READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

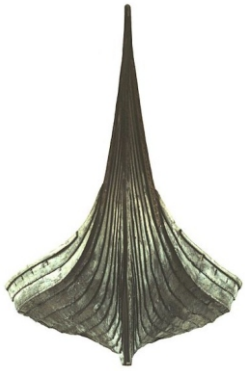
SCANDINAVIAN WOOD CRAFT G11

Wood has been used for thousands of years for many different purposes - tools, weapons, housing and so on. Unfortunately, as wood rots when buried the archaeological record often gives the impression that stone and pottery were more important in past societies than was actually the case. Museum displays of Roman material, for example, are usually dominated by pottery and stonework, while there were probably a large number of wooden bowls and spoons in use then that have not survived.



Wood is abundant in much of Scandinavia and it has been much used by the people living there. At an early date they learned to make impressive structures from it, perhaps the most well known being wonderful wooden stave churches and the sleek and strong long ships with which the Vikings conquered much of northern Europe. The photographs on the right show the thirteenth century Reinli stave church and decorations from Urnes stave church, both in Norway. The photographs on the left are of the ninth century Oseberg ship, also from Norway.







The artefacts in this box are much more humble, but they reflect the long Scandinavian engagement with this beautiful and useful material. Items like this are sometimes referred to by the collective name 'treen' in English. This word means 'of/from a tree' and was obsolete, until it was revived by a collector of wooden objects, Edward Pinto, in the mid-twentieth century.

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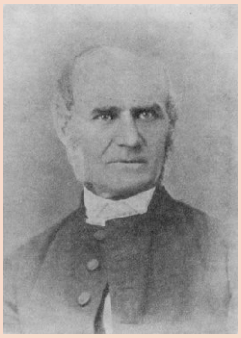
Slöjd



In Scandinavian schools wood craft has long been considered an important element of basic education. This tradition has its origins in the nineteenth century in the ideas of the Finnish Lutheran clergyman Uno Cygnaeus (1810-1888, right), who is considered the father of the Finnish folk school system. His accomplishments also include the initiation of high class teacher training, emphasising the importance of women's education and, most importantly, introducing the use of crafts (veisto in Finnish, sloyd/sløyd in Norwegian, slöjd in Swedish, and sløjd in Danish), as a mandatory subject in the school curriculum. The word slöjd means craft.

The Slöjd system became compulsory for all Finnish boys and for all male teachers in teacher training institutions in the 1860s. As well as learning to read, write and add up students were taught about metals, fabrication techniques, selecting appropriate wood samples from the forests, the care necessary for working with materials and finally the need for collaborative efforts to accomplish tasks. It was thought that the benefits of woodworking in general education built the character of the child, encouraging moral behaviour, greater intelligence and industriousness.

The system was then adopted in the 1870s in Sweden under the guidance of educationalist Otto Salomon. Salomon thought craft education should concentrate on wood working. In his system wood working projects were designed to build on the child's growing skill. Projects grew in difficulty over a period of time, through the introduction of complexity of shape and procedures and through the gradual introduction of more difficult woodworking tools, starting with the use of a knife! During the time of slöjd education in rural Sweden, nearly every boy growing up on a farm was already experienced in the use of the knife and knew how to use it without endangering himself or others.



Slöjd is still part of the compulsory school curriculum in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In Sweden, students choose between wood, metal or textile slöjd. In Denmark all three subjects are compulsory. The photograph on the left shows a slöjd class in Denmark in the 1930s. In Norway all craft activities are united into one subject called 'forming'.

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Love Spoon



In medieval Scandinavia most people owned their own spoon, made from wood or horn, which they would carry with them to eat with at meal times. Meat was infrequent and many meals would consist of milk or grain products, sometimes with some fish. A metal knife was expensive and unnecessary. This was often the case in other north European countries at the time, including England.

Many spoons would be plain, but it was relatively easy to add simple decorations. Carved spoons could be given as gifts. For someone who was poor they were cheap, but at the same time the many hours devoted to shaping and decorating them indicated the value and respect which the giver felt towards the receiver.



In many places such carved wooden spoons were given by bridegrooms to their future wives. Such spoons are often referred to as love spoons, although wedding and bridal spoons are names which are also used. In the UK such gifts are particularly associated with Wales, although they were made in other places too. The photograph on the left shows a Welsh love spoon.



A love-lorn spoon maker could doubly emphasise his love and his skill by turning a single piece of wood into several separate but linked pieces, as with this example. The two spoons linked by a chain also symbolise the union of two separate people in marriage. This particular design is from Norway and variations of it can still be found for sale in Norwegian gift shops (below). Metal versions are also sometimes made (right). Such gifts are no longer used for eating with - in fact it would be rather difficult to use a linked pair like this! - but are largely bought as travel souvenirs for display.



The spoon in this box is from Hallingdal, Norway.

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Wooden Bowl



In much of rural Scandinavia china plates and cups were rarely used until the twentieth century. Instead people used containers made of wood, both in the home and for farming tasks (buckets, for example). A bowl like this one is made in the same way as a barrel. Wooden staves are fixed to a base and then held tight by a hoop. In Britain the staves are often held in place by a metal hoop, but in Scandinavia strips of wood, often from the root of birch, are used to do the same job. Such a structure could be used to make everything from small mugs to large vats. There is always the danger of leakage between the staves, but a skilled maker can prevent this. Also the moist contents can make the wood swell and block any leaks.



This bowl, which was made in Norway, could have been used to eat from. It may also have been used in a dairy. The first stage of making butter used to involve allowing the milk to stand in broad bowls so that the fatty material would float to the top. It could then be scooped off and used to make the butter. The photograph on the left shows a dairy on an eighteenth century English farm. The broad china separating bowls can be seen on the tables. The same scene on a Norwegian farm would have shown wooden vessels.

Wooden Plate



This plate was made in Finland. It is not a traditional design, but demonstrates the continuing innovation that characterises Scandinavian wood craft. In this case, cross sections from tree branches have been squared and then glued together to form a wooden block. The block has then been turned on a lathe and a chisel used to shape the curved surfaces. The upper surface has been polished to bring out the decorative patterns produced by the tree's growth rings.

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Decorative Butter Mould



Butter moulds were used to form and decorate a lump of butter. In Britain a block of butter was often decorated only on the upper surface. Some typical examples can be seen on the lower left. Mrs Beeton, the nineteenth century domestic guru, describes how to use them: 'Butter-moulds, or wooden stamps … are made in a variety of forms and shapes. In using them, let them be kept scrupulously clean, and before the butter is pressed in, the interior should be well wetted with cold water; the butter must then be pressed in, the mould opened and the perfect shape taken out.'



This example, made from juniper, is unusually elaborate. The moulds shown in the photograph on the left worked by pushing the shaped butter out using the loose top as a sort of plunger. This example would release its contents by pulling the wooden pin and unfolding the beautifully hinged sides. The block of butter which it formed would have been in the shape of a highly patterned steeple.

Thomas Cross



This cross is labelled on the back 'Svensk Slöjd' - Swedish craft. As mentioned in the section on Slöjd, learning how to use a knife to carve with was the first technique taught in the Swedish Slöjd system. This cross has been made by carefully cutting along the wood grain to cause curled slivers to form decorative motifs.

St Thomas Day was celebrated on 21 December, traditionally the day of the winter solstice, the year's longest night and shortest day. In some areas of Scandinavia it was formerly a great children's day. It was the breaking-up day for schools and children used to bring their master an offering of candles and money. In return he gave them a feast. In some places the children were allowed to rule the school and all sorts of games and larks took place.

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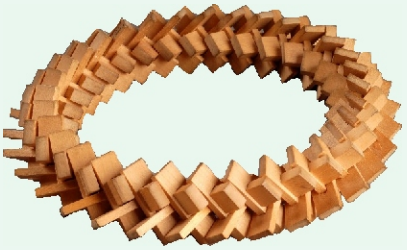
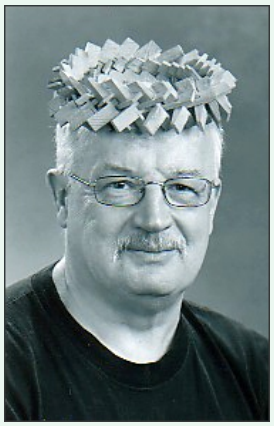
Yeast Ring



A wooden yeast ring used to be used when making beer. Beer, like bread, uses yeast as an essential material. In bread yeast causes the bread to rise, in brewing yeast causes fermentation in which sugars are turned into alcohol. Yeast is a kind of fungus.

New yeast has to be added each time bread is baked or beer brewed, so it is essential that the brewer or baker keeps a live sample for future use. In brewing this was sometimes done by putting a wooden spiked yeast ring into the brew for a while. Particles of yeast would stick to it. It could then be removed and stored until it was needed. Even if the yeast caught on the wooden ring and dried out, it could be reactivated when it was put into the next brew.

This object, however, is not strictly a yeast ring - it is actually a wooden puzzle that resembles a yeast ring. These puzzles were once widely made in Finland, Sweden and Estonia. They were made from 40 to 50 separate wooden pieces to form a flexible chain, which is closed to form a ring. The puzzle was to work out how this was done however, don't try taking it to pieces as it is unlikely you will be able to put it back together! Constructing a yeast ring puzzle involves a degree of mental agility, as with a Rubik's Cube, combined with the physical dexterity used to take apart the metal puzzles that are often found in British Christmas crackers.



The photograph on the left shows Matti Linkola, a modern Finnish wooden puzzle maker, with a yeast ring puzzle on his head. A display of other wooden puzzles made or collected by Matti can be seen on the right.

