



Color rendering by Zoe Kauffman of a painted Pennsylvania schrank which was found by the author in "Little Pittsburgh", Manor Township, Lancaster County. (Courtesy of Rock Ford - Kauffman Museum)

Schranks and Schrank Hunting

By Henry J. Kauffman

The "Schrank" has come a long way. Fifty years ago it was almost impossible to get a bid on them at a Lancaster County auction. Most people thought they were worthless, and they brought only a few dollars.

I once found one in an antique shop in Lititz. The dealer refused to place a price on it, because he planned to cut it up and use the wood to repair antique furniture. It was obviously well suited for such a purpose. Finally, the dealer placed a price on it of \$40. I bought it and stored it in a barn because it was too big to get into my house. The great size of the schranks was their forbidding factor. Most of them are more than eight feet high. Although some might be squeezed into a room with an eight-foot ceiling, the squeeze is too tight to make them look attractive.

Their size was minimized by the fact that they could be disassembled into a number of separate parts: the top, back, sides, doors, and base. This asset is well concealed, and on a casual examination it is not evident. Only the best cabinetmakers could make schranks.

The origin of the form is doubtless Europe, where many Pennsylvania antique forms originated. A Nuremberg cabinetmaker first built this form during the Middle Ages. Practically every folk art museum in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland has at least one schrank in their display. The form has changed over the years. Most European examples are painted (decorated) with religious scenes and people on the panels of their customary single door. The European examples are made of a variety of woods, however, most Lancaster County schranks are made of walnut. Walnut was a cabinetmaker's dream until mahogany came along.

Another Lancaster County dealer rejected an excellent example because it was made of pine. He looked only at the inside, where the species of wood was easily examined. Not caring for a pine schrank, he told me where it was located, and that it could be bought.

I found it in a small village in Manor Township, called by old residents, "Little Pittsburgh." The village consisted of a small number of nineteenth-century houses built close to the road. There was a church and a one-room schoolhouse.

The schrank was located on the third floor of the house, which was very poorly lighted. Fortunately, I took a flashlight along to view the schrank. By rubbing the exterior surface with my thumb, and throwing a light on it, I discovered the exterior surface was painted a beautiful "old Dutch blue." The fact that the doors had a different color from the balance of the surface was not apparent.

Then a problem arose: the schrank would have to be removed through a window. However, with enough hands, this was soon accomplished. It is about six feet high and fitted beautifully into my library. It is now on display in the Rock Ford-Kauffman Museum. Very few people realize its rarity and its worth. The outer surface is unblemished.

Most Lancaster County schranks are divided vertically into two parts and have two doors. Shelves are placed in one half of the schrank on which folded pieces of clothing can be placed. In the other half there are wooden pins on which long clothing can be hung.

A few Lancaster County schranks are decorated quite simply with natural motifs, but unlike the European examples, not with buildings or people. Probably the best decorated schrank extant is on display in the Henry Ford Museum at Dearborn, Michigan. The background surface of this schrank is marbled and has motifs from nature on the door panels. Five drawers are located in the lower section—most schranks have only three. The Dearborn example has very modest hardware on the drawers and doors. Although no documentation is available, it is identified as a Lancaster County product. Its extreme width is 88 inches, and it is dated 1790. This schrank is illustrated in *American Painted Furniture, 1660-1880*.

The Landis Valley Museum, near Lancaster, has a schrank which is painted a plain blue. They paid \$8,000 for it twenty-some years ago, and were severely criticized for spending the Commonwealth's money so carelessly. Today it is worth several times that amount. Nothing of any value can be bought today for less than \$20,000, and the price might well run to \$40,000.

A common way to decorate schranks was to carve openings and fill them with sulfur. The extent of this decoration varies from just the maker's name and date to a very bizarre example which is owned by the Philadelphia Art Museum. The entire outer surface of the museum's schrank is covered with designs, not really compatible with good taste.

Finally, some comment should be made about the word "schrank." In a book about Lancaster's Hans Herr House, the writer calls a schrank a "clothes press." A clothes press is a common piece of English furniture which resembles, in a small way, a schrank. Here the author missed a wonderful opportunity to emphasize an important aspect of German culture present in the Herr House. People don't read books to read what they already know. If they did, there would be no reason to read a book. Not to use the work "schrank" immediately identifies the author as an amateur at his task.

On the other hand, some years ago the Philadelphia Art Museum in a display of Germanic things called their schrank a "wardrobe." They made the same error as the author of the Herr House book. The aim is to educate. This can't be done with the use of ordinary run-of-the-mill words. Very few viewers came away with an enriched view of Germanic culture in America.

If you see a good schrank for \$5,000, buy it. If you become unhappy with it, call me!

Henry J. Kauffman is a retired professor of industrial arts at Millersville University. He is the author of many best-selling books on antique pewter, copper, brass, iron, and tinware; rifles and axes, and Pennsylvania German furniture and architecture.

The late Zoa Kauffman was for many years the art teacher in Hempfield High School, and has numerous works of fine art to her credit. She was the wife of Henry J. Kauffman.