

Tracing the Trunk

By Betty Dowe

Egyptians were the first to use trunks in everyday living. The world's oldest trunk, which is wooden and decoratively painted with scenes, dates circa 1500 to 1380 B.C. It's on exhibit at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England.

Hollowed-out logs, plugged on each end with hinged covers on top, were among the earliest types of trunks or chests. They didn't have legs. Acacia, cedar, sycamore and other fragrant woods were often used to construct trunks. Since the tree was used in the origin of the word, "trunk" came about and is used today. This type of chest may have been inspired by religious references to trunks such as the Ark of the Covenant from the Bible.

Norwegian chests in the 1400's were built both with and without legs. This was a cultural difference; rural boxes had no legs while those owned by the upper classes did. Trunks with lids as we now know them were common by the 1600s. (Some as immigrant trunks.) They were of lighter construction and the rounded top, found in earlier trunks, was reintroduced.

Rosemaling was introduced into rural Norwegian homes in the 1700s, adding color to simple farmhouse interiors. Paintings and carvings with flowers and scrolls embellished church walls and inspired rural Norwegian painters. Walls, beds and furniture were covered with rosemaling, which remained popular through much of the 19th century.

One special piece of furniture was the dowry chest. Norwegian girls stored handmade items in anticipation of starting their own homes. Even poor families managed to have these chests decorated. The bride's name or initials, her year of birth or of receiving the trunk and, occasionally, the father's name were included in the decoration. Some trunks were quite simple because farmers with scant experience decorated them. The trunks were beautifully decorated for urban families and others who could afford to pay a rose painter.

Trunks usually were constructed with metal handles, hinges and even ornamental metal strips on the top and front. Some had leather straps for handles.

Immigrant luggage trunks were painted and decorated as well. For the voyage to America, they contained such practical items as kitchen utensils, sewing items, carpentry tools, burlap, bedding, clothing, farm implements, fire arms and small heirlooms, to name just a few.

Trunk exteriors were customarily done in oils and the inside of the lids were decorated with chalk paint. While colors varied, most were dark outside and off-white inside. Norwegians primarily used colors specific to their provinces. Most early trunks were black-green, blue or red-orange. White wasn't used on dowry trunks until later because it was the color reserved for coffins.

In rural painting, a Renaissance motif, the cartouche, could be found on some trunks. Cartouches are oval or oblong figures that enclose a sovereign's name or they may also be ornamental frames. Many Norwegian trunks were decorated with cartouches, which were incorporated into a rosemaled design. A cartouche might include a biblical scene, landscape, lions, doves with palm branches, roosters, peacocks or horses with or without riders.

The novel, *Giants in the Earth*, by Ole Rolvaag, describes the significance of the trunk to the immigrant wife, Berit: "The trunk comes to represent both the Norwegian womb to which she wanted to return and the coffin in which her loneliness would end."

The Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, has one of the largest collections of trunks in the United States. One of my favorite rooms in the museum displays more than 100 trunks.

References

Norwegian Rose Painting, Nils Ellingsgaard. Det Norske Samlaget Norway, 1988
Norwegian Folk Art, Marion Nelson, editor. Abbeville Press Publisher, New York, 1995

Dr. Marion Nelson, Minneapolis, Minn., former director of Norwegian American Museum, Decorah, Iowa.

Gary Albrecht, teacher^{or} author and Vesterheim gold medalist of honor in rosemaling, Madison, Wis.

Norwegian Rosemaling **By Betty Dowe**

Rosemaling is a colorful and distinctive folk art unique to the valleys and mountains of Norway. Rose painting is the term used for Norwegian Decorative Painting. It was developed in Norway in the 18th century (1750). Each Province has its own style. Best know probably is Rogaland, Telemark and Hallingdal.

I have been Rosemaling since 1978 and started teaching in 1980. My husband Don and I and our family lived in Decorah, Iowa for 20 years where I received my formal Rosemaling training at Vesterheim Museum. I painted in oils for over 10 years but the last 18 years it has been only acrylics. Many of the projects I paint or design are my own design. Each summer when we go to MN. on vacation I spend a week in Decorah studying Rosemaling with the Norwegian and American Masters. I enjoy any type of painting that is stroke work. In the last 6 years I have enjoyed Watercolor painting also. I hope you enjoy this beautiful art as much as I do. God Bless!