

SIMEON WARREN, DEAN OF
THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF
THE BUILDING ARTS, CARVING
STONE. AS THE FIRST FOUR-
YEAR BACCALAUREATE DEGREE
FOR BUILDING CRAFTSMANSHIP
IN THE UNITED STATES, THE
COLLEGE IS HELPING CHANGE
HOW FUTURE CRAFTSPEOPLE
ARE EDUCATED AND TRAINED.



Earl Barthé is the Jelly Roll Morton of plaster. Like the legendary jazz pianist, the 84-year-old New Orleans craftsman is a master of improvisation in his medium. In fact, he often describes his highly ornate ceiling medallions and crown moldings in musical terms, such as “arias in plaster.” Barthé, a self-described “Creole of Color,” is descended from a long line of plasterers, beginning with his great-great grandfather who came to New Orleans from France via Haiti.

In 2005, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded Barthé a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship, recognizing his lifetime achievement in building craftsmanship. As he described in an interview at the time, the Barthé family is one of the most recognized plaster families in the United States. “My father was a plasterer, his father was a plasterer, his uncles and everybody else were plasterers. The Barthé children just knew they had to be plasterers. Daddy didn’t want me to be a doctor, a lawyer, or an Indian chief. He wanted me to be a plasterer.” Hurchail Barthé, Earl’s son, continued the tradition by learning the plaster trade.

But a profound shift has occurred over the last generation. “Plastering families wanted their children to follow in their footsteps,” said Barthé. “You don’t have that as much now. I have grandchildren who are nurses, doctors, and things like that. It would be difficult to say, ‘I want you to be a plasterer.’” But the future of New Orleans and the United States’ architectural heritage depends on just that—the survival of not just plastering, but all the traditional building trades.

Rebuilding the Building Arts

by MORRIS HYLTON III

The loss of craftspeople experienced in historic building materials and techniques is directly related to the steady erosion of traditional systems of training. The causes are myriad and complex.

The introduction of modern building materials and technologies resulting from the rise in industrialization over the last 100 or so years—but particularly since World War II—has impacted how craftspeople are trained and employed. Small family-oriented workshops have been replaced with larger construction companies, resulting in the loss of apprenticeship opportunities in traditional construction methods. Existing apprenticeship programs, such as those developed and supported by the major trade unions like the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, focus primarily on contemporary building applications and, at best, offer only an introduction to traditional technologies and preservation.

Then there are the changes in the American public educational system. Most schools expect high-level students to pursue a two-year associates or four-year baccalaureate degree after graduation. In 2002, for instance, the federal government—as part of the “No Child Left Behind” Act—proposed to significantly decrease funds allocated toward vocational education. With strong opposition from organizations like the Association for Career Technical Education and National Association of Secondary School Principals, the original bill was altered and the federal monies for vocational programs remained intact. But despite the survival of the funding for vocational programs, the majority of support goes toward training in computers and other technologies. Much less is allocated for instruction in the construction trades.

But perhaps the greatest impact on the recruitment and education of building craftspeople is the lack of respect our society affords to those who work with their hands. The skills of building artisans are often unappreciated. Individuals who work with their hands—as well as their heads—are

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often treated as second-class citizens. To echo the sentiment of Earl Barthé: How many parents today encourage their children to be plasterers or masons or timber framers instead of doctors, lawyers, and bankers?

These societal and economic changes and their impact on the traditional building trades have occurred over several generations, and it will take several generations to reverse the trend. WMF is leading the effort.

For more than four decades, building-crafts training in the service of preservation has been a global theme of WMF programs. In Cambodia, WMF helped create a new generation of preservation-minded masons to conserve the ancient remains of Angkor after many of the country's artisans lost their lives during the violent rule of the Khmer Rouge. WMF supported the formation of a school of carpentry in Chiloé, Chile, to aid in the restoration of hundreds of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century churches, constructed by local craftsman using historic shipbuilding techniques and methods. The churches—threat-

IN 2006, WMF LAUNCHED A FIELD SCHOOL AT THE MOUNT LEBANON SHAKER VILLAGE WHERE APPRENTICES FROM THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF THE BUILDING ARTS AND FRENCH COMPAGNONS WORKED WITH STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA COLLEGE OF DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION, AND PLANNING AND THE BROOKLYN HIGH SCHOOL OF THE ARTS TO RESTORE THE TIMBER FRAME OF AN 1830 GRANARY.

American College of the Building Arts, Charleston, SC

In 2003, WMF facilitated a partnership between the Association Ouvrière des Compagnons du Devoir et Tour de France—France's highly regarded system for education building craftsman—and the then School of the Building Arts in Charleston, SC, (see ICON Spring 2005). The School of the Building Arts was founded in 1988 to address the lack of qualified craftspeople needed to restore the historic buildings of Charleston following Hurricane Hugo. The Compagnons served as a model as the leaders and staff of the School of Building Arts developed a four-year program and, in 2005, launched the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA), the first baccalaureate degree for building craftsmanship in the United States. "You can't restore historic buildings if you don't have the skilled craftspeople," says Simeon Warren, Dean of the College and Professor of Architectural Stone Carving. "Over the past 100 years, the educational pathways that led to that kind of skill level have broken down.

We're trying to help rebuild those systems."

The ACBA educates and trains artisans in the traditional building arts to foster exceptional craftsmanship and encourage the preservation, enrichment, and appreciation of architectural heritage. Students major in one of seven crafts: timber framing, carpentry, masonry, stone carving, plaster, ornamental iron work, and painting and finishes. "As a college, we're trying to reconnect the hand-skills with the mind," says Warren. "And we emphasize the theoretical knowledge that you need to really learn the trade and eventually become a great craftsperson."



Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Center

At the post-graduate level, WMF supported the formation of the Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Center, the nation's only non-profit dedicated to educating stained glass artisans and conservators. "We've had six full-time apprentices since we've started and each one has been successful," says David Fraser, executive director and senior conservator of the center. A partnership with the Preservation Arts and Technology High School Program in Brooklyn, the first high school in the United States to teach the building trades using the theme of historic preservation, also brings interns into the studio each summer. "We've had the most wonderful kids, and each one has designed and made a stained glass window," says Fraser. "We give them these skills, these twelfth-century techniques, and they get a whole new sense of what they're capable of." Since 2003, WMF has helped fund an exchange program that allows French stained glass artisans—early in their apprenticeships and careers—to work at the studio, learning the materials and techniques specific to stained glass in this country, specifically the methods employed by the disciples of Louis Comfort Tiffany.



IN OCTOBER 2006, MORE THAN 80 STUDENTS FROM THE PRIESTLEY HIGH SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDING CONSTRUCTION IN NEW ORLEANS PARTICIPATED IN A SERIES OF DEMONSTRATION RESTORATION PROJECTS AND WORKSHOPS SPONSORED BY WMF AND PRESERVATION TRADES NETWORK FOR THE HOLY CROSS NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE CITY'S LOWER NINTH WARD. NEW ORLEANS STUDENTS HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH FELLOW STUDENTS FROM THE PRESERVATION ARTS & TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM AT THE BROOKLYN HIGH SCHOOL OF THE ARTS.

ened as much by the decline in the number of local craftspeople as by wood rot and insect damage—were placed on the first WMF watch list of *100 Most Endangered Sites* in 1996.

In the United States, WMF has emerged as a leader in a growing effort to raise public awareness of the role of the craftspeople in the preservation process, and to create new and sustain existing educational opportunities for those interested in becoming building artisans. In 1993, WMF convened a symposium that brought together representatives from the public and private sectors to examine how the country's youth and displaced workers could be introduced to technical vocations in preservation and trained to fill jobs. A direct outcome of the symposium was the development of the Preservation Arts & Technology High School program.

In 2000, WMF partnered with the New Jersey Institute of Technology's Center for Architecture and Building Science research to create the nation's first high school dedicated to preservation. Housed within the Brooklyn High School of the Arts, the program exposes its students to historic architecture, traditional building construction, and preservation, while those students majoring in preservation arts take additional hands-on classes focusing on the technical application of the trades and preservation.

Beyond the high school level, which introduces and recruits young people to the building trades and preservation, WMF has supported a number of other innovative educational programs that are changing how the next generation of craftspeople are formally educated and trained. These include the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA), the first four year-year baccalaureate degree for building craftsmanship in the United States, and the Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Center, the nation's only non-profit with the mission of training stained glass artisans and conservators (see sidebars).

Employing the lessons learned creating programs like the Preservation Arts & Technology High School, WMF consolidated its activities in 2004 and launched the Traditional Building Arts Initiative. Recognizing the many needs impacting traditional building education, WMF designed a multifaceted approach aimed at raising public and professional awareness and experimenting with new ways to recruit and educate the next generation of building artisans.

WMF has organized and supported a number of forums that bring together people



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from both within and outside the preservation community to learn from one another's experiences and to work together toward a common goal. At Belmont Technical College in St. Clairsville, Ohio, in 2005, WMF participated in and sponsored the first International Trades Education Symposium organized by the Preservation Trades Network—a national, non-profit organization whose mission is to provide educational opportunities in the preservation-focused building trades and to develop a network of interested organizations and individuals. Craftspeople, architecture and preservation specialists, and educators from more than ten countries gathered to share individual experiences. Supported by WMF, Japanese carpenters and members of Kezurou-Kai—an organization dedicated to preserving knowledge of traditional Japanese woodworking skills—underscored the importance of building crafts knowledge as intangible cultural heritage. In Japan, the government designates living master craftspeople as national treasures.

In addition to the public and professional forums, WMF assembled representatives from a number of organizations and groups, such as the National Council for Preservation Education, and formed a task force to examine traditional building education from a national perspective. The trades are not tracked by the federal government or the construction industry, so task force members are currently working on a strategic plan to survey and assess the traditional building trades in the United States one at a time.

While the task force takes a “top-down” approach to building craft education, the traditional building and historic preservation field school developed by WMF is intended to address one of the most important needs from the bottom up. Initiated for the first time at Mount Lebanon Shaker Vil-



Traditional Building and Historic Preservation Field School

WMF partnered with the Preservation Trades Network (PTN), American College of the Building Arts, and the University of Florida's College of Design, Construction and Planning to develop the Traditional Building and Historic Preservation Field School model. Among the school's goals are fostering interaction between craftspeople and preservation specialists, as well as promoting local traditional building and preservation education. In the summer of 2006, first-year students from the American College of the Building Arts and advanced students from France's Association Ouvrière des Compagnons du Devoir et Tour de France worked with architecture and historic preservation graduate students from the University of Florida to survey, document, and restore the timber frame structure of the 1838 North Family Shaker Granary at Mount Lebanon Shaker Village in New Lebanon, New York. "It is a completely unique building in the United States and was meticu-

lously crafted," says Rudy Christian, a master timber framer and project development director for PTN who led the field school. "So it was perfect place for students to step in to the boots of a master builder. Once they learned how to read the building, the carpenter's way of thinking nearly 200 years ago was transferred to the students today. There is no way you could have taught that to them on a blackboard." The field school should serve as a successful model that can be adapted at other cultural heritage sites in the U.S. Discussions are underway for similar schools in Newburgh, New York, and Charleston, South Carolina.



A FIFTH-GENERATION PLASTERER, EARL BARTHÉ RETURNED TO HIS HOME CITY OF NEW ORLEANS IN OCTOBER 2006 TO ACCEPT THE ASKINS ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FOR THE PROMOTION, APPLICATION, AND EDUCATION OF PRESERVATION TRADE SKILLS. DURING HIS VISIT, BARTHÉ VISITED THE DEMONSTRATION RESTORATION PROJECTS AT LAFAYETTE CEMETERY NO. 1, WHICH ARE BEING SPONSORED BY WMF AND IMPLEMENTED BY THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF THE BUILDING ARTS AND THE PRESERVATION TRADES NETWORK.

lage in New Lebanon, New York, in summer 2006, the field school model created by WMF brings together building trades apprentices from programs like the ACBA and graduate-level students in architecture, preservation, and allied disciplines and allows them to work together to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom or shop to a real-world project. A 2004 and 2006 WMF Watch site, Mount Lebanon Shaker Village was the physical and spiritual center of the Shaker world. The aesthetic principles that define the Shakers' distinct material culture—including objects, furnishings, and architecture—were first developed at Mount Lebanon along with the concept of craftsmanship as a form of worship.

Based in part on the field-school model developed and employed at Mount Lebanon, WMF collaborated with the Preservation Trades Network and University of Florida College of Design, Construction, and Planning to undertake a series of workshops complementing a number of demonstration restoration projects along the post-Hurricane Katrina Gulf Coast. In late October 2006, over 200 craftspeople and preservation specialists descended on

the Holy Cross neighborhood of New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward to participate in an International Preservation Trades Workshop and to volunteer on one of four projects to restore the community's historic architecture. A separate workshop was held at the city's Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, where participants repaired and stabilized three historic tombs damaged by the hurricane.

Earl Barthé and his family—who were displaced by the flooding—traveled home to New Orleans so he could be honored at the workshop with an Askins Achievement Award presented by Preservation Trades Network. Named for Jim Askins, the founder of the U.S. National Park Service Preservation Training Center, the award recognizes outstanding contributions and accomplishments in the promotion, education, and application of preservation trades skills. Barthé spoke of his desire to start a formal apprenticeship program to recruit young people to the trades. He also took part in the Lafayette cemetery workshop.

"Meeting Mr. Barthe was a real inspiration," says Mimi Conlon, a first-year ACBA student who participated in the cemetery workshop. "He's amazing, a legend. And when he was talking to us about working with plaster, you got the sense that there is so much you can do with your life when you have these skills." The nation's architectural legacy depends on the transfer and survival of the knowledge of master craftsmen like Barthé to students like Conlon. With the growth in partnerships and projects WMF has helped foster, there is real hope for the future. This summer Conlon will participate in the field school at Mount Lebanon. Inspired by her training at the ABCA and experience at workshops like the one at Lafayette cemetery, she will put her skills to use restoring a stone barn expertly built by the Shakers in 1860, a promising place to begin a career in the building arts. ■