

Picturing the Self and Homeland in the Late Soviet Home

Susan E. Reid

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Fig. 1 - Pictures on nautical themes were common. Irina's St Petersburg interior with pictures of boats and ships. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

NINA S. and her military officer husband had relocated many times in their youth and early married life, living in temporary digs where they accumulated few possessions until they finally moved to Leningrad (St Petersburg) in the late 1950s. As they settled down and grew better off in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, they began to purchase, or to receive as gifts, works of art and craft in various media. "And once we were here we began to hang what we had". After decades as rolling stones, their acquisition of pictures reflected their new permanence and confidence in the future; Nina and her spouse

accumulated pictures along with a subjective perception of rising living standards and social status and a sense of themselves as entitled consumers. Their collection grew so large that Nina even feared it betrayed a middle-aged and petit-bourgeois penchant for acquisition and loss of the romantic mobility of youth. She cites, with self-irony, a popular song, *The Brigantine*, which romanticises the mobility and adventure of a life under sail and contrasts this to "despised, cheap cosiness (*uiut*)". Espousing the *intelligentsiia*'s commitment to the modernist ideal of unfettered freedom to roam and embrace change¹, her army officer husband disclaimed the symbols of stability and embourgeoisement: decorations, clutter and coziness. Yet, over time, the ideal of mobility and adventure had become reduced to the subject matter of pictures: sailing ships [Fig. 1]. Her husband's retirement was marked by the gift of a picture of a brigantine, a ship associated with pirates, sailing off into the open sea.

Although my husband didn't have much of an ear he loved the song [Brigantina]. . . how does it go? . . . "Let us drink rough wine to the fierce and the lawless, to those who despise cheap cosiness . . ." What is that song called? Now, let's see, this picture is hanging here. . . He retired from his job at the Construction Directorate. "Upon the blue sea. . . the sails are hoisted". And they gave him this, it's not a caravel but a brigantine, "the brigantine hoists its sails". They gave him a brigantine!

Nina was one of nearly eighty participants in an oral history research project on which the present paper draws². Semi-structured interviews were

¹ Olga Matich calls this the "camp-bed mentality". O. Matich, *Remaking the Bed: Utopia in Daily Life*, in *Laboratories of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experience*, ed. by J. Bowlt – O. Matich, Stanford 1996, pp. 59-78; S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge [MA] 1994, pp. 73-88.

² Susan E. Reid, oral history project, *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, 2004-07. Unless otherwise attributed, quotations are from the interviews for this project.

conducted in the mid-2000s with individuals who had moved to new, mostly prefabricated apartment blocks – known as *khrushchëvki* – in a range of cities across the USSR (St Petersburg, Kaluga, Kazan', Samara, Kovdor, Apatity, and Tartu in Estonia) soon after they were first built in the early 1960s, and who still resided there at the time of the interview. The interviews explore how these 'new settlers' (*novosely*), as they were called in the contemporary press, had gradually "made themselves at home" in these plain, standard, minimal spaces. Pictures served as a useful starting point for the interview conversations, helping to draw out recollections and stories. They are also an object of study in their own right – along with the associated narratives of provenance and the ways in which they were hung, combined, and arranged – and are treated here not only in terms of subject matter, but as material objects.

By the late Soviet period, the domestic interior came to be "hung all over with pictures", as one of my informants, Anneta (Kaluga, born c. 1940), described her apartment. Over the three Soviet decades that followed the first mass migrations to new housing regions in the early 1960s, the standard, minimalist apartment became a key site for the consumption and display of art and mass visual culture. The *novosely* of the 1960s had transformed the interiors of their minimalist *khrushchëvki* into domestic galleries where an eclectic range of pictures and decorative objects was displayed³.

Noble collections of fine art and curiosities have been widely studied, as has the taste of major collectors. However, the everyday collections and display practices of 'ordinary people' in their domestic picture galleries, along with the choices made by the home 'curator' concerning what to hang and how, have received scant attention⁴. There has been lit-

tle attempt to examine such questions as what do people *do* with pictures; and what do pictures *do* for them? This paper explores the subjective connection between hanging pictures and settling down in the standard apartment: achieving a sense of continuity, stability, belonging, coherent selfhood, and urban, middle-class status. The ostensible purpose of pictures at home may be for decoration and aesthetic contemplation, but they also emerge as an emotionally charged, personally meaningful resource for stabilizing and reflecting back a continuous self over time, and for locating it in place and within social relations. Indeed, these functions often appear more important than purely aesthetic considerations. At the same time, picture practices register changes over time – including changing relations with the past or with place – and play a role in securing present-day identity. It is axiomatic for art dealers in the western art market that, when choosing works of art, the question foremost in the minds of potential purchasers is: "what does this painting say about me?" It was also a commonplace of Soviet discourse that the domestic interior, and especially its aesthetic, decorative touches, manifested the identity of those who lived there. This paper, likewise, assumes that self-identity and changing self-other relations are worked out and articulated not only in verbal narratives, but also through things, material environments and practices of domestic display. Pictures on the wall play a special role in the visual culture

³ The prevalence of pictures is corroborated by a contemporaneous survey of people who moved into a new housing block in Moscow in 1966. Seventy-six percent of its respondents said they had pictures, prints, or ceramics. These were privileged people, in a prestigious *intelligentsiia* quarter of the city. For others, the 'pictorialisation' of the apartment took longer. Elena Torshilova, *Byt i nekotorye sotsial'no-psikhologicheskie kharakteristiki sovremennogo zhilogo inter'era*, in *Sotsial'nye issledovaniia. Vypusk 7: Metodologicheskie problemy issledovaniia byta*, ed. by A. Kharchev – Z. Iankova, Moskva 1971.

⁴ Exceptions include essays in *Contemporary Art and the Home*, ed.

by C. Painter, Oxford 2002; E. H. Gombrich, *Pictures for the Home*, in *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Communication*, ed. by Idem, London 1999, pp. 110–116; T. Bennett – M. Emmison – J. Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*, Cambridge 1999. In regard to photographs, everyday material practices have received greater attention, e.g. E. Edwards, *Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image*, "Annual Review of Anthropology", 2012 (XLI), pp. 221–234; *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. by E. Edwards – J. Hart, London 2004; *Oche-vidnaia istoriia: Problemy vizual'noi istorii Rossiia XX stoletii*, ed. by I. Narskii, Cheliabinsk 2008; *Double Exposure: Memory and Photography*, ed. by O. Shevchenko, New Brunswick [NJ] 2014; O. Sarkisova – O. Shevchenko, *Moving Pictures: The Many Lives of Photographs*, in Idem, *Snapshot Histories: Family Photography and Generational Memory of Russia's Socialist Century*, forthcoming. The broader history of collecting is extensive but does not focus on the vernacular material culture of pictures in the home. E.g. J. Elsener – R. Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting*, London 1994.

of the interior, and domestic practices with pictures may enhance our understanding of experiences that lie beyond the limits of quantitative, objective data. James Clifford has described collecting and display as “crucial processes of Western identity formation,” and “a form of Western subjectivity”⁵. While Clifford had in mind public collections and institutions, notably ethnographic museums, the metaphor of identity is also a productive lens to explore the relation between consumption, everyday aesthetics and self-production in private, domestic collections. Can we say that the curation of domestic picture galleries was also a way of ‘curating’ the self? An examination of pictures in the home and of the ways they were displayed there can help frame the historical questions at the heart of this paper (and the larger project of which it forms a part), concerning the subjective effects of, and responses to, rapid modernisation, which the move to new flats “brought home” for individuals. At the same time, it keeps in focus both the agency of subjects – the active ways in which they construct a sense of coherence, continuity and identity – and the sociality of aesthetic choices.

The paper falls into three sections. The first addresses the use of pictures to recuperate the past and construct continuities; the second examines changing modes of display and their social meanings; the third turns to the ways pictures helped to construct ‘home’ in the sense of local and national identities. While establishing a relation between pictures and ‘making oneself at home’ (in both senses of this intentional pun) the evidence presented here also problematises this connection. If a sense of continuity and coherence of the self was achieved, this was neither automatic nor essential; it was often against the odds, in spite of the realities of rupture, discontinuity, and loss.

1. TIME TRAVELLING:

FINGERPRINTS OF THE COMMUNIST FUTURE, RE-PRESENTATIONS OF THE (LOST) PAST

To hang pictures was not a new practice born with the move to separate apartments in the 1960s;

it had been part of homemaking before the 1917 revolutions, both in bourgeois homes and, largely in the form of Orthodox icons, in rural Russian ones. In Soviet times, devotional pictures were cast as superstitious throwbacks, while the display of secular, mass visual culture such as picture postcards and cheap reproductions was targeted by *intelligentsiia* reformers, first in the 1920s and again in the 1950s–1960s, as part of their campaign to improve popular taste. At the same time, authoritative discourse represented the democratisation of secular picture consumption as an index of socialist modernisation. Marx had theorised that the satisfaction of basic needs gave rise to new needs and the “refinement of needs”, a process that was a driver of historical progress⁶. The presence of secular fine art in the people’s homes was greeted as a symptom of rising living standards and cultural levels, and the fulfillment of the promise of Communism to enable the all-round development of each individual in society⁷.

In the course of the 1960s–1970s, Soviet citizens became consumers of pictures. By the 1970s, according to a 1979 Soviet ethnographic study of material culture in rural homes, framed pictures had even arrived on the walls of rural dwellings. This demonstrated, for the authors, the convergence between the rural and urban way of life and the increasing modernity and sophistication of popular

⁶ K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1973, pp. 325, 408; Idem, *Capital*, III, 1959, p. 820; D. Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 102–109.

⁷ According to Party statements, the highest phase of Communism required art, along with other forms of ideological work, to raise “the working people up to the level of their Communist vanguard”, preparing them to be conscious, self-regulating contributors to the common weal in the transitional period of participatory government. Editorial, *Kommunizm i iskusstvo*, “Kommunist”, 1961, 8, pp. 5–6. Art historian Dmitrii Sarab’ianov and others criticised the Artists’ Union and Art Fund for neglecting the production and sale of work for private apartments: RGANI (Russian State Archive of Contemporary History) f. 5, op. 36, d. 74, ll. 46–50; D. Sarab’ianov, *Iskusstvo – v povsednevnuuiu zhizn’*, in *Iskusstvo i kommunisticheskoe vospitanie*, Moskva 1960, pp. 96–99. For detail see S. E. Reid, *Art for the Soviet Home*, “Human Affairs”, 2011 (XXI), 4, pp. 347–366; Idem, *The Soviet Art World in the Early Thaw*, “Third Text”, 2006 (XX), 2, pp. 161–175. The “aestheticisation of everyday life” has been identified as a defining process of late and postmodernity. M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London 1991.

⁵ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge [MA] 1988, p. 220.

taste, even among the most impoverished and culturally 'backward' sector of Soviet society. Displacing icons and traditional forms of decoration, as well as more recent kitsch (*rynochnye izdeliia* and *aliapovatosť*), the study argued, secular art reproductions registered the masses' rising living standards and cultural level, and the overcoming of religion and superstition:

Many young *kolkhozniki* told us that it is becoming unfashionable to decorate portraits and mirrors with embroidered cloths, to spread out or hang crocheted and embroidered napkins, and to clutter up the room with unnecessary things. Now, in many homes one can see on the walls reproductions of pictures by well-known artists, prints in baguette frames, good carpets on the walls and on the floor⁸.

The accumulation of secular pictures also reflected the growing acceptance, commonplace by the 1970s, that the interior of standard new flats could and should become an individualised, even idiosyncratic, expression of the self, and that the choice of decorative, aesthetic touches played a key part in this⁹. The design journal "Dekoratívnoe iskusstvo SSSR" (Decorative Art of the USSR) dedicated an issue in 1975 to surveying the decoration of interiors, focusing on metropolitan dwellings of the creative *intelligentsiia*. The editors observed transformations over the previous fifteen years: "whereas, in the early 1960s, artists strove to liberate man from the 'thrall of things' (accentuating the functionalism of the domestic environment), today, we observe their striving to help man 'express himself' in things, the artistic ensemble of his home". This was a normal, legitimate tendency, the authors argued, called for by the spiritual development of the Soviet person and diversity of their interests, and should be welcomed as a sign of socialism's maturity¹⁰.

⁸ L. Chizhikova, "Zhilishche russkikh", in *Material'naia kul'tura kompaktnykh etnicheskikh grupp na Ukraine: Zhilishche*, ed. by M. Rabinovich *et al.*, Moskva 1979, p. 63.

⁹ The complementarity of individual aesthetic finishing touches with standard solutions to serve basic utilitarian functions was already expressed in the early 1960s, e.g. G. Liubimova, *Ratsional'noe oborudovanie kvartir*, "Dekoratívnoe iskusstvo SSSR" (hereafter "DI"), 1964, 6, pp. 15-18.

¹⁰ Editorial introduction to L. Andreeva, *Veshchi vokrug i my sami*, "DI", 1975, 7, p. 30. The journal issue set out to explore the 'di-

Such were the 'official', utopian meanings of pictures on the wall, aligning them with progress towards the communist future. Along with the consumption of other luxuries, pictures were normalised as an aspect of socialist modernity and a legitimate resource for self-fashioning and personalisation of the standard apartment¹¹. Pictures on the walls of domestic interiors, and practices of displaying them, were also ascribed social meanings by my interview subjects in their personal narratives. While authoritative discourses represented growing popular consumption and amateur production of 'art' as fingerprints of the communist future, the domestic picture gallery was also oriented towards the past¹². It was a site of nostalgia, and for the curation, preservation or reconstruction of memory and its transmission to the next generation. Pictures emerged, in the interviews, as significant resources for the production and sustenance of a continuous self, and for maintaining or, rather, inventing continuity with the past in the face of change.

1.1 CURATING DOMESTIC PICTURE COLLECTIONS

This article draws on accounts of the self that focus on the active construction of self from available resources, or what Stuart Hall called "the practices of subjective self-constitution"¹³. Reinstating the role of conscious agency, these often treat the self as a narrative form, constructed and structured through individual choice and effort, within historically and socially formed conventions such as those

alogue' between designer and user: how the products of artists' and designers' labour lived on and participated in the life of urban dwellers. Correspondents were dispatched to survey the apartments of a standard block and interview their occupants. The results of this 'raid' focused on relations between the standard, common and individual. See also in the same issue, A. Levinson, *Zhivye kvartiry*, pp. 13-18.

¹¹ On luxury consumption see J. Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*, London-New York 2003; *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. by D. Crowley – S. E. Reid, Evanston [IL] 2010.

¹² Alexei Yurchak refers to "fingerprints of imaginary worlds" to describe domestic objects that claimed to testify to contact with other places. A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton 2006, p. 203.

¹³ S. Hall, *Who Needs 'Identity'?*, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by S. Hall – P. du Gay, London 1996, p. 13; D. Slater, *Consumer Culture*, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

of language or narrative. For Giddens, the instability of identity in the post-traditional world demands that we engage in a “reflexive project of the self”, involving unremitting self-monitoring, and “ordering of all elements of our lives, appearances and performances in order to marshal them into a coherent narrative called ‘the self’ in a transient social present”¹⁴. “We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves”, he writes. “The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future”¹⁵.

Accounts of the modern self often privilege the role of language and the production of a ‘coherent’ or ‘warrantable’ narrative. This paper proposes, however, that the self as structured and presented not only by means of verbal narratives but also through ‘curatorial’ practices such as the assemblage, aesthetic ordering, display and concealment of material objects and visual images. The production of home is a material and visual production of self: individuals and families “make themselves” at home¹⁶. Giddens acknowledges the role of material ordering practices – specifically modern consumption and lifestyle choices – as well as verbal narrative, as Alan Warde summarizes:

Today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others, through the goods [...] that they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances and thereby create and sustain a ‘self-identity’. In a world where there is an increasing number of commodities available to act as props in this process, identity becomes more than ever a matter of the personal selection of self-image. Increasingly individuals are obliged to choose their identities¹⁷.

Hannah Arendt expressed eloquently the way that everyday domestic things and interior ensembles

help to stabilise identity; they “give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man”¹⁸. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi developed Arendt’s point: “the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are [...] ; they constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves”¹⁹. Domestic collections of pictures play a special role as resources for producing and maintaining a coherent sense of self, providing an enabling fiction of sameness – of a continuous, constant self over time – and of belonging in a place, by providing points of reference and continuity²⁰.

The status of home, as a site of memory and commemoration and as a place for the preservation and intergenerational transmission of both stories and material things, has been much discussed²¹. Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rocheberg-Halton found that memory was perhaps the single most important purpose of many special objects and displays in the Chicago homes they studied in the 1970s²². The mnemonic function of pictures, representing past events and absent people and places, whether iconically or metonymically (through association), is closely associated with the centripetal role of female labour and spaces in the home, as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu and others²³. Home, in many cultures, is a site for curating the past: for gathering in and keeping together, collecting and recollecting,

¹⁸ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958, p. 137.

¹⁹ M. Csikszentmihalyi – E. Rocheberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge 1981, p. 16; G. Noble, *Accumulating Being*, “International Journal of Cultural Studies”, 2004 (VII), 2, pp. 233–256.

²⁰ I. Woodward, *Domestic Objects and the Taste Epiphany: A Resource for Consumption Methodology*, “Journal of Material Culture”, 2001 (VI), 2, p. 119; J. Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Oxford 2000 pp. 134–135; L. Auslander, “Jewish Taste?": *Jews and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Paris and Berlin, 1920–1942*, in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. by R. Kosbar, Oxford 2002, p. 300.

²¹ E.g. *Material Memories Design and Evocation*, ed. by M. Kwint – C. Breward – J. Aynsley, Oxford 1999, pp. 221–236; G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990, pp. 44–53.

²² M. Csikszentmihalyi, *The Meaning*, op. cit.

²³ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by R. Nice, Cambridge 2002, pp. 89–92.

¹⁴ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge 1991, chapter 3; D. Slater, *Consumer Culture*, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁵ A. Giddens, *Modernity*, op. cit., p. 75.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Hurdley, *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture*, Basingstoke 2013; J. Attfield, *Bringing Modernity Home: Open Plan in the British Domestic Interior*, in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. by I. Cieraad, Syracuse 1999, pp. 73–82; S. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, London 2013.

¹⁷ A. Warde, *Consumption, Identity-Formation and Uncertainty*, “Sociology”, 1994 (XXVIII), 4, p. 878.

integrating and preserving. Imaginative and material ordering practices assimilate disparate items and memories into a coherent presentation of a household self, overcoming or eliding differences²⁴. Domestic objects and displays perform mnemonic and aesthetic functions that are crucial to the maintenance of identity, reflecting back assurances of ontological sameness, coherence and continuity. The domestic curator is concerned with preserving and passing on values, memories, stories, traditions and ways of doing, which together constitute the basis for identity²⁵.

There was nothing simple or automatic, however, about the late Soviet home's status as a site for curating memory and mediating continuity between past, present and future. We cannot assume that the presence of pictures, heirlooms or souvenirs necessarily represents personal, remembered experiences (rather than vicarious or collective memory) and seamless continuity with the past, nor that it reflects an existing sense of stability, rootedness, and continuous identity. My subjects' earlier lives were scarred by discontinuities, rupture, dislocation, and alienation. Rarely did these individuals have the possibility to "grant themselves 'belonging' by filling their homes with inherited goods", as Grant McCracken described the (North American) 'curatorial consumer' and her role in memorializing the family²⁶. From the comfortable vantage point of their later life, Nina might romanticise a ballast-free life of mobility, and worry about becoming stuffy and middle class, but for many, the experience of poverty, homelessness and internal displacement was all too real and traumatic a part of their life stories. Rolling stones that gathered no moss until they came to rest in the *khrushchëvka*, they had little in the way of

accumulated possessions that would lend material substance to the "accumulation of being"²⁷. Material continuity between past and present, such as might be objectified in heirlooms, was problematised by Soviet ideological and legal obstruction of inheritance of property, and by authoritative modernising discourses that valorised rupture with the past, as well as by physical destruction, loss and displacement through dekulakisation, purges and war. Rather than seamless intergenerational transmission and complacent, petit-bourgeois stability, the only constant in many people's lives had been repeated dislocation.

In this regard, individual lifestories intersected with macro-historical processes and events, which were both specific to Soviet history and part of the wider experience of modernity²⁸. As Heidegger lamented, the ability to 'dwell' – to be at home and at peace – was rendered problematic by industrial modernity. There was a fundamental contradiction between the constancy, duration, and stability requisite for a sense of identity and belonging, and the restlessness, transience and constant motion that are the condition of modernity. The problem of achieving a sense of belonging, 'dwelling', or being 'at home' was exacerbated by the industrially produced material environment, which the standard, minimalist nature of the *khrushchëvka* apartments epitomised. The home, as a site for recollecting and commemorating, is also closely identified with a particular form of memory: nostalgia. Defined as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed", nostalgia entails fantasy and idealisation. As Svetlana Boym emphasises: "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy"²⁹. Nostalgia, involving regret for the lost wholeness and simplicity of an imagined and idealised past, is, paradoxically, a phenomenon of modernity.

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss theorised the house as a site for assimilating, accommodating and reconciling difference; *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, ed. by J. Carsten – S. Hugh-Jones, Cambridge 1995, p. 8; D. Miller, *Accommodating*, in *Contemporary Art*, ed. by C. Painter, pp. 115-130.

²⁵ L. Auslander, *The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth Century France*, in *The Sex of Things*, ed. by V. De Grazia, Berkeley 1996, p. 221; I. M. Young, *House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme*, in *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, ed. by S. Hardy – C. Wiedmer, New York 2005, pp. 115-147.

²⁶ G. McCracken, *Culture*, op. cit., p. 44.

²⁷ G. Noble, *Accumulating Being*, op. cit.

²⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, London 1995, p. 3; L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London 2016.

²⁹ S. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001, p. xiii; S. J. Matt, *Why the Old-Fashioned is in Fashion in American Homes*, in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*, ed. by R. L. Blaszczuk, Philadelphia 2007, pp. 283-284.

In a comparable setting – a postwar London council estate in the 1980s – Daniel Miller found that tenants actively overcame the alienated condition of social housing by “putting up an aesthetic front”; a significant role was played by decorative items in appropriating alienated built space through “consumption as production”³⁰. Boym, similarly, found that in Leningrad communal apartments in the post-Stalin decades, the private and personal were reconstituted “in the minor aesthetic pursuits of communal apartment dwellers and their personal collections of souvenirs”³¹. Did displays of pictures help their ‘curators’ to imaginatively (re-)construct continuity and achieve identity as ontological sameness and stability: what Arendt called the “artifice of the self”³²? Did they help thereby to overcome the ruptures and dislocations that were part of many residents’ life histories prior to moving into the new flats?

1.2 PROXY PASTS, APPROPRIATED HEIRLOOMS, RE-EMBODIED GHOSTS



Fig. 2 - One of Anneta’s treasures, a pencil box, Kaluga. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

Anneta, above, talked about her picture-saturated interior. But to hang pictures and arrange ornaments when she moved to her new flat in 1969 was not a simple matter of finding new places for old things

that had accompanied her throughout her life. Anneta was the granddaughter of a respected doctor who, in the early twentieth century, had owned a mansion in the centre of Kaluga. She had never lived there, since it was confiscated during the revolution, a quarter century before her birth. Nevertheless, the ancestral home and its loss featured as a point of origin and an explanatory factor in her narrative of self³³. She spoke with longing and regret of the lost home she had never known. Homelessness meant much more than lack of shelter. It was linked both subjectively and legally with loss of civic and ontological personhood. Stripped of their home, along with their privileged social status, and labeled bourgeois class enemies, Anneta and her siblings had grown up to be abject or ‘cowed’, as she puts it. Anneta regretted her lack of handed-down possessions to anchor her ontologically in relation to a stable place, genealogy, kinship and continuity with the past. She had a few small treasures to represent that past, her matrilineage, and her own earlier self: her mother’s needle case and a veil her mother used to cover pillows after the war, her great-grandmother’s wooden mould (*pasechnitsa*) which she still used to make *paskha* at Easter, and her great-grandmother’s pencil box, where Anneta still kept old clip-on earrings that she had worn before she got married [Fig. 2]. She also had an old icon, which, she said, had a “difficult ‘history’”. It had belonged to her husband’s grandmother but when she died his family had given them none of her possessions. Anneta had stolen the icon so that they would have something to remember her by.

For Anna A. (St Petersburg, born 1919) and her family, the Stalinist purges had rendered home and continuity with the past problematic, along with other anchors of identity such as memory, heredity, kinship and civic personhood. Anna had suffered repression and displacement in her youth, and had lost her family, home and social class. Her father, a specialist, was purged in 1937, and the family, deemed guilty by association, was thrown out of

³⁰ D. Miller, *Appropriating the State on the Council Estate*, “Man”, 1988 (XXIII), 2, p. 353; Idem, *Accommodating*, op. cit., p. 116.

³¹ S. Boym, *Common Places*, op. cit., p. 74.

³² H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, op. cit.

³³ Cf., on the myth of the lost homestead in Latvia, V. Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*, London 2002.



Fig. 3 - Anna A.'s interior, St Petersburg 2005, with examples of her amateur pressed flower pictures. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

their home in the centre of Orenburg. Anna's spatial and social displacement – her thirty years of homelessness and exile – played an important part in her account of who she had become, and her explanation of her later concern with home decorating. When in 1968, approaching fifty years of age, she at last received a home of her own where she could settle, Anna hung many pictures (although, significantly, not family photos) on the wall as part of her urge to 'beautify' the apartment [Fig. 3]. She drew a direct, causal connection between her past experience of dislocation and the special significance which home decorating, especially the choice of aesthetic touches, held for her. Both displacement and making a beautiful home were constitutive parts of the self that Anna presents on her walls and narrates in the interview. Like Anneta, Anna had some cherished old possessions including an antique furniture suite. This was not an inherited family heirloom, however; she had purchased it cheaply from a family who were leaving the country and abandoning their possessions. She had lovingly restored and reupholstered it. The plain, functionalist interior of her *khrushchëvka* apartment was a space where she could realise and objectify herself through aesthetic production – or "putting up an aesthetic front", as Miller put it – and make a fresh start on reclaiming her *intelligentsiia* identity. But it was also shaped by absence and loss.

Nina D. (Samara, born in 1927) talks about her stepmother in the countryside, whose interior decorating she characterises as anachronistic. Her stepmother had a framed portrait of Tsar Alexander (presumably Alexander III) hung in the sacred red corner (the place of honour in the Orthodox home). Both the subject of the portrait and the place where it hung represented continuity with the prerevolutionary, imperial and Orthodox past. Yet the Tsar's presence in the most honoured place in her stepmother's interior could not simply be put down to inertia and habitus. On the contrary, the picture was given by or stolen from (this detail is elided in the interview) *kulak* neighbours whose property was expropriated, presumably in the early Soviet-era collectivisation drive.

Nina D.: Later my cousin came to see her [Nina's stepmother] – he was Chair of the *Raiispolkom* [Regional Executive]. And he says to her, "Auntie Tania, you take down that portrait in the frame now!" – the big portrait of Tsar Alexander, it was in our *zal* in the red corner [...]

Interviewer: Where did such a portrait come from?

N. D.: This portrait was. . . next to us lived some very wealthy people. And they were *dekulakised*. [. . .] Oh how many things they gave us! There were a lot of children in our family. I was the eleventh. And they handed on so many things to us. They clothed and shod us. And so this portrait came to us.

The hanging of the Tsar's portrait was condemned as a holdover from the autocratic past, and the *Raiispolkom* chair commanded Nina D.'s rural stepmother to remove the picture. In its place she pasted photo-cards – mass-produced and widely circulated visual culture – all over the walls. Nina D. and her husband also engaged in the practice of enlarging, tinting, and framing passport photos. In the sixties she had photographic enlargements made up from small studio photos produced for identity documents. These included old photos of family members who were already deceased: her sister, and her brother who had died in a fire in a tank. The enlargements, which were mounted in homemade frames, were produced in the countryside where her stepmother lived, rather than in an urban studio. Like the ersatz rugs, this was one of those everyday services carried out as part of the informal economy, filling a gap left by the state³⁴. Nina D. says,

³⁴ For similar gaps in services, in regard to car maintenance, see L.

At that time [1960s] there were enlarged photographs. We enlarged them, the two of us. Well, we were very young. Enlarged. My father-in-law and mother-in-law were enlarged. My brother – he was burnt to death in a tank – also enlarged. My sister died – also enlarged.

Photographic displays stand out among other domestic pictures as especially significant for my informants. The mnemonic function of photographs has been widely recognised, as has their use in establishing family likeness and continuity, as well as in intergenerational transmission of family stories, which play an important part in perpetuating family identity. Csikszentmihalyi found that photographs were among the most cherished classes of objects for his Chicago informants because they contributed to a sense of personal continuity – “without them I think I would lose a lot of my past” – and were important for the future identity of their descendants³⁵. “More than any other object in the home, photos serve the purpose of preserving the memory of personal ties. In their ability to arouse emotion there is no other type of object that can surpass them [...] Because photos bear the actual image of a departed kin, they can acquire an almost mystical identification with the deceased person”³⁶. The main reasons Csikszentmihalyi’s informants gave for treasuring photographs concerned memories and immediate family. But what if photos had never been taken of a particular subject, or if all such likenesses had been lost or destroyed? The incompleteness of the photographic record required creative efforts to reconstitute kinship and actively seek points of reference for the self.

Like Nina D., other informants also began to use their walls as a place to re-gather lost or absent family members after they moved into their new flats in the 1960s. This sometimes entailed the material and imaginative work of finding or producing place-holders to represent those missing. Diana, the poor



Fig. 4 - Diana’s enlargements of photographs of her siblings, Kaluga. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004–07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

factory worker in Kaluga, born in 1925, had suffered repeated displacement as a teenager during the war, and had been separated from her family. Her tales of wartime wanderings placed great emphasis on family ties – even as these ties were ripped apart – and on her efforts during and after the war to rejoin her scattered kin. In Diana’s living room, two photographs, one of a man and the other, unframed, of a young woman, her hair styled in the fashion of the 1940s, hang together with an oval embossed copper picture (*chekanka*) of a sailing ship and a small landscape painting above bookshelves holding classics of Russian and Soviet literature, encyclopedias and school books, and soft toys [Fig. 4]. “These are from long ago”, says Diana about the photographs. Their distant, grainy appearance, unnatural colour and ghostly incandescence derive from the fact that they are hand-tinted enlargements made from old black-and-white identity photos of her brother and sister who died during or soon after the war³⁷. In the absence of any more animated or intimate record of her siblings’ personality and lifestyle, these were Diana’s only remaining trace of them.

The original photos had been produced long ago, while her siblings were still alive, as documentary proof of their bureaucratic identity. Registering and preserving the fall of light and shade on their faces

Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades*, Ithaca 2008. On photostudios and the anachronistic décor and style of this service, a holdover from prerevolutionary times, see I. Narskii, *Fotokartochka na pamiat’: Semeinye istorii, fotograficheskie poslaniia i sovetskoe detstvo*, Cheliabinsk 2008; *Oche-vidnaia istoriia: Problemy vizual’noi istorii Rossii XX stoletii*, ed. by I. Narskii, Cheliabinsk 2008.

³⁵ M. Csikszentmihalyi, *The Meaning*, op. cit., pp. 66–69.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Retouched photos, tinted with aniline inks were still common in the early 1960s, e.g. L. Nevler, *Tut vsë gorazdo slozhnee*, “DI”, 1963, 3, p. 29.

at a moment in the past, for Diana the identity documents served like a genetic code from which the lost persons could be cloned. Their power to re-present – to make the past and lost ones present again – owes partly to the intimate connection between the photographic likeness and the person; as indexical signs, they are a trace of the individual's one-time presence, representing them metonymically³⁸. Only the 'period' feel of the photos, the dress and hairstyles, and the graininess and signs of retouching, recorded the trace of time, the distance between present and past, and the work of overcoming it. By 'resurrecting' their likenesses and placing them on her wall among other photos and pictures, she reconstructed the lost relations between family members and herself. Diana's dead siblings were ever-present, side-by-side, in her living room: revenants she had summoned out of the past and reinserted into the 'collage' of her present-day relationships.

Diana's and Nina's manipulation of original photographs attempted to redress the ravages of time and achieve a semblance of continuity and co-presence. This practice is similar to what Susan Stewart has described in regard to photograph albums, which she calls "pasts constructed from a collage of presents." These function to portray an idealised self and family life, while offering proof of personal and familial existence³⁹. Photographs compensate for non-presence, resulting both from spatial distance and from the passage of time, creating their own spatial and temporal relations and appearing to allow control over the passage of time. For Jean Baudrillard, collections of photographs such as photo albums, as well as other collected objects, can create a structured environment that substitutes its own temporality for the 'real time' of historical and productive processes: "The environment of private objects and their possession – of which collections are an extreme manifestation – is a dimension of our life that is both essential and imaginary. As essential as dreams"⁴⁰. Although my focus here is on

photographs that are displayed on the wall, rather than on those that are pasted into albums, Stewart and Baudrillard's descriptions aptly summarise the function of these wall arrangements and the way they assert their own alternative temporality.

As Diana's and Nina's examples illustrate, photographs of people do not simply 'reflect' existing relations but structure relations between the present and the absent, present and past, memory and forgetting⁴¹. They are representations of, and proxies for, what is no longer present – or in some cases, never was; they may *re-present* (restore imaginatively to presence) and compensate for absence. Photographs lend a sense of permanence, arrest the moment, and create the illusion of a world in which nothing ever changes, whereby, "in being photographed, people become denizens of this eternal world"⁴². The new flats served, for individuals like Nina, Diana and Anneta, as a place of commemoration, where they could regather and retie the 'broken threads' (a metaphor common in 1970s cultural discourse concerning the need to actively reconnect the present with the past) which tied them to their family history and deceased kin in spite of losses and displacement⁴³. Access to the past was not passive or automatic but often entailed reconstruction from fragments and traces. These cases suggest that surrounding oneself with pictures in the interior could be a way to achieve, daily but against the odds, the

Clifford, *The Predicament*, op. cit., p. 220.

⁴¹ E. Edwards, *Photographs*, op. cit., p. 221.

⁴² A. Sologubov, *Fotografīia i lichnoe perezhivanie istorii (avtobiograficheskiĭ essei)*, in *Oche-vidnaia istoriia*, ed. by I. Narskii, op. cit., p. 77; R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by R. Howarth, London 1984. Photographs are used to keep the dead alive in memory, staging the dead person as once alive: P. Munforte, *Trauerbilder und Totenporträts: Nordamerikanische Miniaturmalerei und Fotografie im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2018; *Double Exposure*, ed. by O. Shevchenko, op. cit.

⁴³ The need to restore the broken *sviaz' vremēn* [connection between times] was explored by novelist Iurii Trifonov, for example in *The House on the Embankment* and *The Old Man*. See N. Ivanova, *Proza Iurii Trifonova*, Moskva 1984; S. E. Reid, *The Art of Memory. Retrospectivism in Soviet Painting of the Brezhnev Era*, in *Art of the Soviets*, ed. by M. Cullerne Bown – B. Taylor, Manchester 1993, pp. 161-187. In the last two decades of the USSR, the motif of the family album became a symbol of the relation between the past and the present and between history and memory, for example in the work of painter Tat'iana Nazarenko. It also became a *cliché* in artistic investigation of memory and identity in the West.

³⁸ E. Edwards, *Photographs*, op. cit., pp. 221-236.

³⁹ S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham [NC] 1993, p. 145; G. Noble, *Accumulating Being*, op. cit., p. 241.

⁴⁰ J. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, London 1996, p. 135, cited by J.

sense of identity as sameness, ontological continuity and stability which Arendt called the “artifice of the self”, providing the continuity with the past that is the basis for identity⁴⁴.

1.3 DYING ROOMS

A brief digression is called for here to discuss the place of death and dying in living rooms. Pictures of deceased relatives are common in interiors, with the significant exception of Tatar homes, where they were prohibited by the occupants’ Islamic faith and were eschewed at least in post-Soviet times. Photographs have a profound and widely noted association with death, funerary practices, and commemoration of the dead. As Elizabeth Edwards writes, photographs “are fragmentary and irreducibly of the past or of death itself”. They speak not of ‘being there,’ but of ‘having been there’⁴⁵.

Photographs played a role in traditional practices around death, dying, and funerals, and were used to record the passing from presence to absence. In Russian villages, it was customary to photograph the extended family around a corpse before burial, and even to invite a professional photographer to document the stages of the interment. All family members were expected to be present to see the deceased off, and photography served to record their witness. Photographs of the funeral could also be shared with those who were unable to attend in person⁴⁶. The practice was not exclusive to Orthodox Russians. Linda, an Estonian, had a cluster of pictures of various sorts on one wall of her one-room apartment in

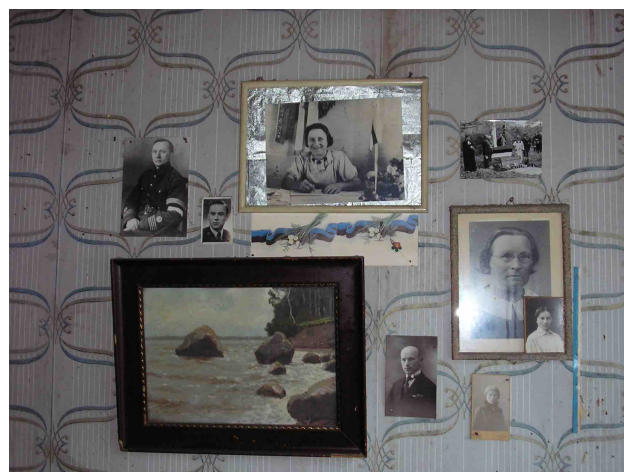


Fig. 5 - Linda’s cluster of pictures, Tartu, Estonia, 2006, including an original landscape painting and a photograph of a funeral. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004–07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

Tartu, which included an amateur photograph of a funeral with mourners beside a coffin and fresh grave [Fig. 5]. Perhaps she had been unable to attend the funeral and the photo was sent to her to witness the interment vicariously. The inclusion of the graveside photo in Linda’s wall collage points to the function of the home as a place to cope with change, including coming to terms with mortality and marking the loss of a person while preserving their memory.

Living rooms were the main sites for displays of family photographs commemorating key lifecycle moments, predominantly celebratory occasions such as weddings and births. Among its many daily functions – sleep, dining, leisure, study – however, the ‘general room’ of the separate apartment was also a dying room. As in many parts of Europe until at least the mid-twentieth century, most people died at home, and the front room or parlour was significant not only as a place of everyday life and familial rites of passage, but also of death. It was traditionally the place for the dying, for the laying-in of a corpse, and then for the posthumous commemoration of the deceased, keeping them in the presence of the living. In the first half of the twentieth century, the resilience of the parlour, as a separate space set aside for limited functions, in face of reformers’ efforts to modernise, open up, and rationalise domestic space, was associated with its vital role in rituals surround-

⁴⁴ H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, op. cit.; S. E. Reid, *Everyday Aesthetics in the Khrushchëv-Era Standard Apartment*, “Etnofoor”, 2013 (XXIV), 2, pp. 79–106; I. M. Young, *House*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ E. Edwards, *Photographs as Objects of Memory*, in *Material Memories*, op. cit., p. 226, with reference to C. Metz, *Photography and Fetish*, “October”, 1985 (XXIV), pp. 81–90; R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York 1981; Idem, *The Rhetoric of the Image*, in Idem, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by S. Heath, London 1984.

⁴⁶ S. Adon’eva, *The Memorial Gestures of Shared Emotions*, paper presented at ASEES 50th Annual Convention, Boston Dec. 2018; Idem, *Arkhiv “Rossiiskaia povesdnevnost”*, <<http://www.daytodaydata.ru>> (latest access: 21.12.2020); O. Sarkisova, personal communication, 30.11.2017; O. Boitsova, *Photographs in Contemporary Russian Rural and Urban Interiors*, in *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR*, ed. by G. Roberts, London 2018, pp. 82–84.

ing death⁴⁷. Tensions between social conventions, cultural and religious traditions on one hand, and the rationalizing principles of modernist, *Existenzminimum* dwelling, on the other, were at their most emotive in regard to dying. A proper house required a parlour big enough to hold a coffin. The parlour allowed for dignity in death. Those who lived in houses without parlours, where there was “no room to die”, faced the problem of where to store a body⁴⁸. The problem of accommodating mortuary practices was part of the discourse around the *khrushchëvki* when the modernist, functionalist housing standards were first launched. *Novosely* expressed concern that the small dimensions and lack of auxiliary spaces subjected the dead to the indignity of being carried out vertically in their coffins instead of horizontally, feet first, as was required by religious belief and custom⁴⁹. Moreover, the multifunctional room could not be set aside for dying and laying-in, since it also served indispensable daily functions of living. Igor', for example, describes the difficult arrangements in their small Petersburg flat, where the spatial needs of the well and living were subordinated to those of the sick and dying.

2. HANGING OFFENCES: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, DISTINCTION AND MODERN SELFHOOD

2.1 PHOTOICONOSTASES

Practices of photographic display could also play a part in constructing and representing identity as discontinuity and difference, rather than continuity and likeness. Domestic displays of family photographs not only structure remembrance, but also forgetting.

Like silences, the absence of pictures was as significant as their presence, for it was sometimes caused by the omission or excision of those who had become “non-persons”⁵⁰. Absence may also indicate change over time and expose the gap between present and past and between self and others. Given the importance of photographs in achieving and maintaining a sense of self-identity, (re-)constructing a family past, and curating collective and personal memory, changing practices can provide the historian with a way to understand subjective responses to social and material change. The choice of pictures for the home, the ways they were hung, and the ways informants account for their presence can, together, draw out subjective social attitudes and self-other distinctions and their transformation in the last Soviet decades.

Photographs are kept in a variety of ways and places in the home, with differing degrees of intimacy and publicity, and presupposing different modes of contemplation⁵¹. This section turns to a once widespread form of ‘public’ display of family photographs in the interior, the practice of hanging *fotooklady* – ‘photo-iconostases’ of multiple photoportraits of generations of the family – and to the way this practice became devalued in the last Soviet decades. Stewart’s description of photographic collections in albums as “pasts constructed from a collage of presents” is also a useful way to think about these collages of photographs hung on walls⁵². While they are less intimate than albums, they similarly bring together photographs from different origins and times, which record the trace of an erstwhile presence at some time in the past. Selected photos from different times and places were collaged, sometimes overlapping, within a single rectangular frame, which contained and held together

⁴⁷ K. Cowman, *A Waste of Space? Controversies Surrounding the Working-Class Parlour in Inter-War Britain*, “Home Cultures”, May 2019, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17406315.2018.1610610>> (latest access: 10.09.2019) (revised version of paper for colloquium “The Heart of the Home”, Sapienza University, Rome, 2013, p. 18); J. Hockey, *The Ideal of Home: Domesticating the Institutional Space of Old Age and Death*, in *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*, ed. by T. Chapman – J. Hockey, London 1999, pp. 108-118; L. J. Olson – S. Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*, Madison [WI] 2012.

⁴⁸ K. Cowman, *A Waste*, op. cit., pp. 17-19.

⁴⁹ S. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*, Washington 2013, p. 272.

⁵⁰ O. Sarkisova (with O. Shevchenko), *Soviet Past in Domestic Photography*, in *Double Exposure*, ed. by O. Shevchenko, op. cit., pp. 147-176.

⁵¹ For important recent work on photography and post-Soviet memory, focusing on family albums, see, O. Sarkisova and O. Shevchenko, op. cit.; Idem, *Remembering Life in the Soviet Union, One Family Photo at a Time*, “The New York Times Sunday Review”, 27.12.2017, <[nytimes.com/2017/12/27/opinion/sunday/-soviet-union-one-photos.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/27/opinion/sunday/-soviet-union-one-photos.html)> (latest access: 06.08.2020).

⁵² S. Stewart, *On Longing*, op. cit.

the disparate images in a way reminiscent of how an iconostasis holds multiple icons⁵³. In collage or montage, discrete items bring meanings and associations with them from the original context from which they have been displaced, without effacing the disparate nature of their origins. While indexing the diverse places and moments in which the photos were taken, and referencing their own distinct junctures of time and space, the components of the composite display are lent a semblance of causal relatedness and synchronicity by their juxtaposition within the frame. The structural relations of contiguity and distance within the context of the collage, implying hierarchies and links between the individuals, produce new meanings and associations⁵⁴. Such collages seem to offer proof of personal and familial existence and genealogy, giving an effect of coherence and continuity over time and space⁵⁵. In spite of the ruptures and dislocations that had characterised many of my subjects' earlier lives until they settled in the *khrushchëvki*, these arrangements – “imprinting genealogy on the wall”⁵⁶ – reconstituted and represented the extended family as an entity that continued through time and generations – leading from the present back into the past. They can be said to portray an idealised family ‘self’ over time, demonstrating likeness, and maintaining (or reconstituting) continuity and completeness in the face of losses, death, purges, and excision. The term *fotoklad*, along with the similarity to the way that icons are presented, points to the fact that, like an icon corner, they demarcated a place in the everyday

for contemplation, for remembering the dead or absent, while at the same time, like a mirror, reflecting back assurances of one's identity⁵⁷.

Some of my oldest informants recalled that it was still ‘fashionable’ in their lifetime to hang *fotoklad* or ‘photoiconostases’ of family photographs on the wall. Anna F. (Kovdor, born 1919), an aircraft engineer, came from an impoverished rural background in the south west but had moved to the Far North in the 1930s. Unusually, she still had a wall collage of family photos as late as the mid-2000s. They hung, as they had always done, in frames that her husband had made. Anna F.'s family members were flung far and wide across the former Soviet Union and beyond, but photographic representations played an important role in keeping the family together, both visually and virtually.

Others had witnessed a shift in photographic display practices in their own lifetimes, although they remembered the existence of photocollages continuing into the 1960s. Raisa (Kaluga), born in 1941 and a generation younger than Anna F., also came from a deeply impoverished rural background and had only middle school education. She and her neighbour concurred that photographs of several generations of the family – grandparents, parents and aunts – mounted on card or board or in wooden frames, had been “fashionable” in the postwar period. But some time before 1968 (when her daughter was born), they had “suddenly disappeared” from the walls. She fixes the dates of the ‘fashion’ for photocollages between circa 1945 (or earlier) and the mid-late 1960s, although, she says, not everyone had them even then. For Raisa, the photos were part of a domestic culture that included hanging tied-back little curtains (*zadergushki*) in windows, which was marked as a rural holdover from the past. Tat'iana Ku. in Kovdor (born 1929, a divorced single parent of three), likewise, associated the practice of hanging photos on walls with the display of embroidered cloths on *etazhërki* [*étagères* or whatnots] – a practice that had still been the norm in her milieu in the post-

⁵³ For an example, still extant in 2013, see Frische Fische, *Babushka Dunia i ee ogromnyi dom*, 22 Sept. 2020, <<https://bit.ly/3fE3EdX>> (latest access: 07.06.2019).

⁵⁴ There are not enough extant examples in my sample to allow a systematic, comparative structural analysis, but see the structural analysis of Mongolian photocollages in R. Empson, *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory, and Place in Mongolia*, Oxford 2011; and on “village collages” in Tatarstan, R.O. Abilova, “*Oni vseгда so mnoi*”: *k istorii nastennogo fotoal'boma*, “Vestnik Chuvashskogo universiteta”, 2015, 4, pp. 5-10; O. Boitsova, *Photographs*, op. cit., pp. 71-96; and on Romania: G. Hanganu, *Photo Cross*, in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. E. Edwards – J. Hart, London 2004, pp. 156-174.

⁵⁵ S. Stewart, *On Longing*, op. cit., p. 145; G. Noble, *Accumulating Being*, op. cit., p. 241.

⁵⁶ This apt phrase was used by Ekaterina Gerasimova in her capacity as a research assistant on the project *Everyday Aesthetics* – 2005.

⁵⁷ Several informants refer to this as an *oklad* or recognise the term *fotoiconostas*. See also used by R. Abilova, “*Oni vseгда so mnoi*”, op. cit.

war period, but which the modernising advice of the 1960s targeted as regressive ‘petit-bourgeois bad taste’. She identifies both display practices with the memory of the postwar period and, like Raisa, recalls that photographs suddenly ‘disappeared’, just as the embroidered cloths and *etazhërki* had done. She dates this to the 1970s.

Interviewer: So how was it before, in the 1960s–1970s, did you hang photographs and pictures on the walls?

Tat’iana Ku.: There were [photos]. And then, somehow they suddenly disappeared. . .

I.: Why?

T. Ku.: I don’t know. Somehow, earlier I also did embroidery. There were all kinds of embroidery. And I crocheted. All sorts, there were. And then later somehow everything was liquidated and . . .

I.: It became unfashionable?

T. Ku.: Yes, it became unfashionable, that’s all. Now the crocheted lace is all lying over there.

Zinaida (also in Kovdor, born in the late 1930s) associated the practice of hanging *oklady* of photographs with her childhood home and her mother’s housekeeping. As an adult, however, she emphasises, photoiconostases had no place in her home-making or self-presentation. She had just one single photograph, and even this she had removed from public display.

Zinaida: I never hung photos, ever. Although, when I was a child, we had these big *oklady* and all the photos were there on the wall.

Interviewer: But you didn’t want to do it here?

Z.: No.

I.: You didn’t like it? Why?

Z.: I don’t know. Evidently things had changed, so to speak. . . it was mother’s apartment. Well, how to put it, everybody had them and clearly everyone imitated one another. I don’t know. Here we didn’t. We didn’t hang any pictures at all.

Others also explain the disappearance of iconostases of photos on the wall in terms of ‘fashion’, in the sense of emulation of others, to explain the disappearance of the photo-iconostasis. Svetlana (Apatity) states: “later it wasn’t fashionable”. In 1972 there were still a few around, “then, if you went to see people, they didn’t have them. And somehow, you know, everyone took them down”.

Something had evidently changed in the course of the 1960s. Yet the idea of ‘fashion’ which these informants invoke does not appear an adequate explanation for its demise. Why did this take place

when it did? What did such changes in the ways in which photographs were used and displayed in the home mean? And how did this relate to transformations in the sense of self and to the experience of modernity? The changing attitude towards the display of family photographs is one of many symptoms of socio-cultural transformation associated with the new stage of Soviet modernity emerging in the late 1950s and consolidated in the 1960s–1970s: with rising living standards, the accumulation of material possessions in the home, and an emerging consumer culture; with social stratification and status consumption; and with technological change. It also marked the changing relationship with the past and tradition: from an ideal of organic continuity to a sense of detachment: that the threads that tied past to present had been conclusively broken.

Tat’iana A. in Apatity (born in the early 1940s) explains that she did not have any spare walls on which to hang photos once she acquired a wall unit, *stenka*. A sought-after consumer commodity in the 1970s, all the more because hers came from East Germany, the *stenka* was a new technology for managing domestic appearances, combining compact storage with display.

Tat’iana A.: We didn’t hang photographs. I don’t like that.

Interviewer: Why?

T. A.: Well. It wasn’t fashionable. Nowadays photographs have become fashionable. . . I didn’t have them back then. All the more because I didn’t particularly have any [free] walls. Because I had a *stenka* standing there [. . .] There was a rug like that. And I had pictures above the *stenka*. Above the *stenka*, but not right up to the ceiling (*pod potolok*), but like so. True, we had a German *stenka*. [. . .] There was a picture, there, between the doors.

Tat’iana A.’s explanation suggests that the *stenka* displaced the older culture of display and consumption associated with studio photographs. The changing mode of display was part of the achievement of a modern urban lifestyle, entailing the accumulation of manufactured goods, embrace of novelty, and concern with making ‘fashionable’ consumption choices.

The production and consumption of photographs and their status as material artifacts and commodities were also directly affected by the democratisation of camera ownership in the Khrushchëv era, ac-

accompanied by increased leisure time and top-down encouragement of amateur photography. An abundant display of studio photographs on the wall had once been a status symbol. Until the 1950s and, for many, through the 1960s, it remained a form of ostentatious consumption, which demonstrated a family's respectability, prosperity and modernity. But these connotations changed as camera ownership became more accessible, and opportunities for amateur photography increased. As photographs proliferated, they also grew less prestigious; they were no longer precious commodities or signs of one's modernity and prosperity.

While some of my subjects continued to hang wall photos for some time after they moved to *khrushchëvki*, the practice had almost entirely disappeared from their homes over the next decade. By the time of the interviews, there were only some residual examples in the urban interiors in my sample. The iconostasis of photographs had come, in the course of the long 1960s, to represent a superseded stage of modernity and outmoded claims to distinction. It was stigmatised as an uncultured, lower class and rural practice. The demise of the photoiconostasis emerges from the interviews as a watershed marking a new period and, for many, a new sense of self as urban and modern, separating them from their rural parents and cousins. The informants who recall the practice in their own lifetimes were among the less educated in my sample and many were also first-generation city dwellers. It mattered to them to distinguish themselves from a practice they associated with the rural past. Some were explicit that hanging photos on the wall was 'rural' and, as such, backward. Its rejection was associated with their personal experience of modernity and urbanisation, and their changing aspirations and sense of self. Tat'iana Ka. (born in the mid-late 1930s), who had moved to Kaluga from a village in her youth, replied unequivocally when asked why she did not hang photos on the walls: "That's in the countryside; there were my mother's photos hanging there. She came here, my Mum died here, and I left the photograph of her, of course, but I hung it in my own bedroom, my own. There, in the girls' room,

I didn't hang anything". She makes clear that the rejection of photo displays was part of her personal trajectory of modernisation and social ascent to the status of a city dweller. Distancing herself from the practice, she also separated her modern urban self from the older generation, and from her own rural origins: "after all, it's the city here".

This qualitatively new stage of modernity, as Tat'iana Ka. experienced it, entailed the modernisation of subjectivity and emergence of a new sense of self and self-other relations. The single photograph of her mother that survived her purge of photographic clutter and still hung in her own personal space, the bedroom, maintained the one-to-one relation between mother and daughter. But no longer was a family photocollage displayed in the general room, where all household members and visitors could see the family identity laid out before their eyes. The 'public' display of dynasty – defining who one is through vertical and horizontal kinship relations – was replaced by a more selective and intimate display in the 'private' space of her bedroom. In other cases, individual portrait photos were kept, unframed, behind the glass doors of the cabinet, to be taken out occasionally, shown and held. No longer was the question "who am I?" to be answered in terms of genealogy and kinship (daughter of X, granddaughter of Y), but through more elective affinities, with a greater element of self-definition.

The demise of these visual mnemonics of identity, conceived in terms of lineage, may be seen as part of the wider process of modernisation and urbanisation, of which the move to new flats was part. It reflected some important and related aspects common to modern society: changes in the resources for a sense of self; the loosening hold of traditions; and the separation of the nuclear family from the extended family⁵⁸. The modernisation of resources for self-production did not arrive immediately with

⁵⁸ In the Soviet Union, changes in the function of the family common to all modern societies, notably the transfer out of the family of activities that were formerly its concern, were more extreme. "As a result, the family has become a more highly specialized institution. It is a voluntary group formed on the basis of individual preferences and held together basically by affiliative needs". K. Geiger, *Family and Social Change*, in *The Family in Soviet Russia*, ed. by H. K. Geiger, Cambridge [MA] 1970, p. 452.



Fig. 6 - Inna's painting brought home from Japan by her father, a diplomat, in the 1920s. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

the move to new flats, as a simple reflex determined by the new environment; given the tenacity of deeply ingrained dispositions or habitus it developed more gradually. In some homes, the photoiconostasis survived for a number of years after the relocation, and recent photographs in villages near Kaluga show that some continue this practice to this day⁵⁹. Nevertheless, the mass construction of the new flats, with their modern conveniences plugged into municipal services, accelerated the process of urbanisation, while their design and (in principle) allocation on the basis of nuclear family units also encouraged the younger generation's separation from extended family. This was reflected in domestic visual display. Moreover, the disappearance of photoiconostases of extended family was not only a symptom of change. It also had effects: it changed the ways in which family stories and identity were passed down and in which younger generations gained their knowledge and understanding of the past and, hence, in which the collective identity of the family was constituted and transmitted between generations⁶⁰.

The presence or absence of photocollages also marked synchronic, social distinctions. The less educated, less socially advantaged among my subjects – first-generation city dwellers – put the practice

behind them, along with their ties to rural backwardness, in the course of the long 1960s. For others, in metropolitan *intelligentsiia* households, it had 'never been done' to hang photoiconostases in the first place, and the absence of such displays was a mark of social distinction. Inna was keen to dissociate herself from the practice of hanging photographs in general. Saying that she did not like it, she immediately changed the subject to talk about an original painting and objects of decorative art, which her father, a diplomat, had brought back from Japan. "No, I didn't have photos. I'm no lover of that. No. On the walls there was probably this painting here" [Fig. 6]. She draws a distinction between the display of a single, select photoportrait standing on a sideboard, and the profusion of pictures in an iconostasis or photocollage on the wall. Galina L., who identified with the educational capital, cultured and modern tastes of Petersburg *intelligentsiia*, also distanced herself from these stigmatised display practices. The presence of multiple photos on the wall marked those 'others' as lower class, rural, provincial, and lacking in cultural competence.

Anna A.'s *intelligentsiia* family had never engaged in the practice of putting photos on the wall even in the 1930s and 1940s. It was the kind of thing that 'other people' would do. In the Orenburg house where they had lived prior to her father's arrest and the family's expulsion there had been some photographs in fine frames standing on the sideboard, including portraits of her father, but they had never been hung on the walls. While she responded to receiving an apartment of her own in the 1960s by hanging pictures there, Anna chose not to display family photographs, but her own amateur pressed flower pictures, professionally framed and mounted [see Fig. 3].

Anna's daughter (D.): There were definitely never any photographs!

Anna (A.): Photographs, yes, I...

D.: Somehow it wasn't done in our family, [to put them] on the walls. Here there's only M... 's photo on the sideboard...

Interviewer: Why weren't there any photographs? In your family, when you lived in Orenburg back then, did you have photographs?

A.: Never, never.

D.: Well it depends on the family.

⁵⁹ See O. Boitsova, *Photographs*, op. cit.; Frische Fische, *Babushka*, op. cit. With thanks to Oksana Sarkisova, personal communication 15.04.2019.

⁶⁰ Cf. Sarkisova and Shevchenko, *Moving Pictures*, op. cit.

I.: Because in many homes, of course, whole iconostases [of photos] have been kept.

A.: Well you know, no. There were [inaudible] when we were forced to leave Forshtat, and [lived] in the house with the earthen floor... We simply left all the furniture we had there; we were frightened. There was a lot. I remember of course that on the sideboard there were very beautiful frames. There were photographs there, I suppose, of father... .

D.: They were displayed.

A.: But never on the walls.

Several explanations – not mutually exclusive – can be offered for Anna and her daughter’s categorical repudiation of the common practice of hanging pictures on the wall.

The absence of pictures in Anna’s family’s temporary domicile perhaps reflected the close identification between hanging pictures and making oneself at home, and conversely, the sense of displacement and impermanence, which Anna indicates that they felt. “Don’t knock a single nail into the wall!” wrote the exiled German poet Bertolt Brecht in a 1937 poem about the limbo state of refugees and their refusal to accept that they might never go home⁶¹. Gestures of homemaking, such as hanging pictures, may be resisted by sojourners because they imply a betrayal of their “real home”⁶². The absence of pictures spoke of Anna’s family’s hope that their place of exile would turn out to be only a temporary lodging, and that they would soon be readmitted into society.

In addition, Anna’s refusal to hang family photos on the wall may also be partly explained by loss and by ingrained habits of silence and cover-up instilled in her since childhood. Anna explains that the family photos, including that of her father, had been abandoned along with their furniture and other possessions when they were forced to leave their home, noting that they were frightened. Recent research by Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko, concerning the ways that Russian family photo albums are used in intergenerational transmission of

family collective memory, has found that they not only represented materialised memory and a record of continuity and heredity; they also recorded *lacunae* in the human narrative and bore the visual trace of misremembering and enforced forgetting. Fear had compelled those who were deemed guilty by association with repressed ‘enemies of the people’ to remove pages or photos and to excise the trace of repressed individuals from the photographic record⁶³. The family album might represent the one-time presence of persons, but the gaps, silences and omissions from its pages also marked the absence of those declared ‘non-persons’, and the way family members were complicit in the process of erasure; such albums could be collages of absences as much as of presences. If families felt compelled to excise images from albums, they would surely not advertise their tainted bloodline in the more public form of photoiconostases displayed prominently on walls. Furthermore, Anna’s insistence that this was ‘never done’ in her family was a matter of holding onto the family’s sense of social superiority in spite of their being socially outcast. Anna identified as a member of the *intelligentsiia* on the basis of her family background. Although her father’s repression in the purges had deprived her of the material and social advantages that might be expected to come with this ‘capital’, her primary socialisation had inculcated the tastes and dispositions of the *intelligentsiia* along with their sense of social distinction and cultural prerogative⁶⁴. It may have been especially important for Anna to reassert her distinction and claim to *intelligentsiia* status through visual and material practices, once she had been rehabilitated (as marked by allocation of a new flat), precisely because her family had been declassed and deprived of civic personhood. As Jochen Hellbeck found in his study of diary writing, his subjects who had been excommunicated engaged in this practice of self as a search for reintegration into the collective to give their lives historical purpose and meaning⁶⁵.

⁶¹ B. Brecht, *Gedanken über die Dauer des Exils*, *Svendborger Gedichte*, in *Bertolt Brecht: Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9: Gedichte 2, Hg. in *Zusammenarbeit mit Elisabeth Hauptman*, Frankfurt a. M. 1967, p. 719 ff., <<http://www.literaturepochen.at/exil/multimedia/pdf/brechttdauerexil.pdf>> (latest access: 25.11.2017).

⁶² For the refugee as modern ‘everyman’ and the state of exile and nostalgia for home as a quintessentially modern experience: S. Boym, *Commonplaces*, op. cit.; Idem, *Future*, op. cit.

⁶³ O. Sarkisova (with Olga Shevchenko), *Soviet Past*, op. cit., pp. 147–176.

⁶⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge [MA] 1984.

⁶⁵ J. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under*



Fig. 7 - Aleksandr Laktionov, *Moving into the New Flat*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 134 x 112 cm. Donetsk Regional Art Museum.

However, where Hellbeck implies a homogeneous social body, this late Soviet social body was not unitary. Domestic picture culture could reveal aspects of social change that were less easily reconciled with Khrushchëvist utopian projections of social development: not towards a classless socialist community with equal and universal access to culture, but towards a more fractured society, stratified by nuanced cultural markers of distinction; and not future oriented, imbued with optimism and progress under socialism, but oriented toward the past.

2.2 SOPRAPORTE AND SKYING

If Aleksandr Laktionov's well-known painting of 1952, *Moving Into the New Flat*, was to be believed [Fig. 7], the first question that exercised exemplary Soviet citizens when they moved into new or improved housing – before they could even hang curtains or unpack their belongings – was: where to hang the picture? That they must display a portrait of the leader Stalin, thanks to whose paternal beneficence they had received this fine apartment, was apparently self-evident to this model household and to the contemporary viewer, but the drama, such as

it is, rests on the decision about picture hanging.

This Socialist Realist representation should not, of course, be viewed as a document of actual conditions and ethnographic practice. Laktionov's depiction of housewarming nevertheless demonstrates that the consumption and display of pictures in the private space of the home was a culturally significant communicative practice, invested with social connotations and values. The artist could draw on a common understanding in contemporary Soviet society that the *novosël's* judgments about hanging pictures in the home directly reflected their social identity as model Soviet citizens. Critic Leonid Nevler, in an account of decorating practices in a women's hostel a decade later, also paid considerable attention to the mode of display. Everything, from family photographs and reproductions of nineteenth-century oil paintings to housekeeping rotas, he noted with implicit criticism, was mounted indiscriminately in deep frames⁶⁶. Not only the choice of what to hang was socially significant: where and how to hang it also mattered. In the interviews, too, the topic of hanging pictures emerged as a locus of status anxiety, social distinction and cultural snobbery. The wrong types of pictures, or too many and badly displayed, could speak not of the *kul'turnost'* (progressive, socialist culturedness or urbanity) of the occupants, but of their vulgarity⁶⁷. "I never liked it when there were a lot, it was trashy", said Zinaida. The misuse of photographs could reveal the curators' rural upbringing, only thinly papered over by a veneer of urban culture. Nina (St. Petersburg), meanwhile, worried that her husband's accumulation of pictures in the 1960s–1970s betrayed their embourgeoisement, belying their continued identification with *intelligentsiia* values.

The answer to the new settlers' question about the proper place to hang pictures is indicated, in Laktionov's painting, by the convergence of the gaze

⁶⁶ L. Nevler, *Tut vsë gorazdo slozhnee*, "DI", 1963, 3, p. 29.

⁶⁷ On *kul'turnost'* and its antitheses see V. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Cambridge [UK] 1976; and S. Fitzpatrick, *Becoming Cultured: Socialist Realism and the Representation of Privilege and Taste*, in Idem, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca 1992, pp. 216–237.

of the female head of household and that of her son holding the picture: the portrait of the Leader should hang high up in the corner to the left of the window (whose location is indicated by the way the light falls), the sacred corner assigned to the icon in Orthodox culture. Their choice, a few years after the end of the war, was marked as national popular (*narodnyi*): at once vernacular and patriotic. Laktionov's painting about judicious picture hanging as a marker of civic virtue could invoke a widely shared, if unspoken, understanding about the correct place to hang pictures. Just a decade later, however, the choices made by Laktionov's housewarmers in 1952 would appear as bad taste, no longer identifying them as virtuous Soviet citizens, but as ignorant and backward.

According to psychologist Ernst Gombrich, although judgments around picture hanging have some basis in psycho-physiological constants or needs, they are also historically and culturally specific⁶⁸. The norms of tasteful or 'cultured' picture hanging are not universal and immutable but socially conditioned; they evolved historically in response to the economic and socio-cultural transformations that accompanied industrialisation, modernisation, and the rise of capital. The changing status of pictures as luxury objects for private consumption, the emergence of middle-class consumers and, in the nineteenth century, the development of an art market, together brought shifts in genre, medium, and size of works of art. These historical developments also brought changes in conventions for displaying pictures, both in public and in the home⁶⁹.

Marxist sociologist Bourdieu emphasised more categorically the sociality of aesthetic choices and what he called the "social genesis of the eye". Like other judgments of taste, ideas about what 'looks right' in regard to picture hanging are socially constructed dispositions, which are acquired during primary socialisation. The rules of hanging pictures consist of deeply held judgments concerning pro-

portion, composition, balance, and order. Although such competencies are social constructs, cultural and acquired, their origins are forgotten. They appear natural and instinctive because (along with other aspects of habitus) the rules are deeply internalised and not consciously articulated⁷⁰. Thus the unwritten "rules of art" – the norms of 'educated' modern domestic picture hanging – function as "something like a 'class unconscious'"⁷¹; they serve to transmit and perpetuate class prerogative in the form of cultural capital. The domestic curator's 'eye' for hanging, demonstrating their mastery of these rules – or ignorance thereof – demarcates social distinctions.

Bourdieu's analysis, based on 1960s France, cannot simply be transposed onto the Soviet context, both because of the complexities of assigning class in the USSR and because the hereditary upper classes, far from being able to translate their cultural capital into social or economic privilege, had been dispossessed, disadvantaged and deprived of status and personhood. Nevertheless, class terms (notably the pejorative *meshchanskii* or petit-bourgeois), were widely used in public discourse to denigrate 'vulgar' taste. Social divisions along lines of educational attainment and geography (distinctions between metropolitan and provincial and, especially, urban and rural) also emerge frequently in the interviews, as we saw above regarding the practice of photoiconostases. The interviewees' responses make clear that the consumption of images was a social practice; aesthetic choices – even in private, domestic space – carried social meanings, as markers of distinction or of backwardness and lack of *kul'turnost'*. The practices, and the values attached to them, were subject to change in the period of destalinisation and rapid modernisation of everyday life that began in the mid-1950s. Changes are most obvious in regard to the subject matter

⁶⁸ E. H. Gombrich, *Pictures*, op. cit., pp. 110–116.

⁶⁹ Such changes included the shift from state patronage and commissioning of art toward speculative production for an emerging middle-class market and public for art, as well as changes in artistic practices and technologies.

⁷⁰ For "The Social Genesis of the Eye" see P. Bourdieu – A. Darbel, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by S. Emanuel, Stanford 1996, p. 256; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception*, "International Social Science Journal," 1968 (XX), p. 608; Idem, *Logic of Practice*, Cambridge [UK] 1990, p. 56; G. Noble, *Accumulating Being*, op. cit., p. 237.

⁷¹ T. Bennett et al., *Accounting for Tastes*, op. cit., p. 11.

considered appropriate for domestic pictures. Thus, within a year, Laktionov could no longer have represented the choice of Stalin's portrait as exemplary, as the personality cult fell into disrepute following the Leader's death. Less immediately evident is that changing norms also affected the mode of display. This included the density of hanging and the placing of pictures, particularly the height at which it was considered appropriate to hang them.

In the stately homes of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe, pictures had been *de rigueur* in two positions: above doorways, known as *sopraporte*, and over mantelpieces. These norms subsequently 'trickled down' into bourgeois homes. While mantelpieces were not a traditional element of Russian interiors (which, prior to the advent of central heating, were warmed by stoves rather than open fireplaces), the *sopraporte* was a customary site for pictures in Russian gentry and noble homes, as in the West, as paintings of early nineteenth-century cultured interiors illustrate⁷². Meanwhile, in royal galleries and the salons of imperial art academies across Europe until the late nineteenth century, the walls were used to display as many pictures as could be squeezed onto them, from floor to ceiling, those in the uppermost tier being canted forward to be visible from far below⁷³.

Two main changes in picture hanging accompanied the processes associated with the emergence of modernity and a middle class in Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. First, paintings in domestic interiors gradually descended to eye level along with the emergence of a prosperous bourgeoisie and luxury consumption, and in conjunction with technical changes, notably the adoption of linear perspective with its eye-level vanishing point⁷⁴. Second, dense arrangements of large numbers of heterogeneous pictures gave way to a

smaller number of pictures presented in isolation, or grouped in accordance with formal aesthetic criteria such as style and colour⁷⁵. With the development of the art market and of modernism, hanging practices changed in favour of a sparse arrangement, with individual works hung at eye level, isolated against a plain white wall to maximise the viewer-buyer's undistracted attention⁷⁶.

A modern, minimalist approach to displaying pictures was also advocated by taste experts in the Khrushchëv era. Model interiors in the modernist 'contemporary style' – such as those shown at a major exhibition of new furniture designs, *Art and Everyday Life*, in 1961 and illustrated in publications promoting modern good taste – often included a single, abstracted, even monochrome, print in a simple flat mount, hung at eye level against a plain ground⁷⁷. Writers on the tasteful 'contemporary style' home recommended that homemakers hang just one or two well-chosen and precisely placed pictures or other visual accents against a plain ground, preferably distempered in pastel tints, rather than the floral wallpaper or stenciled patterns that were widespread; distractions from the hermetic world of the picture should be minimised⁷⁸.

Another tradition of hanging pictures high up had existed in prerevolutionary Russian culture in parallel with the elite, cosmopolitan, secular practices. This was associated with vernacular superstition (especially around thresholds) and Orthodox devotional convention. The most important icon was hung diagonally across a corner where the wall met the ceiling (rather than above the door and flush with the wall

⁷² On mantelpieces see: J. Atfield, *Wild Things*, op. cit.; R. Hurdley, *Dismantling Mantelpieces*, op. cit.

⁷³ To hang pictures very high up, known as 'skying', was the frequent object of artists' complaints, for it made their work hard to see, marginalizing them from critical attention and opportunities for sales. The height of hanging was therefore salient in art world politics and a marker of the degree of favour an artist's work enjoyed at the time.

⁷⁴ E. H. Gombrich, *Pictures*, op. cit., pp. 110–116.

⁷⁵ Changes in the conditions of production, exchange and consumption of art affected subject matter, genre, medium, size, framing, and also the height and density of hanging, as was exemplified by the Impressionists in 1870s France and the Peredvizhniki in Russia at the same time.

⁷⁶ By the twentieth century, the hegemony of the modernist ideology of the autonomy of art was reflected in the minimalist modernist white cube gallery. B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), Berkeley 1999.

⁷⁷ E.g. O. Baiar – R. Blashkevich, *Kvartira i eë ubranstvo*, Moskva 1962; see S. E. Reid, *Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home*, "Cahiers du Monde russe", 2006 (XLVII), 1–2, pp. 227–68; Idem, *Communist Comfort: Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era*, "Gender & History", 2009 (XXI), 3, pp. 465–498.

⁷⁸ I. Voeikova, *Uiut – v prostote*, "Rabotnitsa", 1964 (X), pp. 30–31.



Fig. 8 - A flower picture hung from the curtain pole in corner of Ekaterina's living room in Kovdor, a secular placeholder for the icon that would once have hung in this corner. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

in the *sopraporte* position of early modern, westernised, noble homes) in the sacred 'red' corner of Russian Orthodox tradition, a place of honour and reverence. Although official atheism had delegitimated the aesthetic as well as ritual uses of icons in the home, the unconscious visual dispositions of picture hanging acquired from socialisation in Orthodox material culture lived on in the Soviet period⁷⁹. For Laktionov's anticipated audience in 1952, to hang pictures high up, appropriating the sacred icon corner for the Leader's portrait, signified the virtue and *narodnost'* of the family depicted; it revealed their rootedness in the traditional values and customs of the 'simple' Russian people, even as it secularised these in service of the Stalin cult. There is evidence that this 'Orthodox eye' and rural dispo-

sitions persisted through the 1970s and even into the present day, dictating which locations in the interior called for pictures and where the most important image should be hung⁸⁰. Describing the use of pictures in ethnic Russian homes, the 1979 ethnographic study cited above observed the continued practice of hanging special paintings or photos in the former icon corner. The photographs and sketches of contemporary rural homes that illustrated the publication showed framed paintings and photographs, hung very close to the ceiling above the rug, with embroidered towels draped around them as they had traditionally been around an icon. They included a contemporary example of the secularised red corner, with framed pictures pressed high up to the ceiling and canted forward between windows draped with white embroidered curtains⁸¹.

The 'eye' for hanging pictures appears to have been a deeper and more resilient disposition than the photoiconostasis, whose demise I tracked above: less susceptible to reformist intervention and modernisation. This may be, in part, because authoritative culture had appropriated and perpetuated the practice of red corners. The photographic evidence gathered as part of the interview project makes clear that modern, secular norms of sparse hanging at eye level were not universally recognised or practiced. A number of interviewees from rural backgrounds and with limited education still had pictures hanging high under the eaves even in the 2000s, although they had abjured the other picture practice marked as backward, photoiconostases. Ekaterina, born in a village in Penza oblast' in 1927, had been snatched away from the idiocy of rural life and from labour on the *kolkhoz* by her future husband, who brought her to the city of Kovdor as a young woman. Ekaterina's interior was filled with colour and pattern on every possible surface. A bold wallhanging occupied the whole of one wall with striped covers on the armchairs placed in front of it. A flower picture hung from the curtain pole in a corner of her living room, [Fig. 8] between floral curtains and wallpaper with a

⁷⁹ S. Boym, *Common Places*, op. cit.; V. Buchli, *Archaeology of Socialism*, Oxford 1999; O. Boitsova, *Photographs*, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Project photos for *Everyday Aesthetics*; for other examples see Frische Fische, *Babushka*, op. cit.

⁸¹ L. Chizhikova, *Zhilishche Russkikh*, op. cit., p. 65, fig. 22.



Fig. 9 - A framed reproduction hung high above an ornamental carpet and canted forward, Kaluga, 2005. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

contrasting floral pattern, a placeholder for the icon that would once have hung in this corner.

Mariia, a Kaluga seamstress born in 1928, who moved into a brick-built *khrushchëvka* in 1960, had a number of framed reproductions, all of which were hung as high as possible above the bed and divan, canted forward. One of these [Fig. 9] hung immediately above the ornamental rug. Three large framed studio photo-portraits of family members hung in a corner of Vasilii's (a Kaluga railway worker born in 1924) living room. Instead of positioning the perspectival vanishing point roughly at eye-level, as would be the norm in modern, professional practice, he had aligned the top of each frame with the ceiling [Fig. 10]. In the *sopraporte* position above the door, was a more 'public' set of images: a studio photograph of the young Lenin⁸², hung alongside a photo of the 'star' of the Soviet space program, Iurii



Fig. 10 - Three large framed studio photo-portraits of family members hung close to the ceiling in a corner of Vasilii's apartment, Kaluga, 2005. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.



Fig. 11 - A photograph of the young Lenin alongside one of Iurii Gagarin hung above the door of Vasilii's living room, Kaluga, 2005. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

Gagarin, with an ornamental horseshoe between them, as if the cosmonaut's glimpse of the heavens had invested him with the magical powers to protect the threshold, as an icon hung in this position would do [Fig. 11]. Others, too, had portraits of mass culture celebrities, political leaders and ancestors above the door.

Neither the move to modern housing nor the accompanying advice appears to have had much impact on Ekaterina, Mariia or Vasilii in regard to their 'eye' for hanging pictures. The unconscious, deep rules according to which the eaves and *sopraporte* were the proper and respectful places for pictures survived the move to modern *khrushchëvki*. They

⁸² For the Lenin photo see Getty Images, <[bit.ly/2Xx6RWs](https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/stock-photo/young-lenin/118548488)> (latest access: 01.09.19).

persisted in spite of the low ceiling of the new flats, which meant that pictures hung over the door were necessarily very close to the cornice. Rather than the plain ground and pastel tones recommended by specialists, they also hung paintings and photographs against floral wallpaper or even directly on richly coloured and ornamented rugs, another culturally specific practice that was not to be found in the homes of metropolitan and highly educated informants. Recent photographs of Russian rural homes, in a village near Kaluga, also witness the remarkable tenacity of these practices of display in contemporary Russia⁸³. The issue of hanging – where people often operate with a seemingly intuitive sense of what ‘looks right’ rather than with consciously learned and verbally articulated principles – is a further example of how the modernizing prescriptions of metropolitan *intelligentsiia* culture ran up against habitus: the persistence of other, unconsciously acquired, ingrained dispositions and authorities. They contradicted the dispositions of rural, Orthodox culture, which Laktionov had appropriated as a marker of Soviet patriotism and populism.

This is not to say that continuity with past practices was universal. Receptivity towards new norms was divided along generational and ‘class’ lines reflecting educational level and rural/urban differences. The elite and modern(ist) urban norms of hanging at eye level and in isolation – led by metropolitan cultural specialists and by trends in professional, secular curatorial practice – were observed by educated citizens. Their grasp of the rules of educated hanging manifested their cultural capital and social distinction. Tat’iana A., above, was quick to emphasise that even though she hung photos above the *stenka*, she did not hang them *pod potolok*, that is, right under the eaves.

Nor were rural traditions themselves untouched by forces of change, as the demise of the photo-iconostasis exemplifies, although they changed more slowly and unevenly among the less educated and first-generation city dwellers. For contemporary observers in the 1970s, the vernacular mode of hanging represented, *pars pro toto*, a vernacular rural cul-

ture and way of life that was passing. Some, like the ethnographer above, welcomed its displacement by the growing presence of art reproductions in rural homes, seeing this shift as a sign of progress and indicator that the gap between the urban and rural way of life was narrowing, in accordance with party rhetoric. At the same time, a more critical and ambivalent discourse emerged in urban *intelligentsiia* culture, beginning in the mid-to-late sixties, concerning the cost of progress and, for conservatives, the perceived loss of national wholeness. Visual and verbal accounts in the 1960s–1970s described – with a sense of temporal and geographical distance, nostalgia and regret – vernacular traditions that were perceived to be in decline or facing extinction, along with religious practices and superstitions concerning domestic space, notably around thresholds and positioning of icons⁸⁴. The 1975 issue of “Dekorativnoe iskusstvo” on home-decorating practices included reproductions of work by contemporary artists representing traditional interiors, such as a 1963 linoengraving, *Alone*, by Moscow artist Ilarion Golitsyn, which depicted an old woman in a headscarf (marking her as a rural *baba*) in the interior of a wooden *izba*⁸⁵. Behind her, a table covered by an embroidered cloth stands against a wall on which pictures in oval frames hang right up to the eaves, including over the door, inclined towards the floor. Obscured by shadow, the content of these pictures is indistinct: the artist elides the distinction between studio portrait photographs and icons.

The discussion so far has focused on time, exploring the ways that picture practices may reflect its passing or may propose an alternative temporality as a way to overcome loss and rupture. The final section turns to the dimension of space and its role in the constitution and sustenance of identity as it is curated through pictures. To examine the sense of place at different scales – home, locality, nation – and to analyse the construction or ‘curation’ of an ideal of homeland, it turns to the predominant genre

⁸³ E.g. the work of artists V. Popkov, N. Andronov and I. Golitsyn; S. E. Reid, *Art*, op. cit. The art journal “Tvorchestvo” published numerous contributions to a debate on *tselostnost’* [(national) integrity, wholeness] in relation to artistic style in 1976–1978.

⁸⁴ Reproduced in L. Andreeva, *Veshchi*, op. cit., p. 31.

⁸³ Frische Fische, *Babushka*, op. cit.

and subject matter of pictures in domestic displays: landscape.

3. DOMESTIC 'NATIONAL GALLERIES': REPRESENTING HOMELAND AT HOME

Linda's funeral photograph, discussed above [see Fig. 5], was part of a dense, irregular cluster of pictures of various sorts, which were placed directly on one wall of her Tartu flat. These included several photographs and some original works of art in various media – painting, drawing and ceramics – amongst them, a small landscape distinguished from the majority of pictures in the interiors studied because it is an original oil painting in a painterly, impressionist style. It depicts a rocky, pine-clad northern shore, probably on the Baltic. Linda's multimedia wall-collage also included, placed above the landscape, a photograph from the interwar period of a man (presumably her husband) in military officer's uniform which, as far as the black and white photograph allows it to be identified, may be that of the Estonian Defense League, the national guard in the interwar independence period, liquidated in 1940 with the Soviet annexation of the Republic of Estonia. To the right of the photograph is a portrait of Linda in a formal setting, perhaps a civic office, with an Estonian flag on the desk before her. The photo is mounted on foil, lending it a celebratory appearance. Linking it to the landscape below is a printed greetings card in the colours of the Estonian flag. Linda placed a small flag next to a pencil portrait of her sister, displayed atop her cabinet, for the interviewer to photograph [Fig. 12].

Linda's deceased husband had been a member of the anti-Soviet resistance, the Forest Brothers, which formed across the Baltic States after they were annexed by the USSR⁸⁶. Linda remained a



Fig. 12 - Portrait with Estonian flag, Tartu, Estonia, 2006. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

staunch Estonian nationalist, as she made clear in the interview. She expressed a strong sense of injustice and resentment at the way Soviet power had alienated her from her birthright and from the cultured and successful person she believed she should otherwise have become. Talking about herself as a singer (aligning herself with the 'Singing Revolution', the mass song movement so important in the Baltic national independence movements of the 1980s), she took pains to let the interviewer know her patriotic pride in, and identification with, Estonian culture. She drew attention to a number of original works in her display by Estonian artists, whom she name-checked, expecting the Estonian interviewer to recognise them. Thus emphasizing her cultural capital as someone born to appreciate her national heritage, she sought to contradict the impression given by her tiny flat and impoverished circumstances; she blamed these on discriminatory Soviet rule in Estonia, which had also alienated her

⁸⁶ The Forest Brothers were Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian national partisans who waged a guerrilla war against Soviet rule after they became part of the USSR in 1940, during and after World War II, with the goal of opposing the Soviet Union in a bid to restore the independence of their home nations. NATO documentary film, 2017: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5rQFp7FF9c>>; *Forest Brothers – Fight for the Baltics*, "Estonian World", 13.07.2017: <<https://estonianworld.com/life/film-forest-brothers-fight-for-the-baltics/>> (latest access: 02.07.2017).

from her national cultural heritage.

Linda used the walls of her apartment to construct a narrative of national identity, curating a kind of miniature, domestic ‘national gallery’ of Estonian references. Her choice of pictures, assembled into an informal collage that juxtaposed the personal and the national-historical, served to affirm a broader ideal of ‘home’ in the sense of belonging to a place, community and nation. Linda’s national gallery was perhaps the most explicit in its assertion of national or ethnic identity (and its overt nationalism was probably a late- or post-Soviet development; the flag she placed specially for the photo was unlikely to have been part of the interior prior to Perestroika). But she was not alone in using the walls of her home to construct an ideal of homeland and of belonging to an imagined, national community⁸⁷.

A very large amateur painting on the theme of *Three Bogatyrs* occupied the entire wall of Nina D.’s living room in Samara. Her former neighbour, an amateur artist, had painted it for her. It was typical of many original paintings in domestic collections in that it was both an amateur work and a gift. It had long ago been dispatched to the purgatory of things, the dacha, but its title suggests it may have been a copy of Russian painter Viktor Vasnetsov’s eponymous work of 1898. Vasnetsov’s painting depicts the heroes of Slavic oral epics, Il’ia Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich and Alesha Popovich, who defended the poor, fought the enemies of Russia and guarded her borders. It had become part of popular visual culture, circulating by means of mass photographic reproductions, and was familiar to every Soviet schoolchild. Soviet artist Fëdor Reshetnikov cited Vasnetsov’s *Bogatyrs* as a picture within a picture in his postwar painting *Arrived for the Holiday* (1952); a framed reproduction of Vasnetsov’s painting can be seen on the wall behind the boy in cadet uniform who has just arrived on a New Year visit to his grandparents. The picture of bogatyrs provides a transhistorical, mythic commentary on the exchange between the boy and his grandfather; the latter’s erect military bearing and the boy’s salute

tell a story of intergenerational transmission of masculinity and patriotic, military values⁸⁸. As in Laktionov’s painting *Moving Into the New Flat*, the device of a picture within a picture amplifies and fixes its meaning and the characterisation of the protagonists; Reshetnikov’s cross-reference reinforces the connotations of militarism, patrilineage, and Russian (rather than Soviet) patriotism, based on a mythical national past. His painting was, in turn, reproduced as a pattern for amateurs to copy, whether in paint or in needlepoint⁸⁹.

Figures from Russian myth and folk tales were quite common in the interiors of Russian informants, often appearing on items of ‘traditional’ decorative art. Certain techniques and media indigenous to particular regions, and ‘brands’ such as Gzhel’, Khokhlama and Palekh lacquer ware had become identified as the folk traditions of particular localities and regions. Having begun in the late nineteenth century, this identification was institutionalised in the Stalin era, exemplifying the principle that Soviet culture was “national in form, socialist in content”. The techniques and materials themselves bore national or regional connotations, sometimes referencing their place of origin materially and metonymically, as in the case of marquetry made from Siberian woods.

Pictures for the home, art world reformers argued in the Thaw, should not be vehicles of important ideological messages or emotionally exciting narratives about Soviet man’s promethean transformation of the wilderness, as was required for the public works of Socialist Realism. Even moralizing genre pictures like Reshetnikov’s were no longer in favour. According to the tentatively modernist criteria that reformers promoted in literary and specialist art pub-

⁸⁸ Cf. C. McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965*, DeKalb 2018. The military stance of the grandfather receiving the boy’s proud salute indicates that this is a family with a military tradition that is passed down the generations. The *ëlka* (New Year’s tree) stands between these two generations in the place where the father should be; we can presume that he was lost in the War, heroically defending the motherland.

⁸⁹ The needlepoint pattern, on sale in the Moscow store “Rukodelie” [Handcraft] in the early 1960s, was illustrated as an example of bad taste. I. Suvorova, *Na urovne plokhogo rynka*, “DI”, 1962, 6, pp. 46–47.

⁸⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

lications, domestic pictures should be primarily decorative components of the interior composition. They would exercise beneficial effects on the inhabitants through abstract, aesthetic means such as colour and formal harmony. To this end, they advocated still life paintings or prints⁹⁰. The popular magazine “Sem”ia i shkola” [Family and School], addressed to a broader readership, was less convinced by the merits of still life, although it acknowledged some uses for it. It advised homemakers on their choice of pictures for different settings (assuming, over-optimistically, that their readers had separate rooms for different functions): “Aim for the subject matter of the picture to be appropriate for the character of the room and its décor. In a bedroom it looks silly to have a still life painting – so choose some kind of landscape for it, or hang a portrait – but in the dining room a still life is entirely suitable”⁹¹.

3.1 “NATURE IN A FRAME”

The landscape genre, prominent in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century painting, had been downgraded with the advent of Socialist Realism, being considered, along with still life, to be insufficiently ideological because it lacked narrative and direct representation of human agency. It had come into its own, however, during the war as a means to bolster patriotism through the emotional associations with the motherland. Thus the national scene and its representation in landscape were invested with patriotic meaning, harnessing and reinforcing the affective power of place to trigger emotional response. As “Sem”ia i shkola” exemplified, landscape was promoted in popular advice literature as an appropriate choice for the home.

While photographs were mostly family portraits,



Fig. 13 - Vasilii's reproduction of Ivan Shishkin (1832-98), *Mast Pine Forest in Viatka Province* (1889) (original formerly in the collection of Norman Hall Hansen, Copenhagen, sold by Christie's 2008, <<https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/ivan-shishkin-1832-1898-mast-pine-forest-5091200-details.aspx>>, oil on canvas 78.7 x 107.3 cm.). Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

the majority of paintings and reproductions in domestic displays were in the landscape genre (including townscapes and seascapes). The meaning of these landscape paintings was underscored by their contextualisation in the interior; often they hung above bookshelves holding runs of the classics of nineteenth-century Russian literature, as in Diana's living room, as well as items of ‘traditional’ folk decorative art. Landscape paintings were the main representation of locality and of the ‘national idea’ on apartment walls⁹². The landscapes in my informants' homes, with a few exceptions such as Linda's Baltic shore, conform to a topography and composition that, in the mid-nineteenth century came to be mythologised as the archetypal ‘Russian national’ landscape. As Christopher Ely has shown, the construction of a particular type of topography, flora and fauna as the ‘Russian scene’ emerged historically as part of the process of modernisation in nineteenth-century Russia. That earlier period of industrialisation and social upheaval, preceding the intensive modernisation of the Soviet era, had been accompanied by the search for national identity and an image of ‘Russia’. Domestic tourism, a quintessentially modern phenomenon, also began to develop in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century,

⁹⁰ Reformers, seeking to rehabilitate figurative modernism and expressive use of form in art, argued that still life was appropriate because of its mundane content and association with everyday routine and sustenance, and because it focused attention on the ‘decorative’ (a euphemism for abstract or formal) properties of line, composition, and colour. Iu. Filatov, *Veshchi, sovremennost', zhivopis'*, “Zvezda”, 1961, 2, p. 177. See S. E. Reid, *Art*, op. cit., pp. 347-366; Idem, *Still Life and the Vanity of Socialist Realism: Robert Fal'k's Potatoes, 1955*, “The Russian Review”, 2017 (LXXVI), 3, pp. 408-437.

⁹¹ Z. Krasnova, *Khoroshii vkus v ubranstve zhil'ia*, “Sem”ia i shkola”, 1960, 1, p. 45.

⁹² Landscape photographs were rare, however.

and the cultivation of a modern tourist gaze played an important role in the process of constructing and developing a taste for the Russian scene⁹³. Tat'iana A. (Apatity) had, typically, purchased her landscape paintings – or “nature in a frame”, as she referred to them – while on vacation.

In the construction of a sense of Russianness, as a quality invested in the land as well as in the people, a seminal role had been played since the late nineteenth century by the work of artists associated with the *Peredvizhniki* or Wanderers [Fig. 13]. This artistic association was established in 1870 with the expressed aim to broaden the public for art and appeal to the newly emerging middle-class buyer⁹⁴. The cultural form they gave to Russian nature, organizing and framing it into landscape for the aesthetic gaze of their urban public, came to represent ‘Russia’, an image that persisted through the Soviet period to the present day⁹⁵. Reproductions of landscapes by the *Peredvizhniki*, or imitating their realist style and choice of motifs, predominated among paintings and reproductions in the homes in my study, alongside amateur works. Irina P. in Samara, for example, had an amateur copy of a painting by Isaak Levitan, depicting a woodland path⁹⁶. Popular preference for nineteenth-century Russian landscapes was unsurprising, given that such works were the most familiar as well as widely available. Strongly promoted in the Soviet education system and popular enlightenment programmes as well as in museums and in mass print runs of reproductions, the *Peredvizhniki* were

presented as national popular artists whose project of bringing art to the ‘people’ had presaged Soviet efforts to democratise art. In the immediate post-war period, the suppression of alternative schools of art, both Western and indigenous, meant that for many Soviet citizens (especially those who did not have the benefit of educated parents with collections of older publications in domestic libraries) the *Peredvizhniki* – and Soviet works closely modelled on them – became almost synonymous with ‘art’, being the only professional art they knew. Reproductions of nineteenth-century Russian landscape paintings by Savrasov, Shishkin and others were a staple among the ‘official’ pictures ubiquitous in public interiors, reflecting impersonal, institutional choices of décor⁹⁷.

Russian realist landscapes were also a ‘safe’ choice for the home, unlikely to challenge the taste of household members of different generations, or of their guests. This preference for nostalgic, pastoral pictures of a hospitable, homely nature is neither surprising nor unique to Russian or Soviet homes, even if the specific topography, flora and fauna conforms to the established stereotype of the ‘Russian scene’. As has been found in other national contexts, a guiding principle in choices for the domestic interior is that the décor should be recognizably ‘homey’ or *uiutno* [cosy] to others; it should make them feel at home⁹⁸. A large scale survey of popular consumer preferences in regard to art, commissioned in the mid-1990s by the Russian émigré conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, made similar findings about popular taste on an international scale. Parodying Soviet concern with defining “the people’s art”, they used market research techniques in Russia, USA, China, and other countries to identify “the kind of art that people most want”. The survey showed a wide popular preference, across different nations, for ideal landscapes of a type that,

⁹³ C. Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, DeKalb 2009; C. Ely, *The Origins of Russian Scenery: Volga River Tourism and Russian Landscape Aesthetics*, “Slavic Review”, 2003 (LXII), 4, pp. 670–682; A. Rowley, *Open Letters: Russian Popular Culture and the Picture Postcard, 1880–1922*, Toronto 2013.

⁹⁴ E. Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*, New York 1989; D. Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting*, Manchester 2006; A. Shabanov, *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia: The Peredvizhniki, a Partnership of Artists*, London 2018.

⁹⁵ C. Ely, *This Meager Nature*, op. cit.; For the way the tourist gaze is structured and its object commodified as “sites/sights” see J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London 1990

⁹⁶ Several works by Levitan correspond to Irina P.’s description, including *Evening: The Path into the Woods*, or his *Path into the Woods*, *Novkuznetsk*

⁹⁷ E.g. L. Nevler, *Tut vsë*, op. cit.; and an example of bad taste from the foyer of Dinamo Cinema, Moscow, illustrated in I. Zhvirblis, *Domas privideniem*, “DI”, 1962, 6, pp. 43–45.

⁹⁸ M. Gullestad, *The Art of Social Relations*, Oslo-Oxford 1992; G. McCracken, “Homeyness”: *A Cultural Account of One Constellation of Consumer Goods and Meanings*, in *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. by E.C. Hirschman, Provo 1989, pp. 168–183



Fig. 14 - Vasilii's reproduction of Ivan Shishkin (1832-98), *Rain in the Oak Grove* (1891) (original in collection of The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, oil on canvas, 124 x 203 cm.) Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

according to 'evolutionary aesthetics', was most hospitable to human life, while lacking signs of human intervention⁹⁹.

Like Komar and Melamid's respondents, my subjects also showed a preference for timeless, nostalgic, and sentimental subject matter, set in a selectively imagined, preindustrial or even primordial, edenic past. The more troubling paintings of the *Peredvizhnik*i, such as Il'ia Repin's critical social commentary and tragic moral dilemmas, were avoided, as were landscapes that more explicitly reflected man's interventions in nature¹⁰⁰. Human figures play little part in these compositions, serving at best as staffage, and traces of human presence and actions were minimal and entropic. Ivan Shishkin's meticulously observed studies of Russian landscape and vegetation were especially popular. Larisa (St. Petersburg) also describes a reproduction of a forest landscape, probably by Shishkin or a follower. Vasilii had several framed reproductions of nineteenth-century Russian landscape paintings (in addition to photos, calendars and other images), including a framed repro-



Fig. 15 - Landscape reproduction in Vasilii's collection, Kaluga. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

duction of Shishkin's *Rain in the Oak Grove* (1891) [Fig. 14], and another depicting a forest clearing by a stream with a tumbledown cottage in the process of returning to nature, while a small figure walking into the painting also seems about to be reabsorbed into the landscape¹⁰¹ [Fig. 15].

Often the main protagonists are animals, contrasting with Socialist Realism's emphasis on human agency and subjugation of nature [Fig. 16]. Rugs or tapestries on the wall depicted deer and antlered stag in edenic lakeside landscapes¹⁰². Bears enjoyed great popularity in the decoration of these modern urban apartments, thanks to Shishkin's widely reproduced work; to their ability to stand on two legs, which enables them to be anthropomorphised; to their identification with childhood and teddy bear toys; as well as to their status as established symbols of Russian identity. In the home of a Russian couple in Tartu, a needlepoint runner in saturated blues and greens depicts two exaggeratedly cute bear cubs playing, like children, on a seesaw in a clearing of a birch wood with a white cottage in the distance [Fig. 17].

While some pictures had been acquired in the

⁹⁹ V. Komar – A. Melamid, *The People's Choice Series, 1994-1997 / The Most Wanted Paintings*: DIA Center for the Arts, <<http://awp.diaart.org/km/>> (latest access: 04.09.2019); E. Dissanayake, *Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste*, "Philosophy and Literature", 1998 (XXII), 2, pp. 486-496.

¹⁰⁰ If they had other pictures, which might arouse troubling or unpleasant associations, or even ones that were demonstrably modern in subject matter or style, then these were rarely on show.

¹⁰¹ Cf. J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840*, Cambridge 1980; D. Lowenthal, *Past Time, Present Time: The Landscape of Memory*, "Geographical Review", 1975 (LXV), pp. 1-36; S. Boym, *Future*, op. cit.

¹⁰² These choices were not exclusive to ethnic Russians, for example, Roza, a Tatar in Kazan', had a black and white scraper board picture depicting deer in a forest clearing, light on water and silver birches.



Fig. 16 - Wall-hanging with antlered stag and reproduction of Ivan Shishkin and Konstantin Savitskii, *Morning in a Pine Forest*, 1889 (original in collection of The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, oil on canvas, 139 x 213 cm.), in Iadviga's St Peterburg flat. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.



Fig. 17 - Needlepoint tapestry with bear cubs at play, hung beneath a world map in the apartment of a Russian couple in Tartu, Estonia. Photographed for the project *Everyday Aesthetics in the Modern Soviet Flat*, 2004-07, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. © Susan E. Reid.

intervening years, including in the post-Soviet period, these motifs were not only a later accretion. Even at the peak of the drive to modernise the material environment in the early 1960s, their prevalence is indicated by contemporary, highly critical accounts. Nevler, in 1963, described how hostel residents chose to decorate the walls of their dwelling with their favourite pictures: “Above the bed hangs a pattern for cross-stitch embroidery with figures from fairy tales – the anthropomorphised animals of fables [such as] foxes, rabbits, and bears – plus photos of artists from the back cover of ‘Sovetskii ekran’. There is also a plastic plate with the portrait of Iurii Gagarin”¹⁰³. The prevalence, among popular choices, of antlered stags or does in woodland clearings, bears in deep forests, cute kittens, and “silly swans and mermaids”, was widely condemned by taste experts in the 1960s as banal, sentimental kitsch, and was stigmatised as uneducated, ‘philistine’, provincial bad taste¹⁰⁴.

Above I noted that the appearance of pictures on the walls of the people's homes was welcomed as a

sign of progress. Yet the pictures that hung there had an ambivalent relationship with modernity. Favouring a reassuring image of nature that was tame and hospitable, yet untouched by human industry and modernisation, they were oriented towards an idealised national past. The nostalgia that dominated domestic visual culture was at odds with the chiliastic aspirations of Soviet discourse since the Revolution. These retrospective choices were far from the authoritative meanings inscribed on the new, industrially built flats – as a site for unsentimental rejection of the past and embrace of progress – and contravened the ubiquitous advice on ‘contemporary good taste’ in interior decoration. There is little sign, in regard to choices of paintings and reproductions, that the modernist environment of the *khrushchëvki* and the accompanying prescriptions of modernist taste changed the penchant to surround oneself with nostalgic, backward-looking or exotic images. If anything, they exacerbated it. Popular preference proved resilient and resistant to reform in this regard, even as, in other respects such as the display of photoiconostases and *etazhërki*, my subjects came, by the late 1960s, to see the handed-down practices as inappropriate to their new urban selves and modern way of life.

Should we interpret the widespread choice of nostalgic representations of a premodern, pastoral natural world as a form of everyday resistance to the

¹⁰³ L. Nevler, *Tut vsë*, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. an open letter from leading artists, published in *Krokodil*, castigated the popular penchant for such things: S. Kononkov, Kukriniksy, Iu. Pimenov, N. Tomskii, D. Shmarinov, *O pypsikakh, koshechkakh i vospitanii vkusa*, “Krokodil”, 1959, 6, pp. 8-9; Z. Krasnova, *Khoroshii vkus*, op. cit., p. 45; L. Nevler, *Tut vsë*, op. cit., p. 29.

hegemony of the modernising state and to the *intelligentsiia* specialists' civilising mission? Did it confirm, as Bolsheviks and cultural modernists had always suspected, that the home was a regressive, recalcitrant realm, a millstone around the neck of progress?

The relationship was a more complex and ambivalent one than 'resistance' would imply. As Boym wrote about private collections of objects and pictures (in late Soviet communal apartments), these "allow one to imagine other times and places and plunge into domestic daydreaming and armchair nostalgia"¹⁰⁵. But nostalgia and progress are two sides of the same coin. Nostalgia has been historicised as a quintessentially modern emotion. Although its historical roots lie in the ancient myth of the return home, it was reborn in the early modern period in response to continual change¹⁰⁶. The pastoral, too, was a product of industrialisation, typical of modernity's paradoxical relationship with nature and with the past. Significantly, the greatest nostalgia seems to be displayed by those, like Vasili, who were more recently urbanised. The penchant for pastoral and nostalgic images of a premodern past cannot be dismissed as a simple rejection of industrial progress, nor should it necessarily be seen as an effort to exclude Soviet public culture. The avoidance of all traces of industry exemplifies the home's heterotopic relationship to modernity, as a site for mediating and mitigating change. The late Soviet home, as I proposed above in regard to photographs, was a place for reconstructing imaginary continuity with the past: for curating an idealised familial and national past, and for maintaining genealogy and kinship over time and space¹⁰⁷. Displays of pictures

could play a role in overcoming deracination and establishing a sense of belonging or identification of self with home, in the sense of 'homeland'.

Moreover, we should not lose sight of the contradictions of authoritative discourses. These were not always internally coherent and homogeneous, but were a battleground between forces of reform and conservatism, and were also subject to change. By the late 1960s-1970s, the domestic, vernacular culture of nostalgia was no longer out of kilter with Soviet public culture, as it had been in the Khrushchëv era, which saw the apotheosis of modernist faith in progress. The source of identity, authority, purpose and legitimacy of the Soviet project shifted from the future to the past: to wartime suffering, heroism, and triumph, as well as to the mythic olden times of preindustrial Russia. By the 1970s it had become legitimate to look backward and inward. Along with a more critical approach to the costs of progress and the ways in which the past was represented, nostalgia became the dominant emotion expressed in public culture of the seventies. Its expressions included the rise of environmentalist and historic preservation movements, and tourism to sites of Russian premodern history such as the Golden Ring; and they ranged ideologically from the liberal metropolitan *intelligentsiia*'s critical discussions of the "ecology of culture" and use of history to critique the present, to a reactionary Russian chauvinism that idealised an integral, pure, national past¹⁰⁸. As the 1975 special issue of "Dekorativnoe iskusstvo" indicated, the domestic interior was also, by the 1970s, acknowledged as a site for an eclectic collection of things originating in different times and places; no longer did aesthetic specialists insist on the synchronic newness and stylistic unity of the modernist

¹⁰⁵ S. Boym, *Future*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ Nostalgia is an historical emotion coeval with modernity itself. S. Boym, *Future*, op. cit., pp. xiii-xvi; M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York 1982.

¹⁰⁷ The aesthetics of homeyness (*uiutnost'*) and privacy were conservative and retrospective, a response to modernity that was not exclusive to the USSR. S. E. Reid, *The Meaning of Home: "The Only Bit of the World You Can Have to Yourself"*, in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. by L. Siegelbaum, New York-Basingstoke 2006, pp. 145-170; S. E. Reid, *Communist Comfort: Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev-Era Soviet Union*, "Gender and History", 2009 (XXI), 3, pp. 465-498. See also on memory and identity: C. Kelly,

Making a Home on the Neva, and A. Pechurina, *Russian Dolls, Icons, and Pushkin*, both in "Laboratorium", 2011, 3, pp. 53-96; pp. 97-117. Cf. J. Attfield, *Bringing Modernity*, op. cit., pp. 73-82. ¹⁰⁸ E.g. D. Likhachev, *Ekologiya kul'tury*, "Moskva", 1979, 7. See S. E. Reid, *Art*, op. cit.; J. V. Haney, *The Revival of Interest in the Russian Past in the Soviet Union*, "Slavic Review", 1973 (XXXII), 1, pp. 1-16; J. Bushnell, *The New Soviet Man Turns Pessimist*, in *The Soviet Union Since Stalin*, ed. by S. F. Cohen – A. Rabinowitch – R. S. Sharlet, London 1980, pp. 179-199; S. V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat*, Ithaca [NY] 2008.

‘contemporary style’¹⁰⁹.

Domestic picture culture did not develop in isolation from such developments in late Soviet public culture. Individuals exercised agency and choice within a common material and discursive framework, which was shaped in part by the party-state and its specialist agents, as well as by handed-down dispositions. Private visual culture was, to some extent, contingent upon the priorities of central planning and production; the reproductions that people put on their walls were, after all, largely the products of Soviet reprographic and publishing industries and mass communications. Domestic picture culture was not, however, entirely determined by state production and public discourse. The resources they provided were curated in ways that sometimes contradicted authoritative prescriptions, values or aesthetics. They were selectively appropriated, personalised, and incorporated into syncretic ensembles, along with items of heterogeneous origins, representing other cultures and different internalised authorities.

Domestic displays demonstrate the way the home functions to reconcile contradictions, which are also part of self-identity. Nostalgic references to national olden times cohabited with collections of items that directly referenced the new experiences of late Soviet modernity: consumption, leisure culture, tourism, the explosion of mass visual culture and even globalisation. The representations of self, kin and homeland, which this paper has considered, coexisted with references to travel to other places, which lie beyond its scope. Most obviously, maps of the world were a common form of visual culture that often appeared on walls, just as, in Laktionov’s painting, the family’s possessions included a globe, positioned prominently near the radio [see Fig. 7 and Fig. 17]. Domestic visual culture was embedded in a network of routes, while things of disparate origins were juxtaposed within the ‘global assemblages’ of the home.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on domestic pictures and their display as a way to frame historical questions

concerning the subjective effects of, and responses to, rapid modernisation, while keeping in focus the agency of subjects and how they constructed a sense of coherence, continuity and identity. The proliferation of domestic pictures marked a new stage of Soviet modernity, beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, during which my subjects relocated to new apartments and made themselves at home there. It was a symptom of becoming a consumer society and a more leisured one, when some began to have opportunities for tourist travel and to engage in hobbies such as amateur art or collecting. The visual culture of the new flats was also shaped by the rapid growth of mass reproduction and consumption of images. The increasingly saturated ‘pictorialisation’ of the interior indexed the assimilation of these and other aspects of modernity into private life and domestic, everyday material culture, and made visible the permeability of the threshold between public and private that is a widespread characteristic of the modern home¹¹⁰. Domestic picture displays reveal how macro-structural changes entered the micro-dynamics of citizens’ lives, cumulatively yet sometimes imperceptibly. Aesthetic choices reflected social stratification and self-other distinctions. At the same time, they demonstrate the tenacity of deeply rooted dispositions and practices. Displays of pictures could also play a role in overcoming deracination and establishing a sense of belonging or identification of self with home, in the extended sense of ‘homeland’. The curation of domestic picture galleries emerged, in the interiors and interviews on which this paper draws, as a means of ‘curating’ – producing and maintaining – a continuous self in the face of change.

www.esamizdat.it ◇ Susan E. Reid, *Picturing the Self and Homeland in the Late Soviet Home*.
◇ eSamizdat 2020 (XIII), pp. 27–58.

¹⁰⁹ A. Levinson, *Zhivoye kvartiry*, op. cit., pp. 13–18.

¹¹⁰ T. Riley, *The Un-Private House*, New York 1999.

◇ *Picturing the Self and Homeland in the Late Soviet Home* ◇

Susan E. Reid

Abstract

The paper considers the roles played by pictures on the walls of standard, prefabricated apartments (*khreshchëvki*) built in cities across the Khrushchëv-era Soviet Union. It explores the intimate but sometimes problematic relation between hanging pictures and achieving a sense of self and belonging. The increasingly saturated ‘pictorialisation’ of the interior was hailed by Soviet authorities as a marker of progress, growing prosperity and rising cultural level of the Soviet people, but its relation to the passage of historical time was not unilinear, nor did it passively ‘reflect’ change. The selection and arrangement of pictures could tell more nuanced and contradictory stories about the past and present of those who chose to live with them on their walls, about their social relations, and about the complexities and contradictions of Soviet modernity. The apartment walls were a site for practices of memory and nostalgia, whereby the occupants produced themselves by ‘curating’ a selective past. Displays of pictures could also play a role in overcoming deracination and establishing an identification of self with home in the wider sense of ‘homeland’. At the same time, the culture of hanging pictures was subject to change over time and to social distinctions.

Keywords

Pictures, Photographs, Curating, Home, Domestic Collections, Self, Memory, Homeland, Soviet, *Khreshchëvki*.

Author

Susan E. Reid is Professor of Transnational and Modern European History in the Department of History at Durham University, UK, and Visiting Professor of Cultural and Visual History in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University. She holds a PhD in History of Art from University of Pennsylvania. She is author of widely cited publications on the history of Soviet art and design, visual and material culture, gender, consumption, and the everyday, with a focus on the Khrushchëv era and the Cold War. Recent publications include: *American Art in Moscow 1959 and the Cold War Politics of the Public* in *The Cool and the Cold. Painting in the USA and the USSR 1960–1990. The Ludwig Collection*, ed. by Brigitte Franzen/Peter und Irene Ludwig Stiftung (Walther König, 2020); *How did Material Culture Matter in the Khrushchëv Era USSR? Everyday Aesthetics and the Socialist Culture of Things*, in *Zeitgeschichte der Dinge: Spurensuchen in der materiellen Kultur*, ed. by Andreas Ludwig (Böhlau Verlag, 2019); “Palaces in Our Hearts”: *Caring for Khreshchëvki in Architecture, Democracy and Emotions: The Politics of Feeling since 1945*, ed. by T. Großmann and P. Nielsen (Routledge, 2018); *Kak obzhivalis’ v pozdnesovetskoi modernosti (Making Oneself at Home in Late Soviet Modernity)*, in *Posle Stalina (After Stalin: Subjectivity in the Late Soviet Union 1953-1985)*, ed. by A. Pinsky (St. Petersburg University Press, 2018); *Cold War Binaries and the Culture of Consumption in the Late Soviet Home*, “Journal of Historical Research in Marketing”, 2016 (8), 1 (winner of the Emerald Outstanding Paper Award for 2017). She is currently completing the monograph *Khreshchëv Modern: Making Oneself at Home in the Soviet Sixties* on homemaking, consumption, material culture, everyday aesthetics and the popular experience of modernity in the USSR after Stalin.

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