State policy on the arts promoted by the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the 1980s. It asserted that all the arts should appeal to ordinary workers, and should be inspiring and optimistic in spirit. Art that did not fulfill these precepts was effectively banned, and most serious writers, artists and composers were forced underground or into exile.

Officially approved type of art in the former USSR and other communist countries. The creation of artworks came under the communist doctrine that all material goods, and the means of producing them, were the collective property of the community. Art was to be produced solely for the education and inspiration of the people. Optimistic images of work and the heroic worker celebrated the virtues of communism and patriotism, and glorified the state. In Soviet Russia, as in other totalitarian countries (run by one party), the government controlled all artistic organizations. All forms of artistic experimentation were condemned as a sign of decadent Western influence and, therefore, anticomunist principles. Although the term is used mainly with reference to painting, it can apply to literature and music.

Socialist realism became the official doctrine in the USSR in 1932 when Stalin's repressive government issued a decree ‘On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations’. Painters were expected to produce scenes of happy workers on collective farms, heroic portraits of Stalin and other leaders, and industrial landscapes, all painted with a straightforward naturalism. Novelists were expected to concentrate on uplifting stories and not concern themselves with subtleties of plot or characterization. Composers were to produce ‘vivid realistic music reflecting the life and struggles of the Soviet people’.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, the official line became less harsh, but personal expression still remained difficult and dangerous (in 1974 a show of unofficial art in a field near Moscow was broken up with bulldozers and water-cannon), and socialist realism remained technically in force until the break-up of the USSR in 1991. Among the other countries to which socialist realism spread was China, where it became the norm in painting in the 1950s.

Socialist realism is not to be confused with social realism, art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern.

© RM, 2018. All rights reserved.
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA