

SOVIET SOCIALIST REALISM

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Background Information:

Soviet Socialist Realist paintings can be divided into the following three categories:

1. Classical: Soviet academic art
2. Working Class Impressionism: gestural, masculine, immediate, and accessible
3. Rough or Severe Style: various official, Modernist styles such as Cubo-Realism, Primitivism, Mannerist elongation, and Nativism.

For more information, see HIDDEN TREASURES: RUSSIAN AND SOVIET IMPRESSIONISM: 1930-1970s by Vern G. Swanson. The book is available for purchase at the Springville Museum of Art. Copies of the book also are available for reference use in the Museum library.

When researching Soviet Socialist art, you will find various spellings of the names of artists and of other nouns. This variation is due to the inherent difficulties of translating words in Cyrillic into our modern English alphabet. You also will probably find that birth and death dates, places lived, etc., will vary with the source because the artists have been isolated from western civilization and they and much of their work has been out of favor in their own countries until the very recent growth of interest in and exposure to Soviet Socialist Realist art.

ACTIVITIES

The following activities are designed to be used with any of the artworks that are appropriate; many can or do use more than one of the artworks featured in this packet.

Visual Art

Objective: The students will explore the possibilities of normal, everyday life as the subject of artworks.

Perceiving:

Show the class slides of several of the artworks from this packet such as *Virgin Land Dinner*, by Khirichenko; *Reading by the Oven*, by Sokolovskaya; and *The Fisherman and His Sick Son*, by Tutunov. Using information from the Biographies and the Questions for Looking, lead a discussion about the artworks and their subjects. Depending on the students' age and background in history, they may have some understanding, or be able to gain some understanding, of the USSR's political stance that sought to glorify the common worker, the common man. If so, include the students' reactions to these artworks in light of that historical knowledge. You may want to ask the students to consider whether the political ideology expressed in these artworks affects their value as artworks. (Note, several of the other artworks from this packet are more overtly propagandistic. For help with a lesson on aesthetics, (State Core, Contextualing) see Rotnitski Activities)

After the class has discussed the Soviet artworks, show them slides or reproductions of non-Soviet works that also use everyday life as subject matter.

Some possibilities are the following: *Farm Near Fillmore*, Donald Beauregard and *Harvest Scene in France*, Lorus Pratt, both from the April 1992 packet MOVE TO THE MODERN; *County Fair*, B. F. Larsen February 1993 packet LEARNING ABOUT OUR SOCIETY THROUGH ART; *Boy with a Bun*, J. T. Harwood, April 1993 packet PORTRAITS IN PAINTING and the 1997 SMA Elementary State Core Poster sets. Also in the posters are *Youthful Games*, Gary Smith; *Richard's Camp*, J. T. Harwood; *The Factory Worker*, Mahonri Young; *Wash Day in Brigham City*, Calvin Fletcher; *Riders of the Range*, Paul Salisbury; and *New Bloom*, Trevor Southey. The UMFA Elementary poster set has several usable artworks, and many of the more recent Educator Evening packets contain slides of artworks that can be used in this activity.

Have the students compare the artworks. Then ask the students if they feel differently about the Soviet artworks after seeing the non-Soviet pieces. Ask the students to justify their responses with specific points about the artworks and to identify clearly what feelings they have and why. Have them explore the Realism movement with whatever sophistication they can.

Variations: Many other kinds of comparisons can be made using the Russian artworks, the two poster sets, and slides from past packets. For example, compare various harvest scenes: how they differ, how they are the same, and why you can or cannot tell what area of the world is being depicted.

Compare some of the Russian peasant scenes with early and contemporary Utah art and/or with the romantic depictions in several of the UMFA posters, for example, compare works featuring Utah pioneers with works like Rotnitski's *The Impassioned Years*.

Another possibility is to compare some of the Russian pieces about war with other artists' works done in response to war such as works by Käthe Kollwitz or Ben Shahn.

The potential comparisons are limited only by your imagination, and the comparisons and discussions easily can involve art history, art criticism, aesthetics, social studies, or geography.

Expressing:

After discussing the artworks as suggested above, have the students write one of the following:

1. A description of one of the artworks.
2. A response to one of the artworks.
3. A critique of one of the artworks.
4. A comparison of two of the artworks.
5. A comparison of one of the artworks with an artwork of another subject such as beautiful flowers or scenery.

The suggested writing assignments also can be used as discussion topics, particularly if your class is too young to write well or if they have had little experience talking about art.

Making:

After discussing the artworks as suggested above, assign students to make drawings of everyday scenes from their lives. For young students, you may want to have this assignment be just to draw a scene from memory. Older students can be assigned to make several quick sketches over the period of a week. Then they should choose their favorite sketch and make a more detailed drawing or use some medium to add color.

Another possible assignment is to have the students enlist the aid of family members or friends as models, and do a sustained drawing as homework. Or, you may choose to have students take turns being models for each other, or have other students or members of the community come to class to be models. Use simple props to suggest scenes or activities. You can have the students do quick preliminary sketches to help them decide on their composition.

This assignment on Realism lends itself to many different emphases such as line quality, value, shading, color, design, proportion, balance, etc. All you need to do is ask the students to focus on the specific element or principle of design you want to emphasize. If you want the students to concentrate on several areas, you may want them to do preliminary sketches that help them, for example, decide on the appropriate proportions before they begin their final drawing.

Visual Arts: Making

Objective: The students will learn to use appropriate structure and proportion when drawing the human head.

Show the students several artworks that feature human figures or heads. If possible, also show them a skull and have them feel their own faces to identify the major bones. Then show them an overlay of muscles and/or have them feel the muscles working as they

move their faces: smile, frown, open and shut jaw, close and open eyes, raise eyebrows. Explain that artists study the bones and muscles to help them know how to give their artworks a feeling of structure, a sense of solidity, a foundation.

Many beginning art texts have good lessons on drawing the human head with correct proportions. In addition, several past Educator Evening packets have simple lessons, including April 1993, PORTRAITS IN PAINTING and March 1995, A NATIONAL VIEW.

You may want to have the students do several gestural drawings: very quick sketches that capture the movement or position of the model: before they attempt a more complete drawing. Have the students focus on capturing a feeling of the shape of the skull, of the structure underneath the skin. They can take their best gestural drawing and superimpose on it the details of the features and hair, or they can start a more detailed drawing using what they have learned about the structure of the human head and the practice with gesture.

Dance

Background: Russian ballet is considered the best in the world. Russian dancers are known for their discipline, grace, and dramatic performance style. Some of the greatest ballet dancers in history come from Russia. The most famous are Vaslav Nijinsky and Anna Pavlova. Students also may be familiar with Mikhail Baryshnikov, who in addition to dancing in U. S. Ballet companies, was featured in the movie White Knights.

Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) is considered by many to be the greatest female dancer in history. It was said of her "She does not dance, she soars as though on wings." She was known for her pirouettes (turns) and for practicing 15 hours a day. Her most famous performance was in "The Dying Swan"; the audience would weep.

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950) is best known for his leaps: "He seemed to 'epause' in the air." At age 17 he was acknowledged the greatest dancer in the world. He created movement never seen on the stage before. He was not only a dancer but also a choreographer.

There are at least 36 major ballet companies in Russia. The most famous being the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow and the Maryinsky Ballet in St. Petersburg.

Russian composers:

Tchaikovsky : Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, The Nutcracker

Stravinsky: Petroushka, The Firebird

Rimsky-Korsakov: Flight of the Bumblebee, Snow Maiden

Prokofiev: Peter and the Wolf

National Folk Dance, Festivals throughout the year: music, dancing, national costumes, food festivals to celebrate the end of winter, the beginning of Spring, harvest festivals,

Reindeer festival, Midnight Sun Celebration, Revolution Day, May Day, Victory Day, Christmas-January Trees, Easter, etc.

Dance Activities

Interpretive movement: Look at a piece of Russian art: peasants, somber, hardworking. Play a Russian song such as "Nye Probyzday" and have the students walk to the beat with heavy steps, like the hardworking peasants. They can use a partner and push and pull as if they were working or part of some machinery. Then contrast the weight of "Nye Probyzday" with "Korobuska," which is festival music: fun and upbeat. Have the students dance in a circle or with a partner, such as clap dancing.

"Peter and the Wolf" by Prokofiev is a great way for children to learn about the different instruments in the orchestra. Have them listen to the assigned instrument for each character.

Bird: flute, duck: oboe, cat: clarinet, grandfather: bassoon, wolf: horns, Peter: strings, hunters: woodwinds, hunters' rifles: timpani

Have the children create a movement for each instrument. Some possible movements are, the bird: runs, duck: low on ground, cat: all fours, grandfather: giant rocking steps, wolf: sneaking, Peter: skipping and galloping, hunters: jump, surprise, hunters' rifles: explosive jumps. As much as possible, encourage the children to come up with their own movements.

Divide the children into groups that match each character, let them choose a movement, and play the piece with each group doing their chosen movements when their character is being played. Or, allow each student to choose movements for all or several of the characters and let them dance to the piece. Depending on the space and time you have, you may want to divide the class into two groups so that each student has a chance to be in the audience and to be a dancer.

Use Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" for music and let the children choose one or two of the groups below. Have each group compose and choreograph their own dance to share with the class. Props such as the following can be a lot of fun.

- Battle of the Nutcracker and Mouse King: imaginary or cardboard swords
- Snowflake Dance: pom poms on sticks
- Spanish Dance: Clapping or tambourines
- Arabian Dance: scarves
- Chinese Dance: fans
- Trepak Dance: jumps, leaps, heel touches, partner throws, "show-off moves"
- Clown Dance: acrobatics

Social Studies/Map Reading/Geography/Healthy Lifestyles

Objectives: The students will use the Russian artworks as a springboard for learning to

find places on maps, for comparing the USSR with the current division of countries, for learning the geography of Russia, or for learning about social change.

Show the students whatever seem the most appropriate artworks and tell them a little about the artists. Then write some of the places mentioned in the Biographies or Activities sections on the board and have the students as a class, or as individuals, find them on a map. The children may also enjoy seeing a couple of the names written in Cyrillic: see.

Show the students some of the Soviet artworks and give them copies of a map showing the USSR and one showing the current countries in the area we call "Russia." You can assign the students to do an activity with the maps that fits their age and your class' curriculum. Some possibilities are listed below.

1. Have the students color the USSR one color and the countries it has been divided into each a different color. Have the students count the number of countries that currently exist.
2. Give the students an additional map from before the creation of the Soviet Union and have them trace the formation of the Union as well as the dissolution of that Union.
3. Have students individually, or as small groups, research a particular country. Students should find information about ethnic groups, conflict, natural resources, local industries, the economy, and the culture(s). Have the students present the material to the class.
4. Have students bring newspaper, magazine articles, or information from television news or the internet about "Russian" countries. Discuss what is happening and why. For example, the countries that are experiencing conflict between Muslim and Christian cultures. You may want to relate these conflicts to similar conflicts in other parts of the world. Discuss why differences in ethnic origin, religion, politics, race, culture, etc., can produce such intense conflict. Have the students as a class or as small groups brainstorm some ways conflict can be avoided or mitigated. You may want the class to focus on local conflicts in their brainstorming sessions. Students can share their best ideas with the class.
5. Have students identify geographical features on their maps and draw and color them appropriately. As an extension, or for an older class, have the students identify features that affect life in various areas. For example, mountains, elevation, distance from water, latitude, etc. The internet has information on weather in all parts of the world. After the students have identified geographical features that will affect life in various areas, have them hypothesize what the weather will be like and then check their hypothesis on the internet.

Links for Russian Internet Resources

The 1st year Russian students have teamed up to present the 33 letters of the Cyrillic alphabet

[Http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/south/russian/alphabet.html](http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/south/russian/alphabet.html)

Russian Alphabet with audio for russian pronunciation

<http://alice.ibpm.serpukhov.su/newfriends/cyrillic/russian.alphabet.html>

Written Cyrillic this site compares the written cyrillic to the printed

[Http://www.dnaco.net/~ivanjs/written.html](http://www.dnaco.net/~ivanjs/written.html)

Basic information on Unfamiliar Languages of Eastern Europe and the Former USSR

<http://www.smartbiz.com/sbs/arts/spe7.htm>

A wonderful site called YU Landscape Landscape Painted With Heart: resources for information on language, food, people, places, and culture; audio for russian pronunciation; reading drills; photos of places to see; recipes

<http://www.yugoslavia.com/culture/html/izgovor.html>

UtahLINK/Curriculum Front Door/Foreign Language Curriculum Units/Foreign Language Beginning Proficiency (new) Curriculum Units The state of Utah must educate students who will be able to communicate linguistically and culturally

http://www.uen.org/cgi-bin/websql/lessons/c3.hts?core=11&course_num=4700
