

Soviet Socialist Realism and Art in the Asia-Pacific examines the history and significance of Russian Socialist Realism for Asian art – and extends to the experience in Australia. It argues for its importance socially in this region and as an art movement poses the question, if this was the case, why has it been written out of art historical thinking? The issue is increasingly being researched in individual countries about their own art, especially in China, but this is the first cross-regional analysis of this impact.

The book evaluates how the policies and practices of art developed by the Soviets have influenced in the Asia-Pacific region, then addresses the art itself, first from 1917 until the decades after the Second World War, followed by the new era of protest from around 1970 to today, focused particularly on China, Vietnam, the two Koreas, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia. The text demonstrates how each society adopted and adapted the Russian example to create some of the most important imagery of recent history. It was imagery central to the creation of local identity, transforming the heroic, nationalistic, ideologically driven, generic ideals of Socialist Realism established in Russia.

Joseph Stalin was no great lover of the arts, unlike his Communist leader peers, but he recognised their power to stir his people's souls in pursuit of his political goals to change culture more broadly. Stalin and the writer Maxim Gorky are both credited with defining, in 1934, the new style that would promote this: a style called Socialist Realism, socialist in content and realist in style.

One of the burdens this new style had to bear in the capitalist West in later years was that it was labelled as formulaic, static and unfeeling. The irony of this position was that its purpose was the opposite. It was meant to be an expression 'saturated with ideas and feelings,' wrote Lenin's arts colleague Anatoly Lunacharsky. Such words were repeated under Stalin with his arts leader, Andrei Zhdanov, saying artists must be able to show our heroes ... to catch a glance at our tomorrow'. Beyond a dislike of Cubism and similar movements, how they achieved this was surprisingly elastic: the definition of style was never further specified.

The book follows the support and successful promotion of this art internationally by the Soviets, in events like the 1937 International Fair in Paris, success that prompted increasing alarm in the UK, leading, as their website has said, as a counter-measure to the establishment of the British Council. Post-Second World War, the success of Soviet cultural activities led the Americans to establish the United States Information Service, and in turn their cultural institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, promoted American abstract and conceptual art internationally.

The Cold War provided the context for discrediting Socialist Realism in the 'first' world. Western art historiography provided the means to do this. It identified four criteria. First, it applied the Western-driven concept of connoisseurship, with the idea of fine and poor 'taste', positioning Socialist Realism as 'bad taste', or kitsch. Second, it contrasted Enlightenment ideas of elite individual genius with Socialist Realism's apparent disregard for individualistic creative processes. Third, the related idea of popular (mass) visual art and Socialist



The Second Coming by Sanggawa (established 1995), the Philippines, 1994, oil on canvas, 207 x 619 cm, collection of the Singapore Art Museum

SOVIET SOCIALIST REALISM AND ART IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

by Alison Carroll

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Realism's focus on mass popularity was discredited; and fourth, it critiqued any role of the state in art's creation, specifically, the paramount role of the state in Socialist Realism and its apparently automatically deleterious effect on the quality of the work produced. All this needs closer evaluation. An aspect of this involves looking at the impact of the word 'propaganda', which only from the First World War, took on a negative meaning in the West (in the East it still is benign) in relation to how Socialist Realism should be perceived. This also should be examined – Napoleon reigning in his wild-eyed stallion, propagated through engravings, is as much a fiction as any Socialist Realist painting.

Beyond this is the art. If it had no strength as art, no one would care, but the style's spread and impact through the Asia-Pacific highlights that this is not the case. Contrary to Western thinking, it was the visual power of this work describing an idealised new world that has stirred countless millions throughout the last century in the Asia-Pacific.

Let us look at some examples. Vera Mukhina (1889-1953) created the *Worker and Farm Woman* in 1937 for the International Fair in Paris for Stalin, representing the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), competing with what Hitler was organising to represent Germany. It is, at 24 metres high, the size of an six storey building, made by a



Welcome Monument by Henk Nangtung (1921-91) and Edhi Sunarso (1932-2016), Indonesia, 1962, bronze, six metres high, Jalan Thamrin, Jakarta. Photo: IVAA Collection, Yogyakarta

woman, yes, in the new material of stainless steel, yes. Besides its subject matter and its recognisable human form (its 'realism'), it had the subtlety demonstrating new emancipation for women and experimentation with new technologies. More than that is its artistic strength, recognised by the press at the time as 'the greatest

work of sculpture of the 20th century'. In far-away Indonesia, the Communist Party had grown to be the third largest in the world. Leading artists like Hendra Gunawan (1918-1983) and Sudjojono (1913-1985), later elected to parliament, were members, and were sent to the USSR and East Germany respectively on

cultural tours. President Sukarno himself went to Moscow in 1956 and was so impressed that he brought back both ideas and literal Russian sculpture (the Farmer Statue is one example) to his new post-Independence capital, Jakarta. Henk Nangtung (1921-1991) and Edhi Sunarso's (1932-2016) Welcome



Olympia, Identity with Mother and Child by Semsar Siahaan (1952-2005), Indonesia, 1987, oil on canvas, 139.5 x 289 cm, collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of the National Heritage Board, Singapore

Monument of 1962 very directly reflects Mukhina's work, challenging traditional Indonesian sculpture in its open body positions and modern dress revealing muscle and flesh. It tested the Indonesians technically and financially – Sukarno sold his personal car to help with the costs – but it remains central in Jakarta today.

Soviet influence impacted art practices throughout the Asia-Pacific region in many ways, especially the idea that everyone, particularly 'workers, farmers and soldiers', would have access to the arts. The art schools in the USSR in the late 1920s decreed that 60% of places were to be for the working classes, 30% for farmers and the rest for the former upper classes. The USSR was the first government to stipulate such ideas, edicts that were copied directly in Communist Asia – China, Vietnam, North Korea – but also had an impact in Australia. The Community Arts Board of the Australia Council was founded on the ideal of access for all, a criterion contentiously overriding the assessment of 'quality.' Celebration of 'women's' work, community art classes, access in working spaces like factories, and in country or regional areas, public art, and the employment of arts officers by local councils are all children of Soviet practices. Collective practices, where individuals set their own interests as secondary to the group, originate literally from the Soviets. Political posters are a highlight of the response, usually in places like Australia including a good dose of iconoclasm. Ann Newmarch (1945-2022) humourously applied Mao's dictum about women's equal place with a family snap of her aunt on holiday holding up her husband.

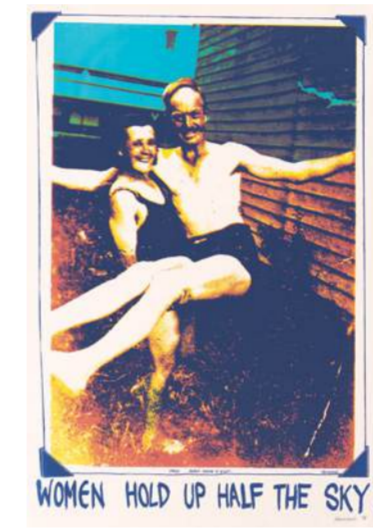
Socialist Realism has been expressed in many ways. An important part was the grand history painting, particularly learnt by the Chinese, who were keen for images to tell the story of their new People's Republic. Russian academicians, like Aleksandr Gerasimov's (1881-1963) portrait of Stalin and General Voroshilov on the walls of the Kremlin, now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, depict an idealised leadership, literally looked up to as they stand solidly together gazing out over Moscow towards 'destiny'. In China, works like Shen Jaiwei's (b 1948) *Standing Guard for our Great Motherland* were similarly recognised for their capacity to tell a tale of strength and determination. In a work highly praised by Madame Mao, again we literally look up to two soldiers transformed into generic heroes gazing out across the border river towards the (at that time) hostile Soviet Union.

Posters and visual magazines made in the USSR, encouraged from the time of the Revolution and created by artists like Aleksandr Rodchenko (1881-1956), and El Lissitzky (1880-1941) spread widely, especially in China, with huge print runs in both places. They adapted traditional imagery – the folk print and papercut – often combining word and image, with pared down colours, and simplified lines, while adding exaggerated heroic figures with clenched fists and glaring eyes that have become icons of Chinese art.

Japan has an interesting role in this, with its own Communist Party under pressure from its military command before the Second World War. However, the government recognised the power of Soviet graphic imagery and used it to convey a very different political agenda. *FRONT* magazine, produced to



FRONT, Japan, No 1-2, 1942, Navy Issue, lithograph, 41.5 x 19 cm



Women Hold Up Half the Sky! by Ann Newmarch (1945-2022), Australia, 1978, screenprint, 80 x 56 cm, courtesy the artist's estate

support the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during the War, follows the Soviet USSR in Construction graphic masterpiece (by Rodchenko and others) in its use of angled views, text and image, duotones and bled edges, but with a further refinement seen in *ukiyo-e* printed portraits. And the quality of the production is a notch higher.

As has been noted, Socialist Realism can be a flexible style. The Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi privileges its own form of Socialist Realism produced from the



Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland by Shen Jiawei, China, 1974, oil on canvas, 189 x 159 cm, courtesy Long Museum Collection Shanghai and the artist



Worker and Kolkhoz Woman by Vera I Mukhina (1889-1953), USSR, 1937, stainless steel, 24.5 m high

1950s to Doi Moi in the 1980s, featuring personal, human-scale imagery with small works often of domestic or pastoral scenes. These works are frequently painted in watercolour, using the techniques learnt from their School of Paris colonial-era teachers.

The Communist Vietnamese understanding of the emotive power of the arts is seen in the role of soldier-artists during the Vietnam (American) War against the capitalist West. One of these artists remembered: 'The morale was high. We soldier-artists felt thrilled with our task, witnessing the battle. On the other hand, our troops felt honoured at having soldier-artists in the company, our drawings glorified their sacrifice and even their death.'

The countries of Southeast Asia mostly had access to Socialist Realism through China with artists unusually using its power, to critique rather than glorify the status quo.

Indonesian Semsar Siahaan (1952-2005) painted his *Olympia* during Suharto's regime, and the Filipino collective Sanggawa (established 1995) made *The Second Coming* just after Marcos had left. They are two very large, grand history paintings, full of political message, humour and intent. The first refers to the Manet painting of the Parisian prostitute refigured as the blonde tourist in Bali fawned over by officials while the people starve. The second comments on the failings of the powerful Catholic Church, here epitomised by the arrival of Pope John Paul in Manila. The artists wrote: 'Religion and entertainment then became the prevalent theme ... Whatever was happening in Manila back in 1994 and early 1995 – the Miss Universe brouhaha; the Pope's record-



The 3 July and 24 July Proclamations are Chairman Mao's Great Strategic Plans! Unite to strike surely, accurately and relentlessly at the handful of class enemies, China, 1968, lithograph, 105.5 x 75.5 cm, Tianjin Fine Arts Publishing House, Landsberger Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

breaking crowd on his second visit; the EDSA anniversary [of Marcos's overthrow and "People Power"] celebration which preceded a fraudulent election; the rise to power of Mike Velarde's El Shaddai, a religious organisation that says liking money is not at all a sin; and through it all sin, sin, and more sin with the good Cardinal hogging the political limelight as usual – these events became fodder for more *gawang editorial* (editorial artworks). The murals tend to hold up a mirror to Philippines society, asking the people to confront and laugh at their demigods, so they may discover their real voice from within'. These works were made in the

1980s and 1990s, relatively recently, but what of today? Is this art still relevant? The Chinese say it is alive and well – witness the imagery made for the 100th anniversary celebration of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021: socialist in content, with the bravura and theatrical dramatisation of earlier grand set pieces.

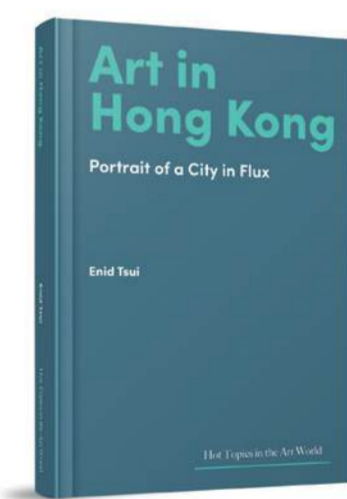
The same occurs in places like Indonesia. The last *Documenta* exhibition in Germany, in 2022, was about collectivism, curated by the Indonesian group Ruangrupa (established 2000) and including the Yogyakarta collective Taring Padi (established 1998), whose work fulfils all the Socialist Realist criteria. They made a series of images, a set of which is now in the Queensland Art Gallery collection, in the left-wing medium of woodcuts, 250 cm high, from 2003, depicting the common people, including protestors carrying the sign 'build solidarity between workers and oppressed people'.

This year in Australia, now-Sydney-based Shen Jiawei (who painted *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland*, which Madame Mao commended) has created a huge work on the history of Communism, celebrated in a new documentary film winning at the 2024 Sydney Film Festival, where it is described as a 'parable of the history of Communism in the style that has established him as one of the world's great history painters'.

Socialist Realism is part of the history of the Asia-Pacific region. It should be known, celebrated where it is merited, and placed it in its rightful context.

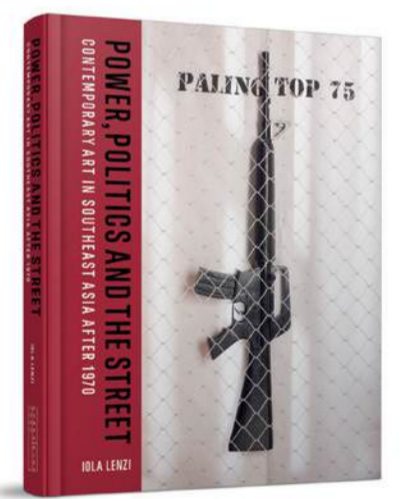
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