

LEONID STEELE

A Russian Master Turns 90

BY PETER TRIPPI

While marking his 90th birthday this past November, the artist Leonid Steele (b. 1921) had reason to celebrate something else: the crucial blend of talent, independence, restlessness, and even stubbornness that has allowed him to evolve aesthetically through a career conducted (primarily) in one of the least permissive societies ever — the Soviet Union.

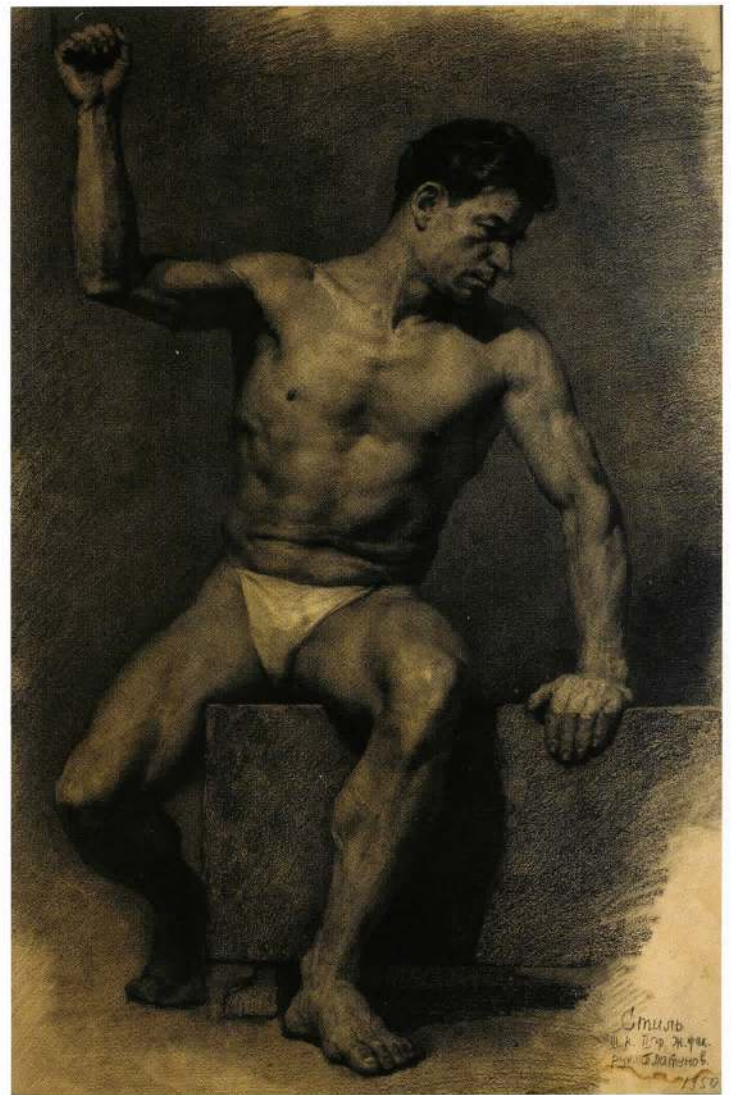
Steele was born in the Ukrainian town of Lebedin and raised in the city of Kharkov; there he survived the horrors of the 1933 famine, only then to endure service in the Red Army during World War II. It was art that kept him going through this tragic era: he had started painting at age four, and at 18 one of his watercolors was chosen to hang in the young people's art exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. In 1947, Steele entered the prestigious Repin Institute in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg), where the competition for places was fierce. Then, as now, just two top art institutes served Russia's enormous population; in Steele's day, each institute produced a few hundred graduates annually, yet only a handful would go on to serious careers.

At the Repin, Steele benefitted from rigorous training in drawing and painting, working from live models in the academic tradition and also from nature in the spirit of such 19th-century *plein air* masters as Repin, Serov, and Levitan. After six years of full-time study, he graduated in 1953, when his large, multi-figure diploma painting, *Defend the Peace*, was exhibited to wide acclaim in Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery and St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral.

A VERY PARTICULAR CONTEXT

This debut suggested there were great things ahead for the 32-year-old, though success would necessarily be measured in the context of Soviet officials' tight control of both images and ideas. The only approved artistic method was Socialist Realism (*Socrealism*), and because there was virtually no commercial market, artworks were perceived not as possessions, entertainments, or decorations, but as the artist's way of communicating his aesthetic and cultural aspirations with a vast public presumed to share similar views. Even today, foreigners remark on how passionately Russians of all kinds engage with artworks and performances; this intensity was not mandated by the government, but emerged spontaneously because it allowed the citizens of a dehumanized society to express themselves and to connect with each other. For this reason, the finest paintings of artists like Leonid Steele were illustrated in almost every mainstream publication; these photographs were often displayed in people's homes in lieu of actual artworks, which could rarely be afforded.

Today most Americans equate *Socrealism* with propaganda churned out by artists seeking honors and privileges from the regime. Of course there was plenty of that, but like any artistic milieu, *Socrealism* also



Academic Study (Male, Full Figure)

1950, Graphite and charcoal pencil on paper, 22 x 14 3/4 in.



Cavalry Soldier

1952, Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 31 in.

encompassed artworks that can be classed as good, better, and best. At its best, in works by Leonid Steele and other leading practitioners, Social Realist art rose above ideology to speak to viewers of any time and place.

Upon graduation, Steele moved to Kiev, the capital of his native Ukraine. Although he flourished there, he found its official art scene pretentious and suffocating, so he often escaped to rural villages in search of authentic, no-nonsense workers he could both paint and befriend. The residents of his favorite village even elected Steele a member of their collective farm board, probably the only member of the Union of Artists ever to be honored in this way. (He was admitted to that prestigious national organization in 1958.) When Steele warned the collective that he did not understand agriculture, their chairman replied, "But you understand the human heart." Indeed, the artist's deep empathy for regular, hard-working people shines through in every phase of his oeuvre, and especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when his exuberant, impressionistic brushstrokes enlivened the solidly academic forms and values visible just beneath.

This edifying mix of proletarian subject and *alla prima* handling helped Steele emerge as one of the Soviet Union's leading artists. He participated in 80 exhibitions, including 11 of the elite All-Union Exhibitions,

and in 1968 he was accorded the rare privilege of visiting 22 foreign countries with his exhibition. Not surprisingly, this voyage introduced Steele to new methods and ideas, which clearly informed the pictures he made and exhibited once resettled at home. Through it all, Steele maintained a healthy distance from politics, and indeed was often on the wrong side of the bureaucrats, who resented his independence. His son Alexey, a talented painter profiled in the February 2010 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*, succinctly describes his father in those days as "the ultimate insider-outsider."

NEW CHAPTERS

From the late 1950s, Soviet authorities gradually revealed to the world the horrendous consequences of Stalinism, triggering a sense of disillusionment and melancholy that contrasted with citizens' comparative optimism during the post-war and Sputnik era. In the early '60s, therefore, Steele and his peers developed the so-called Severe Style, infusing the usual subjects with a degree of psychological insight and dark undertone not seen in *Social Realism* before. This trend is epitomized by *The Land*, the major "spiritual commission" that Steele created from 1961 to 1968. The elders of his favorite village had suggested he "paint an icon



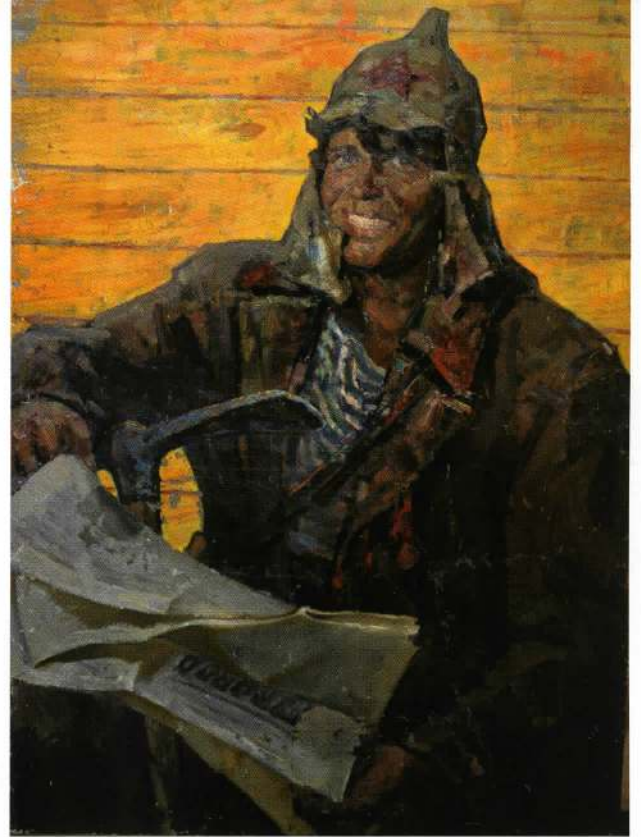
Old Musician
1955, Oil on board, 13 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.



The Land
1967, Oil on canvas, 74 x 156 in.



Carpathian Peasant in His Yard (Gucul's Yard)
1962, Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 47 in.
Painted in the Carpathian mountains of western
Ukraine, where the people call themselves Guculs



Civil War Soldier (Pavka Korchagin)
1957, Oil on canvas, 70 1/2 x 57 in.





The Family

1970, Oil on canvas, 103 x 78 in.



Autumn Day, Moscow Region
1975, Oil on canvas, 27 x 35 in.



about the Land, the most sacred thing of all.... It's what we've been promised, but did not receive." In this huge, intense, and unnervingly truthful canvas, farm workers stand barefoot as one with the Land, their forms now broadened and flattened into the shallow relief characteristic of the Severe Style. Once again, Steele led his field, and by 1975 it became clear he needed to relocate to Moscow.

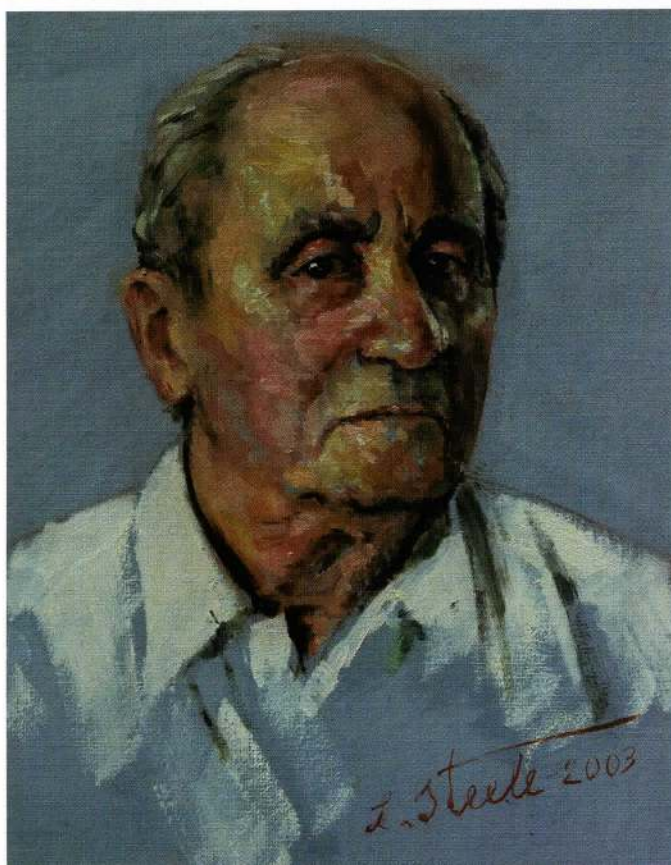
Unfortunately, his 15-year stay there coincided with the decay of *Socrealism*, which gradually became a mere formula, ever more cynical and empty. This diminution was epitomized by the exponential growth of the Union of Artists to include virtually anyone who applied. Like other talents, especially his younger colleagues, Steele embraced the nascent "neo-academic" movement and began producing romantic, even

March, Moscow Region

1981, Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.



Adamson House, Malibu
2002, Oil on canvas board, 12 x 16 in.



nostalgic, scenes of the lush landscape near the museum and children's art school he operated outside Moscow. It was this kind of work he was making in 1990, when an opportunity arose for Steele to immigrate to Los Angeles, where he has focused primarily on California's varied landscapes and on insightful *alla prima* portraits.

Although his work can be found in collections around the world, and especially in Japan thanks to a proactive Tokyo gallery that once represented him, much of Steele's oeuvre remains in his studio today. He and his family, therefore, are devoting considerable energy to cataloging, conserving, and framing these works; to support these endeavors, they have made a very limited number available for private acquisition. (Inquiries can be made via leonidsteele.com.)

Though the story of Socialist Realism has been told thoroughly in several English-language publications, its finest practitioners remain unfamiliar to most North American connoisseurs. This is understandable in light of the Cold War and the ubiquity of *Socrealism's* kitsch and propagandistic aspects, but it's certainly not too late to admire and collect the best of this fascinating period. Leonid Steele is a key practitioner still in our midst, and *Fine Art Connoisseur* congratulates him on his 90th birthday. ■

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Ilya Berlin (Iljusha)
2003, Oil on canvas board, 18 x 14 in.