

Ukrainian Churches: Standing Tall in the Struggle Exhibition

David Boeck's poignant series of sketches embody the breathtaking beauty of Ukraine's churches, while chronicling a painful chapter of the nation's history

By Ayah Victoria McKhail



St Michael's Monastery in Kyiv, Ukraine

Artist: David Boeck, Ink, coloured marker, 23 x 27.5 cm

On February 9, 2025, the Taras Shevchenko Museum unveiled its first art exhibition of the year, entitled *Ukrainian Churches: Standing Tall in the Struggle*. Curated by Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, director and Olha Turko, assistant curator, it has been spiriting visitors on an epic journey through the architectural wonder of Ukraine's churches. On display is a series of sketches in ink and coloured marker by David Boeck, artist and professor emeritus at the University of Oklahoma, who's based in Norman, Oklahoma.

As he watched Russia's war on Ukraine unfold from afar, he found himself increasingly distressed by the wanton death and destruction taking place. Seeing that churches weren't spared the wrath, he began to sketch these places of sanctuary as a show of support and solidarity with Ukraine, determined to demonstrate how art can ignite a political conversation. To him, art also serves as a powerful means to reveal profound insights about the world we live in. "Art is a way to communicate stories about the culture around us."



St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv, Ukraine

Artist: David Boeck

Ink, coloured marker, 28 x 23 cm

The centrality of faith and the reverence of churches in Ukrainian culture are salient themes that are divinely conveyed in the sketches, according to Tetiana Protcheva, an internationally renowned textile artist and digital designer, who attended the opening reception in order to meet the artist and hear him speak. "I'm deeply moved by how Boeck has brought the importance of spirituality in Ukrainian culture to light, particularly during a time of war, where so many of us are relying on our faith for hope and strength. The importance of resilience is also palpable. As someone from Kyiv, I'm drawn to his sketches of churches that hold a special place in my heart. *St. Andrew's Church* and *St. Michael's Monastery* are two noteworthy examples, which are beautifully rendered."

Boeck was inspired to delve into the magnificence of Ukraine's churches at the height of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. He had long been intrigued by the distinct structure, design and style of the country's religious places of worship, where Orthodox and Catholic churches dominate the landscape, so sketching provided him with a window into their unique characteristics. "I began researching images of Ukraine's many churches online. I'd examine them from different angles and then I'd begin sketching. Throughout the process, I gained a greater understanding of Ukraine's history and politics."



Orthodox Church in Kyiv, Ukraine

Artist: David Boeck, Ink, coloured marker, 14 x 23 cm

At the exhibition's opening reception, where Larissa Stavroff, a cultural worker at the museum served as the master of ceremonies, that history and the politics intertwined with Ukraine's churches are subjects that were illuminated in the keynote address by Dr. Frank Sysyn, director of the Petro Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) in Edmonton, Alberta, and head of the executive committee for the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium in Toronto. A prolific writer, one of his books, which he authored with Serhii Plokhy, is entitled *Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine*, whereas another, which was edited with Martin Schulze Wessel is entitled, *Religion, Nation, and Secularization in Ukraine*.

Dr. Sysyn found the exhibition to be compelling, noting the significance of Boeck's sketches as artefacts, since they document the defilement of Ukraine's churches. "Not only has he depicted churches as they are, but he has also sketched them

as they were engulfed in flames, revealing the extent of the desecration.” A few examples are: *Orthodox Church in Kyiv, Ukraine* and two sketches with the same title, *All Saints Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery in Tetyanivka, Donetsk oblast’, Ukraine*, but in different sizes.



**All Saints Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery in Tetyanivka,
Donetsk oblast', Ukraine**

Artist: David Boeck, Ink, coloured marker, 14 x 24 cm

The exhibition also resonated with Oleh Wolodymyr Iwanusiw, president of the Encyclopedia Foundation of Ukraine. He's the author of *Church in Ruins*, a historical record, which painstakingly documents the destruction of churches in Ukraine. Published in 1987, among its many notable aspects are examples of Lemko and Boyko wooden sacral architecture. “As someone who has documented the destruction of Ukraine's churches due to various reasons in the past, Boeck's sketches centre our focus on present day examples of the damage and destruction that Ukraine's churches have been subjected to; giving us pause for reflection. This exhibition revives an interest in both the glory and pain surrounding Ukraine's churches.”



**All Saints Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery
in Tetyanivka, Donetsk oblast', Ukraine**

Artist: David Boeck, Ink, coloured marker,
13.5 x 19 cm

The entwinement of glory and pain was on full display in an elegiac slideshow, which was shown at the exhibition. It depicted images of churches across Ukraine that have been damaged or destroyed by Russian missile strikes and artillery fire throughout the war. As agonizing images and detailed descriptions flashed across the screen, a sombre mood fell over the museum as Tetiana Cherneta, former associate professor at Borys Hrinchenko University in Kyiv played on bandura, while her son, Denys Trokhymenko, played the violin.

Iris Sopinka, a retired French teacher who volunteers at the museum and is an amateur art collector, found herself upset over the extent of the damage and destruction that was revealed. “There’s an inviolability to Ukraine’s churches, which I hope will be restored, as these are places of sanctity that should always be protected.”

Yurij Klufas, chair and president of the Ukrainian Canadian Art Foundation concurred. And as he absorbed the magnitude of the exhibition in its entirety, he found himself struck by its emotional resonance. “The sketches stir the soul; they’re both harrowing and beautiful. It’s also terrific to see how an interactive component was included in the day’s event,” he said, referring to a tutorial on urban sketching, which Boeck led whereby the Holy Ascension Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Maryville, Saskatchewan was the focus.

As the opening reception came to a close, Boeck found himself heartened by the widespread interest the exhibition generated. “It’s been a truly meaningful experience to meet so many people and to hear about how my sketches resonated with them. It has also been wonderful to see that so many Ukrainians who have fled the war have found a home in Canada, just as many have in the United States.”

As his thoughts turned back to Ukraine, he said, “It has been devastating to bear witness to everything that has happened over the last three years. The damage and destruction levelled on churches has been staggering. My prayer is that they’ll be rebuilt and restored.”

The “Ukrainian Churches: Standing Tall in the Struggle” art exhibition can be viewed at the Taras Shevchenko Museum until **February 28, 2025**

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Gallery hours: Mon, Tues, Weds, Fri: 10 a.m.-4p.m., Thurs: 12-7 p.m., and weekends
by appointment

www.shevchenko.ca



About Ayah Victoria McKhail

Ayah Victoria McKhail is a Toronto-based journalist who is passionate about arts and culture reporting. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, such as the Literary Review of Canada, the *WholeNote*, and newspapers affiliated with the East Coast's SaltWire Network.