

Creche course: Students learn about Polish culture by making folk craft

Monday, November 24, 2008

By Dan Majors, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Jarek Wlodarczyk and his daughter, Ella, 4, of Lower Burrell, begin to wrap wood pieces in colored foil paper to build their szopka, also known as a Cracow Creche, yesterday at the Pittsburgh Children's Museum.

The arched doorway of a szopka isn't very big at all -- maybe just an inch high -- yet it can lead to an appreciation of art and architecture that is unique to an ancient part of the world.

A dozen students including children and adults gathered at the Pittsburgh Children's Museum yesterday to construct their own szopkas, also known as Cracow Creches, a folk craft tracing its origins to Krakow, Poland.

Szopkas are made of cardboard, wood, ribbon and foil paper, transformed into elaborate architectural constructions. The influences date to the Middle Ages.

Dave Motak, 58, of Bethel Park, a former university administrator, is a szopka artisan, teaching and creating the art form since discovering it on a trip to Poland in 2003.

"They started as puppet theaters in the churches of Krakow, and were used for Christmas plays," he said yesterday as the apprentices around him began gluing pieces together. "Now, it's an art form [reflecting] the architectural elements you'd find in the city of Krakow."

Finished pieces have brightly colored towers, steeples, spires and domes, with arched doorways and windows, looking like someplace you'd expect Santa Claus to call home.

While master craftsmen often construct towering models with working lights and motorized pieces, the 11-inch versions put together during yesterday's free workshop were much simpler.

And it isn't all fun with foil. Mr. Motak makes a point of teaching participants about the history of the art and the people who created it.

Sue Harkins of Mount Washington was building one with her 11-year-old granddaughter, Heather, of Baldwin. But she admitted that she was more keen about doing something with her granddaughter than learning about Polish heritage.

"But it seemed interesting, and she likes to do things like this," Mrs. Harkins said.

Heather, a longtime lover of Legos, said the educational aspect added another dimension to the project.

"I get great joy out of doing this," she said. "It's really fun to do different things. And also [learn] about the culture. That's the best thing about it."

"It provides young people with an awareness of other cultures," said Mr. Motak, whose grandparents emigrated from Poland to Johnstown. "Eastern Europeans aren't always seen in a positive light. This art is something special. So we put it in the historical context, so they know where this art form comes from.

"Krakow has more than 1,000 historically significant buildings. It's a very lyrical, architecturally rich city. And immigrants brought that to this country in the 1800s. You see that influence in some buildings from that era. And we're reviving it."

Szopkas created in yesterday's workshop will be exhibited with those of professional artists during a free holiday reception from 1 to 4 p.m. Dec. 14 in the Frick Fine Arts Building on the University of Pittsburgh campus in Oakland.



Dan Majors can be reached at dmajors@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1456.