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Return of a Soviet-Era Genre Lost to Perestroika

By JUDY DEMPSEY
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BERLIN — When Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of the former Soviet Union and Communist Party leader, introduced perestroika in the late 1980s, his policies had a profound affect on almost every aspect of life.

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Letyanin Viktor Fedorovich, "The Report," 1953

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The censors for music, newspapers, television, and radio melted away.

Banned writers, whose secret books were read only in samizdat, often typed out so many times on fading carbon paper that they were difficult to read, could finally appear on the shelves neatly bound. It was a fascinating period of the 20th century because the freedom was so intense, almost frenetic.

But what also happened during this time was the disappearance of a genre of art: Socialist Realism.

"It happened so quickly," said Alessandra Lucia Coruzzi. "In the late 1980s, a part of Soviet history was deleted."

Ms. Coruzzi is one of two curators of the exhibition "Behind the Iron Curtain," a fascinating collection of Socialist Realism art put on display in Berlin by a group of art collectors from Milan.

Gaia Fusai, one of the collectors, said the paintings had been taken down at great speed under Mr. Gorbachev's term, as if there was an urgency to break with the past.

"The paintings were put into basements or corners, or thrown aside as if that part of the past had no meaning. But that art is part of the former Soviet Union's history,"

said Ms. Fusai, who was in Berlin for the opening. "You can't just blot it out. So a group of collectors decided to go about trying to find these paintings. It is about saving the art of Socialist Realism," she said.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-'80s, leading artists had been commissioned by the Communist Party, for propagandist reasons, to depict the achievements of the Bolshevik Revolution and its leader, Vladimir Lenin. Artists who did not want to paint under such restrictions retreated to internal exile or emigrated.

For 50 years, Socialist Realist paintings, many of them showing Lenin and all of them depicting heroic or optimistic facets of life under Communism, had hung in public places.

Some still hang in museums in former Soviet republics. But they are few and far between.

So in a strange twist of history, just as the avant-garde art banned by the Soviet regime was viewed again, Socialist Realism, discarded so quickly in the late '80s, may be going through its own renaissance. At least, that is the hope of the Jeschke-Van Vliet Art Gallery,

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located where the Berlin Wall once stood 20 years ago. For the first time, more than 300 paintings, created between the mid-'20s and the early '80s have been brought under one roof.

The quest to bring the collection together began nearly five years ago, not much time to find so many paintings scattered across the former Soviet Union. The issue of property rights further complicated things, since the state commissioned the artists to paint and owned many of the paintings.

"We went through different channels to acquire the paintings," said Ms. Fusai. "It had been easy for paintings to cross the border from Russia into the other former Soviet Republics. We could buy the paintings. All the paper work is legal and correct. But it was more difficult in Russia."

Finding them and buying them was one thing. Restoring them was another.

Hassan Bayati, who studied at the Academy of Art in Baghdad and Florence and is the other curator of the show, said he could not have imagined what he was to find when he set about restoring at least half the paintings.

"It's not that they just had to be cleaned. You had to know which materials to use," said Mr. Bayati. He explained that artists of the period had to be extremely inventive to find materials because of shortages. Some of the canvases were made from jute, or "sewn together from pieces of military tents." The artists obtained cement dust and heated industrial oil to bind the canvas. "And if you look behind the canvasses, sometimes you can read what the artist was thinking, what he wanted to paint, how much money he needed, and so on."

The themes of the paintings on exhibit are consistent, despite the immense changes that had taken place throughout the Soviet Union during this time.

There are the typical scenes with Lenin standing with villagers or leading a Communist Party congress, or talking to workers. An entire room is devoted to Lenin in all his guises. But there are many paintings without Lenin, too.

In the works there is never any sense of conflict or doubt. But that does not mean that the artist, though commissioned by the Communist Party, did not develop a certain freedom.

One painting, "Students — volunteers in the fowl-run" by Semenov Evgeni Vladimirovich, who was born in Russia and studied art at Kiev Art Institute, shows how much liberty was taken by the artist. It is mocking and absurd given the way he painted an abundance of well-fed hens and scantily dressed students. It was done in 1973.

Inevitably there are the paintings of the big, collectivized farms. But not all show contented tractor drivers. "Wheat Harvest," painted in the late '70s by Kodev Petr Ivanov, a Ukrainian born in 1899, shows a combine harvester, but well in the background. In the foreground, the wheat with all its texture and colors is where the artistic freedom shines through.

A painting by another Ukrainian, Vosnyuk Petr Stepanovich, shows a teacher observing young students in a woodworking class. The boys wear the scarves of the Young Pioneers, or young Communists. But the eye focuses more upon the wood carvings and details in the painting that was completed between 1968 and 1970. "That is what this exhibition is about," Ms. Fusai said.

"It is more than just propaganda. It is about a time in the Soviet Union. That is why we want to show these paintings to a wider audience. We want to fill the black holes of history."

Behind the Iron Curtain. The Art of Socialist Realism. Jeschke-Van Vliet Gallery. Krausenstrasse 40, Berlin. *Through Nov. 30.*

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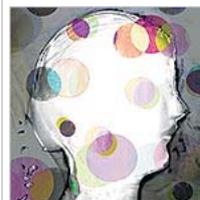
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