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# Blacksmithing Art in the Cultural and Art Environment of Ukraine

## ХУДОЖНЕ КОВАЛЬСЬКЕ МИСТЕЦТВО У КУЛЬТУРНО-МИСТЕЦЬКОМУ ПРОСТОРІ УКРАЇНИ

**Abstract.** The paper analyzes the body of literature on the blacksmithing art and delineates the main lines of study of the latter as a phenomenon of contemporary culture and art. Reconsideration of the experience of the blacksmiths, both craftsmen and artists, contributes to revealing the national, regional, and local cultural features, as the culture of blacksmithing art, on the one hand, is linked to the past, and on the other hand it serves as a modern representation and symbol of the nation.

The aim of the work is to study Ukrainian blacksmithing art in the sociocultural context of contemporary time.

Methodologically, the research was based on generalization, on the systemic-structural, and structural-functional methods that enabled revealing and examining the traditional and innovative basis of Ukrainian blacksmithing art in the cultural and art environment of Ukraine.

*Keywords:* blacksmithing art, blacksmithing, craft, culture, tradition.

**Problem statement.** The need to preserve national cultural heritage and create the best possible grounds for the development of Ukrainian art and culture requires an in-depth study of all genres of folk art. Blacksmithing is one of the traditional folk art forms, which nature, type, historical existence, and art features reveal an indissoluble unity with the ancient folk traditions. It is also a powerful source that nourishes the creativity of professional artists. Blacksmithing in Ukraine, due to a number of factors, including historical ones, had a unique line of development; social attitudes towards blacksmithing, both towards art and craft, underwent numerous changes. For instance, in the European states, the society treated the works of blacksmithing art and the masters with respect, and art historians identified the decorative blacksmithing pieces in the interiors of palaces and temples as the works of art of their own right. In Ukraine, despite the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century being a golden age of Ukrainian blacksmithing, when carefully crafted blacksmithing pieces appeared nearly all over Ukraine, in the landlords' estates, in the palaces and gardens, in cities and in small villages, blacksmithing, nevertheless, unlike the other forms of art, was long considered a craft and only over some time

it was categorized as a form of decorative and applied art. Interestingly, Ukrainian researchers, both of art and of culture, initiated a profound study of Ukrainian blacksmithing art only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. During the 1920s through the 1980s, resulting from a number of factors, there were only scarce studies of blacksmithing as an art and cultural phenomenon; the development of blacksmithing art that was forcibly interrupted since the first years of Soviet power and until the 1970s. That had virtually put blacksmithing creativity to a halt, with only the blacksmithing craft still surviving, mostly in the countryside. Powerful furnaces at the industrial plants had some resemblance to the blacksmithing craft but the profession of blacksmithing artist became extinct in Ukraine until the 1960s.

Development of blacksmithing as a form of folk art was determined by the specific historical background of the nation, by its level of life and by the socio-cultural-processes in the state. Throughout history, blacksmithing, along with other forms of folk art, played a significant role in the culture of Ukrainians which embodies their national identity and national traditions. However, as a separate genre of folk art and a unique art form, Ukrainian blacksmithing and its

development requires further research, as there still are many unanswered questions that need addressing.

The significance of blacksmithing art during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was actualized with that fact that blacksmithing is an embodiment of the Ukrainian national worldview formed for centuries. Also, reconsideration of the experience of craftsmen and artists who worked in the domain of blacksmithing will contribute to the verification of historical and cultural processes that influenced its development; it will aid in revealing national, regional, and local specifics because the culture of Ukrainian blacksmithing, on the one hand, is linked to the past, but on the other hand it has been representing and symbolically denominating the nation as a whole now.

**Literature review.** Theoretical and methodological foundations of the work are both generalizing and fundamental research works in art history, theory, and cultural history, etc. Until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the studies of blacksmithing art in Ukraine were practically non-existent. At the same time, in the European states scholars have extensively researched blacksmithing and jewelry art. During this period, the translations of the foreign publications on the subject appear in Ukraine that, in general, cover the history of jewelry art. Among such publications are the works of Basil William Anderson (Anderson, 1983), Erhard Brepohl (Brepohl, 1982), Alfred Lukas (Lukas, 1958), G. F. Herbert Smith (Smith, 1984), etc. Unfortunately, the abovementioned inquiries were published only in Russian translations. Nevertheless, at the time, for the self-taught blacksmiths, it was an essential material, as the many jewelry technological processes were equivalent to blacksmithing ones. In this context, the textbook *Blacksmithing Art and Lockmongery* (1982) by Gustav Semerák and Karl Bohmann (Semerák & Bohmann, 1982) should be also mentioned. The book covered in detail the techniques and technological sequence of producing jewelry and blacksmithing pieces. In 1978, Ukrainian artist and art historian Liudmyla Zhohol published her seminal work *Decorative Art in the Interiors of Public Buildings*, which had a special focus on art metalworks (Zhohol, 1978).

During the 1990s, Ukrainian researchers initiate more profound studies of blacksmithing art, the first doctoral dissertations on the subject emerge: “Art metal in the architecture of Kyiv of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” (Mohylevskiy, 1990), “Blacksmithing of Ukraine (mid-19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Art features, typology of items” (Bonkovska, 1994).

By the early 2000s, the number of art and cultural research works on the development of Ukrainian jewelry art and blacksmithing art increased. The following periodicals were published: *24 karaty* (24 carats), *Yuvelirnyi visnyk* (Jewelry Bulletin), *Zhurnal pro metal* (Journal on metal), *Svit metalu* (The World of metal), *Kovalska maisternia* (Blacksmithing shop). A number of papers on blacksmithing art were published by the periodical of the National Union of Artists of Ukraine *Obrazotvorche mystetstvo* (Fine Art) and the academic journal of the Modern Art Research Institute, *MIST*.

Inclusion of the issues of blacksmithing to the agenda of academic conferences was another important stage in the research of Ukrainian and global art of forged metal. For instance, in 2019 the International Scientific and Practical Conference “Art Metal. Visions of Future” was organized by the Modern Art Research Institute of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine, “Sviato kovaliv” and Ring of European Cities of Iron Works NGOs, Ivano-Frankivsk City Council, and fortress gallery Bastion in Ivano-Frankivsk. The proceedings of the conference were published under the eponymous title “Art Metal. Visions of Future.” Svitlana Rohotchenko, a postgraduate student of the Modern Art Research Institute, moderated the discussion. Investigations on the problems of blacksmithing art have repeatedly been a subject of academic conferences at the Modern Art Research Institute of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine and at the other fellow institutions in Ukraine and abroad, with the research fellows of the Institute participating. In addition, during this period, the academic journals of the Modern Art Research Institute published the papers that addressed the issues of development of Ukrainian blacksmithing as an interrupted process. A separate note must be made for the exclusive trilogy *Encyclopedia of Art Metal* by Rostyslav Shmahalo where the scholar presents blacksmithing art as a multifaceted trans-cultural phenomenon and creative legacy of contemporary Ukrainian artists and the artists originally from Ukraine is viewed in the holistic context.

The **aim** of the paper is to study Ukrainian blacksmithing art in the sociocultural context of contemporary time.

**Results and Discussion.** The history of blacksmithing as an art and as a craft is a significant component of the art and cultural history of Ukraine. The facts on blacksmithing could be discovered in the state and city chronicles, guild statutes, notes of foreign travelers, etc. Blacksmithing craft is considered to be one of the most ancient in the territory of modern Ukraine. Excavations of the Kyivan Rus period prove the existence of blacksmithing pieces produced by craftsmen that were common household items. Since these ancient times, blacksmithing shops emerge as separate professional production sites (Figol, 1997).

A blacksmithing shop, or a “smithy”, its colloquial name during the middle ages, required specific equipment. Numerous archaeological expeditions in the Central Ukraine revealed the remnants on such smithing enterprises: “These are the smithies at the villages of Dorohynka (Fastiv district), of Desnianska (right bank of the Desna river near the Litochky village), on the farm near modern Boyarka. Practically each of the mentioned excavations found forging furnaces and pieces of metal that prove the blacksmithing use of the furnaces” (Rohotchenko, 2018, p. 97). The typology of metalwork was based on household needs. During the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries, forged metal pieces become household necessities. It is, for instance, a door lock with a latch, without which a house at the time was unimaginable. Such a lock, produced by a blacksmith, was an essential element both for housing and outbuildings. Nearly all homes had an oven for heating and cooking. Such ovens had metal doors

that could be produced only in the smithy and the chimney had a hovel (a device protecting a chimney from rain and snow). The hovel was also forged in the smithy.

Monasteries often had the forges of their own. Churches commissioned sophisticated book covers, as well as decorated frames for icons and books. As for the blacksmithing items, the commissions included doors, crosses, and constructions for the domes, bells, fences, and bars. "Church commissions" always received special treatment as the results were viewed by hundreds of people for the years to come. Hence, the blacksmithing guilds were one of the first professional enterprises since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Traditionally, the smithies were the centers of attraction for other related metal trades, i. e., goldsmiths and jewelers. With time, each specialization had its separate guilds and production lines. Industrial blacksmithing and blacksmithing art of the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries developed under their own scenario. Large, powerful, and influential blacksmithing guilds (plants, in the modern sense), as well as small smithing enterprises, emerge throughout Ukraine. Urban production, predominantly targeting the needs of urban development, was fundamentally different from the one-man rural forges which produced the items predominantly for agricultural purposes.

The need in blacksmithing enterprises set the ground for the development of blacksmithing shops and guilds in most regions of Ukraine. Blacksmithing guilds emerge both in the cities and towns and in the countryside. The guilds were named fraternities. The documents of the Kyiv, Ovruch, Kovel, Nizhyn, Chernihiv, Fastiv blacksmithing guilds survived centuries of historical turmoil. In 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were enough commissions for all the guilds. Still, the subsequent shift to capitalist relations inflicted a crashing blow on the patriarchal system of blacksmithing craft. Since the 1890s, the grand urban redevelopment starts; obviously, Kyiv, the capital at the time, becomes the first city to be redeveloped. The mass demand for blacksmithing pieces resulted in the rapid development of blacksmithing enterprises. When the professional guilds emerged, so did the schools of blacksmithing. These institutions provided blacksmithing training. Economic development of blacksmithing enterprises enabled their owners to initiate specialized training of their own staff. However, capitalism had a rather negative impact on the development of blacksmithing, as the guild system went into decline. A capitalist, an owner, who trained the master craftsman and covered this education, was not willing to let the apprentice go. This way, the first social tensions in the professional environment emerged.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the smithies in the landlord's estates, from the point of view of blacksmithing art, were unique productions. There are historical data about the smithies at the estates of the Pototski, Galagan, and Tereschenko noble families. Such smithies were neither industrial nor truly rural enterprises. Their scenario of development included both meeting the needs of agricultural production of the estate and of housing construction. Often, such blacksmithing shops also produced the decorative pieces, e.g. the park furniture: gazebos, benches, fountains, lanterns, and heraldic elements.

Since the baroque period and until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the landlords' desire to decorate their estate resulted in numerous wrought fences, bars, chimneys, porches, and park furniture produced by Ukrainian blacksmiths. These pieces were of competitive quality. During the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century, metal sculpture was in fashion, and it was produced mostly in blacksmithing shops.

The turn of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Kyiv was marked with extensive urban development, both in the city center and outskirts. This included multi-storey buildings and one- or two-storey mansions with elaborate decorations. The architecture of the period welcomed wrought metal and casting. Also, the construction industry required large quantities of balcony grills, fences, balcony lattices, and visors over the front entrance.

Promising development of the blacksmithing art during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was abruptly interrupted at its peak. The October Revolution and its outcome have negatively impacted Ukrainian blacksmithing art. Literally, since 1917, the most of the working blacksmithing workshops were closed. Obviously, amid the consequences of the First World War, revolutions, and coups, the subsequent sociocultural policy of the Bolsheviks was not favorable for the development of the arts. By the early 1920s, blacksmithing as an art became practically extinct both in the capital of Ukraine and in the provinces. The grim result of the closure of blacksmithing enterprises was the total elimination of the profession of the blacksmithing artist. The revolutionary processes in the domain of politics of Ukraine negatively impacted its culture. The studios of religious fine art closed down, jewelry production almost vanished, 95 % of the existing urban forges around the state stopped operating. The traditions of blacksmithing mastery, rooted back in Scythian times, were halted for half a century. Totalitarian regime forbade the very existence of blacksmithing art as an art of the ruling classes. The remaining forges survived without the artists in their staff, producing only small everyday household pieces. This forced halt of the art of "big metal" lasted until the 1970s, when Oleksandr Milovzorov, Anatolii Haidamaka, Oleh Stasiuk, Volodymyr Pakhomov, Victor Sholomiy, Oleh Bonkovskiy, Volodymyr Diomin, and others produced their first artworks in metal. Blacksmithing art of the 1980s–1990s is marked with the purposeful use of all the richness of traditional forms of composition structures. The experiments with decorative expressiveness continue and the blacksmithing pieces are incorporated into the interiors of housing and public buildings, into the exteriors of the historical buildings being restored or reconstructed at the time.

The school of professional blacksmithing art, exterminated in Ukraine during the 1920s, underwent a drastic revival at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dozens of departments of metal art opened at higher educational institutions and art schools. Thus, the mastery of blacksmithing artists in Ukraine by the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reached the level of the rest of Europe. Tetiana Kara-Vasylieva, an academican who has been studying Ukrainian decorative art for half a century and who extensively cooperates with blacksmithing

festivals and participates in the conferences on the issues of the art of blacksmithing, notes, “Prominent European masters of metal art, whose creative legacy is marked with aesthetics of modernism, turned to the heritage of the previous eras; they, though, neither performed exact copies of some stylistic elements nor recreated historical pieces. They strove to synthesize the most notable characteristics of various cultures, generalizing the cultural experience of several generations. Introduction to Eastern culture, particularly Japanese art that produced stylized images of nature using extremely smooth lines and asymmetric schemes of composition, influenced European artists greatly” (Karavasylieva, 2010, p. 5).

Increased attention to the expressive means and broader sphere of functioning of the forged pieces in the art practice (with the artworks produced by the professional metal artists used in the restoration and reconstruction of historical and religious buildings) are characteristic for the contemporary Ukrainian blacksmithing art. The works of Ukrainian artists blacksmiths are rich in their ornamentation and art forms, they reveal the aesthetic principles of the traditional environment of spaces and objects, traditional system of artistic vision.

Artistry is a complex and multi-aspect phenomenon that integrates a number of parameters (signs of artistry) and serves as a category and essential characteristics for specifically art phenomena. The study of artistry is methodologically significant for all areas of art history. Modern art historians state that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century not only perception of the boundaries of artistry has changed but also the very phenomenon of artistry has transformed. Postmodernism, its values and new art trends (digitalization, visualization, commercialization, blurring the boundaries between elitist and mass art, polystilistics, loss of integrity, etc.) became dominant in contemporary society. Hence, now the “timely” art is most topical, along with its new forms, namely installation, performance, happening, video art, and conceptual art.

Contemporary blacksmithing art of Ukraine is an integral component of Ukrainian culture that accumulates all the aesthetical, social, political, historical, ideological, technological, and psychological components that emerged as a result of worldview changes. At present, there are at least five museums of contemporary blacksmithing art in Ukraine. The artworks of artists blacksmiths are presented at almost every all-Ukraine art exhibition. The works of Ukrainian blacksmithing art are participating in the most prestigious blacksmithing forums and festivals both in Europe and in the United States,

Ukrainian art of blacksmithing throughout the history of its development was always socially focused and, similarly to the other art forms, addressed historical events almost instantly. Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine affected all the spheres of Ukrainian society: the infrastructure and economy were ruined, Ukrainian citizens are dying, Ukrainian territories were occupied, even the most basic and commonplace things as peace and quiet were no longer

possible. Ukrainian culture and art face the new war reality, with the rift occurring between the “natural” and “common” infrastructure of the cultural and art life of the past and the partial change of the values in society. The subject of war as an atrocity and catastrophe is not new in the history of art; however, every new war changes the expressive language of art and the understanding of the latter. Obviously, Ukrainian blacksmiths did not stand aside and reacted to the bloody war waged by Russia. In many Ukrainian blacksmithing shops, the artists blacksmiths along with the other metal masters, for instance, the welders, produced special anti-tank hedgehogs that stopped or complicated the advance of tanks or other armored vehicles of the enemy. These constructions are colloquially labeled simply “hedgehogs.” After the start of the large-scale invasion, Ukrainian blacksmithing shops also produced hundreds of thousands of brackets that connect wooden bars in the blindages. With winter approaching, the blacksmiths turned to making special wood-burning heaters for the soldiers that allow them to warm themselves, cook, boil water, etc. Aside from meeting the practical needs of the military, blacksmiths of Ukraine initiated a new trend in blacksmithing art—they created art objects from the remnants of destroyed enemy vehicles.

It is common knowledge that every historical and cultural era forms its own “worldview,” its particular artistic vision, its circumstances and prerequisites for creativity that result in its unique art. Currently, after the eight months of the full-scale Russia–Ukraine war, we can state that Ukrainian blacksmithing art remains topical.

**Conclusions.** It was clarified that the art of blacksmithing as the one of the traditional forms of art has a vast potential for development. It fascinates not only the viewers but also the scholars who analyze its transformations as resulting from the certain historical changes in the living environment of the nation. The study of the origins of blacksmithing art enables us to determine the main stages and forms of development of blacksmithing as an art: from a folk craft and amateur works (reproduction and assimilation of traditional techniques and decorative forms) to the innovative tendencies and broadening the range of imagery, plasticity and artistic expressiveness (blacksmithing pieces as the artworks). This proves a dialectic links of collective and individual, traditional and innovative in the creativity of the artists blacksmiths. Ukrainian blacksmithing art is a non-ordinary art form that combines the revival of traditions and their enhancement in the modern times. Amid the war, the folk symbols of Ukraine receive their rightful acclaim for being a true cultural treasure of Ukrainian nation. The paper also specifies the range of factors that influence the transformation of blacksmithing art in Ukraine. They are the following: impact of folk traditions on the mindset of an artist blacksmith; social demand for blacksmithing art that is formed both by the global and domestic processes stimulating the artists to create contemporary art objects; and the influence of the global trends on the worldview premises of the creativity of an artist blacksmith.

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Безугла Р., Гончаренко А.

**Художнє ковальське мистецтво у культурно-мистецькому просторі України**

**Анотація.** Проаналізовано роботи щодо осмислення художнього ковальства як явища сучасної культури та мистецтва, виокремлено основні напрями дослідження цього феномену. Переосмислення досвіду майстрів та митців, які працювали у сфері ковальства, сприяє виявленню національної, регіональної та локальної специфіки, адже культура художнього ковальства, з одного боку, пов'язана з минулим, а з іншого — репрезентує та символізує націю.

Мета статті — вивчення українського художнього ковальства в соціокультурному контексті сучасності. Методологічною основою дослідження стали такі загальнонаукові методи, як метод узагальнення, системно-структурний та структурно-функціональний, що уможливили вияв і аналіз традиційних і новаційних засад українського художнього ковальства у культурно-мистецькому просторі України.

**Ключові слова:** художнє ковальське мистецтво, ковальство, ремісництво, культура, традиція.