

# CLOSE-UP – THE PAINTED DECORATION OF DOWRY CHESTS

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**Abstract:** In the vast field of cultural heritage, a detailed approach based on conservation sciences represents a fundamental pillar. The importance of this approach becomes evident in the research of five painted dowry chests – a typological category of heritage objects for which information is limited. These artefacts, although deeply connected to local communities and their cultural-social traditions, remain relatively unexplored. Written sources devoted to these dowry chests are scarce, leaving us to contextually deduce most aspects of their mode of manufacture, stylistic influences, and material composition.

Existing gaps in the bibliography on painted dowry chests emphasize the need for a detailed approach. This study aimed to investigate the painted decorations found on their surfaces. As a result, particularities of the techniques used in the painted decoration were highlighted, and a comparison of them was made for the five pieces under study.

The accumulated information has the potential to shed light on some lesser-known aspects of these objects, contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural context from which they originate, and the traditional techniques used in their manufacture.

**Rezumat:** În vastul domeniu al patrimoniului cultural, o abordare detaliată bazată pe studiul științei conservării constituie un element esențial. Importanța acestei abordări devine evidentă în cercetarea a cinci lăzi de zestre pictate – o categorie tipologică de obiecte de patrimoniu pentru care informațiile sunt limitate. Aceste artefacte, deși profund legate de comunitățile locale și de tradițiile cultural-sociale ale acestora, rămân relativ neexplorate. Sursele scrise dedicate acestor lăzi de zestre sunt rare, ceea ce ne lasă să deducem contextual majoritatea aspectelor legate de modul lor de fabricație, influențele stilistice și compoziția materială.

Lacunele existente în bibliografie despre lăzile de zestre pictate subliniază necesitatea unei abordări mai detaliate. Acest studiu a avut ca scop o investigație a decorațiilor pictate de pe suprafețele acestora. În urma acestui demers au putut fi evidențiate aspecte ale tehnicilor utilizate la nivelul decorației pictate, realizându-se și o comparație a acestora pentru cele cinci piese aflate în studiu.

Informațiile acumulate au potențialul de a aduce la lumină aspecte mai puțin cunoscute ale acestor obiecte, contribuind la înțelegerea mai profundă a contextului cultural din care acestea provin și a tehnicilor tradiționale utilizate în manufacturarea lor.

Among dowry chests, two distinct categories can be defined: an older one, manufactured by woodworkers, and a more recent one, commonly referred to as carpenter's chests.<sup>1</sup> The former is characterised mainly by incised decorations on the wooden surface and a very limited colour palette – red, black, and sometimes white, while the latter features a simpler wooden panel construction but also surfaces adorned with painted decorations, encapsulating a rather diverse colour palette.<sup>2</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of many sawmills in the Bukovina region shifted wood processing from manual labour to mechanised production,<sup>3</sup> making wood panels readily available; carpenter's dowry chests became the more popular type.

When it comes to carpenters' chests, several stylistic typologies can be distinguished. These reflect the social aspects and the cultural context of the communities in which they are produced.<sup>4</sup> Narrowing the discussion on the region of Bukovina, we can acknowledge the diversity<sup>5</sup> of decorative motifs in the context of the annexation of this region by the Habsburg Empire.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Capesius 1974, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Meșteriuc, Huică 2024, pp. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Mărgineanu 1999, p. 52. The growth of the wood industry is evident: in 1786, Bukovina had two water-powered sawmills, while by 1898, there were 109 automated water-powered sawmills and 31 steam-powered sawmills recorded.

<sup>4</sup> Prepeliuc 2012, pp. 57-108; See also Dina, Dina 2022, pp. 236-243, 256-261, 273-278; which illustrate different stylistic typologies of painted chests in the region of Bukovina and Moldova.

<sup>5</sup> van Drunen 2013, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Stambrook 2004, p. 185.