



35 William Kurelek

ARCA OC OSA 1927 – 1977

The Ukrainian Woman in the Old Country (Triptych);

1. Free Woman on Ukrainian Frontier

2. Election of a Cossack Chieftain

3. Oppression and Poverty

mixed media on board triptych, initialed and dated
1966 – 1967 and on verso titled on the gallery label
37 ¼ x 83 ½ in, 94.6 x 212.1 cm

PROVENANCE

The Isaacs Gallery Ltd., Toronto
Private Collection, Ontario

LITERATURE

William Kurelek, “Exhibition Statement: The Ukrainian Woman Pioneer in Canada, 1968,” The Isaacs Gallery Ltd., 1968
Bernadette Andrews, “Spring Season Opens at the Art Gallery,”
The Toronto Telegram, January 13, 1968, page 28
Andrew Kear, *William Kurelek: Life and Work*, Art Canada Institute, 2017

EXHIBITED

The Isaacs Gallery Ltd., Toronto, *The Ukrainian Woman Pioneer in Canada*, January 10 – 29, 1968

ESSAY BY WILLIAM KURELEK:

THE UKRAINIAN WOMAN IN THE OLD COUNTRY

THE IDEA FOR this large work came indirectly from my wife, who is of British origin. Watching me work on this series she observed one day, “Ukrainian settlers were not full-fledged North American pioneers because they didn’t have to fight Indians like the English and French.” That I had to admit—their struggle was only with the elements and the land. Indian treaties enforced by the RCMP kept the peace. However, a little later, thinking back on

the history of the Ukrainian people, it occurred to me: “Sure our people were frontiersmen at one time!” In fact, right about the very same time as the beginnings of French, English and Spanish colonies in the New World, there was an analogous situation in the Ukraine. Even the word UKRAINE means exactly that—“FRONTIER COUNTRY.”

Mongol hordes from Asia mostly under Genghis Khan had depopulated large areas of the region above the Black Sea in the 13th century. The land had reverted to wild grasslands called The Steppes, inhabited by wildlife and roving bands of Tartars. These were the Ukrainian “Injuns.” For some time the survivors of the original population sought shelter in a feudal system under barons of western Slavic countries, but it wasn’t long before the freer spirits among them began to push back into the steppes. There, there was danger almost all the time—one would be plundered, killed, or taken into slavery. But while it lasted, the colonist was a free man and worked his own land.

They lived in villages for mutual protection within a stockade of pointed timbers around which lookouts were posted. But the best defence was attack. The men folk developed into a warrior class called the Cossacks who periodically left behind their womenfolk and children to go on campaigns against the Turks, whose mercenaries the Tartars were. Their organization was democratic and the order of the day quite fluid—their nature a rare mixture of buccaneer and crusader. The Zaparozhian Sich in their fortress on the lower Dnieper River, with its stockade, barrack longhouses and church, where women were strictly forbidden, lived a riotous life on booty they had won until they were in the mood for another campaign.

I have represented this in the large centre panel, in the main part of which I have taken the liberty of including all the steps (four) simultaneously in the election of their leader, the Hetman. One man, one vote was the rule, which was taken literally by each man going over to stand beside his favourite nominee. Then the outgoing Hetman in a prescribed ritual smeared the forehead of

the elected one with mud, signifying that he must dedicate himself to the defence of this land. After that all entered the chapel to pray for his success. Then the campaign. Like a miracle, dissipation vanished into discipline. The reckless bravery and prowess of such an army was phenomenal.

Those who returned from battle eventually saw their women and children again. Meanwhile the women (and old men and children) had shouldered the responsibilities of life on the land. Danger, hard work, a measure of happiness was their lot. This is the subject of the left-hand panel. Three centuries later both sides of the Dnieper were repopulated and foreign occupation, over-crowding and poverty had long overtaken the original colonist. This is what I've tried to represent in the right-hand panel, using the symbolism of the lord's manor and the fighting dogs. The people badly needed living room and opportunity. The Canadian government, seeing the danger of the Western provinces being occupied by the press of American migration, needed a hardy farming people to settle there as British subjects. The Ukrainians were one of those ethnic groups invited. And so this is where the story of *Ukrainian Pioneer Woman in Canada* begins—around about 1890.

ESSAY BY MARK CHEETHAM

WILLIAM KURELEK IS a folk hero in the annals of Canadian art. A proud chronicler and interpreter of his Ukrainian heritage—he grew up during the Depression on farms in the “Western Ukraine” of the Canadian Prairies, the first of seven children—he showed extraordinary skill as a painter and as a frame maker, learning the latter trade in London, England. A dedicated researcher into family and regional history, he presented his work in ways accessible to all, not least in his famous illustrated children’s books, such as *A Prairie Boy’s Winter* (1974) and *A Prairie Boy’s Summer* (1976). His life was difficult in all imaginable ways; this he made a virtue, fashioning himself as a “suffering artist” in the image of Vincent van Gogh. A convert to Catholicism in 1957, like van Gogh, he was intensely religious and brought his belief system to all he created.

The Ukrainian Woman in the Old Country is important in Kurelek’s oeuvre. This was the first painting in a 20-part series called *The Ukrainian Woman Pioneer in Canada*, and it was exhibited at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto in January 1968. It was conceived and exhibited at a time of burgeoning Canadian nationalism and the growing recognition of multiculturalism around the 1967 centennial. The series was commissioned by the Ukrainian Women’s Association of Canada, whose 40th anniversary—as well as the 75th anniversary of Ukrainian immigration to Canada—it was intended to mark. The commission fell through, but Kurelek persevered, noting in his exhibition statement that the entire cycle was a tribute to his mother. More expansively, it is a testament to Kurelek’s celebration of specific cultural identities within the Canadian whole. Kurelek’s detailed account of the historical and personal motivations and associations that attend this complex painting is also reproduced here.

This painting received attention at Kurelek’s 1968 exhibition. According to reviewer Bernadette Andrews, “The left panel shows *Free Woman on Ukrainian Frontier, Election of a Cossack*



detail

Chieftain in the centre and to the right, *Oppression and Poverty*.” The themes and setting were what the artist called “a brief reference to Ukrainian history,” which set the stage for the narrative that continued in Canada in 1890. While this description of the panels suggests the overall sweep of the images, what viewers attend to and enjoy most are the myriad details that Kurelek characteristically included in his paintings.

In the manner of the northern Renaissance master Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569) especially—whose large, meticulously detailed presentations of everyday life Kurelek had first seen in Europe in 1952—some of this detail is anecdotal and amusing. Figures on the roofs of the buildings to the left, for example, clamber for a view of the civic and religious proceedings below. But Kurelek is anything but lighthearted: he shows poverty, contention and confusion alongside the piety and civic dedication of his forebears.

In its visual detail and especially in its self-consciously anachronistic use of the triptych format, the painting also speaks of an earlier, more pious time in both art and society. This painting and the extensive series that it introduced were not nostalgic, however, but were Kurelek’s earnest and memorable attempt to record Ukrainian history in Canada as a living reality.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Canadian Art, 1970–1990*, for contributing the above essay.

This work is in the original frame made by Kurelek. Each panel individually measures (without the frame):
 Outside panels: 37 ¼ x 17 ½ inches, 94.6 x 43.5 cm
 Middle panel: 37 ¼ x 48 ¼ inches, 94.6 x 122.6 cm

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 300,000