



History of woodcarving in Switzerland

The art of woodcarving has been a well-established tradition in Switzerland for many centuries.

The earliest documented woodcarvings date back to the years 506 and 915. Many well-preserved wood carvings, mostly of oak, date from the early and late Gothic periods and still adorn our cathedrals, minsters and churches today. As witnesses to the style of the time, they mostly depict religious motifs and can be found on numerous church altars in our country. Worthy of mention are the choir stalls of Lausanne Cathedral from the 13th century, the Supersaxo house in Sitten with its richly carved late Gothic wooden ceiling from 1505, as well as the many particularly valuable choir stalls, such as those in Basel Cathedral, the monastery church of Wettingen and the monastery of St. Urban. Many sculptures and other valuable woodcarvings, on the other hand, were lost in the iconoclasm of the Reformation.

Woodcarving - which had long since developed into a craft in ecclesiastical and secular cultural centres - can be traced throughout the Alpine region in the 17th century and is particularly rooted in the Bernese Oberland. With the Renaissance, movable household goods began to increase and rooms were furnished with richly carved panelling. What had previously been the preserve of the nobility and the clergy now also found its way into the farmhouse. While in the Central Plateau the painting of furniture became widespread from about 1650 onwards, in the Bernese Oberland wood sculpture and carving remained predominant. From time immemorial, people here have enjoyed carving ornaments on houses, in parlours and on everyday objects.

It is particularly true of the folk woodcarving in our country that amateur work and professionally produced items were found side by side. The craftsmen were located in the towns and were organised in guilds. In addition to furniture and building carvings, figures and sculptures were increasingly carved in wood. Thus, wood sculpture experienced its greatest development during the Rococo period.

In the countryside, everyone was their own carpenter, turner or wainwright. Guilds did not exist there and especially in the purely agricultural Bernese Oberland, craftsmen were held in low esteem until the first decades of the 19th century. In contrast, the art of carving was practised by herdsmen and shepherds. These farmers carved not only names or farmer's signs on homemade household and alpine dairy utensils, but also rich notched carvings on spoons, boxes, butter churns, whetstone bags and milking buckets. These decorations reveal an often astonishing talent. The motifs chosen were traditional ornaments in a mixture of every style as well as, above all, experienced, personal observations from their rural life and the nature of their surroundings.

In addition to such private origins, carving is later found to be commercially anchored as part of carpentry and joinery. The carpenter decorated the planks with geometric motifs in notch or tooth cut, with simple leaf tendrils in low relief and also mastered various types of writing for inscriptions. Soon, the carpenter also extended his range of forms to include simple elements from the classical styles.

There are various reasons why people carved especially in the Bernese Oberland and not also in Aargau, Thurgau or even Vaud. Wood carving in Brienz and the Bernese Oberland is a complex phenomenon and is inseparably linked to the history of Swiss tourism.



As an ambassador for Switzerland, it shaped the image of our country for countless Alpine tourists and visitors, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This close link to tourism has not fundamentally changed to this day, despite various attempts at diversification. Self-employed woodcarving businesses, which produce souvenir articles as well as sophisticated commissioned works, are witnesses to the continuation of this tradition.

However, there are still many parts of Switzerland, such as Appenzell, Valais, Central Switzerland or the Fribourg region, where wood sculpting and carving have remained just as traditional. These are handicraft products that are first made by amateurs and later by professionals. In most cases, they are artistically designed beyond their utilitarian function and tradition in such a way that they make the boundaries between folk art and arts and crafts appear fluid.

References: Compilation from anniversary publications of the Schule für Holzbildhauerei Brienz, Blätter für Volkskunst und Handwerk der "Heimatwerke", Heimatbuch Brienz, articles from the media.

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