

ICONOGRAPHY AND STYLISTICS IN THE SERIES OF ARTWORKS OF “PASSIONS OF THE CHRIST” BY VASYL KURELEK

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Beregovska Kh. Iconography and stylistics in the series of artworks of “Passions of the Christ” by Vasyl Kurelek.

Aim. Art Criticism is a young field in Ukraine, and is just beginning to grow into maturity. Many topics have been adequately studied and scores of names have been recognized, but hundreds of worthy artists are waiting to be registered and feted in the national discourse. The history of the 20th century was such that artists of Ukrainian heritage often found themselves creating outside the borders of their native land. However, regardless of the geographic locale in which the art was created, it always had at its nucleus the traditions of the artist's native land.

One such artist, well known and respected in Canada, but very poorly known in Ukraine, was William Kurelek (1927–1977). In Canada, he is known as “The Bruegel of Manitoba”, in London – “The Canadian Bosch” or “Van Goh of the Prairies”. It is difficult to disagree with these assessments, so let us familiarize ourselves with him.

The theses discuss one of the fundamental themes in the works of the famous Ukrainian Canadian artist William Kurelek – “The Passion of Christ”. Attention is paid to the meaningful role played by the only verse-by-verse illustration of the Gospel According to Matthew in the world. Described are the mechanics of illustrative portraiture and the thematic structure of sacred subjects.

Obviously, the story of Christ's suffering had been retold many times in various formats by various voices earlier, but new artists were always attempting to retell it in their own way, each focusing on what was important to them. William Kurelek was aware of these works by earlier artists. However, his version of “The Passion” is to a large extent a mirror of his own life and calling. William Kurelek first had the idea of creating a series of paintings about “The Passion of Christ” in 1956. Of the four Gospels, he chose the one according to St. Matthew, saying that it had the most easily understandable details and provided the best dramatic qualities. Kurelek created 160 paintings, illustrating verse for verse, building from sketch to completed painting. His very long-term plan was to illustrate the entire Gospel according to St. Matthew – a series of 800 paintings. However, he only managed to complete 30 works. His plan was cut short by his untimely death.

In order to be able to create a more perfect reproduction of the events of the final three days of Christ, Kurelek travelled to the Holy Land in 1959, where he made hundreds of sketches, took hundreds of photos, and collected historical and geographical information about the places where Christ lived. This precious knowledge laid the foundation for Kurelek's series, which he began at the start of 1960 and completed in 1963.

In the 160 paintings, we see the various styles and approaches used by Kurelek – some are created in a natural/primitivistic method, while others are exemplars of the highest form of detailed precision.

Kurelek spent three weeks in the Holy Land, walked from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and took hundreds of photos – on which he would base his depictions of location and landscape.

The formal language of the series “The Passion” discloses an ongoing attempt to unite traditional and personal thought. The artist had his own take on religious painting. His iconography became a form of synthesis of eastern (Byzantine), northern-renaissance, and Mexican styles.

Kurelek was interested in the use of light, colour, and techniques of depiction of the static form, its deconstruction and composition in freeform, and the relationships between line, form, and shade in general.

In the series we find many works of various scope – mass or individual. Therefore, the series can be separated into two groups: those which multiple figures, and those with only one or two – again dictated by what the artist wanted to emphasize. Kurelek paid great attention to detail, investing in serious study

of history, tradition, and architecture of the land of Israel in the time of Jesus.

An analysis of the stylistic character of the works will show a synthesis of the influences on Kurelek. We know that he often drew on the works of his favourite painters, emulating the greatest achievements in the world of art.

The series “The Passion of Christ” is not the result of detached artistic calculation, but rather an honest, moving declaration of faith. It is a proof that even today religion continues to be an inspiration for cultural expression. This series was an explicit act of conversion of a practicing atheist to devout Catholic – an ascent from depths of personal suffering and torment, to a fulfilled spiritual life. In the words of the artist, in his work he positioned point vs counterpoint – love vs hate, creation vs destruction, faith vs superstition [5, p. 30].

Kurelek believed that he was given his artistic ability in order to serve God. He considered himself His servant, and his art was a tool of God's will – not his.

Results. The phenomenon of William Kurelek first absorbed the best from the classics of the old world, then matured in the ashes of personal psychological traumas, suffered, proceeded to be washed in faith, and finally became whole. The result was the creation of a thousands strong army of masterpieces, armed with deep meaning and symbolism. The artist created monuments on canvas to multiple ethnic groups of immigrants to Canada and illustrated “The Passion of Christ” from the Gospel according to St. Matthew verse by verse, yet he continued to strive for more. Having exchanged outlook from clinically depressed to theologically-metaphysical, he created a rich, enduring legacy of prophetic, mysterious, and religious art.

Novelty. “The Passion of Christ” is one of the most significant works in the history of religious art. This series is a symbolic thanks to God from the artist for his spiritual salvation. His creativity continues to remain an open field in the search for the Eternal.

Keywords: Series, phenomenon, subject, creativity, The Passion of Christ, Canadian, William Kurelek.

Береговська Х. О. Іконографія та художньо-стилістичні особливості серії творів «Страсті Христові» Василя Курилика. У статті висвітлено сакральну живописну серію «Страсті Христові» канадського художника українського походження Василя Курилика. Ця серія — єдиний аналог у світі повіршового живописного ілюстрування Євангелія від Матея — цикл про Страждання, Смерті і Воскресіння Ісуса Христа. Зокрема у статті досліджена іконографія образів та різносюжетних композицій творів, детально проаналізовано художньо-стилістичні особливості сакральних творів.

Формальна мова творів серії «Страсті Христові» виявляє постійний пошук автором гармонії традиційних і новаторських ідей. Художник володів своєрідним трактуванням релігійних образів. Його іконографія тяжіє до синтезу східної (візантійської), північно-ренесансної та мексиканської стилістики, де автор торкається проблем світла, кольору, середовища. Проаналізувавши стилістичний характер творів, можна збагнути про синтез різноманітних творчих впливів. Відомо, що Курилик чимало черпав із творчості улюблених мистців (П. Брейгеля, Ван Гога, Рівєри), наслідуючи найважливіші світові мистецькі досягнення.

Ключові слова: іконографія, «Страсті Христові», впливи, художні особливості, Василь Курилик.

Береговская К. А. Иконография и художественно-стилистические особенности серии произведений «Страсти Христовы» Василя Курилика. В статье исследована сакральная живописная серия «Страсти Христовы» канадского художника украинского происхождения Василя Курилика. Эта серия — единственный в мире аналог стихотворного живописного иллюстрирования Евангелия от Матфея —

цикл про Страдание, Смерте и Воскресение Иисуса Христа. В частности, в статье исследована иконография образов и разносюжетных композиций произведений, подробно проанализированы художественно-стилистические особенности сакральных произведений.

Формальный язык произведений серии «Страсти Христовы» проявляет постоянный поиск автором гармонии традиционных и новаторских идей. Художник владел своеобразной трактовкой религиозных образов. Его иконография тяготеет к синтезу восточной (византийской), северо-ренессансной и мексиканской стилистики, где автор касается проблем света, цвета, среды. Проанализировав стилистический характер произведений, можно понять о синтезе различных творческих воздействий. Известно, что Курилик немало заимствовал из творчества любимых художников (П. Брейгеля, Ван Гога, Риверы), наследуя удачные мировые художественные достижения.

Ключевые слова: иконография, «Страсти Христовы», влияние, художественные особенности, Василий Курилик.

The pantheon of 20th century artists century is rich with unquestionable talent. Some of these artists have hundreds of books and documentaries dedicated to them and their work, others are known only in certain regions, still others are popular only in their home countries – the rest however, are familiar only to scholars.

If the mid-20th century is examined through a prism of art, a map of the planet will show a constant pulse of genius – from self-taught artists to professionals: Pablo Picasso was continuing his experimentation in Paris, Salvador Dali was creating surrealism in Spain, Jackson Pollock was mastering abstract expressionism in the US, Nikifor Dovnyak (Lemko) was creating primitive landscapes in Poland. At the same time, in Canada William Kurelek was creating a hierarchical “cannon” of portraits of the first settlers of the Canadian prairies.

Formulation of the problem. One such artist, well known and respected in Canada, but very poorly known in Ukraine, was William Kurelek (1927–1977). In Canada, he is known as “The Bruegel of Manitoba”, in London – “The Canadian Bosch” or “Van Gogh of the Prairies”. It is difficult to disagree with these assessments, so let us familiarize ourselves with him.

Today it is very important to comprehensively explore the “multiserial” legacy of Vasyl Kurylyk, and in particular his series “Passion ...”, analyzing iconography and artistic and stylistic peculiarities of his works.

Analysis of recent research and publications. About the legacy of Vasyl Kurylyk hundreds of articles are written, dozens of them are devoted to the theme of his sacred series “Passion for the Christ”. This is mostly the publication of periodical Canadian editions, as well as Ukrainian diaspora periodicals. The fundamental book on The Passion of the Christ by Vasyl Kurylyk, is a catalog of 1975, published by Kolyanskivsky in Nianar Falls, Canada [6].

After a detailed study of the collected sources it follows that the legacy of V. Kurylyk is well-known in Canadian society, however, today we have not met any scientific research that would comprehensively cover the fundamental heritage of V. Kurylyk.

Aim. The phenomenon of William Kurelek first absorbed the best from the classics of the old world, then matured in the ashes of personal psychological

traumas, suffered, proceeded to be was washed in faith, and finally became whole. The result was the creation of a thousands strong army of masterpieces, armed with deep meaning and symbolism. The artist created monuments on canvas to multiple ethnic groups of immigrants to Canada and illustrated “The Passion of Christ” from the Gospel according to St. Matthew verse by verse, yet he continued to strive for more. Having exchanged outlook from clinically depressed to theologically-metaphysical, he created a rich, enduring legacy of prophetic, mysterious, and religious art.

Therefore, the purpose of the article is to analyze in detail the iconography and the artistic and stylistic features of this series, which will enable to clear the deep meanings laid by the artist in the his art works.

Basic theses. The story of “The Passion of Christ” has often been depicted by artists throughout the last two millennia.

The French painter Jan Tissot (1836–1902) created a benchmark illustration of the life of Christ with 700 watercolours and sketches. His aim was to visually describe the complete life of Christ – from Birth to Resurrection. Part of his work portrayed the facts as laid out in the Gospel according to Matthew. However, this artist did not attempt to recreate the gospel verse by verse chronologically, nor did he “tie” himself to the Gospel. He was greatly influenced by the work of the renown French Biblical illustrator of the Romantic period, Gustave Dore (1832–1883).

Obviously, the story of Christ’s suffering had been retold many times in various formats by various voices earlier, but new artists were always attempting to retell it in their own way, each focussing on what was important to them [1, p. 21]. William Kurelek was aware of these works by earlier artists. However, his version of “The Passion” is to a large extent a mirror if his own life and calling.

William Kurelek first had the idea of creating a series of paintings about “The Passion of Christ” in 1956. Of the four Gospels, he chose the one according to St. Matthew, saying that it had the most easily understandable details and provided the best dramatic qualities. Kurelek created 160 paintings, illustrating verse for verse, building from sketch to completed painting. His very long-term plan was to illustrate the entire Gospel according to St. Matthew – a series of 800 paintings. However, he only managed to complete 30 works. His plan was cut short by his untimely death.

In order to be able to create a more perfect reproduction the events of the final three days of Christ, Kurelek travelled to the Holy Land in 1959, where he made hundreds of, sketches, took hundreds of photos, and collected historical and geographical information about the places where Christ lived. This precious knowledge laid the foundation for Kurelek’s series, which he began at the start of 1960 and completed in 1963.

In the 160 paintings, we see the various styles and approaches used by Kurelek – some are created in a natural/primitivistic method, while others are exemplars of the highest form of detailed precision.

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The formal language of the series “The Passion” discloses an ongoing attempt to unite traditional and personal thought. The artist had his own take on religious painting. His iconography became a form of synthesis of eastern (Byzantine), northern-renaissance, and Mexican styles.

Kurelek was interested in the use of light, colour, and techniques of depiction of the static form, its deconstruction and composition in freeform, and the relationships between line, form, and shade in general.

For Kurelek, the setting of the painting was a metaphysical space where two worlds intersected: the realistic, measured landscapes, and historical-biblical stories – as interpreted by the newly born again Christian artist. The space was painted in a linear way, depicting ancient structures of Hebrew cities as well as landscapes filled with cliffs and sand. The artist often crops the Biblical image, zooming in in order to focus on certain details or facts. Each crop is carefully carried out to convey a specific lesson or meaning. Kurelek is not interested in a complete depiction of each scene, often cutting the composition in a most unexpected place, or leaving a detail from a previous composition. In this way, Kurelek forges and weaves an invisible chronological chain of events into the series of “The Passion”.

Interior scenes are set tightly enclosed in monumental stone walls, as if literally facing an inevitable prophesy. The artist went to great lengths to recreate the interiors exactly as they would have looked: antique orders, capitals, and semi-circular vaults; the characteristic draperies, and semi-reclined dining poses at semi-circular tables. Kurelek paid great attention to detail. He was very familiar with the architectural styles of the time of Christ, as well as middle eastern cabinetmaking, clothing, carpet weaving, ceramics, decoration, and even the assortment of foods served. (fig. 1)

Kurelek clearly divided the canvas into two horizontal planes – heaven and earth. The visual characteristics of heaven, or the heat-soaked air, served to reinforce the emotions created by the events unfolding in the painting: gentle or threatening, baby blue or leaden. The artist depicted air using half-tones of light, raising or lowering the temperature. The sky is not “connected” to the time of day or night, but rather to the tragedy of inevitable events that unfolded, page by page, in the Holy Gospel. Tint in each work acts like a generator of evocative emotion, and buttress of the dominant accents. It is used to create or balance the plane. The colour scale Kurelek used is very wide. Black is the colour of contours and shading. Red is present in each painting and represents the suffering and inescapable fate of the Son of God. Red is often used in contrast with the complementary green, an effect works to activate visual receptors and strengthen the already powerful emotional messages. It is important to note that colour schemes used in some paintings border on the psychedelic, which reflects the personal

experiences and perturbation of the painter. He often uses a gradation of light and semi-contrasting shades, especially when depicting evening or darkest night – the events of the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Peter, and the flight of the disciples. (fig. 2) The use of these achromatic techniques allows Kurelek to create a profound and mystical stage on which he, using a fine stroke, sets the scene. Line and tint are the tools which Kurelek juggles, painting dynamic figures, or creating a statue-like web of veins on the backs of the hands of Christ.

In the series we find many works of various scope – mass or individual. Therefore, the series can be separated into two groups: those which multiple figures, and those with only one or two – again dictated by what the artist wanted to emphasise. Kurelek paid great attention to detail, investing in serious study of history, tradition, and architecture of the land of Israel in the time of Jesus.

Each main persona has a unique speed of understood physical and spiritual movement. The contrast of static vs dynamic was a key technique in differentiating the heroes. The image of Christ, for example, remains immovable and monumental amid the confused, teeming masses. Each slight movement or exaggerated pose was intentional, collectively enhancing the depiction of the three-day ordeal of Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

An analysis of the stylistic character of the works will show a synthesis of the influences on Kurelek. We know that he often drew on the works of his favourite painters, emulating the greatest achievements in the world of art.

Kurelek’s paintings can be compared to Giotto’s “Judas Kiss”, in that both masters strive to dramatize the events as a developed means of expression. Kurelek took from Giotto the most refined perspectives, and transformed them to fit his own personal artistic expression and scale of depiction, in which he arranged the scenes relative to the next.

Kurelek synthesized Giotto’s two dimensional depiction of spatial areas with Bruegel’s lush subject matter and emotional hyperbole. It is this Bruegelsque plurality of mutually dependent emotions that creates a unity on the canvas. Kurelek also learned from Bruegel to modernize faces, using just one line to depict both the features and emotion. Kurelek also studied Hieronymus Bosch a great deal, especially during the period of his emotional crisis. The phantasmagorical personages who inhabited the works of Bosch heavily influenced the development of artistic creativity in William Kurelek. He associated those images with the apocalypse and worldly sin, and they made their way into the works “The Temptation and Fall of Judas” or “The Rise of the Dead”. Let us not forget that Kurelek spent time studying art in Mexico, where he came under the direct influence of the work of Diego Rivera – especially his massive and monumental way of depicting trifling detail. (fig. 3) Kurelek depicted women in the style of Rivera: majestic and composed, holding the fates of loved ones – or even of all humanity – in their hands.

The characters in the series “The Passion” are witnesses, the chosen, who had the honour of



Fig. 1. William / Vasyl Kurelek. The Passion of Christ (And while they were at the table, He said...). Fragment. 1960–1963. Gouache on paper. 51,1 × 48 cm. Niagara Falls Art Gallery. Canada. Photo by K. Beregovska. 12.2017

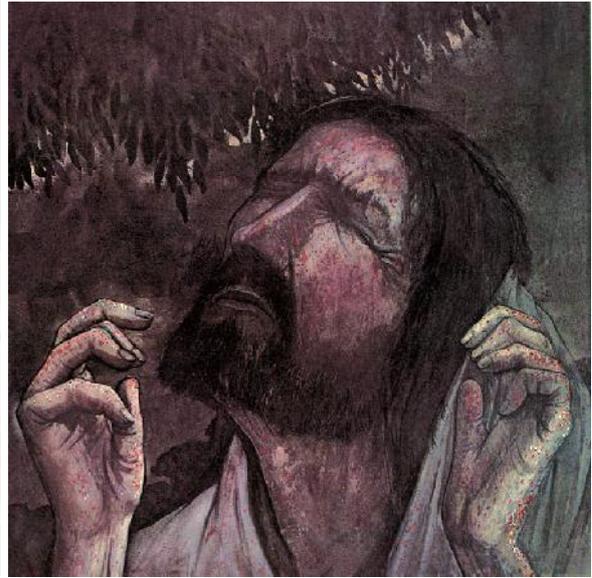


Fig. 2. William / Vasyl Kurelek. The Passion of Christ (And began to pray “Father...”). Fragment. 1960–1963. Gouache on paper. 51,1 × 48 cm. Photo from the book: [6, p. 48]

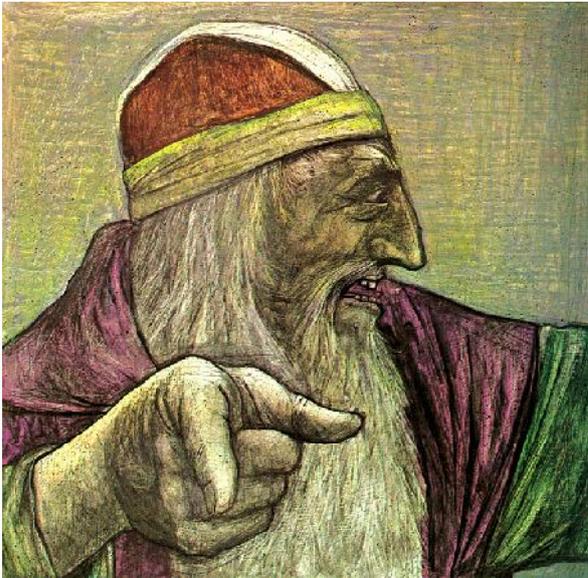


Fig. 3. William / Vasyl Kurelek. The Passion of Christ (Mark well, you have heard...). Fragment. 1960–1963. Gouache on paper. 51,1 × 48 cm. Niagara Falls Art Gallery. Canada. Photo by K. Beregovska. 12.2017

participating in the historic events of the last days of Christ. Each person has portrait traits which, when examined together, give a feel for the mood of each painting. There are no “extras” in these paintings – each person has a specific role to play in the drama, as laid out in the Scripture. In the works Kurelek cropped to focus on people, the viewer can see every slight trace of filth and depth of treachery on the sinner; the perfectly natural drops of sweat, tears, or saliva, and blood-red eyes of the lynch mob; the scarred body of Christ. The faces are striking – the emaciated Christ with his heavily Semitic features, like an image from an El Greco painting; the fat Judas with his asymmetrical face; the mask-like face of Pilate, where we can read spiritual trepidation and conflicting emotions.

Kurelek pours light into the souls of the characters and uses that to arrange his paintings. He is also not afraid to show the abhorrent face of pain

and suffering. Each painting is inspired by events from Kurelek’s life – where a calm exterior hides a charged emotional interior.

All of the characters in Kurelek’s works appear to be sculpted. We know that sculpture was dear to Kurelek – he created the unique, two-meter tall plastic sculpture of Joseph entitled “The Worker” (1966) for the Jesuit college in Guelph, Canada. We see shades of this statue in the depiction of Joseph in the series “The Passion” [3, p. 55].

According to Yuri Shevelov, “Kurelek was a particular type of surrealist. In one way, he did not ‘photograph’ reality, but rather stylized and simplified it; in another way he rarely resorted to random combinations of things as did Rene Magritte; and in still another way he boldly introduced into his works elements of ethnography, religious tradition, or even symbolic and allegorical elements. It is impossible to fully comprehend the refined formal face of Kurelek

without examining his proclivity towards primitive, naïve art – although he was never a primitivist in the style of Henri Rousseau or Nikifor” [5, p. 51].

The series “The Passion of Christ” is not the result of detached artistic calculation, but rather an honest, moving declaration of faith. It is a proof that even today religion continues to be an inspiration for cultural expression. This series was an explicit act of conversion of a practicing atheist to devout Catholic – an ascent from depths of personal suffering and torment, to a fulfilled spiritual life. In the words of the artist, in his work he positioned point vs counterpoint – love vs hate, creation vs destruction, faith vs superstition [2, p. 30].

Kurelek believed that he was given his artistic ability in order to serve God. He considered himself His servant, and his art was a tool of God’s will – not his.

His main aim was the salvation of his soul, and to help others find salvation also. This was much more important to him than painting for painting’s sake.

We find clear proof of this in his autobiography, where he wrote: “If I had to choose one to save – my soul or my art, I wouldn’t hesitate to destroy my paintings” [7, p. 501].

It is important to note that the series “The Passion of Christ” and the later book of the same name, which was published in 1975 and included the entire set of 160 paintings with descriptions written by the artist himself, garnered quite a bit of attention in the press. It is also important that Kurelek wrote the text for the book himself and personally explained the depth of meaning of each piece [6, p. 7–16].

For Kurelek himself, the highest praise for his series “The Passion of Christ” a letter from Pope Paul VI which he received in 1975, full of praise and admiration, which read: “I am enchanted by the deep artistic and spiritual content which is evident in the scenes of suffering, especially in the depiction of the flagellation and crucifixion; the epic torment, insults, human injustice and the greatness of God” [4, p. 8].

Conclusions. Studying the artistic heritage of Vasyl Kurilyk, conducting an art-study analysis of his numerous different-thematic series, we dwelt in detail on the series “Passion for Christ”. Expanding the subject of the study, it was possible to comprehensively analyze the artistic and stylistic features and iconography of 160 gouache and watercolor works. We have shown many influences of creative manner of Bruegel, Van Gogh, Rivera’s, which Kurylyk transformed through the prism of his own artistic conception, in the author’s manner.

And also to show the series “Passions of the Christ” by Vasyl Kurylyk as a powerful phenomenon not only in Canadian but also in the world context, first introducing him into Ukrainian art studies.

Prospects for further research. It is very important for Ukrainian art studies to study the phenomenon of Vasyl Kurylyk’s art works. Particularly is important is analyze and holistic highlight his various thematic paintings series, which constitute a single “conceptual canvas” of his art.

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