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OLEKSII SHOVKUNENKO KHERSON REGIONAL ART MUSEUM: EXPERIENCE IN SAFEGUARDING CULTURAL HERITAGE DURING THE OCCUPATION"

Abstract. *This essay highlights the heroic efforts of the staff of the Oleksii Shovkunenko Kherson Regional Art Museum to safeguard the museum's collection during the Russian occupation of Kherson in 2022. Drawing on the personal testimony of the museum's director, Ms. Alina Dotsenko, the study highlights the challenges faced by cultural institutions in times of armed conflict and the strategies employed to preserve Ukraine's national heritage under extreme conditions.*

Keywords: *cultural heritage preservation, museum studies, Oleksii Shovkunenko Kherson Regional Art Museum, Russian occupation, art looting, Alina Dotsenko, Ukraine*

War has radically transformed each of our lives, dividing time into "before" and "after". Every city, every cultural sphere, every person in Ukraine has faced terrible challenges demanding rapid and momentous decisions. From the first day of the full-scale invasion, museum professionals mobilized all their efforts to save their collections, doing everything possible and impossible to ensure the safest preservation of their exhibits.

Oleksii Shovkunenko Kherson Regional Art Museum found itself in an especially difficult situation. Even before the outbreak of the war, renovation and restoration work had begun, despite the objections of the director, Ms. Alina Dotsenko, who has led the institution since 1988. As an expert in her field, Ms. Dotsenko opposed the hasty decision to commence the works and to appoint a contractor that did not meet modern requirements for restoring museum buildings of such scale and significance. She warned that these works could damage the architectural monument itself – a building constructed in 1905 and designed by architect Adolf Minkus.

Unfortunately, the regional authorities ignored the opinion of the museum community and granted permission for the renovation without ensuring that the collection was relocated to a safe place for the duration of the works. The museum staff themselves had to pack and carry the artworks to the basement storage rooms on the ground floor doing their best to protect them from inevitable damage.

Therefore, at the start of the war, the museum was in a disastrous state: the windows had been dismantled by the contractor, their locks removed, the floors between storeys disassembled, and the workers responsible for the site had already fled to Odesa early on the morning of 24 February 2022, leaving the building to its fate.

When the first explosions rang out on 24 February 2022, Alina Dotsenko – the daughter of a military officer who had grown up on a border outpost – immediately called the security police to find out what was happening. They told her that the war had begun, that Russian troops were advancing towards Henichesk, and that the border outposts in Chonhar and Skadovsk had already been bombed.

The decision was immediate: to go to the museum. But it was physically impossible – drivers refused to go to the Antonivskiy Bridge area where the director lived because fighting was already taking place nearby and taxi services had stopped answering calls. From home, Ms. Dotsenko tried to coordinate her team remotely, instructing them to secure the museum and begin saving the artworks. When transport could not be found, she set out on foot to the museum, 15 kilometres from her home. According to her recollections, the city seemed lifeless in those days, holding its breath before the catastrophe that lay ahead.

As already mentioned, at the beginning of the war, almost all the windows in the museum were open, left without locks by the contractor, and the museum staff, on their own initiative, spent several days trying to brace them with stones, beams, iron bars – anything the builders had left behind. It was extremely risky: between the second and third floors, the floorboards had been removed and only crossbeams remained at a height of 11–12 metres. Engineer Ihor Rusol carried materials across those beams to the windows while women from the courtyard below passed them up, doing everything they could to block the openings.

However, this did not solve the problem, and the director appealed to the Board of Trustees for assistance. Help was provided by Roman Romanov from Kyiv. Thanks to his support, welders were able to seal the windows that had been damaged by the builders, preventing looters from freely entering the premises.

On 1 March 2022, Kherson was occupied, and soon afterwards the same fate befell the museum – often referred to by visitors from Ukraine and abroad as the "Kherson Louvre." According to the director, before 24 February 2022, the museum had been the cultural heart of Kherson and a favourite destination for city visitors. It displayed outstanding paintings, unique icons, and examples of applied art from Ukraine, the East, and Western Europe, with works spanning geographical regions from the United States to South-East Asia, including France, Germany, China, Japan, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The exhibits ranged from the seventeenth century to the present day.

The collection included masterpieces by Oleksii Shovkunenko, Mykola Pymonenko, Davyd Burliuk, Ivan Aivazovsky, Mykola Hlushchenko, Kostiantyn Kryzhytskyi, Kostiantyn Trutovsky, Volodymyr Orlovsky, Mykola Skadovsky, Ivan Kramskoi, Kyriak Kostandi, Mykhailo Zhuk, Serhii Shyshko, Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo, Temistokl Virsta, Mykhailo Vrubel, Zinaida Serebriakova, Vasyl Polenov, Yevhen Lanceray, Tetiana Yablonska, Viktor Puzirkov, Leonid Chychkan and many others, both Ukrainian and internationally renowned Western European masters. A significant part of the collection was occupied by icons from the iconostasis of St Catherine's Cathedral, painted by Mykhailo Shybanov, a serf artist of Prince Potemkin.

After the occupation of Kherson, on 2 March 2022, armed Russian soldiers burst into the museum. They forced a policeman, disguised in civilian clothes, to the floor, handcuffed him, and dragged him outside. The occupiers intended to establish a checkpoint inside the museum, but due to the damaged condition of the building, they left, leaving all the doors open.

One of the local residents, Mr. Volodymyr, showed courage and compassion: he immediately rushed to the museum to help, called the director, and at her request stayed there overnight with employee Hanna Skrypka. The next morning, 3 March, right after the curfew ended, Alina Dotsenko, accompanied by the deputy head of the security police, arrived at the museum in a civilian car to avoid attracting the occupiers' attention. For the safety of the young police guards, she decided to replace them with older men unknown to the museum staff. Officially, everyone was told that the security contract with the police had been terminated and that ordinary watchmen had been hired. Only a few trusted people knew the truth.

It was claimed to the occupiers that the collection had been evacuated to a safe location before the repair works began in 2021. All loyal museum employees maintained this version, and in this way the staff managed to protect the collection for nearly six months.

As the danger increased, when the occupiers began to pressure her to collaborate, the director left Kherson on 5 May 2022. After her departure, her colleagues continued to deny Russian forces access to the collection, insisting that all artworks had been removed and the premises were empty.

Unfortunately, there were also potential collaborators among the staff. On 19 July 2022, at around 11 a.m., masked individuals claiming to be officers of the FSB and the police entered the museum. They were accompanied by the "new" director, Ms. Desiatova, and a museum employee, Ms. Koltsova. The loyal museum custodian, Hanna Skrypka, who had remained to protect the collection, was forced to hand over all the keys to the storerooms. Searches began, and documents relating to the collection were seized, including from the private home of a museum employee. Sadly, some workers chose to cooperate with the occupiers.

When it became clear that the city would soon be liberated by the Ukrainian army, Russian forces and their collaborators began removing the most valuable items before their retreat. Unfortunately, the museum was not spared. The looting of the collection took place from 31 October to 4 November 2022. The "operation" was overseen personally by Andrey Malgin, Director of the Tavrida Central Museum in Simferopol, Crimea. Regrettably, some museum staff assisted the occupiers in locating and stealing the most precious works.

According to eyewitnesses, at first the exhibits were wrapped in fabric, but later they were simply thrown into lorries to speed up the process. Thanks to concerned residents of Kherson, videos appeared on social media showing trucks near the museum building, loaded with artworks and guarded by armed men in civilian clothing who blocked traffic and pedestrian movement. Later, residents of Crimea identified the same lorries parked near the Tavrida Museum in Simferopol.

Tragically, after the occupation, the losses were enormous. As of 1 January 2022, the Kherson Regional Art Museum's inventory recorded 14,140 exhibits. After the looting, only 3,355 items remained. Thus, 10,785 artworks were stolen by the invaders.

Fortunately – if such a word can be used in this context – the occupiers overlooked certain items: Japanese applied art from the 18th–20th centuries, hidden behind curtains on wide windowsills, and a portrait of Oleksii Shovkunenko's wife, Oleksandra, which by some miracle they failed to find.

When Alina Dotsenko and her colleagues returned to the devastated museum after the liberation of Kherson on 16 November 2022, the first thing she saw was a portrait of Lenin in front of the empty storage vault and a sculpture of the revolutionary leader – objects the occupiers had chosen not to take, despite their ostentatious ideological reverence. This grotesque reminder of chaos and destruction symbolized the essence of the crime committed in the name of yet another tyrant of the modern age.

Symbolically, the occupiers also failed to notice a large tapestry by Kherson artist Olha Bryntseva, which she had donated to the museum in 2021. Its title, "The Nativity", carries profound meaning, as the birth of the Saviour has always signified the triumph of light over darkness. It reaffirms the hope that, despite all the terrible circumstances, the museum – and the whole of Ukraine – will prevail in the struggle for dignity and freedom and embark on a new path of revival.

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ХЕРСОНСЬКИЙ ОБЛАСНИЙ ХУДОЖНІЙ МУЗЕЙ ІМЕНІ ОЛЕКСІЯ ШОВКУНЕНКА: ДОСВІД ЗБЕРЕЖЕННЯ КУЛЬТУРНОЇ СПАДЩИНИ ПІД ЧАС ОКУПАЦІЇ

А н о т а ц і я . Це есе висвітлює героїчні зусилля співробітників Херсонського обласного художнього музею імені Олексія Шовкуненка, що були здійснені для збереження колекції музею під час окупації Херсона російськими військами у 2022 році. Спираючись на особисті свідчення директорки музею, пані Аліни Доценко, дослідження висвітлює виклики, з якими стикаються культурні установи під час збройного конфлікту, та стратегії, що використовуються для збереження національної спадщини України в екстремальних умовах.

К л ю ч о в і с л о в а : збереження культурної спадщини, музеєзнавство, Херсонський обласний художній музей, російська окупація, розграбування творів мистецтва, Аліна Доценко, Україна.