

## The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

### HUTSUL CERAMIC OVEN TILES

by *Lubow Wolynetz, Curator*

Our Museum has a fine collection of earthenware ceramics from the various regions of Ukraine, dating from the mid-nineteenth to early and mid-twentieth centuries. A good number of these ceramics was purchased for the Museum by the first curator Father Lev Chapelsky in the 1930s. Subsequently, the collection was enriched by gifts and purchases in the ensuing years. A group of the more interesting ceramic pieces in the collection is the Hutsul ceramic oven tiles.

Ceramic production in Ukraine has an age-old tradition. Its development dates back to antiquity and has continued to flourish even to our days. Ukraine is rich in various clays needed for the production of earthenware pottery, and this has facilitated its wide development and popularity both for practical and decorative uses. Folk art ceramics consisted of pottery needed for storage of food and liquids and for cooking; for the decoration of homes; for technical products such as bricks, oven tiles, roof shingles, smoke chimneys; and for all kinds of clay toys. All of these items could be glazed or unglazed, ornamented or plain, depending on the final use of the item, as well as on local tradition. Potters believed that their craft was the oldest and the most important, and they substantiated this belief with stories from the Bible, pointing out that God Himself was the first potter, since He created the first man out of clay.

Hutsul ceramics occupy a very special place in the Ukrainian earthenware craft. These products were known for their high quality of workmanship and for their fine and original ornamental designs.

Because of this, they achieved wide popularity and were in great demand, not only by the village folk but especially by the townspeople. The towns of Pistyn, Kutu, and Kosiv were the main centers of Hutsul ceramic production. Important character-

istics of Hutsul ceramics include the following: a combination of stylized floral motifs, animals and birds, and varied geometric elements; religious subjects like crosses, churches, bell towers, saints; scenes from everyday life, manners and customs of the Hutsul

are created from the following: a combination of stylized floral motifs, animals and birds, and varied geometric elements; religious subjects like crosses, churches, bell towers, saints; scenes from everyday life, manners and customs of the Hutsul peasant, the gentry of the ruling class; and soldiers and army life.

The 22 oven tiles in our collection are some definitely, and some in all probability, the work of Oleksa Bakhmetiuk, 1820-1882. Son of an average simple potter, he was born in the town of Staryi Kosiv and became one of the most prominent ceramicists of his day. In his youth his father apprenticed him to I. Baraniuk, a well known and experienced potter

in Kosiv. Oleksa quickly surpassed his master's teaching, took over his father's pottery workshop, and began to produce his own works. He introduced an original and novel way of decorating earthenware products, experimented with ceramic paints and glazes, and was known for producing a better quality of glazed earthenware than other potters. Al-

though he produced bowls, plates, and pitchers, he concentrated on producing oven tiles for which he has become best known. During his lifetime he participated in various Handicraft Trade Shows: in 1873 in Vienna, and in 1877 in Lviv where he received medals and gold ducats for his products. In 1880 in the town of Kolomyia, he participated in a major ethnographic art show and displayed many of his earthenware products. Among them he presented two tiled ovens – one for a Hutsul home and another for a city apartment. One of the important visitors to this art show was the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. He was so impressed with Oleksa's works that he purchased one of the tiled ovens, and also presented Oleksa with gold medals for his excellent work.

The arrangement of tiles on the chimney and side parts of a Hutsul oven varied with a few exceptions. On the upper level of the chimney, there was always centrally placed a tile depicting a religious theme – an icon of a saint, a three-domed church, a bell tower, etc. This was done in the belief that it would protect the family hearth. The rest of the surface was covered

with ornamental and narrative tiles. Each narrative tile had a story to tell, and with an imaginative and articulate onlooker fabulous, often quite humorous, tales could be spun. Vira Svientsitska, 1913-1991, a folk art scholar once stated that "One tile is a short story about the everyday life of a Hutsul, but the whole tiled oven is already a novel of satirical nature".

The tiles in our Museum's collection are of both decorative and narrative types. We

have square tiles for lining the straight walls of the oven, as well as comices and two front-pieces for crowning the top of the oven.

Hutsul oven tiles are fascinating to study. They tell us not only about the artistic talent and creativity of the craftsman, but also they reveal to us by tile illustrations the social aspect of that particular community's lives, beliefs, work, hardships, humor, happiness, joyfulness, and even imagination.



istics of Hutsul ceramics include the following: incision of the design over white slip done with a nail or other sharp instrument; painting with red-brown clay paint for which the horn of an ox with goose quill tips was used; firing for the first time; painting with green and yellow glaze paints the other parts of a design; glazing with a translucent glaze; and firing for the second time. The secret for making a good ceramic product is as follows: knowing how to select and prepare clay; preparing the slip, glaze paints, and the glaze itself; and knowing how to fire properly. In the past, each master craftsman had his own secret formula, which very often went to the grave with him.

An important aspect of Hutsul ceramics is its ornamentation. Original decorative compositions



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