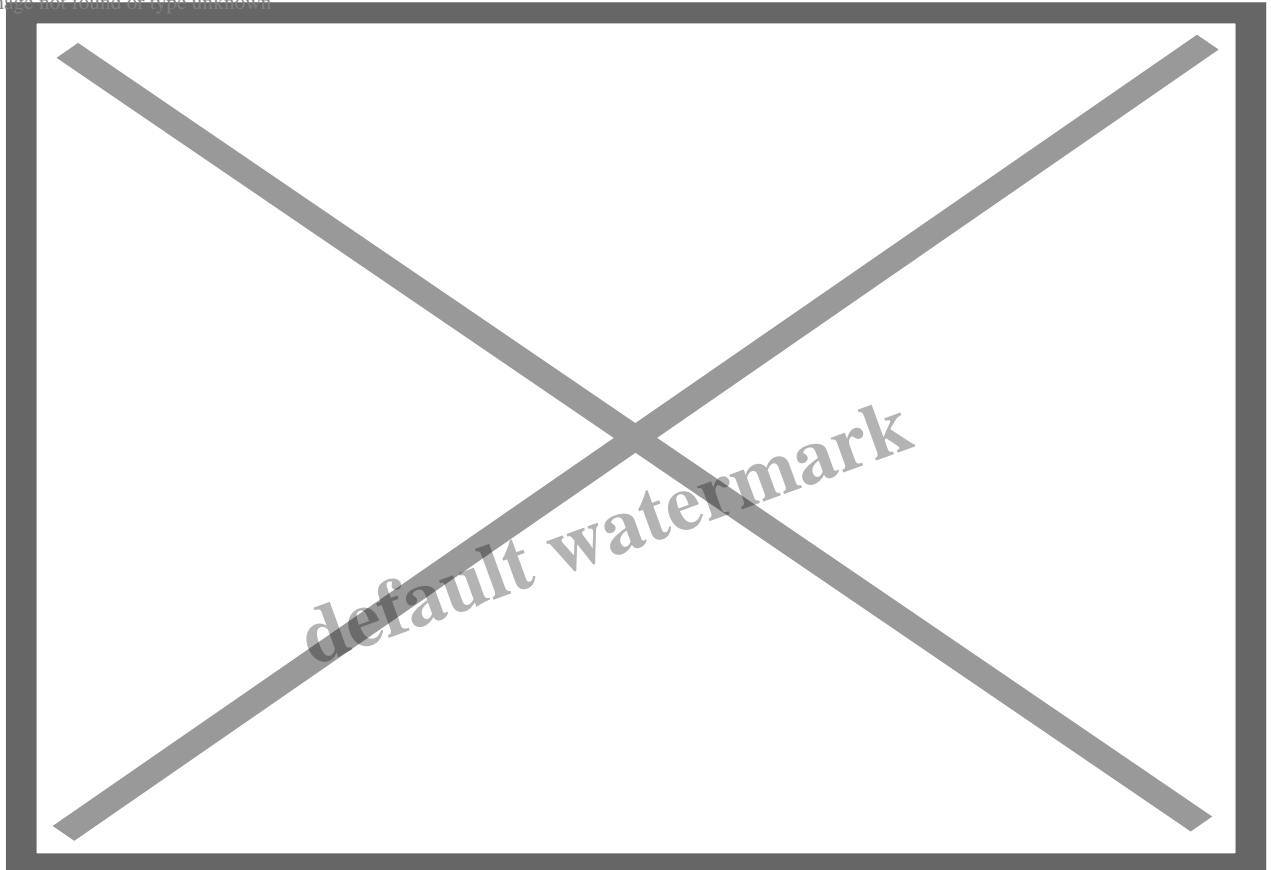


A collector's passion: diverse woods used in early European guitars

Description

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Le Stanze per la Musica, Museo civico 'Ala Ponzzone', Cremona

A chance visit to a historical guitar collection in an Italian art gallery provided interesting insights into the variety of types of wood used in early European guitars – not much tropical wood and a lot of local species.

I love it when a chance event leads to fascinating discoveries and different perspectives. I've spent most of my life doing research in ecology and am used to the rigours of systematic observation, experimentation and analysis. But sometimes the most important insights – that can lead to whole new perspectives – come from one-off observations that arise from being in the right place at the right time. Or sometimes from brief conversations with people from other professions or countries.

I'm sure the same is true whatever your interests are. It's certainly true in relation to my Nature of Music project. In this post, I return to my [recent visit](#) to Cremona in Italy, where I went to experience first-hand the violin capital of the world. It turned out that there was a guitar twist to the visit too.

Guitars in the art gallery

While visiting the Violin Museum, I was excited to see, in addition to all the amazing violins, one of the few remaining guitars made by Stradivari. Elena, our guide, said “You know there is a guitar collection on display here in Cremona too?” I confessed that I didn’t know about it, and she marked on our map the Museo civico “Ala Ponzzone” where the collection was housed.

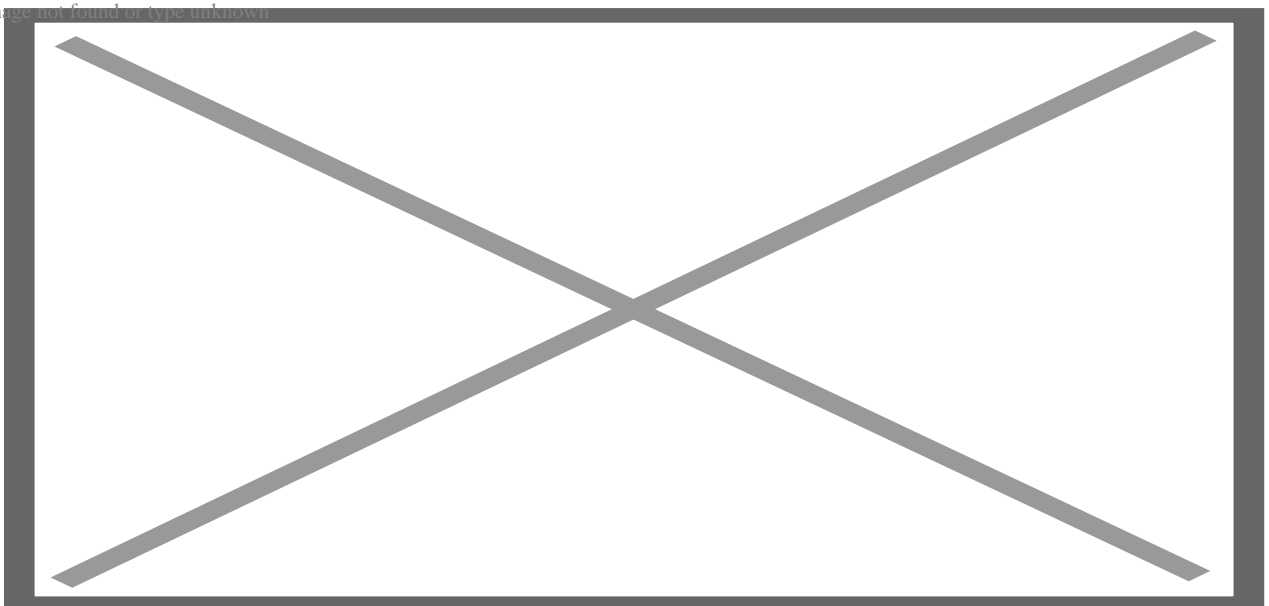
We had a pretty full afternoon already lined up, but I ended up with some time at the end of the afternoon to try to fit in a quick visit to the gallery before it closed at 5pm. [The Museo civico “Ala Ponzzone”](#) was an imposing building on a small street near where we were staying. It’s mostly devoted to classical Italian artworks, including paintings by Caravaggio and many others, spread over many rooms on several floors.

There was scant information available to help navigate the museum, and no indication of where the guitar collection might be. After a few minutes of fruitless searching, I returned to the entrance to ask for directions, and eventually found the collection tucked away at the end of numerous galleries of grand classical paintings.

Carlo Alberto Carutti

At the entrance to the [Stanze per la Musica](#) (Music Rooms), a sign indicates that the rooms contain Carlo Alberto Carutti’s collection of historical instruments. Digging around on the internet later, I discovered that Carutti was “[an engineer by profession and musician by vocation](#)”. When he died in February 2022 in Milan at the age of 98, his [obituary](#) described him as “a humanist entrepreneur, collector, writer, poet, painter and musician”.

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Carlo Alberto Carutti. Source: [Mondopadano](#)

Carutti developed an interest in music early in life and became an avid collector of old instruments. He

was obviously a man after my own heart, always on the look-out for interesting guitars, especially bargains. He keenly sought out instruments around the world and in unlikely places. A 2012 [article](#) in La Repubblica gave this account:

“Over time, the passion for period instruments led Carutti to travel halfway around the world, looking for flea markets and antique fairs where he could expand his collection. ‘But I’ve never been crazy from an economic point of view. Also because I have often come across unique pieces whose owners did not know the historical value. For instance, I found a very rare guitar from 1880, made by Pasquale Vinaccia, hanging behind the counter of a bar. Another guitar, by maestro Antonio Monzino, instead arrived thanks to a barter with an electric train’. Thus, year after year, the Milanese engineer expanded his collection with lutes, hurdy-gurdies, guitars and mandolins.”

Carutti said: “There are seventy works of art, made by some of the greatest luthiers of all time. And, the fundamental feature that distinguishes my collection, all playable because I have had them restored and I keep them in perfect working order”

His collection, which traces four centuries of European instrument building, became the envy of museums around the world. He kept his collection in his house until he donated it to the museum in 2012. The collection has been [described](#) as “one of the most important international nuclei of stringed musical instruments, which are distinguished by rarity, quality, state of conservation, usability and sometimes for belonging to famous personalities from the world of music, aristocracy and of the nobility of the time”.

Carlo Alberto Carutti: “Passioni di un collezionista” (Passions of a collector)

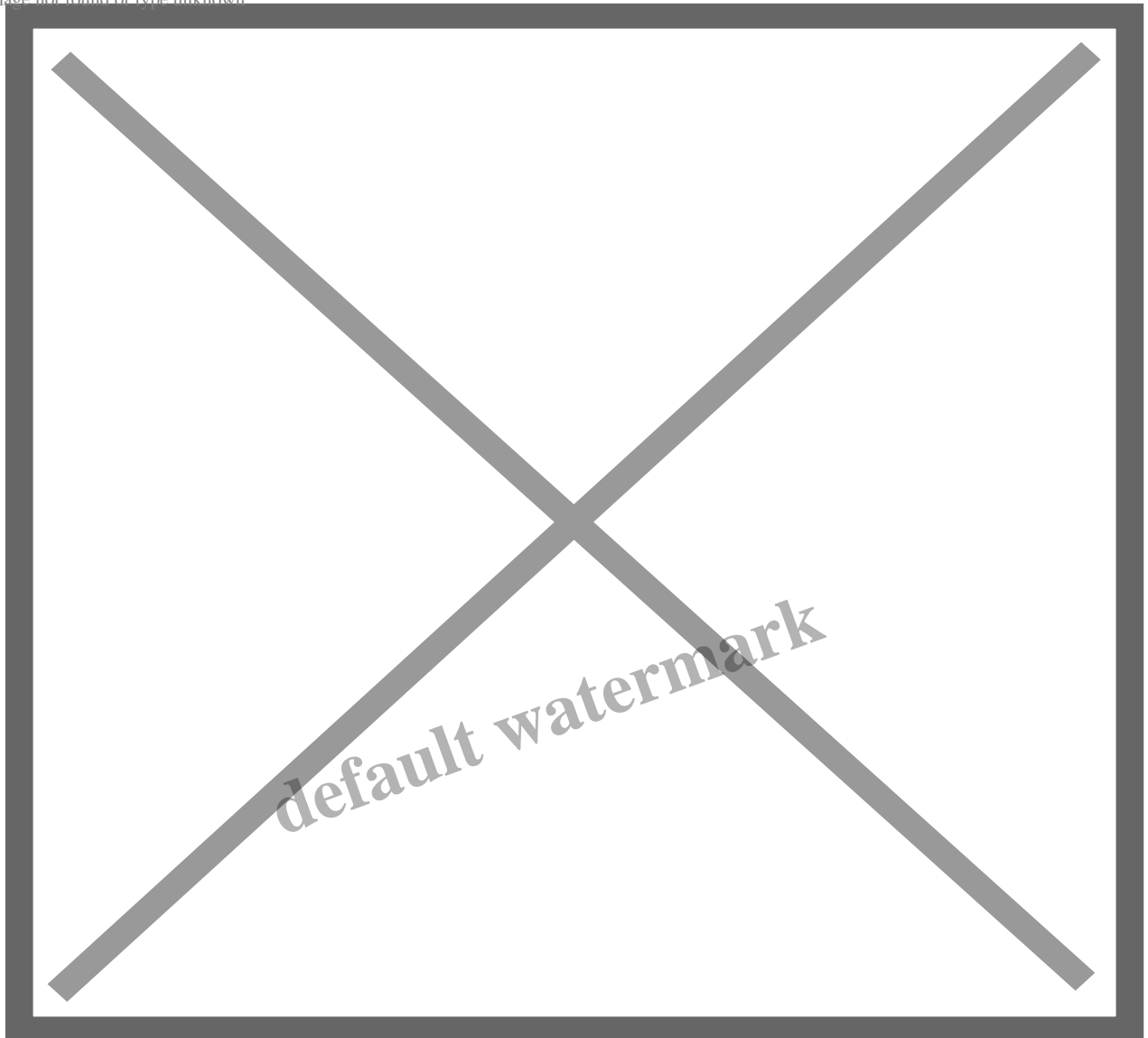
Carutti wrote several books, including one about his instrument collection – [Passioni di un Collezionista](#), published by Galli Thierry Stampa in 2005. There was a copy of this grand book available to look through at the entrance to the Music Rooms, but I only had time for a cursory look. Unfortunately, it seems to be no longer available anywhere, but I’d love the opportunity to examine it in more detail sometime (even though it is in Italian!).

Carutti’s instruments

I ended up having about 40 minutes to go through the various rooms housing the collection. Like the other museums I’d visited recently, the rooms contained neatly organised glass cabinets each containing one or more instruments. Carutti indicated that all of the instruments were playable, but it was unclear whether any are taken out and played these days.

Each room also had posters with brief summaries (in Italian) of the history of guitar making in various periods and regions of Europe. A walk through the rooms was like a crash course in the development of the guitar in Europe during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

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Torres guitar with historical information in the background

I came across guitars by several makers whose names I recognised from reading around early guitar history, plus quite a few more I'd never heard of. An article in [Orfeo Magazine](#) on the collection concluded that "The prestige of the names to be found in its glass cases is overwhelming: Fabriccatore, Guadagnini, Lacote and Torres, to name but a few".

There are quite a few written accounts of the history of guitars, including a [wide range of books](#). There are also lots of different opinions about the instruments from which the modern guitar developed and who created the first instruments that could confidently be described as a guitar. I'm not going to delve into that here, but you can find quite a refreshing approach to all this in a [2020 article](#) titled "The guitar: a brief history from the renaissance to the modern day" by Ian Pittaway.

The guitar makers represented in the Carutti collection certainly reflected all the various iterations of size, shape, number and configuration of strings and so on. Early guitars were shaped along the lines of the Stradivari guitars I'd seen at the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Violin Museum in Cremona. But

over time, the shape changed, the number of strings became more standardised, and the modern guitar started to materialize.

I only had my phone with me, but quickly took photos of a range of the guitars in the collection, together with their descriptions. If you want to geek out on early guitars, have a look through the gallery below.

Fedele Barnia, Venezia 1740. Spruce top, ebony back and sides

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Jean-Nicolas Lambert, Parigi 1775. Spruce top, pear and maple back and sides

Agostino Rosa (attributed) Roma o Rieti 1780. Spruce top, walnut back and sides

Gerard Deleplanque, Lille 1785. Spruce top, cypress back and sides

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Giovanni Battista Fabricatore, Napoli 1798. Spruce top, larch back and sides.

Giuseppi Filano (atributed), Napoli circa 1800. Spruce top, black cherry back and sides.

Luigi Filano, Napoli 1819. Spruce top, maple back and sides

Mauchand frères (attributed), Mirecourt circa 1825. Spruce top, maple back and sides.

François Soriot, Mirecourt circa 1830. Spruce top, spruce back veneered with rosewood, rosewood sides.

Louis Panormo, Londra 1833. Spruce top, rosewood back and sides.

Johan Anton Stauffer, Vienna 1834-43. Spruce top, birch back and sides veneered with mahogany.

Johann Anton Stauffer, Vienna circa 1843. Spruce top, maple back and sides.

Antonio Guadagnini, Torino 1856. Spruce top, applewood back and sides.

Aubry-Maire (attributed), Mirecourt circa 1860. Spruce top, maple back and sides.

Pasquale Vinaccia, Napoli 1880. Spruce top, maple back and sides.

(L) Pasquale Vinaccia, Napoli 1883. Spruce top, maple back and sides. (R) Rafaele Calace, Napoli 1908. Larch top, maple back and sides.

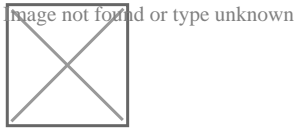
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Antonio de Torres, Almeria 1884. Spruce top, cypress back and sides.

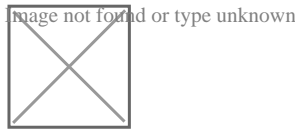
Antonio de Torres, Almeria 1884. Spruce top, cypress back and sides.

Every guitar tells a story

All of the guitars are fascinating, and all have stories to tell. For instance, the guitar built in Mirecourt by Aubry-Maire and belonged to the Spanish singer Lorenzo Pagans; the same guitar appears carried by Pagans in the famous [painting by Degas](#), now kept at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.



Edgar Degas – Lorenzo Pagans et Auguste de Gas, 1871-2. Source: [Wikipedia](#)

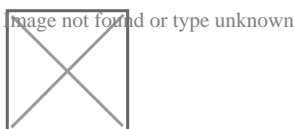


Aubry-Maire guitar, Mirecourt, circa 1860

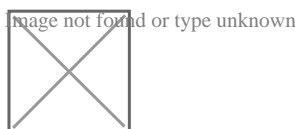
The guitar built by Panormo in London in 1833 foreshadowed more modern guitar designs, and the instrument by Antonio de Torres built in 1884 clearly demonstrates de Torres' reputation as "[one of the single most important inventors in the history of guitar](#)". Indeed, de Torres has been described as "the Stradivarius of modern guitar" in a [2018 book](#) by Giovanni Accornero.

Another guitar with an interesting connection to the present day is the instrument by Johann Anton Stauffer (1805-1871). He and his father [Johann Georg Stauffer](#) were prominent Austrian luthiers, and Johann Georg trained an apprentice who went on to become one of the most famous names in guitar building. [Christian Frederick Martin](#), from Markneukirchen, Germany, went at 15 years old to Vienna for an apprenticeship with Stauffer.

Martin later returned to Markneukirchen and opened his own shop. However, a long dispute with the guild of luthiers resulted in Martin emigrating in 1833 to the USA, where he introduced the mechanism developed by Stauffer and founded Martin Guitars, introducing Stauffer's design features to the new world. In 2008, the 175th anniversary of the Martin Company, the company released a tribute guitar: the "[Martin 00 Stauffer 175th](#)".



Stauffer guitar, Vienna 1843



Martin 00 Stauffer 175th, 2008

But what about the woods?

As I quickly zipped through the music rooms taking as much in as I could before closing time, I started noticing that the labels in the glass cases included not only the builder, location and date, but also the woods used in constructing the instruments (as in the photo gallery above).

I was fascinated to see the range of woods used in these early guitars. In a direct link with the violin tradition described in a previous post, quite a few instruments had tops made of spruce and back and sides made from maple. This presumably reflected the prevailing perception that this combination of woods made for good-sounding instruments.

Spruce was certainly the dominant wood used for the guitar tops, although there were a few instances where other species such as larch or birch were used. But it was in the back and sides that a surprising diversity of wood types were to be found. As well as maple, you could find instruments made with walnut, pear, applewood, black cherry and larch. And only a few instruments used the tropical woods now considered standard – rosewood, mahogany and ebony.

It was also interesting to observe several instruments on which veneers had been used – for instance, birch with mahogany veneer.

Local versus tropical

Although admittedly a fairly small and eclectic sample of historical European guitars, Carutti's collection nevertheless provides a useful insight into the materials that the early builders used. The emphasis on using local woods, even right up till the end of the 19th Century, is surprising.

Although tropical woods such as rosewood were readily available from about 1760 onwards (according to Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren's book "[The Guitar: Tracing the Grain back to the Tree](#)"), they were poorly represented in Carutti's collection. Instead, the emphasis was on local woods – woods that are now being considered as "alternative tonewoods".

So, what's the origin of the idea that tropical woods such as rosewood and mahogany are best for making guitars? It's certainly clear that there is a strong perception that some woods and wood combinations are "the best". A [2022 article](#) on sixstringacoustic.com comments that: "Rosewood back and sides with a Sitka Spruce top is sometimes referred to as the 'Holy Grail' of tonewoods as some people consider this the best combination you can have."

It's hard to pinpoint when their use became widespread, although [some sources](#) suggest that rosewood has been popular since the 1800s. And, as discussed in [an earlier post](#) on Brazilian rosewood, Christian Frederick Martin started using rosewood preferentially quite early in the development of the Martin company, even though other early American builders focused more on local woods.

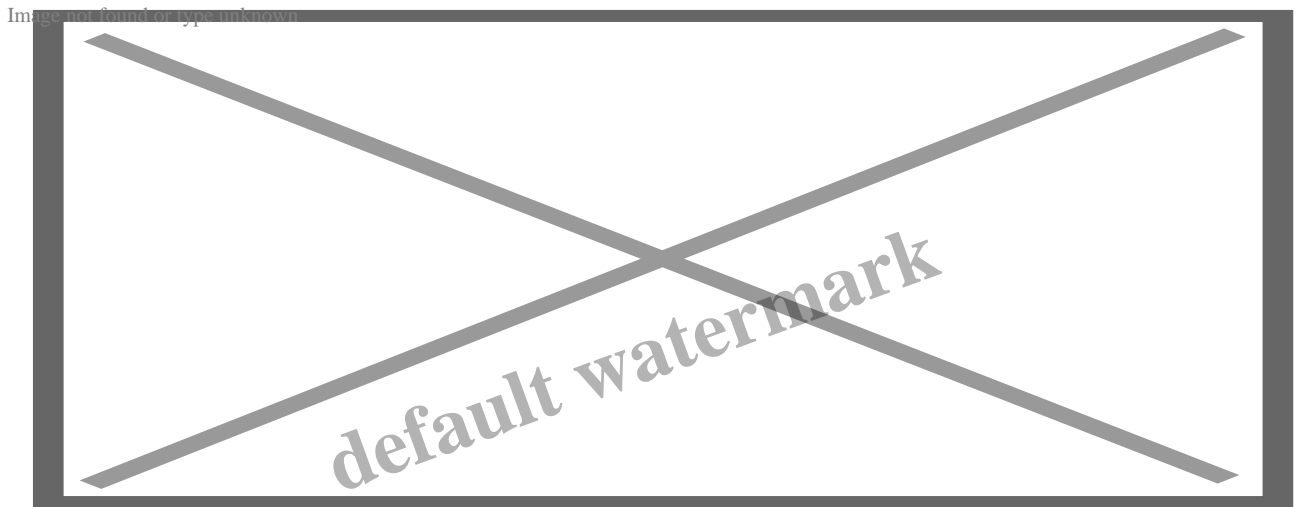
Whatever the origin, it's clear that the use of tropical woods in guitars increased dramatically during the modern era. Mahogany and rosewood became staples, along with a few others such as koa. Maple continued to be used frequently, and tops still relied mostly on spruce (although Sitka spruce joined European spruce as the preferred choice).

Looking at modern norms through a historical lens

The [rationale behind the Nature of Music project](#) lies in the fact that the woods preferred for guitar making have become scarcer and subject to increasing trade restrictions. Hence there is a push to consider alternatives to the "traditional" woods.

There are plenty of exciting things happening in this regard, as evidenced in past posts on this site. The quest for alternative woods and materials is resulting in fascinating approaches to building guitars differently.

We'll look in a later post at the [Leonardo Guitar Research Project](#) (LGRP) Set up in 2011, this is a European initiative which aims to study, demonstrate and communicate the possibilities of building acoustic and classical guitars from local non-tropical woods. The program builds guitars from both tropical and non-tropical woods and assesses them for performance and acceptance in a series of comparative tests. The [list of non-tropical woods](#) being tried includes virtually all the woods found in the Carutti collection.



[Leonardo Guitar Research Project](#)

It seems that alternative woods are not so much being discovered as being rediscovered. What's traditional and what's alternative maybe depends on the timeframe you choose. A chance visit to an art gallery in Italy certainly changed my perspective a bit.

This post was written while undertaking a Writing Residency at the Rockefeller Bellagio Center. I am deeply grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for providing me with this opportunity – and especially for keeping the opportunity open despite its initial cancellation due to COVID. As well as providing a wonderful writing environment, the residency allowed me to visit Cremona, which provided the inspiration for this post. I thank my wife Gillian, my fellow residents, and Pilar, Alice and all the Center staff for making the residency such an amazing experience.



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Date Created

December 2022

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