

Freedom and Art

What paintings from Lenin's Russia and Depression America tell us about turbulent times

by Theodore Dalrymple



Had it not been for the cataclysmic First World War, Vladimir Illich Ulyanov, a.k.a. Lenin, would have remained as he should have remained: an obscure, exiled scribbler of dull, intolerant, and hate-filled political pamphlets, with no chance to put his fathomless misanthropy into practice (no man was ever more a stranger to pity). The world would have escaped a lot of trouble. But history is what it is, not what it ought to have been, and Lenin was indisputably one of the twentieth century's most important men. Iconographically, he

remains one of the most instantly recognizable of figures, along with Marilyn Monroe and Che Guevara.

To mark the centenary of Lenin's revolution, the Royal Academy in London mounted an exhibition, *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932*—probably the largest of its kind ever mounted in a foreign country. It overlapped for a time with another exhibition in the same institution that, in a way, took up the baton: *America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s*. Whether intended or not, the juxtaposition was instructive, for it allowed a comparison of the artistic production of two fateful nations during some of their most turbulent years.



Kazimir Malevich, "Woman with a Rake", 1928–32 (TRET'YAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW, RUSSIA / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES)

Some of the similarities and differences between Russian and American art of their respective periods were, to me, surprising—none more so than the realization that the Russian artistic endeavor was not only more vigorous but also more varied than the American, despite the state's monopoly as a

patron from nearly the outset of Lenin's regime. The new state brooked no opposition or even criticism, but at first it did not meddle much with the forms of artistic expression (civil war, economic collapse, and famine will distract even aspiring totalitarian regimes from the arcane disputes of aesthetic theory). I was reminded of Fidel Castro's famous, or infamous, dictum, that within the revolution, everything was permitted, while outside it, nothing was. The more a totalitarian regime consolidates, the greater its control and the narrower its definition of what lies within the revolution; and this is precisely what happened in the Soviet Union, so that by the end of the period covered, only a single style of artistic expression—socialist realism—was permitted.

During the New Deal era in America, the Works Progress Administration (later the Works Project Administration) had subsidized thousands of American artists, employing them to decorate federal buildings, as well as to produce more intimate, less public, art. This backing was intended to compensate for the collapse of private patronage after the Wall Street crash, providing a basic income to artists, who otherwise, or so it was held, would have had to give up their profession or starve. Like all institutional patrons, the WPA made its support dependent on not violating too greatly its preferences—in this case, quasi-ideological ones. It wanted uplift to relieve the gloom of the times, an iconography of progress in a period when progress itself seemed hard to make (or discern) and when the Depression must have seemed to many a permanent state of affairs.

Whereas Russian patronage was a monopoly (the state henceforth owned all artworks, and private collecting was forbidden—in theory, if not quite in practice), American patronage was not. Private support declined for economic reasons but not for ideological ones; and the principles of Keynesianism were applied to the art market. Still, if federal patronage under different formal guises imposed neither a necessary style nor

subject matter, it certainly had its preferences and guidelines. Nudity was forbidden, abstraction discouraged, and depictions of "the contemporaneous American scene" and works of "social significance" preferred. Artists receiving WPA subventions painted murals for more than 1,000 government buildings, mainly of uplifting scenes of past local achievements or the hope of future progress, or both.

This was the American equivalent of socialist realism, though—a crucial difference—it was not rigidly enforced, with an alternative always available. Private patronage still existed, even if on a reduced level, and artists could opt out altogether. The state did not control access to artistic materials, nor was there any punishment for ideological deviation. Losing the chance of a subsidy does not have the same demonstration effect as being shot or starving to death in a labor camp. (Nikolay Punin, the art critic and champion of modernism, was twice arrested by the Soviet regime—the second time, in 1949, for publicly preferring Rembrandt to portraits of Lenin, many of which he described as tasteless. He died in a labor camp in 1953. No American connected with art ever had a remotely comparable trajectory.)

Even as the ideological room for maneuver contracted in Russia, artists managed to insinuate ambiguous meanings into their work. In 1920, Boris Kustodiev painted a dramatic image, *The Bolshevik*, in which a Brobdingnagian figure of a proletarian, bearing a vast, flowing red banner, strides over a Lilliputian Moscow, staring straight ahead with the eyes of a fanatic, the city streets full of tiny figures, whose attitude to the giant cannot be made out. The image bears more than one interpretation: from the inevitable and glorious triumph of the proletariat to the total crushing of individuality. It leaves you free to interpret it according to your predisposition.

Even more ambiguous is Konstantin Yuon's painting *New Planet*, in which the silhouettes of small human figures, facing in

more than one direction, and with a few seeming corpses at their feet, extend their arms in supplication, or terror, toward two planets in the dark sky, one red, the other yellow, illuminated by shafts of bright light from an unknown source. Is this painting expressive of a totally new, and glorious, world—or of a nightmare? To me, it is more akin to Goya's *Disasters of War* than any promise of a paradise to come, though that was the officially favored interpretation. The artist died in his bed, in the odor of Soviet sanctity, in 1958.

Kazimir Malevich's *Red Cavalry* of 1932—the last year with any scope left for ambiguity in Soviet art before socialist realism was pronounced the one true style—was a response to increasing pressure on him, one of the originators of abstract painting, to return to figuration. It is still partly abstract, with kilim-like colored stripes representing land below a pale sky that shades upward into indigo; but over the land thunder 12 rows of schematic Red Cavalry, as though crossing the endless plains of central Russia, in pursuit of an enemy to eliminate. Nothing in the picture, however, indicates whether their cause is good or evil, whether the horsemen are heroic or vicious. Since all of Malevich's other figurative paintings of the time show heads without faces—an oblique commentary on the Soviet dream of cloning Communist Man socially, if not genetically—it is fair to conclude that the artist did not intend his *Red Cavalry* to be seen as wholly heroic—though one could interpret them that way if proceeding from the premise of their heroism.

Ambiguity is not absent from American painting of the 1930s, either. Grant Wood's iconic *American Gothic*—obviously influenced, if not actually inspired, by the Flemish primitives—depicts a farming couple (in reality, Wood's sister and his dentist) standing, he pitchfork in hand, before their wooden house, with its Gothic upper window. Wood clearly intends us to see the couple as imbued with moral qualities:

they are hardworking, modest, proudly independent, almost certainly sincerely religious—but not much fun. For them, life is something to endure rather than to enjoy, to frown at rather than to smile at: and pleasure is a temptation of the devil (as was bourgeois luxury or even comfort in the Soviet Union). So we do not know whether to admire or to detest the couple, to laugh at them or mourn their passing: for the pitchfork, symbol of pre-machine-age farming (and relentless physical work), is merely pathetic in the era of the combine harvester and the Dust Bowl. Since the man is old—or, at any rate, aged before his time as a result of backbreaking labor—one senses a lifetime of self-sacrifice, without anything to show for it, not even happiness along the way. The couple appear as trapped by their virtues as libertines are by their vices. But their virtues are nevertheless virtues.



Grant Wood's "American Gothic", 1930 (THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO / ART RESOURCE, NY)

Wood's pastoral landscapes exude the same nostalgia for a recently bygone age as Kustodiev's, Yuon's, and Chagall's townscapes, nostalgia for a seemingly immemorial, or slowly changing, way of life overtaken by destructive events. What these pictures celebrate is what was not appreciated or even noticed at the time, before it was destroyed. Appreciation of beauty is often retrospective, recalled with a roseate glow.

In Soviet art, mass man had increasingly to be celebrated for ideological reasons. He (or she) was depicted as iron-jawed in determination to build the new world of equality and prosperity, without thought of self. The attitude toward mass man in American art is more ambivalent. As portrayed by the artists in *America After the Fall*, a curious dialectic runs through American life that cannot be wholly attributed to the Depression—between a frantic, superficial, and promiscuous sociability, on the one hand, and a profound isolation or loneliness, on the other, from which the sociability is an almost hysterical attempt to escape. One can see the dialectic clearly in two treatments of the New York cinema: Reginald Marsh's *Twenty Cent Movie* and Edward Hopper's *New York Movie*. In Marsh's painting, a crowd pullulates around the entrance to the cinema, the men leering (one looking more a pimp than a patron) and the women in cheap seductive finery, while all around them are adverts for films such as *Joys of the Flesh* and *A Love Written in Blood*, suggesting a need for distracting sensation. But if there is such a need, what is it a distraction from? In Hopper's painting, we get at least one answer: the existential isolation of urban modernity. A movie-house usherette, a beautiful young woman, stands aside from the elaborate auditorium with its plush-covered seats, in a pose of despair. The cinema is mostly empty, and the two audience members one can see are on their own, not sitting next to each other. One senses that they have come to watch the film not from any real desire to see it but simply to fill their minds with something other than thoughts about their situation. Where no community exists, entertainment rushes in to fill the gap.



Edward Hopper's "New York Movie", 1939 (DIGITAL IMAGE © THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/LICENSED BY SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY)

Other pictures of American sociability depict either grossness or religious hypocrisy, or some combination of the two: in Paul Cadmus's *The Fleet's In*, painted just after the end of Prohibition, unattractive drunken sailors cavort coarsely with equally unattractive young women (the painting outraged admirals of the time). But where sensitivity is shown, as in Helen Lundeberg's *Double Portrait of the Artist in Time*, one again finds only isolation and melancholy, if not melancholia. The artist displays herself as a baby, chubby, smiling, and seemingly with everything to look forward to. But above her is a framed self-portrait of the artist as she now is, a picture of loneliness and misery. The two depictions are connected by a shadow, reaching from one to the other—that of time itself. It is as if the perennial optimism on which American life (and achievement) is built must end in personal disappointment and frustration, perhaps an understandable reaction to the period.

I was struck by the parallels between the furious debates among artists in the early years of the revolution and those that raged during the Depression about the "correct" way to paint and the role of art in society—the assumption being that an indubitably correct answer was there to be found, as if there could not be many mansions in art, as if appreciation of one style automatically precluded admiration for another. The debates were highly ideological: in the Russian case, about what activity truly served the revolution and the proletariat (itself an abstraction, very different from workers' actual lives); and in the American case, about what activity was truly American. In Russia, the figurative artists accused the abstract artists of being in thrall to bourgeois aesthetics and of ignoring proletarian reality; in America, the figurative artists accused the abstractionists of ignoring American reality and of being in thrall to European aesthetics.

Incidentally, in the essays in the American exhibition catalog, the authors—all of them curators or academics—seem unable to distinguish between national and nationalist. For them, nationalism indicated xenophobia, chauvinism, and an implied proximity to fascism: as if, by loving a tradition, a way of life, or a landscape, you must necessarily devalue and hate everything else, or as if, by lamenting loss, you necessarily are obstructing progress and trying to prevent change. Thus, figurative artist Thomas Hart Benton found himself accused by the abstractionist Stuart Davies of reactionary chauvinism, though, to me, his depiction of agricultural laborers seems far removed from the evasive romanticism or pastoralism that might be expected from a reactionary chauvinist—on the contrary, it evokes a sympathy for their hard lives, even where the surroundings are indeed pastoral. On Davies's view, taken to its logically illogical conclusion, any reference to a particular time and place would be chauvinist, so that Vermeer, say, would be considered a reactionary chauvinist for painting his native Delft.

The debates in Russia about the “correct” way to serve the revolution by artistic means—some extremists going as far as to say that art, as traditionally conceived, was inherently reactionary, because it was individual rather than collective—ended by the *force majeure* of the Stalinist state, an ending that, in retrospect, was inevitable, given Bolshevism’s premises. (There was no question of postrevolutionary art in Russia ever being explicitly anti-Bolshevist, and by the end of the period, in 1932, there was no question even of a passive or private withdrawal from Bolshevism. Active affirmation was required if one was to be an artist. Exile, if permitted, was the only choice for those who did not fully approve of the new dispensation.) By contrast, American artistic debates, though verbally intense, had in retrospect a storm-in-a-teacup quality about them, precisely because the American commitment to freedom and pluralism held. But as the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam put it, not long before being killed himself, Russia was the only place where they took poetry seriously—because they troubled to shoot poets there. In Soviet Russia, all intellectual disputes soon became deadly serious; to be on the wrong side was frequently fatal.

There were Communists among the American artists in the 1930s who probably would have become socialist realists à la Stalin, if (as was, in reality, impossible) the U.S. had turned Communist; but in the American political context, theirs was an art of protest, not unjustified in itself but ill-assorted with their blindness to the incomparably worse horrors of Soviet Russia. The working-class, self-taught Joe Jones, for example, painted his powerful *American Justice* in 1933 to protest lynchings and the continued existence of the Klu Klux Klan. This was perfectly justified; lynchings, though not numerous, given the size of the U.S. population, must have exerted an influence far beyond their statistical importance, not unlike Islamist terrorism today; yet even lynchings were a minor phenomenon compared with the mass executions and

starvation synonymous with Communism from its inception. Despite his obvious and sincere sympathy for the impoverished and downtrodden, Jones could not imagine that anything was worse elsewhere—least of all, in his imagined utopia-on-earth.

The *America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s* catalog includes a lithograph (not included in the show itself) by Mabel Dwight, titled *Danse Macabre*, circa 1934. It depicts Hitler and Mussolini, John Bull, Marianne, and Uncle Sam as absurd marionettes—John Bull and Marianne obviously impotent, Uncle Sam standoffish, and Hitler and Mussolini as preposterous and posturing but dangerously aggressive. Stalin's absence from the *danse macabre* was more eloquent than his presence would have been, for he was at the time the most macabre of all—responsible, along with the regime he headed, for deaths even then counted in the millions. This partial blindness resulted from ideological wishful thinking that somewhere on earth there was a regime free from the problems of capitalism (Dwight, for example, belonged to one of the John Reed Clubs that acted as Communist front organizations, seeking to spread influence among left-leaning artists and intellectuals).

Russian artists after the revolution and American artists during the Depression indulged in what might be called industrial romanticism, a vision of industry that celebrated size almost for its own sake, or as if the size of one's works were testimony in itself to Man's grandeur. Insofar as men actually appeared in the factories and workshops depicted—as often they did not, because people tend to create complications in the smoothest-running organizations—they were mere auxiliaries to machines. Here was Chaplin's *Modern Times*, in which minus was changed for plus. If Charles Scheeler's *Suspended Power* of 1939, a painting of a huge turbine propeller being lowered into a shaft that dwarfed two tiny workers, had been hung in the *Revolution* exhibition and attributed to a Russian artist of the socialist-realism

school, I doubt that one in a hundred visitors would have noticed the substitution. The difference was in the degree of compulsion under which such a work was produced rather than in the artistic work itself; not evident in the pictures of industrial life themselves is the vastly superior and more advanced nature of American industry.

But perhaps the most surprising discovery of all in comparing the two exhibitions is the greater variety, vigor, and quality of the Russian artistic output in the chosen periods. This superiority raises important and unsettling questions about the relationship of art to freedom, which clearly is not linear: the more freedom, the better the art.

Then again, the purpose of society is not to produce the best possible art. Australia is one of the world's most attractive countries to immigrants, and I doubt whether many aspiring migrants would cite Australian art as the reason for wanting to move there: though, as it happens, I think Australian art is more interesting than many suppose.