



The things we do...

by Orysia Paszczak Tracz

'Scandalous' exhibit at Honchar Museum



Bohdan Poshyvailo

Fufaiyka, or kufaiyka, in the Ivan Honchar Museum in Kyiv as part of the exhibit "Etnohrafichni Nebylitsi" (Ethnographic Nonsense).

With tongue planted firmly in cheek, and yet deadly serious, Petro Honchar discussed the latest exhibition at the Ivan Honchar Museum in Kyiv, which conveniently opened on March 29, right before April 1. The director of the Ukrainian Center of Ukrainian Culture – The Ivan Honchar Museum opened "Etnohrafichni Nebylitsi" [Ethnographic Fables or Nonsense], an exhibition like no other at the museum. Up until this show, all the others since the museum's opening in 1993 were elegant, refined, and presented with the utmost taste and beauty.

This exhibit was different. Hanging on the walls, with the appropriate display labels, were "fufaiyka," the Soviet-era grungy quilted grey or black jackets that had been worn by working people in the villages and towns. They were torn, patched, stained and never-cleaned, just worn to death.

As described in Rukotvory (rukotvory.com) in the post "Petro Honchar discovered his formula of Ukrainian culture of the 20th century," the guests coming to the opening of the exhibit did not know what artifacts to expect. There was very little information provided in advance, other than the promise "You have not seen something like this before!"

Before the doors to the gallery opened, Mr. Honchar invited the guests to a reception. Holding up a goblet of red wine, he stated that the artifacts are all genuine and all data about them are credible. Then he shouted out "Budmo" [the toast "let us be," which means let us survive], and opened the doors to the display of the grungy jackets and the pile of treasured Ukrainian embroidered and woven textiles on the floor.

This exhibition was Mr. Honchar's idea. "I collected and displayed. I traveled throughout Ukraine. Every fufaiyka was selected from the Sian to the Don Rivers, and from north to south. I concluded that this is our national idea – the fufaiyka. This is one more visual formula of Ukrainian culture of the 20th century and we do not have to invent anything. We are already dressed and united by the fufaiyka... 'they' united us."

The reaction from attendees, the media and the cultural community was divided, with some applauding his commentary, others appalled at the lack of respect for the treasured items in the massive pile in the middle of the gallery floor. I have compiled information and comments from the museum itself and from the media, and the storm of comments from various online groups related to this theme.

"I am very disillusioned with this exhibition and its organizers. Obvious that this is on the level of jeans... [i.e., there's no point to this] This is repugnant to the depth of the

soul. Who do they take us for? And to show this at Lent? After such a display the facilities should be reconsecrated..." wrote Kostyantyn Cheremsky.

Lena Utkina commented, "Really, we have never seen anything like this! I have been disappointed by the Honchar Museum for the first time. I have never seen before that the museum would pile up so plainly the priceless rarities our ancestors so carefully stored in their 'skryni' [chests], and which miraculously survived to our days. What is the point of this display and what does it teach us? Maybe someone from the museum can explain? I had paid the photography fee, but didn't even take my camera out. Forgive me for my intolerance."

One newspaper headlined the story with "Honchar Museum transformed into a second-hand [store] of embroidery."

Blogger Lesia Hasydzak of the Ukrainian Center for Development of Museums, wrote: "...For many generations, the kufaiyka became one of the symbols of the Soviet Union. The kufaiyka [also known as fufaiyka, tilohryky – body warmers], were the most widespread (and for a long time the only) type of outerwear in the totalitarian state. They appeared in 1931 as a warm uniform for workers and soldiers of the working and peasant Red Army. They were worn under the coat, against the frost, because they were sewn from cotton, with the padding acting as insulation... After World War II, the kufaiyka became the everyday and even special event outerwear for the regular population who could not afford anything better. Because THERE WAS NOTHING BETTER [author's capitalization]. The embroidered shirts and moth-eaten kozhuky [sheepskin coats] were in the attics, on the floor or in the fire, and the kufaiyka were hanging on the walls – this is the story of Ukrainian culture. This is the EVIDENCE OF THE UNIFICATION OF CULTURE THROUGH DEFORMATION, RUINATION, PROHIBITION, AND DEGRADATION to create a 'homo Sovieticus' with the label 'Soviet Union' on the working days and the kufaiyka wearer's stooped spine... Obviously, no one would be discussing so tumultuously a show of photocopies or violets. Only a real event could create so many emotions in the museum realm... This is not a vulgar installation, this is not a stream-of-consciousness and, thank goodness, this is not 'contemporary art,' under which term it is accepted to include anything and from those incapable of creating art. This exhibition is an x-ray of each of us and our culture in the whole of the 20th century."

The fufaiyka were also worn in other parts of the Soviet Union but, in this exhibit, the

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