

The Timeless Craft of Wooden Furniture Carving in Cyprus

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This study explores Cyprus's long-standing and rich heritage of carving wooden furniture, a craft that plays a significant role in the island's artistic, cultural, and historical narrative. The Cypriot woodcarving heritage is a singular fusion of artistic, religious, and practical craftsmanship. It has roots in centuries-old techniques and influences from succeeding civilizations such as Byzantine, Venetian, and Ottoman. This study investigates the dissemination of carving methods, the development of artistic motifs, and the socio-cultural meanings ingrained in the carved items using an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical research, fieldwork, and interviews with modern artists. Religious iconography, the vine, and the rosette are examples of traditional motifs that are examined as both decorative accents and symbols of shared memory and identity. The research also analyses regional variances across the island, from the intricate furniture of the Troodos region to the simpler, yet symbolically rich, home objects found in rural towns. The materials utilized—especially local hardwoods like walnut and olive—as well as the specialized hand tools and techniques used by expert carvers are all carefully considered. The study shows how, despite the demands of mass production and modernization, these artisans have preserved a high level of technical and symbolic continuity.

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INTRODUCTION

Wooden furniture carving in Cyprus is more than a decorative practice. Rather, it is a living testament to the island's complex cultural history and artisanal ingenuity. As an art form that has persisted through centuries of political change and cultural exchange, Cypriot woodcarving reflects a synthesis of aesthetic traditions and localized craftsmanship that continues to shape the material culture of the island today. From ecclesiastical thrones and iconostases to intricately carved dowry chests and domestic furnishings, the carved wooden objects of Cyprus serve both functional and symbolic roles, often embodying layers of religious, social, and familial meaning (Stylianou and Stylianou 1992; Hadjikyriakos 2005).

The origins of this craft can be traced back to the Byzantine period, during which religious woodcarving flourished alongside the construction of monastic centers in the Troodos Mountains and other regions (Papacostas 2018). Subsequent influences from Venetian and Ottoman rule introduced new iconographic motifs and technical styles, which local artisans gradually absorbed and reinterpreted, giving rise to distinct regional carving traditions (Roudometof 2014). These furnishings were traditionally produced in village

workshops and monasteries, transmitted through master-apprentice relationships or family lineages, emphasizing both craftsmanship and cultural continuity (Christodoulou 2010).

In recent decades, however, the tradition of woodcarving in Cyprus has faced numerous challenges. Globalization, mass production, and the decline of rural economies have led to a dramatic reduction in the number of active carvers and workshops (UNESCO 2012). The erosion of apprenticeship systems, coupled with limited institutional support and waning interest among younger generations, has placed this once-flourishing craft at risk of extinction (Ioannides *et al.* 2014). Within this context, the scholarly study and documentation of Cypriot woodcarving practices becomes essential—not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a way to reassert the value of traditional craftsmanship within contemporary heritage discourses.

This study explored the historical development, stylistic evolution, and current status of wooden furniture carving in Cyprus. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and visual analysis, the study examined how the craft has evolved, persisted, and in some cases, adapted to new socio-economic realities. It argues that carved wooden furniture, though often overlooked in broader discussions of Mediterranean material culture, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the intersections of art, labor, memory, and identity in Cypriot society.

LITERATURE VIEW

The craft of wooden furniture carving in Cyprus occupies an important but often underexplored space in Mediterranean material culture studies. Existing literature on Cypriot woodcarving has tended to focus on ecclesiastical art, particularly the ornate iconostases and bishop's thrones, benches, and pews found in Orthodox churches (see Fig. 1), which exemplify the fusion of religious devotion and local artisanal skill (Stylianou and Stylianou 1992; Papacostas 2018). These works often highlight the symbolic and liturgical function of carved objects, emphasizing their theological meaning, and visual impact within sacred spaces.



Fig. 1. Carved wooden church pews, benches, Orthodox Church Paphos, Cyprus

In the broader context of Cypriot craftsmanship, Hadjikyriakos (2005) offers one of the few comprehensive studies dedicated specifically to traditional woodcarving techniques. His work documents the tools, motifs, and processes used by master artisans, shedding light on the regional variations that distinguish the carving styles of Troodos,

Lefkara, and Paphos. Likewise, Christodoulou (2010) situates furniture carving within the vernacular architecture and design traditions of the island, noting the interplay between form, function, and symbolism in rural domestic interiors. Figures 2 and 3 show examples of Lefkara and Troodos styles. In these examples, high and low relief motifs can be seen.



Fig. 2. Dowry Chest – Lefkara Region (c. 1880). High-relief floral motifs with pomegranate and vine designs, Walnut wood, Lefkara Folklore Museum



Fig. 3. 17th century Cyprus wood pitch decorated boarded chest, Troodos location, Lefkara Folklore Museum

However, much of the academic focus remains centered on church art, with relatively limited attention given to secular or domestic carved furniture—such as hope chests, mirror frames, or dowry wardrobes—which also embody significant cultural meaning. These objects, which are often identified as family heirlooms or bridal gifts, encode narratives of lineage, gender roles, and social status; yet they have not been widely studied outside of folkloric or ethnographic frameworks (Roudometof 2014; Ioannides *et al.* 2014).

From a heritage conservation perspective, the status of Cypriot woodcarving as an endangered traditional craft has recently garnered attention. According to the Cyprus National Commission for UNESCO (2012), traditional craftsmanship—including woodcarving—is considered part of the country’s intangible cultural heritage, deserving of formal recognition and preservation. Initiatives have since emerged to document and safeguard these practices. Academic engagement with these efforts remains scarce, particularly in terms of critically assessing their effectiveness or community impact.



Fig. 4. 17th century Cyprus wood carving, Kyrenia location, Kyrenia Museum

Comparative literature from other Mediterranean regions offers additional context. Studies of traditional carving in Greece, Turkey, and Lebanon, for example, reveal similar patterns of syncretic influences, intergenerational transmission, and modern decline (Kalantzis 2019). These works help situate the Cypriot experience within a larger regional pattern of artisanal change, modernization, and resilience.

In summary, while there is a foundational body of literature on ecclesiastical woodcarving and vernacular furniture in Cyprus, significant gaps remain in the analysis of domestic carving traditions, their evolution, and their role in contemporary heritage discourse. This study contributes to filling that gap by documenting living practitioners, analyzing surviving objects, and contextualizing wooden furniture carving as both an art form and a cultural practice that continues to evolve under shifting historical and social pressures.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining ethnographic fieldwork, art historical analysis, and archival research. The aim was to document, interpret, and contextualize the living tradition of wooden furniture carving in Cyprus, with a focus on both historical continuity and contemporary transformation. This approach is grounded in cultural heritage research practices that emphasize local knowledge, material culture, and community engagement (Smith 2006; Högberg 2016).

Fieldwork and Interviews

Primary data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with practicing woodcarvers, workshop apprentices, and heritage professionals across several Cypriot regions known for their carving traditions, including the Troodos Mountains, Lefkara, Kyrenia, Famagusta, and parts of Nicosia. Interview subjects were selected using purposive sampling to identify key informants with specialized knowledge of carving techniques, stylistic traditions, and the socio-cultural functions of carved furniture. In total, 10 interviews were conducted between January and June 2025, each lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Participant observation also played a crucial role in the data collection process. Time was spent in artisan workshops and community centers, where traditional tools, processes, and materials were observed firsthand. This immersive aspect of fieldwork allowed for a more nuanced understanding of both the technical and symbolic aspects of the craft (Pink 2009).

Visual and Stylistic Analysis

Complementing the ethnographic component, the study also incorporated art historical methods to analyze a sample of carved wooden objects from both ecclesiastical and domestic contexts. Selected pieces included dowry chests, iconostases, chairs, and mirror frames housed in museums, churches, and private collections. Visual documentation was carried out through high-resolution photography and field sketches. The analysis focused on identifying recurring motifs, stylistic features, and regional variations, drawing connections to historical influences such as Byzantine iconography, Ottoman ornamentation, and Venetian design (Stylianou and Stylianou 1992; Papacostas 2018).

Archival and Documentary Research

Archival research was carried out using materials from the Cyprus Department of Antiquities, religious records, and local heritage archives in order to place the discoveries into a larger historical context. These records shed light on the socioeconomic responsibilities played by artists in various eras, the historical relevance of woodcarving workshops, and guild customs. Additional sources included UNESCO heritage documentation, folklore records, and previously published scholarly works.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical protocols for fieldwork in cultural heritage settings. Participants were informed of the study's goals, assured of anonymity where requested, and given the opportunity to review and comment on their interview transcripts. Special care was taken to represent the voices of artisans authentically, without romanticizing or reducing their practices to static heritage forms (Högberg 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through fieldwork, interviews, and visual analysis revealed several key themes relating to the practice, transmission, and perception of wooden furniture carving in Cyprus.

These findings are organized into four primary categories:

1. Continuity and change in carving techniques,
2. Symbolism and regional variation in motifs,
3. Intergenerational transmission,
4. Threats to sustainability and cultural visibility.

Continuity and Change in Carving Techniques

The majority of interviewed artisans use hand tools that have changed little over generations—chisels, gouges, mallets, and carving knives—demonstrating a strong continuity in traditional techniques (Christodoulou 2010). To cut down on labor time, some workshops have started using electric rotary tools, especially in urban areas. Even if this

change boosts productivity, some master carvers are worried that mechanization could undermine the expressive and tactile aspects of handcrafted pieces. Notably, even in contemporary projects, skilled carvers frequently employ old joinery techniques such as mortise-and-tenon joints and hardwood pegs. Figure 5 clearly shows the difference between hand and machine carving.



Fig. 5. Comparison between hand and CNC carving

Symbolism and Regional Variation in Motifs

Visual and stylistic analysis of carved pieces revealed recurring motifs that vary slightly by region but maintain a core iconographic vocabulary. Common elements include the vine and pomegranate (symbols of fertility and abundance), the rosette (representing eternity), and the double-headed eagle, which is often associated with Byzantine influence and ecclesiastical authority (Stylianou and Stylianou 1992; Papacostas 2018). While religious furniture in the Troodos region favors geometric and vegetal motifs inspired by Orthodox liturgy, dowry chests in Lefkara, for example, often have densely packed floral patterns carved in high relief.

Intergenerational Transmission

All of the artisans, over 50 of whom were interviewed, had acquired their skills through unofficial family apprenticeships, usually from fathers or uncles. Younger practitioners (those under 30) were uncommon and were mostly drawn into the practice through part-time vocational/course programs or new cultural efforts. A number of elderly artisans bemoaned the lack of persistent interest from younger generations, pointing to the pull of metropolitan work as well as economic difficulties. “This is not just work—it’s memory,” remarked one Kyrenia artisan, “but fewer want to remember this way anymore.”

Threats to Sustainability and Cultural Visibility

The study identified a growing disconnect between the craft’s cultural value and its economic viability. Most carvers reported declining demand for carved furniture, particularly in domestic contexts, where imported, mass-produced alternatives dominate. Efforts to preserve the tradition—such as municipal workshops or EU or government funded programs—have achieved modest success, but they lack long-term sustainability. Artisans expressed a desire for broader institutional recognition, especially through

integration into formal arts education or heritage tourism frameworks (UNESCO 2012; Ioannides *et al.* 2014).

More than just documentation is needed to preserve this art; inclusive, flexible approaches that unite innovation and tradition are needed for revitalization. Possible future directions include incorporating carving into modern design, providing instruction in trade schools, and raising awareness through cultural tourism. There is still a chance that this rich history will only endure in museum exhibits and recollections if such interventions are not made.

In the end, the Cypriot woodcarving case forces us to reevaluate our appreciation of craft as a living, breathing art form that can significantly support local economies, cultural identity, and artistic expression in the contemporary world, rather than just as a holdover from the past.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the paradox at the heart of Cyprus's woodcarving tradition: a craft deeply tied to cultural identity yet increasingly marginalized in the face of modern economic and social realities. The persistence of traditional tools and techniques underscores the resilience of embodied knowledge systems, even as the number of practitioners declines. These results align with broader heritage studies literature, which emphasizes the fragility of intangible cultural practices when not embedded in living economic and educational systems.

Regional motifs and stylistic distinctions reflect a rich tapestry of local identities and historical influences, suggesting that carved furniture should not be viewed as a monolithic tradition but as a mosaic of evolving expressions. These aesthetic variations also point to the craft's role as a vehicle for cultural memory, one that encodes values, beliefs, and community narratives into physical form.

The crisis of intergenerational transmission mirrors patterns seen in other Mediterranean craft traditions, where younger generations often lack incentives to pursue time-intensive artisanal paths. While external interventions—such as UNESCO listings or government subsidies—are important, they must be paired with sustainable, community-driven strategies that integrate crafts into contemporary life, whether through tourism, education, or design innovation.

The conclusions from this study shed light on the paradox at the core of Cyprus's woodcarving heritage: A craft that is closely linked to cultural identity but is becoming less and less accepted in light of contemporary social and economic realities. Even though there are fewer practitioners, the continued use of conventional tools and methods highlights how resilient embodied knowledge systems are. These findings are consistent with the literature on heritage studies, which highlights how intangible cultural practices are vulnerable when they are not incorporated into active educational and economic systems.

1. Wooden furniture carving in Cyprus represents a vital strand of the island's intangible cultural heritage, linking past to present through an enduring language of form, symbol, and skill. This study has shown that while traditional carving practices continue to exist—especially among elder artisans and in rural contexts—they face serious threats from economic pressures, cultural disinterest, and lack of institutional support.

2. The vast fabric of regional identities and historical influences reflected in regional motifs and artistic differences suggests that carved furniture should not be seen as a single, unchanging tradition but rather as a mosaic of changing emotions. These differences in aesthetics also highlight the craft's function as a medium for cultural memory, encoding values, beliefs, and collective stories into tangible form.
3. Similar trends to other Mediterranean craft traditions, where younger generations frequently lack motivation to continue time-consuming artisanal paths, are reflected in the issue of intergenerational transmission. External interventions, such as government subsidies or UNESCO lists, are vital, but they must be combined with community-driven, sustainable methods that incorporate crafts into modern life, whether through design innovation, tourism, or teaching.
4. Preserving this craft requires more than documentation; it calls for revitalization through inclusive, adaptive strategies that bridge tradition and innovation. Integrating carving into contemporary design, offering training opportunities in vocational schools, and promoting awareness through cultural tourism are potential pathways forward. Without such interventions, the risk remains that this rich tradition will survive only in museum displays and memory.
5. In Cyprus, wood furniture carving is an essential part of the island's intangible cultural legacy, bridging the past and present with a timeless language of form, symbolism, and artistry. According to this study, traditional carving techniques are still practiced, particularly by older craftspeople and in rural areas, although they are seriously threatened by institutional support gaps, cultural apathy, and economic pressures.
6. Ultimately, the case of Cypriot woodcarving challenges us to reconsider how we value craft—as not merely a relic of the past, but as a living, evolving practice capable of contributing meaningfully to cultural identity, local economies, and creative expression in the modern world.

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