

THE POWER OF VISUAL CULTURE: PRESERVING AUTHENTICITY

In order to discuss Ukrainian visual culture and art, we must first acknowledge what makes Ukraine such a unique place. One of its defining characteristics, which sets it apart from many other nations, is its desire to balance modernity with tradition. As it seeks to integrate into the European cultural landscape, Ukraine remains fiercely committed to preserving its authentic identity, one deeply rooted in core values such as family, land, and freedom.

A THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY OF CULTURE

Ukraine's geographical location and history have significantly contributed to its rich multicultural heritage. Kyivan Rus, a medieval state founded in the 9th century, played a vital role as a major trade and cultural hub in Eastern Europe. The state's influential position enabled the local culture to absorb and adapt elements from various foreign influences, resulting in a rich and diverse cultural identity.

From the 9th to the 20th century, Ukrainian cultural history underwent a series of transformations, closely connected to wider European narratives. In the years following the Reformation, Byzantine architecture and magnificent church mosaics gave way to the stunning baroque era. In Ukraine, as in other countries, the baroque style was defined by highly ornate architecture and sculpture. However, Ukrainian masters did not simply copy Western models: they were able to combine them with their own traditions and in doing so created highly original works. 17th-century Ukrainian engravers have preserved some of the oldest examples of this synthesis, mixing the baroque decoration of the West with the fanciful motifs of the East. This fusion resulted in a distinctly Ukrainian style that culminated in the Cossack baroque style, considered by many to be the epitome of the Ukrainian style. Following the baroque period, the elegant rococo era ushered in fresh ideas and brought



Andriy Kalkov encodes images and symbols in geometric modules, creating optical art. Above: *Circulation*, Kyiv, 2016. Below: Artwork, by Les Panchyshyn, from the "We Will Never Forget" series, 2022.



Dzvinyia Podlyashetska combines different art influences, creating her own unique, emotive style. Below: In her collages, Olga Zerno often uses old photographs to great effect.



new forms to Ukrainian culture. After this period, artists turned to folklore motifs, historical subjects, and picturesque landscapes, creating art that highlighted the beauty of nature, folk stories, and village life. A notable figure of this period was Mykola Pymonenko, whose works helped to establish a romanticized image of the Ukrainian countryside. A master of his craft, he painted expressive images of Ukraine, celebrating its vibrant people and the charm of his native land.

A CULTURE IN TRANSITION

The turn of the 20th century marked a time of radical change. This period not only brought new, unconventional approaches to the creation and perception of art, but also markedly changed public consciousness. The era of Tsarism had begun to wane, the Russian Revolution was looming on the horizon, and social unrest had reached a fever pitch.

Against this backdrop, the distinctive Ukrainian avant-garde emerged, blending European modernist aesthetics with elements of Ukrainian folk art. The term "Ukrainian avant-garde" was first coined by Franco-Bulgarian art historian Andréi Nakov after visiting the 1973 exhibition "Tatlin's Dream" in London.

Celebrated artists such as Oleksandr Bohomazov, Volodymyr Tatlin, Alexander Archipenko, Alexandra Ekster, and David Burliuk made substantial contributions to the Ukrainian avant-garde movement. Their work still resonates with contemporary artists around the world—evidence of their enduring impact on international art and culture.

FROM CONSTRAINT TO CREATIVITY

Throughout the USSR's seven-decade history, Ukrainian artists grappled with the complex task of defining their identity while also navigating a tumultuous environment marked by genocide, repression, war, revolution, standardized state contracts, double standards, and the restrictive ideologies of socialist realism. This period witnessed rampant human rights violations and the quashing of artistic expression.