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## The place of art in the Soviet union

Osip Beskin

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# The PLACE of ART in the SOVIET UNION

By  
OSIP BESKIN

Foreword by  
CHRISTIAN BRINTON



THE AMERICAN RUSSIAN INSTITUTE  
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*"Volga" by Alexey Kravchenko*

FOREWORD  
*by* CHRISTIAN BRINTON

THE following essay, by a noted specialist, throws welcome light upon a question that has long puzzled the non-Soviet public—what is the rôle played by art in a proletarian social order? The answer given by Mr. Beskin in the ensuing pages is both concise and comprehensive. Yet the subject is one which would seem to call for a certain measure of generalized orientation. The organic inter-relationship between art and life that today obtains in the Soviet Union was not won without struggle. The movement in the direction of what has come to be known as Socialist Humanism was first fraught with sharp vicissitude and overcast by sinister shadow. Let us, in introducing Mr. Beskin, pass in review a few of the steps leading toward the fundamental readjustment of life standards reflected in the changing pageant of Soviet art. Inevitably, the face of Soviet art was at the outset distorted by all manner of pre-October individualist exaggeration and posturing decadence. Next it became the mirror of external reality—stark, unrelieved, aesthetically barren. Today it expresses with calm assurance a broader humanity. It is transfused by elements at times heroic, romantic, and even lyrical.

The three definitely marked periods in the evolution of Soviet art may be summarized as follows: 1. Revolution, 2. Recovery, 3. Realization. The first phase, which also includes the era of War Communism, extends from 1917 to 1921. The second coincides with the NEP, or New Economic Policy interlude—1921-1928. The third and present stage begins in 1928 with the initiation of the first Five-Year Plan. This is the bare topical outline. Beneath the surface there is the surge of mighty, and at times conflicting cross-currents: social, economic, aesthetic. These currents, often troubled and unruly, have gradually become canalized, given direction. In the matter of artistic expression the drift sweeps irresistibly away from formalism and frankly toward realism. Yet Soviet realism—socialist realism—is not arid and doctrinaire. It is a vividly diversified realism. It is not a copy, but a courageous re-creation in terms of plastic imagery of the basic content of Soviet life and aspiration.

The initial forward step in the enunciation of a definite Soviet art policy was taken with characteristic surety and conviction by Lenin himself. As is well known, he stood resolutely against any abrupt, arbitrary break with cultural tradition. He was also stolidly opposed

to the egocentric abstractions of cubist, constructivist, futurist, and the like. With due respect for the past his outlook was soundly, progressively realistic. The result of such an attitude speaks for itself. Art in the Soviet Union has in consequence acquired a measure of social integration elsewhere unknown. How this intimate interaction between art and life actually functions, is specifically set forth in Mr. Beskin's paper. Furthermore, Osip Beskin's standing as former director of the Fine Arts Department of the People's Commissariat for Education (NARKOMPROS) places him in a position to cover the field with first hand finality.

Mr. Beskin's analysis of the underlying social content of art leaves nothing in doubt. Quite frankly he states that "the cardinal factor determining the quality of the art of any given period is always its integration with the progressive ideas of the epoch, or conversely, its isolation from them, its cloistered seclusion." Spontaneously there come to mind certain figures not unmoved by the social ferment of their day—Goya depicting with dynamic *furia* the disasters of war—Daumier castigating with bitter, ironic power Third Empire venality and corruption—burly Courbet toppling the Colonne Vendôme—Van Gogh fervently preaching to Flemish miners or chance stragglers in the mist and rain of a London street corner. Each epitomizes after his own particular fashion some sporadic, unrelated stirring of the social consciousness, deep-rooted in purpose but possessing no plan.

What we witness in the Soviet Union is a vast, specifically coordinated program to better the lot of humanity through the ministrations of art, to promote universal artistic activity and appreciation. How complete is its mere organizational operation Mr. Beskin conclusively demonstrates. Life in the Soviet Union is today unthinkable without mass participation in art. We see its appeal addressed to all ages. We note its myriad ramifications in every phase of conscious effort and in the remotest corners of a country embracing one hundred and eighty-two distinct racial groups. So much for the general situation. From the standpoint of the individual producing artist the major accomplishment of Soviet art activity would seem to be the attainment of *material security* and its logical corollary, *freedom for creative effort*.

What are the outstanding characteristics of contemporary Soviet art? In what manner and to what degree does it differ from Soviet art in its early, arduous stages? As previously noted, materialist modernism and bare, elementary realism have gone by the board. Neither could answer the needs of Socialist Humanism. On all sides one encounters less rigidity, more flexibility of temper and outlook.

Purposeful the later manifestations of Soviet art assuredly are, but not so in any narrow, pedantic sense. A fresh form-creating process is animating all phases of endeavor. And everywhere does this process keep step with the rapidly expanding new social-economic system of which art itself is but the happy fruition.

To be specific, architecture in the Soviet Union is becoming less severely functional and more legitimately ornamental; sculpture less austere monumentally, more truly plastic. And painting reacts untrammelled to reality and even seeks to refashion to its own varied purposes that which is merely real or actual. Multiformity of expression, not uniformity—the beckoning multiformity of a fuller, ampler life is the message of this art. The hope of Engels that art be “rich in content and beautiful in form with a Shakespearian picturesqueness and wealth of action” seems not to have been vain.

## THE PLACE OF ART IN THE SOVIET UNION

by OSIP BESKIN

LIVING conditions and opportunities for artists in the Soviet Union today reflect the great changes which have taken place in the whole country. The new socialist system has resulted in the transformation not only of the economic status of artistic enterprise but also of the popular attitude toward art itself. The central idea around which Soviet art is being developed was summed up by Lenin in these words:

"Art belongs to the people. It must have its deepest roots in the broad masses of workers. It must be understood and loved by them. It must be rooted in and grow with their feelings, thoughts, and desires. It must arouse and develop the artist in them."

The cardinal factor determining the quality of the art of any given period is always its integration with the life and progressive ideas of the epoch, or conversely its isolation from them, its cloistered seclusion. The ancient Greeks and Romans introduced artistic creation into the very heart of their social life, and Renaissance art, which was permeated with full-blooded optimism, was also close to life. The period of the richest flowering of Dutch art, which accompanied the economic rise following the Netherlands' revolution, is still another example of art which is both a part of and a reflection of the life of the times.

Perhaps the penetration of art into the day-to-day life of the people is best demonstrated by the participation of the artist himself in the affairs of his time. We may cite as examples Leonardo da Vinci, architect, engineer, organizer of festivals, encyclopedic in his knowledge and interest; and Courbet, State Director of Decorative Arts. If, on the one hand, there is such participation by the artist, the result is vitality and growth of art, but if, on the other hand, he withdraws into himself, the result is preciosity and finally decadence.

It is natural that in a country such as the USSR, which is basing its existence on social co-operation and integration, conditions must be created which will not only bring the artist close to the most stimulating and advanced ideas but will also enable his creative capacities to develop most freely and fruitfully so that he may contribute to the country's progress. Can this be achieved either by patronage or by



separate measures of a philanthropic nature? Certainly it cannot, because they are inevitably dependent on purely personal taste and therefore tend to be capricious and not necessarily based on established critical values. Instead, a very flexible and broad system of social and governmental measures is required. Since such a system will exist for the satisfaction of the aesthetic needs of the people, it must be responsive to the popular criticism of the entire country. The living voice of the people can alone judge and evaluate the worth of artistic productions.

The following is a description of the organization of art work in the Soviet Union and is in no sense to be taken as a declaration that all is entirely satisfactory in the realm of Soviet art. This is far from the case. We are a young country, only eighteen years old; and nothing in our ideals, our philosophy, or our experience permits self-conceit. We criticize severely much in our art because it has not yet reached our standards or our hopes. So far, we are convinced only of the soundness of our line of development. We insist on high qualitative standards, and we believe that in the very trend of our art is an implicit guarantee of dynamic growth, freedom, optimism, and courage. These qualities can only be absorbed by our artists directly from the new and expanding life. This life must be a part of their experience if they are to produce effective work.

### TRADE UNIONS OF ART WORKERS

The artist like anyone else must eat, must have a roof over his head, a suitable place in which to work, and opportunities for relaxation. Furthermore, the artist must be sure that when he is ill or incapacitated he will have the necessary financial means for proper care and medical treatment will be forthcoming. Like other workers, artists can best find their material security through an organization which is concerned with their common needs—the social and material conditions of their lives. Therefore, Soviet artists are organized into a special section of the Trade Union of Art Workers (known by the abbreviated name RABIS), which unites workers in the field of the pictorial, the plastic, the theatrical, the musical, and other arts. This union, like all other unions in the USSR, has a dual function: first, caring for the material well-being of its members; and, second, offering educational and cultural opportunities to them.

In the material field RABIS performs the following functions: (a) establishes forms of payment for artistic work and sees that they are

observed; (b) provides special rest homes and sanatoria, both in urban districts and in the south (the Crimea and the Caucasus), where artists may go at reduced rates and in some cases without charge; (c) arranges mutual-aid funds from which the artists may borrow; (d) organizes or assists in arranging special restaurants for artists; (e) provides free medical service for artists both in dispensaries and in hospitals; (f) organizes nurseries, kindergartens, and playgrounds for the children of artists; (g) acts as representative of its members in all cases of conflict arising between individual artists and organizations or institutions. These are only some of the functions of RABIS, but they serve to indicate the extent to which trade unions of artists can assist in those professional and material matters which are usually associated with industrial unions.

In its function as arbitrator in such conflicts as arise between artist and employer, RABIS, like all Soviet labor unions, attempts to stimulate a self-respecting, socially conscious attitude toward work. Thus if, in a dispute between an artist and an employer, RABIS discovers lack of conscientiousness on the part of the artist or any tendency to dilettantism and haphazard methods, the union will not defend him but will instead use all the social influence at its disposal to appeal to his artistic and class consciousness. In this sense RABIS is also concerned with certain aspects of the quality of artistic work.

On the cultural and educational side RABIS arranges courses of lectures on educational and political subjects, establishes art schools, organizes studios where artists may obtain additional training, sponsors special clubs for art workers and "Hostels for Artists" throughout the country, arranges sport and recreational activities, assists in the cultural rapprochement and interchange of opinion among representatives of the different fields of art, and organizes special libraries and consultation bureaus.

### CREATIVE UNIONS

Besides the Trade Union of Art Workers there is the so-called Creative Union of Artists, which has a membership that includes painters, graphic artists, poster artists, decorators, stage designers, and textile designers. (Architects, sculptors, and writers have separate unions of a similar type.) This union was organized in 1932 at the end of the first Five-Year Plan, when the association of proletarian artists (RAPH), of proletarian writers (RAPP), of proletarian musicians (RAPM), were abolished because the radical change in the

social attitude of the Soviet intelligentsia had necessitated a change in the framework of the unions. The new type of union embodies a more valid functional relationship between the arts and the social and economic needs of the people. Because of its important historical bearing on the growth of art in the Soviet Union, the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (April 23, 1932) is quoted below:<sup>1</sup>

"The Central Committee declares that in the last few years Soviet literature and art have achieved great progress, both quantitatively and qualitatively, on the basis of the momentous successes of socialist construction.

"A few years ago, when the influence upon literature of alien elements, especially active in the first years of the NEP,<sup>2</sup> was still appreciable, and the proletarian literary forces still weak, the party aided in every possible way in the creating and fostering of special proletarian organizations in the sphere of art with the aim of strengthening the position of proletarian writers and artists.

"At the present time, now that the forces of proletarian literature and art have had time to grow up and new writers and artists are coming forward from the shops and factories and collective farms, the framework of the existing proletarian literary and art organizations (RAPH, RAPP, RAPM, and others) has already become narrow and hampers the growth of creative art. This situation precipitates the danger of having the existing organizations degenerate from instruments of the greatest mobilization of Soviet writers and artists around the problems of socialist construction into instruments that will give rise to cliques isolated from the political problems of the day as well as from other groups of writers and artists who are interested in socialist construction.

"Hence, the necessity for a corresponding reconstruction of literary and artistic organizations and a broadening of the base of their work.

"On this basis, the Central Committee of the Communist Party resolved:

1. To liquidate the Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).
2. To unite all writers supporting the platform of the Soviet Government and desiring to participate in socialist construction, into a single union of Soviet writers, containing a communist fraction.

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1. Russian text published in "*Sovetskoe Iskusstvo 15 Let.*" (Soviet Art for Fifteen Years) Ogiz-Izogiz, Moscow and Leningrad, 1933, page 644.

2. New Economic Policy, 1921-1928.

3. To make similar changes in other fields of art.
4. To commission the ORGBUREAU to work out practical measures for carrying this decision into effect."

This decree not only brought to an end the struggle in the field of art, but also was a proclamation of confidence in the artistic intelligentsia at the beginning of the second Five-Year Plan.

In these circumstances the Creative Union of Artists, which artists alone administer, came into existence. The union serves as a laboratory of creative discussion, a social center where different creative methods and different aesthetic views are debated. In order to stimulate a critical approach, the union organizes exhibitions. It also keeps informed on the many questions which touch the creative life of the artist. At the present time the union is actively engaged in preparations for an All-Union Congress of Artists.

A few of the problems discussed by hundreds of artists in the conferences held by the union will make the functions of the organization clearer. Some of these are: 1. Naturalism versus Realism; 2. Formalism in painting; 3. The problems of a synthesis of the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture); 4. The problems of landscape painting, and similar matters. Such discussions are frequently accompanied by lectures on the history of the questions involved.

In Moscow the union publishes its own journal, *Art* (a substantial, theoretical, bi-monthly magazine, richly illustrated); and *Creative Art* (a popular magazine). In the near future a special art periodical will also be issued in Leningrad.

The union likewise takes an active and energetic part in all decisions and measures bearing on art in the USSR, whether of a social or governmental nature, and it has an authoritative voice in all such matters.

### CONSUMERS OF ART IN THE USSR

The tremendously important place occupied by art in the life of the Soviet people becomes especially clear when it is realized that the objects of art are acquired by factories, mills, clubs, restaurants (either in the plants or districts), trade unions in all fields, state institutions, city institutions, district and regional Soviets, cultural and educational organizations of the Red Army, sanatoria, hospitals, public baths, and railroads. The following are a few illustrations. The Kuznetsk region, the important coal and metallurgical base in Siberia, set aside 2,000,000 rubles in its budget for artistic purposes and gave orders

for painting and sculpture covering the most varied range from landscape to revolutionary subject. These pictures adorn many public places in the district. In the Donetz Basin the same sort of thing has been done, and on the same scale. Similarly, the railway administration has invited the best artists to do murals for railway stations, as for example, the mural painted by the artist Lanceray at the Kazan Station in Moscow. The Red Army, too, is a regular purchaser of art. Every five years it distributes tremendous orders for thousands of works of art depicting the history and the peacetime existence of the Red Army. There is not a single important station on the Moscow subway in which statuary, frescoes, ceramics, or other forms of artistic decoration have not been used. Ceramic artists are also being employed in connection with the new baths being constructed in Moscow, and today every factory has its entrance decorated in some way. It is likewise worth noting that during the past two years, the private acquisition of artistic objects to adorn workers' homes has very noticeably increased. However, the government itself, either through the Council of People's Commissars or through the Commissariat for Education, is the chief customer for all art objects.

In this far from complete enumeration, there is one thing that is especially striking—the great variety of places which use artistic adornment. This is the best proof of the fact that art in the USSR is becoming an integral part of life. As it has begun to be more closely woven into all Soviet undertakings, the appeal of and the demand for it is growing wider and wider. Thus our art is entering into our social life and thereby becoming the art of the people in the truest sense. The traditional barrier between cultural expression and the details of ordinary existence is fast disappearing. This process is accompanied by great attention to the artistic creation of objects in daily use. Some of the finest Soviet artists are working in the textile factories, in the making of agricultural and industrial posters, in the designing of furniture and household objects, and in the decoration of new stores.

There exists for the handling of this great quantity of orders a co-operative organization which acts as agent, keeps track of customers' requirements, and makes contacts with the artists. It is known as the Artists' Co-operative (VSEKOKHUDOZHNIK) and has many branches throughout the country. This co-operative has three functions: first, the receiving and distributing of commissions; second, the manufacture and distribution of artists' materials; and third, the arrangement of public exhibitions. The Artists' Co-operative is a large organization with a turnover of from twenty-five to thirty million rubles a year.

## REMUNERATION OF THE ARTIST

During my visit to the United States I was constantly questioned about how Soviet artists are paid. Usually the question took this form: In the Soviet Union do all artists receive a salary? This, of course, is not the case. The Soviet Union is interested in providing its artists with the opportunities to develop their creative life freely and to work intensively toward the mastery of their talents. To transform this living creative process into perfunctory employment, into mere performance of official duty, what could be more stupid than that! Such an idea could be entertained only by those persons who are inclined to represent Socialism as a regimented and joyless barracks-like way of life, and not as a harmoniously organized social milieu, designed to allow full freedom to individuality. It is precisely a fuller life which our country is seeking and toward which the Five-Year Plans are directed, although these plans, to be sure, necessitated for a time a certain restraint and a certain collective self-denial.

In the USSR the artists do not receive salaries, nor is the creative work of the artist allowed to be converted into mere goods, subject to all the caprices of the "market." The Soviet system of payment to artists is arranged so that while providing the means of existence, it at the same time assists in the widening of the artist's horizon, in increasing his contacts with the broad and varied aspects of life in his country today, in raising the aesthetic quality of his work, and especially in helping to establish favorable circumstances for the development of his creative individuality.

The payment of artists takes three forms. The first form is that of travelling commissions (*komandirovki*). Under this system the organizations in charge of artistic matters—the People's Commissariat for Education, the Artists' Union, the Artists' Co-operative, and other organizations—provide funds for this purpose. These commissions make it possible for the artist to travel over the whole country selecting the places most appropriate to his individual talents. The artist is free to choose his own subject matter in whatever part of the country he has been commissioned to visit. Thus artists have gone to the Caspian Sea, to the Crimea, to the Caucasus, to the high Pamirs, to the coal basins, to the new industrial projects, to the collective and state farms, to Siberia, and even to the republics of Central Asia.

On such commissions the artist receives his travelling and living expenses wherever he goes. He is not required to produce finished pictures as a result of the trip, only studies and sketches for future develop-

ment in whatever medium he chooses. In other words, all that is asked of the artist is tangible proof that he has actively applied himself in the place to which he has been sent and has not given himself up solely to contemplation. If finished pictures are ordered on the basis of sketches presented, the artist receives full price for them irrespective of the money spent on the trip. The sketches he has produced remain his property. Artists of all ages, from the oldest to the youngest, are sent on such trips. Special boards consisting of representatives from such organizations as the People's Commissariat for Education, the Artists' Union, the Artists' Co-operative, judge the resulting sketches.

A second method of payment is by general contract to the Artists' Co-operative. By this means individual artists receive definite sums of money in the course of the year and may produce anything which appeals to them as being worthwhile. Again the artist is confined to no particular subject. He merely agrees to turn over to the Artists' Co-operative one or two of his works produced during the year, the number depending on their size and importance. All other work produced during this period the artist is free to sell himself. In this, too, the Co-operative helps him.

It may be readily seen that both of these forms of payment relieve the artist of the burden of anxiety about financial matters and actually serve to liberate his creative abilities. If we add to this the orders for the decoration of factories and public buildings, and the special *komandirovki* from the People's Commissariats for Transport, Agriculture, etc., then the picture of the artist's active participation in the life of the country becomes clear. In such activities lie the guarantee for the health, strength, and courage of his creative work.

The third form of payment is the conventional one of commissioning a given artist for a specific piece of work. In this case a minimum rate is established by the trade union. Above this minimum payment prices are the affair of the contracting parties. It is hardly necessary to add that much painting and sculpture is produced by the artists and sculptors entirely on their own initiative and is sold through voluntary agreements with various organizations and individuals, especially through the regular art exhibitions.

## ART EDUCATION

In view of the wide dissemination of the pictorial arts throughout the USSR, great attention is being given to art education. Here are applied in full the principles which form the foundation of the whole

system of organization of artistic work as set forth above. The Art Department forms a separate section in the People's Commissariat for Education. Art schools of all kinds operate on the same basis as other special and technical schools, such as engineering and medicine.

Education in the art schools is entirely without cost to the students, as is all other education in the USSR. Furthermore, throughout the whole period of their studies, the students in the art technicums (the middle schools) and the higher schools (the institutes and academies), if their families have not sufficient means, receive their entire support from the state so that they may devote themselves wholly to their studies. Students receive monthly stipends, a place to live, food in special restaurants, and whatever else is necessary to the development of their creative talent.

The length of the courses of study is four years in the technicums, four to five years in the institutes, and six years in the academies. In addition to this there is a preparatory course of three years connected with the Academy of Arts and a course of four years connected with the Institute for Advanced Training (the highest course). The most diverse specialties may be pursued in the technicums such as, pedagogy, painting, book designing and illustrating, staging of mass holidays and club activities, theatrical designing, architecture. The Academy has departments of painting and graphic art, sculpture, architecture, and a number of laboratories for the allied arts. The Moscow Institute of Pictorial Arts has chairs of painting, graphic art, book making, and posters.

Art schools are scattered throughout the country. In the RSFSR<sup>3</sup> alone there are some thirty state art institutions, not including the popular amateur art circles, and a number of studios which are under the management of various social organizations. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions is the center for one network of amateur art circles in both city and country, and the Central House of Art under the Commissariat for Education is especially active in the country districts.<sup>4</sup> The other Union Republics have their own similar systems which are, however, somewhat smaller in scope.

The program under which Soviet art schools function is based on a combination of theory and practice. "Academic" and classical training is combined with the free rendering of domestic and street scenes, which involve both the study of nature and creative interpretation from

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3. Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic—the largest of the seven Republics which compose the USSR.

4. See Appendix 2.



memory. Moreover, in order that the students may receive a constant flood of fresh impressions and be closely in touch with the life of the country, in order that they may feel and understand the dynamic pulse of socialist construction and become not merely one-sided, academic artists, but citizen-artists, the students each year, as part of their training, are sent on "production practice" all over the country, to cities and to factories, to collective farms, to the national districts, to the oil fields, to the far north, and to the extreme south.

## EXHIBITIONS AND GALLERIES

Art exhibitions are constantly being held in the cities and travelling exhibits are sent to rural areas. In 1932, on the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, two very large exhibitions were held: "Fifteen Years of Soviet Art" and "Fifteen Years of Red Army Painting." Graphic art, sculpture, book and magazine illustrations, and posters were represented. There were over two thousand oil paintings, hundreds of pieces of sculpture, and several thousand examples of graphic art.

In the three months during which these exhibitions were on view over a million persons visited them, which is a startling attendance for art exhibitions. All of Soviet society and the entire Soviet press gave them special attention. Excursions from factories and shops visited them daily. The artists whose works were on view kept in constant contact with the visitors and explained their pictures. Artists who had won for themselves the title "Honored Artist of the Republic" made reports about their work using the examples hanging on the walls of the galleries for illustration. The audience was encouraged to ask questions and enter into discussions of artistic problems. Certain of the speeches made by the various artists were broadcast, both directly from the exhibition rooms and from the radio studios. The workers' press sent its representatives to the exhibitions and wrote about them for its widely distributed shop papers. Special discussions were arranged for the representatives of the Dynamo plant, the Kalinin factory, Elektrozaovod, and others. The exhibitions also aroused tremendous interest among the foreign workers in the USSR, for whom two special excursions were arranged. In addition to the general public, artists, students, writers, and poets from the whole Soviet Union visited the galleries singly and in groups.

The popularity of these displays indicates the general interest in cultural achievement in the Soviet Union and shows that great love for the beautiful and stimulating image does not diminish before the

importance of economic construction. On the contrary, it is nourished by this and, in turn, contributes to the development of the mature citizen, whose need for the fulfillment of the aesthetic and the emotional is never impaired by mental or physical labor. The ancient superficial concept of the apparent dualism between spirit and matter has no place in the experience of our people. Action with us is not a thing apart from feeling; day-to-day life is not removed from aesthetic matters; they are a part of one another.

The attention attracted by these two exhibitions is mentioned as an example of the important place occupied by art in the life of the country. Other displays of smaller scope are arranged in the Soviet Union every year. (Incidentally, there was recently on view in Moscow an exhibition of the work of theatrical designers, containing some three thousand objects, occupying eighteen large rooms of the Historical Museum.) The Moscow plan for 1936 provides for some two hundred and fifty exhibitions of the following types: one-man shows; thematic exhibits, as for example, pictures for children, pictures on special subjects such as sport, or construction; and special exhibits of wood carving and ceramics. In addition to such exhibitions shown in the regular halls, many are held directly in the factories and shops and in club buildings. Thus the artist comes into direct contact with the chief spectator to whom he is addressing himself—the worker. Meetings of artists, art critics, and theoreticians constantly take place in the workers' clubs. Out of these discussions, in which both the worker-spectators and the specialists take part, is born a popular criticism to which the utmost attention must be paid.

Special exhibitions are also held in the various state museums. In the Tretyakov Gallery recently there were displays of Russian landscape painting and of the works of such well-known painters of the past as Ivanov and Perov. In 1935 the memorable exhibition of Persian art was held in the Museum of Oriental Culture in connection with the Millennial Celebration of Firdusi, the great Persian poet. A showing of portraits by old masters was held at the end of 1934 in the Fine Arts Museum. In the Museum of Modern Western Painting there are from time to time exhibits of the work of contemporary artists. These examples serve to indicate the extremely diverse character of the exhibitions as well as the fact that they are by no means confined to merely Soviet-produced art. The growing contacts with foreign countries should be especially emphasized. During the past two years the work of artists from Poland, Latvia, Finland, China, and other countries have been shown in Moscow. Likewise there have been

exhibitions of various aspects of Soviet art in the United States,<sup>5</sup> France, Italy, England, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and several other countries.

The general management of all such exhibitions is under the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat for Education. The actual organization of them is primarily in the hands of the Artists' Co-operative.

I shall not attempt to describe the work of the museums in detail because this requires separate and extended treatment. Here it is only important to point out that in the USSR the museum is by no means simply a repository for dead things. Soviet museums enter directly into contemporary artistic and scientific life, presenting their materials so that they will add to man's knowledge and aesthetic appreciation, thus helping the workers of our country to realize the "critical mastery of the whole cultural inheritance of the human race." Lenin believed that there could be no building of Socialism without the conscious study of all the past conquest of human culture. Our museums help in critical study, as opposed to slavish imitation, by instilling an attitude of profoundest respect for the best artistic achievements of all centuries and all peoples. The beauty of the past must be used to help create still greater beauty in the future, but it must be used in such a way that the dead does not drag down the living. This policy was exemplified in the historical research connected with the recent anniversary celebrations in honor of Goethe, Hegel, and Firdusi. For several years past, intensive preparations have been under way for the Pushkin Centenary.<sup>6</sup> The classics in all fields of art are finding new life in the Soviet Union and are reappearing to our people in a fresh light.<sup>7</sup>

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5. The American public has had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with Soviet art on numerous occasions. In 1924, and again in 1929, there were held at Grand Central Palace, New York, exhibitions of painting, sculpture, and graphic art, the latter exhibition being sponsored by Amtorg. Since 1929 the Carnegie Institute has regularly included Soviet painting in its annual exhibitions. In 1933 graphic art was shown in Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities. The first exhibition of Soviet art seen in the leading museums in a country-wide tour from coast to coast opened at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Philadelphia, December, 1934. This exhibition was organized by the American Russian Institute, Philadelphia, in co-operation with the Pennsylvania Museum, the College Art Association, and the Moscow Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Voks).

6. The Pushkin Centenary will occur January 29, 1937.

7. Since this article was written, the newest development affecting all art institutions is the decision, January 17, 1936, of the Council of People's Commissars to establish an All-Union Committee on Art Affairs. The decree reads in part as follows:

In line with the raising of the cultural level of the workers and with the need for a better fulfillment of the requirements of the people in the realm of art and in line with the need for unifying the direction of the development of art in the USSR, the Central Plenary Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR decree:

1. To form an All-Union Committee on Art Affairs to be attached to the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR.

## ART OF THE MINOR NATIONALITIES OF THE SOVIET UNION

The Soviet Union is made up of many peoples. (There are 182 different nationalities within its borders.) Through the ages, wars of plunder and of excessive cruelty waged in Eastern Europe and Central Asia reduced to subjugation peoples of such rich cultural pasts as the Uzbeks, Tadzhiks, Turcomans, Kirghizes, Buryats, and Mongolians. Tsarist oppression was also most effective in wiping out the ancient culture of the Ukrainians, Georgians, White Russians,<sup>8</sup> Poles, Jews, Armenians, and others. Not until the October Revolution of 1917 did all the nationalities of the former Russian Empire receive real liberation. The development of the Soviet policy regarding the national minorities which allows for the expanding of cultures, "national in form, but socialist in content," affords opportunity to all peoples of the country to retain their traditional cultural patterns and at the same time stimulates their participation in general socialist construction.

The sensitive, aesthetic qualities of the minor nationalities of the Soviet Union, which in the past went chiefly into ornamentation and handicraft work are now finding expression in finished works of art. For example, an exhibit of Uzbek art was recently held in Moscow by the Uzbekistan Artists' Union. To the great pleasure of the public this exhibition compared favorably with other exhibits held in our capital. However, it had its own manner, its own style, its own specific composition built into a plan most easily described as "realistic decorativism." It must be remembered that nineteen years ago the Uzbeks were not producing paintings at all because they were forbidden by religious laws to make pictures of man (considered as the image of God).

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2. To invest in this All-Union Committee on Art Affairs the authority on all art matters with control over theatre and other spectator enterprises, cinema organizations, music, graphic arts, sculpture and other institutions of art, and over those educational institutions which have as their aim the preparation of cadres of workers in the theatre, the cinema, music, and the graphic arts.

3. To order the People's Commissariats of Education of the various republics of the Union and other institutions having under their aegis the management of art affairs to transfer within a month to the All-Union Committee on Art Affairs all those institutions referred to in paragraph 2, together with the materials and financial funds allotted to those institutions for 1936.

4. To include the central control over the film and photo industry in the duties of the All-Union Committee on Art Affairs.

5. To establish a council of representatives from the Unions and the Autonomous Republics which is to be under the supervision of the president of the All-Union Committee on Art Affairs.

8. People inhabiting the region now known as the White Russian Socialist Soviet Republic.

## CREATIVE FREEDOM IN THE USSR

The foregoing indicates the tremendous scope of the creative effort of the artists of the Soviet Union, and so in part answers the question as to the extent of creative freedom and of development of artistic individuality in the USSR. The great variety of style and content of the new Soviet art as exemplified at the "Fifteen Year Exhibition" indicates clearly the wide range of artistic individualities finding expression in the Soviet Union. This, in our opinion, is the natural result of increasing the material independence of the artist and of bringing him close to the multitudinous activities of the building of a new society. But this increased creative freedom is true also in a higher sense.

Spinoza, in one of his treatises, said that if a stone thrown into the air possessed the ability to think, it would be convinced that it fell back to earth only because it willed to do so, and it would never occur to the stone that it was compelled to fall back by the iron law of gravity. This example of Spinoza's is an excellent illustration of the co-existence of free will and of causal determinism. Every genuine self-respecting creative individual, not actuated by mercenary motives, feels himself to be master of his own will. In any country, under any social system, the artist, when not under direct pressure of material need, takes brush in hand in order to express truly whatever he feels and perceives—whatever stimulates a creative response in him.

But the artist, even when materially independent, does not live in a vacuum. Like other people, he is first of all a social being; he lives in society; his interests are bound to it by ties of friendship, family, comradeship, and the dependence of his economic and social existence on the rise or fall of that society. To the extent that society is not homogeneous, but divided into classes, and the classes in turn are divided into many different groups, naturally the artist too is swept into the orbit of the experience and interests of one or another of these classes and groups; and the interests of his class dictate the direction of his art, dictate it in a thousand quite ordinary ways. In this sense the artist is not objectively free. Naive and primitive indeed would be the person who would insist, "Say one or the other—the artist is either free or not free." Our answer can only be, "Both one and the other—subjectively free and objectively not free." This contradiction results in a psychological conflict in the individual artist. In periods of transition, when a class is in process of self-assertion and of organic growth, this contradiction becomes less marked although it never quite disappears in a class society. Examples of such eras include Greece, in

the period of the city states, the Renaissance, and the European art of the second half of the seventeenth century.

In bourgeois society, the more talented and the more gifted the artist, the less is he limited by his class and the greater the objective truths revealed in his work. Thus it was that Goethe, counselor and minister of state, was able to present many objective truths in his art; that Tolstoy the landowner was able to describe more or less objectively the mood of the peasant revolts. But Goethe and Tolstoy at the same time showed in their works all the tendencies of their class. This is where it is necessary to make critical, historical distinctions.

The artist of the Soviet Union is by the very structure of our society freed from those economic deterring influences which restrict the subjective freedom of the artist: the influence of patronage, of financial dependence; and of standards of selection arbitrarily established by "business people" dealing in art. But naturally at the same time the Soviet artist objectively expresses the ideas of the dominating class. However, these are special ideas, and this is a special class. The proletariat, which has taken power in the Soviet Union, is building a *classless society*. The dictatorship of the proletariat itself is only a means for the building of this society, which from the point of view of art means freeing art from the limitation of class. The proletariat fighting for communist principles is, in the final analysis, fighting for its own liquidation as a class. The consciousness of this means in itself a new point of view and a new and freer attitude to art and life. It means coming to grips with life and mastering it (armed with a full understanding of natural laws and the development of human institutions and customs). This approach provides fertile soil for the growth of intellect and emotions, and we believe that the future classless society will afford the highest type of artistic freedom.

Because of these social principles the creative work of our artists promises to become the freest kind of creative work. In our struggle for mastery in art, a fetish is made of no single style, and no one aesthetic vision is over-emphasized. Equally loved and esteemed in our country are artists of such widely different methods as Deyneka, Ryzhshsky, S. Gerasimov, and Yohnson. The young Soviet artists are travelling widely different roads. Side by side with the ideological picture, one finds nature studies, nudes, and still life. But although they may use different media, the overwhelming majority of our artists work with the rest of the people toward one goal—the building of a

new life. This is becoming apparent in every painting, every piece of sculpture, and every mural.

It is entirely natural that in the Soviet Union special importance should be attributed to a type of picture which is, by its aesthetic or emotional effect, able to lift historical or modern social subjects to a high level of generalization. In our country pictures are considered not merely a means of reflecting the world but of interpreting the world and thus affecting society. The artist himself interprets the world through his paintings and helps those who view them to comprehend it. A painting or piece of sculpture is not only a vehicle of aesthetic pleasure, but it also teaches and directs thinking and the emotions. Herein lies the explanation of the struggle taking place in our country to achieve a type of painting which is of high aesthetic quality, enriched by broad and deep philosophical content and social analysis.

The 1934 showing of Soviet art in the Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia called forth such remarks as: "Here is tremendous and varied freedom of expression," "Here it is easy to breathe." And Soviet art does express the free atmosphere of a country full of enthusiasm for work, a country of radically changing human psychology, a country fighting for a new type of human being who will be free from economic pressure and from the distinction between mental and physical labor—the integrated human being of the future who will receive from society according to his need and give according to his ability.

## APPENDIX I

### HOW THE ARTISTS' CO-OPERATIVE FUNCTIONS

**I**N connection with the statement in the foregoing article by Mr. Beskin regarding the functions of the Artists' Co-operative, it is of interest to quote some further details and figures on the activities of the Co-operative. The following notes are taken from an article by K. Kravchenko entitled "Life and Work of Soviet Artists," which was published in the VOKS Bulletin, "Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Art in the USSR," for October, 1934.

The Co-operative has sixteen branches in the USSR and 4,000 members in the RSFSR alone. Its chief branches are in Moscow and Leningrad.

When the Co-operative was founded in 1929, it received a loan of 15,000 rubles from the Central Communal Bank, and by 1930 it had a turnover of 980,000 rubles. In 1931 its turnover was 5,000,000 rubles, in 1932 11,000,000 rubles, in 1933 14,000,000 rubles, and in 1934 approximately 18,000,000 rubles.

In the Moscow Co-operative, which is taken as an example since it is typical of the others, the membership includes 800 painters, 200 sculptors, 370 graphic artists, and 251 industrial artists. The Co-operative has its own factories which produce artists' supplies, and it also sponsors enterprises where certain artists are given constant work. These include a decorative art shop, a textile designing shop, a modeling shop, a children's toy shop, a marble section, an enamel cloisonné section, and others. The Artists' Unions of Palekh, Mstera, and Fedoskin, famous for their lacquer work, are also affiliated with the Artists' Co-operative. There are some five hundred artists working in these shops in Moscow alone. The artists so engaged have a normal working day of six hours and receive from 300 to 500 rubles a month.

As to travelling commissions given to artists in order to enable them to visit new construction projects or collective farms, to join expeditions to remote parts of the country or wherever the artist may wish, these tours may last from one and a half to three months and in some cases much longer. The artist receives a monthly remuneration of 600 rubles plus travelling expenses, and is supplied with the necessary materials at nominal prices. In 1934, 400 artists were sent on such commissions, and a sum of over 300,000 rubles was assigned for this purpose by the Council of People's Commissars, the Artists'



Co-operative, the Trade Unions, the People's Commissariat for Transportation, and other organizations. The number of artists engaged in these roving commissions has greatly increased since 1934.

The Artists' Co-operative functions actively in selling the work of Soviet artists. Its chief customer is the Central State Buying Commission, which buys mainly for museums, institutes for the study of various regions, palaces of culture, workers' clubs, sanatoria, rest homes, and similar organizations. In 1933 the Artists' Co-operative sold 463 paintings by 264 artists for the sum of 220,800 rubles—an average of 478 rubles apiece. The Co-operative also frequently gives special orders to artists. In 1934, 900,000 rubles were assigned for this purpose. In addition to its own orders it distributes all orders which are commissioned from the larger shops, factories, and organizations. Thus the Donetz Coal Basin gave a large order for paintings on "The New Donbas," and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions ordered a large group of panels, paintings, and graphic albums depicting "The Trade Unions in the Building of Socialism."

During 1932 and 1933 commissions totaling over 1,000,000 rubles were distributed among the artists for the exhibition of "Fifteen Years of the Red Army." A group of mural decorators headed by Aleksandr Deyneka painted a large series of panels to adorn the new factory kitchens. The new chemical plant at Berezniki bought all the works painted by Lekht while he was there on his two travelling commissions in 1930-31, for which he received 20,000 rubles. Six panels made by a group of artists consisting of Savitsky, A. Gerasimov, Kotov, Grekov, and Shukhmin were bought for the schools of the All-Union Central Executive Committee for 36,000 rubles. These are only a few examples of the numerous fields of activity opening up to Soviet artists and the remuneration they receive. In order to attract young sculptors, orders were given out for various models on specific themes. When an artist is in need of funds for the completion of a large work, the Co-operative helps with a loan, which may be paid back in work or in installments.

In 1934 the Artists' Co-operative commenced the construction of an important plant occupying about thirty acres of land where all of its enterprises will be concentrated. It includes a shop for monumental sculpture, a modeling shop, a shop for sculptural reproduction, a glass pavilion, numerous individual studios, and extensive gardens. The Artists' Co-operative also arranges exhibitions dealing with special subjects and containing the work of both individual artists and groups.

These are shown in the large cities and in traveling exhibits throughout the country.

Prices received for individual paintings, generally speaking, range as follows: from 300 to 10,000 rubles for oil paintings, from 150 to 300 rubles for water colors; sculptural work may bring up to 30,000 rubles. Any artist who wishes may become a member of the co-operatives. The admission fee is ten rubles. The dues are graduated, depending on the artist's income. Apart from those dealing through the Artists' Co-operative there are a number of other organizations which buy directly from the artists, among them the Tretyakov Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Russian Museum in Leningrad, the Museum of the Revolution, and others. Many artists work as illustrators and book designers for the various publishing houses such as the State Publishing House of Fine Literature and the Academia Publishing House. In addition, there is the IZOGIZ, a special Art Publishing Company which issues periodicals, monographs on individual artists, and reproductions. There are also wide opportunities for Soviet artists in the field of theatrical decoration.

In the Artists' Co-operative apartment house in Moscow there are apartments and studios on every floor—both individual studios and large studios for group projects. There are play rooms, rest rooms, a large central restaurant, and a kindergarten. There is also a mechanized laundry, a barber shop, baths, a club room, a solarium, and a library for the adults. The house is surrounded by lawns where there are tennis and volley ball courts. This apartment house naturally takes care of only a small section of the artist population in Moscow, but despite the crowded living conditions in that city the artist is everywhere entitled by law to a separate studio. Plans are under way for the construction of an artists' settlement where houses especially suited to the needs of artists will be built, and where all the facilities needed to carry on their work will be available.

## APPENDIX II

### AMATEUR ARTISTS IN THE SOVIET UNION

(From an article by N. Chetyrkin in "Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art in the USSR." *Voks Bulletin*, Oct., 1934.)

The importance assumed in the artistic life of the Soviet Union by the development of amateur groups of workers and peasants is indicated in the following summary of the Chetyrkin article.

In the summer of 1933 there was an exhibition of painting by worker-artists in Moscow. There were pictures of city streets and of construction projects; pictures of the women of Uzbekistan meeting in the fields at cotton picking time, deciding to throw off forever the veils that have hidden their faces for centuries; pictures of harvesting on collective farms—pictures full of color and rhythm and force, weak in technique, sometimes crudely drawn, but vibrating, stirring canvases nevertheless. The artists were plumbers, metal workers, carpenters, physical culture teachers, mechanics, shoe factory workers, and workers from other industries. Many of the artists represented were shock troop workers and had received premiums for excelling in their jobs. Most of them were workers who took an active part in the social as well as productive activities of their factories, and who still found time to spend in the various art "circles" that are a part of every factory and institution in the Soviet Union.

There are tens of thousands of these worker-artists in the USSR. In the RSFSR alone there are over five hundred art circles in the various workers' clubs, and many hundred more outside of the clubs. Even more numerous are the small worker-artist groups in the shops and factories, in the "Red Corners" of various institutions. There are also many art groups working on wall newspapers, printed papers, and in reading rooms and libraries. In Moscow there are two large worker-artist studios and over thirty special art circles, besides the numerous ones connected with individual factories. The various art magazines and some of the principal newspapers receive many contributions from the worker-artists, which frequently are printed. At the end of 1933 the Peasants' Gazette organized a drawing contest for the artists among their village correspondents. Many of the contributions were crude efforts by persons who had never before used a pencil, but many others were exceptionally successful in their general ideas, penetrating in their interpretation, executed with skill, and in some cases with talent. The best of them were published in an album by the Peasants' Gazette.

The October Revolution, the Civil War, the construction of industrial plants, collective agriculture, socialist competition, the work of shock brigades, economic and cultural construction in the national republics, the emancipation of women, the elimination of illiteracy, the struggle for a new cultural mode of life, Soviet sport—such are the subjects which are popular among these amateur Soviet artists. Along with the recent emphasis on avocational activities and relaxation, greater attention than previously has been paid to the more joyous aspects of life. The result is pictures of people at play as well as people at work. A great deal of the work of the amateur artists has a practical application. They work on newspapers, decorate their own clubs, make posters, and work on stage settings for club performances and mass celebrations. The fine pageantry of the May Day and November Seventh celebrations is vivid evidence of the part played by the worker-artist in such events.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the role which the worker-artist movement, young and unformed though it is, is playing in bringing to the front great numbers of talented people, in creating a new intelligentsia from among the workers. These amateur artists do not confine themselves merely to contemporary events. They are profoundly interested in the culture of the past, which is being carefully preserved for them. They are frequent visitors to the galleries and museums; they realize they have much to learn from the old masters and from professional artists.

For the most talented the way is open for further training and professional work. The work of these factory artists is watched carefully, and it not infrequently happens that a worker with natural artistic ability gives up his job and is sent by his trade union to art school, where educational and living expenses are taken care of by the state. The important problem which concerns Soviet art teachers in the case of these worker-artists is to find a way to teach them mastery of artistic technique without spoiling the freshness, vigor, and originality of approach which is in part due to their very lack of training and to their closeness to the living scenes, events, and people which form the content of their work.

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C. B.

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