

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

An Artist from Zakarpattia – Iosyf Bokshai

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Painting by Iosyf Bokshai. Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford.

The Ukrainian Museum and Library has an impressive fine arts collection which contains works of prominent Ukrainian artists. Among them are a significant number of landscape and genre paintings by one of the most outstanding artists from Zakarpattia – Iosyf Bokshai, (1891-1975) – realist painter, graphic artist, pedagogue. We were fortunate to inherit a number of his works from three individual donors.

Iosyf Bokshai, together with Adalbert Erdeli, (1891-1955), was influential in the development of contemporary art trends in Zakarpattia. Bokshai was known not only for his artistic output, but even more so for his work and devotion to art education. In 1927, he founded the First Public School of Art in the city of Uzhhorod for the education of future generations of artists. In

1931, together with Adalbert Erdeli, they founded the Society of Artists of Zakarpattia. The Society was instrumental in organizing art exhibitions of regional artists not only in Zakarpattia but also in numerous major cities in Czechoslovakia. As an art educator, Bokshai continuously lectured at institutions of higher learning like the Lviv Institute of Applied and Decorative Art or at the Uzhhorod Institute of Applied Art.

Iosyf Bokshai was born in the village of Kobyletska Poliana in Zakarpattia, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, into a priestly family. His father, grandfather and elder brother were all Greek-Catholic priests. After graduating from the Mukachiv High School, on the recommendation of his teacher who recognized the

exceptional artistic talent in the young man, he was accepted to the prestigious Budapest Academy of Art. There, from 1910 to 1914, he studied art and art pedagogics. At the onset of World War I, he was mobilized into the Austro-Hungarian Army. In 1915 he was captured by the Russian army. As a prisoner of war, he was transported through various Russian Asian territories like Turkestan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and finally ending up in Ukraine in the Katerynoslav region. Upon his release from captivity, Bokshai returned home to Zakarpattia, which after post-war peace talks, became part of the Czechoslovak Republic. Bokshai did not like to talk about his war-time experiences. It was too dangerous to acknowledge a part of this nature, during the Stalin days.

In the 1920s and 1930s, in

addition to his academic and pedagogic work, Bokshai created many religious paintings. He painted interiors of churches, monumental church murals, decorated chapels, iconostasis and portraits of Bishops and other prominent church leaders. During the Soviet days, his religious paintings were in danger of being destroyed by the atheistic politics of the Soviet regime. Fortunately, a collection of Bokshai's religious art which was housed in the Uzhhorod museum was saved. The collection was hidden in the secret chambers of the museum by a few devoted museum curators.

The years of Soviet occupation for Bokshai as an artist were trying and challenging due to the regime's demands that artists create works in the socialist realism style only. Bokshai, like many other artists, in an attempt

to preserve their freedom of artistic expression, turned to painting landscapes, still life, and genre works. Such artistic themes were neutral and safer and eluded the critical and destructive censorship of the regime.

Bokshai was a master landscape artist. In his works, he depicts the beauty of his country, and its nature's splendor in all seasons of the year, especially in the Autumn. In his genre works, he portrays the Zakarpattian people and various aspects of their life and work, their traditions, their folk costumes, etc. As an artist, Bokshai is characterized as a "realist painter with an inclination towards impressionism." His artistic output, and especially his commitment to art education, contributed much to the flourishing of artistic and cultural life in Zakarpattia. ❖



Paintings by Iosyf Bokshai. Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford.