

Slavic And East European Folkloristics at the Canadian Museum of Civilization: An Overview

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In keeping with the growing recognition of Canada's multicultural profile and its concomitant discovery of *terrae incognitae*, the Canadian Museum of Civilization (née National Museum of Canada, and later National Museum of Man), Canada's national museum of anthropology, began the earnest collection, documentation and study of Slavic and East European folklore materials in the early 1960's thanks in most part to the pioneering work of Kenneth Peacock. (Earlier, incidental Slavic and East European materials appear sporadically in the Museum's collections of such figures as M. Barbeau and L. Boulton.) From the outset these efforts emphasized the new Canadian experience. (In any case, conditions in Eastern Europe at that time discouraged the undertaking of credible folklore research in the homelands.) This in turn prompted the accumulation of complementary primary data that, from a global perspective, now serve to enhance our appreciation of Slavic and East European folklore.

In the course of these early activities, the traditional canons -- whether Slavic, Baltic, Yiddish or Finno-Ugric -- usually served as launching pads as researchers and field workers (such as J.L. Perkowski, V.R. Tilney, L. Degh, M.T./S.M.G. Salo, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and others) struggled either to salvage pearls from the past or to cross the gaps that divided classical Old Country lore from North American realities. After all, what does one make of such seeming aberrations as Polish jokes that are not even delivered in Polish, or Ukrainian village harvest songs performed on the cemented balcony of a highrise condominium in downtown Toronto? Among the "pearls" was the latter-day discovery of an unpublished collection of Russian incantations recorded (on paper) among Canada's newly arrived Doukhobor immigrants a century ago by one of V.I. Lenin's more illustrious cronies, V.D. Bonch-Bruevich. (His original field notations, located in Russian archives, are currently being prepared for publication.)

The initial focus on oral lore (folksongs dominated this phase) soon mushroomed to include attendant phenomena. Ritual, belief, art and material culture emerged as areas that also warranted attention if the Museum was to mount well-researched and comprehensive exhibitions on the nation's East European legacies. This trend is reflected in the multi-disciplinary study of a Hungarian settlement on the prairies ("the Bekevar project") in the 1970s, two exhibitions marking the centenaries of particular Slavic communities in Canada ("Art and Ethnicity: the Ukrainian Tradition in

Canada" [1991] and "Spirit Wrestlers: the Doukhobors" [1996]), and the development of a national icon collection featuring works of East European/Byzantine influence by most of the country's iconographers.

The extensional directions outlined above continue today. Foremost in this regard is the on-going "Gimli Community Research Project" that since the mid-1990s has approached the study of a small town on the prairies as a longterm, open-ended investigation from a variety of perspectives. Ukrainian folk traditions constitute an important component of this particular multi- and inter-disciplinary investigation. Similarly, a compilation of reports on cantorial traditions in Canada, scheduled for publication later this year, includes several pieces of direct interest to Slavic and East European folklore studies on this continent.

Although the move in favor of multi-ethnic projects continues, occasions for in-depth mono-ethnic research still surface. For example, to salute the 150th anniversary of one of Canada's oldest Polish settlements (Wilno, Ontario) in 2007, the Museum's Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies may formulate a suitable project to mark this milestone. However, to facilitate any future work in the area of Slavic and East European folklore and cultural traditions, a critical guide to relevant areas in the Museum's collections is currently a priority that has yet to be addressed.