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Artists Newsletter

IN THE MIX

Ceramics and mixed media

AGENT OF PRODUCTION

The pros and cons of artists' agents

EMPOWERING AND INFORMING THE MAKER AND ARTIST





The Park of Soviet Achievements.

Back in the former USSR

Simon Walker considers training in art, craft and design in post-perestroika Russia.

IT IS INCREASINGLY CLEAR THAT SINCE THE heady days of the mid-eighties, it has become harder and harder to make a living as a practising craftsperson. Staying in the crafts business certainly has nothing to do with financial rewards. Consider then the impressive spectacle of a strong craft presence in the (still) ex-communist state of Russia. One cannot help but admire the vast array of Russian home grown and well-crafted products which are valued not only by tourists but by the Russian people themselves. Woodcarving, textiles, carpet weaving, embroidery and lace, painting on wood, metal and papier mâché and the ubiquitous *matrioshka* dolls are all part of this culture, the existence of which is found in most Russian homes. One wonders whether there is

some corner in the Russian psyche which regards the products and working practices of the craftsperson as important to the spiritual and economic well-being of the culture. In contrast, the Russian visitor to London looks for some affordable souvenir to take back home and, ignoring the dire value of the rouble, buys an article, probably plastic, which is stamped underneath Made in... well anywhere but the UK. It is a familiar lament.

On my recent visit to Moscow, I was interested to see what kind of training students receive to become craftspeople capable of sustaining this immensely accomplished and individual folk craft tradition and whether the relaxation brought about by perestroika has affected art and design students.

If you are intending to visit Russian towns and cities I would strongly recommend procuring up-to-date street maps alongside any old ones as name changes are very fashionable. Streets, dance companies, colleges: all have come under scrutiny and change, although this may not have registered with the Russian citizen from whom you are asking directions. It took some time to locate the M Kalinin School as it exists under its new title of The Russia School of Applied Art. Mikhail Kalinin was a Soviet statesman, founder of the newspaper *Pravda*, and like so many in favour during the cold war, is out of favour now.

There is a great diversity of state education in Russia which has not only an impressively high literacy rate and respect for intellectual and cultural matters but also caters, on a seemingly equal basis, for students studying technical, vocational and academic subjects. The Russia School of Applied Art is a specialist vocational school which trains students for a period of four years from the age of fifteen.

Education is seen by many Russians to be a smart move in a tottering economy. The situation in Russia somewhat mirrors the expansion of further and higher education in the UK. 1996 will not only see an expansion in numbers and an increase in competition for state-subsidised places but also a blossoming of private independent colleges and universities, which few Russians can actually afford. These changes have had some impact on the The Russia School of Applied Art.

Even though the college has a good reputation, it finds itself, as with most state run operations, in an increasingly impoverished and vulnerable position. Morale in the college remains high even though teachers have sometimes had to go without pay for several months. It has recently started an income generation programme and takes on fee paying students at £900 per annum.

There is considerable competition for places at this school. Each year approximately 400 students from the whole of Russia apply for sixty places. High standards are demanded.

The seven departments all cultivate strong links with traditional practices. Its small museum exhibits work dating from its foundation in 1920; it is this continuity that largely dictates the curriculum. Unfortunately, however, no work of the revolutionary past is exhibited, this work is in the archive.

The debate on whether art schools and colleges in the UK have lost their ability and confidence to teach basic skills is constantly fuelled by the likes of an older

generation of artists, such as David Hockney and Peter Blake, who urge a classical training with drawing as the basis for all artistic expression. These views are largely upheld in Russia where notions of a classical training in a Western tradition for all visual arts and crafts has been firmly entrenched since Stalin snuffed out the optimistic and inspired art of the revolutionary period. Much of the day here is given over to the practice of drawing and painting and the theory and history of the crafts. The emphasis is placed on the ability to represent. Students are able to attain very high standards in this area. The school seems to identify and promulgate a singular, coherent and absolute cultural value system in keeping with traditional Western classical artistic values. It appeared that distortion and originality on an individual level were certainly not encouraged. The extent of teaching drawing and painting skills as a basic visual training is seen here as critical for the art and design curriculum in general.

There still remains a strong link between design and industry. The market model chosen by Russia is based on a blend with the English/Dutch small business system but it does not appear to have filtered down to art and design education in any real sense. At No 3 Industrial Pedagogical College in central Moscow (why can't they rename those institutions that really need it?) the major input of business studies for fashion students consists of playing a market economy game, and is taught by a lecturer with no practical experience. A senior lecturer from the Institute of Marketing visits the college weekly and students learn the business environment of corporations rather than the setting up and running of small businesses. Although extremely competent, very few of the students appear to start themselves up after qualifying. Many state a strong desire to set themselves up independently but realise that the capital required is unlikely to be available. Instead, students are encouraged to join established institutions.

Students study in the state run colleges and universities for up to four years. If the college has a hostel it will take students from all over Russia. Otherwise students are Muscovites and forced to live with their parents in small state flats in massive conurbations. Some state colleges still give students one free meal a day but this is an increasingly poor one as the Ministry of Education allocates only 2000 roubles per person (about 30p) a day for this. They also receive a stipend, a princely sum of seventy roubles per month, which would not even cover the price

of a box of matches. However, many art and design students are very inventive and earn money by selling their production. No 3 Industrial Pedagogical College makes use of a number of commercial outlets where student produce is sold to raise funds for the purchase of materials.

Russian culture has always placed a high value on art but its inability to properly apply funding to develop its infrastructure is blatant and especially noticeable in many of the art museums. Showpiece theatres and museums like the Bolshoi or the Pushkin, housing national art treasures, retain their imperial splendour but places like the Central Exhibition Hall are a symbol of poor Soviet design and construction. This museum is similar in form to the Tate, but the attitude differs in many respects. The Tate has cottoned on to the idea of having shows of individual contemporary artists' work, as in the series of 'Art Now' exhibitions. In Moscow, contemporary artists have been regularly showing their work in the Central Exhibition Hall, which consists of a number of small gallery rooms. The artists preside over the show, and are available for discussion of the work, and arrangement of sales, if they are fortunate. However, the sense of presentation is poor and reflects the general lack of infrastructure in Russian society. Here canvas surfaces are rippled through poor stretching and nails can be seen in the gaps at the corners of the lengths of wood that constitute frames.

The changes brought about by perestroika have forcefully affected the whole of Russian society and for most ordinary Russians the daily struggle for economic survival dominates their lives. They feel apprehensive about the pace and nature of the changes. They regard nervously the shift from ideological socialism to a more hedonistic culture, and observe daily the antics of the new power and monied elite who speak the language of market method. Sculptors who used to produce socialist images may now turn their hand to sculpting religious icons: the curriculum looks unlikely to change, only the content of the work.

In a society moving increasingly towards mechanisation and replication the products of this type of education must find themselves increasingly marginalised and vulnerable to market forces. However, unlike the UK, which has largely abandoned its traditional craft base over the years, Russia currently continues to bathe in her folk art traditions.

Simon Walker is a senior lecturer in the School of Post-Compulsory Education and Training at the University of Greenwich and a practising artist.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE DALBY FOREST, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Forest Enterprise invites artists to apply for this ten week residency, running from mid-August to October, 1996. The successful applicant will work with local schools and colleges as well as making a public work of art to go on permanent display in the forest. A fee of £3,300 (excluding materials) is available.

We invite interested artists to submit up to 20 slides of recent work, a CV, letter of application and a SAE for return of materials. Shortlisted applicants will be invited to visit Dalby Forest and discuss their work with the selection panel.

Applications to be submitted by 31/7/96,
to: Pippa Kirkham, Forest Enterprise,
42 Eastgate, Pickering, N. Yorks, YO18 7DU.
For further information phone: 01751 472771.



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- **Extremes of consciousness** – Judith Palmer on the whys and wherefores of the extremes of contemporary art practice
- **Buying art is hard to do** – Elizabeth Nicholls writes about the difficulties she has encountered.
- **Dickinson's diary** – Roger Dickinson takes another look at Visual Arts UK.
- **Awards and prizes** – Nik Houghton investigates the value to artists of grants.