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## Graphic chronicles of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in the works of Ukrainian icon painters

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**Abstract.** The relevance of the study was determined by the active dissemination of expressive graphic sketches created by artists during the full-scale war, a significant part of which combines the iconographic tradition with elements of war reporting. Despite the presence of these works in the digital space and the growing interest in them, the illustration of war crimes by Ukrainian icon painters is an understudied topic. The aim of the article was to outline the role of graphic chronicles in the works of Roman Barabakh, Ulyana Krekhovets and Danylo Movchan and to identify the artistic features of the works. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods, formal, iconographic, and semiotic analysis. It analysed 164 works created by Ukrainian icon painters during the full-scale war. The article focused on works created between March and July 2022, when icon painters were most active in creating graphic chronicles. The analysed works demonstrated a synthesis of the visual language of icon painting with the current political and social context. The artists' work revealed active encryption of meanings through the symbolic system of iconography, the personification of heroes in the form of saints, references to local iconographic images, and the documentation of specific military events. The article noted a decrease in the number of such works, indicating the emotional exhaustion of artists and the gradual adaptation of society to the prolonged threat. The analysis showed that graphic chronicles created by icon painters during the war perform a number of important functions, including social, memorial, and communicative ones. In particular, it was found that social networks were actively used by artists to disseminate their work and engage the audience in reflection. The practical value of the study lay in recording new artistic strategies that demonstrated the transformation of iconographic images during wartime. The study of these processes provided a deeper understanding of the role of sacred art as a form of reflection, documentation and spiritual support in times of trial

**Keywords:** religious images and motifs; graphic works; documentary evidence of war; iconography; sacred art

### INTRODUCTION

After the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, Ukrainian art became a space for reflecting on the tragic events of the war. Painters, sculptors, and graphic artists represented the tragedy of war in their work, capturing the scale of destruction in urban and rural areas, reflecting the suffering of the civilian population, as well as manifestations of humanism and civic solidarity. Themes of memory, loss, and resistance were traced in large-scale street murals, intimate watercolour series, and video art works, where personal stories were intertwined with political and military narratives.

Art, including sacred art, always interacts with the historical and political context of its era, performing

social functions – from representing religious ideas and consolidating historical memory to supporting protest movements. In a broader international context, the research by N. Shefi *et al.* (2025) is important, showing that social art can function as a space for expressing loss and trauma, as well as a form of therapy and collective communication. Such works are not limited to the role of objects for contemplation, but appeal to viewers, evoking empathy and promoting civic mobilisation. Similar processes have been observed in the Ukrainian context, where iconographic motifs in contemporary graphics have served as a kind of “medium” for reflecting on and understanding the war.

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L. Lozova (2025) argued that Byzantine iconography and the post-Byzantine tradition always developed in connection with historical and political events. At the same time, these circumstances did not completely determine the content of icons, but could give theological meanings special relevance at a particular historical moment. This principle of interaction between sacred art and historical events became particularly pronounced in times of political upheaval, when images take on new functions and meanings in the public sphere. The potential of sacred art to transform under political tension was noted by T. Lesiv (2021), who observed that following the Revolution of Dignity (2014), sacred art often functioned as political commentary or took on characteristics of symbolic weaponry.

The war contributed to a profound rethinking of Ukrainian national identity in art, which, according to I. Lokshuk *et al.* (2024), manifested itself in the active appeal of contemporary Ukrainian artists to historical roots, traditions and symbols, emphasising the uniqueness of culture and its resilience in the face of the threats of war. Exploring references to religious images in the visual field of war, M. Levytska (2023) noted that the events of war actualise various aspects of “muted” religious consciousness and revive attention to the historical and cultural archetypes of the past. Thus, war stimulated artists to create a new mythology, a new pantheon of heroes called upon to motivate resistance and lead to victory. H. Zorndrager (2025) emphasised that the spiritual dimension of struggle in wartime becomes visible in the artistic expressions of the visual arts: the role and significance of Mary, the Mother of God, in wartime artworks is evident. Icon painters show how love and divine presence support people even in traumatic circumstances. Y. Yurchuk (2024) pointed out in her article that the use of sacred symbols in the visual culture of resistance is not always a manifestation of religiosity as such. Instead, these images act as a universal cultural language capable of evoking an emotional response in both local and international audiences. Christian iconography functions as a visual code that transcends national, religious and linguistic barriers and contributes to the establishment of the phenomenon of “post-secular sanctity”, in which the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the political are blurred. S.I. Horban (2024) noted that among other types of art, sacred visual art is unique in the process of artistic comprehension of the transcendent world, forming new narratives that express reflection on the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war and empathy for the victims. Art projects, exhibitions, charity activities, works on military artefacts, and more not only enrich sacred visual art, but also become an important “artistic document of the times”. As noted by S. Kot *et al.* (2024), works created during wartime not only reinterpret reality but also document actual events, becoming part of the collective digital memory.

During the full-scale invasion, iconographic images were widely used in the digital environment, but the issue of their transformation and the emergence of new forms of Christian iconography as a means of documenting the war remains understudied, which justifies the relevance of the research. The aim was to identify the artistic features and functionality of graphic chronicles in the works of R. Barabakh, U. Krekhovets and D. Movchan based on 164 works created in 2022-2024.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used a comprehensive approach to analyse visual graphic chronicles created at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Based on a preliminary review, 164 works by three artists – Roman Barabakh, Ulyana Krekhovets and Danylo Movchan – were selected. The main selection criteria were the authors' focus on military themes, the use of iconographic motifs, and work in the format of quick, expressive sketches, which most fully represent the phenomenon of representing war events. These artists were chosen because of their active creative position during the war, their systematic recording of events in artistic form, and their different approaches to combining sacred tradition with the current experience of war. Thanks to this, their works were indicative for studying the transformation of contemporary iconography.

Quantitative analysis was conducted based on visual materials published on the artists' personal pages on social networks. The works were arranged chronologically, which made it possible to trace the dynamics of their creation and identify changes in the artists' artistic approaches and representative strategies. This arrangement made it possible to compare the time of creation of the works with specific historical events that took place during this period. During 2022, the artists created 103 works, in 2023 – 42, and in 2024 – only 19. This gave reason to focus the main attention of the study on the works from March to July 2022 – the period of greatest artistic activity. Separately, 18 works were selected for review in the article.

For a deeper understanding of the characteristics of these works, a qualitative analysis was applied, which included interpretation of content, symbolism, and stylistic features. The analysis of the works was carried out according to several indicators: genre and stylistic characteristics (format, technique, means of expression) and artistic strategies of documentation (methods of visualising events, use of symbolism, narrative construction of images). The article highlighted the following illustrations: R. Barabakh – “Rachel Weeping for Her Children”, “Mariupol”, “Good Friday”, two illustrations “Exodus from Azovstal”, “Archangel Michael”, “Communion at Azovstal”, “Missile Strike in Vinnytsia”, “Martyrs of Azovstal”, D. Movchan – “Destruction”, “Burnt Bodies”, U. Krekhovets – “Children of Mariupol”, “Flight to Lviv”, “To My Kyivites”, “My

Lions", "Why Is Mary Crying?", "Vinnytsia", "Martyrs of UA. Olenivka. 29.07.22".

Formal analysis allowed to identify the compositional and plastic features of the works, while iconographic analysis revealed the meaning of the images and symbols used, often borrowed from the traditional language of icons. The semiotic approach played a key methodological role in the study, allowing to identify the hidden meanings embedded by the artists in the images. The interpretation of the works was based on the semiotic theory of R. Barthes (1991), in particular his approach to distinguishing between the denotative and connotative levels of signs. The visual analysis was supplemented by the artists' personal comments on social media. In particular, published interviews with artists in the media and open online resources were studied (Kurtiak, 2022; Ya Gallery, 2022; Martyniuk, 2025). An individual interview with Roman Barabakh was also conducted in February 2025. The interview took place in person, in the format of a personal conversation. The answers were recorded using a voice recorder. The total duration of the conversation was about 60 minutes. The questions concerned each of the artist's analysed works, the process of their creation, the circumstances that determined the choice of themes and symbols, and the artist's personal stories and experiences. His creative path, experience of military service, and the differences between quick sketches and traditional icons were discussed separately. The interview was semi-structured and took place on the basis of voluntary consent in accordance with the ethical standards of The World Medical Association (2024) Declaration of Helsinki.

Contextualising the works within the specific historical events that took place at the time of their creation allowed for a deeper understanding of the artists' interpretations and revealed the individual experiences that formed the basis of their artistic expression. The methodological approach used ensured a multidimensional understanding of the visual practices of Ukrainian artists during the war period, combining quantitative, qualitative and semiotic analysis. The combination of chronological ordering of materials with in-depth interpretative analysis made it possible to identify the dynamics of changes in artistic strategies caused by the development of war events.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation caused a massive humanitarian and security disaster, while also bringing new forms of social mobilisation to the fore, particularly among members of the artistic community. With the start of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian artists actively sought new means of artistic expression that would allow not only to record events, but also to reflect on the experience of war. At the heart of the research was the question of how art can serve as a means of documentation, reflection and support in

wartime. During an interview with Ya Gallery (2022), artist Danylo Movchan noted how, in the early days of the war, he continued to work in the traditional iconographic manner, but by the end of February 2022, the artist had begun creating a series of watercolour works in which he employed more generalised and allegorical imagery. According to the artist, this approach became a form of artistic reflection that helped him not only to comprehend the events, but also to maintain his inner emotional balance. Sacred motifs gradually appeared in his works, in particular elements of the Crucifixion, which formed a new visual synthesis between traditional iconography and images of the war experience.

From March 2022, icon painters Ulyana Krekhovets and Roman Barabakh also began to actively demonstrate their artistic response to the events of the war. Their work testified to a shift in emphasis from canonical religious images to expressive visual recordings of reality. In the early days of the invasion, Krekhovets began a daily practice of graphic sketches, which became a visual chronicle of the war. According to the artist in an interview with L. Kurtiak (2022), the need for this form of expression arose against the backdrop of internal exhaustion from traditional icon painting. The graphic sketches, created with markers in a notebook, were often made in shelters, based on observations and reproducing people's emotional states and reactions to events. As noted by L. Kurtiak (2022), the artist began creating her graphic works during a long stay in a shelter after a missile strike on Yavoriv (Lviv region). In her later work, allusions to Christian iconography appeared: in particular, the image of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus was transformed into the figure of a mother with a child during the shelling.

From the first months of the full-scale invasion, R. Barabakh combined volunteer work with artistic practice, and in 2023 he joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine. According to O. Martyniuk (2025), despite his participation in combat operations, R. Barabakh managed to continue his artistic practice, particularly in the form of sketches. As R. Barabakh noted in a personal interview, unlike icon painting, which was a spiritual sphere for the artist and required inner peace, sketches emerged as "brutal impressions" of military reality – fragments of what he saw that could not be reproduced in a canonical icon. Thus, his work during the war demonstrated the coexistence of two directions: spiritual tradition and reportage. The artist noted that he could not return to creating traditional icons at that time, explaining that icon painting for him was a process that required inner peace and a peaceful atmosphere. Thus, as in the case of U. Krekhovets, so in the practice of R. Barabakh, there was an intense transformation of the means of artistic expression: from canonical religious tradition to individual artistic testimony about the experience of war. These works function not only as forms of personal reflection, but also as visual



documents of the time, combining religious symbolism, everyday military life and collective memory.

A departure from traditional canons, the use of high-speed graphics, expressive sketches and fragmentary images – all this became a characteristic feature of the artistic reactions of some artists. As noted by S. Hulievych (2023), Ukrainian graphics are deeply intertwined with socio-political changes: war penetrates graphic works through personal perception and emotional-psychological reflection. Thanks to its technical diversity and conciseness, graphic art becomes an effective means of quickly recording events and replenishing the archival artistic experience. The works of artists reflect key events of the war that had a profound social and humanitarian resonance. S. Kot *et al.* (2024) emphasised that Ukrainian artists use their art not only to express emotions caused by aggression, but also to voice the experiences of many Ukrainians, expressed in visual images and symbols.

In early March 2022, the city of Mariupol was surrounded by Russian troops. During the first two weeks of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, numerous air strikes were recorded, resulting in significant human casualties. Reflecting on the war through art became a painful reflection of the realities that Ukrainian society began to face. S. Plokyh (2023) noted that as of early April 2022, according to the mayor Vadym Boychenko, the number of deaths in Mariupol exceeded 21,000. This led to the development of artistic practices aimed at documenting and comprehending the events of the war. Icon painters began to reflect despair and injustice in their works, reinforcing the emotional significance of the works through the use of Christian iconography. A characteristic example of the use of iconographic images to enhance emotional content is R. Barabakh's work "Rachel Weeping for Her Children", in which the artist depicts a woman kneeling, surrounded by Russian soldiers (Fig. 1).



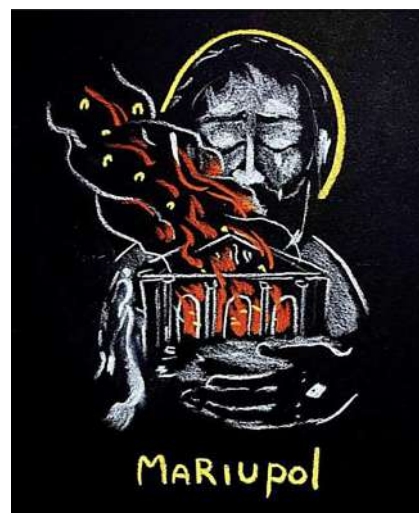
**Figure 1.** R. Barabakh, "Rachel weeping for her children" (2022)

**Note:** pastel, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.)

The work was created on 9 March 2022 and depicts events related to the shelling of a building in Mariupol, Donetsk region, which at that time housed a maternity hospital and a children's hospital, with medical staff, patients and local residents using it as a temporary shelter. The central image of the composition is a woman with an expression of deep suffering on her face, raising her hands in despair; around her are the bodies of children and bloodstains, which intensify the emotional impact of the image. The title of the drawing corresponds to an excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew 2:18: "Rachel weeping for her children". This excerpt was used by the artist as a metaphor for the contemporary context: Russia's war against Ukraine, emphasising the cruelty and injustice of war. In the text of the post, R. Barabakh (n.d.) mentioned the air strike, dedicating this emotional sketch to the children who died as a result of the Russian army's aerial bombardment.

In March 2022, the Mariupol Drama Theatre, which at that time was being used as a shelter for civilians, was destroyed by an air strike. According to the Donetsk Regional State Administration (2024), there were about a thousand people in the building at the time of the explosion. The events surrounding the destruction of the theatre were artistically interpreted by R. Barabakh in his work Mariupol (Fig. 2), in which the central figure is Christ, depicted at the moment of embracing the burning theatre building. The author depicted the wounds on Jesus' hands after the Crucifixion, emphasising the symbolic connection between his suffering and the tragedies of the Ukrainian people.



**Figure 2.** R. Barabakh, "Mariupol" (2022)

**Note:** pastel, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.)

R. Barabakh posted the work on his Instagram account, dedicating it to the tragedy in Mariupol. In his post, the artist emphasised the scale of the crime and called for prayers for the local residents of Mariupol.

Such meaningful messages accompanying the publication of works served as a means of self-expression for the artist and a tool for communicating with the audience, aimed at revealing the cruelty and tragedy of war. The use of English for most posts was motivated by the author's desire to spread information about the realities of war to the widest possible audience, primarily the international community (Barabakh, n.d.). As noted by S. Kot *et al.* (2024), artists actively use Instagram to disseminate their works representing war, thus giving their work a more precise political context, and the use of hashtags contributes to its active dissemination. The use of anti-war and politically charged hashtags and the frequent combination of illustrations with slogans and political messages demonstrate how digital art can be used as a form of digital activism during war and serve not only to tell the story of war, but also to shape the narrative and call for action. M. Levytska (2024) argued that contemporary forms of digital graphics, as a form of artistic resistance, are widespread in electronic media and are an integral part of various artistic practices designed to motivate, strengthen and support society in the context of a war aimed at destroying Ukraine and its identity. Thanks to the technical capabilities of the Instagram platform, artists are able to distribute their works to a wide range of users, which helps to expand their audience and activate communication with new viewers. As a result, artworks gain a viral effect, reaching a much wider audience than within the traditional exhibition space. Thus, the combination of art with the communicative capabilities of social networks, in particular Instagram, creates new mechanisms for the dissemination of works. According to M. Levchenko *et al.* (2025), digital technologies and social networks play a key role in the dissemination of military visual culture, becoming a platform for instant reaction, communication and cultural resistance. Online exhibitions, internet memes and digital creativity ensure the widespread dissemination of artistic interpretations of war.

For example, among R. Barabakh's creative works, the work "Good Friday" (Fig. 3) gained the most resonance and viral spread. In it, the artist depicted soldiers pulling Christ's body out of an evacuation vehicle, creating a visual analogy with the fallen Ukrainian defenders who gave their lives. This artwork resonated with viewers on Instagram: over 3,370 users liked the post, and 499 people shared it on their pages. These data were collected from the artist's Instagram profile in July 2025. Such activity indicates a high level of audience engagement and a deep emotional response to the visual interpretation of the theme of death in the context of war.

Thus, artists actively engage the audience in empathy, reflection, and interaction, which becomes one of the key tasks in their work. Thanks to such a wide reach, artists are able to represent the realities of war to an international audience. Ulyana Krekhovets also created an emotional sketch in which she focused on

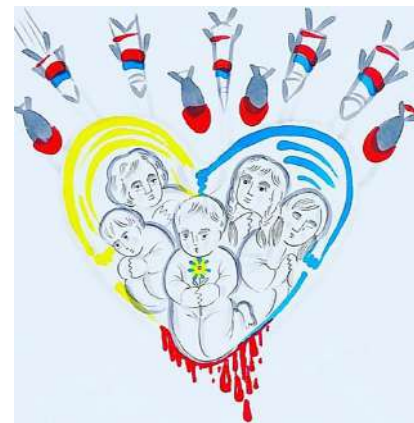
the killings of children and the tragedy of the attack on the drama theatre. In her sketch, the artist illustrated children who suffered as a result of the war. In the drawing, they huddle together in the shape of a yellow and blue heart, which is attacked by rockets marked with the colours of the Russian flag (Fig. 4).



**Figure 3.** R. Barabakh, "Good Friday" (2025)

**Note:** digital graphics

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.)



**Figure 4.** U. Krekhovets, "Children of Mariupol" (2022)

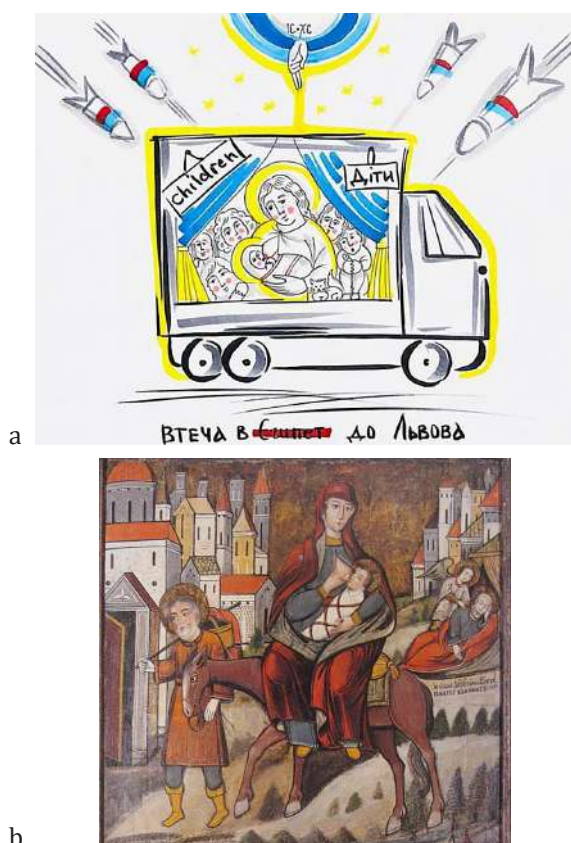
**Note:** liners, paper

**Source:** U. Krekhovets (n.d.a)

Another theme raised by artists in their work was the forced evacuation of the population. After the beginning of 2022, the migration flows of Ukrainians reached unprecedented levels. As noted by T. Renduk (2022), the history of Europe and the world over the past half-century includes several significant migration crises: the Afghan crisis (1979-1989), which resulted in more than 6 million refugees and emigrants; the Venezuelan crisis (2013-2019), which affected about 3 million people; and the Syrian crisis (2019-2020), which affected almost 3 million people. Compared to these crises, migration flows from Ukraine are on a larger scale. As of 1 April 2022, according to a survey



by the International Organization for Migration (2022), the number of internally displaced persons in Ukraine exceeded 7 million, while more than 4 million Ukrainians left the country. In March 2022, U. Krekhovets published a sketch depicting the forced evacuation of the Ukrainian population. The central image in the work is a truck with children and a mother with a baby, which refers to the iconographic image of the Virgin Mary with Christ (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** Visualisation of the evacuation in dialogue with the iconographic image of the Virgin Mary

**Note:** a – U. Krekhovets, “Flight to Lviv” (2022), liners, paper; b – fragment of the icon “Flight into Egypt”, first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Galicia. National Reserve of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

**Source:** U. Krekhovets (n.d.a)

Thus, the artist turned to the traditional iconographic plot “The Flight into Egypt” and interpreted it through the prism of contemporary events, conveying in the image of the Virgin Mary with the infant a generalised image of all women forced to leave their homes because of war. The visual language of the work was built on a system of iconographic symbols, in particular the halos around the heads of the woman and child, as well as a compositional solution that echoes the iconographic type of the Virgin Mary as the Nurse (Galactotrophus). This allows to interpret the image of a woman with a child not only as a scene from real events, but

as a symbolic embodiment of the Virgin Mary, and thus a universal archetype of motherhood and protection. Another significant detail is the image of God’s hand, which in iconographic tradition personifies God’s blessing, presence and protection. It is thanks to the visual system of signs, familiar to the viewer through the religious context, that the author has activated a multi-level perception of the work. Thus, the image of the Virgin Mary with the infant in U. Krekhovets’ work appears not only as a symbolic reproduction of an iconographic plot, but also as a universal archetype of motherhood and protection.

Viewed through the semiotic framework of R. Barthes (1991), the denotative level of the work depicts a woman with a child in a lorry. However, visual elements such as halos, compositional structure, inscriptions, and the blessing gesture of God’s hand form a connotative level, thanks to which the image acquires deeper meanings. This approach opens up a multi-level reading of the work, revealing cultural codes, symbolic references and collective memory captured in visual form. As the author noted in an interview with L. Kurtiak (2022), the traditional image of the “Flight into Egypt” featured the Virgin Mary on a donkey with the infant Christ. In her interpretation, this motif was changed: instead of a donkey, the image of a truck carrying the Virgin Mary and Christ was used. The artist drew a parallel between this image and modern women with children who left Mariupol, Chernihiv or Kyiv, heading not to Egypt, but to Lviv. Graphic works by artists representing the war become a record of significant events. In this case, the works take on other functions. In the traditional context, iconography primarily serves a prayerful function, acting as a mediator between the believer and the transcendent. However, an analysis of contemporary graphic works by Ukrainian icon painters shows a significant transformation of these functions in the context of war. In such works, the prayerful dimension recedes into the background, while social, memorial and communicative functions come to the fore.

At the end of March 2022, U. Krekhovets created a sketch entitled “Angel Michael, protect Kyiv and all the cities of Ukraine!” (Fig. 6). The work featured an image of the city of Kyiv, which became relevant after the end of the occupation of the Kyiv region by Russian troops in early April 2022. In her sketch, U. Krekhovets used the image of Archangel Michael, the patron saint of the city of Kyiv. He destroys the snake, symbolising Russian aggression, with a sword depicted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. At the bottom of the composition, the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine unfurls over Ukrainian soldiers and residents of the city. In her work, the artist sought to reflect the heroism and resilience of Ukraine. Thanks to this, the work acquired a social function, supporting the moral state of society and visually articulating the ideas of national resistance. The use of the image of Archangel Michael as the defender of Kyiv and

the symbolic victor over evil acquired not only religious but also political significance.



**Figure 6.** U. Krekhovets, “To My Kyivites” (2022)

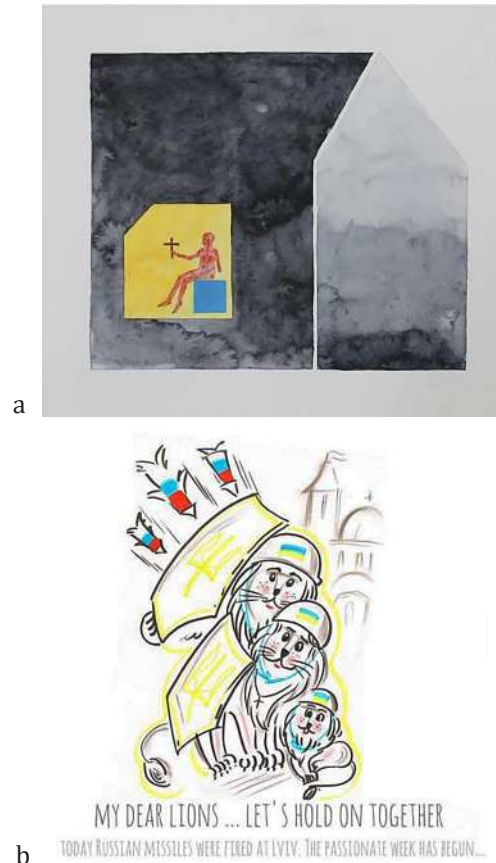
**Note:** liners, paper

**Source:** U. Krekhovets (n.d.a)

In April 2022, numerous massive missile strikes by the Russian Federation were recorded. The shelling damaged not only military and critical infrastructure, but also civilian objects, including private residential buildings. These events were reflected in the graphic works of Lviv artists U. Krekhovets and D. Movchan, who drew on their own experiences of living through a missile attack. In his work “Destruction” (Fig. 7), Danylo Movchan depicted a dark silhouette of a building, inside which, in a light rectangle, there is a figure of a man with a cross, accentuated by the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Ulyana Krekhovets, using the image of lions – a traditional symbol of the city of Lviv – created a composition in which animals with shields protect themselves from missiles. In a comment on the work, published on social media, the artist noted that Holy Week began in a new context and took on new meanings (Krekhovets, n.d.a).

Thus, these works represent an immediate artistic response to events witnessed by the artists themselves. While previous works were mostly the result of processing information obtained from photographs, videos, or news reports, in this case, it was a direct personal experience of a real threat and the transformation of this traumatic event into symbolic artistic images. While D. Movchan’s work was dominated by tragic, muted colours that created an atmosphere of danger, and the figure of a man with a cross, despite its miniature scale, served as a sign of hope, in U. Krekhovets’ work the emphasis shifted towards the visualisation of resilience. Lions, which are a traditional symbol of the city of Lviv, are depicted with calm, even slight smiles, protecting themselves with shields, which reinforces

the feeling of inner confidence and readiness to resist the threat. Thus, both artists demonstrated differences in their artistic emphasis and ways of interpreting their experiences: each artist interpreted the events in their own way, focusing on different emotional aspects of the war.



**Figure 7.** Works dedicated to Lviv after the attack on the city

**Note:** a – D. Movchan, “Destruction” (2022), watercolour on paper; b – U. Krekhovets, “My Lions” (2022), liners on paper

**Source:** D. Movchan (n.d.), U. Krekhovets (n.d.a)

At the end of April 2022, when the situation in Mariupol remained critical, U. Krekhovets (n.d.a) created an illustration, in the caption to which she emphasised on social media the two months of rocket attacks and the genocide of Ukrainians (Fig. 8). The author deliberately turned to the iconographic sign system, using the image of the Virgin Mary as a multi-level symbol. On the one hand, Mary appeared as the traditional protector of the city, since the name “Mariupol” has an etymological connection with the name of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary herself is considered the patroness of this city. On the other hand, the iconographic motif of the Protection of the Virgin Mary functions as a cultural code established in the Ukrainian visual space, signifying care, intercession and protection in times of danger.



**Figure 8.** U. Krekhovets, “Why is Mary Crying?” (2022)

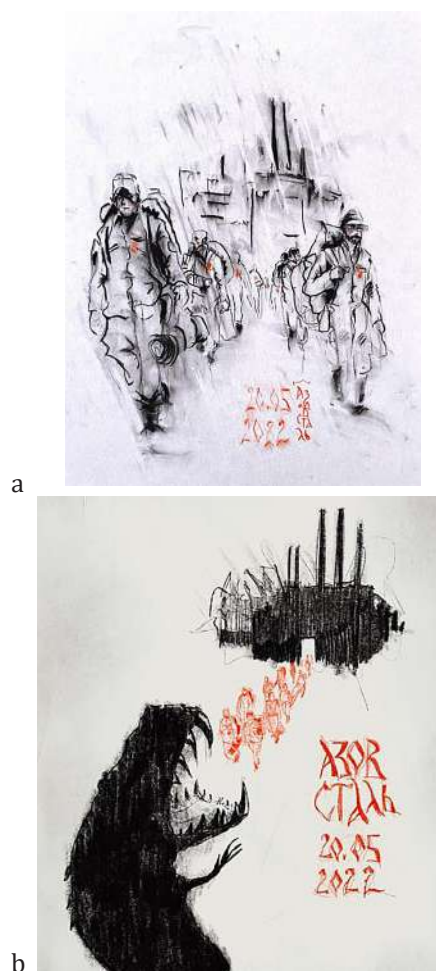
**Note:** liners, paper

**Source:** U. Krekhovets (n.d.b)

In the composition of the work, the Virgin Mary is depicted as a protector, covering Ukrainian soldiers and city residents with her omophorion from enemy shelling. The city is engulfed in flames in the background, and the Virgin Mary, with tears in her eyes, contemplates its suffering. The yellow marker outlines around the heads of individual figures resemble halos, which traditionally symbolise holiness. It is likely that the author used this artistic technique to emphasise the martyrdom of Ukrainians forced to endure attacks on their cities. In this context, H. Zorgdrager’s (2025) observations were revealing: the researcher emphasised that Ukrainian artists’ use of the image of the Virgin Mary in wartime highlights her multidimensional role – as a protector, comforter and compassionate intercessor, as well as a powerful spiritual leader in battle. In this way, the artist constructed a symbolic system in which the local identity of cities such as Lviv and Mariupol was integrated into a broader sacred and cultural context. This allows the viewer to interpret the works not only as individual reactions to events, but as symbolic constructions that accumulate religious and national meanings.

At the end of April 2022, the evacuation of the civilian population from Mariupol began. Historians, including S. Plokyh (2023), noted that the Ukrainian authorities were forced to agree with the Russian side on the withdrawal of the defenders of Azovstal, followed by their capture and exchange. The events related to the defence and evacuation of Azovstal were reflected in the works of artist R. Barabakh. In 2023, the artist created an illustration dedicated to the departure of Mariupol’s defenders from the territory of the metallurgical plant (Fig. 9a), adding an inscription in the style of traditional iconography: “20.05.2022. Azovstal”. In 2024, the artist created a compositionally similar work (Fig. 9b), depicting soldiers walking towards a dark

mass, interpreted as an image of evil in the form of a monster. In the caption to this work on social media, the artist recorded the date of the defenders of Mariupol’s departure from Azovstal (20 May 2022), describing it as a tragic transition from darkness into even greater darkness (Barabakh, n.d.).



**Figure 9.** Illustrations by R. Barabakh dedicated to the defenders of Azovstal

**Note:** a – 2023, charcoal, paper; b – 2024, charcoal, pastel, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.)

Barabakh’s works were an emotional reflection of the reality faced by Ukrainian soldiers. These compositions also feature iconographic visual language, manifested in the choice of font and iconographic text abbreviations. This artistic technique may reflect both the artist’s professional experience in iconography and serve as a symbolic marker that gives the works additional symbolic meaning. In June 2022, icon painter R. Barabakh created an illustration (Fig. 10) in honour of soldier Mykhailo Dianov, whose photographs taken during his exit from Azovstal became famous and widely circulated in the media. The artist graphically depicted a portrait of the soldier, behind whom he painted a



pastel image of Archangel Michael as a guardian angel. Iconographer R. Barabakh illustrated the archangel with a fiery sword and deliberately gave the archangel the portrait features of M. Dianov. As noted by V. Ovsii-chuk & D. Krvavych (2000), Archangel Michael is traditionally considered the leader of the heavenly army and the patron saint of many military structures.



**Figure 10.** Comparison of artistic and photographic images

**Note:** a – R. Barabakh, “Archangel Michael” (2022), pastel on paper; b – photo by M. Dianov taken while leaving Azovstal (Mariupol, 2022)

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.), N. Dym (2022)

R. Barabakh (2025) noted in a personal interview that while working on this piece, he did not know whether Mykhailo Dianov would return from captivity, and emphasised that his figure had already been recorded in history. In the image, the author deliberately contrasted the figure of the Ukrainian defender with that of the Russian soldier leading him into captivity. According to R. Barabakh, the Russian soldier is presented as “just dust, a shadow” that will crumble. The work emphasises that true courage, will and strength remain in people’s memories regardless of circumstances. This example clearly demonstrates how contemporary artists resort to personification, giving the images of saints the portrait features of real heroes. The image of Archangel Michael appears not only as a symbol of heavenly protection, but also as a visual embodiment of M. Dianov himself.

Mykhailo Skop also resorted to a similar representation in his work, creating the poster “Ukrainian Martyr”, in which he depicted a soldier as a modern martyr. In

this way, a specific hero “outgrows” the context of personal history and acquires a sacred dimension. At the same time, as researcher M. Levytska (2023) noted, the author preserves the formal language and means of poster graphics, transforming the modern poster and its hero into an icon of the new era. It should be noted that this practice is not new to Ukrainian iconography. For example, T. Lesiv (2021) mentioned that among the biblical and Christian themes in the paintings of St. Michael the Archangel Church in the village of Veryn, Mykolaiv district, created by Mykola Havryliv, there is a composition illustrating the events of the Maidan. Also, in the composition “The Appearance of Christ to the People”, almost all the images have the portrait features of the author’s contemporaries.

In June 2022, R. Barabakh (n.d.) created an illustration dedicated to communion at Azovstal, which he published on social media, emphasising the significance of this act as a sacred communal meal and a symbol of solidarity among the defenders (Fig. 11). The iconographer depicted the distribution of bread among people who were forced to hide from constant shelling at Azovstal. In it, the author highlighted mutual support in the most difficult times of trial, allegorically comparing the meal to Holy Communion. Thanks to the symbolic system in the composition, the viewer intuitively reads the red accents in the work as a symbol of Christ’s blood, and the image of bread as an allegory of the Christ’s body. Through such artistic means, the author gave the work a sacred meaning, transforming the meal at Azovstal into a symbolic image of sacrifice and spiritual unity.



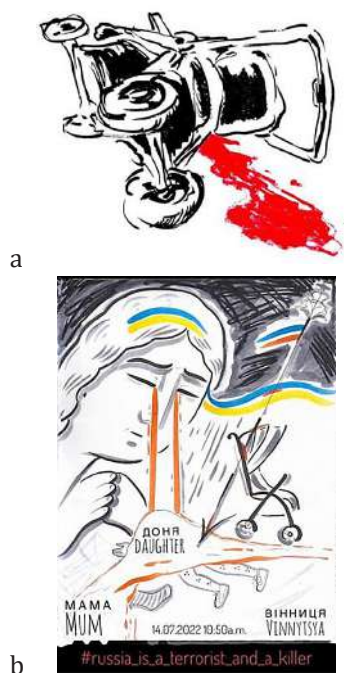
**Figure 11.** R. Barabakh, “Communion at Azovstal” (2022)

**Note:** pastel, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.)

In July 2022, civilians were killed as a result of a missile strike on the central part of Vinnytsia carried out by the Russian military. As reported in an article by S. Rainsford (2022) on BBC News, a photograph of a bloodstained pink pram belonging to a deceased child attracted particular attention in the media. Its image, as well as other visual symbols of the tragedy, gained widespread international publicity and were

interpreted in reflective graphic works by artists U. Krekhovets and R. Barabakh. In particular, R. Barabakh created an illustration (Fig. 12a) depicting a bloodstained overturned pram. U. Krekhovets created an image of a mother mourning her child (Fig. 12b). The artist also depicted a spear piercing a child's pram, symbolically emphasising the brutality of Russian aggression and its consequences.



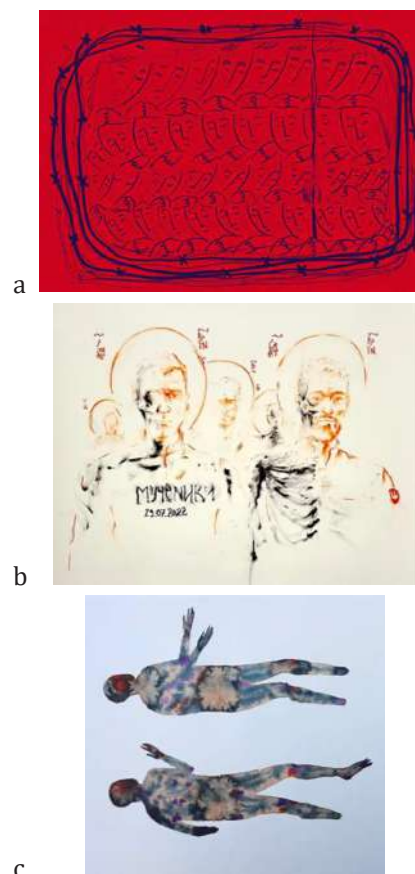
**Figure 12.** Illustrations of a pram following the missile strike on Vinnytsia

**Note:** a – R. Barabakh (2022), ink, pen, acrylic, paper; b – U. Krekhovets (2022), liners, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.), U. Krekhovets (n.d.a)

On the night of 28 to 29 July 2022, in the village of Olenivka, Donetsk region, 53 soldiers of the Azov regiment were killed in an explosion in a building where Ukrainian prisoners of war were being held. According to A. Halasiuk (2024), eyewitnesses said the explosion might have been planned in advance, and Russian federation reps delayed giving medical help to the injured. The events in Olenivka were reflected in the artistic interpretations of U. Krekhovets, R. Barabakh, and D. Movchan, who addressed the theme of captivity and the tragic death of soldiers in their works. U. Krekhovets created an emotional sketch depicting many figures of Ukrainian soldiers with their hands folded in prayer, surrounded by barbed wire (Fig. 13a). At the same time, icon painter R. Barabakh created an illustration depicting figures of men, signing their images on the sides in a font characteristic of icon painting – Holy Warrior (Fig. 13b). The author depicted the figures of soldiers with halos, portraying them as martyrs. The central figure stands out with the inscription “Martyrs”

on his chest with the date 29.07.2022, which enhances the tragedy. The figures are drawn rather schematically, some details of the bodies are partially erased or drawn in black, emphasising death and destruction. As researcher S. Wanner (2022) emphasised, the sacrifice of soldiers takes on a sacred meaning, similar to the sacrifice of saints, and becomes the basis for new forms of national community. Artist D. Movchan also created a work dedicated to the memory of those who died as a result of the terrorist attack in the village of Olenivka (Fig. 13c). The author depicted two figures of mutilated human bodies lying horizontally, as if in weightlessness. The men are depicted with missing limbs. In this way, D. Movchan emphasised the terrible consequences of the Russian terrorist attack. Thus, the works of three different artists were united by a deep emotional response to the tragedy in the village of Olenivka, which manifested itself in various artistic strategies of interpretation, each of which represented an individual vision of the event and ways of visualising collective pain.



**Figure 13.** Illustrations dedicated to those who died in the terrorist attack in the village of Olenivka

**Note:** a – U. Krekhovets, “Martyrs of Ukraine. Olenivka. 29.07.22” (2022), liners, paper; b – R. Barabakh, “Martyrs of Azovstal” (2022), pastel, paper; c – D. Movchan, “Burnt Bodies” (2022), watercolour, paper

**Source:** R. Barabakh (n.d.), U. Krekhovets (n.d.a), D. Movchan (n.d.)

Summarising the analysis of the above-mentioned works, it is appropriate to consider speed sketches as a form of visual response to collective trauma. Such works function similarly to photo reports, capturing moments of pain, loss and destruction. In this context, artists appear as visual witnesses who, through visual means, not only document the course of the war, but also form a visual memory of crimes committed against the civilian population. J. Kabrońska (2016) mentioned in her work the creativity of E. Wiesel, who was a writer and one of the surviving victims of the Holocaust. In his texts, Elie Wiesel viewed testimony as a life calling, emphasising the need to convey the experience of catastrophe, because silence or refusal to do so, in his words, is a form of betrayal of memory. The absence of an active act of remembrance, in this context, is regarded as complicity in the crime. The idea of testimony as a moral duty resonates with the position of contemporary Ukrainian artists who, acting as eyewitnesses, consider the artistic recording of war events to be an ethically motivated practice. Their work takes on the significance of a means of preserving collective memory and passing on experience to future generations.

As S. Stoyan (2022) noted, war radically transforms both the basic foundation of creativity and the end result – the work of art. Artworks created during war-time reflect the author's internal reaction to shocking events, manifesting the sublimation of traumatic experiences and the visualisation of existential fears, exacerbated by the awareness of one's own vulnerability and mortality. Thus, quick sketches and other graphic works not only document events, but also convey the psychological and emotional experience of artists, providing a deeper understanding of the impact of war on creativity. S. Sontag (2024), analysing war photographs, emphasised that their task is not so much to find solutions to prevent tragic situations as to recognise the scale of suffering caused by human cruelty and to spread knowledge about it. Based on her theses, it may be concluded that emotionally charged rapid works by Ukrainian artists, created under the influence of their experiences of war, like war photographs, do not have the power to stop hostilities or guarantee that such tragedies will not be repeated. However, at the same time, they play an important role in visualising the truth about war, its devastating consequences and the scale of human suffering.

After the first six months of full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, terrorist acts and shelling carried out by Russia against Ukraine did not stop. During this period, events took place that significantly affected public life, confirming the systematic nature of military actions against the civilian population and infrastructure. However, it was observed that the number of such works by artists decreased with each passing year. An analysis of 164 graphic works created by the

aforementioned artists and published on social media showed a tendency for the number of works dedicated to the theme of war to decrease with each subsequent year. Thus, in 2022, 103 works were created, in 2023 – 42, and in 2024 – only 19. This dynamic indicated a gradual decline in the intensity of artistic response to events during the war, which was probably due to emotional exhaustion. R. Barabakh mentioned in conversation that the number of his works had definitely decreased and this occurred after he joined the army. The author noted that he had not during his presence on the frontline for a long time, as it was difficult, but later it became easier for him.

In the context of the media's influence on society, there is a noticeable trend towards a gradual decline in emotional sensitivity in conditions of prolonged information stress. Under the constant threat of war, a process of psychological habituation takes place: what initially caused shock and a deep emotional reaction eventually ceases to have the same effect. As S. Sontag (2024) noted, adaptation to an excessive amount of traumatic information manifests itself through avoidance, emotional detachment, or a decrease in the level of response, which is a natural form of psychological defence. Such desensitisation affects not only the perception of media content, but also the nature of artistic representations of war. According to S. Sontag (2024), people may turn away from images of violence not only because they become accustomed to the constant flow of such images, but also because of fear. As a result, the intensity of visual comprehension of tragic experiences decreases, which is associated with the psychological exhaustion of both the artists themselves and society as a whole. Prolonged exposure to threats and constant encounters with manifestations of violence contribute to a decrease in emotional sensitivity and limit the possibilities of artistic expression.

The results confirmed and at the same time expanded existing approaches to studying the role of iconographic symbolism in the representation of war. The study proved that the transformation of iconographic images in contemporary Ukrainian art is closely linked to the experience of war. As recent studies have shown, the war stimulated the formation of a new pantheon of heroes who gradually acquired the characteristics of saints. According to the conclusions of S. Wanner (2022), in the public space of Independence Square and subsequent military events, the deaths of protesters and soldiers were interpreted as sacrifice, comparable to the martyrdom of Christ. Crosses, icons, and improvised shrines created the feeling that the dead were martyrs and saints of national resistance. This idea was directly embodied in the visual works of contemporary artists mentioned in the study. These artists combined traditional iconographic images with figures of modern defenders, endowing them with the traits of saints. This



combination of the sacred and the modern creates a kind of new mythology that shapes collective memory.

According to the conclusions of G. Kolesnyk (2024), in the visual culture of war, Ukraine is often personified in the form of female images – mother, guardian, warrior. A special place is occupied by the image of the Virgin Mary, which is superimposed on the allegory of Mother Ukraine. The study confirmed this trend: images of the Virgin Mary often appeared as defenders of the nation, combining the traditional Christian understanding of motherhood with the symbolic image of Ukraine. Thus, a new iconographic layer is formed in wartime works, where sacred images are combined with the national idea. At the same time, Y. Yurchuk (2024) noted that sacred motifs in the visual culture of resistance are not limited to a narrow religious meaning, but rather function as a universal cultural code that is understandable to many and designed to evoke a strong emotional response. The results of the study partially confirmed this thesis: sacred images become understandable symbols for local and international audiences, thanks to which they overcome cultural barriers and affirm the phenomenon of post-secular holiness. However, the study also found that graphic works endowed with iconographic symbolism are often associated with religiosity, as artists consciously used traditional iconographic motifs to give their images a sacred dimension. As J.-K. Chung (2025) noted, sacred art and iconography play a key role in shaping religious identity, as they convey multi-layered spiritual meanings through colours, shapes and symbols. This allows to maintain an emotional and psychological connection with religious archetypes and strengthen the symbolic power of works in the context of war.

Particular attention should be paid to the dissemination of graphic works in the digital space. E. Olzacka (2024) pointed out that Ukrainian war posters have taken on new functions in the age of digital media: they combined physical presence in urban space with active life in the online environment. The researcher emphasised that posters not only retain their traditional features, but have also become a component of digital participatory culture, where users can download and distribute them. Thanks to this, they have gone beyond the boundaries of classical propaganda and have become a tool for documenting events in real time and mobilising communities, both in Ukraine and abroad. This study expanded on this idea, showing that iconographic images in graphic works are actively shared on social media, where they become a tool for documenting the war in real time and supporting the spiritual aspect of viewers. Thus, contemporary graphic works by Ukrainian artists function similarly to the posters described above by the researcher. They not only convey sacred images, but also become part of digital culture, serving as a means of forming a shared memory and a “spiritual weapon” in the global space.

The study showed that Ukrainian icon painters actively used digital space to disseminate their works. An important feature of this practice is the speed of response. Graphic works shared on social media functioned as visual “chronicles” of the war, recording events in real time. In the digital environment, such works went beyond the national context, becoming understandable symbols for international audiences in particular. The artists mentioned above documented the events of the war in their graphic works, using iconographic motifs, which gave them additional meaning – they became carriers of sacred images and spiritual content, which strengthened their role in shaping collective memory and understanding the war experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rapid graphic works of icon painters, created in wartime conditions, are valuable documentary evidence recording the experience of war, suffering and resistance, as the speed sketches were based on photo reports or real events witnessed by the artists themselves. In this context, art becomes a means of recording historical events and reflecting on the experience of war. The analysed works by R. Barabakh, U. Krekhovets and D. Movchan demonstrated a synthesis of the visual language of iconography with the current political and social context. Among the key artistic strategies of the artists were the encryption of important meanings through the iconographic sign system, the personification of contemporary heroes in the images of saints, the use of local sign systems (depicting the patrons of specific cities), reflecting and documenting real events, and actively using social networks to disseminate works and engage audiences in reflection, forming a new model of digital testimony and activism. Although the works discussed in the article are not formally icons, they clearly reflect the language of iconography: symbolism, composition, and a system of signs.

In the context of war for Ukrainian icon painters, the icon has transformed into a means of recording and comprehending events, becoming a kind of informational weapon. The works mentioned perform social, communicative, and memorial functions, contributing to the formation of a visual memory of war. At the same time, there was a tendency towards a decrease in the number of such works, which may indicate the emotional exhaustion of artists and the gradual adaptation of society to a prolonged state of threat. Thus, the study confirmed that iconographic images undergo transformation during war. Artists adapt traditional images to contemporary realities. Their works become an important visual testimony to the tragic events of war and national resistance. In the perspective of further research, it is advisable to conduct an in-depth analysis of the visual strategies used by Ukrainian icon painters in their works created in the context of war. First of all, it is worth highlighting the iconographic images

that artists refer to, tracing how these images are re-interpreted, combined with contemporary elements, or transformed into new visual narratives.

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## Графічні хроніки повномасштабної російсько-української війни у творчості українських іконописців

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**Анотація.** Актуальність дослідження була зумовлена активним поширенням експресивних графічних скетчів, створених митцями під час повномасштабної війни, значна частина яких поєднує іконописну традицію з елементами воєнного репортажу. Попри присутність цих творів у цифровому просторі та зростання інтересу до них, ілюстрування воєнних злочинів українськими іконописцями є недостатньо опрацьованою темою. Метою статті було окреслити роль графічних хронік у творчості Романа Барабаха, Уляни Креховець та Данила Мовчана та виявити художні особливості творів. У дослідженні було "застосовано якісний і кількісний методи, формальний, іконографічний та семіотичний аналіз. Проаналізовано 164 твори, створені українськими іконописцями упродовж повномасштабної війни. У статті акцентовано увагу на роботах, виконаних з березня по липень 2022 року, коли спостерігалася найбільша художня активність іконописців у створенні графічних хронік. Проаналізовані твори демонстрували синтез іконописної візуальної мови з актуальним політичним і соціальним контекстом. У творчості митців було розкрито активне шифрування сенсів через знакову систему іконопису, персоніфікацію героїв у вигляді святих, звернення до локальних іконописних образів та документування конкретних воєнних подій. У статті відзначено зменшення кількості таких творів, що вказує на емоційне виснаження митців і поступову адаптацію суспільства до тривалої загрози. У процесі аналізу було простежено, що графічні хроніки, створені іконописцями під час війни, виконують низку важливих функцій, серед яких – соціальна, меморіальна та комунікативна. Зокрема, було виявлено, що соціальні мережі активно використовувались митцями для поширення творчості та залучення аудиторії до рефлексії. Практична цінність дослідження полягала у фіксації нових художніх стратегій, що демонстрували трансформацію іконописних образів в часі війни. Вивчення цих процесів дало змогу глибше зрозуміти роль сакрального мистецтва як форми рефлексії, документації та духовної підтримки в часи випробувань

**Ключові слова:** релігійні образи та мотиви; графічні твори; документальні свідчення війни; іконографія; сакральне мистецтво