

Näver

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Introduction

In this project I'm exploring the traditional craft in Sweden of birch bark weaving by creating a series of objects. The course is called "action and failure" at Konstfack University of arts, craft and design.

Since I am new to the country of Sweden it is interesting to research a craft that has strong value and history. In Swedish this bark is called Näver.

The first time I saw Näver was during my internship Stockholm, and I was instantly fascinated by it. The flexibility, colors and strength of the bark are extraordinary, and immediately got me enthusiastic. It is mainly used for weaving, but in this project i'm investigating what the other possibilities can be, through tactility and aesthetics.

Issue

I am investigating the material Näver. It is a personal research on a craft that has a strong heritage in Sweden. Since I am visiting this country as an exchange student I'm interested in researching and learning more about a natural material, that is harvested in Sweden. My approach is to study the traditional craft of basket weaving with Näver and then trying to find my own ways or experimentation of how to tweak the bark.

Birch bark has been in use since the prehistoric times, mostly as writing and building material. Archaeological findings show that näver was used as roof covering more than 5,000 years ago. The material was extensively used in the countryside of Siberia region and spreaded over to the nordic countries. The craft is popular by many generations but mostly by seniors. Perhaps you could say that this is my own contemporary take on the material, but combining my material explorations with the traditional weaving, in order to create a dialogue between the different layers.

Design process

I started this process with researching about Slöjd, a phenomenon that I had never heard of before. It is a system of handicraft-based education that is taught as a compulsory subject in Swedish and Norwegian schools. The Slöjd course can be divided into two parts, soft material such as textile and hard materials with is wood and metalwork. Otto Salomon can be seen as the pioneer of this teaching program, he saw slöjd as shaping the character of the children and promoting moral behavior and intelligence. I started to dive deeper into the hard materials and got a book called Näver slöjd [1] from the Slöjd education teacher at Konstfack.

In this book, the craft of bark weaving is explained by pictures and step by step text. The next step for me was to get my hands on some material, since the harvesting process can only be done during mid-summer and which permission from the land-owner, I was not able to harvest it myself, and also it takes quite some skills to be able to harvest the bark without harming the tree.

When people harvest the bark they always take a small stroke of a tree, and leave the rest of the tree alone so that it can grow back. The reason that you can only harvest the material during the mid-summer is because the pores of the bark, that acts as windows and provide gas exchange between the stem and air, are open during this time. During the winter time these so called "windows" are closed. [2]



[1] Näver slöjd- Katerina Agren and Karen Lundholm (1976)

[2] Trädens anatomi och biologi- K. Vollbrecht (1994) and image above

In order to get Näver material I got in contact with the director of Stockholms Länsmuseum in Nacka called Andreas Sohlberg. He is an experienced basket weaver and told me about the time that he had lived in the north of Sweden where this craft is still very present. The Näver I bought from him was harvested last Mid-summer in a forest north from Stockholm. Harvesting mostly happens up north because there is a better accessibility of birch trees without lots of trunks and bits. After harvesting, the bark must be flattened, because it has a natural tendency to curl up. Also it must be stored outside.

Since the bark that I bought has not been stored outside I must let it breath before working with it and possibly soak in water depending on the stiffness of the bark. By having the materials in my hands I already got a better understanding of it and its possibilities. The bark has lots of character from growing in nature, in some of my pieces you can see that a bird tried to pick into it. So for weaving or materializing with this, I either have to work around the “imperfections” or embrace them and show their character.

At this point in my process I started sketching and making models in paper. Andreas Sohlberg advised me to first get the basic technique of weaving in my fingers before starting with the real material. My initial idea was to create a series with a large range of objects, with different functions or uses. I was having in mind to make around 7 different artifacts in Näver. But soon after making my first paper models and sketches I realized that I valued the relation between the objects more. In my opinion my sketches and models didn't communicate the same language shape wise and function wise.

I decided to take a step back from my model making, and started material samples with the real Näver that I had. This was a good learning experience for me to get to know the material better, I made about 20 different modifications of the Näver and I tried to think very freely and intuitively while working hands on. In one of the first teacher presentations in Konstfack I showed some of the samples that I made. [3]



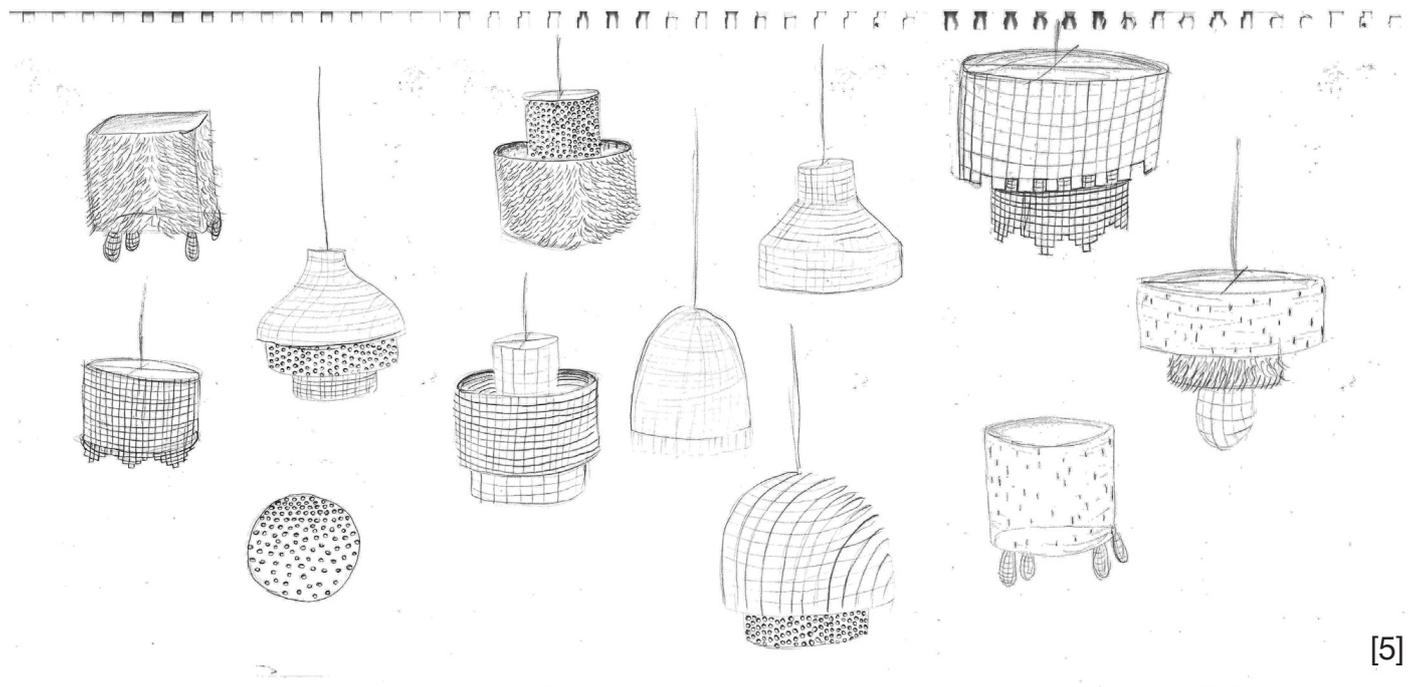
[3]

The feedback that I had received encouraged me to go on in this direction of material experimentation.

So I decided to go on and focus on lamp shades. The reason I got interested in making lamp or light shades is when I started holding pieces of Näver into the light and saw a beautiful warm color appearing. Birch bark has the ability to evoke an almost magical glow by just having a light source shine through it.

Also since the darkness is so present in the Nordic I notice a tendency to create very warm and beautiful light in order to deal with these circumstances.[4]

It was a key decision for me to start a new sketching and model making process again. It helps me to shift from designing to experimenting and constantly opening up and narrowing down. I made sketches where I started combining a variation of material modifications, combined with a woven element. These sketches and models turned out to be interesting in the way the different layers worked together [5].



But still it felt that the first prototype lamps had a pretty stiff aesthetic there was not a lot of alluring shape or detail to look at. I missed something but couldn't find out what it was that I was missing. Maybe the cone shapes that I used were not interesting enough to look at, having this in the back of my mind I ensured myself that I needed to find even more limits or boundaries of the material. This meant that I wanted to explore how biomorphic shapes and forms could be made in Näver and with a weaving technique.

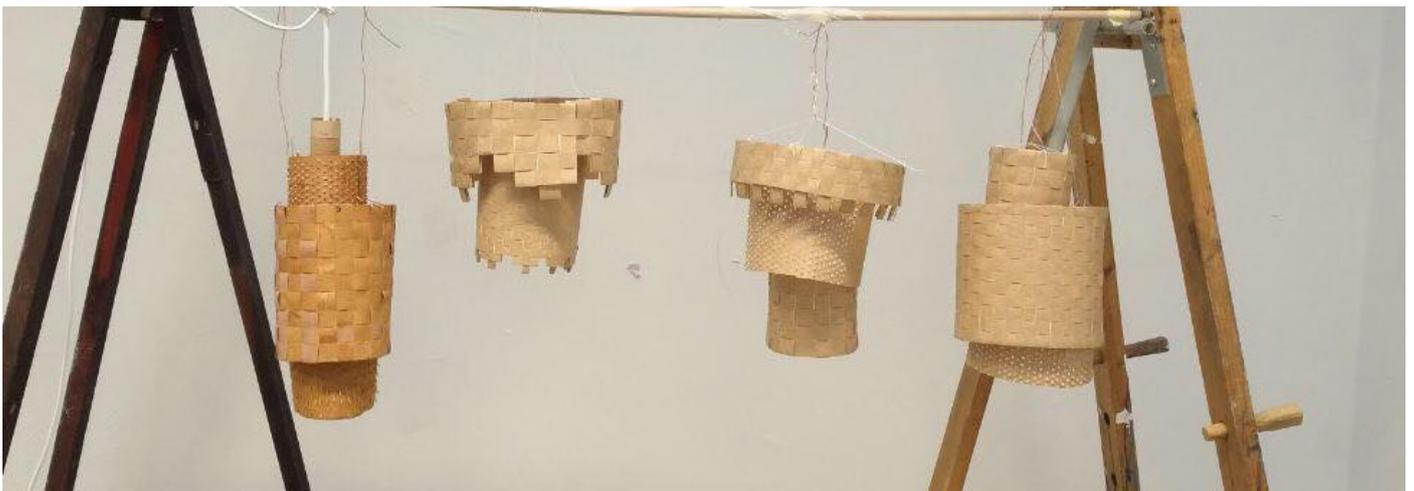
So I started making a woven paper model that had more shape to it than the cones I had been working with before. In my research I had not seen anything shaped very organically in Näver, and later I found out why that is. It turned out to be very hard to make an organic shape while weaving, I think it should be possible but learning the craft of weaving can take a lot of time and practice and that is not something that I have the time for with in this process and the deadline of the project.

[4] Image database Nordiska Museet Stockholm

[5] Sketches made by Elsa Sier

Instead of trying to continue to make biomorphical shaped lamps I decided to stick with the cone shapes, because this is something that I know that I am capable of, and will manage to do. I started making some more material samples but this time I used the laser cutter to help me with this, I figured that there might be some more possibilities and ways of working. I designed some patterns that I thought might be interesting in the bark and also could play with the light, maybe the shapes could create interesting shadow and patterns in the space where it would be located.[4] With these test I made a series of combinations again and figured out which modifications and shapes will fit best together and what would look the best.

Because there are so many possibilities, it was hard for me to decide where to go for. I was considering to make the lamp modular so that the user or owner can be in charge of what they like the best. But for the exhibition it would be nice to have a series of lamps. [6]

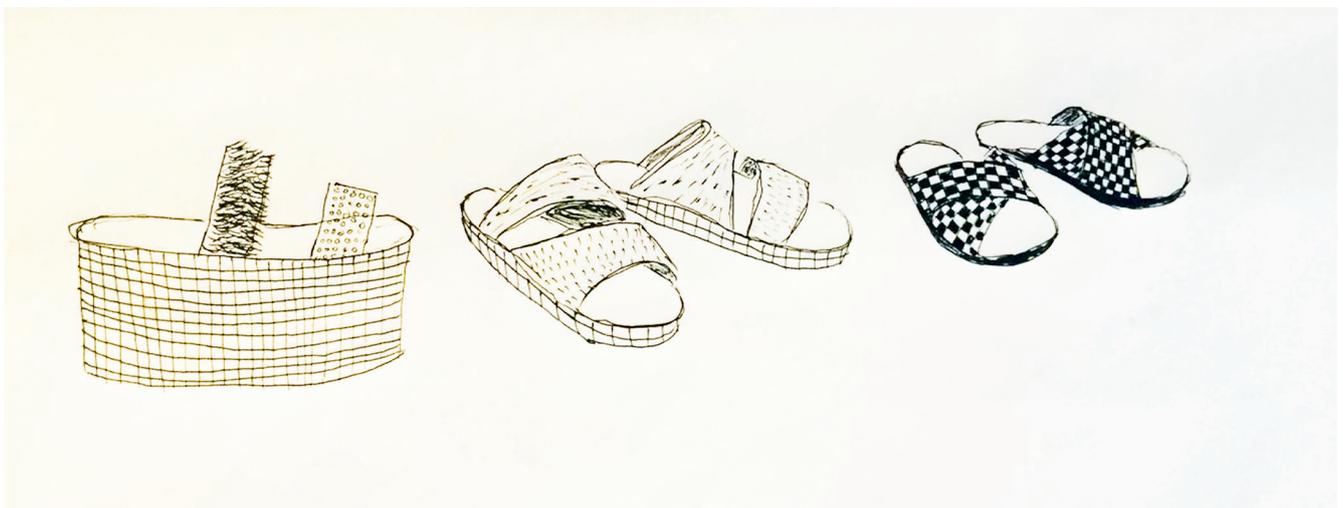


[6]

With this idea of my project I presented in one final teacher presentation at Konstfack. During this I presented my concept and how far I had come. Cheryl Akner-Koler a professor at the institution pointed out that my lamps looked less contemporary than my initial approach. And I completely agreed on this feedback, which was in a way also frustrating to notice that my work so far was not good enough for the final exhibition.

I took some time to reflect on the feedback, I realised I wanted to dive into footwear, since näver is traditionally also used in shoes.

I made some models and sketches [7]



[6] Prototypes made in paper

[7] Rough sketches with fine liner

So now that I decided on which combination and textures are the best, I have to start working with the real deal. I have been postponing this moment of working in real Näver because I am scared of making mistakes and ruining the material which is very valuable and expensive. It would have been best to work with Näver during the mid-summer season because it is the easiest to work with right after harvesting it, then it does not need treatment but can be used just like that.

But since I am working in the fall there are some steps that I need to take. Also before starting I need to calculate the amount of Näver that I need for the shape I want to make. Weaving means that you need more than double the amount of what you see in the end, so that is something to have in mind before hand.

The first step would be to let the material breath outside for a couple of nights, this way it can get more flexibility, and also it would be easier to work with. After the breathing, the cleaning of the material has to start. There are quite some bums and places where trunks have been, for the weaving it would be good to sand or scrape this away. Then to make the material even better to work with it must be soaked in a little bit of water, not for to long otherwise the material starts getting too soft.

Some tools that are very important are clothes pins and wax. The bark needs to be cut in even strokes and then be covered in wax, in order make the material slide better during the process. And the clothes pins are used to make the bark stay in place while adding more strokes. If the weaving part is done it is really important to add weight to the shape otherwise it will deform. [8]



[8]

For the other modifications of the material I will use the laser cutting machine or wood carving tools. Because the bark has so much character I need to create the laser cut file around certain parts.

For the final models I need to have in mind that they need to be ready to wear and shaped comfortably around a foot. They have to be standing by themselves, in order to create a stable construction I am using the material of hard styrofoam as a base to work from. The wearables still need to be lightweight and appealing to walk with. hanged on the ceiling on standing on themselves.

Design Proposal

To create a collection of footwear made in Näver.

Summary and reflection

What I have learned in this process is that it is okay to make mistakes and decisions.

Concept wise I wish that I had gone a little deeper, for example I could have done more research into the history of Näver and where it comes from originally how the craft travelled from Siberia to Sweden. And how I as a Dutch person perceive this and maybe combine the traditional Dutch craftsmanship in a birch bark material. On the other hand I think my contemporary and explorative approach has let to some interesting outcomes and modifications of Näver.