

ART HISTORY, POLITICS, HERITAGE: A SOVIET DIMENSION

Dr Pat Simpson, Reader in Social History of Art, School of Creative Arts



My research is broadly concerned with the relationships between art and politics in the 20th-21st centuries. I am also, however, a Soviet and post-Soviet art specialist.

Most recently I have been exploring the linkages between art and the representation of bio-politics at the State Darwin Museum in Moscow, 1917-1964.

It may sound arcane and academic, but the research has opened up 4 interesting impact pathways, which are the focus of this poster presentation.

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The 4 Impact Pathways that have opened up for my research, so far, are:

- **Advising documentary film-makers**
- **Giving talks to non-academic local/national specialist societies**
- **Creating public art exhibitions & catalogues**
- **Giving talks to local museum volunteers [heritage]**

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Impact Pathway 1

V. Evstaf'ev, *Michurin and Kalinin*. State Darwin Museum Moscow, 1948

Advising documentary film-makers

My research has drawn me to contribute to international Interdisciplinary conferences and workshops about Darwinism, bioscience, eugenics and Soviet Lysenkoism. The latter denied Mendelian genetics, and emphasised a neo-Lamarckian idea that plants/animals could be genetically changed by altering their environment. In 1948 this approach became the sole definition of Soviet genetics until 1964, causing a huge international debate.

Taxidermist D. Fedulov with a display of stuffed animals, with busts of Lysenko & Michurin, Photo, State Darwin Museum Moscow, 1948

My conference contributions led to an invitation in March 2015, to advise on a grant application to the US NEH 'Bridging Cultures' fund for a drama documentary about Lysenko's 'Michurinist biology' by the award winning UK director, Ben Lewis. If the bid is successful, my research will be credited.

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Impact Pathway 2

Giving talks to non-academic specialist societies

My research in Moscow disclosed that the first contact between the Moscow Darwin Museum director, Professor Aleksandr Kots, and the eminent British scientist, Sir Julian Huxley, was through the SCR [Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR] in the early 1920s. An enquiry to this society's successor, the SCRSS [Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies], led to an invited talk to the members in March 2014. 'Tales from the Russian Room', focused on the role of the society in facilitating the base of UK support that enabled Soviet art works to be sent by the Darwin Museum in the 1950s-60s, to the Darwin memorial house at Downe in Kent. Nationally advertised, and presented at the society's headquarters in Brixton, the talk was well-attended and well-received.

Catherine Rabinovich [SCR]
letter to A. Kohts re Julian
Huxley, State Darwin Museum
Archive. 27/03/26.

V. Evstaf'ev, *Middle-aged Darwin in his Study*, 1958. oil on Canvas, the Boardroom, English Heritage, Down House, Kent

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Impact Pathway 3

Creating Public Exhibitions and Catalogues

I already have expertise in the curation of Art exhibitions and writing catalogues, and have curated/contributed to a number of exhibitions, both for UH Galleries and elsewhere.

Currently I am engaged in an exciting exhibition project for 2018 with the UH Heritage Hub and UH Galleries, provisionally entitled 'Aftermath', that will visualise aspects of the pre- and post WWI world. My contribution will highlight the contradictions between optimistic Soviet propaganda and the allied war of intervention in Russia, 1918-23.

Poster, *Mutiny of the Machines*, play by Alexei Tolstoi, design, Yuri Annenkov, 1924



Bolshevik executed by US guard 03.00am, 08/01/19, "Polar bear expedition" by U.S. Army, photograph – USA Army Signal Corps. Bentley Library, University of Michigan.

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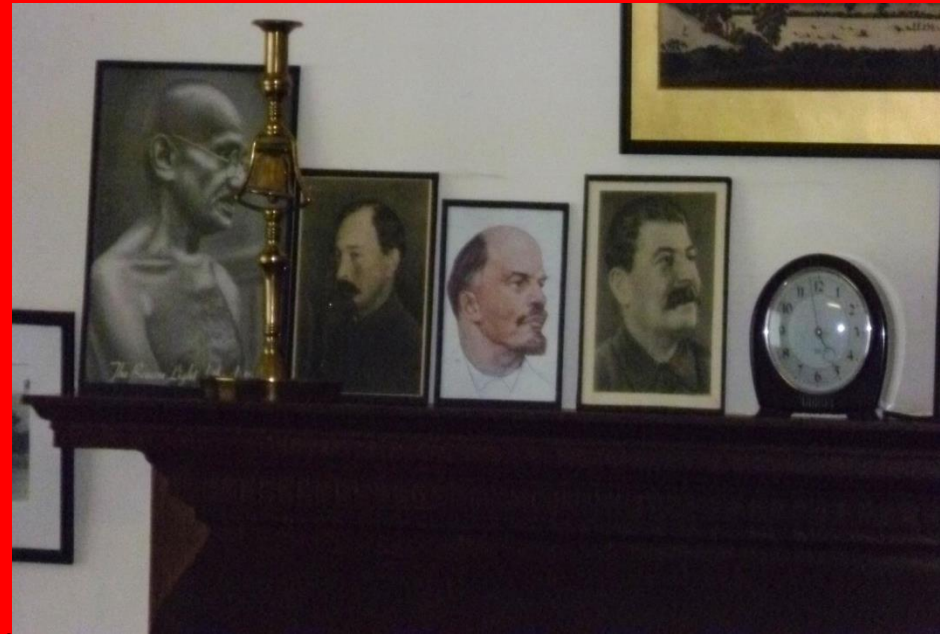
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Impact Pathway 4

Giving talks to Museum volunteers [heritage]

In relation to my research on Soviet art, and bioscience – eugenics, genetics, and gender politics – I have an AHRC funded Collaborative Doctoral student, Alice McEwan, based at the National Trust property Shaw's Corner, Hertfordshire.

On May 14, 2015, I gave a talk to the NT volunteers on the 'Russians on the Mantelpiece', regarding a print of a portrait of Lenin by Nikolai Andreev, and photographs of Lenin and Stalin that adorn the dining room mantelpiece at Shaw's Corner. The volunteers thoroughly enjoyed the talk, asking many thoughtful questions, and I have been invited back to speak again.



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Conclusions:

As an academic researcher, I am only at the beginning of an exciting journey of using my research to reach out to broader audiences., including policy makers in museums and heritage organisations in the UK, but also the general public – however this might be defined. So far, the journey looks successful, albeit on a small scale for the time being.

What I have learned from my experiences, may be summarised thus:

1. There are always going to be aspects of one's research that may have serendipitous/accidental impact potential. It is crucial to keep a log of potentially interesting data discovered in archives, eg. references to special interest societies, places and people that may be tangential to the immediate focus of the current research, but might have impact value when re-considered later on.
2. Interdisciplinary working may be crucial, as a way of being included on a grapevine that could lead to 'impactful' outcomes.
3. Look out for local/national special interest societies/museums where you could air your ideas.

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Future Impact Possibilities

- **Pamphlet for English Heritage Down House on the Soviet connection with The State Darwin Museum in Moscow in the 1950s-60s**
- **Leaflet/pamphlet for National Trust Shaw's Corner, on Shaw's interest in the USSR – co-authored with Alice McEwan, my AHRC funded PhD student**
- **Talk to Shaw's Corner volunteers on Shaw, Julian Huxley and the British debate about Lysenkoism in the 1940s-60s**
- **Talk at Letchworth Museum about the interests of the Russian anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin, in Letchworth Garden City and eugenics**