Landscape as a Form of Escape:

Apolitical Art and Politics in the Soviet Union

between c. 1945 and 1991

Draft for the talk at the mM ArtCenter, Pyeongtaek, South Korea, January 28, 2023

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[A couple of notes to the translator:

→ please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, I'll be more than happy to clarify and discuss any details.

→ please note that I've put in *footnotes* full records of artists' names and artwork titles from the Excel file that I've received from the mM ArtCenter in case that may help you identify the artists and artworks. When you prepare the text for printing, *please delete all footnotes*.

→ meanwhile, all the notes are listed in *endnotes*. Endnotes are *for a printed version only.*

Thank you!]
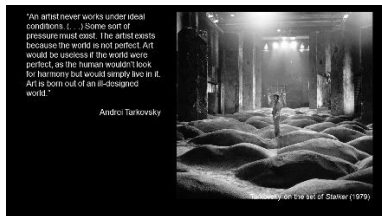
"An artist never works under ideal conditions. (. . .) Some sort of pressure must exist. The artist exists because the world is not perfect. Art would be useless if the world were perfect, as the human wouldn't look for harmony but would simply live in it. Art is born out of an ill-designed world," so the Soviet Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky said about his 1966 film *Andrei Rublev* which was based on the life story of a religious painter in the early 15th century Russia.[i] Tarkovsky was closely familiar with such pressure, as he faced bureaucratic and political obstacles and "constraints on his artistic freedom" throughout his career until he emigrated.[ii] We shall return to Tarkovsky's films later, when we will discuss Soviet art of the 1970s, but here his quotation sets the tone for understanding the role of art and artists in the postwar Soviet Union.

Throughout the Soviet history, professional visual art was always politicized. Artists oftentimes found themselves under considerable pressure to align their creative pursuits to political goals if they wanted to build successful careers. To put it simply, in the Soviet Union artists were employed by the state and were required to produce works fulfilling the requests of the authorities. The purpose of public art was not to express oneself but rather to serve the political system.

Within the highly politicized social and cultural environment of the Soviet Union, the more intimate genres of painting such as landscape offered a quiet route of escape from the requirements of public art to serve the government and the communist party. Most paintings in the mM ArtCenter's collection depict seemingly timeless views of nature, devoid of any obvious signs of modernity. However, the artists' choice to focus on apolitical subjects was itself a political choice.

Although most of the paintings in the mM ArtCenter's collection show us beauty, serenity, and harmony, we should be careful not to romanticize life under an oppressive regime. Russian imperialism and colonialism have shaped much of the Soviet history. Now, these trends have resurfaced with the war in Ukraine. This talk examines the tradition of landscape painting on the background of broader cultural and political developments in the Soviet Union.

Departing from the late Russian Empire and the establishment of landscape painting tradition by the Peredvizhniki (the Wanderers) movement, the talk traces the history of apolitical art in the USSR. The dominance of realism was only briefly interrupted by the arrival of Russian and early Soviet avantgarde art in the 1910s and early 1920s. During Stalin's regime in the 1930s, the concept of Socialist Realism was defined as the mandatory method of creative production for all Soviet artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, and other creative professionals. Debates about Socialist Realism characterized the official public discourse on the arts until the 1990s. However, Socialist Realism was not a consistent and unified style, but rather a broad range of permissible styles and types of subject matter which, moreover, developed through numerous distinct stages over time.

For example, the Thaw in the 1960s brought partial relaxation of the government control and opened the borders to international art, cinema, and literature. The following Era of Stagnation or the "long 1970s" with the "Bulldozer exhibition" reinforced limitations to freedom of expression, causing a proliferation of nonconformist and underground art events. Beginning in the second half of the 1980s, the Perestroika (reform) and Glasnost (openness) era was permeated by the anticipation of the Soviet Union's imminent collapse whose spirit materialized in the extremely depressive and violent chernukha (dark) cinema and rock music openly calling for liberation.

While almost each decade in Soviet history developed its own visual culture, fashion, popular music, and trends in film and literature, landscape painting tradition apparently rejected most of these changes. By doing so, this tradition reflected the ubiquitous tension between the public and private worlds. Moreover, despite the pressure of russification, paintings in this collection also reveal some of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the fifteen republics that made up the Soviet Union after the Second World War.

Geopolitics

It is impossible to talk about art from the Soviet Union without mentioning the Russian Federation's invasion in Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. This shocking turn of events has influenced the way we think about history and has demonstrated how the past shapes the present—and not in a metaphorical sense but through the most terrifying reality of war.

The painting, *The Apotheosis of War: To All Great Conquerors, Past, Present and Future*, by the Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin, was completed in 1871, "at the height of Russia's colonializing campaigns in Central Asia."[iii] A few days after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, on February 28, 2022, this painting appeared in an Instagram post by the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, one of Russia's largest and most important museums, with the following caption: "These days, we, like everyone else, are closely and anxiously following the ongoing events that cannot leave anyone indifferent. We believe that culture is designed to unite people, give hope, form a space for dialogue, and promote mutual understanding. The museum remains open; we are adjusting our plans and continue to work for you, upholding humanistic values."[iv]


Even while looking at the most apolitical art, we have to keep in mind the context of its creation—the imperialist past,[v] the history of oppression and exploitation,[vi] russification[vii] and

geopolitics. Sometimes it is forgotten or overlooked that the postwar Soviet Union consisted of fifteen republics, each with its own unique ethnic, racial, religious, and historical identity.[viii]

The list of independent countries that emerged after the collapse of the USSR reminds us that Soviet Union was much more than just Russia.
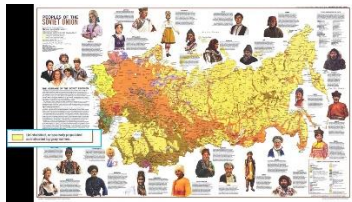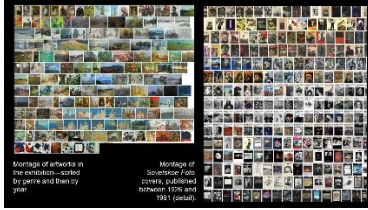

Each of the fifteen republics had its own history, language, and culture that all were distinctly non-Russian. It is important to acknowledge this multiculturalism to avoid equating between "Russia" and "Soviet Union." Moreover, this map also shows how ethnically diverse was the population of Russia itself.

Overview

First, I would like to approach the works in the exhibition from a distance. This montage of artworks in the exhibition, arranged by genre and then by year, offers a glimpse at their variety and diversity. This perspective differs from the typical way art historians analyze artworks, viewing individual works in close-up, and allows us to observe some larger trends or patterns. Such visualizations and montages are based in the cultural analytics, an interdisciplinary methodology that brings together tools from social sciences, computer science, and digital humanities, and applies these tools to the analysis of artworks.[ix]

Montage of artworks in the exhibition—sorted by genre and then by year   Montage of *Sovetskoe Foto* covers, published between 1926 and 1991 (detail).

As a comparison to the montage of the artworks in this exhibition, I would like to briefly mention one of my previous research projects where I examined the history of Soviet photography magazine *Sovetskoe Foto* (Soviet Photography).[x] Published in Moscow, Russia, from 1926 to 1991, *Sovetskoe Foto* was the only specialized photography magazine in the Soviet Union, aimed at a broad audience of professional and amateur photographers. It represented the official photographic culture of the USSR throughout the history of this country. It was quite satisfying to observe how the cover images, design, and colors underwent several significant changes which coincided with the broader political and social developments in the Soviet Union. Just displaying the magazine covers next to each other demonstrated the profound impact these broader changes in the political climate had on the arts and visual culture.

Sovetskoe Foto covers: October 1927 (left), January 1934 (middle), August-September 1991 (right).

Looking into individual magazine covers, these changes become more obvious. Here is just one example, where avant-garde artist Aleksandr Rodchenko's mother, Stalin, and a semi-nude female model each represent a particular political climate of different periods in Soviet history.

Montage of artworks in the exhibition—sorted by genre and then by year

This montage of artworks from the exhibition, however, instead of chronological development highlights the variety of genres and distribution of multiple styles. So, for example, we can notice a certain development in portraiture and other figural paintings, from the darker shades on top left corner to lighter and more colorful over time, while the latest figural paintings

in the exhibition from the 2000s return to darker tonalities.

The largest part of the montage contains landscape paintings. Here, however, more notable are the differences between particular types of landscape, which do not seem to evolve that much over time—so instead of chronological development, we can observe a variety of distinct approaches to the genre such as winter landscape, cityscape, and so on.

This bird's-eye view on the artworks offers a more distant perspective where we can observe broader patterns and tendencies. Now, we shall examine some of the works in more detail and outline the historical background of landscape painting tradition as it developed in the late Russian Empire and then Soviet Union.

Peredvizhniki (the Wanderers), 1870s—1920s
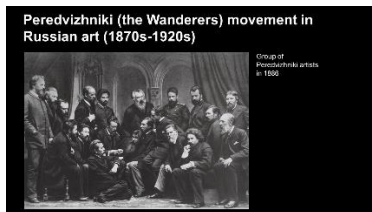
We have to look back at the late 19th century Russian Empire to see the origins of the realist tradition in Soviet art. The background on which the Russian realism took shape was *the academic painting tradition*. This tradition was part of the Western European academicism and neoclassicism.[xi] Just like its Western counterparts, academicism in the Russian Empire produced large size, complex paintings dedicated to Biblical themes and historical or mythological narratives.

One example of the academic painting in the Russian Empire is *The Sword Dance* (1881) by Genrikh Semiradsky (also spelled as Henryk Hektor Siemiradzki), a Russian-born Polish artist who lived and worked in Rome. The painting depicts a nude female dancer performing in front of several lounging male spectators in a nicely shaded and idyllic Mediterranean seaside location, accompanied by female musicians.[xii] This painting characterizes an art world that follows Western European artistic traditions and aesthetic sensibilities, and this is the environment where the first specifically Russian artistic movement took shape.

It is called *Peredvizhniki, or the Wanderers*. For a sharp contrast in terms of subject matter, I would like to mention the painter Ilya Repin—perhaps one of the most famous artists associated with the Peredvizhniki (the Wanderers) movement and also well-known internationally. Although Repin is usually referred to as a Russian artist, he was born and raised in present-day Ukraine.[xiii]

Repin's painting *Religious Procession in Kursk Gubernia* (1880-83) embodies the ideals of the Peredvizhniki movement. The painting represents a scene from contemporary everyday life, as opposed to the heroic, historical or mythical themes of the academic painting. The focus is on real people in a small village in deep countryside of Russia. The artist highlights social inequality and injustice of the time, such as the extreme poverty of the peasant masses and the privileged lifestyles of the elite, represented here by church, police, and local nobility.

The sharp, cruel details create a grotesque caricature of these classes—notice the arrogant, wealthy landowner couple and the drunken priest. Suffering and human drama is emphasized in the disfigured hunchback boy in the foreground, while the oppressive monarchy is present in the form of horseback-riding militia.[xiv] Even the plain landscape could not be more different from the Mediterranean paradise favored by the academic painters.

Repin unites the complex composition into a dynamic chaos, radically different from the sophisticated, leisurely atmosphere that we see in Semiradsky's *The Sword Dance*. Repin's

painting presents a fragment of the everyday reality in Russian countryside, clearly sympathizing with the poorest and most powerless part of the society, which was unusual at the time and caused outrage.[xv]

The name of the artists' group Peredvizhniki (the Wanderers) points to another, no less important innovation that they brought to the art world of the Russian Empire, namely traveling exhibitions. Initially founded as The Society for Traveling Exhibitions (Obshchestvo peredvizhnykh vystavok), the artists' group wanted to bring art to other cities of the empire besides Moscow and St. Petersburg that previously were the major centers of most cultural activities.[xvi] Artists at the time earned income by selling admission tickets to their exhibitions—thus organizing traveling shows was also a step toward financial independence from the Academy of Arts that controlled the art market as well as all other aspects of professional art world.[xvii]

Isaac Levitan, "The Vladimirka (Vladimir's Road or Vladimir's Highway), 1892

In terms of subject matter Peredvizhniki introduced yet another significant innovation. They elevated the landscape painting which before that was not a particularly respected genre. The local countryside "was considered unworthy of representation" and "an uninspiring vision of 'Russian backwardness'."[xviii] Most Peredvizhniki works belong to this genre.[xix] Great example of this innovation is Isaac Levitan's painting *The Vladimirka (Vladimir's Road or Vladimir's Highway)* (1892).

It is not a particularly picturesque landscape, there is not much to see—just a plain field bisected by a dirt road, and in far distance some sign of a town with a church tower. But the painting creates a certain mood, and that mood is the main subject matter. Levitan's work in general is associated with the genre of the so-called "mood landscape" or the "lyrical landscape." Landscape painting becomes more than just a depiction of a beautiful sight—it becomes a metaphor for human feelings, emotions, or thoughts. Natural phenomena such as clouds and light, features of particular geographic location all become means of expressing human condition and emotions.

In Levitan's *The Vladimir's Road,* the muted, grayish color scheme creates a gloomy and sad mood of the heavily overcast day. The figure of a peasant woman praying at an icon-and-cross station emphasizes the sense of loneliness and remoteness. The psychological mood is amplified by the cultural context—this is not just any random country road but rather a particular site, familiar to the viewers at the time. Vladimir's Road was part of the Great Siberian Road along which prisoners were transported by foot from Moscow to exile and labor camps in Siberia.[xx].[xxi]

To conclude, the Peredvizhiki rejected the historical and mythological themes of academic painting and replaced them with locally specific subject matter reflecting contemporary life in all its harshness and roughness.[xxii] Their focus on Russian landscape later was taken up by the Soviet cultural policymakers as a source for Socialist Realism. But before that, there was another artistic revolution, a movement against Realism—the brief but explosive arrival of the Russian and early Soviet avantgarde in the 1910s and 1920s.

Russian and early Soviet avantgarde, 1910s and 1920s

The Russian avant-garde emerged in the 1910s as a radical break with all previous artistic traditions, reflecting the great turmoil that the society underwent at the time, marked by the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, which initiated the collapse of the Russian Empire and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 after a terrible civil war.

The experimental and radically innovative direction of the Russian avantgarde has left an immense impact on global art history. One of the most symbolic artworks of this avantgarde is

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Suprematic Square*, made in 1915. The radical abstraction manifests a complete rejection of any previous artistic tradition. Moreover, the artist's biography points to the cultural diversity of the Russian Empire at the time—Malevich was actually Ukrainian of Polish origins.[xxiii]
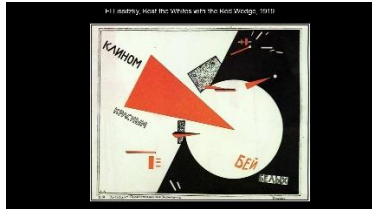
Most of the early Soviet avantgarde art carried political messages—this avantgarde took shape among the most progressive leftist artists of the time and their goal was to create effective propaganda for their cause. The cause was to build a modern country on the ruins of the outdated Tsarist monarchy. An iconic artwork from this era is El Lissitzky's abstract poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* from 1919. Its message has to be read in the context of the civil war between the "reds" (the revolutionaries) and the "whites" (the monarchy supporters). Also, it is important to acknowledge that El Lissitzky was a Russian artist of Lithuanian Jewish origins.

Because the avantgarde artists advocated for a complete overturn of all old values, including art, they chose radical abstraction in painting and sculpture, and experimented with photography and photomontage. For example, another important avantgarde artist, Aleksandr Rodchenko, worked in abstract sculpture, photography, and graphic design, and was one of the founders of constructivism.

One of the most well-known constructivist artists and designers of the time, Gustavs Klutsis, was a Latvian who worked in Russia. His photomontages were groundbreaking and were

used for a broad range of subjects including political propaganda as well as advertising of sports events.

To summarize, the Russian avantgarde came with a radical break from the previous artistic traditions and brought along experiments with abstraction, developed an innovative language of photography, photomontage, and graphic design. This avantgarde was driven by political idealism—to support and advertise the revolutionary ideas, to advocate for modernization of the society and positive social change.

By mid-1930s, however, the avantgarde was replaced by Socialist Realism—a return to figural painting and other traditional art forms. The life of the Russian avantgarde was cut so short mostly because of these two main reasons. First, their work remained relatively elitist and was not widely understood by the general population. One could say that this avantgarde was too advanced for its time and place, and the society was not ready to accept it as universally as the artists expected.

Second, the group of the avantgarde artists remained an exception, working against the majority of the art world which did not approve of their approaches and desired for the return to more traditional forms of artistic expression. The majority of artists were upset to see that all commissions now went only to one small group of artists, leaving the rest of the artistic community without work and income. It is oftentimes assumed that the Stalinist regime oppressed and silenced the avantgarde, but that is only partly true, as mostly it was other artists—their own colleagues who stood up against the avantgarde artists.[xxiv]

Stalinist Socialist Realism and Soviet art world in the 1940s and early 1950s

The era of Stalin's dictatorship (1927-1953) produced the concept of Socialist Realism. The concept of Socialist Realism first took shape in the field of literature in 1934, and only later was applied also to the visual arts.

Delegates of the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Moscow, August 1934.

The theoretical concept of Socialist Realism was first proclaimed in the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 as "the basic method of Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism" whose main task now was to educate the working class "in the spirit of socialism."[xxv] Socialist Realism was defined using these four principles: "Proletarian: art relevant to the workers and understandable to them. Typical: scenes of everyday life of the people. Realistic: in the representational sense. Partisan: supportive of the aims of the State and the Party."[xxvi]

USSR pavilion at the World's Fair in New York, 1939

One of the earliest manifestos of Socialist Realism was published as an introductory text to the Soviet Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York in 1939. The manifesto claims that "In his work the Soviet artist primarily addresses the people. His art is democratic. That is why hundreds of thousands of visitors attend our art exhibitions, (…) that is why such heated discussions arise about various paintings—discussions in which the collective farmer and the student, the worker and the university professor, the [person from Moscow] and the visitor from remote borderlands take equal part."[xxvii] This manifesto captures some of the idealism of the time before Socialist Realism had become a dogmatic political principle.

The early 1930s also was the time of the organization of the art world in the form of a centralized, state-run system. All previously existing artistic groups and organizations were outlawed and replaced by government-controlled Artists' Unions.

The Soviet system eliminated the art market and instead established a new infrastructure, which we can understand as a system where artists are employed by the government and state authorities, and produce work commissioned by these authorities. Many of those artists who accepted the new rules were guaranteed access to "paid artistic research, travel, commissions, stipends for the reproduction rights of paintings, exhibitions, and mass distribution" of their works.[xxviii]

Two main organizations that controlled the art world were the Artists' Union and the Art Fund. The Artists' Union organized exhibitions, published art press, and distributed opportunities to its members such as purchases of artwork, exhibitions, and so on.

The Art Fund, meanwhile, was the primary funding agency. It controlled access to art supplies, artist studio spaces, and housing, and distributed other practical privileges such as summer camps for the artists' children and travel opportunities. For example, the Art Fund established a network of resorts, called Houses of Recreation and Creative Work, where selected Artists' Union members could stay for free or for a symbolic fee.[xxix]

The Ministry of Culture of the USSR and in each of the fifteen republics also had a role in organizing exhibitions and providing opportunities to artists. Art schools such as Art Academy in Moscow and the capital cities of the other Soviet republics were extremely important, state-controlled centers of education as well as distribution of privileges and power.

In general, the majority of large-scale commissions and purchases came from the Artists' Union, the Art Fund, and the Ministry of Culture. Besides, all government organizations, offices of different authorities, and state enterprises had to display paintings and sculptures depicting the party leaders, celebrating the Revolution, and so on, and they also commissioned artworks.[xxx]

Meanwhile, the field of apolitical art consisted of small-scale artworks in the more intimate genres such as landscapes and still lifes, produced with private art buyers in mind. Artists could sell works directly to individuals or through a system of "salons," government-controlled art galleries and consignment-shops that sold a range of decorative objects and artworks for people's homes.[xxxi]

I would like to mention two major types of subject matter in Stalinist Socialist Realist art: first, the depictions of Stalin and other leading political figures, and, second, glorification of the image of the worker.

Especially after the end of the Second World War, cinema was the most effective art form

used for propaganda purposes, disguised as spectacular entertainment.[xxxii] One of the most notable examples of Stalin's personality cult in film is *The Fall of Berlin* (1950), directed by Mikheil Chiaureli and produced by one of the leading Soviet film studios, Mosfilm. *The Fall of Berlin* is an astonishing accomplishment of Soviet film industry. Accompanied by a musical score composed by Dmitri Shostakovich, the film depicts the fall of Berlin as the symbol of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany that put the end to the Second World War, and presents a god-like figure of Stalin.[xxxiii]

The sets, action, camerawork, and editing all are skillfully orchestrated to build up two emotional climaxes of the film. The first one focuses on the surrender of Nazi troops to the Soviet army and the following celebrations by the victorious soldiers near the Reichstag in Berlin.

The second climax of the film is the moment when Stalin descends from the sky in a plane, dressed in an all-white uniform, and appears in front of the cheering crowds. Interestingly, among these crowds, for a few short moments we see also the flag of the United States as well as the flags of other Allied forces.

The scope of the action, the level of the production, symbolism, and music—everything is over the top and extremely persuasive. These scenes are also disturbing to watch—the uplifting fairy-tale conceals the pain and suffering that all of these events entailed. In Soviet cinema, the Second World War, called the Great Patriotic War, was celebrated as Soviet and particularly Russian "national triumph," all the while obscuring its inhuman and tragic aspects.[xxxiv] The film has scenes with Nazi death camp prisoners, now liberated by the Soviet army, but at the same time the Stalinist regime set up its own death and labor camps in Siberia.


Meanwhile, Tatiana Yablonskaya's *At a Construction Site* (1957) is a great example of another popular type of subject matter in Socialist Realist art, namely the glorification of the worker. This painting focuses on an anonymous couple, a young man and a woman, workers at a construction site who are enjoying each other's company during a break. They both are

laughing, their gestures are full of dynamism. The color scheme is light and bright, and the manner of the painting almost reminds of the Impressionists. Yablonskaya was a Soviet Russian artist working in Ukraine, and the painting is said to be inspired by the dedication of the young construction workers who re-built Kyiv after the destruction of the war.[xxxv]

From today's perspective, we can see that such art was based on idealism, which at times could transform into single-minded, naïve and fake optimism: "All of Soviet painting was extremely optimistic and its protagonists had idealized human appearances. There was no place for tiredness, depression or doubt—instead, there was only the bright sun, the joy of work and sport, and the pride that comes from achieving something."[xxxvi]

In other words, Socialist Realism was not a "realism" at all because it was not based on an accurate depiction of the reality, but rather created idealized images of a desired reality.[xxxvii]
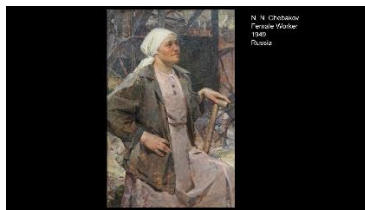
One of the earliest artworks in the current exhibition and a typical example of Socialist Realism of its time is N. N. Chebakov's *Female Worker* (1949).[1]

The image of a "female worker" was a popular trope in Socialist Realist art because it carried positive political messages. One of these messages was about the emancipation of women, the alleged equality of women in the workplace, which was presented as one of the great achievements of the Soviet state. Meanwhile, what remained untold was the other side of this "emancipation," which included *the double burden* most women had to carry because their equal employment opportunities did not liberate them from the so-called "second shift" or the unpaid work at home—because childcare and housekeeping remained the sole responsibility of women.[xxxviii] Because of this gendered division of labor, men, unlike women, were relatively free to pursue leisure activities.[xxxix]

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[1] 9   n-009.jpg   P   Чебаков Н. Н. N. N. Chebakov   Работница   Female Worker 1949   Oil on Canvas   106 x 69   Russia

"Happy holidays, dear women!" Caricature by N. Lisogorsky published in Krokodil, No. 6, 1963.

The issue of double burden was raised in literature and quite often was addressed in a humorous manner but was never discussed on a more serious level. For example, a caricature by N. Lisogorsky, published in magazine *Krokodil* (no. 6, 1963), depicts a party during a public holiday, the International Women's Day which was celebrated on March 8. In this party, paradoxically, the men are the ones who are eating and drinking and enjoying themselves, while the family's women are working hard to serve them.[xl] That's a comment on the non-existing gender equality.

While depicting women as liberated, emancipated workers, the Socialist Realist art obscured the inequality in daily responsibilities and the unjust distribution of workload between women and men. This again demonstrates how Socialist Realist art represented the desired reality instead of the actual reality.

Now, for a comparison, I would like to mention two other artworks from the 1950s that represent the more poetic side of Soviet art which always existed parallel to the more visible, politically engaged art.

A. V. Kravets, The Sochi port. A lighthouse, 1950s, Russia
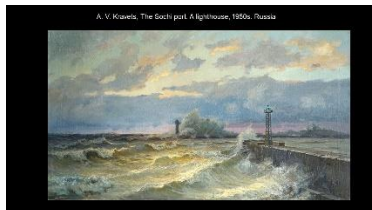
The Sochi Port. A Lighthouse (1950s) by A. V. Kravets is a typical "mood landscape," following in the footsteps of the earlier Peredvizhniki movement.[2] Here, the artist has depicted the sea and the sky during a dramatic moment in nature.

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[2] G001 G-001.jpg   LS   Кравец А. В.   A. V. Kravets   Сочинский порт. Маяк. The Sochi port. A lighthouse.   1950s   Oil on Canvas   70 x 124.5   Russia

Ya. I. Kozlov, On a Frosty Day, 1959, Russia
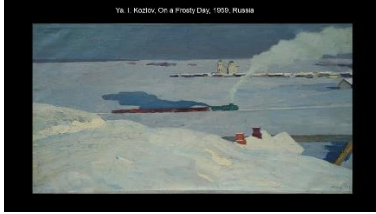
Meanwhile, Ya. I. Kozlov in his *On a Frosty Day* (1959) very gently inserts modern technology into nature, as a train bisects the peaceful and snowy landscape with the outlines of a village further behind the train tracks.[3]

One could ask: are these two paintings also Socialist Realist?

Socialist Realism was not a single, recognizable visual style—like for example Impressionism or Cubism—but rather a theoretical concept, a method of artistic production that evolved along the changes in the broader social and economic structure of the Soviet Union. Thus, it is more helpful to think about Socialist Realism as a broad range of permissible artistic styles and types of subject matter that changed over time. There was Socialist Realism of the early 1950s and there was Socialist Realism of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and they didn't have much in common. At different times and in different locations, almost anything could pass as Socialist Realism as long as the artists steered clear of abstraction.[xli]

This nuance is key to understanding art history of the Soviet Union: there was an ever-growing split between the official discourse, the private discourse, and the actual artworks. While the official art magazines, for example, tirelessly celebrated Socialist Realism in theory, completely different debates took place in private, around people's kitchen tables, and a range of different aesthetic sensibilities was developed in artists' studios.[xlii]

To summarize, the Stalin era established the concept of Socialist Realism, which was not a single artistic style, but rather a range of permissible artistic styles and types of subject matter that changed over the subsequent decades. Moreover, Socialist Realism most often was not "realism" at all, because instead of the actual reality it depicted the idealized, desired reality. Finally, during Stalin's rule, also the state-controlled infrastructure of the art world was set up, based on the Artists' Union membership and centrally distributed commissions.

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[3] n-810.jpg   LW   Козлов Я. И.   Ya. I. Kozlov   В морозный день   On a Frosty Day   1959   Oil on Canvas   120 x 62   Russia

The global 1960s

The global 1960s
Montage of artworks in the exhibition from the 1960s

The Thaw, the Cold War, the Iron Curtain are just some of the political metaphors that characterize the next decade. The Thaw as such was a relatively brief period, from 1954 to 1964, and marked a relative liberation of the regime after the death of Stalin. During the "global 1960s," youth culture, new cultural exchanges with the outside world, general modernization, and the latest trends in pop music, fashion, and cinema also reached the Soviet Union. Arts and visual culture, which previously were heavily politicized and conservative, experienced a gradual shift toward more contemporary styles.

Prague, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic), 1968. A protester standing in defiance atop a tank. Photo: Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

But this was also the decade when the Soviet Union solidified and reinforced its control over the Eastern Bloc, exemplified by the brutal oppression of the uprising in Prague in 1968.

Robert Falk, Nude in an Armchair, 1922

Nikita Khrushchev: "Don't you know how to paint? My grandson will paint it better! What is this? . . . How can you paint like that? Do you have a conscience? That's it. . . . The Soviet people doesn't need all this. I'm telling you! Forbid! Prohibit everything! Stop this mess! I order! I say! And check everything! On the radio, on television, and in print, uproot all sympathizers of this!"

The Manège Affair
December 1, 1962
"30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union"
Manège Central Exhibition Hall in Moscow

Also, the Soviet art world experienced tightening of censorship and oppression of creativity after the brief period of the so-called Thaw. The most symbolic event of this tendency is the so-called Manège Affair that took place on December 1, 1962.

The Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, visited the "30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union" exhibition at the Manège Central Exhibition Hall in Moscow. In this large-scale retrospective exhibition, the Artists' Union had included works by modernist, post-impressionist artists from the earlier years, such as Robert Falk's 1922 nude—which previously, during Stalin's dictatorship, had been censored and hidden away. The paintings themselves were not particularly scandalous

or avant-gardist. It was not even an exhibition of abstract art.[xliii] However, during the Stalin's regime, post-Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, New Objectivity, and all other modernist trends were criticized and prohibited.

Now, when modernist art was put back on view in this retrospective exhibition, it caused an outrage from the Soviet leader who "shouted obscenities at the artists, promised to deport them from the Soviet Union and ordered the exhibition closed down."[xliv] Khrushchev yelled, "Don't you know how to paint? My grandson will paint it better! What is this? . . . How can you paint like that? Do you have a conscience? That's it, . . . The Soviet people doesn't need all this. I'm telling you! Forbid! Prohibit everything! Stop this mess! I order! I say! And check everything! On the radio, on television, and in print, uproot all sympathizers of this!"[xlv]

The so-called Manège Affair signaled the end of the Thaw and a return to more conservative cultural policies. Subsequently, it also signaled the beginning of a lively *underground and nonconformist* art scene.[xlvi] An American curator who visited Soviet Union in the early 1960s noted that "Imaginative artistic experiment is still being carried on in the Soviet Union, ... Many artists do abstract works in the privacy of their studios and at the same time carry out routine state commissions in the style of socialist realism. Youthful and often very able nonprofessionals, who are not subject to the discipline of the Artists' Union, are also active."[xlvii]

The *split between the public and private discourse* encouraged the emergence of nonconformist artistic practices and underground art exhibitions. Numerous artists began working only for themselves and their friends while avoiding public career or working in two parallel styles—creating one type of art for the government commissions and public display, another for one's own circle of friends.[xlviii] The underground art scene revolved around informal, unofficial exhibitions in artists' studios and apartments.

Gatherings in Ilya Kabakov's Studio. Kabakov showing work to Andrei Monastyrski.

For example, the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov was one of the most visible artists in this scene in Moscow. Between 1967 and his emigration in 1987, he organized unofficial art exhibitions and artist gatherings in his studio. Kabakov's studio became the center of Moscow Conceptualism, and "artists, poets, philosophers, critics, gathered there to discuss new work."[xlix]

Still from the film Opening of the Kazimiera (Kazė) Zimblytė Exhibition at the Apartment of Judita and Vytautas Šerys, 1971. Filmed by Vladas Vildžiūnas.

Similar underground, unofficial art practices developed also in other Soviet republics beside Russia as well. For example, unofficial art exhibitions, poetry readings, and discussions took place at the home of the museum worker Judita Šerienė and artist Vytautas Šerys in Vilnius, Lithuania between 1967 and 1975.[l]


Exhibition of Pablo Picasso in Moscow, 1956.

Despite the oppression and censorship, the late 1950s and 1960s brought to the Soviet Union also notable positive changes that include access to (at least some) foreign films, literature, art, and music. As Western observers noted at the time, "Many books and periodicals on art are being published, including works of prerevolutionary and foreign artists, and the canvases of such painters as Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse, recently judged heretical, are now exhibited."[li] An exhibition of Picasso took place in Moscow in 1956, international contemporary art was displayed at the International Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957, and a major exhibition of American photography and Abstract Expressionism took place in 1959.[lii] Similarly, foreign contemporary cinema became available, film festivals in Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) introduced the viewers to Italian neorealism and French New Wave.[liii]

To demonstrate the broader shift in the visual culture, I would like to mention one of the iconic films of the decade, *Four White Shirts* (1967), directed by Rolands Kalniņš and produced by Riga Film Studio, the main film production company in Latvia, then one of the fifteen Soviet Republics.

We can think about this film in comparison with *The Fall of Berlin* from 1950, with its celebration of Stalin on the background of the Soviet victory over the Nazi Germany. *Four White Shirts*, meanwhile, revolves around pop music—the narrative follows a group of young people who form a rock band and struggle with the censorship authorities. The music for the movie was written by a famous young composer, Imants Kalniņš, and the songs became anthems of the generation who were in their twenties at the time. The film *Four White Shirts* wonderfully captured the youth culture spirit of the 1960s with its focus on pop music, the lives of young people, their sense of fashion and style among other things.

This exhibition features a few artworks from the 1960s, some of which tell us about ways in which artists were developing their artistic practices outside the public arena.

L. A. Fokin, A Horse beside a Barn. 1967. Russia
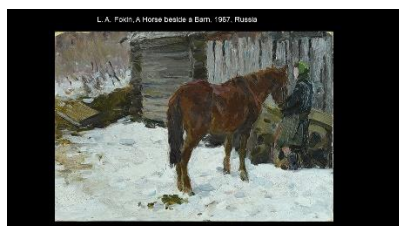
For example, L.A. Fokin's *A Horse beside a Barn* (1967),[4] represents an environment quite far removed from the sophisticated, modern, Western-looking urban youth culture of the time that was reflected in the film *Four White Shirts* made in the same year. One could say that the painting expresses nostalgia and romanticizes the past, but it also reflects the present—the reality of the 1960s included also rural lifestyles that still were dominant across many areas outside the major urban centers. What else is interesting here is the quite painterly surface with strong visible brushstrokes and heavy layer of paint—not at all similar to the smooth, illusionistic academicism of the more official school of Socialist Realism.

Era of Stagnation—the long 1970s

In Soviet history, the phrase the "Era of Stagnation" is used synonymously with the rule of Leonid Brezhnev from 1964 to 1982, and primarily points to the slowdown of the economic development.

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[4] n-073.jpg   LW   Фокин Л. А.   L. A. Fokin   Лошадь у сарая   A Horse beside a Barn   1967   Oil on Board   33 x 47 Russia

In the arts, however, we can talk about an Era of Stagnation, or "the long 1970s," as the time between 1970 and 1985. If the 1960s were full of activity, youthful energy, and hope, the 1970s created an agonizing, suffocating atmosphere. The time had stopped, there was nothing new, there was no development, and, worst of all, there was no hope for any changes in the future— these were some of the most characteristic feelings that permeated the Era of Stagnation.

The works in the mM ArtCenter's collection from the "long 1970s" show a vast variety of scenery—different climates, weather conditions, seasons—but almost not a single sign that it is the 1970s, not, for example, the 1870s or 1770s. One could say that the interest in the seemingly "timeless" and apolitical landscape at the time was a form of quiet escape from the official art world.

In the field of visual arts, the Era of Stagnation saw also some more open acts of resistance and attempts to stand against the oppressive regime. As one of the most notable examples I would like to mention the so-called Bulldozer Exhibition, internationally much discussed unofficial art exhibition that was organized in outskirts of Moscow in 1974 and was shut down by law enforcement during its opening.[liv]

The event, considered to be one of the "pivotal episodes in the history of unofficial Soviet art," was intended as the First Fall Outdoor Exhibition of Paintings, organized by a small group of artists.[lv] The authorities sent law enforcement, trucks, bulldozers, and water cannons to disperse the approximately 400 spectators who had come to the opening. Some artists and visitors were taken into custody, some foreign journalists were beaten, and artworks were destroyed. "The Soviet press called the show a 'provocation' intended to harbor anti-Soviet sentiment."[lvi]

The Bulldozer exhibition symbolized the artists' desire for at least some freedom of

expression. What caused the repressions was not so much the art itself but the audacity of some artists to go against the system so openly, so disrespectfully. Arguably, the authorities saw the greatest threat in the artists' ability to organize an event in public space and attract audience and international press, bypassing the official infrastructure of the Artists' Union.

The Bulldozer exhibition also marked the proliferation of the underground and nonconformist activities that had emerged already during the late 1960s. The 1970s brought along a further separation between the public art and the unofficial art world. Artists could either make successful careers and follow the rules or reject the official art world and work on their own artistic practice, knowing that they won't have access to any benefits, exhibition and career opportunities, and basically any form of public recognition.

I would like to mention a couple of examples from cinema that express the general mood of the decade without openly saying anything critical. The skill to speak indirectly, through metaphors and allegories was essential to all artists, writers, and other creative professionals working in the Soviet Union. Any artwork that was not celebrating the Soviet regime could be interpreted by the censorship apparatus as a dangerous "critique" which could cost its makers their career and more.

Domestic and international posters for the film Solaris, 1972, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

First, I would like to briefly return to Andrei Tarkovsky, one of the internationally most well-known Soviet arthouse filmmakers. His work from the 1970s—the iconic films such as *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979)—epitomize a desire to escape the dreary, monotonous, and generally hopeless Soviet daily life. Tarkovsky found an escape route in the field of sci-fi which was a relatively safe area for artists, writers, and filmmakers to explore—because one can avoid discussing the present-day directly.

In *Solaris*, the action is set in a spaceship in far future, but it also includes episodes with the art of the past, such as the detailed view on Pieter Bruegel The Elder's painting *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565). The main character's colleague in this episode says, "Today, at 5pm, there will be 30 seconds of zero gravity. Don't forget."

For artists, the past and the future were safer spaces if compared to the present. Moreover, both *Solaris* and *Stalker* are extremely, painfully slow to watch—and this slowness is

a perfect symbol of the Era of Stagnation in Soviet history.

Next, I would like to mention another example where a totally apolitical plot and setting became a popular symbol of the Era of Stagnation. One could say it is impossible to imagine a more apolitical genre than an animation film for children. Yet, *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) directed by Yurii Norshteyn became a metaphor of its time for a whole generation of adults. The simple and short—under ten minutes long—animation film tells a story of a hedgehog who gets lost in the fog on his way to see his friend, a bear cub, with whom he enjoys tea and counts stars in the sky every evening.

The absurdity of the situation, the fairy-tale characters, the naivety of the story, and the vague symbolism of the imagery leaves the film open to interpretations. Why are the hedgehog and bear cub friends? What kind of friends they are? What is the fog? What does it mean to be lost in the fog? Isn't it all of us who are lost in this fog? *Hedgehog in the Fog* is an exemplary case of "escaping" into a genre, narrative, and aesthetics that has nothing to do with the daily reality, but which at the same time perfectly captures that reality.
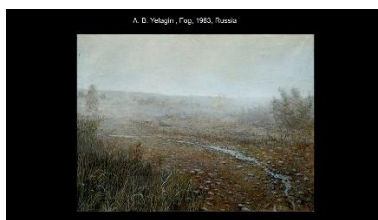

Paintings by this artist, A. B. Yelagin, such as *Fog* (1983),[5] express some of that timelessness, stillness, and melancholy that we recognize both from Tarkovsky's films and the animation film *Hedgehog in the Fog*. This particular painting is not included in the current exhibition, but other similar works by Yelagin are, and these paintings wonderfully convey the mood of the Era of Stagnation.

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[5] n-780.jpg   Елагин А. Б.   A. B. Yelagin   Туман   Fog   1983   Oil on Canvas   60 x 80 Russia

A. P. Perov, The Old Elm Tree in Khiva, 1985, Uzbekistan
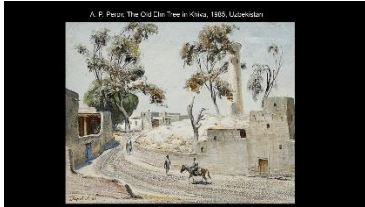
In the exhibition, we see a variety of painting styles and approaches to landscape from the 1970s. I'm especially interested in seeing the various styles and aesthetic sensibilities coming from the non-Russian republics of the USSR. Thus, for example, *Winter in Ashgabat* (1978) by V. Ya. Pavlotsky[6] is a wonderful representation of the cityscape in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, a secular Muslim country in Central Asia which at the time was one of the fifteen Soviet republics but whose culture and language were distinctly different from Russia.

R. Kh. Abdurashitov, A Spring Day in the Mountains, 1982, Tajikistan
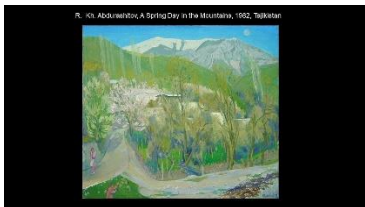
Meanwhile, R. Kh. Abdurashitov's *A Spring Day in the Mountains* (1982) [7] is a representation of a typical mountainous landscape of Tajikistan—which is another former Soviet republic, now an independent country in Central Asia bordering Afghanistan. Historically, this territory was part of the Persian empires, and the local culture, traditions, and language are distinctly different from Russia.

V. V. Vardanyan, Requiem, 1982, Armenia
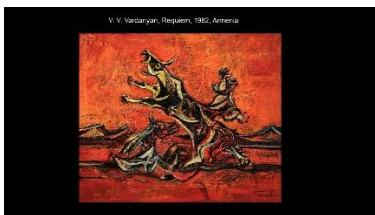
Another artwork from the exhibition, *Requiem* (1982) by V. Vardanyan[8] from Armenia represents a different national school, characterized by the expressive use of colors. This particular artwork brings in some mythological references, depicting fantasy figures on the

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[6] n-106.jpg   LW   Павлоцкий В. Я.   V. Ya. Pavlotsky   Зима в Ашхабаде   Winter in Ashgabat   1978   Oil on Board   50 x 80 Turkmenistan

[7] n-014.jpg   LS   Абдурашитов Р. Х.   R. Kh. Abdurashitov   Весна в горах   A Spring Day in the Mountains   1982   Oil on Canvas   110 x 125   Tajikistan

[8] n-279.jpg   Варданян В. В.   V. V. Vardanyan   Реквием   Requiem   1982   Oil on Canvas   100 x 120   Armenia

background of dramatic mountainous landscape, thus again escaping the daily life and the practical realities of the time.

These artworks represent different national schools and introduce a variety of approaches to making apolitical art. One could say that in general, art from the Era of Stagnation represents the mood of the standstill waters, the slowness of the time where everything seems to be strictly planned and where there is no chance of change in the future. The symbolic image of fog, general mood of introspection, interest in the spiritual or mythical imagery were some of the typical forms of escaping the reality at the time.

Perestroika and Glasnost era, 1985-1991

The next distinct period in Soviet history is the so-called era of Perestroika (reform) and Glasnost (openness) which marked the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union and lasted from 1985 until 1991. The montage of the artworks in the exhibition from this time demonstrates a certain level of diversity and variety in terms of colors, saturation, and brightness, but in general it seems like darker tones are slightly more dominant. In terms of Soviet visual culture, this era is characterized by a complete break from the rules of the Socialist Realism, although the official discourse still maintained this outdated concept. Especially in film, this was the time when depressive, violent, and particularly melancholic narratives dominated the scene.
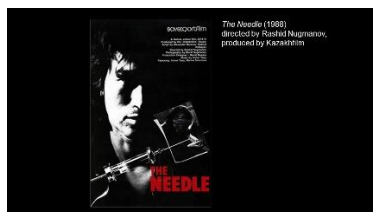
One the most popular films in the USSR at the time was *The Needle*, a 1988 film, directed by Rashid Nugmanov and produced by Kazakhfilm, the national film studio of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, which today is the independent country of Kazakhstan in Central Asia. The film tells the story of drug addiction, senseless violence, and impossible love on the background of the bleak landscapes of the late Soviet Union.

The main character is played by Viktor Tsoi, a Soviet Russian singer, songwriter, and actor

of Korean descent who tragically died in a car crash at the age of twenty-eight in August 1990.[lvii] Viktor Tsoi became a symbolic figure of the Perestroika era, his music expressed the sense of doom, hopelessness, and all-encompassing sadness plus some timely metaphors as well, like the line of a well-known song at the time, "we're waiting for change / our hearts are demanding a change"—which had a particular meaning at the time when just the word "change" was politically charged.


The film represents the emergence of chernukha (*чернуха*), a style of filmmaking that was popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Soviet Union. The name of this style can be very vaguely translated from Russian as "the dark and dirty stuff," and initially it was a vernacular, pejorative term. The most characteristic features of this cinematic style include emphasis on an overarching sense of doom and hopelessness. It is based on closeup depictions of violence, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty and crime, all on the background of decaying Soviet housing.[lviii] In these films, everybody is an anti-hero, everybody is unhappy, there is not a single chance of a "happy end" for anyone in the world of alienation, despair, and endless pain. The chernukha films came as a shock after the decades of political censorship and oppression that prohibited filmmakers from depicting *any* negative side of life at all, forcing them instead to produce only positive and moralizing narratives.

The film also represents the multiculturalism of the Soviet Union. Most of the action in the film takes place in and around the city of Almaty which then was the capital city of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, located in Central Asia. Now, Kazakhstan is an independent country, which is, and always has been, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically different from Russia.

The opening sequence of the film introduces the main character as well as the bleak and grey aesthetics of the Soviet everyday life. The camera follows Tsoi's character as he travels through the extremely sad, poorly built, uniform, and depressing Soviet housing, which was virtually identical across the USSR and was built mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. This greyness and uniformity characterize the Soviet urban landscape, but you will notice that not so much of this type of landscape can be seen in the paintings in the mM ArtCenter's collection.

V. G. Tatishvili, Old Tbilisi, 1990, Georgia
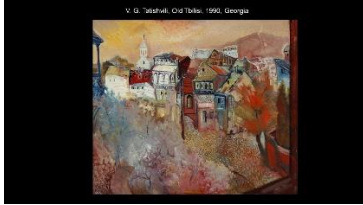
Arguably, some artists, even if they lived in this type of housing, were looking for aesthetic escape either in nature or the architecture of historical districts, and rarely depicted the Soviet contemporary housing. Some artists would turn toward the historical, pre-Soviet architecture, which had some aesthetic, picturesque allure as opposed to the mass-produced and poorly maintained Soviet housing. This choice of subject also allowed the artists to focus on the variety of local, non-Russian cultures and environments, and some of this variety is beautifully represented in the collection. For example, historical architecture of Georgia appears in the dreamlike painting *Old Tbilisi* (1990) by V. G. Tatishvili.[9]

E. M. Adamiya, Village, 1987, Georgia
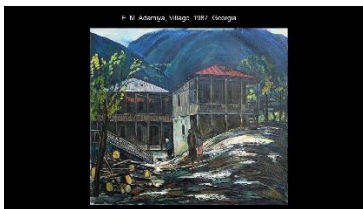
Another Georgian artist, E. M. Adamiya, has depicted typical rural architecture in the painting *Village* (1987).[10] Georgia, at the time one of the fifteen Soviet republics, is a country in the Caucasus mountains, along the coast of the Black Sea bordering Russia and Turkey, with unique and ancient culture, traditions, language, and alphabet, which all are, again, distinctly different from Russian.

A. P. Perov, The Old Elm Tree in Khiva, 1985, Uzbekistan
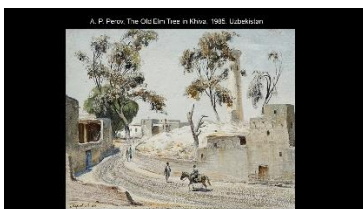
Meanwhile, this painting, *The Old Elm Tree in Khiva* (1985) by A.P. Perov, brings us to Khiva, an ancient Silk Road city in the middle of a desert, in present-day country of Uzbekistan.[11]

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[9] n-252.jpg Татишвили В. Г. V. G. Tatishvili Страый Тбилиси Old Tbilisi 1990 Oil on Canvas 120 x 140 Georgia

[10] n-460.jpg Адамия Э. М. E. M. Adamiya Селение Village 1987 Oil on Canvas 86 x 95 Georgia

[11] n-508.jpg Перов А. П. A. P. Perov Хива. Старый Карагач. The Old Elm Tree in
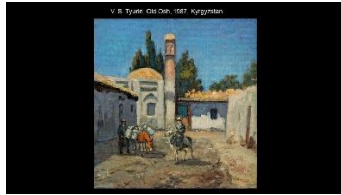
Scene from the historical part of another ancient city along the Silk Road, is depicted in V. S. Tyurin's *Old Osh* (1987).[12] The city of Osh is in present-day Kyrgyzstan, a secular Muslim country in Central Asia, bordering China.
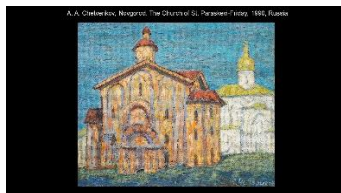
Finally, let's take a closer look also at some of artworks depicting typically Russian landscape. Continuing the theme of urban landscape, as the first artwork I would like to mention A. A. Chetverikov's *Novgorod. Church of St. Paraskevi-Friday* (1990).[13] This is a quintessential Russian monument—the church in the historical city of Veliky Novgorod (Great Novgorod) is one of the oldest in Russia, initially built in 1207. The city of Novgorod, first mentioned in written sources in 859, is considered to be the birthplace of Russian statehood, and the church represents the history of the Christian religion in the country.
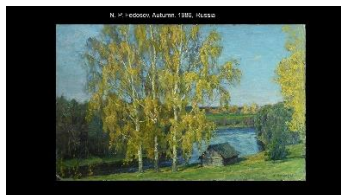

N. P. Fedosov's *Autumn* (1986),[14] meanwhile, is a typical Russian countryside landscape with the birch trees and a small log building, perhaps a bathhouse, near a lake.

Khiva   1985   Oil on Board   40 x 50 Uzbekistan
[12] n-701.jpg   Тюрин В. С.   V. S. Tyurin   Старый г. Ош Old Osh   1987   Oil on Board   62 x 64 Kyrgyzstan
[13] n-047.jpg   Четвериков А. А.   A. A. Chetverikov   Новгород. Собор Параскевы-Пятницы   Novgorod. The Paraskev-Friday Cathedral.   1990   Oil on Board   25 x 30 Russia
[14] n-356.jpg   Федосов Н. П. N. P. Fedosov Осень Autumn 1986   Oil on Board   50 x 80 Russia

S. B. Shishkin, Golden Autumn, 1991, Russia

Similarly, another typical Russian landscape in a different season can be seen in S. B. Shishkin's *Golden Autumn* (1991).[15]

V. P. Krants, By the bay, 1986, Russia
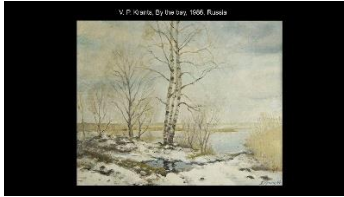
Finally, the all-Russian birch tree appears also in this snow-covered, peaceful, and harmonious winter scene, *By the bay* (1986) by V. P. Krants.[16]

«Kazimir Malevich-110» – group exhibition
4 November–4 December 1988
Vitebsk, Belarus

To conclude our discussion of the Soviet art during the Perestroika era, I would like to mention another trend that is also represented in the mM ArtCenter's collection, namely a return of interest in the early Soviet avant-garde and geometric abstraction in particular. While abstract art had been seriously censored and virtually nonexistent in Soviet public spaces since the 1930s, during the Perestroika era this legacy was finally revisited. One example of such revisiting was the exhibition "Kazimer Malevich-110" that took place in the Artists' Union in Vitebsk, Belarus. The images are from a performance "Resurrection of Kazimer" by Ludmila Rusava that took place on November 4, 1988. The performance, dedicated to the 110th anniversary of Malevich's death, "was the first in a series of ritualistic performances exploring Malevich's legacy in Belarus (other exhibitions included "Kazimir's Revival" in Minsk, 1988 , and "Suprematist Kazimir Revival" in Moscow, 1990)."[lix]

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[15] n-175.jpg   Шишкин С. Б.   S. B. Shishkin   Золотая осень   Golden Autumn 1991   Oil on Board   60 x 80 Russia

[16] n-841.jpg   Кранц В. П.   V. P. Krants   У залива   By the bay   1986   Oil on Board   41 x 50 Russia

S. L. Roshchin, Corner, 1990, Russia

In the exhibition here at the mM ArtCenter, the revival of the early Soviet avantgarde is represented by the paintings by S. L. Roshchin such as *Corner* (1990).[17]

Post-soviet culture after 1991

The exhibition includes also several artworks made after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, in what is today the Russian Federation. The post-Soviet years have been difficult across the territory of the former USSR for a variety of reasons. Some regions, such as the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—have been celebrating their reconstructed independence and steering away from the Soviet past as fast as possible. In other regions the end of the Soviet Union was experienced with a range of emotions, including nostalgia. While the society suffered from the overturn of all systems and values, from economy to culture to politics, many artists again looked for an escape in the beauty of nature.

Here I would like to mention only one example of such nostalgia. We can observe it in the revival of the style of Peredvizhniki (the Wanderers) painting from the late 19th century, here exemplified by M. M. Yurko's large size canvas, simply titled *A landscape painting* (2010).[18] In terms of composition, color scheme, and general mood, as well as the sheer size, this painting

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[17] n-477.jpg   Рощин. С. Л.   S. L. Roshchin Угол   Corner 1990   Oil on Canvas 22 x 22
        Russia

[18] G-004.jpg   Юрко М. М.   M. M. Yurko   Пейзаж A landscape painting   2010   Oil on
Canvas 77.5 x 120   Russia 2010s

brings us back to the very origins of Russian landscape painting tradition and iconic artworks such as Isaac Levitan's *The Vladimir's Road* (1892).

With this comparison, we have made a full circle and traced the development of landscape painting tradition in the Soviet Union from its earliest origins in the late Russian Empire and the Peredvizhniki movement in the late 19th century all the way up to the present day.

Conclusion

After a brief look back at the Peredvizhniki movement, we revisited the Russian and early Soviet avantgarde of the 1910s and early 1920s. It was followed by the era of Stalinism that brought the concept of Socialist Realism in the 1930s and established a centralized, government-controlled system that organized artistic production in the country until the 1990s. "The global 1960s" came with the Thaw, openness to foreign art and popular culture, yet soon the political control over the art world tightened again. During the "Era of Stagnation," and especially between 1970 and 1985, freedoms were severely limited and the underground art scene flourished. During the era of Perestroika (reform) from 1985 until the Union's collapse in 1991, depressing and dark cinema reflected the mood of the time, while many artists found refuge from that darkness in nature and local historical architecture.
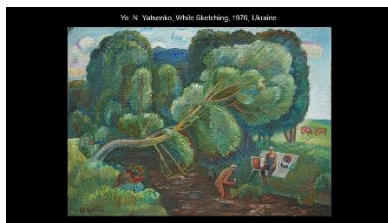
I would like to conclude my talk today with one of my favorite paintings in this collection. It is *While Sketching* (1976) by Ye. N. Yatsenko from Ukraine.[19] I feel that it symbolizes the spirit of the whole collection particularly well.

In this exhibition, only a few paintings depict recognizable elements of modern daily life.

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[19] n-089.jpg   Яценко Е. Н.   Ye. N. Yatsenko   На этюдах   While Sketching
1976   Oil on Board   49 x 68.5   Ukraine

For that reason, it is even more exciting to see this painting which offers us a glimpse into an artist's work and life. Even if it is idealized and romanticized, it offers an idea of what an artist might have imagined to be a good representation of their life. For that reason I consider this painting a beautiful metaphor of how some artists could position themselves within the broader structure of Soviet society.

Far away from the politicized newspapers and television programs, far away from the grey and sad blocks of Soviet housing that made all cities look the same, far away from the bureaucracy and elitism of the Artists' Union, one artist here is spending a day in nature, sketching *en plein air* in a beautiful and secluded spot by the river, accompanied by a lovely and nude model. The artist is surrounded by the abundant greens and sheltered from the roughness of the Soviet reality by the leaning, lush tree.

This painting wonderfully conveys the idea of rejecting the forced politicization of the arts that had taken place in the USSR. If the daily reality of the Soviet Union felt like a prison for many, the artist here demonstrates one way of escaping it.

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[i] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001789/bio#quotes

[ii] Alex Ross, "The Drenching Richness of Andrei Tarkovsky," *New Yorker,* February 8, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/15/the-drenching-richness-of-andrei-tarkovsky.

[iii] Allison Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art: On Resistance, Complicity, and Decolonization in a Time of War," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 21, 3 (2022): 128, https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2022.21.3.7.

[iv] Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art," 128.

[v] Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art," 133.

[vi] Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art," 136.

[vii] Russification is a form of linguistic and cultural imperialism. Its purpose was elevating the role of Russian language and culture while diminishing the visibility of local languages and cultures across the vast territory of the USSR. Learning the Russian language as the first non-native language was mandatory in all schools, and Russian was the official language of centralized government and authorities, of science and bureaucracy, of political discourse, of centralized mass media such as magazines and tv, and also the only shared language of interpersonal communication among people living in the fifteen republics and speaking more than 130 different languages. Another form of russification was the government-encouraged large-scale migration of ethnic Russians to non-Russian republics (as, for example, skilled workers for newly built factories). The presence of these settlers then justified the establishment of new Russian-language schools, theaters, media, and so on. See Mart Rannut, "Russification in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Era," in C. A. Chapelle, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1031.pub2.

[viii] The Soviet Union was established in 1922, as the result of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the consequent collapse of the Russian Empire. After the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states that had been independent European countries since 1918: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It also annexed some other areas along its borders.

[ix] See: Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

[x] Alise Tifentale, "Seeing a Century Through the Lens of Sovetskoe Foto," *Cultural Analytics Lab,* 2018, http://lab.culturalanalytics.info/2018/07/exploring-photography-magazine.html.

[xi] Inessa Kouteinikova, exhibition review of "The Peredvizhniki Pioneers of Russian Painting," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 2012), http://www.19thcartworldwide.org/autumn12/kouteinikova-reviews-the-peredvizhniki.

[xii] Sotheby's, "Russian Works of Art / Lot 11," https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/russian-works-of-art-n08733/lot.11.html

[xiii] Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art," 138-139.

[xiv] See: Ben Pollitt, "Ilya Repin, Krestny Khod (Religious Procession) in Kursk Gubernia," in *Smarthistory,* August 9, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/ilya-repin-krestny-khod-religious-procession-in-kursk-gubernia/.

[xv] Yelena Fedotova, "Who were the Peredvizhniki and why were they so important in Russian art?," in *Russia Beyond*, November 4, 2019, https://www.rbth.com/arts/331225-peredvizhniki-russian-art.

[xvi] Kristen M. Harkness, "An Introduction to The Peredvizhniki (The Wanderers)," in *Smarthistory,* August 9, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/an-introduction-to-the-peredvizhniki-the-wanderers/.

[xvii] See: Alla Vereshchagina, "The Academy of Arts and the "Wanderers"," in *The Tretyakov Gallery Magazine* 1, 14 (2007), https://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/1-2007-14/academy-arts-and-wanderers.

[xviii] See: Octavian Eşanu, "Escape the Landscape," *ARTMargins* 10, 1 (2021): 3–13, https://doi.org/10.1162/artm_e_00280

[xix] Kristen M. Harkness, "An Introduction to The Peredvizhniki (The Wanderers)," in *Smarthistory,* August 9, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/an-introduction-to-the-peredvizhniki-the-wanderers/.

[xx] Harkness, "An Introduction to The Peredvizhniki."

[xxi] At the time when Levitan painted this landscape, however, the story of marching the prisoners on foot was already history—prisoners were transported to Siberia by train. For that reason, we can talk about a romanticizing tendency of the Peredvizhniki landscape. See: Anna Vcherashniaya, "The Vladimirka," *Art Hive,* https://arthive.com/isaaclevitan/works/374425~The_Vladimirka

[xxii] Kouteinikova, "The Peredvizhniki Pioneers of Russian Painting."

[xxiii] Leigh, "Farewell to Russian Art," 140.

[xxiv] See Jeffrey Brooks, "Socialist Realism in *Pravda*: Read All About It!" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 4 (1994): 991.

[xxv] From the statutes of the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934. Quoted in: Brooks, "Socialist Realism in *Pravda,"* 977.

[xxvi] Dubravka Juraga and Keith M. Booker, *Socialist Cultures East and West* (Praeger, 2002, p.68), quoted in: Cathy Locke, "The Early Years of Soviet Realism," https://musings-on-art.org/soviet-realism-1930s

[xxvii] Cited from: "Introduction to the Soviet Pavilion, the World's Fair, New York, 1939," in Miranda Banks, ed. *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism under Stalin* (Long Island City, NY: Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum, 1993), 8.

[xxviii] Christina Kiaer, "Fairy-tales of the Proletariat, or, Is Socialist Realism Kitsch?" in *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting, 1920-1970* (Milan: Skira, 2012), 184.

[xxix] M. Lazarev, "The Organization of Artists' Work in the USSR," *Leonardo* 12, 2 (1979): 108, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1573832.

[xxx] All of these commissions, opportunities, and privileges were open to a relatively small elite of artists who were socially well-connected and established. This elite "consolidated their power over the institutions of the art world" and controlled the Art Academy, the Artists' Union, art schools as well as "exhibition committees, competition juries and purchasing commissions." According to art historian Susan Emily Reid, "…the structures of state support for art had become an effective mechanism of control and exclusion in the hands of a small number of artists. Their place at high table was associated to a large extent with their service to the cult, but it was also founded on a gradual accumulation of institutional power." See Susan Emily Reid, "The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw," *Third Text* 20, 2 (2006), 163.

[xxxi] However, in 1954 there were only "78 salons in the whole USSR, 51 of them in cities of the Russian Federation and the remaining 27 salon-shops in other Union Republics. Many major cities had no salon,

and even in existing salons the art languished unseen in dusty crates." Reid, "The Soviet Art World," 166.

[xxxii] Cinema, just like all other arts, was given the tasks "to support the ideology of the Party, to glorify the accomplishments of the regime, and to create sustained optimism for the continuing work of the Revolution, all the while providing Soviet cinema-goers with entertainment." See Lora Hamilton, "Cinema during the First Two Decades of the Soviet Union: How Censorship of the Arts Inhibits the Dissemination of Information," *Dalhousie* Journal of Interdisciplinary Management 7 (2011): 8.

[xxxiii] The film was taken out of circulation after de-Stalinization in 1956, and first screened in 1991 in Venice International Film Festival.

[xxxiv] A. V. Prokhorov, "Cinema of the Thaw (1953 – 1967)," in Rimgaila Salys, ed., *The Russian Cinema Reader: Volume II, The Thaw to the Present* (Academic Studies Press, 2013), https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters/86.

[xxxv] "At a Construction Site by Tatiana Yablonskaya," *Artefact,* https://ar.culture.ru/en/subject/na-stroyke#

[xxxvi] Irina Osipova, "Why is Soviet art so aesthetically pleasing?" *Russia Beyond,* August 20, 2020, https://www.rbth.com/arts/332595-aesthetic-soviet-art.

xxxvii "Despite claims to "realism", it was never really realistic, depicting communist reality not as it was but as it should be. There was no space for any critique." Agata Pyzik, "Get real: why socialist realist painting deserves another look," *The Calvert Journal,* December 18, 2014, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3475/socialist-realism-Soviet-official-painting.

xxxviii Moreover, outside the big cities, in the countryside, women "bore the triple burden of work in the [government-owned] collective farm, on the household's private plots, and in the household itself." Lewis Siegelbaum, "The Double Burden," in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1968-2/the-double-burden/.

xxxix Siegelbaum, "The Double Burden."

xl Mykolė Lukošienė, "Boring Soviet humor: the artificiality of International Women's Day and an imitation of criticism," in *Darbai ir dienos* (Kaunas, Vilnius: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas; Versus Aureus, 2016): 174-175, https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8769.65.7.

xli "… it never actually disappeared as a style in the USSR; it lasted the whole Soviet period and as the regime went through periods of softening and hardening, its forms followed suit. …. the realist mode remained dominant for the whole post-1953 period and had many permutations: it flirted with modernist painting and critiques of state policies. Yet this later phase remains mostly unknown, overshadowed by its most blatantly propagandistic early period." Agata Pyzik, "Get real: why socialist realist painting deserves another look," *The Calvert Journal*, December 18, 2014, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3475/socialist-realism-Soviet-official-painting

xlii Matthew Bown, for example, brings in a specific Russian term *dvoeverie*, a "system of dual belief" originally used to describe the parallel existence of pagan and Christian worldviews after the Christianization of Russia and later used to point to the "double lives" people were leading in the Soviet Union, the private and the public one. Matthew C. Bown, Matteo Lafranconi, and Faina Balakhovskaia, eds. *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting, 1920-1970* (Milan: Skira, 2012): 82.

xliii Susan Emily Reid, "In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited," in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 6, 4 (2005): 679.

xliv "Manezh Re-Examines Khruschev Outrage of 1962," *The Moscow Times,* December 20, 2012, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/20/manezh-re-examines-khruschev-outrage-of-1962-a20360.

xlv Quoted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manege_Affair

xlvi "Manezh Re-Examines."

xlvii Richard B. K. Mclanathan, "Art in the Soviet Union," *The Atlantic,* June 1960, 76. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1960/06/art-in-the-soviet-union/659108/.

xlviii See, for example, Diane Neumaier, ed., *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2004).

xlix Yelena Kalinsky, "Gatherings in Ilya Kabakov's Studio," in *Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950-1989*, https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/gatherings-in-ilya-kabakovs-studio/

l Dovile Tumpytė, "Exhibitions in the apartment of Judita and Vytautas Šerys," in *Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe*, https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/exhibitions-in-the-apartment-of-judita-and-vytautas-serys/

li Mclanathan, "Art in the Soviet Union," 76.

lii Susan Emily Reid, "In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited," in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 6, 4 (2005): 692.

liii A. V. Prokhorov, "Cinema of the Thaw (1953 – 1967)."

liv "The Bulldozer Exhibits," in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1968-2/the-limits-of-expression/the-bulldozer-exhibits/#

[lv] The leaders of the group were the painter Oskar Rabin and poet and art collector Aleksandr Glezer. See Yelena Kalinsky, "Bulldozer and Izmailovsky Park – outdoor exhibitions," in *Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950-1989*, http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/bulldozer/

[lvi] Kalinsky, "Bulldozer and Izmailovsky Park."

[lvii] Viktor Tsoi's father was Robert Maximovich Tsoi (Korean name: Choi Dong Yeol, Hangul: 최동열), a descendant of a Korean family from Kazakhstan. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Tsoi.

[lviii] See, for example, Seth Graham, "Tales of grim: Seth Graham on the dark side of Russian cinema," *The Calvert Journal,* January 18, 2013, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/57/chernukha-little-vera-cargo-200.

[lix] Olga Kopenkina and "pARTisan," "Kazimir Malevich-110 – group exhibition," in *Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950-1989*, https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/kazimir-malevich-110-collective-exhibition/.