Poster Exhibits Depict China, Poland, and Romania under Communism

The Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts Gallery (SoFA) at Indiana University Bloomington hosted, back-to-back, two impressive and colorful exhibits of communist-era posters from China, Poland, and Romania. The multimedia exhibit, *Picturing Power: Posters of China's Cultural Revolution*, covering the period 1963 to 1979, was shown from August 24 to October 3. The project was co-directed by Jeffrey Wasserstrom (History, IUB) and Harriet Evans (University of Westminster, London), and curated by SoFA Gallery director Betsy Stirratt and associate director Ben Pond, with the assistance of Sue Tuohy (Folklore, IUB). The exhibit of 75 posters was drawn from the collection of posters at Westminster’s Centre for the Study of Democracy and also included artifacts and ephemera from IU’s East Asian Studies Center collection, an audiovisual accompaniment of songs and video footage, and a related series of lectures and roundtable discussions.

The second exhibit, *Behind the Iron Curtain: Poster Art from Poland and Romania*, concentrating on the 1970s and 1980s, took place from October 22 to November 21. It was curated by Maria Bucur (History, IUB) and Timothy Wiles (English, IUB) using posters lent from several collections, and included two special lectures by Romanian scholars Marius Marcu-Lapadat, on graphic art in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe, and Augustin Ioan, on Romanian postmodernism.

Posters in these countries were among the most powerful mass media used to disseminate communist propaganda and political messages. In China, huge posters were plastered in public places, but smaller posters were also mass-produced for display in factories, clinics, schools, and even homes. They promoted the ideals of the Great Society, praised the people's struggles, ennobled the masses as well as their leaders, and inculcated patriotism. The brightly colored posters, painted in state-sanctioned artistic styles, were accompanied by such didactic slogans as: “Let new socialist culture occupy every stage”; “Struggle to increase the mechanization of agriculture”; “Urgently forge ahead and bravely advance with great leader Chairman Mao”; and “Great nation joyfully flourishing.” According to the descriptive notes on the exhibit, “Most of the posters are influenced by Mao’s call for a fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism; everything seems a bit larger, brighter, and better than life, as though the communist utopia had already arrived.” As Wasserstrom points out, however, these bright images do not negate the “undeniably brutal side” of the revolution.

In bringing to light these historically important but rarely seen Chinese posters, the project co-directors hope to educate an entirely new public from the originally intended one. As the authors of the exhibit notes state, “Together, [the posters] provide us with a window onto scenes from a world that no
longer exists but that continues to exercise a powerful influence on collective and individual memories and identities." Indeed, as part of the exhibit, there was a panel discussion with Chinese intellectuals who grew up under the Cultural Revolution but now live in the West. They admitted that many readily bought the posters, aspired to become like the happy smiling faces depicted, and appreciated the positive pro-minority, pro-woman, pro-worker messages. Yet today, the Cultural Revolution is officially reviled in China. It is ironic, notes Wasserstrom, that "a university outside of China is one of the only places where a show such as this could be staged and open exchanges of ideas . . . take place." In 2000 and 2001, there are plans to show this exhibit in various European sites.

By way of contrast, the second exhibit of more than 40 posters from Poland and Romania illustrate very different communist-era societies and artistic expressiveness, even between these two Eastern European countries. In Poland, according to the exhibit notes by Wiles, who collected many of them, "Imaginative posters advertising cultural events have had the status of an art form for more than a century." After the death of Stalin in 1953, greater freedom of expression was permitted, leading to a more characteristic Polish art style that depicted "political protests disguised by symbols, parables, and allegories. The poster became an ideal visual medium for this." These posters, often designed for theatre, film, as well as political events, and signed by well-known artists, were allowed to express dissent, irony, and surreal imagery, but they had to be done subtly enough to avoid official censorship. Wiles explains this in the context of Poland's long national struggle: "While this strategy of speaking behind a mask was true to some extent of all the arts in the East European countries, it was most fully developed in Poland, where government control was lenient and artists in all media had long been thought of as nationalist spokesmen for freedom."

Many of the theatre posters are provocative, even ugly, in imagery. A strikingly surrealist poster from 1978 for a play entitled They shows a huge egglike form covered around with eyeballs, representing a modern police state. In the 1980s, posters promoting the Solidarity movement were bold enough to incorporate such an American icon as Gary Cooper from High Noon, holding a Solidarity ballot in his hand, "striding forward, like Poland, to face the hour of destiny," writes Wiles.

Turning to Romania under Nicolae Ceau§escu (1965-89), Bucur describes the government as "domestically the most authoritarian and dictatorial communist regime anywhere in the region." Graphic and poster art from this period was influenced by East Asian communist models, particularly that of North Korea, which Ceau§escu visited in 1971. There is a certain stylistic kinship to some of the Chinese posters. The Romanian posters, all loaned from the collection of the National Office for Documentation and Art Exhibits in Bucharest, are of two types: propaganda-driven announcements of important communist anniversaries or special political events, or cultural posters focusing on specific events or topics with little reference to political or social contexts.

In contrast to the Polish posters, Bucur admits that the question could be raised "whether [the Romanian posters] can be defined as art, or whether they are simply a form of graphic design," given the heavy censorship of the period. Many posters were unsigned. The propaganda posters all feature the Romanian flag, the color red, three-dimensional lettering, and depersonalized faces, sometimes carrying slogans, such as "Long live May 1st: the day of international solidarity of those who work, the day of brotherhood among workers everywhere." Yet subtle forms of dissent were present. The poster promoting Balkan solidarity, "The Balkans—a zone of
peace and understanding between people," uses ambiguous imagery. The flags of six nations, in the form of a seamless cord, are wound into a knot around a pencil. In one interpretation, they could represent the close bond of friendship between these nations. But the knot could also be viewed as a "Gordian knot," symbolizing that it is tension and conflict that keep these nations together, not peace. Elsewhere, a theatre poster, depicting a lonely old woman beside a crumbling wall, is a veiled criticism of the state's inability to care for its poor and aged.

The juxtaposition of the two exhibits at the Fine Arts Gallery was planned by Bucur and Wasserstrom, once they realized their overlapping interests. As part of the Polish and Romanian exhibit, they organized a roundtable discussion that also included Lazslo Borhi (Hungarian Studies), Christina Illias (Slavics, Classics), and Bozena Shallcross (Polish Studies, Slavics). The group examined the relationship of the two exhibits to each other, the impact of the posters on their viewers, and posters as an artistic genre in these different countries. To keep the dialogue generated by these two exhibits going, the Center for the Study of Global Change has established a faculty study group to compare socialist and post-socialist cultures.

Major support for the Chinese exhibit came from The Henry Luce Foundation, IU's East Asian Studies Center, and SoFA, with additional support from other IU units and programs. A complete description of the exhibit may be found by following the links under the EASC Web site: http://www.indiana.edu/~easc. The Polish and Romanian exhibit was supported by IU's Russian and East European Institute, the Polish Studies Center, and SoFA. A complete description of the exhibit may be found at the SoFA Web site: http://www.fa.indiana.edu/~sofa/Iron/index.html.

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and sculpture, novels and poetry, history and theatre, travel and memoirs, autobiography, and cabaret dancing.

The conference featured several special events, notably an exhibit of women's writing at the Lilly Library of rare books and manuscripts, and two concerts of music composed by or written about women. The Lilly exhibit, Women Seeking Expression, 1789-1914, was open from September 20 through December 18, 1999. Despite the inhospitality of the nineteenth century towards publications by women, due in great part to the Napoleonic code and the anti-feminist backlash occurring around 1880 when education was made free, compulsory, and secular, the women writers, artists, and composers of that period were enormously productive. The Lilly exhibit showed the great variety achieved, including pedagogical books, historical analyses, journals and travelogues, novels, poetry, plays, polemical treatises, and studies of natural sciences. A few highlights include the 1903 doctoral thesis of two-time Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, a manuscript by art critic Judith Cladel and a photo of her and Rodin, and a recently discovered and unpublished letter dated in 1857 by George Sand.

IU's School of Music offered participants a concert of music composed by sisters Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) and Lili Boulanger (1893-1918). Emile Naoumoff of IU's School of Music organized the concert. The pieces performed included one that Lili dictated on her deathbed to her sister Nadia, one that Nadia composed for Lili's funeral, and a composition written by Lili at the Villa Medici in Rome in 1913, the year she won the Grand Prix de Rome for composition.

A second concert, titled Portrait de Femmes, was performed in the Hoagy Carmichael Room. It featured mezzo-soprano Margo McLean and pianist Gaët Sirguey, offering a musical representation of French women in history, myth, and daily life as depicted by writers and composers of both sexes. The first part, "La vie d'une femme," portrayed women's experiences from birth through childhood, sexual awakening, marriage, abandonment, nostalgia, and death. The second part, "Les grandes héroines," reacquainted the audience with goddesses, saints, literary figures, and the Romantic muse.

The conference ended with an optimistic sense of mission: as more researchers reach a deeper understanding of women's artistic contributions in the nineteenth century, the more possible it will be to effect a radical transformation in what has

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