

## Ukrainian culture thrives despite war with Russia

By Tamar Jacoby

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*The opera house in Kyiv on the anniversary of the Russian invasion*

KYIV, UKRAINE – It was a perfect spring Sunday in Kyiv and the city’s cafés were filled with people laughing in the sunlight. Inside the Pinchuk Art Centre, the mood was different – quiet, focused, somber – but it too was filling with visitors eager to see an exhibition of works by young Ukrainian conceptual artists. Their pieces were mostly responses to the war, many steeped in pain and loss. Yet of all the places people could be spending a spring Sunday in a country at war, these visitors were choosing a museum.

But why? From fine art to magazines, cinema to cuisine, why does culture matter as battles rage across Ukraine? And how is culture even produced in the midst of war?

“It’s been a long time since I felt a positive emotion,” one visitor, a high-school teacher, told me as he looked at a work depicting the reconstruction of a shattered wine glass. “Watching this video, I can breathe and get some distance on the war.” Others seemed to feel that, if anything, the art took them closer to the fighting. “You get desensitized by the news,” explained a young IT worker. “This helps you regain your focus and see what’s really happening.”

Fifteen months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, life goes on in Kyiv and other cities. The economy is smaller but still churning. Bars and restaurants are full. Many people ignore the sirens that ring out across the city when drones or missiles are approaching. The cultural scene is also vibrant, albeit, like almost everything else, transformed by the war.

The first few months were difficult for everyone. no one knew if Kyiv would withstand the Russian advance; millions fled the city and almost everything closed. As one of Kyiv’s leading museums, the Pinchuk Art Centre scrambled first to make sure its staff was safe

and then to save its artworks, evacuating paintings and sculptures to western Ukraine and Europe.

The Voloshyn Gallery, a boutique venue housed in a thick-walled downtown building, turned its exhibition space into a shelter for artists, who slept on mattresses strewn across the floor. Celebrity chef Yevhen Klopotenko – he raises awareness of Ukrainian cooking with a popular Kyiv restaurant and TV show – opened a canteen for refugees in Lviv, in western Ukraine, while his restaurant in the capital fed soldiers and frontline workers.

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### *Why does art matter in wartime?*

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But then, late last spring, when the Russians retreated from Kyiv and residents began trickling back, cultural institutions reopened. Klopotenko's cutting-edge restaurant, 100 Years Ago in the Future, was one of the first. "The people coming back to Kyiv needed to understand there is a future," he told the Post, "and one of the easiest ways to show this was with food." At first, business was slow, and sourcing ingredients proved a challenge. But today all of his tables are full.

Some industries face more challenges than others. Performances at the national opera of Ukraine, for instance, now begin in mid-afternoon so viewers can get home before curfew, and the audience cannot exceed 300 ticket holders – the number that could fit in the basement if an air alert sounded.

The editors of Vogue Ukraine scrapped an entire issue because they felt that a glossy fashion magazine would look out of place as the country went to war. As the year wore on, movie and TV producers struggled with edits and digital enhancements amid blackouts triggered by Russian shelling of Ukrainian infrastructure.



*Civilians watched a movie in a converted parking lot in Kharkiv*

Many artists, filmmakers and other cultural figures began to place new priority on international audiences. For the movie business, this has been a financial necessity. The economic model that once sustained the industry has collapsed. "Even in good times," explains veteran distributor Igor Storchuk, now a member of the organization of Ukrainian Producers, a newly founded collective of artists dedicated to making movies about the war, "there aren't enough Ukrainian viewers to cover production costs." But co-production with Russian distributors, who once provided an audience for Ukrainian films and TV series in the huge Russian-language market, is now unthinkable.

krainians are still making movies. Some filmmakers have coped with the new financial and logistical challenges by turning to documentaries or lower budget features, Storchuk noted. But the biggest change is the target audience. The market that now matters most is in Europe.

For filmmakers and other artists, showcasing Ukraine to global audiences has never been more crucial. The goal is to explain what's at stake in the war while rallying international support for the nation. Vogue Ukraine remained dark through the first year of the war. But it roared back on the scene this April with a commemorative issue, "The Road to Unbreakable," released at a splashy exhibit in Vienna.

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*'The push to rediscover our identity drives every creative project.'*

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Some writers worked on the new issue from Europe, others from inside Ukraine. Fashion photographers fanned out across the war-torn country to shoot desolate villages and damaged infrastructure. "There is no textbook on how to edit a magazine during a war," explains Julia Kostetska, publisher of Vogue Ukraine. "We wanted to make the issue relevant to our readers."

In the last 15 months, the Pinchuk Art Centre mounted 25 exhibitions in Europe – from the Venice Biennale to the World Economic Forum in Davos. "We've worked relentlessly so that people would understand what Ukraine is about – to demonstrate that despite what Putin says, Ukraine is a nation and a culture," said Pinchuk curator and artistic director Bjorn Geldhof.



*The Voloshyn Gallery was converted into a shelter for artists who remained in Kyiv*

Since February 2022, the Voloshyn Gallery has collaborated with 10 European and US galleries and displayed Ukrainian paintings at nine international art fairs. "Before the war, many people we met abroad didn't know where Ukraine was," co-owner Max Voloshyn recalls, "it's our mission to show them we're not a colony of Russia."

Other Ukrainian artists have found a new audience inside the country: soldiers fighting on the frontlines and recuperating in military hospitals. TV celebrity Kolya Serga – he made his name as the cohost of a popular travel show, Heads or Tails – now devotes himself full time to what he calls "service": bringing music and books to active-duty soldiers.

Serga's new organization, Cultural Forces, employs some 30 staff and relies on more than 100 volunteer artists. Based in Kramatorsk, less than 35 miles from the frontline in eastern

Ukraine, Serga and a handful of other performers visit three or four hot spots a day to sing and play for small groups of fighters resting between rotations. The settings are gritty, the performances heartfelt, and they often find a second life on social media. "Our first goal is to raise morale in the military," Serga explains, "but we also among Ukrainian civilians and help them understand the soldiers fighting and dying for them."



*Celebrity chef Yevhen Klopotenko champions traditional ingredients and dishes from Ukraine*

So why does art matter in wartime – to soldiers or civilians? Ukrainian artists, the answer starts with national identity. "Russia is trying to suppress our culture and insisting we don't exist," chef Klopotenko points out. The struggle to separate from Russia didn't begin 15 months ago. Ukrainian cultural traditions – music, painting, poetry, food – trace back centuries.

But the Russian empire, then the Soviet Union and now Putin's Russia have long pushed to quash or appropriate those traditions, claiming Ukraine's best poets and painters as their own. Even 20 years after Ukrainian independence in 1991, most books available in the country were published in Russia, in the Russian language, and the main pop radio station in Ukraine – Radio Russia – played almost exclusively Russian songs.

Klopotenko started fighting back a decade ago, finding Ukrainian cookbooks once banned by Russian authorities and traveling the country to authenticate classic Ukrainian recipes. His restaurant uses only Ukrainian ingredients – no lemons or black pepper, for example – and his popular TV show is devoted to spreading awareness of Ukrainian cuisine. "But now the fight's much bigger," he explains. "The push to rediscover and refine our identity drives every creative project."

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*'We help the soldiers get in touch with their feelings.'*

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But that's not the only reason culture matters in wartime. Just as important, say cultural figures I spoke with in Kyiv, is helping Ukrainians cope with the trauma of war.

Very few ordinary Ukrainians talk about the effect of trauma on their lives, but virtually everyone from the art world brought it up.

"People live with a constant awareness of loss," Pinchuk director Geldhof explained. "Our job is to give them a safe place to think about other things or ask critical questions. People need oxygen."

Serga the TV star talks about the impact of trauma on soldiers. "The constant stress makes it hard for soldiers to concentrate or even think clearly," he told me. "We need to bolster their mood. But we also need to help them get in touch with their feelings; that's something only music and art can do."

What will the future bring for the art scene in Kyiv? No one knows for sure. No one knows the outcome of the Ukrainian counteroffensive expected in coming weeks. No one knows how long the war will last. No one expects the trauma to disappear when the war is over – or the push to rediscover and refine Ukrainian national identity.

Serga expects to go on serving soldiers, helping veterans readjust to normal life. Curator Geldhof talks about keeping Ukraine "open to the world" – Working with Europeans and Americans to bring international art to Ukraine while showcasing Ukrainian art abroad. Chef Klopotenko is also thinking about foreigners: he expects an influx of visitors after the war.

But for now, like most Ukrainians, he's focused on the present. "Life must go on," he says. "We cannot stop. You can die in a basement shelter – or you can die in a restaurant eating borscht."

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