

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Alice Wadowski-Bak received her Bachelors of Fine Arts degree from the Albright School of Art, University of Buffalo. After graduating, she moved to New York City and worked as a textile designer; an illustrator of books, magazines, and greeting cards; and as an art teacher at several colleges. The U.S. State Department invited Bak to represent the US Council of the Arts in Poland. While there, the artist met and married her husband, Andre Bak. The couple returned to New York and made their home there for several years. After the birth of her two children (Gregory, b. 1968; Kenneth, b. 1969), Bak moved back to Niagara Falls, New York, where she continued her artistic career.



In the 1970s, Bak's reputation as an artist and generous teacher of Polish-American tradition grew enormously. She served as Artist-in-Residence at the Polish Community Center in Buffalo for over ten years. In this capacity, Bak presented numerous programs on drawing, painting, and Polish folk arts such as *wycinanki* (papercutting), *pisanki* (wax-resist eggs), reverse drawing on glass, and straw arts. During this period, she also offered classes through ArtPark, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and other venues including Columbia University. Actor Vincent Price collected a number of the artist's works.

Through the 1970s and 80s, Bak received many significant commissions for her work. A Toronto-based group purchased a Bak painting that depicted Polish unions, and later presented the artwork to Lech Walesa as a gift. The Blue Army commissioned Bak to produce a painting depicting Christianity in the Americas. The painting featured Our Lady of Guadalupe and over 200 saints, holy persons, places, and events in North and South America. *History of the Church in the Americas* was presented to Pope John Paul II when he visited Toronto in 1990 and is on permanent display at the Vatican. *Wigilia*, perhaps Bak's most well-known work, was commissioned in 1985 by Milan Slahor, the founder of the Christmas Wafer Bakery and CWB Press in Lewiston, New York. The painting depicts *Wigilia*, the traditional Polish Christmas Eve feast. For decades, this painting has served as the cover art for packages of *opaltek*, the wafer bread shared by family and friends at the *wigilia* feast as a sign of reconciliation and renewal.



This exhibition and accompanying workshops are made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts celebrating 50 years of building strong, creative communities in New York State's 62 Counties.

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## FOLK ARTS PROGRAM CASTELLANI ART MUSEUM OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY



## THROUGH POLISH-AMERICAN EYES: THE ART OF ALICE WADOWSKI-BAK

March 27 - November 27, 2011



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# THROUGH POLISH-AMERICAN EYES

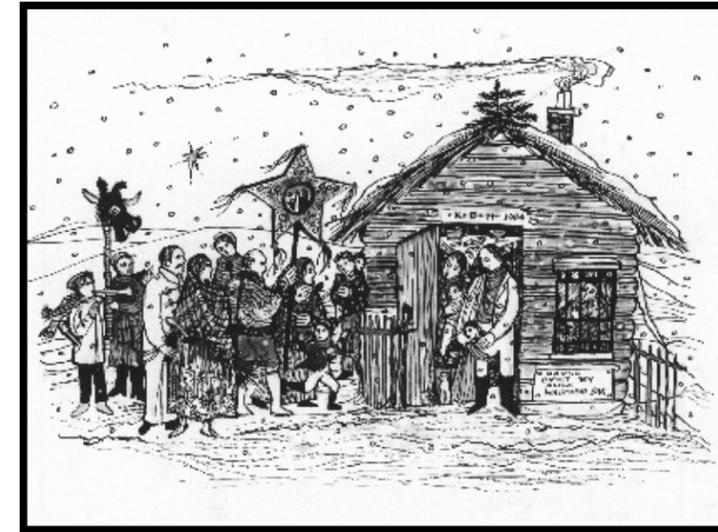
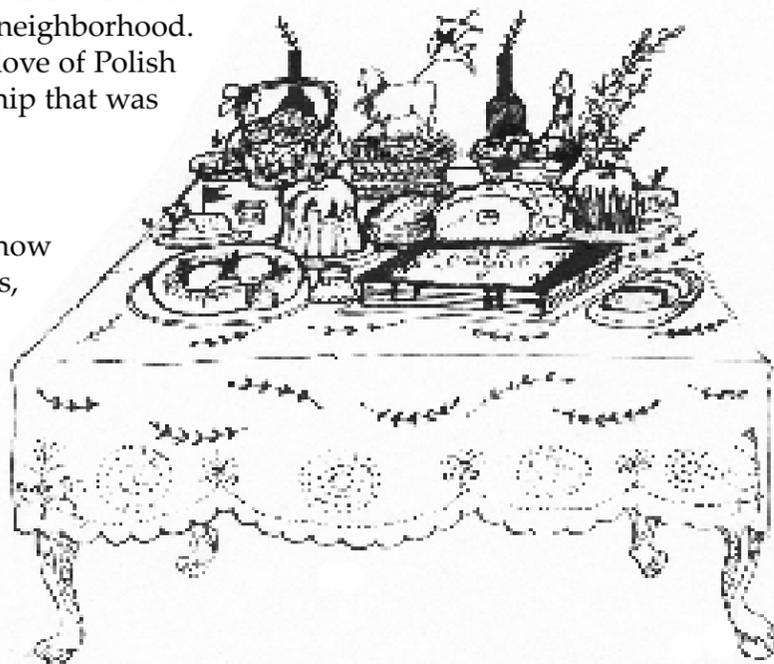
Artist Alice Wadowski-Bak (1935-2008) was born to Polish immigrant parents and grew up in a thriving Polish-American community in Niagara Falls, New York. *Through Polish-American Eyes: The Art of Alice Wadowski-Bak* is the first retrospective of the work Bak created to illustrate the traditional customs, celebrations and beliefs she learned and enjoyed as a child. In some cases, family and friends are featured in the work. Holy Trinity Church, which was her family parish, appears in several drawings.

Like most countries in Eastern Europe, Poland was largely agrarian until after World War II. Because people grew their own food to survive, pre-Christian beliefs and rituals tended to focus on ensuring successful growing seasons and harvests. Customs and celebrations followed the annual cycle of nature's seasons. After the introduction of Christianity in Poland, Catholic beliefs and liturgical celebrations were often combined with those from older times. Spring, for example, came to symbolize both the rebirth of nature and man's spiritual rebirth through the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week and Easter.



*Through Polish-American Eyes* is largely arranged to follow the annual seasonal celebrations of Polish-Americans, both sacred and secular, that take place in parish churches and family homes. Many of the beautiful black and white drawings in the exhibition were created for the book, *A Polish Christmas Eve* by the Rev. Czeslaw M. Krysa. The artist and Rev. Krysa grew up in the same Niagara Falls neighborhood. Though separated by a generation, their love of Polish heritage drew them together in a friendship that was to last over twenty-five years.

Two other sections of the exhibition show *wycinanki*, traditional Polish papercuts, that Bak produced for two books by Joanne Asala, *Polish Proverbs* (Penfield Press, 1995) and *Polish Folklore and Myth* (Penfield Press, 2001). Bak created hundreds of *wycinanki* for these and other publications, and as special gifts for family and friends.



The artworks included in this exhibition celebrate the power of customs that endure in peoples' lives through the generations. The drawings above present an especially good example of how traditions change, but retain a special meaning, over time. In the first, costumed carolers carrying a traditional star shaped lantern, or *gwiazdka*, are greeted at the door of a rustic cottage in 19th century rural Poland. In the second drawing, a Polish-American family gathers in their living room, perhaps during the 1940s or 50s, to sing the same carols that were shared and enjoyed a century earlier.

Valerie Walawender  
Guest Curator

Our thanks to: the AmPol Eagle; Claudia Andres; DiCamillo's Bakery; EuroDeli; Kenneth Bak; Gregory Bak; Natalie Bak; Patrick Buechi; Jim Charlier; Echo Society; Barbara Frankiewicz; Patricia Frederick; Biff Henrich; The Kosciuszko Foundation; Rev. Czeslaw Michal Krysa, S.L.D.; M & R Nursery; Joseph Macielag; Patrick McPartland; Michael Parsnick; The Lewiston Porter-Sentinel; The New York Folklore Society; The Niagara Falls Historical Society; Niagara University Information Technology Department; Milan Slahor; Tops Friendly Markets; Western New York Catholic Newspaper; and the staff and volunteers of the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University.

**Illustrations:** (Cover) *My Musical DNA*, 1988; (Inside pages): *Blessed Easter Basket*, circa 1988; *Blessed Easter Table*, circa 1988; *Carolers in Poland*, 1984; *Polish-American Caroling Family*, 1994