

Popkov Retrospective Shows More the Socialist Realism

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"The Builders of Bratsk," (1961) is by far the best-known work by Popkov. **Viktor Popkov**

"The Builders of Bratsk" is by far Viktor Popkov's best-known painting — a classic of socialist realism, the work shows tired workmen striking monumental poses of weariness, having completed construction of the Bratsk Dam in Eastern Siberia.

However, though every Russian student might recognize this work, Popkov — who lived from 1932 to 1974 — in fact painted many others and rarely used the realist style on display in "The Builders of Bratsk." The full range of Popkov's talents are now on display in a new retrospective of the Russian painter's work at the Zurab Tsereteli Gallery.

While best known for the surly, Soviet style of "Builders," the famous work was in fact one of Popkov's first paintings, and it seems that the breakout piece allowed him freedom for more stylistic experimentation. Later works become far more expressionist and less representational, as well as becoming considerably darker in mood.

Only two years after painting "Builders" in 1961, Popkov created his memorable work "He Does Not Envy Them," a rough outline of a painting created from the point of view of one lying in a freshly dug grave, looking upwards at grieving and angry faces.

Popkov trends towards depicting village life over the industrial scenes favored by many Soviet artists, yet his dark palette and obsession with death create a much darker picture of the Russian provinces than the traditional idyllic depiction.

His painting "By the White Sea" shows this grim countryside, depicting fallen crosses and a darkly silhouetted, ominous cow beneath a grey sky. Similarly, in "Brick Factory in Chelyuskintsy," a faceless woman walks alone through an empty, snowy landscape.

One of his most striking works, "Recollections. Widows," depicts a small room in a cottage filled with aged widows, all dressed in red. Painted in 1966, it can be assumed that in their youth the women suffered through the various conflicts of the early 20th century, losing dear friends and relatives along the way.

Popkov reportedly painted the scene after traveling to a village in Arkhangelsk region and seeing a similar scene. "All their lives, all their youth swam before my eyes — all that remained was recollections," Popkov later said in an interview with Sovetsky Khudozhnik magazine.

While the small exhibition only fills two rooms, the works on display show the breadth of Popkov's talents and belie his reputation as a painter of socialist works like "The Builders of Bratsk."

In addition to Popkov's work, the Tsereteli Gallery also has a special exhibition of work by painter Milya Gataullina, whose highly textured landscapes and pastoral scenes are also worth a look. Her work is on display until Jan. 12

Work by Viktor Popkov will be on display until Jan. 26 at the Zurab Tsereteli Arts Gallery, 19 Prechistenka. Metro Kropotkinskaya.

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