

# Letters

## The Ukraine Art Aid Center

Sir, In your issue of July 2022 you published an incisive Editorial by Konstantin Akinsha entitled 'Ukraine's cultural casualties'. Already at that time, Akinsha's terse summary of the destructions by the Russian invaders could have extended over dozens of pages. Since then, countless additional war crimes have been committed against Ukraine's cultural heritage. The Kherson Regional History Museum, for example, presciently identified by Akinsha as particularly menaced by the Russian aggressors, was systematically plundered before their retreat from that city in early November. Territories still occupied by the Russian forces have seen pillaging and wanton destruction of monuments on an even larger scale. The Mariupol Theatre, for instance, perhaps the best known among the destroyed sites, was hit on 17th March 2022 by Russian bombing that killed many civilians; the remains of the building were then demolished by the invaders, starting in December.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is not only plundering and destruction that jeopardises Ukrainian cultural heritage. When the war broke out, many institutions were scrambling to bring their treasures to safety. The desperation of Ukrainian art historians was keenly felt during a quickly organised panel with experts from the war-stricken country at the German Association for Art History's conference at the University of Stuttgart on 23rd March 2022. Already before, starting on 2nd March 2022, the association's outgoing president, Kilian Heck, had begun to organise weekly (now bi-weekly) online meetings in which colleagues from Ukrainian museums, libraries, archives, monuments and sites spoke of their often deeply troubling wartime experiences. During a recent meeting, Denis (Denys) Sikoza and Olena Dzeladze of the Kherson Regional History Museum showed shocking images of its rooms before and after the arrival of the Russian convoy, which carried away nearly all the holdings of this venerable institution (Fig.1).<sup>2</sup>

Such encounters, although extremely worrying, lead to a better understanding of the actual needs of Ukrainian cultural institutions – and to the realisation that something can in fact be done. In the first weeks of the war, an informal group of colleagues began to collect donations of wrapping materials, crates, fire extinguishers, etc. from institutions and firms in Germany and sent them to Ukraine – initially on buses that went there to bring back refugees, later also by rail and eventually on chartered trucks. The fledgling organisation, which soon called itself the Ukraine Art Aid Center (UAAC),<sup>3</sup> not only managed to secure many donations in kind, but also considerable financial support, notably from the Hasso Plattner Foundation and the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, the latter agreeing in March 2022 to pay for a full-time coordinator. Eventually, the UAAC's ability for rapid response also attracted the attention of the office of Germany's Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth, which in the second half of 2022 provided three million Euros.

These highly welcome government funds allowed for a robust upscaling of the operation, enabling the UAAC to respond quickly to arising needs by sending large consignments of dehumidifiers, tools, OSB boards, electric generators, power banks, computers, scanners, cameras and many other items required by colleagues who are labouring to document and save the treasures entrusted to them – and to protect the often-damaged buildings against the approaching winter. This operation would have been unthinkable without a dedicated team in Germany and without the fantastic work of volunteers in Ukraine, above all in Kyiv and in Lviv, who made sure that the truckloads of goods reached those who particularly needed them – not only in the country's cities but also in towns and villages. By early 2023 the UAAC had succeeded in sending 250



1. A plundered exhibition in the Kherson Regional History Museum after the retreat of the Russian army, November 2022. (Kherson Regional History Museum; photograph Valeriia Nikolaeva).

tons of material and equipment to more than five hundred institutions – and it had also supported about a dozen of special projects directed by individuals and academic institutions in Germany and in Ukraine.

As spring approaches, we are hopeful that the German government will again provide significant funds to allow for a continuation of these operations and to also encourage the planning for reconstruction. As such, the purpose of this letter is not only to attract donations for the UAAC – always highly appreciated – but to exhort readers to remind their governments that the cultural sector must not be forgotten in this crisis and that help can be provided.<sup>4</sup> All involved in the UAAC were extremely happy to see, for instance, how the supply of large generators enabled the opera houses in Odesa and Lviv to stage performances despite this winter's constant power cuts – providing a significant boost of morale for the local population.

JOHANNES NATHAN

1 For a list of damaged cultural sites in Ukraine, verified by UNESCO, see [www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco](http://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco), accessed 4th April 2023.

2 Readers wishing to receive invitations to these online meetings should send an e-mail to Kilian Heck at [kilian.heck@uni-greifswald.de](mailto:kilian.heck@uni-greifswald.de).

3 The UAAC (in German: Netzwerk Kulturgutschutz Ukraine) is associated with the Deutsch-Ukrainische Gesellschaft für Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft e.V., which currently acts as the holding organisation and hosts the UAAC's webpage: [www.dug-ww.com/Kulturgutschutz\\_Ukraine](http://www.dug-ww.com/Kulturgutschutz_Ukraine), accessed 4th April 2023. The members of the UAAC's Steering Committee are Olena Balun (Rosenheim), Kilian Heck (Greifswald / Berlin), Klaus Hillmann (Frechen / Potsdam), Matthias Müller (Mainz) and Johannes Nathan (Potsdam / Zurich). The Coordinators in Ukraine are Iryna Horban (Lviv), Iryna Nikiforova (Kyiv), Ihor Tymets (Lviv) and Mykola Kuschnir (Chernivtsi).

4 Donations with the keyword 'Museums' may be wired to the account of the Deutsch-Ukrainische Gesellschaft e.V., IBAN: DE49 5519 0000 0653 9900 10. Please provide your name and address if you would like to receive a proof of donation (tax-deductible). For any enquiries, please write to the author of this letter at [jjn@jnnathan.net](mailto:jjn@jnnathan.net); or to the UAAC's Coordinator, Yevgeniya Kozmenko: [artaid@gmx.de](mailto:artaid@gmx.de).

## The background of 'Portrait of Mai'

Sir, Amid the publicity surrounding the attempts to save Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Mai (Omai) for the nation, next to nothing has been said about the landscape in the background. It bears a striking resemblance to the views of Vaitepiha Bay, Tahiti, by John Webber (also known as Wäber; 1755–93), an Anglo-Swiss artist who accompanied Captain Cook on his voyage of 1776–80.<sup>1</sup> In the course of it, Cook revisited Tahiti and Webber portrayed its people – including very possibly, in a painting known as *A native of Otaheite* (Fitzwilliam Museum,