

Doctoral (Ph.D.) Thesis

**CHANGES IN FOLK FURNITURE IN NORTHEASTERN HUNGARY FROM
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
UNTIL THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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a. Purpose of the Dissertation, Scope of the Topic

The study examines the history of folk furniture in northerneastern Hungary from the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century from three different perspectives.

1. We examine those processes that affected folk domestic culture, and the extent to which peasant domestic culture changed in the region in question, particularly in relation to the spatial layout of peasant dwellings and the style in which they were decorated. We seek to establish those features that were characteristic of northeastern Hungary, pointing to the historical and cultural processes that provided the catalyst for change, as well as the geographical limits and time scale involved.
2. We examine the historical development of folk furniture according to furniture type, looking at how the development of folk furniture in the area in question stood in relation to what was happening in Hungary as a whole. Examining those features characteristic of northeastern Hungary on a type by type basis, it was noticeable how styles and means of expression tended to lag behind what was happening elsewhere.
3. Of particular importance was the need to examine the places of manufacture. It emerged that folk furniture could be made by any one of a number of practitioners. These could be anything from specialists, craftsmen and trained cabinet-makers to furniture works and other places of organised production. Following an apprenticeship lasting many years with a guild cabinet-maker, carpenters would most frequently wander either throughout northeastern Hungary, or the towns that lay beyond, gaining experience working at various workshops. In our region, village traditions were maintained by families specialising in one particular craft, while it was at the furniture works that new types of furniture came onto the market, setting new fashions to the detriment of the furniture's previous individualism.

b. Explanation of Methods

The artifacts themselves provided the basis for the bulk of the paper. Between 2002-2005, as part of the National Research Development Programme (Nemzeti Kutatás Fejlesztési Program), the István Dobó Castle Museum hosted the “Tradition and Survival” (Tradíció és Továbbélés) research programme. One of the sub-projects involved was the creation of a digital database, the construction of which was managed by the dissertation’s author. Artifacts and photos of folk art that had been created or used in Heves County were collected. Research ultimately expanded to several public collections – three museums and nineteen historical preservation houses, operated by the local government, four cooperative and two large private collections. The resources and records of museums were utilized as well: the Ottó Herman Museum in Miskolc, the Déri Museum in Debrecen, the Palóc Museum in Balassagyarmat, and the János Damjanich Museum in Szolnok; additionally, national-level museums included the Folk Art Museum, the Szentendre Open-Air Folk Art Museum, and the Agricultural Museum. In all, the completed Heves County Folk Art database holds more than 25,000 records; among these, nearly 2,000 pieces are furniture. Though only artifacts stemming from Heves County were added to the database itself, research spread to the above-mentioned museums’ many north-eastern Hungarian furniture items. Museums consulted outside of Hungary proper included the Gömör-Kishonti Museum in Rimaszombat and the Mining Museum in Rozsnyó, as well as the museums in Fülek and Losonc. Simultaneously to the examination of the museum collections, research was conducted in their own databases and handwriting archives, as well as in national, county and foreign letter archives. The paper is incorporates this concurrent examination of artifacts and writings.

c. Presentation of Thesis Conclusions

When examining the centres of production it was necessary to establish exactly who the manufacturers were. The question of what level of craftsmanship characterised any given furniture type became an issue. Using historical sources it was possible to establish those processes and procedures that were instrumental in setting up a centre of production. With the benefit also of a wide range of material evidence the study outlines

the characteristic stylistic features and local similarities present at the region's folk furniture production centres throughout the region.

We have sources recording the general lack of furniture and other objects in folk domestic culture in northeastern Hungary at the end of the seventeenth century and in the first half of the eighteenth century. Inventories and damage assessments tend to contain a few items of furniture of little monetary value. Researchers have usually suggested that this is due to the general state of poverty in the wartorn years following the Turkish occupation. The data featured in this study, however, helps to provide a more detailed picture. Firstly, there was one section of the peasantry who enjoyed relative prosperity during the cereal boom of the first half of the eighteenth century. For them, unlike the majority, Maria Theresa's regulation of the labour statute proved to be a drawback rather than an advantage.

Having conducted a comparative price analysis for the decades covered in the study, which includes the prices for the furniture types favoured at any one time, it becomes clear that poverty is not a sufficient explanation for the lack of furniture, and that when poverty was an issue it only affected a particular section of the peasantry at any one time. Comparing the price of furniture with household goods, foodstuffs and the kind of clothing that couldn't be made at home, it becomes apparent that furniture was not entirely beyond people's means. For instance, there is hardly a piece of folk furniture in our region whose price would have exceeded that of a traditional shepherd's cloak.

Apart from the questions of household management and relative market prices it is only by looking at peasant attitudes during the period in question that we can hope to find an adequate explanation for the changes that went on in the way people lived. For the peasantry, labour was its defining feature, whether one farmed one's own land or tilled somebody else's. Those peasants with smaller plots of land invariably also had to hire out their services as a means of supplementing their income. The floor-space of the outbuildings was frequently four to six times larger than that of their dwellings, a ratio, however, that fell on the Great Plain, where it was not normal to build barns. Even there, however, outbuildings continued to exceed the dwellings in size. The building of substantial dwellings for larger families from materials that were readily available in the locality proved of less pressing importance than the construction of sufficient farm

buildings, for it was on these buildings that the livelihood of the family depended. It is a matter of peasant logic supported by the fact that only a small part of human activity took place in the dwelling. Some members of the family didn't even sleep there, and the space that was available was sufficient merely for the tasks of baking and cooking, and weaving and spinning in the winter. Eating in the home didn't take place on a regular basis, a table being placed outside in the yard in good weather and meals eaten out in the fields on workdays.

Family members did not possess many clothes, which explains why there was hardly any furniture for storage purposes. Where such furniture does appear it was used for storing formal or church clothes, which all being well everybody had. The changes that took place in domestic culture during the nineteenth century were accompanied by changes in peasant attitudes. This did not mean, however, that representative pieces dating from the eighteenth century, or indeed earlier, did not continue to find themselves in folk dwellings. Records from our period show painted chests and "old peasant" cupboards dating back to the seventeenth century. On account of their important role at wedding ceremonies, one of the most important events in village communities, particular care was lavished on bridal chests, especially up to the eighteenth century. Unfortunately in the seventeenth century the written sources are restricted to mere mentions of a particular furniture's existence rather than a description. From the second half of the century, however, we have examples of the objects themselves allowing one to detect the style and mode of manufacture that was characteristic of the region. Written records also suggest that storage furniture was the first of the contents of the peasant dwelling to show any signs of a specifically local style, occupying a very specific place within the living area positioned diagonally in one of the corners not occupied by the hearth. The number of dated examples in our region is however relatively small. The fashion of including the date of manufacture spread quicker on chests dependent on painted rather than surface decoration. Incised surface decoration was particularly characteristic of the trousseaux featuring human figures made in Gömör County.

There were two major periods of change in folk furniture in our period. At the end of the seventeenth century painted furniture could only be found among a very small section of the peasantry. In the eighteenth century painted furniture and furniture reliant

on incised motifs for its decoration existed side by side. Painted carpenter-made furniture made especially for the market can be found together with homemade pieces and furniture bought from specialists. Painted furniture became widespread during the nineteenth century, only to be replaced in the century's final decades by monochrome furniture made by cabinet makers, and factory-made furniture. The features that were characteristic of northeastern Hungary have been explored with the aid of numerous new sources.

The changes in folk furniture in the domestic culture of northeastern Hungary was by no means uniform either geographically or chronologically. Bridal chests, for example, continued to be used due to the important role they playing in the wedding celebrations. Their emotional importance also meant people were reluctant to part with them. For their children's trousseaux, however, they assembled items in the latest style.

Chests relying on incised rather than painted decoration retained their popularity much longer among the *Palóc* communities than was the case elsewhere, something explained partly by a preference for decoration of that kind on domestic furniture in Nógrád County as a whole. The study traces the characteristic features of *Palóc* furniture over several periods, showing that the *Palóc* population was more conservative and more eager to preserve their traditions. At the end of the nineteenth century chests could be made more marketable through the addition of plant and floral motifs found on other furniture and the application of red stain.

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the fashion for painted furniture was on the wane as new types of furniture started to appear. Chests began to be replaced by commodes containing drawers and standing on legs. Under the influence of bourgeois urban fashions such furniture was of one colour only, most frequently brown or black, rejecting the bright colours of before. The *Palóc* population, however, started painting their chests of drawers. Several examples from the Mátra region are included in the study.

The prestige items tended also to be the most beautiful pieces of folk furniture, whose importance was heightened by the place they occupied in the traditions surrounding courtship and marriage. As these tended to be made by trained craftsmen, the changes in decorative style and furniture types can be traced relatively easily. The first piece of prestige furniture was the chest, which would variously be drawn up alongside

the bed, the bench, the table and the chairs according to the season, although the preferred options would also change from place to place. There are great variations, however, in the numbers of trousseaux found in our region. During the nineteenth century furniture begins to be decorated in the style of the painted chests in northeastern Hungary, and our study records not only where and when this occurred, but among which ethnic groups and concerning what types of furniture. Although the painting of chests, benches and beds was widespread, the decoration of chairs, and even more rarely tables, only occurred in very specific areas, as was the case with the decoration of arm-rests with small brightly coloured flowers in Mezőkövesd and the *Matyó* villages. Tables painted red with black marbling from the Eger area have also found their way into museum collections.

The legged wardrobe first appears among the peasantry of northeastern Hungary at the end of the 19th century. Its use spread at a time when urban bourgeois styles were becoming popular, the simple brown wardrobe becoming common at the beginning of the 20th century. Only a few examples of painted floral wardrobes from our region can be found in our museum collections. Some items dating from the middle of the nineteenth century can be tied to ethnic German communities, like the wardrobes coming from Aldebrő in Heves County, where German agricultural labourers settled during the eighteenth century at a time when wardrobes were becoming common among the peasantry of a number of German provinces. There were craftsmen, some cabinet-makers, among the tradition-respecting Germans who arrived in the Eger area. It was probably they who made the wardrobes, as we have been unable to find any data suggesting that a Hungarian cabinet-maker worked for them. At the same time there is nothing to suggest that the Hungarian peasantry would have adopted the painted wardrobe from the German-populated villages, or even from villages like Egerszalók, where there was a mixed population,. Wardrobes containing painted floral motifs have tended to be ignored in accounts of Hungarian folk furniture in our region due to its patchy history.

At a number of points the study examines the parallels existing between developments in furniture and domestic culture in general. The relevant sources prove that the stylistic changes in folk furniture also led to changes in the way other household objects looked in northeastern Hungary. Mirrors, wall-clocks, picture frames, lighting

fixtures decorated in various different ways are to be found all over the region under examination. Not surprisingly there are very few survivals or written references to the way the peasantry used such objects in the eighteenth century. Objects harmonizing with the domestic furniture do appear however in considerable numbers during the course of the nineteenth century. It is only at the turn of the twentieth century that most objects, like the wall-clock for instance, become widespread albeit not in all regions. In some Heves villages interior furnishings included curtain-holders which were made by local specialists and craftsmen. To find such objects in peasant houses, which originally had no curtains at all, and only latterly had curtains held up by twine or rods, suggests it was an object that came from an urban milieu. The makers would invariably paint them and, in the case of those at Gyöngyöspata for example, emphasise the central section by adding picture frames. Stylistic changes also manifested themselves in other ways. In some areas, as in the case of several villages in the southern part of Heves County white walls were painted in other colours. In most cases it was the oven that was painted, a simple blue in Adács and in rich patterns incorporating human figures in Boldog.

Thanks to the dated pieces and sources we have it is possible to date the changes going on in furniture down to the nearest decade in most of the areas covered in this study. Apart from showing that the spread of painted furniture in northeastern Hungary varied according to the ethnographic group and region, the evolution of local styles can be traced. It is these features, and their geographical and chronological extent, that this study has been able to examine with the help of considerable source material and numerous examples courtesy of a number of private and local collections, and museums beyond the frontiers of present-day Hungary, many of them unlikely to be familiar to readers. It has made for a more detailed and nuanced account.

There were styles and associated centres of production that emerged in the period in question that were to have an effect on a substantial part of northeastern Hungary. The one-time county of Gömör-Kishont was one such place, whose influence in the field of incised wooden furniture has had the longest lasting effect. Written sources, as well as the objects themselves, tell us that dismantled cupboards and wooden flour-bins arrived from the hilly wooded landscape of Gömör to the markets of Miskolc, Eger and Gyöngyös by the wagonful as part of the traditional exchange of commodities that went on between the

two regions. Although the Gömör incised chest could be found in dwellings all over northeastern Hungary, its popularity was to decrease more rapidly in some areas than others. In an effort to supply what was a huge market for incised chests from the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of specialists in the villages of the hillier parts of northeastern Hungary started to make the furniture themselves. Despite their undeniable debt to Gömör, local traits can nevertheless be detected in such objects. In this respect particular mention should be made of the villages of Bélapátfalva and Mikófalva lying on the northern approaches of the Bükk, and Szuhahuta in the Mátra Hills. In the latter case, the disappearance of the glassworks led the Slovak population to make wooden utensils and furniture instead. At several points the study turns to the ethnic background of the furniture and its makers. The incised furniture in Gömör County for instance was made by both Hungarians and Slovaks. The written sources from second half of the eighteenth century describe the two biggest manufacturing centres Kiéte (Kyjatica, Slovakia) and Barbaret as being Slovak villages. In this case the question of ethnic identity is not particularly important owing to the fact that the carved incised chest could be found in the domestic culture of both populations. In the case of the Szuhahuta wood-carvers, on their own admittance they learned how to make wooden tools from the people of Gyöngyössolyomos, and armchairs from the local Hungarian millers.

For the spread of painted furniture it was necessary to pay greater attention to the target market. The Gömör manufacturers supplied markets and clients beyond the county's borders. In the eighteenth century there were many strands linking the styles of painted furniture made by the craftsmen of Gömör County and Miskolc. As late as the mid-eighteenth century we meet the work of the Gömör painted furniture makers in churches throughout northern Hungary. From the mid-century onwards, however, it is the cabinet-makers of Miskolc who attain prominence. Those who had started as provincial masters or apprentices for the guild in Kassa (Košice, Slovakia) had by the end of the century a guild of their own. The colours and motifs used in the painted liturgical furniture also had an effect on folk furniture. The beginning of the nineteenth century, however, witnessed a substantial change in style. Research has tended to suggest that it all started in Gömör County in the area around Rimaszombat (Rimavská Sobota, Slovakia). An analysis of the most recent sources available to us prove rather that the

Rimaszombat II. style didn't amount to a complete change as old colours and techniques continued to be in demand. From our research it has been possible to conclude instead that although a new style did emerge in Rimaszombat based on marbling effects and a distinctive bouquet design, it prompted the more significant changes in domestic folk culture of Borsod and Heves Counties, that came out of the carpentry centres of Miskolc, Mezőkövesd, Eger and Gyöngyös. The designs, which had by no means been slavishly dependent on those coming from Rimaszombat, had within a few decades become immediately distinguishable.

Although our examination of folk furniture has placed its emphasis firmly on peasant culture, it was nevertheless considered necessary to examine the way furniture was used among the lower nobility as well. There were parts of northeastern Hungary where the lower nobility made up a substantial proportion of the local population. For the majority their standard of living was no better than that of the local peasantry, their only privilege being that of being spared the need to pay tax. In Gömör County in particular we found several chests which contained inscriptions referring to noble ownership, despite the fact that their style and manner of decoration corresponded with those found on the chests used by the local peasantry.

The making of furniture was carried out by trained craftsmen, carpenters, the majority of whom either worked within the guild system in one of the region's towns, or as a provincial master elsewhere. Bolstered by the presence of the largest number of provincial masters the guild in Miskolc was able to boast the largest membership. The study looks at all the surviving documentary evidence relating to the cabinet-making guilds, paying particular attention to the similarities and differences existing across the region. The regulations applying to the way the guilds operated and the manner in which apprentices became masters can be seen in the privileges and articles. The training consisted primarily in becoming proficient in the skills of fashioning wood, joining, assembling and finishing. Apprentices also had to prove their proficiency in furniture painting. None of the official documents in the towns, however, tell us whether this latter skill was a key component of the training. In those towns where guilds were present the cabinet-makers either worked to order, or produced for the market place. The former were often known as "German cabinet-makers" and the latter "Hungarian cabinet-

makers”, owing to the fact that cabinet-makers working to order were making furniture for the urban bourgeoisie, many of whom spoke German as their mother tongue, particularly in the eighteenth century. The folk furniture was made by cabinet-makers producing for the market, who made up about half of all the cabinet-makers in existence according to the records of the Miskolc guild. This is a figure which was probably equally true for the other towns in the region. It wasn't necessary therefore for all cabinet-makers to be familiar with the arts of floral decoration and furniture painting. Our research shows that not all cabinet-makers producing directly for the market were able to paint furniture in the style favoured by a particular ethnographical area. The floral compositions found on folk furniture is invariably the work of a female hand, frequently belonging to a member of the cabinet-maker's family. From the beginning of the twentieth century furniture painting gradually declined in importance, becoming dated and old-fashioned. At the same time the activities of the cabinet-makers producing for the market, who now operated from furniture shops, were becoming ever more restricted. During the course of our research, however, we also came upon a number of villages where folk furniture-making traditions were being revived and cultivated. In Mezökövesd there is a folk craftsman who makes chairs, and the motifs found on Gömör incised chests are now being given new life in the making of folk toys.

d. List of Topical Works by the Author Published or Accepted for Publishing

- 1998 The folk handcraft industry in Heves. In: Folk art conferences in Heves County 12. 37-52. Eger.
- 2001 Historical folk art artifacts relating to the 19th-20th century handcraft industry in Heves. In: Studies on Heves. 427-464. Heves.
- 2005 Residential culture. In: Heves County's folk art 125-173. Eger
- 2006 Artifacts relating to the 17th-18th history of furniture in north-eastern Hungary. In: Agria. The István Dobó Castle Museum's Yearbook. XLII. 209-221. Eger
- 2007 Carpenters' franchises from north-eastern Hungary. In: Being Drawn to the Alföld. 283-291. Nagyköros-Debrecen
- 2007/a Folk furniture in Gömör. In: Agria. The István Dobó Castle Museum's Yearbook. XLIII. Eger (in process)

2007/b The village house and its furnishings. In: the Hóstyas of Eger (in process). Eger