

Ukrainians Demand Their Place in Art History

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No one would call an artist from India “British” or an artist from Peru “Spanish,” so why do museums continue to label Ukrainian artists as “Russian”?

When Eastern Europeans visit an art museum abroad, they are, by default, forced to admit that things they consider native do not belong to them. The power to call their cultural heritage theirs is stripped away. Whenever they venture into a gallery space somewhere in the United States, they find out, much to their dismay, that expressionist Oskar Kokoschka was British; modernist Marc Chagall was French; avantgardists Oleksandra Ekster and Kazymyr Malevych were Russian, and so on.

That is exactly what happened to me, an art journalist from Ukraine who recently enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), when I first visited the Art Institute last fall. The thrill of recognizing works by Malevych and Ekster in the permanent collection of one of the world’s biggest and most important museums was poisoned by captions indicating their national origin.

On display at the AIC, Ekster was identified as “*Russian, born Poland,*” and her biography on the museum website read: “A pioneering figure in the *Russian avant-garde, Polish-born* Alexandra Exter was a painter and designer active in Moscow and Kiev before settling in Paris” Kazymyr Malevych was “*Russian, born Kiev (now Ukraine)*” and on the museum’s website “*Russian, born Ukraine*” (italics are mine.)

Many things were problematic here — from the outdated spelling of Kyiv (“Kiev” is a spelling Latinized from the Russian language and referencing the times when the city was under Soviet rule) to the usage of the imperialistic umbrella term “Russian avant-garde” to the lack of a unified and concise style of captions. Why are some artists nationally identified while others are not? But my main concern was the uncritical representation of both artists as Russian, with little attention paid to their complex and diverse ethnic and national backgrounds even though it informed their art.

Ekster was born in Bialystok, a largely Jewish-populated city in what was at the time the Russian Empire. Her father was a Belarusian Jew and her mother was Greek, which makes the “Polish-born” nomenclature problematic. She spent her childhood and youth in Kyiv and studied art at the Kyiv Art School alongside Ukrainian avant-garde icons Oleksandr Bohomazov and Oleksandr Arkhymenko. Her teachers at the school included Mykola Pymonenko, a famous Ukrainian painter.

The same is true for Malevych, for whom Ukraine was much more than a place of birth. He was born in Kyiv in 1879 to a Polish family and lived in Ukraine until he was 25. It was here that he started learning art. Malevych, too, was acquainted with Pymonenko and derived some ideas works of his he’d seen in Kyiv. He spoke and wrote Ukrainian and stated his nationality as “Ukrainian” in many formal documents during the 1920s.

Ekster spent more than half of her life — 35 out of her 67 years — in Ukraine (mostly in Kyiv) and

only four years in Moscow. Returning to the biographical note at AIC's website, it would be much more accurate to identify her as a pioneering figure in the Ukrainian and Russian avant-garde and an artist of Jewish-Belarusian-Greek origin who was active in Kyiv and Moscow before settling in Paris.

Malevych, who lived in Ukraine for 28 years— at least half of his life — and retained close ties to the Ukrainian avant-garde scene throughout his career, must be considered an important figure in both Ukrainian and Russian avant-garde and an artist of both Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian identities.

With all that in mind, I wrote a letter to the AIC curators to request a revision for both artists' representation and attached a research paper to support my arguments. The Art Institute responded and promised to make some changes. First, they corrected the spelling of Kyiv. They also replaced the term "Russian avant-garde" with "international" in Ekster's bio. However, she remained a "Russian" artist. And Malevych's identity is still unclear.

Whatever the Art Institute's reasons are, their revisions look like half-assed stopgap measures.

Misnomer Geography

The misnomer issue is nothing new. Researchers and curators from Ukraine have been contacting institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Centre Pompidou for years to ask them to acknowledge the Ukrainian descent of some of the artists in their Russian collection. These requests were mostly ignored before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Ukrainian culture (and any other post-Soviet/post-Russian Empire oppressed culture, for that matter) is successfully erased from global art history. And virtually every museum collection is an example of this erasure. Ukrainian art historian Oksana Semenik, who is now studying at Rutgers University, provides more proof of that. As an assistant curator at the Zimmerli, the [biggest collection of Soviet non-conformist art](#) in the US, Semenik examined the museum archive to find out that out of 900 artists labeled "Russian," 71 were Ukrainians, and 80 were artists of other nationalities like Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, etc. "About 15% of the 'Russian' collection is misidentified. But when I asked if this could be changed, the response was: The identity question is not relevant these days," Semenik said.

If this question is irrelevant, then why does "Russian" remain? "Some curators told me that using Ukraine in the caption is incorrect since there was no such country at that time," Semenik continued. She also checked the online archive of the Smithsonian Institution and found 42 Ukrainian artists labeled "born *Kharkov*, Russia" or "born *Odessa*, Russia," among other examples. In fact, a country called "Russia" did not exist before 1991, either. But the problem is bigger here — attributing Ukrainian cities to Russia, especially in the current context, rings like blatant Kremlin propaganda.

To be unable to recognize the difference between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation or Russia is a shameful mistake for institutions whose archives are used as credible academic sources. "It's tough to acknowledge that the history Western art historians were learning for years, all those tons of books about Malevych and the Russian avant-garde, were part of the Russian propaganda," Semenik added.

In June 2022, Semenik started the Twitter account "[Ukrainian Art History](#)" to inform the international audience about lesser-known Ukrainian artists. It has over 13,000 followers and continues to grow. "I asked my groupmates in Rutgers how many Ukrainian artists they know," Semenik said. "They didn't know anyone, but one person responded that she knew some Russian

artists: Malevych, Repin, and Hnizdovsky.” Ironically, all of these artists were Ukrainian. From Semenik’s perspective, it’s important to provide historical analogies to explain this case to the world — no one would call an artist from India “British” or an artist from Peru “Spanish.” Artists’ bios and titles in leading museums should be more sensitive to the complex historical narratives that inform their art. “I like the approach of the New Jersey State Museum; they mention where the artist was born, lived, studied, and died. In cases of the US artists, they even indicate a state,” added Semenik.

Loot or Shoot

“Some have been surprised by the passion invested by the colonized intellectuals in their defense of national culture. But those who consider this passion exaggerated are strangely apt to forget that their psyche and their ego are conveniently safeguarded by a French and German culture whose worth has been proven and which has gone unchallenged,” Frantz Fanon wrote in *Wretched of the Earth*. I am mad that writers worldwide still have to quote this book from 1961 in contemporary texts because of how similar the painful experiences of oppression are.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly [denied](#) the Ukrainian right to independence and even the existence of Ukraine as a state, calling Ukraine “an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space.” Presenting Ukrainian culture as Russian is a deliberate strategy of Russia to blur the borders between imperial power and its subalterns and to construct a single narrative of “the great Russian culture.”

Museums that fail to provide the distinction between Russian culture and other cultures overshadowed by it, involuntarily or not, become complicit in spreading Russian imperialistic narratives globally. “If those who work in museums and those who write about the art of the former Russian Empire fail to make these kinds of ethnic and cultural distinctions, they and we become guilty of perpetuating the precise mythology that Putin is using to justify the war,” writes art historian Allison Leigh in her 2022 essay “[Farewell to Russian Art: On Resistance, Complicity, and Decolonization in a Time of War](#).”

Ignoring this issue not only prolongs the status quo but makes it easier for Russia to steal and appropriate more. As I pass by Ekster’s work at the Art Institute, I get a push notification on my phone saying that Russian soldiers looted art museums in the Kherson region. All these stolen heritage properties will end up on display in Russian state galleries and museums, and the looted artists will likely be identified as “Southern Russians.”

Over the course of nine months of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian army has committed a number of intentional attacks on Ukrainian cultural sites. As a result, [over 500 cultural heritage sites](#) in Ukraine were destroyed or heavily damaged. Russian soldiers have [destroyed Polovtsian statues](#), dating from the 9th to the 13th century, and [stolen gold Scythian artifacts](#) dating back about 2,300 years from the Melitopol Museum of Local History.

Art history is, like every history, unfair. As the history of colonization shows, art and culture have long been instrumentalized for the purposes of the colonizers. Art history, in this case, should not be perceived as neutral but recognized as a communicative tool to spread power.

When imperial powers destroy a museum or steal its collection, they strip the opponent side of its material culture and, therefore, of any hard evidence for the legitimacy of its existence. By targeting Ukrainian cultural heritage, Russia obliterates the material representation of Ukrainian identity. And by stealing heritage and appropriating names, Russia denies the oppressed nations any right to independence and self-identification. As Semenik has [tweeted](#): “Representatives of various nationalities entered the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, but only Russians graduated.”

Great Cultures Club

“Russians chose ‘sameness’ as an instrument of domination. The message of Western colonialism was: ‘you are not able to be like us,’ while the message of Russian colonialism was ‘you are not allowed to be different from us,’” [explained](#) Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko in a talk at the Tbilisi Storytelling Festival last year.

Only a few, though, have recognized Russia as an imperial power despite its recent imperial wars in Ichkeria, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. When talking about decolonization, the main discussion is centered around countries of Western Europe and the US as the main colonizers of previous centuries. However, this discussion ignores the role of powerful countries from the East in the colonizing processes. Countries like China or Russia haven’t only been using the methods of colonialism in their politics but continue to exert colonial influence, both political and cultural, on weaker neighbors.

As an imperial power, Russia has for centuries invested in promoting its culture or culture it considered as its own. From Russian and Slavic departments in the leading universities to Russian ballet and opera and the “Russian avant-garde,” it ensured its presence as the main brand of the region.

It has been very different for Ukraine. Known primarily for its turmoil (be it Chernobyl, revolutions, or war), Ukraine has little to no positive presence on the global stage. To a nation that is formally young but has existed for centuries in a state of oppression, the historical narrative is not merely a war over symbols but a way to validate its existence and regain its history. The history of the colonized usually consists of dark pages filled with traumas, tragedies (such as the one currently unfolding before our eyes), and uncomfortable compromises, whereas the bright episodes are appropriated by empires.

So while “the great Russian culture” has just been there historically — in your libraries, concert halls, and museums — Ukrainian culture has been a blank space, a void. Russian voices seem important and crucial, the Russian narrative is vital, Russian perspective is worth listening to because it’s rooted in the “great Russian culture.” The presence of Russia is neutral simply because it was there with you all the time, embedded in Western history and promoted by your well-respected colleagues from Russia. Ukrainian culture, on the other hand, still remains an exotic and victimized *other* while the experience, knowledge, and opinions of Ukrainian professionals are treated as second-grade because there is no “great” culture to back them up.

Recent attempts by postcolonial nations to repatriate their heritage have created a meaningful conversation on the decolonization of museums worldwide, emphasizing the former colonies’ right to their past. Figures such as Malevych and Ekster are examples of the imperialist appropriation of history, which leads to blurring their multifaceted identities and diminishing their position in the culture of postcolonial countries. The institutions that follow this narrative do in fact (un)intentionally support the omission and erasure of weaker cultures and promote colonial logic in art history. That said, the ultimate idea is not to simply change the “Russian” attribution to “Ukrainian” (or Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, etc.), but to find a way to acknowledge a broader spectrum of influences and identities in order to lead art out of a narrow and terribly outdated colonial perspective.

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