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Shared Images of the Cold War: American Art in the Soviet Union

Paradoxically, before the Cold War, with no Iron Curtain preventing free cultural exchange, the Soviet Union hosted single exhibitions of American visual art, minor in terms of attendance, scale, and impact. However, by the second decade of the Cold War, Soviet museums hosted over twenty exhibitions, introducing American art from colonial to contemporary to millions of Soviet people. These exhibitions emerged due to two distinct approaches to showcasing American art. In my book project, I comprehensively analyze American and Soviet concurrent strategies of exhibiting American visual art in the Soviet Union during 1950s to the late 1960s. Methodologically, my research focusing on how American art transgressed Cold War boundaries in order to be exhibited in the Soviet Union contributes to the transnational turn. Challenging the limits of openness and isolationism of the postwar Soviet Union and Cold War divisions, my research approaches American art as a transnational phenomenon, showcasing how its history was coined both within and beyond the borders of the United States. However, transnationalism, although applicable to my research, is hardly capable of defining my ultimate approach. Highlighting American-Soviet cultural contacts, a transnational approach is partially misleading because it in a way conceals the subject of my research—the history of American art. The strategies of American art promotion central to my project were actually alternative ways to experience American art, and worked to establish two opposite canons of American art. Thus, that was American art at stake. Consequently, my ultimate goal is to reveal how the two superpowers established two signature canons for one concept: American art. In order to analyze this case, in my presentation I will suggest thinking about the history of American art not only in transnational terms, but also in treating it as a “shared” history. The latter notion, arguably, is particularly relevant and productive for researching the fate of American art in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.