly cut wood, an amazing array of cutting and chiselling tools, a machine shop for cutting raw wood blocks, a library or rare and ancient wood offcuts, and a chemistry laboratory for the analysis of compositions of woody fragments, veneers and paints. A veneer hammer is shown here.



Postgraduate education at West Dean College is cross-disciplinary. In the lecture room (illustrated) student in all the practical disciplines attend each other's specialist lectures, as well as exchanging their individual issues and challenges. The room also provides a dust-free environment for the application and drying of stains and polishes.