

Katja Bernhardt

Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict

Editorial

Ukraine has been at war for more than two and a half years. It is being imposed by Russia, and it is also a battle for the interpretation of the country's history and culture. The war, the images of it and the presence of Ukrainians who have fled the war and found refuge in many countries in Europe and beyond, have brought the country, its present and its history, to the attention of world politics and, above all, to its western neighbours in Europe, with an unprecedented intensity.

Besides the immediate practical help needed to be organised for colleagues in Ukraine, Russia's attack on Ukraine poses challenges to academic disciplines dealing with the history and present of Eastern Europe. Historians are currently debating the extent to which this development requires a critical revision of previous research on Eastern European history, and which new questions and approaches offer new perspectives.¹ In September 2023, the University of Vilnius, in cooperation with numerous international research institutions, invited historians to the conference *Rethinking Ukraine and Europe. New Challenges for Historians*.² The aim was to discuss how to rethink historical research on Ukraine and how to place the history of the greater Ukraine – Lithuania – Belarus – Poland region in a transnational horizon. As part of the conference, the Nordost-Institut Lüneburg (IKGN e.V.) organised the panel *Appropriation and blind spots. Cultural heritage in conflict*. The thematic issue of [kunsttexte.de/ostblick](https://www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick) 2024/3 is partly based on it.

The title refers to two problems with which art and visual history was confronted by the war against Ukraine. On the one hand, the war has revealed the enormous lack of knowledge about the history of art in Ukraine, a blind spot in so-called Western art history. On the other hand, the war threatens historical monuments, objects and collections of art and culture in Ukraine in many ways, directly and indirectly, and

thus also sparked a new debate about the understanding cultural heritage, not only in Ukraine.

Blind Spots

The immediate threat posed by the war to Ukraine's cultural heritage has made us aware of the country's limited presence in so-called Western art history. This realisation led to an intensification of interest in the history of art, collections and architecture in Ukraine. It made us aware of the remarkable diversity, uniqueness and complexity of this heritage at the very time when it was and is threatened with destruction – a depressing ambivalence of this war. This shock the intensity and consequences of which we will only be able to assess in a few years' time, has presented and continues to present challenges to the professional world.

The sudden call to engage with the country's history of art was answered – to name just a few examples – by a section dedicated to Ukraine at the *36th German Art Historians' Conference* in Stuttgart in March 2022 with a section dedicated to Ukraine which was added to the programme at short notice.³ Boise State University, in cooperation with Harvard University's Dumbarton Oaks Research Center, also swiftly organised a special lecture series entitled *From Kyivan Rus' to Modern Ukraine*. It focused on the history of Kyivan Rus', its visual heritage, its representation and instrumentalisation, and then built a bridge to the modern era.⁴ The lecture series *Under Fire. Art Historical Revisions in the Wake of the Ukraine War* organised by the Institute for Art and Visual History at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in the winter semester 2022/2023 addressed the relationship between image and violence and pointed to the importance of art in coping with the experience of war. Several papers highlighted the complexities an art history of Ukraine has to deal with.⁵ The June issue

of the journal *Histoire de l'art*, brought together articles which shed light on the history of art in Ukraine, starting with the earliest evidence of Christianisation and continuing to the present day.⁶

It is a reflection of the current emphasis of our discipline that the avant-garde and so-called modern art have a special presence in these endeavours. Exhibitions such as *Futuromarennia: Ukraine and Avant-Garde* (2023 Tallinn, 2024 Drogenbos),⁷ *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900 - 1930s* (2022-2024 Madrid, Cologne, Vienna, Brussels, London)⁸ and *Kaleidoscope of (Hi)stories. Ukrainian Art 1912-2023* (Dresden)⁹ not only presented Ukrainian modernism, but subjected it to a revision of its previous unreflective subsumption under the concept of the Russian avant-garde.

But the criticism must not end here. On the contrary, it shows once again that the conventional and persisting organisational models and knowledge systems of art history require discussion. This re-examination is, of course, already in full swing from various perspectives - colonialism/post- and decolonialism debates, feminist art history, global art studies, horizontal art history, critical historiography of the discipline etc. The events of the recent years, however, have given new impetus and acute relevance to those approaches that have long directed this criticism at the latent marginalisation of the history of art in Eastern Europe in the knowledge system of 'Western' art history and, from there, subjected the premises of the discipline to a revision.¹⁰

Just a few weeks after the attack on Ukraine in February 2022, a short study examined possible reasons for the 'invisibility' of the history of art in Ukraine in 'Western', in this case German and Polish, art historiography. The authors point to a number of partly structural factors that have gradually manoeuvred the history of this art into a kind of blind spot in 'Western' art historiography.¹¹ In June 2024, the workshop *'Westplanning' in Art History* followed a comparable approach but related to a broader geographical framework. Based on the term 'Westplanning', a term from political theory which describes the projection of Western models of interpretation onto conditions and events in Eastern Europe, the organisers argued for alternative models to the hegemonic discourses of

'Western' art history.¹² The need for such new approaches was also discussed at the conference *What is to be Done? Methodological Challenges to Art Historical Research in Central and Eastern Europe* in October 2023 at the George Enescu National University of Arts from Iași.¹³

This is a start. The study of the history of art in Ukraine, its objects, its condition and its historiography, as well as the critical revision of the knowledge systems of art history and the discussion of new approaches, remain a necessary long-term task for the discipline. The challenges for the future will probably consist of not replacing one projection with another, resisting renationalisation tendencies, and countering them with the courage of multi-perspectivity. Finally, we must not shy away from a critical examination of the principles of the discipline.

Heritage in conflict

Despite all this necessary theoretical review of the conditions of our professional perception and judgement, the protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine remains of paramount importance in the situation of war. Russia continues to attack Ukrainian towns and villages and destroy the country's infrastructure. This not only directly damages cultural monuments,¹⁴ but also exposes them to an indirect, insidious danger. The war means a reduction in funds for the documentation, protection and conservation of architectural and artistic monuments, collections and museums. The climatic conditions required for the conservation of artefacts can no longer always be guaranteed due to the lack of energy. Some of the staff working in collections, archives, cultural institutions and heritage conservation are fighting on the front line. Some of them have fallen. The responsibility for ongoing tasks and for the additional pressing tasks that have arisen as a result of the war rests on the shoulders of fewer and fewer people. Emergency financial and professional aid for colleagues and people of Ukraine, is still necessary.¹⁵

Problems, opportunities and strategies for safeguarding cultural heritage were and are discussed in close dialogue with colleagues from Ukraine. The German Association of Art History organised regular zoom meetings to maintain contact with colleagues-

from Ukraine.¹⁶ In October 2024 – to name just one of the latest initiatives – the lecture series *War in Ukraine. Destruction of Heritage, Mastering Legacy* was launched as the first of a series of events organised by the only recently established *Competence Network Interdisciplinary Ukrainian Studies Frankfurt (Oder) - Berlin* (KIU), which is based at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder).¹⁷

The organisers start from a broad understanding of material and immaterial heritage. They include memories and objects that could be described as 'dissonant heritage', i.e. those that are perceived as conflictual by contemporary society. Thus, not only in Ukraine, but in many countries that were once under the hegemony of the Soviet Union, the beginning of the full-scale war against Ukraine was followed by a renewed, sometimes radical confrontation with the so-called Soviet monuments. For *kunsttexte.de/ostblick* 2024/1, Kristina Jöekalda invited colleagues to document and discuss these current appropriations, iconoclasm and reinterpretations.¹⁸ However, the KIU lecture series goes beyond this 'dissonant heritage' and draws attention to the legacy that has no such symbolic presence but is often fundamental to daily life (infrastructures, behaviours etc.).

Appropriations

The contributions in the special issue *Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict* fit into these discussions. However, their approach is a historical one. The focus is not on current challenges, debates and claims, but on how cultural heritage has been discursively, medially and conceptually constituted, appropriated or negated in Ukraine's past. The theoretical starting point is the assumption that cultural heritage is always the result of appropriation processes and is therefore subject to constant negotiation processes – be it discursive, institutional, political etc. This means that on the other side of appropriation are revaluations, marginalisation, repression and deliberate denial. The contributions by Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, Anna Yanenko and Dmytro Myeshkov open up three different perspectives on this problem.

In her contribution *Imaging Kyivan Rus' then and now, or how to look at Antin Losenko's Vladimir and*

Rogneda, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius focuses on a painting that was highly regarded at its time. Losenko's *Vladimir and Rogneda* (1770) is not only considered as the starting point of the so-called Russian School, but also marks the beginning of an iconography that served to visualise the myth of the origins of the Russian Empire in the Kyiv Rus' in a memorable way. Murawska-Muthesius re-analyses the painting with Walter Benjamin and with a view to the origins of the artist Antin Losenko from a Cossack family in Hlukhiv. The article is a study of the historical process of appropriation and construction of a heritage, in this case Kyiv Rus', and the role of visual media in this process. However, the author also examines the potential for a new understanding of the image and draws a line to the perception of the motif in the present day.¹⁹

In her informative study *The Museum Space of the Kyiv Pechersk Monastery in the 1930s. Soviet Imperial Interventions and Metamorphoses* Anna Yanenko presents the museum and exhibition projects with which the Kyievo-Pescherska Lavra, the so-called Kyiv Cave Monastery, was subjected to Sovietisation in the 1920s and 1930s. This ideologically motivated appropriation of the monastery as the All-Ukrainian Museum Town meant the negation of its original religious function and the targeted installation of a new discourse, which resulted also in the dismantling of the collection and an immense physical restructuring of the complex. Through detailed, source-based insights into individual exhibition projects, which are also presented visually in the article, Yanenko also paints a vivid picture of how a new historical narrative was developed, structured and communicated.²⁰

The *Ukrainica*, whose history Dmytro Myeshkov traces in his article *Ukrainica abroad. A resource between science, state-building and international relations*, was and is based on the idea of identifying all documentary sources on the history of Ukraine, collecting them in a national information database and describing them. According to the concept, *Ukrainica* should include not only all archives, museum collections and library resources in the country, but also records located outside the country. Myeshkov first presents the concept and history of the project during

the period of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1918) and then its resumption in the 1990s. *Ukrainica* thus appears as an attempt to anchor independent Ukraine in a historical dimension by recording, identifying, determining and securing a seemingly reliable heritage.²¹

The issue is enriched by a fourth, special contribution: Tetiana Vodotyka and Svitlana Dovhan present the journal *Місто: історія, культура, суспільство*. *City: History, Culture, Society*, which they co-edit with other colleagues. Although the main purpose of the article is to promote the journal and present its concept and profile, the text fits the theme of the thematic issue. As the two authors write, the events of 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Luhansk and Donetsk, were an important impetus for the creation of the journal. They sparked a need to delve deeper into the history of the towns and villages there and understand their relationship with Ukraine. Since then, *Місто: історія, культура, суспільство* has published a series of thematic issues that demonstrate a broad and innovative approach to urban studies with an interdisciplinary understanding. The presentation of the journal at *kunsttexte.de/ostblick* and the invitation of the authors to all interested parties to participate is a further step towards getting to know the research landscape in Ukraine, establishing long-term cooperation and becoming familiar with the research questions and approaches that our colleagues in Ukraine are working on.

Our colleagues in Ukraine continue to need our support. I would therefore like to draw your attention to a current appeal for donations.



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Appeal for donations from World Heritage Watch in cooperation with the University of Cologne. The donations will go to the Klementy Sheptytskyi Open Air Museum in Lviv. They will help fund much-needed training courses in the conservation of historic wooden architecture. The long-term aim is to establish a centre for wood restoration at the museum. Further information on the donation target and the cooperation partner can be found at:

<https://holzkirchen.uni-koeln.de/spendenauftruf/>

Endnoten

- See for instance: Libman, Alexander: *Russlandforschung vor einer Neuorientierung. Russlands Krieg, die Isolation und die Folgen*, in: Osteuropa, no. 5-6, 2023, pp. 127–142.
- Programme and further explanations: <https://vilniuscongress.com/en/home> (last access: 24.10.2024).
- The contributions of this section are published: *Als der Krieg kam ... / When the war came Neue Beiträge zur Kunst in der Ukraine/New studies into art in Ukraine*, ed. by Kilina Heck and Aleksandra Lipińska, Heidelberg 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1227>.
- The contributions can be viewed online: <https://www.doaks.org/events/byzantine-studies/public-lectures/kyivan-rus-to-modern-ukraine-home> (last access: 24.10.2024). The lecture was mainly organised by Tomasz Grusiecki.
- The lecture series was organised by Mateusz Kapustka. Program: <https://www.kunstgeschichte.hu-berlin.de/2022/10/ringvorlesung-im-ws-2022-23-unter-beschluss-kunsthistorische-revisionen-im-zeichen-des-ukrainekrieges/>. A publication of the contributions is in preparation.
- Histoire de l'art, thematic issue: *Ukraine*, ed. by Bertrand Cosnet, Dominique des Font-Réaulx and Igor Sokologorsky, 91 (June 2023).
- The exhibition was shown at the KUMU/Eesti Kunstimuseum 2023 and the Felix Art & Eco Museum in Drogenbos, near Brussels 2024. Information on the concept: <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/povidomlennya/the-exhibition-futurumarennia-ukraine-and-the-avant-garde-opened-in-belgium/> (last access: 24.10.2024). On the exhibition in Tallinn: <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/futurumarennia-ukraine-and-avant-garde/> (last access: 24.10.2024).
- The exhibition was first shown at the Thyssen-Bornemisza - Museo Nacional Madrid: <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exhibitions/eye-storm-modernism-ukraine-1900-1930s> (last access: 24.10.2024). It subsequently moved to the Museum Ludwig Cologne, the Belvedere Vienna, the Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België/Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique and was last shown at the Royal Academy London: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/eye-of-the-storm> (last access: 24 October 2024). An exhibition catalogue has been published: *In the eye of the storm. Modernisms in Ukraine*, ed. by Stella Rollig, Konstantin Akinsha, Katia Denysova et. al., Cologne 2024. <https://albertinum.skd.museum/en/ausstellungen/kaleidoscope-of-histories-ukrainian-art-1912-2023/> (last access: 24.10.2024).
- The editors of *kunsttexte.de/ostblick* took the 20th anniversary of the online magazine as an occasion to problematise this topic in a roundtable discussion: *Revisiting the Region. A Debate on Art History of Eastern Europe, Katja Bernhardt, Robert Born and Antje Kempe in a roundtable discussion with Mathilde Arnoux, Anna Baumgartner and Tomasz Grusiecki*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Festausgabe, no. 1, 2022 (15 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2022.1.88236>.
- Bernhardt, Katja, Born, Robert, Kapustka, Mateusz; Kempe, Antje; Lipińska, Aleksandra; Störkuhl, Beate: *Die blinden Flecken der Kunstgeschichte? Das Beispiel Ukraine*, in: *Als der Krieg kam ... / When the war came Neue Beiträge zur Kunst in der Ukraine/New studies into art in Ukraine*, ed. by Kilian Heck and Aleksandra Lipińska, Heidelberg, 2023, pp. 12–43, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1227.c17103>.
- The workshop was organised by Margaret Tali, Magdalena Radomska, Matthew Rampley and David Crowley. Programme and abstracts: https://www.ncad.ie/files/research_files/Westsplaining_Programme.pdf (last access: 26.10.2024).
- The conference was organised by Cristian Nae. Conference programme: <https://www.arteias.ro/en/what-is-to-be-done-methodological-challenges-to-art-historical-research-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (last access: 26 October 2024).
- List of Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO* <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco> (last access: 20.10.2024).
- One of the organisations, that coordinates support for the protection of art in Ukraine is the *Ukraine Art Aid Centre*, based in Germany: https://www.dug-ww.com/Kulturgutschutz_Ukraine (last access: 30.10.2024).
- These meetings were organised by Kilian Heck.
- Programme and further information: <https://www.kiu.europa.uni.de/en/programs/kiu-lecture-series/winter-semester-2024-2025/index.html> (last access: 26.10.2024).
- War on Monuments. Documenting the Debates over Russian and Soviet Heritage in Eastern and Central Europe*, ed. by Kristina Jöekalda, special issue of *kunsttexte.de/ostblick*, 2024, H. 1; <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.1>.
- Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, *Imaging Kyivan Rus' then and now, or how to look at Antin Losenko's Vladimir and Rogneda*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, no. 3, 2024, section ostblick, thematic issue: Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict, ed. by Katja Bernhardt (9 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.3.106996>.
- Anna Yanenko, *The Museum Space of the Kyiv Pechersk Monastery in the 1930s. Soviet Imperial Interventions and Metamorphoses*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, no. 3, 2024, section ostblick, thematic issue: Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict, ed. by Katja Bernhardt (34 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.3.106995>.
- Dmytro Myeshkov, *Ukrainica abroad. A resource between science, state-building and international relations*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, no. 3, 2024, section ostblick, thematic issue: Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict, ed. by Katja Bernhardt (11 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.3.106993>.
- Tetiana Vodotyka and Svitlana Dovhan, *Місто: історія, культура, суспільство. City: History, Culture, Society. From Over-the-Coffee Ideas to a Trendsetter*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, no. 3, 2024, section ostblick, thematic issue: Appropriation and blind spots. Ukraine cultural heritage in conflict, ed. by Katja Bernhardt (8 pages), <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2024.3.106997>.

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Titel

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