

BLESSED Exhibition

In a symbolic debut, Olena Illichova and Volodymyr Illichov unveil their first solo exhibition in Canada. The awe-inspiring artistic works on display manifest a profound connection to their spiritual and cultural origins

By Ayah Victoria McKhail



Volodymyr Illichov, *THE JOURNEY TO ONE'S HEIGHTS*, 2014, oil on canvas

To cap off an exciting year of programming, the Taras Shevchenko Museum unveiled its final art exhibition for the season on December 7, 2024. Entitled *Blessed*, it showcases an enchanting collection of oil paintings depicting portraiture, figurative art, still lifes, and landscapes by Olena Illichova and Volodymyr Illichov, esteemed figures on the contemporary art scene, who are based in Guelph, Ontario. According to Lana Matskiv, an artist with extensive knowledge of the couple's illustrious careers, the masterpieces are spellbinding. "Their elegant, delicately illuminated works exude a magical, dream-like quality, and evoke subtle emotions. Building on the legacy of Old Masters, the artists'

compositions are filled with impressionistic moments of grace and beauty.”

The duo’s inspiration is largely derived from the infinite wonders found in their beloved homeland of Ukraine. The country’s rich cultural treasures have also had a profound effect on their creativity. “Plangent and deep songs were played from early childhood and the tenderness and melody of Taras Shevchenko’s poems, such as *The Mighty Dnieper*, became an integral part of our perception of the beauty of our native land,” shared Illichova. “To us, Shevchenko isn’t only a symbol of national culture, but also a guide to the depths of mystical knowledge who enriches our consciousness and inspires creativity,” added Illichov.



Volodymyr Illichov, *ODESA. BY THE SEA*, 2012, oil on canvas

Ukraine’s inextinguishable light continues to ignite a spark in their imagination, illuminating their artistic paths, which are rooted in the land of sunflowers. Illichova was born in Izmail, whereas Illichov was born in Odesa, legendary cities where the Black Sea would beckon and where the unmistakable fragrance of acacia trees was inescapable.

They both honed their skills at the Grekov Odesa Art School, Ukraine’s oldest arts institution, which was established in 1865. Works emanating from the storied institution are renowned for their

embodiment of humanitarian values, bold renderings, vibrant colours, and incorporation of elements of Ukrainian decorative art; attributes, which are apparent in the collection on display.

Eventually, Illichov would complete a degree in architecture at the Odesa State Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture. He then travelled to Sofia, Bulgaria, where he embarked on postgraduate studies at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy. Illichova would complete a degree in paintings and graphics at the Southern Ukrainian National Pedagogical University K.D. Ushinsky. The couple would teach in their respective disciplines, while continuing to create art, exhibiting in Ukraine and internationally.

Their paintings, which grace private and museum collections around the world, are distinguished by the unique characteristics and style achieved through a technique they've developed called *Blade and Socks Art Technologies*. This avant-garde formula utilizes an architectural blade from an architectural knife as part of the process.



Olena Illichova, *THE ARCHITECT'S MUSE*, 2013, 90 x 100 cm, oil on canvas

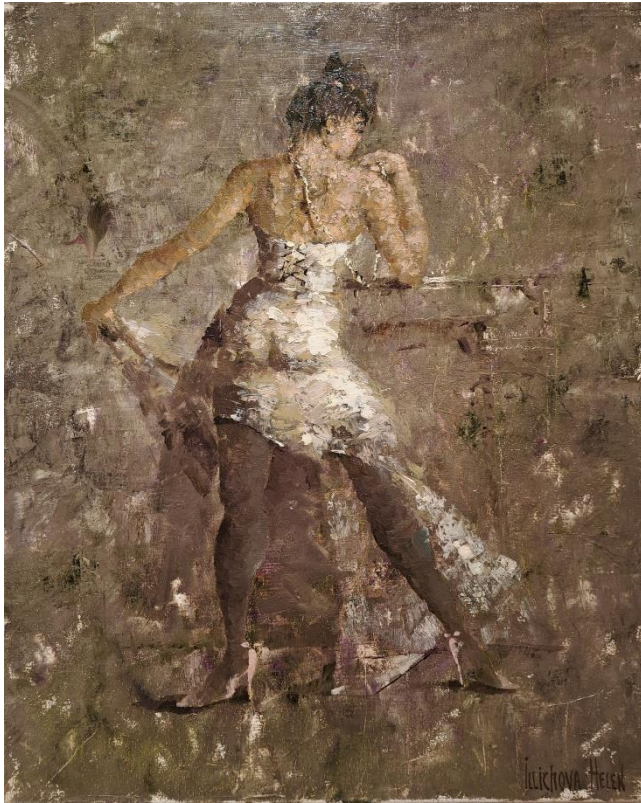
The technique is comprised of several stages: Stage One involves the preparation of materials and the creation of a unique texture base. Stage Two allows for the application of the first layers of paint using a sock for controlled texture. Stage Three introduces the use of an architectural blade for precision detailing and for creating dynamic contrasts. Stage Four entails additional layers and highlights, combining both tools for depth and emotion. Stage Five embodies perfection. The final touches are made, ensuring the composition is balanced and expressive.

Oleksandra Lytsak, an artist who studied visual arts and costume design at the Lviv National Academy of Arts and who taught art at the Ternopil cooperative trade and economic college, found herself impressed by the level of skill required to execute the artistic works on display. *The Architect's Muse*, by Illichova was particularly mesmerizing. The viewer's eyes are instantly drawn to the centre of the painting, where a portrait of a woman bursts to the fore. "Each stroke appears to be effortless, but I marvel at the level of professionalism required to achieve the effects we see in this painting. In some areas, the paint is thicker, whereas in others, it looks diluted. It's evident the artist has an intimate understanding of the palette and exactly how and where to apply the paint."

Odesa. By the Sea, instantly caught Daniel Sun's attention. A painting by Illichov, it depicts a window, evoking the style and structure of the buildings he left behind in Odesa, but which remain etched in his memory. A notable feature of the painting is the artist's incorporation of crushed limestone from an actual building in Odesa into the underpainting, which refers to the initial layer of paint applied to the canvas, prior to adding subsequent layers. "The texture and intricate details draw you in. The subtle use of blue to denote the Black Sea is also nice."

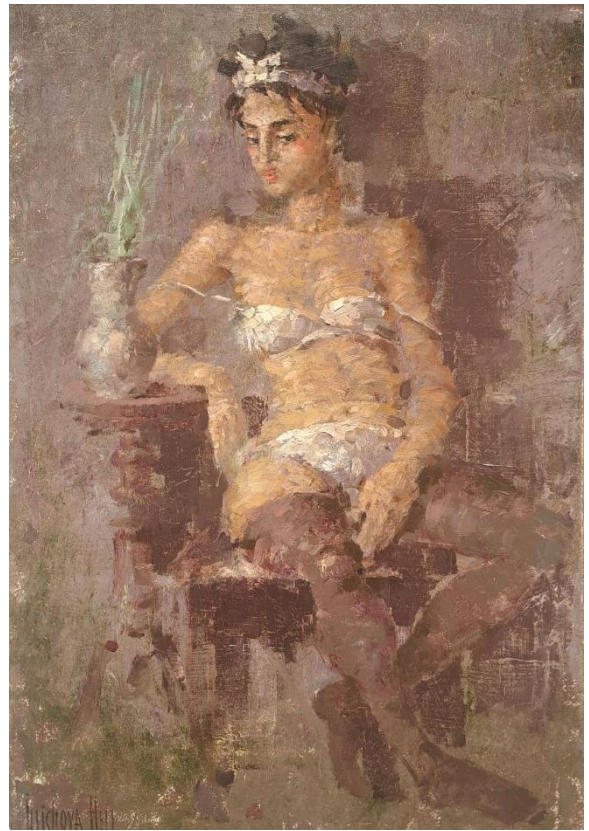
Thomas Sokoloski found Illichova's paintings of women appealing. He was especially captivated by *White Satin Dress*, which features a woman with her back turned and her head tilted posing, and *Cozy Corner*, which depicts a woman seated in her undergarments; her gaze cast askew. "There's an air of relaxation in these paintings. They're very

reminiscent of early French paintings, particularly those by Édouard Manet.”



Olena Illichova
WHITE SATIN DRESS

2020, 50 x 40 cm, oil on canvas



Olena Illichova
COZY CORNER

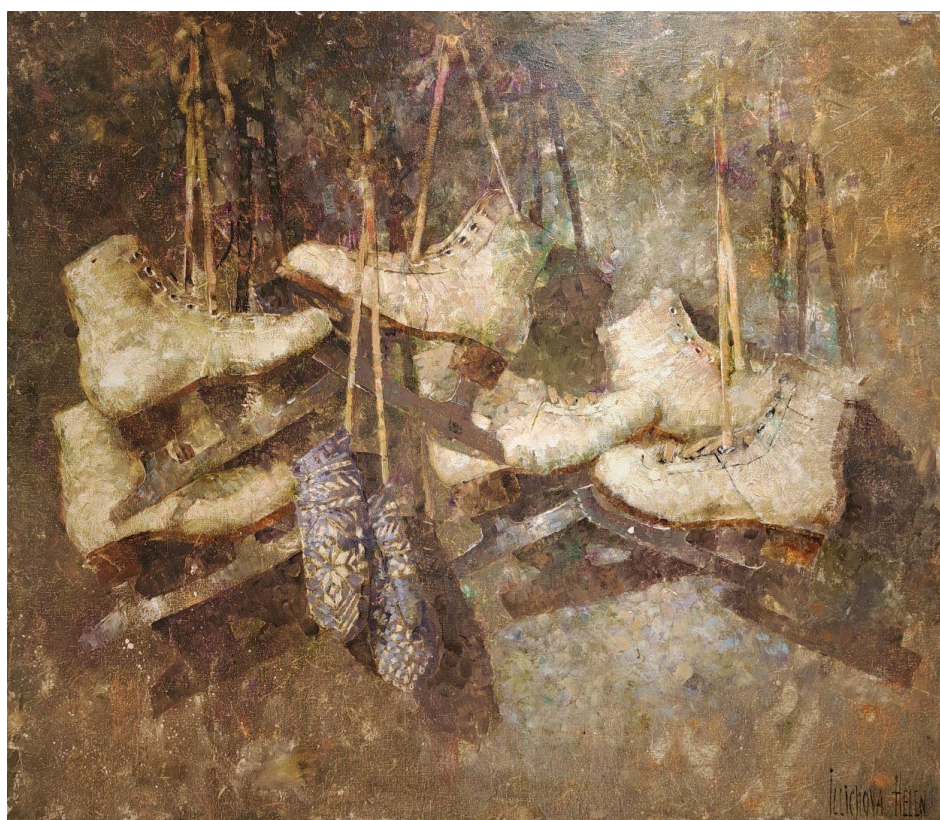
2020, 60 x 40 cm, oil on canvas

Daria Tischenko-Zhuravel, an artist and photographer, was dazzled by the sensuality conveyed in Illichov’s *A Branch of Pink Cherries*, which pops out against a backdrop, which utilizes earthtones. “It evokes an orchard, so it’s very pleasant.” Commenting on the collection in its entirety, she remarked, “It’s reminiscent of paintings by Vladyslav Shereshevsky, who’s based in Kyiv.”

Denys Noskov, who’s from Mariupol, was also transported to Ukraine as he reflected on the magnitude of the artistic works encircling him. Illichova’s *Skates*, which showcases three sets of dangling ice skates and a pair of mittens, was replete with symbolism to him. “It reminds me of my childhood and hanging out with my friends at the ice rink. There’s a palpable sense of nostalgia associated with this painting.”



Volodymyr Illichov, *A BRANCH OF PINK CHERRIES*, 2022, 40 x 50 cm, oil on canvas



Olena Illichova, *SKATES*, 2018, 60 x 70 cm, oil on canvas

Yana C., a volunteer at the museum, was enthralled by the picturesque charm emanating from Illichov's *The Journey to One's Heights*. Featuring a valley with mountains in the distance, the painting is peppered with quaint homes and a lively scene of people cavorting in the snow. A horse drawn carriage adds to the overall sense of whimsical delight. "What's most compelling about this painting is how it brings you right into the present moment. It literally transports you to the heart of the scene by conveying a profound sense of emotion. It's truly spectacular."

Olena Illichova and Volodymyr Illichov have been heartened by the extent to which their artistic works have been resonating with visitors. According to Illichova, having an exhibition at the museum has been a meaningful experience. "It's a great honour to be represented at a museum dedicated to the great Kobzar. Shevchenko's poetry is a jewel that helps you find answers to the most difficult questions in life."

Such challenging questions are being asked by many Ukrainians around the world, who are struggling with the tragedy that has befallen their nation. As Illichov looks toward the new year, he's convinced the land he loves, which inspired the exhibition's title, will remain blessed. "I believe that the indomitable spirit of courage, faith, and hope will help Ukraine survive. In these trials, the Ukrainian people will gain new shining qualities; in particular, true freedom of thought and free thought, which will be the key to future prosperity. I wish Ukraine peace, victory and new horizons of light."

The "Blessed" art exhibition can be viewed at the Taras Shevchenko Museum until **January 15, 2025**

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Gallery hours: Mon, Tues, Weds, Fri: 10 a.m.-4p.m., Thurs: 12-7 p.m.,
and weekends by appointment

www.shevchenko.ca

To learn more about Olena Illichova and Volodymyr Illichov, and the art classes they offer, please visit the Aurum Art Gallery:

aurumartmarket.com

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About Ayah Victoria McKhail

Ayah Victoria McKhail is a Toronto-based journalist who is passionate about arts and culture reporting. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, such as the *Literary Review of Canada*, the *WholeNote*, and newspapers affiliated with the East Coast's SaltWire Network.