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Passing on the Tradition of Making Straw Christmas Ornaments (šiaudinukai)

By Don Astras

As a child, I watched my mother and folk artist, Ursula Astras (Lukoseviciute), create beautiful Christmas ornaments made from wheat and rye straw. Our family celebrated many other Lithuanian immigrant Christmas traditions, too. However, we would have many visitors come to admire our Christmas tree decorated with my mom's works of art.



Astras family Christmas tree in 1963 (Ursula, Tony, Stanley, Alberta and Don).

Being a guy, the art form was too delicate for me. Instead, I would build stables out of scrap plywood that my Aunt Nellie (Lukoseviciute) would bring home from the furniture factory. I used balsa wood for the rafters and would cover them with the chaff and broken straw pieces that my mom would discard. I also preferred drawing and sketching, so I filled my school notebooks with illustrations of each topic. However, I would draw hot rods when I lost interest.

I did enjoy travelling with our family to my mom's events and helping out. My father was the chauffeur and would always pick up Lithuanian delicacies when in Chicago or other Lithuanian communities. It wasn't until later that I took on that role. I also began to fully appreciate her talent and take a genuine interest in that folk art.

Since 1978, I would accompany my mom at demonstrations and workshops, participating as translator and instructor. I helped my mom stage her art shows, served as her critic and passed on the Lithuanian folk arts to my children and to the public – teaching how to create straw Christmas ornaments at Camp Dainava, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, the Grand Rapids Public Museum and Saints Peter & Paul Family Center.

What I learned from my mother, besides the art, was that she had a vast network of friends, admirers and interested students from all walks of life. Over the years in our workshops and exhibits, our family has reconnected with old summer camp friends, former classmates, world travelers, distant relatives and acquaintances. We have also forged many new relationships.

In December 2015, I designed and launched the Lady of Wheat website: <http://ladyofwheat.com> to honor my mom's art and take her works to the public including her larger straw paintings and decorated Easter eggs (margučiai). Lithuanians of all generations, their descendants, families and friends will welcome the connection to this beautiful global culture, where my mom

has transformed folk art into fine art.



Don and Kathy Astras demonstrate straw Christmas ornament-making techniques at the 2016 Lithuanian Day Festival at Saints Peter & Paul Family Center.



Don holds wheat shaft before cutting it into pieces for making ornaments.

Lithuanian Christmas Tree Ornaments by Ursula Astras

Lithuanian Christmas tree ornaments have been made from natural wheat or rye straw for centuries. Traditional designs included braids and mobiles with strings running through them. In the 1950s, my mom created new art forms of intricate snowflake or geometric design by pressing the straw onto a masking tape backing and gluing these veneers together. Her straw art has been displayed at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago, Frederick Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids Public Museum, Vilkaviskio Krasto Muziejus in Lithuania and numerous other places in the US and Canada.

These processes and art were mastered by my mom and taught to our family. In turn, I have documented them for my family and posterity because I still marvel at the beauty, craftsmanship and ingenuity of my mom's artistry.

Additional Designs

More patterns or designs by my mom can be found on her website at <http://ladyofwheat.com/ursula-astras-art-portfolio/lithuanian-straw-christmas-tree-ornaments/>

and serve as templates. Notice the shapes used and their repetition. Please feel free to simplify the designs or create your own.

I conducted a workshop on how to create your own straw Christmas ornaments at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture <http://balzekasmuseum.org/> in Chicago in December 2016.

I will return to teach how to decorate Easter eggs on March 25, 2017.

For inspiration in Grand Rapids, don't forget to visit the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park during the Christmas season.

Next summer, I can teach your children or grandchildren at Camp Dainava during the Lithuanian Heritage Camp: <http://lithuanianheritagecamp.org>. or Straw ornaments at Ateitininku Sendraugiu Savaite Kennebunkport.

Our family would love to show you how to create these beautiful, Lithuanian straw Christmas ornaments in your own private workshop. Young and old alike enjoy the hands-on experience.

Contact me at <http://ladyofwheat.com/contact/> or e-mail at don.astras@ladyofwheat.com.





Eglutė papuosta su Albertos Astraitės sukurtais šiaudinukais.
Paukštis sukurtas Uršulės Astrienės.



Four generations of “šiaudinukai” – see poster above. Alberta Astraitė-Singh and Maryte Astraitė Currier with Maryte's signature piece, The Last Supper.