

# **Aleksandr Laktionov: A Soviet Artist**

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What did it mean to be a successful Soviet artist? Was Socialist Realism, the official art of the Soviet Union, simply the dictated ideological product of a totalitarian cultural policy, or were its producers progressive artists, harnessed to a great national tradition and liberated from the constraints of a market-driven art establishment? These are the two Cold War poles of contention that simplify the reality of a diverse and complex art establishment. Through an analysis of Aleksandr Laktionov, a popular and contentious Soviet artist who rose to prominence in the late 1940s, it is possible to trace the main arguments and controversies that helped to shape the Soviet art world in the post-war years.

This project employs archival material such as visitors' books from major exhibitions, stenographic reports of meetings, documents pertaining to the organisation of exhibitions and letters and personal documents in order to reconstruct and examine significant moments in the career of a major Soviet artist, including detailed analyses of several individual works of art. This unique case study of Laktionov's work and its popular and critical reception reveals an art establishment that was structured in the late 1940s according to privileged lines of patronage and association, and in the 1950s became the battleground of a struggle for taste. The Soviet public defied attempts to mould and direct their tastes by responding to works of art as diverse and impassioned consumers, and the Soviet artist played an active role in contributing to an evolving definition of Socialist Realism.

<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>A Note on Transliteration</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	
‘Life is the Source of Inspiration for the Artist’ .....	1
<b>Chapter One</b>	
‘Paint with Great Patience and a Small Brush’: The Genealogy of Laktionov.....	31
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
‘A Premonition of Victory’: <i>A Letter from the Front</i> .....	55
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
Portraits and Patrons, or How to Get Ahead in the Soviet Art World.....	81
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<i>Kul'turnost'</i> or Kitsch? Varnishing Reality in the Art of Aleksandr Laktionov.....	109
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
A Self-Portrait of the Socialist Realist Artist.....	137
<b>Conclusion</b>	
A Very Soviet Story.....	161
<b>Plates</b> .....	<b>173</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>181</b>
<b>Illustrations</b> .....	<b>193</b>
<b>Appendix (List of the Artist’s Known Works)</b> .....	<b>195</b>

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**The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:**

AKhRR: The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia

AKh SSSR: The USSR Academy of the Arts

GRM: State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

GTG: State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

MOSSKh: Moscow Organisation of the Union of Soviet Artists (from the mid 1950s known as MOSKh)

OMKh: The Society of Moscow Artists

OST: The Society of Easel Painters

RGALI: Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts, Moscow

RGASPI: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow

TsALIM: Central Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow

**A Note on Transliteration:**

Throughout the thesis the Library of Congress system will be used for the transliteration of Russian names, phrases and publication titles. Exceptions will be made in the case of names that have become familiar in the English language, for example: Maxim Gorky, State Tretyakov Gallery.



**'Life is the Source of Inspiration for the Artist'<sup>1</sup>**

***Self-portrait with a Burning Candle***

In 1970, at the age of 60 and just two years before his death, the artist Aleksandr Laktionov painted his final self-portrait (*Self-portrait with a Burning Candle* [plate 8]). In this pastel work he depicted himself, with characteristic precision, as a much younger man with his hand outstretched towards the viewer as he reaches for a candle. The candlelight glows orange on his fingers as they come close to the flame. This depiction of the artist has none of the arrogance and pride of his early self-portraits, in which he had deliberately emphasised his likeness to the iconic figure of Peter the Great, nor the haughty grandeur of his later self-portraits, in which his lofty status was represented by fine clothing and a splendid black beard. Instead he presented himself as a somewhat subdued character, informally dressed in a nightshirt, his hairline receding and lines forming around his bespectacled eyes. There remains a sense of pride and dignity but it is tempered by a knowing gaze of weary disillusionment. Perhaps it is fanciful, but this painting can be seen as a fitting metaphor for Laktionov's career in the turbulent waters of the Soviet art establishment. Laktionov was an artist who was drawn towards the enticing flame of success in the elite society of high Stalinism. He had his fingers burnt during the upheavals of the 1950s but, unlike many of his peers, he survived to continue his career beyond the Khrushchev era thaw and into the late 1960s.

What did it mean to be a successful Soviet artist? Success and influence within the Soviet art world, as in most areas of Soviet society, was in many ways a double-edged sword. Following the breakout success of his painting *A Letter from the Front* [plate 2] in 1947, Laktionov was thrust onto the fast track to fame and fortune. With the backing of powerful patrons within the upper echelons of the art establishment, such as the influential critic Andrei Lebedev, he was rewarded with a number of lucrative and high profile commissions addressing such significant subject matter as the 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations of Pushkin, Stalin's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday festival, the Soviet space programme, and portraits of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. He saw a rapid improvement in his material conditions, achieving, amongst other things, a spacious new flat and private studio space in downtown Moscow. By the early 1950s Laktionov was living the privileged existence of the Stalinist elite in all its exclusive luxury. Having achieved prominence during the post-war clampdown on artistic experimentation initiated by Stalin's right hand man and cultural theoretician Andrei Zhdanov, a period in which the leader cult came to play an increasingly dominant part in Soviet art production, Laktionov and his work became indelibly associated with the oppressive creative environment of this era.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is the title of an autobiographical article written by the artist in 1961. Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika', *Khudozhnik i sovremennost'* 1961: *Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv* (AKh SSSR: Moskva, 1961), pp. 279-89.

Stalin's death in 1953 and subsequent denunciation in 1956 by Khrushchev contributed to a growing liberalisation of Soviet culture. Some of the biggest names in the Soviet art establishment, including the self-styled artist-laureate and President of the USSR Academy of the Arts Aleksandr Gerasimov, were subjected to increasingly harsh attacks both in the press and behind the closed doors of the art organisations as a new generation of artists and critics became more adventurous in their dissent. In the early 1950s targeted criticism from influential figures such as the famous war correspondent-turned-cultural-commentator Boris Polevoi, the prominent writer Ilya Ehrenburg, as well as a number of artists and critics within the Moscow Artists' Union, began to turn the tide against the entrenched demagogues of the state cultural bureaucracy, whose authority had been undermined by the demise of their main patron. A generational divide emerged as younger artists began to challenge the established hegemony of their older colleagues. A widespread perception that success in the Stalinist art world had necessarily entailed a 'selling out' of artistic principles took firm root and the monotonous official commissions of the preceding years came to be derided as inexpressive and uniform hackwork.

By the time he painted this self-portrait, Laktionov had ridden out the critical upheavals of the mid 1950s to remain as one of the few survivors of an old guard; a generation of conservative artists and critics, many of whom maintained influential positions within the Soviet art establishment, whose work and attitudes remained associated with the Stalin era. For the liberal intelligentsia of the 1950s and 60s the Laktionov 'brand' of academic realism—distinguished by a meticulous approach to drawing and a prevalence of fine detail—represented the aesthetic equivalent of Stalinist repression and cultural stagnation. Yet while the work of a number of the artist's contemporaries had been rendered obsolete in the moderate creative environment of the period, Laktionov's art continued to captivate audiences and generate diverse and animated responses. After struggling to exhibit his works in the late 1950s, during which time he was forced to call upon his friends and patrons to pull strings and exert leverage, he went on to achieve a certain notoriety as a purveyor of highly detailed academic art and as a spokesperson for the ongoing battle against the influence of formalism in the development of Socialist Realism. In 1963, following a visit to the retrospective exhibition *30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union*, Khrushchev himself hailed Laktionov's work as a positive example of 'unspoiled taste' in contrast to the 'dirty daubs that any donkey could paint with its tail' which, for the outraged First Secretary, characterised formalist experimentation.<sup>2</sup> Although reviled by many critics to the very end, Laktionov's often dazzling technical virtuosity ensured his continuing status as a celebrity artist and enabled him to avoid the bland mediocrity that plagued a number of his contemporaries in this new era.

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<sup>2</sup> Khrushchev's outspoken criticism of formalism at this exhibition has since been labelled the 'Manege Affair' in reference to an alleged provocation of the leader's tastes by conservatives within the art establishment, with the goal of fomenting a renewed clampdown on experimentation and modernist tendencies. Khrushchev's comments are taken from 'High Ideological Content and Artistic Mastery Are the Great Force of Soviet Literature and Art,' *Pravda*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1963, trans. by *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XV, no. 11 (1963), p.8. For an extensive analysis of the Manege Affair see Susan Reid, 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005), pp. 673-716.

To suggest however that Laktionov was a 'typical' artist of the Stalin era is an oversimplification of the issue. Laktionov's art was always controversial and always distinctive. Even in the late 1940s and early 1950s, at the height of his success, his paintings attracted passionate criticism for their near-photographic portrayal of reality and naturalistic tendencies. Both published reviews and comments from exhibition visitors' books displayed a striking divergence of opinions and judgements that demonstrate the problematic nature of the artist's work. But if Laktionov was never the most acclaimed artist, never the most powerful artist and never the most popular artist, then why does he merit such detailed analysis? Laktionov was above all a contentious artist, whose work often represented a flashpoint in the Soviet art world. By the mid 1950s it seems that no one was without an opinion when it came to Laktionov's particular interpretation of Socialist Realism, from the recreational exhibition-goer to the leading art critic. Time and time again, the debates would rage around Laktionov's canvases at meetings within the art organisations, in specialist art journals, in the popular press, and in the visitors' books at major exhibitions. The polemics surrounding a new Laktionov canvas would frequently expand to take in much broader issues of socialist aesthetics and cultural production. An opinion on Laktionov transcended simple questions of like or dislike and took on the form of a political statement that defined one's particular worldview. To simplify matters to their face value; if you were for Laktionov, you were a reactionary conservative; if you were against him, you were a progressive liberal. In the 1950s and 60s the art of Laktionov came to represent the cultural frontline in the battle for definitions of Soviet art, across which these divided camps hurled criticism and abuse at one another.<sup>3</sup>

Laktionov was not the only Soviet artist to provoke acrimonious debate. Such divergences of critical opinion were a commonplace of the Soviet art establishment and creative controversies by no means precluded the future success of an artist. Over the course of their careers such diverse and prominent artists of Socialist Realism as Aleksandr Deineka, Sergei Gerasimov and Petr Konchalovskii would produce works that divided the Soviet art world. Regular criticisms were directed at Deineka's work for its distortion of the human form and lack of perspectival depth; at Sergei Gerasimov for the brushy intrusion of impressionistic tendencies into his paintings; at Konchalovskii's canvases for their vestiges of Cézannism; yet all retained their status as acclaimed and successful artists working within the official sphere.<sup>4</sup> It is indicative of the persistent totalitarian model of Soviet art that these and other artists are only now undergoing a process of re-evaluation as distinctive creative individuals rather than as inhibited practitioners of Socialist Realism.<sup>5</sup> Laktionov stands out as an artist who tenaciously adhered to a personal interpretation of the demands of Socialist Realism in spite of at times vitriolic criticism and the ever-present threat of repercussions for his career. As we shall see in Chapter One, the artist did not deviate

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<sup>3</sup> In her analysis of the visitors' books at the 1962 Exhibition *30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union*, Reid argues that Laktionov was one of the most divisive artists on display and provoked an impassioned debate about taste. 'In the Name of the People', pp. 697-705.

<sup>4</sup> The status of an 'official' Soviet artist is hard to define. For the purposes of this thesis it will refer to those artists who were supported through regular state commissions, who were affiliated to state organisations, who participated in major state exhibitions and who were nominated for or recipients of Stalin and Lenin Prizes.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Christina Kiaer, 'Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s,' *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 28 (2005), p. 321-45.

from the guiding principles of traditional academic art, which he had inherited from his former teacher and mentor Isaak Brodskii, and consolidated through prolonged research into the methods of the Old Masters. Laktionov's painting tapped into the national tradition of Russian realism and his works of art gained legitimacy through their patriotic and accessible subject matter.

A significant footnote to the Laktionov's career is the way in which history has adopted his works as paradigms of Socialist Realism. The artist's paintings have often been cited as examples of the ubiquitous 'varnished reality' of Stalinist art, in spite of the fact that the artist's works were, even in the early 1950s, somewhat anomalous at exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> Both the style and content of Laktionov's paintings have come to reflect a contemporary impression of what Socialist Realist art ought to have looked like: formidable working class heroines enjoying the good life in a fairytale world of luxury and abundance, rendered in fine detail with a heavily varnished finish. The distorting filter of the Cold War has intensified the cultural standoff between the liberal aesthetic of modern Western art and the perceived repressive nature of realistic academic art. But it is not only in the West that Socialist Realism has been typecast based on the work of a non-representative handful of artists; the Sots art movement of the 1970s and 80s adopted Laktionov's quasi-photographic realism as a target of its satire and in so doing contributed to its enduring status as the embodiment of the Stalinist 'style'.<sup>7</sup> The same emphasis is perpetuated by collectors, for whom striking and recognisable images of socialism (ideally depicting Stalin himself, with Lenin running a close second) command the highest prices in the somewhat ironic, but exceptionally buoyant, market for Socialist Realist art.<sup>8</sup> This project will demonstrate that Laktionov was by no means a 'typical' Soviet artist and that his success and popularity were based less on his adherence to the official line, than on his contribution to its development.

This thesis is not structured as a monograph dealing with the life and times of a Soviet artist. The goal is not to provide an assessment of the quality (or otherwise) of particular works of art. Rather, the objective is to explore certain tendencies of Socialist Realism through an analysis of one member of its work force; to uncover the mechanisms by which a Soviet artist achieved prominence in the Stalin era; to explore the ways in which individual works of art were evaluated and judged; to examine the concept of popular taste in the Soviet Union; and to consider the constructed persona of the celebrity artist in the context of the Socialist Realist project. Over the course of

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<sup>6</sup> It is a painting that was extremely poorly received on its exhibition in 1952, *Into a New Flat* [plate 4], that has been most widely reproduced and analysed in Western literature. For instance, although she acknowledges that the painting attracted some criticism on its 1952 exhibition, Svetlana Boym describes the work as 'a perfect Socialist Realist genre scene' in *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in the Russia* (Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 5. Likewise Irina Gutkin describes the painting as an 'icon of ideological advertisement for good Soviet living' executed in 'typical socialist realist fashion.' Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934* (Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 103. The reception of this painting is the focus of Chapter Four of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Komar and Melamid's *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series which draws on the traditional academic style of Laktionov and others. The images are available online at: <http://www.komarandmelamid.org/chronology.html>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Tania Branigan, 'Stalin Was Their Darling,' *The Guardian*, 13 Jun. 2002, available online at: <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,766070,00.html>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

this thesis the reader will visit several major art exhibitions and view them through the comments of their visitors, eavesdrop on the proceedings of the Moscow Artists' Union as they debate the future development of Soviet art, browse newspaper and journal reviews, and trace the preoccupations and concerns of a controversial artist as he engaged in the struggle for the definition of Socialist Realism. Laktionov's developing career as a Soviet artist ran in parallel with the evolution of the Socialist Realist project. His enrolment as a student at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts in 1932 coincided with an intensification of state involvement in the fine arts, and by the time of his death in 1972 the dominance of Socialist Realism was already being challenged by a growing nonconformist art movement. However, the principal focus of this thesis is framed but not delimited by two of Laktionov's most important canvases, *A Letter from the Front* (1947) and *After the Operation* (1965), a period that covers the artist's main period as a successful artist in the Soviet art establishment.

## Sources

Details about Laktionov's life and chronology are taken primarily from two Soviet era biographical works, both of which present a linear account of the artist's career from a conservative and manifestly uncritical position.<sup>9</sup> These one-sided sources are supplemented by archival material and informal interviews conducted with the artist's daughter, Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova, in 2006-7. Laktionova is herself an artist and offered fascinating childhood recollections of growing up as the daughter of a famous artist, as well as providing a commentary on her own private collection of her father's works. The problematic nature of biography as a useful and reliable source is acknowledged in Chapter One, which deals specifically with Laktionov's carefully constructed biographical narrative and analyses the particular conventions that were employed by Soviet era biography in order to invest their subject with legitimacy.

A variety of archival documents are employed throughout the project, including visitors' books from major Soviet exhibitions, stenographic reports from meetings of art organisations and miscellaneous private documents of artists, critics and politicians. These sources are taken from several state archival depositories including the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (henceforth RGALI), the Central Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (TsALIM), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and the archive of the State Tretyakov Gallery (GTG).<sup>10</sup> The assessment of archival material in Russia can be a frustrating experience as documents are spread far and wide, sometimes divided between depositories and often relocated as the state archives have undergone various processes of reorganisation. I was fortunate to find a rich vein of relevant material in the depository of the Moscow Artists' Union (RGALI fond 2943), which includes a collection of stenographic reports from important meetings and discussions of the 1940s and 50s. The archive of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation (RGASPI

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<sup>9</sup> D. Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* (Moskva: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1968) and E. V. Nikolaeva and I. G. Miamlin, *Aleksandr Ivanovich Laktionov* (Leningrad: Kudozhnik RSFSR, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> TsALIM was abolished in 2005 and its contents were split amongst the Central Archive of the City of Moscow (TsAGM) and the Central Archive of the Socio-Political History of Moscow (TsAOPIM). Referencing throughout this thesis applies to the former archive of TsALIM, which is where the material was located. It has not yet been possible to ascertain the new location of these documents.

fond 17), which contains stenographic reports and correspondence between the Party bureaucracy and art organisations, has revealed details of the functioning of the Soviet art establishment in the late Stalin period, although this investigation has only scratched the surface of this extensive collection. The archive of the GTG proved to be an especially useful resource as the friendly staff took an unusually active role in helping me locate useful material including artists' biographical material, documents relating to the organisation of major exhibitions and visitors' books from exhibitions.

Of these documents, the exhibition visitors' books represent the most underused of sources, yet they proved to be a fascinating record of personal opinions and heated dialogues, as visitors not only made their own comments but underlined, crossed out and scribbled abuse or encouragement over the comments of others. Susan Reid, in her innovative work on Soviet era visitors' books, has described the material as 'a kind of virtual public sphere, something like an internet message board'.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the often-imposing official nature of the visitors' book—sometimes leather bound and emblazoned with an emblem of Lenin—and the ever-present threat of surveillance, comments appear to be expressed candidly and often passionately. By the late 1950s visitors' books had been replaced by individual comments slips to be placed anonymously into a ballot-style box, perhaps in an effort to prevent the proliferation of negative or unwanted opinions. It is possible that some or all of the visitors' books and comments slips underwent a process of excision and censorship before their consignment to the archive, but the abusive language and aggressive opinions of comments that remain suggest otherwise. It is difficult to evaluate how closely the visitors' comments were analysed by the art establishment but what is certain is that the Soviet exhibition-goer was expressing a desire to be listened to, and asserting his or her status as a cultured individual with developed personal taste. Most importantly, many of those who wrote in these books expected their comments to be read, taken seriously, and acted upon by the exhibition organisers, artists, and even policy makers. Sadly this resource is of little quantitative value, based as it is on abstract opinions and virtually devoid of reliable demographic detail. Nonetheless these documents provide an insight into the types of discussions that were in circulation within the halls of major exhibitions and reveal the attitudes of many 'lay-viewers' to Laktionov's work, which was always at the very heart of debates.

These primary sources are supplemented by and juxtaposed to the published critical reaction and theoretical contributions of the period taken from the major state art journals *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*, a number of books and edited volumes, the popular press, including the popular illustrated journal and arbiter of Soviet taste *Ogonek*, and the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. Although these combined sources provide only fleeting glimpses of Soviet culture and society, often obscured by the intrusion of personal bias or the weighty influence of the official line, they allow for a threefold analysis of the period from the perspectives of an artist, his audience and his critics.

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<sup>11</sup> Reid, 'In the Name of the People', p. 680. Jan Plamper has considered the history of the institution of visitors' books in the Soviet Union and studied visitors' comments at exhibitions of the Stalin Cult. Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929-1953* (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), pp. 170-226.



## The Historical Context

What appears to us today as self-evident, as beneath consciousness and choice, has quite often been the stake of struggles and instituted only as the result of dogged confrontations between dominant and dominated groups. The major effect of historical evolution is to abolish history by relegating to the past, that is, to the unconscious, the lateral possibles that it eliminated.<sup>12</sup>

The *Glasnost*' era decline of Cold War politics, accompanied by the opening of restricted Soviet archives, awakened Western curiosity for what was once perceived to be a mysterious and alien society, operating in secrecy behind firmly closed doors. Even in the post-Soviet era there is a marked tendency to focus on those features of the Soviet state and society that were rendered exotic and unknowable by the political divide: Stalinist terror, cultural repression, economic stagnation and military build-up. It is at times possible to forget that the Soviet Union was populated by real people living real lives. The 'popular' or 'public' response to Soviet culture is a central concept of this thesis, but who exactly was this public and how can their response be isolated? Naturally, this is a difficult question to answer when considering a society that was subjected to years of terror and coercion in an attempt to unify popular opinion with the Communist ideal. The unmediated personal opinion is a scarce commodity that is buried amongst the debris of terror, surveillance and communal suspicion. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the concept of public opinion is a manufactured construct that is always subject to manipulation and interpretation.<sup>13</sup> Yet as Isaiah Berlin once wrote, 'although there might not exist such a thing as popular opinion in Russia, there is public sentiment.'<sup>14</sup> It must be acknowledged that the public I refer to throughout this thesis was by no means a unified entity, and popular responses are presented not as indicative of a wider public opinion, but as individual interpretations revealing a wide divergence of opinions. What limited source material there is must be treated with caution and placed in the context of a society that had become thoroughly acclimatized to official Soviet discourse and its enforced significance.

Several recent attempts have been made to get inside the thick skin of official 'Soviet speak' and reveal the flesh and bones of life and culture in the Soviet Union. The society of the Stalin era is dealt with by Sarah Davies's treatment of popular opinion and Sheila Fitzpatrick's work on everyday life in 1930s Russia, both of which endeavour to bridge the abyss between the apparent simplicity of official pronouncements and the paradoxical realities of an everyday life that simply did not

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, (Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 56-7.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Public opinion does not exist,' in Seth Siegelau, and Armand Mattelart, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle: Capitalism, Imperialism* (New York: International General, 1979), pp. 124-30. See also Reid, 'In the Name of the People', where the manipulation of Soviet public opinion is described as 'a political balloon,' or 'a figment of political discourse to be inflated with different content according to its rhetorical function.' p. 674.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 96. First published 1949.

match up.<sup>15</sup> Davies's work makes use of archival material such as intelligence reports and letters to the press, but acknowledges the limitations of these sources in drawing quantitative conclusions about the Soviet public. This work plays an important role in diminishing the myth of the anaesthetised, submissive masses; however it is marked by a tendency to focus on the prevalence and nature of dissent, and to overlook the innate ability of people to persevere doggedly with their daily lives in spite of the turmoil of political and social upheaval. Fitzpatrick, in contrast, makes use of the products of popular culture—films, fashion and consumer goods—to paint a convincing picture of a society that faced severe material shortages, but ultimately 'coped' by employing a variety of official and non-official practices including the establishment of networks of patronage and the exchange of goods and services on the black market, or *blat*. This unofficial economy of influence was an important feature of the Stalinist art establishment, and its significance for the developing career of a Soviet artist is analysed in Chapter Three.

As part of a shift in scholarship away from the totalitarian model of Soviet society, the private or 'unofficial' sphere is becoming an increasingly important field of analysis. Recent work on Stalin-era diaries, letter writing to the Soviet press, and documents presented in legal cases have demonstrated the ways in which individual citizens interacted with the state in the construction of their own attitudes and self-identities.<sup>16</sup> As Jochen Hellbeck has written, 'Ideology should [...] be seen as a living and adaptive force; it has power only to the extent that it operates in living persons who engage their selves and the world as ideological subjects.'<sup>17</sup> Art provided another important means for self-representation. A principal theme of this project is the process by which the Soviet artist negotiated with the art establishment for the agency of self-definition. We shall see in Chapter One the means by which the figure of the artist was constructed in published biographies according to an ideal Soviet narrative, in Chapter Two the ways in which a work of art could be appropriated as an indicator of official policy, and in Chapter Five the process by which the artist engaged in the writing of his own identity through works of self-portraiture.

Habits and practices inculcated over the course of several generations persist into the post-Soviet era and many Russians continue to reminisce fondly about the stability and welfare of the recent past. We are now experiencing first-hand the aborted future of the communist project and it is important not to allow interpretations of past events to become distorted by the selective lens of history. Yet the present day can also shed valuable light on the past as Svetlana Boym has demonstrated with her compelling exploration of Soviet culture from the perspective of a somewhat nostalgic

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Harvard: 2006); Miriam Dobson, 'Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"', *Slavic Review* 64, no. 3 (2003), pp. 580-600; Denis Kozlov, 'Naming the Social Evil: The Readers of *Novyi Mir* and Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone, 1956-9 and Beyond*' in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation: A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge, 2006), pp. 80-98; Deborah Field, 'Irreconcilable Differences: Divorce and Conceptions of Private Life in the Khrushchev Era', *Russian Review* 57, no. 4 (1998), pp. 599-613.

<sup>17</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, p. 13.

expatriate. Artefacts left over from the Soviet era; art, architecture and above all attitudes can all be applied to an understanding of past events and Boym draws on contemporary remnants of ingrained habits in order to examine what she describes as ‘the Soviet social consciousness [...] structured like a communal apartment – with flimsy partitions between public and private, between control and intoxication.’<sup>18</sup> What Boym is attempting to uncover in her analysis is the nature of ‘popular taste,’ an arena in which the state staged an intensive struggle for legitimacy throughout the Soviet era, and a concept that will be explored at length in Chapter Four of this thesis.

## Definitions of Taste

With the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, a move towards a system of limited capitalism intended to invigorate the crippled economy after three harsh years of War Communism, the Soviet state made an concession to the individual needs of its population. Already at this early stage of socialist development there was an acknowledgement by the Party leadership that the cultural level of the masses was lagging behind that of capitalist nations. In 1922 Leon Trotsky published a series of essays entitled *The Tasks of the Communist Upbringing*, in which he identified several particular examples of distasteful ‘traits of the past’ among not only the population at large, but also within the Party itself. At the same time the Party embarked on a determined campaign for literacy among the trade unions with the aim of developing a fully literate workforce by 1925. While this goal was hamstrung by the influx to urban centres of a largely illiterate rural population, it set a precedent for the Soviet government’s continued emphasis on improving the education and cultural levels of the masses.<sup>19</sup> Irina Gutkin has described the process by which the state initiated a comprehensive reform of *byt’*, a notoriously untranslatable word, which can be roughly expressed as ‘lifestyle’ or ‘the everyday.’<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1920s the term had become heavily weighted with negative connotations of narrow-minded decadence and anti-socialist tendencies as the intelligentsia rallied against relics of the bourgeois past. The ‘cultural revolution’ reached its peak in 1928-29 with a series of articles in the communist youth newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda* entitled ‘Down With Domestic Trash,’ in which the population was urged to purge their flats of extraneous, ‘tasteless’ bric-a-brac and furniture; commodes, trinkets and floral wallpaper were out.<sup>21</sup> To fill this void Soviet artists and designers of the avant-garde turned their hand to the development of modern, utilitarian commodities; socialist furniture, fashion and belongings, devoid of frills and appropriate for the new Soviet consumer.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> See Charles Clark, ‘Literacy and labour: the Russian literacy campaign within the trade unions, 1923-27’, in *Europe-Asia Studies* 47, no. 8 (1995), pp. 1327-41.

<sup>20</sup> Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins*, pp. 81-106 and Boym, *Common Places*, pp. 29-40. See also Catriona Kelly’s work on advice literature, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, pp. 8-9. See also Fitzpatrick, ‘Cultural Revolution as Class War,’ in Idem, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (London: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 8-40; Karen Kettering, ‘“Ever More Cosy and Comfortable”: Stalinism and the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1928-1938’, *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), pp. 119-135.

<sup>22</sup> See Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, eds., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Indiana University Press, 2006) and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

Under Stalin the social and cultural revolution was phased out to be replaced by rhetoric of stability and tradition. In 1935 Stalin announced the 'final and irrevocable triumph of socialism,' yet the period has since been interpreted as a partial abandonment of core Marxist-Leninist principles of socialism. David Brandenberger and David Hoffmann have investigated some of the inherent contradictions between the Stalinist lifestyle and the revolutionary socialist ideal.<sup>23</sup> Brandenberger argues that the patriotic and Russocentric rhetoric of Stalin era culture was a radical departure from 1920s ideology and in fact promoted a set of values that were anomalous to the building of communism. For Brandenberger the Socialist Realist project, in parallel with the emerging Stalinist leader cult and the later anti-cosmopolitanist campaigns, was central to the development and promotion of Russian national identity and the ultimate 'selling out' of the utopian goals of the revolution. This stance concurs with several major histories of the Soviet Union, which have identified the 1930s as a 'Great Retreat' from the Marxist origins of socialism.<sup>24</sup> Indeed Robert Tucker characterised the Stalin regime as a throwback to Tsarist-era exploitation and militarism: 'To Stalin "socialism in one country" meant a strengthening of the dictatorship and an orientation of the country's economy towards total war.'<sup>25</sup> According to this perspective, the interventionist cultural policies of the Stalin era operated as a kind of smoke screen for the ulterior motives of the regime.

In contrast, Hoffmann approaches Stalinist culture as an inevitable and even necessary adaptation of the revolutionary ethos of socialism towards the fulfilment of pressing social and economic demands. Hoffmann argues that concessions to personal property, retail and even bourgeois culture were not only compatible with the tenets of socialism, but were indispensable for the continuing economic and social development of a modern society. This promotion of 'middle-class socialism' and the cultivation of petit-bourgeois cultural practices, or *meshchanstvo*, have been labelled the 'Big Deal' by Vera Dunham in her acclaimed study of Soviet literary models of the late Stalin period.<sup>26</sup> Under Stalin a compromise was made with the introduction of a limited consumer culture, and the revolutionary socialist superman of the 1920s was reinvented as a refined Soviet citizen: literate, sober, good mannered, even fashionable but above all cultured (*kul'turnyi*).<sup>27</sup> From this perspective the official culture of the Soviet Union resembled nothing so much as the practices of Western advertising, an observation that has been supported by Evgenii Dobrenko, who has

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<sup>23</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of the Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> See Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: Arno Press, 1972); Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972).

<sup>25</sup> Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> The problematic buzz-word of the Stalin era, *kul'turnost'*, has been the subject of analysis in a number of studies. See for example Vadim Volkov, 'The Concept of Kul'turnost': Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,' in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 210-29 and Catriona Kelly, 'Kul'turnost' in the Soviet Union: Ideal and Reality' in Geoffrey Hosking and Robert Service, eds., *Reinterpreting Russia* (London: Arnold Publishers, 1999), pp. 210-11. The term is analysed in relation to Laktionov's painting in Chapter Four of this thesis.

described Socialist Realism as ‘the machine of virtual consumption’; that is, it provides an illusion of prosperity and abundance that contributed to the stability of the regime.<sup>28</sup> In Hoffmann’s words:

Lacking real life prosperity, the Soviet government instead created images of abundant food and copious consumer wares. It also sought to promote happiness through publicity of material rewards, symbols of prosperity, cheerful holiday celebrations, and even Soviet musical films to provide entertainment for the masses.<sup>29</sup>

Official culture under Stalin represented not only a glossy façade, but also a model to which everyday life—characterised for many by shortages and deprivation—could aspire.

As conditions in the countryside deteriorated under Stalin’s collectivisation policies, the 1930s and 40s saw a massive influx of rural to urban migration. These new urbanites, largely uneducated and rooted in traditional Russian customs posed a challenge to the Soviet state’s drive to enlighten the masses through improvements in education and the elevation of culture. In the urban environment the traditional customs of peasant life manifested themselves through a complex interaction of supposedly ‘backward’ behaviour with the ‘superior’ practices of the modern Soviet lifestyle.

Urban and rural elements were so thoroughly intermixed in the subculture of former peasants that it would be impossible to disentangle them entirely. New cultural symbols were imbued with traditional meanings, while traditional cultural forms received new contents and assessed new urban phenomena.<sup>30</sup>

The new society of the Stalin era was a strange hybrid of Marxist ideology, traditional values and bourgeois affectations as urbanised peasants and educated workers responded to the contradictory symbols of socialist consumption.<sup>31</sup> Symbolic (but often virtually unattainable) high-end goods with an ‘aura of luxury’ such as Soviet champagne, gramophones and even automobiles were promoted as evidence for Stalin’s famous 1935 declaration, ‘Life has become better, comrades, life has become happier.’<sup>32</sup> The brazenly optimistic content of popular films, novels and works of art provided a constant reassurance that the socialist project was achievable and imminent. More importantly, Hoffmann demonstrates that they contributed to a widespread belief amongst the population at large and within the ranks of the Party itself that the stark realities of everyday life in the 1930s were merely awkward obstacles strewn across the road towards the communist idyll.

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<sup>28</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, trans. by Jesse M. Savage, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 282.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> David Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social identities in Moscow, 1929-1941* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 186.

<sup>31</sup> The 1930s drive to educate and enlighten the new urban population has been analysed in Volkov, ‘The Concept of Kul’turnost’, pp. 210-30, and Kelly, *Refining Russia*, pp. 230-320.

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of the conception, production and distribution of these status products see Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin’s Russia* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003).

Stephen Kotkin unites many of these themes in his ambitious account of the construction of the new socialist city of Magnitogorsk during the industrialisation drive of the first Five Year Plan, a grandiose scheme that encapsulated the monumental ambition and often inhuman scale of the Soviet project. Split into two parts, the book deals first with the official conception and institution of the project before shifting its focus towards the strategies of adaptation employed by the citizens of this new factory-city and of the USSR as a whole. In doing so he develops a case for the broad appeal of Stalinist socialism as a positive life-building doctrine:

The USSR under Stalin meant something hopeful. It stood for a new world power, founded on laudatory ideals and backed up by tangible programmes and institutions: full employment, subsidized prices, paid vacations for workers, child care, health care, retirement pensions, education and the promise of advancement for oneself and one's children.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of the policies of coercion that were a central feature of the Stalinist regime, its stability was based also on a widespread voluntary commitment to its ideals and principles, although as Kotkin acknowledges this commitment was often dependent on a 'willingness to suspend disbelief.'

### **The Great Patriotic War**

In June of 1941 the Axis forces launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union that would, over the following four years, become the bloodiest theatre of the Second World War. The ensuing years of fighting and hardship would eventually claim the lives of around 25 million Soviet citizens and leave an indelible mark on the nation's collective consciousness. The Soviet victory in 1945 was appropriated by the state as the ultimate vindication of Stalin's leadership, but the unprecedented trauma of this cataclysmic period had a profound effect on the continued development of Soviet socialism. The legacy of the war is a constant point of reference throughout this project and my analysis is informed by several significant works that deal with the social and cultural conditions and repercussions of the war experience. Amir Weiner has argued that far from being an isolated event in the history of the Soviet Union, the Great Patriotic War, like the revolution itself, represented an inevitable phase in the attainment of Communism. It was 'the Armageddon of the Revolution, the ultimate clash dreaded yet expected by the first generation to live in a socialist society, the event that would either vindicate or bring down the system, depending on one's views and expectations.'<sup>34</sup> For Weiner the war was internalised by Soviet citizens as part of the revolutionary myth and the first major test of the new socialist society. The turning point of the Eastern Front, the Soviet victory in Stalingrad, represented the ultimate ideological coup (notwithstanding the tactical blunders that resulted in appalling casualties on both sides) that sealed the enduring legitimacy of the regime and paved the way for the era of high Stalinism that was to come.

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 358.

<sup>34</sup> Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 19.

Although the Soviet victory was presented retrospectively as a legitimising myth of the Stalinist regime, the war experience itself catalysed the revival of certain traditional values and saw a concurrent moderation of official intervention into the practices of everyday life. Elena Zubkova has written of a kind of spontaneous process of de-Stalinisation that emerged in both public and private discourse during the course of the war and which persisted beyond the eventual victory.<sup>35</sup> With the very existence of the Soviet Union under threat from the Nazi advance there was a marked return to traditional values that had been stigmatised by the drive for modernisation since the Revolution; the family, Russian national identity and even religion were elevated to the forefront of wartime ideology. Lisa Kirschenbaum has called this process ‘mobilizing for the Motherland’ and has written of the attempts of the Soviet press to forge an organic connection between national patriotism and sentimental family ties.<sup>36</sup> Old myths and heroes were dusted down, reinvigorated with contemporary relevance and integrated into the official canon. From Peter the Great to Ivan the Terrible, edifying role models and precedents for the imminent victory were found in episodes of Russian history that had previously been superseded by socialist dogma.<sup>37</sup> According to Richard Stites the Soviet propaganda machine was, after a decade of state intervention in all fields of culture, well prepared for the kind of mass mobilization of artists, writers, composers and entertainers that was demanded by the onset of war.<sup>38</sup> The war was experienced at the home front as a constructed myth disseminated through a variety of media; radio shows, works of art, newspaper reports, and public celebrations.

The much anticipated and longed-for victory—officially represented by a vast bombastic victory parade on Red Square—was the most carefully constructed myth of all which focused on the heroic success of the Soviet forces but made little reference to the tragedy of human loss.<sup>39</sup> The war years and their immediate aftermath had seen a relaxation of state intervention into the fields of cultural production as resources and attention were redirected elsewhere. Many of the Soviet state’s wartime concessions, such as the limited promotion of family values and religion, had fostered among the population a belief that post-war life would continue along a similar path of liberalisation, yet as Fitzpatrick has argued that the concept of a post-war ‘return to normalcy’ was misleading in the Soviet context.<sup>40</sup> The mood of optimism and the desire to ‘pick up where we left off’ was tempered by subsequent years of famine, forced relocation and economic reform as the Soviet state attempted to rebuild its crippled infrastructure and re-impose policies of Sovietization over a population that

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<sup>35</sup> Elena Zubkova, trans. by Hugh Ragdale, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, ‘“Our Cities, Our Hearths, Our Families”: Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda,’ *Slavic Review* 59, no. 2 (2000), pp. 825-847.

<sup>37</sup> See Kevin Platt and David Brandenberger, ‘Terribly Romantic, Terribly Progressive, or Terribly Tragic: Rehabilitating Ivan IV under I. V. Stalin,’ *Russian Review* 58, no. 4 (1999), pp. 635-654.

<sup>38</sup> Stites writes of the German appropriation of the Soviet model as an efficient means for the production of wartime propaganda. Richard Stites, *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Nina Tumarkin, ‘The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory,’ *European Review* 11, no. 4 (2003), p. 596.

<sup>40</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Postwar Soviet Society: The “Return to Normalcy”, 1945-1953’ in Susan J. Linz, ed., *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), pp. 129-156.

had been subjected to four years of suffering and sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> Nina Tumarkin claims that as early as 1947 there was a conscious drive to replace remembrance with reconstruction as Victory Day was demoted as a public holiday and military heroism was substituted for the rhetoric of social and economic rebuilding.<sup>42</sup> The rapid escalation of Cold War politics in the aftermath of the war saw the allied nations—in particular Great Britain and America—recast as enemies in the new global struggle against imperialism. Geoffrey Hosking has written of the resultant abandonment of the Soviet internationalist outlook, which was replaced by a powerful sense of national insularity.<sup>43</sup> For Hosking, the Great Patriotic War was an event that fundamentally altered the forward thrust of the Soviet project and marked the end of the utopia-building ethos of the 1920s and 30s:

The centre of gravity of the symbolic life of the Soviet state, and therefore Soviet society too, shifted from the future to the past, from experience of the distant and somewhat ghostly anticipated triumph of socialism to remembrance of the very real and undeniable victory of Soviet arms.<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not the Great Patriotic War was the event that destabilised the Soviet Union and made inevitable its decline and eventual collapse has been a matter of some contention, but what is clear is that its legacy lived on, internalised by those that had played a part in its tragedies and triumphs. The impact of the war on the development of Socialist Realism is discussed in Chapter Two with reference to Laktionov's famous image of wartime optimism, *A Letter from the Front*.

### **The Post-War Soviet Union**

The late 1940s were marked by a renewed emphasis by the Soviet state on interventionist strategies and command politics at the outset of the Cold War. A concerted attempt was made to rein in the cultural establishment through a series of decisive attacks on formalist tendencies in the arts. Zhdanov, who in 1944 had been promoted to the position of Central Committee Secretary with responsibility for ideology, came to play a decisive role in the post-war development of Socialist Realism. In 1946 the Central Committee issued a series of decrees, ostensibly directed at the literary organs, but carrying an implied significance for all fields of art and culture, that condemned the work of the prominent writers Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova.<sup>45</sup> Zoshchenko and Akhmatova were thrown out of the Soviet Writers' Union following accusations of 'being anti-Soviet, of undermining Socialist Realism, and being unduly pessimistic.'<sup>46</sup> These writers were permitted to keep their

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<sup>41</sup> For various accounts of the processes of social and economic reconstruction in the years following the war see Juliane Fürst, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (Routledge, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Tumarkin, 'The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory', p. 597.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, 'The Second World War and Russian National Consciousness', *Past and Present*, no. 175 (2002), p. 169. Lisa Kirschenbaum has argued, in a similar vein, that the definite 'us and them' dynamic of the War generated a much clearer sense of national values than the complex ideology of the Soviet project could ever hope to. Kirschenbaum, "'Our Cities, Our Hearths, Our Families'", p. 832.

<sup>44</sup> Hosking, 'The Second World War and Russian National Consciousness', p. 187.

<sup>45</sup> John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1990), p. 62-63.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.



lives, but their careers in the Soviet Union were effectively finished and their work was removed from the official canon. A further set of decrees were issued in 1948 concerning literature, the theatre and cinema, that directed criticism at several of the Soviet Union's foremost composers, including Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev and Aram Kachaturian. These were the opening salvos in a restrictive period for Soviet art and culture known as the *Zhdanovschina*, the influence of which would outlive its main architects, both Zhdanov and Stalin himself. The new regime was instituted in the fine arts through the formation of the USSR Academy of the Arts (AKh SSSR) in 1947, with the conservative artist and spokesperson for the Party line Aleksandr Gerasimov installed as its president. This organisation of state-appointed members enjoyed a near-stranglehold over the Soviet art establishment with responsibility for the process of commissioning works, the organisation of exhibitions and editorial control of the major art journals.<sup>47</sup>

The conservative dominance was not absolute, however, as a number of influential artists and critics, many of whom were affiliated to the Moscow Artists' Union under the more liberal leadership of Sergei Gerasimov, began to protest against the strictly enforced status quo. By the early 1950s the Soviet art establishment entered a period of conflict between the conformist doctrine of the Stalinist elite and a grass roots demand for an increased diversity of expression, a divergence that was accelerated and accentuated by Stalin's death in 1953. In 1954 Ilya Ehrenburg, a vocal promoter of artistic experimentation as a viable basis for the further development of Socialist Realism, published his landmark novel *The Thaw*, in which two of the main protagonists, the artists Volodia and Saburov, embody the debate in microcosm through their contrasting approaches to creativity:

Volodia and Saburov had been friends at school but life had parted them. Volodia dreamed of fame, of money. He always knew which were the 'shock' themes, which artists had been rewarded, and who had been told off. All this time Saburov dilligently painted landscapes that were never shown. He seemed to care for nothing except his painting and his wife, Glasha, who was delicate and a cripple.<sup>48</sup>

The novel lent its name to the early years of the Khrushchev period, which has been characterised as a retreat from the most repressive policies of the Stalin era and as a partial dismantling of the legacy of Stalinism, a process that was made explicit by the 1956 'Secret Speech.' A tentative denunciation of certain of Stalin's atrocities and the all-pervasive cult of personality, the speech was anything but secret and was deliberately filtered down the hierarchy of Soviet society in a controlled manner intended to soften the blow and reduce the inevitable public outcry.<sup>49</sup> The speech was

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<sup>47</sup> For an account of the power relations in the Soviet art establishment in the early 1950s see Susan Reid, 'The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw,' *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006), pp. 161-175; Susan Reid, *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1963*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Thaw* (New York: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), p. 31. For an evaluation of the official response to this novel see Susan Reid, 'The Soviet Art World', pp. 161-2.

<sup>49</sup> For an account of the process by which the speech was disseminated and interpreted see Polly Jones, 'From the Secret Speech to the Burial of Stalin: Real and Ideal Responses to De-Stalinization' in Idem, *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation*, pp. 41-79. See also John Rettie, 'How Khrushchev Leaked his Secret Speech to the World,' *History Workshop Journal* 62, no. 1 (2006), pp. 187-193.

an exercise in compromise and selective disclosure and, as Donald Filtzer has identified, its repercussions led conversely to a partial retreat from the processes of de-Stalinisation in the late 1950s.<sup>50</sup>

De-Stalinisation was not only a political process, but was evident also in the habits and practices of everyday life, as the coercive methods of the previous polity were replaced with a tentative liberalisation of state rhetoric and a new drive towards the improvement of material conditions such as housing and consumer goods. The overblown excesses of the late Stalin period—epitomized by Moscow’s monumental ring of neo-classical skyscrapers—were exchanged for a more austere functionalism and the promotion of a culture of ‘rational consumption.’<sup>51</sup> Reid, in her pioneering work on the culture and society of the Khrushchev period, has written of the 1950s struggle for the definition of a new ‘contemporary style’ of art and design to replace what was represented as the vulgarity and ostentation of the Stalin era: ‘As art world reformers construed it in their public statements, Stalinism was bad taste: its crimes were as much aesthetic as moral.’<sup>52</sup> The development was presented by the new intelligentsia as a generational divide. Expressive works by young artists such as Vladimir Gavrilov and Iurii Tulin were promoted as a positive alternative to the outdated traditionalism espoused by their older colleagues. Yet reforms of lifestyle and taste under Khrushchev were impeded by reversals and about-turns in official policy as the regime attempted to impose limits on the extent of de-Stalinisation. In the art world this was most famously demonstrated in the aftermath of the 1962 exhibition *30 Years of the Moscow Artists’ Union* at which Khrushchev was stirred (or provoked) to condemn as ‘filth and faecal messing, decadence and sexual deviance’ the modernist tendencies of certain works on display and to reassert Party control over the arts.<sup>53</sup> Under Khrushchev the issues of personal taste and individual expression were once again sanctioned as arenas of debate but the actual extent of reform was restricted by the regime’s fragile stability and dependence on the foundations of Stalinism.

## Soviet Art

Art and culture in the Soviet Union cannot be viewed and interpreted in isolation from their historical context. From the very early years of Soviet rule, art was identified as a vital tool for the development and manipulation of the masses and from 1918 it fell under the auspices of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) to be integrated into the machinery of propaganda and agitation.<sup>54</sup> With

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<sup>50</sup> Filtzer construes de-Stalinisation as a political tool employed by Khrushchev as ‘a vehicle for weakening or removing possible political rivals,’ but from which a retreat was necessary when it threatened to destabilise his own position. Donald Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinisation and the Limits of Reform in the USSR, 1953-1964* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 17-29.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Reid, ‘Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,’ *Slavic Review* 6, no. 2 (2002), p. 214.

<sup>52</sup> Susan Reid, ‘Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a “Contemporary Style” in Soviet Art’, in Jones, *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation*, pp. 209-230; Reid, ‘Destalinisation and Taste, 1954-1963,’ *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), p. 178; Reid, *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art*.

<sup>53</sup> For an analysis of the public reaction to this exhibition see Reid, ‘In the Name of the People.’

<sup>54</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organisation of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

the official endorsement in 1934 of Socialist Realism as the compulsory method for the production of literature and the arts, the Soviet Union isolated itself from international trends and prohibited the domestic avant-garde movement. A number of Western cultural commentators of the Cold War period lament this moment as the end of a golden era in Soviet culture.<sup>55</sup> Experimental art had flourished in the years following the revolution, as the aims of the fledgling Soviet state to break from the past and create a new form of utopian society merged with the radical ideals of the avant-garde intelligentsia. The early 1920s were marked by a categorical rejection of the traditional 'bourgeois' standards of art that saw the Academy liquidated and replaced by the Free Art Studio. New and competing groups flourished, each distinguished by ever more radical manifestoes and groundbreaking means of expression in their heady attempts to fuse notions of art, construction, science and mathematics. Yet even as the conceptual images of the Futurists, the Constructivists and the Suprematists were assaulting the established boundaries of art and taste, the traditionalists were re-establishing themselves as the vanguard of the Soviet art world.<sup>56</sup>

Leon Trotsky was an influential voice in the drive to restrict the unmanageable tendencies of the avant-garde and to develop a specifically proletarian art form, although he could hardly have predicted how his theories would later come to be enforced. In 1924 Trotsky published a series of essays that set out to tether art production to the development of socialism. He actively criticised the so-called 'cosmism' of the avant-garde, condemned their petty infighting, and acknowledged that Soviet artists should 'come out from under the yoke of the Gothic arch, to look at Gothic art and all that preceded it as material for its own disposal, and to use the art of the past for its own artistic aims.'<sup>57</sup> Trotsky, echoing the views of Lenin, contended that a new style of socialist art could not develop in isolation but would need to draw actively on the best achievements of world culture.

What is necessary here is a stable, flexible, activist point of view, saturated with facts and with an artistic feeling for the world. To understand and perceive truly not in a journalistic way but to feel to the very bottom of the section of time in which we live, one has to know the past of mankind, its life, its work, its struggles, its hopes, its defeats and its achievements.<sup>58</sup>

Trotsky's guarded caveat that party policy towards the art should remain 'broad and flexible'<sup>59</sup> was ultimately not endorsed. By the time Socialist Realism became enforced as the official method of Soviet art production, Trotsky himself had fallen from grace and been sent into exile, leaving his ideas to be appropriated and manipulated by the Stalinist regime.

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<sup>55</sup> See for example Margit Rowell and Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Art of the avant-garde in Russia: selections from the George Costakis Collection* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981) and Halina Stephan, *Lef' and the Left Front of the Arts* (München: Sagner, 1981).

<sup>56</sup> Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, vol. 2 (London: Pluto Press, 1991).

<sup>57</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (London: Redwords, 1991) p. 216.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

Crucial to the ultimate downfall of the avant-garde was the persisting influence of the nineteenth century Russian Realist School of painting and in particular a group of artists known as the *Peredvizhniki* (the Wanderers), or the Society of Travelling Art Exhibits.<sup>60</sup> The society's most prominent members, such as Ilya Repin, Vasiliï Surikov and Isaak Levitan, would later come to be hailed as the founding fathers of Socialist Realism. With the implicit endorsement of Lenin and Anatoli Lunacharski, the head of Narkompros, the *Peredvizhniki* staged a comeback exhibition in 1922. The exhibition enjoyed limited success but it paved the way for the subsequent establishment of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), a group that set out to renovate the somewhat antiquated approach of the *Peredvizhniki* for a contemporary Soviet audience. This organisation was exceptionally active throughout the 1920s and progressively established itself as the dominant force in Soviet art. Brandon Taylor has attributed the rise of AKhRR in part to the close relationship of a number of its members such as Evgenii Katsman and Isaak Brodskii with the Party elite, and to the enduring appeal of their traditional realist style to the conservative tastes of high-ranking old Bolsheviks. Although it was never endorsed as an 'official' state organisation, it came closer than any other group towards claiming that privileged position.<sup>61</sup> It was AKhRR that was adopted as a stable foundation for the future development of Socialist Realism. As David Jackson has observed:

Although AKhRR went through structural changes and weathered the state imposing ideological corrections to its ethos, its style and subject matter became the essential paradigm for Soviet Socialist Realism and thus the Wanderer's legacy, which might have been thought to have died with the Society's last [...] exhibition, lived on.<sup>62</sup>

We will see in Chapter One how this legacy was adopted and manipulated by Laktionov in order to provide legitimacy and tradition for his own works of art.

In the early 1930s leftist tendencies were actively restricted, starting with Stalin's *Six Conditions* speech in June of 1931 and the Central Committee's landmark decree in April of 1932, *On the Restructuring of Literary and Art Organisations* which called for the dissolution of the rival artistic groups and their unification into the all-encompassing Union of Soviet Artists.<sup>63</sup> In practice this upheaval simply enveloped those same warring factions under one umbrella organization within which the debates and polemics continued to rage. But the stage had been set for the Party to institute an enforced cultural policy. Stalin's address to the Congress of Writers in 1934 stated the position in no uncertain terms. 'An artist must above all portray life truthfully, and if he shows life truthfully, on its way to socialism, that will be Socialist

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<sup>60</sup> For a thorough account of the nineteenth century rise of the *Peredvizhniki* see David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Brandon Taylor 'On AkhRR,' in Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 51 and Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 2, pp. 21-31.

<sup>62</sup> David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism*, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> See Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 2 for a detailed analysis of this decree and its practical consequences among independent groups such as AKhRR, OMKh and RAPKh.

Realism.<sup>64</sup> Zhdanov, Stalin's new right hand man in the field of cultural policy, reinforced this position:

Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you? In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality,' but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in *belles lettres* and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.<sup>65</sup>

Maxim Gorky complemented these pronouncements with a judicious speech in which he proclaimed Socialist Realism to be the next natural stage in the evolution of Russian literature. In Gorky's hands the new doctrines were reinforced with a healthy dose of Marxist ideology and imbued with a glowing sense of revolutionary optimism:

Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery. That is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add - completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis - the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.<sup>66</sup>

However appeasing the terms of expression, the implication was nonetheless the same: freedom of expression was to be reined in and replaced with an all-encompassing cultural policy. The implications of this congress radiated out into all spheres of cultural production as the state mobilised its resources within the newly formed art apparatus to oust the remaining vestiges of the avant-garde.<sup>67</sup>

## Socialist Realism

In its most positive form, Socialist Realism represented a comprehensive system of state patronage for the arts, including the provision of education, studio

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<sup>64</sup> Stalin is quoted in Irina Gutkin, *The Social Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic*, p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature: the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature', 1934, *Marxists Internet Archive*:

[http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit\\_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm](http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm), last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Maxim Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', 1934, *Marxists Internet Archive*:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>67</sup> For a Soviet-ized account of this process, see K. A. Sitnik, *Voprosy teorii sovetskogo iskusstva: sbornik statiei* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1950), pp. 20-31. On the artists of the 1920s avant-garde Sitnik writes: 'Groveling to the recent Parisian trends the formalist-liquidators spared no quarter to discredit the great traditions of Russian classical art. [...] In this way these bourgeois cosmopolitans tried to tear art from the masses, to rid it of its ideology, to free it from the accessibility of an understandable realistic language.' p. 21.

space, materials, commissions and salaries for its workforce.<sup>68</sup> In practice the system was flawed and resembled, as Reid has written in reference to the landmark *Industry of Socialism* exhibition of 1939, ‘a grandiose project that foundered on purges and power struggles, recalcitrance and disarray.’<sup>69</sup> Throughout the Stalin era, Party pronouncements on the doctrines of Socialist Realism would focus on the written arts, leaving it to artists and critics themselves to make their own assumptions and draw their own conclusions when applying the nebulous ideas of Soviet cultural theory to their own fields of production. Even within literary circles there would remain a margin of flexibility in the interpretation of such ambiguous directives, such that the official discourse would pass through a further filter of analysis and explication by the critics and writers themselves. As Irina Gutkin has written, ‘Although intended as a synthetic genre that would overcome the split between elite and mass culture, the socialist realist novel was a product of the visionary, theoretical discourse of the cultural elite.’<sup>70</sup> The inevitable consequence of the hierarchical delegation of power was the establishment of micro-dictatorships within the cultural apparatus. The Soviet art world came to be dominated by a small number of leading figures who wielded a huge amount of influence over the development of Socialist Realism. With the power to award commissions, select works for exhibition and editorial control over the arts press held by a closed circle of artists and critics, the optimistic objective of Soviet art to enlighten the masses was often subordinated to the tastes and whims of a select elite.<sup>71</sup> A successful career in the Soviet art establishment after 1934 was dependent not only on talent and distinctive technique, but on the nurturing of advantageous relationships with higher ranking artists and officials, essentially a system of private patronage.<sup>72</sup>

The emergence of a culture of sycophancy and careerism in the Soviet art establishment went hand-in-hand with the exponential growth of the Stalinist leader cult as aspiring artists vied to create successful representations of Stalin and other leaders.<sup>73</sup> A series of conventions and practices were born in the representation of

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<sup>68</sup> Kiaer has written of the paradoxical freedom of the Soviet artist with reference to Aleksandr Deineka: ‘For many Soviet artists, as well as for many leftist artists around the world in the 1930s, the Soviet model of organised artistic labour – well paid and directed toward a wide public – represented not forced labour but freedom from market forces.’ Kiaer, ‘Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?’, p. 324.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Reid, ‘Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: *The Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition,’ 1935–41, *Russian Review* 60, no. 2 (2001), p. 153.

<sup>70</sup> Gutkin, *Social Origins*, p. 73.

<sup>71</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov was perhaps the most notorious of these artist-dictators. Having risen to prominence in the 1930s and played a major role in the development of the Stalinist leader cult, he was installed in 1947 as the president of the USSR Academy of the Arts. See Matthew Cullerne Bown, ‘Aleksandr Gerasimov’ in Cullerne Bown and Taylor, *Art of the Soviets*, vol. 2, pp. 121–139 and Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*.

<sup>72</sup> Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, pp. 71–113 and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 62–66.

<sup>73</sup> Benno Ennker has argued that the leader cult was the direct result of the hierarchical systems of patronage upon which the Soviet system was constructed. ‘The Stalin cult was not just the “beautiful façade” of Stalin’s real power. The cult and the evolution of Bolshevik rule during the 1930s were intimately related. The Kremlin circle of Stalin’s close lieutenants was the source of initiatives to launch the cult. [...] The necessity for them to court for favours lead to the social practices of the Stalin cult.’ Benno Ennker, ‘The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction’ in Balazs Apor, Jan Behrends, et al., eds., *The Leader Cult In Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 85.

Stalin, which contributed to a powerful mythology of the great leader (*velikii vozhd*), standing immobile and steadfast at the very centre of Soviet society.<sup>74</sup> Malte Rolf has suggested that the very structure of the Soviet Union, with the Kremlin at its centre, became subordinated to the cult of Stalin, existing as a kind of galaxy revolving around its brightest star.<sup>75</sup> As everything from cities and squares, streets, factories and even mountains came to be named after Stalin, the entire Soviet Union came to resemble a paean to its glorious leader, the first among equals in an absolute violation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of power. Sarah Davies has argued that the cult was an ‘unbolshhevik aberration’ that was detrimental to the building of communism, but was sanctioned and promoted by the state because of its appeal and educational value for the poorly educated masses.<sup>76</sup> In its worst excesses the cult of personality was distinguished by the sickly-sweet sentimentality and over-earnest simplicity made notorious by paintings such as Boris Vladimirkii’s *Roses for Stalin* (1949, GTG) and Vasili Efanov’s *An Unforgettable Meeting* (1937, GTG). By the late 1940s images of Stalin and Lenin were near-ubiquitous in the arts. When the leader was not directly present in the image, he would be represented in spirit, embodied by a statue, bust or banner as an omnipotent presence, presiding over the depicted events. The practices of patronage in the fine arts and their relationship to the leader cult are the focus of Chapter Three.

It would be a simplification to imagine that Socialist Realism operated according to a clearly defined and stringently enforced set of principles. Official writings on art and culture were often inhibited by a prevalence of empty rhetoric and sloganeering that offered its producers, critics and audience little concrete guidance. Thus this ‘method not a style’ was to be ‘national in form, socialist in content,’ and aimed to show ‘reality in its revolutionary development’ for the purpose of ‘the ideological refashioning and education of the working people in the spirit of socialism.’ Definitions were marked by a wealth of signifiers with a spectacular absence of signification as, for example, in the following statement by the president of the Academy of the Arts, Aleksandr Gerasimov:

Our great epoch has placed an honourable and difficult task on our artists: to imprint the events of our day in simple, majestic, stirring forms, to create tremendous examples of the valour of Soviet people, their great patriotism and steadfast love for the motherland.<sup>77</sup>

As in the overblown prose of Socialist Realist literature, every noun is adorned with an extravagant adjective and every verb is aggressively emphasised with a complementary adverb.<sup>78</sup> In its peculiar ability to formulate elaborately descriptive language into labyrinthine but ultimately meaningless sentences, Soviet rhetoric could

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<sup>74</sup> Jan Plamper, ‘The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult: Circles around Stalin’ in Eric Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (University of Washington Press, 2003), pp. 19-50.

<sup>75</sup> Malte Rolf, ‘Leader Cults and Spatial Politics in Pre-War Stalinism’ in Apor, *The Leader Cult In Communist Dictatorships*, p. 141.

<sup>76</sup> Sarah Davies, ‘Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s’ in *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>77</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, ‘Put’ sovetskogo khudozhnika’ Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Za sotsialisticheskii realism: sbornik statei i dokladov* (AKh SSSR: Moskva, 1952), p. 75.

<sup>78</sup> Irina Gutkin has commented on this practice in her analysis of Socialist Realist literature. Gutkin, *Social Origins*, pp. 64-79.

often leave its bewildered recipient little the wiser. Leonid Heller has written of the prolonged struggle among critics to determine the precise terminology of Socialist Realism in an attempt to create a 'utopia of total communication'.<sup>79</sup> What resulted instead was a proliferation of at times contradictory and confusing statements.

[The system] operated according to an 'uncertainty principle' of sorts, analogous to what Hiesenberg formulated for quantum physics: that is, the spin and the position of a particle cannot be simultaneously determined, nor its trajectory predicted, just as the ups and downs of the Party line, of the whole system, were always unpredictable, despite the codification of all its elements.<sup>80</sup>

Socialist Realism was never a stable entity, either in theory or practice. As the tastes, attitudes and politics of the Soviet Union developed and transformed over the decades, so too did Socialist Realism experience a process of evolution and development. In the typically polemical discourse of the Stalin era, Socialist Realism was often considered in terms of what it was not; that is, its margins of acceptability were bounded on the one side by the excessive experimentation of formalism and on the other by naturalism's emphasis on detailed drawing.<sup>81</sup> Many of the debates that shaped the Soviet art establishment were expressed as a struggle for the definition of these parameters, between which Socialist Realism was theorised as an elusive compromise. But what exactly did the terms formalism and naturalism, which will be encountered throughout this thesis, signify? To return once again to Aleksandr Gerasimov, who was an outspoken critic of the Western influence of formalist tendencies on Soviet art:

The formalist art of the West [...] completely lacks progressive ideas and thoughts. With their gimmickry and foolishness the formalists try to outdo one another. The viewer is confronted with glimpses of distorted, badly drawn paintings. [...] It is impossible to look without loathing at disfigured faces, at sadistic perversions of the form of the human body, at the degraded cynicism with which the sick art of the West depicts a person.<sup>82</sup>

Formalism was posited as a symptom of Western decadence that posed an insidious threat to the humanism and purity of purpose with which Soviet art was conceived. Any trace of Western influences—the textured brush strokes characteristic of Impressionism or the simplified lines and bold colours of Cézanne-ism—could expose an artist to the risk of criticism, although the extent of that risk was often dependent on the artist's status within the establishment; numerous leading Soviet artists such as Sergei Gerasimov, Iurii Pimenov and Arkadii Plastov employed techniques that could have provoked censure amongst their less recognized (or well-connected)

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<sup>79</sup> Leonid Heller, 'A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and its Aesthetic Categories' in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>81</sup> Jørn Guldberg, 'Socialist Realism as Institutional Practice' in Hans Günther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: MacMillan Press, 1990), p. 155.

<sup>82</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Protiv formalizma: Za ideinoe iskusstvo,' Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Za sotsialisticheskii realism*, pp. 85-86.



contemporaries. The campaign against formalism, which reached a peak in the mid 1930s, was taken up again in earnest in the late 1940s under the repressive cultural policies of Zhdanov.

Naturalism, at the other extreme, constituted a too-literal rendering of reality without being passed through a filter of individual artistic expression. Such features of Socialist Realist art as meticulous drawing, uniformity of detail over the entire canvas and a flat, varnished finish to a painting were considered by some critics to negate the demand of Soviet art to 'not only depict something, but also to open up its inner essence, to expose its "typical character and typical circumstances."' <sup>83</sup> The worst incarnations of naturalistic tendencies were often condemned as photographism; a label that was regularly applied to Laktionov's work. As Vladimir Kostin described the phenomenon:

Unfortunately we still have a few people who consider an exact, documentary, impassive depiction of particular aspects of life to represent the highest expression of realism. Even now at exhibitions works are appearing that are cold and empty, representing nature with the accuracy of a camera. <sup>84</sup>

The backlash against naturalism came to the fore in the thaw period of the 1950s as a number of liberal critics began to promote terms such as expressiveness (*vyrazitel'nost'*), individuality (*individual'nost'*) and beauty (*krasota*) as a means to break with the restrictive artistic language of the Stalin era. <sup>85</sup> Under the broad epithet of Socialist Realism individual artists and groups were constantly engaged in what Pierre Bourdieu has described as 'a field of competition for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy.' <sup>86</sup>

In practice the production of art under the banner of Socialist Realism was beset by difficulties, but to what extent were the objectives of the Stalinist reorganisation of the Soviet art establishment based on affirmative socialist principles? As Eugene Lunn has identified, Marx's conception of realist art could be described as a tendentious approach that called for 'the presentation of humans as subjects as well as objects of history.' <sup>87</sup> In the absence of a specific Marxist thesis on art and culture, these fields of production have usually been interpreted as part of the superstructure and therefore subject to social and economic demands. This framework was later applied as a basis for the development of Socialist Realism, but tailored as 'an ideological use of Marx: what was once critical and subversive had deteriorated into an apologia of a massively powerful status quo.' <sup>88</sup> The legitimacy of Socialist

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<sup>83</sup> The critic Aleksandr Kamenskii is quoting Frederick Engels in *Zritel'iu o zhivopisi* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1959), p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Vladimir Kostin, 'O khudozhestvannosti', *Iskusstvo*, 1956, no. 2, p. 13.

<sup>85</sup> The revised significance of the concept of aesthetic value in the Soviet Union is tackled by Nina Dmitrieva's book *O prekrasnom* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1960) in which she examines the concept of aesthetics as an important and necessary feature of art and everyday life.

<sup>86</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Susan Emanuel, *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 132.

<sup>87</sup> Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 26.

<sup>88</sup> Margaret M. Bullitt, 'Towards a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union', *Russian Review* 35, no. 1 (1976), p. 54.

Realism as an aesthetic application of Marxism has been the subject of a prolonged debate within the Frankfurt School. In his argument for a realist art connected with the objective reality of society and based on the traditions of classical culture, György Lukács has been cast as an apologist for the repressive qualities of Stalinist art, yet his theories also acknowledge the humanist impulses of the Socialist Realist project.<sup>89</sup> As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer made apparent with their forceful critique of the American culture industry in 1944, the capitalist drive for standardisation and mass production was also a totalising force that posed a potentially greater threat to the autonomy of art and culture than the ideological demands of the Soviet system:

The art historians and guardians of culture who complain of the extinction in the West of a basic style-determining power are wrong. The stereotyped appropriation of everything, even the inchoate, for the purposes of mechanical reproduction surpasses the rigour and general currency of any 'real style,' in the sense in which cultural cognoscenti celebrate the organic pre-capitalist past.<sup>90</sup>

Even the avant-garde, the last bastion of 'high culture,' was under threat on the one side as Adorno argued, from the evolution of its own 'formal laws', and on the other as Walter Benjamin contended from the encroachment of technological advances and mass culture.<sup>91</sup>

According to Boris Groys it is possible to interpret the Socialist Realist project as a consummation of the avant-garde movement itself. In freeing its cultural workforce from the demands of the market and integrating art with everyday life, Groys argues, the artists and theoreticians of Socialist Realism were bringing the avant-garde aesthetic to its logical conclusion, albeit in a very different form to that in which it was conceived.

The avant-garde's dream of placing all art under direct party control to implement its program of life-building had now come true. The author of the program, however, was not Rodchenko or Mayakovsky, but Stalin, whose political power made him the heir to their artistic project.<sup>92</sup>

Groys considers that the emergence of Socialist Realism as a comprehensive aesthetic programme was simply a natural stage in the progression of the avant-garde under the power structures of the Soviet system. While modernism in its Western incarnation sold out to the demands of the market, the Soviet avant-garde was reinvented as a pure expression of ideology. Which artist, asks Groys, enjoyed the greater freedom?

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<sup>89</sup> Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 131.

<sup>90</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in idem, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1997). First published 1944.

<sup>91</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London: Collins-Fontana Books, 1973), pp. 219-53. First published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V, no. 1 (1936). See also Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, pp. 154-7.

<sup>92</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 34.

What the absolute freedom of the artist meant to the modernist was absolute control over the context of an artist's work. But from the point of view of Soviet culture, the modernist artist merely served the market, unlike the Soviet artist, who participated in the collective project of reconstructing the world. [...] Both parties saw the aim of art as autonomy and reproached each other for betraying it: modernism for the benefit of the market, Sovietism for the sake of politics.<sup>93</sup>

While Groys' assertions represent a radical interpretation of Stalinist art they have provoked a revision of the totalitarian model of Soviet cultural history and encouraged an acknowledgement that Socialist Realism did not necessarily represent an unprecedented break or interruption in the development of Soviet art. It was rather a response to and an intensification of an existing dynamic within the Soviet art establishment. Yet Groys' hypothesis can be taken a step further to contend that the Soviet artist did not only participate in the Socialist Realist project, but also played an active role in its formation and definition.

### **In Perspective**

Socialist Realism, in breaking with the 'natural' course of art development and setting art to the work of the state in a traditional and retrospective form, has been characterised in the West as deeply regressive. In 1939 Clement Greenberg famously contended that the inevitable consequence of state intervention into the artistic process was a culture of mass-produced kitsch intended to 'flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level.'<sup>94</sup> It is only in recent years that Western literature has begun to reassess the widely held notion that Soviet Socialist Realism was nothing more than a form of cultural propaganda; a uniform and homogenised product of the official dictates of a totalitarian regime. The following quote on Soviet culture, taken from *The Slavic and East European Journal* in 1957, provides an insight into the bigotry endemic to the Cold War era:

Russia, as she eventually shakes off Khrushchevism no less than Stalinism and Leninism, will not remain troglodyte. She will yet re-enter the main stream of man's creation and appreciation of the finer nuances of life and civilization.<sup>95</sup>

An historical perspective reveals that such a response has its origins in the pervasive Western suspicion of all things communist. Soviet culture, and especially culture with an explicit ideological underpinning, has proven unpalatable for Western commentators—an outlook that is largely attributable to an entrenched Cold War

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<sup>93</sup> Boris Groys, 'A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism Between Modernism and Postmodernism' in Thomas Lahausen and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, p. 80.

<sup>94</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), pp. 512-520. First published in *Parisian Review*, 1939.

<sup>95</sup> Albert Parry, 'Are They Kul'turny?', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 1, no. 2 (1957), p. 135. The article deals with the assimilation of classical art and literature into Soviet culture and attributes this development to an envy of the West amongst the Soviet intelligentsia. Fifty years on and the article is more interesting as an example of the Cold War mentality with its culture of mutual resentment and suspicion.

mentality; a skewed 'us and them' perspective that, until the late 1980s, considered Soviet cultural development as nothing more than an aberration from the Western 'norm'. As Vern Grosvenor Swanson puts it, 'the perplexing social-political and cultural underpinnings of each system which conditioned Western and socialist art were mutually unfathomable. Their 'high' art was the antithesis of our 'high' art.'<sup>96</sup>

Although its development predates the post-war deterioration of East-West relations, the Western stereotype of Socialist Realist art has been distorted by the overbearing imagery of the Stalinist leader cult, the imagery of which holds a special fascination to a Western audience as a monolithic genre indicative of stifled creative liberty. Yet even the art of the Stalin cult did not necessarily represent a millstone around the neck of the artist; the desire to depict the leader through works of art could also be driven by a kind of stimulus not unlike the divine inspiration that is attributed to the works of the great Renaissance artists. It is the notion of Stalin's status as a living deity that is repulsive to our Western tastes, not the fruits of the cult themselves. Plamper has argued for the contextualisation of judgements on the products of the Stalin cult and of Socialist Realism itself:

To contemporary actors, Socialist Realism seemed utterly reasonable and not at all paradoxical; trained to organise the chaos of reality in the dialectical mode, their synthesis made complete sense to them. Thus a definition of Socialist Realism as a 'paradox' is of little heuristic value; it can ultimately be reduced to stating that the actors of the past communicated in different ways than we do today, in ways that we do not understand.<sup>97</sup>

Several recent exhibitions and books have contributed to an awareness of the diversity of styles and artistic voices that were encompassed within the catchall term of Socialist Realism.<sup>98</sup> As Soviet art has undergone a reappraisal so too has it been removed from its ideological basis and subjected to the new demands of the modern international art market. Swanson, in a promotional, image-filled tome, goes so far as to hail its re-evaluation as the great artistic discovery of the 1990s.

If the 1990s was the 'discovery decade', then the first decade of the 2000s will be the 'appreciation decade'. Thus within a score of years the discovery, dissemination and appreciation of Soviet art will have taken place [...] It is a

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<sup>96</sup> Verne G. Swanson, *Soviet Impressionism* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>97</sup> Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, pp. 167-8. See also Igor Golomstock, 'Problems in the Study of Stalinist Culture', in Günther, *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, pp. 110-121.

<sup>98</sup> One of the first of these, the 1993 Exhibition *Stalin's Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism 1934-1956* held at the P.S.1 Museum, New York is complemented by a collection of essays, Joseph Bakshtein and Miranda Banks, eds., *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism under Stalin* (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1993). The most recent exhibition, and the largest of its kind since the end of the Cold War, was *Russia!*, held from 16 Sep. 2005 to 11 Jan. 2006 at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Covering Russian art through the ages this exhibition included a significant section devoted to Socialist Realist art. See Mikhail Swydkoi, ed., *Russia!: nine hundred years of masterpieces and master collections* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2005). See also Boris Groys and Max Hollein, eds., *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz, 2003).

view shared by an increasing number of art historians, museum directors, curators and collectors.<sup>99</sup>

Such an optimistic view of Soviet art's rehabilitation appears, even today, to be somewhat impulsive. Works such as Swanson's *Soviet Impressionism* and Cullerne Bown's *Socialist Realist Painting* have presented a populist view of Soviet art that goes some way towards eroding its perceived totality, but stops short of tackling its inherent 'otherness'—that fascinating quality that pervades these cultural artefacts from an unfamiliar society.<sup>100</sup> To consider Soviet art in terms of its theory and production perpetuates the established mythology of strictly regimented artistic production. Such work serves to demarcate the entity of Socialist Realism as an exotic field of cultural production that is somehow unique and self-contained, within which its individual artists and works of art are subordinated to the system itself.

The aim of this project is to acknowledge Socialist Realism's fundamental role in the formation of aesthetic taste in the Soviet Union, but at the same time to push it firmly into the background. In the post-war Soviet Union, Socialist Realism was no longer debated in terms of its validity and significance—it was simply accepted as an incontrovertible aspect of the status quo. The emphasis will be placed instead on the social and cultural conditions surrounding the career of a Soviet artist and the reception of his work, or as Bourdieu has put it, to 'describe the entire set of social mechanisms which make possible the figure of the artist as the producer of the fetish that is the work of art.'<sup>101</sup> Official discourse will play an important part in setting the scene, but it will act as a backdrop for the main action, which will play out in the galleries of art exhibitions and in the meetings of art organisations. It is the intention that this thesis will contribute to the growing body of work to treat Soviet art, and indeed the period itself, as a shifting and constantly evolving conglomeration of official policy and individual interpretation, rather than the fully-formed monolith of totalitarian control that it was once assumed to be. In tackling the life, work and reception of a single artist within the field it is possible to penetrate the imposing façade of official rhetoric and to view the system of Socialist Realist art production from the inside out, to demonstrate the processes of adaptation and manipulation that were employed in a protracted struggle for success and influence.

## The Thesis

The structure of this thesis is based around a number of significant themes and issues with which Socialist Realism was defined and debated in the post-war years. In departing from a chronological analysis the intention is to present the material not as a monograph of an artist's life and career, but as an account of certain factors that were themselves subject to shifts and developments throughout the period. However a biography of the artist cannot be avoided entirely and Chapter One provides a critical analysis of the processes by which Laktionov's official biography was constructed,

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<sup>99</sup> Swanson, *Soviet Impressionism*, p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> Cullerne Bown's *Socialist Realist Painting* has value as the first attempt to present a comprehensive art history of Socialist Realism, and provides a point of entry into some of the major events and issues that surrounded its production, but its usefulness as a reliable source is limited by the wide breadth of its scope and a scarcity and unreliability of references.

<sup>101</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 291.

with a particular emphasis on defining the art historical model that served as the artist's favoured basis for Socialist Realism. This chapter also serves as an introduction to a number of the key terms and influential figures that play a major role throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two focuses on Laktionov's most famous painting, *A Letter from the Front*, and analyses the nature of its popularity as both an icon of post-war optimism and as a stylistic model for the nationalistic and anti-formalist strictures of the *Zhdanovshchina*. The significance of the work is considered with reference to its *tipichnost'* (typicality) and *narodnost'* (patriotic national character), which were promoted as important features of Soviet art in the post-war era. The painting was subjected to intensive scrutiny and criticism within the Moscow Artists' Union before being awarded a Stalin Prize first class in 1949. The narrative of this painting suggests that its success (and indeed the further success of the artist) was based on its value to the regime as an affirmative and popular paradigm of the realist tradition.

Chapter Three deals with the issue of patronage through an analysis of Laktionov's works of portraiture, including an examination of his lost contributions to the leader cult. This exploration of Laktionov's relationships with high-ranking officials and celebrities reveals the importance of propagating and nurturing networks of patronage in order to achieve success within the Soviet art establishment. Laktionov's meticulous style, based on the traditions of the Russian Realist School proved to be an ideal means for the representation of authority in the post-war Soviet Union. The issue of 'photographism', a criticism that was often levelled at the artist, is analysed with reference to his later status portraits, with the conclusion that the overt technical illusionism of his works represented an attempt to sustain the 'aura' of realist art in an era when photographic technology threatened to undermine its relevance.

Chapter Four analyses Laktionov's work in relation to the developing popular tastes of the post-war era using the *1952 All-Union Exhibition* and its visitors' books as a case study. For some, Laktionov's well-known painting *Into a New Flat* was compatible with the Soviet drive for *kul'turnost'* while for others the work represented the epitome of bad taste. In spite of the severe criticism which the work attracted at the time of its exhibition, it enjoyed great popularity amongst its 'lay-viewers', who were enticed by the optimistic display of abundance and joy as well as the technical virtuosity of the work. This chapter attempts to contextualise a painting that has come to be reviled as an example of Stalinist bad taste and to rationalize the kitsch stereotype of Socialist Realism.

In Chapter Five the emphasis shifts back to Laktionov's self-image with an analysis of the relative autonomy with which a successful artist could work within the official realm of the Soviet art establishment. Laktionov's numerous works of self-portraiture and extensive personal works appear incongruous with the demand of Socialist Realism to create an art form for the masses. In 1934 Zhdanov used the term 'Revolutionary Romanticism' to describe the future basis of Soviet art, and a conscious manipulation of the myth of the Romantic artist is clearly evident in Laktionov's self-portraits, which present a shifting mode of self-representation in keeping with the complex demands of celebrity in the Soviet system.

Through an analysis of these key moments and significant works of art we follow the career of a Soviet artist from his formative years as a student to the peak of his celebrity and beyond. Certain themes recur throughout. In particular the developing relationship between the modern Soviet artist and tradition is a constant point of reference that is vital to an understanding of Laktionov's approach to Socialist Realism. Likewise the compromise made by the Soviet artist between artistic autonomy and obedience to the prevailing trends is a problematic issue that constantly informed Laktionov's creative choices. The conclusion that is developed over the course of this thesis is that the Soviet artist was not merely a passive agent of state art policy, but was engaged in a complex interaction with the official line. As a successful Soviet artist, Laktionov was both a participant in and a contributor to the development of Socialist Realism in the post-war period.





**‘Paint with Great Patience and a Small Brush’: The Genealogy of Laktionov**

How could I reject Repin, my own father who taught me to love my people and serve them with all my soul, to give them everything that is good in me! No, I will never sink to such treachery!

We will take everything beautiful that has been created by humanity over the course of its history, from the ancient Greeks to our time, and throw away anything ugly, anything decadent, no matter what sauce it has been served to us in.<sup>1</sup>

Aleksandr Laktionov sometimes introduced his artistic legacy by means of a romanticised anecdote from his student years. It was used in a number of speeches and regurgitated in several books and articles and it goes something like this: In 1938

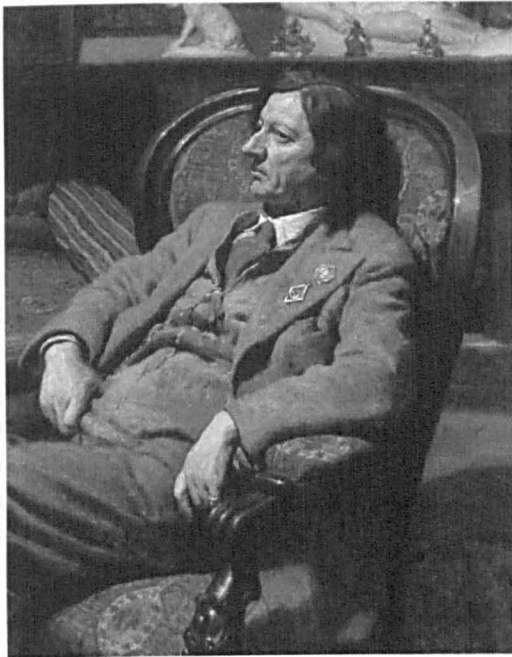


Fig. 1: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Portrait of I. I. Brodskii*, 1938, GRM

Isaak Brodskii, the venerable artist and professor at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts, fell terminally ill. The sickly artist invited several of his students, including his favourite young protégé Laktionov, to paint his death bed portrait. The young graduate, inspired by devotion to his favourite teacher, produced a work that is still acclaimed as a masterpiece of Soviet portraiture; a large, dark-toned and meticulously drawn canvas, in which his teacher is depicted reclining in a chair in a state of visible weakness and discomfort, yet retaining an air of dignity and poise worthy of his stature [fig. 1]. The detailed drawing and controlled brushstrokes paid homage to the artistic techniques of their subject. With the canvas complete Laktionov visited his mentor to show him the work. The old man, by now bedridden and close to

death, took a long look at the painting before declaring: ‘At last I can die.’ Brodskii had found his successor. Laktionov was to inherit the traditions of Russian realist art and continue the auspicious lineage of Brodskii, and before him, Brodskii’s own teacher, Ilya Repin.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, ‘Uvazheniie i liubov’ naroda—vyshaia nagrada,’ *Pravda*, 4 Jan. 1963, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> D. Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* (Moskva: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1968), pp. 64-68. The title of this chapter references a quote made by Isaak Brodskii to his students at the All-Union Academy of the Arts in Leningrad. The constructed myth of the Brodskii-Laktionov relationship references the prototype Russian cultural association: that of Pushkin, who gained legitimacy and status through the

Using the example of Laktionov and the early years of his career this chapter will examine the ways in which an aspiring artist could invest his work and career with legitimacy through the construction of an art historical narrative. This analysis of Laktionov's autobiography and biography is an attempt to separate fact from fiction and to establish the genuine influences on the artist's style. But the fiction is interesting also, since it provides an insight into the process by which artists defined themselves within the Soviet art establishment, an arena in which success was dependent not always on talent and skill, but on aligning oneself with the right theories and individuals. This will necessitate a largely biographical approach, but it will, somewhat paradoxically, call into question the nature and value of biography to the study of Soviet art. With their stylistic borrowings, their technical execution, their backgrounds filled with representations of other paintings and portraits. and with their 'aura' of high art, Laktionov's works aspired to a long and auspicious tradition of realist art; the artist cited amongst his influences a cherry-picked inventory of famous names stretching from Jan Van Eyck to Repin. In spite of his status as Brodskii's star pupil and the self-styled heir of the *Peredvizhnichestvo* tradition, Laktionov nonetheless maintained his own conception of realist art that neglected, if not rejected the influence of late nineteenth century critical realism and adopted instead a scrupulously academic approach to Socialist Realist representation.

Such narratives as the one related above were an important mechanism in the construction of Soviet mythology, as celebrities, politicians and organisations sought to establish and legitimise their agendas based on the pedigree of (usually conveniently dead) authority figures.<sup>3</sup> This process was quite distinct from the system of patronage (which will be dealt with in Chapter Three) since it often took place after the fact, with scant regard to the inclination of the individual in question. Thus the Soviet military commander Georgii Zhukov invoked the untarnished memory of the eighteenth century strategist Aleksandr Suvorov in the development of his own mythology and the popular Soviet polar explorer and scientist Otto Schmidt represented himself as a modern day Mikhail Lomonosov.<sup>4</sup> Likewise the mythology of the Bolshevik revolution itself was replaced in the Stalin era with a revival of pre-revolutionary history as a glorious precedent for the achievements of the Soviet state. As Nicholas Timasheff has written:

History, which for many years had been taught only in terms of mass activity, reappeared as a sequence of magnificent deeds performed by Russia's national heroes, no longer the few rebels such as Pugachev and later on Lenin, but the

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endorsement of Gavril Derzhavin. See Catriona Kelly, *Russian Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> The early years of the Stalin cult provide the most commonly cited example of this phenomenon. Stalin was regularly represented alongside Lenin in an effort to promote the myth that the two leaders had been close friends and collaborators during the early years of Soviet rule. The reality was less than ideal for propaganda purposes, since the two had met only infrequently and Lenin was, in his later years, reportedly concerned about Stalin's abuses of power within the Politburo. V.I. Lenin, 'Letter to the Congress', 23-31 Dec. 1922, reprinted in Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Structure of Soviet History: Essays and Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 118-9.

<sup>4</sup> John McCannon, 'Positive Heroes at the Pole: Celebrity Status, Socialist-Realist Ideals and the Soviet Myth of the Arctic', *Russian Review* 56, no. 3 (1997), p. 353.

princes of Kiev, the Tsars of Moscow, the dignitaries of the Church, the generals and the admirals of the Empire.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst it might seem contrary to the forward thrust of Soviet socialism to rely on the appropriated mythology of historical figures and tropes, in the context of a system in which success and power was precarious and often transitory those figures that had already been consigned to the Soviet pantheon of heroes provided a stable foundation to build upon.

In the Soviet art world of the 1930s onwards such a practice became especially important. In the early 1920s a number of avant-garde groups had adopted the strategy of a clean break with the 'bourgeois' history of art in their attempts to represent the socialist tomorrow, but their radical positions had been placed under increasing pressure in the late 1920s by the increasing dominance of realist easel painting. Rival factions emerged in the struggle to define realism in its Soviet context with the Society of Moscow Artists (OMKh) and the Society of Easel Painters (OST) amongst others promoting an interpretation of figurative painting that was informed by international developments including Impressionism and Cézanne-ism.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), under the leadership of Aleksander Gerasimov and Evgenii Katsman and supported by Brodskii, adopted nineteenth century Russian realism as an appropriate model for the new national art of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> It was the adherents of this latter group, favoured by those in power, that gained prominent positions in the newly formed Union of Soviet Artists following the 1932 restructuring of the art establishment and who exercised a major influence over the 1930s development of Socialist Realism. Their legitimacy was based in part on a national artistic tradition that elevated a number of pre-revolutionary artists as their historical forbears. Foremost among those artists who were canonised at this time was Repin, around whom a virtual cult of personality was developed.<sup>8</sup> Although the story of how Repin and his art were promoted as a model for aspiring Soviet artists has already been explored at length, it is worth recounting briefly here, since it is pertinent to Laktionov's own narrative.<sup>9</sup>

### Repin and his Legacy

Repin began his career at the Imperial Academy of the Arts in St Petersburg in 1864, at a time when the strict conception of a classical art education was being called into question and even openly defied in some quarters. Although Repin completed his education according to the prescribed criteria of the Academy and maintained a disciplined approach to drawing and figurative realism throughout his career, the

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1946), p156-7.

<sup>6</sup> Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, Vol. 2 (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 12-18.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the factional infighting that took place within the Soviet art establishment of the 1930s see Susan Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The *Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition, 1935-41' *Russian Review* 60 no. 2 (2001), pp. 153-84.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Valkenier, 'Politics in Russian Art: The Case of Repin,' *Russian Review* 37, no. 1 (1978), pp. 14-29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* See also Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

young student was exposed to the reformist trends and populist philosophy of the period. On his graduation Repin was adopted as a *cause célèbre* by the controversial art critic and proponent of 'critical realism' Vladimir Stasov, who contended that national art should confront the shortcomings of everyday life rather than retreat into classical romanticism.<sup>10</sup> Repin's work *The Volga Barge Haulers* (1870-73, GRM) was hailed by Stasov as a masterpiece of social commentary and an open protest against the exploitation of the masses. This painting and its outspoken critical reception cast the artist as a rebel and reformist, yet Repin proved reluctant to accept that mantle; he continued to work on official commissions and lucrative portraits and maintained an association with the Imperial Academy throughout his career. Elizabeth Valkenier has described Repin's connection with social protest as 'often incidental' and written of the process by which the artist was adopted as a proto-revolutionary figure after the fact.<sup>11</sup>

In 1878 Repin joined The Association of Travelling Art Exhibits (*Peredvizhniki*), a group whose independent touring exhibitions, began in 1871 to break down the barriers of traditional academic art practises and broaden the art market in an attempt to secure greater creative freedom, an act of open defiance of the Russian art establishment and its strict controls. Yet by 1890 the group had lost much of their political radicalism and a compromise was reached with the Academy, which was reorganised under Aleksandr III with the aim of reining in the dissenters and promoting a centralised national school of painting. Repin accepted a professorship and entered a phase of his career that was an anathema to Stasov and his oppositionist views, and was conveniently sidestepped by later Soviet biographies. Disillusioned by the increasingly restrictive approach of the *Peredvizhniki* the artist re-entered the official sphere and embarked upon a series of official state commissions that led to inevitable accusations of selling out in the liberal press.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless this partial rapprochement with the state art organs helped to cement his reputation as the nation's leading artist. By the early twentieth century Repin enjoyed a reputation as a paradigm or 'father figure' of Russian realist art, yet as the modernist movement took root and launched scathing attacks in the press against Repin and the realist tradition, the artist became an increasingly retiring figure in public life, eventually leaving St Petersburg for Penaty, a country studio that from 1917 lay inside the Finnish border.<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of the 1917 revolution, the Soviet art world was thrown into turmoil as various groups vied for official recognition and scarce state funding. The *Peredvizhniki* were still active in this period and staged exhibitions until as late as 1923, although they failed to excite the critical or popular acclaim that they once had. It was instead a new generation of realist artists who succeeded in turning the tide of Soviet art against the experimental work of the avant-garde and towards figurative and traditional easel painting. AKhRR was formed in 1922 and quickly rose to prominence based on its adaptation of traditional forms to represent contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 27-8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 144-5.

<sup>13</sup> David Jackson, *The Russian Vision: The Art of Ilya Repin* (Schoten, Belgium: BAI, 2007), p. 13. See also Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 2, p. 29.

events, an approach that was vilified by many critics, but found favour amongst influential figures in the Party leadership.<sup>14</sup> Where the *Peredvizhniki* were doomed to a mediocre reception in their exhibitions of the 1920s for actually *being* relics of the bourgeois past, AKhRR was successful because it drew on an established artistic legacy without bearing the stigma of pre-revolutionary success. AKhRR hailed the *Peredvizhniki* and in particular the now expatriate Repin as paragons of Russian national art and launched a determined campaign to bring their figurehead back to Russia from his home in Finland and to award him the prestigious title of People's Artist of the USSR. Foremost among their members was Brodskii, a former student of Repin in the old Academy of the Arts in St Petersburg and firm advocate of figurative drawing as the correct basis for Soviet art. Brodskii engaged in an ingratiating correspondence with his revered tutor in an attempt to gain Repin's blessing for his own work and the activities of AKhRR. Yet Repin, being inconveniently still alive, proved remarkably resistant to the advances of AKhRR and the promise of a hero's welcome on his return, apparently preferring to live out his final years in his modest retreat at Penaty. As Elizabeth Valkenier has written,

What the Soviet proponents of concrete realism were unable to obtain during Repin's lifetime, i.e., the imposition of an official style buttressed by native tradition and the prestige of a national figure, happened after 1932.<sup>15</sup>

True to the mechanisms of Soviet mythmaking, Repin could only reach his full potential as an influential artist posthumously.

Over the course of the 1930s, proponents of the Russian School eagerly constructed a revised biography for Repin, which skirted around such delicate issues as his close relationship with certain members of the aristocracy and his acceptance of major state commissions and awards, to promote a distorted image of the artist as a revolutionary figure, motivated and inspired by his unwavering devotion to the Russian people.<sup>16</sup> A major retrospective exhibition was staged first in Moscow in 1936 and later in Leningrad and Kiev, which included over one thousand of the artist's works. It was accompanied by a fanfare of acclaim in the press and the Committee of Arts Affairs prepared a comprehensive program of touring exhibits and reproductions of works in order to promulgate the legacy of Repin throughout the population.<sup>17</sup> The artist was adopted as a national hero and his work was hailed as a pioneering antecedent of the nationalist ethos of Socialist Realism.

Meanwhile Brodskii, whose star had risen over the course of the 1920s, was in 1934 installed as Rector of the newly-formed All Russian Academy of the Arts in Leningrad, where he was effectively responsible for the re-establishment of traditional academic realism as the cornerstone of Soviet art education.<sup>18</sup> His relationship with Repin, in combination with his own significant achievements in the production of monumental parade paintings and works of the fledgling leader cult, granted him a

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<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism*, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Valkenier, 'Repin Retrospective: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 8-11 October 1994', *Slavic Review* 54, no. 1 (1995), pp. 130-1.

<sup>17</sup> Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, p. 175-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

degree of authority that was unrivalled in the period; in 1933 the artist was invited to a tea party at the dacha of Kliment Voroshilov at which he, along with former members of AKhRR Evgenii Katsman and Aleksandr Gerasimov, were granted the rare privilege of a meeting with Stalin himself and engaged in a discussion on the affairs of the art world. This informal gathering was an unprecedented event that marked a decisive turning point in the struggle for official definitions of realism. As Jan Plamper has observed, 'privileged access like the July 1933 meeting with Stalin [...] was considered major symbolic capital and was used by all of the painters to further their own standing.'<sup>19</sup> Bolstered after 1934 by Party support and legitimised by the implicit endorsement of Stalin himself, Brodskii and his fellow proponents of academic realism established a powerful dominance over the structures of art education, production, exhibition and criticism over the course of the 1930s. In the Leningrad Academy Brodskii revived many of the teaching practices of the Imperial Academy, including a renewed emphasis on life drawing and composition as well as the reintroduction of art history courses.

### The Young Protégé

It was into this environment that the fresh-faced young Laktionov arrived in 1932 and spent his formative student years. The following examination of Laktionov's biography is based primarily on two Soviet era books, one written in 1968 shortly before the artist's death, and the other written posthumously in 1978.<sup>20</sup> Both of these accounts present a Soviet-ised version of the Laktionov's life and career, a critical analysis of which reveals the mechanisms by which an artist's biography was constructed and invested with legitimacy. Additional details are taken from Laktionov's own writing. An important exercise in the development of a Soviet artist was the writing of their autobiography—a kind of romanticised *curriculum vitae* in which the artist not only gave a brief synopsis of key moments of their career, but argued for their conception of Socialist Realism—in order to gain entry to art organisations such as the Moscow Artists' Union and to exhibit at major exhibitions.<sup>21</sup> This early synopsis of the artist's career was later expanded into an autobiographical article in a 1961 edited volume from the Academy of the Arts, *The Artist and Modernity*.<sup>22</sup>

The key feature of Laktionov's mythology, in common with numerous success stories from the early Soviet era, was his rock solid proletarian credentials. Each biographical work and autobiographical recollection of the artist begins with a protracted account of his early years; raised as part of a large family in the provincial town of Rostov to a laundress mother (good) and a blacksmith father (better) who

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<sup>19</sup> Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929-1953* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), p. 70. Voroshilov, who worked as Commissar for Defense from 1925 until 1940, was an especially active figure in the promotion of certain artists for whom he acted as a patron under the auspices of developing artistic representations of the Red Army.

<sup>20</sup> Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* and E. V. Nikolaeva and I. G. Miamlin, *Aleksandr Ivanovich Laktionov* (Leningrad: Kudozhnik RSFSR, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> An example of Laktionov's early autobiography, written in 1949 shortly after the awarding of a Stalin Prize, can be found in *Ankety, avtobiografii, spisok rabot Laktionova, 8 Aug. 1948-24 Dec. 1949*, GTG, f. 59, op. 1, d. 4178.

<sup>22</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika', *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv* (AKh SSSR: Moskva, 1961), pp. 279-89.

later worked on the construction of the railways (better still). The following is a typically romanticised version of events as the first embers of socialism were awoken in the young boy's imagination.

On occasion his father would take Sasha to work with him. The boy loved to watch how the blacksmiths worked harmoniously in unison with the hammerers, how showers of sparks flew from the forge under the blows of the hammers. He saw the powerful figures of the workers, illuminated by glowing flames, and attentively listened to the clear, rhythmic music of labour.<sup>23</sup>

The young artist was a sickly child and was forced to drop out of secondary school early due to a serious bout of mumps. Naturally he found solace in drawing and was in a sense 'saved' by this one passion, his talent for which allowed him to return to school and continue his studies, although he continued to lag behind in all other classes. This talent later earned him a place in Rostov Art School, where he studied from 1926-29 under the tutelage of the artist A. S. Chinenov, a staunch believer of figurative drawing as the foundation of a sound art education. As Laktionov himself fondly reminisced many years later:

This unforgettable school was unusual for its uncompromising attitude towards all types of 'isms' which were at that time taking up extraneous forms to the point at which they became a complete rejection of realist art. Our school remained a kind of oasis which was out of the reach of all that devilishness.<sup>24</sup>

Classes were based on the academic model, beginning with close studies of inanimate objects, from simple geometric shapes to complex ornaments and masks, before moving on to anatomical sketches of plaster casts taken from antique statues, and finally graduating to drawing from life.<sup>25</sup> Safely isolated in a conservative provincial art school Laktionov was not exposed to the avant-garde influences that were so prevalent in Moscow and Petrograd in the 1920s. It has been possible to invent Laktionov's firm commitment to realist art as an early career choice made by a young proto-Socialist Realist after the fact, but it is doubtful that such a choice was deliberately made at the time; Laktionov's adoption of realism was more likely a circumstantial phenomenon and a symptom of the avant-garde's limited reach into the traditional infrastructure of Russian art education.

Following a successful graduation from Rostov Art School and inclusion in a 1929 exhibition of artists from the North Caucasus, Laktionov took the natural route for any aspiring young artist—he left for Moscow and applied for VKhuTeIn (Higher Artistic Technical Institute). He returned home just days later having been refused admission to the entrance exams. Three years of work experience (*stazh*) was necessary to gain entry to such an institute and so Laktionov reluctantly joined a labour exchange, who arranged for him to work on a building site and then later as a ceramics painter in a chemical factory. These were years of 'melancholy' (*toska*) for the frustrated young artist but they merely strengthened his resolve to continue with

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<sup>23</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhisa' – istochnik vdokhnovenia khudozhnika,' p. 280.

<sup>25</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, pp. 18-19.

his art education. In August of 1931 Laktionov took the decision to run away to Moscow with a pair of fellow artists, 'with barely a kopeck in my pocket'<sup>26</sup> but heavily laden with a portfolio of over three hundred works of art. Having left Rostov in a heady rush the group found themselves stranded in the capital without any of the necessary documents and recommendations in order to register for a hostel or to find official employment. Stranded and destitute in an imposing city and sleeping rough at Kazan Station the group found solace in the nation's art heritage and spent their first days in Moscow visiting the Tretyakov Gallery and the Pushkin Museum. They eventually found refuge in a half-built construction site next to the House of Artists, which was at that time a hotbed of artistic talent. D. Osipov, in his biography of Laktionov, dwells at length on the group's experiences as vagrants in the capital, and fleshes out Laktionov's intermittent reminiscences with what can only be his own idealised contribution to the narrative of the young, tenacious artist. The 'discomfort' (*neudobstvo*) and 'hardship' (*trudnost'*) of their situation was tempered by the 'radiant hope' (*raduzhnaia nadezhda*) inspired by their visits to Moscow's art galleries in this glamorised episode of the artist's rags-to-riches story.<sup>27</sup>

The group—by now reduced to just Laktionov and his friend Nikolai Timkov—were rescued from this purgatory by the kindness of the artist V. N. Perel'man, director of the House of Artists and one of the founding members of the Moscow Regional Union of Soviet Artists (MOSSKh). Having discovered their illicit dwelling the director paid the group an unexpected visit one evening with the intention of making a swift eviction. According to Laktionov, he found the pair engaged in studious activity: Timkov was drawing landscapes from memory while Laktionov was copying a Velasquez reproduction.<sup>28</sup> Hardly the den of iniquity that Perel'man was anticipating! The generous artist and his colleague Katsman, one of the influential 'big three' artists who met with Stalin in 1933, immediately took the pair under their wing, arranged accommodation for them first at a converted church, then later in the library of the House of Artists, and found them work at the Mosfil'm factory. But perhaps most importantly for the aspiring artists, he arranged a series of meetings with other esteemed Moscow artists in the hope that they might find an apprenticeship to help them on their way. So began a period in which Laktionov subjected several famous names to a virtual siege in an attempt to gain the necessary recommendation to resume his incomplete art education. Sergei Maliutin, Igor' Grabar', Aleksandr Gerasimov and above all Mikhail Nesterov were paid regular visits and in return offered sage words of advice to the impressionable youth, warning him about the threat of formalism to realist art. As Osipov explains:

Grabar' showed the young people a recently completed work—a study of the interior of his workshop—and said, 'This is my protest. I assert that life—the real world—always was and always will be in art.' The study was finished in a manner unlike his earlier, well-known works. Everything was painstakingly

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<sup>26</sup> Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnovenia khudozhnika,' p. 282.

<sup>27</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, pp. 26-45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32 and Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 9. See also an account of this meeting written by Katsman in which he claims a somewhat greater role in the 'discovery' of Laktionov and his friend Timkov. Evgenii Katsman, 'Tri vstrechi s Laktionovym', *Ogonek*, 1968, no. 2, p. 16.



drawn and it had no traces of the impressionistic influence characteristic of the artist's style. This made a strong impression on the young people.<sup>29</sup>

Slowly but surely, through such anecdotes and selective name-dropping, an artistic legacy was being developed for the young artist, the foundations of his style and technique were being constructed with the revealing benefit of hindsight through a series of preferred influences and defining moments.

Ultimately Laktionov acquired what he needed: a letter of introduction to Isaak Brodskii himself, written by Maliutin and signed by Nesterov and Grabar', requesting entry to the Leningrad Academy of the Arts.<sup>30</sup> Laktionov set off without delay on what was to become the defining stage in the narrative of his artistic development. As the story goes, Brodskii and Laktionov struck up a strong rapport almost immediately, after the older artist recognised a similar talent to that of the early Serov and Repin in the portfolio of this young novice. He passed the entrance examinations with flying colours and achieved his lifelong ambition to walk in the footsteps of Briullov, Repin, Serov, Kramskoi and other great names in the halls and workshops of this illustrious school. Unfortunately for Laktionov the reformed Academy was not the haven of academic diligence that he had anticipated. The famous school was in a state of upheaval in the early 1930s as realist artists such as Brodskii engaged in a bitter struggle to oust the remaining vestiges of the avant-garde and to revert to the traditional practices of art education that were developed by the old Imperial Academy. As Laktionov reminisced:

Before my admission the Academy was in the hands of formalists, various untalented rogues and cheats, who had been holding back the development of Soviet art for quite some time. Exaggeration, affectation and cunning (*shtukarstvo, krivlianie, lovkarstvo*) were elevated as great art, while the study of nature was considered somehow shameful.<sup>31</sup>

Upon Laktionov's arrival he was assigned to the tutelage of P. S. Naumov, a professor with leftist leanings, who persecuted the aspiring young realist by criticising his method of drawing, confiscating his finest brushes and promoting a 'new way of seeing.' The young artist was tormented with doubts, 'He asked himself, "is what I'm doing right? Is it necessary?"' In an effort to strengthen his resolve he visited the Hermitage and the Russian Museum and learnt from the classical works.<sup>32</sup> In Osipov's terms Laktionov escaped the perverting influence of Naumov and his ilk, by seeking salvation in the Great Works of the Old Masters.

It was not until Brodskii's promotion to the post of Rector in 1934 that a comprehensive purge could take place. Those professors who had demonstrated formalist inclinations were ousted and their positions were filled with committed

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<sup>29</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnovenia khudozhnika,' p. 283. The letter itself was later displayed in the museum of the Academy of the Arts in Leningrad.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Nash uchitel' i drug: Vospominania uchenikov I. I. Brodskii' in I. A. Brodskii and M. P. Sokol'nikov, *Pamiat' I. I. Brodskogo: Vospominania, dokumenty, pis'ma k 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia 1984-1959* (Khudozhnik RSFSR: Leningrad, 1959), p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 56.

realists from Brodskii's circle. Entering his third year in the Academy Laktionov transferred to Brodskii's class. According to Laktionov, these classes were initially small, but soon developed into a 'significant group.' However as Valkenier has noted, this was due at least in part to Party 'persuasion' of students to apply.<sup>33</sup> Yet this group of students was to become a celebrated and much-hyped yield for the Academy; they were the vanguard of the new artistic intelligentsia, educated on a strict and traditional program of life drawing, and their output was closely followed by the Soviet art press in the years following their graduation. Of the thirty or so students who comprised Brodskii's renowned 'class of '38' there were an exceptional number who enjoyed considerable success in their later careers: in addition to Laktionov, Iurii Neprintsev, Anatolii Iar-Kravchenko and Aleksandr Kazantsev went on to enjoy considerable acclaim.<sup>34</sup> There were accusations from some quarters that Brodskii had erased all traces of individuality from his students and that their work was all but indistinguishable one from the other, but Osipov describes a sensitive teacher who corrected mistakes 'without disturbing the manner and style of his students.'<sup>35</sup> Yet just paragraphs later he depicts Brodskii as an uncompromising believer in a 'culture of drawing', who fought tooth and nail against the 'evil' leftist influences still rampant among some students and staff of the Academy.<sup>36</sup> The august professor inspired, or so it is claimed in a collection of reminiscences celebrating his life and career, a devoted following among his pupils, who worked with enthusiasm from early in the morning until midnight, participated in excursions to Brodskii's home town of Berdiansk and attended creative evenings at his Moscow house, where they circulated in the auspicious company of celebrated artists, writers and actors. It is perhaps surprising that such a traditional, centuries-old approach to art education that rejected even nineteenth century forms of modernism could have been considered fresh and dynamic in the 1930s, but as the first generation of Soviet artists to emerge from the Socialist Realist mould the activities of these young artists were invested with an aura of audacity and innovation.

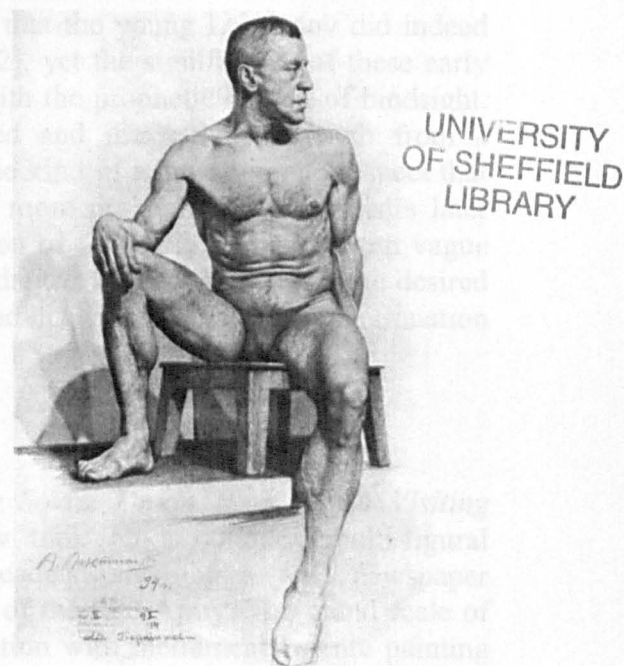


Fig. 2: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Male Nude*, 1934, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg

Amongst his group of classmates Laktionov was considered something of a leader and authority. According to the reminiscences of the artist Mikhail Kozell, who was educated alongside Laktionov at the Academy, 'We young artists always watched with interest how Laktionov worked.'<sup>37</sup> The official account celebrates Laktionov as

<sup>33</sup> Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 14.

Brodskii's star pupil and emphasises the intimate relationship shared between student and professor, citing as circumstantial evidence a handful of anecdotes most of which were written many years later. Most compelling of all are the words of Brodskii himself, who wrote about his student in a short article for an obscure Ukrainian journal that has since been reproduced in the artist's collected writings.

There was a great deal of discussion of Laktionov's natural gift, not only inside the school but also elsewhere. It was universally recognised that here was a great organic talent, of the sort which appears once every 50-100 years.<sup>38</sup>

It is clear from surviving sketches and studies that the young Laktionov did indeed exhibit a great talent in his student years [fig. 2], yet the significance of these early achievements has certainly been embellished with the prophetic benefit of hindsight. Was it really the case that a poorly-educated and inexperienced youth from a provincial town was capable of commanding the kind of admiration and respect that his biographers describe? Maybe so, but it is more probable that the artist's later success was the main catalyst in the fomentation of this early narrative, with vague recollections and reminiscences ideologically adapted in order to support the desired thesis: Laktionov was the protégé of Brodskii and his work represented a continuation of the best traditions of Russian realism.

### *A Hero of the Soviet Union*

For his diploma work *A Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops* [plate 1] Laktionov took on a complex multi-figural composition depicting a group of military cadets unveiling a wall newspaper produced in celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Red Army. The grand scale of the work prefigures the artist's later preoccupation with monumental genre painting and its process of development reveals his lasting ambition to create a landmark work of Socialist Realist art. An initially small group of cadets was gradually augmented with extra soldiers and the central figure was changed from the commander of the tank regiment (who somewhat ominously 'suddenly left' his office)<sup>39</sup> to the eponymous Captain Iudin, Hero of the Soviet Union, lending the work the specificity of a group portrait. Completed as it was in the period of the late 1930s purge of the upper echelons of the Soviet military, any representation of a senior officer carried with it an inherent element of risk. Most of the individual figures were based on genuine cadets, with early sketches annotated with both their names and in some cases nationalities ('Russian', 'Belarusian'). Even in a diploma work, such ideological details as the depiction of the ethnic diversity of the Red Army were an important factor of success.<sup>40</sup>

The work is grand and monumental both in its scale and composition, the gathered soldiers arrayed within a vast room looking out over the banks of the River Neva. The interior itself appears to have been modelled on a room in the Academy of the Arts and is distinguished by its neoclassical architecture including a pair of

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<sup>38</sup> Isaak Brodskii, *Pamiati I. I. Brodskogo*, p. 307.

<sup>39</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 33-34.

Corinthian columns dividing the two arched windows and a Romanic bass relief coving depicting a battle scene. The ornately carved furniture and rich, patterned rug, all painted with meticulous attention to detail, complete the impression of stately grandeur. Indeed, this magnificent room hardly seems like an ideal location for the production of a wall newspaper; paint pots and easels are strewn on the seats of the antique chairs and scraps of paper are falling to the floor. In the background hangs a life-sized portrait of Stalin and Voroshilov next to the Kremlin walls (its provenance unfortunately untraced). It is an amalgamation of forms that embeds a contemporary, specifically Soviet, event into the infrastructure of Russia's glorious past and imbues it with a sense of authority and permanence. In the rhetoric of the painting the Red Army is the legitimate heir of its imperial forbears. These magnificent premises, which would once have been home to those privileged by the tsarist regime, are now utilized by the equitable brotherhood of the Soviet Army in the production of celebratory propaganda. Captain Iudin, standing at the very centre of the canvas, is not aloof and imposing in spite of his array of decorations and stripes; rather he is comradely and affable in his appraisal of their artwork, his genial, fatherly manner mirroring that of Stalin in the painting behind him. The cadets are not standing on ceremony, but are gathered around in an informal huddle, with one, presumably the chief artist, still sitting proudly in his seat.

As one would expect from a diploma work, the painting is a showcase for Laktionov's technical ability. Each figure is carefully realised, based on a series of preliminary sketches in which the artist has included detailed studies of hands and boots to assist in their integration into the enlarged canvas. Most striking of all is the dramatic back-lighting from the two enormous windows, which throw bright sunbeams into some areas of the painting, cast others into dark silhouette, and create a complex web of shadows across the floor. One cadet's ear blushes brilliant red in the sunlight, Captain Iudin glows with an illuminated edge to his figure and the wall newspaper itself is rendered semi-transparent in the brightness, revealing a faint reverse image of its content along with a shadow from one of the cadets. The reflected glow of the white sheet of paper further illuminates Iudin's face and uniform with a flattering under-lighting and the bright rug, rumpled in the corner, creates a red glow on the cadets' boots and legs. This remarkable display of lighting effects is absent from the preliminary sketches from which the painting was composed, suggesting that the artist may have devised them at a later stage as a creative embellishment to the image. It is an early indication of Laktionov's preoccupation with the artistic representation of light and represents an injection of a distinctive individual style into an otherwise commonplace work of Socialist Realist genre painting.

Laktionov considered his work to be in an unfinished state on its submission to the board of examiners, but in spite of this he was awarded the top grade of 'excellent' for his work, and was commended at length for the 'life-affirming brightness' of his painting and the 'smiling eyes' of Captain Iudin, the like of which 'none of our artists have yet succeeded in capturing.'<sup>41</sup> It is of course possible that a degree of bias was involved in the marking process following the words of Brodskii to the board, 'If Laktionov is not awarded the top grade then I will leave the

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<sup>41</sup> G. Serii, *Molodye zhivopistsy: O vystavke diplomnykh rabot v Akademii khudozhestv* (Leningrad: Arkhitektura Leningrada, 1938), pp. 37-38.

Academy.<sup>42</sup> Brodskii considered the work, the theme of which he had helped to chose himself, to be a great success and was confident that while it was sure to provoke debate amongst the critics, 'the exhibition viewer will welcome the work of Laktionov.'<sup>43</sup> The famous teacher had invested a great significance in his close involvement with the Academy, and the successful reception of his first graduates held wider implication for his own career and reputation.

Just one month after its appraisal in the Academy, Brodskii's prediction was put to the test at the 1939 *Exhibition of the Works of Young Artists Celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Red Army* in Moscow. The impact the work made there foreshadowed the impassioned reactions that the artist's later works would provoke.

There can be no other diploma work that has become such an object of criticism, created such a sharp intersection of contradictory opinions, as this work by Laktionov. The argument surrounding it went beyond a debate about the merits and shortcomings of one concrete work to touch on a wider circle of problems. Questions of style and the method of Soviet art, the organization and principles of art education, the system of teaching in the Academy – all of these divided the opinions of the critics and artists.<sup>44</sup>

Laktionov's work was singled out by a number of Moscow critics as a symptomatic example of the backward Leningrad Academy and its outdated methods of art education. The mysteriously anonymous B. A., writing in *Tvorchestvo*, described how everything in the painting had been painstakingly 'drawn out and then accurately coloured in.'<sup>45</sup> He went on to condemn the misconceived composition and execution of the work:

Lifeless dummies with identical, indifferent, grinning mouths supposed to depict a 'joyous smile' are arranged according to the rules of composition. Besides the dummies, a red rug has been magically depicted in the bright sunlight. Here is a bit of landscape and there is an artificially drawn still life. All of this is mechanically united according to the principle of a Roman mosaic. As a result we have an underdeveloped illustration instead of a painting.<sup>46</sup>

By the late 1930s the campaign against formalism had come full circle and naturalism was perceived to represent the new threat to the expressive quality of Socialist Realist art. Following Brodskii's death in 1939, the dominant former members of AKhRR including Aleksandr Gerasimov and Katsman came under increasing pressure from rival factions, such as the former members of the OMKh Sergei Gerasimov and Petr Konchalovskii, who promoted a more 'painterly culture' in which expressive brush

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<sup>42</sup> Isaak Brodskii, 'Aleksandr Laktionov', *Isaak Iarailevich Brodskii: Stat'i, pis'ma, dokumenty* (Sovetskii khudozhnik: Moskva, 1956), p. 307.

<sup>43</sup> Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 74.

<sup>44</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> B. A. 'O kartine,' *Tvorchestvo*, no. 5 (1939), p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

strokes, tonal contrasts and rich colour would come to replace the flat finish and meticulous attention to detail that were associated with the Leningrad Academy.<sup>47</sup>

Brodskii's assertion that the work of the Academy represented a rebirth of the best traditions of the *Peredvizhniki* was hotly disputed by certain critics, who felt instead that it represented instead a return to older, bourgeois forms of academicism and bypassed the late nineteenth century development of critical realism. Writing in *Tvorchestvo* the prominent critic Nikolai Shchekotov specifically attacked this aspect of the work of the Leningrad students.

Apparently the battle of the nineteenth century artists for colour and light in painting, the battle in which such great artists as Repin, Surikov, Levitan and Serov distinguished themselves, all the achievements which were made in the field at that time, have been forgotten by our Leningrad Academy of the Arts.<sup>48</sup>

The output of Brodskii's first graduate class provided the earliest concrete evidence of the traditional academic approach manifested in a new generation of Soviet artists. Their inclusion in the 1939 exhibition contributed to the development of a clear schism between the conservative work of the Leningrad artists and the more expressive artistic language that was characteristic of the Moscow art establishment.

### **Moscow vs. Leningrad**

The 1932 reorganisation of the Soviet art apparatus may have allowed the adherents of traditional realism to establish hegemony over the course of the 1930s, but there was still a considerable variance in definitions of realism itself. While Brodskii's influence had come to dominate the Leningrad art establishment, the MOSSKh was subject in the late 1930s to an ongoing power struggle in which the conservative former members of AKhRR Aleksandr Gerasimov and Katsman attempted to impose their authority over MOSSKh and the Moscow Art Institute respectively.<sup>49</sup> Yet these organisations were subject to conflicting trends as prominent artists such as Arkadii Plastov and Sergei Gerasimov, who would regain the leadership of MOSSKh from his namesake Aleksandr in 1940, continued to promote the influence of Impressionism through their work. Although this influence was based on an isolated Soviet interpretation of certain elements of Impressionist aesthetics removed from their wider context in an evolving movement, it nonetheless contributed to the appeal of a looser, more painterly approach to painting in late 1930s Moscow, with an emphasis placed on form and expression as well as the all-important

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<sup>47</sup> Reid describes the critical reaction to the 1939 Industry of Socialism exhibition, which promoted a more painterly culture within the boundaries of figurative realism. 'While the critics in 1939 did not question the orthodoxy that realist painting's function was "cognitive", they insisted that this must be achieved by means of a synthetic, expressive and "genuinely pictorial" treatment of theme, summed up by the term "painterliness" or "painterly culture." High artistic quality had been part of the original prescription for Socialist Realism, but, as they now lamented, the overzealous crusade against formalism had resulted in a neglect of such professional matters in recent years.' 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror,' p. 178.

<sup>48</sup> Nikolai Shchekotov, 'Vsesoiuznaia vystavka molodykh khudozhnikov: Leningradskie khudozhnikov,' *Tvorchestvo*, no. 5 (1939), p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror', pp. 155-6.

socialist content. A work such as Iurii Pimenov's *New Moscow* (1937, GTG) which was exhibited alongside Laktionov's canvas at the 1939 Exhibition, was representative of a very different artistic culture to that of Brodskii and his students. Still far removed from Impressionism as a movement, this canvas nonetheless borrows certain stylistic features from nineteenth century French artists such as Claude Monet and Pierre-August Renoir including *plein-air* effects of lighting, a primacy of colour over line and short, visible brush strokes. In the eyes of prominent Moscow art critic Osip Beskin, who was editor of the major art journals *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*, this constituted an enlightened and dynamic approach to the forward momentum of Socialist Realism.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, according to the rhetoric of the Moscow critics such as Shchekotov, Brodskii and his students were shut away in the Leningrad Academy, surrounded by vestiges of the Imperial past and ignorant of the great leap forward that was being made in art and culture in the capital city. Brodskii supported an alternative interpretation of the demands of Socialist Realism that rejected all foreign influences (at least all nineteenth century ones) and fetishized instead the national legacy of Russian art. The teaching practices of the Leningrad Academy represented a revival of an old Imperial tradition, but this was by no means anomalous in the 1930s Soviet Union; amongst other major concessions to the past the Red Army reintroduced Imperial-style personal ranks in 1935 and rehabilitated certain Tsarist era figures such as Aleksandr Nevskii and Aleksandr Suvorov.<sup>51</sup> In his attempt to establish a traditional academic basis for Socialist Realism, Brodskii was engaging with the shift 1930s state strategy towards an adoption of historical methods of representing stability. The Russian avant-garde may have been a suitable art form for a new society, fresh from revolution, but in the 1930s the regime sought to consolidate its power base, preferably in nationalistic terms. As a Western European movement associated with innovation, Impressionism was considered by some to be ill-suited to the introspective process of building socialism in one country.<sup>52</sup> Brodskii's pantheon of acceptable influences was based on the safe formula of the Imperial academic model, in which the art of antiquity, the Renaissance and the Dutch School were adopted as acceptable influences, but Western European art of the nineteenth century was rejected in response to the breakdown in East-West relations under Aleksandr I and Napoleon.<sup>53</sup> In short, Brodskii and the All-Union Academy of the Arts aligned themselves with an art historical tradition that could be unambiguously applied to the building and glorification of a new national school of painting. In spite of the hostile

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>51</sup> For an account of the 1930s reinstatement of ranks, titles and uniforms in the military as well as the inauguration of various honours and awards in the rest of society see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 106-8. See also Kevin Platt and David Brandenberger, *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> For an analysis of the revolutionary mythology of the Impressionists see Philip Nord, *Impressionists and Politics* (Routledge: London, 2000), pp. 8-10. Alison Hilton has assessed the relationship between Socialist Realism and Impressionism in 'Holiday on the Kolkhoz: Socialist Realism's Dialogue with Impressionism', in Rosalind Blakesley and Susan Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 195-216.

<sup>53</sup> For a brief history of the Imperial Academy of the Arts see Rosalind Gray, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-11.



critical reaction that welcomed the diploma work of Brodskii's graduates on their inaugural exhibition in Moscow, the disciplined academic realism of Laktionov and others would, as we shall see over the course of this thesis, have a major bearing on the continuing development of the Soviet art establishment.

It is little wonder that Laktionov was discouraged by this initial response, his first experience of critical vitriol, and a precursor to later responses to his works of art. The young graduate became a teaching assistant to Brodskii in October of 1938 and subsequently begun a postgraduate course in January of 1939. The proposed structure of his three-year project exemplifies the traditional Academic approach that was practised by Soviet art students in the late 1930s: the first year was spent copying the works of Old Masters in the Hermitage, the second was spent on the composition of the *kartina* (a complex, large-scale oil painting) and the third was spent on the execution of a *kartina*. Frustrated by the perceived failure of his ambitious diploma work, Laktionov opted to alter this structure somewhat by preparing a series of portraits of famous Soviet notables for his dissertation work instead of a single large-scale canvas.<sup>54</sup> However work on this project was interrupted by two unforeseen events: first, the death of Brodskii in 1939, which burdened the student artist with extra teaching duties and second, the onset of war, which saw the artists of the Academy evacuated to Samarkand to engage in the production of propaganda. Laktionov never did return to complete his studies at the Leningrad Academy. After the war he left Samarkand directly for Zagorsk, on the outskirts of Moscow, where he would begin work on *A Letter from the Front*, the painting that earned him a place amongst the capital's artistic elite. It is this subsequent phase of Laktionov's career from 1947 onwards that will be the focus of the remainder of this thesis.

## Old Masters

Laktionov and his biographers placed a great emphasis on his artistic forbears in the representation and self-representation of the artist, but what was the concrete influence of these exemplary figures on his own style and technique? In spite of his unofficial status as Brodskii's heir and torchbearer of the legacy of Russian realism it is clear that Laktionov's works are strikingly different from those of either Brodskii or Repin, or for that matter any other twentieth century artist Soviet or otherwise. Although he was to some extent sustained by the myth of a Russian national style, his art, with its quasi-photographic finish and unusual effects of lighting was striking for its uniqueness in the field of Socialist Realist painting.

Repin emerged from an academic tradition that held a mastery of drawing in the highest regard. Yet the artist graduated from the cloistered environment of the Imperial Academy at a time when an awareness of new European trends was entering the Russian art world. In the late nineteenth century Repin undertook a series of trips to Europe on which he was exposed to the intoxicating aestheticism of French Impressionism with its emphasis on colour and form over line and content. Although he ultimately rejected the emerging Western notion of *l'art pour l'art*, and retained a strict conception of the boundary between the sketch or study and the finished canvas, selected works throughout his career display an adoption of certain Impressionist

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<sup>54</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 41-50.



devices; an emphasis of the primacy of colour and light and the use of thick, visible brush strokes.<sup>55</sup> This looser conception of realism was apparent in a number of the artist's works of social commentary, such as *They Did not Expect Him* [fig. 3], where some areas of the bare canvas are left exposed and others are filled with a painterly application of bright colour. Elsewhere, in official commissions and works of status portraiture Repin employed a more disciplined approach to drawing that was often likened to the style of Old Masters including Rembrandt and Velazquez, a comparison that the artist himself was keen to promote.<sup>56</sup> In the Soviet era such comparisons would be perpetuated in an effort to develop a cultural timeline leading directly to the art of Socialist Realism, which was in 1933 famously described as 'Rembrandt, Rubens and Repin put to serve the proletariat.'<sup>57</sup> Repin's approach to realism incorporated aspects of academicism, traditionalism and certain European influences. His works are at times naturalistic and create the illusion of detail, yet nowhere did Repin pursue the same intricate detail, fine brushwork or flat varnished finish as Laktionov, whose work is strikingly distinct from that of Repin and the *Peredvizhniki*.



Fig 3: Ilya Repin, *They Did Not Expect Him*, 1884, GTG

Brodskii, meanwhile, has been remembered in his Soviet incarnation as a firm advocate of academic realism, a kind of missing link between the 'critical realists' of the late nineteenth century and Socialist Realism. However this interpretation rests on the artist's status as a promoter of realism in the period of creative upheaval in the 1920s and 30s and requires a selective appraisal of his work. Certainly later flagship works such as *Lenin's Speech at the Meeting of Workers of the Putilov Factory in May 1917* (1929, Central Museum of V. I. Lenin, Moscow), *Lenin in Smolny* (1930, GTG) and *The Peoples' Commissar for Defence, Marshal of the Soviet Union K. E. Voroshilov out Skiing* [fig. 4] are meticulous, detailed and highly finished works, but these are atypical examples of Brodskii's overall output. Such paintings, often based

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, *The Russian Vision*, pp. 42-71. Some examples include *On a Turf Seat* (1876, GRM), *Girl with a Bunch of Flowers* (1878, The Museum of the Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg), *Religious Procession in the Province of Kursk* (1980-83, GTG), *They Did Not Expect Him* (1984, GTG) and a number of late portraits from the 1890s onwards.

<sup>56</sup> The establishment of a list of great masters to act as art historical precedents was part of the process by which the Russian national school of painting legitimised itself. Repin reportedly elevated Rembrandt and Velazquez as 'yardsticks of intellectual and technical excellence' whose naturalistic manner of representation and lack of idealisation appealed to the artist's conception of realism. Jackson, *The Russian Vision*, pp. 219-20.

<sup>57</sup> This definition was made by Ivan Gronskii writing in *Tvorchestvo* and is taken from Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror', p. 170.

on photographic sources, strove for a documentary realism in their verisimilitude.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere the artist maintained a strict conception of drawing, but experimented with a painterly application of colour and light, with some areas of his canvases filled with thick brush strokes and bold tones; the spiralling branches of a tree, the explosive colour of a flower, or the expressive pattern of a dress. Earlier more informal works such as *Self-Portrait with the Artist's Daughter* (1911, House Museum of I. I. Brodskii, St Petersburg) and *Portrait of Talalayeva* (1915 GTG, Moscow) represent a dramatic departure from the academic model for which he would later become spokesperson. Even in early contributions to the leader cult such as *Lenin outside the Kremlin* (1924, Central Museum of V. I. Lenin, Moscow) and *Lenin outside Smolny* (1925, present location unknown) the artist uses the distorted perspective, simplified forms and stark contrasts of light and shade reminiscent of post-Impressionism in his representations of the leader.

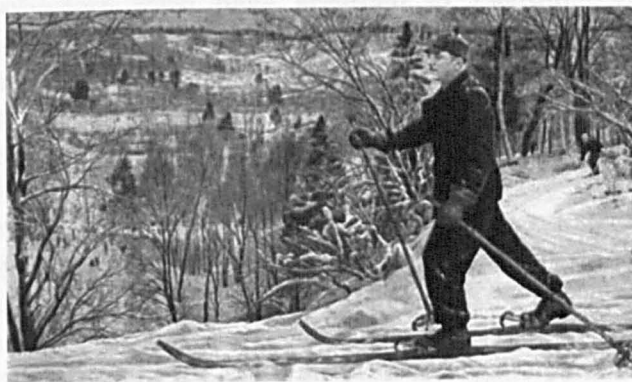


Fig. 4: Isaak Brodskii, *The Peoples' Commissar for Defence, Marshal of the Soviet Union K. E. Voroshilov out Skiing*, 1937, Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow

artistic development. In the 1950s Laktionov began a period of intensive research into the historical techniques of painting and engaged in the copying the works of famous artists such as Van Dyck and Velazquez as a means to capture and preserve the timeless styles and methods of the Old Masters.<sup>59</sup>

His talent as a copyist earned him an unusual commission in the mid 1950s. The Ministry of Culture enlisted Laktionov to make a reproduction of Jean-Etienne Liotard's delicate pastel work *The Chocolate Girl* (1743-45, Gemaeldegallerie Alte Meister, Dresden) before it was returned to East Germany in order to preserve a version of the work in the Soviet Union [fig. 5]. The copy was reportedly so perfect as to have been indistinguishable from the original.<sup>60</sup> The artist followed this commission with a series of pastel works, clearly influenced by his work on the

<sup>58</sup> See Brandon Taylor, 'Photo-Power: Painting and Iconicity in the First Five Year Plan', in Dawn Ades, Tim Benton et al., eds., *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-45* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with Hayward Gallery, 1995), pp. 249-52.

<sup>59</sup> Laktionov's copies of famous works have been lost from the record, but his daughter Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova recalled his work on these artists.

<sup>60</sup> This version of events is based on the recollections of Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova on 14 Dec. 2006. A photograph of the artist standing in front of both the original work and his own reproduction can be seen in Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 104. See also Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 139.

Liotard copy, which were exhibited at the 1957 All-Union Art Exhibition. February [fig. 26], *Portrait of an Old Teacher* (1956, private collection of E. V. Vuchetich, Moscow) and *Self-Portrait* [plate 5] all mimic the finely detailed pastel work of the Swiss artist with his textured and delicately modelled representations of the skin tones of his subjects and the fabric and fur of their attire. Visitors to the exhibition were awe-struck by the verisimilitude of their execution:

*Self-Portrait* is so good. How remarkable the face is, especially the eyes. You want to reach out and touch the coat and the scarf with your hands, not believing that they are drawn. You really want to try the softness of his coat. [...] It's very hard to draw in pastel and everyone thinks that it is an oil painting.<sup>61</sup>

The notion of applying his talent to the preservation of the nation's art collection must have appealed to Laktionov's passion for art history. Yet this commission reveals a surprising attitude towards the status of an original work. Was it considered acceptable to 'replace' the Liotard original with a Laktionov copy, or was it simply an exercise in demonstrating the talent of Soviet artists and their ability to recreate the techniques of acclaimed masters? This work, along with Laktionov's other reproductions, have been lost from the official record and warrant scant mention in his biographies; indeed they are not even listed in a catalogue of the artist's work in spite of textual and photographic references elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> However a number of variants of *A Letter from the Front* do survive (one is owned by the Central Art Gallery in New York, another is in a Vilnius gallery and an incomplete version was recently sold by a private Moscow gallery) which indicates that the production of authors' copies of works was a sanctioned practice in the Soviet art world as a means to disseminate an acclaimed work amongst a wider audience.<sup>63</sup>

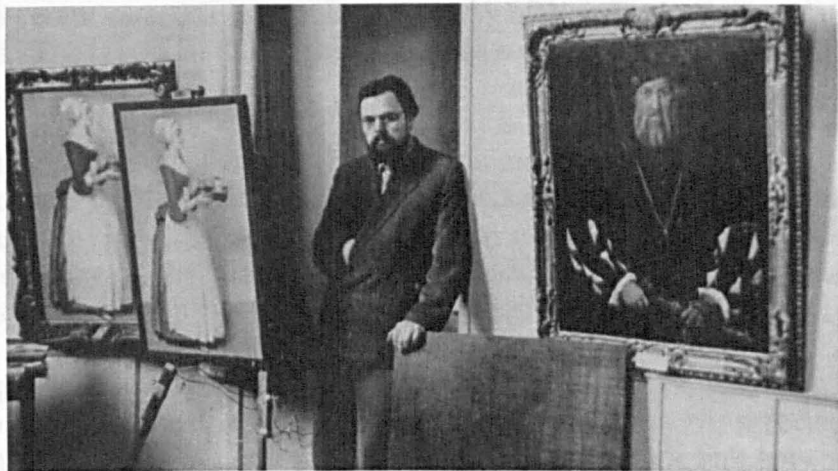


Fig. 5: Aleksandr Laktionov copying Liotard's *The Chocolate Girl*, 1950s, Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 104

<sup>61</sup> TsALIM, *Individual'nye otzyvy posetitelei vystavki '40 let oktiabria'*, 1957, f. 21, op. 1, d. 18, p. 227.

<sup>62</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76 makes a reference to the New York and Lithuanian versions, whilst an incomplete version was sold in 2005 by the Les Oreades Gallery in Moscow.



Laktionov's own cited list of influences offers no great surprises and steers close to the state-approved pantheon of great artists, as developed by Soviet art critics and historians over the course of the 1930s. A typically cagey answer to a (most likely staged) question from the audience at a public appearance in 1949 summarizes his official position quite clearly:

Which Western artists do I most like? If it is a question of current artists, then no one, but of the classics of Western art every artist has his God. M. Nesterov told me that if you are going to imitate, then you must imitate the very best: Velazquez, Van Dyck, Rembrandt and Rubens.<sup>64</sup>

Yet Laktionov's fascination with the history of art appears to run deeper than a mere passing admiration for a sanctioned list of Old Masters. In 1961 the artist co-authored a book entitled *The Technique of Soviet Portrait Painting* in which he, along with the art historian and critic Aleksei Vinner, examined the methods and materials of a diverse range of popular Soviet artists from Brodskii to Petr Konchalovskii and Aleksandr Deineka.<sup>65</sup> Laktionov's long entry, written by Vinner, deals at length with his painstaking 'classical' method of preparing multi-layered canvases and his preferred palette and brushes before moving on to an analysis of the specificities of the artist's technique. His meticulous style was, according to Vinner, the result of 'a long and difficult search, a vast amount of research that the author of this book has undertaken over a prolonged period.'<sup>66</sup> Laktionov began his investigations in the museum collections of the Soviet Union where he studied the funerary portraits of the Roman period, medieval art and icon painting in order to determine the origins of the techniques and materials of the Renaissance artists. He followed this with a 'systematic, detailed study of individual paintings of the Old Masters, revealing the reasons for the astounding preservation of the paint layers of these works and the clarity of their colours.'<sup>67</sup> His primary interest was in the art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in particular the works of Van Eyck, Titian, Van Dyck and Rembrandt. The results of this ongoing research were then applied to the development of Laktionov's own techniques.

The practical application of this search and the study of the techniques and methods of the works of the Old Masters are visible to some extent in all of Laktionov's works. So gradually, step by step, the 'secrets' of the remarkable perfection of the masters of painting and their ability to create works of exceptional longevity have been opened up.<sup>68</sup>

According to the rhetoric of this book, co-authored by the artist, Laktionov considered himself to be something of an art historian as well as an artist. His preoccupation with these 'lost' techniques of painting was an attempt to forge a link between his own work and that of the Old Masters, to continue their legacy and to invest his own work

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<sup>64</sup> GTG, f. 18, op. 1, d. 495, *Stenogramma vstrecha zritelei s laureatom stalinskoii premii A. I. Laktionov*, 3 Jan. 1949, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Alekasnadr Laktionov and A. Vinner, *Tekhnika sovetsoi portretnoi zhivopisi*, (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo VTsSPS, 1961).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

with a similar permanence, authority and status. This engagement with past forms was a distinctive feature of Laktionov's works of self-portraiture, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Many critics and artists considered Laktionov's art to represent a backward step in the development of Socialist Realism. Meanwhile the artist considered himself to be reviving forgotten practices from a period considered to be at the very pinnacle of art history, to be applying these practices to the brave new world of socialism and to be preserving Soviet culture for the benefit of future generations. In a technical article entitled 'On Glazing' which was included in a 1959 collection of essays on the techniques of painting, Laktionov outlined a method, borrowed from Jan Van Eyck, of applying multiple levels of varnish to a work of art in order to increase its longevity (*dolgovechnost'*).<sup>69</sup> This riposte to the accusations of 'varnishing' (*lakirovka*) and high finish (*zakonchennost'*) that had been levelled at the artist throughout his career carried with it an implicit message: Laktionov's works of art, like those of the Old Masters, would withstand the test of time. Laktionov's evocation of art historical precedents as the basis for his style and technique was a response to his detractors, whom he accused of staging a break with tradition and of 'pushing our art to the brink of boorishness (*nekul'turnost'*).'<sup>70</sup>

### Passing on the Torch

Over the course of the 1950s and 60s Laktionov's works were regularly accompanied by harsh notices in the press as critics attacked the naturalism of his paintings and expressed their concern about his particular conception of Socialist Realist art. Nonetheless the artist's status and authority was strengthened by the support and endorsement of several influential figures such as the President of the Art's Committee Petr Sysoev and the Ministry of Culture's Director of Fine Art, Andrei Lebedev. He was awarded a Stalin Prize first class and made a correspondent member of the USSR Academy of the Arts in 1949, later upgraded to full membership, and named as Honoured Artist of the RSFSR in 1958. In 1969 he was named as Peoples' Artist of the RSFSR. Over the course of the 1960s he began to participate more actively in the day-to-day affairs of the Soviet art establishment. In 1961 he joined the exhibition committee for the All-Union Exhibitions and took part in sessions of the Academy of the Arts, where he was able to apply his weight of authority to the continuing development of Soviet art and to ensure his posterity as a positive influence on a new generation of artists. *Ogonek* carried a series of adulatory articles on the artist and reproductions of his work throughout the late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>71</sup> This culminated, in May of 1970, with a biographical article entitled *A Belief in Truth* by the conservative artist Boris Shcherbakov, in which he attributed the Soviet continuation of the Academic tradition to Laktionov and his influence. The

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<sup>69</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'O lessirovkakh,' *O zhivopisi: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii khudozhestv SSSR, 1959), pp. 92-99.

<sup>70</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Uvazhenie i liubov' naroda—vyshaia nagrada,' *Pravda*, 4 Jan. 1963, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Ogonek*, 1955, no. 38 carries a front cover reproduction of *Sewing: Spring* (1955); *Ogonek*, 1957, no. 10 carries a back cover reproduction of *February* (1957); I. Shevtsov, 'Sila khudozhnika,' *Ogonek*, 1958, no. 5, pp. 10-12; Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Trud liubimyi, na vse zhizn' izbrannyi', *Ogonek*, 1963, no. 23, p. 8; Evgenii Katsman, 'Tri vstrechi s Laktionovym,' *Ogonek*, 1968, no. 2, pp. 16-17; Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Vchera i zavtra,' *Ogonek*, 1968, no. 29, pp. 8-9; V. Efanov, 'Razgovor o portrete,' *Ogonek*, 1969, no. 43, p. 24.

article, which was accompanied by no less than three full-page colour reproductions of Laktionov's work, concluded with a quote from the artist:

We must continue the race: we have accumulated the knowledge and contributed something ourselves to art. We must pass all this into the hopeful hands of our youth. Just as we inherited the legacy of Repin through the Academy, so we must continue this lineage, we must give what we have received to our students. The people call upon us to continue the great traditions of the Russian Realist School, and never to forget them!<sup>72</sup>

The guidance of young artists had been a primary concern among Soviet art theoreticians since the controversial reception of Brodskii's first graduate students in 1939. In the 1950s the issue became especially contentious as the struggle for definitions of realism began again in earnest. As a number of the older, 'Stalinist' generation of artists came under critical fire for their outdated means of expression, they placed an increasing emphasis on their role as educators and supporters of young talent in order to defend their privileged position.

Laktionov was no exception. As his stature grew within the art establishment he contributed a number of articles to the artistic and popular press, in which he urged Soviet youth to stand behind realist art and to resist the lure of formalism.

I would like to appeal to the young artists. I would like to tell them: enrich yourselves with knowledge, gain mastery. Do not seek sensations, do not look for rewards and laurel wreaths from the enemies of our homeland, but try to be worthy of the respect and the love of your own people.<sup>73</sup>

In 1967 Laktionov continued his active role in the development of Soviet art by taking on teaching duties in the Moscow State Correspondence-Learning Institute, where he became a professor in 1968. Here he remained a staunch supporter of the traditional academic model even as the Soviet art establishment departed ever further from the 'Stalinist' model of Socialist Realism through which he had launched his career. As Lebedev reminisced about Laktionov's methods of teaching:

In his teaching duties, as in his art, he was set apart by his unconditional orientation towards Socialist Realism and his devotion to the principles of truth to life.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout an unstable phase in the development of Soviet art and culture Laktionov's adoption of a selective canon of Art History contributed to the longevity of his status as a prominent advocate of Socialist Realism. As we shall see in the conclusion of this thesis, his legacy is one that continues to make its mark in the present day.

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<sup>72</sup> Boris Shcherbakov, 'Vernost' pravde,' *Ogonek*, 1970, no. 2, p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Laktionov, 'Uvazhenie i liubov' naroda—vyshaia nagrada,' p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Andrei Lebedev, 'Tvorchestvo Aleksandra Laktionova,' *Iskusstvo*, 1971, no. 4, p. 27.

## Academic Realism

The extent to which Laktionov's appropriation of past forms and historical precedents was considered laudable or even acceptable in the Soviet art world is questionable. The rhetoric of Socialist Realism was, from its origins in the early 1930s, complicated by a problematic contradiction. In their attempt to create a dynamic, forward thinking art form based on styles and techniques borrowed from the nineteenth century and further back still, the practitioners of Socialist Realism had forced an unhappy union between the radical dynamic of the avant-garde and the academic traditions of the Russian realist school.<sup>75</sup> The Soviet artist was, in effect, expected to be both radical and traditional in the same brush stroke, to show reality 'in its revolutionary development' without resorting to 'leftist distortion' or formalism. Realistic artistic representation, as developed by the courts and academies of Europe, carries with it historical connotations of bourgeois conservatism, yet in the Soviet Union of the 1930s it was required to cast off those shackles and enter the realm of the avant-garde in its production of a new society.<sup>76</sup>

The legacy of the *Peredvizhniki* provided a solution to the paradox. A Soviet approach to art history credited the *Peredvizhniki* as revolutionary elements within a largely bourgeois art establishment, who brought art closer to the masses by means of their critical approach to realism and their accessible, touring exhibits. Theirs was an academic realism that transcended its bourgeois roots. For Laktionov to associate himself with these established exempla of Russian national art was a useful survival strategy in the unpredictable critical environment of the 1930s. But those artists and critics who compared Laktionov's art unfavourably with the works of Repin, Serov and Surikov were missing the point; it was not the specificity of Repin's style and technique that Laktionov sought to emulate but rather the academic tradition of the late nineteenth century from which the *Peredvizhniki* emerged. That they had also challenged that tradition was beside the point; Brodskii's version of Socialist Realism promoted the educational and theoretical practices of the Imperial Academy with its emphasis on a grand narrative of European art. Yet academic realism, in the Soviet context, was not the vestige of a long and auspicious tradition, as it was in the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, rather it was a loose and amorphous concept based on a selective appraisal of European art and culture from an historical perspective; a partial revival of an artistic elitism that seized upon a handful of key names and theories. Laktionov's detailed courtly style was a product of this Soviet-ized version of art history. It was a form of 'high art' for the masses that was perfectly in keeping with the Stalinist drive for *kul'turnost'* (cultured-ness) and the demand to represent the stability of the developing Soviet state. As Laktionov himself wrote in 1963:

None of us, it is clear, thinks that the highest art is also the most accessible. At the same time we know that the people will stand behind lofty art, they will

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<sup>75</sup> Boris Groys has developed a controversial theory of Socialist Realism as a continuation and culmination of the avant-garde project whereby the utopian rhetoric of the 1920s was harnessed to a popular art form and invested with social and political significance. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> Robert Witkin, 'Bourgeois Production and Realist Styles of Art,' Jonathan Barry and Joseph Melling, eds., *Culture in History: Production, Consumption and Values in Historical Perspective* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1992), p. 200.

give their love and enthusiasm to it. [...] True art lives eternally and shines to us over the distance of the centuries, whereas pseudo-art dies before our very eyes, having barely had time to be born.<sup>77</sup>

Like the hybrid neo-classical architecture of Stalin's Moscow, Laktionov's art was an eclectic amalgamation of past techniques and influences. It was above all an attempt to represent the Soviet reality in a grand and magnificent form; that same form that had once captured the imagination of the young artist as he made his way from a conservative provincial art school through the traditional education system of the Leningrad Academy of the Arts to the dizzy heights of fame and fortune in the Soviet art world. It is a very Soviet story in which a combination of raw talent and dogged determination is recognised, moulded and rewarded by a benign and supportive establishment. Yet as we shall see over the course of this thesis, reality was not so straightforward and this constructed narrative acted as an official gloss over rough layers of corruption, controversy and criticism.

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<sup>77</sup> Laktionov, 'Uvazhenie i liubov' naroda—vyshaia nagrada,' p. 4.



**‘A Premonition of Victory’: A Letter from the Front**

On 30 April 1945 the Hammer and Sickle was raised over the Reichstag in Berlin and just eight days later the War in Europe was finally over. The Soviet Union began the gradual process of reconstruction of its damaged infrastructure and economy. The victory was won but it had come at a high price. The Soviet losses of over twenty-five million soldiers and civilians represented some twenty percent of the country's total population. Around one in five people perished as a result of military actions, starvation, cold or hard labour in four years of a war that left entire cities devastated and the national economy crippled. At the close of the War over ten million soldiers were dead or missing. Of the more than five million that were taken as prisoners of war by the Axis forces only half would survive, many of whom were to be sent directly into exile to bolster the depleted workforce of Soviet labour camps in the far North and East. Forced population movements were carried out on a vast scale in an effort to repopulate territory acquired during the relentless Westward advance. At home, the population was hit by severe food shortages—the combined result of a crippled agricultural infrastructure and drought—which saw the prices of staple goods triple and demanded the continuation of a Draconian rationing policy until 1947.<sup>1</sup> To put it simply, not one Soviet citizen remained untouched by the momentous events. Fighting may have ceased in 1945 but the legacy of The Great Patriotic War lived on, internalised by many of its survivors as a potent mix of national pride, bitter hardship and communal stoicism.<sup>2</sup>

Art provided a means for the devastated Soviet population to come to terms with its grief and suffering. During the immediate post-war years there was, in the Soviet Union as in the West, a spate of filmic, literary, theatrical and artistic portrayals of wartime events and the ultimate victory. Whilst these representations were often simple propagandistic attempts by the state to develop a patriotic mythology of the war, they played an important part in the process of remembrance, and as we shall see here often had a significant popular appeal. If one fine-art image captured the spirit of the period it was Aleksandr Laktionov's 1947 canvas *A Letter from the Front* [plate 2]. The painting is still hailed, both in Russia and abroad, not only as a sensitive representation of the Soviet war experience, but also as an iconic image of Socialist Realist art. The original painting now dominates its hall in the New Tretyakov Gallery on Krymskii val and author's copies are on display as far a field as Lithuania and New York.<sup>3</sup> It toured the world over the course of the 1940s and 50s

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the devastating consequences of WWII for the Soviet Union see Susan J. Linz, *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Rowman & Allanheld, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Recent accounts of the Soviet post-war situation include Elena Zubkova, trans. by Hugh Ragdale, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998) and Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead: the Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> E. V Nikolaeva and I. G. Miamlin refer to an author's copy that is owned by the Central Art Galley in New York and to another version that is owned by a Vilnius art gallery. *Aleksandr Ivanovich Laktionov* (Khudozhnik RSFSR: Leningrad, 1978), p. 76-7.

with Soviet art exhibitions in Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Finland, India, China and the United States. The painting was reproduced in the form of posters, postcards and postage stamps, printed in books, journals and newspapers and was even the subject of an indulgent 1951 monologue by the critic V. I. Antonova.<sup>4</sup> The artist was awarded a Stalin prize in 1948 for the painting and earned his place in the official canon of Soviet art. It has since been included in the 1993 exhibition, *Stalin's Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism, 1932-1956* at the P.S.1 Museum, New York and in the 2006 *Russia!* exhibition at the Guggenheim, New York.

Yet at the time of its first unveiling at the 1947 *All-Union Exhibition* in the Tretyakov Gallery the painting was hung in a poorly lit corridor, was largely ignored by the critics and seemed fated to slip into obscurity.<sup>5</sup> The story of how and why a highly detailed genre painting by a little-known young artist made such an unanticipated impact in the Soviet art establishment of the post-war years is yet to be told. How did the popular response to a painting at a Soviet art exhibition play its part in the painting's reappraisal and acceptance? Why did this painting stand out amongst the others at the exhibition and why has it continued to enjoy such enormous popularity? Who was behind the promotion of this painting and how did its imposed significance influence the direction of Socialist Realist art development in the years to come? Based on an analysis of the official response to the work in the popular and specialist press and within the discussions of the art organisations, this chapter will chart the remarkable story of *A Letter from the Front* and examine its importance for Soviet culture of the late Stalin era. It is a Barthesian story in which the author himself figures only as a bit part in the grand narrative of his own painting, as its significance is first stifled, then debated and ultimately appropriated by various players in art establishment.<sup>6</sup> It is also an account of the subjective and sometimes arbitrary mechanisms of success in the Soviet art world, which depended on the tastes and influence of those at the top of the Party hierarchy.

The work was initially viewed with suspicion and curiosity by both the liberal artists of the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSSKh, later MOSKh) and the conservative artists and critics of the USSR Academy of the Arts, who saw in it the potential for furthering their own conceptions of Socialist Realist art. However attitudes towards the work became increasingly polarised following Andrei Zhdanov's late 1940s attacks on the literary and theatrical organisations, the fallout from which led to a clampdown on vestiges of formalism and cosmopolitanism in the fine arts. *A Letter from the Front*, with its detailed academic modelling and familiar artistic language, was supported by the dominant conservative power holders in the Ministry of Culture and the USSR Academy of the Arts as a genuinely popular affirmation of traditional realist art. It was vilified on the other hand by liberal artists and critics, including the

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<sup>4</sup> V. I. Antonova, *Kartina A. I. Laktionova, Pis'mo s fronta* (Moskva: GTG, 1951). As early as 1948, prior to the painting's awarding of a Stalin prize, it was reproduced in a print run of 50,000 postcards and large scale posters. Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-6.

<sup>6</sup> In 'The Death of the Author' Roland Barthes argues that the meaning of a text is dependent not on the author's intentionality but on the reader's interpretation. 'The unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination.' Here I argue that dominant forces in the Soviet art establishment imposed their own meanings on Laktionov's work, independent of the actual origins of the painting. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in Roland Barthes, trans. by Stephen Heath, ed., *Image Music Text* (Hill and Wang, 1978).

influential writer Osip Beskin and the artist Sergei Gerasimov, who argued that the style of the painting was outdated and indicative of the growing predominance of naturalistic tendencies in Soviet art. But for the lay viewer none of this was especially important. *A Letter from the Front* was above all a popular and accessible image that represented an optimistic and nostalgic vision of the war experience.

### *A Letter from the Front*

The painting depicts a small family group—a mother with her son and daughter—a neighbour and a wounded soldier standing in the dilapidated doorway of an apartment block in Zagorsk (now Sergeiev Posad) outside Moscow. The soldier, who has presumably returned from the front to recuperate from a minor injury, has brought with him a letter from the missing father, which the young boy is reading aloud with evident pride and pleasure. In the background a square covered in sparse tufts of grass, still brown in places after a harsh winter, stretches out towards the distant spire of a church. A few old, dead leaves are scattered across the worn porch while in the distance bright new growth is visible on the trees. The scene is infused with a brilliant sunlight that throws colours into sharp contrast; faces, hair, clothing and above all the letter at the very centre of the composition glow with bright white edges [fig. 6], while the doorway itself is plunged into dark shadow. In reproduction the detailed realism of the image is reminiscent of a photograph, yet the surface of the canvas is heavily textured. The bright areas of white paint in particular are thickly layered and stand out from the rest of the canvas in jagged peaks and troughs. The painting is certainly striking and accomplished, but to the Western observer, at least, there is little to set it apart from other works of Socialist Realist painting—it is surely guilty of the one-dimensional sentimentality that afflicted the worst examples of Stalinist art. So what was it about this painting that so endeared it to its Soviet audience?

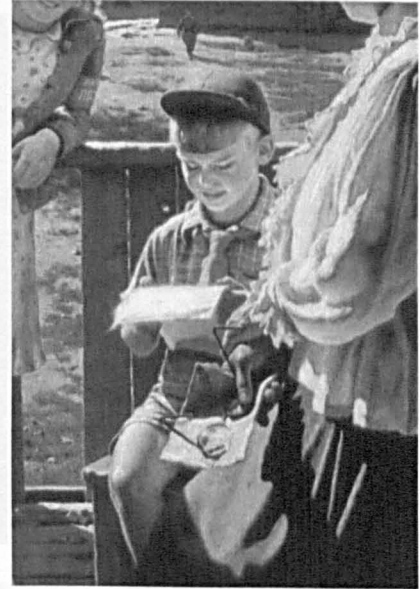


Fig. 6: Aleksandr Laktionov, *A Letter from the Front*, detail

Here is a premonition of the victory and the assurance that it is on the verge of occurring. That is why there is such blindingly bright sunlight, such fresh green leaves, such a joyful blue sky and why the most usual and insignificant objects become beautiful as they unite with the atmosphere of a warm day. Such a sky, such a sun will always shine when there is peace!<sup>7</sup>

This is how the work was described in a 1978 biography of the artist. It is clear that although the painting was painted and exhibited almost two years after the war had come to a close it fulfilled a demand for alternative representations of the victory. Other artists had dealt with the momentous events of 1945 in the

<sup>7</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 74.

monumental, heroic manner that has come to represent the Western stereotype of Socialist Realist art. Typical subjects of the post-war years were epic victory parades and salutes such as Boris Ioganson's *Victory Celebration* (1947, State Historical Museum, Moscow), paintings of Soviet troops participating in the Nazi defeat such as Mikhail Khmel'ko's *The Triumph of the Conquering People* [fig. 7] or Vasilii Iakovlev's grandiose portrait of Marshall Zhukov, *Victory* (1945, GTG) and group portraits of the Party and allied leadership welcoming a new era of peace such as Vasilii Efanov's *Yalta Conference* (1946, GTG). Monumental in scale and composition, imposing and patriotic, these works imbued the War with a mythological status that matched the prevailing ideology of victory. In official discourse it was a victory of the Motherland (*rodina*), a victory of the people (*narod*)



Fig. 7: Mikhail Khmel'ko, *The Triumph of the Conquering People*, 1949, GTG

and an inevitable triumph of socialism brought about by a nation of heroes and unwavering leadership.<sup>8</sup> It was greeted, on 25 June 1945 by a celebration on Red Square, in which battalions of Soviet troops and military hardware were paraded before the Lenin Mausoleum upon which stood the party leadership. Thousands of soldiers amassed as one immense and powerful body that dismissed recent memories of bloody massacres, hunger, cold and impending defeat as a distant nightmare.<sup>9</sup> Such stirring bombast no doubt satisfied a primary need to visualise the remote victory but, like the epic battles themselves, the scale of these representations must have rendered them inaccessible to the everyday people for whom the Great Patriotic War remained a deeply troubling and tragic event. The victorious society of post-war Stalinism held no place for painful memories of suffering or loss; the wounded were hidden away in

<sup>8</sup> See for example Stalin's victory speech to the Soviet people on 9 May 1945 in which he speaks of the War as a chapter in 'the age-old struggle of the Slavic peoples for their existence' and pays homage to the 'heroic Red Army which upheld the independence of our Motherland and won victory over the enemy' and 'our great people-the victor people'. Already, on the day of victory, the War has been integrated into the grand narrative of Soviet history and reinvented as a nation-building myth. Trans. by *Ibiblio*: <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1945/450509b.html>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>9</sup> For an evocative description of the first Victory Day parade see Zubkova, *Russia after the War*, pp. 92-4.

remote sanatoria and repatriated prisoners of war were transferred directly from the Concentration Camp to the Gulag.<sup>10</sup>

Laktionov's canvas, on the other hand, dealt with the victory in microcosm depicting the human face of the home front—a place where countless Soviet citizens waited in anxious uncertainty and helplessness for news of their loved ones and reports about the course of the war. It is a nostalgia-saturated vision of war-time provincial life that celebrates the everyday sacrifices and unsung heroism of the women and children who stayed behind to keep the home fires burning. Although *A Letter From the Front* does contain the usual, obligatory symbols of Soviet life—the young boy's Pioneer neckerchief, the neighbour's red fire warden's armband and the soldier's decorations—they are relegated to secondary detail behind imagery of the family, provincial life, Russian nationalism and even religion. Everything about the work, from the traditional rustic costume of the old woman and the young girl to the church spire visible across the unkempt courtyard gives the sense that the scene could have been plucked from a different chapter of Russian history. With the exception of the vapour trails in the sky and the young boy's bright blue cap, the trappings of the modern world are conspicuous by their absence. As Andrei Lebedev has written of the work:

An individual, private scene from the life of a simple Soviet family has in a sense grown into an expansive and deep picture of those socialist community relationships, which turned out to be one of the important conditions of our defeat of the fascists. The painting demonstrates the mood of the people with the idea of an enduring unity of interests in the Soviet home front, in the Soviet army and in all people.<sup>11</sup>

The victory in Laktionov's work is not one of epic and bloody battles, advanced technological warfare or strategic ingenuity – it is a victory of the everyday citizen over long years of uncertainty, privation and loss. We will see later in the chapter how the intimate nature and typicality (*tipichnost'*) of the work were important factors in its successful reception.

## The Post-War Soviet Art World

Laktionov's new canvas was indicative of a number of trends that were apparent in the post-war Soviet art world. The catastrophic upheavals of the war made their mark on the Soviet art establishment as on all areas of society. In 1941, seven years after the official declaration of Socialist Realism when Zhdanov had called upon artists to 'be in the front ranks of those who are fighting for a classless socialist society', art was mobilised for a new cause—the production of wartime propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Nina Tumarkin, 'The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory' in *European Review* 11, no. 4 (2003), pp. 595-611.

<sup>11</sup> Andrei Lebedev, 'Aleksandr Laktionov', *Khudozhnik i sud'ba naroda: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1983), p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Speech by Andrei Zhdanov to the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934. 'Soviet Literature: the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature', 1934, *Marxists Internet Archive*: [http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit\\_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm](http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm), last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.



Its writers, composers, directors and artists of standing, were gradually evacuated from their institutes in Moscow and Leningrad and sent to towns and cities in the interior to fulfil the urgent demand for agitational material.<sup>13</sup> Art production, like heavy industry and arms manufacture was treated as a valuable strategic resource that was withdrawn to the rear to continue its important work. It is an indication of the significance attached to the fine arts by those in power that the mechanisms of the art world continued to function throughout the war. Artists received government commissions and took part in exhibitions organised in major cities including the besieged Leningrad, and even directly at the front. Some artists, such as Gregorii Melikhov, were assigned to divisions of the Red Army to document first hand the hardships of life in the trenches.<sup>14</sup> The prestigious Stalin Prizes continued to be awarded and a vast number of posters and paintings were produced dealing with contemporary images of the war, historical battle scenes and portraits of military and political leaders and heroes.



Fig. 8: Arkadii Plastov, *Haymaking*, 1945, GTG

Although the bureaucratic structures of the art establishment continued to operate throughout the war, there was a marked decline in the processes of art criticism and evaluation. The major art journals *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo* were not produced during the years 1942-7 and the issues of artistic technique, style and subject matter that had dominated and at times stifled the Soviet art establishment throughout the 1930s were now superseded in the press by more pressing concerns. Freed from the critical glare, many of their number in a state of temporary exile away from the major cities, the artists of the Moscow and Leningrad Artists' Unions amongst others experienced a period of tentative creative freedom in the years of the

<sup>13</sup> The majority of the staff and students of the Leningrad Academy of the Arts, including Laktionov, were transferred to Samarkand in Uzbekistan until 1945. See Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn' – istochnik vdokhnoenia khudozhnika', *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1961), p. 285.

<sup>14</sup> K. Sitnik, 'Laureate Artists', *Soviet Literature*, 1949, no. 7, p. 131.

war that lingered long after the eventual victory. Evidence of this comparative relaxation can be seen in several major works of the period in which formal aesthetic and traditional Russian features were elevated above the socialist theme. Arkadii Plastov's *Haymaking* [fig. 8], which was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1946, is an acclaimed example of these trends. Through his depiction of women, old men and children engaged in physical labour the artist was acknowledging the human cost of a war that had devastated the young male population, and the bright sun-dappled field imbues the work with a sense of optimism for the future. Yet its traditional rural setting sets the painting apart from the depictions of Soviet industry and advanced collective farming techniques that represented the norm in the late 1940s.<sup>15</sup> The canvas is awash with splashes of colour and light that transcend any purely realistic representation of tangled flowers, leaves and insects. Details are neglected and the canvas is instead built up of thick brush strokes with garish purples, greens and yellows applied side-by-side to create a dazzling, vivid surface. These Impressionist features of Plastov's painting were typical of works by a number of successful artists in the post-war years including Sergei Gerasimov, Boris Ioganson and Mikhail Kostin. In 1946 the avant-garde apologist Nikolai Punin made an address to the Leningrad Artists' Union in which he asserted that Impressionism represented a viable method for Socialist Realist painting and extolled the virtues of artists such as Monet and Cezanne.<sup>16</sup> Yet Punin's position was not tenable in the Soviet art world of the late 1940s. The post-war 'mini thaw' came to an abrupt end in 1946 as the Party initiated a hard-line attack on Western influences in art and culture and reasserted the importance of ideology as the key tenant of Socialist Realism.

Cultural policy after 1946 was dictated by Andrei Zhdanov, who presented a series of decrees attacking the foreign influence of formalism evident in the works of Soviet writers and composers.<sup>17</sup> Although his words did not relate directly to fine art they provided the necessary ammunition for the older generation of conservative artists and critics, already dominant in positions of power within the Soviet art establishment, to initiate a clamp-down on formalist tendencies and harmful 'cosmopolitanism.' As an outspoken critic of Soviet cultural policy and advocate of international trends, Punin was arrested in 1949 and sent into Siberian exile.<sup>18</sup> Success and popularity offered scant protection from criticism and condemnation, as many of the Soviet Union's leading composers including Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev and Aram Khachaturian were subsequently attacked at a special congress of the Composers' Union. Their works were banned from public performance, their privileges as prominent Party members were revoked and they were subjected to a constant fear of arrest and persecution for many years to come.<sup>19</sup> In 1947 the USSR

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the changing representation of Soviet landscapes in the post-war years see Alison Hilton, 'Holiday on the Kolkhoz: Socialist Realism's Dialogue with Impressionism', in Rosalind Blakesley and Susan Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 207-9.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> For a reactionary Soviet account of this process see K. A. Sitnik, *Voprosy teorii sovetskogo iskusstva: sbornik statei* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1950), pp. 51-2.

<sup>18</sup> Sidney Monas, Jennifer Greene Krupala, eds., *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 183

Academy of the Arts (AKh SSSR) was formed after a period of long gestation, and the conservative 'court painter' Aleksandr Gerasimov was installed as its President. Gerasimov's reactionary line called for the rejection of all foreign influences and formalist innovation, and a strict adherence to a national, realist school of ideological art.<sup>20</sup> In an impassioned 1948 letter to the head of the Department of Propaganda and Education Mikhail Suslov, the liberal writer Osip Beskin criticised Gerasimov's authoritarian control over the art establishment. Beskin described Gerasimov as a 'prince and lord' who had gathered around him a group of critics who held the exclusive right to express an opinion.<sup>21</sup> Although their voices were stifled, a number of writers and critics began to speak out in the late 1940s against the repressive cultural policies of the *Zdanovshchina*, which they felt were leading to an enforced environment of artistic stagnation. Their protests laid the basis for some of the power struggles that were to come in the 1950s.

It was in an art establishment overshadowed by these events that Laktionov first exhibited his canvas at the 1947 *All-Union Exhibition* where they had no small part to play in the critical reception of the work. A minor myth later arose around the premiere of this work, propagated in part by the artist himself and consolidated by certain conservative critics and writers. As the story goes, Laktionov's painting was initially judged to be defective in a number of ways, in particular in its honest depiction of a shabby, worn porch with cracked floorboards and flaking plaster on the walls. One committee member even recommended that the artist should 'do up the ugly planks with new floorboards' before it would be suitable for exhibition to a Soviet and overseas audience.<sup>22</sup> The young artist was still relatively unknown in the Soviet art world and these shortcomings were enough to ensure that the canvas was hung in an unfavourable position in a dull passageway of the Tretyakov Gallery where it could be safely ignored by the majority of visitors. But the exhibition selection committee did not foresee the perspicacity of the Soviet people, who were drawn to the painting in spite of its poor location. In the first days of the exhibition crowds of eager viewers thronged around the painting, blocking the passageway and the exhibition visitors' book was filled with gushing praise for the artist and his work. Within a few days the organisers acquiesced to popular demand and transferred the painting to a more suitable position in a gallery where it could be appreciated in all its glory and without causing further congestion.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst this account has certainly been 'varnished' by its narrators, it is clear that it has some basis in truth. Initial reviews of the exhibition published in *Pravda* failed to mention the work, and an *Iskusstvo* editorial review simply mentioned Laktionov (misspelled 'Loktionov') in a list of young artists participating in the exhibition.<sup>24</sup> Writing in *Ogonek* in 1958 of the events surrounding this painting's first

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<sup>20</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Zadachi Akademii Khudozhestv SSSR v dele khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia', Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Za sotsialisticheskii realism: sbornik statei i dokladov* (AKhSSSR: Moskva, 1952), pp 247-55.

<sup>21</sup> Beskin's letter was written in protest of his rejected application to join the board of critics at MOSSKh. His complaint was rejected in a letter signed by Suslov. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 86, *Spravki upravleniia propagandy i agitatsii TsK VKP(b) i otdela iskusstv, itd.*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>22</sup> D. Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* (Moskva: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1968), p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 74. For similar accounts see also Osipov, *Laktionov*, p. 103 and V. I. Antonova, *Kartina A. I. Laktionov 'Pis'mo s fronta* (Moskva: GTG, 1951), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> 'O Vsesoiuznoi khudozhestvennoi vystavki', *Iskusstvo*, 1947, no. 1, p. 7.



exhibition, the conservative writer Ivan Shevtsov asserted that the painting was in fact hung in a dark corridor in an attempt by some jealous art professionals to suppress the dangerous naturalistic tendencies of the young artist.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately the visitors' books from the 1947 *All-Union Exhibition* have so far proven to be elusive, although references to them and quotes from them were made by various critics and artists of the period, making it possible to formulate a cautious sense of the public response to the painting. Nikolaeva and Miamlin, writers of a 1978 hagiography of the artist, have claimed that three-quarters of positive comments in the visitors' books were about Laktionov's painting.<sup>26</sup> Judging by the stir that the work caused amongst the artists and critics of MOSSKh, a number of whom referred to the positive public reception of the work in their evaluation of the exhibition, it seems likely that the painting was indeed well received by the Soviet audience.

### **The Moscow Artists' Union Debate**

So seriously was the response to this work taken by MOSSKh that in March of 1948 a private exhibition of the work of Laktionov and some of his contemporaries from the Leningrad Academy, Aleksei Gritsai, Shepeliuk, Boris Shcherbakov and Viktorov was organised in its halls. The exhibition was followed by a lively discussion of the works on display and their significance for the future of Soviet art. The acclaimed artist Pavel Sokolov-Skalia chaired the proceedings but the president of MOSSKh, Sergei Gerasimov, was conspicuous by his absence, as were all of the affiliated art critics. Coming as it did in the midst of Zhdanov's outbursts against the artistic intelligentsia, the proceedings were lent an atmosphere of daring and audacity that Rutsai described as 'white hot'<sup>27</sup> (*nakalennaia*). The artist Anatol'ev described the prevailing mood of recalcitrance:

Some say that the people are lagging behind and that we need to lead them forward, but the same thing was said by the composers Prokofiev and Shostakovich. They also thought that the masses lagged behind and that it is necessary to lead them forward on the path of this new art. Very many people applauded them for this sentiment and they were even awarded Stalin Prizes, but now they have been, as they say, disbanded. They were shown that they had made a mistake, but not only had they made a mistake, but also their critics had made a mistake and as a result these critics are now completely bewildered. I'm sure that MOSSKh invited the critics to take part today, to say what is good and what is bad at our exhibition, but they probably refused.<sup>28</sup>

If even Stalin Prize laureates could be subjected to censure then who could predict where the axe would fall next? Anatol'ev alleged that the critics section of MOSSKh was burying its head in the sand until the unpredictable repercussions of the *Zhdanovshchina* had blown over. Unclear as to what exactly constituted 'new art' there was an unwillingness to commit to a critical position that could later be

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Reid, 'Destalinization and Taste, 1953-1963,' *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), pp. 183-4.

<sup>26</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 1206, *Stenogramma zasedaniia sektsii po obsuzhdeniiu vystavki khudozhnikov Viktorova, Gritsai, Laktionova, Shepeliuka, Shcherbakova*, 2 Mar. 1948, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

construed as unacceptable. Although a number of participants at this meeting were outspoken in their contributions, it should be born in mind that the discussion was inevitably coloured and inhibited by the recent interventions of Zhdanov and the pervasive fear of repercussions.

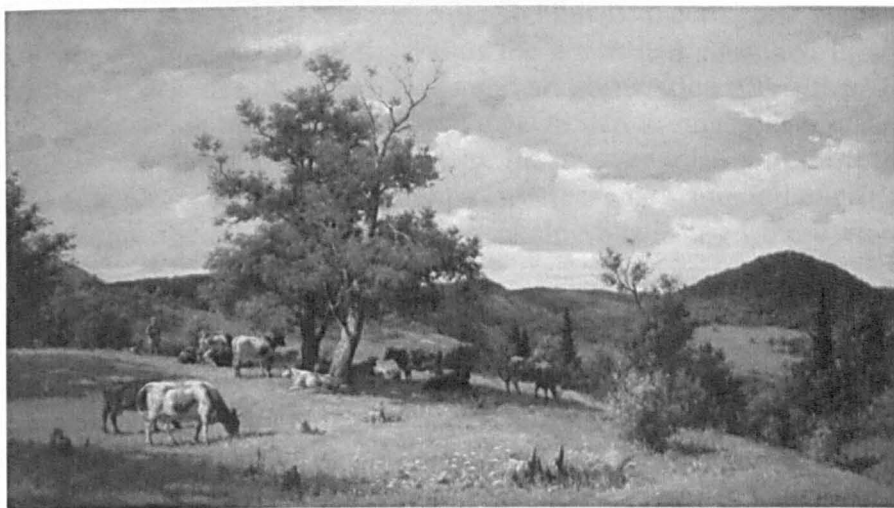


Fig.9: Boris Shcherbakov, *In the Ural Hills*, 1940s, present location unknown

Exhibit A, for these artists, was the exhibition itself: a collection of paintings and studies from the 1930s and 40s in various genres that were connected by the academic realism of their execution; portraits and genre paintings with a classical approach to the sculptural forms of their protagonists, landscapes with naturalistic lighting effects and meticulous perspectival depth, above all a uniform level of detail that was not restricted only to the subject of the painting but extended also to the backgrounds, edges and extreme corners of the canvases [fig. 9]. These were features of the paintings that led their detractors to accuse the artists of ‘photographism’, ‘naturalism’ and ‘superfluity’. All of the exhibited artists, with the exception of Viktorov, had studied at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts under the tutelage of Isaak Brodskii and all had, to some degree, inherited their mentor’s rigorous approach to realism and traditional forms. In the late 1940s MOSSKh had amongst its affiliated members a number of liberal artists and critics, including Beskin, Vladimir Kostin and Aleksandr Kamenskii, whose progressive opinions would, in the 1950s, earn the organisation a reputation as a ‘bastion of liberal intelligentsia values.’<sup>29</sup> What then, were these paintings, including the ‘icon of neo-academicism’<sup>30</sup> *A Letter from the Front*, doing in an exhibition in the halls of MOSSKh? In 1948 MOSSKh was still dominated by a number of conservative elements, and fell under the powerful influence of the newly established AKh SSSR.<sup>31</sup> Was this exhibition staged in order to present an edifying example of successful academic art to the wayward artists of

<sup>29</sup> This is how Reid describes the reputation of MOSSKh in the mid to late 1950s. Reid ‘Destalinization and Taste’, p. 184. See also an analysis of the struggles of MOSSKh in the thaw period in Reid, ‘In the Name of the People’, pp. 673-716 and Reid, *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1963*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> Beskin claimed that his application had been rejected under the influence of the President of the AKh SSSR, Aleksandr Gerasimov. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 86, *Spravki upravleniia propagandy i agitatsii TsK VKP(b) i otdela iskusstv, itd.*, pp. 11-13.

MOSSKh? If this was the case, then the ensuing debate reveals that it was singularly unsuccessful, and instead contributed towards the growing divide in artistic judgments that would counterpose the increasingly liberal values of MOSSKh against the conservative traditions of the AKh SSSR.

Criticism was tempered somewhat by Exhibit B: the visitors' books from the *1947 All-Union Exhibition*, which several of the artists had consulted in advance of the discussion. It was these visitors' books and an observation of visitors' behaviour at the exhibition that, in part, led the artists of MOSSKh to stage this private viewing, with the intention of uncovering the secrets of the mass popularity of these young and relatively unknown artists. and to discuss whether they might be groomed and moulded as future members of MOSSKh. Sokolov-Skalia used these words in his opening address:

One of the tasks of today's discussion is to create some kind of atmosphere around these people, to bring them into a godly light by means of comradely criticism and comradely participation [...] and to induce them to live the life of a MOSSKh artist, a life of comradeship.<sup>32</sup>

The initial goal of the discussion was to work out exactly why such paintings enjoyed great popularity amongst the public and how that popularity might be harnessed. No such constructive resolution was achieved, however, as the meeting took on the nature of a show trial, in which the paintings of these unfortunate artists were placed in the dock. As the alleged ringleader, Laktionov and his painting *A Letter from the Front* were subjected to intense criticism as the artists of MOSSKh merged the disciplined academic realism of the work with the conservative dictates of Zhdanov to reveal an ominous trend that threatened their very concept of Socialist Realist art. Vera Gertsenberg outlined the wider significance of the meeting:

This analysis of art raises a particularly tense issue, because many of us want to answer this question: what is the correct path and must we go in that direction? [...] It is dangerous that these artists will leave this exhibition as the accused, and that this viewing has turned into a court of law.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless a number of participants did speak out in defence of Laktionov and his fellow artists, although some of the more extreme comments, like that of Kotov who described the exhibition as 'landmark' (*etapnaia*) and compared it to the realist counter-revolution of the 1920s, served only to aggravate the sense of threat represented by these works.<sup>34</sup> Similarly Bogorodskii, who had helped Laktionov out in the early stages of his career, issued a stark warning to the gathered artists of MOSSKh:

The fact of the matter is that the people have their point of view on art and we, artists and specialists, have another. This divergence led, fairly and naturally, to the ruin of the formalists in music. If you so wish that same fate can happen to us, if we do not understand in time that we are painting only for the people,

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<sup>32</sup> RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 1206, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

that all of our experiments are necessary, but they must remain in our workshops or be shown at posthumous exhibitions.<sup>35</sup>

He concluded by quoting the words of Lenin that 'art belongs to the people, it must be understood by them and loved by them.'<sup>36</sup> To refute the value of Laktionov's work was to dispute not only the judgement of the proletariat, but also the immortal words of Lenin himself; how then were the artists of MOSSKh to proceed with their criticism?

Whilst it was acknowledged by the gathered artists that Laktionov was a talented painter whose works had a particular ability to 'mobilise the masses' the majority of praise was couched in begrudging or contradictory terms.<sup>37</sup> 'Laktionov's strength, of course, is in the fact that he is trying to follow some kind of new path, although one could also say that it is a very old one.'<sup>38</sup> Several references were made to the visitors' books filled with effusive praise for *A Letter from the Front* and Gertsenberg even quoted directly from their pages. 'Comrade critics! Why does your opinion about Laktionov's painting not correspond to the opinion of the everyday person? Think about this!'<sup>39</sup> Although she criticised Laktionov's naturalistic approach to painting, his love of special effects and his reliance on traditional, academic methods of representation, she could only concede that this canvas did indeed wield a particular power over the viewer.

There are comments, in which a viewer has written that he experienced a revelation, as if transferred to the front, and felt the happiness carried by this letter. In short, the painting compels the viewer to work; he approaches it with all the baggage of his life and it forces him to stop and think about those that are close to him. This is why it is truly popular.<sup>40</sup>

The accessible realism and transparent ideology of *A Letter from the Front* were identified as the basis of its popular appeal. Yet to acknowledge that Laktionov's traditional style of painting was indeed a positive contribution to the development of the Socialist realist canon would have been tantamount to an admission that many of MOSSKh's own artists were guilty of harmful formalist tendencies in their own works. With loyalties torn between the pressing need for self-preservation and the desire to stand up for their own liberal principles, many chose simply to remain silent.<sup>41</sup> Where artists did wish to voice criticism it was often expressed in cautious terms and was concentrated, for the most part, on the traditional or 'out-dated' forms of the paintings. Sokolov-Skalia used the term 'museum-like' (*muzeinoe*)<sup>42</sup> to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 67, Spoken by Tovalisev.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 42, Spoken by Vera Gertsenberg.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Tovalisev, for instance, urges his comrades to speak out: 'Before the start of our discussion I loved the fact that this group argues in such a lively way, but now the majority of comrades with whom I have often engaged in debate, are not participating for some reason. This is unpleasant. Why are they not participating? Evidently they either don't wish to, or don't have it in them. But I ask you, can you remain silent, and will you remain silent for long?' Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

describe Laktionov's work and Rabinovich described its aloof 'salon quality' (*salonnost'*), as if the artist had 'withdrawn into his own creativity' and become somewhat detached from Soviet reality.<sup>43</sup> Several artists asserted that Laktionov relied too heavily on visual cues borrowed from Russian and European art of the nineteenth century and felt that his work represented little more than a poor imitation of past forms. Indeed, Rutsai disputed the very validity of this approach in the light of Zhdanov's famous words: 'we are today not the same as we were yesterday, and tomorrow we will not be the same as we are today.'<sup>44</sup> But it was the former avant-garde artist Solomon Nekritin who spoke out most vehemently against the manner of these paintings, and made explicit the tone of persecution and concern that was simmering throughout the discussion.

The general atmosphere of this discussion is, in my opinion, very harmful for Soviet art and for its development and this compels me to speak. [...]

It must be said, that this group of artists are following a very harmful, a very negative path, which leads not only us, but Socialist Realism itself into the wilderness of false academicism.<sup>45</sup>

Laktionov himself was not present to defend his work, but Shepeliuk did attend to represent the exhibited artists and was given the opportunity to comment on the proceedings at their close; a thankless task given the entrenched hostility that was evident from previous responses.

Perhaps one of us should have spoken first, in order to dispel the notion, which many of you have expressed, that we are just four or five idiots, who make imitations of old classics, who don't think about anything rationally, who live and breathe but for the grace of god and nothing more.<sup>46</sup>

Shepeliuk assumed the moral high ground and asserted that those artists of MOSSKh who had attacked their work were also 'operating on traditions' but that their traditions were 'harmful [ones] taken from the West that inflict great damage on [...] national Russian art.'<sup>47</sup> His defence made, the die was cast and the artists of MOSSKh could only await the inevitable repercussions of the debate.

### **Stalin Prize Laureate**

The beleaguered approach of Shepeliuk and his fellow 'idiots' was vindicated, less than a month later, when Laktionov's name appeared on a list of laureates for the most prestigious award attainable by a Soviet artist: a Stalin Prize, first class.<sup>48</sup> The artists of MOSSKh, on the other hand, were subjected to a backlash in the press following their haranguing of this newly-distinguished laureate artist and faced several years in the wilderness as the Academy of the Arts consolidated its position in

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 71-2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 76.

the Soviet art establishment. Laktionov's painting and its immense popularity, appearing as it did in the midst of Zhdanov's anti-formalist attacks, dealt a crippling blow to the liberal elements of MOSSKh, who found themselves depicted in the press as anti-artistic formalists. An *Iskusstvo* editorial article in 1948 reported on the debate:

At the recent discussions of the Moscow Artists' Union there was an attempt to discredit the work of our Soviet artist-realists of the older and younger generations. [...] Instead of serious analysis of the works and creative direction of the artists, instead of a discussion of their great achievements and criticism of their occasional shortcomings, a tendency was observed towards unfounded criticism of all their work, with several artists being groundlessly labelled naturalists.<sup>49</sup>

In that very same issue of *Iskusstvo* the influential conservative art critic V. Tolstoi contributed an article on the work of young artists that included a glowing tribute to Laktionov and his acclaimed work with its 'specific, realistic language of painting, which can be understood and loved by the masses.' The artist was praised not only for the quality of his work but also for standing firm in the face of fierce opposition.

Laktionov's great merit in his work *A Letter from the Front* is his genuine bravery as an innovator. We can see that the artist openly and directly rose up against those mediocre artistic standards which, according to some unwritten rule, are considered to be compulsory. The artistic problems, which Laktionov's canvas so acutely raises, have been coming to a head for some time in our art.<sup>50</sup>

According to the reminiscences of Laktionov's daughter, Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova, no one was more surprised by the awarding of the Stalin Prize than the artist himself. The family was, at the close of the 1940s, living in a cramped basement flat in Zagorsk, the very building in which *A Letter from the Front* was conceived and set. As a large family living on the meagre earnings of a young, little-known artist, they were by no means well off and Laktionov was forced to supplement his scant income with independent portrait work for a variety of patrons. The decision to devote himself to a large genre painting for inclusion at an *All-Union Exhibition* was a serious undertaking; for a young artist such work was often the result of personal investment and was not supported by the usual system of state commissions.<sup>51</sup> A large *kartina* was very costly in terms of materials and time and there were no guarantees that the selection committee would accept it. Laktionova remembers the two years that it took to complete *A Letter from the Front* as a difficult time of scrimping and saving, and the initial muted reception of the work came as a huge blow to the artist and his family.<sup>52</sup> Yet the painting had set in motion a series of behind-the-scenes machinations that would turn around the fortunes of the Laktionov family for good. The arrival of an unexpected telegram in April of 1948 announcing its attainment of a Stalin Prize first class promised a radical change in circumstances,

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<sup>49</sup> 'Uluchit' rabotu tvorcheskikh souzov khudozhnikov', *Iskusstvo*, 1948, no. 6, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> V. Tolstoi, 'Tvorchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov', *Iskusstvo*, 1948, no. 6, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 71-5.

<sup>52</sup> These reminiscences are based on informal interviews with Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova conducted on 23 May 2006 and 14 Dec. 2006.

not only in immediate financial terms (the prize carried with it a 100,000 Rouble bonus), but also in creative terms; a Stalin Prize laureate artist could expect to claim the most lucrative commissions and was granted a temporary cloak of critical immunity in the press. It was in reward for this painting that the Laktionov family, after a period of petitioning to the authorities by the artist himself, was able to move from their cramped quarters in Zagorsk to the dizzy heights of a spacious five-room flat in the prestigious Sokol district of Moscow. Although future developments in the Soviet art world would later undermine the powerful position of the artist-oligarchs of the Stalin period who had been instrumental to the success of Laktionov's painting, the enduring popularity and official acclaim for *A Letter from the Front* would sustain the artist's status throughout the Khrushchev-era thaw until his death in 1972.

In the wake of the announcement of the new Stalin Prize laureates, a further meeting was held in MOSSKh to discuss its significance. On this occasion several leading critics did turn up as did several prominent artists including the group's president, Sergei Gerasimov and the president of the Academy of the Arts, Aleksandr Gerasimov. Sergei Gerasimov, acting as chair, opened the proceedings with a thinly-veiled protest against Laktionov's award.

[Laktionov] has come to be the object of such criticism that I doubt has ever fallen to the lot of a Stalin prize laureate. [...] Loktionov's (sic.) painting created the impression, not of being old-fashioned, but of being too smoothed out, too finished, as if it had been polished with glass paper.<sup>53</sup>

Yet on this occasion the tables were turned and the conservative critic Sidorov responded with an emphatic endorsement of Laktionov's work, in which he emphasised the young artist's meticulous approach to drawing.

Loktionov (sic.) is a young miracle and it is good that we have such artists, because with his genius he follows a one-hundred year tradition from Briullov with a clarity of drawing, such that not one line has the right to waver.<sup>54</sup>

If that metaphor was lost on the gathered members of MOSSKh, they could scarcely have missed the threatening language of his closing rhetorical question. 'And who among us is against drawing? No one.' In the context of the late 1940s anti-formalist campaign, an affirmation of drawing was a response to the growing emphasis on colour and form evident in the works of some artists. Sidorov's address was followed by that of Aleksandr Gerasimov, who spoke of the need to reassert the principles of ideology in the fine arts and to oust vestiges of formalism. Touching briefly on the matter of Laktionov, he reinforced the words of Sidorov and effectively forbade further criticism of the artist.

A. A. Sidorov referred to Laktionov and explained that he had heard a lot of criticism of the artist. If it was criticism that he had heard that would be fine,

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<sup>53</sup> GTG, f. 59, op. 1, d. 204, *Stenogramma zasedaniia posviashchennogo obsuzhdenniuu rabot stalinskikh laureatov 1947 goda*, 5 May 1948, p. 15

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

but he has heard abuse (*khula*). I think that this should put an end to the matter.<sup>55</sup>

It is clear from the events of 1948 that Laktionov's painting was better received within the Art's Committee and possibly even the Central Committee itself than it was by those critics who did not consider it to be worthy of a mention in newspaper reviews of the 1947 exhibition.<sup>56</sup> The unexpected awarding of a Stalin Prize to a relatively unknown artist demonstrates that someone was taking Laktionov and his new painting very seriously indeed. It remains a mystery as to who exactly put Laktionov's painting forward for a Stalin Prize. The initial long list of works, compiled by a selection committee consisting of Aleksandr Gerasimov, Sergei Gerasimov and Igor' Grabar' amongst others, does not include Laktionov's painting.<sup>57</sup> Following a recommendation from Stalin to Zhdanov and Suslov to increase the number of prizes awarded for painting to seven, Laktionov's name appeared as a proposed recipient of a Stalin Prize second class. Dmitrii Shepilov, member of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation and later editor of *Pravda*, cited the reasons for Laktionov's inclusion as 'Sharpness of drawing, expressiveness, brightness and richness of colour.'<sup>58</sup> After apparently being rejected by the committee once again, Laktionov was eventually included in the list of first class winners.<sup>59</sup> It appears that the decision to reward Laktionov for his canvas came from an influential figure from within the Central Committee such as Zhdanov, Suslov or even Stalin himself. It is also likely that the dominant critic-decision makers in the Art's Committee, its president Petr Sysoev and vice president Andrei Lebedev, were supporters of Laktionov's canvas. By 1949, Lebedev was a close friend of the Laktionov family and was actively involved in fighting the artist's corner on several occasions.<sup>60</sup> It was to Lebedev that Laktionov and his wife petitioned to receive their new flat in Moscow and they continued to exchange greetings cards and correspondence throughout the 1950s and 60s.<sup>61</sup> We will see in Chapter Three how these and other patronage links were important throughout the artist's career.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>56</sup> The Arts Committee acted as 'watchdog' over issues of ideology in the fine arts and played a major role in the campaigns against formalism in the 1930s and 40s. Jørn Guldberg, 'Socialist Realism as Institutional Practice' in Hans Günther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: MacMillan Press, 1990), p. 165.

<sup>57</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 587, *Spravki upravleniia propagandy i agitatsii TsK BKP(b) i otdela iskusstv [...] o sostave Komiteta po Stalinskim premiim, o predstavlenii kandidatur i prisuzhdenii Stalinskikh premii za 1947 god v oblasti iskusstva i literatury*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Letter to Suslov presenting the recommendations from Shepilov and Leonid Il'ichev. p. 83.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., The final selection of winners were listed in a letter to Stalin, p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> In a telegram dated 5 May 1949 Laktionov pays the following cryptic tribute to Lebedev: 'Dear Andrei Konstantinovich, [I am] happy in the knowledge of the victory of your ideas. Your correct actions have been victorious. Heartfelt thanks to you, Laktionov.' RGALI, f. 2711, op. 1, d. 76, *Pis'ma i telegrammy Laktionovykh Lebedevu*, p. 1. A later book by Lebedev presents a hagiographic account of Laktionov's career. Andrei Lebedev, 'Aleksandr Laktionov', *Khudozhnik i sud'by naroda: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1983), pp. 175-80.

<sup>61</sup> Olga Laktionova, Laktionov's wife, wrote a letter to Lebedev in Laktionov's stead: 'We want, of course, to have our own corner in Moscow. But unfortunately nothing has happened yet with the [application for a] flat. Shura sent another letter to MosSovet with a request, but there is still no reply and whether there will be, we don't know. Shura dreams of one day showing you our new flat. It would have been better, of course, if you could have come to visit us in it already. RGALI, f. 2711, op. 1, d. 76, pp. 2-4.



In 1948, however, *A Letter from the Front* appears to have been advanced by the Central Committee to act as an indicator of official policy for the art world. The debate which the list of laureates was met in MOSSKh demonstrates that the Stalin Prize awards were closely monitored by art organisations as a litmus paper for the prevailing trends. Laktionov's painting was especially significant for the regime as a genuinely popular incarnation of the Soviet state's draconian dictates as applied to the fine arts. The unfolding of these events in the aftermath of the *1947 All-Union Exhibition* was unforeseen by the artist himself, who began work on the painting in 1945, long before the emergence of *Zhdanovshchina* rhetoric. How was it that this young artist, who had not achieved critical attention since his diploma work of 1938, *A Hero of the Soviet Union, N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops*, succeeded in creating such a significant and influential painting?

### *Tipichnost'*

The typical and personal nature of Laktionov's intimate genre scene was vital to the positive public reception of the work. The artist's own account of the period of creative soul-searching that he experienced in his attempt to find a viable form for a planned genre painting about soldiers returning from the front is nostalgic and romantic, and deliberately so, perhaps in order to inspire young artists to pursue their ambitions, or perhaps to perpetuate the myth of artistic genius that surrounds a famous work of art. He was eventually inspired, as the story goes, by a chance meeting with a wounded soldier, who was himself delivering a letter to a comrade's family. As the artist himself recalls,

At some point I saw a soldier coming along the dusty road, limping, with one hand in a bandage and a letter in the other [...]. He was walking and glancing at the letter, then up at the house numbers.

I talked with him. He was just out of hospital where he had been with a comrade who had not written home for many years and was considered missing without trace. He had asked him to pass on a letter to his relatives. Meeting this soldier gave me a theme for my work. Who had not received a letter from the front at that time? The theme was simple, but how could I fill this modest theme with great significance? Little by little the form of the painting was born.<sup>62</sup>

As a sister work to *A Letter from the Front*, and to thank this very soldier for providing the initial inspiration for the work, Laktionov painted his portrait the following year, which he entitled *Defender of the Motherland* [fig. 10]. The portrait, which is executed with characteristically fine detail, depicts this soldier as a sombre, yet proud young man adorned in full military regalia including several meticulously drawn decorations his hand is wrapped in a bandage and sling, just like the hero of Laktionov's famous painting. This battle scar not only rendered him identifiable as the bearer of good tidings from Laktionov's previous work, but was also an important signifier in Laktionov's rhetoric of victory. The pain, suffering and hardship that all

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<sup>62</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnovenia khudozhnika', *Khudozhnik i sovremennost'*: *Ezhegodnik akademii khudozhnikov SSSR* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1961), p. 285.

Soviet citizens had endured with stoical determination were symbolized by the soldier's bandage. More than a straightforward portrait, *Defender of the Motherland* was a patriotic image of wartime heroism that represented this nameless soldier as a symbol of the Soviet victory.

A further inspiration must surely have come from Radio Moscow's hugely popular series of wartime and post-war broadcasts *Letters from the Front* and *Letters from the Rear*. Richard Stites has written of the importance of these programs, which were aired ten times each day and totalled two and a half hours of daily airtime, for those millions of families that had been separated by the war and for whom the radio



Fig. 10: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Defender of the Motherland*, 1948, Astrakhan Regional Art Gallery

was the primary source of news from the front.<sup>63</sup> The radio station received around 50,000 letters every month, a carefully selected and sometimes edited few of which were read out on air by famous actors and sometimes even the civilians who had written them. The programs continued for many years after the war, during which time they continued to reunite displaced families and lost loved ones, although the rhetoric of hope was replaced by the rhetoric of inevitable victory and the war years were invested with a rose-tinted hue of nostalgia. Such broadcasts helped to forge an intimate connection between the epic war effort and the individual citizen, for whom they provided a precious source of optimism and helped to counteract the countless everyday stories of hardship and loss. Similarly the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda* carried a regular column of personal letters between soldiers at the front and their loved-ones back home. Lisa

Kirschenbaum has written of the language of the wartime press, which departed from the Soviet norms of impersonal rhetoric to embrace a more emotional register that contained frequent allusions to family ties and hometowns, as well as more general patriotism for the Motherland.<sup>64</sup> Laktionov's canvas tapped into this wellspring of popular sentiment and provided a sympathetically realised visual image for those millions of citizens who had shared this experience of the home front.

Laktionov's painting was indicative of the growing prevalence of genre painting (*bytovaia zhivopis'*) at Soviet exhibitions of the post-war years. Genre subjects were adopted as worthy and significant themes in the late 1940s, second only

<sup>63</sup> Richard Stites, *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, "'Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families': Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda", *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (2000), p. 828-9.

in the hierarchy of Soviet fine art to representations of the leader.<sup>65</sup> Both the theme and title of Laktionov's painting encourage the viewer to participate in the narrative of the characters; to construct their superficial biography; to piece together their relationships to one another and in doing so to synthesise their own narrative and the national narrative of the home front with the image. The trick was to provide sufficient information, sufficient specificity, for the viewer to be able to interpret the story of the painting, but to leave the narrative as open as possible, allowing the viewer some freedom to relate it to their own particular circumstances. In Marxist terms, this represented the very essence of realism: the 'ability to interrelate individuals and social development, to present humans as both objects and creative subjects of history.'<sup>66</sup> This depiction of an informal gathering on the porch of an everyday block of flats is composed not merely of individual characters thrown together by the artist, or captured at a chance moment as the painting would lead the spectator to believe. They are an ensemble of stereotypes, caricatures even, instantly and effortlessly identifiable as friends, neighbours and acquaintances and demanding of empathy and compassion. The Soviet cultural theorists had a word for such a concept that defies direct translation: *tipichnost'*, literally meaning 'typicality', but encompassing the entire positive essence of everyday existence. The artist invited members of his own family and friends to pose for the picture, yet their distinctive features are not emphasised as they might be in a group portrait, rather they are portrayed as the Soviet everyman and everywoman. Laktionov himself acknowledged the necessity of such artistic license in an autobiographical essay written in 1949. 'As a basis for the form of the soldier I had the artist V. I. Nifontov pose for me, but I significantly changed the features of his face, bringing to life features of severity and heroism.'<sup>67</sup> The old woman and young girl have their backs turned to the viewer, who is free to transpose the faces of his or her own loved ones onto their anonymous visages. They are typical too in their manner of dress with its connotations of the traditional peasant costume. The old woman's headscarf and the young girl's patterned, smocked blouse reminded the viewer of their own way of life, or perhaps more accurately stirred a nostalgic sense of an ideal way of life as it should be; such bucolic attire would have looked somewhat out of place in late 1940s Moscow, but even progressive urbanites could yearn for a simpler, more plainly typical existence.<sup>68</sup>

Laktionov employed several established visual tricks and techniques in order to amplify these associations. The composition of the painting interpolates the viewer into the close-knit group of family and acquaintances so that, standing before the canvas, he/she completes the symmetrical circle of roughly life-sized figures. The depiction of a dark interior opening out into a bright courtyard creates the sense of a frame within a frame to the point where Laktionov's sculpturally modelled protagonists seem to break out of the picture plane in a *trompe l'oeil* feat of technical

<sup>65</sup> Nina Dimitreva, 'Vsesoiuznaya khudozhestvennaya vystavka 1952 goda: bytovaya zhivopis', *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 2, pp. 13-22.

<sup>66</sup> Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (California: University of California Press, 1982), p. 79.

<sup>67</sup> GTG, f. 59, op. 1, d. 204, *Ankety, avtobiografii, spisok rabot Laktionova*, 8 Aug. 1948 – 24 Dec. 1949, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Reid writes of the comments of some visitors to the 1962 exhibition *30 Years of the MOSKh* who identify the blouse as specifically Ukrainian and therefore indicative of a family happily emancipated by the Soviet victory. 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005), p. 703.

illusionism. Its perspectival depth proposes to the spectator, as John Berger has written, 'that he/she was the unique centre of the world.'<sup>69</sup> Viewers were invited to believe that this optimistic and welcoming gathering had been arranged precisely for their benefit: the bright letter, glowing white at the centre of the canvas was being read to them, and imparting to them its glad tidings of victory and euphoria. This dazzling letter, radiating golden light onto the surrounding faces, lends the work the aura of a religious allegory, comparable to works of Titian such as *Pentecost* [fig. 11] and *Madonna with Saints and Members of Pesaro Family* (1519-26, Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice) in which the bright, heavenly light that illuminates the miraculous events throws the corners of the painting into dark shadow. It is icon-like in its perfectly balanced circular composition and golden hue. Thus the young boy at the centre of the canvas is cast as the prodigal son of the Soviet Union, born out of and touched by the events of the Great Patriotic War. Indeed responses to Laktionov's canvas were often expressed in religious terms that emphasised the miraculous or revelatory effect of its realism.<sup>70</sup>

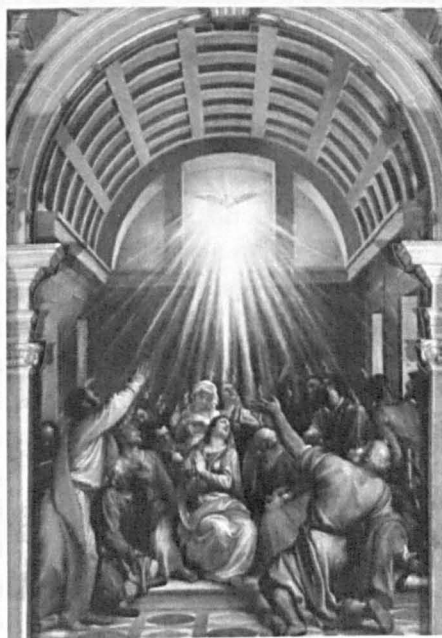


Fig. 11: Titian, *Pentecost*, 1541, Santa Maria Della Salute Venice

Aleksandr Gerasimov and his vice president Boris Ioganson displaying clear European influences in their work of the mid-1940s.<sup>72</sup> The characteristic features of Laktionov's painting—a high finish, uniform detail and the classical forms of his protagonists—were not a response to state dictates or pressure from above, rather, they were indicative of Laktionov's academic education and personal creative choices. We have seen in Chapter One how the young artist aspired to replicate the traditional techniques of the Russian School and the *Peredvizhniki*. In *A Letter from the Front*, Laktionov emphasised these associations to create a work of art that was

It was not only in theme and composition that Laktionov's canvas was praised for its typicality. The technique of the painting was also judged by some critics to be representative of an inherently Russian national style. The cultural theorist K. A. Sitnik praised Laktionov's canvas not only for its 'national character (*narodnost'*) and its clarity', but also for its 'finished forms (*zakonchennost' formy*), its sculptural quality and its clarity of drawing.'<sup>71</sup> He went on to assert that it continued the best traditions of Russian painting with an artistic language that was accessible to the masses. Yet Laktionov was not simply working according to the prescribed trend. When the theme of the painting was conceived in 1945 the academic aspirations of the artist were distinctly unrepresentative of the prevailing trends in the Soviet art world with even the President of the Academy of the Arts,

<sup>69</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Reid, 'The Manege Affair Revisited', p. 703.

<sup>71</sup> Sitnik, *Voprosy teorii*, pp. 38-9.

<sup>72</sup> Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, pp. 282-3.

deeply national in character. Yet the artist could have little suspected, as he worked on the painting, that this strict formula of academic realism would be adopted as the officially sanctioned method of Socialist Realism in the late 1940s. Laktionov was established as a spokesperson for the continuing relevance of traditional realist art and his most famous canvas was elevated above criticism to the status of an unimpeachable modern day classic. As Aleksandr Gerasimov asserted firmly in 1952:

We do not need criticism which is inclined towards abstract, decadent art, which attempts in any way possible to bring down realistic art of the Great Russian school and to hinder the development of those Soviet artists who adhere to this school.<sup>73</sup>

The quest for typicality in the style and content of Soviet art in the late 1940s represented a subtle shift of the 1930s forward-thrusting rhetoric of Socialist Realism that required artists to depict 'life in its revolutionary development.' *Tipichnost'* meant the integration of traditional Russian values into the official imagery of Socialist Realist art. Laktionov, with an academic lineage that connected him, via the tutorship of Isaak Brodskii, to Repin (Brodskii's own tutor), was an ideal role-model for the advancement of the Russian realist tradition in a modern Soviet context.

Such patriotic qualities of the Laktionov's work achieved a dual effect: on the one hand it ensured the adulation of the masses with whom it was designed to connect, and on the other it forestalled direct criticism. To launch an attack on the theme or technique of Laktionov's painting would have been tantamount to striking a blow at the very heart of the Russian and Soviet soul. As Antonova wrote in her eulogy to the painting, 'Laktionov's Russian people are typical and ordinary; the artist has correctly shown that they are the great, hidden heroes that touch the heart of every Soviet person.'<sup>74</sup> As the anti-formalist campaign of the post-war years gained momentum, Soviet artists retreated into the safer waters offered by patriotic themes and traditional methods. The success of Laktionov's painting provided a model, which was imitated and modified by a number of artists throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s such as Fedor Reshetnikov, Nikolai Ponomarev and Anatolii Levitin, and the genre painting, depicting intimate scenes of everyday family life, became increasingly prevalent at Soviet exhibitions.

### **The Death of the Author?**

With Aleksandr Gerasimov keen to ensure the stability of his own position in the wake of Zhdanov's decrees, it was necessary for him to take a firm line against those artists and critics who posed a threat. Criticism of Laktionov in the past or present provided a fine pretext for decisive action, as an attack on Beskin in a report made to the Central Committee in 1949 clearly demonstrates.

With his attempts to discredit everything that shows talent [...] and his efforts to tear young artists from the traditions of the Russian realist school, Beskin represents a great threat to our youth. When the talented young artist

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<sup>73</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Put' sovetskogo khudozhnika' in *Za sotsialisticheskii realism: sbornik statei i dokladov* (Akh SSSR: Moskva, 1952), p. 82.

<sup>74</sup> Antonova, *Pis'mo s fronta*, p. 11.

Aleksandr Laktionov exhibited his diploma work *A Hero of the Soviet Union, N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops* Beskin rushed to declare it naturalistic. In this painting the young artist expressed his patriotic love for the Motherland, for our Soviet army, yet Beskin labelled the hero of this painting 'standardized.'<sup>75</sup>

A campaign of intensive criticism was launched in the press against the 'bourgeois cosmopolitanist antipatriots'—those writers and critics including Beskin, Punin, Aleksei Efros and Vladimir Kostin who had spoken out against the imposition of traditional academic realism on contemporary Soviet art, or promoted an alternative artistic language based on an adoption Western European trends. Gerasimov's attack was expressed in deeply nationalistic terms with the critics accused of 'lacking a feeling of love for the Motherland and the people.'<sup>76</sup> The art establishment was subjected to a hard line purge that saw professors sacked from the Academy, 'ideologically suspect' books removed from libraries, the critics section of the Moscow Artists' Union dissolved and a number of critics prevented from publishing and in some extreme cases arrested and imprisoned.<sup>77</sup> Acting as the Party mouthpiece in the art establishment, Gerasimov consolidated his autocratic dominance of the post-war Soviet art world and imposed a revised history of Soviet art founded on the legacy of the nineteenth century Russian Realist School. *A Letter from the Front*, with its traditional academic realism and deeply patriotic subject matter, provided a useful popular front for the new ideology and Laktionov and his work, past, present and future, were for the time being off limits for official criticism. It is little wonder that Sokolov-Skalia would later come to refer to the period not as the *Zhdanovshchina*, but as the *Laktionovshchina* in reference to the overreaching influence not only of the artist's approach to Socialist Realism, but of the establishment's approach to the artist.<sup>78</sup>

In the events surrounding *A Letter from the Front* the artist himself played only a passive part. His work and indeed his public persona were appropriated by a series of events that were largely beyond his control. True, the artist slipped into the role allotted to him with evident gratification and worked throughout the 1950s and 60s as an active promoter of the realist tradition, but in the late 1940s his increasing influence was established largely by external factors. Laktionov's 'text' was assigned a particular significance by the regime, which sought to 'fix its meaning' as a crystallisation of current trends in the Soviet art world.<sup>79</sup> In its bypassing of critical opinion in the reception of Laktionov's work, the Soviet state was attempting to reduce the diversity of possible interpretations and elevate the work as a symbolic object. Pierre Bourdieu has written that 'the producer of the value of the work of art is not the artist but the field of production.'<sup>80</sup> In the late 1940s the significance of a work

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<sup>75</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Vyshe znamia sotsialisticheskogo realizma', *Izvestii (deputatov trudishchikhsia SSSR)*, 1949, no. 39, in idem., *Za sotsialisticheskii realism*, p. 157.

<sup>76</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Za sovetkii patriotizm v iskusstve', *Pravda*, 1949, no. 41, in idem., *Za sotsialisticheskii realism*, p. 136-7.

<sup>77</sup> See Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, pp. 182-3 and Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, 286-7.

<sup>78</sup> RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 1276, *Stenogramma soveshchaniia zhivopisnoi sekti MOSSSKh po obsuzhdeniiu Vsesoiuznoi khudozhestvennoi vystavki 1952 goda*, 13 Mar. 1953, p. 32.

<sup>79</sup> Barthes, *Image Music Text*.

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Susan Emanuel, *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 229.



of art was decided not by its audience or by its critics, but by those who dominated the power structures of the art establishment, who attempted to recreate the author according to their own agendas.

An interesting postscript to this story is provided by the events of 1962, when *A Letter from the Front* was included in the retrospective exhibition *30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union*.<sup>81</sup> This vast exhibition of over 2000 works represented an ambitious, revisionist attempt by MOSKKh to reveal a comprehensive history of Soviet art from the 1920s onwards, incorporating several artists that had been previously condemned as formalists during the Stalin era such as David Shterenberg, Robert Fal'k and Petr Konchalovskii. The exhibition not only included works displaying modernist devices by artists that had been subjected to repression and censure, but it granted them a full rehabilitation and even emphasised their contribution to Soviet art history over and above the works of the established old guard of the Academy. In a clear repudiation of Zhdanov-era ideology, once-dominant artists such as Aleksandr Gerasimov and Dmitri Nalbandian were here marginalised by the very works they had participated in suppressing. Reid has described the exhibition as a visual representation of the internal conflict of the post-Stalinist art world: 'the continued force of Stalinism and Russian chauvinism versus liberal cosmopolitanism and modernism.'<sup>82</sup> Laktionov was represented by one canvas alone, the work no doubt legitimized in the eyes of the selection panel by its status as a popular icon of the war experience. Exhibited as it was in the context of this revisionist sample of Soviet art, the painting appears to have stood out from the other works on display, distinguished perhaps by its academic realism and striking verisimilitude. As in 1947 the visitors' books were filled with a disproportionate number of comments about the painting, many of which expressed their admiration for the work and claimed the work as an icon of the national artistic tradition. As one fairly typical comment stated: 'Thanks to Laktionov who proves with his mastery that genuine art outlives all arguments.'<sup>83</sup>

The exhibition was graced with a visit from Nikita Khrushchev himself, who was reportedly dissatisfied with the 'manifest liberalism' and 'ideological inconsistency' with which MOSKKh had selected works for display. As *Izvestiia* reported in the aftermath of the visit:

Yes, tastes differ, they must be respected, as personal opinion is respected. But we are not omnivorous. The indulgence of a 'taste' for ideologically harmful influences in art, when enthusiasm for formalistic devices leads to a distortion of reality and to the disparagement of man, is alien to us. This is why certain works shown at the exhibition [...] provoke sharp objections.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The events surrounding this exhibition, the notorious 'Manege Affair', have been seen as an attempt by conservative forces to reassert control over the art establishment following the cultural thaw in the period of de-Stalinisation. See Reid, 'In the Name of the People', pp. 673-716 and Reid, *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art*, pp. 609-51.

<sup>82</sup> Reid, 'In the Name of the People', p. 687.

<sup>83</sup> TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 155, *Knigy otzyvov Vystavki 30 Let MOSKKh, 1962 goda*, 1962, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> 'High Mission of Art', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XVI, no. 48 (1962), taken from *Izvestiia*, 4 Dec. 1962, p. 1.

The fallout from the exhibition had far-reaching consequences for the Soviet art establishment. Soon after the incident Laktionov published a ingratiating article in *Pravda* entitled 'Respect and Love of the People is the Highest Reward' in which he attacked the purveyors of modernist tendencies and called for a reaffirmation of genuine 'full-blooded painting' in keeping with the tastes of the Party leadership.

The visit of the leaders of the Party and government to the exhibition of Moscow artists and the talks with the representatives of the creative intelligentsia have shown how highly the Party and the people value realistic art and how resolutely they reject anti-artistic, abstractionist and formalist eccentricities.<sup>85</sup>

His reward for this piece was not long in coming. In March of 1963 Khrushchev made a speech on the state of the art apparatus in which he emphatically asserted the legitimacy of realism as the only possible path for ideological art and attacked those who had rejected this incontrovertible truth. Laktionov was singled out among Soviet artists as an example of a positive trend, in contrast to the modernist painter Boris Zhutovskii, whose work was described as 'an abomination and horror.' Zhutovskii's self-portrait (1961, Galereia Chugunnogo Koz'my, St Petersburg) was executed in a primitivist style, the artist's torso and head depicted in a highly simplified form with a striking application of flat, unblended colours. In Khrushchev's words:

No matter what abuse is hurled at the work of artists who adhere to Socialist Realism, and no matter how the abstractionists and any other formalists are lauded, all sensible people clearly know that in the former case [Laktionov] we are dealing with real artists, with genuine art, and in the latter [Zhutovskii] with perverted persons who, as they say, have their heads on backwards, with indecent hack work that insults the sensibilities.<sup>86</sup>

As in 1948, Laktionov was adopted by conservative elements in the cultural bureaucracy as a *cause celebre* in defiance of specialist critical opinion. On both occasions Laktionov's work was supported on the basis that its traditional realism appealed to simple everyday people, in contrast to the works of formalist 'innovators' that were popular only amongst a small group of deviant critics.

Although the artist went on to enjoy an illustrious career and, as we shall see over the ensuing chapters, created many more successful and controversial works of art, Laktionov would ultimately be remembered above all for *A Letter from the Front*. Aside from its status as an object of contention amongst competing artistic groups, the painting has been adopted as a relic of the War, and it is largely in this capacity that it has been exhibited, reproduced and studied in school classrooms throughout the late Soviet era. The development of the cult of the Great Patriotic War in the years after

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<sup>85</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Respect and Love of the People is the Highest Reward', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XVI, no. 48 (1963) taken from *Pravda*, 4 Jan. 1963.

<sup>86</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, 'High Ideological Content and Artistic Mastery Are the Great Force of Soviet Literature and Art', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XV, no. 11 (1963), p. 8, taken from *Pravda*, 10 Mar. 1963, pp. 1-4. See also the reminiscences of Boris Zhutovskii published in *Iskusstvo*, 2003, no. 1, also available online at: [http://iskusstvo-info.ru/2003/1/04\\_49.htm](http://iskusstvo-info.ru/2003/1/04_49.htm), last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.



Stalin's death ensured that the painting remained in the public consciousness and it has been featured in retrospective articles in journals and newspapers right up to the present day as a nostalgic reminder of the Soviet war experience.<sup>87</sup> The painting that once provoked such passionate disputes and contributed to the prolonged suppression of progressive tendencies in the Soviet art world now hangs in the chronological permanent exhibition of the Tretyakov Gallery as part of the modern day constructed narrative of Soviet Socialist Realism. But above all the painting owes its enduring legacy to a darker purpose; its elevated status as an imposed icon of *Zhdanovism* in the Soviet art establishment of the late 1940s.

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<sup>87</sup> See for example 'Pis'mo s fronta', *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, 1970, no. 5; M. Shashkina, 'Sud'ba kartina', *Iskusstvo*, 1985, no. 2; Aleksei Korzikhin, 'Klassika strany sovetov: Pis'mo s fronta', *Literatura Rossii*, 8 May 1987; and the front cover of *Tret'iakovskaia galereia* 2005, no. 2, where a reproduction of the painting is used to illustrate a special issue on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory.



Portraits and Patrons, or How to Get Ahead in the Soviet Art World

A portrait of the leader was the highest denomination in the currency of Stalinist art. It was the image that launched many flourishing careers in the 1930s and it was the image upon which they foundered in the 1950s following Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of personality. Throughout the hierarchy of Soviet society there emerged a veritable industry of lesser cults whereby aspiring Soviet artists committed the nation's leading lights to posterity in accordance with the centuries old tradition of portraiture. From *Stakhanovites* to scientists, from agricultural workers to academics, from military commanders to cosmonauts, famous citizens were captured and immortalised in oils, pastels and watercolours, hung on the walls of classrooms, offices and homes, exhibited in galleries and reproduced in newspapers, journals and books. The photographic portrait, which had improved in quality and gained in prominence as a means for the recording and reproduction of individual likenesses, posed a challenge to realistic artistic representation, yet Soviet portrait painting retained its significance in spite of the encroachment of new technology. The painted portrait was a valuable commodity in the unofficial economy of the Soviet Union; a symbol of status for both the artist and the sitter that could be exchanged for favours, goods and services and in some cases even bought and sold for hard currency.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps nowhere in the world, since the advent of photography and the development of modernism in the fine arts, had realist portrait painting enjoyed such a resurgence as in the art of Soviet Socialist Realism.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will examine the phenomenon of Soviet portrait painting through the works of Aleksandr Laktionov, who was a prolific portrait painter throughout his career. It will position the artist in relation to the Stalinist leader cult and argue that his traditional style of detailed realism was an ideal form for the representation of authority and permanence. Laktionov began his career as a portraitist at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts in the late 1930s where he worked on a series of portraits of famous actors and actresses, and ended it in the late 1960s as Peoples' Artist of the Soviet Union with a series of acclaimed portraits of cosmonauts. In the late 1940s, following the success of his painting *A Letter from the Front* (1947, GTG), the artist painted several portraits of Comrade Stalin himself, works that were later purged from his official biography. Despite the success of his major works in the field of genre painting, Laktionov always returned to the portrait as a favoured means of expression;

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<sup>1</sup> For instance it was discovered in 1955 that the opportunistic artist Dmitrii Nalbandian had sold the same portrait not once, but twice, after making an author's copy and passing it off as an original. For this offence he was publicly criticised and excluded from the Moscow Artists' Union for one year. RGALI f. 2943, op. 1, d. 811, *Protokol n.12 i stennogramma zasedaniia pravleniia po utverzheniiu rezoliutsii pravleniia po dokladu T. I. Rubleeva o rabote MOKhF za 1954-55 obsuzhdeniiu personal'nogo dela D. A. Nalbandian*, 16 Dec. 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Plamper examines the Soviet portrait and its relationship to patronage ties in the period of the Stalin cult in *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929-1953* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), pp. 170-226. He cites an article by the critic K. A. Sitnik from *Iskusstvo*, 1947, no. 4, that pronounced portraiture dead in the capitalist West and claimed that it was thriving in the Soviet Union.

indeed many of the artist's major genre works are composed around group portraits of family members and friends. Yet Laktionov was perhaps most famous for producing status portraits of prominent citizens, many of which were arranged through a network of influential acquaintances and recommendations. By the 1960s a Laktionov portrait was considered to represent a mark of distinction and eminence as well as a certain political outlook; as an artist who rose to prominence in the Stalinist era and an outspoken critic of modernist influences on Socialist Realist art, the artist's work was closely associated with conservative tendencies. A Laktionov portrait could bestow upon the subject an aura of tradition and longevity that rested on the centuries-old institution of portraiture as a symbolic practice that was the exclusive preserve of the Imperial Court, dignitaries and wealthy patrons. Yet the relationship was a reciprocal one; an artist could himself improve his standing through the representation of influential sitters. Soviet portraiture was bound up in the practice of patronage and became closely associated with the leader cult as artists vied for the recognition that could accompany a successful portrait of Stalin. As the example of Laktionov reveals, the field of Soviet portraiture was altered by the processes of de-Stalinisation, but an official demand remained for the representation of authority in a traditional artistic language.

### **The Roots of Soviet Portraiture**

We have seen in earlier chapters how the development of Socialist Realism was influenced by Russian art of the nineteenth century and the language of Soviet portraiture was no exception. The Imperial Academy of the Arts in early nineteenth century Russia adhered to a traditional hierarchy of genres in which historical, religious and genre themes, produced under a rigid system of state patronage, eclipsed the significance of the portrait as an exhibition work.<sup>3</sup> The status portrait maintained its importance as a means of representation primarily amongst the aristocracy. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, the early nineteenth century saw the portrait emerge from the private sphere, where it was considered suitable as a decoration for a domestic interior or a document of family history, to enter the public sphere as an object worthy of attention for its aesthetic merits.<sup>4</sup> This can be attributed, in part, to the gradual emancipation of the processes of art production, whereby major state commissions were increasingly replaced by private works for wealthy patrons as the main source of income for an artist. In the words of Sebastian Allard, 'the cult of the great man had been replaced by the cult of the individual.'<sup>5</sup> The private portrait was embraced somewhat reluctantly by the arbiter of good taste, the Paris Salon, and came to overtake history painting as the dominant genre on display at some exhibitions.<sup>6</sup>

In Russia the entrenched hegemony of the aristocracy impeded this development until the second half of the nineteenth century and the emergence of a

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<sup>3</sup> David Jackson, *The Wanderers and critical realism in nineteenth century Russian painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Halliday, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gulheim Scherf, 'Between the Novel and History: French Portraiture towards 1835,' in Sebastian Allard, Robert Rosenblum et al., eds., *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2007), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

private art market funded by the growing entrepreneurial class.<sup>7</sup> The portrait—once the exclusive preserve of the privileged elite and dictated by the restrictive technical demands of the Academy—experienced a diversification as it became subject instead to the fresh tastes of independent collectors and critics. Although Russian artists were exposed to and influenced by contemporary European trends, the development of Russian art outside the auspices of the Academy followed a generally nationalistic path. Leading intelligentsia figures such as Lev Tolstoy and Nikolai Chernyshevskii promoted art and culture as media of social commentary and as outlets for an upsurge of national sentiment.<sup>8</sup> Portrait painting developed accordingly away from the exclusive glorification of certain privileged individuals in stiff, mannered poses with flattering effects of chiaroscuro, to allow for the depiction of everyday people engaged in everyday activities, free from excessive embellishment and affectation. The *Peredvizhniki* regularly portrayed impoverished peasants and labourers in their canvases, imbuing their works with an element of dissent that has become known as critical realism.<sup>9</sup> Their cause was championed by a number of critics and philanthropic art collectors such as Vladimir Stasov and Pavel Tretyakov who acted as patrons for a generation of independent artists. Leading members of the *Peredvizhniki* such as Ilya Repin and Valentin Serov have been hailed as masters of portraiture, their best works expressing not only the outer appearance of the subject, but also a psychological dimension conveyed by the artistic style and composition of their canvases.<sup>10</sup> As David Jackson has observed, these artists transformed the nature of Russian portrait painting ‘from [a genre] of financial privilege to that of a “meritocracy” of cultural exemplars.’<sup>11</sup>

The rapid development of the avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century forced a decisive break from the academic traditions of the Russian school, which the suprematist artist Kazimir Malevich described, in typically confrontational language, as ‘the inquisition of nature.’ Realism was condemned as an outmoded concept that had been superseded by advancements in media such as film and photography. It was not only the traditional roots of portrait painting but also the very principle of the artistic representation of the individual that came under attack in this new era as radical artists shunned the concept of the subject in their attempts to depict a new social order based on mass mobilisation. To return again to Malevich:

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<sup>7</sup> There was little concept of patronage and almost no such thing as an art market in Russia prior to the 1861 emancipation of the serfs. As David Jackson has summed up the inequitable system, ‘Why buy paintings when one could own a painter?’ *The Wanderers and Critical Realism*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-20.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Repin’s acclaimed portrait of the terminally ill composer Modest Musorgsky (1881, GTG) in which, as Jackson describes, ‘Repin succeeded in capturing an image of the composer which shows him balanced between normality and physical degradation, dissipated by his errant lifestyle but retaining a spark of vivacity and kindness.’ David Jackson, *The Russian Vision: The Art of Ilya Repin* (Schoten, Belgium: BAI, 2007), p. 184.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

The individual has no rights, for the rights are common to all, and the individual is simply a fragment from a united being, all of whose fragments must be joined together in one, since they originated from one.<sup>12</sup>

What place was there for the inherently bourgeois practice of portrait painting in the new social order offered by the post-revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat?

The revival of the Soviet practice of realist portrait painting was twofold. Firstly, the development of a proletarian art form required the generic representation of the proletariat. Having declared representational art dead in 1920, Malevich returned to figurative art in the late 1920s under increasing pressure from the Stalinist

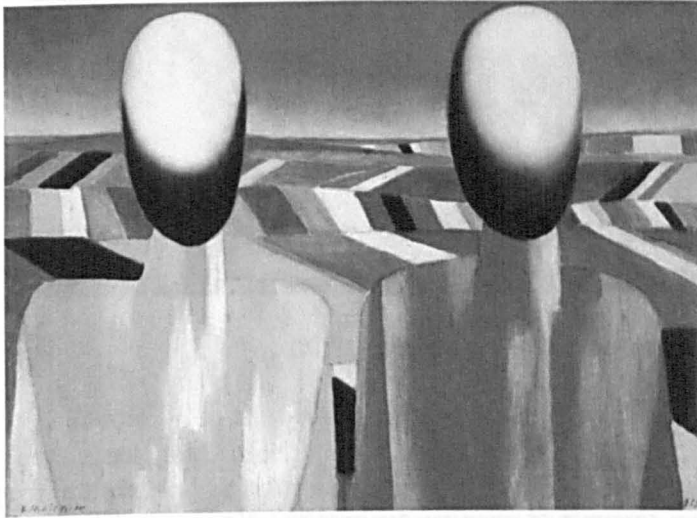


Fig. 12: Kazimir Malevich, *Peasants*, 1928-32, GRM

state and painted a series of 'portraits' of Soviet workers in which their faces were replaced with a bald, featureless ovoid [fig. 12].<sup>13</sup> These somewhat sinister figures represented the Soviet everyman and woman and their blank, expressionless faces foreshadowed the coming development of Socialist Realism and its endorsement of the generic portrait as a means to depict the 'typicality' (*tipichnost'*)

of Soviet life. In the mid 1920s, under the influential patronage of the Commissar of War Kliment Voroshilov, and by extension the Red Army itself, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) was instrumental in the elevation of the portrait as a master genre of Soviet art. Their exhibitions of the mid 1920s were distinguished by a prevalence of portraiture, including portraits of leading soldiers, but also numerous portraits of everyday Soviet citizens who were depicted as 'not only individuals but types.'<sup>14</sup> The adoption of Socialist Realism in 1934 as the officially endorsed method for Soviet art ensured the replacement of Malevich's faceless figures with an ever-expanding gallery of model Soviet citizens—archetypal labourers, collective farmers and factory workers, their everyday

<sup>12</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *The Question of Imitative Art* (Smolensk, 1920), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), p. 293.

<sup>13</sup> See for example *Head of Peasant* (1928-1932, The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) in which a bearded peasant is depicted in the form of a traditional head-and-shoulders portrait, yet somewhat disturbingly devoid of any facial features.

<sup>14</sup> Brandon Taylor quotes Lunacharsky at the *Eighth Moscow Exhibition* in 1926, who went on to claim that the portraits on display depicted the 'organisers of a completely renewed social existence, [...] a review of the many figures within a new society, a new mankind.' *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, vol. 2 (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p. 55. For an analysis of Kliment Voroshilov's patronage of AKhRR, see Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, pp. 71-113.

achievements and heroic countenances immortalised in oils for the edification of the masses.



Fig. 13: Isaak Brodskii, *Lenin in Smolny*, 1930, GTG

Secondly, in the wake of Lenin's death in 1924, art was employed as a means to document and glorify the deeds of the leader; a practice of 'exemplary' representation in the words of Tony Halliday, as opposed to the 'normative' function performed by portraits of typical citizens.<sup>15</sup> Several posthumous portraits of Lenin were painted by prominent realist artists of AKhRR such as Isaak Brodskii and Aleksandr Gerasimov that were promoted by the Soviet state as official representations in the early canon of *Leniniana* [fig. 13].<sup>16</sup> Under Stalin the proliferation of glorifying imagery began to include living figures as well as dead. This was the beginning of the leader cult; an ever expanding collection of imagery and rhetoric that was monitored, manipulated and controlled by the Politburo, filtered down into the Soviet cultural organisations and disseminated to artists as a series of commissions, dictates, guidelines and criticism.<sup>17</sup> By the 1930s the leader portrait was a near-ubiquitous feature of classrooms, factory floors, parades, festivals and private homes. The development of the leader cult opened up the floodgates for the representation and reification of individuals throughout the hierarchy of Soviet society, the early 1920s avant-garde stigma of traditional portraiture dismissed in the wake of a Stalinist revival of individual status. By the peak of the leader cult in the

<sup>15</sup> Halliday considers the mechanisms of a similar practice of portraiture in the Paris Salon of the eighteenth century. *Facing the Public*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the two most celebrated examples of the early Lenin cult are Gerasimov's *Lenin on the Tribune* (1929-30, GTG) and Brodskii's *Lenin in Smolny* (1930, State Historical Museum, Moscow).

<sup>17</sup> For an exploration of the development of the Stalin cult see Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper, *Personality Cults in Stalinism* (Gottigen: V&R Unipress, 2004) and Balázs Apor, J. C. Behrends, et al., eds., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (London: Palgrave, 2004).

early 1950s Soviet art exhibitions were dominated by portraits of famous Soviets both dead and alive.<sup>18</sup>

The new prevalence of exemplary portraiture went hand in hand with the 1930s rejection of modernism in Soviet art, whereby the depiction of famous figures—their faces imprinted on the public consciousness by the proliferation of photographic and print technology—required the artist to capture a mimetic ‘likeness’ in his work to ensure a positive reception amongst a public well-versed in its appreciation of realist art. Leah Dickerman has written of the close relationship between the photograph and the work of Socialist Realist art in the 1930s, whereby painting gained documentary legitimacy through its use of photographic sources and representational techniques: ‘It borrows the reality-effect of the photograph in order to naturalize the mythology of the artwork, tapping its evidential authority even as it obscures its mechanical origins.’<sup>19</sup> Brandon Taylor has identified a dual role of photographic realism in Soviet art, whereby the painting gained a kind of sacred significance through its indexical verisimilitude. ‘The result of the photographic effect within the painted surface was to lend it an icon-like presence and hence a transcendental meaning that elevated it beyond the here and now.’<sup>20</sup> The 1930s portrait took its visual cues from the language of the photograph, but allied it to an iconography that emphasised or exaggerated certain specifically Soviet features of its subject in order to render Socialist Realist mythology as documentary fact.

Jan Plamper has written of the Soviet attempt to reconcile the traditionally bourgeois phenomenon of the realist status portrait with Marxist ideology:

The portrait was not only elevated to the master genre of Socialist Realist art; it was also presented as a sign of Soviet humanism, Bolshevik care for man. Conversely the decline of portraiture in Western art was portrayed as a symptom of the West’s antihumanism.<sup>21</sup>

The theories of Soviet portraiture during the Stalin era focused primarily on its constructive role in the development of the new Soviet man. V. Zimenko began a 1951 book on the practice of Soviet portrait painting with two chapters outlining the history of the revolution and the evolution of the classless Soviet individual, distinguished by his humanism and devotion to the collective cause, before presenting any concrete examples of portrait painting. He finishes this extended introduction by quoting from Gorky: “Now the Soviet people are not the same as they were 30 years ago.” To depict the form of these new people—that is the task of the young art of Soviet portraiture.<sup>22</sup> In the post-war years, wrote Zimenko, it was not only

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<sup>18</sup> See for example the *Iskusstvo* editorial exhibition review of the 1952 All-Union Exhibition in which many column inches are devoted to works of individual and group portraiture. ‘Sovetskoe izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu: o vsesoiuznoi khudozhestvennoi vystavke’, *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 1, p. 3-15.

<sup>19</sup> Leah Dickerman, ‘Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography’, *October* 92, (Summer 2000), p. 153.

<sup>20</sup> Brandon Taylor, ‘Photo-Power: Painting and Iconicity in the First Five Year Plan’, Dawn Ades, Tim Benton et al., eds., *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-45* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with Hayward Gallery, 1995), p. 251.

<sup>21</sup> Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> V. M. Zimenko, *Sovetskaia portretnaia zhivopis'* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1951), p. 30.



'individual appearance' that was considered to be important for a successful portrait, but also the 'intensification of psychological characteristics.' For a work of portraiture to avoid accusations of naturalism, it was necessary for an artist to 'expose the inner essence' of the subject—their 'high moral appearance, their social pathos and vitality.'<sup>23</sup> Soviet portraiture of the Stalin era was required to depict the achievements of socialist society through individual microcosms of exemplary values.

There can be little doubt that the exponential rise of Soviet portraiture was both a symptom of and a contributory factor in the renewed hierarchy of individual status and influence from the 1930s onwards, with the Stalin cult as its most blatant manifestation. The prominence of exemplary portraiture, and especially works dealing with Stalin himself, was addressed by Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of personality in the 1956 Secret Speech, an event that necessitated a far-reaching reorganisation of the Soviet art establishment and reassessment of the requirements of Soviet art.<sup>24</sup> Such features of post-war Soviet art as 'sickly-sweet sentimentality, cold internal grandiloquence, saccharine prettiness, pseudo-poetic delicacy and slavish imitation of nature' were condemned as relics of Stalinism and the detailed realistic style of many of the cult's purveyors was attacked as an outmoded interpretation of the demands of Socialist Realism.<sup>25</sup> Applause painting and monumental representations of the leader all but disappeared in the mid 1950s. Other forms of portraiture—individual and group portraits of prominent citizens and generic portraits of the proletariat—continued to play a major role in Soviet art exhibitions throughout the late 1950s and 60s, although the theory of their conception had to adapt to reflect the changing rhetoric of the new era.

Simultaneous and by no means coincidental to the vilification of naturalism was the rise of the photograph in the 1950s Soviet Union as an object worthy of aesthetic consideration, a development perhaps catalysed by a widespread loss of faith in the reliability and significance of fine art following Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of personality. Although photography remained distinct from the fine art establishment, whose conservative majority still adhered to a traditional academic hierarchy of genres and media, its rise no doubt impacted on the campaign against naturalism, which employed the term 'photographism'—denoting verisimilitude or the absence of a painterly touch—as a harsh criticism.<sup>26</sup> Moisei Kagan dealt with this issue in a 1958 article in *Tvorchestvo*, where he argued for the unique ability of painting to open up the 'psychological world' of its subject.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 163-4.

<sup>24</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, 'Speech to 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the C.P.S.U.', 24-25 Feb. 1956, *Marxist Internet Archive*: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008. For an analysis of the developments in Soviet art during the thaw period see Susan Reid, 'Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a "Contemporary Style" in Soviet Art,' in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation: A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge: 2006), pp. 210-230.

<sup>25</sup> Sergei Gerasimov is quoted from the 10<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the USSR Artists' Union in 1962. 'Gerasimov at the Artists' Union', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XIV, no. 1 (1962), p. 10. First published in *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 26 Dec. 1962, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> On the rise of the Soviet art photograph and its complex relationship with fine art see Susan Reid, 'Photography in the Thaw,' *Art Journal* 53, no. 2 (1994), pp. 33-39.

A criterion of fine art is not simply the depiction of reality, but the representation of its general character. Neither a blueprint, nor a documentary ethnographic or anatomical sketch can be considered as artistic forms, rather, the goal of painting and graphics is the creation of an artistically-modified reflection of reality.<sup>27</sup>

In combination with this, Kagan highlights the 'poetic quality' of fine art as a unique characteristic encompassing not only the artist's painterly interpretation of source material, but also the uniqueness of the work of art—a concept that is comparable to Walter Benjamin's 'aura' of the artwork in Western terminology. Benjamin argued that the modern, reproducible work of art was liberated from its social function as a regulator of mass response: 'The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed and the truly new is criticised with aversion.'<sup>28</sup> Mechanical reproduction had impacted on but not yet destroyed the social significance of the original work of art in the Soviet Union, where a distinct line remained between the field of photography, considered primarily in terms of its documentary application, and the field of painting, which was treated as a superior medium of representation with a long and auspicious tradition.<sup>29</sup> It was through this elevated status of fine art that Soviet portrait painting could retain its dominance over the photograph as a primary means to depict the nation's heroes and leaders.

### Laktionov and Portraiture

This exploration of Laktionov's portraiture will begin with an analysis of the artist's early works before moving on to deal with three distinct but overlapping areas in which he worked over the course of his career: the leader cult, group portraiture, and the status portrait. It will examine several key works and, where such material is available, consider the public and critical responses with which they were met. The issue of patronage is central to the discussion since it provided the agency by which the aspiring artist secured access to prestigious sitters, and each completed portrait in turn contributed to the artist's growing portfolio of references. It was a process by which the artist could propagate an ever-expanding social network of influential acquaintances and his portrait paintings could become prized status symbols for the nation's elite. Although Laktionov did paint a number of generic 'type' portraits over the course of his career—examples include *A Letter from the Front* [plate 2] and *Defender of the Motherland* [fig. 10] which are dealt with in the discussion of typicality in Chapter Two—the focus here will be on works depicting specific individuals. Also excluded from this analysis are the numerous family and personal portraits and self-portraits to which Chapter Five will be devoted.

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<sup>27</sup> Moisei Kagan, 'Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo i fotografiia,' *Tvorchestvo*, 1958, no. 7, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, pp. 512-520. First published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V, no. 1 (1936).

<sup>29</sup> In his 1959 book *Zriteliu o zhivopisi* (Iskusstvo: Moskva, 1959), Aleksandr Kamenskii described the advantages of painting over photography. 'The photograph cannot give the viewer the *expression* of a painting which draws on the collective experience of hundreds and thousands of viewings, it cannot create a *typical* expression.' p. 7.

The young artist began his career as a portrait painter among the artistic elite in Leningrad where he earned a reputation as a talented artist and able socialite. With the awarding of a Stalin Prize First Class in 1948 Laktionov entered a new, politicised phase of his career during which he became involved in the burgeoning leader cult and earned the support of several key patrons within the art establishment. In the wake of Stalin's death and subsequent fall from grace the artist was forced to disavow his contribution to the cult of personality and apply himself to the safer theme of everyday life. In this period, in which the glorification of individuals was considered temporarily unacceptable, he painted a number of 'generic' portraits and group portraits of well-known Soviet citizens. In the 1960s the artist returned to individual subjects with the intention to create a gallery of portraits of great Soviets from Lenin to the cosmonauts, a project that was cut short by terminal illness in 1970. Throughout his career Laktionov worked on numerous private portrait commissions for colleagues, friends and acquaintances that were sometimes exhibited, but more often simply entered the private collections of their subjects. Such extra-curricular activity constituted a vital element in the career of a Soviet artist, as works were presented as gifts for, or exchanged for favours from, famous or influential patrons of the arts.

### Early Portraits

Throughout his career Laktionov displayed the tendencies of an upwardly mobile socialite in his efforts to secure portrait sittings with ever more distinguished subjects. As a student of Isaak Brodskii at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts in 1934, Laktionov worked on a series of sketches, made from within the audience, of famous opera stars performing in the Leningrad State Conservatory.<sup>30</sup> Later as a postgraduate student he embarked on an ambitious undertaking to meet and draw the actors of the Moscow Artistic Academy during their visit to Leningrad. In order to achieve this goal the artist befriended I. M. Kudriavtsev, a less well-known member of the company who acted as an intermediary (*posrednik*) to broker a sitting with some of his more famous colleagues.<sup>31</sup> Aided by a reputation as Brodskii's favoured pupil, the young artist eventually gained access to the two stars of the theatre company, Ol'ga Knipper-Chekhova, wife of the illustrious writer, and Vasilii Kachalov, a renowned veteran of the stage. Painting these portraits was an intimidating experience for the young artist, who was extremely nervous in the company of these celebrities, yet the works are highly accomplished and clearly demonstrate the talent for portraiture that Laktionov was to develop over the coming decades. Indeed these loosely composed, unfinished works of mixed media retain an element of spontaneity and



Fig. 14: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Portrait of O. L. Knipper-Chekhova*, 1940, GTG

<sup>30</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

vigour that is deadened by the artist's meticulous technique in later, more finished works.

In *Portrait of O. L. Knipper-Chekhova* [fig. 14] Laktionov used a combination of pencil, sanguine and charcoal to retain a sense of fine detail in certain areas, without the defined drawing that distinguishes the majority of his work. The portrait was completed during four to five short sittings, over the course of which the artist claimed to have 'felt a miraculous connection, seeing before me the beauty of old age.'<sup>32</sup> Although the portrait makes no attempt to disguise the advanced years of its subject, Laktionov deliberately emphasised the former beauty of the actress, using the white of the paper and a darkly shaded area of background colour to imbue her face with a brilliant light. Her gaze and faint smile are sympathetic but somewhat wistful, as if recalling past triumphs with a sense of fond nostalgia. The unfinished nature of the work is most likely due to the limited opportunity for sittings, but this time constraint does not appear to have hampered Laktionov from capturing a lively sense of the actress's personality and demeanour.

A similarly expressive approach can be seen in Laktionov's *Portrait of V. I. Kachalov* [fig. 15], which the artist was forced to complete in just one sitting of two hours, having been disappointed by an earlier attempt made over the course of two sittings. The artist recalled the trepidation he experienced in the company of this famous actor, who read poetry aloud throughout in a loud voice that was audible even



Fig 15: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Portrait of V. I. Kachalov*, 1940, GTG

in the corridor: 'During the work I was terribly nervous, I was engrossed by the reading and the presence of the actor, I stopped several times, watching and listening to him and the work suffered as a result.'<sup>33</sup> Although Kachalov claimed to be satisfied with the first portrait and even signed it himself, the artist was not, and requested a further sitting in order to redeem himself. Kachalov agreed and the following day Laktionov produced a work in charcoal that captures the tired dignity of the aging actor in a painterly manner that is quite uncharacteristic for the artist. Executed in charcoal, it is set apart by a looseness of line that is evident elsewhere only in experimental sketches made by the student artist. Kachalov's face is depicted with layers of wavering lines that give the portrait an animated quality in spite of the actor's stationary pose. Only his eyes are presented as fixed points on the page giving the impression of a keen intelligence undiminished by the evident age of the wrinkled face. The actor's hand resting on his forehead, usually an important and meticulously drawn feature of Laktionov's portraits, is left entirely unfinished, a mere vague shape completing the posed composition.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> I. G. Miamlin, *Risunki A. I. Laktionova: [Al'bum] 12 Reproduktsii* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1962), p. 7.

These works, which were executed at an early stage of the artist's postgraduate course at the Leningrad Academy, were never intended for public exhibition or private ownership, but were completed instead as an exploration of the techniques of portraiture. Laktionov made a conscious decision to leave several of these portraits in an 'unfinished' state that sets them apart from those works that were destined for public or private collections. The traditional approach of the Academy instilled in the young artist an understanding of the clear distinction between the study or sketch and the finished painting that predates late nineteenth century developments in Russian art.<sup>34</sup> An official 1978 biography of the artist divides a list of his works according to the categories of 'painting' and 'graphics', with those works deemed to be unfinished assigned to the latter heading.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly the looseness of style and expressive variations of detail that are in evidence in these early works are absent in the more thorough, uniformly finished canvases with which the artist later became synonymous. The majority of Laktionov's works of portraiture are distinguished by their strict conception of drawing and a high level of detail that often extends beyond the subject of the portrait to include surroundings and accoutrements. Some critics, including the renowned artist Boris Ioganson, considered such an approach to be incompatible with the demands of Socialist Realist portraiture:

We [artists] know that as well as drawing there is also painting. Unfortunately Laktionov's brush does not express those elements, like the play of warm and cold tones, like the harmony of colours, which are integral to the fascination of a painting. Without these qualities it is impossible to convey fully a person's charm, because the twinkle of an eye, the movement of the lips, the very facial expression, all demand the resolution of extremely difficult artistic, painterly problems.<sup>36</sup>

Yet these early portraits demonstrate Laktionov's skill in capturing those very qualities. The highly finished execution of later portraits is a deliberate creative choice born out of the artist's traditional education at the Leningrad Academy and a belief in the enduring legitimacy of nineteenth century forms of artistic representation.

### Portraits of Stalin

It has proven difficult to trace the full extent of Laktionov's involvement in the Stalin cult since his works in this field have been systematically erased from the official record, presumably in an attempt to preserve the artist's status into the thaw period of the late 1950s. The whereabouts of those works that have survived are, for the time being, unknown. The one exception to this dearth is the major genre painting *Into a New Flat* [plate 4], in which a young child is depicted holding aloft a picture of Stalin to display in the family's new home. This canvas is located in a remote

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<sup>34</sup> Repin was instrumental in the elevation of the sketch and study through his participation in a series of exhibitions in the 1890s in which unfinished works were, somewhat controversially, exhibited alongside paintings, or even independently in dedicated shows. See Jackson, *The Russian Vision*, pp. 225-26.

<sup>35</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 149-60.

<sup>36</sup> Boris Ioganson, *Molodym khudozhnikam o zhivopisi* (Moskva: Akademia khudozhestv SSSR, 1959), p. 199. Ioganson is also quoted in reference to Laktionov's work in Susan Reid, 'Destalinisation and Taste, 1954-1963,' *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), p. 183.



provincial gallery and has, since 1956, been reproduced only in a cropped, fragmentary state in biographies of the artist in order to conceal the embarrassing and potentially damaging content of its remainder. The artist is known to have painted at least three portraits of Stalin before the leader's death in 1953, the first entitled *Stalin in Exile Reading Lenin's Letter* (1938, present location unknown), the second *Stalin's Appearance in Red Square 7<sup>th</sup> November 1941* [fig. 16] and the last, simply *Portrait of I. V. Stalin* [plate 3], which was included in the vast 1949 exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery, *I. V. Stalin in the Fine Arts*, to commemorate the leader's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday.<sup>37</sup>

Laktionov's treatment of Stalin as an inspiring figurehead during the years of war, *Stalin's Appearance in Red Square 7 November 1941*, is an allegorical portrait that connects the leader with the Soviet war experience. Stalin is depicted atop the



Fig. 16: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Stalin's Appearance in Red Square 7 November 1941*, present location unknown

Lenin mausoleum during a traditional military parade on Red Square even as the *Wehrmacht* stood poised for attack on the outskirts of Moscow. The Kremlin Tower, obscured by thick snow, is visible as a shadow in the background and the figure of Stalin appears to merge into the architecture of the Kremlin, every bit as immobile and imposing as the ancient walls themselves.<sup>38</sup> Only the leader's face is rendered in sharp detail, apparently impervious to the flakes of snow and sense of bitter cold that pervade the remainder of the canvas. He is depicted with tough, leathery skin and a steely, resolute gaze that captures the open defiance of this eleventh hour propaganda coup before the final stages of the Battle of Moscow. It is an intensely patriotic work, completed by the artist during his evacuation in Samarkand, at a time when Stalin's popularity was reaching a peak following the successful repulsion of the Nazi

offensive. The portrait attempts to blend the imagery of Stalin, the Kremlin and the Russia winter into a single ideology of steadfast endurance and permanence. It is a work of fantasy, presumably based on newspaper and radio reports from the front, in

<sup>37</sup> This information is taken from Laktionov's 1949 autobiographical notes, GTG, f. 59, d. 4178, *Ankety, avtobiografii, spisok rabot Laktionova*, 8 Aug. 1948-24 Nov 1949, and from the list of works exhibited at the exhibition *I. V. Stalin in the Fine Arts*, GTG, f. 8.II, op. 2, d. 18, *Spisok kartin, skulptur i grafiki, nakhodiashchikhsia na vystavke 'I. V. Stalin v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve'*, 1949. It is interesting to note that although the whereabouts of these works are unknown, a google image search for 'Laktionov' returns *Portrait of Stalin* as the second most common result after *A Letter from the Front*. There is a public fascination with works of the leader cult that often overshadows the work of Soviet artists in other genres.

<sup>38</sup> Laktionov's painting references a number of famous representations of the leader, most notably Aleksandr Gerasimov's canonical work *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938, GTG).

which the artist is a spectator in the crowd, looking up to the nation's saviour with deference and awe.

A very different impression is created by Laktionov's 1949 *Portrait of Stalin*, which raises some interesting questions of cult production. The painting, based on an exceptionally popular stock photograph that was reproduced far and wide on everything from posters and postcards to decorative plates, is almost deliberately banal in spite of its thorough execution. Indeed several other prominent artists, including Dmitri Nalbandian and Viacheslav Mariupol'skii, used the very same photograph as the basis for their own versions of the leader portrait, and the source image reappeared later as the poster within Laktionov's painting *Into a New Flat*. The image provides concrete evidence that the artist did at times resort to photographic sources although in this particular circumstance it is likely that he simply had no choice, since direct access to the leader was granted in only rare and exceptional circumstances.<sup>39</sup> Laktionov's painting was indicative of the strict degree of Central Committee control over visual representations of the leader which maintained an established canon of acceptable images.<sup>40</sup>

Laktionov's 1949 portrait depicts Stalin, dressed in military uniform decorated with a single gold star—the simple medal denoting a Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest order of distinction—and epaulettes, gazing into the middle distance with a slightly furrowed brow and an expression of proud resolve. Stalin's visage in the portrait, as in the source photograph, is smooth and free of the pockmarks that afflicted the man himself. The representation is meticulous and makes no attempt to disguise its origins as a photograph, although the leader is flattered somewhat by Laktionov's subtle enhancement of his abundant moustache and coiffured hair and a slight enlargement of his eyes—features of the portrait that suggest a younger, more handsome figure than that of the already retouched original. Laktionov also chose to replace the neutral, pale background of the photograph with a rich brown colour, which adds depth to the image in spite of its two dimensional source. It is a highly finished and intensely flattering work that appears warmer and more lifelike than the retouched photographic original, yet there is a sense of deliberate neutrality about it that suggests a rote execution, imparting nothing of the artist's intentionality or signature. Laktionov's painting was the final name on the listing for the 1949 exhibition, implying that the newly distinguished Stalin Prize laureate was a late addition to this flagship event, which brought together the work of all major Soviet artists past and present.

Both of these works suffer the blight that afflicted the majority of portraits of Stalin from the 1940s and 50s; the lack of vitality and character in the subject that is an inevitable consequence of the leader cult. Since fine art representations of Stalin were almost always based on stock photographic images, his depiction was locked into a series of fixed expressions and static poses; a set of clichés that were firmly and

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<sup>39</sup> Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, pp. 71-113.

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of the sanctioned imagery of the Stalin cult see Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1997), pp. 155-85.

indelibly imprinted into the mass consciousness.<sup>41</sup> Likewise the artist could ill afford to stray from the source material or imprint his own interpretation on the work since the consequences of an unfavourable reception could result in severe repercussions for a burgeoning career. A notable feature of the Stalinist leader cult is that it became dominated by a number of unremarkable artists, whose style and technical ability was certainly outclassed by some of their less successful peers. Aleksandr Gerasimov, Dmitri Nalbandian and Iraklii Toidze were the most renowned (or notorious) practitioners and were, accordingly, its greatest casualties in the aftermath of Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of the cult of personality. Current theory suggests that the hegemony of these court painters was a direct result of their skilful manipulation of state rhetoric and opportunistic careerism, yet perhaps it was precisely the neutral quality of their art, or their willingness to subdue it, that rendered them so appropriate to the leader cult; artistic individuality was subordinated to theme and content resulting in a series of representations of the leader uncomplicated by the encroachment of the artist's personality.

In 1953 Laktionov finally got his chance to draw the leader 'from life.' Shortly after Stalin's death on the fifth of March the artist was allowed access to Stalin's body while it was lying in state in order to complete a portrait (*Stalin Lying in State*, 1953, Rosizo, Moscow). The resulting charcoal work, which was drawn between the hours of two and ten in the morning, shows the leader lying in his ceremonial coffin, his face rendered in fine detail and exuding a sense of serene benevolence. This devout and somewhat eerie representation was Laktionov's final contribution to the Stalin cult which, after a prolonged period of widespread mourning, experienced a rapid and comprehensive decline in the mid 1950s.

### Surviving the Leader Cult

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the painting *A Letter from the Front* marked a significant turning point in Laktionov's career and brought him to the attention of certain key figures in the Soviet art establishment including Mikhail Sholokhov, the head of the Ministry of Culture, Petr Sysoev, chief editor of the journal *Iskusstvo* and President of the Arts Committee and its Vice President Andrei Lebedev.<sup>42</sup> Lebedev, who was later to become Director of Fine Art in the Ministry of Culture, was a staunch supporter of Laktionov throughout the remainder of his career and there is evidence to suggest that he acted to further the artist's cause in both an official and an unofficial capacity. Such adoption by an influential patron was an indispensable asset for any Soviet artist that wished to advance their station.<sup>43</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick has suggested certain factors that may have motivated the Soviet patron, namely 'a belief that patronage of the arts sheds a lustre on the patron, enjoyment of social contacts

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Davies, 'Stalin and the Making of the Stalin Cult in the 1930s,' in Beherends, *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships*, pp. 29-46.

<sup>42</sup> According to the reminiscences of Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova, Sholokhov was 'like a father' to Laktionov and arranged a private studio for him on Ul. Volodarskogo, which Maria was permitted to use following her father's death, an example of the way in which Soviet patronage could pass down through generations.

<sup>43</sup> Plamper has written of the 'semi-formalised' systems of patronage upon which the Soviet art establishment operated, focusing on the activities of Kliment Voroshilov, Commissar of War from 1925 to 1940 and prolific patron of the fine arts. Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts*, pp. 71-113.



with members of the *haute monde*,<sup>44</sup> yet Lebedev's actions suggest a further, less philanthropic motive: that of furthering of his own particular taste in art as the correct and mandatory model for Socialist Realism.

The most significant manifestation of Lebedev's patronage was his support for Laktionov and others throughout the tumultuous aftermath of Stalin's death and subsequent denunciation, a time when many established artists fell foul of the new critical standards.<sup>45</sup> As a participant in the Stalinist leader cult and an artist of the older generation, Laktionov was a natural target in the liberal purge of the Soviet art establishment in the mid 1950s. Lebedev spoke out against the stifling of realist artists at a 1956 conference of the Ministry of Culture, called to discuss the repercussions of the denunciation of the leader cult, where he claimed that certain individuals were determined to drag Soviet art 'into the swamp of insipidity.'<sup>46</sup> The matter reached a head in the run-up to the 1957 *All-Union Exhibition* in which Laktionov was scheduled to exhibit several works. Threatened with exclusion from the exhibition Laktionov wrote the following hastily scribbled note to his patron urging him to pull some strings within the Ministry of Culture:

Dear Andrei Konstantinovich,

The artist Laktionov has recently been put in a very difficult position in regard to current discrimination against the previous leadership. The matter is so serious that they are threatening to exclude the artist from the Jubilee exhibition, regardless of the fact that the work has already been finished. I decided to ask the Ministry, while it's still not too late, to help to clear the way for cooperation.

I suggest today (if it is technically possible) for you and Mikhailov to hear my questions, which are in need of urgent resolution.<sup>47</sup>

The matter was surely resolved with Lebedev's help, since Laktionov was represented at the exhibition with four works. Such correspondence reveals the mechanism by which Laktionov sustained his influence throughout the 1950s to become one of the few Soviet artists to enjoy a successful career in both the 1940s and the 1960s and to count Nikita Khrushchev himself amongst his outspoken admirers. Throughout the

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<sup>44</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> See for example the story of Aleksandr Gerasimov's fall from grace in Matthew Cullerne Bown, 'Aleksandr Gerasimov', Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> 'Molotov and Mikhaikov at Soviet Artists' Conference,' *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* VIII, no. 48 (1956), p. 10. First published in *Sovetskaiia kul'tura*, 20 Nov. 1956, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI, fond 2711, opis' 1, delo 76, *Pis'ma i telegrammy Laktionovykh Lebedevu*. The note is handwritten on a small scrap of paper and lacks a date, although it is possible to estimate that it was written some time in 1957 during preparations for the *All-Union Art Exhibition Commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great October Revolution* in Moscow, the first major Soviet art exhibition since Khrushchev's Secret Speech of 1956.

1960s the Ministry of Culture was responsible for awarding Laktionov a number of major commissions, some of which still hang within its walls.<sup>48</sup>

The campaign against the cult of personality in the mid 1950s threw the Soviet art apparatus into a state of confusion as artists and writers sought to distance themselves from past associations and incriminating material, while liberal critics such as Ilya Ehrenburg and Osip Beskin became increasingly outspoken against the entrenched conservative bastion of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>49</sup> The reformist coup that swept through the cultural institutions in the late 1950s was an apparently unintended consequence of Khrushchev's Secret Speech that he would spend the remainder of his leadership attempting to curb. In a speech made on 13 May 1957 to the Central Committee and repeated some days later to a reception of artists, sculptors, writers and composers, Khrushchev endeavoured to reign in the liberalisation that the art establishment had undergone during the process of de-Stalinisation.



Fig. 17: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Portrait of N. S. Khrushchev*, 1958, present location unknown

It has got to be admitted that among the intelligentsia there were people who did not take any active part before in our cause and who began to vilify and smear workers of literature and art who glorified achievements our people had won under the Party's leadership. They invented and gave currency to such a vituperative tag as 'prettifier', labelling it on to all who wrote truthfully about our reality and our people's constructive endeavour and great victories, on to all who created positive likenesses of Soviet people in works of literature and art.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 149-155.

<sup>49</sup> See for example a 1957 discussion in the critics section of the USSR Artists' Union in which an ongoing dispute between the critics Vladimir Kostin and Aleksandr Kamenskii and the Ministry of Culture is discussed. Izakson makes a clear statement about the hypocrisy of the situation: '[Kostin] called members of the Ministry of Culture bureaucrats. Let's talk openly, what exactly can you call someone [...] who said two months before Stalin's death, "not one painting without the leader" and two months after his death that same Sysoev said, "not one painting with the depiction of Stalin."' RGALI, f. 2940, op. 1, d. 121, *Stenogramma zasedaniia seksii kritikov SSKh*, 19 Nov. 1957.

<sup>50</sup> The original speech was made to the Writers' Congress on 13 May 1957. This translation is taken from Nikita Khrushchev, 'Closer Alliance of Literature and Art with the Life of the People,' *Soviet Literature*, 1957, no. 10, pp. 3-21.

It seems likely that Laktionov was precisely one of those artists whose interests Khrushchev intended to protect in the face of increasing dissent from some quarters. Just two years after the Secret Speech Laktionov flaunted the tacit embargo of representations of the leader and completed a flattering drawing of the First Secretary that was widely reproduced throughout the Soviet Union [Fig. 17].<sup>51</sup> The artist petitioned Khrushchev for permission to paint his portrait from life and met the First Secretary in person at a reception for leading members of the artistic community, an occasion about which he reminisced in a sycophantic article in the newspaper *Sovetskaia kul'tura*.<sup>52</sup> Following the notorious 'Manege affair' of 1962 Khrushchev made a speech in which he attacked the formalist tendencies on display and defended Laktionov's position as an artist whose work 'is attractive in its humanity and evokes respect for man.'<sup>53</sup>

### *Old Age Provided For*

In the post-Stalin era the term 'group portrait' raised connotations of monumental applause paintings such as Ioganson's *Our Wise Leader, Teacher of the Path* (1952, GRM) and Mikhail Khmel'ko's *Toast to the Great Russian People* (1952), works in which individual likenesses of prominent Party members were indeed represented, but as vague faces in the crowd, subordinated to the dominant figure of Stalin. In the 1950s the Soviet group portrait experienced a diversification as artists were encouraged to expand the complex interactions of their subjects and to construct a narrative uniting them. The demands of the group portrait overlapped with the growth of genre painting as a means to represent the intricacies of Soviet life.<sup>54</sup> Laktionov completed several major group portraits over the course of his career, including his diploma work *A Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops* [plate 1] and *After the Operation* [fig. 21]. In the years following Khrushchev's denunciation of the leader cult Laktionov began work on the remarkable group portrait, *Old Age Provided For* [plate 6], a vast and complex composition which eschewed current trends in the Soviet art establishment in favour of a deeply traditional portrayal of the older generation of Soviet citizens.

<sup>51</sup> Laktionov wrote of the need for higher quality representations of the country's leading figures in 'Zhizn—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika,' *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv SSSR* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1961), pp. 287-88. The article includes a full page reproduction of Khrushchev's portrait.

<sup>52</sup> As the artist recollected: 'Amongst the numerous guests Nikita Khrushchev suddenly saw me. [...] I reminded Nikita Sergeevich of my request to paint him from life. [...] Nikita Sergeevich was modestly silent. In discussion with N. S. Khrushchev we touched on a series of creative questions.' Later on at the reception a government minister congratulated Laktionov on his bravery as an artist to which Laktionov responds, "Thank you, thank you", in reply I thanked every member of the government, "Thank you my dear Nikita Sergeevich for your love and attention." Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Khochetsia tvorit' i tvorit', *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 26 Jul. 1960.

<sup>53</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, 'High Ideological Content and Artistic Mastery Are the Great Force of Soviet Literature and Art', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XV, no. 11 (1963), p. 8, first published in *Pravda*, 10 Mar. 1963, pp. 1-4. For a recent analysis of the 'Manege affair' with reference to Laktionov's work see Susan Reid, 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited' in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6 no. 4 (2005).

<sup>54</sup> Nina Dmitrieva devoted an article to the development of genre painting in a 1953 edition of *Iskusstvo* in which she writes of the need for greater drama and a story for the individuals depicted, together with an interpretative perspective which she labels tendentiousness (*tendentsioznost'*). Nina Dmitrieva, 'Vsesoiuznaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka 1952 goda: Bytovaia zhivopis', *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 2, pp. 13-20.

*Old Age Provided For* [plate 6] is an ambitious and monumental multi-figural portrait of stage veterans, living out their retirement in the lavish surroundings of A. A. Iablochkina's Retirement Home for Stage Veterans in Moscow. Not only a group portrait, this was also a genre painting in which the artist intended to show the excellent provision made by the Soviet state for its retired actors. The resulting ostentatious depiction of the privileged older generation, executed with precise realism and a high finish, was bound to incite criticism in 1960, when both the style and subject matter of the work raised connotations of the Stalinist past. The representation of old age appears to have been a fascination for Laktionov in his portrait work, as he delighted in the intricate patterns of wrinkles, creases and textures in faces and hands of his subjects. The association of Laktionov's painting with the depiction of old age is likely indicative of the growing generational divide of the Khrushchev era, in which an 'artistic rejuvenation' took place in the Soviet art world as a fresh emphasis came to be placed on the work of youth artists.<sup>55</sup> In the late 1950s Laktionov's traditional artistic language represented an appropriate and logical means for the representation of the older, Stalinist generation. The recommendation to work within this retirement home was granted by People's Actor of the USSR, A. V. Zhilt'sov, for whom Laktionov painted a portrait in 1956 (*Portrait of A. V. Zhil'tsov*, 1956, private collection V. A. Zhil'tsova, Moscow), a minor example of the use of the private portrait as a form of unofficial currency within the Soviet art world. The artist spent three years working on the canvas, during which time he painted each of the figures from life, no simple task considering the advanced years of certain participants. A. A. Iablochkina herself originally intended to participate in the work but was forced to pull out due to illness and was represented instead by her portrait hanging on the wall. Another actress passed away before Laktionov had been able to complete the preliminary sketches and was subsequently replaced in the final work.

The painting is based on the principles of seventeenth century Dutch group portraiture and owes a particular debt to Frans Hals' *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard* [fig. 18], whose semicircular composition and arrangement of figures it borrows wholeheartedly. Where Hals positioned the officers around the table in a hierarchy of military rank, Laktionov's old folk have been arranged according to the advancement of their years, with the youngest figures standing around the fringes and the most decrepit seated in the centre. This classical, semicircular composition of the painting, developed for the hierarchical representation of the status of wealthy patrons, appears somewhat absurd in the context of a Soviet retirement home, in which the privileged pensioners exude a sense of smug decadence as they relax in their opulent surroundings. A maid proffers an overflowing basket of fruit while an improbably fluffy cat snoozes on a comfortable lap. Several of the group engage with the viewer and one standing figure gestures to us with an inert smile, indicating the calm tranquillity of old age under the welfare of the Soviet system. Where Hals' painting accentuated the easy rapport and solidarity of a group of officers as they wine and dine around a small, crowded table, a similar arrangement appears contrived and uncomfortable when applied to a group of pensioners. There is

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<sup>55</sup> The term is borrowed from Reid, who analyses the practice of youth art exhibitions in the Thaw period in 'Modernising Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a "Contemporary Style" in Soviet Art', Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation: A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge, 2006), pp. 217-21.

an unintentional sense of overcrowding, wholly inappropriate to the theme of the Soviet state's excellent provision for its elderly, as the pensioners squeeze around the table, lean uncomfortably into the composition, or stand at the fringes of the group.

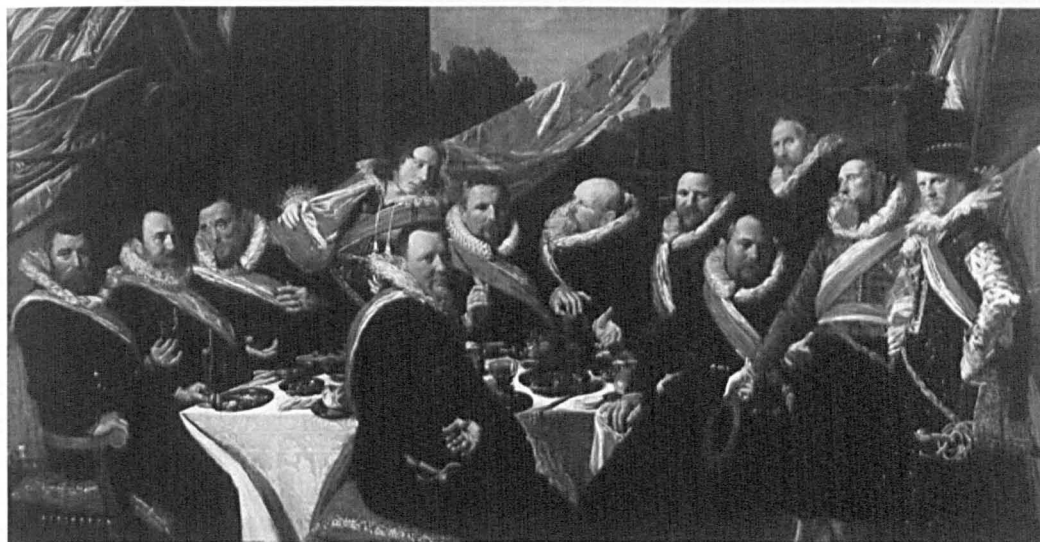


Fig. 18: Frans Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard*, 1616, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

Laktionov's highly finished group portrait retains none of the vigour or vivacity of his earlier portraits of stage veterans. Each figure is depicted in fine detail that renders it statuesque in its fixed pose—an approach that is characteristic for Laktionov in his later individual works of portraiture, yet antithetical to the interaction required by a group portrait. In juxtaposition the protagonists are lifeless and impassive, lending the painting an air of the grotesque. Every wrinkle, line and hair, so meticulously wrought in each individual portrait, is accentuated and exaggerated by their repetition across the canvas so that the pensioners become caricatures of old age, their rictus grins and blank expressions exuding a sense of impending mortality. The two newspapers included in the image, *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*) and an open page covering the launch of a Soviet space mission, are presumably intended to connect these old people to the present day.<sup>56</sup> Yet the most lifelike objects in this unintentionally disturbing representation of retirement are the two vast indoor plants, their lush leaves towering over the group of veterans as they enjoy the hospitality of the Soviet state, waiting impassively for death. One figure, an elderly man in the centre of the canvas, appears listless and thoroughly bored by his aged company, and the viewer cannot help but gravitate towards him and share in his gloom.

<sup>56</sup> The newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossia* included a review of the painting in which V. Shleev contended that 'You look at the painting and clearly feel both the atmosphere of peaceful relaxation and lively interest in the pressing issues of today. One pair are discussing an article about the launch of a Soviet space rocket, and at the other end of the table someone is reading the paper with interest.' V. Shleev, 'Trud zavershen', *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 5 Mar. 1960.



The painting was first exhibited at the vast *Soviet Russia* exhibition of 1960 in the *Manezh*, where it was greeted with both admiration and consternation by visitors, who were divided over the work.<sup>57</sup> Where one visitor praised its ‘remarkable mastery’,<sup>58</sup> another despaired that the artist had ‘confused painting with colour photography.’<sup>59</sup> For one visitor it was ‘a bright spot at the exhibition’<sup>60</sup>, while for another it was ‘a subordination of theme to technique.’<sup>61</sup> All agreed, however that the painting attracted a large crowd of spectators and generated passionate debates and discussions. It was, by 1960, a cliché that a new Laktionov painting should be controversial and the newspaper treatments of the work reflected this expectation. The newspaper *Moskovskii komsomolets* published a letter from the student Nina Braichova, which began with the plea: ‘I am contacting you with the request that you resolve our argument.’<sup>62</sup> How, asked Nina and her friends after seeing Laktionov’s new painting, could this be considered beautiful, and how could it be reconciled with the demands of ‘genuine painting’ (*nastoiashaia zhivopis*)? A week later *Literaturnaia gazeta* contributed to the matter with a series of photographs of viewers and their various reactions to the painting – ridicule, bewilderment, awe or respect – accompanied by a sample of the ‘stormy debates’ of the exhibition-goers [fig. 19]:



Fig. 19: ‘Na vystavke *Sovetskaia Rossia*’, *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 23 Jun. 1960

You allege that this is art? But surely you expect something more from art than colour photography?

But what are you saying? It’s all wonderful! Look how the shawl has been drawn, you want to touch it. And the candlestick and the rubber plant and the grey hair!

Well, what has the artist shown me that is new?<sup>63</sup>

*Moskovskii komsomolets* followed up Braichova’s letter with an article entitled ‘The Argument Continues...’ in which a selection from the great influx of readers letters regarding Laktionov’s painting were published. Once again, various opinions are presented, although significantly more space is devoted to negative evaluations, the

<sup>57</sup> The visitors’ comments were collected on individual slips that have been bound into a volume. TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 81, *Individual’nye otzvyvy posetitelei po vystavke ‘Sovetskaia Rossiia,’* 1960.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

<sup>62</sup> *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 16 Jun. 1960.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Na vystavke “Sovetskaia Rossia,”’ *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 Jun. 1960.

dominant sub-heading reading 'Without Thought or Feeling' by way of introduction to a letter by Lida Volobueva:

It unwittingly put me in mind of the frailty, the old age of these people and my heart became heavy. The artist has not succeeded in filling the painting with genuinely significant content. It is, if I may use the term, passively contemplative, and nothing more. It is beautiful, and accurately presents the shapes of objects and the textures of fabrics, but is this really the main thing in painting? [...] I am against scribbling and abstraction but I consider Laktionov's style to be out-dated (*nesovremennyi*).<sup>64</sup>

In their criticisms of the canvas Volobueva and Braichova merge the artist's traditional academic style with its 'out-dated' depiction of the older generation. Laktionov's painting was an old-fashioned representation of old age in a period when youth and progress were promoted as important features of the new regime.

A month later the newspaper followed its article with a response from the reactionary art critic N. Sobolevskii entitled 'Inspired by Contemporary Ideas,' in which he addressed the issues raised by young exhibition-goers in somewhat patronising terms.

I wanted to take part in this creative debate not only because of my field, but mainly because the argument in the pages of this paper involve not professional artists, not art critics, but normal people—workers, farmers, students, the young intelligentsia. I have been following them with great attention and now I have a great desire to join in.<sup>65</sup>

He goes on to quote the Central Committee's pronouncement on literature and the arts from 13<sup>th</sup> May 1957, which stated that the creative individualities of artists should be preserved and developed through a process of criticism and self-criticism. According to this measure, Sobolevskii asserts, Laktionov's canvas was not out-dated and could in fact be judged a great success, since it stimulated such a passionate and constructive debate about art.

Laktionov's *Old Age Provided For* grabbed the attention of Soviet viewers. And this alone holds great significance. In the end what can be wrong with a painting that doesn't leave one indifferent (as do some others) and encourages such contradictory opinions among Soviet viewers, who are knowledgeable and appreciative of the art of painting.<sup>66</sup>

Putting aside the inevitable editing and selection that these published letters and articles must have undergone, this episode represents a surprising element of democratisation in the official reception of Laktionov's canvas, and the positive encouragement of a varied response from viewers.

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<sup>64</sup> 'Spor prodolzhaetsia,' *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 3 Jul. 1960.

<sup>65</sup> N. Sobolevskii, 'Odukhotvorennoe ideiami sovremennosti,' *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 6 Aug. 1960.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

But most significantly the language of its reception in the Soviet press focuses primarily on the artist and his idiosyncratic technique, rather than the merits of the theme or the likenesses of its subjects. As one visitor commented, ‘The subordination of the theme to technique is a shortcoming for such a talented artist.’<sup>67</sup> The nature of the group portrait is undermined by Laktionov’s conspicuous style, which replaces the retired actors as the focus of the work. The over-sized rubber plant, the intricate patterns on the rug, the vase of flowers and the effects of lighting represent the artist’s distinctive signature; the complexity of the composition is a pretext for the appropriation of art historical precedents. In a group portrait based on an important Soviet theme the overt presence of the artist’s hand was problematic for the exhibition-goers and some critics. Above all, as a number of visitors contended, Laktionov’s meticulous style rendered the work photographic and even inartistic. A review of the painting in the art journal *Tvorchestvo* attacked the artist’s naturalistic style and lack of artistic selection:

The portrait is all in all a snapshot of everything that fell into the artist’s field of vision. It especially clearly reveals the illusionistic coldness of the artist’s method. [...] It turns out that these days, when alongside painting there exists the ever-improving art of photography, artists have the opportunity to more acutely express the specific goals and means of their own art with its own particular values.<sup>68</sup>

According to Molchalov and those exhibition viewers who accused Laktionov of photographism, the Soviet artist was expected to express himself in a painterly fashion, to open up the ‘inner world’ of his subject and above all to distinguish his work from the unedited realism of a photograph. Yet it was that very time-consuming and disciplined approach to realism that made Laktionov’s painting perfectly suitable for the execution of status portraits.

In Laktionov’s works of private portraiture this distinctive style and verisimilitude of drawing is precisely the point; what was the purpose of commissioning a Laktionov if it did not look like ‘a Laktionov’? The academic realism of Laktionov’s work proved popular amongst organisations and individuals who were keen to promote their traditional values and an adherence to the conservative line in Soviet culture. Laktionov’s painstaking execution of detail with its aura of high art was well suited to the stiffly-posed and formal requirements of portraits of significant public figures. In keeping with the traditional language of the status portrait, the sitter would often be depicted seated and

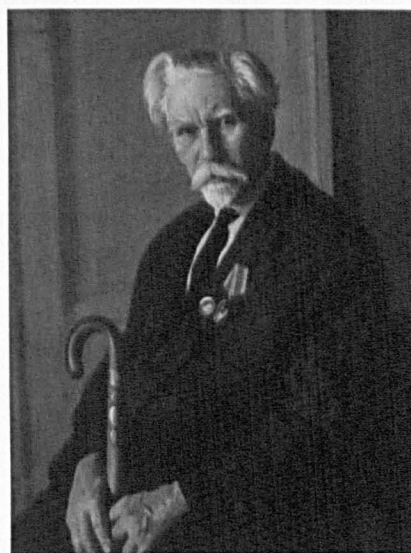


Fig. 20: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Portrait of the Old Bolshevik P. I. Voevodin*, 1963, Roslzo

<sup>67</sup> TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 81, p. 35.

<sup>68</sup> L. Molchalov, ‘Vystavka “Sovetskaia Rossia”: ot portreta ocherka k portretu obrazu,’ *Tvorchestvo*, 1960, no. 8, p. 5.



surrounded by the tools of his trade (for example *Portrait of the Architect A. N. Dushkin* (1967, private collection of M. A. Laktionov)), or as a torso framed against a plain dark background (*Portrait of the President of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian Soviet Republic, N. I. Muskhelishvili* (1968, National Gallery of Lithuania, Vilnius)). In the late 1950s and 1960s Laktionov completed numerous portraits of the older generation and further consolidated the relationship between his artistic style and the depiction of old age. Significant examples include *Portrait of an Old Teacher* (1956, private collection of E. V. Vuchetich, Moscow), *Portrait of the Old Bolshevik P. I. Voevodin* [fig. 20] and *Portrait of the Old Bolshevik F. N. Petrov* (1964, RosIzo). These latter two works in particular, both of which were exhibited at the *Second Soviet Russia Exhibition of 1965*, imbue their aged subjects with an air of dignity and permanence, their expressions intense and solemn as if reminding the frivolous youth of their serious debt to the past. The titles of these works specified their subjects as old Bolsheviks and consequently bypassed the negative connotations of the Stalin era to engage with the untainted heroism of the Revolutionary era.



Fig.21: Aleksandr Laktionov, *After the Operation*, 1965, Kursk Regional Art Gallery in the Name of A. A. Deineka

The relationship between old age and legitimacy was dealt with once again in Laktionov's second major group portrait of the 1960s, *After the Operation*. Here the artist portrayed a seated trio of renowned surgeons surrounding the central figure of Sergei Iudin (who was painted posthumously, having died in 1954). An early draft of the painting was entitled *The Feat of the Scientist* and it is clear from the completed canvas that Iudin, who holds aloft

a phial of blood in a manner of great excitement, is in the process of describing a major breakthrough to his attentive colleagues, one of whom is keeping careful notes. The painting is temporally somewhat misleading, depicting contemporary portraits of the doctors D. A. Arapov, B. S. Rozanov and A. A. Bocharov alongside the central figure of their famous teacher, who died over ten years previously. Likewise, Iudin's 'feat' most likely refers to a groundbreaking 1930 blood transfusion that paved the way for the establishment of the blood bank as a means of storing blood for later use in operations. It is notable that Iudin was in 1948 arrested and later exiled to Siberia, only to be rehabilitated in 1953 following Stalin's death. During this period his name disappeared from medical journals, several of his articles were withheld from publication and his works were removed from libraries.<sup>69</sup> In tackling this portrait of a

69 Vladimir Alexi-Meskishvili and Igor E. Konstantinov, 'Sergei S. Yudin: An Untold Story', *Surgery*, 139, no. 1 (2006), pp. 115-122.

reconstituted Stalinist purge victim Laktionov was to some extent claiming his own position as an artist of the post-Stalin generation.

The group portrait invests the white-coated figure of Yudin with animation and vivacity as he leans forward into the composition and clutches one hand to his own heart as he describes the successful application of his new procedure. Meanwhile his three listeners are more stiffly posed and their solemn expressions and dark uniforms lend a contrasting gravitas to the scene. They are matched, in the background by a trio of busts and an array of photographic portraits depicting important doctors and surgeons of the past including Nikolai Pirogov and Ivan Pavlov. Laktionov claimed to have recreated Iudin's office down to every last detail in his preparation for this painting, and these background details seem to spill out into the foreground action, the busts in particular appearing every bit as lifelike as the gathered group of surgeons.<sup>70</sup> The painting claims a place in history for its subjects and invests them with the established legacy of their forbears. It is a work that, somewhat uncannily, brings the diseased Yudin back to life to reassert his place in the pantheon of Russian and Soviet medical practitioners. His groundbreaking work of the 1930s is recreated as a contemporary event to which his surviving colleagues and former students bear witness. Laktionov's painting presents a revised history of Iudin that denies the events of the late Stalin period and promotes instead a direct visual link between the great doctors and surgeons of the past and these three prominent figures of the contemporary Soviet medical establishment.

### Portraits of Cosmonauts

Laktionov's style could also be allied to more modern themes in order to lend them a weight of tradition and stability. In the mid-1960s Laktionov was commissioned by the Soviet state to visit *Zvezdnyi gorodok* (sometimes known as *Star City*) near Moscow, a highly restricted area used for the training of cosmonauts, in order to paint a series of portraits of these dazzling celebrities for exhibition. It was his remarkable work on these exclusive portraits that earned Laktionov the title of Peoples' Artist of the USSR in 1970, although he would not live to see the commission to its conclusion. Of the proposed ten works, which were later extended to seventeen, Laktionov completed only five: those of Vladimir Komarov [fig. 22], Iurii Gagarin (1969, Ministry of Culture), Pavel Beliaev [plate. 7], Andrian Nikolaev (1969,



Fig. 22: *Portrait of B. M. Komarov*, 1967, GTG

<sup>70</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 124..

Ministry of Culture, Moscow) and Pavel Popovich (1969, Ministry of Culture, Moscow).<sup>71</sup> Several other portraits, including that of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, remain incomplete after the artist succumbed to ill health in the early 1970s. The series are a uniform size of 100x75cm, scaled roughly to life size, and depict the seated torsos of the cosmonauts with hands loosely clasped in their laps. The paintings draw on the historical language of the military portrait with the subjects depicted in uniform, laden with a breathtaking (and entirely impractical) array of decorations against a dark, nebulous background suggestive of the void of outer space from which they have returned. The simplicity and traditional nature of the images are perhaps surprising in the context of Soviet space exploration. In Laktionov's representations the heroes are devoid of cosmonautical accessories or their famous spacesuits and are distinguishable from other military personnel only by their specific decorations and the titles of the paintings.

The venerable artist and early advocate of Socialist Realism, Evgenii Katsman, wrote a gushing eulogy about Laktionov's *Portrait of B. M. Komarov*, the first of the series to be completed, in the journal *Ogonek*. Although this passionate tribute was no doubt intensified by Komarov's dramatic death during re-entry in 1967, it nonetheless provides an insight into the successful reception of these portraits.

Laktionov's ability to *see* a person is evident in the portrait of Komarov. All inner details are shown on the surface. In front of us is a brave man with a determined, severe expression, his form modelled perfectly. I think that Komarov's face is one of the most beautiful pages in the book of Russian portraiture. And there still remains the other half of the portrait. A hero's uniform. His decorations. His marks of distinction. You might expect that around such a beautiful face the artist would just sketch in these otherwise distracting details. But however hard we try to not notice the hero's eyes, his firm-set mouth, his raised, literally sculptural brow, the image will always be startling, will always be remembered.

Hundreds of years will pass. Colour photographs will fade, newspapers will yellow. But for centuries this remarkable image of our contemporary will remain with all its substance and realism.<sup>72</sup>

Here Katsman praises the very features of Laktionov's work that so often incite criticism—the details, the sculptural approach to drawing and above all its relationship to the photographic image, which is described here as being more ephemeral than the painted portrait. Indeed the series of paintings are clearly distinguished by the influence of the photographic portrait in their exaggerated illusion of three-dimensionality and the casual spontaneity of the sitters' poses; the cosmonauts lean forward from the frame in a virtual trick of *trompe l'oeil* and individual medals are partially obscured as they catch the light from some unseen source. The sharpness and clarity of the lines, the unearthly brightness of colours of epaulettes and decorations and the life-sized scale of the subjects imbue the portraits

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<sup>71</sup> See Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 154.

<sup>72</sup> Evgenii Katsman, 'Tri vstrechi s Laktionovym' *Ogonek*, 1968, no. 2, p. 17.

with an aura of hyper-realism that challenged the limitations of 1960s colour photography—it is as if Laktionov wished to tackle his detractors head on with a series of paintings that exceeded the photograph as a means of realistic representation. The works demand attention for their lavish production values, or what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer have called their degree of ‘conspicuous production.’<sup>73</sup>

Two years later *Ogonek* carried a further article about Laktionov and his work written by Boris Shcherbakov, the artist’s contemporary and fellow student of Brodskii from the Leningrad Academy, and illustrated with a full page colour reproduction of the second cosmonaut painting, *Portrait of P. I. Beliaev*. Shcherbakov praises Laktionov’s meticulous adherence to the methods of the Old Masters yet simultaneously hails the work as ‘a new step in the art of painting.’ How Laktionov achieves this apparent paradox is explained in the following way:

In recent times, when contempt for mastery is becoming noticeably widespread, the unshakable position of Laktionov and certain other comrades acquires a hint of heroism. Regardless of cursing and abuse they are attempting to build a bridge connecting classical realist art with modernity.<sup>74</sup>

In this series of works Laktionov merged the centuries-old language of the status portrait with the contemporary language of colour photography to produce a series of works that appear curiously modern in their conception. The decision to commission Laktionov—a conservative artist of the older generation with a deeply traditional style of painting—to paint the portraits of the cosmonauts—the dynamic sons and daughters of the Soviet space age—produced a fascinating union of the old and the new. Laktionov’s artistic legacy imbued the cosmonauts with the status of old-fashioned military heroes and the artist, in turn, gained relevance and prestige through the depiction of these icons of the modern-day, technologically advanced Soviet Union. The artistic language of their portrayals deploys the ‘truth-effect’ of the photograph in combination with the longevity of the painted portrait in order to present the cosmonauts, whose exploits took place beyond the realm of everyday experience, as real and tangible Soviet heroes. Roland Barthes has written of photographs that ‘there is always a defeat of time in them.’<sup>75</sup> In a career that was fraught with danger, as evidenced by the Komorov’s ill-fated mission, Laktionov’s works provided a traditional portrayal of heroism that would outlive the transitory deeds of the cosmonauts themselves.

### **The Fabric of Tradition**

Benjamin has suggested that the aura of the work of art is dependent on its ‘being imbedded in the fabric of tradition’, a state that he considers to be untenable in

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<sup>73</sup> In regard to the Hollywood film industry Adorno and Horkheimer observe that the ‘universal criterion of merit is the amount of “conspicuous production” of blatant cash investment.’ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,’ in idem., *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993). First published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> Borish Shcherbakov, ‘Vernost’ pravde.’ *Ogonek*, 1970, no. 22, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> For Barthes the photograph invokes the future death of the subject and simultaneously commits it to survival through the longevity of the image. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 96.

the era of photographic and print technology.<sup>76</sup> Yet the adoption of Socialist Realism in 1934 can be seen as an attempt to preserve that fabric of tradition in an age when modernism and the encroachment of photography threatened to undermine the relevance of traditional realist art. Dickerman has argued, with reference to the work of Brodskii, that the mimetic artistic language of Soviet painting in the 1930s was a response to the threat of the photograph. In his words, 'Socialist realism ties the semantically malleable photographic image to concrete meanings, reconstructing a mnemonic filter, a collective memory image for mass distribution.'<sup>77</sup> Laktionov's emphasis on the verisimilitude of his portraits, his use of actual photographic sources and his deployment of photographic visual cues, reveal an aspiration for the documentary realism of the photograph, yet his images are also enhanced and embellished to claim a greater legitimacy than that of the unedited original.

The parallel emergence of the cult of personality in the 1930s was a related development that re-established the interconnection between art and ritual to ensure that the painted portrait of the leader maintained a unique capacity to instil awe in the spectator. Driven by this ritual function and its integral connection to the hierarchical nature of the Soviet system the traditional portrait painting was a natural medium for the self-representation of an authoritarian society. As the Stalinist state conceded wealth and privileges to its acolytes, a pseudo-bourgeois middle class emerged that seized upon traditional symbols of status and prestige inherited from past generations as its favoured means of expression. The painted portrait enjoyed a prominence as a means not only to reflect or document the subject, which was the preserve of the photographic portrait, but to imbue the subject with particular characteristics. Strict Central Committee regulation over images of the leader ensured the development of a canonical series of recognisable representations that drew on the past traditions of status portraits and allied them to a specifically Soviet iconography. The influence of the leader portrait persisted in artistic representations of status and authority into the post-Stalin era.

As the Soviet art establishment entered a phase of reformation in the mid 1950s, it was marked by a growing divide between the traditional methods of the older, Stalinist generation and the more diverse artistic language of a younger generation of artists and critics.<sup>78</sup> The processes of de-Stalinisation had terminally damaged the careers of some practitioners of the leader cult and had begun to stigmatize the naturalistic means of representation associated with their work. As a survivor of the Stalin era and a passionate exponent of academic realism, Laktionov's art became increasingly unique and divergent in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Although Laktionov was only intermittently involved in the production of leader cult works, his artistic language became closely associated with the restrictive creative environment of late Stalinism. We shall see in the following chapter how Laktionov's artistic language was considered by many exhibition-goers to be an example of out-dated 'bad taste' in the early 1950s. Yet those tastes that had developed during the

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<sup>76</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 514.

<sup>77</sup> Dickerman, 'Camera Obscura', p. 153.

<sup>78</sup> Reid, 'The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw', pp. 161-175, Reid, 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited,' pp. 673-716, and Susan Reid, *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1963*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1996).

Stalin era continued to exert an influence. As a means for portraiture in particular, Laktionov's traditional style—so often vilified as photographic by critics and viewers at public exhibitions in the 1950s and 60s—retained its cultural capital as a status symbol for a significant proportion of the population. Khrushchev's Secret Speech may have ended the cult of personality in name, but the entrenched Party elite still coveted the symbolic art of authority represented by the realist portrait. In a period of political instability and change, Laktionov's works of portraiture maintained an important dialogue with history. His representations of elderly subjects, as well as his representations of modern dynamic subjects in a traditional artistic language, promoted a sense of continuity and stability that was welcomed by a number of influential patrons within the art organisations and the Central Committee.

A fitting conclusion to Laktionov's career as a portraitist came in 1969. The Brezhnev era saw a partial reversal of the processes of de-Stalinisation which had taken place under Khrushchev. This included a tentative revival of the leader cult in the visual arts as the incumbent leader began to encourage the proliferation and veneration of his image.<sup>79</sup> One of Laktionov's final paintings was a 1969 oil portrait of Brezhnev himself which hangs to this day in the building of the Supreme Soviet in the Kremlin (*Portrait L. I. Brezhnev*, 1969).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> For an analysis of the Brezhnev cult see Graeme Gill, 'Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union', *British Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 2 (1980), pp. 172-4.

<sup>80</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 154.



*Kul'turnost' or Kitsch? Varnishing Reality in the Art of Aleksandr Laktionov*<sup>1</sup>

A visit to the 1952 *All-Union Exhibition* must have been a disconcerting experience for the typical Soviet citizen. What did he (or she) make of the glossy, varnished images on display and how could they be reconciled to the austere reality of post-war Soviet life? To provide some context, the average Muscovite in 1952 earned little more than a subsistence wage; roughly enough to afford a basic staple diet with precious little left over for items of clothing or leisure activities. Their living space was less than five square metres per person with the majority living in cramped conditions in communal apartments or dormitories.<sup>2</sup> Luxury items were out of reach for most people, available only through a network of special shops that were closed to the general public.

So it was a perplexing parallel universe that awaited this citizen in the ornate halls of the State Tretyakov Gallery. Throughout the exhibition were works depicting all aspects of Soviet life—here a scene from a factory floor, there a domestic interior, landscape or cityscape. But what a life it was in these paintings; beautiful, spacious flats, a wealth of luxury goods including ornate furniture, sports equipment, paper flowers, ornaments, framed pictures, radios, watches, bicycles and personal cars; fashionable, modern clothes, abundant spare time for recreational pastimes like reading, skiing and boating—in short, a life of comfort, prosperity and luxury. The viewer would also have been faced with an imposing array of solemn portraiture; famous academics and scientists seated at their desks amid an assortment of advanced scientific instruments and papers; artists, actors and musicians, sumptuously dressed in their evening wear; politicians and military leaders commandingly posed in full regalia. Hardly what one would expect from an exhibition that aimed to present ‘patriotic works, developing a sense of revolutionary national pride in the Soviet people, and educating them in the



Fig. 23: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Into a New Flat*, 1952, Donetsk Art Gallery, Detail

<sup>1</sup> An earlier and abridged version of this chapter has been published in *Studies in Slavic Cultures* VI (2007), pp. 82-106.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations 1953-1964* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77-116.

spirit of Communism.<sup>3</sup> Mostly painted to a high degree of realism with a dark palette and high finish reminiscent of the academic realists of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the exhibition was a culmination of the anti-formalist and anti-cosmopolitanist campaign of the late 1940s that was dealt with in Chapter Two.

On their way through the halls of the exhibition our theoretical visitor would have been confronted with Aleksandr Laktionov's latest work, *Into a New Flat* [plate 4]. The painting depicts a 'typical' Soviet family of the post-war generation—a mother, two sons and a daughter, with the father notable by his absence (presumably a fallen hero of the Great Patriotic War)—as they move into a luxurious new flat. The mother stands at the centre of the canvas, hands on hips, surveying her new domain with a proud grin across her face [fig. 23]. She is most likely a new urbanite of the period, her attire combining elements of traditional peasant costume, such as a headscarf and patterned skirt, with a modern jacket and shoes appropriate to life in the city. Her coarse hands and ruddy complexion suggest that her life has been one of outdoor labour. Perhaps she, like our theoretical viewer is unaccustomed to the beauty and comfort of this shiny new flat? To one side of her stands her youngest son, a pioneer, who is holding dutifully aloft a reproduction of Stalin ready to be hung in pride of place. The benign face of the leader takes the place of the family's missing father figure in the triangular structure of this modern Soviet family, with the empowering mother-heroine at its pinnacle. He is balanced on the other side of the triangle by a globe, which sits atop a jumbled pile of possessions waiting to be arranged inside the flat: chairs, suitcases and bundles sit alongside luxurious items such as a radio, a lute, some paper flowers, and most prominently of all, a polished rubber plant.<sup>4</sup>

Laktionov's painting represented an awkward compromise between the worlds of bourgeois 'high' culture and Soviet 'mass' culture. It acted as a flash-point for debate at the time of its display and it has since been branded as a characteristic example of late Stalinist excess in the fine arts. The painting sat uncomfortably with traditional notions of Soviet socialism, which were hostile to such overt displays of luxury. While Laktionov's painting was by no means alone in this regard at the 1952 *All-Union Exhibition*, it was singled out time and time again as the worst example of a

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<sup>3</sup> 'Sovetskoe izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu: o vsesoiuznoi khudozhestvennoi vystavke', *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 1, p. 3. This quote from an editorial article paraphrases the words of Andrei Zhdanov, made at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 when he defined Socialist Realism as 'a true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development [...] combined with the task of educating workers in the spirit of Communism.' In John Bowlit, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp. 296-7.

<sup>4</sup> Descriptions of and references to this painting can be found in a number of recent articles and books including Svetlana Boym, "'Za khoroshii vkus nado borot'sia!': sotsrealizm i kitsch"; Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (Sankt Peterburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), p. 89; Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in the Russia* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 5; Jørn Guldberg, 'Socialist Realism as Institutional Practice' in Hans Günther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: MacMillan Press, 1990), pp. 169-70; Susan Reid, 'Modernising Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a "Contemporary Style" in Soviet Art', in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation: A Social and Cultural History of Reform in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge, 2006), pp. 211-12; Susan Reid, 'Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinisation in Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw,' *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (1999), p. 279; Valerie Higgins, 'Komar and Melamid's Dialogue with (Art) History', *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1998), p. 51.



trend. The disparaging phrase that is repeated throughout in the exhibition visitors' books is 'bad taste' (*durnyi vkus*). But just what constituted good and bad taste in the Soviet Union of the early 1950s? Visitors' comments and published reviews of the exhibition focused on the still life element of Laktionov's painting as the main target of criticism. Meanwhile the lifelike and expressive quality of Fedor Reshetnikov's comparable genre scene *Low Marks Again!* [fig. 27], a work that is described later in the chapter, provides a positive counterpoint to Laktionov's canvas. An analysis of visitors' responses to these works reveals the ways in which the Soviet public expressed themselves as diverse and discerning consumers of Soviet art. But first of all it is necessary to leave the *1952 All-Union Exhibition* and consider the historical conditions that lay behind the edifice of Soviet consumer culture, an oxymoronic phenomenon that is fundamental to the problematic relationship between *kul'turnost'* (literally 'culturedness' or cultivation) and kitsch.

### Stalinist Kitsch

In its modern context the word 'kitsch' has been distanced from its origins as a derogatory term that was used in the Munich art markets of the late nineteenth century, and gained currency as a statement of taste carrying a variety of negative connotations; extreme sentimentality, ostentation, vulgarity, shoddiness, outdateness or any combination of the above. To describe something as kitsch is to denigrate it to a lower order of culture and, in doing so, to promote the legitimacy of one's own sophistication. In short, the world of kitsch is the preserve of those that don't know better.<sup>5</sup> As Pierre Bourdieu put it:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.<sup>6</sup>

For Bourdieu, kitsch is a by-product of the elitist construct of 'high culture', which is established as a field precisely by the rejection of the popular products of mass culture.

This understanding of the term owes a debt to Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, in which he sets out a case for the cultural superiority of progressive avant-garde art over the repetitive realism of works of kitsch. He offers the following well-known definition:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times.

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<sup>5</sup> For an examination of the concept of kitsch see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Post-Modernism* (Duke University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 281.

Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.<sup>7</sup>

According to Greenberg, kitsch is a virulent symptom of the industrialised modern society with its literate population that is equipped with the disposable income and leisure time to participate in culture, but not with the tools or education necessary to appreciate 'difficult' art. It is this mass appeal of kitsch that has allowed it to integrate so seamlessly into the fabric of consumer culture, adapted in the West to the market forces of capitalism and in the East to the demands of politics. In both cases, Greenberg argues, kitsch is a sedative, a simple means by which a regime can pacify its citizens.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, kitsch represents a threat to the continued existence and development of high culture, whose social and economic base is being constantly eroded by the relentless encroachment of mass taste.

But it was not only the guardians of high culture such as Greenberg that felt threatened by the forces of popular culture. Several years earlier in 1936, the Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin had written of the new opportunities for cultural development opened up by new techniques of mass production. He foresaw a future in which the unique and revered 'aura' of the work of art would be superseded by new technologies such as film and photography to form a kind of synthesis between the worlds of high and low culture.<sup>9</sup> But by 1944 fellow adherents to the Frankfurt School, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer responded with a vigorous indictment of mass produced art and culture, which they felt had been appropriated by the mechanisms of capitalism to churn out bland and mediocre works of art, literature, film and consumer objects that pigeon-holed consumers into a firm and inescapable class hierarchy.

The consumers are the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class. Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them. As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them. The misplaced love of the common people for the wrong which is done them is a greater force than the cunning of the authorities.<sup>10</sup>

For these writers mass culture had been transformed into a hegemonic industry that produced synthetic and sanitised works of kitsch that presented the consumer with a Faustian pact: the saccharine escapism of kitsch is offered in compensation for the

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<sup>7</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), p. 534. First published in *Partisan Review* VI no. 6, (1939).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London: Collins-Fontana Books, 1973), pp. 219-53. First published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V, no. 1 (1936).

<sup>10</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *idem.*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1997), p. 133. First published 1944.

mundane drudgery of everyday life. As Adorno and Horkheimer so succinctly put it, 'light art [...] is the social bad conscience of serious art.'<sup>11</sup>

Although their conclusions were based on the mechanisms of capitalist production, a similar model can be identified at work in Soviet society of the 1950s. Indeed the end products of the two systems are strikingly similar in spite of their contrary rhetoric; the Stalinist musical film took its cues directly from Hollywood cinema, while Laktionov's paintings (with some minor ideological alterations) bear a striking similarity to Norman Rockwell's cover illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>12</sup> Kitsch, with its soothing narcotic effect, was a vital jigsaw piece of the cold war mentality—an intercontinental contest to produce a placid, superficially contented population. With warheads poised in a lethal standoff, a no less important battle was being fought on the cultural front. The ubiquitous images of abundance and joy that characterised the popular culture of both sides were not only designed for consumption at home, but were deployed as weapons of international propaganda, global advertisements for two flawed economic systems. As the popular slogan of the Stalin era optimistically announced, 'we were born to make fairy tales come true.'

The political value of kitsch as a tool of manipulation and sedation has prompted Milan Kundera to coin the term 'totalitarian kitsch'—an aesthetic based on official cultural policy rather than the stimulus of popular taste.

Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements. Whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch.<sup>13</sup>

For Kundera totalitarian kitsch exists in the sanctuary of an ideological battle won and projects a sense of a universal, shared worldview, in contrast to the personal, introspective nature of 'democratic kitsch.' Svetlana Boym offers further clarification:

'Democratic kitsch' is often associated with the culture of bourgeois comfort, the hearth and home with patterned curtains and geraniums, and with objects of applied art and all kinds of sweet knick-knacks. In contrast, 'totalitarian kitsch' takes the form of joyful mass action, marches and dances, driven by the spirit of universal brotherhood in the Soviet style.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that public life in the Soviet Union was defined by a different order of kitsch to that of its Western counterpart; contrast the glorious, overstated ebullience of a physical culture parade with the intimate, family celebration of Thanksgiving. Yet in the 1950s an increasing emphasis was placed by the Soviet state on the development

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> A *Time* review of the 2003 exhibition *Dream Factory Communism—the Visual Culture of the Stalin Era* at Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle described Laktionov's *A Letter from the Front* as 'pure Slavic Norman Rockwell.' Jordan Bonfante, 'Selling Joe Stalin', *Time Magazine*, 5 Oct. 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Milan Kundera, trans. by Michael Henry Heim, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> Boym, 'Za khoroshii vkus nado borot'sia!', p. 89.

of individual taste as the excesses of late Stalinism came to be replaced with what Susan Reid has described as a 'reform of the aesthetics of everyday life.'<sup>15</sup>

One important difference remained between the popular culture of East and West: The Soviet Union took its kitsch seriously, while in America it was treated as little more than low-brow entertainment. Greenberg was right when he wrote that 'superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations', and in 1950s America his insight was proving extremely prescient. The non-representational canvases of the abstract expressionists took the avant-garde project to new heights of experimentation that rendered them deliberately incomprehensible to the everyday citizen. This 'connoisseur's art' found its antidote in the accessible aesthetic of



Fig. 24: Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943, Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, M.A.

popular culture—the sumptuous film version of *Gone with the Wind*, or the rose-tinted patriotism of Rockwell's *The Four Freedoms* series [fig. 24]. Yet for all their enormous popularity and appeal, these works were advertised as mere entertainment, unworthy of serious critical attention. Hollywood was simply an industrial film factory and Rockwell was simply a magazine illustrator. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that the significance of these works of popular culture have been acknowledged, their creators rehabilitated and hailed as *bona fide* artists. *Gone with the Wind* may have been awarded ten Oscars at the glitzy 1939 Academy Awards show, but *Volga-Volga* received a Stalin prize and its place was sealed in the pantheon of Great Soviet Art. Mass art in the Soviet context was invested with social responsibility. Its function was to educate, inform and

ultimately to mould the population in its own radiant image. Although the end result was strikingly similar, the cynical, market-driven nature of Western kitsch inhabited a different universe from the romantic, utopia-building ethos of Socialist Realism. It was not simply capital that was at stake in the state-funded art world of the Soviet Union, but ideology itself. As we shall see in this investigation of Laktionov's painting, the varnished reality of Socialist Realism was accepted and embraced by a significant proportion of Soviet citizens, who saw in its optimistic imagery a template for everyday life and the realisation of a socialist future.

### A Design for Life

By the mid-1930s, the Soviet drive for the reformation of everyday life that had begun with the literacy programmes of the 1920s had evolved into a campaign for

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Reid, 'Destalinisation and Taste, 1954-1963,' *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), p. 178. See also Susan Reid, 'Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,' *Slavic Review* 6, no. 2 (2002), pp. 211-52.

*kul'turnost'*.<sup>16</sup> A new emphasis came to be placed on the ownership of certain commodity items as the regime came to realise the potential benefits of such enticements for the motivation and loyalty of its workforce.<sup>17</sup> It also became clear that a limited endorsement of consumer culture would stimulate the lumbering Soviet economy. The paradoxical situation arose whereby in aspiring towards luxury goods the Soviet consumer was actually contributing to the building of socialism. As Hoffman has written:

The promotion of consumerism raised the delicate matter of distinguishing socialist trade from capitalist consumption. Soviet propagandists sought to differentiate socialist trade by stressing its modern and didactic elements and their discourse on culturedness offered a means to articulate materialist ambitions without the usual bourgeois connotation.<sup>18</sup>

In official rhetoric at least, the Soviet citizen had access to a wide variety of luxury goods such as champagne, chocolate and perfume. Such goods, although not widely available, came to play a significant part in the economy of the Soviet Union, both as a symbol of prestige on the international market and as desirable commodity items at home.<sup>19</sup> Such items, which could usually only be bought in special exclusive shops (*gastronomy*) came to establish a new hierarchy in Soviet society between the Party elite and the proletariat. Vera Dunham has written of the implicit 'big deal', which evolved between the regime and the upper strata of society whereby exclusive commodity goods served as an effective inducement for the conformity of the middle classes.<sup>20</sup> Yet while such goods were not readily available to everyone, it was the task of Soviet propaganda to ensure that everyone could aspire towards them. Catriona Kelly has related this promotion of consumer impulses to international trends such as the growth of the 'American dream', but also identifies the collective significance of *kul'turnost'* and its fundamentally classless rhetoric as specifically Soviet features.<sup>21</sup> Certain luxury goods were advertised as the appropriate and universally accessible reward for distinction in the workplace, yet they contributed to a confusing and contradictory message for the upwardly mobile socialist citizen.

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<sup>16</sup> For an account of the 1920s attempt by the Soviet state to restructure the everyday life of its citizens, see Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 81-106.

<sup>17</sup> In the words of David Hoffman: 'Stalin himself [...] trumpeted the new prominence of materialism and consumption in the Soviet system. His speeches reflected acknowledgement of human desires for personal ownership and material goods and a tacit admission that the party had tried to progress too quickly towards communism during the first five-year-plan. In this sense, the new course can be seen as a concession to human nature and the need for material incentives.' *Stalinist Values: the Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>19</sup> Jukka Gronow, *Caviare with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 2003). Gronow documents the growth of the production and retail of luxury goods in the Soviet Union throughout the 1930s but makes little mention of the limited availability of such goods for the population at large, or the paradoxical nature of their function in a socialist society. For an account of the inherent difficulties of obtaining even staple, everyday goods during the 1930s see Hoffman, *Stalinist Values* and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Catriona Kelly, 'Kul'turnost' in the Soviet Union: Ideal and Reality' in Geoffrey Hosking and Robert Service, eds., *Reinterpreting Russia* (London: Arnold Publishers, 1999), pp. 210-11.

As a sequel of sorts to the 1920s rhetoric of the Soviet superman, the drive for *kul'turnost'* sought to expand the cultural horizons of the proletariat and promote a model of the ideal Soviet citizen. This mythical creature lived at an improbable crossroads between the worlds of socialist and bourgeois culture, every inch the middle-class communist. It was acceptable to desire certain possessions, so long as they were officially sanctioned and appropriate to the Soviet lifestyle. The campaign was disseminated via the popular press in newspapers such as *Pravda* and glossy magazines such as *Ogonek*, as well as in specific advice literature. As Svetlana Boym has noted:

It is in Stalin's time that the word 'culture' acquired an important suffix, and the slogan of the 1920s 'cultural revolution' turned into the advocacy of *kul'turnost'*. This term includes not only the new Soviet artistic canon but also manners, ways of behaviour, and discerning taste in food and consumer goods. Culturalization is a way of translating ideology into the everyday; it is a kind of Stalinist 'civilizing process' that taught Marxist-Leninist ideology together with table manners, mixing Stalin with Pushkin.<sup>22</sup>

Lifestyle advice would cover all aspects of everyday life from the banal: washing your hands after work, to the refined: how to decorate your new home in a modern, fashionable style. Kelly has observed that the promotion of *kul'turnost'* as a model of 'good taste' in the 1930s and 40s was marked by a simultaneous identification of the signifiers of petit-bourgeois 'bad taste' (*meshchanstvo*) or lack of culture (*nekul'turnost'*): excessive decoration, ostentation or a penchant for relics of the past.<sup>23</sup>

The development of Socialist Realism in the arts during the early years of the 1930s went hand in hand with the campaign for *kul'turnost'*. Both emerged from an adaptation of certain aspects of bourgeois 'high' culture to the rapidly developing socialist society. In this sense the traditional language of Socialist Realist art served a dual purpose—its images would both cultivate the artistic tastes of the population and provide a model for correct socialist living. It goes without saying that the lavish world depicted in Socialist Realist works of art rarely reflected the austere reality of Soviet everyday life. Ever since the official endorsement of Socialist Realism at the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934 there had been an official demand to show 'life in its revolutionary development'—that elusive socialist near-future of comfort and wellbeing rather than the glaring shortcomings of the present day. The images on display in 1952 were the crystallization of dominant trends in both the art world and in Soviet culture as a whole that, after twenty years of rhetoric, had come to resemble a full-blown cult of the good life. Boym has described Laktionov's painting as a 'totalitarian sit-com',<sup>24</sup> and indeed, to the cynical post-Soviet viewer it corresponds to an amusing caricature of Socialist Realist art.

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<sup>22</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> Catriona Kelly has analysed the advice literature of the *kul'turnost'* drive in *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 244-309.

<sup>24</sup> Boym, 'Za khoroshii vkus nado borot'sia', p. 92.

The promotion of consumer desires in the Soviet population during the mid-1930s followed a prolonged period of famine and rationing; a consequence of the turbulent process of collectivising the agricultural system combined with coincident years of poor harvests. It in turn was followed, in the early 1940s, by the start of the Great Patriotic War and yet another period of severe shortage and rationing. Such a roller coaster ride of availability fostered in the Soviet consumer a desire for goods and services that was most often left unfulfilled. Nonetheless, the tantalising desire itself was all-important for the regime, which had staked its legitimacy on the promise of a socialist nirvana, lingering somewhere in the near future. In order to whet the appetite of the luxury-hungry population the Soviet state employed advertising techniques that bore a striking resemblance to their Western equivalents, with the difference being that ideology, rather than the product itself, was being promoted. As Evgeny Dobrenko has observed:

Soviet advertising promises nothing but affirms the product it promotes as an integral part of a great and beautiful reality, therefore de-realising not only the real stratification of Soviet society but everyday life as well. [...]

Soviet advertising participated in the overall process of creating 'socialism' and its 'productive forces.' The goal of this production was the same as any advertising: to produce a consumer. What was unique about Soviet advertising was that it played only a facilitative role in this process. The main role undoubtedly belonged to art.<sup>25</sup>

The language of the Soviet advertisement was often lifted directly from the rhetoric of *kul'turnost'*, with the emphasis placed on the educational, nutritional, or practical value of a commodity rather than its luxury status.<sup>26</sup> For Dobrenko, Soviet advertising and Socialist Realist art merged into a single entity, a kind of aestheticised advertisement that visualised and promoted the mythical socialist land of plenty. As Dobrenko points out, however, this phenomenon did not reduce art to the level of mere advertising but rather the opposite: advertising, emptied of its direct referent, took on the elevated status of art. With no explicit commercial interests at stake, Soviet advertising simply presented a visual realisation of the socialist near-future and became the symbolic ally of Socialist Realist art. Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued that these prolific images of abundance desensitised the Soviet consumer to the discrepancies of an everyday life beset by shortages and tainted by hardship. 'Socialist Realism was a Stalinist *mentalité*, not just an artistic style. Ordinary citizens developed the ability to see things as they were becoming and ought to be rather than as they were.'<sup>27</sup> What is certain is that Socialist Realism, in parallel with advertisements and the retouched photographs and illustrations from popular newspapers and magazines, contributed to the development of an image-literate population who could interpret and assimilate engineered visual cues wherever they looked. From the ever-changing cityscape of Moscow, encircled by a partially

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<sup>25</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, trans. by Jesse M. Savage, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 294.

<sup>26</sup> Dobrenko offers some examples of this phenomenon such as an advert for confectionary which offered the wisdom that it is 'pleasant to taste and nutritious' and is 'not a luxury but a product of prime necessity in the human diet.' *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>27</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 9.



completed ring of neo-gothic skyscrapers and interwoven with a subterranean network of palatial metro stations, to the weekly issue of *Ogonek*, saturated with optimistic images of a sophisticated and advanced modern society, it was not difficult to buy into the ideology; rather, it became part of the everyday struggle of Soviet existence to live up to it.

### The Cultural Battlefield

In the early 1950s some critics began to suggest that the discrepancy between the uniformly optimistic art and culture of Socialist Realism and the more complex challenges of everyday life had resulted in a creative output that was hackneyed and stale. The following quotation comes from an article written in December of 1953; exactly one year after the opening of the *1952 All-Union Exhibition*, by Vladimir Pomerantsev entitled 'On Sincerity in Literature.' Although this text deals explicitly with literature, Pomerantsev's argument had resonances across the spectrum of Soviet culture and could be readily applied to the fine arts. Indeed, Laktionov's painting corresponds closely to this description of varnishing reality (*lakirovka deistvitel'nosti*):

No matter how rich the methods of varnishing reality, they are easy to spot.

The most crude of these methods is the fabrication of complete and total prosperity. You read some books and you are reminded of that period, lost in the history of literature, when the action of the novel played out under the sun of some unknown country and the landscape was all liana flowers. Just as these novels gave off the aroma of amazing, unknown fruits, so, too, some of our works issue the delicious aroma of *pelmeni*. [...]

There is a second method that is more subtle. It doesn't set the table with jellied pork and roast goose; but it removes the black bread. [...] The author says nothing about the factory hostel and cafeteria, which were foul. He doesn't hang any earrings or brooches on anyone, but anything nasty or foul also is excluded.

The third method is the cleverest. It consists of selecting a subject in such a way that all the problems of the theme remain out of the field of view. The distortion here is arbitrary selection. [...] And here you can't find fault with the author – he has his own particular subject. Although this is a more crafty method, all the same, the reader feels the insincerity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This controversial article was one of the first open attacks on the notion of varnishing reality. Much of the article, which focuses on the degeneration of Soviet literature in the post-War period, takes the form of an imaginary dialogue between the author and a writer of formulaic hack novels. Pomerantsev attributes blame not only to the writers themselves, but also to the critics, who 'don't demonstrate how to write properly, but always know when something is wrong'. The article provoked a storm of recriminations and debate and has since been hailed as one of the first contributions to the 'thaw' that took place in Soviet culture and society over the course of the mid 1950s. Vladimir Pomerantsev, trans. by Eric Konkol, 'On Sincerity in Literature', *Sovlit.com*: <http://www.sovlit.com/sincerity/>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008. First published *Novyi mir*, Dec. 1953, p. 218.

A symptom of Socialist Realism's attempt to synthesise art with ideology, varnishing reality and its twin evil *beskonfliktnost'* (literally, conflictlessness) were born out of the precarious nature of the Zhdanov-era art establishment of the post-war years, in which ambiguity of style or content could lead to harsh criticism, loss of privileges or worse. As these terms gained currency over the course of the 1950s they were used by some writers and critics to denigrate the official art of the Stalin era as a fundamental deceit and a rejection of the principles of socialism. According to a number of liberal writers and critics, such as Ilya Ehrenburg, Boris Polevoi and Osip Beskin, the Soviet art establishment had been poisoned by a culture of sycophancy and careerism, whereby talented artists churned out varnished 'pot-boilers' in return for privileges and advancement.<sup>29</sup> They suggested that the Soviet audience had grown weary of sentimentality and official bombast and should be challenged by more substantial themes, a closer connection with the life of the everyday citizen and a greater diversity of artistic styles.<sup>30</sup> These tentative steps towards the coming 'thaw' in the Soviet art world were given momentum by the death of Socialist Realism's main architect, Stalin himself, on the 5 March 1953.

The passing of the *Velikii Vozhd* (Great Leader) just three months after the opening of the *1952 All-Union Exhibition*, and his subsequent fall from grace would ultimately reduce the influence of those who had thrown their lots in with the leader cult and contribute to a marked transformation of the Socialist Realist project over the coming years. The process of change was driven by a protracted and acrimonious debate in the press and within the art organisations which, in the power vacuum that followed Stalin's death, was largely unencumbered by directives from above. The once sacrosanct works of privileged artists such as Aleksandr Gerasimov, president of the USSR Academy of the Arts from 1947 until his forced resignation in 1956, were increasingly treated as legitimate targets of criticism. It would be a mistake to overestimate the influence of critical freedom in this period, as the entrenched Stalinist elite still enjoyed a formidable hold over the infrastructure of the art establishment and would continue to do so for many years to come, but the dominance of established artists of the older generation and the prevalence of glossy 'parade paintings' at exhibitions was increasingly replaced by a more diverse culture of artistic expression. By the end of the 1950s the ostentatious subject matter, sentimentality and high finish that was characteristic of so many paintings at the *1952 All-Union Exhibition* had ceased to dominate exhibition halls and had become indelibly associated with the worst excesses of Stalinism. The impressionistic and simplified means of expression that took its place was retrospectively termed the *Surovyi stil'* (Severe Style) by the liberal critic Aleksandr Kamenskii, partly in reference to its rejection of extraneous sentimentality or varnished reality. In contrast to the stylistic simplicity and austere themes of this new period, Laktionov's works would come to look more and more like dated relics of a bygone era.

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<sup>29</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg dealt with this problem in his famous novel *Otopel'* (*The Thaw*), in which he counter-posed the talented young artist Volodia, who had sold out to become a Party hack, with the Romantic landscape painter Saburov, who lived a reclusive existence on the breadline and never exhibited his work. *The Thaw* (New York: Henry Regnery Company, 1954).

<sup>30</sup> See for example two major articles in *Iskusstvo* relating to the *1952 All-Union Exhibition*. Nina Dmitrieva, 'Vsesoyuznaya khudozhestvennaya vystavka 1952 goda: bytovaia zhivopis', *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 2, pp. 13-22 and Vladimir Kostin, 'O nekotorykh voprosov masterstva v zhivopisi', *Iskusstvo*, 1953, no. 4, pp. 51-54.

The 1952 *All-Union Exhibition* benefited from a series of bound volumes of visitors' books, their covers emblazoned with a golden image of Lenin and Stalin, perhaps in an effort to stimulate positive and acceptable feedback.<sup>31</sup> If this was indeed the intention, it could not have been more flagrantly ignored. Admittedly, the first few pages of the first volume are graced by a series of neatly written and polite comments, which praised the general level of the exhibit and paid tribute to the continuing high standard of Soviet art and sculpture. But by page seven of the first volume of exhibition visitors' books, less than one week after the opening of the exhibition in December of 1952, abusive comments began to appear. A wealth of heated and often humorous remarks appear throughout the nine volumes of visitors' books, interrupted only by several pages of respectful and sombre entries at the start of Volume Seven, as exhibition-goers paid their respects to Stalin in the days following his death. For several days the question of art was eclipsed by widespread bereavement as exhibition-goers were moved to express their heartfelt grief at the passing of their leader. The popular mantra, 'Stalin is life, and life has no end!' was repeated solemnly in numerous entries, yet the period of mourning did not last long and by the 12 March the debate had reignited and would continue to rage until the closure of the exhibition in May.<sup>32</sup> And so, alongside the positive impressions recounted by school groups and more mild-mannered visitors, runs a protracted and passionate dialogue on art and taste, as irate exhibition-goers were stirred to assert their own opinions, dispute the opinions of others, cross out entries, underline words and phrases, scribble abuse in the margins, even write poetry or rip out pages. The candid nature of many comments suggests (perhaps surprisingly) that the visitors' books were largely left unattended and unmonitored. As one unhappy punter wrote,

It's a great shame! The most interesting thing at the exhibition is the visitors' book; here is all life, arguments and battles of opinion. But what about the paintings? Flatness, varnishing, serenity or ill-proportioned poster-like things. Shame on you comrade-artists!<sup>33</sup>

Laktionov's new canvas was at the epicentre of this bitter dispute. If the accounts left in the visitors' books are to be believed, this painting was the talking point of the exhibition, perpetually surrounded by jostling crowds of viewers, all eager to make their own judgements. By the end of January 1953, no doubt encouraged by published criticism of the exhibition, the painting had earned a degree

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<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately it is impossible to draw any sociological conclusions about the contributors to the visitors' books as the comments are, for the most part, anonymous. Dates are occasionally included, but thanks to the more or less chronological nature of the pages and volumes it is possible to read the books as a kind of narrative in which certain threads emerge and expand. Several visitors make it clear that they have read previous comments before contributing their own and consider the books as a valuable tool of art criticism and education. *Knigi otzyvov Vsesoiuznoi vystavki 1952 goda*, GTG, f. 8.II, op. 2, d. 6-17. For an account of the Soviet exhibition visitors' book as a valuable source see Susan Reid, 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6 no. 4 (2005), pp. 673-716.

<sup>32</sup> By way of example, a comment from p.1 reads, '5 March will be remembered by all working people as the most tragic day – a day marked by a heavy loss. Our people, who passionately love their dear leader, are feeling a great sorrow on his demise. There are no words that can express our compassionate grief.' 8 Mar. 1953. GTG, f. 8.II, op. 2, d. 14, pp. 1-18.

<sup>33</sup> 29 Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 10, p. 18.

of notoriety amongst visitors, with almost half of all comments mentioning the artist's work, often in no uncertain terms. 'Laktionov's work is philistinism, really nasty philistinism.'<sup>34</sup> This is how P. Vakhitova described *Into a New Flat* in January of 1953, her comment underlined for extra emphasis. Her opinion was echoed by many other contributors to the visitors' books who were moved to express their displeasure. 'Comrade Laktionov made us especially angry with his nasty work, not fit for display on the walls of the Tretyakov Gallery, a hallowed place for the great names of Levitan, Repin and Surikov.'<sup>35</sup>

The painting's theme of the Soviet state's provision of beautiful new housing was generally acknowledged to be important and valuable, but its manner of execution struck a raw nerve with many exhibition-goers, who felt that it did not adhere to their conception of Socialist Realist art. We have seen in Chapter Three that Laktionov's work was often criticised for its photographic style, and this painting was no exception—the colour, finish and intense detail of the canvas all brought to mind the retouched photographs from the pages of glossy magazines such as *Ogonek*. In reproduction the painting is virtually indistinguishable from a photograph, a fact that did not escape the notice of some viewers. The following comment from a school student, which deals with Laktionov's predilection for extraneous detail, is worth quoting at length:

I want to write specifically about Laktionov's painting. I was surprised by the comment of one viewer who wrote 'The artist is lost!' Was there any art in those photographs, sorry, paintings by Laktionov!?

The painting [...] took up a lot of the artist's time and effort. In this regard I recall the comments of M. Gorky about a complicated music hall performance. The great writer said to its participants, 'The work you have done is vast and difficult, but it's not necessary to anyone.' I want to say the same thing to Laktionov who copied out all the names on the books on their spines and almost put the names of seas and mountains on his globe.

It is said that this is lifelike and realistic, that this is exactly what we see in life. But is not realism, it is naturalism of the purest kind! [...] If the author wanted to show everything in detail, just how it would be in life, he couldn't have succeeded in doing that: we can't hear what the heroes are saying, we can't hear the miraculously fluffy cat meowing, and we can't smell the un-lived-in flat. You need to put your own art into the frame. You can't withdraw into the realm of photography and depict a new flat full of old things.

In conclusion I want to wish for the successful development of the art photography, which adorns the pages of *Ogonek* and for the development of Soviet painting, which boasts many talented artists.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 7, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> The comment is signed 'Pupil 126<sup>th</sup> School M. Gershtein', and several subsequent readers have added their support: 'Nice one', 'That's true, kid.' See also d. 14, p. 13, 'The painting *Into a New Flat* reminds us of a picture from the magazine *Ogonek*.' *Ibid.*, d. 9, pp. 15-16.

Laktionov's detailed representation of a domestic interior was eye-catching and meticulous, but it was also considered by a number of exhibition-goers to be distracting and excessive both in theme and technique.

### Still Lives

Of all the objects depicted in Laktionov's elaborate painting, one in particular was singled out for criticism. The rubber plant, standing at the very front of the composition, immaculately rendered by the artist with shiny, polished leaves and a modest terracotta pot, was the main target of abuse. As an angry visitor wrote:

And here is another embarrassment – Laktionov! A rubber plant – what use is that? It's nice and smooth and green – simply lovely. [...] It's offensive—such a great artist but he has forgotten about art.<sup>37</sup>

Another wrote playfully, 'But Laktionov! This fixation with a *figus* is actually a little bit worrying.'<sup>38</sup> That an innocent rubber plant should become a focus of abuse is perhaps surprising given the prevalence of equally prominent household objects within the painting. What could have been so offensive about a simple plant? The rubber plant had, since the 1920s, been a prominent scapegoat in discussions of bad taste (*meshchanstvo*). The verisimilitude of its depiction is eye-catching, and the glossy reflections on its leaves appear more lifelike than the stiffly posed and somewhat statuesque family standing next to it. It is here, among the carefully arranged assortment of objects that make up this still life, that Laktionov could most fully apply his time-consuming technique—lighting effects on the globe, the sheen of the paper flowers, the texture of the worn-out teddy bear and the silken threads of the bookmarks. It was not the Soviet family or the socialist theme that attracted the viewer's attention first and foremost, but the towering pile of possessions and the shiny rubber plant. Laktionov's happy family simply did not capture the viewer's attention and blended seamlessly into the rest of the canvas, just another element in an enormous still-life. As Nina Dmitreva complained in an *Iskusstvo* review of the exhibition, 'Laktionov's painting is distinguished by its painstaking finish and achieves an illusion of reality. But it is deathly, cruel, like the illusion of wax figures.'<sup>39</sup> One exhibition-goer described this shortcoming in no uncertain terms in his entry, which was entitled 'On "still-death" (*dokhlopis*) and naturalism':

I don't have the strength to look at Laktionov's painting. He has deadened his characters, turned them into rubber plants, as if they are under anesthetic. They are paralysed into poses, the mother's face, the son and the feeble daughter

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<sup>37</sup> Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 4. Many of the entries make passing references to the rubber plant including 29 Jan. 1953, d. 10, p. 20: 'Laktionov should paint paintings like *A Letter from the Front* and not draw rubber plants.' Also Feb. 1953, d. 11, p. 5: 'Everything in this painting is painstakingly drawn, from the rubber plant to the people.' And Mar. 1953, d. 16, p. 19: 'Many people are amazed by the rubber plant, the cat, the suitcase, but few are paying any attention to the central form of the painting. This is not the viewer's mistake, it is Laktionov's mistake.'

<sup>39</sup> Dmitreva, 'Vsesoyuznaya khudozhestvennaya vystavka 1952 goda', p. 13.

with the dead cat. He has turned the genre painting into a still life and he has taken the 'life' out of 'still-life.'<sup>40</sup>

Given the outspoken criticism with which Laktionov's rubber plant was greeted, it is perhaps surprising that the houseplant became a recurring feature of much of the artist's later work. In *Sewing, Spring* [fig. 25] a young girl perched on a window ledge is balanced by a tall, leafy plant; in the still life, *February* [fig. 26] a potted flower takes pride of place on an indoor windowsill, brightly contrasting with the dead tendrils of plants struggling with the wintry conditions outside; in the monumental genre painting *Old Age Provided For* [plate 6] an elephantine rubber plant and spindly flowering plant tower unapologetically in the background. Similar examples can be found throughout the artist's canon. This critic-baiting preoccupation with the houseplant can be interpreted as an assertion of the artist's technical ability.

Taking great pride in his academic education and in maintaining continuity with the history of art, Laktionov placed a special emphasis on the still life as a demanding technical exercise to raise his works above the level of comparable Soviet genre paintings by other artists.

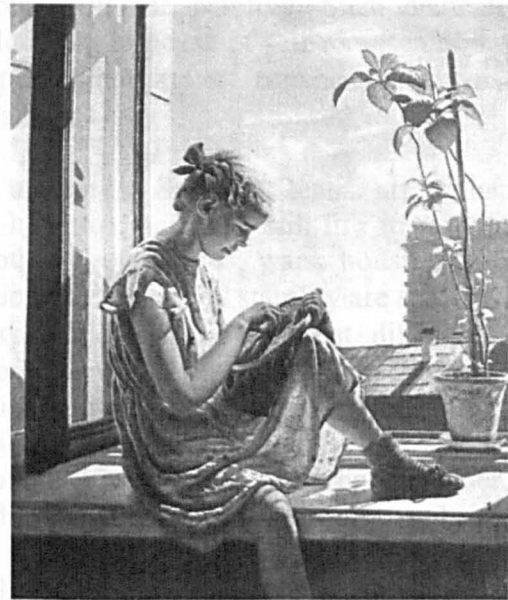


Fig. 25: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Sewing, Spring*, 1954, gift from the USSR to the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru



Fig. 26: Aleksandr Laktionov, *February*, 1956, Lvov Art Gallery

In the Dutch Golden Age, complex still life arrangements were tackled by artists specialising in the field, such as William Claesz Heda and Pieter Claesz, in an attempt to depict increasingly challenging effects of lighting and texture, with specific items, including reflective ornaments in glass and silver, pieces of fruit and arrangements of flowers, constituting the staple fare of compositions. Their works were presented as overt demonstrations of technical prowess in a *trompe-l'oeil* resolution of material complexities; here a translucent lemon, its skin partially peeled, there a half-filled jug of water or bulbous silver vessel throwing out a distorted reflection. Alongside the house plant, still life motifs were evident in many of Laktionov's

<sup>40</sup> Apr. 1953, GTG, f. 8.II, o. 2, d. 16, p. 36.

paintings. A peeled and separated orange in *February*, a carefully arranged bowl of fruit born aloft by a maid in *Old Age Provided For* and a glass vase of flowers, the water displacing its stems, in *After the Operation* [fig. 21] make obvious allusions to the conventional subject matter of traditional still life painting. Such distinctive displays of technical virtuosity could be included as a means of self-representation in an art establishment where explicit experimentation or conspicuous stylistic eccentricities were often condemned as formalism.

The genre of still-life was relatively unusual in Socialist Realist art, perhaps, as Svetlana Boym suggests, because 'it is hard to imagine a still-life in a culture where one major devastation follows the other—revolutions, wars, housing crises, famine, Stalin's purges—where habit, repetition, and everyday stability are so difficult to sustain.'<sup>41</sup> Perhaps another possible explanation is the inherent difficulty of reconciling the gratuitous depiction of goods and possessions to an acceptable socialist theme—in the art of Socialist Realism objects were there to be used, not to be admired for their aesthetic qualities. Laktionov's intention in *Into a New Flat* must surely have been to blend beautiful new Soviet objects such as a radio, a banner, a globe and a portrait of Stalin, with traditional Russian possessions such as a Mandolin, a doll, some paper flowers and a rubber plant. But evidently not everyone could agree which possessions were suitable for the 'average' Soviet family in the painting. Dmitreva singled out the 'florid wallpaper, such that would not exist in a new home in real life' and went so far as to suggest that the painting represented the antithesis of Mayakovsky's famous poem *The Old and the New*, in which the author urges his hero to discard the relics of his old, materialistic way of life upon moving to a new home:

The moral  
of the verse  
is self-evident,  
like a nail  
hammered  
into your brain  
— Comrades,  
on moving  
into a new home,  
tear yourselves  
from your old way of life!<sup>42</sup>

For Boym the rubber plant represented the epitome of bad taste in the 1950s Soviet Union, a place where luxury items like potted plants, paper flowers and dolls were guilty possessions in many homes, a throwback to an old way of life that was lost but not forgotten.<sup>43</sup>

The post-war years saw a flood of rural to urban migration in the Soviet Union as poor harvests and widespread poverty drove the peasant population to seek

<sup>41</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> Dmitrieva, 'Vsesoyuznaya khudozhestvennaya vystavka 1952 goda', p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> Boym 'Za khoroshii vkus nado borot'sia'.



their fortune in Moscow and other major cities.<sup>44</sup> For the city-dwellers this influx of poorly educated, rustic migrants represented a perceived threat to their *kul'turnyi* (cultured) way of life and a drain on already overstretched resources; jobs, living space, food supplies and public facilities. While the family that Laktionov had depicted in *A Letter from the Front* [plate 2] represented a nostalgic vision of provincial Soviet life, the family shown here—over-privileged neo-urbanites with a stack of old-fashioned possessions—inspired only jealousy and resentment among some viewers. The mother-heroine came across not as a 'typical' Soviet citizen, but as a greedy caricature, or as several visitors described her, 'a crude fishwife.'<sup>45</sup> Another visitor elaborates:

The irrepressible joy in the face of the woman is depicted very badly, as if she had gone to heaven. We Soviet people have new flats and this is, of course, a happy occurrence, but the most important thing is that it is a necessary and everyday occurrence. This woman is going to break her jaw in rapture.<sup>46</sup>

Viewers and critics were aggravated by Laktionov's painting because he undermined the mechanism of Socialist Realism in making the subtext of the thematic message transparently explicit. The discreet incentive system, the generous allocation of new flats and the improving lifestyles of Soviet citizens were widely acknowledged as valuable themes, but in this depiction they were tainted by an all too obvious representation of good old-fashioned materialism. Laktionov's domestic interior and assortment of possessions presented an image not of *kul'turnost'*, but of superfluity.

### Bad Taste

The phrase that recurred more than any other in the negative comments about Laktionov's work was '*durnoi vkus*' (bad taste). As a pair of artists wrote in the visitors' book:

Outrageous! When did we start showing such anti-artistic things at our exhibitions? It is breeding bad taste among young people. I'm writing about Laktionov's painting *Into a New Flat* where everything from the new parquet flooring to the suitcase, the radio, the flowers and the figures of the people are drawn in the same way!<sup>47</sup>

Another contributed, 'Laktionov!??? Just because you have bad taste, that doesn't mean you should inflict it on those around you!'<sup>48</sup> The expression of personal taste was a moot point in the evaluation of Socialist Realist art, as a later exchange between the liberal writer Boris Polevoi and others in *Literaturnaia gazeta* reveals. Polevoi described Laktionov's painting in no uncertain terms as 'a malicious parody of art'

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<sup>44</sup> See for example David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of the Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 183-239 and Elena Zubkova, trans. by Hugh Ragdale, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> Mar. 1953, GTG, f. 8.II, o. 2, d. 16, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> The comment is covered in scribbles and abuse including the legible words, 'Laktionov is rubbish at drawing.' 2 Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 7, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> The comment is signed 'artists x2', Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Feb. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 11, p. 9.

and criticised the publishing houses for reproducing prints and postcards of the work.<sup>49</sup> According to Polevoi, it was time for Soviet art to move on from what he saw as an outdated and trite mode of representation:

Tell me, if you please, what boy upon entering a new apartment immediately picks up Comrade Stalin's portrait as if it were an icon and shows it to his mother? What sort of family, in moving to a new home, drags along an old placard, no matter how fine the words written on it? It is in almost precisely this way that our art has been caricatured in the most reactionary foreign magazines, which I have had occasion more than once to see.<sup>50</sup>

For Polevoi the popularity of the work amongst lay-viewers was secondary to its aesthetic quality and thematic significance. The article was greeted with an angry response from Laktionov's supporters, who rallied around to defend the artist and his work. *Literaturnaia gazeta* published a reply to Polevoi's article from a group of influential cultural figures who objected to the liberal critic's brazen display of personal taste in making judgements on works of fine art.

Apparently the author was more concerned with insulting the artist with a single stroke of the pen, denigrating his creative work as tactlessly as possible [...] We understand that the writer Boris Polevoi has his personal taste, sympathies and antipathies [...] but taste is not always a reliable criteria for judging the work of another artist.<sup>51</sup>

This last remark captures the inherent dilemma of art criticism in the Soviet Union of the 1950s. If not taste, then what exactly could be employed as a reliable criterion for making a judgement on a work of art? In the early 1950s, the notion of individual taste was considered to be antithetical to the nature of Soviet art which was, by virtue of its socialist means of production, assumed to engender mass appeal. Taste, in its Stalinist incarnation, was still bound inextricably to the official stance of the regime and was usually expressed through a filter of established and sanctioned rhetoric. But as the popular response to the 1952 *All-Union Exhibition* reveals, where personal tastes could find an outlet, they remained intact, passionate and developed.

Why was taste such an important issue for the critics of Laktionov's painting? The answer is a simple one: it was an extremely popular work, and that mass popularity posed a threat to those with more 'developed' tastes. Although criticism of *Into a New Flat* dominated the visitors' book, there were many more comments that extolled the virtues of the painting and paid tribute to the artist. One frustrated viewer made this point explicit.

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49 Boris Polevoi, 'Razdum'ia na vystavke', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 2 Feb. 1957, p.3.

50 Boris Polevoi, 'On Principled Criticism and 'Personal Taste,' *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* IX, no. 14 (1953), pp.37-38.

51 The letter is signed by an imposing array of intellectual figures: Fyodor Gladkov, Sergei Malashkin, Doctor of Arts I. Belza, Academician Vasily Baksheyev, Honoured Scientist I. Sarkizov-Serazini and USSR Peoples' Artist N. Khanayev. Fyodor Gladkov, Sergei Malashkin et al., 'Letter to the Editor', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* IX, no.14 (1953), pp. 36-7.

It makes me angry that our viewers understand very little, when the whole book is filled with praise for Laktionov's *Into a New Flat*. It is a thing of vulgar, tasteless naturalism, and they are writing hymns of praise. How can this be! Surely it is at the lowest level of art! And they don't understand this. It makes me very, very angry!<sup>52</sup>

But praise him they did. Around forty percent of relevant comments expressed a positive evaluation of the artist and his work. Many of these viewers simply named the painting as one of their favourites in the exhibition, but some went on to mention the technical accomplishment of the painting, the artist's startling virtuoso technique and its striking life-like quality. As one student remarked,

With his meticulous attention to detail, Laktionov has surpassed all the classical artists. For him there are no bad themes and no bad presentation. Not wanting the viewers' attention to be scattered, he focuses it directly onto all the details. It is laudable that he strictly adheres to his own line in spite of being criticised for fussiness and naturalism.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that Laktionov had earned himself a legion of fans through the success of his 1947 canvas, *A Letter from the Front*, which many of the more effusive visitors were compelled to mention in their tributes. A handful of contributors filled several pages with dense handwriting in a tribute to their favourite artist, perhaps feeling the need to fight his corner in the face of the harsh and open criticism that was in evidence elsewhere. As one of these devoted fans began his essay,

I really can't understand why many of the visitors have cursed the artist Laktionov in the previous visitors' books. It seems that the harder he tries, the more they curse him. In his new painting, *Into a New Flat* Laktionov has surpassed himself. Laktionov remains sure of himself and Laktionov remains Laktionov.<sup>54</sup>

A number of the artist's adherents felt that Laktionov was being unfairly treated by the exhibition organisers and in the visitors' books, with one complaining that some prejudiced tour guides were maliciously informing viewers about the shortcomings of the painting.<sup>55</sup> Another felt that the spate of negative comments expressed in the visitors' books did not accurately reflect the mood in the halls of the exhibition. He wrote,

Some malevolent people have made attacks on Comrade Laktionov in the visitors' book and at the same time demonstrated their rudeness and bias against the artist. Strange that people are crowding around Laktionov's *Into a*

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<sup>52</sup> Jan. 1953, GTG, f. 8.II, o. 2, d. 8, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> The comment is signed 'Student MGU'. Two other visitors have written 'that's true' and 'I agree' beneath the entry, Jan. 1953, Ibid., d. 8, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> The comment is signed 'Alekseev, 26 Mar. 1953' and covers three pages with densely written handwriting. Ibid., d. 9, p. 8-10. It is little wonder that another visitor complained that he had to stand in line to wait for the visitors' book to become available, Feb. 1953, d. 12, p.3.

<sup>55</sup> 'The tour guides are wrong to criticise the painting for the cold depiction of the mother-heroine – this is simply ideological gibberish.' May 1953, Ibid., d. 17, p. 13.

*New Flat* [...] about 95% of whom (and I listened for a long time) are expressing their thanks in various different ways. In my opinion this clearly bears witness to the fact that the viewer has understood the painting and its theme and it is meaningful to him. This is much more valuable to Soviet art than the individual gossip of some comrades in this book.<sup>56</sup>

It is certainly possible (and indeed probable) that the visitors' books did present a somewhat biased view of the prevailing mood. It is a particular type of visitor that decides to wait in line to articulate their opinion in writing, and it is simply human nature that a negative impression is more likely to generate an impassioned response. Whilst this is certainly a limitation of the source material that precludes any attempt to draw concrete conclusions about the prevailing mood within the halls of the exhibition, it does not detract from its usefulness as a document of spontaneous and largely unmediated individual reactions to the images on display.

### *Zhivye Liudi*

In order to better understand the problematic response to Laktionov's painting it is worth looking at the contrasting reaction to a comparable work by the artist Fedor Reshetnikov. If Laktionov's canvas represented the controversy of the 1952 *All-Union Exhibition*, then Reshetnikov's genre painting, *Low Marks Again!* [fig. 27] was, without doubt, the runaway success story. Throughout the exhibition visitors' books comment after comment pays tribute to this painting and its touching and humorous subject matter.

Every exhibition has its 'special attraction' (*iziuminka*). This time the masterpiece is Reshetnikov's 'Low Marks Again'. Out of all the genre paintings this is the brightest. The faces are lifelike. It's possible to stand for hours by the painting and laugh from your soul.<sup>57</sup>

And of course one remark repeated itself with predictable regularity. 'I would give *Low Marks Again!* full marks.'<sup>58</sup> Reshetnikov's small and unassuming genre work was in many ways the antithesis of the pompous parade painting that had so dominated proceedings in previous years. The artist depicted recognisable and somewhat caricatured everyday people in his painting in order to develop a complete narrative, captured in a single, intimate moment. Thus in *Low Marks Again!* we are presented with a rosy-cheeked, tousle-haired schoolboy who has received another *dvoika* at school. His loving mother looks on in loving disappointment while his high-achieving sister smugly reads a book and his younger brother, still too young to understand, grins at his sibling's discomfort. An ice skate pokes guiltily out of the boy's satchel, while the family dog, unaware of his master's discomfort, jumps up, eager to play. Dmitreva takes the imagined narrative still further:

We can clearly see that the mother has invested her whole soul in encouraging her children to study, so that they will become worthwhile, educated people:

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<sup>56</sup> The comment has been covered in abusive replies, many of them illegible. For instance, 'Obviously he has no idea of art', 'That is no painting'. Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Signed 'students MGBI' 28 Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 8, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> For one of many examples, see Jan. 1953, *Ibid.*, d. 9, p. 4.

for her it is a matter of great importance. But not only for herself, but also for her children and for the guilty 'hero' himself. He is not crying because he fears punishment: the judgement in his mother's soft, kind face does not threaten anything terrible. But he feels sincerely guilty.<sup>59</sup>

This kind of creative license was the norm in reviews of works of art in the 1950s, with the expanded narrative often providing a convenient way for the reviewer to sidestep making any actual critical judgement on the work. Nonetheless the idea of Socialist Realist genre painting as a window into the everyday trials and tribulations of Soviet life proved genuinely popular with the critics and public alike.

On a superficial level there are many obvious thematic similarities between *Low Marks Again!* and *Into a New Flat*. Both Reshetnikov and Laktionov attempted to depict a 'typical' Soviet family of the post-war generation; a working-class single mother with several children. Both mothers are dressed in headscarves and patterned clothing that are reminiscent of traditional peasant attire, and both sets of children are smartly dressed in modern shirts and blouses. Yet as we have seen, in Laktionov's painting the family appears somehow too perfectly realised, almost statuesque in their static poses and fixed expressions. Like the finish of the painting, their faces are glazed and inexpressive and their stances are artificial and affected. Their faces carry little active characterisation or narrative substance. Who are they? Why have they been awarded a new flat? In contrast with Laktionov's near-photographic representation, Reshetnikov's family is marked by minor imperfections and idiosyncrasies—the naughty schoolboy's hair is ruffled and his nose is red and shiny from the cold, the mother's brow is wrinkled and she is wringing her hands in concern. These small concessions to the real world distinguish Reshetnikov's painting from the somewhat disturbing perfection of Laktionov's work.



Fig. 27, Fedor Reshetnikov, *Low Marks Again!*, 1952, GTG

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The main thing that struck us about [*Low Marks Again!*] was the expressive faces of the characters in the painting. The painting is startling in its truthful portrayal of this small everyday scene.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Dmitreva 'Bytovaya zhivopis', p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> The comment has several signatures. Jan. 1953, GTG, f. 8.II, op. 2, d. 8, p. 10.

A recurring phrase in Soviet art criticism of the post-war period was a demand for representations of ‘living people’ (*zhivye lyudi*), perhaps in response to Stalin’s own famous words at a 1933 art exhibition, the only time he was ever known to comment directly on a work of fine art.<sup>61</sup> Indeed these very words recur three times in *Iskusstvo*’s review of *Low Marks Again!*<sup>62</sup> Unlike Laktionov’s stiffly realistic family, Reshetnikov’s was honest, familiar and above all lifelike.



Fig. 28: Reshetnikov, *Low Marks Again!*, detail

The domestic interiors too are comparable in their levels of comfort and luxury. Reshetnikov’s young family are fortunate enough to own a bicycle, a wristwatch, a clock, a new overcoat, an enormous rug and of course a potted plant, all arranged around their spacious and well-decorated flat. Not quite the display of affluence that is evident in Laktionov’s picture, but a far cry from the average living space of the ‘typical’ Soviet family. But significantly, Reshetnikov has emphasised the human interest dimension of his scene and pushed everything else into the background. The canvas is executed in a brushy, impressionistic style, with only the faces of the protagonists rendered in sharp detail and focus; the eye is immediately drawn to the facial expressions and sentiments [fig. 28]. The domestic interior simply blends into the murky background as a

natural and comfortable setting for the story to play out against. Reshetnikov’s fictitious family fitted perfectly into the ideal mould that Pomerantsev described in his assault on Soviet literary conventions.

Our hero never gets lost in everyday life, never gets swallowed up by it. An important job of the critic is to teach us to fight for a well-balanced everyday life, so that we might lift the reader even higher above everyday life.<sup>63</sup>

Reshetnikov’s painting represented a welcome break from the one-dimensional harmony that had defined Soviet art during the 1930s and 40s. *Low Marks Again!* stood out amongst works at the exhibition in its depiction of a scene of failure, no matter how trivial or temporary, and in this sense it was something of a groundbreaking work. *Iskusstvo* declared the artist to be ‘a master of psychological characterisation and a great director’<sup>64</sup> and the exhibition visitors were quick to agree.

*Low Marks Again!* Goodness, what a surprising, new thing it is. Two of the faces—the young boy and the dog—how sweet they are. The most people are gathered around this painting. There are no dry pedagogues here. Here there is

<sup>61</sup> Matthew Cullern Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: London, 1998), p. 184.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Sovetskoe izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu’, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Pomerantsev, ‘On Sincerity in Literature’.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Sovetskoe izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu’, p. 3, the reviewer goes on to suggest that ‘The painting can be interpreted as a small novella about Soviet life, children and school.’



life, here even a sad event contains humour—and that gives us great strength.<sup>65</sup>

It is perhaps hard to imagine the sense of release that this painting must have engendered on its exhibition in 1952. In spite of its relatively small scale, subdued palette and brushy execution, the painting was hailed as a great success with many visitors calling for the artist to be awarded a prestigious Stalin Prize.<sup>66</sup> The early years of the 1950s saw criticism grow for the conflictless drama of Soviet literature and the varnished reality of Soviet art; Reshetnikov's painting can be understood as an early response to this issue. To a Western observer the dramatic impact of the scene appears crude and couched in sentimental Soviet imagery, but to the contemporary Soviet viewer this was a genuinely innovative work of art that offered a precious chance to laugh out loud amongst the serious canvases that filled the gallery walls.

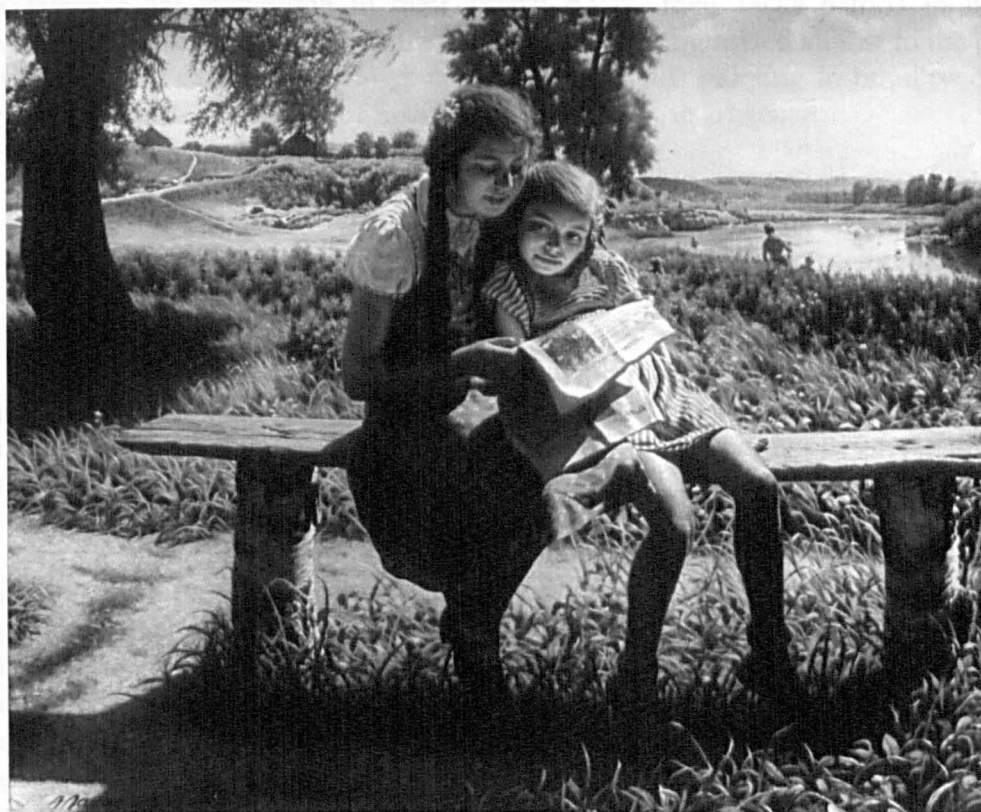


Fig. 29: Aleksandr Laktionov, *In Summer*, 1954, Altaiskii Krai Museum, Barnaul

### **‘We were born to make fairy tales come true’**

Given the harsh criticism that Laktionov endured at the *1952 All-Union Exhibition*, one might have expected him to avoid such heavily varnished subject matter in the future. On the contrary, his next major canvas, *In Summer* [fig. 29], exhibited at the *1954 All-Union Exhibition* aggravated some critics still further with

<sup>65</sup> Jan. 1953, GTG, f. 8.II, op. 2, d. 9, p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Reshetnikov did not win a Stalin Prize for this work although he was already a laureate of the prize, which he was awarded for his portraits of Stalin in 1949.



its saccharine depiction of a pair of endearing Soviet children sitting in a sun-drenched meadow—it was nothing short of pre-Raphaelitism albeit with a Soviet theme; the subtitle of the picture was *Pionerskaia Pravda* (Pioneers' Pravda). In the foreground two young girls, for whom the artist's daughters had acted as models, perch on a bench pouring over a copy of the Communist Youth newspaper. In the background is a rural-fantasy landscape, complete with a shimmering river, idyllic dachas, children playing and cotton wool clouds in a blue sky. The entire scene is rendered in exquisite detail from the individual blades of grass at the young girls' feet to the ripples on the surface of the river. Like the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John Everett Millais and Holman Hunt, Laktionov's painting is distinguished by its saturated colours, vivid lighting effects and the artist's emphasis of the embellished mimesis of his image.<sup>67</sup>

In common with the protagonists from *Into a New Flat*, the two girls depicted in *In Summer* are statuesque in their frozen poses, their faces bathed in bright reflected light from the newspaper, their elfin features emphasised almost to the point of grotesque caricature. Boris Groys could have had this painting in mind when he described the dreamlike nature of Socialist Realism, whose artists,

Almost seem to be in the employ of some kind of extraterrestrial bureau planning a trip to earth—they want to make their envoys as anthropomorphic as possible, but they cannot keep the otherworldly void from gaping through all the cracks in the mask.<sup>68</sup>

It is a work of caricature and exaggeration but ultimately one of escapism. Every aspect of the painting is designed to stimulate a particular emotional response—a warm glow of nostalgia for lost youth, an affection for the sweet young girls, a yearning for the unspoilt countryside, the warmth of the summer sunlight. Thomas Kulka has described the trick that kitsch plays on its consumers, who 'believe that they like (and aesthetically appreciate) the symbol—that is, the kitsch picture—for its specific aesthetic properties, while what they are really affected by is the emotional charge of the referent.'<sup>69</sup> No wonder the public were enticed by Laktionov's dazzling special effects, as golden beams of sunshine, unusual plays of shadow and light, or surface reflections permeate even the artist's most serious work; the soldiers' halos of white light in *A Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops* [plate 1]; the brightly glowing letter in *A Letter from the Front*; and the incandescent leaves of the potted plants in *Old Age Provided For*. The very subject matter of *A Letter from the Front* appears to be situated firmly in the depicted young boy's imagination, as aeroplanes leave looping trails across the sky in a victory salute and the long-absent father appears across the square just above the child's head—the scene is one of pure, exultant fantasy. The critic Vladimir Kostin surely had Laktionov's work in mind when he wrote the following in 1953:

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<sup>67</sup> Reid writes about this work in 'Destalinisation and Taste', pp. 182-3, where she quotes Kostin, who describes its 'primitive illustrativeness.'

<sup>68</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 80.

The fundamental demand in art—the demand for truth to life—commits artists to such a possession of the technique of their work that it does not put up a wall between the viewer and the image, so that it does not attract the viewer's attention for its own sake, with its internal lustre, artfully and unscrupulously, but instead blends completely with the image, and helps to more fully and truthfully expose the subject itself in the ideas and the forms of the painting.<sup>70</sup>

Was Kostin describing here the nature of kitsch and the insidious threat it posed to the consumer of Soviet art? In a regime that claimed to have erased all class boundaries and created an art form for the masses, Laktionov's paintings created an inherent difficulty. They revealed the new schism that had evolved between the Stalinist generation with its inherent compromise of the communist project and a new generation of liberal intelligentsia. For many viewers the 'internal lustre' of Laktionov's new flat with its enticing aroma of *pelmeni* undermined the lofty ambitions of Socialist Realist art. As Pierre Bourdieu put it:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.<sup>71</sup>

Yet Laktionov's paintings were by no means coarse or profane. They were reinforced by an art historical savvy and virtuoso technique that elevated them above their superficial content and corresponded with the Soviet notion of *kul'turnost'*. Art itself is at the very core of his paintings, the subject matter existing as a mere veneer over the individual details and special effects—those formal features that have been plundered from the selected highlights of art history. The imagery and composition of *Into a New Flat* is steeped in intertextual references; in it we see the perspectival depth and delicate courtly style of Jan Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434, National Gallery, London) and the still life element with its globe and lute pays homage to Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533, National Gallery, London). Yet these are facets of Laktionov's painting that could not have been included for the sole benefit of the Soviet lay-viewer. One gets the sense that the artist had adopted the technical challenge as a means of personal expression and as a means to elevate his work above others at the exhibition. Laktionov deliberately emphasised the technical excellence and art-historical ancestry of his painting above and beyond its superficial content to the point where it replaces the socialist theme as the subject of the image. The very scale and high finish of the painting can be understood as a testament to his status among Soviet artists; not everyone could afford to lavish so much time and attention on their work. This was a celebrity artist at the peak of his popularity putting on a display of technical mastery within a tightly controlled art world.

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<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Kostin, 'O nekotorykh voprosov masterstva v zhivopisi', *Iskusstvo*, no. 4 1953, pp. 53-4.

<sup>71</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Susan Emanuel, *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p 281.

Laktionov himself was a success story of the system he was portraying. In contrast to many other established artists of the late Stalin era, such as Aleksandr Gerasimov, Boris Ioganson and Dmitri Nalbandian, Laktionov spent his formative years under a Communist government (he was just seven years old when the Bolsheviks took power in 1917) and as we have seen in the biographical analysis of Chapter One, his experience of the Stalinist regime was largely a positive one. Drawn to the bright lights of first Leningrad, then Moscow from the provinces, armed only with rock solid proletarian credentials and talent, his was a classic tale of rags to riches success in the Soviet context, in particular following the runaway popularity of *A Letter from the Front*. By 1952 Laktionov was living out the ideal of 'the Stalinist dream' from the comfort of his very own beautiful new flat in Moscow and had no reason to doubt in the validity of the system that helped to take him there. As the artist would later write, 'life and only life can be the source of inspiration for the artist' and Laktionov was indeed taking his cues from his own experiences of Soviet life.<sup>72</sup> *Into a New Flat* is an image that confounds the contemporary viewer with its apparent naivety, but for the artist and his admirers it was a sincere reflection of the world of real socialism—a varnished bubble within which a privileged minority could reap the concrete rewards of the Soviet project.

Clement Greenberg wrote in 1939 that: 'It is lucky that the [Soviet] peasant is protected from the products of American capitalism, for [Repin] would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell.'<sup>73</sup> In the 1950s Soviet Union Laktionov's painting fulfilled a similar function to the Rockwell illustration: it answered the popular demand for entertainment in Socialist Realist art. It represented the point at which *kul'turnost'* and kitsch merged into one all-pervasive entity on a social, cultural and political level: socially, because the academic realism and transparent theme of the work endeared it to popular taste; culturally because the 'high' art on display was tethered to a mawkish and sentimental theme; and politically, because it was an official product of the prevailing ideology. Perhaps this is the ultimate fate of a high art form that was designed to cater for mass tastes and accessibility. Lurking behind the rhetorical battle against formalism and naturalism was a struggle amongst Soviet artists to reconcile artistic integrity with a popular demand for lowbrow works of kitsch.

The art of Laktionov, and ultimately the art of Socialist Realism, has been hamstrung by the merciless process of historical change that has carried Soviet art on a different trajectory from that of its Western counterpart. Where Laktionov was hailed by many as a great master in his lifetime, his works have fallen into disregard and are considered now as interesting historical artifacts, propaganda tools, but rarely as serious works of art. Rockwell, on the other hand, who was treated as a mere illustrator in his own time, has since been promoted to the status of a great artist and his newspaper illustrations reinvented as great works of art. They were both artists of popular culture, they were both producers of works of kitsch, but where one has been legitimized by the ultimate success of his regime, the other has been reduced to a mere footnote in the history of a failed economic system. A nostalgic look back at Rockwell's Americana reveals a visionary perspective of the everyday people behind

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<sup>72</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika', *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv SSSR* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1961), p. 288.

<sup>73</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', p. 537.

a rapidly developing society. The same nostalgic perspective on Laktionov's work reveals the embellishment of an elaborate lie that undermines the apparent sincerity of his images. But the Socialist Realist artist should not be judged so harshly, for his varnished images of the good life served, for many Soviet citizens, a concrete purpose of escapism and optimism. They made perfect sense in the context of a utopia-building, yet inequitable regime.

And so our Soviet citizen will leave the *1952 All-Union Exhibition* and the fairy-tale architecture of the Tretyakov Gallery and stroll to a nearby Metro station, where he will walk beneath frescoed ceilings, chandeliers and marble colonnades to wait for his train. He will emerge from this underground palace into a square flanked by the imposing neo-classical architecture of a colossal new apartment building. He will walk past the windows of the *gastronom* filled with goods that he cannot afford to buy, brush shoulders with a Party man dressed in beautiful clothes that he cannot afford to wear, trudge along a wide prospect busy with shiny cars that he cannot afford to own, and return home to his crumbling *kommunalka*, where he will tell his family and neighbours about the beautiful paintings that he has seen, which hold the enticing allure of a better life, awaiting them just around the corner.



### A Self-Portrait of the Socialist Realist Artist

Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, Revolutionary Romanticism. We say that Socialist Realism is the basic method of Soviet *belles lettres* and literary criticism, and this presupposes that Revolutionary Romanticism should enter into literary creation as a component part, for the whole life of our Party, the whole life of the working class and its struggle consist in a combination of the most stern and sober practical work with a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects.<sup>1</sup>

In a pair of speeches to the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934 Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky set out the theoretical basis for the method of Socialist Realist art production. In his opening address Zhdanov used the term 'Revolutionary Romanticism' to describe the calling of the Soviet writer, proposing that the mystical ethos of Romanticism was consonant with the tasks of the Soviet artist, albeit detached from its bourgeois origins in the 'world of utopian dreams.' The use of this term, somewhat anomalous with the rest of his speech which dealt with literature in industrial terms as a vital component of 'socialist construction,' anticipated a turning away from the Marxist rationalism of 1920s state rhetoric and announced the coming of a new era in which the heroic individual would come to replace the proletariat as the new power base of the Soviet regime.<sup>2</sup> It was a phrase that proved especially significant for the development of Soviet culture and society over the coming decades. Even at this very early stage of the Socialist Realist project, Zhdanov was ceding a limited autonomy to the creative workforce and acknowledging some special quality of the artistic process that raised it above its functional status as an element of the ideological superstructure in Marxist philosophy.

This chapter will consider Revolutionary Romanticism in the fine arts after 1934 as an influential concept that initiated a conflict between the proposed industrial model of Soviet art production and the prominence of the individual artist as a dominant creative force. Through an analysis of Laktionov's works of self-portraiture and independent personal works we will see the process by which a Soviet artist courted the nineteenth century myth of the Romantic artist, and how the socialist content of his works became secondary to what Walter Benjamin has called 'the fetish

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature: the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature', Speech to the Soviet Writers' Congress, 1934, *Marxists Internet Archive*: [http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit\\_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm](http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm), last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Revolutionary Romanticism has been analysed in several studies of Soviet literature. Katerina Clark associates the term with the 'exaggeration and grand scale' of Socialist Realism and as a shift away from the verisimilitude of conventional notions of realism. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 34. Meanwhile Vera Dunham has described the process by which the romantic ethos of the revolution as a force of mass action was transformed in the 1930s into a 'sacred monument [...] both obsolete and ineffective.' *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 66.

of the name of the master.<sup>3</sup> Previous chapters have dealt primarily with the ways in which Laktionov's career and individual canvases were received and appropriated as exempla of certain trends in the post-war art world, but here the emphasis will shift to explore the ways in which the Soviet artist could gain a kind of autonomy within the system—not as a form of dissent or underground activity, but as an open and unexceptional utilization of the Soviet art establishment as a vehicle for self-definition and self-promotion. How did a Soviet artist promote his own image through self-portraiture and was this process compatible with the demands of Soviet art? In the 1950s Laktionov's self-portraits were exhibited alongside his other canvases at major exhibitions and contributed to the growing public fascination with his work.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, in major genre works and thematic canvases, Laktionov's signature was evident in stylistic flourishes and motifs that drew attention to the artist's hand but often distracted viewers from the subject matter of his work. The intention of this chapter is not to suggest that Laktionov was unique among Soviet artists in this regard, but to examine his self-portraits as a manifestation of celebrity culture in the Soviet art world of the post-war years.

### The Industry of Socialist Realism

The creative workers of Socialist Realism were famously described by Stalin as 'engineers of human souls.'<sup>5</sup> Following this lead, the rhetoric of Soviet art criticism and theory often deployed industrial or military metaphors to describe the calling of the artist.<sup>6</sup> Integral to the mid 1930s development of Socialist Realist art theory was the process of planning and implementing the 1939 monumental exhibition, *The Industry of Socialism*, which was intended to represent the much vaunted synthesis of fine art with everyday life and labour.<sup>7</sup> Not only the content but also the execution of this exhibition was designed to be an affirmation of the socialist system of organised labour, with the majority of work proceeding to order under the auspices of a

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<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the origins of the concept of artistic genius in *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 201-210.

<sup>4</sup> In the daily evaluation of comments made by the Ministry of Culture at the 1957 *All-Union Exhibition* it was acknowledged that 'without doubt the bulk of comments name Laktionov as the most significant artist of the Soviet Union, although individual comments express opinions about photographism as a major feature of his work.' A number of visitors named Laktionov's self portrait as their favourite painting. RGALI, f. 2329, op. 4, d. 675, *Obzor otzyvov zritelei vystavki 1957 goda*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> The words were allegedly used by Stalin at a meeting with Soviet writers at the home of Maxim Gorky on 26 Oct. 1932. 'The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks [...] And therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul.' They were borrowed two years later by Andrei Zhdanov in his aforementioned speech to the Soviet Writers Congress. 'To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams.' Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature.'

<sup>6</sup> See for example a speech made by Sergei Gerasimov at the Second All-Union Congress of Artists on 10 April 1963, where he talks of a 'thousands-strong army of artists', a 'fierce struggle' for artistic ideology and the 'weapon of art' that Socialist Realism represents. *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 11 Apr. 1963, p. 1. This translation is taken from *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XV, no. 15 (1963), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Reid has dealt with the significance of this exhibition, which acted as a kind of model for the future development of Socialist Realism in 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935-41', *Russian Review* 60, no. 2 (2001), pp. 153-184 and 'All Stalin's Women: Gender and Inequality in Soviet Art of the 1930s,' *Slavic Review* 57, no. 1 (1998), pp. 133-73.



committee composed of artists, politicians and representatives of heavy industry. Works were commissioned based on a 'Thematic Plan' published by the Commissariat of Heavy Industry and artists were dispatched to work on location in factories, mines, laboratories and institutes across the country with the goal of developing a comprehensive vision of Soviet progress.<sup>8</sup> Although Susan Reid has demonstrated that the reality of this ambitious celebration of socialist achievement was undermined by the debilitating interference of the purges, infighting amongst competing artistic groups and organisational shortcomings, it was nonetheless designed to represent a new model for art production. According to Reid:

*Industry of Socialism* was an exercise in integrating artists into socially useful, planned production: the Romantic and modernist paradigm of the individualistic creative genius working in mysterious ways was to be superseded by the industrial model. Artists were now paid employees fulfilling the social command in accordance with a predetermined master plan.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the many failings of this exhibition, its original concept of centrally regulated, collectively organised art production remained a cornerstone of the Socialist Realist project throughout the Stalin era and deep into the post-war period.

In the rhetoric of this prototypical model, fine art was a branch of the ideology industry, geared exclusively towards the construction of communism, and its artists were labourers working towards the fulfilment of their production quotas.<sup>10</sup> In its purest form the 'production aesthetic' of the Stalinist art establishment represented an outright rejection of the myth of the Romantic artist with which the creative process had become associated in its nineteenth century incarnation.<sup>11</sup> Socialist Realism was conceived as a visual representation of social consciousness, or as Vissarion Belinskii stated in an article of 1841 that came to have a major influence on the development of Soviet art theory, a form of 'thinking in images.'<sup>12</sup> This notion of the 'antiaestheticism' of Soviet art was endorsed as a key principle of Socialist Realism until long after the start of the cultural thaw of the mid 1950s. Leonid Il'ichev restated the principles of the 'ideological front' at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress in 1961:

The ideological work of the Party is not an end in itself but an effective means for solving questions of communist construction. [...] But how should the

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<sup>8</sup> Faina Balakhovskaia, 'Zhivopisnaia industriia: istoriia odnoi vystavki,' in Ekaterina Degot' and Aleksandr Sysenko, eds., *Sovetskii idealizm: zhivopis' i kino, 1925-1939* (Brussels: Fonds Mercator/Europalia International, 2005), pp. 27-32.

<sup>9</sup> Reid, 'Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror', p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Igor Golomstock has suggested that the Soviet artist was personified exclusively as a symbol of collective labour, a position against which I will argue here. 'The name of the author was no more than a symbol of collective creativity [...] for his name represented not an individual talent, but a gigantic cultural megamachine, in which he fulfilled the role of a "cog or screw."' 'Problems in the Study of Stalinist Culture', in Hans Günther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: MacMillan Press, 1990), p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Brecht used the term 'production aesthetics' to describe his understanding of Marxist theory as a rejection of the 'nineteenth century idealist redefinition of art as an imaginative pursuit higher than mere craft or technical skill.' Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (California: University of California Press, 1982), p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> James P. Scanlan, *Marxism in the USSR: A Critical Survey of Current Soviet Thought* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 295-6.

strength of its influence be checked, how should its results be appraised? Are there scales on which to weigh the fruit of ideological work? There are, Comrades, and I hope this will not sound like a paradox. These are the same scales on which we weigh our daily needs, our cotton, steel, pig iron and meat, in short, all the material values created by man. As a rule there is a direct relation between say, production successes in industry or agriculture and good ideological work.<sup>13</sup>

According to this theoretical basis, the Soviet artist was no different from a construction worker or manual labourer and was no more entitled to engage in private enterprise than a collective farmer was officially permitted to invest time and resources in the tending of his own vegetable garden.

Although the precise mechanisms by which the cultural apparatus functioned in the late Stalin era remains under-researched, it is clear that the Soviet art establishment of the post-war years was a far cry from the efficient model of socialist industry envisioned by the lofty concept of *The Industry of Socialism* exhibition. The indeterminate nature of the creative arts precluded the kind of concrete facts and figures required by the Soviet bureaucratic machine and the artists of Socialist Realism enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in their day-to-day activities that frustrated the intentions of policy makers. Policies dealing with the production of Socialist Realist art often originated from individuals and committees within Party organs including the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Propaganda and Agitation; bureaucratic bodies that exercised control over the economic and material needs of the art establishment but had little direct involvement with the routine production of works of art. Prominent Central Committee members and influential cultural theorists such as Zhdanov and Mikhail Suslov were involved in policy decision making in areas of Soviet society ranging from the sciences and agriculture to art and education and, due to the panoramic scope of their interests, were necessarily detached from the actual implementation of their dictates.<sup>14</sup> Consequently directives from the upper tiers of the hierarchy were disseminated to the art establishment via certain intermediary figures such as Andrei Lebedev, Director of Fine Art in the Ministry of Culture, Aleksandr Gerasimov, President of the USSR Academy of the Arts, and Petr Sysoev, head of the Committee of Art Affairs and editor of the journal *Iskusstvo*.<sup>15</sup>

Demand for works of art was determined by bureaucratic bodies such as the Committee of Art Affairs and orders were placed with local organisations before being awarded to affiliated artists in the form of specific commissions including an advance payment. The commissions might be awarded based on competitions in which artists were invited to submit sketches, or presented directly to well-known or

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<sup>13</sup> Leonid Il'ichev, 'The 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress and the Tasks of Ideological Work,' *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XIII (1961), p. 51, taken from *Pravda*, 27 Dec 1961, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Suslov replaced Zhdanov as the 'ideologist in chief' of the Party following the latter's death in 1948, although as Roy Medvedev notes, both were always subordinate to the wishes of Stalin. Suslov continued his duties as ideological overseer until his death in 1982. Roy Medvedev, trans. by Harold Shukman, *All Stalin's Men* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 70-81.

<sup>15</sup> The art journals *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo* carried regular Party statements regarding the tasks and achievements of Soviet art as their lead articles, providing indications of current concerns and requirements.

well-connected artists.<sup>16</sup> Evidence suggests, however, that a significant proportion of these commissioned works never materialised.<sup>17</sup> Completed works were on occasion subjected to demands for revisions by exhibition organising committees, and if judged successful might subsequently be purchased by the Art Fund for redistribution amongst state institutions and regional art galleries.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of the performance of art organisations was often severely limited, usually restricted to statistical tallies listing annual totals of works completed in different genres and media, and analyses of exhibitions detailing numbers of participating artists from each Soviet republic and the volume of works contributed.<sup>19</sup> Within this loose scientific framework particular artists or trends were singled out for public criticism or praise, often according to the tastes and allegiances of a very few influential individuals.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of this brief (and incomplete) synopsis of the often inefficient, top-heavy bureaucracy of the Soviet art establishment is to suggest the lack of accountability and clarity with which individual artists, the organised labour of the ideological front, were expected to carry out their daily work.

### Soviet Celebrity

The underlying assumption of the system was that artists themselves would follow developments in the press and within the organisations to which they were affiliated in order to correspond as closely as possible to Party policy in their artistic endeavours. The ever-present threat of public criticism and the enticement of career advancement or major financial reward provided a persuasive incentive to toe the line, although as Christina Kiaer has argued with reference to the popular artist Aleksandr Deineka, interpretations of policy were often subject to the intentions of the individual artist.<sup>21</sup> Even the workshop (*masterskaia*), that mainstay of socialist art production,

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the process of competitions for selecting artists to participate in exhibitions see Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929-1953* (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), pp. 114-33.

<sup>17</sup> For example in 1950 A. Pavel'ev wrote a letter to Kliment Voroshilov complaining of the failings of the Committee for Art Affairs in ensuring the completion of state orders for works of art. He cited several artists to illustrate his point, including Nechitailo, who was in January of 1948 commissioned to paint a portrait of Lenin and Stalin with an advance of 10,000 roubles. In July of the same year he requested and received a further advance of 20,500 roubles to continue work on the project, but by January of 1950 no painting had materialised. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 425, *Zapiski i spravki Otdela i sektora iskusstv po pis'mam i resheniiam Soveta ministrov SSSR po delam iskusstv*, pp. 28-43.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the meeting of an exhibition committee (*Vystavkom*) within the Ministry of Culture, which recommends certain changes to be made to works of art ahead of the *1954 All-Union Art Exhibition*. RGALI, f. 2329, op. 4, d. 234-5.

<sup>19</sup> For examples of these statistical tallies see the archival depositary of the Ministry of Culture in RGALI, fond 2305.

<sup>20</sup> In 1948 the critic Osip Beskin wrote a damning letter to the secretary of the Central Committee Department of Propaganda and Agitation criticising the influential and biased manoeuvring of Aleksandr Gerasimov within the art establishment. He wrote: 'His influence within the Committee of Art Affairs is boundless. For the head of the fine art section P. M. Sysoev the word of A. Gerasimov is an unbreakable law, and the same can be said for M. Khrapchenko. In the Central Committee Art Department they don't simply pay attention to his words, which would of course be perfectly natural, but they treat them as almost indisputably decisive.' RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 86, *Spravki upravleniia propagandy i agitatsii TsK VKP(b) i otdela iskusstv, itd*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Christina Kiaer, 'Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka,' *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005), pp. 321-345.

was beset by inequity as established artists exploited their less experienced colleagues, who were employed as contributors to major brigade paintings, the authorship and creative initiative of which was invariably attributed to the most senior member of the team. Likewise successful artists on occasion passed off copies of their works produced by subordinate artists as their own.<sup>22</sup> Yet a number of artists remained somewhat detached from this collective model of Soviet art production. From the end of the war until 1949 Laktionov was unaffiliated to any organisation, although he maintained a close relationship with friends and acquaintances in Moscow through whom he was able to organise the occasional commission. The artist was accepted as a correspondent member of the Moscow Artists' Union in 1949 but he remained independent from the organisation in his day-to-day activities and rarely participated in its operations during the 1950s. It was not until the early 1960s that the artist began to play a more active role in the affairs of the art world.<sup>23</sup> Aside from the occasional official commission and the preparation of canvases for major Soviet exhibitions—these accounting for a perhaps two or three major works per year—an established Stalin Prize laureate artist such as Laktionov was free to pursue a relatively autonomous career with a reliable income in the privileged surroundings of his own, state-awarded studio space.<sup>24</sup>

Many Soviet artists devoted a vast proportion of their time, energy and materials to the production of works of art that dealt not with state-sanctioned lofty themes but with intimate family scenes, portraits of friends and relatives and self-portraits. One only need scour the listed works in the biographies of Soviet artists to notice that a large proportion of their paintings are located not in public galleries, institutions or government buildings as might be expected, but in the private collections of descendents and friends.<sup>25</sup> The line between public and private was often a hazy one in the Soviet Union so it is important to acknowledge that such works were neither illicit nor clandestine and often formed part of an artist's extended portfolio, to be reproduced in official biographies and articles as approved exempla of certain tendencies. However such works were not created according to any prescribed formula and it was often in these private works that the Soviet artist could explore styles and techniques that were considered unacceptable for official commissions. It is a great paradox of Socialist Realism that a theoretical approach, so often regarded as

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<sup>22</sup> Reid writes of the inequity of brigade painting arrangements in 'All Stalin's Women,' pp. 164-5. In 1955 a special meeting of the Moscow Artists' Union was called to discuss the affairs of Dmitri Nalbandian. Amongst other crimes, he was accused of exploiting the young artist Kuzmina and passing off copies of his work as his own. RGALI f. 2943, op. 1, d. 811, *Protokol n.12 i stennogramma zasedaniia pravleniia po utverzheniiu rezoliutsii pravleniia po dokladu T. I. Rubleeva o rabote MOKhF za 1954-55 obsuzhdeniiu personal'nogo dela D. A. Nalbandian*, 16 Dec. 1955, pp. 21-2.

<sup>23</sup> E. V. Nikolaeva and I. G. Miamlin, *Aleksandr Ivanovich Laktionov* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1978), p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Laktionov's output was usually limited to two or three commissioned works per year, a figure that was often outweighed by his production of unofficial works. Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, pp. 149-163. In an informal interview conducted on 14 Dec. 2006 the artist's daughter, Mariia Aleksandrovna Laktionova, described the beautiful, spacious private studio on Ul. Volodarskogo, which was arranged for her father with the help of the famous novelist and influential obkom member Mikhail Sholokhov and which Laktionova was permitted to keep following her father's death until it was requisitioned in the late 1980s.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Vladimir Sysoev, *Deineka: 1899 – 1969* (Moskva: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1973), D. M. Osipov, *Aleksandr Gerasimov* (Moskva: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1981) and E. V. Nikolaeva and I. G. Miamlin, *Aleksandr Ivanovich Laktionov* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1978).

‘totalitarian,’ should condone and even encourage such active extracurricular activity amongst its work force. Having achieved recognition within the Soviet art establishment, the artist was liberated, to an extent, not only from financial concerns but also from stylistic and thematic restrictions. As we have already seen in previous chapters, the reputation of a successful artist could sometimes overrule the quality control imposed by exhibition or Stalin prize committees. It was this muddled union of autonomous independence and official accountability that spawned the celebrity artist of Socialist Realism; a feted individual whose works of art held a special significance that surpassed their socialist content.

The notion of celebrity was nothing out of the ordinary in the context of Soviet society after the mid 1920s as the state sought actively to promote certain individuals and groups to a level of nationwide prominence; high achieving citizens that served as edifying role models for the masses functioning as the flip side of the terror campaign in the stick and carrot coercive method of the Stalinist regime. In the 1930s cinema stars such as Liubov Orlova, and theatrical and musical performers such as Leonid Utesov were promoted extensively as positive models of the ideal Soviet *lichnost'* (personality).<sup>26</sup> The methods by which celebrity culture was deployed by the Soviet state in order to provide a paradigm of positive socialist behaviour has been dealt with by a number of recent studies. Katerina Clark has dealt with the qualities inherent to the ‘Heroic Age’ of high Stalinism in her work on Socialist Realist literature, where she contends that the characteristics of the literary hero were not those of an individual, but were instead a microcosm of socialist society itself, in a neat sidestepping of the contradictory demands of Marxist ideology and celebrity culture.<sup>27</sup> John McCannon argues that the very same approach was employed in the media promotion of real-life heroes such as the famous aviators and Arctic explorers of the 1930s, whereby a charismatic figure such as Otto Schmidt, the captain of the ill-fated Cheliuskin voyage of 1934, was represented as an embodiment of positive social values, ‘the blueprint for the evolution of Soviet society [compressed] into the adventures of a single person.’<sup>28</sup> David Priestland has related this practice to representations of the Bolshevik state itself in the Stalin era, which was promoted as a ‘quasi-romantic’ institution whose legitimacy was based not on a rational, scientific basis, but on a mythology of its ‘extraordinary powers and access to higher truth.’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of cinema and theatre celebrities in the Stalin era see Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 64-97. For an analysis of Soviet musical stars see David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), pp. 6-32. In a discussion of Grigirii Aleksandrov’s musical blockbuster *Tsirk* (1936), Beth Holmgren argues that the plot of the film deals with Marion Crane’s (played by Orlova) rebirth as a Soviet celebrity imbued with the humane characteristics she lacked as a product of the American system. Beth Holmgren, ‘The Blue Angel and Blackface: Redeeming Entertainment in Aleksandrov’s Circus’ *Russian Review* 66, no. 1 (2007), pp. 5-22.

<sup>27</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 136-57.

<sup>28</sup> McCannon contrasts the conduct of two heroes of the Arctic, Otto Schmidt and Mikhail Vodop’ianov, the former a paradigm of moral sobriety and the latter a free-wheeling social climber. John McCannon, ‘Positive Heroes at the Pole: Celebrity Status, Socialist Realist Ideals and the Soviet Myth of the Arctic, 1932-39,’ *Russian Review* 56, no. 3 (1997), pp. 346-365.

<sup>29</sup> David Priestland, ‘Stalin as Bolshevik Romantic: Ideology and Mobilization, 1917-1939’ in Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: A New History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 183.

But the notion of Soviet celebrity in the Stalin era was always subject to the gravitational pull of the greatest star of all: Stalin himself. The politics of the leader cult exerted a massive influence on the development of celebrity culture as famous figures were represented in relation to the leader, their degree of celebrity always directly proportional to their proximity to Stalin in both physical and abstract terms. It has been suggested that Stalin himself represented the personification of 'Romantic Marxism' with a style of leadership that privileged such notions as 'faith' and 'heroism' in the development of a socialist mythology.<sup>30</sup> In the art establishment the most famous artists were those that could claim to have met the leader—the powerful triumvirate of Aleksandr Gerasimov, Evgenii Katsman and Isaak Brodskii—but other artists could still define themselves in relation to Stalin through the success of their painted portraits which were, in the 1930s and 40s, a valuable benchmark of distinction. The leader cult was a phenomenon that helped to legitimise the fetish of the individual and provided a normative model for the widespread development of celebrity culture in Soviet society.

We have seen in Chapter Three the significant role that portraiture had to play in the hierarchical system of privileges upon which the Soviet art establishment of the post-war years was constructed, but what place could the inherently individualistic practice of self-portraiture, a genre traditionally employed by the artist as a means of self-exploration, self-promotion, or self-glorification, have in the canon of Socialist Realist art? Aleksandr Gerasimov described the communal responsibility of the Soviet artist in a 1952 essay:

The paths and objectives of Soviet art are directly opposed to bourgeois art. The Soviet artist, armed with the method of Socialist Realism, creates for the masses and serves the interests of the masses [...] Soviet artists strive to express the thoughts and feelings, the great affairs of the masses. This is the strength of their art.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the self-portrait was an established and sanctioned genre of Socialist Realism that often played a part in major Soviet exhibitions. A vast proportion of Soviet artists engaged in the production of self-portraits over the course of their careers with some particularly famous examples including Petr Konchalovskii's *Self-Portrait in a Yellow Shirt* (1943, GTG), Martiros Sar'ian's *Self-Portrait - Three Stages of Life* (1943, Martiros Sar'ian Museum, Yerevan) and Gelii Korzhev's *In the Days of War* (1952, private collection). But few Soviet artists were as prolific in the genre as Laktionov. The artist created an extensive gallery of self-portraiture dating from 1931 to 1970, charting nearly every year of his career and displaying a variety of different styles and approaches that reflected his evolving position within the art establishment.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksandr Gerasimov, 'Protiv formalisma za vysokoe idieinoe iskusstvo,' in Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Za sotsialisticheskii realizm: sbornik statiei i dokladov* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1952), p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> A comparative practice to portrait painting is diary writing, which has been dealt with by Jochen Hellbeck in *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Harvard: 2006). Hellbeck writes of the need felt by some diarists to 'construct or reconstruct' the self in relation to state ideology, or to 'idealize one's life.' p. 13.

In spite of its prevalence the self-portrait received scant attention in Soviet art theory. Where the self-portrait was mentioned it was usually considered alongside works of conventional portraiture and its quality was measured according to the same standards.<sup>33</sup> Yet the visual representation of the cultural intelligentsia was essential to the development of Socialist Realism. As Evgeny Dobrenko has written, a new relationship was required between the artist and the audience as part of the process of eliminating 'the gulf separating the mass consumer from the cultural repertoire of the age'.<sup>34</sup> Visual representations of Soviet writers, composers, artists and sculptors—otherwise invisible, anonymous figures—helped to bring art and culture 'closer to the masses.' Catriona Kelly has traced the Soviet model for the image of the artist back to early depictions of Pushkin that emphasised his status as a romantic genius. She identifies a process of interaction between the representation of the artist or writer and the reception of their work through which the artistic depiction of a physical appearance could do more to enhance the 'heroic poetic identity in the public imagination than any notable achievement.'<sup>35</sup> Legitimised in part by the grand mythology of Pushkin, which proceeded along an increasingly nationalistic trajectory in the Stalin era, portraits and self-portraits of Soviet artists were by the 1950s considered almost exclusively in terms of their expression of the 'heroic essence [...] of the typical, progressive Soviet man.'<sup>36</sup>

A 1986 book on the chronology of the Soviet self-portrait by the conservative critic L. Zinger tackled its various incarnations in terms of its tendentious nature; that is, how the self-portrait could be related to the life and times of socialist society. According to Zinger's historical analysis, the early Socialist Realist self-portrait represented not only a reflection of the self, but also an integration of the self with wider social phenomena such as revolutionary imagery, the development of the new Soviet citizen, or the hardships and glories of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>37</sup> The Soviet self-portrait was required not only to depict the specificity of the individual, but more importantly to expose the 'essence of being' (*sushchnost' byitiia*), the complexity and range of the author's interrelations with the surrounding world.<sup>38</sup> More problematic for Zinger were the post-war years, which he described as a 'crossroads' for Soviet self-portraiture, where the tendentious nature of wartime works met the more experimental psychological aspect evident in works of the 1960s and 70s. Zinger described Laktionov's self-portraiture of the 1950s as 'groundbreaking' in its truth to life, an impression that was heightened by the artist's intensive application of detail:

We feel that a firm, purposeful impression of nature is before us. As in all of Laktionov's canvases, *Self-Portrait* [plate 5] is distinguished by a great attention to detail. [...] But in this case it does not weaken the psychological

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<sup>33</sup> See for example V. M. Zimenko's book, *Sovetskaia portretnaia zhivopis'* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1951).

<sup>34</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, 'The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or, Who "Invented" Socialist Realism,' in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds. *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997), p. 142.

<sup>35</sup> Catriona Kelly, 'Painting and Autobiography: Anna Prismanova's *Pesok* and Anna Akhmatova's *Epicheskie motivy*' in Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell, eds., *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 62. See also Wendy Slater, 'The Patriot's Pushkin', *Slavic Review* 58, no. 2 (1999), pp. 407-21.

<sup>36</sup> Zimenko, *Sovetskaia portretnaia zhivopis'*, p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> L. C. Zinger, *Avtoportret v sovetskom zhivopisi* (Moskva: Znanie, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



expressiveness of the work, but only increases its lifelike authenticity (*zhiznennaia dostovernost'*).<sup>39</sup>

Just as the Soviet self-portrait underwent a process of development, so too did Laktionov's mode of self-representation develop over the course of his career, although it did not reflect Zinger's emphasis on tendentiousness, but mirrored instead the artist's own rising status within the Soviet art establishment. While early self-portraits of the young artist provided an arena for self-exploration and experimentation, later works reveal the constructed and manipulated image of a public figure as he engaged in a process of self-promotion. By the 1950s, the Laktionov self-portrait had taken on a prominent position amongst his works at All-Union Exhibitions and their 'lifelike authenticity' represented a reflection of celebrity.

### Early Experiments

In its rehabilitation of pre-revolutionary Russian art history as the kernel around which Socialist Realism was to be constructed, the Soviet art establishment adopted not only the styles and techniques of the past but also some of its attitudes and affectations. We have seen in Chapter One how certain traditional practices of art education such as an emphasis on drawing from life were reintegrated into the approach of the Academy of the Arts in the mid 1930s, and it is perhaps unsurprising that, hand-in-hand with this, came a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the artist himself as the source of inspiration and creativity. Although Imperial Russia lagged behind Western Europe in its elevation of the social status of the artist, the rise of private patronage in the second half of the nineteenth century saw a rapid adoption of independent values, promoted in part by a fascination with the more liberal artistic cultures of France, Italy and Germany. Yet in the rhetoric of 1920s avant-garde theorists, the bourgeois construct of the Romantic artist-genius was rejected in an attempt to rationalise the creative process and bring art closer to the masses.<sup>40</sup> The installation of Isaak Brodskii as Rector of the Academy in 1934 carried an important implication for the remaining proponents of modernism amongst the teaching staff: the status of the artist was once again primary. As a famous artist of the older generation, legitimised by his association with both Repin and Stalin himself, Brodskii was the prototype celebrity artist of the Soviet Union, whose name alone carried with it a powerful weight of authority. Studying under Brodskii, Laktionov and his fellow students adopted not only their teacher's scrupulous approach to realism but also his traditional approach to the noble calling of the artist and the unique field of artistic creation. Some years later Laktionov recalled an early childhood memory in which he came across a photograph of Brodskii that was reproduced in the journal *Solntse Rossii*:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Kazimir Malevich's tirade against the academic tradition in 'The Question of Imitative Art', first published in 1920: 'Nowadays no individual personality is allowed to have the freedom to live as it pleases, arranging a personal economic programme for its own vegetable garden, since it must be included in the system of sharing and of common freedom and rights; hence the individual has no rights, for the rights are common to all, and the individual personality itself is simply a fragment from a united being.' Taken from Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992).

The artist was shown at work on a portrait of Ilya Efimovich Repin. This great artist, whose works I loved with all my soul, radiated the bright light of his glory onto everything around him.<sup>41</sup>

The language of this quote with its imagery of transcendental genius reveals an acknowledgement of the status of fine art as an exclusive arena in which superior individuals exercised their extraordinary gift.

Under Brodskii's leadership in the 1930s, self-portraiture once again came to play an important part in the education process of the Academy of the Arts. Laktionov drew and painted a significant number of self-portraits during his years as a student under Brodskii, and it was in these works that the young artist was able to experiment most freely with the styles and techniques of realist representation. In a 1934 self-portrait sketch the artist composed his face from a series of loosely scribbled lines that coalesce to form a detailed impression of his features [fig. 30]. In a later 1930s self-portrait sketch depicting himself at work Laktionov used strongly drawn parallel hatching to represent his torso and easel, while his face was drawn with finer lines to create a calm area of detail in the centre of the chaotic mass of jagged strokes (*Self-Portrait at Work*, 1930s, private collection of I. A. Laktionov). In a painted self-portrait of the early 1940s Laktionov depicted himself with highly simplified brush strokes to build up a textured impression of his face that is virtually devoid of detail (*Self-Portrait in a Red Headscarf*, 1940s, private collection of A. A. Laktionov). These works reveal a freeness of line that was usually kept in check when dealing with less intimate subject matter.

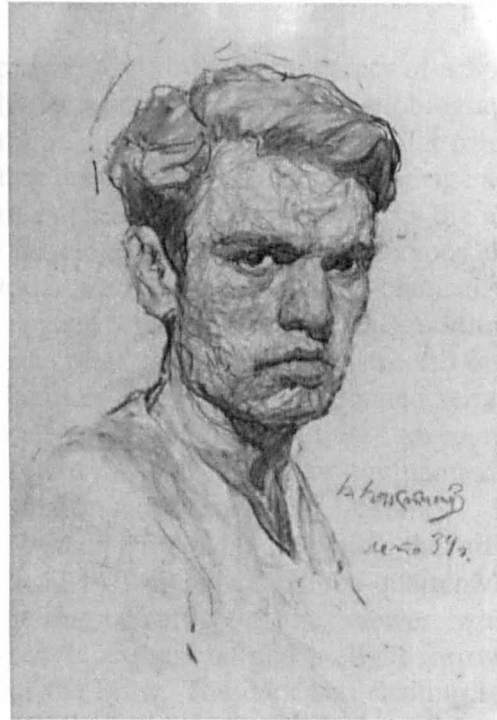


Fig. 30: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Self Portrait*, 1934, private collection of O. Johnson

In Laktionov's monumental diploma work of 1938 he took the step, unusual for a Soviet artist, of reproducing himself in the large group portrait *A Hero of the Soviet Union, N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops* [plate 1], ostensibly a genre work about young military cadets. The artist can be seen third from the right leaning towards the central table and partially silhouetted against the bright window. Although he is depicted as an inconsequential, shadowy figure in the crowd and was added as a late addition to the composition, the artist nonetheless drew attention to his own figure as the only member of the group that is engaging directly with the viewer,

<sup>41</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Nash uchitel' i drug: vospominaniia uchenikov I. I. Brodskogo' in I. A. Brodskii and M. P. Sokol'nikov, *Pamiat' I. I. Brodskogo: vospominaniia, dokumenty, pis'ma, k 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia 1984-1959* (Khudozhnik RSFSR: Leningrad, 1959), p. 159.

gazing out of the canvas with a half smile across his face.<sup>42</sup> Laktionov depicted himself slightly larger than life in a perhaps unintentional disruption of the perspectival plane: if his bent figure were to straighten he would tower over the surrounding Red Army cadets. Laktionov's appearance in this painting can be interpreted either as a playful gesture made by a young and as yet unknown artist, or as an early assertion of the centrality of the figure of the artist in the process of Socialist Realist art production. In either case it prefigures Laktionov's later fascination with his own self-representation as he develops from a minor bit-part player in this large composition to take centre stage in later works of self-portraiture.

## Role Playing

We have seen in Chapter One that progression in the early career of a Soviet artist was dependent upon the successful self-representation of a select autobiography, lineage and persona, and a self-portrait could be employed to fulfil a similar role. In the 1940s Laktionov painted several works that presented a particular self-image as he attempted to gain a toehold in the Soviet art establishment. In these works the artist represented himself in various guises that developed a series of associations upon which to construct his reputation. These works are light-hearted, even comical, and

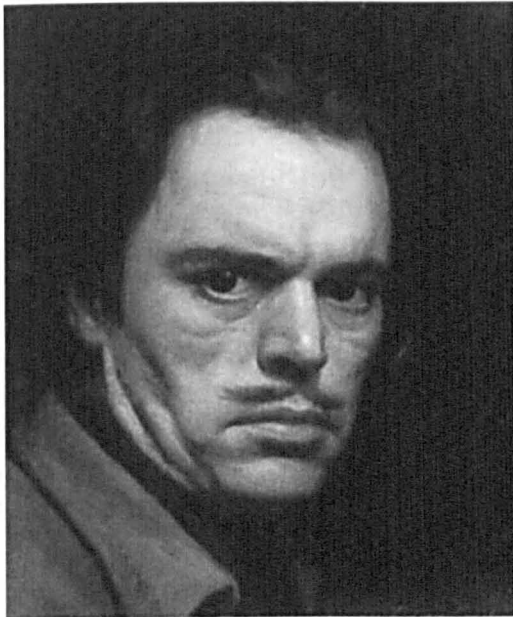


Fig. 31: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Self Portrait*, 1945, GTG

engage with an art historical tradition of role play that has been constructed on the basis of Rembrandt's celebrated series of self-portraits from the seventeenth century.<sup>43</sup> In 1945 Laktionov painted the small, but extremely detailed *Self-Portrait* [fig. 31], in which the artist's head is depicted in a three-quarter view, staring directly at the viewer with a severe expression and a slight furrowing of the brow. The dark and dashing looks of the young artist were frequently likened to those of Peter the Great, and in this portrait his resemblance to that celebrated icon of Russian national identity is emphasised in every detail, from his brushed back, flowing, black hair to his thin, wispy moustache. The image is reminiscent of early 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits of the Tsar, such as Ivan Nikitin's *Portrait of Peter the First*

(1720, GRM), and it lends the young artist an air of gravity and aloofness that is quite unlike the intimate tone of Laktionov's earlier self-portrait studies at the Academy.

<sup>42</sup> An early study for the *kartina* with Laktionov's figure omitted from the composition can be seen in Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> In the words of Shearer West, 'the afterlife of Rembrandt's self-portraiture has perpetuated the idea that it was desirable or beneficial for artists to represent themselves in such exploratory or experimental ways.' Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 174-5.

In 1947, whilst living in a basement flat within the walled monastery in Zagorsk, Laktionov completed the extraordinary *Self-Portrait in Rags* [fig. 32], a painting that appears incongruous and somewhat nonconformist in the resolutely dogmatic environment of the Soviet art establishment. Although it was painted as a personal experiment and was never intended for exhibition, the work was by no means secret and later came to hang in a prominent position in the artist's Moscow studio. Laktionov depicted himself roughly shaven with dark bags under his eyes and a white handkerchief wrapped around his head, his semi-naked torso covered only by a piece of frayed sackcloth. He meets the gaze of the viewer with a wild-eyed stare and a broad grin that gives the impression of precarious sanity. The artist is set against a dark background amid thick shadows with an elevated source of light that throws his features into exaggerated relief, his lips appearing almost blood red in contrast to the gloomy brown shades of the rest of the canvas. It is an unsettling self-representation that is deliberately suggestive of the borderline destitution and emotional strain felt by the young artist as he struggled to make his name in an unsupportive industry. Laktionov and his family had indeed fallen upon hard times in 1947, but they were far removed from the levels of poverty suggested by this work, which was painted simultaneously with *A Letter from the Front*, a contrastingly bright and optimistic image that asserts the communal riches of provincial Soviet life. Laktionov himself put a positive spin on the rhetoric of this self-portrait, which he considered to rank among his finest works:

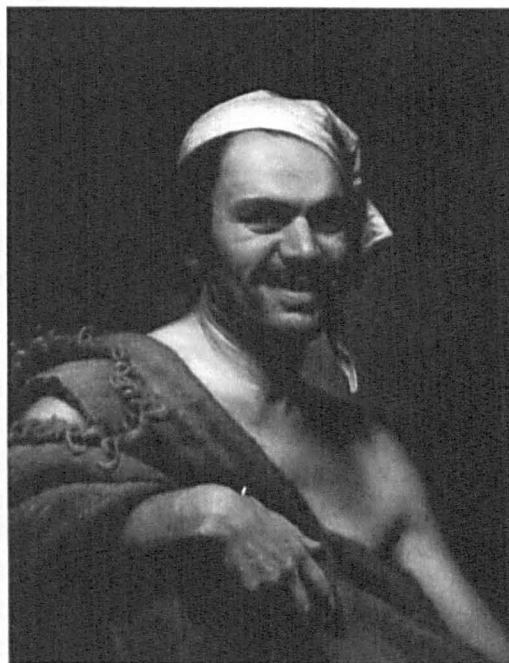


Fig. 32: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Self-Portrait in Rags*, private collection of O. A. Laktionova

Until the acceptance of *A Letter from the Front* and its success in exhibition, it was quite hard for me to support my family. In order to work, buy paints, canvases and to pay models it was necessary to economise on everything else, including sometimes even food. I was alone, without a studio, living with my family in a poor flat. But in spite of all these hardships my spirit did not drop, I believed in art, I loved it wholeheartedly and knew that I was following the correct path. That's what I tried to show in this portrait. Of course, the sackcloth was an exaggeration.<sup>44</sup>

Such a depiction of poverty was highly unusual at a time when exhibitions were filled with varnished images of abundance and wellbeing and it prompted the

<sup>44</sup> D. M. Osipov, *Aleksandr Laktionov* (Sovetskii khudozhnik: Moskva, 1968), pp. 113-115.

critic Vera Gertsenberg, confronted with the painting in a review of Laktionov's work at the Moscow Artists' Union, to ask:

If this painting was to be hung in the Tretyakov Gallery alongside Laktionov's other painting [*A Letter from the Front*], what would the viewer say then? [...] What is it? A joke aimed at himself? A joke aimed at the viewer?'<sup>45</sup>

The cynical humour of Laktionov's painting stands in stark contrast to the pious sincerity and seriousness of the majority of Socialist Realist art, which, in its overbearing post-war formulation, allowed scant opportunity for such expressions of irony or sardonic self-exploration.

The painting engages with the historical ideal of the Romantic artist as a volatile genius living on the breadline and escaping the degradation of poverty through the production of beautiful works of art. As such Laktionov's self-portrait privileges the notion of the artist as the source of creative inspiration in direct opposition to the theoretical demands of Socialist Realism, in which Soviet life was supposed to provide the raw material for the artistic process, with the bourgeois paradigm of the artist as genius subordinated to the socialist model of the state as collective genius. The Romantic ideal emerged in the early nineteenth century through the work of German philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant, who began to challenge what they saw as the excessive rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period. Their theories were embodied by the fictional characters of Henri Murger's 1851 book *Scènes de la Vie Bohème*, which dealt with a small group of poverty-stricken writers, painters and musicians in Paris and created a blueprint for the construct of the Romantic artist; an individual set apart from the rest of society by a mark of intellectual distinction—often manifested in alienation, destitution, or in some extreme cases a form of madness—who somehow exceeds the bounds of normal human existence through a kind of aesthetic catharsis.<sup>46</sup> Griselda Pollock has argued that the notion of the artist as an outsider-genius is an inherently bourgeois construction that 'operates to sever art and the artist from history' and to 'produce a notion of art as ineffable, pristine, discrete—a non-verbal experience rooted in the difference of the artist.'<sup>47</sup> It is a concept that has informed the development of modernism in the fine arts by foregrounding the artist as the unique producer of the value of a work of art, but its promotion of the individual stands in opposition to the rationalism of Marxist theory, according to which the field of art

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<sup>45</sup> RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 1206, *Stenogramma zasedania sekti po obsuzhdeniiu vystavki khudozhnikov Viktorova, Gritsai, Laktionova, Shepeliuka, Sherbakova*, 2 marta 1948, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> The construct of the 'Romantic artist' was dealt with in an exhibition of self portraits entitled *Rebels and Martyrs* (2006) in the National Gallery. The accompanying volume attributes the rise of the artistic self image of the Romantic artist to early nineteenth-century artists such as Eugene Delacroix and Gustav Courbet, who presented themselves as 'inspired rebels, battling against a philistine society.' Murger's influential novel, *Scènes de la Vie Bohème*, first published as a series of articles in the 1840s and in subsequently in book form as simply *La Vie Bohème*, was based on the author's own poverty-stricken existence working as a young writer in Paris. The influential notion of the bohemian lifestyle of the Romantic artist was especially influential for the New York school of the 1940s and 50s, but has rarely been considered in relation to the Soviet Union. Michael Wilson, 'Rebels and Martyrs' in Alexander Sturgis, ed., *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 2006), p. 6-28.

<sup>47</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Artists, Mythologies and Media: Genius, Madness and Art History,' *Screen* 21, no. 3 (1980), pp. 64-65.



production is inseparable from its wider social context. In the words of Friedrich Engels:

The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour. If, in certain social conditions, everyone was an excellent painter, that would not at all exclude the possibility of each of them being also an original painter, so that here too the difference between 'human' and 'unique' labour amounts to sheer nonsense.<sup>48</sup>

Yet as we have seen in Chapter Three, the Soviet art establishment of the Stalin era was constructed around an elitist hierarchy that exercised a near dictatorial control over definitions of art and the artist.

Although Laktionov claimed that his painting revealed only a passionate belief in art that was undiminished by the everyday hardships of the post-war years, its subtext is a tacit acknowledgement that a successful career in the Soviet art establishment depended on more than simple talent and hard work. It was necessary to nurture a self-image, to develop a biography, and above all to engage with the cult of the great artist. By disguising and painting himself in this manner Laktionov was emphasising his status as an isolated prodigy—his sackcloth clothing represents an independence from the welfare systems of the Soviet state and the insane glint of inspiration in his eyes suggests an internal source of raw artistic talent, uninhibited by the discipline of a traditional Academic education—and downplaying the nurturing influence of the socialist system. As Michael Wilson has written,

The notion of genius [...] provided the first step towards elevating the artist above society and its rules. For the Romantic artist, subjectivity and introspection replaced the concept of an external idea of beauty, *le beau idéal*. [...] Consequently the artist evolved into an alienated figure, misunderstood and neglected by the world.<sup>49</sup>

Yet above all, these works of role play, executed in fine detail and dark tones, were an attempt to depict himself in the artistic language of his forebears; Van Dyck (whose portraiture Laktionov was copying at the time) and especially Rembrandt, whose abundant playful works of self-portraiture were adopted, in the Soviet Union as elsewhere, as the pinnacle of artistic self-representation. In these works of self-portraiture Laktionov was proclaiming his adherence to a tradition of Great Art and simultaneously declaring a degree of autonomy from the structures of the Soviet art establishment.

### **The Public Image**

Once established as a prominent and successful artist, Laktionov's mode of self-representation underwent a dramatic shift towards an imagery of solemnity and gravitas befitting of a Stalin prize laureate, but betraying none of the candour or

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (International Publishers Co., 1970), p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 'Rebels and Martyrs', p. 10.

playfulness of his earlier works. In two major works from the 1950s, *Self-Portrait* [fig. 33] and *Self-Portrait with a Cane* [plate 5], both of which were included in the *All-Union Exhibitions* of their respective years, the artist represented himself in dark, sombre colours and rich clothing. In contrast to the youthfulness and vigour of his earlier incarnations he is depicted as an older and more mature figure with a long black beard and imposing demeanour. Both works are distinguished by a fine level of detail and disciplined drawing that seems to stop somewhat short of a revealing self-representation. As the critic A. Iagodovskaiia wrote of the latter work in *Tvorchestvo*, 'Even in his self-portrait, which is always to some degree a form of confession of the master, the artist does not depart from his manner.'<sup>50</sup> A visitor to the exhibition echoed this remark by suggesting that 'here it is rather a portrait than a self-portrait.'<sup>51</sup>

The somewhat cold mannerism of these works may not have fulfilled the demand for the expressive psychological dimension of self-portraiture, but they are

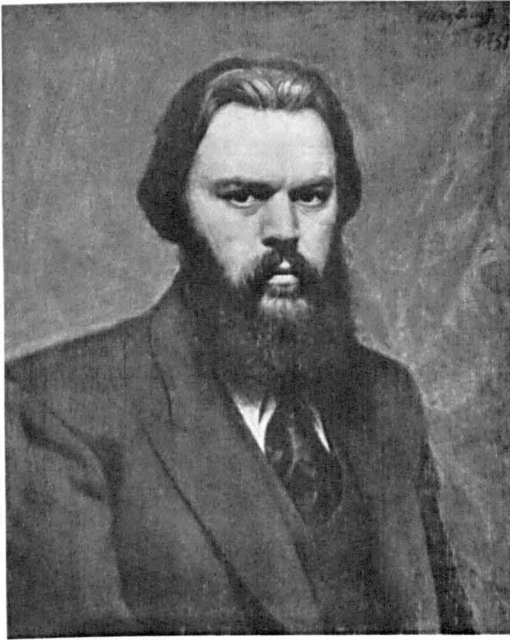


Fig. 33: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Self-Portrait*, 1952, Kemerovskii Regional Art Gallery, Novokuznetsk

indicative instead of the conscious adoption of a constructed persona. In contrast to earlier experiments in self-representation, these works depicted the public face of the artist. In the 1952 work Laktionov depicted himself in oils against a backdrop of red drapes, their folds and creases appearing flame-like behind the artist's dark-suited figure, who stares directly at the viewer with an intense gaze and taciturn expression. The lively patriotic colour of the background, as well as raising connotations with the ubiquitous drapery of eighteenth century status portraits, suggests that fervent activity is taking place within the artist's mind in spite of his inscrutable external characteristics. Likewise the artist's face is bathed in a bright white light of inner revelation and radiates a brilliance that throws his dark suit and black beard into stark contrast.

In the 1957 pastel work Laktionov depicted himself in half profile, leaning slightly forward with his hand resting on the top of a polished wooden walking cane. Once again his expression is stern and intense, but here signs of aging are emphasised by a pair of spectacles and greying hairs at the tip of his dark beard. The self-portrait was painted shortly after Laktionov had recovered from a serious heart illness and his slumped position and sickly complexion clearly reflect his state of poor health, although according to the artist himself, this was an unintentional consequence of the work.

<sup>50</sup> A. Iagodovskaiia, 'Chto videt khudozhnik,' *Tvorchestvo*, 1958, no. 3, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> 7 Mar. 1958, TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 20, *Individual'nye otzvyvy posetitelei vystavki '40 let oktiabria'*, p. 268.



In spite of the doctors advice [forbidding work] I started bit by bit to draw *Self-Portrait*. I involuntarily depicted my sickness and the state of deep alarm I experienced at having to carry out my favourite pastime—painting—almost in secret.<sup>52</sup>

Involuntary or not, this emphasis on the sickly nature of the artist's body is striking, and is offset only by the penetrating gaze of his eyes which remain sharp and intense in spite of these outward indications of physical weakness. Once again the work evokes the notion of the artist as an extraordinary being, driven to create in disregard of failing health, a popular nineteenth century myth that was most famously portrayed in Russian art by Repin in his acclaimed *Portrait of Modest Musorgsky* [fig. 34], a work completed just weeks before the composer's death that shows him ravaged by the effects of terminal illness but nonetheless retaining a hint of his former brilliance in the lucidity of his eyes.<sup>53</sup> Here Laktionov invests his own period of convalescence with a similar mythology—the stooped and weary figure representing so great a burden of talent—although he stops short of the dishevelled state of degradation in which Musorgsky was depicted, emphasising instead the dignified manner with which he was weathering the storm.



Fig. 34: Ilya Repin, *Portrait of Modest Musorgsky*, 1881, GTG

Most prominent of all in this work is the artist's luxurious attire—a dark velvety coat, a red woollen scarf and a fur cap—the various textures of which have been meticulously translated into pastel so that, as one viewer commented in rapture, 'you want to touch the scarf and the coat with your hand, not believing that they are drawn.'<sup>54</sup> It was anecdotally reported by several visitors to the 1957 *All-Union Exhibition* that the tour guides were engaged in a campaign of discrimination against Laktionov's art, describing it as 'inartistic,' yet the majority of viewers were captivated by the artist's collection of works which included the still life *February* (1956, Lvov Art Gallery) and *Portrait of an Old Teacher* (1956, private collection of E. V. Vuchetich) and were hung together in a small side room.<sup>55</sup> Another viewer

<sup>52</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika' in *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv* (AKh SSSR: Moskva, 1961), pp. 286-7

<sup>53</sup> For a vivid description of the circumstances surrounding the production of this painting see David Jackson, *The Russian Vision: the Art of Ilya Repin* (Schoten, Belgium: BAI, 2007), pp. 184-6.

<sup>54</sup> Feb. 1958, TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 18, p. 227.

<sup>55</sup> See for example the words of one viewer who questioned on his comments slip, 'Why is [Laktionov] not in the list of candidates for the Lenin Prize? Why do the tour guides say that this is not art? And why does everyone like his work so much? Why? Why? Why?' Feb. 1958, TsALIM, f. 21, op. 1, d. 18,

commented, 'Do [the tour guides] think it is bad that the coat and the fur in the self-portrait are executed with such mastery? Surely the measure of all this doesn't detract from the face of the artist.'<sup>56</sup> And this visual connection was precisely the intention. In this small quasi-private gallery within the overwhelming space of the *All-Union Exhibition*, Laktionov's painstaking technique was rendered inseparable from the face of the artist; it represented his unique signature and trademark, courting debate and controversy but inevitably raising his public profile. By exhibiting a self-portrait alongside others of his own works, the artist was reclaiming part of their significance and asserting his authorship. The viewer was encouraged to enter into a special relationship with the artist—one of compassion, respect, or in some cases even anger—based on an interpretation of the self-portrait and the ownership it implied via the visual linkages of style and technique.

It was not only through self-portraiture that the public was able to engage with the Soviet artist. In the press the artist was also represented as a celebrity whose name and image lent an aura of significance to his works of art. Following the success of *A Letter from the Front*, not only did the unveiling of Laktionov's new works become

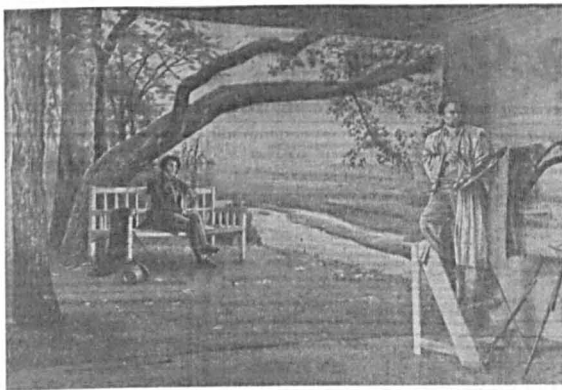


Fig. 35: The artist at work, *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 16 May 1949, no. 115

hotly anticipated events, but so too did the artist himself enter into the limelight. An early example of this phenomenon from the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* in 1949 saw a photograph of the artist 'in action', palette and brush in hand, poised on a stepladder before his vast (and apparently already complete) portrait of Pushkin, *Once Again I Visited...* (1949, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery) [fig. 35].<sup>57</sup> Likewise in *Leninskaia smena* in 1955 the artist was shown at the *All-Union Art Exhibition* staring thoughtfully up at

a painting, with his new painting, *In Summer*, hanging on the gallery wall behind his back, surrounded by a huge crowd of people.<sup>58</sup> Laktionov is framed by two awestruck young exhibition-goers, who join the artist gazing intently into the middle distance, enraptured by some work of art just outside our field of vision. The emphasis of these images is on the fascinating quality of artistic creation, as the reader enters the inner sanctum of the artist's studio or accompanies the artist into the halls of an exhibition, as if the presence of the artist alongside his own work can somehow reveal the mystical processes of art production. Later articles about Laktionov in the journals *Ogonek* and *Tvorchestvo* were introduced via a self-portrait of the artist, lending them a tone of intimacy and familiarity.<sup>59</sup>

p. 262. Another viewer complains that Laktionov's works were somewhat cut off from the rest of the exhibition and that space around them was limited. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup> TsALIM, Feb. 1958, f. 21, op. 1, d. 18, p. 274.

<sup>57</sup> *Vecherniaia Moskva*, no. 115, 16 May 1949.

<sup>58</sup> *Leninskaia smena*, 27 Jan. 1955.

<sup>59</sup> Evgenii Katsman, 'Tri vstrechi s Laktionovym', *Ogonek*, 1968, no. 2, pp. 16-17; Boris Shcherbakov, 'Vernost' v pravde', *Ogonek*, 1970, no. 22, pp. 8-9. Such a practice was also employed in the

We have seen in Chapter One how the artist's rise in status coincided with a more active participation in public life. In 1961 Laktionov became part of the organising committee for the All-Union Exhibitions and began to take part in sessions of the Academy of the Arts. He also began to contribute to art criticism and theory, writing a number of articles and contributing to a number of books. The status of the celebrity artist was also promoted through the 'creative evening' at which specially invited guests could view selected works of art and hear a presentation from the artist including a question and answer session. One such occasion was organised in 1960 to honour Laktionov's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and '30<sup>th</sup> year of artistic activity.' The invitation was a grand affair including only one image: a photographic portrait of the artist lost in thought, gazing into the distance with a severe expression on his face. Here the artist himself replaced his works of art as the focus of attention.

### Artistic Autonomy

The reward for this active engagement with public life was the relative autonomy with which the celebrity artist was entitled to work. Kiaer has argued, with reference to Deineka and his work in the 1930s, for the paradoxical creative freedom of the successful Soviet artist who, under the nurturing system of state support, was liberated from the demands of the art market.

For at least some of its developers and practitioners [...] Socialist Realism created a space for artistic labour that they could experience as a space of 'actual freedom' because they understood their art to be contributing practically and aesthetically to a social project that fully undermined the coordinates of capitalist exploitation.<sup>60</sup>

Between official commitments Laktionov was prolific in his production of personal works, depicting family members, friends, still lives and landscapes, many of which were never intended for public exhibition. In common with the majority of major Soviet artists, Laktionov was granted the rare privilege of international travel as part of his professional development, including two trips to Paris in 1960 and 1969, and an extended sabbatical to Italy in 1962, which included visits to Rome, Venice, Naples and Capri. Likewise the artist undertook regular summer vacations to resorts in the Crimea and the Baltic. Over the

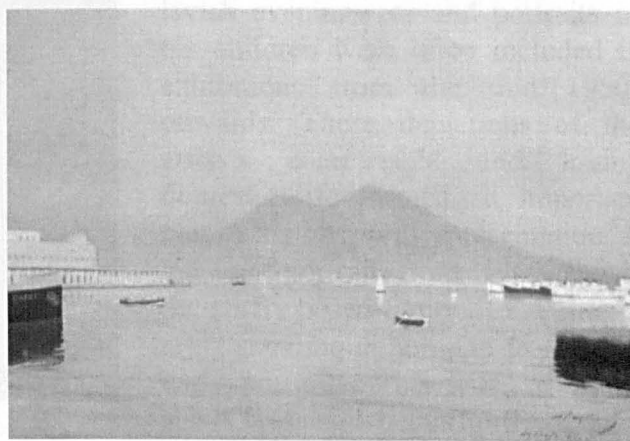


Fig. 36: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Naples*, 1962, private collection of N. Blokhina

construction of Deineka's public persona as Kiaer has noted in 'Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour', pp. 336-7. In contrast to Laktionov's severe air of gravitas, Deineka was represented in the press in terms of his 'brashness and modernity.'

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 336-7.



course of his travels the artist produced a great number of landscapes, the painting of which Nikolaeva and Miamlin have described as ‘a kind of break’ (*otdykh*) from the rest of his work.<sup>61</sup> Often painted with gouache or watercolours, or drawn with pastels these represented a break not only from the intense detail and high finish of his better-known works, but also from the official demands of depicting socialism. They are a series of quiet scenes; empty landscapes devoid of people; touristic snapshots of Venetian architecture; Parisian landmarks and Crimean seascapes; studies of reflections on rivers, atmospheric skies and sea spray. The pastel shades and open spaces of works such as *Naples* [fig. 36] and *The Sea. On the Shore* (undated, private collection of S. A. Laktionov) are tranquil antidotes to the disciplined lines and meticulous realism of the artist’s signature style. Completely absent are the thematic and stylistic motifs of Socialist Realism, replaced instead by a deliberate emptiness and lack of intent. In these landscape paintings Laktionov dispensed with the definite subject so fundamental to the tendentious nature of Soviet art.

The personal works with which the artist occupied the remainder of his time provided a similar freedom to experiment with techniques and styles. On occasions his depictions of family members were expressive and intimate (*A Visit to the Grandchildren*, 1963, present location unknown), while at other times they were aloof and imposing.



Fig. 37: Aleksandr Laktionov, *Self Portrait*, 1969, private collection of G. A. Laktionov

In an especially unusual work from 1956 the artist dressed his son Vania in the costume of a seventeenth century nobleman’s son in breeches, stockings and a ruffled shirt and painted him in the style of a Dutch portrait (*Portrait of Vania*, private collection of I. A. Laktionova). Paintings of his wife dressed in lavish eveningwear and portraits of his children were often included in exhibitions from the mid 1950s onwards. These depictions of the artist’s comfortable and loving domestic life formed an important part of his own self-representation. A late self-portrait from 1969 shows the stiffly posed figure of the elderly artist standing at home in front of an early portrait of his wife, in which she is wearing a beautiful floral dress and silken shawl [fig. 37]. Laktionov rendered himself in sharp detail as a

grand and imposing figure in an immaculate suit and tie, his beard now almost entirely grey, whilst in the background his wife appears in a softer focus as a muse-like figure behind his shoulder lending inspiration to the artist.

<sup>61</sup> Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Laktionov*, p. 113.

Just one year later Laktionov painted his final self-portrait, mentioned at the very start of this thesis (*Self-Portrait with a Burning Candle*, 1970, Les Oreades, Moscow). In 1970 the artist fell terminally ill with a recurrence of the heart defect that had plagued him throughout his career and which would claim his life two years later. Although he was forbidden to work, the artist nonetheless began this large scale pastel that remains unfinished. This final self-representation is a striking departure from the grand works of the previous two decades; the artist appears neither distinguished nor imposing, but is instead modestly dressed and somewhat dishevelled with the hint of a wry smile on his face. The facial expression of this self-portrait caused the artist some difficulty as evidenced by a reproduction of an early version that accompanied an article in *Ogonek*.<sup>62</sup> There the smile was distinct and lent the work a proud and contented appearance, while the revised version imparts a more sombre tone of uncertainty. A staple of artistic symbolism, the burning candle represents the transience of life as the artist enters his final years. Perhaps, as suggested at the outset, its flame, burning close to the artist's outstretched hand, can be read as an analogy for Laktionov's artistic ambition, or perhaps, less romantically, it is simply an exercise in depicting unusual effects of light and shade. Either way, this work marks a somewhat subdued and reflective end to Laktionov's self-representation as an artist; a remarkable series of self-portraiture that reflects the developing self-image of a celebrity artist of Socialist Realism.

### **The Myth of the Great Artist**

There was nothing unusual about Laktionov's ascendance to the status of a celebrity in the art establishment of the late Stalin era. We have seen in Chapter Three how an active involvement with the leader cult was significant for the advancement of Laktionov's career prospects. Indeed it is possible to contest that the rapid acceleration of the artist's status in the late 1940s and 50s was only tenuously connected to his actual artistic output and rested more on his willingness to play the role of a positive and charismatic advertisement for the virtues of an ideal Soviet artist. Just as certain explorers, soldiers and workers who had exceeded their production quotas were promoted as exempla of the correct socialist lifestyle, so too was Laktionov elevated by members of the Central Committee and cultural bureaucracy to act as a model for his contemporaries in the art world. The artist proved ideal for the purpose; a handsome figure with a striking resemblance to Peter the Great and a family man with a beautiful wife and children, he was a passionate proponent of Russian realist art as the correct path for Soviet art and to this end contributed not only paintings but also reactionary newspaper and journal articles calling for stability and adherence to tradition in the art establishment. Both the image and the self-image of the artist had an important role to play in the promotion of these positive values. To what extent this constituted a manipulation of the artist by the state or the manipulation of the state by the artist is a question with no straightforward answer; it was a symbiosis, by no means unique to the situation of Laktionov, through which each party nourished and sustained the other.

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<sup>62</sup> Shcherbakov, 'Vernost' v pravde', p. 8.

Bourdieu has written of the 'art of producing oneself as an artist.' For him 'the quasi-magical powers' of the artist are inseparable from the entire field of artistic production, including the economic and social conditions which make possible that field.<sup>63</sup> In his self-portraiture, Laktionov was indeed producing himself as an artist, but he was also contributing to the self-representation of the Soviet art establishment. The self-portrait held a significance in Soviet culture as an attempt (also apparent in artists' biographies and art criticism) to recapture the myth of the Great Artist in the present day. In 1961 Laktionov himself asserted:

Our Soviet art has no small amount of achievements, but we still do not have any Repins, any Surikovs, and we must strive towards this goal. [...] In order to achieve this we must penetrate the very essence of their art, we must understand the creative processes of Titian, Velasquez, Rembrandt, Repin and Surikov.

I believe deeply that our Soviet art will attain those heights of mastery and that the ship of our art will be cast into the cosmic distance.<sup>64</sup>

Laktionov's self-portraits presented a living, breathing master as a concrete example of the contemporary achievements of Soviet culture. Laktionov's own image, captured in a traditional artistic language borrowed from the artist-geniuses of the past, could contribute to the definition of Soviet art by investing it with the enduring mythology of the Romantic artist.

To return to the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, Maxim Gorky followed Zhdanov's speech and defined revolutionary romanticism in the following way:

Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery; that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add—completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis—the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.

[...] Bourgeois romanticism, based on individualism, with its propensity for fantastic and mystic ideas, does not spur the imagination or encourage thought. Sundered, detached from reality, it is built not on convincingness of imagery but almost exclusively on the 'magic of words.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Pierre Bourdieu wrote, 'Who, in other words, created the "creator" as a recognized and known producer of fetishes? And what confers its magical or, if one prefers, its ontological effectiveness upon his name, a name whose very celebrity is the measure of his claim to exist as an artist and which, [...] increases the value of the object upon which it is affixed? [...] Art historians are not able to replace the ritualistic inquiry concerning the place and the moment of the appearance of the character of the artist (as opposed to the craftsman) with the question of the economical and social conditions underlying the establishment of an artistic field founded upon the belief in the quasi-magical powers attributed to the modern artist in the most advanced states of the field.' *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 291.

<sup>64</sup> Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika', p. 289.

<sup>65</sup> Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature.'

According to this formula the artists of Socialist Realism were granted the right to create works of art according to their own individual inventions and visions, provided the resulting works were not degraded by a bourgeois elevation of form over content. It is this concession to the spark of inspiration with which the artist was expected to illuminate the otherwise routine work of socialist construction that provided the theoretical basis for the development of the cult of the Romantic artist within the Soviet art establishment of the 1940s and 50s. Once an artist was established as a creative genius through the production of a landmark work of art—for Aleksandr Gerasimov it was *Lenin on the Tribune*, for Laktionov it was *A Letter from the Front*—their future career was legitimised to some extent by the enduring brilliance of that image. As Gennady Batygin has written, ‘social solidarity cannot be based on ratiocination alone. Left to itself, ratiocination corrupts the social order. What the ruling elites need above all are poets.’<sup>66</sup> The industry of Socialist Realism did not require only the production of great works of art, but also the production of great masters.

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<sup>66</sup> Gennady Batygin, ‘The Transfer of Allegiances of the Intellectual Elites’, *Studies in East European Thought* 53 (2001), p. 262.





### A Very Soviet Story

The fate of Laktionov's works of art in the post-Soviet era provides a fitting conclusion to this project. A surprising obstacle to my research has been the difficulty in tracking down and securing access to Laktionov's paintings. On more than one occasion during the research for this project I strode hopefully into an art gallery confident of locating a famous work, only to be informed that 'the Soviet section is being reorganised,' or 'that painting is waiting for restoration.' In the Kiev Museum of Russian and Soviet art the major genre painting *Old Age Provided For* [plate 6] is too fragile to be disturbed, in Donetsk, the infamous depiction of luxury and wealth *Into a New Flat* [plate 4] is in urgent need of restoration, in St Petersburg the Socialist Realist section of the State Russian Museum is in a state of semi-permanent closure and Laktionov's paintings lie inaccessible in storage. Many of Laktionov's works are held in private collections with the occasional canvas appearing at auction to be snapped up by a voracious Russian art market. Those that were once owned by the Soviet state have been transferred to the vast storerooms of RosIzo in Moscow, the government department responsible for the maintenance, cataloguing and redistribution of paintings following major exhibitions. Although this institution was once home to a large number of Laktionov's works, its immensely helpful staff were able to inform me that all but one of his canvases had since been transferred to the permanent collections of regional art galleries throughout the former Soviet Union, from Sakhalin to Alma-Ata, from Murmansk to Tashkent. It will be an ongoing pursuit to track down and view some of these far-flung works.

Laktionov remains known as an artist largely due to the enduring appeal of his most famous work, *A Letter from the Front*, the first version of which hangs in a brightly-lit hall of the New Tretyakov Gallery, its colours still bright and well-maintained. As a celebrated icon of the war experience it retains a popularity that has outlived that of its creator; the image was reproduced on the front cover of the glossy journal of the Tretyakov Gallery for a 2005 issue devoted to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory and, as discussed in Chapter Two, it has been included in several recent exhibitions in the West. It is the only painting by Laktionov to figure in the Tretyakov's permanent exhibition where it is slotted somewhat awkwardly into the contemporary constructed narrative of Soviet art history. It is encountered by the viewer as they emerge from an imposing hall filled with monumental parade paintings and leader cult works of the 1940s by major Stalinist artists including Aleksandr Gerasimov, Dmitrii Nalbandian and Mikhail Khmel'ko. In a vast simplification of its reception in the late 1940s, *A Letter from the Front* is exhibited alongside canvases such as Arkadii Plastov's *Haymaking* [fig. 8] and Fedor Reshetnikov's *Low Marks Again!* [fig. 27], where it provides an example of the bright optimism and creative liberalisation of post-war genre painting. This context is unrepresentative of its significance in the late 1940s as an adopted symbol of the conservative tendencies of the *Zhdanovshchina* period. Viewed in isolation this painting is also somewhat unrepresentative of the remainder of the artist's canon; few of Laktionov's major

works have proven so adaptable to fresh eras and ideologies. Consider the cropped reproductions of *Into a New Flat* in Laktionov's official biographies of the late Soviet era, the absence in the official record of his portraits of Stalin, and the disregard and disrepair which have befallen *Old Age Provided For*. Much of this thesis has been devoted to an analysis of Laktionov's status as a popular and successful celebrity artist whose characteristic style and technique sometimes eclipsed the theme and content of his paintings. Yet posthumously it is the optimistic subject matter of this breakthrough work that is remembered above all else. In the present day, detached from the interventions, criticisms and discriminations of the post-war Soviet era art establishment, Laktionov's famous painting embodies a far purer vision of the Socialist Realist aesthetic than it ever did in his own lifetime.

### Nostalgic Socialist Realism

Posterity has not been kind to the artist Laktionov, any more than it has been kind to the method of Socialist Realism itself. What was conceived in its most optimistic form as a new life-building aesthetic, an accessible and influential artistic



Fig. 38: Komar & Melamid, *What is to be Done?*, 1982-3, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

language arranged under a comprehensive system of state patronage for the arts, was subject to an erosion of purpose and a dilution of concept that has resulted in an enduring stereotype of state intervention and creative repression. In the present day Socialist Realism is often remembered through the distorted medium of the leader cult and its unfulfilled promises of utopian socialism. The overt sentimentality of some works of Socialist Realism—examples might include Laktionov's *Into a New Flat* or *In Summer* [fig. 29]—that seem to teeter on the brink of self-parody, has been appropriated by the artists Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid in their contributions to the

Sots Art movement of the 1970 and 80s. In their *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series of 1981-3 they undermine and satirise the sentimental imagery of Stalinist art by quoting directly from its iconography; red flags, pioneer uniforms, and of course the ubiquitous image of Stalin, all depicted in painstaking detail with a flat, glossy finish. As an American review of their New York exhibition of 1982 described it:

K & M's (sic.) paintings are not merely banal, but excruciatingly so, oily and inert, varnished so heavily that three-quarters of the surface is glare; the eye gropes for the clichés that lie embedded in them. The accretion becomes a kind of conceptual art, holding everything in quotation marks.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hughes, 'Through the Ironic Curtain', *Time Magazine*, 25 Oct. 1982.

In *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982-3, Zimmerly Museum, N.J.), a seated, statuesque Stalin is visited by a nymph-like muse against a backdrop of classical pillars and a burning flame; in *What is to be Done?* [fig. 38] a rebellious youth looks on suspiciously as his uniformed father strikes a heroic pose and points towards a billowing red banner; in *October Still Life with a Machine Gun* (1982, present location unknown) a withered leafy branch wilts in a vase with a First World War era machine gun standing incongruously at its foot. The works adhere to a version of Socialist Realism that merges Laktionov's academic tradition, special effects of lighting and heavily varnished finish with Brodskii's sculptural drawing and Gerasimov's bold colours, but transfers their bright optimism to a dark night time world of candlelight and sinister shadows. Komar and Melamid have claimed that the purpose of these works was neither confrontation nor irony, but homage, as Melamid stated in an interview with Vladimir Paperny:

We just looked out the window and saw the portrait of Lenin. This was our landscape, and we painted it. It was common sense. What we wanted was to recreate the dream, to recreate the great art as we understood it in our childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Yet these works, created and first exhibited in Regan's America by an eccentric pair of Soviet artists, have conversely contributed to the Cold War mythology of Soviet Culture.<sup>3</sup> Although Melamid claims that this series was intended as a dissection and examination of the tropes of Socialist Realism, it simultaneously fulfils another function; that of confirming and reinforcing Western prejudices about Soviet art.

Several years later Komar and Melamid once again explored the notion of artistic responsibility and public reception in a project entitled *The People's Choice* (1994-7). With the help of a market research company the pair of artists conducted a series of surveys, first in America and then in several other countries, in order to determine what exactly constituted popular taste in works of art. Based on the results from a series of questions ranging from 'What is your favourite colour?' to 'Do you prefer a representation of reality or of imagination?' Komar and Melamid proceeded to create the ideal people's painting.<sup>4</sup> What the artists claimed to have surprised them above all else was the degree of concurrence with which all respondents completed

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Paperny, 'Cold War, Hot Culture,' 2001, *Artmargins*: <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/boym.html>, last accessed 1 Jan 2008.

<sup>3</sup> As Valerie Higgins has observed, 'Because many U.S. artists were exploring similar issues at the time, [K&M] were able to skillfully locate their work within the larger postmodernist discourse. However, they distinguished themselves and their art through their selection of primarily Russian and Soviet subjects, as well as through their carefully crafted public personae as wacky, exotic Russians—the forbidden yet enticing Soviet Other to Western, and especially U.S., consumers during the height of the Reagan era and the Cold War.' Valerie Higgins, 'Komar and Melamid's Dialogue with (Art) History', *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1998), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> JoAnn Vypijewski, ed., *Painting By Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art* (University of California Press, 1998). The poll and its results can be found at the website of the Dia Centre for the Arts, who supported the project: <http://www.diacenter.org/km/surveyresults.html>, last accessed 1 Jan 2008. For an analysis of the resulting images see also Higgins, 'Komar and Melamid's Dialogue with (Art) History'. The work was first exhibited at the Alternative Museum in New York in 1994.

the survey, regardless of nationality or social background.<sup>5</sup> The ‘most wanted’ paintings that emerged from the project in the majority of cases, from America to Russia, from France to Finland, were medium sized oil paintings depicting realistic landscape scenes including wild animals and portraits of historical figures [fig. 39]. In contrast the ‘least wanted’ paintings were a series of abstract compositions based around geometric shapes, stark colours and visible brush strokes. The results confirmed a public rejection of modernism and a preference for nineteenth century models of realist painting informed by ‘national’ artists such as John Constable, Thomas Cole and Ivan Shishkin. The project was conceived as a semi-serious investigation of the concept of mass taste that the artists suggest was inspired by their experiences as citizens of the former Soviet Union, a place where art was

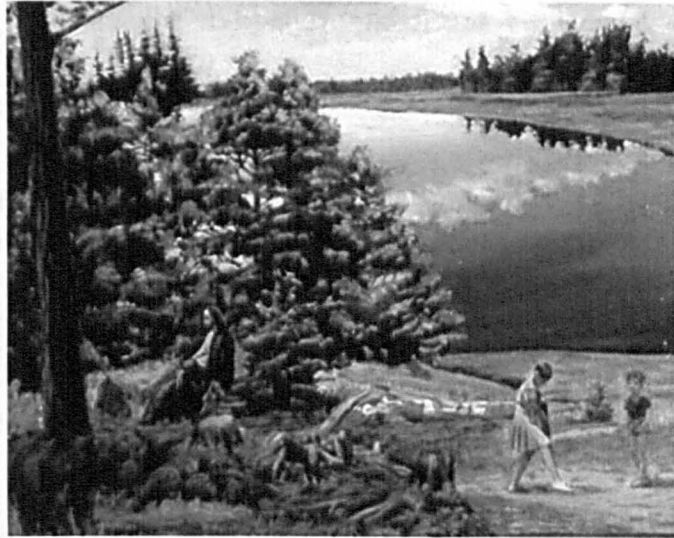


Fig. 39: Komar & Melamid, *Russia's Most Wanted*, 1995, present location unknown

‘scientifically’ designed and produced to fulfil a particular social function. Their findings were presented in the form of a pseudo-scientific guide to art production, with pie charts and statistics exhibited alongside the canvases themselves, lampooning the modern day ubiquity of market research as a mode of social engineering and undermining the concept of an attempt to define mass taste. The project can be understood as a critique of both the Soviet art establishment with its imposed ideal of artistic expression, and the capitalist system of art production with its elite pretensions that Melamid has described as similarly ‘totalitarian.’

Modern art, and Pollock is the best example, is totally inhuman. Huge pictures for museums—now we call them museums; in Stalin times they were called palaces, but basically the same thing—which we rarely see and rarely visit. [...] There's a machine which is called History of Art, which is a structure and the artist fits into this only because he or she is needed for this structure. If for example the History of Art needs some parallel lines, there is an individual who makes parallel lines. And this individual fits into this machine which works by itself; it doesn't care about people or anything else, it just goes by itself.<sup>6</sup>

That the series of works attracted criticism from the art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto in an essay entitled, ‘Can It Be the "Most Wanted Painting Even If Nobody

<sup>5</sup> Aleksandr Melamid was interviewed about the project in ‘Painting by Numbers: The Ideal People’s Art’, *The Nation*, 14 Oct. 1994, pp. 334-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

Wants It?' appears to have provided the artists with some vindication for the work.<sup>7</sup> However tongue-in-cheek Komar and Melamid's undertaking may have been, its findings are interesting, if not surprising. As an affirmation of traditional styles of realist painting as a basis for mass art, *The People's Choice* series exposes the validity of the Socialist Realist project as a positive alternative to the elite field of the modern art establishment. As Melamid concedes, 'We—my partner and I—were brought up with the idea that art belongs to the people, and believe me or not, I still believe in this.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Russia's Most Wanted?**

Laktionov and his contribution to the development of Socialist Realism have left another indirect legacy that demonstrates the enduring appeal and dominance of the realist tradition in the present day. In the later years of his life, Laktionov was approached by a talented young artist who was a great admirer of his artistic style and sought the old master's support as an informal patron. The talented youth was exceptionally persistent and was a regular visitor to the Laktionov household. As the aspiring young artist reminisced, with a narrative that sounds strikingly familiar:

I worked as a loader in a factory, but I didn't give up drawing. I lived only for that. I still harboured the dream to become an artist. I was helped by the fact that I came to know the artist Laktionov. People have different opinions of him; they either get him or they don't. But he was a great master. I remember how other artists at exhibitions would ask for their paintings to be hung further from his canvases because they 'killed' their own work. And Laktionov stood in the corner chuckling.

I risked showing him my work. His words were extremely important to me:

'You must give up your job as a loader,' he demanded. [...] Laktionov told me to work hard, to become a well-educated person, to study anatomy and perspective and psychology.<sup>9</sup>

He duly enrolled at the Surikov institute and continued to nurture his relationship with the most successful artists of the older generation; as well as Laktionov, Boris Sherbakov, Nikolai Tomskii and Vladimir Serov were among his close connections. With the onset of Laktionov's terminal illness in 1971, the young artist secured the right to continue his mentor's unfinished commission to complete the portrait series of cosmonauts at Star City.<sup>10</sup> These works provided the breakthrough that established his

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<sup>7</sup> Danto criticism of the series of works is that they are based on a popular concept of art perpetuated by the reproductions of kitschy landscapes on Western calendars the world over. 'It is altogether likely that what Komar and Melamid have unearthed is less what people prefer than what they are most familiar with in paintings.' The article was reproduced in JoAnn Vypijewski, *Painting by Numbers*, pp. 124-140.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Shilov, 'O svoem tvorchestve i problemakh zhivopisnogo iskusstva', *Sovetskaia Rossiia* no. 183, 7 Aug. 1983. Available online at: <http://www.shilov.su/press/press005.html>, last accessed 1 Jan 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandr Shilov, 'Mne vazhno dostuchat'sia do liudskikh serdets', *Sovershenno sekretno*, no. 1 2001. Available online at: <http://www.shilov.su/press/press010.html>, last accessed 1 Jan 2008.



reputation as a prominent portrait painter for the nation's rich, famous and influential figures and as a late champion of Socialist Realism.

Over two decades later in 1996, that artist, Peoples' Artist of the USSR Aleksandr Shilov, donated 365 of his works of portraiture to the city of Moscow and was granted in return a vast state-owned gallery in an ornate building on Znamenka



Fig. 40: Aleksandr Shilov, *Self Portrait*, 1990s, Shilov Gallery, Moscow

Street overlooking the Kremlin Walls. The gallery itself is a strange enclave of nineteenth-century furnishing and conservative style that provides an alluring sense of escapism from the noisy modern city outside. The oak-panelled walls are adorned with uncannily life-like depictions of beautiful actresses in extravagant ball gowns, distinguished gentlemen in dress suits, nostalgic elderly women in old wooden dachas, rosy-faced young children at play, orthodox priests, decorated Red Army veterans, politicians, literati and above all self-portraits, all captured in heavily varnished oils or glitter-enhanced pastel and exhibited in ostentatious gilt frames [fig. 40]. The stairwells are lined with black-and-white photographs showing the flamboyant artist meeting and greeting his famous and influential patrons, friends and guests. Shilov has become one of the most successful artists of the post-Soviet era; his gallery now claims to be among the most frequented in Moscow with over 100,000 visitors per year; all over the city the artist's self-portrait is reproduced on advertising hoardings; and his works even adorn special edition chocolate box assortments.

Yet Shilov is also a hugely controversial artist with a great number of detractors among the cultural intelligentsia, largely due to his uncompromising attitude to the contemporary modern art movement. In Shilov's own words:

What is it? It is an attempt by people who are very clever, who are as a rule very businesslike and adroit, based literally on Andersen's story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, to veil their professional worthlessness. These kinds of 'ventures' are now breeding in great quantities. Admittedly many of them



are flourishing; although they can't do anything useful, they loudly demand both attention and support for their ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

For Shilov, as for Laktionov and the theorists of Socialist Realism, the quality of a work of art lies not in its aesthetic quality but in its accessibility and its popular appeal. It is an argument that continues to be supported by a considerable weight of evidence (not to mention political authority) as realist art continues to thrive in the post-Soviet era. The Russian economy may have shifted from one of diluted socialism in the late Soviet period to one of corrupt capitalism in the present day, but the art establishment has remained dominated by a steadfast adherence to tradition. Leading artists such as the sculptor and current president of the Academy of the Arts Zurab Tsereteli, the nationalist artist Il'ia Glazunov and Shilov himself maintain close relationships with members of the nation's political elite such as the Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov and the culture minister Aleksandr Sokolov.<sup>12</sup> The renowned art critic and member of the Academy of the Arts Mariia Chegodaeva has described these artists as 'the kings of kitsch' and spoken out against their installation as modern day 'court painters' of the Russian government.

Their success is attributable to the fact that they appeal to the average person. [...] Shilov is a classical portraitist in the eyes of many. Almost Briullov, you understand, almost Kiprenskii. The pseudo-classicality of Shilov's work proved to be at exactly the level of the pseudo-knowledge of hundreds of spectators.<sup>13</sup>

For Chegodaeva the promotion of such artists contributes to a self-perpetuating impoverishment of public aesthetic education. While Glazunov and Shilov are supported by state commissions and permanently exhibited in lavish state-owned galleries, Russia's modern art movement continues to function as an art of opposition, subject to regular bouts of state intervention and censorship.<sup>14</sup>

But what do these modern day digressions reveal about the Soviet art establishment of the mid-twentieth century? Not only that Socialist Realism may have been an expression of power and a subordination of art to the ultimate tastes of the nation's 'premiere art critic and first among viewers' Stalin himself, but that it was also a concession to popular taste, or as Evgeny Dobrenko has defined it, 'a contact

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<sup>11</sup> Shilov, 'O svoem tvorchestvo'.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Romilly Eveleigh, 'People's Artist: Ilya Glazunov's Paintings on Themes of Nationhood and the Ills of Modern Society Get Their Own State-Funded Gallery', *Moscow Times*, 17 Sep. 2004 and Anna Malpas, 'Highest Laurels Anna Malpas Talks with Artists Zurab Tsereteli and Alexander Shilov', *Moscow Times*, 27 Feb. 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Vlad Vasiukhin, 'Ia by s'ela Shilova s bol'shim udovol'stvиеm,' *Ogonek*, 2001, no. 1-2 (Jan). Available online at: <http://www.ogoniok.com/archive/2001/4676-4677/01-58-61/>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The culture minister Sokolov recently intervened in plans by the Tretyakov Gallery to exhibit a number of works of modern art in Paris. Amongst other works, a photograph of kissing policemen in a birch forest entitled (evidently somewhat optimistically) *Kissing Policemen (An Epoch of Clemency)* was described by Sokolov as 'pornography' that would 'bring shame on Russia.' Luke Harding, 'No Paris trip for Russia's Kissing Policemen', *The Guardian*, 12 Oct. 2007, available online at: <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/news/story/0,,2189442,00.html>, last accessed 1 Jan. 2008. See also Mikhail Ryklin's account of the suppression of a 2003 Moscow art exhibition in *Svastika, krest, zvezda: proizvodstvo iskusstva v epokhu upravliaemoi demokratii* (Moskva: Logos, 2006).

point and a cultural compromise between two currents, the masses and state power.<sup>15</sup> As an artist whose preferred means of expression engaged with a popular, 'mass' perception of what constituted fine art, Laktionov was entirely justified in stating that 'life and only life can be the source of inspiration for an artist.'<sup>16</sup> The artist was cast by himself and his supporters as 'the people's choice' and the defender of a national tradition in Soviet art, and the popular response to his work provided the perfect exoneration for a cultural policy that could otherwise be (and has often been) criticised as an infringement of creative liberty. Today the same arguments are restated time and time again as modern Russian art continues to struggle against the social and political dogmatism of the entrenched realist tradition, and émigré artists continue to explore the 'alternative totalitarianism' imposed by the market forces of Western consumer culture. In spite of its enduring reputation as an unnatural or 'forced' method of art production, Socialist Realism was neither unique nor even unusual in its elevation of the realist tradition as an appropriate basis for the development of a mass art; its difference lay only in the terms of its enforcement which, though in practice may have been little more repressive than those of the all-powerful American entertainment industry, have been made notorious as a symptom of Soviet authoritarianism in contrast to the much-vaunted libertarianism of Western culture.

### In Summary

This thesis has explored a number of features of the late Stalinist and post-Stalinist art establishment through the example of Laktionov and his work. We have seen the process by which a Soviet artist constructed a narrative and genealogy in order to legitimise and promote the early stages of his own career based on a selective appropriation of famous names and precedents from the past: Ilya Repin and his successor Isaak Brodskii provided a significant endorsement for the young artist's career, which was later expanded to include significant international figures of European art such as Van Dyck and Rembrandt. We have followed the success story of a single major work of art that provided the basis for a lifetime of state support for an artist: in the period of the *Zhdanovschina* the significance of *A Letter from the Front* was adopted by influential figures within the cultural bureaucracy as an affirmative indication of the prevailing trends and desired outcomes of post-war Soviet art production. We have seen the ways in which an artist could develop and maintain his status through the propagation of networks of patronage: the 'photographism' of Laktionov's painted portraits provided an ideal medium for the representation of authority and status, enabling a reciprocal relationship from which both the artist and his subject benefited. We have explored the diverse public response to a controversial work of art at the *1952 All-Union Art Exhibition*: the fine line in Laktionov's works of art between the fields of 'high' and 'low' culture provoked a

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<sup>15</sup> The first quote is taken from Susan Reid, 'In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited' in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6 no. 4 (2005). Although it is used here to describe Khrushchev, the description can be readily applied to Stalin. The second quote is from Evgeny Dobrenko, 'The Disaster of the Middlebrow Taste; or, Who "Invented" Socialist Realism?', Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism without Shores* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksandr Laktionov, 'Zhizn'—istochnik vdokhnoveniia khudozhnika', in *Khudozhnik i sovremennost' 1961: Ezhegodnik Akademii khudozhestv SSSR* (Moskva: AKh SSSR, 1961), p. 288.

passionate response amongst viewers. Finally we have followed the development of a successful artist's own self-representation through a lifetime of self-portraiture: Laktionov engaged with the concept of the Romantic artist as a superior being endowed with an exclusive right to creative autonomy and played an active role in the definition of Socialist Realism.

It is the hope that this project has contributed to a richer understanding of the methods of Socialist Realist art production, criticism and reception. It provides a concrete example through which a number of phenomena have been explored, including the mechanisms of the Stalinist leader cult, the systems of state patronage for the arts, the manifestations of the cultural thaw in the post-Stalin years and the consequences of Khrushchev's interventions into the fine arts in the early 1960s. It also considers a number of areas that have received less attention, including the application of the Zhdanov dictates to the fine arts, the public reception of Socialist Realist works of art and the development of the 'fetish of the name of the master' in the Soviet art establishment. Above all the project has shed new light on the career of a major Soviet artist who was at the forefront of the debates that shaped the art world in his own lifetime and who has been frequently referenced in contemporary literature dealing with the culture and society of the period, but about whose career and status within the art establishment little was previously known. In contrast to their avant-garde predecessors of the 1920s, few individual Socialist Realist artists have yet been subjected to such close scrutiny in the post-Soviet era, with the possible exception of the leading member of AKhRR and darling of the Stalinist art establishment, Aleksandr Gerasimov.<sup>17</sup> Complementary to this project is the ongoing work of Christina Kiaer, which deals with the career of Aleksandr Deineka, friend and colleague to Laktionov, although distinguished by a contrasting approach to Socialist Realism.<sup>18</sup> It will be possible to draw some useful comparisons between the methods, products and reception of these two distinctive contributors to the development of Soviet art. I anticipate that further studies will emerge over the coming years in which other diverse and significant artists such as Petr Konchalovskii, Iurii Pimenov and Arkadii Plastov are subjected to further analysis.

This project is by no means comprehensive. In restricting my analysis to the case study of a single artist it has been necessary to curtail a number of digressions that may have proven fruitful in their own right. In the process of my research I have become aware of a number of areas in which further research is necessary. It was intended to present a detailed study of the mechanisms by which Laktionov's painting *A Letter from the Front* was granted a Stalin Prize first class. Whilst some correspondence between the Department of Propaganda and Agitation and the Stalin Prize Committee, dealing with the exceedingly protracted process of selecting works for the Stalin Prizes of 1947, are available in RGASPI, these documents reveal an incomplete picture of the system as certain candidates' names appear and disappear

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<sup>17</sup> See Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929-1953* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001) and Matthew Cullerne Bown, 'Aleksandr Gerasimov', Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) pp. 121-139.

<sup>18</sup> This project has so far yielded a fascinating article: Christina Kiaer, 'Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s,' *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 28 (2005), pp. 321-345.

without due explanation.<sup>19</sup> A detailed analysis of this awards system, which was so significant as a gauge of Party (rather than art establishment) preferences in all fields of art and culture, would contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms through which the state transmitted its cultural policies to its workforce of artists and theorists. A systematic examination of the Central Committee archive of material relating to the Department of Propaganda and Agitation has not been possible within the time limits of this project. In particular, documents relating to the dictates and decisions of the Central Committee members and major contributors to the development of Soviet culture, Zhdanov and Suslov, are in need of further research. These powerful figures have remained in the background throughout this project yet their influence on the art establishment in the post-war years cannot be underestimated.

Time constraints have limited my exploration of the vast depositories of the Moscow Artists' Union and the Ministry of Culture. Additional analysis of these extensive collections of stenographic reports, statistics and correspondence would no doubt yield further insights into the ways in which Soviet cultural policies were debated by its artists in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Likewise an analysis of the depository of the USSR Academy of the Arts held in RGANI may have provided a useful complementary approach to the discussions of the period. Finally one set of visitors' books, from the *1947 All-Union Art Exhibition*, has remained elusive, although references to them were made by a number of artists and critics in their evaluations of the exhibition, all remarking on the prevalence of comments about Laktionov and his work. This has necessitated a reliance on alternative sources of information for an analysis of the responses to this key exhibition.

Overall it has become apparent that the period of high Stalinism remains something of a black hole for literature dealing with the fine arts, which has so far focused primarily on the period of development of Socialist Realism in the pre-war years, and to a lesser extent on the period of the cultural thaw under Khrushchev. Soviet art production during the *Zhdanovshchina* in particular is often considered either as a consolidation of the trends that were theorised and enforced during the late 1930s, or as a repressive prologue to the liberalisation of the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Yet my findings over the course of this project suggest that the late 1940s represented a distinctive stage in the development of Socialist Realist art. It saw a crisis of art criticism as writers, reviewers and theorists were called to account for their role in the distortion of public tastes and the deviation of Soviet art from its guiding principles. Rendered

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<sup>19</sup> RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 587, *Spravki upravleniia propagandy i agitatsii TsK BKP(b) i otdela iskusstv [...] o sostave Komiteta po Stalinskim premiim, o predstavlenii kandidatur i prisuzhdenii Stalinskikh premii za 1947 god v oblasti iskusstva i literatury.*

<sup>20</sup> Reid has used the depository of the Moscow Artists' Union extensively in her work on the thaw period of the 1950s and early 1960s. Reid, 'In the Name of the People', 'The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw,' *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006), pp. 161-175; 'Destalinisation and Taste, 1954-1963,' *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997), pp. 177-201, and *Destalinisation and the Remodernisation of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953-1963*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1996). This material is available in RGALI, f. 2943, *Moskovsaia organizatsiia Soiuza khudozhnikov RSFSR* with some additional material available in GTG, f. 59. The Ministry of Culture fond is located in RGALI, f. 2329.

<sup>21</sup> This dearth is starting to be addressed by work such as Juliane Fürst, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (Routledge, 2006).

virtually impotent by Zhdanov's decrees and their pervasive repercussions, certain influential critics, such as Osip Beskin and Boris Polevoi, initiated a war of words against the dominant figures within the Soviet art establishment with the unconcealed goal of toppling its ivory towers, a process that sowed the seeds for the cultural thaw of the early 1950s. It was largely as a result of the repressive interventions of the Zhdanov era that the field of art criticism became disenfranchised from its synthesis with the art establishment and developed a degree of autonomy that would increase throughout the 1950s. As Aleksandr Gerasimov bemoaned in 1952, 'In modern criticism, instead of an impartial evaluation, we often observe boundless praise, unfounded censure, or deathly silence.' Gerasimov's desired 'impartial evaluation' can be understood as a thinly veiled appeal for adherence to the Party line, and his observation demonstrates that art criticism in the early 1950s was becoming increasingly diverse and spontaneous. It was also in the Zhdanov era that the power structures of the art establishment—most notably the USSR Academy of the Arts—certain of which would maintain a powerful influence throughout the thaw period and into the late Soviet (and even post-Soviet) era, were designed and implemented.

This analysis of Laktionov's career, his works of art and their reception has offered a glimpse into the inner workings of the post-war Soviet art world and has illustrated a number of the policies, issues and debates that helped to define and mould public taste in a period of turbulent change. Laktionov's art reflected certain important features of Soviet society such as a rich national tradition, shared communal experience, the representation of the heroic individual and above all an aspiration for high culture. What has been unexpected is the degree to which Laktionov's art adhered to and endorsed the official policy. It has been tempting throughout this project to search for examples of dissent or divergence within the artist's canon, but it has become apparent that such an inclination was to miss the point. Laktionov was not forced to produce works of art according to any prescribed formula. Rather he engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the Soviet art establishment. On the one hand his works of art satisfied the conservative tastes of influential policy makers. On the other hand, he received rewards that were both tangible and intangible: the artist was granted financial incentives and privileges, but most importantly he earned the right to contribute to the ongoing development of Socialist Realism and to mould the system according to his own definition. The successful Soviet artist was not simply a puppet of the state, but was a stake holder in Bourdieu's continuous struggle for the 'monopoly of artistic legitimacy.'<sup>22</sup> The question that remains is who was producing who: the state or the artist? In the art of Socialist Realism the two were simultaneously involved in the construction of the other in the formation of a very Soviet story.

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<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Susan Emanuel, *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 132.





Plate 1: *A Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops, 1938, Museum of the Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg*





Plate 2: *A Letter from the Front*, 1947, GTG



Plate 3: *Portrait of I. V. Stalin*, 1949, whereabouts unknown





Plate 4: *Into a New Flat*, 1952, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery



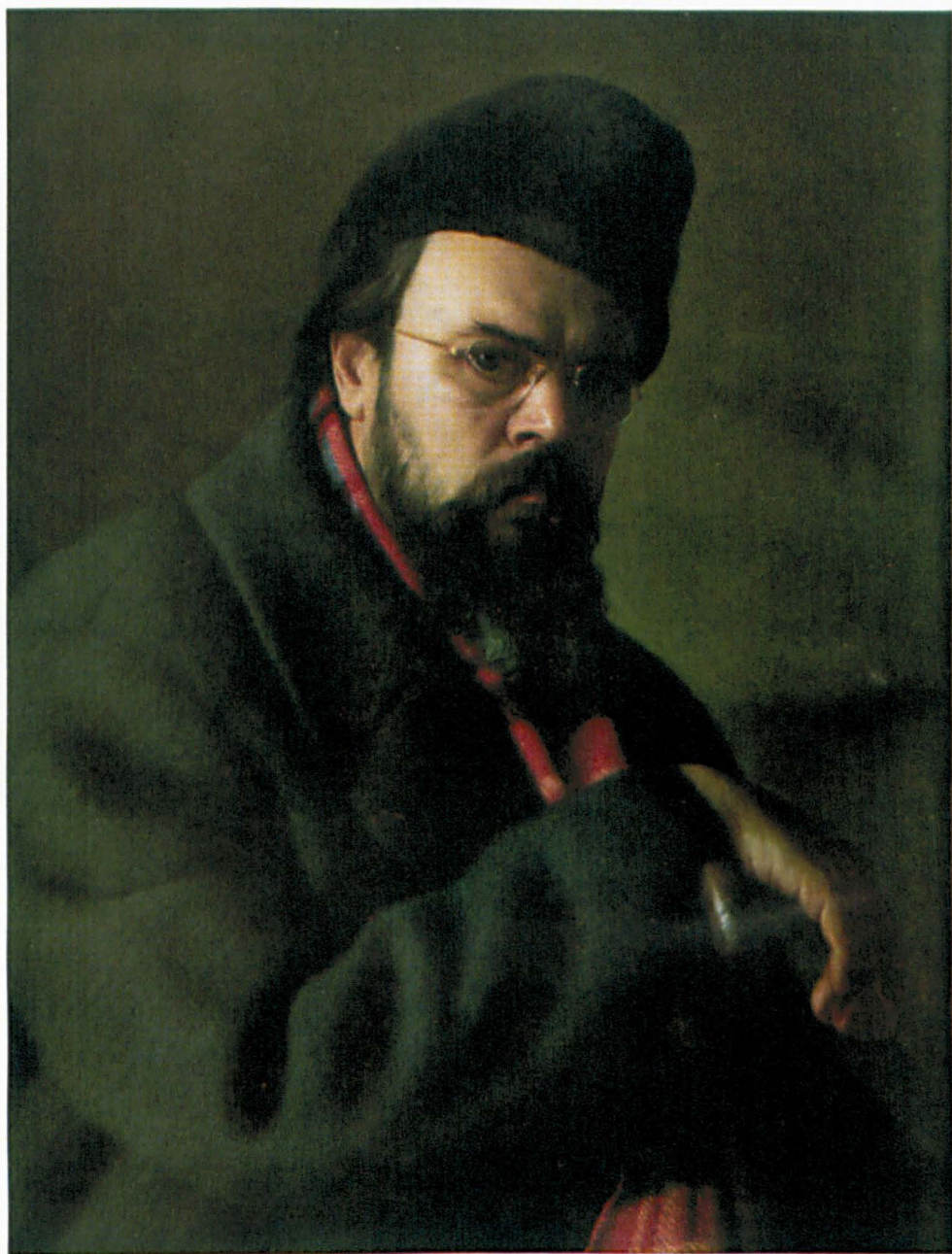


Plate 5: *Self Portrait with a Cane*, 1957, private collection of A. A. Laktionov



Plate 6: *Old Age Provided For*, 1959-60, Kiev Museum of Russian and Soviet Art





Plate 7: *Portrait of P. I. Beliaev, 1969, whereabouts unknown*



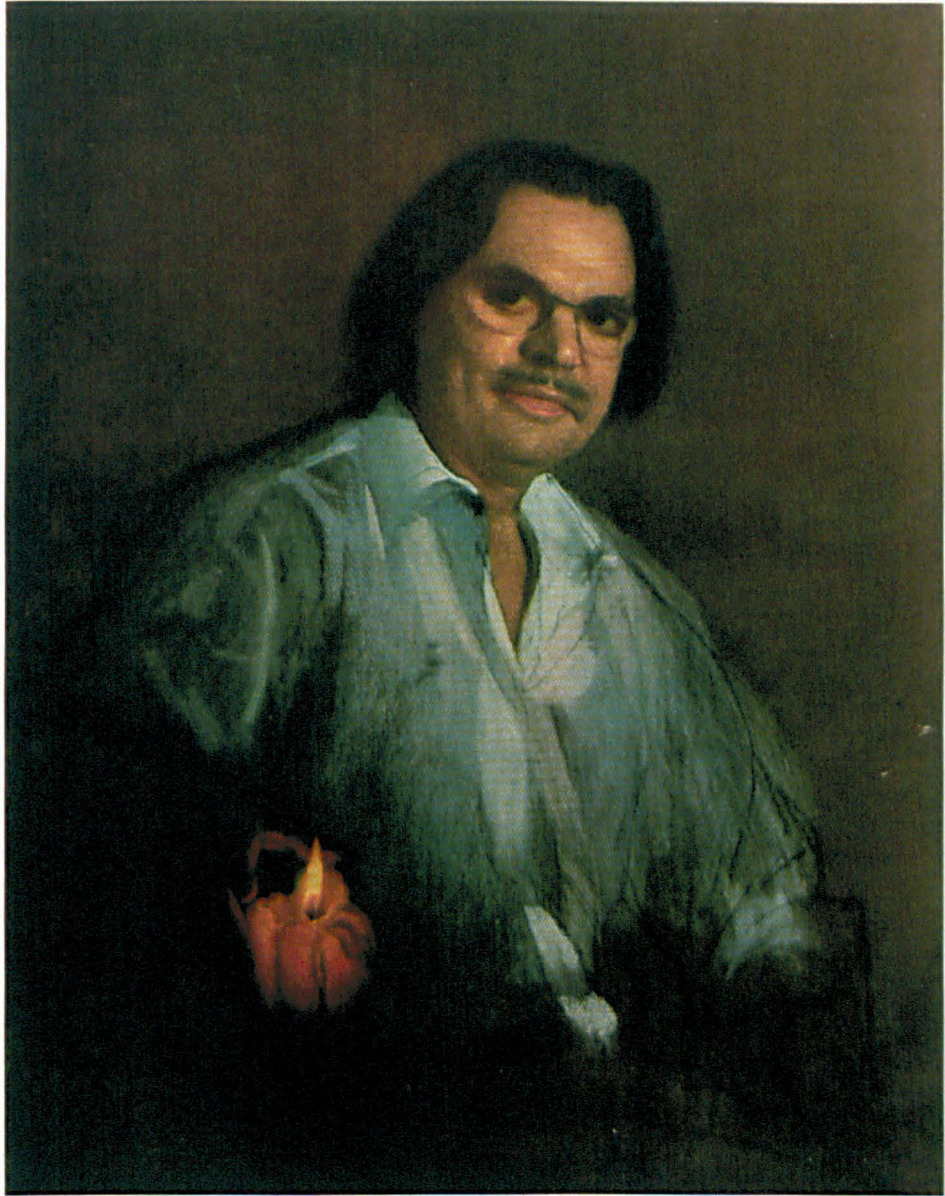


Plate 8: *Self Portrait with a Burning Candle*, 1970, Les Oreades, Moscow



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\* TsALIM was abolished in 2005 and its contents were split amongst the Central Archive of the City of Moscow (TsAGM) and the Central Archive of the Socio-Political History of Moscow (TsAOPIM). Referencing throughout this thesis applies to the former archive of TsALIM, which is where the material was located. It has not yet been possible to ascertain the new location of these documents.



Unless otherwise indicated all works are by Aleksandr Laktionov and are oil on canvas. All dimensions, where known, are given in centimetres, height first.

**Figures:**

1. *Portrait of I. I. Brodskii*, 1938, 118 x 88, GRM
2. *Male Nude*, 1934, pencil, 63 x 44, AKhSSSR
3. Ilya Repin, *They Did Not Expect Him*, 1884, 160.5 x 167.5, GTG
4. Isaak Brodskii, *The Peoples' Commissar for Defence, Marshal of the Soviet Union K. E. Voroshilov out Skiing*, 1937, Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow
5. Photograph of Aleksandr Laktionov copying Liotard's *The Chocolate Girl*, 1950s, Nikolaeva and Miamlin, *Aleksandr Laktionov*, p. 104
6. *A Letter from the Front*, 1947, GTG, detail
7. Mikhail Khmel'ko, *The Triumph of the Conquering People*, 1949, GTG
8. Arkadii Plastov, *Haymaking*, 1945, GTG
9. Boris Shcherbakov, *In the Ural Hills*, 1940s, present location unknown
10. *Defender of the Motherland*, 1948, 121 x 91, Astrakhan Regional Art Gallery
11. Titian, *Pentecost* 1541, Santa Maria Della Salute Venice
12. Kazimir Malevich, *Peasants*, 1928-32, GRM
13. Isaak Brodskii, *Lenin in Smolny*, 1930, GTG
14. *Portrait of O. L. Knipper-Chekhova*, charcoal and pencil, 69 x 55, 1940, GTG
15. *Portrait of V. I. Kachalov*, 1940, charcoal, 59 x 44, GTG
16. *Stalin's Appearance in Red Square 7 November 1941*, present location unknown
17. *Portrait of N. S. Khrushchev*, 1958, present location unknown
18. Frans Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard*, 1616, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem
19. Newspaper image, 'Na vystavke Sovetskaia Rossia', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 23 Jun. 1960
20. *Portrait of the Old Bolshevik P. I. Voevodin*, 1963, 100 x 80, RosIzo
21. *After the Operation: a Portrait of the Surgeons S. S. Iudin, D. A. Arapov, B. S. Rozanov and A. A. Bocharov*, 154.5 x 220.5, Kursk Regional Art Gallery in the Name of A. A. Deineka
22. *Portrait of the Cosmonaut B. M. Komarov*, 100 x 75, 1967, GTG
23. *Into a New Flat*, 1952, 130 x 113, Donetsk Art Gallery, detail
24. Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943, Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, M.A.
25. *Sewing, Spring*, 1954, pastel, 116 x 100, gift from the USSR to the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru
26. *February*, 1956, pastel, 97 x 82, Lvov Art Gallery
27. Fedor Reshetnikov, *Low Marks Again!*, 1952, 101 x 93, GTG
28. Fedor Reshetnikov, *Low Marks Again!*, detail
29. *In Summer (pioneers' Pravda)*, 1954, 124 x 145, Altaiskii Krai Museum, Barnaul

30. *Self-Portrait*, 1934, charcoal, 27 x 18, private collection of O. Johnson
31. *Self-Portrait*, 1945, 36 x 29, GTG
32. *Self-Portrait in Rags*, 1947, 67 x 54, private collection of O. A. Laktionova
33. *Self-Portrait*, 1952, 63 x 50, Kemerovskii Regional Art Gallery, Novokuznetsk
34. Ilya Repin, *Portrait of Modest Musorgsky*, 69 x 57, 1881, GTG
35. Newspaper image of the artist at work, *Leninskaia smena*, 27 Jan. 1955
36. *Naples*, 1962, gouache, 31 x 48, private collection of N. Blokhina
37. *Self-Portrait*, 1969, 75 x 51, private collection of G. A. Laktionov
38. Komar & Melamid, *What is to be Done?*, 1982-3, 183 x 183, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York
39. Komar & Melamid, *Russia's Most Wanted*, 'television sized,' 1995, present location unknown
40. Aleksandr Shilov, *Self-Portrait*, 1990s, Shilov Gallery, Moscow

**Plates:**

1. *A Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting KomSoMol Tank Troops*, 1938, 299 x 300, Museum of the Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg
2. *A Letter from the Front*, 1947, 222 x 155, GTG
3. *Portrait of I. V. Stalin*, 1949, present location unknown
4. *Into a New Flat*, 1952, 130 x 113, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery
5. *Self-Portrait with a Cane*, 1957, pastel, 81 x 60, private collection of A. A. Laktionov
6. *Old Age Provided For*, 1959-60, 270.5 x 310.5, Kiev Museum of Russian and Soviet Art
7. *Portrait of P. I. Beliaev*, 1969, 100 x 75, present location unknown
8. *Self-Portrait with a Burning Candle*, 1970, pastel, 95 x 74, Les Oreades, Moscow

## List of the Artist's Known Works

All painted works are oil on canvas unless otherwise indicated. All graphics, sketches and studies are pencil on paper unless otherwise indicated. The last known location of all works, where known, is listed. All dimensions, where known, are given in centimetres, height first.

## 1931

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), private collection of the Katsman family, Moscow  
*Wolves: Three Sketches on One Page* (Волки. Три наброска на одном листе), 9 x 18, coll. I. A. Laktionov

## 1933

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Drawing of a Feather* (Рисунок пером)  
*Lion's Head* (Голова Льва)  
*Man's Head* (Голова мужчины), ink on paper, 16 x 11, coll. of O. A. Laktionova  
*A Model* (Натурщица)  
*My Hands* (Мои руки), 26.5 x 20, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Scarecrow* (Чучело птицы), 20 x 14, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Seated Model from Behind* (Сидящий натурщик со спины)  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 14 x 10, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 20.5 x 29.4, Art Museum of the Kazakh Socialist Republic, Petrozavodsk  
*Young Woman* (Женечка маленькая), 19.5 x 17, coll. I. A. Laktionov

## 1934

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of the Komsomol Member Mai* (Портрет комсомолки Майи), 105 x 66, Luhansk, Art Museum.  
*Portrait of a Singer* (Портрет певицы), 80 x 60, coll. I. A. Laktionov, Moscow  
*Portrait of A. S. Chinenov* (Портрет А. С. Чиненова), 69 x 50, coll. A. A. Laktionov, Moscow  
*Portraits of Soloists of the Leningrad State Conservatory* (Портреты солистов оперы Ленинградской государственной консерватории. Серия), pencil on paper, coll. O. A. Laktionova:  
*Portrait of A. I. Kazbanov in the Role of Figaro* (Портрет А. И. Казбанова в роле Фигаро), 31 x 21  
*Portrait of E. I. Kil'chevskii* (Портрет Э. И. Кильчевского), 31.5 x 21.5  
*Portrait of I. E. Pechugin in the Role of Germann* (Портрет И. Е. Печугина в роле Германна), 31.5 x 21.5  
*Portrait of E. V. Svirskaiia* (Портрет Е. В. Свирской), 30.5 x 21.5  
*Portrait of L. P. Solomiak* (Портрет Л. П. Соломяка), 31.5 x 21.5

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Abramtsevo* (Абрамцево), 32 x 22, Briansk Art Gallery

*A Black River, Leningrad* (Черная речка, Ленинград), 19.5 x 28.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Boy Model* (Натурщик-мальчик), 39.4 x 22.1, Kostromsk Regional Art Gallery

*A Boring Lecture: Sketch of Three Seated People* (Скучная лекция. Набросок трех сидящих), 17.5 x 20.5, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Drawing of an Ear and a Brush in Hand* (Рисунок. Ухо и кисть руки), 29.5 x 40, coll. Belousov, St Petersburg

*An Elderly Man's Head* (Голова старика), 31.5 x 25.5, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg

*Female Portrait, Sketch* (Женский портрет. Набросок), 23.5 x 16, private coll. I. A. Laktionov

*The Garden of the Academy of the Arts* (Сад Академии художеств), 29.1 x 20.1, Art Museum of the Kazakh Socialist Republic, Petrozavodsk

*In the Library of the Academy of the Arts* (В библиотеке Академии художеств. Серия рисунков), coll. I. A. Laktionov

*The Leningrad Academy of the Arts* (Академия художеств в Ленинграде), 29 x 20, Briansk Art Gallery

*Male Nude* (Обнаженный натурщик), 63 x 44, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg

*Male Portrait, Sketch* (Мужской портрет. Набросок), 26 x 18, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Mikhailov Gardens* (Михайловский сад)

*Mikhailov Gardens* (Михайловский сад), 27.5 x 19.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Model with a Bird* (Модель с птицей)

*Portrait of S. A. Abugov* (Портрет С. А. Абугова), 84.8 x 63.5, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg

*Portrait of T. K. Kapustnaia* (Портрет Т. К. Капустиной), 37 x 31, coll. I. A. Brodskii, St Petersburg

*Portrait of A. T. Matveev* (Портрет А. Т. Матвеева), sanguine on paper, 87.8 x 63, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg

*Sasha Vazhnov* (Саша Важнов)

*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 26 x 18, coll. A. A. Laktionova

*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), pencil and charcoal on paper, 27 x 18, coll. O. Johnson, Sheffield

*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), charcoal on paper, 39 x 25, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Three Sketches on One Page: Two Seated Figures at the Bronze Horseman* (Три набросок на одном листе: У Медного всадника и две сидящие фигуры), 32 x 22, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*The University Embankment* (Университетская набережная), 32 x 21, coll. G. A. Laktionov

*Young Model* (Молодой натурщик), watercolour on paper, 36 x 25, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

### **1935**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of a Shepherd* (Портрет пастуха), 103 x 70.5, coll. A. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of Zoia Gritsenko* (Портрет Зои Гриценко), 79 x 60, Voronezh Regional Art Gallery

*The Shipyard* (Судоверфь), 50 x 41, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii  
*Weddings* (Браки), 35 x 50, coll. Z. S. Kotliarovaia, St Petersburg  
*Weddings on the Shore* (Браки на берегу), 71 x 90, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*The Market* (Балочка), 27 x 40.5, GTG  
*A Female Brigade Leader* (Бригадирша), 30 x 20, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii  
*A Collective Farm Brigade Leader* (Колхозный бригадир), 30 x 20, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii  
*Blast Furnace at the Dneprozerzhinsk Factory* (Домна на Днепрозержинском заводе), 16 x 22, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*The Façade of the Academy of the Arts* (Фасад Академии хыдожеств), 27.5 x 21, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*A Man in a Chair* (Мужчина в кресле), 37 x 21.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Naked Reclining Model* (Обнаженная полулежащая натурщица), 17.5 x 27. coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Academic A. A. Bogomol'ets* (Портрет академика А. А. Богомольца), 45 x 32, Briansk Art Gallery  
*Portrait of I. I. Brodskii* (Портрет И. И. Бродского), 80 x 60, Apartment-Museum of I. I. Brodskii, St Petersburg  
*Portrait of I. I. Brodskii in Bed* (Портрет И. И. Бродского в постели), 28 x 42, Apartment-Museum of I. I. Brodskii, St Petersburg  
*Portrait of A. Genkel'* (Портрет А. Генкель), 35 x 26, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Seated Man* (Сидящий мужчина), etching, 12 x 8, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Tractor Driver* (Тракторист), 39 x 28, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii  
*Tractor Driver* (Тракторист), acrylic on paper, 39 x 28, Apartment-Museum of I. I. Brodskii, St Petersburg  
*Warm Autumn* (Теплая осень), 27.5 x 21, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*The Iron Works at the May Day Factory* (Чугунолитейный цех Первомайского завода), 27 x 41, Berdiansk Art Gallery in the Name of I. I. Brodskii

#### **1936**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Feeling Unwell* (Больная), 70 x 89.5, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg  
*Feeling Unwell* (Больная), 97 x 76, Mordovian Republic Art Gallery in the Name of F. V. Sychkov, Saransk  
*Griboedov Canal* (Канал Грибоедова), 21.5 x 12.5, Rostov-on-Don Museum of Fine Art  
*Male Portrait* (Мужской портрет), 87.5 x 72.5, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg  
*On the Beach* (На пляже), 39.3 x 86, Kalinin Regional Art Gallery  
*Portrait of an Old Man* (Мужской портрет (старик)), 104 x 90, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg  
*Portrait of a Cossack* (Портрет казака), 76 x 65, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Artist's Father* (Портрет отца)

*Seated Elderly Model* (Сидящий старик-натурщик), tempera on canvas, 91 x 69, coll. S. A. Laktionov, Moscow  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 20.7 x 16.6, Lvov Art Gallery  
*Woman with a Sunflower* (Женщина с подсолнухом), 99.3 x 80.7, Smolensk Regional Art Gallery in the Name of S. T. Konenkov

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Female Portrait* (Женский портрет)  
*Lev in Mourning* (Лев грустит), 37 x 27, coll. O. A. Laktionova  
*Man in a Chair* (Мужчина в кресле), 39 x 30, coll. O. A. Laktionova  
*The Pouring of the Steel: A Metallurgical Factory* (Разлив стали (Металлургический завод), 62 x 53, Dnepropetrovsk Art Gallery  
*Seated Elderly Model* (Сидящий старик-натурщик), seria on paper, 39 x 28, coll. S. A. Egorova  
*Standing Model* (Стоящий натурщик), 60 x 38, coll. I. A. Laktionov

**1937**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Female Portrait* (Женский портрет), watercolour on paper  
*Portrait of I. I. Il'iasheva* (Портрет И. И. Ильяшева), 121 x 90.7, Nizhnii Novgorod State Art Gallery  
*Portraits of Leaders of Industry for the Exhibition 'Industry of Socialism'* Портреты передовиков промышленности для выставки «Индустрия социализма», Cheliabinsk Regional Picture Gallery  
*Portrait of V. V. Balandin* (Портрет В. В. Баландина), 80 x 60  
*Portrait of A. Burin* (Портрет А. Бурина), 80 x 60  
*Portrait of Bulgarov* (Портрет Булгарова), 86 x 64  
*Portrait of Dolgopolo* (Портрет Долгополова), 87 x 64  
*Portrait of Tkachenko* (Портрет Ткаченко), 80 x 60  
*Portrait of Zhukov* (Портрет Жукова), 87 x 64  
*Portrait of P. Urova* (Портрет П. Уровой), 86.5 x 63

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Female Portrait* (Женский портрет), charcoal on paper, 79 x 59, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Katia Kopeikina* (Катя Копейкина), 26.5 x 18.5, coll. O. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Mathematician R. Arago* (Портрет математика Р. Араго), 42 x 28, coll. P. P. Belousov  
*Portrait N. Pugachev* (Портрет Н. Пугачева), 36.5 x 27, coll. A. A. Laktionov

**1937-38**

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Self-Portrait in Development at Work* (Автопортрет в рост за работой), 36.5 x 26, coll. A. A. Laktionov

1938

**Paintings and Pastels**

- Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops* (Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов), 299 x 300, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg
- Portrait of I. I. Brodskii* (Портрет И. И. Бродского), 118 x 88, GRM
- Portrait of O. N. Laktionova in a Beret* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой в берете), 91 x 65, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Seated Model from Behind* (Натурщик сидящий (со спины)), 88 x 61.5, Academy of the Arts, St Petersburg
- Sketch for the Painting 'Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops'* (Эскиз картины «Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов»), 75 x 65, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov, Moscow
- S. M. Kirov Sends Bolshevik Agitators on Propaganda Work to the Zakavkaz'e* (С. М. Киров направляет большевиков-агитаторов на подпольную работу в Закавказье), watercolour on paper, 43 x 64, Apartment-Museum of S. M. Kirov, St Petersburg
- Study for the Painting 'Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops'* (Этюд к картине «Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов»), oil on paper, 41 x 29, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Studies for the Painting 'Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops'* (Этюды к картине «Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов»), coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Male Head* (Голова мужчины), 35 x 30
- Standing Model with Folded Arms* (Стоящий, откинув руки), 29.5 x 17
- Standing Model with a Newspaper* (Стоящий перед газетой), 45.5 x 31
- Standing Model holding a Box* (Стоящий с коробкой в руке), 53.5 x 19
- Standing Model by a Chair* (Стоящий у стула), 44 x 30

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

- Aviator-Heroes V. P. Chkalov, G. F. Baidukov and A. V. Beliakov* (Герои-летчики товарищи В. П. Чкалов, Г. Ф. Байдуков, А. В. Беляков), acrylic on paper, 86 x 63, RosIzo
- Arctic Explorer-Heroes on the Deck of the Ice Breaker 'Ermak'* (Герои-папанинцы на борту ледокола «Ермак»), acrylic and sanguine on paper, 86 x 63
- Female Artist at Work* (Рисующая художница), 28 x 21, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- A Male Drawing* (Рисующий мужчина), 28 x 21, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Preparatory Drawings for the Painting 'Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops'* (Подготовленные рисунки к картине «Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов» (голова и две руки)), 24 x 22, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Sketch for the Composition of the Painting 'Hero of the Soviet Union N. V. Iudin Visiting Komsomol Tank Troops'* (Эскиз композиции картины «Герой Советского Союза Н. В. Юдин в гостях у комсомольцев-танкистов» (с пометками относительного цвета)), 33 x 43, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov



## 1938-39

### Paintings and Pastels

- Portrait of the Artist's Son Genrekh* (Портрет сына Генреха), watercolour on canvas, 50 x 38, coll. G. A. Laktionov, St Petersburg  
*Stalin in Exile Reads a Letter from Lenin* (Сталин в ссылке читает письмо Ленина), Museum of the Revolution, St Petersburg

## 1939

### Paintings and Pastels

- Alupka* (Алупка), watercolour on paper, 21 x 32, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*Alupka, Study* (Алупка, этюд)  
*Paganini* (Паганини), 36 x 46.7, Kubibyshev Art Gallery  
*Portrait of T. K. Kapustnaia* (Портрет Т. К. Капустной), pastel on paper, 58 x 44, coll. T. K. Kapustnaia, St Petersburg  
*Portrait of the Architect I. G. Langbard* (Портрет архитектура И. Г. Лангбарда), 117 x 99, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of T. P. Miasoedovaia-Brodskaiia* (Портрет Т. П. Мясоедовой-Бродской), 203 x 131, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of Professor A. Ia. Shterenberg* (Портрет профессора А. Я. Штеренберга), 80 x 60, Azerbaijan State Art Gallery in the Name of R. Mustafaev  
*Sketch of the Painting 'Meeting'* (Эскиз картины «Митинг»), 50 x 69, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

### Graphics, sketches and studies

- I. I. Brodskii Before His Death: A Sick Teacher* (И. И. Бродский перед смертью (больной учитель)), charcoal on paper, 29.4 x 41.8, GRM  
*E. A. Mravinskii, Sketch* (Е. А. Мравинский. Набросок)  
*My Brother Lenia Il'iashev* (Мой брат Леня Ильяшев), 42 x 29.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov  
*A Quay in Tarus* (Пристань в Тарусах), 11 x 15, coll. A. A. Laktionov

## 1939-40

### Paintings and Pastels

- S. M. Kirov at a Meeting in Astrakhan* (С. М. Киров на митинге в Астрахани), 99 x 149, The Museum of S. M. Kirov and S. Ordzhonikidzhe  
*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой), 128 x 62, coll. G. A. Laktionov

## 1930s

### Paintings and Pastels

- Elderly Model in Ukrainian Dress* (Старик-натурщик в украинском костюме), 120 x 94, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Girl with a Round Chair* (Девушка с круглым стулом), 57 x 74.5, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*I. I. Brodskii Shortly before Death* (И. И. Бродский незадолго до смерти), oil on plywood, 30 x 45, GRM  
*Male Portrait* (Мужской портрет), oil on card, 27.5 x 19, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*The Mill* (Мельница), 50 x 40, coll. E. I. Brodskii, St Petersburg

- Portrait of a Man with Folded Arms* (Портрет мужчины со сложенными руками), 68 x 55, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of N. N. Punin* (Портрет Н. Н. Пунина), oil on card, 25 x 21, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), watercolour on paper, 15 x 12, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait in an Apache Shirt* (Автопортрет в рубашке апаш), 52 x 45, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait of Head* (Автопортрет (голова)), 16 x 13, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait with Arms Folded in Lap* (Автопортрет со сложенными на груди руками), 80 x 60, coll. M. A. Laktionova

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- Sketches of Beasts* (Звери. Зарисовки), 30 x 21, coll. S. A. Egorova
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет, за работой), etching, 25 x 16, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- I. I. Brodskii in the Presidium* (И. И. Бродский в президиуме), 28 x 41, coll. O. A. Laktionova
- E. A. Mravinskii Conducting* (Е. А. Мравинский дирижирует), 26 x 20, coll. S. A. Egorova
- Portrait of T. P. Brodskaiia* (Портрет Т. П. Бродской), charcoal on paper, 37.5 x 29.8, Murmansk Regional Museum
- The Roof of a Rural House* (Крыша деревенского дома), 30.5 x 39.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

### **1940**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

- Portrait of Colonel V. I. Tsvetkov* (Портрет полковника В. И. Цветкова), 120 x 90, coll. F. D. Burinchuk, St Petersburg
- Svetlana with Mishka* (Светлана с мишкой), 37 x 56, coll. S. A. Egorova

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- Female Portrait* (Женский портрет), coll. O. A. Laktionova
- Hero of the Soviet Union I. V. Krasnokustskii* (Герой Советского Союза И. В. Краснокутский), 47 x 33, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- V. I. Kachalov, Sketch* (В. И. Качалов. набросок), sanguine on paper, 39 x 30, coll. O. A. Laktionova
- V. I. Kachalov Reading* (В. И. Качалов читает. Три рисунка головы на одном листе), 39 x 29, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of I. V. Ershev* (Портрет И. В. Ершева), sanguine and charcoal on paper, 49 x 33, coll. I. A. Brodskii
- Portrait of V. I. Kachalov* (Портрет В. И. Качалова), charcoal on paper, 59.3 x 44, GTG
- Portrait of O. L. Knipper-Chekhov* (Портрет О. Л. Книппер-Чеховой), pencil, charcoal and sanguine on paper, 68.6 x 55, GTG
- Portrait of I. M. Kudriavtsev* (Портрет И. М. Кудрявцева), sanguine on paper, 18 x 14, coll. O. A. Laktionova
- Portrait of M. P. Lilinaia* (Портрет М. П. Лилиной), 35 x 26, Museum of the Moscow Artistic Theatre (MKhAT), Moscow
- Portrait of N. O. Toporkov* (Портрет Н. О. Топоркова), sanguine on paper, 54.3 x 44.2, GTG

*Portrait of N. P. Khmelev* (Портрет Н. П. Хмелева), 68.6 x 54, GTG  
*Portrait of F. I. Shevchenko* (Портрет Ф. И. Шевченко), acrylic and sanguine on paper, 55 x 39, Museum of the Moscow Artistic Theatre (MKhAT), Moscow  
*Portrait of the Artist's Son Genrikh* (Портрет сына Генриха), 38 x 29, coll. G. A. Laktionova  
*Serezha with his Nurse* (Сереженька с няней), charcoal on paper, 60 x 44.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov  
*Tarkhanov, Sobakevich* (Тарханов – Собакевич), charcoal on paper, 45 x 34, Central State Theatrical Museum in the Name of A. A. Bakhrushin  
*Still Life: Plates and a Bottle* (Натюрморт. Тарелки и бутылка), 12 x 9, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*The Public Prosecutor Podgornyi* (Подгорный – прокурор), charcoal on paper, 45 x 34, Central State Theatrical Museum in the Name of A. A. Bakhrushin

## 1941

### Paintings and Pastels

*Sketch of the Poster 'Moscow will not Surrender'* (Эскиз плаката «Москва не сдадим!»), gouache on paper, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

### Graphics, sketches and studies

*Portrait of the Artist's Wife with a Baby* (Портрет жены с ребенком), 18 x 14.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

## 1942

### Paintings and Pastels

*I. B. Baklanov in an Uzbek Gown with a Staff, Study* (И. Б. Бакланов в узбекском халате и с посохом. Этюд), 34 x 19.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Singer G. S. Avsiukevich* (Портрет певицы Г. С. Авсюкевича), 90 x 140, coll. G. S. Avsiukevich, Moscow

### Graphics, sketches and studies

*I. B. Baklanov in an Uzbek Gown with a Staff* (И. Б. Бакланов в узбекском халате и с посохом), 25.5 x 18, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Hands: Three Hands in one Shake* (Руки (три руки в едином рукопожатии)), 20.5 x 29, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Artist A. Segal* (Портрет художника А. Сегала)  
*Portrait of I. A. Brodskii* (Портрет И. А. Бродского), 47 x 31, coll. I. A. Brodskii

## 1942-43

### Paintings and Pastels

*A Brick House with Vines* (Кирпичный дом, увитый зеленью), 23 x 32, coll. M. A. Laktionova

## 1943

### Paintings and Pastels

*A Garden in Samarkand* (Самаркандский садик), 25 x 21, Mordovian Republic Art Gallery in the Name of F. V. Sychkov, Saransk  
*In a Kishlak* (В кишлаке), 50.3 x 60.3, Penzensk Art Gallery in the Name of K. A. Savitskii

- O. N. Laktionova, Study* (О. Н. Лактионова. Этюд), 21.5 x 9.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Rear Admiral P. F. Popkovich* (Портрет контр-адмирала П. Ф. Попковича), sanguine and pastel on paper, 87 x 54, Briansk Art Gallery  
*Portrait of the Rear Admiral P. F. Popkovich* (Портрет контр-адмирала П. Ф. Попковича), 71 x 56, Kirov Regional Art Gallery in the Name of A. M. Gorky  
*Portrait of an Artist* (Портрет художника), 63 x 46.5, Lvov Art Gallery

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- D. A. Solovei* (Д. А. Соловей), 25 x 18, coll. O. A. Laktionova  
*Girls* (Девочки), 26 x 39, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Rear Admiral P. F. Popovich* (Портрет контр-адмирала П. Ф. Попковича), sanguine on paper, 60 x 100, Roslzo

#### **1944**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

- A Chapel in Zagorsk* (Загорск. Часовня), watercolour on paper, 11.5 x 10, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*The Collective Farmer Stepan* (Колхозник Степан), oil on card, 21.5 x 16, Nizhnii Novgorod State Art Gallery  
*Portrait P. A. Leshchinaia* (Портрет П. А. Лещиной), 34 x 27.5, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), oil on card, 25 x 17.8, Rostov-on-Don Regional Museum of Fine Art  
*Sewing, Study* (За шитьем. Этюд), watercolour on paper, 16 x 9, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*The Zagorsk Monastery* (Загорская лавра), watercolour on paper, 21.3 x 15.8, Kostromsk Regional Art Gallery

##### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- Landscape with a Group of Seated People* (Пейзаж с группой сидящих людей), 16 x 22, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait M. I. Bogdanovich* (Портрет М. И. Богдановича), sanguine and charcoal on paper, 52.5 x 37, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой), 19 x 13.5, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of G. G. Niskii* (Портрет Г. Г. Нисского)  
*Portrait of F. P. Reshetnikov* (Портрет Ф. П. Решетникова)  
*A Seated Man* (Сидящий мужчина), 15.5 x 21, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

#### **1945**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

- The East Gate of the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery* (Восточная стена Троице-Сергиевой лавры), pastel on paper, Irkutsk Regional Art Gallery  
*Family Portrait (Self-Portrait with Family), Sketch* (Семейный портрет (Автопортрет с семьей). Эскиз), 37 x 30, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Girl Sitting in a Tree* (Девушка, сидящая на дереве), 19 x 24.5, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*July* (Июль), oil on plywood, 45 x 37, Dnepropetrovsk Art Gallery

*The Monastery at Sunset* (Лавра на закате), 16.5 x 19, Rostov-on-Don Regional Museum of Fine Art  
*O. N. Laktionova with Masha in Her Arms, Study* (О. Н. Лактионова с Машей на руках. Этюд), 29.5 x 20, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Artist's Son Genrekh* (Портрет сына Генриха), pastel and sanguine on paper, 34 x 27, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova in front of a Curtain* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой на фоне занавеса), 71 x 83, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of Serezha* (Портрет Сережи), watercolour on paper, 25 x 17, coll. S. A. Laktionov  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), oil on card, 36 x 29, GTG  
*A Temple amongst the Trees* (Храм в деревьях), 18 x 13, Nizhnii Novgorod State Art Gallery  
*Study of a Collective Farm Worker* (Этюд колхозника)  
*Zagorsk, Monastery* (Загорск. Лавра), pastel on paper, 44 x 34, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Zagorsk, Study* (Загорск. Эскиз)  
*Zagorsk, Winter* (Загорск. Зима), oil on card, 44 x 35, Voronezh Regional Art Gallery

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*The Bells of Paraskeva Piatnitsa, Sketch* (Колокольная Параскевы Пятницы. Набросок), 19.5 x 13.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Gera Sleeping* (Гера спит)  
*My Mishka Sleeping* (Мой Мишка спит), 20 x 13.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Admiral N. G. Kuznetsov* (Портрет адмирала Н. Г. Кузнецова), charcoal on paper, 95 x 74.5, Rostov Regional Museum of Fine Art  
*Seated Nude with a Jug* (Обнаженная сидящая с кувшином), 27 x 37, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Zagorsk Monastery Series* (Загорск. Лавра), coll. O. A. Laktionova  
*Cathedral* (Собор), 15 x 10.5  
*Gate* (Ворота), 10.5 x 15  
*Bridge* (Мостик), 15 x 10.5  
*General View* (Общий вид), 10.5 x 15  
*Wall with a Tower* (Стена с башней), 15 x 10.5

## **1946**

### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Female Portrait* (L. N. Kirkhoglani in an Armchair) (Женский портрет (Л. Н. Кирхоглани в кресле), watercolour on paper, 31 x 23.5, coll. E. V. Kirkhoglani, St Petersburg  
*Head of a Woman in a White Dress, Study* (Голова женщины в белом платке. Этюд), 25 x 19, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Landscape with Log Huts and Kitchen Gardens* (Пейзаж с избами и огородами), 59 x 114, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Architect Zh. D. Kirkhoglani* (Портрет архитектура Ж. Д. Кирхоглани), 21 x 17, coll. E. V. Kirkhoglani  
*Portrait of the Artist's Son* (Портрет сына (голова)), watercolour on paper, 16 x 9.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of Evdokaia Nikiforovna* (Портрет Евдокии Никифоровны), 70 x 60, coll. S. A. Egorova  
*Portrait of P. A. Leshinaia* (Портрет П. А. Лешиной), 30 x 22, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Sketch for the Painting 'A Letter from the Front'* (Эскиз картины «Письмо с фронта»)  
*Sketch for the Painting 'A Letter from the Front'* (Эскиз картины «Письмо с фронта»)  
*Still Life with a Lamp* (Натюрморт с лампой), watercolour on paper, 31 x 23, coll. G. A. Laktionov  
*Sveta with a Floral Bow* (Света с пестрым бантом), watercolour on paper, 38 x 30, coll. S. A. Egorova

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Bed, Sketch* (Постель. набросок), 16 x 25, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Children, Sketch for the Painting 'A Letter from the Front'* (Дети. Эскиз к картине «Письмо с фронта»), 29 x 22, Kaluga Regional Art Gallery  
*Hands Holding a Pair of Glasses* (Руки, держащие очки), 24 x 21, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of the Artist's Wife* (Портрет жены), charcoal on paper, 78 x 59, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov  
*Woman in a Chair* (Женщина в кресле. набросок), 30.5 x 21, coll. S. A. Laktionov  
*Woman with a Letter* (Женщина с письмом), 29 x 22.5, Kaluga Regional Art Gallery

### **1947**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Evening in Zagorsk* (Вечер в Загорске), oil on card, 27 x 35.5, coll. N. N. Blokhin, Moscow  
*Girl with a Chicken* (Portrait of Svetlana) (Девочка с цыпленком (Портрет Светланы)), pastel on paper, 59 x 46, coll. S. A. Egorova  
*A Letter from the Front* (Письмо с фронта), 222 x 155, GTG  
*Pioneer Alesha Laktionov* (Пионер (Алеша Лактионов)), 53 x 43, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой), 82 x 68, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of Masha* (Портрет Маши), oil on card, 30 x 23, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the People's Artist of the USSR M. M. Tarkhanov* (Портрет народного артиста СССР М. М. Тарханова), 91.7 x 68, Yaroslavl Architectural, Historical and Art Museum Preserve  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет)  
*Self-Portrait in Rags* (Автопортрет в рубаше), 67 x 54, coll. O. A. Laktionova

### **1940-48**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of the Actor Iu. M. Iur'ev* (Портрета артиста Ю. М. Юрьева), 228 x 130, Mariupol Regional Museum

**1948**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Defender of the Motherland* (Защитник родины), 121 x 91, Astrakhan Regional Art Gallery

*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой), pastel on paper, 71 x 56.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of V. N. Nifontov* (Портрет В. Н. Нифонтова), gouache on paper, 59.5 x 48.5, Kostromsk Regional Art Gallery

*Still Life* (Натюрморт), 80 x 90, Gorlov Art Gallery

**1949**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*'Once Again I Visited...'* (*A. S. Pushkin in Trigorsk Park*) («Вновь я посетил...» (А. С. Пушкин в Тригорском)), 300 x 400, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery

*Portrait of I. V. Stalin* (Портрет И. В. Сталина)

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Portrait of A. N. Radishev* (Портрет А. Н. Радишева), charcoal on paper, 73 x 58, coll. A. A. Laktionov

**1940s**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*The Cathedral in Zagorsk* (Собор в Загорске), 34 x 27, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*A Church in Zagorsk* (Церковь в Загорске), 18 x 13, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*A Corner of Zagorsk* (Уголок Загорска), 18 x 16.3, Nizhnii Novgorod Art Gallery

*A Courtyard in Zagorsk* (Дворик в Загорске), pastel on paper, 25 x 33, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*Double Portrait of Soldiers* (Двойной портрет военных), 26.5 x 36.5, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*Girl in a Red Dress, Study* (Девушка в красном платке. Этюд), 27 x 17.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Landscape with a River and Logs* (Пейзаж с рекой и бревнами), oil on card, 11.5 x 16, coll. S. A. Egorova

*Portrait of a Priest of the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery* (Портрет священника Троице-Сергиевой лавры), 121 x 91, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*Self-Portrait in Crimson Drapery with a Naked Shoulder* (Автопортрет в малиновой драпировке с обнаженным плечом), 71.5 x 58, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Self-Portrait with a Red Kerchief on Head* (Автопортрет с красной косынкой на голове), 62.5 x 49, coll. A. A. Laktionov

*Self-Portrait with a Red Kerchief on Head* (Автопортрет с красной косынкой на голове), 28 x 23, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Self-Portrait with a White Head-Scarf* (Автопортрет с белым платком на голове), 27.5 x 24, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Serezha Lying on a Pillow, Study* (Сережа, лежащий на подушке. Этюд), 18.5 x 16, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Serezha with a Dummy* (Сережа с соской (голова)), pastel on paper, 42 x 32, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Snow on the Roofs, Study* (Снег на крыше. Этюд), oil on card, 11.5 x 21, coll. M. A. Laktionova



*Stalin's Appearance in Red Square 7 November 1941* (Выступление тов. Сталина на Красной площади 7 ноября 1941)

*Study of a Burning Candle* (Горящая свеча. Этюд), 33 x 21, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Two Childrens' Heads* (Alesha and Serezha Laktionov) (Две детские головы (Алеша и Сережа Лактионовы)), watercolour on paper, 25 x 17, coll. A. A. Laktionov

*Sveta in an Orange Blouse* (Света в оранжевой кофточке), watercolour on paper, 21 x 16, coll. S. A. Egorova

*View of the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery, Study* (Вид на Троице-Сергиеву лавру. Этюд), oil on card, 37 x 27, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*Zagorsk, a Tree by the Church Fence* (Загорск. Дерево у церковной ограды), watercolour on paper, 19.5 x 14, coll. M. A. Laktionova

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Portrait of a Soldier* (Портрет военного), charcoal on paper, 54 x 40, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of a Young Soldier* (Портрет молодого военного), charcoal on paper, 36.5 x 28, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Sketch for the Painting 'Pushkin in Trigorsk'* (Эскиз картины «Пушкин в Тригорском»), 32 x 40, coll. I. A. Laktionov

## **1950**

### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of the Teacher P. Dobronravinaia* (Портрет учительницы П. Добронравиной), watercolour on paper, 41 x 32, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

*Portraits from the Series 'Famous People from the Latvian Socialist Republic'* (Портреты из серии «Знатные люди Латвийской ССР»), watercolour on paper:

*Portrait of the Engineer Erna Daugavet* (Портрет инженера-технолога Эрны Даугавет)

*Portrait of the People's Writer Andrei Upit* (Портрет народного писателя Андрея Упита), 41.5 x 31.5, Museum of the Institute of Russian History

*Portrait of the first Latvian-Stakhanovite of the Carriage-Building Factory Edit Podnieks* (Портрет первой литейщицы-стахановки вагоностроительного завода Эдит Подниекс)

## **1951**

### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Uzkoe* (Узкое), watercolour on paper, 29 x 27, coll. A. A. Laktionov

*Trees, Study* (Деревья. Этюд), 20.5 x 16, coll. N. N. Blokhin

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*In Uzkoe* (В Узком)

*A Standing Model* (Стоящий натурщик), 66 x 46, coll. I. A. Laktionov

## **1952**

### **Paintings and Pastels**

*At the Bedside of the Sick Artist I. I. Brodskii* (У постели больного художника И. И. Бродского), oil on card, 34 x 48.5

*Into a New Flat* (В новую квартиру), 130 x 113, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery

*Portrait of the Academic I. P. Bardin* (Портрет академика И. П. Бардина), 92 x 73, Donetsk Regional Art Gallery  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 62.5 x 49.5, Kemerov Regional Art Gallery, Novokuznetsk

### 1953

#### Paintings and Pastels

*At Istra* (У Истры), 55 x 84

*In Istra* (На Истре), 57 x 87

*Poltavshchina* (Полтавщина), 38 x 64

#### Graphics, sketches and studies

*Portrait of P. P. Sokolov-Skalia* (Портрет П. П. Соколова-Скаля), 37 x 26, All-Union Applied Art Combine in the Name of E. V. Vuchetich, Moscow

### 1954

#### Paintings and Pastels

*Portrait of the Artist's Wife* (Портрет жены художника), 98 x 77, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of an Old Man* (Портрет старика), 34 x 26

*Sewing, Spring* (За вышиванием. Весна), pastel on paper, 116 x 100, presented as a gift from the USSR to the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharal Nehru

*Summer: 'Pioneers Pravda'* (Летом (Пионерская правда)), 124 x 145, Altaiskii Krai Museum, Barnaul

### 1955

#### Paintings and Pastels

*Fresh Sea Breeze* (Свежий ветер у моря), 16 x 17

*Portrait of the Academic I. V. Kurchatov* (Портрет академика И. В. Курчатова), charcoal on canvas, 120 x 100, Kemerov Regional Art Gallery, Novokuznetsk

*Portrait of A. M. Shabal'nikov* (Портрет А. М. Шабальникова), 64 x 54, coll. A. M. Shabel'nikov

*Towards Evening in the Forest* (К вечеру в лесе), oil on card, 35 x 25

*White Night in the Baltics* (Белая ночь в Прибалтике), oil on card, 21.5 x 33.5

#### Graphics, sketches and studies

*Portrait of the Academic I. V. Kurchatov* (Портрет академика И. В. Курчатова), 33 x 25

*Sketch for 'Portrait of the Academic I. V. Kurchatov'* (Эскиз портрета академика И. В. Курчатова)

### 1956

#### Paintings and Pastels

*February* (Февраль), pastel on paper, 97 x 82, Lvov Art Gallery

*Female Portrait* (Женский портрет), pastel, 100 x 120

*A Pine Illuminated by the Sun* (The Last Ray) (Сосна, освещенная солнцем (последний луч)), oil on card, 47 x 33, coll. S. A. Egorova

*Portrait of the Old Teacher* (Портрет старой учительницы), pastel on paper, 96 x 80, coll. Of the family of E. V. Vuchetich, Moscow

*Portrait of Vania Laktionov* (Портрет Вани Лактионова), 97 x 82, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Towards Evening* (К вечеру), 38 x 29, Gorlov Art Gallery

*The Village of Shishaki* (Село. Шишаки), tempera on card, 26.5 x 36, coll. V. V. Antonov, St Petersburg

*Warm Autumn* (Теплая осень), 80 x 60

#### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Portrait of A. V. Zhiltsov* (Портрет А. В. Жильцова), sanguine on paper, 60 x 48, coll. V. A. Zhil'tsov, Moscow

#### **1957**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Female Portrait* (Женский портрет), pastel on paper, 124 x 103, Rostov-on-Don Regional Museum of Fine Art

*Landscape, Poltavshchina* (Пейзаж. Полтавщина), 43 x 63, GRM

*Pines* (Сосны), 88 x 65

*Self-Portrait with a Cane* (Автопортрет (с тростью)), pastel on paper, 81 x 60, coll. A. A. Laktionov

#### **1958**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of Aleksei Laktionov* (Портрет Алексея Лактионова), pastel on paper, 103 x 73.5

*Virgin Lands Worker Dmitriev* (Целинник Дмитриев), watercolour on paper, 51 x 38.5, Kabardino-Balkaria Museum of Fine Art, Nal'chik

*A Withering Bouquet* (Увядаяющий букет), 95 x 79.5

##### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Portrait of G. A. Gerasimova* (Портрет Г. А. Герасимовой), charcoal on paper, 117 x 78, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of N. S. Khrushchev* (Портрет Н. С. Хрущева)

#### **1959**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of the Doctor V. G. Zlot* (Портрет докора В. Г. Злота), watercolour on paper, 23.5 x 31.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

##### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Kurt Zanderling* (Курт Зандерлинг)

#### **1959-60**

##### **Paintings and Pastels**

*Old Age Provided For (Veterans of the Russian Stage in A. A. Iablochkina's Retirement Home for Stage Veterans)* (Обеспеченная старость (ветераны русской сцены в доме ВТО имени А. А. Яблочкиной)), 270.5 x 310.5, Kiev Museum of Russian and Soviet Art

## 1950s

### Paintings and Pastels

- Female Portrait (with a Fox-fur Scarf)* (Женский портрет (с лисой на плечах)), 70 x 60, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova
- In the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences, Study* (В Президиуме Академии наук. Этюд), 27 x 17.5, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Pines, Illuminated by the Sun, Study* (Сосны, освещенные солнцем. Этюд), oil on card, 50 x 35, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Pines, Study* (Сосны. Этюд), 20.5 x 12.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of Serezha and Masha* (Портрет Сережи и Маши), tempera on canvas, 76 x 60, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Seated Male, Study* (Сидящий мужчина. Этюд), 35 x 24, coll. G. A. Laktionov
- Sunset (Закат)*, oil on card, 17 x 24.5, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Vania Playing the Violin* (Ваня, играющий на скрипке), 170 x 184, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova

## 1960

### Graphics, sketches and studies

- The Beach at Palanga* (Пляж в Паланге), 13 x 19, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of E. I. Brodskii* (Портрет Е. И. Бродского), acrylic on paper, 55 x 45, coll. E. I. Brodskaia, Moscow
- Portrait of the Lieutenant General of the Airforce I. I. Tsybin* (Портрет генерал-лейтенанта авиации И. И. Цыбина), 120 x 100
- Portrait of L. D. Korin* (Портрет Л. Д. Корина), 60.5 x 43.8, GTG

## 1962

### Paintings and Pastels

- Capri* (Капри), coll. N. A. Shchelkov, Moscow
- Naples* (Неаполь), gouache on paper, 31 x 48, coll. N. N. Blokhin
- Paris, Notre Dame* (Париж. Нотр-Дам), tempera on paper, 151 x 116.5, Kalinin Regional Art Gallery
- Pompeii* (Помпея), watercolour on paper
- Portrait of A. P. Ognivtsev* (Портрет А. П. Огневцева), coll. A. M. Gritsai
- A Roman Forum* (Римский форум), gouache on paper, 50 x 60, Briansk Art Gallery
- The Sene Embankment* (Набережная Сены), watercolour on paper, 35.5 x 47.5, coll. V. E. Grechko, Moscow
- The Sene Embankment near the Notre Dame Cathedral* (Набережная Сены близ собора Парижской богородицы), gouache on canvas, 152 x 116
- A Small Canal in Venice* (Маленький канал в Венеции), watercolour on paper, 45 x 27
- The Villa of Abamelek-Lazarev in Rome* (Вилла. Абамелек-Лазарева в Риме), 50 x 61, Irkutsk Regional Art Gallery
- The Villa of Garibaldi* (Вилла Гарибальди), gouache on paper

### Graphics, sketches and studies

- The Capitol Stairs, Rome* (Капитолийская лестница)
- The Grand Canal in Venice* (Венеция. Большой канал), 35.5 x 47, coll. S. A. Egorova

*S. S. Iudin, Study for the Painting 'The Feat of the Scientist' (С. С. Юдин. Этюд к картине «Подвиг ученого»)*  
*A View of St Mark's Square, Venice (Венеция. Вид на площадь святого Марка), 48 x 36, Kazakh State Art Gallery in the Name of T. G. Shevchenko, Alma-Ata*

**1963**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of V. I. Lenin in Discussion with H. G. Wells (Портрет В. И. Ленина в беседе с Уэллсом), charcoal on canvas, 121 x 80, coll. G. A. Laktionov*  
*Portrait of the Old Bolshevik and Hero of Socialist Labour P. I. Voevodin (Портрет старого большевика Героя Социалистического Труда П. И. Воеводина), 100 x 80, Roslzo*  
*Study for the Painting 'Visiting the Grandchildren' (Этюд к картины «В гостях у внуков»), 141 x 117, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionova*

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Glass on a Coaster (Стакан в подстаканнике), 11 x 9, coll. G. A. Laktionov*  
*Study for the Painting 'The Feat of the Scientist' (After the Operation) (Эскиз картины «Подвиг ученого»), coll. D. A. Arapov, Moscow*

**1964**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Estonian Landscape (Пейзаж в Эстонии)*  
*A Park in Palanga (Парк в Паланге)*  
*Portrait of the Old Bolshevik and Hero of Socialist Labour F. P. Petrov (Портрет старого большевика Героя Социалистического Труда Ф. П. Петрова), 107 x 82, Roslzo*

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Red Square (Красная площадь)*  
*Self-Portrait (Автопортрет)*

**1964-65**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of V. I. Lenin (Портрет В. И. Ленина), 120 x 100, Lipetsk Regional Art Gallery*

**1965**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*After the Operation: a Portrait of the Surgeons S. S. Iudin, D. A. Arapov, B. S. Rozanov and A. A. Vocharov (После операции. Хирурги С. С. Юдин, Д. А. Арапов, Б. С. Розанов и А. А. Бочаров), 154.5 x 220.5, Kursk Regional Art Gallery in the Name of A. A. Deineka*

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Zagorsk: Series (Загорск. Серия), 10 x 15*  
*The Church of Paraskeva Piatnitsa (Церковь Параскевы Пятницы)*  
*Entrance to the Monastery (Вход в лавру)*

*Panorama of the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery* (Панорама Троице-Сергиевой лавры)  
*Solianaia Tower* (Соляная башня)  
*Uspenskii Cathedral* (Успенский собор)

**1966**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*O. N. Laktionova with a Toy Monkey* (О. Н. Лактионова с игрушечной обезьянкой), 121 x 101, coll. A. A. Laktionov  
*V. I. Lenin at Work* (В. И. Ленин за работы), 120 x 100, Roslzo  
*Portrait of O. N. Laktionova* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой), pastel on paper, 90 x 74, coll. M. A. Laktionova  
*Portrait of the Actor L. A. Petropavlovskaiia-Vishnevskaiia* (Портрет артистки Л. А. Петропавловской-Вишневецкой), pastel on paper, 84 x 68, coll. T. V. Inauri, Moscow  
*Study for the Painting 'Silence'* (Этюд к картине «Тишина»), oil on card, 51 x 72, Avtomekhanicheskii tekhnikum, Moscow

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Portrait of A. A. Vishnevskii* (Портрет А. А. Вишневецкого), sanguine on paper, 72 x 57, coll. A. A. Vishnevskii, Moscow  
*Portrait of V. N. Vorob'ev* (Портрет В. Н. Воробьева), sanguine on paper, 69 x 50, coll. V. N. Vorob'ev, Moscow  
*Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), sanguine on paper, 72 x 57

**1966-67**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Portrait of E. M. Ignat'eva* (Портрет Е. М. Игнат'евой), 75 x 100, coll. E. M. Ignat'eva, Kuibyshev

**1967**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Gurzuf* (Гурзуф), watercolour on paper, 50.5 x 64.5, coll. N. N. Blokhin, Moscow  
*Gurzuf, Chekhov Beach* (Гурзуф. Чеховский пляж), watercolour on paper, 49 x 69, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Gurzuf, Sea and Cliffs* (Гурзуф. Море и скалы), watercolor on paper, 46 x 62, coll. I. A. Laktionov  
*Portrait of E. M. Smirnovaia* (Портрет Е. М. Смирновой), 103 x 81, coll. A. A. and E. M. Smirnov, Moscow  
*Portrait of the Twice Hero of the Soviet Union the Cosmonaut V. M. Komarov* (Портрет дважды Героя Советского Союза летчика-космонавта В. М. Комарова), 100 x 75, GTG  
*Silence* (Тишина), 220 x 180, Roslzo  
*Still Life* (Натюрморт), watercolour on paper, 21.5 x 17.3, coll. N. A. Vishnevskii, Moscow

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Eternal Life* (Вечно живой), sanguine on paper, 63 x 42, Roslzo

- V. I. Lenin, from the Series 'Eternal Life'* (В. И. Ленин. Из серия «Вечно живой»), sanguine on paper, 63 x 42, Kholmok Art Gallery
- Portrait of the Architect A. N. Dushkin* (Портрет архитектура А. Н. Душкина), sanguine and charcoal on paper, 74 x 108, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Portrait of E. A. Kalugina* (Портрет Е. А. Калугиной), sanguine on paper, 69 x 50, coll. E. A. Kalugina, Moscow
- Portrait of the Grandfather A. A. Vishnevskii* (Портрет деда А. А. Вишнеvского), 40.7 x 30, coll. N. A. Vishnevskaiia
- Portrait of A. V. Vishnevskii* (Портрет А. В. Вишнеvского), 41.5 x 30.5, coll. M. A. Vishnevskaiia, Moscow

## 1968

### Paintings and Pastels

- Portrait of V. I. Karataev* (Портрет В. И. Каратаева), 60 x 75, coll. V. N. Karataev, Moscow
- Portrait of the President of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian Socialist Republic N. I. Muskhelishvili* (Портрет президента Академии наук Грузинской ССР Н. И. Мухелишвили), 100 x 75, Art Gallery of Lithuania, Vilnius
- Vilnius Old Town, Literatu Street* (Старый Вильнюс. Улица Литерату, Дом Адама Мицкевича), watercolour on paper, 70.2 x 50.2, Odessa Art Gallery

### Graphics, sketches and studies

- August, A Footpath along a Fence* (Август (Вдоль околицы тропинка)), charcoal on paper, 59 x 79
- The Dacha Settlement of Skachi, near Kranoe Selo* (Дачный поселок Скачки близ Красого села)
- The Kremlin in Winter* (Кремль. Зима), charcoal on paper, 67 x 51, coll. M. A. Vishnevskaiia
- Portrait of Danglele Galinauskene* (Портрет Данголе Галинаускене), sanguine on paper, 64 x 45, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Vilnius Old Town* (Старый Вильнюс), sanguine on paper, 66.5 x 48, Ministry of Culture
- A. A. Vishnevskii with his Son at an Operation* (А. А. Вишнеvский с сыном на операции), 33 x 49, coll. N. A. Vishnevskaiia
- Willow Grove* (Ивовая роща), 50 x 69
- Winter at the Kremlin Walls* (Зима у стен Кремлевских), charcoal on paper, 50 x 69

## 1969

### Paintings and Pastels

- Ballerina* (Балерина), pastel on paper, 47 x 62, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Koz'modem'ianskaia Church in Suzdal* (Козьмодемьянская церковь в Суздале), pastel on paper, 62 x 46, coll. S. A. Egorova
- Novodevichii Monastery* (Новодевичий монастырь), gouache on paper, 74 x 54, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- Paris: View of the Eiffel Tower from the Alexander III Bridge* (Париж. Вид на Эйфелеву башню через мост Александра III), watercolour on paper, 37.5 x 27.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Portrait of L. I. Brezhnev* (Портрет Л. И. Брежнева), 135 x 80, Building of the Supreme Soviet, Kremlin



- Portrait of the Twice Hero of the Soviet Union the Cosmonaut P. I. Beliaev* (Портрет дважды Героя Советского Союза летчика-космонавта П. И. Беляева), 100 x 75, Ministry of Culture
- Portrait of the Hero of the Soviet Union the Cosmonaut Iu. A. Gagarin* (Портрет Героя Советского Союза летчика-космонавта Ю. А. Гагарина), 100 x 75, Ministry of Culture
- Portrait of the Twice Hero of the Soviet Union the Cosmonaut A. G. Nikolaev* (Портрет дважды Героя Советского Союза летчика-космонавта А. Г. Николаева), 100 x 75, Ministry of Culture
- Portrait of N. V. Podgornyi* (Портрет Н. В. Подгорного), 135 x 80, Building of the Supreme Soviet, Kremlin
- Portrait of the Hero of the Soviet Union the Cosmonaut P. R. Popovich* (Портрет Героя Советского Союза летчика-космонавта П. Р. Поповича), 100 x 75, Ministry of Culture

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- The Art Critic I. I. Iastrebov* (Искусствовед И. И. Ястребов), 17.5 x 12, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Passing on the Torch: Portrait of the Surgeon A. A. Vishnevskii with his Son* (Эстафета поколений (Портрет хирурга А. А. Вишневецкого с сыном)), pencil, pastel and chalk on paper, 53 x 40, coll. G. A. Laktionov
- Passing on the Torch: Portrait of the Surgeon A. A. Vishnevskii with his Son at an Operation* (Эстафета поколений (Портрет хирурга А. А. Вишневецкого с сыном на операции)), 33 x 49, coll. N. A. Vishnevskaiia
- Portrait of the Artist's Wife* (Портрет жены художника), charcoal on paper, 75 x 100
- Portrait of a Friend* (Портрет друга), charcoal on paper, 78 x 98
- Portrait of I. M. Makarova* (Портрет И. М. Макаровой), sanguine on paper, 65 x 50, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Portrait of Masha* (Портрет Маши), charcoal on paper, 65 x 50, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Portrait of T. N. Nasipova* (Портрет Т. Н. Насиповой), 43 x 32, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 48.6 x 35, GTG
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), acrylic on paper, 75 x 51, coll. G. A. Laktionov

### **1960s**

#### **Paintings and Pastels**

- The Beach at Palanga* (Паланга. Пляж), oil on card, 12.5 x 21, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- By the Ponds in Palanga* (У пруда в Паланге), oil on card, 31 x 46, coll. S. A. Egorova
- Christmas Cathedral in Suzdal* (Рождественский собор в Суздале), pastel on paper, 49 x 65, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- A Church in Suzdal* (Суздал. Церковь), pastel on paper, 59 x 49, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- A Corner of Palanga* (Уголок Паланги), pastel on paper, 22 x 31, coll. S. A. Egorova
- A Corner of Palanga* (Уголок Паланги), 116 x 151, The Culture House of the April Record Factory, Moscow
- Dunes at Palanga, Study* (Паланга. Дюны. Этюд), 16.5 x 26, coll. M. A. Laktionova

- The Old House of Artists in Palanga* (Старый дом творчества в Паланге), oil on card, 12 x 21, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Estonian Landscape* (Эстонский пейзаж), 80 x 60, Chernavskii Sel'skii Culture House of the Izmailovskii Region of Lipetsk
- One of the Thousands of Small Canals, Venice* (Один из тысячи малых каналов. Венеция), watercolour on canvas, 49 x 35
- Paris, the Sene* (Париж. Сена), watercolour on paper, 18 x 23, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- A Park in Palanga* (Парк в Паланге), 141 x 111, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Seated Model in a Green Dress* (Сидящий натурщик в зеленом платке), watercolour on paper, 22 x 16, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Seated Nude on a Background of Green and Yellow Drapes* (Сидящая обнаженная натурщица на фоне зеленой и желтой драпировок), oil on card, 20 x 12, coll. A. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), sanguine, charcoal and watercolour on paper, coll. S. A. Egorova
- A Street in Vilnius* (Улица в Вильнюсе), watercolour on paper, 70 x 51, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Unfinished Portraits of Cosmonauts* (Khrunov, Popovich, Beliaev, Feoktistov, Shatalov) (Неоконченные портреты летчик-космонавтов (Хрунов, Попович, Беляев, Феоктистов, Шаталов)), oil and charcoal on canvas, 100 x 75, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- The Villa of Abamelek-Lazarev: a House with Trees* (Вилла Абамелек-Лазарева. Дом с деревьями), oil on card, 44 x 56, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- The Walls of the Novodevichii Monastery* (Стена Новодевичьего монастыря), watercolour on paper, 16.5 x 23.5, coll. G. A. Laktionov

### **Graphics, sketches and studies**

- The Cosmonaut V. Komarov at Leisure* (Космонавт В Комаров на отдыхе), sanguine and chalk on paper, 64 x 50, Yaroslavl Regional Art Gallery
- Pages of a Sketch Pad* (Листки из рабочих альбомов), 17 x 12 (9 pages), coll. I. A. Laktionov
- A Park in Palanga* (Парк в Паланге), 41 x 31, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of Masha Laktionova* (Портрет Маши Лактионовой), charcoal and tempera on paper, 96 x 66, coll. M. A. Laktionova
- Rome, Marcus Aurelius, Capitol Square* (Рим. Марк Аврелий. Площадь Капитолия), tempera on paper, All-Union Applied Art Combine in the Name of E. V. Vuchetich, Moscow
- A Woman Sitting in a Chair* (Женщина, сидящая в кресле), charcoal on paper, 35 x 28, coll. I. A. Laktionov

## **1970**

### **Paintings and Pastels**

- Portrait of P. I. Egorov* (Портрет П. И. Егорова), pastel on paper, 68 x 48, coll. S. A. Egorova
- Portrait of A. A. Vishnevskii* (Портрет А. А. Вишневецкого), pastel on paper, 40 x 32
- Self-Portrait with a Burning Candle* (Автопортрет с горющей свечой), pastel on paper, 95 x 74, Les Oreades Gallery, Moscow

1971

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*A Policeman, Drawing Completed with the Left Hand of a Sick Artist* (Будочник (рисунок сделан левой рукой больному художникам)), 15 x 11, coll. I. A. Laktionov

**Undated Works**

**Paintings and Pastels**

*Apple Trees, Study* (Яблони. Этюд), 14.5 x 25.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Children Swimming* (Купающиеся дети), pastel on paper, 25.5 x 18, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Female Portrait, Study* (Женский портрет. Этюд), oil on card, 26 x 20, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*A Joke Composition with Three Playing Cards* (Шуточная композиция с тремя игральными картами), watercolour on paper, 33 x 46, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Landscape* (Пейзаж), watercolour on paper, 19.5 x 16.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov  
*Landscape with a House by a River* (Пейзаж. Дома у реки), oil on card, 48 x 68, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Landscape with the River Voria in Abramtsevo* (Пейзаж. Река Воря в Абрамцево), 95 x 80.5, coll. M. A. Laktionova

*Landscape with a Sunset* (Пейзаж. Закат), 20 x 29.5, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*Landscape with a Sunset on the River* (Пейзаж. Закат на реке), oil on card, 17.5 x 30, coll. S. A. Egorova

*O. N. Laktionova, Study* (О. Н. Лактионова. Этюд), 56 x 48.5, coll. A. A. Laktionov

*A Rural Hut, Study* (Деревенская хата. Этюд), 20 x 31, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Portrait of the Artist A. P. Zarubin, Study* (Портрет художника А. П. Зарубина. Этюд), 67.5 x 50, Rostov-on-Don Regional Museum of Fine Art

*Portrait of a Woman with a Blue Ribbon in her Hair* (Портрет женщины с голубой лентой в волосах), watercolour on paper, 38 x 30, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*The Steam Barge* (Самоходная баржа), oil on card, 24 x 33, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Still Life with a Samovar and Dishes* (Натюрморт с самоваром и посудой), 19 x 30.5, coll. O. A. Laktionova

*A Table under the Trees, Study* (Стол под деревьями. Этюд), oil on card, 20.5 x 12, coll. O. A. Laktionova

*A Tree, Study* (Дерево. Этюд), watercolour on paper, 19 x 12, coll. S. A. Egorova

*Trees with a Sunset in the Background, Study* (Деревья на фоне закатного неба. Этюд), oil on card, 12 x 21, coll. M. A. Laktionova

**Graphics, sketches and studies**

*Father's Head, Sketch* (Голова отца. набросок), 37 x 26.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov

*Katia Moskovskaia* (Катя Московская), 32 x 25, coll. I. A. Laktionov

*A Naked Model with a Beaded Necklace* (Обнаженная натурщица с бусами на шее), 48 x 31, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*A Naked Model with Arms Stretched Forward* (Обнаженная натурщица с вытянутыми вперед руками), 38 x 27, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

*Nine Sketches (Self-Portraits) on One Page* (Девять набросков (автопортреты) на одном листе), 25 x 16, coll. O. A. Laktionova

- Portrait of Serezha Laktionov* (Портрет Сережа Лактионова), sanguine on paper, 62 x 46, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- Portrait of Serezha* (Портрет Сережи), 26 x 18, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- The Sea Shore* (Море. На берегу), watercolour on paper, 18 x 27.5, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- V. A. Serov and Yu. N. Truze* (В. А. Серов и Ю. Н. Трузе), 27 x 37, coll. I. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 29 x 22, coll. S. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), charcoal on paper, 70 x 54, coll. O. A. Laktionova
- Serezha's Head, Sketch for a Portrait* (Голова Сережи. набросок портрета), 45 x 34, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- A Standing Model* (Стоящий натурщик), 34 x 25, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Study for a Female Portrait, Two Sketches on One Page* (Эскиз женского портрета. Два наброска на одном листе), 25.5 x 17.5
- Study for a Portrait of K. A. Zubov* (Эскиз портрета К. А. Зубова), 40 x 28, coll. O. A. Laktionova
- Study of a Seated Girl* (Этюд. Сидящая девушка), 37 x 29, coll. G. A. Laktionov

### **Sculpture**

- Portrait of O. N. Laktionova with a Baby* (Портрет О. Н. Лактионовой с ребенком), plaster, 23 x 18 x 16, 1950s, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), plaster, 50 x 40 x 35, 1950s, coll. I. A. and O. A. Laktionov

### **Print Graphics**

Listed in date order. All works are lithographs unless otherwise stated.

- I. E. Iakir* (И. Э. Якир), 69 x 51.5, 1934
- The Spit at Berdiansk* (Бердянская коса), 1935
- I. I. Brodskii* (И. И. Бродский), 85 x 64, 1935
- I. I. Brodskii* (И. И. Бродский), 65 x 50, 1935
- T. G. Shevchenko* (Т. Г. Шевченко), 71 x 53, 1935
- R. P. Eideman* (Р. П. Эйдеман), 72 x 48.5, 1935
- I. I. Brodskii* (И. И. Бродский), 78 x 55, 1936
- N. Pavlov* (Н. Павлов), 31 x 23.5, 1936
- Landscape* (Пейзаж), 1936
- Hero of the Soviet Union Kudashev* (Герой Советского Союза Кудашев), 1940
- Hero of the Soviet Union Larchenko* (Герой Советского Союза М. Ларченко), 1940
- Hero of the Soviet Union Larionov* (Герой Советского Союза Ларионов), 1940
- Hero of the Soviet Union Serebriakov* (Герой Советского Союза Серебряков), 1940
- K. Marx* (К. Маркс), 44 x 31, 1940
- Poster 'The Scum has Succumbed to the Clutches of Winter'* (Плакат «Попались стервецы в объятия зима»), 1941
- Poster 'Stalinist Falcons, Beat the Overstretched Fashist Pirates!'* (Плакат «Сталинские соколы, бейте зарвавшихся фашистских пиратов!»), 44 x 30, 1941
- Poster 'Comrades Anti-Aircraft Gunners, Beat the Fashist Scum!'* (Плакат «Товарищи зенитчики, бейте фашистских стервятников!»), 54 x 35, 1941

- Poster 'Fashism is a Bloody Monster, Beat it without Mercy!'* (Плакат «Фашизм – кровавое чудовище! Бей его без пощады!»), 62 x 45.7, 1941
- V. I. Lenin* (В. И. Ленин), 42 x 29, 1945
- M. I. Kalinin* (М. И. Калинин), 54 x 38, 1946
- N. A. Rimskii-Korsakov* (Н. А. Римский-Корсаков), 52 x 37, 1947
- P. I. Tchaikovsky* (П. И. Чайковский), 52 x 36, 1947
- N. A. Voznesenskii* (Н. А. Вознесенский), 62 x 46, 1948
- A. N. Radishchev* (А. Н. Радищев), 62 x 44, 1949
- K. Marx* (К. Маркс), offset, 82 x 58, 1959
- F. Engels* (Ф. Энгельс), offset, 80 x 58, 1959
- K. E. Voroshilov* (К. Е. Ворошилов), offset, 60 x 44, 1960
- V. I. Lenin* (В. И. Ленин), 79.5 x 59.5, 1962
- K. Marx* (К. Маркс), 60 x 46, 1962
- F. Engels* (Ф. Энгельс), 62 x 47, 1962
- F. Engels* (Ф. Энгельс), 80 x 46, 1962
- L. I. Brezhnev* (Л. И. Брежнев), 57 x 45, 1963
- The Cosmic Brotherhood: P. R. Popovich and A. G. Nikolaev* (Космические братья (П. Р. Попович и А. Г. Николаев)), 60 x 75, 1963
- V. I. Lenin* (В. И. Ленин), 80.5 x 60, 1963
- Il'ich* (Ильич), 60 x 47, 1964
- Red Square* (Красная площадь), 1964
- Self-Portrait* (Автопортрет), 60 x 47, 1964
- V. I. Lenin at Work* (В. И. Ленин за работой), 65 x 52, 1964
- A. E. Arbuzov* (А. Е. Арбузов), 60 x 45, 1965
- V. F. Bykovskii* (В. Ф. Быковский), 60 x 47, 1965
- B. B. Egorov* (Б. Б. Егоров), 62 x 47, 1965
- K. P. Feoktistiv* (К. П. Феоктистов), 62 x 47, 1965
- Iu. A. Gagarin* (Ю. А. Гагарин), 62 x 47, 1965
- V. M. Komarov* (В. М. Комаров), 60 x 47, 1965
- A. N. Kosygin* (А. Н. Косыгин), 83 x 60, 1965
- A. I. Mikoian* (А. И. Микоян), 85 x 62, 1965
- A. N. Nesmeianov* (А. Н. Несмеянов), 60 x 46, 1965
- A. G. Nikolaev* (А. Г. Николаев), 60 x 47, 1965
- V. V. Nikolaeva-Tereshkova* (В. В. Николаева-Терешкова), 60 x 47, 1965
- P. R. Popovich* (П. Р. Попович), 62 x 47, 1965
- G. S. Titov* (Г. С. Титов), 62 x 47, 1965
- The Kremlin* (Кремль), 40 x 62, 1966
- V. I. Lenin Speaking* (В. И. Ленин говорит), 60 x 47, 1968
- I. S. Turgenev and N. K. Krupskaiia in Gorky* (И. С. Тургенев и Н. К. Крупская в Горках), offset, 60 x 82, 1969
- N. V. Podgornyi* (Н. В. Подгорный), 60 x 46, 1969