

## **Saving Chechnya's Past**

**Author:** [Asya Ramazanova](#)

A collection of Chechen art and culture salvaged from years of war and theft needs a proper home.

In the centre of Grozny stands a war-damaged five-storey building, with its windows replaced by polythene sheeting where the glass has been blown out. The view may be uninviting, but walk through the metal door standing ajar on the ground floor and you will find yourself in Chechnya's main museum.

The National Museum is one of just three to survive the ravages of war. It is itself a product of conflict - set up in 1996 at the end of the first Chechen war to amalgamate what was left of the archaeological finds and cultural artefacts from the Chechen State Museum and the Zakharov museum's collection of Russian and European paintings and sculptures.

Before the war, the State Museum had over 250,000 items in its possession, but the building and much of the collection were destroyed in the 1994-96 conflict, and just 29,000 items, most of them ethnographic, were saved.

Adnan Mazhidov, Chechnya's deputy culture minister, says many unique exhibits have been lost forever. "Ninety per cent of the [State] Museum's collection was destroyed," he said, noting that funds have now been earmarked to replenish the collection.

In recent years, as the second war which began in 1999 subsided in intensity, the Russian government sent in a team of art restorers and curators who scoured the basements of devastated museums and were able to salvage 500 of the 950 paintings once held in Chechnya. Mazhidov says 95 paintings are now undergoing restoration.

It is not just war that has laid waste to Chechnya's museums. In 1992, well before hostilities began, museum staff recall seeing people dealing openly in plundered exhibits, in the free-for-all of President Jokhar Dudaev's administration.

"No one was there to stop them," said one employee who did not want to be named. "Generally, you could get most money for old belts, both men's and women's, for tsarist-era decorations and of course kinzhals [long daggers]."

Between the wars, when the late President Aslan Maskhadov was in charge of Chechnya, the thefts continued. Among the important paintings that were spirited away were "The Capture of Shamil" by Franz Roubot - a painter who documented Russia's 19th century Caucasian wars - which disappeared without trace from the National Museum, and a portrait of Baron Rokossovsky by Vladimir Makovsky, which later turned up in Russia's Far East.

Just before the second war began, a stock of archaeological items stored at the Chechen Ministry of Culture went missing. As Alvi Mutsaev, deputy director of the National Museum, notes, "it is precisely the archaeological collections that are impossible to replenish".

Mutsaev said pictures stolen from the museum sometimes resurface, for example at London auctions. "It's only thanks to the Russian Ministry of Culture that two 19th century portraits of Count and Countess Zubov have been returned," he said, referring to paintings that disappeared during the first conflict.

But these are rare occurrences, and the National Museum is far from attaining its goal of becoming the main repository of Chechen culture and history. Even though its budget is funded by the Chechen government and a grant from a Russia-wide cultural programme, the money is barely enough to cover staff wages and running costs.

Almost nothing is left for acquisitions or for the new premises which are so badly needed. By and large, it is the Chechen people themselves who are replenishing the museum, with donations of treasured items from family collections.

Before the National Museum can even dream of making new purchases for its collection, it needs a suitable building in which to house them. Mutsaev sees this as a priority, but his hands are tied. The current building, where the museum occupies only the ground floor, is otherwise residential, with old plumbing and waste pipes liable to burst at any moment. There is no mechanism to regulate temperature, a vital element for preserving fragile exhibits.

A few years ago, the plan was to take over a five-storey former department store just across the road from the current premises. But every time the issue was addressed, something came up to stop it happening. Most recently, in November 2004, the Chechen government ruled that there were “pressing reasons” for keeping the building as a shop.

In compensation, the museum was offered a sizeable plot of land on a main thoroughfare in central Grozny.

The problem was that there was a half-built mosque on the site, started when Maskhadov was in power but never completed. “Demolishing the mosque would be sacrilege, and they wouldn’t give us the money to restore it,” said Mutsaev.

Deputy culture minister Mazhidov, told IWPR that Moscow’s Tretyakov Gallery is now developing plans for the construction of a museum complex on the site.

Museum staff employees say that while the plans could well result in a fine building, they foresee many obstacles to it ever becoming a reality.

First and foremost is the financing for the project. According to Roza Yusupova, head of the Chechen culture ministry’s finance department, the building work alone, not counting fitting out the interior, will cost 150 million roubles, over five million dollars.

Mutsaev still hopes he might get the store across the road. It is solid constructed and its central location would bring visitors flocking. “On the first two floors I’d house the permanent ancient collection,” he said. “On the other floors there’d be the archaeological collection and research areas. The basement is ideally equipped for the reserve collection and we’d build studios for restoration work in the courtyard.”

While Mutsaev dreams, Chechnya has seen two new museums open in the past year. In autumn 2004, a brand new museum was opened to commemorate the life and work of Akhmad Kadyrov, the Moscow-backed Chechen president who died in a bomb-attack in May 2004. And this spring saw the opening of another museum to commemorate the Second World War.

The National Museum will just have to wait.

Asya Ramazanova is a correspondent for the Chechenskoe Obschestvo newspaper in Grozny.

**Location:** Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia  
Ingushetia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/saving-chechnyas-past>