Wood-carving

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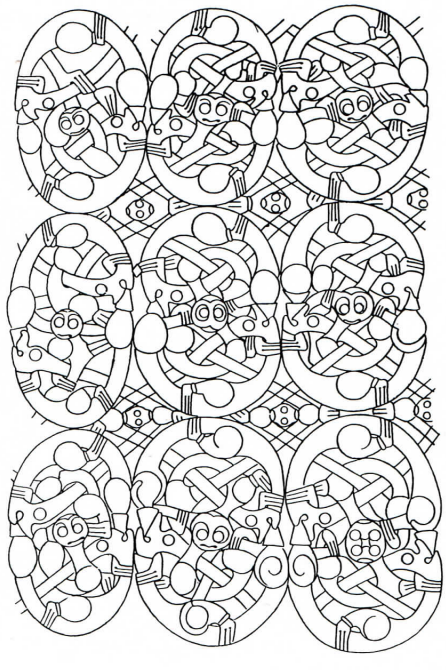
This is one of the areas in which Scandinavia apparently differs from the rest of Europe in that so much decorative wood-carving has survived. This is probably because objects happen incidentally to be better preserved. Our impression of the rich wood-carving art of the Viking Age is based on one fortuitous discovery, the Oseberg ship burial, which contained a full set of magnificent fittings and furnishings in almost perfect condition from a royal hall. Similarly, the rich material from the post-Viking Middle Ages really comes almost exclusively from the Norwegian stave-churches, the survival of which is due partly to a dry climate, and partly to an impoverished Norwegian society which could not afford to replace the wooden churches with stone buildings. Some examples of wood-carving have also survived in Iceland, Sweden and Denmark, and there must have been decorated wooden objects in countries further south. Furniture and other fittings are documented in lands of the people whom the Vikings encountered as they travelled southwards through Europe. France, Germany and England all had wooden churches—and they were presumably decorated—but everything has vanished.

Another reason for the survival of wooden objects is that in the rest of Europe professional artists traditionally had other media in which to express themselves—art forms such as stone sculpture and illuminated texts, which were more prestigious—and above all more permanent. In the northern world, however, the art of building in stone and the art of writing did not arrive until the introduction of Christianity. It was, therefore, wooden architecture and its ornament that attracted the best talents; thus a tradition grew up in which the art of wood-carving assumed a respected place.

Both pine and oak were used, and worked with tools which were not very different from those still used today: knife, chisel, gouge and file—everything except the v-shaped gouge, which is of more recent date. There are many kinds of relief and many effects are achieved. Most pieces have a simple pattern in relief on two horizontal planes, but the relief can be deep or shallow, dense or open (cat. no. 40, 441). The incisions may be straight-sided and the edges sharp, or they may be gently sloping and rounded, all producing different effects (fig. 1). Many medieval crafts seem to be modelled on European models, particularly the products of the ivory carver and the goldsmith. On the other hand the very complex carving from Oseberg, which is executed on several horizontal planes with the deepest motifs only visible through gaps in the outermost patterns (cat. no. 166 and fig. 2), appears to have no surviving parallels in contemporary European art. Relief on several planes in the round, which is known in stone carving, is only rarely adopted (cat. no. 451); whilst chip-carving, which became so important in all countries in the late Middle Ages, is totally absent.

Fig. 1. Detail from the Romanesque portal of the stave-church at Ulvik, Norway. C. 1130. The open, rounded relief and the interlace composition are stylistic descendants of Viking Age art.

Fig. 2. Detail of work from Oseberg, Norway: the second 'Baroque' animal-head post, cf. cat. no. 166a. First half of the 9th cent. The complicated composition represents a high point in the art of wood carving.



The treatment of the surface is of paramount importance for the final result: smooth and polished, or rich with many small details. The surface detail of the Oseberg objects has been so worked upon that the motifs themselves are often almost obscured (cat. no. 166 and fig. 3). On some of the pieces traces of paint have been found—black, white, red and yellow; painting would naturally have made the motifs more understandable.

All manner of objects were decorated. At Oseberg (p. 44, fig. 2; p. 50, fig. 10), the decoration on the boat is limited to the stem and stern posts, but the cart and sledges are covered with decoration of great complexity, often enriched with small studs of silver or pewter (cat. no. 166a). These were hardly objects for everyday use: such objects would by contrast have had simple decoration, often merely incised with the point of a knife (cat. no. 567–70).

The Oseberg objects have a courtly background and provide evidence for the work of several, very accomplished carvers. The other major class of surviving examples of the wood-carver's art, the decora-

Fig. 3. Detail from the Oseberg find: the largest draw-bar from the sledge, one of the finest works of the 'Baroque master' with details picked out in silver/pewter. First half of the 9th cent.

tion on the Norwegian stave-churches, must also be regarded as specialist work. Here master carvers or the professional workshops involved in the construction can be identified. Seventy-six great ornamental doorways have survived in Norway (cat. no. 441–2), as well as several smaller doorways, a large number of wooden capitals, chancel screens and other decoration (cat. no. 42, 443, 459). A large quantity of ecclesiastical wooden material has also survived in Sweden and Iceland (cat. no. 453–4), and decorated wood from churches as well as secular contexts continues to be found in archaeological excavations (cat. no. 563–5).

The designs are generally ornamental. There is, extraordinarily, little narrative carving. The sagas tell of pictorial representations, but such pictures are in other media, such as textiles and painting; what do survive are the great pictorial stones from Gotland, carved with scenes from mythology. The splendid cart from Oseberg has amongst its purely decorative ornament a couple of figural scenes (fig. 4), the meaning of which is unknown, otherwise all the Oseberg objects are decorated with animal ornament. A few of the stave-church doorways illustrate heroic stories (cat. no. 442), but most are decorated with inhabited vine-scrolls. After the introduction of Romanesque art to the North, vine-scrolls, lions and dragons are preferred above everything else, even in ecclesiastical art.

Wood-carving styles follow European stylistic developments, but retain strong local characteristics. It has been argued that the wood-carver's art should be particularly traditional and conservative —but this is hardly correct in respect of the work of the professional craftsmen. Here new ideas were quickly adopted. On the other hand, there is clear evidence in the simpler and more vernacular work of a tendency to stick to the earlier ideas of animal ornament. In this context the font from Alnö (fig. 5) provides a good example: in form it is Romanesque, the inspiration for the four lions around the base comes from European fonts, as do the figures of Christ and his angels which decorate the basin. But these figures are caught up in a world of intertwined serpents which can only have Scandinavian prototypes. As new impulses were gradually adopted, the towns became the centres for crafts, and in the course of the thirteenth century the conservatism of the Nordic wood-carver's art disappears. The interaction between distinctive Nordic characteristics and the strong impulses from abroad must be discussed later in relation to other art forms.

Fig. 5. Font from Alnö church, Medelpad, Sweden. C. 1200. The motifs and technique are derived from Romanesque stone sculpture but the sense of style is Scandinavian.

Fig. 4. Figural scene from the Oseberg waggon. First half of the 9th cent. Its significance is unknown.