

# The Russians are coming



Brian Fallon previews a major show of Soviet art

WHATEVER ABOUT Iron Curtains, the Soviet art world for decades has been shut off from the West by an opaque blind. Soviet writers occasionally travelled abroad or published abroad; Soviet painters and sculptors very seldom did. There was a brief period during the Sixties "Thaw" — who remembers that now? — when things seemed to be changing, but this proved a false dawn.

Very occasionally, a touring Russian exhibition was seen, but not much excitement was generated. Before the first World War, Russia had been well up with the European avant garde and in some respects — notably abstract art — even ahead of it. But the pioneers petered out under Stalin — that is, if they hadn't already emigrated to Europe or America like Chagall, Kandinsky, Exter, Naum Gabo and many more.

It was taken for granted, in the West, that Russian art had fallen well behind the times. Recent signs, however, indicated that this viewpoint was too pat, and a few years ago the emergence of a lively avant garde in East Germany showed that times were changing. And when Francis Bacon showed in Russia recently, not only painters but the entire Russian intelligentsia are reported to have been shaken by his pictures.

Dublin has seen two Russian exhibitions in the Eighties — at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, and at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham; and now it is to see another. On March 15th, the USSR Ambassador to Ireland, Mr Ginnadii Uranov, will open a major exhibition of Soviet and contemporary Irish art in the Mansion House, Dublin. Sculpture will be included as well as paintings and one of Russia's most famous painters, Rudolph Khatchatryan, will attend the opening personally, bringing with him a number of his works.

The show will cover a wide range of styles, and while Russian art may not be in step with the West, it isn't provincial either. Abstraction isn't shunned — after all, the Russians virtually invented it — and Social Realism is not only dead but buried. But there is rather more "human interest" than contemporary European or American art likes to deal in, and the presence of nature bulks larger than it does with Western artists. The Soviet Union, after all, includes a lot of field, forest and mountain.

The artists represented range over several generations, though all are living. Moses Feigin, for instance, was born in Byelorussia in 1904; Boris Markovnikov was born as late as 1958. Markovnikov says about his work: "Beauty is the pain of memory. It's the way from the point of memory up to the moment I put my brushes aside and say: that's it. It's sadness for what is gone forever, for permanent loss, it's my daily routine." Another exhibitor, the woman painter Larissa Naumova, says: "One cannot see evil in my works but a problem, a tragedy of good and its eternal fight with evil."



ABOVE: "People Flying over City" by Natalia Nesterova, born in Moscow in 1914 and a graduate of the Moscow Surikov State College of Arts.

LEFT: "Night Visitors" by Mikhail Dronov, born in Moscow in 1956 and also a graduate of the Surikov State College of Art