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Abstract

When Russia commenced their full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it had devastating effects on the lives of countless people in war zones, displaced Ukrainian people all over the continent, and shook up international security politics. Additionally, though often left undiscussed, it sent waves through the European cultural sector. As part of Russia's long and successful history of influencing European perspectives through cultural diplomacy, there used to be two satellite locations of prominent Russian museums in continental Europe. After the invasion, these two locations had to pivot to cut ties with their Russian leadership in order to continue functioning as museums, which resulted in the ignition of broader discussions of culture, politics, and responsibility amongst European art museums. This thesis researches these developments by asking the question: *How have European art museums responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?* Employing a digital ethnography, textual analysis, and visual analysis, this thesis finds that museums have responded in various ways, often influenced by politics, artistic values, and an awareness of their role and responsibility in times of conflict as a museum. Through situating these developments in a larger debate of culture, politics, and a supposed cultural neutrality, this thesis argues that museums can enact soft power in times of conflict, are uniquely situated in the cultural political context, and are also spaces where this war plays out.

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Art is above all a personal position, a kind of political act

– Stanislav Belovski (2023)

Introduction

In March 2022, the satellite location of the Russian Hermitage Museum in Amsterdam cut all ties with their founder, quoting 'moral reasons' after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Siegal, 2023). The museum was founded in 2009 as an outpost for the famous Russian Hermitage and would regularly show exhibitions with work borrowed from the Russian collection. With the *raison d'être* of the Hermitage Amsterdam and its entire collection gone, the museum had to pivot to enter into new partnerships with institutions who were willing to lend out their collections (ibid.). More than a year later, in September 2023, the museum cut the final symbolic tie to Russia and the Hermitage museum by changing their name into H'Art, which is supposed to represent the *heart for art* ('hart' means heart in Dutch) that the museum wants to express. The Hermitage Russia published a diplomatic statement in response, in which their director stated he "regrets the separation imposed by politics and wishes the new project all the best in the care of the national cultural heritage" (Boutsko, 2023).

The H'Art museum is an exceptional case due to its special ties to one of Russia's biggest museums. The only similar example in Europe is that of the Museo Ruso in Malaga, which was the Spanish wing of the Russian State Museum (Burgen, 2023). The Museo Ruso's response to the invasion was rather different from the H'Art's reaction. While the museum was reluctant to address anything at first, they ended up having to return the entirety of their borrowed collection to the Russian State Museum. After experiencing difficulties to create new exhibitions, the director commented that "Russian culture isn't responsible for what's happening. Cancelling Russian culture doesn't solve anything. Malevich and Tchaikovsky aren't to blame for this situation and we will continue to work with culture as a bridge between people" (ibid.). This stands in stark contrast to the H'Art statement, which noted that the Russian Invasion made it impossible to "[stay out of] the political developments in Putin's Russia" (Hermitage, 2022). The Museo Ruso continues to put on exhibitions centered around 'Russian' art and unfairly portrays artists like Chagall, Kandinsky, and Malevych as Russian (Museo Ruso, 2023b, 2023a, 2024).

As someone with an academic background in both politics and art history, these developments intrigued me. While there are only a few Russian so-called 'satellite museums' in Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine also ignited discussions about the labelling of artworks, artists, and collections. For example, the National Gallery in London renamed Edgar Degas' painting of a group of ballet dancers from 'Russian Dancers' to 'Ukrainian Dancers', after renewed awareness of Ukrainian culture increased the focus on its representation (Quinn, 2022). These varying reactions make me ask the question: *How have European art museums responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?*

We know that museums have been important in multiple ways within this conflict. Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska has spearheaded an initiative to include Ukrainian-language audio tours in more than

90 European museums, to make the art collections more accessible to Ukrainian refugees (The Brussels Times, 2024; Odessa Journal, 2024). She noted the importance of "addressing the world at a time when Ukraine is still battling against the invasion and the Russian aggressor is destroying our museums" (ibid.). Seeing as Russia is systematically targeting Ukrainian heritage and cultural sites (UNESCO has identified damage to 458 cultural sites since 2022, of which 33 museums), it is especially important to research the political dimension of these cultural institutions (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2024; UNESCO, 2024). The specific targeting of cultural sites also has a genocidal dimension: the destruction of cultural heritage aims to impact Ukraine's national identity with the goal of rewriting history according to a Russian narrative (Shydlovskyi *et al.*, 2023; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2024).

While the European Union was quick to respond to the invasion with financial sanctions and travel restrictions, there were no official guidelines on how to deal with the existing cultural relations with Russia and its institutions (Romashko, 2024: 2, 4). There exist many efforts to strengthen solidarity with Ukraine in the form of cultural funds, exhibitions, and festivals, yet Russia's 'cultural allure' remains (Zerka, 2023: 14-16). Especially as Russia's narrative attempts to integrate Ukraine into its own cultural sphere, and as they have an interest in undermining European sentiment to weaken the EU's solidarity with Ukraine (idem: 11, 16), the actions of visible institutions like museums are important.

While I have been able to amass a decent amount of academic literature on museum diplomacy and the cultural diplomacy surrounding the ongoing war in Ukraine, these two areas have yet to be brought together by researching the reactions of European museums to Russia's gross international law violations. In the past decades, the academic field of cultural diplomacy has grown, and space has opened up for the role of museums in international politics. However, this field remains small and underresearched (Grincheva, 2023). Additionally, the relevance of researching museums relies heavily on the understanding of art as political, as it matters what and how art is shown in trusted institutions. This combination of international relations and more humanities-based approaches also work to further cultural diplomacy as an interdisciplinary endeavor, as proposed by Grincheva (2023: 2). It is important for more research to be done on museums as they are influential institutions due to their close relationship with the public, and this thesis will further the understanding of museums' ability to make political decisions during times of conflict.

In order to investigate the museums' responses, I start by situating the phenomenon of museums and politics in the literature, and providing more context on culture, diplomacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Afterwards, I explain the relationship between museums and political power, looking specifically at their ability to exert soft power. Subsequently, I explain my methods, followed by a three-part analytical chapter where each section will dive deeper into the data, corresponding to the different

methods I employed. Next, the findings are discussed in relation to the broader academic and societal implications. Finally, the consequences of this research will be discussed.

Art, Culture, and Politics: Situating the Phenomenon

As this research aims to discover the ways in which European art museums have reacted to the invasion of Ukraine, I will first discuss how art is political and how the museum is uniquely situated in the relationship between art and the public. Furthermore, the literature on cultural diplomacy and the invasion shows how the international context surrounding museum responses is shaped. Due to the nature of Russia's propagated narratives, the literature argues that art, representation, and museums are powerful weapons in this war.

Art and Politics

While some forms of art are more explicitly political than others through, for example, clear references to social issues, every form of art is produced within social strata and thus contributes to either the reproduction or deconstruction of social ideas (Edelman 1995: 2). However, for long, people have tried to separate the two. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel was painted over because it was perceived as 'too nude', and Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* was rejected by the Salon because jurors feared the painting depicted prostitutes (Davies et al. 2011: 604, 868). Neither artwork has explicit political references, yet they were uniquely situated and treated within their political context. More recently, an art museum in Washington, D.C. cancelled two exhibitions in anticipation of possible government crackdowns, as both exhibitions prominently featured Black and LGBTQ+ artists (Smith, 2025). Governments' anxiety around art is logical as art is highly effective in transferring political opinions: (Edelmann 1995: 2-3). Art can create worlds through which the spectator gives meaning to core human ideas like bravery, leadership, evil, and danger (ibid.). Of course, politics also influences art: through subsidies, discourses, and more overtly, bans and legislation, politics shape what is being produced. The museum, then, has a unique role in curating not only artworks, but also their political potential. As Luke (1992: 228) notes: "artworks and art exhibitions should be considered as complexly coded texts, which are always scripted out against a backdrop of larger cultural forces and political institutions". The political meaning of an artwork relies not only on that which the artist tried to convey, but also on the way the spectator consumes the work, or how they give meaning to the signs and (re)produce the work within certain discourses (idem: 229).

Fine art is often associated with a conception of 'high culture', or an idea of culture as a tangible production which can be ranked along a value scale. Fine arts, classical music, and poetry are usually classified as 'high culture', where soap operas, pop music, and comics are seen as 'low culture' (Spencer-Oatey, 2012: 15; Fisher, 2000: 473). This distinction is controversial, as this value judgement is filled with prejudices. However, historically, societies all over the world have attempted to divide art into value categories (Fisher 2000: 474). Cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu commented that 'cultural competence' in society is always located in a hierarchical system as its social value derives directly from class structures (Bourdieu, 1993 in Fisher 2000: 474). In other words, fine arts' status as 'high' is

socially constructed. In diplomacy, the 'high' status of art is reflected in its role as high-status gifts between diplomats, providing contextual ambience to diplomatic meetings, or as thematic travelling exhibitions (Neumann, 2016: 117). This high status also results in fine art being received as civilized, refined, and educated, making 'high culture' especially apt in influencing the public (Spencer-Oatey, 2012: 15).

Simply put, museums have a legitimizing function on the art in their collections: by choosing what is on display, museums provide an institutionalized approval, rendering art culturally valuable (Alexander and Bowler, 2021). In this way, museums are the ultimate arbiter of the distinction between visual arts as 'high' or 'low' culture, and thus of what influences the public. This distinction is also highly volatile, with value judgments changing constantly: the 'avant-garde' of any discipline always attempts to push the boundaries of what we appreciate as fine art.

Memory Politics and Identity

In national museums specifically, the collection on display is supposed to represent the collective they serve. Through the cultural items on display, a narrative is created about the essence of a nation, their values, and their history (Poulot, 2014: 112; Hoogwaerts, 2017: 315). Decisions on what to put on display and what not are guided by larger (and political) questions of who is included in that collective and who decides its identity (Poulot, 2014: 109; Grincheva, 2015: 40). For example, in Nazi Germany, museum curators were forced to fully subject to the national political agenda and had to put on specific exhibitions as propaganda (Poulot, 2014: 90). This is a form of memory politics, or the ways in which a collective's identity is shaped by hegemonic narratives of the past (Mälksoo, 2021: 493). These memory politics are not limited to national museums or certain collectives: the representation of, say, Dutch identity through Dutch Renaissance paintings in Madrid influences outside perceptions of Dutch culture in our globalized and interconnected world. The same goes for the representation of Russian and Ukrainian art abroad.

Memory politics are especially relevant to the post-Soviet space as the Soviet Union's dissolution has created special relationships with national identity and unique attitudes towards Russia, as well as it being one of the main reasons for the relative growth in memory scholarship (Verovšek, 2016: 530). Memory politics affect not only the collective's identity, but also political tactics: Russia's attempt to rewrite Ukrainian history is a prime example. Heritage in the form of cultural objects like art plays a crucial role in not only the creation but also the preservation of cultural memory and identity. As prominent memory scholar Jan Assman stated: "through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society" (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995: 133). In other words, it is in the cultural objects that a society's values, myths, and identity are aggregated (McDowell, 2016: 37).

Cultural Diplomacy and the Invasion

In this section I will provide more information on the cultural and political context of the invasion that surrounds cultural institutions. This allows me to situate the reactions in the broader developments.

Russia

Russian cultural diplomacy finds its origins in the Soviet-era, with the creation of the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (VOKS) in 1925, after the Bolshevik government became aware of the success and positive political effects of a Russian art exhibition in Berlin (Berard, 2021: 165). Cultural diplomacy, as a "discursive practice seeking to deploy culture in support of foreign policy objectives" (Valenza, 2023: 404), might not seem to align with Bolshevik politics, yet Berard (2021: 165) shows how the event helped to carry the possibilities of cultural diplomacy into Russian political society. VOKS continued to exist in various forms until 1992, when it disbanded as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 29).

After the end of VOKS, there were various smaller government initiatives of cultural diplomacy (Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 30). In 2008, *Rossotrudnichestvo* was founded as a continuation of previous cultural diplomacy initiatives. *Rossotrudnichestvo* is an 'autonomous' Russian government agency, which covers cultural diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and compatriot cooperation (Valenza et al, 2022: 209; Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 23-25). Nowadays, *Rossotrudnichestvo* mainly spreads propaganda on the invasion, and was sanctioned by the EU in 2022 as "the main state agency projecting the Kremlin's soft power and hybrid influence" (Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 21). With "shaping an objective perception of contemporary Russia, its role and place in global history among the international community" (idem: 23) as one of its main objectives, high levels of funding, and no real autonomy from the Kremlin, this organization serves as one of Russia's main tools to exert soft power abroad.

The organization also tries to actively maintain and create relations with Russian 'compatriots' abroad, much like Russia's other cultural diplomatic organization *Russkiy Mir* (translation: Russian World), which focuses on language. However, unlike the *British Council* or *Alliance Francaise*, *Russkiy Mir* is uniquely integrated into the Russian ambitions of creating a 'Russian world' (Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 101). Their focus on extending Russian culture beyond the borders to geopolitically expand the 'Russian World' shows the dominant frame of thought in Russian politics that underlies their cultural diplomacy, one of traditional values and redefining all those with ties to Russia as Russian (idem: 111, 157). Within this frame, Russia claims Ukraine should be 'reunited' with Russia, questioning Ukraine's distinct culture and identity not only at home, but also abroad (Zerka, 2023: 15).

For years, attempts at actual cultural cooperation have been replaced by Russian attempts to use culture for political goals (Vlaeminck, 2017: 92). After the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin attempted to promote and legitimize the concept of *Novorossiya* (New Russia), which justified the annexation

through rhetoric that posed Ukraine and Russia were the same country all along (Jilge, 2016). There were even physical *Rossotrudnichestvo* centers located in Ukraine to promote Russian historical revisionism. While the centers were closed after the annexation of Crimea, their work continued to be carried out by proxy organizations (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, 2021). Since the full-scale invasion in 2022, both *Russkiy Mir* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* have become machines for the distribution of pro-Russian war propaganda (Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 84, 159).

However, it is important to remember that Russia's intense use of cultural diplomacy is not a recent development or something that can be exclusively ascribed to Vladimir Putin. As shown above, Russia has been promoting narratives of the 'Russian World' for years, and even centuries if we take into account their attempts to spread their language and culture abroad in the 18th century (Klyueva and Mikhaylova, 2017: 133). Additionally, seemingly innocuous trends like the romanticization of the Romanov era online, driven by state-sponsored media, have played a significant role in the Russian state's ambitions of spreading their culture abroad (Slater, 2023: 354, 379). The extent of Russia's cultural diplomacy makes it difficult for people to see through it and function outside of Russian narratives. The vast history and contemporary engagements with cultural diplomacy show its importance and central role for Russia. Ballet, opera, literature, and fine arts are all integral to Russia's identity creation abroad, and have thus become a political tool (Gonçalves, 2019; Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023: 71; Valenza, 2023: 417-418). Any attempt to remove Russian culture gets labelled as 'Russophobia' or 'cancel culture', and decisions to continue portraying Russian culture are cheered on by Russian state officials (Koval, 2024). Decisions about culture in the context of this war are therefore crucial to this conflict and make it impossible to see culture as politically neutral.

An Important Note on "Russian" Art

The aforementioned 1922 'Exhibition of Russian Art' displayed many different art styles with the official goal of raising money for famine relief but with the effect of promoting Russian culture abroad and legitimizing Soviet – German relations (Berard, 2021: 165). All the artists on display were therefore portrayed as quintessentially Russian: Repin, Malevych, and Tatlin all entered the artistic canon as Russian artists yet were born in what we know now as Ukraine. Ukrainian history goes back centuries, and especially with regard to the Russian government's legitimizing rhetoric and tactics, it is important to recognize Ukraine's own cultural history (Leigh, 2022: 143; Demchuk and Levchenko, 2024: 20). Of course, many artists in the historical canon lived all over Europe, and it is therefore difficult to designate artworks as belonging to a singular nation or location. However, the ongoing portrayal of artists born in Ukraine or other ex-Soviet states as 'Russian' contributes to the Russian colonization of surrounding cultures (Demchuk and Levchenko, 2024: 6). In fact, many Ukrainian modernists actively tried to create a recognizable national art style (Akinsha et al., 2022: 10). Therefore, attempts to

correctly re-label art and artists in museums all over the world are crucial to preserving those cultures and histories (Leigh, 2022: 146).

Ukraine

Ukrainian culture has a long history of being appropriated by an oppressor, especially Russia. Ukrainian streets were filled with references to Russian culture and USSR leadership, far outnumbering references to Ukrainian history like the Holodomor famine or the victims of the Soviet regime. This is the product of an internalized colonial memory politics that continued to shape Ukraine's image long after the USSR's dissolution (Demchuk and Levchenko, 2024: 2). Of course, prior to 1991 Ukraine had little say in the representation of their own identity and culture, but even after their independence these efforts remained small (ibid.). Recently however, the Ukrainian government has attempted through public diplomacy efforts to counter the Russian propaganda (Tsyrfa and Bielousova, 2024). After the invasion, the Ukrainian government successfully and radically transformed the country's image into a symbol of freedom and human rights which resulted in increased support not only by the public, but also in the form of weapons and financing (idem: 33). Specifically, Ukraine's cultural diplomacy output which supports Ukrainian artists and narratives has been an efficient channel to distribute these ideas (idem: 35).

It was only in 2017, in the context of the Donbas war, that cultural diplomacy became a distinct area of specialization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Klavdienko, 2024: 151). Its main goals are to "promote a better understanding and a dignified attitude towards Ukraine, to create opportunities for Ukrainians to interact with the world, as well as the implementation of state policy in the field of cultural diplomacy and the protection of national interests in conditions of information warfare" (ibid.). This comparatively short history of cultural diplomacy makes the success of the shaping of Ukraine's image abroad especially impressive. In that sense, Ukrainian cultural policy has become securitized as it has become central in the amassing of foreign and military support through the influencing of public opinion abroad (Olzacka, 2024).

However, while the Ukrainian state's efforts might have been belated, after the invasion many relevant bottom-up initiatives promoting Ukrainian culture and identity abroad arose. Museums all over the world have been urged by Ukrainian activists and art historians to reconsider their labeling of "Russian" artists (Pogrebin, 2023). The activists pose that the portrayal of these artists as Russian ignores their Ukrainian roots and makes the museums complicit in the colonization of Ukraine (ibid.). In a time when much of Ukraine's cultural heritage is destroyed, it is crucial to present cultural objects abroad as Ukrainian: Russia's narrative that Ukraine is not a separate nation goes hand-in-hand with rewriting their culture as either Russian or non-existent (Méheut, 2024). Oksana Seminik, a Ukrainian art historian and seminal figure in this movement, has started a Twitter (now X) account (@ukr_arthistory) where she sheds light on key objects of Ukrainian culture and lobbies world-class museums to

decolonize Ukrainian art (ibid.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and The National Gallery have all made changes in their representation of Ukrainian artists due to her efforts. Other examples of bottom-up initiatives include the artists in Odesa who made art out of war scraps and managed to sell their work to fund humanitarian efforts in the region, a project in Kyiv where Ukrainian writers recycled Russian-language books to raise money, and the renaming of institutions and locations previously named after Russian figures (Kurkov, 2023).

While these examples show how seemingly small bottom-up initiatives can make serious changes in the fight against Russia's propaganda machines, the above also illustrates the extreme power differences between Russia and Ukraine when it comes to their institutional capacities. Therefore, this thesis attempts to shed light on the Ukrainian cultural identity and highlight the ways in which their heritage is and should be presented abroad.

Europe

For years, European countries have struggled to find ways to deal with Russia's cultural influence. After 2014, when the EU installed several restrictive measures on other fronts, the cultural relations continued and were even seen as the way to improve EU-Russia Relations (Valenza and Bossuyt, 2019: 2). While EU countries have shown unprecedented support for Ukrainian culture since 2022, the question of what to do with Russian culture remains debated. Latvian, Lithuanian, Danish, and Portuguese governments urged cultural institutions to review their materials, with the Baltic countries even calling for a boycott. Other countries, like Germany, endorsed the separation of culture and politics (Zerka, 2023: 16). According to Zerka (2023: 11) this is partly because there exists a 'weakness' for Russian culture within the European elite. However, he argues it is essential to be careful with responses that pertain to culture: while cultural diplomacy is an important and influential soft power tool, it can easily backfire. Bans can be counterproductive as they can be seen as signs of weakness, against the proclaimed European values of democracy and openness, and make the public question if the war is not some kind of power play (ibid.). Many European countries and organizations have introduced support initiatives for the proliferation of Ukrainian art and culture, and there has also been renewed attention paid to the names given to Ukrainian heritage (idem: 15). This might seem merely symbolic, however, as Russia weaponizes Ukrainian culture in their war narratives by questioning a separate Ukrainian cultural identity, these initiatives offer a useful way to fight back (ibid.).

The lack of binding direction from official EU institutions and of a possibility thereto makes it possible for countries and individual institutions to respond in various ways. While the EU did ban two Russian media agencies to combat misinformation, cultural initiatives are much harder to legislate (Zerka, 2023: 11-12). In 2022, the European Council passed a non-binding resolution which recognized the impact of the ongoing war to the Ukrainian cultural sector and therefore agreed to empower the creative and cultural sectors, strengthen cultural external relations, and enhance public participation (European

Council, 2022). However, while this resolution recognizes the dangers that Russia's actions against Ukrainian culture and heritage have for European values, there are little clear directives on the support or boycotting of either country's culture besides the call for preservation of heritage in Ukraine (European Commission, 2024).

While there might not be a coordinated project to culturally sanction or boycott Russia at the EU level, Ukraine has called for countries to 'Stand with Ukraine' and for a ban on Russian culture in an attempt to get as many countries on their side as possible (Klyszcz, 2023). The economic sanctions that do exist rely largely on a united European response, which some have marked as being unexpected and unique (Maurer et al, 2023: 219). This united response is the result of high stakes: the pressure on politicians to make the 'right' decision is very high in these precarious situations, creating a 'rally effect' where all governments are drawn to the same response (Stolle, 2023: 222). Acknowledging that cultural institutions are also situated in this national and international political context, which will be expanded on in the next chapter, makes it likely they too are influenced by these norms.

However, as mentioned above, the cultural response was left to individual countries, institutions, and people (European Council, 2024). In fact, the transport of cultural goods for the purposes of cultural collaboration with Russia was excluded from the road transport ban, leaving space for lower-level actors like museums to navigate their own decisions (ibid.). For example, in Italy, the culture ministry suspended all partnerships between the state-led cultural institutions and Russia, as well as the then-ongoing Italy-Russia crossover year (Imam, 2025). This decision then ignited a broader debate by Italian museums on how to handle the situation, resulting in a variety of responses: the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria broke off their partnership with the Russian State Hermitage, whereas the Uffizi director stated he thought cultural sanctions were counterproductive (ibid.).

The literature indicates that art is not politically neutral, and that museums have a legitimizing function on what counts as 'high culture' and therefore on what influences the public. Additionally, art and museums have a mnemopolitical purpose: the (re)presentation of art in these legitimizing spaces matters as it influences perceptions and understandings of national cultures. In the context of the invasion this is crucial: I have illustrated the ways in which Ukrainians are fighting for financial and military support abroad and against the spread of *Russkiy Mir* using cultural diplomacy. Even the EU recognizes the unique dangers to Ukrainian culture, showing that art museums are also spaces where this war plays out.

Museums and Political Power

As the literature indicates the political nature of art and museums in the context of this war, the following section sets out to define museums as spaces of power in international politics. Thereto I will discuss the origins of the modern-day museum and conceptualize soft power.

Christine Sylvester was one of the first to explicitly investigate the space museums take up in international relations. In her book *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*, she identifies museums as spaces of power that represent and constitute elements of international relations (Sylvester, 2008: 137). They do this through attracting social attention, increasing numbers of visitors, and engaging in the international exchange of art, which inevitably is the exchange of ideas (Grincheva, 2020: 112). This is not a new activity for museums by any means: they have been involved in international relations since at least the Renaissance, when they started im- and exporting private collections of art, thus strengthening international bonds (Grincheva 2019b: 1).

The very creation of the category of 'museum of art' is a historical one, emerging from the Enlightenment, and it has transformed into an institutional system that is responsible for shaping the contemporary art world (Poulot, 2014: 89). Art museums were from their conception meant to influence public tastes and opinions and were well suited to achieve social and political objectives of cultivating and educating the public (ibid.). According to Bennett (1995: 90), the modern museum has two underlying principles: the museum should be open and accessible to all, and it should accurately represent the cultures and values of the public. What museums choose to display, therefore, has political relevance: spreading ideas about aesthetics, identity, and culture makes them a constant aspect of cultural policy (Poulot, 2014: 90). Nowadays, as museums are increasingly answering to calls for decolonization, navigating an 'age of protest', and responding to ongoing social issues like refugee displacement, it is more clear than ever that they are political institutions through and through (Brulon Soares, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Sergi, 2021).

However, museums' political nature clashes with the 'myth of neutrality' that is often permeated about cultural spaces (Raicovich, 2021: 14). The idea that museums are devoid of any politics or ideology as if they do not themselves stem from a political culture of institutional privileges is hypocritical. Scholar Robert Janes (2015) confirms this, stating that "neutrality is not a foundational principle of museum practice, but rather a result of the museum's privileged position in society". He continues that museums have gotten so used to their privilege as socially trusted institutions that they believe they are 'above' any social issues, and therefore do not usually participate in the social debate or exercise their social responsibility (Janes, 2015). However, in the past years the focus on the non-neutrality of the museum has increased, with campaigns that urge museums to recognize their political positions and use it for social good (Prescha, 2021: 116). The choices of what to put on display, the origins of private funding,

and the expectations that come with it are examples of museum politics, and some scholars even pose that neutrality in museums is completely impossible as not taking a position is also taking one which supports the status quo (Evans et al. 2020: 21). While this might be true for institutions that stay intentionally silent, it is unfair to generalize this statement to all museums: minor museums, with smaller publics and less resources, might not be able to do anything outside of their everyday activities.

Museums and Soft Power

As explained by Christine Sylvester (2009: 3), when museums became increasingly accessible in the 19th century they inevitably took up social and political roles. Where art used to be on display in private or even royal collections available only to the elite, it now became accessible as long as you were able to pay the entrance fee (Hoogwaerts, 2017: 314). This institutionalization allowed museums to become even more implicated in the international, enabling them to serve political purposes on a global scale. Museums started entering into partnerships with institutions abroad, loaning out their collections, and attracting more foreign visitors (idem: 315).

As such, museums started wielding international political power. While power commonly refers to the ability to make someone else do something they would not do otherwise (Dahl, 2007: 2002), soft power, as famously defined by Nye, "rests on the ability to shape the *preferences* of others" (Nye, 2008: 95). Therefore, soft power expands on the traditional idea of power as it makes the other party *want* the thing they would not do otherwise; it is less coercive and more preference-shaping. Soft power is a key component of cultural diplomacy, and as cultural diplomacy is becoming more influential, the efforts of countries to shape their soft power grow too (Kim, 2017: 293-294). Nye already argued in 2002 that soft power was growing in importance, with it bridging the gap between traditional diplomatic activities and 'new public diplomacy', which included the influence of public opinion as a key component of power (idem: 294, 299). Nye highlights that cultural elements like fashion, literature, and art can serve to buttress a country's attractiveness, which is where museums come in (Nye, 2004 in Hoogwaerts, 2017: 314). Cultural institutions, such as museums, have the ability to convey cultural values to the world, enabling new social understandings (Nye 2008: 96; Lord and Blankenberg, 2015: 25). As described above, art museums have been doing this since their conception, and due to increased globalization and technological advances they can now reach new publics (Nye, 2008: 99; Hoogwaerts, 2017: 314-315). Grincheva (2015: 41) explains that due to technological advances, online media have not only offered ways to reach a broader public but have also brought the audience closer through opportunities to debate and participate. In other words, what museums communicate online matters increasingly and is an excellent way to exert soft power.

Natalia Grincheva poses that museums are also able to wield their own specific form of soft power, or "develop a strong recognition, visibility and appreciation among international constituencies, patrons and stakeholders" (Grincheva, 2019a: 242). In this approach, museums do not only exert soft power

over their publics, but are also part of an international political system (Sylvester, 2009: 3). This conception of museums as wielders of soft power, however, is problematized by Priewe (2021) in a paper where he argues for a new framework of museum diplomacy. He argues that museums cannot be 'centers of soft power', as according to Nye, soft power must always go hand in hand in the capability of hard power (Priewe, 2021: 27-28). While Nye indeed acknowledges the role of culture in soft power, this does not necessarily make all cultural institutions capable of wielding it (idem: 26). Priewe explains how he sees diplomatic actors and soft power actors as two different things, relegating soft power to the capabilities of the state. Instead, Priewe proposed a purely diplomatic approach to museums' power on the global stage. However, he undercuts his argument by acknowledging museums' history of asymmetric power relationships, using examples of museums taking materials from colonized communities without consent, which can be seen as a form of hard power as it uses force (idem: 29).

As Grincheva (2019b: 20) rightfully notes, many big players in the museum world enjoy a combination of private and public funding, and can have varying levels of government influence on their activities. For example, during the time of the Soviet Union, the Russian State Hermitage Museum's offices where many foreign officials were welcomed were wired to allow KGB officials to listen in. Moreover, their foreign exhibitions were largely designed by the government to promote the image of Russian life abroad (Grincheva 2019a: 237). This example illustrates how museums can be used directly by governments, actors with traditional hard and soft powers, to fulfill their own objectives. However, museums can also be approached as political actors in their own right. As Hoogwaerts (2017) shows, museums can make their own decisions that have direct political consequences: the loan of a Picasso sculpture by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven to the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP) in 2011 caused serious diplomatic issues of security and bureaucracy on the one hand, but was able to spread political values of modernity on the other. The IAAP Director stated he hoped the loan would cement the position of Palestine as a 'modern' region, and that it would bring attention to the political situation (Hoogwaerts, 2017: 316). Lord and Blankenberg (2015: 10-13) also note the increasing political nature of museum diplomacy: as museums become more mixed up in civil society, they are faced with new roles, responsibilities, and expectations and thus increasingly transform into places of soft power.

To conclude, the literature indicates that museums can be soft power actors in their own right by influencing the public, impacting international politics, and can be tools for governments to exert soft power through. The technological advances and the global accessibility of online media have allowed museums to situate themselves within the conflict and have allowed the public to enter the debate of the museum's role and responsibility. As shown in the previous chapter, museums have also become subject to governments' calls for boycotts or regulations regarding the mobility of (Russian) art, showing the dual relationship between soft power and museums. Due to the political nature of the

museum and art itself, in this thesis, museums are approached as heavily political “internationally implicated/socially situated social institutions” (Sylvester, 2009: 3). In this sense, museums make decisions that are shaped by and shaping the political context.

Research Design

As this thesis aims to uncover the various ways in which museums have responded to the invasion of Ukraine, I have performed a digital ethnography. Digital ethnography, as a broad research approach, allows the researcher to approach online media and websites as objects of research that are situated around a certain 'event'. According to Doreen Massey, an event is "a happening in which a series of things and processes come together" (Massey in Pink *et al.*, 2016: 149). In that sense, the invasion of Ukraine can also be seen as an event. Researching an event through digital ethnography allows for a focus on the relationship between the event, the media, and the contexts (ibid.). This approach enabled me to analyze statements that the museums have put up on their websites, incorporate social media posts, research interviews in news articles, and analyze visuals.

Gathering Data

To select the data for analysis, I imported a list of 612 art museums in Europe from Wikipedia (2025). This list does not include all art museums in Europe, but only the most 'significant' ones and offers a decent geographical spread. While, perhaps unsurprisingly, the highest concentration of museums is found in countries like France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, the list also highlights many museums in Turkey and Eastern Europe. I made some additions to this list after researching museums with specific collections of Russian art but also had to remove a few due to closures, mergers, and the mislabeling of the museum as art museum, leading to a total of 550 museums. When collecting the data, I searched the museum website with the terms "Ukraine" and "Russia" and performed a google search with the museum name and those terms. I always performed these searches in English as well as the native language of the museum. Many documents I gathered were not written in a language I speak (English, Dutch, and French), so I had to overcome these barriers by using a translation engine. This is not ideal, as there is a risk of losing nuance and context by analyzing translated texts. However, excluding these documents from analysis would imply a strong geographical bias to countries where one of the abovementioned languages is widely spoken, which would preclude me from making any conclusions about *European* museums.

In addition to statements, I collected social media posts, news articles, announcements, and other documents that the museums published in response to the invasion. During my preliminary research I found that sometimes, information on museum responses had either been wiped from the museum's official website or nothing had been published at all. However, these activities were usually reported on in local newspapers, which were often able to get direct quotes from museum officials. Therefore, I included these statements in addition to the official statements that museums post on their websites. It must be noted that I was only able to analyze what I found online. It is possible that certain museums, for example due to limited resources, did respond to the invasion but did not leave a digital footprint of it. This a limit of my research that is unfortunately not easily mitigated. Out of the 550 museums, 177

had some kind of response to the invasion, leaving me with 322 separate documents for research. Of those 322, 153 featured a visual that is included in the visual analysis. The 381 museums that do not have any online record of a response may have had multiple reasons, which will be explored further in the discussion.

Methods

As my research question is well-suited for an inductive manner of research, one where I am guided by data rather than theory, I performed the analysis in three consecutive steps. Of course, each following layer of analysis was informed by the previous inferences as well as the literature and theory which guided my lens. Concurrently with the data gathering through the abovementioned digital ethnography, I was able to map out the field of museum responses and categorize them by type. This allowed me to create an overview of the reactions and begin to identify any patterns.

For the published texts, I performed a coding analysis, following Saldaña's (2013) two cycle coding method. I used Atlas.TI, a program I was already familiar with, to perform the coding rounds. The program allows me to easily create codes, make overviews, and categorize them. The first round of coding is inductive, meaning that it is completely based on what I found in the research material and not based on any prior frameworks or hypotheses. This aligns with Saldaña's (2013: 100) *initial coding,* which allows the researcher to remain open to all theoretical directions that the data may hold. Of course, it has inevitably been guided by my previous knowledge and expectations on the topic, as well as the research question I am asking (idem: 7-8). However, due to my extensive use of *in vivo* codes, I hope to have been guided by the text more than my previous notions. After the first coding round, I categorized my codes using a second cycle *focused coding* method, which aims to identify the most salient themes in the first cycle codes (idem: 213). The results can be found in appendix 1, and the categories will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Next to the textual data, I noticed how the content published by the museums is often accompanied by visuals. This did not come as a surprise, as museums often use visuals in their communication due to the nature of the beast. However, the visuals struck me as interesting and valuable as they presented an extra dimension and power to the textual content, and provide a new way of giving meaning to social phenomena (Rose, 2016: 4). The visuals ranged from artworks that were part of a special exhibition to photographs meant to accompany the textual content and were often made by artists related to the museum, but at other times were stock images or digital designs.

For my visual analysis, I performed an inductive content analysis (ICA) on 153 images due to its suitability for large amounts of data. Content analysis is a way to quantify visual representation using categories (Bell, 2002: 13), and the inductive approach allows for the categories to emerge out of the data itself (Vears and Gillam, 2022: 113). Vears and Gillam (2022: 115) note that ICA is especially

suitable for cases where there exists little previous research, which is the case for the use of images in museum publications. I performed two coding rounds, which made sure that all categories that emerged in the first round were tested on all images, something vital in ICA (idem: 113). In the first coding round I inductively drew up 25 categories (see appendix 2) with which I coded the images in round 2. Due to the time constraints of this thesis and the combination with my textual analysis, the visual part is relatively modest in scope as the data has been quantified. However, quantification does not necessarily preclude a qualitative analysis, and allows for visual patterns to easily emerge out of the data (Lutz and Collins in Rose, 2016: 87). These patterns will then be analyzed to reveal their relation to the broader discussion.

Museum Reactions Analyzed

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I had a large amount of data to research. Thus, I executed my research in three steps that each dive one level deeper into the data. Below, they are addressed in order – in accordance with how I performed my research. The first section will provide a 'lay of the land' of the reactions through a digital ethnography. Then, the textual coding analysis functions to lay bare the reasonings behind the reactions, and finally, the visuals that were present in the responses are analyzed to reveal anything left unsaid in the text.

Reactions Mapped Out

Table 1 contains the findings categorized by type. 'Exhibition' refers to the museum putting on an exhibition in light of the invasion. 'Statements' are texts that describe the stance of the museum on the situation. While the announcement for an exhibition can also be paired with a statement, the category refers to stand-alone statements. 'Other Event' is a catch-all term for events like music performances, roundtable talks, and movie screenings. This category is distinct as it encompasses physical events, whereas the 'Other' category refers to less-tangible responses. 'Fundraising Campaign' is the organized attempt to raise money, whereas the 'Fundraising Event' category refers to physical events that either accompany a broader campaign or stand on their own as one-off efforts. 'Art Exchange' refers to the exchange of art between museums in Ukraine and elsewhere, usually for safekeeping purposes. 'Cutting Ties' denotes the mention of boycotts or ending partnerships, 'Decoration' refers to decorating or lighting up the museum to show support for Ukraine, and 'Renaming' is the changing of art's representation. Finally, 'Removing Art' refers to taking art off display.

Table 1. Response Types

Response Type	Frequency
Exhibition	65
Statement	50
Other Event	46
Fundraising Campaign	23
Art Exchange	20
Other*	21
Fundraising Event	16
Cutting Ties	16
Decoration	16
Renaming	10
Removing Art	3

*other includes free admission, school trips, petitions, providing shelter, and collaborating with Ukrainian artists

It is clear that 'Exhibitions' have been the most popular type of response, with 'Statements' and 'Other Events' following closely. Much less popular are 'Cutting Ties', 'Renaming', and 'Removing Art'. This is interesting, as it could indicate that museums prefer to highlight culture rather than penalize it. However, it could also be that putting on events and exhibitions and publishing statements is more accessible and perhaps the only option available, as many museums might not have Russian art in their collection nor any partnerships to end. Below, I will dive into various cases that illustrate the landscape of museum responses.

Collaborative Networks

The 'In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine' exhibition was an initiative from the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid. The travelling exhibition, which visited various European countries, aimed to highlight a selection of ground-breaking Ukrainian Art, many of which were rescued from the National Art Museum Ukraine in Kyiv, the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine, and various private donors. (Cumming, 2024; Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, nd.). The exhibition was supported by Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and President Zelenskyy, who, at the opening of the exhibition, said "I think this exhibition shows what Russia is trying to destroy, [and] it also shows how connected Ukraine is to Europe and why you should visit Ukraine when we bring back peace" (Morel, 2023). It was spearheaded by Baroness Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, a powerful art collector and namesake of the Museo Nacional who seems to take the Ukrainian cause to heart (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, nd.). She organized the 'Museums for Ukraine' campaign which aimed to raise funds for the protection of art in Ukrainian museums, called on museums to dedicate space for Ukrainian art in their 22/23 programs, and regularly posts about the Ukrainian cause on social media (Museums for Ukraine, 2022; Instagram, nd.). The campaign, of which the exhibition was a product, worked in close relation with the Ukrainian government to develop spaces for Ukrainian culture in European museums. Additionally, Thyssen-Bornemisza arranged rescue missions in collaboration with multiple governments to get artworks for the exhibition out of the war zones and into safety, showing another relation to conventional politics. "It is becoming clearer day by day that Putin's war against Ukraine is not only about stealing territory but it is also about controlling the nation's narrative and its cultural heritage," she said in an interview (Kishkovsky and Jhala, 2022; Sherwood, 2022). At the opening of the exhibition, which was also attended by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), an independent foundation that works to facilitate cultural developments in Europe, a call for a European Cultural Deal for Ukraine was made (Kishkovsky and Jhala, 2022). The ECF also opened up their Culture of

Solidarity Fund, originally founded to support the arts during covid, to the Ukrainian culture sector (Culture of Solidarity Fund, nd.).

The ‘In the Eye of the Storm’ exhibition is by far the largest response in scale, but there existed also other collaborative initiatives. In The Netherlands, the #hArtforUkraine campaign was launched, organized by Kunsten92, the main interest group for the Dutch cultural sector with close ties to Dutch national politics (Kunsten ’92, nd.). With the goal of raising funds for Giro555, a cooperative effort of humanitarian aid organizations to gather donations, #hArtforUkraine united multiple cultural organizations, of which many museums. They also mentioned the specific purposes of bringing people together, showing solidarity, and bringing comfort (hArt for Ukraine, 2022). Participants were asked to create a special program for the cause, to decorate their venues in yellow and blue, to create a moment of reflection, and/or to collect donations. The campaign ran for the entire month of March 2022 and consisted of over 300 initiatives (ibid.). They also specifically highlighted the possibility of donating to Ukrainian cultural initiatives to show solidarity with other artists and art professionals instead of the general humanitarian aid collection initiative. After a month of successful fundraising, the campaign pivoted to exploring how the cultural sector could offer support for refugees in The Netherlands. Their announcement of the continuation of the campaign mentions them discussing the organization of future initiatives with the Ministry of Culture and DutchCulture, their partner organization that is funded by the Dutch government and the European Union to implement international cultural policy (DutchCulture, nd.). Unfortunately, the #hArtforUkraine campaign website did not post any further updates after April 2022, and the website was taken off the air in early 2025. A google search also shows no results for any continuation of the campaign. I reached out to the organizers for clarification but did not receive a reply.

I have highlighted these collaborative initiatives as I encountered multiple museums that took part in them, and they show the direct connections to the surrounding (inter)national politics. However, there were also plenty of individual actions undertaken by museums. Various museums organized activities for refugees such as workshops and art classes, and there is a wide diversity of how museums decided to respond. For example, the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, Romania, provided their venues as a place for Ukrainian refugees to come together, relax, co-work, and reunite (CiMAM, nd.). The National Museum in Warsaw organized a special cinema for Ukrainian kids, the ZKM Karlsruhe put on an exhibition of art made by children that had to experience the war first-hand, and the Museum der Moderne Salzburg facilitated a knitting marathon to craft blankets for people in the war zones (National Museum Warsaw, 2022; MdM Salzburg, 2023; ZKM Karlsruhe, 2024). All do relate to art, but not specifically visual or fine arts: crafts, music, and cinema are popular too.

Cutting Ties

Several museums decided to cut ties with Russian institutions, cease collaborations, or install boycotts. In addition to the ones mentioned in the introduction, the Tate Britain cut ties with Russian billionaires and vowed not to collaborate with anyone associated with the Russian government (Tate, 2022). Similarly, the Finnish Ateneum museum halted a collaboration with the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the MuHKA immediately disbanded their Russian partnerships and called on others to do the same, the Altes Museum Berlin cancelled a collaboration on pottery research, the Kunsthalle Bremen said they would not revive any of their concluded Russian projects, the Perugia Museum refrained from borrowing the State Hermitage's Perugino exhibition, and the Oxford Ashmolean withdrew their exhibition on the Russian Avant-Garde (Ashmolean, 2022, 2022; Ateneum, 2022; Monopol, 2022; MuHKA, 2022; SMzB, 2022; Imam, 2025). While these actions are commendable, they are also in the minority. It might be that not all museums posted about cutting ties: the Altes Museum cancellation was only mentioned shortly in an interview blog post and the Perugia Museum was reported on in an independent source. Some seem to stem from necessity, others from ideology: the Ateneum cited safety concerns for the artworks as a reason where the MuHKA mentioned a "rapid and unequivocal condemnation of the war by the art field through our international network" (MuHKA, 2022).

However, there were also reactions that were more indirectly influenced by the invasion. The Musée Departmental Henri Matisse in Lille cancelled their loan to a museum in China due to the political ties between China and Russia. While lauded by many critical artists for standing up for human rights and speaking out, the director seemed to cite more practical than ideological reasons for the cancellation, saying that he was unable to track and secure the safety of the works as well as guarantee their return due to the geopolitical climate. Because of the relevance of Matisse to the French national heritage, the director felt he was unable to take the risk of loaning out the artworks (BFM Lille, 2022; Tsui, 2022). The Chinese newspaper *Global Journal*, owned by the CCP, published a reaction stating that "art and culture should not be controlled by narrow-minded political prejudices or become tools for political gain. Matisse tried to use his paintings to express optimism during a time of war" (Chow, 2022). This example shows how museums can also affect third-party countries, and the influence of practicality and ideology.

Statements and Representation

When it comes to statements, it differs how museums interpreted what a statement should entail. The Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague kept it short by posting a single sentence accompanied by the Ukrainian Flag: "Stand with Ukraine - The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a war against all democratic states" (Galerie Rudolfinum, 2025). However, the Kunstmuseum Moritzburg was slightly more creative with their statement, providing a lesson on Ukrainian history, its parallels with German history, and the relation to the museum. For example, they highlight the influence of the German Nazis in Ukraine's

museum sector, stating that they used to put on exhibitions of Germanic art only so as not to stir up feelings of national community (Kunstmuseum Moritzburg, 2023). Additionally, not only did they denounce the invasion, they also detailed the actions they had already taken: after getting in contact with the Kharkiv Art Museum to ask what they needed, they purchased packing and restoration materials and made sure they arrived safely in Kharkiv with the help of local Ukrainians (ibid.).

Various museums paid extra attention to the representation of the artists of display and relabeled their national identities where needed. For example, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam edited their portrayal of Malevych from "Russian" to "born in Ukraine to parents of Polish origin" (Harris, 2023). At the opening of an exhibition on futurist Ukrainian art at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallin, Estonia, Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska stated in a video message that "some [Ukrainian artists] did manage to gain international recognition, but only after their true identities were concealed and they were labelled Russians" (Kumu Art Museum, 2023). Unfortunately, not all museums have been as thorough in their evaluations. In many cases, Ukrainian artists are either presented as merely Russian, or in other problematic ways. For example, the National Gallery in London represents Ilya Repin as "leading artist in the Russian realism movement […] born in the Ukraine" (National Gallery, nd.). Referring to Ukraine with a definite article in front of it implies a disregard for Ukrainian independence and mimics the language Putin uses in Russian to speak of Ukraine as a part of Russia (Graber, 2022). There exists also the broader question of language and spelling when it comes to Ukrainian names and places: in March 2022, President Zelenskyy called on the world to use the Ukrainian spellings rather than the Russian versions which stem from the Soviet period (@ZelenskyyUa, 2022). While this has generally been successful, not all museums have updated their catalogs. Another example of misrepresentation is that of Kandinsky at the Guggenheim Bilbao, where it is stated that he "spent his early childhood in Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine)" (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, nd.). Here, the Russian spelling of Odesa is used, and it depicts the city as primarily Russian: its Ukrainian identity is an afterthought in parentheses.

These findings indicate that museums are indeed soft power actors in their own right, as well as tools for governments to exert soft power through. The discussed efforts showed close ties to national and international politics: through partnering up with governments to save Ukrainian heritage, responding to Ukrainian calls about correcting representation, and cutting ties by necessity, museums conformed to international political interests. On the other hand, museums also exercised soft power through setting up their own networks, situating themselves within the larger geopolitical debate, and making their own ideologically motivated decisions, but also refusing to update the representation of art and artists. In the next section, the reasoning behind their reactions will be explored further.

Behind the Response: Textual Analysis

During the digital ethnography I familiarized myself with the landscape of museum responses and gathered the data for further analysis. From my two-cycle coding analysis on the text nine distinct

categories emerged. In the section below, each category will be explained further and contextualized. A codebook listing the categories with corresponding codes and quotations can be found in appendix 1.

Empathy/Emotions

Based on earlier experiences with organizations speaking on political events, I expected that I would encounter many appeals to human emotion. This category mostly encompasses codes that speak to the hardships and daily lives of the Ukrainian people, but also their strength and power. The 'Empathy/Emotions' category is present in most documents, especially in the ones that are statements or announcements of exhibitions and is often accompanied by descriptive and vivacious writing.

For example, the Klovićevi dvori Gallery in Zagreb, Croatia described the invasion as a continuation of "the struggle of the Ukrainian people against foreign oppression, their suffering, their thralldom, their tumultuous history, but also their freedom and glory" (Klovićevi dvori Gallery, nd.), situating it within a larger struggle and showing both suffering and strength. Similarly, the Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague stated that "War ravages the land, Ukrainians have become refugees in their own country, many have left for abroad" (Galerie Rudolfinum, nd.). Here, the awful effects of the war are made legible through the use of 'ravaging' and the result of displaced people. While these two examples describe more the general hardships, some statements specifically point out the situations of the 'vulnerable'. The Pinacoteca di Brera explicitly directed their statement at Ukrainian children, explaining how "mothers seek shelter with their children in air raid shelters to try to protect themselves, avoiding the worst" (Finestre sull'Arte, 2022). Additionally, the Musei Vaticani created a link between Catholicism, children, and the war: "In the face of the Child which is no longer present, there is the face of every Ukrainian child. Of every child who is an innocent victim of the folly of war" (Musei Vaticani, 2022). This is a small section of the 'Empathy/Emotions' category, as children were mentioned about 25 times, but still a relevant one. The mentioning of women and children will be discussed further in the visual analysis.

Memory and Identity

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the idea of museums as places of memory and identity creation and preservation is very prevalent in the literature. This category indicates that museums themselves are also aware of the link between culture and memory and their role therein. This category is comprised of codes that denote Ukrainian heritage, national identity, and museums as memory institutions.

Some museums, like the Centre Pompidou, 'simply' mention the relationship between the war and identity and memory: "What profound traces does a war like the one Russia unleashed against Ukraine leave on people, consciences, bodies, landscapes, identity, and the memory of a country?" (Centre Pompidou, 2024). Others directly link the war and cultural identity to art, like the Moderna Museet i Malmö: "The attack illustrates how art is used in warfare and as a means in the strategy to destroy a

people and a culture" (Millqvist, 2024), or the Nationalmuseum Stockholm: "When our culture burns, part of our identity burns with it, affecting us deeply" (Petterson, 2022b). While these examples show an awareness of the relationship between heritage, memory, and identity, and the destructive powers of war, some institutions are also aware of the important role of the museum in portraying history, like the Moesgaard Museum: "The Ukrainian treasure shows how big the role of history and cultural heritage is in a war, and how crucial history is for the identity of a people and the story of who is right and what values are the right ones. This is also a very clear example of how important it is to present history in a credible and nuanced way" (Moesgaard Museum, nd.). The explicit mention of presenting history is also reflected in codes of 'truth' and 'discourse', where museums ask about the representation of the ongoing invasion, Russia's actions, and history.

Political Values

The third-largest category is 'Political Values', which encompasses codes that use political language like references to geopolitics, the safeguarding of democracy, civil liberties, and pro-peace/anti-war sentiments. This category was present across all types of documents, with general anti-war and pro-peace statements making up a large part of the quotations.

These sentiments were sometimes communicated using hashtags, like #stopwar and #standwithukraine. The Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin, in an update on their fundraiser, stated in addition to '#standwithukraine' that "Our solidarity is with all those who don't want war. Our support goes out to all people who are not living in peace all over the world!" (Neue Nationalgalerie, 2022). Similarly, the SKD stated that "The SKD stand alongside the people of Ukraine and thus alongside freedom, peace, tolerance and human rights" (SKD, 2022b). While this statement is rather broad, some museums featured political values to reflect cultural aspects, like the Hamburger Kunsthalle: "the voice of art and culture must speak out loudly that war must never be a means for nations to deal with each other" (Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2022). However, others took it further, saying that "the exhibition is more than just an anti-war statement, it asks us if we are complicit in the rape of Europe" (Seymour, 2022). Similarly, the Irish Museum of Modern Art posed that their new exhibition "highlights the new possibilities for artists in the early twentieth century, an era of collapsing empires and seismic geopolitical shifts, to articulate and enact radical modern and democratic principles" (IMMA, 2023). In other words, this category shows how museums situate themselves in the debate by taking political stances.

Global Community

The 'Global Community' category is meant to denote any reference to common global identity, based on for example, international law, values, or a type of world order. A big part of this category is made up of references to Europe, or a "pan-European sense of cohesion" (Bucerius Kunst Forum, 2022).

Where, in other categories, museums are likely to keep things vague by 'merely' calling for peace, here, they tend to draw a stronger line in the sand. For example, the ZKM in Karlsruhe worded their position very strongly: "it is a shared tragedy that must be addressed with a shared responsibility that does not permit genocide in the 21st century" (ZKM Karlsruhe, 2023). Here, a 'global community' is created by referring to the invasion as a 'shared tragedy', as if people outside Ukraine are similarly affected by the horrors of the war. This is also the only time the term 'genocide' was used to refer to the situation, reflecting a willingness to speak frankly.

Similarly, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona said that "We strongly believe the war in Ukraine is a fight for freedom, for the future of democracy, the global legal order, and respect for human rights, including the right to self-determination. We caution everyone against ignoring this threat" (MACBA, 2022). This museum again references supposedly over-arching values of democracy and human rights, as well as the 'global legal order', and is strongly phrased with a word of warning. A global world order is referenced often, like at the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum: "We […] are deeply committed to the people of Ukraine and to respecting the transcultural and transnational unity of the fundamental rights enshrined in the UN Charter" (3Landesmuseen, 2022). While these statements rely more on a global sense of cohesion, the abovementioned focus on Europe also presents frequently: "The exhibition draws on the international law-breaking Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 to reflect on European values and Europe's destiny and future" (Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2023). The absorption of Ukraine into the liberal democratic European identity against the Russian Other is reflected in the aforementioned opening of the ECF fund to Ukrainian artists, and was also seen in political rhetoric after the invasion: the war is framed as a clash between two poles, authoritarian Russian identity and democratic European values (Deyermond, 2022: 233).

(Re)Actions

The '(Re)Actions' category is different from the others as it refers to the actions that museums said to have undertaken in their statements and announcements. This category is not focused on the reasoning behind an action, but on the actions themselves. Examples of codes are 'fundraising', 'cutting ties', and 'critical reflection'. For example, "Each evening we have been lighting up Tate Britain in the colors of the Ukrainian flag to reflect the fact that our thoughts and hearts are with all our colleagues and friends in Ukraine" (Tate, 2022) is what the Tate Britain communicated in their solidarity statement. In addition to this symbolic support, the Tate also communicated a more concrete (re)action: "we will not work with or maintain relationships with anyone associated with the Russian government" (ibid.). It seems the Tate stuck to their promise in this statement they posted quickly after the start of the invasion: The Guardian reported that they cut ties with two Russian billionaires only a week later (Sweney, 2022). This category makes it easier to designate the museums' actions.

Artistic Community

This category encompasses codes that reference an artistic community. It differs from the 'Global Community' category as it is not based on political values or institutions out of which a commonality is constructed, but rather on the fact that they have a passion, interest, and investment in the arts in common.

This category is often paired with a (re)action, but rarely with a strong political statement. For example, the MuHKA in Belgium stated that "MuHKA has, besides our support for artists in Ukraine, also supported the humanitarian efforts of another of its partner institutions, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw" (MuHKA, 2022). Additionally, there are also many mentions of partnerships with museums in Ukraine based on this artistic community: "We, too, at Sweden's Nationalmuseum are helping museums in Lviv with materials and other necessities" (Petterson, 2022a). The category is often part of a statement of solidarity, like the National Museum in Warsaw posted: "We, the Team of the National Museum in Warsaw, express our solidarity with the employees of museums and cultural institutions, as well as with the entire society of Ukraine" (Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2022). The National Gallery Prague created a concept of artistic community in their statement by referring to people in the Ukrainian art sector as "colleagues and friends" (Národní galerie Praha, nd.). The focus on art also emerged in the digital ethnography, where I illustrated how museums center art in their responses.

Power of Art

The seventh category is meant to denote the role of art and culture during wartime according to museums. This category also fits into the overarching theme of artistic values but specifically mentions the possibilities that art and culture provide during wartime, as well as any accompanying responsibility for museums. It is often found in exhibition announcements, as it is there that art can fulfill its promised power. Additionally, it is often a lead-in to a (re)action, as a reasoning behind why a museum is undertaking a certain action.

The Accademia Carrara, in an announcement of their partnership with the Andrey Sheptytsky Museum in Lviv, stated that "art can play a fundamental role as a messenger of peace" (Accademia Carrara, 2023). The statement is accompanied by an image of two wooden angel statues, supposed peace bearers, rescued from the National Gallery in Lviv (ibid.). The proposition that art has valuable power in a war context also leads museums to ask what their responsibility is: "How to react, as a museum, how to show a sign of solidarity with those under attack when direct cooperation with a Ukrainian museum is currently proving impossible and our own collections contain almost no objects related to this country?" (Seymour, 2022). However, other museums seem to have already answered this question: "the exhibition also addresses the role of museums in times of war: protecting, documenting, educating" (Louvre-Lens, 2024). This category reflects museums' awareness of their social responsibility, which

also appeared in the literature: Janes (2015) and Prescha (2021) explained how museums have become increasingly engaged instead of placing themselves 'above' social issues.

Decolonization

Another relatively small category is 'Decolonization'. Often paired with outspoken political stances, this category covers calls for decolonization of Ukrainian art and land, recognitions of Russian imperialism, and the right of an independent Ukraine to its own sovereign borders. The category is often paired with the 'Memory and Identity' one but makes explicit mention of the above. The literature showed that, in an 'age of protest', museums are increasingly responsive to calls for social issues like decolonization, which this category affirms.

While often used in reference to an exhibited artist's values and influences, sometimes the museum itself makes a call against imperialism: "with full conviction we shout: never again war, never again imperialism!" (MACBA, 2022). As mentioned above, it is closely related to memory politics, which shows in the Prague National Gallery's statement: "One of the best things we can do now to contribute against Imperialism and against Russian colonial ambition is to support Ukrainian identity: with our word and attention" (Národní galerie Praha, 2022). This category is also often present in announcements of organized discussions or roundtable talks. The SKD made the question of decolonization in Ukraine central to one of their panels: "Decolonization seems to become an urgent agenda of this year that at the same time makes us reflect and figure out the terminology itself, if and in which way we can imply this terminology in the context of Ukraine?" (SKD, 2022a). In this way, the museums respond to calls for the decolonization of Ukrainian art like those made by Oksana Seminik.

Neutrality of Culture

In the theoretical section of this thesis the 'neutrality of culture' argument has already been mentioned and debunked. However, this line of argumentation still showed up in my research, although only in a handful of cases. Where the other categories all arose in documents the museums posted themselves, this category was only found in secondary sources like interviews and news articles. This makes sense, as museums that subscribe to this viewpoint could much easier post nothing at all. The secondary sources usually have a cause for reaching out to the museums, for example based on museums' ties to Russia, Russian art collections, or previously made statements. A prime example is the previously mentioned Museo Ruso: "Russian culture isn't responsible for what's happening. Cancelling Russian culture doesn't solve anything" (Burgen, 2023). Similarly, the Uffizi director bemoaned cultural sanctions as he found them 'ineffective' (Imam, 2025). Surprisingly, the British Museum combined this sentiment with an anti-war statement: "The scale of human displacement and destruction in Ukraine is deeply distressing. The safeguarding and neutrality of culture during conflict is crucial to the future rebuilding of society" (British Museum, 2022). This is contradictory in itself: denouncing the war and

acknowledging the power of culture therein precludes the ability for culture to be neutral in conflict. Another interesting example is that of the Musée d'Orsay, who organized a round-table talk on 'Russian art' specifically focused on Arkhyp Kuindzhi and Ilya Repin, two Ukrainian artists (Havrylchyk, 2023). While not technically articulating the neutrality narrative, their decision to portray the artists in this way, especially a week after The Met renamed them as Ukrainian, speaks volumes on where their priorities lie.

Women and War: Visual Analysis

The final level of analysis I performed was on 153 visuals that accompanied the written data. The frequency table with visual codes can be found in appendix 2. Through visual sources' unique ability to evoke emotions and to offer new insights about the political, they bring out things left unsaid in text (Hansen, 2011: 53; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2022: 95). Therefore, this section aims to supplement the findings already uncovered. The most prevalent textual category, 'Empathy/Emotions', is also present in the visuals, as shown by the categories of destruction, war, and pain. However, the visual analysis revealed a new gendered dimension of this category. While the most salient code is the one of 'Ukrainian Colors' with 59 instances, this is followed closely by 'Woman' with 53 occurrences. 'Men', on the other hand, only appear 17 times. Additionally, 'children' are featured 19 times, of which 8 are explicitly girls and only 1 a boy. The other 10 are either a combination or indeterminate.

It is well-known that disaster media prominently feature imagery of women and children suffering to support the urgency of a cause as if they are waiting to be rescued (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2022: 94). Due to stereotypes of women and children as helpless and innocent, their suffering in crisis works to engage the viewer with the visual (idem: 96). The feminized representation of disaster is not without effect: the extensive use of gendered stereotypes influences the spectator's relation to the event, as if all disaster victims are fragile and helpless, and can work to 'feminize' the conflict itself (idem: 99). These modern gendered representations all find their roots in deeply entrenched aesthetic patterns: for example, the imagery of mother and child is rooted in the iconography in the Pietà (idem: 101). In addition to the literal codes of 'woman' and 'child', the codes of the stereotypically feminized spaces of 'home' and 'nature' were also present. All of these concepts are, in the liberal tradition, seen as outside of politics – they belong in the private sphere (Bleiker, 2018: 52). On the opposite end of the spectrum we have the representation of the soldier, and while the soldier is not necessarily male, its representation is deeply entwined with masculinity and the public (Wojnicka et al., 2022: 84).

So, if this is already a well-established visual pattern, what does it mean in the museum context? If we accept that all representations of global politics are inevitably political and that there is no way to represent the world 'neutrally' (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2022: 95), then we can again situate the museum as a political actor in the international. Drawn out against a background of gendered stereotypes, where one pole represents the hyper-masculine machismo leadership that partly underlies the invasion, and

the other a non-hegemonic or even feminized masculinity that has been pushed into a more hegemonic role (Wojnicka et al., 2022: 84-85), museums can also perpetuate gendered discourses. However, the underlying issue is that Russia has widely portrayed Ukraine as a feminine subject in need of saving by a masculine leader (Gaufman, 2023: 524). This constructed power difference works to lessen Ukraine's agency and affirm Russia's supposed superiority (ibid.). Russia uses representations of Ukraine as a woman with 'loose morals': one that needs to be 'straightened out', and is in need of saving (idem: 524). As Bleiker and Hutchison (2022: 99) claim, the depiction female victims works to feminize not only the conflict but also the represented nation. In that way, the overrepresentation of femininity in the museum imagery can unintentionally provide support for Russia's war rhetoric.

Fig. 1: Oleksii Kyrychenko. *Girl With Candy Soon Becomes a Viral Hit Inc. a Poster.* National Museums Liverpool (2023)
Fig. 2: Maks Levin. *Clouds of smoke over oil warehouse shelled at night by Russian forces*. Vasylkiv, Ukraine. MOCAK (2022).
Fig. 3: Mstyslav Chernov. *20 Days in Mariupol.* Mariupol, Ukraine. Palazzo Esposizioni Roma (2023).

The pictures above are examples of imagery that accompanied the museums' online responses. Figures 2 and 3 fall neatly into the gendered scripts described above: male soldiers, female victims. Figure 3 even features an injured pregnant woman rescued by five men. Figure 1 is more interesting as it plays with the gendered expectations: here, a girl in a traditional pink dress with flowers brandishes an assault rifle in front of the Ukrainian flag and a fighter jet. The words underneath say "Europe, I am fighting for you!", which, together with her pointing pose, directly evoke similarities to the infamous American "We Want You" Uncle Sam posters. The subversion of gender and age, as well as the shocking combination of innocent (a young girl) and violent (an assault rifle and fighter jet) stops the spectator in their tracks. Due to its shock factor, I interpreted the image as ironic, however, it seems the museum

has not: the image is accompanied by the question “with a war in our European backyard, what role will you play?” (National Museums Liverpool, 2023). While this image thus propagates the ‘European identity’ rhetoric found in the texts, the gendered logics that underly global conflicts also become visible here. Through playing with expectations, the image asks the question of who is fighting this war and for whom. The gendered analysis of the visuals reveals that, while museums’ statements might be critical, it is easy to fall into the trap of furthering Russian narratives. It is interesting that here, museums fall in line with larger trends of gendered representations when their textual statements did not.

Emerging Argumentation

The analyses indicate that museums have responded with varying degrees of ‘politicalness’ and involvement. Their tendency to rely on concepts of international law, community, and political values as basis for their (re)actions suggests that a previously discussed “rally effect”, where governments are drawn to the same response, also applies to cultural institutions. Much like with governments, there is external pressure on museums to do the ‘right’ thing, like twitter campaigns and governments’ call to review museum collections. The rhetorical creation of a common identity based on political values or ‘Europeanness’ also reflects tendencies seen in other political spaces (Deyermond, 2022). As indicated by the categories of ‘Political Values’, ‘Global Community’, and ‘Decolonization’, museums can insert themselves into the broader political debate by taking political stances, thus exerting soft power within their capabilities. Funnily enough, the category that aims to stay outside of politics is also making museums part of the debate: intentionally not taking a position is taking one supporting the status quo. Here, the status quo is one of years of Russian cultural influence that are not easily undone. As explained before, going along with Russia’s cultural narratives is especially dangerous when the aggressor is using those narratives to justify their crimes. The danger of the ‘neutral’ approach also became visible in the visual analysis, where I showed how it is easy for museums to reproduce narratives that benefit the Russian invasion, and the ‘hidden’ role of gender therein.

The ‘banding together’ of museums is also reflected in the coordinated action networks like ‘Museums for Ukraine’ or the Dutch ‘#hArtforUkraine’. Nearly all the Dutch museums in the sample participated in the action, making it one of the countries with the highest percentage of museum respondents. It seems these coordinated networks make it easier for museums to respond, as they provide a framework for activities and prefabricated communication the museums can share. However, museums publishing more politically outspoken reactions, like calls for decolonization of Ukrainian art and land, did so outside of these coordinated networks. Within The Netherlands, only the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, which has a history of progressive politics (Torenbosch, 2025), mentioned decolonization. It must also be noted that this museum is part of the L'Internationale Confederation together with 12 other museums, which has as its goal to promote decentralized and non-hierarchical art spaces

(L'Internationale, nd.). Many of the museums in this confederation also published vocal statements, further illustrating the relevance of partnership networks.

Museums are largely aware of their role and responsibility as art exhibitors, as shown by the categories of 'Power of Art', 'Artistic Community', and 'Memory and Identity'. Many museums tried to center art and culture in their response: as context for their statements, in a call for the protection of Ukrainian heritage, or for the content of a (re)action. While it makes sense that museums try to stay close to their artistic identity in their reactions, only a fraction has made any real effort to correct the representation of Ukrainian art as Ukrainian. The symbolic gesture of lighting up a museum building in blue and yellow shows support and reminds people of the situation, yet it does little to enact actual change. It is an 'easy way out': it portrays a support for the general cause yet does not directly engage with the precarious discourse surrounding the conflict. However, especially in the context of this invasion, where Russia attempts to rewrite Ukrainian history into its own, correct representation of art is much more effective as it directly works to undo the rhetorical justifications that underly the invasion and acknowledges the role and responsibility of the art museum. Exerting soft power through renaming directly bars Russia from furthering a *Russkiy Mir* narrative. While fundraising is an effective reaction as it directly raises money, it also successfully exists outside of the museum sphere. Therefore, the ways in which museums try to raise funds, and the specific goals of the funding are often shaped by their identity as art museums, for example through special exhibitions or directing funds specifically to the Ukrainian art sector. Additionally, their awareness of memory politics and its relation to identity as well as museums' role therein is contributory to the shaping of their reactions. For example, the frequently occurring response of exhibitions are the practice of what Luke (1992) calls 'coded texts': they are situated in the political context and therefore produce new meanings through their interaction with the spectator. In that sense, exhibitions are effective responses as they work to create new political understandings and provide the spectator with new perspectives.

Where the digital ethnography showed both the soft power exerted by museums and the relationship with conventional politics, the textual analysis primarily revealed the ways in which museums can shape preferences. The widespread use of emotive language, which is highly effective in influencing people's perceptions (Macagno and Walton, 2014: 108), allows museums to impact large audiences. As mentioned in the literature, their educative historical position allows them to speak from a place of authority, art exhibitions are especially apt in creating new political meanings, and the online aspect allows museums to reach more people. Therefore, the focus on art and artistic values allows museums to effectively shape preferences of the public. Museums also insert themselves into the political debate through taking political stances, furthering common identity rhetoric, and making calls to action.

Discussion

This research showed how factors of memory, identity, community, politics, artistic values, empathy, and gender all underly European art museums' responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While there was a myriad of responses, all with varying degrees of action and politicalness, these factors were present across borders. Museums have a tendency to band together in organized networks, which is effective in reaching a broader public yet can inhibit individual museums from speaking out on their own terms as they already participate in something. Museums also used more widespread rhetoric of common identities, showing similarities to the language in the broader discourse. While they generally seem to be aware of their role and responsibility in the creation and preservation of heritage and identity, this only translated into effective action in a handful of cases. As argued earlier, some of the most effective actions are related to the nature of the war: preserving heritage, exhibiting Ukrainian art, and correcting representations. Interestingly, the majority of responses and actions are explicitly pro-Ukrainian rather than anti-Russian. The most frequent response type was that of the exhibition, often featuring Ukrainian art or providing a Ukrainian perspective. Statements often focused on solidarity with the Ukrainian people and spoke out more against the horrors of war than the Russian perpetrator. As Zerka (2023: 11) explained, bans can be counterproductive as they go against liberal values. This sentiment likely transferred to museums, making them more likely to offer positive rather than negative support.

Problematizing (Non)Responses

It seems some museums might have had good intentions yet did not go beyond a simple statement posted on their website. For example, the ARoS art museum in Aarhus, Denmark, posted a blue and yellow picture on their Instagram but left no further trace of any real action (ARoS, 2022). Similarly, the Musée Lorrain posted a statue wrapped in a Ukrainian flag on Facebook and left it at that (Musée Lorrain, 2022). Luckily, it seems that, while the sample contains 24 instances of statements without actions, museums with action points completed their proposed actions. Exhibitions came and went, funds were raised, and events were held. One type of (re)action that is difficult to check is the proposed partnerships. Multiple museums mention initiating them together with Ukrainian museums to share artworks, good practices, and knowledge. However, in many of these cases it is unknown whether these partnerships are still ongoing, were a one-off instance, or remained in the proposition stage. In some cases, the partnership was clearly delineated to a singular event, however, more often the extent was not communicated to the reader. To gain more insight into this, I reached out to three museums: MuHKA, Kunstmuseum Moritzburg, and the Accademia Carrara. The Accademia Carrara very kindly got back to me, informing me that the partnership was indeed ongoing and they supplied me with materials that illustrated how the partnership went beyond the loan of artworks: the Accademia Carrara supported the Lviv National Art Gallery with conservation, launched a fundraiser after the success of the exhibition,

and according to the mayor of Bergamo the cities themselves have also built "particularly significant and symbolic international relations" (private communication). The appearance of conventional politics in these supplemental materials again indicates that museums can be conductors for soft power in international politics. The other museums did not respond.

While not responding to my emails can be a resource or availability issue, it must be mentioned that out of the 550 museums in the sample only 177 museums posted some sort of response. This amounts to about a third of all museums, meaning that two-thirds did not post anything. During the analysis I mentioned that the 'Neutrality of Culture' argument was mostly found in secondary sources, and almost never in something published by the museums themselves. In other words, this category likely would not have been found if newspapers were not included. Why exactly those 373 museums did not respond remains guesswork, but it seems plausible because of the above that at least some also adhere to the idea that culture and art are neutral forces and therefore decided not to directly engage in political discussions. However, it is unfair to ascribe this presumption to all 373 museums. There is also the question of resources: during the digital ethnography, I noticed how most larger and well-known museums did publish something, whereas the smaller museums with outdated websites and less resources were less likely to. This is also not a perfect explanation, as many small museums did respond and some larger museums with big names did not. For example, the Nationalmusée Luxemburg, a small museum, directly asked what their role and responsibilities are and could be as a small museum with no ties to the involved countries nor any relevant art in their collections (Seymour, 2022). On the other hand, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam took part in the #hArtforUkraine collective fundraiser but there is no trace of anything published on their own websites and channels. Similarly, the Guggenheim Bilbao, part of the powerful Guggenheim museum, did not respond and continues to refer to Odesa as "Russia (now Ukraine)" (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, nd.). These cases illustrate that it is hard to speak of a resources problem as there are museums with less resources doing more. Finally, it might be that the country's national politics either prohibits museums responding or negatively influences it. There is some basis for this in my findings: none of the Hungarian, Serbian, or Belarusian museums in the sample made any efforts after the invasion. The Slovak National Gallery did host the 'In the Eye of the Storm' exhibition, but just last year the director was dismissed by the right-wing government and there have not been any actions since (Oltermann, 2024). However, in the other countries there is a combination of museums that responded and those that did not, indicating that again, this is not a perfect explanation. Not responding seems like an innocent thing – and in many cases it might be. However, staying silent intentionally is also a form of exercising power: it chooses to perpetuate the status quo.

So What?

Throughout this process, one question kept following me: what does this all matter? Within this thesis, I have made an argument that museums' actions matter in the light of Russia's rhetoric and situated this

within a debate between the political or neutral nature of culture. However, there is more at play here. Susan Sontag addresses the question of 'fascinating fascism' in her 1975 essay of the same name, where she problematizes the mainstreaming of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda as interesting and beautiful works of art (Sontag, 1975). The rigidity and uniformity of fascist art had become 'in fashion', and with this, Sontag noticed an altered representation of Riefenstahl herself which diminished the horror behind her work and instead focused on Riefenstahl's 'pursuit of beauty'. It was not that Riefenstahl's sympathies had suddenly become erased or acceptable, rather that they no longer mattered in the face of the current trend, causing the controversy to be driven into the background (idem: 84). Sontag continues that a change of elite tastes might seem trivial, but that as they become more established and common, ethical challenges arise as the politics of the work are also spread (idem: 98). Similarly, propagating Russian narratives about a *Russkiy Mir* through the misrepresentation of nationality and the reliance on a neutrality of culture narrative similarly steers tastes and drives the political implications into the background. As museums have a legitimizing function on art and are figures of authority, they spread the 'elite tastes' onto the general public. Fine art as a form of 'high culture' targets elites, and that status is also especially apt in influencing the public. This, combined with the increasing accessibility of the museums, shows that museums' soft power is essential in steering the preferences of the masses. Therefore, museums' direct engagement with these issues can prevent increasing the already existing weakness for Russian culture within the European elite (Zerka, 2023: 11).

In a world where Russian cultural influence still shapes foreign perceptions of its national identity, politics, and the invasion, these museum responses do not only illustrate how they are soft power actors through shaping public preferences along political lines, but also directly exert power on Russia. Decades of intensive cultural diplomacy that influenced the European perception of Russian culture, something essential to Russia's geopolitical aspirations, are now called into question through the renaming and showcasing of Ukrainian art.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to answer the question '*How have European art museums responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?*'. I found that museums have reacted in a variety of ways, often influenced by politics, artistic values, and an awareness of their role and responsibility in times of conflict. More importantly, I showed that museums have an important role in this specific conflict as their ability to enact soft power through exhibitions and communication can shape public perspectives. They too are spaces where this war plays out: museums have been impacted by public calls to action, government regulations, and moral questions. Additionally, I situated these responses within the extensive history of Russian cultural diplomacy. Since 2022, Russia's cultural grip on Europe has continued to evolve. Partly due to cultural institutions highlighting Ukrainian culture, Europeans have been confronted with a different view of Ukraine, Russia, and their relationship. While in this thesis I have focused specifically on museums, many of the findings can also apply to other 'high' culture institutions like theatre, opera, and ballet.

This thesis aimed to expand on the academic debate surrounding museums and politics by situating museums as soft power actors, investigating their roles in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, and providing new insights on the power of museums in times of conflict. It provided a previously non-existent overview of museum reactions to the Russian invasion and showed the risks of Russia's treacherous trap of cultural diplomacy. While this thesis affirmed the role of museums as memory curators, it also revealed their awareness of their responsibility therein. It has added to the debate surrounding the neutrality of culture by positioning cutting ties, correcting representations, and other responses that center art as effective ways to exert power in this conflict. Further research could visit museums and investigate the current representation of artists or look into other locations or conflicts. Additionally, it could focus on the effect of national politics on museum reactions, something alluded to in the discussion but not included in the scope of this research.

Since I began writing this thesis, I have noticed my awareness of the representation of culture increasing. Right before deciding on this topic, I took a trip to London. While reading the program of 'Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812', a musical adaptation of a section of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace', I recognized the name of Len Blavatnik, a billionaire sanctioned by the Ukrainian government (President of Ukraine, 2023). That morning, I had visited the Tate Modern where he donated a building. It took diving into this topic for weeks until I realized that maybe there was more behind why this exact show (which portrays Russian culture in a rather romanticized way) was funded. These developments and the money flows behind them are usually invisible to the public, making it easy to fall into the trap of Russia's perpetuated cultural diplomacy. More recently, in Amsterdam, my eye fell on a description of a public artwork by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, two artists who were born in Dnipro during the Soviet Union (now Ukraine) but consider themselves international artists (Kishkovsky, 2022). The sign

however described the artists as Russian-American. On Ilya's frequent Russian representation, Emilia Kabakov commented: "I think they might have rushed to claim him as a Russian artist so that Ukraine doesn't lay claim to him" (ibid.), showing the politics behind his representation.

Unfortunately, Russia is not the only country where the debate of cultural neutrality and representation is relevant. In February, US President Donald Trump took over as chairman of the revered Kennedy Center, a podium for performing arts and music in Washington, D.C., and replaced the entire board with people that aligned with his politics. His aim was to remove 'woke' programming and transform the center into a place where people "can enjoy the arts with respect to America's great history and traditions" (Bumiller, 2025). Similarly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban poured millions into state-sanctioned art to glorify the nation and his leadership (ibid.). All over the world culture is becoming increasingly contested, making it all the more relevant to investigate the politics behind it. It is with this sentiment and the current global context that I hope that this thesis provides a new dimension to the academic debate surrounding museums and conflict, and that it allows people to think more critically about what they see around them like it did for me. What is put on and what is kept off display is political, and we should approach it as such.

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Appendix 1: Codebook

Table 2. Codebook

Code Category	Code Examples	Quote Examples
Empathy/Emotions	displacement, destruction, everyday life, children, death, bombs, family, suffering, trauma, women and children, courage, hope, rape	"many Ukrainians have fled their country to save their lives, as the enemy demolished and looted their homes", "Tens of thousands dead, cities partially razed, millions of Ukrainian refugees wandering across Europe", "those who suffer the most are the children", "the experience of war lived by children is similar even though the times and places change", "caution against forgetting the physical and psychological trauma that war leaves", "everyday, hundreds of people are murdered, raped, and traumatized", "aim to show the pride, strength, and hope of the Ukrainian people", "mothers seek shelter with their children in air raid shelters to try to protect themselves, avoiding the worst"
Memory and Identity	history, destruction of art, identity, heritage, memory, culture, protecting art, destruction of heritage, propaganda, truth	"This is story of Ukraine, told in the first person: a story that has not yet become a past.", "The current crisis shows us that understanding the complexity of the past is a safeguard against rigid interpretations of our own world and against the abuse of history", "At war for history", "Ukraine's art and culture have been highly endangered since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against the country", "Cultural heritage forms the basis of our identity, community and understanding of the past on which we stand", "When our culture burns, part of our identity burns with it, affecting us deeply", "struggle for truth", "Others deliberately oppose Russian cultural propaganda"
Political Values	war, freedom, anti-war, peace, international law, human rights, invasion, democracy,	"We are shocked by the war in Ukraine. We hope for an immediate restoration of dialogue and peace", "[we] stand on the side of the Ukrainian people and thus on the side of freedom, peace, tolerance and human rights", "Violence, human rights violations, and a lack of freedom have no place in today's world", "Faced with the dramatic developments of the conflict in Ukraine, the

	#museumsagainstwar, #standwithukraine	Leopold Museum wants to broadcast this plea for peace", "How can she be an artist when her country is being brutally invaded?", "Democracy and independence are ideals Ukrainians strive for"
Global Community	shared history, peaceful world, Europe, community, shared values, European history, human experience, global community, common future	"the freedom of all of us is at stake", "The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a war against all democratic states", "respecting the transcultural and transnational unity of the fundamental rights enshrined in the UN Charter", "The Russian troops' attack on independent Ukraine brings all of Europe to the brink of the abyss", "it impressively reflects Ukraine's cultural proximity to Western Europe", "This special exhibition aims to introduce artworks from the Odesa Museum of Western and Eastern Art to a broad audience and to highlight the connections between Ukraine and Western Europe", "a symbolic action that once again emphasizes the universality of life and human experience and the sharing of its fundamental values", "We did this for the benefit of future generations and a shared future in peace and friendship"
(Re)Actions	fundraising, breaking ties, renaming, financial support, free admission, awareness, building bridges, reflection, boycott, decoration, discussion, removing art, returning art	"In response to the current humanitarian crisis in the Ukraine, the Luxembourg art scene is mobilising to raise funds", "Unfortunately, relations with Russian museums ended after Russia started its unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine", "we will not work with or maintain relationships with anyone associated with the Russian government", "Finland's largest art museum Ateneum has changed the nationality of artist Ilja Repin from Russian to Ukrainian in its cataloging system", "Entry for Ukrainian war refugees is free, based on a document proving their citizenship", "an effort to raise awareness of the threat posed to the war-torn country's artistic legacy as fighting grinds on", "we will continue to work with culture as a bridge between people", "Russian participation in cultural gatherings such as biennales should be […] boycotted", "Each evening we have been lighting up Tate Britain in the colours of the Ukrainian flag to reflect the fact that our thoughts and hearts are with all our colleagues and friends in Ukraine"

Artistic Community	solidarity, collaboration, safeguard, art exchange, partnerships, support Ukrainian artists, #cultureunitestheworld,	"We […] express our solidarity with the employees of museums and cultural institutions, as well as with the entire society of Ukraine", "we wish to express our full solidarity with all staff members of the cultural institutions of the independent and sovereign Ukraine and the entire Ukrainian nation", "The aim of the fund is to initially provide urgent cultural assistance but also to stand by Ukraine in the longer term through European support campaigns in the spirit of a common culture of solidarity", "In connection with the exhibition, Moesgaard has worked closely with researchers and staff at museums in Ukraine", "Through its actions, the Louvre Museum intends to contribute to the preservation and fight against illicit trafficking of Ukrainian cultural property", "The forty-nine paintings from the eighteenth through the twentieth century and other works from Kyiv will find a temporary home in Switzerland."
Power of Art	power of art, responsibility, protecting art, art as politics, #hArtforUkraine, dialogue, artistic expression	"art can offer insight and understanding beyond the 24-hour news cycle", "The role of art has now developed from emotional impact and intellection discussion to become a social practice", "The artworks in question were evacuated from the city before the onset of war and transferred to safety in Berlin, where they will be brought into dialogue with paintings from the collections of Berlin's museums", "It is the duty of all of us, regardless of nationality, to stand guard over cultural assets, to respect them and surround them with care so that they can last for generations to come", "How to react, as a museum, how to show a sign of solidarity with those under attack when direct cooperation with a Ukrainian museum is currently proving impossible and our own collections contain almost no objects related to this country?", "Art is above all a personal position, a kind of political act"
Decolonization	decolonization, imperialism, self-determination, sovereignty, colonialism,	"full respect for the freedom and sovereignty of the independent Ukrainian state", "the figure of a soldier becomes a metaphor for thinking about the Soviet as such in historic memory of the country which is trying to rapidly realize the process of decolonization", "decolonial thinking and how it can be used to critically reflect on and resist the insidiousness of imperialist and

	independence, fascism, colonial structures, colonial violence	colonial rhetoric and practices across Europe and in post-colonial territories", "the art collections of Ukrainian museums will be examined for traces of historical ruptures and imperialist oppression", "with full conviction we shout: never again war, never again imperialism!", "We thought fascism was defeated forever. But fascism proved very resilient"
Neutrality of Culture	cancel culture, counterproductive, Russian art, apolitical, neutrality of culture, no other choice, separation imposed by politics	"Cancelling Russian culture doesn't solve anything", "To expel an artist from public space because of his nationality or inconsistency with the prevailing morality is like Germany in the 1930s with its 'Degenerate Art'", "cultural sanctions are counterproductive", "Differences of opinion always proved to be bridgeable", "dissent at the interruption of cultural exchanges between countries in conflict and an eventual embargo regarding Russian art, such as the proposed closure of the Russian Icon Museum at Palazzo Pitti, recently inaugurated at the beginning of this year", "For a long time, the Hermitage Amsterdam has kept its distance from political developments in Putin's Russia", "The safeguarding and neutrality of culture during conflict is crucial to the future rebuilding of society", "The Hermitage Amsterdam currently has no other choice", "Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine)"

Note. Not all codes and quotations listed in codebook due to space constraints.

Appendix 2: Visual Analysis

Table 3. Visual Analysis

Visual Code	Frequency
Ukrainian Colors	59
Woman	53
Nature	25
War	20
Children	19
Destruction	18
Men	17
Art	17
Home	15
Religion	15
Peace	14
Abstract	13
Museum	13
Text	12
Agriculture	9
Girl	8
Soldier	8
Pain	7
Sunflower	5
Europe	4
Death	4
Labor	3
History	3
Politician	3
Boy	1