

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE

by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Over the years this well known adage has proven to be accurate many times and based on a recent episode at our Museum and Library, the adage is still accurate.

A few months ago, our Museum received an e-mail from a person inquiring about the ownership of a wooden chest which he had recently purchased at a Goodwill facility. The person contacted various sources for information, but was unable to get a definite answer from any of them. Finally, he came upon the Website of our Museum and Library and wrote to us, inquiring if we could assist him in identifying the ownership of the item. Included with the letter was a set of photographs of the chest for our examination.

You can imagine my outright amazement when I saw the photos of this wooden chest. What the person had purchased was actually a Ukrainian wooden dowry chest from the Hutsul region. It most likely was made about the middle of the 19th century. Dowry chests from that region were usually of peg (dowel) construction, made out of beech wood, and fashioned as a rectangular flat lid chest or sarcophagus style.

Chests of this type were decorated with specific carved or incised ornamentation, employing highly symbolic motifs as prescribed by age-old tradition.

To my delight, the person inquiring about the chest decided that he did not want to keep it, but was willing to sell it. I accepted this proposition and, after negotiations with the Museum Board and the seller, I made the purchase. As a result our Museum now has three dowry chests from the Hutsul region. In the May and June 2011 issues of the *Sower*, I had written about the first two chests that we have. The first Hutsul dowry chest



we had acquired in the 1930s through the curatorial efforts of Reverend Leo Chapelsky. It is in a sarcophagus style and has the traditional carved ornamentation of exceptional artistic quality. The second dowry chest, of a rectangular, flat lid construction, was donated to our Museum in the 1940s by family members whose ancestor used it as his traveling trunk when emigrating to America. In it he had brought all his worldly belongings. This

chest still has the remnants of a traveling stamp with an i.d. number and directions of destination.

The dowry chest which we recently purchased is a fine example of a peg construction wooden artifact. Its decorative carvings are not as elaborate or artistically refined as on the 1930s chest, but it does include,

though simplified, carved symbolic elements. These elements were an integral part of the décor, unchanging for centuries, and considered essential for the purpose of being a safeguard.

In a traditional Ukrainian village home, a dowry chest was not only an indispensable furniture piece, but also because of its size and contents it reflected the owner's social and economic status within the community. Items it contained, which were purchased or produced through hard work, were lovingly cherished and evoked emotional attachment. In a special way the dowry chest symbolized the hearth and home of the family, the accomplishments of a life of devotion and usefulness well spent.

The initial purpose of applying symbolic signs to items of use, was belief in its protective powers, necessary for the well-being and welfare of the people. For that pur-

pose dowry chests were decorated with distinctive ornamental elements. Traditional carvings on Hutsul dowry chests consisted of solar motifs in the shape of circles or semi arch-like half circles, rosettes, oblique crosses in the shape of an "X", straight and slanted lines forming a mesh-like netting, stylized pine branches, zig-zags, triangular shapes, etc. These elements symbolized life, eternity, protection against evil, harm, and adversity. The dowry chests in our Museum have some of these elements as age-old tradition required. These elements were applied according to the creator's own artistic skills and individual preference.

As to the original owner of this third dowry chest, and how and why it ended up in a Goodwill facility we do not know. Unfortunately, this is another example of how neglectful a person can be of his/her heritage. We as Ukrainians should wisely preserve the most minute, sometimes even the most insignificant items of our past, because these are part of our unique heritage and for us this is significant and important, if not for the present, the certainly for the future!



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