Almost nothing seems as incongruous as Soviet proletarian art in middle-class Utah. Russia's forests and steppes are far removed from the mountains and deserts of the Beehive State, yet Utah now ranks (with Minnesota, New Jersey, and Arizona) among America's top centers for Russian art of the Soviet era. With the help of such Utah dealers as Ellie Sonntag Stephens, Thomas Kearns McCarthy, and James Dabakis, a score of outstanding collections of Soviet art have emerged here.

Why Utah, of all places? Like most life-altering events, the start of this journey was not planned. In 1990, Ray Johnson of Scottsdale, Arizona's Overland Gallery found that he shared a passion for the art of eastern Europe with the Utah talk-show host and entrepreneur James "Indiana Jim" Dabakis. In my role as director of Utah's Springville Museum of Art, I had just returned from Russia, where I discovered Soviet art for myself, and was busy "infecting" others with my enthusiasm for its beauty and insights. Soon our trio began to find, acquire, and import these artworks to the U.S.

Nestled in the Wasatch Mountains just south of Salt Lake City, the Springville Museum of Art is now the epicenter of Utahans' interest in Soviet imagery. Inside its "Spanish-Moroccan" Art Deco structure is the state's largest single holding. We began presenting exhibitions of Soviet art here in late 1990, and the following year one of America's greatest collectors of Soviet art, Utahan Jerald H. Jacobs, lent his treasures. In 1993 he began donating important examples to us, and soon oth...
collectors followed suit, among them Diane and Sam Stewart, John and Debbie Watkins, Roy and Anne Jespersen, the Dumke Foundation, and Dabakis with his partners Alexey Zubach and Igor N zaruchuk.

Today the museum owns 125 important Soviet paintings, sculptures, and woodcuts, and 300 works have been loaned by their generous owners. Five of its galleries are dedicated to this specialty, and additional galleries are used for temporary displays. For example, exhibitions such as Women Workers in the USSR: Liberation or Slavery? (2005) and The Iconography of Soviet Propaganda (2003) have delved into sociological issues related to communism.

ART WITH AN AGENDA

Fortunately, no matter how one slices the black bread of Marxist-Leninist Russia, the art always comes out cake. It would seem that the stringent conditions imposed by totalitarianism did not destroy artistic expression, but rather redirected it. Official artists in the Soviet Union were expected to ignore their own visions and focus instead on the task of changing society for the greater good. This was both a burden and a blessing: The government subsidized the arts, and thus it called the shots.

At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, Socialist Realism was identified as the single expressive means of bringing to pass a utopian communist state. It encapsulated three major principles:
Yuri Podlazov (1923-1987)

Yellow Socks: Portrait of Masha Svergunova Reading

1953, Oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 20 1/4 in.
Private Collection

- Partiinost — The communist party should lead in all fields, including the arts.
- Ideinost — Art should be guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology, and thus stress socialist-utopian themes.
- Narodnost — Art should spring from national roots and personal character, and thus be accessible to common people.

Hailed as "the only productive artistic method of our times," Sotsrealism moved some artists to describe themselves as "helpless before the enchanting beauty of Communism." Akhmed Kitaev's Miru Mir (Peace to the World), May Day, Red Square of 1964 is propagandistic in conveying this viewpoint. Fifteen years earlier, the art magazine Iskusstvo had noted "Only by evaluating all the phenomena of life ... in the light of the struggle of the Soviet people to construct a Communist society, can the artist ideologically justify his high calling as an ... artist of a new type, a standard-bearer of the Soviet people."

At first, most artists did not see artmaking and ideological dictatorship as irreconcilable; They embraced their unique role as agents of social change, exalting labor, be it in the arena of technology (Mikhail Kostin's In the Stalin Steel Factory of 1949) or agriculture (Mikhail Bogatyrev's New Farrows of 1971). Thus the official artist held to the principles of kritika i samokritika (criticism and self-criticism), "in which he knew what to paint and what not to paint. In other words, he had become his own personal State censor." (After Stalin's death in 1953, artists gained a degree "of relative autonomy."

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Usually official painters celebrated the proletariat through unpretentious portraits and images of the common worker. Pictures such as Yuri Podlazov's Yellow Socks (1953) did not promote the state so much as the family, an acceptable alternative to ideologically driven scenes such as those mentioned above. This focus on the human condition was carried out...
with remarkable empathy, helping to preserve people's dignity in the face of a largely inhuman social structure. In this way Social Realism became, according to the contemporary artist Alexey Steele, "the main vehicle of people's internal freedom and stands as a testimony of insuppressible and self-preserving powers of the human spirit." Other artists found both refuge and self-expression by depicting the landscapes of Mother Russia, as seen in Vladimir Stozharov's *April in the Village of Mufuga* (1967).

The official artist was expected to avoid ambiguity (both thematic and compositional) in order to create works plainly "readable" by the working class. Thus most Social Realist pictures exhibit a certain *tipichnost* (typicality) that appears true to life.

Paintings of workers could be serious without being fatalistic, and positive without being giddy: Indeed, it seems that Soviet Social Realism actually attained the middle ground that had eluded the German Biedermeier and French naturalist schools of the 19th century. Its only true rival was American art of the 1930s, when the undeniable trauma of the Great Depression enabled socialist perspectives of labor to appear in both paintings and politics. In this regard, Nikolai Furmankov's *Mistress of the Road: Portrait of Asphalt Layer Vera Petrovna* (1964) speaks of, and to, the modern world more effectively than most Modernist works do. Here Furmankov conveys his sitter's industrious role as one among millions of "participants in the construction of a new life." *

ENGAGED, AND OPTIMISTIC

In 1939 visitors to the Soviet Pavilion at the New York World's Fair read in the accompanying brochure that the nation's art was truly "democratic ... that is why the Soviet people take the successes and failures of their favourite artists so much to heart, that is why such heated discussions arise about various paintings — discussions in which the collective farmer and the student, the worker and the university professor, the Muscovite and the visitor from remote borderlands take equal part ... and the new artist responds to such a public, such an eager interest in art." *

In the northern Slavic soul, there seems to be a natural inclination toward fatalism. Pointing this out in artworks, however, was branded anti-socialist, and artists who traded heavily in cynicism were condemned. The party wanted brighter interpretations that boosted morale, as seen in Kitaev's exuberant *Just Graduated, We are Going into a New Life* (1953). Indeed, Aleksandr Gerasimov wrote that art should be "educating the Soviet person in the spirit of cheerfulness," and Steele points out that "This 'cheerfulness' was not something totally foreign either. After all, it was an intoxication of the Revolution. Everybody was young, everything was possible, no one could stand in their way, they had victory after victory, at horrible cost, but it only made the victory sweeter. Just one more little step and they would enter the unimaginable, never seen before, the world of 'paradise on earth.' What could produce a more optimistic mode than that?"

Setting aside the fact that the USSR was among the 20th century's most murderous regimes, western critics' animosity to Soviet Socialist
And More Soviet Art — in Minnesota

By Kelly Compton

Minneapolis's Museum of Russian Art (TMORA), the only U.S. institution dedicated to art made in Russia during the 20th century, is poised to unveil its first monographic exhibition. Geli Korzhev: Raising the Banner is also this Soviet Social Realist's first solo show outside his homeland, though some American art lovers will surely recall the impact he made in the Guggenheim Museum's 2005 survey, Russia!

Set to run in Minneapolis from September 10 through January 5, 2008, this retrospective has been organized by TMORA with curators from Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery and St. Petersburg's Russian Museum, both of which will present it next year. Together this pair of distinguished institutions have loaned 16 Korzhev works; the remainder of the 58 works on view in Minneapolis come from TMORA's rich collection and from private U.S. owners.

Born near Moscow in 1925, Korzhev survived the privations of World War II ("the Great Patriotic War") and graduated from Moscow's renowned Surikov Art Institute in 1950. Though he never formally joined the Communist party, young Korzhev could not help but paint images that celebrated the Soviet Union's recent rise to superpower status and that commemorated its people's wartime heroism and suffering. Korzhev benefited from the more relaxed regime of Nikita Khrushchev, and he won fame for co-founding the "Severe Style" movement, the harder-edged, clearer-eyed sensibility of which challenged Stalin's earlier mandate for idealized impressionism.

Endnotes
3 Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China (London: Collins Harvill), 1990, p. 289.
6 Comments by the artist Alexey Steele (b. 1967), 24 July 2000.
7 Platon Biletsky, Soviet Ukrainian Art (Kiev: Mieststvo, 1979), p. 50.
8 Excerpt from the introductory text to the Soviet Pavilion. See exhibition brochure, P.S.1 Museum, 1993, pp. 1.
9 Comments by the artist Alexey Steele (b. 1967), 24 July 2000.