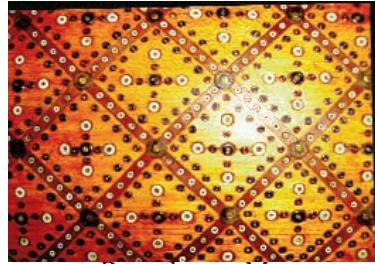


The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

THE HUTSUL WOOD-CARVED BOX

A Family's Keepsake Becomes Our Museum's Treasure by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Recently, our Museum received a special gift from Larissa Muzyczka. It was a 119 year old wood-carved box, the work of a notable Hutsul woodcarver Mykola (Nykola) Shkribliak, 1858-1920. Mykola was the son of Yura Shkribliak, 1822-1884, forefather of a family of the most notable wood-carvers in the Kosiv region of the Hutsul area. Although Mykola, his brother Wasyl, 1856-1928, and Fedir, 1859-1942, received their carving and wood turning training skills from their father Yurii, all made use of the same artistic technique; yet each developed his own particular ornamental style by combining traditional ornamental motifs into original compositions within the traditional framework of Hutsul flat wood carving. Mykola's works were known for the incorporation into his carvings of inlaid work with seed beads, copper wires, metal studs, and colored wood which produced the shadow-light effect in his ornamentations. Father and sons participated in many ethnographic exhibitions and national craft trade shows, where for their works they received gold medals, honorable mentions,

etc. The father Yurii, the sons Mykola and Wasyl initialed their work. Mykola's initials were always initialed "N. SH." (H.III). All of their works were characterized by high quality workmanship and excellent technical and artistic skills.

The wood-carved box mentioned above is the work of Mykola (Nykola) Shkribliak. It has his initials "H.III." clearly carved on the bottom of the box. In the ornamentation of the box Mykola employs such motifs as "ram's horns", "square crosses", "solar motifs", "lozenges", "star motifs", "semicircles", etc. The box is in-

laid with colored wood for shadow-light effect, white and dark seed beads, twisted cooper wires, and metal studs. These features characterized most of Mykola's works. His ornamental compositions are quite varied and intricate. The lid of the box is decorated with squares placed diagonally checkerboard fashion with crosses within each square. The front, back, and side panels, each have an original compositional arrangement of geometric motifs as those aforementioned. The box is fitted with a lock and the original key is still in working order. The carvings, inlays, and ornamentation of the box are very fine, delicate, and detailed. They truly reflect the workmanship of an excellent artist.

The artistic quality of the carved box, its age, the fact that it is the work of a notable artisan makes this artifact a valuable and interesting addition to our collection. Yet, the background story about the owners of this box makes this item even more fascinating. The original owner of the box

was Khrystyna Mykhailovych, 1876-1966, principal of a school in the village of Buyaniv, Zhydachiv district, Lviv oblast. Whether she purchased this box or was given it as a gift, we do not know; but it was in her possession until the 1950s. She had two sons and a daughter Maria, 1901-1985. Maria was married to the Reverend Hryhorii Muzyczka, 1889-1978, in 1917, at the age of 16. They had three sons – Roman, 1918-1983, Yaroslav, 1921-2012, and Evhen, 1922-?. Father Muzyczka served as pastor in the towns of Zhuravno, Chertizh, Zhydachiv, later becoming the Dean of the Zhuravno district. For his cultural and patriotic activities he was arrested several times by the Polish authorities in the 1920s and again in 1939. When the German armies occupied Poland and Ukraine, he was freed from the Polish prison; but with the Soviet armies approaching, he was advised to go west to escape imprisonment, exile, or even death at the hands of the Soviet authorities. From 1944 -1961 he was performing his priestly duties in Germany and Belgium. Upon retirement he came to the United States and

stayed with his family. Maria, Father Muzyczka's wife, was in Chertizh, the parish town when the Soviet army came and occupied the area. She was immediately arrested by the Soviet authorities and exiled to Kazakhstan for six and a half years of hard labor. Meanwhile the three sons were in school in the town of Stryi and thus escaped the fate of their mother. Had they been home with their mother, they would also have also been exiled. Roman and Yaroslav went to Western Europe where they completed their studies. Roman was ordained to the priesthood and served in Canada. Yaroslav became a medical doctor, married, and lived and practiced in the United States. The youngest son Evhen joined the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and was not heard from again. When Maria Muzyczka was freed from her exile, she came back to Ukraine to her mother's (Khrystyna Mykhailovych) home, but stayed there only one night. In those years local Soviet authorities would

constantly organize raids and roundups of people whom they felt like denouncing and would then have them imprisoned or exiled. Anyone who was once imprisoned and spent years in forced exile was considered to be a persona-non-grata and an easy prey for renewed arrests. Maria left her mother's home and went to Lviv. Here a former student of her husband's took her in and took care of her until she found a job. Some time later her mother came and lived with her in Lviv. The mother brought with her the wood-carved box. A few years later Maria, was able to get in touch and correspond with her husband and sons. Upon learning of the marriage of her son Yaroslav, both she and her mother presented the couple with a wedding gift. This gift was the wood-carved box which they had sent to Yaroslav and his wife Larissa in 1959. In corresponding with her family, Maria wrote letters using fictitious names and identities. It was safer that way. When Maria's mother died in 1966, the son in the United States was able to bring his mother to America in 1967. Finally the family was reunited.

Dr. Yaroslav Muzyczka died in 2012. His wife Larissa is currently sorting various family artifacts and donating them to different cultural institutions for safekeeping and preservation for posterity. Our Museum and Library was fortunate enough to receive many valuable items from her, as well as archival materials about her husband's family, especially about Fathers Hryhorii and Roman Muzyczka. The latest item which we received was the wood-carved box.

The wood-carved box is a small folk artifact of high artistic quality, a treasured family heirloom, a witness and a keeper of historic memory, not only of one family, but of the Ukrainian people who lived through such turbulent, brutal, and ruthless years, yet never having lost their dignity, never having abandoned their identity or their heritage!

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