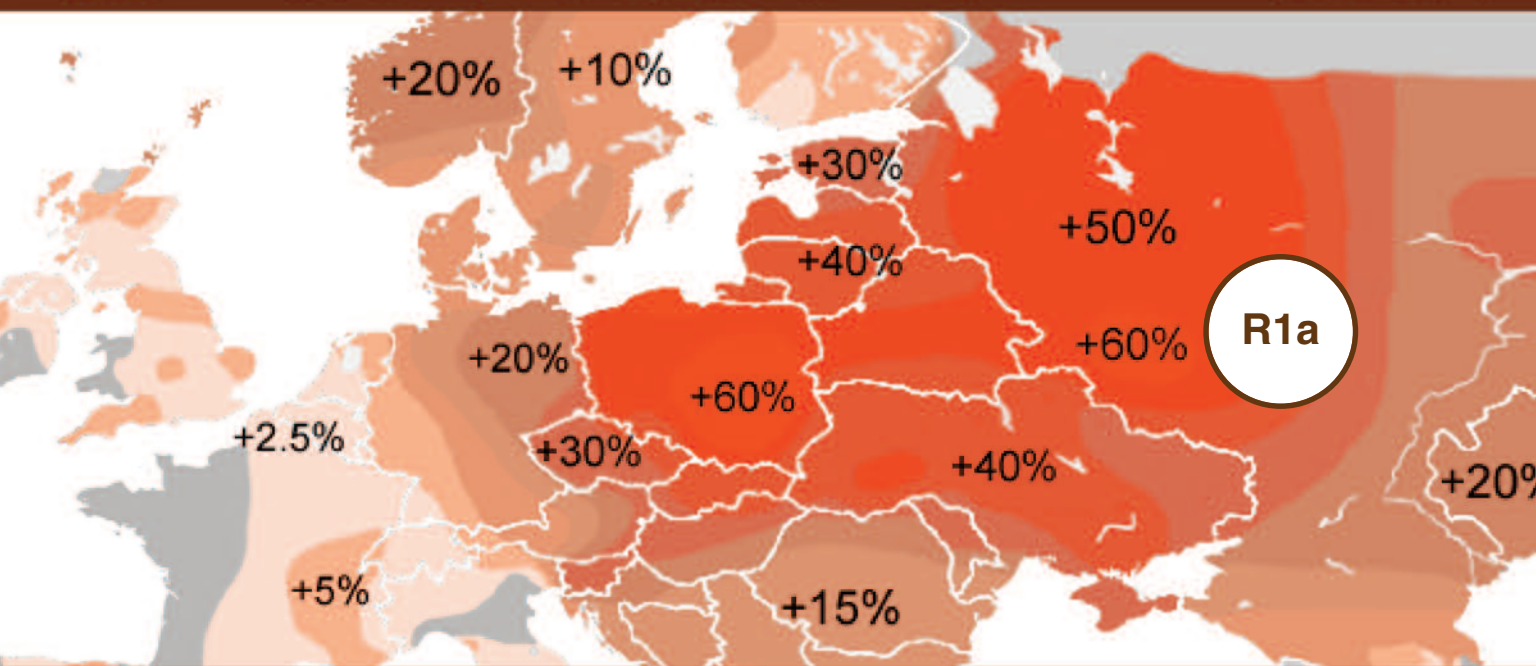


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HERITAGE

R1b



R1a

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Linksmų šv. Kalėdų!

LITHUANIAN HERITAGE

Volume 4, Number S6
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FEATURES

Lithuanians on the “Titanic”

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by Gerda Butkuvienė

It’s 104 years since the “Titanic” disaster, but new twists keep being discovered. Among them, the presence of 3, perhaps 4, Lithuanians on the liner, and another Lithuanian was captain of a rescue ship.



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Is There Lithuanian-specific DNA? An Interview with Prof. Vaidutis Kučinskas

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Are we related to the Vikings? To Slavs? To Central Europeans, or to nobody except ancient Indo-Europeans? We turn to an expert in population genetics from Vilnius for answers based on our DNA.

Searching for Roots

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by Richard Gostautas

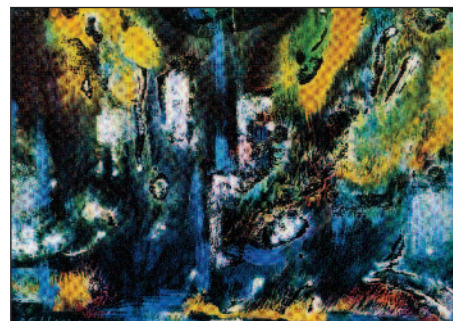
A number of useful tips on how to begin a family tree search, from an active member of Lithuanian genealogy websites.

Galdikas in Paris and New York City

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by Antanas Andrijauskas

When Galdikas left the displaced person’s camp in Germany and moved to Paris, he was exposed to new influences, and then he headed to New York where he enjoyed his most productive period.



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Hunting for Mushrooms in Vermont

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by Laima Vince Sruoginis

Camp Neringa in Vermont hosted a mushroom-picking event this autumn. Searchers were guided by two notable experts in the field.

How to Make Straw Christmas Ornaments

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by Don Astras

Don’s mother Ursula pioneered the tradition of straw Christmas tree decorations, and now Don gives detailed instructions for making them.



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Poetry 101: Janina Degutyė

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Baking Kūčiukai

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Cover Credits:

FRONT COVER: R1b, R1a, and N1c haplotype groups in Europe (Maciamo Hay, eupedia.com)

BACK COVER: Lithuanian Forest (Vytautas Knyva)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Straw Ornaments (Don Astras)

INSIDE BACK COVER: Law School students (Lidija Ringienė)

Making Straw Christmas Ornaments (*šiaudinukai*)

by Don Astras

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

Being a guy, this art form was too delicate for me. Instead, I would build stables out of scrap plywood that my Aunt Nellie (Lukoševičiūtė) would bring home from the furniture factory. I would use balsa wood for the rafters and would cover them with the chaff

and broken straw pieces that my mom would discard. I also liked to draw and sketch, and filled my school notebooks with illustrations of each topic. However, I would draw hot rods when I lost interest.

I enjoyed 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 more fully appreciate her talent and take a genuine interest in that folk art. Since 1978, I would accompany my mom to 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 art traditions to my children and to the public – teaching them how to create these beautiful straw Christmas ornaments. My mom's straw art has been displayed at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago, at the Frederick Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park and the Grand Rapids Public Museum in Michigan, at the Vilkaiviškio Krašto Muziejus in Lithuania, and at numerous other venues in the US and Canada.

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 also forged many new relationships.

In December 2015, I designed and launched the Lady of Wheat website: 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*). Her work transformed folk art into fine art. Lithuanians of all generations, their descendants, families and friends are welcome to participate in this connection to our beautiful global culture.



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

(all photos by the author)



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

Lithuanian Christmas tree ornaments have been made from natural wheat or rye straw for centuries. Traditional designs have included braids and mobiles with strings running through them. In the 1950s, my mom created intricate snowflake or geometric designs by pressing the straw onto a masking tape backing and then gluing these veneers together. These processes 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. Below are some detailed instructions on how to create your own straw ornaments.

Preparing the straw

Use this process to prepare the straw. Alternatively, you may pur-

chase wheat (already cut, soaked, split and ironed) or rye (already cut)

straw from the Straw Shop at thestrashop.com.



Remove chaff and flowers from natural wheat or rye straw. Clip off joints or knuckles and discard. Save the remaining hollow parts that are from five to fifteen inches in lengths. We prefer to use the longer pieces for flattening. Save the thicker lower pieces for mobiles (*sodai*). Save the flower stems for larger picture compositions (see my mom's online straw art picture gallery at ladyofwheat.com/ursula-astras-art-portfolio/fine-art-prints-straw-pictures/). Also, save the chaff for the manger.



Soak the straw in hot water for 30 minutes until tender.



Slit the end of a piece of straw with a toothpick or X-acto knife and iron it flat. Iron only from the inside. Using the side of the iron, curl the straw slightly. Repeat this process for the remaining straw. After the ironed straw is dry, create appliques by adhering it to a masking tape backing (1½-inch wide). We use a cardboard with slits to hold our tape in place while applying the straw. Select straw of similar shading or color and affix it to the masking tape. For a more dramatic look, you can use wheat straw for one element and rye (darker) for the other.

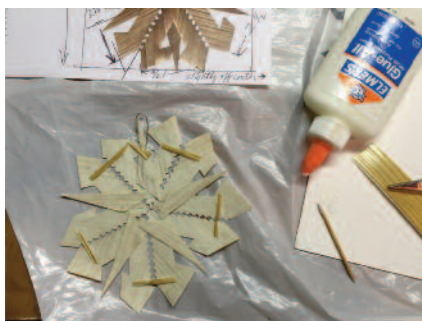


Press the straw to its backing with the back of a chisel or metal burnisher. Trim the ends of the appliqué.



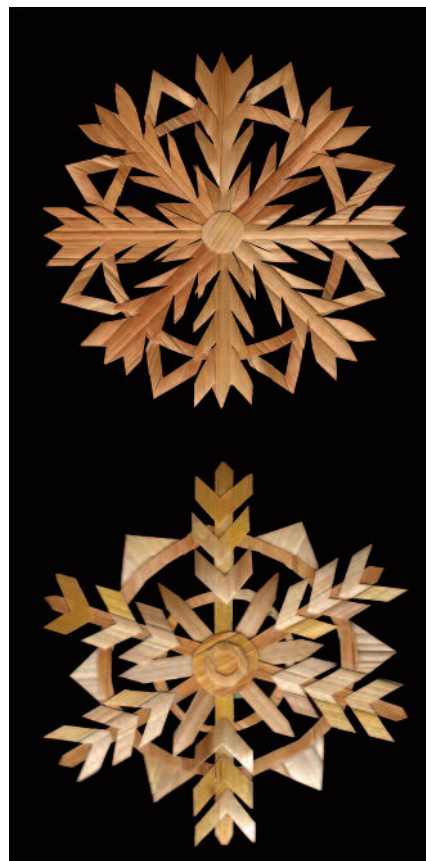
Making the design

Cut designs as desired to create radial patterns. The straw veneer can be folded lengthwise to create cutouts or patterns on each side. Likewise, a hole-punch can be used to create various negative space patterns.



After the designs are cut, connect the pieces with masking tape on the back side or use Elmer's glue to affix straw to straw. You can use a thin piece of applique to reinforce more fragile designs. Remember to place a flat portion of a plastic bag underneath to avoid getting glue on the table. Glue a decorative thread to hold a wire ornament hanger to hang from the tree. The decoration

may also be mounted on velvet or felt material using Elmer's glue and framed.



Where to get designs and patterns

On our website, ladyofwheat.com/ursula-astras-art-portfolio/lithuanian-straw-christmas-tree-ornaments/ you can find patterns that were designed by my mom and that can be used as templates featuring six or eight sides. Please feel free to simplify the designs or create your own.

Editor's note: Don is planning to conduct a workshop at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago on December 3, 2016. If you happen to be in Grand Rapids during the Christmas season, don't forget to visit the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, where the Astras ornaments and pictures are on display. Next summer, he will be teaching children how to make these ornaments at Camp Dainava during the Lithuanian Heritage Camp. Readers can contact Don at the ladyofwheat.com website or by e-mail at don.astras@sbcglobal.net.