

Vladislav Zil'berstein, 1977

Art in Context: Exploring Nonconformist Art in the Soviet Union

a resource for educators, grades 7-12



Prepared by
The Davis Center for Russian and
Eurasian Studies
at Harvard University

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Founded as the Russian Research Center in 1948, the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies is the intellectual home of Harvard University scholars and students with an interest in this critical region of the world.

Beyond the university setting, one of the cornerstones of the Davis Center's mission is to develop and deliver high quality resources and programming that will educate the general public (and specifically K-12 teachers and students) about the history, culture, and current events of Russia and Eurasia. We do this by developing and executing high-quality events and programming (including workshops for teachers, in-classroom lectures, cultural events and webinars) as well as developing, disseminating and helping teachers make use of curricular and material resources. Please be in touch with us if we can help you bring this rich and vibrant region into your classroom teaching.

This curriculum module is one of a series of topical resources created on a variety of historical, political, and sociocultural themes relating to Russia and Eurasia. Each document includes a content essay, classroom applications and approaches, a bibliography and list of further resources, as well as connections to the Common Core Standards. In order to access additional modules and multimedia content, please visit the Davis Center website at <http://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/teach>.

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+ Don't forget these accompanying materials:

A video interview with Professor Jane Sharp of Rutgers University on nonconformist art in the Soviet Union: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiBj2AyA71Y>

A lecture by Robyn Angley, formerly of the Davis Center, on the intersection of early Soviet ideology and culture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irypxeQOQqI#>

Overview and Standards

Students looking at the mysterious compositions of Viktor Pivovarov, the dreamlike landscapes of Boris Sveshnikov, or the amorphous figures of Vladas Zilius might describe them as striking or powerful. But would they understand these images as politically radical or subversive? Would they guess these artists risked their reputations, their livelihoods, and the threat of exile from their homeland to produce these images? As nonconformist artists during an era of intensely controlled Soviet art production, Pivovarov, Sveshnikov, and their contemporaries illuminate diverse ways in which Soviet citizens responded to, and resisted, state authority. Their work offers students the opportunity to consider how historical context informs the creation and interpretation of visual art and imagery.

This module includes background essays for educators, as well as a range of student activities suitable for social studies, humanities, or art classes, focused on observation, discussion, and response exercises. The background materials include a short history of Soviet nonconformist art, as well as definitions and artist profiles illustrating key visual concepts such as surrealism and conceptualism. Video resources for the classroom are also referenced in this text.

The content and classroom approaches in this module address anchor standards from the Common Core State Standards for College and Career Readiness:

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.7.: Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium's portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.7.: Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.context and task.

Background for Teachers and Students

Adapted in part from the exhibit guide The Arts of Subversion: Nonconformist art from the Soviet Union / The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection at the Kathryn W. and Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies by Anna Wexler Katsnelson, Curator (Cambridge, 2008).

The Arts of Subversion

Leaders of the socialist Soviet state crafted a vision of an ideal society through political, economic, and social policy. Following the overthrow of the Russian monarchy through the February and October revolutions of 1917, Russia was plunged into a period of civil war from which the Bolshevik Red Army emerged victorious. The Bolshevik-led movement coalesced into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and as the state extended its control in the 1930s, authorities increasingly demanded that their vision be reflected in the works of Soviet visual artists. In form and content, the state sanctioned a particular style of artistic expression—socialist realism—promoting a worldview that prized collective experience, complete loyalty to the paternalistic regime, and unwavering celebration of the life promised to Soviet citizens by their government. This agenda is easy to recognize in the subject matter of socialist realist paintings. Happy and healthy citizens beam out from the canvas: hardworking farmers, brave soldiers, and loyal factory workers. Less obvious are the ways in which the viewer's experience was also understood to reinforce Soviet ideals.

"Realist" visual art is sometimes called "representational" or "mimetic" (literally meaning "to mimic"). These terms refer to images that depict people, objects, and the natural world in ways that are easily recognizable and claim to represent "real life." Socialist realism demanded not only art that glorified Soviet life, but a representational approach ensuring identical interpretations by every viewer. Two different people viewing a realist painting of a jubilant harvest on a collective farm could each easily identify the scene and come away with similar ideas about what the artist was trying to express. Such a shared vision, state authorities concluded, would help to strengthen Soviet collective identity while directing citizens' imagination toward the construction of an ideal socialist society.

This representational art was quite different from the abstract shapes, dreamlike landscapes, and fragmented images of nonconformist art. Rather than visualizing a shared reality, nonrepresentational images conjured up the inaccessible inner life of the artist and the possibility of varied, private, and highly personal responses from viewers. The likelihood of multiple interpretations of an image emphasized individual—rather than collective—identity and experience.

The link between art and social politics was present from the earliest days of the Russian Revolution, starting with the establishment of Proletkult (the Proletarian Cultural and Enlightenment Organizations, a state federation of cultural societies and artists) after the October Revolution of 1917. Initially, diverse aesthetic styles were embraced as outlets for expression of proletariat identity. Over time the dominant political culture came to condemn all styles but socialist realism as "decadent" and "bourgeois," and by the early 1930s, socialist realism had been enshrined as state policy under Stalin. Artistic production was thoroughly controlled by the state during this time. Artists who did not conform to the mandate of socialist realism could not be official state-sanctioned artists, and, as such, they could not maintain membership in the artists union or receive art supplies and materials sold exclusively by the state. Artists who wanted to produce work outside of state-sanctioned style and themes faced poverty, exile, and persecution.

Conceptual Art

By the 1960s the underground movement of nonconformists was flourishing. Many artists who had been excluded from working in public or state institutions chose to create their own art outside of the government-sanctioned process. Unofficial artists who wanted to show their work and connect to an audience had to do so creatively and surreptitiously, at great personal risk. For example, an open-air exhibit staged in a vacant lot in 1974 was soon attacked by police and bulldozed to the ground. Nevertheless, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw a new generation of artists focused on conceptualism emerge.

Unlike abstract art, conceptual work may include images of recognizable objects or people, but composed in ways that do not mirror the natural world—perhaps floating on a blank page, or presented in implausible scale. Setting and composition are even less recognizable than those of surreal images. Here artists play with the idea of communication and reference. Playfully or absurdly, they may hint at a recognizable narrative, though a clear message remains unfixed and elusive.

Artist Focus: Viktor Pivovarov (b. 1937)

The accompanying “Art in Context” video featuring art historian Jane Sharp examines a lithograph by Viktor Pivovarov. In this work, various objects and words seem to float across the page: a pair of sunglasses; a pencil with a landscape aligned neatly along one of its sides; a hand. A man’s face peeks out from the lower left corner, partially concealed by a fly and an apple (after which the piece is named). A dreamlike balloon of images emerges from the man’s head. The work playfully, or perhaps maddeningly, invites us to make sense of the chaos.

It is this interplay and its effects on the viewer that characterize the conceptual work Viktor Pivovarov pioneered as a member of the Moscow conceptualist art movement. A creator of prints and children’s books, Pivovarov drew heavily on these influences when combining text and image. In contrast to the didactic agenda of official Soviet art, his works invited viewers into a web of images containing multiple possible stories. Affirming the viewers’ individuality, this reading relies on unique perspectives, assumptions, and associations to complete the meaning-making experience.



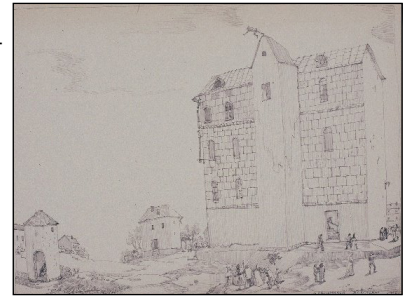
Viktor Pivovarov, *Fly on the Apple*, 1972

Watch minutes 00:45–12:45 of the accompanying video to learn more about Pivovarov and his invitation for viewers to become “co-creators” of meaning for his work.

Surrealism

Finding materials and support for their livelihood was not the only concern of nonconformist artists who risked working outside of the state-sanctioned system. They also had to find models of nonrepresentational art from which to draw inspiration.

Rather than depict a Soviet reality intended to be easily recognized and mimicked by viewers, surrealist Soviet artists portrayed fantastical, absurd, or dreamlike scenarios. Soviet authorities saw the lack of clear meaning, reference, and narrative in these enigmatic subjects as dangerously subversive.



Boris Sveshnikov, Untitled, 1950

Artist Focus: Boris Sveshnikov (1927-1998)

As a 19-year-old art student Boris Sveshnikov was arrested on false charges and spent nearly ten years in a Gulag labor camp. While imprisoned he produced many images in pencil on paper: absurd, disturbing, and disorienting scenes. Sveshnikov's work can be seen both to mirror the brutal world of the camps, and to escape from this world into fiction. Though elements of Gulag life are clearly present, comical and mysterious scenarios force the viewer to question the reality and the meaning of what is being portrayed. Students exploring Sveshnikov's work can be invited to consider its personal and political dimensions.

Watch minutes 12:05–26:57 of the accompanying video to learn more about Sveshnikov and his work.

Abstraction

Searching for artistic legacies outside of the Soviet system, some nonconformists looked to the works of Russian avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, as well as to new movements in Western art. From these sources they studied the use of abstract art, a visual style focused on building blocks of visual images—forms, lines, and color. Geometric shapes, curving outlines, or splashes of color may show only fragments of recognizable figures, objects, or landscapes, inviting viewers to create their own interpretations and experiences of the image. In contrast to realism, which was used to moralize, teach, or insist on a single meaning or “lesson” for a painting, abstraction was used as an open invitation to the viewer, to welcome multiple responses free from an artist's agenda.



Evgeny Rukhin, Untitled, 1975

Artist Focus: Evgeny Rukhin (1943-1976)

Working on canvas, Evgeny Rukhin used not only oil and tempera paints but wood, paper, and objects to explore material textures and the relationship between text and image. Rukhin layered text from newspapers and books with photographs as well as materials from religious and everyday life such as Russian Orthodox icons: a kaleidoscope of media from unexpected sources. The lands under Soviet rule included just such multiplicity: ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity that the state strove to enfold into a universal Soviet identity. Rukhin's art—a riot of textures, fragments, media, and “voices”—boldly questioned this monolithic vision.

Classroom Applications and Approaches

When studying art in a social studies classroom, students can be introduced to two interconnected goals. One is to better understand the historical moment in which the art was created and how this context informs the work. The other is to directly respond to the image itself, learning from observation and attention to the visual language used by the artist. With deepening understanding of Soviet nonconformist art these goals are intimately connected. As students parse drawings, prints, and paintings and reflect on their own responses to them, they experience that “co-creative” viewership that the Soviet state found so threatening. The meaning of the work is not static or didactic; rather, it is deliberately intended to honor the ways in which individual identity informs and changes a viewer’s experiences.

Communicating and Close Looking with Images

Consciously and unconsciously, we all continuously absorb, decode, and respond to images that surround us. The role of the educator here can be to model awareness and reflective practices. When an image produces feelings of curiosity or anxiety, when it persuades us or prompts us, how is it doing so? Does it provoke an interior monologue? Does it speak to us in ways that text or words do not? The following activities are designed to help students explore particular ways in which visual language can be used to communicate.

Creating images as a means of reflection (either before viewing works of art or as a response to them) can help students to understand the power of visual language by asking them to communicate with it themselves.

Classroom Prompts and Activities

1. Give students five to ten minutes to depict one of several ideas or emotions, such as power, solitude, connection, opposition, resistance, or freedom, using only lines and geometric shapes.
2. Have students trade and respond to one another’s sketches. What feelings or ideas are evoked for them when looking at their classmate’s sketches?
3. Ask students to reflect on the choices they made when creating their sketches. What shapes did they use? How were the elements positioned in relation to one another and the larger page? How did they use these marks to evoke an emotion, theme, or idea? Did they use lines and shapes to depict recognizable forms such as people and objects, or did they depict more abstract images? Did their classmates’ responses match their intention? Why might this be?

Nonconformist prints, paintings, and drawings are densely populated with objects, faces, shapes, and landscapes. Having students begin by simply noting what they see can help them “enter into” a work that might at first seem inscrutable. Adding some structure to this process can help students to make thorough and precise observations.

1. Ask students to see how many observations they can independently make about an image in three minutes, and then compare with their classmates.
2. Go around in a circle, each student naming something they see in the image without repeating anything noted by a previous classmate.

Recreating the image can prompt even deeper student observation than close looking alone. Ask students to sketch the image independently. Or, have students team up with classmates to recreate the composition with their own bodies and classroom furniture. For the latter exercise, ask students to identify four or five key elements of the composition (figures, shapes, lines, etc.). Then, have them each stand in for one of these elements, mimicking its form and position with their stance to create a frozen tableau. Drawing a line or extending an arm to mimic a curve that they see can help students to reflect further on their own associations with these visual elements. After re-creating an image in this way, or while watching other students do so, ask students to reflect on the following questions:

Do the people or abstract forms seem to be cowering? Standing tall?
Are they crowded or isolated? Moving away from the viewer or engaging them directly?
When mimicking the position of a shape or posture of a person in the image, do they feel dynamic (in mid-motion) or static (fixed to the spot they are on)?
Does this feel like a powerful position to be in? Does it feel like a weak or vulnerable position to be in? What is the effect of this in the image?
Where does the eye go first when viewing this image? How does it travel among the different elements of the image?
Is the image symmetrical or asymmetrical? If asymmetrical, what is placed in the central part of the image? What is placed along the side? What is the effect of this?
Is there repetition in the image? If so, what is repeated? What is the effect of this?

Responding and Engaging

How do building blocks of visual language (shape, form, color) combine to communicate with the viewer? How do students' own perspectives influence their response to the visual language? The following activities, focusing on viewer response to images, invite students into these questions. (This method is modeled after the "Personal Response Tours" developed by Ray Williams, former Director of Education at Harvard's Sackler Museums.)

Classroom Prompts and Activities

Begin by posting multiple images around the classroom (suggested images on p. X), or by projecting images onto a screen at the front of the room. After students have had a chance to look closely at three or four images, ask them to select one of the prompts below and find an image that evokes the topic or theme.

Choose a painting that makes you think about power.
Choose a painting that makes you think about danger.
Choose a painting that makes you think about rebellion.
Choose a painting that makes you think about sadness.

Ask students to share their choices with the class and explain:

What elements of the image's visual language evoked the theme you chose?
What elements of your own perspective, associations, experiences, or memories do you think contributed to your response to the image?

As students transition from close looking into more expansive thinking about the images they are viewing, it may also be useful to structure student response using a Visible Thinking methods. (These response methods were developed through Project Zero's art and education research at Harvard's Graduate School of Education.) The routines ask students to begin with their own close looking and observations and use these as insight and evidence to generate larger questions about an image, and perhaps its context and creator.

Claim-Support-Question: Make a Claim about the image; Give Support to your claim; Ask a Question related to your claim.

Know-Puzzle-Explore: What do you think you know about this image? What questions or puzzles do you have? What does this image make you want to explore?

Have students pick an image to recreate or “translate” into an alternate visual style of their choosing. How might they express a similar feeling or elicit a similar response from a conceptual collage through a surrealist drawing? What elements of the visual vocabulary could students change while demonstrating a response or reference back to the original work?

Connecting to Historical Context

As students explore the meaning and impact of these images, they are slowly widening their view to take in more and more of what scholar S. Brent Plate calls the “field of vision” surrounding an image. After looking closely and considering their own perspectives, students now step back even further to look outside the borders of page and print. Students can then be invited to consider how knowledge of the contexts in which images were originally created informs their understanding of the work's meaning and significance.

Classroom Prompts and Activities

Have students view minutes 20:00–21:20 of Robyn Angley's lecture, *The Transformative State*, and/or minutes 7:40–10:00 of the accompanying video with Professor Jane Sharp.

Discussion Prompts: Power and Subversion

1. Ask students to think back to the images they initially chose in connection to the themes of power, danger, rebellion, or sadness. After learning more about the historical context in which these images were created, how do the students now see power and resistance expressed in these images? How might the artists who created these images understand their connections to power and resistance?
2. Ask students to create three lists of adjectives: one listing words they would use to describe the image, one listing words the creator of the work would use to describe it, and the third listing words a Soviet state official might use to describe it. What are the similarities and differences among these lists? What accounts for these similarities and differences?

Discussion Prompts: Realism

1. Individually or as a group, ask students to define the word “realistic.” What are the different ways in which people use this word? What does it mean for a book or a movie to be “realistic”? Can something be realistic to one person and not to another?
2. Have students view examples of socialist realism, for example, “Lenin With Villagers” (Evdokiya Usikova, 1959) and “Happy Reuniting” (Fedor Ivanovich Deryazhny, 1950), both of which are available from [this online gallery.] Do these paintings seem “realistic” to them? In what ways are these paintings “realistic”? Based on the historical moment they portray, in what ways are they unrealistic? Whose reality is being portrayed in these images? Realism is a style that is said to “mirror the world.” In what ways do abstract or surreal works of nonconformist art “mirror the world”?

Discussion Prompts: Viewer Experience and Community

1. Return to the students’ experience as viewers of nonconformist art. How did it feel to engage with a visual image whose meaning is intentionally unclear? Was it frustrating? Enjoyable? How did it feel to hear about other students’ observations of these images? The Soviet state believed art would support the formation of community when all individuals came away with the same understanding of a work of art. How might students respond to this assertion based on their own experience with viewing both realist and nonconformist art?

Further Resources

Extension Resource: At the Davis Center

Teachers can borrow large folio collections of perestroika-era political posters from the Davis Center. With their bold colors, short slogans, and cartoonish figures, posters from the glasnost and perestroika era of the 1980s were used to communicate clear, strong messages critiquing the Soviet government for its lack of innovation and free thinking, environmental destruction, and financial instability. Students can compare and contrast the visual language used in these posters and works of nonconformist art, considering:

*In what ways do each use imagery as a response to government control and conformity?
Would students describe this work as conceptual, abstract, or surreal?
How does use of imagery and text in these posters compare and contrast with use in works of nonconformist art?*

Works from the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art are on display at the Davis Center on the Harvard University campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tours of the collection for teachers and student groups are possible.

Accompanying multimedia resources

Video interview with Professor Jane Sharp of Rutgers University on nonconformist art in the Soviet Union: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiBj2AyA71Y>

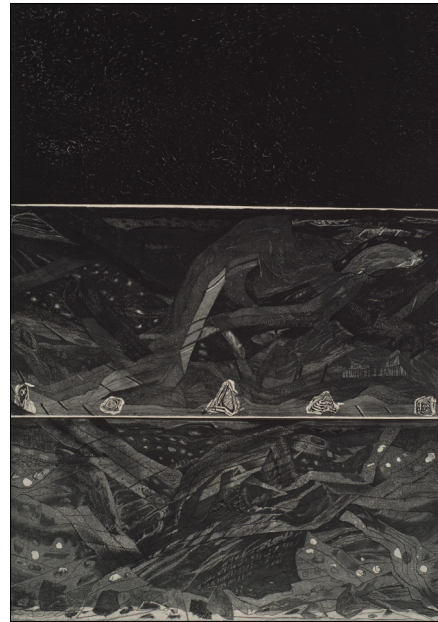
Lecture by Robyn Anglely, formerly of the Davis Center, on the intersection of early Soviet ideology and culture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irypxeQQQI#>

Additional Images

See <http://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/resource/art-context/resources-art-context> for links to larger sizes of these images.



Vladis Zilius, Untitled, 1977



Peeter Ulas, Land, Country, Landscapes, Earths, 1982



Evgeny Rukhin, Untitled, 1975



Vello Vinn, Traffic Lights, 1977