

## **Preserving Alternative Histories: The Maniichuk-Brady Collection of Soviet Ukrainian Art in Perspective**

by Olena Martynyuk, Guest Co-Curator

Ukrainian-American art collector Jurii Maniichuk assembled a collection of close to 150 paintings of Ukrainian Soviet art during the middle of the 1990s. His choice could not be said to be dictated by the fashion of the day because, at the time, Soviet art was no longer as trendy as it was shortly before and right after the collapse of the USSR, partly spurred by a successful 1989 Sotheby's auction in Moscow. Much of the critical thought of the time was devoted to rethinking Socialist Realism of the 1930s and to reintroducing unofficial artists of the former USSR into world art history. Born in Ukraine in 1955, Mr. Maniichuk chose to preserve an alternative history: He collected Soviet art made after the end of Stalin's period, thus eschewing the most famous classical period of Socialist Realism. Maniichuk's desire to prevent the recent historical epoch from vanishing without a trace at a time of colossal social and political changes resulted in the creation of a unique and historically important art collection with a precise focus on a specific place and time: Soviet Ukraine of the 1950s-1980s. (Since Jurii Maniichuk's death in 2009, the collection is owned and administered by his wife, Rose Brady.)

The present exhibition at the Ukrainian Institute of America pays tribute to Maniichuk's energy and enthusiasm by presenting artworks that have never been shown outside their original context of Soviet exhibitions. During most of the USSR's history, with the exception of its avant-garde period of the 1920s, the country's only permitted and Communist Party-endorsed art style was Socialist Realism. This style originated during the period of Soviet history when Stalin consolidated his power in the USSR, thus tainting Socialist Realism by associating it with one of the cruelest political leaders of the 20th century. Large-scale Socialist Realist canvases depicting ecstatically happy workers and reeking with unnatural optimism at the real presence of extremely harsh living conditions in the USSR of the 1930s often appear artificial to today's viewer. As a didactic art style meant to tell stories and indoctrinate the people, Socialist Realism is perceived by many as one-dimensional. But the seeming homogeneity of the style practiced by artists of the multinational USSR still awaits serious critical attention. Such an important collection as Maniichuk-Brady's presents a rare opportunity for viewers – and researchers – to analyze the widely-accepted narrative about Socialist Realism's monotony and recognize nuances in the art that evolved as did life in the USSR.

Socialist Realism can hardly be a neutral topic, especially because many people still retain tragic memories of Stalinism's direct impact on their lives and the lives of their families. The art designed to convey the ideological messages of the regime, which turned out to be so cruel and corrupt, will always be suspected of manipulating people and implanting ideas in their minds. Fully aware of this, the contemporary viewer may want to examine his or her visceral and mental response to Socialist Realism. Do we feel fascinated or disturbed while looking at the art that was supposed to forge its spectators into exemplary Soviet citizens? One of the privileges that we 21st century beholders have in looking at these pictures is the passage of time, which can enable us to see a real work of art behind an ideological tool of Soviet totalitarianism. Another dimension we may look for in this exhibition's works is the national one: If Socialist Realism was meant to be so uniform, could anything specifically Ukrainian seep through the solid monolith of the style?

### **Socialist Realism Reflected in the Post-Modern Mirror**

For decades, Western critical theory relied on the view of Socialist Realism formulated by American art historian Clement Greenberg, who is best known for his theories of modernism and his writings on Abstract Expressionism. In his influential article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"<sup>1</sup> (1939), Greenberg contrasted high modernism as an intellectual and technically advanced endeavor with vulgar popular art catering to the tastes of mass culture. As an example of the latter, he cited Socialist Realism. Although Greenberg illustrated his thesis by describing an unidentified battle scene painted by Ilya Repin, who never adopted the Socialist Realism style and did not even live in Russia during Soviet rule, his critical approach was not questioned until the end of the 1980s, when such books as "Culture Two"<sup>2</sup> (1985) and "The Total Art of Stalinism"<sup>3</sup> (1988) were published by former Soviet dissident thinkers Vladimir Paperny and Boris Groys. Both researchers aimed at offering a more nuanced history of Socialist Realism, which was previously exclusively associated with either kitsch or Stalin's inhuman system.

Groys, who later supplemented his book with the curatorial project "Dream Factory Communism"<sup>4</sup> at Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in 2003-2004, countered a number of presumptions about Socialist Realism's relation to the past and mass culture, and its

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<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review*. 6:5 (1939) 34-49.

<sup>2</sup> Paperny, Vladimir. *Culture Two*. Ann Arbor: Ardis. 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Groys, Boris. *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*. München : C. Hanser, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Groys, Boris, Hollein, Max. *Dream Factory Communism. The Visual Culture of the Stalin era*. Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz; Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2003.

purported appeal to the masses on which Greenberg based his argument in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. According to Groys, Socialist Realism was never liked by proletarian viewers who preferred American mass culture and Hollywood movies; moreover, it was never meant to be appreciated as such. Instead, it was part of anti-commercial culture that did not bother about enchanting the potential customer but rather aimed at educating the ideal Soviet citizen. According to Groys, “Socialist Realism was the attempt to create dreamers who would dream socialist dreams<sup>5</sup>.” Groys also claimed that Socialist Realism’s denial of avant-garde’s visual forms did not have to be explained exclusively by its traditionalist return to 19th century realist art. The theorist argued that Socialist Realism depended on photography and film both formally and by its principle of dissemination. Thus, for Groys, the style not so much signalled a return to the past as it was a response to the new socialist condition. Groys’s point of view was both endorsed and challenged by many critics, generating a fruitful scholarly debate on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

This discussion was continued by Western art historians, in particular by Matthew Cullerne Bown, who has published extensively on Socialist Realism since the early 1990s<sup>7</sup>. While opposing Groys’s position, Bown has nevertheless fought against the exclusion of Socialist realism from general discussions of Russian art and modernism of the 20th century. He claimed that looking at Socialist Realism only through the lens of totalitarianism was no longer productive<sup>8</sup>. From the art historical point of view, Bown’s argument could be supported by the style’s comparisons with the 1930’s return to realism in painting, not only in the Soviet Union and Germany, but also in the French trends of a “return to order”<sup>9</sup> or in the American Federal Art project<sup>10</sup>, which displayed similar stylistic tendencies in very different historical circumstances. The main point of divergence in the approaches of Groys and Bown is the quality of the works, and while

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<sup>5</sup> Groys, Boris, Hollein, Max. *Dream Factory Communism*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> See articles by Katerina Degot, Viktor Tupitsyn in: Banks Miranda, *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism Under Stalin*. Long Island City, N.Y.: Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum, 1993.

Günther, Hans; Hänsgen Sabine; *Sovetskaia vlast i media: sbornik statei*. Sankt-Peterburg : Akademicheskii proekt, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Bown, Matthew Cullerne. *Art under Stalin*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991. Bown, Matthew Cullerne. *Socialist Realist Painting*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Bown did not agree with the perspective offered by Golomshtok, Igor. *Totalitarian art : in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China*. London : Collins Harvill, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Between the two world wars, many artists in Europe, including Italy and France, turned from abstraction to more traditional genres of paintings, such as landscapes and portraits. Among them were, for instance, the former Fauvists Maurice de Vlaminck and André Derain and the former Futurists Gino Severini and Carlo Carrà. See Golan, Romy. *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars*, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> The project’s representationalist tendencies were well-exemplified by the multi-figure murals by Thomas Hart Benton, a prominent member of American Regionalist art movement.

the former critic considers paintings of the style to be boring for the general public, the latter boldly claims that “Soviet official art outclasses the unofficial art”<sup>11</sup>.

These authors applied their theoretical frameworks largely to the classical phase of Socialist Realism, namely, its Stalinist period. The fact that Post-Stalinist Socialist Realism was not as uniform as the Socialist Realism of the 1930s-1950s is less researched and demands more critical reconsideration. The Maniichuk-Brady collection offers art lovers and students an excellent opportunity to return to the subject and to learn more about this unconventional period in the history of Socialist Realist style. However, before analyzing the potential significance of the Maniichuk-Brady collection, it is important to understand the origin of the Socialist Realism style.

### **Avant-garde and the Origin of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union**

Socialist Realism was not created overnight to become the official style of the young Soviet country with the arrival of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In fact, the early art of the Soviet Union was dominated by the utopian aspirations of the avant-garde, with such radical innovators in art as Kazimir Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Vassily Kandinsky occupying prominent positions in the new Soviet art establishment. Enthusiastically supporting the communist ideas of creating a new world functioning on the basis of universal equality these artists invested their energy into the promotion of the new proletarian culture which, as they believed, would help the new country to realize its ambitious goals. Relying on the tradition of the Russian avant-garde, which emerged in the late Russian empire, the artists continued to develop their formal experiments in painting, photography, and film, rejecting the traditions of easel painting. They invented unusual technical approaches, such as the unconventional camera angles in Rodchenko’s photography. In their sophisticated theoretical writings on the nature of artistic spirituality, Malevich and Kandinsky strove to inspire people to change their surrounding reality and completely reject the old one.

In the post-1917 atmosphere, many artistic groups appeared, competing for the status of the most revolutionary-minded artists and thinkers. The resulting array of styles and artistic programs ranged from constructivists, who dreamt of a productive combination of art and industry; to extreme leftists, who staged formal experiments in abstract painting, photography, and photomontage; and to more traditional and painterly-inclined groups such as OST, Four Arts, OMKH and AKHRR. Hidden behind these ornate abbreviations so much favored in early post-revolutionary Russia were numerous

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<sup>11</sup> Bown Matthew Cullerne. *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. xvii.

associations of easel painters, with AkhRR (Association of Revolutionary Artists of Russia) as the most influential. Founded in 1922, it was comprised largely of painters such as Nikolai Kasatkin, who previously belonged to the Itinerants<sup>12</sup> (*peredvizhniki*) movement and promoted the traditional techniques of easel painting.

The only documented visit of Stalin to an art exhibition was in fact his appearance at a show organized by AKhRR in 1928 and dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Red Army. Apart from new artworks produced by the organization's members, the show presented earlier works by Itinerants—for example Ilya Repin's famous "Zaporozhie Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan" and works by traditional monumentalist Aleksandr Deineka. Stalin, who spent most of the time looking at Repin's work, recorded his impressions in the visitor's book: "Generally, in my opinion, good."<sup>13</sup>

After the weakening of Lenin's health in 1922 and especially after his death in 1924, a cult of Lenin started to dominate Soviet culture. Portraits of Lenin replaced icons in many households of the country and painted or sculptural images of the communist leader became omnipresent. In the 1920s, one of the most renowned painters of the AkhRR, also a former Itinerant and a student of Repin, Isaak Brodsky, turned his attention almost exclusively to painting Lenin, producing such works as "Lenin in Front of Smolny" and "Lenin Speaking in Front of Putilov Factory workers," finishing his series with one the most massively reproduced works in the Socialist Realism artistic canon – "Lenin in Smolny" (1930). As images of Lenin dominated the visual culture of the Soviet Union, artists and critics increasingly echoed the communist leader's views on art which were quite traditionalist – he preferred classicism and Renaissance to avant-garde. He was reported to ask once after reading a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky: "Is it impossible to find any reliable anti-futurists?"<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the consolidation of aesthetic standards modeled after the tastes of the two major communist leaders, the end of the 1920s saw further tendencies toward centralization in the arts, including the founding of the VseKoKhudozhnik<sup>15</sup> organization in 1929. It took over all state commissions for art works and eventually became the only

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<sup>12</sup> The Itinerants, or Wanderers, were the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian artists who opposed the academic tradition of depiction of mythological subjects and who insisted on working with social subjects inspired by the people's hardships or religious topics. The most famous Itinerant was Ilya Repin. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of the Itinerants became the new Academy. See more: Valkenier, Elizabeth K. *The Wanderers. Masters of 19th century Russian painting*. Dallas : Museum of Art, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Bown, Art under Stalin, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> VseKoKhudozhnik – Abbreviation from Russian: All-Russian Artistic Cooperative.

art buyer in the entire country. Following the Communist Party Decree of April 1932, the single Union of Artists of the Soviet Union was created.

The year when Socialist Realism was announced to be the official doctrine of Soviet art was 1934, when Communist Party secretary Andrei Zhdanov made a speech to the first Congress of Soviet Writers, famously encouraging the writers to become “engineers of the human soul.” This phrase, believed to belong to Stalin himself, was pronounced by the communist leader during a meeting with writers at writer Maksim Gorky’s apartment in 1934<sup>16</sup>, although a similar idea was formulated by Soviet critic and playwright Sergey Tretyakov on the pages of journal *Novy Lef* as early as 1929<sup>17</sup>. According to Zhdanov, in order to accomplish his or her goal, the artist was supposed to create images that were true and historically concrete while simultaneously showing reality in its revolutionary development.

Thus, the project of avant-garde advancing the utopian version of communism was replaced by centralized production of art liable to criticism by the country's only legitimate art critic – Stalin himself. Those who did not comply with the rules outlined by Socialist Realist doctrine were mercilessly persecuted and often physically destroyed. Like many others, Tretyakov, who supposedly co-authored with Stalin the metaphor of the artist as the engineer of the human soul, was shot in 1937.

### **The National Question: What was Ukrainian about Early Socialist Realism?**

The ideologically correct attitude of Socialist Realist doctrine to the national question was clarified by Stalin himself even before the style got its name<sup>18</sup>. During the sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, Stalin made a statement that was so often repeated thereafter it became a kind of incantation among Soviet art critics. Explaining his vision of Soviet culture at the time of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” Stalin declared that it should be “national in form and socialist in content.”<sup>19</sup>

In Ukraine, which officially became part of the Soviet Union in 1922, the exploration of national forms already had a long history by 1930. Ukrainian avant-garde artists Oleksandr Bohomazov, Hryhory Narbut, Mykhailo Boichuk, and Oleksandra Exter explored traditional Ukrainian religious and folklore art, combining it with the achievements of European cubism and futurism and striving to develop a Ukrainian

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<sup>16</sup> Bown, Matthew Cullerne; Elliott David. *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting, 1930-1960s*. p 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sartori, Rosalinde. “Fotocultura II ili “vernoe videnie” In nther, Hans; Hänsgen Sabine; *Sovetskaia vlast i media: sbornik statei*. p 149

<sup>18</sup> First mentioned in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in 1932.

<sup>19</sup> Bown, Matthew Cullerne *Socialist Realist Painting*. p 84.

version of modernism in art. In 1917, the Ukrainian Academy of Arts was founded on the initiative of M. Hrushevsky, the leader of the short-lived Ukrainian Republic of Central Rada. Albeit undergoing numerous changes and restructuring, this art organization survived much political turmoil, eventually outliving even the Soviet Union. It provided a unique artistic education through the help of its impressive faculty which, up to the middle of the 1930s, included Oleksandr Murashko, Fedir and Vasyl Krychevsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Boichuk, Bohomazov, and Malevich. The first Soviet rector of the institution, restructured into the Kyiv Fine Arts Institute in 1924, was Ivan Vrona, who became famous for his efforts in stressing the necessity of creating a specifically Ukrainian artistic tradition<sup>20</sup>.

Thanks to this high standard of education, Ukrainian art received high acclaim during the 1927 *Moscow Jubilee Exhibition of the Art of the Peoples of the USSR* dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the revolution. The critics, especially the prominent Yakov Tugenkhold<sup>21</sup>, praised the Ukrainian section as one of the most successful in representing the achievements of its nationally-rooted art. He was impressed by the New Byzantinism of Boichuk's school, which combined the aesthetics of old Ukrainian icons with the styles of the early Renaissance art and then-contemporary Mexican muralists.

With his European education and experience (he studied in Munich and Krakow and travelled in Italy and France), Boichuk was praised by European critics for his exhibition at the 1910 Independent Salon in Paris. Working in Ukraine as an art professor beginning in 1917, Boichuk created the most renowned art school in post-revolutionary Ukraine (his students are often referred to as the *Boichukists*) and founded the professional group ARMU (Association of Revolutionary Artists of Ukraine), which aimed to fight provincialism in Ukrainian art while making it accessible to the workers and peasants. The group's main rival was the AKhChU (Association of Artists of Red Ukraine) headed by Fedir Krychevsky and following AKhRR's platform of respect for traditional art and the realism of the Itinerants.

Eventually, these groups met two different fates. Even though the formula of "the national form" originated from Stalin himself, the efforts of Boichuk and others to revive Ukrainian art and culture had grim consequences. In 1937, Boichuk, his wife Sofia Nalepinska-Boichuk, and his closest students Vasyl Sedliar and Ivan Padalka were condemned to death by the state security service, the NKVD, thus joining the generation

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<sup>20</sup> Ya. Tugenkhold. *Iskusstvo Oktyabrskoi Epokhi*. Leningrad, 1930. Cited in Bown, Matthew Cullerne. *Socialist Realist Painting*. P 86.

<sup>21</sup> Yakov Tugenkhold was an art critic who helped the famous Moscow art collector of European avant-garde Sergei Shchukin to select works for his collections and who wrote extensively on Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde artists, such as Natalia Goncharova and Aleksandra Ekster.

of perished artists, poets, and writers in Ukraine known as “The Executed Renaissance.”<sup>22</sup> Those who survived the purges were deprived of any influence in the art establishment or were sent, as Kyiv Art Institute’s Vrona, to Gulag concentration camps.

At the same time, Fedir Krychevsky’s AKhChU became the foundation for the Ukrainian section of the centralized USSR’s Artist Union in 1932. Krychevsky, as head of the AKhChU, followed the ideological party line by making such works as “They Defeated Wrangel,” (1934) which realistically depicted rank-and-file soldiers of different national profiles as happy and proud of their victory. This painting was based on a documentary photo (similar to many canonic Socialist Realist works, such as Brodsky’s “Lenin in Smolny”), rendering the soldiers from a low-rise perspective as invincible in their international comradeship and optimism. Krychevsky’s position, however, was far from that of an unequivocal follower of Socialist Realism. His artistic interests, evident in his earlier works such as the triptych “Family” (1925), reveal the artist’s amalgamation of the aesthetics of Byzantium icons, Italian proto-Renaissance frescoes, and Japanese prints’ colors – which refers him stylistically to European Art Nouveau. He abandoned most of his innovative interests in the menacing atmosphere of the 1932-1933 mass famine (Holodomor) and the authorities’ ideological war against the Boichukists, who were blamed for being too nationalistic in their paintings. Nevertheless, Krychevsky resisted becoming an exemplary Soviet painter, consistently avoiding painting portraits of Stalin or feasts at collective farms. Instead, he worked on creating the Ukrainian school of Socialist Realism and taught the two most acclaimed Ukrainian artists of the next generation of Soviet painters – Serhiy Hryhoriev and Tetyana Yablonska, both represented in the Maniichuk-Brady collection.

Immediately after WWII, it became clear that some forms of Russian nationalism had become part of the official Soviet discourse – as was evident in Stalin’s famous toast “to the great Russian people” raised at his meeting with Red Army Generals in the Kremlin in May 1945. Surprisingly, Ukrainian artist Mykhailo Khmelko decided – perhaps in an act of self-imposed censorship-- to depict this moment. Khmelko’s 1947 monumental canvas “To the Great Russian People” received Stalin’s Prize and became one of the most widely circulated Socialist Realist images in the USSR, with copies hung in libraries, houses of culture, and cinema theaters and reprinted in school text books and the mass media. Ideologically, the painting came to function as the certificate that Ukrainian art had become free of the national issue. In the Maniichuk-Brady collection,

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<sup>22</sup> The term was coined by Polish publicist Jerzy Giedroyc while working on *Antology on Ukrainian literature* in 1958. More on the phenomenon of Executed Renaissance: Lavrinenko Yu. *Rozstrilyane Vidrozhennia: Antolohiia 1917 – 1933*. Kyiv: Smoloskyp. 2004.

Khmelko's 1961 painting "Motherland Greets a Hero" (fig. #7) is another example of Socialist Realist ceremonial portraiture, yet with important differences in style and meaning. The painting, Khrushchev greeting the triumphant Yuri Gagarin after his return from space, is less solemn and pompous, gravitating toward the simplification of form and brighter coloration. The dark-toned indoor scene of Stalin's appearance before his generals in "To The Great Russian People" is replaced by the sunny atmosphere of the outdoor meeting of Khrushchev and the famous Soviet cosmonaut, witnessed by ordinary Soviet people.

Another method of discouraging nationalism was implemented through the system of art education, clearly inherited from the historical experience of the Russian Empire. The most talented artists from non-Russian provinces were encouraged to continue their careers and education in Moscow or St. Petersburg (Leningrad) – thus becoming Russian artists and disseminators of Russian artistic culture and styles. In this way, Ukraine contributed to the formation of artistic cadres at the origin of the main Soviet Socialist Realist canon, including such leaders as Isaak Brodsky, who was born in Zaporizhia region and who received his primary art education in Odessa art school, where he was taught by the famous impressionist Kiriak Kostandi.

As is evident from the development of the Ukrainian branch of Socialist Realism in the 1930s, Stalin's doctrine of "national in form" was in reality gravitating toward an almost complete erasure of the national idea and its manifestation in all kinds of art. Utopian aspirations of the artists who believed in the possibility of a national form of expression within the communist canon conflicted with the demands of the homogenizing style, which could be controlled only from above. The notion of "national in form" appeared to be incompatible with the requirement of "socialist in content."

After Stalin's death, the depiction of folklore themes was no longer suppressed, as one can see in such works from the Maniichuk-Brady collection as Halina Zoria's 1960 painting, "Ukrainian Still Life with Cock," which showed Ukrainian folk patterns in clay pottery and embroidered towels. What was still not tolerated, however, was the national stylistic interpretation of the kind earlier proposed by Boichuk's school. Nevertheless, even the presence of Ukrainian national symbols within the canon of Socialist Realism was liberating for many artists. Gradually, starting from Khrushchev's period, the shadows of the national form revealed themselves in official art in Ukrainian Socialist Realist paintings.

## The Maniichuk-Brady Collection and Post-Stalinist Socialist Realism in Ukraine – A Constellation of Influences

As the Maniichuk-Brady collection clearly shows, the paintings historically categorized as Socialist Realist art from the end of Stalinism to the collapse of the Soviet Union were diverse stylistically, thematically, and ideologically. The art represented in the collection reflects a constellation of influences, which contributed to artistic practices in Soviet Ukraine from the 1950s through the mid-1980s. These factors included the influence of the Moscow Painting School, which was the first to introduce slight modifications into the Socialist Realist style after Stalin's death, and the Severe (Surovy) style, which resurrected the monumental tradition in painting and had special significance for Ukrainian art. Other important factors included the development of the dissident culture of the Ukrainian *shistdesintyky* (the generation of the 1960s), who strived to revive Ukrainian traditions in culture, including primitivism and religious art as well as modernist traditions of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last developments of Socialist Realism unfolded in the background of the Soviet Union's disintegration at a time when ideological points of reference were vanishing and the earlier styles began to be recycled and recombined.

These stylistic changes developed in correlation with their historical circumstances: After World War II, Socialist Realism progressed in the background of Khrushchev's Thaw, Brezhnev's stagnation, and the gradual disintegration of the USSR. In the Ukrainian context, this development coincided with the growth of nationally conscious unofficial movements, which sometimes managed to introduce their points of view into the vast field of official art and culture.

A relative weakening of political and cultural control in the USSR during the rule of Khrushchev (1954 -1964) was named after the novel "Thaw" written by Ilya Ehrenburg<sup>23</sup>. In 1954, the warmth of the new political climate contributed to the first exhibition in Moscow since the 1920s that was not subjected to any censorship by the central art authorities<sup>24</sup>. After this symbolically significant but small-scale event, other events followed that were extremely formative to the cultural development of the USSR. Two shows in Moscow – the Youth Festival in 1957 and the American National Exhibition of 1959 – made available the latest developments in European and American

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<sup>23</sup> Ehrenburg, Ilya, transl by Manya Harari. *The Thaw*. Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Sidorov Aleksandr. "The Thaw. Painting of the Khrushchev Era". In Bown, Matthew Cullerne; Elliott David. *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting, 1930-1960s*. P 30

art to Soviet viewers, many of whom travelled to Moscow from different parts of the country. These exhibitions helped to spread information about formalism and abstraction strictly forbidden in the USSR but apparently flourishing outside its borders. On the political level, at the 20th Party congress, Khrushchev denounced Stalin's atrocities — a move resulting in the 1956 Party decree “On Overcoming the Cult of Personality and its Consequences.” Together with the earlier Party decree “On Elimination of Excesses in Projects and Construction” (1955), these events exerted a substantial influence on the Soviet art sphere.

Alert to changes occurring in the country's center, Ukrainian painters of the Thaw generation also revised their approach to the Socialist Realist canon and explored the newly- changed borders of what was permitted. Serhiy Hryhoriev, the period's leader of thematic genre in Soviet art, painted a lyrical portrait of his student Oleksiy Zakharchuk in 1960, which depicts a young man immersed in his thoughts. In contrast to the narrative style of the earlier Socialist Realist genre painting, Hryhoriev neither indicates the profession of the depicted person nor offers any plot – the viewer is simply invited to contemplate the play of the brushstrokes on the surface and the psychological state of the person depicted. The two paintings by Kharkiv artists of the same period also reveal lyrical tones and the absence of academic finish in the genre of portrait: Ashkat Safargalin's “School Girl” and Hrygory Halkin's “Portrait of the Artist's Wife.” While Safargalin's school girl wears the Komsomol badge, no party leader (typically present as a portrait on the wall or a sculpture bust in classical Socialist Realism) overlooks her. The painter clearly does not strive to show the bright future of the young person, as he would have had to do earlier, but instead leaves the girl's future open, without the pathos of obligatory optimism. Far from theatrical triumphalism is the 1961 portrait “Hanna Semenivna” by Mykhailo Antonchyk, in which the somber-colored figure of an elderly woman is painted laconically on the background of a doorstep and house wall rendered with wide elegiac brushstrokes. Such works demonstrated growing inclusiveness of the Socialist Realist canon on both stylistic and ideological levels, allowing for more sophisticated brushwork and more humane topics on the canvases.

Yet another trend diverging from the canon of Socialist Realism that originated from the center during the Thaw was the Severe (Surovy) style, which championed formal innovations on a more advanced level than the Moscow School of Painting (which had introduced slight modifications) but strove to retain some revolutionary romanticism. The term coined in 1957 by the critic Aleksandr Kamensky was used to describe the art of Russian painters Geli Korzhev, Viktor Popkov, Dmitrii Zhilinsky, and

others who successfully wove monumentalism into easel painting technique. They often represented workers enduring harsh working conditions, depicting them in a laconic manner of sharp silhouettes and bold simplifications of color and form. Eschewing excessive detail, the Severe painters concentrated on rhythmic patterns to underline the dynamism of composition. The trend's popularity went beyond Moscow, reaching Ukrainian artists who sought for monumental and decorative generalization in painting, and continued well after the Thaw. The use of outlined silhouettes and expressive monumentality for romantic glorification of labor in such works of the collection as Ivan Yevchenko's "Beet Farmers" (1967), Natalia Korobova's "Noon" (1970), Valentin Stupin's "The Beginning of Construction" (1964) and Ilia Vasylchenko's "Fishermen of Collective Farm "Russia" (1967) reveal their stylistic proximity to the Severe style. Vasylchenko's work not only demonstrates the author's adherence to the newly permissible version of Socialist Realism but is also reminiscent of the early aesthetics of easel art from the pre-Stalinist period. While the Moscow artists clearly look back at 1920s-era monumentalist Aleksandr Deineka, Vasylchenko's painting reminds one of Fedir Krychevsky's "They Defeated Wrangel" in its use of low-rise perspective, which monumentalizes and dignifies the isolated and solid figures of the fishermen. Similarly to Krychevsky, Vasylchenko builds figures sculpturally, creating forms by vivid and energetic brushstrokes and turning the painting into a semblance of a sculptural frieze. The painting's color, diluted in accordance with the roughness of the Severe style, nevertheless contributes to the complex decorative pattern of the painterly surface. The embroidered Ukrainian shirt of the third fisherman on the left reflects the decorative program of the work and reminds one of its national rootedness.

Besides the genre of multi-figure compositions traditional for Socialist Realism, the changes occurring during the Thaw influenced landscape painting by making forms more graphic and expressive. "New Town" (1964) by Yadviha Matseyevska, who was Belarusian but was trained and worked in Kyiv, presents the familiar scene of the achievements of communist power in improving people's lives – newly-built houses surrounded by blooming spring flowers. At the same time, the town's landscape is rendered with more direct fields of pure colors and bold contours reminiscent of naïve painting style. The painting's foreground is filled with flowers, which shifts the focus into a more lyrical register.

In the Ukrainian context, the Severe style had another dimension that revealed more subversive potential in the officially permitted mode of artistic expression. The revival of monumentalist tendencies inevitably brought back the forbidden memories of

executed Boichuk and his art school. Boichuk's bold experiments, banned from museum spaces and destroyed, were nevertheless alive in the memory of the people who, like former Kyiv Art Institute rector Ivan Vrona, had returned from concentration camps during the Thaw. The sharpened contours of forms and the combination of primitivism and avant-garde characteristic of Boichuk's art resonated well with the monumental decorativism of the Severe style.

In the Ukrainian artistic context of the Thaw, this array of influences produced paintings that balanced on the border of the canon, threatening to explode it from within by their dangerous associations with the forbidden avant-gardist Boichuk and his school. One such work is Mykhailo Weinstein's 1966 painting "Postman," undoubtedly a gem of the Maniichuk-Brady collection and the clear evidence of Socialist Realism's multi-layered stylistic in its post-Stalinist period. The painting boldly contrasts the sharp contour of the postwoman's body with an almost abstract background. The expressive brush strokes of the painting's background coincide with pure colors, which fill out the shapes of the postwoman's skirt as well as her bag and head shawl. The dynamism of the composition stems not from the anatomically correct depiction of a three-dimensional body moving in space but, on the contrary, from the means of abstraction and simplification of pattern-like forms. The monumental quality of the work breaks away from the easel painting's view of the image as of a window onto the world enclosed within the borders of the frame. The young postwoman emerges as not belonging to the confines of the picture and her movement makes the composition open beyond the surface of the painting.

Many tendencies that characterized Ukrainian Socialist Realism of the Thaw period carried over to the next decade of the 1970s known as the acme of Brezhnev's stagnation. During this period, the generation of young Kyiv painters who became active in the 1960s, such as Weinstein, Yuri Lutskevych, Yakym Levych, and Zoya Lerman (all represented in the Maniichuk-Brady collection) continued to explore the limits of official art. While censorship in art actively resumed during Brezhnev's rule, the decay of ideological fervor among the Soviet power hierarchies had reached unprecedented heights; the utopianism of Khrushchev's period was completely gone by the end of the 1970s. In terms of artistic achievements, more diversified stylistic developments became evident in many artists' growing interest in icon painting and folk art as well as in the aesthetics of the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance with its flat frontality of figures. However, these stylistic experiments remained within the borders of realistic narrative painting. For example, Yegor Tolkunov's 1971 work "Celebration," emulating by its

frontal and flattened figures the Ukrainian naïve folk painting, tells a story of a family through their dress and material environment. Therefore, the flat modernist pictoriality of the work coincided with the narrative demands of the Socialist Realism canon.

The revival of decorativism and folkloric patterns becomes present in Yevdokia Boldyrieva's 1971 "Portrait of Tania" in which the ornamentality of the dress was reflected in the decoration of the room, thus creating a unifying decorative whole. Boldyrieva's work reveals another feature of Brezhnev-era Socialist realism, namely the withdrawal from collective endeavors into individual contemplation. The prevalence of the individual over the collective sharply distinguished late Socialist Realism from its highly politicized Stalinist version aimed at inciting the collective spirit in viewers.

These 1970s-era experiments could be said to illustrate non-conformist tendencies within the style of Socialist Realism in Ukraine. Apart from these efforts, Ukraine did not have such a fully-fledged nonconformist culture as Russia during the period of Brezhnev's stagnation of the 1970s. Among the reasons for this absence could be the authorities' fear of nationalist and separatist tendencies associated with dissident artists and the harsher methods<sup>25</sup> of censorship applied to them. (That fear can be best described by quoting Ukrainian dissident poet Ivan Drach: "When they clip your nails in Moscow, they cut your fingers off in Ukraine."<sup>26</sup>) Given these circumstances, the Maniichuk-Brady collection offers researchers of the Soviet art period an opportunity to get a glimpse into both official and unofficial culture since some artists represented there practiced Socialist Realism while engaging in experimentation on the side.

The late period of Socialist Realism in the mid-1980s coincided with the gradual dissolution of the system that commissioned and approved art works according to their compliance with the canonic style. While the Artist's Union still demanded depictions of Lenin and happy workers, the collapse of the Soviet Union was already in the air, infusing later Socialist Realist works with irony and postmodern citations of the earlier styles without preserving their ideological or historical meaning. Yuri Kolesnyk's "Portrait of Twice Hero of Socialist Labor M. Brintseva" (1977) employs the aesthetics reminiscent of the sophisticated symbolism of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Art Nouveau seen in the central figure located against the background of a more generalized landscape, with flat figures appearing as wall paper. Placing both the hero of labor and the anonymous

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<sup>25</sup> For example, artist Alla Horska was killed by KGB in 1970 because of her distinct national-minded position. More on Ukrainian nonconformism: Myroslava Mudrak. "Lost in the Widening Cracks and Now Resurfaced: Dissidence in Ukrainian Painting". In Rosenfeld, Alla; Norton T Dodge *From Gulag to Glasnost': Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Krawchenko, Bohdan. "Glasnost and Perestroika in the USSR" In Bahry Romana M. *Echoes Of Glasnost In Soviet Ukraine*. North York, Ont. Canada :Captus Press Publications, 1989, p. 11.

figures in the background in an unreal and illogical space, the author undermines the very principles of realist painting.

Eventually reaching the point of no return, late Socialist Realism contributed to the commercial recycling of Soviet symbols characteristic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the West, this period was known as the height of the postmodernist theoretical development, which interpreted the postmodern condition as an era in which “the grand narratives”, or the styles striving to depict the world in its totality, had vanished.<sup>27</sup> Socialist Realism was undoubtedly one of such totalizing “grand styles”. Today, looking at the Maniichuk-Brady collection from this perspective allows one to see it as an important project of documenting the gradual dissolution of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s “grandest” artistic styles.

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Olena Martynuk is a PhD candidate in Art History Department at Rutgers University. She is also a Graduate Curatorial Assistant and a Norton Dodge Fellow in the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

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<sup>27</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984

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