

DRAWING STRAWS

In recent years, the Baltic craft of constructing artful shapes out of straw has become a winning Christmas tradition – but there's far more to 'himmelis' than mere decoration.

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A straw star sways gently in Marija Liugiene's kitchen window. Look a little closer and you'll spot intricate configurations forming a cross inside it. This is just one of many *himmelis* in Liugiene's whitewashed house in a leafy suburb of Vilnius. She spends much of her time on her light-filled, glass-fronted veranda, surrounded by her impeccably constructed straw mobiles, threading a long, flexible needle through rye straws that have been cleaned and cut to size.

"Cleaning straw is boring but that's why I have a husband," she says with a delighted laugh. He has also fashioned a cutting tool that saves her hours of trimming the stalks by hand. "If you want a *himmeli* to look good, you have to use carefully measured lengths," she says, while balancing a delicate star in the palm of her hand.

Every *himmeli* starts with a simple triangle. In the Baltics and beyond, people have been creating geometrical shapes using straw for centuries, the slender yet surprisingly strong stalks held together with linen string. "Himmelis have many meanings," says Liugiene. "They represent heaven and life on Earth, hold the spirits of the ancestors and can ward off the evil eye."

About half of Lithuania's total area is used for agriculture and its people's relationship with the soil and straw has remained strong. The art of making *himmelis*, locally known as *sodai* (translating as "gardens"), began to disappear in the mid-20th century but now it is blooming again. Liugiene, who grew up in a rural village, is the head of a 66-strong association of *sodai*-makers and has spearheaded the resurgence of the craft.

"We came to a point when *sodai* didn't resonate and Lithuanians no longer saw them as special or interesting," she says. "That was when I realised that it was my calling to remind people about them. Holding straw in your hand gives you a primal feeling. It has a lot of meaning in this country. It illustrates the cycle of life." Liugiene now runs *sodai* workshops, takes part in exhibitions and promotes the craft; she was instrumental in bringing about Unesco's decision to add it to the list of the nation's intangible cultural heritage. She also educates people about the meanings of *sodai* and their long history in the region.



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These straw sculptures are more than just decorations. They are works of art that can grow and incorporate ever more elaborate shapes. A medium-sized mobile typically consists of several hundred pieces. There are no hard-and-fast rules and every craftsperson adds flourishes, decorating their *himmelis* with designs such as birds or angels. "When I'm working on a new 'garden', I add and add," says Liugiene. "Then, if it doesn't feel right, I take something away or even start again. Some of them require several days of working from morning until night. I wouldn't say that I fall into a trance when I'm working on *sodai* but I don't want to be doing anything else."

A lot of effort goes into a *himmeli* before the making process can even begin. It all starts with the harvest, which usually takes place on or soon after St John's Day (the longest day of the year). The straw is then laid out to dry and changes in colour from green to a golden brown, which takes several weeks. Once ready, the rye, whose stalks can reach some two metres in length, is cut into various sizes and sorted by thickness.

The universal shapes of *himmelis* resonate beyond this part of the world. People in countries as distant as Australia and Japan have taken up working with straw in this way. Though the mobiles are made to celebrate a range of important occasions, from weddings to births, they are particularly lovely at Christmas and increasing numbers of festive stars, angels and crosses are being sold during the winter months. Even Lithuania's

presidential palace has decorated its official tree with Liugiene's straw handiwork in recent years.

For Liugiene, this is a passion project but she also sells her creations through word of mouth – something that is helped by the fact that Lithuania is a small country with close-knit communities. The most that she has received for her *sodai* is €600 but prices vary from maker to maker. Her work is currently on display at the Gallery of the Union of Lithuanian Folk Artists in Vilnius. "My style is quite dry and architectural," she says. "I don't decorate so much because I want the construction to be visible."

Both young and old attend Liugiene's workshops. She knows that some people see *himmelis* simply as decorations for their homes but she hopes that, once they learn a little more about the craft, their shapes will take on a special meaning. "Intuitively, people want to work with straw again," she says, thumbing a handful of rye that has been readied for her next project. "It's tied to our identity as a people." — **K** sodai.eu

1. Craftswoman Marija Liugiene
2. Rye stalks, ready to be cleaned and cut
3. Finished pieces in Liugiene's work room
4. Some of her intricate patterns