

# The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

## *THE DOWRY (HOPE) CHEST* by Curator Lubow Wolynetz

In today's society weddings often take place in the months of May and June. Therefore, it is an appropriate time to write about artifacts in the Museum's collection which once had a very important association with traditional Ukrainian folk weddings. The artifact in question is the dowry chest (posahova skrynia).

In the Museum we have two dowry chests from the Hutsul region of Ukraine, both dating to the mid 19th century or even earlier.

In a traditional Ukrainian village home, the dowry chest was an ubiquitous and essential furniture piece serving a utilitarian and decorative purpose. Every young maiden of marriageable age had to have one, whether it was especially made for her, newly purchased, or handed down as a family heirloom. The front, side, and lid panels of the chest were always decorated. The style of the decorations varied from region to region. Some were decorated with brightly-colored, luxuriant floral motifs painted in the shape of a blossoming tree or a bouquet of exotic flowers in a vase. Others were decorated with carved or painted geometric motifs, always arranged symmetrically, which included solar signs, rosettes, crosses, triangles, zigzags, half-circles, nettings, pyramids, squares, eternity lines, highly stylized tree of life, etc.

In anticipation of marriage, young village girls would begin filling their dowry chests with a variety of items of their own handiwork. Considered valuable and essential for the maiden's future family and home, these items, by their quantity and quality, indicated the maiden's skill and capability of becoming a successful homemaker.

Typically, the dowry collection would include an assortment of linens — embroidered shirts which could number as many as thirty or forty, ritual cloths, household textiles, and bolts of linen cloth — as well as some items of greater value, such as necklaces of coral, amber jewelry, and silver coins.



All  
of  
these

double-sloping lid encased in arch-like ends. All parts of the chest are attached with wooden pegs. Traditionally, nails were not used. The wood was stained with a natural substance which gave it a reddish-brown hue. The front and side panels, the lid with its arches, and the legs are all decorated with geometric motifs employing flat contour and profile carving. The dominant motif is the solar disk.

The Hutsuls, known for their conservatism, preserved many ancient cultural concepts in their outlook on life, their beliefs, customs, and their folk art up to the 20th century. Most of the utilitarian items which they produced

were always decorated in a very specific way employing highly symbolic motifs. These motifs, according to belief, possessed protective qualities. They shooed away evil, bad luck and safeguarded wealth, plenty, and good fortune.

In contemporary times we look upon these symbols as motifs in art and artistic expression, but for the Hutsuls they were the essential and magical elements needed for their perpetuation, well-being, and existence as such.

The dowry chest — filled with dreams and hopes and protected with magical symbols— would ensure the future harvesting of joys.

items would be judiciously, painstakingly, and lovingly accumulated.

Although importance was placed on the material value of the items in the chest, the emotional attachment was just as significant. The dowry chest was a symbol of the maiden's heritage, her youth, her dreams, and her aspirations for a happy family life that she would build and the joys it would bring.

The first of the two Hutsul dowry chests which we have at the Museum was constructed in the sarcophagus style. It is made of beechwood, stands on four short legs, and has a



## Explore and Experience Our Past

SOWER

MAY 29, 2011