

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

AN EXHIBIT OF ONE PAINTING by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

In the organization of fine arts exhibits, museums often choose to show the works of one artist, or the works of many artists of the same artistic era, style, or school, or works depicting comparable subject matter, and other alike integrations of art works. Museums do this in order to acquaint, involve, and stir interest of the visiting public in the aesthetic creative wealth of the past and the present. Occasionally, museums will choose to exhibit a single great painting. This is done so that the public might have a deeper appreciation of the work, focus more intently on it, broaden a better understanding, and encourage further engagement in works of art, artists, and museum exhibitions.

Our Museum has an imposing fine arts collection representing works of notable artists from Ukraine and the Ukrainian Diaspora. In the past we have mounted exhibits depicting the works of individual artists, namely, Alexis Gritchenko, Mykola Butovych, Ivan Trush, Oleksa Novakivsky; the works of artists from one region, e.g., the works of artists from Zakarpattia; the works of art depicting Kozak lore, etc. Currently we are preparing for the fall an exhibit of the works of Edward Kozak (EKO). Since readers of our articles live far and wide, and are not able to visit the Museum to view and experience the exhibits which we mount, I decided that occasionally I would write about an individual artist and his work or works in our collection. In this way I would familiarize you with the artist and his work, engage you in our exhibits, albeit from afar, and hopefully make you more appreciative and supportive of our work.

For today's article I have chosen to write about the artist Roman Maraz (1911-1979) and his painting, which we have in our collection, entitled *Lirnyk* (The Minstrel or The Lira Player). Although not well known now, Roman Maraz's works from the 1930s to mid 70s were shown in over 45 exhibits in both Canada and the United States, and can be found in private collections as well as in a few permanent museum collections.

Roman Maraz was born in the city of Buchach in 1911, and as a young

boy emigrated to Canada in 1926. He graduated from the Ontario College of Art, and in the 1930s came on a fellowship to the United States to study at the Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Birmingham, Michigan. His works were executed in various mediums – oils, tempera, pencil drawings. He also dedicated some of his works to religious themes, e.g., Christ and the twelve Apostles. His professional experiences include the following: teaching at the Meininger Art School; stage design for Columbia Pictures Corp.; architectural design for the Ford Foundation Community in Dearborn, Michigan; Industrial Designer for Wills Motors; and senior designer for Chevrolet Motor Division.

In 1938 Maraz had a one-man exhibit at the prestigious Scarab Club of Detroit, Michigan. It was hailed by Mr. Burroughs, the Curator of American Art at the Detroit Art Institut, as "one of the best one man exhibitions I have seen this year". At this exhibit the painting *Lirnyk* was shown for the first time. Two years later, in September, 1940, the Regional Council of the Ukrainian National Women's League of America organized an exhibit of Maraz's works at which the painting *Lirnyk* was again exhibited. At this time our Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford was conducting an extensive campaign for the support of the institution. The Regional Council of Detroit decided to help in this campaign, and so purchased the painting *Lirnyk* from the artist and donated it to our Museum as a sign of support, thereby enriching our collection.



The painting depicts an aged blind minstrel, sitting cross-legged on the ground by a fence and holding the lira, a Ukrainian version of the hurdy-gurdy, which is a hand-cranked wheel rubbing over strings like a violin's bow. It produces a continuous hum-like sound whose pitch can be changed and a melody can be played by pressing the keys on the keyboard. The minstrel's straw hat is upturned so as to receive alms. Alongside is a young boy, the minstrel's guide, holding a wooden staff in his hand. Who were the *Lirnyky* (minstrels)? What was their role in Ukrainian society? Why did the artist, after so many years away from the country of his birth, decided to paint this sad and poignant scene?

For centuries traveling musicians were a part of Ukrainian folk tradition. They traveled throughout Ukraine and were known from about the 17th century up to the 20th. There were two distinct types: the *kobzari* or *bandurysty* (those who sang to the accompaniment of the stringed instrument *kobza* or later *bandura*) and the *lirnyky*, who sang and played on the *lira* or hurdy-gurdy. The majority of the traveling musicians had some physical infirmity or handicap, most often blindness. Each group was organized into a specific guild which had very strict rules, and prospective members had to undergo specific schooling and training and submit to a formal initiation rite. First the apprentices had to learn many prayers, versified pleas, invocations, begging and gratitude songs; then came the learning of psalms, chants (*kanty*); next they were taught to play on the *lira*; lastly came the learning of the *lirnyk's* secret language which was called the Lybiiian (or Lebiian) language. This language the *lirnyky* used amongst themselves whenever they did not want

the general public to understand what they were saying, and also to weed out any imposter *lirnyky*. The imposters did not belong to the *lirnyk's* guild; were not properly trained, were simply beggars, and often cheats and thieves. True *lirnyky*, on the other hand, had an unblemished reputation. They were honest, upright in their behavior, and were respected by the populace. All the prayers and songs were recited or sung to the accompaniment of the *lira*. *Lirnyks* were most often seen at religious festivals and at monasteries and churches.

Why did Roman Maraz choose to do a painting of a *lirnyk*? He was probably quite familiar with *lirnyky* when he was growing up in Ukraine. How and why? During my research about *lirnyky* I found an interesting fact. The earliest source materials which were gathered about the *lirnyky* was the work of a notable ethnographer by the name of Volodymyr Hnatiuk. His findings were published in 1896 in the *Enografichnyi Zbirnyk* (Ethnographic Collection) by the Shevchenko Society in Lviv. Hnatiuk did most of his research and field work on the *lirnyky* in the Buchach area of eastern Halychyna, because this area was actually the richest source of material on the subject matter. Roman Maraz was born in Buchach and in his youth must have experienced this phenomenon which impressed him immensely; and so he chose to immortalize the *lirnyk* in his painting.

Unfortunately, in the 1930s, during the Soviet days, Stalin decided to get rid of these musicians. On the pretext of calling an "ethnographic conference" the *kobzari*, *bandurysty*, and *lirnyky* were gathered together and were subsequently executed by the Soviet authorities. Fortunately few of the musicians did survive, that is, those who did not attend the conference. Today in Ukraine there are some *lirnyky*, no longer the wandering minstrels, nor blind, but professional performers who have revived this traditional form of musical art.

Explore and Experience Our Past