CIEE in St. Petersburg, Russia

Course name: The Politics of the Image and the Image of Politics in Russian Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries

Course number: AHIS 3001 RASU

Programs offering course: Summer Russian Area Studies Program

Language of instruction: English

U.S. Semester Credits: 3 credits

Contact Hours: 45 hours

Term: Summer 2019

Course Description

This course examines Russian/Soviet visual art from the prism of political forces that influenced its development. The renaissance of Russian art known as the Silver Age coincided with the social unrest and political turmoil at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1910s, Russian avant-garde artists introduced new ways of non-objective art (Malevich, Kandinsky, Larionov) through their re-discovery of Russian icons. The Utopian ideas of the 1920s, and the Stalinist ideology of the 1930s-1950s, brought to life Socialist Realism—the prevalent method of Soviet art. The overall liberalization in culture following Stalin’s death resulted in the artists’ interest in the form of representation rather than its content. The irony of the Sots-Art movement of the 1970s (Komar and Melamid) contributed to the disappearance of totalitarian ideology in visual art. The cardinal political changes of the 1980s inevitably affected the aesthetics of Russian art: post-Perestroika art has been accepted as a new avant-garde.

Learning Objectives

The course aims at providing students with the essential knowledge of the history of Russian fine arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Upon successful completion of this course, the students would be able to:

1) identify major trends in the history of the Russian art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including avant-garde, socialist realism, underground art of the 1960s-1990s, sots-art, postmodernism, and others;
2) to identify most prominent artists from that period and their works from the collections of St. Petersburg museums;
3) to understand and summarize the ideological contexts, in which these works emerged and existed;
4) apply some of the skills of formal analysis, including artistic style, towards a work of art.

Course prerequisites

None

Methods of Instruction

The course will comprise classroom sessions and excursions to museums and artist studios in St. Petersburg. The classroom meetings will be a combination of lectures and discussions. The students are encouraged to participate in the in-class discussions of the works of art and of the assigned readings. The course will also include individual presentations.

Assessment and Final Grade

Students will be assessed according to the following criteria:

- In-class participation 30%
- Quiz #1 15%
- Quiz #2 15%
- Final presentation 40%
Course Requirements

Participation
Taking part in class discussions is essential for learning. It is important that all students prepare course readings for the assigned date and come to class ready to analyze and debate issues raised by the readings. All reading materials will be made available to students in electronic form (pdf), so having a convenient means to read .pdf files (a laptop, a pdf-capable e-book reader, etc.) would be of great help. If necessary, paper copies of the readings will be available upon your request.

Quizzes. Two quizzes will be given during the semester. These quizzes will test your knowledge of course concepts, theories and facts, and they will be a combination of multiple-choice questions and several open questions.

Presentation: The goal of the presentation – is to analyze a particular work of art either covered in the class or of the student’s own choice, using a theoretical framework acquired in the course. You presentation should last 10 minutes and be accompanied by visuals (handouts, PPT presentation). The instructor will provide the students with relevant scholarly material to base their presentations.

Class attendance
Attendance is crucial for successful completion of the class. Students are allowed to have two unexcused absences for each course for the whole semester program. These allowed unexcused absences should be used for situations such as minor illnesses without a doctor’s note or personal situations that prevent the student from attending the class. Allowed unexcused absences should not be used in a planned way for travel or other activities.
Unexcused absences beyond the limit of two will lower a student’s grade by 2 points on the 100-point scale each. For example, if your overall score in the class is 90 (an equivalent of A-) and you have had three unexcused absences, your final score will be 88 (B+).

Weekly Schedule

Week One

Class 2. Russian Futurism, its differences and similarities to Italian Futurism. Poetic and artistic movements Gileia and Youth Union. Futurist manifests and exhibitions. Reading: Howard, Jeremy. The Union of Youth, pp. 8-40

Class 3. Off-site visit to St. Petersburg Museum of Avant-garde (the Matiushin House). The class will visit the St Petersburg Museum of Avant-garde that was the house of Mikhail Matyushin, the founder of the “Youth Union” group. Students will examine books and posters by Russian Futurists. The students will study Matyushin’s theory of expanded view [rasshirennoe smotrenie] and his group Zor-Ved [to see – to know].

Class 4. The birth of non-objective art – most significant revolution in visual art of the twentieth century. Mikhail Larionov, Vassiliy Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich as founders of non-objective art. Personal evolution of the artists and situations and cultural and political background of their discoveries. The emergence of rayonism, abstract compositions and suprematism coincided with the political turmoil in Russia and the beginning of the First World War. Reading: Painting revolution: Kandinsky, Malevich and the Russian avant-garde, pp. 24-35.
Week Two


Reading: Twentieth-century Russian and East European painting, pp. 11-26

Class 2. Off-site visit to the St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music
Experimentations in theater of the 1910s and 1920s.
1. Opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913): libretto Alexey Kruchenykh, introduction Velimir Khlebnikov, costumes and stage design Kazimir Malevich, music Mikhail Matushin
2. drama "I" (1913) " scenario Vladimir Mayakovsky
3. drama “Zangezi” (1923), scenario Velimir Khlebnikov, director Vladimir Tatlin
4. revolutionary theater, director Vsevolov Mierkhold.

Class 3. Russian avant-garde and the revolution of 1917.
The involvement of the avant-garde artists in the work of the new revolutionary government. Kazimir Malevich and his work in the Collegium on the Arts of Narkompros, the Commission for the Protection of Monuments, and the Museums Commission. Lenin’s “Plan of Monumental Propaganda” (1918) and the city decorations during the celebration of the anniversary of the revolution. The role of GINKhUK (The State Institute for Artistic Culture, dir. Malevich) in the revolutionary art of the early 1920s.

Reading: Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde, pp. 67-90.

Week Three

Class 1. The birth of socialist realism
The notion of socialist realism: history, theoretical background and key figures. The shutting down of the avant-garde movements in the 1930s. The newly introduced hierarchy of genres vis-à-vis the emerging political power structure.

Reading: Bown, Matthew. Socialist realism painting, pp. 41-70.

Class 2. The off-site visit to the Russian Museum
The art of socialist realism in the collection of the Russian Museum

Class 3. Visual arts during the Thaw
Nikita Khruschev’s policy of liberalization and destalinization after 1953. The birth of “unofficial” art during the period between the 1950s and 1962: circles of artists, who denied socialist realism. The opposition between official and unofficial art.

Reading: Susan E. Reid, “Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinisation in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw,” pp. 276-312

Week Four

Class 1. Off-site visit to the Museum of Nonconformist Art
Creative works of “unofficial” artists of the 1970s-1990s from the museum collection. Vadim Voinov’s exposition, “The Bridge over Styx”: representing the memory of political repressions and history.

Class 2. The “sots-art:” rethinking totalitarian ideology in visual art. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid – the founders of “sots-art” in the 1970s. The key principles of the sots-art:
exploiting socialist realism clichés, parodying the images of power in the art of previous epochs.

Class 3. Contemporary art in Russia
Global political changes and its effects on the Russian artistic scene in the 1980s The birth of contemporary art in Russia. Artistic movements during the time of Perestroika and changes in the economic and institutional aspects of the artistic life: art auctions, private exhibitions and museum collections.

Class 4. Off-site visit to the Ludvig Museum collection of the Russian Museum
The key figures of Russian contemporary art in the museum’s collection: Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, Vladimir Yankilevsky, Ivan Chuikov, Igor Makarevich and Leonid Sokov.

Class 5.
Final presentations by the students

Course materials

Readings
Backstein Joseph et al., eds. The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism under Stalin. New York, 1993
Reid Susan E., “Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinisation in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw,” Gender and History 2 (11) 1999, pp. 276-312

Online resources