In Russia, red art turning to green

The nation's new capitalists are paying top ruble for paintings of Socialist Realism -- glorified renderings of happy, toiling Soviet peasants.
By David Holley, Times Staff Writer
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Malyy Gorodok, Russia — THE painting exudes the sweet softness of idyllic village life: A mother, towel wrapped around her head, braids her daughter's hair while a young woman draws a red comb through her own tresses. A girl in a dark dress carries a samovar for tea, a little girl drinks from a white cup, and a cat makes its presence known.

Yuri Kugach, 90, still remembers the inspiration for one of his most famous paintings. He was visiting the home of a fisherman when he saw the women of the house making themselves up after a visit to the banya, or Russian-style steam bath.

"I said to myself, 'This is a painting,' " he recalled four decades later.

Today, his works and those of other Soviet painters who produced technically skilled art in the happy-worker style often dubbed Socialist Realism are riding a wave of new popularity. In a development that bygone communist leaders might not have found amusing, wealthy Moscow capitalists are sharply bidding up prices — as high as $200,000 — as they scramble to acquire pieces.

Kugach's life as one of the most well-known Soviet artists was cemented more than half a century ago when he moved into the home of a peasant family in this tiny lakeside village surrounded by birch and pine forests 250 miles northwest of Moscow.

He has been based here ever since, doing landscapes, some overtly political works such as paintings glorifying Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, but above all chronicling the life of peasants in a style that emphasized the satisfying aspects of their existence, such as the scene of women and girls after enjoying the banya.
Yuri Tyukhtin, 39, a banker who also runs a gallery specializing in Soviet art, said such paintings were now trendy because "people feel nostalgia for the USSR."

"They forget everything that was bad, and people are homesick for the good things."

Tyukhtin said he liked Socialist Realism "because it's monumental, because it depicts happiness."

"The characters are healthy and enlightened. The art was propaganda of happiness, and the people who were doing it were doing it sincerely."

Today's buyers are members of Russia's emerging upper middle class, who often want paintings to decorate their urban apartments and countryside dachas, or collectors among the country's new super-rich who see art as an investment and a hobby.

Alexei Ananyev, a wealthy collector who is chairman of Promsvyazbank, said he had noticed the growing popularity of Soviet art in the prices he must pay. But the paintings are still a good investment, he said.

"People are investing in real estate," Ananyev said. "And when they have enough funds to invest, some of them start investing into fine arts. But this increase is motivated by people's desire to obtain something which they can understand and love. With this kind of art they feel at home, as it describes their lives and the reality they live or lived in."

When Kugach and his wife moved to this village a few years after World War II, he started painting the rituals of daily life — mothers near cradles, children playing, youths dating, weddings, funerals.

"It was not just village life for me," he said. "It was the life of the Russian people."

Kugach recalls with pride how an art reviewer had described his paintings as "poetical description" of village life.
"The main thing is poetry," he said. "This is the essence of all my work. A real artist doesn't paint what he sees. He paints what he wants to see. Those who want to see dirt, see dirt. At all times, some people want to see bad things and some want to see good things.

"In the art of our period, it's quite natural that artists depicted labor not as a curse, but regarded labor as a necessity — a human necessity, natural and full of life."

In Socialist Realism, that spirit infuses art depicting all sorts of scenes, including steelworkers at their jobs, soldiers and sailors on duty or at play and ordinary folk going about their daily lives.

KUGACH'S 68-year-old son, Mikhail, who also is a famous artist, recently sold Ananyev a painting he had held for 45 years depicting a young ticket collector late at night in a nearly empty trolley bus, deeply engaged in reading a book. She is illuminated with a bit more light than the rest of the bus, projecting a touch of holiness.

It was a scene he saw often, because "at that moment, education was given a lot of attention, and everybody was trying to read and get educated at any time," Mikhail Kugach said.

Ananyev said he liked the painting because the artist "managed to convey all her feelings — her fatigue, but her desire to read even in the dark, cold trolley bus."

Though Soviet artists knew they could get in trouble for openly dissident works, the pressure to be political in their paintings was often exerted in subtle ways. Artists needed many years of formal schooling, then lived as a privileged class entitled to better apartments, large studios and access to holiday guest houses.

Soviet officials preferred that when artists painted happy peasants, the art also showed them working, Mikhail Kugach said.

Leonid Shishkin, 60, director of an art gallery bearing his name, is
among the pioneers in turning Soviet-era art into a commercial business. He began selling art to Western dealers in 1988, launched a gallery for private sales a few years later and opened his gallery to the public in 1995.

"Paintings were hidden in artists' family apartments, behind sofas, under beds," he said. "And this art that nobody ever saw became the merchandise we began to look for and find and sell."

There were five galleries in Moscow dealing in Soviet art 10 years ago, 10 galleries five years ago, and there are 50 galleries today, Shishkin said.

Alexander Dobrovinsky, a Moscow lawyer and collector of Soviet art, uses humor to deal with the connection between Socialist Realism and the darker side of communism.

Rugs showing portraits of Soviet founder Vladimir I. Lenin and Stalin protege Vyacheslav M. Molotov, made to be hung on a wall, lie on the floors of his law firm headquarters, which is lavishly decorated with Soviet art.

"I have the pleasure to walk on it, to clean my shoes on it," Dobrovinsky said of the rug with the image of Molotov.

The Lenin rug is strategically placed to encourage people entering his office to step on it.

"It is the biggest pleasure to see people who walk on the carpet," he said. "The older people try to avoid his face. And the young fellows clean their shoes, just on his face.

"I can accept it that some people take it much more seriously than I do," Dobrovinsky added. "I live only to have pleasure in my life, nothing more…. The things I collected should bring some sunshine in my life and the life of the people who are here."

Dobrovinsky said he would sometimes ask himself whether it was justifiable to have fun with art that was so closely tied to a repressive system that caused great suffering.
"I find several excuses," he explained. "First of all, I think that absolutely terrible things happened in Western Europe in the Middle Ages — grotesque tragedies like when the Inquisition burned people at stakes. Nevertheless, we accepted Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, etc., disregarding what happened in Western Europe. This is history. To reflect it to Stalin's era — to me, it's the same."

Others are less critical of Soviet times than Dobrovinsky.

ALEXANDER Nekrassov, 45, owner of Arbat Prestige, a chain of large cosmetic stores, said he buys paintings that depict "the real life of the Soviet people, in love and happiness, in work, in families."

The upbeat flavor of much Soviet art only adds to its appeal for such collectors.

"I have a country house, and it will harmonize with nature around the house and the house itself, and it's characteristic of the time of my parents' lives. They will be very pleased," said Dmitry Ivanov, 35, a real estate manager who recently bought several paintings showing oil-industry workers.

"I would like the memory of those times to continue to live," Ivanov said. "My father and grandfather worked in the oil industry, and my brother and my sister. Even my great-grandfather."

Andrei Bobkov, 41, a businessman in the oil industry, bought three paintings at the same auction.

"People keep returning in their thoughts and remembrances to those times, to the best moments they left back there without trying to recall the dark and unpleasant things," he said. "You can call it nostalgia or whatever, but the price for that period art is steadily and dynamically going higher and higher. I am buying that art to invest."

In a change from the early 1990s, when foreigners were buying much of the art, it is now Russians who are most willing to spend money,
although Chinese dealers also have started coming to Moscow to buy works from that period, Shishkin said.

"Foreigners can't pay the money that Russians can pay," Shishkin said. Foreigners at auctions spend $100 to $2,000, whereas Russians often buy paintings in the $50,000-to-$70,000 range and beyond, he said.

The competitive fervor at auctions sometimes gets out of control, with bidders running the price well past what items are worth, Shishkin said.

"It's the Russian character," he explained. "We're talking about the Russian new rich. They don't want to give in. I had a case where the price skyrocketed from $1,000 to $50,000."

Among the paintings Shishkin has for sale at his gallery is a roughly 8-foot-square work of Stalin being greeted by children. The price is $150,000.

"Things like this that I sold before, one I sold to an important oil company that put it in their VIP hall," Shishkin said. "I think in general a lot of company owners feel themselves to be like Stalin — a big boss. Stalin is a strict big boss, and some people associate themselves not in this political cruel style, but they feel themselves like a big boss."

At the Arbat Prestige cosmetic stores, where owner Nekrassov has hundreds of the paintings on display, the art gets a mixed reception.

At one store, a large portrait of Stalin gazes over the checkout counter, as if warning against shoplifting.

"My reaction toward Stalin was horrible," said Anna Stirnelskaya, 60, a pensioner. "I came in with a friend of mine whose parents were repressed, and she immediately wanted to leave the shop."

But, Stirnelskaya added, "it's mostly young people who come here, and those young people don't pay any attention at all. For them it's like the history of the Egyptian pyramids. They've grown up in a
different country."

At another Arbat Prestige store, Yelena Pleshakova, 20, a student, was checking out pink-packaged perfume on the shelves of Gucci products, with a Stalin portrait hanging high on a nearby wall.

Asked her reaction, she replied, "I don't really pay much attention to Stalin when I see Gucci."

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