

## Ukrainian Antiques?

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In the late 1970s it had become apparent in Canada that the supply of antiques was diminishing. Certain items that were readily available in the 1960s and 1970s had disappeared. More-commercial items such as dry-sinks, flatback cupboards and six-foot tables became difficult to obtain. For this reason a number of antique dealers and collectors (especially those interested in East European folk art made in Canada) turned their attention towards western Canada to the handcrafted furniture and accessories of such ethnic groups as the Ukrainians. Of course these artifacts are not classed as antiques since they are not a hundred years old. However, dealers in eastern Canada decided to overlook the wire and nail construction, a telltale sign of furniture made within the last hundred years. Frankly they had no choice. As long as the furniture was made of pine and had the country look, as

opposed to the factory design of ash and oak furniture from the early twentieth century, it was marketable.

There are two distinctive groups interested in acquiring Ukrainian artifacts: dealers who purchase the furniture and refinish it so that it resembles eastern pine furniture; and folk-art collectors who are not concerned with the age, the wood used or the construction, but with the surface treatment including the occasional carving. The main interest is, of course, the bold use of colour. The furniture forms are quite often unusual and the construction is crude, but the use of colour is sensational. Bright, often primary, colours are arranged in combinations of red and green, orange and green, and blue and red. These combinations are most often found on cupboards, tables, sleeping benches and wall benches. It is this use of colour that folk-art collectors prize most highly.

When I first began to sell Ukrainian folk art in the mid-1970s, few people were interested. Most Canadian collectors did not feel that the Ukrainian artifacts would improve or enhance their collections. There are those who would not concern themselves with any items made after 1860, labelling these pieces as "late." Today, however, there is a growing number of collectors who are knowledgeable about the society that produced these artifacts. They appreciate the form, function and decorative surface treatment. Many are concerned with the well-being and the survival of this art form. Indeed a number of collectors present Ukrainian folk art as the pivotal expression of their collection.

**Fig. 1**

Ukrainian sitting bench, pine, Yorkton, Sask., c. 1900, 13.7 m wide. Note the H-stretcher, traditional colour combination (orange and blue) and two extra vase-shaped splatts for added support of the upper horizontal rail. (Photograph courtesy of the author)



## Icons: Theology in Colour

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The word *icon* is of Greek origin and means "image." The theology of icons is based on the Eastern Christian belief that Jesus Christ, the perfect image of the Father, is the image according to which man (male and female) was created (Genesis 1: 26). Created in God's image, man is called to grow in his likeness so that eventually in eternity he can share, as the Body of Christ, life with the Father, Son and Spirit in

the Trinity. Icons are a call to become or grow into the perfect image Jesus Christ.

Iconography can be traced through legend or tradition to the beginnings of Christianity. The earliest icon of the Theotokos (Mother of God) is said to date back to Luke the Evangelist. The earliest-known icon of Christ, the God-Man, "Archeiropoietos," is from fifth-century Edessa. This icon, "made without hands," was

known in the West as the "Holy Face" and sometimes as "Veronica's Veil." Legend attributes this icon to an image of Christ's face imprinted by Christ himself on a cloth and sent to Abgar, King of Edessa, to cure him of an illness.<sup>1</sup>

Icons serve many purposes: they speak to Ukrainian Christians of rootedness and human dignity; they call to become like Christ, evoke a presence, and thus are a focus of prayer; they are a source of healing, blessing, life.

A basic doctrine of the Eastern Church regarding humanity is man's creation in God's image (whence he was to grow into his likeness); his fall (through sin) into a distorted image; and his re-creation into a new image with the coming of Christ. A number of icons remind Eastern Christians of their great dignity as sons of God and of their call to grow in Christ-likeness. This call, given at creation and repeated anew at re-creation, is an invitation to enter into a relationship with all humanity and with the cosmos, and in this communion, to enter into the life of the Trinity.

One such icon that speaks powerfully of this new life in Christ is the resurrection icon. To understand this icon one needs to remember the liturgical refrain repeated so often during the Easter season: "Christ is risen from the dead; by his death he conquered death, and to those in the graves he granted life." In the icon, Christ stands over the broken gates of Hades. The gates are in the form of the cross, broken. Death has no power, for the demons are now relegated to the darkness—but Christ has touched that darkness too, that core of the fallen world. From there he has brought into life all the just, the human race beginning with Adam and Eve through to the prophets, kings and patriarchs who await the promised coming of the Messiah. He extends his hand to raise into resurrected life the human race. Death is conquered. He who is life extends life to Adam and Eve, and they once again are able to reach out and accept it. Once again life has been given to the human race, new glorious life, and been accepted. Man is empowered to reach out, accept, become alive with eternal promise. Death holds no fear. Life is the eternal gift.

Every icon evokes a presence and thus becomes a focus of prayer. The eyes of an icon beckon to the beyond. They are an invitation to enter the invisible world beyond death, the world where life in its fullness is lived beyond time and space, beyond pain and suffering, beyond limitations of any kind. Any icon of Our Lady of Tenderness can serve as an example of how to use an icon for prayer. It is



the eyes that invite the prayer to communicate with this gentle mother. As a person, looking at a photograph of his or her beloved mother, living or dead, experiences the intimate presence of that mother, more so is the presence felt with an icon. She who is mother of all, concerned for her children, is truly present to them as they turn to her icon. Her eyes look at the prayer, they see the heart, understand the pain, share the joy, await the plea. These are the eyes of a mother who has watched her son grow to manhood, give life daily to his people, be cruelly humiliated and painfully put to death. They are eyes that have danced at his resurrection. This mother looks out at the prayer and says, "Come, speak, I understand, I

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**Fig. 1**  
*An icon depicting the miracle-working Our Lady of Victory, painted by Father J. Mokrycky, 1983–84. It resides in St. Basil's Ukrainian Catholic Church, Regina, Sask. (Courtesy of the Ukrainian Catholic Brotherhood of Canada, St. Basil's Branch, Regina, Sask.)*

love you, I am Mother. I am your mother, and mother of your Saviour." As mother of this Saviour she seems also to be looking inward, remembering all her son has done for the world, marvelling at the continual wonder of the Trinity herself, the world and the prayer before her. Not only does the mother beckon and invite, but she gently holds out her son; she points to him as the Way, the Truth and the Life; she gives him to the world. It is Jesus who clings to his mother (and thus teaches us to cling to her), but she does not cling to him; rather she offers him. "He is the salvation you are looking for. Come to him, receive him, become one with him." The mother invites us to follow her son, be his disciple as she was, and as such, be like her—life-giver, Christ-giver to the naked, the hungry, the weary. As she is tender, compassionate and forgiving, she invites the prayer to gentleness, open-heartedness and care.

Icons are also theological statements in colour and line. The mother is frequently covered from head to toe with a magenta robe. She who was human (signified by the blue dress) is covered with a robe of divinity (magenta), or queenship; the veil, a symbol of an Eastern woman's humility, is the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit covered and filled the Mother of God with his light, with himself, she became completely transformed; she became higher than the cherubim; she became the first and most glorious creature to fulfill God's plan for womanhood/

manhood. Furthermore, on her robe shine three stars; these are symbolic of the Eastern belief, so often praised in liturgic song, in the threefold virginity of this mother: before the birth of her son, during his birth and after his birth. The virginity of the mother is a gift of the Trinity, and as such, these stars speak of the relationship of this woman to the Father: all her thoughts and obedience are his (star on forehead); to the Spirit: all her love and being are his (star on shoulder); to the Son: her life is totally his (star on shoulder where he rests). This woman speaks softly of the way to listen, to empty self and to allow love to fill. The shoulder fringes and the gold or bright lines around her face tell of her holiness, her divinization, her participation in eternal splendour and glory: her life in God. Beauty of face is her predominant feature. It attracts us to her and opens our hearts to receive, be touched, be filled, be.

For Ukrainians the icon is not a decoration nor a sign of ethnicity, but rather, a presence issuing a call to become our real selves, persons, to enter into a relationship of love with all creation and with the Creator.

#### NOTES

1. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Cresswood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), p. 69.