

KIDS ARE KIDS AFTER ALL

An exhibition
on intangible cultural heritage
and peace education



We live in a world of recurrent conflicts and disasters. Lives are irremediably disrupted. Families and individuals resist; humans are definitely resilient beings... until home becomes unbearable. Then, some consider migrating, others have no other choice but to immediately flee, and they all add their souls to the millions of displaced people globally in search of safety and fulfilment.

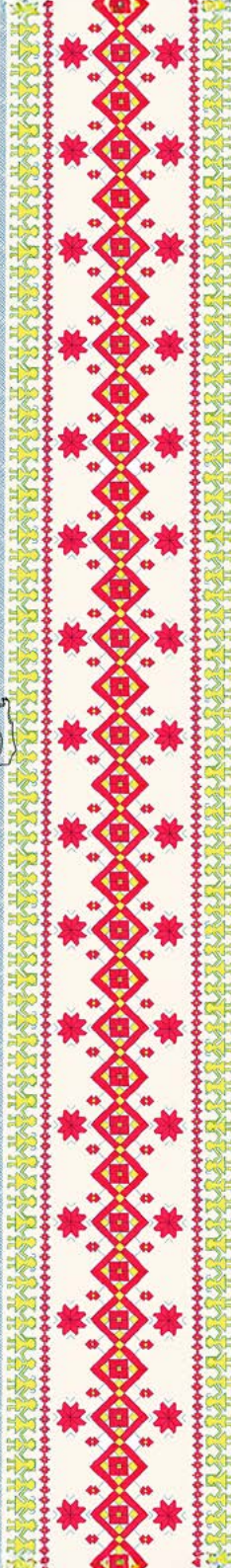
Whether far from home or just nearby, children are often the silent victims of displacement. Distress, fear and sadness of parents are absorbed without fully processing the reasons and consequences. They feel it all and the suffering is real, woven in emotions and incomprehension. Yet children are malleable, still in the mould of life. Their innocence holds hope and carries a message of joy... if we stop to listen.

KIDS ARE KIDS AFTER ALL invites us in that reflexive journey. It is an immersion in the struggles and joys of displaced Ukrainian children looking for a new beginning in Romania through the reconnection with the intangible cultural heritage of their homeland. Culture provides us with a sense of identity, and we undeniably have to first learn who we are before relating to the Other. Then, we begin to discover the shared meanings and values of our intangible cultural heritages. The Other eventually becomes Us, a bridge between cultures.

The exhibition offers five windows into the participatory reconnection of Ukrainian children with their intangible cultural heritage. They are developed by artists from different countries and the displaced Ukrainian children themselves, guided by their trainers, to propose a message of peace. Despite challenges, displaced children continue to learn, grow and bridge cultures with their innate curiosity and resilience, because kids are kids, after all.

This exhibition is an outcome of the project “Community-based teaching and learning of Ukraine’s living heritage in Romania”. Funded by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund of UNESCO, the project is implemented by the Jesuit Refugee Service – JRS Romania.

Julio Sa Rego & Ioana Baskerville
curators



FOLK EMBROIDERY

Folk embroidery is an important traditional craft in Ukraine. It is best represented in *Vyshyvanka*, a Ukrainian traditional embroidered shirt. Main sewn patterns are rich in symbolism and visual compositions reveal the identities of regions of the country.

Geometric shapes, such as diamonds or X-shaped motifs, often represent harmony, balance or protective talismans. Floral designs symbolise fertility, life and the natural world, while animals and birds can convey wishes for agricultural prosperity and vitality. Even the placement of embroidery on garments holds meaning – stitching around collars, cuffs and hems was traditionally believed to guard the wearer against harm.

Folk motifs are nowadays still applied on traditional clothes but also adapted by contemporary fashion design. Embroidered clothing is worn on special occasions, particularly during Vyshyvanka Day, celebrated every May.

Ukrainian children participating in the workshops were introduced to basic sewing techniques and practiced embroidery by following simple ornamental patterns. Through this hands-on activity, they discovered the complexity and dedication involved in this heritage.

THE ARTIST

Erien Withouck is a Flemish artist whose practice centres on social and ecological themes, currently exploring how indigenous plants can act as tools of resistance. Her work has been presented at institutions and festivals, including WIELS (Brussels), De Brakke Grond (Amsterdam), FOMU (Antwerp), Mareel Arts Centre (Lerwick), ARGOS (Brussels), CONTOUR Biennale (Mechelen) and Brainwash Festival (Amsterdam).

She drew from traditional Ukrainian embroidery motifs and incorporated archival photos from the Ivan Honchar Museum in Ukraine to highlight the cultural significance of these traditions. Her work also features drawings of children learning embroidery to emphasise the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage.



Zaple 2008-2009
Izabella Coelho

PYSANKA

Pysanka is the Ukrainian tradition of decorating eggs connected with Easter holidays. It has pre-Christian historical roots and expresses the symbolism of land fertility and renewal after the winter season. The practice carries ritual, social, artistic and recreational functions. Eggs are mostly decorated in family communion to connect generations.

The main painting technic is using wax, but watercolour painting is also common. Patterns differ according to the regions of the country. These symbols often serve a magical or ritual purpose, expressing wishes of good fortune for the person receiving the egg. Painted Easter eggs are exchanged to bring blessings and positive omens.

Egg decorating served as an introduction for children to the practice of creating miniature artworks. It also offered an opportunity to explore ornamental patterns specific to the regions of their families' origins.

THE ARTISTS

Izabella Coelho is a Brazilian visual artist and designer whose practice bridges graphic design and ecological art. With a background in branding and cultural communication, she creates interactive, multisensory installations using reused and natural materials. Her work explores connections between art, agroecology, traditional technologies and biomaterials. She is also active in art education.

Bruno Assis Fonseca is a Portuguese visual artist. His work spans across illustration, design and visual storytelling. He has illustrated several children's books and contributes to educational and cultural projects involving animation, art direction and infographics. His illustrations have received awards from Folha de São Paulo (Brazil) and Ar.Co (Portugal). Bruno's work has been shown in group exhibitions in Brazil and Portugal.



MALANKA

Malanka is the celebration of the Old New Year from the Julian calendar in Ukraine (13th of January). Festivities include pagan and Christian traditions. Masks are a central component. They are hand-crafted from wood, fabric and leather.

Masks are worn to embody the characters of the celebration, among which Malanka, a female mythological being holds a central role. Her life trajectory symbolises the renewal of life and the coming of spring. Other recurring characters include the Devil, witches, bears, and other local or exotic animals who form part of the door-to-door performances in rural areas or urban parades.

During workshops dedicated to this element of intangible cultural heritage, children created masks using sturdy paper and colourful textiles and painted according to their own inspiration. Some invented entirely new characters. Created masks were later worn during winter community gatherings with music and dance.

THE ARTIST

Ana Petrovici-Popescu is a Romanian artist whose practice engages with memory, identity and the layering of visual narratives through mixed media and sculptural forms. With a background in painting, sculpture and a PhD in visual arts, her work reflects a deep investigation of spatial and emotional contexts, often exploring the intersections between personal and collective experience. She has exhibited widely in Romania, Italy and Germany, participating in both solo and group exhibitions. In 2023, she coordinated the work “Roots and Dreams” within the *Open Museums Open Hearts* project. Together with Ukrainian teenagers displaced in Romania, she created four “whispering monuments” installed in front of museums across Bucharest. Whispering monuments were sensitive expressions of an exiled world, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the young participants’ experiences.



POTTERY MAKING

Pottery making is a traditional craft in Ukraine that combines functional uses and symbolic meanings. A potter's wheel is used to mould the clay into the desired form, then vessels are left outside to dry and then baked in special ovens at high temperatures. Pots and plates are then painted with motifs specific to various regions, covered with a transparent glaze and then burned again.

Kosiv ceramics, originating from the Ivano-Frankivsk region of Ukraine in the ethnographic area of Hutsulshchyna, and inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List in 2019, served as a major source of inspiration. These distinctive ceramics are coated with white clay and then ornamented with images of human figures, animals, the sun, stars, plants and other symbolic motifs, using green, yellow and brown pigments.

As part of the project, children had the opportunity to explore traditional pottery techniques. They experienced both hand-moulding, which is one of the oldest forms of pottery making, as well as working on the potter's wheel. In some sessions, undecorated ceramic items were provided, allowing the children to paint traditional ornaments using the characteristic colour palette and symbolism of this intangible cultural heritage of Ukraine.

THE ARTISTS

The collage representing pottery making in this exhibition is the result of a participatory creation. Children were invited to recreate the spirit of the workshops with drawings and printed pictures from the pottery activities, under the guidance of Elena Orlova and Kyrlo Mazur.

CHRISTMAS STAR

Christmas star is a symbol of the winter holiday traditions in Ukraine. It is usually handcrafted from wood, fabric or paper within families and carries a spirit of joy and solidarity across regions and generations. The Star plays a central role in festive customs such as Vertep (the Ukrainian nativity puppet theatre), and Koliada (carolling). It carries messages of hope, bringing blessings to homes and inviting joy and protection into households.

The workshops dedicated to this element of intangible cultural heritage offered children a rich variety of creative experiences. They crafted small stars intended for personal or family use and engaged in the collective making of large-scale stars. In this case, each child contributed with individual decorative details and motifs that reflected both tradition and personal expression. Christmas star workshops were organised in the broader context of winter festivities and carolling to ensure the contextualisation of this element.

Special carolling events were also organised within the JRS community. Children embodied traditional characters; they dressed as Magi or angels and spun or raised Christmas stars at specific moments recommended by the tradition. These gatherings mirrored Star parades held in Ukrainian towns and villages and offered a sense of normality to the displaced community.

THE ARTISTS

The collage representing Christmas star in this exhibition is the result of a participatory creation. Children were invited to recreate the spirit of the workshops with drawings, Christmas ornaments and printed pictures from the activities, under the guidance of Elena Orlova and Kyrlo Mazur.



VOICES OF TRAINERS

Elena Orlova, trainer in Bucharest

The UNESCO project gave us the opportunity to show Ukrainian and Romanian children how rich Ukrainian culture is. Knowledge is power, and knowledge consolidated in practice is an acquired experience, an intangible cultural heritage that will be safeguarded for many years to come and will certainly be passed on to future generations. Every painting, every dot on the Easter egg and every colour carries its own story and I was able to convey this symbolism to many children, reviving in my memory important moments from my own childhood, when my great-grandmother taught me all of this. So, for me, this project is special because the intangible cultural and spiritual heritage was revived in my heart.

Yulia Zakurzaeva, trainer in Costanța

I prepared the workshops so that each child could participate, give their contribution and learn. During the classes, with music, I tried to create a cultural atmosphere we might experience as if we were in Ukraine. Our work was divided in seminars and practical master classes, where children had the chance to fully immerse themselves in the world of Ukrainian ICH and give their most enthusiastic contribution. It was definitely a great opportunity of sharing heritage with the youngest and for them to learn and understand our culture, feel part of it. Parents were involved and happily joined in the whole process. Being away from home, their country, they want to feel closer to their roots.

Kateryna Usenko and Ludmila Bondar, trainer in Bucharest

ICH awareness was different amongst participants, mainly because Ukrainian heritage varies across the country, from region to region. So, for the participating kids, it was extremely enriching to share their own region's customs and learn of others'. We did a cultural geography of Ukraine! And to stimulate their participation even more, we introduced creativity in our learning processes, showing how traditional art can be implemented in the modern world. Parents' participation was also very important. Including

them in the finalisation of their kids' project made them feel as if it was "part of home", as happened with the traditional embroidery project. Last, but not least. For us, it was very important to share our traditions also with Romanian kids and see how much we have in common!

Viktoriya Udodik, trainer in Suceava

My teaching technique was based on direct engagement and interaction with the kids, like quizzes and riddles but also fairy tales, legends or videos related to the history and customs of Ukraine. I tried to make them reproduce our cultural heritage. For example, during Christmas time, we recreated together a nativity scene where each child presented a carol. Cultural immersion through specific insights was my way of having kids remembering the information we sought to convey. We were trying to share Ukrainian heritage, no matter the vehicle, either through pottery or cuisine, the importance was to learn and transmit it. The project deepened kids' knowledge and awareness on Ukrainian ICH and it was valuable for me working with all of them. I will never forget their eyes looking at me when I told them the story of Ukrainian traditional bread baking during war times. I was very touched. We built together a lot of unforgettable memories.

Kyrylo Mazur, trainer in Bucharest

Together with my colleague Elena, we teamed up to give the most motivated workshops. This allowed us to make sure each child was given enough attention to enjoy and fully participate in our proposed heritage transmission activities. My personal take on heritage transmission was to share with the kids my own personal experience, from my family, what it had already been transmitted to me. Since the objective of the project was to make the kids and their family engage with heritage, their participation demonstrates how much they all got interested. Such enthusiasm shows the importance of transmitting, of creating moments dedicated to Ukrainian cultural identity, history and heritage by sharing experiences and memories together. We must remember where we came from and what it was that brought us where we are now. We cannot forget.

COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING OF UKRAINE'S LIVING HERITAGE IN ROMANIA

The project encourages the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) among displaced Ukrainians in Romania. It aims to mitigate the risk of losing direct and organic connections to ICH traditionally passed on within families and communities.

A series of thematical workshops were organised in Bucharest, Constanța and Suceava for almost 2,000 displaced Ukrainian children and young people. They offered a hands-on experience of reconnection with Ukrainian ICH. Topics and content were designed and delivered by Ukrainian trainers, but families were continuously consulted to make sure the needs of the community were met.

Trainers were selected from individuals within the community who have a professional background in education, youth work, culture, arts or crafts. They were trained by a team of ICH experts to better learn the approach and principles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention. Trainers were often in situation of social and economic vulnerability and many of them were single mothers.

Workshops strengthened social ties between children, youth, parents, trainers and broader Ukrainian displaced communities in Romania. They also fostered dialogue among individuals from various regions of Ukraine, encouraging reciprocal knowledge and inter-regional connections.

For the trainers, the project created opportunities to enhance livelihoods and develop new skills. For children, it served as a meaningful space to reconnect with their cultural heritage while supporting their socialisation and emotional well-being in a context of displacement. All-in-all, the project contributed to the resilience and active safeguarding of cultural identity and collective memory within the context of international displacement.

A handbook with lessons, good practices and guidance from the project is published in English and Ukrainian. The handbook is expected to facilitate the dissemination of the approach and methodologies applied to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage for peace promotion.

JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE ROMANIA

Jesuit Refugee Service Romania (JRS Romania) is a non-governmental organisation established in 2000. It is part of the international Catholic network JRS that is active in over 50 countries. Guided by principles of human rights, hospitality and social inclusion, JRS Romania works towards a Europe where displaced persons are welcomed and empowered.

Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, JRS Romania has played a key humanitarian role, offering support to displaced Ukrainians through access to basic needs, psychosocial services and cultural integration programmes. Main services provided are counselling, art therapy and community events that honour Ukrainian traditions and help individuals regain dignity and hope. The organisation also supports Ukrainian teachers and schools established in Romania for displaced children.

With strong ties to the Ukrainian community, JRS Romania delivers tailored services and manages cultural projects that promote resilience, education and intercultural dialogue. The organisation is thus a key partner for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage and building inclusive futures for those affected by displacement.

KIDS ARE KIDS AFTER ALL

Project Manager: Bianca Albu (JRS Romania)

Community officer: Olena Zinkevych (JRS Romania)

Curation: Ioana Baskerville (Romanian Academy – Iași Branch) and Julio Sa Rego (RHE Initiative)

Artists: Ana Petrovici-Popescu (Romania), Bruno Assis Fonseca (Portugal), Elena Orlova (Ukraine), Erien Withouck (Belgium), Izabella Coelho (Brazil), Kyrylo Mazur (Ukraine).

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