

## The Art of Zeljko Kujundzic

Zeljko Kujundzic is a name many Nelsonites are familiar with. His artwork can be found in homes throughout the region, and those who lived here in the 1960s remember his accomplishments and his charismatic persona. However, this is the first time in over four decades that Kujundzic's work has been shown publicly in Nelson. Although he was only a resident of Nelson for about 5 years, his contribution to the development of the visual arts in our community was significant. While many artists and community members were involved in establishing the Kootenay School of the Arts (KSA), Kujundzic's influence and his remarkable life story are worthy of celebration and recognition.

Kujundzic was born in 1920 in former Yugoslavia. During WWII he was active in a resistance cell and was captured twice, first by the Germans and then by the Russians, escaping both times. His war time experiences are documented in his autobiography, "Torn Canvas". After the war he lived in England for a time and then Scotland for ten years, before moving to Cranbrook in 1958. Later that year he moved to Nelson, where he assisted in establishing KSA, working as its first principal for four years.

Kujundzic's artistic training in Hungary provided him with technical skills in numerous mediums including ceramic sculpture, beaten copper, painting, printmaking, metal casting, wood carving and jewelry. He was passionate about using local materials; grinding his own pigments for paint, using local clay for sculpting and silver in his jewelry work. His depth of understanding of the materials of the trade is remarkable and incredibly rare. Kujundzic's bold lines, mixed media approach, and use of figurative and iconic imagery reflect not only his Eastern European heritage, but also the aesthetics of the time in which he was working. He was deeply influenced by his Byzantine roots and found inspiration in the iconic imagery he encountered in churches throughout Europe. Kujundzic had an early fascination with First Nations art, and he befriended and mentored many young aboriginal artists throughout BC.

An internationally acclaimed artist throughout the 1960's to '80's, Kujundzic was incredibly driven and prolific. Beyond his contribution to the establishment of KSA, his influence was felt wherever he lived and worked. After he moved to Kelowna in 1964, Kujundzic established the Art Centre, the Okanagan Summer Arts Festival and formed the Contemporary Okanagan Artists group with five other artists. He also taught at Pennsylvania State University and moved between there and the Okanagan from 1968-1992. Kujundzic completed many commissions, including Thunderbird sculptures for UBC's Thunderbird Stadium, the Fink Fountain in Cranbrook and the Gate of Life monument in Pennsylvania which commemorates Jewish people killed in the holocaust. Other accomplishments include inventing a solar kiln in 1975 and creating sculpture for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '87. Kujundzic held solo shows in Edinburgh, London, Paris, Mexico, Pennsylvania, Japan and Oslo. Also of interest is the fact that three of his daughters are artists, Claire Kujundzic being the most widely recognized and exhibited. Their work is for sale in the gift shop throughout the duration of the exhibition.

Kujundzic's contributions to the visual arts in BC are legendary although rather unsung, and it is my pleasure to honor his achievements, in particular his influence on the development of the KSA. I hope you, too, will find inspiration in his life and work.

Jessica Demers  
Curator