

Artist depicts faces of Maidan's "Revolution of Dignity"

by Zenon Zawada

KYIV – Ola Rondiak was inspired to paint the faces of Ukrainian women while observing and living through Ukraine's recent struggles.

Most aren't the faces of anyone in particular. They're images she drew from deep within her soul, in the chamber of her unconscious, collected from throughout her life, whether from family long gone or daily encounters in Kyiv.

Ms. Rondiak's latest collection of faces, "Revolution of Dignity," will be on display at the Soyuzivka Heritage Center on July 11-13 during the eighth annual Ukrainian Cultural Festival. Four paintings are already on display at a gallery next to St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church in Hunter, N.Y. It consists of more than 50 collages (some of which have been sold) that combine acrylic-based drawings with newspaper and magazine clippings.

"I wasn't consciously looking at faces to replicate them," she said of her visits to the Euro-Maidan this winter. "It was more about the overall feeling and aura, and I think that feeling came out in my faces."

Ms. Rondiak began drawing her faces in the winter of 2013, almost a year before the Euro-Maidan protests erupted. State persecution of Ukraine's pro-Western and patriotic forces was in full swing, and prospects for improving living conditions were bleak.

She had recently returned to her home art studio in Ukraine after a four-year period in the U.S. Occasionally, she reconnected with her passions: Ukraine and art. Ms. Rondiak experimented in silk screening and mixed media at a 2010 Soyuzivka gathering.

Yet it was being back in her suburban Kyiv home that prompted her to dip her brushes in acrylic paint and tap her soul. The process resulted in "50 Women," Ms. Rondiak's hailed return to the Kyiv art scene.

"I just wanted to get back into painting so I kept moving, moving, moving, and the faces just started coming out," she said. "Before I knew it, there were 50 of them and I said, 'They're all staring at me. They need to leave the house!' And it happened that my friend with a beautiful garden said, 'Why don't you exhibit them?' and I agreed since they had to leave anyway."

Only five of the original paintings remain in her possession, the rest having been sold. The expressions depicted are as gray and stern as the punishing Ukrainian winter during which they were painted. The



"Revolution Woman 9," paper collage on canvas by Ola Rondiak.

occasional smiling visage is an American relative.

Ms. Rondiak also drew on traditional symbols, such as wreaths and embroidered shirts, without slipping into kitsch. Instead, the traditional was contemporized, reflecting the harshness of the post-Soviet abyss that Ms. Rondiak felt surrounding her.

"I'm fascinated by the faces of women, particularly Ukrainian women, as their lives haven't been simple or easy. I see them as very strong and almost hardened by many generations of struggle and victimization by outside forces," she said.

Simple things such as hearing the newspaper being read out loud by her husband would evoke feelings that got channelled into the art work, Ms. Rondiak said.

"I didn't plan to make them somber or sad, but perhaps they're a direct reflection of feelings in Ukraine at this time," she said. "I think some are not particularly sad, but serious. There is a pain, but also a deep determination."

Yet other times, Ms. Rondiak drew inspiration from her own tragic family history, which fuelled the "Icons" series that emerged on canvas alongside the Euro-Maidan protest.

To cope with her suffering, her grandmother sewed images depicting the Mother of God while serving in a labor camp in Mordovia. Before being deported, she had lost her family, including a daughter who died in her arms, in her native village of Pechenizhyn in the Kolomyia district of the Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast.

In the brutal conditions, Paraskevia Michniak resorted to using potato sacks for her canvases, fish bones for a needle and threads from her clothes. Somehow, several of these works made it out of Siberia to Ms. Rondiak's grandfather, Roman Michniak, who was living in Cleveland with their two children who survived.

But he was never to see his wife Paraskevia again, who died in her village home after serving eight years in the labor camp. What did survive was her five or so potato sack canvases, which passed through several hands, through the Iron Curtain, over a period of 15 years before reaching Ms. Rondiak's grandfather in Cleveland.

"When I think about my babtsia's [grandmother's] life, I don't think it can get harder than that: to have her whole family be taken from her and then go to a women's labor camp," she said.

"I'm positive my story isn't unique. I think most Ukrainian people have had similar tragedies in their families. I read somewhere that if you go to any village in Ukraine, every house will have a story of how tragedy touched them personally, including families getting torn apart."

Ms. Rondiak launched the 15 collages of her "Icons" collection based on an unfinished image of the Mother of God that her mother never completed.

The paint used to draw their modest, even meek faces – as is traditional in Byzantine iconography – is complemented by various color patterns and newspaper clippings to create their traditional Byzantine aureole, crowns, clothing and background.

More visages, quite similar to the moving faces of "50 Women," reappeared to Ms. Rondiak during the Euro-Maidan, giving her another collage project. The common element throughout them is the wreath and flowing ribbons, which she often made out of newspaper headlines.

"With 'Revolution of Dignity,' I was incorporating documents, which is a special way of preserving a part of history in the artwork as well," she said.

Several works feature a thought-provoking pose of a woman with her hands placed behind her head and arms and elbows outstretched to the widest. The "freedom pose," as she refers to it, is so striking that it could become Ms. Rondiak's unique contribution to Euro-Maidan iconography that will inevitably emerge.

The expressions are those seen in Byzantine iconography, reflecting Slavic stoicism and the unmoved patience that forms the bedrock of Ukrainian values.



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Kyiv artist and Cleveland native Ola Rondiak is displaying her collage art work from the Euro-Maidan revolution at the Soyuzivka Heritage Center during its Ukrainian Cultural Festival on July 11-13.

Such details as eyes and lips are made for the colorful photography of magazine clippings.

"The faces just reflect the pensive and difficult life," she said. "Sometimes when I look them afterwards, or the kids and I look, then we say, 'Doesn't that remind you of so-and-so?' Sometimes we start seeing people in them, but it wasn't that I consciously set out to paint that person."

Ms. Rondiak, 47, has been an active artist ever since moving to Kyiv from the U.S. with her family in 1995.

A native of Strongsville, Ohio, she was engaged in Cleveland's Plast Ukrainian Scouting Organization and churches before pursuing her studies in New York, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and education at Hunter College. She completed a master's degree in psychology and counseling from Cleveland State University.

She and her husband, Petro, joined hundreds in the diaspora who took advantage of Ukraine's independence to see the homeland of their parents and grandparents about which they had only heard stories.

"I held Ukraine close to my heart and when I got married and had the opportunity to visit, I didn't think twice," she said. "I think that's why it's reflected in my art because being Ukrainian is an inseparable part of my being."

Ms. Rondiak's psychology background has also played a critical role. Having never planned a particular project or theme, she has been driven by her intimate link with her unconscious.

She started painted faces as early as 2006 but they've been a part of her soul ever since childhood when she "would have these almost nightmarish faces coming at me, bigger and bigger," she recalled.

"I even talked about it then that I needed to do these works to get the faces out of me, but apparently they're still in me," she said, referring to her "Conversation with a Dream" exhibit in 2005.

During her trip to the U.S., Ms. Rondiak will visit the Ukrainian Museum-Archives in her native Cleveland to discuss exhibiting her work. By then, her faces may have finished preoccupying the depths of her mind.

"I myself am always curious what will develop next in my art," she said. "I've never gotten caught up with representing a specific style or theme. I just create whatever needs to come out at the time. Maybe if Ukraine is in a good place I'll have more joyful artwork. I'm just creating, exploring, growing and learning, and that's why art is just life that way."



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Ola Rondiak (right) greets U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt and his wife, Mary, at the June 17 opening of her "Images of the Maidan" exhibit at the Fulbright Center in Kyiv.