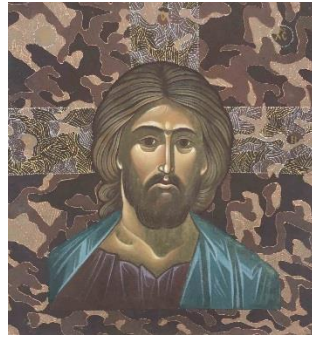


# PRAY AND PLEAD FOR UKRAINE

Icons on Ammo Boxes by Sofia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko





## In brief

*Buy an Icon – Save a Life*, more widely known as just *Icons on Ammo Boxes*, is a joint project of two Kyivan artists and spouses, Sofia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko, and the Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital (PFVMH), an NGO that engages civilian medics to provide medical aid to both militants and civilians in the armed conflict areas in Eastern Ukraine. The artists paint the icons on the lids, bottoms, and other fragments of wooden boxes that used to store various types of ammunition and weaponry. The boards are brought from the combat zone by PFVMH volunteers as well as servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the National Guards of Ukraine.

The main idea of the art project is the transformation of death (symbolized by ammo boxes) into life (traditionally symbolized by icons in Ukrainian culture). The receipts from the icons sale go the PFVMH to support activities of its volunteer medics. In this way, this victory of life over death happens not only on the figurative and symbolic level but also in reality: the artists have already donated to the PFVMH about \$300,000, becoming its main sponsors. In the last two years, their donations accounted for about 95 percent of the mobile hospital's total receipts.

Exhibitions of the *Icons on Ammo Boxes* have been held on both sides of the Atlantic, including (alphabetically) Alberta, Antwerp, Berlin, Bloomington, Bonn, Brussels (European Parliament), Catania, Chiaramonte Gulfi, Chicago, Edmonton, Frankfurt am Main, the Hague, Hanover, Iași, Kyiv (Parliament of Ukraine, St. Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, Lithuanian Embassy in Ukraine, and Superior Institute of Religious Sciences of St. Thomas Aquinas) Leipzig, Lublin, Los Angeles, Milan, Montreal, Munich, Ottawa, Paris, Philadelphia, Prague, Rome, Toronto, Vienna, Vilnius (Parliament of Lithuania), Warsaw, and Winnipeg, as well as a number of Ukrainian cities. Exhibitions of the icons were also part of various events in Ukraine and abroad.

*This deeply Catholic instinct for transforming what is dead or death-dealing into something life-affirming and life-giving continues today in Ukraine, through a remarkable project known as "The Icons on Ammo Boxes" ...*

*Icons written on wood using various types of paint are nothing new, of course; many of the greatest icons in the history of Christian art were written that way. Oleksandr Klymenko's brilliant idea was to use a different kind of wood: not a polished and treated panel, but the rough-hewn tops or bottoms of the boxes in [which] bullets, grenades, and artillery shells were once stored...*

*The icons turn trash, redolent of death, into life-affirming art in several ways. First, by their very existence: for they transform materials that stored munitions intended to kill and maim into celebrations of faith and life...*

*Second, through the sale of Sofia Atlantova's and Oleksandr Klymenko's work, the "Icons in Ammo Boxes" project supports the Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital, which brings medical professionals into the warzone of eastern Ukraine to treat wounded soldiers and civilians. Since its inception, the mobile hospital has served some 50,000 patients, saving or repairing many lives broken by Russian aggression.*

**George Weigel**, Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center

## History

The idea to paint classic Byzantine icons on ammunition boxes belongs to Oleksandr Klymenko. In the fall of 2014, he, his wife Sofia, and several other artists organized an exhibition in support of the Main Military Clinical Hospital of Ukraine. The exhibits included conventional icons. Some of the icons were sold, including a few to be given as a present to the *Sich* battalion. Oleksandr was one of those invited to the battalion for the ceremony. There, he saw piles of used AKM ammo boxes and noted that the boards of these boxes looked very much like the boards on which he and Sofia painted icons.

He asked to give him one box, and painted on it the first icon – “Holy Mother with the Child”. This icon looked as if it was very old, from a museum; its stylistics was of the beautiful ancient Byzantine Empire. “It was then that I got the idea of a conceptual art project in which the theme of war could be combined with what was not connected with the war at all,” Oleksandr says. “The collision of things, an antinomy. That is, I was interested in this antinomicity, when you combine the uncombinable, an ammo box board and an icon, with an incredibly organic result. You paint an icon, and then you have the impression that it’s been there for a thousand years.”

He invited two more artists, Sofia Atlantova and Natalia Volobuyeva, and they carried out a pilot exhibition – to see how the audience would respond. The project was officially launched at St. Sophia of Kyiv in February 2015.

Quite soon, the art project was joined by the PFVMH, not without a miracle. Says Oleksandr Klymenko:

*In November 2014, a monk of one of Kyiv’s monasteries called me and said, “Oleksandr, I heard that you were fundraising for the hospital. I’ve got money for you.” I went to him, and he handed me a bagful of money – UAH 100,000 [about \$12,000 at the time]. He said this bag had been given to him by a stranger who asked to give the money over to those who suffered from this war, who needed help most badly.*

*I said I’d give it a thought. The Main Military Hospital at the time had no problems with supplies. So could there be any projects that are not too well known but essential? On my Facebook timeline, I came across a post by Gennadiy Druzenko [PFVMH cofounder], who desperately asked to help pay for a vehicle for the PFVMH. I thought: “A cool idea – a volunteer hospital!” I was also impressed by the sincerity of his call for help. I knew Gennadiy a little since we had many mutual acquaintances, and I also had met with him several times before and during the Maidan revolution. Still, I made some inquiries among people who knew him well and whom I trusted, and heard only commendations. I ascertained that he was a person who would not steal that money, that the PFVMH was a humanitarian project and important for Ukraine, and that it would work systematically. Then I called Gennadiy and said there*

*This combination of war and peace reminds me the American seal, which has the eagle holding an olive branch in one talon and arrows in the other one. This is wonderful stuff, it’s culture and patriotism at the same time.*

**Daniel Fried**, American politician and diplomat

*These icons are like coins: they have two sides. Not literally two sides painted, as some icons have, but two aspects that make them unique. First, they are beautiful pieces of art painted by a talented couple of Oleksandr Klymenko and Sofia Atlantova. Stylistically, they blend modern motifs and traditional patterns that go back to Byzantine masters.*

*The second important aspect of this collection is its story. Or better to say, many stories that comprise a single narrative of war and peace, human sufferings and hope. The icons have been painted on wooden planks from ammo boxes. Those boxes were used in the eastern front, where Ukraine is at war with Russia-backed separatist groups. The icons painted on those boxes thus try to bring hope for peace and justice to the tormented East of the country.*

*This is not the only story that the icons can tell. Sales from them go to the Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital (PFVMH)... There, they help wounded and ill: both the Ukrainian soldiers and civil locals. The icons on ammo boxes, thus, demonstrate how violence and pain can be transfigured to peace and relief, and actually contribute to this transfiguration through the work of doctors.*

Archimandrite **Cyril Hovorun**, Prof. at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Act. Director of Huffington Ecumenical Institute

was money for him. He said: "You know, we are now praying, because tomorrow we have to pick up the vehicle but lack UAH 70,000. If we fail to pay up, we'll lose it."

We met, Gennadiy told me about his hospital in detail, and I realized that I had not mistaken. The vehicle bought for this money was called "Angel." The hospital was launched and I felt like a witness to a miracle. Miracles like that might have been witnessed by Kyiv Pechersk monks a thousand years ago if any.

Then I saw how efficiently the PFVMH worked at the front, so I did not hesitate on whom the money for sold icons should be given. It is because money should work in systemic projects where they think strategically.

And then the concept of my project gained perfection: the transformation of death into life not only symbolically but really. Now I'm awfully happy because I feel like a person involved in a real transformation of death into life, in a real fight against death.

#### About the artists



SOFIA ATLANTOVA (born on Dec. 14, 1981, in Kyiv) is an artist and a writer. Studied in the Kyiv Shevchenko State Art School and the National Academy of Art and Architecture. Sofia Atlantova works in the field of monumental and easel art, book illustration, and installation art. She is a participant in a number of exhibitions in Ukraine and abroad.



OLEKSANDR KLYMENKO (born on July 5, 1976, in Kyiv) is an artist and art critic, a writer (under the pseudonym of Olaf Clemensen), and a member of the Ukrainian Union of Artists. Decorated with a medal "For Assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine" for the *Icons on Ammo Boxes* art project. He graduated from the National Academy of Art and Architecture in 1998 and completed a postgraduate course at the Rylsky Institute of Art History, Folklore, and Ethnography in 2002. Worked as a teacher at the Kyiv Boychuk State Institute of Decorative and Applied Arts and Design and at the High

Humanitarian and Theological Courses in Kyiv. Oleksandr Klymenko is the author of the introductory article to the album "Jewel Art of Ukraine" (Kyiv, 2000), a series of articles on art history, and a book "The ATO Summer" (Kyiv, 2015). Oleksandr Klymenko works in the field of monumental and easel arts. He has participated in exhibitions in Ukraine and abroad, and organized a number of literary and art actions and performances. He is the author of the idea and one of the curators of the *Icons on Ammo Boxes* project.

*The series Icons to Ammo Boxes is itself an icon that suffering can be redeemed and that in the end, love wins. I have one in my office. In my work, I regularly see the harm that people do to each other. But every morning, when I see the icon, I am forcefully reminded that people can also dwell in grace and in beauty. I treasure it.*

**David C. Williams**, Executive Director, Center for Constitutional Democracy, Indiana University Maurer School of Law

*Come, stand before these icons, pray, and plead for Ukraine...*

*My great gratitude to you [the artists] for that these saints look at us through the prism of the pain our country is experiencing.*

Fr. **Mykhaylo Romaniv**, Dean of the Roman Catholic parish in Fastiv, Ukraine

## About the PFVMH



# PIROGOV FIRST VOLUNTEER MOBILE HOSPITAL

The Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital is the largest nongovernmental project engaging civil health professionals in the provision of medical assistance in the zone of Joint Forces Operation (formerly “Anti-Terrorist Operation”), which is carried out in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. The project is implemented by the Charitable Foundation “Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital” in cooperation with the Health Ministry of Ukraine, the Defense Ministry of Ukraine, and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with support from the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine.

During its operation in the ATO/JFO zone, the PFVMH has provided timely and skilled medical care to over 56,000 patients. The hospital has been stationed in 49 locations in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts – in cities and villages as well as in the field and at checkpoints on the contact line.



PFVMH website: <http://www.medbat.org.ua/en/>

To buy icons: <http://www.medbat.org.ua/en/buy-icon-save-a-life/>

To donate: <http://www.medbat.org.ua/en/to-support-the-hospital/>