

Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union

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The Moscow painter Esayan described to me what it was like for a young artist to grow up in post-war Moscow. This was the time when Stalin had defined the role of the painter and writer in the utilitarian and technological society as "an engineer of the human soul". Socialist realism was rigidly enforced, and the masterpieces of Impressionist painting were relegated to the vaults of museums. "There was an art exhibition at the Pushkin Museum when I was a boy", Esayan told me. "It consisted of 'Presents offered to Comrade Stalin by the peoples of the world'. The star exhibit was a grain of rice engraved by a Chinaman with quotations from the work of Stalin, and people queued for a chance to look at it through a microscope. In the same museum there were also enormous plaster casts of the works of Michelangelo, which had been covered over with fabric so as not to detract from the theme of the exhibition. I suppose my first encounter with art", he told me, "was when looking through a hole in the cloth I was able to distinguish part of the sculpture it concealed."

An exhibition was mounted earlier this year (19 January–27 February) at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) with a useful catalogue of paintings by artists of Esayan's generation. It was entitled *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union*, and on the whole the critics (familiar with the dynamic creativity of early 20th century Russia) have judged it harshly without, it would seem, taking the trouble to single out some of the individual talents among the artists exhibited.

The 20th century, engaged in a quest for the new, has embraced the art of the Russian revolutionary *avant-garde* with genuine admiration. Many Russian artists early this century welcomed the destruction of the old values because they had acquired a new faith in "progress" and in the advantages to be derived from Western materialism. This explains why many were to acclaim the Bolshevik Revolution. "Lenin has turned Russia upside down, just as I do my canvases" exclaimed Chagall. But the fervour which enabled masterpieces – reflections of artists' idealistic faith in the potential of a mechanistic society – to be created, was doomed to

disenchantment, and was ultimately to be eradicated by the Philistine henchmen of the Stalin era. If at the beginning of this century Russia was a centre of creativity, it was subsequently to become a cultural waste. Art is the pulse beat of the intellectual and spiritual life of the people, and once uprooted it cannot easily flourish again.

The painting at the ICA exhibition reveals the psychological state of mind of those "unofficial artists" for whom the celebration of "unprecedented Soviet achievements" is no more than a mockery. A striking feature in their work is the integration of symbols and other elements taken over, or "annexed", from a traditional Russian way of life, which the authorities have been systematically endeavouring to eradicate for more than 50 years. The Moscow art critic Barabanov, commenting on the 1975 "Exhibition of Unofficial Art" writes:

In almost every other picture, regardless of the age and aesthetic orientation of the artist, one can see, whether directly or indirectly, Christian subjects or elements or motifs derived from Christian ritual. Cupolas, crosses, haloes, crucifixions, crowns of thorns, little churches, icons . . .

This curious phenomenon would have been inconceivable even 15 years ago. And yet, since these artists witnessed the systematic uprooting of a way of life which earlier this century was still basically intact, it would seem only natural that they record it in their work.

Inevitably the response of the individual artists varies, but frequently it is a sense of nostalgia or bewilderment which pervades their art. Thus Valentina Kropivnitskaya has drawn *The Drowned Church*, with despairing donkey-like figures, staring blankly ahead. Zelenin paints a landscape of Vladimir with a church – qualitative symbol of a cosmological and divine world order – with a sequence of quantitative numbers superimposed across it representing contemporary reality. And Oscar Rabin shows a village of wooden houses which, when reflected in a pond, reveal the church whose cupola had, in the past, actually been there. Another of his paintings shows a church and village with a superimposed road sign, depicting a lorry and inscribed "detour". Dmitri Plavinsky paints *The Gospel according to St. John* in such a way that the sequence of the lettering, no longer decipherable, is further effaced by the marks of trampling footprints.

This last painting is perhaps particularly illuminating. Traditional icon painters, for whom every line had a definite place and function, strove to make their painting as "legible" as possible. It was when the icon could no longer be "read" that traditional culture, now only partially understood, could no longer provide the answers which were relevant to the needs of the whole society. In contrast to the clear "legibility" of the work of traditional artists, modern painters do not aim at integrating

symbols into the composition of their paintings in order to manifest an intelligible spiritual vision. And in this sense, of course, they further the destruction and fragmentation of the old culture. The paintings at the ICA convey "impressions", nothing more. It is as though a door had been opened to reveal a room. We see people and discern a mood, but we do not know what the characters are saying to one another.

The 19th century artistic group known as the "Wanderers", fired with a love of their native country, contrived to paint national types in a "realistic" manner, hoping thereby to create a Russian national school of painting. And now the use of evocative images of Russian traditional art and of symbols, which have degenerated to the point of being mere allegories, can surely be no more successful in furthering this aim. Icon painters, in contrast, although they never sought to create a "Russian" style, nevertheless reflected the harmony of the cosmos in a way that tallied with their native landscape.

Many artists totally disheartened, are emigrating from the Soviet Union if they can. But it is those who are left behind who often experience most poignantly the essential validity of their tradition and their native soil. "Russia is not a country without a past, even though we are now taught that it is, and people in the West often believe it. It is not America", a Moscow artist told me. "As I walked down a modern Moscow street the other day, I chanced upon a 17th century roof tile, and this causes me to reflect and re-appraise. I might indeed work in the West more freely, but I would be removed from my chief inspiration. Besides, in the West, there are no icons. As a Russian artist I cannot live and work without them, so I prefer to die here."

CORRECTION

The article "Catholic Intellectuals and Constitutional Change in Poland" (RCL Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 12) stated mistakenly that the bulletin of documentation, *Chrzescijanin w Swiecie*, is published by *Wiesz*. It is in fact published by the ODISS group.—Ed.