



Boris Pavlovich Shvarkov

(1920 - 1978) b. Noyava, Russia

Scientists at the Airport 1964

oil on canvas

A helicopter has just landed, and a group of people, bundled in thick winter coats and scarves, steps out. Their arrival feels purposeful, determined. Leading the group is a woman holding books, her stride confident, her gaze focused. She is not a bystander, nor is she waiting for instructions. In this story, she plays the central role, and she is ready to contribute to Soviet innovation.

This image marks more than just a moment in a snow-covered airport. It is the culmination of decades of shifting ideology and evolving opportunity.

In the early years after the 1917 Revolution, Soviet leaders saw women not only as citizens but as an untapped labor force essential to the communist future. Lenin himself railed against what he called the “barbarously unproductive” drudgery of housework. In 1918, sweeping legal reforms granted Soviet women rights many women in the United States wouldn’t see for decades: legal divorce, paid maternity leave, and protections for mothers and children.

By the early 1930s, women were entering science, medicine, and engineering fields in unprecedented numbers. They worked as doctors, journalists, scientists, and construction workers. One Soviet report even noted that women were favored for certain construction jobs because they took fewer breaks than their male colleagues.

And yet, while the law promised equality, reality lagged behind. Women often received lower pay and were passed over for promotions. They also remained responsible for all the housework, which included cooking, cleaning, and caring for husband and children at home. This “double burden” of working full-time while managing the home became a defining feature of women’s lives in the Soviet Union.

In the mid-1930s, Stalin began to roll back many of the earlier reforms. Women were re-cast as heroines of the home: mothers first, workers second. Family and fertility were seen as tools of national strength, and gender equality took a backseat to the demands of the state.

Despite these shifts, Soviet women continued to make extraordinary contributions. During World War II, they took over collective farms, staffed hospitals, and filled factories. Some joined all-female combat regiments, like the legendary Night Witches—bomber pilots who flew under cover of darkness, terrifying German forces. Others, like Lyudmila Pavlichenko, became military legends. A sniper with 309 confirmed kills, she would go on to tour the United States and befriend Eleanor Roosevelt.

In 1963, just a year before this painting was made, Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space. A former textile worker and skydiver, she orbited the Earth 48 times, embodying the Soviet ideal of female strength and scientific ambition.

Scientists at the Airport seems to echo this sentiment. The women we see here are not assistants or background figures. They are central. Visible. Professional. And yet, if you look closely, there’s still a quiet tension.

Behind their determined faces lies the unspoken weight of expectation: the pressure to succeed not just as scientists, but as mothers, wives, and daughters. Underneath the confident surface lies this burden to prove themselves again and again in systems that still favored their male counterparts. The promise of equality was real, but its fulfillment remained uneven.

Still, the image endures as a testament to possibility. This is one of several paintings in this exhibition that centers women’s labor. You’ll see images of women at switchboards, in marketplaces, on farms and construction sites. You’ll see them healing, teaching, building, and, in this case, innovating. These women were not just part of Soviet society. They shaped its future.

As we reflect today, this painting invites us to celebrate the strides made by generations of women and to consider how much further there is to go. The journey toward equity is not over. But each step, and each story, moves us closer.

