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Award-winning illustrator featured in Colborne Art Gallery show

by BOB OWEN

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Internationally acclaimed for her rich luminous illustrations, Jirina Marton will be the solo artist for the next show at the Colborne Art Gallery on King St. East in Colborne. An Illustrative Life, opening Saturday and running to April 26, will highlight the works she has created in the past five years, from children's story books like *The Bear Says North*, and *Arctic Adventures*.

Her oil pastels have drawn high praise from those in the book industry. Commenting on the illustrations in *Arctic Adventures*, Quill & Quire states, "Marton's artistry makes the reader experience the uncertainty and thrill of visual discovery." Joanne Schwantz of Canadian Children's Books News says, "Jirina Marton's illustrations are rich and beautiful. Her layered technique creates such subtlety and depth there is a sculptural quality to the artwork. She imbues her illustrations with light that seems to emanate from beyond the page. The rectangular spreads that open each section stunningly capture the otherworldliness of the Arctic landscape."

Marja's Skis was nominated for the Governor General's Award for children's illustrations in 2007.

Creating the images for a children's book is more than simply painting pictures, says the artist. The pictures have to work together from beginning to end, telling the story, enhancing the atmosphere, creating continuity, and adding detail that isn't found in the words. And they have to mesh with the printed text. At times ethereal, at times whimsical, the paintings fill the space with the aura of the story. Even talking about creating the illustrations, Marton becomes animated. There is so much the artist can control -- everything from the colour of the character's eyes to the clothes worn. Drawing from her rich personal experience, the Czechoslovakian-born, former resident of Paris no longer writes books, concentrating on illustrating the stories offered to her by Groundwood Books.

She was immersed in her drawings and in the arts in her Czech childhood. She escaped the country, fleeing to France two days before the Russians invaded in 1968. She spent eight years in Paris before immigrating to Canada. Upon her arrival in the early 1980s, it was time once more for this vibrant woman to re-form her way of life. Speaking very little English and with a 10-month-old daughter in tow, she connected with some Czech friends in Toronto. She did some renderings of buildings, earning a decent living. And Marton built her career as a children's book illustrator and writer, following some advice given to her back in Paris in 1982.

Her first story, *Nicole's Boat*, was followed quickly by *Le Petit Benjamin*, printed in 1986 and a pair of French titles she illustrated. Since her first book, Marton has written or illustrated close to 30 books, with more due to be released. The next book to be released with her illustrations is *Bella's Tree*, a Christmas story due for release later this year.

Reflecting on the future in a recent interview she recalls the story line of her 1997 book, *Lady Kagula's Secret*, a 10th-century Japanese tale. "It is about a poor peasant couple who are childless. A child comes to them, enchanting all whom she meets, then departs. She is going back to the moon. "We come into this world and know nothing. We learn about love and there is a time to go. It is a simple understanding of the meaning of life," Marton says. "I may not be able to change the world around me. But I can change my mind, and in that way I can change my world."

This is Marton's first solo show at the Colborne Art Gallery.