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Film paper

Cutting a box hedge with a sickle

An intangible cultural heritage

ABSTRACT

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has identified craft as an intangible cultural heritage in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The nature of this cultural heritage is that it must be practiced by living craftspeople to endure, and when it is performed by very few, it can be seen as endangered. This research, funded by the Carl-Göran Adelswärds Foundation, is a documentation of such a craft: cutting a box hedge with a sickle. At the same time, in this study, a master–apprentice situation was staged in order to safeguard this traditional craft and pass it on to new craftspeople. The core elements of this learning procedure are imitation and feedback. This specific craft is an ancient tradition with very few living practitioners. The garden in which this endangered craft is still practiced is Castello Ruspoli, created in 1611, when sickles were still used for cutting box hedge hedges. Thanks to the restoration and preservation by the current owners, it is one of the most well-preserved gardens from that time. One of the reasons this garden is so special is the way it is cared for by the gardener, Santino Garbuglia, using traditional craft methods that this film article will investigate and show. The author argues that some traditional gardening methods should be considered intangible cultural heritages and safeguarded as such.

Keywords:

intangible cultural heritage, craft, clipping box hedge, historic gardens, heritage gardening.

INTRODUCTION

The field of intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding practices is relatively new. As stated by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the

knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts” (UNESCO, 2023a). Thus, the study of intangible cultural heritage is new, and within this field, the domain of traditional crafts is only a small part. In this context, UNESCO describes craft in the following way: “Traditional craftsmanship is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. However, the 2003 Convention is mainly concerned with the skills and knowledge involved in craftsmanship rather than the craft products themselves” (UNESCO, 2023b). I share this focus.

To consider traditional gardening craft methods as intangible cultural heritages and to safeguard these traditions are new challenges. This study starts to explore the craft of gardening as an intangible cultural heritage and how it can be safeguarded. I argue that some traditional gardening methods should be considered intangible cultural heritages and safeguarded as such.

The nature of craft as an intangible cultural heritage is such that it cannot be preserved in museum collections or archives. Instead, it must be practiced by living craftspeople to endure. As soon as the last practitioner of a specific craft dies, that craft should be removed from the list of intangible cultural heritages, according to UNESCO’s instructions (UNESCO, 2003). When a craft is practiced by very few practitioners, it can be seen as endangered—at risk of being extinct. This research is a documentation of such an endangered craft: the craft of cutting a box hedge with a sickle. At the same time, in this study, a master–apprentice situation was staged in order to safeguard this traditional craft and pass it on to new craftspeople. In this situation, Swedish gardeners were the apprentices that observed the practices of the master, Santino Garbuglia, and listened to his explanations. The apprentices imitated his practices, and the master then examined the practices of the apprentices and provided feedback. The core elements of this learning procedure were imitation and feedback.

This craft is an ancient tradition with very few living practitioners. According to historical research, hedges were cut with sickles until the 15th century, when gardens with more intricate hedge ornaments developed and hedge shears were invented (Wimmer, 2012, p. 117). The practice of clipping a box hedge with a sickle is mentioned scarcely in the sources that I have found in my research. However, several sources mention using pruning hooks and hedge slashers to clip higher hedges in Sweden (Fjäderhane & Arvidsson, 1963, p. 29; Karling, 1970, p. 122, footnote 15; Lundström, 1833, p. 19; Müller, 1857, p. 63).

The garden in which this endangered craft is still practiced is Castello Ruspoli, created in 1611, when sickles were still used to cut box hedge hedges. This garden is described in the following way by the current owners:

The garden, considered one of the most important in Italy, was created in 1611. Marcantonio Marescotti (3rd Earl of Vignanello and Parrano) was married to Ottavia Orsini, daughter of Vicino Orsini, creator of the sacred garden of Bomarzo. She planned and supervised the creation of the Renaissance Garden parterre of Castello Ruspoli. Thanks to the restoration and preservation promoted by the family, it is known in Europe as one of the most well-preserved gardens of that time. (Castello Ruspoli, 2023)

One of the reasons this garden is so special is the way it is cared for by the gardener, Santino Garbuglia, using traditional methods. It is not technically perfect but retains its character, partly due to the craft that Garbuglia has practiced in the garden for 40 years. The craft itself contributes significantly to the experience when visiting the garden.



FIGURE 1. The parterre of Castello Ruspoli, cultivated entirely with a sickle by the gardener, Santino Garbuglia. Photo: Joakim Seiler (2022).

THEORY AND METHOD

The American pragmatist John Dewey introduced the concept of learning by doing, which has been fundamental for craft research (Dewey 1934/2015, pp. 63–94). The concept of the reflective practitioner was developed by the philosopher Donald Schön and incorporates reflection on action and reflection in action (Schön, 1983, p. 26). These concepts contextualize and shed light on what craft and intangible cultural heritage might encapsulate and have been the theoretical foundations of my craft research.

To document and analyze a craft and not only the objects produced by that craft and to reflect on my own practice, these theoretical concepts led me to use a video in this study. Previous examples of using videos as tools for craft research are found in Camilla Groth (2017), Wuon-Gean Ho (2021), Fernström et al. (2021), and Seiler et al. (2021), to name a few.

The researcher Wuon-Gean Ho has explored how videos can be constructed to reveal tacit knowledge within a craft. She concludes that “constructed scenarios might convey more than real-time truthful indexical footage” (Ho, 2021). I agree that this might be true if both the maker and viewer of the video are craftspeople with experience with that specific craft. To others, the videos would not demystify or reveal craft practices. In my understanding, Ho does not try to make the viewer understand craft practice; instead, she constructs the film to make the viewer feel like the craftspeople.

Fernström et al. have used filmmaking as part of craft studies and narrative exploration. They “explore the opportunities to transmit multisensory experiences via short films” (Fernström et al., 2021, p. 1). Both Ho and Fernström et al. have shown a methodological interest in video and experimented with new ways of using it.

My own filming has been more straightforward. I investigate the question of how conventional filming can contribute to safeguarding gardening craft as an intangible cultural heritage. For craftspeople, my videos can act as reminders of how it feels to perform a practice and provide other visual

perspectives on the practice. When you are engaged in crafting, you feel it and see it from the inside; when you see a video, you also get the external perspective. To use a concept of Tim Ingold, the craftsperson has a “dwelling perspective”—dwelling within the practice (Ingold, 2000, p. 5). My method builds on autoethnography, the craft research of Camilla Growth, and her use of video to analyze her own craft practice and embodied knowledge (Growth, 2017, pp. 43–47).

In my thesis, I described the use of video in the following way: “In order to combine these two positions and sources of information (the practitioner making research from the inside and the researcher observing practice from the outside), I started to record think aloud accounts” (Seiler, 2020, p. 61). This was also the method in the present study. The filmmaker and the practitioners have a conversation with the aim of revealing information that is not obvious in the visual documentation.

THE CRAFT

During a workshop in May 2022 with three Swedish gardeners (including myself) acting as apprentices and Santino Garbuglia serving as the master, many details about the craft were discovered and documented. For Garbuglia, most of these lessons were obvious and nothing worth speaking about, but for gardeners working in another tradition with different tools, these details are significant.

The sickles used by Garbuglia looked like our grass sickles. They were made of soft steel and sharpened by first being peened with a hammer and anvil and then sharpened with a whetstone. Garbuglia showed us the peening on an anvil that we had never seen before, but he did not show us the sharpening with the whetstone. Presumably, this was done in the way that a scythe is sharpened with a whetstone in this part of Europe, a technique we know.

Some aspects recalled our experiences with box hedge clipping. One was that the gardeners at Castello Ruspoli cut until they reach the old cut from last year. They say that one cannot do it wrong: you get support from the old clipping; old, harder plant material; and strong shape. When one instead uses a power tool, it is possible to cut in the wrong shape and take too much. The old plant material guides the present clipping.

We asked what the important features of the clipping technique were. Garbuglia replied, “Forte—it must be done with some power.” When he was clipping the box hedge, he stood diagonally and not too close to the hedge to avoid hitting himself with the sickle, as can be seen in the film. Alternatively, he stood with one leg on each side of the hedge. He also used the tool both ways: he could cut forwards and backwards, but always upwards on the sides of the hedges and not from above downwards. It is easier to cut in the morning when there is some dew, as we learned from Garbuglia.

Was it easy to get the right shape? The old growth supported the shape and the clipping, so it was not too hard to find the right shape. It was formed based on the feel, not on visual observation. This is a significant departure from how we work in many other historic gardens, including Gunnebo House, where we always assess lines visually. Garbuglia said that because you find resistance from the old growth, you cannot go wrong.

To attempt the craft with the tradition-bearer Garbuglia present provided an embodied experience of safety. If we did anything incorrect, he would correct us. This is a significant difference from trying a craft on one’s own. Practicing with this specific tool, the sickle, felt quite similar to working with other single-bladed tools as opposed to, for example, manual hedge shears with two blades. With two blades, you have one for clipping and one for resistance. This tool design enables you to move the tool slowly and still cut the plant material. This is a significant departure from single-bladed tools, where you have to find another source of resistance than a second blade. The resistance with this tool comes from the controlled movement of one’s body, which is directed at limiting the movement of the tool, and there is also resistance from the plant material.

The practice, the making, is vital for knowledge development. The feeling of making, to begin with, induced great anxiety, as we, the apprentices, were afraid of cutting wrong and doing harm to this beautiful garden. But when we turned to Garbuglia and saw his confidence and relaxed way of working, it also gave us confidence in our own practice. The master was present, and the previous year’s clipping

of the hedges supported the present clipping. This situation supported or almost forced us into a position where little could go wrong.



FIGURE 2. The master–apprentice situation: Swedish gardeners learning from Santino Garbuglia, head gardener at Castello Ruspoli. Photo: Joakim Seiler (2022).



VIDEO 1. This video, titled *The intangible cultural heritage: Clipping a box hedge with a sickle*, is a vital part of this study. To watch the video, click the picture or this link: <https://bicc.s.dh.gu.se/2023/25-2023/1>

CONCLUSION: SAFEGUARDING THIS INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

How can this traditional craft, which can be considered an intangible cultural heritage, be safeguarded for the future? The first step in this process is to recognize its value. The owner of Castello Ruspali recognized that the head gardener, Santino Garbuglia, did something of interest to other gardeners, who came from as far away as Sweden to study his craft. Garbuglia's craft was considered valuable to these visitors, and this had some influence on the owner's view on this matter. Both the owner and the younger gardener, Mariano, agreed that after Garbuglia, the working tools should change from sickles to ordinary manual hedge shears. In this respect, we came to study the very end of a tradition, like an ethnologist collecting disappearing customs in the early 20th century. However, our intentions were not to see the end but to become tradition-bearers of Garbuglia's craft and contribute to safeguarding it. Of course, we could not fully learn the craft in a few hours, but we could document it and grasp the basics. After the workshop with Garbuglia, we could make progress in this craft by practicing more on our own.

When the research trip was planned, the whole safeguarding process was not known; it still is not. Yet we now face new dilemmas. I have found no historical sources describing clipping box hedges with a sickle in Sweden. In my previous research, I have found numerous sources that mention the use of pruning hooks and hedge slashers to clip higher hedges in Sweden, from Andre Mollet in 1648 to Fjäderhane and Arvidsson in 1963 (Fjäderhane & Arvidsson, 1963, p. 29; Karling, 1970, p. 122, footnote 15; Lundström, 1833, p. 19; Müller, 1857, p. 63; see also Seiler, 2020, pp. 148–156, where a thorough discussion of the relevant sources is presented).

However, these hooks and slashers were used with higher hedges. This is one of the dilemmas: how and where shall we safeguard the craft of clipping a box hedge with a sickle? My research indicates that the introduction of box hedges into Sweden and the invention of manual hedge shears took place around the early 17th century. If this is true, the tradition of clipping box hedges with sickles was never practiced in Sweden. Historically, the sickle has mainly been used on grass and grains in the Nordic countries. If the practice of cutting box hedges with sickles could be preserved in Sweden, it would be the right tool on the wrong plant material. One could argue that the imprint of the tool on the plant

material is part of the cultural heritage; the practice, tool, and plant material are all intimately connected as part of a cultural context.

So, how shall we address this dilemma today? Shall Swedish gardeners safeguard a tradition in Sweden that was never practiced here before? Where can we find a garden in Sweden where we would be allowed to practice this craft? The result would communicate the gardening history of Italy, not Sweden. The most credible suggestion for safeguarding is to continue to practice this specific craft in the garden at Castello Ruspoli, which has been shaped by this craft for a very long time. The craft tradition has contributed to the creation of the cultural–historical value of the garden day by day and year by year through the work of the gardener, Garbuglia, and the gardeners before him. Let us contribute to continuing this tradition in this garden!



FIGURE 3. The master, Santino Garbuglia, showing his craft: clipping a box hedge with a sickle. Photo from a video filmed by Sara Gyllestrand (2022).

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