

FOLK ART LOVE TOKENS

by Robert Young

Our father never wanted us to buy him Christmas or birthday presents, always claiming that the only gifts we could give him that really mattered were the ones which we made for him ourselves. I was one of four children and remember the hours we spent at the kitchen table working intently with our little fingers, sticking with glue, applying bits of coloured paper to individual match boxes, sticking loops and ram's horn spirals of string onto freshly painted cigar boxes and fixing carefully selected photographs and cuttings onto a cardboard backing with little ribbons hanging below attached to small painted calendar booklets.

As the years passed, our creative offerings gradually became a little more imaginative and sophisticated. The two girls knitted scarves and woolly hats, embroidered hankies with his initials and even made up little bags of homemade fudge and mint creams, whilst we boys painted

wooden golf tees, made wooden pen stands decorated with felt tip pens, painted glass bottles with enamel colours, designed and painted fanciful book markers and any other such paraphernalia that came to mind and we thought might please him. Little did we know that we were, in a minor and insignificant way, creating little works of folk art for our father.

'Folk Art' is the generic term used to describe the decorative and fine arts of untrained makers and painters. The oeuvre is wide ranging in scope, media, nationality, style and period, but there exists a body of work that was made as gifts both by and for courting couples. These individual and personal objects are known as 'love tokens', and form a significant part of the folk art tradition in most Northern European countries. Here in Great Britain the traditional Welsh love spoon (figure 1) is the most commonly recognised example, but there are many others



Figure 1. Traditional carved love spoon, silhouette-carved boxwood with decorative sealing wax details, Welsh, c.1860. 9¼in. x 3in.

including shell valentines, embroidered and beaded pin cushions, heart-shaped snuff and tobacco boxes, servicemen portrait valentines,



Figure 2. Heart decorated love token spice cupboard, walnut, fruitwood and pine, English, c.1720. 13¼in. x 11¼in. x 7¼in.



Figure 3. Miniature love token wool winder, hand carved and painted birchwood, Swedish, initialled 'ABS' and dated '1804'. 6¼in. x 4¼in. x 4in.

candle boxes and spice cupboards (figure 2).

In Scandinavia the tradition of carved and painted wooden love tokens is particularly rich and followed an almost ritualistic pattern. All suitors wanted their beloved to be reminded of them when they saw their gifts or love tokens so in rural communities they frequently crafted objects relating to the day's work. The primary objects created and offered by these smitten and hopeful male suitors were tools and implements related to the spinning, weaving, cleaning, smoothing and other working of cloths. The reason for this is that young women invariably spent their days working together with textiles and the young men wanted the girls to show off their gifts to their friends and colleagues.

Such pieces were invariably made from relatively hard Alpine pine or the more durable birchwood, and lovingly hand carved and painted with various symbols and decorative devices. They frequently bore both the year of manufacture and the recipient's initials.

The ritual of these gifts related closely to the various stages of courtship. At first there was the scutching knife, a broad flat-bladed tool related to the processing of flax into linen. Then there was the spinning wheel with its distaffs on which freshly spun woollen yarn was held, or wool winders, of which figure 3 illustrates a delightful miniature example. A wide variety of baskets made from woven thin splints of pine were exuberantly decorated with 'rosemaling' or stylised painted floral motifs (figure 4).

If these initial gifts were accepted and the courtship continued to develop, subsequent offerings normally became more elaborate. Washing bats, used for scrubbing and beating cloth in the washing tub (figure 5), long handsome mangle boards – often with carved horse- or lion-form handles and decoratively carved fronts (figures 6 and 7) which were made to smooth and



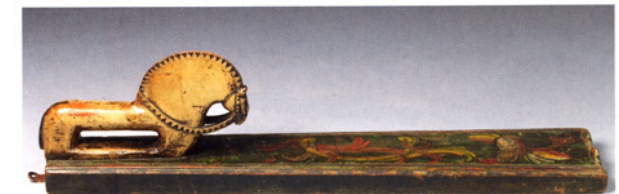
Figure 4. Decorated love token wool basket, woven pine splints with original rose-maling, Swedish, c.1870. 10¼in. x 11¼in. x 11¼in.



Left. Figure 5. Pair of love token washing bats, carved and rose painted, birchwood. (Left) Initialled 'KJED' and dated '1821'. 13¼in. x 5¼in. (Right) Initialled 'HHD' and dated '1827'. 14¼in. x 6¼in.

Below. Figure 6. Fine love token mangle board with carved stylised floral and crown motifs and lion handle, birchwood with original rose-maling, Scandinavian, c.1800. 6¼in. x 32in.

Bottom. Figure 7. Exceptional horse-handled love token mangleboard, hand carved birchwood with original rose-maling, Norwegian, Telemark Region, inscribed 'AHD' and dated '1842'. 7¼in. x 28¼in. x 4¼in.



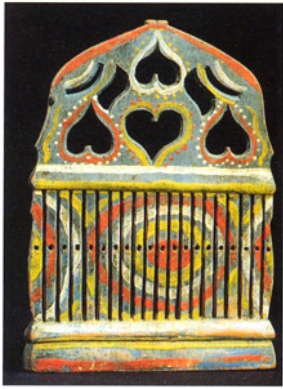


Figure 8. Four-heart love token braid loom, silhouette-cut and painted birchwood, original rosemaling, Scandinavian, c.1800. 6 1/4 in. x 5 in.



Figure 9. Fine love token braid loom, hand carved and painted birchwood, Swedish, initialled 'IPD', dated 1811. 6 1/4 in. x 5 in.



Figure 10. Roundel and heart decorated braid loom, hand carved and painted birchwood, Scandinavian, initialled 'FBFD' and dated '1837'. 11 in. x 8 in.

flattened cloth after washing – and, finally, braid looms (figures 8, 9 and 10), the delightful little boards used to push woven ribbons tightly together in the making of long garters and belts, all were made as love tokens.

These pieces were made of the same materials and in exactly the same way as their everyday working

equivalents, but as love tokens they were comprehensively carved and decorated to make an impression and to display the skill, imagination and dedication of the suitor who made them. Such examples were only rarely used for their original purpose and were more usually given pride of place in the young woman's timber-built cabin,

treasured as keepsakes and subsequently as heirlooms. Hence they are generally in fine original condition.

Inevitably there is a wide range of designs and quality of execution to be found in these objects, but some of the finest and most sensitive examples now form part of the folk art collections at both the Norwegian Folk Art Museum in Oslo and the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm.

Once the courtship had run its full course and the wedding approached, another cluster of important and ritually symbolic artefacts were necessary. The well documented and significant items such as the marriage cupboard/armoire or chest (figures 11 and 12) were generally commissioned by the families of the bride and groom and were filled with homespun fabrics, knitted garments and woven textiles for the young couple's new home. The bride herself made some of these including finely embroidered linen dress shirts for her husband's national costume. But the ultimate gifts and the final act of the traditional love token ritual were the pieces made by the groom for the wedding day itself. First, there was the courting mirror (figure 13) and then the various vessels related to



Figure 12. Early twin panel marriage chest, pine with original painted decoration, central European, dated 1776. 19 1/2 in. x 40 in. x 23 1/2 in.



Figure 13. Love token courting mirror, pine with original painted decoration, Scandinavian, c.1780-1800. 20 1/2 in. x 10 1/2 in. x 1 1/4 in.

drinking at the ceremonial party. At such occasions, large bowls of home-brewed ale would be placed in the middle of long tables, and special bowls, ladles and tankards were required to scoop the ale out for drinking. Many are simple turned bowls, usually with some polychrome painted decoration, but the most cherished are the little ale hens and bride's bowls (figure 14) which floated on the ale and were taken out full of ale for the bride herself to drink from. Then there are the communal loving cups in the form of 'kasas' or 'kjenge' (figures 15, 16 and



Above right. Figure 14. Ceremonial ale hen, dug out and hand carved birchwood retaining original painted decoration, Norwegian, probably Telemark Region, c.1800. 4 1/2 in. x 7 1/2 in. x 3 in.



Right. Figure 15. Love token oval horse-headed kasa, geometrically carved and painted burr birchwood with inscribed rim, Norwegian, c.1790. 6 1/2 in. x 9 1/2 in. x 7 in.



Figure 11. Fine paint decorated marriage chest, iron bound pine with original rosemaling decoration, Swedish, initialled 'B Ha Da' and dated 'An 1820'. 24 in. x 34 in. x 24 in.



Figure 16. Paint decorated horse-head wedding kasa, dug out, hand carved birchwood with original rosemaling, branded to underside of base with a monogram and 'LOSpilde', Norwegian, dated 1804. 6 1/2 in. x 13 in. x 7 1/4 in.

Below. Figure 17. Exceptional early horse-headed kasa, hand carved and painted burr birchwood, Norwegian, c.1749. 7 1/2 in. x 13 in. x 7 in.



purchased gift, something made especially for you, by someone who loves you, is curiously more precious.

Robert Young and his wife have been dealing in British and European country furniture and folk art in London for over 30 years.

17), or large lidded tankards (figure 18), both of which were passed around the table for each guest to toast the newlyweds and drink their measure to their health and happiness. These vessels hold a special place in the Scandinavian folk tradition.

There are dedicated collectors of these various love tokens, partly because of their romantic history and also because of the variety of their forms, decoration and regional styles. Motifs such as the stylised horse's head (which was considered to represent honour, strength against evil and faithfulness in Norske folk tradition), the heart (to represent love), the acanthus leaf (to represent fertility and prosperity), the lion (to represent

nobility and power) and the dragon (to represent the warrior), all have roots back to the Vikings. However, each lovingly crafted piece, individually dug out, hand carved and decorated over many days, represents something extra, something fundamentally human and personal that we can somehow relate to.

These humble yet unique objects display an instinctive creative spirit. There is often a joyful vitality to the carving and bright original colours that is often not apparent in commercially produced equivalents. So, perhaps my father was right in thinking that, compared to any



Figure 18. Traditional Scandinavian peg tankards, turned and carved root burr birchwood. (Left) Rare bird and dog carved lid, c.1770, 9 1/2 in. high. (Centre) Finely carved with a crowned lion finial, c.1815, 7 1/4 in. high. (Right) Unusually small with primitive lion finial, c.1800, 7 in. high.

ANTIQUE COLLECTING

Incorporating Antique Dealer and Collectors Guide

SEPTEMBER 2011

