



Sons of Norway Information Banks

#206: WOODCARVING

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THE HISTORY OF NORWEGIAN WOODCARVING

In Norway, woodcarving is an ornamental art form that has a long history dating back before the Viking era (ca. 800 – 1050 A.D.). The level of quality of the earliest examples of woodcarving from this time indicates that by the Viking era woodcarving already had a strong tradition. Therefore, it seems that the majority of the woodcarving done during the Viking era was crafted by trained artists.

As time passed and tools became more accessible to those untrained in the craft, such as farmers, woodcarving became more prevalent among the everyday lives of the people. Besides Norway's iconic stave churches, woodcarving was used to adorn functional items such as butter dishes, bowls and boxes, as well as houses and barns. The motifs of animals and plants, as well as geometric designs often blending and developing as people came into contact with new styles of woodcarving.

Today, woodcarving has become a more refined craft and a rare art form. While the tradition continues, it is no longer common to see woodcarving influencing every aspect of our daily lives. Rather, woodcarving is once again mainly practiced by trained artists, instead of the common man.

STAVE CHURCHES – STAVKIRKE



Named after the staves, or the four massive timbers that acted as the main supports of the four corners of the nave, the original stave churches were constructed between 900 and 1,100 A.D. Lacking windows, the basic structure of the stave church included a nave, an apse and chancel, and high vaulting ceilings opening to the roof rafters. Since they were made entirely of wood, stave churches often used for the main staves a species of pine with dense and moisture-resistant heartwood known as the *malmfuru*.

In an infusion of old Norse mythology and Christian imagery, the architecture of the church was often carved with faces, as well as plant and animal motifs. Carved dragon heads were prominent aspects of some churches, mimicking the style of a figure carved into a ship's bow. As features of highly-crafted woodcarving, the stave churches influenced the common man of this largely agrarian society; causing farmers to mimic the artful images in their everyday woodcarving.



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OSEBERG VIKING SHIP

Excavated in 1904 on an Oseberg farm in Norway, the Oseberg Viking Ship was an exceptional find of Viking era woodcarving. Buried with furniture and all kinds of household and personal items, these examples of woodcarving consisted of three-dimensional figures, relief-carved animal images and geometric designs. The show of skill in the carving suggests that woodcarving may have been the leading art form of the Viking era.

CARVED FIGURES



Woodcarving was not exclusively used in Norway for the ornamentation of buildings and objects. There is also a long standing tradition of figure carving, often figures of animals and humans. The early examples of carved figures in Norway are believed to have been used as charms for protection or good-luck. Carved figures were often seen mounted in houses or standing guard of buildings. Today, figure carving has become a traditional folk art practiced in both Norway and in North America. To learn more about figure carving read *Woodcarving in the Scandinavian Style* by Harley Refsal.

THE WOOD

Wood was a universal material in early Norwegian construction and crafting. Due to the topography and climate in Norway the different types of wood (pine, spruce and birch) used were often not harvested until they had grown for 75 to 100 years due to slow tree growth. Once harvested, the wood would be used to make almost everything from buildings and vehicles to hinges and tools.

The natural curve, twist and burls in the wood were used to the advantage of the carvers. By following the natural shape of the wood when a curved piece was needed, Norwegians constructed stronger items that would last longer. Many bowls were made from hollowed out burls and followed the natural grain of the wood.

TYPES OF TOOLS

The first woodcarving tools in Norway were handmade and simplistic. As time passed, more refined and specialized tools for woodcarving were created. Tools such as gouges, curved and straight knives, as well as axes are known to have been used. However, when Norway was under Denmark's rule from 1380 to 1814 a royal decree from the Danish king made it illegal for Norwegian farmers to use specialized woodcarving tools. During this time farmers were forced to use mainly knives and axes to continue their woodcarving.

THE DIFFERENT STYLES OF WOODCARVING

When it comes to the actual carving of the wood there are two main techniques seen in Norway:



- **Karveskurd**, or chip-carving, is most recognizable by its geometric patterns that have sharp surface edges and finish at a point in the bottom of the groove. This style of woodcarving is most common in the western part of Norway as well as the coastal area to the north and south.



- **Flatskurd**, or carving in low relief, is often used to create simple vine tendrils with leaves. It is also typical to see Flatskurd used to ornament architectural columns and moldings. This style of woodcarving is most common in parts of southern Norway, especially in Valdres, Hallingdal and Telemark.

While woodcarving techniques vary across Norway, different designs and motifs developed in certain areas:

- In **Telemark**, the wood sprouted into rococo leaves and flowers to the degree that it resembled rosemaling.
- **Gudbrandsdalen** favored the Baroque acanthus leaf. Here the renowned *døleskurd* was developed.
- **Trøndelag** developed the broad-leaved vine so typical of this area.
- In conservative **Setesdal**, the Romanesque vine was preferred.

LEARNING MORE

You can learn more about woodcarving and try it yourself through Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program. To learn more, check out www.sonsofnorway.com.