

If we exclude the masters of the historical avant-garde, well-known in the West just because they were outsiders (Maljevic, Kandinsky, Kokoska, Chagall), we must remember that Western critics took into consideration only the art of regime, the art of “Socialist Realism”. Our initiative, while introducing to a large public the works that the Soviet artists produced for themselves, revealed how good, true and complete were those artists who worked for their state; their sensitiveness made them similar to the ideal image we have of an artist. One thing made them different from the majority of Western artists: their technical skill. The ideas which lay at the basis of their works were supported by a wide knowledge of art techniques, by a skill that is not to be found among our artists. To become an artist in the Soviet Russia, to be recognized as such and work as a professional in that field one had to study long, and pass a difficult exam: only after that examination, after obtaining the certificate and the stamp for their works the artists could operate, sell their products to private and state organizations: to sum up, only after these procedures they could earn their living as artists. The strict control over the management of arts made the artists of the ex-USSR unbeatable against their Western colleagues, but still too late in their artistic experimentation.

In his beautiful article on our travelling exhibition, published on the “Veneto’s Gazette” (June 25, 1999), my friend Paolo Rizzi said: “To be painters is what these authors only cared for, as we can see from their works...” and I added that all these authors, since Abstract painting onwards, have avoided a lot of trifles.

Moreover, this concept emerges clearly from the works included in our initiative, just as what I call the “box of Socialist Realism” included all the forms of expression related to the great trends of European art in the 20th century. One of the first Italian scholars who understood this situation was a friend of mine, Raffaele De Grada, an art expert well acquainted with the themes of art in the USSR. Around the late 1980s he was entrusted by the City of Milan with the task of setting up an exhibition on the art of the USSR. De Grada went to Moscow, and during his meetings at the Ministry of Culture he was proposed to set up an exhibition on Socialist Realism. During previous journeys, De Grada had visited the small museum of Serpukov, dedicated to the so-called “peredvizhniki” (travelling painters), an important movement patronized by the Tsar Alexander II around 1865. The function of these travelling painters was to inform the uneducated people about the situation of the country and politics by means of murals and sermons; the major exponent of this movement was certainly the Ukrainian Ilja Repin (1844 - 1930). The revolutionaries supported this movement by creating special divisions within the Red Army, dedicated to the artistic propaganda of the revolution. Raffaele De Grada asked for permission to present the exhibition of the travelling painters in Milan. The exhibition was held in 1972 and had a great success, both at a national and at an international level. This was one of the first times in which the West realized how an art that was subordinate to a kind of national propaganda could include different expressive languages, determined by the different personalities of their artists. We can mention for example the works of the great artist from Uzbekistan Nikolaj Karahan (1900-1970), who worked as a volunteer from 1920 to 1924 in a section of the travelling painters of the Red Army; in his works of propaganda we can find typical elements of Western painting of his time as well as the aesthetic influence of that Asian East in which he was born and studied.

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