

Daniel Arasse made me a partisan of “close looking”

A Talk about Art History in Ukraine after the Big Thaw¹

Stefaniia Demchuk, Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, in conversation with Heidrun Rosenberg, a freelance art historian based in Vienna

Born in Kyiv, Stefaniia Demchuk enrolled at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in 2006. She thus belongs to the first generation of academic scholars after the *Big Thaw*. Having begun her studies in History, she later changed to Art History and graduated with a thesis on *Popular culture in early modern Netherlands* in 2016. Since 2017, Stefaniia Demchuk is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Art History at Taras Shevchenko National University. Her principal research interests lie in the fields of sixteenth century Netherlands, Medieval and Renaissance Art, and Theory and Historiography of Art. She is currently studying intellectual exchanges between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ European art histories. In 2020, she published her brilliant and eye-opening essay on the influence of the Vienna School of Art History on Soviet and post-Soviet historiography, a field that has not yet been widely researched. In 2021, Stefania Demchuk was invited to the international conference “Great Female Art Historians”, organized by the Association of Austrian Art Historians (VoeKK), and contributed a well-received lecture on *Career Patterns of Female Art Historians in Soviet Academia*.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Stefaniia Demchuk decided to leave Kyiv and is now a research fellow at the Masaryk University in Brno.

HR: Many thanks for finding time for this interview!

SD: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak more about my research and Ukrainian art history!

HR: Firstly, please tell us a little bit about the situation at universities in Ukraine before the Russian invasion: Was it difficult to get a place to study Art History at a Ukrainian University? How would you characterize the “Ukrainian Curriculum of Art History”?

SD: Over the last few years, Art History became very popular among the students. And, in order to enter our department, one had to get very high scores for their ‘ZNO’

(tests for the External Evaluation of Knowledge, which one has to pass after finishing high school in order to enter university). I’m sure that this popularity is due to the dominant role of visual culture in the modern world.

The peculiarity of education in Ukraine is that only our Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv offers courses in art history. There are academies of art that teach ‘mystetstvoznavstvo’ (‘art studies’ or ‘Kunstwissenschaft’), which embraces the history of styles, connoisseurship and art management. But on the other side the academies have been mostly reluctant to show art in the political, social and cultural contexts. This division between art history and art studies reflects the long-standing colonialist policy of Moscow, which deprived Ukraine of the proper art historical discourse. After the Revolution of Dignity, the cabinet of Arts which existed at our university was transferred to the Academy of Arts, where it became the Department for History and Theory of Art, but only in name. Thus, the re-establishment of the Department of Art History at Kyiv University in 2015 can be regarded as a part of long-awaited decolonization. So, I cannot speak for other institutions, but our curriculum is pretty straightforward.

All our undergraduates have an obligatory survey of art history from ‘Pyramids to Picasso’. But then we offer several different programs with a number of courses. For example, if they choose ‘History of European and American art’, the courses will include aesthetics, art historiography, history of fashion, history of photography, etc. Apart from the obligatory survey and the courses determined by the program of their choice, there are a number of optional courses offered by all members of the faculty which, therefore, can be attended by students from different departments. I have not seen a lot of other curricula, but I would say that our approach to the education of undergraduates is more classic, because we retained the traditional survey. I know that some art historians consider it a little dated, but in my opinion it is better for students to have some kind of framework at this stage.

Our Master's program is rather similar to Western ones. We have two of them, actually: the first is focused on contemporary curatorship, and the second is about restoration and art expertise.

HR: May I ask you personally: Which teachers impressed you the most? Did you have preferences for certain methods? Who has been your greatest role model, and why?

SD: There are two kinds of teachers who left a deep mark on my personality: the ones I met and worked along with, and the others who influenced my work through their books.

My supervisor, Prof. Petro Kotliarov, belongs to the first group. Although he was trained as a historian, he also had a past as an artist. After I listened to his passionate lectures about Renaissance art, I decided to switch from pure history to art history. I have never regretted this decision, even though it was easier to decide than to follow. When I studied at the university, there was no separate department of art history. The one I work in now is only six years old. Thus, I had to prove to the professors of our Department of Ancient and Medieval History that my research about the art of the early modern Netherlands is legit. My supervisor helped me a lot; he revised all my manuscripts, loaned me the books which he considered useful, encouraged me at the moments when I felt stuck and offered an example of academic integrity. I can say that he is my role model. Another scholar who has become my mentor is Matt Kavalier. His generous support made me find my way in my postdoctoral research. He is a role model, too, because he chooses rather complex topics such as Gothic architecture in the Renaissance epoch or, presently, Netherlandish sculpture. He keeps challenging himself. I should also mention my colleague from Masaryk University, Prof. Matthew Rampley, who helped me to get the scholarship when the war started. He is a brilliant scholar and an example of a critical mind. I appreciate how he tries to initiate a discussion about the way of dealing with Central and European art and challenge existing narratives.

Amongst my other teachers, whom I do not know personally, but who impressed me through their studies, are Aby Warburg (1866-1929), Daniel Arasse (1944-2003), and Michael Baxandall (1933-2008). I think each of them opened a fascinating and fruitful way to look at artworks and write about them. I was inspired by the concept of artistic survival developed by Aby Warburg. Instead of the linearity in art history, he offered a much more complex view of art-historical temporality. I love his passion and

his devotion to the *métier* of an art historian. Daniel Arasse made me always look for the details which can potentially undermine all interpretations. His analytic iconography changed forever the way I see artworks and made me a partisan of close looking. Michael Baxandall is a perfect example of a happy marriage between theory and history. Art Theory can sometimes distance one from the actual artworks and, although it can become seductive, will be far from history. Baxandall proved that one can at least partly reconstruct the 'cultural equipment' that informed the way the works of art were looked at. I liked his way of doing the social history of art.

As you can see, the list of my teachers is rather international and, in fact, there is nothing special about it. Many of my colleagues who studied after the disintegration of the Soviet Union are rather international, which makes a huge contrast with the scholarship done behind the Iron Curtain.

HR: Did you have also a female role model?

SD: I would mention Prof. Barbara Baert. I love how she always starts from a particular artwork and then develops the case study into a theoretically brilliant essay. And in my opinion, her synthesis of methods of iconology and visual anthropology is something art history, so divided amongst different national and methodological camps, has always lacked. Thus, I am looking forward to working with her during my research stay in Leuven planned for 2023.

HR: The present situation must be extremely challenging for you: You are now a fellow at the Masaryk University in Brno and at the same time you are teaching at the University in Kyiv. What projects are you focusing on currently?

SD: Challenge is always about personal growth. So, I try to get the best out of the situation, which is in every other respect dramatic. I have a lot of plans for my research. The first thing I would like to write about is the decolonization of Ukrainian art history. For far too long, Ukraine has been perceived as a part of the 'Russian world' and its scholarship, thus, remained behind the virtual 'Iron Curtain' of present-day Russia. As the war showed us, in order to preserve its independence Ukraine has to break free from the narratives which kept it close to the former metropole. These narratives unfortunately had been internalized for decades, if not ages. Therefore, the deconstruction of old imperial narratives and the strengthening of the new ones are of primary importance. Second, I would like to get back to my research about art and memory in the early modern Netherlands,

which was interrupted by the war. My interest lies, however, not in the development of collective national or religious memories, but a change in the practices of individual and family memory. The main question of my research is how urban classes dealt with political, religious, and personal challenges, what memories they produced, and how they were exposed to the public.

HR: Obviously, the war will influence our intellectual life in a deeper sense. How could scholarly approaches in the field of Art History contribute to the situation?

SD: I would say that we have to bring Ukrainian art history back to the European discourse. Now it is virtually absent from the map of the discipline. Even the projects or monographs which deal with Central and Eastern European historiography omit Ukrainian scholarship. Now we have an opportunity to make it visible and leave the notion of ‘two Europes’ in the past. At least in everything related to science. Also, it might be also an opportunity to reconsider the centre-periphery dichotomy of European art historiography, which makes Central and Eastern art look belated and derivative.

HR: What are your plans and wishes for the future?

SD: Of course, my biggest wish now is the victory of Ukraine. I’m not saying ‘peace’, because peace without our victory won’t last long. I would like to finally see Ukraine joining the European community as an equal, respected for its indestructible love of freedom. Now, when everyone can see that Ukraine is far from being Russia’s natural ally, I think the integration into the European Union will be possible. And, of course, I have a very simple dream about going on vacations with my now dispersed family. The war makes dreaming really challenging, because you live in the moment and the next day is a total mystery.

HR: What’s your favourite science quote?

SD: I won’t be original here! Aby Warburg’s ‘Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail’ still strikes a chord with me. It’s easy to lose oneself in general considerations, but the attention to detail will always bring us closer to the way of thinking of people who created the artworks we admire and study.

HR: Dear Mrs. Demchuk, thank you very much for the conversation!



Selected bibliography

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5. Stefaniia Demchuk, The Spanish Fury in the Frans Hogenberg’s Engravings (1535–1590): “Wandering” Images of the Eighty Years War, in: *Vox medii aevi*, Vol. 3 (2018), p. 3 – 28.

1 We decided not to use metaphors like the “Fall of the Iron Curtain”, or the “Fall of the Berlin Wall”, because it seems too focused on one date and on a western point of view. The term “Big Thaw” imagines a more open and active natural process. It is borrowed from the climate debate and has already been used by James M. Markham in this sense: James M. Markham, *The Big Thaw: The Idea That Democracy Pays Helps Reshape East-West Ties* (NY Times 25.09.1988, Section 4, p.1).