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*Archives of American Art*

## **Celebrating 175: Hugo Gellert, American Artists Congress, First American Artists Congress against War and Fascism, 1936**

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## GOVERNMENT IN ART STATUS OF THE ARTIST IN THE U.S.S.R.

LOUIS LOZOWICK

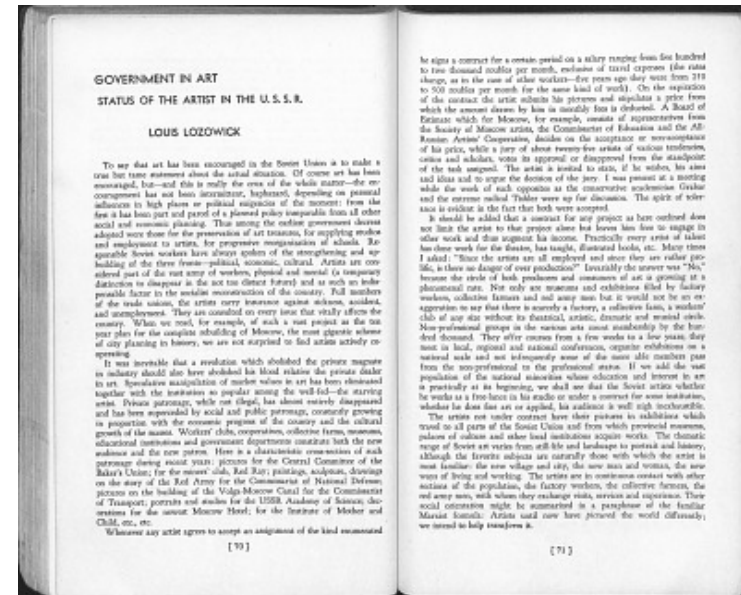
To say that art has been encouraged in the Soviet Union is to make a true but tame statement about the actual situation. Of course art has been encouraged, but—and this is really the crux of the whole matter—the encouragement has not been intermittent, haphazard, depending on personal influences in high places or political exigencies of the moment: from the first it has been part and parcel of a planned policy inseparable from all other social and economic planning. Thus among the earliest government decrees adopted were those for the preservation of art treasures, for supplying studios and employment to artists, for progressive reorganization of schools. Responsible Soviet workers have always spoken of the strengthening and up-building of the three fronts—political, economic, cultural. Artists are considered part of the vast army of workers, physical and mental (a temporary distinction to disappear in the not too distant future) and as such an indispensable factor in the socialist reconstruction of the country. Full members of the trade unions, the artists carry insurance against sickness, accident, and unemployment. They are consulted on every issue that vitally affects the country. When we read, for example, of such a vast project as the ten year plan for the complete rebuilding of Moscow, the most gigantic scheme of city planning in history, we are not surprised to see artists actively cooperating.

It was inevitable that a revolution which abolished the private magnate in industry should also have abolished his blood relative the private dealer in art. Speculative manipulation of market values in art has been eliminated together with the institution so popular among the well-fed—the starving artist. Private patronage, while not illegal, has almost entirely disappeared and has been superseded by social and public patronage, constantly growing in proportion with the economic progress of the country and the cultural growth of the masses. Workers' clubs, cooperatives, collective farms, museums, educational institutions and government departments constitute both the new audience and the new patron. Here is a characteristic cross-section of such patronage during recent years: pictures for the Central Committee of the Baker's Union; for the miners' club, Red Ray; paintings, sculpture, drawings on the story of the Red Army for the Commissariat of National Defense; pictures on the building of the Volga-Moscow Canal for the Commissariat of Transport; portraits and studies for the USSR Academy of Science; decorations for the newest Moscow Hotel; for the Institute of Mother and Child, etc., etc.,

Whenever any artist agrees to accept an assignment of the kind enumerated {70}

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he signs a contract for a certain period on a salary ranging from five hundred to two thousand roubles per month, exclusive of travel expenses (the rates change, as in the case of other workers— five years ago they were from 250 to 500 roubles per month for the same kind of work). On the expiration of the contract the artist submits his pictures and stipulates a price from which the amount drawn by him in monthly fees is deducted. A Board of Estimate which for Moscow, for example, consists of representatives from the Society of Moscow artists, the Commissariat of Education and the All-Russian Artists' Cooperative, decides on the acceptance or non-acceptance of his price, while a jury of about twenty-five artists of various tendencies, critics and scholars,



votes its approval or disapproval from the standpoint of the task assigned. The artist is invited to the state, if he wishes, his aims and ideas and to argue the decision of the jury. I was present at a meeting while the work of such opposites as the conservative academician Grabar and the extreme radical Tishler were up for discussion. The spirit of tolerance is evident in the fact that both were accepted.

It should be added that a contract for any project as here outlined does not limit the artist to that project alone but leaves him free to engage in other work and thus augment his income. Practically every artist of talent has done work for the theatre, has taught, illustrated books, etc. Many times I asked: "Since the artists are all employed and since they are rather prolific, is there no danger of over production?" Invariably the answer was "No," because the circle of both producers and consumers of art is growing at a phenomenal rate. Not only are museums and exhibitions filled by factory workers, collective farmers and red army men but it would not be an exaggeration to say that there is scarcely a factory, a collective farm, a workers' club of any size without its theatrical, artistic, dramatic and musical circle. Non-professional groups in the various arts count membership by the hundred thousand. They offer courses from a few weeks to a few years; they meet in local, regional and national conferences, organize exhibitions on a national scale and not infrequently some of the more able members pass from the non-professional to the professional status. If we add the vast population of the national minorities whose education and interest in art is practically at its beginning, we shall see that the Soviet artists whether he works as a free-lance in his studio or under a contract for some institution, whether he does fine art or applied, his audience is well nigh inexhaustible.

The artists not under contract have their pictures in exhibitions which travel to all parts of the Soviet Union and from which provincial museums, palaces of culture and other local institutions acquire works. The thematic range of Soviet art varies from still-life and landscape to portrait and history, although the favorite subjects are naturally those with which the artist is most familiar: the new village and city, the new man and woman, the new ways of living and working. The artists are in continuous contact with other sections of the population, the factory workers, the collective farmers, the red army men, with whom they exchange visits, services and experience. Their social orientation might be summarized in a paraphrase of the familiar Marxist formula: Artists until now have pictured the world differently; we intend to help transform it.

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