Wall with Alexandr Deineka paintings in 15 Years of Artists of the RSFSR. *Leningrad*, 1932. Photograph courtesy of Masha Chlenova.
The thirty-three-year-old artist Aleksandr Deineka was given a large piece of wall space at the exhibition 15 Years of Artists of the RSFSR at the Russian Museum in Leningrad in 1932. At the center of the wall hung his most acclaimed painting, The Defense of Petrograd of 1928, a civil-war-themed canvas showing marching Bolshevik citizens, defending against the incursions of the White armies on their city, arrayed in flattened, geometric patterns across an undifferentiated white ground. The massive 15 Years exhibition attempted to sum up the achievements of Russian Soviet art since the revolution as well as point toward the future, and Deineka, in spite of his past association with “leftist” (read: avant-garde) artistic groups such as OST (the Society of Easel Painters) and October, was among those younger artists who were anointed by exhibition organizers as leading the way forward toward Socialist Realist art—a concept that was being formulated through both the planning of and critical response to this very display of so many divergent Soviet artists. Known for his magazine illustrations and posters, Deineka had also established himself at a young age as a major practitioner of monumental painting in a severe graphic style that addressed socialist themes, such as revolutionary history (e.g., Petrograd), and, as his other works displayed at the Leningrad exhibition demonstrate, proletarian sport (Women’s Cross-Country Race and Skiers, both 1931) the ills of capitalism (Unemployed in
Berlin, 1932), and the construction of the new Soviet everyday life (Who Will Beat Whom?, 1932).

The inclusive and artist-organized Leningrad iteration of the exhibition 15 Years closed in January 1933 only to open five months later in Moscow under greater bureaucratic supervision and following a significantly sharpened ideological agenda. As Masha Chlenova argues elsewhere in this issue, the Moscow version of the exhibition amounted to the final “public stigmatization” of the avant-garde and formalism, offering a selection of works more weighted toward revealing the appropriate future paths of a Soviet art answerable to the masses. As the organizers emphasized, the Moscow exhibition contained a greater number of very recent works, produced after the epochal Central Committee decree of April 23, 1932, dissolved all artistic groups and ordered the formation of a central Artists’ Union; it was meant to showcase the “post-April artistic production” (posleaprel’skaia khudozhestvennaia produktsii) made possible by the “creative atmosphere” facilitated by this unprecedented new centralized and collectively organized art system.

The display of Deineka’s works certainly changed dramatically between Lenin-
grad and Moscow, but not necessarily in the anti-formal or ideologically tendentious
directions that Chlenova identifies in the exhibition overall. His Defense of Petrograd
was still on view, as were a couple of his other monumentally scaled proletarian-
themed paintings from the mid-1920s, but three recent showstopping “post-April”
canvases were now included that would be intensely analyzed by the critics: Mother
(Mat’) and The Ball Game (Igra v miach) of 1932, and Bathing Girl (Kupaiush-
chaisia devushka, also known as Bathing Collective Farm Woman or Kupaiushchaisia
kolkhoznitsa) of 1933. Large-scale but intimate, these close-up cropped images of
beautiful nude female bodies, only nominally related to the thematics of the new Soviet
woman as mother, physical-culture enthusiast, or collective-farm worker, were
immediately hailed as “lyrical” (liricheski). Expressive in Russian as in English of
feeling, emotion, and sensuality, this term of approval threaded its way through critical response to the exhibition and figured within the
developing discourse of Socialist Realism across media. These “lyrical” paintings,
and the lyrical critical language that responded to them, open up a different
model of Socialist Realism than the one we have come to know. This essay will trace this newfound concern with “feeling” as one of the positive or productive contributions of Socialist Realism to the project of revolutionary art, to be distinguished from its negative aim of eliminating the avant-garde from that project. Socialist Realism would change and narrow over the following years, to be sure. But the practice of always reading backwards with the hindsight of later disappointments neutralizes the unrealized possibilities of early moments of Socialist Realism that might have ended differently. This essay aims to retrieve a moment in 1933 when Socialist Realism had the potential to become a radically collective project of artists working at the boundary between private emotion and publicly oriented feeling to create a shared visual language of socialism. This lyrical strand of Socialist Realism was an attempt to rework modernist aesthetic strategies to help viewers to feel, as well as to comprehend analytically, the meanings and promises of socialism.5

5. The “lyrical” also emerges in debates on Soviet poetry and film of this time, as I discuss in the book-length project on Soviet Socialist Realism from which this essay is drawn. I am grateful to Slavic and film scholars Liya Kaganovsky and Emma Widdis for inviting me to join their panel “Revisiting Early Stalinism through Visual Culture 1: Bodies & Feelings” at the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Convention in 2011, for which I first developed these ideas. I would like to thank the audience members there, as well as at the Penn Seminar on Russian/Soviet History and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania, the Institute for Advanced Study, and the conference “Objects of Affection” at Princeton University (all 2012) for their responses to this project.
In their variety, Deineka’s works on view in the exhibition *15 Years* did straddle feeling and analysis, and they were admired for both according to different, coexisting criteria. On the analytical side, the instructions for tour guides of the exhibition endorsed Deineka’s *Petrograd*, along with Georgii Riazhskii’s *Collective Farm Team Leader* (*Kolkhoznitsa-brigadir*), as examples of the “in-depth depiction of social processes” that were desirable in Soviet painting. We can imagine the tour guide pointing to the female civil-defense soldier who features so prominently in the center of Deineka’s composition or to the imposing female team leader talking to another female worker on the collective farm in Riazhskii’s painting, in order to analyze the transformation of the “social processes” of women’s labor after the revolution. The avant-garde inflection of Deineka’s formal language compared to that of Riazhskii does not seem to have troubled this comparative analysis of paintings in which none of the women are subordinated to a male authority figure, nor are they depicted with conventional prettiness.

In contrast, the ample nude women pressed close to the picture surface in Deineka’s “lyrical” paintings would seem to lack *Petrograd*’s analytical or “in-depth” investigation of revolutionary action, as well as its Bolshevik-feminist rigor. With their solidly rendered bodies, the women in Deineka’s lyrical paintings are in some ways less “formalist”—less avant-garde—than the more schematic figures of his earlier work, and we might have expected critics concerned with the formation of Socialist Realism to embrace them more for this reason. At the same time, as we will

7. Susan Reid singles out this painting by Riazhskii (who at 37 was also heavily favored by critics as an important younger artist in the exhibition) as an unusually feminist work within 1930s painting. See Reid, “All Stalin’s Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 57 (1998), pp. 133–173. Official Bolshevik ideology maintained a firm stance of equality for women, even if the historical reality of gendered experience belied it, as the vast bibliography of scholarly research on the history of Soviet women attests.

*Georgii Riazhskii. Collective Farm Team Leader. 1932.*
see, critics recognized without censure that the radical cropping, fragmentation, and repetition of these bodies draw just as firmly, albeit differently, on the avant-garde pictorial lexicon. Art historians discussing Socialist Realism, when they attend to it at all, tend to focus on the enforced transformation of the modernist techniques of the avant-garde in the direction of a conventional mimetic realism. While some version of this transformation undoubtedly took place, especially in the rejection of abstraction, artists and writers charged with formulating Socialist Realism remained engaged with the possibilities of “leftist” art, imagining a Socialist Realist reworking of its terms. For most critics responding to the exhibition 15 Years, the significance of Deineka’s shift to the lyrical had less to do with its formal qualities, concerning the sin or virtue of his more or less modernist pictorial strategies, than its content—specifically, of feeling.

If Deineka’s new lyrical paintings did not fully satisfy the demand for historically concrete analyses of social processes, they were incorporated into, or even themselves engendered, a new set of values within the discourse of Soviet visual culture: socialist versions of “feeling” (чувств), “sensation” (ощущение), “emotion” (эмоциональность), “lyricism” (лиризм), and “joy” (радость). The artist Ivan Semenov, for example, wrote an unusually direct and ebullient review of the Moscow exhibition 15 Years in the popular evening newspaper Vecherniaia Moskva entitled “An Art of Joy” (Искусство радости). Visiting the exhibition before it opened to the public, he writes from an artist’s perspective, opening the review with the insider image of artists nervously milling on the day before the opening, worrying that their pictures might be moved or hung badly at the last minute. His writing is more direct and obviously personal than that of the professional art historians and critics who weighed in on the show, but it introduced the same language of sensation and emotion that permeated critical responses to the exhibition: “The further we penetrate into the exhibition,” he writes, “the harder and stronger beats the pulse of the Soviet epoch.” Impatiently passing through the early rooms of works by older artists to arrive at “the joyful panorama of young Soviet art” in the final rooms, “saturated with the bright colors of reality (действительность),” he has little left over for the abstract works by Malevich, Filonov, or Tatlin, which stare out from their frames “like the eye sockets of empty skulls”—the deathliness of that simile contrasting with the “beating pulse” and saturated color he values in the newer Soviet art.

8. The standard interpretation of the trajectory of Deineka’s career is that, while he was always a figurative artist, his shift from the experimental and graphic canvases of his early years as a painter in the 1920s, when he was influenced by the avant-garde, to the more three-dimensional, immediate, and painterly canvases of the early 1930s resulted from the demands imposed by the developing doctrine of Socialist Realism—that he “bent sufficiently in the prevailing wind,” as Matthew Bown, a leading Western author on Socialist Realism, once put it. Matthew Cullerne Bown, Art under Stalin (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1991), p. 119.
10. Ibid. For a detailed account of the layout of the exhibition and the place of the avant-garde rooms within it, see Chlenova, “Staging Soviet Art,” in this issue.
Deineka’s lyrical painting Bathing Girl embodies this pulsating socialist joy for Semenov:

There are nude girls in Deineka’s picture. And this picture does not seem out of place next to Petrov-Vodkin’s tragic canvas Death of the Commissar. Life is joyful, life is dazzling. Reality gives the artist a scattering of great and small themes, equally awaiting creative reflection.¹¹

The term “dazzling” (oslepitel’nyi) can also mean “blinding,” but it is not properly life but the paintings themselves that dazzle—or blind—the eye with their overwhelming depiction of larger-than-life, rosy flesh pushing against the tightly cropped frames. What are we to make of this excitable language of sensory experience and affect intruding into what we have been led to think of as the more analytical discourse on the “thematics” of “reality” in Socialist Realism?

A vivid instance of the opposition between feeling and analysis in the propagation of Socialist Realism burst off the pages of the central art journal Iskusstvo (Art) at the end of 1933. Celebrating sensation and emotion, the venerable art historian and critic Abram Efros wrote an exhaustive fifty-page review of the exhibition that was immediately and brutally refuted, in the very same issue, by the journal’s recently appointed editor-in-chief, the author behind the recently initiated anti-formalism campaign, Osip Beskin.¹² Efros’s text surveys in detail the messy variety of Soviet painting as it struggles, as yet in vain, to “sustain the capaciousness” of Socialist Realism as a concept (Efros, p. 64). Yet he alights throughout on examples of artists who demonstrate the qualities of sensation and emotion that Semenov applauded. He praises Aleksandr Labas for the

¹¹. I. Semenov, “Iskusstvo radosti.”
¹². See Abram Efros, “Vchera, segodnia, zavtra,” Iskusstvo 6 (1933), pp. 15–64, and Osip Beskin, “O ’nezainteresovannosti esteticheskogo suzhdeniia,’” Iskusstvo 6 (1933), pp. 65–76; further citations will be given parenthetically in the body of the text as “Efros” and “Beskin,” respectively. Beskin had just published his article and book against formalism; see his Formalizm v zhivopisi (Moscow: Vsekhudozhnik, 1933) and Chlenova’s discussion of him in “Staging Soviet Art.”
way his painting “shakes and trembles with an emotional and painterly lyricism” (Efros, p. 42). The artists Fedor Antonov, Samuil Adlivankin, and Fedor Shurpin are not “cold,” but rather “they love people and they know how, or almost know how, to show them through their love”; Shurpin depicts his female protagonists with “lyrical passion” and Antonov’s painting Love (Liubov’) is “pleasant to look at . . . with your eyes and with your feelings,” a phrase that evokes the image of an embodied, emotive vision (Efros, pp. 56–57). In the paintings of Georgii Riazhskii, he sees “revolutionary vitality” (revoliutsionnaiia zhiznennost’; Efros, p. 59).

Beskin’s rebuttal, sharply titled “On ‘The Disinterestedness of Aesthetic Judgment,’” was not directed exclusively at Efros’s interest in “feelings,” but also at his prerogative, typical of the bourgeois art critic, to make a “disinterested aesthetic judgment” when such disinterest (Beskin never mentions Kant by name) is antithetical to the struggles of Soviet art. Beskin discounts Efros’s method of consistently tying his aesthetic judgments of the sensuous form of paintings to the problems of representing the individuality and vitality of the new Soviet person, and the new socialist reality itself.13 Beskin’s Kantian angle is more a pretext to criticize Efros for any focus on aesthetics when the guiding criterion of judgment should be the extent to which the artist analyzes the “truth of reality” (pravda deistvitel’nost’i) through a realism defined by contemporaneity (sovremennost’), principles (printsipial’nost’), and ideas (ideinost’), as well as political and social analysis (analiz politicheskii, obshchestvennyi; Beskin, pp. 69 and 72). Beskin does not provide a specific content for any of these terms; they function as placeholders for an unspecified historical objectivity that he opposes to what he sees as the asocial, individual, and subjective pitfalls of Efros’s emphasis on aesthetics in artworks that Beskin doesn’t like. In terms of desirable realistic form, he warns only that naturalism is too passive while formalism is too subjective (pp. 69–70), and the only real content that he demands from art and criticism is general and unsurprising: an account of “the entire complexity of the class struggle in its most delicate manifestations and nuances” (p. 65). In order for the work of art to be realistic, it must “share a common language with its viewer”—but the nature of that language or commonality is defined only negatively, by its difference from bourgeois aesthetics (p. 69). Beskin thunders that Efros, in his asocial concern with his own aesthetic “feelings” about the paintings, “simply profanes the concept of socialist” in the term Socialist Realism (p. 69).

The lines, then, were starkly drawn. At one point Beskin jokingly refers to “us narrow dogmaticians,” but the joke is unfunny because it’s uncomfortably close to the truth (Beskin, p. 67). At this formative moment, in 1933, there was room for different approaches to Socialist Realism on the part of artists and critics alike, and Beskin’s humorless harping on the catchphrases of truth to reality, idea, principle, and so on was not yet fully dominant within Soviet art. Even the prominent bureaucrat and critic Nikolai Shchekotov, who was one of the early organizers of the

13. Beskin chides Efros for forgetting that “the critic in our understanding of the word is not just someone who evaluates, but a public leader, and therefore each of his words must possess a particular responsibility” (p. 65; emphasis in original), confirming Chlenova’s similar claim about the ideological leadership role accorded the Soviet critic in her article in this issue.
exhibition 15 Years and whose epic ninety-two-page essay on the exhibition in *Iskusstvo* served as a kind of official review, used the language of sensation and lyricism. Although he, like Beskin, could also be sharply critical of previously formalist artists who were guilty of “an inadequate understanding of Soviet reality,” his review attended in generous detail to scores of paintings and he effused, in terms strikingly similar to Semenov’s invocation of “dazzling” life, that the exhibition “plays and glints with innumerable colors. For the unaccustomed eye, it can be difficult to deal with this multicolored play.” Less dogmatic critics than Beskin, then, recognized that artists could convey their perception of the new Soviet reality as much through their pictures’ aesthetic effects as through their subjects.

*From Private to Public*

This emergence of what we could call a *haptic* aesthetic was a phenomenon detected by critics rather than a programmatic shift in artistic production. Some artists, writers, and intellectuals perceived the April decree as a welcome sign of the end of the contentious accusations and antagonisms of the class war waged by the militant Russian Associations of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and Artists (RAKPKh) during the so-called cultural revolution that dominated much of the first Five-Year Plan (October 1928–December 1932). The easing of the rhetoric of class war, as well as the triumphal rhetoric of the successful completion of the Plan leading to the achievement of socialism, opened the possibility of art’s exploring not just socialist struggle but the joys of the lived experience of socialism more broadly—without the constant anxiety of being attacked as a “class enemy” (*klassovy vrag*). This shift in artistic interest was articulated most explicitly, in 1933, in the discourse of Soviet film. In an important article in the central film journal, which discussed painting as well as film, the cinema critic and historian Nikolai Iezuitov identified the necessity of both a “style of socialist concepts” or “intellectual style” and a “style of socialist feelings” or “emotional style” for the development of Socialist Realism. When art critics identified Deineka’s recent paintings as “lyrical,” they recognized his work as a site where this emerging rhetorical


15. I use the term “haptic” here in the art-historical sense, as it was developed by Alois Rieg, who opposed the “haptic” to the “optic”: If the optic mode of vision takes things in at a distance, the haptic is a mode of vision that is near, analogous to the sense of touch in the way that it synthesizes discontinuous sensory inputs. Rieg had originally used the term “tactile” for this mode of vision, but changed to “haptic”—a term he took from the language of physiology (from the Greek *haptein*, to fasten)—because he worried that the tactile might be taken too literally as “touching.” See Margaret Iverson, Alois Rieg: *Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 9 and p. 170, n. 8.


shift took material form: from the linear and thematic to the haptic and emotional and from the depiction of clothed ideological actors to less thematically identifiable “nude girls”—when nudes had not previously appeared in his public work, and were almost unheard of in the chaste Soviet art of this moment. In the case of Deineka, this change in his practice seems to have resulted from a convergence of events in his private emotional life with the emerging public rhetoric about an art of socialist feelings. Briefly put, in 1932 Deineka met a girl.

The beautiful blonde in Mother, The Ball Game, and Bathing Girl was not a professional nude model but a specific young woman with a renown of her own, and Deineka was in (unrequited) love with her. Rather than the blank facial and bodily “type” (tipazh) that he usually depicted, the woman who lent her body and face to these pictures was Liudmila Sergeevna Vtorova, known as Liusia, a champion long-distance swimmer from the Dinamo sports complex in Moscow, where Deineka met her when she had just turned seventeen. According to her older sister, Evgeniia Sergeevna Vtorova—also a champion swimmer—he immediately fell for her (“on srazu zhe vliubilsia v nee”), arriving at their family home with a big box of chocolates. Even though he was by then a

18. The one exception to the chronology of Deineka’s nudes, the painting On the Balcony (Na balkone, 1931), showing a naked, barely pubescent girl standing on a sunlit balcony, would not be publicly exhibited in Russia until it was shown in Deineka’s first solo exhibition in 1935. Although it constitutes his earliest “lyrical” painting, its lack of a public Soviet reception prevented it from entering into the critical discourse of lyricism discussed in this essay.

19. The identity of Liusia Vtorova as the model for these pictures was mentioned in a memoir essay by the aviator and writer Ivan Rakhillo. See his Serebrianyi pereulok (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1978), p. 458. My account of Liusia’s encounter with Deineka is based on interviews conducted with her sister Evgeniiia Sergeevna Vtorova in Moscow, April 2001. On the Vtorova sisters and their photo albums, see my “The Swimming Vtorova Sisters: The Representation and Experience of Soviet Sport in the 1930s,” in Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society, ed. Sandra Budy, et al., pp. 89–109 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 2010).
famous and successful artist, and, judging by photographs, a fit and attractive man to boot, Liusia would not get involved; she knew he was living with someone, and she had a boyfriend her own age. The big sister’s story of Deineka’s love for Liusia may or may not be trustworthy, but given Deineka’s strong identification with Soviet sports, it is not surprising that he would have been attracted to the much younger, athletic, and strikingly beautiful Liusia—at least to the extent of bringing her a box of chocolates and, more importantly, sketching her. Her outright rejection of him would likely have stung his pride, potentially complicating his emotions as he incorporated her image into his paintings.

Deineka’s lyrical paintings, however, do not seem to aim for—or even to betray—an expression of his personal feelings toward Liusia. Rather than telling thematic stories about Soviet girls like Liusia that direct viewers’ emotions in particular ideological ways, the paintings convey a more generalized “emotionality” that is not securely directed toward either a fixed personal or narrative end. Their origins may be private or personal, and the nudity, especially, may originate in Deineka’s desiring gaze at the young swimmer. The extreme self-containment of these female figures may well stem from Liusia’s own self-possession at a surprisingly young age, as suggested not only by her coolly turning Deineka down but also by some of the snapshots we have of her—particularly ones in which she holds the camera up to her eye as subject as well as object of representation. Yet the immediacy of the original private desire recedes in the final production of these large, formally composed canvases that aim for what Efros called the “public breadth” of Socialist Realism (Efros, p. 59). Despite their seemingly intimate subjects, these paintings were not like the private concoctions created by artists in the West, who were inventing alone in their studios with their naked models, hoping for buyers. Deineka was under contract with the organization Vsekokhudozhnik, the central state commissioning agency, which entered into contracts with artists stipulating that a certain number of works be produced within a certain period of time in return for a monthly stipend—a system (kontraktsiia) that, in theory at least, allowed artists in good standing to produce works to be purchased by museums or distributed to the network of various Soviet institutions.

Efros’s demand for “public breadth” in Soviet art emerges in specific contrast to the private or personal experiences of artists, and he calls attention to the difficult process of mediating between the two to achieve the aims of Socialist Realism. The occasion for this discussion is his enthusiastic response to Aleksandr Samokhvalov’s Girl in a Soccer Jersey (Devushka v futbolke, which he misnames

20. At this time, Deineka lived with the artist Pava Freiburg, a Latvian Party member nine years his senior.
Fizkul’turnitsa, or [female] physical-culture enthusiast), one of the most popular paintings in the exhibition 15 Years:

In his magnificent ... Fizkul’turnitsa you recognize the beautiful “girl of our country.” Very few artists, old or young, can boast of this: theirs are either a private event, not transferable to the public, i.e., a naturalistic portrait, lacking any public breadth; or a schematic type, i.e., a conditional depiction, without living individuality. The “Soviet portrait” ... demands precisely this double task: the public-personal (obshchestvenno-lichnoe) depiction of the person (Efros, p. 59).

Deineka, in his transformation of the “private event” that is his relationship with Liusia to the “public breadth” of his lyrical paintings, would seem to achieve this “double task” at least as well as Samokhvalov. Efros in fact introduces this discussion of Samokhvalov by noting that he “cannot yet be compared to Deineka.” Yet Efros can’t see this “public-personal depiction” in Deineka’s paintings because Deineka’s “girls” are not sexually available enough to alert Efros to their “private” origins. Throughout his review, his delight in lyricism, passion, vitality, and personal feelings is often tied to depictions of accessible, attractive women, however laboring and Soviet, betraying a conventional masculine desire. The female figures in Girl in a Soccer Jersey and Deineka’s Bathing Girl stand in nearly identical poses and resemble each other closely, but the clothed “girl” in the jersey is more objectified and available than the naked one. Framed against the blank background, Samokhvalov’s figure exists just for us, and the fitted soccer jersey, with its sug-

23. On the popularity of this painting as an emerging Soviet icon, see Chlenova, in this issue.

24. Efros’s conventional views of gender emerge also in the special criticism he reserves for the two main female artists represented in the exhibition 15 Years, Ekaterina Zernova and Ol’ga Ianovskaia; the latter, in particular, he judges harshly for what he sees as the overly feminine qualities of her painting: “It matters formlessly, it makes things too sugary” (p. 61).
gestively loose string tie, reveals a shapely torso sinuously curving toward us. Deineka’s blockier collective-farm worker (kolkhoznitsa), knitted into the landscape composition and closely entwined with another figure seen from the back, her own double, is more self-contained and, in spite of her nakedness, deflects Efros’s desiring gaze. If Efros had been more alert to the operations of what a later generation would call his male gaze, he might have detected Deineka’s specific achievement: reworking a private, conventionally gendered erotic desire (of an older man for a beautiful, barely adult woman) into a more diffuse emotionality with a potentially collectivizing social force.

**Monumentalism and Its Fragments**

Deineka accounted for the explicitly collective orientation of his recent work in a speech he gave in late January 1933, between the Leningrad and Moscow presentations of the exhibition *15 Years*. From the stenogram of his speech, we can see he offered an admittedly oblique explanation for the anti-narrative emotionality that had emerged in his recent painting (i.e., the lyrical Liusia cycle), which he characterized as a response to his perception of himself as a graphic and monumental artist rather than a narrative “easelist.” The context for his remarks was an evening dedicated to a discussion of his work at the Master of Arts Club in Moscow, attended by fellow artists, critics, and art historians. In his historical accounting, he described his reasons for leaving the Society of Easel Painters (OST) in 1928 for the radical new association October:

By nature I didn’t feel a kindred spirit with OST. I painted very few easel paintings—two pictures a year. As a matter of fact I was doing completely different things so, naturally, I was drawn to convert OST into a different organization and that’s why I left it and entered “October.”

The October group promoted architecture, design, and mechanically reproducible media, especially posters (to which Deineka dedicated much of his energy in the period 1930–33), and sanctioned painting only in the form of the monumental mural, the approach most geared to collective production and reception. Deineka eventually left October for the briefly dominant proletarian artists’ group RAPKh in 1931, and by 1933, after the dissolution of all artistic groups by the April decree, association with the discredited October group was not something to advertise. Yet Deineka affirmed his commitment to their ideas, stating that he spent more time working in graphics than in painting and expressing his regret for the explicitly collective orientation of his recent work.

that he had so far had only a few opportunities to work on monumental murals. “Our time is in essence more graphic than painterly,” he says:

For all that has happened I still hold the position of an anti-easel list. I consider this to be correct, because an easel painting is a limited idea of a gold frame of one and a half meters or more. For us this is too small a size—in both scale and circulation.26

If he was an “anti-easel list,” why was he making lyrical easel paintings of Liusia, most of them in the vicinity of one and a half meters and displayed in gold frames?27 One answer might be that even as easel paintings, these works were meant to demonstrate how “our time is in essence more graphic than painterly.” We might read Deineka’s contrast of “graphic” with “painterly” not in the conventional art-historical sense of disegno versus colorito, the firm line of the pencil versus the touch of the brush, or simply, in terms of medium, a drawing (or a drawn poster design) versus an oil painting—but more metaphorically as a kind of code for a direct aesthetic language communicating feeling or emotion (the “graphic” or decorative nature of large-scale murals) versus the truthful language of realism (not too naturalistic, not too formalist) demanded by someone like Beskin for analyzing contemporary social processes (the “painterliness” of the narrative easel painting). (This is the kind of demand to which Deineka likely gestures in the phrase “for all that has happened.”)

Largely deprived so far of opportunities—which is to say, commissions—for making actual monumental murals, for now he practices monumental scale and simplified graphic forms within the cramped confines of the one-and-a-half-meter gold frame.

Critics responding to Deineka’s work at this time seized on this notion of him as a “monumentalist”—a term that openly referred to his reworking of modernist techniques. Efros is perhaps most forceful, even poetic, in his account of how Deineka’s massive scale produces the opposite effects of the “chamber” or “easel” painters:

His latest works are fragments of some kind, bits of larger compositions that would require a whole wall. For Deineka the scale of a room is already cramped. His Mother and Child is only a sketch for some kind of large fresco; Girls Playing Ball are asking for a massive plane; The Bathing Kolkhoznitsa would only gain in the antique chastity of her nudity if she could take up more space (Efros, p. 57).

Deineka’s visual language of oversized scale and fragment manages to distance the viewer from the immediacy of the nude “girls”: They are transitory

27. The conventional answer is that he did so out of opportunism—or, less negatively put, out of a recognition of current realities. The new post-April art system would promote not only realism as a style but also oil painting itself as the most valued medium in the hierarchy of mediums, so Deineka would have to overcome his earlier sentiment of not feeling a “kindred spirit” with easel painting. On the ideological significance that the large-scale oil painting (kartina) would increasingly have for Socialist Realism as the 1930s progressed, see Reid, “All Stalin’s Women.”
figures on their way to larger spaces, and the “antique chastity” of the bathing kolkhoznitsa’s nudity will only come into focus on a larger surface. As we have seen, it is symptomatic of Deineka’s disjunctive haptic effects that Efros cannot see the nudity in these lyrical figures: He sees only fragmentation and distorted scale, while the bodies remain, for him, chaste and sculptural. In emphasizing Deineka’s scale, Efros may have been cribbing from the distinguished writer and critic Sergei Romov, who had previously called Deineka a “monumentalist” in his new paintings, claiming that what he needed were entire cycles of frescoes: “A single painting is crowded for him, it presses in on him, it oppresses him, just like the small room in which he works. Deineka needs walls.” Calling cinema a modern dynamic “fresco” (“In our new conditions, which will prevail: the frescoes of Leonardo or the ‘frescoes’ of Pudovkin?”), Romov points to the influence of cinema and photography on Deineka’s work.

Neither Romov nor Efros spells out how this all might work in specific pictures, but it’s not difficult to read all three lyrical paintings in the show 15 Years as fragments, in the sense that photographic snapshots or film stills offer decontextualized fragments of reality, with pieces of bodies cut off or cropped, and looming discrepancies of scale that can bring the object startlingly close. It is as if the depiction of social processes or the social totality demanded by the thematic model of Soviet painting had been replaced by the body itself as a totality, with social processes largely edited out. The critic Boris Nikiforov gets more specific about how Deineka’s “monumental style” works in Mother. The artist achieves “maximum expressiveness” by “simplifying and generalizing” the forms to create a “feeling of rhythm” in the composition. The simplified, rhythmic forms that achieve maximum expressiveness on a monumental surface have a different, directly haptic effect when realized on the smaller scale of the easel painting. This haptic effect has nothing to do with the surface tactility of colorful paint or the sensuous touch of the artist; the paint is sparingly applied and resolutely monochrome in spite of the luminous white of the mother’s face and child’s forehead and the warm tones of the skin. The intensity of sensation comes rather from the way that Liusia’s life-size body is pressed so closely to the tightly cropped picture surface that she seems to be almost in our space, available to touch. With the view of Liusia from the back and the child from the front, the composition stimulates the tactile sense that we could walk around this mutually absorbed pair as if they formed an enclosed sculpture.

The self-contained sculptural feel of the smooth, monochrome bodies, as well as the impressively classical slopes of Liusia’s profile, gesture toward the model of the antique. This model was not pursued much by critics; Efros referred only briefly, as we have seen, to the “antique” chastity of the Bathing Girl, and

28. Sergei Romov, “A. Deineka,” Sovetskoe iskusstvo 39 (1932), p. 2. As this article is only one page, future citations will not be referenced separately.
Shchekotov mentions in passing that Deineka’s lyrical paintings “show a critically diffracted connection to the classicism of ancient Greece.” His emphasis is on the “diffraction” of the classical, which comes out in the radical telescoping of the composition, as well as the stark, blank background that harks back to Deineka’s earlier, “schematic” paintings. These elements work against classical harmony—including the ideological harmony between (Soviet) mother and child, a story that Deineka had concocted. Like him, Liusia was childless and would remain so all her life; placing the babe in her arms may have had more to do with his interest in imagining Liusia in sensuous contact with another body than in maternity as such (though he would likely have anticipated a positive response to this ever-popular thematic convention). The haptic effects of fragment and sensation—the symptom of Deineka’s personal, libidinal feelings for Liusia as the ideal representative of the new Soviet body—turn this potentially sentimental “Soviet Madonna” into a less-directed image of touch and closeness, of diffuse emotional energy or “joy,” rather than an ideological story of Soviet maternity.

The Emotional Saturation of the Image

This reading of Mother has attempted to flesh out what the critics might have meant when they applied terms like “emotion” and “lyricism” to the formal strategies of Deineka’s “monumentalism.” Nikiforov and other critics never articulate specific ideological interpretations of the subject matter of Deineka’s lyrical pictures; the emotionality they see is, rather, a non-instrumentalized, or at least a generalized, visual language of socialist feeling—appropriate for an affirmative public art, certainly, but not directly harnessed to Beskin’s themes of analyzing the political or the public. Nikiforov, for example, concludes that Deineka’s avant-garde-derived simplification and generalization of forms in Mother, “so simple at first glance,” allowed him to achieve an “emotional saturation of the image” (emotional’naia nasyshchennost’ obraza). The emotion, by implication, is a desirable one, but its uses for the Soviet project are left unspecified.

If the “emotional saturation of the image” stems at some level from

30. Shchekotov, “Sovetskie zhivopisty,” p. 120.
Deineka’s feelings for Liuia, however pictorially transformed, then it is doubled and tripled in *Bathing Girl* and *The Ball Game*, where the multiple female figures are only so many repetitions of the same woman. As in *Mother*, the haptic pictorial effects overtake the ideological “story” of *Bathing Girl*, in which Liuia is transformed into a peasant girl taking a break from her labors by going for a swim, a well-ordered farm just visible in the background and an ostentatiously ruddy working suntan on her hands and face. The distinguishing feature of the composition is its tactile investigation of the figure’s body from the front, standing erect, and the back, gracefully bent at the neck as she dries herself. From the front, Deineka’s usually smoothly rendered, generalized body surface is interrupted by the ostentatiously realistic detail in the depiction of the navel, fingernails, nipples, ear, and facial features, even if, seen from the back, the body is more characteristically represented as all burnished surface swells and hollows. Yet as close as this frontal lifelike body is pressed toward us, it is not fully available as eroticized flesh: Its placement in the uniform picture surface prevents this, refusing to let the pink skin be different from the sandy pink dirt of the landscape, as does the tight jigsaw puzzle of the composition. The brilliant white swath of towel, for example, wedges open a space between the two bodies seemingly pressed close against each other, opening an imaginative space for the viewer to circumnavigate them like the sculptural group of mother and child in *Mother*. This nearly abstract curve of white finds its compositional counterpart in the vertical strip of glittering silver on the lower left, which won’t behave, in scale or orientation, as a corner of an actual pond in which the *kolkhoznitsa* might have been swimming. The landscape becomes a tactile mosaic of flat, geometrically blocked shapes and occasional thick strokes of paint, working against the realism effect created by the detailed portrayal of the body. It conveys an energy or intensity or, to use Nikiforov’s terms, an emotional saturation rather than a specific emotion.

*The Ball Game* is perhaps the most “supercharged” of the lyrical paintings in its presentation of the sheer overpowering totality of the body as a force dispersed across the picture surface. First, there is the formidable architectural vertical of that severely cropped body seen from behind, seemingly anchored by steel beams in the ground, buttocks clenched and arm muscles rippling, which both carves up and bars our entry into the dark unreadable space—or better *surface*—beyond. The two other figures float on this surface, one standing uncertainly, the other in a reclining seated position with legs stretched out before her in a showy foreshortening that defines the shallow space between the threesome. The purported *fizkul’tura* (physical culture) theme of a ball game is fully subordinated to the pictorial exploration of Liuia’s body in the form of the intensification of the

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32. I use Devin Fore’s suggestive term “supercharged” to evoke the intensity or emotional saturation of certain Socialist Realist images, although my account of realism in Soviet painting of this moment diverges from his analysis of the grotesque Überstaltung or overcoding of mimesis in interwar art. See Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 229.
foreground figure, as if we could lean close to touch it; the triple replication of the figure, in different positions, again as if the composition walks us around her body; and the stilled, dreamlike state of these bodies and the variously obscured faces that suggest a sensation more of diffuse erotic reverie than of athletics. The rhythmic surface pattern of glowing figures forms a tight triangle within the intimate dark space. In its anti-narrative fragmentation and disjunction of scale, and in its dynamic circulation of rhythms of light and dark, the picture performs all the terms critics associated with Deineka’s “monumentalist”—or avant-garde-derived—technique.

Reworking the Avant-Garde for Socialist Realism

Deineka’s lyrical paintings embody the “reworking” rather than the outright rejection of avant-garde pictorial strategies in the pursuit of a new form of realism. In his review, Efros openly praises the former OST artists for “reworking from within the means of ‘leftist’ art, expanding its possibilities, enriching its applications” (Efros, p. 45). Sergei Romov derides the philistines (obyvateli) who see only modernichanie (a derogatory form of “modernism”) in the work of Deineka, and points, as we have seen, to the dynamizing effect of the modern visual forms of cinema and photography on Deineka’s pictorial structures. Nikiforov is most explicit about Deineka’s “closeness to the ‘leftists,’” which, he points out, “ended only very recently.” Their influence on Deineka can be seen in his “attentive relation to the specific means of art; to the emotional expressiveness of color, rhythm, dynamic movement”—precisely the qualities that he credited with the intensified emotion in Deineka’s work. “Deineka,” he concludes from all this, in language similar to that of Efros, “is one of the best examples of the correct and critical use and reworking of the creative problematic of the leftists in connection to the tasks of the battle for the style of Socialist Realism.”33 In this reworking, the leftist forms no longer pursued earlier avant-garde strategies of negation, or participation in production, or direct entry into life, although some of the political affect of these strategies was preserved, even rescued, within the most hopeful construction of Socialist Realism as a shared, haptic project of socialist communication.

One of the central “creative problematics” of modernism that would need to be reworked or simply jettisoned by Socialist Realism was the staunch tradition of the female nude, in which pictorial innovation was worked out across the bodies of naked women. Shchekotov was the only critic directly to address Deineka’s lyrical pictures within this tradition of sexualized images of women (albeit without explicitly discussing the nudity), and he did so as a way of articulating the critical intelligence of the haptic aesthetic and its contribution to Socialist Realism. He immediately identifies Mother as a “lyrical image of a mother with a child in her

33. Nikiforov, A. Deineka, pp. 102–105; my emphasis of “reworking.”
arms.” But his argument about the effect of this lyricism is specifically feminist, countering patriarchal constructs of femininity and maternity:

This is not the sentimental petit-bourgeois (meschanskii) female animal who has been served up to us countless times under all kinds of guises by the artists of the capitalist countries, not the mother beholden to her husband as master, provider, tyrant; this is a powerful image of an energetic, independent, free woman, in whom biology is mediated by elevated social consciousness (pp. 120–121).

Although he does not offer an analysis of how Mother works as a painting, beyond naming its lyricism, something in its pictorial structure prevents him from perceiving the nudity as reflecting either a femininity fully anchored in the body or a socially mediated sexual availability. Extending his argument to include the female figures in The Ball Game and Bathing Girl, he sharpens the distinction between Deineka’s nudes and the stereotyped or sexualized representation of women within academic classicism or Impressionism, respectively:

[Deineka’s] type of woman …is a successful attempt to find an image of a woman worker who is beautiful in a new way, in our way, and, at the same time, it is a stand against academically conditioned “correct” facial features, constructed according to the desiccated and petrified clichés of ancient plasters and, on the other hand, a sharp protest against the “piquant-erotic” ladies of bourgeois society, painted with such great mastery, for example, by the recently deceased French master Renoir (p. 121).

Deineka’s lyrical pictures of women who are beautiful “in our way” do not simply counter bourgeois artistic stereotypes of women or provide images of the thematic of the “new woman” of socialism; they transform the very notion of a “Soviet thematic” in Socialist Realism:

Before these works by Deineka, the viewer, regardless of his will, is made smarter, is internally enriched, in so far as they evoke a mass of associations with contemporary Soviet reality, and excite him with the novelty of their unexpected, artistically vital impressions and the freshness of the questions posed by the artist. Here the Soviet thematic is resolved not in the didactic lubok mode, but philosophically (philosophy in action, to the extent that the artist intervenes in life).35

In the face of the insistence by someone like Beskin on the analytical and thematic rather than the aesthetic, Shchekotov suggests that the constantly reiterated the-

34. Shchekotov writes that he doesn’t have the space to offer “formal analysis” of these Deineka paintings in the context of his exhibition review, but that such an analysis “would give us a lot of interesting material to strengthen even further our conviction that here before us is a great step toward socialist realism” (“Sovetskie zhivopisy,” p. 121).
35. Ibid., emphasis added. The lubok was the traditional Russian woodcut, often incorporating text.
matic of “contemporary Soviet reality” can itself be haptically experienced “in action,” through the sensuous excitement provoked by the vitality of artistic forms.

Lyrical Socialist Realism is not a reactionary regress into a precognitive arena of pure feeling but an intelligent—even philosophical—critical intervention with powerful elevating effects on the viewer’s conscious experience. This effect is not necessarily less ideological than the narrative forms of Socialist Realism—the goal was, after all, to create a conscious viewer who would participate in the shared project of socialism—but the ideological address is more diffuse, and more open to individual experiences of the meanings of socialism, because it is directed toward the feelings more than the analytical capacities of the viewer. In this alternate understanding of the “Soviet thematic,” the artist’s intervention into life is emotive and affective rather than production-oriented (as it had been in the grandest ambitions of Constructivism) or analytical of the truth of reality (as in the Beskin version of Socialist Realism). This is, in effect, a proposal for the critical value of deploying emotion as a social force, and for the social value of communicated emotion.

Ivan Semenov, who had found such “joy” in the new Soviet art at the exhibition 15 Years, understood emotion as a social force. He concluded his fervent review by invoking not just sensation and emotion but love as well—the hoped-for love between Soviet artists and their viewers:

The mass viewer will come tomorrow to study the Soviet artists. He will single out the works that are close to him, that ignite his vitality and love of life, and at the same time he will come to learn from the artist. He will learn to love the artist. For the country must know its artists.

Semenov imagines that the joyful paintings will educate the viewer through emotion, through love. Reversing the vector of emotion, Efros, we recall, wrote of

36. Recent affect theory, which distinguishes between sub-cognitive, biologically imprinted affects and the socially, linguistically, and cognitively determined emotions, might seem to offer a set of terms for the distinction I am making between the lyrical (affective) strand of Socialist Realism and the more ideologically determined emotions mobilized by thematic or didactic Socialist Realism—especially given the vitalist language of sensation that suffuses many critical responses. This theoretical distinction breaks down, however, because the shared feelings evoked by the paintings are too worked out to be pure affects: They are produced by the sophisticated, entirely cognitive structures of the pictures themselves, and they are connected to specific social and critical ideas about (socialist) joy. For a clear synopsis of terms, see the “Glossary” in Jonathan Flatley, Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2008), pp. 20–36; for a lucid critique, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Critical Inquiry 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 434–472.

37. Certain practices of Constructivism, in their orientation toward the experience of consumption as well as production, also encompassed an emotive or affective address to the viewer/user, and can form, together with lyrical Socialist Realism, an alternate history of Soviet art as the production of socialist affect. On this aspect of Constructivism, see Christina Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

38. I. Semenov, “Iskusstvo radosti,” p. 3. Here he equates Soviet artists with heroes of labor by referring directly to the recently created slogan “the country must know its heroes.” The phrase first appeared in the article “Luchshie iz luchshikh” (The Best of the Best) in the newspaper Pravda (March 6, 1931), p. 5, on prizes awarded to top-producing workers. It would soon appear in widely published brochures and posters, such as Gustav Klucis’s poster Labor in the USSR (Trud v SSSR) of 1931, produced in an edition of 30,000.
three favorite artists in the show who “love people and they know . . . how to show them through their love”; the emotional force of the paintings, in other words, stems from the shared emotions of the artists toward the collective people of the Soviet land. While this emotional language describing the relationship between the socialist artist and viewer may seem overwrought, it finds its parallel in the length and intensity of the reviews by Efros and Shchekotov, as they search and search for evidence of artworks that will get it right, that will be adequate to the overwhelming feelings sparked by the collective endeavor of socialism. We know that those idealistic feelings would eventually be ruthlessly instrumentalized, even trampled, and that the idea of the Soviet Union as a modern lyrical community would become harder and harder to sustain. But the lyrical paintings and the emotionally charged response they elicited at this moment of the exhibition 15 Years in 1933 can still stand as a model of the possibility of an art engaged in a collective project and of socialism as an alternative affective economy.