

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

DMYTRO POTOROKA, 1897-1962 – A FORGOTTEN ARTIST

by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

The best witness to the life of a particular individual or, as in this case, an artist, is that person's legacy – the works he has left behind. Based on this legacy, we can recreate an artist's life and introduce him to a wider audience.

Our Museum is in possession of two paintings by Dmytro Potoroka, a forgotten artist; and it is for this reason that I wish to bring to light information about him as a talented artist and as a remarkable individual.

Dmytro Potoroka was born into a priestly family in the city of Katerynoslav, in the Zaporizhzhia region (the Steppe area) of Ukraine. After completing his studies at the seminary, where singing and playing musical instruments (he played the bandura) were part of the curriculum, and demonstrating artistic talent, he was admitted to the renowned Kyiv Art Institute. Many talented Ukrainian artists graduated from this school. His art professor was Fedir Hryhorovych Krychevsky, 1879-1947, an artist in his own right, and a strict and demanding teacher. To be admitted to the Institute, one had to undergo an arduous entrance exam. Often there were a few hundred applicants, and only 50-60 could be admitted. This shows that Potoroka must have demonstrated exceptional artistic talent. Fedir Krychevsky taught genre and historical painting and portraiture. Under his teacher's guidance, Potoroka became an artist of the school of realism and produced a number of paintings depicting historical events and legends, as well as some aspects of traditional ways of life, portraits, and still lifes.

During the War for Ukrainian Independence, Potoroka served as a lieutenant colonel in the army of the Ukrainian National Republic. He participated in the so-called winter campaigns – offensives by the UNR army behind enemy lines (White and Bolshevik armies) of 1919-1921. The campaigns ended tragically, with many killed, and some handed over to the Bolsheviks.



Those who crossed over to Poland were held in the city of Kalisz internment camp. Potoroka ended up in Kalisz. For his courage, valor, and vigor, he was awarded the Iron Cross of the Army of the UNR, the Cross of Symon Petliura, and the Military Cross of the UNR. He later resided in Warsaw and continued his art studies there. His paintings were exhibited in Lviv as well as in Bratislava, Berlin, Vienna, and Munich. After the War, most Ukrainian refugees lived in various Displaced Persons camps. Potoroka lived in the Ingolstadt DP camp. This camp was noted for having a ballet school under the directorship of Valentyna Pereiaslavets. Although a refugee at this time, she was formerly a prima ballerina of the Kharkiv, Kyiv, and later Lviv Theatres, and a capella of bandura players (*Kapela Bandurystiv*) under the directorship of Hryhorii Kytasty and Volodymyr Bozhyk. Potoroka belonged to the capella as a bandura player and singer.

The Dmytro Potoroka painting in our Museum had just as interesting a journey as the artist himself. The painting *Resting in the Steppe*, was created in the late 1940s and was first exhibited in 1947 at the National Museum of Munich, in the International Art Exhibit. This exhibit was organized by the Ukrainian Society of Artists with the help of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA) and the International Relief Organization (IRO). The exhibit featured the works of refugee artists. Ukrainians were represented by 48 artists and 290 works

which consisted of paintings, graphics, and sculptures. The opening of the Exhibit included a performance by the *Kapela Bandurystiv*. Potoroka's painting received honorable mention. When Potoroka immigrated to the United States, he brought the painting with him and sold it to Maria

danger in the Steppe was not only from Tartars and robbers, but also from storms, drought, and swarms of disease-bearing insects. Many a *chumak* died along the way. The *chumaky* were a special breed of people. Most of them were freedom-seeking men, always looking for adventure and a means for travel, but for some it was a way to make a living. Taras Shevchenko's father took a few trips with the *chumaky*. On one occasion he even took Taras along with him. Taras later epitomized this trip in a pencil drawing of the *chumak* caravan in the Steppe amidst the burial mounds (*mohyly*). When the *chumaky* returned home, they always had a repertoire of new songs that they had composed along the way – songs about their lives, adventures, and customs. People were in awe of this and created a legend about these songs, saying that the *chumaky* learned new melodies from the mermaids, while resting on the banks of the sea listening to the mermaids sing. *Chumak* songs are considered to be one of the most beautiful of all Ukrainian folk songs.

Chumak lore is so ingrained in the Ukrainian mentality that to this very day certain terminology is associated with the *chumaky*. For example, the Milky Way in Ukrainian is called the *chumak* road; the Big Dipper is called either the big wagon or *chumak's* wagon. When we refer to a modern-day young man's behavior and say that he *chumakaye*, we mean that he is a free spirited, carefree wanderer, and not interested in settling down.

Potoroka's painting *Resting in the Steppe* is a marvelous illustration of just one aspect of a bygone way of life. We can glean so much information from this painting and be meaningfully and emotionally enriched.

The second Potoroka painting we have in our collection is a still-life – a vase of yellow roses. His many works can be found in private homes and in the homes of his family members. And thus his legacy lives on!



Klachko. In the late 1980s, Bishop Basil Losten purchased the painting from Ms. Klachko for our Museum. During his first years in America Potoroka was active in the Ukrainian community. He was co-founder of the Society of Ukrainian Artists in America, and participated in their organizational work and exhibitions. However, after contracting a very serious illness, his activities decreased. But to his dying day he never gave up his artist's brushes. His friends remembered him as a "kind, friendly, sociable, unpretentious individual without a grain of jealousy or conceit".

Resting in the Steppe depicts *Chumaky* (salt traders) with their wagons, oxen, and goods. *Chumaky* traveled in caravans across the Steppe to the Black Sea and Crimea, where they traded grain and other goods for salt and dried fish. The journey was long and dangerous. They left their homes in early spring and returned in the fall. The

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