Traditional art of Belarus: how it is preserved and transformed into the present

Belarusian art: from maljavanka to NFT | BELARUSIAN TRADITION | CINTEMPORARY ART | 28.07.2022

We now live in a state of duality, and this state manifests itself in all areas of life. Including in the visual representation of traditions in today's Belarus. But if we go back to a tradition that is archaic and more authentic, we find out that much has survived. One just needs to know what to look for and where to look for it. We continue the project "Belarusian art: from maljavanka to NFT" and this time we will talk about Belarusian traditions that appear in our lives through the art and works of our creators. This article presents two parts. First, we'll talk about the work of museums and independent artists, and then about those who you should check out because it is worth it.

SHARE:

FACEBOOK TWITTER LINKEDIN

Table of contents:

- **How do museums work and why do we look at exactly what is exhibited there?**
- **How do modern creators work with tradition?**
- **What to look at? Museums in Belarus, online projects and artists**

How does storing our past work?

How do museums work and why do we look at things that are exhibited there?

Let's start with the fact that every museum is a titanic work, and high-quality things are shown there. Maybe there won't be a brilliant art piece, but it will never be tacky. Museums themselves are a puzzle. Objects of their exhibitions are like a piece of a puzzle called "top things from culture that we've been able to preserve." At the same time, preservation is the first task of the museum, followed by research and demonstration. The logic is this: if we don't preserve, there will be nothing to show.

A great example of why certain things aren't shown to us is Zaslaŭje and it's museum of local history and the construction of the museum of maljavankas. Currently, there are almost 250 carpets by different authors in Zaslaŭje. Those include carpets by Alena Kish, whom we already talked about in the article about women of Belarusian art, and Yazep Drazdovich. But the museum, which has been promised to be opened many times, is still not open. The explanation is as follows: the works of artists can be preserved, but there is no place to show them. But, according to Nikita Monich, an art critic and author of the "Okolo kultury" (meaning: near culture, ed.) channel, time passes differently in museums and outside them, so the museum will open sooner or later. The only irreparable thing that can happen to the museum is that it can be looted or burned. If neither happens, sooner or later the museum will show us its exhibits.

Yazep Drazdovich — A fox with an owl / One of his maljavankas.

If we refer to the museums that already exist, then many questions may arise here as well. Why specifically these expositions are the ones to be presented:

"When one answers this question to himself, the first option that arises is — "They show what they have!". And if one knows that the museum has much more than it shows, and the viewer sees just 2-3% of the fund, then they think: "It's beautiful, I understand that. But what is THIS doing here? Who hung/put it up?". Accordingly, it is necessary to explain about the selection. Each exhibit of the museum has gone through its Mortal Kombat, if it is not a micro-museum of only one artist that was birthed by this Earth in the last 100 years. "The art piece was born in its era, was preserved for some reason, then it was selected for purchase or transfer to the museum, studied and chosen in another very strict selection process to be in the exhibition," says Nikita Monich.

A photo from the main building of the Belarusian National Arts Museum. Address: Miensk, Lienina street, 20. Taken from the museum's Instagram @artmuseum.by

When we talk about traditional art, the exhibit should still have a connection with the tradition of the territory, with its spiritual culture, often with already lost practices. So, in the case of tradition, the object of art is a hyperlink to a whole fragment of an already often non-existent reality, which we symbolically "raise". We take a part of the natural or working world of our past and bring some additional meaning to it. It is this reality and our heritage that are important and precious to us. At the same time, sometimes we sacralise what was not perfectly sacralised within the framework of the traditional culture itself. As an example, we can recall the maljavankas and works of the contemporary Belarusian artist Maksim Osipaŭ, whom we'll discuss in this article.

Museums of traditional culture and the objects they hold are important for preserving one's tradition and understanding one's self. At the same time, if museums are important for a formed nation, so that children remember or understand what is in front of them, when they come to visit their grandmother or great-grandmother in the village, then for a nation that is only becoming aware of itself and is being formed (like Belarusian now), it can easily inspire a romantic myth about the lost golden age or the distinctive nature of Belarusians.

An example of the "Babickaj" weaving tradition — an ethno-determining and semantic phenomenon of the folk culture of the Homiel region. The photos are taken from the Instagram page of the Vetka Museum of Old Believers and Belarusian traditions named after F. G. Škiarava @vetkamuseum

Art pieces that belong to tradition also have their own characteristics of preservation — if something from the tradition still lives or is used by people, then the value of this object can be underestimated. Nikita Monich has given two striking and unusual examples of a similar thing from the history of China:

"The first story is about the great Russian sinologist scholar Alekseev who was researching China. He was the first one to start collecting folk drawings — a lubok, which was printed from wooden boards and often hand painted and used at the Spring Festival (also known as Chinese New Year, ed.). And no one, except Alekseev, knew that it was valuable. At first he collected it by himself, then he got his European colleagues to do it as well. Meanwhile, the Chinese thought that it didn't make any sense and was a waste of time. After some time they felt ashamed and started to collect it themselves.

Let's rewind a little and look at the most famous work of Asian art in the West — "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" by Katsushika Hokusai. The Western world became familiar with the phenomenon of Japanese printed graphics "ukiyo-e" (engravings from wooden boards that were popular in the 18th-19th centuries in present-day Tokyo, ed.), because it was used as wrapping paper for ceramics during departure to Europe. Traders of that time were very happy that the ceramics arrived, and when unwrapping it, they saw engravings and admired the excellent artistic achievement: "Houston, code red – code red, call Monet, call Degas and Van Gogh, we have an art revolution here!"

Katsushika Hokusai — "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" / wood engraving / 1823-1831

The same thing happened in the 19th and 20th centuries with our folk and traditional culture, when aesthetics was noticed in the peasants' household straw products".

How do modern artists work with tradition?

In addition to cultural institutions that are engaged in the preservation and demonstration of Belarusian tradition, there are also a number of modern independent figures who are engaged in their own research. All of them work independently with different materials that could help to find something new about our heritage. For example, Belarusian artist and researcher Masha Maroz independently searches for material for her art works and projects. The artist has been working on her archive of the Belarusian tradition called "Past Perfect" Masha has been researching photographs everywhere she can reach: in literature, the Internet and private archives, where she scans information and creates her base and archive.

Paliessie / Pinščyna / 1936 / photo of Henryk Poddębski from the collection of Miačyslava Hlovića / Archival photo from the Past Perfect project by artist Masha Maroz

"With archival photographs, I work according to a fairly simple scheme: there is a limited list of literature that can be studied, and I research it. I have a large library in which I collect everything that can help, everything related to Paliessie and other regions of Belarus.

There are also Internet resources, photos of museums, and private archives, with which, fortunately, I also have the opportunity to work directly in expeditions, also people show something. For example, during my last expedition in the village of Cierabličy I was absolutely happy because I was able to scan the private archive of a wonderful woman and also my friend Katsaryna Petrushkevych. I found some of her photos in one of the "Vkontakte" (*social media platform, ed.*) communities more than 10 years ago. Some images were iconic to me, as they can't be found in any literature. And then I saw them live! It was, of course, important and touching for me. And now I have these images in good quality. The pictures, which reveal a very interesting ethnographic post-war layer, will definitely not be lost."

Paliessie / Girl in a wedding dress / Bieraście region / Pinščyna / 1936 / photo by Zofia Chomętowska / Archive photo from the Past Perfect project by artist Masha Maroz

Modern figures also organise independent expeditions. As Masha Maroz says, there is no secret at all in how these expeditions take place:

"I advise people to just get in a car, drive and preferably lose the map and then the connection will be established immediately. Of course, I always have more or less specific destinations, because I already know my way around my region quite well: there are villages that are more interesting for me, or just some special ones because of the knowledge from the archives. I can just know that a hundred years ago there was such a fantastic uproar that it's simply impossible not to go there. And so I make my own route with what I'm interested in, what I want to see," says the artist with a smile.

Photographs from the expeditions of the artist Masha Maroz / Paliessie / Izbiy Bor / Bieraście Oblast / Gantsavitskyi District / May 2022 / Izbiy Bor is an iconic place known since the middle of the 18th century, the place of descent of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn. It's a unique space for ritual worship in Belarus, vividly combining features of Christianity and paganism. Every year, hundreds of people come here to ask for healing, support and protection.

When you lose the map and start talking to the locals, the space itself begins to interact with you. It can happen to absolutely anyone, you just need to drive with sharp vision and something will definitely happen. It is important to remember that it is very easy to delve into historical heritage through live contact. Moreover, it is necessary to do so, to try.

"Sometimes you just stop in the middle of the village, and the locals are interested in what is being filmed there, what is happening. That's a way to get to know each other. People spend time differently in the village. In my previous expedition, it seems, there was a very interesting acquaintance: a local woman invited us to her house. She was just walking around the village and saw that there were some cars. As a result, she gave us eggs and bread, told us the whole story of her life and introduced us to her daughters. One daughter was even forced to sing us a song! — Masha laughs, remembering. — At the same time, the woman has no phone. She lives in the village called Ivanaŭskaja Slabada. It's very close to the Ukrainian border and there is no communication."

Paliessie hut in Stachava village, which is in ancient Pinščyna region / Picture and photo are from the projects @woodenberg_inst and @shukannie_

In addition to such spontaneous meetings, there is, of course, an option to search for the necessary contacts beforehand. One could do it through acquaintances or social media. Masha Maroz talks about such cases:

"Sometimes I know that someone is ready to make contact through acquaintances. In Cierabličy I met Katsaryna Petrushkevych, whom I talked about earlier. Thanks to the "Past Perfect" archive, we first became online friends with Katsaryna's friend. She invited us to Katsaryna's place in Cierabličy and said that pampushkas (*pastry, ed.*) are waiting for us there. Katsaryna's friend passed on the contact, and I was indeed very hospitably and sincerely welcomed in Cierabličy. It was one of the most special days of my life, because Katsaryna accepted us as her best friends. I am amazed at the openness of people. Of course, at first they may not let you in and perceive you as a stranger, but they change after literally just a few phrases when it's clear what the one's true intentions are. They are ready to tell you everything with an open heart. You can feel how much they love the place where they live and how important it is for them to pass on the information. They do it with such passion and love... It's very inspiring".

Photographs from the expeditions of the artist Masha Maroz.

The artist advises to read some information about the area, just to think of a reason why you want to go there, because the entire territory of Belarus is extremely interesting. Every other village has a church, a homestead, a castle, or something else.

What to look for and where to look for it? Traditions in modern times through art

The question of preservation of traditions in Belarus can be looked at from different angles. A lot of material has been accumulated, and we have always had people who work with preservation. But at the same time, there is a big problem with what to do with the information after, how to popularise it. Time requires cultural figures to look for aesthetic forms that will be understandable and interesting for modern viewers, so that the tradition is not only preserved, but also lives on — if we stop at preservation, we'll get a dead piece of our history. Next, we'll tell you about the places, online projects and creators that you should look at first when starting to research our topic.

Going to a museum. Which one?

Vetka Museum of Old Believers and Belarusian traditions F. G. Škliarava (Instagram)

Many people we spoke to for the preparation of the text described the Vetka Museum as an incredible discovery and a must-visit place. It's located in the city of Vetka (Homiel region, 279 km from Minsk or 25 km from Homiel), and its branch is in the regional centre itself. Both points should definitely be seen with your own eyes, even if you have already been to the Vetki exhibitions that have been to Minsk.

Photograph from the Vetka Museum of Old Believers and Belarusian traditions F. G. Škliarava / from the Instagram page @vetkamuseum.

Today, the Vetka Museum is a research and educational centre of the region in the field of traditional culture. Its funds include more than 13,000 museum objects. The scientific research of the museum is dedicated to the study of the Old Believers' culture and the culture of the Belarusian village. All "Vetka" projects are the result of the museum staff's work. Thanks to the creative achievements of its employees, the Vetka Museum remains "alive" and interesting. Moreover, "Vetka" is cramped and would like to be expanded to a size eight times bigger that the current one.

Photograph from the Vetka Museum of Old Believers and Belarusian traditions F. G. Škliarava / from the Instagram page @vetkamuseum.

If you don't have the opportunity to visit the museum itself, we strongly advise you to see what the Vetka Museum is doing on its social networks. For example, they post photos and videos from exhibitions, tours, lectures and other events on their Instagram.

The Vetka Museum: 5, Krasnaja plošča, city Vetka; Hours of operation: daily from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (entrance to the exhibition until 5:30 p.m.)

Its branch works at the following address: Homiel, Lenin Square, 4 ; Hours of operation: daily from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (entrance to the halls until 5:30 p.m.)

"Museum of Belarusian Folk Art" is a branch of the National Art Museum (Instagram)

You can also look at Belarusian folk art in Raubičy. "Museum of Belarusian Folk Art", a branch of the National Art Museum, is located there in the former Krestahorski church.

Photo of the Museum of Belarusian Folk Art from their Instagram page @musejraubichy1979

The Krestahorski church, built in the pseudo-Gothic style, was heavily destroyed by the time the museum was created. After the restoration, it was turned into a museum of incredible beauty.

Visitors can already see the folk art on the stairs leading to the permanent exhibition. On the two landings of the stairs peculiar barriers-showcases are equipped, which feature flaxen dolls in national clothes and wooden trunks inlaid with straw. From the stairs, the audience enters the entrance hall, where there are wooden curtains and a long table. In this room one can spot group classes for pupils and folk art masters working. From there, the viewer gets to the permanent exhibition. The exposition introduces the traditional peasant art of the 16th — early 20th centuries and the works of modern masters who work in the most common types of folk art — weaving, pottery, carving and painting on wood, weaving from straw and vines.

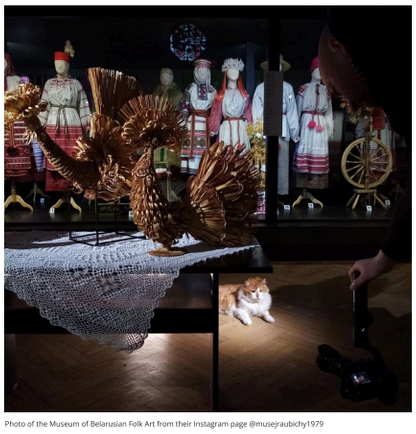

Photo of the Museum of Belarusian Folk Art from their Instagram page @musejraubichy1979

The museum is located next to the "Raubiči" biathlon sports buildings, 24 kilometers from Miensk. The address is: Miensk district, Ostrašycky Horadok, "Raubiči". Working hours: Wednesday - Sunday 10:00 - 17:00 (closed on Monday and Tuesday).

Online projects that talk about Belarusian traditions

«Tradycyja» (Instagram, YouTube)

A project of great quality aimed at the development and popularisation of Belarusian traditional culture. On their YouTube channel, one can find videos from ethnographic expeditions, concerts of authentic groups, master classes on making traditional things performing rituals, and singing gatherings.

Malarycki stroj — a traditional complex of the Belarusian folk festival in west Paliessie / Was spread in the 19th - mid-20th centuries mainly in Malarycki region and in the south of Kobrynski region / Photos of the project "Tradycyja"

"Tradycyja" publishes the first online encyclopedia of folk costumes of Belarus in video and photo format. You can watch traditional Belarusian outfits from different parts of the country both on YouTube "Tradycyja" and on their instagram "Traditional Outfit".

«Šukańnie» (Instagram)

A completely new project, created last summer, about grassroots ethnography, practices of village life and travels in Belarus. In a unique way, the project explores culture and daily life and talks about Belarusian villages in such a way that readers themselves want to learn more about their roots and Belarusian culture.

Photo from art-festival of the "Šukańnie" project

As the authors of the project themselves note, Šukańnie is a constant search for the forgotten, but so close to us, Belarusians, past, which is important to remember.

And, of course, looking for tradition in the works of creators

Maksim Osipaŭ (Instagram)

Talking about maljavanka in our special project, it's impossible to overlook the contemporary Belarusian artist Maksim Osipaŭ. Maksim's art works are easily recognizable among other authors.

Maksim Osipaŭ – "My, bliać, nie kociky" (*meaning: "We are not some freaking kitty cats" ed.*), "Abludnaja Pahonia" (*meaning: "Prodigal chase", ed.*), "Cyrk na drocie" (*meaning: "Circus on a Wire" / not making sence or making a fool of oneself, ed.*), «Sonnaja loišćna» (*meaning: "Sleepy Hollow", ed.*)

The artist creates modern maljavankas for which he draws inspiration both from traditional painting and our history, and from modern mass culture. Our past and present (and modern pop culture) collide in Maksim's works. The artist adds explanations to his carpets, sometimes even several to just one work. His maljavankas are like a whole world that is very interesting to research.

Darya Cemra (Instagram)

According to Cemra, at a certain period of her life she realised that it's difficult to walk around people with a sense of question and there is a need to look for ways to express her thoughts — that's how she started making paintings. Now the artist creates large, complex works that vividly reveal the problems of modern society, also through traditional culture.

Cemra – Bielarusačka (*meaning: Belarusian girl, ed.*)120x100 cm / Belarusian / Bielarusačka – self-portrait in a Belarusian mourning veil (as an image). Reinterpretation of Belarusian symbols, which were historically only red, into a black ornament of the mourning veil.

The creative pseudonym Cemra is consistent with the essence of her art works, which comprehend acute social problems. Among them you will find many reflections on Belarusian culture and identity. One can also see Cemra's works on war, ecology or social standards.

Masha Maroz (Instagram)

The artist Masha Maroz immediately considered the study of traditions as a part of self-knowledge. Through her art works, she talks about Belarusian traditions and helps herself and other Belarusians to love themselves and learn more about our history and heritage. The most recent work of the artist is an installation about the archaic rite called "Vadžennia kusta" ("*Kusta" means a group of homogeneous objects, ed.*).

Masha Maroz — "Smaha: Akumuliacyja žadannia" (*meaning: "Thirst: Accumulation of Desire", ed.*) / installation / photos by Brigita Kasperaite

The ritual itself is about a girl or a woman who is taken from the village to the forest by a women's circle. There she is completely clothed with leaves, so she looks like a plant creature. Then this young woman is being led around all the village by her dedicated group of women. During this, she maintains anonymity and keeps silence, does not utter a single word. This is done, because at the ceremony she represents a being coming from another world and carrying the energy of well-being, life, and fruit from ancestors to people. Families meet "kusta", give her food, drinks, money or other items. Women sing songs and an exchange of energy is happening. When "kusta" goes around the entire village, everyone gathers together and celebrates the end of the ritual with a collective feast. It's such an act of solidarity between people, an exchange of energy and birth of a new cycle of life, because the ritual is performed just before Whit Sunday (a Christian holiday, ed.). All this is living history to this day.

The installation is currently in Leipzig at the exhibition "When The Sun Is Low – The Shadows Are Long".

KANVA (Instagram)

KANVA is a good example of how tradition can be transformed into something modern through objects that consist of quite archaic things, modern design, and beautiful visualisation. In the Belarusian folk brand, you will find the traditions of straw "spiders" — mysterious talismans, with which many Belarusian legends are connected. Straw spiders were hung under the ceiling in the most honourable place — in the red corner of the house. They were hung over the heads of the newlyweds during the wedding and over the baby's cradle. These amulets were woven from golden straw, collected from many figures in the form of pyramids or rhombuses. Such a light product is supposed to protect, bring prosperity, health and at the same time be a decorative item in the house. The spider "defended" the owners of the house, and all misfortunes and diseases were "entangled" in its web.

KANVA — Earrings "Spiders" **and** Traditional straw spiders / from an exposition in Y.N. Drazdovich Museum of Art and Ethnography in the village of Haradziec, Viciebsk region / A Photo from a "Spadŷna Vioski" (*meaning: Village's heritage, ed.*) community, author unknown

Also, KANVA has other straw products and even clothing items with themes from the Belarusian past.

SHARE:

FACEBOOK TWITTER LINKEDIN

Падобныя матэрыялы

Аўдыявізуальнае мастацтва Bazinato
Інтэрвію, 8.06.2020 | СУЧАСНАЕ МАСТАЦТВА | БЕЛАРУСЬ

«Их искусство знает весь мир, и нам пора». Мнение о коллекции Белгазпромбанка
Мнение, 17.06.2020 | ПАРИЖСКАЯ ШКОЛА | БЕЛАРУСЬ

Генрых Вайсэнгоф
МАСТАКІ БЕЛАРУСКАГА МІНУЛАГА

CONTACTS

FOLLOW US

INSTAGRAM TELEGRAM TIKTOK FACEBOOK YOUTUBE

© Chrysalis Mag, 2018-2024
Reprinting of materials or fragments of materials
is allowed only with the written permission