

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS  
FROM THE  
HISTORY  
OF  
**FEMINISM**  
AND  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS

EAST CENTRAL EUROPE,  
SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Edited by*

Zsófia Lóránd

Adela Hîncu · Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc · Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz

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*This book is dedicated to our daughters,  
Lisa, Zoja, and Pola,  
with gratitude to Maera, our companion.*

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Alla Hors'ka

## Maternity in Ukrainian Dissent

**AUTHOR** Alla Oleksandrivna Hors'ka

**TITLES** *Autoportret z synom* [Self-Portrait with Son], oil on canvas, 1960; *Materynstvo* [Maternity], colored pencils and gouache on paper, 1961; *Abetka* [The Alphabet], tempera on canvas, 1961; *Shevchenko Maty* [Shevchenko. Mother], gouache on cardboard, 1964.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alla Oleksandrivna Hors'ka** (1929, Yalta–1970, Vasil'kyv) was a Ukrainian artist and dissident. Hors'ka was born in Crimea but grew up in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in a family employed in the film industry: her father Oleksandr was a director of various film studios, while her mother, Olena, worked as a costume designer. After World War II, her family moved to Kyiv, where Hors'ka began studying at the Academy of Arts of Ukraine and where, due to her lack of knowledge of the Ukrainian language, she developed the idea that she had been Russified at the expense of her Ukrainian origins. At the Academy, she met the artist Viktor Zarets'ky, whom she married in 1952. Sometime later she came across the initiatives of the theater group of the Club of Creative Youth (Klub Tvorchoi Molodi, KTM), founded by the director Les' Taniuk, with whom she became close friends. It was through her activity in the KTM that Hors'ka met the leading figures of the Ukrainian cultural renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called *shistdesiatnyky* (sixtiers). Her artistic aspirations thus joined a growing political commitment, which from 1965 increasingly took the form of dissent against Soviet political power and Russian-language-dominated Soviet culture.

In addition to drawings and paintings, which often portrayed friends active in the *shistdesiatnytstvo* movement, Hors'ka worked extensively as a costume and set designer for theatre and film. As was usual in the Soviet period, she often contributed to the creation of art for public spaces, above all large mosaics which decorated museums, stations, and restaurants. Hors'ka apprenticed in the school of Ukrainian monumentalism of the 1930s, so-called Boichukism, a form of public art typical of socialist realism. She, however, merged this more traditional style with an aesthetic inspired by naïve art and popular art, from which she drew a particular use of perspective, proportions, and colors. In this way, Hors'ka effectively avoided the rhetoric of socialist realism by creating monumental art which was close to popular sensibility. Beside the originality of her aesthetic approach, Hors'ka introduced the themes of Ukrainian national culture that her generation was committed to revitalize through

new forms of expression. Among other projects, Hors'ka was part of the group of artists that created the most famous artwork in 1960s Ukraine, namely the stained-glass windows for the entrance staircase of Kyiv's Shevchenko University in 1964. The central window, which depicted Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko in the act of protecting a woman (a metaphor for Ukraine) caused great scandal, and the stained-glass windows were soon destroyed by Soviet authorities. In the meantime, the home of Hors'ka and her husband became one of the movement's central physical locations: thanks to the greater space artists were granted to house their artistic studios, the couple's apartment became one of the main locations for informal meetings of the developing cultural dissent.

Hors'ka animated a network of female friendships, especially with the actress Nelli Kornienko (Les' Taniuk's wife), the historian Mykhailyna Kotsiubyn's'ka, and with Nadia Svitlychna, the sister of literary critic Ivan Svitlychny, who would become the leading representative of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group abroad in the 1970s. This women's network also imagined and managed a system of solidarity with the families of those affected by repression: money was collected to help arrestees' relatives who had often lost their jobs but had to raise their children and pay lawyers. The money was delivered by someone who did not contribute to the donations to avoid the embarrassment of the recipient towards the donors. It was thanks to this initiative that these women met Raisa Moroz, whose husband, Valentyn, had been imprisoned for his writings, although he had no previous relationship with the *shistdesiatnyky*.

Hors'ka's political activism soon earned her the hostility of the Soviet authorities: on November 28, 1970, she disappeared along with her father-in-law (with whom the family lived), and their bodies were found dead a few days later. Police speculated a case of murder-suicide, although all the evidence suggested instead that both were killed by KGB agents who then tried to cover up their own crime. After 1991, even the parliamentary investigative committee headed by Taniuk failed to find documents that could definitively solve the mystery.

HORS'KA'S WORK IN ART CATALOGUES AND COLLECTIONS OF TEXTS • *Chervona tin' kalyny: lysty, spohady, statti* [The Red Shadow of the Viburnum: Letters, Memories, Articles], ed. Oles' Zarets'ky and Mykola Marychev's'ky (Kyiv: Spalakh LTD, 1996); *Alla Hors'ka: dusha ukrains'koho shistdesiatnytstva* [Alla Hors'ka: The Soul of the Ukrainian Shistdesiatnytstvo], ed. Liudmyla Ohnieva (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2015); *Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesiantikov* [The Art of the Ukrainian Shistdesiatnyky], ed. Ol'ha Balashova, Liza Herman, and Maria Lan'ko (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2015); *Alla Hors'ka* (Kyiv: Dukat Auktsionnyi Dim, 2017); *Alla Hors'ka: spalakh pered svitankom* [Alla Hors'ka: A Flash before Dawn] (Kyiv: TOV "Vydavnytstvo Klio," 2019).



## CONTEXT

Similar to what happened in other Soviet republics, after the death of Stalin in 1953, Ukraine underwent a period of relative liberalization, usually known as the “Thaw.” The new political climate allowed what can be defined as a renaissance of Ukrainian culture after decades of the violent repression of Stalinism. The protagonists of this cultural revitalization were a new generation of writers, artists, and critics that went under the label *shistdesiatnyky* (sixtiers). They had a couple of distinctive characteristics: they were mostly born in the 1930s and had experienced the Second World War as children or teenagers. They therefore grew up believing in the myth of Stalin as a savior, considered themselves communists, and were usually involved in Party (Komunistychna Partiya Ukrayiny, the Communist Party of Ukraine, CPU) and Komsomol (short for Lenins'ka Komunistychna Spilka Molodi Ukrainy, the Leninist Communist League of Youth in Ukraine) organizations. They had absolutely no ties with the previous generations of the Ukrainian national movement, but most of them came from the countryside, from Ukrainian-speaking families surrounded by traditional Ukrainian peasant culture. They were very good students and were able to move to the most prestigious Ukrainian universities because of their good grades. In the Russified urban cultural environment, they discovered that Ukrainian culture was marginalized if not repressed and they strived to include their native culture into the official Soviet Ukrainian public space. They did not consider themselves opponents of or dissidents toward Soviet power, but as part of those who were collaborating to reform the Soviet Union, rediscovering a more authentic Leninism and Marxism: the former also included a positive evaluation of the contribution that the Ukrainian national movement could bring to the construction of a socialist society. They also shared some common features with their analogues in the other Soviet republics: they promoted a rediscovery of individuality and of its role in society, of the importance of the self and of its quest for happiness. They believed in a set of values that differed from the ethics of the 1930s, which was limited to the sphere of collectivity; these new values included friendship, love, and freedom. Consequently, they promoted a re-evaluation of human civil rights, for which they started to fight in both art and civic life.

Regarding women's and sexual rights, the Ukrainian *shistdesiatnyky* thought that the Soviet Union, despite the official propaganda on women's emancipation, was a sexophobic and sexist society that imposed definite roles onto both men and women. The *shistdesiatnyky* fostered art that addressed the questions of corporeality and sexuality, and underlined the importance of the role played by women in cultural preservation and in the education of children. They stressed the importance of and reclaimed a right to intimacy that sharply distinguished them from traditional Soviet values, which condemned any activity carried out in private, arguing that individuals could only find real fulfillment in collective activities carried out for the community.

The four pieces of figurative art that follow appeared in different contexts, but all share the same subject: motherhood. The first one is a painting dated 1960, a self-portrait by Alla Hors'ka with her son; the second is a sketch for a print to be published in the periodical press (1961); the third is a portrait of a peasant woman with her child, entitled *The Alphabet* (1962), and the last one is a sketch of one of the stained windows for the entrance staircase of Kyiv's Shevchenko University. All four women are mothers and all four are bearing or embracing their sons in a behavior of care and affection. This was a revolutionary way to represent children and their relationship with adults; they can be considered a sort of evolution of the poetics of the *shistdesiatnystvo* that progressively addressed public opinion. The works presented here deal with the theme of motherhood first in works designed for private use (a portrait or painting) and later in works addressed to the public like a drawing for the press or a stained-glass window in a university. In doing this, Hors'ka followed a path similar to many other intellectuals and artists who initially addressed a small circle of friends but who, over time, presented their ideas and creations more and more explicitly to Ukrainian society as a whole. Children were often depicted in the art of Stalinist socialist realism, but they were either depicted together with their own peers (e.g., art celebrating the pioneers) or together with adults who oversaw their political education. Children (usually girls) were often depicted in the arms of an adult man who was their protector: the two archetypal images are that of Stalin holding the famous Gelya Markizova,<sup>1</sup> and the image of the little girl in the arms of the Soviet soldier in the central statue of the Soviet War Memorial in Berlin's Treptower Park. It was no accident that children were not together with their parents: the USSR pushed for the loosening of family ties, as the whole society had to take care of the education of young people. Children and young people were even urged to denounce their parents if the latter engaged in anti-Soviet behavior. The rhetoric of the heroism of children denouncing their parents to the authorities was precisely accompanied by an education in which children were pushed to see themselves as children of society, a collective that looked after them thanks to the institutions and organizations, not leaving them "alone" with their families.

Given all of this, one can understand how Hors'ka's portrayal of motherhood was revolutionary: first, there is a curious inversion of genders that sees an adult woman, the mother, in a protective role toward a male child, thus breaking with a custom that saw men as the ones capable of providing protection. Above all, the motherhood represented by Hors'ka is not the stereotypical motherhood of the motherland, whose children are usually soldiers (called precisely to protect the mother and not the other

<sup>1</sup> Engelsina (Gelya) Markizova (1928–2004) was the little girl portrayed in 1936 in Stalin's arms in one of the most famous propaganda images of Stalinism. The following year, her father was executed as an enemy of the people and her mother sentenced to the Gulag. Gelya was discriminated against as a daughter of enemies of the people until de-Stalinization.

way around), but a concrete, individual motherhood. These children do not look out toward the public but take refuge in their mother's breast and do not perform any heroic or public deeds: they were "bad children" from the Soviet point of view, since the intimate moment has the upper hand over the Soviet imperative to find fulfillment in the collective. The very idea of a portrait to be enjoyed in private and not in public was nonconformist. Mothers are depicted in the colors of the Ukrainian nation or busy teaching (a function that would be the school's and not the parents') how to read and write, in an allegedly "peasant" language such as Ukrainian. This portrayal of motherhood, eventually occupying a public space such as the stained-glass window of Shevchenko University, could only strongly clash with Soviet public morals and certainly contributed to the decision to destroy this piece of artwork.

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*Simone Attilio Bellezza*

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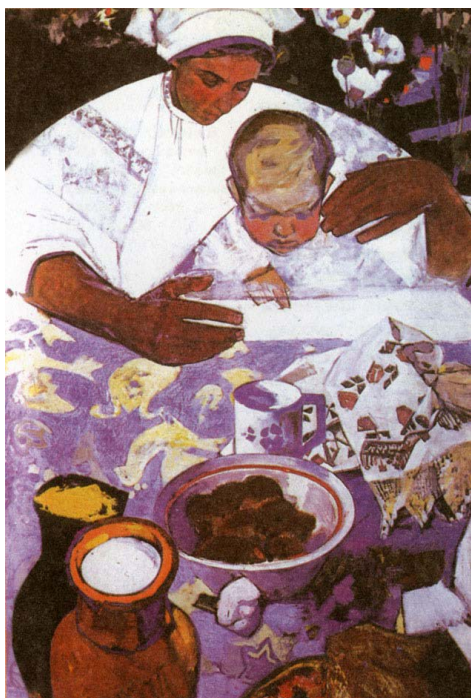
2 Author's note: Please note that Kasianov here chooses not to use the word "dissident" in Ukrainian, that is why I have used "Dissidents," which is more literally what he wrote.



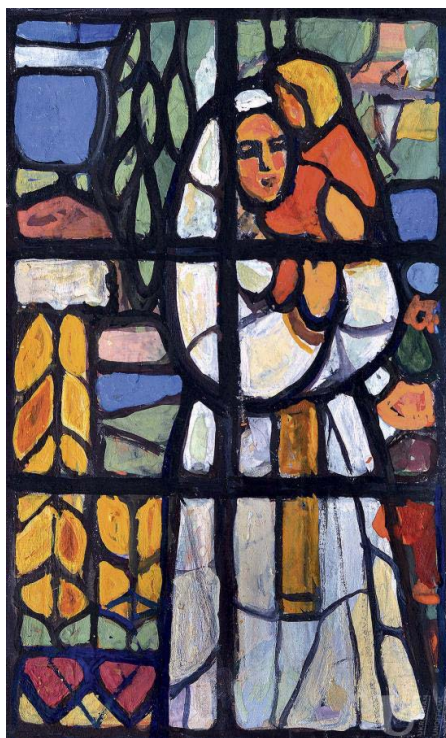
*Avtoportret z synom* [Self-Portrait with Son],  
oil on canvas, 1960.

*Maternystvo* [Maternity], colored  
pencils and gouache on paper, 1961.





*Abetka* [The Alphabet], tempera on canvas, 1961.



*Shevchenko Maty* [Shevchenko. Mother], gouache on cardboard, 1964.