



T. H. Shevchenko
1814 - 1861

Shevchenko Museum Музей Шевченка

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LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: How the Shevchenko Museum is adapting to changing societal needs

by Lana Matskiv, Master of Arts, Shevchenko Museum board member, member of the Union of Journalists of Ukraine since 1986, artist.

A line of women, men, and children is waiting to take long strips of white fabric from a basket. Their purpose is to tie and twist this fabric onto a netting to make a winter camouflage – an exact replica of military equipment used to disguise Ukrainian war machines on the battlefield.

As the work progresses and people take turns, the fibres begin to change colour, as if human touch were bringing them to life. There are names, wishes, and prayers in ink and pencil left by the weavers. They complete their task and step aside, wiping away tears and whispering names of loved ones lost in the long months of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. It is February 4, 2024, Toronto, Ontario, Canada and the war in Ukraine has been going on for nearly two years. The white camouflage netting is stretched inside an exhibition gallery of the Shevchenko Museum – a sight that, not so long ago, was unimaginable. Yet, on that day, there it was, centre stage under bright lights – entwined emotions, heart-felt tenderness and sorrow, anger and love. An umbilical cord connecting makers and visitors to their ancestral land. A symbol of the new reality within the halls of the Shevchenko Museum.

This interactive weaving experience was in conjunction with “A Diary of War”, a recent exhibition by eight young Ukrainian artists of posters reflecting their first-hand experience of the war, together with works of children's art donated by the art school from Sokal in the Lviv region of Ukraine. Over the following weeks, the net would

grow in size daily. Twenty days later, a guided tour would serve as a sombre reminder of February 24, 2022, the day Russia launched missiles into the peaceful skies over Ukraine. Most of the children's art was sold via a series of fund-raising raffles, but a section of the net remains as an artifact in the museum.

From its founding in 1952, the Shevchenko Museum has been the only Ukrainian cultural establishment on the North American continent fully dedicated to the life, art, and literary legacy of Taras Shevchenko.

“Our museum has always pursued three major lines of work – the first being to promote Taras Shevchenko's huge contribution to world culture both as a national poet and prophet who inspired generations of Ukrainians worldwide and as an individual who was twice celebrated by UNESCO. The second is to collect and preserve materials pertaining to the history of Ukrainian immigrant settlers in Canada. And then, there is the important mission of disseminating the glorious culture of Ukraine by promoting Ukrainian fine and folk art to a broad Canadian audience,” says Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, the museum's director and its intellectual driving force. “But with the influx of the new wave of Ukrainian refugees escaping the brutality of the war in Ukraine, the priorities are shifting and dictating a new meaning and purpose. We have to rise to the demands of the time. This means both responding to the increased Canadian interest in all things Ukrainian, and meeting emotional, social and intellectual needs of the recent wave of Ukrainian immigration to this country”.

With the easing of COVID restrictions near the end of 2021, and the approach of the 208th birthday of Taras Shevchenko, the museum, in collaboration with Alla Yevdokimova, Ukrainian-Canadian artist and founder of Art Heritage School, decided to hold an exhibition of children's art called “My Shevchenko, My World”.

Then, the unthinkable happened. On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine and the full-scale invasion began. Despite this, the children's art project proceeded, with the unanimous decision that all funds collected from the sale of the paintings and souvenirs from the museum's collection be donated to Ukraine. That highly-successful exhibition raised over \$4,000 for humanitarian aid to Ukraine. From that

time, working with youth on a regular basis has become an integral part of the museum's functioning.

The war has been a key factor in turning the attention of Canadians to Ukraine and has brought about a palpable change in public response. From the outset, the museum was flooded with a record number of visitors from all walks of life. Some even came directly from the airport, with their baggage in tow, eager to have a guided tour and learn more about the history and customs of the country in which its citizens demonstrated such exceptional courage. Many visitors gave generous monetary donations for Ukraine, and some even offered to help teach English to refugees. To this day, interest has not waned as more and more members of the general public come by for visits and tours.

One major gesture of support was "United for Ukraine", a fundraising concert organised by the National Ballet of Canada's legendary prima ballerina Sonia Rodriguez who requested the loan of six paintings to serve as a backdrop for a performance by leading Toronto artists. Additionally, the Shevchenko Museum joined the Canadian Coalition for Cultural Heritage in Ukraine to help museums in Ukraine which struggle to preserve their collections under war conditions. The Shevchenko Museum helped by supplying over one hundred inflammable blankets to their Ukrainian colleagues, while also conducting on-going fundraising projects to help Ukraine.

And then there were hundreds who came with a different kind of baggage – one which held memories and hopes. Their former lives ruined, homes destroyed, and dreams crushed by the aggressors, recent Ukrainian refugees came to the museum to seek solace and support while they build a life in Canada. Within months, the Shevchenko Museum became a pilgrimage site for newcomers, drawn to it by the power of the name it bears:

"The Shevchenko Museum is my home away from home. I find strength in the Kobzar's words which are more relevant today than ever", observed Olena Redko, a refugee from Kyiv, who is a classical ballet dancer. "Being here is like breathing the fresh air along the banks of my beloved Dnipro River. Without the museum, my immigration experience would have been much harder. It not only connects me with

my cultural roots, but it also helps ease my children's transition into their new country by keeping them involved in Ukrainian art projects".

Together with her young children, Olena Redko takes painting and drawing classes at Art Heritage School with instructor Alla Yevdokimova, who encourages her students to study Ukrainian folk art, and to be inspired by it. They participated in the "My Shevchenko, My World" exhibition. Since then, there were several more events with the participation of children as young as five years of age. A subsequent children's art show, "Maria Prymachenko through the Eyes of Children", was another success.

"From the museum's inception in 1952 in Oakville, Ontario, its halls have never been so full of children's voices and laughter", says Bernardine Dobrowolsky, president of the museum. "We are blessed to see how essential we are in the lives of young families of refugees and happy to pass the torch to this new generation of the Ukrainian diaspora".

Notably, the museum's board of directors has encouraged wider use of the Ukrainian language in the daily work of its personnel to accommodate the needs of a new, growing cohort of over twenty five volunteers and as many educators in various art-related disciplines. They give art lectures, demonstrations, lessons, as well as art therapy sessions to children and adults. Their master classes in traditional Ukrainian folk arts such as pysanka writing, straw weaving, regional styles of embroidering, and motanka-doll making, to name a few, have become an integral part of the museum's daily activities. These classes, which are usually fully booked, help new immigrants, and especially their young children, to gain a sense of belonging and to feel the magic of creating an object with their own hands. They also create a heart-warming experience of community, the joyful bonding of new friends.

In the spring of 2023, the Shevchenko Museum undertook the initiative to hold "Ancestral Voices", a highly-successful exhibition of traditional folk costumes representing various regions of Ukraine. The exhibits were comprised of garments from the museum's permanent collection along with items from the private collection of Toronto-based ethnographer and scholar Olha Klymenko. Ms. Klymenko conducted a well-attended curatorial tour on the origins, ornamentation, materials,

and uses of the clothing. The display was supplemented by enlarged copies of historical photographs from our colleagues at the Ivan Honchar Museum in Ukraine.

The second initiative was undertaken by Margaryta Puhachenko, a refugee and art-history graduate student with the Borys Grinchenko University of Kyiv. She facilitated a series of lectures between the university and the Shevchenko Museum. The lectures debuted on November 26, 2023 with Professor Olga Shkolna's online presentation "Silk in the Culture of Ukrainians". The second lecture entitled "Glass Jewellery on Ethnically-Ukrainian Lands from Antiquity to the Present" was delivered by Marharyta Puhachenko. The third, "Decorated Eggs in Various Cultures of the World" by Professor Shkolna, took place on April 7, 2024. In conjunction with the approach of Ukrainian Easter, in May, 2024, the museum is offering pysanka-writing master classes for all ages.

The Shevchenko Museum, in its current incarnation, opened in Toronto in September of 1995. As of 2019, it has a newly-renovated facility with an impactful façade facing Bloor Street West. Close to the centre of Toronto's Ukrainian community, it has a large exhibition hall showcasing the life and work of Taras Shevchenko, a heritage gallery, a contemporary art gallery, a library and creative spaces for art classes, workshops, rehearsals, concerts and day camps for school children. In order to heighten awareness about Ukraine the museum has commissioned an outdoor mural by renowned Toronto artist John Kuna. He is painting an image of a Ukrainian woman in traditional attire, surrounded by Petrykivka-style birds and flowers. Visible from the nearby, above-ground subway line, it will be seen by thousands of commuters on a daily basis.

As the Shevchenko Museum's popularity grows, it has captured the imagination of the broader Canadian public and attracted the attention of other arts institutions and the media. Journalist and arts critic Richard Ouzounian sought out the museum and its artifacts when consulting on the Lighthouse Immersive Project which featured the art of Taras Shevchenko. *The West End Phoenix*, a local community newspaper, interviewed museum director Lyudmyla Pogoryelova for an article on the museum. For its program *Living Local*, YES TV filmed an interview on the life and works of Taras Shevchenko and on the history and programs of the museum.

Heritage Toronto (formerly the Toronto Historical Board) interviewed Larissa Stavroff for its State of Heritage project. The museum signed a contract with the City of Toronto for two public talks at the Lesya Ukrainka monument in High Park. Director Pogoryelova spoke in September 2023, and the contract has been renewed for 2024.

The Shevchenko Museum is actively co-operating with two major government-sponsored organisations which help new Canadian immigrants. Both CultureLink Settlement and Community Services are working with immigrant children and young adults affected by the war in Ukraine, providing them with much-needed emotional support. Students at the local Bishop Marrocco/Thomas Merton Catholic Secondary School, many of whom are from Ukraine and still adjusting to their Canadian experiences, are frequent visitors to the museum and participants in joint cultural endeavours. One of them is grade twelve student Andriy Olimpiiev, who is from Kharkiv. During a three-month placement with the museum, he provided excellent assistance and benefitted from exposure to various aspects of the museum's functions. A letter of gratitude and appreciation was received from the school administration praising the museum for giving Andriy the opportunity to work in an arts-related environment, conducive to his aspirations to become an architect.

Between 2022-2024, the museum hosted ten exhibitions of fine art and photography, four major social events, two concerts and theatre productions, three virtual events, five presentations, an auction, a poetry night and three successful markets. But this is not a complete list of its activities. Opening our doors for social events provides newcomers an opportunity to meet fellow Ukrainians and other nationalities in Toronto, and to make friends and professional connections so essential in the life of a new immigrant. One of the most memorable gatherings was a networking event for Ukrainian cinematographers, providing them the opportunity to connect and engage in creative discussion for the first time since escaping the war.

In 2023-2024, the museum hosted a number of literary events, including a lecture on the Bard's legacy as an artist, presented by the museum's director, Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, on the 210th anniversary of his birth. Poetry readings and book presentations are often enhanced by musical performances.

Various musical groups and soloists perform and lecture in the museum, bringing the beauty of Ukrainian song to new audiences. As an example, in 2023, the museum hosted Ukrainian-American musician Yuriy Fedynsky, who accompanied his musical performance with a lecture on the bandura, kobza, and torban as well as other traditional musical instruments.

Exposure to a range of creative genres led to an appreciation of their interconnectedness and resulted in a special project undertaken by fans and regular attendees who organised an evening of poetry inspired by paintings from the museum's recent exhibitions. In another example of this interconnectedness, the museum received a recorded musical work in 2023 by American composer Stanley Grill, who finds inspiration in the imagery of Shevchenko's poetry.

At its founding in 1952, the Museum received a priceless gift of 500 artifacts from various Ukrainian museums, but primarily from the Taras Shevchenko National Museum of Ukraine. This included 23 paintings dedicated to the Kobzar's life. From the day of its inception, the museum has been actively building its collections by gathering materials and artifacts related to the life of Taras Shevchenko and the Canadian-Ukrainian diaspora. At its heart is the collection of visual art which is expanding constantly from donations by artists and collectors.

Fine art exhibitions are central to the museum's activity. The board is dedicated to sharing gallery space amongst contemporary artists from Ukraine and those in Europe and North America. In 2022-2024, the museum held exhibitions of the late Toronto artist Vasyl Kondratyuk ("Promenades", 2022) and contemporary Canadian artists Pavlo Lopata ("Spiritual Dimensions"), Oleksandr Gutyrza ("Seven"), and Lana Matskiv ("Defiance"). The resoundingly successful exhibition, "Colours of Ukraine" (October 2023 – January 2024), showcasing paintings by prominent Ukrainian artists Liubov Senchuk of Kyiv and Karina Voloshko of Kharkiv, marked a high point for the museum. The current exhibition entitled "When the Sky Falls", is of works by Maryna Kaminska from Ukraine, currently living in Germany.

Through 2022-2024, approximately 40 works of art were acquired by the Shevchenko Museum. For example, I donated three works by Merited Artist of Ukraine Natalia Loza of Odesa, together with my own paintings: one, an exploration

of the theme of flight to safety by women with children while leaving husbands, fathers and brothers behind to defend their homeland (“For the Sake of Her Children”), and two visual renditions inspired by the poems *Contra spem spero* by Lesya Ukrainka and *The Lily* by Taras Shevchenko. To me, the latter is particularly important due to the Kobzar’s defence of women, deprived of human rights, abused and forever traumatized by violence, and societal rejection. This is the aspect of Shevchenko’s work I treasure the most, both as a woman and an artist. On presentation of the donated works in March of 2023, I stated that it pained me to admit that Shevchenko’s *Kateryna*, *The Lily* and *Mermaid* are as heart-wrenching today, in this time of war, with its violence and aggression against women, as they were in his day. My meaning resonated with the international crowd in attendance, and I felt that I had touched people’s hearts by highlighting that reality of war.

While it is difficult to determine the precise number of new supporters and return visitors to exhibitions and events, it is certain that this number contributes tremendously to one of the most vital goals of the museum – recognition of Ukrainian culture by a broader audience via exposure of works by Ukrainian artists.

One ground-breaking project was the show “Memories of the Future”. Organized by the relatively new Vytik Art Collective UA in August, 2023, it united 13 young, aspiring creators from cities across Ukraine. They presented paintings, photographs, digital images, batiks and collages reflecting their everyday, firsthand experiences in the days of war and peace in their home country and in Canada.

The multidisciplinary exhibition was called “momentous’ and “awe-inspiring” by Canadian journalist Ayah Victoria McKhail. She wrote that the major goal of the show was met with passion and clarity: “encapsulating how we bring our past into our future, the Vytik Art Collective’s thematic exploration of hope and cultural identity, as it evolved under the pall of war, built upon and pushed the boundaries of what constitutes Ukrainian Art”.

The author noted the magnitude of meaning and the striking forms of rendering by group members as well as the organizational efforts of its founders Iryna Kolotylo, art director, Marta Kolotylo, art teacher, and Violetta Skrypnyk, art historian. The

works spoke of devastation after escaping from one's war-torn homeland and of the birth of new hopes and dreams in foreign surroundings.

"From the moment I first set foot in the Shevchenko Museum, I felt I had found a piece of my homeland across the ocean," claims Olha Turko, who sought refuge in Canada together with her husband, two young children, and her mother when her hometown was heavily bombed by the Russian invasion.

She first began working at the museum as a volunteer, helping with exhibition set-up, design, and using her carefully honed art skills: Olha is a recent graduate of the Kharkiv Academy of Fine Art, and a professional art restorer. Now, a full-time assistant curator, she continues to work on the restoration of artifacts, teaches art classes and curates exhibitions. But most importantly, she keeps her finger on the pulse of the changing needs and aspirations of the newly-arrived who are drawn to the Shevchenko Museum by the magnetism of Taras Shevchenko's legacy and the wisdom of his poetic prophesies. The Shevchenko Museum is trusted by newcomers to help maintain a connection with their heritage and to ensure that their future as Ukrainian Canadians is culturally rich and meaningful. In fulfilling this mission, we hear the voice of the immortal Kobzar in his sacred appeal: *"Learn, my brothers, think, and read, learn from others, but do not shy away from your own."*