

Confronting Stenciled Posters: The Discovery, Conservation, and Display of Soviet TASS World War II Posters

ABSTRACT

Summer 2011 brought to fruition a 10-year collaborative project in which museum professionals from all corners of The Art Institute of Chicago conserved, researched, and displayed hundreds of oversized World War II TASS posters alongside commercially printed war posters and artists' renditions of war.

The TASS posters were modeled after stenciled posters made by the Russian Telegraph Agency, ROSTA, during the Russian Civil War (1917–23). The initial goal of the TASS Studio was to produce one poster for each day of World War II. Over the course of 1,418 days of war, the studio collaboration brought together more than 92 of the most noted artists, poets, writers, stencil cutters, and painters of the day, resulting in 1,240 designs and a total of 690,000–700,000 individually stenciled posters. Although the posters were produced rapidly, with poor quality paints and papers—the shortage of artists' materials plagued the studio throughout the war—they were made to the highest aesthetic standards. The TASS posters were distributed each day and hung in shop windows throughout Moscow and abroad, fulfilling the TASS Studio artists' goal of disseminating agitational propaganda.

In 1997, staff in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute made a startling discovery during preparation for a major renovation. At this time, art from all corners of the department was inventoried and temporarily relocated. While emptying out a closet, Art Institute staff discovered a narrow, trough-like shelf high above rack storage; it contained two thick rolls of paper and 26 folded-paper parcels. Enclosed within these parcels were 157 long-forgotten TASS posters that were mailed to the Art Institute in 1942. The USSR Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) was responsible for the international distribution of TASS posters, and it began mailing posters to the United States as early as the summer of 1941. Current knowledge

indicates that this remarkable collection was never exhibited during the war.

This talk described the discovery and study of the Art Institute's collection of TASS stenciled posters. Trends in materials usage were outlined, and the stencil process used in the TASS Studio was elucidated. Conservation was discussed in two phases: Phase I, which addressed the Art Institute's long-forgotten TASS posters, was carried out in 1997; Phase II, which treated the Ne Boltai private collection of posters, was conducted during 2010–11. Innovative and unconventional conservation treatment techniques were necessitated by the oversized format and poor-quality materials of the TASS posters. Unorthodox display methods—developed to bring the posters back into the public eye in the exhibition *Windows on the War: Soviet TASS Posters at Home and Abroad, 1941–1945*—were described.

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