

Grass and Wood: Folk Arts from Nature's Harvest

Elaine Eff

For centuries, American folk craftspersons and artists have recognized and utilized the aesthetic properties of materials found in nature. Grass and wood abound, their colors and textures providing ample inspiration for creative and not-so-creative minds alike.

Grass

Grass is almost everywhere. Consider the vegetation of front lawns, creeks, swamps, and highlands, as well as fields of grain for feeding humans and cattle. Types of grasses are almost as varied as the places they grow and the products made from them. In this age of technology, it is easy to ignore the historical role of grasses in American life.

In many traditional cultures, survival—particularly food and shelter—depended upon local vegetation. Grasses persist as a useful and beautiful reminder of the relationship between man and nature.

Ancient cultures celebrated the harvest through the presentation of gifts to the spirits responsible for the next season's feast or famine. Today, wheat weavers of the Great Plains perpetuate the spirit of this rite in their fabrication of "corn dollies." "Corn" is the English term for all food grains; "dolly" is a corruption of the word "idol." Through artistic manipulation of the grain stalks (the part that would ordinarily be wasted), spirals, cages, braids, and representations of human forms are created.

In other sections of the country, basketmakers continue to use traditional materials and methods. The Gullah of South Carolina seek sweet coastal marsh grasses to make forms that survive from West African heritage. The Aleuts of Alaska draw from a dwindling supply of native grasses to handcraft their unique containers.

Several qualities make grass a desirable medium. It is extremely flexible: it can be braided, coiled, tied, woven, or sewn. It is durable: it can be cut, colored, incised, immersed.

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This Czech polka band was woven in wheat by Doris Johnson of Luray, Kan.

It is abundant and can be employed in projects of major scale. Grass protects, repels water, floats and cushions. And it exists in all but the most arid climates. It is no wonder that agile hands have discovered and perpetuated its products from generation to generation.

Wood

Objects fashioned from wood—particularly furniture, containers, and items of household interior architecture—have little resemblance to their original form (trees). Although the natural colors and grains of many woods might be works of art in themselves, it has become an accepted practice to individualize a finished product by embellishing it with carving or paint.

Some traditional motifs on wood have been associated with certain ethnic or regional groups. Pennsylvania Germans profusely decorated storage chests and boxes with hearts, tulips, and unicorns. Shakers used particular shades of yellow and blue on their meticulously crafted chairs and containers. Norwegians practice *rosemaling* (rose painting), a floral adaptation of simple C and S strokes; the Dutch painted their case furnishings with *grisaille*, or gray shadow designs. New England has long been known for a profusion of embellishments on wood, ones that were employed by country furnituremakers and artists who travelled from house to house decorating walls, woodwork, or household items.

These same techniques are carried on today by inheritors of the painted-wood tradition. Paint not only embellishes what might otherwise be a nondescript surface; it also preserves the wood beneath. Soft woods such as pine, more economical to purchase and maintain than finer woods, are often stained in imitation of rosewood or mahogany.

The three categories of painted decoration are the plain, such as the Shaker one-color covering; the imitative, or counterfeit curly maple, rosewood, or marble; and the imaginative, such as stenciled or free-hand drawing.

The tools of the furniture painter are easily acquired and portable. They include feathers, corncobs, putty, sponges, powders, vinegar, or any other suitable material that yields the desired effects. Traditional methods and designs have continuing relevance and appeal despite the widening range of synthetics.

Grass—roots, soil, and all—forms the sod house for the J. C. Cram family of Loup County, Neb., 1886. Other uses of grass are shown at the Renwick Gallery during the Festival. (Photo from the Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska Historical Society)





The Dutch who settled the Hudson River Valley of New York State painted some of their furniture in imitation of wood carving. This grisaille kas was exceptional even when it was made in the early 18th century.

(Courtesy Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum)

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CATALOG

- Grass, from the exhibit by Mary Hunt Kahlenburg; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1976