

Saving the world: The moving legacy of sculptor Ernst Neizvestny (1925-2016)

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In August of last year, the Soviet-Russian sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, one of the most interesting artists of the postwar period, and someone with a distinctive political history, died in New York City at the age of 91. His death was only given passing mention in the media, but for what he tried to achieve, for his impressive artistic legacy and for his place in the rich story of Soviet and modern art, much more could and should be said.

Born in 1925, Neizvestny came of age during the Stalinist darkness that gripped Soviet culture, and so it was against great odds that he was able to distinguish himself on the world stage. Today he may be best known for his confrontation with Premier Nikita Khrushchev at a Moscow exhibition in 1962 over “degenerate” modern art.

From early on in his artistic life, however, Neizvestny gained recognition in international competitions for his work on cyclic themes, of which his “Tree of Life” in its epic and heroic aspirations is perhaps the most advanced and well known. He eventually left the Soviet Union in 1975 and settled in the US in 1977 where he continued in a highly celebrated career as a monumental sculptor until his death.

His art work reveals both the immediate impact of his complex and contradictory personal history, as well as a broad spectrum of cultural experiences and traditions. Neizvestny developed a unique and powerful visual vocabulary. He assimilated the advances of modern art, but liberated from any rigid or formal constraints, as can be seen in works like “The Stride” (1960) or “Suicide” (1966). He also consciously worked to preserve the conquests of tradition in his consistent focus on figurative and representational form evident in “About Airplanes” (1954) or his “Female Torso” (unknown date).

Neizvestny may still be better known in the former territories of the Soviet Union, particularly Russia and Ukraine, but his work—especially in the form of his massive sculptures—has been hailed throughout the world.

“Lotus Blossom” (1968) in Aswan, Egypt—a grand modernist structure—is reputedly the largest sculpture in the world; the “Tree of Life” museum in Uttersberg, Sweden has one of the most extraordinary collections of sculpture; Shelter Island Sculpture Park on Long Island, New York is home to hundreds of his drawings, paintings and sculptures; any one of these works or locations alone would stand as a lasting legacy, but this only begins to suggest the breadth of Neizvestny’s body of work.

The degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the growth of a grasping, anti-socialist bureaucracy had a disorienting impact on Neizvestny, as it did on several generations of artists and intellectuals born in the Soviet Union. To his credit, however, Neizvestny apparently deluded himself less than a good many other “dissident” artists about conditions under capitalism. He was never shy about identifying in his writings what he saw as the hypocrisy and stupidity of the Western art market, declaring, “No matter what people say, the sound of money is not the best accompaniment for immortal works of genius. But apparently there is no other mechanism for developing art in the free world.”

An embattled nature

Born Erik Iosifovich Neizvestny in 1925—he later changed his name to Ernst—in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), Russia, the future artist grew up in a relatively privileged Jewish household. His family had a somewhat checkered political history.

Neizvestny’s mother was a liberal poet inclined toward the mystical. His father’s family was fairly well off, having owned a printing company prior to the October Revolution that at one point printed Bolshevik propaganda, though the family members’ socialist sympathies were inconsistent at best. Following the revolution, they fought on the side of the Whites during the civil war—a fact Neizvestny’s father managed to hide for decades, thereby allowing him to enter an elite medical school and go on to become a renowned surgeon.

The artist recalls that he was drawing and molding materials with his hands as far back as he can remember. At the age of 15, he won entry to the elite Repin Academy of Art’s Middle Art School, a special school for artistically gifted children, but within a couple of years he was forced to change schools when, in an apparently characteristic outburst, he gave the school’s director a beating for showing favoritism to parents with political connections.

Shortly thereafter, Neizvestny witnessed and underwent the horrors of World War II on the front lines in Ukraine, Romania, Hungary and Austria. He apparently served part of the time in a punishment battalion (Red Army units made up of soldiers convicted of crimes and sent on what were considered suicide missions). He sustained life-threatening injuries and was at one point even pronounced dead, only to fully regain his health after a long and difficult recovery. This near-death episode and the overall experience of the war years represented a turning point in his life and, indeed, images of life-and-death struggle permeate his work.

Neizvestny’s poems from this time—cited by Albert Leong in *Centaur: The Life and Art of Ernst Neizvestny*—reveal a cynicism and verbal brutality that the artist presumably erected, to borrow Leon Trotsky’s phrase about the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, “as a barrier against being hurt by the external world.”

(Remarkably, moreover, already prior to the war, Leong notes, Neizvestny had lain near death from typhus in a hospital for a month. For two weeks he was unconscious and then suffered temporary but total amnesia and loss of hearing.)

The pain of his injuries, both physical and psychological, and the trauma of war never really left the sculptor, but rather sharpened a critical attitude toward the war and the regime and set him on a path of serious philosophical and political reflection. In the ensuing period, he began to read and learn about everything he could find that was disallowed or forbidden, setting him on a collision course with the Stalinist authorities.

In the period following the war, pockets of dissent in the Soviet Union were meeting in secret in what Neizvestny describes in his (largely

unpublished) memoirs as a “catacomb culture” and in which he took an active part, even at the risk of the Gulag. Though this didn’t bring him into direct political activity—and there were few such avenues available—he did become aware of the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution and became an opponent of the bureaucracy. He argues, however, that as a monumental sculptor, he was obliged to compromise his convictions to attract state funding for his projects.

In addition to discovering the writings of Trotsky in the course of this education, he encountered banned figures such as George Orwell and others, who collectively radicalized his outlook. He was particularly inspired by the life and work of Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose own brush with death at the hands of a tsarist firing squad is often cited as the moment of his artistic awakening. Neizvestny’s affinity for the great novelist led him to produce numerous drawings and paintings based on *Crime and Punishment* and other writings.

Because of the Soviet Stalinist regime’s virtual blockade, Neizvestny had limited exposure to modern art in the West during the postwar period, then dominated by abstract expressionism, conceptualism and other non-figurative and non-representational currents. He was determined, however, to remain current on cultural advances and these included scientific ones, with which he had a life-long interest, viewing science as the handmaiden of art.

In works such as “The Great Centaur” (1962) and “Orpheus” (1964), his emotive and muscular treatment of the figure makes up the work’s core. His sculpture reveals a certain influence, albeit belated, of cubism and surrealism. Perhaps inevitably, however, notwithstanding his opposition to the Kremlin, some of his more idealized and heroic works, such as “Cosmonaut” (1962), do appear to bear the stamp of Stalinist monumentalism. “Socialist realism,” the officially sanctioned artistic style in the USSR, was the opposite of genuine artistic realism and honesty and essentially justified the status quo under nationalist-reactionary Stalinism.

To the wider public of a certain generation, Neizvestny may be best known for his confrontation with Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the Cold War. In the same year that saw the Cuban missile crisis bring the world to the brink of nuclear war, a group of artists with Neizvestny as their spokesman came into conflict with the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Khrushchev’s famous speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, during which he revealed a portion of Stalin’s crimes, had marked the beginning of a short-lived “thaw,” which created a relatively more open political and cultural climate in the Soviet Union. Neizvestny and other non-conformists came to feel certain new freedoms as well.

The well-publicized encounter between the artist and the top bureaucrat took place at a group exhibition in Moscow of a number of artists who had been working outside of the approved “socialist realist” style. Khrushchev came to preview the show and was outraged at what he saw. The old Stalinist launched into a loud denunciation of the work, calling it “dog shit,” but at a certain point he was confronted by Neizvestny who challenged the Soviet leader’s knowledge and understanding of the work. Focusing on internationally respected artists who had inspired his Soviet colleagues, such as Picasso and Siqueiros, both supporters of the Soviet Union, Neizvestny asked Khrushchev what attitude should be taken to such world renowned artists.

Ultimately Khrushchev abandoned the argument and although Neizvestny was not immediately punished, he was not granted any significant commissions over the next decade and was ultimately forced to leave the country to pursue his artistic career. He first moved to Switzerland, before emigrating to America where he lived and worked for the rest of his life.

A product of history

Neizvestny was conscious to some extent of the great forces and historical tensions that influenced and weighed on him and to which he showed a special interest and sensitivity. It would be an error, however, to overestimate his degree of understanding. In exile, he participated in various events and activities organized by anticommunist and reactionary forces, whether he fully agreed with their outlook or not.

Surveying the work of Neizvestny one is struck by an emotional tension and striving. A work such as “The Prophet” (1966) conveys particular pathos, representing what the artist called an “extruding heart” proffered by a figure at once tender, pained and powerful. Works such as this show an immense compassion. Beyond an obvious depth of feeling in his work, one also comes to see through his poetry and other writings, a considerable intellectual sophistication. Here it becomes clear that he had some understanding of the great betrayal of socialist aims that was represented in the Stalinist regime, against which in work such as “First Wings” (c. 1954) he advances a hopeful if pained view for the future.

One of the more influential and insightful cultural critics of the postwar period, the late John Berger, probably best known for his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), wrote an admiring appraisal of Neizvestny in *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R* (1969). The work presents the Soviet sculptor as an important figure in modern art. Berger’s high opinion of Neizvestny derived from what he saw as the artist’s ability not only to express the hope and tragedy of the human situation, but to oppose all forms of oppression through his art.

One feels in the sculpture, despite everything, confidence in a better future for humanity. This takes on an even deeper meaning when one recognizes that the work emerged out of a struggle against the grinding oppression of the Stalinist regime. Berger points out that “nobody can deny the contradiction between the original spirit of the October revolution and the grave compromises imposed by Stalin ... Neizvestny has lived with the same contradiction in the field of art.” Although Berger understates the devastating and counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism in *Art and Revolution* (a book dedicated to Isaac Deutscher), the analogy nevertheless has a certain aptness.

In addition to his memoir, the artist left a number of writings that shed light on his world outlook. In *Space, Time and Synthesis*, Neizvestny puts forward his views on art and philosophy in a sometimes prolix, but generally thoughtful series of essays. He goes off on tangents that become fanciful and speculative at points, but nonetheless he reveals a serious purpose and the determination to champion humanity’s betterment.

Neizvestny’s shortcomings and adaptations, to both the regime in the USSR and the “free world,” were inseparably bound up with the great difficulties of the mid-20th century, an era during which fascism and imperialism slaughtered millions and Stalinism besmirched the noblest ideas in history with its vast crimes.

This was an artist who pushed the boundaries of artistic practice itself in the face of immense historical obstacles—his body of work attests to the herculean efforts he made. What changes he could effect through his personal entanglement with the Stalinist bureaucracy and, more generally, what progress art on its own could achieve in transforming the state of things were inevitably limited by the more general conditions prevailing.

Neizvestny’s confused political views passed through various stages, and there is no need to idealize them, but he persevered throughout in advancing what he saw as the transformative potential of art, believing like Dostoevsky that “beauty will save the world.” Such a sentiment might be considered naïve given current realities, but in the face of a prevailing cynicism and given the harsh circumstances of the artist’s life, it is perhaps a failing that deserves some sympathy and latitude.



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