

**VISUAL NARRATIVES OF RESISTENCE : GRAPHIC ART AS A FORM OF PROTEST IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR**

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**Цитування:**

Греков О. Війни наративи спротиву : графіка як форма протесту митця в реаліях російсько-української війни. *Українська культура: минуле, сучасне, шляхи розвитку*. 2026. № 52. С. 127–132. <https://doi.org/10.35619/ucpmk.52.1129>

The russo-Ukrainian war following the full-scale invasion in 2022, has fundamentally reshaped Ukraine's cultural landscape and catalyzed an intense evolution of artistic expression. This article examines Ukrainian graphic art as a potent medium of protest and cultural resistance. Due to its inherent mobility and flexibility, graphic art has emerged as a primary tool for documenting traumatic experiences, exploring national identity, and reclaiming historical memory in the face of aggression.

The research analyzes various visual narratives of resistance through several thematic lenses: the reinterpretation of historical paradigms to counter imperial propaganda, the motif of the search for lost homes and reclaiming identity among displaced Ukrainians, and archiving trauma, which serves as an act of defiance. By exploring the works of artists P. Makov, M. Vaisberh, N. Kadan, M. Polovinko, and more, the author highlights how contemporary graphics bridge the gap between tradition and modern visual codes. Furthermore, the study addresses the philosophical tension between universal pacifism and the pursuit of a just peace, arguing that art grounded in truth becomes a vital force in the struggle for justice. The article demonstrates that the Ukrainian graphic art archives reality and actively forges new symbols, becoming a crucial frontier in the defense of cultural resilience and the nation's future.

*Key words:* Ukrainian art, graphic art, protest, russo-Ukrainian war, cultural resistance, national identity, art and politics.

*Problem statement.* In the face of contemporary existential challenges, the transformation of Ukraine's cultural landscape has assumed an accelerated pace, reflecting the definitive consolidation of the Ukrainian political nation. Graphic art, as the most mobile and reflexive medium of visual expression, has emerged as a pivotal tool for articulating a renewed national visual code. Utilizing a specific arsenal of artistic techniques, contemporary artists do not merely retransmit prevailing social sentiments but act as active agents of meaning-making, modeling new ideological and aesthetic paradigms.

The rapid proliferation of novel visual forms, which are arising at the intersection of classical techniques and digital technologies, currently outpaces their theoretical comprehension, resulting in a conceptual lacuna within art historical classification. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a rigorous attribution of contemporary narratives and the development of a cluster of artistic trends. The systematisation of both emerging and reinterpreted traditional practices will facilitate the categorization of the current output of Ukrainian graphic artists while identifying developmental vectors for domestic art within the broader context of the pan-European cultural discourse.

*The methodological* framework of the research is based on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, which allows for the examination of graphic art during the Russo-Ukrainian War as an aesthetic object and as an active instrument of sociocultural resistance. At the core of the study is the historical-typological method, employed to identify the continuity between contemporary artistic strategies and historical paradigms of Ukrainian defiance in an anti-colonial discourse. Semiotic analysis and the method of iconological interpretation are utilized to study the new visual codes and symbols integrated into artists' works, though to reveal the underlying meanings behind the transformation of classical imagery and sacred iconography under the conditions of martial law.

The comparative analysis facilitates a juxtaposition of traditional graphic techniques with innovative practices necessitated by extreme living conditions, while the formal-stylistic analysis aids in investigating the nuances of graphic language as a means of archiving collective trauma and constructing a visual archive of the war. Attention is paid to the axiological approach, which serves as the foundation for analyzing the ethical dimension of the works, especially within the context of the philosophical debate between universal pacifism and the pursuit of a just peace. This synthesis of methods ensures a holistic understanding of graphic art as a mobile medium that document reality and acts as a proactive force in the process of reinterpreting national identity.

*Literature review.* The theoretical foundation for the study is formed at the intersection of art historical analysis, philosophical reflection, and documentary studies of contemporary wartime experience.

General trends in the transformation of culture under martial law are highlighted in the works of N. Bondarenko, who identifies three incarnations of Ukrainian art during this period, as well as in studies by O. Mosendz and colleagues, which focus on the problems and prospects of cultural development in the realities of war. The existential and aesthetic reimagining of war as a traumatic experience is revealed in the works of K. Shevchuk, while M. Polyakova provides a detailed analysis of Ukrainian artistic reflections specifically within the chronological boundaries of 2022-2023.

The outside view on Ukrainian graphic art is the main theme of M. El Mesallamy and R. Housny's article, where the Ukrainian experience serves as a model for studying the impact of war on the strategies of graphic artists. Issues regarding the national context and the identification of Ukrainian art at the turn of the century are raised by O. Kashshay, while the theoretical aspects of relativism as a methodology for contemporary practices are explored by O. Holub.

The main body is composed of various interviews of practicing artists. Of particular importance for understanding axiological contradictions are the reflections of K. Yakovlenko, who analyzes the dichotomy between pacifism and justice in contemporary Ukrainian society, as well as the classic works of S. Sontag regarding the visual perception of war. Collectively, these sources allow for the examination of Ukrainian graphics as a complex system of trauma archiving, where the artist's personal reflection merges with the collective memory of the struggle for the future and resistance.

*Presentation of the main material. Historical paradigms of Ukrainian resistance.* The use of historical perspectives has been an essential tool in artists' narratives to counter Russian propaganda's aggressive attempts to distort national memory as well as global perceptions of Ukraine. Against the backdrop of a new stage in the formation of Ukraine's political nation, artists draw upon both heroic past and traumatic experiences, resuscitating images that became symbols of resistance. Historical events and figures inspire contemporary creators but also serve as powerful tools in constructing an anti-colonial discourse, countering the enemy's imperial ambitions with a distinct national identity.

In the context of forced migration caused by Russian aggression, artist M. Vaisberh turns to graphic art, as seen in his series 'Road Diary'. As the artist notes, while observing works by European masters in museums, he «sought echoes of Ukraine» (Suspil'ne Kul'tura 2024), thus creating a dialogue. This approach, combining traditional redrawing practices with contemporary wartime experience, can be viewed as a form of involuntary artistic residency. Vaisberh reinterprets classical imagery through the prism of trauma, where landscapes of old masters acquire new meaning considering Ukrainian cities' destruction, and dramatic genre paintings almost photographically reproduce current events. Such artistic strategy aims to document individual displacement, simultaneously bridging Ukrainian culture and European artistic tradition, emphasizing their historical cognition.

A similar approach is employed by N. Kravtsov. Echoing E. Delacroix's masterpiece 'Liberty Leading the People', he presents a striking example of artistic appropriation in the context of Ukrainian resistance. A marker-on-paper sketch, which became the basis for a Parisian mural, performs a semiotic substitution of key compositional elements, the French tricolour yields to the Ukrainian flag, while at the feet of the allegorical Liberty, Kravtsov depicts a caricatured Russian bear. Preserving the original's ideological core - devotion to ideals of freedom and equality, now resonating anew in the Russo-Ukrainian War, the artist inscribes Ukrainian resistance into Europe's tradition of struggle for freedom. This transformation of a classical motif becomes an effective tool of visual communication, merging international cultural memory with current geopolitical realities.

K. Zorkin's works explore symbolic resistance to colonial presence. Exposing the violent dynamics of Russification in public life as part of a hostile drive to homogenize a subjugated people. His art intertwines the grim irony of cities that, since Ukraine's 2015 decommunization laws, have been painfully shedding markers of the Russian world with the biographies of repressed Ukrainian artists of so-called 'Executed Renaissance', crafting a multilayered narrative of historical trauma. The artist employs contrasting compositional solutions, visually echoing the recurring need for decolonization and emphasizing tensions between past and present. Zorkin's works highlight forced assimilation while serving as a means to restore historical memory. In his series 'Motanka', D. Krishovs'kyi depicts his subjects in traditional Ukrainian garments situated within the context of the ongoing war events, creating a stark visual contrast between past and present. These images, clad in folk costumes, emerge not merely as symbols of cultural identity but as reminders of historical trauma. Visually, they resonate with archival photographs from the Holodomor - the genocide perpetrated by the Soviet totalitarian regime. This artistic juxtaposition underscores the cyclical nature of violence aimed at the physical and cultural erasure of Ukrainians. Through these images, Krishovs'kyi foregrounds the discourse of enemy aggression, demonstrating how tactics of identity obliteration persist in Russia's contemporary rapacious military strategy.

A compelling example of symbolic continuity manifests in the appliance of Orthodox Christian iconography as an embedded narrative of mercy and sacrifice. However, as K. Yakovlenko notes, – «Contemporary Ukrainian art features many crosses, but this does not mean these works glorify Orthodox or Catholic traditions. The crosses are portraits of people who were among us just yesterday» (Yakovlenko 2023). M. Skop, the son of an iconographer, innovatively reworks sacred imagery in his art, merging classical iconographic techniques with modern themes of war and resistance. This reinterpretation engages a visual paradigm where religious canon becomes a vessel for the urgent narrative of Ukraine's national struggle. This approach expands the semantic boundaries of icon painting while imbuing it with new sociopolitical weight as a manifesto of Ukrainian wartime resistance.

These examples illustrate how artists actively employ historical contexts to frame their protest narratives in wartime art. *Search: narratives of lost home and identity reclamation*. In the graphic art of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the motif of search has evolved from an individual experience into a collective artistic narrative reflecting society's traumatic ordeal. While in 2014, the search for a lost home was primarily a localized phenomenon related to Crimea's annexation and occupation of certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, after February 24, 2022, it became universal, overcoming all of Ukraine. Artists displaced or living in constant uncertainty reinterpret this experience through visual imagery, where the pursuit for physical shelter intertwines with existential self-searching in a new reality.

Etchings by P. Makov, who encountered news of war far from his hometown Kharkiv, exemplify an artistic exploration of lost urban identity. His installation artwork 'The Fountain of Exhaustion. High Water', presented at the 2022 Venice Biennale, which was mirrored on paper, lays bare the absurdity of a city's deconstruction as a social and cultural organism. Revisiting the fountain motif first explored in 1994, Makov reinvents his narrative, emphasizing grim indifference as a symbol of exhaustion not only of infrastructure but also of the human psyche. Yet, in his graphic works, the artist does not merely document destruction but constructs an alternative reality where Kharkiv persists as a site of memory, filled with symbols of resilience.

For V. Tkachenko, who lost his native Mariupol to Russian occupation forces, the search takes the form of reconstruction of personal and collective memory. Drawing on fragmented recollections and family archives, the artist rebuilds the lost city, embracing such mundane details as streets, courtyards, and interiors. This is neither nostalgia in the classical sense nor an act of defiance against deliberate cultural erasure. Tkachenko literally reassembles Mariupol from fragments, transforming each artwork into a stand against cultural genocide.

D. Chechushkova's series 'A Guide Before Confession' explores another facet of search – reintegration as a path to rebirth. The artist, who lost her home and social ties, redefines her identity through relentless experimentation with techniques and materials. Her intentionally fragmented, seemingly unfinished graphics become a manifesto of eternal return, a process in which the search for new forms of expression mirrors the search for oneself amid total instability.

O. Dzhurayeva's woodcuts document the possibilities of rebuilding war-torn cities via physical record of acts of gathering and preserving what was lost. Using soil collected from missile strike sites as her medium, her works acquire unique patterns, each telling its own story.

Escape from reality becomes another important narrative in the artistic search during wartime. A vivid example is Y. Bolsa's series, 'Ivanova L.K. worker's notebook', created while absconding in a bomb shelter. Using abstract forms and surreal imagery, the artist constructs an alternative space where the reality of war temporarily gives way to the world of imagination. Whimsical images, inspired by the surrounding horrors and uncertainty of the outside world, become a visual equivalent of psychological defence, kind of an attempt to find peace amidst quotidian wartime chaos. This practice helped the artist to maintain personal resilience by opening new dimensions in the studies of traumatic experience.

These examples illustrate the evolution of the search motif in resistance narratives. From concrete loss of physical homes to abstract fragmentation of identity and memory, artists articulate their protest through graphic art. What unites them is the transformation of personal trauma into a universal communal code. Together, they forge a new artistic paradigm where search ceases to be a passive reaction to loss and becomes an active strategy for Ukrainian culture's survival. *The archive of trauma and the act of resistance*. Ukrainian graphic artists reinterpret the function of documentary art, transforming it from a passive chronicle of events into an active tool for processing collective trauma. Moving beyond traditional illustration, they experiment with techniques that visualize the rupture between pre-war normality and wartime reality. Such works do not merely archive events but create new modes of perception, offering viewers emotional and intellectual access to experiences that underscore the power of resistance. A key feature of these works is their communicative potential. Visual narratives amplify the shared experiences in which individual artists' stories merge with collective consciousness. In the graphic series 'Double Exposure', I. Levi overlays

documentary war footage, viewed through her smartphone screen, onto idyllic Carpathian landscapes seen through bus windows. This technique creates a duality effect, accentuating the contradictions of presence. Such works function as artistic commentary and a study of media's role in shaping traumatic memory.

Of particular interest are works that combine physical and symbolic resistance. The art of M. Polovinko, tragically killed in action on April 5, 2025, embodies resistance to death itself and the war's total devastation. Using her own blood as a medium, the artist transforms creation into a symbolic act of physical and spiritual survival. Each drawing serves as a testament to existence amid chaos, transcending traditional aesthetics. Every drop of blood on paper metaphorizes sacrifices made in the fight for freedom.

With a ballpoint pen, Y. Korshunov documents the stories of ordinary soldiers – comrades he met in combat training camp. Each portrait is a unique account of individuals whose lives were upended by war. Through this expressive method, the artist highlights the resistance of ordinary people amid the horrors of war, emphasizing the social universality of trauma. T. Kovach's etchings document the artist's exploration of Kyiv's urban environment. His works capture the transformation undergone by disparate, often chaotic fortification structures that serve not only as physical and symbolic protection but also as an obstacle for enemy forces, thus for residents of the bustling metropolis itself. In Kovach's works, the barricades are persistently overgrown with weeds, serving as a visible indicator of the city's and its inhabitants' ongoing motion despite the active phase of lingering warfare.

The late eighteen-year-old artist V. Kozhushko, whose works were created under relentless shelling in Kharkiv, left behind a visual manifesto of resilience. Her graphics transformed personal protest into a symbol of cultural revival. Illustrations for contemporary poets' works exemplify conscious resistance to the city's Russified narratives. Thus, Ukrainian graphic art's resistance narratives do not merely archive trauma but actively construct its interpretations, blending documentation with metaphor. They become instruments of cultural memory, resisting simplified perceptions of war and proving that art can remain a vanguard of resistance even when its creators can no longer speak.

*Pacifism or justice.* Amid prevailing patriotic discourse advocating unwavering resistance, Ukrainian graphic art also presents an alternative narrative rooted in pacifism and the pursuit of peace. However, in a society confronting daily consequences of Russian aggression, such a position is often met with criticism, particularly when they involve humanizing the enemy or seeking compromise.

As Yakovlenko notes, «Peace does not mean laying down one's arms - peace demands justice» (Yakovlenko 2023). This statement encapsulates the central tension in debates about pacifism during war. Can peace exist without holding the aggressor accountable and restoring historical truth? In Ukrainian graphic art's protest narratives, this dilemma manifests in two opposing approaches.

On one hand, some artists adopt universalist rhetoric, emphasizing shared human suffering regardless of conflict sides. Such works often employ abstract symbols of destruction, deindividuated victim imagery, or metaphors of cyclical violence. This approach risks reducing the Russo-Ukrainian War's specificity to generalized humanist platitudes, ignoring its historical roots.

On the other hand, artists insist on clear moral demarcation, where peace is achievable only through the aggressor's punishment and Ukraine's territorial integrity. In their works, pacifism is not synonymous with surrender but is reimagined as an active struggle for existence, with artistic practice as a form of resistance.

This contradiction reflects a broader philosophical conflict between universal human values and historical justice. While classical pacifism calls for unconditional nonviolence, in a hybrid war encompassing armed clashes with cultural annihilation, such a stance may be perceived as moral relativism.

N. Kadan's graphic works address the international community with minimalist pencil-drawn aesthetics to depict the devastation of war. His laconic style visualizes traumatic experience, transforming individual suffering into a universal anti-war manifesto. Notably, his artistic expression serves a dual function - as personal protest and as participation in a global dialogue for peace. Unlike abstract pacifism, Kadan avoids moral relativism, maintaining a clear stance on the necessity of just peace. Free of overt propaganda, his works remain politically potent, demonstrating that art can simultaneously advocate pacifism and fight for truth.

Thus, Ukrainian wartime art illustrates that the pursuit of peace cannot exist outside justice. Pacifism devoid of accountability risks becoming a tool of manipulation, whereas art grounded in truth and justice becomes a reason for fighting for genuine peace.

*Conclusion.* The visual narratives of resistance in Ukrainian graphic art amid the Russo-Ukrainian War employ tools of documentation, defiance, and national identity formation without shying from pacifist ideas. This study demonstrates that through historical paradigms, motifs of search and the dialogue between pacifism and justice, artists create powerful works that archive trauma, consolidate society, and defend

cultural memory. Graphic art has proven to be not merely a reaction to war but an active force in its interpretation, merging artistic expression with ideological stance. Artists do not simply record reality but forge new symbols of protest, becoming a crucial front in the struggle for Ukraine's future and that of the civilized world.

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**ВІЗУАЛЬНІ НАРАТИВИ СПРОТИВУ : ГРАФІКА ЯК ФОРМА ПРОТЕСТУ МИТЦЯ  
В РЕАЛІЯХ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ**

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Стаття присвячена дослідженню трансформації наративів в українському графічному мистецтві як дієвому інструменту культурного спротиву в умовах повномасштабного вторгнення російської федерації в Україну. Констатується використання чотирьох панівних кластерів, що їх використовують митці в мові своєї художньої експресії. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена радикальними змінами в культурному ландшафті країни, що призводять до формування політичної нації. Розвиток нових візуальних форм, що виникли на перетині сталих технічних засобів і інноваційних технологічних рішень випереджає теоретичне опрацювання і осмислення цього напрямку, що створює потребу в класифікації та систематизації задля подальшого вивчення. У дослідженні використано комплексний міждисциплінарний підхід. Автор використовує історико-типологічний метод для виявлення зв'язків між творами, семіотичний та іконологічний метод задля вивчення нових і перегляд трансформації сталого символізму, порівняльний та формально-стилістичний метод для виявлення нюансів художньої мови як засобу архівації, а також аксіологічний метод в дослідженні дискусії в філософській площині екзистенційних питань пацифізму і справедливості. *Наукова новизна* полягає у теоретичному осмисленні та систематизації наративів в у графіці даного періоду. Автор стверджує появу нових підходів у документації травматичного досвіду і актуальності графічного мистецтва як сучасної форми протесту, водночас відкриваючи дискусію в царині аксіологічної дихотомії і морального релятивізму. *Практичне значення даного дослідження* характеризується подальшим розвитком систематичного дослідження графіки даного періоду, створення архівів і тематичних експозицій і використання в ширших дослідженнях соціокультурного спрямування.

*Ключові слова:* українське мистецтво, графічне мистецтво, протест, російсько-українська війна, культурний спротив, національна ідентичність, мистецтво і політика.

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