Where high art and folk art meet – how rural pieces of furniture depict the differences. Techniques, tools and textures used in rural workshops to upgrade furniture

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This paper, presented at the 13th International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation, explores the different functions of furniture, what furniture represented, and how it was decorated. Using examples of courtly, bourgeois and rural furniture from the region known as Hohenlohe-Franconia, it is demonstrated how village joiners imitated different kinds of woods and elaborate designs like inlay and marquetry with the use of colour only.

Different functions of furniture in society

For more than a thousand years, furniture in the cultures of Europe has fulfilled several functions. In all social classes, it served first of all as the storage of objects of daily use, of clothing, or in churches and monasteries of the keeping of ritual equipment and instruments. Another important purpose derived from eating and sleeping habits. The shape and size of the furniture were first of all determined by their practicability and usefulness. In different walks of life, however, other functions soon emerged.¹

Accordingly, furniture was used to demonstrate the wealth or social status of its owner, to document claims of power, and therefore, it also served representative purposes. A third aspect emerged mainly in modern society. It is the convenience and comfort that furniture can support and also express visually. Such furniture is more about issues of physical well-being, rest and relaxation. This aspect mainly affects seating and lounge furniture.

As a result of this we can easily understand that for a long time the aspirations of nobility and aristocracy and the rather barren and labour-driven environment of the rural population have formed two opposing poles of living quality, furnishings and furniture.

Social prestige played a much greater role in the upper social classes, the clergy, the nobles and the prestigious bourgeoisie in the cities than for the craftsmen and peasants in the countryside. Furniture served to convey their status to others.

The decorative and representative role of furniture such a representative role of furniture was not only achieved by its prominent size, but also through eye-catching decoration and through prominent features in the display of its front side. The representative function finds its expression in the use of decorative elements with artistic aspirations. Therefore, it may also be said that there is an additional decorative requirement which must be considered alongside the representative one. Ornamentation and colours were used as a possibility to beautify a room. Thus decor was a decisive factor. Hence, at different times and in different countries and regions, the decor expressed itself in time-specific and country-specific forms.

Influencing factors on the embellishment of furniture

The decor of noble furniture was always influenced by the current trends in art history. Elements of painting, graphics and architecture have found their various ways into the arts and crafts and also into the furniture design practiced by well-trained artisans at court and in the cities.

The decoration of rural furniture with ornamental elements reflects different backgrounds. It originated first from the heritage of mystical and religious symbolism, which was based on signs of salvation and defence. Some of the elements go far back into history, even into times before Christian beliefs, when people practised natural religions. These ancient people already used simple, geometrical, but very symbolical signs that in their understanding had a close relation to nature or were used to keep away evil (figure 1).²

In trying to further embellish and structure the surface, a more complex but nevertheless still popular decoration of furniture developed over time. Their creators made use of simple geometrical shapes

Figure 1  Bride’s chest, St. Florian, 17th /18th century, taken from F.C. Lipp, Oberösterreichische Bauernmöbel, p. 25. Courtesy of Oberösterreichische Landesmuseen Linz.
with circles, triangles as well as heart- and star-shaped forms. In addition, animals and human figures entered the design. The patterns shown here certainly have their roots in folk art. These early pieces of painted furniture were usually chests and their colour was rather reserved.

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, the decor of rural furniture has principally changed. Under the influence of the Enlightenment and with the rising self-awareness of the peasantry, an increasing desire for representation arose. Therefore, more and more elaborate furniture with ornamental and floral patterns also developed in the countryside (figure 2). In these cases the representational and also decorative character of the furniture’s appearance was achieved by a flamboyant use of colour. In the course of the described social change more elements of high art found their way into rural furniture. They were adopted by local craftsmen who tried to offer their customers contemporary designs. That is, the surface design of furniture intended for the peasantry, was taken over by the village carpenters from existing models as were customary in the castles of nobles and in the bourgeois town houses. But in the case of rural painted furniture it is not possible to exclusively refer to the imitation of materials. We certainly have to consider that pieces of furniture used by the upper classes were not the only models that were imitated in their form and in their decoration. In the same way a corresponding decoration was also on show as architectural elements on the fronts of city buildings, in churches or at the nearest castle (figures 3a, b, c, d). There the ornamentations could be seen as the work of plasterers and gilders, as woodcarving on doors, as the work of smiths at forged gates and fences and as the work of stone masons. Such artisan work displayed a rich number of motifs as elements of decoration. They could be found in many different forms and from all their diversity, the rural craftsmen also drew their inspirations.
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It was easy for them to copy a few ornaments into their sketch book and take them home into their workshop. However, they were probably not aware that the classical, academic art forms had been developed a long time before in the centres of art and architecture common to Italy and France. From these locations it took them many years to find their way into rural areas. Therefore, these ornamentations were not as modern as people thought. Regardless, the joiners met the tastes of their customers. In each single case it was a matter for the individual craftsman as to which ornaments he chose and in what way and arrangement he used them to decorate his products. Additionally, we have to bear in mind that journeymen came into the workshops and brought in new ideas from other regions, or even from foreign countries. The extent of ornamentation would depend on the prosperity of the peasantry or the country people. If they were prosperous they could express their wealth and status in purchasing more magnificently painted pieces than someone who could not afford some well painted furniture.

The role of denomination in furniture embellishment

Another influencing issue on the embellishment of painted furniture is related to religious beliefs. There are two major confessions in Germany: Catholic and Protestant. Especially in times of the Baroque period, catholic churches displayed some exuberant ornamentation in form and colour. The lavish decoration, much of it accomplished as stucco or woodwork, was usually gold-plated as well as colourfully painted. The paint work was often done by professional painters who were employed by the territorial sovereign, such as an archbishop or a catholic prince, earl or count. Monasteries were also centres of craftsmanship where many craftsmen were educated. The craftspeople that had been trained in painting were additionally engaged by local joiners to ornament their most representative pieces of furniture with common elements of high art decoration. It was mostly southern Bavaria and other catholic regions lying south of the river Danube where the joiners, in cooperation with trained painters, created the most outstanding pieces of painted furniture in Germany.

In other areas, mostly in protestant ones, furniture would appear less spectacular if not comparatively unemotional. Protestants kept more to pietism that accentuated spiritual tendencies from which no excessive adornment should distract. Therefore, in protestant areas, a simpler and more modest decoration was executed in churches and as a result also in private homes.

Furniture of this type was produced in Wurttemberg, Hesse, Thuringia, Saxony and parts of Lower Saxony. Its decor was generally accomplished by the joiners themselves.

In northern Germany, the production and use of painted furniture was less common. There, the joiners could process more hardwood which was regarded more valuable than the softwood that was primarily available in southern Germany. In view of this aspect we find more carved decoration on furniture in the rural areas of northern Germany and more painted furniture in the farming regions of southern Germany.

Hohenlohe-Franconia is well-known for its diversity of painted furniture

In the following I refer particularly to pieces of
furniture originating from a very small agricultural region in southern Germany, called Hohenlohe-Franconia. The name Hohenlohe derives from the family name of a dynasty of dukes and princes who had been the sovereign rulers in the area for many centuries. The term ‘Franconia’ comes from a Germanic tribe and later from a duchy of the same name that once occupied the region. The district itself is located in the very northeastern corner of Baden-Württemberg, overlapping the border into Bavaria.

Hohenlohe-Franconia is famous for its large variety of painted furniture that was produced for about 200 years between ca. 1650 and 1850. Despite the fact that the sovereigns and the population have mostly been protestant over the centuries, a rich diversity of very colourfully painted pieces of furniture can be found in this area. This circumstance is due to several reasons that are very special for Hohenlohe-Franconia. To begin with, until the year 1806 there was a considerable fragmentation of the area into innumerable small territories such as bishoprics, margravates, principalities and free imperial cities. All had their local ruler and they lay close together. In addition to the geographical location we must also consider the connections between noble craftsmen who were working in the castles and the ordinary joiners who produced their furniture in the adjacent surroundings. There was sometimes even a direct way from the furniture of nobility to the one of peasantry.

How the design and ornamentation of high-end furniture could find its way to rural joiners

Two examples from Langenburg Castle and the surrounding area demonstrate such a relationship. In the first half of the eighteenth century a carpenter at court named Johann Heinrich Vogt was also designated as guild master. He was responsible for the administrative implementation of the guild’s rules. He organised meetings and conducted the examinations of the prospective masters. In both cases the joiners of the small residential town as well as those of the surrounding countryside were ordered to come to the workshop of the guild master in the castle. There they could have a look around and also see what kind of furniture was produced and what ornamental accoutrements were implemented at court. Although the princes in the Hohenlohe castles were mainly protestant, they tended to favour extravagant and most representative pieces of furniture.

In this way a direct transfer of high-class knowledge, art forms and skills took place from the courtly cabinetmaker to the village carpenter.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Prince of Langenburg employed a carpenter at his court whose name was Johann Adam Peter Hirsch. He was born in Bächlingen, a small village lying in the valley right beneath the prominent castle and only twenty minutes away on foot. In that village and at the same time the rural joiner was Johann Heinrich Michael Hirsch, a brother of the one described before. In these cases, we can easily understand how a constant exchange took place between the artisans employed at court and the joiners in the residential town, and in the surrounding countryside.

Furthermore, since the middle of the eighteenth
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century the rural population had gained more and more self-awareness. The acquired self-esteem and pride was correspondingly expressed in a trend to more representative and colourfully painted wardrobes and chests. This circumstance played a major role, when a farmer’s daughter married and her rich dowry, including some brightly coloured furniture, was transported on a horse-drawn wagon to her groom’s village under the admiring and recognising glances of the local people. As more preciously painted furniture was in vogue, the prince of Öhringen implemented measures to promote the craftsmanship. Twice a week he opened the doors of a painting school he had founded in 1779 for the education of high school pupils to craftsmen. There they were trained by the prince’s artist and by his architect. More than forty percent of the artisans who attended the school were carpenters who were there to learn how to paint. In the following paragraphs some design features and decorative elements of pieces of furniture used by the aristocracy as well as by the growing bourgeoisie are described. The influences of high art on the design and the outer appearance of rural pieces of furniture are apparent.

Copies of the outer appearance

The following examples enable the imitation products of the simple cabinetmakers in the countryside to be compared with the high-quality designs of their courtly counterparts which they imitated on their village furniture by just using colour. In Weikersheim Castle there are two pieces of furniture which we call Tresur in southern Germany and which is probably the equivalent of the English dresser (figures 4a, b, c, d). The same type of furniture could also be found in bigger cities: made of hardwood, and in the countryside as painted furniture made of softwood. The design of the furniture of the nobility was copied by the city carpenters and also by the carpenters in the countryside.

The imitation of popular motifs

From the basic form I now turn to some motifs that found their way from aristocratic furniture down to rural painted furniture. The following examples illustrate the relationship between furnishings in a castle, in a bourgeois household and in a village home. In these cases it is not so much the distinctive form of the furniture but more the outer appearance in terms of the use of different woods and the ornamentation with star-shaped forms (figures 5a, b, c). The elegant courtly Baroque cabinet shows a pattern made from different dark and light woods. On its centre piece this pattern forms a figure that looks like a sparkling star. The bourgeois cabinet follows this idea and presents two stars as inlay work on its two doors. To accentuate the areas of light wood the cabinetmaker surrounded them with darker wooden panels in the form of a bastion. On the rural wardrobe the precious woods, the inlay work in form of a star, the form of a bastion and the grain were imitated by the use of colour and with the help of different brushes.

The pictured side of a courtly chest of drawers again presents some splendid inlay work. Among flow-

Figure 4e Bourgeois ‘Tresur’, 18th century, Hällisch-Fränkisches Museum Schwäbisch Hall.

Figure 4d Rural ‘Tresur’ made by joiner Johann Heinrich Rößler (1751-1832) in Untermünkheim, dated 1806. Städtische Sammlungen Künzelsau. Courtesy of Stadtverwaltung Künzelsau. Photo: Volker Immel, Ilshofen.
Left:

Figure 5a  Courtly Hohenlohe cabinet, 18th century, privately owned.

Figure 5b  Bourgeois armoire, end of 17th century, Sandelsches Museum Kirchberg/Jagst. Courtesy of Museums- und Kulturverein Kirchberg/Jagst.

Figure 5c  Rural wardrobe made by joiner Johann Heinrich Michael Hirsch (1735-1796) in Bächlingen, dated 1769. Courtesy of Kirchengemeinde Langenburg-Bächlingen.

Below:

Figure 6a  Side panel of a courtly Hohenlohe chest of drawers, around 1700, privately owned.

Figure 6b  Upper part of a courtly escritoire, Kirchheim unter Teck ca.1720/1730, Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart. Photo: Peter Frankenstein/Jörg Jordan.
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ers and a bird we can recognise some strapwork as a decoration on its surface. The impression is achieved by the masterly use of different dark and light sorts of valuable woods (figures 6a, b).

Another example is an escritoire with impressive inlays. Its main motifs are again exotic birds with a large parrot as a centre piece. Exotic birds were one of the most favourite motifs in the Baroque and Rococo eras. These birds are also pictured on bourgeois furniture (figure 7).

Here you find the birds in the middle of a wooden panel. While the latter were generally achieved by inlay on courtly furniture, the effect on this wardrobe is attained by the use of brush and paint, as are the rocailles and shellwork.

The example of a simple softwood wardrobe demonstrates how the local carpenters not only were able to copy the courtly designs but also showed some extraordinary skills in painting a bird (figure 8). When looking at these pieces of rural furniture in the Hohenlohe-Franconia area we must bear in mind that it was always the carpenter himself who did both: the woodwork and the painting. At least he painted the decor on the doors. The door of a wardrobe always functioned as a trademark for the carpenter. There he used motifs and patterns that reflected his design programme and had a high value of recognition. Other parts may have been painted by other staff in his workshop.

The imitation of marquetry, inlay work, veneer and grain

The following example of a courtly armoire shows how marquetry was used. The difference between inlay work and marquetry is that various woods of different colours and forms are positioned next to each other, as in a jigsaw puzzle, whereas inlay work is characterised by pieces of wood that are inserted into a specially cut wooden structure (figure 9).

You can clearly see the ornamentation done by putting different stripes of veneer next to each other. Round the doors these pieces of wood have a rectangular shape, whereas at the sides the stripes have a rhomboid form. These, arranged next to each other, give the impression of triangles pointing upwards and downwards. At the right side of the wardrobe a vertical accentuation can be seen. The same effects were achieved on rural pieces of furniture by painting these triangular forms on the surface and also structuring the sides by imitating some vertical grain with colour (figures 10a, b). For this, the joiner had different tools, such as brushes, iron combs and a roller with a profiled gum-roll.
Figure 10a  Rural wardrobe, Limpurger Berge, joiner not known, dated 1803. Museum Wörner, Fichtenberg.

Figure 10b  Detail of wardrobe in figure 10a.

Figure 11  Bourgeois armoire, surroundings of Feuchtwangen, first half of 18th century. Photo: Auktionshaus Eppli, Stuttgart.

Figure 12  Rural wardrobe, surroundings of Feuchtwangen, dated 1778. Privately owned.

Figure 13  Rural wardrobe, surroundings of Crailsheim, end of 18th century. Privately owned.

Figure 14  Elm burl saw veneer. Courtesy of Immel Restaurierung, Ilshofen.
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mounted on its front that he moved to create the way he wanted the texture to look.

Some of the previously shown pieces of furniture bear wooden panels in the form of a bastion, some of these displaying a shape with pointed ends. Such panels are a prominent feature in the centre of the doors. In this bourgeois example of an armoire the panels are surrounded by carved mouldings (figure 11). Above and below the centre panels we see an acanthus ornament and the sides of the two doors are accentuated by twisted columns.

In its rural counterpart, a wardrobe of 1778, we can find all these features too. There are the wooden panels in the shape of a bastion, there are turned columns and there is the leafage ornament on the top and at the bottom of the doors. This decoration is a reminder of inlay work with dark wood (figure 12). Other parts painted in white colour possibly imitate white bone inlay. Additionally we find some exceptional imitation of veneer, replicating the curved manifestation of heartwood and sapwood.

The imitation of different types of wood and their textures

The following example shows these characteristics again. Here the doors are encircled by the imitation of small pieces of light and dark veneer. Each door has two cassettes mimicking pieces of veneer cut out from some wood with a nice heartwood and softwood pattern (figure 13). These pieces are arranged inversely in the manner of a cross joint. The rest of the doors and also other brown parts of the surface show the imitation of hardwood veneer. The black lines mimic ebony inlay.

Other veneers made from domestic woods like cherry tree, walnut, Hungarian ash, birch tree and even yew tree were also popular for furnishing the furniture of the upper social classes as all of them produced fine, good-looking veneer that demonstrated not only quality but also expert craftsmanship. Especially the root wood of some of these species had a specific look (figure 14). We notice clusters of curved or even round forms and it was exactly these round forms that also inspired rural carpenters to try to imitate them. You can see one of the more modest results in the brown fields of this chest from the year 1784 (figure 15). Here the carpenter achieved the special ornamentation by first painting a light colour into the fields and on that a darker brown colour. While the second layer of paint was still wet he took a piece of cloth or a natural sponge, turned it in circles and so partly took away the dark brown colour leaving these circle-like shapes.

A chest of drawers shows a surface made from walnut root wood. Its specific vibrant veneer gives a very elaborate and ornate look to this piece of bourgeois furniture as can be seen at the front of a draw-
er. Of course, it also impressed the carpenters in the countryside (figures 16a, b). They took over the idea and covered the fronts of their rural wardrobes with the same vivid pattern. The wardrobes look even more colourful with this particular decoration, carried out in green or blue colours. The imitation decor was achieved by rolling a crumpled and colour-soaked piece of cloth over a surface that had been prepared with a white ground. Improvements were then done by using some special brushes.

Conclusion
From examples of Hohenlohe-Franconia furniture we have seen how the relationship between the court carpenter and village joiner developed over time. The latter imitated courtly forms and designs and used simple techniques utilising colour and brush to mimic the sophisticated inlay and marquetry decorations as well as the hardwood veneer favoured by the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.

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Notes
5 Ibidem.
10 Handwerkerbuch der Langenburger Bauzunft von 1683-1752, Württembergisches Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg F 168, Büschel 467.
11 Hohenlohe Zentralarchiv Neuenstein, Langenburg, Regierung II, Büschel 3565.
12 Gebhardt 1982, 10.

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