

The Artists International Association (AIA) was founded in 1933 by two young painters Cliff Rowe and Misha Black, who earned their living as commercial artists. Their aim was to mobilise 'the International Unity of Artists Against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial Oppression'. By the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, The AIA had over 600 members and had evolved into a 'United Front Against Fascism and War'.

Each year they organised an exhibition devoted to a major social or political theme, such as 'The Social Scene', 'Artists Against Fascism and War', 'Artists Help Spain' and 'Art for the People'. Although the organisers shared a basic programme for the development of a new politicised realism, these exhibitions accommodated a wide range of styles, from surrealists and constructivists to post-impressionists and members of the Royal Academy. It was a social group rather than a stylistic one, and any artist willing to exhibit their work for a political motive was welcomed.

The AIA published a regular bulletin or newsletter throughout its history, and this provides an unbroken link between the anti-fascism of the thirties and the cold war of the late 40s and early 50s. A lot of material has already been published on the influence of socialist ideas on artists and writers in the thirties but the consequences of this trend in the immediate postwar years are still relatively obscure. Yet it was events between 1945 and 1953 that initiated the debate on atomic weapons and disarmament and saw the division of Europe between East and West.

'Britain between East and West' was the theme of a special issue of *Contact* magazine in 1946. Several members of the AIA were contributors and the leader article by Richard Grossman juxtaposed the views of 'Westerners' and 'Easterners';

'The Progressives, including... the bulk of the Labour movement, reject decisively the whole idea of an Anglo-American alliance... not only Germany, the whole world will be parcelled out between the two contending grand alliances. In the end this would mean a war in which the British Isles would become merely a part of the Western European 'no man's land' between the two great contending powers!'

The Left's call for a postwar Britain independent of both the Soviet Union and America, the two wartime allies, disintegrated under the economic pressures of land lease and the Marshall Plan. The change of attitudes towards the Soviet Union first appeared as a popular debate

THE ARTIST'S INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

Lynda Morris

surrounding the 'Soviet Composers Controversy' early in 1948. It began with official Soviet disapproval of Muradeli's opera *Great Friendship* performed as part of the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution. The criticism of formalist tendencies in the music led to a conference involving Zhdanov, Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khachaturyan organised by the Central Committee of the CPSU.

Coverage of the controversy in Britain led to crude juxtaposition of the individual freedom of artists against the Soviet emphasis on the social responsibility of the artist to work in a widely accessible form. The April 1948 *Newsletter* gave the AIA's position:

'...the treatment of the recent controversy by the press has been more in the nature of anti-soviet propaganda than fair statement of fact... -- We cannot simply translate Soviet conditions into our own terms.'



(Left to right) James Fitton, Ruskin Spear, John Berger and John Minton selecting pictures for 'The Most Beautiful Woman in England', Daily Express Competition, 1953.

This debate was superseded by the formation of a communist government in Czechoslovakia. This was a particularly sensitive issue as the US had originally intended to include the Czech in the Marshall Plan. The back page of the same issue of the *Newsletter* contained a letter calling on the AIA to protest against the methods used to bring about the change of government in Czechoslovakia. The next issue carried the first reference to Hiroshima in a report on the first public meeting held in Britain at Caxton Hall in April 1948 to discuss atomic weapons.

In June 1948 the Berlin Blockade began and in August the First World Cultural Congress for Peace was held at Wroclaw in Poland. 400 delegates from 45 countries attended, including Picasso, who made his maiden speech for the peace movement. By October of that year an extraordinary general meeting was called to discuss the suspension of the political clause in the AIA's constitution, 'for an experimental period of two years'. The resolution was defeated by 43 to 58; however the vote was declared null and void because of the loss of a list of postal votes. A report of the EGM appeared in Tom Driberg's column in *Reynold's News* as 'Cold War Rages in the AIA'.

The AIA's traditional role as a peace group came to be seen as a controversial political issue, many members resigned and calls increased for it to be an artists exhibiting body and to leave politics to the politicians. A second EGM was held to vote on the political clause and the voting resulted in a dead heat. It was decided that all political matters should be referred to the full membership, and that was such a time consuming procedure that it effectively censored any future political action.

The second World Peace Congress was held in Paris in April 1949, and Picasso's lithograph of a white fan tailed pigeon became the international symbol of peace. In August the Soviet Union exploded their first atom bomb, three or four years ahead of the US expectations. The word peace began to appear in the British press in inverted commas, the British Peace Committee was widely referred to as a communist front and distinguished from Quaker inspired pacifist organisations. In October NATO was formed and USAF bases with the capacity for atomic weapons were prepared in Britain. In June 1950 the Korean War broke out, and in October of that year, the AIA held a third EGM which passed a resolution condemning the failure of the British Peace Committee to protest

against communist aggression in Korea.

In November 1950, as the Korean War entered its most savage period, a Third World Peace Congress was planned in Sheffield. The *Daily Minor* reprinted in full a speech Attlee made under the headline 'Attlee's Exposure In Full: The Great Red Peace Lie'. Hundreds of delegates were refused permission to enter the country, including Paul Robeson, Pablo Neruda and Louis Aragon. Picasso was allowed in, but the BPC decided to cancel the congress and reconvene it a week later in Warsaw. Considerable controversy surrounded Picasso's visit after he refused to attend a private view of an exhibition of his work organised by the Arts Council, because it was funded by the same government that had wrecked the Sheffield Congress.

In the 1930s the AIA members had divided between the realists led by Anthony Blunt and the Surrealists led by Herbert Read over the relevance of *Guernica* to the lives then being lost in Spain. When Paris was liberated, Picasso joined the communist party and his tragic, grey still life paintings from the years of the Occupation had a great influence on younger artists. Cliff Rowe recalled the way Picasso became a symbolic figure for socialist artists in the years after 1945:

'I was for Socialist Realism but not their (Russian) kind. Picasso was a communist, in his way, but it all got clouded over. My interests were in Picasso, Leger and in primitive and prehistoric art.'

In August 1950 John Berger showed some paintings in a group exhibition of young artists at the AIA gallery. His work showed the influence of Picasso in the 'thick black lines' surrounding the figures. Berger became an active member of the AIA and his name appears among the members who called on the AIA to take immediate steps to organise a peace exhibition early in 1951. But peace was now a political issue, and an organisation which supported peace would be widely seen to be communist front. A peace exhibition was held later in the year but took place under the auspices of a new organisation, Artists for Peace, whose membership came almost entirely from the left of the AIA. Artists For Peace held three annual exhibitions in 1951, 1952 and 1953. In 1955 they brought the *Iroshoma Panels* by two Japanese artists to Britain for a widely acclaimed tour of major cities. CND was not founded until 1957.

Artists for Peace did attract a great deal of publicity, not all of which was politically



Julian Trevelyan, *Inside Russia*. Scene for a mural at The British Restaurant, Hammersmith.

hostile and the exhibition was considered a success for the remaining politically active members of the AIA. In response it was proposed that the AIA should organise an exhibition on 'the prevailing controversy between those whose work is abstract and those with a humanist approach . . .'. The proposal was ridiculed on political grounds, but it was accepted by the membership with the qualification suggested by John Berger, that there should be more than two categories: 'For instance, we might have Realistic, Abstract and Subjective.'

The exhibition, called *The Mirror and the Square*, took place in December 1952 and ranged from socialist realism, through Cornish and Mediterranean 'Compositions' to pure abstraction. The *Daily Worker* called the exhibition an 'Approach to Lunacy', saying it was:

'...a sorry example of the ailments that now prevail in British art, of the profound conflict that exists which has been transformed into gradation of styles.'

It was in this climate of the division on the Left in postwar Britain, that the 'Kitchen Sink' painters emerged with a style of 'realism' more influenced by expressionism and Picasso's thick black lines than the established tradition of socialist realism. Berger became the leader of the group and much more famous than any of the artists involved. His subjectivity

encouraged a view of realism as a style, rather than realism as an 'attitude to life, to the major social and political attitudes of the time'. His subjectivity led him eventually to write a book on Picasso which hardly referred to the major role Picasso played in the immediate postwar peace movement.

The Mirror and the Square shows the way bitter political divisions were shrouded in a juxtaposition of formal styles in art. The exhibition was arranged to conceal ideological disunity over the peace issue, the atom bomb and the East West confrontation. It reduced these major political realities to the level of an aesthetic argument.

Finally in December 1953, six years after the Soviet Composers Controversy, began the debate over the political clause in the AIA constitution, the words 'political activity' were replaced by the words 'intellectual freedom'. The AIA continued as an apolitical artists organisation until 1971.

The story of the Artists International Association 1933-53 is a touring exhibition organised by Lynda Morris and Robert Radford for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford where it was first shown in April and May. It will travel to Bradford 16 July — 4 September, Nottingham 15 October — 20 November, Hull 26 November to 8 January, Edinburgh 21 January — 25 February and to the Camden Arts Centre in London 16 March — 22 April 1984.