

# Back on “the main stage”: Russian art at the Guggenheim Museum—part 2

By Clare Hurley  
16 January 2006

*Russia!* An exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, and the Guggenheim Heritage Museum, Las Vegas, until January 11, 2006, presenting selections from the State Hermitage Museum, the State Russian Museum and the State Tretyakov Gallery

*This is the second of two parts. Part one was posted January 14.*

The Guggenheim Museum’s *Russia!* exhibition has drawn significant and deserved criticism from reviewers [1] for its political agenda and revisionism, which become increasingly obvious as one enters the modern period; the artistic developments of the twentieth century are repackaged with a heavy-handedness that assumes the viewers’ historical ignorance and credulity.

The show pays perfunctory attention to the 1917 Revolution, which not only overthrew the bourgeoisie and replaced it with the first workers state, but achieved an unprecedented transformation of art as well. This made not only the political, but also the artistic betrayals of Stalinism all the more devastating.

In *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, Trotsky writes, “The October revolution gave a magnificent impetus to all types of Soviet art. The bureaucratic reaction, on the contrary, has stifled artistic creation with a totalitarian hand. Nothing surprising here! Art is basically a function of the nerves and demands complete sincerity. Even the art of the court of absolute monarchies was based on idealization but not on falsification. The official art of the Soviet Union—and there is no other over there—resembles totalitarian justice, that is to say, it is based on lies and deceit. The goal of justice, as of art, is to exalt the ‘leader,’ to fabricate an heroic myth. Human history has never seen anything to equal this in scope and impudence.”

In the Guggenheim exhibition’s version of art history, patrons with strong ties to the West are given the lion’s share of the credit for the innovations of the Soviet avant-garde. The collections of industrialists Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin, who imported the works of Picasso and Matisse (with money made in Shchukin’s case by crushing the textile workers strike in 1905) are given a gallery of their own, while works that catapulted Russian art to the vanguard of world art for the first time in its history are hard to grasp from the limited manner in which they are displayed.

The exhibition includes only one of Liubov Popova’s *Painterly Archtechtonics* (1912); one of Vladimir Tatlin’s *Counter Reliefs* (1916); Alexander Rodchenko’s painting *Triptych of Pure Color Squares—Red Yellow, Blue*, but none of his graphics; and a badly cracked version—he made several—of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1921). These seminal works, which have justifiably been called the greatest accomplishments of twentieth century painting [2], all seem rather small, dimmed, and even quaint stripped of their context.

None of the early Soviet posters, no photographs of the agit-prop movement that staged the first “art happenings” for the masses, no samples of Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov films are included to indicate the atmosphere of experimentation and hopes for the creation of a new

society in which these artists were working.

While it is true that the movements of Constructivism and Suprematism pioneered by these early Soviet artists were influenced by European artists such as Picasso, Matisse and others, it is false, and furthermore beside the point, to present them as simply Russia’s version of European modernism. If anything, the impact of the Revolution on artistic consciousness in the West, and not vice versa, was far greater than has been acknowledged.

The first years of the revolution, including the civil war years (1918-21), were terribly harsh for the Russian population, artists among them. Seven years of world and civil war devastated the country and led to widespread starvation. The mid-1920s witnessed economic improvements and, to a certain degree, an intellectual relaxation. The growth of the anti-socialist Stalinist bureaucracy by the end of the decade, with its nationalist, short-sighted and repressive measures, reversed those trends. Artists died in Stalin’s gulag, some fled to the West, others, like Malevich and Tatlin, lapsed into silence and obscurity. This was a tremendous setback for Russian and indeed world art from which neither can be said to have fully recovered yet.

Socialist Realism is the infamous next phase in art in the USSR. The term itself, as Trotsky noted, was evidently “invented by some high functionary in the department of the arts. This ‘realism’ consists in the imitation of provincial daguerreotypes of the third quarter of the last century; the ‘socialist’ character apparently consists in representing, in the manner of pretentious photography, events which never took place.” Long employed in the West to discredit Communism—a goal that the curators of the exhibition certainly share—Socialist Realism here is bizarrely rehabilitated.

It is given an adjoining gallery, in addition to space in the Guggenheim’s main rotunda, with a companion exhibition, “Reflections: Socialist Realism and Russian Art,” taken from the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis, thrown in for good measure in the museum’s Sackler Center.

While ironic, this refashioning is not surprising given the spirit of Great Russian nationalism that pervades the show. We are told that not all the “Socialist Realist” artists were hacks, that they could paint as they chose in their free time, and that even Alexander Laktionov’s *Letter from the Front* (1947), which epitomizes everything saccharine about a Socialist Realist painting, has its technical accomplishments in the handling of light through the fabric of a shirt sleeve!

The exhibition is at pains to tell us that there was greater variety within Socialist Realism than commonly thought. Isaak Brodsky’s *V.I. Lenin in the Smolny* (1930) was considered the first work of Socialist Realism, though it was painted before the term was coined. Highly popular and realistic (it was painted from a photograph), with a strong narrative component—Lenin sits turned away from the viewer while an empty armchair across from him beckons—it exhibits all the qualities which were valued in Socialist Realist painting; nevertheless, it is not fundamentally a

falsification in the way that the paintings created later to advance Stalin's personality cult were.

And some Socialist Realist paintings, like Alexander Deineka's *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* (1935), are interesting. However, it is not possible to separate these paintings as a whole from the deforming pressures that artists were subject to, and the persecutions and executions that they were called upon to "varnish."

Having minimized the early Soviet avant-garde and celebrated Socialist Realism, the show resorts to complete obfuscation in the section "Official and Unofficial: 1940s-1980s." In her review in the *New York Review of Books*, Jamey Gambrell notes how "this chronological division makes no sense: several periods with very distinct political and social characteristics are collapsed into a single blur. The wall text claims that 'despite its official themes, Soviet art in the 1940s became less idealistic and bombastic than that of the 1930s,' creating the mistaken impression that an 'unofficial art' existed in the USSR of the 1940s in the way it did between the 1960s and the late 1980s. It did not and could not have." [3]

Since the overarching concern of the exhibition is to associate the official Soviet regime with artistic inferiority while advancing the accomplishments of Russian artists as a form of opposition, the political complexities involved in the crisis and breakup of the Soviet Union and the maneuvering of the bureaucracy—Khrushchev's thaw, Brezhnev's chill—are merely skimmed over to arrive as quickly as possible at Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the restoration of capitalism in 1991. Thus it is difficult to make sense of the art in this section.

The task is made all the more challenging because an understanding of what constituted official and unofficial art in the late Soviet period is unfamiliar to most Western viewers today. Since the founding of the Soviet Artists' Union in 1932, Soviet artists worked, one commentator remarks, as part of a "collective autodidactic circle of sorts, based on the exchange of experience and the mutual stimulation of creativity ... [regulated by] 'artistic councils (soviets).'" [4] This was the ideal. In practice, bureaucratic fear of anything unknown or difficult interfered with this process at every level, and no democratically operated soviets functioned in the USSR after the early 1920s.

"During the period after Stalin's death, many artists became dissatisfied with the concrete makeup of these 'artistic councils.' This gave rise to unofficial art. Yet even if unofficial art presented an alternative to the official art system, it remained within the framework of the same Communist model of creativity, according to which live interaction between artists is more important and more productive than the completeness and formal perfection of their artworks." [5] Again, this "Communist model of creativity" sounds legitimate, although sanitized somewhat, and some of this spirit no doubt existed, but the corrosive influence of the national-reactionary bureaucracy had to be felt at every point.

Furthermore, Soviet artists produced art dependent on and generally advancing the interests of state. They were not producing artworks to be bought and sold in an art market to private collectors, which changed the fundamental character of what they created, and the audience for whom it was conceived. They were not at the mercy of the market like their Western counterparts, but at the mercy of a privileged, parasitic social caste whose very existence had to be concealed (officially, classless 'socialism' had triumphed in the USSR in the 1930s!). These conditions also limited the options available to the artists to create at all if they withdrew from this system, since everything, including studio space and supplies, were contingent upon membership. Thus many "unofficial" artists were in fact members of the Artists' Union.

More importantly, the critical standpoint of "unofficial" subcultures such as the conceptual artists around Ilya Kabakov, or the Sots Art group that included Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, were criticizing the Soviet regime from standpoints that the regime itself had already mapped

out.

Little of this is clear in the Guggenheim exhibition; instead it tacitly encourages hangovers from the Cold War mindset in the West that embraced any art produced in the Soviet Union in a style other than Socialist Realism as politically "dissident." But the grimmer, grittier realism of Geli Kozhev, considered one of the most significant postwar Soviet painters, was not a challenge to the treacle of Socialist Realism. It was instead "official" art in the late 1950s.

*Raising the Banner* (1957-60), painted after the watershed 20th Party Congress in 1956 when Khrushchev first exposed some of the crimes of Stalinism, embodies the idea of a restoration of "Leninist-Communism" called for by the regime itself. And Kozhev's startling depiction of the hardships and heroism of the Soviet citizens in World War II in a grisly large-scale portrait of a mutilated soldier in *Traces of War* (1963-64) is in line with the national patriotism increasingly promoted by the bureaucracy to deflect the pressures which confronted it.

To the extent that greater artistic freedom beginning in the 1960s and 1970s allowed artists to examine reality honestly in their work, they did so in ways that made a point out of being guarded, encoded or introspective. Viktor Pivovarov's *Project for a Lonely Man* (1975) is a series of wall diagrams, pseudo-scientifically charting the life of a Soviet citizen. Igor Makarevich communicates the retreat into interiority by painting large photo-realistic portraits cramped into the physical framework of actual closets or boxes.

However, it is indicative of the show's muddle, and many outright mistakes, that while placed in the "unofficial art" section of the 1940s-1980s, Makarevich's work actually dates from the late 1980s, the switch made perhaps because it seems out of place in the later period.

The show's culminating section, "Opening New Spaces: 1980s to the Present," is presumably the artwork that the exhibition's official sponsors hope to convince us picks up the thread of 700 years of Russian artistic achievement where it left off. But it fails miserably.

Celebrating the freedom that Russian artists now have to sell their work in commercial galleries and participate in international art shows like the Venice Biennale, the show proceeds to offer tepid pieces in prevailing international styles to demonstrate the open-minded climate that prevails now that Russia is back on track after its unfortunate detour.

It ignores of course the fact that several of these artists have lived and established their reputations outside of, and/or before, the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

An installation by Conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov, *The Man who Flew into Space* (1981-88), is one of the more interesting pieces, but again it seems chosen for a superficial message which may not have been one fully intended by the artist. The room of a Soviet 'everyman' decorated with Soviet era propaganda posters has been left with a gaping hole in it through which its inhabitant has presumably catapulted himself into space. But since Kabakov generally examines the ideals of the Soviet period with subtlety and ambivalence, one should resist the simplistic interpretation that what the Soviet everyman hopes to do is simply to escape his constricted reality for freedom, and by implication perhaps, Western capitalism.

That the motives, and even fitness, of the show's curators are less than disinterested is voiced most sharply by Margarita Tupitsyn, scholar and co-curator of an earlier show of the Russian avant-garde at the Guggenheim in 1993. Writing in *Artforum*, she says, "The institutions and individuals who ignored artwork (if not suppressed it) during the Soviet era are now eager to embrace and rewrite its history.... This exhibition is a microcosm for the dismal state of cultural affairs in Russia..." [6]

However, this implies that the problem is simply a continuation of Stalinism, of 'communist' officials. There may well be such officials, but the problem is not that things haven't changed since the days of the Soviet Union, but rather that the Putin regime, with whatever elements of

the old Stalinist apparatus it absorbed, and the mafia-capitalist Russian elite which it represents are organically hostile to the development of honest artistic work.

This is what in fact underlies the Guggenheim exhibition's exclusion of any contemporary Russian artwork that is even remotely critical of the Putin regime itself, not to mention any that depicts anything of the actual conditions of existence for the majority of Russia's inhabitants today.

This pointed exclusion has prompted a counter exhibition at the White Box gallery, in New York's Chelsea district. *Russia2: Bad News from Russia* displays artwork that, if nothing else, is refreshingly irreverent toward what it calls the official "Russia 1" of the Putin regime. It will be discussed in a review to follow.

*Concluded*

**Notes:**

1. Of particular interest are: Hal Foster, "At the Guggenheim: Russian Art," *London Review of Books*, November 3, 2005; Jamey Gambrell, "An Affair of State," *New York Review of Books*, 1/12/06; and Margarita Tupitsyn's review in *Artforum*, November 2005.
2. Jamey Gambrell, *New York Review of Books*, 1/12/06, p. 50
3. *Ibid.*, p. 52
4. Ekaterina Degot, *Art in the USSR: The Dialectics of the Vertical and the Horizontal*, exhibition catalogue, pp. 365-66
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 365-66
6. Margarita Tupitsyn, *Artforum*, November 2005

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