

SOVIET SOCIALIST REALISM

ARTIST: Semon Aronovich Rotnitsky (1915—) St. Petersburg
TITLE: *The Impassioned Years: The Partisans of Pskov* 1975-90
MEDIA: oil on canvas
SIZE: 86”x 140”
Courtesy of a private collector

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Semon Rotnitsky was born in Minsk, Belorussia where, at the age of eight, he studied art at the Marx Palace of Culture Art Studio. He received a prize and diploma at a republican exhibit of children’s art.

In 1926, his family moved to Tula, Russia. Four years later, Semon worked at the Tula Arm Factory Palace of Culture Art Studio until 1934, during which time he graduated from middle school and trade school. Semon entered the Russian National Academy of Arts Institute in Leningrad. From 1934-37, he studied at the preparatory department of the Institute, until becoming a student from 1937-41. During this time, he participated in local, republican, and national art exhibitions.

When the Great Patriotic War began, Rotnitsky joined the military. One year later, he became a member of the Communist Party. In 1945, Rotnitsky was demobilized to resume his education. In 1948, he completed his study at the I.E. Repin Institute. That same year, he joined the Leningrad Chapter of the Russian Artists Union.

For 12 years, Rotnitsky taught at the Kazan Trade School of Arts, and during that time he also was a director of the school. In 1953, he was elected a member of the Tatar Artists management, and in 1957, he was named Honorable Art Worker of Tatarstan.

In 1960, Rotnitsky moved to Leningrad and became a teacher at the V.I. Mukhina Higher Trade School of Art and Industry in Leningrad in 1965 where he taught for 16 years. In 1979, he became a docent of the Painting Faculty.

Semon Rotnitsky has held personal exhibitions at the Mukhina Higher Trade School of Art and Industry in Leningrad, 1981; the Summer Garden Coffee House in Leningrad in 1985; and in the Leningrad Artist Union in 1991.

“Truthful and deep penetration into the character is what I believe to be the artist’s main objective. The whole life is too short for it. It takes talent and hard work. As for the results, they will be evaluated by the contemporaries and descendants,” says Rotnitsky. The artist believes his duty is to “be able to see the beauty of nature and man and to communicate this beauty to the spectator.”

Rotnitsky’s works are found in major museums in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Samara, Kazan, Tver, Perm Pskov, Kislovodsk, Krasnoyarsk, the Fleisher Museum and in private collections in the Soviet Union and the United States.

Pskov, the area depicted in the painting, is a rural area 50 kilometers south west of Leningrad. After 900 days of siege from the German army, the Soviet regular army and thousands of partisan volunteers from the occupied territory broke the blockade at Pskov and freed Leningrad.

The artist, Rotnitsky, was a soldier participating with the Soviet forces which liberated the city. He was in Pskov the day the partisans met the regular army and remembers how exhausted and elated they were to break the German strangle-hold on Leningrad. All of the artist’s family died in the siege, along with over one million other Leningraders, mostly from starvation and the bombardment.

Rotnitsky painted nearly 50 preliminary oils for this his masterpiece. The painting, when it was exhibited in Moscow in 1990, won him the title of “Most Honored Artist of the Soviet Union.” Within a year of his being so honored, the Soviet Union fell. But the picture remains one of the great icons of Soviet Socialist Realist painting.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Criticism, Aesthetics)

What event is portrayed within this artwork? (the liberation forces of the siege of Leningrad during World War II) In what country is Leningrad located? (Russia) What is a siege? (An attempt to overtake a fortified location by keeping it surrounded by an armed force) What country imposed the siege on Leningrad? (Nazi Germany) How long did the siege last? (900 days) What was the result of the siege? (Millions died from starvation because food supplies could not reach the city and because of the bombing) What does liberation mean? (To set free or remove from restraint) Referring to the title of the artwork, what is a partisan? (A member of the resistance movement, not a member of an official military group, usually a concerned citizen of the local area or country)

From the title of the artwork, what does the word impassioned mean? (To move by strong passion or feelings) What are some of the passions the partisan forces may have felt? (Relief, pride, feelings of accomplishment, joy) How are some of those emotions evident within the artwork? (Some members are smiling, many are talking together excitedly, others look proud or very content) Could partisans also be victims of the siege? (Yes, partisans could be citizens within the city that helped to break down the forces of the Nazi army) How can you tell these are the partisans and not victims of the siege? (Many look well fed and healthy and are dressed in warm clothes, they have ample guns and ammunition, and the setting is a rural area rather than a large city)

ACTIVITIES

Visual Arts—contextualing

Objective: The students will understand the basic concepts related to the Social Realism art movement and be able to distinguish differences in American and Russian social realist works.

Give the following background regarding Social Realism:

Social Realism: A twentieth-century art movement that focused on the belief that art must reflect real people's environments, lives, and problems. An international movement that depicted political and social situations, its themes often centered on the struggles of the poor and socially disadvantaged. In many totalitarian states, the art was used for propaganda, often in mural format. In America, the social realist works did not display the strong political aspects of the Mexican muralists or the forced optimism of Russian artists. Rather, American works portrayed the public's general disregard for society's victims.

Discuss the following concepts:

1. How do American social realist works differ from those of Russia?

American: Many works originated during the Great Depression and display aspects of the economic crisis. Artists had the freedom to depict varying social concerns including

poor working conditions, strong government involvement in labor processes, and government corruption.

Russian: Social realism was used to “ideologically transform” and educate the working people in the spirit of Socialism. Workers were portrayed as the true heroes of the new socialist state and the Red Army, peasants and revolutionaries were major images of social importance. Most artworks displayed a sense of cheerfulness and good will.

For advanced students, further comparisons can be made between American and Russian works and those of Mexican social realists.

2. Project how social realist works might change in regards to changes made within the government structures of the country in which they are created.

For example, in America as new federally funded projects (i.e., Workers Progress Act (WPA), welfare and unemployment acts) became available, they lessened the effect of the Great Depression. What influence would these actions have on the subject matter and themes of the American social realist artist? Also, what effects might be seen in Russian social realist works since the dissolution of the strong central Communist government?

3. What effect does the aspect of freedom have on a social realist artist?

In a free nation, the artist is not only free to portray society’s ills but also is free to display aspects of government’s problems. In a totalitarian state, the artists might be censored or “strongly encouraged” to portray only the positive aspects of society in regards to government involvement.

For further study have the students identify examples of social realist works and classify them as to whether they might be from a socialist state or from a democratic state. If images are not available, describe several themes or events that deal with social issues and have the students describe how those ideas would be portrayed in either type of state. Following are a few situations that can be described for the students:

1. A member of the treasury department has been found to have been funneling large amounts of monies into programs that help educate underprivileged children.

2. There is a massive cave in at a mine that recently was supposed to have been inspected by a government safety team. There are numerous deaths in addition to rumors that bribes might have been made to the inspectors.

3. The government recently drastically reduced funding for federally funded health-care programs for the elderly. This was done at the expense of lowering taxes for young families.

4. A new government program allots large amounts of money for new advertisements which promote saying “no” to drugs. Monies for these ads were taken from an existing program of drug-rehab.

Visual arts - expressing

Objective: The students will create a social realist work of art that deals with social concerns.

After discussing some of the aspects of social realism given above, have the students brainstorm as to specific social concerns they might want to display within a social realist work. Encourage the students to explore a variety of approaches (i.e., political cartoon, propaganda poster, large mural format, traditional gallery painting). Also have the students decide who their patron and/or audience would be (i.e., a government agency, a private corporation, an art museum, a private individual). Usually current and local social concerns provide excellent subject matter and involve the students directly.

After each student has decided on the social issue to portray, the approach to take, and the patron and/or audience of the work; provide numerous materials and resources to aid the students in the completion of their artwork.

Evaluation: Have each student view another student’s work and then write a brief newspaper article describing the proposed social situation portrayed within the artwork. This evaluation can be as brief as a newspaper headline or as extensive as an entire article.

Visual Arts - contextualizing

Objective: The students will learn about various American social realist artists.

Provide the student with the names of various American social realist artists. After researching a particular artist, the student will then “present” their artist in one of the following manners:

The student can write a letter or series of letters supposedly from the artist to a contemporary. The letters should address such things as where and when the artist was born, any art training the artist had received, any distinguishing factors about the artist’s life that would be noteworthy, and a brief statement about some of the political or social considerations the artist might address through his/her work.

The student, while representing the artist he or she researched, can play “20 Questions” or “What’s My Line?” with the class. The student must know a significant amount about the artist to play this game. If the class has not guessed who the artist is within the allotted time, then the student can give further clues to the class until they guess who it is.

The student can be a member of a panel and the panel members can debate social issues. The students have to respond as the particular artist they researched would supposedly respond. Questions to the panel can be directed by the teacher or from other class members.

Following are brief biographies of several American social realist artists:

George Grosz (1893-1959) was enraged by the German middle-class corruption of democracy, the brutality of militarism, and the support for the emerging Nazi movement. He fled Nazi persecution to settle in America and became a placid painter, showing none of the psychological insight and sharpness of line that characterized his work in Germany.

Ben Shahn (1898-1969) was a Lithuanian who came to the US as a child. He was raised in a Brooklyn slum and apprenticed as a lithographer. He spent much of the 1920s traveling in Europe and studying art. He completed several government-sponsored works in the 1930s and worked with Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Center murals. His own works, both militant and thoughtful, portray his hatred of injustice and distrust of authority. He did a series of 23 paintings based on the theme of the trial and execution of two philosophical anarchists.

Jacob Lawrence (1917-) born in Atlantic City and later moved to Harlem and trained at the Harlem Art Workshop. After extensively researching aspects of African-American history, he then created works portraying themes of the Great Migration and the position of blacks as they took control of their own lives. He created several series on Frederick Douglass, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and on the themes of work and builders. He did not consider his work to be "protest" art, but rather works that dealt with the social scene of America. Most of his works are small and are meant to be viewed collectively. They contain flat shapes with arbitrary colors and display narrative qualities.

Reginald Marsh (1898-1954) studied art at Yale and created numerous cartoons and drawings for magazines and newspapers. At night he continued to study art, and later he traveled to Europe to copy hundreds of masterpieces. Upon his return, he produced images of graphic New York City life, including crowded tenements and public beaches. Marsh drew incessantly and was a prolific painter whose numerous works captured the crowded living conditions of New York City in the 1930s.

Other American Social Realist artists include Isabel Bishop and George Tooker. Diego Rivera, although not an American citizen, painted numerous socialist murals in America that were highly controversial in their depictions of American social ills.

Visual Arts—contextualing

Objective: The students will be able to classify artworks according to their social impact.

Give the students a brief overview of the following concepts:

There is a theory, developed around 1900, that proposed that art is an instrument to produce effects; usually for social, political, moral, or economic purposes. This theory is called the instrumentalist theory, and it asserts that art should advance the interests of humanity and is the servant of mankind. In fact, the quality of the artwork is directly proportionate to the greatness of the purpose. Therefore, if the purpose is great (i.e., it affects a great number of individuals or it impacts a few people to a great degree) then the artwork is of high quality.

Have the students then view several artworks that portray varying aspects of this theory. Most social realist works would be acceptable, in addition to religious or state art. Generally the works of Goya, David, Gericault, Rauschenberg, Sherman, Kruge, Rivera, and Guston are effective images that portray these concepts. Also, Picasso's *Guernica* would be appropriate. Have the students rank the artworks' quality according to the greatness of the purpose. For example, a work portraying the effects of acid rain, which affects large numbers of people (but somewhat indirectly) might be ranked lower than an artwork portraying the atrocities of the Nazi government towards Jews.

The Instrumentalist theory is just one of many theories that have been developed throughout the history of art to help define and/or qualify various artworks. While not all the students may feel that art should portray social, political, or economic concerns, many individuals within the field of art have felt that art should serve such aims.

For advanced study, have the students study about the marxist or sociological theories that were developed in the mid-19th century. While similar to the Instrumentalist theory, it was more directed toward furthering social ideals. The Fascist and Nazi theories also belong to this category. They reject the nonconformism and total freedom of the artist and assert that the artist's inner world is too narrow and art must embrace deeper social values. This theory views art as a radical means of communication and a social force for promulgation of revolutionary ideas.

Language Arts—writing

Objective: The students will understand the content and structure of diaries in portraying common, everyday circumstances.

After viewing *The Impassioned Years: The Partisans of Pskov* and reviewing the background material on the image provided within this lesson, have the students consider some of the following concepts:

How do we know what had happened to the residents of Leningrad during the siege? (government reports, personal accounts, artworks) Which source would be most accurate? Which source would be most intimate? Which source would be most visual?

We have learned of several historical events through the personal accounts and/or diaries of the participants (i.e., The Diary of Anne Frank and The Hiding Place, by Carrie Ten Boom). Usually these accounts are very revealing as to everyday events and provide the readers with personal insights.

After reviewing some of the facts regarding the siege of Leningrad, have the students write an imaginary diary of the siege. The students could depict several days in the life of a student their own age. Students can be assigned to write about different time periods throughout the siege. For example, the diary accounts would be different at the beginning of the siege then at the end. Following are guidelines the students can use for the diary entries:

1. Begin each entry with the date and day of the week.
2. Keep the entries short; no need for full sentences.
3. Note both group concerns (family life, work, disasters) and something of the writer's inner life as revealed by how he/she reacts to events.
4. Include factual details, embroidered with the personal and imagined.
5. Let your entries reflect your particular gender perspective.
6. Create repetition of certain events to emphasize what your character cared about and took time to notice.
7. Describe the various settings (e.g., home, school, work) that the character might be experiencing. Also give some background information on possible personal relationships (e.g., the population was probably mostly women and very old or younger men, as most of the men would be fighting in the war).

Following are some sources for background information on the siege:

The 900 Days, the Siege of Leningrad by Harrison Salisbury, The Jews of St. Petersburg by Mikhail Beizer, and "The Battle of Russia" by Frank Capra (video).

History—political science

Objective: The students will be able to identify various government structures.

Have the students research some the following government structures:

Totalitarian Socialist
Monarchy Coup
Democracy Republic
Theocracy Dictator
Military Tribal

Advanced students may also research some of the following concepts:

Federal government branches (e.g., executive, legislative, and judicial), military systems (e.g., regular army, partisans, guard, militia), offices within the government (e.g., president, premier, monarch, prime minister) and early American government parties (e.g., whigs, loyalists, tories)

Have the students report on their findings. The student should be able to give a brief definition of the type of government structure and then list several countries that have that form of government.

Math

Objective: The students will work with estimates and relate percentages to actual figures.

During the 900 day siege of Leningrad (portrayed in The Impassioned Years: The Partisans of Pskov) there were over

9 million residents who died from starvation. Have the students estimate the average deaths per day of the siege. Discuss some of the following possible problems with estimating figures:

In a siege would the same number of people die from starvation at the beginning of the siege as at the end? How could you adjust the estimate to reflect other considerations (e.g., the time of year the siege began and ended, the prospects of gardens and animals, the general health of the people before the siege, the food supplies available before the siege, the effects of disease, the ages of the residents)?

Also have the students figure what percent of the population of Leningrad died from starvation during the siege. What are some of the figures you would need to determine the percentage? (The population at the beginning and end of the siege, the number of births during the 900 days, the number of deaths that were unrelated to starvation). Because these figures are difficult to locate, have the students predict that there were approximately 90 million residents in Leningrad. (Note: the actual percentage of deaths was closer to 50 percent of the population.) Have the students figure the percentage of starvation deaths and advanced students could draw those percentages in a scale.

Discuss with the students that often figures or data may not give the entire picture or portray the magnitude of the entire event. Have the students try to relate those figures to their own community. What would the affect be on a community if one- tenth of the population died from starvation? Without becoming morbid, have the students try to project and then personalize these figures to their own neighborhood, class, or family.

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