

RUSSIAN POSTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

OKHO №1044

JEANNE VAN EEDEN

A FORTUITOUS CHAIN OF EVENTS HAS LED TO THE SURVIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA OF 62 RARE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA POSTERS. WHILE SPECIALISED RESTORATION TECHNIQUES PROVIDED LOCAL PAPER CONSERVATORS WITH VALUABLE EXPERIENCE, THE UNIQUENESS OF THE POSTERS CAN ONLY BE EXPLOITED IF THEY ARE PROPERLY RESEARCHED AND EXHIBITED.

Since 1991 the South African National Gallery in Cape Town has had in its possession an unique collection of 62 Russian propaganda posters dating from the 1930s and the Second World War.¹ These posters were restored early in 1996 under the guidance of internationally renowned expert André van Oort, Chief Conservator of Paper and Photography at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The National Gallery, depending on its curatorial and exhibition facilities, hopes to be able to exhibit the posters in the near future. Although the collection is extremely valuable in terms of cultural history, its provenance, as well as future curatorial implications, have highlighted certain issues pertinent to the museum world in South Africa.

PROVENANCE OF THE POSTERS

The Russian posters have a long and elaborate history leading up to their present location in the National Gallery. They originated in Leningrad before and during the Second World War, and were dispatched to the South African Secretary of the Friends of the Soviet Union, who was then probably Mr Robbie Levine (Parker 1996: 1). The South African Communist Party had many supporters during the Second World War, but the election of the National Party in 1948 and the subsequent Suppression of Communism Act forced people such as Levine to leave South Africa during the 1950s (Nolte 1996: 4; Minnaar 1996: 8). Early in 1954 a mysterious man, who is believed to have been Robbie Levine, deposited a load of crates containing the complete library of the Friends of the Soviet Union at the

reference section of the South African Library in Cape Town. Because of their contentious contents, the crates, which also contained the 62 posters, were relegated to the cellars of the Library (Parker 1996: 1).

In 1964 Peter Coates of the South African Library examined the contents of the crates, and although the books were catalogued and removed, the posters were again folded up and left in the cellar. Only in 1991, 'ideologically purged by the passing of time' (Parker 1996: 2), were the posters rescued and donated to the care of the National Gallery. The National Gallery was unfortunately unable to undertake the costly conservation treatment of the posters until early in 1996. The treatment was then sponsored by Dr Mark Voloshin of the Marvol Group. Voloshin has done much to encourage cultural links between Russia and South Africa, and the Marvol Group is furthermore involved in the proposed Russian museum in Cape Town (Parker 1996: 2).

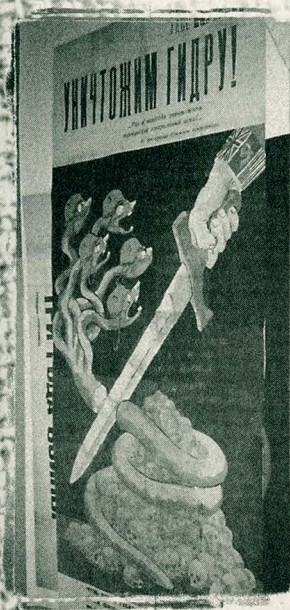
STYLE AND CONTENT OF THE POSTERS

The poster is one of the prime art forms of this century, not merely from an aesthetic standpoint but also because it is an excellent means of mass communication, specifically for advertising and propaganda. According to Barnard (in Jenks 1995: 26-27) advertising (and by implication poster art) has com-

A POSTER DEALING WITH HITLER



СЛАВА ОСВОБОДИТЕ



TWO TYPICAL
ANTI-GERMAN
PROPAGANDA POSTERS

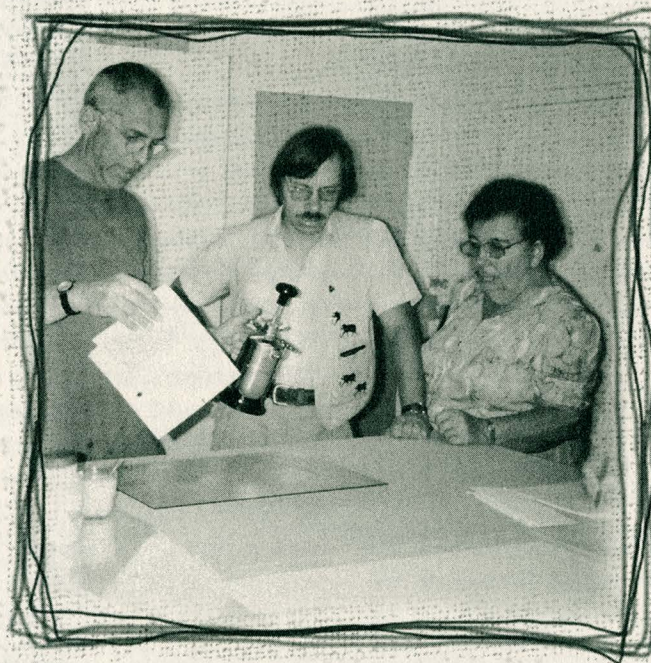


monly been categorised as being either informative or persuasive in intent. Barnard observes that this binary distinction is not adequate to describe the diversity and complexity of visual messages used in the mass media, and posters illustrate his opinion admirably since they generally both inform and persuade.

Posters are usually made in response to specific needs (Ades 1984: 8). Truly political posters became an important adjunct of war and propaganda from the time of the Russian Revolution (Barnicoat 1972: 222), when they were used as part of systematic ideological campaigns. The Russian poster was inextricably bound up with politics and ideological significance, and became an indispensable tool of mass communication. Between 1917 and 1923 over 3 000 different posters were disseminated to propagate the social and political ideology of the Soviet Union (Ades 1984: 11). Moreover, on a stylistic level Russian posters succeeded in incorporating the principles of modernist avant garde design into mainstream poster design.

Russian posters were designed mainly by the Constructivists as part of a system of education for the illiterate masses (Ades 1984: 44), hence the dominant use of visual imagery. From 1919 a new type of Russian poster was devised. It was known as the 'Satire window of the Russian Telegraph Agency' (abbreviated to ROSTA) and consisted of illustrations using the style and imagery of Russian folk art (Barnicoat 1972: 226, 231). These stencilled posters were influenced by Russian icons and appropriated the traditional *lubok* or printed peasant broadside. Explanatory captions or sub-titles were invariably added (Barnicoat 1972: 226, 231). Each poster was numbered, designating a sequence of information (Barnicoat 1972: 231). This 'comic striplike serial imagery was displayed in buildings as a means of reporting and influencing events' (Ades 1984: 10) and was prevalent until 1922 (Ades 1984: 49).

Posters continued to be a dominant genre under Stalin, and during the Second World War renowned Russian poster artists included Mikhail Kuprianov, Porfiry Krylov and Nikolai Sokolov. The Russian posters in the South African National Gallery were produced by the Soviet news agency TASS for display in their office



THE STATE OF ONE OF THE POSTERS
BEFORE RESTORATION

windows (Minnaar 1996: 10). Each poster was given a TASS number in the top right-hand corner, continuing the narrative and sequential character of the original ROSTA posters. The posters were made by the *pochoir* technique² and were printed on separate pages with additional top and bottom strips for the text (Parker 1996: 1). The *pochoir* method used ink hand-colouring, and it is therefore unlikely that more than a couple of copies of each poster were made (Minnaar 1996: 10).

The subject-matter of the National Gallery posters

...varies from silly, sometimes awkward, political cartoons lampooning Hitler and his criminal mates to idealistic visions of the Soviet life and bliss under communism (Minnaar 1996: 10).

Their format is large with bold, naturalistic visuals, and although the posters are vaguely reminiscent of Constructivism they do not incorporate photographs as did the posters of the 1920s. Neither do these posters cling to the minimalism preferred by the Constructivists; on the contrary they betray the influence of the doctrine of Socialist Realist art formulated in 1934. The iconography of the posters uses familiar signs such as the star, hammer and sickle, swastika, factories, smiling Soviet leaders and villainous Nazis. The bold visual imagery and the conservative typography were geared to attract the attention of passing pedestrians and to inform them concerning the events of the war.

THE CONSERVATION PROCESS

Although the damage wrought to the posters was less than expected, the South African National Gallery decided to enlist the expertise of the eminent

paper restorer André van Oort from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Van Oort came to Cape Town during February and March 1996 and conducted a fortnight-long workshop in conjunction with 18 local paper conservators, who gave freely of their time and experience for the cause (Van Staden 1996). This exposure to the expertise of Van Oort was most valuable for local paper conservators who had suffered from the isolation that had resulted from South Africa's former political situation (Van Staden 1996).

The conservation treatment of these large posters (measuring on average 1'5 by 2 metres) demanded a great deal of space. Three conservation centres were therefore used for this daunting task: the JW Jagger

Library Restoration Centre, University of Cape Town; the Restoration Centre, Library of Parliament; and the Restoration Centre of the South African Library.

Any conservation project starts with a careful assessment of the damage that needs to be dealt with, and this will indicate the type of treatment needed. Exploratory tests were performed on other less valuable posters to decide on the best methods of conservation to follow in restoring the Russian posters.

Prior to his coming to South Africa to head the conservation project, André van Oort had been able to examine two of the Russian posters in Holland. These were taken to him by Johann Maree, a paper and book conservator from the JW Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town. Tests were then performed in Holland by Van Oort to determine the most suitable restoration methods. When Van Oort arrived in South Africa, however, he found the climatic conditions resulted in speedier drying times for paper artifacts than had initially been anticipated. Van Oort made some adjustments to his

intended conservation methods after further tests undertaken in South African conditions. After this, the restoration of the Russian posters started in earnest (Van Staden 1996).

The paper used for the Russian posters was obviously of a very poor quality, in keeping with the general ephemerality of the genre. Each poster was made up of between one and four or more pieces of differently shaped paper pasted together with the grains running in different directions. This presented enormous problems in the conservation process since the pieces of paper pulled in different directions, preventing the posters from lying flat (Van Staden 1996).

Under normal circumstances the posters, after having been assessed, would have been cleaned on the surface, washed to remove dirt and acidity from the paper, dried and stretched to flatten them, and finally inpainted where necessary. It was felt, however, that the Russian posters might not be able to withstand such treatment. Furthermore, the inks were found to be unstable and fugitive, and this ruled out any radical treatment (Van Staden 1996).

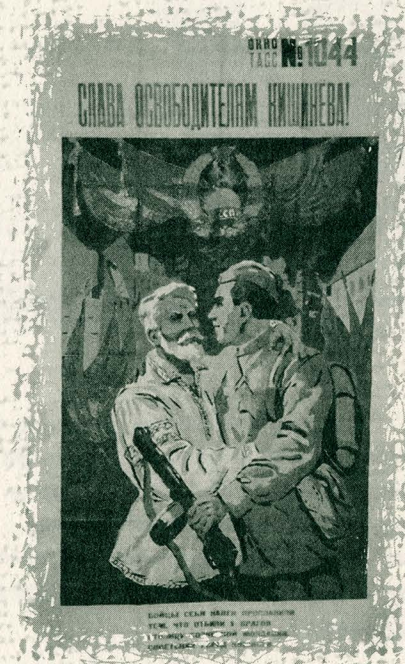
Two conservation methods were used for the Russian posters after the extent of the damage had been determined. The most severely damaged posters often had to be patched together like a jigsaw puzzle, which, considering the language problem, was time-consuming. These posters were then fixed with Methyl Cellulose paste onto dampened heavy-weight Japanese tissue-paper³ and left to dry. Minimal inpainting on the most damaged parts was done with Winsor and Newton watercolours, but only on the tissue-paper, not on the poster itself. On many of the most badly damaged posters the tissue-paper sections were left blank because it was felt that the areas were too large for inpainting.

This complies with Van Oort's philosophy of conservation which is based on the premise of the least possible intervention, restoring only that which is vital (Van Staden 1996).

The least damaged posters, namely those which were not in fragments, were carefully unfolded and



ANDRÉ VAN OORT EXPLAINING
THE CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES



A TYPICAL PROPAGANDA POSTER
FOR THE RUSSIAN WAR EFFORT



FROM LEFT: ANDRÉ VAN OORT, MARILYN MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL GALLERY, OR MARK VOLOSHIN

only minimal conservation was attempted. Any tears were mended with strips of medium-weight Japanese tissue-paper and Methyl Cellulose paste, and the posters were carefully stretched using a method devised by Van Oort. Inpainting was done on the damaged areas, and the posters were stored flat on acetate sheets.

Van Oort designed special polyester hanging 'envelopes' with ventilation slits in which the posters can be stored individually with minimal impact from the environment (Nolte 1996: 4). Since the posters were never meant to be framed, when they are eventually displayed similar specialised exhibition techniques will have to be used to ensure their preservation.

In keeping with current worldwide restoration ethics, any form of 'unnatural' interference with the posters was avoided by Van Oort (Nolte 1996: 4). The basic premise of restoration today is that the main

thrust should only be 'first-aid'. As little possible should be done in order to safeguard the integrity of the original. All restoration should be reversible and conservative (Burcaw 1975: 96-97), and should focus primarily on stabilizing the object. The philosophy of restoration recognises that the damage done to an object forms an integral part of its total history (Van Staden 1996). Any restoration should therefore not intrude upon or erase any part of an object's history; documenting the process of restoration carefully ensures that the history of the original is not lost.

THE FUTURE OF THE POSTERS

One of the main challenges facing the South African National Gallery is the extensive research that needs to be done before the Russian posters can be properly exhibited. Most importantly, they have to be contextualised and the Russian texts have to be fully translated, with a view to the compilation of a comprehensive catalogue.

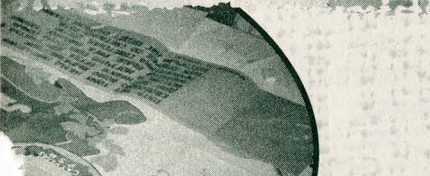
Although many research projects in South Africa today concentrate on local content, this could be an ideal opportunity for the National Gallery to launch an exhibition of international propaganda art. Issues that could be addressed include the propaganda value of the graphic image in historical context, the omnipresence and potency of visual images in contemporary society, and censorship of visual images - the last being a familiar notion for both Russian and South African spectators. The strategies and styles of Russian and South African political posters could be compared, for example, and similar posters worldwide could be examined.

The potentials of graphic art as persuasion and information were admirably explored by Liz McQuiston in her recent book *Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics since the Sixties*.⁴ The interpretative model used by her, and especially her valuable comments concerning censorship of the graphic image, could serve as an example for the type of text demanded by today's scholarship.

According to Elissa O'Loughlin, Senior Conservator of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., there are two similar Russian posters in that collection (Van Staden 1996), and Russian museums and libraries could doubtless yield further examples. It is clear that a collaborative research project is imperative if full justice is to be done to the posters, and perhaps foreign expertise and sponsorship could be involved to the benefit of all.



ONE OF THE POSTERS,
SHOWING ITS SIZE AND THE
TASS NUMBER IN THE TOP
RIGHT-HAND CORNER.



THE 'VICTORY' POSTER

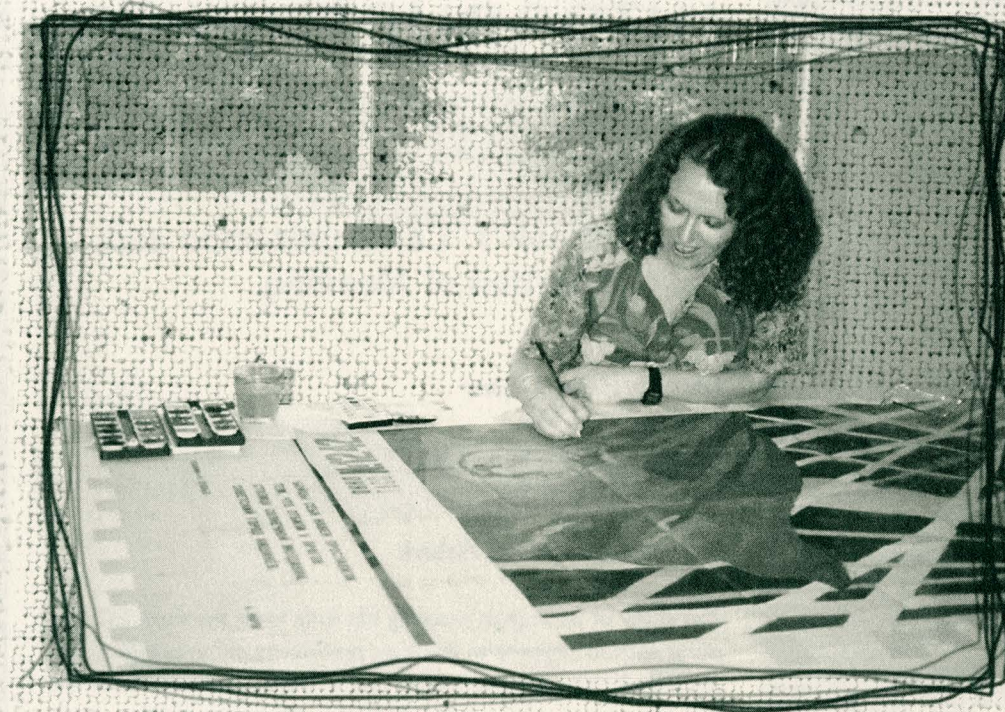
All museums accept as part of their responsibility the tasks of conservation, preservation, interpretation and exhibition of their collection. Hopefully the South African National Gallery will overcome any logistical constraints and will seize this opportunity to make a valuable contribution to world scholarship.

FOOTNOTES

1. According to Maree (1996), the oldest poster dates from around 1932 or 1934.
2. *Pochoir* is the French term for a stencil technique used in graphic design, wood-cut printing and book illustration (Osborne 1970: 1095).
3. This highly specialised tissue paper is made from the koku plant (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) by Paper Nao, Tokyo.
4. Published by Phaidon in 1993; for a review of this book see *Image & Text* 4, December 1994, p 36.

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MAGDA VAN STADEN, ONE OF THE VOLUNTEER PAPER CONSERVATORS

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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MAGDA VAN STADEN.

This article owes its inspiration to the enthusiasm of Magda van Staden, one of the paper conservators involved in the South African National Gallery project.