

Plywood provides canvas to portray war brides' travails



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The piece of plywood is rough, knots dot its surface — a perfect canvas for Calgary artist Bev Tosh to tell the story of Canada's war brides.

During the Second World War, women from allied nations found themselves falling in love with foreign soldiers.

Once the war ended, many of them married, leaving their homes and families to travel to a new life.

One of those women was Tosh's mother. She fell in love with a New Zealand flyer who was in Canada as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

She sailed on one of the many "bride ships" to her new home. Unfortunately, the marriage didn't work and, at the age of nine, Tosh found herself, along with her mother and sister, heading back to Canada.

"My mother didn't speak about her time. It's not that she meant to withhold it from me as I was older. It's simply that it was a closed chapter."

That chapter remained closed for many years until her mother's 80th birthday.

"About that time, I felt a need to paint her from an old photo.

"I took a regular size canvas and started to paint her and thought it doesn't even begin to touch a subject like your mother."

Tosh believed a much larger canvas, one measuring 2.4 metres high and 1.8 metres wide, was the right size to capture a woman who was larger than life.

With the portrait complete, Tosh felt a need to find out more about her mother's time as a war bride. While in New Zealand as a guest artist, Tosh began researching her mother's bride ship.

"My mother didn't remember the name of her ship. So I went to the archives in Auckland and saw her name on the ship and my interest just grew and grew from that."

A New Zealand newspaper featured Tosh's portrait of her mother, and suddenly Tosh was hearing from



Calgary Herald Archive

Bev Tosh poses with an unfinished portrait of a war bride.

other war brides.

She knew the stories had to be captured, and the only way she knew how to do that was through her art.

So she began painting the war brides from the dozens of wedding pictures she received, but a regular canvas wasn't going to do.

She needed a surface that shared the

pain and struggles the women faced when they left their homes.

And she found it in a simple piece of plywood.

"I'm able to look for knots and cracks and colouring patterns and roughness and damage, accidental or otherwise, and utilize that to further tell the war brides' (stories) as I know them."

Over the past four years, Tosh has painted almost 75 war brides.

A few of them line her studio, standing 1.2 metres high, leaning on each other, symbolic of the support they needed in their new life. The rest are part of the impressive "One Way Passage" exhibition that has travelled to numerous museums throughout the country, including Pier 21 in Halifax, where many of their stories began.

As for the painting that sparked Tosh's journey, the portrait of her mother hangs proudly in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

"I've been able to share in other war brides' memories and journey and lives, and had a fascinating interest and continue to do so."