

Folk Influence in Nova Scotia Interiors: The Lunenburg County Example

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Abstract/Résumé

Cette communication étudie les motifs décoratifs qui apparaissent sur les meubles populaires des colons allemands en Nouvelle-Écosse, dans le contexte des traditions du pays d'origine et de la tradition de l'art populaire européen en général.

The decorative patterns found on the folk furnishings of the Germanic settlers of Nova Scotia are examined in this paper. These patterns are seen in the context of the traditions of the homeland and of the general European folk art tradition.

The following illustrations of folk influence in Nova Scotia interior furnishings are drawn from material gathered during a two-year survey conducted at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery. The survey, sponsored by the Museums Assistance Programme of the National Muse-

ums, was followed by a further eight months of contract work for the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies of the National Museum of Man. This subsequent work consisted of locating and recommending objects for purchase by the centre. This material therefore does not

FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



represent a systematic study of the social functions of any specific class of objects; it is eclectic and represents a narrow spectrum of Nova Scotian material folk culture.

Most of the artifacts presented here have been drawn from the Lunenburg County area of Nova Scotia. This particular area, with its essentially homogeneous ethnic and religious population, is probably the best focus for a brief survey such as this. Dr. W.P. Bell has examined the Germanic origins of the Lunenburg County settlers.¹ His study reveals a pattern of geographic and ethnic continuity. From such a tightly woven fabric as this it should be possible to discover a pattern of folk influence which survives through time and changing popular fashion.²

It should be noted that, although most of this material is drawn from Lunenburg County sources, it is difficult to describe its origins more precisely than that. Most of the artifacts came to light through the efforts of local antique dealers. As a consequence, independent sources for provenance and dating are difficult to establish. Dealers have a decided economic interest in protecting their sources and it is not unusual, once an object has passed through several hands, for the provenance to be given no more exactly than "Lunenburg". Nevertheless, I believe that those artifacts identified as Lunenburg County are indeed from that area, and a more exact provenance is given whenever possible.

A wide variety of Lunenburg County domestic artifacts display common characteristics which can be taken as evidence of a conservative and unified approach to style and decoration. Surface treatments, spatial patterns, and basic construction techniques are similar across a broad range of object types. A basic vocabulary of motifs and arrangements was established and then applied as the taste and skill of the maker dictated. The use of paint was the most unifying factor. Both the home interior and its furnishings

were almost always painted. "Too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash," was a phrase used to define those few individuals who neglected even this minimal treatment.³ Beyond paint, there are a variety of geometric and minimally figurative designs which distinguish the folk material from its popular culture contemporaries.

The two chairs and a rocker found in Mahone Bay demonstrate a striking similarity of style. They are a common three-splat ladder-back construction with a peaked crest, and all are of pegged construction. Workmanship and construction details, however, show the chairs to be of three different makers. Differences are apparent in the design of the splats, varying from a modest crest on the green chair (fig. 1) to a pronounced peak on the splats of the rocking chair (fig. 2); the crest on the top splat of the rocking chair has been broken off. The green chair exhibits double pegging in the top splat while the other two examples are single pegged. Draw knife work, common to all three sets of stretchers, differs in quality of finish and profile, particularly for the front stretchers. Several other examples of this chair type have been seen, and an obvious line of inquiry for future study of these chairs would be to determine whether they represent a generic type or are the work of a single family of chair makers.

In a work-table from Lunenburg County dating from about 1850, we can see a typical, flat, red, painted surface relieved by carvings and painted embellishments (fig. 3). Although the table exhibits an eclectic combination of style types and is unusual for the painted and ebonized turnings on the leg, it is important to note the geometric compass rose in the centre of the top and the quarter-round corner decoration. A small work-table from Mahone Bay, ca. 1860, although simpler in execution, also shows the same red ground and quarter-round corner designs. The larger, drop-leaf dining-table found in Dartmouth, and dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, maintains a

FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4





FIGURE 5

similar colour scheme while modifying the corner decorations and extending a semi-circular pattern around the border of the table's edge (fig. 4). Both of the latter examples have legs which show a square section and taper from top to bottom, a style of leg which is most common on tables of this type.

Small storage boxes provide an excellent example of a community-held pool of motifs (fig. 5). Perhaps because they are relatively small (averaging about five by nine by six inches) and with a surface area that is easy to visualize as a unified whole, these boxes display some of the most profuse examples of folk decoration. The repertoire of designs on these boxes could almost serve as a catalogue of the motifs common to Lunenburg County: stars, hearts, diamonds, and geometric compass work. All of these motifs have precedents in the European folk cultures that supplied Nova Scotia's immigrant stock. In the absence of a continuous line of reliably dated objects from the eighteenth-century immigration period to the present, it is still a reasonable supposition that these examples represent a direct survival from the European roots.

Distinctly naturalistic decorations, such as are commonly found in German and Swiss-German material, seem to have been dropped from the Lunenburg County design vocabulary. One of a few possible exceptions is the powder horn from the Bridgewater area (fig. 6). It shows tulips, horses, a crowned lion, compass star, and heart. The piece is dated 1791 and carries the name of a man called Weber. It is impossible to know at this point, without an analysis of the horn, whether or not the powderhorn arrived from Germany or was carved here. Weber's name may yet come to light on an immigration list, a discovery which would help to settle the question of origin; but for the moment his work can offer only a tantalizing clue to the possible existence of a naturalistic tradition in Nova Scotia and



FIGURE 6

bring into sharper focus the question of that tradition's disappearance.

Evidence for this naturalistic tradition appears in a few objects found elsewhere in Nova Scotia. A later example of a piece displaying this treatment is the blanket box found in Tracadie (fig. 7). The box dates from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and was once the property of a Mrs. Mary Fougere. Some similarities to the Lunenburg County material are evident in the five-point stars and the geometrics on the end panels, but the flower vases and pennants are a unique feature of this artifact. The deep blue ground colour is not common to many Lunenburg County boxes of this type but is seen more frequently on French material. In the case of this particular box it should be pointed out that the lady is referred to as Mrs. and not Madame Fougere. This indicates a certain level of assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Scots culture which might have had an effect on the design influences.

FIGURE 7



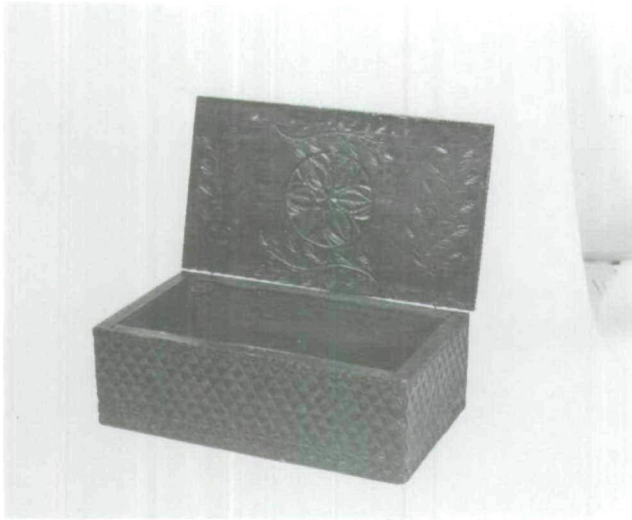


FIGURE 8

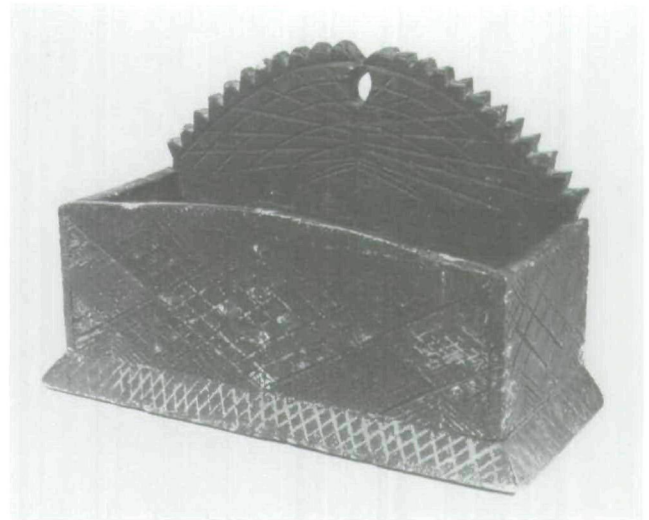


FIGURE 9

Two small storage boxes from areas with a stronger English cultural affinity show patterns of incised carving. The box from Canning, in the Annapolis Valley, combines a lattice-work pattern with naturalistic floral motifs (fig. 8). On the inside centre of the lid is a medallion which is simply the traditional compass rose rendered as a pattern of leaves. A wall box from Terrance Bay is covered with an incised diamond pattern, highlighted by the paint scheme, and topped by a deeply notched crest with arcs and radiating lines (fig. 9). Generally, Nova Scotia's dominant cultural group, the Anglo-Scots, were more fashion conscious and their output was more in keeping with popular fashion. Works contemporary with most of this Lunenburg County material show a strong tendency toward Victorian popular taste.

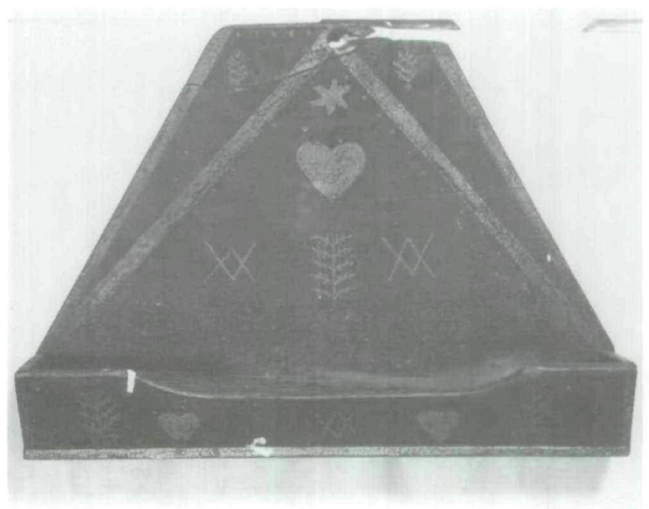
More isolated cultural communities such as those in Lunenburg County continued to utilize traditional colours and decorative patterns well into the twentieth century. A

round storage box from Bridgewater, ca. 1850, has the common red ground relieved by incised six-point stars and broad arrows (fig. 10). A wall box from Lunenburg County, dating from about 1900, still shows the six-point star together with hearts and stylized floral designs (fig. 11). The box also shows what might be interpreted as a Masonic "compass and square" design. Another hanging box, also from the turn of the century, shifts the predominant ground colour from red to green, but maintains a strong heart motif combined with florid curves and diamonds (fig. 12). This piece functioned as a comb box and originally would have held another shallow receptacle for the combs with a mirror placed in the hole above it.

A later addition to the home were magazine racks (fig. 13) produced to meet a demand for mass circulation periodicals which would not have entered the home in quantity until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Even here, where the use of the object was not traditional, the folk motifs were retained. Pierced designs of compass

FIGURE 10

FIGURE 11



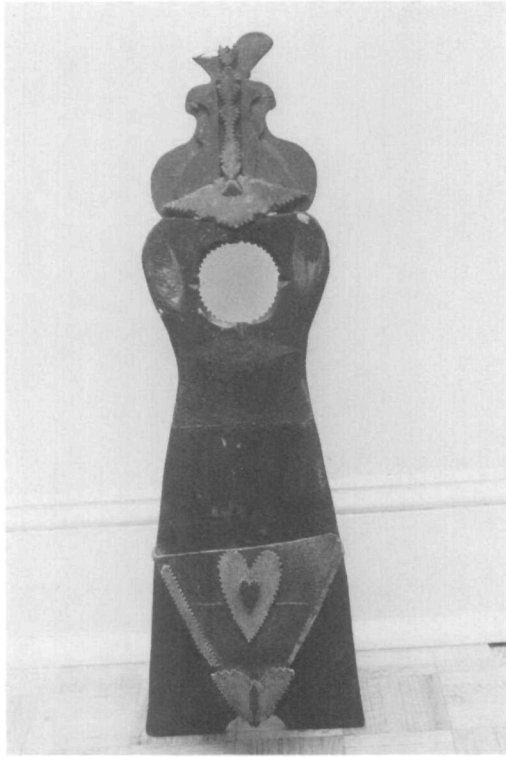


FIGURE 12

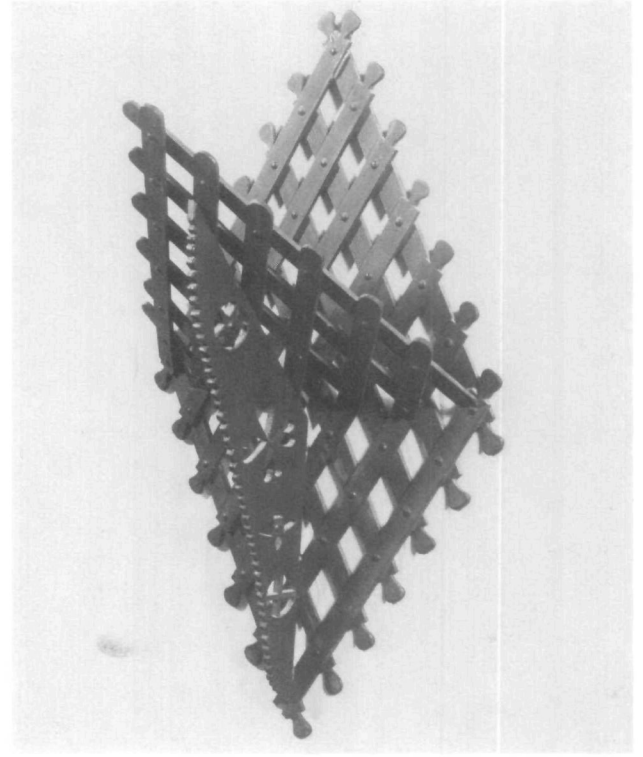


FIGURE 13

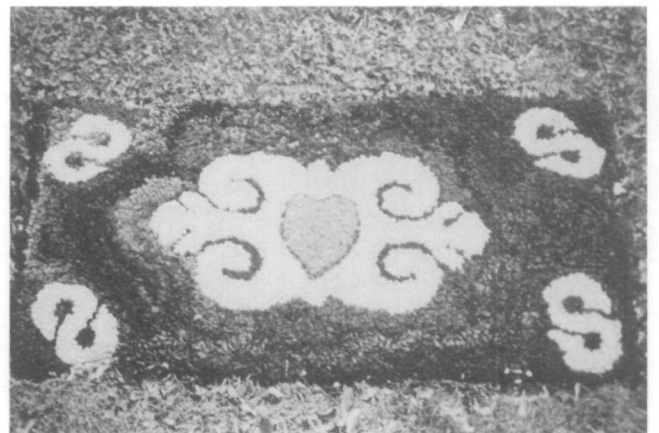
stars, quatrefoils and six-point stars can be seen. The lattice-work backing is probably a response to the popular "rustic" style of the Victorian period.

The genesis of hooked mats is still a matter of inquiry. However, it seems unlikely that eighteenth-century immigrants to Nova Scotia would have arrived with a fully developed form of the hooked mat as we now know it. By extension it would be equally unlikely that a distinct set of social conventions had developed concerning the use or decoration of hooked mats. The mats illustrated here are not typical of the forms that developed with their emphasis

on geometric and non-objective designs. Instead, the present mats are used to illustrate the continued use of the motifs which have been observed on the broader range of domestic material. Mrs. James Huches hooked a mat (fig. 14) in 1888 for Mrs. George Aulenbach, both of Blockhouse, Lunenburg County. This mat might be another example of the survival of a representational tradition in the areas of German influence. It displays tree of life designs with pairs of bird figures. Such combinations are common in German and Swiss-German folk decoration. The small mat (fig. 15) from the Gold River area of Lunenburg County probably dates from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Its dominant central heart is framed by stylized floral designs

FIGURE 14

FIGURE 15



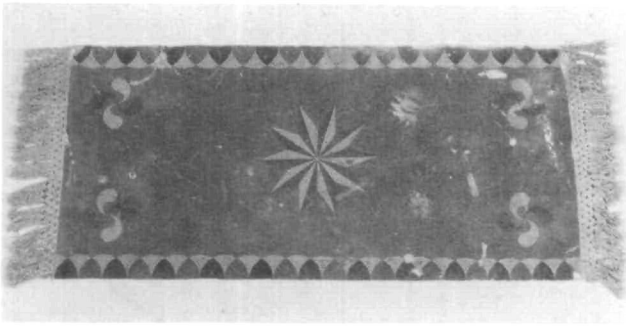
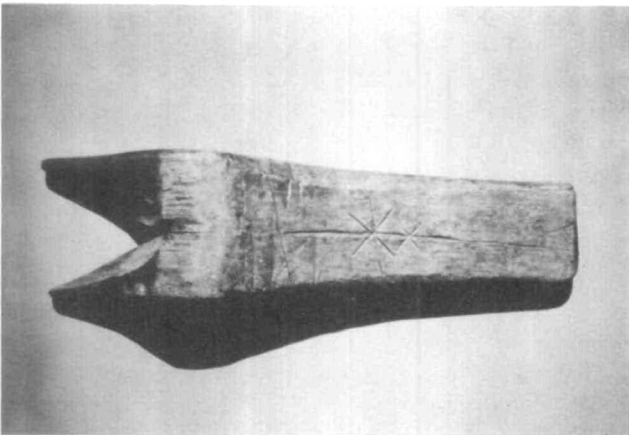


FIGURE 16



FIGURE 17

FIGURE 18



with "S" scrolls at the corners. The last example (fig. 16) is important because it carries the traditional colours and motifs well into the twentieth century. This Lunenburg County canvas mat, ca. 1930, shows a central compass star with corner designs of flying swastikas and a border of hearts. In common with the previous example, this mat shows a spatial organization which is similar to the small boxes illustrated earlier.

Articles which served a daily and personal function but which might now be considered inappropriate or, more likely, unnecessary for display in the home also received decorative attention. A child's commode (fig. 17) from Lunenburg County, probably dating from the first quarter of the twentieth century, displays large five-point stars and compass rose carvings with a crest rail which appears to be the degeneration of a popular form. Although the piece has been stripped, it shows evidence that the carvings were alterations of red and yellow, while the body of the commode was painted a light blue. Even an unpainted bootjack (fig. 18) has been embellished beyond the strict requirements of function and has received careful attention to its form, that of a cloven hoof, and the surface treatment of incised stars on the top and bottom.

All the objects of home use illustrated here display characteristics common to other objects of their type as well as to objects spanning a broad range of functional uses. This material is evidence of use over a lengthy period within the relatively narrow confines of Lunenburg County. The strong German and Swiss-German cultural affiliations of the area suggest a continuity with traditions formed in Europe. Motifs of geometric shapes, painted surface treatment, and similarities of spatial patterning indicate a traditional and community-sanctioned set of values. However, an enormous amount of work remains to be done in order to understand fully and to analyse this material evidence of social and historical attitudes. Field-work is needed to place these artifacts in their home contexts. The arrangement and use of interior space requires study to understand the relationship between the material and the environment in which it was expected to function. European roots need examination to lay the groundwork for a systematic analysis of the origins of colour, form, motif, and pattern which we can observe on local material. This challenge must be met, and must be met soon, for all of the various cultural groups represented in Nova Scotia.

NOTES

1. Winthrop Pickard Bell, *The Foreign Protestants and the Settlement of Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).
2. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 258.
3. In conversation with Dennis Zwicker, Mahone Bay, 1979.