

Ukrainian Art Immediately Following Independence:  
An Exhibition in Anticipation of a Fund-Raising Auction  
Castleton University

By Joe Mark

**Background**

In January of 1993, Castleton State College Professor of Art Bill Ramage traveled to Ukraine to meet members of the art community in Kiev, now Kyiv. A friend of his, an American physicist with expertise in Titanium, had gone there on business and met some of the newly independent nation's artists. He'd told them about his friend Bill and encouraged them to reach out to him. They did.

After developing a long-distance relationship through the mail, Bill was invited to Kyiv to put up one of his large installations. He traveled at his own expense, but hosts, Vladimir and Irena Veshtak, generously extended their hospitality during his two weeks in the country. Irena brought Bill all over the city to show him the sights and introduce him to numerous artist friends. A couple of times they took the bus, which was free, mostly they walked.

**Kyiv in 1993**

At the time of Bill's visit, seven years post-Chernobyl, 16 months after the dissolution of the USSR, and one year into Ukraine's independence, Kyiv still seemed a much-neglected, rundown Soviet city. "A city completely in decay." Its once-elegant, Neoclassical public buildings were in terrible condition. Modifications made under the Soviets were of dismal quality. There was no evidence of craftsmanship, concern for standards, or pride of work. Heat and electricity were in short supply.

Vladimir introduced Bill to a phrase common in the Soviet Union, "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work."

The few food stores were nearly barren. Gas stations didn't exist. Getting a couple gallons of precious petrol meant meeting someone in an alley. Irena had run out of tea, so for the whole time Bill was in Kyiv, in their travels around the city, they stopped at every store. Irena still had no tea when Bill returned to the U.S.

**Art in Ukraine in 1993**

The art community, too, was struggling to recover from decades of oppressive Soviet domination. During those grim times, artists were cut off from colleagues outside the USSR. They hadn't heard of Jackson Pollack. They knew only a bit about Andy Warhol—something about Coca Cola bottles. Probably the Western graphic image they were most familiar with was Mickey Mouse.

For decades, their work was almost exclusively devoted to producing Communist propaganda. Essentially no other art was allowed, certainly not rewarded. Art supplies were virtually unavailable except for the purposes of propaganda. But artists who did the government's bidding were treated well. Many even owned *dachas*, second homes in the country. Because being an artist for the State was a prestigious, much sought-after position, the life of students at the art academy was highly competitive and pressure-filled but extremely dreary. All the emphasis was on skill development; there was no room for creativity. The sole goal was to win 5s on all your assignments. Only those who consistently earned this highest score were admitted to the Union of Artists of Ukraine, which was a meal ticket in those days. Reflecting on his exposure to the life of artists in Kyiv, Bill said, "I was astounded at how joyless it was."

But by 1989, a growing independence movement brought dramatic change to the art being produced in Kyiv. Many artists left the themes of Soviet propaganda behind and turned to subjects that reflected their own views of the world and conditions in Ukraine. To quote Beth Miller, who spent significant time with the Veshtaks during their visit:

*They were not promoting a government view, but a people's view. There's commentary on the destruction caused by Chernobyl; there's commentary on keeping tradition while moving forward into modern society; there's a poster from their very first biennial exhibition—a hugely progressive opportunity for artists.*

### **Bill's installation**

Bill Ramage is a multi-talented artist with strong skills in a variety of disciplines, including drawing, painting, and sculpture. He is also well read and deeply thoughtful about art. During the period leading up to his Ukraine trip, he was particularly invested in producing large, indoor installations that demonstrated his passionate interest in perception and perspective. While Bill normally created his installations *in situ*, this wasn't going to be possible in Kyiv. The piece he planned was to be 24-feet by 45-feet, and he had already learned that art supplies were almost nonexistent in Ukraine. Bill knew he would have to create the installation in his Rutland, Vermont, studio and take it with him.

It's fair to assume that none of the artists Bill interacted with in Kyiv had ever conceived, much less seen, anything like the art Bill was making.

While language differences undoubtedly made dialog challenging, it must have been fascinating to eavesdrop on the intercultural sharing taking place. The Kyiv artists had many questions for Bill, including how one makes a living on art in America. Here's a photo of Bill's installation titled "The Great Gates of Kiev."

### **Returning the favor**

Following Bill's visit to Kyiv and given the strong friendships he had developed during his time there, it only made sense to invite Irena and Vladimir to the US.



Bill pitched this idea to the Castleton administration, which agreed to underwrite the costs of the exchange.

Along with their modest luggage, Irena and Vladimir arrived with approximately 50 dramatically effective posters in hopes of selling them. Few sold. (A subset of these posters will be arrayed in the Gallery of the Calvin Coolidge Library later this month.) But they also came prepared to mount an exhibition of original drawings, prints, and watercolors they and other Ukrainian artists had produced. These were displayed in Castleton's Christine Price Gallery.

Irena and Vladimir's visit also provided the opportunity for two other special events. Bill had been selected by the Vermont State Colleges' Board of Trustees for the prestigious Faculty Fellow award, and this required a public address. Bill chose to focus that presentation on his visit to Kyiv. On a separate occasion, Irena shared what it was like to be an artist in Ukraine. For her talk, the college was fortunate to be able to engage the translation services of Patty Winpenny, a Pawlet, Vermont, teacher with strong Ukrainian language skills.

Irena and Vladimir spent more than a week in America, and the experience was eye-opening, thrilling, and in some ways almost shocking. Even a visit to a Rutland food store that we might take for granted—should I call it a *supermarket*?—overwhelmed them. They had never seen such variety and abundance.

And Bill also got them out of Vermont. Securing the use of a college van, he, Vladimir, Irena, and half a dozen students traveled to New York City and Washington, D.C. Imagine our guests' awe after all those years of living amidst the dearth and dreariness of Soviet-controlled Ukraine. Imagine, too, American students seeing their own country through Vladimir and Irena's eyes!

It was a wonderful artistic and cultural exchange from which all benefited greatly.

### **Fast forward to 2022**

And now, of course, we worry terribly about Irena and Vladimir, their families, and friends.

Russia began a vicious invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Valorous resistance by Ukraine's military as well as its people has thus far thwarted Russia's efforts to conquer their neighbor; but with every passing day, the bombing becomes only more destructive and lethal. Already two million people have fled the country. The humanitarian crisis, both within Ukraine and in those border countries accepting refugees is unprecedented in the history of the continent. We want to help. Surely, many others do as well.

Eleven Ukrainian posters from the early-1990s will be on display in the gallery of the Calvin Coolidge Library at Castleton University from Monday, March 14, through Friday, March 25.

At 4:30 pm on Thursday, March 24, Rutland artist Bill Ramage will deliver a gallery talk about his visit to Ukraine and its art scene thirty years ago. Following the exhibit, the posters will be sent to the Rennert's Gallery in NYC to be auctioned. All funds raised through the auction will be contributed to Ukrainian Medical Association of North America.

For more information on the auction and dates, please contact Beth Miller at [bethmiller817@gmail.com](mailto:bethmiller817@gmail.com).