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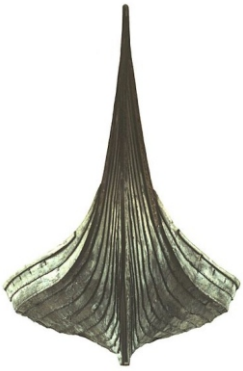
SCANDINAVIAN HOME LIFE G67

Wood has been used for thousands of years for many different purposes - tools, weapons, housing and so on. Unfortunately, wood rots when buried so 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 many more wooden bowls and spoons in use then that have not survived.



Wood is abundant in much of Scandinavia and has been extensively 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.

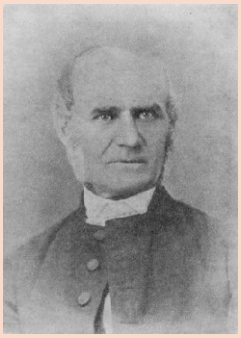






The artefacts in this box are much more humble, but they are predominantly wooden and reflect the long Scandinavian engagement with this beautiful and useful material. Items like this are sometimes referred to by the collective name 'treen' in English. This word means 'of/from a tree' and was obsolete,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

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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Plate



The interiors of Norwegian farmhouses could be dark places. In the mid-eighteenth century people started to paint their wooden walls, cupboards, beds, pots, bowls and so on with bright colours. Sometimes they used plain colours, but usually surfaces were decorated with swirling patterns, floral motifs, figures and animals. This kind of decoration was called rosemaling.

Rosemaling designs were based on those found on grander furniture, but they were usually produced by self-taught local people. The result was the creation of a lively folk art tradition which has survived to this day and has become particularly popular among communities of Norwegian descent in the USA. At times the results can seem over-decorated but rosemaling certainly helped to brighten up plain interiors!

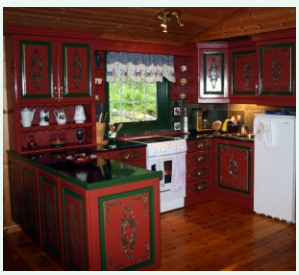


Rosemaling colours and designs are very similar to the folk art which developed to decorate canal narrowboats in England in the eighteenth century. An example of British canal ware art can be seen on the left, a brightly coloured stool painted in the late-nineteenth century.

In Norway some people took up rosemaling painting as a profession, although these craftsmen were still largely self taught and continued to produce the naïve designs that were popular. Strong regional styles developed and today the three main styles are Telemark, Hallingdal and Rogaland, named after the region of Norway in which each originated.



This plate is from Hallingdal, a valley in Buskerud county in Norway. In Hallingdal designs tend to be symmetrical, boldly outlined and dominated by flowers. As with this example, red-orange backgrounds are popular. In Telemark, on the other hand, designs are usually asymmetrical and feature C and S-shaped leafy scrolls. An example of the Telemark style can be seen on the right.



Today rosemaling is often used on items intended for the tourist trade, but is also sometimes still used to decorate Norwegian houses. The photograph on the left shows a modern kitchen decorated in this way.

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Butter Pot



In much of rural Scandinavia china plates, cups and other kitchen equipment were rarely used until the twentieth century. Instead people used containers made of wood, both in the home and for farming tasks. A small pot 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 of birch and from the root, 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.

Cow and goat milk were very important in the Norwegian diet. Each farm would have a dairy where the animals would be milked. The milk would be collected in wooden pails. To make butter the milk would then be put into wide bowls to allow the fat, which is later used to make the butter, to rise to the surface. Again, these pans would have been made from wood. This small container would have been used to keep the finished butter clean and fresh in the pantry. It is made of juniper wood.

Butter Knife & Spoon



Both of these are made from juniper wood and are from Norway. 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, maybe 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.



The Norwegian word for butter is 'smør' it is related to the English word 'smear'. A butter knife is called a 'Smørkniv'. The design of this example is found throughout Europe. However, perhaps the most famous contribution of Norway to modern design is the famous cheese slice (left), which was created in 1925 by Thor Bjørklund. Thor Bjørklund & Sønner in Lillehammer is still Norway's only producer of cheese slicers - over 7,000 are produced in an hour!

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Lapp Spoon



Spoons were such an important part of everyday life that they were often given as gifts. Many spoons would be plain, but it was relatively easy to add simple decorations. For someone who was poor carved wooden spoons 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.

This spoon was made in Lappland. The Lapps (or Sami, as they are also called) live in northern Scandinavia. Roughly half of all Sami live in Norway, but many live in Sweden as well. Finland and Russia are also home to smaller groups located in the far north. They speak a language that is distantly related to Finnish.

Traditionally, the Sami had a variety of livelihoods - fishing on the coast and in the inland, trapping animals for fur, sheep herding and reindeer herding. Today, many Sami lead modern lives with modern jobs in the cities, both inside and outside the traditional Sami area. Some still practice reindeer herding, which for traditional and cultural reasons is reserved for Sami people in some parts of Nordic countries.



Above: A Sami family in about 1900.

This spoon was made in Swedish Lappland from wood and reindeer antler. Sami refer to craft work as duodji. In the past duodji items - knives, boxes, cups and so on - were solely practical, but today they are often produced for the tourist trade. Traditionally each Sami kept their spoon in a special bag. When someone visited and was offered food it was expected that the guest had his or her own spoon with them which would have

Horn Spoon



Horn was used by the Romans and Anglo-Saxons to make cups, spoons and other domestic items. It was also widely used in Scandinavia. The gelatine in animal horns makes it soft and easy to cut when heated. The horn can be softened in boiling water, flattened, separated into sheets and then formed into the desired shape. Spoons made of horn had the advantage of being light, washable, and inexpensive. Patterns could be scratched onto the surface using a hot needle. This example is from Denmark.

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Birch Wood Trencher



In the Middle Ages food was often served onto a piece of stale bread, cut into a square shape. This was called a tr*e*ncher from the Old French *trenchier*, meaning 'to cut'. At the end of the meal, the trencher could be eaten with sauce - or given as alms to the poor if it was a bit too stale! Later the trencher evolved into a small plate of metal or wood. Sometimes, as is the case here, the trencher co*ns*isted of a rough section cut from a branch or the trunk. This example is from Sweden.

Birch Dish



The next step on from using a rough cut trencher like the one above, was to turn a piece of wood on a lathe to smooth and shape it. This simple wooden dish is from Norway and is made of birch wood. In England sycamore wood was often used, as this wood does not taint the food.

Whisk



Every bit of a tree can be used in some way. In this case twigs have been bound together to form a whisk, for use in this kitchen. Such whisks were once widespread in England. This example is from Norway.

Egg Cup



This egg cup is also from Norway. It has been painted in a style which recalls rosemaling decoration.

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Snuff Box



Snuff is powdered tobacco. Rather than setting fire to it and inhaling the smoke, as is the case with cigarettes, it is sniffed up the nose or applied to the gums. Snuff was fashionable across Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and snuff boxes were often made from precious materials and had highly ornate designs. This example, however, is much more humble!



In Norway and Sweden oval boxes like this were made to contain everything from food to precious personal items. In Norway they were called 'tine' and in Sweden 'svepask'. This small example is from Sweden. Very often they were painted with rosemaling-style designs. They were constructed from a thin piece of steam-bent wood laced together with a piece of tree root, usually birch. A collection of modern Swedish containers made in this way can be seen in the photograph on the left.

Straw Bowl



Up to the nineteenth century many Scandinavian farmers lived on the edge of poverty and every scrap of material was made use of. Straw - the stems of corn which, unlike hay (which is dried grass) could not be eaten by animals - was used for bedding but also, as can be seen from this bowl, sometimes made into useful items. The same happened in England. Bee hives, for example, were traditionally made out of coils of straw rope similar to that which has been used here.



This bowl is rather crudely constructed. It is made out of whole stems of straw. Finer work - straw hats for example - are woven out of split hay, which makes a finer product. The photograph on the left shows some of the finer weaves which were created to make straw hats in Bedfordshire, England. This bowl was made in Dalsland, a province in the south-west of Sweden. The tradition of making straw items still survives in this area. It even has a museum - the House of Straw, in Bengtsfors - which is dedicated to the craft. Straw hats, bags, baskets, mats, table cloths, Christmas decorations and lots more can all be bought there.

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Two Cloth Mats



The large place mat is from Sweden. It is made of linen. Linen is fabric made from the fibres of the flax plant *(Linum usitatisimum)*, although today the term is also sometimes used for fabrics made from cotton, hemp and other plant fibres. In Sweden linen has been made since the Bronze Age and linen items are still made and valued.

The smaller mat is from Norway and shows a stave church.

Kluk Flaske



In the Middle Ages glass makers began to produce vessels with long curving necks. The photograph on the left shows one which was made in Venice in the sixteenth century. The narrow, curved neck of these decanters slows down the pouring of its contents to a trickle and may explain this bottle's usual name - 'kuttrolf' in German - since 'gutta' is the Latin word for a drop of water. Widely popular in the 1500s and 1600s, they were valued for the gurgling sounds they produced and for their strange and elegant shapes.





Some Kuttrolfen were made more elaborate by dividing the necks into several interwoven tubes (see photograph on right) The small flask in this box is a later version of these more elaborate vessels. A simple round glass bottle has had its sides squeezed and nipped together to form four separate tubes. Such a design was widely made in Scandinavia in the late nineteenth century. This example is from Denmark, where such flasks are called kluk flaskes they get their name because the gentle glugging sound they make when being emptied is similar to the sound of a clucking hen!



The design was revived in Denmark later in the twentieth century, sometimes for advertising purpose - the elegant example on the left was made in 1960 and has the phrase 'With the compliments of Plumrose' on the bottom. Plumrose were a tinned meats manufacturer! Kluk flaskes were used to hold brännvin or akvavit - strong vodka-like drinks. Fine glass objects are still a feature of modern Scandinavian design.