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Joseph Lehn and Lehnware

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Miniature chest made by Joseph Lehn for Mary Brubaker Rickert, who lived next door to Lehn. From the collection of Herma Losensky, Rickert's granddaughter.



Birth certificate of Henry (Heinrich) Lehn, son of Joseph Lehn. Henry made this fraktur for himself in 1845. Private collection.



Cups and saffron boxes or cups made by John R. Dierwechter (1910-1996). Collection of Esther, Grace and Naomi Dierwechter.

By Donald M. Herr

LANCASTER, PENN. – “,” the first comprehensive exhibit of Lehnware, is on view at the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County through December 30. The display introduces visitors to the life and work of Joseph Lehn and his gaily painted woodenware so sought after by folk art collectors today.

Lehn was a prolific Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania German turner, cooper, cabinetmaker and decorator who worked near the town of Clay in northern Lancaster County. The exhibit features 100 examples of Lehnware and related objects from museums, descendants and private collections, and most of them have never been exhibited previously. The focus of the exhibit is not only on the range and rarity of known examples of Lehn’s work, but also later woodworkers who copied his work and continued the tradition.

Lehnware is paint-decorated woodenware made and decorated by Lehn and others in northeastern Lancaster County in the second half of the Nineteenth Century. This distinctive group of woodenware is characterized by a repetition of the position of decorative colors, background, style of decoration and designs.

Lehn lived to the age of 94 and turned and painted cups, cups and saucers and saffron boxes that bear paper labels from the last few years of his life. An example reads, “Made by Joseph Lehn in his 91 year Jan. 1, 1889.” Three miniature chests made by Lehn for his grandchildren, Maria, Anna and Catherine Greybill have paper labels inside their lids and are dated 1858 in the same flowing calligraphy found in Lehn’s daybook.

Included in the exhibit are five rare seed chests attributed to Lehn, considered by folk art collectors to be the culmination of his artistry. One has six drawers and was, in fact, used for seeds; its drawers bear paper labels of Glessner Seed, Excelsior Seed and Havana seed. These are varieties of tobacco grown in Lancaster County in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century.

Other rarities include a thread holder, saffron boxes and cups with rare yellow or blue-green backgrounds, and cups ranging in sizes from five to 1½ inches in height.

Much new information has been uncovered recently. This includes documentary sources, the discovery of signed pieces by previously unknown makers, the publication of Lehn’s daybook, and his signature on documents in which he did not use his middle name. Also, the presence of motifs on birth certificates made by Henry Lehn, son of Joseph Lehn, are similar to those found on the style of painted woodenware called Lehnware.

Joseph Lehn (January 6, 1798-September 16, 1892) was the son of Abraham and Mary Lane (Lehn) of Manheim Township, Lancaster County, Penn. Joseph was two years of age when his father died. His mother married Daniel Erb, a widower with four children.

Joseph married his stepsister Elisabeth Erb (July 25, 1792-August 19, 1865), the eldest of the children. They lived near the village of Clay, Elizabeth Township, Lancaster County, on land Elisabeth had inherited. They built a brick home near Hammer Creek Mennonite Church in 1849.

Joseph and Elisabeth Lehn had four children: Catherine (1818-after 1900), who married John B. Graybill; Jonas (1821-August 30, 1877), who married Luzetta Furlow; Henry (March 26, 1823-June 26, 1862), who never married; and Joseph (April 15, 1829-September 14, 1854), who also never married.

Joseph Lehn spent his early years in farming, and is listed as a farmer in 1847 to 1854 tax lists of Elizabeth Township. He is listed as an "aged man" in subsequent tax lists but lived to the age of 94 and died in 1892. Lehn is listed as a cooper in the 1860 and 1870 census.

Mennonite Bishop Jacob N. Brubaker mentioned Lehn and his work in *The Herald of Truth*, a national Mennonite publication. "I visited our dear old Bro. Joseph Lehn, near Brunnerville, Lancaster County. He is now 90 years old. His memory is very good. He repeats poetry and passages of Scripture quite readily ... he is daily employed in making boxes, buckets, etc., which he finishes so very tastefully, that but a few can equal ... Brother Lehn is in every respect a remarkable man."

Lehn was blind the last year of his life. He is buried in the Hammer Creek Mennonite cemetery, Elizabeth Township, Lancaster County, Penn.

Decoration

Lehn colored most of the cups and saffron boxes in a repeated sequence. The base or edge of the foot was dark blue, followed by a green stripe, red stem, green stripe, salmon bowl and red border. The lids were green, then salmon, with the finials always painted dark blue. He frequently used a salmon background for the outside of the cup or bowl. Background colors of yellow, blue, and blue-green are found less often.

He frequently used strawberry, pomegranate and floral motifs, sometimes with the addition of decals. An undulating border that suggests the pussy willow was used extensively. A fine yellow or cream line on the front, top and sides of chests, seed chests, sewing boxes, buckets, harvest buckets, sugar buckets or stands, candle boxes and other objects was a popular decorative motif.

Forms

Lehn's daybook, with entries from 1856 to 1876, gives insight into the forms that he made during those years. Included in the daybook entries are barrels, little barrels, little water buckets, chests, little chests, harvest water buckets, sugar buckets, small buckets and water kegs. He repaired buckets, chairs, turned chair feet and painted buckets, chairs and harvest buckets.

Several small barrels with handles, or water kegs, have been attributed to Lehn, as have miniature two-part barrels bearing paper labels indicating that some were made by Lehn in his final years. White oak was the favored wood used for making barrels and buckets.

Buckets have been found measuring from six to nearly 12 inches in height. Sugar buckets have been called sugar stands.

Customarily constructed of pine and painted with pomegranate and/or strawberry motifs and sometimes decals, chests were made in various sizes. Miniature chests made for his grandchildren are nailed but most of his chests, seed chests and sewing boxes have both dovetailed and nailed construction.

Sewing chests had removable trays that held pincushions and other sewing needs in smaller compartments. Seed or spice chests have been found in three sizes, containing six, 12 and 20 drawers. Tall seed or spice chests having a desk-lid form and with drawers have been attributed to Lehn.

Cups ranged in many sizes from 1 1/2 to 5 inches in height. Some bear paper labels that are affixed to their bottoms that bear dates from the last few years of his life. Cups and saucers ranged from 1 7/8 to 3 1/2 inches in width. Occasionally, they bear labels.

Saffron boxes or saffron cups exhibit the same decorative sequence of colors previously described. Decals were occasionally applied to the lids and bodies of saffron boxes.

Forms attributed to Lehn are chairs and miniature chairs with decals, candle boxes, footstools, a thread holder, a wooden egg, a game board and a sewing pincushion.

Other Makers

Peter Stauffer (1831-1905) owned land adjoining that of Lehn. On one of his miniature blanket chests, Stauffer painted on the interior of the lid "S.B.S./Think of me./Work of Peter Stauffer." He had a daughter, Susan Burkholder Stauffer, so the initials presumably are hers. The chest has the pomegranate decoration, background color and construction typical of chests previously attributed to Lehn.

A sugar bucket or stand painted in the traditional manner as those attributed to Lehn is on view. However, inscribed in the decorative paint on the outside bottom is "Mfgt by /JH Sechrist/Mar 7, 1889."

William Carl Heilig (1833-1897) was a chairmaker in nearby Ephrata in the 1880s. The floral decoration on a decorated plank-bottom chair signed "Wm. C. Heilig Ephrata" is similar to the decoration on a chest, cup and saucer in the exhibit.

Other makers include Mennonite Bishop Jacob N. Brubaker (1838-1913), who learned to turn from Lehn. An example of his work, a saffron box, is in the exhibit.

John B. Bucher (1860-1942), a minister at Hammer Creek Mennonite Church, would have been well acquainted with Lehn. Bucher made and sold saffron boxes. His turnings and paint decoration were inspired by, but are distinctly different from, those ascribed to Lehn.

Through the years, many craftsmen made and decorated cups and saffron boxes in the Lehnware tradition. Robert F. Lausch (1911-1988) of Ephrata decorated cups and saffron boxes in the 1960s. John R. Dierwechter (1910-1996) of Schaefferstown made cups, saffron boxes and miniature chests. Centenarian Arthur Shupp of Denver, Penn., turned saffron boxes and cups that were painted by Eleanor Sherk (1914-1997) of Ephrata and June E. Gottshall (born 1920) of Rheinholds.

A 12-page monograph containing 11 examples illustrated in color and 18 in black and white accompanies the exhibit and was published in cooperation with Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society. It was reprinted from *The Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* (April 2001) and is available in limited numbers at the exhibit.

The Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County is at 13 West King Street. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm. For information, call 717-299-6440.