

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2005

Book Review: Folk Furniture of Canada's Doukhobors, Hutterites, Mennonites and Ukrainians

Ervin Beck
Goshen College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Beck, Ervin, "Book Review: Folk Furniture of Canada's Doukhobors, Hutterites, Mennonites and Ukrainians" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 161.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/161>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

furniture dignified by dramatic lighting that discloses the texture, line, and form of historic everyday household items. But the book is an important contribution to material cultural studies, since it not only places furniture in its cultural context but also “reads” furniture like a “text” to discover how it expresses the history, psychology, and ideology of the people who made and used it.

Of the four types studied here, Ukrainian furniture lends itself least well to such study, since Ukrainians are united only by culture, not ideology. Even so, the authors say that the floral and animal motifs on Ukrainian furniture express that group’s “reaching out” to the rest of the world, more so than the furniture of the three other separatist, inward-looking groups. Ecclesiastical pieces also reflect Ukrainians’ affiliation with a ritualistic religious tradition. With its curvilinear, multicolor, and often eccentric designs, Ukrainian furniture reveals its derivation from high baroque (especially French) style.

If Ukrainian furniture is the most “fancy” of the four groups, Hutterite furniture is the most “plain.” Its eminently practical, severely rectilinear, undecorated forms reflect the “straight and narrow” life that Hutterites live. The “visual anonymity” of the very generic furniture forms expresses the Hutterites’ submission of the individual to the group. Chaste design matches the Hutterites’ obsession with cleanliness.

The Mennonites, like the Hutterites, are an Anabaptist group that cultivates communal living—“utopia,” according to the authors—but in a less radical manner. So their furniture reflects some of the same values of the Hutterites, such as simplicity, moral rectitude, and egalitarianism. In both groups, the tendency toward geometric, rather than natural, organic forms reflects the strict rectilinear designs of their villages, which impose order on the otherwise open western landscape, just as the groups’ covenants impose order on individual lives.

Mennonite furniture design derives from Beidermeier, or German neo-classical, style—a remnant of their sojourn in eighteenth-century Polish Prussia. Even the dominant yellow and

Folk Furniture of Canada’s Doukhobors, Hutterites, Mennonites and Ukrainians. By John Fleming and Michael Rowan. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2004. xix + 155 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00.

Folk Furniture makes a fine coffee-table book, with its oversize format and more than one hundred gorgeous color photographs by James A. Chambers. Leafing through it is a visual feast, with otherwise humble pieces of

black coloring of Mennonite furniture may replicate in paint the Beidermeier preference for naturally finished birch and fruitwood furniture. Oddly, even though the authors contrast western Canadian Mennonite furniture with that found in the western U.S., they do not try to explain why the Canadian Mennonite furniture is less decorated and less refined than its U.S. counterparts.

The Dukhobors, a Quaker-like, communally inclined group that dissented from Russian Orthodoxy in the early eighteenth century, moved to western Canada beginning in 1899. Their furniture perpetuates folk elements found in Russian peasant culture, such as pin-wheel designs and stylized flowers and animals, especially horse heads. With its paint, carving, turnings, and incised and applied decoration, Dukhobor furniture is less plain than Ukrainian furniture and more fancy than that of the Mennonites.

Although the authors emphasize the communal function of some of the furniture and suggest that the floral decorations reflect the Dukhobors' vegetarianism, they seem least persuasive here in finding elements that express the Dukhobors' distinctive ideology. Some questionable interpretation also arises. The authors invoke presumed archetypal symbolic meanings of dubious credibility, saying, for instance, that the rose and tulip are "symbolic of natural forces and new life" and that the geometric and vegetable forms are "pagan representations of the life source." And although symmetry characterizes virtually all western folk art traditions, they give it meaning for Dukhobor culture, but not for the other three groups.

Finding meaning in physical objects is a risky enterprise. Like stones, furniture does not cry out. If the authors sometimes offer too extravagant analysis, they have nonetheless produced a beautiful book with a provocative text that does justice to the objects under scrutiny and the people who produced them.

ERVIN BECK
Department of English
Goshen College