

THE ART OF CREATING – FOLK CRAFT IN POLAND, IN THE PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract: Folk handicrafts and crafts in Poland, although no longer existing in their natural context with the sole purpose of serving the rural population, continue to play a significant cultural role today. This fact has been influenced by the changes that have taken place in agricultural production and general civilisational changes, such as: the influx of factory goods to the countryside, changing preferences in the countryside, changes in the employment structure and migrations to cities. In Poland, however, crafts and handicrafts have been under the protection and care of state patronage since before World War II. It was made through various activities of institutions specially established for this purpose, as well as the activities of museums and ministries. In Poland, museums, scientific institutions and cultural NGOs carry out research into crafts, handicrafts and publishing. Websites are also created to promote and educate in the field of handicrafts, bringing the history and traditions closer and drawing attention to the economic factor and the possibility of acquiring certain products. In this article, I will look at the contemporary reception of handicrafts based on my own observations, my ongoing projects on both historical and contemporary handicrafts and crafts, and the literature on the subject.

Keywords: Rural Culture / Traditional Culture / Folk Culture, Handicrafts and Crafts / Intangible Cultural Heritage

Linked to the craft/handicraft is the nostalgic hope of creating an alternative to the frustrating power of globalization, consumerism, anonymity, stigma, dispossession, dehumanization. Rather undefined and positive qualities are expected: evidence of the creative actions of the human individual: evidence of knowledge of the raw material, the purpose of the product, evidence of mastery of the technique, the resulting aesthetic qualities, sometimes artistic threads/in decoration; evidence of an 'author', 'regional', 'identity'. 'Folks', 'Communicability'. Readability of the logic of cause and effect

(Szacki 2002, for Jaszczołt 2018: 288).

These are the very important words of Piotr Szacki¹, testifying to a sensitive approach to craft and handicraft, which carries the tangible matter of the objects made, patterns, forms, the technological feature, and the most intangible one – concealing the immateriality of skills, legacy of many generations of performers and generationally transmitted knowledge.

¹ Piotr Szacki (1939 – 2002), Polish museologist, author of ethnographic films, curator of the collection of material culture at the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. Project "Release the project", <https://is.gd/xFUJWz> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

An important aspect of creativity is the treatment of creativity as the heritage of a particular group, of the nation and humanity in general:

According to the 'new philosophy of heritage', it is understood as the presence of the past in the present. Such an approach, however, does not presuppose the passive recollection, recreation, meticulous preservation and safeguarding of past ideas or insignificant artefacts having only collector's value, in order to pass them on – like a museum exhibit – in an inviolable state to the next generation

(Dziadowiec-Greganić & Dudek 2019: 79).

New approaches to heritage emphasize active use of heritage, taking into account all factors of its existence in social, cultural, and economic life. Transmission across generations and the passing on of intangible skills are also given a lot of importance.

This way of treating the legacy – in which each generation contributes something and then passes it on – is a socio-cultural construct that is born – or rather (co)created – in a specific, primarily local community. It has a visible processual and developmental potential and is realised in the course of diverse interactions and discursive socio-cultural practices

(Dziadowiec-Greganić & Dudek 2019: 79).

Thus, just like a living organism, folk handicrafts are constantly in process – they are subjected to transformation with the changing social, civilisational and cultural reality. Changes are made in areas of:

- technology (e.g. mechanical machines are being replaced by electric ones) – the function of objects (from utilitarian to aesthetic, e.g. in the case of ceramics, where the pragmatic function has been transformed into an aesthetic one – vessels once used for storage, cooking and consumption have started to serve exclusively for decorative purposes);
- design (e.g. new elements, patterns appear, e.g. traditional paper cut-outs take on a new form, but are adopted and developed in the region);
- materials (factory-made materials appear, e.g. synthetic cord in straw plaiting, or are newly applied, e.g. paper tutus as plaiting material);
- recipient (change from rural to urban) – the purpose (education has started to play a major role from the economic point of view).

In addition to the heritage aspect, since the beginning of the 20th century, very important educational role of handicrafts and crafts skills has also begun to be recognized, and this is being used quite intensively in education at different levels and for different age groups (for both children

and adults), with museums, cultural institutions, educational homesteads², or schools organizing demonstrations and workshops on various crafts and handicrafts. State patronage plays an important role, to some extent, regarding those topics. In Poland, museums are state, local government or municipal, but there are also private or social entities that play an important role in the process of using cultural heritage resources, also responding to public demand and interest.³

Crafts “back then”

There are few references to crafts and craftsmen in Old Polish literature. The subject was generally ignored. Exceptional sources are poems published in the first half of the 17th century: “Officina ferraria abo huta i warstat z kuźniami szlachetnego dzieła żelaznego”⁴ by Walenty Roździeński, „Sługa abo uczeń co powinien panu swemu w rzemiośle” by Franciszek Śmiadecki, „Nauki potrzebne do rzemiosła” and „List wolny do rzemiosła” by Jan z Kijan. They present the model of a good craftsman (master, apprentice, and journeyman) – as professional, hardworking, and devout, or on the contrary, they present his caricature.

Generally, these works contain critical remarks directed at the masters and their assistants or are satirical in nature. The opinions presented in them are similar, reflecting the dominant views of the pre-modern Polish society, which was rather unfriendly towards craftsmen. They present a fixed stereotype of the then manufacturer, not his actual image, and indicate what he should be. This literature presents a less than positive image of Polish craftsmanship in the late 16th and 17th centuries. It was commonly believed that those who were not part of a guild did not do their job well, drank alcohol, and neglected their duties. They were considered lazy, dishonest, and careless about the products they made, wanting to get rich quickly without guaranteeing the quality of their products. But these were just common opinions and an image created in literature and peasant stories.⁵

The countryside in Poland, before the industrial revolution, was fairly self-sufficient, and most of the items needed were made on people’s own farms. What could not be made by them, was purchased from local manufacturers, or bought at fairs or markets from specialized village or small-town craftsmen. The 19th century brought significant changes that could not bypass the relatively isolated and conservative countryside. An important caesura in Poland was the enfranchisement of the peasants, i.e. the granting of land to them as their own property (which took place in various

² Educational homesteads, <https://is.gd/gc3GIF> [Accessed 11.2.2025].

³ In recent years, for example, the so-called cultural tourism has become popular, but also the education of children and young people with former lives in the countryside and former professions, as the common knowledge slowly disappears.

⁴ Original spelling.

⁵ Based on <https://is.gd/wgw0MB> [Accessed 30.6.2025].

annexations, at different times: Austrian annexation – 1848, Prussian annexation – 1808-1850, Russian annexation – 1861-1864). Poland regained its independence in 1918 (after having been under partition since 1795). The situation of personal freedom led to a greater boom in the economy with the processes of industrialization and urbanization, which opened up opportunities for development in various areas of peasant life, including rural crafts. The everyday objects and working tools used in the countryside, both in the way they were made and, in their form, did not change for centuries. Eventually, they were superseded by mass-produced products, appearing more massively after the Second World War, which the countryside gradually and willingly adopted. These products, which usually had a different aesthetic than that of the peasantry, turned out to be more attractive to the villagers.

Another important trend was the so-called ‘fashion for folklore’, which was born in Poland as a result of scientific interest in folklore (since the birth of folklorism and ethnography – i.e. since the 18th century, folklore in its broadest sense – e.g. the interest of artists: poet-writers, painters). This current style in art was particularly strong at the beginning of the 20th century, known as “peasantomania”.⁶ Interest in rural design returns in Poland from time to time in fashion design, interior design and graphics. Also, the interest in folk music by musicians is frequent (starting with Frédéric Chopin, up to the present day, but this is of course a broad separate topic – in Poland folk bands are quite popular). Since the time of increasingly widespread globalization, an undercurrent of globalization has emerged, a search for ‘small homelands’, a search for identity, a ‘return to roots’, which also affects the maintenance of traditional customs, rituals, skills, craft techniques, reaching back to old culinary traditions. Thanks to this interest, certain areas of folk production – mainly those that can be classified as applied arts – have survived, finding purchasers and connoisseurs, but mainly in the urban environment.

Caesura

Diametrical changes came about with the political transformation, after the Second World War, when factory goods increasingly flowed into the countryside, and crafts gradually began to lose their *raison d’être*. A recession followed (Jaszczołt 2023: 6). Some crafts survived – especially in the more conservative areas (eastern Poland, mountainous areas), due to the type of economy and the need of the countryside for certain crafts, e.g. carpentry, blacksmithing, saddlery, coopering.

⁶ It was an important and interesting trend in Poland, encompassing literature, fine arts, as well as “life” (because, for example, some representatives of the artistic communities married women from the countryside, which was described in the poem “The wedding” by Stanisław Wyspiański, 1901).

Crafts that were important for the functioning of the rural farm and the traditional agricultural economy survived the longest. For example, traction making, carpentry or wheelwrighting still survived until the 1950s. Coopering (and various stave vessels, e.g. earthenware), manufacture of small wooden objects (spoons, mangles, basins, bentwood vessels), turning (and manufacture of spinning wheels), sieving and sieve-making, blacksmithing due to the need for tools: spikes, axes, ploughs and horse shoeing were still popular.

Another caesura happened in the 1970s, when the electrification of the countryside was definitively completed.⁷ It made some significant changes – possibility to work in a different way – it made work longer, and foot lathes, for example, were introduced or replaced by electric drive. However, some woodworking trades were still going strong at this time: coopering, basin making, making small bent and wooden objects, spoon making, toy making, reel making. Saddlers, tanners and ropemakers were still needed.

Crafts and handicrafts, however, survived...

In the post-war years, rural craftsmen were creating items that were very needed on farms. The wares they made, found their way not only to markets and fairs, but also to folk handicraft shops. From the post-war period until the end of the 1980s, the Central Bureau of Folk Industry, Art, and Crafts played a major and extremely important role in sustaining art, handicrafts and crafts. Centrala Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego, known as “Cepelia”⁸, which operated through a network of regional cooperatives of folk handicraft, in which numerous artists worked, including weavers, embroiderers, doll makers, potters, folk sculptors and painters, toy makers and many others. The number of craftsmen, who in the 1950s supplied their products to Cepelia, was estimated at around 200.000 people. Cepelia products were approved by ethnographic commissions.⁹ Products from the cooperative were available in chain shops and treated most often as souvenirs or ‘for a gift’, but they were also used for interior decoration (e.g. furniture modelled on *zydlach*), or as clothing and jewellery. Cepelia

⁷ Some villages were electrified in Poland only in the late 60s or even early 70s (Jaszczołt 2023: 8).

⁸ For a definition on the word Cepelia, see <https://is.gd/FBIdA5> [Accessed 17.2.2025].

⁹ Cepelia survived until 2020 and as there is no place here to analyze the fall of this excellent brand in Poland, which also unfortunately received a negative meaning, and the word “cepelia” received negative connotations related to “people by force” – on the one hand, ethnographers tried to support the handicraft activity. On the other hand, perhaps they interfered too restrictively in this creation and they decided on the “degree of people” of a given product. Broad study – see Korduba, P. 2013. *Folk for sale*. Foundation Bęc Zmiana, National Centre of Culture.

contributed in many cases to the maintenance of some branches of handicraft e.g. efforts were made to continue work in some of the pottery centres, of which there were several hundred in Poland before the Second World War. After the Second World War, it was possible to preserve a few dozen of them. Cepelia cooperatives also produced textiles, dolls in regional costumes, leather goods, napkins, tablecloths and jewelry. The demand for such 'folklore' allowed certain groups of traditional professions to survive. However, production was already geared towards an urban, rather than rural, consumer, due to the fashion for folk crafts being created, in line with the policy of the Polish People's Republic.

With a change of audience, cepelia products mostly fulfilled aesthetic purposes – even spinning wheels used in a natural space for spinning linen or wool became interior decorations. You could say that ordinary rural utensils found their way 'into the urban living rooms', but to a large extent, many areas of handicrafts and crafts survived as a result. In the countryside in their natural environment, also as a result of aesthetic tastes and the influx of factory goods, local products were no longer as popular – after the war, 'urban' ones became more and more fashionable. It is only thanks to women's home knitting that knitting products or occasional decorations have survived in the countryside.

Definitions of craftsmen/craftswomen/folk artists

It is impossible to provide a single valid definition of craft and/or artisan/craftsman. According to the one jointly elaborated and adopted by consensus by UNESCO, UNCTAD¹⁰ and WTO¹¹, craftsmanship (handicraft) is (...) artisanal products produced by artisans, made either manually or with hand tools or even mechanical means, insofar as the direct manual input of the artisan remains the most important component of the final product. The special character of craft products, on the other hand, derives from their distinctive features, which can be both utilitarian, aesthetic, creative, cultural (culturally attached), decorative, functional, traditional, religious and socially symbolic and meaningful

(Dziadowiec-Greganić & Dudek 2019: 83).

This definition encompasses any manufacturing, not only that which is the subject of this discussion, i.e. related to the rural environment. Starting from the human – (in)creator, the Polish Association of Folk Artists (STL) provides its definition. A folk artist, as defined by the STL, is (...)

an individual who performs works of folk art, and has acquired the skill of their making through direct transmission from master from his/her region of origin (observation), whose work represents a high level of technical –

¹⁰ The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

¹¹ World Trade Organization.

artistic – mastery and conforms to the traditional canons characteristic of the region and includes one of the fields of activity as:

- artist – where the creative element and artistic individualism is important, e.g. instrumental musician, singer, dancer, sculptor, painter, folk writer, storyteller;
- craftsman – who makes objects of a utilitarian nature; e.g. cooper, blacksmith, carpenter, folk instrument builder, braider, potter, turner, woodcarver, furniture maker, furrier, spoon maker, weaver, sitter, tailor, etc.;
- craftsman – who makes decorative and ceremonial items, e.g. embroiderer, lace maker, cutter, gingerbread maker, creator of ceremonial arts (e.g. Easter eggs, palms, nativity scenes), creator of decorative arts (e.g. tissue paper flowers, curtains), etc.¹²

The only definition in Polish literature related to small-scale production was created by Barbara Bazielić (Bazielić 2007), defining such production as ‘home industry’. In ‘Sztuka i rękodzieło w Polsce’, Bazielić writes:

(...) homemade handicrafts, (...), were called domestic industry as opposed to artistic industry. In the nineteenth century, various terms such as handicraft and home industry, sometimes equated with folk industry, functioned in relation to folk art and creativity. (...) folk industry is based on regional traditions and operates using natural raw materials or those produced by villagers and handcrafted by them, in accordance with generational transmission. In contrast, the home industry has no connection to tradition and its production is the result of the tastes of the maker or the principal. A similar definition applies to handicrafts, which, however, do not consist of mass production

(Bazielić 2007: 20).

Definitions, however, only play an organising role.

Handicrafts and crafts in the past and today

With the intention of protecting ‘disappearing professions’, the term is sometimes used and understood interchangeably with ‘old crafts’ or ‘handicrafts’. (...). Hence, two spheres of meaning can be distinguished for the subject we are dealing with: one – ‘anthropological’ – subjective, functioning in the opinions, beliefs, stereotypes. The second is a socio-economic, and therefore objective, category

(Szacki 2002, for: Jaszczołt 2018: 275).

From the 1990s onwards, the term ‘Disappearing Professions’, which is a term used to describe the programme of the then Ministry of Culture and

¹² For a definition on folks artists, see <https://zgsl.pl/tworcy-ludowi/> [Accessed 17.2.2025].

the Arts, became widely used until today.¹³ In Poland, it is still possible to list the areas of traditional crafts that are still present today. Although, it is difficult to speak of great popularity and to give exact statistics of creators. The Association of Folk Artists brings together those who are enrolled in the ranks of this association,¹⁴ but there are still non-associated creators who work on their own, operating on a small scale as an additional occupation. During the implementation of the ‘Disappearing Professions’ programme, the creators were ‘inventoried’ – a database was created (although today, after 30 years, it is obviously outdated).



Fig. 1: Baskets from straw, Fot. R. Karpiński, Warsaw, 2023 NIKIDW

One of the most important jobs of ‘Disappearing Professions’ in Poland are:

- Tailoring of folk costumes. There are individual tailors who work locally in different ethnographic regions. Nowadays, new companies that are working with ethnographic consultancy are appearing in Poland, which undertake the preparation of an outfit from each region (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 39).¹⁵

- Weaving, which is subdivided into threaded, multi-stranded and double-stranded weaving, weaving gloves on wooden forms known as boards. The weavers make materials for folk costumes, rugs, bedspreads, cushions or for belts for costumes. In the region of eastern Poland, in

¹³ Kopczyńska-Jaworska, B. & M. Niewiadomska-Rudnicka (eds.). 1997. *Useful beauty or dying beauty. Information about the implementation of the program of the Ministry of Culture and Art “Dying professions”*. Polish Folk Society, Łódź.

¹⁴ As of January 26, 2025, it is 2.161 people, <https://is.gd/4wvUIV> [Accessed 26.1.2026].

¹⁵ In 1989 there were 90 tailors working (Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 39).

Polesia, there are several female weavers who weave the so-called perebora for Podlasie nadbuzanski costumes, which resemble embroidery (on white linen with red or maroon thread). Some female weavers are involved in so-called double-weaving, which is an artistic field. This technique produces carpets – two-sided two-colour paintings, with a variety of themes, depicting scenes from village life, plants, animals. Furman glove weaving, on the other hand, has been re-established after several years of absence and lack of function in its original context as gloves for carters, driving carts – as a need for hand protection. The gloves are now listed on the national Intangible Cultural Heritage list (from 2022) and are sold as ‘ordinary’ single-finger gloves. Caps are also made by female weavers using this technique. According to the Base, in 1989, 336 weavers worked (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 57).

- Folk embroidery (on linen, tulle, samodi, dresses) occurs as an ornamental element of folk costumes (shirts, handkerchiefs, pockets, caps, headpieces). Nowadays, more often as machine embroidery, it uses elements of folk motifs on handbags, cosmetic bags, phone cases, belts, etc. There is an interesting revival of embroidery on tulle in one of the regions of central Poland known as Kurpie Białe. Types of embroidery include cross-stitch, white embroidery, multi-colour embroidery, threaded embroidery, embroidery on tulle, bead embroidery, woollen cloth embroidery, machine embroidery and embroidered pictures. According to the database, there were 1.391 embroiderers working in 1997 (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 72).

- Lace-making (Crochet technique, net, i.e. filet, block lace and fretwork). The crochet technique is used to make napkins, tablecloths, runners, as well as trims for folk costumes (cuffs, collars, headpieces), and nowadays also Christmas and Easter decorations. More difficult is the block technique (found in southern Poland). This technique is used to make doilies, elements of costumes and, for example, small decorations to hang on the wall or earrings. The net technique, or filigree technique, is known in eastern Poland and is used to make doilies, tablecloths and curtains. Frillwork became popular in the 20th century. The technique is used to make napkins and small gadgets, such as bracelets or earrings. In 1997, 328 lace makers were registered (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 96).



Fig. 2: Ceramic sculpture, Fot. R. Karpiński, Warsaw, 2023, NIKiDW.

- Pottery (pot turning and ceramic sculpture) in Poland has a centuries-old tradition. Before World War II, there were several hundred ceramic centres in Poland. Nowadays, pottery, both as pot-turning and ceramic sculpture, is relatively popular (not only in the ‘folk’ version with regional and family traditions, but also as a handicraft). Before the Second World War, there were several hundred pottery centres and ‘pottery villages’ in Poland, where several or even a dozen potters worked. In 1989, there were 256 potters working in Poland (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewiadomska-Rudnicka 1997: 110). Today, this is a much smaller number, but on a comparative scale with other crafts, pottery still persists. In the 1940s, the roll-and-slide – otherwise known as belt – technique of pottery making disappeared in the northeast of Poland and, despite attempts to reactivate it, it has not succeeded to date.¹⁶



Fig. 3: Ceramic pots, Fot. Danuta Matloch, Warsaw NIKiDW 2022

- Plaiting (mostly from wicker, but also from straw, watercress, pine root, strands of plants, grasses and strips) is also one of the crafts that are

¹⁶ The project „Made in Studziany Las”, <https://is.gd/2QENjP> [Accessed 18.12.2024].

quite popular as vessels made using braiding techniques, have a wide range of uses, and there used to be quite a large group of people who practised this occupation. In Poland, there is also an organisation called Serfenta¹⁷, which works to promote braiding as a Cultural heritage, at the same time combining these activities with the business model and broadly understood education. In 1997 there were 256 knitters working (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 118), but even today knitting is still a relatively popular craft technique and still works, e.g. the so-called “knitting pits” in Rudnik n/Sanem.¹⁸

- Rope making once existed as part of self-sufficient farms, but also as a specialized craft. Various types of ropes were made, commonly needed on farms. In recent years, the last two craft workshops in Poland have stopped working and rewrocław’s workshop has basically disappeared. There are only people who organize workshops as part of reconstruction, for example, at archaeological picnics (archaeological events).¹⁹

- Wood crafts: Among them are present: “tractwo” (electric sawdust), carpentry (in Poland there is the construction of wooden houses, although most of the work is mechanized), production of gonts (wooden tiles, especially for houses in mountain areas), coopering²⁰ (barrels, butter and other tableware are used in agritourist farms; barrels, in turn, are used for beer or wine. This technique is also used to make saunas), wheelwright’s work²¹ (occurs to a limited extent, but wooden wheels are bought for horse-drawn carriages in agritourist farms or as ornaments), carpentry of wheels (it is still popular, but at the moment very mechanized), manufacture of small wooden objects (as pots, rolled on a lathe, turns, for example, of various kinds, or taps), or products of the so-called Eastern Polish so cold “wyrezki”.²²

- Sieve making. Sieves were used to sift flour. In the past, sieves were made by specialized craftsmen, and this profession required two specializations: making a flexible arm and a mesh (from horse hair, yolk, and later wire or plastic).²³ Today, sieve is rare.

- Saddlery products,²⁴ mainly for horseback riding and expensive decorative horse harness accessories. There are also traditional workshops (in the south of Poland in mountainous areas) that produce traditional hammocks and harnesses.

¹⁷ More data can be found on the link: <https://serfenta.pl/> [Accessed 27.1.2025].

¹⁸ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/jxX2HH> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

¹⁹ e.g. group „Sznuroroby z Wieliczki”, <https://is.gd/6sObOj>; <http://powrozy.pl> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁰ e.g. <https://bednarstwo.eu/> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²¹ e.g. <https://is.gd/kpcMrO> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²² More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/5XL2G4> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²³ Sieve – making, <https://is.gd/WwOkUV> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁴ Saddlery, <https://is.gd/7ORp21> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

- Production of agricultural machinery (e.g. cereal harvesters) – occurs sporadically on a small scale.

- Blacksmithing²⁵ (also to some extent mechanized). Nowadays there is a large amount of artistic activity (blacksmiths make candlesticks, ratchet for gates, chandeliers). Occasionally, blacksmiths make traditional agricultural tools, such as sickles, diggers, or hoes or axes, or horseshoes. In 1997, 167 blacksmiths still worked (today it is a much smaller number) (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 128).

- Carving was popular in mountain areas because wood decoration was common there. Today, for an example, there are carvings in churches that serve as decorative elements and these have to sometimes be ordered to be made for specific churches. In 1997 there were 53 carvers working (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 14).

- Bell making,²⁶ popular mainly in mountain areas due to the demand for bells for sheep and cattle (cast from brass or forged from sheet metal).

- Amber and amber rolling.²⁷ In the Kurpie region (central Poland), the technique of rolling fossil amber on a spinning reel is known. Today, two amber workers work in this technique. They make corals for the Kurpie costume and small gallantry.

- Products from horn, known in Pomerania.

- Decorative snuff boxes known in Pomerania, made of cow horn for storing tobacco.²⁸

- Toy making.²⁹ The largest and most famous toy centers were located in the south of Poland. Toymakers produced a wide range of colourful wooden toys for children: carousels, horses, butterflies, flip-flops, wheels, carts and others. Today this field is reviving and so-called ecological toys are becoming more and more popular. In 1997 there were 120 toymakers working in Poland (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 148).

- Paper-cutting, used for interior decoration. Cutouts were made of glossy paper; the monochrome ones had one or two axes of symmetry (cut out geometric shapes or, for example, trees with roosters or colourful genre scenes). There were 180 paper-cutting artisans in 1997 (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 156). Today this field still exists, but the recipient of various types of cutouts is mainly the urban recipient.

- Flowers made of crepe paper or fringe. Paper flowers were used for interior decoration, e.g. the so-called sacred corner, where the statues of the

²⁵ Blacksmithing, <https://is.gd/6NygWe> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁶ Bells making, <https://is.gd/Z5dIC5> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁷ Amber and amber rolling, <https://is.gd/tzizG1> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁸ “Products from horn”, <https://is.gd/ExULvW>; <https://is.gd/H72HGC> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

²⁹ Toys making, <https://is.gd/iGVXAM> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

Virgin Mary, the Lord Jesus, hung paintings, and bouquets were made of flowers. Flowers were also used, e.g., as decoration of the so-called spiders hung from the ceiling, and made of peas, beans, and straw. In 1997, 243 artists worked in this field (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 164).

- Ritual art related to the ritual calendar. For Christmas and Easter, specific ritual accessories are made, such as Easter pisanki eggs (in Poland made with batik technique, scratched or pasted with paper), Easter palms. For Christmas, decorations for the Christmas tree are made from paper, straw or wafer, and ritual bread is baked. Nowadays, decorations made with crochet are also popular. The artists included in the ritual art also make Christmas nativity scenes, carnival costumes and garlands for decorations. A total of 793 artists were registered in 1997 (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 187).

- Production of musical instruments. The production of musical instruments was a specialized craft and few musicians worked to make them, making violins, basses, drums. In 1997, the instruments were made by 60 artists (based on Kopczyńska-Jaworska & Niewadowska-Rudnicka 1997: 206), and to this day music instruments craftsmen are still working, especially as the interest in folk music has increased.³⁰

In Poland the art of wood sculpture is quite popular and on a national scale many artists create small sculptures, but also large ones, which are acquired e.g. by municipalities or churches, but also by private buyers. The sculptures most often depict the Virgin Mary, the Lord Jesus, the patron saints (St. Michael, St. Francis, St. Anthony and others), angels. There are fewer artists who create paintings, but there is a “painted village” in Poland, where the art of painting houses and outbuildings on the outside is popular.

Protecting handicrafts and crafts through ministerial programs and scholarships

The idea of surrounding peasant handicraft production with care (also state), grew on the basis of social and intellectual currents even in the 19th century. Although Poland was not on the map at the time³¹, before the First World War the Society for the Promotion of Folk Industry was founded in 1913, with the aim of preserving and developing the existing folk industry and creating new branches of industry, as well as taking care of the quality of folk handicrafts and its propagation. The Krakow Workshops, established in the same year, brought together artists, architects, craftsmen and social activists, and their aim was to raise the quality of craft production.³²

³⁰ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/uwGzAZ> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

³¹ Independence was restored in 1918.

³² Interview with Małgorzata Jaszczołt. “They were synonymous with kitsch”, <https://is.gd/UinL7r> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

Today, although not on a massive scale, interest in folk art and crafts is returning. In the 1990s, the mentioned program of the Ministry of Culture and Arts,³³ “Dying Professions”³⁴ was implemented, the aim of which was to register the endangered professions, to recognize traditional crafts as an important component of national culture, to protect them, to create conditions for their full protection and documentation, to popularize knowledge about dying professions in society, to create opportunities for passing on knowledge, skills and experiences to successors, to provide social security for craftsmen, as well as to enrich tourism with regional cultural offer (based on Kraczoń 2024: 169). Since then, this term has come into use in Poland and means those crafts and crafts professions, which are disappearing, due to the economy, fashion, changes in civilization (Jaszczolt 2023: 13).

For some time, ethnographers assumed, dealing only with ethnographic documentation of dying professions (through research, photographs, films)³⁵, that certain crafts will not survive if they do not find continuators, and in part this has happened (e.g. the last returning craftsmen or colliery workers disappear), but there are situations where it is possible to restore elements of local tradition and occupations, that disappear for a few years, or even a few decades.³⁶

Today’s arts, crafts and folk crafts can flourish thanks to scholarship programs and the grant system. For many years, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage has run grants to which craftsmen can apply as part of individual scholarships for creators³⁷ or dedicated programs such as the “Master of Tradition”.³⁸ The National Institute of Culture and Heritage also runs the “Master of the Apprentice” program and the Scholarship for Folk Artists, which support folk creativity.³⁹

The “Master of Tradition” and “Master-Apprentice” scholarships are designed for duos in which the student acquires or perfects skills under the supervision of the master, allowing him or her to later continue on his or her own. Such programs produce results, although it cannot be said to be 100%, but they certainly generate interest in ancient craft and craft techniques.

³³ Now The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

³⁴ “Dying Professions”, <https://is.gd/GYeASK> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

³⁵ For ex., films of Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne in Warsaw, <https://is.gd/qUu9dx> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

³⁶ A good example is the reintroduction to polish forests after more than 100 years of absence and entry into the NDK list in 2016 and the UNESCO WH list in 2020. <https://is.gd/h0CpBs> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

³⁷ Competition for creative scholarships and scholarships for the dissemination of culture for 2025. <https://is.gd/r4bLFP> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

³⁸ Program „Folk and traditional culture”, <https://is.gd/MnvIUF> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

³⁹ Grants, <https://nikidw.edu.pl/stypendia/> [Accessed 27.1.2025].

However, the motivation of the creators to work in a given field – often the same as the ancestors – and their determination to meet the demands of the modern market also plays a big role. Those creators who were able to find themselves in the market economy, those who take advantage of every opportunity to sell their products: at fairs, to folk craft shops (including foreign ones), conducting workshops, and taking part in various projects.⁴⁰

Economics

As Joanna Dziadowiec-Greganić and Agnieszka Dudek wrote:

Some modern, mythologicalized and romantic visions assume that crafts related to ancient and dying professions should be cultivated for autothelic purposes, in order to save the tradition for itself. They omit or pejoratively assess the possible economic, commercial factor

(Dziadowiec-Greganić & Dudek 2019: 19).

Production cannot be separated from its pragmatic and market functions, as it is deeply rooted in human existence, which is why it is important for performers to be able to derive financial benefits from their work and activities. In Poland, in both small and large towns, there are numerous occasional, temporary fairs and fairs of folk art that are popular among the public. Among them, it is worth mentioning the Jagiellonian Fair in Lublin⁴¹ or the International Fair of Folklore in Węgorzewo (organized by the Museum of Folk Culture in Węgorzewo).⁴² A well-known event is organized annually in August on the Main Market in Krakow Cepeliada.⁴³ There are also the accompanying Folk Art Fairs in Kazimierz Dolnym.⁴⁴

Worth mentioning is the Avenue of Folk Artists at the annual Horse Fair in Skaryszew,⁴⁵ where you can meet the last craftsmen who make their products really for rural customers – in other words, in the natural context (turners with ropes, weavers with baskets and brooms, manufacturers of small machines, blacksmiths, rhymers with harnesses, ludwisars with bells),⁴⁶ as well as at the well-known market in southern Poland in Nowy

⁴⁰ e.g. with the participation of artists from art schools Project “Traditional trendy”, 2016, <https://is.gd/J5F3Lw> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁴¹ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/GtCYNK> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁴² More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/q2VWNo> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁴³ More data can be found on the link: <http://imagokrakow.pl> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁴⁴ More data can be found on the links: <https://is.gd/epElGn>; <https://is.gd/oAGO4G> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁴⁵ Although not all products sold are “folks”, <https://is.gd/NT7q2q> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁴⁶ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/XyYqoh> [Accessed 26.01.2025]

Targ.⁴⁷ There are also smaller fairs with a local scope, which are also very popular, such as the Hżecki Fair of Folk Art,⁴⁸ organized by the Society for the Promotion of Dying Professions, or the Holeński Fair in Hola,⁴⁹ but on a Polish scale, they take place more and more, in museums, folk parks,⁵⁰ folk festivals, and malls.

The occasional Easter and Christmas markets organized in recent years in larger and smaller cities, where you can buy products directly from the creators – this is their asset – are organized by museums, cultural houses and municipalities.

The fairs take place occasionally and are an opportunity to present products, but apart from that, the creators find sales markets, selling via the Internet, or also to intermediaries who sell folk products in stores. There are examples of good business conditions of craft products, but such situations are always a mixture of persistence, good quality, marketing presence on the market, interest in a given category of products (e.g. sculptors have orders for large-sized sculptures to the villages; recently in one of the regions in central Poland – Kurpia – there is a revival of fashion for walking in folk costume, hence the demand for tailors and other people who make accessories for the outfit). Some creators also run workshops in schools, museums, and cultural houses, trying to present at these fairs, some younger ones advertise themselves online. Creators are also invited to various types of projects and collaborations with artists, so they can present their workshop and products, which can potentially arouse the interest of a new audience.⁵¹ In Poland, craft competitions are also organized to identify sometimes less-known creators.



Fig. 4: Chandeliers made of straw, Fot. R. Karpiński, Warsaw 2023, NIKiDW

⁴⁷ More data can be found on the link: <http://www.targowica.eu/> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁴⁸ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/j2Y2M6> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁴⁹ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/aFRpjW> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁵⁰ Np. <https://etnomania.pl/> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁵¹ For example, the products of Polish weavers from the Podlasie region have a lot too in Japan, thanks to the mediation of Japanese women living in Poland. <https://is.gd/nDHPdz> [Accessed 26.1.2025]; “Slowart”, <https://www.slow-art.pl/> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

Transmission

Katarzyna Kraczoń writes:

The optimal form of protection (...) is intergenerational transmission cultivated in a family/social/professional group, in which a given craft (skill) has its sources (...)

(Kraczoń 2024: 170).

However, there are also people who are not related. Handwork based on cultural heritage in Poland, sometimes becomes the reason for which one gives up full-time work in a corporation. It is important that traditional skills can be maintained and at the same time be a source of satisfaction.

The author notes some dangerous phenomenon of decontextualization:

(...) i.e. the procedure consisting in ‘depriving an object of its ordinary/existing context and moving it into an unusual context’, defined by some researchers as strangeness, defamiliarization or deautomatization (...) therefore “any exit of an element of culture outside the group in which it was created for a purpose other than the one to which it was originally called must mean violation of its cultural purity

(Kraczoń 2024: 176).

According to her “decontextualization also includes innovative transmission of knowledge and skills about crafts. The disappearing professions are talked about using modern technologies and means of communication (e.g. webinars, podcasts, and online courses). Such treatments replace traditional, direct intergenerational transmission” (Kraczoń 2024: 177). Today, however, it would not be possible to maintain folk production solely in its original context, connected with the countryside and new markets. Recipients and changes within production are important, because it is principal that creators who have skills can sustain themselves on their work.

Portals of tradition

As part of the promotion, dissemination and the possibility to sell, several portals have been created in Poland, on which there are presented currently active craftsmen along with the given contacts. Thanks to that, you can order their products or invite them to fairs and craft workshops. Individual crafts and individual people are also described with their stories and the field in which they specialize. These include:

- The Mazowian Trail of Traditions⁵²
- The Małopolska Craft Trail⁵³

⁵² “Mazowiecki Szlak Tradycji”, <https://is.gd/MYPqft> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

- Digital database of creators of Podlaskie Voivodeship⁵⁴
- The Opoczyn Craft Trail⁵⁵

In addition, it happens that local artists are presented on the pages of municipal offices, or city offices as part of the promotion of local traditions. There is no nationwide database of artists (only those who are members of the STL).⁵⁶ Currently, the portal “Heritage of the Polish Village”⁵⁷ is being created, one of the components will be handicraft and craft’s creations.

Documentation

In Poland, projects are carried out, mainly by museums and non-governmental organizations, aimed at documenting crafts, both rural as well as urban. It is worth mentioning a few of them, e.g. “Museum in the field” Ethnographic film reminiscences”,⁵⁸ “7 meetings, 7 stories”,⁵⁹ “Terrain. Re-visits”,⁶⁰ “Crafts 2.0”,⁶¹ “Dying professions”,⁶² “(not) dying professions”.⁶³

Conclusion

In today’s world, it becomes important to search and affirm one’s identity. Embedded in tradition, good-quality handicraft and craftsmanship confirm a connection to a particular place, which is why it becomes important to create generational, regional and national bonds. One can get the impression that the digitized world, with its flood of factory goods, is trying to pause a little to appreciate what is being created slowly and according to nature – as much as is possible today. Some artisans, such as beggars, use electric machines and this does not mean that ethnographers should urge them to produce by hand – rather, one should register the phenomenon, understanding the changes that are taking place. The preservation of traditions as immutable as possible is supported by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

⁵³ More data can be found on the link: www.szlakrzemiosla.pl [Accessed 2.2.2025]. Now is closed.

⁵⁴ “Twórcy Ludowi Podlasia”, <https://is.gd/DD59aK> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁵⁵ “Majówki – piękna tradycja wspólnego śpiewania i modlitwy”, <https://is.gd/8Mn8a7> [Accessed 2.2.2025].

⁵⁶ “Historia Stowarzyszenia Twórców Ludowych”, <https://is.gd/4wvUIV> [Accessed 26.1.2025].

⁵⁷ “Portal ETNOPORTAL”, <https://etnoportal.pl/> [Accessed 28.4.2025].

⁵⁸ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/o0chII> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

⁵⁹ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/blwK2g> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

⁶⁰ More data can be found on the links: <https://is.gd/ijDhJ3>; <https://is.gd/G60Yc6> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

⁶¹ More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/E1wtso> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

⁶² More data can be found on the link: <https://is.gd/0sDye6> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

⁶³ More data can be found on the link: <https://nieginacezawody.pl/> [Accessed 25.2.2025].

of 2003, ratified by Poland in 2011. On the national list of intangible cultural heritage, there are several entries of craft skills and this contributes to greater interest by those who are not connected with a particular heritage. It can be appreciated by outsiders who see the value of rare, valuable and sometimes endangered skills. It is important to find a good balance between tradition and economics and to understand the essence of the changes that are a natural process in the modern world. As Joanna Dziadowiec-Greganić and Agnieszka Dudek write,

No matter how different the faces of contemporary, utilitarian and artistic crafts and crafts, especially those inspired by tradition, it represents a highly valuable form of expression and pride from the past, a cultural capital of self-confidence, which is particularly significant in all countries regardless of what stage of economic development they are at

(Dziadowiec-Greganić & Dudek 2019: 81).

On the other hand, Kraczoń notes:

(...) the passion for tradition and rural production is largely the result of a specific policy of heritage production, according to which rural (including folk) also means what is national. The increase of interest in, among others, traditional crafts and folk art in the era of globalization is, therefore, in a sense, a manifestation of the building of our cultural and national identity

(Kraczoń 2024: 178).

Today, these crafts are part of various trends, such as slow, eco, zero waste – which used to function naturally for years, just without being named. Today, along with the pursuit of manual skills that were increasingly forgotten, discontinued (such as the skill of crocheting or knitting passed down from women to women) due to changes in civilization, workshops of traditional crafts and skills are becoming more popular. Along with recalling the idea of closed circulation, we are reminded of how our grandparents lived. The interest in products made by human hands is also a nod to human beings and their uniqueness. Civilization is changing, we have access to higher and higher technology, but at the same time we want to preserve what man creates in a natural process with his hands or with simple tools he has used for centuries.

One can only wishfully hope that this trend will continue for a longer period of time, and that it will also be associated with a broader public awareness that sees the values in the skills, knowledge and forms that have been passed down through the generations. There is this inherent structure in them, that binds us more deeply to our ancestors, our here and now, and that even more so in a global world, attachment to or search for tradition in any form is an expression of our need to define ourselves, our identity anywhere in the world: in Poland, in the Balkans, in Europe and on every continent.

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УМЕТНОСТА НА СОЗДАВАЊЕТО – НАРОДНИТЕ ЗАНАЕТИ ВО ПОЛСКА, НЕКОГАШ И ДЕНЕС

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Резиме

Во Полска, народните занаети и ракотворби имаат вековна традиција. Со разните еснафски занаети се занимавале жителите и од урбаните и од руралните средини, и изработувале земјоделски алатки, коли, садови за различни намени, кошници, а во некои региони и накит за празнична облека (на пр.: превртени килибарни мониста во Курпие, спојувалки и овчарски појаси во Поткале) или облека (на пр.: чизми, овчи кожи). Ова беше актуелно во 70-тите години од 20 век во некои од поконзервативните региони. Денес, старите рурални занаети не се толку застапени поради недостаток од побарувачка, а како резултат на економските и цивилизациските промени. Сепак, одредени традиционални занаети и ракотворби, коишто, главно, ги задоволувале потребите во руралните средини, од Втората светска војна па наваму, успешно преживуваат до денес и главно се наменети за потрошувачи од урбаните средини (на пр.: уметничкиот ковачки занает или грнчарството, ткаењето во помала мера, казанцискиот занает или изработката на играчки).

Конвенцијата на УНЕСКО и впишувањето на народните занаети на Репрезентативната листа на нематеријално културно наследство, игра важна улога во одржувањето на овие занаети. На пример, од 2009 година, пчеларството, кое исчезна кон крајот на 19 век, почна да оживува и беше додадено на Репрезентативната листа на нематеријално културно наследство на човештвото во 2020 година. Покрај ова, улога играат и стипендиите што се доделуваат од Министерството за култура и национално наследство и од Национален институт за рурална култура и наследство во Полска, кои придонесуваат во документирањето и во промовирањето на целокупната рурална култура, поддржувајќи ги луѓето вклучени во традиционалните ракотворби и занаети кои ги пренесуваат своите вештини на наредните генерации. Денес, во Полска, се забележува интерес за традиционалните занаетчиски техники и производи иако тоа не е масовен феномен и бара понатамошно промовирање и едукација, поврзани со тоа што се подразбира во традицијата под добра занаетчиска работа, но и со уникатноста во изработувањето, што подразбира, секој изработувач да даде свој личен препознатлив печат во создадениот производ од него.