

Internationalization and the Degradation of Jepara Carving Traditions in the Beginning of 21st Century

Sri Indrahti*, Dewi Yuliati, Alamsyah

Doctoral Program of History, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro,
Jl. dr. Antonius Suroyo, Tembalang, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, 50275

*Corresponding Author: indrahti@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v8i2.22440>

Abstract

This article examines the process of degradation in Jepara's ornamental woodcarving, driven primarily by internationalization. In this context, degradation refers to the decline or deterioration of the traditional Jepara woodcarving motifs as a result of modernization. Using historical methodology, the study reconstructs the factors that have contributed to the decline of Jepara's ornamental woodcarving. The degradation process began with the arrival of foreign investors. On one hand, these investors facilitated the global marketing of Jepara carvings. However, this also required Jepara's woodcarving products to conform to international market tastes, leading to a shift towards minimalist or even plain designs without traditional carvings. The changing consumer preferences gradually displaced the distinctive Jepara motifs, which were perceived as outdated, less appealing, and less competitive compared to foreign products. This decline in quality was further exacerbated by the export boom at the end of the 20th century. The findings reveal that the degradation of Jepara's ornamental motifs has significantly impacted the lives of local artisans, both in terms of the diminishing value and quality of their work, and in their struggle for survival by adapting to market demands.

Received:
April 5, 2024

Revised:
August 26, 2024

Accepted:
August 29, 2024

Keywords: Degradation; Carving Motifs; Internationalization; Jepara.

Introduction

The woodcarving industry in Jepara has existed for approximately 500 years. There are two versions regarding the origins of Jepara's woodcarving craft. The first version attributes its creation to Tjie Wie Gwan, a Mahapatih of Kalinyamat and the adoptive father of Sunan Hadirin (Maziyah et al., 2015, pp. 13-23). The second version credits a figure named Prabangkara. In the early 20th century, which marked a significant turning point in the international development of woodcarving, R.A. Kartini began introducing Jepara's carved furniture to Dutch government officials and other prominent visitors to Jepara. Following this introduction, local artisans were gathered and instructed on how to produce crafts that met the desired standards, particularly those artisans living in the mountainous regions, who were known specifically as *Macan Kurung* carvers (Priyanto et al, 2013, pp. 139-147).

During the Dutch colonial period in the Dutch East Indies, a Carpentry School was established in Jepara on June 1, 1920. This educational institution focused on

teaching various decorative styles and motifs, ranging from those of the Majapahit and Mataram eras to those characteristics of Bali, while still preserving the unique Jepara designs (Alamsyah, 2023, p. 65). Skilled artisans trained at this institution were subsequently employed by several family-owned businesses and enterprises established by the Dutch government. One notable example is the *Jepara's Houtsnijwek en Meubel Markt* Regional Company, founded in 1932 (Drieënhuizen, 1955, pp. 163-175).

To further empower the woodcarving craft, in 1963 and 1964, the Head of the Regional Cooperative Office for Central Java established the Woodworking Industry Cooperative in Panggang, Jepara, followed by the founding of the "Sido Dadi" Woodworking Cooperative in Sukodono. In the same year, the "Suka Damai" Woodworking Industry Cooperative was also established in Mantingan, Jepara (Alamsyah, 2023, pp. 24-30).

Entering the 1980s, the development of the carving craft in Jepara began to show changes due to the presence of foreign investors. Their arrival in Jepara cannot be separated from the Jepara carving exhibition in Nusa Dua, Bali, in 1989, which attracted many foreign entrepreneurs to Jepara to witness the creation and products of carving. During the period from 1980 to 1989, Jepara carving art was not widely known by international consumers. This was due to the lack of platforms and access providing marketing at the international level. Additionally, Jepara carvers were predominantly from lower and middle classes, so their production could only meet local market demand (Alamsyah, & Indrahti, 2000, p. 34).

In 1990, Jepara carving crafts gradually gained recognition in the international market as foreign entrepreneurs opened up marketing access, leading to orders from various countries ("Bridge," 1990, p. 7). International consumers were more interested in buying Jepara carvings due to their antique and unique decorative motifs (Maziyah, 2015, pp. 78-80). This trend continued in subsequent years until 1999, when the Export Boom occurred, a condition where the demand for Jepara carving exports increased drastically. On the one hand, this increase was a blessing as it expanded the market for Jepara carving crafts. However, on the other hand, it also led to a decline in the value of Jepara carving motifs. At the beginning of the 21st century, Jepara carving products were known to be less competitive due to a shift in international market demand, favoring Chinese, Japanese, and Italian carving products. This resulted in a decrease in orders for Jepara carvings. This marked the starting point for the degradation of Jepara carving motifs (Riyoko, 2012).

Therefore, the problem of the degradation of Jepara carving motifs is not solely caused by a decline in creativity but also by the need to face global competition. The presence of foreign investors in Jepara, which was supposed to strengthen and enrich Jepara carving motifs in the international market, enabling them to compete with other products like Chinese, Japanese, and Italian carvings and cater to the tastes of international consumers, has instead led to a decline in their motifs. This is due to the emergence of international consumer preferences favoring plain carvings, following the trend of modernization. What were the causes of the degradation of Jepara carving

motifs? How did the degradation of Jepara carving motifs unfold in the context of internationalization? What were the impacts of the degradation of Jepara carving motifs on the lives of those involved in the Jepara carving industry?

Method

This article is compiled using the historical method. The historical method is a method used to research, reconstruct, and analyze past events (Gottschalk, 2008, p. 39). The historical method includes four steps: heuristics (source collection), criticism (source testing), interpretation, and historiography (historical writing). Heuristics is the process of collecting data sources and finding sources relevant to the problem, which can be written and oral documents from past events as historical sources (Wasino, 2005, pp. 11-12).

Written primary sources include archives and newspaper articles. Archival sources were obtained from several Jepara Regency Government agencies, such as the establishment deeds of carving cooperatives and statistical reports. Other primary sources used are newspaper articles, such as *Gelora Bumi Kartini* and the *Birmingham Daily Post*. Articles from these newspapers provide information about the trade activities of Jepara carving crafts to export destinations.

Non-written or oral sources are used to provide information that cannot be found in written sources. Oral sources were obtained from interviews with actors, including entrepreneurs and workers, communities, community organizations, and local government institutions. Therefore, this research is also conducted using the oral history method to capture the development of the carving craft industry during the research period based on information from economic actors who are still alive to further complement contemporary written documents. Secondary sources are obtained through the literature review process, which comes from books, articles in national and international journals, and other literature materials from previous research to support the writing of this article (Suryomihardjo, 1975, p. 139).

The approach used in this research is a socio-economic approach, encompassing the scope of the carving artisan community, local government, Jepara carving art, marketing, production, international relations, and so on. The socio-economic approach is useful in this research because it can help analyze socio-economic activities, especially those related to community activities from an economic perspective, such as sales, promotion, international trade management, competition, and so forth in the degradation of Jepara carving motifs in the context of internationalization (Kocka, 1973, pp. 341-351).

Factors Leading to Degradation of Carvings in Jepara

According to the Indonesian Dictionary, degradation means decline, deterioration, or decrease. Furthermore, according to Dymitrow (2017), a researcher in the field of environmental culture from Gothenburg University, degradation is the decline or fading of cultural values in an object or group within a community that will give rise to a new culture such as consumerism, materialism, individualism, and hedonism.

Degradation can occur in various places and in various forms, such as moral, land, and cultural degradation as a result of modernization. Based on the explanation of the concept of degradation, it can be formulated that degradation is the decline or fading of cultural values in an object or group within a community that will give rise to a new culture as a result of the influence of changes in people's behavior and thinking (Dymitrow, 2017, pp. 36-37).

The degradation experienced by the carving craft in Jepara is caused by the demands of buyers or consumers. In this context, consumers prefer furniture in Jepara according to the design they want, following the trend of furniture craft fashion that is more elegant and luxurious. In general, these modern design models follow trends from the European continent, such as Scandinavian furniture models, Leonardo da Vinci, Windmill in the Netherlands, and so on (Figure 1). Models from abroad (Western countries) are generally minimalist models, meaning there is not much carving art in the manufacturing process (Chrisswantra, 2021, p. 257). This is the background of the degradation of Jepara carving motifs. On the one hand, there is consumer demand who view carving with a minimalist style as a trend of modernization. However, on the other hand, it also lowers the quality of Jepara carvings or can be said to cause degradation. Furthermore, Jepara carving artisans also have to survive amidst the onslaught of similar products that are more popular with people abroad (Kurniawan, 2018, pp. 91-92). Below is a Jepara carved furniture motif that is influenced by European Style.



Figure 1. Jepara Carved Furniture European Style Motifs
Source: Iswahyudi, 2017.

From a geographical perspective, Jepara has been known as a city of carving crafts, both in Indonesia and abroad. This is also supported by the location of Jepara Regency with a position of 3° 23' 20" to 4° 9' 35" East Longitude and 5° 43' 30" to 6° 47' 44" South Latitude. The boundaries of Jepara Regency are as follows: the West and North are bordered by the Java Sea, the East borders Kudus and Pati Regencies, and the South borders Demak Regency (BPPD Kabupaten Jepara, 2005, p. 31). In addition, historically, Jepara is also famous as an old maritime city and the birthplace of one of

the figures of the Indonesian women's movement, R. A. Kartini.

In the field of natural resources, the Jepara region is very fortunate to have an abundance of teak, mahogany, sono keling, and other trees whose wood is very suitable and useful as furniture material because it is durable, not easily broken or damaged, and does not easily fade. Teakwood, in particular, is the best wood and is often in demand by consumers both locally and internationally. Thus, the selling price of Jepara carving craft products made from teakwood is certainly more expensive than other types of wood. Teakwood that is often sought after by consumers is teakwood with an age of 60-80 years. Therefore, it is not uncommon for Jepara carving artisans to order teakwood from other regions such as Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Sumatra, and Nusa Tenggara to fulfill consumer orders. In addition, teakwood in Indonesia managed by Perhutani is also better than that owned by the community (village teak). Thus, many Jepara carving artisans also look for teakwood on Perhutani land and of course already have a permit (Tim JIP MUJ, 2014, p. 22).

The abundance of natural resources certainly benefits Jepara carving artisans and makes it easy for them to find the main medium for making carving crafts in various forms, especially furniture including chairs, tables, doors, and so on. However, this changed when wood resources started to become scarce due to massive deforestation that occurred in 1998 and 1999. At the same time, there was also an export boom in 1999 which flooded Jepara carving artisans with furniture orders. Unfortunately, this boom was not accompanied by maintaining product quality due to market demands.

Degradation Process of Jepara Carving Motifs (Pre-Degradation Phase 1980-1999)

In the early 1980s to 1989, Jepara carvings were not widely known in the international market due to several factors, including the unpreparedness of local artisans in marketing their products due to inadequate knowledge and lack of access to market their goods in the international market. It was only when foreign investors came to Jepara and introduced Jepara carved furniture products to the international market that orders from international consumers began to arrive one by one. This was reinforced by the Jepara carving exhibition held in Bali (1989) and Singapore, which was already known to many foreign tourists from various countries (Figure 2) (Priyanto, 2022, pp. 1-2).

In 1989, Jepara carved furniture was exhibited at the Furniture Exhibition in Nusa Dua, Bali. At that time, Hisyom Prasetyo was present as the Regent of Jepara. Unexpectedly, Jepara furniture impressed the foreigners who attended the exhibition. They did not expect that carving crafts were not only found in Bali but also in Jepara. The Jepara Regional Government seemed quite open to the presence of foreign entrepreneurs. They were allowed to invest in Jepara carvings with the condition that they had to comply with applicable laws and regulations, including capital issues, by using the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) system. Based on this, foreign entrepreneurs (foreign investors) from various countries came to Jepara to invest (Setiawan, 2017, pp. 31-48). In addition to exhibitions, the introduction of carving products was also carried out by fulfilling international market orders, one of which was from a Singaporean

company called Han Rose Furniture. This company was a privately owned family business run from home with an initial capital of 7,000 USD. In its development, the company then had an outlet in Joo Chiat Complex near Geylang Syah, a building and workshop in Tampines Industrial Park. Han Rose Furniture then became one of the popular import companies in Singapore, with buyers on average being residents of Malaysia, China, and India (Rachman, 1987, p. 5). Figure 3 shows Jepara carved furniture ordered by Han Rose company and then ordered by consumers from China.



Figure 2. Regent of Jepara Hisyom Prasetyo and Governor of Bali Ida Bagus Oka at the International Exhibition of Jepara Carvings in 1989

Source: Priyanto, 2022.

The products ordered by Han Rose company from Jepara included bedroom sets, dining table sets, living room sets, in addition to selling various items such as wooden calligraphy, telephone tables, and various handicrafts. In the period of 1987, Han Rose company tended to import goods from Indonesia, but its consumers were on average residents of Malaysia, China, and India who liked antique and unique carvings from Jepara. The dominant motifs were plants, flowers, fruits, leaves, roots, including geometric and abstract. Some of the existing price lists, for example, a popular bedroom set with a mattress bed for US\$2000, a dining table set for US\$1400-US\$2000, a living room set for US\$750-US\$3000, a buffet for US\$300, US\$600 and US\$1000 according to its size. A dressing table with a mirror for US\$300, a layer for US\$600 and a telephone table for US\$300 (1987). The names listed on the carved furniture were very exotic and romantic. Examples include sofas, dining tables, and beds named *kecapi*, *romawi*, *anggrek*, *kursi gajah*, *istana Perancis*, *antic rota*, *sofa Cleopatra*, and *pilipine-madura*; dining tables named *anggrek*, *untir*, *jaya*; bedroom sets named *rambangan bunga*, *italy*, *mahkota bulan rambang*, *puteri rahayu*, *brawijaya*, *raja*, *romawi*, *raffles*, *saloom eropah*, and *mahkota bulan bintang* (Rachman, 1987, p. 5). In addition, entering 1990, there were carving motifs that were favored by international market consumers, namely leaf motifs, fruits, roses, lotus flowers, cliffs, *lemahan*, and so on, as seen in Figure 4.



Figure 3. Jepara Furniture in Singapore Ordered by Han Rose Company, 1987.
Source: Rahman, 1987.



Figure 4. Leaf and Rose Shaped Jepara Furniture Carving Model 1990-1999
Source: Archival Documentation Research Report on Jepara Carved Furniture, 1999.

In 1990-1999, Jepara carved furniture craftsmen began to consistently produce carved products to meet the demands of international market consumers. At that time, international consumers considered Jepara carving products to be unique, antique, and contain high creativity value, making them very suitable as room decorations that add to the aesthetics of homes, restaurants, and entertainment venues. This then led to an increase in the use of teak, mahogany, and other woods (Tim JIP MUJ, 2014, p. 22). Problems then arose in 1997-1998 when Perhutani stopped providing stocks of teak, mahogany, and other woods to Jepara carving artisans. The reason was due to dwindling wood stocks, while the demand for teak exports abroad was booming. The

strengthening of the dollar had caused export and import activities to slump, impacting economic profits. One of those affected was Perhutani. Because Perhutani stopped the supply of teakwood stocks, artisans had to look for teakwood and other types of wood elsewhere (“Meubel,” 2000, p. 18). This condition worsened at the end of 1999 when there was massive looting of teakwood due to the global economic crisis, making it difficult for Jepara carving artisans to meet the very high demand for orders at that time. At that time, there was also an export boom. As a result, many carving artisans made carving products freely, carelessly, and did not comply with regulations. The decline in carving quality then disappointed consumers. The carvings that were considered to be of less value then made international consumers prefer plain or minimalist models. International consumers also eventually switched to Chinese, Japanese, and Italian carvings which were considered to be better (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Kabupaten Jepara, 2005, pp. 85-86).

Previously, the degradation of carving motifs in Jepara began in early 1999 where the glory of the Jepara carved furniture industry began to fade, especially in terms of competitiveness in the international market. Jepara furniture products previously had a high bargaining position and always sold well in the international market because there were no other regions that had similar production with the same quality. However, in its development, there was a shift (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Kabupaten Jepara, 2005, p. 90). The entry of various orders from abroad at first glance seemed profitable for a few groups, but in its development, price competition actually harmed entrepreneurs and benefited exporters (buyers) because they could choose goods at cheap prices. This condition did not last long because, in its development, this price competition was also followed by a decline in quality due to very low prices. This condition certainly harms both the entrepreneurs themselves and buyers as well as the carving craft industry (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Kabupaten Jepara, 2005, p. 91).

Degradation has led to a decline in exports as international market demand has shifted according to their own tastes, namely minimalist or plain, so that the interest in Jepara carving products has decreased, resulting in a decrease in overseas orders. In 1998, orders reached 800 containers per month, but in 1999 only about 50% (“Profesional”, 1999, p. 12). During the strengthening of the dollar against the rupiah, raw and supporting materials such as glue, paper, and cloth experienced price increases that exceeded the limit. In fact, these goods were still obtained through imports. When the dollar depreciated, craftsmen had to bear the brunt from two sides. On the one hand, craftsmen were pressured by the high prices of supporting materials, and on the other hand, furniture prices in the market were also pressured by buyers from abroad. The saturation that emerged in overseas markets was caused by an excess of goods, especially for garden furniture (Irawati, Harini, & Purnomo, 2012, pp. 99-100).

To follow up on this issue, the Indonesian Woodworking Community (MPI) has tried to help procure raw materials and capital through cooperatives, especially related to the distribution of assistance in the form of soft loans. This step also needs to be

balanced with detailed arrangement and calculation of the real need for raw materials for the furniture industry. Because there are indications of a decline in the quality and delivery of furniture, Asmindo then designed technical and managerial training or guidance in the furniture business sector. However, the level of success depends on the active role of the industry players themselves, namely: how much they need to improve themselves in relation to business management, considering that so far the prevailing business management is still instinctive (learning from everyday habits) (Iswahyudi, 2017, p. 51).

Degradation Process of Jepara Carving Motifs (Degradation Phase 2000-2010)

Entering 2000 to 2010, carving motifs to meet international market demand did not experience significant development. Almost 80% of international market demand was mostly plain furniture, and only 20% used carving decorations. In the period 2000-2010, Jepara carved furniture mostly followed the demands of market consumer orders. From the perspective of the local community, the establishment of foreign companies was not considered detrimental to local entrepreneurs, but rather was considered to provide more benefits. The benefits that can be obtained by local residents include several things. First, local residents can be absorbed as workers in foreign companies. This not only solves the problem of employment but also allows these workers to absorb knowledge from foreigners. Second, foreign companies were not allowed to produce finished products, so these companies still had to cooperate with local companies. Third, the presence of foreign companies was considered to encourage the spirit of local entrepreneurs to compete healthily (Hayati, 2000, p. 62).

However, there were also losses felt by local entrepreneurs, namely the increase in wages. With the presence of foreign companies, artisans who were considered skilled were given the opportunity to work in foreign companies with relatively high wages. The provision of relatively high wages also influenced artisans working for local entrepreneurs to demand the same wages as their colleagues working in foreign companies. The increase in wages caused production costs to increase, even though the selling price of goods could not be increased. Meanwhile, if the price is increased, there is a concern that the goods will not sell due to the high competition among entrepreneurs (Sulistiyorini, 2016, p. 135).

In 2000, industrial growth based on statistical reports from Jepara in Figures did not experience significant changes even though there had been degradation of carving motifs. Thus, the degradation of carving motifs in the context of internationalization did not have a significant impact on the carved furniture industry. This can be seen from the number of exporters, destination countries, volume, value, and PMA/PMDN which did not show a decrease. The decline in volume occurred in 2000-2001 reaching almost 50%, but this decline was not significant enough in each year. The growth of the carved furniture industry in terms of business units, workforce, volume, and its value in rupiah, entering the years 2000-2004 did not experience much change, as shown in Table 1.

Jepara carving motifs in the early 21st century after the export boom and timber

looting declined further, especially in international orders, experienced a shift as seen in Figure 5. Products competitors who are superior and modern competition becomes tight. The shift in consumer tastes is the most decisive factor. Jepara carvings which still maintain their traditional nature both in terms of manufacture and motifs find it difficult to survive. Only craftsmen who are able to meet consumer tastes survive (Roda et al, 2004, pp. 21-22). Jepara carvings in turn are considered ancient and do not reflect the trend of modernization, different from carving products from China or Japan which are considered better than Jepara. Therefore, as an effort to survive, Jepara carving craftsmen only follow orders whose models are in accordance with consumer tastes. As a consequence, Jepara carving varieties have also begun to be abandoned (Roda et al, 2004, p. 25).

Table 1. Growth of the Jepara Carving Industry in 2000-2004 Based on Business Units, Workforce, Volume, and Value (Rp)

No	Type of Commodity	Year 2000	Year 2001	Year 2002	Year 2003	Year 2004
1.	Household Furniture from Wood					
	Business Units	3,400	3,008	3,120	3,597	3,776
	Workforce	57,000	43,916	58,210	50,063	59,210
	Volume (Pieces/Sets)	1,957,000	1,967,070	868,446	2,494,000	2,495,000
	Value (Rp 000,-)	1,174,200	1,045,440	742,500,000	749,925.000	748,500,000
2.	Wood Carving Crafts					
	Business Units	210	131	154	155	150
	Workforce	791	791	945	945	1,092
	Volume (Pieces/Sets)	189,625	189,523	190,953	36,825	36,900
	Value (Rp 000,-)	170,662,500	162,983,780	171,857,700	2,950,000	4,428,000

Source: Department of Industry, Trade, and Cooperatives, Jepara, 2004.

Jepara carving motifs in the early 21st century after the export boom and timber looting declined further, especially in international orders, experienced a shift as seen in Figure 5. Products competitors who are superior and modern competition becomes tight. The shift in consumer tastes is the most decisive factor. Jepara carvings which still maintain their traditional nature both in terms of manufacture and motifs find it difficult to survive. Only craftsmen who are able to meet consumer tastes survive (Roda et al, 2004, pp. 21-22). Jepara carvings in turn are considered ancient and do not reflect the trend of modernization, different from carving products from China or Japan which are considered better than Jepara. Therefore, as an effort to survive, Jepara carving craftsmen only follow orders whose models are in accordance with consumer tastes. As a consequence, Jepara carving varieties have also begun to be abandoned (Roda et al, 2004, p. 25).

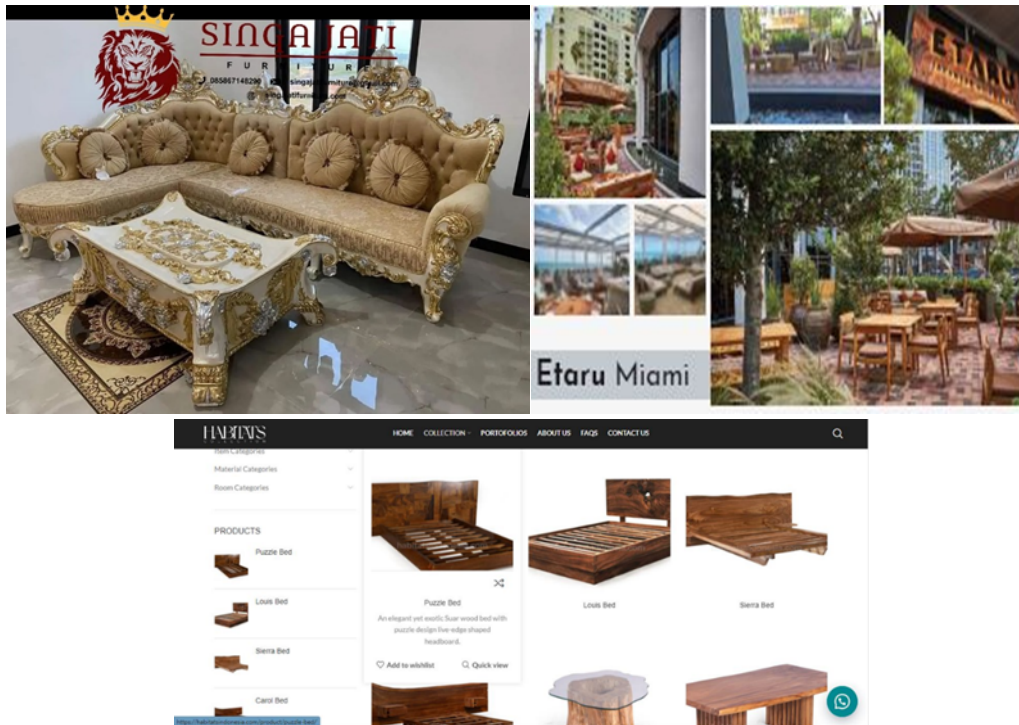


Figure 5. On the Left is a Scandinavian-style Sofa Chair Furniture Model from PT Singa Jati, on the Right is a Miami Furniture Model from PT Umafindo, and at the Bottom is a European-style Bed Model from PT Habitats Indonesia, 2010
Source: PT Umafindo and Habitats Indonesia, 2023.

Based on Figure 5, it is evident that there has been a shift in consumer preferences when ordering Jepara's carved products. Two Jepara-based companies, PT. Umafindo and Habitats Indonesia, have both adopted minimalist and plain carving models in their marketing promotions. This shift is driven by consumer demand, particularly in the international market. Jepara's woodcarving artisans must adapt to market trends to remain competitive with products from China, Japan, and Italy, which are perceived as more beautiful, modern, and precise due to the use of advanced technology in their production (Chrisswantra, 2021, pp. 254-269).

Chinese carvings, characterized by traditional styles featuring dragon motifs—a sacred symbol in China—exemplify unique design strategies crafted by artisans to attract consumer interest (Achdiawan & Puntodewo, 2011, p. 32). The presence of superior, higher-quality competing carvings has made it difficult for Jepara's woodcarving artisans to survive, as they have prioritized maximizing economic profit over developing innovations. Jepara's furniture carving craft is also unable to compete with products from countries like China and Japan, which utilize modern technology, such as machinery, rather than handicrafts, enabling faster production of a large number of products. On the other hand, most of Jepara's carving furniture industries still rely on traditional tools and human skills, with most carving industries operating as small to medium-sized home-based businesses employing between 2 and 50 workers. Therefore, in facing the highly dynamic global competition, Jepara's furniture carving industry must develop strategies to compete with industrial

enterprises, especially those from developed countries (Iswahyudi, 2017, pp. 45-48).

The degradation of Jepara's carving decorative styles has also become more apparent due to the instability of international export markets, especially in the carved furniture sector, following the global economic crisis of 2008-2010 (Bill, 2004, p. 77). This situation was further exacerbated by the withdrawal of foreign investors back to their home countries, leaving the artisans without access to market their products. The dependence on foreign entrepreneurs eventually led to the collapse of Jepara's woodcarving industry. The artisans were affected by layoffs from various woodcarving companies in Jepara after foreign entrepreneurs returned to their countries (Sulistiyorini, 2016, p. 135).

Impact of Decorative Style Degradation on Jepara's Woodcarving Artisans

The degradation of Jepara's decorative carving styles has significantly affected the woodcarving business activities. This degradation is essentially a survival strategy; if the artisans continued to produce only highly intricate carvings without accepting orders for minimalist or even plain designs, they would not earn any income. However, the degradation also represents a decline in the value of Jepara's carvings in the international market. The widespread popularity of minimalist and plain furniture has gradually stifled artisans' creativity. As this trend continued, artisans were criticized for their inability to maintain the aesthetic value of their carvings and instead focused solely on catering to consumer preferences. However, the shift from classical to contemporary styles must be seen as a survival strategy for Jepara's artisans in adapting to changing times. This adaptation is accompanied by a high level of flexibility in responding to market demands, resulting in the production of modern carvings with simple designs (Karmadi, 1985, pp. 43-50). This challenge was met with innovation in carving production that followed market preferences while still incorporating Jepara's distinctive carving accents. The impact of the degradation of Jepara's decorative carving styles can also be observed in the export figures for Jepara's carved furniture in the international market from 2000-2010 (Table 2).

The impact of Jepara's decorative carving style degradation is also echoed by two Jepara woodcarving artisans who engage in business with foreign entrepreneurs, a trend driven by the emergence of new furniture designs by Jepara artisans. These artisans, named Rositta (also known as Sitta) and Farida, are both involved in the carved furniture business. Sitta started her woodcarving furniture business with her American husband, Mr. Hans, and since 2006, there has been a continuous decline in the variety of Jepara's carved furniture designs. The primary cause is market demand for modern furniture designs that lack decorative carvings. Sitta also noted that consumers perceive modern designs of Jepara furniture as more attractive compared to the carved furniture, which is considered classic, old-fashioned, and traditional. Another reason is that consumers ordering Jepara furniture from abroad are capitalists or individuals who prioritize economic profit over cultural preservation. The furniture purchased from Jepara is used in restaurants, hotels, luxury homes, entertainment venues, and other establishments. Sitta also mentioned that most of the Jepara

furniture is exported to the United States. She is unable to do much because if she does not fulfill consumer orders and relies solely on Jepara's woodcarving furniture, her business would not be able to thrive (Rossita, 2023).

Table 2. Fluctuations in the Export Volume of Jepara's Carved Furniture, 2000-2010

No	Year	Number of Exporters	Number of Destination Countries	Volume (Kg)	Value (US\$)
1	2000	436	71	35,773,970	74,737,879
2	2001	451	88	38,956,277	76,110,290
3	2002	325	78	49,852,973	107,816,151
4	2004	343	78	61,817,687	134,500,648
5	2006	265	68	55,765,736	111,842,200
6	2008	248	68	37,847,093	100,334,715
7	2009	254	67	36,297,275	91,309,963
8	2010	252	60	35,209,331	90,498,084

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Jepara in Figures, 2000-2010.

Farida, who started her woodcarving furniture business in Jepara with her French husband, Mr. Gael, corroborated Sitta's statement. She said that it is rare for consumers (export orders) to request furniture with decorative carvings, as they prefer modern and trendy designs. In response to this situation, Farida and Mr. Gael continue to introduce Jepara's decorative carved furniture to consumers, hoping to spark their interest. However, it ultimately depends on consumer preferences. Farida also revealed that during the golden era of Jepara's woodcarving furniture, from around 1990-1999, many carved designs were sought after by consumers due to their unique, antique, and creative qualities (Farida, 2023).

Conclusions

The degradation of Jepara's decorative carving styles did not occur suddenly; rather, it was influenced by several contributing factors, rooted in historical contexts, that led to the decline of Jepara's woodcarving art. The first factor is the availability of natural resources, particularly the abundance of diverse tree species such as teak, mahogany, and sono keling, whose wood has been traditionally used as the primary medium for carving. This wood was sourced from two main suppliers: village-owned trees and state-managed forestry. Initially, this supply chain operated smoothly, as Jepara's woodcarving artisans had no difficulty accessing the necessary raw materials. However, by the late 20th century, the state forestry agency began to reduce the supply of wood to the artisans due to the diminishing number of trees. This situation was exacerbated by illegal logging activities, which further depleted the availability of high-quality woods like teak and mahogany for carving. As a result, consumers became dissatisfied with the products created by Jepara's artisans, leading to a shift toward minimalist and plain designs. Besides environmental factors, economic factors also played a role, including competition from foreign carved products in the

international market, particularly from China, Japan, and other countries.

The process of Jepara's decorative style degradation can be divided into two stages. The first stage, the pre-degradation phase, occurred between 1980 and 1999, during which Jepara's woodcarving artisans began establishing their presence in the international market with the support of foreign investors. These investors played a significant role in representing consumer preferences for carved products in various countries and facilitated access to international marketing, particularly in the export sector. Thus, the presence of foreign investors greatly benefited the growth of Jepara's woodcarving industry in the global market. In 1999, Jepara's carvings experienced an export boom, marking the beginning of the degradation of decorative styles in the early 21st century, from 2000 to 2010 (the degradation stage). During this period, the high volume of orders was not matched by the quality of the carvings, coupled with limited raw materials, leading to disappointment among international consumers. This was compounded by the emergence of superior and more modern competing products, such as those from China, known for their dragon carvings, and Japan, known for lotus or cherry blossom motifs. Consequently, from 2000 to 2010, many carving orders shifted from classical to contemporary styles, characterized by modern, minimalist, and plain designs intended for use in restaurants, hotels, and other establishments, as these were considered modern, not outdated, and elegant.

The degradation of Jepara's decorative carving styles has significantly impacted the lives of Jepara's woodcarving artisans. This impact can be understood from two perspectives. First, the degradation has led to a decline in the value and quality of Jepara's carvings, as international consumers now perceive them as outdated and less in tune with current trends, making them less suitable for placement in hotels, restaurants, cafes, and similar venues. This contrasts with the past when Jepara carvings were regarded as unique, antique, and creative. This shift in consumer preferences has been influenced by the competitive quality that shapes the tastes of the international market. Second, the degradation of Jepara's decorative carving styles has forced the artisans to work harder to sustain their businesses by accepting all orders from the international market. Failure to do so would threaten the survival of their businesses, leading to their eventual closure.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges Arravi Rizal Firmansyah who has helped in finalizing technical submission in this article.

References

- Achdiawan, R., & Puntodewo. (2011). *Livelihood of furniture producers in Jepara; furniture value chain* (Project Annual Report 2011). Bogor: CIFOR.
- Alamsyah, A., Supriyono, A., Mualimin, M., & Maziyah, S. (2023). Between maritime tradition and violence on the sea: local response to the European expansion in Indonesia. *Journal of Maritime Archaeology*, 18(1), 65-83.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11457-023-09354-7>

- Alamsyah. (2023). *Tantangan dan respons pasang surut industri kerajinan ukir Jepara 1980-2022*. Semarang: Undip Press.
- Alamsyah, & Indrahti, S. (2000). *Soenarto: Karya dan baktinya bagi Jepara*. Jepara: Pemerintah Kabupaten Jepara.
- Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Pemerintah Kabupaten Jepara dan Lembaga Penelitian Universitas Diponegoro. (2005). *Penggalian nilai-nilai budaya lokal untuk meningkatkan daya saing industri kerajinan ukir dalam era globalisasi*. Jepara: Pemerintah Kabupaten Jepara.
- Chrisswantra, F. (2021). Jepara wood carving and the cultural influences of the nusantara maritime spice route. *Serat Rupa Journal of Design*, 5(2), 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.28932/srjd.v5i2.3786>
- Drieënhuizen, C. (1955). *Koloniale collecties, Nederlands aanzien: De Europese elite van NederlandsIndië belicht door haar verzamelingen, 1811-1957*. Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Dymitrow, M. (2017). Degradation, restitution and the elusive culture of rural-urban thinking. *Fennia-International Journal of Geography*, 195(1), 36-60. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.60462>
- Gottschalk, L. (2008). *Mengerti Sejarah* (N. Notosusanto, Trans.). Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia Press.
- Hayati, C. et al., (2000). *Perkembangan Peranan Wanita dalam Kegiatan Ekonomi pada Seni Ukir di Jepara Tahun 1970-1977*.
- Irawati, R. H., & Purnomo, H. (2012). *Pelangi Di Tanah Kartini: Kisah Aktor Mebel Jepara Bertahan dan Melangkah ke Depan*. Bogor: Cifor.
- Iswahyudi. (2017). The Re-Documentation of Jepara's Carving Motifs: An Early Study. *Journal of Social Studies*, 13 (1), 44-52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21831/jss.v13i1.16972>
- Karmadi, A. D., & Kartamadja, S. (1985). *Sejarah Perkembangan Seni Ukir di Jepara*. Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Direktorat Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional.
- Kocka, J. (1973). Social and Economy History in Kernig, C. D., (Ed). *Marxism, Communism, and Western Society: a Comparative Encyclopedia*. New York: Frankfrut Citation.
- Kurniawan, B. K., & Wiyoto, W. (2018). Jepara, ukiran dan perubahan jaman. *Productum: Jurnal Desain Produk (Pengetahuan dan Perancangan Produk)*, 3(3), 91-94. <https://doi.org/10.24821/productum.v3i3.1771>
- Maziyah, S., et al. *Ornamen Mantingan: Koleksi Museum Jawa Tengah Ranggawarsita*. Semarang: Museum Ranggawarsita.
- Priyanto, H., et al. (2013). *Mozaik seni ukir Jepara*. Jepara: Lembaga Pelestari Seni Ukir, Batik, dan Tenun Jepara.
- Rahutani, A., et al. (2018). *Profil industri mebel Jepara* (unpublished). Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business, Unika Soegijapranata Semarang.
- Riyoko, S. (2012). Studi penentu daya saing terhadap investasi pada industri mebel di Kabupaten Jepara. *Jurnal Dinamika Ekonomi dan Bisnis*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.34001/jdeb.v9i1.106>

- Roda, J. M. et al. (2004). *Atlas industri mebel kayu di Jepara*, terjemahan Achmad Uzair. Montpellier: French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development.
- Sulistiyorini, U. T. (2016). *Pendekatan alternatif peningkatan kinerja produk: Studi pada IKM mebel di Jepara*. Salatiga: Satya Wacana University Press.
- Suryomihardjo, A. (1975). *Pemahaman bangsa dan masalah historiografi*. Jakarta: Idayu.
- Tim JIP MUJ. (2014). *Buku persyaratan perubahan i indikasi geografis mebel ukir Jepara*. Jepara: JIP-MUJ.
- Wasino. (2005). *Dari riset hingga tulisan sejarah*. Semarang: Unnes Press.
- Bridge to an opportunity. (1990, March 27). *Birmingham Daily Post*.
- Profesional Management Nyawa Perusahaan Mebel. (1999, August). *Gelora Bumi Kartini*.
- Meubel Ukir Butuh Suntikan Darah Segar. (2000, February). *Gelora Bumi Kartini*.
- Priyanto, H. (2022, May 4). Hisyom Prasetyo Bupati Jepara Perintis Ekspor Mebel Ukir Jepara", *Suarabaru.ID*. Retrieved from <http://suarabaru.id/2022/05/04/hisom-prasetyo-bupati-jepara-perintis-ekspor-mebel-ukir-jepara>.