

Richard Bray. Ivory plaque furniture element. Stylized date palm.
Nimrud. Iraq. 900-701 B.C.
March 2008.

I first came upon this piece in 1990 and sketched it, putting it away for future reference. Drawing something is a good way of analysing its form, much better than just photographing it. The process of repeating the shapes and patterns of a piece from three dimensions onto paper helps me to physically connect with the way it was made.

The plaque itself, made within its material and functional boundaries, has a stylized rhythm and order, suggesting it was made to repeat itself in a frieze and had to conform to certain preordained dimensions. But it is clearly derived from a natural source that in itself grew according to natural rules of form, distribution and repetition. It has to suggest volume, perspective and complexity within itself, whilst remaining essentially flat.

This illusion of form and complexity suggested to me ways of approaching work that, whilst restricted by its material (maybe a wood board) also had a vitality and engagement for the viewer, that had its own internal logic but that also referred to other, natural processes, using a material that showed the marks of growth and layering.

As I now know, the palm motif had strong connections to kingship and fertility and can be seen in some extraordinary friezes from Assyria. The decorative element of this plaque has reduced what was once a highly important symbol of the central and natural power of royalty to a pattern. It reminds me of the basic symbolic function of patterning and, in a sense, the ultimate demise of meaning when contexts and beliefs change. If the nursery rhyme is the myth downgraded, then surely pattern is the powerful symbol trivialised.

If Art is to survive and continue to produce meaningful objects which can be widely read and understood then it has to retain a relevant position in society and not exist merely for decorative or commercial reasons. It used to be a dream of the new structures of society proposed in the early 20th century that artists would have an integrated function in society. Now they often seem to occupy an esoteric and highly specialised place, derided by some and idolised by others. Let us redress the balance and produce work that has relevance for all, meaning for all and is produced in the right spirit of generosity and celebration of life.