

THE AESTHETICS OF CARVING MOTIFS IN WOOD DECORATIVE WORKS AS A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION BY CRAFTSMEN IN JEPARA

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Abstract. The art of Jepara wood carving is part of the cultural wealth of the archipelago that has aesthetic value, symbolic meaning, and history. This art is also important in shaping the cultural identity of the Jepara people. With the development of globalization and the creative industry, there is a change in the way artisans make carving art, especially in terms of creativity, production methods, and the role of art itself. This research aims to analyze the creativity of artisans, study the art of carving in the context of the creative industry, as well as understand the changes in the function of the art of carving in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency. This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. Data was collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and work documentation, then analyzed with the Miles and Huberman models. Research results show that the creativity of artisans can be seen from the development of motifs, shape variations, and the combination of traditional elements and modern design. The art of Jepara carving continues to grow as part of the creative industry that leads to the market, but still maintains the local cultural heritage. The change in the function of carving can be seen from the shift in the role of the work, from symbolic objects to decorative products and economic goods that help the survival of artisans

Keywords: Jepara carving art, artisan creativity, creative industry, function transformation

1. Introduction

Jepara woodcarving is a traditional Indonesian art form with strong aesthetic, symbolic, and historical value in building the cultural identity of the coastal communities of Central Java. The existence of this carving art not only represents the artistic skills of the craftsmen but also serves as a cultural heritage that must be maintained through the process of passing on values and meanings across generations (Prasiska & Wati, 2024). However, the currents of globalization and the development of popular culture have brought significant changes to the sustainability of traditional arts, including Jepara woodcarving, both in terms of function, meaning, and production orientation. Globalization does open up broader market opportunities, but at the same time presents the challenge of shifting consumer tastes that tend to prioritize practical and commercial aspects over traditional values, potentially weakening the educational and cultural functions of traditional art (Nurhasanah et al., 2021).

Preserving arts and culture requires the involvement of various levels of society to ensure local values remain alive and relevant, as demonstrated in the research of Persada et al. (2022) which emphasizes the importance of social response in maintaining the sustainability of cultural heritage. In a cultural context, traditional arts cannot be separated from efforts to preserve the values, identity, and social sustainability of the supporting communities. Several studies show that the sustainability of traditional arts is largely determined by the ability of artists to adapt and innovate without losing the essence of the culture passed down from generation to generation. This adaptation includes transformations in form, function, and even art management strategies in response to changing times. This phenomenon aligns with the

findings of Wijayanto et al. (2024) who emphasized that traditional arts can only survive if they are able to respond to globalization creatively and contextually.

Based on pre-research results through initial observations at the carving artisan center in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, a creative dynamic was discovered in the process of creating wood ornaments. Artisans are no longer strictly bound by classical motifs, but have begun to develop variations in shape, size, and visual composition tailored to market needs. The creative process demonstrates the artisans' awareness of the importance of innovation as a strategy to maintain the existence of the carving arts business. These field findings demonstrate that artisan creativity is a key factor in maintaining the sustainability of Jepara carving as a culture-based creative industry. Interviews with several artisans revealed that carving motifs are not only viewed as decorative elements but also as a medium for personal expression and cultural identity. Artisans recognize that the aesthetics of motifs have a direct influence on consumer purchasing interest, thus processing visual aspects and symbolic meanings more flexibly. Documentation of the works shows a tendency to combine traditional motifs such as lung-lungan with modern design approaches. This practice aligns with the view that traditional art can be a means of creative expression as well as a medium for strengthening the economic value of the community (Prasiska & Wati, 2024).

Extensive research has been conducted on local arts and culture, particularly in the context of preserving values and strengthening community cultural identity. Iskhaq et al. (2021) assert that local cultural practices contain character values that can be passed down across generations through community involvement in the creative process. Furthermore, Lidyasari et al. (2023) demonstrate that traditional arts have the ability to survive through social adaptation strategies and form innovation without losing their cultural essence. Similarly, Ilmi and Wijayanto (2024) emphasize that traditional arts practices also serve as a medium for shaping national attitudes and values, demonstrating that art is not only aesthetic but also educational. However, the study still focuses on the preservation and internalization of cultural values, and has not specifically examined the relationship between the aesthetics of the work, the creativity of craftsmen, and economic productivity in the context of Jepara carving art. Based on the description of the problem, field findings, and previous research studies, this study focuses on the question of how the creativity of craftsmen in creating carving motifs so that the work can increase sales productivity? The purpose of this study is to analyze the creativity of carving craftsmen, examine the aesthetic value of motifs as a medium of expression, and understand the transformation of the function of carving art in an economic context. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of local art and culture, while practically it can be a reference for craftsmen in developing sustainable and competitive work strategies.

2. Results and Discussion

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the creativity of carving artisans in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, Central Java. The qualitative method was chosen because this research focuses on revealing the meaning, process, and experience of the research subjects in a naturalistic manner, rather than on statistically measuring variables. The case study approach allows researchers to examine the phenomenon of carving holistically within its surrounding social, cultural, and economic context, thereby capturing the aesthetic dynamics and expressions of the artisans (Sugiyono, 2020).

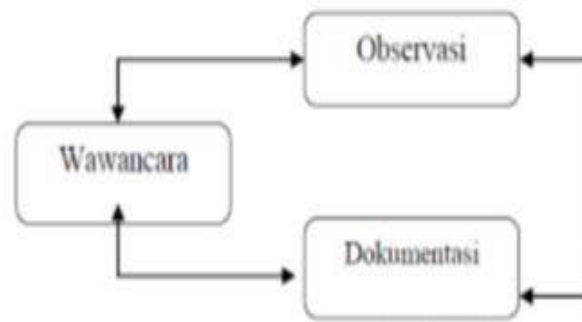


Figure 1. Research Stage
Source: (Wijayanto et al., 2025)

Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to directly observe the carving creation process, motif selection, and craftspeople's work practices. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the craftspeople's perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of creativity, motif aesthetics, and sales orientation. Supporting data included photographs of the work, visual notes, and production archives. The use of these techniques aligns with an ethnographic approach in social research, which emphasizes understanding cultural meaning through engagement with research subjects (Sari et al., 2023).

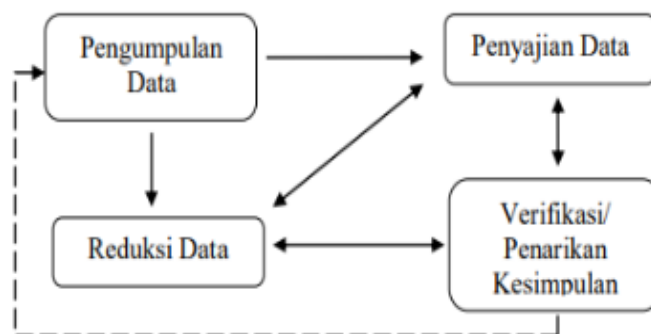


Figure 2. Miles and Huberman Data Analysis Model
Source: (Wijayanto et al., 2024)

The data analysis in this study used the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing data relevant to the research objectives, data presentation was done in the form of descriptive and thematic descriptions, while conclusions were drawn through interpretation of the research findings. This analysis procedure was chosen because it is able to provide a systematic and continuous analysis flow in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 2014). To clarify the stages of data analysis, the following is a research flowchart based on the Miles and Huberman model.

This results and discussion section outlines the research findings obtained through field observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation of carving artworks in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, Central Java. The analysis of the findings is based on an understanding of Jepara carving as a cultural practice experiencing historical, social, and economic dynamics, and therefore cannot be separated from the context of market changes and traditional art

production systems. Jepara carving has historically evolved from symbolic and religious functions to a broader market orientation, including national and international markets, without completely abandoning its traditional roots (Indrahti, 2022).

In this context, the sustainability of carving art is largely determined by the process of inheriting the skills, values, and creativity of craftsmen that occurs socially and culturally within their communities (Muhajirin & Ambarwati, 2025). Furthermore, the Jepara carving art system is also influenced by educational structures, non-formal learning, and the relationships between craftsmen, markets, and art-supporting institutions that shape the direction of production and the aesthetic orientation of the works (Al-Mufti et al., 2023). With this conceptual framework, carving art is understood not only as a visual object, but as a cultural practice that represents the expression of craftsmen while also functioning in the dynamics of the creative economy of the Jepara community.

2.1 Creativity of Mulyoharjo Carving Craftsmen

The creativity of the carving artisans in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, is reflected in their ability to transform inherited carving traditions into works that adapt to changing times and market needs. Creativity in the context of craft art is not merely understood as an individual's ability to produce new forms, but rather as a social process formed through collective experience, informal learning, and interactions between generations of artisans. The pattern of inheritance of carving skills that occurs within the family and community environment is an important foundation in shaping the artisans' creative way of thinking, where basic techniques, aesthetic values, and work ethic are continuously transmitted (Muhajirin & Ambarwati, 2025). In this context, creativity grows from the artisans' closeness to tradition and their openness to change.



Figure 3. Variations in figurative carvings observed in Mulyoharjo Village

Source: researcher documentation

The research results show that the creativity of craftsmen is also influenced by the role of the family as the initial learning space and regeneration of young carvers. The family not only functions as a production unit, but also as a space for the formation of creative attitudes, discipline, and the courage to experiment in their work. Aghnia et al. (2024) emphasized that the sustainability of Jepara carving art is highly dependent on family involvement in instilling artistic skills and values from an early age. Field findings show that craftsmen in Mulyoharjo develop their creativity through exploring ideas sourced from their surroundings, life experiences, and observing consumer tastes, so that carving works do not stop at reproducing old motifs, but continue to experience renewal.

This creative exploration is evident in the craftspeople's courage to develop more varied sources of ideas for creating crafts, whether through processing figurative forms, stylizing natural objects, or incorporating contemporary themes into woodcarvings. Kasanah and Naam (2024) explain that

exploring sources of ideas in crafts is an important marker of craftspeople's creativity, as it demonstrates the ability to read reality and transform it into visual language. Similarly, creativity is also manifested through thematic visual expressions, where craftspeople utilize specific issues, symbols, or ideas as inspiration for creating woodcrafts (Prabowo & Supriyanto, 2022). In this context, carving functions not only as a decorative product but also as a medium for expressing ideas and values.

The figurative carvings found at the research site demonstrate a freedom to explore form and composition that is more flexible than classical carving conventions. The craftsmen's creativity is reflected in their ability to adjust the size, detail, and function of the work to be relevant to consumer needs without abandoning the character of Jepara carving. From a conceptual perspective, artistic creativity serves as a medium for expressing the craftsmen's values and life experiences, which not only produce visual beauty but also represent the relationship between individuals, culture, and society (Umamah & Wijayanto, 2024). The creativity of carving craftsmen in Mulyoharjo Village works as an adaptive mechanism that allows carving to remain alive, meaningful, and productive amidst constantly changing social and economic dynamics.

2.2 Carving Art in the Context of the Creative industry

Jepara woodcarving is currently developing as a traditional cultural tradition and becoming part of the creative sector that seeks financial gain. Carving is understood within the creative industry as a product that combines manual skills, traditional knowledge, and innovation to meet market demand. (Kustanti 2022), creative economy-based MSMEs in Jepara Regency, such as woodcarving crafts, play a strategic role in driving regional economic growth and providing employment opportunities for the local community. This demonstrates that woodcarving is no longer merely considered a cultural symbol; it is now part of a highly profitable creative economy system.



Figure 4. Jepara Carving Art in the Dynamics of the Local Creative Industry

Source: Researcher documentation

Observations and interviews conducted in Mulyoharjo Village indicate that woodcarvers have adapted their production patterns to reflect the characteristics of the creative industry. Examples include the use of a custom-based work system, product variations tailored to customer preferences, and the use of digital marketing platforms and local distribution networks. The utilization of local wisdom in the Jepara woodcraft industry is a crucial factor in maintaining the craftsmen's economic resilience amidst increasingly competitive markets (Setyastanto and Sungkowati 2024). This adaptation demonstrates the craftsmen's ability to combine traditional values with contemporary financial approaches while maintaining local identity.

The development of Jepara carving as part of the creative sector helps artisans survive and enhances the region's image. (Setiawan and Khamadi 2024) explain that cultural preservation and the development of a community-based creative economy help Jepara become a world center for carving.

In such a situation, carving serves as both a cultural expression and a financial asset, increasing the region's competitiveness. Therefore, Jepara carving can survive as a cultural heritage and develop sustainably through the creative industry.

2.3 Carve Function Transformation

The transformation of the function of carving in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, shows a shift in the role of carving from a medium that was originally religious, symbolic, and architectural to a decorative product as well as an economic commodity. Indrahti (2022) explains that Jepara carving has experienced a long dynamic function, from decorative elements of sacred buildings to craft products produced to meet the needs of national and international markets. This shift cannot be separated from the context of the creative economy, where traditional art adapts to modern production and distribution systems without completely abandoning its cultural roots. Within this framework, the transformation of function is not interpreted as a degradation of artistic value, but rather as a form of response to social and economic change.



Figure 5. Decorative carvings as commercial products in Mulyoharjo Village

Source: researcher documentation

The results of the study indicate that artisans in Mulyoharjo Village consciously position their carvings as products with market value by emphasizing their visual aesthetic strength and functional flexibility. Carvings are no longer limited to traditional interior elements or building ornaments, but have evolved into wall hangings, decorative panels, garden elements, and even large-scale works for commercial purposes. Raharjo et al. (2025) emphasized that the change in craft function is a conceptual process that allows artworks to move from the symbolic realm to the functional and economic realm. This functional diversification expands market segmentation and opens up opportunities to increase artisan productivity.

Besides being driven by market demand, the transformation of the function of carving is also related to efforts to strengthen Jepara's identity as a carving city. Setiawan and Khamadi (2024) show that developing Jepara's branding as a carving city encourages artisans to produce works that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also communicative and visually recognizable. On the other hand, the carving arts education and learning system also influences the production orientation of artisans. Al-Mufti et al. (2023) explain that changes in the carving arts education system have impacted how artisans view their work, from mere traditional heritage to professional and entrepreneurial opportunities. Thus, the transformation of the function of carving in Mulyoharjo Village can be understood as a strategic shift

that broadens the meaning of carving, from a cultural expression to a creative economic medium that supports the sustainability of artisans' social lives.

3. Conclusion

This study concludes that the aesthetics of carved motifs in decorative woodworks In Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara Regency, Jepara woodcarving art shows strong dynamics as a cultural heritage that can adapt to the growth of the creative industry and globalization. The development of motifs, variations in form, and the combination of traditional elements and modern designs demonstrate the creativity of craftsmen; this increases the competitiveness of the work in the market. Carving art in the creative industry has evolved from a role solely as a symbolic and traditional medium to a decorative product and financial commodity that helps craftsmen survive. Strategic adaptation to social and economic changes without eliminating local cultural identity allows Jepara woodcarving art to remain relevant, relevant, and sustainable as a cultural expression and driver of the community's creative economy.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article

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