

Cherishing Legacy, Choosing Pearls: stories of resilience in safeguarding cultural heritage amidst disaster

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Image



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As the Oracle stated, Troy could not be won without the death of Achilles. And so, Ulysses went out in search of him. Thetis, upon hearing the prophecy, sent her son Achilles to the court of Lycomedes where he disguised himself as a woman among the king's daughters. Ulysses, donning a merchant's robe, came through town with two crates of goods: one full of jewellery,

the other, arms. While Lycomedes' daughters were drawn to the allure of precious jewels, Achilles revealed his true identity by instinctively reaching for the weapons. This pivotal moment, captured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (13:162-70), marks the beginning of Achilles' journey towards fulfilling his destiny in the Trojan War.

Elie Shamir, a painter and social activist based in Kfar Yehoshua, Israel, drew inspiration from this legend for his work *Family Portrait* (1995). Shamir portrays himself as Achilles alongside his daughters and wife, who represent the daughters of Lycomedes. However, Shamir puts a spin on the original tale: instead of choosing tools of destruction, Achilles selects a pearl necklace from Ulysses' treasure trove. By altering the myth in this way, the value of the story significantly changes. In the midst of so much destruction currently taking place in Shamir's part of the world, it seems the moral of this new story holds great permeance. The artist's reinterpretation of the Achilles myth serves as a poignant theme throughout this paper where we encounter stories of resilience and learn about individuals who cherish legacy—who choose the pearls—over conflict and destruction.

The intention behind this article is to highlight initiatives that seek to protect cultural heritage, not destroy it. Daily we are faced with so many natural, cultural and social tragedies; it's imperative that we also shine a light on initiatives that actively respond to and even pre-empt the loss of irreplaceable tangible and intangible history, identity and heritage of communities worldwide. By spotlighting these efforts, I hope to raise awareness, inspire action and garner support for their vital work. It's also healthy to be reminded that there are good people out there doing good things.

The educators

At this article's core is cultural heritage, so it seems vital that we start at the very beginning with art creation, with humanism and with one of the strongest filaments in our collective being: teaching and education. Elie Shamir represented to me the lasting effects of edification. As both an artist and a teacher, his role is a powerful one, shaping young minds and inspiring futures. Shamir's [TEDx Talk](#), "What makes people create?" encapsulates this ethos.

Shamir plays an active role within his village community. In fact, I interviewed him on the tail of a gallery talk attended by 150 individuals, including 17 current students and numerous alumni. In his own practice, Shamir challenges prevailing mythologies, such as that of Achilles, urging us to explore our identities as part of a broader cultural narrative. Another powerful, invigorating aspect to Shamir's mission is inclusivity. Regardless of gender or cultural background, all are welcome in his studio, which he describes as a place that exists "beneath a dome"—a safe place.

In communities where artistic pursuits (particularly for women) may be frowned upon or limited, Shamir advocates vehemently for equal rights to creative expression. "Becoming [an] artist is not really very well accepted in [some] families. But that success, including economic success, gives [women] power to make up their minds—their families cannot ignore that success. It's risky, it's problematic, but it's happening in an exciting way." Despite the inherent challenges, Shamir remains steadfast in his belief that every individual, regardless of their background or sex,

deserves the opportunity to pursue their artistic passions—after all, the freedom to create is a fundamental human right

This is the power of education. I begin with Shamir because “teacher”, as a guide who instils ideas that leave a lasting impression, is a powerful position to have, especially during war. In his case, Shamir’s art studio sits amidst the devastating Israel-Hamas conflict. With both Israeli and Palestinian students in his class, Shamir vies that no positive or peaceful end can be salvaged from a story run by bad people. With friends who were killed in the massacre of October 7th 2023, Shamir is in despair at the war continuing to rage around him, but his classroom is a haven. I found the following extract in our conversation especially telling:

“When I teach art, I separate the voice and the text... The human voice must come from the lungs, it’s immaterial. The voice takes this text to you. What I’m telling my students is that [their voice] is much more important than the text, and they should use it. The text is whatever it is, but the struggle between texts brings evil to the world—if you think your text is higher than somebody else’s text. Everybody has a human voice. We should listen to this human voice.”

The guardians

Without invitation, no one has a right to commandeer another’s cultural heritage—tangible or intangible—even if the intention behind the act is good. The student-led initiative Konservaction, now [Institut Konservasi](#), was established in response to the Mount Agung eruption in 2017. The ongoing efforts of this foundation not only demonstrate the advantages of cross-cultural collaboration but also underscore the importance of guardians of heritage initiating the calls for aid.

Mount Agung is an active volcano in Bali, Indonesia, and it sits southeast of Mount Batur. Dominating the surrounding areas as the highest point in Bali, the Mount influences climate by shepherding the especially heavy rainfall patterns in this part of the world. At the time of the impending eruption in 2017, Saiful Bakhri was an international student from Indonesia studying his Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. The news he was receiving from home—[1,000 daily tremors](#) with evacuations steered by the [National Disaster Management Agency](#)—highlighted that the focus was on the safety of people and essential stocks, overlooking the protection of cultural heritage in the region, despite Bali boasting at least [44 museums](#) and relying heavily on cultural tourism.

Given the proximity of five museums and cultural centres, along with several smaller shrines located within the 12 km exclusion zone surrounding Mount Agung Volcano, and 15 additional museums situated just a short distance away, Bakhri jumped into action. In consultation with Dr. Marcelle Scott, acting mediator from the University of Melbourne, and Ajeng Ayu Arainikasih, founder of Museum Ceria and lecturer at Universitas Indonesia, Bakhri put a rescue and salvage plan into action. With fellow students Lisa Mansfield, Laura Gransbury and myself, Bakhri applied for the University of Melbourne’s *Student Engagement Grant*, to cover the costs of travel and materials, which was accepted by the University of Melbourne in record time.

Almost as soon as Bakhri and his team landed in Bali, the volcano began to erupt. They launched into action, visiting nine museums and—in collaboration with staff onsite—established disaster preparedness plans. A pre-project questionnaire revealed that most participating museums lacked an adequate strategy and/or response team, prompting focused efforts to enhance preparedness across nine museums including Museum Gedong Arca, Museum Puri Lukisan, and Bali Museum. This process was one of collaboration, with plans built through the exchange of different cultural practices to develop best practice. These insights are further detailed in Bakhri's paper "[From the classroom to the Field: developing cross-cultural skills in conservation](#)".

In the list of nine museums Konservaction agreed to visit, Museum Lontar was the closest in proximity to the Mount. Museum Lontar, at the time, was under development by the community of Dukuh Penaban. The village elders are the guardians of over 400 ancient Lontar texts. These texts, inscribed on palm leaves, embody centuries of oral tradition and cultural identity; they are steeped in both intangible and tangible significance. The elders' proactive collaboration with Konservaction in establishing emergency response strategies showcases the vital role of guardians in heritage preservation. This example reaffirms the power that indigenous communities possess. Prompt intervention was initiated by those best positioned to act; those with the right to spearhead responses to calls for aid within their countries.

The actors

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine commenced on [February 24th 2022](#), with the incursion of Russian military forces from Belarus, Russia and Crimea into the country. The powerless Dr. Donatella Banti felt she had reached a tipping point when she heard the news of the destruction of art by [Maria Prymachenko](#). She thought, "We are part of a heritage community, and we were not saying anything about this. It's not just the human cost, but together with the heritage—the soul of a nation, the soul of its people—I believed we should try to do something." Prompted by this desire to act, Banti initiated contact with Sara Crofts, then head of [Icon UK](#). Eager to rally support and gauge interest, they leveraged Basecamp as a platform for collaboration.

This last part of my article addresses legacy—specifically the actors: the effect of ascribing care and value to things that matter, and the affect—or imprint—of a determined group initiative. My interview with Banti focussed on three core strategies implemented by Icon UK's Ukraine Appeal on Basecamp including "Ukraine: Guidance," "Ukraine: Material Aid," and "Ukraine: Sponsoring Refugees".

The first group, "Ukraine: Guidance," focused on providing essential emergency guidance and informational resources regarding the safe keeping of cultural heritage. These resources covered a wide range of topics including fire protection measures. However, it was quickly noted that the existing materials were solely in English. Immediately, efforts were sought to broaden accessibility by translating these guides, ensuring that crucial information reached the intended audience. Language is definitively a barrier and an important obstacle to bypass in conflict resolution (It's worth mentioning that Sara Crofts is now the chief executive at ITI, [Institute of Translation and Interpreting](#)).

Translated texts include the *Guide on Historic Buildings and Fire in War-affected Countries*, authored by René Teijgeler and Nina Kjølsten Jernæs in May 2022, now accessible on the [Blue Shield International](#) website. Further guidance authored by Karen Dundas ACR, Fiona Macalister ACR, and Katrina Thomson, with significant contributions from conservation and fire specialist colleagues in the UK, Norway and the US can be found [here](#). [Blue Sky: The Ukrainian Conservation Forum on Telegram](#) continues to disseminate this information, building conservation knowledge and expertise in Ukraine.

The second group, "Ukraine: Material Aid," concentrated on mobilising conservation material support and assistance for Ukraine. Despite challenges in coordinating shipments (especially in conflict zones), initiatives were undertaken to organise convoys and distribute essential preventative supplies such as fire safety equipment, extinguishers and Tyvek. The implementation of these plans mainly filtered through [The Committee of Ukrainian Museums](#) which operates from Warsaw. Once secured, the warehouse space in Warsaw served as a hub for accepting large shipments of aid destined for Ukrainian museums, subsequently transported to Lviv and other cities via rail. Private companies played a significant role in funding these efforts with individuals like Jenny Mathiasson, actively involved in coordinating donations and logistics, and Paul Willard from *Willard Conservation Ltd.* who donated a conservation suction table to the National Centre for Restoration (NCR) in Kyiv.

In private correspondence and on [LinkedIn](#), Willard stated that “preservation of the world's priceless works of art and historic media is of paramount importance” and “we felt compelled to help the conservation community in Ukraine in their time of extreme adversity”. The impact of Willard’s involvement can be gleaned in the precis of a letter written by Svitlana Strelnikova, Director General of NCR. “Thanks to your interest in our institution and thanks to your initiative to help the Centre, we are now able to do so much more than had been possible before...The gift is unique for us and undoubtedly a vital piece of equipment which will serve all the affiliated departments around the country. It will help us prevent further loss of museum objects which are a testament of the Ukrainian culture and people.”

The third group, "Supporting Conservators," focused on providing support to conservators and cultural heritage professionals affected by the crisis. This approach not only provided practical support but also instilled a sense of dignity and belonging for those seeking refuge and further professional development. Led by Banti and Katya Belaia-Selzer, who had personal connections to Ukraine, this group sought to assist Ukrainian refugees who were conservators. [Historic Royal Palaces](#) demonstrated a commitment to supporting Ukrainian professionals by offering opportunities for training and development. [The Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust](#) also stepped in. A recent blogpost on the Huguenot Museum webpage highlights current work being undertaken by [Valeriia Kravchenko and Ahneta Shashkova](#), two women in this sponsorship initiative. [The BAPCR](#) gave all Ukrainian conservator refugees in the UK free memberships, and IIC gave free memberships to all displaced Ukrainians worldwide.

As the conflict continues, Belaia-Selzer still plays an active role with partners like Blue Shield International and ALIPH Foundation—a list of their achievements can be found [here](#). Cecile Communal of the [British Library](#) organizes events highlighting Ukrainian culture, reaffirming the importance of maintaining cultural identity amidst crises. IIC continues to support Valeriia Kravchenko in her pursuit of funding to establish the inaugural Ukrainian-English conservation

dictionary, the draft live on [this website](#). And in the US, [Yuri Yanchyshyn's](#) collaboration with Ukrainian conservation education institutions not only integrates conservation into formal curricula but also spearheads the development of a standardised condition checking process in Ukrainian, crucial for disaster response efforts.

In conclusion

Despite the success of these initiatives, the hopelessness felt in the face of bureaucratic hurdles and geopolitical complexities is palpable. For me the imperatives in each story are clear: to safeguard cultural heritage as a bulwark against erasure. But it's crucial to emphasise that without the UK government's initiation of the Ukrainian refugee scheme, this initiative could not have happened.

Through education, guardians and actors, these efforts reach far beyond that of immediate relief. Those who had sought refuge abroad are returning to Ukraine, armed with newfound skills and experiences, contributing to the rebuilding efforts in tangible ways. Institut Konservasi continues to thrive by providing training, research and services of art and cultural materials in Indonesia. And Elie Shamir, the humble practitioner trapped in a warzone, acknowledges that we must focus on our shared humanity and assist each other in order to pull through.

I've come to believe that the measure of our lives lies in the depth of presence and connection that we cultivate along the way. Learning how to love, communicate emotions and respect others is an adult responsibility. Giving voice to every text, assisting where needed in any way that we can, safeguarding that which makes us human; this is what matters.

These acts of resilience highlight some of the good things that professionals working in the cultural sector have been able to accomplish in recent years with much heart, albeit limited resources. Every one of them wisely attributes their accomplishments to choosing the pearls. Unlike Achilles, they've chosen the less predictable path and bravely write their own stories.

Acknowledgements

Elie Shamir—artist and advocate, previously taught in the Art Institution in Oranim Academic College of Education and in Bezalel Academy, Jerusalem, and in the MFA, Boston. Now teaches art from a home-based studio.

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Katya Belaia-Selzer—Painting Conservator-Restorer, Founder of the UA-UK Cultural Heritage Initiative

Paul Willard—Managing Director at Willard Conservation Ltd.

Author bio

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Read the article and see all the beautiful images in the April-May 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 101, p. 18-25