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In "Porcelain War," three Ukrainian artists take up arms. The film has been nominated for the Academy Award for best documentary. (Picturehouse)



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When I was in high school, a magnificent English teacher named Conrad Vachon assigned our class the film "Lust for Life," the story of Vincent Van Gogh wrestling with his life as a painter. Watching Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn, I became enthralled with film; I became a film buff. Last week, I was mesmerized by another powerful film, the Academy Award-nominated Ukrainian documentary, "[Porcelain War](#)."

Such a strange name, "Porcelain War." Yet perfect for the ideas and images its talented creators are communicating. In the film it is said that "Ukraine is like Porcelain, easy to break but impossible to destroy." Viewers watch as three Ukrainian artists take up arms: Slava, Anya and Andrey. Slava works in clay — that he fires up into porcelain when not training neophyte Ukrainian warriors. His life partner, Anya, paints in lively colors Slava's charming porcelain figurines of owls, snails and dragons. She then brings them to life through a story narrative and a touch of animation, infusing power into her stories and art.



A still from the documentary "Porcelain War" is pictured. When not training neophyte Ukrainian warriors, Slava creates porcelain figurines from clay. His life partner, Anya, paints the owls, snails and dragons and brings them to life through a story narrative. (Picturehouse)

The least visible of the trio of artists is their friend Andrey, whose exceptional camera skills capture the beauty of Ukraine in the flowering fields of wildflowers and sunflowers juxtaposed with the horrors of chaos and destruction in cities, towns and villages filmed in a desolate gray. Walks in the woods by the artists, hunting for wild mushrooms meant to replenish their souls, expose land mines that threatened their every step. Yet surrounding these deadly weapons, our trio find beauty, the artist's companion. Despite everything — the immediate war, the history of oppression, they will not be conquered. They find laughter. They are undaunted.

Anya and Slava's life is shared with a small Yorkshire terrier named Frodo, whose defiance matches that of his owners. They adore their little dog, as do most Ukrainian pet owners. The Frodos of this war connect to the human heart. It is not unusual to find elderly Ukrainians who have made up their minds to live out their days in their homes near the warfront, caring for stray dogs and cats. These animals become for them a lifeline and responsibility.

Andrey poignantly shares with us his five-day car escape at the outset of the full Russian invasion in February 2022, made with his wife and two daughters from war-torn Kharkiv near the Russian border. Andrey guides them to the safety of the Carpathian Mountains in western Ukraine, and then Moldova. He can barely tell their story of escape, haltingly recalling their drive with failing brakes down a mountain pass during their cross-country race for survival.

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Andrey's wife and daughters eventually took shelter in Poland. The weight and anguish of their absence is captured through his lens as they share their farewells at the train station. From this point, Andrey's cinematography focuses on Ukraine's survival as a people and as a culture. Without their culture they are dead, so they must both stay alive and destroy the evil that is trying to erase their history. Making art is how they manage this unimaginable dichotomy.

Slava, Anya and Andrey follow a noble tradition of Ukrainian artists subjugated for centuries by Russian imperialism and Soviet persecutions. They fight back with what they have: yes, a newfound drone military infused with Ukrainian technology, but also with the poetry of their adored Taras Shevchenko and modern poets like Natalka Bilotserkivets, who writes in "Love in Kyiv": "More terrible is love in Kyiv than Magnificent Venetian passions." The soul of Ukrainians as captured by their artists is something missing in Russia and its fickle ally, the United States.

"Porcelain War" is accompanied by the Ukrainian folk-rock music quartet, DakhaBrakha, whose pulsating sounds punctuate the seriousness and ominous time in Ukraine. Their music is strong, inviting us to understand and join their righteous cause.



Slava trains civilian soldiers in "Porcelain War." (Picturehouse)

Ukraine is rich with art. From the serenity of the historic Lychakiv cemetery in Lviv to the powerful sculpture at Babi Yar in Kiev, the site in a ravine where tens of thousands of people were killed by the Nazis in World War II. Listening to the Ukrainian National Symphony play their national anthem will give you goosebumps. Listening to the Orthodox chants at the packed Mass in the Church of Sts. Peter and

Paul of the armed forces in Lviv, where the congregants remember their fallen heroes through the laments of praying in song, will moisten your cheeks.

Ukraine is also no stranger to filmmaking, often a winner at film festivals around the globe. At the 2024 Academy Awards ceremony, Ukraine's "20 Days in Mariupol" won the Oscar for best documentary. In recent history, two other highly acclaimed Ukrainian documentaries were honored with Oscar nominations: "Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom," a story of the Revolution of Dignity at the Maidan, was nominated for the Oscar in 2016 and "A House Made of Splinters" was an Oscar nominee in the documentary category in 2023.

Official trailer for "Porcelain War" (YouTube/Picturehouse)

"Porcelain War" is no ordinary documentary; this is a story lived by three artist soldiers both fighting and creating art as weapons against the Russians. They are artists who know their country's survival is a necessity for culture to flourish. This film will haunt you, but its artistic exploration will also leave you with what we have all come to admire about these creative, courageous, resilient and caring people with a 1,000-year history of perseverance. It is a heroic piece of filmmaking from three innovative artists who, like most Ukrainians, are refusing to let the world forget or erase their culture.

Don't be surprised if the Ukrainians, led by a true leader in Volodymyr Zelenskyy, are victorious over both Putin and Trump under the banner of a united and well-armed Europe. And don't be surprised if "Porcelain War" wins the Oscar for best documentary on Sunday night.

This story appears in the **Oscars 2025** feature series. [View the full series.](#)