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Written by Maureen Younger

ARTS

The art of revolution

Russia may not be sure how to mark 100 years since its revolution, but the Royal Academy is, with a new exhibition. *Maureen Younger* went along for a look.

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Boris Mikailovich Kustodiev, *Bolshevik*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 101 x 140.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery. Photo (c) State Tretyakov Gallery.

To commemorate 100 years since the Russian Revolution, the Royal Academy's latest exhibition, *Revolution - Russian Art 1917 to 1932*, takes you from the heady years after 1917 that saw an explosion of avant-garde art, to the Stalinist-prescribed Socialist Realism of the 1930s.

In taking the unusual step of combining avant-garde art alongside its socialist realism counterparts, the exhibition is using as its template the landmark 1932 Soviet exhibition *Fifteen Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic*. In the process you encounter a treasure trove of art works and propaganda.

And in revolutionary Russia, art and propaganda tended to go hand in hand. From October 1917 onwards, the visual image was an essential tool in the Bolsheviks' propaganda war in support of the revolution.

This was not simply the Bolsheviks adhering to the adage that a picture paints a thousand words but rather from the practical necessity that, in 1917, the visual image was paramount in a country with a largely illiterate population.

"Perhaps one of the most sobering sections is a series of photographs of some of the great artists of the day: many of whom, like Meyerhold, Mandelstam and Babel, were to pay a heavy price for their art."

This ranged from the agit-prop trains that criss-crossed the vast country, showing films to the inhabitants of far-flung villages, to the numerous striking posters and paintings, a snapshot of which are on display here. The series of posters by Vladimir Mayakovsky entitled *Enemies Surround Us...* is a particularly fine example of this genre.

In fact, what makes this exhibition so fascinating is how comprehensive it is. In 1918, Lenin announced his Plan for Monumental Propaganda. This meant anything from paintings to ceramics to fabric could be used to promote the Bolshevik ideology and/or glorify the leader.

Thus, objects on view range from clips of classic Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *October* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, to agitational porcelain (yes that really is a thing) to a full-scale mock-up of a flat designed by El Lissitzky for communal living.

What really strikes you, as you go round the exhibition, is the sheer array of styles and artistic talent on offer. The odd Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky painting aside, much of the artwork on display is by artists possibly not as well-known in this country – a room is dedicated to a pioneer of geometric abstraction, Kazimir Malevich, and one to Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, who developed a unique style of spherical perspective in his paintings: its use shown to great effect in the painting *Midday, Summer*.



Marc Chagall, *Promenade*, 1917-18. Oil on canvas, 175.2 x 168.4 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photo (c) 2016, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg; (c) DACS 2016.

The exhibition is also wonderfully curated. With the art on display so informed by political events and later subjugated by them, the exhibition deftly explains the political context in which (and in some cases against which) these objects were created. Thus as you progress through the exhibition, you also encounter the various stages of this tumultuous period in Russian history.

When you first walk into the exhibition you are hit by a reconstruction of a revolutionary banner emblazoned with the slogan 'Вся власть советам' (All Power to the Soviets) and its promise of a workers' paradise.

However, alongside this banner are several paintings of Lenin and the first signs of the personality cult of the leader that would become such a motif of Soviet propaganda.

As Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, Orson Welles said: "In Italy, for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

The abundance of styles, innovation, artistic talent and sheer creativity on show does seem to prove that warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed indeed provided a catalyst for artists. However, as you progress through the exhibition you notice the ever-increasing constraints that Soviet artists had to contend with.

This is not just in the staid style of some of the later paintings but in the short shrift given to objects that went against state ideology, from the portrait of Trotsky cut out from a kerchief by Nikolai Demkov to Kliment Redko's icon-influenced painting *Insurrection*, hidden away from view for decades.



Isaak Brodsky, *V.I. Lenin and Manifestation*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 90 x 135 cm. The State Historical Museum. Photo (c) Provided with assistance from the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSIZO.

The latter's imagery not only implies the Leninist state is turning into a prison but likewise incorporates persona non grata, Trotsky. Even Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's *Beside Lenin's Coffin* was banished into storage for years on account of showing the dead leader, well, dead.

Then, just before you exit the exhibition, you see the apotheosis of the personality cult while watching a film, *Moscow Sports Parade*, shot in Red Square in the 1930s, glorifying the collective spirit of this supposed workers' paradise and of the glorious leader, Stalin.

Next to this film, however, is a darkened box. This *Room of Memory* highlights the reality underlying all the spin; here photos of just a few of the victims of Stalin's purges are flashed on screen ranging from your average Soviet citizen to former revolutionaries such as Grigory Zinoviev and artists such as the ground-breaking theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the writers Osip Mandelstam and Isaac Babel.

Perhaps one of the most sobering sections is a series of photographs of some of the great artists of the day: many of whom, like Meyerhold, Mandelstam and Babel, were to pay a heavy price for their art.

This included Vladimir Mayakovsky who, in the midst of a smear campaign by the Soviet press, committed suicide; Alexander Blok who, in a testament to Soviet bureaucracy, only received permission to travel abroad for much needed medical treatment once he had died; and the poet Anna Akhmatova, whose first husband was executed by the secret police and whose son and common-in-law husband Nikolai Punin were sent to the Gulag where the latter died.

Punin had been one of the organisers behind *Fifteen Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic*: an exhibition that was to prove the swansong for avant-garde art in the Soviet Union.

However, to quote another famous Russian artist, the writer, Mikhail Bulgakov, "*manuscripts don't burn*". Taken from Bulgakov's masterpiece *The Master and Margarita*, the phrase was regarded as a call to arms to Soviet artists that art – if not always the artist – can endure political repression. This exhibition is a great testament to that dictum!



Wassily Kandinsky, *Blue Crest*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 133 x 104 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photo (c) 2016, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932 is at the Royal Academy of Arts until 17 April. Click [here](#) for more info.

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