

## UKRAINE BENEATH



# Preserving Precious Ukrainian Heritage in Melbourne

*The Ukrainian Museum of Australia is an entirely volunteer-run community organisation housed at the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in North Melbourne. The Museum holds a remarkable collection of objects, including rare books, folk and religious art, craft and textiles. The Museum's large collection of traditional embroidered items poses special challenges when it comes to preservation and protection from pests, mould and other hazards.*

*In 2023 SHAPS supported the Museum's team of dedicated volunteers in their work through the provision of a half-day workshop designed to offer basic training in caring for the collection. **Grimwade Conservation Services** experts Dr Holly Jones-Amin (Principal Conservator and Team Leader) and Dr Reyhane Mirabootalebi (Principal Textiles Conservator) took to the floor to demonstrate how small community organisations can care for their heritage collections. Recent Cultural Materials Conservation graduate **Genevieve Schiesser** reflects on the afternoon below.*

“Mister Putin says we don't exist – but look around this room”, says Maru Jarockyj, Director of the Ukrainian Museum of Australia (UMA), “we're here and we'll be here for a long time still.”

Maru was referring to Vladimir Putin’s notorious claim that “there’s no such thing as Ukraine”. In the context of the Putin regime’s brutal assault against Ukraine, aimed at destroying all traces of Ukrainian identity and history, the UMA collection is all the more precious. As Maru pointed out, these objects represent important and vivid material evidence that demonstrates the falsity of Putin’s claims. Ukrainian history and culture is embodied and reflected in these objects, many of which were collected and brought here by members of Australia’s Ukrainian diaspora.



*Ukrainian embroidered textiles, 2023. Photographer: Winter Greet. Ukrainian Museum of Australia*

Conservators, in the broadest of senses, work to make objects last longer. However, it is not only the object itself but also the story it contains that we seek to preserve. [Zekrgoo and Barkeshli \(2005\)](#) encapsulate this idea in their metaphor for the heritage object as the “body” which houses the “soul”—the culture itself, given tangible form by the object.

In the collections at the UMA we find body and soul firmly united and on proud display. Traditional Ukrainian textiles adorn hangers and busts and vibrant ceramics line the walls. Paintings, books, *pysanky* (decorated Easter eggs) and historical religious iconography are also some of the many objects that are kept safe in the community’s care.



*Detail of embroidered Ukrainian textiles, 2023. Photographer: Winter Greet.  
Ukrainian Museum of Australia*

When one is outside of a cultural community it can be easy to incorrectly understand the ties that a community has with its heritage. The afternoon I spent at the UMA reinforced how we must continue to bear witness to the cultural identities of others. When surrounded by these objects, the importance of Ukrainian culture for the members of its community is not easily lost. Painted, dyed, carved, sewn or inscribed into these objects are individual and nuanced expressions of the enduring Ukrainian identity. The museum volunteers take immense pride in their history and generously share their heritage with us.

Restricted access to resources is an unfortunate but common part of reality for small community cultural centres such as the UMA. The workshop held by Grimwade Conservation Services aimed at transferring conservation knowledge on caring for important collections through preventive methods that can be undertaken with sustainable and inexpensive measures in mind.

# A Guide to Caring for Small Collections: Preventive Methods

It is not the object itself but the environment in which it exists that causes deterioration. When wood swells, for instance, this is due to the moisture content in the air. When paint fades, this is due to the amount of light to which it's exposed. The phrase "prevention is better than cure" is very apt here, for it is the preventive methods of looking after heritage collections that are the most accessible and financially sustainable. In this case, preventive conservation means monitoring the environment of the object so as to minimise deterioration.

Preventive conservation is an easy way that a small community can begin assessing and addressing the needs of their collections. This can be undertaken through monitoring the light, temperature and relative humidity of the room, and how collection objects are handled and stored. The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) endorses the '[10 Agents of Change](#)', a fact sheet and conservation discourse that brings attention to how objects deteriorate in an accessible and uncomplicated way. These agents are light, temperature, humidity, dissociation (or neglect) and chemical deterioration – all of which will be discussed below – but also includes physical force, damage, fire, water, pests, theft and vandalism. These agents might seem overwhelming to consider at first, especially for a collection like the UMA's, which comprises over 20,000 books alone. However, when you break down the facts, implementing preventive measures can be well within one's means.

## Temperature and Humidity

When it comes to the effects of temperature and humidity on objects, Holly Jones-Amin puts it simply: "the object wants to be the same as the room." Objects respond to the room they are placed in, just as wood swells or shrinks in response to humidity. One especially dramatic example in the UMA collection is an intricately carved beeswax column depicting moments in Ukrainian history. If this column gets too hot, it may become soft or melt; if it gets too cold, it can become brittle and crack. Either way, this would mean lamentable damage of this precious and unique object.

There are international museum standards for temperature and humidity but, for communities that don't have access to large scale air conditioning or HVAC systems or, [for institutions operating in non-temperate climates](#), keeping a room in conditions that meet these standards can be difficult. What may be more achievable is to meet your collection where it is – in the environment in which it already exists – and think about how you might try to prevent large fluctuations in temperature or humidity. A stable environment means that the structure of objects will not be subject to change so frequently, and therefore be less susceptible to damage.



*Dr Holly Jones-Amin explains the method for dry brush cleaning heritage textiles, 2023. L to R: Ukrainian Museum of Australia Volunteers and Dr Holly Jones-Amin.  
Photographer: Gen Schiesser*

## Chemical Deterioration

Chemical deterioration refers to changes to an object's surface or structure due to chemical changes. Sometimes these changes can be caused by the materials in which the object is stored. For example, most cardboard boxes are quite acidic and can negatively impact an object over time. Therefore, it is best to source archival quality boxes via companies that specialise in these types of storage options such as [Archival Survival](#), [Zetta Florence](#) and [Conservation Supplies Australia](#).

If archival boxes are beyond your budget, it may be cheaper to source a single type of archival wrap, such as Tyvek, and use it as a barrier layer between the object and the box or support it is in contact with. A barrier layer is also useful for objects on display, such between fabrics and their mounts. Good barriers should be made from polyethylene plastic, which is a stable material. You can create a barrier between the object and its support by covering non-archival (acidic) cardboard tubes, coat hangers and containers that you already have with conservation materials such as **Mylar**<sup>®</sup>, **Tyvek**<sup>®</sup>, cotton prewashed in hot water (with no soap) to remove sizing and additives, and polyethylene plastic.



*Dr Reyhane Mirabootalebi demonstrates conservation-standard packing procedures for heritage textiles, 2023. L to R: Dr Reyhane Mirabootalebi, Dr Holly Jones-Amin and Volunteers from the Ukrainian Museum of Australia. Photographer: Gen Schiesser*

## Dissociation (Neglect)

When objects are not photographed or well-documented, information about them may be lost over time. Ensuring your objects are photographed, numbered and documented, and that the information is kept somewhere safe (in both hardcopy and electronic form) is a good start. Documenting your collection does not need to be done all at once. In fact, most museums will document their collections gradually in concurrence with another task such as stocktake or rehousing.

## Clutter Theory

Sometimes contemplating the work that needs to be done is enough to make you feel overwhelmed, but Holly Jones-Amin emphasises that you don't have to do everything all at once. When you can, start by viewing your collection section by section and evaluating what needs to be done. It is also important to appreciate the work that has been put into the collection already and acknowledge that not everything needs to be changed – sometimes things just need to be updated.



*Dr Holly Jones-Amin examines deterioration on the Plashchenytsia burial shroud, 2023. Photographer Gen Schiesser*

The UMA houses some of the most beautifully photographed and accessioned objects I have seen. It is easy to appreciate how heartily the Ukrainian heritage is cared for within the community. A large store of *pysanky* that have been collected over the years all have tiny individual accession numbers attached to the bottom. The *pysanky* are wonderfully intricate in their design; no less wonderfully intricate are the signs of how they have been cared for.

But the *pysanky* are just one example of the soul of the Ukrainian community embodied. The collection store contains many relics of Ukrainian religious and folk craft: *vyshyvanka* (traditional Ukrainian embroidered clothing), priest vestments, paintings and icons. These items all make up chapters in the long narrative of vibrant Ukrainian culture and history.

## The Body and the Soul, the Tree and its Root

Conservation is often understood on a global scale: we might think of [the scaffolding around the Colosseum](#) to facilitate its cleaning, the human-like face in the Van Eyck's [Adoration of the Mystic Lamb](#), [the sketches beneath the Mona Lisa](#). But these high-profile examples are only a miniscule portion of what conservation is. Conservators like Dr Jones-Amin and Dr Mirabootalebi also work toward making their skills accessible to small communities who can then implement it self-sufficiently. The importance of outreach through workshops like this one cannot be understated.



*Detail of embroidered Ukrainian textiles, 2023. Photographer: Winter Greet. Ukrainian Museum of Australia*

The Ukrainian community museum in North Melbourne continues to act as a home away from home, safekeeping the knowledge and objects of Ukrainian culture. Maru Jarockyj hopes one day to send some of their vast collection back to Ukraine as a means of restitution, so that the heritage that has been destroyed through the Russian war of aggression may one day be reconciled. The museum volunteers are aware of the magnitude of their collection and the work that is ahead of them. But this magnitude is also what they are proud of. Every single object in their store is further proof of their identity, legitimacy and sovereignty.



“We have history”, says Deacon Michael Zylan, “we have roots.”

Through the help of these workshops, and the tireless and dedicated commitment of community volunteers, conservation and heritage care continue to be the soil nourishing these roots.



*Embroidered Ukrainian textiles, 2023. Photographer: Winter Greet. Ukrainian Museum of Australia*

Further reading and resources:

- Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) ***Agents of Change: 10 Agents Over 10 Months***. AICCM, 2021.
- Museums Australia (Victoria), ***The Small Museums Cataloguing Manual***. Museums Australia (Victoria), Melbourne, 2009.
- Garry Thomson, ***Museum Environment***, Second Edition. Routledge, 1994.
- Southeastern Registrars Association, (Deborah Rose Van Horne, Corrine Midgett & Heather Culligan [eds.]). ***Basic Condition Reporting: A Handbook***, Fifth Edition. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

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*The Ukrainian Museum of Australia's current exhibition, [Treasures](#), is open to the public every Sunday from 10am to 1pm, with free entry. The exhibition runs until March 2025.*

Feature image: Embroidered Ukrainian map (Вишивана Україна. Мапа вишита луганськими майстринями), 2013. Artist: Qypchak via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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