

# Wooden Shoes | A Tulip Time Tradition



The traditional wooden clog associated with the Dutch has been used in Europe since the Middle Ages. They are still used today in the Low Countries, and especially on the marshy ground of Holland. Besides being affordable and practical, wooden shoes became an art form in the Netherlands, where shoes were created for all occasions. From Sunday “church clogs” to intricately carved bridal shoes, wooden shoes have been carved and hand-painted for generations and remain a strong part of Dutch cultural history. At one time, shoes from each province had their own unique characteristics, so it was easy to tell from which area of the country they had originated.

There has always been an abundance of water in the Netherlands, and so the making of wooden clogs was a necessary chore of the farm, along with making butter, baking bread and smoking bacon. After 1870, with the growth of large agricultural enterprises and an expanding population, the number of professional clog-makers increased. Tens of thousands of clog factories sprung up in each province to meet the demand for this popular and useful article. Today you can still see wooden shoes used in fishing and farming industries in Holland.

Originally, the Dutch used willow trees for their shoes. The willow was abundant and the wood was soft enough to carve. As the willow trees were used and had to be replanted, it became necessary to find a faster-growing substitute. Canadian poplar became the tree of choice and has become a common sight in the Netherlands. The wooden shoe carvers of today still use poplar, which has a tough grain, is lightweight, has little odor and yet is easily carved. An average tree produces enough wood for 75 pairs of clogs.

There are still some places in Europe where one can see wooden shoes being made by hand, but most are now processed by machine. Creating a clog by hand is the work of skilled artisans. Fresh wood is used and divided into discs or “bollen”. From this disc 4 to 8 clogs are made, depending on the size of the piece. Using a hammer and a “kloofbeitel” or splitting chisel, the clog-maker cuts each chunk of wood into a rough shoe. Using a “paalmes” or pole-knife, he shapes the heel, toe-bit, cap and beak of the shoe. From an identical piece of wood he creates a mirror image of the first shoe, striking a pair. Next the shoe is clamped onto a carving pole and hollowed out using a “bodemmes” (bottom-knife), “hakhaak” (heel-hook) and “krulmes” (beveled knife). The pair of wooden shoes are then finished by hand and hung up in the shade to dry. It takes 2-3 hours, typically, to make one pair of wooden shoes.

Plain, carved or painted, wooden shoes still abound in the Netherlands as symbols of the agricultural and festive heritage of that land.

*Information provided by Herrick District Library (04/2010)  
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