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PHILLIP ODDEN : AMERICAN ARTIST

MASTER WOODCARVER IN THE NORWEGIAN TRADITION

by

June Grayson

"..... in pursuit of their past, American collectors have made folk art the
biggest thing going in the Eighties."

"Because we are reminded of sagas of old And are
proud of the land we forsook, Can it be that the
blood of the Vikings still flows In our veins like a
still-running brook?"

- Franklin Petersen, Norwegian-American poet, 1900*

An American Viking is alive and well and working in Barronett, Wisconsin, population 150. There - in a one-story, tin-roofed workshop thirty feet from the pavement of Highway 63 - Phillip Odden carves one of a kind heirlooms owned and treasure#,so far, by people of forty states and ten countries.

Like his famous Norwegian ancestors, Odden is an outdoorsman, world traveler, adventurer, and tradesman. But most of all he is an artist and his medium is wood.

*The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian American People by Odd S. Lovoll, page 8, University of Minnesota Press

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Few countries have a richer tradition of the#rt of woodcarving than Norway. The Vikings started it all, learning their!woodcarvino skills on their trading forays into Ireland as far back as 900 A.D. Irish carvers even transmitted the carving skills of the ancient Greeks, still considered the consummate artisans in the field, because Ireland had traded with the eastern Mediterranean countries since before 1,000 B.C.

The powerful heathen art of the Vikings - with the arrogant dragon heads - decorated the intriguing "Stave" churches, a wood construction peculiar to Norway

about 1,300 A.D. As Norway gradually became Christianized, the carvers added the Christian cross, grapevine, acanthus leaf, and symbolic lions and eagles brought home by the Crusaders. A craftsman could combine all of the ancient motifs, even after the original meaning had been forgotten.

Because wood was the dominant material in Norway and because the interiors of homes and churches were dim most of the year in the long winters of the north, the old Norsemen continued to build and carve in wood, even when woodcarving was replaced by stone and metal work in other European countries.

Also, because Norwegians existed in isolated mountain valleys on the northwest fringe of Europe, they were not much affected by the Industrial Revolution that swept through the rest of Europe in the Eighteenth century. It was not unusual for several generations to use the same house and furnishings. And so the ancient skills and traditions of Norway survive to this day.

How Odden came to be a part of the 1,000 year old tradition could be the plot of one of the old Scandinavian sagas where the hero slays the dragon and wins the maiden. Odden doesn't slay dragons - he carves them But he did win

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the beautiful maiden, even though he had to go to Norway to meet her.

Phillip did not plan to be a woodcarver even though his mother tells him that he was always "making things" for her when he was a child. "I thought I would be a dairy farmer, like my father, but I didn't think too much of the eighteen hour days he worked on the farm." Evidently, his father didn't think too much of Phillip's zeal, either. He told Phil to find a nine to five job - he wasn't cut out to be a farmer.

So Odden studied land use management in college, hoping to be a forest ranger and work outdoors in the mountains he loved. During what he now calls his "free period", he trapped animals in Montana and fought forest fires in Alaska, with time out for Peace Corps assignments in the Phillipines and Nepal. He even took up wood carving to pass the time. But his life lacked a focus.

It was not until he visited relatives in Norway in 1976 that he found what he was looking for - in more ways than one. "I had never seen so many wonderful woodcarvings. And when I met the man who did them, I found out that he was a distant cousin and an instructor in woodcarving. I knew the###. what I wanted to do: I had to enroll in that s#hool and become a woodcarver too.

Johan Amrud, master woodcarver, taught at the prestigious Hjerlid Trade School at Dovre, Gudbrandsdalen, Norway.

There was one problem, however: Odden spoke only English and school was conducted in Norwegian. Fortunately for him, the classmate assigned to the work table next to his proved to be very helpful. So helpful, in fact, that ,.

within a year Phillip asked Else Bigton to marry him. They married in December, 1978, in traditional Norwegian costume in Else's home town of Aalesund, Norway.

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Else had already graduated from a Norwegian weaving school. And now they are both graduates of the two year course in woodworking and carving.

of a student's work he would put his chisel through it. "I got tired of having my carvings destroyed like that," said Else. So she specialized in cabinetmaking and Phil in woodcarving.

They returned to Wisconsin in July, 1979, and opened their own business, the Norsk Wood Works, right across the street from the house that Odden's grandfather built when he came to America from Norway in 1890.

They buy lumber from local saw mills, air dry it for use, and select it for grain direction, uniformity, density, and moisture content. Basswood, birch, butternut, and pine are the four main woods used at the shop, since soft woods are easier to carve. They use the time-proven European joining techniques including the mortise and tenon, dowel, and handcut dovetail joints, so that the solid wood can expand or contract as the weather changes. Some parts may be laminated if indicated for strength and stability. They mix their own water base

stains and finishes of penetrating oils.

They draw their own designs free hand on paper, transfer them to the wood, and carve them entirely by hand using gouges and chisels - sometimes using 60 different tools for ###!y one design. To keep all the tools sharp is demanding of itself. To achieve the complicated patterns requires an amazing amount of time and concentration.

Master woodcarvers can recognize each other's work, even though it is not signed, because each carver's technique is as individual as a signature.

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Sometimes, Else may do the cabinet work and give the prepared item to Phil for carving. Or each one will make an entire project from beginning to end.

Phillip specializes in the Acanthus style, done in the Gudbrandsdalen area of Norway. He also does the Medieval Viking and Rococo styles.

Phillip and Else continue the tradition of the "Kubbe Stol". This was the only chair found in the Norwegian peasant home and was reserved for the head of the household. A romantic symbol of the a#cient peasant tradition, the Kubbe Stol is made from a single tree log, hollowed out so that the base of the chair is a cylinder form and the back continues upward to form a snug and comfortable

curve. The seat may be hinged to expose storage space in the bottom of the chair. Each chair is unique and is embellished with the Baroque Acanthus leaf pattern or the Medieval Viking style with dragons and Stave churches.

So that more people may own their work, they have produced a modestly-priced, limited-edition Christmas plate for the last four years, with the inscription Julen and the year.

Every Thanksgiving weekend, they sweep up the work rooms and hold their annual open house on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Sometimes they miss some of their creations, so they have started their own family custom they plan something special to make and give to each other for Christmas. Last year they made a Baroque style sofa for their living room. The previous year they made a four poster kingsize bed with a menacing dragon head on top of each post and Medieval dragon motifs carved on the head and foot boards. These furnish their home on a nearby lake.

Every year or so they return to Norway for inspiration and guidance from their teachers in Norway's woodcarving Guild. "It is easier for a young wood-

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carver in a European country," says Phil, "because the Guilds have existed for

hundreds of years. They provide structure so that the younger members can improve and gain recognition." Phillip also assists aspiring American carvers by teaching a one-week woodcarving course every year.

Phillip achieved recognition in the United States by earning top honors at the first annual Norwegian carving competition at the "Vesterheim", (Norwegian for "Our Home in the West"), the Norwegian-American Museum at Decorah, Iowa. He won the only blue and red ribbons awarded to the 35 carvers who competed. He has earned the eight points necessary to be named the first American gold medalist in carving. Now he can no longer compete but he can still exhibit his work at the Museum's annual Nordic Fest. Over 70,000 people attended last summer. Perhaps as much as any ethnic group in the United States, the Norwegians encourage the continuation of the traditions of their mother country.

"We are lucky to be able to work when it is acceptable for people to remember their roots," says Odden. Indeed, in pursuit of their past, American collectors have made folk art the biggest thing going in the Eighties. They realize that ethnic art is worth preserving and that it is uniquely suited for the present American life style.

This reflects the changing theories of how immigrants are integrated into American society. Forget the old melting pot theory - ethnic pluralism still survives. Think rather of America as a giant tapestry.: the hopes and talents that these world-wide citizens bring to their new home are woven to make the fabric of

American life - yet each thread retains its own color.

Now only 33 years old, Odden still has goals. "My teachers say it takes twenty years to make a woodcarver. So far I've only been at it ten years. I

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want to find out what I can do in another ten years."

Phil wears a slightly frayed bandage around his right wrist to ease the pain which may develop after he has been carving for five or six hours. In fact, tendonitis is an occupational hazard for carvers, sometimes ending their careers. "My teacher is still carving at 65 - and that is what I want to be doing when I am 65." Growing, evolving, and creating as an artist.

"The only thing I miss from my 'free period'," says Odden, "is the mountains." Others might say that he is already living the good life of which most ordinary American men can only dream. Wisconsin state forests surround Barronett. "I hunt every fall. In winter we cross-country ski. The last four years I ran the American Birkebeiner cross-country ski race from Hayward to Telemark, Wisconsin, 32 miles. And I get to fish every month of the year."

This is when Else catches up on her own hobbies of knitting, weaving, knife-making, and reading.

Through their carving, Else and Phillip contribute their own bright strands to the colorful fabric of American life.

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