

Remember When.

Canvassing Opinion

Not only did UCC students learn from an artistic icon, they also got the opportunity to be immersed in Canadian art history, via their well-connected teacher.



Yulia Biriukova offers advice to her art students.

Photo courtesy of UCC Archives

By John Carson

If you were taught art by the skilled Yulia Biriukova at UCC between about 1942–63, then you're very fortunate. If you were given a painting produced by her as a keepsake, or bought one at a garage sale, then you could be very lucky indeed.

The works of Biriukova have started to become, as they say in the art world, "collectible." She had a special flair for portrait painting. UCC was recently given two of her paintings by William Turville '54 to add to its collection, and now owns seven pieces in total.

"I was given the paintings by the widow of a former classmate, Warren Bryce '54," says Turville. "She was insistent that he would have wanted me to have them as a gift."

"The paintings are called 'Backfield & Sunflower' and 'Hockley Valley'; they were produced in 1936 and 1939 respectively. Both were autographed, so they're a piece of art history," he adds.

It was at an Old Boys' reunion dinner this past May when Turville decided to donate the paintings to UCC.

"I was contemplating who would better enjoy the paintings, then realized there was no better opportunity than to make a gift to the College for others to enjoy," he says. "I'm delighted UCC can make use of them."

Gar MacInnis '54 also had the benefit of Biriukova's teaching and became a professional painter in 1989 after retiring as an architect.

"She let the students do their own thing and encouraged them to experiment, especially with the use of colour," recalls MacInnis. "She also loved to take us on field trips so we could expand our horizons in the 'real world.'"

Who better to offer that worldly experience than Biriukova? She was born in Vladivostok, Russia, in 1895 and — apart from living through the Russian

Revolution — also spent time in China, Japan, Italy and England.

She arrived in Canada around the time of the stock market crash in 1929, and took a studio in Lawren Harris's Studio Building in Toronto.

In 1942, Biriukova joined the staff of UCC and organized sketching trips to various parts of southern Ontario — mostly to Norval — where she walked from one scene to another, encouraging her students with a never-ending supply of chocolate bars.

Each spring she also trained art crews to paint bold and colourful sets for the UCC operettas, including a production of *Iolanthe* by Gilbert and Sullivan.

"Teaching art as a primary source of income was very common among artists during Biriukova's day," says Tobi Bruce, senior curator, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ont. "I wouldn't say that Biriukova became a success after she stopped teaching; she had a name and a place for her practice while she was still teaching. It is really only now — several years after her death — that there is a renewed interest in her work.

"I think Biriukova was a very unique talent," adds Bruce. "Her work is unmistakable. She had a signature style that really set her apart from her contemporaries."

"Women painters from the first half of the 20th century have become very sought after," says Gabrielle Peacock, senior vice-president, director of fine art, Ritchie's Auctioneers and Appraisers, Toronto. "It is often difficult to come by their works. Scarcity certainly plays a central role in pushing prices upwards.

"Biriukova was not terribly prolific; although she exhibited regularly at the Canadian National Exhibition and Ontario Society of Artists, her works were not sold regularly during her lifetime," says Peacock.

"I remember her as a fairly strict and strong character," adds MacInnis.