

Reclaiming our Heritage:

Monitoring Ukrainian Museums to Establish Justice

On June 22, 2023, the Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab and ICOM Ukraine held an online conference "Reclaiming our Heritage: Monitoring Ukrainian Museums to Establish Justice." The event brought together more than a hundred museum experts from nearly 20 countries. During the conference, Ukrainian cultural heritage specialists along with international partners presented the results of monitoring Ukrainian museums during the Russian war against Ukraine.

Russian troops destroyed and looted dozens of Ukrainian museums. It is not only about the period of the full-scale Russian invasion – in Crimea and the East of Ukraine, the occupiers have been committing crimes against Ukrainian culture for years. Specialists of the Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab together with their colleagues record every known case of robbery and damage in order to punish those guilty of crimes against cultural heritage. The first results of the work were shared by the speakers of the "Reclaiming our Heritage" conference.

Documented cases of the destruction of Ukrainian museums were presented by HeMo Lab architects Viktor Dvornikov and Serhii Revenko. Viktor Dvornikov, who recorded several hundred cases of damage to cultural heritage in Kharkiv and Kharkiv region, showed massive damage to Kharkiv region museums and their collections. Serhii Revenko, who works on documenting the destruction in Kyiv region, demonstrated the benefits of 3D scanning of damaged buildings.

Participants heard a detailed report on looted Ukrainian museums from culturologist Valentyna Yefimova, who is engaged in monitoring as part of the HeMo Lab team. It was not only about the removal of collections and looting by the occupiers, but also about deliberate destruction, propaganda reformatting of museum exhibitions in the occupied territories, and museum halls that were forcibly emptied due to the threat of destruction of the collections.

An important report on looted museums in Southern Ukraine was presented by Dr. Katharyn Hanson from the Smithsonian's Cultural Rescue Initiative and Deniz Cil from the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (USA). With the open data monitoring methodology, as well as work with satellite images, it was possible to confirm the illicit displacement of several Ukrainian museum collections by the Russian military and to identify patterns in the looting of museums by the occupiers.

Elmira Ablyalimova-Chiyhoz, a representative of the Crimean Institute of Strategic Studies, spoke about the looting of museums that has been going on since 2014 in occupied Crimea. In particular, about more than 700 museum objects were moved to the territory of Russia, as well as about the ways of the Russian authorities to "legitimize" their looting.

The war in Ukraine continues, and the work on the return of Ukrainian cultural heritage is just beginning. All the more valuable for Ukrainians is the support of the global professional community, generously expressed by the participants and the audience during the conference.

