



vision and communism

September 29, 2011 — January 22, 2012



Viktor Koretsky, *Africa Fights, Africa Will Win!*, 1971, Poster on paper. Ne boltai! Collection.

The Exhibition Project

Drawn from one of the great private collections of Soviet propaganda posters and related material, *Vision and Communism* introduces the poster art of Viktor Koretsky (1909–1998), a master of Soviet propaganda imagery, to audiences unacquainted with his work and the underlying approach that guided his design choices. *Vision and Communism* presents nearly ninety of Koretsky's posters, photographs, and original maquettes from the 1930s through the 1980s.

While great attention has already been paid to the artistic production of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath in the early years of the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (1918 to 1930s), later Soviet material has received much less attention. The exhibition at the Smart Museum contains some pre-World War II images from the Soviet Union, but the largest share of Koretsky's work parallels the struggles for independence and civil rights around the world in the decades following World War II.

Curated by University of Chicago art historian Matthew Jesse Jackson, this exhibition seeks to move beyond conventional thinking about the role of visual propaganda in the U.S.S.R. It does not simply focus solely on what such images reveal about life and aspirations under Communism, but instead asks what these propaganda posters can teach us about the nature of visual communication in the twentieth century more broadly—the power and use of graphic imagery as a tool of communication. The exhibition also makes us think about contemporary visual culture, contemporary

world political issues, and advertising and mass media in related to the printed word and image.

South African protest music will be presented in the museum's galleries as a counterpart to the ideology of shared struggle against injustice and inequality that animates much of Koretsky's work. Music, as heard in the exhibition, was a crucial means of expressing and maintaining traditional culture in Africa. As a strategy of resistance in the early wars between white settlers and local black ethnic groups, warriors would collectively chant before going into battle as a way of instilling fear in the enemy. Songs became a part of the twentieth century experience as workers forced to live away from their families, addressed rural life, loneliness, and African heroes, as well as condemning the deterioration of traditional values and the rise of apartheid politics. Protest songs and broadcasts from Radio Freedom, a live broadcast station from Tanzania, Zambia, Angola, and Ethiopia, also demonstrate civil disobedience and unification. The music heard in relation to Koretsky's poster depictions of struggle and strife in Africa and other parts of the world, provides an additional point of access to thinking about methods of communication.

Vision and Communism is also accompanied by a smaller complementary exhibition, *Process and Artistry of the Soviet Vanguard*, which examines the experimental creative production and imagery of photomontage that generated iconic propaganda imagery in the 1920s and 1930s. The Smart Museum's two exhibitions are presented as part of The Soviet Arts Experience, a yearlong series of exhibitions, performances, and events that explore the riches of Soviet culture.

The Power of Poster Art

Early in the Russian Civil War, following the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks (the major political party fueling the revolution) used posters to inform the public about the news of the day—posters were the principal means of communicating to the masses. Changing poster displays in major cities conveyed messages of military support for the Soviet regime, Communist party policy, health issues, and economic



Gustav Klucis, *Long Live Red Army of Workers and Peasants - Faithful Guard of Soviet Borders!*, 1935. Poster. Ne boltai! Collection.

news. News and propaganda messages were produced centrally in Moscow and also telegraphed to outlying towns and villages held by Bolsheviks, where small groups of revolutionary artists produced the posters with hand-made stencils, using any available, cheap, easy-to-replicate materials. Printed posters were printed in editions of thousands and quite literally flung to the masses from trains. The designs and messages served a definitive purpose—to further the Bolshevik agenda of revolution. The civil war artists used crude stereotypes to make images more relatable to a general audience, and the imagery had to be eye-catching graphically to appeal to a widely illiterate people. For these reason, one doesn't have to understand the slogans included on these posters to understand the general meaning conveyed by the graphics.

Poster graphics in the 1920s and 1930s provided relentless interaction with the masses. They were produced in the thousands, and were dispersed, moved, removed, and replaced in a never-ending loop. Poster images, including those of Koretsky, were rescaled (some from their original approximate size of 32 x 22 inches) and repurposed, placed in newspapers, magazines and used as giant billboards. This process also is well represented in the works of Gustav Klucis (1895-1938) featured in *Process and Artistry in the Soviet Vanguard*.

Posters in the style of Socialist Realism incorporated bold, bright colors with simple, easy-to-read messages to convey a political party message. Confronting viewers with larger-than-life icons, or symbols, and a flat picture plane, poster artists intended to disrupt the viewer's everyday experience by intruding into their personal space, raising political consciousness and an awareness of reality itself. Posters were created to quietly instruct thinking and overwhelm the senses. Often imagery that was presented depicted an "us/them" opposition using exaggerated contrasting characters displayed side by side to clearly convey messages of "good" versus evil—socialism/capitalism; Soviet Red army/foreign military forces; and loyal Communist workers/counter-revolutionary intellectuals. By illustrating the political, social, and economic evils of the West, Soviet artists demonstrated the contrasting strength of the Communist vision of a new world order.



Viktor Koretsky, *The People Will Break the Monopolies*, c. 1960s, Black and white photograph. Ne boltai! Collection.



Viktor Koretsky, *American Policy (Internal/External)*, 1970, Poster. Ne boltai! Collection.

International Communism

Viktor Koretsky, one of many artists who worked under a state-controlled Socialist Realism style, didn't adhere to the narrow orthodoxy of officially sanctioned methods and messages. Rather than creating images that idealized the Soviet experience, he instead depicted at times violent images of human pain and suffering as a way of showing experiences in other part of the world to truly impact and affect the Russian viewer. Koretsky intended to provoke, instruct, and incite by graphically describing the Western world as untrustworthy and undesirable. He did this by producing images of struggle against Capitalist oppression in other parts of the world, such as South Africa, the United States, and Indochina against which he juxtaposed Communism's promotion of equality, acceptance, and togetherness.

Koretsky was especially moved by Black South Africans fighting against apartheid for the right to live as equals in their own country. Although apartheid laws were officially enacted in 1948, racial segregation and oppression of blacks began much earlier with the Portuguese colonization of South Africa in the early 1500's. Over time, Black South Africans were displaced from their lands, reduced to serfdom, even enslavement. Industrialization of the country, followed by enactment of apartheid, led to poverty and the disintegration of Black South African culture. This struggle was fodder for Soviet poster propaganda.

Depictions of Africans bounded by chains, suffering, and bloodied due to conflicts, and in pain aimed to educate Soviet citizens about the political situations abroad and promoted the globalization of Communism. The struggles of the people pictured in his posters mirrored the struggles of Communism itself.

Koretsky also made clear visual connections between the evils of American Capitalism and the conflict in South Africa. Several posters, in a series called



Viktor Koretsky, *Untitled*, c. 1960s, Black and white photograph. Ne boltai! Collection.

America is Racist!, captured the struggle for civil rights in the United States, while condemning Capitalism again as a means of oppression. Images showing The Klu Klux Klan, a White Supremacist organization, or symbolically linking African-Americans to economic imprisonment, demonstrated issues of racial segregation. As further means of activism, Koretsky also created images that strongly suggested the connection between economic crisis and war, as well as clearly representing economic disparity in other works.

Continuing his global call to action in support of Communism, Koretsky produced images of the military crisis and resulting atrocities in Indochina. In 1954, backed by Soviet aid Communist North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. Afraid of losing South Vietnam to communist rule, and the possible domino effect on other East and Southeast Asian countries, the United States intervened. However, it was the citizens of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia who suffered the most, losing their land and relatives to harsh military attacks including bombings and chemical weapons. Koretsky created images juxtaposing icons symbolizing money with images suggesting the damaging affect of American militarism.



Viktor Koretsky, *Peace to the World!*, 1962, Poster on paper. Ne boltai! Collection.



Viktor Koretsky, *A Solid Peace for the World!*, 1965, Poster on paper. Ne boltai! Collection.

Who was Viktor Koretsky?

Viktor Borisovich Koretsky's experimental process, style, and interracial images were ahead of his time, and perhaps foretold the visual language of multiculturalism exemplified by companies like Benetton and MTV, and the 1994 adoption of a fully democratic government in South Africa.

Educated in Moscow art schools, Koretsky began his career as a poster artist in 1931 and found inspiration in the new visual techniques of photomontage artists working in the 1920's, such as Gustav Klutssis (1895-1938). Klutssis was one of the leading propaganda artists during this time. He was heavily involved with the design of posters for the streets of Moscow and also worked in various other capacities as a book and magazine illustrator, and his designs appeared on the front pages of major newspapers including Pravda (Truth, the official newspaper of the Communist Party). He was a pioneer in the use of photomontages—an innovative technique that used multiple photo images, painstakingly merged with hand illustration to great effect.

During World War II, Koretsky became famous for the powerful, emotion-charged images he produced on behalf of the war effort. His design for the anti-Nazi poster *Save Us!*, which depicts a Soviet woman and child being threatened by a bayonet, is arguably the best-known work of Soviet propaganda from the entire era. In the postwar years Koretsky diversified his art by taking on new subjects, many of them dealing with themes of international cooperation, such as Soviet-led campaigns for human rights and nuclear disarmament. In 1964, Koretsky received one of the most prestigious awards for a Soviet artist, the title of Honored Artist of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Koretsky's art continued to gain international recognition, as younger generations of Eastern European poster artists adopted his aggressive, confrontational visual style.



Viktor Koretsky, *Brotherhood and Equality Among All Nations!*, c. 1960s, Black and white photograph. Ne boltai! Collection.

Questions and topics for discussion

“The poster always works on the leading edge, in the thick of events, and precisely for this reason, its representational form must be developed and kept new.” —Viktor Koretsky

Propaganda posters used bright colors, clean lines, and simple content to communicate and influence the attitude of a community toward a cause or position. Bright colors were visually striking while single characters, narratives, or symbols conveyed the artists’ message. In a country where the majority of the population was still illiterate, the Bolsheviks were aware of the importance of the visual message.

What messages can you find in Koretsky’s images? What design elements helped Koretsky to communicate these messages effectively?

Posters were useful and powerful communication tools, especially during the start of the Russian Civil War, 1917. Very few newspapers were published in those days and often a poster replaced the tabloid. Poster art was widely accessible to the masses, and the images posters depicted were easily understood by everyone, and were accompanied by a short and energetic accompanying slogan that stuck in the viewers’ mind as a constant call for action. **How is poster art different from and/or similar to advertising now? What messages have you seen in current media and culture that call you to action?**

In time of Civil War, propaganda posters were sent to the front lines in the same capacity as bullets and artillery shells. They were posted on walls, in cities that were under assault. The bottom of the vivid, bright-colored poster usually contained a warning: “Anyone who tears down or covers up this poster – is committing a counter-revolutionary act”. **In what ways can posters be considered weapons?**

Viktor Koretsky also communicates messages about “we” and “togetherness” through his imagery. How does the artist use pattern & repetition to communicate solidarity? What images can you find in the exhibition that suggest a world united or standing together?



Viktor Koretsky, *Capitalism is War, the People's Suffering, and Tears*, 1960s, Original Maquette; gouache on paper and wooden board. Ne boltai! Collection.

Classroom projects

Visual Communication

What is the most effective way to communicate a message? Posters often present icons, or symbols, using certain characteristics to represent values, ideals, and qualities of a culture or group of people. We can decode the meanings of these works by investigating the images closely and considering what the icons may represent.

Using Koretsky's original maquette image for *Capitalism is War*, start by asking students to describe the image: What details can they find? What do they notice about the colors, lines, and shapes used? What techniques or materials were used to create this work? (Details to note: woman with arms over eyes, plane in left upper corner, bomb traces in lower right.)

Have students analyze the process: How were these techniques applied? How is he using design elements (such as line, shape, color, texture, pattern, repetition) to influence the reading of this message?

Ask students what they can infer about the interpretation, or meaning of the image. What is the artist asking the viewer to care about? What details support these opinions?

Considering the intention of the artist, ask students to judge if this was a successful work of art and explain why. Did the artist communicate his/her message

effectively? Why or why not?

Students can use the DAIJ method above to analyze advertisements to consider the effect of design elements used in visual communication. As a class, examine some ads (try using a few from very different sources) to determine how the design elements are used in presenting the products. You can also discuss the propaganda techniques used by advertisers. For instance, how do companies influence us to purchase a certain car or pair of jeans? Practice identifying these techniques together.

Propaganda techniques used by advertisers:

1. Name-calling: links a person, or idea, to a negative symbol. The propagandist who uses this technique hopes that the audience will reject the person or the idea on the basis of the negative symbol, instead of looking at the available evidence.
2. Glittering generalities: Linking products to ideals we hold deep connections to such as democracy, civilization, Christianity, good, proper, right, democracy, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, medicine, health, and love.
3. Plain Folk: speakers attempt to convince their audience that they, and their ideas, are “of the people.”
4. Transfer: a device that carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something else in order to have us accept it.
5. Testimonial: Tiger Woods is on the cereal box, promoting Wheaties as part of a balanced breakfast. Beyoncé is endorsing a new line of cosmetics, and Lady Gaga says that Google Chrome helps her stay connected with her fans.
6. Bandwagon: “everyone else is doing it, and so should you.” Since few of us want to be left behind, this technique can be quite successful.
7. Avant-Garde: Be the first on your block to own it!
8. Fear: When a propagandist warns members of her audience that disaster will result if they do not follow a particular course of action.

To include art-making in this lesson, have students design an activist poster. Using the design elements and propaganda techniques discussed, students will create a work of art to communicate a message about an issue of importance to them. In the style of Viktor Koretsky, students can use vivid colors and simple images to convey their message, and the technique of photomontage.

First, students should brainstorm to come up with a few ideas of issues that mean something to them—do they want others to help save the trees, help stop crime, collect food for the hungry, etc. They should have a concrete goal.

Next, collect (teacher-approved) magazines from students to gather a collection of resources, including magazines and photographs. Students can pull images by either cutting or tearing. Students should choose images and arrange them in a way that visually communicates their goal.

To complete the project, students can paint the background, glue the images to the page, and embellish with personal sketches, a short statement, or other details.

History Happens Every Day

The daily postings of propaganda posters could be called the blogs of their day. Posters were used a tool of outreach by politicians who wanted to express their views and ideas while quickly communicating news and information to the masses. In our current, more globalized society, we rely on social media outlets to learn about happenings world-wide almost immediately. Blogs and mini-blogs (like twitter feeds) are now written and maintained by politicians, media entities, and even national governments to connect with and report to their constituents.

In this project, students will “follow” a blog (or mini-blog) maintained by a politician, media entity, or national government for one week. Teachers can either provide a list of pre-approved sites or preview students’ choices in advance, for security purposes. Students will record responses in personal blogs or postings to their source site. In responses, students should include citations of any facts and give evidence for opinions. Students should submit a response each day. Teachers can provide a few guiding questions for students to answer: Describe the event or report in your own words. Explain the stance of the source. Do you agree with what has been said? Why or why not? What is your thought on a quote, report, or activity from the source? Did you hear about this same event or report from a different source today? How did that shape your response? How did reading the post today affect your opinion of the source or event?



Viktor Koretsky, *We Will Defend Peace Forever!*, 1965, Poster on paper. Ne boltai! Collection.

Sharing students' projects can be done in a few ways:

1. Students can report to the class at the end of the week, describing their experience, and print-out of any responses, notes, and citations.
2. Teachers can host the blogs on a school-sponsored, possibly password protected host site. This will a) provide a more secure environment for the students posting b) if necessary, allow teacher to act as an administrator of the site, making post approval part of the process.

If the technology available does not permit students to subscribe to an online source, teachers can modify by doing this same activity with a newspaper or television source—it must be a daily source to capture the immediate newsfeed.

Another modification, and to encourage comparison of facts and consider multiple perspectives, is to pair students together, analyzing blogs from politicians on opposite sides of the aisle, media from two different outlets, or interacting nations.

Modification for younger grades: Teachers can bring in a news article each day, present it in a “read-aloud” exercise, and have students respond through writing or verbally, answering similar questions posed above.

Additional Resources

<http://www.sovietposters.com/>

<http://www.justingould-davies.com/research1.htm>

http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/soviet_posters_1940-1945/Historical-Introduction-DW-Spring.aspx

Alignment with Common Core Standards and Illinois Learning Standards

Docent-led discussions of *Vision and Communism*, related to classroom activities inspired by works on view (as exemplified above), and follow-up classroom discussion, reinforce elements of the Illinois standards and goals for the visual arts, language arts, and history. Using the ideas present in this exhibition, teachers can integrate aspects of image making, writing, and social science into the classroom. NOTE TO TEACHERS: please preview the works in the exhibition BEFORE bringing your students. Some subject matter may be challenging for young viewers.

In support of College and Career Readiness Common Core Standards:

CC.K-12.W.R.6 Production and Distribution of Writing: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

CC.K-12.W.R.8 Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

CC.K-12.SL.2 Comprehension and Collaboration: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

In support of Illinois State Goal 1: C. Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.

In support of Illinois State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

In support of Illinois State Goal 15: Understand economic systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

In support of Illinois State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations.

In support of Illinois State Goal 17: Understand world geography and the effects of geography on society, with an emphasis on the United States.

In support of Illinois State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

In support of Illinois State Goal 25: Know the language of the arts.

In support of Illinois State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

In support of Illinois State Goal 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and Present