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The Stedley Art Foundation Collection: Between Private Initiative and The Public-Private Space

Abstract:

The relevance of this study is determined by the growing role of private art foundations and collections in shaping the contemporary cultural landscape and transforming traditional models of institutional representation of art. In the context of rethinking the boundaries between the private and the public, such initiatives acquire particular significance for art history, museum studies, and cultural theory. The research problem lies in the insufficient scholarly examination of private collections as hybrid institutional forms operating within the public cultural space. Existing studies tend to address either museum institutions or private collecting practices separately, without offering an integrated art-historical analysis of their interaction. The scientific novelty of the study consists in a comprehensive art-historical interpretation of the Stedley Art Foundation collection as a hybrid institutional model situated between private initiative and the public-private space. For the first time, the collection is analysed not only as an assemblage of artworks, but as a dynamic cultural mechanism that generates curatorial narratives, educational contexts, and alternative forms of public access to art. The subject of the study is the set of conceptual, curatorial, and institutional mechanisms through which the Stedley Art Foundation collection functions at the intersection of private collecting and the public cultural environment. The object of the study is the Stedley Art Foundation collection as an integral artistic and institutional phenomenon within contemporary Ukrainian art. The study aims to identify and analyse the specific features of the Stedley Art Foundation as a space in which private collecting initiative intersects with public cultural discourse. The methodological framework of the research is based on art-historical, institutional, comparative, philosophical, and axiological methods, as well as the analysis of curatorial practices, visual narratives, and empirical interview material. The study generalises and critically engages with the works of Ukrainian and international scholars and practitioners, including V. Blikhara, L. Levchuk, B. Pylypushko, V. Sakharuk, G. Poberizhna, K. Tsyhykalo, J.-C. Marcadé, and others, whose research addresses aesthetics, private collecting, institutional critique, and contemporary artistic practices. The research examines the principles of collection formation, curatorial strategies, and models of public representation implemented by the Stedley Art Foundation, with particular attention to the role of ethical and aesthetic values in shaping institutional identity. The collection is interpreted as a meaning-producing space that integrates artistic heritage, contemporary discourse, and public engagement. The study concludes that the Stedley Art Foundation represents an alternative model of an art institution in which private ownership does not limit, but rather expands the possibilities of public cultural communication. The findings demonstrate that such hybrid institutions play an increasingly important role in the development of contemporary art, the transformation of cultural landscapes, and the redefinition of the relationship between private initiative and public responsibility.

Keywords: private collection, Stedley Art Foundation, public-private space, contemporary art, art institutions, collecting practices, curatorial strategies, institutional critique, cultural representation.

Introduction

In the contemporary cultural landscape of Ukraine, the role of private artistic initiatives is becoming increasingly prominent, as they move beyond purely collector-oriented practices and acquire the features of public cultural institutions. One illustrative example of this type of institution is the Stedley Art Foundation, whose activities unfold at the intersection of the private initiative of the art collector Stella Benyaminova and an open, socially oriented artistic space.

The relevance of the study is conditioned by the need to conceptualise new models for the functioning of art foundations in the context of the transformation of museum, exhibition, and curatorial practices of the early 21st century, as well as by the lack of comprehensive art-historical research devoted specifically to hybrid forms of “public private space”.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in a comprehensive art-historical interpretation of the Stedley Art Foundation collection as a hybrid institutional model operating at the intersection of private initiative and public private space. For the first time, the collection is examined not only as an assemblage of artworks, but as a dynamic cultural mechanism for representing contemporary art, forming curatorial narratives, and developing alternative models of access to artistic heritage. The study introduces the Stedley Art Foundation collection into the scholarly discourse of Ukrainian art history within the framework of institutional critique, emphasising its role in transforming the relationship between private collecting, public engagement, and cultural policy.

The subject of the study is the set of conceptual, curatorial, and institutional mechanisms through which the Stedley Art Foundation collection functions at the intersection of private collecting and the public–private cultural space. This includes the principles of collection formation, curatorial logic, models of representation and communication with audiences, and the socio-cultural roles performed by the collection within contemporary artistic discourse, while maintaining its private ownership status.

The object of the study is the activity of the Stedley Art Foundation as an institutional entity within the field of contemporary art, while the subject of the study comprises the mechanisms of interaction between a private collection and the public cultural environment, including exhibition strategies, communication models, and the socio-cultural functions of the foundation.

The study aims to identify and analyse the specific features of the Stedley Art Foundation as an example of contemporary institutional practice that combines private initiative with public cultural discourse.

To achieve the purpose, the study sets out to accomplish the following objectives:

- outline the theoretical foundations for the study of private artistic institutions;
- analyse the conceptual approaches to the formation of the collection and the public activities of the foundation;
- determine the place of the Stedley Art Foundation within the broader context of the contemporary artistic process.

The results of the study are addressed to art historians, cultural scholars, curators, museum professionals, researchers of contemporary art, as well as to all those interested in current forms of functioning of artistic institutions within the contemporary cultural space.

Methods

The methodological framework of the study is based on works in the theory and history of art, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics, as well as albums of artists' works from the collection of the Stedley Art Foundation. In particular, the research draws on studies by J.-C. Marcadé, K.

Tsyhykalo, V. Blikhar, L. Levchuk, B. Pylypushko, V. Sakharuk, and S. Hlasenko, as well as works by Ukrainian and international art historians devoted to issues of private collecting and public cultural practices, and interviews with the owner of the art collection, Stella Benyaminova.

The study employs a set of general scientific methods that ensure the systematic character and scientific verifiability of the results obtained. The analytical method is used to identify the structural, substantive, and institutional features of the Stedley Art Foundation collection, as well as to distinguish between the private and public components of its functioning. The synthetic method makes it possible to generalise individual art-historical, curatorial, and institutional characteristics of the collection into an integral conceptual model of a “public private space”. The comparative method is applied to compare the activities of the Stedley Art Foundation with other forms of private collections and contemporary art foundations, which allows its typological specificity to be outlined. The systemic approach ensures consideration of the collection as an integrated cultural mechanism in which collecting, representation, and communication with the public are combined. Inductive and deductive methods are used to formulate generalisations and theoretical conclusions regarding the transformation of boundaries between private initiative and public visibility in the contemporary art environment.

The study applies a range of philosophical methods that make it possible to conceptualise the Stedley Art Foundation collection within broader ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of contemporary culture. The dialectical method is used to analyse the tension and interaction between private initiative and public visibility, which shape the contradictory yet dynamic nature of the “public private space”. The phenomenological approach allows the collection to be considered as a space of immediate aesthetic experience and interaction between the viewer and the work of art beyond rigidly institutionalised museum models. The hermeneutic method is applied to interpret curatorial narratives, exhibition concepts, and the semantic layers of artistic practices represented in the collection. The axiological approach makes it possible to identify the value orientations of the collection in the context of the cultural responsibility of private collecting. Ontological analysis contributes to understanding the collection as a particular form of cultural being that combines the materiality of works of art with the immaterial sociocultural processes of their public actualisation.

The study also employs a set of art-historical methods aimed at a comprehensive analysis of the Stedley Art Foundation collection in artistic, historical-cultural, and institutional contexts. The formal-stylistic method is applied to analyse the plastic, compositional, and figurative-expressive features of the works included in the collection to identify their stylistic dominants and artistic strategies. Iconographic and iconological methods are used to interpret subjects, symbolic motifs, and semantic layers of artistic images within contemporary cultural and social narratives. The historical-artistic method makes it possible to examine the formation of the collection in relation to stages in the development of contemporary Ukrainian and global art. Contextual analysis allows artistic practices represented in the collection to be correlated with curatorial concepts, exhibition solutions, and the institutional environment of their representation. Attributive and typological methods are applied to systematise works according to authorship, genre, and media characteristics, contributing to a more precise understanding of the artistic structure of the collection and its conceptual integrity.

Literature Review

Contemporary scholarly discourse on private collecting and its role within the public cultural space is characterised by a growing interest in the transformation of institutional models, curatorial agency, and cultural mediation. Within the broader field of art history and cultural

studies, private collections are increasingly examined not merely as accumulations of artworks, but as active agents shaping artistic narratives, interpretative frameworks, and modes of public access to cultural heritage. This shift in scholarly focus provides an essential theoretical background for the present study, which addresses the Stedley Art Foundation collection as a hybrid institutional phenomenon situated between private initiative and public–private space.

A substantial theoretical foundation for analysing the ethical, aesthetic, and value-based dimensions of cultural practices is provided by works in aesthetics and philosophy of art. The teaching manual edited by Blikhara (2018) offers a structured overview of ethical and aesthetic categories, emphasising the interdependence between aesthetic perception and moral orientation. This framework is particularly relevant for the present study, as the Stedley Art Foundation collection is conceptualised not only as a visual assemblage, but as a value-driven cultural project in which aesthetic choices articulate ethical positions. The manual supports the interpretation of the collection as a meaning-producing space where aesthetic criteria shape curatorial narratives and institutional responsibility.

Similarly, the comprehensive textbook on aesthetics by Levchuk et al. (2010) provides a classical theoretical grounding for understanding art as a form of cultural cognition and symbolic communication. The authors' treatment of aesthetic experience as a mediator between individual perception and collective cultural meaning informs the present study's approach to analysing the interaction between private collecting and public reception. This source is used to contextualise the Foundation's activities within broader aesthetic discourses and to substantiate the interpretation of the collection as a mediator between personal vision and public cultural dialogue.

Primary empirical insight into the internal logic of the collection is drawn from the author's interview with the collector Stella Beniaminova (2025). This interview constitutes a key source for understanding the motivations, principles, and value orientations underlying the formation of the Stedley Art Foundation collection. In the present study, the interview is used not merely as biographical material, but as an interpretative lens through which the ethical and aesthetic philosophy of the collection is articulated. It allows the research to connect curatorial strategies and institutional decisions with the personal worldview of the collector, thereby illuminating the subjective dimension of private initiative within a public-oriented cultural framework.

A number of sources are devoted to the analysis of individual artists whose works form the conceptual core of the collection, thereby contributing to an understanding of its artistic structure and internal coherence. Yevgeniya (2014) examines the oeuvre of Oleksandr Zhivotkov, focusing on materiality, formal experimentation, and the artist's engagement with the philosophical dimensions of painting. This study is instrumental for analysing Zhivotkov's role within the collection as a figure representing continuity between modernist traditions and contemporary artistic language. In the present research, Zhivotkov's work is interpreted as a key element in the Foundation's strategy of privileging depth, introspection, and ethical resonance over decorative or market-oriented considerations.

The publication "Breathing Form": Oleksandr Sukholit (2021) addresses the sculptural practice of Sukholit, emphasising the organic relationship between form, material, and archaic cultural memory. This source is used to situate Sukholit's work within a broader art-historical trajectory that connects archaic traditions, modernism, and contemporary sculptural thought. Within the context of the present study, Sukholit's inclusion in the collection exemplifies the Foundation's commitment to artists whose work embodies a synthesis of historical consciousness and contemporary expression.

Pylypushko's (2018) doctoral dissertation on the phenomenon of "internal emigration" in the work of Oleksandr Aksinin provides a critical framework for understanding artistic resistance and autonomy under totalitarian conditions. This research contributes to the present study by contextualising Aksinin's graphic works as manifestations of ethical and intellectual independence. The dissertation supports the interpretation of the Stedley Art Foundation collection as a space that preserves and reactivates artistic practices marginalised by dominant ideological systems, thereby reinforcing the collection's role in institutional critique.

The meta-historical perspective offered by Poberizhna (2016) in her analysis of Johann Sebastian Bach provides an important philosophical parallel for understanding the collection's emphasis on continuity, transcendence, and cultural universality. Although focused on music, this work is employed in the present study as a conceptual reference for interpreting the collection's aspiration to integrate visual art into a broader meta-historical and philosophical horizon. It supports the argument that the Foundation's curatorial logic is grounded in an understanding of art as a transhistorical and transdisciplinary phenomenon.

Sakharuk's (2020) monograph on Mykola Trokh contributes to the analysis of photography within the collection, offering a nuanced interpretation of Trokh's position in Ukrainian photographic culture. This source is used to contextualise the Foundation's selective engagement with photography as an artistic medium that resists postmodern irony and spectacle. The study reinforces the interpretation of the collection's photographic component as aligned with ethical clarity, aesthetic restraint, and personal authenticity.

The album Oleksandr Dubovyk. Album No. 27 (2023) serves as both a documentary and interpretative source for understanding Dubovyk's symbolic language and philosophical orientation. In the present research, this publication is used to analyse the role of Dubovyk as a central figure in the collection's narrative of Ukrainian modernism and intellectual art. The album supports the argument that the Stedley Art Foundation positions Dubovyk not merely as an artist of historical significance, but as a thinker whose work facilitates dialogue between philosophy, ethics, and visual form.

Oksametny's (2015) article on Dychenko's mission provides an important contextual background for understanding the genealogy of private collecting in Ukraine. By examining Dychenko's role as a collector who preserved nonconformist art during the Soviet period, this source allows the present study to situate the Stedley Art Foundation within a lineage of private initiatives that functioned as alternative cultural institutions. The article is used to establish historical continuity between earlier forms of private collecting and contemporary hybrid institutional models.

Hlasenko's (2020) philosophical work *The House of Pure Light* contributes to the conceptual vocabulary used in the analysis of spirituality, ethics, and cultural introspection. Although not directly focused on visual art, this source is employed to contextualise the collector's emphasis on inner development, ethical purification, and resistance to mass cultural superficiality. It supports the interpretation of the Foundation's activities as grounded in a broader philosophical worldview that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

Finally, the scholarly publication by Tsyhykalo and Marcade (2021) on Oleksandr Dubovyk provides an art-historical and semiotic analysis of signs and symbols in Dubovyk's work. This source is crucial for the present study's examination of the semiotic and conceptual dimensions of the collection. It also demonstrates the Foundation's active role in producing scholarly knowledge, thereby reinforcing its status as an institution that combines collecting, research, and publication.

Taken together, the reviewed literature forms a multidimensional theoretical and empirical framework for analysing private collecting within the public cultural space. At the same time, it reveals a significant gap: despite the availability of philosophical, aesthetic, and artist-centred studies, there has been no comprehensive art-historical analysis of the Stedley Art Foundation collection as an integrated institutional phenomenon. This gap substantiates the relevance and scholarly validity of the present study, which addresses the Foundation as a representative example of a hybrid institutional model operating at the intersection of private initiative and public cultural responsibility.

Results

Today, Ukraine has a considerable number of private collections of visual art that play an exceptionally important role in the systematisation, preservation, and popularisation of Ukrainian fine art of the 20th and early 21st centuries. This article addresses the principles of artistic selection, formation, and the artistic and stylistic characteristics of one of the most significant art collections in contemporary Ukraine—the collection of Stella Benyaminova, founder of the Stedley Art Foundation.

Stella Benyaminova maintains that she loves and values high art. According to the custodian of rarities, specific principles and approaches to collecting are applied when people are taught how to collect, but today it is impossible to teach a person how to be a person. Many factors influence this, above all upbringing; everything around us should encourage self-knowledge and self-improvement. There must be an inner desire to reach this state and understanding, and only then does a prepared and conscious individual turn to art and culture.

Culture is diverse: there is high culture and mass culture. Therefore, everyone chooses their own path, and there are no universal principles or approaches to collecting. The collector's fundamental principle is to love art—to love not oneself in art, nor oneself within the fashionable collectors' circle that gathers popular artists, but to love art within oneself. Above all, art must be known. Before one can love it, one must understand what art is. And this, in fact, cannot be taught.

The owner of the art collection lives and collects according to the principle that aesthetics shapes ethics. For her, aesthetics is multifaceted. It may be quite simple—flowers in a vase—or it may be vivid, beautiful, and colourful, something that can affect any person. For Stella Benyaminova, however, everything is different, because she arrived at her own aesthetics from within herself: “I moved through the social perception of aesthetics towards my individual perception of it. And perhaps somewhere inside I felt that personality which, as the artist Oleksandr Zhivotkov said, already seeks colour in art, in painting, in music.”

For the collector today, art is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon; it is not apathetic, nor does it represent kitsch aesthetics. For her, art is deeply internal, chaste, and formative—it shapes her ethics, her environment, and her social circle. Aesthetics generally forms ethics, because if one embraces kitsch and provocation, proper ethics will not emerge; instead, one arrives at something entirely different. Contemporary society has significantly simplified and lowered its understanding of high aesthetics and high culture. Today, once again, we stand on the threshold of a renaissance—a new, forgotten revival. We have forgotten the aesthetics that shaped people at the dawn of their formation. What distinguishes us from the crowd is precisely this enduring difference between high culture and mass culture.

There are collectors who chase left-wing artists, and there are collectors who prefer right-wing artists, but Stella Benyaminova seeks herself and the art that has been embedded in her by the Creator: “Because every person is born as a blank page, yet inside there is a certain genetic

component, a code formed by generations of our ancestors, and it exists within each of us. In order to decode myself and understand who I am, I need precisely the art that shapes me and is far stronger than the society that surrounds me, because I do not chase society. I delve into myself in order to understand who I am,” the collector emphasises. The art that assists Stella Benyaminova in this process includes the works of Oleksandr Zhivotkov and Oleksandr Sukholit, the art of Oleksandr Aksinin, and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach—everything that connects her to an understanding of high culture.

Genre scenes were popular and aesthetically pleasing until the 20th century. Everything in them is correct and beautiful: a cottage, flowers, a lovely landscape, a small human figure. All of this is harmonious and aesthetic, yet it does not shape the collector, because it has already existed and belongs to the past. The 20th century, however, gave us freedom. It introduced abstraction, symbolism, and surrealist modes of understanding. All of this profoundly strengthened Stella personally and enabled her to enter into dialogue with art—with any painting, sculpture, graphic work, or photographic artwork. At the same time, the collector notes: “It is I who become the viewer, and I myself complete within me what even the artist might not have been able to invent consciously. Here, one already works on the level of the subconscious.”

What genre composition could there be in the work of Oleksandr Zhivotkov, when he allows himself to invent the genre? Birds are flying above a road. The question arises: where are they flying? Why are they flying? Where does this road lead? This is already a philosophical mode of understanding. For the guardian of memory, it is important consciously to traverse the entire philosophy and history of art through creativity—e.g., through the work of Oleksandr Zhivotkov—from Plato to the present day. The 20th century is a unique century that allows this entire path to be traversed using a contemporary language. Contemporary artistic language is the language of quantum physics; it is the language of modern avant-garde art that enabled the owner of the art collection to be a free individual—free from genres, stereotypes, and interpretations taught in academies of art. Although such foundations are necessary and fundamental, once one has pushed off from them, one has the right to soar to the stars.

Among contemporary media, photography is also represented in the collection of the Stedley Art Foundation. The collector favours collecting artistic photographs by Mykola Trokh. Trokh was a serious photographic artist. Thanks to the researcher Valerii Sakharuk, who thoroughly studied his work, the figure of Trokh emerged for her as that of an outstanding photographer, since in Ukraine Boris Mikhailov is far better known as a fashionable figure. However, Mikhailov’s photography does not resonate with Stella. It is postmodernism, a phase she has already passed through and which never captivated her. Trokh is acknowledged as an honest and pure photographer who lived and worked during the 1990s. Within that decade, he remained faithful to his ethics and aesthetics. This was close to her, as the collector herself also personally lived through the 1990s. Trokh proved to be the photographer who led her away from the cultural photography of Boris Mikhailov.

In sculpture, it was precisely Oleksandr Sukholit who opened up within the guardian of rarities the very concept of sculpture: archaic sculpture, Greek plastic art, and Renaissance sculpture. Through Sukholit, Stella Benyaminova traversed the entire history of art in sculpture. From archaic forms to Greece, from Mycenae to Greece and to high antiquity, then to the Renaissance—a rebirth once again. From Greek sculptures of Apollos and Venuses to Michelangelo, from Michelangelo to Rodin and Maillol, and onward to Sukholit—this is a classical line. Archaic sculpture begins with the Trypillian culture and the Mycenaean civilisation, passes through Greece, and then, in the 20th century, returns once more to where we arrived: to Modigliani and Brâncuși. Once again, we return to archaic origins.

Therefore, for the owner of the art collection, the sculptor Sukholit represents everything that already belongs to the history of art; everything about him has already been said. Sukholit and Zhivotkov armed themselves with the contemporary language of the 20th century, the language of the avant-garde, the language of true modernism in its broad sense. These artists emerged from modernism and went through the entire path of formation and quotation without moving into postmodernism; they preserved the purity of line and aesthetics, which in turn generated ethics for the individual. Thus, having acquired the language of modernism, today they make it possible, through the language of contemporary art, to preserve that genuine naturalness within oneself which must exist, because we are all unique; we cannot march together in a single formation and have a single branded artist. Stella asserts: “Everyone seeks their own line in art, their own path. O. Zhivotkov and O. Sukholit revealed to me through visual art what I then carried into music, literature, and philosophy, and all of this enriched me as a person.” (*Author’s interview...*, 2025)

The artist Oleksandr Dubovyk is also regarded by the collector as the pinnacle of the art of the Ukrainian Sixtiers, because at that time, in the era of socialist realism, habitual genre conventions, and Soviet aesthetics, Dubovyk practically gave her the opportunity to experience modernism through his works and his symbolism (*Oleksandr Dubovyk...*, 2023). Dubovyk is a thinker, and his understanding of life is particularly compelling: who are you on this earth, and where are you going as a human being? (*Figure 4*) He turns to Kant’s ideas, to moral laws, to quantum theories, and to his own singularity, thereby purifying himself. Through this catharsis, one gives birth to something new within oneself. And what is the new? It is the forgotten old. Thus, in the history of art and philosophy, everything ultimately revolves around Plato.

Born in the 20th century and living today in the 21st, Stella Benyaminova does not seek to be a collector of antiquity or of earlier epochs. Even with regard to the Trypillia culture, which she hardly collects at all, the art connoisseur nevertheless turned her attention to Trypillia because it is the only culture on Earth that connects her with all people living on the planet. It is a culture that dates back to the Eneolithic period, and from it the collector found it easy to take her point of departure—from archaic origins—and then traverse the entire history of art. The owner of the art collection emphasises: “In practice, I am not a collector of Trypillia. It interested me as a beginning, as an impulse, and afterwards—of course—the 20th century. This is a difficult and complex century that gave each of us freedom of choice. I have a composition by Henry Moore, I have an original by Alberto Giacometti in my collection, there are such valuable works, but at the same time I never wanted to own brands that are already recognised, for example Brâncuși. There is no point for me in collecting that.” (*Author’s interview...*, 2025)

For the patron, it is better to have ‘one’s own’ Sukholit in the collection, because Sukholit is a distinctly Ukrainian sculptor. Stella does not wish to invest financially in world art, nor to invest in artists who are already deceased and can no longer be helped. It is better to purchase works by living Ukrainian artists—artists whom one is still able, first, to understand, and second, to study and explore, to live and empathise with in the present time. The art connoisseur is happy to be living today in the era of Zhivotkov, Sukholit, and Dubovyk.

Stella Benyaminova is interested in the avant-garde as the principal movement that emerged in Ukraine at the beginning of the 20th century. She is drawn to the Ukrainian history of the 20th century, which, in her view, is easier to comprehend precisely through the prism of the Ukrainian avant-garde.

Stella Benyaminova stood at the origins of the formation of the Museum of the Avant-Garde in Kyiv. All of this she learned from Ihor Dychenko (*Oksametny*, 2015). She did not know him personally, but studied his archives and researched his collection through the works that

later entered her own collection. In this way, the custodian of rarities succeeded in assembling works by the Boychukists (*Figure 1*), Narbut-related themes, the school of Suprematism, scenographic compositions by Khvostenko-Khvostovyi, and others. She was interested in Dychenko as a collector who, during the Soviet period, gathered works that were rejected by official ideology and misunderstood by many other collectors. Only a rather narrow circle of art connoisseurs collected anything similar.

Stella has always been interested in what was collected by only a few, rather than what was amassed by the majority of seekers of rare objects. The avant-garde was born and made it possible to have a multi-vector orientation in the history of Ukrainian and world art. In this way, it becomes easier for us to engage in dialogue with the world. And the artists represented in the collection of the Stedley Art Foundation are world artists, regardless of whether the world has officially recognised them or not. The time of Malevich has already passed. Malevich set his direction, and virtually the 20th century began with him and ended with him. It is clear that most artists of the 21st century carry the history of Malevich within themselves.

However, following only his path has become tedious. Kazimir Malevich's Square is his manifesto. Lucio Fontana also created a manifesto when he cut the canvas and declared that it was enough to remain within the territory of the canvas; it was time to go beyond it. Therefore, Stella is interested in artists who today are searching for the newest forms—forms that were forgotten throughout the history of art. We have arrived at a moment when it is already necessary to give birth to spirituality. Spirituality is ethics; it is what resides in the depths of the soul, yet it is obscured by Instagram, social networks, bloggers, and fashionable figures in the vast world of the internet. One longs to come home and quietly enter into dialogue with good music, a good film, a good philosopher—but this is not given to everyone. Everyone is rushing somewhere, and this everyday routine is the same for all.

In the morning, we get up and watch the news... then we go to bed. Even the war that we are enduring under missile strikes, in hellish conditions—yet this war, as director Andrii Zholdak said, “wars are all the same”. One person kills another; war gives rise to hatred. The enemy came to us with hatred and wants us to drown in it. But only through high art, through our own high culture, is Ukraine capable of winning, because it is love that must prevail. This feeling of love must overcome within us the savagery and inhumanity that the enemy seeks to revive. Therefore, high art is rebirth. Art cultivates us, distinguishes us from barbarism, destroys hatred within us, and instead lifts us above this perishable, suicidal world. For Ukraine, this rebirth must take place now, and it is precisely today that we must arrive at it.

Stella Benyaminova collects various schools and movements; for example, she has a particular fondness for Odesa nonconformism. It so happened that her collection came to include works from the 1980s by leading Odesa artists of that period—V. Khrushch, V. Maryniuk, V. Tsiupko, and L. Yastreb.

The owner of the art collection appreciates the creative experiments of the intellectual artist Leon Tarasevych, although he remains little known to the wider public. The Lviv artist Oleksandr Matviienko, for instance, with whom the collector had friendly relations, represents true Ukrainian pop art. The artist did not cross the boundary into shock value or mass appeal; his pop art is beautiful, pure, ethical, and aesthetic. It is a kind of meditative pop art. For the collector, Matviienko is one of the best contemporary artists, who, unfortunately, has passed away.

Thus, within the field of vision of the custodian of artefacts are the Lviv, Odesa, and Kharkiv art schools. For the collector, the notion of regions is rather relative. For example, the artist Oleksandr Aksinin (*Figure 3*) was born and lived in Lviv, yet for her he is a world artist. As

Stella Benyaminova rightly notes: “Only when an artist rises above the local does he become global, does he become comprehensible to the world. That is why I am interested in those artists who, while remaining within various local regions of Ukraine, were able to rise—armed with the local, the folk, the individual, the original—and, having risen above all this, are capable of uniting us all.” (*Author’s interview...*, 2025)

In the art of collecting, it is as if you string together those “emeralds” and create a beautiful chain, a threaded strand that becomes a unifying principle. For example, the Boychukist school, works by whose representatives are present in her collection, is essentially Byzantium. That is, we say that from Byzantium we move to the Boychukists, and from the Boychukists we can move on to the circle of Mykola Kryvenko (*Figure 6*). When he was friends with Parajanov, those drawings that are preserved at the Stedley Art Foundation are magnificent. This school made it possible to create in Ukraine such much-needed mosaic panels and frescoes that originated in Byzantium.

Vitalii Kokhan and Kostiantyn Zorkin are among the young artists included in the Stedley Art Foundation collection, because the art connoisseur often saw their works at land art projects by Anna Hidora in Myropillia (*Figure 7*).

The collector appreciates the fact that Vitalii Kokhan, who is also an admirer of Oleksandr Zhyvotkov’s work, remains faithful to pure art. Kostiantyn Zorkin impressed her by the fact that he starts from Gilgamesh. These artists build upon profound foundations. If we speak of Gilgamesh, this is the foundation of foundations, the beginning of everything, preceding Homer, the Aeneid, and all that followed; yet one cannot begin everything with the Aeneid. One must look at what came first. Kostiantyn Zorkin, Vitalii Kokhan, and other artists today speak to us about this beginning in the contemporary language of art. They have been, are, and will be, because such pearls exist in the history of art. And it is important for her to string them together in her collection.

The first artwork appeared in Stella Benyaminova’s collection long ago; it is kept in her mother’s house. In Soviet times, for some reason everyone was told that we were all the same, that we were Soviet youth. The collector studied at one of the central schools in Kyiv and saw that life in a professor’s home was different from that in the home of a caretaker’s daughter. She began to reflect on why we were told that everyone was the same, all builders of communism, while in reality everyone lived differently.

It was there that she developed the thought of who she wanted to be and what kind of interior she wanted to create in her own home. The first paintings were acquired for the interior; they were not even genre works, but colouristic compositions. For the collector, the painting itself, as such, was important. She has been looking at it for many years since her first acquisition on Andriivskiy Descent. She was accompanied by Professor of Immunology Ninel Mykhailivna Berezhna, who worked at the Institute of Oncology. It was she who led Stella there and encouraged her to purchase her first painting. That first painting was monochromatic, in dark tones, and later the owner of the art collection reflected that she began her collecting with such a work and eventually came to Zhyvotkov. Although the collector went through a path of very bright, beautiful, genre paintings, at first glance interior works, splendid pieces, it is impossible to come to “your” artist without going through a path of mistakes, trials, forgeries, masterpiece acquisitions, and various curiosities.

During her period of growth, which Stella experienced at the end of the 1980s and 1990s—a difficult time—there was a phase when she did not engage in collecting art because she needed to build her business and repay debts. Yet overall, she was always drawn to art and to Kyiv’s creative intelligentsia. In the 1990s she was immersed in a different environment, and later it so

happened that a significant role in her formation as a collector was played by a diplomat—the Ambassador of Italy to Ukraine, Yolanda Brunetti-Getz—who instilled in Stella a love for high art.

The Ambassador opened the eyes of the future founder of the Stedley Art Foundation to many things, helping her understand that there is an audience from the 1990s that has remained at the same level of development, and there are people who have crossed that boundary—the boundary of money and the desire for power and shock value—for whom self-development is more important and valuable: listening to opera, going to the philharmonic, reading a quality book. Then this path will lead you to your artist. Probably everyone has such a path. “There are a million roads that God gives us. But there is only one that will lead you to yourself.” This is a quote from the favourite contemporary Ukrainian writer of the art collection’s owner, Symor Glasenko (real name is Oleksandr Protsiuk) (*Hlasenko, 2020*).

In her collecting practice, Stella Benyaminova chose depth rather than breadth, because a path of breadth would mean buying “everyone and everything” in order to own many works from different schools and movements. This did not interest her, because a guardian of rarities does not need to prove anything to anyone. Instead, it is important for her to prove to herself who she is, what she is doing in this life, and why one should collect works of art at all. We will all die; we are not eternal. Every person wants to be happy. And to be happy means to know oneself, to know one’s roots, and to understand the structure of the world. One must burn vanity within oneself. Vanity is when we run after what is fashionable, what is imposed upon us, when we are told to buy a fashionable artist for large sums of money. When you enter the flats of some collectors, you count how much money is hanging on their walls. This was of no interest to her, because you still remain in a crowd: “Once I told Kostiantyn Doroshenko that in the 1990s we all dreamed of leaving the crowd of the poor, because we were all poor. Then I entered the crowd of the rich, and now I have left the crowd of the rich and come to myself” (*Author’s interview... , 2025*).

The collector believes that a work of art finds her itself. Stella Benyaminova has developed the gift of seeing—when you look and understand that a particular painting must be in your collection. To acquire this gift, one must walk one’s own path and pay attention to no one and nothing else. One must cultivate a strong person within oneself, someone who allows themselves to say that this painting touches them. Most importantly, one should not be afraid, having acquired a work, to hang it in one’s home. Such a work may look unusual to other connoisseurs who, when entering your home, look for what is familiar and ubiquitous—the same artists or works similar in subject matter or composition.

In her choices and acquisitions, Stella Benyaminova listens to many opinions. Sometimes she pretends to be uninformed in order to hear the truth. Evidently, her consciousness requires such a state and such behaviour. There are intuitive acquisitions of artworks, and there are conscious ones. Often, intuition works first, and consciousness comes later. Afterwards, the guardian of rarities consults art historians and other collectors, but in any case, her intuition prevails. When intuition is supported by knowledge, this becomes a one-hundred-per-cent victory in acquiring a valuable work.

The owner of the art collection always strives to support her knowledge not only through consultations with selected art historians, but also through her own knowledge of art history and her visual experience of the finest examples of art in world museums. Only self-development and the completion of this demanding school can yield a positive and high-quality result in collecting. If one does not go through this school, one cannot become a professional specialist in the field of art, let alone a collector. Stella often emphasises: “Why should I listen to someone

else if I want to hear myself? But to hear oneself, of course, one must go through this school. I studied with the art historian Paola Volkova, and the philosophers Merab Mamardashvili and Alexander Pyatigorsky. It is impossible to understand the history of art if you do not know the history of philosophy and the history of music.” (*Author’s interview... , 2025*)

Unfortunately, everything around us is often one-sided, with ordinary people presenting themselves as great experts. If works by Boychukists or representatives of modernism appear, Stella acquires them only with reliable provenance (*Figure 2*). For example, if a composition comes from the collection of Ihor Dychenko, the art collector, fully trusting this person and the quality of his collection, will acquire the work without hesitation. Dychenko is an outstanding art historian, collector, and patron. Everything that a person of great stature can embody as a personality is embodied in Ihor Dychenko. Thus, Stella follows his path, learns much from her predecessor, and adopts his life stance and principles of collection formation.

Today, the research, publishing, and project activities of the Stedley Art Foundation, in addition to its founder Stella Benyaminova, are carried out by three art historians: Kateryna Tsyhykalo, Tetiana Voloshyna, and Mariia Dotsenko. Each of them has the opportunity within the institution to pursue her own research direction. Kateryna Tsyhykalo works with sculpture; she studies the oeuvre of Sukholit and the sculpture present in the Stedley Art Foundation collection, predominantly sculpture of the 20th century. Her interests also include Trypillian culture.

In addition, she has an intriguing topic—Oleksandr Dubovyk, Mykola Kryvenko, and his dialogues with Serhii Parajanov. She is currently working on this book, as book publishing is one of the institution’s core areas of activity.

The book that Kateryna prepared on Dubovyk is *Symbols–Signs of Oleksandr Dubovyk (Tsyhykalo & Marcadé, 2021)*. She collaborated with Jean-Claude Marcadé, a world-renowned art historian who also holds Dubovyk’s work in high esteem. It was Marcadé who consistently defended the recognition of Kazimir Malevich as a Ukrainian artist on international platforms.

At present, Kateryna Tsyhykalo is working on a major scholarly publication dedicated to the 95th anniversary of Oleksandr Dubovyk, in which the researcher will offer a deeper exploration of the artist’s oeuvre. Each year, the Stedley Art Foundation publishes his reprints and art books; this is also one of the foundation’s core areas of activity, as the institution seeks to share the knowledge that comes into its possession. Dubovyk’s ideas are invaluable, and therefore the foundation decided that they must be published and made accessible to Ukrainian society.

Tetiana Voloshyna is engaged in research on the work of Oleksandr Zhivotkov. Mariia Dotsenko is processing the archives of Ihor Dychenko that have entered the institution. The collector quite rightly observes: “Even if you already love and collect art, you have no right to keep it only for yourself. Art does not belong to me; it belongs to the world. And I believe that our institution has already outgrown itself. Therefore, three art historians, in my view, will not be sufficient in the future to continue developing this institution.” (*Author’s interview... , 2025*)

During the war, when state art institutions (museums) keep works of art in storage, people need to live, not merely survive. In wartime, society must live life to the fullest; we cannot live halfway, because if you live halfway, you are already dying. It is difficult now to endure and not lose one’s sanity. Having passed through the purifying experience of war, art helps us preserve within ourselves not hatred, not malice, and not fear, but strength, will, and love. All of this is given to us by art.

For this reason, during the war, the collector donated part of the collection to the new Museum of the Avant-Garde, which was established in Kyiv in 2024. The Stedley Art

Foundation consistently submits works to exhibitions held not only in Ukraine, but also in Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, and New York. In 2024, the institution organised a full-scale exhibition in Padua, which was highly appreciated by Italian cultural centres, including the National Gallery in Padua. The art foundation also organised an exhibition of Oleksandr Zhivotkov.

Stella Benyaminova often reiterates her position: “When you share art and give people the opportunity to see it while engaging in dialogue with authentic works, you grasp its highest magic. If you feel this magic, you remain with this art forever. And if you look at a reprint, you will never see or feel that magic. That is why it is important to show original works; it is important that these compositions work for people, because you live here and now. Today it is important for me to be happy. And if it is important for me to be happy, then I want as many people as possible to feel this happiness too, even in the conditions of a terrible war.” (*Author’s interview...*, 2025)

Discussion

The relevance of the research is determined by the growing role of private artistic initiatives in shaping the public cultural space and transforming traditional models of the institutional representation of art. In the contemporary art environment, private collections increasingly perform functions traditionally associated with public museums and galleries, participating in the formation of curatorial narratives, cultural policy, and mechanisms of access to artistic heritage. The Stedley Art Foundation collection represents a demonstrative example of such a hybrid model; however, it has not yet been the subject of systematic art-historical analysis. Within the context of current discussions on institutional critique, the boundaries between the private and the public, and new forms of cultural mediation, the study of this collection acquires particular significance for understanding contemporary processes in collecting, curatorship, and the representation of art.

In the course of the study, a number of problems characterising the functioning of the Stedley Art Foundation collection within a hybrid model between private initiative and a public–private space was identified. First, a lack of clearly defined institutional boundaries between private collecting and public representation was observed, which complicates the determination of the collection’s status within the system of cultural institutions. Second, an asymmetry was identified between curatorial autonomy and public responsibility, whereby the private nature of governance is not always accompanied by established mechanisms of scholarly reflection and public accountability. Third, the collection demonstrates limited integration into academic discourse, caused by fragmented documentation, insufficient cataloguing, and the absence of sustained research programmes. A separate issue concerns the tension between the conceptual coherence of the collection and the variability of exhibition practices, which affects the stability of interpretative narratives. Taken together, these problems underscore the need for a theoretical rethinking of the role of private foundations as full-fledged actors within the public cultural space.

The results of the study indicate that the Stedley Art Foundation collection functions not merely as an assemblage of artworks, but as a dynamic institutional mechanism in which private initiative is transformed into a form of open cultural space. The analysis confirms the appropriateness of examining the foundation within the framework of contemporary debates on the “public private space”, where the boundaries between private ownership and public representation of art are fluid and subject to conceptual reinterpretation. Comparing the activities of the Stedley Art Foundation with theoretical models of institutional critique makes it

possible to assert that the foundation develops its curatorial and communicative strategy, alternative to classical museum practices. At the same time, it is evident that the flexibility of its organisational structure facilitates a prompt response to current artistic and socio-cultural processes. The findings expand current understanding of the role of private art collections in shaping the contemporary cultural landscape and confirm the relevance of further research into similar institutions within the interdisciplinary field of art history and cultural studies.

In light of the results obtained, further development of research on private art collections as hybrid cultural institutions appears both relevant and necessary. The scholarly community is encouraged, first, to expand comparative studies of private foundations across different regions in order to develop a typology of models of the “public private space” in contemporary art. Second, an interdisciplinary approach that combines art history, cultural anthropology, museum studies, and the sociology of culture is of particular relevance for the comprehensive analysis of mechanisms of cultural mediation within private collections. Third, a promising direction involves the development of methodologies for the scholarly cataloguing and archiving of private collections, which would facilitate their integration into academic circulation. Special attention should be given to the study of curatorial strategies and institutional critique in the activities of private foundations as factors shaping the public discourse of contemporary art. The inclusion of the Stedley Art Foundation case within a broader theoretical framework makes it possible to consider it as a representative model for further research into the transformation of relations between private initiative and publicness in the cultural space.

Conclusion

The study of the Stedley Art Foundation collection in the context of the interaction between private initiative and the public–private space makes it possible to delineate the specific features of contemporary transformations in the institutional forms of art’s existence. The analysis demonstrates that the Foundation’s collection goes beyond the traditional understanding of a private assemblage, functioning as an open cultural resource with a clearly articulated curatorial position and a pronounced public orientation.

It has been established that the activities of the Stedley Art Foundation shape an alternative model of an art institution in which the principles of autonomy of private collecting, responsibility towards the public, and strategies of cultural communication are combined. The collection emerges not merely as a set of artworks, but as an integrated meaning–producing space that generates new narratives about contemporary art, its social functions, and the mechanisms of legitimation.

Particular attention is paid to the role of curatorial practices and exhibition strategies that ensure the openness of the collection to interpretation and dialogue. In this context, the Stedley Art Foundation demonstrates a shift from a model of elitist ownership towards a publicly oriented cultural environment, where private status does not restrict but, on the contrary, expands the possibilities for the representation of art.

The results obtained provide grounds for considering the Stedley Art Foundation collection as an important factor in the contemporary artistic process in Ukraine, one that actively influences the formation of the cultural landscape, the development of non-state institutions, and the rethinking of the boundaries between the private and the public in the sphere of art. The study opens prospects for further scholarly research in museum, institutional, and collection practices of the 21st century.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Oksana Pavlenko. Reaper. 1920. Paper, pencil, coloured pencil. 18.2×20 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 2. Les Lozovskyi. The Most Holy Mother of God. 1921. Paper, tempera. 30.4×23.3 cm. Stedley Art Foundation collection.



Figure 3. Oleksandr Aksinin. Happy New Year! 1975. Paper, etching. 15×8.6 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 4. Oleksandr Dubovyk. Untitled. Ukraine. 1995. Paper, gouache. 40×40 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 5. Oleksandr Sukholit. The Creation of Eve from Adam's Rib. 1988. Gypsum block, carving. 79.5×40 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 6. Mykola Kryvenko. Untitled. 1982. Paper, watercolour, author's technique. 18.4×25.7 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 7. Kostiantyn Zorkin. From the series "Spring". 2020. Paper, ink. 18.3×25.6 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection



Figure 8. Oleksandr Zhivotkov. Mother's Hands. 2022. Wood, cardboard, mixed media (artist's technique). 162×121.5 cm. Stedley Art Foundation Collection