

From the Editor:

Slavic Review publishes letters to the editor with educational or research merit. Where the letter concerns a publication in *Slavic Review*, the author of the publication will be offered an opportunity to respond. Space limitations dictate that comment regarding a book review should be limited to one paragraph; comment on an article should not exceed 750 to 1,000 words. The editor encourages writers to refrain from ad hominem discourse.

D.P.K.

To the Editor:

In support of the bogus argument that my book *Socialist Realist Painting* displays a “personal animus towards abstraction” and an “automatic reverence for figurative art,” Elizabeth Valkenier paints a misleading picture of the text (*Slavic Review* 58, no. 1). This book is, after all, *about* figurative art, not abstraction, and it is respectful towards its subject. I do not describe the western preoccupation with the Soviet avant-garde as “flummery”: I argue that such a preoccupation, excluding other tendencies in Soviet art, has encouraged flummery in the art historical literature, and I give a couple of examples. She suggests that I rate Isaak Brodskii’s painting of the Third International congress more highly than Vladimir Tatlin’s constructivist tribute to the same event. In my (very limited) remarks about Tatlin’s piece, I target Camilla Gray’s meaningless claim that the “style” of this monument somehow matched its “subject,” but I do not presume to judge the work itself. I describe Brodskii’s painting as a “heroic enterprise” by the artist, as a “massive foundation stone” of developments in socialist realism, as “a massive and telling contrast to Tatlin’s tower”—all of which it was in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. None of this amounts to my “dismissing” Tatlin’s work or, indeed, “lauding” Brodskii’s painting; it is simply providing a more rounded picture of the art of the time than is given by other histories. For Ms. Valkenier to present my skepticism towards some writing *about* the avant-garde as an attack on avant-garde works of art themselves is, at best, ingenuous.

MATTHEW BOWN
London, England

Professor Valkenier replies:

My review praised Matthew Bown for “the laudable aim of presenting the history of socialist realism free from the hitherto prevalent Cold War approach.” But it also noted his preference for realism and disdain for abstraction. His argument that he was not passing judgment on nonfigurative art but merely quoting other historians to demonstrate the prevailing bias is not convincing. By choosing quotations, giving a prorealist twist to the history of Russian art, and praising pedestrian Soviet paintings, he reveals both his own preferences and a strong commitment to that form of expression.

I suppose that complete dispassion on the quality and “success” of socialist realism is impossible. Far too much went into the making of this art besides talent or the public’s spontaneous response. I respond more readily to figurative painting, but I would never call Isaak Brodskii’s *Second Congress of the Third International* a “heroic enterprise.” Brodskii was the regime’s court painter par excellence, widely blamed for perpetrating “heroic servilism,” not “heroic realism.” He strove to attain his preeminent position by pandering to those in power and marginalizing other artists (as I discovered in the Tret’iakov Gallery archives in the 1970s). One need not dwell exclusively on these reprehensible aspects of socialist realism, but a history book requires a more even-handed treatment of the many contemporaneous trends and figures.

ELIZABETH KRIDL VALKENIER
The Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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