Basic Detail Report

Portrait of William Roehrick

Date
1993

Primary Maker
David Esterly

Medium
Limewood

Description
Linden wood (or limewood) has such a fine grain that it can be cut in any direction and is both supple and strong enough to allow for undercutting—thus, it is a perfect material for intricate carvings such as this one. To make a sculpture, the artist David Esterly draws a rough study on a piece of graph paper, transfers the design onto a block of wood, and carves out the general shape with a bandsaw; he then shapes the image with increasing refinement with gouges and chisels. After moving to Cambridge, England, on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1966, Esterly became acquainted with the work of the seventeenth-century wood carver Grinling Gibbons and set out to become an authority on him. Much like Dutch still-life paintings, Gibbons's extremely realistic carvings of flowers and leaves in high relief speak to the fleeting nature of life, as flowers can symbolize both beauty and decay. Later in life, Esterly was hired to replicate Gibbons's carvings at William III's Hampton Court Palace, outside London, after they were badly damaged in a fire in 1986. The Emerson Gallery held an exhibition of Esterly's work in 1989, to great acclaim. William G. Roehrick, Class of 1934, H1971, commissioned this sculpture from Esterly as an homage to his close friend and fellow actor Thomas Coley, who died in 1989. The carved wreath and garland feature plants that grew on Coley's property in the Berkshires, including maple and oak. "I think you will like it," Esterly wrote Roehrick. "When glanced at, casually, it looks rather simple. On more careful study, it turns out to be complex. It is quite like Tom." Roehrick donated the work to the Emerson Gallery in 1993 for placement above its front entrance. Upon Roehrick's death in 1996, Esterly added a star at the top, just right of the center line, along with additional blossoms and berries (a reference to Roehrick's signature bow tie), turning the work into a portrait of the man by whom it was commissioned. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017)

Dimensions
Overall: 36 × 69 × 9 1/2 in. (91.4 × 175.3 × 24.1 cm)