

IMAGE OF THE BLACKSMITH AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON: SOVIET, POST-SOVIET, AND CONTEMPORARY ASPECTS

^aSVITLANA ROHOTCHENKO, ^bLYUDMYLA POPKO,
^cTATIANA MIRONOVA, ^dOLEKSII ROHOTCHENKO,
^eTETIANA ZUZIAK

^{a,d}Modern Art Research Institute of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine, 18-D, Ye. Konovaltsya Str., 01133, Kyiv, Ukraine

^bProfessor of the Department of Cultural Studies and Cross-cultural Communications of the National Academy of Culture and Arts Management, 9, Lavrska Str, building 15, 01015, Kyiv, Ukraine

^cKyiv City Gallery "Lavra", 7V, Lavrska Str., 01015, Kyiv, Ukraine

^eVinnitsia Mykhaylo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, 32, Ostrozko Str., 21001, Vinnitsia, Ukraine

email: ^atsv-inform@ukr.net, ^blyudmylapopko@gmail.com, ^cinfo@mironova-gallery.com, ^drogotchenko2007@ukr.net, ^ezuzyak@ukr.net

Abstract: In this study, a parallel was drawn between the development of blacksmithing in two friendly countries – Turkey and Ukraine. The present paper aims to address the following questions: did the image of a blacksmith undergoes transformations, or it remain relatively stable over the centuries? Did the accents in the image of a blacksmith change from era to era; and if so, how? What is the present-day perception of the image of a blacksmith in society? What is the role of the image of a blacksmith in the visual arts of the different countries of the world today? In addition to presenting the historical outline and turning to the folklore representation of the image of a blacksmith, the joint blacksmithing art projects will be described.

Keywords: Blacksmith, National art, Socio-cultural phenomenon, Turkey, Ukraine.

1 Introduction

The history of blacksmithing – both as an art and as a craft – goes back centuries. There is no country where blacksmithing did not originate and eventually evolved into art. Blacksmithing craft was known since the dawn of culture, and it may be reasonably assumed that blacksmithing is one of the oldest metal crafts and thus one of the main civilizational achievements. The broad use of metal – from the simplest forged pieces and up to the works of high art – allows to unambiguously distinguish blacksmithing as a separate branch in the national art of the countries of the world.

Decorative ironwork was not just a supplementary stage in the production of household items (needles, spades, axes, horseshoes, rings, earrings, necklaces, and other artefacts found during the excavation); it was used in architecture as well, for embellishing secular and sacred buildings. It was not just the mastery of blacksmithing craft, but the very art of metalworking that ensured creation, usage, and preservation of the forged pieces – that both had some specific practical function and served as a decoration for exteriors and interiors of buildings – through the centuries up to the present time.

2 Materials and Methods

Methodology of the research includes archival materials; studies on the blacksmithing art; academic literature by contemporary scholars who study blacksmithing processes, by the researchers of art and culture who focused on blacksmithing in the recent periods; as well as the author's personal archive and interviews with the blacksmiths from the recent five years. The study involves the examination of blacksmithing practice and researching the history of blacksmithing. In the paper, comparative historical research, typology, systemic method, analytical and sources studies methods were employed.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of the Research

Wrought ironwork, regardless of where it was created, almost always is exceptionally expressive. As for the Ukrainian traditional blacksmithing, it should be noted that it was rooted in the metal crafts of Trypillia, Scythian, Sarmatian, Vistula Veneti

cultures. Since ancient times, the image of a blacksmith was closely linked to mythology.

The study of the influence of mythology and mythological archetypes on the national mentality, historical tendencies, and religious traditions was initiated, among others, by Carl Gustav Jung. Jung justified the use of universal symbols for describing the national mentality; thus, the main feature of an Archetype is its ability to "recreate itself in culture over and over, providing cultural phenomena with their inherent power" [7, p. 125]. Ernst Cassirer develops Jung's considerations in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer concludes that "...it is not the history that defines mythology for the nation; on the contrary – mythology defines history" [3, p. 17]. Such interpretation of a myth opens new prospects for our research, as it allows us to scientifically explain the quite tangled history of the changes of the blacksmith's image that eventually evolved into the symbol of one of the most powerful totalitarian empires – the USSR.

In the contemporary process of cultural globalisation, it is important to address the cultural identity of the nation that constitutes its uniqueness. Yelena Schepanovskaya in her article "Mythological archetypes as a core of values of national mentality" notes that the cultural identity of the nation may be investigated involving the universal mythological archetypes, manifestations of which in different religious traditions, historical tendencies, and national mentalities vary [11].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Features of the Blacksmith's Image in Ukraine

Well-known Ukrainian scholar Natalia Kovtun in her study of the archetype of the cultural hero in Ukrainian spiritual tradition conducted a "philosophical and culturological analysis of the correlation between the images of pre-Christian gods and the archetype of the cultural hero in Ukrainian spiritual tradition" [8, p. 68]. For this paper, such analysis is critically important, as it proves a direct link between the image of the blacksmith and the images of the gods of the Eastern Slavs (Svarog, Dažbog, Veles/Volos, and Perun). N. Kovtun considers convincingly blacksmith to be a cultural hero. Still, in this image, she omits one crucial aspect: a blacksmith being also an artist – as is illustrated in this paper with many myths and legends. It is important to make a distinction between a skilled craftsman who produced household items (axes, spades, etc.) and an artist who forges women's jewellery, unique harnesses for the horses, and ornamented weapons [8].

As Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov state in their seminal work, old Slavic **kovati* at first meant art in general, including the art of magic [6, p. 158]. This has highly important implications for art history and cultural studies. The opinion of Ivanov and Toporov regarding the meaning of **kovati* not only as a name for forging and blacksmithing craft but also for fine art seems to be well-founded and opens new horizons to further research.

A recent review of contemporary literature on the topic of blacksmithing in general and blacksmithing art, in particular, proves that currently it is scarcely studied in Europe. As for the mythological basis, Valeriy Voitovych in his book *Myths and Legends of Ancient Ukraine* defines Svarog as a Protogod, Master of the Worlds and father of Svarozhychy (Svarog's children). According to Voitovych's view, based on the old myths and legends, it was Svarog who taught people the secrets of blacksmithing and forged the first wedding band. "The Master of the Worlds is the oldest and eldest god of light and the sky. Up till now, he has a forge in his heavenly temple, in the furnace of which the eternal flame of continuity of life on earth burns day and night" [12, p. 44]. Voitovych's assumption about the image of Svarog (that this widespread European myth includes two merged images of real Svarog, a blacksmith, and mythical

Svarog, the Master of the Worlds) seems to be reasonable. In the folklore of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Bulgaria these mythical heroes occur repeatedly in various interpretations.

Ukrainian folklore, as a material for studying mythology, namely *kolyadky* (traditional songs sung during the Christmas festive season, Christmas carols) were initially investigated by Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky, one of the most famous Ukrainian authors, in his detailed research. Amid the lack of specialised art historical studies, ethnographers failed to notice that some proverbs and sayings about blacksmiths not only reflect everyday communication but became an integral component of national identity. Our previous efforts allowed us to accumulate several hundreds of such proverbs. The following examples are the most commonly used ones. *Dobre kuvadlo ne boitsia molota!* (Good anvil is not afraid of the hammer!) *Dobre tomu kovalevi, shcho na obydvı ruky kuie!* (The blacksmith who forges with two hands has a well-off life); *Kui zalizo, poky hariache* (Strike the iron while it is hot); *Smilyvyi sam sobi kuie slavu* (The brave one forges his glory with his own hands).

3.2 Blacksmith in Turkey and Ukraine: Parallels in Folklore Interpretation of the Image

The interview with the Turkish artist blacksmith İdris Savaş, who focuses on the blacksmithing art of Turkey, provided answers to several puzzling questions. For instance, obvious is the affinity of the folklore of two nations, where the image of a blacksmith is associated with the higher powers. “The Turks, who discovered iron ore in the early periods at the Central Asian area, which has rich mineral deposits; mastered the iron processing methods.

Iron and blacksmithing have created a very important area in both the culture and beliefs of the Turks and their social lives. Turks define blacksmithing as a sacred profession and regard the blacksmith as a guiding sage. The sharp sword is drawn for justice and the sickle in the hands of a farmer is the work of a blacksmith and the protagonist in the epic of freedom is a blacksmith” (İ. Savaş, personal communication, June 17, 2021).

According to this version, it may be concluded that the blacksmithing profession was considered sacred both in Ukraine and in Turkey. This historical fact explains the subsequent transformations of the image of a blacksmith in the totalitarian USSR where a blacksmith becomes a symbol of the state. The legends and verses about a blacksmith serve as proof of such a version, for instance, the famous Ergenekon legend – the homeland valley in Turkic myths, where the Turks were allegedly trapped for the four centuries. Once they saw a grey wolf passing through the cracks in the mountain, so they melted down that part of the mountain (which was an iron mine) by piling wood and coal and got out to the outside world. According to the legend, the man who melted the metal was named Borıu Techen. For that reason, Bozkurt was considered a patron of the ancient Turks.

*“The wolf found a hole, went away,
A blacksmith followed,
The hearth lit, the stone melted,
Our roadblock was removed!*

*The blacksmith was called Bozkurt
Khan recognised, crowned,
He got himself lead the path,
Our flag in his right hand!” [4, p. 78].*

Ziya Gökalp, a famous Turkologist, born in Diyarbakır in 1876, shaped Turkish nationalism and was a major influence on the intellectual, art, and social thought of the time. With his patriotic verses, he appealed to the youth, fostered love and respect for the homeland and cherished interest in its past, as well as the hope for the future. Addressing the youth, Ziya Gökalp stressed that they should explore their national culture, using its authentic ideas and methods. By the end of his life, Ziya Gökalp became a chief ideologist of the Committee of Union and Progress, served at the Ministry of Education, and was elected a deputy of

Diyarbakır. The fact such a powerful figure in modern Turkish history and influential scholar paid special attention to the image of the blacksmith in Turkic mythology is quite telling.

3.3 Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: Social Aspect of the Blacksmith's Image

The single most conspicuous observation, omitted by other scholars who only registered the existence of a blacksmith's image in folklore, is its social load. The latter is utterly important for explaining the further transformations of a strongly built worker (often wage labourer) into a master of the country. Thus, several aspects of the use of the archetype of the blacksmith should be taken into account. First, he was a cultural hero. Secondly, we argue that the visual image of a worker/blacksmith was altered to achieve maximum influence on the public unconsciousness. Such image transformation appropriated the traits of the image of the blacksmith to achieve political victories both inside and outside the state. This phenomenon, unique from the point of view of sociological transformation, did not affect any other image in folk, professional, decorative, and applied fine arts. Even though Soviet ideologists proposed several images for the Soviet pantheon (first, they were the leaders of the state – Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin; later on steelworkers, kolkhoz workers, miners, partisans, and army commanders were added), neither of them became an official symbol of the state. Instead, it was the image of a blacksmith that became a trademark of the Soviet Union. This social and cultural phenomenon may be explained by the fact that only the image of a blacksmith was rooted in mythology, while the other images had an only historical background. The perception of the image of a blacksmith bordered upon the perception of the higher powers, i.e. The God of Gods (if the pagan population was involved). Revolutionary heroization of the victorious Soviet Power since the late 1920s required transformations in the consciousness of social groups. Those who once were pariahs now ascended to the top of the social hierarchy.

Soviet revolutionaries, understanding the sentiments of the people of the empire, treated symbolic and ritual senses in the images of the new heroes with respect. Thus, all possible verbal and visual means were employed. When propaganda campaigns were designed and new state symbols for it were chosen, symbolic and ritual meanings were used to influence society. The leaders who carefully studied ethnic archetypes skilfully managed to “forge” their citizens in a new ideological direction. After taking power, the party leaders faced the problem of organising propaganda campaigns. The constant stress on the proletarian grounds of the revolution placed a worker in the centre of the pantheon of revolutionary heroes. The authorities understood the importance of the use of strong visual symbols, or “invented traditions” (the term by Eric Hobsbawm) for the propaganda campaign. The ultimate aim of the campaign was to inspire social enthusiasm, instil new ideas and cultivate loyalty among the half-literate population used to theatrical old-fashioned performances and images. The newly-created myths, thus, use the image of a blacksmith – a rebel and nation's favourite. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, a blacksmith was compared to a god, primarily due to working with molten metal. Therefore, Soviet ideologists chose this image of honour and equity for their new myths.

Hans Gunther, a well-known researcher of socialist realism and one of the compiling authors of a seminal edition *The Socialist Realist Canon* (co-edited with Yevgeniy Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen) in his article “Socialist realism and Utopian thinking” offers a fundamentally new version of why the new Soviet power was that much interested in the images of a blacksmith and other metalworkers. “The other example of reintegration of the central topos is the adjectives ‘iron’ and ‘steel’ along with their entire metaphorical field, especially in the proletarian literature of the 1920s” [5, p. 45]. The “metal” theme is sweeping the USSR. The traditional image of a blacksmith – originally a loner in a village smithy, a strongly built bearded man – was transformed into a proletarian, a collectivist worker who along with his comrades makes steel for the needs of the

new state. In 1927, Yuri Pimenov creates his classical epic painting *Industry*. The size of the work is 260 x 212 cm. Pimenov builds a complex, multi-layer composition with the steelworkers at the front, clean-shaven, their torsos bare. However, several years later, in 1937, if a blacksmith as a rebel interest of Soviet painters, it is only purely historical interest. Boris Ioganson creates an iconic painting, known all around the USSR – *At the Old Ural Factory*. The image of the bourgeois owner of the factory is contrasted with the images of the workers around the furnace.

In the newly created myths, the image of a blacksmith undergoes transformations. “In the mythology of the 1930s, the metaphorical meaning of iron and steel gets additional sense. It is about the iron will of the party and its leader, it is about the deeds of the polar explorers who were glorified as the ‘iron people’. *How Steel Was Tempered* (1932–1934), a socialist-realist novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky, expresses exactly that sense of the metaphor. If iron and steel, as they were understood by a proletarian artist, mean future unity of a man and a machine that raises a man as high as Prometheus, later on, within the discourse of the Stalin’s era, based on the voluntarism of the party, iron and steel refer to the superiority of the human will and totalitarian heroism” [5, p. 45]. Thus, by the 1930s, the traditional image of a blacksmith in fine art and literature changed dramatically. Though in general terms it seems to be the same, the Soviet ideology also adds an image of a foreign fellow blacksmith. Partly, it may be explained by the general urge of the Soviet power to spread the international labour movement.

In the archives, we have found a collection of issues of the *Obrazotvorche mystetstvo* (Fine art) journal that was an official periodical of the artists and sculptors of the Ukrainians SSR. In No. 2 of 1934, the speeches of Volodymyr Zatonky, a party leader of the Ukrainian SSR, are illustrated with the etching by Fred Ellis. This American painter is described as “...born into a working-class family, one of the notable representatives of the new proletarian intelligentsia that matured amid fierce struggle with the imperialism” [13, p. 17]. The work depicts a blacksmith holding hammer and a sickle, who repels enemies. In *Obrazotvorche mystetstvo* No. 2 of 1934, the image of a blacksmith appears three more times. The article by Israel Rabinovich about Constantin Meunier – “an artist who bonded with the proletariat through 40 years of work, many dozens of artworks, in whose works proletarian images prevail and at the same time are the climax of his creativity, who raises a topical problem...” [10, p. 91] – is illustrated with the three sculptural pieces glorifying the image of the blacksmith. The first illustration is *The Hammerman* (1886). Israel Rabinovich characterises it in the following manner: “In his imagery, Meunier presents the social reality of the working class of the time as the two categories of contrasting images – the images of weak, suppressed proletarians and mighty, confident ones” [10, p. 101]. Except for *The Hammerman*, the other instances when the images of the blacksmith appear on the pages of the 1934 Soviet journal are two more illustrations depicting the statues by Meunier, titled identically – *The Smith*. These are the earlier pieces. Werner Broer dates these works to the early 1880s when Meunier performed other worker-themed statues – *The Mower*, *The Woodcutter*, *The Docker*, *On the Road to the Mine* [2].

As of the early 1930s, the coming of age Soviet power continues to use the image of a blacksmith for asserting the might of the Soviet proletariat. Incidentally, that very image of a worker who conquers metal was also used by another totalitarian system – Nazi Germany. In 1935, Hermann Gradl, a German graphic artist, performed a poster *Arbeit Siegt* (Labour Will Win) depicting a large hammer held by a blacksmith’s strong hand. The hammer has a carved swastika – the state symbol of the Third Reich [9, p. 229].

In 1935, German sculptor Arthur Hoffmann starts working on his monumental relief *Cast Iron* for the ThyssenKrupp headquarters in Essen [9, p. 204]. The multi-figure composition depicts the hard and respectable labour of the steelworker. In 1938, Rudolf Eisenmenger performs *Feierabend* (*After Work*)

monumental mural for the railway station in Wels. Two blacksmiths who are shoeing a horse are the central and dominant group of the composition [9, p. 216]. In 1939, Arthur Kampf presents a large-scale painting *In the Rolling Mill* that includes a detailed depiction of a furnace serving as a background to the main characters of the piece – three workers with bare strongly build torsos. In 1941, Walter Hemming presents his painting *Motherland Produces* (1941). This compositionally complex piece depicts the main characters – steelworkers – standing, back to the viewer; this shifts the focus from the men to the molten steel. Probably, the painting was created the same year. The artist glorified the labour of the assistant who receives the molten steel running from the blast furnace with a shovel [9, p. 230].

Yuriy Markin states that the image of a blacksmith was also used by the antagonist of Germany – the USSR; however, he does not make comparative conclusions regarding the incorporation of the image into the classic imagery of the two most powerful totalitarian European states of the time. The use of the image of a blacksmith may be viewed as an attempt of each of the systems to turn it into the dominant figure for the militaristic ideologies, diverting attention from the war preparations in both the USSR and Germany. If in Germany the image of a blacksmith is hardly ever used after the start of the war, in the Soviet Union, on the contrary, it takes the first place, despite the clear recommendation of the artboards to primarily depict the war heroes, partisans, pilots, tankmen, navy men, and, needless to say, the military elite – generals and marshals.

The 1937 sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* by Vera Mukhina gave fresh momentum to the image of a blacksmith in the USSR. The piece initially decorated the Soviet pavilion of the World’s Fair in Paris. Mukhina’s blacksmith, compared to the blacksmith of the past, has several new distinctive traits. He is young and handsome, holding a hammer in his left hand raised diagonally. The worker holds a hammer and the kolkhoz woman – both not working but triumphant. This male image became a standard look for the image of a worker in Stalin’s era [1, p. 204–208]. Victoria Bonnell’s assumes that the image of a worker lost its primacy in the Soviet political art, as the aim of legitimizing the October revolution was achieved. Nevertheless, forging the hammer as the symbol of the state had permanently entered the history of the Soviet Union and remained one of the main accents of its state emblem [1, p. 208].

The most well-known and popular among the Soviet population was *Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares*, the 1957 bronze statue by Evgeniy Vuchetich that received the Grand Prix diploma at the Brussels World Exhibition of 1958. Soviet ideological machine and art criticism omitted any mentions of Biblical motifs in this work; as well as the very Bible verse “beat their swords into plowshares” – a call to put differences aside and start a peaceful and creative life. As it is said in the Old Testament, “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” [12]. Yet, something unexpected happened. Though the renunciation of religion in the officially atheist state caused this verse to be unrecognised by the majority of the Soviet citizens, it nevertheless became an unofficial motto of the United Nations Organisation. A hammer – the symbol of the blacksmithing work – is held by the blacksmith. As the hammer hits the anvil, the blade of the bent sword is being shaped into a plowshare, offering its new – peaceful – function to the world. The plowshare, unlike the sword, cultivates the soil and does not shed blood. The offered ideology meant, both on conscious and unconscious levels – a proposal of disarmament. The USSR policy of the time was an active build-up of arms and expansionist policy. Such seeming adoption and further transformation of the Biblical motif was an extremely successful political move that granted the USSR ideologists the expected satisfaction. This historical fact clearly illustrates the involvement of art in the policy of a totalitarian state.

3.4 Fusion of Different Images of a Blacksmith in Contemporary Era: Blacksmithing Festivals

Contemporary international relations of professional artists blacksmiths may be studied by the example of two friendly states – Turkey and Ukraine. Turkish blacksmiths repeatedly visited the Ivano-Frankivsk blacksmithing festival, taking part in all its agenda, and always presented blacksmithing pieces of the highest artistic value and mastery. In 2019, at the 17th International Blacksmiths Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, İdris Savaş, Orhan Savaş, Kerem Peker, Yüksel Kantar, the blacksmiths from Turkey, participated in a blacksmithing collaboration; they also held a workshop in blacksmithing art. The creative task for all the participants was the composition titled *The Angels of My City*. The piece by the Turkish blacksmiths was marked with unique professionalism and originality. Also, İdris Savaş and Orhan Savaş presented their skill during the workshop that attracted the attention of all the guests of the festival who were at the city square at the time. Their one-of-a-kind metal braid impressed the viewers with its beauty. Serhiy Polubotko, the Honoured Worker of Arts of Ukraine and one of the organisers of the festival, praised the work by İdris Savaş and Orhan Savaş. According to Polubotko's interview for the documentary about the Turkish blacksmiths, "It is quite a story how these two blacksmiths, İdris and Orhan, whom we first contacted via Internet, changed their opinion on the blacksmith's path in art. They prepare very interesting pieces for each new festival, as well as very interesting presentations. As for me, I am very glad to see our influence on some blacksmiths in the context of the general development of blacksmithing art. I simply love this team". The film about the family of Turkish blacksmiths presented in the conference section of the festival won the admiration of the audience.

In the present time, contemporary blacksmiths communicate and share their experiences online, with the Original International Blacksmithing being one of the most popular communities. In this Facebook community, blacksmiths from around the world present their pieces and inform their peers about the main events, conferences, festivals; they also post educational materials about the history of the blacksmithing craft and new techniques in blacksmithing art. The image of a blacksmith these days became international; it includes various aspects of this ancient profession, associated with the higher powers in the folklore of many nations.

4 Conclusion

Since ancient times, the image of a blacksmith, undoubtedly, transformed from era to era. In many countries, for instance, in Turkey and Ukraine, the folklore image of a blacksmith has many similarities, the main one being its link to the higher powers. In the paper, it was exemplified, how during several periods of the twentieth century, the image of a blacksmith was used for the political goals of the totalitarian USSR. The social aspect of the blacksmith's image in Nazi Germany and the USSR was emphasised for the first time. This aspect is highly valuable for explaining the further transformation of this strongly-build worker (often wage labourer) into a master of the country.

As for today, given the history of steady development up to the 1920s, then a period of oppression (1920s–1960s) and modern period of revival (since the 1970s) of blacksmithing as an art, the image of an artist blacksmith plays a positive socio-cultural role, uniting the artists from different countries and continents. Blacksmithing art occupies a unique niche in the Ukrainian and global cultural process, proving to be an integral part of the visual arts in general.

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