

Norwegian

WOOD

BY MARY JO THORSHEIM AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMBER PROCACCINI

In 1965, when young people were humming along with the Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood," Norway was just beginning to explore offshore oil possibilities on the Continental Shelf. Today, of course, Norway is better known for advanced maritime and energy technologies than sixties melodies. Nevertheless, there are plenty of artists and craftsmen who haven't forgotten their roots. The precision and creativity required for modern innovations are exactly the skills required to transform a block of prized Norwegian wood into the ornate yet utilitarian spoons, boxes, bowls and baskets of long ago.

In a world where the trends and tastes of the day seem to last only as long as the hours between sunrise and sunset, it can be satisfying to remember what endures. Viking uncovered five lovingly preserved artifacts at the Shaw-Olson Center for College History at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., to discover how the techniques of the old masters—often rural peasants and farmers—have inspired today's working folk artists, the keepers of centuries of culture and tradition.

● PURE TRADITION

A *triangel skjerf eske* (triangle scarf box) from 1857

The unusual triangular-shaped box was designed to store the headdress of a bride from Voss, Norway. In the old country, there typically weren't cupboards for storage, so the purpose of an elaborately decorated box was twofold: to keep precious contents—such as wedding attire—safe, and to adorn open shelves. Boxes were a point of pride and meant to be seen, never hidden.

Contemporary Artisan

Dick Enstad, a retired industrial arts teacher and longtime folk artist from Eagan, Minn., was inspired to build this box (above) after seeing one like it at the Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa. He used a *sviddecor* decorative technique by heating metal and burning it to the wood. The ironwork was done by blacksmith Tom Latané. Enstad teases that often a box's *rosemaling* or carving overshadows the construction—itsself no easy feat.



Legacy
"I'VE MADE A STACKED TINE BOX FOR EACH OF MY KIDS AS A WEDDING GIFT." —Bob Hoover, artisan and teacher

SYMBOLISM

Ale bowl with horsehead handles (*kjenger*)

Norwegians have been carving and decorating wooden drinking vessels since what seems like the beginning of time. Many were cups or bowls carved from the burls of trees or solid logs. The horse heads are a symbol of fertility. In the Middle Ages, the bowls were typically shaped like boats, often considered to be another symbol of fertility. Occasionally, ale bowls feature swan, lion or chicken heads. Bowls carved by hand out of wet wood are often imperfectly round.



Contemporary Artisan

For Becky Lusk, a professional woodcarver in Coon Valley, Wis., folk arts are in her blood. "I've grown up around it," she says. "My grandpa is a woodcarver, and my mother is a rosemarler. Learning these art forms keeps me connected to my family and my heritage. Plus, I love the process of starting with a plain block of wood and creating something." Lusk incorporates all kinds of animal imagery into her ale bowls, including horse and dragon heads, hens, geese and ducks.



heritage

"LEARNING THESE ART FORMS
KEEPS ME CONNECTED."

—BECKY LUSK, PROFESSIONAL CARVER

COLOR BURST

"Life in the Forest" by Norwegian artist Dagfin Werenskiold (1892–1977)

Werenskiold's painted and relief-carved panels capture the heartbeat of the forest by weaving images of forest animals throughout the flora and tree forms. "Life in the Forest" was originally intended for the Oslo Cathedral to adorn a special side entrance for the Norwegian royal family, but with characteristic humility, King Haakon VII demurred, preferring instead to enter with the congregation. After the project was abandoned, Werenskiold decided to transfer the designs to polychromed wood.

Contemporary Artisan

Professional woodcarver Deborah Mills, Brooklyn, N.Y., remembers encountering Dagfin Werenskiold's carved and painted bas-relief panels at the Oslo City Hall. "It was very inspiring," she says. "I loved his vigorous designs. They felt so alive."

Mills' "Peacock Shelf" was inspired by a *bibelskap* (bible shelf) with a brightly polychromed decorative top featuring gilded scrolls and wheat sheaves. Mills' peacock shelf shares a folk art sensibility with Werenskiold's panels. Their techniques involve bright colors, gilding and grand, stylized animals.



"LIFE IN THE FOREST" BELONGS TO THE FLATEN ART MUSEUM AT ST. OLAF COLLEGE. A GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. DONALD WINSTON, 1958.

GEOMETRIC

Flatskrud candle box, 1806

Traditional *karveskrud* or *flatskrud* (chip carving or flat-plane carving) decorates the lid of this antique pine *lysskrin* (candle box), dated 1806. Chip carving is also a common technique on mangle boards, the traditional engagement gift from a bachelor to a potential bride. She, of course, would indicate her feelings by whether she accepted the gift.

Contemporary Artisan

Howard Sherpe of Westby, Wis., divides his time between his advertising and graphics business and running a website that sells his Norwegian chip carved bread boards, mangle boards (above), custom plates and relief patterns. Sherpe began ten years ago by carving traditional geometric designs, but over time his work has evolved. "I'm always trying to learn more," he says. "I study the old masters constantly to figure out what they did. It's not easy to master these skills."

detail

"I LIKE CARVING FOR THE DETAIL AND THE HISTORY. DETAILS IN THE WOOD ARE LIKE THE DETAILS IN OUR LIVES."

—HOWARD SHERPE, CARVING ENTHUSIAST



everyday beauty

"MAN HAS AN INBORN DESIRE TO DO SOMETHING WITH HIS HANDS." —JUDY RITGER, ARTIST



Contemporary Artisan

Judy Ritger, an artist in River Falls, Wis., is passionate about rosemaling and kolrosing. In her video, "Kolrosing with Judy Ritger: Reviving a Lost Art," she notes kolrosing isn't a fine art. "It was intended to add a touch of beauty to everyday objects," she says. It can be as easy or as difficult as you like—some of the simplest designs are plain, geometric lines. Ritger advises new practitioners to carve with patience and caution. But, "if some of your lines aren't perfectly straight, it doesn't matter. Just learn to live with a flaw here and there. It is a handmade product, after all."

PRECISION

Kolrosed wooden spoon, 19th century

Kolrosing, literally creating floral patterns with coal, is similar in some designs and patterns to rosemaling. After carving fine lines into a wooden surface with a sharp knife, ashes or coal are traditionally rubbed into the grooves to highlight the design. Today, it's common to use finely ground coffee in place of messy coal dust. In the early days, craftsmen wore kolrosing knives on their belts as part of their daily dress for easy access.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mary Jo Thorsheim founded Norway Art in 1979 to import Scandinavian art to America. Read more about her business at www.norwayartonline.com.



BECOME
A FOLK
ARTIST

To master the timeless art of Norwegian woodworking, you need time, patience and good instruction. The Sons of Norway Cultural Skills Program is an excellent resource for craftsmen and women of all skill levels. Units include relief carving, chip carving, figure carving, rosemaling and many more. For information on how you or your lodge can participate, contact LaDonn Jonsen at culturalskills@sofn.com or 800-877-4299.