ART AND OCCUPATION

Rudolf Fyodorovich Vilde, *Victory for the Workers* 1921

‘SIEG-DER-WERKTATIGEN! (Victory for the Workers!) 25. Oktober’ exclaims the bold black German Gothic script round this simple, white 10-inch porcelain plate. The centre is filled with a hand-painted *Art Nouveau* floral decoration, a pastel wreath of herbaceous perennials including blue cornflowers, pink carnations, red gazania, pink protea, orange rubekia and blue harebells intermingled with variegated leaves, ornamental grasses, cereals and ferns—an unlikely subject for a celebration of the Russian revolution. The clues lie on the plate’s underside where hammer, sickle and cogwheel motifs sit alongside the partially obscured Imperial Porcelain Factory stamp.

The white-glazed blank plate was almost certainly made around 1901 at the Imperial Porcelain Factory, St Petersburg, where it remained stored and undecorated for 20 years. The factory founded by Empress Elizabeth (1744) and imperialized by Catherine the Great (1765) was taken over by Narkompros, the Fine Arts Department of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment 6 months after the October 1917 Revolution and renamed

Rudolf Vilde, Plate (Victory to the Workers) 1921 porcelain, overglaze painted decoration 3.8 × 24.9 × 24.9 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1978.
Gossudarstvenniy Farforovy Zavod (GFZ) or State Porcelain Factory [1]. The Commissariat reported to Sovnarkom, the Council of the People’s Commissars, presided over by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov aka Lenin, who had already nationalized the country’s most important factories and commercial enterprises.

GFZ’s artistic director Sergei Chekhonin aimed to produce ceramics with a new aesthetic and ideology, so called ‘agitational porcelain’, which would be ‘revolutionary in content, perfect in form and flawless in technical execution’ [2]. Chekhonin recruited many of Russia’s leading artists including Kandinsky and Malevich and each was given two unpainted pre-revolutionary pieces of crockery per month to decorate with original designs. The pieces were hand-painted and mostly sold abroad at exhibitions in Paris, Milan and Stockholm. A few reached the expensive stores on St Petersburg’s fashionable Vesky Prospekt but were largely inaccessible to the proletariat [3]. The new patterns embraced socialist themes, quoting slogans from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. Some celebrated the porcelain factory itself. A number, like Vilde’s Victory for the Workers, commemorating the anniversary of the 25th October Revolution [4] were produced for a landmark exhibition, Erste Russische Kunstaustellung (First Russian Art Exhibition) held at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin (1922), where sales reached >5 million German marks, ‘a foreign currency fillip for the struggling Soviet state’ [4]. These ceramics with their avant-garde decoration and socialist exhortations carried Bolshevik propaganda afar, while creating profits to spread international revolution across the purchasing capitalist world.

Rudolf Fyodorovich Vilde, one of the most skilful ceramics artists of the period, was born in Friedrichstadt, Courland Province, Russia (1868) [5]. He attended the Mitava Gymnasium then studied drawing at Prokhorov Tryokhgorny Manufactory in Moscow and graduated from Stieglitz School of Technical Drawing, St Petersburg, as a scholar–draughtsman (1899) [5]. After winning a travelling scholarship he continued his studies in France, Germany and Italy before joining the Imperial Porcelain Factory, St Petersburg, as a draughtsman–designer (1905) [5]. A year later he took charge of the artistic workshops where he remained until the revolution when he was made head of the painting workshops. Although Vilde’s style became much more dynamic and intense under Chekhonin’s influence [6], his nostalgia for the ‘old Russia’ led him occasionally to produce traditional works like this flowery plate.

By 1925 much of the artistic enthusiasm and imaginative production had waned [3] and for a time the factory switched to making porcelain insulators for the country’s massive national electrification scheme. The facility was later renamed Leningradskaia Farforovyi Zavod imeni M.V. Lomonosova (LFZ) in honour of the Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov [2] and produced a range of wares, including collectible animal figurines and dinner sets, until its privatization in 1993. An American private equity company, KKR, subsequently bought a controlling interest in LFZ (1999) primarily for the factory’s priceless museum and then sold it to Nikolai Tsvetkov, President of Nikoil, as a present for his wife Galina Tsvetkova to celebrate International Women’s Day 8 March 2005 [1]. The factory currently employs more than 1500 people and is the official supplier to the Kremlin [7].

Lenin died aged 53 in status epilepticus (1924) after a series of cerebrovascular incidents [8]. He is known to have contracted syphilis during his time in exile and some have suggested that he suffered from GPI (general paralysis of the insane) but his official post-mortem controversially found no evidence of syphilitic brain disease [9]. Nevertheless, many regimes have been less than economic with the truth about their political leaders [10], allowing them to continue in office despite illnesses that have impaired their decision-making capability sometimes with disastrous consequences [11]. How can democratically elected heads of state be relieved from their responsibilities when they are no longer ‘fit’ to govern? Would it be possible to create a politically acceptable but clinically robust system in which presidents and prime ministers were subject to pre-employment and periodic health assessments, restricted duties, suspension of responsibilities and appropriate disclosure without breach of confidentiality? Nyet comrades! As Lenin reportedly said ‘liberty is so precious it must be carefully rationed’.

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References