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Ukrainian Avant-Garde Art and the Construction of National Identity

The aim of my PhD research is to reconsider the history of art on the territory of the present-day Ukraine from the turn of the twentieth century and into the first decades after the October Revolution. I look, in particular, at the question of how avant-gardist art practices can be positioned within the complex historiographical discourse of 'Ukraine' and the interplay between art, politics and the ideology of identity. My thesis focuses on the cities of Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Lviv, to investigate the influence of ideological and socio-political factors on the artistic output in these key regional centres at a time when Ukraine did not exist as an independent state. By examining the work of artists such as Alexander Archipenko, Oleksandr Bohomazov, Aleksandra Ekster, and Kazimir Malevich, to name just a few, I address the complexity of ascribing ethnical and national identifications to artists hailing from the multicultural territory of Ukraine. While contributing to the process of the decolonisation of the post-Soviet space, my research also seeks to re-position the local Ukrainian artistic production within the broader trajectory of European modernism.

Since the collapse of the USSR some thirty years ago, significant scholarly research has been undertaken examining the artistic movements, developments and practitioners active on the territory of the Russian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century and its subsequent iteration as the Soviet Union. However, most of this research has been conducted under the banner of the Russian avant-garde art with insufficient attention paid to the cross-cultural aspirations and national influences of artists operating within these multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic states. The main premise of my thesis is to explore the validity of the idea of 'Ukrainian avant-garde art' and to position it within the framework of the production of national identity. I strive to understand how the art of a non-historical nation, i.e. a nation without a state, might be placed and differentiated vis-à-vis the imperial narratives that engulf it. What is the situation of Ukraine's artistic tradition within the complex fabric of its historical and societal transformations? And what value should be ascribed to artists' self-identification and their engagement with certain ideologies when examining their art?

My research centers on the so-called *spetsfond* [special holding] that was formed within the State Museum of Ukrainian Art in Kyiv in 1937-1939. It incorporated works, gathered from regional museums throughout the Soviet Ukraine, by painters who were labelled enemies of the state and accused of formalism and nationalism. Although the ultimate destiny of these works was intended to be destruction, this never came to pass, as the process was first interrupted by the start of the Second World War, and later by Stalin's death. Many of the artists whose works ended up in the *spetsfond* were either executed or

perished in the Gulag. Similarly to their literary counterparts, they came to be referred to as the 'executed renaissance' of Ukraine. There has, however, been a call in recent years to move away from this paradigm and the conception of the Ukrainian cultural martyrdom it entailed, not least because such an approach obscures the role that many of these practitioners played in setting up the system that later destroyed them. If Ukrainian art of the 1920s is to be celebrated as an inherent and vibrant part of the national cultural heritage, then the attitude towards the Soviet Union, which inevitably made it possible, needs to be re-evaluated. Through my research on the Ukrainian avant-garde, I seek to contribute to a richer understanding of the country's multi-layered identity and to the preservation of its historical memory.