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Amana Folk Art and Craftsmanship

by
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and
Madeline Roemig

In 1929, Grace Chaffee wrote: "things produced in the Amanas were a dreary lot." Her pronouncement has been accepted generally as an artistic judgment on the Amanas, a community that placed emphasis on the useful, the plain, and the communal. In those days church elders discouraged personal art, even forbade it. They considered it frivolous to have paintings on the walls — the only decorations allowed were religious pictures, samplers, and calendars passed out by the Society and its stores.

Yet, in Amana there was — and still is — a wealth of beauty in articles created by the people of the community. As is usually the case with closed societies (as Amana was for its nearly 89 years of communal life) outsiders seldom saw the artistic creations. Of late, however, these examples of Amana folk art have been emerging, in part through display at the Amana Heritage Society Museum. The objects are beautiful, they are skillfully wrought, and they are filled with the most important element of all:

the ability to engage the eye and artistic sense of the receptive viewer.

Even a society that placed high value on tradition produced articles that show concern for color, innovation, and creativity. Many of the older homes of Amana are storehouses for such articles. Some of the traditional forms such as quilts are still produced at the quilting bees which are even today a part of Amana social life. Many of the quilt patterns are unique to the community. At the other extreme (in size if not art) are tiny crocheted animals made as toys or for table decoration during seasonal celebrations. The variety seems endless, and the colorful array is challenging even to the casual viewer.

The community of the seven Amana villages, because of its utopian bent and its desire to be self-sustaining, fostered craftsmen of extreme virtuosity and imbued them with a strong sense of efficiency and a deeply-rooted concern for thrift (*Sparsamkeit*). When these traits pushed against the human need for

creative self-expression the result was an outpouring of art within the confines of local tradition — most often in utilitarian forms. A man might spend his working hours in the cabinet shop, then turn in his free time to using his skills for building a child's china cabinet or a carefully wrought whatnot shelf to decorate his walls. A woman was required to work in the kitchens or gardens, but she found time to knit and crochet. These skills were used to decorate her everyday life with colorful house blessings, newspaper holders, and the omnipresent keyholders. These objects show a consistency of form that reflects the strength of tradition, but within the traditional structure there is a remarkable variety. Simplicity of life may have been preached, but the folk art of Amana shows a complexity worthy of more investigation.

The delightful toys of Amana show the work of the people during off hours. The china cabinet in Fig. 1 was built as sturdily as its full-sized counterpart; its drawers, handles, glass work, and wood inlays show the skill of a master craftsman. The choice of wood suggests that the cupboard was not necessarily made of left-over pieces, but was conceived and constructed to evoke the response "it's just like a real one." The child who received the beautifully-painted sled shown in Fig. 2 must have felt pride of ownership at least in part because of the artistically pleasing qualities of the sled. In turn, the maker must have been equally as proud to have



Figure 1. Children's china cabinet (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 2. Child's sled (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 3. Rocking horse (courtesy Museum of Amana History).

his craft displayed for all children to see. Other toys such as the large rocking horse (Fig. 3) carved from wood with real horse hair and the doll house furniture (Fig. 4) made to imitate the furniture of the communal houses suggest some of the variety and skill of Amana folk craftsmen.

Although only religious pictures, samplers, and standardized calendars were "allowed" by the Society, other wall adornments crept into homes in the guise of functional objects. The ingenious display devices for otherwise

utilitarian things received much more than casual decoration. The dust cloth holder in Fig. 5, made from leftover sateen quilt material with cross-stitched letters and tatted edging, is a good example. An object as mundane as a dust cloth stirred someone to create the holder and to decorate it with the finest stitchery known to the women of Amana. What might have been stored in a drawer or a closet received instead a charming, skillfully-executed, and colorful enclosure, which was placed on the wall for all to see. It was a rare dust cloth indeed



Figure 4. Doll house furniture (courtesy Madeline Roemig).



Figure 5. Dust cloth holder (courtesy Museum of Amana History).

that had such a wonderful resting place.

Elaborate key holders were fashioned of velvet, usually painted or decorated with stitchery (Fig. 6). The typical motif was the flower. Other holders for everyday objects were adorned with a variety of designs ranging from geometric patterns to painted floral designs. The whisk broom holder (Fig. 7) made of leather and velvet and delicately colored with tiny blue flowers, the pocket watch holder (Fig. 8), and the comb and brush holder (Fig. 9), made by a local saddle maker, show the same artistic concepts as the key holder. Many of these things were made as gifts for friends or relatives — a lack of cash in the early communal Society may have motivated some of the artful creations.

Some of the most impressive Amana artifacts, because of their size and wide occurrence, are the wall decorations. Samplers or “House blessings” (*Haus-segen*) were commonplace and found in nearly every home. The tradition of making and displaying samplers is evidently a long one, as some examples reach back to before the arrival of the colonists in the United States. Many of the samplers appear to have been made by children just learning the skills of stitchery. The colorful pieces show the unfinished quality of learning pieces with frequent misspellings and uneven stitching. The most elaborate samplers, made by adults, express religious piety and love of family. Along with the newspaper holders, they are prized possessions.



Figure 6. Keyholder (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 8. Pocket watch holder (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 7. Whisk broom holder (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 9. Comb and brush holder (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 10. A wall hanging with the German motto "Ohne Kreuz keine Krone" worked into the visual motif (courtesy Harvey Oehler family).



Figure 11. Knitted animals (courtesy Madeline Roemig).

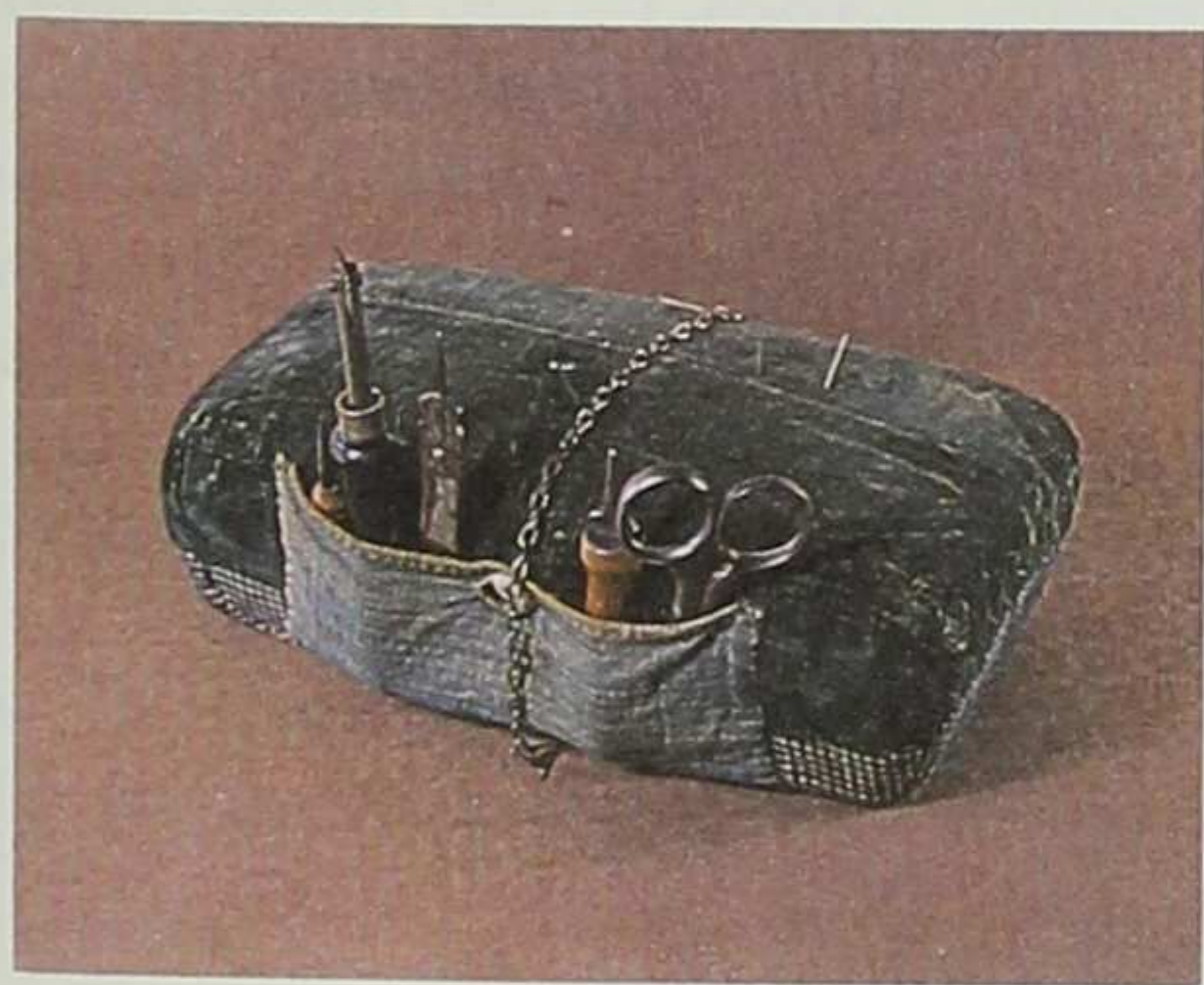


Figure 12. Nähstein (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 13. Nähstein (courtesy Museum of Amana History).

Some of the wall decorations were sewn on punched papers, a tradition that reached back to Germany; others were sewn on canvas. All have some form of religious saying (*Spruch*) which served to legitimize them for the sake of the community elders and allowed them to be hung on the wall for general viewing. Frequently, wall hangings employed a visual and linguistic riddle. Figure 10 shows a clever use of the German word *Kreuz* (crown), for example.

Perhaps the most obvious case of skill and originality in Amana appears in the needlework of the women. Many of the patterns and ideas have been adopted from elsewhere, but the quality of the workmanship and the adaptation of designs point to the discipline, skill, and creative ability of the Amana women. Some individuals stand out, such as the late Mrs. Louise Rettig who was well known in Amana for her small crocheted animals, Christmas trees, Easter bunnies, and a barnyard full of animals (Fig. 11). Working without patterns, Mrs. Rettig simply "created" for the delight of her family and friends.

One of the most unusual pieces is the functional sewing stone (*Nähstein*) (Figs. 12 and 13), a heavy stone or piece of lead whose base was covered with fancy veneer or inlaid wood. An interesting contrast is seen in the two *Nähsteine* shown. One was used in a communal sewing room (*Nähstube*) and seems to be strictly functional, as dictated by the Amana life of the day. The stone is covered in a gray-green plush material and

the base by ticking and a patch of denim, undoubtedly leftover scraps. Two pockets were carefully sewn onto the side to hold sewing instruments. The other sewing stone has a base of intricately inlaid wood and a beautiful needlepoint pincushion. Attached to the *Nähstein* is a tape with a sharply-pointed hook at its end. Large pieces of material, such as sheets, curtain, or tablecloths which had to be hemmed, were attached to this hook and the heavy *Nähstein* served as a firm anchor as a woman doing the sewing moved farther along the hem. A simple stone or a brick would have served the same purpose, but the woman working at the hemming task had before her, in a "functional" object, a challenging example of sewing skill.

The rather drab rooms of Amana buildings were relieved by the colorful, handwoven carpets on the floors and stairways (Fig. 14). The carpets were made to fit into individual homes in yard-wide strips, then sewn together to fit particular rooms. They not only added color but used up scraps of material. Every carpet was an "original" because exact patterns and colors could never be duplicated — each carpet was different. In the past, carpets were generally shades of brown with colorful contrasting stripes. An additional practical quality allowed the strips to be interchanged when traffic wore down one section of the carpet. From the earthy browns, laced with flashes of green, to calico blue or even reds and pinks, Amana people walked on an everchanging array of color as they moved from room to room and one communal building to the next. Amana carpets are still woven and used in Main Amana homes — a tribute to the

artistic quality of the carpets and a love for tradition.

And, not to be overlooked in Amana are the design and craft seen in wooden whatnot shelves (Fig. 15). These were cut with a jig saw and almost invariably featured a stag design, a style brought from Germany. There is even a special vocabulary in Amana German to refer to these creations. Some are large, but many of the whatnot shelves are small and appear to have been made from leftover scraps.

As must be apparent from the number and variety of examples of Amana folk art, everyone in the community was a potential contributor. Everywhere in the communal houses, on the floors and the walls, were colorful creations, growing out of the Society's strong traditions, but still expressive of self and the inner need for beauty. Men contributed woodwork, women stitched and made carpets, even the children learned needed skills by working on wall samplers. The Amana principles of thrift and simplicity were real, but so too was the art of the people. □

Note on Sources

Readers interested in the topic of folk art might wish to read Michael Q. Jones, "The Concept of 'Aesthetic' in the Traditional Arts," *Western Folklore*, 30, 2 (1971), 77-104; Thomas C. Munro, *The Arts and Their Interrelations* (Cleveland, 1967); or Robert P. Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence* (Urbana, 1971). The quotation from G. Chaffee is found in *Antiques Magazine*, 15 (August 1929), 114-18. The aid of the Museum of Amana History is acknowledged with gratitude. Part of the research was funded by two Iowa State University Research Grants and one Sciences and Humanities Research Institute summer grant. For these, grateful acknowledgement is herewith expressed.



Figure 14. Carpeting (courtesy Museum of Amana History).



Figure 15. A whatnot shelf, with the popular stag motif (courtesy Museum of Amana History).