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Ukrainian Symbols and Archetypes in the Historical and Folklore Imagery of Irena Nosyk

Символи та архетипи українців в історико-фольклорних образах Ірени Носик

Abstract. The paper examines the concepts of “symbol” and “archetype” and their realization in the artistic thinking of the Canadian-Ukrainian artist Irena Nosyk. The interest in the use of archetypes as a primary scheme and their subsequent expression in art through the objectification of symbols were examined. The significance of the “spiritual memory of Ukrainian people,” which inspired the artist to depict significant events in the history of Ukrainian culture, was traced. Mythological, historical and folklore imagery in the art of Irena Nosyk were analyzed, in particular: the Scythian woman, Prince Igor Svyatoslavovich, Prince Volodymyr the Great, ethnic Hutsuls, mythical creatures—*mavkas*. Legends and chronicles are considered primary sources for creating this imagery. At the same time, Christian images in Nosyk’s works served as an indisputable means of systematic and purposeful influence on the viewer’s inner world. The elements of Hutsul life and clothing in Irena Nosyk’s works are analyzed. Parallels between her canvases and the works of other artists, including Petro Andrusiv and Viktor Vasnetsova, are drawn. The features of the creative method of the artist are highlighted in regard to a color-tonal palette, with brown-pink tones signifying the supernatural world.

The paper aims to clarify the root causes of the use of symbols and archetypes by Irena Nosyk in her art. The methods used were comparative-historical, analogy and synthesis, as well as specialized art analysis methods, such as: iconological, iconographic, formal analysis, and semiotic. It was concluded that a secret language of semantic fields full of symbolic ciphers is a trademark feature of Irena Nosyk’s creativity.

Keywords: symbol, archetype, mythology, historical and folklore imagery, art of Irena Nosyk.

Introduction. Understanding symbols and archetypes is the quintessence of any scientific knowledge, as it affects the perception of the artwork, enables its correct decoding, and ameliorates the aesthetic taste of the viewer. In fine art, an image is conveyed by various visual means of artistic expression (composition, conception, coloration), with the use of symbols to encode information about one’s internal worldview and to transmit ideas and senses (Varyvonchuk et al., 2021, p. 110). Symbols and archetypes not only open the way for perception of the work of art but also allow understanding the individual spiritual state of the artist, becoming as if a collaborator. In the literature, symbols and archetypes usually refer to the elements capable of denoting and conveying specific concepts, ideas, and senses that exist as a certain language of fine art.

Literature review. The core of ancient Ukrainian symbolism (of pre-Christian and Christian periods) was outlined in the works by Serhiy Krymskyi, in particular “Under the signature of Sophia” (2008) and “Archetypes of Ukrainian culture” (Krymskyi, 1998); by V. Zhaivoronok in his *Symbols of Ukrainian ethnocultural: A Glossary* (Zhaivoronok, 2006);

by I. Nechuy-Levytsky in *Worldview of the Ukrainian People (Sketch of Ukrainian Mythology)*. Several studies, for example by A. Varyvonchuk, I. Bondar, and A. Kulyk “Artistic and Cultural Aspects of Signs and symbols in fine art” (Varyvonchuk et al., 2021); by N. Demyanova “Symbolism of images in Ukrainian painting (theomorphic, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images)” (Demianova, 2013); by B. Mazur “Christian imagery in the works of modern fine art” (Mazur, 2020); by G. Stelmashchuk *Ukrainian folk costume* (Stelmashchuk, 2019) attempted to articulate the understanding of symbols in modern art history.

The **aim** of the paper is to clarify the root causes of the use of symbols and archetypes by Irena Nosyk in her art, to introduce the theoretically processed, generalized, and analyzed information regarding the meaning of symbols in her art into the art historical discourse.

Results and Discussion. Irena Romana Nosyk was a painter, mosaicist, and scientific illustrator of the Department of Zoology at the University of Toronto. Born in the city of Chortkiv in 1928, she emigrated to Canada in 1948 and was active in the Ukrainian art community

of Toronto. During her life in exile, Irena Nosyk created a wide palette of religious, folklore, and historical imagery, inspired by numerous periods and episodes of Ukrainian history. She recreated characters from ancient chronicles, legends, fairy tales, and *dumy*. Her most frequently used heroes were: Scythian woman, Prince Igor Svyatoslavovych, Prince Volodymyr the Great, Princess Olga, ethnic Hutsuls, and mythical creatures—*mavkas* and demons. Each had not only a direct but also a figurative meaning, with certain symbols encoded in them.

In the art of Irena Nosyk, the spatio-temporal mode of existence of ancient times was recreated by the means of symbols. In her paintings in a bright coloristic manner, the artist masterfully uses the chiaroscuro technique, and with the help of certain nuances, conveys the volume of the figures. In the artistic palette of the artist, there are many shades, which create a feeling of movement of air. Usually, these are the colors that are most often used for folk images, namely red, black, yellow, green, and blue.

The use of archetypes, symbols, and allegories is organic to Irena Nosyk's painting. The artist developed her own sign system; with it, she transmits the coded symbols to the viewer. The spiritual memory of the Ukrainian nation, containing significant historical and cultural events, inspired the artist. Her heroes were both the progenitors of the modern Ukrainians and their Scythian predecessors. According to Irena Nosyk, Ukrainians inherited from them the sense of brotherhood, the sanctity of their forefathers' graves, the commemorative ritual of *trizna*, as well as respect for the guests, and the greeting ceremony of bread and salt. In addition, the Baptism of Rus is highlighted as a symbol of its spiritual reunification with the European oecumene, and the military campaigns of Prince Igor—as a warning against civil strife in the administration of the state. Irena Nosyk described in detail the characteristics of the Hutsuls as a symbol of the ethnic diversity of Ukraine.

S. Averintsev, who researched semiotics in painting, believed that in the broadest sense, a symbol is an image, a sign endowed with all the organic nature of a myth and the inexhaustible multiplicity of its representations in art. The structure of a symbol is aimed at immersing a separate phenomenon in the whirlwind of the primary forces of nature and presenting a holistic image of the world through this phenomenon (Averintsev, 2006, p. 178).

Clearly, the image of a deity was one of the most ancient ones that captivated minds (Mazur, 2020). The canvas *Steppe Woman* (Fig. 1) depicts a monumental stone sculpture like the ones that appeared on the territory of Ukraine probably over 6000 years ago. The word *baba* is interpreted from Sanskrit as “soul” or elder. Historians believe that these sculptures were created as a symbol of faith in prosperity for the settlement and fertility. They were placed on mounds. Since the Scythians believed in the reincarnation of souls, these statues served as talismans—receptacles for the souls of ancestors.

Lina Kostenko's poem “The Scythian Woman” from her *Odyssey* collection perfectly illustrates the painting:



1. *Steppe Woman*. Acrylic

You, Scythian woman, a stone clumsy,
you stand in the steppes... Steppe grass around...
What kind of woman are you, well, what kind?!
One hundred centuries here and without a child!
...
You are used to horses, shotguns, arrows,
Traitorous khans with the kite profile
...
... The woman laughs, damned Scythian woman,
Belly up laughing.

(Kostenko, 1982).

By genre, this historical canvas was created in the style of expressionism. The picture is balanced and static. There is no planning of the space. The color scheme is chromatic and polychrome, the artist uses warm shades of red, yellow, and orange colors.

Mythological and religious consciousness permeates Ukrainian art from ancient times to the present, leaving in the depths of the consciousness and subconsciousness of Ukrainians a complete symbolic system, open not only to the artist but also to the viewer (Demianova, 2013). This creates an aesthetic and spiritual dialogue through the transmission of the meaning of the symbol and its perception.

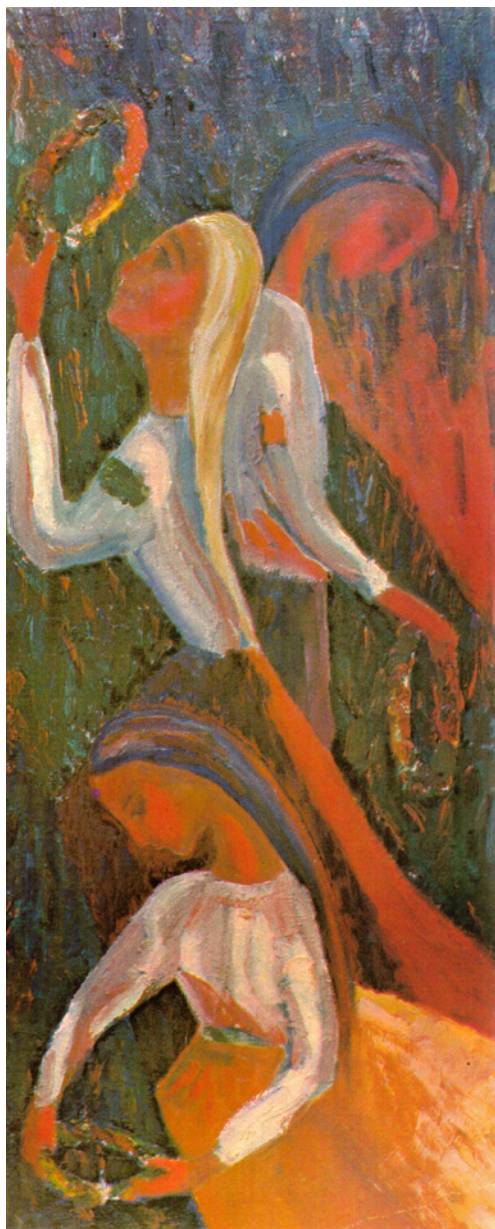
The logical continuation of the image of fertility, embodied in the Scythian woman, is another manifestation of it—the image of a *rusalka*, who, in Ukrainian paganism, was a patron of land fertility (Fig. 2). By genre, it is a mythological painting, a sub-genre of historical painting. The image of *rusalka* derives from Slavic lower mythology. According to the legends, *rusalky* are especially active on Kupala night

(commonly known as Rusalka Easter). Interestingly, there exists an explanation for the fact that modern people do not see *rusalky*: it happened due to the decline of spirituality. Perhaps, Irena Nosyk strived to recreate this ages-old spiritual feature of ancient Ukrainians—to see the supernatural in the everyday environment.

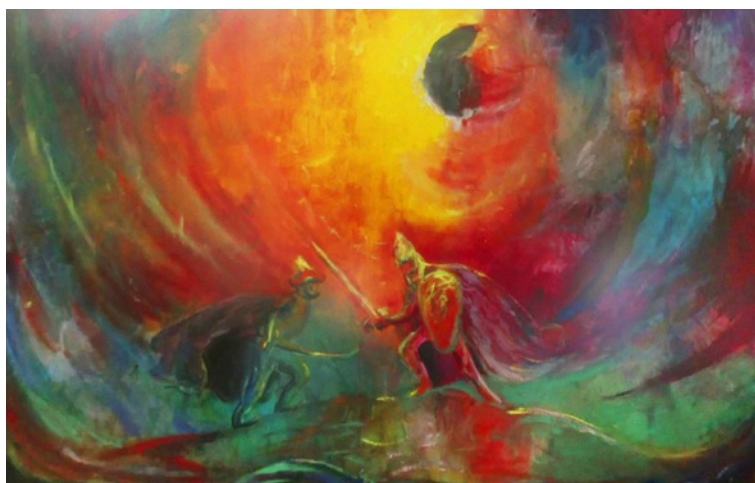
The painting *Rusalky* depicts five figures in the process of offering gifts to the statue of *baba* (see above) as the progenitor of the family. It is known that during the times of paganism, Rosalia—the days of commemoration of the dead—were celebrated, with the rose wreaths being an attribute of this feast. The statue of a stone woman has its hands on her belly, forming a certain vessel for sacrifice (a ritual vessel). Magical symbolism is also present in the numerology of the painting. Using knowledge about the numbers in Ukrainian ethnocultural tradition, the symbolism of the number five (that's the number of figures on the canvas) could be interpreted as a sign of power, symbolizing something hidden, secret knowledge, magic. A certain quintessence of the first

elements—ether, fire, water, earth, and air—is presented by the artist as a background for the painting. In her art, Irena Nosyk separates the other world, where *rusalky* live, from the real-life world with a pink color turning into bright green.

Another embodiment of the mythological image of the pagan holiday of Ivan Kupala is the illustration of the booklet for the opera *Kupalo* by Anatoly Vahnyanin, which premiered on June 13, 1979 at the MacMillan Hall in Toronto (Fig. 3). Symbols of harmony between man and nature are depicted. In a successful composition, the artist placed three female figures against the background of four elements of nature: in the right corner, there is a bright red fire, with dark blue air above it; in the lower left corner, there is green earth, and the right side depicts water with the strokes of blue. Nosyk illustrates the plot elements of the opera, where girls weave wreaths of wildflowers. This is the main pagan ritual of the holiday and the subsequent throwing them in water is a rite that ensures fertility, health, and procreation.



2. Mermaids. Acrylic



4. Prince Igor. Historical series. Oils and acrylics

3. Program for the opera *Kupalo*. 1979. Watercolor, paper.
Photo courtesy of Daria Darevich



5. Baptism of Ukraine. Acrylic



6. Hutsuls. Oil, acrylic

No less full of the dynamic plot is the painting *Prince Igor* (Fig. 4) from the historical cycle of the artist, which depicts the heroic figure of the prince in the battle with the Polovtsian invaders. The image is endowed with the symbolism of metamorphosis, as the majestic Rus is depicted as a locus of human virtues and military prowess. It may be assumed that Nosyk depicted an episode from *A Tale of Igor's Campaign*, based on a story about the 1185 campaign of the Rus prince Igor Svyatoslavovich against the Polovtsy. This plot is quite popular in Ukrainian art: for instance, parallels may be drawn to the graphic work of Petro Andrusiv, an artist from the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland, *Igor's Campaign against Polovtsy*. Andrusiv prefers a battle image: a majestic confrontation of two enemy armies, losses of cavalry, black crows flying over the battlefield indicating many fallen, a detailed image of military ammunition, etc.

Irena Nosyk approaches compositional solutions in a slightly different way. She has only two figures in the picture, which personify the entire two peoples. The emotional

intensity is illustrated by the plot from *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, which warns that it will be unsuccessful: "Igor looked at the sun and was horrified, the whole army was suddenly covered with darkness... Clouds rolled, four suns trying to cover, blue lightning flashed..." (*Slovo*, n. d.).

The plot takes place on the Kayali River near the Don river. Stormy waves increase tension. The spherical perspective adds a certain closedness to the image as if it fits the action into the circle of time. The hero, Prince Igor, is depicted as a brave knight, he is proud and majestic, and he embodies the military virtue of Rus. The warrior clad in heavy armor, holding a sharp sword in his right hand, and a shield in his left. The head is crowned with a knight's helmet. The wind waves his long crimson cloak, with which he shields his Motherland from danger. Polovtsian appears somewhat lower, he contrasts with the figure of Igor because Nosyk depicted him in cold shades of green and purple. He is also clad in armor and with a typical headdress of the Polovtsy—a cone-shaped fur-cap with a crimson fur. In the *Ipatiev Chronicle*,



7. Arkan. Series of Dances. Oil



8. Ukraine. Acrylic

it is mentioned that wolf tails were attached to the battle helmets of the Polovtsy to frighten opponents.

The genre of this painting is historical. The composition is built from left to right, the rhythm of color tones changes from hot yellow-red to cold blue-green. The quintessence of the picture is Igor's sword, the most illuminated object, which creates the impression of an endless source of light. The left part of the canvas is much darker; that may be interpreted as a special means of emphasizing the dark, hostile side of the invader. The right side is full of flashes of light—a glimmer of hope for victory. Another contrasting image is the sun—its left side is darkened, while the right side remains bright crimson. The viewer considers this as a symbol of the temporary decline of the Rus state.

Irena Nosyk's painting is particularly relevant today. Unfortunately, Ukraine again has been invaded by merciless enemies from the East, but the war gives rise to the newest heroes, the descendants of the great Rus warriors.

Irena Nosyk repeatedly addressed historical topics, i. e. in the painting *Baptism of Ukraine* (Fig. 5). Christian imagery were used for millenia in the works of fine art as an indisputable means of systematic and purposeful influence on the inner world of the viewer, on his emotions and feelings, on formation and functioning of religious consciousness, which underlie the development of a deeper religiosity of an individual (Mazur, 2020, p. 135). This plot may be interpreted according to *The Tale of Bygone Years*, where there is a record under the year 988 about Prince Volodymyr Svyatoslavovych of Kyiv baptizing Rus. The painting depicts the moment of baptism of the people of Kyiv in the Dnipro River.

The canvas was also created in an expressionist style, with the figures of the main characters not clearly painted because something else was emphasized, namely, the most significant event for Ukrainian spirituality. According to the iconological tradition, it may be assumed that the figure with the cross is Volodymyr himself, next to him is the smaller silhouette of his wife Anna, and behind them are their sons. In order to understand the peculiarity of this work, it is necessary to compare it with similar themes, in particular, the well-known fresco by Viktor Vasnetsov *Baptism of Rus*. In the latter work, there is a vivid contrast between influential clerics and half-dressed commoners. A similar image is in Peter Andrusiv's painting *Baptism of Ukraine-Rus*, where the poorer strata are clearly separated from the nobility. Instead, in Nosyk's painting, all the figures are depicted in the same proportions and color, as if symbolizing equality before God, and showing humility before his holy image.

The color scheme is chromatic-polychrome, with red, brown, and yellow predominating. In the right part of the picture, the heavens behind the cross are highlighted in bright blue. The possible symbolic interpretation of this technique is a powerful burst of radiant light as the descent of the Holy Spirit on the land of Rus. The optical center of the image is a cross, a symbol of Jesus' crucifixion. The similarity symmetry is applied so that the figures increase in size from left and right to the center of the picture.

The background of folklore poetics echoes in Irena

Nosyk's paintings *Hutsuls* (Fig. 6) and *Arkan*. The canvases are full of folk themes, reproducing the age-old values of mountain people and their material and spiritual culture. *Hutsuls* depicts representatives of the national ethnic group living in the territory of the Carpathians, detailing the elements of their clothing and lifestyle.

The main character of the painting is a tall man in a hat with dark hair and a lush mustache. He is dressed in a white shirt, pulled over his trousers with a *portishch*, girded with a red belt *cheres*, and over it is a sleeveless coat—a *keptar* embroidered in blue and white color with red tassels, holding *bartka* axe (Stelmashchuk, 2019). Behind the young man stands a gray-haired elder, probably his father, who is depicted with an attribute of a mature hutsul—a smoking pipe. The third character is a female figure of hutsulka, wearing an embroidered shirt with an orange ornament on the sleeves and a red cloth skirt. Her outerwear is a pink-orange *serdak*. The woman has a cap with a red-orange scarf on her head and holds a mug in her hand. A characteristic nuance of the image is the green marks on the mug, which is a hint to the Hutsul glazed majolica.

In the foreground, there are typical elements of Hutsul life, namely a candlestick and a pot. The background of this painting is a green shade of a spruce forest, which contrasts well with the colorful images of the Hutsuls. The composition is symmetrical, with an equal ratio of the upper and lower parts of the canvas. The Trinity is inscribed in a regular geometric triangle.

It is worth pointing out that many artists have repeatedly turned to the images of the free people of the Carpathian Hutsuls: Ivan Trush, Fedir Krychevskiy, Oleksa Novakivskiy, Vasyl Kasyan, Mykhailo Demtsiu, Myroslav Yasynskiy, Oleg Loburak, and others. The common feature of these images is a bright color in shades and a sublime tone of the images of hardworking people, full of spiritual greatness and wisdom of the so-called "Hutsul code of life." Irena Nosyk resorts to the same reminiscence.

Developing the Hutsul theme, she creates the painting *Arkan* (Fig. 7), depicting an ancient Ukrainian male dance, which name derives from the Latin word *arkanus* (hidden) (Averintsev, 2006). The famous archaeologist Yuriy Shishov claims that the root "arta" comes from the times of Tripillia culture. It is also known that this dance was a symbol of the initiation—transition of boys to men, who were allowed to have a *bartka*.

Nosyk's painting is full of ethnic coloring, dynamics, and spring energy, it has tangible freedom of movement. The picture is dynamic, its optical center is Hutsuls' hands holding. The dynamics of the work is set by the figures of the depicted dance in motion, which emphasizes the asymmetry of the image. The composition is dominated by a green background—the image of the Verkhovyna forest: trees and grass are painted with prominent strokes of emerald color. In blue, the author imitates the movement of air and clouds.

Turning to authentic signs of folk creativity, Irena Nosyk produces a feminine image of *Ukraine* (Fig. 8). She appeals to an archetypal image—a mother. The personified image absorbed all the multifaceted existence of the Ukrainian people. The composition is built from left to right, the spiral lines



9. Irena Nosyk with a model at the studio.
Photo courtesy of Daria Darevich



10. Family. Acrylic and oil. 38 × 28 cm

on the background lead from the left corner to the center, and the figure's head is also directed to the center, which creates the impression that it is inscribed in an oval or a figure of eight—a symbol of infinity. The optical center is a bright pink-red lower in the heroine's hair. The picture is dynamic, the rhythm is set by the folds of the embroidery on the shirt, the continuation of which is repeated in the ribbons woven into the girl's braid, merging with the background. The dominant color of the composition is blue. This is a clear parallel to the image of the Maiden-Ukraine, full of light and blue tones, reflected on her skin (Fig. 9).

Ukrainian ethnologist M. Stelmakhovich believed that since ancient times, Ukrainians had the cult of hearth and home, the cult of Family. In the Slavic pantheon, there were deities-patrons of the family—Rid and Rozhanytsia. At ancient times, personal happiness was unimaginable without a family and a home (Stelmakhovych, 1997, p. 129–132). Irena Nosyk addressed this theme in her art. The painting *Family* (Fig. 10) depicts a traditional Ukrainian family—a folklore image. The father is presented as strong and steadfast, his figure is the largest—he is a true personification of the head of the family, the first man of courage and strength. The woman appears to be smaller, with long blonde hair, she clings tightly to the man and rests in complete protection and safety. The figure closest to the viewer is a small child in a long tunic sitting next to her parents. The child has fair hair like the mother. The wheat ears in the lower right corner complete the picture. This work is permeated with the archetypes of the Ukrainian people. The concept of archetype means a prototype, an original idea, a certain form for subsequent formations. In the philosophical concept of Serhiy Krymsky, expressed in his work “Archetypes of Ukrainian culture” (Krymskyi, 1998), there is an idea of the Anima Archetype of the female image, bearer of motherhood,

kindness, and fertile Earth. In Ukraine, traditionally, the women in the family were treated with respect. At the same time, this image represents the protection of the homeland, love, and devotion to it. The male archetype Animus is the male counterpart of the Warrior, who has the power to cherish new life. The child's archetype is a symbol of the developing future. The archetype of the steppe symbolizes freedom and independence of Ukraine—“Hellas of the steppe.”

The painting may be conventionally divided into halves—the right is golden-blue, symbolizing the sky and wheat, the main colors of the Ukrainian flag. The left part is dominated by red as a symbol of blood and the terror of the Soviet regime. In the upper left corner, there is a portrait of Joseph Stalin, who organized the genocide of Ukrainians in 1932–33, aimed at the destruction of the peasant population of Ukraine. The image of a man symbolically acts as a shield that protects Ukraine from destruction.

Conclusions. The secret language of semantic fields is inherent in the art of Irena Nosyk. Her works are full of coded messages that require the viewer to know the relevant context. Mythological, historical, and folklore imagery adds a special context to her paintings, opening a new level of their perception. The presence of primary archetypes of human consciousness in the artist's works explains her interest in the history of her family, its experience, and its ethnicity. Her oeuvre proves the artist's belief in the invincible power of the Ukrainian spirit, which will flourish despite vicious enemy attacks, as Taras Shevchenko prophesied: “And in our land, by faith retrieved, / No foemen shall be brought to birth, / Mothers and sons shall show their worth / And love shall reign throughout the earth”¹ (*Kobzar*, pp. 213–214).

¹ Translated by C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell.

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Павлишин А.

Символи та архетипи українців в історико-фольклорних образах Ірени Носик

Анотація. Розглянуто поняття «символ» та «архетип» та їхнє втілення у художньому мисленні української мисткині з канадської діаспори Ірени Носик. Відстежено інтерес до застосування архетипів як первісної схеми, їхнє подальше виявлення в мистецтві за допомогою опредмечення символів. Простежено значення «духовної пам'яті народу», що надихала художницю на відображення знакових подій для історії української культури. Проаналізовано міфологічні, історичні та фольклорні образи у мистецтві Ірени Носик, зокрема: скіфська баба, князь Ігор Святославович, князь Володимир Великий, етнічні гуцули, міфічні створіння — мавки. Розглянуто легенди та літописи як першоджерела для створення образів. Обґрунтовано втілення християнських образів у роботах Ірени Носик як незаперечний засіб системного і цілеспрямованого впливу на внутрішній світ глядача. Охарактеризовано елементи гуцульського побуту та одягу. Надано актуального сенсу полотну «Князь Ігор» у контексті сучасної війни України з Росією. Проведено паралелі полотен Ірени Носик із роботами інших художників, зокрема Петра Андрусів та Віктора Васнецова. Висвітлено особливості творчого методу мисткині у використанні кольорово-тональної палітри: надання образам надприродного світу брунатно-рожевого відтінку. Метою статті є з'ясування першопричин втілення символів та архетипів у мистецтві Ірени Носик. Було використано такі методи: порівняльно-історичний, аналогії та синтезу, а також вузькоспеціалізовані методи мистецтвознавчого аналізу, такі як: іконологічний, іконографічний, формальний аналіз, семіотичний. У висновках підсумовано огляд таємної мови семантичних полів, що сповнені символічних шифрів, які окреслюють її належність до українського народу та пояснюють зацікавленість мисткині його історією, досвідом та етносом.

Ключові слова: символ, архетип, міфологічні образи, історичні та фольклорні образи, мистецтво Ірени Носик.