

# Propaganda museum opens in downtown San Rafael

By [Janis Mara](#author1), Marin Independent Journal

Posted: 05/13/16, 2:27 PM PDT | Updated: 58 mins ago

![Tom Areton places a label under artwork at The Museum of International Propaganda in San Rafael.  (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)](data:None;base64...)

Tom Areton places a label under artwork at The Museum of International Propaganda in San Rafael. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

The painting on the wall shows a man beside a peaceful blue lake, in a bower of pink roses, bathed in a golden glow. The man is Joseph Stalin, one of the most powerful and murderous dictators in history.

The work of art is one of hundreds at the Museum of International Propaganda, the creation of longtime Marin residents Tom and Lilka Areton. The 1,900-square-foot museum at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Court Street opened last week in downtown San Rafael.

“Propaganda is everywhere. It’s all around us,” said Tom Areton, who came to the United States from communist Czechoslovakia in 1968. “Making people aware of it is our objective.”

The San Anselmo couple, who have lived in Marin for 45 years, clearly have an interest in bringing countries together. In addition to exposing art that demonizes and divides nations, the two in 1980 founded Cultural Homestay International, a student-exchange program that brings 12,000 foreign students to American shores every year.

The San Anselmo business has 145 employees and is one of the largest student exchange programs in the world.

“We travel all over the world as part of our work. We have been to 80 countries,” Tom said. The couple have collected propaganda from many of them, including historical material from Nazi Germany as well as North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran and the Soviet Union.

The museum defines propaganda as “the calculated manipulation of information designed to shape public opinion and behavior to predetermined ends.” Because propaganda is so ubiquitous in our culture, the two limited the exhibits to political propaganda.

Viewed from a modern-day perspective, the work is rich in irony. In posters and statues of Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People’s Republic of China, “just like the most venerated saints, Mao is portrayed looking into the future,” Tom said.

Mao’s 1957 “Great Leap Forward” campaign led to a famine with a death toll estimated at 18 million to 45 million.

The Mao depictions are examples of one of the five categories Lilka created for the exhibits: “Leader Idealization.” One of the most well-known examples is the poster of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara wearing a beret.

The museum does not endorse any specific point of view, “but will point out the contradictions in the messages,” according to museum literature.

In another category, “National Glorification,” Lilka Areton said, “they try to make everything look so wonderful.”

A chilling example, “Fragrance of Jihad,” a 1975 Iranian poster, resembles a 1960s hippie composition with its rainbow colors and shower of multicolored flowers raining down on soldiers marching to battle.

 “If it makes the viewer forget about the deaths involved, this propaganda will succeed in its goal,” Tom said.

In the “Fear and Intimidation” category, “they try to scare people so they will come around and join them,” said Lilka, pointing to a 1914 U.S. caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm as a blood-stained gorilla carrying a woman who is a dead ringer for Botticelli’s Venus. The poster is captured, “Destroy this mad brute.”

“It’s a good idea,” Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at New York’s Syracuse University and a pop-cult icon in his own right, said of the museum. “At the most basic level, the museum shows how national ideas are mobilized by pictures and drama, and how one uses art forms to get others to believe something.”

Thompson noted, “If another country does it, it’s propaganda. If our country does it, it’s patriotism.”

“One of the most successful propaganda campaigns ever was Rosie the Riveter,” Thompson said. That campaign was designed to draw U.S. women to such occupations as ship-building during World War II to aid the war effort.

The U.S. wasn’t the only country to conduct such a campaign; the museum has a poster depicting the Russian equivalent of Rosie the Riveter.

“These (propaganda vehicles) are all tapping into the deep emotions that are part of the soul,” Thompson said. Echoing Tom Areton’s earlier comment, Thompson said, “We still have propaganda that’s operating under the same principles. One can argue that every TV commercial is propaganda.”

Admission is free. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

#### About the Author

![Janis Mara](data:None;base64...)

Janis Mara covers education for the Marin IJ. She has worked at the Oakland Tribune, the Contra Costa Times and Adweek, winning awards for business coverage, live-blogging and investigative work. Reach the author at jmara@marinij.com or follow Janis on Twitter: [@jmara](http://twitter.com/jmara).

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