

Depiction of Food in Russian Painting of the Post-Revolutionary Era (1917-1920s)

Daria & Irina Rutsinskay

In Russian historiography the first years after the Revolution are considered a separate era. It covers a brief, but remarkable period of time which lasted from 1917 until the end of the 1920s. This period begins with the October Revolution which drastically changed social, economic, political and cultural conditions in the country, and ends in 1929, which is referred to by Russian historians, using Stalin's definition, as 'a year of great change'. Indeed, the year was crucial for the future of the country and the changes it brought about were tangible throughout the whole history of the Soviet Union.

Precisely in 1929 Stalin launched two important campaigns – forced collectivization of the agricultural sector and rapid industrialization of the country. These steps were carried out in order to transform the Soviet Union into a socialist state. By that time all forms of market relations in the country were eliminated and the state's economy was completely managed by the Soviet government. Stalin had already defeated his last political opponents and with all the rivals gone, the 'cult of personality' of the Soviet leader began to thrive. The year's repressions were officially recognized as a political tool when Stalin coined the phrase: 'In building socialism, repression is a necessity' (Stalin 1949, p. 309). Soon he backed it up with political trials, killings and executions. The country moved rapidly to a totalitarian form of government.

But these events took place only in 1929. The preceding period we are talking about in this paper was ostensibly quiet. But it would be wrong to idealize it, bearing in mind all the horrors of the following period – Stalin's era. The time between these two disastrous dates 1917 and 1929 has a set of the most controversial features. A mood of turbulent change prevailed. The Revolution was followed by years of devastating civil war, military communism and starvation. To mitigate these catastrophic events the NEP (New Economic Policy) was introduced. However, within a few years it turned into the horrors of collectivization. So this seemingly peaceful post-revolutionary period for most of the people was a time of adversity, fear and desperate attempts to survive.

Equally controversial were cultural aspects of Soviet life at that time. The Soviet government considered art merely as a means of propaganda. Art was supposed to be politically applicable. 'Harmful' books disappeared from the libraries; 'hostile' newspapers were shut down. Many theatres were closed, museums – nationalized. However, in the 1920s the total control over cultural life had not yet been established. As the People's Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky wrote in 1928: 'The state has no

right to support particular style or particular artistic school and treat them as though they were state's property.... it must support all formal aspirations of contemporary art' (Lunacharsky 1967, p. 210). We should note that already the following year Lunacharsky was removed from his post of Commissar. It marked a sharp turn to pervasive governmental censorship.

But in this brief post-revolutionary period various artistic movements still existed. The so-called social realism that soon became the one and only 'correct' style of all cultural trends of the Soviet Union at that point was not yet proclaimed. It was already impossible to criticize Stalin, the government and its decisions, but still possible to talk about important issues. We may, therefore, say that in the given period of time artists still had the freedom to pursue their artistic aspirations and their choice of themes of painting. The means and methods of artistic expression were not imposed on them. Their paintings still reflected their viewpoint, their way of seeing the world, their set of values.

Food appeared frequently in the post-revolutionary paintings. The art of that time corresponded to a known reality - total starvation and the necessity of a daily hunt for food. Food was all that people talked about, worked for, dreamed of. In such conditions it could not but appear as an artistic motif. Of course it was not true for all the artists. For such grand masters of avant-garde as Malevich, Kandinsky, Filonov and Tatlin food was too routine, too simple - something not worthy of a great painter. But many other outstanding artists devoted their works to this 'shallow' theme.

We should note from the very beginning that all food-related paintings of that time exceeded a mere portrayal of everyday life. Any reference to the subject of food implied a depiction of complex themes. The artists talked not about life, but about being. Food gained symbolic, philosophical meaning. Romantic aspirations and idealistic hopes for brighter future so specific the post-revolutionary era demanded a special scale of artistic concepts.

This approach determined the genre peculiarity of 'food art'. Among such art works genre-painting (depicting the scenes of everyday life) was practically absent. People sitting at the table were portrayed only by Boris Kustodiev. However, hereafter we will try to show that Kustodiev's works only appeared to be genre-painting, but in fact, they should be understood as artistic reconstructions, nostalgic dreams and not as images of everyday reality.

The undisputed leader among genres was, of course, a still life. This category of painting as a form of understanding reality was very close to the artists of the

post-revolutionary era. Later, in the 1930s, when art was aiming to idolize the heroic everyday life of the Soviet people, still life would once again fade into oblivion. But in the 1920s this genre proved to be useful for understanding the present and for talking about the eternal and the temporal. Still life possessed a complexity of conceptual insights such as the ability to generalize, the ability to depict the world using symbolic meanings, the ability to rise above disturbing everyday reality. At the same time, artists did not depict abstract objects. The canvases portrayed items directly related to the contemporary reality. The artists tried to show the world as it appeared to them. Therefore, in determining the different levels of interaction of a work of art with the corresponding time, paintings should be treated as historical documents of the *époque*.

For example, if we look at the paintings from 1917 to mid-1920s (the hungriest and the most difficult post-revolutionary years), we will not find this abundance of themes. Herring and bread – those are the ‘protagonists’ of the paintings. We won’t find as many depictions of herring before or after the 1920s. The artists turned herring into some kind of a gastronomic symbol of the *époque*. It was not accidental. The artists derived motifs from the immediate surroundings. In the first years of a new Soviet government herring and black bread were the only easily obtainable food. ‘Everybody was engaged into peaceful revolutionary activity – cooking for dinner herring cutlets, herring ragout, herring desserts’ (Zamiatin 2003, p. 97).

The artists Serebryakov, Shterenberg, Petrov-Vodkin and Malagis made this product the preferred theme of their still life’s. It appeared in the paintings as a reminder of an everyday existence which was miserable, monotonous, and severe. Yet the still lifes of those artists do not embody depression, hopelessness, gloom and melancholy. For instance, a still life of Petrov-Vodkin called ‘Herring’ was painted in a starving year of 1918. Austerity of food on the table is a truthful image of what could be seen on every Soviet table - a loaf of black bread, two potatoes, a herring. If we look closer, somewhere in the background, almost invisible, there are people for whom this meal is intended. Compared with the reality of the food on the table they seem almost non-existent. Virtually all the space in the painting is given to the table. The viewer’s interest is intentionally directed at the table which has priority within the pictorial composition. As a result, the food gains particular significance. The artistic conception was to let each of the items on the table speak for itself on the essential aspects of life. Bright colours dominate the painting, with the main tone being the pale-pink colour of the tablecloth. Intensity of coloration transforms the misery of life into something cheerful. The world finds significance and harmony. All objects in the painting live their own life – they do not touch each other, do not interact. They can do so because they are so monumental themselves. These compositional qualities, colouration and artistic techniques are used to raise the world created on

the canvas above the level of everyday life, take it away from the hustle of reality, wipe out the insignificant. The dominance of a pale-pink colour gives the painting an upbeat mood, joy and equanimity. Art becomes a means of gifting life with a higher meaning.

We talked above about the paradoxical fact that no painting dedicated to the image of food in the post-revolutionary Russia conveyed a sense of hopelessness. Instead, the paintings manifest untroubled optimism. Obviously, an important role in this was the artists’ personal attitude towards the Revolution. All painters referred to in this research were loyal to the Soviet power, even more than that, they actively cooperated with the government.

They accepted revolution, idealized it, hoped that it would bring a bright future and freedom. This mind set formed a special artistic perception of the world. Personal ideas of the artists were integrated into their art. Art became a visual medium of their personal aspirations. This, of course, does not mean that all food depicting artistic strategies were identical. As every artist had a bright personality and distinctive belief system, food in their art as a symbol of the Revolution received various interpretations.

Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin tried to create a poeticized world. This approach is evident in his ‘Morning Still Life’, painted in 1918. The minimalist setting of two eggs and a cup of tea does not aim at showing the miserable and hungry existence of the world the artist lived in. The painter was interested only in the artistic qualities and aesthetic values of food. The artist was merely admiring the world of things – their different textures, colour dynamics, delicate nuances. They are reflected, refracted, multiplied in such way, visually widening the boundaries of the painting. The harmonious arrangement of the table looks pure and joyful like a fine morning. To rise above the hungry daily life, to see the beauty of the world - this is the life and artistic strategy of Petrov-Vodkin. The artist did not ignore the surrounding reality, he was truthful and accurate in the selection of items meant to represent it. But he looked at the difficult circumstances of life through the eyes of a philosopher and a poet, capable of focusing on the eternal.

Quite different was the reality of David Shterenberg. The world of his paintings cannot be called peaceful and joyful. Coming from a small Jewish town of Zhytomyr (Ukraine), Shterenberg spent most of his life in poverty. He studied in Odessa, then in Paris, where he was acquainted with Modigliani and Picasso, and where he developed his painting style. In 1917 he returned to Petrograd to continue his artistic career. Here, he accepted the proposal of Lunacharsky to be put in charge of all the fine arts in the country.

The post-revolutionary works of Shterenberg are the pinnacle of asceticism. Contemporaries called them the ‘hungry still lifes’. They depict no more than 2 or 3 simple objects. His ‘Herring’ (1917-1918) could not appear in any other era. This is a genuine portrait of the *époque*. Each element of the painting speaks of almost monastic abnegation. The misery of the shown world is enhanced by

laconic artistic language. The few simple colours of the canvas correspond with a few simple objects. Everything is aimed at minimizing, simplification, generalization. At the same time Shterenberg, unlike Petrov-Vodkin, does not soften his view of the surrounding reality. The brush strokes are harsh, the shades are dark, and the atmosphere is oppressive.

The same minimalism is noticeable in his still life 'Clabber' (1919) and 'Still Life With Cheese' (1920). In these paintings he does not portray a real domestic household. There is no three-dimensional space, only a single-colour background. Being deprived of domestic details, the still life's evolve from being a mere description of the *époque* to being a symbol of the *époque*.

A number of post-revolutionary works of Shterenberg are difficult to unambiguously attribute to any genre. These are his 'Aunt Sasha' (1922-1923), 'Aniska' (1926) and some others. Compositionally, the paintings are the same 'hungry still lifes' – tables with poor food. However, here he expanded the space of the paintings to include new participants – people. But these are not portraits, as the author was not interested in the individual features of the characters, but rather their generalized imagery. The first thing we notice is that the paintings are event-free. There is a table with a meal, a person next to the table. Their appearance close to each other is, of course, not accidental. With Shterenberg and his symbolic and extremely concise language nothing is random. We would expect some kind of interaction between the people and the food. But the artist does not allow the elements of the painting to overlap. People are removed from the food. Eating is not included in the painting. Aunt Sasha is looking afar, girl Aniska turned away from the table. Nothing happens. Time has stopped, the air is heavy. People's thoughts are somewhere far away. Immobility and sadness dominate the canvas.

The artist does not mitigate the austerity of the life stories of his contemporaries. On the contrary, he strengthens it by choosing as protagonists of his paintings the most 'vulnerable' categories - children and the elderly. This is how he underlines the hardship of life and the stoic endurance of the Soviet people. Gloomy paintings of Shterenberg served as a symbol of hard, rough and yet peculiarly poeticized world.

In the 1920s, the artist joined the Easel Painters Association (OST). This society consisted of the artists who welcomed the Revolution. They devoted their works to interpreting such themes as machinery, labour, physical culture and sports, promoting the life of the ordinary Soviet people. Their works are joyful, full of sounds, movement, human interactions. By joining the OST, Shterenberg demonstrated his desire to describe the present with cheer and optimism. But, being an extremely honest artist, he came to a decision: an image of what is on the table is more accurate in understanding the *époque* than the images of factories, plants and sportsmen. His paintings are not 'noisy', they are 'silent'. But this silence is more eloquent.

Quite different was a depiction of post-revolutionary everyday life by Boris Kustodiev. He was a renowned artist long before the Revolution. Already by the end of the 19th century he had developed his own distinctive style, devoting himself to his own recognizable themes. His colourful, bright, vibrant paintings of Russian holidays depicted fairs, festivals and people rejoicing and celebrating. Canvases exuded joy and optimism.

The artist's life changed tragically in 1916, when he was diagnosed with a spinal cord tumour. Numerous operations brought relief from severe pain, but he was paralysed and moved around in a wheelchair. During the last years of his life he could not even sit. He worked lying down with the canvases hung above the bed. Of course this affected his artistic career. But it influenced it in an unexpected way. Contemporaries claimed: the heavier the condition of Kustodiev became, the more vivid and life-affirming his canvases seemed. As the artist himself told his wife, only healthy people could afford to think about death and suffering, when you're sick, the only thing that remains is to think of something joyful and merry. All biographers of Kustodiev wrote that the artist welcomed the Revolution. But his paintings, in our opinion, show the ambiguity of this attitude towards the modern reality. None of his previous paintings were as nostalgic as his paintings of the post-revolutionary period.

According to Boim, 'Nostalgia - it is an attempt to overcome the irreversibility of history, to hide in the mythological space. However, the very need for nostalgia is historical. In certain transitional periods of history, it can be a defensive reaction - searching in the past stability, which does not exist in the present. At such moments, the past begins to have more charisma than the future' (2013, 3 (89)). In our view, it is the exact perception of the past and the future that is shown in Kustodiev's painting. The subject matter of his paintings had not changed since 1917. The Revolution and all that was connected with it are virtually not reflected in his paintings. He seemed to have stayed in the pre-revolutionary past. He portrayed not proletarians, but merchants. Full-bodied Russian beauties are sitting at the tables groaning with food. Life is presented as a world of happiness, serenity, sensual pleasures of life: 'Merchant's Wife on the balcony' (1920), 'Merchant's Wife' (1920), 'Merchant's Wife drinking tea' (1926). He depicts the world that is gone, the world destroyed by the Revolution, but the world of special beauty, harmony and spirituality. He admires it from the horrors of post-revolutionary life.

It is difficult to say what influenced more the development of this art of nostalgia – the artist's personal drama or social upheavals. Probably both. But due to starvation in the country a unique strategy for food representation and perception of reality was born.

In 1918, when Kustodiev's wife sold their last valuables to buy some bread, he created the painting 'The Merchant's Wife at Tea'. Still life, ultimately pushed to the foreground

of the painting, as if it was exposed for adoration. It is, of course, painted from memory. But the artist does not skimp on details. Here is a real gastronomic abundance: cupcakes, cakes, biscuits, jam, fruits, huge ripe watermelon.

If we look at the numerous 'tea paintings' of Kustodiev, we can see that the items of his still life's move from one canvas to another. Due to this repetition they start to be perceived as stage props. Looking at them, we understand the words of the modern researcher of the nature of nostalgia: 'The feeling of loss and fear are carefully masked, black holes in the hearts are disguised with colourful decorations' (Boim, 2013, 3 89). It is unlikely that this self-perception of the artist can be called 'unconditional recognition of the Revolution'.

There was another case of gastronomic abundance paintings in the history of Russian post-revolutionary art. These are two paintings of Ilya Mashkov under the title 'Bread' and 'Meat, Poultry', both painted in 1924. Researchers were puzzled: how could Mashkov find all these products in hungry Moscow. It is obvious these still lifes are also a result of the author's imagination. But this fantasy is not brought about by a sense of nostalgia. It was born exclusively from artistic tasks, set by the painter. He was looking for new artistic techniques, imitating the great masters of the past eras. Indeed, these works somehow seem to be inspired by the Flemish art of the 17th century.

In connection with the analysed topic, one more question arises. How did the contemporaries of the artists perceive their message? What did they see in the paintings of the gastronomic theme of the post-revolutionary era?

Here, as it turns out, there are also unexpected options. Truthful, reflecting the reality paintings of Petrov-Vodkin and Shterenberg were perceived quite adequately, people saw them as the historical documents. But fantastic gastronomic themes of Kustodiev and Mashkov were treated differently. In the nostalgic images of Kustodiev, strange as it may sound, people saw a satire on the pre-revolutionary Russia, and the life and ideals of the merchant class. This largely saved the artist from suspicion and accusations of a desire to return to the past. Mashkov's

paintings, on the other hand, immediately became exemplary works of socialist realism. They were described as 'a truthful depiction of reality'. The artist did not argue against that interpretation. Moreover, a few years later he stated that his still life 'Bread' depicts an ordinary Moscow bakery in 1924. This lie foreshadowed a new transition – to a new *époque* – of Stalin's terror - a time when the horrors of collectivization coexisted with a cheerful image of a 'happy Soviet life'.

Thus, the post-revolutionary era in Russia was responsible for many different forms of artistic representations of food. The change in all the vital principles, coupled with famine and devastation, was not always accompanied by an honest look at reality. Some defended themselves against this brutal truth by escaping into the past; some turned the food images into a piece of propaganda. But, in any case, regardless of the ways the artists depicted the pre-revolutionary past or the present after the Revolution, the food on their canvases did not show private and commonplace existence, but told a story of a changed world and became a symbol of the *époque*.

Somewhat unexpected looks the lack of a futuristic strategy of food depiction in an environment where so many people lived with the hope of a brighter future and the government's promise to build the world's best society within a couple of years. Apparently food and its depiction can only be a symbol of the world that does exist.

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