

Home Grown: Appalachian Crafts from the Past

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Appalachian arts and crafts were a result of need. Today, many of these skills – such as sewing, weaving, woodworking, candle making, glass blowing – are seen as crafts from the past, with only a select few people maintaining the skills and expertise to carry them out.

While the mountainous terrain, rivers and forests of Appalachia may have limited the interactions of early settlers, it also forced a certain level of self-sufficiency on them. They utilized their resources, heritage and skills to create the things they wanted and needed – quilts, baskets, candles,

soap and more. Today, many of these skills – such as sewing, weaving, woodworking, candle making, glass blowing, etc. – are seen as crafts from the past, with only a select few people maintaining the skills and expertise to carry them out. However, they are a vital part of Appalachia's heritage that should be shared.



The History of Appalachian Crafts

Appalachian art and crafts were a result of need. In non-industrialized Appalachia, people were self-reliant, making do with materials at hand and crafting the cabins they lived in and all the furniture in it, in order to make a house into a home. Handmade quilts, coverlets, pottery, wood carvings and woven baskets were often displayed in the home. However, they also served a more functional purpose, such as warmth in the winter, a cover in the warm months, a cup to drink from, or a basket for gathering and carrying things. While the men of the household spent time making household implements, women were growing, weaving, spinning and sewing their clothes. Children were even included, as they were often responsible for dipping the candles.

Natural resources provided the ability to make items more colorful as dyes were made from materials such as walnuts and indigo. Households would

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add an artistic touch to their everyday items by weaving intricate designs or creating detailed patterns for their quilting. Some even created “showoff” quilts that were only used for special occasions such as weddings or burials. As other craftspeople moved into the area, they infused new skills, techniques and artistic directions into Appalachian crafts.

Technology and market demand influenced what people made, as mass production allowed these crafts to be recreated quicker and cheaper by machine. Factories began to replace workshops. This resulted in the growth of the “Craft Revival,” which focused on the impact of machine creations on the overall quality of the craft and the economic impact on the craftsmen.

While factories ultimately prevailed, in the 1920s, there was a push to preserve traditional Appalachian crafts. The 1950s and 60s brought about efforts to educate youth in these skills, but these crafts once viewed as necessary to the mountain people were now considered art.

How and Where to Learn Crafts Today

The best way to learn a craft is from a master who has learned from another master, and so on. If you have a family member or neighbor who already knows an Appalachian craft, then ask them to teach you. Most Appalachian and heritage crafters who have carried on the tradition love to share what they know and help it carry on.

Check with your local library, community building, or church if any craft classes are being offered. Crafts are often used as a fundraiser, so you can also ask the person who made the crafts if they would be willing to teach you.

If you don’t have family, a neighbor, or other community resource, here are some other options:

- The Augusta Heritage Center, located in Elkins, West Virginia, has themed weeks during that summer that offer Appalachian craft classes as well as crafts from other regions.
- Another college well known for teaching Appalachian and heritage crafts is Berea College in Kentucky. No matter what your craft interests, the town of Berea will have something for you to learn.
- Two locations in Tennessee offer quality Appalachian craft classes, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts and the Appalachian Arts Craft Center.
- But perhaps the best location for hands-on, in-depth learning of popular Appalachian and heritage crafts, as well as try your hand at ‘lost’ crafts, is the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina.

If you are unable to travel or do not have a local crafter to learn from, there is always the internet. With the use of YouTube and written tutorials, there is nothing you can’t learn. There may even be online classes available so you can still have one-on-one instruction without leaving the comfort of your home. If technology is a challenge for you, invite a younger member of your family to join you and share in learning a traditional Appalachian craft.

Reflection Questions

- What craft did you learn from your grandparents or parents?
 - Do you still do it today?
 - Have you taught someone else how to do it?
- How might your CEOS club preserve Appalachian crafts in your community?

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