Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution:
An Educational Turn, 1928-1933

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Abstract
The article examines a radical reform of Soviet art museums during the late 1920s and early 1930s both on their own distinct ideological terms, as institutions that would illustrate Marxist dialectical view of historical development, and in the context of a broader international drive to modernize art museums and turn them into primarily educational institutions accessible and attractive to the broader population. A case study of a radically innovative exhibition entitled *Art on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes*, organized by the young Marxist art historian and curator Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in June 1930, reveals the degree to which the Soviet art historian's innovative and polemical curatorial approach finds parallels with the educational strategies of one of the most iconic examples of modern displays in western museums, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, organized by Alfred Barr, Jr. at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936.

**Key words:** Soviet; Museology; Fedorov-Davydov; Tretyakov Gallery; Exhibitions; MoMA.

Résumé
Cet article analyse le renouvellement radical des musées de l’art soviétiques au tournant des années 1930s selon leur propres termes idéologiques en tant que institutions destinées à illustrer la vision dialectique de Marx de l’évolution historique et dans le cadre d’une poussée plus large, internationale celle-ci, pour moderniser les musées de l’art et les convertir en institutions essentiellement pédagogiques qui seraient accessibles et attirantes à la population. Une étude de cas d’une exposition radicalement innovante, organisée en juin 1930 au musée de l’art Tretyakov par le jeune historien de l’art et conservateur marxiste, Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, et qui s’est intitulé L’art soviétique et les thématiques révolutionnaires, met en lumière à quel point la démarche polémique et innovante de l’historien de l’art soviétique trouve des échos dans les stratégies pédagogiques de l’un des avatars de l’exposition moderne des musées de l'Ouest, Cubism and Abstract Art, exposition organisée par Alfred Barr, Jr. au Museum of Modern Art de New York en 1936.

**Mots clés:** communisme; muséologie; Fedorov-Davydov; Tretyakov Gallery; expositions ; MoMA.

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In 1928, with the onset of the so-called Cultural Revolution in Russia, Soviet museums were mobilized for a fundamental reform, which aimed to transform them into political-educational institutions accessible and attractive to the broadest masses of population. The goal of the new Soviet museums was “to present cultural values in such a way that the mass viewer would not only contemplate, but learn to understand the dialectical nature of cultural objects and of the historical process itself.” Individual artworks were embedded within the ideologically driven metanarratives, which Soviet critics already by the mid-1930s derided as “vulgar sociological Marxism” and which Western scholars have subsequently dismissed as too overtly agitational. Yet if one considers Soviet reforms of this period within the context of the contemporaneous modernization of Western museums, one discovers that despite clear ideological distinctions, the educational impetus and display tactics in Soviet art museums had much in common with the most progressive contemporaneous reforms in their European and American counterparts. This article will examine this premise through a case study of one of the first experimental Soviet museum displays, developed by the main proponent of the Soviet museum reform, the young Marxist art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in 1930.

Public art museums in the West were born from the Enlightenment idea to educate citizens and bring them closer to cultural values, yet throughout the 19th century museums appealed predominantly to the educated elite. In the early 20th century art museums gradually began to attract broader layers of population and began to collect and display not only historical, but also contemporary works, in order to help their visitors orient themselves in the modern world around them and thus propel civilization forward. Hugo von Tschudi was a major proponent of this idea in German museums, many of which, by the 1920s, had transformed their displays into didactic presentations of historical development leading up to the present. The most progressive among these was Alexander Dorner’s display at the Landesmuseum in Hanover, which presented a contextualized teleology of art history in a series of “period rooms,” culminating with the room dedicated to contemporary art, El Lissitzky’s celebrated Abstract Cabinet. Shortly after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Russian avant-garde artists set out to create their own network of museums of contemporary art, which they named Museums of Artistic Culture. One of the early leaders of this activity, Vasily Kandinsky, referred to Tschudi’s example as an important inspiration.

By the early 1930s, the task of reforming art museums into educational institutions that attracted broad masses of the population and taught them to discern historical

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2 Tschudi was the director of Berlin National Gallery in 1896-1909 and the head of art museums in Munich in 1909-11. The extent to which German museums collected contemporary artworks became evident when the Nazis confiscated 16,000 works they had labelled degenerate.


development through displays of artworks, was widespread in Europe and the US. This goal was emphasized in a special issue of the professional journal *Museion*, published in France in 1930 with the title “Concept of a Modern Museum” as well as a special 400-page issue of *Les Cahiers de la République des Lettres, Sciences et des Arts*, entitled “Musées,” which appeared in 1931. Both publications advocated the need to modernize museums by turning them into socially engaged educational institutions that would serve not only specialists but also the general public, which was to be attracted with special marketing tools. In that regard, US museums were seen as being in the vanguard and their European counterparts strove to catch up with them. The issue of *Cahiers* was the result of an international survey, conducted by Georges Wildenstein, of twenty-five foremost specialists in museology from nine countries, whose essays were assembled in the journal. Among them was a Soviet citizen, Theodor Schmidt, who presented the reform implemented in his socialist homeland. On the one hand, Schmidt’s article outlined an alternative ideological proposal of a museum reform, with its distinct set of imperatives and methods. On the other hand, however, Soviet modernization of museums clearly took place within an international context, with sufficient mutual awareness and exchange that was significant for both sides. It is by keeping this in mind that we can get the best understanding of its strengths and shortcomings.

Soviet museum reform started in 1928, when during the course of a year museum workers from Moscow and Leningrad held a series of meetings at the Scientific Section of the Commissariat for Enlightenment (Glavnauka Narkomprosa) and postulated that Soviet museums should be “entirely dedicated to the tasks of mass propaganda of the ideas of the Marxist worldview and the tasks of socialist construction.” In December 1930, the First All-Russian Museum Congress issued specific guidelines for museum displays: artworks were to be shown not as objects of fetishism, but as examples of social processes. As a result, between 1929 and 1933, Soviet museum curators developed a range of innovative displays, which became known as “paper exhibitions,” due to the abundance of textual commentaries in them – ranging from large-scale slogans that ran like banners under the ceilings to a multi-tiered system of didactic labels that elucidated correspondences between historical, ideological and artistic developments. These displays’ official name was “comprehensive Marxist exhibitions” (*kompleksnye marksistskie eksposizitsii*), for instead of showcasing individual masterpieces made by great artists, they focused on the dialectical process of historical development, presented in the form of strongly articulated polemical viewpoints through dynamic displays, in which artworks were woven into the politically driven didactic metanarratives.

This period of radical experimentation in Soviet museums was short-lived. By the mid-1930s, new displays were criticized for oversimplifying correspondences between the socio-economic bases of society and its cultural super-strata and were dismissed wholesale as “vulgar sociology” or “vulgar Marxism.” By 1935 Soviet museums returned to the traditional presentation by great masters and masterpieces and the

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5 Theodore (Fedor) Schmidt wrote about the modernization of western museums in his book *Muzeinoe Delo* (Museology), which appeared in 1929, and published several articles about the Soviet reform in European and American journals in the early 1930s. Other Soviet authors also regularly wrote about the Soviet museum reform in *V.O.K.S. Bulletin*, a periodical published in English by the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. In its turn, modernization of Western museums received regular coverage in the specialized journal *Sovetskii Muzei* (Soviet Museum).

6 Doklady na Leningradskoi konferentsii muzeinykh rabontikov (Presentations at the Leningrad conference of museum workers), 1929, RGALI, f.815, d. 221, l.7.
experimental period was largely forgotten. Yet this highly innovative episode in the history of museums, with its strong focus on the function of the exhibitionary language itself and development of a range of innovative display tactics - such as painted walls, theatrical devices and montage elements, the inclusion of historical and literary quotations and artistic paraphernalia, contemporary photographs and newspaper clippings - were all extremely novel for their time and had a lasting impact on museology that has yet to be fully studied and appreciated.

During the last three decades Western art historians have occasionally looked at Soviet experimental displays, only to dismiss them as derogatory examples of “the transformation of Soviet museums into a showcase for Stalin’s crude Marxian cultural theory,” implying an authoritarian state apparatus that handed down specific ideological directions to the art world, in the tradition of Cold War reductionism. An attentive historical examination, however, reveals that the main driving force behind the Soviet museum reform were not the Party leaders, but the activists of the cultural revolution, young convinced Marxists, such as the art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, who became the mastermind behind a series of pioneering displays at The State Tretyakov Gallery, the main museum of national art in the country, and one of the main authors of the new guidelines for Soviet museums adopted in 1930. Rather than implementing directives from above, Fedorov-Davydov himself developed a Marxist art historical methodology and an experimental exhibition practice that transformed Soviet museology.

In what follows I will examine one of Fedorov-Davydov’s earliest exhibitions of Soviet art, entitled “Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes,” held at the Tretyakov Gallery in May 1930. Highly innovative in its methodological approach and display methods, this little known exhibition presents a revealing case study of the young Marxist curator’s novel approach to museology as well as its shortcomings. It demonstrates the foundational traits of the Soviet museum reform, but also resonates with some of the most vanguard exhibitions in European and American museums of the time.

In 1929 when he was appointed curator of new Russian art at the Tretyakov Gallery, the twenty-nine-year-old Fedorov-Davydov had stellar credentials as a Marxist scholar: at 25 he had published a book of essays on Marxist art historical

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8 In 1991 Stephanie Barron compared a 1931 experimental display at The Tretyakov Gallery, which stigmatized works of Russian avant-garde as bourgeois formalism, to the Degenerate Art exhibition, organized by the Nazis in 1937. See Stephanie Barron, “Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany (Los Angeles: Museum Associates, 1991), 398-9
9 The museum reform was initially developed in 1928 through a series of meetings between museum professionals and arts administrators at the Scientific Section of the Commissariat for Enlightenment (Glavnauka Narkomprosa). Individual curators then proceeded to apply the new methodology in their institutions, their work was discussed and their approach was adjusted through further dialogs at museum conferences held in 1929 and 1930. For details see Masha Chlenova, On Display: Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928-1933. Ph.D. dissertation (New York: Columbia University, 2010), 79-83. It is available at ProQuest Dissertations.
10 Fedorov-Davydov was born in Moscow in 1900, son of a well-known children’s writer. He studied first at Kazan University (1919-23) and then at the Institute of Art History and Archaeology in Moscow (1924-27), where he learned both the traditional formal method and Mikhail Friche's sociological approach. His first book, entitled Marxist History of Visual Arts: Methodological and Historiographic Essays, published in 1925, marked the beginning of the Marxist analysis of art historical development, which he was the first to have outlined in detail. On Fedorov-Davydov's views and affinities see Andrei Kovalev, “A.A. Fedorov-Davydov i Sovetskoe Iskusstvoznaniie 1920kh godov” Iskusstvo 3 (1988): 40-44. For a detailed account of Fedorov-Davydov's activity as curator at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1929-34 see chapters 2 and 3 of my dissertation.
methodology, and at 29 a book-length study of 19th and 20th century Russian art entitled *The Art of Industrial Capitalism*. He was well equipped for re-conceptualizing the collection and display of a once private picture gallery of the merchant Pavel Tretyakov into a vanguard public museum of Soviet art. As a dedicated Marxist art historian, Fedorov-Davydov saw his main goal as that of understanding the social-economic nature of the laws of artistic production by analyzing its individual manifestations during different historical periods. He spelled out his ultimate task thus: “to use this understanding of the laws and mechanisms of artistic development as a basis for scientifically changing social aesthetics, and in this way taking part in the general revolutionary transformation of society.”

Right after starting his job at the Tretyakov Gallery, Fedorov-Davydov set out to prepare his first experimental dialectical-Marxist exhibition. Its goal was to gather the best artworks that addressed Soviet and revolutionary topics in order to expand the museum’s collection of post-revolutionary art and to bring it to the present moment, and to include not only painting and sculpture, but also architecture, drawings, posters, photography and film, in order to demonstrate that they played an equally important role in building the new Soviet society. The resulting temporary exhibition, organized in the record time of a little over a year, opened in May 1930 in four museum galleries, and was entitled “Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes.” (Proizvedeniia sovetskoi i revolutsionnoi tematiki) [Figures 1-2].

Fig. 1 : Exhibition “Art Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes” (May 1930) at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Curator: Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov. Wall title: “ON INNUMERABLE FRONTLINES OF THE CIVIL WAR FIGHTING”

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13 Ibid., 7.
Fedorov-Davydov’s radically novel approach to curatorial practice in this display can be productively compared to one of the most iconic examples of modern displays in Western museums – the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, organized at The Museum of Modern Art by its chief curator Alfred Barr Jr. in April - May, 1936. [Figures 3-4].
While at first this comparison may appear contrived, it reveals important commonalities in the defining wish of both curators to create displays that activate individual artworks within the dynamic rhetorical structures of their exhibitions in the service of the well-defined educational goals. First of all, temporal distance between these two shows is deceptive, for Barr himself wrote that he based the plan of this 1936 exhibition on his lectures prepared during his trip to Europe in 1927-8 and given in the Spring of 1929 as a pioneering course on contemporary art across the media at Wellesley college.\textsuperscript{14} Among the sources of Barr’s comprehensive approach to contemporary culture were the radically innovative Museums of Artistic Culture, formed by Russian avant-garde artists in Moscow and Leningrad right after the revolution.\textsuperscript{15} Barr kept abreast of Soviet museology to a degree: during his visit to St Petersburg in 1928, the art historian and critic Nikolai Punin, then curator at the State Russian Museum’s Department of Newest Trends, gave Barr a walk through its galleries.\textsuperscript{16} Building on the pioneering practice of Russian avant-garde artists, Punin conceived of the Department of the Newest Trends, which he headed, as a mini-laboratory of contemporary art within the larger institution of the Russian Museum and described its task as follows: “at any given moment the department should be the focal point of those various vectors, from which the \textit{living fabric} of contemporary creative processes is woven.”\textsuperscript{17} Maintaining continuous direct contact

\textsuperscript{17} Punin defined the tasks of his department to include a systematic study of contemporary art exhibitions in order to reveal the artistic development of already established artists, to study and document their practices; to maintain constant contact with living artists and invite them to participate in discussions about the department’s work in order to “create around the department a social milieu.”
with contemporary artistic life and actively shaping its course through its exhibition and collecting practices was central to Punin’s conception of his department, as it would continue to be for departments of Soviet Art at the Russian Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery upon their establishment in the early 1930s. During the same trip Barr planned to meet with Theodor Schmidt, whose work he may have been familiar with through his publications in the West.18 From its inception, Barr’s ambition for MoMA had commonalities with the Soviet museological model. In 1933, Barr formulated MoMA’s main task as follows: “Basically, the museum ‘produces’ art knowledge, criticism, scholarship, understanding, taste. This is its laboratory or study work.”9 The museum’s collection was formed following Barr’s famous diagram of a torpedo from 1933, which reflects the idea of a museum that continues to collect the most vanguard contemporary art and propels itself forward along with history.20 Furthermore, from its earliest days, MoMA gave an exceedingly prominent role to its various publics. A 1932 brochure entitled “The Public as Artist” could well have been written in the USSR of the same moment:

“Art is the joint creation of artist and public. Without an appreciative audience, the work of art is stillborn. The public must be ready, through a knowledge and understanding no less exacting than that of the artist, to inspire art and make it live. The more intelligent and widespread this reception, the more vital and significant art becomes. The public, therefore, shares equally with the artist the exciting responsibility of carrying on the great tradition of living art.”21

Fedorov-Davydov also sought to engage museum visitors, but his aim in doing so was directly political: he wanted to involve mass Soviet viewers into the construction of the new socialist society by foregrounding the ways in which recent artworks had contributed to this process. The goal of museum displays was to provide the discursive framework within which artworks could communicate to their audiences. “Contemporary [Soviet] art,” the curator argued, “is in itself still insufficiently political and agitational and therefore requires special display methods.”22 He made displays speak in the loud voice of an agitator, channeled through numerous slogans and citations placed on the gallery walls. Fedorov-Davydov wanted his exhibitions to “speak for themselves” without requiring explanations, and thus to communicate to visitors not only through the display tactics and textual commentaries, but also

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18 Alfred Barr “Russian Diary, 1927-28” in Defining Modern Art: selected writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Edited by Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 136. On Schmidt see note 4. While Schmidt’s work on museology was soon to be criticized by his Soviet colleagues, starting with Fedorov-Davydov himself, as insufficiently radical, he remained known and respected in the west thanks to his foreign publications.
19 “Present Status and Future Direction of The Museum of Modern Art” (1933) MoMA Archives. A. Barr Papers. 9a.8. It was originally prepared as a confidential report to the executive committee and accepted by them as a fair statement of principles to define museum policies.
20 Kirk Varnedoe’s “The Evolving Torpedo: Changing Ideas of the Collection of Painting and Sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art” in John Elderfield, ed., The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: Continuity and Change, (N.Y.: MoMA, 1995), 12-72. The museum’s initial plan to transfer out artworks when they became more than 50 years old was gradually abandoned, but MoMA has continued to collect cutting-edge contemporary art.
21 Kirk Varnedoe’s “The Evolving Torpedo: Changing Ideas of the Collection of Painting and Sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art” in John Elderfield, ed., The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: Continuity and Change, (N.Y.: MoMA, 1995), 12-72. The museum’s initial plan to transfer out artworks when they became more than 50 years old was gradually abandoned, but MoMA has continued to collect cutting-edge contemporary art.
22 Minutes from the discussion held in conjunction with the exhibition Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes. Manuscript Division, The State Tretyakov Gallery, f.206, d.1.
through the selection of works and documentary materials. Visitors were encouraged to respond to the exhibition by leaving their comments in a special book placed in the galleries. These responses were subsequently analyzed in a systematic way by dedicated museum staff. Moreover, an extensive discussion of the exhibition was organized for art professionals: art administrators, curators of major art museums, as well as art historians, critics and theorists. The exhibition was presented and widely perceived as an experiment, the first try at the new methodology of display, following the Marxist dialectical-materialist understanding of historical development. Its outcome was subject to honest criticism and debate, and its shortcomings were to be corrected in the future.

The second important parallel between *Works on Soviet Themes* and *Cubism and Abstract Art* - their integration of a range of artistic mediums to reflect artistic culture as a comprehensive environment - was indeed a quintessentially modern concern. Barr's mission in *Cubism and Abstract Art* was to establish the historical credibility of abstraction and cubism, the modalities of early 20th century art that were most difficult to understand for the broad public and that, by the mid-1930s, were under attack in some of their countries of origin, most notably Germany and the Soviet Union. Barr's seminal exhibition, from which many works were acquired for the museum’s collection, played a defining role in preserving the legacy of cubism and abstraction and contributed to their impact on subsequent artistic practices.

Fedorov-Davydov also took a partisan stance concerning the future of Soviet art. His decision to expand the notion of ‘Soviet and revolutionary theme’ beyond the purview of painting provided him with a strong argument against the influential artistic group AKhRR (Artists of Revolutionary Russia), which advocated the return of easel painting as the only medium that could truly reflect the new Soviet reality. In the spring of 1930 artists and critics sympathetic to AKhR mounted an aggressive critical attack against the Tretyakov Gallery and personally against Fedorov-Davydov for undervaluing the medium of painting and the work of AKhR artists in particular. While the “Soviet themes” exhibition was already in preparation then, its opening served as a potent polemical response to this criticism. With this exhibition, its curator and the museum as a whole (including its director Mikhail Kristi) expressed their solidarity with the program of the artistic group Oktyabr’ (October), which carried the legacy of Constructivism and Production artists and their dedication to the synthesis of the arts with a preference given to architecture, film and graphic arts over easel painting. In the spring of 1930, October was at the height of its...
popularity, its own major programmatic multi-media exhibition opened at the Gorki Park in June 1930. Even though this triumph was short-lived – already in the fall of that year critical attacks mounted again –, it is important to see this first political exhibition at the Tretyakov as taking a rather explicit stance in the heat of current artistic debates in the USSR. The aims of Fedorov-Davydov’s polemical and didactic displays were thus not only to enable Soviet citizens to discern the political functioning of individual artworks, but more importantly to influence the future development of Soviet art as a whole.

The distinct visual dynamism of the presentation is another key feature the Tretyakov’s and MoMA’s exhibitions have in common. Fedorov-Davydov spoke about cinematic montage as his source of inspiration and we know that Barr also admired and knew it well through his encounters with Soviet filmmakers during his visit in 1928 and through his colleague Jay Leyda, who studied with Sergei Eisenstein in the USSR and was Barr’s main liaison with Soviet artists in the mid-1930s. The theorist of montage Lev Kuleshov argued that combining two distinct views does not merely create their sum, but allows something new to emerge. Sergei Eisenstein advocated for dynamic montage as a principle central to creativity itself, which allows to “uncover individual imagery simultaneously with the generalized-image not only in cinema but in other visual arts as well.”

Thus, Barr combined several mediums in dynamic displays: [Figures 3-4 above] he mounted De Stijl and Bauhaus chairs onto the gallery walls, leveled them with the architectural models and vitrines, and placed highly geometric posters directly above them – thereby creating a visual and conceptual fluidity between two-dimensional graphic forms and modular units of furniture and architectural design. In his turn, Fedorov-Davydov sought to integrate “visual imagery” with “the word in the form of slogans,” which would, as he wrote, “organically enter into the composition of the wall and unify material into corresponding groups. Visual and verbal-logical materials need to complement each other and the exhibition unfolds as a sequence of themes-phrases.”

Text of various registers – from political slogans to verses and individual words – played a unifying role in Fedorov-Davydov’s displays, both visually and conceptually, as it elucidated the meaning of individual works and of entire gallery walls.

Fedorov-Davydov thought of every gallery wall as a complete composition and of the exhibition as a coherent linear narrative. Its course paralleled the teleological progression of history in its dialectical materialist unfolding, which he articulated by numbering gallery walls and laying out a clear progression in the catalog. Themes followed in a chronological sequence, one for each of the four rooms of the exhibition: from the revolution and its precursors, to the victories of the civil war, to industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, to the new everyday life and the Cultural Revolution. In his turn, Barr also advocated for a progressive development of art - for him it led in two directions of geometric and non-geometric abstraction. He also indicated the sequence of gallery walls with numbers and arrows placed on the walls, and brought all the trajectories together in the famous diagram he placed on the front cover of the exhibition catalog. [Figure 5]
In both of these didactic presentations the aesthetic value of individual artworks is secondary to the historical and educational value of the display as a whole. This instrumentalization of individual artworks and the highly prescriptive character of the overall narrative have been the main points of criticism of Fedorov-Davydov’s displays. In Barr’s exhibition highly didactic displays were balanced by more traditional ones where individual works were given more autonomy for aesthetic contemplation. [Fig. 6]
The core distinction between the two exhibition tactics lies in their approach to historical development itself. Barr’s is grounded in the notion of artistic style, based on formal characteristics, developed by such founding fathers of art history as Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölflin. The stages of his modernist teleology are rooted in the stylistic groupings, the ‘-isms’, which inform one another and follow what Barr construes as a historical progression. For Fedorov-Davydov a linear history of aesthetically defined styles is an expression of a bourgeois artistic culture, which merely naturalizes the premise of the eternal value of artistic masterpieces and affirms their classless-ness. This exact critique has been leveled by leftist critics against MoMA’s seemingly neutral displays since their inception. Fedorov-Davydov denounced style in the aesthetic sense as anti-scientific, and proclaimed it to be “not a historical but a typological category – a sum of characteristics, obtained through the materialist-productive analysis of a given art, an analysis of its social mechanism, a system of artistic devices and the social functioning of their transformation and the deformation of the material of the surrounding extra-artistic reality.” In other words, art is always an expression of the socio-historical conditions of its production. Fedorov-Davydov’s displays sought to reveal the mechanism of dialectical historical development, propelled by inherent tensions between distinct social forces, with artistic attributes being only their secondary expressions. New displays not only presented artworks as secondary to the broader historical forces, but interpreted them as expressions of class characteristics of various social groups. While in his own analysis of artworks Fedorov-Davydov maintained a keen eye to their formal and aesthetic characteristics, his displays were rightfully accused of diminishing the autonomy and aesthetic qualities of individual works within his highly prescriptive metanarratives. In the case of the “Soviet Themes” exhibition, however, the dominant...

curatorial voice was hardly a problem, as most of the works, at the admission of the curator himself, were not of high artistic quality and mainly had to satisfy thematic requirements. One of the goals of that exhibition was to demonstrate the need for a higher quality artistic production, especially in painting. In contrast to Barr’s seminal presentation of the best works of contemporary art, Fedorov-Davydov’s show served an immediate political task – to create an agitational presentation of pointed themes in the most dynamic format in order to solicit viewers’ responses and to open up space for public examination.

A discussion about the exhibition, which brought together two dozen invited museum specialists, arts administrators and critics, was indeed held at The Tretyakov Gallery during the show’s run. According to the preserved transcript of the debates, most participants applauded the outcome, expectedly lamenting the low artistic quality of many works and the excessive propaganda noise of the installation, which, many found, was overpowering the works’ autonomy. Fedorov-Davydov held his ground, explaining his polemical and agitational task at that particular moment. In response to this criticism, however, his subsequent displays at the museum were more toned down and focused primarily on paintings, interspersed with large stenciled slogans and a minimum of labels. In 1933 Fedorov-Davydov published a book summarizing his museological activity, entitled The Soviet Art Museum, where he renounced some of his “youthful excesses” and argued that while such powerful strategies of persuasion as montage and abundant slogans were suitable for temporary agitational exhibitions, they “were not fitting for the main collection display with its goals of a long term and in-depth propaganda.” The curator saw his goal at that point as that of “uncovering the class-based nature of artworks, without fighting the works themselves, without diminishing their aesthetic qualities.” In his turn, Barr employed strongly didactic displays, such as those of “Cubism and Abstract Art,” only for selected special exhibitions, and for collection galleries opted for more neutral and spacious presentations that respected the aesthetic autonomy of individual works and unfolded its historical narrative in more subtle and implicit ways. While there is no doubt that displays at MoMA, like at any other museum, have always had an embedded ideology, they usually give viewers a sense that they are free to make their own conclusions.

Needless to say, in the USSR that task was the opposite: to agitate mass viewers into a specific viewpoint, that of dialectical materialism, which was considered the only right one. This was especially true during the embattled few years of the Cultural Revolution, between 1928 and 1932, and Fedorov-Davydov’s youthful zeal had its well-justified place, especially in the “Soviet themes” exhibition, which was his first display of political agitation. His reinstallation of the gallery’s collection of Russian art over the subsequent two years was already more toned down: the hanging was more orderly and focused almost exclusively on painting, while the slogans were printed in one uniformly large font. [Figures 7–8]

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31 For a detailed account of Fedorov-Davydov’s subsequent exhibitions based on archival research see, Chlenova, On Display, Chapter 3.
32 Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, Sovetskii Khudozhestvennyi Muzei (Moskva: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, 1933), 61. Fedorov-Davydov also denounced his “mechanistic use of montage, which [he admitted to have] uncritically borrowed from the formalist cinema... As a result, the display turned out to be very powerful, but it was too agitated and unsettled. Artworks illustrated the idea of the slogan well, but they were often deprived of an independent voice.” Ibid., 60–61.
33 Ibid., 61.
By the end of 1932, after the rhetoric of class struggle firmly gave way to that of class reconciliation, a growing number of Fedorov-Davydov’s colleagues and peers found his displays too overtly agitational and provocative. In January and February 1933, three extensive debates were organized at the Tretyakov where art historians, critics, curators, administrators and artists from various groups discussed the future of the gallery’s collection presentation and came to the conclusion that Fedorov-Davydov was “destroying art with political labels.” 34 Shortly thereafter the Tretyakov’s new director, Aleksei Vol’ter, asked Fedorov-Davydov to revert to a traditional museum

34 Extensive transcripts of these debates are preserved at RGALI, f. 990, op. 3, d. 7.
display – to show only masterpieces by great painters without any textual explanations and thus abandon his fledgling dialectical-Marxist methodology, which was condemned as ‘vulgar sociology.’35 By 1934, the curator’s situation grew more precarious, as his idealism and outspoken style increasingly fell out of sync with the times. That year, he was fired rather abruptly, supposedly after he made an incautious remark during public debates on realism and naturalism, and never returned to museum work.36 Yet it is precisely the Marxist imperative behind these short-lived, but ideologically unprecedented and highly innovative museum displays that has made them appealing to the leftist contemporaries and spurred telling moments of subsequent reception. In 1932, a Hungarian Marxist art historian and museum professional Frederick Antal visited Soviet museums, where he was guided by none other than Fedorov-Davydov.37 Having himself attempted radical museum reforms in Hungary as Director of Museums in Budapest during the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and working on a Marxist history of Renaissance art, Antal was the most receptive listener.38 Upon his return to Berlin, Antal presented his impressions in a lecture, the notes of which were published nearly half a century later in a German periodical in 1976, and two years later in French, in a special museum issue of the journal Histoire et Critique des Arts.39 These two publications reflected the search among the leftist intellectuals in Western Europe of the 1960s and 70s, for a viable museological model that could serve as an alternative to that of “bourgeois” or capitalist museums. A similar commitment was voiced in Britain in the 1960s by the Marxist art historian John Berger (he had studied with Antal there), who advocated for presenting artworks in museums not as fetishes for passive consumption, but as embedded into historical processes. Berger also insisted that “the curator’s work actually begins with the viewers.”40

As is evident from even a quick look at Alfred Barr’s foundational principles for MoMA’s mission and one of his best known early thematic exhibitions, his approach had more in common with the radical museological practices of his Soviet counterparts than our usual ideological lens of the socialist/capitalist binary has

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35 While the debates took place in the spring of 1933, Fedorov-Davydov completed the manuscript of a retrospective account of the short-lived reform of Soviet art museums in which he played an instrumental role. Sovetskii Khudozhestvennyi Muzei [Soviet Art Museum] (Moskva: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, 1933).

36 The artist Ivan Kliun recounts in his memoirs: “the art historian Fedorov-Davydov, replying to one of the statements, announced that for the artist Perelman it doesn’t make a difference whether to paint the boot of Hitler or that of Stalin.” Ivan V. Kliun, Moi put’ v iskusstve: vospominanii, stati, dnevnik (Moskva: Russkii avangard, 1999), 110. Fedorov-Davydov subsequently taught art history first at Moscow Textile Institute and then at Moscow State University and became an authority on 19th century Russian realist painting and a highly respected professor.

37 Antal was hosted by the Russian Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (V.O.K.S.). Its archive contains a report of Antal’s visit.

38 After the Hungarian revolution was suppressed by foreign intervention, Antal fled to Berlin together with Georg Lukacz, where he co-edited a journal devoted to the theory and methodology of art history until 1932. In 1933 he fled from the Nazis to Britain, where his Marxist views had an impact on the British school of social history of art. See Paul Stirton “Frederick Antal and ‘the Social History of Art’ in Britain” Britain and Hungary 2: Contacts in Architecture, Design, Art and Theory during the 19th and 20th centuries. Edited by Gyula Ernyey (Budapest: Hungarian University of Craft and Design, 2003), 236-53.


previously allowed us to acknowledge. Barr’s visit to the Soviet Union shortly before he assumed his directorship of MoMA undoubtedly had an impact on his vision of a museum of living art that sets out to actively shape the opinions of its diverse visitors by inciting them to engage with the didactic presentations of artworks set within the rhetorical structures of museum exhibitions. In this light the radical leftist critique of MoMA as the ultimate late capitalist institution, articulated by Duncan and Wallace in the 1970s, appears as one-sided and limiting as the wholesale dismissal of Fedorov-Davydov’s innovative methodology as “vulgar Marxism.” Creating balanced socially and politically contextualized displays oriented towards broad layers of the population, without going into the extreme of over-interpretation and allowing individual works to stand their ground without being overpowered by the curatorial voice, has been a core issue of museology and curatorial work. Similarly, the goal of museums to be part of the living fabric of society, where critical issues can be openly and actively addressed, without becoming dogmatic on the one hand, or submitting to the increasing pressure of the commercialization and trivialized technologically driven spectacularization of museum displays, is a task that remains extremely relevant today. The Soviet museum reform, in all its historically specific contradictions, is an important part of this broader field of inquiry.