

PICASSO, THE THAW AND THE “NEW REALISM” IN SOVIET ART

Susan E. Reid • Revoir Picasso’s symposium • 26th March, 2015

1956 was recorded in Soviet history as the year of the “Secret Speech,” when Nikita Khrushchev denounced the “personality cult” and “excesses” of his predecessor, Stalin. Just eight months later, another tremor rocked Soviet certainties. On 26 October 1956, a Picasso retrospective opened at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. It then moved to Leningrad where it was shown from December 1-19 in the Hermitage. Displayed in the USSR’s most prestigious museums, which housed Russia’s collections of classic Western art, the 1956 exhibition appeared to indicate official endorsement of Picasso, hitherto reviled as a formalist. Picasso was, it seemed, being honoured at last as a great modern master and even, perhaps, as new exemplar for the future development of Soviet art. Matters were not so simple however.¹

Picasso represented two things at once that were incompatible in the Cold War’s binary organization of the world. On one hand, the 1956 exhibition was made possible by his position as “the most famous communist in the world after Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung,” having joined the French Communist Party in 1944.² He had publicly aligned himself with the Moscow-led “anti-imperialist” peace agenda, attending the Soviet sponsored Wrocław Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in 1948, a demonstration of unity against capitalism, and he received the Stalin Peace Prize in 1950 for his 1949 *Dove* poster. But Picasso the Peace Partisan was also Picasso the “formalist” artist and signifier of “Modern Art” as a whole. He combined in one person a commitment to the struggle against capitalism with avant-garde aesthetics, which the Soviet establishment rejected.³



Picasso room, Part of Sergei Shchukin’s collection displayed in his Moscow Mansion, 1913

The 1956 exhibition was not the first time Picasso’s work had been seen in Russia. Soviet collections included significant holdings of Picasso’s early work, along with that of other French artists, notably Cézanne and Matisse, thanks to the prerevolutionary collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. Morozov’s collection included three Picassos: *Harlequin and his Friends*, *Acrobat on a Ball*, and the *Wandering Gymnasts*. Shchukin had collected 51 Picassos including *The Absinthe Drinker*, *Two Sisters*, *Dryad*, *Dance of the Veils* and

Woman with a Fan, to which he dedicated an entire room of his house. Shchukin and Morozov’s collections played a vital part in the development of the Russian avant-garde before the Bolshevik Revolution.⁴



PABLO PICASSO
Young Acrobat on a Ball
1905
Oil on canvas, 147 x 95 cm
The Pushkin Museum, Moscow
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Since the early 1930s, however, official campaigns against “formalism” had condemned 20th-century Western art as the decadent antithesis of healthy Soviet Socialist Realism. Even so, these collections were kept safe in the Museum of Contemporary Western Art in Moscow, and many Soviet artists and art historians continued throughout the Stalin era to privately revere late 19th and early 20th-century French art as the epitome of “painterly culture.” For them, Cézanne, above all, remained the “master of us all,” with Picasso representing a vital living link to this pinnacle of world artistic achievement.

In the late 1940s, the onset of the Cold War brought deep cultural isolation and xenophobia and the Museum was closed as part of the Party’s “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign, which sought to purge Soviet culture of any Western contamination. However, after Stalin’s death in March 1953 the Cold War entered a less tense phase in the international arena.⁵ At home, a period of cultural re-examination and relative liberalization, or “Thaw,” began. This included a re-evaluation of international modern art and of Russia’s own suppressed artistic heritage. A landmark exhibition of “Fifteenth to Twentieth Century French Art” from Soviet collections was held at the Pushkin Museum in November 1955, moving to the Hermitage in Leningrad in 1956 (the same itinerary as the Picasso retrospective would follow 11

months later). It exposed the Soviet public to works by artists who had long been denigrated as formalists: Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and early Picasso, including *Young Acrobat on a Ball*.⁶ The Hermitage also paid special tribute to Cézanne by organizing an exhibition for the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1956.⁷ After years of cultural autarky and conservatism, some Soviet artists and art lovers embraced these expositions of French modernism as the return of their *own* heritage and as encouragement for a broader, more expressive and modern approach to realism in place of the narrowly defined canon, dominated by 19th century Russian naturalism, on which Stalin-era Socialist Realism was based. Others, however, still regarded any softening towards Western modernism as a kind of ideological and aesthetic convergence and a threat to the national popular nature of Soviet art. Power struggles between different factions—reformers and conservatives, relative liberals and hard liners—began to surface in Soviet political and cultural life, in which the status of foreign culture and especially of modernism, was at the centre. Reports on the art establishment in the Party Central Committee’s archives present a picture of crisis and factional strife, indicating a revolt of the grass roots against the Stalinist elite in which long-standing resentments and reformist zeal rose to the surface.⁸

Prominent in the reformist, internationalist wing of the creative intelligentsia was the writer Ilya Ehrenburg, author of the novel *The Thaw* (1954), which gave the period its name. He was also a prominent international champion of the USSR’s peace offensive. Ehrenburg was personally acquainted with Picasso from his youth in bohemian Paris in the 1910s, and had renewed this acquaintance at the 1948 Wrocław Peace Congress. Ehrenburg proposed to the Party Central Committee that a Picasso exhibition should be held in the Soviet Union to honour the artist, international communist and peace advocate for his seventy-fifth birthday. In September 1956, the Central Committee resolved to hold a small show of Picasso’s drawings and prints from Soviet museums and private collections, but it tried to limit the impact of his art by keeping it small and limiting press coverage.⁹

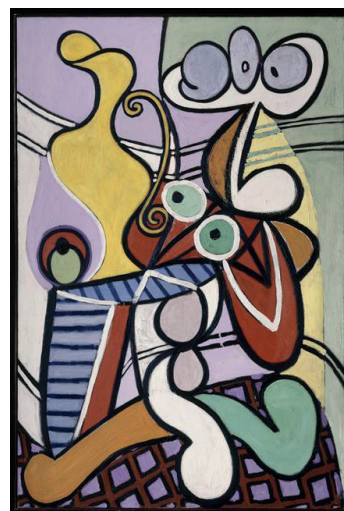


PABLO PICASSO
Portrait of Ehrenburg
1948
© Succession Picasso, 2016

However, Picasso himself took charge, to manage his reputation in the USSR and make sure the exhibition would have the resonance his stature deserved. Perhaps he saw the exhibition as an opportunity to receive the blessing of the mother of Communist Parties. His *Massacre in Korea* in 1951 had failed to win the approval of the French Communist Party and, according to Utley, Picasso had never come to terms with its lack of success.¹⁰ Picasso selected thirty-eight paintings, drawings, and ceramics from his personal collection to represent the development and diversity of his oeuvre from the 1920s to the 1950s. Thus Picasso forced the Soviet authorities’ hand; too embarrassed to decline, and risk offending Western leftist intellectuals, they accepted Picasso’s choice.¹¹

Picasso’s selection was complemented by early work from Soviet holdings chosen by the dedicated curators of the West European Art departments of the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage. Each museum drew primarily on its own collection, so that the Moscow and Leningrad versions of the exhibition differed. At the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, it included *Young Acrobat on a Ball*, *Family of Saltimbanques*, *Head of an Old Man in Tiara*, *Still Life with Violin*. The Hermitage show was larger, having bigger holdings of Picasso to draw on (the Shchukin collection). It was augmented by a number of works from the Blue Period to emphasize Picasso’s early, “realist” phase, and included: *The Absinthe Drinker*, *The Two Sisters*, *Portrait of Soler the Tailor*, and *Woman with a Scarf*.

More challengingly, it also included some of the early Cubist work in Soviet collections, such as *Dance of the Veils*, *Clarinet and Violin*, 1913, *Bowl of Fruit with Bunch of Grapes and Sliced Pear*, as well as *Three Women*, *Woman with a Fan*. Since Soviet collecting had ended with the Bolshevik Revolution, the early 1920s were represented by work from Picasso’s personal collection, including *Maternity* and *Seated Woman with a Book and Musical Instruments*.



PABLO PICASSO
Still Life on a Pedestal Table
Paris, 1931
Oil on canvas, 195 x 130,5 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP134
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / René-Gabriel Ojéda
© Succession Picasso, 2016

The 1930s began with *Still Life on a Pedestal Table* and ended with *Cat Catching a Bird* of 1939, while the 1940s were represented by *Françoise with Wavy Hair*, a portrait of Hélène Parmelin, and a *Vert-Galant* landscape. According to Gilburd, Picasso also took account of his Soviet audience’s taste,

trained on a diet of realist painting, by including some more accessible works such as two drawings of doves, and realist portraits of his mother, his Russian first wife Olga, and his son *Paulo as Harlequin and Pierrot*.¹²

RECEPTION

When the retrospective opened in Moscow on 26 October 1956, it entered a volatile domestic and international situation of cultural and political ferment. Both at home and abroad, people were reeling from the implications of Khrushchev's Secret Speech in February that year. The public response to the Picasso show, and the twitchiness of the authorities, have to be understood in the context of the tense atmosphere of late 1956, pervaded by uncertainties concerning the effects and limits of reform, and by a sense that, for better or for worse, anything could happen. Among art world conservatives and the Central Committee, anxieties concerning the effects of Khrushchev's speech and of cultural liberalization in the Soviet Union were already running high. By October 1956, when the exhibition opened in Moscow, the shockwaves of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin had triggered revolts across the socialist bloc. On 23 October, just a few days before the Picasso retrospective opened, an uprising against Soviet power began in Hungary. Violently suppressed by Soviet tanks (on 4 November), it triggered sympathetic protests in Poland. These events shook the Soviet Party leadership deeply, raising the spectre of the unraveling of the whole project of international Communism, and exacerbating fears that public discussions of the Picasso exhibition could go well beyond matters of art and turn to issues of political freedom. The hopes of a cultural breakthrough in Soviet cultural policy, which the exhibition symbolized, contrasted poignantly with the threat that the events in Eastern Europe would result in renewed isolation from the West.

To make matters worse, just at the very time the Picasso retrospective opened in Moscow, a reproduction of his *Massacre in Korea* was displayed by students of the Academy of Arts in central Warsaw, in protest against the Soviet intervention in Budapest. Picasso's anti-US-imperialist gesture was re-signified as an anticommunist one, co-opted as a vehicle of protest by Polish citizens.¹³ Thus even one of his most explicit political gestures against the "warmongering US-imperialist camp" had become ideologically unstable. Picasso's political allegiance—for many, his only saving grace—was thus called in question. Although this event in Warsaw may not have been common knowledge among the crowds of viewers and wider public in the Soviet Union, the Central Committee would surely have received intelligence of it. Given the coincidence of timing, it was no wonder if Soviet officials were nervous about what meanings Picasso might take on when shown in Moscow and Leningrad and what effects his work might have.

Coverage of the Picasso exhibition in the Soviet press was limited as a result of the Central Committee's caution. Much to its alarm however, the effects of the exhibition on the

Moscow and Leningrad public far exceeded those of a narrowly artistic event. Word of mouth ensured that it attracted large crowds. Respected art historian Mikhail Alpatov declared in the literary press that everyone had a civic duty to know the work of Picasso, for it was the greatest phenomenon of the present day, which reflected the strivings of the twentieth century.¹⁴ The Picasso exhibition became a major public event not only because of the opportunity it offered to study hitherto forbidden examples of modernist art, but because it provided a forum for lively, spontaneous public discussion of contemporary culture and political issues of freedom and truth.¹⁵ Arguments regularly flared up in the queues and before the paintings. In addition, students organized unofficial debates in a number of higher education institutions. These not only discussed Picasso and modern art in general; they even broached such politically dangerous topics as "the artist's creative freedom."¹⁶

When the exhibition moved to Leningrad, the Central Committee's Culture Department reported that viewers, especially students, were taking an "uncritical attitude" toward the formalist works shown in the exhibition. They were declaring Picasso to be the pinnacle of contemporary world art, while denigrating Soviet art and the method of Socialist Realism.¹⁷ Two attempts were made to hold an informal public debate on Arts Square in Leningrad, the second of which, on 21 December, was broken up and the instigators arrested. "Party organs conducted the necessary work with them," the Central Committee report noted ominously. Not to be deterred, some of the students then gate-crashed the Leningrad Artists' Union where artists and members of the public were gathered to discuss the Union's routine exhibition. The students praised the "formalist" work of Picasso, saying that only people of high artistic culture could appreciate it and that it was because there were few such people in the Soviet Union that the work of Picasso was deemed inaccessible.¹⁸

The response to Picasso set alarm bells ringing about the emergence of "alien, antiparty" views.¹⁹ A three-day discussion on "The Future of Soviet Art," held in Leningrad in December 1956, while the exhibition was under way, gave further worrying evidence of the "politically unhealthy mood" among Soviet students and young intellectuals.²⁰ Art historian Moisei Kagan questioned the legitimacy of the USSR Academy of Arts, the most powerful body in the Soviet art world, established in 1947, calling it a revival of a feudal institution. But the challenges went beyond questions of art and its institutions to raise wider questions about Soviet power. One speaker went so far as to condemn collectivization as a national tragedy (a policy whose legitimacy Khrushchev's secret speech had carefully left unchallenged by its condemnation of Stalin's "excesses"). He also spoke of the Soviet regime as the "socialist monarchy," even comparing it unfavorably to the British monarchy because it suppressed the people's sense of beauty and truth whereas the latter, he said, existed to educate this sense.²¹ Not surprisingly, KGB investigators expressed fears that the discussions triggered by Picasso would turn into a "little Budapest."²²

CONCLUSION

Picasso and his work detonated a minefield of contentions that had been opened up by Stalin's death and exacerbated by the Secret Speech. Debates concerned the usable past of Soviet art, the relation between art and political power, between avant-garde art and 'progressive' political ideology, form and content, and called the very definition of realism (fundamental to Soviet assumptions) into question. The retrospective fed into pressures for a rejuvenation or modernization and expansion of Socialist Realism and, indeed, of the Soviet conception of realism. For Picasso, although a declared communist, could only be recuperated into the Soviet canon of "great artist" either by separating out the art from the man and focusing solely on the latter while turning a blind eye to his art, or by broadening the bounds of "realism" sufficiently to accommodate him.²³ The binaries themselves, which placed avant-garde aesthetics in contradiction with leftist politics, had begun to crumble, threatening or promising (depending on one's standpoint) the uncoupling of realism and socialism and the co-option of modernist form to serve the purpose of socialism through a modern, dynamic and expressive realism.²⁴

The ideas and opinions expressed in the videos and publications of this seminar are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Musée national Picasso-Paris, nor does the Musée national Picasso-Paris assume any responsibility for them.

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1. This paper draws on my doctoral research "De-Stalinization and the Re-modernization of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1964" University of Pennsylvania, 1996); Reid, "Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw," in Polly Jones, ed., *Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (London, 2005), 209-30; and Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-Engagement with Western Modernism in the Khrushchev Thaw," in R. P. Blakesley and S. E. Reid, eds, *Russian Art and the West* (DeKalb, 2006), 217-39. For an exhaustive compilation of archival and published accounts of the show see Eleanor Gilburd, "Picasso in Thaw Culture," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47/1-2 (2006): 65-108. My thanks to Kirill Chunikhin for sharing with me his unpublished paper "From Aesthetic Idealism to Aesthetic Materialism: Interpretations of Cubism in the Official Soviet Art Discourse of the Late 1950s to 1960s," Feb. 2015.

2. S. Wilson, "From Monuments to Fast Cars," in D. Crowley and J. Pavitt, eds, *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London, 2008), 29.

3. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Modernism between Peace and Freedom: Picasso and Others at the Congress of Intellectuals in Wrocław, 1948," in Crowley, *Cold War Modern*, 35 of 33-41.

4. B. W. Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (New York, 1983). A. Kostenevich, "Shchukin and Morozov," in *From Poussin to Matisse: The Russian*

Taste for French Painting (New York, 1990); Anatoly Podoksik, *Picasso: The Artist's Works in Soviet Museums* (New York, Leningrad, 1989), 108-121.

5. N. P. Zhilina, et al., comps, *Kul'turnaia zhizn' v SSSR, 1951-1965. Khronika* (Moscow, 1979), 302, 305; Iurii Gerchuk, "Iskusstvo 'ottepeli'. 1954-1964," *Voprosy iskusstvovedeniia* 8/1 (1996): 79.

6. For detail see Reid, *De-Stalinization*; A. Barskaia, *Putevoditel' po vystavke "Iskusstvo Frantsii XV-XX vv."* (Leningrad, 1955), 92; N. Iavorskaia, "Problema impressionizma," in N. Dubovitskaia, ed., *N. V. Iavorskaia. Iz istorii sovetskogo iskusstvovedeniia. O frantsuzskom iskusstve XIX-XX vekov* (Moscow, 1987), 78; "Traditsii i novatorstvo," *Iskusstvo*, no. 2 (1956): 21; Z. Aloian, ed, *Vystavki sovetskogo izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva: Spravochnik*, vol. 5: 1954-1958 (Moscow, 1981).

7. Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) 5/36/47, l. 108.

8. RGANI 5/17/498; 5/17/543. For detail see S.E. Reid, "The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw," *Third Text* 20/2 (2006), 161-75.

9. Gilburd, "Picasso," 70-2.

10. G. R. Utley, *Picasso: The Communist Years* (New Haven, 2000), 150-52; John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (London, 1965); Murawska-Muthesius, "Modernism," 41; S. Guilbaut, "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in S. Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism* (Cambridge, 1990): 69-73.

11. Gilburd, "Picasso," 73-4.

12. Ibid, 74.

13. Murawska-Muthesius, "Modernism," 4; Utley, *Picasso*, 152.

14. RGANI 5/36/47, l. 108.

15. Vladimir Slepian, "The Young vs. the Old," *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1962: 56-7; Reid, *De-Stalinization*.

16. Slepian, "The Young," 57. For art exhibitions and comments books as a kind of surrogate public sphere see Reid "The Exhibition Art of Socialist Countries, Moscow, 1958-1959, and the Contemporary Style," in Reid and D. Crowley, *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000), 101-32; Reid, "In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited," *Kritika*: 6/4 (2005): 673-716.

17. RGANI 5/36/27, ll. 102-5.

18. Ibid, l. 103.

19. Ibid, ll. 102-5; Igor Golomshtok, "Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union," in Golomshtok and A. Glezer, *Soviet Art in Exile* (New York, 1977), 89.

20. RGANI 5/36/25, ll. 110-12.

21. Ibid.

22. Gilburd, "Picasso," 92.

23. Cf. John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (London: 1965)

24. The Italian Communist artist Renato Guttuso had declared "dynamic realism" as the only creative idiom answering contemporary needs. Murawska-Muthesius, "Modernism," 38.