

REPRESENTING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF UKRAINE IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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Summary

Based on the study of scientific works, comparative art historical analysis of a large array of ukrainian graphic design since the beginning of its exit from the Soviet Union and its functioning as an independent state, it has been determined that the national liberation struggle assumed a broad scope, having only a territorial, but also a cultural character. It has been reflected that the new system of visual communication is characterized by the rejection of the Soviet heritage and complete de-Russification at the social and cultural levels. The establishment of the Ukrainian national style includes turning to the ethnic objects and their use by Ukrainian brands as part of the identity, and in the creation of new symbols associated with the war against russian invasion. The scientific novelty of the study lies in revealing the trends in the development of Ukrainian graphic design and visual representation of Ukraine and its symbols after the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation. The practical significance of the work lies in a creation of a holistic picture of the development of graphic design «with a Ukrainian character» and in the formation of the main strategies for creating a Ukrainian national product and brand.

Key words: ethnodesign, visual communication systems, country branding, state brand, national identity, national symbols, «sharovarschyna», «bayraktarschyna».

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, and especially in connection with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the need and interest in creating an independent ukrainian brand and creation of its set of symbols, has increased, which directly affected the development of Ukrainian design. It should be noted that in a recent years the number of studies on the origins of the Ukrainian visual identification in different areas of design, including industrial design, clothing and accessory design, environmental design, have emerged. Of particular importance is that fact that designers not only find the traditional motifs, but also rethinks them in the context of modern time and implement them in their works. Graphic design, as the art of visual communication, plays a special role in the development of the state brand. Currently, an increasing number of independent design companies, publishers of Ukrainian books and printing products are emerging in Ukraine, new design techniques and new symbols used in the creation of graphic works, can be observed.

The concept of branding a country and its national style is relatively new, but there is already a considerable amount of research on this concept. State branding or nation branding and its impact on the perception of the country by the international community is the subject of research by such scholars as F. Kotler, I. Rhine, G. Szondi, T. Cromwell, M. Aronczyk and others. Their works argue that it involves a broad strategic approach, often linked to a long-term vision of the country's development and covering various aspects of the nation's identity and attributes (*Aronczyk, 2008*).

This issue has become especially relevant for Ukraine in the context of new challenges to the country's national security, when there is an urgent need to improve its international image and attract investment for the post-war reconstruction of the destroyed regions (*Madryha, 2024*).

This situation provided a jump-start for designers to study Ukraine's cultural heritage as a structural component of its brand in terms of visual communication. The issues of developing Ukraine's own brand and the modern means of communication currently used to promote it in the international community are highlighted in the works of T. Madryga, O. Biletska, I. Levytska and O. Melnyk. Over the past ten years, the phenomenon of Ukrainian ethno-design and its modernization has become the subject of cultural discourse by a number of researchers (*Mudrak, 2011*).

Since 2014, the study of the heritage of Ukrainian design is being explored at a much deeper level. As a result, previously forgotten artists and objects have appeared and the issues of researches are constantly expanding. It consists of not only analytical articles about Georgy Narbut, Fedor Krychevsky, Mykhailo Boychuk (*Mudrak, 2018*) etc., and the influence of their work on modern design, but also analysis of the Ukrainian avant-garde and futurism, a deeper search of folk heritage of Ukraine and methods of its implementation in contemporary design (*Udris-Borodavko, 2023*).

A large role of educational and advertising aspect in the development of Ukrainian design and visual art in general is played by popular science periodicals «Chronicle of Ukrainian Design», which is published on the initiative of the «Spilka» design bureau and «Telegraf» magazine, from the online Projector Institute (Projector Publishing), which publish creative works of Ukrainian artists and interviews with famous Ukrainian designers. At the same time, despite the growing interest in Ukrainian design within the country, the appeal to the topics of ethnodesign and Ukrainian symbolism in scientific sources, a comprehensive analysis of Ukrainian graphic design as a component of the general branding of Ukraine is practically absent.

Purpose. The identified relevance and degree of research of the problem led to the formulation of the task of the proposed investigation, the purpose of which is to create a holistic picture of the development of graphic design «with a Ukrainian character», to reveal strategies, conceptual and visual decisions that aroused due to the development of Ukrainian brand.

Research methodology. To identify current trends in contemporary Ukrainian graphic design, scientific researches and popular science articles and interviews were analyzed and a comparative, art, historical analysis of a number of graphic works with a Ukrainian character released on market was conducted.

2. Dynamics of evolution of Ukrainian graphic design during the period of independence

The research and analysis of national branding as a means of identifying a country at the international level began in the early 2000s and reached its peak in the 2010s, at a time when Ukrainian design was just beginning its independent development and search for methods and means of visual communication (*Dineri, 2024*).

The Ukrainian design community and a competitive capitalist market emerged 50–70 years later than the European one, which is a consequence of the long-term pressure of Soviet system and the absence of small and medium-sized businesses and the possibility of their development. As a result, there was no need to create different competitive brands that had to fight for the attention of both local and foreign consumers. After Ukraine achieved independence, a foreign goods and advertising appeared on the market, which in turn stimulated the emergence of own ukrainian developments in the field of advertising and branding. At the initial stages, it was copying and rethinking of Western models, but over time, Ukrainian design agencies began to integrate with Western companies and create new products for both their own and foreign markets, gaining important work experience, which was lacking at first after Ukraine gained the status of an independent state.

The national liberation struggle of 2014, the development of medium and large businesses, the entry of Ukrainian products into the European market and the need for its promotion have become a great impetus for the active growth of brand competition and the improvement of the quality of Ukrainian design. Despite the low of advertising quality at the state level, Ukrainian design agencies began to work on creating new concepts, which have contributed to the emergence of new symbols and forms of expression. Among the successful design agencies «Spilka», «Hexagon shots», «Golagon», «I am in media», «Fedorov» can be singled out. At the same time, there is support for the development of Ukrainian design in the international community, which is manifested in collaborations with Ukrainian agencies and the emergence of foreign orders.

In this regard, the case of «Ukraine now» campaign is indicative as a promotion and advertising of Ukraine as a tourist-attractive country (*Mosendz et al., 2025*).

The symbols used in its advertising products, such as the trident, the sunflower spike, viburnum, bandura, and the Cossack, have already become quite familiar signs of a «Ukrainian» product by 2022. The formation of a stereotypical image of Ukraine has obtained both positive (brand and symbolism formation) (*Iermolaieva, 2017*) and negative sides (the phenomenon of simplified stereotypical solutions in all areas of design, or «sharovarschyna») (*Riznychenko, 2024*).

However, the tendency of departure of Ukrainian archaic image, imposed by long domination of Soviet power, can be observed. As a result, new forms based on the study of historical heritage are being pursued, the rejection of Russian fonts at various levels, renaming and redesigning of objects occurs (*Soloviova, 2022*). These processes also stimulate active work on the design and redesign of Ukrainian brands that consciously or unconsciously used elements not rooted in the Ukrainian cultural code (milk products, as Sloviaochka, Halychyna, Fairy Milk, «Bila Bereza», etc.).

For example, TM «Bila Bereza», which previously positioned itself as Belarusian products, has now affirmed its Ukrainian origin and actively includes national elements in the advertising of its own products (embroidery on a girl, wildflowers of Ukraine, ears of wheat, etc.).

In this context, the following sources of inspiration for creating brands that emphasize their national identity can be distinguished:

- Ukrainian folklore (characters from fairy tales, mythology, legends and early religious beliefs in the form of paganism);
- techniques and elements of folk art (ornamentation on towels and clothing, Petrykivka paintings, Kosivka paintings, Kosivka ceramics, Hutsul carpets, Borshchiv embroidery, Krodevets towel, Opishnya ceramics, etc.) (*Halchynska, 2024*);
- works of Ukrainian artists aimed at rethinking folk art (F. Krychevsky, G. Narbut, the work of M. Boychuk and Boychukists, etc.);

- cultural symbols associated with the local area and the image of the land, stylized images of plants typical for Ukrainian nature (viburnum, wheat, spikelets, etc.);
- state symbols (coat of arms, flag).

3. Ethnocode as a mean of national identity

In recent years, ethnodesign has gained popularity in all areas of design, the main features of which are ornamentalism, picturesqueness, intricacy (Bondar, 2020).

Therefore, in the advertising of household goods of various price categories, ethnic elements are actively used, emphasizing the origin of the product and its affinity with Ukraine, – luxury segment brands are also emerging, which have a powerful advertising company and modern design (Pashkevych, 2023). These are mainly jewelry companies and clothing brands (SOVA, Oberig, Kozachka, Kochut, Etnodim, etc.).

Design of cosmetics «Brunka» by Yurko Gutsulyak (Fig. 1). Simple design uses monochromatic Ukrainian ornament, inspired by the embroidery of towels of the Dnieper region and their graphic embodiment in the tree of life. A simplified stylized image of the selected element is organically woven into the overall concept of the company that at the same time, due to graphic stylization and maximum simplification, it looks original and modern.



Fig. 1. Design of cosmetics «Brunka» by Yurko Gutsulyak. Retrieved from: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/50057795/Brunka-Cosmetics>

Packaging design of «Kaniv» Cheese from the Grape agency team (Fig. 2). The cheese packaging uses motifs from the works of Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko, who in turn was inspired by Ukrainian nature and stylized Red Book animal species – black stork, white-tailed eagle, Dnieper feather grass, bear's onion, white water lily and more than 10 other plant groups that require protection (Maslak, 2023).



Fig. 2. Packaging design of «Kaniv» Cheese from the Grape agency team. Retrieved from <https://mmr.ua/show/novi-pakovannya-siru-kaniv-1971-nathnenni-prirodoyu-ta-kartinami-mariyi-primachenko>

The success of Ukrainian ethnodesign is also proven by the awards of the prestigious international competition Red Dot Design Award (Essen, Germany), which is a sign of quality.

Over the years, design projects by «Banda Agency», «Tough Slate Design», «Spiilka Design Büro» received this award in the direction of branding, graphic design, UX/UI, etc.

The design of «Fairy Milk» from the industrial company «Molokia» (design by the studio «Yurko Gutsulyak») has a minimalist national character. The compositional solution consists in combination of drawn characters of Ukrainian folklore made in the style of modern European digital illustration with a minimalist font, which, due to its smooth forms, has a somewhat childish, friendly character (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. The design of «Fairy Milk» by the studio «Yurko Gutsulyak»

Retrieved from: <https://cases.media/en/news/kazkove-moloko-dlya-malenkikh-lyudei-z-velikim-maibutnim-reklamna-kampaniya->

Restaurants of Ukrainian cuisine («Galushka», «Bavovna», «Ostannya Barikada») often use collages with combination of folk elements (ornaments and symbols) and modern digital photos in their promotional campaign on social networks (instagram, facebook).

The evidence that the Ukrainian brand is flowing into the consciousness of the European community and the concept of identity is being consolidated behind it is the work of Western agencies that create a product with a «Ukrainian character».

«UAnimals» with a «sunflower» mane from the Pentagram team (London), created in 2022. While working on the project, the designers studied the history and culture of Ukraine and opted for the image of a sunflower, which is one of the country's permanent symbols. This is explained by the fact that after the full-scale invasion, the sunflower became a world-famous symbol of resistance, unity and hope. The colors of the logo convey the Ukrainian origin of the organization, and the style for an international audience is associated with the Ukrainian trident.

Interest to national design is actively developing in the field of printing and book production: publishing houses focus on the Ukrainian cultural background and are engaged in the popularization of modern ethnodesign and Ukrainian design in general. This movement covers almost all literary genres, including the design of children's books, popular science, art history literature, etc. (publishing houses «Rodovid», «Old Lion Publishing House», etc.).

A large array of merch production (stickers, posters, etc.) of combines ai technology stylization of traditional symbols or images of famed Ukrainian artists and bright collages with geometric forms (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The project merch. This poster combines a quote by Mykola Khvylovy and the Aleksa font, created by Kirill Tkachev and Marcel Mozhin. «Beautiful as a leopard».

The stickers of projector «Tomorrow». Retrieved from <https://www.prjctr.store/>

4. Wartime design

Another trend in graphic design has aroused as a result of the military situation in the country. General militarization, the development of war production led to the emergence of new symbols and forms that have developed both in mass art and amateur performance in the form of «memes», and in official advertising campaigns of the state and large and small enterprises. At the same time, symbols rooted in the cultural code can coexist with the military theme of social posters, which connect time spaces, comprising the symbols of the past with signs of present war, emphasizing the unity and eternity of the country's history. Therefore, it plays an important role in the fight for national identification and confirmation of Ukraine as independent state. The following characteristic features in design can be distinguished, which have developed as a result of political situation in the country and is a reflection of the social demand for psychological support of patriotic sentiments of citizens:

- New artistic fonts or fonts that appeal to the font design of the era of the national liberation struggle of the 30s–50s of the last century (a striking example is the official font of the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Marcelo Mozhyna, based on the fonts of Nil Hosevych, who is currently considered the creator of the visual image of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army) (Syvash, 2024).

- The emergence of new heroes, mythologized symbols. An example of such images is the «Ghost of Kyiv»: a mythological character – a generalizing image of an avenger, a soldier of World War II, who was reborn in order to protect the sky of Ukraine from Russian aircraft; the zoomorphic hero «Patron the Dog»: one of a mass culture mascot of the Ukrainian military, a service dog and a minesweeper (Kostusiak, 2022).

- Appeal to the images of Cossacks, as a historical phenomenon early Ukrainian defenders of Ukrainian territory, which play a kind of dialogue with modernity and current political situation.

- The appearance of symbols with specific meaning, associated with certain events, stages of the war (drones, tanks, etc.).

Examples of such design can be seen in advertising for craft Ukrainian alcoholic beverages, energy companies, etc. For instance, an energy drink «Volya» contain the face of a Cossack combined with a stylized inscription that appeals to Old Slavic fonts and Cossack cursive. The graphic solution of the work corresponds to modern trends in minimalism (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Design of energy drink «Volya» by «Rocketmen». Retrieved from <https://rocketmen.com.ua/ua/topcases/morshinskaya-volyacketmen>

According to digital art researcher Olena Holub, regarding the peculiarities of the dominance of narrative over visuality in wartime art, its «severe militancy is intertwined with lyricism and folk ornamentation» (Udris-Borodavko, 2023).

It is also necessary to highlight interesting and original approaches to branding of companies producing goods of a militarized nature, aimed at supporting the patriotic spirit and

psychological state of Ukrainians, such as advertising campaign for craft beer produced by the DP Ray.

It currently manufactures several three types of beer: «Vilkha», «Neptun» and «Stugna», each of which was named after iconic weapons: «Vilkha» is a multiple launch rocket system, «Stugna» – a heavy anti-tank missile system and «Neptun» – an anti-ship cruise missile that hit the cruiser «Moscow» in April 2022. «Vilkha», «Neptun» and «Stugna» are not just names, but symbols of modern Ukrainian weapons used to raise funds for the needs of the army (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Design of craft beer «Vilkha», «Neptun» and «Stugna» for «III O BREWERY».
Retrieved from <https://tykyiv.com/news/brovarnia-iiio-brewery-ta-biuro-militarnogo-brengingu-vipustili-blagodiinu-seriiu-piva-iiiob-vluchilo/>

Among other industrial brands, the «Transcarpathian Gingerbread» and its series of gingerbread cook be mentioned. The box depicts a teacher at Uzhhorod University, who continues to lecture in dugouts in the Donetsk region.

The Dodo Socks brand has released a charity collection «Towards Victory» with an aim to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The socks are presented on the website with the following inscriptions: «Palyanytsya», «Bandera Smuzi», «Batko nash Bandera», «Slava ZSU». Part of the funds from each product will be transferred to charitable foundations and volunteer organizations.

5. Conclusions

Thus, Ukrainian graphic design is a complex phenomenon that combines both purely ethno-stylistic solutions based on folk decorative and applied art. Ukrainian Designers who conduct historical and cultural research in their works, have found new conceptual solutions: they combine national typical ornamentation with geometric shapes, stylize objects of folk art in the format of the simplified graphic forms, transform artistic «naive works» of folk art into 3D format or create fantasy works with the inclusion of AI, rethink the works of avant-garde artists of the 20th century expand the knowledge about the diversity and modernity of ukrainian cultural background.

At the same time, the active use of collage techniques continues, which is characterized by a combination of established classical works with modern and national symbols and daily objects in the format of kitsch and irony (a combination of high genre with low) (*Udris-Borodavko, 2018*).

By using established symbols and including new ones that have appeared in the course of historical, technological and social transformations, Ukrainian design reflects political and cultural changes in society and, in addition to distributing visual messages and information, serves as a «soft» force that influences the perception and establishment of the Ukrainian brand in both domestic and foreign market. Through stylization and rethinking Ukrainian acquires a new modern character and sound.

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