

# The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Written by **BLAIR A RUBLE**

## Embroidering Tradition and Contemporary Design Together

*Ukrainians celebrated the iconic Vyshyvanka traditional shirts this May as they do every year on International Vyshyvanka Day. Simultaneously, Ukrainian artists are taking the art of embroidery to new contemporary heights in studios across Ukraine and in cultural hotspots such as Berlin.*

On May 15, Ukrainians around the world pulled on their distinctive *vyshyvanka* embroidered shirts to celebrate a Ukrainian-ness that [transcends religion, language, and place of residence](#). This once humble shirt has garnered symbolism as an enduring connection to rural life in a nation increasingly moving to town. Richly embroidered with distinctive complex patterns specific to particular regions, the shirts have evolved into talismans thought to protect those who wear them from harm.

The lands of today's Ukraine fostered a rich culture of embroidery dating back to the Scythians of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. This tradition of complex and colorful needlework became embedded in local communities as the region passed from one civilization to the next. Handmade from local materials, and embroidered with patterns drawn from local folklore, the clothing represented a connection to the earth that distinguished one rural community from another. This characteristic embroidery anchored people to place as various subjugators passed through on their ways to building new empires.

Seventeenth century Ukrainian settlers in southern Russia brought their folk traditions with them. Increasingly, neighboring Slavs developed their own versions of local attire. The core colors of black, red, and white have remained markers of Ukrainian embroidery.

Over time, the *vyshyvanka* became a symbol of Ukrainian pride shared at communal events marking the passages of life and brought to stages through dance and opera. Following Ukrainian independence, local and international designers introduced the once unassuming chemise to the world of high fashion. In 2015, pundits praised the garment as the next trendy phenomenon featured at Paris fashion week and in glossy fashion magazines everywhere. *The Times* of London and *The New York Times* both declared the *vyshyvanka* “the hottest summer fashion” of the year. This international frenzy reached an apogee when French actress Mélanie Thierry wore a *vyshyvanka* to the 2016 Cannes Film Festival and Queen Maxima of the Netherlands wore a *vyshyvanka*-inspired dress to the 2016 Summer Olympics.

In 2006, Chernivtsi National University student Lesia Vroniuk summoned a flashmob to celebrate the shirt urging local students to wear their distinctive tops on the third Thursday of May. Local officials joined when the students assembled in the town square. Their informal celebration became codified as the International Day of the *Vyshyvanka* now commemorated annually by Ukrainians everywhere.

Voroniuk and others of a rising post-independence generation embraced the *vyvshyvanka* as a symbol of Ukrainian identity, especially following Russia's 2014 incursion into Crimea, and Putin's 2022 full-scale invasion. For their generation, embroidery stands at the fulcrum of Ukrainian distinctiveness.

The *vyshyvanka* is one of several instances when embroidery has become embedded in the region's folklife. Stitching became a way to symbolize folktales and, in the process, shape local distinguishing colors and designs. Ukraine's folk painting traditions drew on such textile artistry and vice versa. Together, their artisanship blossomed into customs and patterns found only in Ukraine. They became markers of Ukrainian identity and nationalism.

Since independence, the textile arts have come to express the tension between traditional practices and modernity in Ukrainian originality. Increasingly, artists are turning to Ukraine's textile traditions to express contemporary -- often abstract -- notions of particularity. Kyiv and Berlin-based [Shneider Adamina](#) is one artist among many who has combined tradition with modernity to construct a uniquely personal artistic signature.

Adamina was trained at Kyiv's National Academy of Fine Art and Architecture as well as at private studios in Kyiv and Uzhorod. Following her master's in fine arts, she began working as a restorer of European old masters, perfecting skills that she would bring to her own work. She similarly integrated Ukrainian folk themes and techniques into her work.

This knowledge underscored Adamina's belief that the artistic process is a sacred ritual. She favors abstract visions as part of a personal search for serenity. Her pieces become a blend of graphics, painting, and textiles expressing her understanding of what it means to be an artist and a woman. Adamina developed a following through several exhibitions and shows of these works around Ukraine and Europe. Increasingly, her artistic activities have focused on her studios in Kyiv and Berlin.

Adamina draws on a variety of artistic media including textiles. Her visionary abstractions may appear at first sight removed from the complex designs found on the *vyshyvanka*. Not so. Ukraine's folk traditions have profoundly shaped Adamina's artistic consciousness even as she translates them into contemporary art.

Like many artists of the post-independence era, Adamina combines what is traditional with what has never been seen before. Together with other contemporary artists she embroiders traditional and modern designs together to construct fresh insights into what it means to be "Ukrainian." Celebrating the traditional while creating what is original, these artists are fashioning a foundation for a Ukrainian culture being reformed by war.

