

# The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

## *CAROLERS AND CAROLING* by Curator Lubow Wolynetz

The Museum has an extensive collection of folk ceramics. Earthenware pieces decorated with incised designs, some sculpted, painted and glazed. Among them we have a contemporary sculpted clay piece depicting a group of carolers. The eleven figures are painted in very bright colors and glazed. The characters they depict are the traditional shepherds, the bag carrier, a soldier, kings, the ubiquitous devil, and an angel holding a thatched roof village house. Their faces are heavily masked with overdone, exaggerated features as if to hide the identity of the person. They carry a star; the shepherds have their staffs; the soldier, a lance; the bag carrier, a sack to collect goodies; and the devil, a pitched fork.

Carolers, such as depicted in the sculpture and a variety of other group combinations, traditionally, starting with Christmas and going on up to the Feast of Epiphany would go from house to house caroling, performing short skits, glorifying the master and mistress of the household, praising their hard work, generosity, and conveying good wishes.

Ukrainian carols have their origin in antiquity, as do many other traditions practiced at Christmas time. Ukrainian ritual poetry of this type had a direct bearing on the agrarian style of life the people led.

In the pre-Christian days Ukrainians celebrated winter solstice and sang special winter songs which are known to us as *shchedrivky* – well wishing and glorification songs. People believed that during certain auspicious times – like the winter solstice – by performing



certain rituals, singing and incanting they would be able to bring about good luck, prosperity, fertility for the coming year. But the well wishers could not be the next door neighbors; they had to be special emissaries from beyond; they had to be from the outer world; and by pretending they were believed to be the spirits of the ancestors who come down to earth at certain times of the year to help the living. For this reason carolers wore masks and dressed in outlandish costumes to underscore their otherworldliness. And although the carolers depicted characters from the Biblical story of the birth of Christ, the songs – the *shchedrivky* – they sang were the ancient winter well wishing songs capable of bringing about good luck and prosperity. Many of these

winter songs were Christianized by adding the phrase after each stanza “Oh may God give and let it be so” (Ой дай Боже!) Sometimes the content of the song would be Christianized, for example, in the original *shchedrivka* three guests are coming to visit the homestead – the sun, the moon, and the rain. In the Christianized version the three guests become Jesus Christ, St. Nicholas, and St. George.

Another example of a blend of pre-Christian and Christian elements can be seen in this *shchedrivka*: the ancestral spirits are getting ready to come down to earth to carol (any crossing of waters symbolizes crossing from one world to another):

*Let us buy boats, all made of real gold,*

*All boats of gold and all oars of silver:*

*Let us all sail to the blue sea,*

*To the blue sea, to the golden gates,*

*To sing and carol and make the world merry,*

*Make the world merry, wish it good fortune,*

*From this holyday til St. Basil's Feast.*

*Oh genteel master and all ye mistresses,*

*With your whole household and all your children,*

*Good fortune and health to you with Christ's*

*birth,*

*With the birth of Christ and with Jesus himself!*

*Oh may God give and let it be so!*

The very popular carol “Carol of the Bells” is an ancient *shchedrivka*.

## Explore and Experience Our Past

