



Most of the carved wooden corbels sold at salvage yards were mass-produced in large mills during the late Victorian era, from about 1880 to 1900.



Vintage Brackets With Style

» Use carved wooden corbels to build a more picturesque porch, add character under roof eaves, or brace a bedside table

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE, THE CORBELS tucked under cornices and propping up portico roofs were often grotesque. That is, they were scary by design. Contortionists, dragons, and drunkards carved into the bracket-shaped supports were thought to ward off evil. Adorning Gothic-style churches and surrounded by biblical figures, the frightful corbels—typically made of stone—demonstrated to a largely illiterate congregation the contrast between dark and light, sinner and saint.

The history of corbels in America is far less macabre. Made out of wood because of the abundance of trees here, they were often positioned at a 90-degree angle between porch posts and the ceiling overhead. Corbels were integral to the “gingerbread” millwork decorating Victorian-era facades from the second half of the 19th century. And what could be less threatening than details named for cookies?

Such fanciful trim was originally carved by hand, or by water-powered

TIP

When installing salvaged wood corbels as shelf supports, be sure to securely fasten them to the wall. If you can't screw directly into studs, use self-tapping anchors.

machines in mills and then shipped at great expense via riverboats to the building site. The 1860s invention of the portable pedal-operated scroll saw allowed craftsmen to set up shop in front yards, cutting down on time and expense. In a matter of days, a plain farmhouse could then be transformed into a fashionable Carpenter Gothic with the addition of sawn corbels projecting under roof eaves and supporting new wood window awnings. By using trim “boldly” and for reasons “beyond mere utility,” Americans could greatly add to their home’s picturesque character, as influential tastemaker A.J. Downing wrote in his popular book of the time, *The Architecture of Country Houses*.

By the 1890s, ornate corbels were mass-produced at mechanized mills for use on Queen Anne-style houses. Ordered through catalogs and transported cheaply on new railway lines, these corbels were available in a wide variety of wood species and ranged in size from 4 inches to 3 feet tall. They came in solid serpentine and quarter-round forms, as well as more decorative shapes with applied droplet details and side panels pierced with intricate scrollwork.

Exterior corbels were also common on Tudor-style houses, influenced by English medieval architecture, and Craftsman bungalows built in the early 1900s. These corbel designs were far simpler than Victorian-era ones, possessing clean lines and sharp angles that emphasized strength over ornament.

Rarely used on houses built after the 1940s, most carved wooden corbels seen today are still attached to older buildings or scattered around architectural salvage yards. At Zaborski Emporium in Kingston, New York, a pair of 3-foot-tall harp-shaped corbels cost \$250, and a matched lot of eight smaller blue-painted ones salvaged from a demolished Italianate-style house are \$65 each.



These two-tone corbels with a raised rosette pattern on their sides came off a demolished Italianate-style house in New York.

Most old corbels are too worn for reuse on exterior restoration projects, says Sandy Balla, co-owner of Zaborski, who recommends buying one or two originals and having them replicated at a mill shop instead. “You’ll have something that’ll stand up to the weather, but in a historic pattern you won’t find anywhere else,” says Balla.

Safe from the elements, inside houses—both new and old—is where most salvaged corbels are reinstalled. When securely anchored in the wall, corbels can prop up a mantel shelf, brace a cantilevered countertop, or provide the base for a built-in table (see “Build a Wall-Mounted Bedside Table,” at right). Positioned in the corners of an interior passageway, a matching pair can turn a standard square opening into a curved one reminiscent of the Moorish arches popular in 1920s Art Deco interiors. Balla also suggests making a plate rail by securing a half dozen matching corbels on the wall along a horizontal plane and then topping them with a flat 1x strip.

Basically, if your home-improvement project calls for standard shelf brackets from the hardware store, vintage wood corbels are almost always a more stylish alternative. Sadly, though, if you want them to protect you from danger—or the income tax auditor—as the Gothic stone ones supposedly did, you’ll likely have to carve your own teeth-gnashing ogre. ■

Build a Wall-Mounted Bedside Table

I’ve got one of those old-timey iron beds. You know, the kind that’s so high you have to take a running leap to get into it. So instead of scouring antiques stores for an equally tall bedside table, I built one myself using a pair of salvaged corbels and an old slate roof shingle. The result: a rustic-looking built-in that’s just the right height and doesn’t take up a single inch of floor space (below right).

Here’s how to make one:

1. Locate a stud by punching tiny holes in the wall with a finish nail along the top edge of the baseboard until you hit wood.
2. Center one corbel on the stud at the desired height and trace a horizontal line on the wall across its top. Using a level, continue the line to lay out the position of the second corbel.
3. Steady the first corbel on the line and bore two pilot holes through its top at a 45-degree angle.
4. Secure the corbel to the wall with 3-inch screws (far left); repeat the above steps with the second corbel.
5. Hold the slate in place on top of the corbels with adhesive-backed Velcro tape, and use a rasp to file any jagged edges smooth. Apply a coat of mineral oil with a rag to remove scratches and brighten the stone’s natural color.



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