

# Ukraine is Plundering its Own Museums On the Way to Europe

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The looting of museums and the private collections of well-heeled fellow citizens seems to be an inevitable byproduct of all revolutions. The rebels Robespierre and Cromwell did so in the name of revolution, and during the fighting in the Middle East, hundreds of rare items have vanished from the national museums in Cairo and Baghdad and the Babylon Museum complex. The pandemonium at Maidan and the general free-for-all in Kiev and throughout Ukraine has also made it possible for property to be seized at will. The criminal world is extremely sensitive to social and political unrest and has moved rapidly to restore its old ties with its reliable “shady customers” from the highest echelons of power who are in the market for antiquities.



On the night of Feb. 18, 2014 unknown persons ransacked the collections of the Museum of the History of Kiev, located on the fourth and fifth floors of the Ukrainian House convention center. The museum’s storage area was devastated, and it was several months before the number of objects stolen from their displays could be determined. Some of the exhibits, such as the 19th-century tableware produced by the Volokitinsky porcelain works, were simply destroyed. Paleolithic bones were trampled under revolutionary feet.

Olga Drug, the head of the museum division, reported, “The thugs tossed a large 18th-century icon, *The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, into a corner of the room. They wrapped the image in a dress embroidered with gold and silver threads, which is over 200 years old and was only recently restored. The dress ripped. For some reason, they left the icon, but stole a porcelain sculpture of Empress Catherine II, made at the Gardner porcelain works near Moscow in 1780 and with an estimated value of \$50,000.”

Among the missing items was a knife with a blade of Damascus steel and a handle of mammoth tusk, worth \$25,000, plus a few sabers valued at about \$10,000 each. The thieves took some sacred objects from the early 20th century – the icons *The Virgin and Child*, *Christ*, and *The Ascension of the Lord*, plus an image of St. Nicholas the miracle worker. The market value of each of these icons ranges from \$2,000-\$2,500. A copy of the Gospels was also stolen (\$2,000-\$4,000). At the same time, a 19th-century sculpture of children playing the piano was snatched (\$1,500), as was a handbag from the same century (\$1,000), a silk embroidered tablecloth from the first half of the 19th century that had only just returned from the restoration studio (\$5,000), an 18th-century English clock (\$2,000-\$2,500), and much more. According to the museum staff, the estimated cost of all that was taken exceeded \$200,000.

*The builders of a “new Ukraine” have ruthlessly stolen property that is part of Ukraine’s historical heritage, pilfering not only from the past, but from the future as well.* The Museum of Gifts at the Kiev Mayor’s Office, located in the same building as Kiev’s city hall (which has been “seized by the people”) was looted. Working on a tip, they also raided collections in private homes as well as exhibits being shown at private viewings – everywhere that housed objects of interest to potential customers.

Faced with the revolutionaries’ massive exportation of stolen works of art, the Ukrainian Customs Service has stepped up inspections on the Polish and Slovak borders, as well as within Kiev. The magnitude of the contraband being seized by customs is evidence of the scale of the theft. For example, opening an unremarkable case, customs officers in Kiev discovered a rare musical instrument signed by the master Giovanni Paolo Maggini.

In the spring of 2014, the staff of the eastern customs division blocked two attempts to illegally export an 1884 icon and an 1890 Bible through the Novoazovsk customs checkpoint.

In November 2014, workers at customs control at the Borispol airport recorded yet another attempt to illegally export a large shipment of precious stones and amber weighing almost 235 kg.

Recently, customs staff in Lvov detained another group of lawbreakers trying to spirit 18 gold coins out of the country. Experts estimate the cost of each of them to be at least \$10,000. An entire collection of ancient weapons was also intercepted that had been stolen from museums in Kiev and other cities. The state returned some pictures by Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh.

Ukrainian customs officials believe that the most stable “currency” being exported today from post-revolutionary Ukraine consists of art (paintings, icons, and sculptures) and antiques (weapons, coins, jewelry, and books).

Arseniy Yatsenyuk is the “icon of style” for Ukrainian citizens who might slip an item from a museum into a bag or tuck a rare piece of jewelry into a pocket. In the spring of 2014, he announced that a collection of Scythian gold currently in the Netherlands, which had been shipped from museums in the Crimea for display at the Allard Pierson Archaeological Museum in Amsterdam, was actually the property of Ukraine.



This case includes one interesting detail. When Valentin Nalivaychenko, then the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), was in the process of being appointed the ambassador to the US in the spring of 2009, the Ukrainians decided to probe the attitude of the US State Department. Washington’s answer shocked Kiev – American officials informed them that they possessed reliable data indicating that Nalivaychenko had committed serious violations of Finnish law when he worked at the Ukrainian embassy in Helsinki. Using his diplomatic status, Nalivaychenko had set up a pipeline for smuggling antiquities. With their customary attention to detail, the Finnish police recorded every fact in writing, which naturally they shared with their American friends. They requested that the matter not proceed any further. And now, given the exceptional nature of the US-Ukrainian partnership, the US State Department has recommended that Kiev not move the issue to an official level, i.e., that

they not request agrément for the country's chief spy, suspecting that at the most inopportune moment this sensitive information might become public knowledge and have a fatal effect on the progressive development of their bilateral relations. But in fact, the CIA needed Nalivaychenko for what Washington saw as a key post – as head of the SBU. So there's the story.

*Time is passing. The valuables won during the battles of the "Revolution of Dignity" are slowly but surely trickling abroad. Apparently, Ukraine's cultural and historical heritage is being amassed in Europe to act as a dowry for an aging bride. But the Ukrainian people will most likely find themselves bereft of their valuables, their historical heritage, and even Europe itself.*

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