

Art that Paints a Story

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DOUGLASVILLE, Pa. — Behind every craft is a story about the artisan. Pat Oxenford's decorative and tole paintings illustrate a saga of how 18th-century Pennsylvania German history relates so closely to her life.

Pat has been doing decorative painting for more than three decades and has written a guide book, *Heritage Crafts Today, Tole Painting*, that teaches the technique of tole painting as well as the history behind the craft. She is a juried member of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen, a member of the National Society of Decorative Painters and a Brazer Guild member of the Historical Society of Early American Decoration.

"My father was German," said Pat. "He never got to pursue art, but he did some artwork for his Lehigh High School yearbook." Lehigh, Pa. is populated by many citizens with a Pennsylvania Dutch heritage. Oxenford recalled a childhood memory of her father sitting down with her and carving a sailboat out of ivory soap.

Pat's father encouraged her to pursue art, but it was her husband, Ray, who swayed her to go the historic route. "Ray encouraged me to focus on studying antique pieces and to try to copy the stroke work designs," Pat wrote in her book. Ray Oxenford is a tinsmith, now retired from the antique business after 47 years. Ray makes most of the tinware and boxes that Pat paints. The crafty couple also do commissioned work and antique restoration.

During the time that Ray was working with antiques, he would bring items home with him for them to re-create. Antique dealers also provided the Oxenfords with catalogues, which are often the sources of Pat's paintings. Other sources for traditional designs include *Antique News* and a large collection of books featuring antique patterns.

"Some of these designs date back to the '30s and '40s," said Pat. "In some cases, I am the third or fourth to inherit them."

"Tole" refers to painting on tin. Auctioneers gave sheet iron this French term as a

slang. Painting on wood or other substrates is decorative painting. The first tole painting was done shortly after the Revolutionary War.

"It became popular among the Pennsylvania Dutch when tin peddlers carried unpainted wares from the New England tinsmiths as far as Virginia to sell to a wider market," Oxenford explained in her book.

As New England tin peddlers sold tinware further south, the women, particularly Pennsylvania Dutch women in Berks and Lancaster Counties, began painting on the plain pieces, and tole painting was conceived. It soon evolved from a craft hobby to a trade craft. Girls did six-week apprenticeships where they learned all aspects of the trade. Flowers, leaves and borders were common subject matter, painted on the tin with quick, single brush strokes. Brush control, rather than artistic ability, was the more valuable skill. Pat's paintings demonstrate the work of a steady hand.

After the apprentices became proficient in the craft, they would share their expertise with newcomers.

To reproduce old patterns on new pieces, Pat pulls the strokes with carbon paper. Examples of basic technique include "striping," which are simple borders around the piece, and "comma strokes," the quick single strokes that form flower petals. A steady hand controls a pointed brush, or "quill," saturated with oil or acrylic paint.

In addition to sharing tips and techniques of tole painting in her book, Pat works with beginners by holding classes and demonstrations.

Pat and Ray Oxenford teach and show at events such as the Kutztown Folk Festival, the Pennsylvania German Folk Art Sale, the annual juried holiday craft show and the Pennsylvania German Heritage Crafts Day. Their work has been displayed at Landis Valley Museum, the Pennsylvania Tree Christmas Pageant in Washington, D.C. and publications and documentaries such as *Early American Life* and the Time Warner video, *Expression of Common Hands*.



Prior to 1835, tin sheets did not exceed dimensions of 10 by 14 inches. The center tray is one full sheet. In front is a tray composed of half a sheet, and the tray in back, as well as the coffee pot, are made with two sheets fused together.



Pat Oxenford does Tole painting on a tin tray in her studio. Photos by Sara Miller

Restored antiques by Oxenford include an old scale, a ladle and two canisters. The designs and colors are as true to the original as possible.



These works in progress are replicas of 18th-century antique designs.

Clockwise from bottom left are Susel-Washington's painting of George and Martha Washington, originally painted circa 1780; early strawberries; a distelfink, which was painted on Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs for good fortune; an 18th-century depiction of George Washington; and Pat Oxenford's rendition of a bird from folk art found at the Mennonite Heritage Center, in center.



Oxenford paints customized bridal boxes, enclosed with a note unique to the bride and groom.