

The Magic of Telemark Silver

by Lorna Mandt Robertson

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I now feel I am forced to try to tell you a little about Norway's population. I have the impression that many of you Americans think that there are only ordinary people and trolls in this country. That is not the case. There are several other beings, more or less intelligent and more or less visible. I'll try to tell you a little about some of them:

Trolls are usually evil, but luckily not very intelligent. They are huge, and sometimes, when angry, they are in the habit of throwing big rocks at each other or at people. They live in (inside) the mountains. They are great collectors and love everything glittering, especially silver. They are usually very clumsy and I have never met anyone of them who was able to make something beautiful, for example of silver. So I am afraid all silver in their treasuries must have been stolen or robbed.

Huldrefolket or tussefolket or underjordiske (the netherworld people) or haugfolket (the hill folk) -- pet child gets many names. They look like other people, and they are very attractive. The female hulder unfortunately have a cowtail and that is of course a handicap when competing with an ordinary girl. But if she succeeds in hiding her tail until she has been married in the church, it disappears and she will be a first-class wife. And in this or other ways the huldresølv (hulder silver) came in to the hands of men. Huldresølvet was finer than normal silver work, and "it could not be copied or repaired by men" (As a matter of fact it was very old silver, mostly from the Middle Ages and the technique was forgotten or unknown in the rural districts.)" KM 1995

"In people's fantasy it was considered an art of magic (witchcraft?) to create the beautiful jewelry. It was those living underground who owned and made the most beautiful silver, the huldresølvet" Olav Solberg 1989.

I pray the indulgence of my cousin Kristoffer Mandt to forgive me the use of his wonderful explanation of silver's magic and mystery in the presence of our Norwegian heritage! I could think of no finer way to introduce a subject that I have become enamored of.. this craft of our early Mandt ancestors.

Silver is a marvelous ore. It will not erode or disintegrate. It lies in the earth for thousands of years, never corroding, waiting. It is mined from it's ordinary and unglamorous bed, and is shaped and polished into works of art....everlasting art to be used to sip water or the finest wines, to feed our smallest child or the royalty of the world. It enhances our clothes and our bodies, yet performs tasks and labors in countless ways. It may reflect our wealth and importance, or merely be the humble servant of an ordinary worker. Silver reflects the pride and honor of ancestors; the passing down of heirloom treasures, reflecting our love of those before, of their gifts.

Silver was long believed to have magical powers. Its glow could keep away evil. It was used to bless the new, whether a crop, a birthing, a marriage. The bridegroom carried a

silver cross, and the bride's head and heart were adorned in delicate, tinkling silver. It was believed to have healing properties for mind or body, from snake bite to injury. It has always been used in religious buildings, ceremonies, and articles. Adding silver to church bells made a sweeter, clearer gong. Silver was believed to have a superior power over lead. Warriors armed with silver bullets and silver shields, were invincible against ordinary weapons. Silver was added to the wooden handle of a knife and its leather sheath, worn at the waist. Old ones in the sick bed might give a watch or clock of silver to a young boy, a brooch to a girl. A soldier carried a silver button, ring or cross from his home into battle, and it would be returned there, even if by another. Silver respects the spirit of the people, and has played an important role in the social, economic and religious lives of our ancestors and of us today.

Those who were gifted in this craft were held in high esteem. The magical powers associated with its workmanship, from the mundane to the glorious, set these craftsmen slightly apart.

No district of Norway has had such a rich "farm" silver history as Upper Telemark. Silver is by no means isolated to this area, but in the variety, originality, and quality of workmanship in the "farm" or rural silver craft, Upper Telemark is known as having a remarkable position. (City or "cosmopolitan" silver art is a separate subject, and carries its own uniqueness, triumphs, and artists, which I am not addressing here.) The early "farmers", the inhabitants of this rugged and wild part of southern Norway, were able to work their own magic with this particular ore. They were able to translate the variety, beauty, and uniqueness of their mountain home into their craft. The Telemarkens accepted the silverwork and styles of the larger outside world, but gave them their own personal, and distinctive Upper Telemark identity.

Silver is traceable in Norway from the Viking Age (900's). Gold was used only by the well-to-do or royalty, but silver was found throughout Norway among the peasants and rich alike, even believed to have surpassed other countries of the time in its wide-spread use. Silversmithing was a regulated craft by 1314, but in 1491 a standard was set to insure 14 parts out of 16 parts would be pure silver ore. These proportions varied slightly over the centuries, but a 12 part standard was the average stipulation found up to the 18th century. Guilds were formed by the 1300's, and strictly enforced the rules of licensing and taxing, until 1839 when the guild rights were abolished. Silversmithing was generally an urban craft, maybe including apprenticing or training from abroad. It was forbidden by law to work as a craftsman outside of the specific city or district which licensed (or collected taxes from) each craftsman. Some craftsmen ignored this restriction. Some did have the right to work where they chose because they paid duty to the nearest town as citizens, or because they had been in the military, and were thus given a special privilege. Local silversmiths were not allowed to flourish until after 1839. The first officially recorded silversmith in Telemark was named Holm, in the town of Skien in 1391.

The Kongsberg mines provided the main supply of ore to the Upper Telemark region. The attempts by tax collectors to monitor the flow of silver were not always successful. Raw materials were difficult to trace. The stamping of each craftsman's identifying mark

was another means of tracing, enforcing the laws of the time. Many a rural and urban silversmith ignored the stamping of their work, maybe for their own purposes. This increases our difficulty in identifying particular objects to a specific artist.

The late 1600's and early 1700's were a time of Danish rule in Norway. The government encouraged craftsmen of all skills to come to Norway and establish themselves. The fact that this would increase revenues for the government is balanced with the conclusion that this brought craftsmen from all over Europe to the shores of Norway and introduced the styles and techniques from a wider range.

Jewelry was an important part of festivals, including marriages. The headdress, crowns, buttons and clasps, buckles on shoes, belts, and coats, chains worn around the neck or across the chest, watch chains, and brooches were elaborate. Particular designs were favored for generations, using variations in locales and trends. Animal shapes and heads were favored in early designs. An early filigree circular brooch topped with writhing worms or snakes tightly interwoven was found in Norway, and dated back to 940. The ring-shaped and heart-shaped brooches were well known everywhere in western Europe during the Middle Ages. In Norway the ring-shaped brooch was used all over the country, by rich and poor. It was made of silver or baser metals, in different designs, and remains popular today. The heart-shaped brooch became popular in the 18th century. Both styles were often enhanced with engraved leaves, royal monograms, delicate chains, etc. Early specimens resembled the warrior's solid shield, cast with raised decorations. The "bolesølje" style has six "roundels" (a separate, circular piece) with cast additions, usually of lions or birds and crowned heads, and is found only in Norway and dates back at least to the 14th century .

The rose-brooch is a filigree brooch known from medieval discoveries in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway. A girdle (belt) of leather or cloth, covered with silver mountings is of old European style, as is the use of silver buckles. The snake or serpent design was very popular for centuries. A ring or solid circle brooch decorated to resemble barley corn or grain, was also popular from the Middle Ages.

The more modern filigree work known today was added to or replaced the roundels in an "open-work" style, without the solid "shield" under the filigree. This modern, delicate filigree work was well established in Europe long before it became popular in Norway during the 1700's. It was not of Norwegian origin, despite well established oral traditions. Filigree work flourished in Holland, France, England, Denmark, and throughout Europe. It found it's way into Norway, into the urban centers and seaports by the late 1600's, most likely from these same "imported" craftsmen.

Credited with bringing this newer filigree into Upper Telemark by 1720 are Jens Erland of Copenhagen (and Holland?) and Mikkel Mandt. They settled in Telemark, and for over 40 years produced and created and influenced the styles of silver art affecting all aspects of daily life. They both specialized in filigree work, and are responsible for it spreading onto the bole-brooch, rose-brooch, the buttons, clasps, buckles, etc. of this region. Jens and Mikkel both at times ignored the necessary stamping to identify their work. Jens, and his son Søren are known for the "Erland

Button", the "Søren brooch", drinking cups or bowls, and their fine filigree work. In 1706 Jens Erland applied for a grant to open a silver workshop in Skien. In 1725 he moved to Kviteseid, although it was then illegal for him to practice his craft outside of the city of Skien. A chalice was found in the Kviteseid church dating from 1749 made by Jens. Jens left behind several generations of Erland silversmiths in Telemark. Søren Erland lived and worked in Tinn.

Mikkel Mandt was born in Denmark in 1692, and came to Kristiansand, Norway by 1700. By 1717 Mikkel was licensed in Kristiansand as a silversmith, and five years later in Skien as a silversmith and watchmaker. Mikkel obtained a position as "underofficer" in the military. Mikkel moved to Vinje by 1747, and making use of his military standing, he continued crafting silver in Upper Telemark. He was to become a well-respected man of the community, serving as lensmann, and church klokker. He mostly made buttons, buckles, chains, and bracelets with the filigree design. He would sell his items outside of the church, catching the eye of the worshippers returning to their farms (Rikard Berge), similar to a current "open market." A 1751 drinking cup with a handle and a lid, stamped with one of Mikkel's stamps was found in the 1980's. It is a footed cup, adorned with leaves or feathers, resembling the rosemaling style of Telemark. It was evidently a wedding gift to Jens Evensen Kraft and Anne Marie Moss of Kongsberg. Jens had been an officer in the same military regiment as Mikkel. A few of Mikkel's items are on display at the Lårdal Bygdemuseum in Eidsborg. Mikkel Mandt had two personal stamps, one a "ML" above another "M"; and another of "MM." He was known to be a true artist, and a perfectionist concerning his work. He taught his four sons, Engelbret, Petter Kristian, Olav and Rasmus, the silver trade, and possibly others, too. Engelbret apprenticed to Ole Olsen of Kragerø, and eventually took over that business. He traveled abroad, gathering raw materials, selling his work. His fascinating story is told by Olav Solberg's 1989 *Historik Beskrivelse Over Øvre Telemarken by Engelbret Michaelsen Resen Mandt*. Petter Kristian, Olav and Rasmus were all engaged in silvercraft within Telemark, and artists in their own right, although they did not confine their livelihoods to silver alone. More can be found of them in my "The Mandt's of Telemark," (1996), and other sources. Mikkel's daughter Gjertrud Marie married a silversmith Franz Cudrio of Kragerø. The oldest spoon in the Lårdal Bygdemuseum is one made by Franz Cudrio.

The silver trade was handed down to several generations of Mandt descendants. Eivind Tveiten, descended from Rasmus Mikkelson Mandt, was one the most skilled. He was born at the Tveiten farm in Eidsborg in 1887. He received several national medals, and recognition for his talent and skills. In 1927 a full set of Eivind's bunad silver was chosen for Crown Princess Märthe. In 1968, he and his wife Hæge, presented a full set of his bunad silver to the Norsk Folkemuseum to represent Upper Telemark silver. His complete workshop is on display in the Lårdal Bygdemuseum in Eidsborg, Norway. Today you can shop in the jewelry store of yet another descendant, Trygve Dalen, in Dalen, Norway.

I have failed to mention many other known and gifted Telemark craftsmen, including probably more from our family, and maybe some who are working somewhere in Norway, Canada, or America today, but the information is available for those interested.

Please don't limit yourself by my personal whims and choices. There is much, much more to read about this fascinating subject. A good place to start is Jorunn Fossberg's *Draktsølv*, 1991, and *Norske Sølvstempler*, 1994; "Sølv og Gyllenlær I Telemark" June 1981, an article by Ragnhild Hagen; and *Sylvsmeden Eivind G. Tveiten* by Aagot Noss, 1970; Rikard Berge writings, and many other articles and books about Telemark and silver. Photos of Mikkel's work can be found in these sources. These are the sources I have used for this work.

Whether the silver our ancestors and others hammered and shaped was hulder silver or merely an ore formed by the earth's elements and time, it truly is the "silver thread woven through the culture of Telemark for a thousand years!"

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Mange tusen takk to Kristoffer Mandt, Eidsborg