

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

“THE ICON – A PAINTED PRAYER” (Mykhailo Osinchuk)

by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

The Fine Art collection in our Museum has substantial holdings of the creative output of a considerable number of prominent Ukrainian artists. Among them are the numerous works in our collection of Mykhailo Osinchuk (1890-1969)—painter-iconographer, graphic artist, portraitist, muralist, church decorator, pedagogue, all deserve, appropriately enough, special consideration.



Mykhailo Osinchuk was born in Zbarazh County of western Ukraine into a priestly family. He demonstrated artistic talent from an early age. After graduating from the Ternopil High School, he was accepted to the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts where he studied art and graphics from 1910-1914, as well as history and philosophy of art and literature at the Jagellonian University. During World War I he served in the Ukrainian Galician Army. After the War he taught drawing at the Academic Gymnasium in Lviv, and later was professor of art at the Lviv Academy of Arts. He was also a founding member and later the president of the Association of Independent Ukrainian Artists. This Association was founded by young, talented, and well educated Ukrainian artists, some of whom had studied, worked, and lived in Paris. They saw the need to advance Ukrainian art in Europe, as well as to introduce the newest trends in art to the Galician society. In the span of nine years (1930-1939) they organized 14 exhibits and even published an art magazine entitled *Mystetstvo*. But this

Association was eventually dissolved by the Soviets. Some of the members were able to escape Soviet occupation by fleeing to Western Europe, and later immigrating to countries of the free world. Others, those who remained, were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Mykhailo Osinchuk fled to Western Europe, and in 1947 immigrated to the United States. His pre-war sacred art works, which were housed in the National Museum in Lviv, were destroyed by the Soviet authorities.

Mykhailo Osinchuk devoted his life to the study of ancient Ukrainian sacred art, especially iconography and fresco painting, to its preservation, and to its restoration. During his student days in Cracow and later in his travels to Greece, Italy and Constantinople, he meticulously studied Byzantine iconography and mosaics. He carefully researched ancient Galician iconography, its techniques, particular compositional and stylistic characteristics. His fascination and extensive knowledge of ancient sacred art and iconography led him to the choice he made as an artist and his artistic creativity. Another reason he chose this path was because he was troubled by the fact that centuries old traditional icon painting and iconographic décor in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Churches in western Ukraine was slowly being replaced by westernized religious painting. The begin-

ning of the 20th century, after the War, western Ukraine witnessed a mass effort of restoring the old and the building of new churches. If this work fell into the wrong hands, ignorance and carelessness might bring about the destruction of priceless ancient monuments, art, and religious artifacts. Osinchuk, together with a few other artists like Pavlo Kovzhun (1896-1939), Mykola Fediuk (1885-1962) and their predecessor Modest Sosenko (1875-1920) were instrumental in reintroducing and reinstating the icon, iconographic sacred art (which they named neo-byzantine style) into the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in western Ukraine and into the Ukrainian home. Osinchuk and a few other émigré artists did this as well in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Churches in the United States and Canada. On this subject Osinchuk said “it became evident to us that if Ukrainian art was to have characteristic traits of its own, the iconographic tradition had to be respected – namely, the further progress of Ukrainian art must be based on the art of icon painting”. He also stated that “for each nation tradition is very important. It is the root that holds up the tree. Our failures, very often were caused by the absence of tradition. Our national tradition was often destroyed by internecine wars and by the brutality of foreign occupiers. But our religious tradition was imbedded deeply into the souls of our people and was pre-

served: the tradition of our Liturgies and the tradition of our icons. The icon creates in the Ukrainian soul a prayerful mood, because it is in itself a painted prayer”.

In all, Osinchuk painted murals and ornamental works in 20 churches in Ukraine, 4 in the United States and 2 in Canada. In addition to this, he painted at least a dozen iconostases and many single icons. His graphic works and portraits were all done in the iconographic style.

The art work of Mykhailo Osinchuk in our Museum’s collection is substantial. We have over 30 individual icons, portraits of historic personages, and members of his family, and woodcuts. When the Pavillion was built on our Eparchial grounds in the late 1940s, Osinchuk painted and constructed a portable iconostasis. Because there was a constant demand for home icons by villagers in Ukraine, shrewd merchants imported all kinds of holy pictures, often primitive, foreign to our tradition, and sold them to the naïve peasantry. To counteract this, Osinchuk did traditional icons of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and made printed colored versions available to the villagers. We have printed copies of these in our collection. After Mykhailo Osinchuk’s death, some of his works, drawings, photographs, and other seemingly paraphernalia type of materials were stored in his brother’s home, the home of Dr. Roman Osinchuk. Dr. Roman’s widow, upon cleaning out the house, brought to our Museum shopping



bags full of such unidentified material, telling us to do with them what we wish; otherwise they would be discarded. Upon inspection of these shopping bags, we found a treasure trove. The bags were filled with hundreds of colored drawings of different ornamental motifs to be used in the décor of Eastern Rite church walls, pillars, arches, vaults, frames for the iconostasis, etc. This is just another example of how by pure chance these items were preserved, because the current owner was wise enough to deposit them with us.

Mykhailo Osinchuk used the tempera technique in his iconographic art. His icons are bright in color and serene in outlook. The artist explained that “in my re-introducing of iconography into the church... I had to take only the basic features of the old icon: the linear, the rhythmic color movements, and the symbolic meaning... had a more naturalistic expression, and had lost some of their schematic severity. Instead of the local colors of the icon I introduced the correlative tones according to modern colors concepts... The color arrangement of the ornamental adornment was produced in the same way... Therefore this polychromia of the church, equally treated in the ornamental and pictorial parts had

the prevailing effect of a harmony of colors and values, and thus evoked an exalted mood – which together with the singing, makes our Liturgies so enchanting”.



As to how many of the churches in Ukraine which Osinchuk painted have survived in their original look, I do not know. But in 1995, a journalist from Lviv, upon seeing our large collection of Osinchuk’s works was enthralled that we have preserved his works. She bitterly explained that in the 60’s and later in the 80’s with the political and religious thaw, there appeared a gang of contractors. These contractors, at the request of members of church committees and pastors who lacked not only proper but also basic cultural and art education, painted over the murals of Osinchuk and Kovzhun with pastel colors of pink and green and covered them with primitive ornamental designs. Again, we face the tragedy of the destruction of our cultural treasures not only at the hands of an enemy but also by our own hands. Many a time we have witnessed the fact that Ignorance, carelessness, and indifference can actually do more harm than an enemy. Let us hope that in today’s turbulent times in Ukraine we will not be witnesses of yet another era of destruction.



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