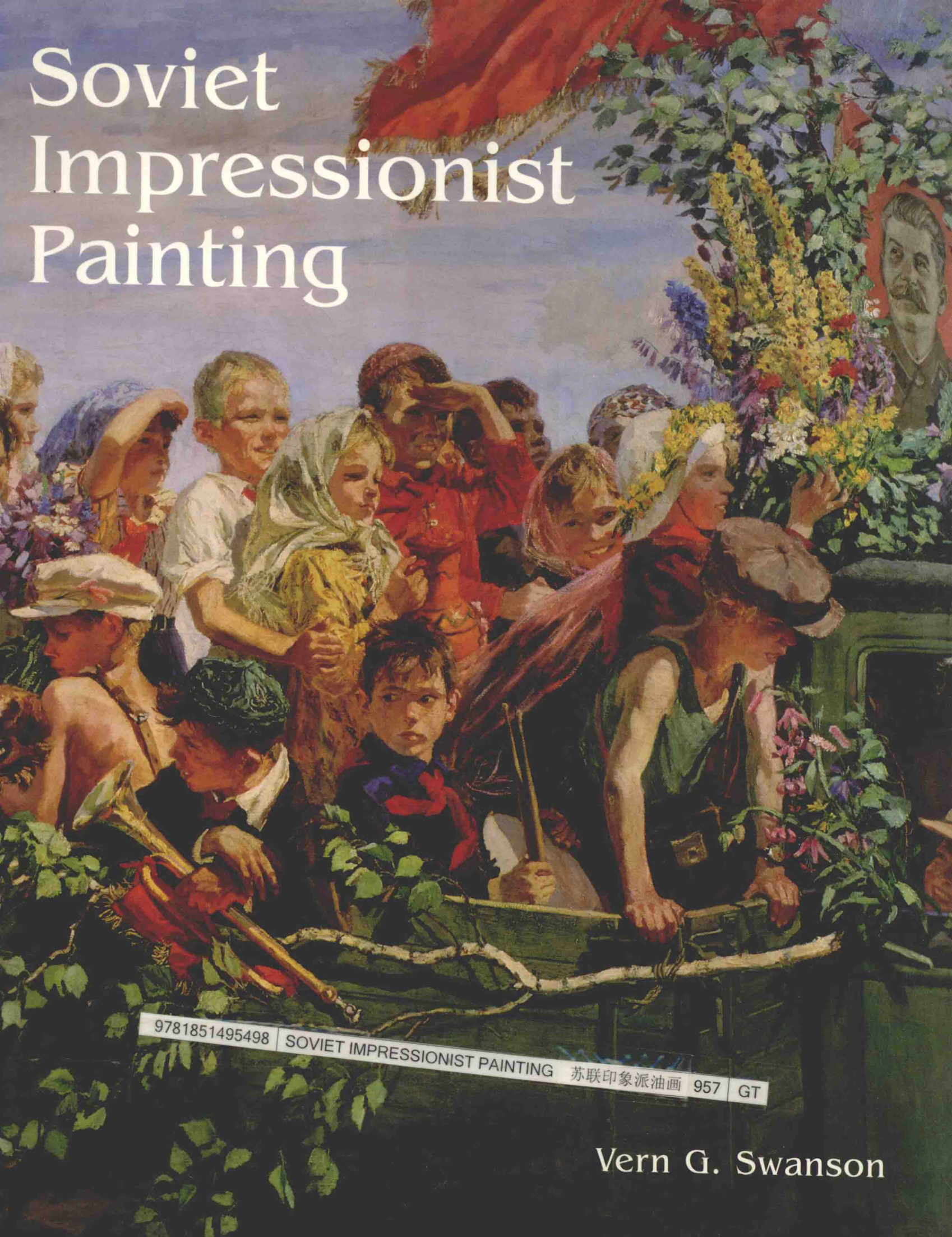


# Soviet Impressionist Painting



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SOVIET IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING

苏联印象派油画

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Vern G. Swanson

# Soviet Impressionist Painting



Vern G. Swanson

ANTIQUE COLLECTORS' CLUB



Second revised edition © 2008 Vern G. Swanson

First published in 2001

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Back endpapers: The palette of Edvard Y. Vyrzhikovski, photograph courtesy of Leon Woodward, Mapleton, VT.

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ТУБА №10

ГАРАНТИЙНЫЙ СРОК ХРАНЕНИЯ

КАДМИЙ  
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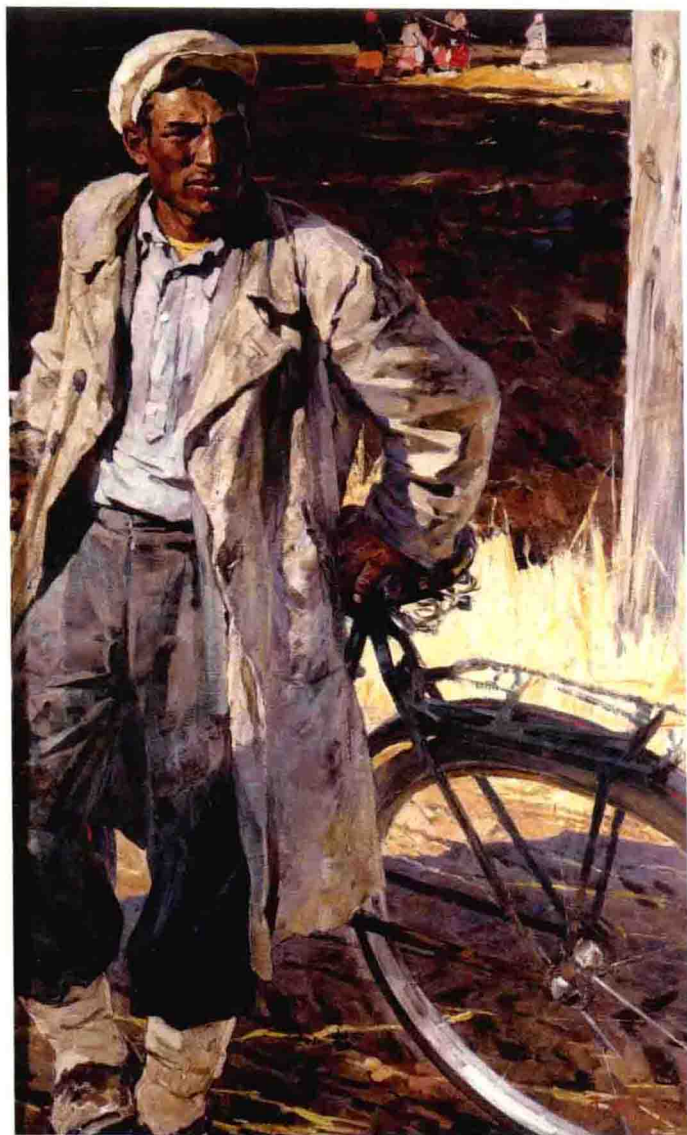


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This book is dedicated to my friends and companions  
James J. Dabakis, Igor Y. Nazareychuk and Alexey B. Zubach

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The first alliance for Russian and Soviet art in America was with Raymond E. Johnson of the Overland Gallery in Scottsdale, James J. Dabakis of Salt Lake City, and myself at the Springville Museum of Art in Utah. By the summer of 1990 we were the "*bolsboi troika*" of Soviet fine art in America. Together, for about a decade, we helped shape America's appreciation of Socialist Realist painting.

My dear friend 'Indiana' Jim (Dabakis) worked at first with Alex Demitriev, then with Igor Nazareychuk and Alexey Zubach, all great Russians and friends of the first order. Jim, Igor and Alexey have the uncanny ability to discover master artists, their masterpieces and bring them to America.<sup>1</sup> Their kind generosity to the Springville Museum of Art has helped place us upon the map. Without them, Russia would not be Russia, and art-life in the Land of the Soviets just wouldn't be fun anymore.

America's relationship with Soviet painting came from Raymond E. Johnson of Overland Gallery in Minneapolis, MN, and Scottsdale, AZ. With the help of his wife, Sue Johnson, and son Douglas, and outstanding associates, Bradford Shinkle IV, Scott Naegle, Joan Lee, John Baird, Reed Fellner, Doug Ellenboe, and Jean Schmoll in Minneapolis; with Trudy Hays, Gina Caruso, Robin Dill, and Paul Creson in Scottsdale, they have all championed the revival of interest in Russian and Soviet art.

The *Bolsboi Troika*'s international dominance in this period's art is a testament to their irrepressible faith in its quality and pertinence to us all. Ray Johnson was the 'Lord Joseph Duveen' of the late twentieth century and the new Millennium. In 2001 he founded The Museum of Russian Art (*TMORA*) in Bloomington and south Minneapolis as an international showplace and education centre for Russian and Soviet art. His work in this field was recognised when, on 19 January 2006, he received from Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, the prestigious Order of Friendship Medal. Working to bring Soviet art into prominence in the West we must not forget the labours of Boris Marchuk, the Cultural Attaché to the United States from the Russian Federation, and art historians John Bowlt and Alla Rosenfelt.

Unquestionably, the most articulate Western voice for Soviet art is the celebrated scholar, Matthew Cullerne Bown of London. The author of numerous books (including *Art Under Stalin*, *Soviet Realist Paintings*, and *A Dictionary of Twentieth*

*Century Russian and Soviet Painters*), his word on the subject is revered. Since I do not speak Russian, therefore I can only be an 'expert' not a 'scholar', as is my friend, Matthew C. Bown. My work is indebted to his work.

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The Ezekiel and Katherine Dumke Foundation has helped greatly in acquisitions. John and Debbie Watkins and Gordon and Hollie Milne, both of California, have added many seminal works to the Museum's Soviet art collection. Dr. Loren and LaRae Broadbent, Liz Sorensen, Betsey Dumke Thornton and Claire Dumke Ryberg, and Jim Sorensen have also contributed significantly to Utah's holdings of Russian and Soviet art.

Through it all, my dear friend, the Park City art dealer, Ellie Sonntag-Stephens, has found ways to make everything work out for the Springville Museum of Art. She has been responsible for helping foster numerous Utah collections of quality Russian fine art. Her generosity, encouragement, honesty and connoisseur's eye is relied upon by all who seek her counsel. She has been a constant beacon. Also of Park City is the Thomas Kearns McCarthy Gallery of Russian and Soviet Art. Art dealer Christine Gailey has done much to help acquaint Western audiences with Soviet painting.

Finally, my dear friend and fellow Soviet-art enthusiast, Jerald H. Jacobs, is the great 'quiet man' in all of this. His sense of passion and quality never faltered when collecting some of the best examples of Soviet art in America. He was the founder of the Springville Museum of Art's Russian-Soviet art collection in 1991. He was there at the beginning (1990), the middle, and he continues to be there. Without him and his assistance much Soviet art would have been destroyed by ruination.

Thank you everyone.

# INTRODUCTION

*Soviet Socialist Realism was the most coarsely idealistic kind of art ever foisted on a modern audience – though Capitalist Realism, the never-never land of desire created by American advertising, runs it a close second.*

Robert Hughes<sup>1</sup>

I was assured by art history professors and art critics that Soviet Socialist Realist artists were mere robots, painting with straight arms, with guns to their heads. Never having viewed any Soviet paintings in person, and with ne'er a glimpse of reproductions, I could venture no opinion except vague acquiescence. I was told that the artist in Soviet culture was a mere soldier conscripted for the campaign to build international Communism. 'Although Soviet artists produced some worthwhile work,' allows Michael Kort, they were hamstrung by, 'Socialist realism [which] suffocated most attempts at genuine artistic expression.'<sup>2</sup> Being a Cold Warrior myself, fearful of the Red Menace, and never having travelled to the USSR, what else could I believe? After all, Ronald Reagan in his early presidency accurately called it "the evil empire".

Thus Western writers could gloat in their own artistic superiority. Of course they imagined that in a controlled society all art was necessarily bad, because artists can only create in absolute freedom. Yet few in the West could name a single Soviet artist or visualize any of their paintings. What we had were blanket dismissals from the ill-informed. Ellsworth Raymond among others exaggerated the repressiveness of the Soviet art world:

*Besides controlling the economy, labor and education, the State Planning Commission attempted to plan literature and art... Artists and writers were ordered to glorify industrialization. Creative people who refused were sometimes imprisoned or shot. As a result Soviet art and literature declined, producing dull paintings and statues of worker enthusiasm, and dreary propaganda novels like Cement.'*<sup>3</sup>

American art connoisseurs had but the vaguest notion of Socialist Realism, or *Sotsrealism* as it was called. They were definitely ignorant as to its content and context. All we knew was that we didn't like it and were invariably dismissive and derogatory. Christine Lindey understood at least one of the root causes, 'The notion that art as propaganda inherently leads to poor quality or non-art, stems from Western modernist aesthetics.'<sup>4</sup> Yet it was this profound divergence from Western contemporaneous art

that accounts for the distinctive character of Soviet art.

How could the West appreciate Mikhail E. Tkachev's narrative painting, *Young Pioneers on a Sabotnik* (1950, plate 2), which depicts the hard work required for those 'seventh day' *Stakhanovites*? Do we even know what a *sabotnik* is, or a *Stakhanovite*? Western diversity stops short when its aesthetic prerogatives are challenged. All it can say is "It looks so old hat," not realising it might be in the social if not stylistic vanguard.

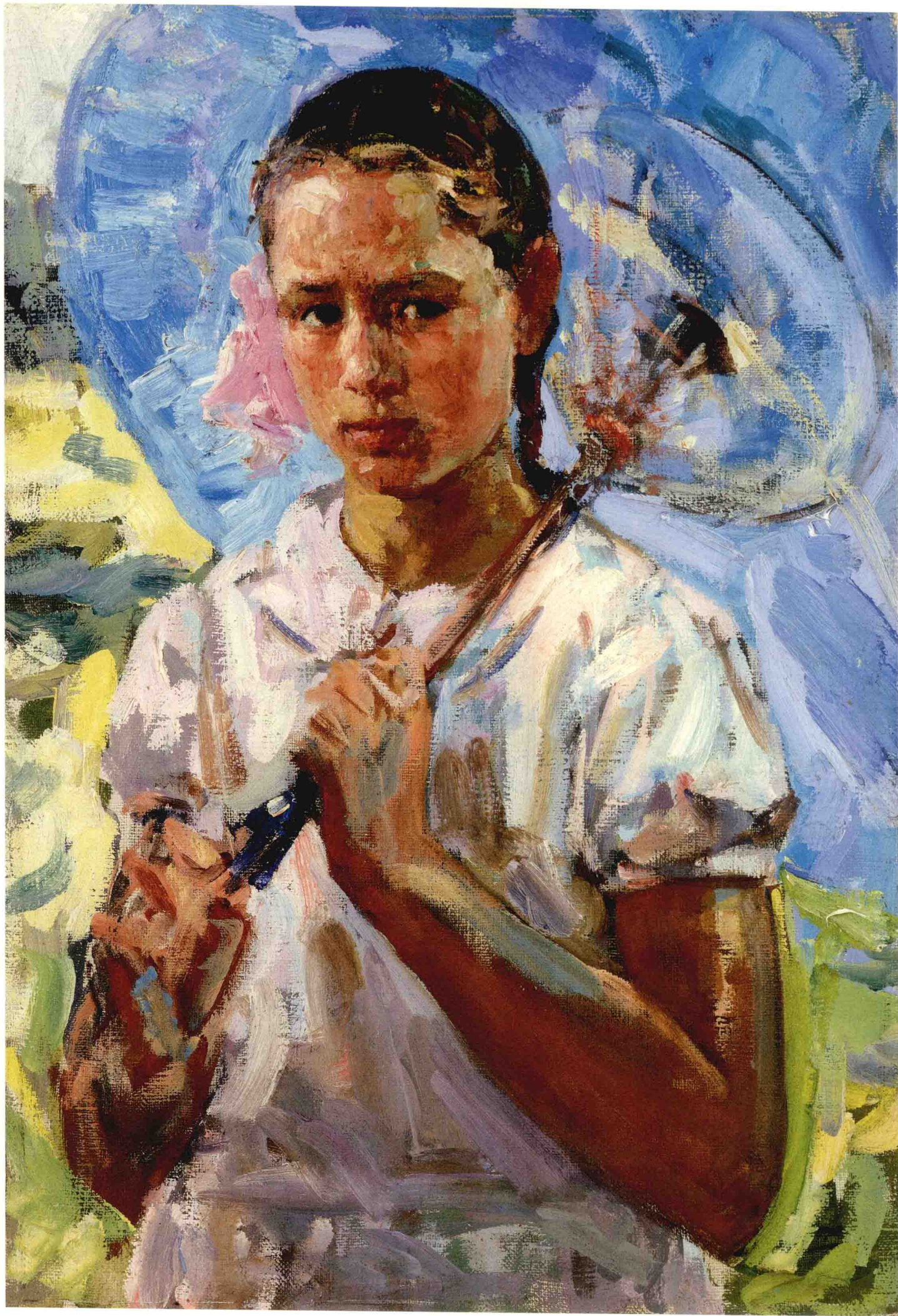
The Soviets too, were equally contemptuous of Western contemporary art, which they saw as decadent, purposeless, dishonest, and of questionable quality. Thus both sides, with perfunctory knowledge and chauvinistic understanding, repudiated each other. The perplexing socio-political and cultural underpinnings of each system were mutually unfathomable. Their 'high' art was the antithesis of our own 'high' art.

After visiting the Soviet Union in 1989, I saw first-hand what had been purported to be the worst art of the twentieth century. I already was an expert on the worst art of the nineteenth century (academic-salon art), so I felt at home in the land of the Soviets. It soon became apparent that I had been misled by partisan members of the entrenched American art establishment, who loved the Soviet avant-garde but hated the Soviet Socialist Realists.

What I was privileged to view was art of surpassing quality and enduring relevance. As a school, Soviet Socialist Realism surpassed the best Naturalist and Realist genre painting in the West during the third quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> It was sort of a 'renaissance of Realism' behind the Iron Curtain. My initial reaction was of genuine intoxication, and has since been confirmed by over thirty trips to the former USSR, visits to nearly four hundred artists' studios, and the opportunity to see first-hand literally tens of thousands of paintings. Finally, this appreciation has also been verified by the judgement of other art scholars,

**Plate 1.** Mikhail Petrovich ZHELEZNOV (1912-1978), Leningrad, *Girl with a Parasol*, 1958, oil on canvas, 20 x 14 ins. (50.8 x 35.6cm)

Private collection



collectors, and artists. Respect for Russian art of the Soviet period continues to grow as we become connoisseurs in a school of art too long hidden from Western eyes.

The Springville Museum of Art (SMA) and the Overland Gallery of Art began to exhibit Soviet Realism by 1990, much to the delight of Western regional audiences. The Overland Gallery has since sponsored many museum exhibitions and publications by the leading scholars to familiarise Americans with the glories of this art. This vision has continued when The Museum of Russian Art (TMORA) moved to its historic building in south Minneapolis in 2004, with Raymond E. Johnson as founder and Bradford Schinkle IV as its first director. Between the two major museums in Utah and Minnesota that exhibit 'official' realist art, thousands of people are able to interact with the pulsating panorama of the tragic Soviet experiment and a monument to the Russian soul.

At first glance these works seem to be like straight Realism, pure and simple. But in every tour, at least one person would ask, "Wouldn't you say that the style of these paintings is Impressionistic?" I soon began to notice outright Impressionist properties in most of the works painted in the 1950s and 1960s. I then coined the term Working-Class (proletarian) or Soviet Impressionism to describe the style of most of the paintings. In paintings like Mikhail P. Zheleznov's painterly *Girl with A Parasol* (1958, plate 1) there was an Impressionist pulse that beat rapidly. This phase of Socialist Realism seems to have made a connection between the colourful French Impressionism and tonal *plein air* Naturalism. Olga M. Baker said it best, 'Impressionist painting is a secret garden in the history of Russian art. One can identify it with the Russian soul, while the avant-garde is the startling outburst of the intellect.'<sup>9</sup>

Yet, knowing that the Soviets themselves had harshly branded Impressionism as a purposeless bourgeois art form, I wavered. I knew that no Soviet literature dealt with Socialist Realist painting of the mid-century as being particularly Impressionistic. Thus I backed off from committing myself in print to this observation.<sup>10</sup> Since most Socialist Realist art did not look as obvious as Zheleznov's painting, I figured it was a reverberation of late nineteenth century Russian Impressionism.

Finally, the full merits of this newly advanced position became obvious when I suggested that much Soviet art from 1945 to 1985 could be spoken of in full Impressionist terms. By the year 2000 Soviet Impressionism had become a widely used term. I also realised that the term Socialist Realism was

**Plate 2.** Mikhail Evdokimovich TKACHEV (b.1912), Leningrad, *Young Pioneers on a Sabotnik*, 1950, oil on canvas, 20 x 39 ins. (50.8 x 99.1cm)

Private collection



an umbrella term for all officially 'accepted' Soviet painting of the period and it spanned three broad range of styles. Of these three major branches of the Soviet tree of art, this book reflects the author's opinion that the middle branch, Working-Class Impressionism, best epitomizes the unique quality of Soviet painting for the proletariat.

The discovery and reappraisal of Soviet art is acting as a catalyst for engendering enthusiasm for the wider appreciation of Realist art in general. Ultimately this book seeks to reverse the critical contemporary modernist tide against conventional narrative art based on political or aesthetic prejudices. This is not to lessen my intolerance toward the twentieth century's genocidal Communist regimes who are responsible for murdering at least 65 million people.<sup>11</sup> The lower left-wing International Socialists (Communists) are as reprehensible as their upper left-wing National Socialist (Nazi, Fascists) competitors.<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx's 'scientific materialism', the philosophy of Communism, had squashed the 'idealism' of individuality. Social critic Abram Tertz explains that the collective spirit of Communism was so