SOCIALIST REALISM: AN EXPLORATION OF 20TH CENTURY ART IN THE USSR

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Russia and Eurasia: Empires and Enduring Legacies

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05/22/2013
“[D]espite everything there is no reason why Socialist Realist works should not prove to be art. After all it is no disqualification of any artwork that it was produced to state order, or according to an ideological plan of some kind. Western art began out of church and state patronage, or out of fawning depictions of the persons, families and possessions of powerful and wealthy men.”

—Mark Jones

Communist revolutionaries knew that in order to achieve their ultimate goal of creating a different and better socialist world they needed to transform the people. Through art, literature, propaganda, and overall culture Bolsheviks formulated a new idealized Soviet person, and strove to impose that idea into the Russian society. In this way, the party developed Socialist Realism, the new art style of Soviet Russia, which encompassed all outlets of creativity. Crammed with strict rules and regulations coming from the state, Socialist Realism is unlike any other art movement. As a result of the oppressive protocol, Soviet art, which was produced on a mass scale is full of mere duplicates, but amid the sea of poorly executed propaganda, true and creative gems of art can be found. Although Socialist Realism limited the content and the purpose of artworks, the techniques—along with the form in which artists could create—were boundless. Artists achieved beautiful and meaningful works in spite of the guidelines imposed from above.

In theory, programs such as industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, which were employed by the communist government, were intended to affect people’s lives, habits of thought, and behavior so that a new person of a Soviet consciousness would emerge. However, in practice, this was not the case; the communist regime in the

USSR carefully administered social change through the means of censorship and illusion.\(^2\) By taking control over the cultural outlets, the communist state was able to create a new reality for its people. The dream-like reality, shown in all branches of art, including sculpture, literature, theater, and visual arts, never existed but was nevertheless forced onto Soviet people of the 20th century. Defined and introduced under Joseph Stalin in 1932, Socialist Realism became the official form of art of the USSR. The images created under the surveillance of the Communist Party idealized party personas, workers, peasants, and the world around them. Parallel to the actuality of life under Communism, art formed a world inhabited by “heroes and heroines who personified political ideals;” the perfect citizens roamed about all Soviet era art directed to a mass audience.\(^3\)

According to the doctrine, art had to serve an educational purpose as well as explore themes of the socialist future. It also needed to enthusiastically praise progress. Along with the idealized individual representing the collective, subject matters such as work, cults of personality, a brighter future, revolutionary propaganda, and other themes linked with building socialism appeared throughout the accepted art. As Sopotsinsky notes, Soviet “cultural workers were assigned the unprecedented task of reflecting in their art the life and soul of the people, their newly won freedom and revolutionary achievements, their struggle for radiant future.”\(^4\) Although uniform in purpose, Socialist Realism is heterogeneous in its form, technique, and style, and can be observed not merely as a tool of the party but also as a period in Soviet artistic society.

\(^3\) Clark, *Art*, 89.
Initially, the main medium of indoctrination, which was carried out on a mass scale in 1918 and was highly appreciated by the Bolsheviks, was the propaganda poster. At the time, when mass mobilization was of great importance, posters lent themselves well as the perfect medium; they could not only respond quickly to changing political, social, and military conditions, but also were cheap in production and their message could be "grasped by the most unsophisticated viewer."\(^5\) Political posters, however, were only the forerunners of Socialist Realism. Early Soviet posters were designed under the Constructivist philosophy, meaning creating art in the service of the state, nevertheless this style was considered avant-garde and eventually clashed with the favored Socialist Realism. Constructivism was characterized by industrial style of work, and used geometric abstraction, and the combination of \textit{faktura} and \textit{tektonika} to visualize artists' ideas. The set of principles, as described by Aleksander Rodchenko, one of the founders of Constructivism, stressed the importance of material texture (\textit{faktura}) and the techniques of construction (\textit{tektonika}).\(^6\) As many other artistic philosophies, including Socialist Realism, Constructivism encompassed all facets of life and culture. In theater, the factory and its machines inspired stage set creators, while in architecture, structures were to be both fantastic and functional. Compared to the later, more realistic style of poster design, Constructivist art was simple in form but according to the authorities, not as easily intelligible in content as realism. For Stalin, art needed “straightforward meanings and


understandable sentiments” characteristic of previous critical realist art, as opposed to abstract techniques seen throughout avant-garde.\textsuperscript{7}

The most well known subject matter of Socialist Realist art is the representation of official Communist personalities in sculptures, posters, and paintings; portraits of gargantuan Stalin or Lenin raised above all people overlooking the masses are one of many examples of the cult of personality. Implemented by Stalin himself, the veneration became a major theme in Soviet art. Stalin’s presence in visual arts was ubiquitous; he was often portrayed either as part of the events or as a depiction in a portrait within the painting (as seen in \textit{Carpet Weavers}). Looking back at these artworks, we see Stalin portrayed among children gifting him flowers. This seems comical and out

of place, especially considering the history of the Soviet Union and Stalin’s time of terror. Socialist Realism was meant to break off from bourgeois artistic traditions but paradoxically the monumental art associated with the cult of personality resembled art of the tsars and the paintings of the elite. Although such paintings are a significant part of Socialist Realism, they do not wholly represent the movement. The majority of artworks connected with Stalin’s personality cult were created simply for that purpose: to glorify Stalin and to create, among people, an almost religious approach toward the Communist Party with Stalin at its center as the prophet.

Often when judged solely by the cult of personality, Socialist Realism is doomed to present itself as a battle against creativity and aesthetics. The images of the cult tended to be boring, repetitive, uninspired, and propagandistic, but the true nature of Socialist Realism was quite the opposite, particularly when artists explored themes of everyday life. Such subjects included the new Soviet individual beaming with enthusiasm for the revolutionary political and social changes; “as tireless labourers, courageous Red Army soldiers, diligent schoolchildren or dedicated Party activists, they demonstrated exemplary behavior and the attitudes of perfect citizens.” The idea behind the new Soviet person originated from Communist belief that in order to achieve true socialism, the mental, moral, and physical improvement of people must take place. Bolshevik confidence in a harmonious future predicted that such change is inevitable and should be encouraged and even accelerated through the media. Captured in various situations, model Soviet citizens shared certain central characteristics. If the subjects were to be portrayed at work, their happiness, strength, and satisfaction from building a new communist society

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8 Clark, *Art*, 87.
should be central themes of the artwork. In the *Metro Builders* series done by Aleksandr Samokhvalov, the superhuman qualities of the women pictured are the main subject of the composition. They seem to be of extraordinary strength and determination. Even while resting, their muscles are tense and their gazes are fixed. They are seeing the bright future of Russia. By painting the background in a cubo-futuristic manner, Samokhvalov accentuated the central concepts of industrialization, including speed, technology, and youth. In spite of the obvious Soviet interpretation, *Metro Builders* can and should be decoded not only under a Socialist Realist approach; Samokhvalov's art is bursting with emotions and their interpretation depends strictly on the viewer.

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Created in 1950 by Vladimir Malagis, the magnificent painting of Steel Workers dwells further on the theme of the changing Soviet people and their transformed environment. The most prominent feature in the image is the smoke that almost completely obscures the workers.

Unlike Samokhvalov, Malagis emphasizes the surroundings instead of the individuals. By using a split-complementary color scheme, the artist contrasted the warmth of the factory with the coolness of the night, stressing men’s devotion and harmonious work spirit.

Although the subject matter of Steel Workers was common in the 20th century Soviet art, Malagis’ canvas is a unique, poetic execution. He follows the guidelines of Socialist Realism but at the same time exposes his personal approach to the posed expectations.

During the first two decades of Soviet art, just after the October Revolution of 1917, when Socialist Realism began to gain the upper hand among the arts, though not without political manipulation, certain individual styles and artistic methods emerged. Despite their differences, the styles rested on true-to-life representation principles and are considered a part of Socialist Realism even though they preceded the official beginning of the movement. Documentary-like works of Isaak Brodsky, such as Lenin in
Smolny or Alley In the Park influenced artists of the following generations. The two examples of Brodsky's paintings resemble photographs, and even bring to mind photorealism, the American art genre of late 1960s. Shown through high attention to detail and hyperrealistic lighting, Brodsky's advanced artistic skills can be truly appreciated.

The painting New Moscow, created in 1937 by Yury Pimenov, also echoes a photograph. In this case the composition was made to look like a frame captured by a camera lens from the car’s back seat. Pimenov produced a number of great compositions; all containing a socialist message and

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accentuating the Soviet faith in progress but at the same time “demonstrating his individual expressive style”\textsuperscript{11}. Representative of Socialist Realism, the canvas depicts modern city life, its impetuous rhythm and new citizens; it symbolizes the new Soviet life. At first glance, one might even mistake Moscow's transformed scenery for New York of the 1930s. The open composition along with the visible brush strokes and the inclusion of movement makes the impressionistic techniques applied transparent. The mixture of styles among Soviet artists is one of the characteristics of Socialist Realism; while the rules for subject matter were very strict and the art must have presented realistic qualities, the individual styles and inspirations varied between artists.

In the first post war years, large numbers of works were devoted to the war and its tragedies as well as military successes of Russian ancestors. As the suffering of the war years became a thing of the past, artists were urged to seek inspiration among the peacefulness of nature and to find “manifestations of the national effort in everyday happenings.”\textsuperscript{12} As a result, painters aimed to captivate the tranquility of landscapes, happiness during and after work, and overall feeling of festivity in their art. Vladimir Gavrilov’s \textit{Fresh Wind} is a perfect example of Socialist Realism from the second half of 1950s. The painting depicts a

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 459.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 115.
young woman standing at the shore of a windy lake and tying a shawl over her hair. Similarly to Pimenov's *New Moscow*, Gavrilov's artwork is painted in an impressionistic manner; the visible brushstrokes create an illusion of summer wind wrinkling the water and pulling on the woman's white dress. The woman's smile, the bright colors, and the professionally captured movement make the painting resonate with energy and cheerful atmosphere, both part of Socialist Realist doctrine. Following the imposed rules, Aleksander Deineka, a well-known artist from the USSR, incorporated radiant happiness in many of his works. Although his painting *By the Sea*, shares some of the same motifs with *Fresh Wind*, their execution and the style are unalike. Deineka's painting pictures fisherwomen at work, hanging their catch. The figures look content and vigorous, as they perform their duties for the common good of the commune. Most of Deineka's work, dating back to the 1920s, is of highly propagandistic content, however, it is his craftsmanship that is noteworthy. Characteristic of his style is the use of negative space contrasting the bold representations of the new Soviet people. His use of bright and often contrasting colors draws the viewers’ attention to the optimistic spirit of his works.

The usage of broad negative space appears also in the works of Georgy Nissky, who dedicated his art to the ever-changing Soviet landscape. A wide plane of vibrant red dominates his painting of *Belt Road Near Moscow*, through which he is able to subtly communicate various moods and emotions. If interpreting the painting through the eyes
of a Communist, the red symbolizes the party and its influence on the natural world, transforming it into an industrial realm. However, for a modern viewer the complete silence of the canvas contrasting with the aggressive crimson sky foreshadows destruction about to happen. This particular landscape painted by Nissky differs in style from his other works. Focusing on the modernization of the countryside, he leaves little room for a fresh interpretation of his work, and as a result some of his other paintings are intellectually dull even if aesthetically pleasing.

The combination of technology with nature appeared continuously throughout Socialist Realist art. Seemingly free of ideological meaning, landscapes often included geometrical shapes of machinery combined with the organic elements of natural world. In this way artists were to demonstrate “the triumph of progress over nature.”\(^{13}\) Clearly seen in *The Evening*, Andrei Ushin’s art expresses this idea of industrialization in a poetic way. The sharp contours of the train contrast with the irregular shadows of trees growing along the tracks, creating a dynamic atmosphere. To produce the desired effect of vivid black and white contrast, Ushin used linocut, a technique of engraving and impressing an

\(^{13}\) Clark, *Art*, 90.
image onto a desired surface. With this practice he was able to convey the rhythmic motion of the train simply with the manipulation of lines, their direction and weight.

The abundant variation in artistic styles seen from 1957 onwards can be attributed to the cultural thaw that arose after Stalin’s death in 1953. Although no significant changes in artistic ideology emerged immediately after the leader’s demise, and artworks were still produced under the Socialist Realist principles, the slow unchaining of culture and creative expression began to take place in the second half of the 1950s. All throughout the USSR, Socialist Realism was being encouraged, with the emphasis on positive unification of cultures, and the approved Russian artistic traditions were imposed on the people of Soviet satellite states. Stalin’s policies increasingly contradicted cultural autonomy and eventually, in 1950s, the complete convergence of cultures, so-called Russification, became one of the goals of the Soviet party. However, the forced melding of independent traditions into a one, was not entirely successful; “national identity survived in the art of non-Russian republics, often in works that, by rendering unto Stalin’s ideologi[es], achieved a striking synthesis between the prescriptive and the personal, the dour and the decorative, the Russian and the home-

15 Ibid., 19.
Some of the most beautiful works of Socialist Realism originated in the non-Russian republics and show the extreme cultural diversity of the Soviet Union. Such works were permitted and publicized only after Stalin's death, which was the catalyst of the “thaw,” or the artistic, cultural, and social relaxation of censorship.

A more traditional landscape, with a touch of local folklore can be found in Moldakhmet Kenbayev's paintings of the steppe. Born in Kazakhstan, Kenbayev drew inspiration from his surroundings, portraying the beauty of Kazakh people and nature. In the vast meadows of *Shepherd's Song* a single man is overlooking a herd of sheep that extends to the horizon. The blue-grey sky and light yellow grass create a calm scenery, yet one can almost hear the song accompanying the shepherd and echoing over the wide pastures of Kazakhstan. The theme of work associated with Socialist Realism remained a part of non-Russian art, however, it did not overwhelm the canvas and became only a residue among the central motifs of national and folk traditions.

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16 Ibid.
Gapar Aityev, an artist from Kyrgyzstan, also inspired by his homeland’s countryside, painted landscapes showing its diverse geography. In the painting *Midday*, complementing the brown cattle and ground are the blues of the sky, the lake, and the mountains. This combination of colors creates a fine balance between the earthly and heavenly, the daily life of the herder and his dreams. The artist uses well-defined planes, with every layer outlining a new type of land, to direct the viewers’ attention from the irregular patches of grass in the foreground through the sandy shore of Song Kol Lake to the lake itself and the mountain range in the background. Aityev takes his audience on a journey through the captivating scenery of Kyrgyzstan but at the same time is able to follow the defined rules of Socialist Realism by including the motifs of work, joy, and bright future.

In the late 1960s, Soviet artists of both Russian and non-Russian ethnicities furthered their experimentation with artistic styles and techniques. As seen in Zukhur Khabibullayev’s artwork, the traditional realism began to transform into more of a personal expression rather than a mere instrument of the state bound by strict rules and censorship. *Bakhor,*
meaning ‘spring’ in Tajik, illustrates two men resting, presumably after work in the field. The figures, captured by Khabibullayev are clearly painted in a realistic manner, however the texture and pattern of their clothing along with the mountains portrayed in the background remind one of expressionism. Khabibullayev painted the men’s surroundings with fantastically organic brushstrokes, imitating movement. By applying bright colors, he gave the painting a merry atmosphere suggestive of the land’s natural abundance. Inspired by folk traditions of Tajikistan, he incorporated elements of Tajik culture such as musical instruments, pottery, and clothing, yet, after a closer observation one will notice the tiny tractor working in the background, symbolizing the link between Soviet republics through industrialization.

*Under the Peaceful Sky* pertains to the Socialist Realistic theme through the presence of the various machines and irrigation systems being built in a desert. According to Sopotsinsky, Muradian’s artwork is “suffused with a joyful feeling of life being reborn.”17 He sees the water pipes and the young girl balancing on them as a symbol of hope and optimism for the future. Nevertheless, if analyzed for a deeper, more modern meaning, *Under the Peaceful Sky* can most certainly become a critique of Stalinist policies. The sickening yellow ground represents decay of the natural world and contrasts with the girl’s light blue dress symbolizing health and tranquility. This melancholic comparison emphasizes Stalin’s exploitation of the USSR’s southern Republics. When

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looking at Muradian’s painting, one cannot help to think of the Aral Sea and its tragic history. Due to Stalin’s five-year plan that began during the 1940s, its water level dropped and the sea almost completely dried out. The event became known as “one of the planet’s worst environmental disasters.”\(^{18}\) The fact that such completely opposite interpretations of the artwork can exist signifies the artist’s ability to adapt his work to the social and political conditions dominating the world around him, while preserving an individual style and ideology hidden within his artwork.

Belarusian artist, Mai Dantsig painted monumental art of various subjects, all falling under the Socialist Realism category. His compositions often pictured the power of wind, intensifying the energy of ordinary scenes, such as landscapes or events of daily life. In *A Sunny Day*, the sharp angles of white sheets blown to the side by the wind bring the viewers’ attention to the central figure at work. It is important to notice that the woman hanging laundry, painted by Dantsig is wearing a scarlet dress and in Slavic folklore, red thread embroidery protected from evil and symbolized health. By dressing the woman in red, a significant color in both Slavic culture and communism, the painter appeals to the Soviet censors but at the same time embraces his own heritage. Dantsig tends to paint in angular, solid brushstrokes, which

he prefers over soft gradients. His technique creates a stained glass effect, especially visible in the woman’s outfit. Through his unique and recognizable style, he was able to fashion a new and creative representation of the commonly portrayed events.

Although Socialist Realist art has been developed to mask the terrors of the Soviet Union, by creating a parallel reality for its citizens, it became an escape from the brutal reality of the time. During communism the goal of artists was to indoctrinate, to distract people, and to hide the truth about the USSR, but sometimes, through joyous paintings, the art gave hope to the Soviet citizens. Socialist Realism, as an art style imposed from above, did not give the personal freedom for artists to stray away from the mainstream.

The strict rules enforced upon the artistic society, pushed artists to produce work of generic themes that appealed to the censors. At first, the regulations appeared to have diminished any and all creativity among painters, however, artists eventually found new ways to express their individual style, while still following the imposed guidelines. Soviet painters of diverse backgrounds created artworks worth the attention of a modern viewer.

“Good art is timeless. It will assume a new relevance to each generation and to yourself as you grow. It will connect to past and feed the future. It has simple and rigorous beauty that commands your gaze and thoughts whenever you look at it.”

—Robert Shimshak

Bibliography


