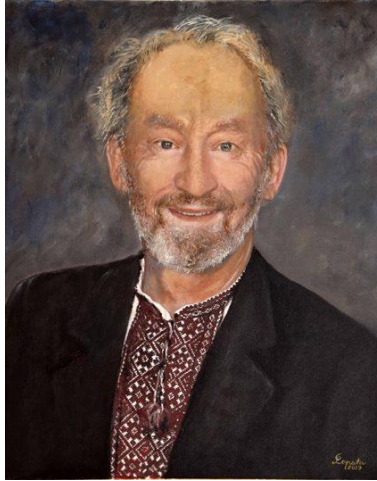


## Spiritual Dimensions Exhibition



Pavlo Lopata, *Self Portrait*, 2019, oil on canvas, 41x51 cm

### **A kaleidoscope of Pavlo Lopata's Symbolist-Surrealist paintings and iconography illuminated Toronto's Taras Shevchenko Museum**

By Ayah Victoria McKhail

An exhilarating journey into Pavlo Lopata's world of wonder and intrigue captivated patrons at the Taras Shevchenko Museum from October 24, 2021 to January 28, 2022. The renowned Ukrainian Canadian visual artist and iconographer's exhibition opened to much acclaim, coinciding with the second anniversary of the museum's revitalization and grand reopening in a new location.

According to Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, the museum's director, the timing of the exhibition held tremendous significance and was particularly poignant as humanity continues to grapple with the pandemic. "The isolation, immense suffering and tragic deaths that have characterized a world turned upside down, have ushered in a period of intense introspection for many people. Lopata's thought-provoking artistic works implore us to look deep into our souls."

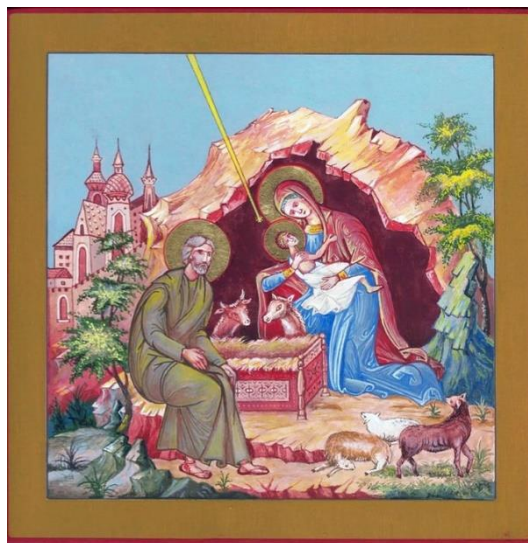
The contemplation his artistic works compel, offers revealing insights into the fascinating life he has lived and the generation to which he belongs. Additionally, his Ukrainian identity and national pride are focal features in his artistic works.

Pavlo Lopata was born on March 20, 1945, in the village of Kalinov in the Prešov region of Czechoslovakia (present-day Slovakia). Also known as Kalyniv, Priashiv, this area is the traditional homeland of a small community of ethnic Ukrainians.

A prodigious child who was enchanted by the pristine beauty of the Carpathian Mountains that encircled him, he dreamed of becoming an accomplished artist. He would often leaf through his mother's Bible, which was adorned with the wood engravings of the French artist, Gustave Doré. Intrigued, he would replicate the dramatic and evocative compositions, working diligently to gain aptitude and hone his skills.

He also yearned to create Byzantine icons, such as the ones that were painted in his village church by Antoni Bogdanski and Michał Bogdanski, two of a multi-generational group of seven iconographers from Poland. Mesmerized, he would often gaze at their compositions utterly intrigued. "Icon-writing, as a classical art form, has many hidden symbols, which I wanted to uncover for myself and the general public. My iconography is the result of over 40 years of work and in that period, I have written close to 500 icons."

Examples of his iconography, which appeared at the museum include 'St. George the Great Martyr' (2000), 'Nativity I' (2016), and 'Guardian Angel with little Girl' (2021), which were all done using wood, linen, egg tempera and 24 karat gold leaf.



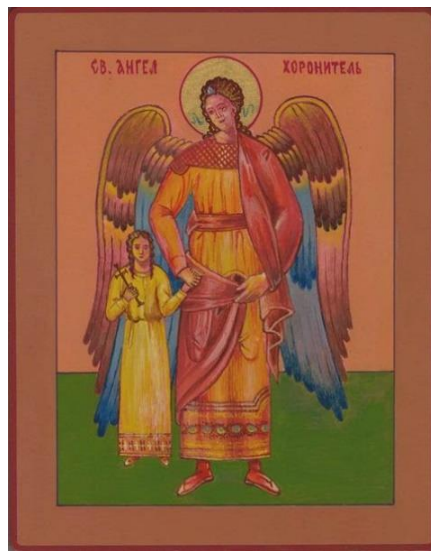
Pavlo Lopata, *Nativity I, Pizdeo I*, 2016, wood, linen, egg tempera, 24 kt gold leaf, 30x30 cm

Lopata's educational odyssey has had several twists and turns. Following the Soviet Union's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, he became involved in student protests for which he was expelled from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. In 1969, he left for Canada in search of a better life and a more progressive environment in which to discover his potential and pursue his artistic aims. In 1978, he embarked on studies at the Ontario College of Art, (currently known as the Ontario College of Art and Design University). Immersing himself in the canons of Byzantine iconography and perfecting his technique in a variety of artistic mediums, he graduated with a diploma in Fine Arts in 1986.

Having mastered the techniques of pencil drawing and painting in egg tempera, oil and acrylics, he paints portraits, landscapes, wooden churches and icons, infusing characteristics of realism, linear expressionism, surrealism and symbolism with every brushstroke.

As for the themes depicted in his paintings, he credits the Symbolist painter, Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist painters, Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst with having a profound effect on his creativity. He also derives a palpable sense of inspiration from the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, in addition to the Italian Renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, among others.

He describes his personal visual language as embodying a synthesis of eastern traditions in art, which are abstract and decorative, along with western ones, which are concrete and naturalistic. "Just as a healthy marriage of spirit with matter, art exists as a concrete manifestation of the internal dynamic of human reason and imagination. In my paintings, I strive for balances, both on a conceptual level and in terms of composition."



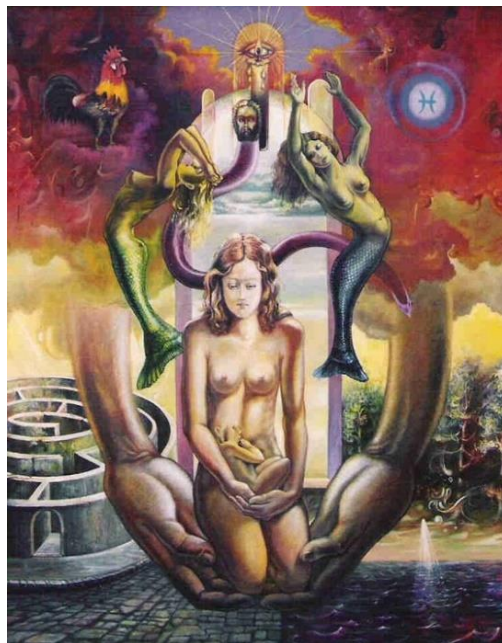
Pavlo Lopata, *Guardian Angel with little girl*, *Ангел Хоронитель з дівчинкою*, 2021, wood, linen, egg tempera, 24kt gold leaf, 24x30 cm

As Dr. Halyna Kostiuk, an art critic, author and member of the Shevchenko Scientific Society of Canada observed, “It is noticeable that Lopata considers the sky not only as a space to populate with his compositions, but also as a vast expanse where he shares his philosophy and aesthetic with the viewers. In Lopata’s aesthetic world, symbols often are multi-semantic.”

The depiction of hands also figures prominently in Lopata’s artistic works. “In iconography, God’s existence and presence are often depicted by an outstretched hand through the composition of clouds,” he explained. He also pointed to Ukraine’s rich folkloric tradition, which is replete with references to hands in fairy tales, songs and proverbs. “Hands feature in Ukrainian literature, such as in the poetry of Ivan Drach, Andriy Malyshko, Uliana Kravchenko, Bohdan Ihor Antonych and Taras Shevchenko.”

Noting civilization exists as a result of the inventiveness, creativity and industriousness of hands, he added, “In my paintings, I express my concept by accentuating and glorifying hands because it’s also with my own hands that I create my art for the world.”

One of the most striking characteristics of the many paintings that were on display, which were primarily done in the 1990s, is his sophisticated use of colour. As Dr. Kostiuk elucidated, “The palette often is overly dramatic: juxtaposition of darkness and light, coldness and warmth with undertones of in-between hues.” This is particularly evident in the oil paintings ‘Born Pisces’ and ‘Omnipotent’. His signature flair can also be seen in ‘Faith, Hope and Love’, which was done using tempera.



Pavlo Lopata, *Born Pisces*, *Народження під знаком Риб*, 1997, oil on canvas, 97x122 cm

Reflecting on another defining aspect of his artistic works, Dr. Kostiuk remarked, “Lopata’s surrealist paintings embrace both European ideas of this art movement and the deepest Ukrainian traditions in a contemporary aesthetic fashion.”

An award-winning artist, he has held over 35 solo exhibitions – including one showcasing his iconography, which was titled ‘Windows to Heaven’ last spring at Toronto’s Ukrainian Canadian Art Foundation’s KUMF gallery – in addition to participating in over 90 group shows.

Today, more than 1000 of his artistic works grace private and museum collections around the world, including the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Québec, (formerly the Canadian Museum of Civilization); the Embassy of Ukraine in Ottawa, Ontario; the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv; the Museum of Ukrainian Culture in Svidník, Slovakia; and the Embassy of Ukraine in Prague, Czech Republic.

In addition to being an accomplished artist, Lopata is also a prolific writer who has authored over 450 articles related to the arts, culture and history. His written works have been published in numerous local and international publications, such as *New Pathway* in Toronto; *Dukla* in Slovakia; and *Vyzvolnyjshliakh* in England.

Living in his dream home in Kingsville, Ont., complete with two working studios, three gallery rooms and ample space throughout the entire house to showcase his artistic works, with his loving and supportive wife, Mary, who has played a pivotal role in supporting her husband, the sprightly 76-year-old shows no signs of slowing down. Creating art is an indispensable part of his identity and he admitted that a sense of melancholy sets in if he does not. “I take a brush into my hands everyday and create a variety of paintings and icons. Recently, I wrote the icons of St. Zachary and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In between, I do research on artists and write about them.”

Reflecting on the many meaningful aspects of his career, what is particularly inspiring to him is when a painting or icon finds a new home and resonates with symbolic significance. “Through my art, I try to convey a message of hope and beauty through the balance that comes from the harmonious coexistence of spirit and matter. I hope that my art provides a refuge to all that is anti-spiritual in the world.”



### **About Ayah Victoria McKhail**

Ayah Victoria McKhail is a Toronto-based journalist who’s 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.