

Handmade Things Medieval Woodwork Worksheet

Medieval Hull was a major port; woodworkers would have been employed in a variety of functions both in the port and in the town. A lot of timber was imported through the port of Hull, in 1304 to 1305 alone, 25.000 boards of Baltic timber were imported through Hull. Board dimensions vary but would generally have been around 4m x 30cm x 2.5 to 5cm. The timber was mostly used for building ships, erecting buildings and making wharves and jetties. Another use for timber was cooperage: the manufacture of barrels and casks for storing and transporting goods such as fish, butter, beers, wines and spirits.

Medieval carpenters at work can be seen in many images from the period, and though varying in detail, can give a good idea of how work was carried out, the tools used, and the specialised woodworking trades. We are lucky that a lot of medieval images depict scenes from the bible; Jesus, we are told in the bible, was the son of Joseph who was a carpenter, so there are many medieval images showing Joseph the carpenter with all his tools. Other biblical scenes which depict carpenters were also popular: the building of the ark and the Tower of Babel are good examples. Good images to look for are: Building the Ark from the Bedford book of hours (note, the item they are constructing looks more like a barn than a boat!), "The four conditions of society: Work" a painting by Jean Bourdichon which shows a carpenter in his workshop. The image illustrates carved furniture being made, together with a selection to tools in what is clearly a domestic workshop. The "Merode Altarpiece" by Robert Campin, which clearly shows Joseph with his tools. Images of tools like this help us to recreate and use tools such as these today, and also show how relatively little woodworking tools have changed over the centuries.





Physical evidence of the work of Medieval woodworkers may be seen in the world around us, in museums and the archaeological record. Traces of the carpenters' skills can be seen in surviving churches, medieval buildings and in smaller work that survives such as furniture, eating utensils and tools.

Medieval carpenters often decorated their work with carving; little of it was left plain unless very utilitarian, or was unlikely to be seen. Although they look complicated at first glance, most of the designs are based on simple geometry. One of the best ways to see how they worked is to study the originals and try to work out how it was done. Here is an example of a design you could do at home with just a piece of paper, a straight edge and a pair of compasses – or piece of string and a pencil if you don't have compasses.



1. Draw a square any size, but make it large enough that it is not too fiddly to work with.
2. Find and mark the centre of each side – using a rule to measure, or folding the paper.
3. Draw diagonal lines across the square from the corners. These meet in the middle and so you have found the centre. These two are the first two lines of your design.

4. Using your compasses, if you have them (or tie a pencil to a piece of string and hold down the end as shown in the video). Draw a circle centred on the centre point of the square (where the lines cross), and just touching each side at the four marks you made on the sides.
5. Then draw a curve from the middle of one side to the middle of the next, with your compasses or string anchored at a corner of the square. (This is the line that you saw drawn in the video.)
6. Now do the other three corners the same. You now have the basic framework of the design for the carving you saw in the video. These lines form the centres of all the ridges.
7. Fill out where the carved ridges would be by drawing extra lines on either side of each of the main lines inside the circle.
8. In the spaces where the circle doesn't meet the square, draw a line from each corner to meet in the middle of the space.
9. You could transfer this design to wood and carve it all out! OR, you could colour it in!



Once you have mastered this, have a look at carvings on churches and other buildings, or on carved furniture and see if you can work out how they set out the pattern. If you can't get out to see buildings or furniture in person, you can find a lot of images on the internet by searching for "Carved medieval furniture"

References:

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