

Osip Brik, "From Picture to Calico-Print" (1924)

The propaganda of production art is now crowned with success.

It is becoming obvious that art culture is not totally covered by objects for exhibitions and museums, that, in particular, painting is not "pictures," but the entire aggregate of the pictorial designing of life.

The calico-print is just the same sort of product of art culture as the picture, and there is no foundation for drawing any sort of dividing line between the two. Moreover, the belief is growing that the picture is riving, that it is inextricably bound to the forms of the capitalist system, to its cultural ideology, and that the calico-print is now moving into the centre of creative attention—that calico, and work on it, are now the peaks of art work.

This is a fact. Our cultural creative work is now entirely purpose-orientated. We do not think up for ourselves any cultural work that does not pursue some definite practical aim. The concepts of "pure science", "pure art", and "self-valuable truths and beauties" are foreign to us. We are practitioners—and in this lies the distinguishing feature of our cultural consciousness.

The easel-art picture can find no place in such a consciousness. For its strength and significance lie in its non-utilitarianism, in the fact that it serves no other purpose than that of pleasing, of "delighting the eye."

All attempts to turn an easel-painting into an agit-picture are fruitless. Not because no talented artist could be found to do it, but because it is unthinkable in its very essence.

The easel painting is intended for a prolonged existence, to last for years and even centuries. But what agit-theme could last for such a time? What agit-picture would not be obsolete within a month? And if the theme of the agit-picture were obsolete, what would there be left in it?

A theme of short-lived effect must not be dealt with by devices intended for a lengthy existence. A one-day object must not be built to last centuries.

This is why the agit-picture cannot bear comparison with the agit-poster, this is why there are no good agit-pictures.

The "pure" easel-artists have exercised good judgment in refusing to work on agit-themes. They realize that this way the easel-painting will perish, that it loses its basic values, its "timeless," "non-utilitarian" significance, and that the poster will outdo it. They are therefore making desperate attacks to save it by another method: - to impress on one and all that the easel-painting is, in its purely formal sense, a huge cultural fact, that without it any art culture is unthinkable.

They maintain that if no easel-paintings are made, then art culture will perish, that the creative "freedom" which is apparent in the making of these easel-paintings must not be extinguished for a single second otherwise art will end.

Let the theme of the picture be trivial, let there be an abstract "free" play of the forms—this is unimportant what is important is that this non-temporal, non-utilitarian, "purely aesthetic" value will continue to exist, that one will be able to glance at it, be imbued with it and art culture will be saved.

This is how monks reason. Their righteous life outside the world saves the world. And yet the easel-artists are right. If the painting can be saved it is only in this way.

If it is true that the easel-painting is necessary for the existence of art culture, that without it art culture will perish, then, of course, we must take every step to encourage its development and well-being.

But it is not true. The easel-painting is not only unnecessary to our present day art culture, but is one of the most powerful brakes to its development. And this is why.

Of course, the chief evil is not in the monkish reasonings of the "pure" easel-artists. These can easily be dispelled by the light of anti-religious, anti-aesthetic propaganda. What is bad is that these monkish dogmas are turned into productional and pedagogical principles.

The nub of the matter is that the easel-artists do not deny the importance and necessity of other forms of art culture. They fully allow the existence of agit-posters, sketches for calico-printing, and book covers; they simply maintain that without easel painting all these "secondary" aspects are unthinkable, that easel-painting is the creative base on which all the culture of painting is constructed.

Hence the conclusion that if you want to make good calico-prints, learn how to paint landscapes.

The easel-artists argue thus: the artist, wherever he works, whatever he does, must be master of an art culture, must be artistically educated. This art culture, this art education, is given to him by easel-painting.

Having mastered the "secrets" of easel-painting, he thereby masters the "secrets" of every sort of painting work, be it calico, the book-cover, the poster, or theatre decoration.

And this is where the easel-artists are cruelly wrong.

The painting is the product of a certain aspect of artistic work. To make a painting one must expend a certain quantity of technical devices and skills, namely those devices and skills with which a picture can be made. Why does it follow that these devices and skills are universal? Why does it suddenly turn out that the devices and skills suitable for one craft are right for any other?

Let us admit that partial coincidences are also possible, that part of the devices may be universally used; but why should one craft be basic in relation to another, Why should the making of a still-life be more basic than the making of a calico print? Why should one first learn to make still-life pictures, and then proceed to calico-prints, and not the other way round?

The easel-artists like to compare pure easel-painting with pure mathematics. They say that both of them give general principles, general propositions, which can then be applied in practice.

But the easel-artists forget that a picture is not science, but practical work, and cannot establish any "general" propositions. The experience of the easel-painter is not the experience of the artist in general, but merely the experience of one particular case of pictorial work.

The easel-artists want to vindicate their right of existence.

If easel-art died, as a socially necessary aspect of artistic craft, then, they say, let it come back to life as a universal artistic method, as the highest school of all artistic practical work.

This is how the zealots of classical antiquity tried to vindicate the need for Greek and Latin in secondary schools.

But the pedagogic universality of easel-art can be disproved not only by theoretical arguments, but also by everyday practical experience.

The sad fate of artists who have passed through the easel-art school, and then try to apply their knowledge and skills in production, is well known. Nothing comes of it. However, the easel-artist, by and large, doesn't care a thing about production. The acknowledgment of production art is an empty phrase in his mouth.

If work in production were always to remain art of the lowest sort it would be all the same to him. This is why it is not the easel-artists who will find methods for this type of work, and it will not be from easel-art that the solution of the problems of production art will come.

Only those artists who have broken once and for all with easel-artistry, who have in fact recognized production work as not only an equally legitimate aspect of art work, but as the only one possible, only these artists can undertake the solving of the problems of present-day art culture productively and successfully.

Among these artists, as yet still few in number, are the members of Inkhuk: Rodchenko, Lavinsky, Vesnin, Stepanova, Johanson, Senkin, Klutskis and the late Lyubov Popova.

There is one very serious objection that the easel-artists make against the production artists. They say: Your works are no different from the most primitive sort of applied art; you are doing just what applied artists have always done, "applying" easel drawings to factory produced objects. But what will you do if there are to be no easel-works? What will you "apply?"

It is true that art work, and factory or workshop work, are still separate. The artist is still an alien in the factory. People react suspiciously to him, they do not let him get close. They do not trust him. They cannot understand why he must know the technical processes, why he should have information of a purely industrial nature. His business is to draw, to make drawings—and it is the business of the factory to choose suitable ones from among them and stick them on ready-made manufactures.

The basic idea of production art, that the external appearance of a thing is determined by its economic purpose and not by abstract, aesthetic considerations, is still insufficiently apprehended by our industrialists, and it seems to them that the artist, in seeking to delve into the "economic secret" of the object, is poking his nose into other people's business.

Hence the inevitable applied art—a result of the alienation of the artist from production. As he does not receive the necessary economic directives he involuntarily falls back on aesthetic stereotypes.

What conclusion can be drawn from this?

Forward!—to the overcoming of this alienation.

Forward!—to the union of artist and factory.

And never: backwards—to pure easel work, or backwards—to little pictures.

Leading artists have already set out on the road from picture to calico-print, and of course they will not turn back. But this is only the beginning. The entire mass of young artists must understand that this road is the only true one, that it is along this road that the development of art culture will proceed.

It is necessary for our industrialists to understand their role in this matter, since on this depends the acceleration of this historical process.

The initiative of the director of the first cotton-printing factory in Moscow (formerly the Tsindel), comrade Arkhangelsky, and of Professor Viktorov, who invited the artists Stepanova and Popova to work there, is worthy of great attention and praise.

And if it is still too early to speak about the results of this first experiment, then it is essential to mention its huge cultural value.

The art culture of the future is being made in the factories and workshops, and not in attic studios.

Let young artists remember this, if they want to avoid falling prematurely into the archives, together with the haughty easel-artists.