

Leonid Sokov

Why would a Russian artist, working in 1978, create a sculpture of a cup of coffee? And why would he make the coffee look so appealing, and warming, and yet, since it is made out of wood, make it clear that it is completely undrinkable?

The artist who made this work, Leonid Sokov (b. 1941), was born and raised in a small Russian village at the height of the Cold War. At the age of 15, he moved to Moscow to pursue his study of art, eventually graduating from the prestigious Strogonoff School of Art in 1969 with an emphasis in sculpture. Despite his training in the officially sanctioned Soviet Socialist Realism style of art, Sokov soon began to create unofficial works of art, in part inspired by having seen the work of Western artists like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns in smuggled-in art journals. The decision to make works of art forbidden by Soviet authorities led Sokov into the company of other nonconformists, constituting a sort of artistic Soviet underground. Sokov explained, “You could see that everything around you in the Soviet Union was falling apart. There was no relationship between the system and what I needed to do... I was educated in a classical mode [, but] the world was not a classical one. I had to look at everything afresh.” Despite not openly protesting government censorship, he was nonetheless considered a dissident figure, and he immigrated to the United States in 1980.

Sokov was one of the foundational members of an art movement known as Соц Art. (Соц—pronounced “Sots”—is shorthand in Russian for “Socialist Realism,” the name of the official art style). The name “Соц Art” (“Sots Art” in English) was chosen as a Russian/English hybrid and as a term that would refer to “Pop Art”. Borrowing from Warhol an interest in exposing the excesses of society, Sots artists readily delved into popular culture, which in the Soviet Union consisted primarily of official propaganda. Like other Sots artists, such as Komar & Melamid and Alexander Kosolapov, Sokov created works filled with images of Soviet figures such as Stalin and Lenin. However, Sokov’s body of work is different from that of some of the other Sots artists, since he also took a careful look at the actual living conditions and commodities of Soviet life.

In part due to his upbringing in a rural village, Sokov’s artworks also are heavily influenced by “low” popular culture in the form of folk art. The artwork on this card, *Cup of Coffee* (1978), both explores the marketplace of commodities as it actually existed in Soviet times and, with its unrefined style, shows the evident influence of folk wood carvings. Far from the classical refinement required of official works of art, this work revels in its imperfections, even to the point where the work of art is not capable of actually standing up on its own, being too top heavy from the steam billowing out of the cup. (If you look carefully at the lower left edge of the cup, you can see the hint of the little “stand” that is used to prop the cup up.)

This work comes from a series of similarly carved objects made while Sokov was still living in the Soviet Union, works he called the “Deficit Series.” The word “deficit” was a loaded term in the Soviet Union at the time these works were created, rooted in the culture of long lines and scarce goods. Among the most enduring images for Westerners from this late period of the Cold War were scenes of Muscovites standing in long, seemingly endless lines waiting for basic goods. At the time, there were two categories of goods in the Soviet Union: “unsellable” and “deficit”. Stores had plenty of “unsellable” goods. But there was always a “deficit”—a scarcity—of the goods that people actually wanted. So long lines were generated whenever a store had such goods. In fact, it became common practice for people to carry little string bags just in case they came across one of these lines. Seeing such a line, a person would generally enter the line if he could, not even knowing what the store had available. It was of little importance whether the person actually needed what the store was selling because, if it was a “deficit good,” it could always be bartered with others for something else.

To capture this duality—the simultaneous desire for and unattainability of these items that were perpetually in short supply—Sokov made several small sculptures of “deficit goods” like coffee, salmon, eggs, fish, and oranges. These works relate to those of the Pop artists, but they also are fundamentally different from those works. In the United States and Western Europe, Pop artists were reacting to a culture of excess goods. So Warhol would make art referencing things like Coca-Cola, Campbell soup, and Brillo Pads. Sokov, though, was reacting to the exact opposite—to a lack of goods. Yet there is a similarity in the work since both Warhol and Sokov produced artworks that lacked the use value of the original product while retaining the symbolic importance of the product within the local material culture. The writers of a recent catalogue regarding Sokov speculated that these works might also have had totemic value, noting that, “In the Soviet Union, a country of food shortages, Sokov depicted dreams of abundance... They are like the wooden fish that Siberian peoples carved to magically boost their catch.” Sokov took an ambiguous and perhaps ironic stance relative to such traditions, playing with the idea that creating the image of these goods would create the real thing.

Sokov is considered one of the most important Russian artists of his generation. His work is included in numerous museum and private collections. In November of this year, he was honored by the Hermitage Museum Foundation (along with the American artist Richard Serra) for his life-time contribution to the arts.