

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford *PAPER CUTOUTS (VYTYNANKY), A REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL FOLK ART* by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

In our extensive fine arts collection, we have many works of Vasyl Korchynskyi, 1955 - . As an art student he concentrated on graphic art and completed his studies at the Lviv Poligraphic Institute. He experimented with various techniques, especially linocuts, but at the same he became fascinated with the art



of paper cutouts (vytynanky) to which he devoted over twenty years of his creative talents. The works of

Korchynskyi which we have in our collection include over 30 artistic paper cutouts depicting ornamental motifs, illustrations for popular Ukrainian literary novels, namely Mykhailo Kozubynsky's *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, and *pysanky*.

The art of paper cutouts has a long history. The Chinese people who invented paper about the 4th century were the first ones to introduce decorative paper cutouts. Although initially popular among aristocratic women, it soon

spread to the lower classes, and eventually to many other nations and ethnic groups. Beginning with the 19th century it developed into a highly popular folk art. In comparison with other folk art products, paper cutouts were inexpensive and a finished product was achieved more quickly. In Ukraine some artistic paper cutouts (small pieces of white paper with decoratively cut edges) called *kustodii*, were used in the 17-18th centuries on official Kozak documents. They were placed as a lining for official wax seals which were then stamped over them unto the document. From the 19th century decorative paper cutouts became very popular among the Ukrainian populace. In addition to the many items used for centuries to decorate the interior of a peasant home, e.g., the icons, ritual clothes, embroideries, ceramic plates, woven textiles for beds, benches, tables, wall and stove paintings, paper cutouts were added in the 19th century. They were used to decorate, windows, window frames, around doorways, walls below the icons, shelves for dishes, etc. I remember, even as a five year old child, seeing paper cutouts in an old house in the Carpathian mountains. During the War, because of nighttime military skirmishes, it was too dangerous to remain in one's



garland like cutouts placed on the wall below the ceiling



kustodii

own house. So we often had to spend nights sleeping in a peasant's home located in a safer area. On one of these occasions as I was huddling in a corner of the room, frightened and tightly holding on to my aunt, I happened to look around the tiny room and saw a pretty garland of heart shaped red paper cutouts attached all around the walls of the

room just below the ceiling. Gun shots and explosions could be heard in the distance, but I kept looking and looking at this paper garland until I fell asleep. After all these years, once in a while, I can still see this heart shaped paper garland of cutouts in my nightly dreams.

Since paper cutouts are highly perishable, they were difficult to preserve for posterity. But, thanks to a few persons who admired and valued folk art, some samples have actually been preserved. One of these persons, a collector and devotee of folk art, was Father Sofron Levytsky, a priest from the Tovmach region, western Ukraine. He collected samples of various folk cutouts, formed them into an album of 12 plates and in 1887 exhibited them at a folk art exhibit in Ternopil. Another collector and ethnographer was Volodymyr Hahenmeister. In 1930 he published a book about paper cutouts as wall decorations in Kamianechchyna, Eastern Podillia.

Modern times and post World War II conditions brought about changes in the lifestyle of the people, and many traditional decorative elements once used were abandoned. Paper cutouts were one of those items which were neglected, although not really forgotten. Lately there has developed a great interest in paper cutouts and a revival has ensued. The popularity is now widespread throughout the whole of Ukraine. Researchers are delving through archival material, looking for samples and historical records. Classes in paper cutouts are currently being offered in craft institutes and art schools. Conferences and exhibitions are organized in which both craft masters and professional artists participate. Vasyl Korchynskyi was one artist who was captivated by this decorative form of art and produced the unique works which we have in our Museum and Library collection.



kustodii

Also we should be acquainted with his paper cutouts depicting traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs – the *pysanky*.

Once again we see how a form of folk art which was almost lost has been revived. All this is due to individuals who understood the value of every aspect of Ukrainian heritage, tried to preserve it, and evoked interest in it for others and thus brought about its revival, study, and documentation. No matter whether this art form is grand and lofty or simple and commonplace, both deserve our care, interest, preservation, and dissemination. It's our cultural heritage, and it's our duty to safeguard what we have inherited from our ancestors. No one will do it for us!



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