

'Forbidden Art Of Postwar Russia' At Bruce Museum

Exhibition Follows Artists' Movements From Socialist Realism Of The 1930s To 1974 Bulldozer Exhibition, To 1990s

GREENWICH, CONN. — In the exhibition "Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia" at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, over 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 Twentieth 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 the 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. The official style, known as Socialist Realism, emphasized narrative, didactic subjects and classical composition.

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. In many ways, the 1970s marked the zenith of the nonconformist movement's originality and disputatious power. Finally, in the late 1980s, Mikhail Gor-

bachev's policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (rebuilding) marked a new era of free and energetic cultural expression.

The exhibition "Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia" traces this growth of nonconformist Soviet art. The exhibition is divided into six sections and begins with examples of the Socialist Realism style against which the nonconformist artists rebelled. In 1934, at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, the state defined Socialist Realism with its naturalistic style and precise execution as the official standard for art and literature. The central tenet of this doctrine was that the arts should glorify the political and social ideals of communism. Nearly all Soviet artists complied with the state's demands that they join the Union of Soviet Artists and that they produce art that would be understood by the masses and would ennoble working people. In short, Soviet art functioned as an ideological tool supervised by political leaders.

"Forbidden Art" includes the work of the first generation of innovators, known as the Reform School. This group of artists from the 1960s reacted to the vast array of artistic approaches in the wider art world which they saw in exhibitions of Pablo Picasso, Polish abstractionist, and contemporary American and French artists in Russia from 1956 to 1961. The artists in the Reform School remained loyal to their national tradition — wishing to expand, not abandon, the principles of Socialist Realism.

While they retained an interest in the naturalistic depiction of human beings in their daily life, the artists of the Reform School rejected the idea that all art should uplift the viewer. Instead, they insisted on the honest portrayal of the brutal realities of life. As they developed this "harsh style," they drew on Russian art from the 1920s and world classical art. Until the late 1980s, when Gorbachev's reforms reduced the power of the Union of Artists, the Reform School formed the liberal wing of the organization. Its members continued to produce new works well into the 1980s and 1990s.

Where the Reform School reinterpreted the narrative subjects and naturalistic style of the Socialist Realist tradition, the Radical School completely rejected the state-approved artistic standards. The work on display shows how they experimented with form and color in order to create elegant abstractions, imaginary worlds, and vivid expressions of emotion. The Reform School artists demanded the freedom to express their personal visions, thus defying the communal values of the Socialist Realist doctrine. The artists of the Radical School opened the door to a new intensity and variety of visual experience and expanded the subjects of Soviet art to include abstract forms, science fiction, the grotesque, and religious metaphysics.

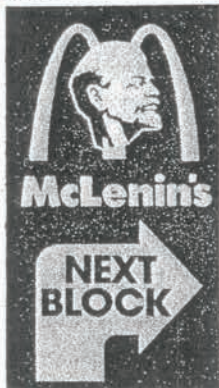
Another group included in the exhibition went by the



Leonid Purygin, "Lion's Self-Immolation with Love for a Girl He Never Knew and Waited For," 1985, oil on linen, 79 by 58 1/2 inches.



Grisha Bruskin, "Jacob and an Angel," 1995, steel, 41 by 25 by 16 inches.



Vladimir Yakovlev, "Cat with a Bird," 1970, gouache on paper, 24 by 33 inches.

Aleksandr Kosolapov, "McLenin," 1991, oil on canvas, 50 by 26 inches.

name Sots-art (an abbreviation for Socialist), a term coined in 1972 by two Moscow artists, Vitally Komar and Alexander Melamid. The term was created to remind people of the relationship between their work and American Pop-Art. Just as the pop artists used brand logos and images of celebrities to comment on American popular culture, Komar and Melamid mocked and modified the symbols of Soviet ideology.

By turning outward to the political sphere and embracing foreign artistic approaches including pop art, conceptual art, and performance art, their work challenged the Socialist Realists' control over a national identity. By rejecting the Socialist Realists' idea of a single Soviet character, the Sots and those who followed them created images of the diverse, incomplete, and often contradictory identities of the Soviet people.

"Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia" also features the work of the Moscow Conceptualists who appeared in the 1970s. The Conceptualists aimed to undermine all hierarchical systems, whether they were instituted by the state or by other artists. Many Conceptualist works explored the ways that words and images create meaning. A final section of the exhibition gathers together

works by artists from St Petersburg.

The Bruce Museum exhibition examines the work of artists who worked outside the official system as well as those who were outright political dissidents. It is clear that 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 leading practitioners of Western art.

The Bruce Museum, 1 Museum Drive, is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm; and Sunday, 1 to 5 pm. For information, 203-869-0376.