Who could have thought that failure to sign a cooperation agreement between Ukraine and the European Union in the 21st century would become so intertwined with the events of 200 years ago? The revolutionary upheaval in Kyiv from December of 2013 until February of 2014 aimed to change those in power. However, in that turbulent sea of human emotions there appeared several artistic phenomena which accompanied the revolution and turned out to be far from accidental.

The creative spirit of Ukrainians manifested itself first and foremost in the different kinds of visual art on the Maidan—Yanukovych’s notorious New Year’s tree nicknamed “yolka,” decorated with posters and banners; New Year’s postcards by Illya Strongovsky; the statue of St. Nicholas which was put up on the Maidan; and the Christmas Nativity scene painted by artists from Lviv. The common need to reflect on the events taking place in Kyiv also led to the creation of the so-called “Art Barbakan”—four walls mounted on Kyiv’s central street Khreshchatyk where artists from all over Ukraine displayed their works.

Besides the Revolution of Dignity, 2014 brought us the bicentennial of Taras Shevchenko. The events planned months in advance could not dominate life in Kyiv as the fate of the Ukrainian State was being decided in those days in Ukraine’s capital. All of a sudden posters from the series The Icons of the Revolution became the harbingers of victory: the images of Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, and Ivan Franko as contemporary revolutionaries appeared on February 10th on the walls of the buildings along the Khreshchatyk. The poster of Shevchenko, signed with the line from his narrative poem “Hamaliya”—“The fire doesn’t burn the battle-hardened”—was etched in the memory of many a protester in those days. The posters were created and published online by an artist who chose to sign them with the nickname “Sociopath.” At a first glance, the use of Ukraine’s literary classics by young artists is surprising—these are the works universally mandated for study in Ukrainian schools. Yet it is perhaps the moments of profound crisis that help one fully appreciate the power of these writers’ thinking, and it is in such moments that Shevchenko becomes exceedingly relevant in our daily lives.

The artist chose a simple depiction of Shevchenko—the poet is wearing the traditional, even “archaic” Cossack hat but also a kerchief that covers half of his face, making his eyes stand out. The background includes crossed bottles—red-and-black “Molotov cocktails”—and that is all. Pathos has been replaced with concision, long tirades and speeches with a portrait-as-sign, which bespeaks Shevchenko’s presence with us—here and now. It turns out that he has been with us all the time and we simply did not notice...

Andriy Yermolenko, one of the founders of the contemporary trend known as “zhlob-art” (which takes a highly ironic look at the contemporary Ukrainian society in some of its worst manifestations), is less laconic. He created his Shevchenko series long before the Euromaidan, having depicted the poet in a variety of contemporary roles—“Shevchenko the Superman,” “Shevchenko the Policeman,” “Shevchenko the King of Rock’n’Roll,” etc. Yermolenko commented on his interest in Ukraine’s premier poet: “Shevchenko! He was a fierce guy... The only individual who had no qualms about calling the Russian tsar names... To me, he is an example of a person of action. It’s time to act!” The exhibition of posters which adapted the image of Shevchenko to our current reality drew the public’s attention: on more than one occasion, I noticed visitors examining this
new image of Shevchenko very carefully. Of course there are people who reject this new trend: at the Andrey Sheptytsky National Museum in L'viv, there was much debate whether it was even worth including the Yermolenko pieces in the Bicentennial Shevchenko exhibit. Yet even in L'viv, a city that is quite conservative in its tastes, the exhibit received much praise.

Adriy Yermolenko, the inscription quotes from Shevchenko’s poem “Do Not Be Envious of the Rich...”: “Do not be envious of the rich: the wealthy man enjoys/Nor love nor friendship—these he buys, and hired pleasure cloys.” (Engl. trans. by C.H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell)

Adapting Shevchenko to the lived experience of later generations is not a new concern. As it turns out, the early 20th-century Galician literary group Moloda Muza (Young Muse), while searching for its own artistic style, pondered the question of Ukrainian conservatism and its influence on how the Ukrainian public received new literary phenomena. As poet Petro Karmanskyi wrote, “[w]e, the members of the Young Muse, perhaps even instinctively felt that Europe was charging ahead while we, the Galicians, were sitting stone-like on the granite foundations of traditional folklore, clichéd patriotism, primitivism, and sentimentalism... We saw that most of the public had not even digested Shevchenko and Franko, stubbornly mulling over only the essays by the former and the pathos of “Kameniari” ("Stone-Cutters") by the latter...” (P. Karmanskyi, Ukrains'ka Bohema, L'viv, 1996, pp. 126-7) Interestingly the Shevchenko exhibit at the National Museum included a caricature of Shevchenko drawn in 1922 by the futurist artist Osyp Sorokhtei, which looked strikingly modern and expressive. In just a few graphic lines, the artist captured both the poet’s character and his inner strength.

The Shevchenko exhibit which opened at the National Museum in March of 2014 demonstrates perfectly the changes that have happened in our perception of Shevchenko: it takes the visitor from the purely illustrative material to the re-contextualized image of the poet, to the interactive elements in the project Our Shevchenko by Serhiy Proskurnia.

A “barricade” built out of works by Vladimir Lenin and other Soviet literature that were kept in the basement of the National Museum in L’viv.
In the article “Taras Shevchenko: the Individual vs. the Myth,” Kyiv art historians Yulia Maistrenko-Vakulenko and Olga Balashova stated, “…in essence, the main achievement of Taras Shevchenko lies not in his art but in the fact that he dared to be a Ukrainian in the high society of the Russian empire—at a time when such a self-identification was unpopular, to put it mildly.” While I disagree with such an assessment of Shevchenko’s art, the authors of the article are right about the “Ukrainian-ness” of the poet. In 2013-2014, Shevchenko emerged as one of the spiritual “leaders” of the Maidan because most of the protesters were there to assert their right to be Ukrainians—rather than “Little Russians” or “khokhly” (many Russians’ derogatory name for Ukrainians—OW)... That is precisely why Shevchenko is appealing to many contemporary artists; it is the reson for their very personal and intuitive reception of his image—and for the poet’s ubiquitous presence on the Maidan as a symbol, an example, and a Great Ukrainian.

It so happened that in February of 2014 the Ukrainian nation managed to re-think its collective existence and to breathe new life into Taras Shevchenko’s enduring slogan: Boritesia—poborote! (“Fight—and you will overcome!”) For this we thank God, Shevchenko, and the heroes of the Maidan...

English translation by Olesia Wallo

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