

# Socialist Realism

## Soviet Ukrainian Art Worth Collecting

The term Socialist Realism is one which is often heard in the art world in Ukraine, with more and more exhibitions and auctions taking place, as this art form is 're-discovered' and becomes more popular, both aesthetically and commercially. It is little understood in other countries though, and perhaps also among the younger generation of Ukrainians.

Socialist Realist art, featuring huge canvases depicting healthy, happy Soviet people going about the business of building up the glory of Communism, is often dismissed as merely 'propaganda' or 'utilitarian'. Now that that page of history has been turned, it is fascinating to explore not only the ideology behind the grandiose title, but also how it has become both an acclaimed and collectable art form.

According to



Matthew Cullerne Bown, a leading British expert on this art movement, 'after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the new government took control of the art establishment, nationalising all art collections and laying down the principles that were to govern the creation of works of art. During the next decades, Socialist Realism became the mainstream movement, encompassing the work of nearly all Soviet artists; they were required to produce art comprehensible to the masses that would inspire admiration for the dignity of the working person and their task of building Communism.'

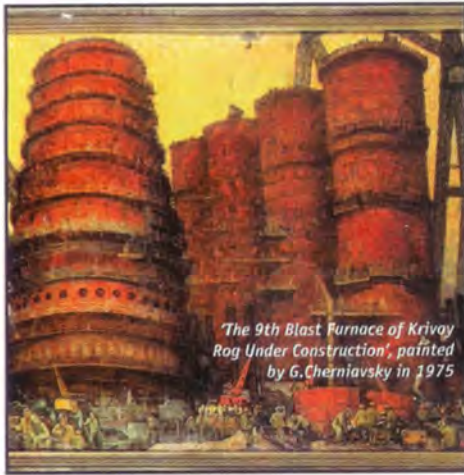
An exhibition in 1919 on the theme of 'The Great Russian Revolution', helped get the movement underway. Isaac Brodski won the painting section with an imposing oil entitled *Lenin and the Demonstrations* and helped to contribute to the process of **idolatry and propaganda** which later expanded into the wider scope of Soviet Realism.

Now that the state had a monopoly on the display of art in public places, they commissioned huge paintings which showed what ordinary Soviet people were capable of achieving as well as reflecting the 'realities' of Soviet life. Across the USSR, Palaces of Culture, Party Committees, schools, hospitals and wedding registry offices bore these monumental canvases showing *subbotniki* (citizens doing Saturday community work), Komsomol weddings or women involved in domestic tasks; the success of planned agriculture was celebrated, as were the building of gigantic factories and people marching in honour of various pompous national occasions.

A catalogue from a Moscow exhibition of 'all-Union artists' in 1977, nearly 60 years later, says, 'Following Lenin's Path' shows that our Soviet artists are very involved in the destiny of the country, in the spiritual enrichment of the people and in helping to mould and educate the new Soviet man! It also goes on to say that their art 'reflects the Soviet way of life with all its diversity and complexity and shows the magnitude of its accomplishments. The new art is always at the vanguard of communist construc-



Tetyana Yablons'ka is one of Ukraine's best known artists of the genre. This painting, on display at ARTEast, a portrait of an ordinary worker, is a great example of Socialist Realism



'The 9th Blast Furnace of Krivoy Rog Under Construction', painted by G. Cherniavsky in 1975



Vasili Serdyuk's 'In the School for Liquidating Literacy' (1925) can be seen in the Ukrainian National Art Museum



Zorko's painting of a prazdnik march in Donbass satirises 1980's socialist society

tion and the endeavour of the artist merges with the labour of the nation!

In fact during the 1930's, Stalin himself is said to have taken a personal interest and ensured that the artists received proper instructions as to what constituted 'correct' art and directives for artistic output. Despite the specific ideological requirements demanded from the artists regarding the social or political orientation of most of their work, it is recognised today that, by and large, these paintings, drawings, sculptures and other pieces of decorative or applied art were executed to very high professional and

artistic standards. Indeed, 'approved' artists underwent years of formal academic training and only then could they enter into the new Soviet art hierarchy, from academician to People's Artist. Another remarkable feature of the whole Soviet system was the fact that a painting might be chosen for exhibition purely on account of its size, since usually only very large canvases were displayed in museums or other public spaces.

The art of the first few years of Soviet power tended towards the abstract and the avant-garde, then, during the 1930's, when any kind of free thinking or discord with Party principles were considered anti-socialist activities, came the Communist call for a return to the tradition of critical realism. This brought about a change in art ideology to make sure that Soviet artists veered away from use of imagination and instead selected only reality. They were allowed to demonstrate their talent and technical skill in their painting but only in the context of the new collectivist society.

**'Art is always at the vanguard of communist construction and the endeavour of the artist merges with the labour of the nation!'**

After the death of Stalin, and especially during the Khrushchev era, Socialist Realism underwent what is now termed the **Golden Age**. The Stalinist personality cult was denigrated, scientific ideas flourished and the USSR embarked on its exploration of space, while in the art world, landscape and still-lives were reinstated as honourable subjects for artists and the Soviet Impressionist movement took off.

As far as the development of Ukrainian artists went, the Golden Age (1940-1953) - apart from the upheaval caused by the Nazi invasion in 1941 - was a period of growth and acclaim within the USSR. The Ukrainian artists **Serhiy Hryhor'yev** and the Russian

Fedor Reshetnikov founded a new movement in Ukraine called the 'genre of everyday life', depicting adults and children going about their normal lives, as a pretext for showing the home life of the average Soviet citizen and humanising other subjects which had not been focused on under Communism. Works by Hryhor'yev like *The Goalkeeper* (Tretyakov Gallery) or *Admission to the Komsomol* (Ukrainian National Art Museum) are good examples, and have been likened to the work of the American Norman Rockwell.

Another shift in Ukrainian Socialist Realism occurred at this time and it was towards the portrait of the individual - but the ordinary individual rather than the party leader, decorated general or 'hero' type. Paintings like *Portrait of Svitlana Shipunova, an Outstanding Student*, by Mikhailo Bozhi (also in the Ukrainian National Art Museum) show the achievements of the average person - still within the Socialist context of course.

The Kyiv Art Institute in the Ukrainian Republic ranked only behind the prestigious

Repin and Surikov Institutes in Moscow for its reputation of turning out first class realist artists; a number of Ukrainian artists including Hryhor'yev, Tetyana Yablon'ska and Mikhailo Khmelko won the Stalin Prize. According to *Isskustvo*, the official Soviet art journal, Ukraine was particularly singled out for its 'impressionist decorativeness, its bright colours, an emphasis on vigorous handling of colour and an unsettling devotion to Ukrainian nationalism...' This last point can be seen in the many agriculturally-themed paintings, with the workers in embroidered national costumes.

In this post-Stalinist atmosphere, criticism of the previous era was allowed, and after Khrushchev's famous speech in 1956, this filtered down to the artistic establishment. One academic, Igor Grabar, even felt emboldened to write that in Stalinist times, 'the impersonality of themes and technique allowed erased sometimes not only the difference between individual artists of the Soviet Union but also the national character of masters of the republics.'





*Flax (1977) by Tetyana Yablons'ka shows some impressionist elements*

For the non-Russian republics, this new culture led to a slight but nevertheless real emancipation of national culture, with Ukrainian art for example, showing a definite tendency towards socialist content in a nationalist disguise. Look at works like Mikhaïlo Kryvenko's *A Kozak has Gone to War* (Ukrainian National Art Museum) or Yablons'ka's *A Wedding* (Kharkiv Museum of Visual Arts) for evidence of folk culture - embroidered shirts and painted plates. Ukraine's industrial centres also produced sought-after works, the Kharkiv School in particular.

The 1960's and 70's saw the dissident movement start to develop, and in art this was expressed by the search for new, more individualist artistic methods. This grew later into an underground movement of artists who wished to show their alternative thoughts and whose work tended towards the ironic or even grotesque. Those artists who retained the socialist theme in their work, also explored individual creative methods and this period of art history saw a multitude of styles in use, from new use of colour and form to a renaissance in primitive folk art as well as an interest in icons.

Many Ukrainian artists, although adhering to their ideological task, added elements of **impressionism and expressionism**, distracting the viewer with colour and line. Even pictures painted on commission were full of elements which turned a supposedly edifying and propagandist canvas into one which conveyed an aesthetic appeal and powerful subtext to the viewer. It was this time in Ukrainian history

that gave its artists a reputation among foreign critics and when their works started to appear in the collections of great museums.

With the arrival of the 1980's and Perestroika, Soviet society suffered a grave disappointment as the whole Soviet system was discredited. Such was the legacy of 70 years of oppression though, that on the whole people accepted this turn-about with a sort of slave-like acquiescence. For example, a painting by Yuriy Zorko shows a Revolution Day demonstration in Donetsk. On a background of almost medieval architecture widened into impossible proportions, march rows and rows of people with their red flags, until they merge into a great mass, looking more like an anthill, than a crowd of people. While outwardly depicting a people's prazdnyk, the artist was really concerned with portraying the monster that socialist society had become, and how it had subjugated the individual.

After the eventual break-up of the Soviet Union, many artists turned their backs on what they and much of the world considered images of a past era and it has only been in the last few years that local and foreign collectors have regained interest in the realist school.

Art critic and writer, Andrei Kourkov, says that 'socialist realism deserves the attention of serious art collectors most importantly because those works are a powerful record, depicting that bygone era in tremendous detail. A second advantage for collectors of this art is that all the necessary work on the who's who of socialist realism has now been done and each artist awarded his or her ranking. The more modest prices for these works can also be attributed to the fact that, for many people, socialist realism simply does not count as real art: it is just too bound up with communist ideology.'

Others, however, consider that the abstractly conceptual nature of contemporary western art requires an antidote, to be found in the refreshingly appealing qualities of Socialist Realist art.

Amanda Pitt

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*Mikhail Khmelko's 'To the Great Russian People' won critical acclaim - and two Stalin Prizes for this Ukrainian artist*

## Investing in Art?

First and foremost, buying art is a matter of personal taste and budget. If you have the money and the inclination, why then invest in Socialist Realist art?

1. It is an art movement unique to the former Soviet Union
2. The actual quality and level of painting is accepted as being very high
3. There is only a limited source of works available
4. Collectors, galleries and auctioneers have been snatching up artworks, depleting those left in Ukraine
5. In time, the art market will start to re-sell the movement, ensuring that your investment doubles!

Once you decide to go for it, there are several points to be aware of:

- a) Only buy from a reputable gallery which is willing to give you a letter of guarantee or from the artist's studio directly.
- b) Always invest in the big names: works by Serhiy Hryhor'yev, Tetyana Yablons'ka, Mikhaïlo Bozhi, Oleksandr Maksimenko, Zinovy Tolkachov and Nina Bozhko among others are likely to bring you a return in the future. If the artist was distinguished with an honour like 'National Artist of the USSR' or a Stalin Award for example, this is likely to increase the value.
- c) Only buy works created after 1947. It is illegal to export art older than this and if it is non-officially taken out of Ukraine, it will be difficult to resell as it will technically be contraband.
- d) Price or value is very difficult to establish, depending on whether you value it on the Ukrainian market or calculate how much it might be worth if sold in the west. Again the advice of a reputable dealer will help. Christies, Sotheby's and Philips all now deal in Socialist Realism as do some major galleries in cities like New York, London and Geneva. Prices that 'average' artists of the period are currently achieving range from USD 650 to 17,500, so you can imagine what a good Hryhor'yev might fetch at auction...

