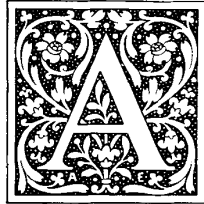


# PEASANT ART OF CENTRAL EUROPE

BY STUART CULIN

*of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences*

A Paper read before the Club on the afternoon of  
April 26, in the drawing-room of Mrs. R. C. Taylor



AMONG the still vivid recollections of my childhood is a lecture I heard in the little country town where I spent some of my early years. Well I recall the speaker, robust, confident, dressed in black, the bare stage lighted with candles, the meagre audience scattered along the benches in front and the men waiting impatiently around the hot stove in the rear of the hall to take their women folk home in sleighs and Germantown wagons through the snow.

It was not the circumstances of this lecture that fixed it in my memory. It was the personality of the speaker and things he said, things that carried conviction to my youthful mind.

The times were troubled times and he spoke seriously and with deep feeling. I was filled with an ambition to become a man, a man of the world, and then to speak my mind on occasions as he had spoken. His name was Locke, and by this name I knew him.

Only now I know that he was known to the world as Petroleum V. Naseby, and that my early idol obtained a hearing, not as the serious man that he was, but as a professional humorist. Even then the cult of omniscience had begun its sway. Of course it has made great progress since then. I know now my early ambition was an illusive, unpractical dream. At the same time I still pursue it to find editors requesting me more or less politely to change my articles in conformity with accepted standards, and audiences accepting my outspoken utterances as attempts to be amusing.

Now, on this occasion, quite sure that I am addressing a society so earnest and well informed that I cannot be misunderstood, I throw caution to the winds and do not hesitate to be as serious as my natural instincts prompt me.

In the first place let me say that many of the customs which we

find among savagery, much of the decorative art we are led to admire among what we are led to regard as primitive people, are broken-down derivatives from higher cultures. In the same way, most of the art we find among peasants did not originate with them, but was borrowed from people in a higher social position. Contrary to the notion that is bound up with certain political theories, art does not spring naturally from the earth, but descended from above. Furthermore, while it is true that we find many customs surviving among peasants from remote antiquity, on the other hand the permanence of folk-customs generally is commonly overstated and this holds true of their art.

The peasant arts of Central and Eastern Europe, of Czechoslovakia, of Hungary, Austria, Servia and Roumania are the foundation of a great national industry. As such they have been recognized by the State, and their encouragement and conservation regarded as a matter of public polity, taking its place with the preservation of the forests and other national resources. These countries inherit, among the people themselves, the very thing we are trying to create and build up with the aid of our schools and museums of industrial art, with our arts-and-crafts societies, with our Art Alliance and all our widespread machinery for industrial art education. We are coming slowly to a realization that good taste finds its roots in these so-called industrial arts, and a few among us have come to understand that the artistic future of our industries, if not the very existence of the industries themselves, depends upon the skill of our specially trained artist craftsmen.

Embroidery and lace making are the two peasant arts that have the greatest practical importance in Europe. They are women's work and are carried on, uniformly, in winter by women and girls who work in summer in the fields. Their products were made for their own use. They made their own clothes, and their household treasures consisted of painted pottery and furniture and embroidered pillow covers and bed curtains, often kept merely for display, and woven of coarse linen from flax grown in their own fields. Even in their worst estate these peasant farmers were well-to-do, producing

their own food and making everything they needed to wear. These conditions were disturbed by the schools, by modern industrialism, by the coming of the railroad and easy intercommunication. Girls gave up their old beautiful peasant dresses and wore clothes of the newest and latest fashions from the shops. The home demand for laces and embroideries declined. The producers were prosperous. They could buy what they wanted ready made. The home industries of lace making and embroidery were threatened with sure and certain extinction.

At this moment these conditions excited the concern of many public-spirited men and women and the protection of the peasant industries was undertaken both by the government and by societies of private individuals created for the purpose. Embroidery and lace making were taught in the schools. In Austro-Hungary the work was directed from a central bureau at Vienna, a bureau that supplied patterns and arranged for the sale of the peasant wares. Ladies who were interested encouraged the work by ordering and wearing copies of the old national costumes, and the revival of these costumes became part of a patriotic propaganda. This extension of the local demand, however, was insufficient to furnish employment to the thousands of trained women workers. The large demand, the real, practical demand that had to be met if the work was carried on on a commercial scale was for finished garments adapted to present-day fashions. For such garments, made by hand and adorned with lace and needlework, there existed an almost unlimited sale.

Capital, of course, was required for such an enterprise, and highly intelligent direction. This work was assumed by private societies in the various capitals such as the Zadruha in Prague, the Isabella in Pressburg, with corresponding societies in Vienna and Budapest, and again, in the countries without the monarchy, such as the Albina in Bucharest, the capital of Roumania. I found the efforts of these organizations broken down and interfered with as the result of the war. In the first place, the peasants themselves were more prosperous and had not the same incentive to labor. Again, the machinery of direction and of sale which had been exercised from

Vienna had been destroyed. The new governments, notably Czechoslovakia, had not re-created it effectively, and the old, disinterested leaders of the movement had been displaced for new, untrained men. The "Isabella" had been under the patronage of the Austrian Archduchess and the work had been carried on under her personal direction in her palace in Pressburg. Everywhere the heads of these societies asked me to intercede for them and enable them to re-establish direct relations with large distributing firms in America.

As the outcome of these private societies and the direct patronage of the government there exist published pattern books in which every form of Central and Eastern European needlework has been reproduced in colors. It is difficult to realize the attention that has been paid to the publication both of designs and of national costume, and for the latter, one finds not only the customary pictures, but full-sized paper patterns with the embroidery, as well. These books were designed for the use of schools. Contrary to the statement widely repeated to me, I found that embroidery and lace were not copied directly by the workers from old examples, but rather that the designs are drawn with a free hand from memory by old women, one or more of whom live in every town or village. These women were kept busily employed, going about from house to house and tracing their old and well-remembered patterns with a lead-pencil directly upon the linen. The range of their patterns is limited, and their themes few in number, but such is their skill, that, while they do not invent, they so vary their designs that no two are ever precisely the same. The silk and yarns now employed are bought in village shops where one sees the same garish aniline colors that now disfigure so many of the present-day embroideries.

The well-fitting silk bodice, that is such a charming feature of the dress both of girls and women, is made, I am told, by a dressmaker who is always found in the villages, and who cuts and sews the linen foundations for the brocades and embroidery. I saw such linen foundations ready made in some of the village stores. In the old days the independence and self-sufficiency of the peasants in their own communities was maintained by monthly and annual fairs held

in the market towns, fairs in which the people trade their own commodities with each other. I attended such a fair held monthly in the old town of Tyrnau in Slovakia. The women had come in from all the neighboring countryside and occupied the principal streets, where, all dressed pretty much alike in work-day clothes, their heads uniformly covered with a white cloth, they had set up their market. Each commodity had its special place and street. Leather and boots and shoes were notable, while lace and embroidery, the most important, had the first place. Their venders were drawn up in two files, facing inward in the center of one of the streets, and the buyers crowded between the lines, bargaining for the old clothes that were extended to them on either side. I could find nothing interesting, nothing valuable, discovering later that these people were very well-to-do and were offering only their cast-off garments. It is very difficult for the visitor to buy old and beautiful embroideries. The original peasant owners do not care to sell them and the old things offered in the shops are for the most part valueless. The new complete costumes made for sale are seldom of linen, for which white muslin is almost invariably substituted. As for the elegant garments made in fashionable styles, it is asserted generally that only their shapes are changed and that the peasant designs are scrupulously maintained. There are students who declare that these new creations result in the death of the peasant art. However that may be, without the support that this art receives from the well-managed societies that order and sell the work, I am sure that the art must perish. I may remark in this connection that the fine new work, in spite of the very low rate of wages, is not relatively so very cheap, being about identical in price with what similar work would cost here if made by machinery.

The patterns of the laces and embroideries, deservedly so admired, are accepted without much inquiry as to their source, it being understood that they have been handed down among the people for countless generations. Mr. Stibrál, the learned President of the Zadruha in Prague, told me that the chief sources of information concerning the old art of the Slavic peoples is to be found in their textiles. Some

little sculpture and some painting remain, but the embroideries represent the chief and almost sole survival. I sympathized deeply with Mr. Stibral in his vigorous and practical efforts to preserve the old traditions and in his opposition to the new "international" art, itself a concrete expression of social and political theories. At the same time I did not cease to pursue my investigation into the origin of the lace and embroidery patterns, arriving at last at the conclusion that in large part they were a more or less recent intrusion, due to recent Turkish influences and more or less harking back to India and Persia, through Turkey, for their origin. This idea is confirmed as one travels eastward in Europe to the countries more recently under Turkish influence. In Hungary I learned that even after the Turks were driven out, male Turkish slaves were esteemed as embroiderers and as such were regarded as valuable property. Furthermore, when it comes to the scrutiny of individual pieces of embroidery, such as are contained in the collections of the great national museums, it is clearly apparent that they may be divided into two groups, one the work of ladies in the castles and great houses and the other of peasant women. The specimens in these two groups are to be distinguished only by their difference in quality. It was the custom for the village girls to go into service in the great houses and learn domestic arts. Another probable source of peasant patterns is thus revealed, while the presence of ecclesiastical ornament, of ornament borrowed from altar cloths and church vestments, suggests another clue.

Whatever may be the antiquity of the devices on our embroideries, however, or the place from whence they came, they are precious as records and full of inspiration. One may say they depend for the beauty upon their color, but what could be more beautiful than some of the embroideries done in white alone? The materials I have assembled as the result of my recent visit in Eastern Europe confirm my original impression that a vast wealth of precious documents, for the most part practically unknown to us, still remained there. The continued existence of home industries, as well as their revival, is bound up with social and economic conditions over which

there is little possible control. At the same time, it is possible for us at least to preserve the records of these fleeting arts to the direct advantage of our manufactures and the general enrichment of our artistic consciousness.

It is not without importance that we should know the history of design. Through this knowledge we are led to return to the source. Through this knowledge we are led to the East and not alone to Turkey and Asia Minor, but to the purer and still more fertile fields of Persian and Hindu art.

The original making of pictures and decorative patterns was with the full brush, with a brush in the way that still survived in the Far East. It was no filling in of traced patterns from which we are only now escaping in our own art of picture painting. The embroiderer I found in Eastern Europe was exercising no artistic or inventive talent of her own. She was doing the thing we know so well: filling in traced patterns, made by a village artist in whom alone reposed the tradition.

The technique of weaving enfeebles design. The technique of embroidery enfeebles design. It is necessary we should refresh ourselves, if not directly with nature, at least by contact with those who see nature with fresh and unsophisticated eyes. It is for this I urge excursions not only to the border lands such as I have visited and described but to the East itself.