The Emigration Experience of Soviet Artists in the United States

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In recent years, there has been a substantial immigration of Soviet artists to New York. As part of a larger study, I have conducted a series of interviews on their experiences in the United States and in the Soviet Union. This paper focuses on their early efforts to establish themselves as artists in New York, their views on the function of art in society, their former and present relationships to colleagues, and their changing conceptions of themselves as artists.

The artists have many reasons for leaving the Soviet Union: hopes for a better life economically, irritation with the inconvenience of everyday life, dislike of the political atmosphere, resentment of travelling restrictions to the West, and, for some, anti-Semitism. As artists, they complained that they were unable to exhibit what they thought worthy and important to share with a large audience. At the same time, however, their life had its positive sides.

Artistic life in the Soviet Union is controlled by the Communist Party through the Union of Soviet Artists. The Union obtains and awards projects to its members, selects artists to represent the Soviet Union at exhibitions abroad, and provides a considerable degree of security. It is very difficult

1. I started this study at St. Antony's College, Oxford, and would like to thank Igor Golomshhtok and Larissa Haskell for their interest and comments on the project; I also discussed this work with John Bowlt whose views were very valuable. Above all, I want to thank the Soviet artists who shared their views and experiences with me so generously.

I interviewed fifteen of the most prominent Soviet artists in New York, two owners of galleries specializing in Soviet art, one manager of a gallery specializing in Soviet art, two owners of galleries who had exhibited a Soviet emigre, three Soviet art historians, and a number of collectors of Soviet art. The interviews, conducted in English, lasted from one to four hours and were done over a period of two years, 1979-1981. All unattributed quotations are taken from these interviews.

2. Most of the emigrant artists are Jewish; some are half Jewish, others had uncovered a Jewish relative in order to emigrate. A few have no Jewish connections.

to work without membership in the union, and most of those interviewed had belonged to it. In their view, union membership indicated a certain level of artistic competence.

The emigre artists had had widely differing positions in the Soviet Union. Some were officially established, with studios of their own, and could support themselves by sales and commissions. Several of them did less orthodox work for private customers. Some of the non-conformists, however, were not accepted into the Union and had to support themselves by manual labour during the day, painting only in their free time, and often finding it difficult to obtain supplies, studios, and opportunities to exhibit their work. These artists were often considered "amateurs" by the "Union" emigres. Some of them, however, enjoyed considerable success; they were visited by members of the intelligentsia, scientists, and even government officials, who tried to arrange exhibitions in institutes, private homes, and youth cafes. A few even received commissions from state institutions. Foreigners became interested in their work, and sales and the occasional exhibition in Europe enabled a few even of the non-official artists to devote all their time to painting.

Thus, before leaving the Soviet Union, several of these artists had had dealings with foreigners, and this gave them some valuable contacts in the European and American art worlds and aroused expectations of quick recognition, a fine studio, and financial success in the West. Indeed, when they arrived in the United States, they received considerable encouragement from the journalists, collectors, and tourists who had visited their studios in the Soviet Union. However, these initial contacts were not able to sustain the artists for long. Therefore, soon after arriving in the West they usually tried to establish themselves by offering their work to general art galleries, by exhibiting in collections of Soviet art that travelled to various Jewish communities, and by contacting the few galleries and dealers that specialized in Soviet art. There were difficulties with all three of these outlets.

The first difficulty (experienced by American artists as well) is that although there are many galleries in New York, their owners and managers are not waiting with open arms to exhibit new artists. Some of the better known galleries will not even look at new work unless the artist has been recommended by the right people. Others will not take chances with art that is not recognizably avantgarde. Thus artists emigrating from a culturally isolated country like the Soviet Union face tremendous difficulties. Even if they can understand the new critical standards in all their subtlety, they are still faced with the problem of remaining true to their past work and the ambiguities of submitting to critical standards which remain external
even if well understood. One artist who had been very successful in the Soviet Union described his present frustration:

I am unstable and unsure of my art style; I am uncertain of where to turn.
I don’t know what Americans want. I don’t understand them.

On the general art market, then, although several of my respondents reported occasional single or group exhibits, their expectations had been largely disappointed.

Some artists began to show their work in exhibits of Soviet Jewish artists which travelled to synagogues and community centres throughout the country. Although the artists were able to sell some of their paintings and sculptures in this way, they worried about their work being lost to the wider art world. Many of these buyers, they thought, had little knowledge of art and their homes were not normally visited by people interested in contemporary art or connected to the New York art world.

A similar problem exists for those artists—and that includes practically everyone I interviewed—who exhibit mainly in the one or two art galleries that specialize in Soviet art. They want to become part of the American art scene and fear that by attaching themselves to a “Russian gallery,” they will isolate themselves from the New York art world and will be considered Russian artists in exile rather than as artists in their own right. A few said that they did not consider themselves Russian but American, and refused to identify themselves in any way with their Russian colleagues. Several others indicated that they exhibited with a Russian gallery only because they had no other choice. They had mixed feelings about their relationship with these galleries. On the one hand, they understood that the Russian gallery owner had to make enough profit to keep the gallery open; if he were to close, some of the artists would have difficulty exhibiting their work at all. On the other hand, when they were in financial difficulty they often sold several of their productions to the gallery at once and were then suspicious that they had not been paid adequately.

Several of the artists I spoke with thought of themselves not only as competent but as great. They expected several thousands of dollars for their paintings and were deeply disappointed when this did not happen. They had hoped to earn enough money from their work to live on. Even if they wanted to do commercial work, they were discouraged by their inability to communicate well. A few had wives who worked outside the house. I heard of others who worked full-time at other jobs in order to survive. In contrast to their earlier expectations, many of the artists now worried about their financial prospects in the United States. One gallery manager, also an emigrant from the Soviet Union, said:
In Russia, life is sheltered. The artists don't develop the initiative to make it in America. They say their paintings are worth thousands of dollars but there is not a market for Soviet art. Still, although money and recognition are important, they don't want to prostitute themselves. The only possibility of becoming well known in the United States is by spending millions of dollars to create an image. Most were known artists in Russia. It took years but they lived fairly well there. The artists want that in America, but Russian artists aren't businessmen. You have to persuade others and be a salesman. Most American artists have that training from childhood.

Of course, some of these anxieties and suspicions with regard to dealers are shared by their American colleagues, who should be more familiar with the system, but in whose eyes

many dealers are irresponsible ("they don't handle the person correctly"); actually cruel ("they'll pick up artists and drop them"); filled with résentiment ("unconsciously they hate artists, lots of them are frustrated artists who can't stand productive people and they take their revenge on us"); exploitative ("they take advantage of artists, but what's worse, they take advantage of ignoramuses who come to them for advice"); mercetricious ("gimmicks are their stock-in-trade"). They are above all, powerful agents of a "sick system and a sick society" which no artist by himself has the strength to lick.4

Even if any of the artists from the Soviet Union did succeed in having a one-person show, it was most unlikely that it would be reviewed in the papers or art journals. For, unless an artist is famous or the exhibition is shown in a well-known art gallery, it is very difficult to get journalists and critics to take notice. One gallery owner specializing in Soviet art had the following observation:

It's so hard to get the important art critics to come. I've never met NN or had a chance to show him the work I have here. If we could speak, he would see. He would really be impressed.

Another dealer who has an old established gallery had a similar comment:

The press didn't cover the exhibit [of a Russian artist]. They seldom do, even with other American and European artists I exhibit.

Indeed, a few of the young Soviet artists were well aware that some of the attention they received was precisely because of their emigration from the Soviet Union, while many deserving American artists were never and would never be reviewed.

Of the reviews that the emigres did get, a few have been quite positive. The general impression of American critics, however, is that Soviet art is not easily accessible to Americans, either aesthetically or intellectually, and that much of it is uninteresting, old, or imitative. One art historian who is also an emigre made the following comment:

Artists think they’re all geniuses. In Russia, abstract art is a revelation. In America, it doesn’t have any meaning. In the West, this kind of art was done years ago. These artists don’t only create from their own minds. They look at magazines and they borrow. It was always so. The talented eventually are discovered.

Igor Golomshток, another Russian art historian, disagrees and emphasizes that Russian art is fundamentally misunderstood by Americans.

Russian art is labeled as traditional, provincial, expressionistic, surrealist. It may be these things but each painting is different. The art is new.\(^5\)

A sociological study is not the place to settle this issue, but it might be helpful to look at how most Soviet artists, art historians, and critics see the function of art in society.

The emigre artists are not united by any common stylistic or philosophical principles other than a general rejection of the demands made of art in the Soviet Union. Igor Golomshток believes that the most important function of unofficial art is to make people see that socialist realism is poor art.

The artistic opposition that arose within the official sector of Soviet art in the middle-fifties was directed not so much against the dogmatism of socialist realism as against its bureaucratic optimism in the interpretation of reality.\(^6\)

Leo Kropivnitsky declared that the only business of the artist is art. “And only art. Teaching, propagandising, laying down the law, is not his business.


This I knew. And know. All activism is alien to me. Even inimical."

Many of his colleagues, however, believe that art should be more than an end in itself. One art collector commented:

Russian artists don’t paint for themselves; they are always serving an ideology. Art for its own sake is a dear notion for Russian underground artists. They say they should be allowed to paint what they want but the reasons for painting have another ideological context. There are major exceptions such as those who flirted with abstraction for awhile; but inevitably, it led to a message.

The artists I spoke with saw similar contrasts:

Artists have intuitive power, a sense of the universal.... American artists tend to think of art as a profession. For me, it involves something like a religious commitment.

Western art is really perfect with colour and line but Russian art expresses an emotional and spiritual inner being.

My respondents frequently talked about the great respect the Soviet public has for the artist, the hunger for art, and the great response of the public to genuine art:

In Russia, if you say you’re an artist, people think it’s very interesting. Here, for most people, you’re nothing special. You don’t even earn much money.

Artists feel the importance of their art more in the Soviet Union. There, they are known; here, they are not at all well known. In Russia people would go anywhere to look at a work of art.... Here, there is no hunger. There, people hunger for something new. In Russia exhibits are crowded and full. Here, there is so much of everything. It is not possible to fully appreciate it all.

Some days in Russia, hundreds of people came to my studio; here, maybe twenty show up at the most.

Some of the Soviet artists thought that Americans did not take art very seriously:

For Russians, it’s as if something comes out from the inside. Russians

8. Alexander Levitsky, art collector and professor in the Slavic Studies Department at Brown University, in personal conversation.
like art very much. Here, the artist is just a strange kind of businessman. Russians have a holy reaction. They will stand a few hours in line to see an hour of an exhibit. Americans won't do that.

Although one of the emigre artists I spoke with believes that art reflects society, most of them see their art as an expression of higher values, such as dignity and freedom. Where the art refers to political aspects of Soviet society Americans may have difficulty understanding its meaning. John Bowlt has written:

Emigrant artists live in a sybaritic society that tends to regard artistic creation as a form of recreation. They find it hard to stimulate general interest in the urgent political tasks of Soviet art, the more so since the art in question belongs to a specific political structure.9

The importance of the spiritual was mentioned by several of the people. One artist said that art has to involve God, another that it is impossible to be a real artist without belief. This religious or metaphysical dimension may add to the distance between Soviet emigrant artists and the art world in America. Recognized art in America has few explicit references to religion. By contrast, the use of Christian and Jewish religious imagery is very important for some of the unofficial Jewish artists (e.g., Rukhin, Plavinsky, and Skharitonov). The appeal of these symbols, however, appears to be universal rather than specifically Jewish or Christian and represents an effort to make contact with an ultimate human or transcendental reality.

It marks a rebellious return to spiritual values in revenge for the slavish glorification of the material gains of an industrialized police state.10

A few of the artists, however, did work with Jewish themes and spoke of the difficulties they had clarifying their own relationship to Judaism.

In the Soviet Union, I began to ask myself who I am. I'm not really Jewish, not a communist, not a capitalist. I began to think and go back to my Jewish roots. My mother was religious. I thought of familiar scenes from her house. I began creating some Jewish art. I am not religious but I do believe in God.

Although in the Soviet Union the artists who were members of the Union tended to respond to commissions and to an accepted style and

subject, at least in their official work, the "ideal" was not to conform, not to follow but to lead. In this sense, the "good" artist is in opposition to society.

Society should be against the artist and the artist against society. The American artist stays close to his society. The typical art imitates the old abstract art but it is more commercial. Galleries will have to search for good artists again. Even Pollock and de Kooning changed. Society destroyed them and pushed them into a commercial world. They are now hugged by society.

Soviet artists involved with such new themes and forms of expression took their art very seriously in the Soviet Union. Even with the variety of approaches they had to their work, they gathered together for mutual support. Nearly all of them referred to the intense personal relations they had with their colleagues in the Soviet Union, and although it is fairly common to idealize such relationships after emigration and ignore feelings of jealousy and other tensions, it seems that the shared excitement and commitment to their art created an unusual sense of community.

There were some circles and groups that brought artists together to look at productions of contemporary art or to discuss and work on innovative art forms. One of the artists I interviewed lived and worked with other artists in the same building. Even if others did not live so closely with colleagues or belong to any particular group, they gathered together frequently in studios or apartments.

In Russia, everyone is in a group. You know everyone. There are different places for graphics or for ceramics. Most of my friends were in this circle—or they were sculptors.... In Russia telephoning was hard so friends dropped by (without making an appointment). I lived thirty-three years in Russia and selected friends. I had the time—and it took time.

At the same time this closeness created its own tensions. One artist, Ernst Neizvestnyi, said that he had a very intense group in the Soviet Union, but, in fact, it was too intense for him.

In Russia, I had a very close circle of friends which included artists as well as scientists, philosophers, and students. Perhaps it was too much, there was too much friendship. I was pushed into being a leader, being a father. It left me tired. I am just an individual.11

These relationships must also be seen in the larger context of Soviet

11. Neizvestnyi was invited to address a seminar for scientists who planned to emigrate; see Mark Ya. Azbel, Refusenik (Boston, 1981) pp. 394-95.
society. Soviet citizens find their friends an important source of emotional and practical support. This particular aspect of Soviet life has proved difficult to recreate in American society.\textsuperscript{12}

Although a few emigre artists retain these friendships in New York, the intensity of the relationship is often diminished. There are many factors involved in this change. They now live further away from one another and so have to plan trips well ahead of time. Because of the distance and because they now have telephones, dropping in unannounced is less frequent, and visiting patterns become more like those of other Americans living in New York City. If they do not live and work in the inner city few people, Americans or Russians, will travel out to see them.

A second factor is that the Soviet artists are tense about "making it." As we have seen, many are unsure about how the New York art world works and feel insecure about their own artistic development. Therefore, they use all their energy for their artistic and professional endeavours and have little left for other concerns:

Immigrants don't discuss problems; they work as individuals. I had friends when I was young. Maybe it's age but there's tension now. We realize this tension; there's no time for discussion. You have to establish yourself or get out. Maybe, after some years, I will have time to sit down and have a beer... when I have established myself.

They struggle so intensely that they often find it difficult to appreciate the accomplishments of their colleagues. The forms and degrees of adjustment are so diverse that former colleagues and friends imperceptibly drift apart. Although a few take the energy and time to support each other, several expressed feelings of jealousy and a desire to avoid contact with other Soviet artists in New York.

I see Russian artists only if I'm in the gallery. I'm not interested in being friendly with them.

I don't like Russian artists here. Two artists meet and there are three opinions. They hate each other. They express jealousy and have sensitive natures. I think I'm over this.

\textsuperscript{12}George Feifer wrote in the introduction to "Russian Disorders" in Harper's, February 1981, that compensation for hardships comes chiefly from friendships in the Soviet Union: "There is more discourse about art, love, fantasy and freedom...'", p. 42. For a discussion on friendship in the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union, see Marilyn Rueschemeyer, Professional Work and Marriage—An East/West Comparison (London and New York, 1981), pp. 176-78 et passim.
In New York, the artists come from different cities. I know them but I'm not too close with them. In the Soviet Union, I had good friends but among the Russian artists, there are problems and competition.... Americans are normal and quiet. Russians are a bit crazy and nervous. They're not comfortable to be with. They want too much but people aren't interested in them.... I want to forget. I don't want to see Russia, to be with Russians.

Although two of the artists interviewed have American friends and colleagues, most of them have only limited contacts with Americans—artists or other people. One problem is language. The simple conversations that they can manage are not particularly interesting for them. When I advised one of the artists to learn more English his daughter replied, "Why? He doesn't speak to anyone."

The Russian artist is often unwilling to approach his American colleagues until he feels more confident about his work:

My level isn't ready for American artists but I dream. My dream is to talk to American artists and get to know them.

One emigrant artist suggested that American artists do not have the same need for intense discussion that there is in the Soviet Union.

American artists don't like to invite and discuss because it's all open. You can go and see everything you want to and evaluate yourself and others. There's nothing to discuss.

Two of the artists were more successful than the others in making close contacts with Americans. The first had lived in the United States the longest, seven years; he had been terribly lonely, however, until he left the small town where he was living and moved into the city. The second was Ernst Neizvestnyi. When he came to the United States, he was able to move to a large studio in Soho. He told me that he does have a circle of interested people now, although they are much more spread out than in the Soviet Union.

In Russia, there were only a few centres of art. Students here are interested in my work and now come around. Until they understood my system, they thought I was conservative.

One gallery manager, however, familiar with this particular artist's circle in the Soviet Union, expressed the feeling that the new people who come to visit the studio in New York are less interesting than his former circle of friends and admirers.

Some of the emigres expressed regret about the loss of former friend-
ships and about the lack of contact with their American colleagues. They said they did not understand Americans, “the American soul”—American psychology, the American life-style. On the other hand, they identified themselves as professional artists “in the American sense,” that is, in their perception of the Americans. Talk is not important—work is. Here they are able to do the work they want to do, look at the art they want to see, read the books they want to read. Another respondent related the different attitudes towards art to broader contrasts between the Soviet Union and the United States.

I don’t blame the Americans. I understand. Here in New York, there is so much going on, so many artists, so many films, so much theatre. There is a fantastic choice here. In Russia, there is much less to do.

Thus, the emigre artists see themselves living as intensely in New York as formerly in the Soviet Union. The intensity, however, does not come from the shared commitment of an unrecognized minority, but rather from the sense of new possibilities, both in their own work and in the variety of art they come in contact with:

If you can’t experiment, there’s no art.

Here you can go from one gallery to the next. Technical work is brought to its peak. The examples here are better. New York is like a blacksmith that bangs out the best.

Although some of the art is terrible, the serious and good people here have the highest standards in the whole world. What is here now, will be in Russia in twenty years. Americans advance all the time.

Several of the people interviewed profess a romantic image of the artist. “Real” artists live dangerously: sometimes, they sell their work and have money; at other times, they fail. “Real” artists do not need the same security as other people. At the same time, these artists see themselves as professionals in America and this means accepting the ways of the real business world. Being a professional artist involves selling work through a good gallery and not in one’s studio to acquaintances. By participating in “the competition” the artist becomes a responsible professional. However, since in the gallery there is rarely personal contact between the artist and the buyer, the artist feels lonely and unappreciated. Furthermore, the emigre artist often assumes that because art is business in America, the dealer who wants to make a profit will exhibit the best art he or she can find. After some time in the United States, though, he becomes aware that often the “best” art is not exhibited, but rather what will sell on the art market.
I have had discussions with many galleries. Before I thought in America there is real art. Art here is a business. What does it mean? In Russia business is nothing. In Russia you might give a picture away to someone who said he liked it. That is Soviet art life.... In Russia, an artist isn’t a professional; but I am equal to other professionals. In the Soviet Union, we often talked about how we can distinguish good art from bad art.

Another artist observed:

For American artists, art is business. They are other men, other human beings. They are not so spiritual; they’re cool, professional in their art. Still, I admire their professionalism. Russians don’t have the same technical skill but they are warmer, more familiar, friendly.... Here, one must be selfish, be his own man....

The artists are ambivalent about their own goals. They want a studio and prestige but they think Americans emphasize these goals too much. In the Soviet Union they had financial security; in America there is fierce competition to make it. The Soviet artists are attracted and also repelled by the businessman ethos. They strive to be professionals, are attracted by the conception of themselves as real artists in the American sense—taking chances, having money at some periods and none at all at others, but they are quite unprepared for having “sell themselves.” They believe that if they are in financial difficulty, they have no one else but themselves to depend on. They expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness. They criticized the lack of dedication in the life and art of their American colleagues.

For most of my respondents, immigration to the United States was not just a matter of improving the material conditions of their life and work. At a deeper level too their exhilarations and disappointments, their tensions and ambitions reflect their ambivalent attitudes to the new culture. Perhaps because they are artists, they express the problems of adjustment common to all immigrants with a special intensity.

Their experience is revealing in three ways which seem worth further exploration. It tells us much about the social and cultural grounding of all art; it gives suggestive insights into artistic life in the Soviet Union; and it provides an interesting perspective on the modus operandi of the art world in America.