

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

International Ukrainian Embroidery Day “Vyshyvanka”

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Folk art has always played an important role in the lives of Ukrainians. For centuries it was part of their livelihood, lifestyle, tradition, and identity. Embroidery was an especially dominant force that permeated the people's entire existence. For the most part, embroidery was created and employed by village folk. Initially, people believed that embroidered symbolic motifs, when applied to cloth, had the power to bring good fortune and to protect the wearer and home from harm. Whether it was an embroidered shirt, a ritual cloth, or household linens – all were important items to be produced in each home, utilized, and cherished by family members. With the decline of traditional village lifestyle brought about by social changes and modern-day influences, much of the folk-art creativity diminished but was not entirely lost. Beginning with the early 19th century, the educated classes throughout the whole of Europe developed an interest in folk art and began a serious study, an appreciation of its artistic quality, and its preservation. In Ukraine a number of enlightenment, scholarly, and educational societies dedi-

cated their work to the collection, preservation and popularization of Ukrainian folk art. This led to the founding of Folk art museums, private collections, folk art exhibition, and folk-art workshops. Through these efforts not only did folk art and especially embroidery gain wide popularity, but it also acquired additional important national meaning. It became a symbol of resistance, solidarity, and strength.

Ukrainian history is underscored by centuries of turbulent events, such as annihilation by famine, political and religious persecution, the destruction and purging of Ukrainian intelligentsia, invasion and domination of foreign powers, etc. Notwithstanding the often dire circumstances, Ukrainians managed to preserve their existence and national identity by adhering to their language and religion, their traditions and their lifestyle. But how does one make a brave political statement in these constricted circumstances without risking incarceration, further destruction and even death? The people resorted to one remarkably visible act of unity, to assert one's national belonging, show a united front of protest

and resistance and strength. And that was by wearing an embroidered shirt on specific occasions, whether those occasions were solemn and grave, or happy and jubilant. Thus, the embroidered shirt which for centuries had served as a symbolic power of protection now became a symbol of national identity and unity.

It was a great day of joy when in August 1991, Ukraine proclaimed its independence after centuries of subjugation and national destruction. The populace of Ukraine and Ukrainians living all over the world expressed their happiness with parades, gatherings and marches. Spontaneously, the people came out in masses, all wearing embroidered shirts. From this day on every year on Ukrainian Independence Day people dress in their embroidered garments. But from the start Ukrainian Independence had its challenges. We had the Orange Revolution, then came the Euro-Maidan, annexation of Crimea by Putin and now war in the eastern borders of Ukraine. Once more Ukrainians had to untie to express their opinions, organize anti-Russian and anti-Putin Rallies, show their resilience, and let the world know about

the tragic circumstances our nation had to deal with and the many attempts of foreign powers to destroy our culture and our nation.

In order, once more, to underscore Ukrainian identity, in 2006, a student at the Chernivtsi University came up with the idea of organizing an International Ukrainian Embroidery Day. The third Thursday in May was chosen as the designated day. Ukrainians all over the world were to show their unity and solidarity by wearing an embroidered garment. This idea became so popular that many non-Ukrainians joined to show their support of Ukraine and spread the idea of Ukrainian identity around the world. It also developed interest in and helped popularize Ukrainian culture.

When we participate in the International Ukrainian embroidery day, we should remember when donning an embroidered shirt we put on a responsibility. It unites us and identifies us with our nation, our heritage, and our past. Above all, we should remember all those who suffered and died for wearing an embroidered shirt in the tragic days of Ukrainian history. ❖

