



Robert Fal'k, *Still Life with Potatoes*, 1955. 69 x 85 cm.
Igor' Sanovich Collection, Moscow.
With thanks to Dmitry Tratsevsky.

Still Life and the Vanity of Socialist Realism: Robert Fal'k's *Potatoes*, 1955

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On December 1, 1962, Nikita Khrushchev confronted a small still life painting that left him spluttering with rage and incomprehension. “But you can’t make anything out!” “Precisely, nothing,” one of his entourage, art functionary Vladimir Serov, provoked him further: ““And the artist was paid 50,000 rubles for that!” ‘What!!’ Khrushchev’s eyes turned to slits and his cheeks began to wobble. ‘50,000? For this daubing? ... My grandson could do better if he wanted to! ... The Soviet people have no need for this. Out of our country!’”¹

The offending work, *Potatoes*, painted in 1955 by Robert Fal'k (1886–1958), was exhibited posthumously for the first time at the major retrospective *Thirty Years of the*

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¹Nina Moleva, *Manezh. God 1962* (Moscow, 1989), 12–13. Vladimir Serov was first secretary of the Russian Federation Artists’ Union (established in 1960 as a conservative Russian counterweight to the liberal metropolitan Moscow organization). A slightly different account, where Khrushchev likens Fal'k’s still life to infantile fecal messing, was given in “Khrushchev on Modern Art,” *Encounter* (April 20, 1963): 102–3, reprinted in *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture 1962–1964*, ed. Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labeledz (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 101–2. It was reported to a meeting of the presidium of the Moscow Artists’ Union’s (MOSKha) party organization that Khrushchev had called Fal'k’s painting “daubing” (*maznia*), complained that he saw no joy in such painting, and declared that money must not be paid for such work (to which someone present at the MOSKha meeting interjected, “And it never was!”). See D. Mochal'skii, participant report on the visit, presented to board of MOSKha, Stenogramma zasedaniia pravleniia MOSKha, December 4, 1962, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), f. 2943, op. 2, d. 57.

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Moscow Artists' Union (MOSKh), where Khrushchev encountered it.² The exhibition, held in Moscow's Central Exhibition Hall or "Manège" from November 1962 to February 1963, presented a reassessment of the development and canon of Soviet art, cautiously reflecting the renewed interest in modernism and the prerevolutionary avant-garde, which had resurfaced among artists and art historians in MOSKh's so-called "left wing" since Stalin's death.³ According to contemporary accounts, the Politburo members, Serov, and other representatives of the conservative wing of the art world who accompanied Khrushchev on his state visit, set out deliberately to provoke the first secretary into suppressing the liberalization of artistic criteria—for which the Moscow Artists' Union was seen as a hotbed—aiming to destabilize Khrushchev's hold on power.⁴ They skillfully pressed Khrushchev's sensitive points, presenting the exhibition in general, and works such as Fal'k's in particular, as a challenge to party control of art, and as a rejection of Socialist Realism's principles of *narodnost'* (national popular spirit) and *ideinost'* (significant, ideologically correct content) in favor of formalism and artistic autonomy.⁵ In the months following the "Manège Affair"—as the exhibition and subsequent reprisals became known—a series of measures were taken to rein in liberalization and reassert party guidance.⁶

But what of Fal'k's *Potatoes*, a small (69 x 85 cm) oil painting in warm earthen tones depicting, simply, a basket of potatoes on a table? That opponents of de-Stalinization such as Serov could count on this painting to trigger Khrushchev's anger suggests that, at this juncture in 1962 when it was first publicly exhibited, the painting was not so innocent as its humble subject matter and quiet, unassertive manner might indicate. Indeed, the first secretary's sense of being excluded by the work—both as an individual lacking in cultural

²*Potatoes* was one of seven or eight paintings by Fal'k shown at the exhibition. It is rarely identified precisely in accounts of this episode, which often refer simply to Fal'k's "still life," but it is described unambiguously in Moleva, *Manezh*, 12.

³"K XXX-letiiu MOSKh," *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, 1962, no. 9; D. Sarab'ianov, "Sozdat' ob'ektivnuiu istoriiu sovet'skogo iskusstva," *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, 1962, no. 11; Susan Reid, "In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6:4 (2005): 673–716.

⁴It was rumored that one aim of the provocation was to secure Serov's restoration as President of the USSR Academy of Arts (Johnson and Labeledz, *Khrushchev and the Arts*, 8). Khrushchev's entourage included, in addition to Serov, Mikhail Suslov, Leonid Il'ichev, Iurii Andropov, Alexei Kosygin, Head of the CC CPSU Culture Section Dmitrii Polikarpov, USSR Minister of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva, First Secretary of the USSR Union of Artists Sergei Gerasimov, and others. See "Vysokoe prizvanie sovet'skogo iskusstva – sluzhit' narodu, delu kommunizma," *Pravda*, December 2, 1962.

⁵Accounts of this event—based on witness accounts, rumor and memory—differ on the details and in the extent to which they present it as a deliberate provocation to undermine the cause of cultural liberalization and destabilize Khrushchev. See RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2, d. 57; Moleva, *Manezh*; E. Beliutin, "Khrushchev v Manezhe," *Druzhba narodov*, 1990, no. 1:136–44; Iurii Gerchuk, "Krovoizliianie v MOSKh," *ili Khrushchev v Manezhe* (Moscow, 2008), 93–100; L. P. Talochkin and I. G. Alpatova, eds, *Drugoe iskusstvo: Moskva, 1956–76*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1991), 99–120; Vladimir Kostin, "Omrachennyi prazdnik. (O vystavke k tridsatiletiiu MOSKha)," *Tvorchestvo*, 1989, no. 8:20–26; "Khrushchev on Modern Art," *Encounter* (April 20, 1963): 102–3; Johnson and Labeledz, *Khrushchev and the Arts*, 101–5; and Patricia Blake, "Freedom and Control in Literature, 1962–3," in *Politics in the Soviet Union: 7 Cases*, ed. Alexander Dallin and Alan F. Westin (New York, 1966), 165–206.

⁶E. Afanas'eva et al., eds, *Kul'tura i vlast' ot Stalina do Gorbacheva: Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS 1958–1964: Dokumenty* (Moscow, 2000), 293–383; RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2, ed. khr. 148, ll. 6–8 (protocol of meeting of the presidium of MOSKh Party Organization, April 8, 1963); Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, op. 55, d. 49, ll. 109–19 (letter from artists to Central Committee calling for reconstruction of MOSKh); Johnson and Labeledz, *Khrushchev and the Arts*.

capital, and as leader of the party-state—may partly explain his anger and paranoia about hidden meanings and artistic subversion. He grumbled, “I will probably be told that I have not reached the point where I can understand such works—the usual argument of our opponents in culture.”⁷ The work seemed at once to represent “nothing” and to harbor a surfeit of elusive meanings, potentially dangerous enough, in his view, to warrant expulsion from the country for suspected treason.

While Khrushchev’s response alerts us to the problematic status of Fal’k’s still life and its resistance to interpretation, his competencies in art appreciation (or lack thereof) are not our focus here. This essay aims to probe the multiple and complex meanings of *Potatoes*, not all of which were available to the first secretary or could be articulated at the time. The Manège Affair made it impossible to engage seriously, in the public sphere, with works shown at the offending exhibition *Thirty Years of MOSKh*. Following Khrushchev’s outburst, defenders of Fal’k and of other artists he condemned there were silenced.⁸ Plans to publish a catalogue presenting the new revisionist narrative were shelved, and published reception was largely limited, for years to come, to condemnatory clichés and pejorative labels imputing formalism, decadence, cosmopolitanism, and alienation from the *narod*, rather than probing more deeply the intrinsic or extrinsic reasons why his paintings were so troublesome.⁹

⁷“Khrushchev on Modern Art,” 102.

⁸Art critics deemed excessively liberal—including Vladimir Kostin, German Nedoshivin, Aleksei Gastev, and Dmitrii Sarab’ianov, one of the most dedicated and prolific champions of Fal’k’s work—were given a dressing down and compelled to publicly confess their mistakes and undergo “self-criticism” for their “erroneous support of formalist tendencies” (RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2, ed. khr. 148 [protocol of meeting of presidium of party organization of MOSKh, April 8, 1963], ll. 6–8). Ilya Ehrenburg, another staunch defender of Fal’k, was also attacked repeatedly in the press and by party secretary Leonid Ilychev, in a speech delivered on March 7, 1963 (printed in *Pravda* on March 9), which counted his defense of Fal’k among the writer’s misdemeanors (Johnson and Labeledz, *Khrushchev and the Arts*, 122–47; on Fal’k, 144).

⁹V. Kostin, “Omrachennyi prazdnik iskusstva,” *Tvorchestvo*, 1989, no. 8:20–26; Susan E. Reid, “Destalinization and the Remodernization of Soviet Art” (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 601. A rare written (but unpublished) indication of what sympathetic professionals during the Thaw valued in Fal’k’s work, as well as of its problematic nature, appears in briefing notes for tour guides at the exhibition *Thirty Years of MOSKh*, drafted by art historian Miuda Iablonskaia. These refer to his “delicate painterly culture (*kul'tura zhivopisi*), delicate combinations of colors, and thoughtful treatment of the surface of the canvas.” Iablonskaia also discussed the significance of Cézanne for Russian artists. See M. Iablonskaia, “Materialy po propagandistskoi raboty po vystavke ‘30 let MOSKha,’ 1962,” *Tsentral'ny gosudarstvennyi arkhiv goroda Moskvyy* (TsGA Moskvyy [formerly TsALIM]), f. 21 op. 1 d. 152, l. 24. The stock accusations used against artists in the Manège Affair included formalism, pessimism, and denigration of the Soviet person. *Khudozhnik*, the conservative, demagogic and Russian chauvinist organ of the Russian Federation Artists’ Union, published an article allegedly written by a lay viewer which described one of Fal’k’s still lifes: “Why, in depicting fruits, offer them up to the viewer in a state of decay (*v gnilom vide*)? The kneaded, chewed up (*miataia, zhevanaia*) paint application, ochre and greenish colors exacerbate the impression of decay. Can such a picture give aesthetic enjoyment? Surely no one would want to hang it in their dining room! Or only to permanently spoil their appetite!” (A. Eremenko, “Nel'zia molchat' ...,” *Khudozhnik*, 1963, no. 2:17). The visitors’ comments books are held at TsGA Moskvyy, f. 21, op. 1, dd. 154–61, 163–64. On divergent public opinions expressed there see Reid, “In the Name.” Viewers’ comments on Fal’k included unsubstantiated insults, anti-Semitic, chauvinist stigmatization, such as “[Send] Fal’k, Shterenberg, Konchalovskii to Israel!” (TsGA Moskvyy, f. 21, op.1, d. 159, l. 22). Taking their cue from Khrushchev, they charged Fal’k with decadence, sexual deviance and mental illness (*ibid.*, d. 155, l. 2 ob.). However, positive responses to Fal’k also continued to appear in the comments books. Greater attention was paid at the time, both in the press and in visitors’ comments books, to Fal’k’s *Nude in an Armchair* (1922), than to the still lifes.

Fal'k's work—which even before the Manège Affair had rarely been reproduced or seriously discussed in public—was consigned to oblivion until the late 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰

To reconstruct the meanings Fal'k's painting held in the 1950s and early 1960s, at the time when the artist painted it and when the Soviet public encountered it, necessarily involves a degree of informed speculation and interpretation, drawing both on circumstantial evidence and on the intrinsic, formal qualities of the piece. We must also consider Fal'k's frame of reference and artistic principles, notably his commitment to continuing early twentieth century modernist aesthetic investigations of color, perception, and painterly surface.¹¹ Khrushchev's unqualified rejection positioned the artist and his work as an antagonistic “other” to the party-state, to the *narod* it claimed to represent, and to the sole legitimate Soviet art it authorized: Socialist Realism. Yet, according to acquaintances and students of Fal'k, political provocation would seem to have been very far from the artist's aims, among which engagement of any kind with state power—whether to gain favor or to challenge it—played little part.¹²

This article arises from a long-standing curiosity concerning the strength of feeling that Fal'k and his work aroused among Soviet and Russian professional and lay viewers,

¹⁰A notable exception to the silence in the early 1960s was Ilya Ehrenburg's account of meetings with Fal'k in his memoirs, *Liudi, gody, zhizn'* (Moscow, 1961). Ehrenburg had continued to “talk painting with Fal'k and Konchalovskii” in the postwar period (Ilya Ehrenburg, *Post-War Years 1945–1954*, vol. 4, *Men, Years, Life*, trans. Tatiana Shebunina (London, 1966), 40, 231–33. French critic Jean Keim began work on a monograph in 1956, but only an article appeared, “A Moscou: Un grand peintre, Robert Falk,” *Combat* (July 5, 1958). An exhibition was held in Akademgorodok in 1967 and a catalogue published in a tiny print-run of 1000, with a foreword by Il'ia Ehrenburg, *Robert Fal'k* (Novosibirsk, 1967). Only in 1974 did the first monographic study, by Dmitrii Sarab'ianov, appear, published in German in the GDR in 1974: Dmitri Sarabjanov, *Robert Falk*, trans. Helmut Barth (Dresden, 1974). This was based on a Russian manuscript “Khudozhnik Fal'k,” written probably in the 1960s (cited by Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 36n.4 [see below in this footnote]). An article had also appeared: D. Sarab'ianov, “Zhivopis' Fal'ka,” *Tvorchestvo*, 1967, no. 2:17–18. Numerous publications followed in the late 1970s–1980s. See A. M. Kazarnovskaia, *Katalog vystavki grafiki R. R. Fal'ka* (Novosibirsk, 1978); D. Sarab'ianov, “Introduction,” in E. Levitan et al., *Robert Fal'k: Risunki, akvareli, guashi* (Moscow, 1979); M. V. Alpatov, “Zhivopis' Fal'ka,” in Alpatov, *Etiudy po vseobshchei istorii iskusstv: Izbrannye iskusstvovedcheskie raboty* (Moscow, 1979), 257–63; R. R. Fal'k, *Besedy ob iskusstve: Pis'ma: Vospominaniia o khudozhnike* (Moscow, 1981); A. V. Shchekin-Krotova, “Stanovlenie khudozhnika,” *Novyi mir*, 1983, no. 10; idem, “Liudi i obrazy,” in *Panorama iskusstv* 8 (1985): 196; idem, “Monolog o Fal'ke,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (April 8, 1989); Tat'iana Levina, *Robert Fal'k* (Moscow, 1996); Alpatov, “Vstupitel'naia zametka k vospominaniiam A. Shchekin-Krotovoi, ‘Stanovlenie khudozhnika,’” *Novyi mir*, 1983, no. 10:207; D. V. Sarab'ianov and Iu. V. Didenko, *Zhivopis' Roberta Fal'ka: Polnyi katalog proizvedenii* (Moscow, 2006); and Vera Chaikovskaia, *Tri lika russkogo iskusstva XX veka: Robert Fal'k, Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin, Aleksandr Samokhvalov* (Moscow, 2006).

¹¹Fal'k's principles were transmitted through his pedagogy and writings and recorded in accounts of contemporaries including Ehrenburg, Fal'k's wife Angelina Shchekin-Krotova, and his students. See documents published in Sarabjanov, *Robert Falk*, including Fal'k's lectures and correspondence; Erik Bulatov, “Gespräche mit Falk,” in Sarabjanov, *Robert Falk*, 257–58; and Il'ia Kabakov, *60-e–70-e Zapiski o neofitsial'noi zhizni v Moskve* (Vienna, 1999), 11–15.

¹²Accounts of Fal'k represent him almost as a Holy Fool: unworldly, ascetic and indifferent to power, selflessly dedicated to his vocation alone, and acknowledging only one master, art (Shchekin-Krotova, “Stanovlenie khudozhnika”; idem, “Liudi i obrazy”; idem, “Monolog o Fal'ke”; Levina, *Robert Fal'k*). This image is also presented by Fal'k's fictionalized alter ego, discussed below: the artist Saburov in Il'ia Ehrenburg, “Ottepel',” first published in *Znamia*, 1954, no. 5: 14–87, and in monograph form (*Ottepel'* [Moscow, 1954]). Later, Fal'k was also the model for the artist Robert Viktorovich in Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Sonechka and Other Stories*, trans. and ed. Arch Tait (Birmingham, UK, 1998).

ranging from veneration to repugnance.¹³ It also seeks to contribute to a more critical and nuanced understanding of artistic opposition or nonconformism. Much important work has been conducted over the past 15–20 years critically reexamining such categories as resistance, sedition, dissent, and dissidence.¹⁴ Yet, in regard to Soviet art and artists, these paradigms remain dominant. The art market, exhibitions, and publications for the general public largely perpetuate Cold War binaries of official/unofficial and the associated myths of freedom, artistic autonomy, and the heroic outsider-artist: a version of the “tenacious liberal subject” which Anna Krylova so cogently critiqued.¹⁵ Work is still needed to define more precisely the shifting nature and location of artistic “resistance” or “sedition” as these were constructed in specific historical junctures.¹⁶

After a brief introduction to Fal'k, I will begin by considering the genre of still life and the liminal position assigned to it within the practice and canon of Socialist Realism, before turning to Fal'k's late still life, *Potatoes*, which caused so much trouble. I shall explore the cultural meanings, which in the 1950s–60s attached both to the subject matter and to the manner in which it was painted. Precisely its apparent insignificance, its “nothing-ness” and self-absorbed impenetrability, I will propose, were part of the problem, inviting the state's paranoid interpretations. Two main sets of meanings will be explored. The first, closer to the Soviet realist mode of seeing art as a “reflection” of life, focuses on the subject matter, potatoes, and treats the work as a document of biographical and social experience of hunger and survival. The second, a modernist reading, brings to bear the concerns of Formalist criticism with the difference between art and life and, above all, the disinterestedness of the aesthetic. Either way, the authority and effectiveness of party-state power are called in question.

ROBERT FAL'K

In the early twentieth century, Robert Fal'k—painter, graphic artist, theater designer, and art teacher—had been one of the leading Russian followers of French Postimpressionism, above all of Paul Cézanne. He was a member of the artists' association “Bubnovyi valet” (Jack of Diamonds), along with like-minded “Cézannists” such as Petr Konchalovskii and

¹³When talking to Moscow artists and art historians during the last years of the Soviet Union I was often puzzled by the sudden inarticulacy that beset them when asked to explain this effect to non-initiates.

¹⁴Space does not permit a full discussion here. See, *inter alia*, essays by Anna Krylova, Lynne Viola, Michael David-Fox, and others in Michael David-Fox et al., eds., *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History* (Bloomington, IN, 2003); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton, 2006); and Kevin M. F. Platt and Benjamin Nathans, “Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Ins and Outs of Late Soviet Culture,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2011): 301–24.

¹⁵Anna Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika* 1:1 (2000): 119–46. Examples include *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant Garde* (Los Angeles, 1999); and, more recently, the exhibition “Breaking the Ice” (Tsukanov Foundation curated by A. Erofeev at Saatchi Gallery, London, 2012–13, reviews at http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/current/breaking_the_ice_reviews.php). All URLs cited in this article were active as of February 1, 2017.

¹⁶On the stance of apolitical, alternative behavior see Platt and Nathans, “Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content,” 322; and Vladimir Kozlov et al., *Sedition: Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev* (New Haven, 2011). For the later, conceptual art of the 1970s and 1980s, useful context is provided by Yurchak, *Everything*.

Il'ia Mashkov.¹⁷ Fal'k spent the years 1928 to 1937 in Paris, returning to the Soviet Union in 1938. His sojourn abroad, combined with his Jewish ethnicity, Germanic family name, and his continued dedication to the French school and foreign modernist concerns, cast over him the pall of “cosmopolitanism” and potential treachery. During the postwar “anticosmopolitan” campaign his work was found to lack *narodnost'*, both in the sense of popular accessibility and of Russian national identity.¹⁸ Because of his self-reflexive concern with technical questions of expression and color and his failure to engage with the norms of Socialist Realism, established during his absence abroad, critics accused Fal'k of “formalism” and “political indifference.”¹⁹

Isolated from the institutions of Soviet art, and excluded from commissions and exhibitions, Fal'k found paid employment as a designer for the theater. Sympathetic and informed reception of his work, and dissemination of his artistic principles, took place only behind the scenes, in the private or semi-private sphere. He had a dedicated circle of followers and admirers, including young artists such as Erik Bulatov, Il'ia Kabakov, Vladimir Veisberg, Boris Birger, Mikhail Ivanov, Andrei Vasnetsov, Nikolai Andronov, and Pavel Nikonov.²⁰ The 1962 exhibition, which launched Fal'k to notoriety, was one of the first times his work was shown in a major exhibition, after years of obscurity.²¹

DAILY BREAD: THE GENRE OF STILL LIFE

The liminality of Fal'k's *Potatoes* in relation to official criteria and public institutions lay partly in the specificity of its genre; it took to an extreme the characteristics of still life that set it at odds with Socialist Realism, established as the sole legitimate “method” for Soviet art since 1934. Genre categories mattered a great deal in the practices, institutions, reward structures, and discourses of Socialist Realism. They can therefore be useful tools to understand how the canon of Socialist Realism was formed, maintained, nuanced, and, at

¹⁷G. Pospelov, *Bubnovyi valet: Primitiv i gorodskoi fol'klor v moskovskoi zhivopisi 1910-kh godov* (Moscow, 1990); idem, “Bubnovyi valet” v russkom avangarde (St. Petersburg, 2004).

¹⁸Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 56 n.2. Fal'k grew up in a German-speaking family. He was treated with mistrust when he returned from Paris in 1938 (Sarabjanov, *Robert Falk*, 48, 235).

¹⁹Ehrenburg, *Selections from People, Years, Life*, 205; Aleksandr Shatalov, “Chelovek sezannovskoi natsional'nosti: Neizvestnyi Fal'k,” *New Times*, July 17, 2012, <https://newtimes.ru/stati/others/e1035fe2366c668042cfea1b430ebbde-chelovek-sezannovskoi-nacuoalnostu.html>.

²⁰Bulatov, “Gespräche mit Falk,” 357–58; Kabakov, *60-e–70-e*, 11–15; Amei Wallach, “Censorship in the Soviet Bloc,” *Art Journal* 50:3 (1991): 80; Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 35. Andronov, Nikonov, and others were actively involved in organizing the MOSKh anniversary exhibition in 1962, and their work, shown there, also incensed Khrushchev (Reid, “Destalinization and the Remodernization of Soviet Art,” 600–601; N. Andronov, “Zhivye traditsii,” *Iskusstvo*, 1962, no. 9:9–10). On Veisberg see Miuda Iablonskaia, “K probleme aktivizatsii stankovizma,” *Sovetskaia zhivopis'* 78 (Moscow, 1980): 43–55.

²¹On his return to USSR, two small exhibitions had been held in Moscow in 1939, in the Writers' House and the House of Workers of Arts, but these were not publicized and received no press response (Shchekin-Krotova, “Stanovlenie khudozhnika,” 219; Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 56). No further solo exhibitions were organized until the year of his death, 1958, when a one-man show was held in MOSKh's exhibition hall on Ermolaevskii pereulok. A catalogue was produced with an Introduction by Dmitrii Sarab'ianov, *Vystavka proizvedenii R. R. Fal'ka* (Moscow, 1958). In 1966 a posthumous solo show of Fal'k was mounted in Moscow, with some sympathetic and informed art-press coverage (Sarab'ianov, “Zhivopis' Fal'ka”).

times, challenged.²² Hierarchical genre distinctions had been fundamental to how imperial and royal academies across Europe had ordered art since the Enlightenment, privileging the “history painting” or multi-figural narrative composition on elevated mythological, religious, or historical themes. Still life was the lowliest genre in this academic system.²³ In early twentieth-century Europe the academic hierarchy was challenged including, in Russia, by Fal’k and his associates in Bubnovyi valet, who were inspired by recent French painting. Cézanne, a vital influence on the early Russian avant-garde, remained a touchstone of artistic quality and “painterly culture” for many artists throughout the Stalin and Khrushchev eras, and his example was particularly important for still life. Many of the artists who remained committed to still life painting, including Fal’k, belonged to this submerged but nonetheless vital “Cézannist,” painterly alternative to Soviet neo-academicism.²⁴

After the Bolshevik Revolution, still life’s focus on the depiction of food, the table, eating implements, and domesticity were hard to reconcile with revolutionary values which cast private life and *byt* as a regressive, potentially counterrevolutionary force. Nevertheless, in the still pluralist 1920s, some artists, notably the Cézannist painters of Bubnovyi valet’s successor, the Society of Moscow Artists, and members of the Society of Easel Painters, continued to use still-life painting as a space to explore such formal concerns as the relation between three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional picture plane. David Shterenberg, Kuz’ma Petrov-Vodkin, and others attempted to establish a revolutionary, proletarian still life, choosing frugal, proletarian foods and machine-age objects as their subject matter.²⁵

In the early 1930s, with the reinstatement of the Academy of Arts under Isaak Brodskii and the establishment of Socialist Realism, the academic taxonomies were restored as a powerful means to administer art and to assign differential value (cultural and financial) to different art forms, and thereby also to rank the artists who produced them; the marginalization of certain genres and media also professionally disadvantaged the artists whose careers were associated with them.²⁶ The *kartina*—a narrative composition in which

²²On the importance of identifying “the machinery of selective tradition” see Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?” *New Left Review* 175 (May–June 1989): 48–52.

²³Even in the late twentieth century Norman Bryson found that “discussion of still life remains oppressed and inhibited; it was virtually strangled at birth in the academies that relegated still life to the lowest level of art, and it is still marginalized in today’s professional art history.” See Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 10.

²⁴The influence of Cézanne is a vital part of the history of twentieth-century Russian art, especially still life. See A. Rzheznikov, “Chto takoe zhivopisnost’?” *Iskusstvo*, 1940, no. 4:69–78; idem, “Pol’ Sezann,” *Iskusstvo*, 1940, no. 2:129; and Vasilii Rakitin, “Sezann zapolnil tu propast’, kotoraiia otdeliala staruiu zhivopis’ ot novoi,” in *Naedine s sovest’iu*, ed. Grigorii Anisimov (Moscow, 2002), 136–45. On the significance of painterliness as a practice of resistance to official norms and the “social command” in the 1930s see A. Morozov, *Konets utopii: Iz istorii iskusstva v SSSR 1930-kh godov* (Moscow, 1995), 173–74; idem, “Kakie oni – 30-e?” *Sovetskaia kul’tura* (April 7, 1990); and Susan E. Reid, “Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The *Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition, 1935–41,” *Russian Review* 60 (April 2001): 176–79.

²⁵Musya Glants, “Food as Art: Painting in Late Soviet Russia,” in *Food in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre (Bloomington, IN, 1997), 215–37. Others, such as Vladimir (1899–1982) and Georgii Stenberg (1900–1933), sought to develop a genre of industrial still life representing technological progress, building on the prerevolutionary avant-garde’s interest in the human/machine interface.

²⁶I. A. Brodskii, “Sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia shkola v bor’be za sotsialisticheskii realism,” in *Iz istorii sovetskogo iskusstvovedeniia i esteticheskoi mysli 1930-kh godov*, ed. V. Vanslov and L. Denisova (Moscow,

the human figure in action, and psychological development were focal—became firmly established as the leading genre in the Socialist Realist Parnassus, just as its close relative, the history painting, had been in the academies of the past. Still life was cast back down to the bottom of the heap, devalued by the emerging norms of Socialist Realism as these were defined in principle and in practice in the mid-1930s.²⁷

Still life's relationship to Socialist Realism was problematic, even antithetical, on many counts. Calling for the "representation of reality in its revolutionary development," Socialist Realism required artists to paint a moment that implied a trajectory from past to radiant future, and to indicate that progress was achieved thanks to the leader, the party, collectivization, and socialist industry. Still life failed to measure up to these demands; in the absence of visible human action, psychological development, and implied narrative, the genre was seen as deprived of public, ideological meaning and, hence, of any social *raison d'être*, laying it open to charges, such as Serov's in 1962, of wasting public funds.²⁸ The everyday routines and intimate domestic things that are still life's object belong to the private sphere, rather than the public realm where important actions are taken and history is made. Moreover, they are associated with a temporality that is fundamentally antithetical to Socialist Realism. Far from visualizing the ever-onward-and-upward march of progress along the shining path toward communism, still life confronts the viewer with ordinary things as they are, with their material being. It is associated not with the linear time of history but with the cyclical time of everyday maintenance and repetitive routines. Still life is just that, still: a response to the "slowed, almost entropic level of material existence."²⁹ It is not about "revolutionary development," but about staying, constancy, and preservation.³⁰ Still life also traditionally references the cycles of flowering and decay. Insofar as it indicates the passage and effects of time, it points in the wrong direction: towards entropy and death. In the allegorical form of the *vanitas* or *memento mori*, with which the genre became closely identified in the seventeenth century, still life whispered a reminder of the futility of human endeavor; the transience and vanity of worldly power, earthly achievements and pleasures; and the inevitability of mortality, even amid the beauty and abundance of Arcadia.

1977), 397. The Imperial Academy of Arts was dissolved in 1918, but its norms and practices were restored with the establishment of the All-Russian Academy of Arts in Leningrad in 1932 (from 1944 the Repin Institute of the All-Russian Academy of Arts). See D. Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* (Moscow, 1968), 30–79; and M. C. Bown, *Art under Stalin* (Oxford, 1991), 237.

²⁷Andrei Zhdanov, speech at First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934, available at https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm.

²⁸Moleva, *Manezh*, 13. Not only did Serov cite an inflated price, deliberately confusing pre- and post-currency reform values, but the claim that it was bought by the state was also false (RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2, d. 57). It is now in a private collection. Another genre also marginalized by Socialist Realism, the nude, was represented at the 1962 exhibition by Aleksandr Deineka's *Mother* and Fal'k's *Nude in an Armchair*, 1922, both of which were received as controversial (Reid, "In the Name").

²⁹Bryson, *Looking*, 13.

³⁰In a rare Socialist Realist still life, further discussed below, Boris Iakovlev's monumental painting *Soviet Preserves* (1939), "reality in its revolutionary development" is replaced by the "arrested time" of the glass jars of preserved food, products of Soviet food processing industry. A rich analysis of Iakovlev's painting as a metonymic state portrait was given by Lars Kleberg and Susanna Witt, "Conservation and Resurrection: Boris Yakovlev's still life *Soviet Conserves* (1939)," paper presented at "Socialist Realist Art: Production, Consumption and the Aesthetics of Power," Stockholm, October 19–20, 2012.

Furthermore, still life requires of the viewer a mode of looking and interpretation that was at odds with the dominant modalities of Socialist Realist culture. The latter privileged verbal, literary communication. The message of Stalin-era painting often began with a verbal formulation or script, rendering the visual and tactile qualities of painting secondary to the subject matter and theme expressed in words. The content of a work, equated with the human actions and emotional reactions depicted, had to enable translation back into words unambiguously and without remainder. Still life's mundane, inactive subject matter, by contrast, placed in the foreground the act of perception and the process of rendering this in the medium of pigment on a surface. The elements that marginalized still life also include the mode of contemplation and competencies required of the viewer: its tendency to foreground symbolic or formal communication and intertextuality, such that the meaning of any individual work is enriched by resonating with historical precedents.³¹ For those who lacked such competencies and knowledge (including Khrushchev) it could arouse fear of ambiguities and allusions hidden in a formal language for which they lacked the code. Its apparent resistance to interpretation, its seemingly insignificant subject matter and lack of literal, narrative content all confirmed that it was overly preoccupied with questions of art rather than of life. The whiff of formalism was seemingly corroborated by the fact that its most notable practitioners had modernist pasts and had engaged in explorations of expressive form, color, and *faktura*. Still life bore the taint of its association with Cézanne and his Russian followers in Bubnovyi valet, and even worse, with Cubism's challenge to conventions of pictorial representation. Its early modernist associations cast a shadow over its subsequent status in the Soviet Union.

FINDING A PLACE FOR STILL LIFE IN SOCIALIST REALISM: INDUSTRY OF SOCIALISM AND FOOD INDUSTRIES

What place could there be for still life, the art of inanimacy, inaction, arrested time, and quiet contemplation, in the Socialist Realist value system? What hope was there, indeed, for stillness, let alone for still life in the Socialist Realist order?³² Yet for many Soviet artists who had come of age under the authority of Cézanne and early modernism, this genre still represented the acme of "painterly culture." Still life was also where their proven talents and skills lay. To survive as professional artists, however, they had either to adapt to other genres or to prove the worth of still life within Socialist Realism. This entailed overcoming the antinomies outlined above, which set the genre at odds with Socialist Realism. How to surmount still life's stillness and make it dynamic, future-oriented, and ideological? How to transform a genre associated with *memento mori* into a window onto the radiant future? And how to indicate that inanimate objects, far from implying the absence of man, represented metonymically the fruits of human labors and the instruments of the construction of communism?

³¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984); Bryson, *Looking*.

³²Svetlana Boym, *Commonplaces: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 154. Fal'k preferred the German term *Stilleben* ("still life") to the French *nature morte* ("dead nature") (Sarabjanow, *Robert Falk*, 57).

The efforts begun after the Revolution to modernize and proletarianize the subject matter of still life continued into the mid-1930s.³³ But more often the search to integrate still life with Socialist Realism entailed marrying it to the *kartina* or state portrait. Still-life elements could play an auxiliary role in amplifying the meaning of the depicted scene, adding extra dimensions to the character of the protagonists like the attributes of saints, for example in representative portraits of leaders such as Brodskii's *Lenin at Smolnyi* (1930). Still life also had a role in less prestigious forms of visual culture: in architectural decoration for the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, opened in 1939 and renovated in the early 1950s; in shop window displays, referencing the promise of abundance via pictorial representations in place of actual goods; and in illustrations of products of state food industries in the state cookbook the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*.³⁴

While still life drew some legitimacy through alliance with the *kartina*, this hybridization came at the expense of its distinct identity. An important opportunity for still life to prove its credentials, along with an ideological framework to overcome its apparent lack of public purpose and meaning, was provided by the exhibition *Food Industry* in 1939. Sponsored by Anastas Mikoian's People's Commissariat of Food Industries, *Food Industry* was the lesser pendant to the major thematic exhibition *Industry of Socialism* (1935–39), which was instrumental in thrashing out the parameters and priorities of Socialist Realism, notably the prioritization of the thematic *kartina* and the practice of scripting exhibitions.³⁵ The script called for depictions of socialist production and industrial processing of food. In line with a wider shift of emphasis, in the second half of the 1930s, from self-denying labor to enjoyment of its rewards, the exhibition provided an occasion to develop the theme of abundance and consumption under the overarching narrative about state socialism's planned and industrialized provision of ample consumer goods.

Even at *Food Industry*, the keynote was set by *kartiny*. However, the emphasis on food and consumption meant that still-life elements played a significant role in their compositions and meaning. For example, Nikolai Denisovskii's *Comrades Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Mikoian Inspect New Products of TEZHE* (1939) embedded a still life of products of the Soviet cosmetics industry in a group portrait of the leaders, implying causality and agency (fig. 2). In Sergei Gerasimov's *Collective Farm Festival* (1937), a harvest feast provided a pretext for still life's traditional objects: a table, vessels, and food. The still life on the groaning table, set amid golden fields of grain, spells out the message of abundance due to collectivization and party leadership (a party representative is present to ensure this causal relationship is registered). Thus Gerasimov, a reformed Cézannist,

³³For example, Nikolai Viting (1910–91), a student of Vladimir Favorskii, painted a *Still Life with Electric Magnets*, 1936, I. V. Savitsky Karakalpakstan State Museum of Art, <http://www.savitskycollection.org/Viting.html>.

³⁴Jack Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists* (London, 1944), 36–37. In 1952, Ekaterina Zernova produced a mural for the Preserved Goods pavilion of the refurbished All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. See I. K. Sivolap et al., *Kniga o vkusnoi i zdorovoi pishche* (Moscow, 1939); and Gian Piero Piretto, "Tasty and Healthy: Soviet Happiness in One Book," in *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, ed. M. Balina and E. Dobrenko (London, 2011), 79–96. For examples of still lives in advertising posters see "Soviet adverts," "Reklama v SSSR: 145 shdevrov," <http://coffeeberry88.livejournal.com/7935.html?thread=57599>.

³⁵For detail see Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57 (Spring 1998): 141–46; and idem, "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror," 153–84.

overcame the problem of still life's lack of *ideinost'* and narrative development. Rather than representing the shining path to the radiant future, the luminous groaning table in the foreground serves up that radiant future as if it was already materializing for exemplary citizens. Similarly, in Arkadii Plastov's *Collective Farm Festival* (1937), much attention is accorded to the detailed still life in the foreground, full of references to Russian traditions of hospitality and celebration culture. A direct line leads the eye diagonally from the feast, via the bodies of the *kolkhozniks* who have worked to achieve this harvest and will be nourished by it, to the ultimate source of this bounty, Stalin, whose portrait looms over the whole event. Thus it visualizes a narrative of cause and effect usually lacking in pure still life. In both Plastov and Gerasimov's paintings it is still life that provides the teleological dimension, representing the end point of progress, the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow placed almost close enough for the viewer to touch and taste.



FIG. 2 Nikolai Denisovskii, *Comrades Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Mikoian Inspect New Products of TEZHE*, 1939.

Set within the thematic framework of *Food Industry*, individual works of “pure” still life gained *ideinost'* and legitimacy, for they, too, could be seen as illustrations of an edifying tale about the development of abundance thanks to collectivization, the industrialization of food processing, the planned economy, and the wisdom of the leaders. Petr Konchalovskii's *Game and Vegetables in a Window* (1937–38) demonstrated nature's bounty, the pleasure and skill of the huntsman, and a generalized message that life is good. Although Konchalovskii had been a leading Cézannist, as his earlier still lives of the 1910s exemplify, here he looked back to the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life tradition, placing himself and his work in a long historical sequence (and by extension making claims for the greatness of Soviet civilization).³⁶

The exhibition threw a lifeline to artists such as David Shterenberg of OST and Il'ia Mashkov—Konchalovskii's and Fal'k's fellow Cézannist and Bubnovyi valet associate—

³⁶This turn to the Old Masters, seemingly repudiating his Cézannist youth, facilitated Konchalovskii's integration into Socialist Realism. He was appointed to the USSR Academy of Arts established in 1947.

both of whom were represented by still-life paintings of bread.³⁷ The identification of bread with the Bolsheviks had been established during the July Days of 1917 when they rallied support with their populist slogan promising “Peace, Bread, Land.” Mashkov’s 1936 still life *Soviet Breads* made explicit the connection between political power and sustenance, representing the Soviet Union as a cornucopia of breads (fig. 3). The loaves are composed to represent the union of peasant and worker, as Darra Goldstein observes: “The batons in the background appear as sheaves of wheat, while the various round rolls in the center resemble cogs in the industrial wheel.”³⁸



FIG. 3 Il'ia Mashkov, *Soviet Breads*, Republic of Tatarstan Museum of Fine Art, 1936.

Other artists also modernized and “sovietized” still life, seeking a Socialist Realist alibi for it by focusing on the high-end products of the Soviet food industry: patisserie (Ol'ga Ivanovskaia's *Master Confectioners*, 1939), and processed foods. A pair of large still lives by Boris Iakovlev, *Preserved Goods* (fig. 4) and *Soviet Wines* (1939), were shown in *Food Industry*. Painted on the scale of state portraits (138 x 162 cm), they monumentalized

³⁷Mashkov had struggled to work on a thematic composition for *Industry of Socialism*, but he was still sufficiently respected for the exhibition's organizational committee (including Evgenii Katsman) to regard his participation as essential to its success and to the broader project of establishing Soviet art, even if this meant selecting from existing work in his studio rather than exhibiting a bespoke piece, commissioned in accordance with the thematic plan. See Reid, “Socialist Realism,” 176; I. Abramskii, “Vystavka ‘Industriia sotsializma,’” *Iskusstvo*, 1962, no. 7:27–28; and RGALI, f. 962, op. 6, ed. khr. 948, l. 41 (tour scripts for exhibition *Food Industry*, 1939).

³⁸Darra Goldstein, “Domestic Porkbarreling in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” in *Russia. Women. Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren (Bloomington, IN, 1996), 146, caption to figure 5.4. Goscilo notes elsewhere that “as the staff of life, bread evokes the quality of natural simplicity,” while the variety and number of types of bread signal abundance (Goscilo, “Luxuriating in Lack,” in *Petrified Utopia*, 58–59). Mashkov earlier painted *Breads. Still Life* (1912). Fal'k also painted a still life of bread: *Still life with Batons* (1933, Collection of Dmitry Bosky, London).

the jars and bottles of preserved harvest that guaranteed not only immediate gratification but continued sustenance and pleasure in the future.³⁹ Significantly, these were not the products of small-scale home bottling, but of the new state canning and conserving industries. Iurii Pimenov's *In the Store* (1938) depicted happy shoppers selecting from abundant produce displayed in the "cultured" surroundings of a Soviet delicatessen (fig. 5).⁴⁰ With the exception of Konchalovskii's depiction of the huntsman's haul, these works made it clear that abundance was the product of state planning, industry, and trade. Depicting the products of the Soviet baking, canning, and wine-making industries, they focus on cooked and processed foods rather than on raw fruits of nature: on refined delicacies rather than staples, cuisine rather than sustenance, cultured consumption rather than nature. Soviet modernity, they claimed, represented life on a higher historical level.



FIG. 4 Boris Iakovlev, *Preserves*, 1939. State Tretyakov Gallery. Photo by Lars Kleberg.

Thus, a space and place existed for still life in Socialist Realism, where it could represent abundance and "reality in its revolutionary development." However, this often involved

³⁹Kleberg and Witt, "Conservation and Resurrection"; Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne* (Oxford, 2003).

⁴⁰On "cultured" consumption see, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Becoming Cultured: Socialist Realism and the Representation of Taste and Privilege," in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Ithaca, 1992), 216–37; Julie Hessler, "Cultured Trade: The Stalinist Turn towards Consumerism," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London, 2000) 182–209; and Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s* (Basingstoke, 2008).

the subordination of still life to the *kartina*, while pure still-life painting was largely consigned to less prestigious, applied contexts such as decoration and illustration, or to the very limited and low-status system for selling art through art salons.⁴¹ If still lives were included in art exhibitions, then reviewers routinely reviewed them last. For any artist with ambitions to advance professionally within the Soviet art establishment, this was not the genre.



FIG. 5 Iurii Pimenov, *In the Store*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 135 x 186 cm. Lugansk Regional Art Museum, viewable at www.art-catalog.ru/picture.php?id_picture=23242.

Moreover, true to the genre's *vanitas* tradition, these still lives continued to be haunted by the shadow of shortage and death even as they spoke of abundance and pledged the imminent arrival of Arcadia. Mashkov painted his image of the USSR-as-cornucopia at a time when the 1933 famine in the Soviet Union's breadbasket was a very recent memory. "Fantasizing a rosy image of plenty at a time of dearth," as Helena Goscilo notes, his painting of *Soviet Breads* "symbolically pinpoints the population's reliance on the state for access to goods."⁴² Even Iakovlev's imposing painting of preserved foods could arouse thoughts not only of prudent husbanding of resources for the future but also of its constitutive other: the absence of fresh food. At times when there was little food to buy, shop windows were filled with carefully stacked cans of fish and jars of bottled tomatoes, just as still-life

⁴¹Lacking big commissions and studio space, artists were sometimes driven to work on more intimate genres, including still life, intimate portraiture and landscape for commission stores. See RGANI, f. 5, op. 17, d. 498, ll. 22–23, 36–37; and Reid, "The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw," *Third Text*, 2006, no. 2:164–66.

⁴²Goscilo, "Luxuriating in Lack," 59; Glants, "Food as Art," 219.

paintings had been commissioned to fill vitrines in the 1930s, replacing real food by signs.⁴³ Thus, canned goods were ambiguous: they spoke not only of plenty, but of shortage.

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

During the Thaw, the status of still life began to be reassessed, along with other challenges to the narrow canon of Soviet art and to the limited historical models of “realism” on which it was based. Young artists were eager to rediscover early twentieth-century Russian and West European modernist painting, and they revered artists such as Konchalovskii and Fal’k as living links with Bubnovyi valet and Cézanne.⁴⁴ The monopolistic role of the state as sole patron and gatekeeper of art began to be eroded amid accusations that it had failed to support “genuine” art. Art world reformers such as art historian Dmitrii Sarab’ianov (a constant champion of Fal’k) pushed for a more liberal definition of realism in contemporary practice, including a reengagement with figurative modernism past and present, Russian and international. They questioned the idea that art should be limited to public consumption, arguing that the Soviet people now also required art for private, domestic use to decorate their homes.⁴⁵ Not only was this a legitimate and important role for art, they proposed, but different criteria of subject matter and formal treatment applied to art for intimate contemplation in everyday settings. These alternative criteria tentatively reinstated modernist values (although reformers did not prejudice their case by making this explicit). Grand compositions, important themes, and narrative action were inappropriate for domestic settings, they argued, which called for smaller, more modest works in the genres of landscape and still life, and prioritized the “decorative” aspects of painting: the arrangement of forms and colors on the flat surface.⁴⁶

Fal’k—both his oeuvre and his persona—constituted part of a wider challenge to the authority of Socialist Realism during the Thaw. Because of his self-reflexive concern with technical questions of expression and color and his failure to engage with the norms of Socialist Realism established during his absence abroad, critics had accused Fal’k of “formalism” and “political indifference” as well as cosmopolitanism.⁴⁷ But for the informal circle of admirers and pupils that gathered around him, the fact that he had been excluded from the institutions of the Soviet art world and had spent years in the solitude of his studio, quietly absorbed in his work, exonerated him from the taint of Stalinism; he had preserved his human and artistic integrity uncompromised. Informed contemporaries reading Ilya Ehrenburg’s 1954 novel *The Thaw* would recognize Fal’k in the positive artist character

⁴³Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists*, 36–37.

⁴⁴Suppressed aspects of the art of the 1920s such as the work of David Shterenberg and OST were also reinstated. For detail see Reid, “De-Stalinization.”

⁴⁵D. Sarab’ianov, “Iskusstvo – v povsednevnuuiu zhizn’,” in *Iskusstvo i kommunisticheskoe vospitanie* (Moscow, 1960), 96–99. He and others also criticized the Artists’ Union and Art Fund for neglecting the production and sale of work for private apartments (RGANI, f. 5, op. 36, d. 74, ll. 46–50).

⁴⁶Dmitrii Sarab’ianov, “K voprosu o tvorcheskome mnogoobrazii sovetskogo iskusstva,” and Moisei Kagan, “O put’iakh issledovaniia spetsifiki iskusstva,” both in *Voprosy estetiki* 3 (Moscow, 1960): 25–45 and 46–84, respectively; Iu. Filatov, “Veshchi, sovremennost’, zhivopis’,” *Zvezda*, 1961, no. 2: 176–79. For further discussion see Susan E. Reid, “Art for the Soviet Home,” *Human Affairs* 21 (2011): 347–66.

⁴⁷Ehrenburg, *Selections from People, Years, Life*, 205; Shatalov, “Chelovek sezannovskoi natsional’nosti.”

Saburov. Ehrenburg was personally acquainted with Fal'k, having first met him in Paris in the early 1930s. He owned a collection of the artist's work, and was author of some of the very few serious considerations of Fal'k's significance published before the 1970s.⁴⁸ The writer represented Saburov as an authentic artist whose only allegiance was to art, contrasting him to the careerist hack, Pukhov. While Saburov "diligently painted landscapes that were never shown"—"one house and two trees. Or two houses and one tree"—the ambitious Pukhov churned out potboilers on timely themes such as "Feast on the Kolkhoz" and "The Pioneer Campfire."⁴⁹ A report to the Central Committee complained that Ehrenburg's novel, widely disseminated among artists, was exercising a "damaging influence," especially on the young generation.⁵⁰ Like Saburov, Fal'k represented the autonomy of the artist and the autonomous value of pure painting. He stood for artistic integrity and disinterested dedication to the commands of art alone, rather than to the "social command" and dictates of power. He was also valued as one of the last custodians of the ideals of the early Russian avant-garde, who had preserved and enriched the "painterly culture" associated both with the Moscow Cézannist tradition and with the best of early twentieth-century European modernism.⁵¹ Without pursuing active opposition, he was seen as a paragon of Thaw-era values critical of Stalinism, around whom young artists and others seeking reform rallied.⁵² Fal'k's unwavering pursuit of his artistic aims also chimed with another important novel of the Thaw, Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone* (1956), in which an inventor pursues his innovation in spite of being blocked by self-serving bureaucrats and sclerotic institutions, and despite economic deprivation and professional isolation.⁵³

The subject of Fal'k's 1955 painting that so riled Khrushchev in 1962—humble potatoes—takes to an extreme still life's characteristic homely and consumable subject matter and concern with the inescapable "conditions of creaturality."⁵⁴ Fal'k's potatoes are far removed from the refined indicators of state-produced plenty and cultured food consumption. Rough and earthy, as if just grubbed from the soil, they are the humble food of survival, not of abundance, cultured consumption, and gastronomy; they are "not at all

⁴⁸Ehrenburg, *Selections from People, Years, Life*, 199–207.

⁴⁹Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, trans. Manya Harari (London, 1966), 38, 45; Ehrenburg, *Ottepel'*, 75–83. Pukhov also compromised his status by supplementing his income through work on refurbishing the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition.

⁵⁰RGANI, f. 5, op. 17, d. 498, ll. 97–98 (Party Central Committee Department of Science and Culture).

⁵¹E. Murina, "Pavel Nikonov" (1985), in *Pavel Nikonov: Zhivopis', grafika*, comp. V. Staritsyna (Moscow, 1990), 27; Hillel Kazovsky, "Fal'k, Robert," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Falk_Robert. Abram Efros declared Fal'k's nationality "Cézannist." See Shatalov, "Chelovek sezannovskoi natsional'nosti"; Andronov, "Zhivye traditsii," 9; N. Volkov, "Lakonizm i iazyk zhivopisi," *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, no. 20–21 (1960); and Volkov, "O zhivopisnoi kul'ture," *Iskusstvo*, 1963, no. 5:20–27.

⁵²On the importance of Fal'k as a paragon for the alternative art scene in the Thaw, including for Erik Bulatov and Il'ia Kabakov, see Wallach, "Censorship in the Soviet Bloc," 80; Kabakov, *60-e–70-e*, 11–15; and Ekaterina Degot', *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moscow, 2000), 129–31.

⁵³Vladimir Dudintsev, *Ne khlebom edinym* (Moscow, 1956); Denis Kozlov, "Naming the Social Evil: The Readers of *Novyi mir* and Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone*, 1956–59 and Beyond," in *The Dilemmas of Destalinization*, ed. Polly Jones (London, 2006), 80–98. Biographies of and memoirs about Fal'k emphasize his disinterested dedication and, like Dudintsev's and Ehrenburg's novels, the supportive role of the ever-faithful, long-suffering wife.

⁵⁴Bryson, *Looking*, 14.

the large-scale, momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance,” as Bryson described the object of still life.⁵⁵ Fal'k makes the potatoes the object of intense, reverent contemplation, such as is more often commanded by things of value and beauty.

Potatoes may be a humble tuber, but they are far from socially meaningless or lacking in cultural resonance; they are as rich semantically as they are nutritionally. Not all the associated meanings they acquired in the context of the Thaw were necessarily intended by the artist in 1955, however; some derived from the specific conditions of reception. Nor were they all available to Khrushchev in the moment he encountered the work in 1962.⁵⁶ But these multiple meanings and associations are nonetheless important for understanding the historical significance of the work.

Among the layers of meaning that were unlikely to be available to Khrushchev and many lay viewers were those arising from the work's intertextual resonance with that of other artists, past and present: an important aspect of the way still life communicates.⁵⁷ While Cézanne remained Fal'k's most important touchstone, *Potatoes* also references the early work of Vincent Van Gogh, notably a number of early lithographs, studies, and still lifes of potatoes, including *Baskets of Potatoes* (1885, fig. 6). Van Gogh made these in association with his early genre painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885), which depicts a Nuenen peasant family eating a humble supper with intense, self-absorbed concentration.⁵⁸ He wrote that he wanted to convey the sense that his “Potato Eaters” “have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor and that they have thus honestly earned their food. I wanted it to give the idea of a wholly different way of life from ours—civilized people.”⁵⁹ Van Gogh's series of potato still lifes were also a formal exercise, exploring nuanced tonal effects within a very restricted palette. Fal'k's composition, the limited somber ochre color scheme, and the Rembrandt-esque *chiaroscuro*, all suggest that he may have had Van Gogh's potato pictures in mind.⁶⁰ Perhaps Fal'k was trying to place his Soviet potatoes in a historical tradition that passes through Van Gogh back to Rembrandt, painting the humble and ugly, to demonstrate art's alchemical power to transform dross into gold.⁶¹ Van Gogh counterpoised to Cézanne's apples, oranges, and hot Mediterranean hues the humble potato and muted earth tones of the North. The idea that potatoes represented the honesty of manual labor, of getting one's hands dirty,

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶The meanings are historically contingent. When first imported to Europe in the sixteenth century, the potato (probably sweet potato) was regarded as an aphrodisiac and a phallic symbol, associated with the cardinal sins of lust and luxury, as exemplified in Shakespeare's plays *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act V, scene 5, l. 20–22) and *Troilus and Cressida* (Act 5, Scene 2). See William Shakespeare et al., *The Plays of William Shakespeare ...: With the corrections and illustrations of various commentators*, vol. 12 (Philadelphia, 1809).

⁵⁷Bryson, *Looking*.

⁵⁸See also Van Gogh, *Basket of Potatoes* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), and *Still Life with Earthenware Bowl and Potatoes* (Museum Boymans van Beuningen, Rotterdam).

⁵⁹Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Nuenen, April 30, 1885, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* (letter 497), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let497/letter.html> (last accessed August 4, 2015).

⁶⁰While I do not have textual evidence that Fal'k knew Van Gogh's potato pictures, he was certainly very familiar with his oeuvre.

⁶¹“Zhivopis' Fal'ka,” 263; Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 76; Sarabjanow, *Robert Falk*, 49.

which Van Gogh sought to express, is also close to the way Fal'k conceived the artists' vocation, according to the accounts of contemporaries.⁶²



Fig. 6 Vincent Van Gogh, *Baskets of Potatoes*, 1885. Van Gogh Museum, viewable at <http://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/baskets-of-potatoes-1885>.

RUSSIAN ROOTS

Fal'k's arrangement of potatoes is far more meager than Van Gogh's overflowing baskets. Just four potatoes are set out on the table as if to be prepared for eating, while the others remain in the basket. They recorded abstinence rather than consumption. This points to the two coexistent yet contradictory sets of meanings outlined above: the first referencing real life and the experience of hunger; the second asserting the difference between art and life and the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience.

For Fal'k, potatoes may have held autobiographical significance relating to his struggle to survive outside the system of state commissions. The Artists' Union tried to punish Fal'k for his "formalism" through economic sanctions, but as Ehrenburg wrote, this approach was misplaced given the artist's indifference to comfort and worldly wealth: Fal'k would "cook peas and potatoes."⁶³ However, to paint food is not the same as to eat it. On the

⁶²Kabakov, *60-e-70-e*; Wallach, "Censorship in the Soviet Bloc," 80.

⁶³Ehrenburg, *Selections*, 206.

contrary, throughout the long time that Fal'k took to paint his handful of potatoes, they remained beyond reach and he had to abstain from eating them.⁶⁴

That the painting of potatoes said more about hunger than about its satisfaction was part of the set of meanings available to viewers in the Thaw. One wrote in the visitors' comments book at the 1962 exhibition (reprimanding the author of a previous negative comment): "The artist Fal'k died of hunger in 1958. You should know that."⁶⁵ In the dichotomies of Thaw discourse, for those who embraced Saburov rather than Pukhov, the painting's frugality underwrote Fal'k's sincerity.⁶⁶ On one hand, Fal'k was cast as the archetypal artist-genius of romantic, modernist myth, starving in the garret, unappreciated by philistines and the Pharisees of the art bureaucracy. At the same time, the idea of the impoverished artist aligned him with popular experience; he too suffered along with the *narod*.

Potatoes spoke to the shared experience of millions of Soviet people of endurance and survival through repeated periods of hunger and privation, most recently during wartime and in the postwar famine of 1946–47. The 1947 famine claimed over a million lives, but it would have resulted in deaths on the scale of the 1933 famine were it not for potatoes.⁶⁷ The presence or absence of potatoes spelled the difference between survival and starvation, life or death. In oral history interviews conducted in the mid-2000s, informants' accounts of surviving wartime evacuation include detailed memories of carefully husbanding the potato supply. Tamara (born in the 1930s) was evacuated from Kalinin (Tver') when it was taken by the Nazis in October 1941. Her family fled eastward to a poor village where she was shocked by the impoverished conditions of the countryside. When the tiny ration of bread was all gone, "we basically ate potatoes. ... The sack of potatoes even stood right in the corridor so that it didn't have to be carried in, so that it wouldn't fall apart."⁶⁸

Such recollections help us to understand the veneration accorded to *kartoshka* and the attentiveness with which these fruits of the earth had to be treated—counted and rationed to ensure that the supply would last, their skins regularly inspected for rot. The nutritional importance of potatoes in times of crisis gave them huge cultural significance. Potatoes, seemingly so humble and insignificant, were the staff of life and objects of great care. The respect and gratitude commanded by the potato—the last dependable source of nourishment

⁶⁴Fal'k took a long time painting *Potatoes* (Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 76).

⁶⁵TsGA Moskv, f. 21, op. 1, d. 155, 31ob. The viewer may have been confusing Fal'k with Pavel Filonov who died of starvation during the siege of Leningrad. Art historian Mikhail Alpatov later called the postwar Fal'k "the artist of poverty" and described his preference for plain things as his subject matter. *Potatoes* were "an expression of sincere humility and gratitude to fate for its meager gifts" ("Zhivopis' Fal'ka," 263). However, the romantic myth of the starving artist-genius needs to be approached critically. According to Sarab'ianov, even as Fal'k was dedicated to his work and had no interest in chasing success or official recognition, "it would be quite ridiculous to represent him as an ascetic to whom earthly life meant nothing and who sacrificed himself to the secrets of art" (Sarabjanow, *Robert Falk*, 49). While he and his wife lived modestly, like many members of the intelligentsia, they were not impoverished (Chaikovskaia, *Tri lika*, 67).

⁶⁶Ehrenburg describes his Fal'k character, Saburov, and his wife as hungry and impoverished (*The Thaw*, 38).

⁶⁷Donald Filtzer, *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 226–29.

⁶⁸Tamara, Apatity, born c. 1936, interviewed by Alla Bolotova on September 24, 2007, for Reid, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat," research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

when all else failed—was something with which many could still identify in the 1950s, on the basis of their own lives.⁶⁹

Potatoes have both positive and negative meanings in Russian culture and social experience. Like Van Gogh, Lev Tolstoy, in *War and Peace* (1869), used potatoes to represent the values he identified with the Russian *narod*: their resilience and resources for survival and happiness as personified in the peasant Platon Karataev, who shares his potatoes and salt with Count Pierre Bezukhov when they are imprisoned together. Bezukhov, ever searching for meaning and purpose, learns from the peasant and his potato the value of accepting whatever life may bring.⁷⁰

Potatoes also “crop up” again and again in the literature and film of the Thaw. Following in Tolstoy’s footsteps, the hero of Boris Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*, first published two years after Fal’k painted his still life in 1957, is saved from starvation during the Civil War by a peasant’s gift of a potato.⁷¹ Respect for *kartoshka* was often associated, as in Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*, with authenticity, honesty, rootedness, and the people. In Marlen Khutsiev’s film *Il’ich’s Gate* (1961), two pivotal scenes focus on the potato as the means to survival during World War II, and on the need to respect it regardless of its apparent humility. The gilded youth’s disrespect for potatoes is tantamount to disregard for the suffering and heroism of the Russian people.

Thus potatoes were associated not only with poverty and privation but with affirmative qualities ascribed to the Russian *narod*. In the postwar period, even before Stalin’s death, the idea that the people’s stoicism and resilience were the source of victory in the Great Patriotic War was sanctioned and even rewarded.⁷² Perhaps *Potatoes* should be seen as an attempt by Fal’k to reconcile his love of French and Dutch art with the requirement of *narodnost’*: to claim his identification with Russian culture (via Tolstoy) and with the Russian people and their privations, stoicism, and resilience during the war, all of which were cast in doubt by his multiple otherness: his Jewish ethnicity and German surname, his residence abroad, and the cosmopolitan heritage and “formalist” obscurity of his painting? Like Van Gogh, he eschewed the foreign, luxurious fruit favored by Cézanne—oranges—in favor of the plain potato, nurtured in Russian soil. According to his wife, Angelina Shchekin-Krotova, Fal’k spoke with admiration of the potatoes: “Look, each one has its own character, it’s not like oranges, all identical like drops of water.”⁷³ A celebration of the life-sustaining powers of the potato and of human survival could perhaps be accommodated with Socialist Realism’s demand for optimism and *narodnost’*, as well as acting as an implicit indictment of the bombast and “varnishing of reality” (*lakirovka*) of which Stalin-era Socialist Realism was accused during the Thaw. Identified with Russian roots, potatoes opened up a route to reintegration in the social body and reconciliation with Socialist Realism, or at least with

⁶⁹This was again the case in the late 1980s in the context of the collapsing Soviet state. See Nancy Ries, “Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 24:2 (2009): 181–212.

⁷⁰Lev Tolstoy, *Voina i mir* (Moscow, 1974), 454–55.

⁷¹Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (London, 1961), 514–18.

⁷²Iurii Neprintsev’s (1909–96) painting *Rest after Battle* (1951) depicting ordinary soldiers under the inspiration of Aleksandr Tvardovskii’s poem *Vasilii Terkin*, was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1952. The artist made two author’s copies, 1953 and 1955.

⁷³Levina, *Robert Fal’k*, 76, citing Shchekin-Krotova, “Liricheskie kommentarii,” 56.

the more critical, “sincere,” and expressive post-Stalinist new realism, the “Severe Style” which artistic reformers were advocating.⁷⁴ While Fal’k’s outsider status is emphasized in the literature, the return to basics accorded with an important tendency of Soviet culture after Stalin’s death, which received some authoritative support during the Thaw. Khrushchev himself had led the way in the rejection of luxury and refinement in architecture, distancing himself from Stalin and from the architectural style identified with his leadership by condemning superfluous ornament and calling for austere, unembellished building.⁷⁵ Lack of refinement, of fine speaking and beautiful surface appearances, became identified with the repudiation of Stalinist “varnishing,” and with the positive virtues of “sincerity,” modernity, and the heroism of the ordinary people.⁷⁶

Yet even if Fal’k sought reintegration with the *narod* and with the aesthetic and moral values of the de-Stalinizing state (a speculation based on contextualized analysis of his work rather than on textual evidence of the artist’s intentions), this aim was overtaken by events. Notwithstanding the positive values associated with plainness and potatoes, and their affirmative associations with survival, victory, and the people, the humble vegetables were far from an unambiguously positive symbol for the regime. They also referenced more problematic associations: with self-sufficiency, with the shadow economy and liminal, outlaw existence, and even the possibility of “potato rebellion,” subversion and the failure of the state.⁷⁷ We should recall that the two other Thaw-era instances of potato culture cited above were also both surrounded by controversy. Pasternak’s novel was not published in the USSR. A similar fate met Khutsiev’s film, with its politically sensitive theme of sincerity versus hypocrisy. In December 1962, soon after Khrushchev’s encounter with Fal’k’s potatoes, the recently completed film was vetted prior to release and the director received a dressing down from Leonid Il’ichev, chair of the Ideological Commission established the previous month.⁷⁸ Some time in the next three months Khrushchev also viewed the film, and it is conceivable that he made the link with Fal’k’s potatoes, finding subversion and pessimism everywhere. In March 1963, at one of a series of meetings between party leaders, artists and intellectuals set up to restore party control over the arts in the wake of the Manège Affair, Khrushchev condemned Khutsiev’s film for asserting “ideas and norms of public and private life that are entirely unacceptable and alien to the Soviet people.”

⁷⁴Thanks to an anonymous reviewer. On the new realism see Reid, “Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-Engagement with Western Modernism in the Khrushchev Thaw,” in *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (DeKalb, 2006), 217–39.

⁷⁵N. S. Khrushchev, *O širokom vnedrenii industrial'nykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel'stva: Rech' na Vsesoiuznom soveshchanii stroitelei, arkhitektorov i rabotnikov promyshlennosti stroitel'nykh materialov, stroitel'nogo i dorozhnogo mashinostroeniia, proektnykh i nauchno-issledovatel'skikh organizatsii, 7 dekabria 1954 g.* (Moscow, 1955).

⁷⁶V. Pomerantsev, “Ob iskrennosti v literature,” *Novyi mir*, 1953, no. 12:218–45. In printmaking and painting, the so-called Severe Style (to which some of Nikonov, Andronov, and Popkov’s works were assigned) presented tough, silent, weather-worn workers in a manner that eschewed refinement, fine brush strokes, detail, and smooth transitions in favor of abrupt tonal contrasts and expressively raw, tortured surfaces.

⁷⁷The “potato rebellions” of the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating in a major peasant revolt, the Potato Uprising of 1842, were, however, triggered by popular resistance to the government’s coercive campaign to enforce potato cultivation.

⁷⁸Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London, 2000), 142.

Khutsiev's potatoes, along with the rest of the film, would lie on the shelf until 1965, when release of an edited version with the title *I Am Twenty* was finally approved.⁷⁹

SURVIVAL IN THE ABSENCE OF THE STATE

There were two key staples in the Soviet Russian diet: potatoes and bread.⁸⁰ The aspiring still lives of the Stalin era discussed earlier pointed to the role of the party-state, socialist planning, collectivization, and industrial production in providing not only basic sustenance but fine white bread, which was to be consumed as part of the modern, urban lifestyle that was promised for all. Bread, the traditional food of Russian hospitality, of shared *zastol'e*, sociability, and celebration, was also, in Soviet times, the product of state organization and mechanized large-scale agriculture; wheat harvested from state and collective farms was industrially milled and baked into bread in state bakeries. Bread had found its place in the Socialist Realist still life, asserting itself as a symbol of Soviet state power, as well as of *narodnost'*, in Mashkov's *Soviet Bread* and Plastov and Gerasimov's *Collective Farm Festivals*, which represented the communion of *narod* with state.

But Fal'k's painting serves us not bread but potatoes: the raw products of individuals' unmechanized labor, gathered by hand into a small basket and still covered with the earth from which they have been dug. Moreover, these potatoes are not the offerings of generous hospitality, to be shared and consumed communally; they are the food of hunger, of solitary, miserly hoarding and hunkering down.

The significance of Fal'k's subject matter, potatoes, lies, at least in part, in what they are *not*: potatoes speak of the absence of bread, just as Iakovlev's canned and bottled goods refer not only to glut but to the need to husband resources for times of dearth. They derive their meaning through the play of difference in a binary semiotic system that is not simply an arbitrary play of signs but is rooted in embodied experience and life-and-death matters of survival or starvation. As Tamara recalled above, during the war, bread was rationed and people supplemented the inadequate allowance with potatoes, cultivated privately and carefully stored at home. "Potatoes were the second bread," as one Soviet economist put it.⁸¹ For anyone who found themselves outside the state supply system, without access to bread rations, potatoes were a vital alternative. In Khutsiev's film, the mother went to the countryside to dig potatoes by night to feed herself and her child because she had mislaid her bread coupons.⁸² The dichotomy of bread and potatoes also reflected, and could stand

⁷⁹Ibid., 145–46.

⁸⁰There was a more or less reciprocal relationship between potato and bread consumption in peasant and worker diets in the postwar period (Filtzer, *Hazards*, 229).

⁸¹Ia. E. Chadaev, *Ekonomika SSSR v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow, 1965), 358, cited by William Moskoff, *The Bread of Affliction: The Food Supply in the USSR During World War II* (Cambridge, England, 1990), 95; Darra Goldstein, *A Taste of Russia: A Cookbook of Russian Hospitality* (Montpelier, VT, 1999), 137. The importance of private cultivation of potatoes was emphasized in March 1942 by President Kalinin in *Pravda*, March 1, 1942: "It is unnecessary to prove the importance of the potato in the national diet. This year the significance of the potato will be even greater" (Moskoff, *Bread of Affliction*, 106).

⁸²While potatoes are not bread, they are also not turnips, a third term that is introduced in Khutsiev's film. In Ehrenburg's *The Thaw*, Pukhov, justifying his work on potboilers, says that turnips were more necessary than art, yet nobody ever thought of spelling turnip with a capital "T" (p. 44). On withholding of rations as

for, the antagonism between city and countryside. In *Doctor Zhivago*, a devastated cornfield, laid to waste in the Civil War, prompts Iurii's traveling companion to recount a story about potatoes. He had helped a poor widow to harvest and hide her potatoes to avoid them being requisitioned to feed the city. The ensuing reprisals were visited upon the village by the town.⁸³ The postwar famine of 1946–47 hit urban dwellers disproportionately, whereas in 1933 the countryside had borne the brunt of the famine. While the peasants were able to grow potatoes for themselves on their plots and potatoes kept them alive, urban workers were more dependent on bread and hence on state provisioning and infrastructure.⁸⁴

Potatoes were not only an uncomfortable reminder of the party-state's failure and irrelevance in times of crisis. They also implied a challenge to its authority, asserting self-reliance; for potatoes enabled survival in the absence (or failure) of the state, and they supported a certain autonomy from its structures.⁸⁵ While bread was the object of the state's regulation and rationing, potatoes evaded its bureaucratic control over supplies and distribution. Potatoes reference the fraught relations between public and private interests: the widow's minor act of resistance in *Doctor Zhivago* was to hoard potatoes for her personal use and survival.⁸⁶ They also reference the contradictory yet symbiotic relations between socialized agriculture on state or collective farms and private plots, and between central planning and localism: despite highly centralized decision making, "local authorities were often left to their own devices when it came to obtaining the means to implement the government's decisions."⁸⁷ The localism characteristic of the Stalinist economy in general was exacerbated during the war, when survival depended on local resources and solutions and on the mobilization of citizen labor, especially in regard to the production and sourcing of food for the civilian population.⁸⁸ Rations, the centralized, official distribution system, played a vital part in keeping people alive, but they were neither adequate nor universal: over half the population did not receive rations at all.⁸⁹ Excluded from the rationing system, peasants were forced to turn to their private plots and potato cultivation for food. Even those officially entitled to rations had to resort to local and unofficial sources of supply, including allotment gardening and other forms of urban food cultivation.⁹⁰ In these

a way to force, for example, housewives to enter the state employment economy see Moskoff, *Bread of Affliction*, 149.

⁸³Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 514–18.

⁸⁴Filtzer, *Hazards*, 226.

⁸⁵Relations between potatoes and power had shifted over the course of the nineteenth century. In the potato rebellions of the 1830s–40s potatoes represented the state's will, while opposition to the government was expressed as revolt against potatoes (Goldstein, *Taste of Russia*, 137).

⁸⁶Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 515.

⁸⁷John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945* (London, 1991), 83. See also Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy* (London, 2003), 74–75. For new research on food provisions during the war and "the politics of food and war" see Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer, eds., *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Bloomington, 2015).

⁸⁸Moskoff, *Bread of Affliction*, 153; Barber and Harrison, *Soviet Home Front*, 83. See also Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2009).

⁸⁹Barber and Harrison, *Soviet Home Front*, 82.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 85; Moskoff, *Bread of Affliction*. Factories, instructed to provide for their civilian workforce as best they could through local resources, set up farms to provide food for their workers. The right to an allotment, previously only given to the rural population, was extended to the whole population, including urban dwellers, and these became an essential source of food.

conditions, as John Barber and Mark Harrison note, where private plots were the main source of food for the peasant and potatoes the main crop they cultivated there: “what bread was to the urban worker, the potato was to the peasant.”⁹¹

The private plot where potatoes were grown was often framed as an autonomous realm, strongly associated with peasant self-sufficiency. This, too, was a wartime legacy, along with other decentralizing tendencies during wartime and postwar reconstruction, characterized by the “survivalist ethic,” which legitimated grassroots initiative even without explicit official authority.⁹² In relation to the later period of transition to capitalism, potato cultivation has been analyzed as a form of critique or self-exclusion from the current political order and money economy. In interviews about *dacha* life conducted by Jane Zavisca in 2001 one *dachnik* declared: “See these potatoes? That’s survival. This is how we like to live! Well like it or not, this is how we live, and power leaves us alone, lets us live here in peace, at least for now.”⁹³

We can begin to understand why it was provocative to paint potatoes in all their mute, humble, earthy materiality—whether or not provocation was Fal’k’s intention. They reference something everyone knew but could not speak of: the failure of the Soviet state during war and famine, its marginality to matters of life and death. For potatoes represent survival not thanks to the beneficent state, its industrialized agriculture, and central planning, but regardless or in spite of these: through self-help, individual backbreaking work on private plots, the labor of gathering up and preserving. They are the dependable friend when the state fails. If still life, as a genre, proposes the possibility of meaning in the absence of man, a still life of potatoes, in the Soviet Union of the 1950s, spoke of survival in the absence of the state. The potatoes leveled an implicit indictment against a state that claimed the prerogative to total control over planning and provision.

Khrushchev cannot have enjoyed being reminded of past famines and of the ever-present specter of hunger in late 1962. Not only did he seek a place in history as an expert in agricultural affairs who resolved the food crisis once and for all, notably through the Virgin Lands scheme launched in 1954 to transform the steppe into a breadbasket. According to William Taubman, his role in the man-made famine of 1946 in Ukraine weighed heavily on his conscience and marked a low point in his career. As first secretary of the Ukrainian party from 1943 and from February 1944 also head of the Ukrainian government, he was responsible for setting the Ukraine’s mandatory grain delivery quotas extortionately high. Despite the poor harvest of 1945–46, the quotas were even increased, exacerbating the food shortage. Seeking “to expiate his own sin” and belatedly to avert famine, Khrushchev took the risky step of petitioning Stalin to reduce the grain quota. His efforts to persuade Stalin, while courageous, also indicate his recognition of his own culpability. As a result, he suffered humiliation, fear of reprisals, and, it seems, nervous collapse. He was removed as Ukrainian party leader in early 1947.⁹⁴

⁹¹Barber and Harrison, *Soviet Home Front*, 85.

⁹²Julie Hessler, “A Postwar Perestroika? Toward a History of Private Enterprise in the USSR,” *Slavic Review* 57 (Autumn 1998): 524; Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk* (Ithaca, 2003), 163–64.

⁹³Jane Zavisca, “Contesting Capitalism at the Post-Soviet *Dacha*: The Meaning of Food Cultivation for Urban Russians,” *Slavic Review* (Autumn 2003): 787; Ries, “Potato Ontology,” 181–212.

⁹⁴William Taubman, *Khrushchev* (London, 2003), 181, 199–203.

After Stalin's death, promises of increased consumption and higher living standards played a central part in the Khrushchev regime's search to renew and maintain its popular legitimacy. Yet despite early successes in the Virgin Lands, the threat of shortage had returned, while the announcement of price increases on basic foodstuffs earlier that year had triggered riots in Novochoerkassk in June 1962, which were brutally suppressed. This was a major embarrassment to Khrushchev's leadership, calling his bluff on several fronts at once.

PAINTERLY CULTURE: THE AUTONOMOUS VALUE OF ART

Fal'k's posthumous gesture of stuffing potatoes in Khrushchev's face at this moment was provocative. I have argued that it was not only the lack of human presence, characteristic of the still-life genre, that was the problem in *Potatoes*; it was also its tacit allusion to lack of bread and, by extension, to the absence of state and party as a meaningful, effective, or sustaining force in people's lives.⁹⁵ But it is unlikely that Fal'k sought such a direct confrontation with the representative of state power. Direct political messages and challenges to power were, according to contemporary accounts of Fal'k, far from the aims and intentions of his work. Moreover, the artist had been dead for four years when his work was shown at the Manège.

Closer to Fal'k's own modernist intentions than any political challenge was the autonomous pursuit of specifically artistic issues—matters of form, surface, and color. The painting referenced a different set of meanings, available only to those who shared certain cultural orientations suppressed since the early 1930s: the modernist values and Formalist critical analysis of the 1910s. It was not about real-life experience but about aesthetic transformation. In this final section we turn to the formal qualities of the work, the specificity of still life, and the modernist pursuit of *artistic* autonomy.

While the life-sustaining role of potatoes gave them social meaning—and this, as part of the artist's own experience, may have informed Fal'k's devoted attentiveness to their individuality and to the play of light on their rough surfaces—we should not forget (as the Socialist Realist mindset invited one to do) that his *Potatoes* were not potatoes but painting. The point was to transform these humble, unbeautiful vegetables into art. As art historian Mikhail Alpatov wrote, comparing Fal'k to Rembrandt, “What strength of spirit must one possess in order to transform a symbol of misery and poverty into high art!”⁹⁶ In a recent account, art historian Vera Chaikovskaia criticizes the “realist” premise of the narrative of Fal'k as an “artist of poverty” who painted potatoes simply because he was too poor to afford bananas or pineapples, as if art was a reflection of life. On the contrary, in accordance with the Formalist emphasis on art's transformation of life, he consciously chose potatoes for their ordinariness, as an everyday motif out of which “the artist, like a magician, creates a feast for the eyes.”⁹⁷ In his work as a pedagogue, Fal'k promoted principles similar to

⁹⁵Cf. Manley, *To the Tashkent Station*, 3.

⁹⁶Alpatov, “Zhivopis' Fal'ka,” 263, cited in Levina, *Robert Fal'k*, 76; Chaikovskaia, *Tri lika*, 67.

⁹⁷Chaikovskaia, *Tri lika*, 69.

Viktor Shklovskii's principle of "making strange" in order to reinvigorate perception. He instructed his students to take an estranged (*ostranennyi*) look at simple things: "Onions, potatoes—we see these objects almost every day and know that we can eat them, etc. But we have lost the live sensation. ... People are lazy, sleepy creatures—it's necessary to wake them up. Only then does art begin."⁹⁸

But authors' intentions do not ultimately control the meanings their works take on in specific historical junctures. Whether or not Fal'k intended it, his unrepentant insistence on the paramount value of art, in spite of reprisals against him for formalism and lack of *ideinost'*, was, in the historical context, insubordinate and provocative. Demands for the autonomy of art, and challenges to party guidance, demagogic criteria, and the social command in the arts, were a significant element of the contentions of the Thaw. Khrushchev's bad day at the art exhibition set in train the reassertion of party control over the arts in face of perceived efforts to liberate art from its strictures.⁹⁹

Fal'k's *Potatoes* take us from an indictment of the state—speaking of hunger and shortage at a time when the party was making renewed claims for state socialism's power to provide higher living standards and consumption—to another heretical proposition. Mutely asserting the value of self-sufficiency and autonomy, the potatoes Fal'k represented carried not only literal meanings but also allegorical ones alluding to the (non-)relation between art and state power. Not only was the impoverished subject matter of *Potatoes* and its associations with survival-despite-the-state set to provoke Khrushchev. The manner in which the work was painted also represented a seemingly arrogant refusal of the norms of Soviet state art and of the social command: the requirement to make content accessible to the mass viewer and to provide apparently unmediated access to ideologically significant subject matter by effacing the materiality of the pictorial surface, creating an illusion of three-dimensional space behind it, and sculpturally separating figures from ground.

It is not surprising that Khrushchev found it hard to "make out anything properly" in Fal'k's painting, as he complained. Not only did it lack narrative, as still life was wont to do; the resistance to interpretation was also exacerbated by the manner in which it was painted. As Nina Moleva writes, Fal'k's work "gave nothing for literary description, [but only] impressions of a lilac-grey color scale like those of a musical study."¹⁰⁰ It lacked illusionistic deep space and distinct outlines or tonal contrasts delineating the objects and distinguishing them from the surrounding space. For his followers in the Thaw, Fal'k's search to express the material essence of the world through color—rejecting the academic practices of separating drawing from color and emphasizing outline, modeling, and tonal contrast—made him a true continuator of Cézanne's legacy in Russia.¹⁰¹ In an essay published in Dresden in 1974 (but probably drafted in the 1960s), Sarab'ianov, a constant champion and collector of Fal'k, analyzed the significant characteristics of his work in modernist, formal terms far removed from the customary ideological emphasis of Soviet

⁹⁸Ibid., citing R. R. Fal'k, *Besedy ob iskusstve: Pis'ma, vospominaniia o khudozhnike* (Moscow, 1981), 28.

⁹⁹Afanas'eva et al., *Kul'tura i vlast'*, 293–383.

¹⁰⁰Moleva, *Manezh*, 11–12.

¹⁰¹Andronov, "Zhivye traditsii," 9–10. Fal'k's credo was that "everything seen by the artist must be perceived through color" (Fal'k, cited by T. Levina, "O parizhskoi zhivopisi R. R. Fal'ka," in *Prostranstvo kartiny* [Moscow, 1989], 256).

art criticism: “Applying close tones with a broken brushstroke, Fal’k created a dense, encrusted, shimmering surface in which void and atmosphere were given as much materiality as the objects they envelop. The life of the surface of the painting was in constant play with the material and spatial characteristics of the motif depicted.”¹⁰² Ehrenburg lent his fictional artist Saburov words that could belong to Fal’k: Saburov complains about the loss of the specificity of painting in Soviet art, its approximation to photography: “If you open *Ogonek* you can’t always tell whether it’s a reproduction or a colored photo. No-one would mistake Rembrandt for a photo. ... It’s high time we remembered there is such a thing as art. ... Raphael isn’t color photography.”¹⁰³

Fal’k’s work asserts the specificity of painting, its “painterliness,” operating with modernist criteria far from those of Soviet realism. Rather than applying color to form, he treated the picture plane as an integral whole, creating what American formalist critic Clement Greenberg, writing in 1949, saw as a defining characteristic of modernist painting: “a continuum which objects inflect but do not interrupt.”¹⁰⁴ Far from effacing the surface to create an illusion of transparent, unmediated access to the subject matter, as Soviet realism required, the thick, scumbled paint and uniform density of broken brush marks retain the trace of making and handling (*faktura*) of the medium and assert the materiality of pigment on canvas. Rather than offering frictionless entry through an apparently transparent membrane into an illusory three-dimensional space, the painting arrests attention on its evasive, noisy surface, which separates art from life. It delays recognition, placing the potatoes just beyond the viewer’s grasp, frustrating desire, and withholding satisfaction. As Shklovsky had defined the art-ness of art, it put up resistance or “hurdles” to the viewer’s perception.¹⁰⁵ The resistant, impenetrable surface creates an equivalence between the viewer’s experience of apprehending the painting and the laborious work of groping in the dark to grub out potatoes from the earth.

In this way the painting placed demands on the viewer that were different from the familiar conventions of Socialist Realism, for it required an unaccustomed degree of patient, attentive contemplation, and it presupposed conversance with a different set of norms and codes, while giving little reward in terms of recognizable verbal “theme.” At the Manège in 1962, the appearance of dim nothingness in *Potatoes*, which so riled Khrushchev, was exacerbated by the fact that it was hung in a high and gloomy spot, depriving it of luminosity and preventing the intimate contemplation that its delicate color transitions required.¹⁰⁶ It seemed to blank the viewer—Khrushchev included, regardless of his status—appearing almost insolent in its self-contained indifference to the “social command” and demands of *ideinost’* and *narodnost’*. Feeling excluded from the frugal fare, one viewer, writing in the

¹⁰²Levina, “O parizhskoi zhivopisi R. R. Fal’ka,” 258, with reference to the original Russian manuscript of Sarabjanow, *Robert Falk*. Fal’k’s still lives of the mid-1950s, including *Potatoes* and *Household Dishes*, are discussed in Sarabjanow, *Robert Falk*, 55.

¹⁰³Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, 42, 43; idem, *Selections*, 199–207, esp. 202, 205.

¹⁰⁴Clement Greenberg, “On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting” (1949), in his *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), 172.

¹⁰⁵V. Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA, 2004) 15–21; Volkov, “Lakonizm i iazyk zhivopisi.”

¹⁰⁶Moleva, *Manezh*, 11.

visitors' book, transposed its "nothingness" onto the person of the artist: "As an artist, Fal'k is a nonentity."¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

Fal'k's *Potatoes* is, on one level, a quintessential still life, pared to its core. The painting hyperbolizes the characteristics that placed still life at odds with Socialist Realism, uncompromisingly refusing any compensatory emphasis on abundance, narratives of future perfect, or deference to the wisdom of state planning. The mundane nature of still life's subject matter and its association with quotidian sustenance is taken, in the form of the potatoes, to a nadir of humility that is almost abject. The lack of narrative is hypertrophied into an ambiguous nothingness, a silence pregnant with unstated accusations. In spite of still life's apparent inability to tell tales, the potatoes bear mute witness, recalling embodied experiences and invoking the role of things as bearers of memories suppressed from the conscious mind and verbal discourse. This in itself posed the threat of ambiguity and uncontrollable meanings. True to the *vanitas* tradition of still life, even as the potatoes represent sustenance, nourishment, dependability, endurance, and survival, they are also reminders of lack and the ever-present possibility of starvation. Like the *vanitas*, *Potatoes* serves as a reminder of the futility of human endeavor, the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures, the limits of worldly power, and the inevitability of death.

Even in the absence of human deeds or grand subject matter, *Potatoes* was far from lacking in resonance in 1955 when it was painted, a decade after the end of the war and less than a decade since the 1947 famine, and this was still the case in 1962, when Khrushchev encountered it at the revisionist art exhibition in the Manège. Its meaning spoke not through verbal narratives but through the gut and the hand and everyday practice recorded in the body: the feeling of picking up, inspecting for signs of rot, and scrubbing those rough earthy potatoes, the gestures of peeling them, repeatedly day by day. The coarse, dirty, and ugly fruits of the earth, glowing out of the gloom as if with their own inner light and warmth, are the true gold that emerges out of the base matter, more precious than Cézanne's oranges and apples.

In the absence of ideological narrative and human deeds, Fal'k's *Potatoes* placed in the foreground the act of attentive looking, the materiality of the medium, and the transformative, aesthetic power of painting. The painting represents absence in the way that is fundamental to all representations: it is not potatoes but a painted surface; light become color in the form of pigment. It concerns the art-ness of art, its separateness from life. Turning the tables on the Soviet state authorities that had marginalized it, his still life marginalized the state as irrelevant to art and life.

¹⁰⁷"Fal'k, kak khudozhnik – nichtozhen," TsGA Moskvyy, f. 21, op. 1, dd. 163. It is notable that, in the visitors' books, comments on Fal'k focused largely on his *Nude in an Armchair*, overlooking his still life in silence.

Falk's work was accused of "nothingness," but silence and absence are core to its multiple meanings. It alluded to the absence of the state and its powerlessness when faced with the ultimate projects of existence and of art. In *Potatoes*, the humility that is characteristic of the genre of still life is so hypertrophied that it became a kind of worm's eye critique of Socialist Realism's millennial claims and of the vainglory of Soviet power.