SOVIET ARTISTIC TRAINING AND PATRONAGE

Historically, technical excellence in the fine arts has long been recognized and well rewarded in Russia. The first Academy of Arts was established in St. Petersburg by Catherine the Great in 1764. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Soviet government established regional art institutes throughout the country. The most prestigious schools were located in Moscow (Surikov Institute) and Leningrad/St. Petersburg (Repin Institute)

The education of a Soviet era artist required the completion of a formal five year program at a recognized art institute. Graduation required the successful completion of a large scale diploma painting that was juried by the faculty members of the institute. After graduation, the aspiration of most artists was to become a member of the regional Artists Union. The regional union was, in turn, influenced by the USSR Union of Soviet Artists which directed all national and regional art policy and programs

As members of the Artists Union, artists received official recognition as state employees. They received a monthly stipend and were provided with studio space, paint, canvas and supplies. Registered union artist also obtained the opportunity to compete in government sponsored exhibitions which were a primary conduit for both supplemental financial earnings and the opportunity to gain artistic recognition among their peers as well as critical public acclaim. Toward the end, in the 1980’s union membership included over 13,000 artists and craftsman

Registered union artists could also be commissioned by a governmental agency to create paintings for specific occasions or on an assigned item. For the majority of union members, government sponsored exhibitions or commission work occupied a relatively small percentage of their total creative output. Artists actively painted subjects of their own choice as a pure extension of their individual creative initiative and as a means of improving or experimenting with their personal painting techniques.

Critics of Russian Impressionism discount its artistic significance due to the relationship with the Soviet state. Government patronage is in no way uniquely Soviet in nature or history. Throughout history the church and state have supported the arts. Examples include the Catholic Church during the Renaissance, the traditional patronage of the French, British and Spanish monarchies, and, more recently, the American government support of Works Project Administration artists in the 1930’s and the National Endowment for the Arts today.