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Woodcarving in Boston

Woodworkers in Boston were interested in revival styles for their overtones of good taste and ruling-class nostalgia. Boston became a center of woodcarving around the turn of the century. Some of the leaders were immigrants who had learned their trade in the old country. Ionannes (John) Kirchmeyer (1860-1930), born in Bavaria, worked for decorating firms in New York and Boston. He became one of the most skilled carvers of the Gothic Revival (see Ch. 3). Some painters, such as Charles Prendergast and Giovanni Troccoli, were drawn to woodcarving because they wanted to make their own picture frames.

There were also inspired amateurs. **Molly Coolidge Perkins** (1881-1962) studied sculpture and decorative design at Boston's Museum School and then took up woodcarving. She exhibited her work at the early Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (SACB) exhibitions and later was honored as a Master Craftsman. Although she remained a member of the SACB until 1927, she dropped out of the public sphere after she was married in 1905. She carved furniture by local cabinetmakers and installed it in her house. She also carved objects as gifts for family and friends. Like many women who avoided the professional routine of exhibitions and sales, she was largely ignored for years, but was rediscovered in the 1980s.

The most unusual Boston woodcarver was **Leander Plummer** (1857-1914). Although educated as a mining engineer at Harvard, he studied painting at the Académie Julian in Paris and then woodcarving with Scandinavian carver Karl von Rydingsvärd. At home in New Bedford, he made carved furniture in the 1890s. Around the turn of the century, Plummer started carving fish. Typically, he would work on panels in deep relief and carve in remarkable detail fish leaping out of stylized waves, everything stained in naturalistic colors. (Plummer called his panels "relief paintings.") He made plaster casts of fish to study their forms and had fish pens built so he could observe their movements and changing color. Observers related Plummer's manner of rendering water to Japanese carving and noted a spiritual connection. To the modern eye, the juxtaposition between the realistic fish and the decorative waves is a bit jarring, but Plummer's studied realism and graceful stylization are unique. He is thought to have carved 40 or 50 panels.¹

ⁱ Relatively little scholarship exists on Perkins and Plummer. See Marilee Boyd Meyer, consulting curator, *Inspiring Reform: Boston's Arts and Crafts Movement*. Wellesley, Mass.: David Museum and Cultural Center, 1997, pp. 55-56, 168-69, and 227 (Perkins) and pp. 56, 168-69 and 228 (Plummer).