

# DOWNLOAD PDF DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE AMISH OF LANCASTER COUNTY

## Chapter 1 : Decorative Arts of the Amish of Lancaster County by McCauley, Daniel -

*Why has Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, become a favorite area for folk art collectors? Two leading experts show how the values of the Lancaster Amish are reflected in a dazzling variety of decorative arts.*

This may sound unusual since art is sometimes associated with pride, vanity, fashion, luxury, and wealth which are attributes commonly shunned by the Amish people. For the Amish, pride is a cardinal sin. As a result, Amish art is characterized by the necessity of balancing humility and simplicity against vanity. As a result, at all times, beauty is tempered with simplicity. Amish culture is also suspicious of the notion of "art." Therefore, in general, Amish art usually has a functional value instead of merely producing a strictly aesthetic pleasure. It is no different with the Amish. For instance, some people wonder why Amish quilts use such expressive colors and designs. The answer is largely because the appreciation for nature is very important to the culture. As a result, items such as quilts are characterized by a rich display of colors symbolic of nature: Blue for the sky and water; green for the grass and leaves; yellow for the sun; brown for the trees and so forth. Likewise, Amish-made quilts, drawings, needlecraft, towels, and so forth commonly contain themes and motifs of nature such as doves, roses, hearts, and trees. Compare this to hex signs. Most people associate hex signs with the Amish. Although hex signs can be found on barns throughout Lancaster County, they are not used by the Amish. Even though hex signs may contain motifs of nature, they are primarily dominated by geometric designs which have no use or value to the Amish people. In addition to color and design, Amish values and identity are artistically expressed in the high quality of the material used as well as the high level of the craftsmanship. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than with Amish woodwork and furniture-making. With such goods, the designs and color may be plain and simple, but the superior quality reflect the importance the Amish place on hard work and durability. Items are built to last and to be replaced at the slightest whim or fashion. Amish decorative and folk art took the form used by the Pennsylvania Germans of Lancaster County. However, the Amish tended not to adopt any given art form until it was no longer fashionable among the non-Amish cultures. For example, fraktur peaked in popularity among the Pennsylvania Germans between and As a rule of thumb, the Amish community did not adopt a given art form until approximately 50 years after it peaked in communities of their mainstream neighbors. The development of Amish art in Lancaster County can be divided into three distinct stages. Like many societies, the early European Amish were exposed to the ideas and art forms of their neighbors. These ideas were evaluated and those found to be most appealing were adopted and modified to reflect Amish attitudes, values, culture, and perceptions of life. As a result, early Amish works are frequently indistinguishable from those of related Germanic groups such as the Mennonites. Since this material culture was brought to America and ingrained into the children, it took several generations for this influence to diminish and for the Amish to develop their own unique art forms. Moreover, during this period, the Amish people became more isolated from mainstream American society. One reason was the outbreak of the American Civil War. While the government pressured the Amish to support the conflict, their long-held tenet of nonviolence separated them from outside and contributed to the formation of stronger communal ties and the formation of a stronger cultural identity. To become less dependent on the outside world and to provide work for their own members, the Amish encouraged one another to provide goods needed by their community. Furthermore, there was a split in the Amish church between the conservatives and liberals. The result was a strengthening of bonds among those remaining in the Old Order. An enhanced cultural identity was seen to be essential for the survival of the community. Also during this period, the Industrial Revolution brought labor-saving devices such as harvesting machines, treadle sewing machines, and factory-loomed textiles. As a result, increased prosperity came to the Amish along with more time. With the extra money they had, the people were able to purchase store-bought cloth, brightly dyed thread and yarn. These material were now cheaply-produced and readily available. Consequently, the period of to saw a trend of enhanced cultural identity and isolation. Agrarian prosperity,

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more disposable time, and the availability of inexpensive decorative material, made it possible for the Amish to express themselves artistically. As the Amish began to provide more goods and services for each other, their products took on a more unique "Amish look with distinct motifs, color schemes, and patterns. Post Overall, the development of Amish art has been slow because so much depended upon acceptance by the church leadership. By the middle of the twentieth century, there began a loosening of the strict standard that Amish art must be utilitarian and not aesthetic. When subtle artistic changes entering the culture were found to be nonthreatening, the Amish church leadership tended to look the other way even if the artistic expression served no functional purpose. For instance, during this period, Amish women began to plant colorful flower gardens to brighten up their yards. Since these flower gardens expressed the Amish admiration towards nature, such artistic expression was permitted. During this period, designs and patterns used on utilitarian objects such as rugs and quilts became more experimental and creative. If the church authority did not censure the Amish artist of such objects, a new design was born and emulated by other members. Artistic Designs As mentioned before, the designs and patterns found in Amish art tend to emphasize the motifs of nature. There are two contrasting attitudes among the Amish on how nature is to be represented in art. One view is that the artwork should appear as real and close to the original as possible. Such images can be remarkable lifelike. A contrasting viewpoint is that depictions of nature should intentionally not be made to be lifelike. The reasoning is that since only God is perfect, it would be vanity and pride to attempt too close a likeness to what God has made. In any case, more abstract and geometric designs which were often used by their Pennsylvania German neighbors were not used in Amish art. Furthermore, the Amish church has traditionally sanctioned against photographs, sketches, portraits, and other graven images. Human images are extremely rare among Amish art. When human images are depicted such as with dolls, there tends to be very minimal facial detail. The Amish color palette tends to be composed of the natural colors that are part of the world. The darker basic colors commonly selected for their clothing is the basis of their textile arts. The traditional aversion towards pastel shades reflects the Amish identification with nature and the land that is so dear to them. There are some exceptions, however. To supplement their income, the Amish of Lancaster County have had to cater toward the tourist industry. Because quilts are very popular among tourists, an unprecedented number of quilts have been produced in recent years. As a result, quilts made for the tourist trade tend to feature pastels, printed fabrics, and patterns that appeal to outsiders. No Formal Artistic Training Among the Amish academic or formal training in the arts is generally not considered a possibility. Those engaged in drawing, painting or any of the other arts have been completely self-taught. This lack of academic instruction can be seen in the way that images tend to be flat in dimension. On the other hand, this lack of formal training has served to preserve an innocent and pure quality that represents the Amish people. If you enjoyed learning about Amish art traditions and would like to learn more about the Amish people of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania:

### Chapter 2 : Decorative Arts of the Amish of Lancaster County by Daniel McCauley

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