

Forbidden Art: The Russian Post War Avant-Garde

UW Art Museum, 2007 Gallery and Study Guide

Observe

The first step in understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. This study guide will help you do just that. Here is background information and questions to consider when looking at the exhibition, *Forbidden Art: Russian Post War Avant-Garde*.

History and Background

The exhibition traces the various influences and ways in which dissident artists articulated their **response to Socialist Realism**, not to be confused with the art type of

Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union Roots of Socialist Realism

Socialist Realism became state policy in 1932 under Stalin.

Artists of all types were held to a strict official line in what they could create and produce. It needed to conform to a proletariat and communist ideas of art for all. Artistic freedom was not allowed and those artists who strayed from the government guidelines of how art should be portrayed for all of the people, and, in particular, the working class, were severely punished. Many were sent to the Gulag labour camps in Siberia and elsewhere. The restrictions were loosened somewhat after Stalin's death in 1953 but the state still kept a tight rein on personal artistic expression. This caused many artists to choose to go into exile. Socialist realism became the predominant art form across the Communist world for nearly fifty years. Socialist Realism had little mainstream impact in the non-Communist world, where it was widely seen as a totalitarian means of imposing state control on artists.

The political aspect of Socialist Realism was, in some respects, a continuation of pre-Soviet state policy. Censorship and attempts to control the content of art did not begin with the Soviets, but were a long-running feature of Russian life.

social realism that realistically depicts subjects of social concern. Socialist Realism was a set of government dictates that told artists WHAT they could create and produce.

In order to understand what these artists were responding to, here is a brief summary of Socialist Realism.

Socialist Realism was the officially approved type of art in the Soviet Union for nearly sixty years. Communist doctrine decreed that all material goods and means of production belonged to the community as a whole. This included works of art and the means of producing art, which were also seen as powerful propaganda tools. During the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks established a movement called Proletkult (the Proletarian* Cultural and Enlightenment Organizations) which sought to put all arts into the service of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, Russian and Soviet artists embraced a wide variety of art forms under the auspices of Proletkult. Revolutionary

politics and radical non-traditional and the avant-garde were often praised.

Question

- What are the different **media*** you observe in this exhibition?
- How are they alike in any way?
- How are they different in any way?
- Which media are you drawn to and why?
- Which works are you drawn to because of colors, textures, lines, marks, light, shadow, shapes and forms?
- Which works are you drawn to because of subjects and objects?
- How would you describe the lines and marks or forms that you see?
- Do any of the works speak to you? What do you feel?
- Does any work make you think of something you have never thought of before?
- What is it persuading you to think or do? Or isn't it persuading you of anything?
- What else about the art created makes you think or feel something?

Explore and Reflect

- Why is some act or thing usually forbidden?
- Who would forbid someone from doing something?
- Why do you think someone would want to do that?
- Does forbidding someone to do something separate one person from the other?

Characteristics of Socialist Realism

Socialist Realism held that successful art depicts and glorifies the proletariat's struggle toward socialist progress. Its purpose was to elevate the common worker, whether factory or agricultural, by presenting his life, work, and recreation as admirable. In other words, its goal was to educate the people in the goals and meaning of communism. The ultimate aim was to create what Lenin called, "an entirely new type of human being": *New Soviet Man*. Stalin described the practitioners of Socialist Realism as "engineers of souls".

The "realism" part is important. Soviet art at this time aimed to depict the worker as he truly was, carrying his tools. In a sense, the movement mirrors the course of American and Western art, where the everyday human being became the subject of the novel, the play, poetry, and art. The proletariat was at the center of communist ideals; hence, his life was a worthy subject for study. This was an important shift away from the aristocratic art produced under the Russian tsars of previous centuries, but had much in common with the late-19th century fashion for depicting the social life of the common people.

Compared to the eclectic variety of 20th century Western art, Socialist Realism often resulted in a fairly bland and predictable range of artistic products. Painters would depict happy, muscular peasants and workers in factories and collective farms; during the Stalin period, they also produced numerous heroic portraits of the dictator to serve his cult of personality. Industrial and agricultural landscapes were popular subjects, glorifying the achievements of the Soviet economy.

Socialist Realism thus demanded close adherence to party doctrine, and has often been criticized as detrimental to the creation of true, unfettered art – or as being little more than a means to censor artistic expression. Not all Marxists accepted the necessity of Socialist Realism. Its establishment as state doctrine in the 1930s had rather more to do with internal Communist Party politics than classic Marxist imperatives.

- <http://en.wikipedia.org>

- When was the first time you heard the word forbidden? What association comes to mind with that specific word?
- What would be the point in forbidding an artist to create something out of artistic and self-expression?
- What is art?
- Why do we make art?
- Does the creative process make us more or less civilized?
- Do our human needs and wants motivate this process?
- Is it in response to social and/or political situations?
- Is it in response to personal thoughts and desires?

***Definitions**

proletariat: *The class of industrial wage earners who must earn their living by selling their labor.*

Reflect, again:

After reading the short summary on Socialist Realism and how artists were expected to work, perform, and create, how have your perceptions changed when viewing the Forbidden Art exhibit again?

media: *the plural of medium meaning any material used for expression or delineation in art; as, this sculptor's favorite medium is stone.*