

An Empty Canvas is Full

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Abstract : This essay examines the Soviet Artist Pavel Korin's artistic pursuit towards his life-long project, "Requiem/Passing of the Rus," framing the funeral of Tikhon, the last great defender of the Russian orthodox Church during the Great purge, as the final moment of "Rus," which is the identity of the Russian people that built up in the 1000 year of history behind Russian Orthodoxy. Korin's project remains in the form of a series of 29 man-sized portraits and a monumental blank canvas. Born in a family dedicated to iconography, Korin witnessed the historic drama during Stalin's terror; therefore, he tried to convey the nation's mourning for the disappearance of "Rus" and disapproval of the Soviet notion of atheism. Yet, due to Korin's success as a state artist, many believed that the political pressure led Korin to give up his belief and controversy arose over the fact that Korin left the canvas blank. The empty 40-square-meter canvas, which remains untouched in his studio since 1930, supports this theory to an extent. However, resources such as Korin's notes, primary accounts from his fellow Soviet Artists, and testimonies from his wife suggested that this assumption is incorrect. Moreover, Korin's uninterrupted relationship with the church and the religious attributes in his commissioned works were brought up as evidence of Korin's continued belief. The empty canvas not only represents Korin's discontentment towards the repression and the hardships that the Orthodox Church experienced, but also depicts the identity that coexisted with the Church in order to bequeath this idea to future generations. The faultless canvas surrounded by the striking 29 portraits is a symbol of the highest spirit, similar to that of the iconography paintings placed in every Russian house that unites the Russian people till this day, therefore one can deduce that the legacy of "Requiem" is still relevant to the Russian people even under freedom of religious expression. Consequently, "Requiem" was on display at the Tretyakov Gallery for the first time in public in 2013 even though Korin started creating this piece in 1925, extolling Korin not only as an artist but also as a historian; by recording the turmoil of the Great Oppression, Korin exhibited the social responsibility universal to artists across time and space. In this essay, the legacy Korin left behind, both to his contemporaries and his posterity is reevaluated through the lens of his works, unfinished as they were.

Keywords : Pavel Korin, Art History, Art, Russia, Soviet Union, Requiem, Russian orthodox church, Tretyakov gallery, contemporary art, socialist realism, Maxim Gorky

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