

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

Ritual Cloths *by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator*

In our Museum we have a very large collection of ritual cloths (rushnyky). They come from different regions of Ukraine with woven or embroidered ornamentation, and date from the early 19th century to the present. Today I will talk about ritual cloths used to frame the holy icons.

Ritual cloths in the Ukrainian tradition perform both ceremonial and decorative functions. Their traditional usage dates far back into antiquity, into pre-Christian days when they were considered to be an essential element in all aspects of a person's livelihood.

According to belief, the rushnyk sanctifies and safeguards its surroundings and has the power to protect human beings during significant events in their lives. No wonder then that an old Ukrainian proverb says "A house without a ritual cloth is not a home."

The rushnyk is a long piece of white linen cloth with a woven or embroidered design. The individual elements of the design are symbolic ideograms of the sun, the tree of life, eternity lines, and many others. Since the art of weaving was considered by ancient man to be a God-given gift, woven cloths created by hand under propitious, ritualistic conditions would become suffused with protective powers.

There were different types of rushnyky designated for a variety of uses. The kilkovi (peg) rushnyky were hung by the entrance



doorway on a special hook or peg. It was believed this would protect

was decorated with many icons. These icons in turn were framed either individually with one cloth, or all together with one extra-long rushnyk.



the home from any evil entering. Many ritual cloths were used for ceremonial purposes – births, weddings, funerals, greeting honored guests with bread and salt on a ritual cloth, etc.

But the finest, most elaborate ritual cloths were prepared for the holy icons. In a traditional Ukrainian home, one corner of the wall in the main room

The reason why in some areas one long cloth was used to frame all icons together was the belief that if one saint had a nicer-looking cloth than another saint, a misunderstanding might ensue between the saints. Without a ritual cloth icons were considered to be naked and poor.

The icons on the wall were of Our Lady with the Infant Jesus, Jesus Christ, the Holy Trinity, and icons of favorite saints: St. Nicholas, St. George, St. Barbara, St. Paraskeva, etc. The common man believed that he was too lowly, too humble to petition or make requests, or asks for intercession from God directly, and so his pleas were sent through intermediaries like the aforementioned saints.

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker was the most favorite and revered saint. It was believed that he would respond to all pleas, especially in emergencies. He helps the sick, widows and orphans, and those who are drowning. He saves people from fire. In fact, he protects all the misfortunate.

The people had equal respect and veneration for St. George whom they believed protected and helped the people in their farm work.

St. Barbara and St. Paraskeva were the saints most loved and revered by women. St. Barbara was believed to be the protectress of women's work – sewing, embroidery, weaving. St. Paraskeva was considered to be the protectress of women's housework, seasonal work, and marriages. She could also help in specific ailments.

To illustrate the above, I have chosen from our collection three extra-long ritual cloths and one single cloth with elaborate ornamentation used to frame icons in a village home. In addition, I have also included folk icons of St. Nicholas and St. Paraskeva which we have in our collection.

Traditional use of ritual cloths both in Ukraine and in the Diaspora continues to this very day. In time, the design on the cloth has changed, and the emphasis now is more on the decorative aspect of the cloth; nevertheless, its usage endures and the innate, unspoken, silent belief in its protective powers still exists.

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