

## Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia

In the exhibition *Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia* at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, more than 70 works by Soviet underground artists, who dared to challenge the Communist government's monopoly on artistic expression are on view from April 28 through July 29.

The exhibition is drawn from a highly focused private collection of contemporary Russian art that took nearly 30 years to assemble. Most of the works on exhibit are figurative, yet many other forms of 20th-century art are also represented, including abstraction, conceptualism, media critiques and complex forms of realism.

The show includes paintings, drawings, sculpture, photography and multimedia work created during a period from approximately 1953, when reforms followed the death of Stalin, through July 7, 1988, when an auction by Sotheby's in Moscow marked the end of an imposed censorship on the visual arts and the entry of "forbidden art" into the international art scene.

The course of Russian art has been heavily influenced by political policies. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, many

Russian artists believed that the new Communist state would give them unprecedented artistic freedom. Instead of filling commissions for the wealthy elite, they strove to create authentic art for the people. These idealistic artists were bitterly disappointed when, in the early 1930s, the Communist government set strict guidelines for Soviet art.

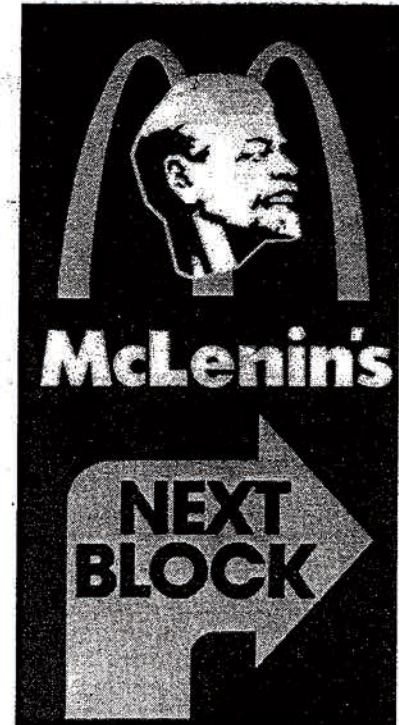
With the death of dictator Joseph Stalin in 1953, the hope of artistic freedom was renewed. Three years later, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered a speech at the XX Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union that denounced the former despot and set the stage for the development of nonconformist Soviet art. New civil and cultural liberties seemed imminent. Joining literary and scientific figures such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrey Sakharov, bold artists took a dangerous path of alternative expression, issuing provocative statements and formulating new aesthetic theories. However, the inevitable result was a series of confrontations with the government, epitomized by the so-called Bulldozer Exhibition in 1974,

when police drove bulldozers through an exhibition, scattering the painters and dousing the paintings with fire hoses.

The state suppression of alternative ideals continued through the Leonid Brezhnev years and the brief tenures of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. Nevertheless, the Soviet underground continued to expand, pressing for creative freedom and public recognition. Finally, in the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (rebuilding) marked a new era of free and energetic cultural expression.

The Bruce Museum exhibition examines the work of artists who worked outside the official system as well as those who were outright political dissidents. Despite official censorship, Soviet artists from the mid-1950s through the late 1980s were able to develop avant-garde traditions and certain surprising parallels to Western art.

The Bruce Museum is located at 1 Museum Drive in Greenwich. Admission: \$4 adults; \$3 seniors and students; free admission for children five and under. Free admission for all on Tuesday.



"McLenin," 1991, by Aleksandr Kosolapov, is a 50" x 26" oil on canvas at the Bruce Museum.