

## The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

### UKRAINIAN GREETING CARDS DURING THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

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The tradition of expressing best wishes during holiday times has been with us for centuries. When such sentiments could not be expressed in person,

certain forgotten or neglected practices.

In the December 23rd 2012 issue of the *Sower* I wrote about greeting postcards in general, and specifically about some vintage

Christmas cards in our Museum and Library collection. In this issue I would like to share with you a group of Christmas postcards in our collection which illustrate specific aspects of the Ukrainian Christmas traditions, namely Holy Supper (*Sviata Vechera*) and Caroling (*Koliaduvannia, Shchedruvannia*).



we would do it via mail by sending greeting cards to our family members, friends, and acquaintances. This tradition, once so popular and voluminous, is slowly dying out. Technological innovations are currently taking over and well-wishing for all occasions is now sent by way of e-mail or else posted on Facebook. And although best wishes expressed in this manner are sincere and heartwarming, they are still fleeting and momentary. There is no possibility of retaining them

for a longer period of time so as to ponder over the words and appreciate the illustrations, even though they were taken from an electronic stock collection. There is no way to preserve them as a keepsake. For these reasons it is so important to value and to preserve greeting cards of bygone years. This is especially true for those that are aesthetically pleasing. These are the ones having original art work which contains symbolic meaning, intuitively informing or instructing us by an illustration or written phrase. These greeting cards rekindle forgotten traditions, awaken memories, inspire the recipient to think about and reflect upon the depicted subject matter, to reminisce, and perhaps even to be stimulated to renew

the importance of the family bond, love, respect, and devotion. It is a time to reflect on the family's future well-being by expressing hopeful wishes. Christmas festivities conclude on the Feast of the Epiphany.

Some greeting cards merely give a hint of a Christmas Eve Supper, like the one by the artist Myron Levytsky: A man is holding a sheaf of wheat and a woman is holding a bowl of Kutia. It is for us to read into this illustration and to fill in the rest of the story. Two cards which best illustrate fully a Christmas Eve Supper are those by the artist Yaroslava (Surmach-Mills) and B. Honta. On both cards we see a solemn but festive atmos-

phere. Three generations of a family gather to partake of the meatless and dairyless 12 course meal in God's presence with holy icons on the walls. All the important elements necessary for a traditional meal are there: a sheaf of wheat representing the ancestors, an extra place setting for the ancestral souls, three round breads (*kolachi*), hay on the floor, and lit candle on the tablecloth, with the first star appearing in the heavens signifying the Star of Bethlehem and the precise time to begin the Supper. Although the card depicts a home and people from a past century, nevertheless, it is the festive and almost sacred atmosphere that really touches us and reminds us of the heritage we have received, which we should always cherish, preserve and transmit to every new generation.

A specific group of carols and winter songs (*kolidaky* and *shchedrivky*) have their origin in antiquity, and according to scholars are considered to be the oldest Ukrainian literary works. They were performed in Ukraine preceding the coming of Christianity during winter and New Year rituals. With the advent of Christianity these songs were adapted. Some underwent changes by substituting ancient motifs with Christian ones, new ones were created, all were incorporated into the Christmas holidays, and for centuries transmitted orally.

Caroling in Ukraine is a joyful and merry pastime. Young men and women, and boys and girls would organize caroling teams or troupes with or without appropriate caroling props like the sixth or eighth pointed star, the goat, angels, three kings, musical instruments, facial masks, a large sack for collecting goodies, etc. They would travel from house to house and sing joyous carols about the birth of

Christ, also suitable carols for each member of the household, and finally expressing well wishes, success in all their undertakings.

The children's caroling teams had the most fun. They roamed from house to house, dressed up, singing, frolicking, and collecting sweets and baked goodies which for them, poor village children, was a very special once a year treat.

A card by the artist Petro Andrusiv illustrates a caroling group as might have



been during the Cossack days of the 17-18th centuries. Two cards by the artist Myron Levytsky illustrate the more ancient songs – the *shchedrivky* (well wishing and glorification songs). One of these two cards illustrates another *shchedrivka* with both pre-Christian and Christian elements. The artist in this card depicts three

students of the 17th century Kiyevan Academy as guests presenting three gifts. The third student holds the gift of the Cathedral of St. Sophia, upon which descends the Star of Bethlehem symbolizing that Christ has come to Ukraine. In front of the three guests is a large traditional sheaf of wheat, symbol of our ancestors, and of our past, of our heritage.

Just a few vintage Christmas greeting cards, and what a wealth of information can be gleaned from them!



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