The return of Socialist Realism

By Olga Kalashnikova
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Socialist Realism, the state-mandated standard that ruled the country’s artistic life for 50 years, passed into history during the dying days of the Soviet Union. But the curious body of work produced under the totalitarian yoke is finding a new following. Once considered worthless propaganda, Socialist Realism is now the subject of museum collections in the U.S. and China.

A St. Petersburg-based entrepreneur from China who has collected Soviet Socialist Realist art in the post-Soviet era is planning to showcase his collection by giving it to the city of Shanghai for a new museum.

Chinese businessman Fan Jianxiang has for the last 12 years been investing a large part of his restaurant-business fortune into a collection of 20th century Russian paintings produced under the Socialist Realist yoke.

Fan’s interest in art began when working as an interpreter in Vladivostok in the early 1990s. At that time, Fan said, Chinese cuisine was not well represented in Russia and he saw a business opportunity. An accomplished chef, Fan established with Russian partners the first in a series of “Eastern Tea House” Chinese restaurants in Vladivostok in 1997.

“Later my friend Sui Chao invited me to St. Petersburg and now there are three restaurants in the city,” Fan said. Fan also has a restaurant in Yekaterinburg and is considering opening one in Riga, Latvia.

But Fan’s true passion remains collecting works of Socialist Realism.

The genre, which had been imposed on the Soviet art world by the Communist totalitarian regime from the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, was — in the absence of that regime — deeply unloved in 1990s Russia.

“The attitude to it was awful. Pictures were even destroyed,” said Fan.

Prices for Socialist Realist canvasses were low and nobody was producing fakes, so Fan was able to amass his collection. Throughout this time, Fan sought a way of to improve ties between Russia and his native China through art.

“Now comes the second spring of Russian-Chinese relations,” Fan said. He said that Russia and China are very close to each other, not only geographically, but spiritually.

“Chinese art possesses spirituality, an appeal to human feelings, a philosophical attitude to life. And Russian art also pays much attention to these. The attention to man, the imagery of art — all these are in both Russian and Chinese Art.”
Fan said Russia has not only given him commercial success and a passion for art, but also a life filled with love.

“Fate threw us together on this immense land when, after the Soviet Union, a new Russia was forming. We met, made friends and fell in love. Evidence of that is the portrait of [my wife] drawn by the Russian artist Koncharenko,” Fan said.

The portrait of Fan’s wife, Zeng Jianhua, was the first of his collection. Now Fan has more than 400 separate works of painting, graphic art and sculpture.

Although based on the discredited, Soviet-mandated genre of Socialist Realism, observers who know Fan’s taste see a connection to a broader tradition of Russian realism in the collection.

“It’s not simply the number of the pictures which Fan Jianxiang likes. They belong to a particular trend in art, founded by Russian masters of realistic painting of the 19th century,” the general consul of Russia in Shanghai Andrei Krivtsov said.

“One can follow the stages of the development of this school from the middle until the end of the last century,” Krivtsov added.

Albert Charkin, the president of St. Petersburg Union of Artists is also impressed by the collection.

“The collection possesses not only topical unity, but also high-level art,” said Charkin, who is also the principal of the Academy of Fine Arts, where Fan is a post-graduate student writing a thesis.

“There is an accent on works of a historic character, which reveals the heroic history of Russia, its revolutionary past, and selfless struggle with invaders during World War II,” Charkin said.

Fan recently organized a trip to China for Charkin, Vladimir Pesikov, deputy rector of the Academy of Fine Arts, and painter Yury Kaluta.

The Russian visitors fondly remember their trip to China.

“When I asked if I could see the Russian Orthodox church in Shanghai, my hosts found it,” Charkin said.

“But there was just the building used as a night cafe. Fan’s wife promised us, and Fan agreed, that they will see to it that the building is redeemed and the parish is revived,” Charkin added. “This makes me deeply respect such people.”