

On the state of contemporary Ukrainian church art and architecture

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This is part of an ongoing series of interviews with prominent Ukrainian architects, artists and clergy on the state of contemporary Ukrainian church art and architecture.

In examining the state of contemporary Ukrainian church architecture, *The Weekly* seeks to create a forum for the expression of diverse views and to allow the participants, in a spirit of critical examination and rethinking, to appraise the state of contemporary Ukrainian church art and architecture as one manifestation of the state of our culture.

The interviews were conducted by Ika Kozmarska Casanova.

Petro Cholođny Jr., son of the renowned Ukrainian iconographer Petro Cholođny, was born in Kiev. He studied art at the Ukrainian Studio of the Plastic Arts in Prague where he specialized in the graphic arts, and at the State Academy of Arts in Warsaw where he was class assistant in painting, drawing instructor and lecturer on painting technique.

In the United States, his icons are to be found in St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church in Hunter, N.Y., St. Andrew's Memorial Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Bound Brook, N.J., and at the Holy Trinity Church in Trenton, N.J. Mr. Cholođny has designed stained glass windows for St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church in Newark, N.J., and most recently, for St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church in New York. Currently, he is working on the



Icon of the Mother of God; detail of the iconostas in St. John the Baptist Church in Hunter, N.Y. The woodcarving is by sculptor Mychajlo Czereszniowskyj.

iconostas for the Ukrainian chapel in Lourdes, France.

Mr. Cholođny's interest in painting is not limited to the sacred domain; a naturalist at heart, he specializes in the painting of beetles, and he is also well known for his landscapes.

I am not going to dwell on the question of whether there is such a thing as a "Ukrainian style" in church architecture. This topic by its very nature will always elicit different, even opposing views. I would only like to point out that St. Andrew's in Kiev and St. George's in Lviv — two of the most popular churches in Ukraine, were built in the Rococo style, a style which is completely extraneous to Ukrainian spiritual life. Therefore, I do not think it appropriate to restrict architects in giving expression to their creative imagination, prodding them to imitate one of the styles of Ukrainian church architecture of the past. Moreover, today we have other building methods, new materials and different possibilities — and I see no reason not to make use of them. But this holds true only for the exterior of the building. The interior planning of the church has to conform to normative rules defined by the liturgical requirements of the Eastern rite.

In the Eastern rite, the church is divided into two main sections — the sanctuary and the section for the faithful. These two areas are separated by the iconostas — a wall with icons placed in a certain order: On the back wall, behind the altar, there should be an icon, not a window. The choir is part of the faithful and should, therefore, be located in the rear of the church. The entrance to the church should be opposite the iconostas. This would be a set of general characteristics of the Eastern rite churches — both Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic.

Many of these requirements are not heeded, whether consciously or unconsciously, by architects. Not too long ago I was at a service in a well-known Ukrainian church. One entire wall of this church was of glass — I could see children playing ball and latecomers hurrying on their way to the service. In his design the architect did not make provision for an iconostas, or for the customary icon behind the altar. The choir, which should be in the back of the church and respond to the priest, has been placed behind the altar, thus, in effect, making the priest the soloist of the choir. It is unfortunate that this otherwise very original structure lacks most of the distinguishing characteristics of an Eastern rite church.

In another church, one not as interesting as far as its exterior is concerned, there is a stained glass window behind the altar instead of the customary icon. In yet

another church, behind the altar where traditionally one would expect to find an icon of Christ or the Mother of God, there is St. Josaphat, the patron saint of the church.

I do not know whether the fault lies with the bishop, the parish priest or the building committee. But without a doubt, we are heading towards a loss of character and identity in the Eastern Church.

As far as icons are concerned I would like to point out that the icon plays a very important role in the Eastern rite. It is part of the liturgy, not just an embellishment as is the case with paintings in the Roman Catholic churches. The iconographer, therefore, has to adhere to rules which have come down through the ages.

Not every painting depicting a religious theme is an icon. The icon is defined by centuries-old rules as to symbols, characterization of individual figures, vestments, etc.

It is a traditional art form and as such requires special studies. An icon should not be rendered in a manner that would draw attention to itself, thereby distracting the viewer, nor should it evoke surprise or have a disquieting effect because then the icon cannot fulfill its proper function — that of evoking a feeling of prayer in the viewer.

The painting of icons is totally different from painting as such. For this reason I find the methods commonly used for commissioning artists to paint icons for our churches quite bizarre. Let me cite some

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The icon of the Madonna and Child, from the artist's private collection.



Icon of the Archangel Michael; from the artist's private collection.

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examples of which I know : the person has done much for the church; his graphic work is known throughout America; he is a good caricaturist, thus, he'll be all the better at painting icons. Obviously, little of worth can be expected given such an approach.

Then again there are those who would like to decorate churches — the innovators. Rejecting the traditional elements of iconography, they use the symbols of their own imagination which, for the most part, are comprehensible to them alone.

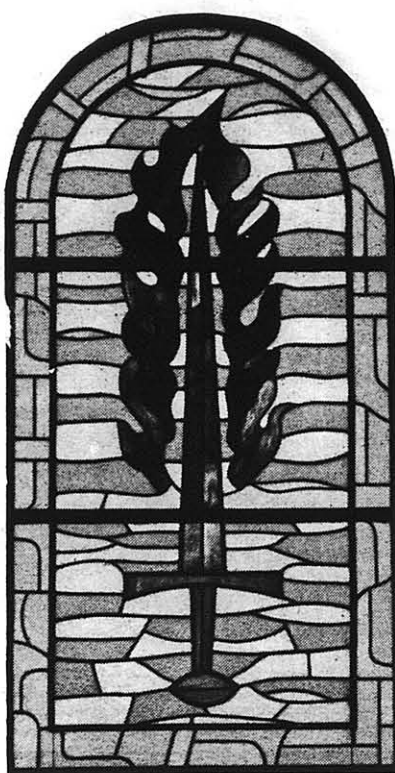
Finally, there are the artists who try to "Ukrainianize" the icon, dressing it up in Hutsul costume. For some reason it is the Mother of God who most often falls victim to this practice.

It is clear that these artists cannot contribute to the safeguarding of our church traditions and most likely, this is not a consideration for them.

The reason that our icons, on the whole, are not of a very high quality should not be attributed to the icon's traditional character — a view held by some, but rather to the lack of good and experienced iconographers.

Finally, I would like to make an additional comment on the iconostas.

Although by and large the iconostas is now to be found in the majority of our churches, in many of them it has come to play only a symbolic role. The original conception of the iconostas as a "wall" has been reduced to the notion of a "screen" or simply an iron grating of the kind to be found in some Spanish churches. This tendency is partly due to the insistence of the faithful to see the priest at all times and partly to the wish to conform in appearance to neighboring churches of the Latin rite.



Stained glass windows for St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church in New York.