THE CRAFT WORK OF PEASANTS IN WAR COUNTRIES

HEN we speak of the craft work of Austria, we are really meaning the work of all the peasants who are in any way under the dominion of Austria, those in Upper and Lower Austria, Styria, Salzburg, the Tyrol, and the Slav lands, Bohemia, Moravia, farther east in Herzegovina, Galicia and Bukovina; then south of the Tyrol, Kustenland and Trieste. It is easy for us to understand the great variation in the art work of these people when we realize the immense variety of country in which the people live, work, and receive their education and religious instruction. To the west are the Alps, then the Viennese forests, and east the Carpathians. Bohemia has the wooded land, and south at Herzegovina are the naked Karst rocks. Dalmatia is a long, low sea-front, and the plains of Moravia must not be omitted. To complete the picture we must remember the high mountain pastures where the lonely shepherd tending his flock gives himself interest and cheer in fashioning objects of art out of bone or wood.

Many influences have come to these peasant craft workers from Byzantine on the East and from the Catholic world on the West. It is extraordinary what a love of beauty has persisted in the lives of these very hard-working people, not only in their decorations, in their jewelry, but in their clothes, in the building and ornamenting of their houses, in the decoration of useful articles of furniture and kitchen utensils, even in the decoration of their fences and doorways. Wood carving, mural painting, fine metal work, excellent cabinet work, architecture at once durable and picturesque; all of these signs of the highest, most valuable culture are to be found wherever one reaches far enough into the interior, close enough to the old peasant life to get at the existence of the craftsman untouched by civilization or modern ideas of art work.

Naturally every country has its own traditions and manner of building and of cabinet work. In the Tyrol the old houses and farms have characteristic forms and methods of construction; in the Alpine lands houses are built differently from the Carpathians or from Bohemia or Moravia. In Salzburg in Upper Austria, the buildings show the decoration of the eaves, of gables, of façades, the latter being adorned with fresco paintings or chip-carving. In Egerland the houses remind us somewhat of the old English cottages, for they are half-timbered or whitewashed and held together with black timber. Among the Slovaks and Hannaks the houses are whitewashed and ornamented with frescoes of national designs and colors. Here the work is usually done by the women, and, as is the case in certain parts
of Holland, every spring the exterior and the interior of each house is re-decorated. In Zakopane the houses are built entirely of wood, with thatched overhanging roofs and each peasant builds his own house and adorns it with his own pierced-wood carving—an ideal of home making which we have sought in vain in this country, and which we realize would lift architecture to a much higher plane than we have yet achieved.

The Austrian peasant builds his house with a view to using it for the most practical purposes. The best room, the stube, is always the most elaborate. In Tyrol, Vorarlberg and Styria the roof is timbered and the walls of the rooms are paneled. The heavy woodwork is ornamented with chip-carving. The peasant furniture in this part of the world is extremely interesting. It is nearly always painted in some dull tone and then ornamented with traditional designs, with flowers or with architectural forms. A tremendous amount of thought and interest is given to the bed which is to be placed in the company room, beautiful bed linen is embroidered for it and each article of furniture is gay with flower decoration.

In Tyrol and in the German Bohemia, the plates and the tankards used are of pewter, but mostly the peasants employ the earthenware painted in national colors and brilliantly decorated. Everywhere among these peasants, the most beautiful embroideries are to be found, not only for dressers and for curtains but for sheets and pillow-cases. Anything more gorgeous, more intricate, more beautiful in craftsmanship than the head-shawls, head-scarves, and caps worn by the Slovak, Hannak and Moravian women, it would be hard to conjure. One finds their drawn-work as beautiful as the finest examples from Mexico, pillow lace that would do for museum pieces and embroidery vying with the most elegant of the French workers.

The caps worn by the married women show great beauty of design and execution. In olden days it was the pious duty of the mother to fashion and work her daughter’s bridal cap, which, after the great day, was carefully laid aside till the day of death, when it was again placed on the head of the departed one. Such caps are even now sacred to their owners, as a touching incident will serve to show. An old Slovak woman, bent with age, was offered, what was to her, a large sum of money for her cap, which was of more than usual beauty. The money would have provided her with many comforts, but she refused it, saying, in reverential tones, “How will my mother know me? I cannot do it.” It was the token by which her mother would recognize her in that “far-off land.”

The blouse is an important article of dress among all these peasant people both men and women. It is interesting to trace how, from the
AN ENTRANCE TO A HOUSE AT KOROSFO IN HUNGARY: IT is a pity that the reproduction cannot show the wonderful colors in the costumes of these three girls with their white blouses and full sleeves, their black aprons and scarlet petticoats and kerchiefs all embroidered and decorated by their own hands: The construction of the gateway and house beyond is of especial interest architecturally and very typical of the Transylvania architecture.
A PAINTED BOX, an interesting example of decoration, the work of the peasants of Lower Austria.

A PEASANT GIRL OF MORAVIA in her bridal dress, white blouse with velvet bodice, elaborate metal head-dress with embroidered streamers, also a richly embroidered belt undoubtedly the work of her own hands.

A CARVED and painted tub at least one hundred years old, taken from a peasant house in Upper Austria: It was undoubtedly the work of some member of the family.

MOST INTERESTING HOUSE AT MAKO, HUNGARY: THE BALUSTRADE ABOUT the balcony on the house at the right is ornamented in elaborate colors, violet and blue and yellow: The blinds are also violet and rose and the effect of this color against the old stucco and the timber mellowed by time is of rare beauty.
A CARVED AND PAINTED cabinet from Bohemia made about the latter part of the eighteenth century: This is undoubtedly the handiwork of a master craftsman among the peasant folk, a man with rich fantasy and great delight in decorated surfaces: Evidently a nature lover and religious if we may count the tiny little figure on the upper panel as a Madonna: The construction of the cabinet is essentially interesting in proportion, sturdy and yet in no way lacking elegance.

A PAINTED CUPBOARD OF Upper Austria: An example of carved and painted furniture from the hands of Austrian peasants of most unusual beauty both in construction and in design: These cupboards were made originally for the homes in which they are found, for the members of the family who are at present using them: They were among the wedding presents that the Austrian peasant girl greatly desired and cherished and passed on to her children as an heirloom.
A CARVED AND PAINTED SPOON rack from Styria: The intricate design and clever workmanship of this article of household utility renders it one of the most unusual illustrations in this article: The symbolic birds which are perched on the very top to oversee the domestic felicity, the painting of scenes from the family life and finally the cross and the I. H. S. in the heart below all render it a rare piece of peasant craft.

A CARVED AND PAINTED marriage coffer, also peasant work from Upper Austria: The architectural design on the surface of the cover is unusually interesting and compact and the beautiful color which is added in the circles makes an article of cabinet work of rare distinction.

ABOVE IS SHOWN A CARVED and painted chair made by the peasants of Bohemia at Egerland: It is unique even among the types of furniture construction to be seen where each man designs what he likes, what interests his fancy and what is pleasing to himself and his family: One wonders if the little figures are family portraits.

THE CARVED chair at the left is a most interesting design from the hands of a Tyrolean peasant: The panels at the back carry painted decorations in the center as does the lower one at the front.
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simple strip of embroidery on the upper part of the sleeve, the whole garment, in some instances, has developed into a mass of gorgeous embroidery. Some of the work is too intricate and elaborate to describe, and the designs often suggest an origin Byzantine or Egyptian. The collars on the blouses of these people are particularly beautiful and in Moravia the young girls wear on their blouses a kind of sailor collar, intricately embroidered in black and colored silks.

It is indeed a tragedy to the beauty loving of the world that the use of the national dress is dying out among so many of these peasant people, although if one goes far enough inland, in Tyrol, Styria, Galicia, Bohemia and Istria beautiful native costumes and primitive social customs are still to be found. Some of the most lovely jewelry is worn by the Ruthenians—elaborate head pieces and chains of silver and gold—while in Cortina metals are made in delicate filigree patterns much more beautiful than that seen in Salzburg or in the Tyrol. The stecher, which serves to keep the heavy braids of hair in place, is still worn by the maids of Tyrol.

The painting of the houses still prevails, especially in Lower Austria, and in this vicinity also the most brilliantly painted and carved furniture is to be found. Here, too, one occasionally sees those lovely caps of gold thread which were once the pride of every woman who possessed them. There was a time when the peasant women of Tyrol reveled in fine embroidered linens and laces for the decoration of their homes and themselves, but today the finest pieces are to be found in the churches and museums, and the peasant women seem to prefer cross-stitched embroidery, worked in red, on homespun linen. The peasant men of Wallachia and Silesia are very much given to the wearing of ornaments. They are also expert craftsmen excelling in chip-carving; and the proper gift for a lover of this region to make his sweetheart is an object which he himself has carved, either a milking stool, a salt box, a knife handle or spoon.

There seems to have been no end to the delightful variation of the work of the Moravian peasants. They not only use conventional designs, but flowers and garlands and leaves for their embroideries and their laces. Their insertion embroideries and colored silks in which conventionalized peacocks occur as motives, are especially beautiful. Then, very lovely embroidered ornamentations are to be found in the hoods of the Moravian women, the ground of which is completely covered with silk embroidery work in a flat stitch. In addition there is the bridal kerkchief and the head-shawl in white silk. The colors which predominate in the Moravian embroideries are black and white, red and yellow, with occasionally an outline of gold and silver. And beautiful edgings are also made by these
picturesque people, for collars, for shoulder-caps, for shoulder-ends. The most interesting bead work among the Austrian peasants is to be found in the homes of the Huzulians. These are executed with a sewing needle and a thread and in technique closely resemble the work of the ancient Egyptians. In embroideries also a high degree of excellence prevails, particularly in the work on the shirts, the head-scarves and the wedding kerchiefs of the women and these latter, are hung in the white-room around the holy pictures.

In Dalmatia and Bosnia one finds bags, carpets, satchels, aprons, all richly ornamented from purely geometrical patterns—objects which were handed down from father to son in days gone by. Present-day craftsmen in this vicinity also find frequent stimulus to their activity in the social and religious life of the community, the requirements of which afford occupation for the cleverest carvers of the village. In Salzburg and in the Tyrol, wooden masks are made for the secular and sacred plays, staves are made for herdsmen and couriers and an infinite number of manger figures for the tableaux at Christmas time. Then, there are the wayside shrines and domestic altars, and there is a constant demand for crosses for house and stable, and for the doves of peace. From the hands of village craftsmen, too, come certain memorials called the “Marterln” pictures painted as memorials of the dead, especially those who have lost their life in Alpine accidents. Also, there are votive pictures and boards on which the dead are placed before being put in the coffin.

In the Carpathian districts and Dalmatia color is added to the woodwork. A process of wood decoration, which is of very great antiquity, going back to prehistoric times, is pyrography or poker painting. This is found in everyday articles among the herdsmen and on the woodwork of the Goraliens and of the Carpathians.

Many of these people have made interesting articles of pottery for centuries, especially articles necessary for their own use—jugs, pots and onion-dishes. The majolica ware of the peasants is especially ornate and luxurious both in the Alpine and Bohemian districts. In Istria every peasant woman takes a pride in having as large a number as possible of gaily decorated plates. Among most of these people there is what is called a “bespoke” ware, that is, special articles of pottery ordered from a famous potter for celebration occasions, for birthdays, for civic meetings, for drinking festivals, for hunting events, etc. Although in the eighteenth century it was the custom pretty well throughout the world to look down on this peasant work, so foolish and unenlightened a point of view has quite gone out, and today the peasant and his work are taken seriously and his art is considered from a scientific and artistic point of view.