

# THE SYMBOLISM OF BIRDS ON POLYCHROMATIC WOODEN DOWRY CHESTS IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA

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## ABSTRACT

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The aim of the research is to investigate the symbols of birds on the furniture artefacts stored in the National Museum of Lithuania: dowry chests. In general, Lithuanian ethnic culture can be called “a tree culture”. The main construction and equipment material of Lithuanian dwellings was wood.

Lithuanians made all household items, furniture, as well as work tools from wood. Wood is also the main material for furniture. As far as it is known, Lithuanian peasants loved to decorate, to paint mostly the dowry chests and the cabinets. The decoration of cabinets with polychromatic painting is identical to the decoration of dowry chests (however, the decoration of cabinets began later than that of the dowry chests).

**Keywords:** dowry chest, symbolism of birds, polychromatic painting, polychromatic wooden furniture exhibits, the National Museum of Lithuania.

## INTRODUCTION

The main focus of the study is the collection of dowry chests at the National Museum of Lithuania. This collection is the most unique and extensive in Lithuania. The current research is unprecedented, because no summarized investigation on this topic has been carried out to date, except several mentions in the ethnologic articles. The current study employs the methods of descriptive and comparative analysis, as well as classic field research methods, namely, observation. The primary purpose

of these furniture artefacts made in the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was functional and practical – to facilitate the household chores of rural people. A little later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the functional meaning was supplemented by the ornamental, decorative connotations.



Figure 1. Dowry chest. LNM EM 12991 (photo: A. Baltēnas)

1. attēls. Pūra lāde. LNM EM 12991 (foto: A. Baltēns)



Figure 2. Dowry chest. LNM EM 16628 (photo: A. Baltēnas)

2. attēls. Pūra lāde. LNM EM 16628 (foto: A. Baltēns)



Figure 3. Dowry chest. LNM EM 6771 (photo: A. Baltėnas)  
3. attėls. Pūra lāde. LNM EM 6771 (foto: A. Baltėns)



Figure 4. Dowry Chest. LNM EM 11413 (photo: A. Baltėnas)  
4. attėls. Pūra lāde. LNM EM 11413 (foto: A. Baltėns)

## RESEARCH DATA AND ISSUES

The aim of the current research is to investigate the symbols of birds on the furniture artefacts stored in the National Museum of Lithuania: dowry chests.

The main focus of the study is the collection of dowry chests. This collection is the most unique and extensive in Lithuania.

The object of my research consists of polychromatic wooden furniture exhibits bearing the symbols of birds in the National Museum of Lithuania: dowry chests.

The current study employs the methods of descriptive and comparative analysis, as well as classic field research methods, namely, observation.

The primary purpose of these furniture artefacts made in the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was functional and practical – to facilitate the household chores of rural people. A little later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the functional meaning was supplemented by the ornamental, decorative connotations. Wooden furniture was made using various techniques: carving, engraving, painting, and the motive of the bird was frequently cultivated. This time, the author focuses on polychromatic furniture exhibits.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decoration of wooden furniture evolved, the ornamentation grew more complex, birds became part of more intricate compositions, usually – the tree of life.

As for dowry chests, the image of birds on them is not very common. The decorations were observed on chests of drawers in different Lithuanian ethnographic regions. The research shows that the collection of the National Museum of Lithuania contains 30 chests of drawers with the motive of bird. The most popular are the images of domestic birds (hen, roosters) and white storks, which can be associated either with common wealth or happy married life.

## **FUNCTIONS OF THE POLYCHROMATIC FURNITURE**

Polychromatic is an adjective characterising the practice of decorating wooden or architectural elements, sculpture, etc., in a variety of colours. The term is used to refer to certain styles of architecture, pottery or sculpture in multiple colours.

The primary purpose of these furniture artefacts made in the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was functional and practical – to facilitate the household chores of rural people. A little later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the functional meaning was supplemented by the ornamental, decorative connotations. Wooden furniture was made using various techniques: carving, engraving, painting, and the motive of the bird was frequently cultivated. The focus of the current paper is on polychromatic furniture exhibits.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decoration of wooden furniture evolved, the ornamentation grew more complex, birds became part

of more intricate compositions, usually – the tree of life, tree of life, *axis mundi*.

As for dowry chests, the image of birds on them is not very common. The decorations were observed on chests of drawers in different Lithuanian ethnographic regions.

The research shows that the collection of the National Museum of Lithuania contains approximately 27 (up to 30) dowry chests with the motive of bird.

The most popular are the images of domestic birds (hen, roosters) and white storks, which can be associated either with common wealth or happy married life.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA FURNITURE SET**

Traditional folk furniture is kept in the Department of Ethnic Culture and Anthropology of the National Museum of Lithuania. This is the largest set of furniture in Lithuanian museums. The largest part of the furniture was acquired by the museum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pieces of furniture were received since 1948, when first ethnographic expeditions were organized.

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the peasant household was dominated by natural wood, cupboards or sawn boards – *kraičkubiliai*, *kraičloviai* – cupboards, wardrobes. They were made by the peasants themselves; they did not require special tools.

Furniture was made with an axe, chisel, and other tools, without much skill or knowledge. In folk household artifacts, decoration is related to material well-being, since the carving of ornaments requires a lot of labour and is costly, only well-to-do farmers could afford it. Therefore, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the decorations were present almost exclusively in the dwellings of free peasants and estates. In the countryside, decor spread along with the progress of construction techniques in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with a wider use of the saw and the drill.

As the economic conditions of life changed, and the work tools improved, so did the furniture. The main material for the furniture was sawn boards (Lith. *pjautinės lentos*). Ash (Lith. *uosis*), spruce, less often – oak were used for furniture. In addition to satisfying the functional need – to store things, the furniture also decorated the living environment. The furniture provided cosiness and beauty to the room because, with the economic improvement of living conditions, there was an opportunity and need to purchase more elegant furniture made by specialised craftsmen.

In the household of the peasants, cabinet furniture (furniture from casings, or *korpusiniai baldai* in Lithuanian), intended for storing food, dishes, and clothes, prevailed. In each shed, there were furniture work cupboards, in Lithuanian called *šėpos*. There were cupboards for storing food, dishes and clothes; also chests for the maidens' dowries.

After the abolition of serfdom in 1863, the countrymen in Lithuania built bigger houses with more rooms; the good premises were used for holidays and recreation.

Furniture decorated the rooms. The embellishment was not yielded as much by the shape of the furniture itself than by the colour and decorative elements.

Cupboards, sideboards, hanging cabinets were painted blue, green, cherry or brown. Paints for painting furniture were produced by the painters themselves from plant leaves, flowers, bark, soot, oil, whereas later the purchased paints appeared.

## FLAT FURNITURE

The flat furniture is the most suitable for decoration, as it has convenient, smooth surfaces. Lithuanians did not like empty planes, so they decorated them. Among the first decorated surfaces were the painted cabinet doors. The earliest cabinets were made with a single door, whereas later spread the fashion of cabinets with double doors. The simpler ones, sparsely decorated, stood in the chambers, in the anterooms. The more opulent rooms were decorated with painted ornaments.

The unique decoration of the chests was determined by wedding customs – to sing during the wedding, to inspect, to judge the bride's hard work and wealth from the size and weight of the dowry chest, while the colours and ornaments adorning that chest suggested her beauty.

*In the traditional Lithuanian culture, the dowry chest was not an object of unequivocal purpose. In addition to utilitarian (dowry storage and transportation) and decorative (applied art), chests were also given symbolic and ceremonial functions. The removal of the bride's dowry from her parents' house and its acceptance by the young man were accompanied by wedding rites, during which the chest (or chests) became a representative piece of furniture – a symbol of the girl's hard work and wealth. (Usačovaitė 1998, 51)*

Valdas Gasiūnas mentioned the motif of birds as an element of the composite plant composition of dowry chests in the article “Motif of a plant in a vase”. He stated: “animal (zoomorphic) symbols are also associated with

the motif of a plant in a vase in Lithuanian folk art, for example, birds associated with a flower in a vase. Bird symbolism in folk art is very old and multi-meaningful. [...] In Lithuanian folk art, birds were depicted one, two, three, five, seven or more at the top or branches of a plant rising from a vase [...] (Gasiūnas 1984).

The dominating flowering plant with birds on the branches also had a symbolic meaning – it embodied her future happiness and well-being.

People were watching birds for centuries. They allowed the birds to live near their homes, believing that the birds brought the inhabitants. Lithuanians considered the stork to be a lucky bird. The return of the stork is equated with the resurrection of nature, he is also the bearer of gifts, wealth, even new life (a baby). Stork is dowry collector, keeper, pleases the eyes and the heart.

Pigeon is a peaceful, gentle, loving bird of conjugal fidelity, – the pigeons live in pairs, and are affectionate.

## COMPOSITIONS WITH BIRDS

Birds on the furniture are grouped by two, five, and these are not accidental numbers – instead, they represent the harmony of the world. Double symbolism determined the layout of the ornaments on the plane. The entire image is painted on dowry chests, furniture. Duck is a domestic bird, they always live in pairs, represent family happiness.

Birds are often part of a composition, usually a with a plant, frequently assuming the same colours as the plant, flower, and in this case it is quite difficult to recognize the species' "identity" of the birds. An example of this is a stamp-decorated Samogitian chest (Mažeikiai district; LNM EM 13687) in blue tones, which has been decorated with the symbol of a bird (pigeon), the bird is in the central part of the chest.

In contrast to the chests from Žemaitija, the decoration of the Aukštaitija chests usually recognizes the species identity of birds: it is usually a composition of chicken – a rooster and a hen – on both sides of a plant.

Both the rooster and the hen, placed on chests, can be treated as signs of abundance, wealth, fertility – even a kind of wish for abundance and wealth. When getting married, the young bride usually brought a dowry chest with her. Sometimes dowry chests were given as gifts.

Several chests depict colourful (greenish, yellowish) birds, whose species identity is difficult to determine, they resemble more exotic birds – brassicas, warblers or even parrots, which, apparently, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also grown in estates.

Notably, birds were depicted differently in various Lithuanian ethnographic regions: "In Upper Lithuania, the plant motifs of furniture are

graceful, small, very graphic, with playful thin lines. Leaves are dominant in the plant motifs of Žemaitija furniture (except for the chests of the field system), colourful flowers are emphasized in Suvalkija” (Keturka 1988, 23).

As the museologist, art researcher Akvilė Mikėnaitė observes, “Birds symbolized fertility, fecundity, family happiness. A stork, a rooster, a hen are considered guardians of the family hearth – at the same time they were also heralds of the increase of the family” (Mikėnaitė 1992, 25).

A. Mikėnaitė also confirms the observation of the author that stork, hen, rooster motifs were widespread in the decoration of Aukštaitija chests and sideboards. According to the ancient belief, storks are sacred birds that bring prosperity to the homestead. Storks were an integral part of the old Lithuanian homestead. The storks were given special care and protection. The depiction of other birds, such as ducks, are occasionally found on the furniture. The love of painting flowers with birds was mainly spread in the decoration of the chests of the Aukštaitija.

As noted in the introduction, practically no dowry chests with the image of birds from Suvalkija and Dzūkija were found in LNM. As an exception, there is one bicolour (blue and red tones) chest from Šakiai district, the middle part of which is adorned by a painted double-headed eagle – the symbol of the Kingdom of Prussia (LNM EM 16226).

The storks in Aukštaitija chests apparently also represent abundance and fertility. According to “Mūsų tautosaka”, “stork brings happiness to the person in whose house it nests. In the first year, he leaves behind a feather as a sign of gratitude, in the second – an egg, and in the third – a child. (Mūsų tautosaka 1931, 72).

The same compositional scheme is observed in both the Aukštaitija and Žemaitian chests: the birds are usually depicted in pairs, facing each other according to the mirror composition. It does not matter at all whether it is a pair of realistically depicted recognizable birds (a rooster and a hen, two roosters, two storks), or two stylized birds whose species identity is difficult to name.

It is worth mentioning that Latvians have similarly adorned, painted dowry chests as Lithuanians – the book of Inese Sirica “Painted Decorations on Latvian Dowry Chests and Wardrobes: Late 18<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century”. I. Sirica was exploring the colours and the motives of the dowry chests, she concludes that “Researchers regard brown, green and blue as the basic colours of vernacular Latvian dowry chests and wardrobes, adding that other colours are also present. After analysing the material, it can be concluded that decorated dowry chests were used alongside unpainted or monochrome ones” (Sirica 2020).

I. Sirica notes that “Birds were very common elements of the vase and flower motif in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century painted decorations of Latvia.



The species of birds, like elsewhere in Europe, are difficult to identify. A common feature of furniture decoration in all regions of Latvia is a couple of birds represented in a heraldic composition. However, there are deviations from this scheme. For example, several chests in Kurzeme and Zemgale are adorned with painted decorations where one of the birds has turned its head and is looking away” (Sirica 2020). It appears that in Lithuanian dowry chests the most popular motives that are domestic birds – roosters and hens, from the wild birds the most popular is a motif of the stork.

According to I. Sirica, “The couple of the rooster and hen has a symbolic meaning in Latvian mythology, as they personify the union of the masculine and feminine in marriage. The hen (occasionally black) or partridge is a metaphor for the bride in Latvian folk songs. Black chicken together with a rooster have been painted on three dowry chests and a wardrobe in the parishes of Rāmuļi, Ukri and Ceraukste” (Sirica 2020, 292).

## **STATISTICS: THE DOWRY CHESTS IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA**

A total of 138 dowry chests are stored in the collections of the Ethnic Culture and Anthropology Collections Department of the National Museum of Lithuania, of which 25 are copper.

Of the 138 chests in the collections of the LNM Ethnic Culture and Anthropology Collections Department, 27 chests are decorated with a bird motive / ornament (usually all or at least some of them are used), which constitutes 35 percent of the total number of chests.

In the collections of the Ethnic Culture and Anthropology Collections Department of the National Museum of Lithuania, out of 138 chests with birds, the author found 27 chests of drawers and cupboards with images of birds from two ethnographic regions: Samogitia and Aukštaitija.

According to the exhibits of the Ethnic Culture and Anthropology Collections Department of the National Museum of Lithuania, birds on Samogitian chests and copper from Samogitia (Kretinga district, Klaipėda district, Mažeikiai district, Seda district, Plungė district, etc.) are often compositions, mostly of plants, are usually painted in the same colours as the plant, the flower, and in this case it is quite difficult to identify the species identity of the bird.

In contrast to the chests from Samogitia, the Aukštaitija’s chests usually enable recognition of the species identity of the birds: it is usually a plant composition with chicken – rooster and hens – on both sides of the plant, which is often supplemented by a pair of storks. Storks can also be depicted alone on dowry chests.

The Department of Ethnic Culture and Anthropology of the National Museum of Lithuania contains 14 chests of drawers from Aukštaitija (North East of Lithuania). In Aukštaitija chests, birds are depicted – painted – quite realistically, choosing the shape and colours characteristic of a certain bird species.

Usually, a pair of hens, the rooster and the hen, are recognizable, as well as white storks, which are sometimes depicted together (chicken and storks), while in other instances – separately.

Black roosters are depicted on several high chests (LNM EM 16268, LNM EM 16265).

The Department of Ethnic Culture and Anthropology of the National Museum of Lithuania stores 12 chests from Samogitia. Samogitian chests depict birds in a rather stylized form, and their species identity is difficult to determine. As noted before, in all but one of the Samogitian chests of drawers (LNM EM 6767), the birds are part of a plant ornament, blending in with the colours of the depicted floristic motifs.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decoration of wooden furniture evolved, the ornamentation grew more complex, birds became part of more intricate compositions, usually – the tree of life.

After reviewing the examples of chests of drawers and of towel holders, it is concluded that they are examples of the furniture decorated by the polychromatic painting.

As for dowry chests, the image of birds on them is not very common. The decorations were observed on chests of drawers in different Lithuanian ethnographic regions. The research shows that the collection of the National Museum of Lithuania contains 30 chests of drawers with the bird motive. The most popular are the images of domestic birds (hen, roosters) and white storks, which can be associated either with common wealth or happy married life.

Talking about The National Museum of Art of Lithuania, from 138 chests in the collections of the LNM Ethnic Culture and Anthropology Collections, 30 percent of them have a bird motif.

The assumption that most of the chests, towel holders are from Samogitia and Aukštaitija, is confirmed. The hypothesis that birds in Samogitian coffins are often part of the composition, mostly plant, is usually confirmed in the same colours as the plant, the flower, and in this case it is quite difficult to recognize the species identity of the birds.

Meanwhile, in the decoration of Aukštaitija chests, the species identity of birds is most often perceptible: it is usually a plant composition with chicken – rooster and hens – on both sides of the plant, often supplemented by a pair of storks. Chicken, especially roosters, are associated with the semantics of abundance and wealth in the decoration of the chests, and the stork is also associated with abundance and fertility.

Unfortunately, neither the LNM nor the LIMIS system was able to detect the bird motif in the Suvalkija, Dzūkija or Lithuanian chests. Of course, this is not yet certain that there were no chests with a bird motif in Suvalkija, Dzūkija and Lithuania Minor. This will be confirmed or disproved by a visit to other Lithuanian museum collections.

## ABBREVIATIONS

LNM – National Museum of Lithuania

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# PUTNU SIMBOLI UZ POLIHROMĒTU KOKA MĒBEĻU EKSPONĀTIEM: LIETUVAS NACIONĀLAIS MUZEJS

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### ANOTĀCIJA

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**Atslēgvārdi:** pūra lāde, putnu simbolika, polihromā glezniecība, polihromēti koka mēbeļu ekspozīti, Lietuvas Nacionālais muzejs.

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Dekorācijas bija vērojamas uz lādēm dažādos Lietuvas etnogrāfiskajos reģionos. Pētījums liecina, ka Lietuvas Nacionālā muzeja kolekcijā ir 30 lādes ar putna motīvu. Populārākie ir mājas putnu (vistu, gaiļu) un balto stārķu attēli, kurus var saistīt vai nu ar kopīgu bagātību, vai laimīgu laulības dzīvi. Kopumā putnu attēls uz pūra lādēm nav īpaši izplatīts. Runājot par Lietuvas Nacionālo mākslas muzeju, no Etniskās kultūras un antropoloģijas kolekcijās glabātajām 138 lādītēm 30 procentos gadījumu tām ir putna motīvs.