

# The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

## Hand Crosses *by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator*

Recently, an avid reader of the *Sower* has responded to my article about Christmas postcards, and graciously donated a few of his vintage postcards to our Museum. This donation certainly augments and enriches our holdings. Furthermore, knowing that our Museum with its exquisite fine art and folk art collections also has an extensive religious section, he decided at this Christmas giving time to make still another donation – his singular and unique collection of eleven wooden hand crosses. This particular group of crosses dates from the end of the 19th to early 20th centuries and is the work of folk artisans, anonymous but talented individuals. The crosses measure between 10” –



11” in height and 3”- 4” in width. All of the crosses are from Western Ukrainian regions, namely from the Hutsul, Boiko, Lemko, and Podillia districts. We are exceedingly grateful to Dr. Jurij Rybak and his wife Anna Ortynskyj for such a fine and rare gift to our Museum. This donation will not only enhance and expand our holdings of hand crosses, but will also serve as invaluable material for researchers and artists who wish to study this form of artistic creativity and religious expression with a deeper insight.

Hand crosses are a group of sacred objects which have an essential role

in the religious and liturgical rituals of the Christian Church. The hand cross is always kept on the altar and is used by the priest or bishop during certain intervals of the Divine Liturgy for the blessing of the faithful. During the blessing of water in the Theophany service of Byzantine Rite



Churches, the hand cross is immersed three times in the water. The hand cross is sometimes placed in the hands of the deceased and is also carried by the priest during religious processions.

In the past, hand crosses in Ukraine were traditionally made by professional artists or by specially trained monks in monasteries, just as in the painting of icons. Often these crosses were made of precious metal; also some were carved in bone, wood, and adorned with enamel or gemstones. However, by the end of the 18th century monastic production of hand crosses diminished to such an extent that parish priests had to rely on town and village folk artisans to make and supply churches with hand crosses and other religious items.

The donated hand crosses are all the work of self-taught village or town artisans. Although they cannot match the refined hand crosses created by highly trained artists, they nev-

ertheless possess features and qualities of original artistic expression, be it naïve and plain in its manifestation. They are characterized by the simplicity of the iconographic composition and unsophisticated technical execution. Still, it is this simplicity, naiveté and sincerity of the artistic portrayal which attracts the beholder.

The artisans were more concerned with the spiritual depiction and less so with its realistic portrayal.

Folk hand crosses were made out of linden tree wood, sometimes out of pear, aspen, or cedar wood. Its structure consisted of the main post and most often three cross-bars separated from each other by a small square or diagonal piece, and an elongated and tapered handle by which to hold the cross.

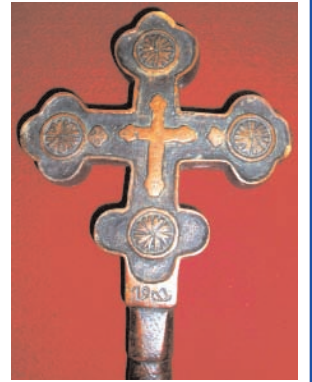
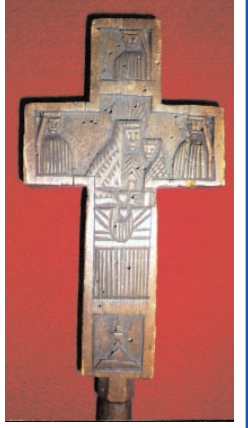
This made the cross seven-ended. The reason for placing additional cross-bars to the main post was motivated by the traditional church-ritualistic and decorative needs, as well as by the artisan’s desire as to the number of iconographic images he wanted to place on the cross. Moreover, the artisan also added both traditionally folk and symbolic decorative motifs with which to embellish and enrich the iconographic portrayal.

Both sides of the hand cross had carved iconographic images. The artisans used flat or low relief, contour or profiling carving techniques. Sometimes the carved depictions were painted, using yellow, ochre, white, and blue colors. The

iconographic images were carved on the post and central cross-bar which always was wider than the upper or lower cross-bars. One side of the hand cross had the Crucifixion, with bystanders.

The other side had Our Lady with Child Jesus and also with bystanders – saints or angel heads. The iconographic depictions were done very schematically, primitively in style. The upper and lower cross-bars and the surfaces around the ideograms consisted for the most part of various linear and geometric decorative motifs.

Although ten of the donated hand crosses depict the same iconographic images and compositions as prescribed by tradition, nevertheless each artisan imprinted on them his own artistic ability and ingenuity. This is what makes each of the hand crosses unique and an interesting example of both religious and folk art.



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