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UKRAINIAN PATRONAGE DURING THE WAR: THE PHENOMENON OF STELLA BENIAMINOVA

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Abstract. The purpose of the article is to analyse the phenomenon of contemporary Ukrainian patronage of arts through the experience of the collector and patron Stella Benyaminova. It is emphasized that in the contemporary cultural and artistic discourse there is a lack of systematic research on this issue in the context of contemporary realities which determines the importance of the presented analysis. The relevance of the article is based on an attempt to present the experience of a Ukrainian patron of art within the framework of global practice and to identify the specific principles and approaches underpinning her philanthropic activity in contemporary Ukraine. The practical significance of the presented analysis lies in the possibility of using this article in the context of popularizing Ukrainian culture and the experience of patronage of arts activity both in Ukraine and abroad.
Keywords: patronage, patron, collector, sponsorship, culture, art, contemporary Ukrainian art.

MÉCÉNAT ARTISTIQUE UKRAINIEN PENDANT LA GUERRE : LE PHÉNOMÈNE STELLA BENYAMINOVA

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Résumé. L'objectif de l'article est d'analyser le phénomène du mécénat artistique ukrainien contemporain à partir de l'expérience de la collectionneuse et mécène Stella Benyaminova. Il est souligné que, dans le discours culturel et artistique actuel, les recherches systématiques sur cette problématique demeurent insuffisantes au regard des réalités contemporaines, ce qui fonde la pertinence de l'analyse proposée. La présente étude se distingue par la volonté de situer l'expérience d'une mécène ukrainienne dans le cadre des pratiques internationales, ainsi que par l'identification de principes et d'approches spécifiques qui structurent son action de mécénat dans le contexte de l'Ukraine contemporaine. L'intérêt pratique de cette analyse réside dans la possibilité d'utiliser l'article pour contribuer à la valorisation de la culture ukrainienne et à la diffusion de l'expérience du mécénat artistique, tant en Ukraine qu'à l'étranger.

Mots-clés: mécénat artistique, mécène, collectionneur, sponsoring, culture, art, art ukrainien contemporain.

Introduction

Within contemporary cultural studies, the revival of patronage in present-day Ukraine has become an exceptionally relevant and significant topic in view of the war and the urgent need for enhanced support of the cultural and artistic sector from business elites. However, this subject remains insufficiently explored. Scholarly attention to patronage, where it exists, has predominantly focused on historical periods rather than current developments, which determines the novelty of the approach proposed in this article.

Background. For instance, researcher I. Yu. Suvortseva, in her dissertation, investigates the traditions of Ukrainian patronage in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. S. I. Shcherbyna and V. Kovalynskyi examine the specific features of the patronage activities of the Tereshchenko family, while N. A. Kolosova focuses on the historical aspects and sociocultural prerequisites of the development of charity and patronage in Ukraine. M. Ometsinska attempts to analyse the current state of research on the development of patronage and philanthropy and, together with other scholars, lays the groundwork for a deeper consideration of this issue within contemporary Ukrainian historical and cultural studies.

Methods. The study employs methods of comparative analysis and synthesis, as well as historical-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches. These methods make it possible to articulate the author's perspective on the significance of Stella Beniaminova's patronage in preserving, revitalising, and promoting the culture of contemporary Ukraine.

Results

Paradoxically, even after more than thirty years of independence, it is difficult to claim that patronage is well developed in contemporary Ukraine. Even in the pre-war period, when circumstances were not as critical as they are now, most cases involved either sponsorship of cultural and artistic initiatives and projects, or the establishment of private institutions designed to enhance the owner's public image—functioning as a form of advertising and a means of gaining both material and non-material "dividends" that elevate social status. Yet, as Stella Beniaminova aptly noted in one of her interviews, "A patron is someone who gives and expects nothing in return" (Leontieva S., 2024). This statement captures the core distinction between patronage and other forms of activity grounded in the expectation of profit from one's investments.

Turning to the origin and etymology of the term, it is worth recalling Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, who "was born approximately in 74–64 BCE, and his name entered history as a protector of art and science. Gaius Cilnius Maecenas was a confidant of Augustus Octavian: he dealt with state affairs while holding no official position at the imperial court. Maecenas conversed with Augustus with ease, enjoyed full freedom, and could express his own views without fear of the emperor's anger. He loved the arts and patronized poets such as Horace, Propertius, and Virgil" (Dzhej Dzhi, 2025). Traditions of patronage were also widespread in Ancient Greece, where "patronage was even regulated by law: a wealth tax was paid by all affluent families of Athens, Olympia, and other poleis to support the organization of athletic games and festive celebrations. There were no attempts to evade payment, because contributing to the development of public space was regarded as a civic honor, and the names of donors were engraved on granite slabs" (Poljakov M., 2022).

Later, patronage in Europe reached its peak during the Renaissance, largely thanks to the Medici family, without whom the cultural and artistic achievements of that era are difficult to imagine. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici contributed to a socially significant project – the creation of the bronze doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni – and, after strengthening his financial position, acted as a patron of construction works for the reconstruction of the Church of San Lorenzo, inviting Filippo Brunelleschi. After Giovanni's death, the family tradition was continued by Cosimo de' Medici, under whom Florence became a true Renaissance city. He personally invested enormous funds in Florence's development—amounts comparable to the assets of approximately six Florentine banks. He supported numerous artists of his time, financing their needs and engaging them in projects aimed at the city's cultural advancement. In 1460, Cosimo founded the Platonic Academy led by the eminent Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino, aspiring to secure for Florence the status of a new Athens. This family tradition of patronage was then worthily continued by Cosimo's grandson,

Lorenzo the Magnificent, who likewise became a powerful patron of the arts, continuing urban development and providing financial support to many geniuses of the Renaissance, including Michelangelo.

As I. Yu. Surovceva, a researcher of the phenomenon of patronage in Ukraine in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notes, "whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the bulk of donations followed the line of pious deeds, in the nineteenth century wealthy people shifted the center of gravity of charity from religion to stimulating 'socially useful undertakings'" (Surovceva I. Yu., 2006).

During this period, patronage began to spread actively among Ukrainian entrepreneurs for whom socially beneficial activity became a necessary component of life and a conscious choice. The Tereshchenko, Khanenko, Brodsky families, along with many other representatives of the industrial elite of the time, created examples of patronage whose outcomes remain accessible today.

Unfortunately, this chain of Ukrainian patronage was brutally interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution and the long period of Soviet rule, when even the use of the term was undesirable and, at times, dangerous.

Ukraine's independence created new opportunities for reviving this tradition; however, the formation of a new entrepreneurial class took time. Gradually, entrepreneurial consciousness began to focus not only on business survival amid the predatory competition of the 1990s and profit-making, but also on social usefulness. Such individuals were few. Post-Soviet realities strongly shaped this situation. A substantial share of super-profits and property was acquired through non-transparent mechanisms, facilitated by the well-known phenomenon of "cronyism," which reduced the likelihood of an altruistic strategy aimed at supporting cultural flourishing. If the patronage phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted from a multi-stage transformation of entrepreneurial consciousness – when business leaders, through their own reflections and worldview, arrived at the perceived necessity of giving back to society and improving it through support of culture – then a mechanical leap from collective property to private ownership could not immediately produce comparable transformations. A long path had to be traversed before figures such as Stella Beniaminova could emerge as landmarks and examples for others.

In the 2000s, beginning with private collecting, Stella – trained as a dentist and founder of her own clinic – underwent a long process of shaping her worldview and convictions that enabled her to become a genuine patron who devotes money, effort, energy, and, in essence, her life to supporting Ukrainian art. Assyrian by origin, maintaining ties with her ethnic roots, she remains Ukrainian in spirit. This is not a rhetorical figure; it is confirmed through action. Biblical wisdom holds that faith

without works is dead. This can be regarded as a guiding principle of Stella Beniaminova's life: with faith in the revival of Ukrainian culture, she undertakes real deeds, embodying her aspirations and spiritual principles in practice.

As noted above, having approached art through collecting, the future patron gradually discovered the world of contemporary Ukrainian artists. A truly fateful encounter that transformed her life and laid the foundations of conscious patronage was her meeting with artist Oleksandr Zhivotkov. According to Stella, at that time she was not yet fully prepared to perceive the work of this profoundly deep master. When she asked where color was in his works – since, in her view, all artists, like Gauguin, seek their color – Zhivotkov replied that he did not need color because he was not Gauguin; he was seeking Light. This became the starting point of a fundamental transformation of Stella's consciousness, a direction she has continued to pursue ever since.

A comparable example is Eusebi Güell who, having met Antoni Gaudí quite by chance (yet chance, as it is often said, does not exist), became his patron and principal commissioner, stating that he had found his Michelangelo. In the same way, Stella Beniaminova found her artist – Oleksandr Zhivotkov – becoming his patron and benefactor and providing, through sustained financial support, full creative freedom. Her conviction is both clear and justified: a genius should not have to think about earning money, selling artworks, or producing commissioned pieces. An artist should simply create, freely implementing ideas. If Michelangelo once came under the protection of the Medici and Gaudí under the patronage of Güell, then fate granted Zhivotkov a meeting with Stella Beniaminova, who became a powerful "mediator" through whom not only Ukraine but also the wider world gradually discovers the depth of his art.

The patron also supports one of the most renowned representatives of the Ukrainian Sixtiers, Oleksandr Dubovyk. Artists of this circle belonged to so-called "unofficial" art that resisted Soviet ideological engagement and sought to affirm creative freedom. Stella Beniaminova's team currently works to preserve and study this artist's heritage, regularly publishing his art books and reflections and organizing exhibition projects that reveal the dynamics of his creative trajectory.

As the founder of the Stedley Art Foundation, established in 2011, she continues to organize major art projects both in Ukraine and internationally. Even the war has not halted this momentum. In 2023, Stella opened a new artistic space – Open Door Residence – designed to revive the tradition of artistic and intellectual hubs that existed in the past and must become, in the present, platforms for creative interaction among artists, musicians, poets, and philosophers – representatives of Ukraine's contemporary cultural elite. Despite the war, she achieved what seems extraordinary: she continued investing in renovation and development of a new space, despite active hostilities and the threat of

air strikes. Not thanks to, but in spite of, circumstances, she created a locus of Hope where anyone can immerse themselves in an atmosphere of genuine art, discovering links between Trypillian artifacts and works by Oleksandr Zhivotkov, Oleksandr Sukholit, Kostiantyn Zorkin, and other contemporary Ukrainian artists. The residency confronts every visitor with an existential question: *Quo vadis? Where are you going? And why?*

Stella's purpose differs radically from the aims of many contemporary sponsors who seek to draw attention either to themselves or to their businesses, using support for artists as advertising. Unlike such intentions, Beniaminova stands on the other side of utility, pragmatic interests, and the desire to profit from her actions. Her aspiration is different: to revive the traditions of patronage and offer an example to others, because change begins with the actions of one individual who seeks to transform the world – and to transform it for the better.

Other distinctions are also evident. Stella has never oriented herself toward brands or fashionable art trends that are often artificially constructed and aimed at capitalizing investments in artworks expected to appreciate in value. She chooses different points of departure, focusing only on what resonates with her inner world, perception, and understanding. She selects "her" authors – who may be far from popular or expensive in the current market. She prefers the less fashionable but unique, profound, and unmanufactured to highly promoted repetitions of commercially successful works for which some collectors and gallerists are willing to pay substantial sums.

Stella favors works capable of producing catharsis – a state that is hardly "fashionable" today, when social criticality, the apotheosis of the ugly, and the deconstruction of beauty often dominate contemporary art. Yet she does not fear being unpopular, repeatedly returning to the need to revive spirituality, beauty, goodness – values without which ancient Greek existence was inconceivable, and without which it is difficult to speak of a return to humanity, the value of human life, and love for the other. The loss of these guiding values in both art and real life becomes a cause of many horrific phenomena, including wars and other conflicts, which – tragically – still persist in the life of contemporary society.

Stella Beniaminova's collection demonstrates cultural continuity, preserving – from antiquity to the present – the most important symbolic codes that remain connected to intangible, spiritual, and sacred meanings, reminding the individual of other dimensions of existence. Symbols depicted on Trypillian ceramics enter into dialogue with the equally symbolic works of Zhivotkov, Sukholit, and Zorkin, reflecting in artifacts of Ukrainian Baroque and in the avant-garde experiments of the Sixtiers.

Open Door Residence offers an environment for interdisciplinary dialogue within which a new culture of interdisciplinary communication can emerge. In wartime, such dialogue can play a

therapeutic role, enabling people – through intellectual exchange – to work through the consequences of post-traumatic syndromes; at the same time, it can generate new views, visions, and strategies for further cultural development. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tradition of so-called "salons," where like-minded people gathered, was highly popular. Stella Beniaminova seems to challenge time itself, demonstrating that even under conditions of a long, bloody, protracted war, such practice remains possible. She organizes a genuine cultural resistance through which Ukrainians and the world see that life continues – and that truth, beauty, and goodness continue to exist within it. According to the patron, it is deeply encouraging that young people are actively drawn to such initiatives. This makes it possible to show the younger generation examples of contemporary art intended to awaken the best aesthetic feelings and restore spirituality, however pathos-laden such wording may sound. Paradoxically, words such as beauty, goodness, truth today often provoke sarcastic smiles and associations with retrograde thinking. Stella does not fear such labels and continues on her path, offering an example to others who share her principles and worldview. Here lies the strength of contemporary Ukrainian society: through self-organization and powerful private initiatives it becomes mature and self-sufficient, overcoming weakness and uncertainty, shaping an identity grounded not in temporary trends or blind imitation, but in a sense of what is one's own – authentic and hard-won.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis presented, it can be concluded that Stella Beniaminova's patronage aims not only to revive the traditions of Ukrainian patronage that were widespread in the pre-revolutionary period – at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries – but also to establish her own ethical norms for such activity. The absence of commercial and trend-driven engagement; orientation toward art that evokes catharsis and rests on deep co-presence and empathy; a personal approach to shaping a collection (focusing exclusively on artists and artworks that are spiritually close); and a distinctive model of organizing art-project activities – all of these reflect the core characteristics of Stella Beniaminova's patronage. She is a powerful and exceptional figure through whom hope persists for a genuine revival of Ukrainian culture.

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