

Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test at the Art Institute of Chicago—an introductory comment

Russian Revolutionary art exhibition opened October 29

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Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test opened at the Art Institute of Chicago this past weekend and runs through January 15. The exhibition focuses on art, design and culture generally that emerged from the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, from 1917 to approximately 1935. A wide range of issues is raised by the artwork, the curation and the historical presentation.

For any viewer interested in a serious examination of post-revolutionary Soviet art, one of the astonishing absences in the current show is any serious explanation of the rise of Stalinism or its significance.

The enormously creative, optimistic and daring period of art and culture that followed the October Revolution finds intriguing expression in various aspects of the exhibition, but there is no effort to explain how the rise of a counter-revolutionary, nationalist bureaucracy led to its withering.

Arguing that “Soviet Russia became a showcase filled with models,” the Art Institute show divides its artwork into a number of sections: Battleground, School, Theater, Press, Factory, Exhibition, Festival, Cinema, Storefront and Home. As part of this, there are fascinating, full-scale recreations of designs, objects, theater sets, art installations and more.

For example, “Factory” includes a 30-foot-long recreation of Aleksandr Rodchenko’s “Workers’ Club” from 1925, in a 2017 replica form. It is a model of a social space that was never put into production, and contains eye-catching design and function. A table at the center has flexible size for different events. There are rotating magazine and newspaper racks, a library, a place for workers to post their own news, a chess set and a stand that can be used for movie projection, plays or lectures.

“Press” contains an eye-catching, fantastical 14-foot multimedia kiosk designed by Gustav Klutsis and also built as a replica for the show, while the “Exhibition” section contains an entirely reconstructed art exhibition designed by the brilliant El Lissitzky. The latter includes paintings by Piet Mondrian and Francis Picabia that were on display in the original exhibition, as well as the uniquely complementary walls, textures, colors, and arrangement that Lissitzky created.

“Theater” contains recreations of props made by artist Lyubov Popova for productions by legendary theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. This section also contains set recreations, models and drawings that show the liveliness of Constructivist stagings, which sought to break down the barriers between spectators and performers.

The “Storefront” and “Home” portions of the show illustrate the expanse of revolutionary art and design, which extended to furniture, ceramics, textiles, fashion and even chess sets.

The Art Institute’s engaging presentation of these works helps to give viewers a sense of the vast cultural impact of the 1917 revolution, which extended into all aspects of life and had the active participation of a wide layer of artists and the public. A curatorial lecture on the opening weekend provided additional context in this regard, describing the outdoor theater performances and poetry readings that would attract tens of thousands of viewers.

Yet the exhibition largely avoids discussion of the revolution and the massive political struggles that formed the background to the cultural environment.

The first room “Battleground,” for example, is a muddle. One side has a small selection of posters from the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), when many striking and urgent images were produced. *ROSTA* [the Soviet state news agency] *Poster No. 355*, by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, is one of hundreds of poster designs that were made as stencils so they could be put up across the country to address urgent issues. They combine cartoonish images with simple text, and often a considerable degree of humor. Despite the text being central to the image, however, the poster is untranslated, as is another *ROSTA* poster further on in the exhibition.

On the other side of the room, there is a “Lenin Wall,” which launches a historical falsification that runs throughout the exhibition. Dozens of images of Lenin are presented, together with a text that asserts, “The Bolsheviks started a cult of Lenin that helped legitimize the new ruling order.” At this point, the reviewer is tempted to suggest, the visitor might legitimately leave the exhibition, descend to the museum’s gift shop, pick up a copy of

David King's remarkable *Red Star Over Russia* (2009), available there, and turn to page 159, where he or she will find this passage:

"Whilst he was alive most of the adulation Lenin received, whether he liked it or not, was from the grass roots and probably well meant. The real Lenin cult began immediately after his death and it was orchestrated by Stalin. Towns and Factories were renamed. Museums full of paintings and sculpture devoted to the earthly life of 'Lenin the Immortal' sprang up all over the land. The Lenin poster, the badge, the Lenin pictorial album, the 'Lenin Corner' (after the devotional icon corner of the peasants), huge Lenin monuments. ... All this was part of Stalin's plan; the Lenin cult laid the foundations for the Stalin cult that was to supersede it. In the 1930s, Stalin would stand where Lenin had once stood and become known as 'The Lenin of Today.' "

Of course, there was a necessary but inverse relationship between the development of the official Lenin cult—which the great revolutionary, personally humble and without a trace of pretention, would have spit on—and the thoroughgoing repudiation in practice by the Stalinist bureaucracy of the political line and social outlook fought for by Lenin.

In an exhibition replete with images of Lenin and Stalin from the late 1920s and 1930s, this historical appreciation is absolutely vital to an understanding of the evolution of the Soviet Union and its cultural life. Moreover, the curators' references to "the Bolsheviks" ignores entirely the fact that a leading "Bolshevik," Leon Trotsky, and many other "Bolsheviks" were forming the socialist Left Opposition to oppose Stalin at the time the Lenin worship was starting up.

Indeed, Trotsky and the Left Opposition go unmentioned in the Art Institute exhibition, despite the fact that it is now well known that artists like Meyerhold, Rodchenko (who designed a proposed cover for Trotsky's *Problems of Everyday Life*) and Mayakovsky admired Trotsky and looked to him as the leading Marxist on cultural questions. There is not a single image of Trotsky in the current exhibition, among its 550 works. This is remarkable, as members of the Left Opposition were deeply involved in literary journals, artistic debates and other fields, and were defenders of the wide range of artistic expression that the exhibition presents. These were the political and cultural figures who, like many of the artists in the exhibition, were subject to repression, or had tragically shortened lives.

The catalogue's introduction, written in contemporary academic jargon, tries in its own confused manner to justify the failure to provide historical material and the curators' general approach to the Revolution.

Devin Fore and Matthew S. Witkowsky, the authors of the introduction, are determined to deny the leading role of the working class in the October Revolution to promote their conception that Soviet society of the time presents "a picture not of sociocultural homogeneity but of multiple, dynamically intersecting interests and identities." Does this sound vaguely familiar? Is it conceivable that the authors' perspective is shaped by the needs and aims of present-day identity politics? We will leave it to the reader to decide for him- or herself.

To bolster their arguments, Fore and Witkowsky make absurd claims. For example, they tell us, "the political identity [of the

working class] was anything but evident" in 1917. The "industrial working class was scarce in this largely agrarian country," and what's more, the reader will be astonished to learn, "from the perspective of Marxist theory, the proletariat was technically not a class at all."

So, having proven to their own satisfaction at least that the working class was lacking in Russia in 1917 and afterward, the authors move on to argue that "this absence resonated in the arts of the period." Could anything be farther from the truth? Artists such as Mayakovsky, Rodchenko, Popova, Vladimir Tatlin and many others were won to the cause of the Revolution and, with whatever confusion and hesitation, placed the fate of the Soviet and international working class at the center of their art. Stalinist reaction in the 1930s brought this to an end, damaging culture not only in the USSR of course, but on a world scale.

Fore and Witkowsky also play unbecoming intellectual tricks. They attempt, for instance, to recruit Trotsky into their campaign against the working class. They write, "None other than Leon Trotsky concluded in 1923 'that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any,' " as though this had anything to do with their contention that the working class was nowhere to be found in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Trotsky was explaining that *proletarian rule* was a temporary, transitional stage of social development and that its historic task was to create the basis for a *classless*, socialist culture rooted in solidarity.

Then, making their cynical postmodernist viewpoint explicit, the authors refer to the "antihistoriographic wager" they are making as part of an effort to discourage any attempt "to align this culture with the familiar historical teleology that begins with the heroic events of 1917, proceeds through reconstruction and Thermidor, and terminates in the Stalinist terror of the 1930s." Their presentation, they inform the reader, "allows for more skid and slippage between art and history" and challenges and contradicts "overbearing linear narratives." In other words, they intend to present artistic life as a phenomenon existing independently of and apart from social life, in the process making the post-revolutionary culture of the early 1920s for the most part incomprehensible.

Truly, in the present debased academic-artistic climate, anything goes.

As noted above, the visitor to the Art Institute will be rewarded with much that is rich and fascinating in the artwork on display, but for an understanding of how it came to be and the fate of Soviet culture as a whole, he or she will have to go elsewhere.



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