

## Ukrainian Art & Literary Club Art



### Tangled Roots “Where have all the mallows gone?” By Myroslava Mudrak

An essay excerpt from the catalog for “Tangled Roots”  
An exhibition of work by artists of Eastern/Central European heritage  
invoking their personal/cultural histories  
October 13-November 3, 1995  
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Bowling Green State University

#### Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

In the tactics of Postmodernism, Bodnar-Balahutrak appropriates details, such as the Crucifix in the Arezzo Chapel overlaid with photographs of famine victims with swollen feet. She thus pays homage to the universal tragedies that today befall many cultures, but identifies these poignant moments of human condition with tragedies that have been visited upon Ukraine in this century: the nuclear holocaust at Chornobyl in 1989 and the **artificial famine of 1933**. Her choice of materials describes her psychic empathy with the compelling pathos brought about by man-made cataclysms: common use of distressed wood, peeling as in aged gold-leaf, chipped and uneven over the surface, objects worn not by the patina of climatic conditions, but by the layering of transparencies of one hopeless event after another that shred the internal wholesomeness so coveted by the nation. The selling out of the nation, its spiritual values and material treasures, are poignantly brought to the current moment by Soviet ruble coins attached to the frame of Bodnar-Balahutrak's work. The compositions establish an undeniable link with the format of traditional and conventional icon painting, not only in the use of wax, but also in the slightly recessed internal image, creating a natural border. The faded image of the Theotokos (the Mother of God, protectress and model of faith) is replaced by a ghostly contemporary mother, holding her wanton child in her lap. In another work from this series, the suffering eye of wasted child becomes one with the Madonna's. The margin, reserved as a convention in icons to elaborate in episodic narratives on the life of the saint, contains a wooden relief form of a visibly empty village house, totally abandoned and lifeless.

Frames are painted black, as if representing memorial portraits carried in ritual processions. All the surfaces, whether they consist of soil, dried flowers, or other plants, coins, and/or ruble notes, are scored, torched, or covered with wax to emphasize the visceral quality of the experience. The torching is an obvious link to the famine during the 1930s when under Stalin's plans to collectivize farms, those who would not comply found themselves burned out of ancestral homes. Millions of people were sacrificed to that cause. Again, the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl is the sad reminder of how a nation falls victim in the name of progress. The material comes from the everyday adornments and family heirlooms that could be found in any Ukrainian home, on either continent: embroideries, carved frames, handicraft that gives identity and bonding to a larger national group. Mementos are in the form of printed holy cards; sacrifice is symbolized by liturgical chalices appended to the surface of the frame. The compelling use of ecclesiastical attributes is a direct reflection of the impact made upon her by the desecrated churches she witnessed during Bodnar-Balahutrak's very first visit to Ukraine in the spring of 1991. Yet it is equally significant that Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's affinity toward liturgical symbols belies a genealogical, as well as a cultural link with Ukraine. Her paternal grandfather was a Ukrainian Catholic priest, a vocation that carries with it the designation not only of guardian of the faith, but also preserver of the culture. In the past, she dedicated her work, not only in name but in subject, to her grandparents whose guidance instilled in her a love for a heritage that she could only know from afar.

<http://www.brama.com/art/mm1.html>  
<http://www.artukraine.com/famineart/darewych.htm>

<http://www.lydiabodnarbalahutrak.com/>