

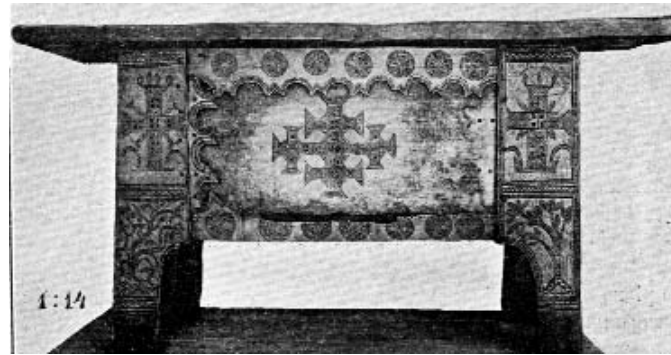
The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

THE DOWRY (HOPE) CHEST - Part 2 by Curator Lubow Wolynetz

The second 19th century dowry chest in our Museum's collection, also from the Hutsul region, has a somewhat unique and interesting history behind it. Originally, the chest was probably used for storage of accumulated items needed for a dowry, perhaps a few family valuables, and also as a table.

Its construction is that of a large rectangular box with a flat lid. All the parts were joined with wooden pegs and not with nails. It probably once had four high legs, when used as a table, and an additional long rectangular oak board was placed over the lid which provided ample room for the family to sit around it at meal-times. To get to the contents of the chest, the oak board had to be taken down. For that reason the board was not nailed to the lid of the chest, but only placed on top.

But this dowry chest had an additional role to play besides the two mentioned above. Apparently, if the owner of it decided to come to America, he would use it as a travel trunk. The economic conditions of the peasantry in Western Ukraine in the 19th and early 20th century were so dire that many individuals decided to immigrate to America for temporary or permanent stay, in order to better their lives and thus to rise above their dismal circumstances. Once an individual decided on such a course, he would pack his bags or chests, travel to a major city from where he would take a train to one of the European port cities, and then board a ship sailing to America. His luggage would be properly identified and stamped by the authorities. Remnants of such a traveling stamp are still attached to the dowry / travel chest in our



museum. The baggage stamp has a number and directions of destination "from station" and "to station" and through which route the baggage was to travel. Sadly to say, the name of the stations and the route are no longer decipherable.

The front panel and the lid of the chest are decorated with the traditional geometric motifs employing flat contour and profile carving. There are the ubiquitous solar motifs --

round disks centers of which are filled not only with six-pointed star elements but also with square crosses. Solar disks in each row are separated with oblique crosses in the shape of an "X" filled with nettings. Connecting the three rows of the solar disks are zigzags and eternity lines. Framing the three rows of the solar disks are narrow panels decorated with oblique crosses, the "X" motifs, reminiscent of the "hour-glass", and traversed from edge to edge with straight lines.

In using this chest as his travel trunk, what did the immigrant fill it with? In the available memoirs and reminiscences written by the early Ukrainian immigrants going to America, hardly anyone mentions what goods were taken with them. We know that immigrants going to Canada took with them farm implements, grain and vegetable seeds, linen and hempen cloth to make shirts, a needle or two, and scissors, which was a dear commodity. But what did they bring with them when going to the coal mine districts of America, and not to the open prairies of Canada to farm? Immigration brokers did advise them to buy western clothing and not to travel in their folk costumes. So then, did they fill the travel chests with their traditional garb to have it as a reminder of their origin and thus preserve the memory of their home, their roots, and their identity?

Whatever the chests were filled with, one thing was certain -- the magical symbolic motifs embellishing the chest were there to protect the contents and the owner from misfortune, to bring about good fortune, and to chase away adversity. Just as the bride's dowry chest was filled with dreams and hopes for a happy future, in a similar manner the travel chest of the immigrant was filled with bright expectations and favorable prospects.

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