

Protecting Cultural Memory and Identity During Wartime: Ukrainian Museum Professionals Work with Penn Cultural Heritage Center

PHILADELPHIA, November 15, 2023—Amid wartime destruction following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its museums, theaters, and other cultural institutions central to national history and identity have been looted, vandalized, or destroyed. Ukrainian cultural workers and heritage professionals are working in partnership with [Penn Cultural Heritage Center](#) (PennCHC) and other institutions across the United States to safeguard their country's cultural memory and identity from erasure.

From December 4 to 8, 2023, leaders from Ukrainian museums and heritage organizations will gather with experts from PennCHC at the Penn Museum to conduct a series of private convenings and discuss the role of museums during times of geopolitical conflict and devastation. Topics will include cultural rights and international law, Russian occupation and decolonization of nations such as Georgia and Ukraine, and the documentation of damage during the war.

"Our partnership with PennCHC is about mutual collaboration. It is of great value to me that we have been able to expand our capacity for cultural heritage during wartime and the opportunity to participate in this international heritage preservation community," says Vasyl Rozhko, co-founder and coordinator of the HeMo: Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab. In 2022, HeMo was established to document the crimes of Russian forces against heritage during the Russian-Ukrainian war for subsequent restoration, with support from PennCHC.

Rozhko is also the founder of Tustan Historical Cultural Preserve in Ukraine and the former Head of the Museum Department in the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine from 2015 to 2016.

"Together with PennCHC, we work towards caring for and protecting the heritage for future generations—not only after the war, but during times of hostilities," Rozhko explains.

The weeklong convention is co-sponsored by the [Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative](#) and the [Artistic Freedom Initiative](#), and will include other representatives from key U.S. cultural rights organizations. The [Georgia National Committee of the Blue Shield](#) (GNCBS) will also share its experience during Russian occupation. PennCHC has an ongoing collaboration with GNCBS to preserve cultural heritage in the nation of Georgia.

As part of their trip to Philadelphia, the Ukrainian visitors will tour historic attractions like the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and Independence National Park, as well as the 136-year-old Penn Museum, on Wednesday, December 6.

To invite public participation, PennCHC, together with Ukrainian museum professionals, will present a lecture and panel discussion, "[Cultural Rights, Heritage Destruction, and the Future of Ukraine](#)," on Thursday, December 7, 2023 at 5:30 pm at the Penn Museum and online. The talk will focus on how cultural workers in Ukraine and institutions in the U.S. can build a response network aimed at the preservation of Ukraine's culture for the future. It is pay-what-you-wish and open to all. Register in advance [here](#).

"The intentional destruction of cultural heritage may count as a crime under international law," says Dr. Brian I. Daniels, Director of Research and Programs at PennCHC, who has been working with Ukrainian colleagues since November 2021 to help protect at-risk workers, collections, and cultural heritage sites. "By documenting acts of cultural erasure, organizations like PennCHC can help hold violators accountable. The documentation also aids the recovery process for communities affected by these crimes."

"Museums and other cultural institutions serve as sites of cultural memory and encourage collective identity, along with community resilience," Dr. Daniels adds. "Museums across the U.S. can leverage their existing alliances with Ukrainian institutions and forge new ones to support our colleagues abroad in their work and their safety—to aid their efforts to safeguard their cultural heritage."

ABOUT THE PENN CULTURAL HERITAGE CENTER

Centering communities, [Penn Cultural Heritage Center](#) reframes the preservation of cultural heritage within a context of social, political, and economic development through field projects, research, engagement in public policy, and public programs that emphasize the centrality of community priorities for successful outcomes.

Founded in 2008, and directed by Richard M. Leventhal, PennCHC draws upon the expertise of scholars and the research collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, while collaborating with researchers across Penn and beyond whose work intersects with contemporary heritage issues.

PARTICIPANTS FROM PENNCHC

Richard M. Leventhal, Ph.D. Executive Director
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ABOUT THE PENN MUSEUM

The Penn Museum's mission is to be a center for inquiry and the ongoing exploration of humanity for our University of Pennsylvania, regional, national, and global communities, following ethical standards and practices. Through conducting research, stewarding collections, creating learning opportunities, sharing stories, and creating experiences that expand access to archaeology and anthropology, the Museum builds empathy and connections across diverse cultures.

The Penn Museum is open Tuesday-Sunday, 10:00 am-5:00 pm. It is open until 8:00 pm on first Wednesdays of the month through March. The Café is open Tuesday-Thursday, 9:00 am-3:00 pm and Friday and Saturday, 10:00 am-2:00 pm. For information, visit www.penn.museum, call 215.898.4000, or follow @PennMuseum on social media.