

Potters' evocative designs inspired by Ancient civilizations

A fascination for ancient European civilizations and a love of diversity motivate visiting Ukrainian artists Mykhailo Horlovy and his daughter Lesia Horlovy.

Speaking through an interpreter, the 25-year-old Lesia says the whimsical, ancient abstract shapes and evocative geometric patterns she sees in the preChristian-era pottery work inspire her not only because of their enduring artistic adeptness, but also because of their personal historic resonance. Her frame of reference is the ancient Trypillian and Scythian civilizations that occupied what is now modern Ukraine.

“These are the cultures that were originally found in the area where my father was born and are an ingrained part of my identity,” she says.

Lesia adds her own contemporary touches to her pieces, which are based on those ancient sources. She's quick to cite early 20th-century Ukrainian-American sculptor Alexander Archipenko and her father, Mykhailo, as her major inspirations.

An exhibit of the Horlovys' work is on display at the downtown Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum of Alberta (UCAMA).

This ancient subject matter was also one of the many sources of new inspiration that became available to Ukrainian artists after Ukraine declared its independence from the former Soviet regime in 1990, she says.

“After the fall of the Soviet Union, information became more readily available including archaeological knowledge. We were no longer restricted and could find our freedom of inspiration anywhere.”

While the pieces on display here are primarily small-scale bronze and stone sculptures by Mykhailo and ceramics by Lesia, both of these Kiev-based artists are fond of working in “monumental” sizes as well. For example, one of the tiny bronze pieces Mykhailo brought to Canada is a model of a five-metre-tall bronze work.

A published poet as well as an acclaimed visual artist, Mykhailo, 55, loves to work in a broad range of media, including ceramics, wood, metal and stone in two- and three-dimensional formats.



One of Mykhailo Horlovy's brass sculptures on display at the Ukrainian Canadian Archives and Museum of Alberta

“I love to work and find working with new materials a real challenge,” he says, also through an interpreter. “A master artist should be a master in everything. Working in different media allows you the ability to do different.”

Working in stone, for example, is far more tactile a process than working with cast metal, says Mykhailo.

“Different kinds of stone affect me in different ways and you can really feel the material as you work it with your hands,” he says. “Not only is it more tactile, it’s a tactility that carries over to the finished piece and the audience. People love the energy of the large stone pieces I make and love to touch them in turn.”

Boasting many high-profile public commissions in Ukraine, Mykhailo has received numerous international commissions as well, earning acclaim and official citations for his art in Russia, Spain, Austria, Lebanon and other nations.

As for his own connection with the art of the Trypillian and Scythian peoples, Mykhailo sees the fascination dating back to his boyhood.

“We used to play as children with pieces of ancient pottery we’d find. They had painted animal images on them and we’d trade them among ourselves and then bury them when we got tired. We had no idea how valuable they were.”