

THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVITY, MOTIF AESTHETICS, AND FUNCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN JEPARA'S RAMAYANA WOOD CARVING RELIEFS

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Abstract. Jepara wood carving, as a world intangible cultural heritage, currently faces serious challenges regarding craftsman regeneration and the necessity to adapt to global market demands without losing its distinctive identity. This research aims to identify craftsman creativity patterns, examine the aesthetic depth of motifs, and analyze functional transformations in Ramayana reliefs in Tigajuru. The findings are expected to provide strategic recommendations for the future preservation of the carving industry. The method employed is a qualitative-descriptive approach with a case study design using observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted interactively using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model. The results indicate that craftsman creativity is manifested in the mastery of flexible carving techniques, despite technical quality inconsistencies serving as a form of non-linear expression. The aesthetic value of these motifs stems from the blend of Ramayana figurative icons with stylized flora and fauna, creating a harmonious visual narrative. Furthermore, a significant functional transformation was found, shifting from decorative door elements into visual media communicating moral values and deep cultural identity. In conclusion, these skill dynamics and shifts in utility prove that relief carvings serve not only as physical artifacts (artifact) but also as carriers of philosophical symbolism (mentifact) relevant to the contemporary cultural context

Keywords: Craftsman Creativity, Functional Transformation, Motif Aesthetics, Ramayana Relief.

1. Introduction

Wood carving from Jepara is an important part of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage that is known throughout the world, earning Jepara the nickname "City of Carving." This rich art form has existed for a long time, dating back to the Kalinyamat Kingdom in the 16th century, and has been greatly influenced by important figures such as R. A. Kartini (Indrahti, 2022). In terms of iconography, this carving style is a combination of various cultures and religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Chinese, and European, resulting in works of art with high aesthetic and philosophical value (Prasiska & Wati, 2024). Apart from being decorative, Jepara carving also serves as a visual medium that preserves cultural stories, often related to the good values contained within, even including mathematical elements such as transformation and symmetry. The existence of this industry is also very important for the regional economy, as many people depend on jobs in carved furniture craftsmanship (Ulwiyyah, 2023). Furthermore, iconographic analysis of these works shows how carvings can convey moral messages about struggle and honor. Therefore, further research is needed to understand how philosophical values, technical skills, and mathematical

elements can be taught in the education system so that these skills and culture can be passed on to future generations.

Preliminary research was conducted through direct observation of wooden carvings on doors with relief patterns in Jepara. The focus was to identify the techniques and images used in these works. These objects feature plant and animal motifs and carving styles characteristic of Jepara, made from teak wood using carving techniques. The analysis shows that although most carvings have smooth and accurate carving results, in line with the characteristics of Jepara carvings, there are differences in the quality of the carving techniques, which need to be further studied due to the worldwide reputation of Jepara carvings. In terms of iconography, the carvings studied tell the story of the Ramayana epic, and these motifs emphasize the function of carving as a visual medium that records and conveys cultural and moral values, in accordance with the role of carving in the development of religion in Jepara. However, if the philosophical values and ethnomathematical elements present in the motifs, based on (Utami et al., 2021), are not supported by good technical skills, then the beauty and meaning will be diminished. Therefore, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the physical characteristics and iconographic meaning of these objects, in order to formulate ways to preserve the beauty and quality of Jepara carvings in the modern era.

Previous studies have examined this issue from various perspectives: Fatikah et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of Geographical Indication (GI) protection for legal certainty and global quality standards, while Al Mufti et al. (2023) highlighted the shift in the transmission of expertise from formal education to informal channels such as families and workshops. while Furqon & Wijayanto (2024) explore the educational value of Jepara batik carving motifs in art education. All three studies agree that carving is a crucial cultural asset that must be preserved in the modern era. However, there is a significant difference in focus between these studies and this study. While previous studies have focused more on public policy, the regeneration of craftsmen, and the adaptation of motifs on textiles, this study focuses on the iconographic analysis of Ramayana-themed wooden door reliefs. Here, wooden doors are not only seen as decorative elements, but as "visual narratives" that give spiritual identity to a space. This study attempts to fill the research gap on how the combination of epic stories and traditional carving techniques produces aesthetic value as well as profound philosophical meaning.

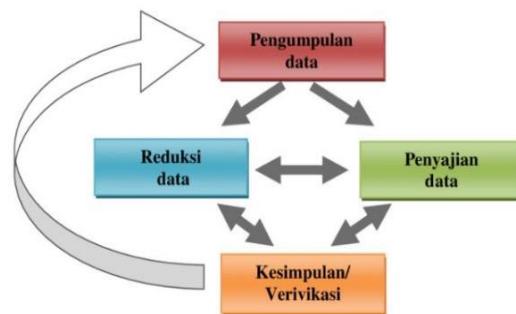
Jepara woodcarving, as a cultural identity and creative economic engine that has gone global, currently faces serious challenges in the form of artisan regeneration issues and the need to adapt to global market demands, which require creativity and innovation without abandoning its distinctive characteristics (MPR RI, 2025). Therefore, this study focuses on wood carvings on doors in the Mayonglor-Kalipucang, Tigajuru area, which feature reliefs of Ramayana puppet characters with an object that simultaneously represents the aesthetics of iconographic motifs rich in narrative while undergoing a transformation in function from architectural elements to visual media that preserve and convey cultural moral values.

Interestingly, the object of study shows a final result that is a combination of precision carving techniques and rough carving traces, reflecting the dynamics of skill and adaptation (Oktavianus Marti Nangoy, 2025).

Based on the background of these issues, this study was formulated to answer three main questions: (1) How does the creativity of woodcarvers in Tigajuru influence the technical quality and detail of Ramayana figure carvings amid issues of regeneration? (2) How is the aesthetics of traditional motifs, particularly floral stylization, interpreted and applied in the context of contemporary figurative wayang carving? and (3) How does the function of carving transform from decorative/functional value to educational and cultural value? The main objectives of this research are to identify patterns of artisan creativity, examine the depth of motif aesthetics, and analyze shifts in the function of carvings in the objects of study in Tigajuru. The final results are expected to provide strategic recommendations for the formation of relevant curricula or training for the preservation and development of the Jepara carving industry in the future.

This study uses a Qualitative-Descriptive approach with a Case Study design, which was specifically chosen to enable researchers to conduct a holistic, in-depth, and contextual exploration of a single unit of phenomenon with defined boundaries (Regina et al., 2025). The research location focused on a single object of study, namely Wood Carving Art on Doors with Ramayana relief motifs located on Mayonglor-Kalipucang Street, Tigajuru, Jepara, where the study focused on three dimensions: analysis of Craftsmen's Creativity (reflected in the inconsistency of the technical quality of the carvings), Motif Aesthetics (particularly the stylization of flora/fauna filling the space), and the Transformation of the Function of carvings from decorative to a medium for narrating moral values.

Based on the research subject, the population consists of all wood carvers in Jepara who focus on figurative relief crafts, while informants were determined using purposive sampling techniques, followed by snowball sampling to obtain the most credible individuals with substantial knowledge about the object of study (Vidri & Susanti, 2025). The key informant categories consisted of Master Carvers (practitioners), Owners/Collectors of objects, and Experts/Academics of Jepara Carving Art. The main objects were made of teak wood with a natural finish, and the production tools that were the subject of technical study included various types of chisels (tatah, penyilat, penguku, kol, pengot) and hammers (ganden); meanwhile, the main analysis tools were cameras (high-resolution), voice recorders, and semi-structured interview guides.

**Figure 1.** Miles & Huberman Data Analysis Model**Source:** Widyatma et al., 2024

Data collection was carried out through triangulation methods to increase the validity and depth of information, including: (1) Direct observation focused on technical analysis (inconsistencies in chisel marks) and visual iconography of objects; (2) Semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the creative process of the craftsmen and the philosophical background of the carvings; and (3) Documentation in the form of visual images of the objects and a literature study related to Ramayana iconography. Finally, data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model, which consists of three main interrelated streams, namely Data Reduction (simplification of raw data by focusing on the core themes of creativity, aesthetics, and function), Data Presentation (compilation in a matrix or systematic narrative to see patterns and relationships between categories), and Drawing Conclusions and Verification (done iteratively throughout the research to ensure the credibility and comprehensiveness of the final findings) (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

2. Results and Discussion

The discussion of the research results is based on the conceptual framework of craft art as a manifestation of Artifact, Mentifact, and Sociofact according to (Sriyono et al., 2025). The comprehensive results of this study show that the carvings on teak doors in Tigajuru, Jepara, reveal a dynamic between the technical skills of the craftsmen, the aesthetic consistency of the Ramayana iconographic motifs, and a shift in value from decorative to a medium of moral communication. These findings are described through three fundamental aspects: the creativity of the carvers, the aesthetics of the motifs, and the transformation of the function of the carvings.

2.1 The Creativity of Woodcarvers

The existence of product innovation today is related to individual or group creativity. According to (Siregar et al., 2021), creativity can be defined as the ability to develop innovations, then convey what is in one's mind, and can be seen from new opportunities that do not yet exist in the product or can be referred to as new discoveries.

According to Rusdiana, as quoted by (Silaen et al., 2021), there are three types of creativity, namely: 1) Creating or inventing new products, 2) Combining old discoveries with new discoveries, and 3) Modifying something that already exists. By creating the three types mentioned above, it is hoped

that craftsmen will become more creative in running their businesses. The results of the study show that the creativity of craftsmen is manifested in their mastery of drawing techniques and flexible carving forms, even though this leads to inconsistencies in the technical quality of the final product.



Figure 2: The craftsman's work before carving

Source: Researcher's documentation

The main evidence is the combination of fine and rough carvings on the same door carving. This flexibility demonstrates the craftsmen's ability to express themselves in a non-linear manner, which is achieved by skillfully utilizing various types of chisels to produce variations in depth and relief detail. A clear example is the precision in creating relief carvings with uniform depth. This is supported by their expertise in using various chiseling tools such as tatah, penyilat, penguku, kol, pengot, and ganden, which help them create complex textures and details in relief. The artisans' manual skills in using various tools represent a form of "Local Genius" that cannot be fully replaced by CNC machines. Manual carvings have higher aesthetic value and detail compared to purely fabricated products (Marizar et al., 2020).



Figure 3. Furniture Workers Carving Wooden Ornaments

Source: Researcher Documentation

Wood carving furniture craftsmen in the modern era serve as agents of hybridization, connecting traditional visual heritage with contemporary design demands. Their expertise lies not only in their carving skills, but also in their ability to transform local cultural symbols into aesthetic elements that are competitive in the global market. According to (MA et al., 2020), carving motifs on furniture, such as those inspired by the Mantingan style, reflect a strong cultural identity in which each stylized

floral pattern has deep philosophical meaning and high artistic value. Furthermore, (Muhajirin et al., 2025) emphasize that the sustainability of this craft profession is highly dependent on the pattern of skill transfer, which now begins to integrate an understanding of market trends and global consumer needs without abandoning the basic principles of traditional craftsmanship. Thus, carved furniture craftsmen today are a crucial pillar of the creative economy in maintaining the relevance of traditional art amid the tide of modernization.

2.2 The Aesthetics of Relief Motifs

Aesthetics is defined as a philosophical study of beauty, art, and how sensory values are absorbed and judged by individuals (Rahmat & Soleh, 2025), where it functions as the spirit that gives strength to a work. The results of the study show that the aesthetic value of Jepara door carvings comes from a combination of figurative Ramayana motifs with stylized flora and fauna. The aesthetic value of the Ramayana relief on wooden crafts lies in the craftsman's ability to compose a harmonious arrangement of characters, floral ornaments, and stylized backgrounds, resulting in a work that has both visual balance and philosophical depth. The precision in executing the anatomical details and expressions of the characters makes this relief a sophisticated decorative element that can increase the artistic and economic value of a furniture product in the global market.



Figure 4. Ramayana Relief Motif
Source: Researcher Documentation

The aesthetic evidence is demonstrated through the figurative iconography that is rich in meaning, namely the Contemplative Rama figure, which is interpreted as loyalty to his longing for Sinta and suffering. This beauty is reinforced by the use of space-filling carvings in the form of trees, leaves, grass, and deer surrounding the figure, creating an integrated and harmonious relief composition. The integration of human figures with botanical and faunal elements reflects traditional aesthetic principles that place nature as an integral part of the narrative, where floral details are not merely ornamental fillers but rather reinforce the emotional atmosphere of the scene being represented (I Nyoman, 2022).

2.3 Carving Function Transformation

The transformation of function in craft art is a shift in value over time, where craft has shifted from merely fulfilling practical needs to becoming a means of expression and message delivery, according to (Raharjo et al., 2025). Research results on door carvings show a significant shift in value. Its original function was only as a decorative element to add to the beauty of the door. However, this

function has been transformed into a visual medium that preserves and conveys the cultural narrative and moral values of the Ramayana epic to its audience. This change proves that the work now has dual value, not only as an artifact (physical object), but also as a mentifact (carrier of symbolism and philosophical values) and sociofact (producer of social values).



Figure 5. Door Shape

Source: Researcher Documentation

This work tells the story of events through the visual images presented. The events communicated by the craftsman can contain various contexts, one of which includes cultural events, both involving themselves in events and conveying the history of a particular culture. This can be obtained through dialogue with nature in relation to the reciprocal relationship between humans and the work resulting from the transformation of nature, namely nature transforming itself into carved artworks. The value of this art needs to be communicated and the flow of sensitivity to the core of the soul. The value itself is actually the core that makes up the function of a work of art, not just paying attention to aesthetic and artistic dimensions alone, but can be conveyed in a much greater and more beneficial way (Ernawati & Sari, 2020).

3. Conclusion

A case study on Wood Carving Art on Doors with Ramayana Relief Motifs in Tigajuru, Jepara, shows a complex interaction between the creative process of craftsmen, aesthetic consistency, and shifts in the value of works of art. From a creativity perspective, it was found that craftsmen demonstrated a high level of productive creativity through technical flexibility in their mastery of various carving techniques, although this resulted in technical inconsistencies (smooth and rough) within a single carving. Meanwhile, the aesthetic dimension of the work is realized through a harmonious blend of meaningful Ramayana figurative motifs (such as the figures of Rama Merenung and Anoman Bersama Sinta) with stylized flora and fauna motifs as fillers, which emphasize the aesthetic function as the spirit that gives strength to the work. The most important point is the Transformation of Function of carving, which was originally only a decorative element (Artifact) but has shifted to become a visual medium that preserves and conveys the cultural narrative and moral values of the Ramayana epic (Mentifact and Sociofact). Overall, this carving proves that Jepara's craft art not only survives as a heritage but also evolves as a medium of expression and transmission of values in the context of contemporary culture.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

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