

SOVIET SOCIALIST REALISM

ARTIST: Vladimir (Lado) Osmanis dze Seidashvili (1931--) Georgia

TITLE: *The Workers in Batumi* c.1966

MEDIA: oil on canvas

SIZE: 74" x 44" (188 x 111.8 cm)

Gift to SMA by Roy S. Jespersion, SLC, 1993

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Lado Seidashvili was born in Batumi, in the Caucasus Republic of Georgia by the Black Sea. In 1956, he studied at the Tbilisi Fine Arts Academy, finishing in 1962 with a diploma as a graphic artist. That year he began working at Batumi's national press as an artist-editor. He also wrote poetry and made stage scenery for the theater. He did so for the plays "Seventh Sky," "Innocent Eye," and "Brave Soldier Shveiko".

Seidashvili paints in the Severe or Rough style, one of the three major divisions of Soviet Socialist Realist art. His style reflects the Communist concept of "narodost," which essentially means that a work of art should be "National in Style and Socialist in Content." One can see in his painting *The Workers in Batumi*, an archaic native treatment in the almond eyes, graceful outlining of the figure, and the frieze-like quality of the composition. All these elements combine to give the workers a ballet dancer's appearance.

Speaking of his painting in a letter to the Springville Museum of Art, Lado reveals: "I am so glad and happy that American students will have the opportunity to look into history's cataclysms in the absurdity of our Social Realism'. . . In the beginning I had a fear that the museums built in the Soviet system would not accept this painting because of its stylized manner. . . I had to make a few corrections to the painting before they would accept it, and as a result my barefoot workers' have shoes on now. . . The museum's committee thought that it was not right to show party workers in their bare feet; did this mean that they could not afford shoes? So, I had to cover their bare feet with shoes. From this caprice you can see what we artists had to live with, especially the ones of us that wouldn't march with the Soviet ideology."

However, speaking about his art in general, the artist admits that much of his work was done for the system he could not tolerate:

"For it was not done by my heart's soul, only for the money. For that same reason I never signed my work. So my work was known more often as 'unknown artist.' That was the rule of our life, no matter how free we felt inside, we were all slaves of the structure. . . There was always an optimistic light in my works. I've always believed that good times would come and we would own ourselves for the first time. I think the sun is coming up, farewell for now."

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

History--art in context. Considering the artist's situation, in what ways is this painting a reflection of its time, place, and artistic climate? Aesthetics--questions about art. What is the purpose and function of Soviet Socialist Realist Painting as reflected in *The Workers in Batumi*?

Criticism--art and meaning. What is the artist trying to say with this subject? Considering the artist's stylistic interests and using the elements and principles of art, what is your interpretation?

ACTIVITIES

Art/Art History

Objective: The students will demonstrate their understanding of the Soviet "Severe" or "Rough" style by creating an art work in this style and with similar constraints to those experienced by the Soviet artists.

Show the class the slide of *The Workers in Batumi* and give them a little background on the painting. (see Biography also) This painting is in the Soviet Rough or Severe style, sometimes called "Ugly Realism." The style was a revival of a 1920s movement, OST (Society of Easel Painters), and is a blend of Realism and Modernism. (Soviet Realism--art movement that rejected the traditional religious and mythological subject matter, choosing instead to focus on typical scenes from everyday life and labor. Modernism--art movement characterized by no one style or approach, but rather by the artists' belief that they were free to continually redefine both the style and content of art in ways that reflected and also perhaps had the power to change their society.)

According to Dr. Vern Swanson, Director of SMA, and author of Hidden Treasures: Russian and Soviet Impressionism, art in the Severe style "is schematic, stylized, and immediate." In other words, it is diagrammatic, fairly two-dimensional, has forms that have been altered from nature in a consistent manner, and was painted quickly, without layer-upon-layer of indirect painting or painstaking details.

The Severe or Rough style, an anti-Stalinist style, also makes a socialist statement, and often is more strident in its propagandistic tendencies than other forms of Soviet Realism such as Classical or Working Class Impressionism. However, as indicated in the Biographical Information, many of these artists felt constricted and controlled in that they were not allowed to travel or fraternize with foreigners, including other artists. Read the excerpts of Seidashvili's letters to the class (in Biography).

Assign the class to make a drawing with crayon or pastel. The drawings should be of people doing everyday activities or kinds of work common to our society. When the drawings are finished, arbitrarily assign a small group of children to look at the other students' drawings and decide on one change each student must make. After the changes have been made, have the students display their art work and discuss: 1) How they felt having someone else decide how they had to do part of their art work, and 2) How well they were able to portray our everyday society.

Art

Objective: The students will show an understanding of Stylization by drawing a stylized figure.

Show the class the slide of *The Workers in Batumi* and discuss how the figures are stylized; they look like dancers, in fact the whole painting feels like a dance. (See previous activity for a definition of Stylization). Ask the students to think of various ways the human figure can be depicted in a stylized manner. (rounded, softened, rough-edged, elongated, squared or geometricized, fractured, textured, etc.) Have the students pick a particular style and depict the figure in that manner. Tell them to be as consistent as possible.

Display the finished works and have the students discuss the variety of styles produced and the differing feelings and effects conveyed by the various styles. Also have

the students talk about their experiences with the process of Stylization.

Social Studies

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of societal judgements and their effects on society by discussing and writing about historical examples.

Show the slide of *The Workers in Batumi* and talk about how the western world scorned Soviet art for many years, even though most of the people had never seen any of the paintings first hand, and very few even had seen reproductions of more than one or two pieces and then only of the most stridently propagandistic. Now that critics and others have seen more Soviet art, the world view is changing.

Ask the students to think of ways we make uninformed judgements, and the effects of those judgements on our society. (For example, the judgements about Soviet art kept the rest of the world from enjoying and supporting Soviet art and artists. Other judgements have had far-reaching, long-term consequences for the world, such as the belief that slavery was justifiable, see Elizabeth Catlett's, *I Have Special Reservations*, in the UMFA Elementary poster set)

Have the students list or outline an event(s) or circumstance that demonstrates critical judgement by society. Make a parallel list of the effects of the event. Younger classes may need to make the list of events and effects as a class and may need to focus on immediate, local problems to give the students a concrete idea of the topic or they may need to use local events to explain the principle, before moving on to a less familiar situation.

This activity can be tied to units on other countries or cultures the students are not familiar with; or to periods of time when prejudice was a particularly strong issue, such as during the 1960s or when the Americans of Asian descent were interred during WWII; or to ways in which propaganda has/is being used to promote nationalism; or to current problems such as the California measure that prohibits illegal aliens from obtaining public schooling or welfare benefits.

Extension: Older students, gifted students, or particularly interested students can research a specific time, occurrence, or place, and write a report on nationalism, propaganda, uninformed judgements, or prejudice and its effects on our society.

Foreign Language

Objective: The students will demonstrate their grasp of vocabulary and sentence structure in a foreign language by writing a short response to *Workers in Batumi*.

Show the class the slide of *Workers in Batumi* and read the Biographical Information to the students. Have the students write a short response to the art work in the language they are studying, in light of the information from and about the artist. Have the students share their written responses with the class for oral language practice.

Variation:**Language Arts/ Social Studies**

Objective: The students will demonstrate their understanding of the Russian alphabet by writing their names in Russian letters.

Show the class the slide and read part or all of the Biographical Information to the students. Find Georgia on a world map. Show the students some examples of Russian writing. Give each child a copy of the Russian alphabet matched with the Roman alphabet and let them figure out how to write their names. Use the information included with the packet. For additional information about Russian or Russia, see the MISCELLANEOUS SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES for addresses of good internet sites.