

It's spring and my grandfather has won the lottery. He is one of those people who from the outside appears to have constant luck. -Let's go to the shop and buy whatever you want, he says. His hand is crunching the ticket. I open the door with squares of multi coloured glass, and we step into the mild day. The calm breeze lifts my grandfather's white hair and I wonder what it would be like to stroke it.

My grandfather and grandmother's house sits right by the ocean, close to the local harbour. I've been to the harbour many times, for my mom and dad has a boat there that we use for vacationing during the summer. Once, we hit a skerry. My mom and dad had to put on their life jackets, but we weren't supposed to be scared until she was. She had grown up on boats and probably could have swam us all to shore if she had to.

(this first memory should be featured in both English and Norwegian)

Boats, not tupperware

If you grew up close to water, you might not be surprised to hear that the field of neuroscience shows that there are great benefits to being near, in, on or under water (Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, 2014). The ocean's rhythmic motions and powerful essence can embrace you if you let it, and along with the smell of salt and seaweed comes stress relief and a happier mind. In fact, it has been proven that water makes you better at what you do (Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, 2014). The man of which this book is about, lived long before the ocean became a medicine for anxiety. Yet he was certainly good at what he did. My grandfather's father, and his father before that, made boats for transporting goods down the river, and my grandfather effectively grew up learning about wood. He made his first boat at 15, which became the catalyst for a life of observing, crafting and understanding the ways of how a boat moves through water.

Unfortunately my kind and loving grandfather passed away when I was young, before any of us knew the pathway which my own life would take. I therefor wonder wether or not it was coincidental that I would embark on an education in graphic design, a modern craft that could be seen as an extension of my family heritage. Could perhaps the love for water, physical material and craftsmanship be part of my families blood, resulting in it being passed down, at times without us realising it?

I remember the look of my grandfather's brown glassed coffee cups, and I remember the way his hallway smelled of tobacco roll up cigarets. Fractions of memories from a child's understanding of her family's being. Yet, up until now, I've know little about his craft and those areas of his life that did not revolve around a grandchild. By means, this project has become a way of connecting with him as an adult, based on conversations with my family and those familiar with his practice. Since embarking on the writing of this text, I have come to realise that he was in fact an inspiring man who should be looked to for guidance, even if it means to look at his boats. His approach to the overwhelming craft of boat building is astonishing and in this text I hope to share my inspiration with others, hoping it will cultivate their own creative practice, by making them trust, slow down and believe in their abilities.

The value of observation

To me, Odd Johnsen was a grandfather. To the outside world, and perhaps to himself, he was a craftsman. He spent his life perfecting the techniques in his practice, starting with the act of observation (Iren Johnsen, 2021). His childhood years were spent at his father's studio, learning the ins and outs of working with natural wooden materials. Without any formal education, Johnsen looked to the ocean for knowledge. He carefully observed the way a boat forces it's way through powerful waves and at 15 he created his first boat (Iren Johnsen, 2021). To make a boat by hand

demands a certain level of engineering skill, which must have come naturally to Johnson after a childhood spent amongst wood workers (Iren Johnsen, 2021). He started with small boats, and through years of devoted practice, Johnston went to develop functionally designed templates from which he would build large boats by hand (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

Through his career, Johnston established a good reputation for himself, with boats called Johnsen crossers (Iren Johnsen, 2021). A Johnsen crosser can be recognised by its attentively crafted *krysserhekk* (Trond Birkeland, 2021), a distinctiveness seen on certain boats where the helm is hidden under the surface and the afterdeck is directed upwards (Wikipedia, 2021). They are harmonious boats, often large in scale and clinker built (Trond Birkeland, 2021). The Johnsen crossers' hulls are made from oak, pine or Oregon pine. Its interior and top structure from the warmer timber of mahogany. (*Perhaps I could analyse further here, inspired by Cereal article, as I receive photos to build an analysis on?*)

During his career, Johnsen worked in a studio situated where the river from inland meets the ocean. Inside his studio there was an oppressive heat, due to the hot steam used to curve wooden planks into the form of a hull (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Smells of linseed oil and salty water mixed with the rhythmic sound of waves as they hit the brew, made his workplace one of nature, sitting right at the core of his craft itself. For most of his career, Johnsen worked alone. By himself, he built 30 feet long boats by hand, which he after their finish put to sea by himself (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Johnsen developed a unique rolling and tilting technique, which goes to show his ability to take on a project of scale without the overwhelmingness that so often follows (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

Being a creative today, who's work mainly springs out from digital software, it is hard to imagine how one might approach a craft of such scale like Johnsen's. As he set boats 5 times the length of his body to sea by himself, he tackled a problem beyond any I have ever dared to come close, simply through the act of observation, creativity and devotion. He must have had the ability I lack, of taking one day at a time. Johnsen's motto was "It's the steady that pulls", meaning "Slow and steady wins the race" (Iren Johnsen, 2021), a saying that is easier said than done. As I look back at his life, I cannot help to think that this motto must have been what got him through the years of learning which he spent, as he attempted to understand the relationship between boat and ocean.

Johnsen's faithfulness to nature

Ever since his early days at his father's studio, and up until he stopped working in 1989, Johnsen preferred to work with wooden materials. Wood is what he knew, and so when plastic boats came along, he developed a slogan that has become his trademark amongst my family: *Wood is for boats, plastic is for tupperware.*

With the practicality that plastic provided, I wonder what held him back from changing material focus. Did he simply prefer the timelessness and nostalgia that came with wood and the idea of what has been shall be? For as plastic has only been around the last hundred years, wood is an ancient invention, and in fact an essential building block for life as we know it on earth. As the tree absorbs our sighs of breath, it provides us with fresh air, and by effect, it gives us with the opportunity of life. Trees can outgrow human crises, and even the lifespan of humans at that. The tree's ability to move at such a slow, yet steady pace could perhaps be seen as a resemblance to the motto of Johnston on steady pulling.

Even after it's been chopped, a tree continues to live as it reacts to its contrasting natural forces, like water and temperature. Wood does not naturally curve at the wish of its craftsman. It needs to be steamed and bended with the force of clamps. A great deal of patience is also needed for the timber to slowly give in and embrace the shape of one of many pieces, which will later come together to create a functional curve. Of course, untreated wood reacts to water, so a wooden boat

builder will have to oil the wood several time, so that the oil can force it's way all through the other side of the wood.

The wood oriented furniture designer, George Nakashima, firmly believed that trees have a soul (Matthew Johnsen, Ca. 2010-2021), and by using wood, he felt that he got the closest to intimacy with nature as one could (George Nakashima Woodworkers, Ca. 2010-2021). Johnsen might have had a slightly more pragmatic view on the material, as his interest for it most likely sprung out from knowledge (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Wood was the familiar and therefor the rational choice. It was what his family had been using for generations. Yet, as Johnsen chose boats over tupperware, he, perhaps without realising it, chose to be connected to nature, both through in terms of materials and through the context of boats: the ocean itself. As Johnsen did everything by hand, one might also say that his very nature became part of the boats he crafted.

A question of value

As I discuss the boat builder's connection to nature and the meditative mind that might follow when being close to water, I think it is important to mention that the life of a wood boat builder at Johnsen's time, was not always as associated with ease. The handling of large scaled material meant a lot of heavy lifting and the scope of each project meant long work days. Yet, my family describes him as a calm man who constantly whistled as he patiently tended to his boats (Iren Johnsen, 2021). According to my aunt, his presence was so calming a stray cat started visiting his studio, and after a while, the cat would sit on his shoulder as he was working (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

As plastic boats came along, I find it hard to believe that he refused to shift focus solely due to being conservatively focused on staying connected to his family roots and knowledge. Could there be something else that appealed to Johnsen as a maker, or perhaps also to his customers? Trond Birkeland, a boat builder working in Oslo today, seems to believe that wooden boats appeal to emotions, rather than solely to function (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). The motor of a wooden boat has a rhythmic beat to it, much like the ocean itself, which sound is lowered by the wood as it protects it's visitor from the ocean's otherwise harsh thrusts (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). On a wooden boat, we are forced to embrace a slower pace of life. The boat is not made to travel with speed, but rather with ease. Could it be that this slow pace, which seems to be a red thread through everything that has to do with wooden boats, is the reason why people love and care for wooden boats even today?

When we are in close proximity to water, the part of our mind that processes memories is triggered (Shweta Venkatramani, 2018). This might explain why Johnsen kept working with wood, even after the emerge and normalisation of plastic boats. If we have stronger memories of that which connects to water, we might also want to keep water related phenomenons as they have always been. With wooden boats comes the memories of our parents and grandparents on their wooden boats, from a point in time where we ourselves only had to tackle the simple difficulties of a child's life (Trond Birkeland, 2021). As the sun warms our skin and the smell of gass fills the salty air, we are taken back to the many times we've felt that exact thing before. We embrace the nostalgia, and by doing so, we might also hope for things to be as they were back then, holding on to what we can still control. The wooden boat does not only become a boat for those who enjoy a slower pace, but in fact for those who wishes for time to stop completely.

Through his hand made approach, Johnsen created beautiful boats, that would go on to evoke emotions, not only in his customers at the time, but in the generations to come. And so I wonder, in this fast paced digital age, are we being prohibited from achieving what Johnsen so beautifully has achieved, as we restrain from embracing the slow and taking the time to create true value?

A poetic mirroring of the ocean

As people, we have the whole world at our fingertips. Yet the fewest of us chooses to leave the familiar environments of home. Like salmon, we might stray off for a moment or two, but for most of us there is always something pulling us back. Something spiritual, or maybe just the simple reason of comfort, which comes with living in a familiar space. Boats became a huge part of Johnsen's four daughters' upbringing (Iren Johnsen, 2021). He himself had spent his childhood at and by the ocean, and so both he and his daughters always felt a strong connection to it (Iren Johnsen, 2021). I myself have started to feel this attraction as well, as I surround myself with the environment a fast paced big city.

There seems to be something about the water that forces a restraint from control. It's bigger than life ability can swallow you whole if visited in a storm, yet it can give new life if visited when you're at you're worst. It steals your ability to decide for yourself, and so you're forced to meet life as it strikes. Essentially, a boat can be seen a tool for those who wants, or in fact needs, to be in proximity to water. And should not the boat then also be in control of you, in order to appeal to those in awe of the forces the ocean portrays? Observing the large scale wooden boats of Johnsen, I can not help but think that they do that exact thing.

Although it might not have been created with that intention, the rhythmic sounds of the motor, as well as the movement of a wooden boat in it's water, is poetically in line with how the ocean behaves and moves to that same rhythmic beat. The wooden boat does not plow through waves, in the way we humans so often do as we take on nature as our counterpart, rather than ally. The boat moves in harmony, subtly mirroring it's powerful medium, like a passenger along for the ride. Never does it attempt to become the ocean's master.

You won't know before you've tried

"We think of our father with pride and a lot of him lives on through us: his work ethic, his urge to create and of course, his sense of humor. We have inherited his ability to believe in ourselves, which has led to us not being afraid. He has given us gumption and due to him we have become more independent than most women" (Iren Johnsen, 2021).

An affection for the ocean was not the only thing my grandfather passed on to the next generation. I have already mentioned two of his mottos, "It's the steady that pulls" and "Wood is boats, plastic is tupperware". I am about to mention a third, perhaps the most inspiring of the three: "You don't know if you can before you've tried".

This sentence clearly shines through every part of Johnsen's work, from his ability to build a boat business from scratch without any prior knowledge, to his use of materials and form. His practice began with small boats, but by embracing the unknown, Johnsen developed design templates which he cut out of card board and used to create the shape of the boat's groundwork. As one spectates his work, it's clear that his ability to embark on unfamiliar routes lead to results much larger that he must have imagined as he crafted his first small wooden boat in his father's studio at 15.

What now?

To Johnsen, boat building was an occupation above anything else, as it is not until recent years that boat building has been recognised as culture and the craft it is (Iren Johnsen, 2021). Yet, as a craftsman I do imagine him having a wish for his boats to live on after him. Most of his boats are still around today (Iren Johnsen, 2021) and with the right care, a wooden boat will go on to live forever (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). It must be set to sea early in the spring, to keep the wood from cracking (Iren Johnsen, 2021) and as the boat season comes to an end in autumn, the boat must be taken up early enough for it to dry before the first freeze (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020).

Sanding and varnishing must be performed regularly, in line with the regular rhythm of so many of the wooden boat associations discussed up until now.

As kin, it comforts me to think that my grandfather's motions, creativity and spirit lives on as new generations attracted to sea, lets him make his way through the unconditional ocean through the act of transportation. In a way, he got the chance at a second life, and if the boats are properly tended to, he might be able to live forever. And isn't it the creative's dream to have a piece of themselves living on long after their time?

Of course, the infinity of Johnsen's craft hugely depends on the ever changing generations of the now. Birkeland suggests that wooden boat's worst enemy is bad owners (John-Arne Ø. Gundersen, 2020). Because, in the same way that water can be merciless to people, it can tear down the cornerstones of a wooden boat, taking advantage of the material's liveliness and willingness to decay. So should we fair for Johnson's boats and the chances that there might not be people around to nurture the his work in the future?

Through his time as a boat builder, Johnsen experienced at least two major floods (Iren Johnsen, 2021). The walls of his studio had water marks 1.10 meters from the ground and Johnson had to row out to the studio as he attempted to save that which was not nailed to the ground (Iren Johnsen, 2021). As the water went back down, he returned to his craft, as he rebuilt and fixed what had been damaged. Perhaps whilst doing so, uttering "It's the steady that pulls". So if Johnsen's boats were to decay at some point in the future, I'd like to imagine him approaching this fact as he approached life and his craft in general: with ease, calm and invincibility.