

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Ukrainian Religious Artifacts on Auction

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Sviatoslav Hordynsky standing beside the auctioned vestments, Photo, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford

The religious collection of our Museum and Library consists of a variety of artifacts, e.g., a significant number of icons dating from the early 19th to the present centuries; wooden and metal hand crosses; rare and valuable old printed church books dating from the 15th to the early 19th centuries; church vessels; antimensions; ecclesiastical vestments and more. Among the church vestments that we have, there are four which deserve special consideration not only because of their provenance (the period they came from, and the quality of the fabric and handiwork) but also because of the intriguing and quite exciting way in which our Museum acquired them.

An eminent Ukrainian artist, poet,

art and literary critic, and a fervent activist in Ukrainian cultural life and its institutions was Sviatoslav Hordynsky, 1906-1993. After emigrating to the United States in the late 1940s, he devoted much of his life to the organizational development of Ukrainian cultural life and the preservation of Ukrainian heritage in America. He ardently studied art collections in American Museums, e.g., the Metropolitan Museum and others, where he found a good number of Ukrainian artifacts from the Kievan-Rus era and later centuries. Oftentimes these items were incorrectly labeled as *Russian*. Hordynsky tried to correct this error. He was also aware of the source of some of these items and those which

might have been purchased in highly respected and prominent auction galleries in New York City. This prompted him to keep abreast of the activities of these auction galleries, visit their exhibitions, study their auction catalogues, and inspect the items for sale, and learn from what source these items came to the gallery.

As a result of his careful and constant vigilance, Sviatoslav Hordynsky discovered that on March 24, 1971 in the Parke-Bernet galleries on Madison Avenue, there would be an auction of religious items brought in by the *Novo-eksport* Company from Moscow. Among these religious items were a number of

persons came to put in their bids. Among them were from the Ukrainian Institute – Sviatoslav Hordynsky and Iulian Revai, Bishop Joseph Schmondiuk and Dr. Vasyl Lencyk from our Museum, Maria Savchak from the Ukrainian National Women's League, and others. Our Museum purchased two episcopal vestments from Pecherska Lavra, one dated from 1830, and one diaconal vestment, also from Pecherska Lavra dated 1768. A third episcopal vestment, also from Pecherska Lavra and dated from the end of the 18th century was purchased by Ukrainian National Women's League, and was donated to our



Diaconal Vestment, Pecherska Lavra, 1768, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford



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ecclesiastical vestments and other religious items all dubbed *Russian*. Hordynsky went to the galleries before the auction to inspect this hoard. After careful study, based on their style, labels, and written notes and stamps, he authenticated these items to be ecclesiastical vestments confiscated or stolen from Kievan churches and monasteries e.g., Pecherska Lavra monastery, St. Sophia Cathedral, etc. Sviatoslav Hordynsky agitated the Ukrainian community to action. He, together with the Board members of the Ukrainian Institute of America, appealed to various Ukrainian institutions and cultural activists to help in purchasing these exceptional historical, religious, and artistic value items, and preserve them in Ukrainian hands for posterity. Normally, items of this nature were auctioned off to fashion designers who would then cut up the rich brocade, satin, velvet gold embroidered cloth for their fashion innovations or costumes.

On the appointed day of the auction, representatives of various Ukrainian institutions and a few private

Museum a few years later after the founding of the Ukrainian Museum in New York. This latter Museum decided that henceforth it would not collect religious artifacts. Our Museum would then be the proper place to which religious artifacts should be donated for preservation.

Thus it was that Ukrainian religious and historical treasures during the Soviet regime were either destroyed, confiscated, or stolen, and then sold abroad for huge profits. How many of these treasures perished – we will never know. But, at least thanks to the watchful eye of Sviatoslav Hordynsky, the generosity of the Ukrainian Institute, and our Museum, etc., some treasures of this nature, almost miraculously, have been saved and will be preserved for posterity.

This is an exceptional example of how a few concerned individuals, and an enlightened, united, and generous community, by working together, can accomplish great deeds. But that was in 1971! Are we as concerned, enlightened, united, and generous today? ❖