

ANTIQUE COLLECTING

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Valentine's Day special
LOVE & MARRIAGE

From lovespoons to chests, the antiques that celebrate romance

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COVER
A wedding chest, Northern European, c. 1830, on sale from Robert Young Antiques, priced £3,000

THE EXPERT COLLECTOR *'Marriage' antiques*



Left A large 10cm (20in) 19th-century four-bowl sycamore spoon inset with a mirror, possibly from Carmarthenshire in southwest Wales. Image courtesy of Tin Bowen Antiques

Below A large, Norwegian sycamore lovespoon c. 1874, 31 x 9cm (12½ x 3½) on sale from Robert Young Antiques, poa. The style, though beautiful, is less ornate than the Welsh



I LOVESPOONS

For the lovelorn Welsh maiden nothing was as thrilling as the presentation of a carved spoon from a would-be suitor. Not only did it show a loving interest, it proved her potential husband was no slouch in the woodworking department. Lovespoons are not confined to Wales – they are also found in Celtic Breton and Scandinavia where their intention varied from 'feeler' spoons (sent to many girls to gauge who was the keenest) to 'suitor' spoons, carried in the carver's breast pocket to show he was 'going steady' with a girl. (Swedes even gave out 'jokespoons' at weddings which were comically misshapen to make eating by inebriated guests very difficult).

Compared to the elaborate decoration of their Welsh counterparts, Scandinavian spoons tended to be relatively conservative, although the heart was generally present somewhere in the design as it was universally recognised as the symbol of love and affection.

In Welsh circles the acceptance of the spoon didn't necessarily signal anything more than mutual interest, with a sizeable collection seen as an indication of a girl's desirability.

WELSH VERSIONS

The oldest Welsh lovespoon is in the collection of the National Museum of Wales and dates to 1667. Like their Scandinavian counterparts spoons were shaped with great care and devotion with the calibre of the spoons testimony to the makers' skill and devotion. Welsh carvers used a wide range of symbols in an eclectic range of styles.

Styles, ranging from simple panel spoons to chain-link and balls-in-cages crowned by ornate swivels

Symbolism of lovespoons

Hearts
The heart is the universal symbol of love and is frequently seen on Welsh lovespoons. It is a sign of passion and strong emotion, proving the carver's depth of feeling for his beloved. A lovespoon showing twin hearts might well indicate a mutual love between sender and recipient.

Double bowls
Occasionally, lovespoons are carved with two or more bowls, possibly to indicate the union of the souls when joined together, or perhaps the number of children desired.

Comma or paisley shapes
Often visible on historic Welsh lovespoons, this shape is said to represent the soul and deep affection.

Balls-in-cages
Balls carved within cages are thought to represent the number of children desired by the carver, but could equally be a sign of a man held captive by love.

All you need is **LOVE**

Love and marriage have influenced antiques for centuries. To celebrate this month's Valentine's Day, Antique Collecting puts three designs in the spotlight

and anchors carved from close-grain woods, such as sycamore, box and fruit woods, were particularly popular. Welsh country furniture and folk art specialist Tim Bowen, said: "The bulls-in-cages demonstrated the consummate skill of the maker as the bulls had to be carved from the solid wood not just placed in the cage."

While few documented records exist, there is no evidence that the acceptance of a spoon constituted an engagement. More likely it gave the young man a green light to initiate a relationship.

2 MARRIAGE CHESTS

One of the quintessential items of peasant furniture, especially in Europe, is the colourful folk-painted antique pine box, coffer, trunk or chest. While popular abroad, the style is less familiar in the UK. Dealer John Cornall said: "If highly decorated chests were not found in the British Isles it is partly because we had different marriage traditions from our European neighbours and also because of the iconoclasm, or anti-festive turn, that our visual traditions took from the time of the English Revolution in the 17th century."

In Wales and in the rest of British Isles, the custom for country people, was to present a dresser, or sideboard, for use and display in the front room or tidy

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Chain links

Generally considered to indicate loyalty and faithfulness. Chain links might also symbolise a couple bound together in love and loyalty.

Diamonds

Diamonds are believed to represent a wish for prosperity and good fortune and a promise to provide well for a partner.

Keys and keyholes

In addition to the house images that sometimes appear on Welsh lovespoons appearing to represent domestic contentment, key and keyhole carvings are also used frequently, perhaps symbolising security or, more romantically, the key to one's heart.

Wheels

Wheels are thought to represent a vow by the carver to work hard and provide for his spouse and family.



Left A Welsh lovespoon with hearts, wheels and 'diamonds', image courtesy of Tim Bowen Antiques

Right A marriage cupboard with field and floral panels, pine, Austrian Empire, c.1840, on sale from Robert Young Antiques priced £4,800



Right A cassone c. 1480-1495, Italian. The gesso relief shows Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture, accompanied by the underworld goddess Hecate, searching for Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres

The Italian Renaissance marriage chest

During the 14th to 16th centuries elaborately decorated wooden wedding chests known as cassoni (cassone in the singular) were an integral part of Italian marriage ceremonies. Commissioned in pairs and shaped like ancient sarcophagi, they were paraded from the bride's house to her husband's after the wedding.

Throughout the marriage, the chests were used for storage and seating and were among the most prestigious furnishings in the home. In an era when homes, even those of the elite, were comparatively sparsely furnished, the marriage chest would have been the most splendid and distinctive piece in the newly-weds' room or camera, a semi-private domestic space which was not only where the couple slept, but was also used for entertaining. They were, therefore, important vehicles for display, reminders of family alliances and family wealth.

As well as being practical, the chest also depicted edifying marriage 'lessons' based on the 14th-century writings of poets such as Boccaccio, Dante and Petrarch.



THE EXPERT COLLECTOR 'Marriage' antiques



room. The dresser would then display the home's best crockery, with a set of rarely used silver cutlery in the drawer, both of which had been wedding gifts.

Growing in popularity today, the boxes are especially sought after by interior designers, modern art galleries and textile collectors, as the designs were often based on traditional bridal dress.

When originally presented, the boxes were often accompanied by other similarly decorated pieces of furniture, whose role was similar, such as an armoire, or a chest of drawers, or a painted dresser and also by smaller items like a spoon or plate rack.

Often made in local workshops, the marriage chests were ornate affairs designed to be on show during the wedding procession. Many were inscribed with a date and the couple's initials and it is not uncommon for one box to be painted over when it was handed down to the next generation.

John continued: "In the Harta region of Hungary and in the Kaloteszeg (now in Romania) a set of furniture was painted in the region's typical colours,



Above left A marriage chest, Austrian Empire, c. 1872, pine, inscribed Anno. Eliza Barbara Sauaura. 1782, on sale from Robert Young Antiques, priced £3,500

Left A marriage cupboard, Austrian Empire, c.1825, pine, on sale from Robert Young Antiques, priced £5,000

Above right A post-modern love seat, by the Dutch designer Frank Tjepkema, made from cedar wood and aluminium

with the same colours, flowers and patterns woven into the bride and groom's clothing, so, too, the blankets that bedecked the wagon."

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Some of the best wedding chest come from Germany and Sweden, which were finely made and well crafted with bold mouldings and panels. Mostly made of widely available pine, the humbleness of the wood was often disguised with a wood grain effect to imitate darker more expensive wood.

Each area or region boasted its own style, patterns, colour and symbols, ranging from religious symbols promoting piety and fidelity to flowers and birds each of which had a different significance.

Hungarians often call marriage chests 'tulip boxes' because of their flower motif borrowed from Eastern Europe and the tulip mania of the Netherlands. While the flower found its way into painting and decorative art of the Baroque, in the multi-ethnic outlands of the Hapsburg Empire, it came to represent tribal identity and solidarity.

John said: "When I put the boxes on the internet I am sometimes contacted by people in Eastern Europe who recognise the style and even know the workshops they came from."

Boxes from Scandinavia are much sought after by collectors as being well built, although Swedish and Norwegian boxes were invariably made with domed lids that is a deterrent to buyers as it limits use in the home, he added.



3 LOVE SEATS

Another furniture style with distinct romantic connotations is the 'love seat' – provoking images of seated young lovers whispering sweet nothings to one another at country house gatherings. It can, however, be more widely used to describe a broader variety of seating styles, encompassing everything from S-shaped