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Manezh Re-Examines Khruschev Outrage of 1962

By The Moscow Times

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Inna Shmelyova is just one of the artists whose work is being re-exhibited fifty years after Khruschev's ban. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Better known in the West for promising to "bury" the capitalist world, Soviet leader Nikita Khruschev is also remembered by Russians for banning works that didn't conform to the Communist Party's notion that art should be straightforward, realistic and appeal to workers and peasants.

Visiting "The New Reality" exhibition in Moscow in December 1962, Khruschev got so enraged with what he saw that he shouted obscenities at the artists, promised to deport them from the Soviet Union and ordered the exhibition closed down.

The exhibition's shutdown marked the end of Khruschev's "thaw" — the relative liberation of political and cultural life that reversed Stalinist-era purges. A subsequent crackdown got more artists blacklisted and drove whole genres of art underground — including folk singers,

jazz and rock bands, a generation of avant-garde composers and filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky.

Fifty years later, some of the banned canvases are on display again at the same Manezh exhibition hall — at a time when critics compare Khruschev's ban to recent charges against the band Pussy Riot and artists whose paintings have angered the Kremlin and Russia's dominant Orthodox Church.

"Of course, there are analogies" between the ban and the charges," says Leonid Rabichev, whose schematic painting depicting a blue crib with his infant son surrounded by trees and newly built apartment buildings was part of the 1962 exhibition.

Frail and stooped by age, the 89-year-old Rabichev recalls the fear he felt after Khruschev yelled threats at him and other exhibition participants.

"As I am talking to you, your (foreign) passports are being issued, in 24 hours you will be stripped of your (Soviet) citizenship and exiled," Rabichev recalls Khruschev as telling the artists.

"And there were yells around us, Politburo members yelled, 'What are you doing, Nikita Sergeevich, they should be arrested.' And (chief ideologue Mikhail) Suslov, who stood next to me, raised both fists in the air and shouted, 'They should be strangled!'"

Rabichev got away with losing his job as an advertising designer and writing a repentance letter that was dictated to him by a Communist official. He subsequently returned to advertising — his designs for Aeroflot airlines and sparkling wines are now text-book examples of Soviet-era ads — wrote several books and is still active as an artist.

But fame and big money eluded him. He sold the 1962 painting for a mere $3,000 in 2008 because he needed money to renovate his apartment, he said, wearing a worn-out suit festooned with his World War II medals.

The ban also changed the lives of half a dozen exhibition participants.

Sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, whose works Khruschev derided as degenerate and "distortions of Soviet people's faces" emigrated to the West and found success in New York. Khruschev's family later approached Neizvestny to design the Soviet leader's sarcophagus at a Moscow cemetery.

Inna Shmelyova and other participants of the New Reality group have for years worked in a desolate park outside Moscow — and had their works exhibited for the first time only in the late 1980s, during Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika campaign.

"We made a breakthrough in art — and took a backseat with our breakthrough," the bespectacled, 84-year-old artist said while clutching a booklet with reprints of her works.

The revival of the Manezh exhibition has coincided with another — much less brutal — crackdown on arts in Russia, amid what critics call the replacement of Communist ideology with Orthodox Christian dogma and nationalism promoted by the Kremlin.

In 2010, two prominent Moscow art curators who organized an exhibition titled "Caution: Religion!" were convicted of inciting religious hatred and fined. The 2003 show, which displayed an icon with Jesus Christ's face replaced by a road sign and a photo of a crucified naked woman with the icon of Virgin Mary placed between her thighs, was closed after a raid by a group of Orthodox activists.

Another exhibition was closed in 2007 after a group of altar boys defaced many of the contemporary paintings — including one of Jesus as Mickey Mouse during the Sermon on the Mount. A Russian court banned the picture in 2011 as "extremist."

Three members of the Pussy Riot band were sentenced to two years in jail after a February prank at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral — following a trial that drew international condemnation and was followed by a massive campaign on Kremlin-friendly television networks that portrayed the feminist punk rockers as "offenders of faith."

The organizer of the new Manezh exhibition drew parallels between the recent trials and the 1962 crackdown.

"Today, half a century later, we show these paintings, some people like them, some people don't, but no one gets enraged," Grigory Zaslavsky said. "So, the main lesson of the exhibition is: let's wait. Let's wait for at least a year, take a pause — and maybe this will not be as offensive."

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