

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

A Portrait of Oleksa Dovbush

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Among the many samples of artistic woodcarvings from the Hutsul region in our Museum's collection, we have one unique work which deserves special attention. The item in question is a bas-relief carved portrait of Oleksa Dovbush – a popular Hutsul folk hero. This depiction of Oleksa was carved on a pear tree board by the folk artisan Vasyl Yakibiuk and set into a wooden frame, which is decorated with simple flat carvings and inlaid with twisted copper wires.

On the back of the portrait the artist wrote the following: *"Hutsulshchyna, Kryvorivnia, poshta (postal zone) – Yaseniv Horishnyi, povit (district) Kosiv. Artist woodcarver Vasyl Yakibiuk, son of Hryborii. March 25, 1937."*

This work was apparently donated to our Museum by the artist at the time of Father Leo Chapelsky (first curator of our Museum) who, in the 1930s, made a few trips to western Ukraine to collect artifacts for the Museum.

Oleksa Dovbush (April 28, 1703-August 23, 1745) was an 18th century Ukrainian folk hero who is often compared to Robin Hood. He was born in the town of Pechenizhyn in the Hutsul region of the Carpathian mountains. He and

his brother gathered a band of about 50 followers, young men known as *"Opryshky"* (outlaws, rebels). According to historical facts and many legends, they conducted successful raids on the manors of the rich, abusive, and cruel landowning nobility. They robbed the rich and gave the looted booty to the poor. The Ukrainian peasants' lot at this time was oppressive and insufferable due to the many abuses they had to endure from the wealthy gentry who owned the land and were part of the ruling class of the Polish Commonwealth.

Oleksa Dovbush became a popular hero whose fame spread throughout the Carpathian Mountains. His raids were so successful that the government organized military expeditions to capture Dovbush and his band. For years he managed to elude capture, hiding in the numerous mountain caves, now known as Dovbush caverns. Finally through the betrayal of a woman, his mistress, he was shot and mortally wounded by her husband Stefan Dzvinchuk with a silver bullet since, according to legend, no other bullet would kill him.

In the portrait, we see Dovbush dressed in the traditional Hutsul costume. He is

standing on a rock with a rifle in his hand. Under his arm he has a *"topir"* (a hatchet), which was used as a weapon. In his wide leather belt, a handle of a pistol is seen. Across his chest and over his shoulder he has a wide leather belt decorated with metal studs to which a gun-powder flask is attached.

Vasyl Yakibiuk (1865-1945), the author of this portrait, was born in the village of Kryvorivnia. This village was known for being a summertime haven for artists, writers, and historians from all over Ukraine. They came here to spend their summer vacations. Some of the visitors rented homes from the Hutsuls, others lived at the parsonage, and still others built their own villas, like Mykhailo Hrushevsky. Yakibiuk's home was often frequented by such renowned writers as Ivan Franko and Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi (the author of *"Shadows of Our Ancestors"*).

In our Museum collection we have similar authentic Hutsul artifacts as seen in the portrait. For example, we have a pistol, a hatchet, and a belt with a gun-powder flask. For a Hutsul, wearing such items as part of his festive attire served as a status symbol and a symbol of valor and gallantry.



A bas-relief carved portrait of Oleksa Dovbush, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.



A gun-powder flask, Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.



A "topir" (a hatchet), Ukrainian Museum and Library in Stamford.

For more information about The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford, please, visit www.ukrainianmuseumlibrary.org, call 203-324-0499 or 203-323-8866.

Due to COVID 19 the Museum is closed until further notice. You may still view some of our exhibitions at our website.

We are located at: 161 Glenbrook Road, Stamford, CT 06902.