

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

WE SHALL SOON CELEBRATE AN 80th ANNIVERSARY!

Part Two by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Among the twenty gifts which we have received from the Basilian Sisters in 1935 there were two Feast Day icons, namely *The Intercession of Our Lady (Pokrov)* and *The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Khreshhennia)*. Both icons are the work of anonymous folk artisans, and not the work of professional iconographers.



Folk icon artisans were self-taught painters who received their training by way of an apprenticeship to a village master icon painter. Since villagers referred to icons as *Gods (Bohy)*, it only followed that folk icon painters would be called *God-daubers (bohomazy)*. This term was used respectfully among the folk people, but professionally trained artists and iconographers actually used this term to belittle the work of the folk artisan. Icons of professional iconographers served as the source or model for folk icon painters, who added folk decorative motifs, artistic tastes, and their simple understanding of the Scriptures which was not always theologically correct.

Icons professionally painted were quite expensive, and the poor village folk could not afford to buy them for personal use nor for the village church. Yet, Ukrainian traditions, both religious and secular, have required the presence and use of icons during important stages of a person's life, e.g., birth, marriage, funerals, military service, pilgrimage travels, and above all for



setting up a holy corner in the home by placing an array of icons on the walls. Due to this need, the phenomenon of folk icon painting became widespread throughout Ukraine. Folk icons were commissioned by individuals and by village churches. For many years the artistic output of folk icon painters was looked down upon by the elite, the educated. However, in the 19th century, the intellectuals, scholars, and even members of the professional art world began to see artistic and creative value in the various forms of folk art including folk icons. Hence museums and private individuals began collecting, studying, and preserving them. The Church hierarchy and scholars encouraged people to be more attentive to this phenomenon and to help in safeguarding it.

The Icon *Intercession of Our Lady (Pokrov)*, according to information provided by the Basilian Sisters, dates from the year 1768, and came from the church in the village of *Monastyrsi (Zhuravno district, Zhydachiv area)*. It is painted on gesso primed, fir wood board using tempera paints and has an outer (red) and inner (dark grey) raised frame. As in most folk icons, the depictions are schematic and simplified. The proportions of the figures appear squatty. The composition is arranged in two tiers. In the upper tier Our Lady in a gold halo edged with a red outline, dressed in a blue tunic and a red cape, is standing on luminous clouds with hands outstretched, holding a long white cloth of protection (an omophor) above a group of individuals in the lower tier. Directly below her is Saint Roman the Melodist, attired in a red dalmatic, stand-

ing on a solea and holding a scroll in his hands. His figure is enclosed by a white arc and thus



is separated from the figures on left and right. The scroll symbolically represents the words and music of the liturgical prayers which he wrote and sang after Our Lady had miraculously bestowed upon him this special musical gift. On both sides of Saint Roman are Hierarchs in Miters, two individuals in crowns and in front of the Hierarchs on the right side is Saint Andrew, the Fool-for-Christ, with his hand pointing to Our Lady. Saint Andrew was a Slav of the 10th century and lived in Constantinople. In a miraculous vision he had heard Christ say to him "Be a fool for My sake". As a result he began to live a life of humility, asceticism, and acted as if he were not mentally sound. He was abused and suffered much, but for his unwavering faith and long endurance of pain and torment the Lord bestowed upon him the gift of prophecy and wisdom. One version of a story about him tells us that when Constantinople was under

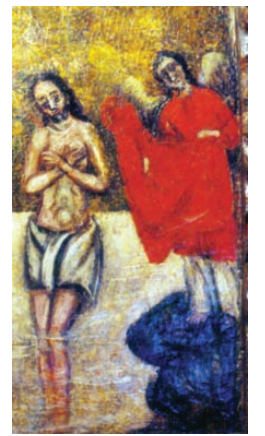
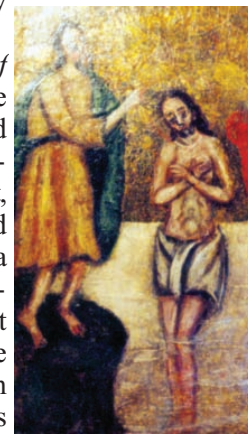
siege by an enemy, the people were praying for protection in the Blacherna Church. Saint Andrew saw a vision of Our Lady descending from the dome of the Church holding an omophor over the praying multitude and thus protecting them and the city of Constantinople from destruction by the enemy.

The second icon *The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ* dates from the end of the 17th century (1690) and came from the old church in the village of Slovita, Zolochiv district, Lviv region. The Basilian Sisters had a monastery in the village of Slovita which was one of the oldest in Halychyna, over 300 years old. The first Basilian Sisters in America came from the Slovita monastery. The icon from the church in this village is painted with oil paints on gesso primed, solid

limewood panel. The figures are depicted schematically but have an elongated form. In the center of the icon Jesus Christ wrapped in a loin cloth is standing up to his knees in the Jordan River waters with hands crossed on his chest. He is shown with a halo around His head, eyes wide-open, a dark mustache, short beard and long wavy hair that falls on his back. In the lower two corners of the icon there are dark mounds which represent the banks of the Jordan River. On the left mound stands John the Baptist wearing a dark yellow robe and a green mantle. He is facing Christ and with his right hand is blessing the Lord. On the right mound stands an angel with large wings, wearing a long white tunic and a red mantle. In his partially crossed hands the angel holds a red mantle for Jesus Christ. The icon has a carved wooden frame primed with gesso and gilded.

Icons have always been used as important items for the education of the faithful in the Scriptures and religious doctrines. Icons have played a significant role in the spiritual awareness and development in the lives of the uneducated village populace. The simple and genuine depictions of religious subjects with the addition of folk elements have enabled the people to learn about major religious themes and thus to improve their devotion.

Folk icons are an important part of our religious and cultural heritage.



Explore and Experience Our Past