



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Country: Russia

Topic: *Towards an Art History of Socialist Realism: Aleksandr Deineka as Case Study*
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Topic of Research

Western art history has largely ignored Socialist Realism, deeming it unworthy of the models of analysis developed by the discipline. My research project aims to produce a new, post-Cold War model of art history that will be adequate to comprehending Socialist Realism *as part of* the history of modernist art, rather than as its repressed East-bloc other.

I take the successful Soviet painter Aleksandr Deineka (1899-1969) as my case study because despite his secure status as a Socialist Realist, his formally innovative and highly corporeal works are intensely compelling to modernist eyes.

Contribution to knowledge in the humanities

Soviet-era Russian scholarship on Deineka is largely monumentalizing, tactfully ignoring moments of political difficulty in the artist's career, and dominated by dry formal analyses of his works (such as V.P. Sysoev; as Sysoev himself told me, the presentation of personal biographic details, let alone biographical interpretations, was considered inappropriate in Soviet art history). Post-Soviet scholarly interest in Deineka and his Socialist Realist colleagues is essentially non-existent, although commercial interest in these works is burgeoning. There is no significant Western scholarship on Deineka; my book on Deineka will contribute to the entirely new field of the Western art history of Socialist Realism. In this new field, one approach tends to normalize Socialist Realism as part of a tradition of figurative art that is securely divorced from modernism, rather than forcing an engagement with it (such as Matthew Bown). In contrast, expatriate Soviet scholars have approached

Socialist Realism from the perspective of Western cultural studies, analyzing the cultural *function* of the images (such as Boris Groys, Mikhail Epstein). Yet their readings tend to congeal into monolithic accounts of the pictures as pure ideology. I approach Deineka's works not only functionally, but also art-historically, as specific and distinct *visual* images that engage with the histories and categories of art. I want to develop a critical model that can account for the relation that existed between his form of Socialist Realism and the modernist forms of Western art. My project will thus contribute to the comparative study of modernity, East and West, that is emerging as one of the more productive critical approaches to Soviet history in the era of post-Cold War scholarship.

Research method

It may seem perverse to insist on the traditional art-historical method of the monograph, when its conventional categories -- quality, style, the individual expressive artist -- seem inapplicable to works of art produced under an institutional system that stipulated content, style, and ideology. But I contend that only a detailed, historically-specific approach to an individual artist, using the methodologies of the social history of art as well as psychoanalytically-derived biographical interpretation, can begin to address the broader question of how Socialist Realists artists came to understand themselves within the category of the "Soviet artist" -- a subject position entailing both limitations and possibilities very different from those experienced by artists dependent on the art market in the West. My research examines Deineka's relation to official Soviet ideology and to Marxism; investigates his official commissions and the entry of his work into private and public collections in the U.S.S.R. and abroad; analyzes the language of official and unofficial criticism of Deineka's work for its lacunae and contradictions; reads critically and psychoanalytically the artist's speeches, letters, and published writings, as well as the accounts of his friends, family and peers; relates his works to the specifically Soviet cultural-historical formations of physical culture, sexuality, gender roles, private life, and consumer culture; and investigates the identity of the people who appear in Deineka's works and his relation to them, piecing together the many holes in his official biography.

Research Sites:

- State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow

Only four Deineka paintings are on view in the galleries of the museum, but I examined the large collection of paintings in the storerooms of the Department of Soviet Painting. I also examined the enormous number of his drawings held in the Drawing Department, and worked at length in the Manuscript Department, which contains documents pertaining to Deineka as well as other relevant artists. I also worked in the Tret'iakov Gallery Library, where their collection of newspaper clippings pertaining to Deineka and all other Soviet artists was particularly useful.

- State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Moscow

I examined the shorthand reports from his unpublished speech describing his 1934-35 trip to the West; from tributes and discussions devoted to him at the Central Artists' Club; and most saliently, from the many meetings of the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh) during the 1930s, in which the theory and practice of Socialist Realism were hammered out, and to which Deineka contributed frequently and outspokenly. I also examined various documents, letters and so on from the archival collections of artists and writers who were

friends or colleagues of Deineka.

- State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Moscow

I examined the archives of VOKS, the society for foreign cultural relations, which sponsored Deineka's trip to the West in 1934-5 as well as the major traveling exhibition of Soviet Art, beginning in Philadelphia in December 1934, that he was sent abroad to accompany and represent.

- Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), Moscow

After a one-month wait, I received permission to work in this archive to examine documents and correspondence from the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C. pertaining to the traveling exhibition of Soviet Art and to Deineka's travels and activities in the U.S., including one-man exhibitions of his work in Philadelphia, in a Washington gallery and in the Soviet Embassy.

- Library and Museum of the Academy of Physical Culture, Moscow

I researched the sports figures who appeared in Deineka's paintings in the 1930s, such as the champion long-distance swimmer Liudmilla Vtorova. The museum researcher put me in contact with Vtorova's sister Evgeniia, also a champion swimmer, who is still living in Moscow.

- Collection of Elena Pavlovna Volkova-Deineka, Moscow

Deineka's widow showed me photographs, clippings and certain remaining materials not yet donated to other collections, and spoke with me about Deineka.

- Collection of the sculptor Viktor Gubko, Moscow

I examined personal documents, photographs and sketchbooks of the artist recently given to Mr. Gubko by Elena Pavlovna, Deineka's widow.

- State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

I travelled to St. Petersburg twice, where I examined the huge collection of Deineka paintings in the Russian Museum, all of which are in storage in the Department of Soviet Painting, and the equally huge collection of drawings in the Department of Drawing.

- Private Collection, Kiev

I saw the major Deineka painting *Boredom* of 1935. It has not been lent to exhibitions in over 20 years, and the owners do not like to open their house to scholars, so this was a rare opportunity.

- Kiev Museum of Russian Art

I viewed the sizable collection of Deineka paintings held in the storerooms of the museum.

- A.A. Deineka Kursk Regional Painting Gallery, Kursk

I saw the collection of Deineka's paintings on view at the A.A. Deineka Kursk Regional Picture Gallery, as well as the many paintings and drawings in storage in the research section of the museum. I was able to consult with the very knowledgeable and helpful museum research staff on a number of my research questions.

- State Museum of Latvian Art, Riga

In December 2001 I travelled to Riga, Latvia, to see and photograph Deineka's monumental painting *Lunchbreak in the Donbass* of 1935, now kept in the storeroom of the museum.

Research Findings

As a result of this research trip, I have managed to see the great majority of the paintings and drawings that Deineka produced in his lifetime, which is crucial for my project of reassessing Socialist Realism *as an art form* and not just as an ideological formation, as it

has previously been studied in the West.

The archival research outlined above has completely transformed my understanding of Deineka as a subject, and of his career. The shorthand reports of the meetings of the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh) during the 1930s have stunned me with their frank and open discussions of art and Socialist Realism, putting the lie to the received Western understanding of Socialist Realism as a purely coercive phenomenon, and to the notion that Soviet power managed to exert total control over art. Deineka's spirited and independent interventions into the MOSSKh debates have given me a greater understanding of his conflicted personality and his views on art and realism than any other sources; he emerges as a voluntary and enthusiastic proponent of a socialist form of realist art, a genuine believer in the greatness of the Soviet enterprise, but also as a keen critic of many Soviet policies and a fighter in a system that was often harshly critical of him. I am more convinced than ever that he provides an invaluable case study for the phenomenon of Socialist Realism, and further, for the understanding of a subject produced by, but also productive of, Soviet power itself.

The existing scholarship has been largely silent on Deineka's personal biography. My research has included a combing of newspaper accounts and of published Soviet memoirs; interviews with a number of scholars, writers, and survivors from the 1930s or family members of people who lived then; and a reading of his few letters and documents or accounts of them. Through these sources, I have been able to piece together a good understanding of such key issues as his activities and opinions at the time that his practice shifted from avant-garde to realist in the early 1930s; his activities during, and thoughts about, his trip to the West in 1934-5; the biographical origins, if any, of the marked homoeroticism of Deineka's work; his sexual relationships; the nature of his close working friendships with a number of artists; his leisure activities and living situations; his attitudes toward socialism, the body, sport, family, sexuality; and his opinions and mental state as his work declined in the 1940s into an almost comic-book-like realism that is riveting in its awfulness. I have preliminarily concluded that Deineka was most likely not an active homosexual, but that his relationships with women were unsuccessful and apparently set up to fail, and that his close friendships with sporty male artist colleagues loomed large in his emotional life. These conclusions about his psychic life help to make sense of the charged eroticism of his paintings and their relation to his ideals of Soviet life. I have also become convinced that his commitment to depicting positive images of Soviet life was genuine, but that he had developed his own, quite specific understanding of the meaning of Soviet power, which emphasized certain things and did not address others. These conclusions are necessarily provisional and schematic at this point, and will only be worked out in the process of writing and further research, but they will allow me to offer more accurate and provocative readings of his work -- and of the possibilities of the Soviet artist under Stalin -- than have hitherto been possible.

Suggestions for future research in the field

In the course of researching Deineka, I have become aware of the existence of a number of interesting Socialist Realist artists of his generation -- Fedor Bogorodskii, Giorgii Riazhskii, Giorgii Niiskii, Ekaterina Zernova, and others -- who are unknown in the West, but who had

important careers in the Soviet Union. Though in my opinion none of these artists are quite as good as Deineka, they all produced work of cultural significance, and many left rich archival and published materials. They therefore offer excellent material for the analysis of Soviet culture and subjectivity of the 1930s-1950s. I also believe that the MOSSKh archives at RGALI are interesting enough to support a study of that organization itself as a model of a Soviet cultural institution negotiating the demands of Soviet power and of individual artists and intellectuals.