

Threads of Tradition

Adelaide Coleman

Threads of Tradition is a 61x45cm triptych, using acrylic paint, embroidery, and sculptural accents, that explores my connections with family and our Ukrainian culture. At the heart of this exploration is the art form and long-standing tradition of pysanky, derived from the Ukrainian word 'pysaty' meaning 'to write.' Pysanky are handcrafted symbols of spring, rebirth, and the cyclical nature of life. The triptych includes three paintings, each featuring a different family member creating a pysanky egg: my grandmother, my mother and myself.

My grandparents' journey as refugees instilled a deep appreciation for cultural tradition in me. For this reason, pysanky was a significant symbol, deeply embedded in my family's heritage and was key in symbolising themes such as the enduring spirit of tradition, even in the face of adversity, like war. Through my art, I sought to convey how this tradition perseveres and breathes new life.

While I initially considered painting pysanky onto the canvas, I was inspired by David Waslyshen, who brought pysanky to life as mosaic protrusions from the canvas. This unconventional approach offered a unique method to accentuate the egg's symbolism. I developed my own technique involving cutting the eggs in half and securing them to the canvas, achieving the desired focus and preventing them from blending into the rest of the painting. When selecting designs for the eggs, I specifically chose diasporan symbolism to further signify my family's journey.

To amplify the theme of life's renewal and the passage of tradition, I incorporated quintessential Ukrainian flora. This included poppies, cornflowers, and wheat sprouting from each figure, visually representing the connection to culture. Particularly in my own portrait, I painted the hair with an organic appearance akin to roots from which the plants could emerge, symbolising the deep roots of our family's cultural heritage, and how they continue to grow and evolve within each of us.

As my folio progressed, I drew inspiration from the vibrant colour palette of Caroline Absher by including "unusual" or exaggerated colours to enhance emotional resonance. Particularly, incorporating unique depictions of colour, such as deep purples in the shadows or bright yellows in the highlights, within the portraits themselves, creating a dreamlike, nostalgic quality. This invites the viewer to immerse themselves within the painting and view it as their own memory that they could be a part of.

The triptych format enabled me to explore each family member's individual expression and interconnectedness, mirroring the way my family is intrinsically linked yet still stand independently. When selecting the background colours for each figure, I aligned them with the essence of each person's role within our family, maintaining simplicity to enhance visual clarity. Blue, symbolising depth and wisdom was a natural choice for my grandmother, signifying her foundational role in our heritage. Red which embodies vitality and love, aptly symbolised my mother as the heart of my family.

Finally, I selected yellow, associated with optimism, creativity and new beginnings to symbolize my role as the new generation.

Overall, I feel that I successfully achieved my goals of capturing the intricate threads binding my family together, celebrating the perseverance of my family and the enduring legacy of our Ukrainian culture.