Introduction

Our image of life behind the Iron Curtain tends to be colored by concepts like totalitarianism, oppression, censorship and lack of freedom, which are usually associated with state socialism. Even so, the human spirit finds ways to be creative, happy and have a meaningful life under any political system. Some supported the powers in charge, others tried to resist them, and many more developed a "parallel universe" in which they created their private niches.

This exhibition shows people from the Eastern Bloc as they were portrayed in paintings and photographs during the Cold War era. It makes the point that socialist visual culture was by no means restricted to one-dimensional propaganda. It presents punks and outcasts next to idealized workers and farmers, it shows a wide variety of individuals and painting styles, and above all, it highlights the intimacy of private life.

The paintings in this exhibition are from the Soviet Union and Hungary. They illustrate how pictorial traditions changed over time, and how the artists found myriad ways to express the individuality of those portrayed. The photographic series Russians by American photographer Nathan Farb gives us a surprisingly rich, candid and sometimes humorous peek behind the Iron Curtain. East German photographers Claus Bach and Harald Hauswald document the "other" side of East Bloc reality that has often been omitted from official culture: life at the fringes of socialist society.
Alexander Pavlovich Solodovnikov (b. 1928)
*Hero of Soviet Labor*, 1957
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

The farmer with his wristwatch and worker’s cap has a self-conscious demeanor, as he stands in the foreground with his back to the agricultural fields. On the far left, a tractor with a plow is shown, but the viewer’s attention is drawn towards the protagonist. In this painting, it is the worker who represents modernization under communism.

Béla Czene (1911-1999)
*Tractor Girl*, c. 1951
Hungary
Oil on canvas

Driving a tractor, this young woman with her red beret is depicted in the typical Socialist Realist manner of the late Stalin period (1948-1953): a happy worker, gazing into her bright socialist future. The emancipation of female workers was an important topic in communist visual culture. Modernity and progress are suggested by the electricity poles in the background.
Gervasiya Vartanyan  
*Steel Worker, 1965*  
Soviet Union  
Oil on canvas

Industrial workers are a popular topic in Soviet paintings. Thanks to a description on the back of this painting, we know that the subject is Ashot Resitvanyan, a worker at the copper smelter plant in Alaverdi, Armenia. Painted in brilliant colors, characteristic of Armenian painting, Vartanyan created a powerful and individualized portrait.

Lázsló Ridovics  
*Steel Worker, 1965*  
Hungary  
Oil on canvas

Compared to Vartanyan’s *Copper Smelter*, this portrait evokes the prototype of a worker rather than a living individual; the features of the metal worker and his surroundings are less defined. On the other hand, the brushstrokes in this work are freer and more expressive, giving the portrait its dynamic quality.
Mikhail Konstantinovich Poplavski (1914-2001)
*Woman Holding a Book*, 1948
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

After the Second World War, Soviet art focused on a peaceful and harmonious classless society. Everyday life was a common topic as far as it represented the values of collectivity and optimism. This work contradicts the official doctrine of the time due to its marked individuality and intimate character.

Boris Mikhailovich Lavrenko (1920-2001)
*Mother*, 1949
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

The woman in this painting just received devastating news from the front. The letter she is holding announces the death of her son. In the 1940s and early 1950s, memories of the Second World War dominated Socialist Realist painting, but artists had to observe a heroic note. This painting, however, lacks optimism and heroism as it intimates the woman’s deepest grief.
Nathan Farb

Russians

“I felt I was doing something that could possibly help reduce the fear between Russia and the United States”
--Nathan Farb on his series Russians

American photographer Nathan Farb (b. 1941) traveled to the Soviet Union in 1977 as host of the American exhibition Photography USA in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. The exhibition was part of a cultural exchange program during President Carter’s administration.

Farb photographed visitors to this exhibition. He used a Polaroid camera and gave them the resulting photo. However, unknown to his subjects and to the Soviet authorities, Farb kept a negative of each Polaroid. He managed to smuggle some 1,500 negatives out of the country in a diplomatic pouch from the US Embassy. The portraits show a diversity of people. Some are dressed according to Western trends of the late 1970s; others are wearing more traditional clothing. In this series, Farb gave the Cold War enemy a human face.

The photographs are on loan by the artist.
Nathan Farb (b. 1941), *Father and Son with Beret*, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph

Nathan Farb (b. 1941), *Mother and Daughter*, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph

Nathan Farb (b. 1941), *A Young Artist*, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph
Nathan Farb (b. 1941), Untitled, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph

Nathan Farb (b. 1941), Teenage Girl, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph

Nathan Farb (b. 1941), Untitled, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph

Nathan Farb (b. 1941), Woman laughing, with steel teeth, 1977, United States, gelatin silver photograph
Mikhail Ivanovich Semenov (1920-1998)
P.T. Tania, 1967
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

Semenov depicts a woman, identified as P.T. Tania according to the inscription on the back of the canvas, playing the piano and wearing an elegant dress and shimmering jewelry. When General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev was in power (1953-64), themes of leisure and the display of luxury were uncommon, but this would change under his successor Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982).

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bozhii (1911-1990)
Woman in White-Red Dress, 1960
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

The celebrated Soviet painter Bozhii is primarily known for his portraits of soberly dressed women embodying moral purity. This young woman with her compelling glance wears a white dress with red ribbon decoration, a red head scarf and a golden earring. Her clothing references a new interest in Ukrainian folk culture during the 1960s.
István Mácsa (1922-2005), *The Painter and his Model*, 1956, Hungary, oil on canvas

The model, standing in front of a painting of a Budapest cityscape, reaches for the collar of her coat. The painter’s easel is collapsed. Since it does not display a canvas, one can assume that the model just arrived. In this version of the artist and model motif, Mácsa has captured an unusual moment.
Elena Vatslovna Yanchak (1918-2006)
*Portrait of a Girl with Heavy Fur, 1977*
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

Against the backdrop of a mountainous landscape, Yanchak, a painter from Odessa, portrays a young girl wearing a warm coat with a fur-lined hood from the northern Russian town of Vorkuta, where the winter temperature can be as low as minus-11 degrees Fahrenheit. According to an inscription on the back of the canvas, the white arc in the background can be identified as the exhaust of an airplane.

Aleksandr Georgievich Gulyaev (1917-1995)
*Girl from Uzbekistan, 1986*
Soviet Union
Oil on canvas

Painted late in the life of the artist, this painting of a spirited young woman is described on the back of the canvas as a girl from Uzbekistan. With this intimate portrait, Gulyaev strayed from his earlier Socialist Realist paintings that depict hard-working farmers and agricultural landscapes. Like Yanchak’s painting, this portrait fits the tradition of illustrating one of the many ethnicities in the Soviet Union.
Claus Bach – Pairs

Harald Hauswald – In the Metro; Concert in Weisseensee

The photographers Claus Bach (b. 1956) and Harald Hauswald (b. 1954) wanted to showcase members of East German society who were not represented in official art - punks at a concert, elderly women sitting in the sun, hooligans at a soccer match, people hanging out in a bar. They were often criticized for their choice of subjects. As members of the cultural underground, they were closely watched by the Stasi, the East German secret police.

For the series Pairs (1986), Bach asked duos who lived together to pose for him in their own home. He photographed people from all strata of society. Bach asked his sitters to decide for themselves where and how they wanted to be photographed, which adds to the intimate character of the pictures.

Hauswald’s work mainly focuses on people with anarchistic lifestyles, like punkers and hooligans. As we can see from his photos In the Metro (1986) and Concert in Weisseensee (1989), he captures the dignity of people who were pushed to the fringes of society.
CLAUS BACH - Pairs

Claus Bach (b. 1956), Conny+Conny, 1986, East Germany, gelatin silver photograph

Claus Bach (b. 1956), Family Batze, 1986, East Germany, gelatin silver photograph
Harald Hauswald (b. 1954), *In der U-Bahn (In the Metro)*, 1986, East Germany, gelatin silver photograph

Harald Hauswald (b. 1954), *Konzert in Weissensee (Concert in Weissensee)*, 1989, East Germany, gelatin silver photograph
The exhibition was organized by Chief Curator Joes Segal with assistance from curatorial interns Karlien Metz and Jori Snels.

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Learn more about the objects in this exhibition by visiting our online catalog at <http://www.wendemuseum.org/collections/exhibitions.php>.

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