

## Twenty years after communism's fall, Stalin's favourite art is back in fashion



Aleksandr Logvinyuk's 1987 portrayal of Lenin, in the first rank, and earlier representations of heroic women factory workers, military life or young citizens living under the protection of the air force fell out of favour after perestroika. All pictures from private collections



Berlin exhibition provides a showcase for Soviet socialist realism, as collectors warm to a style of painting long dismissed as mere propaganda

by Vanessa Thorpe

Art and Media Correspondent

Derided, lampooned and long since consigned to the dustbin of aesthetic history, the art of Soviet Socialist Realism has not enjoyed a happy afterlife following the collapse of communism. From Moscow to Murmansk, many works extolling the collective will and honest labour were simply thrown away or stored forgotten in dusty attics, as the tide of perestroika swept through the former Soviet Union.

All that may be about to change, however. A new and remarkable exhibition in Berlin is displaying the first ever collection of 300 classics of the genre. And, according to some art specialists, it may be the beginning of a revival of interest in a form that up to now has been dismissed as mere propaganda.

Alessandra Lucia Coruzzi is one of two curators who have put together the show, based on work owned by Italian collectors from Milan, all of whom share a faith in the worth of the paintings both as art and as objects of historical interest.

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

From the mid-1920s, leading artists living under the communist regime were commissioned to create art that depicted and celebrated the achievements of the Bolshevik revolution.

The rigorous aesthetic code enforced by the Soviet state, particularly once Joseph Stalin had launched the era of the Terror, stifled the intense creativity that followed the revolution of 1917, when social radicalism appeared to have a natural affinity with artistic experimentation.

In 1932 Stalin announced a decree entitled "On the reconstruction of literary and art organisations". "Decadent" forms of art, such as surrealism and expressionism, were banned and, para-

doxically for a "revolutionary" society, artists were encouraged to explore edifying themes, often celebrating the simple virtues of labour in factory and field. Those painters who did not want to comply were forced into exile or had to work in secrecy, without a public audience. Sanctioned work, the art of the socialist realists, hung in all the major public spaces for the next 60 years.

But while communist ideology may have lost its power today, the art it inspired has not, according to Gaia Fusai, one of the collectors who is backing the Behind the Iron Curtain show. "It is more than just propaganda. It is about a time in the Soviet Union," said Fusai. "That is why we want to show these paintings to a wider audience. We want to fill the black holes of history."

Fusai and her fellow collectors found that many of the paintings they rediscovered and restored had been taken down at great speed as soon as Mikhail Gorbachev, the reforming president of the Soviet Union, began to give some freedom back to the artistic community.

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

The work on display in the Jeschke Van Vliet art gallery, which stands in a space once occupied by the Berlin Wall, took more than five years of research to collate. "It had been easy for paintings



to cross the border from Russia into the other former Soviet republics," said Fusai. "We could buy the paintings. All the paperwork is legal and correct." It was much more difficult, though, to purchase works that had stayed in Russia, where the state, which had after all commissioned much of the art, still owned many of the paintings.

Crucial to the value of these works as rare artefacts is the unusual materials that were used. Artists working a period marked by constant shortages and hardship had to be prepared to make their art with anything that came to hand. Some of the canvases on show were made from jute or were sewn together from pieces of military fabric, such as the sides of discarded tents. Painters also used a blend of cement dust and heated industrial oil to bind the canvas.

Typical scenes on the canvases

show teachers instructing eager Young Pioneers, brave soldiers, Lenin addressing a Communist party congress or perhaps meeting an admiring group of workers.

Some even contain touches of hidden irony that slipped through the net. A 1973 work by Evgeni Vladimirovich Semenov, a Russian-born student at Kiev Art Institute, quietly mocks the

**'In the late 1980s a part of Soviet history was deleted'**

Alessandra Coruzzi, curator

### APPROVED ARTISTS

■ Alexander Deyneka

Born in Kurskon 1899. His most well-known work was the monumental revolutionary "The Defence of Petrograd" from 1928. His mosaics cover the ceiling of Mayakovskaya Metro station in Moscow.

Deyneka was awarded the Order of Lenin and the Order of the Red Banner of Labour.

■ Yuri Pimenov

Born in Moscow in 1903. A founder member of the Society of Easel Painters, he was well known for documenting Moscow's changes from the 1930s to the 60s, as in his 1937 painting "New Moscow".

■ Geli Korzhnev

Born in Moscow in 1925. Korzhnev studied at the Surikov Institute in Moscow and first won acclaim with his painting "In the Days of War" in 1954.

The 1960s series of works "Scorched by the Fire of War" established him as one of the most powerful realist artists of his time.

Compiled by Luc Torres

regime by painting the hens in his scene *Students - Volunteers in the Fowl-Run*, as in far better health than the students who were joining in.

But some art collectors are yet to be persuaded that socialist realism still has something to say. Frank Cohen, known popularly as "the Saatchi of the north", is a veteran British collector of German art, but he is doubtful that propagandist Soviet art can have anything other than curiosity value.

"I went to Russia a while ago and visited a gallery where they were selling off a lot of it, and I hated it," he said. "I found it too political. It was all people and machines."

"I am not saying that nothing of worth was done during that period, and I suspect that the later work may be more interesting, but on the whole I can't see it really catching on. It is too overpowering."