

Book Review

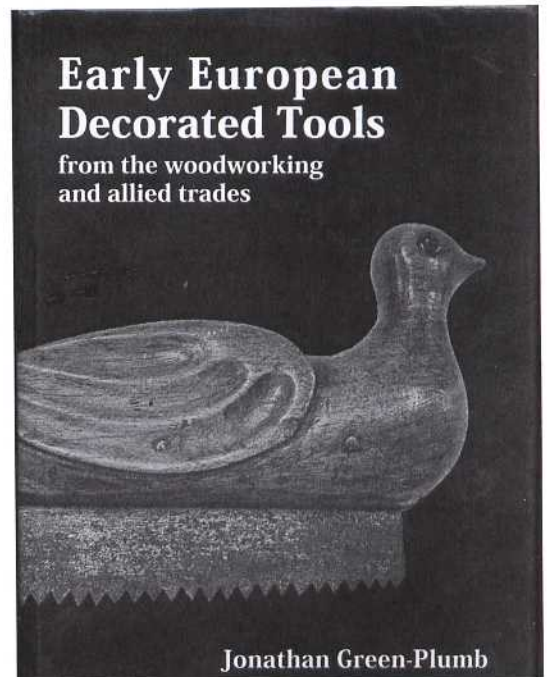
Early European Decorated Tools from the Woodworking and Allied Trades, by Jonathon Green-Plumb, published by Stobart Davies Ltd., Ammanford, UK

Antique Woodworking Tools: Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century, by David R. Russell, published by John Adamson, Cambridge, UK

Books by and for tool collectors tend to fall into two categories: those that focus, often obsessively, on a particular type of tool or group of makers, and the coffee table book in which the emphasis is the beauty of the images. Two recent books from the UK – one a catalogue of one of the best known European collections, and the other by an author who is relatively unknown to US readers – are both worthy examples of the latter type and deserving of a spot on the collector's bookshelf.

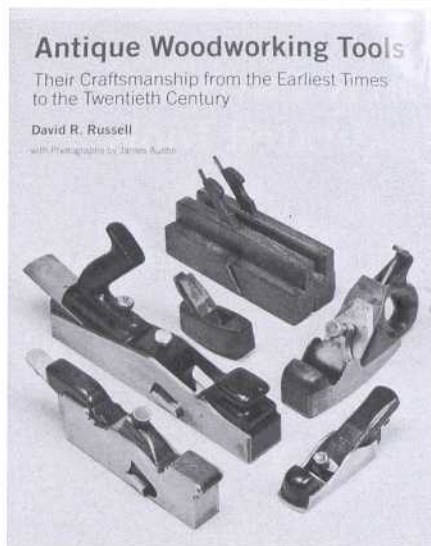
Early European Decorated Tools from the Woodworking and Allied Trades is by Jonathon Green-Plumb who, according to the jacket copy, is a self-taught woodworker and a design and technology high school teacher with a master's degree in fine art sculpture. Although I haven't run into Mr. Green-Plumb in tool collecting circles, he clearly has an extensive collection of his own as well as a broad knowledge of European tools, primarily from the eighteenth century and earlier when the arts of woodcarving and decorative metalwork were at their peaks. Also according to the jacket copy, he received a grant from England's Tools and Trades History Society to allow him to research the book, and he has made good use of it.

Mr. Green-Plumb's goal is more ambitious than that of the typical coffee table book. Rather



than simply including as many lavish photographs as possible, he sets out to use different specific tools, or types of tools, as the starting points for essays not only on the use and development of the tool itself, but on its cultural, economic and artistic context. His chapters are divided into those that are focused on a specific tool or type of tool, and those that are more general such as a list of symbols and images commonly found on tools, and one chapter that describes different ways in which tools are dated. In many cases he will juxtapose a decorated tool with another object from the same period with a similar decoration, like a joiner plane with a lion's head carved into it with a lion's head door knocker.

His illustrative tools are drawn largely from his own collection, but also from major museums, notably the Victoria & Albert and Science Museums in London, as well as private collections and auction catalogues. In addition to photographs, a large number of the tools are illustrated by drawings, both black and white and color, presumably drawn by the author since no other artist is credited. In some cases this is apparently done because no photograph is available, but in other cases he appears to have made a deliberate decision to use a drawing rather than a photograph to better illustrate the



tool's decoration. The illustrations are weighted heavily toward planes, but there are also a number of braces -- including the most beautifully and elaborately carved brace I've ever seen -- saws, hammers, and layout tools.

I found this book resisted my attempts to simply read it through, as the organization of the chapters seemed eccentric. The book is best viewed as a series of essays, each of which can be read independently, and many containing surprising and unexpected connections and insights. My favorite was "Heimat", which begins with a description of the German concept of "homeland" and leads into a lengthy exploration of decorative Austrian tools.

The book itself is well designed and produced, although it could have used a little extra proofreading. There are two typos in the table of contents, which is never a good sign. Some of the chapters are uneven, and some of his associations seemed a little strained, such as his comparison between the cruciform shape of breast augurs and the symbology of the cross. But for the most part I enjoyed it. Like a good collection of essays by a favorite author, it's the kind of book that you can pick up, read a three or four page chapter, and find yourself thinking "I didn't know that!" I hope to see more from Mr. Green-Plumb.

The book is published by Stobart Davies Ltd, Wales. I haven't seen it on the shelves of any US bookstores, but it's available through Amazon. In addition Mr. Green-Plumb has a website at:

www.earlyeuropeandecoratedtools.vpweb.co.uk

By contrast, the name of David R. Russell needs no introduction to tool collectors on either side of the Atlantic. The Russell collection of woodworking tools is universally recognized to be one of the world's great collections, and *Antique Woodworking Tools: Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* is a lavishly photographed and produced testament to Mr. Russell's lifelong passion.

The book is arranged as a museum catalogue, with each tool individually photographed against a white background. There are no full-page photos, but instead there are typically two or three to a page, each with a short description of the tool, the materials of which it is made, its maker, its approximate age, and its provenance. Many of them have close-ups of maker's marks or decorations, and a few are accompanied by pictures of contemporary catalogues or other materials.

After a preface by Mr. Russell himself describing his life as a collector and an introduction by John Adamson, the catalogue proper begins with a short section on tools from prehistory through Roman times, and then covers a few miscellaneous categories such as anvils and axes, before getting down to the serious business of planes. Three fourths of the catalogue is devoted to planes, with sections on continental, British and American wooden and metal planes, and on all of the major British planemakers -- Norris being his favorite. There is then an impressive collection of braces and boring tools and few other miscellaneous categories, concluding with an eight-page comprehensive catalogue of British plane iron markings.

This is a doorstop of a book. It contains over 1500 photographs, most of them in color and all beautifully done, in over 500 pages. It isn't a book to read, but one to pick up and page through to marvel at the comprehensiveness of beauty of the collection. It'll set you back over a hundred bucks, but after being originally hard to find in the US it is now available on Amazon, and anyone who appreciates the beauty of antique tools needs to have a copy.

Jim Gehring