

Foreword

Travellers in Lithuania, both residents and foreign visitors alike, often find themselves captivated by ornate crosses, elegant roofed pillars, solemn column shrines, and small wayside shrines scattered at roadsides, homesteads, town squares, and churchyards. Over several centuries, these monuments of cross-crafting have woven themselves seamlessly into the fabric of Lithuanian landscape. Those intrigued by this rich domain of folk art may already have perused albums and publications showcasing cross-crafting across Lithuania. Yet, despite this widespread appreciation for its artistic merit, the historical evolution of Lithuanian cross-crafting remains a relatively uncharted territory. To address this gap, researchers from the Sacral Art Heritage Department of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute have prepared this bilingual Lithuanian-English publication.

Readers are guided through a comprehensive journey, starting with the earliest references to crosses in 16th-century Lithuania, followed by the proliferation of this tradition during the 18th and 19th centuries, the beginning of research into the cross-crafting tradition in the early 20th century, a classification of monument forms. It also delves into the distinct characteristics of this craft, with a spotlight on the work of the unique cross-crafter and god-maker Vincas Svirskis, as well as the circumstances that led to the formation of the hillocks of vows, the history of the Hill of Crosses, the origins of the Caravaca cross, the conception of the idea of the “Lithuanian” cross in the interwar period, the complexities of cross-crafting during the Soviet era and within the Lithuanian diaspora, and the evolution of this tradition after the restoration of independence in 1990.

The enduring tradition of cross-crafting, which has persevered across centuries and continues to thrive today, has garnered global acclaim. Recognizing its rich diversity of forms and profound significance in the lives of individuals, families, communities, the nation, and the state, as well as its remarkable resilience, evident even during challenging historical periods, alongside its enduring presence in contemporary society, in 2001, cross-crafting was designated a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Intangible and Oral Heritage of Humanity, and in 2008, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

We envision that this publication, crafted for both Lithuanian audiences and international readers, will disseminate awareness of this cherished cultural heritage on a broader scale, fostering deeper understanding, preservation, and continued cultivation of the cross-crafting tradition.