By all accounts, the contemporary art scene in Ukraine is among the most dynamic in eastern Europe. To understand the path of such artists as Roman Minin, if not all the people of the Ukraine, presupposes at least a rudimentary understanding of the winding and often abruptly altered course of Ukraine’s tumultuous path to independence. Its history is marked by a series of conquests by various entities and systems, including Russia’s recent annexation of Crimea in 2014. For centuries, the country was divided between the Russian and Habsburg Empires. In 1922, it came under the iron fist of the Soviet Union, and efforts to develop a sense of a distinct Ukrainian identity through language and culture were halted by Stalin’s reign of terror, which also prohibited any form of art other than socialist realism.

Ukraine became an independent nation on December 1, 1991, the day the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. The change ushered in a transition era of uncertainty and confusion, as Ukrainians were left scrambling to forge a national identity, having literally gone to bed citizens of one nation and waking up as citizens of another, lacking even the most basic identification documents. The need for an entirely new system of national, social, and cultural reference points, archetypes, and paradigms led to collective as well as individual soul-searching for an identity distinct and separate from that of Russia.
Recognizing culture and a collective memory as crucial to this process, Ukraine set out to create and disseminate a unique post-Soviet national narrative that would provide its ethnically diverse population with a sense of unity and belonging. While official efforts focused on folk art and traditions, contemporary artists looked to forge a path to a future that would achieve a distinct place for Ukraine within a European and international context. Galvanized by the lack of sufficient institutional resources and support, these artists created their own opportunities. Whether organizing street art festivals or reconfiguring and reinventing spaces as venues for art, many took their fate in their own hands, inevitably impacting the arts but also their nation’s path to the future.

Roman Minin is one such Ukrainian artist. While he does not forsake Ukraine’s folk cultural tradition, he adapts it to the country’s shifting political and social realities, seeking to create new archetypes and diachronic cultural paradigms that will be imbedded into the Ukrainian narrative.

Prevalent in many of his works is the world he knows best, the world of coal miners and mining, which lay at the heart of Ukraine. He not only strives to attract attention to the harsh life of miners and laborers in general, he also seeks to commemorate their role, and elevate them to national symbols that deserve a place in the pantheon of a uniquely Ukrainian narrative, thus incorporating the past into the future. As the Ukraine was the greatest source of energy for the Soviet Union, with so many of its people still limited to an underground world in some of the world’s deepest mines, Minin is not content with simply memorializing the Donetsk coalminers. He wants them elevated to the level of the sacred and the revered.

To accomplish this, Minin blends his modern works with the world of mining, using images that fuse social realism with Byzantine iconography, reminiscent of both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, as Ukraine’s long and winding history exposed it to both. His detailed graphic work is fraught with sharp and geometric shapes, images, and letters, each contained within smaller sections that could be individual works of art in and of themselves. From a distance, his works exude the look of stained glass, while a sudden twist or turn will make viewers feel they have just come upon a Byzantine church altar.

In Donetsk Subway Generator, Minin uses these elements to create an icon of miners and other laborers in the depths of the earth, combining the nearly outdated world of coal mining with the railroad, another longstanding staple and integral part of Ukrainian life. As the artist himself has said, the Donetsk Subway Generator was inspired by the Ukrainian government’s broken promise to build a state-of-the-art subway for the people of the Donetsk region. While the subway was never built, its extensive cavernous infrastructure of eight railroad lines and 66 stations, remains underground, a reminder of broken economic and political promises. The hollow world of mining that is no longer used meets the abandoned underground labyrinth of the Donetsk Subway to literally pull the ground under the Ukrainian’s people feet, both literally and figuratively, as roads and buildings often cave in.

About the Artist

Painter, graphic artist, photographer, and street artist, Roman Minin was born in 1981 in the small town of Myrnohrad, a mining town in Ukraine’s Donetsk region, ten years before the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union, where generations of Roman Minin’s family worked in the coal mines. While he is the first in the family to pursue a different path, his life and day to day experiences have been defined by mining, and as a result it holds a prominent place in his art.

Minin studied art and graduated from the Kharkiv Academy of Design and Arts in 2008. He began exhibiting his work as early as 1999 at the young age of 18, challenging the status quo of socialist realism that still prevailed. In addition to the Ukraine, his work has been exhibited in many solo and group exhibitions around the world, including the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, France, United Kingdom, Russian, Finland, Italy, and Japan. He has also organized and participated in several street art festivals in his homeland. He continues to live in the city of Kharkiv.