

Images of Women as the Signifiers of the Soviet and National Identity in Estonian Socialist Realist Painting and Graphic Art

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Summary

Abstract: This article will look at changes in post-Second-World-war Estonian painting and graphic art, effected by the introduction of the socialist realist canon. Predominantly, it poses questions about representational transformations designed to construct the new identity of the Soviet Estonian woman, using the examples of the images of working women and of the ethnographic image of the nation-as-a-woman. The discussion of those images will concentrate on how different representations of femininity were utilised for the purposes of official visual propaganda, first of all. At the same time, one has to pay attention to how certain images of women continued to perpetuate – although to a lesser extent – old gender ideologies which in Estonian context could be also read as pro-national and anti-Soviet.

Keywords: Estonian socialist realist art, representations of women, visualisation of the national and Soviet identities

This article will look at changes in post-Second-World-war Estonian painting and graphic art, effected by the introduction of the socialist realist canon. Predominantly, it poses questions about representational transformations designed to construct the new identity of the Soviet Estonian woman. Using the examples of the images of working women and of the ethnographic image of the nation-as-a-woman, I intend to demonstrate how different representations of femininity con-

stituted a battleground of representation in the hands of official visual propaganda. At the same time, one has to pay attention to how certain images of women continued to perpetuate – although to a lesser extent – old gender ideologies which in Estonian context could be also read as pro-national and anti-Soviet.

Socialist realism in Estonia is usually divided into two different periods: the first lasts from 1944 to 1948 and is characterised by moderate ideological and administrative pressure; the second period starts in 1948 when the control and repression of cultural life increased. This was the product of high Stalinism in the arts known as *Zhdanovshchina*¹, usually dated from 1946-1956 when the Communist Party attempted to gain total control over cultural life. In Estonia the era of cultural repressions culminated in 1950, with the infamous VIII plenary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, and continued almost unchanged for even a couple of years after Stalin's death.² In local his-

1 This period in Soviet culture is named after Andrei Zhdanov, General Secretary of the Communist Party in Leningrad and the member of the Politburo, whose speeches reconfirmed the central requirements of Soviet socialist realist culture and strongly criticised traces of 'formalism' and foreign influences. The period was characterised by various campaigns against 'cosmopolitanism', 'impressionism', 'formalism', 'nationalism', etc. in a culture which not only put artists' professional activities, but also their lives, under threat. On *Zhdanovshchina* see, for example: M. C. Bown, *Art under Stalin*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1991, pp. 204–225.

2 S. Helme, J. Kangilaski, *Lühike eesti kunsti ajalugu*. Tallinn: Kunst, 1999, p. 125, 136. Periods of Estonian art of the early Soviet era are usually divided as follows: 1940–1941 1st year of Soviet occupation; 1941–1944 German occupation; 1944–1948 legitimisation of Soviet power in art, propagation of socialist realism; 1948–1955 the high period of Stalinism in arts; 1955 progressive changes, first in architecture followed slightly later in the visual arts (J. Kangilaski, *Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseermine*. – J. Kangilaski, *Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist*. Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2000, pp. 232–233).

torical narratives the accounts of the cultural production of the socialist realist period are generally overshadowed by the repressions that took place in society at large. Also the reception of the art of the period is shaped by a history of institutional and representational restrictions imposed on art, as well as by that of political repressions.

By the time socialist realism was introduced into Estonian art, it was a ready-made product with a clearly defined artistic style and repertoire of imagery. Consequently, the process of transformation of Estonian art culture was meant to transport both the stylistic devices and iconography of Russian socialist realism into an Estonian context. The re-orientation of cultural and ideological influences was made most explicit in representations of a new, Soviet identity organised around the concept of class. These representations included a whole array of iconic images of working-class women, a tradition that had been practically non-existent in the pre-war Estonian art.³

The basic premises of representations of Soviet women were modelled, firstly, on the class structure of the Soviet state, and secondly, on the notion of the equality of the sexes. Naturally, these two coordinates of representation interacted and reinforced each other but it was class, not gender, that supplied the fundamental conceptual framework.⁴ Under the conditions of socialism, seen as a transitory social formation, part of the progression towards a communist society, the class structure of the USSR was divided into three: the leading classes of the proletariat and the peasantry, with an inner hierarchy between them, and a third class, the service-providers, i.e. the white-collar sector, doctors, intellectuals, teachers, etc. These class divisions and professional identities became increasingly important in representations of

women. One of the outcomes of this process of re-imagining the narrative structures and symbolic imagery used to represent Soviet women during the 1930s was the creation of Soviet labour heroines, symbolic figures that became central to the Stalinist discourse about women.⁵ Women's professional identity and participation in social production made them generally the most legitimate objects of representation in visualisations of Soviet femininity. The 'New Soviet Woman' was evoked as 'a liberated, reconstructed persona who symbolised progress'.⁶

In Estonian art of the socialist realist period, normative representations of working women were introduced in three major genres: firstly, representations of women engaged in the working process; secondly, as portrait imagery of the exemplary or so-called 'front-rank' workers; and finally, as individualised portraits, usually of the representatives of other professions, most often intellectuals. Women were sometimes included in the scenes of industrial production, although the industrial sphere was predominantly occupied by male bodies. Since the

3 Armin Tuulse's overview about representations of labour in Estonian art does not name a single image of a female industrial worker although working women appear in scenes of agricultural or domestic labour (A. Tuulse, *Töö eesti kunstis. – Looming* 1941, no. 1, pp. 31–40).

4 V. E. Bonnell, *The Representation of Women in Early Soviet Political Art. – Russian Review* 1991, Vol. 50, p. 287. This essay demonstrates how gender was subordinated to class from the onset of Soviet visual art. Even though Bonnell distinguishes between propaganda art of the pre-1930s and that of the 1930s, one could generalise and say that the notion of class defined the framework for most of the Soviet art.

5 C. Chatterjee, *Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930–39. – Women in the Stalin Era*. Ed. M. Ilic. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, p. 49.

6 C. Chatterjee, *Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity*, p. 52.

early period of socialist realism, the artists often continued to pursue the iconographic traditions of pre-war art, the earliest examples of working women did not differ much from traditional depictions of female participation in rural labour.

In 1945, one of the leading ideologues of the new order, the writer Johannes Semper complained in his article that it was difficult to recognise what precisely would differentiate a contemporary work of art, such as the representation of a harvest from a similar picture from ten years before.⁷ His criticism could be well applied to such works as Richard Uutmaa's 'Rye-Cutters' (1941). This painting, which shows the peasant women working on the field during late-summer harvesting, was produced during the first year of Soviet occupation. Although trying to fit with requirements of realism and representation of labour, it continued a tradition of idealising rural lifestyle and village environment that was widespread in pre-war Estonian art. It also evoked a traditional, rural, and non-progressive image of femininity that did not convey the specificity of the Soviet New Woman.

The painting by Voldemar Väli 'A. Oade, a Exemplary Worker of the Fishermen's Collective Farm 'Soviet Partisan'' (1951) presents the viewer with a radically different type of rural femininity. The painting itself is in perfect agreement with the requirements of socialist realism: the image of a happy, smiling working woman can be seen as 'typical' since it constructs Soviet Estonian femininity through class signifiers and in an entirely positive way. Using the 'typical' and 'contemporary' characteristics as defined by socialist realism in the portrayal of the figure, the painting produces an entirely new identity in Estonian art: that of an individually recognised, yet, typical, Soviet woman, a

heroic or exemplary participant in the process of socialist labour.

However, the large compositions of industrial production or mechanisation of agriculture made use of mostly male bodies and there are almost no examples of heroic working woman in Estonian art. The emancipatory promise Soviet ideology offered for women and women's changing realities was first expressed in works of lesser importance, such as portraits or genre painting which depicted female industrial workers. Current Estonian art history tends to interpret those images of women workers, or women collective farmers for historical reasons as purely propagandistic. In this context, it is rather difficult to ask the question as to what effect this officially directed process of visualising Soviet Estonian femininity had on women's lives.

Within the context of Soviet colonisation that was linked to the importation of an industrial labour force, it is not surprising that images of industrial women gradually became understood as the signifiers par excellence of a colonising Soviet regime. In the collective memory of ethnic Estonians they became aligned with the state, and with Soviet ideology. By extension, the ideals of gender equality that the images of working women were designed to represent were seen as essentially Soviet, i.e. non-Estonian. Only recently, as feminist discourse has filtered into Estonian art history, has it been made possible to address the imagery of women workers as signs or figures of women's emancipation in the public sphere whilst also attending to the limitations of a normative construction of Soviet Estonian femininity.

For instance, during the conference on the Estonian graphic artist Aino Bach (1901–

7 J. Semper, Eesti nõukogude kunst sotsialistliku realismi teel. – Sirp ja Vasar 26 May 1945, pp. 1–2.

1980), the art historian Eha Komissarov pointed out that any positive interpretation of Bach's female workers has been foreclosed by the dominant understanding of representations of industrial female labour as a central component of the imagery of Soviet propaganda. Komissarov argued that given Bach's lifelong and genuine dedication to leftist ideology, one that preceded and overreached the time limits of the Soviet era, these images need to be re-assessed as icons of the representational regime that enabled the artist to depict women's participation in the public sphere and labour.⁸ Bach's works produced during the period of socialist realism ask for a re-interpretation based on her political views, her involvement in the art administration of the early Soviet period, and no less significantly, on her active participation in securing equality for women artists in the art institutions of the pre-war Estonian Republic.⁹

Last examples of this article will engage with the issue of national identity within the general Soviet identity construction. Stalin's approach to the question of how to embrace the temporary situation of co-existence between different languages and cultural traditions within one state was most famously articulated in his central formula for Soviet socialist culture – 'socialist in content, national in form'. Transported into an Estonian context, this formulation produced a number of socialist realist works of an ethnographic nature which served to give visual form and recognition to what was defined as the specificity of locally different national cultures. The forms of cultural nationalism developed during the mid- and late nineteenth century were especially incorporated into the concept of the blossoming of national cultures in the USSR.

Among the best examples of socialist realism's use of what has been called 'pseudo-ethnographic national form'¹⁰ are several paint-

ings by Evald Okas. I will concentrate on two representations of the 'liberation' of Estonia by the Soviet troops. In paintings 'The Estonian Guards Rifle Corps Arriving in Tallinn on 22 September 1944' (1945) and 'Liberation' (1956) the pictorial space is divided between the images of homecoming soldiers (in the case of the first picture native Estonians who had been fighting on the Soviet side¹¹), and the greeting crowd consisting mostly of younger and older women. All the women who appear in the paintings are wearing traditional folk costumes.

The ways in which the element of Estonian-ness is conveyed in these works are the perfect illustration of how the 'national form' appeared in the art of socialist realism and how it could not be divorced from its 'socialist content'. The latter aspect of the paint-

8 E. Komissarov, *Naiskunstnik sotsialistlikus ühiskonnas: kuristik ideaalide ja tegelikkuse vahel*. Unpublished paper presented during a day-conference in Adamson-Eric Museum, Estonian Art Museum, Tallinn, April 2003.

9 Bach was one of these women artists who were responsible for the eventual inclusion of women in the central art organisation of that period, namely, the art society 'Pallas' which was a major professional institution promoting careers of artists after graduating from the art college of the same name.

10 J. Kangilaski, *Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine*, p. 233.

11 The Estonian corps was formed from the survivors of 1941 Soviet conscription, who were initially sent to labour camps, and from war prisoners who had been fighting on the German side. The Estonian corps served a symbolic use in the reoccupation of Estonia. However, in the interval between the German troops retreating and the Soviets arriving, an underground organisation The Republic National Committee managed to announce the installation of a provisional government supported by Estonian units of the German and Finnish troops. It meant that at least 'the symbolic point was made: the Soviet occupation forces did not "liberate" Tallinn from the Germans, but seized it from the Estonians' (R. Taagepera, *Estonia: Return to Independence*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993, p. 71).

ings was embodied in the figures of male soldiers: even if we presume that the fighters represented belonged to Estonian corps of the Soviet Red Army, there is no visible sign of their national identity that the viewer would recognise. The figures of the women in folk costumes, on the other hand, are represented as carriers of visible signs of national belonging. In this sense, the imagery of the feminine continued to be used in socialist realism as a signifier of tradition, belonging and national continuity in a similar way it had been in the discourses and representational regimes of the nineteenth-century national awakening movement. However, the meaning of these images within the logic of the construct of 'socialist content in national form' exceeds the usual implications of the figure of nation-as-a-woman. Now it is inseparable from its 'socialist' or 'Soviet' content, represented by male figures, i.e. Soviet soldiers: the meaning of the ethnographic figure of nation-as-a-woman is to guarantee the recognition of the Soviet soldiers as Estonians. Simultaneously, the visible Sovietness of the male figures endows the figures of women with 'socialist content'. Together they give visual form to a new construct of national identity, based on a common Soviet (i.e. transnational) ideology.

However, was this the only possible interpretation of such imagery? Opposing the view that ethnographic images were purely decorative and entirely in the service of Soviet propaganda, it has been suggested that the postulate 'socialist in content, national in form' offered a sort of 'loophole' for Estonian art and artists. Art historian Mai Levin even claimed that the use of 'national form' was beneficial for maintaining a sort of spirit of national romanticism in general.¹²

As we have seen, the changes in representation in Estonian art after 1945 were

shaped by socio-political and cultural transformations launched as part of the process of Sovietisation of Estonian society and culture. This project included the propagation of new types of individual, Soviet men and women, which generated new types of visual imagery in art, especially regarding women's professional identities. The imagery of nation-as-a-woman, on the other hand, demonstrated that the ways in which socialist realism functioned in newly acquired territories such as Estonia were more complex than it appears and did not just serve to radically and violently transform previous artistic culture. Since the principles of socialist realism and later of 'socialist culture', formulated in accordance with the official ideology of the multinational Soviet state, had to address the issue of the national, they paradoxically provided a limited support to national sentiments. Thus, one might say that at least on the level of interpretation a 'national form' could have been deployed to strengthen the feeling of national identity in opposition to attempts to assimilate a distinct national difference into the homogeneous Soviet identity.

¹² M. Levin, *Sotsialistliku realismi uurimisprobleeme*. – *Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi* 7. Tallinn: Kunst, 1994, p. 204.