AXEL STEENSBERG

The Study of Rural Furniture

SINCE THE 16TH CENTURY A CERTAIN interest in the customs of rural life has been demonstrated by intellectual people in the Northern countries. Olaus Magnus described the Swedish tribes in the early Renaissance. The Duke of Schleswig-Holstein and his wife amused themselves and their court with having garments made as copies of rich peasants' clothings. Also at the royal court in Copenhagen Queen Sophie Amalie liked to present herself as a peasant maiden at the banquets; and at masquerades sometimes all the court dressed up like peasants from the island of Amager. In the middle of the 18th century in the park of Fredensborg Castle King Frederik V had 57 sculptures made showing Norwegian peasants. And primitive thatched cottages were often made as pleasure-houses and used by rich people and noble persons in parks and gardens.

Such manifestations derived more or less from romantic feelings. A more comprehensive and scientific interest arose in the late 19th century when Arthur Hazelius founded Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, Eilert Sundt travelled through his country describing the life of Norse peasants, and Bernhard Olsen founded Dansk Folkemuseet and Frilandsmuseet in Lyngby. Other persons could be mentioned. However much romanticism fertilised their work. They favoured gothic and renaissance furniture, carved and richly decorated pieces with proverbs, datings and names of ancient owners. Bernhard Olsen specially aimed to preserve houses and furnishings which he suggested could prove traditions from nordic antiquity, eventually from glorious times in the Middle Ages or even earlier. If the material was not decorated and outstanding in fashion and shape, it might at least demonstrate traits of great primitiveness and age — which at those times were almost synonymous notions ("Dansk Folkemuseum and Frilandsmuseet. History and Activities". Copenhagen, 1966).

In Denmark a great many folk museums were founded in the late 19th and the early 20th century and enthusiastic persons, mostly self-taught, collected much material which however was not very representative for the peasants' culture as a whole. Sometimes the collections happened to be better when no well-considered choice was made, and the keeper took what he found or what people presented to him. In the National Museum, Kai Uldall started a more systematic registration of peasant furniture. But our Swedish colleagues at Nordiska Museet were far more advanced in this field of knowledge. Sigurd Erixon had made his great inventory-work in the years from 1912 to 1925, and immediately after he published "Möbler och heminredning i svenska bygder" (Furniture and interior decoration in Swedish settlements) 1925-26, and a revised edition came out in 1938 under the title "Folklig möbelkultur i svenska bygder" (Rural furnishing culture in Swedish settlements).

This book was a pioneer work in European ethnological literature. Sigurd Erixon here classified in groups the types of furniture left from ancient times up to the last century, for instance beds, benches, cupboards, tables, chairs, chests and smaller pieces of furniture. The classification was based on the use of the pieces, their placing in the room and in the interior as a whole, and also in respect of their social and stylistic relations. Maps showed the distribution of some typical elements in the country and the historical background was traced as well as important traits of the distribution in Europe.

This work of Erixon became the model when I wrote a book in Danish about

peasant furniture ("Danske Bondemøbler". Hassing, 1949, 2. ed. 1964). Unfortunately it was not possible to equal this brilliant prototype in volume, design and magnificence of illustrations; but I tried to present a collection which was taken mostly from the provincial museums and represented all parts of the country as equally as possible. Like Erixon I also tried to illustrate quite simple pieces without any decoration together with more outstanding examples. Thus I mentioned if some parts of the furniture had been renewed or restored. Pieces which were suspicious or false were of course excluded. This is worth remarking because the furniture of many museums proves on closer examination to have been so thoroughly restored and augmented that only a small percentage of it seems to be original. In future publishers ought to be more critical in this respect. Another point is, that the main dimensions should be mentioned with each photograph as far as possible. Even in field work in house-interiors young ethnologists are accustomed to measure pieces of furniture and produce plans of the furnishing and the walls so it is easy to find all dimensions relevant to the photographs.

In the paper "Volkskunst und Kunstkultur" ("Volkswerk. Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Museums für Deutsche Volkskunde". Jena, 1941, pp. 36-49) Sigurd Erixon pointed out a principal distinction between representative art and primitive decorations made on tools and domestic utensils *(Gebrauchskunst)*. In the latter new motifs from outside are accepted more slowly than in the former. Questions of great importance are, who has made the furniture, for whom was it made, how much did the shape depend on the ideas of the craftsman and how much did he owe to prototypes. Also the influence of the buyer and the demands of the market are relevant factors in this respect. In "Danske Bondemøbler" I suggested that new inventions and ideas in folk-art were performed fundamentally in the same manner as in more artistic art, i.e. through imitation, modifying and renewing by personal active engagement. The difference between them is due to a diversion in qualifications and available means of expression.

SKILFUL DESIGNERS AND CABINET-MAKERS at the royal court drew on ideas and fashions from all the world and from cultures of different ages when they created the style of their time. But also plain craftsmen could happen to create something of original shape. A cabinet maker in a small Jutland town, Nykøbing Mors, produced a new form of furniture in the early 19th century. The decorative elements of this piece were generally classicistic, but its type was genuine: Apparently he combined a traditional hanging cupboard with drawers used for keeping documents, a case for bottles and glasses and a wardrobe in which the men's trousers could hang below the cupboard and the women's long empire-garments in the side compartments from the top of the piece to the bottom. The doors of the wardrobe were consequently narrow at each side of the small cupboard and broad below it, i.e. angular in shape. The cupboard itself was closed by a flap with chains which stopped it in a horizontal position when it was open. In that case it served as a small shelf where it was possible to place a glass when pouring a drink. Often the cabinet maker placed one handle

at the top and another at the bottom so that people could carry the piece of furniture out in case of fire.

The creator of this piece of furniture, Niels Dyhr, had never been outside his country; but he started a rather large production specially based on a market in the neighbouring peninsula, Salling, where the peasants were more well-to-do and advanced regarding the women's clothing than in other parts of northern Jutland. (Axel Steensberg, "En gruppe malede bondemøbler fra Mors og Salling". Budstikken, 1960).

The greater part of the cabinet makers who worked for Danish peasants lived perhaps in the towns, but some of them stayed in villages too. That was the case with Lars Hugger in the small Sealand village, Jersie, near Copenhagen in the early 19th century. He was a specialist in chair-making. His arm chairs were so well made that the constructions of surviving pieces are just as stable and well fitted as they were when the chairs left his workshop 150 years ago. Even if his style depended on the classicistic fashion his chairs will easily be recognized wherever they are found in shops and private collections. The top rail is specially characteristic though it might have been copied from a book of designs, but also the division of the back and the shape of the arms and fore-legs are typical Lars Hugger expressions (Axel Steensberg, "Jersie stolene". *Danske Museer* (København), 2 (1951), pp. 21-34).

In Denmark the schools of painted decorations have not been studied intensively as to what we call "peasant furniture" as is the case in Norway and Sweden. But Niels Dyhr was not only a cabinet maker. He also painted his products himself, and in one case we know his signature. One of my former students, Hanne Poulsen, wrote an article "Traditionsdominanter i Dansk Folkekunst" in *Arv og Eje* 1966 based on a study of nearly 1.000 painted or carved mangle boards in Danish Museums, and she found out that certain schools could be discerned and mostly they could be located in provincial towns. She is of the opinion that all kinds of art can to some extent be characterised by a local component. Even the greatest painters expressed their culture and traditions of their native town or district to a certain degree.

When Sigurd Schoubye of Tønder in South Jutland wrote his inspiring book on the silver smiths in his town and in its surrounding villages *(Guldsmede håndværket i Tønder og på Tønderegnen 1550-1900.* Åbenrå, 1961), he advanced the thesis that you cannot explain the elements of style in a piece of silver without taking into consideration the taste and traditions of those persons to whom it was presented or on whose account it was created. The silversmiths of Tønder had been nearly everywhere in continental Europe as journeymen, working in distinguished masters' workshops from St. Petersburg to German towns in Northern and Central Europe. They knew the contemporary fashions in silver as well as the traditional ones, and when they settled in their home town or in the villages outside they were visited by German "Probenreutere" from whom they had new collections of patternbooks, matrixes or gilded decorations. However, a master could eventually produce one piece in rococo and one in classicistic style in the same year; and the classicism at Tønder was different from that of Husum, 50 km south of the town, and also easily distinguishable from products from Copenhagen and Hamburg. The silversmiths made buttons, brooches and chains etc. for the Frisian inhabitants of the island on the west coast characterised

by these peoples' old traditions and special taste. They also had to accomodate to the demands from the burghers in Tønder and the peasants in the Danish-speaking parts of the duchy of Schleswig. They managed to balance between these different markets and impressed their products with their local character, may be also sometimes their individual touch.

The study of rural furniture may in my opinion profit by such concrete investigations as mentioned above. It is not enough to trace stylistic waves from the big centres of culture out to the most remote outposts of Europe and to study their interference with local traditions. In our time ethnology should not be defined as *Arts et Traditions Populaires* only, while in each local culture there is a creative strength which has often been neglected by traditional educated scholars too. In the "Festkrift to K. Rob. V. Wikman" (Åbo, 1966) I tried to show how cultural interference may be defined mainly by an inactive, traditional component and an active creative one. And the creative component is more or less present in all human beings.