



THE POWER OF PICTURES

Early Soviet Photography and Film

March 11–July 4, 2016 | Upper-Level Galleries

***The Power of Pictures* explores the relationship between art and politics, revisiting a point in history when artists were a primary engine of social change.**

The early years of the Soviet Union (1921–32) were a period of great turmoil and stunning creativity. After the Russian Revolution new artistic approaches were required to reflect a dramatically altered reality. Artists turned to the camera as a new medium to document their young country. This exhibition presents iconic examples of both photography and film, uncovering their shared radical aesthetic in a moment of profound social transformation.

Initially, the Communist government encouraged the avant-garde: radical style was seen as the expression of radical politics. For a time, artistic invention operated in potent and fruitful synergy with activism. Photographers and filmmakers were urged to try unusual techniques: collage, montage, darkroom manipulation, unconventional camera angles, fast-paced editing, and shifts in depth of field allowed the viewer to experience a familiar reality from an unfamiliar perspective.

A large number of the most prominent photographers, photojournalists, and filmmakers were Jewish; as members of a recently emancipated minority, they

welcomed the arrival of the Soviet Union, with its promise of a new, egalitarian world.

The period of intense innovation was brief. By 1932, as Joseph Stalin consolidated power, independent styles were no longer tolerated; the avant-garde itself became suspect. Artistic organizations were dissolved and replaced by state-run unions. Art was subject to strict state control, and required to promote an approved, idealized socialist agenda.

The work of the early Soviet camera artists—experimental, visionary, engaged—is remarkably relevant for our time. As we think about the role of images in the age of social media, it has numerous lessons to offer, particularly in regard to the circulation of pictures, the space between objectivity and manipulation, and the relationship of images to the mass public. It reminds us that to maintain a connection between art and politics is a matter of urgency. Indeed, we must understand the relationship of the two in order to critically examine our own culture.

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