

# Ukrainian Naïve Art

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Naïve art is a form of visual art defined by artist's lack of academical education, i.e. artist being self-taught. While often possessing Primitivist motifs, it has no well-defined art style or form.

Naïve art is an essential aspect of Ukrainian cultural identity. The appeal of Naïve art lies in its unfiltered portrayal of themes such as nostalgia and rural life, author's life and experiences, inviting viewers to engage with the artwork without the need for complex interpretations or any sort of theoretical knowledge.

This sublime form of cultural expression native to rural areas (villages being a home for more than 80% of total Ukrainian population at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) had managed to preserve people's national and artistic heritage, deeply rooted in traditions and beliefs even in times of war and cultural and political purges exacted by Soviet Union. While renowned and critically acclaimed artists were forced to move, comply with the regime or face repressions, this underrated, looked down upon and dismissed as "kolkhoz" art had been able to continue striving unimpeded in many forms.

My main reason for being interested in Ukrainian Naïve is not only its rich folk roots but also its extensive inclusivity – anyone can be Naïve regardless of gender or social standing and that also was the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where modern Ukrainian Naïve art stems from – as long as people were able to keep up with hard rural life where work is never over.

In contrast with many visual art movements of past, the most prominent Ukrainian Naïve figures were (and still are) women – Mariya Prymachenko (1909-1997) and Kateryna Bilokur (1900-1961). Their circumstances were somewhat similar – neither of them had any sort of formal school education (although for different reasons), both had to use natural pigments and homemade brushes, and both couldn't live without painting.

Mariya Prymachenko is one of the most well-known Naïve artists even on a global scale. Her artworks usually depict animals or plants in rich, robust and saturated palette and titles to her paintings she'd come up with were themselves like poetry.

*"Once, as a young girl, I was tending a gaggle of geese. When I got with them to a sandy beach, on the bank of the river, after crossing a field dotted with wild flowers, I began to draw real and imaginary flowers with a stick on the sand... Later, I decided to paint the walls of my house using natural pigments. After that I've never stopped drawing and painting."* – Mariya Prymachenko.

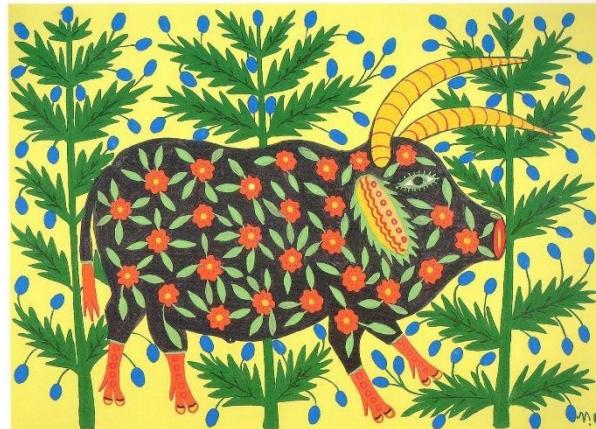
Mariya had been going to school for four years before having to drop out because of contracting polio, a disease which left her with a physical impairment and affected her artistic career. In spite of her creative genius, she had rarely ever been outside her village and when the opportunity did arise, people were hesitant to let her go to the zoopark, fearing she'd lose her vision of fantastical animals.

Her influence on modern art is still as strong as ever, often being an inspiration or material for kids' book illustrations or popular nowadays "primitive" art style in commercial sphere. I personally am

also deeply in love with her works, having read a lot of books with her paintings used as illustrations or even entire books written to match the paintings.



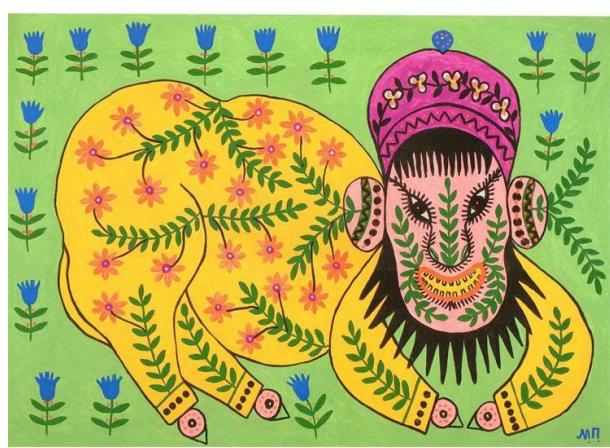
*A Dove Has Spread Her Wings and Asks for Peace, 1982*



*Ukrainian Bull, Three Years Old, Went Walking Through the Woods and Garners Strength, 1983*



*Corncob Horse in Outer Space, 1978*



*This Beast is Making Magic, 1983*

Kateryna Bilokur, on the other hand, had never even gone to school – her parents just didn't want to spend money on clothes, books and education so they figured it would be more beneficial to have the girl helping in the village. Kateryna had also been craving for art since the young age but was always denied it by her parents claiming it to be a waste of time. It was only after her attempted suicide that her father decided to turn a blind eye to his daughter's passions.

*"I stole a piece of ... canvas from my mother and took a piece of coal... I drew something on one side of the rag, then I enjoyed what I created, then I drew something on the other side... And this one time... I didn't draw something I saw, but rather some birds I imagined... My soul felt so happy because of what I could make up! I stared at my drawing, and laughed ... That's when my parents busted me. They tore up my drawing and threw it in the oven... But wherever I go, whatever I do - I*

*have an image in my head that I simply must draw, follows me... I'm offended by Nature, it was cruel to me, by giving me this enormous love of holy drawing, and then taking away any chance to create marvelous work to the whole wide extent of my talent!"*

Kateryna's main inspirations were flowers and only flowers – I remember seeing countless postcards and post marks with her works. Naïve not by choice, she had never been allowed into any academies due to her lack of basic education certification even despite actual prowess. Her talent had only become recognised in her 40's when she heard one song on the radio called "Or was I not the viburnum on the meadow" performed by Oksana Petrusenko – she liked the song so much that she'd drawn the viburnum and sent it to the singer. The singer was so impressed that she had basically kickstarted Kateryna's career.



*Flowers on a Blue Background, 1943*



*Field Flowers, 1941*



*King Spike, 1949*

Another feature of Ukrainian Naïve art that I like is its eternal timelessness – modern exhibitions are filled with paintings old and new, signed and anonymous and most importantly this form of expression is a powerful coping tool. From artists like Bozhena Chaharova who were suggested embroidering as a form to of art-therapy to countless people turning their stress into expressive art in times of war and general unrest.



*Bozhena Chaharova, 2019*



*Dmytro Moldovanov, 2014*

Of course, Naïve doesn't need to be only painted. Handmade swans from car tires, clumsily painted wooden decorations in communal yards, arrangements of toys outside are things often despised yet still what is it if not a form of art borne of someone's vision?



To conclude, I believe Naïve Art is an important aspect of Ukrainian culture that many new art forms stem from. It is more than folk art, in a way, Naïve is the “art of the masses”, representing history, culture and diversity, the purest and most inclusive form of art. While different cultures have different prominent art movements, I believe Ukrainian visual art had mostly always been in one way or another related to rural, naïve traditions and motifs.