

Securing Tradition: Researching the Origins of the Hope Chest through Medieval
European, Italian Renaissance, and Early American Forms

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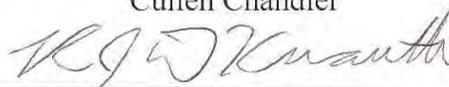
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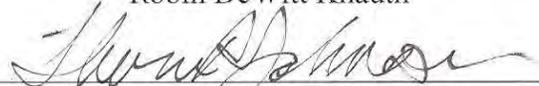
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Securing Tradition

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Abstract

As Katherine Morrison Kahle, an expert in the history of furniture, puts it, “The first piece of furniture demanded by use was the chest.”¹ Whether it be used as a functional piece serving both as seat and trunk, a container of the trousseau and representation of a family’s wealth, or a family tradition rapidly fading from use, the chest has long been a part of the domestic household. This paper seeks to capture the history of the chest, both use and manufacture, from its rise in the Middle Ages, to its peak in the early Renaissance, and ending with its presence in the modern home.

¹ Katherine Morrison Kahle, *An Outline of Period Furniture* (New York: Putnam, 1929), 19.

Introduction

Chests have been in use since people first had material objects to store, and remained unrivaled by any other piece of furniture in the medieval household. From simple and iron-bound utilitarian pieces to painted and gilded works of art, the chest was the ideal piece of furniture for its practicality and variety of use: as a ceremonial piece, treasure chest, and, frequently, a traveling trunk. As Penelope Eames, an expert in the history of furniture commenting on the importance of the chest in the medieval household, puts it,

In an age in which mobility and security for household possessions were primary considerations, the adaptability of the chest in its various forms made it the most indispensable single article of furniture within our period.²

Several chests, especially the more ancient forms, included iron handles at either end, to make it more convenient for travel.³ When placed in the home it served as a bench, table, stool to reach the bed, and, in some cases, even a bed itself.⁴ In fact, most homes had several chests per household, with the average ranging anywhere from ten to fifty in the 16th century.⁵ The primary focus of this research is to present a history of chests from the medieval period, covering use, manufacture, and decoration.

The secondary focus is the interpretation of facets of a culture from the chests it produced. Since chests were in such demand and were frequent among most classes, from

² Penelope Eames, *Furniture in England, France, and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (London: W.S. Maney & Son, Ltd., 1977), 108.

³ Frida Schottmuller, *Furniture and Interior Decoration of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Brentano's, 1921), 19.

⁴ Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Roger Wearne Ramsdell, *The Practical Book of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese Furniture* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1927), 40-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

laborer to royal, they offer a unique opportunity to serve as a marker of culture from which much can be deduced. Such reading of the artifacts can reveal what types of tools were used, what construction method was employed, and what kind of raw materials were available. Considering both the construction of the chests and their artistic value can reveal facets of the culture, intended use of the chest, and artistic developments over large spans of time. The particular examples discussed here are the *Minnekästchen* of medieval Germany and the *cassoni* of Renaissance Italy.

Finally, the research will end with an examination of the legacy of the chest in modern culture. This will focus primarily on the *kast*, or *truhe*, of the Pennsylvania Dutch and the modern tradition of the hope chest.

Part One

In Germany during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, small chests were used as courting boxes (Figure 1). The one hoping to court the woman would commission a box to be made, often with older motifs of love decorating it, and present it to her to be used as a container for future tokens of affection, likely love letters or jewelry. The tradition likely arose out of courtly practice, which later became extremely popular among the middle class.⁶ *Minnekästchen* is the later term given to the boxes, from the word *minne*, which refers to courtly love.⁷ Originally, in Middle High German, they would have been called *truhelin* (“chests”), *schrin* (“coffer” or “shrine”), *kistlin* (“little box”), or *lädlin* (“little container”).⁸

⁶ Jürgen Wurst, “Pictures and Poems of Courtly Love and Bourgeois Marriage: Some Notes on the So-called Minnekästchen,” in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller, and Sarah Rees Jones, vol. 11 of *International Medieval Research*, ed. Axel E.W. Müller, et al (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2003), 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸ All translations obtained from Peter H. Oettli, *A First Dictionary for Students of Middle High German* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1986).



Figure 1. *Minnekästchen*, 1325-50. Oak, inlay, and tempera; wrought-iron mounts, 12.1 x 27.3 x 16.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In the mid-nineteenth century there was a revival in interest in the artifacts, and many large collections were founded, the largest of which are housed at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich, the Schweizer Landesmuseum in Zurich, and the Kunstgewerbemuseen in Berlin, Vienna, and Cologne. The most popular among the group, known as the Munich *Minnekästchen*, was first exhibited in 1856 (Figure 2). The piece was discovered among the property of the Bavarian royal family in 1816, and determined to be a product of the second half of the thirteenth century. After its public exhibitions in the late nineteenth century, it was gifted to the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in 1903. After questions of the authenticity of the chest were raised, the piece was removed from display and placed in the museum's vaults.



Figure 2. Münchner *Minnekästchen*, 13th c. Limewood, 8.3 x 22.5 x 9.9 cm. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich.

Jürgen Wurst describes the Munich *Minnekästchen* with extensive detail. The chest is formed in two parts: an outer box that includes relief carvings, and an interior box that has been sealed to the exterior. The interior is carved with lines from a text which Wurst claims to have been written uniquely for this chest. The text is a love letter to the woman, praising her feminine qualities: beauty, youth, and virtuousness.⁹ The carved scenes on the exterior, three on the longer sides and one on each of the shorter, form a story that wraps around the box:

A man, walking to the right, has grasped the cord of his mantle with a gesture typical for the time of the Staufer. In the middle medallion he, in a slightly bowed posture and with hands raised in an imploring manner, meets a seated woman, who at first reacts to his courting with a rejecting gesture. [...] In the first medallion on the back we see the woman who had been courted on the front shooting an arrow into the man's heart with the help of a second woman (Lady Venus?). In the middle

⁹ For the complete translation of the text into modern German, Wurst refers to Christine Wand-Wittkowski, "Die Inschriften des Münchner Minneskästchens: Eine Fälschung?" *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie*, 117 (1998), 38-54.

medallion, he presents his beloved with a little box. In the last medallion on the back the pair has come together, touching each other at the chin.¹⁰

The mentioned Staufer was a period of rule by a dynasty of German kings, also called the House of Hohenstaufen, lasting from 1138 to 1254, which suggests the box to have been constructed during the first half of the thirteenth century. The gesture itself is mostly used when depicting men, where he holds the tassel on his tunic with the bent thumb or forefinger. The course of events depicted in relief is typical of the *minne* theme: “the man on lookout for a bride, the first shy meeting, the accompanying fiddler, the help of Lady Venus, the kiss, and the end in bed.”¹¹

The reliefs on the Munich chest are typical of *Minnekästchen*, the theme of which was centered on the “power of women, of true and chivalrous love.”¹² Aside from serving as a symbol of love, it has been suggested that the *Minnekästchen* were part of “an erotic game without sexual fulfillment between a man and his adored lady.”¹³ The man, bowing to the woman with deference, and her rejection of his courting, prolongs the “erotic game” and heightens the man’s longing. Once the woman shoots the man with her arrow, attributed to Venus, he returns to her, bringing an offering and token of his affection. It is the chest that fulfills the intention of the game, bringing the beloveds together. For here, in the privacy of this chest meant to hold tokens of love, they can be joined.

A chest would have been the obvious choice to store this treasure, of sorts. Often chests, by this time, were made smaller and iron-bound. They would have been kept in

¹⁰ Wurst, “Pictures and Poems.” 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹² Christa Grössinger, “The Unicorn on English Misericords,” in *Medieval Art: Recent Perspectives*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Timothy Graham. (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 148.

¹³ Wurst, “Pictures and Poems,” 98.

either the personal chamber or solar, for “this room was the most difficult of access in the whole house, almost invariably on an upper floor, and reached from within the hall and often by a narrow winding stair.”¹⁴ The chest functioned as a place for treasure, for valuables to be safeguarded. They were intended as private pieces, kept close to the owner.

A major shift in the theme of artwork occurred during the fifteenth century. The focus shifted from love, pleasure, and the *minne*-game to women bearing down on men and an emphasis on erotic material. This is seen best in contrasting the Munich *Minnekästchen* with a *Minnekästchen* from the Historisches Museum of Basel, which is dated to the first half of the fifteenth century. The chest emphasizes the “power of woman over man, a rather popular topic in the misogynist late Middle Ages.”¹⁵ On the lid of the chest a woman is presented with a man holding his heart out to her. From his stance, it is clear it is intended as an offering to the woman. In the next scene of the sequence, the woman seizes the heart from him and squeezes it, forcing blood to drip (Figure 3). The depictions on the front of the lid continue the theme, showing various ways to torture a man’s heart. One such involves the woman grinding his heart in a mortar while he looks on and begs for mercy from her. It is possible to track the changing perception of women as objects of adoration to objects of enticement and torture, as “the *Minnekästchen*, being representations of contemporary models, illustrate these changing perceptions.”¹⁶ The *minne*-game, a back and forth between the man and woman in the manner of the courtly love tradition, had

¹⁴ Eric Mercer, *Furniture 700-1700*, in *The Social History of the Decorative Arts*, ed. Hugh Honour. (New York: Meredith Press, 1969), 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

been abandoned in favor of viewing women as descendants of Eve, therefore making them naturally inclined to lead men to sin and pain.

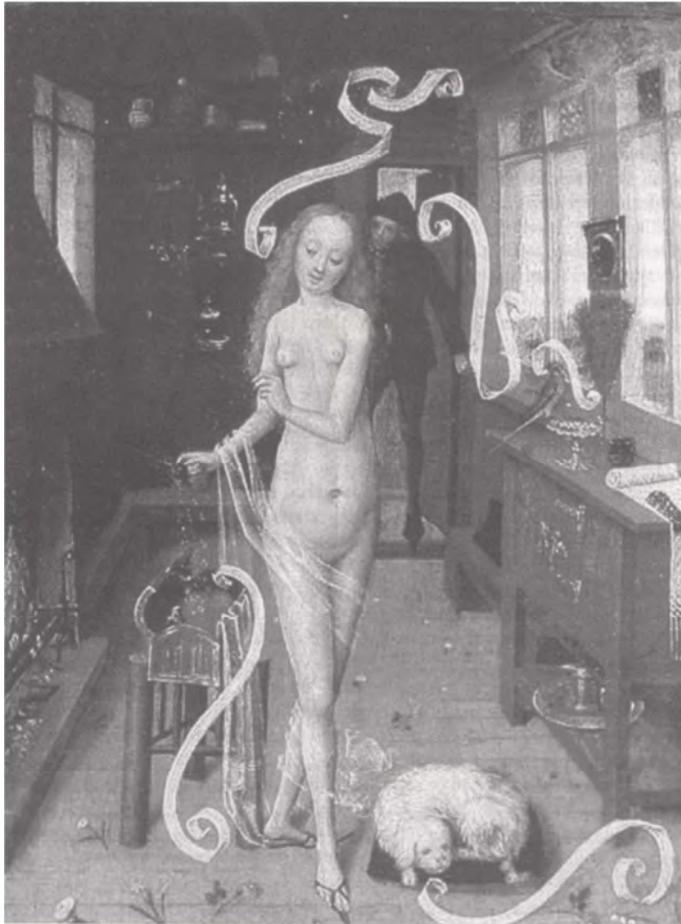


Figure 3. 15th c. Leipzig, Museum der Bildenden Künste.

Unfortunately, the revival of interest in the pieces and their increased popularity in the mid-nineteenth century brought about a rise in copies and fakes. There has also been debate over the identification of certain pieces as *Minnekästchen*, as they bear similarity to reliquaries, document containers, and letter cases. The first large-scale survey of the pieces was conducted by Horst Appulm. He conducted studies primarily in German museums, but also included works in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Though the specifics of his

research have yet to be revealed, as his work is still unpublished, he argued for many of the *Minnekästchen* to be fakes or nineteenth century reproductions.¹⁷ In the late twentieth century the authenticity of the Munich *Minnekästchen* was questioned. Beginning in 1984, the Nationalmuseum subjected the chest to several studies. The first analysis was performed on the material of the chest, and concluded that the age of the materials used did indeed date from the medieval period. The second test was linguistic in nature, for which German linguists confirmed the rhyming used in the love letter inscribed on the interior, as well as the language, to be medieval.

Despite the results of the material and linguistic analysis, Dorothea and Peter Diemer in 1992 took issue with the artwork of the reliefs. They claimed that the design on the Munich *Minnekästchen* was an “unprecedented phenomenon among medieval artwork.”¹⁸ They further proclaimed all *Minnekästchen* to be fakes and “they declared all *Minnekästchen* to be products of a false yearning for the Middle Ages popular in Romanticism.”¹⁹ This was an assumption widely accepted by art historians, though some believed that several, not all, are reproductions. Wurst, for one, takes serious issue with the conclusion reached by Diemer and Diemer. He calls on several contemporary examples of the Staufer period gesture, which confirms the depiction as being common in the medieval period. The style of the figure, as well as the clothing, is both medieval and seen in other pieces of the medieval period, like the Staufer-cameo dated to around 1240.²⁰

Diemer and Diemer also claim that the subject of the reliefs would have been too sensitive

¹⁷ Wurst, “Pictures and Poems,” 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

for the eyes of women at the time, specifically mentioning the scene with the pair in bed.

Wurst again calls on contemporary examples: a manuscript of Veldecke's *Eneas* and the Tristan Codex, which were great heroic romances that depicted the lovers in bedroom scenes more erotic than that found on the Munich *Minnekästchen*.

Part Two

A similar use of chests was employed in late medieval and early Renaissance Italy. These chests were originally called *forzieri*, or coffers, and were primarily produced in wealthy banking towns like Siena and Florence. Generally the chests were placed along the wall in halls, corridors, and bedrooms. The exception to this is when they were used as a step to reach the bed, in which case they would be placed at the foot or side of the bed.²¹ They were used to store dishes, linens, tapestries, and other valuables, but they came to be known more popularly for their use as marriage chests. The chests, modernly called *cassoni*, would be used to store the woman's trousseau. For the trousseau, "the bride and female members of her family would make sheets, shirts and other linen goods, while the groom and his family gave special items of clothing such as sleeves."²² Aside from the practical function of holding the items the woman would need in her new home, the chest also served a function of indication of her status, namely by display during the wedding ceremony.

The use of the *cassoni* as marriage, or dowry, chests reached a peak in popularity in fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy. These chests were called *forzieri*, or strong boxes, though in modern times they, too, have been called *cassoni*. The *cassone* was one of the most valuable, and most treasured, gifts given to the bride. The commission for the work would be sent out months before the wedding by the father of the bride, and the chests

²¹ John Gloag, *A Social History of Furniture Design: From BC 1300 to AD 1960* (New York: Crown, 1966), 35.

²² Victoria and Albert Museum, "Renaissance Wedding Gifts," Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/renaissance-wedding-gifts/> (accessed April 2, 2012).

would be made in pairs with one intended for the groom and the other for his wife.²³ The pieces would either be identical pairs in decoration, or would work as complementary pieces, with one featuring one half of a scene, and the other finishing it. The artwork on the pieces was elaborate, usually featured a popular love scene, and cost about the annual salary of a skilled laborer.²⁴ Both chests, regardless of varieties of decoration, would feature the coat of arms of the two families being joined.

Until 1460 the chests were a centerpiece of the *ductio ad domum*, or wedding procession.²⁵ The procession would depart from the woman's home and proceed through the streets of the town in a great ceremony, before ending at the home of her betrothed. In marriage rituals the *cassoni* were symbolic representations of the human journey into married life. The Italian marriage ceremony did not take place in a church, but rather in the home. There would take place an exchange of rings at the groom's home, followed by banquets and dancing. The groom's *cassoni* was delivered to his home from the workshop, and the bride's was carried by relatives to the groom's house on the wedding day.²⁶ Her chest, containing things like clothing, personal linens, purses, scissors, and gloves, was a symbolic representation of the change brought on by marriage. Both chests would be placed in the couple's bedroom, an example of which can be seen in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*.

²³ Cristelle L. Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cristelle L. Baskins, "Triumph: An Introduction," in *The Triumph of Marriage: Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2008), 1.

²⁶ Emily Jayne, "Cassoni Dances and Marriage Ritual in 15th Century Italy," in *Ceremony and Text in the Renaissance*, ed. Douglas F. Rutledge (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 140.



Figure 4. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Oil in canvas, 119 x 165 cm.

Reconstructing the space in which the chest would have been displayed is a difficult task because, as Patricia Fortini Brown puts it, “much has perished, much has been redecorated, much has been sold off.”²⁷ To reconstruct the interior, one must rely on available inventories, early descriptions, and Venetian paintings of interiors. As depicted in the painting, Italian Renaissance interior decoration was focused on attention to detail. Sabba da Castiglione (1485-1554), of the Order of the Knights Hospitallers, wrote *Ricordi* in 1546, a book of his philosophical reflections in which he described the worldly life of the Venetians. That life, as Fortini Brown quotes, was comprised of

“great gentlemen, rich, ingenious and magnificent...delight very much in adorning and furnishing their palaces, their houses, and especially the chambers and the studies with various and diverse ornaments, according to the variety and diversity of their ingenuity and fantasy...”²⁸

²⁷ Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 124.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

A great deal of time and wealth went into decorating the domestic space. Focus was given to the quality of the pieces over the quantity. This can be seen in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, which not only provides a visual example of how the *cassoni* would have been displayed in the private chamber, but also a glimpse of interior decoration (Figure 4). The woman reclines on a simple sofa made of rich material in a room with bare tiled floors, which also features elegant tapestries and architecture. The elaborate and costly decoration invested in the *cassoni* was a product of a culture of extravagant living, in which attention to detail was of primary consideration.

The tradition of the victorious wedding procession that emphasized familial wealth began to fade near the end of the fifteenth century, as "stricter Florentine sumptuary laws" forced the use of less extravagant containers.²⁹ Near the end of the sixteenth century the *cassoni* were discontinued and mostly forgotten about. Most would have been kept by the families and relegated to general storage use. By the nineteenth century those chests remaining were dismantled and sold, the most frequent customers being British and American tourists.

Most prominent among collectors of *cassoni* were the Americans James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888) and Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924). While much of Jarves' collection has been distributed among several sources, the majority of Gardner's collection can be found at the museum founded in her name in Boston. Also included in the collection are a vast number of *cassoni* panels. These were the highly decorated front and sides of the chests which were removed and sold as separate pieces during the nineteenth century

²⁹ Baskins, *Triumph*, 3.

when many *cassoni* were being dismantled. Often they were framed, either before or after being sold, and displayed as works of art in their own right.



Figure 5. *Cassone*, 1580s. Walnut, 65 x 171.5 x 61 cm. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

The shape and form of the *cassone* is a tribute to ancient Roman culture (Figure 5). The acanthus and bay leaves are a harkening back to this heritage, as well as the shape itself. The chests' resemblance to sarcophagi is not coincidental; rather, it is derived from the ancient Roman caskets. The shape of the *cassoni* does not vary greatly from one to another, though there are three recognized variants. The first of these is the simple form, which is the earliest. The simple *cassoni* are long, low boxes with flat lids. The second form is the boat-shaped, which is seen up to the sixteenth century. The boat-shape is derived from the curvature of a boat, in which the *cassone* is narrow at the bottom and wide at the

top, curving out on the sides. The third form is the sarcophagus shape, which resembles that which it is named after. This is the most popular form for most of the Renaissance. *Cassoni* lids fell into four general categories: flat, raised, domed, and cambered (Figure 6). They also had two choices for a base, either a carved platform or animal feet.



Figure 6. *Cassone* with Strozzi coat of arms, 15th century. Wood covered with vellum painted in tempera, gilded leather, 45 x 160 x 47 cm. Carlotta Bruschi Collection, Florence.

The chests were usually commissioned in pairs in preparation for the wedding, one for the bride and one for the groom. Only the elite families could afford to commission the chests, as they were roughly the equivalent of a laborer's annual wage.³⁰ The men of the family were responsible for commissioning them, either the father or the groom. The chests were produced in large workshops, and so work tended to be anonymous.³¹

Unfortunately, there have been several attempts to restore or reconstruct *cassoni* that have not been done in a conscientious manner. Notorious in this category is William Blundell Spence (1814-1900), who repainted the chests, enlarged them, added spectacular gilding and lion's paw feet, and unique framing elements.³² One such example of this is the Morelli Chest (Figure 7). Using unrelated Renaissance panels he created a *cassone* that

³⁰ Baskins, Triumph, 1.

³¹ Ibid., 5.

³² Ibid.

appealed to Victorian and Edwardian taste. The challenge facing furniture and art historians is sorting out the individual pieces of the hybrid *cassoni* and dating the parts.



Figure 7. Morelli Chest, 1472. Tempera and gold on wood, 212 x 193 x 76.2 cm. Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London.

Even the *cassoni* that appear to be in their original condition have lately come under suspicion. Some technical studies have been undertaken to validate the authenticity of *cassoni*. The Medici Chest of the Philadelphia Museum of Art was subjected to one such study (Figure 8). The chest was acquired by the museum in 1930, from a collection in Vienna. Bearing the Medici crest made the chest more sensational and more valuable, and

so suspicion arose that it might have been repainted in the nineteenth century to increase its value. In 2009 a series of studies were conducted, examining construction, X-radiography, painting materials used, original color scheme, and finally, the Medici connection.

The construction of the chest used butt-joints and nails, and the chest itself is made entirely of poplar with iron bands and corners. The interior of the chest is well preserved, as “the wood shows an even patination, with knots and flaws filled with an off-white material made with marble dust in an animal glue binder.”³³ There were no replaced pieces or other signs of mending, aside from the white plaster on the interior lid. Inside the chest there was also found a few strips of paper, secured to the wood, written in Italian in a fifteenth century script. It is not able to be translated, but it does add an air of authenticity to the age of the piece. X-radiography revealed that the chest had no modern wire nails, nor any sign of other modern repairs. It further revealed evidence of earlier paint layers. The front of the chest and the lid once had lead white pigment in the original decoration. These areas are currently covered by dense paint of another color. Though the small sections decorated in the white paint had been altered, the X-radiography revealed no other alteration to the design.

³³ Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Medici Chest: Technical Study of an Italian Painted Chest,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, <http://www.philamuseum.org/conservation/9.html> (accessed September 22, 2011).



Figure 8. Medici Chest, c. 1450-60. Poplar with painted decoration, 48.6 x 160.8 x 48.9 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

An examination of the materials used for decoration confirmed the fifteenth century dating, as the process used was consistent with the period's method. As recorded in the museum's report, "a cross-section from an area of yellow paint in the coat-of-arms on the lid shows a typical sequence of layers: two preparation or "ground" layers were applied to the outer wooden surfaces of the chest before painting."³⁴ The first layer was to fill in any irregularities in the wood. The second layer smoothed the surface to prepare it for painting. The first layer used calcium carbonate, which is unusual for Italy as *gesso*, or gypsum, was more commonly used. The use of the calcium carbonate may be an indicator of a local practice. The bright yellow paint that appears gold, also called orpiment, is typical for the fifteenth century, as are the deep red, or madder, lead white, azurite, and vermillion. Each color used egg as a binder, which is also commonly seen in paintings of this period.

³⁴ Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Medici Chest."

Finally, the x-radiography revealed an original extensive pattern of green, or verdigris, which is currently painted yellow. Verdigris does have tendency to discolor and fade, and so the “discoloration may have prompted the scraping away of the green lozenges in an early restoration, or alternatively the physical deterioration of the verdigris could have caused the paint and its underlayer to flake away from the surface.”³⁵ Aside from some color scheme changes, the pattern of the decoration was largely maintained, which authenticated the Medici connection. The original verdigris decoration is interesting and important to note because it further identified the chest’s heraldry, as red, white, and green were used in early Medici work, like the “frescoes in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici in Florence by Benozzo Gozzoli, painted in 1459.”³⁶ Though the chest does not have the double crest decoration that included the bride and groom’s families, it does have two other markers that suggest it might have been used as a *cassone*. The first is the use of pine cones and pomegranates around the coat of arms, both of which are symbols of fertility. The second is a small, hard-to-find inscription on the interior lid of the chest in a fifteenth century script, which reads *carissimo mio*, or “very dearest” (Figure 9).

³⁵ Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Medici Chest.”

³⁶ Ibid.



Figure 9. Detail of inscription on the inside of the lid.

Locating textual evidence for the Medici connection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art *cassone* has become a possibility thanks in large part to the Medici Archive Project. From the early 1990s the project has been locating and recording all records that mention, or are from, the Medici family. Once recorded, all records are placed into an online archive, accessible by anyone with an internet connection. The archive, “comprising over four-million letters distributed in 6,429 volumes and occupying a mile of shelf space,” is a fantastic resource for art historians and those generally interested in material culture or Renaissance history.

The chest’s function as a piece of art developed in Quattrocento, Italy, and continued to evolve for the next two centuries. In fact, it is said that Italian chests reached an epitome of development in the Renaissance, the point at which chests combined the best in both beauty and usefulness.³⁷ Italian interior decoration had come to be focused on a few heavily-decorated pieces per room, rather than a room full of exquisite and elaborately

³⁷ Kahle, *Outline of Period Furniture*, 20.

decorated items that would overwhelm the senses of the viewer.³⁸ The chest, because of its practical function, was a key piece to any room. It wasn't long before the chest was subject to more artistic efforts, which is covered more thoroughly in the next section. In fact, they reached such a high standard as pieces of art that they remained in the home as decoration, even after the development of other furniture styles replaced the chest's function as both a seat and storage.

During the Italian Renaissance, the chest combined both beauty and usefulness. Their construction was not viewed as beneath some of the greatest artists of the time. Artists of high caliber, like the painters Botticelli, del Sarto, Pesellino, and di Cosimo, and carvers Donatello, Bernardino, Ferrante, and Canozzo, were commissioned to work on the pieces. Artists saw *cassoni* as an "independent and complete work of art" and gave their best efforts to the pieces.³⁹ In the first half of the fifteenth century, Florence was home to ten *cassoni* workshops. These workshops would not only produce the chests, but artists would devote weeks to paint and gesso work, or carving and gilding.

Those chests intended to be carved or inlaid were made of "finer" woods, like walnut. Those meant to be painted or covered in plaster were constructed of "meaner" woods, like pine and cypress. Gesso and paint were popular in the early stages of *cassone* decoration, before the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century, artists began to favor carving for the chests, making their work "vigorous and sweeping."⁴⁰ In the late 16th

³⁸ Harold Donaldson Eberlein, Abbot McClure, and Edward Stratton Holloway, *Practical Book of Interior Decoration* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1927), 67.

³⁹ Eberlein, McClure, and Holloway, *Practical Book of Interior Decoration*, 68.

⁴⁰ Harold Donaldson Eberlein, *Interiors, Fireplaces, and Furniture of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing, 1916), xi.

century, reliefs became more bold and assertive, and there was a loss of delicate ornamentation.⁴¹ By the Late Renaissance, *cassoni* were solely carved and gilded, plaster and paint having fallen completely out of favor. Unfortunately, it was also the decline of *cassoni* as a whole, as more specialized forms of furniture were arising. It is about this time that panels from the *cassoni* begin to appear hung on walls in homes. The artwork done on the chests was so valuable that they were actually removed from the chest frame and displayed as independent artworks.⁴²

Scenes from the lives of the saints, classical mythology, and historical incidents were popular choices for depiction on the chests.⁴³ Often a reclining youth or nude female would be depicted on the interior of the lid. When used as marriage chests they would also feature the family coat of arms and a scene from a popular love story, they were also “often lined inside with gorgeous silks and brocades strained tightly over the wood.”⁴⁴ The *cassoni* were also usually made of cypress, in order to discourage moths from invading the precious objects kept within.⁴⁵ An especially favored scene for *cassoni* was Petrarch’s *Triumph of Love*. The piece was designed not only to serve utilitarian purposes, but to be a sumptuous gift for the bride celebrating her marriage alliance.

⁴¹ Eberlein and Ramsdell, *Practical Book of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese Furniture*, 43.

⁴² Louise Ade Boger, *Furniture Past and Present: A Complete Illustrated Guide to Furniture Styles from Ancient to Modern* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 41.

⁴³ Eberlein, McClure, and Holloway, *Practical Book of Interior Decoration*, 63.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁴⁵ Edwin Foley, *Book of Decorative Furniture: It’s Form, Colour, and History* (New York: Putnam, 1911), 124.



Figure 10. The Triumphal Procession of a Royal Conqueror, c. 1475-1480. Tempera, gold and silver on panel, 61 x 180 cm. The Marquis of Northampton.

The theme of the marriage as a triumph was often linked to the account of Emperor Aurelian and Queen Zenobia, as recorded in the *Historiae Augustae Scriptores*. In 272 AD Aurelian captured the Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia, and paraded her through the streets. Even though she had waged war against him, he spared her life on account of her gender. As seen in the *Triumphal Procession*, a young ruler is reclining, with crown and sceptre, being drawn toward the city gate (Figure 10). The inclusion of Trajan's Column and the Pyramid of Caius in the background are clues to identify the ruler as Roman. Moving in front of the "languidly reclining young king or emperor" is a group of female prisoners in exotic clothing.⁴⁶ This is meant to represent the queen and her maids. The scene is one that had already been made popular through the works of Boccaccio and Petrarch. The story, and its frequent appearance on the panels of *cassoni*, served to further the theme of patriarchy.

Cassoni paintings were sometimes also used to serve as a reminder to men of the treachery of women. For instance, *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra* is one of many

⁴⁶ Luke Syson, et al., *Renaissance Siena: Art for a City* (London: National Gallery Company, 2007), 213.

depictions of the life of Cleopatra that were frequently seen on *cassoni* from Siena (Figure 11). Though Cleopatra could be considered a model of “conjugal loyalty,” if one interprets her suicide as “an act of courageous devotion to her dead husband,” it is more likely that she served as a warning.⁴⁷ By both ancient and modern writers she was deemed prideful, and Pliny called her a *regina meretrix*, or courtesan queen. She was regularly depicted with artwork in “increasing eroticization,” with an “asp held lasciviously to nipple, dress ever more scanty.”⁴⁸ Chests commissioned with such artwork served as both a celebration of the marriage alliance, and a warning to the bride and groom. The message to the bride was to eschew such lust and deception, as Cleopatra was accused of, and embrace the more praiseworthy feminine qualities: loyalty, devotion, gentleness, and obedience. The warning to the groom was to be ever mindful of woman’s propensity toward a more deceitful nature and to be careful to combat any such behavior.



Figure 11. The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra, c. 1476. Tempera, gold and silver on panel, 36.8 x 113 cm. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

⁴⁷ Syson, et al., *Renaissance Siena: Art for a City*, 218.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

For manufacture, there were four cities that were renowned for their quality. The first and foremost was Florence. Florence produced the most sarcophagus-shaped *cassoni*, which would be either carved or painted. Workshops here favored mythological subjects, and often featured caryatids and lion-paw feet. The chests were chiefly made in Florence, and “for quality and output she retains the first place.”⁴⁹ Siena, in the fifteenth century, was known for its “painted, gilt, and stuccoed” chests.⁵⁰ In the High Renaissance, the majority of production was moved to Rome. These forms show a limit in construction and material that dampened the grandeur found on *cassoni* from Florence. Finally, in the Late Renaissance, when *cassoni* were falling out of popularity, production moved to Venice. The Venetian workshops combined stucco, paint, and gilt decoration, and were known for their bone and ivory intarsia.⁵¹

The *cassone* at the University of Arizona Museum of Art was a gift from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, which made a gift of the *cassone* along with several other pieces, in 1978. The chest was made in Cinquecento Italy, probably in Florence, by an unknown artist. It is made of walnut, shows no evidence of having been lined, and features a flat lid bordered with bay and acanthus leaves. This *cassone*, with its claw feet, gilt decoration, and beautiful carvings, is one of many *cassoni* that exemplify the great wealth of the Renaissance Italians and their love for extravagance.

The high relief panel on the front of the chest depicts two cupids holding a central cartouche divided into four sections. Each section features a symbol: lion, angel, bull, and

⁴⁹ Hermann Schmitz, *Encyclopedia of Furniture* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1936), 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

eagle. These are considered the symbols of the four evangelists: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, respectively. Throughout the relief thread acanthus leaves, their seeds, and bay leaves. All four corners of the chest feature bare-topped women leaning forward, as if from the mast of a ship. The whole of the *cassone* shimmers with remnants of extensive gilt work, which is diminished from its original state.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the *cassone* is the lead seal found tied to the back leg of the chest. Fascinating is its potential for a more detailed history of the *cassone*, as it appears to be a customs seal. Though the seal is not very large, being only about half an inch in diameter, it has inscriptions on both faces. The seal is somewhat damaged and worn down, but a partial translation can be made. The first side appears to read “DOGANA DI FIRE[...]”. *Dogana* is easy to recognize and translate, as it is Italian for customs, but the second half is a bit more difficult. *Firenzei* is recognized as meaning Florence, which makes sense when one examines the history of manufacture of the chests. However, the only part of the word that is readily legible is “FIRE”, and it is not clear if the next letter is an “n”.

The opposite side of the seal has a crest with an anchor to the right side and is inscribed “[...]ERCE” above. Unfortunately the crest is hard to decipher, as is the meaning of the anchor. Furthermore, since it appears there were letters before “ERCE”, but they are in such a poor state as to be illegible, one can only guess what it was originally meant to say. It does appear, however, that this was a seal put onto the chest at a much later date, possibly in the eighteenth century. The string with which the seal was attached is in a reasonable state, and does not appear to be very old.

Due to the chest's lack of lining, familial crests, and romantic imagery, it can be assumed the chest was not made with the intention of acting as a *cassoni*. It has been suggested that the chest was the property of a wealthy ecclesiastic, since it features the religious symbols of the four evangelists. This is reasonable, but the religious symbolism could have appealed to any number of people, not just of the ecclesiastical set. It can safely be considered the object of a wealthy, patrician Italian family of the sixteenth century, likely being used as storage in a hall or salon.

By the end of the sixteenth century, more specialized forms of furniture developed and quickly replaced many of the functions of the chest. One could argue that the chest is the evolutionary parent of most other modern furniture.⁵² The use of the chest as a bench soon resulted in it gaining a cushioned top, back, and sides. This can be seen in a *casapanca*, or bench-chest, which evolved into a box sofa before becoming the sofas familiar today. Also from the chest came the chest of drawers, or dresser, which retains the shape and function of a chest but does so with drawers, rather than opening at the top. A similar evolutionary harkening can be found in several other pieces of furniture, including the credenza, cupboard, etc.⁵³

⁵² Kahle, *Outline of Period Furniture*, 20.

⁵³ Eberlein and Ramsdell, *Practical Book of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese Furniture*, 42-43.

Part Three

Much like the *Minnekästchen*, which occupied a special place in the home, and *cassoni*, which were commissioned by families and held the items a woman expecting marriage might need, were the painted chests of the Pennsylvania Dutch. The Pennsylvania Dutch are German and Swiss immigrants who settled in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among other things, they are known for their elaborately colored and decorated folk art, of which the *Truhe*, or dower chest, is one. Studying these pieces is made easy by the tendency of the Pennsylvania Dutch to remain in the area their first ancestors settled. This is helpful because:

The dower chest was the prized possession of each young girl as she came to marriageable age, and after her marriage was often bequeathed to her daughter. In wills the bequest is often stated as “My chest with linen and pewter therein.”⁵⁴

The chests held value not only as decorated pieces of furniture, but as family heirlooms, shared between mothers and daughters. It is this function, as valuable heirlooms, that has served to preserve the chests through generations.

The most comprehensive study performed on the chests was done by Ester Stevens Fraser in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It is a rare case when one of the chests does not feature the date of manufacture and the name of the owner, and so when this information is used in relation to church records, it is easy to establish the location of origin. Using this information, Fraser discovered six forms specific by county, specifically Lancaster, Lebanon, Berks, Lehigh and Montgomery, Schuylkill, and Dauphin.

⁵⁴ Ester Stevens Fraser, “Pennsylvania German Painted Chests,” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 21 (1925): 27.

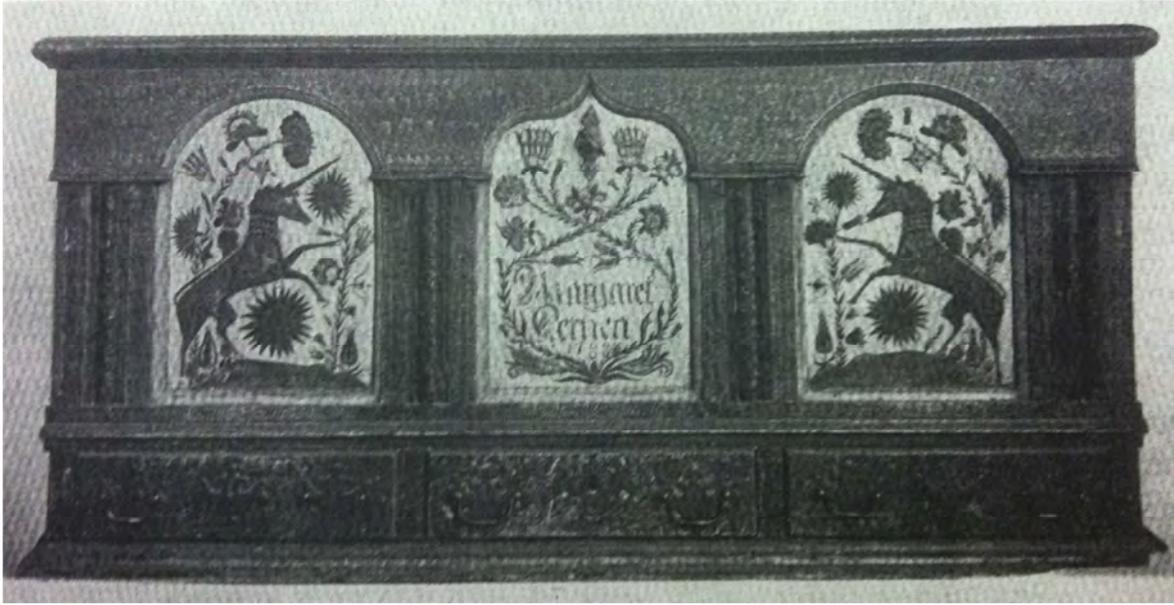


Figure 12. Lancaster County Chest, dated 1788, provided by Fraser.

The type specific to Lancaster County “has three sunken panels with moulded or fluted stiles.”⁵⁵ Examples of this type date to around 1760 to 1781 (Figure 12). One such is the chest that belonged to Elizabeth Herwecken, dated to 1781. Records show that she died unmarried, and in her 1813 will she left the chest, among other property, to her nieces and nephews. Fraser describes it as “a dower chest which failed to fulfill its destiny.”⁵⁶ The earliest dated chest belongs to the Lebanon County type, which typically features:

A baluster-supported arch of Gothic form frames a pot of three tulips...Every design element is outlined in white on these chests—a very effective method to use in an early period when pigments were not clear color, and because of their expensiveness were used sparingly. Some chests were decorated directly on the wood without the use of any background color.⁵⁷

Fraser continues, describing this type of chest as having the most unique decoration (Figure 13). One example she describes features a portrait of the bride and groom on the

⁵⁵ Stevens Fraser, “Pennsylvania German Painted Chests,” 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

face and a building that looks much like a church on the side. This likely would be a representation of the church in which they were married, as the chest was a symbol of the marriage tradition.

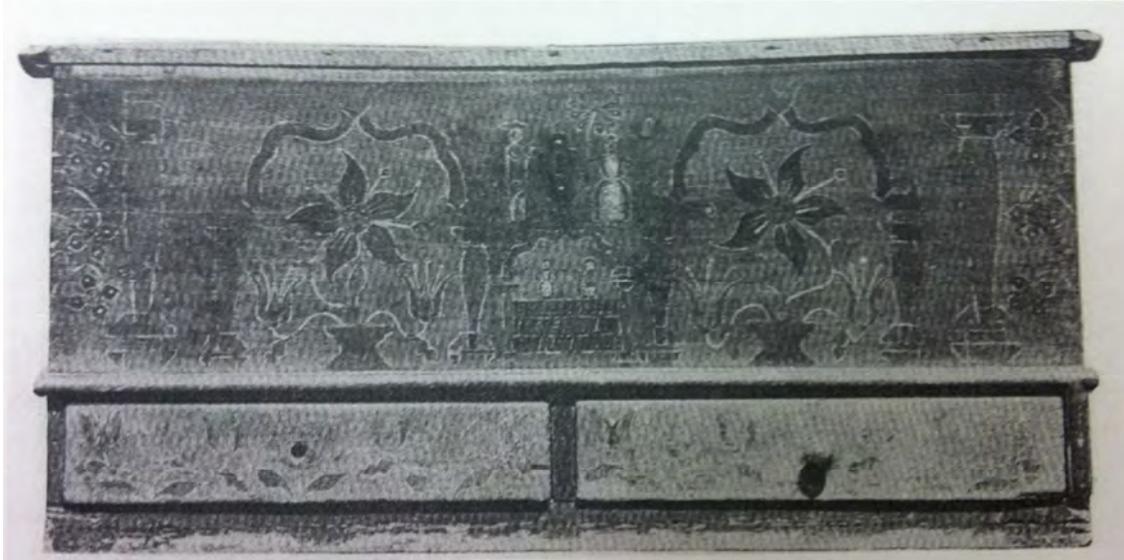


Figure 13. Front View of Lebanon County Chest, dated 1721, provided by Fraser.

The third type, that of Berks County, often depicts unicorns, lions, and horsemen, and “at the corner appears a curious heart decoration painted half on the front face of the chest, and half on the side”.⁵⁸ Fraser hypothesizes that the horseman motif is a harkening back to the Hessian troops brought to America by the British, who later settled among the Pennsylvania Dutch. It is also possible that the horseman and the unicorn both make reference to the medieval romantic motifs of chivalry and maidenhood.

The type specific to Lehigh and Montgomery Counties features floral or geometric shapes, like hearts or stars made by conjoined circles set out in a precise design (Figure 14). The star is a symbol frequently seen in the decoration of many objects belonging to

⁵⁸ Stevens Fraser, “Pennsylvania German Painted Chests,” 31.

Lehigh County, including barns, jewel boxes, chests, spoon racks, and birth certificates. It is believed to have religious meaning, though that meaning is unclear. Chests belonging to Montgomery County are more floral in design, though they are known by the same precise, geometric theme.



Figure 14. Lehigh County Chest, dated 1798, provided by Fraser.

Where the Lehigh and Montgomery County chests make reference to religious meaning, the chest belonging to Schuylkill County memorializes local history. A small civil war was waged over boundary lines between those living in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, the result of which was the formation of small communities of both Connecticut and Pennsylvania Dutch people. The chests from this county reflect the combination, as the method of construction is credited to a Connecticut style and the decoration is Pennsylvania Dutch. The Jacobean style and sunken panels, along with sunken panels in the upright posts at each corner, are exactly like the structure of Connecticut chests of the

eighteenth century. The decoration is similar to types mentioned previously, including hearts and tulips, but also angels and love birds.

The sixth and final type is that of Dauphin County. It is important to note that this is the Dauphin County of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which is currently the northern section of Lebanon County. As the dates of the chests are before 1816, when Lebanon County was formed from a portion of Dauphin County, it is appropriate to designate them under Dauphin rather than Lebanon. These chests feature heavy floral decoration and a vase in some section of the design that was often inscribed with the manufacturer's name.

The dower chests were popular pieces among the Pennsylvania Dutch, upon which much time and expense were spent. As Fraser says, the painting on the chests is done by a professional, as the graining and mottling are elaborate, as is the decoration. From this evidence, Fraser concludes that the chests were "ornamented by professional furniture painters who traveled from farm to farm wherever their work was in demand, just as the traveling cobblers and traveling tinsmiths."⁵⁹ Much like the workshops dedicated to the construction and decoration of the *cassoni*, furniture like the *Truhe* created a class of professional artists specifically trained in furniture decoration.

⁵⁹Stevens Fraser, "Pennsylvania German Painted Chests," 34.

Part Four

Beginning in the twentieth century, the chest expanded in popularity among the nation's middle class, and gained a new name. The chest was no longer referred to as a dowry chest, but as a hope chest. Hope chests were manufactured by larger furniture companies, Lane Home Furniture being chief among them (Figure 15). They were representative of the hope of a secure future, marriage, and establishing a home. Scholarly research has yet to be done on the hope chest, which could in part be due to its being a fairly recent trend. Much attention also might not have been devoted to the pieces as they are underappreciated in historical value. Personal accounts and advertisements of the early twentieth century are the best, and only, source for information on the pieces.

The chest continued to serve much the same function as the previous forms, though now pride was taken in the ability of the woman to purchase her own chest. An article printed in the Burlington, North Carolina, *Times-News* reads, "Woman Mourns Stolen Chest: Keepsake Contained Decades of Memories." The story records Helen Carroll's desperate search for the hope chest she bought in 1945, when she was only sixteen years old. Though she was too young to be employed, she managed to work odd jobs in order to save money for her future wedding. After purchasing her hope chest, "she was able to buy a set of silverware she planned to use with the family she'd hope to have one day."⁶⁰ When she married in 1964, the chest took its place at the foot of her bed, where it remained until it was stolen in 2008.

⁶⁰ "Woman mourns stolen chest: Keepsake contained decades of memories," *Times-News* (Burlington, NC), 29 November 2008.



Figure 15. Lane Furniture Company Advertisement, *Life Magazine*, March 8, 1945.

All of the things Carroll considered to hold significant value and thus desired to keep safe, she stored in the chest. This included such things as “her father’s flag from World War I, her husband’s flag from World War II, and the love letters her husband had sent her before they got married.”⁶¹ With the passage of time it grew to be a repository for the more mundane but necessary documents, like the deed to her home, insurance papers, and the record that reserved a cemetery plot next to that of her husband. In the article, Carroll implores readers who might have seen the items to return them. She assures the robbers that they are allowed to keep the chest, if they would only return the things she held most dear. With the hope chest, the items contained became more important than the chest itself, or its decoration.

⁶¹ “Woman mourns stolen chest,” 29 November 2008.

The tradition of the hope chest is also one that is quickly fading in modern times. An article printed in *American Prospect* in 2008 ridicules a contest held by the Clare Booth Luce Policy Institute, a right-wing think-tank known for being antifeminist and claims the likes of Michelle Malkin and Ann Coulter among its members. The contest was aimed at women in college, and promised a fully-stocked hope chest to the woman who gained the most names to add to the institute's mailing list. As *The American Prospect* says, "You read that right – a hope chest, that relic of the 1950s, fully stocked with 'dowry items' like bed linens and tea towels. All of the things a young conservative woman will want to assemble before she embarks on her career as a homemaker."⁶² To many modern college women, linking the words "career" and "homemaker" is almost akin to an insult, as the focus has become a career in finance, business management, academia, or writing.

The hope chest has indeed become a relic, a hallmark of a previous age in which, for many, being a successful housewife was a paramount achievement. Today, this is not a primary concern. It is perhaps for this reason that the institute had to extend the contest deadline; a lack of interest in "cedar boxes stuffed with doilies" resulted in a lack of eager participants.⁶³ Among this generation it seems the chest has become more of a keepsake kept by mothers and grandmothers, associated with fond memories.

⁶² "Hope Chest Springs Eternal." *American Prospect*, April 2008, 6-7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

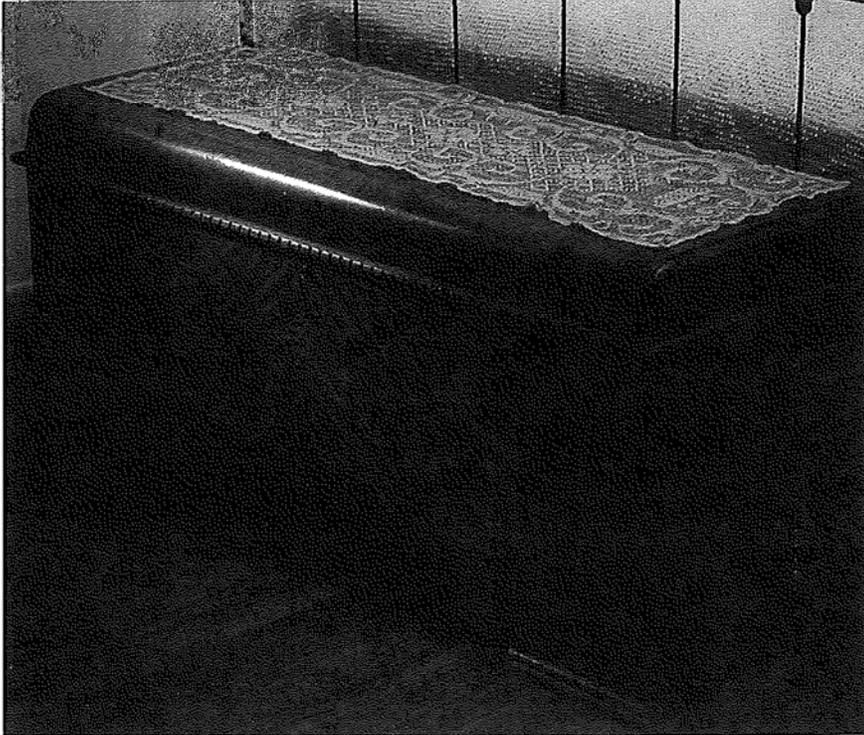


Figure 16. Cedar chest, given to managing editor of *Looking Back* magazine by her father, 1942.

In an article in *Looking Back* magazine by Dorothy Stanaitis from 2011, the tradition of the hope chest, whether intended by the author or not, is accepted as having ended. Stanaitis writes of the “lovely piece of furniture that meant so much to so many young women” and admits that her granddaughter knew nothing of what a hope chest was.⁶⁴ She explained to her that it was a chest that stood at the foot of her mother’s bed, holding delicate blankets, christening gowns, locks of hair from each child’s first haircut, photo albums, and souvenirs (Figure 16). When the author graduated from high school, several of her classmates were given hope chests by their parents, which they immediately began working to fill. As Stanaitis describes,

⁶⁴ Dorothy Stanaitis, “The Hope Chest,” *Looking Back*, April/May 2011, 10.

The “hope” was that the girls would find good husbands and set up housekeeping with the contents that had been lovingly gathered, prepared and stored in the chest. There was an immediate flurry of embroidery to decorate pillowcases and tea towels. Girls learned to crochet so that their hope chests would contain lots of doilies to protect the furniture they hoped one day to own.⁶⁵

Extended family members would make gifts of items for the hope chest for holidays and birthdays. A payday tradition between the author and her friends was to go downtown to Woolworths to see what was on sale that they could add to the chest.

Though information from the furniture companies on the number of chests being sold today compared with the amount sold during the earlier half of the twentieth century is not readily available, it is very likely that there is a great decrease. Among the young women of marriageable age today, purchasing and filling a hope chest would be considered reverting to an archaic tradition associated with the subjugation of women.

⁶⁵ Stanaitis, “The Hope Chest,” 11.

Conclusion

The *Minnekästchen* began as small courting boxes that featured a narrative praising feminine qualities like beauty, youth, and virtuousness. The chest would often be inscribed with poems or short messages to the woman being courted. During the fifteenth century the theme became centered on the power of women in the *minne* game, which was much like courtly love in that it emphasized true and chivalrous love. The chests were intended as private pieces, to be kept close to the receiver. The romantic association the hope chest holds is a clue as to its heritage.

The *cassone*, an important piece in the *ductio ad domum*, was a symbol of the journey into married life. It contained both the woman's dowry and the materials she would need to form a successful home. The *cassoni* were decorated in a way that was culturally significant, revealing both the importance of a display of wealth and the duty of the woman to remain virtuous and obedient. The hope chest functions in a similar way, being provided by the family and filled with the things that a proper housewife would need. The placement of the *cassone* in the home, at the foot of the bed, is a further similarity that reveals the hope chest's lineage.

The *Truhe* of the Pennsylvania Dutch were more humble in design than the *cassone*, but similar in intent. They were gifted by parents and designed with themes revolving around love and faith. They were important pieces in the home, used to hold household items for the newly-married couple and valuable items meant to be kept safe. This tradition is the most similar to that of the hope chest, though the *Truhe* received more

devoted attention in terms of manufacture and design, which is revealed by the county specific decoration done by professional furniture painters.

The hope chest, mass manufactured by large furniture companies, was either gifted by the parents of the woman or purchased by the woman herself. The items it held were obtained in the same way, either purchased from the woman's own wages or gifted by the family. They were an integral part of the journey into married life, hitting a peak in popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. The hope chest is failing to find a home in a society that has made great advances in feminism. Women of today, for the most part, do not view a career as a housewife as an immediate goal, making the tradition of the hope chest obsolete. Those chests passed on as heirlooms have become units of storage for keepsakes like photo albums and documents, unlikely to ever again serve their original purpose.

Through all of the forms analyzed here, a similar tradition has been maintained. From the *Minnekästchen* that were created to be an instrument in the courting process, to the *cassoni* that became an important showpiece in the marriage ceremony, and ending with the Pennsylvania Dutch *Truhe* and the modern hope chest that were family heirlooms filled in anticipation of marriage, these chests were an integral component in the first significant step in creating a new life for many young women through history.

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