

# Russian Art

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# Chapter-1

## Soviet Art

**Soviet art** was the visual art produced in the Soviet Union.

### *Early years*

During the Russian Revolution a movement was initiated to put all arts to service of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The instrument for this was created just days before the October Revolution, known as Proletkult, an abbreviation for "Proletarskie kulturno-prosvetitelnye organizatsii" (Proletarian Cultural and Enlightenment Organizations). A prominent theorist of this movement was Aleksandr Bogdanov. Initially Narkompros (ministry of education), which was also in charge of the arts, supported Proletkult. However the latter sought too much independence from the ruling Communist Party of Bolsheviks, gained negative attitude of Vladimir Lenin, by 1922 declined considerably, and was eventually disbanded in 1932.



*Mower* by Malevich, 1930

The ideas of Proletkult attracted the interests of Russian avantgarde, who strived to get rid of the conventions of "bourgeois art". Among notable persons of this movement was Kazimir Malevich. However the ideas of the avantgarde eventually clashed with the newly emerged state-sponsored direction of Socialist Realism.

In search of new forms of expression, the Proletkult organisation was highly eclectic in its art forms, and thus was prone to harsh criticism for inclusion of such modern directions as impressionism and cubism, since these movements existed before the revolution and hence were associated with "decadent bourgeois art".

Among early experiments of Proletkult was pragmatic aesthetic of industrial art, the prominent theoretist being Boris Arvatov.

Another group was UNOVIS, a very short-lived but influential collection of young artists lead by Kasimir Malevich in the 1920s.

## ***Socialist Realism era***

**Socialist realism** is a style of realistic art which developed under Socialism in the Soviet Union and became a dominant style in other communist countries. Socialist realism is a teleologically-oriented style having as its purpose the furtherance of the goals of socialism and communism. Although related, it should not be confused with Social realism, a type of art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern. Unlike Social realism, Socialist realism often glorifies the roles of the poor.

## ***Soviet Union***



All-Russia Exhibition Centre in Moscow

In conjunction with the Socialist Classical style of architecture, Socialist realism was the officially approved type of art in the Soviet Union for nearly sixty years. All material goods and means of production belonged to the community as a whole, this included

means of producing art, which were also seen as powerful propaganda tools. During the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks established an institution 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 art forms were seen as complementary. In art, Constructivism flourished. In poetry, the nontraditional and the avant-garde were often praised.

This, however, was rejected by some members of the Communist party, who did not appreciate modern styles such as Impressionism and Cubism, since these movements existed before the revolution and were thus associated with "decadent bourgeois art." Socialist realism was, to some extent, a reaction against the adoption of these "decadent" styles. It was thought that the non-representative forms of art were not understood by the proletariat and could therefore not be used by the state for propaganda. Lenin himself deplored the rejection of beautiful because it was old, and explicitly described art as needing to call on its heritage: "Proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner, and bureaucratic society." Modern art styles appeared to refuse to draw upon this heritage, thus clashing with the long realist tradition in Russia and rendering the art scene complex.



Socialist realist bas-relief in the Smolenskaya Moscow metro station, by sculptor Motovilov, circa 1953

Socialist realism became state policy in 1932 when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin promulgated the decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations". Accordingly, the Moscow and Leningrad Union of Artists was established in 1932, which brought the history of post-revolutionary art to a close. The epoch of Soviet art began. In Leningrad well-known artist and art teacher Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin was elected the first president of the Union of Artists. This choice laid down the foundation of the lasting development of the Leningrad Union of Artists and Academy of Arts as a unified creative body.

The first exhibition organized by the Leningrad Union of Artists took place in 1935. Its participants – Piotr Buchkin, Rudolf Frentz, Alexander Samokhvalov, Isaak Brodsky, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Kazimir Malevich, Nikolai Dormidontov, Mikhail Avilov among them – became the founding fathers of the Leningrad school while their works formed one of its richest layers and the basis of the largest museum collections of Soviet painting of the 1930-1950s.

In 1932, the Leningrad Institute of Proletarian Visual Arts was transformed into the Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (since 1944 named Ilya Repin). The 15-year period of constant reformation of the country's largest art institute came to an end. Thus, basic elements of the Leningrad school –namely, a higher art education establishment of a new type and a unified professional union of Leningrad artists, were created by the end of 1932. In 1934 Isaak Brodsky, a disciple of Ilya Repin was appointed director of the National Academy of Arts and the Leningrad Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Brodsky invited distinguished painters and pedagogues to teach at the Academy, namely Konstantin Yuon, Pavel Naumov, Boris Ioganson, Semion Abugov, Pavel Shillingovsky, Dmitry Kardovsky, Alexander Osmerkin, Nikolai Radlov, Yevgeny Lansere, Alexander Lubimov, Rudolf Frentz, Nikolai Petrov, Victor Sinaisky, Vasily Shukhaev, Dmitry Kiplik, Nikolai Punin, Vasily Meshkov, Mikhail Bernshtein, Efim Cheptsov, Ivan Bilibin, Matvey Manizer, Piotr Buchkin, Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva, Alexander Karev, Leonid Ovsyannikov, Sergei Priselkov, Ivan Stepashkin, Konstantin Rudakov and others.



"Spring day" by Nikolai Pozdneev

Art exhibitions of 1935 - 1940 disprove the claims that artistic life of the period was suppressed by the ideology and artists submitted entirely to what was then called 'social order'. A great number of landscapes, portraits, genre paintings exhibited at the time pursued purely technical purposes and were thus ostensibly free from any ideology. Genre painting was also approached in a similar way.

In the post-war period between the mid-fifties and sixties, the Leningrad school of painting was approaching its vertex. New generations of artists who had graduated from the Academy (Repin Institute of Arts) in the 1930s-50s were in their prime. They were quick to present their art, they strived for experiments and were eager to appropriate a lot and to learn even more. Their time and contemporaries, with all its images, ideas and

dispositions found its full expression in portraits by Lev Russov, Victor Oreshnikov, Boris Korneev, Oleg Lomakin, Semion Rotnitsky, Vladimir Gorb, Samuil Nevelshtein, Engels Kozlov, in landscapes by Nikolai Timkov, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Sergei Osipov, Alexander Semionov, Arseny Semionov, Vasily Golubev, Nikolai Galakhov, Dmitry Maevsky, in genre paintings by Nikolai Pozdnev, Yuri Neprintsev, Yevsey Moiseenko, Andrey Milnikov, Nina Veselova, Mikhail Trufanov, Yuri Tulin, Mikhail Natarevich, and others.

In 1957, the first all-Russian Congress of Soviet artists took place in Moscow. In 1960, the all-Russian Union of Artists was organized. Accordingly, these events influenced the art life in Moscow, Leningrad and the provinces. The scope of experimentation was broadened; in particular, this concerned the form and painterly and plastic language. Images of youths and students, rapidly changing villages and cities, virgin lands brought under cultivation, grandiose construction plans being realized in Siberia and the Volga region, great achievements of Soviet science and technology became the chief topics of the new painting. Heroes of the time – young scientists, workers, civil engineers, physicians – were made the most popular heroes of paintings.



"Malaya Sadovaya street" by Alexander Semionov

In this period, life provided artists with plenty of thrilling topics, positive figures and images. Legacy of many great artists and art movements became available for study and public discussion again. This greatly broadened artists' understanding of the realist method and widened its possibilities. It was the repeated renewal of the very conception of realism that made this style dominate Russian art throughout its history. Realist tradition gave rise to many trends of contemporary painting, including painting from nature, "severe style" painting and decorative art. However, during this period impressionism, postimpressionism, cubism and expressionism also had their fervent adherents and interpreters.

The Union of Soviet Writers was founded to control the output of authors, and the new policy was rubber-stamped at the Congress of Socialist Writers in 1934. It was enforced ruthlessly in all spheres of artistic endeavour. Artists who strayed from the official line were severely punished. Form and content were often limited, with erotic, religious, abstract, surrealist and expressionist art being forbidden. Formal experiments, including internal dialogue, stream of consciousness, nonsense, free-form association and cut-up were also disallowed. This was either because they were "decadent", unintelligible to the proletariat or counter-revolutionary. In response to the 1934 Congress in Russia, the most important American writers of the left gathered in the First American Writers Congress of April 26, 27, 1935 in Chicago, at the meetings which were supported by Stalin. Waldo David Frank was its first president See the League of American Writers which was backed by the Communist Party USA. A number of the novelists balked at the control, and the League broke up at the invasion of the Soviet Union by German forces.

The restrictions were relaxed 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, for example the Odessa Group from the city of that name. Independent-minded artists that remained continued to feel the hostility of the state. In 1974, for instance, a show of unofficial art in a field near Moscow was broken up, and the artworks destroyed with a water cannon and bulldozers. Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost and perestroika facilitated an explosion of interest in alternative art styles in the late 1980s, but socialist realism remained in limited force as the official state art style until as late as 1991. It was not until after the fall of the Soviet Union that artists were finally freed from state censorship.

## ***Other socialist states***



The people of Wuhan fighting the flood of 1954, as depicted on a monument erected in 1969

After the Russian Revolution, socialist realism became an international literary movement. Socialist trends in literature were established in the 1920s in Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Writers who helped develop socialist realism in the West included Louis Aragon, Johannes Becher, Jaroslav Hašek, and Pablo Neruda.

The doctrine of socialist realism in other People's Republics, was legally enforced from 1949 to 1956. It involved all domains of visual and literary arts, though its most spectacular achievements were made in the field of architecture, considered a key weapon in the creation of a new social order, intended to help spread the communist doctrine by influencing citizens' consciousness as well as their outlook on life. During this massive undertaking, a crucial role fell to architects perceived not as merely engineers creating streets and edifices, but rather as "Engineers of the human soul". The general theme, extending beyond simple aesthetics into an urban design, was meant to express grandiose ideas and arouse feelings of stability, persistence and political power.

Today, arguably the only countries still focused on these aesthetic principles are North Korea, Laos, and to some extent Vietnam. The People's Republic of China occasionally reverts to socialist realism for specific purposes, such as idealised propaganda posters to