

Connotations of Identities in William Kurelek's Paintings: Typology and Critical Art Analysis

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Abstract

Despite the high popularity of William Kurelek in Canadian society, relatively few interpretations of his works can be found at the scientific, art criticism level. Based on the analysis of William Kurelek's artistic legacy a typological study was conducted identifying the Canadian artist's thinking and personal position declared openly in his art. A study of the thematic content of his paintings led to the identification of the following categories: personal, religious and awareness of community membership. The article outlines the difference between the notion of national and ethnic identity, which the artist saw in the difference between national and ethnic identity an instrument to self-awareness through membership in a particular community as a result of common spiritual, religious and social convictions with shared modes of behavior, mores and traditions. As a result of the study, we derived a certain formula of identity in the works of William Kurelek, which the author understood as a set of ethnic, national, gender-based, and religious characteristics inherent in a person, demonstrating its identity as the appropriate group affiliation. We also conducted a typology of identities in his art: personal, religious, awareness of community membership, national and ethnic. We analyzed the issues of commonality and differences between national and ethnic identity, designating them as "ethnic calmness" and "ethnic stress".

Keywords: immigrant life, cultural world, Ukrainian original, ideological burden, painter.

Introduction

Identity as a theme was one close to Kurelek for a number of reasons. First, he himself belonged to the immigrant group which had gone through all the stages of adaptation to an alien world (from clear-cutting and from logging the forest) from erecting "primitive" housing to creating productive agricultural concerns. Second, as a creative artist he was seeking his own way to integration or

assimilation, to be a coordinate in a multicultural system, without becoming lost among the numerous styles in a multi-ethnic society. Third, he sought to recognize the philosophical essence of identity “from the inside” in this or that socio-cultural context. Proof of this is his series of illustrations devoted to the first immigrants to come to Canada. William Kurelek understood identity to be the combination of an individual’s characteristics: ethnic, national and religious.

William Kurelek (1969) traveled to India in 1969, one result of which was a series of works reflecting the social problems of under-developed countries (“Deformed Destitutes of India from *Pacem in Terris*”). Now he determined to depict in art the “mosaic” of immigrant life in Canada – Cook (1980) wrote about it. The main challenge for Kurelek was to demonstrate in factological detail the various roads to adaptation travelled by five different pioneer national newcomers (the Irish, Ukrainians, Poles) who settled on the untamed Canadian prairies. Kurelek (1978) created five series of art works on the settlement of the various national groups, which populated Canada. “Ukrainian Pioneer” (1971), “Jewish Life in Canada” (1975), “The Irish in Canada” (1976), “The French in Canada” (1976), and “The Polish Canadian” (1977). Kurelek also devoted a separate series to the peoples of Canada’s North, the Inuit, titled “The Last of the Arctic” (1975). Kurelek also discussed identity not only with reference to immigrants but also in graphic series based on materials gathered during numerous travels to the third world, specifically Nepal and India. Especially noteworthy is a graphical series composed of twenty-one pieces, *The Huronia Paintings*, dedicated to the topic of the First Nations, Canadian aborigines, i.e., the war and the peace between the Hurons and the eight French Jesuit missionaries.

It was important for Kurelek to raise the issue of integration in a multicultural space and preservation of his own identity through art, because in the multicultural world of Canada, in its national and ethnic dimensions, identity has acquired universal values – identity as a “partner of liberty”. In fact, in his paintings, Kurelek (1981) “showed” identity as an inherent sign of a person who hopes to live a meaningful life in an independent cultural world. Particularly, it was the problem of “Christmas at Otter Lake, Quebec” (1977), depicting the Christmas idyll of a traditional Polish family. Here the author is meticulous in detail as carriers of factual information about the “life” of Catholic immigrants. Twelve Christmas dishes, “*didukh*”, “*oplatok*”, a Catholic crucifix, a church calendar, an embroidered towel – each item-element works to create and emphasize the Polish identity in the plot of the work.

Typology and psychological basis of Kurelek’s identities

Much has been printed about William Kurelek in Canadian publications on art and culture (in English and Ukrainian). It was also found some learned and general interest material with socio-religious and even philosophical content in British publications, for example Michael S. Bird’s (1995) “Art and Interreligious Dialogue”. In Ukraine Kurelek is little known. There are a few articles about his paintings in academic collections and general interest periodicals by Kh. Beregovska, K. Tsurkovska, I. Hakh, L. Washchuk, S. Herehova, S. Karachko, M. Slaboshpytsky. Kh. Beregovska’s (2018) “The Passion of Christ by William Kurelek” was first to appear in Ukraine. A number of researchers have dealt with the theme of identity in Kurelek’s creative works, particularly R. Cook (1980), A. Arnold (1987), J. Rak (2004), P. Morley (1986), C. Hume (1984), S. Franlkin (1968). R. Cook in his publication, “William Kurelek: A Prairie Boy’s Visions”, describes the preconditions for the creation by the artist of series of paintings on immigrant themes which reflect the problems of the various peoples first to come to Canada as immigrants. The primary source for William Kurelek’ (1980) creative inspiration was his own Ukrainian original.

The historian of Canada's Jewish community, Abraham Arnold (1987), in his article "William Kurelek – Multicultural Artist" analyzed Canada's multiculturalism in Kurelek's art through the prism of the artist's personal trials and critical experiences as expressed later in the various series dedicated to major immigrant national groups: French, Irish, Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish. Another Canadian researcher, Julia Rak (2004) in her article "Pain and Paintings – William Kurelek and Autobiography as Mourning" does a chronological analysis of the painter's creative stages, pausing on the theoretical conclusions of the artist himself, dated 1977, where he publicly states the themes of identity and multiculturalism in his art. Patricia Morley (1986) in "Kurelek: a Biography" finds a considerable influence in the father – son relationship in the self-activation of the artist and thus on the identification of belonging. The theme of identity was fundamental in his art and today demands to be researched thoroughly to supplement understanding of this phenomenon and his heritage.

Analyzing and studying the works of William Kurelek raising the issue of identity, one can highlight the following types of identities: personal, religious, awareness of community membership, national and ethnic. Identities for the artist are collective attribution to certain social classes, professional and gender categories, or interest groups. For Kurelek, the limit of identity remains the limit of a person's belonging to one or another "wider" ethno-national world of life, a certain national culture. In this sense, identity cannot be a purely conscious, reason-based choice of a person who, according to Charles Taylor's (1997) apt concept, is definitely "embodied" in the world of culture. This does not mean for us, however, not to realize "who we are" and not to make moral or cultural choices.

In modern discourses of identity, two questions arise, "who are we" and "who am I." In this sense, it is a matter of identity not only as a psychological unity of a personality, such as ego-identity, according to Erickson and his followers (Bystryckyy et al., 2018), but rather of identity as a collective belonging of "us" to a particular ethnic or national culture, where the struggle for self-realization and recognition begins. In Kurelek's works, the characters of a particular nationality consciously and tolerantly exit/enter beyond their own identity, which testifies to the tolerant policy of recognizing everyone. William Kurelek was often associated with appearance at the stage of joining a certain social group (elementary school, university, Mexican environment), when the primary personal task for him is the task of "being yourself and not seeming like everyone else".

An example of such self-determination of a person in a group is "Suburban Church", 1965 (Kurelek & Murray, 1983), where the author portrays himself as a New Testament proverb protagonist, a doubting and timid Thomas, who climbs a tree and fearfully observes the surrounding reality, not having the courage to become its participant. The artist fills the environment with a crowd of people (contemporaries) who go to the Catholic (as evidenced by the characteristic style of architecture) church in the middle of which we meet the figure of Jesus, who naturally speaks to his flock. Jesus' face is turned to the tree on which an interested doubter was hiding. It was important for Kurelek to show this sensitive, silent dialogue between the omnipresent Savior and the "lost" man. One must note the image of a bare leafless winter apple tree, abounding in red fruits. One can often find the image of a leafless tree in the crown of which a man is entangled in his works, for example, in "Atheist", 1963 (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2020), or "Ukrainian Farmer Picnic", 1966. In the first work, the author semantically depicts a lone dried tree in the middle of the prairie Canadian "desert", on which an atheist holds the end of the highest branch with one hand, a moment before falling down. In the image of an atheist, the artist portrays himself as an example of strength and conversion for millions of unbelievers. Despite decades of opposition and repulsion of God, he still found the courage to hold on to the symbolic "crown of spiritual life".

Kurelek demonstrated his religious identity literally, as in “Our Lady of Czestochowa Outdoor Chapel”, 1977, or “Heart of Light: Charismatics in Laval”, 1975, or indirectly through the household routines and traditions of preparation for religious holidays or rituals, “Baking Easter Bread”, 1968. He, as an “ethnic artist”, had a clear position in the multicultural Canadian environment. He regularly responded and updated various social issues in his own writings, in particular, mourning the loss of traditional Roman Catholic values, showing how Canadian multiculturalism itself is based on high selective identity qualities that do not always correspond to the true immigrant success. Describing the religious and ethnic characteristics of most of the ethnic groups in Canada, Kurelek (1977) focused primarily on religious vision, saying, “Show God first, and your national or ethnic background next”. In fact, this fanatical need to reproduce God's presence in art bothered his critical thinking and desire on a daily basis. This persistence of faith was the main motivator of his art. When he tried to paint pictures without religious content, it led him to deep devastation and disappointment.

Religious meanings were present in the works of William Kurelek throughout his life, which we conventionally subdivide into two periods: atheistic and Christian. In the early period of his work, William Kurelek seemed to deliberately “embed” stylized religious images in secular subjects, mostly on social prairie themes. This author's sacred iconography (the composition of the Crucifixion) was rather an “emblem”, a semantic message than an iconological image that would demonstrate religious identity. An example of such works is “Portrait Artist as a Young Man”, 1950 (Espinoza, Tikhonov et al., 2018), where the author hides Christian symbols, such as a cross or a fish, in concealed elements.

Religious themes became dominant for W. Kurelek after his conversion to the Catholic faith, which took place in Lourdes in 1957, and allowed him overcome the dark times of faithlessness and atheistic lifestyle full of deep depressions. A powerful body of religious works in Kurelek's heritage created during the period from 1957 to 1977 is a kind of gratitude and praise to God for the gift of strength to survive fourteen electric shocks in British specialized hospitals where he stayed for seven years (1952-1957). We see the presence of sacred elements and images, which declare religious identity, in virtually every work, starting with the author's monogram in the form of letter W crowned with a cross and ending with an illustration of the Holy Gospel.

In his art, in the context of the problem of identity, W. Kurelek portrayed a person not only nominally belonging to a particular community (bishop, farmer, musician, worker); he went deeper, touching on the personal awareness of the portrayed person, his/her proper place and role in a particular community, thus emphasizing the value-semantic orientations of the individual. For Kurelek, community as an identity has never been a destination point, but always a starting point for new adaptations or integrations to the other groups or environments. In his paintings, he clearly “drew the line” between social groups – groups of different social identities, uniting them not by convergence, but rather by divergence (a certain difference and at the same time interpenetration). A good example of this is “The Barn Dance” (Kurelek, 1974), “Rosedale Golf and Country Club – It's Hard for Us to Realize”, 1972, “Lumberjack's Breakfast”, 1973 [18] in which the author appeals to the contrast of wealth and poverty; in his paintings, he seeks to show a gap between moral, educational and behavioral standards. For example, in “People and Dogs”, 1962, the artist shows the fundamental difference between human wealth and indifference along with the critical poverty and deep mercy of the people living in a globalized world. Identity as belonging to a community is also clearly seen in “Feathering Bee” 1966 (Ukrainian peasant women working together) or “A Roofing Bee” 1976 (a group of men within the French community in a Quebec town help build a roof for

their neighbor), showing joint action in a specific community in order to achieve material good for others.

Raising the topic of a man's social attribution, his origin, or ultimately identity for the artist was important in this context to emphasize the value of human life, and therefore earthly existence. He was convinced that everything in our lives happened with the Savior's knowledge, and that any unthinkable human "interference" in the natural process would negatively and inevitably affect our continued existence. This is evidenced by a series of works (7 drawings), which the artist created by order of a Waterloo University Professor, Dr. Don De Marco, for "Abortion in Perspective" (Green, 2019). In this context, Kurelek "used" art as the most accessible and eloquent method of drawing attention to dangerous and relevant social issues. In his works, he "noted" the qualities of the gene pool, as well as all risks and consequences in the interruption of the human race.

National or ethnic identity and the problem of its loss from the artist's standpoint

The most serious problem of identity loss begins where there are extreme threats to the very origin/roots of identity. Erickson believed that the formation of identity begins where personal identification becomes inappropriate, "A person does not feel at home", and does not feel an inner conviction in the recognition of those whom he considers authorities (Alvarez-Ramirez et al., 2019). Here we should mention the series of works entitled "Temptation in Desert", 1975 (Goldstein, 2020), on 20 paintings of which the artist illustrated the main social temptations (drugs, prostitution, alcoholism, homosexuality, gambling) for a modern man, who feels uncertain about his affiliation, hence uncertainty of himself as a personality. This series of works was launched by the personal difficulties of the artist, which he experienced in the Mexican environment, hence the chosen environment of the desert, which has always been associated for Kurelek with a twist in spiritual values and a whirlpool of temptations.

In the art of W. Kurelek, we have identified three defining concepts: private, public, and social, which emphasize important qualities of the situation of a person portrayed in a particular environment. Kurelek used art to illustrate these concepts with the help of well-thought-out plots, into which he introduced the real-life stories of the first immigrants, one of the founders of the Canadian state. Documenting the multi-ethnic models of first immigrants in art, synthesizing them into a single chamber context, Kurelek obviously did not suspect the explosion of identity in the modern world, the existence of new forms of everyday life (new worlds). The main purpose for him was to depict the coexistence of different systems of socio-cultural values and meanings, different cultural worlds in paintings, raising the question of identity as a lifestyle for people in certain communities.

For Kurelek, the nation/national community was not so much a political structure. He rather tried to understand and "edit" the ideological burden of the nation, placing this concept on a par with kinship and religion, rather than with liberalism or fascism. The phenomenon of multiculturalism in Canada had a common denominator on which many separate existences focused – traditions, peoples, cultures, individuals, i.e., coexistence-of-all-in-touch-to-all Kurelek considered national identity as a cultural definiteness, even as a separate event, the content of which is not the creation of individuality, but the articulation and creation of universal. Kurelek was always looking for his own "roots", the roots of ancient generations. When depicting French pioneers, it was primarily important for him to understand their traditions, the authenticity of their origins, the categories of understanding the world and themselves in it. He had a "good eye" for the types of genesis, the so-called "genetic codes"; he was able to combine bizarre and picturesque

aspects in one work. Mountain landscapes attracted him only as a fragment of the background, which works to create a psychological climate of the central plot. He had a special passion for people of tireless work: blacksmiths, bakers, farmers (Morley, 1986). Interestingly, Kurelek sent a personal invitation to each “hero” – a commoner from his paintings – for his solo exhibition of the series, which took place on November 18, 1976 in the Gallery d'art Quebec, under the supervision of Michael de Kerdour, called Charlevoix.

Depicting a series of paintings of different ethnic groups that inhabited Canada, Kurelek particularly emphasized the “man of culture”, which is not able to go beyond its own rootedness in the world of its cultural affiliation despite all reflective efforts. It was important for him to form his own “immune system” of identity in his art, where the most reasonable existential dimension is his own self-determination, which inevitably draws a line between the ecumenists of their own cultures and other cultural worlds. In his French, Ukrainian or Irish plots, there is a “sense of one family”, which is associated with the opening of the horizon of the other identities. He actually shows in his paintings the readiness of the “immune system” of the identity of different peoples, which were the first Canadian immigrants (French, Ukrainians, Irish) to go through a difficult path of integration or assimilation in a sophisticated socio-cultural model of Canada.

In Kurelek's works, we see the concern of a man for his human and cultural authenticity, which he cannot yield in any way. Taking care of one's own identity is a way of a man's being in his cultural world with his past life experience. Identity in his artistic interpretation is a being and the ability to be something other than the “reality” in its traditional perception and understanding. An example of this is another work from the French series, “The Wood-Carver's Family”, 1976, where he portrayed the family idyll of a simple peasant family of French origin working together. In this work, the author highlights the carved figure of the “first Frenchman” in Canada, and the background is dedicated to the skillfully drawn emotional grimaces of children and an attentive immigrant mother (Kurelek, 1978). When he visited Quebec, the first thing he learned was about the glorious woodcutters (those who carved amateur sculptures out of wood) from Montreal. Watching them work was like meditation for him. Kurelek compared himself to those folk artisans who did their favorite job to earn their families' living.

The artist portrayed the features of ethnic identity as a deep emotional state of the soul of an individual or a whole community. In some works, he showed the difference between the state of “ethnic peace”, when identity is not threatened by any external factors, and the state of “ethnic stress”, when there is some discrimination of “national” origin in the process of intercultural relations. An example of a work in which Kurelek (1970) emphasizes “ethnic peace” is “Green Sunday”, 1962. Here the artist paints a family idyll of a Ukrainian family, portraying them in national costumes in a traditional folk home interior, decorated with festive green branches. Another interesting work is “Blessing the Paska: to my Father's Village”, 1977, in which the artist depicts the process of paska consecration in an orthodox church in Bukovyna, the village of Borivka. Here we see a detailed and convincing depiction of the religious procession items (incense, Bible, sprinkle, icon), the emotional nature of each person in the picture and the overall Easter village atmosphere.

Instead, we see “ethnic stress” as a conceptual definition in the work entitled “Damned Pollack”, 1977. The central plot of the paintings is children's pranks on a summer background – the yard of the primary school. The composition dedicated to the real story of the artist's childhood memories of the boy Joe Gayski, with whom he attended school, each speaking his own language. It should be mentioned that William Kurelek and his younger brother John, like hundreds of immigrant children, did not know a single English word when they first went to school, so they suffered well from ruthless peers, receiving some isolating language trauma, which the artist called

“racist experience” [4]. Depicting prairie children of different nationalities together, in one picture, the artist wanted, besides children's duties and entertainment, to show the socio-emotional outline enriched by the sum of behaviors, temperaments, and results of “national” upbringing.

For Kurelek, the ethnic image of a person was not only a problem of self-determination in a polyethnic Canadian environment, but rather a problem/harmony of interethnic relations based on the principles of mutual respect and understanding through dialogue. An example of this is the 1966 work entitled “Cultural Exchange in Canada” (Kurelek, 1966), where the author portrays Ukrainians and Jews as mutually supportive peoples. This is a fine example of the coexistence of two ethnic identities in a single cultural context of Canadian pioneers. In the work, the author somewhat sentimentally shows a Ukrainian who laid out his modest stock under a tree, which consists of an embroidered shirt, an icon of the Virgin Eleusis, a kobza, and a Ukrainian tablecloth. The man gently took under his wing a poor Jew who carefully kept all his wealth in a modest bag over his shoulder. This is a very symbolic plot, since it shows an inverse retrospective event in Kurelek's life, which took place in 1960. At his first exhibition, organized by his art dealer Avron Isaac, he was first noticed by Jewish women, then the French, the British, and later the Ukrainians. Kurelek (1973) would later write about this fact in his autobiography “Someone with Me”, 1973. The artist has repeatedly raised the topic of shared Jewish-Ukrainian identities in his art, dedicating a whole series of works “Jewish Life in Canada” (1975), (Kurelek & Arnold, 1976).

It is very important to distinguish between the concepts of ethnic and national identity. Ethnic identity is the realization of oneself as a member of an ethnic community through common beliefs, beliefs, and patterns of behavior that are formed in the process of socialization. National identity is the awareness of one's belonging to a certain state and can be combined with the other class, religious, and personal identities (Kornienko, 2015). From the memoirs of John Kurelek (William's brother) we learn interesting stories about “Old Country” (Ukraine/Bukovyna), which were told to the older sons by father Metro Kurelek, saying that there is a big difference between being and feeling Ukrainian in Ukraine and Ukrainian here in Canada. Undoubtedly, such parental differentiation has influenced and, perhaps, laid down key positions in understanding Kurelek's nationality, which he later embodied in his numerous pictures.

The most famous series showing the Ukrainian national identity are “Ukrainian pioneer woman”, 1966 (Xhignesse, 2020) and “Ukrainian pioneer”, 1971 (Saifer, 2019). In these series, the artist encoded the national mentality of our people as a universal phenomenon of the nation. Here the author demonstrates the inevitability of historical circumstances and ways of adaptation of Ukrainian emigrants in the Canadian prairies. The unifying element of this series is a common deep meaning, rather a message of inviolable Ukrainian origin, tradition and ethnicity. In the context of national identity, the proper role was played by the national tradition, which was the most convincing and infallible source of inspiration for art. In this context, the issue of ethnic identity remains important: the sense of belonging and the importance of cultural heritage, even the definition of oneself (such as “Canadian”, “Ukrainian” or “Ukrainian Canadian”). Identity can manifest itself in different ways, depending on the reaction to aspects of tradition, culture, language, history, and religion.

Kurelek offered his version of the Canadian political identity (multiculturalism) in art, affording special respect to people of different national backgrounds who peacefully shared and disseminated the national heritage: musical, literary, linguistic, or culinary. In this sense, Kurelek emphasizes his own Ukrainian origin, but he in no way singles out Ukrainians as a privileged nation, believing that “Ukrainians, whether individuals or groups, may not be idealized, they, like all human beings, are the descendants of the first man, prone to weaknesses” (Arnold, 1987).

Portraying a multicultural Odyssey with his own clear ethnic awareness, Kurelek said, “Ethnicity, a nation is not a manufactory or a law that can be legalized. It is a birth and an experience. In this multicultural country, no one will be ashamed or apologize for his national origin, and I testify to that in my works” (Barker, 2018).

Conclusions

Kurelek's art gained special importance in the wider context of Canadian culture, as he became the only Canadian artist to represent the essence of Canadian multiculturalism, ways of integrating and assimilating different ethnic groups into a single Canadian space. Each of his works is a source of valuable information about the way of life, experiences, cultural and spiritual values of the peoples of Canada. In his art, Kurelek has developed his own coordinate system, which is characterized by a rethinking of national values and the search for ways of self-identification. His search for new forms of artistic expression, assimilation and understanding of world trends were intertwined with the need for national self-identification, the use of symbols, codes of their own historical and pictorial traditions in the context of Ukrainian culture. Kurelek also demonstrated his identity through a system of images and symbols as stable, strictly differentiated in content ideas, which evoke a constant circle of associations in a certain conscious “religious-conceptual” author's system.

As a result of the study, we derived a certain formula of identity in the works of William Kurelek, which the author understood as a set of ethnic, national, gender-based, and religious characteristics inherent in a person, demonstrating its identity as the appropriate group affiliation. We also conducted a typology of identities in his art: personal, religious, awareness of community membership, national and ethnic. We analyzed the issues of commonality and differences between national and ethnic identity, designating them as “ethnic calmness” and “ethnic stress”.

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