

Amber in Folk Art

The Polish Academy of Sciences Museum of the Earth has been educating the public about various aspects of amber at Gold Silver Time since 2001. This year, the Museum will present an exhibition dedicated to amber artefacts made by folk artists, chiefly from the Kurpie and Kashubia regions.

One of the reasons why this exhibition is held this year is the 130th anniversary of the birth of Adam Chętnik, ethnographer and amber researcher, who systematised all the knowledge he found about amber in the Kurpie region and helped to cultivate folk art. The Voivode (Governor) of the Podlaskie Region announced 2015 as the Year of Adam Chętnik, which provided the PAS Museum of the Earth with an opportunity to look at amber folk art anew and to see what motifs have been reproduced as trends by today's artists.

Amber became popular in Polish folk culture and art towards the end of the 18th century, especially in areas where raw amber was easy to find, like the Kurpie and Kashubia regions. The folk amber industry, amber mining, working and sales, reached their peak in the 1800s, with their development arrested by both World Wars. By 1939, just 20-30 folk artists were working in the Kurpie region. Only a few remained in the post-World War II period and now there is only one family left: the Bziukiewicz family of the village of Wach, who not only cultivate the local folk tradition, but also invent new designs.

Amber was once used chiefly to decorate clothing and village cottage interiors. The ornaments were initially made for family members and neighbours, and as keepsakes. However, with time and as the craftspeople acquired ever greater skills, this occupation came to be treated as a source of income. Amber was worked either by hand or using crude tools known from turner's, clockmaker's and textile shops. The Kurpie region had seasonal workshops where amber was worked only during the winter (the products were sold so amber working was a source of income) and amateur workshops where amber working was treated as a pastime. There were several industrial-scale workshops in the region, the best known and recognised of which belong to the Bernstein brothers of Ostrołęka (from the late 17th to the early 20th century). Apart from jewellery, these workshops produced amber pipe stems, pipes, cigarette-holders, rosaries, snuff boxes, teething rings for infants, watch chains, buttons, cuff links and inkwells.

Few examples of amber being used in folk art have survived to our day: "Around 1910 the fashion for amber beads passed in the Kurpie region; amber was displaced by glass and other imitations, while amber was most often used to make incense. During World War I, the Germans would steal amber not only from private individuals but also from church treasuries, especially in the Kurpie region. We should also remember that the custom to bury the dead with their personal jewellery was prevalent in the region of Kashubia," explains Katarzyna Kwiatkowska, head of the Amber Department at the PAS Museum of the Earth. Rare items may be found today in museums, in churches, where they were donated as votive offerings, and also in the traditional Kurpie fold dress with three strings of beads, later also with heart-shaped pendants and coins, where the amber beads played not only an ornamental but also a therapeutic role.

“It’s too bad that amber folk art, to which we owe amber’s continued presence and importance in jewellery, is now overshadowed. Folk artists seem to feel that to be designated a craftsperson is more prestigious than to be called a folk artist,” sums up Kwiatkowska.

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GOLD SILVER TIME International Jewellery and Watch Fair

MT Polska Conference and Exhibition Centre, ul. Marsa 56C, Warsaw