

Lacquered History: Soviet Crafts and Problematic Memory of the Communist Past

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ABSTRACT

The paper questions the ethics of displaying lacquer miniatures representing the Soviet past drawing on the example of an exhibition and publishing project *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* undertaken by the All-Russian Museum of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art (Moscow). In November 2017, almost 300 lacquer miniatures were displayed to commemorate the centenary of the Russian Revolution and other upheavals of the twentieth century. While recognizing the efforts of the curators to introduce the imagery of lacquer painting into the actual discussion on the communist past, I argue that the project irons out the controversial nature of the Soviet regime and literally "lacquers" history. I criticize the project for (1) using lacquer miniatures merely as illustrations of the historical events; (2) ignoring political, economic and cultural conditions of imagery making; (3) evading discussion of the problematic past. The review suggests questions to be asked about the representation of history in lacquer miniatures that could help museum curators working with Soviet imagery in crafts.

KEYWORDS

Soviet history; visual history; Soviet crafts; lacquer miniature; exhibition project.

In 2017, a new wave of discussion about the Russian Revolution as an event that still has a significant impact on today's world caught public attention. International media and scholars kept an eye open for reactions to the centenary from Russian officials and intellectuals because reassessments of the Soviet past are frequently interpreted as the symptoms of changing strategies of maintaining the legitimacy of the political regime in modern Russia (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz 2020). While several publications, both in the press and in academic journals, noted the confusion of the official authorities about centenary celebrations (Fitzpatrick

2017; Rendle and Retish 2017; Kurilla 2017), Russian cultural institutions and artistic communities responded readily to the anniversary with various exhibitions and events, which raised new questions and concerns over the difficult past. Those events were neither forced nor confined in their approach to the problematic memory of the Revolution and the communist past. Both the largest Russian museums and small cultural institutions were creative in exploring the topic, telling stories, and representing the Revolution and its aftermath through the items held in their collections (Chuvilova 2018). For example, the All-Russian Museum

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of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art launched a series of exhibitions *Born by October* that sought to acquaint visitors with the evolution of the decorative and applied arts under the Soviet regime, from folk crafts to industrial design.¹ Officially unrelated to the series, but obviously in the logic of anniversary celebrations, the museum held an exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature*, which focused public attention on representations of historical events in the art of lacquers.²

Artistically designed papier-mâché objects with decorative painting coated with lacquer became the hallmark of Russian crafts, although lacquer work was not a traditional technique to decorate and preserve objects of everyday use in Central Russia where it flourished. In the eighteenth century, courtly Russian lacquer art arose out of European fashion for Asian lacquers. Masters were invited from Western Europe to head the first lacquer workshops and train Russian apprentices, which copied contemporary European chinoiseries and imported East Asian models. During the nineteenth century, a number of workshops emerged near Moscow, taking on a leading position in the industry. The Lukutine (former Korobov) and Vishniakov factories improved the quality of lacquers, as well as decorative painting, introducing new motives and Russian themes, which were becoming popular due to the romantic nationalist strivings of the educated elite (Kopplin 2016). Idealized scenes from peasant life, the famous Russian troikas, Ukrainian motives, rural and urban landscapes dominated in painting.

The imagery of lacquers broadened after the Russian Revolution: a workshop in the village of Fedoskino near Moscow not only survived the turmoil but also served as an example for newly organized workshops. Under the Soviet anti-religious policy, old icon painting workshops in the villages of Palekh, Mstera and Kholui switched to the new medium and secular themes in painting

(Jenks 2005). When they turned to lacquers, the former icon painters, who specialized in miniature painting and created compositions with dozens of saints or biblical scenes in an incredibly limited space, designed new images from secular Russian folk culture and medieval Russian history, as well as compositions on contemporary Soviet themes, such as collectivization, industrialization, cultural achievements of the Socialist state, and so on. Picturesque and decorative miniatures catch the viewer's gaze with their sophisticated visual language remarkable for the abundance of details, bright colors, and vivid compositions.

The potential of Russian lacquer miniatures to tell stories and fire people's imagination makes them a powerful medium for representing the image of the past. In recent years, collectors and researchers have critically explored historical subjects in Soviet lacquers, studying the genealogy of the images, highlighting controversies in historical representations, or questioning miniatures as visual historical sources (Gershkovich 2011; Lavrov 2016; Berezina 2017). However, these debates hardly went beyond a narrow circle of scholars. The Museum's exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* brought the discussion to a new level, introducing the collection of lacquer miniatures on Soviet subjects to a broader audience.³

The exhibition was divided into seven sections, each of which was dedicated to a certain historical period: the Revolution of 1905–1907, the Revolution of 1917, the Russian Civil War of 1917–1923, Building a New Society, the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, Building a Developed Socialism, and the Decay of the Socialist State in the 1990s. Every section was comprised of miniatures created between the 1920s and 2017, with imagery relating to the major events or historical figures of the given period. The curatorial texts on the walls commented on the historical events. One can

gain an idea about the texts that accompanied the exhibition from the introductory article and description of objects in the catalogue *History of Russia. The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* that was published for the exhibition opening (Pirogova 2017).⁴

It is remarkable how the breadth of the exhibition's theme contrasted with the diminutiveness of the medium. The lacquer paintings are often no bigger than a smartphone screen. Even though every label indicated a utilitarian function of the object (for example, a casket, a cigarette holder, a powder case, or a photo frame), the displayed items were rarely designed for private use. Many lacquers were created especially for exhibitions or commissioned by museums and were never meant to be private objects. However, the peculiarity of miniature painting invited the observer to shorten the distance to the displayed objects and to find a position closer to the showcase. To see a miniature better, one had to lean over the glass of the showcase, or walk around it if the sides of the box had decorative patterns. It engaged visitors in a closer relationship with the artworks, literally shortening the distance to the depicted past.

While the museum space and the medium of lacquer boxes implied that a visitor would be *physically* engaged, there was no room for critical *intellectual* commitment due to the straightforward curatorial narrative that accompanied the exhibition. Russian and Soviet history was presented as linear, coherent, and joyful, as if all the present-day debates over the controversial past never existed. When museums become recognized as public institutions that provoke thoughts and question conventional interpretations, such an attempt to avoid negative or problematic aspects of the past prevents the exchange of ideas and constructive reconsideration of history (Alexander and Alexander 2008). The exhibition in question presented a particular historical narrative adopted by the curator as a universal interpretation of the past and supported by

the visual arguments of lacquer miniatures. I deem such an attempt to persuade the viewer to accept the model of shared history as problematic since (1) lacquer miniatures were used merely as illustrations for the historical events; (2) political, economic and cultural conditions of imagery production were ignored; (3) the curators evaded the discussion of conflicting interpretations of the past.



More than historical illustrations?

The exhibition project represented an outstanding job by the Lacquer department in studying, classifying, and describing the objects of the collection. However, when the curators entered the debates about the communist regime and the history of the twentieth century, their expertise in art history seemed insufficient for dealing with the problematic past in an inventive way. The approach they chose meant to be safe and consistent: the lacquer boxes were arranged according to the historical master narrative structured by revolutions and wars, which were punctuated with periods of relative peacefulness designated as the “building of the new society.” The displayed objects illuminated the narrative with the artists’ visual reflections on the historical episodes. In a showcase dedicated to a certain event, for example, the Revolution of 1917, there were miniatures painted both in the late 1920s and in the 1980s.

On the one hand, such an approach had its advantages. The observer could see how the visual interpretations of the symbolic events changed over time. For example, if we compare the miniatures on the Great Patriotic War from the late 1940s and the 1970s, we will see how the artistic conventions of the genre transformed. During the 1940s, artists sought to create a heroic and patriotic image of the war,





Fig. 1 Serebryakov, Ivan, *The Defenders of the Land of Russia, 1103-1942*. Casket. Mstera, 1947. 6.2 x 29.4 x 19.5 cm. © All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.



Fig. 2 Puchkov, Petr, *Not a Man Forgotten*. Box with a lid. Fedoskino, 1975. 1.9 x 4.2 x 5.8 cm. © All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.

referring to the great battles of the past, Russia's military victories, portraits of the military leaders (Fig. 1). In the 1970s, artists turned to portraying an experience of the war as traumatic past, depicting the landscape disfigured by the Czech hedgehogs, or a grieving female figure that mourned for all those killed (Fig. 2). These miniatures testify to changing attitudes to war which, interestingly enough, may not correspond to the official triumphalist narrative. However, the exhibition text did not comment on such a striking contrast, either failing to notice this shift or leaving the visitor to make his/her own speculation about it.

On the other hand, the exhibition left an impression that the historical fact has a primary meaning and the artists merely reflected it in their works. The curatorial texts were lacking sensitivity to issues related to the complex relations between history and its visual representation (Burke 2001). For example, in the exhibition catalogue, short historical notes accompanied reproductions of the miniatures. These comments, which are mostly complimentary of Soviet power, in the majority of cases ignore the miniatures as artworks and provide only historical

comments about the depicted events. This approach to compiling a catalogue turns the volume into a richly illustrated historical textbook rather than a museum catalogue. In post-Soviet art criticism, it is common to refer to the lacquers on Soviet themes as "agitation lacquer" or *agitlak* (Gershkovich 2011). Still, as we see, the modern curatorial practice did not get beyond the use of images for structuring a biased historical narrative. The images are thus held "hostage" twice: being used in political agitation during Soviet times and supporting the post-Soviet schematizing representation of the communist past.



Objects without history

The manner of displaying the lacquer miniatures and the accompanying texts were also inattentive to the circumstances of the Soviet Union's policy on the artists' work and crafts. Lacquer miniatures are characterized by the great importance of authorship and the artist's individual approach to solving

a particular composition and theme. However, it is important to notice that under communist rule, the production of national crafts, as well as other artistic goods, was placed under the economic and ideological control of the state.⁵ In the Soviet Union, a set of approved themes and subjects and recommendations for their implementation limited the artist's creativity. Each work, especially those dedicated to Soviet themes, occasioned several art councils and discussions. Art historians consulted the artisans to make sure that the picture on the lid was ideologically correct and at the same time maintained the tradition of artistic practice. It didn't mean that the artist's imagination was completely suppressed, but the miniaturists had to meet the expectations of Soviet art and the production system they belonged to.

Institutionalized practices such as competitions for prizes, thematic exhibi-

tions, or museum commissions supported the search for Soviet imagery in lacquer miniatures during the Soviet time. In the exhibition catalogue, one could read that the painters responded vividly to the events of Soviet life and "glorious pages of the history" (Pirogova 2017: 7) (Fig. 3). I do not question the interest of artists in life around them, but I have to note that besides internal intentions, the external stimuli were also important, and museums played an important role in controlling exhibition opportunities for artists and allocating financial and social resources. Some of the displayed lacquers appear to be the outcome of commissioning or collaboration between the museum and the artists. Moreover, the foreword of the catalogue discloses that contemporary artists also created several artworks for the exhibition project, "to reflect on the various events from the modern point of view" (Pirogova 2017: 6). Reflection on the

Fig. 3 Mokin, Sergei, *The Leader of Socialism and the Jubilant Proletariat*. Casket. Kholui, 1935. 4.7 x 19.9 x 13.8 cm.
© All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.



comparison of the contexts of artistic work in different periods of time could have been a starting point for the thought-provoking discussion about the role of commissions in artistic practice, the limits of artistic autonomy, the influence of institutionally supported official historical narrative on the visual imagery of artistic crafts.



Conclusion Silencing the past, dramatizing the present

When museums are places for the collective work of memory, it seems especially reactionary for an exhibition focused on Russian history in the twentieth century to evade discussing the problematic past. One might argue that if indeed there were no lacquer miniatures picturing forced labor, deportations, or any other manifestation of the regime's violence, how could the curators incorporate "a shadow side" of the history in the exhibition? I believe that would be possible by providing space for personal stories of victims of political repression amongst artists, art historians, or patrons of the craft. For example, Alexander Zubkov, a miniaturist and a head of the workshop in Palekh, was arrested and executed in 1938, and his name was almost erased from Palekh's history even though he had been "a widely respected figure among the [Palekh's] artists and a central reason for their Soviet successes" (Jenks 2005: 149). The art historian Viktor Vasilenko, who worked at the Scientific Research Institute of the Art Industry and regularly visited lacquer workshops giving lectures and consultations, spent nine years in Gulag labor camps following his arrest in 1947. After rehabilitation in 1956, he continued working on national crafts, but shifted his attention to the study of decorative art of Ancient Russia and peasant art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Was this choice

of research topics a form of escapism? How did the bright representations of the achievements of socialism in lacquer miniatures correspond to the experience of those who suffered under the communist regime? Answering those questions and voicing the stories that do not fit the heroic narrative of the Soviet history could add new dimensions to the discussion about the relations between art and ideology in the twentieth century.

Silencing the past and cutting corners resulted in a confusion about how to talk about the 1990s in Russian history. The last section of the exhibition was called "The Decay of the Socialist State," and the lacquer miniatures displayed here were notably different from previous ones. The artists criticize political authorities by painting state officials without heads or portraying the unsightly sides of Russian life. In the introductory article, a comment on the modern history of Russia turns into a search for internal and external enemies. Annotating Aleksandr Smirnov's work *The Siege of a Russian City*, the curator and author of the article wrote: "As always after the turmoil, Russia began to rise, but found itself in a hostile ring of those whom it helped at the cost of the well-being of its people." She considers the country a victim of somebody's hostile plans, and its modern history a result of a betrayal by political elites (Pirogova 2017: 34–35).⁶ Making such a statement discredits the curatorial practice as an activity that commits itself to searching for points of convergence between different positions and broadening perspectives on the artworks.

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The medium of lacquer miniature can lead us to the metaphor of "lacquered history." The reluctance to initiate a discussion and question Russian and Soviet history of the twentieth century is characteristic of more than one exhibition or museum (Khazanov



2000). This essay sought to make this lacquering visible through the remarkable example of the exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature*. I consider lacquer miniatures to be an outstanding medium for highlighting the controversy of the communist past—since it lends itself to questioning from the perspectives of visual history, material history, sociology of art and other critical disciplines. Instead of illustrating history with miniatures, the question can be posed differently: What history is embedded in these images, and could it be told through them? Which subjects come to the foreground and which turn out to be hidden? How does this particular version of history relate to other approaches to the past?

To provide place for multiple voices from the past means to make room in the modern museums for a professional collaboration between museum specialists, historians, sociologists, activists, and other experts. When talking about re-shaping the social imagery of the communist past or working with the problematic memory of the twentieth century, it is also important to invite the audience to participate in these discussions, since it could bring multiple perspectives and concerns to the debates. Such an approach might be a new challenge for museums, but it would help curators to stay in touch with actual discussions in society and remove at least some “layers of lacquer” which state ideology so diligently imposed on matters of public history.



NOTES

1. The central event of the series was dedicated to artistic glass and ceramics of the 1960s–1980s. See information about other exhibitions of the program [available at: https://vmdpni.ru/data/events/2017/04/vesna_v_oktyabre/index.php; accessed on October 11, 2020].
2. I used my personal notes, exhibition catalogue, videos, photos, and reviews to refresh my impression of the exhibition [available at: https://vmdpni.ru/data/events/2017/11/istoriya_rossii_v_lakovoy_miniatyure/index.php; accessed on October 11, 2020].
3. The Museum's Lacquer department organized the exhibition, supported by RHANA Corporation and the Foundation “History of the Fatherland.” The department manages the collection of over 5000 lacquer works that cover the history of Russian lacquers from early experiments of the late eighteenth century to the works of contemporary artists. The core of the collection is Soviet lacquers.
4. The author of the introductory article is Lyudmila Pirogova, the Honored Worker of Culture of the Russian Federation, the head of the Lacquer department at the All-Russian Museum of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art.
5. The same could be said about other countries of the Eastern Bloc, not only the USSR.
6. Smirnov, Aleksandr, “The Siege of Russian City.” Casket. Kholui, 2000. 3.7 x 28.4 x 22 cm. Artist's property.



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