Rethinking the imaginary dimensions of museums in times of war: an analysis of the collaboration between the Louvre and the Khanenko Museum in Kyiv allowing for the exhibition of Ukrainian icons at the Louvre.

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Abstract

The political role of museums has been widely discussed and analysed, from perspectives variously highlighting the identity-shaping, historical and educational dimensions of museum-building. In conflict situations, museums often find themselves on the front line, crystallising international tensions as they are instrumentalised by local powers, or else fall victim to looting and destruction. Taking as the subject of our case study the recent collaboration between Kyiv's Khanenko Museum and the Louvre on an exhibition of medieval icons, we seek to explore the potential roles that museums can play in international conflicts, transcending their victim status. Focusing on their imaginary dimensions, drawing upon the work of C. Castoriadis, we shall see that museums, their contents and their museography are all symptomatic of the institutional imaginations of the societies in which they operate. Making use of artefacts of great imaginary significance, in this case medieval icons, the collaboration between the two museums sees them becoming entangled in the struggle of identities at the heart of this war, an extension of the diplomatic and military conflict into the symbolic and imaginary spheres.

The development of relationships of cooperation between museums has already been the subject of much research, examining the stakes and difficulties inherent to such cooperation, and the competing museographic, political, economic and ethical considerations in play (Pichomer, 2003; Ferri, 2009; Stokes, 2020; Laely et al., 2018; Kampschulte, & Hatcher, 2021; Oberhofer, 2018; Kros, 2018), exploring the diplomatic consequences (Paquette 2021) as well as the philosophical ramifications of sharing collections (Knell, 2004). Nevertheless, relatively little has been written on the subject of cooperation between museums in times of conflict, despite the fact that the challenges faced by museums in wartime have long been a subject of scholarly discussion (Smith, 1918), and the protection of cultural heritage during times of armed conflict is increasingly regarded as a major priority (Brosché & al., 2017; Cunliffe & al., 2018; Kalman, 2017; Lynch, 2017; Newson & Young, 2017; Rosèn, 2020; Teijgeler, 2006; Viejo-Rose & Sørensen, 2015, Pearson, 2017; Stone, 2015; 2016, Techera, 2007). The recent example of the war between Russia and Ukraine has had an immediate impact on existing intergovernmental cooperation agreements, affecting Berlin's Karlshorst Museum, for example (Hickley, 2023), while also bringing into stark relief something which is clearly a major priority in times of war: protecting collections (Stone, 2015, 2016) at risk of theft or destruction.

The exhibition entitled '*The Origins of the Sacred Image: Icons from the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv*', presented at the Louvre in Paris from 14 June to 6 November 2023,

is an example of institutional collaboration against the backdrop of a major crisis. We propose to analyse this case study by invoking the concept of the collective imaginary as defined by Cornelius Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1975; 1997; Bouilloud et al., 2020; Joas & Meyer, 1989). To this end, we have studied the documents available on the subject of the exhibition and also met with Matthias Grolier, chief of staff to the Director of the Louvre. This article represents a contribution to the literature analysing the imaginary dimension of the content and operational choices of museums, which must be understood not as mere receptacles filled with exhibits, but rather as places which bring together artefacts invested with imaginary power by different sociocultural groups.

1: Considering the imaginary dimension of museums

a- Castoriadis and the imaginary

For the purposes of this study we adopted the analytical framework developed by C. Castoriadis, particularly his notion of the imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975; 1996; 1997; 2007). Castoriadis' work is becoming increasingly influential in the field of management studies, invoked in studies of the workings of institutions and their imaginary dimensions. Castoriadis (1997, 2007) has recently been reclaimed by management scholars seeking to better understand issues such as the critical role of creativity and imagination in processes of institutionalization (Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015; Bouilloud & al., 2020). This "imaginary institution of society" (Castoriadis, 1997) also has major organizational implications, with the capacity to act as both the initial catalyst, "setting the institutionalization process in motion," (Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015: 321) and the ongoing mechanism underlying institutional field dynamics (Fotaki, 2006; Tsoukas, 2013; Bouilloud & al., 2020).

For Castoriadis, the collective imaginary is the sum total of societal representations shared within a social group, determining the structures of their society along with its evolution, the interactions between individuals and their modes of judgement. As such, Castoriadis describes society as a "product of the imagination," in so far as all political, social, artistic and economic movements are underpinned by this collective imaginary: "Every form of society is a unique creation. I talk of the imaginary institution of society because this act of creation is the work of the anonymous collective imaginary." (Castoriadis, 1996: 118) The collective imaginary is a force which constantly reshapes society, and particularly its institutions. This imaginary is anonymous because it is not associated with any individual in particular; it is the fruit of an "anonymous" group dynamic. It is also a radical force, in the sense that it exists at the root of social institutions.

All of which means that institutions cannot be understood purely in terms of their functional dimension, and that objectivising institutions as social realities runs the risk of masking the psychological and psycho-sociological dimensions they contain. For Castoriadis, the concept of the "instituting social imaginary" is a reminder of the impossibility of understanding human institutions solely on the basis of causal or deterministic explanations. It is testament to the non-determined, creative nature of the human imagination, capable of generating a protean array of forms of life, art and communication which cannot be explained exclusively by social determinism, which would seek to reduce them to expressions of social function.

Being attuned to the imaginary dimension of all institutions helps us to appreciate that institutions are never truly finished or stable entities; they are riven with conflicts and contradictions, the fault lines of the imaginary, the points where the social and psychological dimensions meet and interact. An institution is not just a known quantity; it is a form of praxis. This non-deterministic vision of society

(running counter to structuralism and sociologism) places particular emphasis on the emerging, the unexpected, the possibility of revolution.

b- Museums as spaces inhabited by the collective imaginary

Our own perspective, building upon the theories developed by Castoriadis, considers all existing museums as institutions inextricably connected to the imaginary dimensions of the societies from which they spring; these dimensions are "radical" in the sense that they get to the roots of these societies, but also to the roots of the mechanisms by which museums are established, and by which artefacts are categorised, curated and exhibited. The underlying imaginary dimensions of museums can thus be viewed as reflections of the societies within which museums exist. Considering the example of museums specialising in African, American and Oceanian cultures (Murphy, 2009), a long-term analysis of their museographic choices can tell us much about colonial history and the "decolonisation" movements which have sprung up in recent decades.

One major advantage of approaching museums from the imaginary perspective is that the imaginary enables us to look beyond artefacts. What artefacts to display and how to present them, what explanatory information will accompany them and what narrative framework will be invoked, what will the department be named… all of these choices are deeply informed by the imaginary power of artefacts, the status they are afforded in society, and all of the considerations which transcend individual artefacts to engage with the collective imaginary, determining the sense of attachment and gravitas at work in such matters.

Although Castoriadis' theories have thus far been largely overlooked in studies of museums, many existing studies do share his perspective to a certain extent. For Carol Duncan (2004), museums are spaces capable of providing transformative, or even spiritual experiences. Although they may appear to be secular institutions, they can occupy roles similar to those played by temples or churches, taking visitors out of their day-to-day routine to commune with art. Art museums thus become ritual sites, playing an important role in nurturing the imagination of visitors.

In France there has been much discussion of the "imaginary museum," to borrow the term coined by French author and former Minister of Culture André Malraux (Malraux, 1951). In Malraux's view, the imaginary museum does not exist in reality. It is instead a fictitious museum, a "*cosa mentale*" bringing together a diverse array of artefacts united by a specific connection. This polysemic and oft-misunderstood notion (Lantonnet, 2014, p. 406) definition of the "imaginary museum" is in fact very different from the concept we seek to explore here: we are not concerned with the "imaginary museum," but rather with the *imaginary dimensions* associated with the establishment of museums and their collections.

The collective imaginary encompasses multiple dimensions, all of which may be mobilised in the creation and development of museums, something which can be illustrated by studying the practices of museography:

- *The imaginary and identity:*

The link between imaginary and identity pertains to the origin stories and official histories with which all nations are endowed. Like any other narrative, these stories weave together events, places and historical characters which becomes component elements of national identity. Within these frameworks, cultural heritage is often invoked as a testament to the storied past. It may, for example, be utilised to "reconstruct" a national identity on the basis of elements derived from popular culture,

as witnessed by the use of music in several Central European countries in the 19th century (Pailhé, 2004). As Pomian (2010) puts it, cultural heritage may thus become a central pillar of national identity, not as a manifestation of some uniform "national character" or "spirit," but rather as an expression of the diversity and historical evolution of the nation. National identity, as expressed in museum exhibitions, is constantly evolving, shaped by history and intergenerational transmission. Each new generation appropriates the cultural heritage passed down by its elders, adding its own contributions and reinterpretations. This evolution of historical perspectives is mirrored by the evolution of museography. Museums thus play a crucial role in the transmission (and thus the survival) of national identities in the face of social and cultural change, as well as the transformation of these identities in response to political events (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 1995; Pomian, 2010; 2013).

- *The imaginary and the championing of knowledge:*

Traditionally, museums house and display items considered to be of superior or exemplary value, key elements in the process of transmission (Pomian, 2010; 2013). For Hooper-Greenhill (1992), museums actively shape our cultural knowledge and understanding because not only do they present us with facts, they also concern themselves with the revelation of these facts. Curatorial choices, the staging of exhibitions and the information technologies used in museums all have an influence on what we as visitors learn and take away from our visit. They shape our knowledge, and the way we acquire that knowledge. More recently, Diletta Guidi (2022) has used the examples of two French cultural institutions – the Louvre and the Arab World Institute – to demonstrate the radically different ways in which Islam can be represented. The Louvre's Islamic Art department represents Islam primarily through secular artefacts in order, Guidi suggests, to reaffirm the institution's commitment to "museal secularism." The Arab World Institute, meanwhile, has adopted a broader presentational approach which includes information on Islamic practices, doctrine and worship.

Building on Foucault's work on governmentality, other researchers have criticised the way in which museums and their reforms perpetuate certain forms of power and subjectivation, arguing that museums operate primarily as tools for social control and reproduction rather than truly democratic forums. For Tony Bennett (1988), during Europe's industrial revolution, museums also provided spaces in which visitors could learn how to behave correctly in public, and how to engage with culture. Formal education was therefore not the sole concern of these public institutions; they also exerted a form of social regulation and control. The visitors themselves became artefacts on display, observed and supervised by the institution. This interaction had the effect of transforming visitors into regulated subjects, implicitly teaching them to recognise their position in the social order. Bennett suggests that, although the form and function of museums may have changed, they continue to play a fundamental role in educating and regulating the public, and thus continue to influence our behaviour and our ideological positioning to this day.

- *The political imaginary*

The purely political dimension of museums is sometimes clear and explicit, as witnessed by certain historical, colonial and military museums. In this respect, Paris' Museum of the History of Immigration is a very interesting case. Founded in 1931 to coincide with the Colonial Exhibition, it was known as the 'Museum of the Colonies' from 1931 to 1935, before being renamed the 'Museum of France's Overseas Territories' in 1935, then the 'Museum of African and Oceanian Art' in 1960, the 'National Museum for the Arts of Africa and Oceania' in 1990 and finally, in 2007, the Museum of the History of Immigration (https://monumen.palais-portedoree.fr/decouvrir-le-monument). These successive

incarnations mirror the evolving attitudes of the French state and French society with regard to these far-flung territories, and the accompanying changes to their official names and legal status (the colonies officially became independent, or became part of France's overseas territories). But they also offer an insight into the changing aims of the museum authorities in terms of what they sought to present: championing economic success (the colonies), then shifting focus to the arts of these territories, and finally concentrating on the circulation of people between these territories and mainland France. These days, the museum's mission is to "unite, conserve, champion and make accessible to the public the history of immigration, promoting understanding and recognition of the role it has played in France's past and present." (https://www.palais-portedoree.fr/le-musee-national-de-l-histoire-de-l-immigration) In this respect, the museum offers a clear illustration of the significant evolution which has occurred in the country's attitude towards its former colonies. At a more general level, J. Paquette (2021) contends that museums, far from being mere passive receptacles of art and history, are in fact dynamic, active players on the international political scene, where they serve as both cultural mediators and agents of soft power in the service of states and their governments. He cites the example of the specific museum development strategies adopted in France, especially since the 1990s, with a view to strengthening ties with the country's former colonies (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos).

2: Museums during wartime: the example of the Ukrainian icons

a) Museums in times of conflict

Museums often find themselves on the front line in times of war. They are frequently mobilised as propaganda tools in support of the prevailing national ideology (Pomian, 2013), and once the war is over historical museums sometimes have a hard time reconfiguring the interpretative thrust of their exhibitions to reflect new political and ideological realities. This was particularly evident after the Second World War, when museums had to rapidly adapt to new historical realities and perspectives. K. Pomian (2013) has demonstrated the ambiguous role played by museums of history during and after conflicts, wavering between ideological boosterism, commemoration of the suffering endured and the desire to encourage critical examination of history.

In addition to bearing witness to conflict, museums are also potential targets of great symbolic significance. J. Brosché *et al* (2017) offer a non-exhaustive list of four motivating factors for attacks on cultural heritage. The first source of motivation is directly connected with the intrinsic nature of cultural heritage: for example, religious sites may become targets if religious or cultural identity is a central feature of the conflict. The second factor is the desire to secure tactical advantages in conflict situations, e.g. using historic buildings because they offer military advantages, or else to damage an opponent's morale. The third motive is a desire to assert one's strength and commitment to a path of aggression, targeting symbolically significant sites as a means of proclaiming one's power and independence. The fourth and final source of motivation is financial, funding military activities through the theft and trafficking of historical artefacts and artworks. A proper understanding of these motivating factors is essential in order to develop effective strategies to protect cultural heritage during times of conflict, and to identify potential risks to specific cultural sites.

Museums founded upon international partnerships are acutely exposed to geopolitical tensions in times of crisis. For example, the museum formerly known as the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, inaugurated in 1995 on the site of the German surrender in 1945, is devoted to the history of warfare and diplomatic relations between two countries, namely Russia and Germany. Its collections include numerous artefacts loaned by the Russians, including the Soviet tank which stands at the

entrance to the museum (Hickley, 2023). With Germany now supporting Ukraine in the current war, the governance of the museum has become extremely complex on account of the presence of both Russian and Ukrainian representatives on the museum's board of directors. In spite of these tensions, the museum has reiterated its firm support for the Ukrainian cause. The board of directors has not met since the Russian invasion began in 2022, and the Russian members have remained silent regarding the museum's official position (Hickley, 2023). Germany's Ministry of Culture is now considering the possibility of restructuring the museum's board of directors, at the risk of losing a significant portion of the collections, on loan from the Russian government.

b) The collaboration between the Louvre and the Khanenko Museum to exhibit Ukrainian icons

When war broke out in Ukraine in February 2022, the Musée du Louvre in Paris and the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv began working together to organise the transferral to Paris of sixteen works regarded as being of particular significance, in order to protect them from the risk of theft or destruction: 11 were studied and restored at the Louvre, while 5 were presented to the public in the special exhibition '*The Origins of the Sacred Image: Icons from the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv'* hosted at the Louvre Paris from 14 June to 6 November 2023 (Durand, 2023). This exhibition meant that works which could have been under threat were transported to safety, protecting an irreplaceable and politically sensitive heritage, but it also served to forge or strengthen institutional ties and bring these works to the attention of a wider audience. Our conversation with Matthias Grolier, chief of staff to the Director of the Louvre, allowed us to retrace the roots of this collaboration and its practical implementation. It also emerged that this cooperative project provided an opportunity to improve internal organisational structures at the Louvre.

The official website of the Louvre offers a very clear explanation of the context in which this project took shape:

"The war that Ukraine has been enduring since 24 February 2022 continues to represent a serious threat for the museums and heritage of this country, with its millennia-old history, whose treasures are at greater risk than ever.

Through its action, the Musée du Louvre is seeking to contribute to the protection of Ukrainian cultural objects and the fight against their illicit trafficking. To respond to this pressing need, since December 2022, Louvre staff have been collaborating with their counterparts at the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv, to facilitate the transfer of sixteen of the most emblematic works from the Ukrainian national collections to France, in the utmost secrecy.

This operation, unprecedented in character and scope, demonstrates France's unwavering support for Ukrainian culture professionals, who demonstrate extraordinary energy and creativity on a daily basis in coping with the consequences of the war. It was devised in partnership with the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), which has been fully committed to the protection of Ukrainian heritage since the start of the war.

The exhibition *'The Origins of the Sacred Image: Icons from the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv'*, is presenting five of the sixteen works transferred to France: four icons from the 6th and 7th century, encaustic paintings on wood from Saint Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, and one micro-mosaic icon from the late 13th or early 14th century from Constantinople, with a remarkable gold frame.

This set of five icons illustrates both the classical heritage at the foundation of Byzantine civilisation, and the highly original relationship to images that it introduced, which characterised artistic expression within Eastern Christianity. It forcefully announces the themes of the Department of Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art recently created at the Musée du Louvre." (https://presse.louvre.fr/the-origins-of-the-sacred-image/).

The museum does not openly adopt a position with regard to the war, although the French government's support for Ukraine is well documented. The operation is simply presented in terms of protecting the artworks involved, an unassailably laudable proposition.

- The origins of the operation

Matthias Grolier explains that the starting point for this collaborative operation was the visit of a Ukrainian curator to the Louvre. This visiting expert alerted colleagues at the French institution to the very significant risk hanging over much of Ukraine's heritage. A number of works of capital importance had already been transferred to protective storage facilities within Ukraine, but the conservation conditions were unsatisfactory. Senior managers at the Louvre thus began looking for a way to help their Ukrainian colleagues and safeguard this endangered heritage. It soon became clear that extraction was the best solution. In an AFP press statement released on 7/6/2023, Louvre director Laurence des Cars declared that "As soon as the war began, along with other leading museums and institutions, our priority was to find a way to support our Ukrainian colleagues. By the autumn, given the intensity of the conflict, we had agreed to launch this rescue operation […] It is a small gesture amid an ocean of sadness and desolation, but it is symbolically significant." Although it was an unusual and costly operation, getting the icons out of the country was judged to be the best way of helping the Ukrainian museum.

- Organisation of the operation

The 16 Byzantine icons were transported to France via Poland and Germany in May 2023, accompanied by a military escort. The operation was made possible by the support of the ALIPH foundation (the *International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas*), established in Geneva in 2017, which covered the financial cost of transporting the works in optimal conditions.

Only five of the icons are set to be displayed at the Louvre in Paris, with eleven more heading for the Louvre-Lens to be restored and made available for subsequent research. Of the five works selected for the exhibition, four are immensely valuable on account of their age: these encaustic paintings were produced in the sixth and seventh centuries at Saint Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai in Egypt. The fifth is a micro-mosaic depiction of Saint Nicholas, a later work dated to the thirteenth century, in an ornate gilt frame which was probably added in the fourteenth century.

Art historians regard these icons as incredibly rare pieces, in part because they survived both periods of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the eighth and ninth centuries, but also because the techniques used in their creation mark them out as essential milestones in the history of painting. The four most ancient icons entered the collections of the Kyiv museum relatively recently, in 1941. They were transferred to Kyiv from the 'Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism' established by the Soviet government in Leningrad (Triomphe, 1965). The more recent icon of Saint Nicholas was purchased by Ukrainian art-lovers and philanthropists Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko. The couple began collecting art during their honeymoon in Italy in 1874, and did not stop until 1914. By that time the couple had amassed some

25,000 works of ancient, Byzantine, European and Asian art over the course of their numerous travels, and wished to share this collection with the Ukrainian public. Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko were instrumental in the foundation of five national museums, including the institution in Kyiv which bears their names.

- An opportunity to create a new department at the Louvre

The exhibition of these Byzantine icons attracted considerable media coverage in France. This special exhibition, which ran for five months, offered a high-profile foretaste of the museum's new Department of Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art, scheduled to open in 2027. In Matthias Grolier's words "in some respects, there was a favourable alignment of events." In a broader sense, the creation of this new department is representative of a long-term policy aimed at rebalancing representations of France's two biggest religions: the Islamic Arts Department was established in 2003 at the behest of the former president Jacques Chirac, in response to the wave of Islamist attacks which France had endured, with the goal of presenting visitors with an alternative vision of Islam, a more secular perspective focused on the aesthetic dimensions of Islamic culture.

The establishment of the Islamic Arts Department, and, more recently, the Department of Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art, are examples of how the political context can have an impact on museums, which are called upon to echo the diplomatic preoccupations of those in power. The foundation of these two departments also shows how the repercussions of events in the Middle East, particularly Iraq and Syria, have been felt in France.

It is worth noting that in terms of the collections they house, both of these new departments have been largely formed by reassigning artefacts already belonging to the Louvre. Although they have been enriched by a number of new donations, the great majority of the artefacts involved were already present in the museum's collections. It is the way these artefacts are perceived that has changed: they are no longer associated with a historical period or geographical area, but instead a political-historical space imbued with a religious character.

3: Icons of immense imaginary significance

Whether they are creating new permanent departments or collaborating on one-off projects, museums sometimes act as echo chambers for broader social and political issues.

In this particular case, the priority was to ensure the safety of works which hold great symbolic significance for Ukraine. The works in question are very ancient religious icons, some of which originated in the venerable monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, founded by Justinian in the sixth century and still in operation today, regarded as being home to the oldest extant icons and other examples of Byzantine art (Durand, 2023). These icons are understandably imbued with great symbolic value, and could be a source of temptation for other countries with an Orthodox Christian heritage. Russia once proclaimed itself the third Rome after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, before experiencing a long period of anti-religious repression during the Soviet era. In more recent times, the country has sought to reconnect with its roots and history in various ways, not least by affording new prominence in the cultural and political landscape to the Orthodox Church (Drost & de Graaf, 2022).

One can easily portray the war between Russia and Ukraine as a conflict of imaginary identities, with the Russians regarding Ukraine as one of the historic cradles of the Russian homeland (Vinet, 2023). The cooperation between the Louvre and the Khanenko Museum exemplifies this identitarian conflict: the works in question originated at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Egypt, and as such are not Ukrainian

artefacts strictly speaking, but as they are among the world's oldest known icons they represent a potential booty of great imaginary power in the rivalry between Russia and Ukraine regarding the foundations of the Orthodox faith. In this context, the icons are imbued with exceptional value: they are among the oldest surviving examples of Eastern Christian religious art, and the radical imaginary associated with national identity attaches particular importance to the veneration of "origins" and "sources." The Russian government transferred these icons from its "anti-religious" museum to Ukraine in 1941, but might now have designs on the icons in a domestic context where the Orthodox Church, once considered a political enemy, has now become an ally and key component in the nation's imaginary identity (Drost & de Graaf, 2022). If these works were to be captured, they would probably be regarded as valuable trophies of war in Russia, and deployed in service of the political imaginary.

The objects on display in this department and this exhibition are not mere artistic or anthropological artefacts; they are nodes of imaginary significance mobilised in response to current political events and deeper societal transformations. It is interesting to observe that over the past two decades the Louvre, a public institution in a secular state, has established two departments named after religions, for the first time in the museum's history.

4: The imaginary institution of museums: a perspective with the potential to enrich the debate on the workings of museums.

The development of cooperative relationships between museums has inspired a wealth of research (Pichomer, 2003; Ferri, 2009; Stokes, 2020; Laely et al., 2018; Kampschulte, & Hatcher, 2021; Oberhofer, 2018; Kros, 2018), with a particular focus on diplomatic ramifications (Paquette 2021) and conflict contexts (Brosché & al., 2017; Cunliffe & al., 2018; Kalman, 2017; Lynch, 2017; Newson & Young, 2017; Rosèn, 2020; Teijgeler, 2006; Viejo-Rose & Sørensen, 2015, Pearson, 2017; Stone, 2015; 2016, Techera, 2007). Nonetheless, this existing literature has made scant use of Castoriadis' work on the imaginary.

The exhibition of Ukrainian icons at the Louvre provides an excellent illustration of the three dimensions of the imaginary which are of particular relevance to museums – identity, knowledge and politics. In terms of imaginary identity, the great age of these icons makes them integral to the Orthodox imaginary, and potentially valuable spoils of the Russia-Ukraine war. In terms of celebrating knowledge, the age of the icons and the archaic techniques used in their creation mean that they are items of great historical value, regardless of other considerations. Last but by no means least, the importance of the political imaginary is plain to see: this Franco-Ukrainian collaboration exemplifies the political will in France to support Ukraine against Russia, while also highlighting the threat faced by Ukraine's cultural heritage in the current conflict. In this respect, inter-museum cooperation is a complement to actions taken in other spheres.

Castoriadis defined the institution as a form of tension between the stable, the firm, the "instituted" and the instituting forces which constantly seek to alter it. Institutions are not stable things, as the term might lead us to believe. They are in fact unstable elements, existing in a state of perpetual transformation. Museums have every appearance of being instituted realities, with their installations, their collections, their departments. But behind that façade of apparent stability, the "instituting" forces of political events and ideas are constantly redrawing the lines, transforming departments, or even entirely overhauling the identity of museums, as witnessed by the examples of former colonial museums (Murphy, 2009). These transformations of the instituted mirror tensions in the imaginary, over the things that societies value or disdain at a given time, and the self-image they wish to project and which politicians seek to embody.

Conclusion: museums as silent guardians of the imaginary

Museums, by virtue of their contents, and the various ways in which these collections are defined and categorised, can be viewed as silent guardians of the imaginary stakes and debates pulsing through our societies. They crystallise the tensions that rage over identity, history and the events and heroes of the past. As well as its pertinence to conflict contexts, the concept of the imaginary offers a fresh perspective on the debates over restitution and the calls for museums to return works acquired/collected in the past.

The position which museums should adopt with regard to political events is a subject of much debate, some of which has been very heated. Are museums political spaces, or do they exist in some airless other world? Lynch (2017) argues that museums have a habit of using emotionally charged exhibitions to draw attention to global crises, all while treading lightly around conflicts and controversies within their own communities. Museums thus run the risk of becoming spaces for passive consumption, where visitors are exposed to images of suffering without being compelled to take action or engage in constructive criticism. Mirroring the tensions of the wider world, museums have the capacity to become places of "critical humanitarianism," not merely exhibiting problems but helping to solve them, in collaboration with visitors and the communities affected.
Such transformations of the instituted can be detected in the terms museums use to describe themselves, to the extent that we can regard museums as collections of objects united by a purpose, a discourse which explains and justifies their existence. That discourse is constantly evolving, something which is evident from the name changes undergone by certain museums, including Paris' Museum of Immigration. This discourse represents the projection of the collective imaginary into the museal sphere. Museums and their functional organs thus become creators of the imaginary in their own right.

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