Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format. Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

LIFE & STYLE | AUGUST 10, 2009, 10:36 P.M. ET

Why Dictators Love Kitsch

Kim Jong Il-Clinton photo op spotlights a style that's long glorified tyrants

By ERIC GIBSON

This week the world's eyes were on the extraordinary photograph of former President Bill Clinton seated next to North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il—an official picture taken at the end of talks that led to the freeing of two imprisoned American journalists. Mine, I confess, were elsewhere, continually diverted to the photo's dramatic backdrop, an enormous mural of crashing seas and fluttering birds rendered in lurid greens and brilliant whites.

On the one hand, a run-of-the-mill seascape, the kind of visual elevator music one finds in public spaces the world over, where the aim is to decorate but not offend. Yet there was something about the picture that wasn't quite right and that kept drawing me back to it. For one thing, there was its vast internal scale. The waves were bigger, even, than the figures posing for the photograph, and they so dominated the foreground as if ready to break out and drown the assembled dignitaries.

Then there was the picture's bizarre disunity. Two opposing visions of nature are combined, a benign one (the luminosity and fluttering birds), and an angry, violent one (the heaving seas and crashing waves). Just as strange, the painting's various elements seem at war with each other. For instance, the rhythm of the breaking waves leads our eye from left to right, yet at the bottom right-hand corner—just to the right of the woman in the official party wearing a white jacket—a flock of birds, facing to the left, abruptly halts and reverses that momentum. A more accomplished artist would have found a way to integrate the various elements more harmoniously and lead our eye around the canvas more smoothly.

Then I realized: This is no ordinary painting but art with a purpose. What seem to our eye as limitations are the result of deliberate intent. It's a piece of political propaganda. As such it belongs to a subspecies of kitsch known as totalitarian kitsch, where art's sole raison d'etre is to bolster a dictatorial regime and glorify its leader.

The message of the painting, located in what appears to be the presidential palace, is a simple one: Kim Jong Il's regime as a force of nature. The painting has a split personality because it aims to convey two distinct messages simultaneously: The soft light and gamboling birds conjure up thoughts of a natural paradise, an allusion to the "paradise" such regimes believe they are creating for their subjects. The crashing waves are a metaphor for the overwhelming power of the state and its Great Leader ready to crush all enemies.

"Kitsch" has become a byword in the culture for anything over-the-top or tacky. In art, it's meaning is more specific. It refers to works trafficking in facile, base or false emotions—most often sentimentality—and whose imagery is off-the-shelf and formulaic, a debased version of a once-original aesthetic idea. Need to conjure that warm-and-fuzzy feeling? Cue the fiery sunset. Looking to express fragile innocence? Bring on the shoeless urchin carrying the bird with the broken wing.

Totalitarian kitsch puts those ideas in the service of the state. It is the official art of authoritarian governments, aimed at extending state control through propaganda. Totalitarian kitsch exists to glorify the state, foster a personality cult surrounding the dictator and celebrate ceaseless and irrevocable social and economic progress through images of

churning factories and happy, exultant workers. It does so using the corrupted language of academic realism—heavily muscled supermen and women and colossal scale. Pyongyang's "Monument to Party Foundation" consists of three hands each emerging from a circular platform and holding, respectively, a hammer, a hoe and a brush. The hands alone are over 150 feet tall.

Such art isn't produced by the proverbial starving artist in a garret but on an assembly line, like Mansudea Studio in Pyongyang.

"Mansudea is an 'art-creation company' as they call it, and it has over 3,000 workers in it," says Jane Portal, author of "Art under Control in North Korea" and chairwoman of the department of Asian, Oceanic and African art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. "They create with great speed. Artists at the Mansudea produce on average two paintings a month."

Totalitarian kitsch got its start in the Soviet Union in 1934 when the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers ratified the principles of what became known as Socialist Realism. The first decades of the century saw the greatest innovations of modernism through Europe, and in Russia, artists such as Kazmir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko made seminal contributions to the language of Cubism and abstract art.

But under Stalin, the Party decreed that art must serve the cause of revolution, and it could only do so with imagery that was universally and easily understandable and possessed of a didactic purpose. So in 1934 modernism was banned as bourgeois and reactionary (Malevich, who died the following year, spent the remainder of his days painting bland pictures of peasants) and artists began churning out heroic images of Stalin and the proletariat, a classic example of which is Vera Mukhina's 1937 "Worker and a Kolkhoz Woman." A statue some 80 feet tall (currently being restored), it shows two strapping figures, a man and a women, breasting the wind as they surge forward, hammer and sickle held high.

In the decades following, Socialist Realism became the style of choice for dictatorships. The Nazis adopted it, as did Mao Zedong and Saddam Hussein. Mr. Hussein's main artistic legacy is the 1989 "Hands of Victory" in Baghdad, consisting of enormous hands emerging from the ground holding swords that cross. It's a classic of totalitarian kitsch, part personality cult—the hands are based on casts of Mr. Hussein's forearms—and Orwellian doublespeak. They were erected to commemorate Iraq's "victory" in the Iran-Iraq war, which, after eight years and hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides, in fact ended in a draw.

According to Ms. Portal in Boston, while North Korea's version of Socialist Realism is typical—"The Kim cult is based on the Mao cult and the Stalin cult—personality cults where they're regarded as gods," she says—there are differences.

"One of the interesting things is women," she says. In Soviet and Chinese art, women are shown shouldering as heavy a burden as men. In North Korean art, women aren't shown working, and they wear makeup and dresses. "You never see them in pants," says Ms. Portal. "This comes from Neo-Confucianism, which is traditionally Korean and very male chauvinist," she says.

To an artist in a democratic country living the customary hand-to-mouth existence, working as a state employee might seem like a boon, even if it does mean doing the same thing day after day. But it too has its perils. Dictators fall and regimes go out of business. Worse than simply being unemployed, the artists might find themselves outcasts, symbols of a discredited ideology.

Some years after the collapse of Communism, I asked a Russian art critic what had happened to all the Socialist Realists in his country. He said they were still earning a living making other kinds of art, but that the transition hadn't always been seamless. He cited the case of a painter whose stock in trade had been portraits of Lenin. The man was now earning his living churning out religious subjects. But, my friend added, so ingrained were his earlier habits that every time he painted the face of Jesus, he wound up with a likeness of Lenin.

That was a decade ago. But this week, another photo op brought news that Socialist Realism is still in the cultural water in Russia. The very day the Bill Clinton-Kim Jong Il photo appeared, Vladimir Putin's office released photographs of the Russian prime minister on vacation that are nothing if not totalitarian kitsch. One shows him bare-chested on horseback, another swimming butterfly in a river. "Putin's action-man holiday album," was the BBC's

snarky headline, and they were right. All political leaders try to project an image of vitality and vigor, but these photos went farther in their attempt to portray Mr. Putin as somehow superhuman. As such, they are of a piece with the propagandistic purposes of totalitarian kitsch in which the leader is turned into a larger-than-life icon.

For example, the horseback photo bears a striking similarity to an image in "State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda," now at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, showing Hitler as a mounted knight in shining armor, while the swimming photo recalls Mao Zedong's celebrated, and equally public, 1966 swim in the Yangtze River. Both were designed to portray the respective leaders as Canute-like figures, so powerful they could even master the forces of nature.

Now, I'm not saying Mr. Putin is a totalitarian dictator, and certainly not suggesting he has anything in common with Hitler. It's simply that, as a man who grew up under Communism and served in the KGB, his conception of what constitutes the public face of leadership would inevitably have been shaped by the tropes of totalitarian kitsch.

Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Leisure & Arts features editor.

Write to Eric Gibson at eric.gibson@wsj.com

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com

Moscow’s ‘Worker and a Kolkhoz Woman’ was built under Stalin in 1937.