

“The Bolshevik Revolution liberated art and artists”

Radical Russia: an interview with curator Peter Waldron

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Curator Peter Waldron spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the Radical Russia: Art, Culture and Revolution exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich and the Royal Fabergé exhibition running in parallel.

Waldron is Professor of History at the University of East Anglia, specialising in Modern Russian and European history. His books include *Governing Tsarist Russia; Between Two Revolutions: Stolypin and the Politics of Renewal in Russia; The End of Imperial Russia, 1855-1917* and *Russia of the Tsars*.

PM: Why did you stage the Radical Russia exhibition?

PW: Of course, we wanted to mark the centenary of one of the greatest events of the twentieth century. We wanted to put together two very contrasting sides of Russian culture and give a different approach. The exhibition of Fabergé art objects, with their style of extreme ornateness and painstaking detail, shows the astonishing wealth and opulence of the wealthy Russian elite. In contrast the radical art was aimed not at the elite but at a different audience—the Russian people as a whole. The message was absolutely different to that of Fabergé.

PM: The exhibition does not have the obvious anti-Bolshevik ideology that other exhibitions have had this year. Why is this?

PW: A historical perspective helped us produce a different exhibition. We weren't essentially art historians, but were interested in the real history of Russia and hoped thereby to illuminate the art and culture produced after the revolution.

PM: How did you go about selecting the objects for display?

PW: We wanted to show the variety of ways in which radical culture was being expressed and the way it engaged with ordinary people and everyday Russian life, whether through theatre, photography, ceramics or other art forms. El Lissitzky, for example, was using his art to teach people how to read and write. Then there is Danko's chess set on display and various plates and saucers. The Sainsbury Centre has also been fortunate in acquiring permanently the model of Tatlin's Tower.

PM: Avant-garde art had developed in the years before the revolution, but in the Royal Academy exhibition earlier this year the curators claimed that the Bolsheviks wanted to suppress it from the start. What do you think?

PW: Yes, radical art had developed before 1917 but the Bolshevik revolution liberated art and artists. It allowed artists to reach a far wider audience than they could ever have expected. Unlike in the West, the Bolsheviks embraced radical art and radical artists embraced the cause of revolution.

The Bolsheviks saw art as very important and were firmly committed to culture. They encouraged a huge variety of different artistic approaches even though individual Bolshevik leaders may not have liked particular styles themselves.

PM: What do you think of the view that the Bolshevik Revolution was a mistake or detour from Russia's natural development?

PW: (laughs) Clearly there are deep-seated reasons for the revolution. We can trace out the long-term causes. The outcome was far from certain and could have gone in different directions. The 1905 revolution was a dress rehearsal for 1917. Lenin understood this

and prepared. He thought about revolution deeply and was not bound by ideology in the sense that changing political and social conditions would mean new ideas had to be put into practice. By 1917 Lenin was grounded in a sensitivity to what was needed.

PM: Yet some of the exhibitions this year say Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of Leninism?

PW: Firstly, Stalinism was not the only possible outcome from 1917. You cannot just read history backwards and say because Stalinism occurred it was inevitable. You just have to look at the huge struggle Stalin actually had to carry out to establish himself in the 1920s and then the purges and terror. Clearly if someone like [Leon] Trotsky or [Lev] Kamenev had emerged things would have been different.

The theory of “socialism in one country” became a potent slogan. Stalin used it to point to the left and say what you predicted hasn’t come to pass.

PM: What reaction has there been to the exhibition?

PW: There has been a very positive response. We have had well-attended lectures with students showing a huge amount of interest. We have also had Russians visiting who were not aware of the history. I think we have created an exhibition that is not just the well-trodden hackneyed ideas that are around.



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