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Barrel Art Origins by [Freeman](#)

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“Wine barrel art” is the range of aesthetic objects made from wine barrels through an artisan’s skill and creative imagination. These objects make great “wine décor” for decorating and accessorizing wineries, tasting rooms, bars and restaurants, as well as home wine cellars and bars.

Here we provide a brief review of wine barrel art from its origins in the old world folk-art of barrel carving.

Wine barrels have been around for thousands of years. Nearly 4000 years ago in Babylon (in modern day Iraq) wood casks were first used for storing and transporting. The wine barrel we know today was most likely developed by the Celts around 400 BC. They had migrated to what is now the Burgundy region of France, where they used techniques employing heat, water and pressure adapted from ship-building to shape wood staves into water-tight barrels. The conquering Romans embraced these barrels and used them to transport a great variety of bulk goods throughout their empire, spreading knowledge of barrel making all across Europe.

The use of barrels to store and transport most bulk goods gradually gave way to other more efficient methods, but their use in storing and aging wine and spirits is going stronger today than ever. The reason is their unique ability to impart the tannins and flavors to wine and spirits, while regulating the opposing flows of oxygen and liquid.

Since wood eventually decomposes, the earliest examples of wine barrel art are lost. Only some of the biggest, best and more recent survive to this day. Many of them are in Germany, where wine-making on a large scale co-existed with the presence of highly skilled wood carvers. Some of the most well-known examples are in the Heidelberg Castle.

This ornately carved and embellished wine tank dates back to 1591.

NOTE: see photo below or optionally this link:

<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~george/johnsgermnotes/heidelbergkleinwinevat.jpg>

This “small” wine tank was supplemented with an additional “large” wine tank in 1751.

NOTE: see photo below or optionally this link:

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It was a sign of status for wineries to show off elaborate barrel carvings on their large wine tanks, as well as on their smaller barrels in those days. They acted as signs at wineries, as well as decorations inside, depicting a broad range of subjects - such as the owner’s favorite vintage or pastime, to landscapes and wildlife scenes, to bacchanalian celebrations.

The ornate barrel carvings in the famous Achaia Clauss winery outside Patras Greece are another example. This winery was founded by Gustav Clauss around 1860, who brought with him to Greece from Bavaria his love of winemaking and the barrel carving tradition. A typically ornate carving is shown here, with a distinctly Greek theme.

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The barrel carving tradition nearly faded away until being revived by a handful of new world artisans. The beautiful Sebastiani Winery in Sonoma California is home to the largest modern day barrel carving collection. It includes hundreds of hand-carved barrels of all sizes. There are also many carved doors, archways and posts and beams inside the winery. It is all the work of one man, Earle Brown, who dedicated much of his life to this craft under owner August Sebastiani's patronage. Here are some examples of his work.

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[Freeman](#) - About Author:

Marie Freeman is co- owner of eWoodArt.com. For more information contact her at a marie@ewoodart.com or visit a <http://www.ewoodart.com/> .

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