

### Ukrainian-Canadian Folk Furniture and the Marketplace

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Nine years ago I walked into an antique store in eastern Canada and produced a picture of a table made in Alberta around 1895 by a Ukrainian settler. The dealer had no difficulty identifying it as a western-Canadian table of "ethnic" origin, stating that the unusual folk form and bright colours were a dead giveaway. He said he would not be interested in buying it because it was not officially antique; however, he suggested I might find a buyer in one of the not-so-discerning dealers. I did finally place the table, happy to accept what was at the time a generous offer of two hundred dollars.

Last week I received a picture in the mail. The picture was of a Ukrainian-Canadian table made in southern Manitoba around the turn of the century. I called a collector and described the table. On his behalf I tendered an offer of \$9500, which was accepted by the table's owner. The figure is a Canadian record, the highest price paid for any table of this folk-country genre in Canada.

The majority of the handmade artifacts from eastern Canada are officially antique, not to mention well documented and publicized. Why, then, does a Ukrainian-Canadian table from western Canada, young by comparison at only ninety or so years, break the record price? The answer to this question lies in the marketplace.

Significant settlement of the Canadian West by Ukrainians occurred between 1891 and 1914. Many of these settlers arrived with the clothes on their backs and one or two trunks loaded with treasured possessions or items they thought would not be available in Canada. Items needed for daily use often had to be made. It is these items, made after arrival in Canada, that are the most interesting to the marketplace.

Contrary to what many believe, the market for most items brought by the Ukrainians from the old country is limited. Some, such as clay

poppy bowls, wooden hehels and religious icons, are important and of interest to museums; however, their commercial value is a fraction of that of the items made here in Canada. The marketplace runs by the strict law of supply and demand. Many items similar to the ones brought to Canada may have been made in Ukraine during the few hundred years before the move to Canada. If the Soviet Union decided to export such items, the marketplace would be flooded. Hence the low market value for old-country artifacts. Fortunately, many objects that are assumed to be of old-country provenance out of surmise and foggy memories are in fact valuable items made in the first years of settlement in Canada.

The majority of Ukrainian settlers came without furniture; once here, they either bought or made it. If they had money, they could easily order furniture from the Sears and Roebuck or T. Eaton Co. catalogue. Those without money made furniture from the pine, spruce or birch on their land. Once they became more established, most of the immigrants switched to the finer factory furniture, usually relegating the original homestead pieces to the barn, summer kitchen or junk pile. Unfortunately, the number of pieces sent to the junk pile is probably much higher than the number saved. Those that survived would be rare, making them even more valuable in the marketplace.

In addition, the switch to factory furniture means that the original pioneer furniture was produced for only a short time—about ten years beginning from the first day a particular area was settled. The fact that the furniture was made for only a few years, and thus is relatively rare compared with similar furniture produced in Quebec for a period of two hundred years, further increases its value in the marketplace.

A fairly accurate account of the types of items made by the immigrants after their

arrival in Canada can be obtained by studying the furniture fabricated in Ukraine at the same time. Although there are exceptions, the new immigrants probably made items similar to the ones they had in the old country.

My research shows that most Ukrainian pioneer homes were furnished with some form of dish cupboard, a table, benches (including a sleeping bench) and a couple of trunks. There were only a few corner cupboards, chairs or chests of drawers. Probably the high degree of skill required to make these items played a part in their absence, but it is more likely that these items did not exist in great numbers in Ukraine either.

Assigning values to Ukrainian folk furniture is difficult. Unfortunately, or fortunately, each Ukrainian table, cupboard or trunk is unique. A farmer made the item for his wife from memories of the table his father had made, and so on back over generations. Only a vague price guide can be established based on this tradition.

Other factors, however, can come into play in establishing the value of such items in the marketplace. A traditional Ukrainian table has four legs and a box stretcher below; therefore, tables that are only slightly varied from this general form are more valuable than a non-traditional table with three legs and no box stretcher. A table with a high degree of personal artistic input (that is, with a sawtooth skirt, a drawer with carving, four legs and box stretcher and painted in three colours) is much more valuable than a table without any attempt at artistry.

Artistry itself must be broken down to traditional components and transitional copies. A table with traditional six-pointed pinwheels carved on the skirt is much more valuable than a table with copied Victorian floral arrangements. A table with carved people dressed in traditional Ukrainian garb is more valuable again. Painting the people after they have been carved would further increase the value. The subject is traditional, yet there is a high degree of personal effort and skill involved in carving and painting a table in this manner.

The centenary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada has also heightened interest in Ukrainian-Canadian folk furniture, pushing the prices even higher. The approach of the centenary has resulted in increased awareness by the press concerning Ukrainian society and its material culture. Press coverage has been fairly regional, mostly restricted to western Canada. Eventually, news will spread to the

United States, where people are well acquainted with folk furniture, albeit of a much greater age. Prices approaching one million dollars are being paid there for such items.

The appreciation of folk ethnic form is strong and growing. Design magazines abound with illustrations of painted country furniture set in sophisticated interiors. Some painted country furniture looks much like Ukrainian-Canadian furniture. Of even greater importance than the form is the colour. In the 1960s and 1970s the demand was for natural-wood furniture; the original painted finishes were stripped. In the 1980s, a more educated marketplace wants furniture with the original painted finishes intact. Painted finishes are rarely found in the East now because most of the country furniture was stripped in the previous two decades. The largely untapped market of Ukrainian-Canadian furniture is the perfect answer to this demand for painted country furniture.

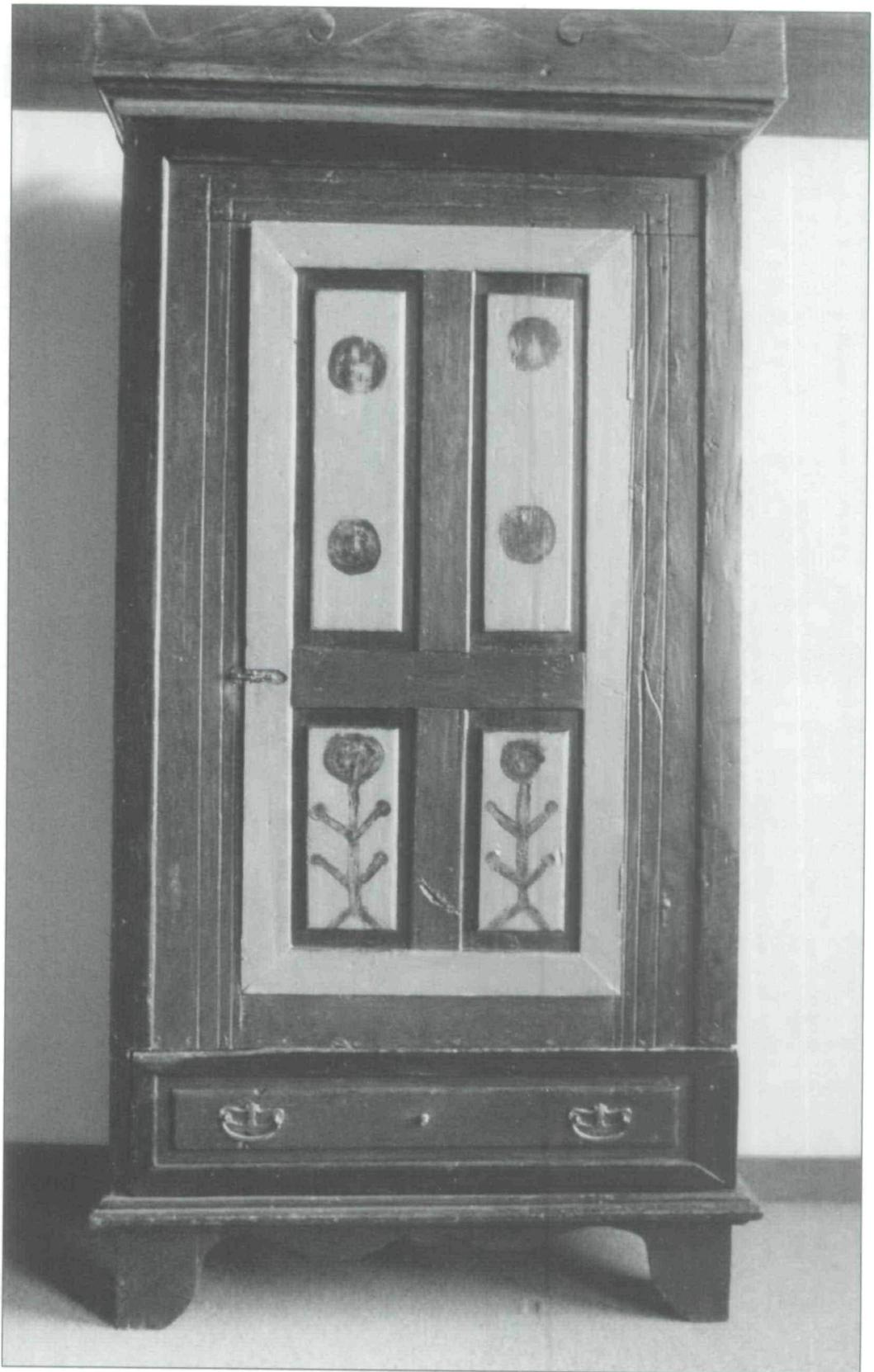
The supply of such furniture dwindles each day in the eastern United States, thus driving the prices into the hundreds of thousands of dollars for selected items. This will eventually result in the search for new sources and the subsequent discovery of Ukrainian-Canadian folk furniture by the Americans. Based on my working knowledge of the supply, I feel several hundred motivated and educated collectors from the United States could easily buy out our heritage and take it south. Fortunately, there is still time to educate the people who at present own the furniture, and most importantly, the marketplace in Canada.

There are people who do not approve of mixing commerce with the collecting of artifacts. They feel that artifacts should be in museums not private collections. Although I sympathize with these sentiments, the reality is that too many significant pieces were made for the existing museums to house, let alone show, and museum-quality pieces constitute a fraction of the objects actually crafted by the original Ukrainian settlers. The cost in time and money to locate these top-quality items is at the moment far beyond the budgets of most institutions. For instance, over the last nine years I have located more than 5000 Ukrainian items. Of these, a hundred would qualify as great or significant finds. My wages and expenses alone amount to about \$3700 for each of the 5000.

How then can we hope to locate and save our Ukrainian material heritage? One way is to search for these items using the marketplace as

**Fig. 1**

A good example of a great or significant find, this wardrobe has three-colour paint, a scalloped pediment and base, high foot, single raised panel door, incised lines and moulded facing. These, however, are not nearly so rare as the finger-painted designs on the door. (Photograph courtesy of the author)



a tool. Another way is what I term the "passive" search; it is only feasible when time is not pressing.

The passive search has been going on now for two decades and has accounted for the majority of the Ukrainian ethnic items in Canadian museums. The actual principle of the passive search is simple. A great piece filters through the marketplace to someone who recognizes its value. Typically a piece shows up at a farm auction. A local farmer purchases the item for a few dollars, thinking he can sell it for a few dollars more to someone with connections to interested museum buyers. For years the Ukrainian artifacts showing up in the marketplace were found this way. The beauty of the passive search is the negligible cost of the search and the low price paid for the items. Low prices mean resale is that much easier. Everyone is happy. Several collections in eastern Canada became substantial this way. Eastern Canada was the eventual resting place of almost all the western Ukrainian artifacts found during the heydays of the passive search, 1960-80.

The problem with the passive search was that very few involved became educated about the true worth of Ukrainian folk furniture. The main dealers near the top of the pyramid, based in eastern Canada, were not interested in raising awareness because the price of each item turning up passively was extremely sensitive to increased buying pressure. They kept the grassroots-level suppliers in the dark regarding the true value of the items, encouraging them to pay as little as possible. Unfortunately, a farmer attending a farm sale and seeing a table like the one his father made sell for a couple of dollars is more inclined to burn it than put it up for sell. Through ignorance or negligence, these key players were probably responsible for a great many Ukrainian items being destroyed. They did save a good number of pieces using the passive-search method, but failed to understand an important rule of the

marketplace: cheap is relative. Failing to educate both the supply and demand side of the marketplace as to the value of items means one may be able to buy cheap but then one must sell cheap.

Conversely, if an effort is made to educate the marketplace, an expensive item can be sold for even more. In addition, when the farmer attends an auction and sees a table sell for a few hundred dollars, he will certainly not destroy his table until he gets a second opinion on its value. As a result, the number of artifacts destroyed decreases. Time, unfortunately, is running out for our Ukrainian-Canadian folk furniture. It is imperative to save the best of our Ukrainian material heritage from going to American markets.

To sum up, every effort must be made over the next few years to uncover the best Ukrainian-Canadian furniture. Anyone in a position to create a market or help a market develop (whether it be directly by buying items or indirectly by publishing information about this folk form) must do it. The rest of us must, at the very least, take a camera on our next visit to the relatives on the farm and document any items that might be examples of pioneer hand-made furniture. Dealers in folk furniture should educate their collectors about the value and importance of Ukrainian-Canadian furniture. Let the marketplace soak up the commercial items; satisfy the America demand by sending as many truckloads of mediocre furniture southwards as possible. Above all though, keep our museum-quality items here.

Everyone will benefit if we understand the marketplace for what it is, a tool to use. Used properly, it will help us save the best of the Ukrainian-Canadian folk furniture for future collectors, museums and the Canadian public. Improperly used, it will make a few elite collectors and dealers wealthy. Ignored, it will turn the hundredth anniversary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada into a dinner bell for our antique-hungry neighbour to the south.