

## The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

### ICONS ON GLASS by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



icons.

Our Museum is fortunate to have in its collection 6 folk icons on glass from the 19th century, from the Hutsul region. They were acquired for the Museum in the late 1930s by the first curator Father Leo Chapelsky.

Folk icons on glass were destined for the home and roadside chapels, not for church usage. As with icons on wood or on paper, glass icons were also placed on the wall in the so-called “holy corner” of a Ukrainian peasant’s home. They would hang slightly tilted towards the table with important family documents and special herbs (which people believed to have medicinal and miraculous qualities) placed behind them. Icons on glass were actually more popular than those on wood or paper, because they were always bright, luminescent, and glistened in a dimly candle-lit room.

One example of a unique form of Ukrainian folk art is glass painting, in particular icons painted on the reverse or underside of glass. This technique of painting was very popular throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries in the Hutsul and Pokuttia area of the Carpathian Mountains, in some areas of Podillia, and in the Bukovyna regions.

Glass painting as an art form had been known in ancient times in Byzantium and Rome. In Central and Eastern Europe, its development and popularity spread from the 18th century on and was based on these ancient traditions. This technique was used both by professionally-trained artists and by folk artisans. The main centers of glass paintings were in Slovakia, Poland, and Romania. From there it spread into the Ukrainian mountain regions. Glass painting in these areas dealt mostly with religious themes – icons on glass. Glass painting by folk artisans fall into the category of naïve art. For a long time interest in this art form was minimal until the early 20th century when avant-garde artists, like Picasso and others, art historians, and art specialists saw artistic qualities in naïve art and began to study it and give it credibility. In Ukraine, Ilarion Sviensistky, the first director of the National Museum (now The Sheptytsky Museum) in Lviv, was the first to draw the attention of the art world and the public to these



The glass icons in our collection depict Our Lady with the Infant Jesus – the Hodigitria or the Guide type, Our Lady the Protectress (Pokrova), Saint Barbara, Saint George the Dragon Slayer, Jesus Christ and St. John the Baptist in childhood with the three Hierarchs, and the Crucifixion with bystanders – St. George on one side and Our Lady – the Guide on the other.

The folk artisans who painted icons on glass were talented but untrained individuals. For their paintings they used as their prototypes icons which they had seen in their churches. However, they never copied blindly but often added their own artistic tastes, their own understanding of the Bible stories they had heard, their creative imagination, and technical know-how. The color

palette and ornamental designs on these icons frequently reflected the characteristics of the artisan’s surroundings. Although these icons depicted religious themes, they differed from the canonically-accepted church iconography. Oftentimes they manifested folk traditions, concepts, and tastes.

The predominant color on the icons was a radiant red with additions of blue, green and some yellow. The outline of the drawing was always done in black. Faces, hands and bodies were done in chalk white.

Certain items on the icons were gilded – like the halos, the globe, using gold leaf or false gold. Gold leaf could be purchased at fairs and markets, and it was a very important item for the folks in villages. Gold leaf was used in gilding the bride’s wedding wreath, parts of the wedding bread, and wedding tree.

Our Lady on glass icons is always shown as crowned. In the peasants’ understanding, a queen and in this case the Queen of Heaven must have a crown. From below the crown and down and around her shoulders is a beautiful shawl – the cloth of protection which Our Lady spreads around her subjects. On our icon this shawl is filled with ornamental floral designs, just like a peasant woman’s kerchief.

In folk tradition only maidens had the right to wear wreaths on their heads and show off their beautiful tresses. In the icon of Saint Barbara we see just that. Since she was a virgin, the artisan crowned her head, but placed a floral wreath around it and painted an elaborate arrangement of her braids. In Ukrainian tradition Saint Barbara was the patroness of womanhood, woman’s decorum, and maiden’s honor. In each of the six icons on glass in our collection we can find some traditional folk elements.

The painting of icons on glass in the villages began to decline rapidly in the 20s of the



20th century. However, thanks to Ilarion Sviensistky and certain artists like Yaroslava Muzyka, not only interest but even a revival of the art of painting on glass took place among the professional artists in the late 30s, and after the War another revival occurred in the late 50s and 60s. These artists do not depict religious themes, but use folkloric and historical subjects in their works.

In the Diaspora, we can be very proud of an artist of Ukrainian descent by the name of Yaroslava Surnach Mills who revived the art of painting on glass in the United States in the late 50s. Throughout her lifetime she continued to produce exquisite paintings on glass, depicting Ukrainian traditions, and the lore and life of the Ukrainian peasant based on stories which she had heard from her mother. As she herself said “from some colorful pocket of my subconscious the little peasants began to spill out onto the glass and arrange themselves into scenes of my childhood’s imagination.” Many of her paintings have appeared on cards which are still available.

Painting on glass is a significant and original phenomenon of Ukrainian folk culture the study and preservation of which is of utmost importance.

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