

From Russia with a love for art

BY BILL ARNOTT

Lena Kolobow's waiting room and art gallery is all about mental health. Every piece of art in the Chancery Art Gallery is chosen because of its psychological content.

"I'm looking for something in a piece of art that gives enough complicated material for people to think and to feel," said Kolobow. "People can sit here and enjoy the art and maybe they won't need a shrink. People in Muskoka do not have mental health problems like people in New York City. Maybe, it is all the gorgeous scenery around here."

The wrought iron gate, the stone pillars and interlocking red brick of Chancery Lane give old world presence to the gallery. This walkway is located off Manitoba Street in downtown Bracebridge. It is also the home of Kolobow and her husband Paul Ivanoff, who live upstairs. Downstairs, in front of large showcase windows, is a turn-of-the-century display room with a high embossed tin ceiling. "It took four coats of prime and two coats of paint," said Kolobow talking about the completed renovations for the opening, which took place this summer.

A new hardwood floor has a sparse amount of furniture placed with old world elegance. There is a white grand piano, a wooden pew, classic wood-leather armchair bench, a rocking chair and two wooden end tables. The paintings of the walls have a definite European perspective and a surrealistic presence.

"This is my waiting room," said Kolobow. She is a qualified psychotherapist but not a licensed psychologist. She explained to be licensed, you need to take lessons and exams and need to be practising. "I hold private sessions as a psychotherapist," she said, opening a door off the gallery. "This is my session room now under construction."

The two-storey brick building housing the gallery dates back to the late 19th century. It was a tobacconist shop and barbershop in the 1960s and before that it was a bookstore and a candy store.

"I would like to write a book about it," she said. "The high tin embossed ceiling is something the wealthy, maybe not the rich but definitely business people, had back then. We got rid of a drop ceiling



OLD WORLD ELEGANCE. Psychotherapist Lena Kolobow has set up the Chancery Art Gallery. She chooses art, like that of Yevgenia Nayberg, for its psychological content.

Photo by Bill Arnett

and installed two gas furnaces, one upstairs and one in the basement. We hope to make this a cultural education centre. Muskoka artist Pat Fairhead brought a class here for a session on art appreciation.

"We would invite people to use the gallery for lec-

tures on all kinds of art, and welcome teachers to bring children here. Writers could use the gallery for book signings and readings. Small theatrical productions could be put on. There would be no charge."

Kolobow and her husband grew up in Russia and immigrated to the United States in 1993 and to Canada in 2000. "We both have our master's degrees at Yaroslavl University," she said. "We both attended the Russian Academy of Science, Institute of Psychology in Moscow and received our doctorates in psychology. We both attended the Bechterev Neuropsychology Institute in St. Petersburg for courses in clinical psychology and psychotherapy and then both went back to Yaroslavl University to work as professors.

"My husband was on exchange to a university in Massachusetts in the '90s and I was attending a scientific conference in New York when we decided to immigrate to the United States. We wanted to explore a new country and a new city."

The couple was living in Ottawa when her husband got a job with the federal government in Muskoka as a forensic psychologist at Fenbrook.

The July-August paintings in the gallery belonged to Yevgenia Nayberg, a fellow Russian immigrant who lives and works in New York. Nayberg was named the sixth most influential stage designer in the United States, said Kolobow.

The work of Mikhail Gubin went on display at the Chancery Art Gallery on August 24. He is another Russian-born artist and has spent two decades in New York painting and exhibiting his work. "He is helping me out, and I have never met him," said Kolobow. Gubin attended the opening of his show, the next day.

Not all artists featured at the gallery are of Russian extraction. Toronto's Marjolyn van der Hart is the next artist. Only one artist is shown at a time, said Kolobow.

Kolobow said some people see art as sad while others can view the same work and feel joy. "There is a deep psychological difference in people," said Kolobow, talking about the psychology of art. "There is a compromise on what we take in, we get a perception. It is therapeutic and people in the gallery are getting art therapy."