

# Crafts in focus: lights, camera, action?

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Patrick Storme at work © ETWIE

**The intangible heritage of crafts and old techniques is often very threatened because the small pool of people still working on them in our industrialized society is diminishing. Documenting their techniques and practical knowledge is therefore an improved step in safeguarding this heritage. Together with Wendy van Wilgenburg, visual anthropologist and director of the Ambacht in Beeld Festival in the Netherlands, ETWIE organized the active and hands-on course "Bring your craft or technique into focus". In this article we want to share some do's and don'ts we picked up.**

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As the Centre of Expertise for Technical, Scientific and Industrial Heritage (ETWIE), we are working hard to find ways to give intangible heritage a future. Crafts and old techniques in particular are very threatened, because of the small - and diminishing - pool of people (amongst other things) still working on them in our industrialized society. Documenting their techniques and practical knowledge is therefore an improved step in safeguarding this heritage. For some, the opportunity to pass on their trade has long passed. But we can attempt to document what they know and how they do it. This could be a very valuable resource for craftsmen to hone their skills or try to recreate lost practices.

Already in 2016, ETWIE organized a small workshop on the audiovisual documentation of heritage practices. In 2018 a grant for passing on craftsmanship through a 2-year apprenticeship with a master craftsman was launched by the Flemish Government. This extended and intensive period where the master raises his apprentice seems to be an ideal time to also focus on documenting their techniques.

We approached Wendy van Wilgenburg, visual anthropologist and director of the Ambacht in Beeld Festival in the Netherlands. Van Wilgenburg regularly makes documentaries and short films on crafts. She was thrilled to share her expertise and best practices! Together with her, ETWIE organized the active and hands-on course "Bring your craft or technique into focus". The course led from four lessons, interspersed with camera exercises and recordings in a craftsman's studio.

As ETWIE, we also participated in this course and chose to practice what she taught by trying to visualize the chiselling and embossing techniques of Patrick Storme. Storme was taught how to smith gold and silver at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. His teacher was professor and established value Wim Ibens. As a result of his cooperation in the restoration of the 13th-century St. Gertrudis' Shrine, Storme's mastery of historical silversmithing in particular developed strongly. By now, he has built up his expertise for almost 40 years. In 2019 he started guiding four students through the master-apprenticeship course with the aim transfer his experience and skills.

In this article we summarize what we learned from this course and from our own experience. Filming a technique or craftsmanship is no easy task: you have to show the right actions at the right time, because repeating a specific action is usually not possible! Learning a craft is also not a short-term process, it would be no understatement to say it takes years of dedication and passion to master a particular skill, let alone an entire craft. This passionate dedication somehow must also be transferred to the big screen. At the end of the film, the viewer should be able to ask himself what he has learned and reference the various steps in the making process. However, it would be impossible for a viewer to master a technique just by watching a video, no matter how well done. After all, it is repeated everywhere that one needs around 10,000 hours of practice before your body has memorised how to perform the specific actions needed to truly and accurately perform at the level of a master craftsmen.

### **Preparation is everything**

A first important point is the **preparation** of your film project: the construction of a film plan, preferably together with the craftsman. You must know what he or she is going to do, where you need to be at what time and which steps are essential to capture on film. The title and length (approximately) of your project also provide guidance. There's only so much you can cram into a 10, 20 or 30 minute film. What is your subject? What do you want to include? What is the added value of this film which a manual or text can't provide? In short: why is it instrumental to make this film and what benefit does it provide? Think about the audience the film targets: the general public? Insiders? You can also record the beginning and ending

of the video: in the case of a craft or technique, you usually end up with the finished product, but when filming social practices or a tradition, it's not that simple. Please note: a film plan should not be a decisive and restricting factor. It is not because something is or isn't mentioned in the original film plan that this must then be complied with. Often you learn more by simply filming. The plan can and may be adjusted when necessary.

A second important point appears at the start of your project: **meeting the person** you will be filming. Spend enough time to get to know the craftsmen. Let him or her get used to you and your camera. You'll be able to move more freely in his workplace. He or she will appear more calm and natural on image. When getting acquainted, it is important that you consider which ethical issues you should take into account. Does the person want his face on screen? Are there objects made of substances that should not be filmed, for example if the craftsmen do not comply with certain personal health and safety requirements? It could get them in trouble. Moreover, it is of great importance - as we experienced ourselves - that you get to know the process of the craft yourself! Only then do you know from which action you can best shoot from which point of view. We ourselves underestimated this during the first recordings. The result is your camera is always chasing the action, instead of being in place and prepared to record from the best possible angle. This radiates unrest in the shots. So do your research. Talk with the person in advance about his work and what exactly he will do. Maybe do a trial run? This way you can anticipate his actions during filming and you can choose a good vantage point. Explore the confines of the workplace, so you don't bump into stuff or burn yourself trying to manoeuvre in a good position. This sounds self-explanatory, but you'll be surprised how fast you forget your surroundings when you're focused on the screen, the sound and whatever the craftsmen are doing. Making several test recordings is highly recommended. Let the person you are filming see what they look like on camera. This should take away some of the unease.

## Equipment

A third important recommendation is using a **professional video camera**. A smartphone or budget camera can really only take you so far. It is essential for the camera to have a connection for an external directional microphone. This microphone records the sound so much better than an internal one. At the same time you put on headphones, so you can intercept noise and other disturbing sounds and adjust if necessary. Filtering out annoying sounds in editing is way harder than just eliminating them first hand. Many of the shots we made of hammering, for example, were much too loud because we did not take adjusting the decibels into account. This was adapted afterwards during assembly, but ideally this is done in advance. Be sure to also choose an SD card with sufficient memory. And always (!) bring spare batteries and a charger with you! You will run out of power. Nothing as annoying (and embarrassing) as having to stop recording because your battery is empty. If the space and the workplace are large enough, use a tripod with your camera. If this is not possible, you can use a belly tripod - a belt around your belly that rests your arm and keeps the camera still. If on a budget, just mount it on a single pole. It seems almost feudal, but you'll notice it still beats anything you can shoot from handheld. You are a tad more static, but these setups still allow you to be mobile and flexible enough to move without struggling with tired arms. Smooth movements during filming are essential to get calm images. Practice this beforehand so that you get to know the camera, how you can grip it while moving around, so your movements with it and the tripod becomes more natural. Without a tripod you should try to lean against something static: a table, a wall... This will make your image significantly more stable. Don't forget to breathe! Often the people behind the camera hold their breath, then realise they have to breathe at some point and inhale or exhale rather

forcefully. You'll notice when the cameraman is breathing in or out harshly in editing and it'll make you run up the walls.

A fourth point of attention: the **settings of the camera**. It is advised to set the focus manually. We had left our camera on automatic due to it being a bit "too complex", and to be honest: it worked out pretty well. With close-up images you did have to be careful that the camera focuses on the right object (on what you want to film and not on the environment around it). In the workplace you should also pay attention that there is no backlight, otherwise you get a silhouette instead of a person in the picture.

### Shooting & editing

Fifth tip? We have already talked about **'insightful' filming**. This means that you visualize and anticipate the partial sequences of a certain action as well as possible, so that the viewer can learn how the action works. Give it a try: one person demonstrates how to tie shoelaces step by step, the other person films. You can divide the tying of laces into different steps and you have to visualize those steps. If the process is too fast or if you do not make clear which individual steps the process consists of, the shots are not sufficiently clear. Hands will get in the way so you don't see how the knot is tied. Shadows will accidentally be cast on specific details. And so on. This is also the case with filming a craft or technique: you want to visualize all aspects, especially those that you do not think about or that seem logical. It is not at all logical for the non-connoisseur. Just think how hard it is to teach a child how to tie their shoelaces. Optionally, you can use two cameras: one that films the same perspective from a distance and another camera that moves around and that takes care of the close-up images and other views. Certainly, if you have to identify complex issues, this can be a useful tip.

As a sixth tip, we would like to point out that the position from which you film must be thought out. This way you can film the same action from **different perspectives**: front view, above the shoulder, in close-up. This provides an interesting variety of images for the viewer. And for you to choose from in editing. It'll allow you to shake things up a bit and keep the attention. Time compaction is therefore important in this respect: you take different shots from different points of view, so that actions on screen take less time than in real life. The better you know the process, the better you can estimate which actions will be interesting from which angle.

A seventh important recommendation: you can include an **interview** in your video. It can be done by filming the craftsman while he is speaking, but you can also only use the audio when editing other video images. We used this technique in which we use the interview as a voice-over in our film, because some images were made wrongfully without sound. If you conduct an interview, pay attention to various matters. For example, do not display a clock. If you mount in reverse order, it can create confusion for the viewer. The same applies to a radio, cigarettes or a glass of water. Imagine how strange it would be to see glass first half empty and then full again. Also avoid background noise: do not stamp with your feet, do not click with a ballpoint pen. Also prepare the interview well. Ask as many open questions as possible, to which the interviewee can not only answer 'yes' or 'no', but can tell his story. As a cameraman / interviewer you have to suppress the tendency to always answer 'yes' or 'okay', because it's disturbing and you have to cut it out afterwards. Also, instruct the person you interview to count to ten between your question and his or her answer. This gives you some space in editing to cut up the shots and mount them together. It's also useful if the person you interview briefly repeats your question.

An eighth recommendation is about the **editing of your film project**. We first tried a free program, but that left a watermark on the final version of the film unless you pay up, unfortunately. For ease of use, peace of mind and a professional result, you really can't beat Adobe Premiere Pro or Final Cut Pro. First you place all the videos on the timeline and you watch them piece by piece. Then you choose which scenes you will use and where you will cut. Starting with a panorama image is a good idea: this way the viewer has an impression of the space and the workplace where the film is set and where the camera and craftsmen move around in. As mentioned, filming on a tripod gives peace of mind to the image and is therefore advisable, especially when filming in close-up. Following someone who gets out of the picture is a natural way to create the transition to the next step / scene. Moving the image to black to make this transition clear is not always recommended because of too intense. You can safely play with different settings and types of transitions here! An extra tip: there are tons of instruction videos of how to work with Adobe Premiere Pro or Final Cut Pro on YouTube.

### **Conclusion**

The workshop was very useful as a start to build up expertise in the making of short films and documentaries, in order to help communities safeguarding the embodied knowledge of craftsmen/women. In this way, we can respond quickly and help identify and safeguard threatened intangible heritage, even though we will never reach the level of a professional. It is also an added value that when we engage a professional documentary maker, we can indicate what is important when portraying a craft or technique.