The Ifugao Woodcarvers

The Ifugaos, Tagbanwas, Maranaos and Paetenos have been carving on wood for more than 2,000 years. Today they continue to produce fine works of wood art.

The Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legaspi called the Filipinos “buen ebanistas” after seeing the woodwork produced by the natives. Filipinos had been engaging in the art of woodcarving long before the arrival of the Spaniards. The craft is more than 2000 years old -- dating back to the time when carvers had to make use of stones, shells and even the teeth and tusks of animals to shape the wood. Today, Filipino woodcarvers continue to carve a name in the ranks of the finest in the craft.

The more popular Filipino woodcarvers are the Ifugaos, the Tagbanwas, the Maranaos and the Paetenos.

Ifugao Woodcarvers

The Ifugaos of Northern Luzon are famous for the way they carved the mountain slopes that form the legendary Banaue rice terraces. They are also well known for their mastery of wood carving. Ifugao woodcarvings are usually of their deities, the most famous of which are the various interpretations of the granary deity known as the bul-ul. This granary deity occupies a significant role in the lives of the Ifugaos and the bul-ul is ever present in the rice granaries, usually accompanied by a female idol to assure an abundant harvest.

With the current ban on hardwoods, Filipino woodcarvers now use ipil or acacia. Ifugaos also use the reddish wood called gutmu. The wood is roughly shaped with a bolo -- a one-edged knife about 12 to 18 inches long. In working out the details, an improvised thin gouge 2 to 6 inches long is used and then the carving is polished with the leaves of the aplah plant. After this, the images are blackened with soot. Through time, the wood acquires a fine, hard gloss.

Tagbanwa Woodcarvers

South of the Philippines, one finds the Tagbanwa woodcarvers. Whereas the Ifugaos engage in woodcarving primarily because it is an essential part of their beliefs and customs, the Tagbanwas of Palawan carve for the sheer fun of it. And this is probably why the Tagabanwa woodcarvings stand out as one of the most exciting of indigenous Philippine woodcarvings. These wooden works of art are highly stylized and reflect sophisticated aesthetics, leading one art critic to say that they have “close affinities to near-abstract art.”
Tagbanwa wood carving is unique because it incorporates a technique of completely blackening the surface of the wood and then bringing out white portions while etching the design. Only a few of the Tagbanwa woodcarvings are intended for use in rituals. Most of them serve as toys for the children, décor for the house, or as a means of self-expression.

The Tagbanwa’s favorite wood comes from the alimutyugani tree. After the bark is removed, the wood is shaped. Then the wood is rubbed with the leaves of the cassava plant until it turns green. Lumps of resin called salung are placed on the ground and ignited and the wood is passed over the smoke until it becomes black with soot. The process of rubbing cassava leaves all over the wood and blackening the carving by passing it over the burning resin is repeated until the black coloring does not rub off. Then the designs are etched out using a very small knife called pisaw. These designs are usually polka dots, v-marks and white triangles which, when carved on the blackened wood, come out was white incisions.

**Maranao Woodcarvers**

Further down south of the Philippine Islands, are the Maranoa Muslim woodcarvers. Figural representations in their craft are taboo to the Maranao woodcarvers. Natural forms are allowed only on the condition that they are “de-natured.” Because of this limitation, the Maranao woodcarvers use the okkil motif in most of their works. The okkil motif is rich in Sassanian character -- the flowing floral forms and S movements. The Filipino Muslim adaptation of the okkil has a strong indigenous character, deriving inspiration from local plants, sea corals and native objects.

The okkil is carved into musical instruments and everyday objects such as kitchen wares and bamboo tubes. The design can also be seen in the wooden handles of swords and knives. Aside from the okkil, the sarimanok -- a stylized representation of a bird or rooster is also one of the more popular Maranao woodcarving designs.

**Woodcarvers of Paete**

In Luzon - the biggest of the three major Philippine islands - the town of Paete in Laguna has been known as the center of woodcarving in the Philippines. The ban on logging has led many woodcarvers to switch to paper mache, but today, Paete continues to be one of the best sources of fine woodcarvings. In this town, woodcarving has been elevated to a fine art form which is no wonder, because the name Paete comes from the word paet, which literally means chisel.

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