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Roots: The Birch Root Basket That Became Woollen Socks



*Figure 1. Table sparer from 2002.
Image: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.*

In Norwegian, we have an expression called “*handlingsbåren kunnskap*”. Since English is not my native language, I struggled to find an accurate term to translate this, and the closest I got was “knowledge in action”. In

this essay, I will explore the term in light of my experiences with a traditional craft technique.

My father once collected birch roots and planned to include me in his creative project by teaching me how to merge baskets from them. But it never happened. He passed away before we got that far. This was more than 20 years ago.

At that time, I tried to make something out of the birch roots by myself without his expertise or help from any other mentor. It was hard physically. I used undivided roots, but with the help of pinchers and by looking at pictures from an old handicraft book, I managed to make a table sparer for hot dishes. The technique that I used is called simple binding; another name is “*østlandsteknikk*” (Andersen, 1977). I did not know that at the time. I only knew this: The making process was an important part of my grieving.

The rest of the roots I hung up in my shed in anticipation of a creative raptus. Now, I thought the time had come with LILA.

In our fieldwork in Sweden, I looked for more roots to include in my project. Because of the rocky landscape, I did not succeed, disregarding a short, tiny piece of birch root. I wondered whether this would eventually be my artistic expression for the final exhibition of LiLa but found another way, as I describe later.



*Figure 2 a, b. My father's birch roots.
Images: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.*



Starting All Over Again

When we returned home to Norway, the gardening season had started. As I dug up some land for potatoes, I came across an enormous amount of birch roots. I saw it as a sign to continue my initial birch root project idea. I peeled the bark off the roots and started to merge a little basket. Hundreds of times, I tried to get started, but it was like I did not comprehend what the books and videos wanted to tell me. Then, I found the old table sparer from 20 years ago and understood how I was supposed to do it. In the following weeks, I had to plan my work; the roots needed to be soaked in water for hours before merging. But not too long to avoid wood ending up crispy and fragile. The merging took a long time and was difficult and occasionally quite strenuous. It made



Figure 3. Sitting here with all these new roots, I started to merge a little basket. It took a long time and was difficult and occasionally quite strenuous. It made me reflect on how fast we live our lives now compared to earlier times. Image: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.

me reflect on how fast we live our lives now compared to earlier times. Yet, I kept working day by day and ended up with a little product to show at the exhibition.

Why Socks, Then?

Because I could not find any roots in Sweden, I ended up spending all my creative time knitting socks. I use woollen socks not only in the wintertime but also at hiking during the summer. I had planned to take many walks this summer, so I needed new ones.

I chose the charcoal colour for practical reasons; if they get dirty, it does not show and the socks remain discrete. As I sat there knitting, I began to see the same colour in everything. I thought about the burnt wooden spoons



from an article by Antti Stöckell (2018) where he and his students made a campfire, took the embers, put it on a piece of wood and rolled it in circles until it had made a little pit. Then, they carved the rest of the piece with a knife. Shaping by fire glows is an old method that nobody uses anymore. I found a resemblance not only to the colour of my yarn but also to the root-merging technique.

As we drove home from the fieldwork week, it dawned on me that my project was turning accurately the same way as life itself; it never becomes how we plan.

My father never got to teach me how to merge baskets, but he taught me how to add masks to the knitting needle. To teach me how to knit, he left it to his mother, my grandma. He seemed to show me how to get started on projects but never how to complete them.

I thought, Perhaps the birch root basket is not meant to be. When I cannot do it with my father, it is not worth it, one might say. In Sweden, I read a novel by Guri Sørungård Botheim (2023), called *Høgfjellsmelding* (“The Mountain Report”). One of her messages is to have closure, pass by grieving and have a new beginning. Sometimes, one must let the past be past and start on a new fresh. I realised, my socks were my new fresh. I decided to make an embroidery; I tried to make an image of a basket merging on the most wear-prone places on the socks. As an answer to the UN’s sustainability goal number 12: Responsible consumption and production, I wanted to make reinforcements under the heel and toe balls to make the socks last long. The technique can also be used to repair already broken socks.

Of course, I included my 8-year-old daughter in

Figure. 4 In this picture, one can see that I have taken off my hiking shoes and my fabric-made socks, knitting new socks on the Högklinten mountain on the Swedish coast. I always knit. I have done it since I was a little girl. It keeps me calm, makes me live out my creativity and it feels useful. Images: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.



Fig. 5. After knitting and washing the socks with green soap, I dried them in form using a cast. My grandfather once made it for my grandmother, who used them whilst making “lugger”, a local traditional woollen shoe one can use outdoors in the winter when the snow is dry. Image: Hallvard Kjelen, 2023.



Fig. 6. When dry, I took my grandmother’s woollen carded yarn and embroidered a spiral pattern as a reminder of birch root binding. The art of embroidering was taught to me by my mother, who was highly skilled in this craft, so I also wanted the project to honour her. Image: Berit Oksfjellekv, 2023.

the process. As you will notice, knowledge in action is a thing in our family. Stöckell (2018) also emphasised this: “An important part of handicraft is gathering up cultural tradition, especially through the skills and values from one generation to another” (Stöckell 2018, 95).

Tim Ingold (2021) tells about how his father taught him about fungus by showing him them on trips to the forest. Ingold, as I see it, discusses the difference between information and knowledge in this way:

“My father’s purpose, of course, was to introduce me to the fungi, not to communicate by way of them [...]. This is not to deny that information may be communicated in propositional or semi-propositional form from generation to generation. But information, in itself, is

not knowledge, nor do we become more knowledgeable through this accumulation.” (Ingold, 2021, p. 21)

My project seemed to have a great deal with the generational transmission of knowledge as well as objects, and I do not think one can separate knowledge and information as terms, as Ingold (2021) has. In my family, we are both very verbal and practically oriented, so we name actions and objects whilst transferring knowledge. Therefore, information is so related to knowledge that it is difficult for me to separate them.

Conclusion

I know I can learn things from a book, but for me, it felt wrong to do so with the birchroot project, which was so



Fig. 7. Woollen socks embroidered with my grandmother's hand-carded yarn dyed together with my daughter using the bark from fresh birch roots. Image: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.

personal and related to my father. This explains why my project took another way, where I could use the techniques that had been taught to me in person, knowledge in action so to speak; the knitting, the dyeing and the embroidering, techniques I have incorporated by learning it from women I was close to. And now I am passing it further on to my little girl. It is all about keeping the handicraft tradition alive.

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Figure 8. My daughter picked birch leaves for an early attempt at dyeing yarn. That did not succeed (too hot water?). Therefore, we used the root bark instead. Image: Berit Oksfjellelv, 2023.

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