

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

Textiles with Block Printed Designs (Vybiuky) as Used in Ukrainian Folk Costumes by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Decorating plain woven fabric with embroidered, hand painted, stamped or block printed designs is a very ancient tradition. Fabrics with block printed designs were produced and widely used in pre-Christian days in China, India, Japan, and the Middle East. As a result of trade contacts, travels, and the Crusades, block printing came through Byzantium to Europe. Although we have some archeological evidence that block printing existed in Ukraine already in the 11th century, more concrete evidence of its existence and usage are based on documents from the 18th – 19th

centuries. These documents tell us that the wealthy of Ukrainian aristocracy, the church hierarchy, and the Cossack elite used block printed fabrics for the following purposes: for ritual cloths, bed covers, drapes, book covers, chair and wall covers, church vestments, but mostly for all kinds of clothing. Samples and fragments of such block printed textiles can still be found in many museums in Ukraine.



In rural areas of Ukraine, block printed textiles were used primarily for cer-

tain parts of folk costume: overcoats, skirts, pants, vests, and kerchiefs. In our Museum we have three skirts with block printed designs from western regions of Ukraine and a sampler of eight patterns used for block printing from the Yavoriv region in western Ukraine. The sampler in our Museum was purchased in 1936 through the efforts of our first curator Father Leo Chapelsky and Sister Severine Parylle, OSBM. In previous articles (*Sower, 2011, July 24, August 28*) I wrote about Sister Severine's visitation to the United States. She not only was highly influential in the organization of our Museum, but also was the procurator of many artifacts in order to make our Museum collections representative and all-encompassing.

The printing of images or patterns on textiles was done through the use of a wooden board or block (pear or walnut tree wood) into which a variety of designs and patterns were carved. Special oil paints were used to make the imprints. For centuries, colors for paints were obtained from natural substances until chemical dyes were introduced. If more than one color was used to make the imprint, separate boards had to be carved for each color.



One type of decorative elements on the

The predominant colors used for block printing in Ukrainian villages were black, blue, and ochre. As with all folk art creativity, master artisans of block printing were self-thought, talented individuals. They had to be carvers, dye-makers, and printers. Their knowledge, expertise, and secret formulas for dye-making were passed on to family members only or to talented apprentices. The boards with carved designs could be the width of the cloth (looms for weaving cloth in western Ukraine were narrow), or smaller boards where one large or a few smaller motifs were carved; and then the boards were combined for printing onto the cloth in a variety of ways, and thus intricate and varied decorative designs could be produced. Master craftsmen block printed cloth in their homes, or by traveling from village to village. If it was done in their homes,

they had an array of carved wooden blocks from which a client could choose. The client had to bring his own cloth – linen, hempen broad cloth, or all wool (*sukno*). The traveling craftsmen, usually after harvest, began their work by bringing along samples of carved boards with ornamental designs and paints with them. Villagers would come out with their cloth, choose their design, and printing would ensue. Some block printing was also done at regional bazaars.

One type of decorative elements on the

carved boards consisted of a variety of geometric motifs: dots, squares, stars, rhombs, circles, crosses, x-motifs placed in a checkerboard or vertical arrangement and most often interspersed with straight, wavy, and zig-zag lines. The second type consisted of sophisticated, intricate and highly stylized floral motifs, flowering vines, winding branches with leaves and flower buds. In some cases even stylized birds were also depicted. The sampler which we have at our Museum has both types of designs. In the 30s block printed fabrics became very popular in western Ukraine among the city population. Fashionable dresses, blouses, and suits were made from such fabrics. In the Diaspora the artist Irene Twerdochlib, 1918-



2012, mastered the art of block printing and produced large, block printed textile art works. She donated some of them to our Museum, as well as a few carved boards.

Block printing textiles is just another colorful example of Ukrainian folk art creativity.

Explore and Experience Our Past