

SIDE BY SIDE

Bride's Boxes

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

In German-speaking countries, the bride-to-be often received a gift of a brightly decorated box to hold mementos or small items. These boxes were crafted by Rebekah Smith based on motifs drawn from her Pennsylvania German ancestry. She frequently paints designs or adds *fraktur*-style artwork on the inside of the lid.

POPULAR IN GERMANY FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY BUT NEVER ON THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC, COLORFUL PAINTED BOXES SOMETIMES GIVEN AS WEDDING GIFTS HAVE BECOME TRADITION—AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FOLK ART—IN THE HANDS OF TODAY’S HERITAGE ARTISTS.

A bride smiles more brightly than the sun on her wedding day, but like sunshine her smile is hard to capture—especially in the centuries before photographers ruled the ceremonies. In 18th-Century German lands, the perfect wedding gift was a brightly painted wooden box that could grab some of the glow and relight the romance of the blessed day.

The bride’s box, modest in size but elaborate in decoration, became the repository for keepsakes from the occasion—lace, ribbons, perhaps a bit of jewelry, or even pressed flowers from the bouquet—the 18th Century’s version of an album of wedding photos.

The bride’s box flourished as both a matrimonial custom and a cottage industry in the German-speaking countries of Europe from about 1750 to 1850. It formed a specialized part of a more general trade in *span-schachteln*—from the German *span* for wood splint and *schachteln* for box—that included lightweight but sturdy boxes for hats, clothing, documents, and other household items requiring protection from dirt, sunlight, and insects.

When German-speaking people sought new lands, opportunities, and freedoms by immigrating to the New World, they carried with them the tradition of giving each new bride a gift box. Most immigrants remained loyal to their homeland, however, and imported their bride’s boxes from European makers.

Although some American box-makers adopted the German folk art decorating style, they did not assume the tradition—no American-made bride’s box is known to experts—until modern times.

Today the quaint beauty of the old German bride’s boxes continues to inspire some of America’s finest

folk artists to create stunning replicas and adaptations of European boxes for brides as well as folk art collectors. We selected four artists from our Directory of Traditional American Crafts to explain the attraction and discuss the special boxes they paint for today’s brides.

ORIGIN OF A CUSTOM

Methods of constructing *span-schachteln* remained fairly constant in Europe from the middle ages through the mid-19th Century. Box-makers thinly planed knot-free strips of wood then soaked them in hot water until they were pliable. They clamped the limp strips around molds to create the oval shape—some strips wider for the bodies of the boxes, some narrower for lids.

To finish the ends of the strips, they often lapped and laced them with leather or willow reed. Sometimes they just glued them. They fastened the box bodies to wooden bases

and lids to a top rim with tiny wooden pegs or headless metal tacks.

Medieval monks employed this process to make the earliest *span-schachteln* intended as mundane cartons. “The first of these well-made boxes were used as storage containers for such items as medicines, food, sweets, sewing supplies, and toys, supplementing baskets and leather sacks,” according to Linda Lefko, an authority on early American art forms who has studied the boxes for three decades.

With the utilitarian popularity of the boxes steadily growing, a box-making industry arose in the 18th Century in parts of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. “Some box shops kept the entire family busy—adult men cut the wood, children cut out the bottoms, older boys cut out the sides, and the older girls assembled all the pieces,” Lefko said.

The bride’s box tradition formed as boxes beautifully decorated with



This well-worn box shows several characteristics of early-1800s German wooden boxes, especially the laced bindings on the sides to hold the bent wood in place. With simple floral designs on the top and sides, the box could have functioned as a traditional bride's box or for storing household items.

COURTESY OF AS GOOD AS OLD, LOWER GWYNEDD, PENNSYLVANIA

milk-based paints and matte finishes started appearing in continental markets during the 1700s. A new industry developed just to paint the boxes.

"Boxes were not always painted by their makers," Lefko noted. "A *schachtelmaler*, or box painter, would add decorations to finished but unpainted boxes. Usually the *schachtelmaler* was one of a family line of decorators, sometimes men, sometimes women."

Folk art renditions of roses and tulips, vines and tendrils, and lively leaves wrapped around the sides of the boxes and onto the lids, framing pastoral landscapes, scenes of village

life, angels, and other religious themes along with written sentiments painted in Germanic script.

By 1750, the true bride's box had appeared, frequently featuring images of brides and grooms amid sentimental messages such as "To you my life I give," and "You are my only love." The popularity of bride's boxes would last until about 1850 before industrialization replaced the handcrafted *spanschachteln*.

IN AMERICA—FINALLY

Today modern artisans have recreated the bride's box tradition, some replicating classic designs pre-

cisely, others using the traditional style as an inspiration for their own creativity. Customers can choose an accurate reproduction of a vintage bride's box or an artist's unique rendition of one.

"I strictly stick to the original designs on the boxes," said Jean Sage, a longtime member of the prestigious Historical Society of Early American Decoration (HSEAD) and a collector of antique bride's boxes. "I don't go out and design one of my own—these are all original designs from actual early boxes."

Two other folk artists we talked to enjoy painting Pennsylvania German designs on boxes, influenced but not confined by historical examples. "I like the freedom of doing them the way I want to do them," said Sharon Ascherl. Rebekah Smith concurs, bringing extensive knowledge of Pennsylvania German design to her one-of-a-kind bride's boxes.

Christa Smith relies on historical designs, although she noted, "Not every pattern fits every box, so I make some adjustments, but I stay as close to the original as possible."

All four artists use acrylic paint, which closely matches the bright yet flat tones of the old milk paint but yields a more enduring finish. All makers take steps to tone down their final products.

Unlike artisans in other 18th- and 19th-Century crafts who challenge experts to tell their skillfully

A pristine German bride's box from the early 1800s depicts a romantic couple in formal attire on the lid. The sides are a complex arrangement of geometric shapes and floral designs. Measuring about 18 inches long, it sold at auction last year for about \$650.



INSET
Box-makers typically used leather or willow to lace the ends of the box body together.
COURTESY POOK & POOK, INC., DOWINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA

aged reproductions from antiques, artists making bride's boxes today are reluctant to gouge, scratch, and muddy the box's surface to give it the look of another 200 years passing. That's because many of these boxes are to be given as wedding presents and the emphasis is on beauty.

"Mellow" is the term these artists favor. "I don't distress them a lot, just enough to give them a more mellow look," said Rebekah Smith. Likewise, Christa Smith mixes her own aging medium and applies it "just enough to take the brightness off of the box so that it's mellow." Ascherl echoed, "I'll add an antiquing glaze to give the box a bit of a

mellow, antique look."

"I use an antiquing mixture that I make up myself and I rub it on to give the surface a warm patina, but I don't scratch them up or anything like that. I just want that really nice patina," Sage explained.

Because most bride's boxes are custom-made, the artist can add the married couple's name and wedding date to the decoration. But most people prefer more anonymity to preserve the appearance of antiquity.

Christa Smith, a native of Germany, encloses a certificate inside the box. Other artists work similarly. Rebekah Smith decorates the inside of her bride's boxes, sometimes includ-

ing a *fraktur* on the inside lid with the pertinent wedding information.

Sage also uses the inside of the box for personalization, but is unyielding that the exterior be a replica of an actual antique bride's box. "If they want some intimate thing on the inside of the box that's fine," she said. "But on the outside of the box, it's always the original style from the late 1700s or early 1800s."

Ascherl prefers to put the bride's and groom's names and wedding date on the bottom of the box yet is amenable to personalized designs for the top. "One time a lady was ordering one for her daughter who was marrying a midshipman at Annapo-

This colorful early-19th-Century wooden box could have served as a bride's box or perhaps as another form of *spanschachteln*, or German box. The lid has a scenic painting of a goat herder with an inscription that translates, "It gives me happiness tending my goats." The quality of painting on this box is exceptional, particularly in the blossoms, leaves, and tendrils that twine around the sides. The ends are lapped and laced as was typical of most bride's boxes.

COURTESY OF AS GOOD AS OLD, LOWER GWYNEDD, PENNSYLVANIA





Sharon Ascherl copied the painting of a Hessian soldier from an early bride's box. Although this box is a reproduction, most of Ascherl's bride's boxes are her own designs based on period subject matter and decorative techniques.

lis, so I went to the library and looked up midshipmen of the early 1800s, and I painted the groom's outfit as an early midshipman's uniform," she said.

"A woman told me that she has a couple getting married, and their dog is their life. And I said, 'Well, if you tell me what the dog looks like and can send me a picture, I can probably put him in the painting, too.' I try to work with people."



Sharon Ascherl

SHARON ASCHERL

With her German-French lineage and her husband a native German, Sharon Ascherl has deep connections with German folk art and proudly calls herself a *schachtelmaler*.

A painter since she was a child, she first became acquainted with bride's boxes about thirty years ago. "I saw one someplace and did some investigating and found I couldn't afford one—they were just too expensive," she recalled. "So I decided I could make one. I got some books with patterns and pictures of the old ones, found a place to get the boxes, and I just began painting.

Of German-French descent, Sharon Ascherl bills herself as a *schachtelmaler*, the German term for box painter. This example features a formally dressed couple from the Empire period, her favorite era to depict. She often personalizes the bottoms of her boxes.

Jean Sage bases her bride's boxes on early-19th-Century German boxes from her personal collection. A purist, she limits personalization to a label on the inside of the box to avoid deviating from the original designs.

"I painted one for myself and my family liked it," she continued. "I started giving them away as presents and people were thrilled. Then I found a shop in Annapolis and I did very well selling them, and it just took off from there."

Raised in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay region, Ascherl is an accomplished folk artist who offers a large selection of paintings and prints along with her bride's boxes. The latter range from \$150 for an 11-inch box to \$200 for a 15-inch box, sold through her web site and an occasional regional show.

Ascherl obtains museum-quality boxes from a supplier and decorates them using 18th-Century German folk motifs and other sources as well as her own imagery. "My favorite is the Empire period, the Jane Austen period. I love that style of dress and everything else about the period, and I use it on my bride's boxes."



Jean Sage

This brightly colored box is a replica Jean Sage created from one in her collection of German bride's boxes from the late 1700s and early 1800s. She is drawn particularly to the bright yet flat colors of the originals as well as the intricate floral patterns typical of many of them.





JEAN SAGE

An artist accomplished in several forms of early American decoration, Jean Sage relies on her personal collection of vintage bride's boxes for many of the designs that adorn her reproductions.

A member of HSEAD since the 1970s, Sage has earned guild status for her abilities in painted country tin, stenciling, gold leaf, freehand bronze, and reverse glass painting. She also earned an HSEAD award for a stenciled-and-gold-leaved tray, making her among today's most accomplished traditional American artists. Her work has been exhibited in the American Folk Art Museum in New York, and she contributed an ornament to the White House Christmas tree in 1999.

"My chief interest is in decorated furniture and, for some reason, the bride's boxes just caught my eye," she recalled. "They were such a folksy way of painting and very different from the American tin painting that I just took a big interest in them. I bought several of them because I wanted to paint them myself, so I found somebody who could take my original bride's boxes and duplicate them for me. I could then take the patterns from my originals and reproduce them."

Sage lives in Rochester, New

Bavarian by birth, Christa Smith is drawn to the German folk art designs that adorn authentic bride's boxes, although she modifies some of them to accommodate a particular box's size and shape. She also prefers brightly colored boxes over some of the dark ones she has seen on visits back to her homeland. For personalization, she prefers to include a certificate inside the box.





Christa Smith

York, and offers a brochure showing the different styles of bride's boxes, which cost from about \$275 to \$365.

She purchases her boxes from a woodworker in Pennsylvania. "He does a beautiful job, taking an original box and duplicating it for me in any size I want," she said. "They're basically 19 to 20 inches long and about 12 or 13 inches wide."

She personalizes her replicas with a label on the inside while retaining only the authentic period designs on the outside.

CHRISTA SMITH

Long involved in the world of folk painting, Christa Smith of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, became intrigued with German bride's boxes several years ago. "I'm from Bavaria and most of those boxes were painted in Bavaria," she recalled, so on a visit to Germany she purchased an early wooden box. "I thought, 'I have to first practice so that I know what I'm going to put on that old little box.'"

She bought some new wooden boxes and tried painting them using historic bride's box patterns, and sold a few. So she kept practicing and soon was selling her bride's boxes at some of Kentucky's top folk art sites such as Berea College, the Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea, and Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill.

"It took me a little while, but I found the market for my bride's boxes," she said. "And, by the way, that first little old box is still not painted."

She paints about thirty different styles of bride's boxes, still available through the Berea outlets and the

Shaker museum. Her smallest box is 11 inches long for \$150, up to about \$350 for a box 20 inches long. When the bride's box is to be a gift, Smith includes a certificate with the pertinent names and dates and the translation of any German script on the box.

For more than a decade, a woodworker in Indiana has made the boxes specifically for her. After painting a box, she applies multiple layers of satin varnish and a final buffing with beeswax polish. "It rewards the effort because you can tell the difference, like the icing on the cake."

REBEKAH SMITH

Bride's boxes are among several objects—other styles of early boxes, furniture, country tin, Rufus Porter-style murals—that Rebekah Smith skillfully adorns with folk art designs of Pennsylvania origin.

"I grew up in Pennsylvania and have a long history of Pennsylvania Germans on both sides of my family," said Smith, who now lives in the Western Reserve town of Chester-



Rebekah Smith

land, Ohio. "When I began painting folk art after I graduated from art school, I was drawn to the Pennsylvania German style because that's been my first love in folk art.

"I find boxes in general to be very appealing, which is why I paint a lot of them," she explained. "What I find especially appealing about the bride's boxes is that they're different



Rebekah Smith personalizes many of her boxes as wedding gifts by including *fraktur*-style artwork on the inside of the lid.



Rebekah Smith often adorns her bride's boxes with period designs of her own interpretation, such as tulips and hearts, motifs typical of Pennsylvania German folk art.

than your basic document box. There's a lot more you can do with the bentwood boxes, an endless number of motifs you can put on them. And they have such an intriguing history."

She utilizes historical designs and draws upon her wide knowledge of Pennsylvania folk art to create bride's boxes that are unique and highly personal. She often covers the box interiors with hand-embellished and stenciled paper.

Smith sells most of her bride's boxes by special order, with prices ranging from \$95 to about \$350 depending on the box size and design complexity.

"People tell me if they like birds, or tulips, or if there's something specifically that they don't like," she explained. "But for the most part, they leave the design up to me and that's worked out very well." ★

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

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An Invented Tradition:

Bride's Boxes in America

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

IT SEEMS A REASONABLE ASSUMPTION THAT GERMANS SETTLING IN PENNSYLVANIA IN THE 1700S CONTINUED TO MAKE BRIDE'S BOXES AND GIVE THEM AS WEDDING GIFTS, BUT NO HISTORICAL EVIDENCE SUPPORTS IT.

Although the custom of giving brides these special boxes was popular in parts of Europe for at least a century, there is no evidence—popular lore to the contrary—that true bride's boxes ever were made in America in the 18th and 19th Centuries or that the widespread custom surrounding them ever took hold here, even among the Pennsylvania Germans.

"Bride's boxes in the continental manner with elaborate floral and figural imagery as well as inscriptions were not made in Pennsylvania," noted Lisa Minardi, an assistant curator at Winterthur Museum and co-author with Wendy A. Cooper of *Paint, Pattern & People: Furniture of Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1725-1850*. "That said, there were painted oval boxes made in Pennsylvania of a similar form, albeit with less elaborate decoration."

Boxes for storing things were a necessity, and many people made them, including both Shakers and Pennsylvania Germans. While the former did not decorate their products (other than by giving them a good coat of paint), many immigrant Germans did paint folk motifs on the boxes they made.

"One sizeable group of these boxes is thought to have been made in Lancaster County from about 1800 to 1840 and often are referred to as 'Bücher boxes' after the erroneous assumption that a Heinrich Bücher made them when, in fact, he was one of many owners of such boxes," Minardi continued.

"These boxes typically have flowers and sometimes buildings painted on a black ground and come in several different shapes, most commonly a rectilinear form of about two inches high, and less often an oval form that is similar to European examples."

Linda Lefko, who has studied and made decorated boxes for about thirty years, is particularly adamant on this point. "There is absolutely no evidence of Pennsylvania painters doing the typical German bride's boxes," she said. "Bride's boxes were made in the 1700s and early 1800s and they're European. They're not American. You can tell by the wood.

This early-1800s German bride's box shows a formally dressed couple on the lid and a flower pattern on the sides. It is about 16 inches long.

COURTESY OF AS GOOD AS OLD, LOWER GWYNEDD, PENNSYLVANIA

There were Pennsylvania painters of oval boxes, but none that resemble bride's boxes or that were used for the same intent."

Confusion between the popular legend and historical fact likely lies with the specific label, Minardi suggests. "Although these boxes are often referred to as 'bride's boxes,' I'm not sure that this is really a period term rather than a collector's term. Likely all manner of objects were stored in these boxes, and unless they have firm documentation or inscriptions making it clear that they were intended as a wedding present, it's really hard to know why they were given and how they were used."

A similar misnomer is "Scandinavian bride's box." This label is inaccurately applied to similar wooden boxes decorated with Norwegian rosemaling or other Scandinavian folk art motifs and used to hold a variety of household items. Presenting special boxes to Scandinavian brides never was a formalized tradition.

Undoubtedly some Pennsylvania German settlers created wooden oval boxes in the traditional style and might have inscribed them with matrimonial messages and given them to brides in the manner of the Old World custom, but no proven examples have surfaced. Boxes purported to be bride's boxes of Pennsylvania origin are generally either German imports or never were intended specifically as bride's boxes—despite what some antiques dealers and auction houses might claim.

Even if they are not truly bride's boxes, wooden boxes of Pennsylvania origin usually command higher prices today in America than European boxes. "Condition and rarity of design will drive pricing, and you can expect retail pricing between \$1,000 and \$2,000 for continental boxes," according to Doug Robinson, owner of the As Good as Old shop in Lower Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, and a frequent buyer and seller of both continental and Pennsylvania boxes.

"Boxes made domestically, especially from Pennsylvania, can command prices well above this range," he said, noting that condition as well as origin affect price. "We see continental boxes in poor condition, not worthy of a collector's interest, sell for less than \$500.

And if a Pennsylvania box, signed and in very good condition, came up for sale in our area, we would expect to see a five-digit price tag." *

