



CHEST OVER DRAWERS

Lively, colorful designs decorate this large storage chest and tell us about where, when, and why it was made. Looking at the lid, we can find the year it was created, 1803, and the name of the person who first owned it, Margaret Bladt (here spelled Margreth Bladten). She lived in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and was a part of a large community of people known as the Pennsylvania Germans, who emigrated from various German-speaking regions of Europe in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (see maps below). She probably received this remarkable chest as a gift from her parents when she married her husband, John Nein. Traditionally, a bride filled a chest like this one with textiles such as tablecloths, clothing, and blankets that she and her new husband would use in their home.

1803

Poplar, white pine, painted decoration; brass, iron

30 3/4 x 54 1/4 x 22 3/8 inches (78.1 x 137.8 x 56.8 cm)

American, Pennsylvania German

Gift of Arthur Sussel, 1945, 1945-12-1

LET'S LOOK

What kinds of animals, people, and flowers can you find on this chest?

Describe the colors, lines, shapes, and patterns that you see.

Which shapes appear more than once? Where?

What kinds of materials were used to make this chest? How do you know?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

How would you describe the mood of the painted scenes? What do you see that makes you say that?

What could someone store inside this chest? For what else could it be used?

What does this chest make you wonder?

This chest's elaborate decoration reflects influences from Germany, England, and the United States. On the front of the chest, two proud unicorns rear upward, their bodies creating a mirror image of each other. In traditional German culture, these mythical animals were admired as symbols of purity. The artist also may have been inspired by the unicorn that appears in the British coat of arms, a symbol that Americans would have seen often. Pennsylvania's state coat of arms, which first appeared in 1778, might have influenced the design as well. This state symbol—still in use today—includes a pair of rearing horses in a similar position as the unicorns on the chest.



This photograph shows the inside of the chest and its two bottom drawers. The small till on the left could hold small or precious objects, and its top serves to hold the chest's lid open. Notice the interesting shape of the iron hinges that secure the lid. Can you find a similar shape elsewhere on the chest?

Red, yellow, green, and black tulips with pointed petals bend and twist in different directions on the front and top of the chest. The largest tulip emerges from a curved flowerpot at the unicorns' feet. These flowers would have reminded Margaret and her family of their ancestors' home in Europe, where tulips were plentiful. Horse and rider figures, complete with red coats, hats, and swords, appear below arched tulip stems on the front of the chest. These men could represent soldiers in the Continental Army and demonstrate pride in America for gaining independence from England during the American Revolution (1775–83). Two identical crowned figures hold tulips and playfully hover above the horses and riders. These figures are a traditional German motif that refers to a bride and groom such as Margaret and John.

Pennsylvania German artists often incorporated bold geometric designs into their painted decoration. In this chest, a red and navy zigzag pattern frames each panel on the front. A second border features diagonal lines alternating with rows of dots. Circular patterns with radiating lines appear along the top edge of the chest and on either side of the bottom drawers. As seen here, it was common to paint the background to look like woodgrain, probably using a sponge-painting technique.

From the inside out, painted storage chests were unique and personal. The beautiful decoration on the outside showed pride in Pennsylvania German heritage and the treasured textiles stored inside were useful and valuable. In addition, people often pasted important documents such as birth and marriage certificates on the inside lids of the chests. These documents celebrated important life moments and were similarly adorned with colorful decoration. Storage chests were cherished possessions that were frequently passed down from one generation to the next.

ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN ARTISTS

Pennsylvania German cabinetmakers, or craftsmen who built objects out of wood, made not only chests but also items such as chairs, beds, cradles, tables, and even coffins. Artists known as decorators usually painted the chests, but sometimes a cabinetmaker completed the decoration. Designs were often carved into the wood with a sharp instrument and painted using brushes, corncobs, feathers, or combs. The painted decoration made the chest beautiful and also protected the wood. Many artists who painted these chests, including this one, remain anonymous because they rarely signed their work.

In the eighteenth century, a distinct artistic style emerged among the Pennsylvania Germans who

lived throughout the southeastern part of the state. Similar to the decoration on this chest, the style is characterized by symmetry, bold colors, geometric designs, and natural motifs. Birds, flowers, stars, and hearts were especially popular. The Pennsylvania Germans decorated furniture and many other everyday objects such as plates, pots, cups, and even special molds to stamp patterns into the butter they churned.

PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN OR PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH?

German-speaking immigrants began to arrive in Pennsylvania during the late seventeenth century. They were drawn to the colony for its abundant land, plentiful resources, and religious tolerance. It is estimated that 75,000 German-speaking settlers arrived between 1683 and 1820. They settled in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties and established prosperous farming communities. Pennsylvania Germans emigrated from different parts of Europe, primarily areas that are now Switzerland and Germany (see map). They spoke different dialects of German and were from diverse



This map shows the areas of Europe where many Pennsylvania Germans lived before they immigrated to America.



This photograph shows the top of the chest, decorated with flowers, hearts, and geometric patterns. The name of the original owner of this chest, here spelled Margreth Bladten, appears at the bottom. The year 1803, when the chest was made, is shown near the top of design. Why do you think the decoration on the top of the chest is more worn than the front?

Christian denominations including Lutheran, Reformed, Mennonite, Moravian, and Amish. Sometimes an entire church congregation or a group of neighbors immigrated together, which helped maintain a sense of community and preserve cultural traditions. As time passed, these various groups developed a shared sense of cultural identity that still endures today.

The Pennsylvania Germans are also referred to as the "Pennsylvania Dutch." "Dutch" was the historic label used by the English for centuries to refer to the inhabitants of Germany. It is a misinterpretation of the German word "Deutsch," which means "German." Today, scholars refer to these early settlers and their descendants as the Pennsylvania Germans.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Pennsylvania Germans are one of many groups of people who have immigrated to the United States. Choose a time period in American history and research other groups of immigrants who settled in the United States during that time. When did they arrive? What were some reasons that they left their home country? Where did they settle? What cultural traditions did they bring with them? How have these traditions been shared with Americans who have different cultural backgrounds?



The green highlighted areas show the regions in southeastern Pennsylvania where many Pennsylvania Germans had settled by 1760. Contemporary county lines and names are shown for reference.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Unicorns are mythical creatures that combine features from several animals. They are often shown with the head and body of a horse, the hind legs of a deer, the tail of a lion, and a single horn. Research other mythical creatures such as griffins and dragons. What traits do each of them have? Create your own mythical animal by combining traits from your favorite animals. Remember to come up with a creative name for your imaginary animal.

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