

## Exhibition Projects of the Vinnytsya Regional Museum during the Critical Phase of Russia's War in Ukraine

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The essay presents the exhibition activities of the Vinnytsya Regional Museum during the first year of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (February – December 2022), conducted in the conditions of the closure of the main museum exposition, the influx of refugees from the Southern Regions of Ukraine, and the extreme concerns for safety of the staff, visitors, and art objects.

**Keywords:** Europe, war, environment

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, the Vinnytsya Regional Museum has closed its permanent exhibition and moved its collection to storage in preparation for evacuation. This decision was taken by the interdepartmental museum council, made up of the curatorial staff. Although Russia had begun its war against Ukraine in 2014, the full-scale aggression of 24 February 2022 developed so rapidly that the museum staff felt it imperative to protect the collection.

The Vinnytsya Regional Museum was founded in 1918. The museum building, located in the historical center of the city, has sixteen permanent exposition rooms and three temporary exhibition spaces. The museum has more than 100,000 items of different periods and genres, including works of art, historical objects, and documents. Among these, the most acclaimed are archaeological finds from the Bronze Age and Sarmatian period and cult objects from the Trypillian culture of the neolithic-chalcolithic archeological period, a population that disappeared from Eastern Europe thousands of years ago.<sup>1</sup> Regional ethnographic items such as portraits of local gentry and numismatics, together with religious objects such as robes and icons, constitute another significant part of this collection.

Geographically, the Vinnytsya region is in the heart of Ukraine. After the February 2022 invasion, it was considered a relatively safe area, given that direct military operations were taking place 160-170 km to the north and about 300 km to the south. The region's position meant that hundreds of thousands of civilians fleeing the war traveled through Vinnytsya, heading to the western regions of Ukraine and/or neighboring European countries. Some of the refugees decided to stay in the city. Residents of Kharkiv, Kherson, Mariupol, and Donbas who escaped their homes after 24 February 2022 swelled the city's population of 370,000 by approximately 40,000, straining its resources.

As early as March of 2022, the museum's leadership felt that it ought to resume its work and adapt to the changed conditions, including provisions for the safety of visitors during air raids. Since then, we have managed to organize several new exhibitions on the history of our region, which has historically been known as Podillia: *The Beauty of Podillia: The Land of Knights and Agrarians*, *Podillia House: City/Village, Schooling of the Middle Ages*, and *Podillia Folk Icons: Vernacular Renaissance and Baroque*. In creating these exhibitions, we primarily used photographs, reproductions, and facsimiles, as well as other materials that could resist damage. Exhibitions reflecting the current military situation were prepared by a subdivision of our institution, the Museum of the Courageous, which has been collecting documents and objects related to the war since its establishment in 2014.

We also developed several exhibitions stemming from current events. The exhibition *Ukraine: Caprichos 2022* featuring political cartoons by Oleksandr Nikitiuk was one of our

first efforts to re-establish links with the public after the closure of the permanent collection. Nikitiuk's works were already well-known through social media, and we offered the public an opportunity to see them off-screen in our temporary exhibition spaces from March to June 2022. Nikitiuk, a Vinnytsia-based artist known for his environmental art and murals, founded the Laboratory of Actual Creativity group and the Mythogenesis art festival. Presenting the daily news through caricature, as in his version of Goya's *Caprichos*, was a new technique for him, however. It enabled Nikitiuk to ridicule the hybrid, perverted ideology of the aggressors and to emphasize the callous nature of the war crimes they committed. After the exhibition, the artist donated 50 of his works to the museum's collection, making this a time of expansion as well as loss.

The empty rooms that held the main collection were extremely depressing for staff who saw them as symbolic of the country's tragic situation. Consequently, when MON, a group of young artists from Vinnytsia, proposed an exhibition of posters reflecting on the effects of war, to be titled *Response*, we accepted. Our relatively spontaneous and unexpected decision included a plan to hang the works in the part of the museum dedicated to the permanent exhibition. The result was an exhibition reflecting the vicissitudes of the current war in place of a chronological display. Hlib and Katia Zelgin, and Lina-Maria Shlapak, the artists who form the group, work in various media, including visual, verbal, and performative genres – not the traditional kind of works ordinarily displayed in the halls dedicated to *Response*. This yielded an unusual mingling of different temporalities. For example, their recently created posters and videos were placed in the former halls of Cossack history and of the ethnography of Eastern Podillia. The exhibition also included versions of the performances *People Kill*, *People Heal*, and *The Title*, along with the video project *Yadro [The Core]*. We were honored that the group would place their art and perform in a space that remained vulnerable.

The exhibition *Land Art and Archeology: Ukraine-Lithuania* was organized with the cultural center Lithuania-Ukraine and the center for cultural development, Totem, with the support of the Institute of Archeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. This exhibition opened further possibilities of inter-sector and inter-regional collaboration in wartime. Initially planned to be held in Kherson (which has been occupied by Russian troops since 2 March 2022), the exhibition was originally planned to display the results of the *Land Art* group's residency at architectural excavations in Beryslav. The group was to work side by side with archaeologists at the site of the Tyahyn Fortress in Beryslav, one of the oldest settlements in the Kherson region, populated since the Bronze Age. The artistic residency would highlight the ancient roots of the Ukrainian South and its multiple exchanges with Europe throughout history. Not surprisingly, the war altered these plans. Lithuania offered the artists a residency instead so they could still produce their works. Archeological objects came from museums in Kyiv rather than new excavations. The Vinnytsia Museum hosted this exhibition 7 July – 14 August 2022. It was particularly meaningful to the large community of exiles from Kherson that settled in Vinnytsia; however, the refugee group was too mobile for us to conduct visitor studies and exhibition evaluations for a proper evaluation of the project.

As Head of the Exhibition Department, I had to abandon planned exhibitions, designing new projects instead, or developing new thematic threads relating to civic education and patriotism so that previously arranged events would remain relevant. For the first half of the 2022-2023 academic year, the project *My Consignment: Civic Practices in the Museum* was prepared in cooperation with art schools in the city, the region, and other parts of Ukraine and supported by a grant from the Goethe Institute. This ongoing project educates young Ukrainians to become conscious patriots of their country based on historical and cultural knowledge. This project promotes social empathy and builds an active civic identity in younger generations. Visual arts are one of its means of immunizing young people from civic apathy, a position common among Russians. As we have seen in the current war, such apathy can lead to passivity and a reluctance to denounce injustice.

To further promote empathy and civic responsibility, we arranged a charity exhibition and sale of artworks to benefit local animal shelters. The exhibition, *Wagging Tails: The Calling of Kindness*, was held from 22 September until 30 October 2022. Artists of all ages took part in this exhibition, but most active were young students at art institutions, working

in a wide variety of techniques and styles. The traditions of Podillia ceramics, developed in this region in the seventeenth century, resurfaced in exhibited works by teachers and students from the Tulchyn College of Culture. Students from the youth center Colors of Ukraine showed animal puppets, while the display from the Vinnytsia Children's Art School included a portrait gallery. This featured the heroic bomb-detecting dog Patron who worked for the national emergency service, along with feline warriors who became 'special soldiers' of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Professional artists participating in the exhibition included Andriy Mashkovtsev, who serves in the Ukrainian military. The participation of young artists added a special emotional tinge to this exhibition, because their creations were designed to elicit donations to help protect domestic animals afflicted by war and displacement. The exhibition enabled these young artists to put their creativity to work and demonstrate their active empathy in a time of war.

Our current exhibitions also contribute to civic education by focusing on the preservation of Vinnytsia's regional culture. Protecting our historical and cultural identity by means of creating and exhibiting art counteracts the ideological assault on Ukrainian culture mounted by Russia's official media. For example, since 2006, our museum has hosted the Vinnytsia Biennial of Textile Art created by youth. For the ninth biennial, participants were asked to submit art relating to a specially named theme – *Descendants of the Great Heritage*. The call for submissions suggested that heritage could be considered in broad terms, for instance, through the use of traditional techniques, or the creation of works related to the topic. The exhibition, which opened on 3 November 2022, featured art made by students from various specialized schools in Ukraine, including the Lviv Children's School of Folk Art, Zavodske Art School of the Ternopil Region, the Khmelnytskyi Children's School of Fine and Decorative Arts, the Department of Decorative Arts of Khmelnytskyi National University, and the Kostandi Odesa Children's Art School. The Vinnytsia region was represented by the Tulchyn College of Culture, the Center for Children's and Youth's Creativity Colors of Ukraine, Vinnytsia Children's School of the Arts, and the Fine Arts Department of Vinnytsia's Children's Music School. Approximately 100 students exhibited 60 works (some were collective creations) in various genres of textile art, including tapestry, batik, collage, felting, embossing, painting (fabric), and puppetry. Young artists demonstrated a green approach to previously manufactured textiles; the themes of conservation and textile recycling held special places in the exhibition due to the participation of the Dashiv Training and Rehabilitation Center Planet in Your Hands.

This exhibition had a particularly optimistic note. Its bright, luminous atmosphere was created by the vivid imaginations of young artists, nurtured by respect for their native land and expressed in the Ukrainian tradition of textile art. Not by coincidence, the Tree of Life motif, common in Ukrainian traditional art as well as in other nations, became a symbol of this Biennial. We organized guided tours of the exhibition, in which we covered issues of art history and ethnographic heritage, but we also highlighted the achievements and pedagogical methods of the diverse art institutions that participated.

The exhibition by young artists demonstrated hope in recovering from the damage and losses suffered by Ukrainian culture during the war. Visitors included groups of children from the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine (those most affected by the military aggression) under the care of the Vinok [Wreath] charity. Visits to the exhibition and encounters with the works of young textile artists alleviated the effects of the refugees' traumatic experiences. Communication with works of art created by peers during the war reinforced the children's perceptions of the continuity of life instead of the rupture of displacement caused by war.

Ukrainian-Canadian artist Lesia Maruschak's *Maria* was originally scheduled for exhibition in our galleries; however, the exhibition had to be moved to another space when our activities were interrupted by power outages and recurrent air raids. We deeply regretted losing the installation, because it pertained to Ukraine's relationship to Russia during the 1932-1933 Holodomor in Ukraine. The term *Holodomor* derives from the Ukrainian expression *moryty holodom*, that is, 'to kill by starvation'. The word describes the Great Famine, man-made deprivation in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, in which the negligence and indifference of Stalin's administration killed millions of Ukrainians. I felt it was important to engage with this history in a time of renewed Russian aggression, even if Maruschak's exhibition was unavailable. Based on my experiences during a study tour of German museums (sponsored

by the House of Europe program), I therefore proposed a workshop, 'Ukraine's Historical Wound: The Grandchildren's Perspective'. Its aim was to give visitors an opportunity to convey their immediate, personal impressions to works of art depicting the Holodomor. Educational programs developed by the National Museum of the Holodomor Genocide in Kyiv helped us to plan the event. It took place in the museum with students from the fine arts department of Vinnytsia's Children's Music School. The students learned about the circumstances of the Holodomor in the Vinnytsia region in conversation with museum scholars and artists working on this theme. More broadly, the opportunity to create art inspired by what they saw was intended to provide some psychological relief for the children. Even so, the extremely emotional works of the young artists had to be placed in a separate part of the exhibition, one dedicated to the ninetieth anniversary of the Holodomor in Ukraine.

Continuing war and trauma have prompted us to implement new exhibition projects as well as to adapt our methodological and pedagogical practices. The 2022 exhibition projects in the Vinnytsia Regional Museum were predominantly temporary and relevant to the current situation in Ukraine. The richness and variety of these projects nonetheless assured local and international audiences that the museum could maintain its schedule of exhibitions even in the unstable and unpredictable conditions of an ongoing war. We will continue in this direction in the coming year, despite all of the uncertainties. Although the city of Vinnytsia became significantly emptier after the bombing of its center on 24 July 2022, museum activities proved significant in strengthening the civic identity of our public – inhabitants who remain in the city and refugees who have fled our way. We are especially proud of having contributed by presenting exhibitions oriented toward children and youth, populations which will be the foundation of the future Ukraine.

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## Notes

- 1 For additional information see 'Tripilian Culture', Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine 2001. <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CT%5CR%5CTrypilianculture.htm>, accessed 29 May 2023.