

SOCIAL SCIENCES

SERHII POLUBOTKO – BLACKSMITH OF MODERN RESISTANCE AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17352735>

“For Peace and Hope for Ukraine”

S. Polubotko

Abstract

The article is devoted to the work of Serhii Polubotko, a blacksmith, artist and cultural figure whose activities go beyond individual art and take on social and national significance. It examines his role in the development of artistic blacksmithing in Ukraine, in particular the founding of the international festival “Sviato Kovaliv” (Blacksmiths’ Festival), which has become a platform for the preservation and popularisation of the craft, the formation of a cultural environment, and the creation of iconic urban art objects in Ivano-Frankivsk. Particular attention is paid to the symbolism of the cross in Polubotko’s artistic practice, which intensified during the Russian-Ukrainian war, acquiring the meaning of a metaphor for memory, resistance and spiritual resilience. The article traces his international activities and volunteer initiatives, in particular the “With Love to Ukraine” campaign, which brought together blacksmiths from around the world. It shows how, through artistic forging, the artist creates a visual language of resistance and solidarity, combining craft tradition with contemporary humanistic meanings and establishing Ukraine on the world cultural map.

Keywords: author's artistic blacksmithing; iconography of the cross; metal art in Ukrainian art; sacred semantics of form; tradition and innovation in metal art; representation of national identity.

In times when culture is transformed into a tool of struggle for truth, dignity and national continuity, special attention is paid to those artists whose activities reach far beyond the boundaries of personal creativity. One of these is Serhii Polubotko, a blacksmith, artist, organizer of the international festival “Sviato Kovaliv” (Blacksmiths’ Festival). His figure today personifies not only the revival of a forgotten craft, but also the transformation of blacksmithing into an effective cultural and even volunteer gesture – a gesture of resistance, memory, uniting and action.

Since the early 1990s, Serhii Polubotko has been actively developing the direction of artistic blacksmithing in Ivano-Frankivsk, where no established blacksmithing traditions existed at the time. His initiative and leadership qualities contributed to the formation of both the local artistic environment and the growth of the blacksmithing movement in Ukraine as a whole. In 2006–2014, Polubotko headed the Union of Blacksmith Masters of Ukraine, a leading professional organization in the industry. Under his leadership, the Union opened regional branches in 20 regions, launched national exhibitions, student competitions, and established cooperation with higher educational institutions and local municipalities.

Thanks to this large-scale work, in 2009 the city was included in the “Ring of European Iron Cities”. And already in 2011 Ivano-Frankivsk received the prestigious Alfred Habermann Award for its contribution to the development of international blacksmithing – in recognition of the leadership and vision of Serhii Polubotko [1].

An important role in this activity is played by Polubotko’s creative residence – the workshop – “Kovalska Fabryka ARMA” LLC, which has become a powerful educational and artistic center. Hundreds of young artists have passed through it, gaining professional training and a valuable understanding of art as a form of social dialogue. Polubotko acts as a mentor and architect of an entire cultural environment, where technical skill is organically combined with conceptual depth.

Serhii Polubotko has repeatedly represented Ukraine at leading international festivals and symposiums from Italy to Australia, where he has been invited as an instructor, demonstrator, and jury member. Key events include the European Biennale of Blacksmithing Art in Stia (Italy), festivals in France, Austria, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Belgium, as well as specialized courses in Barcelona dedicated to Eastern European traditions. He was often the only representative of Ukraine, which gave his presence special weight as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, cultural continuity, and artistic dignity.

His participation in such events combines a representative function with active professional activity – from shaping programs and conducting master classes to supervising art projects and developing conceptual narratives. His practice is a form of representation of Ukrainian culture, embodied through work with material, space, and personal presence.

A special manifestation of this mission was Serhii Polubotko’s initiative to establish the International Festival “Blacksmiths’ Festival” in 2003 – an event that

over time outgrew the local context and became one of the most famous blacksmithing forums in Europe. Every year, the festival brings together hundreds of participants from over 20 countries, uniting them in a collective process of creating large-scale public art objects directly in the urban space of Ivano-Frankivsk.

The main goal of the event was to revive the forgotten blacksmithing traditions in Ukraine during the Soviet era and to popularize artistic metal as a craft and as an art. According to Serhii Polubotko, “Metal compositions by blacksmiths were created with the aim of conveying to a wider circle of people the idea of preserving the ancient craft in the modern world of the disappearance of any crafts and, in this context, to propose a new role for blacksmithing in the world (at least in our city)” [2, p. 29]. In addition, the transfer of information that artistic metal products can be not only functional, but also decorative, often with a deep idea.

As a result of the activities of the festival “Blacksmiths' Festival”, the urban environment of Ivano-Frankivsk has been enriched with a considerable number of forged compositions, becoming permanent

exhibits of the city, and over time – its unique calling card. Since the foundation of the festival, a considerable amount of creative work has already been accumulated. Today, the city is decorated with the compositions “Spring”(2005), “Bouquet of Masters” (2006), “Easter Sun” (2007), “Tree of Happiness” (2008), “Within the Framework of Blacksmithing Traditions” (2009), “Carousel of Blacksmithing Cities” (2010), “Arch of Municipal Law” (2011), Memorial Sign to the First Ukrainian Church of Stanislavov (2012), “Cross of Unity” (2014), “Nest of the Universe” (2015), Gate of Blacksmithing Cities of Europe (2016), “My Birds” (2018), “Flowers of independence” (2021) [5, p. 75].

The sculptures created within the festival capture important social, historical, or national narratives in metal. A striking example of this is the sculpture “The Nest of the Universe” (Fig. 1), created in 2015 as a metaphor for a common home, unity, and invincibility – values that gained particular importance during the war and post-war period.



Fig. 1. Sculpture “The Nest of the Universe”, 2015.

However, recent years have become a serious challenge for artistic initiatives in Ukraine. The COVID-19 pandemic, and later the full-scale war, have significantly changed the conditions for the implementation of public cultural events. In this regard, the activities of the “Sviato Kovaliv” festival are currently suspended. However, its ideas and artistic heritage remain alive in the urban space, where forged compositions serve not only as aesthetic objects, but also as symbols of resilience, solidarity and memory.

In this context, the image of the cross, one of the key symbols of his artistic expression, acquires special significance in the work of Serhii Polubotko. According to the artist, the cross is the main coordinate for humanity [10]. In periods of deep social upheaval, when there is a need for new points of support, art naturally turns to eternal archetypes as a means of reflection, rethinking and unity. With the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, against the background of aggravating issues of national identity, historical memory and spiritual stability, the cross in Polubotko’s works increasingly appears not only as a religious sign, but as a symbolic form that embodies moral, cultural and civilizational meaning.

In the European cultural context, the cross is often interpreted as a symbol of the vertical connection between the human and the divine, an expression of the absolute, a transcendent principle. It is mostly geometrized, architecturally ordered, often devoid of ethnographic color. In contrast, in Ukrainian art, especially in folk tradition, the image of the cross has a much broader and warmer spectrum of meanings. It is both a talisman, a monument, a sign of the presence of the spirit in everyday life, and a symbol of the life cycle. The cross could take on multiple forms – from a laconic trident to a flourishing, cruciform with archaic motifs close to solar symbolism.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, this image was repeatedly reinterpreted by Ukrainian artists in the context of social catastrophes, repressions, and national revival.

The theme of the cross, which became especially relevant in wartime conditions, has a long history in Serhii Polubotko’s work – even before 2022, this motif occupied a prominent place in his metal-sculptured works. In particular, starting in 2010, a number of the master’s creative works were presented at the personal exhibitions “Signs” in the galleries of Kyiv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Chernivtsi. The artist presented a series

of author's interpretations of forged crosses in different styles, techniques and with different symbolism [4]. The cross appears here not only as a sacred form, but as an object of personal rethinking – a sign open to multi-valued readings. Each work is distinguished by an individual, often metaphorical title, which emphasizes the author's vision of the image of the cross. Among them: "Beaded", "Galactic", "Light", "True" and others.

Among them, the cross "Eccentric" (Fig. 2) in Polubotko's interpretation acquires not only religious,

but also metaphysical and philosophical meaning. Three round elements, mounted in the center and ends of the arms, personify the trinity – spiritual, bodily and intellectual principles. At the same time, they create a feeling of movement, as if a rotating cosmos intersecting with the human world. The author avoids excessive ornamentation or literal religious quotes. His cross appeals to the viewer not as a believer, but as a thinking being seeking meaning. This is the universalism of the image, the openness to interpretations inherent in modern sacred art.



Fig. 2. S. Polubotko. Cross "Eccentric", 2010.

Thus, the metal sculpture presented at the exhibitions became an important stage in the conceptual formation of the symbol of the cross in Polubotko's work, laying the foundation for the further development of this theme in a military and international context [4]. A logical continuation of this process was the installation of six forged crosses from the exhibition series near the church of St. Peter and Paul in Ivano-Frankivsk. Today they (Fig. 3) form an orderly composition in which each element has its own authorial form, texture and symbolism, and together

they realize the concept of the "Garden", which is a visual metaphor of a sacred spiritual presence.

In combination with the architectural forms of the temple, they create not only an object of religious veneration, but a space for inner concentration and social unification through an artistic gesture. At the same time, this series became one of the first attempts in Ukraine to comprehend the cross as a spatial artistic object in the technique of artistic forging, assigning to it not only a sacred, but also a cultural and social function.



Fig. 3. S. Polubotko. Forged crosses near the church of St. Peter and Paul in Ivano-Frankivsk, 2010.

The development of this theme continued within the framework of public events, in particular in 2014, during the festival "Sviato Kovaliv" [6]. It was then, under the leadership of Serhii Polubotko, blacksmiths from different countries created the symbolic composition "Unity" (Fig. 4) – a large cross over six

meters high, formed from four wooden columns connected by metal clamps. The image embodies the four cardinal points and at the same time – the integrity of the human soul between earth and sky, at the intersection of the bodily and spiritual, horizontal and vertical dimensions of being.



Fig. 4. Joint blacksmith composition "Cross of Unity", 2014.

This cross became not only the result of international artistic collaboration, but also a symbolic element of further cultural dialogue. It was solemnly installed in the village of Tyshkivtsi in the Horodenka region in 2015. Such an initiative proved that blacksmithing is capable of performing not only an aesthetic function, but also an important social and cultural role – uniting the community through symbolism, joint creativity and deep meanings.

With the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, blacksmithing in the work of Serhii Polubotko acquires new meanings and accents. It combines the aesthetics of form with deep meaning, acting as an instrument of solidarity, collective memory and cultural resistance. In 2022, the artist initiated the international campaign "With Love to Ukraine", which arose within the framework of the volunteer movement "Union for Ukraine – Blacksmiths without Borders". The symbolic impetus for its launch was the donation

by the Slovak blacksmith Daniel Miklos of a small forged cross with the inscription "For Peace and Hope for Ukraine" [11, p. 37].

Serhii Polubotko supported this symbolic gesture and launched an international challenge among blacksmiths – a call to create original metal crosses as signs of solidarity with Ukraine and the desire for peace. The initiative quickly spread, uniting craftsmen from Ukraine and 27 other countries, and turned into a large-scale artistic and humanitarian project. The collected works became not only artistic artifacts, but also carriers of a powerful message. The exhibition of over two hundred original crosses was demonstrated in various spaces, including churches, museums and galleries in Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Australia, Italy and Finland (Fig. 5). In each of the locations, it became an important cultural event that drew attention to the war in Ukraine and contributed to the growth of international support.



Fig. 5. Joint blacksmith composition "Cross of Unity", 2014.

The cross created by Serhii Polubotko coincided in size with the Slovak model, which inspired the artist to announce a challenge to make 500 mm crosses from steel and brass – and the whole project began with it. During wartime, the image of the cross in Serhii Polubotko's work acquires a new, especially deep meaning. It becomes not just a religious or decorative symbol, but a metaphor of loss and salvation, pain and hope, silence and dignity.

This is a visual embodiment of the artist's inner position, a means of artistic comprehension of the tragedy and a call for unity, memory and faith in a common future. The author himself defines the cross as a point of intersection of the vertical and horizontal, space and earth, universal and personal, which combines the spiritual and material, immersing the

works in a global humanistic context. Through forging metal, working with texture, form and emptiness, the artist creates a unique sculptural image that speaks without words – it is a cross of presence, memory and resistance.

The forged cross by S. Polubotko (Fig. 6) is an example of modern decorative blacksmithing, combining sacred symbolism with artistic form-making. The work is distinguished not only by technical skill, but also by deep figurative content. It acquires special symbolism in the context of the war that modern Ukraine is experiencing. Its form composed of twisted but strong metal is a metaphor for the broken but unconquered spirit of the nation. The spirals at the ends resemble explosions or endless circles of suffering and loss experienced by the people.

At the same time, it is a symbol of eternity, of hope for rebirth – like the DNA spiral that preserves life. The central brass flower shines like the heart of the nation: golden, unbreakable, burning even in the darkness of destruction. The cross, as an eternal sign of sacrifice, also appears here as a memory of the fallen heroes, a symbol of resilience and a prayer forged not with words, but with fire and metal. The lower interweaving

of the rods resembles the thorny path that every Ukrainian overcomes in the fight for freedom.

This is not only a sacred object, but also an artistic testimony of the times – times when metal itself speaks of pain, faith and indomitability. As a blacksmith-artist, Polubotko combines high skills in hot forging with the ability to create deep visual metaphors, embodying Christian philosophy in metal through his own artistic style.



Fig. 6. Polubotko. Cross, 2022.

Thus, today, Serhii Polubotko's work appears as an art of resistance – an aesthetic forged by fire, pain and faith. It is a language of iron that speaks of values that are not subject to the erosion of time, in particular dignity, freedom, memory and solidarity. The style of the works combines craft tradition with current artistic thinking, national codes with a universal humanistic message. Polubotko's participation in international forums turns his forging into an act of cultural diplomacy – the visual language of Ukraine, which declares itself as a modern, creative and invincible state that protects not only its territory, but also its cultural identity, history and right to the future.

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