Talking It Over:

Art in Soviet Union

By Bertram D. Wolfe

HAVING jailed Director Gerasimovic of the Pulkovo Observatory and shot Director Numeroff of the Astronomical Institute at Leningrad and removed and jailed so many "wreckers" and "traitors" of star-science that no Soviet astronomers could be sent to the recent meeting of the International Astronomical Union at Stockholm, the G.P.U. has now turned its attention to the field of Soviet art. The campaign was opened with all solemnity by Izvestia at the beginning of September. Soviet art is to be purged of "the sticky sweetness of romanticism." Painters, if they know what's good for them, are advised to imitate Michaelangelo, Titian, Leonardo da Vinci and other painters of the Renaissance. "Neither French impressionism nor post-impressionism," they are told, "nor bourgeois romanticism in the art of the French Revolution, nor the spirit of eighteenth-century painting, can harmonize with Soviet art." Going back to the Renaissance for their models (but, of course, not for their subject-matter nor for examples of artistic courage), they must nevertheless base themselves on "new ideas, new spectators and new beauty as the principal accessories of socialistic art," with "Soviet humanism" (as exemplified in the blood-purge?) as "its basic morality."

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ALL sensitive observers have wondered why the greatest social upheaval in human history has not yet produced a great art. Ironically enough, the best artistic expression of that earth-shaking event is to be found in distant Mexico in the murals of Diego Rivera, who has been accused of every crime and condemned with every curse in the Stalinist calendar.

The history of Soviet art and letters is full of examples for the working class of how not to treat its artists and writers and the artists and writers of other classes that it may inherit along with the society it takes over. In the early twenties, the futurists and abstract artists got brief factional control; then the academicians were permitted to hound the abstract artists out of Russia or out of painting; with the ultra-left political line after 1928 came the dictatorship of the R.A.A.P.; this was dissolved in 1932 and its leaders, once faithful tools of Stalinism, were purged, some of them physically, a few years later. Since 1928, exhibitions have been increasingly filled with scenes showing Stalin winning great military battles (it was necessary to paint out the memory of Trotsky's role in the creation and leadership of the Red Army); with scenes showing Lenin eagerly seeking advice from Stalin and leaning upon him (it was necessary to paint out the memory of Lenin's dying warning to the party that his "best disciple" must be removed or the party would be wrecked); with ugly, insincere, badly-executed portraits of Stalin by the thousands. The very style of depiction changed with each twist and turn of the party line: till 1934 Stalin was always stern, unsmiling, standing alone in heroic pose, the man of steel; then he began to appear as a benevolent patriarch, patting heads, kissing children, seated in the bosom of his family, smiling fixedly at all and sundry, the great humanitarian. It was at that moment that he began the purge!

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SOVIET art shows the consequences of this attempt to force totalitarian dictatorship in this least amenable of fields. Art exhibitions are incredibly dreary and mediocre; architecture, which began beautifully, gets progressively worse and culminates in the costly and garish ugliness of the new subway and the plans for the Palace of the Soviets, which will be not only the tallest but beyond doubt the ugliest great skyscraper in the world.

The first blunder in dealing with the artist was perhaps pardonable, at least understandable. It was the demagogic error of flattering mass taste, forgetting that under capitalism the masses are culturally as well as economically oppressed and that their taste has to be developed by works of good art before they, in turn, can become mentors and stimuli to the artists. But, as Soviet democracy yielded to burocratic totalitarianism, the taste of the burocrat became the determinant—his taste and his

(*Continued on Page* 6)

Art in the USSR

(*Continued from Page* 4)

needs as burocrat—with results in the case of such great artists as Meyerhold, Shostakovitch and Eisenstein, that are too well-known to require retelling. The dicta and deeds of Stalin in this field make it look as if he were bent on wiping out the differences between Hitler's brand of totalitarianism and his own.

The artist cannot be forced to accept by ukase a subject that does not stir creative desire within him. Still less can he be told how to paint it, since style is the man himself and each good artist creates his own esthetics. The number of ways in which good pictures have been painted, can be painted, will be painted, is incalculable. Of those who paint for us, or for the society we hope to control and reorganize into a more human social order, all that we can safely demand is competence and genuineness—that they have something to say, that they say it the best they know how, that they have the courage to resist attempts to force them into insincerity in matter or manner. Sincerity is the conscience of the artist. If he have that, he can learn in the end from the masses as well as teach them Only thru this interaction can the artists help to beget great audiences and the great audience in turn serve to beget great artists.