



KARVSNITT

Carving, Pattern & Color in the Slöjd Tradition

JÖGGE SUNDQVIST





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INTRODUCTION

Cutting patterns is a natural part of working wood with hand tools. For centuries, patterns and symbols have decorated simple tools and utensils. During long winter nights in front of the fire, symbolic patterns were carved into the wood. And with the tip of a sheath knife, a signature or house mark was added next to the year — a couple of slanted notches that have immortalized the object for posterity, a plowed furrow in the soil of time. Today, these objects glitter like treasure in museum archives and provide inspiration for those who want to develop a creative and authentic practice of pattern-carving in wood.

To me, contemplating what pattern to cut on an object — on a box, spoon or knife handle — feels like I'm being served dessert. I want to enjoy the process, allow the sketching the time it needs to create a unique and ideal pattern: a decoration that I can cut at my leisure, safe in the knowledge that it will stand the test of time for many years to come. This is the feeling and experience I want to share with you. A big advantage of cutting patterns is that you don't need many tools; a chip carving knife and a regular well-sharpened sheath knife will go a long way. Basic slöjd tools are needed to make the objects themselves, of course. But once this is done, you can bring your chip carving knife anywhere. Once you begin to familiarize yourself with techniques such as the fingernail cut, shallow relief carving and kolrosing, you'll need to supplement your tools with a few gouges and a kolrosing knife. You may also need to fasten the material to a workbench or table with clamps to free up both hands.

There is great variety and freedom of choice in composing your own designs. Think of this book as a primer on technique, a source of inspiration and an invitation to create your own bank of patterns as well as your own unique style.

It contains many pictures of newly composed patterns and objects made and crafted specifically for this book. There are also pictures of older examples from folk art, captured in museums around Scandinavia.

You can also read about cutting patterns in my previous book "Slöjd in Wood" (Lost Art Press, 2018), under the chapter on chip carving. This book offers a wider range of in-depth pattern ideas, additional inspiration, and suggestions on how to make various everyday objects the slöjd way. You can read and use this book independently of "Slöjd in Wood," though I occasionally refer to technical descriptions found in the previous title.

ROOTED IN A FOLK TRADITION OF PATTERNS

My journey as a woodworker began when my father put a chopping block in my childhood bedroom. Along the way, as I have adopted new techniques and materials, these experiences have been compounded into a knowledge that has shaped a special slöjd-inspired approach to my materials, tools and folk art. It has resulted in a practice that has gradually come to encompass work processes as well as cultural history in a never-ending exploration that is constantly growing both deeper and broader. Slöjd has become part of my profession, a kind of artistic vocation or a so-called *métier*. Traditionally, this has been common in many professions that involve working with one's hands but has rarely been documented by the practitioners themselves, who are preoccupied with their work. Herein, I have gathered all my experience of cutting patterns in wood, and with this book I wish to pass it on to you.

My woodworking is marked by a quest to strike the perfect balance between opposites such as shallow and deep, burlesque and serious, as well as classical and folksy. Drawing inspiration from older slöjd, this has always been a stated aspiration in my work. When I admire traditional patterns, I'm often struck by all that the term "traditional" holds. It's a loaded, heavy and somewhat boring word, often evoking preconceived conservative images imprinted on us by museums and history books. Yet for me, the opposite is true. Every time I return to the archives — as I like to call the thousands of pictures and drawings of old slöjd and patterns I have collected over the years — I am struck by a tremendous desire to work wood with my hands. When I study the patterns, I see the folk geometry, the rhythm, all the personal mannerisms and local variations. I feel like I become part of a long tradition of folk-art souls making slöjd. These explorations give me a deeper understanding of the conditions that governed how folk art was made, both the living conditions of the slöjd maker and the materials and tools that were used.

The choices and limitations — why a certain pattern has been carved — are influenced by the time in which the slöjd maker lives. Often, I see a personal and artistic style that offers a great freedom, which in my view approaches a folk-art definition of what slöjd is. To me, slöjd and folk art offer the freedom to express beauty, contradiction, naive delight and deep seriousness in my own unique way. I can't wait to try out variations on what I have just seen. In slöjd, I get to explore new ways of expressing a different aspect of my personal style through sketching, drawing, reshaping and finally cutting the pattern. Together with the joy of having made a new object, to me the creative process is the greatest satisfaction in slöjd.

In this book, I hope to awaken in you the same desire to do slöjd – but with your own way of seeing, sketching and carving that makes the patterns unique to you. This is slöjd and chip carving as an everyday joy, a way to develop creativity and a pattern-making practice inspired by older slöjd and folk art.



Ale-drinking vessel, from the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, Norway. The barely discernible face surrounded by rays underneath a crown became the spark that ignited my long interest in pattern-making in slöjd. At first, I was attracted by its crude yet refined simplicity. Only later did I become aware of the significance of the symbols. “IHS” was originally an abbreviation for the name Jesus in medieval manuscripts.

WHAT’S THE POINT OF CUTTING PATTERNS?

One of my earliest vivid memories of pattern-carving is from a visit to the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo in the early 1980s. The exhibition space is dark; only the light from the display cases illuminates the room. Some *guk*s (wooden cups) and burl bowls from the 17th century catch my interest. I try to take a picture, but suspecting it’s too dark, I take out my sketchpad instead and begin to draw the shapes and patterns from the outside of the bowl. I struggle to define which parts of the carved surface are raised and which are recessed. After staring and thinking, sketching and erasing for quite some time, the pattern finally emerges with greater clarity – as though I were developing a photograph in an analog darkroom. Shading with a pencil, I create depth and angles. How can I accentuate shallow and flat surfaces in relation to deep cuts?

“Through the lenses one acquires, you develop a local perspective where certain modern and technical tools and solutions don’t fit. This helps you be selective and establish a framework within which to paint with a freer hand!

Here, the individual can practice variation and find ways around their strict framework. How do we wish to paint the world? What signs do we choose and what do we communicate?

– *Inger Stinnerbom, costume designer at Västana Theater*



Stool from the Västernorrlands Museum in Härnösand, Sweden. The pine seat is rabbeted into a bench made of crooked birch carved with dates and signatures.

By the time I have been sketching for an hour, I’m exhausted and my fingers are itching for a piece of wood and a knife; I want to have a go at cutting the pattern myself. Someone is speaking to me from behind the carved figures. The woodworker is inviting me to do the same: “Try it yourself! Put your knife to the wood and the rest will take care of itself.”

In my pattern-carving, the driving force has always been a desire to communicate with the person who will be using my slöjd. Not just through form and color, but also symbols and patterns that frame and reinforce the shape — a subtle message that invites the user to relate to the object. Often, the pattern comes to me intuitively. But just as often, I find myself diving into my sketchbook, drawing inspiration from things I have made before.

TRADITION IS CHANGE

When studying old slöjd, you quickly realize that there are many levels of knowledge and skill. They run the gamut from casually sloppy and charmingly simple to petulantly rigid and artistically ambitious. Where on the scale you want to place yourself is entirely up to you. Like life, all tradition is change; everything is in constant motion. This slöjd tradition beckons you to become part of it by being inspired, mixing and matching, and incorporating new elements with contemporary meanings and messages.

In this book, I present a folk tradition of slöjd made at home. Other types of pattern-carving on wood in churches and on furniture that belonged to the nobility are closer to the sculptures made by journeymen. These were itinerant professional craftsmen trained at some institution in a major city or on the continent. There are clear influences from the Netherlands found in Norway and from Germany in Sweden. If you are interested in classical carving and woodwork, there is plenty of inspiration to be found.

There is a long tradition of looking to the old to make something new. To name a few: the founder of the Swedish Handicraft Association, Lilli Zickerman; textile artist Märta Måås-Fjetterström; designer and artist Stig Lindberg; textile artist Viola Gråsten; designer Wanja Djanaieff. The list is long; they all picked up, processed and transformed old patterns, using them in new contexts and eras.

In the beginning, choose patterns that are not too difficult to cut. Folk art is characterized by a fear of empty space — what is known as *horror vacui* — so it is tempting to cover every surface with a pattern. But don't over-work your material. Instead, choose where you want to focus your time and energy. Let the level of difficulty become a gradual challenge as you penetrate deeper into the patterns and symbolic worlds you want to explore. Transform the patterns, let the process take time, and enjoy developing your own personal style — a world of patterns that is uniquely yours.

Key Fobs





A good way to practice cutting patterns is to make a bunch of key fobs. The main purpose of a key fob is to indicate which lock the key is for. It should also be handy enough to fit in your pocket, but large enough to prevent the key from being lost. Some hotel key fobs are large and heavy so that the traveler won't forget it in their pocket. The color and shape should be distinct, so that you don't have to read the carved text every time you are looking for a key.

Level of difficulty: easy

Tools: Saw, axe, drawknife, sheath knife, fine-toothed Japanese saw, chip carving knife, drill 4mm (3/16").

Material: Straight-grained birch, alder, willow or aspen. Metal wire or a small staple.

The blank should be 20-25cm (~8") long. This makes it easier to quickly carve it smooth with a knife or in a shaving horse. Choose the width and final length of your key fob. A standard size to start from is 6 x 30 x 80mm (1/4" x 1-1/4" x 3-1/8").

METHOD

From straight-grained, knot-free material, split out a blank and thin it down to a thickness of about 5–6mm (~1/4"). Carve it smooth with a drawknife or a long sheath knife on both sides.

Start by making a few sketches that you are happy with. Keep in mind that the letters should not be too small, otherwise they will be difficult to cut. Between 12 and 15mm (1/2"–9/16") is a good place to start.

There are different ways to attach the key. You can drill a 4mm (3/16") hole for a string or strap, or you can insert a 19mm (3/4") long staple into two 1.5mm (~1/16") holes drilled into the end-grain wood.

Draw the outer contours onto the blank and saw it out a little roughly. Carve the sides and chamfer all the edges. Cut any concave surfaces with a gouge, such as grooves and shallow relief carvings.

Draw the text and any decorations as carefully as you can. Strop your chip carving knife, find good lighting and start cutting your pattern using the chip carving techniques.

When you are happy with the pattern, you can paint your key ring; see the chapter on painting.



The yellow key ring on the previous spread was inspired by a well-composed pattern on a mangle board from Sverresborg in Trondheim, Norway. The semicircles of the different-sized fingernail cuts combined with some three-sided triangle chips breathe life and movement into the composition.

