



Polish—Cut-Paper Design.

By HELEN BULLITT LOWRY

ONCE it was the proper and highbrow thing to talk of the Melting Pot of America. That melting pot still boils, of course, but we have learned that in the melting we must take care to preserve the "Old World arts" of the immigrant peasant who is cast into the pot. The newer Americanizer puts himself on terms with the immigrant by taking account of the gifts he brings to his new home—his folklore and songs and embroidery skill, for instance. In a fashion, this new sort of Americanization is one of saving the immigrant from the melting pot.

The new theory is that the Pole who remembers his mazurka is a better American citizen than the Pole who has traded his mazurka for the American "toidle." The D. A. R.'s all over the country, the Foreign Woman Department of the Y. W. C. A., the propaganda of Commissioner Wallin at Ellis Island, and the businesslike efforts of the Art Alliance of America to put the handicrafts of the American-born on the American market are a few of the agencies that are doing away with the crude melting pot philosophy—which, when all was said and done, was founded on provincialism.

A newer agency working that way is the Commonwealth Centre. This is an organization which assembles economists and actors, rich folks, society women, musicians, foreign-born intellectuals and Americans to match, or nearly so. They purpose to give to groups of foreign artists and foreign amateurs, versed in the folk songs and folk dances of their native land, the opportunity to give dramatic performances to general audiences of mixed Americans—to "sell" the idea of their native arts to America.

Such groups, some professional, some amateur, already exist throughout New York's foreign quarters. But the performances given by them are rarely seen except by their own people. The Commonwealth Centre's plan, if it is carried to completion, is to furnish the theatre which shall be the common show ground of the contributory nations—and to count on the proceeds from each group's offering to reimburse the performers.

The first group to present its wares has been the Russian, which has just finished giving at the Lexington Theatre a two weeks' performance of the "Russian Isba"—which for a while last Spring, and now again, has given New York its picturesque epitome of the arts of the Russian peasants, before the Bolsheviks. New York and America were already familiar with the Russian ballet.

Well, that ballet is the sophisticated, cosmopolitized version of the Isba. As Chopin or Tchaikovsky or Grieg has taken the theme of a folk song, which is the ancestor of composed music, and on that theme has elaborated, so the Imperial Ballet magicians of St. Petersburg took the village dances and songs and built them into forms of the Italian ballet and pantomime, into which French supersophistication also entered largely.

Part of this scheme of Americanization is to prove to complacent America that every self-conscious art is built on an earlier unconscious folk art—that, since America has grown up in the age of mechanical industry which does not breed home arts, she must import her foundation of art from rural Europe.

That is the message of the Russian Isba. Other groups will follow with their offerings—an Armenian group, to show that out of that an-

cient country comes something besides drawnwork for Summer resort peddlers. A Czechoslovak, a Hungarian and a French group have been got in touch with and are making plans each for its particular demonstration of national arts. There are Jewish musical societies and the Yiddish Theatre. There are Italian opera and the Italian marionettes theatre. All are what the promoters of the Commonwealth Centre call "available material."

These are the bare facts that can be gleaned from a theatrical program. A more colorful set of emotions arise when composite, pot-melted America stops for a minute to consider what does this country lack in art that these new arrivals can contribute? We'll not discover by inquiring of the second generation Italians shooting their beer bottle top carroms on the cement outside our window—nor yet of the Swedish cook who embroiders American Beauty roses on a cotton sofa cushion. They have left the culture of their fathers as far behind as has the Anglo-Saxon race the folk lore and the Morris Dances of old Merrie England—and by much the same process.

In both cases the rural person's passion to copy the city dweller destroys his national dress and his traditional home interior just as soon as he strikes town—substitutes by the process of unpracticed selection the ugliest clothes and table cloths that newly earned money can buy.

European Continentals love to scoff at the Anglo-Saxon lack of musical appreciation and the Anglo-Saxon self-consciousness in art. England was merely unfortunate in that her handicraft employed rural popula-

tion became manufacturers and the buyers of manufactured things about a hundred years sooner than the same folk in Continental countries.

Chaucer's England, Henry the Eighth's England, Elizabethan England, Jacobean England, match them for color and art anywhere in Europe. The factories robbed this England of her craftsmen and the Roundheads came and stole her folk dances. That point, too, must not be forgotten in wondering why the Anglo-Saxon is less "artistic" than his Celtic and Continental neighbors. The village Sunday festivals of dancing and singing got somehow so mixed up in the people's minds with "Popery" and superstition that what corresponded to the Russian Isba in every village simply

ceased to exist. The Sabbath was made up of blue laws—no longer of reds and yellows and greens. And so Medieval and Tudor England passed away, carrying the folk art with them that was the accumulation of the centuries.

As for ill-fared, smug America, she has practically done all of her growing in the century and a quarter, since we buy instead of make. And it would seem a biological law that the gods mete out the arts to whatever nation creates with its own hands—and withholds them from that nation which buys.

The New England "period" passed away with the pre-Revolutionary handicrafts. The handicrafts of the Kentucky and Tennessee

schools and trade outlets for the handicrafts. Dr. Stewart Cullin of the Ethnological Department of the Brooklyn Museum of Arts, who has just returned from a year's research in the peasant arts of Hungary, tells of these highly organized methods of preserving the national arts.

"Industrial trade was inevitably bringing manufactured goods to the peasants. All stimulus to create his own was disappearing, especially as he preferred the new wares. The handicrafts would have disappeared had it not been that the best art minds of the countries set themselves to work to place the national handwork on the world's markets and to see to it that the home-trained craftsmen made articles that were salable."

What is happening to the crafts of Russia behind the veil of Bolshevism is in question, but what has happened in Hungary, where the peasant class is also in the political ascendancy, is known. The intellectuals who directed the endowed craft schools have been demoted. Their places have been handed out as political plums to the newly rich peasants. And it takes intellectuals to value and preserve a national folk art against the modern economic conditions, just as it takes the "folk" to create it. When the veil is lifted from Russia the golden oak period may be in.

By precedent, it has been inevitable that the European immigrant should promptly drop his peasant embroideries and songs and call it "progress" and getting "Americanized" when there was no "intellectual" plan to hold up nature.

True, America has plenty of self-conscious art. If you don't believe me, just count the young ladies that study art—just try to count them. America buys tickets for music, and there are enough cultural departments of women's clubs, Heaven knows. And we've got so we can play our victrolas—even down to the regulating of speed.

But, as for just expressing ourselves unconsciously as amateurs through the medium of the arts, this country simply does not do it. Much less do the European peasants

that become overnight our bourgeois citizens. The raw, unpainted barns built by Scandinavian farmers grown rich and prosperous bear witness. Forgotten the steep roofs of Norway and the high porcelain stoves of Sweden!

In the old countries art was the outlet for emotions—not, as with us, a thing that you put in a frame or on a talking machine. When the peasant feels emotion he sings. He sings when he is glad and he sings when he suffers. He sings when he worships.

He sings when he is sent as exile to Siberia, folk songs that are known as the songs of the chains. The rhythm is timed to take count of the clanking. He sings when he plows, songs that evolved centuries ago, somewhat as this, "I hold a plow, I hold a plow, I use my plow,

# Americanization by Addition



Russian—Ghost Story Woven Into Lace.



Magyar Peasant Costume.



A Swedish Maud Muller.

I use my plow." As the plow became more modern—as oxen, perhaps, were introduced—the rhythm of the plowing song changed to the new rhythm of plowing. The sound and the beat of the work which the peasant performs are the orchestral accompaniment to his singing.

If the suppressed majorities of America are asked to sing, we murmur that we are sorry, but that we "really haven't a voice"—or else we think that we are trained sopranos, and then we seize the chance. Among European peasants there is no such thing as "not having a voice," unless one is literally dumb. We in America do not stop talking because of the mediocre quality of our speaking voices. Well, our method is as foreign to the peasant custom as it would be for us if we reached a country where conversation were confined to the public forum and admission charged to get in.

By the melting pot method of Americanization the immigrant has thrown his singing voice into the pot—and fished out the hunky-gurdy with a big spoon.

Who has ever heard the Italian or Hungarian or Polack peasant sing at the top of his lungs as he walks past Macdoughl Street? Probably, if he did, he would be arrested for "disorderly conduct." In America we don't do street singing unless we happen to be drunk.

But in Europe the history of the emotions and experiences of its peoples are written in its folk songs—a history that now is locked behind the lips of the newcomers.

But, frankly, the translated words of them mean little to Americans, accustomed to expressing emotions through the spoken word. The words are too elemental. The peasant does not "say it with words." He says it with wood carvings and embroideries and songs. He is in this country now with his emotions bottled up. This new philosophy of Americanization might furnish his emotions an outlet, so that we might not continue our perfected process of breeding "dangerous citizens."