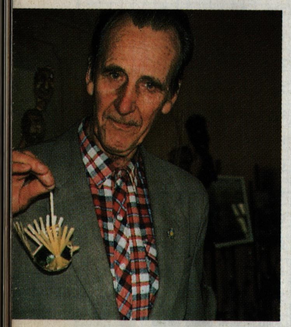
LITHUANIAN STRAW SODAS

ORNAMENTS OF CELEBRATION

M. KATI MEEK

KESTUTIS KAUŠYLA found me in the medieval courtyard of old-town Vilnius, Lithuania. Baltica '93, an international folk festival, was in full swing; performers from around the world joined with Lithuanian musicians and dancers to celebrate the richness of many traditions. My husband and I were representing eighteenth-century Scotland through its traditional bagpipe music and dances. The opportunity to participate in the festival had come to us by chance when I was on a textile research trip to Lithuania in 1992. While I was waiting for the last piece of a national costume reproduction I had commissioned to be finished, a woman who turned out to be Zita Kelmickaitė, the director of the Baltic International Folk Life Festival for 1993, noticed among photographs I had with me some of my husband playing the bagpipe as I danced. She soon had invited us to participate in Baltica '93, and we had found our way back to Lithuania to do so.



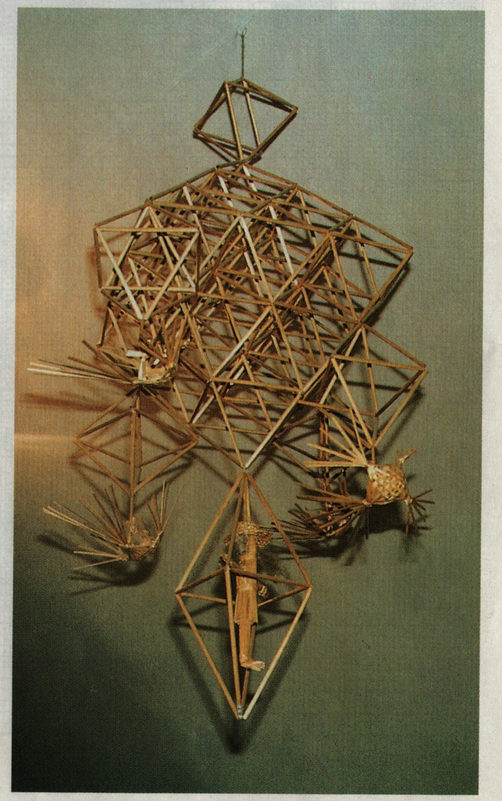
Kestutis Kaušyla, of Vilnius, Lithuania, and one of his straw sodas birds.
Photograph by M. Kati Meek.

The festival involved bus travel with twelve groups from around the world and performances in parks, courtyards, auditoriums, and concert halls across the country. Lithuanian audiences, children especially, enjoy rewarding performers with bouquets of flowers. This time, however, a whiskery face greeted me, and from a garland around his neck, the man selected and gave me, not flowers, but a lacy bird woven from golden straw.

Many of the Baltica Festival reception rooms were decorated with straw ornaments hanging over the reception tables. Many of the straw mobiles had straw birds like the one I had been given hanging from them. By talking with Kestutis Kaušyla, the man who had given me the bird, and with others, I began to learn about these traditional straw *sodas.*

According to an ancient, pre-Christian tradition in Lithuania, a groom and his family present the bride-to-be with a straw sculpture representing the tree of life. This sodas, whose name translates as "orchard" or "garden," is an airy golden geometric construction made of lengths of wheat straw fastened with linen yarn. The size of sodas varies from a few inches to more than 5 feet in diameter. They are often decorated with grain, flowers, acorns, greens, paper stars, even bits of amber. Traditionally, they contain a "gardener" figure. Frequently, small straw birds adorn the sodas. Although sometimes made of dried grasses and placed within the straw construction, the birds are most often woven of flattened straw and hung from various points and from the bottom of the sodas.

The irrepressible artistic flair of Lithuanians has taken the bird from the straw sodas and made it into an endearing talisman in itself, presented on many occasions as a gift. The bird seems to represent the entire straw ornament now, as the term "sodas" is used for the bird alone as well as for the larger structure. The woven straw birds often hold decorated eggs at Easter time.



Straw sodas with the figure of a gardener, by Kestutis Kaušyla, of Vilnius, Lithuania.
Photograph by M. Kati Meek.

Lithuania, the site of Baltica '93. The traditional folk art of making straw sodas has been prevalent in the northeastern part of the country.

Mr. Kaušyla, my benefactor, was born in Utena, Lithuania, in 1922 and taught himself to make birds when he was young. "I saw them and copied what I saw. I make them the same way now, but the quality is higher." His mother, a teacher in the city, wove sashes and made butter at home; his father, a self-employed metalsmith, made everything from keys to pipes to turbines. Mr. Kaušyla continued,

> Young and old, male and female Lithuanians make birds of all kinds. Men tend to like wood carving [Lithuanian wood carving is well known for its originality and expressive imagery] more than straw sculpture, but it is a good feeling to participate in the tradition of making birds. My son grows the straw in his garden. My wife and children help with cutting. The longest joints are made into braids for hats. The shorter pieces are for sodas. The chickens eat the grain heads. I used to make birds only for friends and relatives, but now I make many more birds to sell in shops. People like to give them as gifts. The custom is especially strong in the northeast of Lithuania, the region called Aukštaitija. I can make ten birds in about eight hours. To make a large sodas takes about two days, after the straw is prepared.

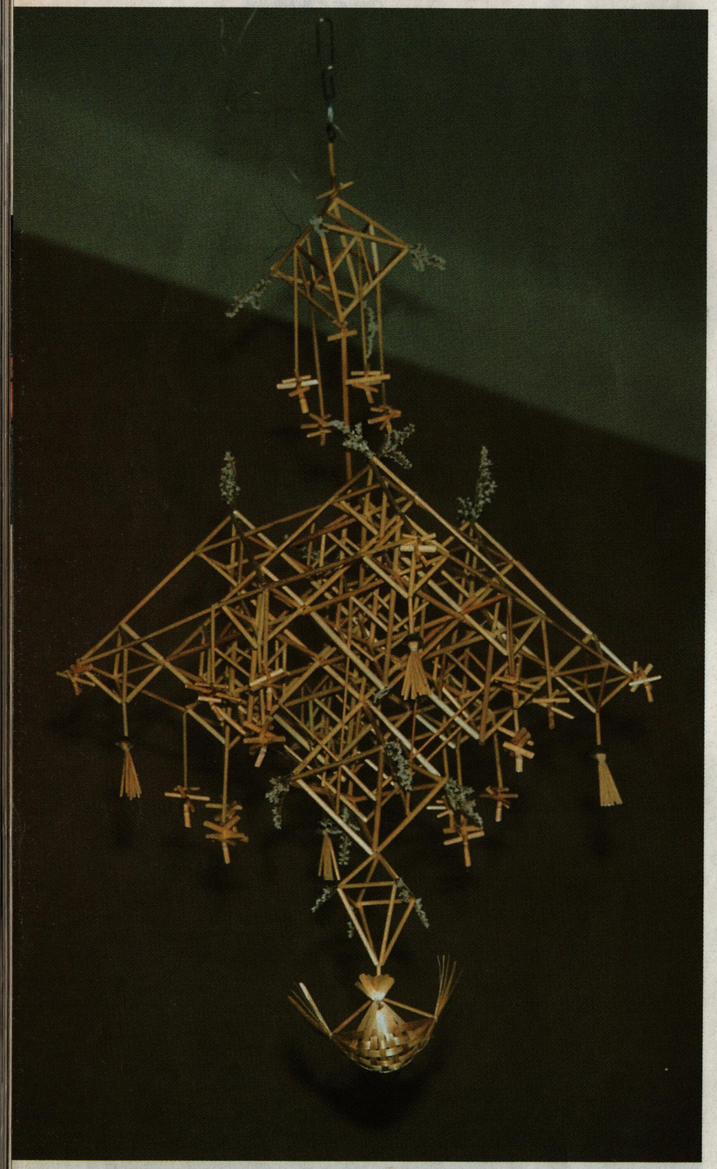
HISTORICAL SODAS FORMS AND MATERIALS

The simplest sodas is an angled construction that often takes the form of two pyramids with a common square base. This basic shape is a repeated element in most of the complex sodas as well, with smaller versions of it built inside or hanging from the four corners of the central form. Although some sodas are cone-shaped, round, or cubic, most are based on the double pyramid form. So that they would spin smoothly, lightweight sodas were hung on waxed thread or horsehair.

Throughout their history, sodas have varied in material as well as in shape. They have been made of pliable twigs or rue stems covered with myrtle and juniper branches. Early sodas were fir or juniper trees hung upside down over the table and decorated with apples,

Detail of straw sodas by Kestutis Kaušyla with birds visible inside the straw construction.
Photograph by M. Kati Meek.

candies, pinecones, nuts, cookies, birds, and the figure of an old gardener made of straw. Some fir sodas were ornamented with vegetables such as carrots, onions, garlic, radishes, turnips, and even cabbages. Sometimes wooden sticks were inserted in the vegetables and lit to burn like the Christmas candles used on fir trees centuries later.



Straw sodas with bird suspended from its lowest point. Made by Kestutis Kaušyla, of Vilnius, Lithuania.

Celebrations in Straw

Straw sodas were traditionally used in wedding celebrations. They were often central to the proceedings, sometimes being haggled over or "ransomed" in ritual "contending" between the bride's and the groom's families.

The wedding sodas seem to represent the basic parts of the universe: sky, trees or forest, fruits, birds, rivers, and gardener. Songs about the sodas sung in traditional ceremonies described how within the sodas the sky is visible, the birds sing, the rivers flow, and the sun rises. With those associations and its basic meaning of garden (with the additional suggestion of a walled or protected garden, an earthly "paradise"), the sodas clearly symbolize the abundance with which everyone hopes the marriages will be blessed. The festive wedding table, at which the newlyweds sit, is a symbol of the earthly garden. The sodas hanging above the table represents the tree of life under which the couple's union takes place.

A Living Folk Art

In present-day Lithuania, I have found straw sodas in many places. One 5 feet in diameter hangs in the stairwell of a craft school in Kaunas. It is a complex geometric form with a hidden motor that turns it. I have seen sodas 1½ to 2 feet in diameter in restaurants and in apartments from Klaipėda to Vilnius. In the office of the museum of musical instruments in Kaunas, a 7-foot-long bird of straw and grasses was suspended from the ceiling. In Klaipėda, a Baltic seaport, sodas decorated every folk-art center we visited; in Palanga, another Baltic coast town, sodas were displayed prominently at an exhibit of folk art. Although admittedly I traveled in folk-art circles, I was nevertheless impressed with the frequent visions of these celebrations in straw that still seem to play an active part in Lithuanian folk life.

Note: Some of the information in the article is taken from a translation by Paul F. Endzelis of an article by J. Vaiskunas, in *Liaudies Kultūra*, 4, 1992.

About the Author. *M. Kati Meek is a handweaver, textile researcher, and Scottish folk dancer who lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She works as a sales merchandiser for Johnson & Johnson.*

A Sodas Bird to Make

DESIGNED BY VIDA BELKYTĖ AND M. KATI MEEK

VIDA BELKYTĖ, one of the organizers of Baltica '93, the international folk festival that took me to Lithuania, agreed to show me how to make the sodas birds. She is a bird maker who makes sodas only to give, never to sell: "My own energy goes into my birds and makes them special for my friends," she comments. She showed me how she makes the birds so that I may make my own as ornaments or for giving.

The festive straw birds, each about 4 inches long, are shown holding naturally dyed hen's eggs. A small flock of these airy creations can decorate your dining room for Easter or any spring celebration.

The straw for making sodas is traditionally gathered from the field just before harvest when the wheat stems are golden and shiny. Those without a handy wheat field can mail-order suitable wheat straw from The H. H. Perkins Co., 10 South Bradley Rd., Woodbridge, CT 06525. Call (800) 462-6660 or (203) 389-9501 for a free catalog. One packet of their Weaving Wheat will make several sodas birds.

After making your first wheat straw sodas, you'll have the hang of it, and soon you'll have a small flock of celebrative, egg-laden birds to nest on or fly above your dinner table.

Materials

Wheat straw (only the stems will be used)
Scissors and ruler
Unbleached plied linen yarn or
No. 8 pearl cotton thread
Chenille or crewel needle
Spring clothespin or large paper clip (optional)

Soak the wheat straw the day before you plan to make the sodas. Cut it into lengths at the joints, discarding the joints and seed heads. Soak the cut lengths in water for about 12 hours. Reserve at least one piece of dry straw for each bird you intend to make. (Note: you may soak the straw for as little as 4 hours if you wish to prepare the straw and make the sodas in one day. In this case, keep the straw damp after soaking by wrapping it in a wet towel until it's needed.)

1. Flatten the straw between your fingers and split it in half or quarters with a fingernail or the needle so that each section of straw is about 1/8 inch wide. You'll need fourteen flat pieces of straw about 10 inches long and two pieces about 15 inches long for each bird.

Note: Three, six, nine, seven, or twelve are considered "good" numbers and may be reflected in the construction of your bird. Vida chose seven, which means her bird required seven 10-inch flat pieces of straw for the body and another seven for the wings. If you choose another number, you'll need twice that number of 10-inch pieces of straw for the body and wings plus the two 15-inch pieces for finishing.

2. Arrange seven of the 10-inch pieces in a fan with their stems crossing about one-third of the way from one set of ends. Keep all the pieces flat, with the inside of the stem facing up. Wrap the crossing point once with linen or pearl cotton thread, tie firmly with a square knot, and trim the ends. This will be the bird's neck. The clothespin or paper clip is useful for holding the straws in place while you tie them.

3. One at a time, weave each of the seven remaining 10-inch pieces alternately over and under the fanned lengths, centering them across the long portion of the original seven. Keep the straws flat and the inside of the straw facing up. The free ends of these interwoven straws represent the wings. After the straws are in place, use your fingers to work them close together behind the tied neck (Illustration 1). Gather the ends of the original seven straws behind the strips you have just woven in. Tie them together to make the tail fan and trim the thread.

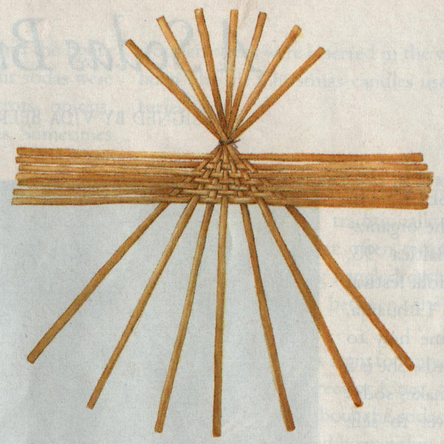


Illustration 1

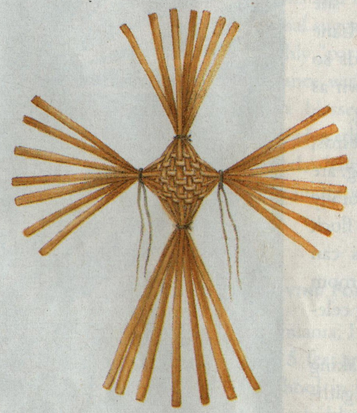


Illustration 2

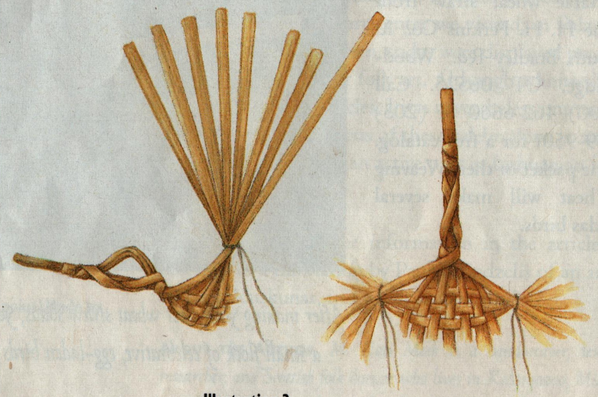


Illustration 3

Illustration 4

Illustration 5

4. Shape the woven straw into a rounded abdomen with your thumbs and forefingers. The outside of the straw becomes the outside of the bird's abdomen.

5. Gather the wing straws on each side of the woven abdomen together, pinching them into a fan shape. Tie each wing at the base of the fan with a 5-inch length of linen or pearl cotton thread, leaving the ends of the thread untrimmed. The "feathers" in the wing should be about 3 inches long (Illustration 2).

6. Before starting the head, make sure that the remaining lengths of straw are still damp and pliable. If the neck and head straws have dried out, soak them in water for 30 minutes. Gather the straws forward of the neck into two groups. Bend the top set to form an angle that becomes the top of the head; the bottom straws stay straight. With thread, tie the top (bent) set of straws to the bottom set to form the beak. Trim the thread. To cover the thread tie, center one of the 15-inch pieces of straw over the thread tie on the beak. Wrap both ends around the beak, crossing twice on top and twice below. From the top of the beak, cross the ends under the throat to the neck and wrap them around the neck two or three times. The number of wraps determines the length of the bird's neck and can be varied. Carry the ends from the underside of the neck to the wings and tie them in place with the same thread that ties the wings. Do not trim the thread yet (Illustration 3).

7. Use the remaining long piece of straw to make a bridle so the bird can fly. Center the straw under a wing tie, bring the ends around the tie, and twist the two strands firmly together along their entire length to make a bridle arching to the other wing tie. Pass the end of the bridle around the wing tie. Tie the bridle straws in place with the ends of thread already there. Trim the ends of the bridle straws close to the tie and trim any remaining ends of thread.

8. With scissors, trim the wings, tail, and beak to a shallow point.

9. Cut each wing and tail straw once lengthwise to make feathers.

10. Cut a piece of dry, round straw about 3 inches long. Thread it onto a piece of linen or pearl cotton thread 24 inches long, or as long as you need to hang the sodas bird. Tie one end of the thread to the center of the bridle and slide the round straw down the thread to cover the knot (Illustration 4).

Enjoy your bird in flight!