

**A MUSEUM FRAME OF ODESA LIFE
DURING THE FULL-SCALE INVASION**

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The article reflects on how, during Russia's full-scale invasion, Odesa has been rethinking its relationship with urban heritage and redefining the city's image—an image long reproduced within an imperial frame. The text emphasizes a double context: the city has been a target of sustained Russian propaganda for decades, yet in 2014 it stopped the so-called “Russian Spring,” which makes questions of self-identification especially acute. Writing from the position of a participant in cultural processes, the author stresses that under conditions of extreme ordeals the question “Who are we?” becomes a resource for survival, while museums function as infrastructure for producing and articulating meaning. After the evacuation of collections in 2022, Odesa's museums faced a choice: suspend operations or continue without permanent displays. The article outlines institutional responses—from interventions in public space (MoOMA project *Shoulder to Shoulder*) to turning emptied galleries into platforms for processing the experience of war (the *Languages of War* series at the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, tribute exhibitions to artists killed in the war, and Alevtina Kakhidze's solo project *Dad, I'm in Odesa!*). The author also describes local narrative formats for speaking about safeguarding heritage (the Bleschunov Museum's graphic novel), the Archaeological Museum's symbolic turn to Snake Island, the opening of the private genocide museum Territory of Memory, and cultural diplomacy through exhibitions in Kraków and Berlin that shape alternative frames for perceiving Odesa as a Ukrainian and European city. A second focus is decolonization: the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum's work with the Soviet legacy embedded in its collection; public tensions surrounding the transfer of dismantled monuments to Catherine II and Suvorov; and the UNESCO nomination file, which proposes an anti-imperial reading of Odesa's urban phenomenon (port-city development, multiculturalism, entrepreneurship, and democratic practices of coexistence). The article considers the business community initiative *Odesa Decolonization*, which seeks to shift the city's myth from a “criminal” trope to an “entrepreneurial” one. The conclusion argues that in wartime museums can remain community centers even without their collections on display, sustaining memory, resilience, and the construction of a future-oriented civic narrative.

Keywords: urban myth, museum, South of Ukraine.

Some cities have complicated heritage, and it is not immediately clear how to engage with it. Some cities are, by definition, perceived within a particular interpretative frame, regardless of whether it corresponds to reality. Some cities are shaped by powerful urban myths that may work both to their benefit and to their detriment. Odesa is just this kind of city. Located in the South of Ukraine, it is often perceived within the interpretative frame of imperial heritage, and that of a specific empire, although the borders of at least three empires reached the city at different times. It is at times striking how enduring the city's image is within Ukraine and beyond its borders, as it is often difficult to trace its origins. Therefore, it is all the more important to examine how Odesa has been transforming during the years of the Russia–Ukraine War, for it is precisely during the extremely trying periods that the question of who we are ceases to be merely a matter of curiosity or academic reflection. Instead, it becomes a matter of finding resources to resist war, a matter of survival. In this text, we offer a few reflections on the relationship between Odesa's inhabitants and their urban heritage throughout the Russia–Ukraine War. It is essential to recognize a few framing aspects, without which it is impossible to discuss these relationships meaningfully. In 2014, Odesa became a city that stopped the so-called Russian Spring in its tracks. Over the recent decades, Odesa specifically has become the target of Russian propaganda; Vladimir Putin has repeatedly mentioned it in his speeches, and no other city has been the target of such an amount of Russian propaganda of varying intensity. As the film scholar Ivan Kozlenko has calculated¹, between 2004 and 2022 alone, 17 films about Odesa were made in Russia, including 6 feature films and 11 television series. No other region of Ukraine—or Russia—has been the object of such persistent attention from the Russian television. At the same time, again, Odesa still managed to stop the “Russian Spring.” While discussing the city's internal transformative processes, we must keep in mind both facts as a framework for articulating meanings significant to the city here and now.

To understand the city's internal processes, just analyzing the developments that fit within the framework of “decolonization” will not suffice. However, these issues undoubtedly are, and should be, of high relevance to Odesa. For starters, we would like to acknowledge that this text is written from a subjective perspective: the author observes the developments from within, has a limited view of the situation, and lacks the objectivity of a detached analytical perspective on cultural transformation. At the same time, precisely in view of this subjectivity and embeddedness within ongoing processes, the text may serve as a valuable record of a situation as it unfolds. Imagining a more detached analysis of the city's development from the vantage point of a peaceful future (should such a future come to pass), this text may capture moments that will not develop into lasting trends, disappearing from collective memory, while others will become mainstream. In this sense, it is equally important to document both the moment and

1. «Одеський міський міф: наративи, структура, перспективи розвитку», *Odesa Decolonization*, 16 червня 2024, <https://www.odesadecolonization.org/post/одеський-міський-міф>.

the contexts of their formation. The focus of our analysis is the period of the Russia–Ukraine War beginning in 2022, which may be defined as the Russian Federation’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

ODESA’S MUSEUMS IN THE TIME OF WAR.

REFRAMING THE MEANING

In 2022, Odesa’s museums moved their collections to relatively safe locations. It was the moment of the greatest challenge and—paradoxically—the greatest opportunity. The institutions’ answers to the question, “Should we close up until the end of the war, or somehow do without our collections?” varied. The museums that had long lacked space and resources for non-core projects suddenly had vast exhibition spaces. At times, the shock of empty galleries compelled museum teams to search for new solutions.



Fig. 1. The second floor
of the Odesa National Fine
Arts Museum in 2022



Fig. 2. The Odesa National Fine Arts Museum in 2022

It was in this situation that Ukrainian museums—and specifically those in Odesa—found an answer to the question of what a museum truly is nowadays. Even unable to display their collections, they remained centers of gravity for communities, demonstrating that the primary function of the museum these days is not to exhibit treasures, but to create a space for public dialogue, the search for meaning, and—ultimately—social therapy.

In the spring of 2022, having safeguarded their collections one way or another, museum professionals posed a new question: What is next? Should museums attempt to “soothe” visitors by creating spaces detached from the war, or, conversely, provide an opportunity to engage with wartime artistic reflections? Or should they move “into the streets” and develop projects in public spaces?

In the middle of relocating to a new space at the time, the Museum of Odesa Modern Art (MoOMA) immediately went with the latter approach. Its new cultural center, slated to open in spring 2022, did not materialize for obvious reasons. During the first months of the full-scale invasion, representatives of the Muzeon experimental center, then part of MoOMA, became key actors within the cultural field. In the spring of 2022, Volodymyr Chehrynets and Valeriia Nasedkina organized the exhibition of Ukrainian war photography titled *Shoulder to Shoulder* across five locations in the city: the fence

of the State Archive of Odesa Oblast, the fence of the Odessa Sparkling Wine Company, the gazebo in the City Garden of Odesa, the space opposite the Odesa Quarantine's arcade in the Taras Shevchenko Park, and the Stroganov Bridge. A peculiar moment of social communication occurred when somebody cut one of the photographs, and the curators repaired it with a Band-Aid. Subsequently, they saw someone else had similarly "patched up" another photograph.

One of Ukraine's most compelling museum projects during the full-scale invasion period was probably born out of fear of empty spaces and a desire to reflect on the expression of Ukrainian contemporary art. Titled *Languages of War* and accommodated by the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, the series of exhibitions by contemporary Ukrainian artists was held in 2022–2023². It was the idea of Kyrylo Lipatov, then head of ONFAM's research department, and it was implemented through the collective efforts of the museum team³. The series included exhibitions by Ihor Hora, Vasyl Dmytryk, Dmytro Yevsieiev (Fig. 3), Volodymyr Semkiv (Figs. 4, 5), Kinder Album, Albina Yaloza, Kostiantyn Zorkin (Figs. 6, 7, and 8), Stas Zhalobniuk, Yevhenii Bal, Mykola Lukin, and Danylo Movchan (Figs. 9, 10).

Individual exhibitions from the *Languages of War* series were displayed at other museums across Ukraine. Some were conceived as paired statements, e.g., the exhibitions of Stas Zhalobnyuk and Kostiantyn Zorkin were positioned as responses by artists from cities with radically different experiences of war. In this article, we will not go into the artistic statements themselves or the project's successes and failures, but rather acknowledge the significance of the museum team's initiative in searching for an answer to the question: What is a museum in times of war?

ONFAM has consistently engaged with the theme of working through the wound of war, going beyond exhibitions to organizing public programs, artist talks, and similar events. Among the tribute exhibitions dedicated to creatives killed in the war, particular mention should be made of *Flowers Behind the Dumps* (Boris Eisenberg) and *Dali: I Will Take Back My Life* (Maksym Kryvtsov).

Among the projects presented at ONFAM was Alevtina Kakhidze's exhibition *Dad, I'm in Odesa!* (May 25, 2024, to February 28, 2025), which addressed decolonization and the Russia–Ukraine War, demonstrating, through the history of the artist's own family, the impact of empires on multiple generations of her kin over the past century, from the Soviet Union to the present-day Russia–Ukraine War. *Dad, I'm in Odesa!* was Alevtina Kakhidze's first solo exhibition in Odesa⁴. The project combines *All Good?*, a video piece co-authored with the artist Roman Khimei, and an installation created specifically for

2. Ю. Манукян, «Мови війни в ОФАМ: випалювальна мова травми», LB.ua, 23 квітня 2023, https://lb.ua/culture/2023/04/21/552578_movi_viyни_ofam_vipalyuvalna.html.

3. Ю. Манукян, Мови війни в ОФАМ: сакральне і профанне», LB.ua, 4 червня 2023, https://lb.ua/culture/2023/06/04/558439_movi_viyни_ofam_sakralne_i.html.

4. «Виставка Алевтини Кахідзе "Тату, Я в Одесі!"», Минуле / Майбутнє / Мистецтво, 13 травня 2024, <https://pastfutureart.org/dad-i-am-in-odesa/>.



Fig. 3. Dmytro Yevseiev, *Palimpsest (Languages of War)*, ONFAM



Fig. 4. The opening of Volodymyr Semkiv's exhibition at ONFAM;
In the photo are Volodymyr Semkiv and Pavlo Hudimov



Fig. 5. Volodymyr Semkiv's exhibition at ONFAM



Fig. 6. Kostiantyn Zorkin (*Languages of War*, ONFAM)

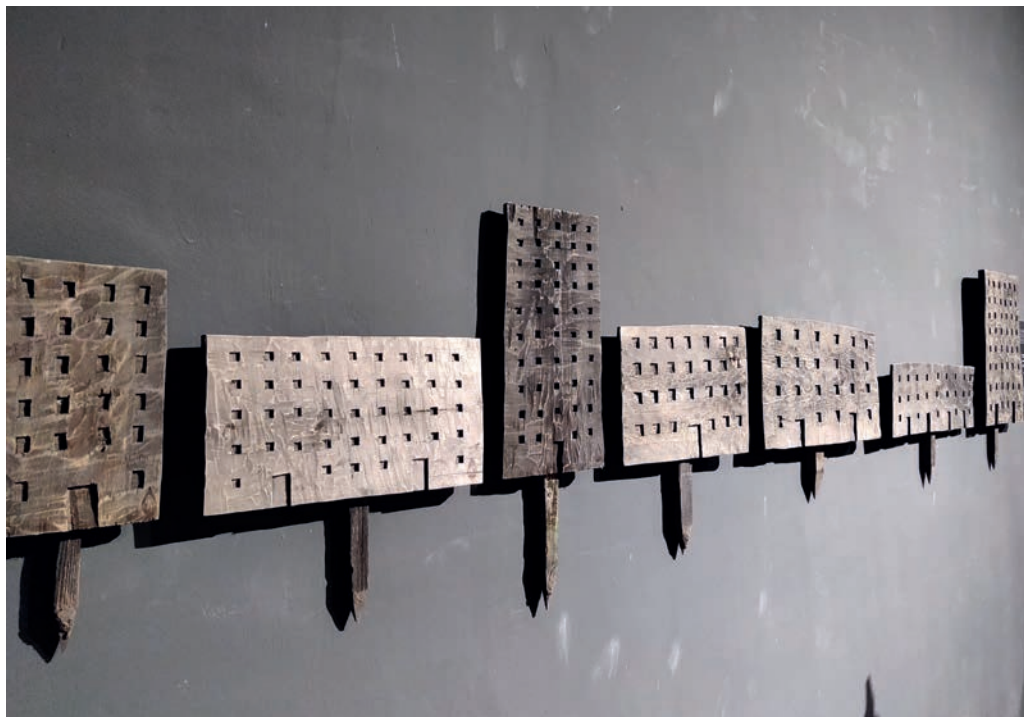


Fig. 7. Kostiantyn Zorkin's exhibition *Protective Layer* (*Languages of War*, ONFAM)



Fig. 8. Kostiantyn Zorkin (*Languages of War*, ONFAM)



Fig. 9. Danylo Movchan's exhibition
(*Languages of War*, ONFAM)



Fig. 10. Danylo Movchan (*Languages of War*, ONFAM)

the exhibition, which includes archival photographs, objects from the family collection, drawings, and herbaria. The exhibition marked the continuation of the collaborative work of artist Alevtina Kakhidze and curators Kateryna Semenyuk and Oksana Dovgoplova on the theme of decolonization. The video *All Good?* was the centerpiece of Ukraine's National Pavilion "From South to North" at the Malta Biennale 2024⁵. The project focused on the theme of working through the imperial past, a subject equally relevant to Ukraine and Malta alike, symbolically linking Malta to Odesa—a gateway city between the Ukrainian steppe and the Mediterranean. This optic presents the port city of Odesa not as the south of the Russian/Soviet empire, but as the north of the Mediterranean region. For Kateryna Semenyuk and me as curators, it was important to articulate these messages not only for a European (and, more broadly, international, since the Biennale is an international event with projects not only from Europe but also from Africa, Asia, and both Americas represented) but also for a Ukrainian, and specifically Odesa's, audience. It was important for us to emphasize the need to shift the perception of Odesa and to stop playing the imperial game when interpreting the city's history and its present.

While the ONFAM chose to present and reflect on Ukrainian wartime art, the O. V. Bleshchunov Municipal Museum of Personal Collections focused on the experience of Odesa's museum staff in the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion. In 2023, the museum presented the graphic novel *War Diary: Marisel and Panna Kota Saving Cultural Heritage* (The diary is available on the museum's YouTube channel). The protagonists of the comic book are the real-life cats, whom the museum employees have cared for over many years. In the comic, Marisel and Panna Kota pack exhibits for evacuation from February 24 to June 18, 2022: the author Olena Iliasova and illustrator Maria Apriatova found a tender yet ironic way to talk about terrible things.

Also of note is the only project opened at the Odesa Archeological Museum since 2022—the exhibition *Zmiinyi: The Island Defended by the Gods*, launched under the auspices of ONFAM⁶. The role of Snake Island has clearly transformed since 2022, so the Archeological Museum's choice to turn its attention there did not come as a surprise. The legends of Achilles Pontarches, who was allegedly buried on the island to awaken someday, suddenly took on new meaning. The Odesa Archeological Museum regulars will be familiar with the sections of the exhibition relating to the sanctuary of Achilles, which existed on Snake Island from the 1st millennium BCE, making the subject equally familiar and appealing to those closely familiar with the evacuated collection and to first-time visitors alike. Such was the Odesa Archeological Museum's response to the challenges of the war.

5. «Павільйон України "From South to North" на maltabiennale.art 2024", *Минуле / Майбутнє / Мистецтво*, 25 грудня 2025, <https://pastfutureart.org/from-south-to-north/>.

6. «Залишки храму Ахілла та античні амфори: знахідки зі Зміїного вперше презентували в Одесі», *Суспільне Одеса*, 5 серпня 2024, <https://suspilne.media/odesa/806071-zaliski-hramu-ahilla-ta-anticni-amfori-znahidki-zi-zmiinogo-vperse-prezentovali-v-odesi/>.

Remarkably, entirely new museum spaces have emerged in Odesa since 2022. One worth mentioning in particular is the Territory of Memory genocide museum, privately established by Pavlo Kozlenko, the former director of the Holocaust Museum⁷. He said he founded a new museum because it is impossible to speak about the Holocaust as a separate, isolated phenomenon nowadays. Rather, genocide must be addressed as a broader phenomenon that also encompasses the genocide committed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The museum does not convey precise messages; rather, it serves as a public space for discussions, screenings, lectures, and similar events.

Once again, this text is guided primarily by the author's personal perspective and makes no claim whatsoever to providing a complete picture of how Odesa's self-interpretation through culture transformed over the first years of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Also worthy of mention are the cultural diplomacy efforts undertaken by Odesa's museums that leveraged the evacuation of their collections abroad. The exhibition *Odesa. The Long 20th Century in Art*⁸ was prepared for the International Cultural Center in Kraków (ICC) in 2024 by ONFAM and the Museum of Odesa Modern Art.

A century of Ukrainian history is explored here through the lens of a single city—and, crucially, that city is Odesa. Such a curatorial gesture acts to overcome the myths and stereotypes that present Odesa as an entity, separate from Ukraine. In particular, the exhibition highlights the intertwining of the artistic traditions of Odesa and Kraków, creating interpretive frameworks for perceiving Odesa that differ from those prevalent during the Soviet era and, to a large extent, throughout the first decades of Ukraine's independence. The exhibition established a space for serious critical reflection on the "Odesa myth" and the place of Odesa's art within both the European and broader Ukrainian traditions.

The curators of the exhibition *From Odesa to Berlin: European Painting of the 16th to 19th Century*, which opened in 2025



Fig. 11. The International Cultural Center in Kraków

7. «В Одесі відкрили музей геноцидів», Суспільне Одеса, 30 травня 2024, <https://suspilne.media/odesa/757509-v-odesi-vidkrili-muzej-genocidiv/>.
8. «Відкриття виставки "Одеса. Довге ХХ століття в мистецтві" у Міжнародному центрі культури Кракова», Генеральне консульство України в Кракові, 16 травня 2024, <https://krakow.mfa.gov.ua/news/vidkrittya-vistavki-odesa-dovge-hh-stolittya-v-mistectvi-u-mizhnarodnomu-centri-kulturi-krakova>.



Fig. 12. An exhibition about Odesa in the International Cultural Center in Kraków

exhibitions at other venues in Odesa (e.g., the Museum of Western and Eastern Art) and in the so-called Gallery of Resilience, established in one of the invincibility centers in a decidedly non-tourist part of the city. The latter is worth mentioning in particular, as it represents one of the attempts to address the lack of museum spaces outside the historic city center. Before the full-scale invasion, it was the O. V. Bleshchunov Museum of Personal Collections that had been attempting to bring museum interventions to Odesa's residential periphery. The fact that the efforts to extend museum initiatives into Odesa's dormitory districts continue even during the years of the full-scale invasion is, arguably, worthy of attention.

In the spring of 2025, however, MoOMA finally returned to the Odesa museum scene with its project *Mirages of Calypso Enchanted by the Depths: Dmytro Dulfan*, sending a symbolic message that it did not shift its focus away from Odesa's contemporary art in particular, as the museum's guest projects hosted in other venues presented contemporary Ukrainian art more broadly without explicitly focusing explicitly on that from Odesa. All museums have had to adjust to the war, and MoOMA is no exception; a number of its exhibitions from 2022 to 2024 focused precisely on Ukrainian artists' conceptualization of the conflict.

The ambitious plans to explore the art of Odesa and to engage with contemporary Ukrainian art have every chance of being realized. As already noted, even the Odesa

at the Gemäldegalerie⁹, took a different path, establishing a dialogue between the works from the Odesa Museum of Western and Eastern Art and the Gemäldegalerie's own collection, while also calling out the Russian army's crimes against Ukraine's cultural heritage.

Odesa's museums are responding to the wartime challenges in a variety of ways, both within Odesa and abroad. In 2025, the Museum of Odesa Modern Art—a museum that had been planning to move to new premises even before the full-scale invasion began—also returned to active operation. In an abrupt change of those plans, the institution had to keep searching for its own space until early 2025 for reasons beyond its control. The museum held several exhi-

9. «У Німеччині відкрилася виставка «Одеса — Берлін». Фото», Офіційний сайт міста Одеса, 27 січня 2025, <https://omr.gov.ua/ua/news/240418/>.

Archeological Museum found its own way to address the present-day challenges. Some museums have largely paused their operation. Particularly telling is the silence of the Odesa Literary Museum, from which one might have expected the most powerful critical reflection on the current state of the “Odesa literary myth.” E.g., looking at the impressive projects of the Kharkiv Literary Museum—from research and exhibition projects on Ukrainian literature of the 1920s to the *Slovo* art residency in Kharkiv¹⁰—such silence feels, at the very least, disappointing.

DECOLONIZATION. THE ODESA FOCUS

The full-scale invasion not only “freed up” museum spaces for Ukrainian contemporary art but also provided the backdrop for the long-since-initiated efforts to rethink museum displays.

ONFAM, in particular, has been working on decolonizing its collection for several years. However, why decolonize the museum in the first place? The story of the Odesa Art Museum’s 1924 split into two institutions—the National Art Museum, focusing on “domestic” art, and the Museum of Western and Eastern Art—calls for reflection and analysis. The collection of the Odesa National Art Museum (the museum for “domestic”—i.e., Russian—art) was ideological from its very inception. The mere names of its halls, visible in photographs from the museum’s archive, already reveal the narrative communicated to its visitors. The museum’s history itself can serve as a foundation for working through and representing Soviet instruments of ideological education, demonstrating how self-evident the irrelevance of claims such as “art is beyond politics” is. The museum offers enormous potential for rethinking its Soviet past in particular, which would be natural to do in collaboration with the Odesa Museum of Western and Eastern Art—a municipal institution with an extensive enough collection that includes genuine masterpieces.

ONFAM’s first step in this direction was thoroughly working through its Soviet-era collection and developing the concept for its permanent exhibition *From the ‘20s to the ‘20s*, which opened in 2021. In addition to introducing visitors to the museum’s collection, the exhibition opened up contexts that could address broader questions about the era. The second step in this direction could be a presentation on the history of building the collection, including an analysis of the sources of acquisition during the early Soviet period and the institution’s aforementioned 1924 split. For now, however, it is at the goal-setting stage. Opened at ONFAM in 2024, the permanent exhibition on the museum’s history frames these questions with considerable caution¹¹.

10. «Резиденція “Слово”», Харківський ЛітМузей, дата звернення 20 грудня 2025, <https://litme.com.ua/uk/slovo>.

11. «Музейна історія. Про виставку», Одеський національний художній музей, 10 серпня 2024, <https://www.ofam.ua/exhibitions/muzeyna-istoriya-3>.



Fig. 13. The monument to Catherine II in ONFAM's courtyard

ONFAM feels the decolonization issues more acutely than the rest of Odesa's cultural institutions, because of the particular nature of its collection, which radically “lost its innocence” after Russia launched its aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and in light of the 2022 Odesa City Council resolution¹² to relocate the dismantled monuments to Catherine II and Suvorov to the museum grounds.

Neither of them is historically significant, as both were created in the 21st century as approximate copies. Of value, however, are the four statues of the empress's lovers, which are original works by sculptor Boris Edwards (1860–1924).

As a reminder, the monument was built in 1900 and dismantled immediately after the Soviets came to power in Odesa. In 2007, a copy of the monument to the empress, accompanied by the original figures of her lovers, was installed as the “Monument to the Founders of Odesa.” The monument was controversial from the outset, but the majority of Odesa residents never considered it problematic. In 2022, however, attitudes toward the monument shifted dramatically. Two petitions calling for the monument's

12. «Нормативні акти. № 1044-VIII від 30.11.2022», Офіційний сайт міста Одеса, 30 листопада 2022, <https://omr.gov.ua/ua/acts/council/196279/>.

dismantlement were registered back to back, each getting the required number of signatures for being submitted for consideration to the President of Ukraine: Petition No. 22/141740-ен, “Replace the monument to Catherine II in Odesa with a monument to American actor Billy Herrington”¹³ (submitted on May 20, 2022, by O. Yu. Matveiev), and Petition No. 22/145072-ен, “Demolish the monument to Catherine II in Odesa”¹⁴ (submitted on June 28, 2022, by S. I. Tsehelnik).

The statues of Catherine II and Suvorov were moved to the museum grounds in December 2022, and the institution faced the problem of formulating its stance regarding these new objects. The museum has yet to voice its position, which is understandable given its limited resources and the level of tension surrounding decolonization in Odesa. However, it will not be able to keep silent for much longer.

THE UNESCO NOMINATION FILE CASE

Throughout 2022, the preparation of a nomination file was underway to inscribe the historic center of Odesa on the UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in Danger¹⁵. The work towards Odesa’s inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List had begun as early as 2001, as evidenced by the Resolution no. 878 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine from July 26, 2001¹⁶. The 2009 saw the drafting of a preliminary description of the historic center of Odesa for the UNESCO World Heritage List application. In 2018–2019, the Ukrainian national committee of ICOMOS received the materials. However, no major effort to prepare a high-quality application that met all requirements was made until 2022. Leading the working group was M. Viknyansky, an Odesa-based entrepreneur—he assembled a team of authors and enlisted Italy’s LINKS Foundation for technical support during the preparation process.

In January 2023, UNESCO approved the inclusion. Having analyzed the nomination file’s text, we are ready to recognize it as a very serious step toward decolonizing Odesa’s history. It argues for the anti-imperial nature of the urban phenomenon of Odesa, analyzes Odesa’s radical distinctiveness from other cities of the Russian Empire, and demonstrates that the phenomenal pace of the city’s development as a seaport was due not to imperial calculations, but to the readiness of the local multicultural community to create the conditions for the city’s growth.

13. «В Одесі замінити пам’ятник Катерині II на пам’ятник американському актору Біллі Геррінгтону», Електронні петиції — Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України, 20 травня 2022, <https://petition.president.gov.ua/petition/141740>.

14. «Знести пам’ятник Катерині II в Одесі», Електронні петиції — Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України, 28 червня 2022, <https://petition.president.gov.ua/petition/145072>.

15. “The Historic Centre of Odesa”, UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed December 24, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1703/documents/>.

16. «Про затвердження Списку історичних населених місць України, Офіційний вебпортал парламенту України, дата звернення 20 вересня 2025, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/878-2001-%D0%BF#Text>.

The authors demonstrated that the uniqueness of the historic center of Odesa as a port city lay in the fact that a new urban space, designed as a coherent urban ensemble, was built in parallel with the construction of the seaport at the end of the 18th century. Port construction triggered a boom in Odesa's development, and the city quickly became a maritime trade center of regional and even global significance.

Also highlighted in the file is the uniqueness of the multicultural urban community that formed in Odesa over the course of the 19th century. This urban phenomenon has existed *continually* from the moment the port-city complex was established and to this day, with all its elements retaining their functionality and integrity. The city's historic center still retains the regular grid plan envisioned by François de Wollant and has high cultural value for this reason alone. It is not so much the overall authenticity of the space that is at work here as the *continuity* of the urban phenomenon. That is why this particular fragment of the city of Odesa, within this specific historical period, can claim the UNESCO World Heritage status.

The part of Odesa recognized as UNESCO cultural heritage is the one shaped by the port's activity. Although maritime trade had always been part of the Northern Black Sea region population's life, the conditions for the kind of maritime trade that met the needs of the new era appeared only in the early 19th century.

In the Northern Black Sea region, maritime traffic traditionally went through river mouths. The Odesa port was built in defiance of the geographic logic and thanks to the "human will and the spirit of free enterprise"¹⁷. The port's construction was funded not because it had been "planned" or because such was the will of the ruler (quite the contrary). It happened thanks to the persistence of the local urban community. (I will not digress into urban legends here, only noting that overcoming the emperor's resistance is embedded in the foundational Odesa myth; the file, on the other hand, deals in facts.) Within just 20 years of the port's completion, Odesa had overtaken other cities with a geography favoring maritime trade (e.g., Ochakiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson) in terms of development. Within a few years, Hajibey, already known as Odesa, became one of the principal maritime trade hubs in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

The authors emphasize the uniqueness of the urban phenomenon that took shape here at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. As noted in the file, it is precisely for this reason that Odesa was able to overcome the challenges of the late 19th century (crop failures, the imperial authorities' repressive policies, and intensifying competition on the part of the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia in the grain markets) and maintain its position in grain exports. Remarkably, it is precisely this function of Odesa that becomes central today, as the months-long blockade of Odesa's port as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion suddenly demonstrated how vital its operation is to the world at large.

17. Ukraine, Odesa City Council, Ministry of Culture and Information Policy Of Ukraine, *Nomination dossier for inscription on the World Heritage List*, Nomination file, adopted November, 4 2022, 87, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1703/documents/>.

Also emphasized in the file is the fact that Odesa's multiculturalism is not merely about the linguistic and religious enclaves present in the city. It is about creating the kind of social relations that afford any enterprising person—regardless of their background, religion, language, or anything else—the possibility of influencing the city's life, being visible, and having rights. Odesa offered opportunities for professional fulfillment and education for representatives of various nationalities, unfathomable elsewhere in the Russian Empire. The file describes mechanisms of urban coexistence in Odesa and highlights unique cases. E.g., it was in Odesa that Charles Ephrussi, a Jew, became a member of the English Club¹⁸.

The nomination file also describes the distinctive character of Odesa's urban landscape that arose from the specific nature of its social relations. For instance, the city has no administrative center—no seat of power, no principal administrative building, no city hall. One of Odesa's first institutions was a theater, which became its symbolic center. Crucially, it was accessible to representatives of multiple social groups. There were no separate sections or designated places for members of various cultures or religions. The nomination file authors emphasize that it was the theater that set in motion the general democratic ethos of Odesa's life.

Unlike the proponents of the version that Odesa was founded “in the middle of wasteland,” the authors clearly demonstrate their awareness of historical contexts. The file's text mentions de Wollant's plan under the title *The Plan of the City of Hajibey with a Military Harbor and a Pier for Merchant Vessels*. It is precisely these contexts that allow for describing the boom in the city's development that transformed it into a port city of global significance with its own unique culture.

Importantly, the authors of the file emphasize that the very idea of a trading city oriented towards the European worldview becomes, within the Russian Empire, effectively anti-imperial.

The architectural codes shaped the face of a city that was ostentatiously alien to the Russian Empire, which naturally correlated with the absence of an explicit seat of power, as well as with its multiculturalism, democratic character, and orientation towards commerce and enterprise. Odesa also proves to be anti-imperial in another political context. The image of a frivolous multinational city with questionable tastes allowed it to develop its own means of pushing back against Soviet power. Odesa's distinctive humor traditions are analyzed in the file as a clear anti-Soviet gesture.

The optic chosen in the file upends the understanding of Odesa as a city founded by the empire, dependent on it, and, allegedly, yearning to return into its fold. It is our response to our enemy's proclamations.

18. Nomination dossier for inscription on the World Heritage List, 114.

THE ODESA BUSINESS CLUB'S ODESA DECOLONIZATION PROJECT

In 2023–2024, fairly unexpectedly—but totally reasonably, in reality—the Odesa Business Club joined the efforts to reconceptualize Odesa's imperial past. As Odesa has a strong history of enterprise and trade, it is entirely conceivable that the business community itself would take on responsibility for the city's both economic and cultural well-being. As the nomination file for the inscription of the historic center of Odesa on the UNESCO World Heritage List was drafted, another issue drew public attention. Odesa had to be seen as a city of entrepreneurs to offset its widespread perception as the city of bandits and petty crooks (which was popular not only in the post-Soviet space with its nostalgia for Benya Krik, but also in the Western academic world—e.g., see Jarrod Tanny's book *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa*). The emergence of the Odesa Business Club as a player in the city's cultural sphere was therefore to be expected, to a certain degree.

We believe that could very well be the result of a considerably earlier effort of ONFAM director Oleksandr Roitburd (1961–2021), who established the Marazli Club, a community of museum patrons. As a reminder, the ONFAM building was donated to the city by Grigoriy Marazli (1831–1907), a local philanthropist and public figure, whose family had built its capital from grain trade. Marazli served as Mayor of Odesa for 17 years, actively developing the city's infrastructure and culture throughout his tenure. His name was easily and naturally put back on Odesa's symbolic map as soon as the form of social engagement associated with his name returned to lived reality. By all means, one could tell stories of the glorious past. However, they remain nothing more than a formal phrase from a guided tour unless there is something in the present that supports that element of the myth. Marazli's name thus eventually returned to the cultural sphere, bolstering the new patron community's activities. Meanwhile, that of Odesa engineer Tymchenko (he invented the motion picture camera before the Lumière brothers) remains merely a "curiosity of the past."

In creating the Marazli Club, Roitburd proceeded from a simple idea. If a business owner gains reputational benefits from supporting the arts, both the city as a whole and each participant stand to gain. The museum created a special ecosystem for the Marazli Club, including thematic gatherings, museum breakfasts, exclusive tours of museum exhibitions, meetings with artists, and similar events. It is a particular type of social communication that emphasises the reputational benefits of supporting the museum. Notably, the Marazli Club events have never overlapped with the museum's public activities. That is, serving the needs of the patron community does not interfere with the museum's operation as a cultural institution for the general public: club members come to visit either before or after its working hours. The Marazli Club is not a "money bag" that provides additional entertainment in return for financial support to the museum. Its active members help design museum programs and make other important decisions, e.g., on restoration projects and the acquisition of new items for ONFAM's collection, in

close cooperation with the museum's team. Sadly, the war halted the museum's sustainable development program in collaboration with Odesa's business community, which has understandably shifted its support to the defense effort, even though the museum's survival has yet to be assured.

Naturally, the participation of Odesa's business community in the development of the city's museum landscape is not limited to the Marazli Club's activities. The aforementioned private Museum of Odesa Modern Art was created on the initiative of and with funding from Odesa entrepreneur Vadym Morokhovskiy. The gallery of Odesa businessman Anatoliy Dymchuk was also open to the public until 2022. For many years, the name Dymchuk Gallery was associated with Kyiv. However, it also had an active exhibition space in Odesa, showcasing art primarily from Dymchuk's private collection. In other words, business is by no means a new or unexpected player in Odesa's cultural field, including its museums.

As might be expected, several Odesa Business Club members were also members of the Marazli Club. So there are relatively recent practices of business participation in Odesa's cultural life to speak of, beyond the natural desire of Odesa's businesspeople to reboot their city's image from the "city of rogues and schnorrers" to the "city of entrepreneurs." Therefore, there has been nothing unexpected in the Odesa Business Club's project to establish a new image for Odesa. Ensuring visibility for real entrepreneurs rather than "picturesque bandits" is thus an understandable goal for the Club.

When the full-scale invasion began, the Odesa Business Club joined the effort to shape a vision of Odesa's history, distinct from the Russian one, highlighting the role of local enterprise in shaping Odesa as a phenomenon. The Club launched archival research into the biographies of local entrepreneurs in 2023 and received additional funding from USAID in 2024 for its *Odesa Decolonization* project¹⁹, which envisaged a research into the contemporary state of the Odesa myth, the completion of the stories of Odesa's entrepreneurs, and the creation of a media campaign to highlight Odesa as a city of entrepreneurs rather than a place of Sonia the Golden Hand's glory.

The project's initiators set out to create a new image of a city that has a future. The Business Club is convinced that reframing the Odesa myth will enhance Ukraine's resilience at the international level. Within Ukraine, it is necessary to rid the city's image of outdated stereotypes as much as possible. Within Odesa itself, the goal is to work through the city's relationship with the past and to articulate an entirely realistic image of the future that the people of Odesa are ready to defend and build.

19. "Odesa Decolonization", *Odesa Decolonization*, accessed December 14, 2025, <https://www.odesadecolonization.org/>.

This selective account of Odesa's response to the challenges brought about by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine can hardly paint the full picture of how the city's museums work through their wartime problems. Safeguarding their collections is by no means their only concern at the moment. As such, they have to answer the question: Is a museum still a museum without its primary collection? When Oleksandr Roitburd became the Director of ONFAM, he emphasized that an art museum can become central to Odesa's search for new meanings. After Russia launched its full-scale invasion, ONFAM, like many other Ukrainian museums, tested the assumption that a museum is a space for meaning-making rather than a repository of cultural artifacts. In fact, the museums, which built their development strategy on that assumption, have remained meaningful centers of community life despite the war.

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