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Historical and technological research, comparative analyses of the materials and conservation possibilities of 18th century Transylvanian chests covered with leather and decorated with metal ornaments

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Chests were the first representatives of storage furniture, in which documents, money, jewellery, clothing and household utensils were kept and transported. Contemporary registers tell that beside carved, inlaid and painted items, many chests were covered with leather. These registers, however, did not differentiate them by their functions and did not pay attention to their decorations. The purpose was the registering of the clothing, the valuables and other objects kept in them. Thus the material remains can help us in the first place to reconstruct the use and the methods of production and ornamentation of chests covered with leather. It is especially true for the 18th century the source material of which is less known than that of the previous periods.

The publications written by Jolán Balogh, Klára K. Csilléry, and Erzsébet Vadászi, and the restoration of a 18th century Transylvanian chest covered with leather and decorated with metal mounts, which was published by Márton Tarisznyás and which was very close to the ones published by the above authors, made me start my investigations. The special feature of these chests is that the metal floral motives were cut from sheets.

My objective was to find similar chests both in the arthistorical literature and in the reality. I found publications only about two other chests similar to the above in the arthistorical literature written in Hungarian and in foreign languages: one can be found in the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb, while neither the provenance nor the present location is known of the other one. I discovered eight more items in museums, ecclesiastic and private collections in Hungary and Transylvania: Ethnographic Museum, Budapest (1), Hungarian National Museum, Budapest (1), Tarisznyás Márton Museum in Gyergyószentmiklós (1), Castle Museum in Vajdahunyad, (1), Muzeul National Brukenthal, Nagyszeben, Romania (2), Armenian parish church in Szamosújvár (1) and private collection in Marosvásárhely (1). Two of them were registered as travelling chests, one as a guild chest, one as a diplomatic chest and two as hope chests. The registered provenances were Transylvania and, in a single case, Poland. A few of them got into the museum collections from Armenian owners.

Another goal of my investigations was the examination of certain historical aspects: the method of ornamentation, the place of production, the function and the nationality and social status of the original owners.

I compared the metal ornaments of the published 18th century Western European leather-covered chests and the ones I examined. The latter ones appeared to form a separate group regarding the motives and also the shaping of the ornaments, as Jolán Balogh expounded in respect of the item she published, the applications cut from iron or brass sheets. The motives of the Spanish, French and English items are usually shaped with nails, while engraved metal bands were applied on the German, Austrian and Italian chests. At the latter group, the leather cover itself was also often decorated with various techniques (embossing, painting, etc.). The provenance, where it was evident or probable, was always Transylvanian, so the examined chests were most probably produced in Transylvania. According to the dates on the items, they were prepared between 1762 and 1790. They could even be produced in the same workshop since the motives and the execution are very similar. As the provenance of one of the items was Poland, and there was a Greek letter mark on this very item, it would probably be worth extending the examination on the possible regional versions of the object type.

I separated two groups of chests by the ornamental motives: chests decorated exclusively with flowers and ones decorated with flowers and double-eagles. Regarding the latter one, genealogical analyses have revealed that they were once owned by Armenians. It cannot, however, be proved that the double-eagles were the depictions of the Armenian coat-of-arms according to the traditions. On the contrary, I suppose that they expressed the loyalty of the Transylvanian Armenians to the Habsburg house or the expression of their belonging to the Principality of Transylvania, or both. The fact that the Armenians, who were not considered an independent nationality in Transylvania, were granted various privileges and most of the families won title of nobility at that time supports this conclusion.

The oral tradition passed in the families in connection with the chests in Armenian possession saying that the Armenian chests were made as hope chests can also be questioned. Investigations of family trees in registers of births and in the technical literature did not evidence that there were marriages in the given families the years marked on the chests, especially not in the case of persons marked with the initials. It seems more probable that similarly to the rest of the chests they were made as travelling chests, and they could be used as hope chests by the second or third generations that inherited it.

In the course of the research, I assessed the condition of the chests, I took samples from the leather, the metal, the textile, the paper materials and the adhesives, and made instrumental investigations to determine the materials and their conditions. The chests themselves were made of pine wood, and cowhide from young animals or calf-skin, in a single case goatskin and sheepskin were used for the cover. The metal mounts were made of brass or iron or both. The iron ornaments were blanché. The interior of all the chests was lined with linen decorated with printed patterns. Excepting one, which is lined with linen without printed patterns and one other covered with wallpaper inside of the lid.

At the investigation of the technology, I made comparisons with the descriptions of the making of travelling chests, iron and brass sheets, copper-headed nails etc. and the contents of chapters on textile printing, tapestry, papers and adhesives in the nearly contemporary German source: J. G. Krünitz Oekonomische Encyclopädie oder allgemeines System der Staats- Stadt- Haus- und Landwirthschaft, in alfabetischer Ordnung. The organoleptic observations and the results of instrumental analyses led to the conclusion that the examined chests and the materials used in them matched in general Krünitz's descriptions.

Regarding the decomposition stage of the leathers, I carried out a series of investigation on 43 samples of 12 chests. These investigation determine the shrinking temperature of leather. They are regularly used in leather and skin industry, and their application in the field of restoration has been published in foreign conservation literature only. This method gives a more reliable result concerning the condition of leather than the methods traditionally used in conservation practice. The results of my investigation proved determinant in the planning of the conservation technology of the chests especially regarding the limitations of watery treatments and the application of agents containing water. With the adaptation of the method to the instruments of the Department of Conservation Training and Research of the Hungarian National Museum, the measurement of the shrinking temperature can be taught to students of restoration in the future, and the method can be propagated with colleagues who deal with leather conservation.

Summing up the results of the investigations of the technology and the various material types, I think that the objects should not, or at least not completely, be taken to elements during the conservation/restoration of the chests, and the elements should not individually be treated since the physical and chemical conditions of these materials do not afford it and the preservation of the integrity of the object should be a major aspect at the planning of the interventions.

In the course of the investigations of the materials, I found the results of numerous methods daily applied in the restoration practice uncertain (e.g. the demonstration of starch and albumen with micro-chemical tests and the demonstration of iron content on leather objects with indicator paper), and further experiments and investigations are necessary to control these experiences.

In the dissertation, I collected the sketches of the motives, the data of weaving technology and patterns of the textile linings, the patterns of the paper covers and the results of my investigations of the materials (metal materials and coatings, tanning methods of the skins, and their deterioration characteristics) of 18th century Transylvanian leather-covered chests decorated with metal ornaments in tables, and set up a database to enable comparative analyses of similar objects to be found in the future.