

# German Decorated Boxes

TEXT AND IMAGES BY LINDA CARTER LEFKO

We live in a world of sophisticated decoration that bombards our senses with beautiful fabrics, bountiful colors on walls, and stylish accoutrements to furnish our homes. The spontaneously simple designs on decorated *span-schachteln* (*schachteln* meaning boxes; *span*, wood shavings) popular from 1750-1850 in the states that make up modern Germany provide a refreshing and rewarding break. These oval boxes, made from thin or shaved wood, were often given to a bride-to-be to hold the smaller items of her trousseau such as linens, lace, and ribbons. Although such bridal gifts account for only a fraction of the oval decorated German boxes familiar to collectors today, in America *span-schachteln* are most often termed “bride’s boxes.”

In addition to accommodating the trousseau, larger boxes stored elaborate women’s headwear called *trachtenhauben*, men’s fur hats, christening gowns, bridal jewelry, and important documents. The surprisingly strong boxes could then be placed in chests to protect their delicate contents from pressure, household dirt, moths, and light. Often the boxes protected prized items that were to be passed from one generation to the next. Boxes ranged in size from nineteen inches long to a miniscule three inches and were oval or rectangular with rounded corners. The larger boxes could hold as many as twenty boxes in graduated sizes, packed one inside the other, for shipping.

The custom of giving a decorated box as a gift on various occasions has



Highly decorated box, 8" x 6", rectangular with rounded corners, probably from Berchtesgaden, Germany, early 19th century.



Side panel of a Viechtauer Valley box from southern Germany. The rich transparent background color remains bright under the lid, where it was protected from exposure to the light. Split reed closures tack down the overlap.

been documented throughout history. Today many collectors believe bride's boxes to be an American craft, but many decorated boxes formerly attributed to the Pennsylvania Germans were actually made and decorated in Europe and brought here by the Central European immigrants.

The origins of this type of box-making are definitely European. The industry has been documented as far back as the Middle Ages when the monks near Ammergau encouraged woodworkers to use the Bavarian pine forests to make boxes. Workers living in Baden-

Württemberg near Berchtesgaden, in what is now southeastern Germany, produced the first documented boxes in 1541. Others were made in the Viechtauer Valley in Upper Austria, and even into northeastern Switzerland. Many of the forests were state controlled, and those who worked in them were generally poor and rarely recorded what they did.

A guild system likely controlled box-making and required a two-year apprenticeship before a craftsman earned a master's title. Guild members were forbidden to work elsewhere for

fear they would divulge the shop's box-making techniques. 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 older girls assembled all the pieces. The box maker occasionally branded the bottoms of his products with a stamp and initials.

To make a box, workers soaked thin, knot-free strips of birch, basswood, linden, or maple in hot water until they became pliable. Makers then fitted the thin strips around molds, clamped them, and left them to dry. Where the ends lapped, the workers pierced and bound them together with split willow or reed. (The technique used to bind the overlapping ends often gives a clue as to the shop where a box was made.) They cut a base and lid from thicker pine and secured them to the side strips with wooden pegs and later with small headless nails. Smaller boxes were simply lapped and glued. The depth of the lid varied. Some lids were blocked with interior spacers so that when closed, the lid did not go all the way down and

1/2 page horz  
with heart and hand





Small (4" in diameter) *Godendosen*, probably Austrian, with religious painting on the lid, often a gift from godparents to an infant at baptism.

RIGHT:

Late-18th or early-19th-century bride's box, 19" x 11". The baroque clothing and spiral ornamentation suggest a box from middle Germany.

TOP:

This 19" x 12" box is unusual in that it has an unpainted background beneath large fruit and pomegranates in a symmetrical design. Construction and lacing indicate it was probably made in central German in the first half of the 18th century.



allowed more of the decorative side panel to show.

Little documentation exists to trace the development of the box industry. Records from 1840 have been found for the Kingdom of Saxon, where 102 box makers were listed along with 236 clock makers, 2,356 furniture makers, and 10,085 shoemakers. Small home-based woodworking shops produced toys, figurines, plates, and boxes. Records indicate that buyers traveled to the shops in small mountain towns and collected boxes to bring into a larger town market or fairground, where handmade goods were sold.

Shoppers traveled from the northern and western German states and as far away as the Netherlands to buy boxes.

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. Physicians and veterinarians found uses for them, and the military handed out shoe polish in them. Churches used a variety of sizes and shapes for storage and celebration.

Artists quickly realized that an ornamented box would be more appealing to consumers, and decorated boxes began to appear at the annual markets during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Simple dots, strokes, and flourishes formed flowers. Wealthier customers wanted their boxes decorated for both personal use and gift-giving. The demand for decoration created a new box-painting industry.

Boxes were not always painted by their makers. 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. Box painters most often used a milk-based paint for exterior decorations, resulting in a matte or chalky appearance. Boxes made in the Thüringen area, however, seem to keep their color longer and be more resistant to flaking. Dry pigments may have been added to a type of shellac, giving the paint added strength and luster. Sometimes the box painters carved or burned designs into the wood surface, then embellished them with paint. Box makers did not stain or paint the box bottom or interior. Families developed different styles of decoration and special recipes for their paint, which they kept secret.

Certain styles of decoration can be identified with specific regions, although determining whether a particular artist painted a given box is difficult or impossible because the boxes were almost never signed. The signatures found on some boxes can be misleading because they are as likely to be the name of the person for whom the box was painted as they are to be the name of the painter.

Near Berchtesgaden, in the southeast corner of modern Germany close to Salzburg, Austria, a group of *schachtelmalers* stained their box backgrounds with a thin transparent layer of color believed to be made from natural berry dyes. The stain formed a base color for the simple stroke decoration on top of it. Sometimes the decoration was stamped. The Berchtesgaden Museum has a variety of round-pronged wooden tools, in all sizes, which were used to stamp perfect daisy-like flowers into the pigment and onto the box surface. Many of the boxes from around Berchtesgaden have a lacy sponged edge and were typically rectangular with rounded corners.

Early painters in what is now northern Germany painted stiff, stylized tulips on the side panel, paying little thought to perspective or to making the designs realistic. Box makers in the Viechtauer Valley region of Upper Austria around Neukirchen produced early painted boxes with a *zwiebelmuster*, or onion bulb, pattern on them using a very limited palette—white, deep blue, and yellow ochre. The bulbous, abstract

flowers were arranged on the lid and then formed a continuous line around the side. Later patterns were more conventional in flower interpretation with colorful backgrounds.

Eighteenth-century painted box decorations were sometimes religious and allegorical, such as the images of saints that occasionally appeared on boxes from Berchtesgaden. Elongated boxes were designed and painted to store the family's crucifix and religious relics. Small, turned wooden containers with wooden threaded lids were called *Godendosen* in Austria, where the custom developed for godparents to commission a painted box, put money in it for the newborn, and present it at the baptism.

During the nineteenth century, makers in the central and northern German states used a strong opaque background color—blue, green, vermilion, or white—in their box decoration. On this colorful background, decorators painted flowers, animals, human figures, and landscapes, often including mottos within the confines of wide and narrow stripes and bands. Figures

dressed in period clothing—long vests on the men, baroque fancy dresses on the women—help date the boxes.

As the century progressed, motifs gradually changed to horizontal placement on the lid. The boxes appear to be painted freehand, fresh and spontaneous, with no evidence of stenciling or pattern transfer. The artists were truly skilled and filled the entire surface of the large box with bright paint and lively brushstrokes. Flowers—most often tulips and roses—and pomegranates grew around the side panel of the box, carrying out the color scheme from the lid. The motifs twined in one direction on the box and a different direction on the lid.

Scenic landscapes often included sayings. In the early nineteenth century, some box painters added inscriptions to their work, a phrase or motto that often followed the contour of the box lid. The sentiments covered nearly every emotion: irony, satire, romance, and humor. A typical verse was “To you my life I give,” although inscriptions could be more pointed, like “All young ladies on this earth would like well to become wives.”

1/2 horz  
mercier mueum



On a box depicting a bride and groom seated on a bench, it appeared that the wife was pushing the man off the bench toward a blazing cauldron. The inscription read, "I will go now, my dear Fritz, and cook you some nice applesauce." Some messages were playful, like the buxom lass saying to a gentleman, "Come on and let me kiss you. My husband does not have to know everything." Others were philosophical: "Hope will bring us nearer to our dreams."

The descendants of Michael Greiner (1852-1944), a *schachtelmaler* from Steinach in Thuringerwald, owns a family album that documents inscriptions that had been used by their family of box painters back to the seventeenth century. It records more than 300 inscriptions that had been painted on boxes over the years, all by different hands. The inscriptions did not seem to use local dialects, indicating that the box makers intended their work to be widely distributed. The scarcity of dates on the boxes suggests that they were taken to market season after season until they were sold.

Oval painted *spanschachteln* dating from the mid-1800s occasionally have a lithograph decouped on the lid, with a beautifully painted floral side panel. Pasting a picture on the central area of the lid and then painting a suitable inscription around it was less time-consuming for the box painter. Since the same side motifs have been found with different lithographs and sayings on the lids, decorators may have used a model for the patterns on the side panel. Boxes decorated in this manner are less valuable than completely hand-painted examples.

The Industrial Revolution brought an end to the box-making industry and box painting. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, mechanization shortened the box-making process, and cheaper paper and tin containers replaced handmade wooden boxes. ★

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TOP: *Zweibelmuster*, or onion bulb, pattern typical of the Viechtauer Valley around Neukirchen by Gmunden in Upper Austria. This 11" x 3 1/2" box was probably a candy or sweets container.

CENTER: This 15" x 9" box, probably from middle Germany, early 19th century, has a rich blue background with a simple floral bouquet. Note the repeating border going in one direction on the bottom and in the opposite direction on the lid.

BOTTOM: The opaque background paint and scenic image on this 19" x 11" box is typical of the decorating style in middle and northern Germany in the mid-19th century. The inscription translates "Whoever is not helpful, it reflects back on you" or "You reap what you sow."

## COLLECTING DECORATED BOXES

With the current interest in folk art and decorating, the ornamented bride's box is enjoying a revival. Throughout Germany, almost every town has a *Heimatmuseum*, akin to our local historical societies. In each of them you will find wonderful painted pieces, including bride's boxes that are indicative of the area in which the town is situated.

Today painted wooden boxes are difficult to find in the German antiques marts, perhaps because pickers who know of the American interest in these boxes are rapidly exporting them for resale here. Painted European boxes are not uncommon in booths at antiques shows in the United States. In addition, many modern craftsmen make new boxes using the same techniques and decorative styles as European antiques.

You can judge the age of an antique box both by construction technique and shrinkage of the wood. The wood used for making the box can also help you determine whether it is an American or European product. The wood grains of European species look different than American softwoods. The paint of most antique bride's boxes has a chalky appearance, but the colors remain bright because early boxes were never varnished. Natural resins and oils in varnish yellow as they age, altering the original paint colors.

Bigger is not always better when determining the value of a bride's box. The highly decorated eight-inch box shown on page 22 is worth more than some of the larger boxes because of its distinctive size, condition, and quality of decoration. Small, highly decorated boxes are uncommon. Condition is also an important factor in setting value. The sides of the lids are so thin that as they dry out and age, they often split around the circumference of the box, leaving half the depth of what should be there. Occasionally the sides of the box themselves split and might be reglued. Check the interior of the box for repairs before you invest in one.

To be safe, buy from a reputable dealer and pay only what you feel is fair. Set your limits before you start negotiating. Prices can range from as little as \$175 to several thousand dollars. Ideally, you should actually hold the piece and examine it before buying. Although on-line auction sites have wonderful digital pictures, you cannot judge the physical aspects of a box without holding it in your hands. Be sure you are allowed a return privilege in case the box is not as represented.

*Maine Antique Digest* ([www.maineantiquedigest.com](http://www.maineantiquedigest.com)) usually has two or three bride's boxes advertised among its dealer ads. Merritt's Antiques ([www.merritts.com](http://www.merritts.com)), in Douglassville, Pennsylvania, imports containers from Europe and occasionally sells bride's boxes. Cupboards and Roses ([www.cupboards-androses.com](http://www.cupboards-androses.com)), in Sheffield, Massachusetts, also offers boxes. The more you look at old paint, the more comfortable you will be investing in it.

1/6th vert  
authentic designs

## SOURCES

### GERMAN MUSEUMS WITH BRIDE'S BOX COLLECTIONS:

BAYERICHES NATIONAL MUSEUM  
Munich

BERCHTESGADENER MUSEUM  
Berchtesgaden

BRAUNSCHWEIGISCHEN  
LANDESMUSEUM  
Braunschweig

GERMANISCHES  
NATIONAL MUSEUM  
Nürnberg

HEIMATMUSEUM  
Ruhpolding and Berchtesgaden

HESSISCHEN LANDESMUSEUM  
Kasse

SPIELZEUGMUSEUM  
in Sonneberg, Thüringen

WESTFÄLISCHES FREILICHTMUSEUM  
Detmold

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country road  
associate