

Sacred Art from the Frontline: The Iconography and Symbolism of the Contemporary Ukrainian Art Project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes”

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Abstract: *The paper is highlighting the unique phenomenon of modern Ukrainian sacred art – holy icons painted on panels made of ammunition boxes brought from the war zone in Ukraine. The aim of this paper is to conduct a comprehensive study of the project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” from the point of view of art history and social culture; to understand the prerequisites for the appearance of the art project “Holy Icons on the Ammunition Boxes” and its functions as social and volunteer project; to carry out an art analysis of separate holy icons and icon painting cycles of this art project. Several interviews with the creators of the project – artists Oleksandr Klymenko and Sofia Atlantova – were conducted, based on which the necessary conditions for the creation of holy icons, their symbolism, iconography, and social function (which is manifested in the support of the First Voluntary Mobile Hospital named after Mykola Pirogov) were analysed. The project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” carries an important function of unification and fusion: stitching together the rear and the frontline. Its symbolism is based on the antithesis of death and life, the transformation of death into life, not only on a symbolic level, but also literally since all funds from the holy icons’ sales are directed to saving the lives of wounded Ukrainian soldiers and civilians. Weapons, which are originally instruments of death, acquire the opposite symbolic qualities, and become sacred artifacts. The article analyses both the artistic features of the project and its social function, which is no less important.*

Keywords: icon painting, holy icon, ammunition boxes, art, war, volunteering.

Main part

The Russian war in Ukraine has been going on for over ten years. On February 24, 2022, the war entered the phase of a full-scale Russian invasion and continues to this day, taking thousands of military and civilian lives,

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making millions displaced both within Ukraine and abroad. Unfortunately, in the period from 2014 to 2022, for a huge part of Ukrainians and residents of other countries, this war was remaining practically invisible, virtual like, known only from individual posts on social networks and statistical reports in the media. Paradoxically, Jean Baudrillard was right when in his essay “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” he raised the topic not of the war itself, but of the “picture” of this war, its simulacrum¹. War as a game, as virtual reality. Most of the world’s population does not experience this war, but consumes its simulacrum created by the mass media – similarly, many Ukrainians living far from the frontline did not experience the Russian-Ukrainian war personally, perceived it as a kind of computer game, the progress of which could be followed sitting in front of a monitor or TV. Of course, everything changed after the full-scale invasion, when almost all Ukrainians realized the new reality of Russian aggression, thousands took up arms and stood up for the defence of Ukraine, and the rest of the majority got involved and actively worked to support the economy and life of the state.

The art project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” was started years before the full-scale invasion of 2022 precisely with the aim of pulling out passive and indifferent observers from this virtual perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war that prevailed at that time. The founders of the project are the couple of Kyiv based artists Sofia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko. The project, which was born during the hybrid war, became a hybrid itself in a certain way – artistic and volunteer. From its very beginning, since October 2014, all funds from the holy icons’ sales were directed to the financing of the First Voluntary Mobile Hospital named after Mykola Pyrogov, who treats the wounded in the war zone².

What is the project itself? The Army stores and transports ammunition and weapons in special boxes mostly made of wood. After the ammunition is used, these boxes are usually just thrown away like any other packaging. Sofia and Oleksandr have noticed that the wooden boards from which these boxes are made paradoxically resemble the traditional wooden bases of the holy icons – they are made according to the same principle: separate boards are joined into panels and fastened with pegs. This is how the idea of using these boards from boxes as panels for holy icons appeared – an idea that is very simple at first glance, but extremely deep and symbolic in its essence. It is about transforming military objects that carry death into a holy icon that carries life – both in a symbolic and literal sense, because the purpose of creating this holy icon is to save the lives of the wounded.

¹Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1991.

²Olena Maksymenko, *Holy Icons painted on ammo boxes save lives*. 2016, Cenzor.net.ua, date of access: 20.03.2024 [in Ukrainian]

The wood itself as a material has a deep sacred symbolism. Turning to the history of Christianity, the wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified was a symbol of shameful death but became a symbol of life after His resurrection. The same concept is developed by the authors of the project. The antinomy of Christian existence, where things are inherently opposite, contrasting, can be merged, combined into a single wholeness. According to the artists, to understand the entity and, in this case, this war, it is necessary to collide things that, it seems, cannot be collided. This is the antinomy of life and death. The symbol of death is ammunition boxes (and not only them, but weapons in general, because we are talking about different scales – from boxes for small arms to large artillery shells). The holy icon in our tradition symbolizes the Incarnation, and the purpose of the Incarnation of Christ was to defeat death and give life. One of the symbolic goals of the “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” project is an attempt to reflect the Easter joy of life’s victory over death, to continue the biblical theme, the Old Testament’s lines: “beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). Artists emphasize this idea of turning death into life, merging the incompatible³. These antinomies are key for them in the project not only in the biblical context, but also in the context of Ukrainian history.

When asked to outline the symbolic base and the origins of the project more deeply, Oleksandr Klymenko claims that he is mainly referring to both the classical Byzantine holy icon and the Western European artistic tradition, medieval art, and attributes of modern warfare. He builds the symbolic construction of the project in the context of Ukrainian history, starting from the time of Volodymyr the Great and ending with our days. And in this context, the current war acquires an epic colour of the struggle between good and evil. The first exhibition of the project took place in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv⁴, and one of the symbolic concepts of the construction of the Sophia Cathedral was victory over nomads, pagans. That is the theme of confrontation between Kyivan Rus’ as a cultural and civilizational space, and the world of pagans, nomads, and chaos. Today, the war in the East of Ukraine is often compared to Igor’s military campaigns, Sviatoslav’s military campaigns, even with the battles of the Cossacks and the Tatars – this in a certain way reveals the Ukrainian code. In this context, according to Klymenko, this struggle is built into the paradigm of “war in the steppe” familiar to Ukrainians. But it is very important for the artist to reveal not only this struggle in the steppe, but also to investigate the eternal question “what is the struggle against evil”, how it takes place. We remember that in

³*We are fighting to make an icon from a weapon, not to turn an icon into a Weapon*, 2019, Heart to heart, coradcor.us, date of access: 20.03.2024) [in Ukrainian]

⁴Iryna Ryndych, *Holy Icons on ammo boxes: an unconventional approach to iconography in contemporary Ukrainian art*, 2015, Relihijno-informatsijna sluzhba Ukrainy, risu.org.ua, date of access: 20.03.2024) [in Ukrainian]

the classical Christian tradition, an icon is a prayer, but in the context of this project it also becomes a weapon of personal struggle against evil in oneself – one can defeat the enemy only by overcoming the evil in oneself. These are some of the important conceptual principles of this art project.

Speaking about the sources of iconography, whether it is mainly the Ukrainian tradition of icon painting, or whether the authors rely on a more generalized Byzantine canon, Oleksandr Klymenko answers that he is focusing not only on the Ukrainian tradition. The artist's sources are Kyivan Rus', the Balkans, and even Western European painting. However, the base is a Byzantine icon painting. The author has a special view of the Byzantine tradition in the context of the Crimean annexation: "The reason for the Russian annexation of Crimea is not only that it is an important military base, but it is also Russia's attempt to become a part of the Mediterranean culture, in which Byzantium is very important. It is an Aramaic heritage. Somehow it is so firmly perceived that Ukrainian culture is mainly Ukrainian baroque. The Ukrainian discourse today does not work at all on the fact that Byzantine heritage is also ours, Ukrainian. Instead, Russia took such a problematic step as annexation precisely for the sake of confirming the Russian imperial myth about the rightful succession of Byzantine culture." Through the art project Oleksandr Klymenko argues with the Russian discourse that Byzantium is not a Russian tradition, it is a Kyivan tradition, and Kyivan Rus' is a Ukrainian tradition. In this context, another important function of the project is clearly manifested – the struggle for historical origins, the struggle for cultural sources.

The entire project "Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes" is inextricably linked with the theme of the Russian-Ukrainian war, its landmark events, the history that is happening here and now – that is why the authors of the project constantly emphasize not only the artistic component of the project, but also its political and historical context. We should mention that three artists participated in the first exhibition: Sofia Atlantova, Natalka Volobuyeva and Oleksandr Klymenko. Natalka Volobuyeva left almost immediately after the first exhibition, and since then Sofia and Oleksandr have worked on the project together. At the beginning authors united around the idea of creating holy icons specifically on ammunition boxes, without forming any generalized concept of iconography or choosing specific subjects. Subsequently, Sofia and Oleksandr began to form separate cycles of holy icons – this is how the cycles "Ilovaisk' Deisis" and "Passion" appeared.

"Ilovaisk' Deisis" (Fig. 1-2) is one of the key cycles of the entire project "Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes", because it precisely reveals its peculiarities and its inclusion in the context of war. The traditional composition "Deisis" is a central object of the Ukrainian iconostasis and means "Prayer". Atlantova and Klymenko created a cycle of "Prayer" for the victims of the bloodiest event of the first year of Russian-Ukrainian war – the

battles for Ilovaisk in August 2014. During the presentation-performance of the "Ilovaisk' Deisis" project, which took place in the "Kalita Art Club" gallery in Kyiv in 2017, artists inscribed the names of the fallen Ukrainian soldiers directly on the surfaces of holy icons. This became a symbolic gesture, as if adding the fallen to the rank of saints, symbolic gratitude for their greatest sacrifice for the Homeland.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The cycle consists of thirteen large format holy icons painted on panels made of artillery shell boxes. The boxes were brought from the frontline by employees of the First Voluntary Mobile Hospital named after Pirogov. These are panels with a height of 103–118 cm and a width of 35–48 cm. The traditional Deisis triptych for icon painting – the central image of the Saviour, and two holy icons of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist – in this cycle is expanded and continued with pairs of holy icons of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the Apostles Peter and Paul, saints John Chrysostom and Nicholas, Saints George and Dmitri of Thessalonica and images of the holy hermits Macarius and Mark. The boards on which the holy icons are painted have practically not been processed or changed by the authors. There is no gesso (levkas) used, the painting is placed directly on the wooden panel. Fragments of metal fastenings of boxes, locks and curtains, various military markings, inscriptions, remnants of protective khaki paint remained on the boards – everything indicates that these are the boxes of weapons brought from the war zone. The artists deliberately leave the original appearance of the panels. They minimally interfere with the nature of this wood, which carries the memory of terrible events of war. According to the authors, their entire apartment, balcony, garage, cottage – the entire personal space of the artists is piled with these boxes brought from the frontline. They are with them all the time, there is always a dynamic process of thinking about which image will suit this or that board. The authors do not cover the panels with gesso, because according to Oleksandr, if you cover the base with gesso, you will lose not only the formal appearance of ammunition boxes, but also the texture of the wood, which is very beautiful. Due to the lack of gesso, the holy icons are perceived as translucent, the impression of the saints' images appearing directly on the plane wood is created.

Sometimes the authors create a background made of camouflage fabric, also brought from the frontline – these are the fragments of military uniforms worn by soldiers. The camouflage texture sometimes appears as a veil, and sometimes as a decoration element of the clothes of the saints. Otherwise, artists do not use just plain camouflage fabric, but decorate it, draw on it with their own hands, so that it is no longer perceived as camouflage uniform, but as some kind of expensive vestment. They also suggest the idea of a metaphor of camouflage as an invisibility cloak, in which the enemy cannot see you. In the context of the icon painting, it is not only a literal, real enemy, but also the “enemy of this world” – the devil. This is exactly the principle used in the holy icons of the “Ilovaisk’ Deisis” – the cloth and vestments of the depicted saints are interspersed with camouflage motifs. Art critic Zoya Chehusova, describing the paintings of the “Ilovaisk’ Deisis”, says: “the camouflage-styled vestments of the saints are, of course, not camouflage in the literal sense, but are only associated with military uniforms and symbolize the approach of the saints to the needs of people.

The barrier between our world and the divine realm is being erased, the sky is getting closer to the earth, and the saints standing before Christ are among those who saw the bottom of the Ilovaisk hell with their own eyes, and can testify about it, this hell"⁵. Is the camouflage a kind of symbolic hiding place from evil for the authors? Oleksandr says that only to a small extent. He carefully approaches this, avoiding delving into the pagan context. The authors try to distance themselves from apotropaism, their interpretation minimizes the magical context, because, according to them, there is already a lot of magic in the war. For example, the children's drawings, which are used there by soldiers as talismans or charms.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The style of the painting, in which "Ilovaisk' Deisis" are made and its visual language create in a certain way parallels with the children's drawings. The artists combine tempera painting, traditional for icon painting, with coloured pencils and pastels (Fig. 3–4). The faces, hands, feet of the saints are painted with tempera. The vestments are shaded with pencils and pastels, sometimes rather chaotically, expressively, as if really imitating children's drawings, but then expertly supplemented with light tempera dyes. Such a combination of tempera and pencils creates a rather original style.

⁵ Chehusova Zoya, «Ilovaisk' Deisis» by Sonia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko, KalytaArtClub, Kyiv, 2015, p. 4-6.

Sometimes it seems that the holy icons were created directly at the frontline, in field conditions with the help of materials at hand – pencils, pens, pastels. In what other ways can holy icons be drawn in conditions of war? That is why authors practically do not use gold in icons, because there is no place for gold and luxury in wartime. There is modesty and restraint, and this is exactly the impression made by the holy icons on the ammunition boxes.



Fig. 5

Another icon painting cycle by Sofiya Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko as part of the project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” is dedicated to the iconography of “The Passion” (figs. 5–6). The cycle was presented in the spring of 2019 in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv and had two dedications: the first – to all military and civilians fallen in the war, and the second dedication – to all mothers and women who lost sons and husbands in the war. The style of the icon painting of this cycle is somewhat different from the holy icons of the “Ilovaisk’ Deisis”. The authors move away from the use of coloured pencils and pastels, the icons are dominated by tempera painting, which is placed directly on the wooden panel, without the gesso layer. The colours of the cycle have also been slightly changed:

muted, restrained colours prevail. Painting is very light, translucent. The viewer, looking at the image, seems to be watching the development of a photograph in a darkened laboratory – this is the impression that comes from contemplating these icons.



Fig. 6

The events that took place and continue to take place in Ukraine, the artists integrate directly into the theme of Holy Week. The anniversaries of the beginning of the war, the biggest battles – these important moments of history are projected on Holy Week, either Orthodox or Catholic. The very beginning of this war was woven into the context of the Passion and reflections on what war is and who are the people who died in this war. For artists, the only possible association is precisely the comparison of those who died in the war with the sacrifice of Christ, with His sacrificial love and willingness to die for the sake of love. This is the path of every person in the war, and in general of Ukraine, which in a symbolic sense is currently experiencing the Passion. There is a belief that after these sufferings there will be a resurrection. Therefore, among the Passion cycle at the exhibition, there were two holy icons on the theme of resurrection: “The Myrrh-Bearing Wives” and “The Descent into Hell” (Fig. 7). However, they were slightly

different from the rest in terms of colour, painted on dark green military boards.



Fig. 7

Collages from newspaper clippings appear on the margins of some holy icons of the Passion cycle. These “Vytnankas” (traditional Ukrainian art form of papercutting) lay symbolic bridges to Ukrainian folk art, however, here they have a relatively different context. Clippings from newspapers brought from the cities at the frontline were used for the collages. Atlantova and Klymenko used pre-war newspapers brought from the territory where hostilities later began. According to their idea, this is a kind of metaphor for what is happening in the East of Ukraine: “Donbas is like a Vytnanka in the hands of God. Reading these newspapers already after the war started, – admits Oleksandr, – it becomes scary the level of misinformation that was spread there, and in a certain sense it becomes clear why the war happened there”. Implantation of these clippings into the holy icon structure carries the symbolic meaning of cleansing from lies and misinformation. On the other hand, collages on holy icons, like camouflage, carry symbolic meanings. During the war, according to the artists, it is wrong to use gold as an ornament, instead as a symbol of wealth it should be sent to the frontline as an aid. And the decoration on the holy icon should be modest. Paper and

camouflage fabric is almost the only possible type of decoration for the holy icons during the war.



Fig. 8

At the “Passion” cycle exhibition in Lviv in June 2019, six icons with the image of “The Eleusa” (fig. 8) were exhibited – a dedication to mothers and women who lost their husbands and children in the Russian-Ukrainian war. These icons in the Byzantine tradition have their own symbolism of the Passion – mother tragically witnesses what is happening to her son. For Oleksandr Klymenko, this dedication to mothers and women who have lost someone is very important. You can truly empathize with a loss and survive the tragedy of losing a close one only in dialogue – with loved ones, with God, with yourself. And in the context of the post-Maidan understanding of our existence, a holy icon is a way of dialogue. This is Ukraine’s dialogue with the world. Atlantova and Klymenko’s project is a dialogue of artists with God and with the audience, a dialogue of civilians with the military. These holy icons, these panels made from ammunition boxes – they are real, not virtual, they are from the war zone. Here we are back again, one of the functions of the holy icons in general is to testify the Incarnation. Holy icons on the ammunition boxes testify not only to the

Incarnation, but to the war in Ukraine, reminding the audience that the war is still going on.

When asked what the authors of the project think about the concept of canonicity of an icon painting and whether they consider their holy icons to be canonical, Oleksandr Klymenko expresses the opinion that tradition cannot be permanent, but there is a certain tradition of the icon painting and when working with a holy icon, one must respect this tradition. According to Oleksandr, this project is not completely a project of sacred art but exists simultaneously in two planes – sacred art and secular culture. At first glance, this project has features of postmodernity: citation, the use of compatible-incompatible, collage – these components inherent in postmodernism are present here. But Klymenko himself rejects postmodern connotations: “During the war, postmodernism does not work. There is no postmodern game here, there is a clearly defined theme of good and evil, i.e., things that postmodernism is struggling with.” There is a theme of transforming death into life, and postmodernism is never going to transform anything. The transformation of death into life in this project occurs not only in the symbolic sense, but also in the literal sense. In Alexander’s opinion, this is no longer post-, but meta modernism.

So, if this project actually exists on the border between sacred and secular art, then the question arises, what are these icons – objects of prayer or artifacts of contemporary art? The authors admit that it is also a certain paradox for them that this project is well perceived by religious people (for example, the exhibition in Philadelphia in the Greek Catholic Cathedral of Sophia⁶), and at the same time this exhibition works perfectly in secular space. That is, these two worlds coexist. Apparently, the holy icon is a sacred object of prayer, but it also becomes clear to secular people, because the holy icon is open for any public, it becomes understandable to people of Christian and post-Christian civilization. For example, Orthodox, Catholics, Greek Catholics, Lutherans rather perceive its religious component, and secular people better dealing with the symbolic context. Somewhere on a subconscious level, one feels that the icon is something holy, connected with reconciliation, with peace, something that is always opposed to war. This project sometimes requires its secular interpretation. The authors would like this project to become a bridge between traditional religious denominations and secular, or even atheistic space. Because, again, the theme of unification, merging and stitching is very important in this project.

The artists admit their co-authorship – and they emphasize this from the very first exhibition – with people who are at the frontline, volunteers, soldiers of the Armed Forces. Those people who are there, who often feel a mental gap between themselves and the civilians, feel misunderstanding,

⁶Weigel George, *Icons on Ammo Boxes*, 03.07.2019, Ethics & Public Policy Center, eppc.org, date of access: 20.03.2024.

detachment, alienation, but thanks to this project they become complicit, co-create something with authors, searching for and collecting ammunition boxes, and in fact – taking them out from under fire.

So, in such a case, when is the initial act of creating a holy icon, where is the starting point? At what point does its creation begin? Klymenko claims that its creation begins from the moment when soldiers and volunteers under fire and shelling find boxes for the project and take them away – this is already the process of creation. The main thing is that these people are there, they did not forget about the project, even under bullets and shelling. “We still call, talk, discuss,” says Oleksandr, “this is, in fact, such a complex process of understanding this war, instilling it in me and instilling me in this war. Such a reflection on the war, which would not have happened without this project. In fact, this is a continuation of what I wrote about in the book *Summer-ATO*⁷, with this project I finished my book at the beginning of September 2014, at the same time the idea for the project with holy icons arose. It turned out that verbally this war did not let go and had to continue to tell visually. These holy icons are my dream of peace, not the sacralization of war. This project arose after Ilovaisk. I worked on it during the battles for Debaltseve, during the tragic events at the Donetsk airport, and in fact it was a dream that the war and all this horror would end. Not just a dream, but faith and affirmation that the Passion will end, and the resurrection will come.”

Conclusions

The artistic value of the project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” is particularly evident in its metaculturality, its artistic and social unity. Military artifacts being transformed into sacred works of art, are inextricably linked on the one hand with traditional Byzantine and post-Byzantine icon painting, its symbolism and theology, and on the other hand with the theme of the Russian-Ukrainian war, its landmark events, a story that is happening right here and right now. The authors of the project constantly emphasize in their stories not only the artistic component of the project, but also its political and historical context. This project exists simultaneously in sacred and secular realms, stitches those realms together and destroys established boundaries.

The iconographic base of the project consists of cycles of icons, the most notable of which are “Ilovaisk’ Deisis”, “Passion”, “Saints of the Gray Zone”. Each of the cycles has its own stylistic features, manifested in the style of painting, the use of artistic materials, dedications to specific events, or war victims. The unifying factor of the various icon painting cycles of the project is not only the boards from the ammunition on which they are

⁷Olaf Klemensen, *Summer-ATO*, Liuta Sprava, Kyiv, 2015.

painted, but also the most important purpose of their creation – giving life to the wounded and victims on the frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The project “Holy Icons on Ammunition Boxes” is unique and had no analogues in the world before its beginning. Over the past few years, similar projects have begun to appear, but Sofia and Oleksandr remain pioneers, systematically working and developing the project, feeling a great responsibility for the operation of the mobile hospital, and in fact for the lives of thousands of people whom the hospital helps every day.

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