

MOTHER GODDESS

A symbol of fortitude and resilience found in Ukrainian hand-woven textiles

In these recent months of the war in Ukraine, the urgency and reality of a culture under threat calls for a narrative of fortitude and resilience, the intertwined tales of a figure who couldn't be revised out of the weave of living history and of the women who ensured her endurance.

These stories unfold in two especially fine weavings from Andrea Mozarowski's ancestral village of Mozhary, located in the region of Polissia, Ukraine: one is a zapaska (apron) of hand-spun wool dyed in jewel tones, slit-tapestry woven with eye-dazzling exactitude; and the other is a aviska (ritual towel) of creamy soft hemp shimmering with bands of cotton supplementary weft patterning in rich reds and earthy blacks. In these textiles, the Mother Goddess Mokosh—an arresting figure in a protective warrior stance, arms akimbo and glowing with the energy of a pulsating rhombus at her core—has revealed herself, unfailingly, as “this old, very dear image, that lasts.”

sacred corner of the home; and the zapaska, an apron woven as a protective force—practical, symbolic, magical.

In 2017, 20 years after the weavings were entrusted to Mozarowski for preservation, they were accepted into the fine arts collections of the RISD Museum. Entranced at first sight by the raw power they exude—the finesse with which they were made and the layers of labour and expertise that they embody—Kate Irvin, Curator and Department Head of Costume and Textiles sensed the wonder and significance of their specific provenance and survival. In the materiality of these textiles, one senses the feet that operated the loom treadles, the hands and saliva that humanized the fibres, and the hearts and minds that conjured the ancient symbols in their patterning.

Pointing to the figure built from rhombus shapes in the weaves of the zaviska and zapaska, the Mozhary women named them

It is then only natural that we become more like apparitions, already sepulchral effigies, stand-ins for ancestors....

This is the thinness of our aesthetic reality, this old, very dear image that is left and lasts.

—James Hillman, *The Force of Character*

Mozarowski travelled to Mozhary three times during the post-Perestroika period in the 1990s and 2001. On one of these visits, during the peaceful blaze of summer's bounty and surrounded by swaying sun-bleached poppies and red viburnum, Mozarowski's aunts gathered women and materials to tell their stories of spinning and weaving. They resurrected a broken treadle loom to simulate their weaving process. They went into cupboards and brought out the textiles they had saved: items like the four-metre-long zaviska that they held at each end, naming the motifs chosen to protect the icons over which it would have been draped in the



Kozaky, or Cossack, and thus, an imposing masculine presence declared itself. Upon first seeing the pieces, Irvin traced the rhombus shape, noting its relation to the female body, to the womb. And thus, the authors were guided by an invisible hand to the sacred provenance of Mokosh.

Mary Matossian's 1973 essay “In the Beginning, God Was a Woman,” serves as a deep synthesis and bridge to work undertaken more recently by Ukrainian ethnographers, scientists, and researchers, notably Dr Yevhen Prychepii, Mykhailo Selivachov, Halyna Stelmashchuk, and Nadiya Borysova, among others. Their

Image above and right: Zapaska (apron), early 1900s, wool interlocking slit tapestry weave, 72cm.

Gift of Andrea Mozarowski and women of Mozhary, Ukraine, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence



profound work has reveals how the sacred potency of masculine and feminine heavenly luminaries worshiped during pagan times continues to speak to us today through the geometric ornamentations of the circle, triangle and rhombus in textiles such as those made by the women of Mozhary.

Enshrined in the Chronicle of Rus' (980 C.E.), the ancient, vibrant, and irrepressible pre-Christian cult of the Mother Goddess—Mokosh, Moist Earth, *Maty Syra Zemlia*—has survived embedded in Ukrainian textile patterns as a testament to their makers' beliefs in the power and potential of women. Stretching from fleshy Paleolithic fertility goddess figurines to Sarmatian rhombus motifs that pay homage to the vulva's procreative powers, the lineage of Mokosh's image continues to be celebrated today.

The woven figure of Mokosh opens a portal into an ancient world where one encounters the stone women (*kamiani baby*) standing atop Scythian barrows in the Steppes; travels with the Sarmatians into the proto-Slavic stronghold of the Dniester and gazes in

Polissia, a marshy, forested, biodiverse landscape, with its own customs and traditions. During World War II, in this geopolitical space, the inhabitants, similarly threatened and facing the menace of violence from an occupying force, watched as the soil they drew life from, the black soil or *chornozem*, was dug up and carried from the territory by freight train. Mozhary weavings were buried by villagers, hidden from occupiers, or burned.

And yet, they are alive. The weavings passed into Mozarowski's hands for safekeeping are remarkable remnants of a once-thriving fibre culture under threat. Masterfully crafted in maidenhood and motherhood from homegrown and homespun thread, these textiles stand for a handmade life. The hemp and woollen fibres themselves convey much: about the earth where the seeds were planted and the animals grazed; about the people who watered the sprouts and reared the sheep, ultimately transforming hard-won yields into thread. And out of this labour rises the image of Mokosh, Moist Mother Earth, creator, weaver, tender of sheep, spinner of Fate.

The Goddess cult reinforced the values of fertility, nurture, and healing in a violent world.

— Mary Matossian, "In the Beginning, God Was a Woman"

wonder at a Slav buckle brandishing the figure of a woman with a rhombic head; and near Bulgaria and Odesa, beholds pregnant figurines marked with lozenges on their bellies.

In this ceaseless dance of quantum entanglement, varied manifestations of a shape-shifting goddess emerge: mortar; a spinning top; a figurine with a lozenge at the waist, inscribed by a diagonal cross; a mirrored figure dancing in repetition at the flourishing end of a linen ritual towel; a pulsating protectress blessing and amplifying the reproductive zone on a woman's festival apron.

Today, Ukraine is building a reinforced concrete wall with barbed wire on the border with Belarus. Approximately 100 km south of the border, Mozhary is situated in the northern district of

Image above and right: *Zaviska* (ritual towel) late 1800s. Hemp twill weave; cotton weft-faced plain weave; hemp crochet fringe, 33cm wide.



One afternoon, Mozarowski sat with her aunts at a long table jammed with small plates. The offerings were nurtured by the hands of her family. Ever resilient, they chuckled about the irony of having to return to the land to survive. As Mozarowski recorded their voices, they sang rounds of carols, in Old Church Slavonic, kept safe and silent during Soviet times, and buried memories were dislodged. Her aunts tell a story of a Marian vision in Mozhary, during WWII. They repeated fragments and remembrances of sightings, of visions and versions that had been passed down. Her visit transforms the space into *temenos*: Mozhary will not be razed, whilst Ovruch is burning, because the Deity has stepped on village earth. The unassailable Goddess. ... **Andrea Mozarowski and Kate Irvin.** risdmuseum.org

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