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Ukraine's museums scramble to protect their collections.



An exhibition in 2021 at the National Art Museum of Ukraine, one of many large museums in Kyiv. Yuliia Ovsianikova /Ukrinform, via Getty Images

KYIV, Ukraine — At 4:30 a.m. on Thursday, Ihor Poshyvailo, the director of the Museum of Freedom here, was woken by the sound of explosions.

He rushed outside to the street and saw airplanes flying overhead, he said. An hour later, he was in a meeting with officials from Ukraine's Ministry of Culture trying to work out how the country's museums could protect their collections.

"We had plans for what to do prewar," Poshyvailo said, "but now it is a war, it's totally different."

By the time they considered evacuating the museum's most prized objects from Kyiv, the roads were already clogged with Ukrainians fleeing west, and they realized it would not be possible, Poshyvailo said.

Although talk of conflict in Ukraine has been building for weeks, some of the country's museums were badly prepared when shelling and rocket attacks began and Russian troops entered the country Thursday morning. Even if museums and other cultural sites are unlikely to be direct targets of Russian aggression, administrators worry about the security of their collections if fighting escalates and enters urban areas. Some were concerned that Russian nationalists could attack institutions that put forward Ukrainian historical and cultural narratives.



The exterior of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, in Kyiv. The museum's director said he was worried the building could be a target for rocket attacks. Chris McGrath/Getty Images

Ukraine is home to thousands of museums, ranging from small, private institutions to major state-owned collections in Kyiv, the capital, and Odessa, a port city on the Black Sea. The state collections include significant works of Ukrainian and Russian art; classical and Byzantine artifacts; and paintings by Bellini, Goya, Rubens and Jacques-Louis David.

The Museum of Freedom, which was founded in 2014, features a collection of around 4,000 objects associated with Ukraine's pro-democracy struggles, including banners and artworks. Poshyvailo said he feared for some items if Russian troops entered Kyiv before the objects had been moved to safety.

"Our museum is evidence of Ukraine's fight for freedom," he said. "Of course I'm fearful."

State museums, including the Museum of Freedom, need government permission to remove items from their buildings, a process involving a lot of paperwork. Poshyvailo said he applied to do that earlier this month, but other museums hadn't, and the government had done nothing to make it easier for them as tensions grew in recent weeks.

Poshyvailo said he was moving items from his museum's collection to storage, but declined to give further details.

He declined to lay blame on Ukraine's government for a lack of preparation or guidance. "It's not the government that has done this," he said. "It's Putin."

A damaged car on display at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, which also tells the story of Ukraine's involvement in other conflicts. Alamy

Another Kyiv museum whose administrators feared for its collection is the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, which also tells the story of Ukraine's involvement in other conflicts, including its war with Russia in the country's east starting in 2014. Yuriy Savchuk, the museum's director, said he and his staff worked for 12 hours from 6 a.m. on Thursday to move the museum's most important exhibits to a safe location. It was "a great feat," he said.

The museum, which stands under Kyiv's landmark Motherland monument, was a possible target for rocket attacks, he said.

Aleksandra Kovalchuk, the director of the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, said in a WhatsApp message that museum employees were "doing the only thing that we can" to protect its collection. That meant, she said, "hiding arts to the basement. Trying to arrange security. Barbed wire."

The Odessa Fine Arts Museum's collection includes more than 10,000 objects ranging from Russian and Ukrainian religious icons, dating to the 16th century and works by contemporary Ukrainian artists. Its events director, Ulyana Dovgan, said the museum was closed on Thursday. Ukraine's Interior Ministry said that Russian troops had landed in the city.

Sergiy Lebedynsky, the director of the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography, in an area close to the Russian border that was shelled throughout the day, said in an email on Monday that much of his museum's collection was in storage in Germany while the museum was being renovated. He would probably "have to evacuate the rest of our collection this week," he said. Lebedynsky did not reply to requests to comment on Thursday.