

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Winter Holidays and Christmas Greetings

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



"Visit from St. Nicholas," Post card, Y. Surmach Mills, Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford



"Christmas is Here," Post card, Y. Surmach Mills, Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

Wintertime, and especially the month of December and the first half of January, is filled with a number of joyous holidays which most of us eagerly anticipate. We celebrate these holidays solemnly, devotedly, and joyously in an appropriate manner in keeping with our age-old Ukrainian traditions. These holidays evoke in us a feeling of gladness, a desire to do good, to be kind, to forgive, and to wish everyone all the best.

An important quality of these holidays is our desire not only to share and impart feelings of happiness and joy to others and especially all family members, but also to awake in us fond memories of past celebrations, to remind us of our traditions, and most of all to give thanks to God for all the blessings received throughout the year. If we cannot express these feelings in person, the next best thing is to send an appropriate greeting card, which would express these sentiments pictorially.

Notable Ukrainian artists contributed considerably in the creation of holiday greeting cards, especially artists in the diaspora.

One of these artists about

whose greeting cards we shall discuss is Yaroslava Surmach Mills, 1925-2008, a graduate of the Cooper Union Art School. She was an artist, illustrator, icon painter, stained glass artist, and educator. Yaroslava was one of the first who introduced and popularized the art of the Ukrainian pysanka to the American public. Her achievements in all her works were exceptional, but among Ukrainians she is best known, best liked, and best remembered for her paintings on the reverse of glass depicting Ukrainian folk scenes and traditions which were reproduced as postcards. As the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants and proprietors of one of the oldest Ukrainian Book Stores in New York City, Surma Book Store and Music Co. on 7th Street, Yaroslava was surrounded by and constantly aware of her ethnic heritage. She listened to her mother's stories of village life in Ukraine, and, while helping her father in the Surma Store, she listened to the stories and reminiscences of the many visitors to the store, about the old ways and traditions they knew in their youth.

While traveling in Ukraine in

the late 1950s, Yaroslava became fascinated by the traditional folk art painting on the reverse of glass, depicting mostly religious scenes, samples of which she found in the museums. On returning home to New York, she began experimenting with this type of painting, using her own sophisticated naïve style. As a result, she created hundreds of paintings on the reverse of glass which depicted the folk stories, traditions, and rituals heard about as a child and young girl. Consider now 2 of her holiday postcards:

The first major winter holiday to which especially children look forward to is St. Nicholas Day. In Yaroslava's painting "Visit from St. Nicholas" we see St. Nicholas entering the home with an angel on his side, with a bag of goodies, and a devilish imp behind him with a bag of coal and a bunch of birch twigs. A group of nine children, in a traditionally decorated folk home, stands huddled and waiting. Although the children's faces seem to look alike, yet, if examining carefully, one can see how the artist managed subtly to convey each child's distinct emotions. The oldest girl with a know-it-all expression is

aware that this is not the real St. Nicholas, but probably her uncle or a next-door neighbor dressed as one, but pretends for her younger siblings sake and pushes them forward to St. Nick. Some children look at the Saint in awe, some are frightened, some with outstretched hands ready to get the gift St. Nicholas has in his hand – an apple. But, one little boy with a twig in his hand is ready to run away, fearing that he is going to get another birch twig from the devilish imp because he was a bad boy. The bag of goodies does not contain elaborate toys but mostly fruit. In the past, to get fresh fruit in the dead of winter in a folk village was indeed a special treat.

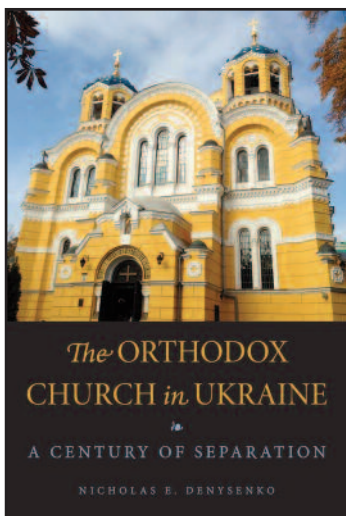
The painting "Christmas is Here" is an iconic representation of a traditional Ukrainian Christmas Eve with all the elements, rituals, and beliefs that are associated with this holiday and to which Ukrainians strive to adhere. A traditional village home, is festively decorated with the table set for Christmas Eve Supper for each member of the family, with one extra for the faithful departed. On the table there already stands a bowl of *Kutia* (which is called God's food

and a jug of *Uzvar* (stewed fruit) which is called God's drink), the two most important dishes of a Christmas Eve Supper. Hay is strewn under the tablecloth and under the table. The father with his older son is bringing in a sheaf of wheat, the *Didukh*, symbol of the ancestors, which he will place by the icons. The mother is ready to place three round kolachi with a lit candle in the center—symbol of life, the sun, and the Trinity. Grandmother is getting the other dishes out of the oven. Two boys looking through the window, spotted the first star in the sky, signifying time to begin the Holy Supper. Through the open door we can see in the stable door the head of a happy and satisfied horse. The master of the house must have given him special treats, so that according to a belief which claims that animals can talk to God and to the ancestors on this night, will praise the master and not complain about him. One little postcard speaks volumes!

Two holiday postcards, each telling a story, reminding us of our traditions, reviving happy memories, illuminating the past, and bringing about a feeling of harmony, peace, and joy! ❖

Book Review by Museum Director

Msgr. John Terlecky



The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: a century of separation by Nicholas E. Denysenko. (Northern Illinois University Press. 2018, \$28)

Hot off the press is this scholarly work on the history of the Ukrainian

Orthodox Church in Ukraine and in the diaspora in the twentieth century. The book is an excellent introduction to the attempts for canonicity and autocephaly issues that lead up to the present status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the "tomos" declaration, approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople during this past year.

The author himself has great credentials for this study. He himself is the grandson of a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the United States. During his college years, he was troubled in spirit by the "canonicity" status of this church and leaned to the Orthodox Church of America. He holds graduate degrees from both Saint Vladimir Orthodox Theological Seminary and The Catholic University of America. He is an ordained deacon of this church (OCA) and a gifted author of Orthodox liturgical subjects. He currently heads the chair of theology at Valparaiso

University.

The author provides an in-depth chronological study of the attempts of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to be an "ecclesia sui juris" throughout the twentieth century. The immense amount of resources of his scholarship is indeed impressive. Chapters of his book are devoted to the following: the first instance of the short-lived existence of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) at its October 1921 Council; the second attempt for the revitalization of the UAOC during World War II in Ukraine and Poland; the development of the UAOC in two jurisdictions of North America; the control of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine during the Soviet years; and the spring uprising of both the Kyivan Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the UAOC in the years following Ukraine's declaration of independence in August, 1991.

There are a number of complex issues addressed by the author in the book: the role of language in the UAOC, matters of national identity, and especially the thirst for self-actual canonicity for this church. The author's assessment of the "sobornopravnist" issue is in theoretical alignment with the present canonical status of the Church.

I was particularly pleased by the author's use of Ukrainian terminology in the book. There are constant references to Kyiv and Kyivan councils, to Halychyna, and even the Ukrainian option of "вічна ім пам'ять" in the dedication to his grandparents.

This is a book that might not be of interest to the average reader due to its religious nomenclature; yet it is a book of great importance to anyone interested in the church history of Ukraine and the determination of UAOC to become a fully autonomous church within the worldwide Orthodox fold. ❖