

Fine Arts Committee
PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE PROGRAM
Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington 6, D. C.

TO: Mr. David E. Finley, Chairman
DATE: January 26, 1958

FROM: Eleanor Mitchell

SUBJECT: Visit of American artists to Soviet Union, October-November, 1956;
notes compiled from conversations with Mr. Franklin C. Watkins,
his letters and his debriefing at the offices of the International
Educational Exchange Service, Department of State, December 2, 1956.

Cultural Agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union

In the Agreement on East-West Exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union, signed January 27, 1956, specific provision was made for the exchange of artists. The International Education Exchange Service of the Department of State has been assigned the responsibility of selecting American artists for such exchanges. Mr. Franklin C. Watkins, painter and member of the Fine Arts Committee, Mr. Lamar Dodd, painter, Head of the Department of Art at the University of Georgia and a member of the Advisory Commission on the Arts, Mr. William A. Smith, painter and former President of the American Watercolor Society and Mr. John Hoden, sculptor, were chosen to visit the Soviet Union for a month during October-November, 1956. With the exception of Mr. Dodd, who travelled as a member of the Advisory Committee on the Arts and returned to this country by way of the Orient, they went as United States Specialist Grantees and travel expenses to and from the Soviet Union were taken care of by exchange program funds. During their sojourn in the Soviet Union they were guests of the Soviet Government. All four had previously participated in the exchange program in other parts of the world.

Cities Visited

The principal cities visited were Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia and Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Armenia is normally off limits for American visitors. Mr. Harry Barnes of the American Embassy who accompanied the group on their trip was not permitted to go there and was forced to await the return of the party in Georgia. Mr. Watkins reports that Mr. Barnes was viewed with some suspicion at first because of his excellent command of Russian and his United States government connection. Before long, however, he was able to break through the Russian reserve by the force of his personality.

Reception

The artists were put up at the best hotels throughout their stay in the Soviet Union. They were accompanied everywhere by an interpreter. They were well received and hospitably treated, being invited to artists' studios and apartments for lunches or suppers. For instance, the Moscow artists, V. Bugatkin, Goryaev and Shiman, seemed particularly well disposed. All three entertained the group and went with their wives to a party given by Mr. Barnes. Bugatkin went to see Mr. Watkins off, when he left for the United States.

Reception (continued...)

Mr. Watkins reports, however, that a certain amount of suspicion was shown at first. The Soviet artists seemed to be leery of government contacts. The American artists were constantly asked how they had been selected. When it was apparent to the Russians that the visitors were in fact artists who had achieved distinction in their respective fields, their reserve was broken down and they became much more friendly. They were impressed, for example, that Mr. Watkins had won the first prize at the Carnegie International in 1931, although his painting, "Suicide in Costume" had been classed as "Second".

Several times Mr. Watkins was asked how much he was paid for his paintings. Once he was asked how much his suit cost.

Art Education in the Soviet Union

Technically Soviet artists are well prepared. Their work is highly disciplined and academic. Training begins at the age of 8. For example, in Moscow there may be 1500 applicants for the art school. Of these perhaps 50 are chosen on the basis of aptitude and on general qualifications. They are taken from their homes and live at the school in dormitories, which Mr. Watkins visited and photographed. During the first year only 45 minutes a day are devoted to drawing, the remainder of the time being spent on academic subjects. The art studies are increased each year. The children remain at the school until they are 16 and then go on to the next higher school.

Children are reported to visit museums in perhaps even greater ratio than in the United States and attend lectures.

Status of the Artist in the Soviet Union

The living conditions of artists in the Soviet Union are, relatively speaking very good. They were found to be well dressed. The Government is taking the position that they are doing more for the artist than the western countries. They have brought out a stamp honoring artists of the world. The stamp depicts a famous Chinese artist.

Most artists belong to a union. The American group met many artists through the Union of Artists of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow, which is the head or governing union. Other unions have special characteristics and feel themselves to be autonomous, although Mr. Watkins feels this may be a cultivated delusion. Individual artists outside of Moscow expressed doubt once or twice that material left with the Moscow Union would be disseminated. Critics are also members of the union, from which close association they publicize the decisions and pronouncements. A few architects were identified as such at one of the union gatherings. It was not made clear whether they have their own unions.

Artists who belong to unions have commissions handed to them. In fact most art work is done on commission. People do not in general buy pictures for their homes. The Government buys art or otherwise supports it by commissions, publications or embellishment to public buildings. Original works of art are to be found on the walls of hotels.

Soviet Art

The American artists looked everywhere for some signs of creative artistic expression. Mr. Watkins reported that he found none. All the art was poor from this point of view, although it was technically competent, academic and disciplined. It was felt that among the unaccepted artists, whom the Americans did not meet, there may have been found more fertile work.

An exhibition of Ukrainian landscapes was seen. All was seen to be gamy. There were no woody skies. It was noted that in the art school in Leningrad all the models were beautiful. In the United States models are not chosen because they have perfect figures. The term "social realism" can be applied only superficially to Soviet painting. The artists apparently do not dare go below the surface. "Artists seemed to paint the smile of life." They do not reflect the influence of the great masterpieces in the Hermitage, where the Rembrandt paintings, for example, portray so clearly the feeling coming from within. Mr. Watkins found it difficult to get anywhere in talking to Soviet artists on the subject of aesthetics.

Mr. Watkins had occasion to mention the difficulties one encounters in the United States in serving on the jury of an art exhibition. This is due to the fact that the work is so varied. In contrast the task of an art jury in the U.S.S.R. is relatively easy. The Russian artists would say, "We are so unified".

The former Museum of Modern Western Painting has been broken up and is in large part in the Hermitage, where this section is not well attended. The Pushkin Museum in Moscow contains many paintings by Manet, Gauguin, Cezanne and others, hung one above the other as though for storage rather than presentation.

Art Exchanges with the Soviet Union

Mr. Watkins reports the impression that Russian artists have a great eagerness to come to this country. One evidence of their lack of knowledge of the United States is found in the unneeded exclamations which are reported to have greeted every showing of slides of the United Nations building.

They would like to exchange art exhibits. Artists who might be represented in American exhibits shown abroad should be people with a record of accomplishment. Exhibits should presumably be largely contemporary, but possibly with a historical section. Mr. Watkins suggests that if the Russians have built up a line of propaganda against abstraction, we should include non-abstract works to show that many American artists do work in a non-abstract form. This would not necessarily mean that no abstract works should be included. Presumably the best exhibit which the Soviet Union might send to the United States would receive a terrific "puzzing".

Several Soviet artists are scheduled to visit the United States in the near future. These are Ingomson, President of the Academy in Moscow, Subparidze of the Union of Artists in Tbilisi, Georgia and Tansyubov of the Union of Artists of Uzbek, Central Asia, who is a Muslim.

American Fine Art Material Presented

A certain amount of fine arts material has already been presented as a result of the American visit. The Fine Arts Committee gave Mr. Hoden before his departure slideslips of sculpture in the National Gallery of Art. The Committee sent to Mr. Watkins in care of the American Embassy in Moscow slideslips of paintings in the National Gallery of Art and 10 color slides of paintings and stained glass in the Gorkovskaya Gallery of Art. Mr. Watkins took with him a selected group of color slides of paintings in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, various art catalogs and books on American art. Mr. Watkins' slides were left with the Union of Artists of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow, as well as a number of books. Messrs. Dodd, Hoden and Smith also left considerable material. On one visit to the Union a collection of color reproductions of American painting provided by UNIA was taken.

Several copies of John Bour's "New Art in America" were left in Moscow and elsewhere. A copy of Alexander Eliot's "Three Hundred Years of American Painting" was given to the head of a rest home where over 1000 artists and writers are reported to go every year. Copies of "Painting in America" by Edgar P. Richardson were distributed in several places.

Since his return Mr. Watkins has sent to the Soviet Union two large packages of books on American literature.

Future Presentations of American Fine Arts Material

Mr. Watkins' report points up the desirability of sending to the Soviet Union good slides, photographs and reproductions of strong American art and architecture, interiors, houses and cities. Books about American art were received with great interest. Many more books and periodicals should be sent. These should include the Museum of Modern Art publications.

The Fine Arts Committee hopes to assist in providing these materials which should lead to a greater understanding of the cultural patterns of the United States in the Soviet Union.