

Wooden crosses and shrines, full of expressive sculptures, have been grown into Lithuanian scenery since long ago. In the 19th century, one would come across them in almost every homestead, by waysides, in fields, villages, even forests, not to mention cemeteries and churchyards.

The habit of erecting crosses began with the Christianization of Lithuania and evolved adding to the artistic framework of buildings elements of pre-Christian culture and distinctive interpretations of the styles of Christian sacral art.

A traditional Lithuanian folk wooden monument consists of a set of its architectural part, sculptures, an iron

top forged by a blacksmith, sometimes even a complex of painted pictures. By structure, cross-shaped crosses, roofed pillars, pillared shrines and shrines are singled out. Every ethnographic region has distinctive varieties of these monuments. For example, only the crosses in Dzūkija region have a silhouette of an upside-down triangle, which is formed by a spear and a battleaxe (Christ's torture tools) intersecting with a rail.

Aukštaičiai (east Lithuanians) decorate the construction of a cross with multi-layer carved, mostly openwork ornaments: geometrical (triangular-, bow-, hole-, trapezium-shaped, etc.), floral (leaves, branches, blossoms, especially of the lily), symbolic patterns. Aukštaitija is also distinctive for its multi-level roofed pillars.

Suvalkija region stands out with an extremely vast amount of crosses erected in the pre-war period to the designs of the artist A. Varnas and his disciples: their construction and rich décor contain typical features of other regions.

Samogitian crosses vary in shape and size, however, high, massive constructions, mostly moderately decorated, as often as not carrying shrines on their shaft, are preferable.

Double crosses, called "karavikas", St Benedict's Crosses, Plague Crosses, used to be erected for protection from plague and other epidemics. In the first half of the 20th century, double crosses also began to be erected on significant occasions in the life of the nation.



All across Lithuania we find shrines in trees. There also used to be pillared shrines everywhere, but most of them and most different in Samogitia.

Only Samogitians built shrines on the ground "accommodating" in them a great many of saints. These are most different small constructions – from simplest small "houses" to copies of chapels, even churches.

Klaipėda region, especially Neringa, stands out with "krikstas" gravestone monuments. They consist of low decorated and profiled boards with carved or perforated ornaments and symbols.

In homesteads, cemeteries, by waysides, in fields, crosses were most often erected by individuals; in the squares of villages, towns, in churchyards by rural

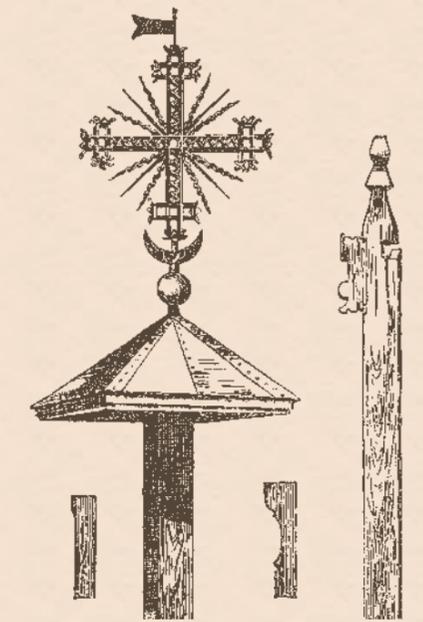
communities and parishes; whereas in the first half of the 20th century they were also built by different religious and social organizations.

By erecting a cross, a shrine with statuettes of saints, a man is asking, thanking, praying, and perpetuating the memory of the deceased. The choice of the themes of the statuettes, of their number depends on the aim (intention), construction, and place of the monument. An image of the Crucified Christ, as an expression of the peak of Christ's suffering and a symbol of the Christian faith is essential for every monument of sacral content, even if there is some other statuette of Christ – Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Pensive Christ, Christ carrying a cross, etc. In nearly every monument we will also find a statue of Mother of God, who is very significant for the countryman. Among many subjects of ecclesiastical art in Lithuania, *Pieta*, *Our Lady of Sorrows*, *Madonna with a Child*, *The Blessed Virgin Mary* prevail.



Well-liked are St Johns (St John Nepomuk and St John the Baptist) – their sculptures are built in shrines by rivers, lakes, bridges, as is the sculptural group *The Baptism of Jesus*. The statues of St George, respected in Lithuania as the patron of the household, especially of animals, are usually housed in homestead shrines; St Isidore is often found in field monuments. In homesteads, sculptures of their owners' saint patrons are frequent. St Anthony is worshiped as a wonder-worker. When ill, it is often appealed to St Rokas. To avoid devastation of home by fire, a pillared shrine with a statute of St Florian, sometimes of St Agatha, is usually built in the centre of a village or town. Apart from the said saints, in the shrines and crosses we would come across quite a few sculptural images of other saints.

In the iconography and stylistics of folk sculptures we will easily recognize a character presented by Christian iconography, the reflections of the styles of ecclesiastical art. A folk sculptor would look carefully into church sculptures, prayer book illustrations, religious pictures, the content of which used to be complemented by folk chants, very popular in Lithuania. Following canonical examples, a self-taught individual or a folk carver, having learnt somewhat from a



village sculptor, did not feel restrained. For him it was important to convey not the iconic similarity or the character of a historical epoch, but the idea embodied in a specific picture. It is therefore no wonder that as often as not the saints are "dressed" in Lithuanian countryman's clothes and in their faces the Lithuanian type is recognizable.

Signs testify to a special request, thanks or respect: in Samogitia, sculptures of the Virgin Mary are often dressed in material clothes, decorated with beads, ribbons, etc.; in Dzūkija, the crosses are surrounded with national girdles, specially woven aprons and the like. Offerings are put near crosses believed to be miraculous and shrines.



Čiurlionis Road, The Hill of Witches, Peace for Man, etc.). All in all, over 30 of them were built before the Revival. In the monuments of such nature, big-scale sculptures, compositions in relief, bas-relief complemented by some traditional elements (roofs, blacksmith-made iron tops) prevail.

The history of cross crafting in Lithuania is dramatic, related with various bans. The most pronounced among them is the ban by Tsar of Russia after the uprising of 1863 on erecting and repairing crosses in unsanctified places (not cemeteries and churchyards), and particularly drastic bans by the Soviet power along with destruction of heritage (the Hill of Crosses, Panu hill, destruction of individual crosses). However, crosses were secretly built even during the years of the bans.

Tragic periods in the history of the nation (occupations, fights for freedom, expatriations) not only have preserved cross-crafting, as a phenomenon of folk culture, but also made it a special symbol of national identity, a sign of resistance. Apart from secretly built crosses, ensembles of wood sculptures, referred to as folk monumentalism, of secular content appeared in the early 1970's (such as *Ablinga*,



A great many of folk masters having created priceless masterpieces have not made their names known (not all masters mark their works with their initials now either). They were mainly those born to be artists, artists from God's grace; some of them were even homeless, without a family. Most of them were completely self-taught, earning their living from creation and devoted to it alone.

There have not been nor are there any schools of cross crafting in Lithuania. Carving is mostly learnt from other masters and experience is gained through working independently. Working tools have changed; modern cross crafters employ wood working technique, however the traditions are passed directly from master to master.

The conception of cross crafting comprises the idea, intention, creation, sanctification of a monument, from which the actual, customs regulated, life of the cross begins in the community until its decay (the decayed cross is burnt, and instead of it a new one is most often built).

For the existence and development of cross crafting two things are necessary: master creator and a person in need of these creations. Lithuania has always had, still has, and is likely to have both. The need to give meaning to a significant event through a wooden monument, to express religious feelings, to perpetuate the memory of a deceased person, to protect home and village, to thank for mercies received is a feature of Lithuanian mentality and an inexhaustible source of cross crafting traditions. This vitality, the exclusive artistic value of the monuments and of their statuettes have also earned universal acclaim for this field of folk culture – in 2001, the Lithuanian cross crafting and its symbolism were included in the List of Oral and Intangible Masterpieces of Humanity by UNESCO.

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Nowhere else in the world are there so many crosses and shrines with sculptures; nowhere are they so varied in shapes as in Lithuania. And nowhere have these wooden folk monuments been so deeply rooted in the peoples' consciousness.

