

REINVENTING ARCADIA?  
Aleksandr Deineka's Nudes  
in the Southern Landscape

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Soviet Socialist Realist art has, in recent years, become a subject of considerable interest amongst both the academic community and the museum-going public. Long ignored by western scholars, the last decade or so has witnessed a concerted effort to engage with official Soviet culture, generating a plethora of publications and a wide range of exhibitions all exploring what Paul Wood has described as 'the ossified Other of Modernism'.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by a renewed

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<sup>1</sup> P. Wood, *The Politics of the Avant-Garde*, in: *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915-32* (exh cat), Guggenheim Museum, New York 1992, p. 6. Publications include: I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*, London 1990; M. Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, Oxford 1991; *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992*, eds. M. Cullerne Bown and B. Taylor, Manchester 1993; *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, eds. T. Lahusen and E. Dobrenko, Durham and London 1997; M. Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, New Haven 1998; V. Swanson, *Soviet Impressionism*, Suffolk, 2001. Exhibitions include: *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting 1930s-1960s* (Museum of Modern Art, Oxford 1992); *Agitation for Happiness: Soviet Art of the Stalin Epoch* (Kassel and State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg 1993-94); *Tyranei des Schönen: Architektur der Stalin-zeit* (Oesterreichisches Museum, Vienna 1994); *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1930-45* (Hayward Gallery, London 1995); *Berlin-Moscow 1900-1950* (Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow 1996); *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era* (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt 2003-2004).

interest in figuration in contemporary art practices and specifically enabled by the political circumstances that brought about the end of the Cold War, these publications and exhibitions have drawn attention to a huge body of work, mostly unfamiliar to western eyes. Perhaps inevitably, much of this work has adopted a wide focus, covering either the whole of the Soviet era, or examining an extensive range of cultural artefacts produced within a particular period. Such an approach has been both useful and necessary, particularly considering the unfamiliarity of much of the work, and indeed history, concerned.

As Socialist Realism in the visual arts has always adopted an exclusively figurative approach, rejecting all experiments in abstraction, many commentators have, perhaps inevitably, placed a great deal of emphasis on subject matter rather than style. In particular, much attention has been drawn to what is commonly referred to as the 'hierarchy of genres', a conventional standard according to which certain subjects have been ascribed more or less value in relation to the prevailing ideology of those administering the arts. As the Soviet state itself operated effectively as the sole patron and supporter of art practices and explicitly advocated that the fundamental role of art was to serve the Bolshevik state, this notional 'hierarchy' can thus be read as a reflection of the official ideological position of the Soviet leadership.

History painting, most particularly works addressing modern history, and portraiture were certainly regarded as the pre-eminent genres within Socialist Realist painting, a factor attested to by the sheer abundance of commissions in these fields of production, and indeed by the awarding of prestigious honours such as the Stalin Prize, inaugurated in 1939.<sup>2</sup> Landscapes, still-lives and everyday scenes, or genre painting, were produced in significant numbers and even gained a degree of official support at various moments during Soviet history. Thus landscape painting acquired specific nationalist associations in the wake of the liberation of Soviet territory from German occupation during the Second World War, whilst genre painting was widely promoted at the same time to restore a sense of normality. However, such works were always regarded as subordinate to the more heroic modes of history painting and portraiture. In this way, the official Soviet hierarchy conformed largely to standards set

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<sup>2</sup> See M. Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting...*, op. cit., p. 137.

in the academies of art established throughout Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, albeit for very different reasons.<sup>3</sup>

But what might be said of the category of the nude as a genre for Soviet artists? Traditionally, the representation of the nude, both male and female, has played a dominant role in artistic training, not least of all through its role in the life class.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the public presentation of such works, whilst regularly attracting the disapproval of some critics on the grounds of moral decency, remained a broadly accepted social practice throughout the early modern period, in Russia as well as the rest of Europe. However, the justification for such representations was frequently based on several key factors. Studies of the nude, for example, were frequently presented as the product, indeed the evidence, of long and arduous training. Here, mastering the representation of the human form was regarded as a prerequisite of high academic accomplishment. The representation of the idealised nude also forged a strong link to the classical tradition, as epitomised in the sculptural works of Greek masters such as Phidias or Praxiteles. Further, the nude, when presented in the public arena of the art exhibition, often appeared in the guise of a mythological figure, a god or goddess, nymph or bacchante inhabiting a timeless Arcadian setting, rather than as a modern, real flesh and blood individual.

All of these factors served to militate against the nude becoming a suitable subject for Soviet artists and, indeed, the subject was largely ignored throughout the early post-revolutionary period. This was understandable enough. Firstly, the reorganisation of art education in 1918 resulted in the removal of many traditional teachers, replaced by those with more experimental and radical agendas. In this climate the value of life drawing as a component of artistic training was significantly reduced. As Matthew Cullerne Bown has pointed out, students at the 1905 Art Tekhnikum in Moscow even requested the sacking of one teacher on the grounds that he specifically promoted life drawing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See N. Blake and F. Frascina, *Art Practice and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century Art World*, in: F. Frascina, N. Blake, B. Fer, T. Garb and C. Harrison, *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, New Haven and London 1993, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Postle, *From Academy to Art School*, in: *The Artist's Model: From Etty to Spencer* (exh cat), Kenwood, London 1999.

<sup>5</sup> M. Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting...*, op. cit., p. 137.

Throughout the early post-revolutionary era representations of the nude were thus largely dismissed as socially irrelevant, regarded as not directly serving the needs of the new regime. Further, any potential eroticism generated by such works could be seen as anathema to the puritanical attitudes towards individual sexuality promoted by the state. As Aaron Zalkind had stated in 1924, '[s]exual life is permissible only in a form which contributes to the growth of collective feelings, class organisation, creative, productive or military activity'.<sup>6</sup> Zalkind continued, '[p]urely physical sexual attraction is impermissible from a revolutionary, proletarian point of view'.<sup>7</sup> Here, it would seem, viewing too much bare flesh, even in the medium of painting and within the confines of the public art gallery, might well prove a distraction from the notionally greater projects demanded of Soviet youth.

Yet, whilst the nude did play a lesser role in Soviet culture at this time, not all artists rejected the subject. For example, during the early 1930s Aleksandr Deineka produced dozens of images representing both the male and the female nude, many of which were publicly exhibited, widely reproduced in the major art journals and purchased for national collections. More intriguingly, many of these works were produced during the period between the April 1932 Decree, abolishing the existence of all independent art groups, and the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress, at which the doctrine of Socialist Realism was officially announced, as well as in the immediate aftermath of this culturally groundbreaking moment. Here Deineka's works appear to have attracted official approval at a time when a Socialist Realist mode was still far from being clearly defined. In fact, Deineka's representations of the nude can be read as a significant intervention into the debates surrounding the question as to which course Soviet painting should now follow.

In this article I want to examine Deineka's representations of the nude produced during this period. Many of these works were notably set in the sunny landscapes of southern Russia and Ukraine. In one sense, these quasi-Mediterranean images of naked children, youths and young adults, represented both

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from A. Zalkind, *Revolution and Young People* 1924 in E. Stishova, 'Full Frontal': *Perestroika and Sexual Policy*, in: *Women in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. R. Marsh, Cambridge 1996, pp. 188-195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

at rest and at play, can be read as operating within the broader context of the international neo-classicism of the inter-war years; his return to the traditional bather theme paralleling similar interests in painting throughout Europe at this time. For Deineka, however, the grand tradition of the nude also offered a more particular and contemporary significance. For far from inhabiting a timeless Arcadian world, Deineka's nudes live very much in the modern day, where their nudity specifically alludes to their physical fitness and health. At a time when physical culture, or *fizkultura*, was being widely promoted throughout the Soviet Union, these images modified the bourgeois associations of the nude with luxuriance, eroticism and idleness, promoting instead the concept of both physical and moral transformation. In this respect the body became a cipher for the emergence of a new kind of Soviet citizen, the *novyi chelovek*, or Soviet New Person, in whom such faith was invested during the early decades of the Bolshevik regime.

Yet, it was not just in terms of subject matter that Deineka's nudes proposed to transform the notion of what Socialist Realist painting might be. In style too, he proposed a radical way forward. Notably, Deineka often fused past and present styles. Thus the simplicity of his graphic style and use of bright colour, much developed as a consequence of his extensive illustration work for popular journals, also resulted in his works frequently being compared to traditional Russian icon and fresco painting.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, this loose, schematic handling was associated more with Western modernism than with the pro-nineteenth-century realism commonly assumed to typify Socialist Realist painting. Yet this very stylistic handling, giving the works, and the actual

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<sup>8</sup> To take one example, the critic Boris Nikiforov recognised how Deineka appropriated the visual form of the icon whilst simultaneously deploying it to different ends. Focusing initially on Deineka's graphic works for the specifically atheist journal *Bezbozhnik u Stanka*, Nikiforov claimed: 'The artist was faced with the problem of undermining the religious dimension of the icon form. This would be achieved only by destroying it from within. Therefore a number of drawings in the journal *Bezbozhnik u Stanka* and many other of Deineka's works, are based upon typical forms and compositional styles, borrowed from the traditional icon.' ('Перед художниками стояла задача разрушить это культовое восприятие иконописной формы. Этого можно было достигнуть, только взрывая ее изнутри. По-этому ряд рисунков в *Безбожнике у станка*, в том числе и рисунки Дейники, построены на использовании приемов формы и композиции, заимствованных у икон.') "Iskusstvo" 1933 No. 3, p. 87.



bodies represented, an appearance of incompleteness, also marked a significant contribution towards a reading of the works in relation to the more specific conditions surrounding the emergence of the Soviet New Person and, more particularly, for the very process of transformation that would bring this about. Here I want to argue not only that Deineka's representations of the nude constitute highly complex works engaging explicitly with contemporary ideas and debates regarding health, hygiene and physical fitness but also that the specific style deployed in their production posited a way forward for Soviet art that attempted to fuse both past and present, the traditional and the modern, to generate a new synthetic model of Socialist Realism.

In the end, Deineka's particular approach to painting did not come to dominate Socialist Realist culture. More realist-inspired artists such as Isaak Brodskii, Aleksandr Gerasimov and Boris Ioganson soon adopted this mantle. However, Deineka's works did acquire a high degree of success at the time of their production and throughout much of the remaining Soviet era. In essence they provide a prime example of how officially approved Soviet art retained a degree of diversity and plurality in both style and content. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Deineka remains a fascinating artist for both Russian and western audiences.

### **The Bathers**

In the summer of 1932, Deineka completed a small-scale oil painting entitled *Midday* (ill. 1). Set in an unspecified, sunny, rural landscape, the work depicts five young women enjoying the healthy rigours of a jog in the warm, open air. All run naked through the shallow waters of a river having come, presumably, from the huts situated in the middle distance.<sup>9</sup> In the background a steam train races along the horizon, passing in front of industrial chimneys; the smoke billowing from one of these chimneys echoes the steam from the train and simultaneously indicates that this is a working day. Here, Deineka purported to represent a realistic scene of modern life in the Soviet Union, emphasising

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<sup>9</sup> For young men, at least, such nude bathing was indeed a feature of life in the sunny south, a factor attested to by one English visitor in 1934. See *Playtime in Russia*, ed. H. Griffith, London 1935, p. 213.



iii. 1 Aleksandr Deineka, *Midday*, 1932.  
Oil on canvas, 59.5 x 80cm. (State Russian Museum, St Petersburg)

the fitness and commitment of Soviet youth.<sup>10</sup> Notably, these young women are all highly active, running energetically through the landscape towards the viewer. The title of the work, *Midday*, also adds another level of meaning. This is lunchtime, a brief respite from labour, yet these women perform exercises in the fresh, open air. Since the early 1920s, Soviet factories and workshops had been commanded to introduce regular exercise routines for their workers before, during and after their official labour duties. These 'physical-culture minutes', as they became known, were designed to improve the health and fitness of the worker, and thus ensure increased labour productivity.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, *Midday* eulogises such practices, idealising Soviet youth as fit, healthy and joyous participants in physical exercise in the open air.

Yet, as a representation of nude women bathing leisurely in the warm waters of a rural landscape, *Midday* also recalls the precedent of classical Arcadian imagery. Here, in the tradition of the pastoral, the nude female body is presented in the midst of an idyllic landscape setting. The inclusion of a belching factory chimney in this image might seem to negate the notion of the idyllic landscape. However, in the pro-industrialist context of the First Five-Year Plan, this detail signified an idealisation of rural progress. Certainly the inclusion of industry in landscape painting increased dramatically during this period. Despite the inclusion of modern details, Deineka has notably presented this nudity as a natural state: no discarded clothing, for example, can be seen on the banks of the river. Here, Deineka has adopted the Western classical tradition of bather imagery, a tradition harking back to Renaissance masters such as Titian and Giorgione, as well as to the works of Poussin. At the same time, Deineka's redeployment of the Arcadian tradition can be linked to more recent examinations of this theme by modern French painters such as Manet, Cézanne and Matisse. Interestingly, Deineka did not publicly exhibit *Midday*. The reasons for this are by no means clear, although recent criticisms of Aleksandr Samokhvalov's series of sketches representing modern bathers in a state of undress, may

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<sup>10</sup> Sysoev has suggested that this work was based upon a small pastel sketch entitled *Landscape with a Train*, produced a year earlier. See V. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka, Vols I and II*, Moscow 1989 (В. С ы с о е в, Александр Дейнека, I-II, Москва 1989), Vol. I p. 127 and Vol. II p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> N. Semashko, *Health Protection in the USSR*, London 1934, p. 61.



well have generated a degree of reticence on the part of the artist.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, during this period, Deineka continued to focus on the theme of the female nude and in 1933 he included several nudes at the major exhibition *Artists of the RSFSR During the Last Fifteen Years*. These works, including *Mother* 1932, *Playing Ball* 1932 and *Bathers* 1933, were generally well received.<sup>13</sup> That summer, Deineka's reputation was further enhanced by the publication of an article in *Iskusstvo* outlining his career to date and highlighting these most recent of his works.<sup>14</sup> The author of the article, Boris Nikiforov, drew particular attention to *Bathers*, praising the representation of 'healthy' and 'energetic' characters full of 'the joy of life'.<sup>15</sup> From this point onwards, Deineka increasingly incorporated the nude into his work. Yet Deineka was here doing much more than making a reference to past artistic genres. Indeed, the representation of the nude became a vehicle through which he could signify explicitly the transformative potential of fresh air, sunshine and physical exercise for the human organism.

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<sup>12</sup> Samokhvalov's sketches, produced in 1927 and intended for a mural project to be entitled *Radost zhizni (Joie de Vivre)*, were roundly criticised by the leadership of the *Krug (Circle)* group. Whilst the main criticism suggested that the subject was too subordinate to the style of the work, the overtly sensuous representation of modern 'nymphs' was, in all probability, regarded as equally lacking in gravity and moral probity. See A. Samokhvalov, *My Creative Journey*, Leningrad 1977 (А. Самохвалов, *Мой творческий путь*, Ленинград 1977), p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> The critic N. Shchekotov praised Deineka's inclusions in the exhibition, although he did not refer to specific works. See "Iskusstvo", 1933 No. 4, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> B. Nikiforov, *Aleksandr Deineka (Александр Дейнека)*, "Iskusstvo" 1933 No. 3, pp. 85-106. Four years later Nikiforov published an extensive monograph on Deineka, B. Nikiforov, *Aleksandr Deineka*, Moscow 1937 (Б. Никифоров, *Александр Дейнека*, Москва 1937).

<sup>15</sup> 'In this work Deineka conveys, with a great expressiveness, the contrast between a cold I chilly, overcast day and the brightness of the healthy bathers, whose energy and joie de vivre were drawn directly from Soviet reality.' ('В этой картине Дейнека особенно выразительно передает противопоставление холодного пасмурного дня и здоровой бодрости купающихся девушек, жизнерадостный, энергичный типаж которых взят художником из окружающей его советской действительности.) "Iskusstvo" 1933 No. 3, p. 102.

### **Our Man in the South: New Modes of Tourism**

Most of Deineka's representations of the nude were produced during, or as a consequence of, his numerous journeys to the warm, southern regions of the Soviet Union. Few artists were as frequent travellers as Deineka. After finishing his studies at the Moscow *Vkhutemas (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops)* Deineka was employed by a number of Soviet periodicals and was regularly sent to the south on official commissions. In Kiev, Ekaterinoslav (later renamed Dnepropetrovsk) and the Donbass region he regularly produced representations of industrial and agricultural labourers, as well as images of sport and bathing. In the summer of 1934 he made his first visit to Sevastopol, which subsequently became a kind of spiritual home to the artist.<sup>16</sup> Here Deineka produced dozens of works representing life both in the Don basin and on the Crimean peninsula focusing, in particular, on Soviet youths at leisure, bathing in the sun and the sea. His reputation was strongly based upon these travel experiences and the works subsequently produced. Deineka soon came to epitomise a new kind of traveller, or 'tourist', in the post-revolutionary age.

In the first stormy years of the new regime, before the consolidation of Soviet power, all forms of travel throughout the country were inevitably fraught with danger. The increasing stabilisation of the mid to late 1920s, however, witnessed the rebirth of tourism as an officially approved practice. In particular the trade unions played a major role in organising trips for workers, whilst *Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment)* orchestrated tourist programmes for both students and members of the Red Army. In 1929 the official Soviet travel agency *Intourist* was set up whilst, one year later, the fledgling company *Soviet Tourist* joined the *Society for Proletarian Tourism to form the All-Union Voluntary Society for Proletarian Tourism and Excursions*.<sup>17</sup> Theoretically, at least, tourism was no longer to be the sole preserve of the wealthy. Yet it was not just the class origins of tourism that were to be

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<sup>16</sup> Deineka returned to Sevastopol on many occasions throughout his career. In 1935, his travel experience was vastly extended when he undertook official visits to France, Italy and the United States. Images produced during, or as a consequence of, these trips, as well as his earlier visit to Sevastopol, constituted the work exhibited at his one-man shows in 1935-1936.

<sup>17</sup> *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, Vol. 26, New York 1977, p. 258.

transformed. Essentially, the distinctions between labour and leisure inherent within the holiday ethos were now to be renegotiated. For example, traditional visits to famous historical sites were frequently supplemented with educational visits to new factories or work communes.<sup>18</sup> Inactivity was acceptable but came to be presented less as an indulgent reward for past efforts than as a necessary physical recuperation, the resting of the body in order to replenish its strength and subsequent labour potential. As the Commissar of Health and Hygiene Nikolai Semashko pointed out in 1934, tourism 'aims not only at the improvement of health, but renders active assistance in the work of socialist construction.'<sup>19</sup>

In his quasi-'tourist' capacity, Deineka was similarly concerned to witness and record the transformations of life under the new regime. As an official journalist with first-hand travel experiences, he was deemed by many contemporary critics to have a considerable degree of insight and authority. Yet, like most tourists, then and now, Deineka inevitably witnessed the sites he visited through his own personal filter; in his case, an unfailing belief in the transformation of the Soviet population into fitter, healthier, stronger citizens. The resulting works, in particular his images of life in the Crimean peninsula, marked a major contribution to the official reinvention of both Soviet youth, and the southern regions of the Union.

In the pre-revolutionary period, the Crimea was broadly identified as the playground of the rich and famous. Once a Greek colony, the warm, sub-tropical climate, blue skies and luxuriant vegetation offered the perfect summer retreat for the Russian aristocracy whose numerous summer palaces and mansions lined the coast of the peninsula.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, the Crimea was popularly dubbed the Côte d'Azur of the Russian Empire, whilst the town of Sevastopol became colloquially known as the Nice of the Crimea.<sup>21</sup> The collapse of the Tsarist regime deeply affected the region. Following the Treaty

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<sup>18</sup> 'Frequently tourist expeditions have a productive aim. The workers of one factory visit kindred factories, exchanging experiences and thus raising their qualifications. The same applies to collective farmers.' N. S e m a s h k o, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> In Greek mythology the Crimea, known to Homer as Colchis, was the legendary site from which Jason and the Argonauts recovered the Golden Fleece.

<sup>21</sup> M. S l o n i m, *Les Onze Républiques Soviétiques*, Paris 1937, pp. 150-157.

of Brest-Litovsk the Crimea, along with most of the Ukraine, was ceded to Germany and subsequently underwent a period of instability. A broad-scale Ukrainian nationalist uprising was followed by occupation by French forces before the Bolsheviks recaptured the region in 1920 and launched a new era in its history. At this time, the Crimea's former reputation for exclusive luxury and indulgence hardly matched the ideological requirements of the new workers' state. Yet, far from demonising its Tsarist associations, or discarding its potential as a summer leisure resort, the Crimea was now broadly reinvented as a national health centre. The former Tsarist palace at Yalta was immediately appropriated by the state and turned into a sanatorium whilst, along the coast, new hospitals were built to care for the sick.<sup>22</sup> As Hubert Griffith, an English visitor to the region in the early 1930s, pointed out, 'all official and government activity in the place is directed toward getting people well who have been ill, or who are tired and run down.'<sup>23</sup> Yet, despite this official objective, Griffith could not help but notice that,

there were large numbers of the visiting population with nothing whatever the matter with them, who found themselves free enough, or well enough off, to come to the select Yalta purely for the bathing, the climate, and the general fun of the thing.<sup>24</sup>

### **Fitness, Health and Hygiene**

Despite his first-hand knowledge of the Crimean health resorts, Deineka's works consistently prioritised the well over the sick. Nonetheless, his constant emphasis on the representation of the unclad body reveals contemporary concerns for health and hygiene, and celebrates bathing, either in the sun, the sea, or the tub. From its very inception, the new state recognised the need to improve education in health and hygiene. During the Civil War period, when the spread of infectious diseases in the major urban centres seemed to pose as much of a threat to the continuance of Soviet power as Western intervention, the state launched a widespread campaign to promote personal hygiene. The link between health, fitness and civic duty was perhaps best captured in several

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<sup>22</sup> N. Semashko, op. cit., pp. 68-71.

<sup>23</sup> *Playtime in Russia*, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

slogans of the time, admonishing the population at large to 'Help the Country with a Toothbrush' and to 'Help the Country by Washing in Cold Water'.<sup>25</sup> The requirement for an educational campaign promoting hygiene was further exacerbated by the somewhat primitive conditions of sanitation in the major urban centres. Here personal ablutions were, by necessity, a very public affair. Throughout the inter-war period, both Moscow and Leningrad suffered from an acute housing shortage. Self-organised communes, established in properties confiscated from the former bourgeoisie, initially helped to alleviate this problem although an inevitable consequence was that sanitation facilities scarcely matched the needs of the immediate community. Even in purpose-built housing blocks, bathrooms were often designed to be communal, thus maximising the space for habitation.<sup>26</sup> For many city dwellers, the public bath-house still offered the principal means of access to personal hygiene; the facilities in such establishments, however, as the Soviet satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko pointed out, often left a lot to be desired.<sup>27</sup> In this social climate bathing, the cleansing or purifying of the naked body, inevitably came to signify a whole host of social issues.

In line with many Western nations at this time prostitution was viewed in the Soviet Union as a potentially degenerative menace. Whilst the rampant spread of venereal diseases during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries threatened the individual physical organism, the notional bourgeois corruptibility of prostitution was also seen as a threat to the state's moral well being. Immediately after the October Revolution, the Soviet authorities established a Joint Council for the Suppression of Prostitution.<sup>28</sup> Aiming to combat the spread of venereal diseases, the council somewhat ambitiously advocated the complete eradication of prostitution, launching widespread anti-prostitution

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<sup>25</sup> J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 73. Semashko indicated the extent to which sanitary education was a widespread phenomenon in the early post-revolutionary years. See N. Semashko, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: the Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, London, 1987, p. 343.

<sup>27</sup> M. Zoshchenko, *The Bath-House*, 1925, trans. B. Johnson, in: *Soviet Short Stories 2*, ed. P. Reddaway, Middlesex 1968, pp. 40-47.

<sup>28</sup> N. Semashko, *op. cit.*, p. 109.



campaigns and programmes of action.<sup>29</sup> Predictably, the metaphor of dirt and disease was frequently invoked; prostitutes were variously described as a 'disgraceful spot' or as women with 'foul, vice-ridden bodies'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, these notional 'stains' were not seen as the indelible marks of a threatening underclass. As Elizabeth Waters has pointed out, during the early post-revolutionary era prostitutes were regarded by many far more as 'victims' than 'villains'.<sup>31</sup> As such, full social rehabilitation, rather than demonisation, was the state's primary objective.

Significantly, the greatest efforts in this direction coincided with the period of the First Five-Year Plan, the primary incentive for this campaign perhaps epitomised in the title of a 1929 text, *Off the Street into Production*.<sup>32</sup> In 1931 a major conference was held in Moscow at which former prostitutes were invited to declare, in public, how they had made the transition from prostitute to socialist worker, how each individual had been cleansed and transformed into a Soviet New Person.<sup>33</sup> That same year A.H. Bronner even made the remarkable, if unlikely, claim that over the last two years the number of prostitutes operating in Moscow had been reduced from 3000 to just 400.<sup>34</sup> In this context, images of bathing inevitably carried wider connotations. Cleansing here acted metaphorically to signify the removal of the past, characterised as dirt, to allow the new revolutionary present to emerge and shine through.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The extent of this problem was adequately reflected in a 1927 act of legislation that enabled the prosecution and imprisonment of any individual 'knowingly placing a person in danger of venereal infection', regardless of whether infection actually resulted. See *ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> E. Waters, 'Victim or Villain': *Prostitution in Post-Revolutionary Russia*, in: *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. L. Edmondson, Cambridge 1992, p. 165.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172. Special V.D. clinics were established throughout the nation whilst so-called 'flying squads' were despatched to the more distant countryside to provide treatment, advice and education. See A. J. Haines, *Health Work in Soviet Russia*, New Haven 1928, pp. 114-121.

<sup>33</sup> E. Waters, *op. cit.*, p.172.

<sup>34</sup> Semashko aimed at nothing less than the complete eradication of prostitution by the end of the Second Five-Year Plan. See N. Semashko, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> For a more general discussion of the discourses of hygiene and prostitution, see A. Callen, *Degas' Bathers: Hygiene and Dirt – Gaze and Touch*, in: R. Kendall

At the same time the image of bathing, or cleansing, could also be deployed to carry other metaphorical connotations. As the historian Geoffrey Hosking has pointed out, the language of sanitation was frequently invoked during the Bolshevik Red Terror as a convenient euphemism for the removal of so-called 'class enemies'.<sup>36</sup> By the mid 1930s, this metaphor would take on a new, and more terrifying, significance as the Stalinist purges were publicly described as a form of 'cleansing' (*chistka*).

Like *Midday*, the majority of Deineka's images of nudes are set in the open, rural landscapes of the south and emphasise the cleansing of the body as a key aspect of hygiene, health and fitness. However, Deineka's sketchy treatment and loose finish also gives these figures an additional reference, suggesting the notional birth of the Soviet New Woman. For example, the female figures represented in *Midday*, defined as socialist workers on their lunch break, notably appear to rise from the foamy waters of the river like modern day Venuses. Facial features and the articulation of muscles and bones are barely distinguishable. The suggestion of breasts and pubic hair – or is it mere shadow? – identifies these figures as female, yet their bodies are devoid of any other distinguishing features. Indeed the gender identity of the figure on the far left can only truly be established on the basis of assuming an all-female group. Equally, these figures seem as yet unsteady on their feet. The central figure stumbles, rather than races, forward whilst her blond companion in the rear seems still to be negotiating the process of walking. Furthermore, the bodies appear incomplete, fragmented in form. Four of the figures seem devoid of one lower limb, obscured either by their running posture or the splash of the water. The figure on the far right similarly lacks an arm and, unlike her companion alongside, casts no shadow on the surface of the water. These runners, emerging naked from the waters of a specifically Soviet rural landscape, symbolise the emergence, the evolution of the Soviet New Woman. However, their bodies

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and G. Pollock, *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, London 1992, pp. 159-185. Whilst Callen's discussion focuses essentially upon nineteenth-century France, there can be little doubt that many of the views and associations made between prostitution and hygiene were shared by early twentieth-century Soviet theorists.

<sup>36</sup> G. Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1993, pp. 70-71.

are not yet fully formed, fully defined, or fully articulated, but maintain some semblance of the raw material from which this eponymous type is presently being formed.

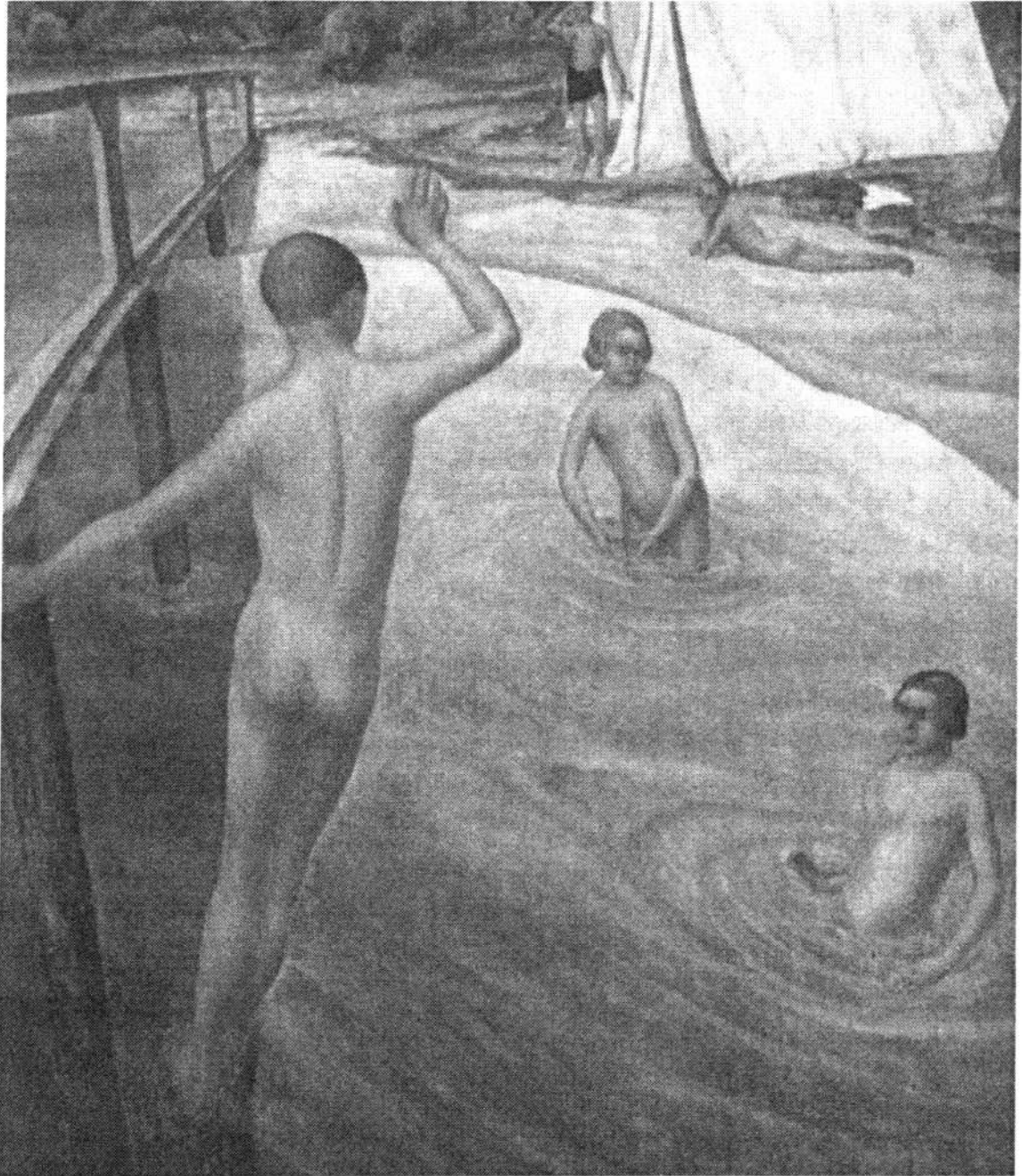
In *Midday*, Deineka's loosely finished and sparsely detailed representation of the nude female body can be read as a clear metaphor for the development of the Soviet state in the early 1930s. Certainly the achievements to date of the post-revolutionary period were recorded as a major contribution to the transformation of the Soviet Union from a pre-industrial peasant society towards that of a modern state. However, the completion of the First Five-Year Plan was broadly promoted as only the first step in the ultimate progression towards becoming a fully established socialist nation. At this stage, the new regime was effectively leaving its infancy behind, both in terms of years and social development, and entering its adolescence. Whilst the transformation of the Soviet citizen was still very much a rallying cry, the ultimate proof of this transformation would inevitably be recorded in the younger generation, those born after the 1917 Revolution, and who were now growing towards adulthood.

### **The Adolescent Body as a Metaphor for the Soviet State**

During the late 1920s and early 1930s several Soviet artists produced images of nude bathers in the open air. Significantly, many focused specifically on the pre-pubescent body, both to undermine accusations of bourgeois eroticism and to symbolise the development of the new society. To take one example, in 1927 Nikolai Sekirin, a little-known graduate of the Academy of Arts in Leningrad, produced a work representing naked young boys and girls bathing together in a stream beneath a wooden bridge (ill. 2). Sekirin's work certainly drew on famous precedents, most notably the work of the nineteenth-century Russian artist Aleksandr Ivanov and Sekirin's own teacher Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin.<sup>37</sup> Yet, at the same time, Sekirin made his image a specifically modern scene; the inclusion of a tent, red flag, discarded clothing and a distant figure wearing shorts all suggest the contemporary nature of the work entitled, significantly, *Pioneers' Swimming Camp*. Nor was Sekirin alone in his emphasis on youthful

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<sup>37</sup> Ivanov's *Three Naked Boys (Study for Christ Appearing Before the People)* 1833-1857 and Petrov-Vodkin's *Two Boys* 1911, both from the collection of the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, clearly inspired Sekirin.



iii. 2 Nikolai Sekirin, *Pioneer's Swimming Camp*, 1927.  
Oil on canvas, 104 x 96cm. (Academy of Arts, St Petersburg)



nudes. Lidya Timoshenko's *Bathing* of 1934 shows a similar scene, this time with a greater emphasis on drying and dressing, whilst Aleksandra Yakusheva's image of a young girl bathing, also exhibited at the 1935 *Spring Exhibition of Moscow Painters* and reproduced that summer in *Iskusstvo*, suggests the breadth and popularity of such imagery.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps even more problematically, several artists focused on the young, but notably maturing, female body. In 1934, for example, the sculptor Sarra Lebedeva produced a small statuette entitled *Devochka*. Whilst this title can straightforwardly be translated as *Girl*, the use here of the diminutive term, *devochka* as opposed to *devushka*, also suggests *Little* or *Young Girl*. The pose of the figure, playing childishly with her pigtails, certainly suggests immaturity yet the body itself is clearly represented as beginning to develop towards adulthood.<sup>39</sup> Aleksei Pakhomov, a specialist in the representation of children, similarly focused on the developing female body in his painting *In the Sun* of 1930 (ill. 3). Like Lebedeva's *Devochka*, Pakhomov's image emphasises the ambiguous adolescent status of the young bather, no longer a child nor yet a woman.

The most dramatic of these images, however, is Deineka's own *On the Balcony* of 1931, a large-scale painting, 100 x 105cm in size, first shown at the 1934 Venice Biennale exhibition and subsequently at Deineka's own one-man shows in 1935-36 (ill. 4). Here, Deineka has represented a young girl on a balcony overlooking the still, blue waters of a southern river. The composition is highly unusual. A small bath tub and towel are placed at the centre of the image, suggesting that bathing is the principal theme of the work, whilst the figure herself is crammed into the left side of the composition, cut off by the edge of the frame. This figure stares out at the viewer as if she has just been caught in her nakedness yet, in escaping, makes no attempt to cover her exposed body.

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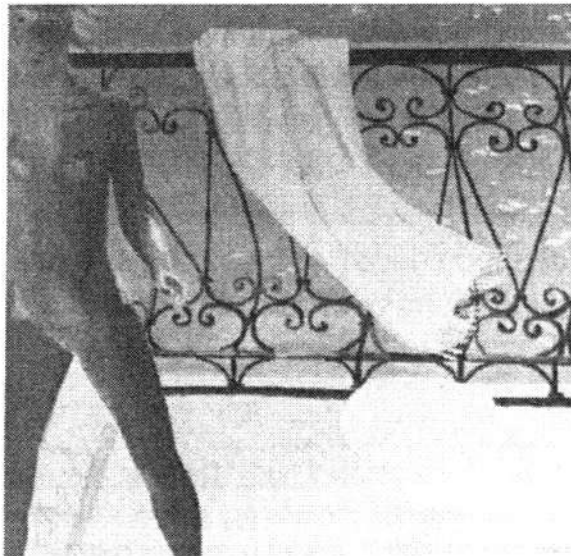
<sup>38</sup> "Iskusstvo" 1935 No. 4, p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> An illustration of this work was included in "Tvorchestvo" 1935 No. 1, unpaginated. In 1936, Lebedeva once again focused on the adolescent female form in her monumental sculpture *Girl with a Butterfly*. Following the exhibition of a plaster version of this work at the 1937 *Exhibition of Moscow Sculptors*, a cement version was displayed in Moscow's Gorkii Park of Culture and Rest. See B. Ternovets, *Sarra Lebedeva, Moscow and Leningrad 1940* (Б. Терновец, *Сарра Лебедева, Москва-Ленинград 1940*), p. 39.





iii. 3 Aleksei Pakhomov, *In the Sun*, 1930.  
Oil on canvas (State Tretyakov Gallery)



iii. 4 Aleksandr Deineka, *On the Balcony*, 1931.  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 105cm. (Collection of the Artist's Family)

The stylistic execution of the work is here of particular interest. Whilst the water, balcony, towel and tub have all been given a relatively detailed finish, the figure is only sketchily defined with bare canvas showing through the body along the left-hand edge. This is not, however, an unfinished work; the artist has clearly added his signature and date in the lower right-hand corner and offered the work for exhibition on several occasions. As in Pakhomov's earlier work and Lebedeva's sculpture of a few years later, the figure represented is clearly no longer a child. Yet neither has she grown to full womanhood. Her physical development, like the painted image, is seen as advancing but not yet complete.<sup>40</sup> In this image, Deineka presents the still developing adolescent body to signify, metaphorically, the transformation of the Soviet New Person, placing this figure in the healthy environment of the sunny south. As Semashko claimed,

physical culture combines physical exercise with an extensive use of the sun, air and water for the purpose of hardening the organism, and with a rational regime and hygienic habits at work and at home.<sup>41</sup>

Deineka's *On the Balcony* identifies all these key elements, combining them in one major work heroising the youth of the present and, perhaps more notably, the future generation.

Importantly, Deineka did not confine his representations of the youthful body to the female gender. Amongst the works he produced in the south during the early 1930s were *Sleeping Boy with Cornflowers* 1932, *Resting Children* 1933 and *Crimean Pioneers* 1934. In the first of these works, Deineka focuses on rest, represented through the image of a small child sleeping in a foetal position. The boy's nakedness suggests a natural state whilst the inclusion of a large vase of cornflowers in the foreground indicates the theme of growth and development.

In *Resting Children*, produced one year later, Deineka further pursued this theme. This time two young boys stretch out on a rug, bathing in the open

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<sup>40</sup> Despite the incompleteness of the painted body, Deineka did place much emphasis on the sexual organs. The developing breasts are fully included whilst half the face is absent. Further, in this instance, the lack of body hair is not a sign of genital absence, in the tradition of nineteenth-century academic painting, but rather signifies an emergent, but not as yet fully developed, adult body.

<sup>41</sup> N. Semashko, op. cit., p. 60.

sunshine. As if to ensure the total exposure of the body, the artist presents both front and back views. Here, Deineka proposes that the notionally beneficial rays of the sun play a major role in physical growth. A pair of discarded boots signify the importance of stripping off in order to expose the body to the sun, whilst flowers are once again included to symbolise growth. An apple, strategically placed between the sleeping children, further implies fecundity. The two boys' bodies are represented extended longitudinally, the figure on the left seen in mid stretch with his muscles tensed. Here, it as if these boys are growing, developing, before our very eyes. In *Crimean Pioneers* (ill. 5), the boys have already grown into young adolescents; now dressed in swimming trunks, they still enjoy the sunshine, fresh air and waters of the southern setting.<sup>42</sup> Once again, Deineka emphasises the length of the bodies. The figure on the right rests languorously on the edge of a balcony, his body forming a sinuous s-curve, whilst the figure on the left stretches upwards and towards the viewer. Occupying the same space as the female adolescent in *On the Balcony*, this body is barely contained by the frame of the painting, the large feet and left hand suggesting that this young lad is rapidly approaching adulthood.

### The Bathers Revisited

In 1935, in the wake of the Soviet Writers' Congress, Deineka reworked *Midday* into a larger format. The resulting painting was entitled *Lunch Break in the Donbass* (ill. 6). Spurred on by the successes of his recent works at the 1933 jubilee exhibition and at the Venice Biennale, Deineka produced this work on a monumental scale, approximately 1.5 x 2.5m, almost three times the size of its predecessor.<sup>43</sup> A similar landscape setting is deployed with a train once more running across the distant horizon. The five central figures, however, have been brought much nearer to the viewer and, despite adopting almost identical postures, have noticeably changed gender. The now male workers, this time with an additional ball, are again enjoying physical exercises in the open air.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The critic R. Kaufman considered *Crimean Pioneers* to be one of the most significant works displayed at Deineka's one-man shows. See "Iskusstvo" 1936 No. 3, p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> This work was also exhibited at Deineka's one-man shows. Kaufman considered this a work of the first order. See *ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Deineka probably based both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass* upon a contemporary



iii. 5 Aleksandr Deineka, *Crimean Pioneers*, 1934.  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 80cm. (State Art Museum, Perm)



iii. 6 Aleksandr Deineka, *Lunchbreak in the Donbass*, 1935.  
Oil on canvas, 199.5 x 248.5cm. (Latvian State Art Museum)

Here, the ease with which Deineka switched the gender identity of these figures reflects the notionally ungendered role of sport and physical culture within Soviet society; men and women alike were encouraged to take part in physical exercises for the improvement of the health of the nation. However, the increased proximity of these bathers allowed Deineka a greater attention to detail whilst an increased emphasis on distinct facial features implies a greater individualism. The Donbass setting additionally suggests that these young workers are miners. Yet their bodies, though in the process of being bathed, are remarkably clean and fresh, their blond hair and golden suntanned bodies contrasting with the blue waters of the southern Don river, flowing into the Sea of Azov and the Crimean peninsula. Once again these bodies are loosely defined and again look far from complete. Fragmentation is once more evident, whilst the bodies appear almost transparent with the sun shining through them. The genitals are barely suggested and the figures, though adult in scale, have no noticeable body hair. Here Deineka has presented the viewer simultaneously with young male workers, whose labour enables the development of the Soviet Union, and pre-pubescent youths, thus encompassing both the nation's present and future.

### **Et in Arcadia Ego?**

Deineka's representations of the nude, in both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass*, thus highlight a host of contemporary issues regarding health, hygiene and the notional transformation of the Soviet citizen. Ostensibly they represent modern scenes and promote the official fizkultura policies advocated by the state. As heroic images of Soviet youth they certainly seem to fulfil many of the criteria of Socialist Realism strictly laid down by Andrei Zhdanov at the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress. Thus Deineka, through his first-hand travel experiences, did indeed 'know life so as to depict it truthfully (...) – and not to depict it scholastically, lifelessly or merely as "objective reality"'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover,

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photograph he had himself taken in the surroundings of his native Kursk in 1932. Notably, the photograph represents young, male bathers running through a stream. See V. Sys o e v, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> From Andrei Zhdanov's speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow in 1934. Cited in J. E. Bow It, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, London and New York 1988, p. 293.



his emphasis, literally, on the transformation of Soviet youth, perhaps more than any other Soviet artist, fulfilled the aim to 'depict reality in its revolutionary development'.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in order to fulfil this mission, Deineka did not deploy the heightened realism of the Soviet cultural right. Nor did he deny the lessons of the Western cultural tradition. Both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass* essentially reinvent Arcadia. Here modern day bathers replace the shepherds, nymphs, fauns, bacchantes and satyrs of the grand tradition. At the same time, these works also express an affinity with Western modernism at a time when such associations were roundly condemned. For example, Deineka's overt emphasis on the theme of the bathers was clearly reminiscent of Cézanne's late works.

Few Western artists had acquired more followers in Russia than Cézanne. By the mid 1920s many former members of the pro-Cézannist Jack of Diamonds group still held influential teaching positions at the *Vkhutemas* and, whilst debates raged over the relevance of Cézanne's works to the modern Soviet age, artists such as Robert Falk, Petr Konchalovskii, Aristarkh Lentulov, Ilia Mashkov, Aleksandr Osmerkin and Vasilii Rozhdestvenskii continued to produce and exhibit works obviously inspired by the French master.<sup>47</sup> Deineka's overt affiliation with the southern regions, identified as the Soviet equivalent of the Mediterranean, made this connection clearer still. Furthermore, his loose style, the technical incompleteness of his figures, the awkwardness and anatomical distortion of his forms, led to an uncertainty of identification. These figures could not clearly be defined as either adults or youths. And, at times, even their gender identity seemed uncertain, as in the case of the left-hand figure in *Midday*, or could be interchangeable, as in the use of the same poses in both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass*. As in many of Cézanne's smaller bather studies, Deineka depicted five figures in both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass*. Similarly, he was content to work both on a small and a monumental scale. There can be little doubt that Deineka's references to Cézanne were here both self-conscious and explicit. However, unlike many of the pro-Cézannists still active in Soviet artistic circles, Deineka was less interested in Cézanne's

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<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> The debates concerning the validity of artists such as Cézanne for Soviet artists are discussed in B. Taylor, *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks*, Vol. II, London 1992, pp. 61-65.

reputation for simply formal reasons. Rather, Deineka looked to how Cézanne's legacy might usefully be redeployed to generate a new artistic style as intricately bound up with contemporary Soviet social concerns as it was with formal ones.

Deineka's *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass* might also be linked to Matisse's *Dance*, a work Deineka had certainly seen on many occasions at Moscow's Museum of Modern Western Art.<sup>48</sup> Matisse's five naked figures dancing frenetically in a timeless landscape have here been transported to the modern world. Even the red glow of Matisse's bodies, suggestive of the energy and vibrancy of his Dionysian figures, is reflected in the bright, golden suntan of Deineka's runners. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, both *Midday* and *Lunch Break in the Donbass* could be read as engaging directly, if negatively, with Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, infamous at this time even in the Soviet Union. Here, Deineka's emphasis on health, hygiene and fitness, the joyous pursuits of Soviet youth in the fresh, open air, could be seen as an antidote to the claustrophobic and threatening interior of Picasso's bordello scene.

The nude, in Deineka's work, occupies a diverse and complex position within official Soviet culture. Presented within the context of officially approved practices such as bathing, the exposed, naked body here symbolised many of the social values promoted by the state. Health and fitness, moral as well as physical, are here celebrated through the image of the transformation of the Soviet citizen, a transformation which, these works seem to claim, has already occurred and yet is still developing. Similarly, the visual language with which Deineka expressed this transformation was itself undergoing a process of transformation. Rejecting, on the one hand, the more extreme abstract experiments of the early Soviet avant-garde, Deineka's work at this time strongly emphasised a return to the figurative tradition. Yet, at the same time, the lessons of both the classical tradition and Western modernism were too strong, too important to be thrown overboard in a fit of nationalist fervour. Ultimately, the plurality and complexity of Deineka's works undermined the more simplistic

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<sup>48</sup> The Museum of Modern Western Art was first opened as the First and Second Museums of Modern Western Art. These constituted the confiscated, or 'nationalised', collections of the famous Russian industrialists and art collectors Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. They included works by many modern French painters including Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso. In 1928 the two museums were amalgamated into one and, contrary to popular perceptions, remained open to the public throughout the entire inter-war period.

approaches of both the Soviet right and left, demanding that the notionally new cultural forms should themselves unite a multitude of past experiences with the present requirements of the new era.

### Ponowne odkrywanie Arkadii?

#### Nagość w krajobrazie Południa w twórczości Aleksandra Deineki

W pierwszej połowie lat trzydziestych radziecki malarz Aleksandr Deineka stworzył liczne obrazy przedstawiające zarówno męskie, jak i kobiece akty. Wiele z nich było wystawianych publicznie, reprodukowanych w najważniejszych czasopismach artystycznych i nabywanych przez galerie narodowe. Może się to wydawać zaskakujące, zważywszy oficjalny radziecki stosunek do przedstawień nagości. W zasadzie nagość, jako motyw malarski, była łączona przede wszystkim z przedrewolucyjną burżuazyjną przeszłością, ze zmysłowością, ekscesami oraz erotyzmem i jako taka zdecydowanie odrzucana jako społecznie nieistotna, niesłużąca potrzebom nowej władzy. Niniejszy artykuł bada znaczenie tych dzieł i podejmuje kwestię, w jaki sposób i dlaczego weszły one do oficjalnie uznanego kanonu kultury wizualnej wczesnego okresu realizmu socjalistycznego. Autor dowodzi, że Deineka wykorzystuje tutaj swoje bezpośrednie doświadczenia z południowych stron Związku Radzieckiego, zwłaszcza z Krymu, aby przekazać swoje rozumienie idei narodzin radzieckiego Nowego Człowieka. Co ważniejsze, autor, w odniesieniu do specyficznej stylistyki prac Deineki tego okresu, dowodzi, że szkicowa, „niedokończona” natura tych prac została użyta w metaforyczny sposób, aby zasugerować, że to raczej sam proces przemiany niż jego spełnienie stanowiło istotę pojęcia Nowego Człowieka. Jednocześnie jednak Deineka łączył pojęcia nowoczesności i tradycji, Wschodu i Zachodu, modernizmu i realizmu, co czyni jego prace zarówno fascynującymi, jak i wielowymiarowymi. Wykorzystując stworzone przez Deinekę przedstawienia nagości, autor usiłuje ukazać sposoby, przez które powrót do malarstwa figuratywnego w malarstwie radzieckim, kierunku oficjalnie uznawanym w stalinowskich latach trzydziestych i postrzeganym jako naturalnie złączony z ideą socrealizmu, może być odczytany jako zjawisko złożone i inteligentne, a nie proste i zachowawcze.