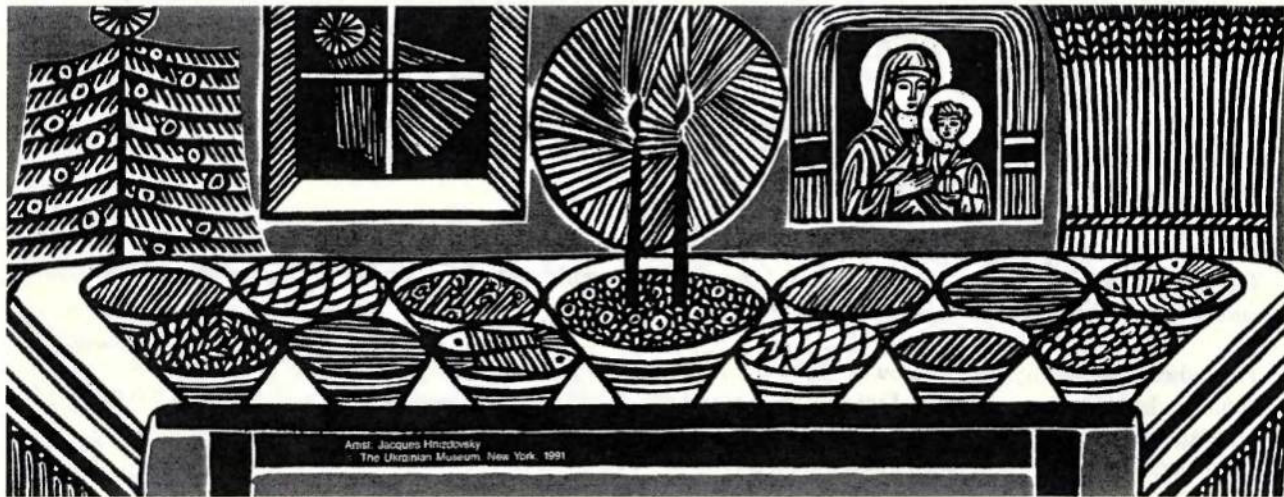


UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS  
CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS



The Ukrainian Museum

## UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS EVE

For Ukrainians, Christmas is the most important family holiday of the year. It is celebrated solemnly as well as merrily according to ancient customs that have come down through the ages and are still observed today.

Ukrainian Christmas customs are based not only on Christian traditions, but on pre-Christian, pagan culture and religion. Ukrainian society was basically agrarian in ancient times and it had a highly developed pagan culture, elements of which have survived to this day.

Christianity was introduced in Ukraine in 998 A.D. Pagan religious beliefs and practices were too deeply rooted for the Church to eradicate them completely. The Church took a tolerant position toward many of the pagan customs and adapted them to Christian rites. Thus, the ancient pagan feast Winter Solstice and the Festival of Fertility were transformed into Christmas holidays. This perhaps is the reason why Ukrainian Christmas customs are deeply symbolic and unique.

The festivities begin with Christmas Eve and end on the Feast of the Epiphany. Families gather together for Christmas Eve Supper (*Sviata Vecheria*) to partake in the special foods and join in customs that hark back to antiquity. The rituals of Christmas Eve are dedicated to God, the welfare of the family, and the remembrance of ancestors. Supper begins with the appearance of the first star, which is believed to be the star of Bethlehem.

The table is covered with two tablecloths, one for the family's ancestors, the second for the living. In pagan times ancestors were considered to be benevolent spirits that brought good fortune to the living family when properly respected. The tabletop may be slightly uneven because hay is spread beneath the tablecloths to remind us that Christ was born in a manger. There is always one extra place setting for the dead whose souls, it is believed, come to partake in the Christmas Eve feast.

A *kolach* (Christmas bread) is placed in the center of the table. This is a bread braided into a ring, with three such rings placed one on top of the other and a candle in the center of the top one. The three rings symbolize the Holy Trinity, while the circular form represents eternity.

A *didukh* (meaning grandfather), which is a sheaf of wheat or mixed grain, is placed under the icons of the home. This is a very important Christmas tradition in Ukraine, for the stalks of grain symbolize all the ancestors of the family and it is believed that their spirits reside in the *didukh* during the holidays.

The father of the family places a bowl of *kutia* (boiled wheat mixed with poppy seeds and honey) next to the *didukh*, which is a place of honor. *Kutia* is the most important dish of the Christmas Eve Supper because it represents all the bounty of the earth, and the generosity and blessings of God. It is also called "God's food." A jug of *uzvar* (a dish of twelve different stewed fruits), known as "God's drink," is placed next to the *kutia*.

After all preparations have been completed, the father offers each family member a piece of bread dipped in honey (*prosfora*), which had been blessed in church. He then leads the family in prayer. After the prayer, the father extends his best wishes to everyone with the greeting "Chrystos Razhdayetsia" (Christ is born), and everyone then sits down to enjoy the twelve-course meatless Christmas Eve Supper.

In the Christian tradition the twelve courses symbolize the twelve apostles. According to ancient pagan beliefs a course was offered for every full moon during the year. The dishes were meatless and dairy-free because the Church required a fasting period before Christmas.

## CAROLING

While Ukrainian Christmas Eve traditions are of a solemn nature, caroling is joyful and merry. Ukrainian Christmas songs or carols have their origins in antiquity, as do many other traditions practiced at Christmas time. There are two main groups of Christmas songs in Ukraine: *koliadky* and *shchedrivky*. The name *koliadky* is probably derived from the Latin “calendae” meaning the first day of the month; they are sung on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. *Shchedrivky* is derived from the Ukrainian word *shchedryi*, meaning generous. *Shchedrivky* are sung during the Feast of the Epiphany.

Both *koliadky* and *shchedrivky* have pagan elements in them but many have been Christianized. For example, one pagan carol tells of a landowner who is awakened by a swallow and told to make preparations for three guests that are coming to his house: the sun, the moon and the rain. In the Christianized version the three guests became Jesus Christ, St. Nicholas and St. George. The very popular Christmas carol “Carol of the Bells” was originally a Ukrainian *shchedrivka*. It tells of a swallow (a herald of spring) that came to a landowner’s house, and asked him to come out and observe all of his (the landowner’s) wealth, how many calves he has, and so on.

Themes in Ukrainian Christmas songs vary. Many, of course, deal with the birth of Christ, marking this joyful celebration. Other carols contain purely pagan mythological elements. Still others deal with Ukrainian history of the IX to XII centuries, mostly with the heroic episodes in the lives of some of the popular princes. Some of the most common carols are glorification songs. They glorify the landowner, the farmer, his children and other members of his family. The songs glorify their work as well as their personal traits.

Caroling is an organized affair with specific requirements. Each troupe has a leader. The carolers dress in costume, where one is a goat. Another is a bag carrier, the collector of all the gifts they hope to receive from the people. Yet another carries a staff topped with a six-pointed star lit at the center, which symbolizes the Star of Bethlehem. Customs vary somewhat from one region to another. In some areas of Ukraine, carolers carry musical instruments such as a violin, dulcimer, or trembita – a wooden hollow pipe about 8 to 10 feet long which is the native instrument of the Hutsuls in the Carpathian Mountains.

Caroling is not just for singing Christmas songs – it’s more of a folk opera. Before entering a home, carolers ask for permission to sing. If the answer is yes, they enter and sing carols for each member of the household, even for small children.

Sometimes, carolers used to performed slow, ritualistic dances. They often presented a short, humorous skit involving the goat. The custom of the goat accompanying the carolers has its origin in pagan times when the goat represented the god of fertility. In the skit, the goat dies and is then brought back to life. The act symbolizes the death and burial of winter and the birth of spring. The carolers always ended with short well-wishing poems, appropriately selected for each home.

*Koliadky* and *shchedrivky* are the oldest forms of Ukrainian folk songs. At Christmas-time they are sung by Ukrainians all over the world.



## UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS PUPPET THEATER *VERTEP*

The Ukrainian Christmas puppet theater, *vertep*, had its beginnings in the XVII century. According to scholars, the theater was probably founded by students of the Kievan Academy, who also wrote the plays for it. This theater became very popular, and in time its special plays were being performed by wandering teachers, minstrels, deacons and traveling theater groups.

The puppet theater consisted of a miniature two-storied structure which served as a stage. The actors were puppets made from wood and dressed in clothing according to their roles. Each puppet had a wire attached to one leg and in this way the puppeteer was able to control the doll's movements, moving it back and forth via the vertical and horizontal grooves cut out in the two floors of the structure.

The play was comprised of two separate acts that were thematically unconnected. The first act which took place in the upper floor of the miniature theater had a religious theme and was didactic in character. A shepherd and Three Kings came to visit the newborn Jesus. They sang and rejoiced in His birth. There was also a scene with weeping Rachel whose child was killed by order of King Herod. In this scene Rachel cursed the King, and as he died the devil took his body and soul into hell.

The entire second act of the play took place on the lower floor of the theater. It consisted of short humorous scenes, designed to amuse the viewer. Although the various short scenes of the second act did not constitute a tightly knit story, the action in them did revolve around one personage who was not given a specific name, but was just called *kozak* (*Zaporozhets*).

In Ukrainian folklore there are many legends about *Kozak Mamai* who was a great warrior, defender of freedom and honor. He always appeared at a critical moment in battle to save the day. Probably the role of *kozak* in the puppet theater was based on *Kozak Mamai*, this semi-legendary folk hero. In the puppet theater play the *kozak* doll was always made larger than the others. He wore the traditional garb of the *kozaky* (cossacks), had a *bandura* (Ukrainian folk string instrument), and smoked a pipe. In a very long monologue the *kozak* spoke of Ukraine's glorious past.

The short scenes of the second act also addressed a variety of negative characteristics of man, such as cowardice, greed, etc. The scenes changed rapidly, and in them people lied, cheated, tricked each other, argued, fought – all for the purpose of bringing out comic elements of such behavior. The *kozak*, however, was beyond all that. Although he may have pretended to be fooled, he did so only to get a hearty laugh out of the audience. He conquered all who wished him ill, even the devil. The viewers saw the heroic past of Ukraine in the person of the *kozak*. For them he was the eternal defender of Ukraine's freedom.

Both acts of the play were accompanied by music – a choir, duets, solos and instrumental ensembles made up of violins, cymbals, a flute and a drum. The *kozak* played the *bandura* and sang old epic songs. He and other characters in the play also danced.

During the Christmas holidays, students wandered from house to house, from town to town, village to village with the *vertep* and gave performances.



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