

Milada Dohnalek

1919 - 2006
In Memoriam



Milada

Photograph by Joseph Belohradsky

Milada Dohnalek was born March 26, 1919 in Czechoslovakia. Milada was one of 5 children born to Aneska and Joseph Belohradsky. She enjoyed a happy, idyllic childhood in Banska Stavnice. Her father was a professor of Chemistry at the University and the family was frequently visited by artists, writers and scientists. These eclectic visitors were to influence her future life as an artist. It was her privilege to entertain these guests with poetry recitals as she was an avid reader. There was always a book in her hands.

When World War 2 was declared, the family moved to Prague. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the war, Milada met and fell in love with Frank Dohnalek. They married and had 2 children, Michael and Joan. Soon after the war ended, they decided to leave Europe and the terrible memories behind them. They tried to go to the United States and Canada but, as so many refugees were attempting to do the same, the doors were quickly shut to both countries.

The Dohnalek family found themselves in Lima, Peru. In the following years, they had two more children, Robert and Katherine. Frank got a job with the Czech firm, Bata Shoe Company in Lima and the family spent the next 11 years waiting to be accepted into the United States or Canada. One day, a letter arrived from the Canadian Embassy stating that they would now be allowed to emigrate to Canada. The next day, they received a letter from the American Embassy allowing them into the United States. They chose Canada and in the spring of 1959, the Dohnalek family arrived at Vancouver International Airport. Many times in the coming years, Milada would say that the moment she stepped on Canadian land, she took a deep breath of fresh, sweet, clean air and felt she had arrived "home." The family began their new life in the small seaside village of Deep Cove and enjoyed a peaceful life.



Milada and son Michael Photograph by Frank Dohnalek

In 1967, they moved to Horseshoe Bay, another seaside village. Here, Milada met and became close friends with a very talented and creative lady, also a war refugee from Europe. The two embarked on their lives as artists. Milada experimented with many mediums, but painting became her passion. Milada spent the following years developing her skills. In 1985, Milada, her son Michael and daughter, Katherine opened the doors to The Old Customs House Gallery in Britannia Beach. The Old Customs House represented many wonderful local artists and crafts people, as well as Milada's work.



The Old Customs House Gallery Photograph by Katherine Dohnalek



Old Customs House Gallery Window Photograph by Michael Dohnalek

Milada loved the time she spent at The Old Customs House. She painted almost every day. The ocean, the mountains, the ever changing view inspired her. A friend from Britannia Beach often brought Milada incredible bouquets of flowers from her garden to paint. She enjoyed meeting people from around the world, discussing art and learning from other artists. Milada loved people and many in turn loved her. She touched many lives, encouraged many dreams to become reality.

Milada's uncle had been a recognized artist in Czechoslovakia. Many happy days were spent in the country side watching him paint plein air. Her uncle, Chagall and Van Gogh were her greatest inspiration. Milada's paintings evolved from traditional, representational work to a more exuberant, vibrant, expressive style. Milada's sunflowers burst with movement and vivid colour. Her poppies are rich and mysterious, daisies are fresh and cheerful. Mountain peaks with swirling, dancing clouds. Landscapes with unexpected whimsy. Portraits with a story to tell. Collectors from all over the world brought home paintings by Milada Dohnalek.



Windy Day Howe Sound

Pastel by Milada Dohnalek

Milada Dohnalek tried to paint the wildness of the wind, the lush colours of nature, but she also had a mischievous streak. Her paintings of Adam and Eve always made people giggle! Her goal was to have the viewer experience a compelling connection to her work. She was passionate about painting and everything made by hand. Another form of creative expression came in the form of making hand felted wool "Art" hats. Bold, colourful, beautiful hats. Although made to be worn, people sometimes purchased these hats to display in their homes as sculptural art. She also enjoyed painting on ceramics. Those lucky enough to have acquired some of her hand painted ceramic pieces, cherish them. Her ceramic works of art were often described as "happy" and evoked a bright smile.



Milada wearing one of her felt hats
Photograph by Michael Dohnalek



"A Walk in the Country" Vase by Milada Dohnalek

On March 10th, 2006, Milada passed away with her family around her. She was just shy of her 87th birthday. The twinkle in Milada's eyes, her gentle compassion and generous spirit is greatly missed but lives on in memory. Those who knew her like to believe that she continues to pursue her artistic endeavours and is meeting great and wonderful artists. Her beloved rabbit in her arms.



Milada Dohnalek looking out a gallery window with one of her hats. Circa 1990's
Photo by Michael Dohnalek