

# INTRODUCING BEREHYNIA a mural by John Kuna

By Lana Matskiv



When the Bloor line subway train emerges from the tunnel and takes a brief ride in the sun between Keele and High Park stations, everyone on board turns towards a stunning mural on the back wall of the Shevchenko Museum, an acclaimed Ukrainian cultural hub in Toronto's West End. The central image of the mural is both mysterious and, most decidedly, impactful. It is the figure of a woman whose face is half lit, yet radiant with a warm glow. She is in the brilliant colours of traditional Ukrainian folk dress. Her head is

encircled by a shining wreath of golden wheat which reads almost like a halo. She is concentrated on her task, embroidering a Ukrainian ritual cloth (*rushnyk*) with images of blossoms and an ancient symbol of the tree of life. She is *Berehynya*, the protector of Ukraine itself.

For centuries, the woman's role of matriarch in Ukrainian society has always been supremely important. Endowed with wisdom and a loving heart, a stalwart supporter of the family and one who tends the ever-burning hearth, *Berehynya* threads the nation's past and future. A guardian of Ukrainian heritage, traditions and customs, she is responsible for passing them on to succeeding generations. Most importantly, *Berehynya* protects the soul of the nation with its focus on values of love, beauty and creativity. The essence of the central figure suggests a broader connotation, one which carries a larger emotional weight. This depth of narrative is particularly striking in the new artwork, created by renowned Toronto muralist John Kuna.

*"From the very start, the biggest challenge for me, as an artist, was to convey within a matter of a few seconds the meaning of the central figure as a positive archetype",* John Kuna recalls. *"It is exactly how much time the viewer has to contemplate the work, when viewing it from a subway train. But I also had to tackle a larger range of subjects for those approaching it at close range".*

*"The idea of creating a mural with Ukrainian content originated when our freshly-painted museum wall was vandalised by taggers",* says Bernardine Dobrowolsky, President of the Board of Directors. *"We realised that our walls could serve a much nobler purpose by communicating in the language of public art, by creating an image that would help educate Torontonians about the Ukrainian cultural heritage, by beautifying the area, and becoming a source of inspiration for local residents. John Kuna was the obvious choice",* continues Bernardine. *"In the old Islington Village, he had recently created a number of memorable murals, much loved by the general public and revered by historians of Toronto's urban development. We are immensely proud of ours, both in terms of its content and technical rendering".*

In explaining his process, John says, *"Working on a project, I develop a composition which integrates with its surroundings. I work with exterior house paint, which is highly pigmented and the most durable and weatherproof. I mix my own colours, and paint in a watercolour technique".*

The agreement with the museum was to draw inspiration from the art of Taras Shevchenko, whose name the museum bears. A colossal figure in nineteenth century Ukrainian literature and history, Taras Shevchenko, a magnificent poet, writer, artist and folklorist, was a public and political figure whose call for Ukrainian independence and self-determination is more relevant today than ever. His artistic legacy includes oil paintings, watercolours, drawings and etchings characterised by realism and often imbued with a humanist and patriotic spirit. The central figure in the mural is inspired by *Kateryna*, one of Shevchenko's most powerful paintings. Completed in 1842, it is an illustration to his own poem *Kateryna*, named for its central female character.

The face, at the centre of the dynamic composition, is enhanced by the national garment, boldly rendered in deep shades of red and gold. The vibration of colours and abundance of detail invite the viewer to pause and explore the richness of the Ukrainian cultural treasure chest. The beaded *gerdan*, close to the woman's neck, is supported by strands of shells, coins, and coral, all of which serve to demonstrate social status and protection from evil spirits. The halo of wheat, a symbol of wealth and prosperity, is a glorious reference to the fertile soil of Ukraine. The hovering white doves stir the tranquility of the sky with the turbulence of their wings. Restless and unable to roost, their jittery flight disrupts the calm. According to the artist, they represent the souls of those who have lost their lives and whose memory is with us forever.

The meshing of the embroidered *rushnyk* with the two firebirds painted in the Petrykivka folk art style, suggests a nod to the works of Gustav Klimt and Alphonse Mucha. *"I was exposed to the Art Nouveau style, since childhood, by virtue of my Czech origins, so it meandered onto the mural quite naturally"*, claims John Kuna. *"My Slavic roots flow from the same river, and that helped me explore the most important elements of Ukrainian art with deep insight and appreciation"*.

The museum's mission is to share the beauty of our ancestral lands and the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Ukrainian people. It is the undaunted spirit of the nation that is at the heart of the Berehynya mural. And we hope the public will relate to it and embrace its narrative within the contemporary context.