

SOVIET SOCIALIST REALISM

ARTIST: Aleksei Alexandrovich Vasilev (1907: 1975) St. Petersburg

TITLE: *They are Writing about us in Pravda* 1951

MEDIA: oil on canvas

SIZE: 39" x 61"

Courtesy of a private collector

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Aleksei Alexandrovich Vasilev was born September 30, 1907, in Samarcand in Central Asia. When he was still a young boy, his family moved to Frunze, Kirgizia, where he started drawing. His first teacher was the Kirgistan painter, Valdimir Obrastov. In 1926, Vasilev began studying art at the Moscow Art College and his professional training continued at the Moscow Higher Art-Technical Institute. After graduation, he went on to do postgraduate work at the Tretvakov Gallery while lecturing on theory and history of art and writing articles on the problems of art criticism.

Vasilev became the head of the Young Painters Brigade of the Far East while he was living in the Khabarovsk region. In 1938, he went to the Chukotka peninsula and created a series of works about the people there. Then in 1940 Vasilev moved to Moldavia. His stay there was interrupted by World War II, which he spent in evacuation in Tashkent with other artists. There he worked in the "TASS Windows" project making posters, propaganda sheets, newspaper graphics, and cartoons. After the war, Vasilev returned to Moldavia. During his life he was named the "Merited Arts Worker of Moldavskaya, SSR."

After his return to Moldavia, he made numerous landscapes and paintings depicting everyday life there. In paintings like *They are Writing about Us in Pravda*, included in

this packet, the landscape serves as a background for people of labor, the collective farmers. Other paintings celebrate the beauty of Moldavian nature, and some use the just-finished war as their theme. He also painted landscapes of the Crimea and Central Asia. Atypically, Vasilev made numerous trips to African countries and produced landscapes and sketches devoted to the nature, people, and architecture of these countries.

Vasilev participated in numerous art exhibits. His works are in the Tretyakov Gallery and the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. In the United States, his works are in the Museum of Philadelphia and in private collections.

Aleksei Alexandrovich Vasilev died on March 25, 1975.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, aesthetics, criticism)

What do you see in this painting? What time of year is it? What country is it? What does the dress of the people tell you about them? What other objects in the painting give you clues about when and where this scene takes place?

What is happening in this painting? Are the people happy or sad? How do the colors used by the artist contribute to the mood of the painting? How does the placement of the figures affect the painting? Would the painting create a different feeling or send a different message if the figures were farther away?

What do you think the artist is trying to say? What is the focal point of the painting? Describe the line, symmetry, texture, and other artistic devices used by the artist to create this work.

ACTIVITIES

Art: Perceiving

Objective: Students will be able to compare two works of art, identifying the similarities and the differences.

Review with students Vasilev's *They are Writing about Us in Pravda*, included in this packet. Introduce students to *Reapers Resting in a Wheatfield* (1888) by John Singer Sargent or to *The Harvest*, by Van Gogh. *Reapers Resting in a Wheatfield* can be found in [John Singer Sargent](#) by Trevor Fairbrother published by Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994. The Van Gogh is in [Van Gogh: Art for Children](#) by Ernest Rabott, Harper Collins Publishers, 1988.

Ask students to compare these works. What story does each painting tell? Both the Sargent work and the Vasilev piece show workers resting in the field during the harvest season. But the paintings are very different. Discuss the placement of the workers in the paintings. Discuss what differences are attributable to when the paintings were done : *They are Writing about Us in Pravda* (1951) and *Reapers Resting in a Wheatfield* (1888). What did the artist intend to show in each of the paintings?

Extension: Have students locate other paintings which show a similar scene and compare them with the two paintings discussed above. Van Gogh's *The Harvest* is one possibility. Many past Educator Evening packets contain slides of works that fit this activity, particularly from the packet featuring "Utah Impressionism."

Art: Making

Objectives: Students will create an art work showing differences between foreground, middle ground, and background.

Review with students the two paintings discussed in the previous lesson: Vasilev's *They are Writing about Us in Pravda* and Sargent's *Reapers Resting in a Wheatfield*. Review the concept of foreground, middle ground, and background in painting. Again, have students note where the figures are placed in each of the above paintings.

Students will create an artwork which differentiates between foreground, middle ground, and background. Students will be able to tell why they have placed objects in each of these areas of their art work and how that placement impacts the meaning or effect of the art work. Have students consider what would happen to the painting and its meaning if the objects were shifted around.

Language Arts

Objectives: Students will be able to write descriptive paragraphs.

Have students pretend the painting, *They are Writing about us in Pravda*, is a picture in a newspaper. Direct students to write a short descriptive paragraph about the people in the picture. "Descriptions should include details about their clothing, the setting and the situation depicted. . . . The description could include personality and visual characteristics." (This lesson was taken from Writing with the Newspaper: Ideas for Teachers edited by Judy True and Judy Long and published by Deseret Newspaper in Education, Salt Lake City, and presented at a workshop cosponsored by the International Reading Association and the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation.)

Social Studies

Objectives: Students will be able to discuss in class a subject they have researched.

In Vasilev's painting, *They are Writing about us in Pravda*, a girl has ridden her motor bike out to where the fields are being harvested and is reading Pravda to the workers. During his presidency, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) had fireside chats on the radio in which he talked directly with the people about the state of the nation. These talks were well received and most people made a point of listening to their radio when the fireside chats were on.

Assign students readings about FDR, his presidency, why the fireside chats were important, and what they accomplished. Discuss their readings with students. Ask them: What was happening in the country and in the world during this time? Why did Roosevelt have the fireside chats? Were they effective? Did they achieve FDR's goals? Each student can be assigned a specific topic to read about or general readings could be assigned to the whole class.

Language Arts

Objectives: Students will be able to use a variety of news media to get information.

Vasilev's painting shows how people in this one area got their news. Today, in the United States, there are a variety of media including newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and news magazines available for people to get news of what is happening in their town, state, country, and the world.

Students should select a current topic or event of either local, national, or international interest. Have students follow the story for a set period of time (say one month) looking at one or more newspapers, following stories on television or radio, listening to radio opinion shows, surfing the net, and reading news magazines. Students should pay particular attention to any bias in the news reporting. The placement of the story in context with other events reported shows how important that media believes the story is. Students should note how the story develops and/or changes over time and when it disappears from the news.

Extension: The name "Pravda" means truth in Russian. Have students speculate about whether and how the average person can get the truth from the news media.

