

**Figurative Art in Soviet Russia circa 1921 – 1934:
situating the realist- anti-realist debate in the context of
changing definitions of proletarian culture.**

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Submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts
at the University of Cape Town.

March 1994

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17 MAY 1995

10.00

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation is due to the financial aid rendered by The Centre for Science Development and the University of Cape Town Research Council.

I wish to extend my thanks to Sandra Klopper for her dedicated and patient supervision of this dissertation.

I am indebted to Evelyn Cohen for initiating me into the discipline of History of Art and for encouraging me to persevere in this field of study.

I am grateful also to Helen Bradford for allowing me to participate in the Russian Revolution Honours Course in the department of History and Economic History at UCT.

Acknowledgements are also due to the professional service rendered by the staff of the inter-library loan department of UCT and UCT slide librarian Alex d'Angelo.

I wish, finally, to thank Antoinette Zanda for her friendship and support.

ABSTRACT

Figurative art in Soviet Russia circa 1921-1934: situating the realist – anti-realist debate in the context of changing definitions of proletarian culture.

In this dissertation I demonstrate that in many Western and Soviet texts the work of so-called formalist leftists and figurative artists are viewed as diametrically opposed to one another. I argue against the perpetuation of this polemic and the assumptions that inform this view. These assumptions are that the leftists produced self-referential works indicative of an anti-realist philosophy and that figurative artists produced social commentaries informed by a philosophy of realism which led ‘inevitably’ to Socialist Realism. Although a few recent texts warn against oversimplifying this debate, none go far enough in deconstructing the view that there were two groupings diametrically opposed to one another. In fact, many simply repeat the argument as it was articulated in the twenties and thirties, which is to ignore the possibility of a critical analysis of the theoretical principles and constraints informing the debates current at that time.

Categorising leftists as anti-realist and figurative artists as realist is not satisfactory firstly because neither the leftists nor the figurative artists existed as homogenous groupings and secondly because many figurative artists (the so-called realists) in fact challenged the idea of a coherent world order existing external to the art work. Nevertheless there are artists from both these categories who asserted the importance of an objective world that was external to and a primary determinant of the art work. In this dissertation I demonstrate that these figurative artists often shared the same ideological goals with leftists. Instead of working with the idea of viewing artists of the twenties and thirties as realist or anti-realist, figurative or so-called formalist, I discuss their philosophical and stylistic choices in relation to the political and economic project of the period, namely the empowerment of the proletariat and the attempt to foster a proletarian culture.

Chapter One of the dissertation begins with an overview of theories of realism which were crucial to the development of Soviet art in the twenties and early thirties. These were Marxist theories of realism espoused by G. Plekhanov, V. Lenin, L. Trotsky and A.

Lunacharsky. I discuss these theories in relation to the political project of the protagonists and their arguments for either a classless or a proletarian culture. Chapter Two is given over to establishing the political project of the so-called formalists, their institutional status and theoretical claims. I discuss the adaptation of their theories of realism in relation to the political and economic pressures to increase industrial output. I consider their definitions of realism in the context of political and economic arguments for technical expertise and arguments for and against the assimilation of pre-revolutionary art forms. Chapter Three describes the constitution of various figurative groups in the twenties and early thirties, their status in the face of attacks from leftists, and their diverse claims to realism. As in Chapter Two the production of artists is located within the context of socio-political and economic developments. Here I focus on the effect of political developments which occurred after the death of Lenin, the ways in which these informed figurative artists' claims to objective analysis and the impression that this created of their being committed to the realist project. Chapter Four tests and disputes these claims to objectivity through a careful visual analysis of selected works from groups discussed in Chapter Three. The formal operations of works which both reinforce and contradict Marxist notions of realism are discussed. The decision to analyse only figurative works is informed by the belief that it is the absence of detailed analyses of figurative work produced between circa 1921 and 1934 that has led to misrepresentations and oversimplifications of the work of this period.

In the Conclusion to the dissertation I argue that these misrepresentations have been informed by refusals, both conscious and unconscious, to acknowledge the dialogue and mutually beneficial exchanges which occurred between formalists and Marxists, not only in the area of clearly articulated theoretical exchange, but also in the less perspicuous area of practical production. This dialogue was characterised by an attempt to regard the image as a sign and to concede its importance as a specific contiguity of elements whose arrangement could elicit non-habitual, and therefore revolutionary, perspectives of the world. The shared area of interest between Marxist Realists and 'formalists' pertained not only to the radical project of challenging modes of perception but also to a realization that the recognition or dis-ease elicited by these configurations was contingent on culturally or socially specific codes of convention.

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GLOSSARY

AKhR	Association of Artists of the revolution. Established in 1928. Previously known as AKhRR.
AKhRR	Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia. Established in 1922. Renamed AKhR.
Bolshevik	A group within the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP). It was led by Lenin after a split at the 1903 RSDLP congress. In 1918 it became the Russian Communist Party and in 1925 the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
FOSKh	Federation of Associations of Soviet Artists in the Spatial Arts. Established in 1931.
Glavpolitprosvet	Central Committee of Political Enlightenment. Established in Narkompros in 1920 to address the issue of adult education.
Glavprofobr	Chief Administration for Professional Education within Narkompros.
INKHUK	Institute of Artistic Culture. Established in Moscow in 1920 and in Leningrad in 1923 where it was also known as GINKhUK.
IZO	The art department of the Peoples' Commissariat for Education/Enlightenment.
LEF	Left Front of the Arts. A journal established in Moscow in 1923.
Makovets	'Art-Life' Union of Artists and Poets. Established in 1921.
MOSSKh	Moscow section of the Union of Soviet Artists. Established in 1932.
Narkompros	Peoples' Commissariat for Education/Enlightenment.
NEP	New Economic Policy introduced by Lenin in 1921.
NOZh	The New Society of Painters. Established in 1922.
OBMOHKU	The Society of Young Artists. Established in 1919.
OMKh	The Society of Moscow Artists. Established in 1927.
OMZh	The Societ of Moscow Painters. Established in 1924.

Orgkomitet	Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Artists. Established 1939
OST	The Society of Easel Artists. Established in 1924.
Peredvizhniki	Society of Wandering Exhibitions. Established in 1870.
Proletcult	Proletarian cultural and educational organization. Formally established in 1917.
RAPKh	Russian Association of Proletarian Artists. Established in 1931.
RAPP	Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. Established in 1925.
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (Russia).
RSDLP	Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.
SVOMAS	Free State Art Studios. Resulted from the integration of Moscow Institute of Painting Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov Art School. Later called VKhUTEMAS then VKhUTEIN.
TsIT	Central Institute of Labour.
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Established in 1922.
VKhUTEIN	Higher Artistic-Technical Institute. Established in Leningrad in 1922 and in Moscow in 1926.
VKhUTEMAS	Higher Artistic-Technical Studios. Established in Moscow and Petrograd in 1921.
VOKS	All-Union Society for Foreign Cultural Links.
Vsekokhudozhnik	All-Russian Union of Co-operative Comradeship of Workers in Representational Arts. Established in 1929.
Zhivskulptarkh	Collective of Painting-Sculpture-Architecture Synthesis. Established in Moscow in 1919-20.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to draw attention to the complexity of Russian figurative art produced between circa 1921 and 1934. The underlying intention is to challenge the reductive analyses of this art which assert a crude opposition between figurative realists and so-called formalist leftists. Emphasis is placed on elements which figurative art held in common with non-figurative art during this period and what is challenged is the notion that this figurative art can be seen in the same light as the Socialist Realist production of later years. The general disregard of this figurative art by Western art historians has been informed by a tendency to collapse it into the category of Socialist Realism and to dismiss it as pedantic illustration of political theory¹. In accordance with this view Russian figurative art of the 1920s and early 1930s is considered principally as an expression of Marxist realist philosophy and is situated unproblematically on one side of an artificially constructed antagonism between philosophical realism and anti-realism². By implication works which are non-figurative or which seem to prioritise an overriding concern with formal components are assumed to be anti-realist. In a similarly politically motivated construction of art history, Soviet art historians have tended to separate out figurative art of the 1920s and early 1930s as the principal form of expression during that period, on the assumption that it was these figurative works which explicated the principles of Marxist Realism in a reliable

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1. This attitude characterizes early publications such as those of Holmes (1935), Gray (1959) and Gray (1986 re-edition), but it persists in relatively recent publications, for example, in Turine (1988) and Bown (1991). What is striking is the absence of Western publications on Soviet figurative art until the mid 1980s. The few publications prior to this were obviously by writers sympathetic to socialism and the 'triumph' of realism. See, for example, Holmes (1935) and Chen (1943). Recent publications are in the form of cursory catalogues such as Elliot (1989), broad overviews of Russian painting such as Bird (1987) or texts on Socialist Realism which avoid the complex juncture of realism in the mid-twenties and thirties. Lodder's invaluable study of Constructivism separates the leftists from figurative artists and gives over only three pages to figuration. Bird (1987) suggests that figurative art has received so little attention precisely because it was overshadowed by the radical innovations of Suprematism and Constructivism.
 2. Those texts which do recognise the need for redressing this polarity, for example, Elliot (1989) and Bowlt (1982), do not set about deconstructing it or constructing an alternative vision.

manner³. What I question throughout this dissertation is the simplistic relations of equivalence between figuration and Marxist realism, and non-figuration and philosophical anti-realism.

My intention is to challenge this presentation of figuration and formalism as oppositional because it is simply a perpetuation of the polemic which was articulated in its crudest form by protagonists 'for' or 'against' realism during the mid-twenties and early thirties in Russia. At this time the polemical exchange did exist between those artists who had initially engaged in formalist experimentation and artists in the old and newly established figurative groups. That this polemic existed is no justification however for its perpetuation in current analyses of the work of that period. I take issue with this simplistic presentation because it serves the political interests of those who believe that certain works are message bound while others are not. This simplistic view has contributed to the tendency of some art historians to appropriate the non-figurative or so-called formalist production of this period of Soviet art history into an anti-realist development as if the components of this work defy social comment and only betray evidence of a self referential and authentic artfulness⁴. To reproduce the debate as it was articulated in the twenties and thirties is to ignore the possibility of a critical analysis of its informing theoretical principles and theoretical constraints.

In opposing a reductive understanding of Soviet Russian figurative art I will attempt to challenge the view which sees formal experimentation in Soviet Russia as diametrically opposed to the philosophy of realism prevalent at that time. I argue that figurative artists and artists prioritising technical experimentation were often committed to the same ideological goals. My purpose is to restate the debate on the relevance of figuration as

3. See, for example, the VOKS almanac (1934). It is significant that no Soviet publications on Modernists occurred between the years 1932 and 1956. In recent years the divide has been redressed in the works of, for example, Strigyalov (1988) and Leniashin (1988), but these still portray figuration as that which 'inevitably' triumphed over formalism. Although these works contain welcome warnings of oversimplifications and speak of the need for a reassessment of the approaches to the work of the twenties and thirties, there is no evidence of such a reassessment in the texts. Neither of these publications attempts to trace the interrelations between social, political and economic developments and artistic events.

4. I use the term 'artfulness' in accordance with its usage by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" in Lemon and Reis (1965: 3-24).

against formal experimentation in relation to the way in which certain art forms were deemed appropriate or inappropriate to an audience broadly defined as proletarian. The polemic will be situated within a history of debate about the emergence of proletarian culture, with the aim of ascertaining how these definitions of proletarian culture affected the definition and application of realism, and how this influenced developments in visual art. The definition of realism was central to this debate and so the dissertation begins with an investigation of this concept⁵.

The meanings and use of the term 'realism' shift according to the social context and the political intentions of the user. Within the Soviet Union between the years covered in this research, the definition and application of the term 'realism' changed considerably. The concept was debated to the point that the application of the term 'realism' to a fixed set of works was consistently queried by both artists and theorists. The debates reflected a complex juncture of Marxist and 'Formalist' theory and a questioning of the very viability of realism as an aesthetic principle. What was evident was that realism was central to Marxist cultural theory and that it was therefore associated with the concept of political and cultural empowerment of the proletariat.

To associate figurative art with realism and non-figurative art with anti-realism is to ignore the fertile dialogue which occurred in the arena of cultural theory between Marxists and those who advocated the importance of the specific formal components of an art work over and above an 'external' world of content. That this dialogue did occur and that it was fruitful is evident not only in the discourse of theoreticians like Medvedev

5. Most of the texts on Soviet art provide little or no information on these theoretical exchanges concerning the nature of a proletarian art. Bowlt (1988) gives some indication of these in his invaluable collection of documents but offers no analysis of the material. Bird (1987) attempts a rudimentary analysis but he does not provide a satisfactory correlation of political and artistic events. Nor does he specify what it is that is common to those artists he terms proletarian artists, apart from the vague notion that they were all opposed to the more militant AKhRR grouping (see below for information on AKhRR). There is rudimentary information on these debates in Lodder (1983) and less in Bown (1991). There is none in Leniashin (1988), Strigyalov (1988), Dudakov and Elliot (1989) and Gray (1986). The most useful source for these debates is Fitzpatrick (1970) and the original texts by writers from this period.

and Bakhtin⁶, who found a way of combining formal and ideological analysis, but also in the practical accomplishments of figurative and non-figurative artists in the twenties and early thirties⁷. A polemical interchange did occur between realists and non-figurative so-called formalists in the Soviet Union at this time, but to perpetuate this in the textual re-presentations of realists vs. anti-realists is not only to reproduce the polemical interchange in its crudest form but also to ignore the dialogue which led to fundamental paradigm shifts that paralleled, at least in part, the rapidly shifting political and economic context.

The recognition of this paradigm shift in the 1920s⁸ should enable one to understand the distinction between realism and anti-realism not as works being more or less life-like but as simply different in how they laid claim to reality, in what their 'real' referents were and how these were indicated. For the categorical separation of figurative and non-figurative works to be accepted as valid and pertinent to the analysis of the Soviet art discussed in this research both of these differences must be identified when comparing works i.e. the what and the how. While in the post-revolutionary climate the formal signifying means of figurative and non-figurative artists did indeed differ radically, the concepts referred to were very often similar. In addition, one finds works with shared formal signifiers

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6. See, for example, Medvedev and Bakhtin's "The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship" (1978). See also Jakobson's "On Realism in Art" in Matejka and Pomorska (1971)
 7. Recent texts which point to this dialogue are mainly by Soviet writers, for example Leniashin (1988) who suggests that leftists and figurative artists shared a creative quest, and Strigyalov (1988) who emphasised their unified effort to construct a new Soviet psyche. Unfortunately neither of these writers goes further than these statements of intent. Of the Western publications which insist on the need to dispel the polarity, Elliot's argument (1989: 9-18) is not developed and it is falsely backed up by the oversimplified notion of an abrupt state-orchestrated end to this period of ideological commonality and pluralistic expression. Bird (1987) defends his argument by drawing on differences between Socialist Realism and proletarian culture but he does so in an unconvincing fashion. He argues that a relationship exists between Bogdanov's Proletkult theories and what he calls the 'proletarian' artists of the twenties and that this is evidenced in the idea of proletarian art having to be optimistic and heroic. I believe that it is more useful to detect the influence of Bogdanov's theories in Productivism and that the images of the twenties and early thirties were not characterised by optimism and heroism. I would suggest that this problem occurs because of the complexity of the period of figuration which preceded Socialist Realism and that Bird has difficulty making sense of the contradictory and shared arguments which characterised that period.
 8. This paradigm shift was due largely to the work of literary theorists such as Shklovsky, Jakobson, Bakhtin and Medvedev.

indicating quite different content. Although a clear opposition did exist between theoreticians and artists who advocated that culture should passively reflect societal conditions, and theoreticians and artists who emphasised the inherent and informing dynamism of the cultural artefact irrespective of its identifiable narrative references, in the post-revolutionary climate there emerged some agreement that works, whether figurative or experimental in form, could be regarded as a form of realism if they provided a 'reliable evaluation' of events in life. Realism was not taken as an open-ended concept designating everything that pertains to human experience. Nor was it taken to pertain only to a realism of description as in mimetic attempts to reproduce the world 'out there'. With realism regarded as a 'reliable evaluation' of events in life⁹ a work which is realistic in the sense of being immediately recognisable, might nevertheless be regarded as unrealistic, depending on the criteria used to judge the 'reliability' of the evaluation¹⁰.

The polemic set up in many Western and Soviet texts places figurative work in the realist category as if this work presents the world as a number of pre-existing facts with which we are familiar or might easily believe in. In the anti-realist category are placed works in which the form does not necessarily conform to the utilitarian presentation of these facts. It has been argued that the work of Russian 'formalists' illustrates precisely this tension between the artistic medium and the 'pre-existing world'. What I emphasise in this dissertation is that some of the so-called 'formalists', like many of the so-called realist figurative artists, also accepted the existence of a pre-existing and unmediated objective world and that both figurative and non-figurative artists asserted the existence of a positively determinable world external to fiction. In the light of the above definition of realism as a 'reliable evaluation' of events in life, it could be argued that the formal experiments in abstraction and production of, for example, the Constructivist or

9. This definition of realism is similar to that used by Christopher Nash in "World Games. The tradition of anti-realist revolt" (Nash 1988).

10. It is obvious that at this point one might identify overt political interests interceding in the assessment of reliability and so this rather broad definition of realism might be seen as an unsuccessful paradigmatic shift and an ultimate reinforcement of realism as an aesthetic paradigm.

Productivist artists, were as 'realist' as those of figurative artists¹¹. What I set out to do is to identify the root of these philosophical similarities between some of the so-called formalists and figurative groups operative in the twenties and early thirties while nevertheless acknowledging formal differences between these works.

While pointing to this common impulse I also argue that it is erroneous to regard the figurative artists as an homogeneous group all characterised by a philosophy of realism and whose work 'naturally evolves' into Socialist Realism¹². I set out to do this in the form of a visual analysis. While the theoretical intentions of both leftists and figurative artists will be discussed, a visual analysis will only be applied to figurative art production. This is because so much has been written on the formal redefinitions of the non-figurative avant-garde as opposed to the work of figurative artists which is assumed to be characterised by totally different interests.

Non-figurative artists acquired the label 'formalist' because of their interest in identifying the specific components of an artwork, in drawing attention to the 'artfulness' of these components and to new ways of highlighting and juxtaposing these internal relations. The

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11. Constructivists and Productivists had denied the place of autonomous easel art. They seemed to deny all reference to the traditional realist criticism which was still overtly present in the surrounding discourse of Nonobjectivism. The abstraction of Nonobjectivism was still based on having to recognise the *relevance* of the absence of figurative and narrative concerns. In this sense Bryony Fer argues that Nonobjectivists relied upon realist discourse for its sense. However equally it could be argued that the Constructivist/Productivist enterprise was marked by its reliance on the philosophical assumptions of the realist project that the world was rational, receptive to human order and change, and able to reflect a comprehensive design.
 12. I oppose the idea that Socialist Realism came about simply as a result of state impositions, as in Elliot (1989), but it is equally erroneous to suggest that figurative art was predestined to evolve into Socialist Realism as in Holmes (1935), Chen (1943), Apletin (1934) and to a lesser extent in Gray (1986), Strigyalov (1988) and Bown (1991). Bird (1987) qualifies this view of a natural evolution by arguing that the demise of the leftists was due not only to external developments but to internal feuds as well. Leniashin (1988) qualifies the notion of a 'natural' evolution by arguing that Socialist Realism was not at variance with the artists' own interests. At the same time Leniashin and Bird do not collapse all figurative artists into one category but maintain a focus on their diversity. This is rare in the literature but is a direct result of their more detailed documentation of the figurative arts groupings.

so-called formalist group consisted of Cubofuturists¹³ who subsequently became Constructivists and Productivists¹⁴. They argued for the abandoning of easel art and the linking of the visual arts to industrial design. Like many of the figurative artists they defended their style in terms of social significance. Although regarded as an early proponent of formalism, the Cubofuturist project in Russia was not anti-realist. The Cubofuturists in Russia never succeeded in dissociating themselves entirely from the political context and, throughout their formal experimentation, continued to believe in the possibility of understanding the world according to a coherent set of rules. This was an idea central to realism, namely that the world was an integrated system of phenomena and its truthful representation rested on the rational description of this coherence. I argue that those engaged in formal experimentation in Russia *were* committed to this rational explanation or interpretation of the world. Works were taken to contain truths, to make sense, to be probable and to be informed by a common experience, knowledge and language.

It is important to recognise that the new figurative groups asserted their claims in manifesto form and organised exhibitions at the same time as the first texts on Constructivism were published. In the twenties and thirties the various art groups vied with each other to justify their artistic products in accordance with the socio-historical climate¹⁵. In general the cultural debate in Soviet Russia in the twenties and thirties had less to do with a polarisation of realism and anti-realism, translated in the art world

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13. The term 'Cubofuturist' was developed by Camilla Gray to describe the combined influences of Cubism and Futurism on the Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century (Gray:1970). For a number of years the Cubofuturists had posited painterly expression as more important than the imitation of reality. Those Cubofuturists who did away entirely with references to the objective world were called Nonobjectivists. Their emphasis on technique was carried over into the Constructivist/Productivist enterprise. The Constructivist artists who radically questioned the status of art, were situated mid-way between the autonomous self-referential works of the Nonobjectivists and the utilitarian projects of the Productivists which were far removed from easel art. Although the Nonobjectivist easel art painters were termed formalist, along with Constructivists/Productivists what they shared with figurative painters was a defence of the relevance of easel art.
 14. Lodder differentiates between Productivist theorists and Constructivist practitioners (Lodder 1983). In this dissertation I use the term Productivism to refer to a form of late Constructivist practice.
 15. The Makovets were founded in 1921 and held their first show in 1922, the year Aleksai Gan published "Constructivism".

as figuration versus abstraction, than with the success with which artworks were thought to impact upon specific material conditions¹⁶. Politicians, theorists and artists who supported figurative art did so because of the presumed primacy it placed upon particular material conditions, but the endeavours of non-figurative artists were equally oriented toward effecting a change in the material reality of the populace. The climate in which these artistic tendencies coexisted was that of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and it was in this context that their effectiveness was judged. Their coexistence continued into the late twenties and the beginning of the so-called Cultural Revolution of Stalin. I argue that the early figurative and so-called formalist non-figurative works can be viewed as constituting a continuum of production emerging from a common socio-political base and from common philosophical premises. I take issue with the view that NEP was the cause of the flourishing of figurative art and the demise of leftist production¹⁷.

Beginning with a discussion of the philosophical premises of Marxist Realism I proceed to discuss the objectives of the 'formalist' and figurative groups in the light of the socio-political context and from there proceed to a visual analysis of figurative works. It cannot be ignored that the numerous cultural debates and the institutional shifts in the twenties and early thirties reflected an increasing conflict between those who desired an experimental and non-hegemonic art world and those who fought for a politically motivated hegemony, but to separate these out into figurative versus non-figurative art is problematic. For the purposes of this dissertation, so-called leftists and figurative artists will be dealt with in separate chapters. This is to risk perpetuating the tendency to separate these groups, but I intend to reveal commonalities between, and complexities and contradictions within these supposedly coherent groups. The rationale of each chapter is set out below. Throughout the course of this investigation I consider the

16. Most of the figurative artists assumed that a more organic link existed between their representations of working class life and the Soviet state, which set out to address the 'real' material needs of the working class. However it was as commonly argued by Constructivists and Productivists that their formal experiments and technical concerns reflected the industrial concerns of the new Soviet state and was therefore as beneficial to promoting a new proletarian culture.

17. The idea that the demise of the left is linked to NEP is argued by Lodder (1983), Bird (1987) and Bown (1991).

influence of cultural theory, its institutionalisation into cultural policy and its practice in the organisations of figurative and non-figurative artists.

In Chapter One I situate the definitions of realism in the context of Marxist political theory in Russia. I focus on the political arguments for and against the continuation of older forms of realism. These arguments were instrumental in shaping the production of figurative artists, the production of the so-called formalist avant-garde as well as those who ultimately subscribed to Socialist Realism. These debates regarding the meaning and purpose of realism were inseparable from concurrent political developments and were intertwined with debates regarding the possibility of establishing a proletarian culture in fulfillment of the project of the Russian revolution, which was to establish a government to further the interests of the proletariat. In this first chapter, Marxist theorists Georgi Plekhanov, Lev Trotsky, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Vladimir Lenin have been identified as important proponents of the kind of cultural production that was considered most suitable for Russia. The views of these Marxist thinkers played a fundamental role in the shaping of government and non-government cultural institutions as well as of the teaching programmes, aims and objectives of arts groups and the public reception of visual production. These theorists' writings were variously interpreted to support the idea of Socialist Realism and are in part responsible for the evolution of this concept. To place figurative art at the opposite end of the spectrum of 'formalist' art is also to assume that all figuration in the Soviet Union fulfilled the didactic functions of Socialist Realism. This is erroneous and is to ignore the complex history of the emergence of Socialist Realism.

Chapter Two will focus on the way in which the formalist-realist debate was reflected in institutional policies, but with emphasis on the position of the so-called formalists, some of whom, despite this perception of their being formalist, developed sagacious arguments in favour of an industrially useful art. Their arguments drew strongly on the economically motivated theories of Osip Brik, Viktor Pertsov, Boris Arvatov and Alexei Gan, all of which will be briefly discussed to illustrate and emphasise their social concerns. These leftist theorists' definitions of the term realism will be discussed in accordance with their political commitments.

These politically motivated arguments about culture pertained to ways in which culture might be democratised so as to be most beneficial to the working class, and many of these addressed the political and economic need to increase industrial output. These leftist theorists' concerns with democratising culture included a consideration of the accessibility of cultural training, who carried out this training, and what artistic forms of expression were advocated. Chapter Two will thus also include, as a context for these so-called formalists' theories of realism, an outline of the positions held by the so-called formalist leftists within the material base of the visual arts (i.e. the art institutions and training colleges).

The shape of these debates and the objectives of art organisations and institutions was affected by the government's attempt to regulate a weakening economy by instituting a new economic policy (NEP). Chapter Two will therefore also contain a brief synopsis of the attitudes of government spokespeople who advocated NEP and who were positioned in government affiliated organisations in such a way as to affect the development of the arts. This will be done with the purpose of drawing attention to the government's role in increasingly emphasising technical development under NEP as opposed to the development of human resources and the liberal arts.

Before NEP, the non-figurative so-called formalists agitated for a hegemony in the art world founded solely on political injunctions supportive of the new government. Under NEP, and faced with figurative artists drawing an increasing number of commissions, these so-called formalists later found themselves arguing against an hegemony informed by political injunctions. This position was to shift again in the post-NEP situation with both the so-called formalists and figurative artists assuming increasingly militant political stances. Despite this history of so-called formalists aligning themselves with the state's political and economic policies, by the mid-thirties the state was perpetuating the idea that at one end of the cultural spectrum, autonomous cultural action was being defended by leftists over and above any political allegiance, and that at the other, artists were

choosing figurative expression as the most 'direct' means of communicating with the broad populace¹⁸.

The cultural debates between leftist so-called formalists and the various figurative groups in the twenties and thirties need to be seen in the context of the Soviets' reconstruction of the history of Soviet art, which claims a direct line of development from nineteenth-century realism to Socialist Realism¹⁹. What *was* a contested issue amongst different art institutions, associations and groupings was not whether or not art should be autonomous - they all agreed that it affected material conditions - but whether or not its forms should be built upon the older forms of realism. The non-figurative artists had a recent history of rejecting past figurative expression entirely so as to experiment with a new language of form, based on what they assumed constituted the essence of visual language. Although in their initial stages their manifestations emphasised the internal relations of the artwork over relations with the external world, this shifted considerably in the post-revolutionary context. The contention throughout this dissertation is that underlying the apparently polemical interchange was a broader socio-political issue informing artistic developments in the Soviet Union, one which most Western art historians have been largely insensitive to, that is, that definitions of realism changed according to shifting definitions of proletarian culture, and that these definitions of proletarian culture shifted in accordance with changes in economic and political policies. In the course of this dissertation I point to the interrelations of political, economic and cultural theory and visual art production, and I attempt to demonstrate that not all politically interested artists worked with tried and tested realist styles even if they did subscribe to a common philosophy of Marxist realism.

In Chapter Three I will discuss the status of figurative art both during and after NEP. This will entail a consideration of the status of figurative art in the art institutions, its defence by a number of different figurative groups, and its survival in the face of

18. It was only when the arguments for utilitarian art excluded any necessity for formal and aesthetic experimentation that artists who had formerly argued for utilitarian art then tried to resurrect the formalist project.

19. See Valkenier (1989) for a study on this reconstruction of Soviet art history.

concerted attacks by so-called formalists in LEF²⁰. This attack by LEF is important because it constitutes part of the artificial separation between figurative artists and so-called formalists. This antagonism between the artists, largely informed as it was by a struggle for patronage and commissions, has been repeated in the documentation and analysis of this era²¹. To understand the argument between leftists and figurative artists, it will be necessary to discuss the political allegiances of the artists which informed their place in the debate and which gave fuel to their arguments. The political context from 1924 on is of particular importance here because the theories of Lenin were reinterpreted after his death, those of Lunacharsky lost weight, and those of Trotsky and Bukharin were overshadowed due to the rise of Stalin and the 1927 Cultural Revolution.

Chapter Three will focus on the crucial 1924 Discussional exhibition and the reactions to the claims of the figurative artists who exhibited on this show. The debates centred around the artists' claims to objective analysis which was a sign of their eagerness to support the NEP goals of rapid industrialisation. Despite both the figurative and non-figurative groups' claims to reflecting the scientific ethos of Soviet society, some figurative groups were already favoured and commissioned by some state departments because of their overt didacticism and even their romanticism. The post-1924 situation was epitomised not only by an intensification of contesting claims to objectivity, but also by their united support for rapid urbanisation, and the notion of a collective identity. In this post-1924 context, the polemic became even cruder in that an absolute divide began to develop between those who proclaimed the exclusive importance of subject matter as opposed to those who emphasised that formal and technical developments were also of import.

I will discuss and position figurative groups in relation to this polarity and in relation to the debate about professionalism and expertise. It is important to note however that many figurative and 'formalist' groups which espoused technique did so alongside of a

20. LEF (*Levyi front iskusstv*) was a journal which existed from 1923 -1925 and then resumed as *Novyi Lef* until 1928, and in 1928 became *Ref* (*Revollyutsionnyi front*). Founding members included Arvatov, Brik, Chuzak, Kushner, Mayakovsky and Tretyakov. See Bowlit (1988:199-202) for extracts from LEF April-May 1923.

21. See footnotes 1, 3 and 6 above.

commitment to the new Soviet order. It is this that is often written out of history, that is, that not all figurative groups were passively reproducing nineteenth-century forms of realism and that some of the figurative groups shared with the so-called formalists a didactic militancy. In the early thirties both figurative artists and the 'formalists' in LEF tried to outmanoeuvre and radicalise one another and the development of both groups toward didactic figuration will be traced.

Fundamental shifts in the political and cultural sphere after 1927 led to mergers, to state interventions, to blueprints for new unions and to official re-presentations of art history. In the post-NEP period, the emphasis was still on the establishment of a proletarian culture but this was a far narrower definition of the concept than was previously signified in definitions posited by Plekhanov, Lenin, Lunacharsky and Trotsky. By 1934 the proletarian cultural revolution in the visual arts was equated with a figurative art typified by easy recognition, heroism and optimism. In effect this was the illustration of the Socialist Realist approach advocated at the 1934 All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, but this is not reason enough to ignore the multiple differences within the production of figurative painters before this date. Nor is it reason to lump together all figurative art under the rubric of realism. Socialist Realism reinforced state policy, but it was some years before it was legislated as the only acceptable mode of artistic expression. That Socialist Realism was ultimately narrowly defined in terms of an old academic realist style and in terms of a conceptual exclusion of ambiguity, contradiction or criticality is not unimportant, but to assume that this was the case with the figuration *preceding* officially sanctioned Socialist Realism is problematic. This argument will be returned to in the last chapter which is based on a visual analysis of figurative works of the mid-twenties to early thirties.

In Chapter Four I will focus on samples of work from figurative arts groupings with a view to establishing that a number of them cohered around a shared Marxist philosophy of realism while others did not. The figurative art production will be evaluated according to the presence or absence of a causative, objectifiable and quantifiable view of the world, and the belief in principles of certainty or relativity. I will assess the extent to which artists confined their interests to the specifics of place and time. I question the

notion of figurative expression as a contiguous association of elements uniformly reflecting the ideas of realist philosophy. Not all of the figurative production of the late twenties and early thirties tried to arrive at a 'total' picture of events, nor did it try logically to retrieve empirical truth. After close observation of figurative work from the late twenties, it is argued that a fair number of these works laid little claim to a finite, orderly and complete world. It is when works question this idea of the world operating according to fixed, observable laws that anti-realism can be said to be operating in this figuration. Those works that contradicted Marxist notions of realism will be discussed in relation to way in which they contradicted a realist perspective.

This entails an identification of the degree of 'subjective' ambiguity or 'objective' and causal continuity. The latter demands a belief in a relatively transparent means through which a 'truth' is arrived at. In the figurative art practice of the twenties there exist varying degrees of conscious emphasis on the psychology of the maker and the psychology of those portrayed. Certain works speak more of coherent characters and 'types', while others tend toward a more abstract rendition of experiences unmediated by attempts at quantifying reality through the framework of realism. When the latter occurs, there is no longer an attempt at separation between the artist and what she or he portrays. With the object and subject mixed up, realism fails and notions of objectivity, comprehensiveness, uniformity and figurality are subverted. When realist strategies remain intact, reality is always an identifiable 'subject' already there and resisting the influence of form over content. There is at least the semblance of detachment from a concrete objective existence which is distinct from the artist's subjective experience. The subjective has become objectified, as has the abstract, and the focus of attention is on recognisable objects whose very distance from the subject preserves a stable cognitive gap between the events of life and the subject.

If realism is taken to pertain to an exhaustive disclosure of facts and 'truths' and is assumed to be viable because of our experience of such truths, then according to this argument, the experiences recorded and communicated would of necessity have to be of a 'common' or 'general' nature. The more complex, diverse and subjective a rendition of events, the less likely it is that this more ambiguous version of reality would be

understood. In this chapter the figurative art will thus be analysed visually in terms of the degree of conscious ambiguity and assertion of a subjective presence 'intervening' as it were between the 'objective' articulation of data.

This of course raises the issue of *who* would experience the data as recognisable, relevant, objective etc. For a work to be considered realist it has to produce an illusion of truth, or it has to seem identifiable with an actuality outside of itself. This authenticity is declared not only by the artist but also by the audience. These works will therefore also be considered in the light of their reception at the time of production and the questions posed will be: *which* viewers must be convinced of the reality and what 'sense' is being conveyed? More important than the artists' intentions, it is the images and the reception of these images that will reveal whether or not they could be regarded as real in terms of a 'proletarian' reality. It is only by combining a visual analysis of works with a consideration of the prevailing definitions of 'proletarian culture' that their status as 'proletarian realist' work can be ascertained. If realism is taken as a representation of things as they are 'normally' seen, then here again the 'normal' assumptions of a particular (in this case proletarian-identified) audience must be specified, as must be any evident challenges to these 'norms'.

The social order portrayed might indeed be a different one to that featured in preceding bourgeois realism. Figurative works claiming to be suited to a new proletarian order might display the displacement of a predictable and structured hierarchical world and in lieu of such a world might picture a different ethos and a different set of meanings resident in physical locations and institutions. This raises the issue of whether images passively reproduce reality in the manner criticised by early twentieth century Marxist realists and labelled as 'naturalist'²², or whether a 'realist' depiction existed in which individual human consciousness was indicated as that which grows and changes in a *dialectical* relationship with the material world. The difference between 'normality' and 'typicality' enters at this point, the latter being a concept particular to Marxist realism. Images will be viewed in terms of this notion of typicality, and in terms of whether this

22. Plekhanov, Lunacharsky and Lukacs regarded images which passively reflected reality 'naturalist'.

concept accommodates the portrayal of shifts in codes of value (familial, national, individual, sexual etc.). Which values remain reified will also be of interest as this will indicate how the revolution affected changes in representations and will provide reference points when considering further changes introduced by Socialist Realist methodology.

In Chapter Four I will also ascertain whether the images represent the world as is 'normally' seen or as it might exist in the process of becoming. Both these forms of realism, the latter pertinent to Socialist Realism, excluded from their ambit self-conscious references to the construction of subjective or imagined realities. When analysing figurative art production from the twenties to mid-thirties it is the conscious distancing between subject and object that will be looked at in an attempt to ascertain which works claim to be unambiguous and non-ideological presentations of the world and which works exploit this ambiguity. While ambiguity and anti-realist elements will be identified in some works, others which claim to be non-ideological will be examined to identify how they collapse complex factors into a simple unitary vision and hence reinforce certain ideological positions. Such works function as if they are underlined by 'universal' assumptions and as if the originator had no part in their proclamation. As such, they partake of the same principles that inform Socialist Realism. This supposedly objective and precise mimicking of reality is based on the assumption that reality is solid, and the worst perpetuation of this realist strategy occurred when older formulaic modes of imitative representation were inherited by artists who neither questioned nor altered them.

The principle intention in the Conclusion is to demonstrate that the 'oppositional' categories of formalist and figurative are misleading, as is the assumption that in the post-revolutionary context they betrayed different philosophical premises. On the basis of the preceding detailed cultural study which is accompanied by political and economic references and a detailed visual analysis I point to the similarities in intention and rationale of so-called formalists and many figurative artists. I oppose the construction of the 'formalist' project in the Soviet Union as a movement which prioritises the means of

expression above 'content' or concerns 'external' to the formal means²³. Equally important, I oppose the idea that figurative works perpetuate the illusory representation of the human subject as a coherent subject whose identity is central to the workings of a rational world.

I argue that those figurative works which reflect realist philosophical ideas with a semblance of detachment do so in accordance with Marxist theories of realism and that the ideas of permanence, coherence and certainty which they reflect are shared by the so-called formalists²⁴. In such works illusionism still operates, based on the assumption that reality is always and already there²⁵. These works are realist in that they seek to 'organize' data and 'objectify' the abstract. If in the attempts to find formal equivalents for abstract universal laws, the privileging of form could be seen to be linked to attempts to capture immutable truth the so-called formalists were in fact realist in their philosophical enterprises. This raises philosophical questions about the relationship between realism and Modernism in the USSR, about whether and how the so-called formalists and figurative artists in Russia politicised their aesthetic, thereby challenging their own utopianism with a critically realist vision.

On the other hand there existed figurative artists who searched for subjective equivalents to objective reality and in so doing evoked a non consensual reception of data. In this respect such figuration could be seen as anti-realist. Such images challenge realism fundamentally because they blur the dualities of fact/ fiction, interior/ exterior, rational/ irrational and the dualism of matter and mind. These images cannot be assumed to constitute a 'natural' development toward Socialist Realism and provide evidence that figuration did not necessarily reflect the philosophy of Marxist realism as was assumed

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23. It is politically significant that it is the view of formalism minus the concern for social change that has prevailed in Western histories of art. The continuity of capitalist world orders are contingent on cultural attitudes which assume a separation between intellectual enjoyment and the travails of labour.
 24. These realist notions are also related to the utopian beliefs that characterised the pre-revolutionary avant-garde i.e. those who anticipated a future which would offer up a progressive completion or solution to contemporary problems.
 25. According to Nash (1987:33) in such works "there is an elaborate matrix of data...that completely and definitely explicates the dynamics of that subjectivity in terms of rational materialism".

by a host of Soviet writers from Plekhanov, to Lenin, Lunacharsky, and apologists for Socialist Realism.

It is through these two strategies: demonstrating the shared intentions of so-called formalist leftists and realist figurative artists, plus demonstrating that the practice of a number of figurative artists was anti-realist, that I challenge the construction of the supposedly oppositional categories of realism and anti-realism, and the idea that the former was constituted by figurative artists and the latter by leftists. As mentioned above, what becomes evident in examining the relationship between the so-called formalist theory and practice and figuration in the USSR is the relationship between Modernism and Marxism in the USSR. The legislated endorsement of a particular form of figurative expression eradicated the revolutionary and Marxist potential of the so-called formalist enterprise as well as the revolutionary potential of that figuration which was considered inimical to Socialist Realism. With the definition of realism restricted by stylistic assumptions, those realist works which lent support to the Marxist project of revolutionary change by challenging habituated perception were discounted. Marxist theory could and was beginning to develop a redefinition of the artwork in terms of contextually contingent functions, but this proved too radical for a government eager to legitimate itself by inventing a 'tradition' of Socialist Realist works built upon the idea of 'immutable' artworks of the past.

CHAPTER ONE

MARXIST THEORIES OF REALISM IN RELATION TO POLITICAL ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST A PROLETARIAN CULTURE.

In this chapter I set out to identify the concept of 'proletarian culture' which emerged from the interface between political and cultural debates in early Soviet Russia. These debates were pivotal to the development and reception of early Soviet art and in different ways they acted as fertile reference points for future artistic organisations trying to stake a claim for figurative art. It is in the writings of Georgy Plekhanov, Lev Trotsky, Anatoly Lunacharski and Vladimir Lenin that the concurrence of political interest and art criticism can be identified and it is in their definitions of culture that 'politically viable' visual expression begins to be equated with realism.

The cultural theory and criticism of each of these writers was informed by the political alliances that each believed was necessary for the revolution to occur and to succeed. Cultural theories thus referred to the class status of the artist as well as the status of her/his audience. Each theorist conceived of a different role for the urban working class in its relationship to the peasantry, the urban bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. It is the negotiation of these relationships that influenced their definitions of culture and the functions they envisaged for it.

The application of class analysis to artistic production and consumption was also informed by what these theorists regarded as the most suitable cultural expression for a future liberated Russia. This entailed the adoption of positions in relation to past and present forms of indigenous expression, to European cultural heritage and to the latter's effect on contemporary cultural activities of the Russian urban middle class. The question posed was how these influences could best be assimilated in furthering the liberation of the oppressed working class in Russia. Whatever position was adopted was argued in political terms and this related to the degree of subjective intervention 'allowed' the

cultural producer in the face of both the 'predetermined' laws of history and the political control by a revolutionary vanguard.

What is foregrounded in this dissertation is how the attitudes of Plekhanov, Trotsky, Lunacharsky and Lenin impacted on the general understanding of 'proletarian culture' and how their definitions encouraged and/or counteracted the emergence and development of this concept. Their attitudes to 'proletarian culture' influenced their critical appreciation of art and their respective attitudes to realism. Under Stalin these views were collapsed into a call for a proletarian 'style' of art which was narrative, figurative, didactic and ostensibly without contradiction.

Georgy Plekhanov

To understand the Marxist defences of figuration which arose in the late 1920s it is useful to consider the shift from Georgy Plekhanov's explanations of beauty as contingent upon use, to the argument developed by later Marxists, that art *ought* to fulfil social needs. Plekhanov tried to cultivate an 'objective' tolerance of various forms of artistic expression but in later years his ideas were easily absorbed into defences of Socialist Realism. His concern that a political alliance between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat be formed for the success of the revolution was also to have an impact on cultural thought and ironically to reinforce conservative bourgeois assumptions about culture and future Soviet cultural policy. It was ultimately the bourgeoisie's inheritance of eighteenth and nineteenth century art techniques, taught at the imperial academies, that was preserved by most of the Marxist cultural theorists. This preservation of past 'culture' was often at the expense of new developments in art practice.

Born in 1856, at age 24 Plekhanov was forced into exile for 37 years. Within three years of moving to Europe he had become an 'orthodox' Marxist. The analysis which he accordingly arrived at, of 'inevitable' revolutionary change occurring in two distinct phases (as discussed below), proved problematic when applied to Russia. He believed that Russia was already following the Western path of development toward capitalism,

thus the first revolution would be a bourgeois revolution to overthrow autocracy and to guarantee civil liberties. After this stage of fighting alongside the liberals, the socialists would present their revolutionary and socialist programme. When sufficiently mature, the proletariat would proceed toward revolution by seizing power and establishing the dictatorship of their class. Whether this seizure would be by military or legal means would be dictated by the prevailing material or 'objective' conditions (i.e. the presence or absence of factors conducive to change occurring within a constitutional framework). Given the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie, if Plekhanov's theory of revolution were to materialise, the proletariat would have to concede power to the bourgeoisie until such time as the capitalist modes of production had been developed and were 'ripe' for social ownership. The question Plekhanov did not address was how to ensure that a fully conscientised proletariat would be willing to waive its claims to equal ownership in this interim phase.

The revolution, in Plekhanov's analysis, would have to be preceded by an extensive period of preparation during which time the proletariat would be in the process of achieving full consciousness. This formed the crux of a future dispute in Marxist circles, namely the degree to which it would fall upon the non-proletariat revolutionary intelligentsia to impart this full 'consciousness' to the proletariat. This issue was also of importance in cultural circles where bourgeois cultural activists saw it as their responsibility to pass on cultural skills to the proletariat. According to this analysis there was much to be gained from a political alliance with the bourgeoisie. For Plekhanov there was therefore value in the study of bourgeois cultural expression. This would enable the working class to 'raise' its cultural level and to absorb what would be of use to its continuing struggle. It would seem that such bourgeois activists tended to overlook the importance of cultural practices which were already in place amongst the rural population.

For Plekhanov, the coming revolution had its origins in the West, thus proletarian consciousness would grow out of an acknowledgement of these origins. His analysis of the unfolding of the revolution did not concede the possibility that the bourgeoisie might counteract emerging and independent proletarian political forces. It was Plekhanov's

'tactful' handling of the bourgeoisie that was in later years to become increasingly evident in his political and aesthetic theories and it was this tolerance that was to be rejected by an increasingly radicalised working class and its sympathisers. These radical political positions were evidenced in the rise of support for the Bolsheviks just prior to October 1917 and in the cultural activities of the organization Proletkult.¹

While Plekhanov warned against agitational art which denigrated the bourgeois cultural heritage, he was also intolerant of socially 'disinterested' art. This 'objectivity' was possibly due to the fact that from 1906 to 1911 he was not politically aligned to any one grouping. During this period he was less a pragmatic politician than a politically equivocal theorist, critical of Menshevik and Bolshevik policy, but nevertheless a confirmed Marxist and member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.²

Despite Plekhanov's later political equivocation, his early writings were central to Soviet Marxism. The evidence of a Marxist materialist analysis in his early essays on aesthetics was to be a formative influence for the next generation of Marxists who addressed the question of culture, namely Vladimir Lenin, Lev Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky. In Plekhanov's essays "Labour, Play and Art" (1900) and "Art and Utility" (1900), he made use of an historical materialist analysis which he elevated into a world-view he called dialectical materialism. He based this concept on Marx and Engels' reading of Hegel and on the fact that they replaced Hegel's "abstract reason" as the determining source of history, with that of modes of production. Plekhanov inherited their belief that ideas derive from the productive material base of society and in turn affect the social base through human action.

1. John Bowlt refers to Proletkult as a proletarian *cultural* organisation. Its name seems to be derived from that of its publication, "Proletarskaya kultura" [Proletarian Culture] (Bowl 1988:xxxiv, 177). Peter Scheibert however refers to Proletkult as the "Proletarian organization for *political* enlightenment", which shifts the definition of its activities from cultural to political (Eissenstat 1971:50). I argue that Bogdanov attempted to integrate political and cultural theory and practice.

2. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was an organization of Marxists established in 1898, out of which developed the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks as well as various other Marxist tendencies.

The conclusion Plekhanov drew from this materialist view was that labour was older than art and that art arose from and fulfilled precise social needs. What was recognised as beautiful by particular societies was that which was useful for society's survival. For Plekhanov the experience of beauty could not be generated from a single individual's experience of 'disinterested' pleasure. 'Beauty' had to satisfy the needs of a number of people in that society. For Plekhanov individual aesthetic experience was thus contingent upon a consideration of the social good, aesthetic pleasure was linked to utilitarian purpose and the contemplative faculty was considered secondary to the logical and functional (Plekhanov 1953:109-110).

This link which Plekhanov drew between beauty and utility was argued in a far cruder form in subsequent Soviet Marxist aesthetic debates. Plekhanov postulated that the artist *only* uses ideas of immediate use to her/his class. Although for Plekhanov class struggle was an inevitable product of history, he also did not define a 'useful' idea as one which facilitated class conflict. He did not call directly for art in the service of socialism but attempted instead to make allowances for all art which reflected the complex material conditions from which it had arisen. In 1912 in an article "Art and Social Life", Plekhanov wrote that all art was a natural reflection of its material context, and yet he often evaluated the art of his own day in terms of its contribution to class struggle. This he justified on the grounds of his belief that the contemporary social climate was conducive to change, and that if art were to reflect the material conditions of this present climate truthfully, it would inevitably reflect the 'inherent' change toward socialism. He therefore reserved a place for art to affect social relations, but had firm ideas on how this was to be done and what ultimate end it would serve. His praise was limited to artworks which participated in that 'natural progression' of historical forces which he predicted would lead to socialism. Plekhanov's criterion for contemporary art to be successful was not simply that it engage with the socio-political issues of the day but that it do so in accordance with a specific political analysis, i.e. in accordance with the development toward socialism which would advance in the form of two distinct revolutionary phases.

Although Plekhanov's 'tolerance' of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois cultural expression meant that he discouraged agitational art, it did not encourage him to praise any of the

diverse forms of artistic production emerging from contemporary 'bourgeois' artists around him. He criticized the Romantics for their excessive despair, the French Realists for encouraging a 'disinterested' naturalism and the Cubists for their subjective idealism. He argued that both these European depictions of 'subjective' reality and the excessive revolutionary agitation and intervention posited by the Bolsheviks were opposed to an 'objectively' given reality.

For Plekhanov, the well-realised idea in art had to be recognisable, and not located in the extreme subjectivism of 'bourgeois ideologists' such as the Cubists.³ An alliance between the working class and such bourgeois 'idealists', *undirected* 'naturalists' or 'individualists' would, in Plekhanov's scheme of events, provide the working masses with no useful cultural models.

Gleizes and Metzinger say that doubts about the existence of external objects are entirely foreign to them. But, admitting that the external world exists, our authors (sic) immediately proclaim it unknowable. And this means that for them too, nothing is real except their ego (Plekhanov 1953:216-217).

In statements such as this Plekhanov laid the ground for a trajectory of Marxist criticism, criticism which was later typified by defences of Soviet Socialist Realism.⁴ His accusations of decadence directed at Gleizes and Metzinger, both of whom had trained young Russian artists, paved the way for the ultimate intolerance of such influences and such formal experimentation in Russia.

This proclamation also illustrates the contradictions within Plekhanov's supposed objective methodology as he failed to make evident his own cultural prejudices. Cultural artifacts produced outside his immediate context were viewed with scientific detachment but it was the artistic production emerging from the complex conditions of his own

3. In reply to Anatoly Lunacharsky's objection that he was applying absolute standards of beauty over and above 'ugly' contemporary expression, Plekhanov replied: "[The]more the form of a work of art corresponds to its idea, the more successful it is....When Leonardo Da Vinci drew an old man with a beard, for example it did turn out to be an old man with a beard..." (Plekhanov 1953:225).

4. See Chapter Three on Socialist Realism. A direct link can be drawn between many of Georgy Plekhanov's ideas and those of Georg Lukacs.

his own situation that he was in effect unable to deal with because of the need to locate some evidence of emancipatory ideas specific to his own analysis in all contemporary art.⁵

Plekhanov espoused the importance of a proletariat-bourgeois alliance based on a respect for a 'bourgeois' cultural heritage, but the effect of his thinking contributed to the post-revolutionary scourges of 'bourgeois' avant-garde art which challenged academic realism and also to the stifling of proletariat expression such as that which occurred in Proletkult workshops. His early attempt to promote a proletarian consciousness which would be linked to an initial commitment to the bourgeoisie, was progressively abandoned as he found himself trying to stem a growingly independent proletarian voice.⁶

At no point in his career did Plekhanov ever write about the emergence of independent proletarian cultural forms. Nor did he consider that any artistic expression peculiar to the working class, might already be in evidence or worth examining. What is of interest in his defences of European bourgeois culture is that the study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century French painting was of far greater significance for him than the investigations of indigenous art and craft then being conducted by the likes of artists gathered at Savva

5. Plekhanov saw 'new' art solely in terms of the desire of individual artists to reject the old so as to gain fame for these new inventions. This he linked to the growing art market which speculated in unpublished 'genius' (Plekhanov 1953:222). He valued art only if it reflected a commitment to the project of 'improving' humankind, yet even the **Peredvizhniki** works of Kramskoy and Repin which were painted in a realist manner and which did address social issues were criticised for being overtly influenced by Populist philosophy. Plekhanov's own shift away from Populism toward Marxism obviously informed this attack on the realist **Peredvizhniki**.

6. A similar intolerance of an independent proletarian *cultural* voice was evidenced in later years in the Bolshevik Central Committee which acted against the proletarian cultural organization Proletkult. Interestingly the Bolsheviks then reverted to Plekhanov's two stage theory of revolution by making various economic concessions to the bourgeoisie.

Mamontov's Abrembtsevo Estate.⁷ Since Plekhanov was living in Europe he was perhaps unaware of the existence of this grouping but such popular expression was unlikely to be granted any significant status in his political understanding, because in his view it was the handicraft of an illiterate peasantry, a reactionary class of little importance.

The concept of 'proletarian culture' had little place in Plekhanov's scheme primarily because his view of revolution was rooted in a western model of liberal democracy. He had little tolerance for arguments that Russia had its own unique developmental path to revolution and therefore had little tolerance both for Populists' calls for the preservation of indigenous culture and for calls for a revolutionary agitational culture specific to the claims of an ascendant working class.

Lev Trotsky

Like Plekhanov, Lev Trotsky viewed the peasantry as a counter-revolutionary force. But while Plekhanov advocated a revolution led by a proletarian-bourgeois alliance, Trotsky proposed that only a revolution led by workers could result in a workers' government. Trotsky held this position between 1903 and 1917 when his view of society was that it should centre around the needs of a highly-conscientised and urbanised working class. This class would be represented by the Party and would prevail over all matters including cultural matters. It was in accordance with pragmatic political decisions taken later as a Bolshevik, that he was to retract his calls for an exclusive working class consciousness. Nevertheless it continued to inform his proclamations on culture in the form of a lingering anti-intellectualism. A curious combination of this anti-intellectualism and

7. Savva Mamontov was a Moscow merchant who established a colony of artists on his estate near Moscow. This colony grew out of a group of artists who had seceded from the Academy of Art in 1863. They called themselves the "Wanderers" since they organised travelling exhibitions throughout the countryside. One of the chief activities of the colony was a workshop for craftspeople who were skilled in traditional arts, and for artists who were interested in learning to practise ancient artistic traditions. Detailed reference is made to the colony in Gray (1986:11-14,17,20).

arguments in favour of bourgeois culture was to take effect in the type of culture officially condoned in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s.

Like Plekhanov, but 22 years later than him, Trotsky escaped from Siberia at age 23, and made his way to London, where he met with other exiled revolutionaries. In exile he belonged to a group of Russian Social Democrats which served as a bridge between various factions of Social Democrats. This group set itself up in opposition to any limitation of proletarian power, as was evident in the Mensheviks' compromises to the liberal bourgeoisie and in the Bolsheviks' decision to concede the necessity of an initial phase of democratic capitalism. Trotsky believed that only the workers were in a position to assume immediate power, and furthermore, that organised into a working class party, they could proceed directly to socialism.⁸

He was initially unsympathetic to Lenin's notions of a party controlled by the revolutionary intelligentsia. The intelligentsia did play a disproportionate role in the RSDLP at this point and Trotsky was highly critical of their entry into politics at the expense of the working class. He opposed the social democrats such as Plekhanov and Lenin who argued for participation in the post-1905 parliamentary structures, and insisted that an entry into a government in which the working class had no power would be meaningless. Trotsky believed that a coalition with either the bourgeois parties or the peasantry would serve only to confuse the direct movement toward the seizure of power by the proletariat. What was prioritised in this argument was the subjective state of consciousness of the working class. The revolution had to be a 'permanent revolution' which would lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat and would take place when these subjective factors had come to fruition i.e. when the consciousness of the workers themselves had reached the point of manifesting itself and coincided with the objective material conditions.

8. Part of this position had been outlined by A. L. Helfand Parvus on the eve of the 1905 revolution. See Carr (1950-53:III, 23).

Trotsky's criticism of the intelligentsia was also directed at their perception of culture as significant in itself. For Trotsky, art was an isolated activity which could not affect the world. He believed that only political designs could ensure progress (i.e. an 'inevitable' increase in the forces of production predicted by Marx). Art, he believed, was inimical to such rationalisation because it was informed by unconscious factors and intuitive cognition (Trotsky 1974:7). Like Plekhanov, Trotsky proclaimed that art 'lagged behind' social development.⁹ However, unlike Plekhanov, he had little tolerance of the bourgeois intelligentsia and bourgeois culture and later saw it as his role to *advise* the bourgeoisie on cultural matters.

The role that Trotsky was to play in cultural affairs after 1917 was dictated by his political priorities. In 1917 the strategy of the revolution began to coincide with Trotsky's theory of immediate seizure of power for the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Along with thousands of workers, ex-Mensheviks, old political rivals and previously non-aligned citizens, Trotsky joined the Bolshevik Party. As president of the Petrograd Soviet it was his practical organization of the immediate seizure of power and his protection of it as Supreme Commander of the Red Army during the civil war years that was to inform his views of cultural development in the Soviet Union.

By 1920 Trotsky had recognised that 'war communism', i.e. the militarisation of the Soviet Union, was killing the economy. The Kronstadt rebellion of sailors, in sympathy with peasant demands for an end to grain requisitioning, led to Lenin's proposal for a 'New Economic Policy' (NEP). In 1921, to ensure a productive agricultural sector and the growth of technology, the Bolsheviks introduced NEP, conceding an interim period of 'retreat' for socialism. During NEP, Trotsky's greatest fear was the re-emergence of the wealthy peasant and the restoration of bourgeois ideology. His attitude to culture in this era was thus informed by his desire to check the class differentiation which he believed could re-enter society under NEP, but also by the need to ensure that NEP succeed in facilitating industrialization.

9. Trotsky writes in 1923: "in a certain sense, politics always ranks first....Even the advice of Lenin to shift our interests from politics to culture is a piece of political advice" (Trotsky 1974:7).

Trotsky's energies were devoted to building a party which would serve the interests of the working class. During NEP years he criticised all internal party action which he identified as a threat to the proletarian dictatorship but he also advised the working class to abandon its revolutionary militarism, to support state policy and to learn from the bourgeoisie how to be efficient, accountable and reliable.¹⁰ In particular he warned against growing bureaucracy which would stifle individual initiative.

This meant that under NEP Trotsky had to abandon his previous working class eulogies to allow for an interim period of bourgeois technical and cultural development.¹¹ As the bourgeoisie asserted its historical presence by constructing and studying its history so, according to Trotsky, ought the working class and the vanguard of the working class to pay attention to the realities of working class life. However, whereas bourgeois culture had existed *before* the bourgeoisie took power, the proletariat had always been without property and without its own cultural heritage. So, according to Trotsky, only after assuming power would it recognise its cultural 'backwardness' and the need to abolish its impoverished class characteristics. This new culture ought to eradicate old 'bad' working class customs and habits (Trotsky 1924:27). The task ahead was to construct a new culture based on the old but in accordance with present needs and circumstances.¹²

This politically motivated position on culture which he presented to the working class, was accompanied by another position which was directed at the intelligentsia, but which also included a position on the formal means of cultural expression. In line with NEP strategy to draw on bourgeois expertise, Trotsky emphasized the importance of supporting a diversity of artistic groupings. He advised the cultural intelligentsia of the

10. The entire content of "Problems of Life" focuses on confronting and rectifying problems in the new Soviet state and is addressed (Trotsky 1924) to a working class audience gathered at a Moscow Conference of Communist Propagandists.

11. This was in effect a retreat to Plekhanov's two phase revolution along with its rejection of peasant culture and its refusal to acknowledge that working class culture might already be in existence.

12. In "Problems of Life" (Trotsky 1924), Trotsky makes the following statement: "Show us life as it has emerged from the revolutionary oven" (Trotsky 1924:23).

importance of cultural pluralism and chastised iconoclastic artistic groupings such as LEF for their monopolist claims on cultural expression.¹³ The cultural vanguard was told to reassess all early calls to bypass bourgeois development and to recognise that present circumstances necessitated a retreat from uncompromising socialism.¹⁴ Trotsky argued that all the cultural forms of this vanguard were in fact bourgeois in origin, and that since the working class were not yet equipped to influence cultural expression, 'socialist culture' in fact lay generations away.¹⁵ For Trotsky the new culture would be classless and built upon the *diverse* influences of the bourgeoisie, the avante-garde and the working class.

Although his political motivation for cultural pluralism was that it promoted political tolerance, he reserved a special supervisory role for the Party as the ultimate defender of 'truth'.¹⁶ Trotsky appealed to the avant-garde to act as "cultural overseer" and to help realise a culture for the working class in accordance with the Party's programme. For Trotsky it was ultimately Party ideology that should serve as the central point of reference for aspirant artists and cultural theorists. To artists proclaiming their proletarian origins and the importance of 'proletarian culture', Trotsky advised that as cultural workers they recognise their separateness from their working class base and their commonalty with other cultural workers, including the bourgeois "fellow travellers" they were so quick to deride (Trotsky 1974:20). By encouraging artists to abandon support for

13. LEF's call for a single 'Front of the Left Art – The Red Internationale', is reproduced in W. G Rosenberg's "Bolshevik Visions" (1990:244).

14. The issue was particularly pertinent to Trotsky given his pre-1917 connection with activists who subscribed to his theory of permanent revolution and who constituted a grouping in Russia in 1917, called the Mezhraiontsy, a group in Petersburg, which was neither Bolshevik nor Menshevik. The Mezhraiontsy had adopted Trotsky as their leader and allied themselves to the Bolsheviks when it became evident that an immediate transfer to the second stage of the revolution was to take effect.

15. Despite these criticisms Trotsky did at times intervene on the part of the avant-garde when Lenin accused them of decadence. See Trotsky's own references to in his essay "Class and Art" (Trotsky 1974).

16. "The Party will repel the clearly poisonous, disintegrating tendencies of art and will guide itself by its political standards". Trotsky in Solomon (1979:194).

the Proletkult position, Trotsky was in effect hoping that artists would be 'freed' to accept a supervisory role for the Party.

The older forms of representational art were considered to be the only forms capable of mirroring externally located 'truths'. It was not art, but this externally located 'true content' which had the power to reinforce the paradigms of the revolution. Given this faith in the Party's capacity to identify and to preserve truth, his warnings of the ideological 'dangers' of bourgeois formalist experimentation are understandable. The avant-garde was not only reprimanded for its cultural analysis, which was often devoid of any sociological concern, but also for its attempts to build an entirely new culture which ignored the value of past technical achievements. Trotsky identified the cultural avant-garde with a 'bourgeois nihilism', and contrasted this with a 'proper' proletarian revolutionary concept which was reliant on and fully cognizant of its own bourgeois democratic traditions, namely, the French revolution of 1879, the 1848 revolts and so on (Trotsky 1924). This claim to a continuity of revolutionary thought and historical events was for Trotsky what marked the fundamental psychological difference between the Communist and the LEF Futurist.¹⁷ By extension the Futurists' or leftists' rejection of realism was in effect considered by Trotsky to be a rejection of a potentially democratic art form. The belief in the importance of a 'tradition' of established form with a recognisable 'truth' content informed not only Trotsky's pronouncements on the cultural vanguard's political strategies, but also his pronouncements on its formal choices. In "Literature and Revolution" Trotsky wrote:

...to reject art as a means of picturing and imaging knowledge because of one's opposition to the contemplative and impressionistic bourgeois art of the last few decades, is to strike from the hands of the class which is building a new society, its most important weapon (Trotsky 1970:130).

For Trotsky, art forms which 'traditionally' had been considered most important were those which were concretely identifiable and recognisable. Trotsky presumed that the use of established frames of reference carried with it an historically endowed hierarchy of

17. The term 'Futurist' became an abusive term amongst art critics hostile to new developments in the art world. It grouped together most of the developments since Cubism which seemed to erode the figurative and narrative tradition, namely Rayonnism, Suprematism, the influence of Tatlin, Constructivism and other associated developments.

importance. To abandon figuration for abstraction was thus to lose access to what had been a potent cultural device over centuries. The point was made explicit with his criticism of artworks, which gave equal weight to subjective responses to the world instead of prioritising quantifiable historical and causal factors. This was in part similar to Plekhanov's argument. Trotsky argued that such equal attention to all aspects of the artwork prevented the whole from hanging together. In relation to contemporary formal experimentation he advised that components of works could be 'enlivened' but that the existing principles of representation ought not to be revised fundamentally. He argued that if formal innovation was informed by the desire to 'purify' form so as to arrive at its 'essential' components then this should be done in accordance with ideological requirements.¹⁸ Trotsky seemed almost to evince a fear that if life were defined in terms of the unknown, it would be uncontrollable. This was particularly evident in his rejection of Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation which proposed the development of techniques to disrupt habitual perception.

Trotsky believed that art had a limited role to play, especially in the epoch of the transition to socialism: this epoch would be characterized by international revolution, and civil war was not favourable to art. In effect he argued that in this interim period all energies would and ought to be harnessed to the political and economic struggle.¹⁹ For Trotsky, as for Plekhanov, the Archimedian point of history was human control over nature and over the formerly oppressive social process. Both theorists had held up the Hegelian idea of art as an embodiment of the ideal, but in that they believed that art would approach universal thought only when in a position to echo the virtues of the

18. This point is made in relation to Mayakovsky's "150 Million". See Trotsky (1970:152).

19. "... the proletariat, in so far as it remains a proletariat, is compelled to expend its best forces in political struggle, in restoring the economy, and in meeting elementary cultural needs, fighting illiteracy, lousiness, syphilis, etc. Of course, the political methods and revolutionary customs of the proletariat can also be called its culture; but this, in any case, is a sort of culture which is destined to die out as a new real culture develops" (Trotsky 1974:19). This argument and the tone of the entire address coincided with Lenin's belief that the cultural revolution would follow, not precede, the political and economic revolution. The argument reinforced the idea of culture as synonymous with scientific knowledge and technical manifestation.

classless society that gave rise to it, its effectiveness was indefinitely delayed and its power undermined.

Trotsky developed a minor and politically motivated argument in "Class and Art", that good bourgeois art could transcend all historical contexts due to its reliance on 'mood' and 'feeling'. Yet it was this very 'mood and feeling' which ensured Trotsky's dismissal of art from the contemporary milieu, leaving a place only for 'scientifically' derived 'rational' thoughts and actions in accordance with 'healthy' Western habits and 'efficient' Western technology. Although these 'scientific' concerns were echoed by artists in the mid-twenties (see Chapters Two and Three), it was under Stalin that the technicist attitudes evinced by cultural theorists such as Trotsky were finally realized.²⁰ The cumulative effect of such Marxist cultural criticism on formal experimentation was the expulsion of all formal innovators or so-called formalists from official posts even though many of them had been the only initial supporters of the 1917/18 Arts Commissariat. As Constructivists and Productivists, leftists had attempted to redefine the production and reception of art and to accompany their experiments with political and utilitarian defences of their practices (see Chapter Two). Such justifications were to hold little weight in the climate of ever hardening attitudes against formal experimentation, expectations that art ought to evoke moods and feelings and that a cultivated bourgeois segment of the populace not be indulged with their experimentation.

While Trotsky had criticised those who prioritised formal expression over and above the pragmatic tasks of the revolution, he nevertheless had attempted to promote a pluralist vision of culture. But in trying to moderate the position of radical Proletkultists and advocates of 'proletarian culture' he contributed to the entrenchment of a separation between the concept of a political dictatorship of the proletariat and an assertion of a proletarian culture, assuming that the former was not contingent on the latter and that what was required in the long term was a classless culture.

20. Under Stalin's rule the Archimedian point of history was declared by Stalin to be already in existence, hence human control over nature became increasingly evident as the overt subject matter of artworks.

Anatoly Lunacharsky

In contrast to Plekhanov and Trotsky, Anatoly Lunacharsky attempted to preserve a central place for artistic activity in the formation of a proletarian culture. He considered the pursuit of art as important for workers because creativity ensured the self-transformation of individual consciousness which was needed for social change. Contrary to Trotsky he argued that proletarian culture had an important role to play in the development of a classless socialist culture. He agreed with both Plekhanov and Trotsky that all cognitive activity was directed toward humanity's success in its fight against nature, but for Lunacharsky this programme toward collective harmony was not just mechanical and rationalistic. It was an emotionally charged process and involved cultural as well as political and economic transformations. Lunacharsky's emphasis on cultural transformation was to lessen in the post-1917 situation.

In 1892 at the age of 17, Lunacharsky was already lecturing Kiev workers on Marxism. His subsequent university studies under Avenarius in Switzerland were to equip him for a close alliance with A. A. Bogdanov. Both agreed that psychic and physical matters were of equal importance. After imprisonment in Russia in 1903 Lunacharsky went abroad, met Lenin, and together with Lenin, Bogdanov and others, established the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. For Lunacharsky, Marxism presented a viable alternative to religion because of its search for community. It offered a sort of deification of humanity which, like religion, would appeal to one not just rationally, but also emotionally.

Lunacharsky's work was an attempt to reconcile positivist thought with the revival of idealist thought in Russia. This was in line with the various intellectual critiques of positivism and materialism which had been ushered in at the turn of the century (Kolakowski 1988:2:419-422). In 1904 Lunacharsky and Bogdanov had written "An Outline of the Realist World View" as a defence of Marxism but within an empiriocritical framework. Associated with Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, empiriocriticism was an anti-metaphysical approach to epistemology. It challenged the duality of the objective and subjective worlds in an attempt to prove that inner experience, and therefore

knowledge, was inclusive of all outer things experienced and known. The argument aimed at eradicating the dichotomy between mind and matter and was as much a challenge to Idealists as it was to Marxist materialists.²¹

Lunacharsky and Bogdanov attempted to explain the world through a single principle. This single principle was humanity's collective struggle against nature for a harmonious and equitable socialist order. All spiritual and mental activities were seen in the biological and social senses as instruments of life in the battle for integral harmony and were considered valuable or moral if they promoted this harmonious concentration of activity. It was an anthropocentric world-view and it dovetailed neatly with the centrality of human labour to Marxist philosophy. It was nevertheless an adaptation of Marxism which was fiercely contested by Lenin and was ultimately to lead to a political split within the Bolshevik party and to the emergence of diametrically opposed views on culture within it.

The split between the early Bolsheviks occurred after the 1905 revolution. Prior to 1905 Lunacharsky had argued for a democratic revolutionary alliance of the proletariat and peasantry to form a provisional government, but after the defeat of the Bolshevik uprising in December 1905, he and Bogdanov stressed the need for an independent proletariat. He opposed Lenin's belief in the political potential of the peasantry and the need for a "left block" with the new peasant labour party in the Duma. The failure of the 1905 revolution had seen Lenin ultimately concede some use of legal institutions but Lunacharsky and Bogdanov were among those who had opposed Lenin on this issue, believing that the Bolshevik Duma representatives should be recalled and the Duma boycotted.

Lunacharsky and Bogdanov asserted that the system of capitalist production was characterised by a division of labour which left most of the populace in a disempowered state. They argued that the proletariat alone was best equipped to restore to humanity

21. Between 1903 and 1908 Lunacharsky's writings on art included "Fundamentals of Positivist Aesthetics", "Dialogue on Art" and "Tasks of Social Democracy in the Arts". Along with Bogdanov's work "Empiriomonism"(1904-1906), his 1908 work on "Religion and Socialism" had caused enormous friction amongst Bolsheviks.

a unity of labour and knowledge. The premise of this belief was that the proletariat enjoyed a collective experience and will in the industrial workplace as potential 'masters' of a 'progressive' technology which would ultimately free all workers to collaborate on a more or less equal basis. What this amounted to was a new world defined as proletarian and characterised by a supreme control over any potential contradictions, be they external or internal. Only the proletariat could effect this clean break with an oppressive economic and cultural past. Lunacharsky and Bogdanov thought that the failure of the proletariat to have achieved this in 1905 rested only on the fact that they were ideologically immature and culturally dependent on the ruling class. If this cultural revolution did not occur, the working class would remain lackeys of the revolutionary intelligentsia and fail in the attempt to organise themselves into a cohesive collective. What was required for the success of this revolution of the working class was the provision of an environment in which the embryonic comradely relations of a future society could develop free of strict party centralism and authoritarianism.²²

While Lenin emphasised the need for workers to be centre-stage, he also saw the need to win over bourgeois intellectuals, peasants and those soldiers and sailors who were defending Imperial Russia. In contrast to this Lunacharsky and Bogdanov believed that the workers' revolution would be assured by a tight network of underground workers drawn from the proletariat only. They saw the success of the revolution as contingent on the development of a revolutionary *proletariat* culture inimical to bourgeois culture. They argued this position in their publication, *Vpered*, which they continued to work on without Lenin's support and they promoted this view at a school they then set up for workers in Capris (Williams 1980; Sochor 1981). It was the combination of their idealisation of the potential of the working class, their opposition to Bolshevik centralism and parliamentary participation and the empiriomonism which they wove into Marxist thought that led to an inevitable split between them and Lenin in 1908.

22. The importance of cultural matters is evident in the following statement by Bogdanov in "Sotsializm v nastoiashcem": "A conscious comradely organization of the working class in the present and a socialist organization of all society in the future – these are different moments of one and the same phenomenon" (Sochor 1988:34).

Lunacharsky and Bogdanov continued to work on the *Vpered* publication, with the help of Maxim Gorky and propagated the importance of cultural education at two Party schools which they set up for workers who were smuggled out of Russia. The first they set up at Gorky's villa in Capri in 1909 and the other in Bologna in 1910-11. It is significant that, at this point, Lunacharsky and Bogdanov opposed Lenin's belief that cultural issues should be addressed after the transition to socialism. Their party schools were consequently aimed at developing an independent workers intelligentsia whereas at Lenin's party school in Paris, set up in opposition to the schools in Italy, party cadres were trained in accordance with the politically pragmatic requirements of a centrally orchestrated underground party informed by 'orthodox' Marxist philosophy.

Bogdanov and Lunacharsky were reacting against determinist Marxism and were opposed by Bolsheviks who were unwilling to concede ideology an organisational function. In effect they were criticising the crude base-superstructure model of Marxism. They recognised that cultural work was capable of effecting change, even if not acting as the most direct source of change. Given that cultural factors contributed to the perpetuation of social, political and economic relations they recognised that these factors might also prevent the successful introduction of another system of relations. They argued that the revolution was as dependent on a crisis in the economic system as it was on the ethical and cultural level of the proletariat. They argued that revolution could therefore be retrogressive or progressive depending upon whether or not there existed consensus amongst the workers (Sochor 1988:73).

Lunacharsky and Bogdanov's analysis of class relations did depart from 'orthodox' Marxism in that they identified at the root of class conflict not just the property relations of exploiter and exploited but authority-subordination relations perpetuated, for example, by the managerial organizers of production. Culture was understood by them to constitute the formative moment of the social divisions caused by technology. They contended that even if the base of society was transformed, exploitation and alienation would continue unless a cultural revolution transformed the old authoritarianism embedded in the superstructure.

According to them a classless society thus necessitated not only changes in ownership of the means of production but a transformation of the cultural and psychological factors which continued to divide people. This implied the necessity for a revolution in world views, artistic creativity and aesthetics and political relations. To prevent its continuing alienation, the proletariat would not only need a sense of its own oppression but would have to develop its own cultural hegemony. They believed that only with educational and cultural training could the working class seize power and create institutional changes which would reflect its changed consciousness. According to this view socialism was contingent upon a scientifically planned evolution of society as well as upon individual growth toward equality. This was in effect a marriage of the physical and the psychic and it was best facilitated through workers engaging in artistic activity (Eissenstat 1971:49).²³

In 1913 Bogdanov returned to Russia and Lunacharsky moved to Paris where he established a circle to address the issue of 'proletarian culture'. What becomes apparent from this point on is a difference in their respective interpretations of the concept of 'proletarian culture'. Lunacharsky developed a notion of 'proletarian culture' as a heightening of working class consciousness fused with militant enthusiasm. Bogdanov remained sceptical of the idea that the war would serve the purposes of revolution and was critical of the excessive emphasis that Lunacharsky now placed upon the militant component of proletarian culture. Bogdanov placed less emphasis on the military component. After the outbreak of the First World War, Lunacharsky reunited with Lenin on an international platform and revived the *Vpered* journal without the anti-Bolshevik sentiment which characterised earlier editions. Lunacharsky moved closer to Lenin's views of culture which were clearly dictated by political pragmatism. He appeared to jettison his earlier commitment to cultural change having to precede political change. Bogdanov continued to criticise Lunacharsky's notions of a militant proletarian culture during the post-revolutionary civil war years, years which he associated with an expedient political

23. Scheibert quotes Bogdanov as follows: "...art is the most powerful instrument of the organization of collective forces. In a class society art is the instrument of the class forces". See Eissenstat (1971:49).

and economic system.²⁴ However Lunacharsky was to reach the zenith of his political and cultural career during the civil war and was in effect to contribute to the collapse of Bogdanov's attempts to reignite concepts of 'proletarian culture' within the organization Proletkult.

Lunacharsky had returned to Russia in May 1917, rejoined the Bolsheviks and in September became president of the cultural-education committee of the Petrograd Party. It was in October with former *Vpered* members that he initiated the first conference for proletariat cultural organisations in Petrograd and that he was elected onto the central committee of the new organisation, Proletkult. However the week *after* the formation of Proletkult the Bolsheviks took power. A few days later Lunacharsky was given the position of Commissar of Enlightenment (i.e. Education and Culture), thus shifting his base of power. It was from Moscow that Bogdanov later assumed a leading role in Proletkult.

The government department which Lunacharsky headed was known as Narkompros.²⁵ Proletkult chose to remain autonomous from Narkompros but on the basis of its cooperation with the commissariat it was funded by public funds.²⁶ Proletkult collaborated with the artists employed at Narkompros on a number of the annual revolutionary festivity designs as well as on state organised agitational campaigns directed

24. It is interesting to note that during NEP Lenin conceded that War Communism was a military form of economic policy and not an harmonious economic system. For Bogdanov authoritarian-bureaucratic forms were inimical to comradesly organization and cooperation and the increasing influence of the army in the cultural and structural life was believed to lead to submission, a lack of initiative and a lowering of proletarian consciousness (Sochor 1988:89).

25. Other Proletkult members who also immediately became members of Narkompros were Kalinin, Lebedev-Polyansky and Krupskaya (Fitzpatrick 1970:11).

26. Of the initial Proletkult conference delegates, 170 of 330 were Bolsheviks. Delegates came from factory committees, trade unions, soviets, writers circles and other cultural organisations. The organization was divided into arts, publications, instruction, science, youth and finance. It consisted of district, city and regional Proletkult councils and grew rapidly, as did the organisations from which it drew its membership. The National council included representatives from Proletkult, the Bolshevik Party, trade unions, worker cooperatives, the Red Army and socialist youth organisations.

at the rural proletariat. The attitudes to 'proletarian culture' which developed during this period of profuse cultural practice originated not only from the major theories of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov but also from the debates and diverse practices of those artists connected to Proletkult and Narkompros.²⁷

Three central Proletkult resolutions were to prove problematic for Lunacharsky. These resolutions were (a) that cultural-educational work be considered equal to economic and political work, (b) that the best of past bourgeois culture should remain but that it should be subjected to critical appraisal, and (c) that the proletariat should rely largely on its own forces while utilizing the assistance of the 'revolutionary socialist' intelligentsia (Sochor 1988:128). As head of a state institution attempting to address cultural and educational needs and, subject to party rule, Lunacharsky was increasingly drawn toward a politically pragmatic programme of culture and away from calls for autonomous cultural activity. In opposition to Proletkult he emphasised the importance of the Communist Party assuming a leading role in all matters including educational and cultural matters. By 1921 Lunacharsky was in full agreement with Lenin that the great cultural traditions of bourgeois culture be preserved at all costs and that bourgeois working habits be assimilated by the working class if its dictatorship was to survive.²⁸

Lunacharsky concurred with the Bolshevik government's announcement that NEP be seen as the start of a cultural revolution which would allow Russian society to 'catch up' with capitalism. According to this view NEP was to be a time in which the working class could absorb the 'best' of bourgeois culture. This involved their assimilating educational and technological skills considered essential for rebuilding the industrial infrastructure and which would guarantee the Soviet Union's international survival.²⁹ Lunacharsky was

27. See Chapters Two and Three below.

28. It was however only a cultural history marked by moments of 'progressive' political accomplishment that he earmarked for assimilation.

29. At the 3rd All Russia Conference of Directors of Adult Education and Divisions of Gubernia Education Departments 25 February 1920 Lenin stated that " electrification plus Soviet power equals socialism".

swept along in this post-revolutionary 'quick fix' attitude to culture as skills-development. For Lunacharsky the cultural revolution could be initiated by simply persuading the populace to emulate the western technological path as a means of arriving at socialism. Capitalism provided the model (in the way of Taylorism and American pragmatism) and it was considered the task of the state to sift out from bourgeois culture that which it considered undesirable.

In opposition to this, Proletkult and certain LEF artists argued for a long term approach to developing a socialist culture. This entailed that culture be admitted a space to develop outside of the expectations surrounding the need for industrialisation. What they objected to was the expectation that the Soviet Union should inherit not only the technology of the West but also the cultural attributes of a bourgeois order. Although Lunacharsky maintained links with LEF and Proletkult, he distanced himself from their commitment to the development of new cultural forms.³⁰

It was due to Proletkult's insistence that there must be no retreat in the ideology of proletarian culture and no concessions to bourgeois values, that the state intensified its campaign against it in the NEP years. For Proletkult it was imperative that the industrial proletariat counter the growing individualism of the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. Whereas Lunacharsky believed the cultural revolution to be safe on the basis of who controlled the cultural institutions, Proletkult followed Bogdanov's position, which was to interrogate more precisely whose premises, values and visions this new culture would reflect (Sochor 1988:144). Proletkult envisaged its regional workshops rather than the offices of the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks, as the place where

30. In Proletkult the separation of manual and physical labour was being discouraged. Studio members were encouraged to swap skills and roles so as to abide by the principle of universalism in their interrelations. These suspicions of professionalism were countered by Lunacharsky in his argument that the studios should do more than provide experimental spaces for self-transformation. They should train proletarian artists to become professionals and not fear that this would result in a separation from their class base. The dictatorship of the proletariat would prevent any such alienation (Sochor 1988:139).

the "proletariat spirit" would be forged into a proletarian culture.³¹ Because of this insistence on autonomy, within the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Lenin agitated for Proletkult's demise. After extensive political lobbying at the 1919 All Russian Congress on Extramural Education, the status of Proletkult was debated, and delegates voted for Proletkult to surrender its autonomy to Narkompros. Lunacharsky unsuccessfully tried to persuade Proletkult that within Narkompros it would still maintain its independence.³² In 1920 he wrote of Proletkult:

Under the guise of "proletarian culture" they represent to the workers bourgeois views in philosophy (Machism). And in the artistic sphere they implanted in the workers absurd, distorted tastes (futurism) (Sochor 1988:153).

The cessation of Proletkult's activities was largely a result of this proclamation and of subsequent Party action.³³ Lunacharsky increasingly lent support to Lenin's disparaging proclamations although in his early writing class struggle was not just a political-historical category.³⁴ He considered the ideological effects of class in terms of psychology. The silencing of Proletkult did not serve to signify the cultural pluralism which Lunacharsky espoused, but rather a period in which most artists and theorists simply redefined the terms of cultural debate in an attempt to integrate the personally creative impulse with that of public morality.³⁵

In earlier years Lunacharsky had avoided a simple application of class analysis in relation to the artwork and instead identified a complex of interacting characteristics thought to indicate the artists class origin, her/his 'psycho-biological nature' and personal relation to

31. Their insistence on autonomy was out of line with the tightening of political controls exercised by the state under NEP and evidenced in Lenin's ban on factionalism.

32. Lunacharsky argues this in *Proletarskaya kul'tura* 1919 no 9-10 June-July, quoted in Fitzpatrick (1970:109).

33. By 1921 it had shrunk from 300 Proletkults to 50. The main organization was only dissolved in 1932.

34. Later, however, he made reference to Proletkult's decline in activity and expressed remorse for his failure to defend its autonomy in the face of the attack from Lenin

35. Under Stalin Proletkult was considered insidious and anti-Soviet, especially due to its insistence on the possibility of an international socialist revolution and therefore its implied objection to a national form of culture.

her/his class origins. The result was an acknowledgement of the importance of differences in the 'subsoil' of class which might otherwise have been overlooked by assigning artists to a generalized class category. This early writing was also indicative of his concerns with the experiential nature of cognition. The very form of an artwork was argued to be ideologically informed, and its reception was seen as contingent on a combined effect of external class factors and individual psychology. After October 1917, due to his resumed Bolshevik activities and allegiance to Lenin, Lunacharsky applied his belief in the psychological functioning of art to justifications of a foregrounded political function. Ironically his earlier acceptance of the influence of thought upon matter was thus used to support Bolshevik interventionist politics.

In "Basic Problems of Art" Lunacharsky criticised Plekhanov for presuming that society would unfold according to *predetermined* laws regardless of human intervention. Implicit in the attack on Plekhanov was the idea that Bolshevism offered a 'correct' analysis of the way toward socialism. In this essay Lunacharsky argued against Plekhanov for the possibility of arriving at criteria for identifying good art in different historical periods. Lunacharsky insisted that if a critic's views were determined by a progressive class or a progressive era committed to the 'objective development' of humankind (namely Lunacharsky's own position of Bolshevism), then that critic would be well placed to judge the relative value of social orders (Lunacharsky 1935:52). Against Plekhanov's 'objective' refusal to arrive at cross culturally valid or eternal criteria, Lunacharsky contended that utilitarian art could be evaluated according to the type of social base that gave rise to it and which it in turn promoted (Lunacharsky 1935:59).³⁶ Lunacharsky argued that artists needed to be encouraged to contribute to the establishment of a socialist world order and to act on behalf of the already established socialist state. Those art critics like Plekhanov,

36. Of Plekhanov he said : "Plekhanov was compelled to admit this partially, even though with various circumlocutions..."(Lunacharsky 1935:59).

who avoided such a direct call, he termed 'unbelievers' in the project of changing the world.³⁷

In opposition to Plekhanov, Lunacharsky defended "tendency" work, as well as the idea that artists could be significant political activists. As Bolshevik commissar, Lunacharsky was to abandon his early subtle distinctions of class, individual psychology and ideological form. Any place which had been reserved for a possible distinction between individual psychology and external political factors was now considered irrelevant. Lunacharsky called for the artists themselves to be fully cognizant of the ideology of their form and content and to act accordingly i.e. to consciously further a 'correct' ideological position. This was an attempt to go beyond Plekhanov's mere identification of the ideological content of the artwork. Lunacharsky's argument presupposed that art of greater worth would arise from the 'progressive' social base of post-revolutionary Russia and that models from past 'progressive' eras would in turn serve to provide aesthetic models for socialist Russia. It was by virtue of this argument that Lunacharsky arrived at an elevation of the cultural expression associated with the 'rational' world of antiquity over that associated with the despised Christian 'mysticism' of the middle ages. These principles of classicism and 'noble' Greek ideals he then appended neatly onto his calls for Socialist Realism in later years.

By 1933 Lunacharsky was proclaiming Socialist Realism as the only possible path for young socialist artists. He declared that realism was essential for materialists who needed to orientate themselves to the environment.³⁸ Lunacharsky argued that realism was best suited to those wanting to gain a precise knowledge of themselves, of nature and of the

37. Lunacharsky did detect instances where Plekhanov departed from his 'objective' stance but he believed that in general Plekhanov's defence of socially useful art was deficient and somewhat fatalistic. Contrary to this Lunacharsky assumed a far more aggressive approach which coincided with his position as Bolshevik commissar. His support for the early agitational artworks initiated by Lenin's proposal for monumental propaganda was an indication of this stance.

38. See Lunacharsky's 1933 essay "Socialist Realism" in James (1971:55-59).

social forces which he believed should be 'countered'.³⁹ He drew a clear distinction between Socialist Realism and 'bourgeois' realism. Lunacharsky described the tradition of 'bourgeois' realism as a three phase development from progressive anti-aristocratic realism, to that form of realism which was accurate but lacked social comment, to that which bemoaned reality but was too similar to 'disinterested' naturalism to be of any significance. According to Lunacharsky, present in all of these forms was a tendency to emphasise detail at the expense of an image of the whole. What distinguished Socialist Realism from these other realisms was evidence of a positive progression toward the attainment of an 'harmonious' vision. Lunacharsky conceded that the idea of the harmonious whole was romantic but he justified this romanticism on the grounds that it was not pessimistic but instead 'enthusiastic' and 'militant'. The harmonious visions of Socialist Realism were asserted to herald Stalin's cultural revolution and proclaimed an official artistic style. One of Lunacharsky's last remark on proletarian culture was:

Of course, it will be some time before it (Socialist Realism) will settle down internally, and the proletarian style, with its own peculiar genre and exhaustive thematics, will be adequately established and complete... (Lunacharsky 1971:58-59).

This equation of Socialist Realism with 'proletarian culture' is surely indicative of his dismissal of the entire Proletkult project as well as of his prior qualified support for an 'interim' proletarian culture.

The choice of realism as the most appropriate style for socialism was now unambiguously argued by Lunacharsky on political grounds. He envisaged cultural change as that which would proceed on the basis of the political transformation of society. The political hegemony of the proletariat had been prioritised over and above his prior insistence on its cultural hegemony. Accordingly a political culture was promoted rather than the 'proletarian culture' argued for by Bogdanov and fellow Vperedists of earlier years. This political culture was to be concerned with political images, symbols and values for the purpose of legitimating state policy. The proletariat was considered to be in need of tuition, the Communist Party was to be their cultural tutor and the Proletkult plan of self-

39. It is likely, despite Lunacharsky's public proclamations of remorse with regard to the demise of Proletkult, that these "social forces" referred to groupings such as Proletkult and LEF and other 'harbingers' of Futurism and non-Bolshevism. This was a direct echo of Lenin's sentiments.

tuition and artistic experimentation was declared revisionist, divisive and utopian. Lunacharsky's support for authoritarian modes of behaviour and for the idea of political hegemony contrasted starkly with his earlier notion of socialism as a personal liberation from external imperative and eternal truths. To preserve the new institutions he had followed a path of cultural conservatism and in an attempt to bind the people at large to the new state, he supported the combination of old and new cultural components and tried to delimit utopian notions of culture.

Whereas Lenin considered a 'proletarian' style to be possible and worth developing, for Lunacharsky this proletarian style was synonymous with Socialist Realism. This can be contrasted with his earlier work where there remains evidence of an attitude to cultural revolution and proletariat cultural expression directly at odds with the shape these concepts took under Stalin. Under Stalin the consolidation of political power was prioritised over experimental culture and the early Vpered warnings were forgotten, viz. that socialism would be a failed project unless linked to cultural liberation. The concept of 'proletarian culture' as that which might emerge from the experimental cultural experiences of the working class in decentralised and autonomous workshops at a grassroots level was jettisoned by Lunacharsky the moment he had to engage with the pressures of the post-revolutionary political domain.

Vladimir Lenin

What is evident throughout this debate surrounding the concept of proletarian culture, is that Lenin's views are a point of constant reference. Lenin, born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, in 1870, was indeed the key player in political and cultural events. Because Lenin addressed the issue of a cultural revolution only in the post-revolutionary era, toward the end of his life, it is often assumed that this was the only time the relation of culture to revolution was ever discussed. Nikolai Bukharin went so far as to say: "No one had or could have broached it (the cultural revolution) in the previous phase of historical

development....This is a new task – the task of our future" .⁴⁰ This myth was activated to write out of history the role of the early Bolsheviks such as Lunacharsky and Bogdanov, and to claim legitimacy for the cultural path followed by the Bolshevik government after the death of Lenin. Lenin was undoubtedly a primary player in the destiny of 'proletarian culture', but he was not the only one. Nor had he been the first to address the interrelationship of the revolution and cultural development.

Lenin used the term culture to refer to ideology, to knowledge and to civilisation (Sochor 1988:175-181). When he used culture to refer to ideology, it assumed specific strategic connotations. In his opinion the way to institutionalize ideology, or working class culture, was to capture political power and to enforce it. This differed sharply from the early attitudes of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov who believed that the only way to ensure a place for 'proletarian culture' was through the cultural matrix, introduced *prior* to structural change. Lenin's programme of cultural change focussed on the democratization of knowledge and mass literacy for the benefit of economic productivity. Cultural-educational work was thus linked to political-educational work. He called for the development of skills, by drawing on capitalist work habits and methods, and for the assimilation of the best of bourgeois culture, so as to benefit from bourgeois expertise. It is clear that much of this attitude to culture had its origins in Plekhanov's two stage theory of revolution.

In 1895 at age twenty five Lenin had travelled abroad to meet Plekhanov and other socialists of the second Internationale. He had already translated the Communist Manifesto and developed a critique of those Marxists who were committed to gaining power through legal channels, drawing strongly on Plekhanov's Marxist treatise. Before his departure, Lenin had investigated what was needed to build a strong underground network and on his return felt equipped to orchestrate strike action in factories. He formed a Marxist grouping called the "League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class" and was subsequently arrested, imprisoned and exiled for his activities.

40. This myth is reinforced by Claudin-Urondo who uses this quote to back up such a perspective (Claudin-Urondo 1977:10).

After a period of exile in Siberia he moved to Europe where he created an underground party newspaper, *Iskra*. The origins of his commitment to the idea of a centralised party led by a small revolutionary vanguard thus emerged in these years when the need for a stable organization of underground leaders became increasingly apparent.

A key text often quoted when considering Lenin's attitude to culture was one he wrote in 1905, entitled "Party Organization and Party Literature". The contents of this document must be considered in the light of the context which informed its writing. Crucial to events in 1905 was the split which had occurred at the second congress of the RSDLP in 1903. The factions proved permanent and Lenin subsequently led the Bolsheviks (majority-ites) in a struggle to develop a strictly centralised party. The Mensheviks (minority-ites) argued for a more loosely knit political programme and for the party to be opened to all those who simply believed in the party programme. The year 1905 had brought famine, the bankruptcy of the Tsarist government due to the Russo-Japanese war and massive unemployment. That same year Tsarist troops had mown down a workers' procession and general strikes had spread throughout Russia. In response the liberal bourgeoisie had organised itself into a parliamentary opposition of Constitutional Democrats and the Mensheviks called for an alliance with them. The Bolsheviks organised a congress at which Lenin pragmatically called for a shift in emphasis away from an exclusively underground form of operation toward an incorporation of above ground activities amongst the proletariat. Most of the Bolshevik party leaders opposed the idea of the party entering into the provisional government but Lenin argued that since the proletariat was still in the minority the *party* should enter into the provisional government on its behalf so as to get a foot in the door. Lenin argued this on the basis that party members would be kept under strict control by the executive of the Party.

It was within this context that Lenin called for all literature that was issued in the name of the Party to adhere strictly to the Party political programme. This call was reinforced by Lenin deriding the very concept of 'freedom of criticism' on the basis that 'hypocritically free literature' was in reality linked to the bourgeoisie.⁴¹ Lenin argued

41. See "Party Organization and Party Literature" reprinted in Deutscher (1973:158-162).

that truly free literature was that which was openly linked to the proletariat. Although his statement was initially directed at writers who were purporting to represent Social Democratic positions and who he thought should toe a strictly supervised party line, the broader implications of the document were that all "free" literature should be in line with the working class movement and therefore the Social Democratic Party. This interpretation suggests that Lenin's was an unprecedented call for all cultural production and distribution networks to be approved by centralised political bodies.

What is interesting in this document is that it contains one of the few references Lenin makes to culture as ideology. Certain types of writing he referred to as bourgeois ideology. Proletarian ideology however, was considered to be synonymous with Party ideology. This was consistent with Lenin's assumption that once the Party governed as the representative of the proletariat, all problems pertaining to the ideological function of culture could then be addressed. It was not a matter of transforming culture, as was persistently argued by Bogdanov and Lunacharsky in early years. For Lenin it was simply a matter of acquiring culture. He argued that with the Party in control culture could and had to be used in the interests of the proletariat and bourgeois bearers of culture could and had to be persuaded to lend their cultural skills to the proletarian cause.

When Proletkult insisted that the ideological basis of society be transformed it was described by Lenin as doing no more than the Russian Communist Party and Narkompros combined. While Proletkult advocated a 'new' culture, Lenin emphasised that the primary threat to the revolution was the lack of 'civilisation' amongst the 'masses'. Once 'literate' and 'civilised', the 'masses' would be equipped to recognise ideology for what it was and could assume a 'correct' ideological allegiance.⁴² When power had been secured for the working class cultural issues could be addressed. Lenin and the Party would then 'allow' this development of mass consciousness toward

42. Strangely this argument was in contradiction to Lenin's earlier argument against Bogdanov and Lunacharsky for their promotion of the idea of consciousness as the determinant of material conditions.

ideological 'clarity', a clarity outlined by the leaders of the working class (Claudin-Urondo 1977:72-77).

Despite Lenin's references to bourgeois ideology in his 1905 text,⁴³ his understanding of culture was generally not of culture as ideology, but of culture as knowledge. This was a view of culture which accorded with Marxists' beliefs that it was essential for the populace to acquire technological skills which would benefit production and ensure the economic survival of the Soviet Union. Conceived of as modern science and as technical knowledge, 'culture' was thus seen by Lenin to be the sole province of the bourgeoisie. Lenin argued that it was imperative that it be transferred to the proletariat and that the 'barbaric' illiterate populace be taught to read in order to become civilised. In this context, 'civilised' referred directly to attaining the technical and economic 'status' of Western industrial societies.

This reference to culture as knowledge and as civilisation was made explicit in one of Lenin's last observations, diarised in January 1923, wherein he noted the pressing need to combat "semi-Asiatic ignorance from which we have not yet extricated ourselves".⁴⁴ When he argued that the masses were aware of their cultural deficiencies what he was referring to was their *desire* for literacy and learning. The Eurocentric bias of this learning was never questioned. Socialism was simply seen as contingent upon this learning which would enable the development of productive forces and the development of a rational labour force. All this knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, was considered to be free of ideology.⁴⁵ It was precisely the ideological assumptions which underly such learning that the early Vperedists had tried to expose, even though they themselves uncritically absorbed technicist attitudes.

43. See footnote 41 above.

44. See "Pages From A Diary" in Deutscher (1973:167).

45. Claudin-Urondo points to a distinction Lenin draws between the association of capitalism and Western civilisation and capitalist politics (Claudin-Urondo 1977:16).

Neither Lenin nor the early Vperedists had seen the need for a critique of industrial society. However the Vperedist's call for attention to culture as ideology was informed by their critique of Lenin's assumptions that knowledge operated ideologically only in certain historical periods. They were not convinced by Lenin's belief that political emancipation ensured social emancipation.⁴⁶ When Lenin argued for the proletariat to learn cultural and management skills from the bourgeoisie he did not assess critically what else would be absorbed from the bourgeoisie and which of these attitudes might be contrary to socialist thinking.⁴⁷ The only time he used the term 'proletarian culture' was when he referred to it as a concept used by his opponents, and then he defined it as a "logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner and bureaucratic society".⁴⁸ Although Lenin referred to a critical reshaping of culture when addressing the Youth Leagues, which were known to be supporters of Proletkult ideas, in general he stressed that a continuous development of bourgeois culture was the logical course for cultural development.

The impact of this political strategy on his attitudes to cultural development becomes particularly clear when one looks at his statements on the 'backward' attitudes of the masses. Lenin's belief in orchestrating decision making from above and confining the participation of the masses to responsive mass action was particularly evident in his antagonism to the autonomy of Proletkult. In his 1923 work "Better Fewer But Better" Lenin argued that because workers lacked the managerial qualities required for the modern state, the continued role of the Party was essential for the direct management of state machinery (Claudin-Urondo 1977:67). Culture was to be choreographed from the

46. As early as 1907, in opposition to Lenin, the Vperedists had criticised the participation of Bolshevik representatives in the predominantly bourgeois third Duma, or parliament. They had argued that coalition work would undermine the growth of a proletarian intelligentsia and that political and cultural work were inseparable (Kolakowski 1988:418).

47. It is interesting to note an article written by Pletnev, prominent Proletkultist which appeared in Pravda September 1922: "On the Ideological Front". Pletnev calls for a critical assimilation of bourgeois culture, so that only that which serves proletarian class interests be retained. The article is reprinted in Claudin-Urondo(1977:41).

48. See Lenin's "The Achievements and Difficulties of the Soviet Government" (Claudin-Urondo 1977:25).

upper hierarchy of the Party which was occupied by the revolutionary intelligentsia. This emphasis on the Party as the highest instrument of class consciousness was in direct contravention of Proletkult's more strictly Marxian idea that proletarian consciousness resulting from class struggle was in itself higher than that of a leader or Party.⁴⁹ Lenin always maintained that the working class was politically backward and after the revolution this attitude informed his argument for the necessity of the *dictatorship* of the proletariat whose task would be the reeducation of the masses.

In the post-1917 situation Lenin defended the idea of a proletariat 'dictatorship', calling for the cultivation of non-communist allies. He criticised Bogdanov, Lunacharsky and Proletkult in part, and all cultural groupings who were sympathetic to the revolution but were concerned only with the proletariat. Lenin considered reconciliation with non-proletarian classes to be absolutely essential for the cohesion and survival of Soviet society.

Outside this context Lenin's own position on the peasantry and the bourgeois intelligentsia was far from complementary. For Lenin the workers had always been the only class who, because they owned nothing but their labour power, were capable of the necessary and complete reconstruction of society. The peasantry were less of a unified class, being divided into a rural bourgeoisie, rural petty bourgeoisie and rural proletariat, and capable of identifying with the bourgeoisie or proletariat.⁵⁰ Lenin believed the

49. Claudin-Urondo points to Lenin's divergence from Marx and Engels and to their insistence that a revolutionary intelligentsia can only contribute to proletarian consciousness, not create it. Contrary to this Lenin had insisted that the spontaneous working class movement minus revolutionary ideology from outside it, was limited to a servile trade unionism.

50. For Lenin the peasants' possible betrayal of the proletariat was historically manifest in their role in the Paris Commune. See Lenin's 1911 "In Memory of the Paris Commune" in *Deutscher* (1973:153-157).

'democratic' demands of the peasants to be limited because of their patriarchal and semi-religious ideas of life.⁵¹ In an essay in 1911 Lenin wrote:

despair is typical of those who do not understand the causes of evil, see no way out, and are incapable of struggle (Lenin, "L. N. Tolstoy and the Modern Labour Movement" in Deutscher 1973:140-142).

According to this analysis, both peasants and bourgeois found salvation from such despair and had to be "won over" to the socialist cause.

But Lenin was not always entirely convinced that the values espoused by the Party were eternally valid truisms. He encountered a contradiction between the 'progressive' values upheld by the Party and those values reflected in great cultural products of the past, such as in Tolstoy's novels. Initially he made attempts to include Tolstoy's writing in his construction of a single great revolutionary tradition looking for what they contributed to this 'teleological' revolutionary development.⁵²

However, Lenin conceded, in relation to this same study of Tolstoy, that artworks might only reveal *particular* views of an historical period and that what we encounter in the artwork is the ideology of the artist which comes from her/his location in a particular context outside of the work. The question of how Lenin managed to reconcile his own

51. In his 1910 essay "L. N. Tolstoy and the Modern Labour Movement", Lenin praised Tolstoy but chastised him for echoing the psychology of "the patriarchal, naive peasant", and their "alienation from political life, their mysticism, their desire to keep aloof from the world". With such conceptions it was little wonder that he saw them in need of being rescued from their "Asiatic ignorance". See also Lenin's 1911 article "Leo Tolstoy and His Epoch" wherein Lenin lambastes Tolstoy for invoking the eternal principles of morality and religion, typifying the old order of the 'Oriental' peoples. This article appears in Deutscher (1973:145-148).

52. He argued that Tolstoy's contribution to this development was in the form of his expression of the contradictory conditions of Russian life in the last third of the nineteenth century, and in the form of protests against advancing capitalism and the accompanying dispossession of the masses. The contribution of the work was thus seen to lie in its articulation of peasant demands, as limited as these were in revolutionary content. Lenin's appreciation of Tolstoy was qualified by such statements as the following: "The people must realize that it is not from Tolstoy that they must learn to win a better life but from the class which Tolstoy did not understand, and which alone is capable of destroying the old world which Tolstoy hated. That class is the proletariat". See Lenin's essay "Tolstoy and the Proletariat Struggle" written in December 1910 and reprinted in Deutscher (1973 (1973:143)).

convictions with his appreciation of 'ideological' perspectives that often contradict Party dictates has been taken up recently in the writing of Pierre Macherey.⁵³

Lenin had identified the contradictions revealed in Tolstoy's work but he had located them outside the work, in, for example, the fact that Tolstoy was a landlord with religious beliefs. To understand Lenin's references to art as something which is transparent and historically useful, Macherey suggests that Lenin's choice of metaphor for art be carefully scrutinized. When Lenin spoke of art as a partial mirror this indicated that for Lenin art was neither the equivalent of history nor the equivalent of a particular ideology, but he could not identify quite what it was. Lenin's discomfort was related directly to his recognition of the text as a simultaneous reflection and absence of reflection. It is precisely this simultaneity which induces a recognition of ideology at work.⁵⁴ It is possible that a recognition of such revealed discordances and incongruities would have been a direct threat to Lenin's own stringent requirements for art. Lenin failed to acknowledge that art's power is inherent in the nature of art itself i.e. as a fictitious totality, with a real and necessary discontinuity (Macherey 1978:105-133). In his insistence on the primacy of political strategy and tactics Lenin denied the function and power of art.

His denial of unconscious impulses, the place of intuition and the power of spirituality was already evident in his early disputes with Bogdanov and Lunacharsky. As a fellow Marxist he chastised them for prioritising mind over matter and for disrespecting the

53. Macherey *Theory of Literary Production* 1978.

54. Macherey's argument is that it is the work itself that enables us to grasp the relationships of contradiction, by means of the contradictory images represented. By revealing ideology, in for example, the form of "crystallised subjectivity in objective form" the art work is capable of acting against ideology. See Macherey "Problems of Reflection" in Barker (1976:41-54).

'essential' separation of materialism and idealism.⁵⁵ Against the idea of reality being a product of perception, Lenin posited the obsolete theory of reflection. Lenin argued that our sensations and cognition are the reflections in our minds of actual external qualities and not effects or symbols of the external world, but direct links to this world.

Lunacharsky's accounts of Lenin's desire for accurate likenesses in the commemorative sculptures which he commissioned after 1917, bear testimony to Lenin's reflection theory of art. These accounts are corroborated by conversations he held with young art students in which he explained his appreciation of realist works and his bewilderment before Nonobjective studies. He assumed that all this new cultural expression would also be alien and inaccessible to the masses and therefore was not worth cultivating. For Lenin art belonged not to the few but to the people at large:

It must be understood and loved by them. It must be rooted in and grow with their feelings, thoughts and desires (Macherey, "Lenin critic of Tolstoy" in Macherey 1978:105).

Lenin considered Cubofuturism in particular to be deficient in this regard and was particularly dismayed when Narkompros money was spent on these avant-garde projects rather than on the teaching of basic literacy which in his view was a far more pragmatic approach to education than that of cultural development.⁵⁶

For Lenin art had its uses but a 'correct' understanding of society would only ever be gleaned from political analysis. In response to the profusion of cultural activity by the avant-garde during the civil war years he said:

But of course we are communists. We must not put our hands in our pockets and let chaos ferment as it pleases. We must consciously try to guide this development, to form and determine its results (Klara Zetkin's reminiscences of Lenin in Deutscher 1973:29).

55. This might have been due to Lenin's own unfamiliarity with early writings of Marx such as "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts", 1844. He criticised all those pluralist divergences from what he regarded as 'true' Marxism and termed them an unnecessary 'seeking'. This was coincident with his having to come to terms with the breakaway of the empiriocritical Bolshevik contingent in 1908.

56. "...are we to give cake and sugar to a minority when the mass of workers and peasants still lack black bread" (Klara Zetkin's reminiscences of Lenin in Deutscher 1973).

Like Trotsky, Lenin attempted to give shape to cultural expression by preserving a Western cultural tradition and by assimilating from this tradition that which accorded best with his rational and materialist philosophy, namely the classical heritage.⁵⁷ His distrust extended however from the leftists to the entire old cultural milieu, summed up in a letter written to Gorky in 1919. Lenin understood Gorky's despair to be caused by his overt exposure to 'embittered' bourgeois intellectuals who had failed to support the Soviet cause, had understood nothing, forgotten nothing and were in despair, repeating old prejudices and frightening themselves to death.⁵⁸ The image Lenin sketched is of a sick intelligentsia, out of touch with working life in the city, on the fronts and in the country. As a solution he issued a call to all artists, via Gorky, to make an attempt to observe how people were building life anew. Presumably he believed that artists would then reflect this daily reconstruction in their work in a mode recognisable to the broad populace.

Given the later canonisation of Lenin's views under Stalin such statements warning against demotivated bourgeois artists and overzealous modernists and leftists acquired enormous weight. They were instrumental in encouraging a return to figuration but one that reflected explicit political motivation. Lenin required art to reflect, in as direct a fashion as possible, an identifiable content which could be deemed relevant to social circumstances. To accept, as Lenin did, that art had the potential to promote 'truth' was tantamount to believing in the irrelevance of contradiction. Ignoring contradiction was indeed a characteristic of the new Soviet State.

However, whereas for Lenin the elimination of all contradiction and the development of the culturally transformed Soviet citizen lay in the future, for Stalin the material conditions were declared already realised, as was the 'new man'. This was asserted by

57. Lenin is quoted by Klara Zetkin in her "Reminiscences of Lenin" as follows: "Why worship the new as the god to be obeyed...". See Deutscher (1973:170).

58. Lenin's intolerance was informed by the evident support of much of the bourgeoisie for the white guard. This was acted upon by the Bolsheviks in the form of mass arrests of Cadets, Social Revolutionaries and censorship of publications deemed sympathetic to the white guard.

Stalin despite Marx's argument that constantly changing circumstances prevent the transformation of the 'new man' from ever being an accomplished fact (Marx:1928). Stalin's denial of this bears some relation to Lenin's denial of the importance of recognising ideological contradiction within artworks as necessary routes toward knowledge.

Lenin's insistence on separating social and cultural emancipation from political emancipation meant that the accomplishment of revolutionary objectives could never be judged by attention to 'living relations' (i.e. the ideology) underpinning the socio-economic sphere. It could be argued that Stalin and Lenin both shared an economistic and technicist vision of society in which art, science and morality were only of value if they contributed to the Soviet industrial enterprise. But whereas Lenin still, theoretically, argued for the withering away of the state and the coming into power of the proletariat itself, Stalin cemented the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the state itself. For so long as the masses were seen to be in need of technical skills and political and economic understanding, and for so long as only these were seen to constitute culture, self transformation by the Soviet peoples could not occur. It would appear that Lenin's dismissal of the 'proletarian culture' project thus had severe repercussions and led ultimately to the disintegration of the Marxist project in the Soviet Union. Refusing to foreground the importance of cultural transformation, disallowing a radical transformation of the conditions of cultural production, and determining cultural growth in terms of nineteenth-century European cultural criteria were all actions which inhibited the growth of a revolutionary proletarian culture.

It is these political definitions of realism outlined in Chapter One that inform the contingent debates and context of the cultural production of the twenties and thirties i.e. realism as a continuation of 'bourgeois realism', as an assertion of proletarian culture, as evidence of a classless revolutionary culture and as knowledge deemed essential for 'the proletarian dictatorship'.

CHAPTER TWO

LEFTISTS POSITION THEMSELVES IN OPPOSITION TO EASEL ARTISTS AND FIGURATIVE REALISM.

Introduction

In this dissertation I challenge the idea that the figurative artists and so-called formalists were informed by diametrically opposing views on culture. To challenge the validity of viewing so-called formalist production and figurative production as antagonistic movements it is necessary to assess the status of each of these constructed groupings during the years in which this antagonism was first identified. The issue of what constitutes 'formalist' art in the post-1917 context in the USSR is complicated by the fact that artists were termed formalist because of their pre-1917 avant-garde proclamations. As Nonobjectivists the so-called formalists had, in the years prior to the 1917 revolution, prioritised new analyses of form over narrative, historical or personal/expressive content in artworks. In the post-revolutionary period these same artists attempted to apply the principles of the new art to projects developed in accordance with the social, political and economic needs of the new order. Despite the changes that the work of many of these artists underwent in the post-revolutionary context, the most notable of which was a commitment to Productivism (see below), they continued to be labelled 'formalist'. This was because their commitment to the importance of formal analysis remained central to their endeavours and to the fact that they refused to compromise these principles.

Both figurative artists and the so-called formalists justified their production in terms of 'realism'. Realism was variously defined, politically, philosophically and stylistically, according to the interests of the theorist or practitioner. The debate about which art best reflected a realist philosophy was essentially a debate about what cultural expression best suited the prevailing socio-political context. This was obviously contingent not only upon the particularity of the prevailing material conditions but also on how these conditions were interpreted and by whom. The concept of 'proletarian culture', its definition and

application is particularly important in relation to these debates on realism. As with the concept 'realism', the definition of 'proletarian culture' was contested by theorists and by practitioners. Cultural debates centred on what style was the most realist in philosophical content and what form of art was best suited to the proletariat, but there were diverse interpretations of Realism and 'proletarian art'. What I emphasise in this dissertation is that both the so-called formalists and those who defended and revived figurative art used theories of 'proletarian culture' in their claims for legitimacy.

In this chapter I set out to present the defence of formal experimentation put forward by the so-called formalists. This defence was based on particular definitions of 'proletarian culture' and was backed up by cultural theorists on the basis of the social climate and prevailing economic needs. In this chapter it is not only the theoretical defence of these so-called formalists that will be examined but also the climate in which that defence occurred. I sketch out the position of these artists within the organisations, institutions and government departments to which they belonged as this will reveal how the so-called formalists developed their practice as well as how they theorised it in terms of ideas about 'proletarian culture' and industrialisation. What is also addressed is how they jockeyed for position on the basis of these theories and how they presented their positions as scientific and 'realistic'.¹

This chapter collates diverse and scattered references to historical, art historical, economic and political matters, with the aim of bringing greater clarity to what I believe has been a questionable interpretation of the simultaneous development of figurative art and the supposedly formalist enterprise. I have organised this information into three sections. Section A is a contextual introduction and documentation of artistic *and* political events *prior* to 1921. This section focuses on developments in the visual arts which were concurrent with the introduction of the New Economic Policy.

1. I have chosen to discuss the so-called formalist art in the light of these material conditions and as manifest in the organisations which constituted the material base of the visual arts. This is not to assume that all conceptual and material developments in the visual arts directly reflect socio-political and economic events but it is to acknowledge that a dialectical relationship exists between the socio-economic and artistic spheres.

Section B details the positions of the cultural theorists of the so-called formalists in the post-1921 period. This entails an explanation of the theories which supported the development of the so-called formalists in the direction of applied industrial design between 1921 and 1924. This orientation toward industrial design was termed Productivism but it had specific political as well as economic connotations. The supporting theories drew on references to ‘proletarian culture’ and ‘realism’ both of which were redefined in accordance with the Soviet Unions industrial needs and the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Section C is an assessment of the status of these so-called formalists in relation to socio-political and economic events. This is traced through the changing cultural administration which mediated between the so-called formalist position and that of the government. In this section I take issue with the way in which NEP has been related to the demise of ‘formalist’ practice by certain writers.² Instead of focusing on economic factors only I will focus on the effects of *political* power battles between Lunacharsky and his antagonists Litkens and Preobrazhensky, and Lenin’s attempts at mediation between Lunacharsky and the new administration. These political exchanges constituted a long and complex series of developments and arguments but their effect was *not* that of entirely closing the space in which the so-called formalists could continue to practise. It was in the state financed training institutes, the VKhUTEMAS, that both Productivists (see below) and figurative artists coexisted. I argue that this indicates that state policy and NEP were *not* responsible for the demise of so-called formalist production. This is notwithstanding my contention that NEP did not indicate a period of cultural pluralism.

A. The pre-1921 context

Following the 1917 February revolution, organization within the artistic sector gained impetus. A mass organization of Petrograd artists, architects, writers, musicians and actors

2. The demise of leftist so-called formalist practice has been linked to NEP by Higgins (1971), Lodder (1983), Bird (1987) and Bown (1991).

was launched, calling itself the **Union of Art Workers**. Old members of the **World of Art**³ and the **Union of Russian Artists**⁴ joined this larger union and together issued a call for a Ministry of Arts which could dedicate its services solely to the coordination of the various forms of artistic expression. At a plenary of leftist artists⁵ from this new organisation, Vladimir Tatlin was elected to go to Moscow to contact other left wing artists with a view to establishing a leftist organisation. By November Tatlin and other leftists had left the old **Union of Russian Artists** which was in their experience a largely bourgeois organisation. In Moscow the newly established **Union of Artists** delegated certain of its artists, including Tatlin, to work in the Moscow Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Their intention was to introduce art to those who had previously been excluded from the artistic sector for reasons of class (Zhadova 1988:41). What this burgeoning activity indicated was a strong desire on the part of Cubofuturists and Nonobjectivists to align themselves with the new Soviet order.

Leftists also formed a grouping called **Freedom To Art**, based on an initiative of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the art critic Nikolai Punin. This grouping directed its services to those who had not had access to art training but they agitated for the removal of all forms of state supervision and for the introduction of local government in the arts. They opened their studios to poor artists, held lectures for workers and offered their services to the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Through such initiatives of the **Union of Artists** and the **Freedom to Art** group the left was to secure a place for itself in the future administration of the arts. Eight months later, with the advent of the October revolution,

3. **The World of Art** group was a group of St Petersburg painters who absorbed the painterly and theatrical developments of artists on the Abramtsevo estate. Their work was characterised by technical finesse, an elegant decorativeness and a somewhat conservative discipline which distinguished them from Cubofuturist developments.

4. **The Union of Russian Artists** was an exhibiting society that organised exhibitions of naturalistic art between 1903 and 1917 and 1922 and 1923.

5. The 'leftists' included the broad category of Nonobjectivists. These Nonobjectivists were so named because of their rejection of the object in their art. They were Cubofuturists who rejected figuration and who subsequently aligned themselves with developments such as became Suprematism, Constructivism and Productivism.

the old academicians, including the **Peredvizhniki**,⁶ lost their official power base. The Academy included members of the **Peredvizhniki** who had only recently been admitted into establishment structures. There had been a reconciliation between the **Peredvizhniki** and the Academy in 1893, after which members of the **Peredvizhniki** entered the Academy and began to attain the status and wealth which they had desired from the outset.

When in April 1918 the Academy was liquidated so too was the relatively new power base of the **Peredvizhniki**. At the same time as the Academy's influence waned so too did that of the old art training institutes. New Free Art Studios (SVOMAS) were set up in Moscow and State Free Educational Studios in Petrograd (these were initially known as the Pegoskhuma but later were also named SVOMAS). The SVOMAS replaced the old Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov Art School. The new SVOMAS administration abolished all educational prerequisites for admission to the art colleges. A broad autonomy was granted to students who could either study independently or elect to work with specific teachers. (Lodder 1983: 109-113). This democratisation of studying facilities paralleled the efforts of the **Union of Artists** and **Freedom to Art** to democratize the art world. This issue of democratisation was to play itself out not only in the reorganisation of admission procedures, staffing and teaching programmes, but also in the specific styles that were taught and advocated as most suitable to the new climate.

The new SVOMAS administration tried to avoid employing artists who worked in the **Peredvizhniki** or the late nineteenth-century academic mould. Most of the artists employed at the SVOMAS could be broadly categorised as Cubofuturists and included

6. The **Peredvizhniki** grew out of a grouping of thirteen artists who seceded from the Academy in 1863. Gray suggests that they sought to introduce their work to 'the people' by arranging travelling exhibitions throughout the countryside. She links their rejection of the neo-classicism of the St Petersburg Academy to Nikolai Chernyshevsky's aesthetic treatise which stressed that the content of the work was more important than the means of representation as it made direct reference to the more 'significant' reality (Gray 1986:9-11). What was meant by this was that they depicted scenes of the peasantry and underclasses rather than the nobility. Valkenier links the work of the **Peredvizhniki** to the growing bourgeois art market and queries that it was ever aimed at 'the people' at large (Valkenier 1989:8-11).

names such as Malevich, Tatlin, Kandinsky, Mashkov and Kuznetsov (see Chapter Four). Common to their practice was their cognizance of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European developments which prioritised formal innovation over narration, hence the fact that they were labelled 'formalists'. Most of the artists willing to work with the new Bolshevik Commissariat of Enlightenment and the Arts (i.e. Narkompros) were these Cubofuturists or leftists who, a few months before the revolution, had resisted the idea of state involvement in the arts. However they now saw their opportunity to denounce the sombre palette and populist narratives of the **Peredvizhniki** as well as the academic tradition preserved by the imperial powers.

The first rector of the SVOMAS was Nikolai Punin of the **Freedom to Art** group. Punin believed that the old painterly style of Realism simply signified a lack of talent (Valkenier 1989:145). Many Realist professors were dismissed and emphasis in the SVOMAS shifted to formal experimentation in accordance with socialist concerns. The SVOMAS fell under IZO, the fine arts department of Narkompros. IZO was divided into the Moscow collegium under Vladimir Tatlin, and the Petrograd collegium under David Shterenberg. Punin, Tatlin and Shterenberg were all representatives of the artistic left and advocates of Cubofuturist art. In that IZO coordinated the designs for the first year of the anniversary of the revolution, most artistic commissions for the transformation of streets and squares went to leftist artists. However Lunacharsky favoured an equal distribution of state commissions between the Cubofuturists and Realists and tried to promote cultural tolerance within Narkompros. Although significant power shifts had occurred in favour of the so-called formalists, Lunacharsky endeavoured at this juncture to ensure the continuation of Realist expression and called on Shterenberg, as head of IZO, to aid him in this task.

Between 1918 and 1920 the 'pure art' shows of Cubofuturist or Nonobjectivist tendency were overshadowed by the instrumental designs for the October and Mayday anniversary celebrations, but the decorations designed by the Cubofuturists/Nonobjectivists were severely criticised by the more conservative elements in government circles and by those who preferred the older forms of realism and naturalism. At the same time the formal innovation which was exhibited in the galleries began to meet with some political

criticism.⁷ A 1920 exhibition by Alexander Rodchenko and Vasily Kandinsky met with the following response:

This is pure formalism, the logical consequence of the whole prior development of painting. Summing up what has been said, we see that the analysis of form and colour has led painting toward metaphysics – an academic metaphysics – and alchemy and has condemned it to creative sterility (Quoted from a review by Melnikov, printed in *Tvorchestvo*, 7-10, 1920, reprinted in Khan-Magomedov 1986:77).

Under the influence of Lunacharsky, IZO nevertheless persisted with its commitment to cultural pluralism and offered a stable base for the Cubofuturists. In an attempt to encourage this pluralism IZO organized a Free Exhibition of All Artistic Trends, held in Petrograd in 1919 without pre-selection. This commitment to a policy of non-allegiance to any particular style or artistic grouping was especially difficult given the climate of threatened boycotts by the many groupings which were trying to stake claims in the cultural terrain.

One of the numerous groupings which was to exert considerable influence was **Zhivskul'ptarkh**.⁸ **Zhivskul'ptarkh** was a collective established in 1920 within the Subsection of Artistic work at IZO to consider the synthesis of sculpture and architecture. It was their analytical work on form which laid the ground for a new syllabus in the Free Studios and for a reorganisation of these studios in 1920 into the Higher State Art-Technical Studios (VKhUTEMAS).⁹

7. One such criticised exhibition was the 10th State Exhibition at which Rodchenko displayed 38 of his colour constructions (Khan-Magomedov 1986:43).

8. Their exhibition formed part of the Nineteenth State Exhibition in Moscow from October 2 to December 4 1920. Members of the group included sculptor Boris Korolev, artists Aleksandr Shevchenko and Alexander Rodchenko, and architects Nikolai Ladovskii, Vladimir Fidman and Nikolai Istselena. Their new architectural forms were termed 'rationalist'. The group's interest was in small-scale architectural forms in opposition to the classical architecture which was promoted under Lunacharsky in the Section of Architecture within Narkompros (Khan-Magomedov 1986:41).

9. On 12 October 1920 Narkompros approved the formation of the VKhUTEMAS and on 29 November 1920 the school was established by state decree. For detailed information on the VKhUTEMAS see Lodder (1983:109-140).

The theoretical justification for the technical emphasis of teaching at the VKhUTEMAS was also based upon an elaboration of Tatlin's concept of material culture which he had taught in his Petrograd SVOMA Studio of Materials, Volume and Construction. Tatlin's pedagogical concerns were characterised by an attempt to combine 'pure art' and industry so that the material components with which an artist worked might be organised into utilitarian form while simultaneously fulfilling new aesthetic criteria and concepts of design. This emphasis on the utilitarian echoed **Zhivskul'ptark's** argument for architecture as a utilitarian synthesis of all the arts. It was practice such as Tatlin's, the **Obmokhu** artists and **Zhivskulptarkh**, that set the scene for the future theoretical motivations for Productivism. It is significant that all these initiatives took place within the auspices of state funded institutions.

Obmokhu was established in the Moscow SVOMAS in 1919 by the Stenberg brothers.¹⁰ Their aim was to create 'extra-aesthetic' and applied art only. This argument that art should move away from aesthetic purpose toward a utilitarian aim was illustrated in their sculptures which were technical in appearance [**Fig 1**] although without particular technical application. The group partook of the 1921 debates on the principles of art held at INKhUK (see below) and argued for the principle of Construction. It was the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii who were the first to name their exhibition Constructivist. This exhibition was held in Moscow in 1922 and was followed up by a paper on Constructivism by the Stenbergs and Medunetskii.

The principles of Constructivism were developed in tandem with the debates regarding what constituted the most 'applicable' development of art. This debate occurred within INKhUK (The Institute of Artistic Culture). This Institute was established in Moscow in 1920 out of an older Council of Masters. Its founding members included Rodchenko,

10. **Obmokhu** artists included the Stenberg brothers, Medunetskii, Ioganson, Nikolai Denislovskii and Vasilli Kormardenkov. Obmokhu displayed their work on four occasions between 1919 and 1923. Initially they worked under the impetus of older artists such as Yakulov and Lentulov. In 1921 Rodchenko joined the now predominantly young student group. His authority lent weight to their presence but also gave impetus to Rodchenko's own commitment to Production art (Lodder 1983:24,26,69; Bowlt 1988: 238).

Kandinsky, Shestakov and Stepanova. Later it established branches in Petrograd and in Vitebsk. Whereas the Council had comprised largely artists and painters, INKhUK also drew in a number of cultural theorists. The role of these theorists in relation to the demise of figurative easel art is of particular importance. Their theories were as instrumental in shaping culture in the post-revolutionary years as were the policies of the government, the cultural commissariat and the artists' particular practices.

Toward the end of 1920 a decision was taken that INKhUK join with IZO to create a Museum of Pictorial or Artistic Culture. This was informed by their joint intention of promoting the collection and exhibition of contemporary art and it reflected their support for contemporary formal innovations in the arts. The reorganisation of the old museums was left to the Museums Collegium but even the conservative Museum collegium was later persuaded to admit onto its board a representative of the Museum of Pictorial and Artistic Culture to serve as an advisor with regard to the hanging of the contemporary works which they had bought. INKhUK affiliated to the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences at the end of 1921, and in 1922 the research project which had been conducted by Tatlin under the auspices of the Museum of Pictorial Culture in Petrograd developed into the Petrograd scientific research institute, GINKhUK (The State Institute of Artistic Culture).¹¹ The significance of these developments lay in the legitimisation of new Cubofuturist work and formal innovation, and in the conferring of scientific and academic status upon these contemporary developments.

INKhUK liaised with the VKhUTEMAS to devise an introductory course entitled the Basic Division. The course was designed as an objective investigation into formal artistic elements and how these might relate to industry. It was under the control of artists who, like Tatlin, focused on the properties and functions of materials and forms so that this knowledge might then be synthesised with the technological and social needs of the day. The application of this knowledge also presupposed a redefinition of the status of the

11. GINKhUK was divided into four sections: Painterly culture headed by Malevich, Organic culture headed by Matyushin, Material culture headed by Tatlin and General Ideology headed by Punin. See Bowlt (1988, p xxxvii).

artist as creative constructor/engineer or labourer. For a number of years the programme of this Basic division was central to the school.¹² Although artists who advocated the importance of training artist-constructors/engineers were not in the majority in the VKhUTEMAS their influence was widely felt and they consistently argued for the presence of more artists devoted to the scientific investigation of materials. The argument for this utilitarian technological art had grown out of the formal experiments of the Cubofuturists and Nonobjectivists [Fig 2 & 3]. Some of these older so-called formalists continued to dedicate themselves to two-dimensional formal innovation and defended the status of easel art. Within the VKhUTEMAS artists defending abstract easel art coexisted with figurative easel artists, Constructivists, Productivists and with those who called for a restoration of older forms of arts and crafts.

This reorganisation of the SVOMAS into the more technical VKhUTEMAS was approved by Lenin,¹³ who was convinced that the technical training of artists would benefit the economy. This was to lend support to the utopian element in the planning of the school – utopian in that there were few industries to which artists could offer their services. In that the VKhUTEMA training promoted formal innovation, Constructivism and Productivism, it is ironic that Lenin's support for the VKhUTEMAS lent support to the artistic expression most opposed to his earlier theories of the development of visual art as a continuation of nineteenth-century bourgeois cultural form. Together with INKhUK the VKhUTEMAS soon became the base for a united left front which promoted a synthesis of art and industrial production. It would appear that what Lenin had probably envisaged was two separate spheres of production – a form of nineteenth-century narrative history painting and a form of industrial design, neither one excluding the other.

12. Initially the Basic Course was taught for one year. It included a course by Klyun on colour, form, plane and an introduction to Suprematism as well as an introduction to Construction by Rodchenko. Later in 1921, the Division was divided into four sections: the Graphic Focus, the Planar-Colour Focus, the Volume-Grid Space Focus and the Space Focus (Lodder 1983: 122-137).

13. The evolution, and sometimes contradictory components, of Lenin's thoughts on education in the arts are traced in Fitzpatrick 1970.

Lunacharsky, commissar of the controlling body of art and education, vacillated in his opinion and support of formal experimentation. Like Lenin, Lunacharsky praised the preparatory course for its contribution to industrial design, but he did not see formal enquiry as valid in its own right. Contrary to this view, many artists were loathe to regard industrial design as purely pragmatic and so the support lent by Lenin and even by Lunacharsky with regard to the development toward a utilitarian art was not comfortably received by artists. When these artists argued for a utilitarian Production Art from within INKhUK, they generally emphasised the *interrelationship* of artistic and technical knowledge. A resolution passed by the senate of the VKhUTEMAS also warned against creating a distinction between art and productive design (Lodder:1983:13). It was felt that the place of aesthetic experimentation was not properly understood by political critics who simply favoured the most expedient solution to the needs of industry.¹⁴

Artists who expressed their aesthetic concerns in the shape of formal analyses were termed 'formalist' by political critics who disapproved of formal analysis which occurred without cognizance of the political climate. Only when linked to utilitarian claims was it more readily tolerated by these critics. Theorists within INKhUK and GINKhUK such as Boris Arvatov, Aleksai Gan and Osip Brik therefore based their arguments for the new art on pragmatic, not formal, concerns. They acted as political commentators explaining developments of the Constructivists who produced non-utilitarian two-dimensional and three-dimensional work with a view to applying their work to the needs of industry. It was such justifications of the 'new art' that protected the innovators from attacks against formalism. For this reason these cultural theorists fulfilled a mediating role between artists, government critics and a confused public.

Although Lunacharsky and Lenin supported the growing motivation by avant-garde artists and theorists to train artists for industry, the art which resulted from this initiative had little in common with their and Trotsky's idea of art as a 'mediating' mirror between the

14. Although the Constructivist and Productivist artists expressed their interests in purely rational and scientific terms certain artists, such as Rodchenko, never dismissed the importance of aesthetic sensibility.

creative or perceiving subject and 'objective' reality (see Chapter One). Instead of allowing for the 'intrusion' of properties such as narrative, the new art prioritised an objective analysis of construction which it identified as the structuring, handling, and organization of material (Fer 1989:16). In effect this Constructivist art promoted an opposition between visual production as effective organization and visual production as a system of signification, claiming that it was no longer concerned with signification. That it defied *conventional* signification was true. Whether the resistance to art as resemblance succeeded is however a larger question which in turn throws into question the relevance of the polarity of Realism and Production art.

B. Theories of Productivism as the new 'proletarian culture' in INKhUK, Narkompros and Proletkult (1921-1924).

From 1921 to 1924 the approach of INKhUK to its work was informed almost exclusively by the theories of Production art, and by November 1921 INKhUK had transferred its affiliation from Narkompros to Vesenkha, the Supreme Council for the National Economy. This was a change in allegiances which indicated a shift away from Narkompros' concept of art as enlightenment toward a utilitarian notion of art, the function of which was justified by a technical bias suitable to a growing industrial order. The shift away from figurative and abstract easel art toward a defence of formal experimentation applied to industry occurred after a major theoretical dispute which surfaced in INKhUK at the beginning of 1921. The theoretical components of this argument for art in industry (Productivism) will be outlined below. Section C will comprise an explanation of the political climate which informed this growing concern with economic and technical matters.

As director of INKhUK Kandinsky had drawn up a programme based on an analysis of the objective laws of the psycho-physical perception of artworks. Under Rodchenko, a parallel praesidium was then set up within INKhUK which was less interested in the way in which the individual responded to art forms such as painting, music and dance and instead emphasised the 'culture of materials' evident in art forms such as sculpture and

architecture. Notably, both Kandinsky and Rodchenko rejected figurative art. However, in contrast to Kandinsky, Rodchenko and his colleagues queried the notion that a work might have meaning derived from associative and symbolic factors. This they regarded as an undue emphasis on the subjective response of the viewer and as detracting from an 'objective' understanding of art, hence the name of their group: **The Group of Objective Analysis**. On 21 January, Kandinsky's section resigned, leaving a praesidium of Rodchenko, Nadezhda Bryusova, Aleksai Babichev and Varvara Stepanova, all of whom were devoted to objective analysis.

In January, February and March 1921 debate ensued around an analysis of the concepts of construction and composition. **The Objective Analysis** group favoured construction (notwithstanding the various and contradictory definitions of the term, see below) over and above composition.¹⁵ One of the outcomes of this debate was the formation of a **Working Group of Constructivists** set up in March 1921. Even *after* the establishment of this group there were varying definitions of the term. For the advocates of utilitarian art it had more to do with the functional organization of materials than the aesthetic ordering of elements associated with 'composition'. The drawings which arose out of this debate as illustrations of 'construction' were strangely more representational than the more two-dimensional 'compositions' (Lodder 1983:85; Fer 1989:20). The 'constructions' depended on their reference to technical drawings and on marks which appeared to cohere in a scientific system designed according to objective requirements [Figs 4.1 – 4.4].

Artists claimed a scientific status for these artworks at the same time as Lenin argued that Communism was a scientific system and a logical development on the basis of the past achievements of bourgeois science and specialisation. 'Constructivism' was thus justified in terms of the political and economic rhetoric of the day. It claimed scientific status and a knowledge of the laws of production and for a short time seemed successfully to justify its status as the most politically appropriate form of art. This

15. See Lodder (1983:83-94) for a detailed account of these debates.

justification was based on its claim to benefit the proletariat at the point of production and consumption.

It was nevertheless evident to many of those who were seriously examining the interrelationship of art and industry that Constructivist practice had a long way to go before it would convincingly fulfil the theoretical prerequisites that art benefit the economy and be of direct use to the populace. Since the formation of **KOMFUT**¹⁶ in 1919 Boris Kushner had railed against Narkompros for protecting bourgeois practitioners and had called for the creation of a proletarian culture infused with communism. Against art defined as beauty or revelation, he had posited the importance of the artist in industry as a new type of engineer working in a technical office. In 1921 Kushner formed part of a commission established under the auspices of the Supreme Council for National Economy (Vesenkha) to investigate the scientific organization of industry. These interests were introduced into his lectures at the VKhUTEMAS and his talks at INKhUK. Between 9 March 1922 and 6 April 1922 he delivered a series of lectures entitled "The Production of Culture", "The Role of the Engineer in Production" and "The Artist in Production". These lectures were to give impetus to the split between those who were content with Constructivist practice and experimentation within the studios and those who argued for the relevance of industrial production only.

In opposition to Kushner, arguments were developed in favour of an industrially oriented art which would be based on the experiments of the so-called bourgeois studio work. This studio work or easel art was referred to as 'laboratory work', thereby bestowing a 'scientific' and 'experimental' status on it, suggesting that it was a necessary preliminary stage to industrial production. One advocate of such an approach was Boris Arvatov (see below). The debate regarding the intrinsic or supplementary worth of easel art was fuelled by the "5x5=25" exhibition organised in September 1921 in Moscow under the

16. KOMFUT was an abbreviation of *Communists and Futurists*. It was established in January 1919 and amongst its members were Boris Kushner (chair), Osip Brik, Nikolai Punin, David Shterenberg and Vladimir Mayakovsky. See Bowlit (1988:164-166).

auspices of INKhUK itself.¹⁷ At a plenary session of INKhUK in November 1921 the majority of these exhibitors referred to their show as the last possible stage in the development of easel art, obsessed as they were with the notion of teleological progression toward the fusion of art and industry. This retrospective justification of their work seemed to be informed by the talks on production art which had taken place at INKhUK. These were by Kushner, Osip Brik and in particular Nikolai Tarabukin whose paper, "The Last Picture has been Painted" (Lodder 1983:93) was delivered the month before.

The INKhUK debate that resulted from the show was a clear indication of theory forging ahead of practice. The summation of these discussions was a proposal on 24 November 1921, put forward by Osip Brik to those artists who had rejected easel painting, that henceforth they proceed with the 'real practical work of production'. Brik demanded that INKhUK ally itself to Production artists only and that these artists serve the economic policy of the Party. Brik's call was to cause a major split among leftist artists, some of whom were loathe to surrender the place of easel painting, others of whom were keen to become Production artists. Artists such as Alexander Vesnin and Liubov Popova believed in the importance of formal innovation which had occurred in easel art and insisted that it was the task of INKhUK to continue with theoretical debate pertaining to such issues. However from this point on Brik argued against theory and insisted that all efforts be directed to the design of artifacts for mass production.

Brik argued that the easel picture could not claim cultural importance for its formal meaning alone, nor could figurative easel art claim importance for its agitational function. The former was dismissed for its monastic contemplative rationale and the latter for its inbuilt obsolescence. Mass produced agitational posters would, in Brik's view, accomplish the task of agitation far more successfully and without falling into the 'trap' of claiming eternal validity as an art form. This was an uncomplicated argument against all that art which did not fulfil a definite practical aim. Brik's conclusion was that all art ought to be

17. The show involved five artists each exhibiting five works: Aleksandra Ekster, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Vesnin and Alexander Rodchenko (Lodder1983:90).

determined by economic purpose. Of all the Productivist theorists his argument was the most functionalist in its view of art.

After Brik's position, delivered at INKhUK in November, twenty-five artists signed a declaration that Production art should unilaterally replace easel art. Amongst the signatories were Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Alexander Vesnin, Liubov Popova, and Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg.¹⁸ Brik joined the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions' Central Scientific and Technical Club. Other theorists allied themselves with industrial commissions and strengthened ties with the Supreme Council of the National Economy (Enzensberger 1973; Bann 1974). In keeping with this shift artists focused on the production of textile designs, clothing, stage sets, furniture, books etc.

As uncompromising as Brik in his promotion of a utilitarian Production art was Alexai Gan. Gan was dismissed from Narkompros because of his extreme ideological position and his dismissal of 'artistic' endeavours, but retained close ties with INKhUK. In 1922 he published a book entitled "Constructivism", in which he criticised Narkompros for its cultural conservatism, its pluralism and its involvement with 'spiritual culture'. Gan argued that developments in art had held no relevance for the proletariat which had its own class specific cultural perspective. Narkompros' notion of continuity with the art of the past was derided as a worthless delusion of 'spiritual' continuity which implied a continuity which was based on an abstract status unrelated to and of no use to the populace at large. He argued that current developments building on bourgeois formal enquiries and limited to the two-dimensional canvas were also inimical to the materialist and collective goals of the proletariat revolution since they were founded upon individualism, metaphysical concerns and notions of subjective beauty. Gan argued for art's 'natural' death:

18. See Lodder's (1983:90) speculation as to who the signatories were. It does not seem that Ekster was a signatory although her commitment to dress and theater design would indicate otherwise.

Marxists must work in order to elucidate its death scientifically and to formulate new phenomena of artistic labour within the new historic environment of our time (Lodder 1983:221).

According to this argument, the only form of artistic labour considered relevant to proletarian culture was that which was directly and concretely linked to social objectives. Since these social objectives were conceived purely in economic terms, the place of speculative art was to be replaced by purposeful art, i.e. by a redefinition of art in terms of labour, technology and organisation. Gan argued that Constructivism had gone further than any of the leftist art forms to meet the needs of the proletariat, and had incorporated the need to apply formal experimentation to practical industrial tasks.

He regarded Constructivists who organised themselves in response to the 1921 INKhUK debates as still caught up with aesthetic 'tricks' and as unconvincing in their claims to social concerns (Bowlit 1988:215-225). Gan in effect had no tolerance for any justifications of artistic concerns, whether these be justifications of past formal innovations or calls for a return to representational art. He attempted to push the INKhUK position beyond that which Rodchenko and colleagues had developed in opposition to Kandinsky and he theorised the anti-subjective position in its most extreme form. According to his analysis, art would disappear along with the bourgeois society which had preserved a place for individual subjective activity (Bowlit 1988:224-225). An art of personal speculation would be superseded by practical organised material production to benefit the working class and to occur in accordance with the Soviet Union's planned economic objectives. For Gan it was only Constructivism that had the potential to combine formal and ideological components in this fulfilment of the needs of an industrialised Marxist society.

Although Gan was eventually expelled from Narkompros, he had taken up this radical stance from within the organisation, as had Osip Brik. The head of IZO, David Shterenberg, attempted to counter the radical iconoclasm of Brik and Gan by calling for a compromise i.e. by affirming the necessity of both fine art and production art, the latter vaguely defined as the production of industrial objects for everyday use. This encouraged a debate on the possible coexistence of easel art, and production art. A collection of articles was published in 1921 by the Art-Productional Council of IZO entitled "Art and Production" (Bann 1974). In this publication Toporkov entered the debate by suggesting

that the task of artists was that of an aestheticising of technological forms, and as such he drew little distinction between applied art and production art. Fillipov also emphasised the importance of the aesthetic factor and the contribution of easel art to production art. This was seemingly an important concession for theorists to make who were operating within the ambit of Narkompros. However Fillipov did manage to build in an argument favouring Constructivist easel art over representational easel art. He then legitimised his preference for production art by describing it as the true development of easel art away from 'passive', 'imitative' and 'degenerate' representational art, which remained 'enclosed within the confines of chance and caprice' (Bann 1974:22-25). For Fillipov the task of artists was not the depiction of the world but the changing of it and this meant a rejection of old 'bourgeois' forms of art. This was a challenge not only to the conservative intelligentsia and critics who remained faithful to easel art but also to painters who refused to abandon their belief in 'pure' art.

The link between INKhUK, Narkompros, Proletkult¹⁹ and the art training institutions becomes apparent when one notes how many of these theoreticians were operating in all spheres. Punin was a co-founder of Petrograd INKhUK, on the editorial board of the IZO journal 'Art of the Commune', Narkompros commissar of the Petrograd SVOMAS and a teacher in the SVOMAS and VKhUTEMAS. Brik was active in INKhUK but also edited the Narkompros journal 'Art of the Commune'. Seeing that Gan was dismissed from Narkompros his activities were limited to INKhUK. Kushner was active in INKhUK, was employed at the VKhUTEMAS and contributed to the IZO journal. In addition he lectured extensively in the Proletkults. At this time Proletkult, under Bogdanov's more radical successor, Pletnev, closed their painting studios and reformed studios of production art. Developments in Proletkult thus paralleled those in the VKhUTEMAS and INKhUK.

Boris Arvatov's position is interesting as an example of the surviving influence of Proletkult thought and Bogdanovism within Narkompros and as an example of one which, alongside the Proletkult argument for a grassroots development of culture, retained a

19. For information on Proletkult see Chapter 1 above.

place for the 'formalist' concerns of the bourgeoisie. Arvatov had been a member of Proletkult from 1918. He was also a member of IZO, participated in the reorganisation of art education in the SVOMAS, and was editor of 'Art of the Commune'. Arvatov rejected the aesthetic self-sufficiency posited by bourgeois artists but at the same time he recognised the importance of the preceding developments for the emergence of proletarian art. The so-called formalist work of the Cubofuturists was deemed important by Arvatov because it could be seen to be valuable if the form was *applied* purposefully. Abstract constructions were conceded as significant and as contributing to the transition to utilitarian art, but representational easel art was dismissed as a 'means of organising ideas in bourgeois society' and as an art form that would inevitably die with the demise of the bourgeoisie (Lodder 1983:105).²⁰ For Arvatov abstract expression was closer to the proletariat project than any form of narrative or figurative painting (Rosenberg 1990:238-241). The abstract forms of Constructivism were conceived by Arvatov as a method rather than a form and as an historical movement passing from the 'benumbed forms' to a socially vital art for the proletariat.²¹

He regarded these artistic developments as beneficial to the proletariats' present state of aesthetic sensibility. The proletariat would benefit from the formal developments via the fusion of these discoveries with the purposeful design of a product. Proletarian artists would need to inherit the method of formal enquiry because only thus could they obviate a repetition of 'stale formulae' and arrive at forms appropriate to each and every occasion. In this way a case was made for an 'abstractionism' which was defined as scientific, not sensual, and which would equip the artist with a feeling for raw materials and the methods of processing them. Such processing would take place in accordance

20. Over the next three years Arvatov was increasingly critical of easel painting although never totally dismissing its importance, especially when it began to approach the technical industrial process in its focus on material construction. It was as a member of LEF that this argument was developed.

21. See Arvatov's 1923 article "Class and Art" reprinted in Bann (1974:47).

with collective needs and not for the satisfaction of subjective desires.²² Working with the collective goal in mind would prevent proletarian artists from being in the alienated position of a bourgeois engineer/designer.²³

Arvatov did not provide a detailed explanation of how this fusion of supervisor and producer would occur. He only posited that the end result would be a type of artistic-constructor with a grasp of artistic skills and a specific knowledge of technology. In that he had been a member of Proletkult since 1918, what he probably had in mind was the artistic training of the producers themselves. For Arvatov, as for Bogdanov, 'proletarian culture' was a synthesis of the artistic process and the labour process was based upon an organizational objective defined by collective needs. It was the antithesis of a 'home-made individualism of forms' and 'arbitrary' subjectivity.²⁴ This was a concept of 'proletarian culture' largely based on Bogdanov's notion of art as the highest form of conscious collective creation. The subject matter of art was the organizational principal informing the production process.

Viktor Pertsov went further in problematising this new proletarian culture. Pertsov was a prominent theorist who belonged to INKhUK, maintained relations with Narkompros, and from 1920, was a member of Moscow Proletkult.²⁵ In his articles he seemed to accept the premise of a possible fusion of the role of artist and engineer and his

22. Arvatov traced two developments toward the abstract picture: the one leading via Expressionism to 'extreme idealistic individualism', the other developing via Cezanne and Picasso to Tatlin and the idea of the artistic-constructor. See Bann (1974:43-48).

23. It should be noted that this was in direct opposition to Trotsky's contention that as soon as a worker began to produce artistic work so she/he was elevated to a different class status, one which was shared with all other cultural workers. See Chapter 1 above.

24. See Bann (1974: 43-48).

25. In later years he contributed to the journal of Glavpolitprosvet, the political-education committee of Narkompros.

membership of TsIT²⁶ points to his commitment to this idea. Pertsov however posed some difficult questions, one of which was what *art* stood to gain from this synthesis. The implication of Pertsov's argument was that if art was simply and prematurely redefined as technological in content this would undermine its historical worth: the task of art could amount to more than an improvement of everyday appendages. According to him a move by artists away from easel art ought not to be interpreted as the worthlessness of artistic concerns. Art had an independent worth which could indeed benefit mass production. This had always been known. For Pertsov the Constructivists' arguments for a production art did not address how a new, pragmatic and beneficial relationship could be set up between industry and art and fell short of proposing a coherent programme for the training of engineer-artists. He drew two principal conclusions from the Constructivists' argument i) that the problem of designing a pragmatic industrial design course had yet to be satisfactorily addressed, and ii) that this did not rule out the simultaneous development of art as a discipline concerned with aesthetic experience. According to Pertsov the possible disappearance of 'art' could only be ascertained when the development of the new centres of training had taken shape and effect.

Pertsov obviously saw TsIT as one of these centres. TsIT owed its existence to a very early initiative by the Nonobjectivist artist Olga Rozanova, who established a sub-department in Narkompros called the Subsection of Art and Production. Rozanova had facilitated the liaison of industrial enterprises and specialists and organised a 1919 First All Russian Conference on Art and Production. The conference was supported by Lunacharsky and led to the Art and Production Commission of the Scientific and Technical Department of the Supreme Council of Peoples' Commissars. Its aim was to "... develop and encourage artistic creativity among the people" (Lodder 1983:113).

The establishment of TsIT, under Alexai Gastev, represented a concrete step in the direction of this objective. Its explicit aim was to develop artistic and industrial creativity

26. TsIT, the Central Institute of Labour in Moscow, served as a laboratory for the analysis of the 'rhythmic' rotation of work, with the intention of creating a human labour process as efficient as technology itself.

and Lenin placed at its disposal rare funds of foreign currency. These were the first signs of the Soviet government's promotion of the synthesis of art and industry. The origins of TsIT also point to the early presence of the concept of production art in Narkompros, conceived by Rozanova as the most appropriate development of a new proletarian culture.

However the concept of 'proletarian culture' which was developed within Narkompros was of a different order to the Proletkult's definition of the idea, despite the overlap of alliances evident above. It was within Narkompros that the radical ideas of Brik, and for a time Gan, were espoused. The more sober references to the importance of past art for proletarian art had found expression in the writing of Proletkultists like Arvatov and Pertsov. The rampant iconoclasts were truly within Lunacharsky's domain, but Proletkultists wanted to eradicate the distinction between art and applied art so as to find a way to combine new aesthetic principles with the collective production process. For Proletkultists the concept of 'proletarian culture' also entailed an egalitarian redressing of managerial relations. Creativity meant workers themselves would understand, be motivated by, and would apply these new principles. The contradiction between the objective material factors which made revolution possible would now be resolved in that the means of production and the relations of production would be socialised.²⁷ Democratising art involved more than a specialist artist at work in a factory such as the role played by Tatlin or Popova. The democratisation of the relations of production posited by Proletkult was a challenge to the rhetoric and practice within Narkompros. Proletkult also challenged Narkompros by objecting to the Cubofuturists occupying a protected position within Narkompros. Proletkultists disapproved of the Cubofuturists' alliance with the state and in response to this tried to enforce their own hegemonic control in the cultural arena. On behalf of IZO Shterenberg wrote an article defending the Cubofuturists entitled "To the Critics from Proletkult" (Fitzpatrick 1970:123). He identified Proletkult theory as empty rhetoric and accused Proletkultists of having

27. This approach would resolve the contradiction between the socialised means of production and the type of alienated labour which occurred under private ownership.

accomplished nothing in practice whereas IZO had at least successfully destroyed old cultural stereotypes and had created some new forms.²⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Narkompros was criticised by Proletkult given the overlap of the activity of artists and theoreticians in both organisations. It is possible that Proletkult's criticism of the Cubofuturists was based on an objection to the way in which these new cultural forms were being devised by intellectuals from within state funded institutions, as opposed to being conceived by the proletariat or in consultation with the proletariat in the numerous regional studios.²⁹ The debate seemed to hinge on the question of which political alliances were more 'correct' given the possibility of either forging an autonomous cultural organization which would produce 'proletarian culture', or a state affiliated organization which would assume the mandate to define and produce such a culture. Identifying clear alliances is difficult given the economic necessity of theorists and practitioners accepting employment by the state and receiving state commissions. Even though Narkompros tried to maintain a position of cultural pluralism, balancing allegiance to the new state with a commitment to cultural enquiry and formal innovation was no doubt a difficult task. In general the Proletkult theorists who were critical of the inadequate solutions within Narkompros were in effect also criticising the divisions between the intransigent Nonobjectivists, the Constructivists and the Constructivist-turned Productivists.

The concept of a 'proletarian culture' was thus contested not only by Proletkultists, Bogdanovites, Lenin representing the new Bolshevik government, and Lunacharsky in Narkompros, trying to steer a path between the government and the Cubofuturists, but also by the various groupings which emerged within the circle of Cubofuturists. Amongst

28. See above for information pertaining to Shterenberg's attempt to liaise between various arts groupings despite his own allegiance to KOMFUT.

29. The statement on the need for a new proletarian culture made by the ex-Cubofuturist and Nonobjectivist Rodchenko, from within IZO, seemed to echo Proletkult's devotion to the creation of an entirely new set of cultural values and forms which made matters extremely complex, notwithstanding the fact that Rodchenko was unsuccessful in redressing managerial relations in his production plans.

the leftists there were divides between intransigent Nonobjectivists, Constructivists, and those who later rejected Constructivism for Production art. In addition to this there existed particular definitions of 'proletarian culture' by the figurative arts groups, which will form the basis of Chapters Three and Four. In the following section the demise of so-called formalist Constructivism/Productivism will be discussed in terms of the contesting claims of these groups and in terms of the socio-political context which informed cultural debate of the twenties and thirties.

C. Socio-political factors which informed the status of the so-called formalists in the visual arts sector.

The demise of the Productivists and their failure to claim ultimate victory in the proletarian culture debate has been explained in terms of the introduction of NEP in 1921.³⁰ To assume that the state's New Economic Policy (NEP) was responsible for the demise of the practice of so-called formalists, whether these be Cubofuturists, Constructivists or Productivists, is simplistic and incorrect. Narkompros promoted both iconoclastic Productivists and figurative artists but, despite NEP, the so-called formalist avant-garde retained its primary position between 1921 and 1924. Constructivism, Production art and easel art, whether Nonobjectivist or figurative, all coexisted in the common climate of NEP. In this section I shall trace the interrelationship of political and economic and cultural theories during NEP and comment upon the extent to which NEP could be seen as instrumental in the demise of Productivism.

NEP was introduced after the 1917-1921 civil war when the Bolsheviks found themselves face to face with a situation of industrial and economic devastation.³¹ Emigration had removed much of Russia's skilled and educated elite and demobilised soldiers and sailors had little reason to return to the towns. In the countryside peasants were embittered by

30. See Folgarait (1985:72) and Gray (1959:36).

31. War, drought, disease, industrial closure and urban food shortages had contributed to the diminishment of the proletariat from 3.6 million in 1917 to 1.5 million in 1920.

the Bolsheviks' forced requisitioning of grain and in March 1921 sailors at Kronstadt naval base rebelled against the rule of the commissars which they regarded as arbitrary, calling for a true soviet of workers and peasants. The revolt has been seen by some historians as a symbolic parting of ways of the Bolsheviks and the working class.³² Peasant unrest and the Kronstadt rebellion pointed to the urgent need for the policy of War Communism to be replaced by a new economic policy which would alleviate economic and political pressures.

The arguments which have linked the demise of so-called formalist art to NEP have suggested that the so-called formalists suddenly found themselves at odds with a government policy which began to seek reconciliation with the peasantry and petit-bourgeoisie.³³ The premise of this argument is that those so-called formalists who became Productivists had prioritised the role of the proletariat in calling for the fusion of art and industry. These leftists then found themselves without support when emphasis shifted to the rural peasantry. Their claims to an alliance with the urban worker thus held no relevance with the government. Such analyses have drawn a clear link between the arrival of NEP, a shift of focus away from the urban centres, and the rise of figurative art after the demise of so-called proletariat aligned leftists.³⁴ What is ignored in this analysis is the *motivation* which informed the introduction of NEP, which was to promote industrialisation and the long term survival of a working class government.

Nikolai Bukharin, as official defendant of NEP, based his argument for the interim promotion of private trade amongst the peasantry on an economic analysis which posited

32. See Fitzpatrick (1978:86-87).

33. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in pre-revolutionary years the avant-garde had prioritised formal innovation above all else, particularly in their theories of Nonobjectivism. When some of them applied these formal innovations to the tasks of the revolution and developed theories of Constructivism and Productivism they were still associated with these concerns with abstract form, hence their being called 'formalist'. The legacy of this crude polarity is passed down in texts which continue to blur the distinction between their pre-revolutionary commitment to the principles of abstract composition and their later concerns with the pragmatic organization of useful constructions.

34. See footnote 2 above.

consumer demand as a major motivating force *for* industrialisation.³⁵ Bukharin argued that the surplus sold by the peasantry would enable them to buy the industrial goods they desired and the subsequent stimulation of the industrial sector would serve to place the Soviet Union on a footing with other industrial nations. So as to leave producers with a marketable surplus, the government decided to replace requisitioning with a tax in kind. This resulted in the resumption of private trade which was then legalised. This had a radical effect upon the psychology and culture of the country. NEP created a climate of confusion in that it proposed an interim period of private enterprise as a means toward the ultimate implementation of communism. However at no point was there disagreement over the ultimate objective which was that socialism would be impossible without industrialisation. It was this same equation of socialism and industrialisation which inspired the leftists' development of Productivism but which ironically *also* influenced the development of the new figurative easel art groups. In this section I argue that NEP alone was not responsible for the demise of the avant-garde nor can this argument be supported by characterising NEP as a period which shifted emphasis *away* from industry and the proletariat. Industrialisation was always a priority and if anything NEP promoted opportunities for Productivists to take up positions in industry.³⁶

In accordance with the economic concessions of NEP which were aimed at promoting industrialisation, certain Central Committee members of the Communist Party favoured

35. As a young revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin was known for his left wing communism. In 1919 he co-authored a book with Preobrazhensky entitled "ABC of Communism". During NEP he and Preobrazhensky agreed on the necessity for industrialisation but differed on the means of attaining it. Bukharin adopted a right wing position in opposition to the militaristic solution favoured by Preobrazhensky. In the mid-twenties Bukharin supported Stalin in his concerted efforts to consolidate socialism in the Soviet Union, against the continual threat of ostensible foreign invasion. He supported Stalin's defeat of left wing critics such as Trotsky but by 1928 was himself opposing Stalin's continual coercion of the peasantry and disregard for the principal of collective leadership in the Party. The right was defeated in 1929, Bukharin was removed from the Communist International and removed from his editorial post at Pravda. In 1938 he was tried, as were all of Lenin's original politbureau, and found guilty of attempting to undermine Stalin's rule and the Soviet Union (Solomon 1979:199-214; Tucker 1977:161-212).

36. Rodchenko and Mayakovsky's work for GUM and MOSSELPRAM are examples of this move into industry, as are Varvara Stepanova's book designs and Liubov Popova and Stepanova's textile designs [Figs 5, 6, 7 & 8].

the development of technical training at schools over and above a broad education incorporating the humanities. This meant that the old Narkompros characterised by a commitment to liberal arts was overshadowed by a developing technicism. In addition the state insisted that fees for education be reintroduced. The effect was that Lunacharsky's attempts to introduce all children to a broad education in the humanities and therefore to democratise art from the level of schools upwards were also frustrated and instead an elite technical strata was to develop. The results of this technicism will be considered below.

The abandonment of the project of nationalising the private sector and the reintroduction of fees for various public services created resentment amongst a proletariat which wanted an immediate redressing of past inequities and a fulfillment of its needs. Politically, NEP led to uncertainty amongst the working class which no longer saw evidence of its interests being protected. Economically NEP was characterised by the state's concessions to the peasantry, the intelligentsia and the petit bourgeoisie. Old Communists experienced NEP as a retreat from the objectives of the revolution and many failed to respect Lenin's attempts to cultivate the support of bourgeois specialists.³⁷

The state balanced these economic concessions, which seemed to favour the non-proletariat sectors, with an increasing intolerance of political opposition to the Bolshevik government. Hundreds of liberals and members of non-Bolshevik revolutionary groupings were imprisoned, exiled and shot. Within the party those on the extreme left, including Trotsky, criticised the abandonment of the War Communism of the civil war years. This left wing criticism represented the fears of many workers and old Bolsheviks. Lenin's response was to introduce a resolution 'On Party Unity' at the 10th Party Congress in 1921, which forbade factional activity within the party. The result of this was a cessation

37. See Fitzpatrick (1978:88-89) for an explanation of NEP as a period of retreat from revolutionary objectives.

of all opposition outside of the Party and a censoring of debate within the Party.³⁸ The impact of economic reform combined with the increased political repression had a complex effect on culture. Some politicians and economists, for example Bukharin, based their support for the artistic avant-garde on the more tolerant economic policies of NEP, while others, for example Preobrazhensky, criticised the avant-garde and in accordance with the politically repressive atmosphere of NEP, supported the notion of state action against autonomous cultural activity as had been evident in Lenin's action against Proletkult in 1920.

NEP was a time in which the government turned to culture because the political battle had largely been won. For the first time Lenin turned his attention to culture, but as outlined in Chapter One, his definition of culture was still entirely determined by economic and political imperatives.³⁹ His denial of 'proletarian culture' had been illustrated in his campaign against Proletkult.⁴⁰ He construed it as divisive and degenerate and due to this intervention, by 1921, Proletkult was effectively dead. Proletkult had always been wary of participation with bourgeois experts and it was this position which, especially at the outset of NEP, had led to conflict. The organization had opposed Lenin's calls for a retention and part reform of bourgeois culture and had adhered firmly to its programme of working out a proletarian culture at a grassroots

38. These tensions introduced during NEP were to emerge later in the psychology of the era which became known as Stalin's 'cultural revolution'. The attitudes evident during the cultural revolution were a direct result of the concomitant hope and resentment in the early and mid-twenties and were ultimately instrumental in the defences of realism and in the promotion of figurative art. See Chapter Four.

39. See Chapter One above.

40. Apart from the cooperation of some individual artists, mainly Cubofuturists, Proletkult had been the only cultural organization to respond positively to the newly formed Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1918. Lenin's negative attitude toward the organization was therefore particularly devastating to it. A few leftists in open support of the Bolsheviks included Mayakovsky, Blok, Meyerhold, Tatlin, Shterenburg and Punin. For information on Lenin and Proletkult see Chapter One above.

level.⁴¹ The technical training conducted by professionals and facilitated by the Proletkult was not objected to by Bolshevik ideologists. What was seen as problematic was Proletkult's political theory and its mobilisation of the proletariat. In particular its activities were seen as a threat to the extra-mural department of Narkompros, Glavpolitprosvet. The demise of Proletkult makes evident the fact that NEP was *not* a period of cultural tolerance as is suggested in the analyses which associate the demise of leftist production with NEP.

It is understandable that with such political repression some researchers have been tempted to conclude that NEP might be seen as the cause of the demise of avant-garde activity. The direct tailoring of education to meet the practical needs of the RSFSR was echoed within IZO, ironically by virtue of the direction that the Cubofuturists in IZO *mapped out for themselves*. Although a concentrated attack was launched on the Cubofuturists by the technical lobbyists, as discussed below, it must be noted that the government decree that art directly service the state was only introduced many years later, after the avant-garde had arrived at such a position itself. It is nevertheless important to examine the effects of the technical lobby on the Cubofuturist avant-garde so as to be able to ascertain the extent to which the demise of their art was contingent on coercive government policy or of their own design. Nevertheless we have to reconcile a strange combination of factors which include the political 'rationalisation' of Narkompros, various politically motivated interventions in culture, and the course of development which the avant-garde mapped out for itself. Many of the old Cubofuturists or Nonobjectivists were now largely Constructivists and Productivists based in Narkompros, INKhUK and Proletkult who had shifted toward a utilitarian and technicist notion of art. It is this shift that was resisted by those who remained committed to easel art and who theorised a realist philosophy in terms of their figuration. That these artists based their critique of Productivism on the *same* political affiliations to the working class

41. Although Lenin and the Central Committee preserved the status of bourgeois professional cultural teachers and producers from the pre-revolutionary era, it could be argued that some of these very teachers, as discussed above, focussed their efforts on redefining their practice to equate it with the commonplace industrial labour process, thereby echoing in part Proletkult's intent.

struggle as was claimed by Proletkult and Productivists makes it all the more difficult to correlate political and artistic development directly.

The argument for a working class culture as opposed to a culture which would be a continuation of bourgeois culture was played out in Narkompros and it involved the Central Committee of the Communist Party, cultural administrators, theorists and the artists themselves. The Central Committee was divided on the issue. Some were in favour of bourgeois enlightenment values while others were more technicist.⁴² The majority of the Central Committee regarded Narkompros as inefficient, overstaffed with old intelligentsia and lacking in the 'necessary' influence of proletarian Communists. At the outset of 1921 they allocated E. A. Litkens the task of rationalising Narkompros (Fitzpatrick 1970:195-200). What effect proletarian Communists could have on culture was obviously not clearly anticipated by the Central Committee since this could take the form of Alexai Gan's rampant communist iconoclasm or conservative reaffirmations of easel art. Although the former proletariat communist call was by a leftist and the latter was a continuation of the bourgeois tradition of art, it was probably the latter which they anticipated.

An account of this rationalisation and political intervention will enable an assessment of the extent to which the demise of the leftists was informed by the economic and political events of NEP. The effect of Litkens' interventions had severe repercussions for Narkompros, but these NEP related interventions did not ultimately dislodge or eradicate leftist visual production. Litkens was generally disrespectful of the worth of cultural production aside from that which contributed to industrial technical expertise or military matters. When Litkens entered Narkompros, he saw it as having failed to learn anything from the lessons of the civil war. He accused it of having "drowned completely in general cultural enterprises, utterly failing to set itself the task of giving practical service to Soviet construction" (Fitzpatrick 1970:192). For Litkens this practical service necessitated a

42. See Chapter One above for information on Lenin and Trotsky and see below for information on Bukharin and the technicist arguments of Preobrazhensky.

technical education which was not contingent upon the influence of a privileged middle class intelligentsia which included the utopian Cubofuturists.

Political protest against the presence of the leftists had in fact been forthcoming as early as their entry into Narkompros. In December 1917 Zalevsky had written in *Izvestiya*: "The futurists, penetrating into the proletarian milieu, could bring the putrid poison of the decaying bourgeois organism into the healthy spirit of the proletarian." What the proletariat needed in Zalevsky's view was "beautiful form [which] will be the reflection of rich content" (Fitzpatrick 1970:122). In the letter "On the Proletkults" (Lenin 1964) which had been drafted by the Central Committee and published in *Pravda* in December 1920 the government had criticised the organization for admitting the 'pernicious' influence of bourgeois intellectuals and futurism.⁴³ Cubofuturists within IZO published a proclamation declaring that art could be either reactionary or revolutionary and that IZO was devoted to a revolutionary art against the bourgeoisie and for the proletariat.

The technical lobby argued that Narkompros was indulging in a luxury which the country could ill afford.⁴⁴ In general Litken's approach was characterised more by the lingering attitudes of War Communism introduced by Trotsky than by the spirit of NEP. His was a technicism founded on the righteousness of proletarian ideology rather than a

43. But the Cubofuturists not only had to defend themselves against the political commissars, they also had to defend themselves against the Proletkultists with whom they had close relations and to whom they also lent their services.

44. During the civil war years lobbies had already formed in the economic commissariats, in the unions and in local party committees to agitate for a more practical and utilitarian solution in the schools. In opposition to this Lunacharsky had consistently adhered to the idea of education as enlightenment and as that which should be equally available to all, irrespective of the pressure to specialise in technical education at a young age. Lunacharsky retaliated by reiterating his belief in aesthetic education that schools ought to cater for aesthetic education and that these schools should take the form of 'labour schools'. A 'labour school' was a combination of Dewey's activity school and a polytechnical school espoused by Marx. They were to be locally administered by representatives from both the community and the schools themselves. Unfortunately the teachers did not understand the principles of this cooperative approach nor the absence of central direction. In addition local Party Committees dismissed the importance of administering culture and education.

pragmatic use of bourgeois expertise.⁴⁵ A new collegium would be established within Narkompros to reform professional training and to provide a constant supply of skilled workers.⁴⁶ Narkompros thus became a coordinating body of an education system which turned out socialists on the orders of particular government departments. From Lunacharsky's initial position of insisting that the people themselves must evolve their own culture,⁴⁷ Narkompros now organized training for a future technical intelligentsia and administered and controlled one of the largest formerly autonomous cultural groupings in the union viz. Proletkult.

The decision of the Central Committee had been to reorganise Narkompros as a whole and in the process to try to redress the weight of the artistic sector which was so clearly dominated by Cubofuturist leftists.⁴⁸ Litkens' part in this plan had been to propose that the arts, like the sciences, be subordinate to the state which in effect meant the Central Committee. Although the **Union of Art Workers** lobbied against this, Litken's proposal

45. The Central Committee supported the establishing of a Committee of Technical Education which would undermine Lunacharsky's plans for the labour schools. The retention of Narkompros's control in education was only maintained when Lunacharsky struck a compromise with Trotsky. Lunacharsky agreed to emphasise professional education and introduce it at a secondary school level.

46. At the higher technical schools students were to be regarded as government employees, to do their practicals in factories and to be penalised for absenteeism and unsatisfactory performance. Free admission to higher education was replaced with study conscription occurring on the basis of students being put forward by unions, factory committees, local soviet and party organisations.

47. See quotes by Lunacharsky to this effect in Fitzpatrick (1970:86).

48. Narkompros had been appealing for some time to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets for resources which had not been forthcoming. The commissariat was not blamed for this state of affairs. What provoked them to action against Narkompros was Lunacharsky's failure to enforce Lenin's position against Proletkult's autonomy at the 1920 Proletkult conference. The aftermath of Party action was the creation of a Chief Committee for Political Education to replace the extra-mural department and into which Proletkult was absorbed. The incident had confirmed their fears that Narkompros was unreliable and that it promoted the views of non-party intelligentsia.

won the day.⁴⁹ What Litkens did was to abolish the old extra-mural department which had subsidized Proletkult, thereby attacking the avant-garde in Proletkult, and to remove IZO's status as a separate administration thereby attacking the power base of the avant-garde in Narkompros. The absorbed Proletkult was now directly answerable to the political education administration, Glavpolitprosvet. This and all other departments in Narkompros fell under Litkens who as chief administrator liaised with Lunacharsky. This amounted to a severe check on the power of the avant-garde within state cultural organisations. Significant inroads had been made into Narkompros and Lunacharsky's arts-oriented education programme and policy of cultural tolerance.

The fight between cultural and technical education ensued on a broad front. The choice which was presented was a crude polarity, minus the subtle distinctions and philosophical arguments which existed in the old Vperedy.⁵⁰ One of the Narkompros administrations was given over to the supervision of E. A. Preobrazhensky who also worked on the collegium of the Finance Commissariat. The interchanges between Preobrazhensky and Lunacharsky were published in Pravda and the Narkompros journal, and illustrate Lunacharsky's constant battle to defend the arts against the increasing technocratic concerns of the Central Committee. Lunacharsky attacked Preobrazhensky for suggesting that 'man lives by bread alone' and went on to state:

If, for example, we came to the conclusion that it was necessary to sell our whole museum collection abroad, exchanging it for the appropriate quantity of flour, or to stop all artistic education or all artistic life in the country completely, we would hardly be acting rationally (Fitzpatrick 1970:269).

Preobrazhensky was less persuaded by Lunacharsky's rational argument for securing a place for the non-rational components of human experience than he was by the urgent need for workers with adequate qualifications in agriculture and engineering. For

49. He sketched out four chief administrations consisting of Gosizdat (publishing), Glavsotsvos (social/school training up to the age of 15 years), Glavprofobr (professional training over the age of 15) and Glavpolitprosvet (political education). IZO, the visual arts department, was to be replaced by an artistic committee which with a scientific committee would constitute an Academic Centre. The centre was also to incorporate a museum administration and an archival administration.

50. See Chapter One above for information pertaining to Vperedy.

Preobrazhensky the question was whether to support a 'higher' or a middle education. He was unconvinced by the integration posited by Lunacharsky's labour school model which ensured an education in the humanities for all up to a certain level. According to Preobrazhensky the working class did not need artistic education.

Preobrazhensky's position was informed by the preceding years of War Communism. He adopted a position to the left of Lenin and Bukharin's arguments for a New Economic Policy. Preobrazhensky did nevertheless concur with Lenin and Bukharin on the Soviet Union having to get on with industrialisation, with or without the prospect of international help. The policies that were developed in relation to culture and education were thus strongly informed by this conviction that rapid industrialisation was essential for the success of socialism in an isolated country. For Preobrazhensky the means of arriving at this goal was far more aggressive and hasty than that which was ultimately to characterise NEP. The influence he brought to bear on Narkompros at the outset of NEP was thus contrary to the idea of NEP as a period of class alliances. Contrary to arguments that NEP was an anti-proletariat period unfavourable to the urban leftists,⁵¹ the early pressures on Narkompros by Litkens and Preobrazhensky were marked by firm *preferences* for the urban proletariat. These politicians were intolerant of the pre-revolutionary 'bourgeois' Cubofuturists and educationalists who, they believed, were *confusing* the cultural education of the working class and *hindering* their rapid development into a technically efficient production force.

51. See footnotes 2 and 35 above.

In addition to this upsurge of technicism within Narkompros a cut in the 1921/22 budget saw culture, education and social security being marginalised.⁵² The move away from free education and social services fought for by Lunacharsky introduced a debate on public spending. The soviets argued for a sacrifice in the financing of cultural enterprises so as to maintain the idea of free basic education. This separation of cultural education from elementary education was precisely what Lunacharsky had tried to avoid. When the Party intervened in cultural affairs the various groups on the left turned to Lunacharsky for support. Lunacharsky's history of ambivalence toward the avant-garde and his absence from the Central Committee did not serve the Cubofuturists' cause.

The power and to some extent the fate of the leftists within Narkompros was determined by the ambivalence of Lunacharsky's support, an ambivalence further compromised by Lunacharsky's allegiance to Lenin, who believed in the importance of easel art as an indication of the assimilation of bourgeois cultural practice. Although Lunacharsky was the primary protector of the leftists within the corridors of Bolshevik power,⁵³ he questioned the relevance of the *abstract* easel art which he associated with Cubofuturism. At the same time he had defended the positions of the leftists in general, and identified the Central Committee's intolerance of them as communist conceit, opportunism and bourgeois cultural prejudice.⁵⁴ Lunacharsky seemed to favour the Productivist contingent of the Cubofuturists as it at least appeared to him to be more convincing as a proletarian art form and could be defended economically and politically. As is evident

52. Not only did cultural funding dry up but the private art market which was envisaged as the alternative source of funding for artists also failed to emerge. Lunacharsky was in any event mistrustful of this market since he foresaw the emergence of a neo-bourgeois speculator. To some extent the demands of the emergent speculator did effect the reemergence of figurative art i.e. easily recognisable portraits, landscapes etc., but it was not this that Lunacharsky feared. What he could not tolerate was the prospect of no psychological control over the cultural domain: "The danger is of an outpouring of filth, which may splash outside its channels and dirty the completely healthy sections of the population". Lunacharsky: "The New Economic Policy and Narkompros" Narkompros pros. nos 87-8, 25 October 1921.

53. At times Bukharin and Trotsky also lent qualified support to the leftists.

54. It is obvious that in different political contexts Lunacharsky adjusted his tone and the nature of his allegiances.

in Chapter One above, Lunacharsky tended to associate abstract easel art with the last days of capitalism. For a time he supported the apparently utilitarian Productivist developments but he counterbalanced his support of the leftists in paid positions of employment by persistently rebuking them for their monopolist claims for state recognition.⁵⁵ Against the leftists he defended his own dealings with the conservative art strata.⁵⁶ He defended his mistrust of the Cubofuturists' political justifications of their artistic style by declaring himself unequivocally averse to political interference in poetic creativity: "I consider that one of my own functions, on the basis of the office which I hold, is the defence of the rights of free culture against Red Sycophancy".⁵⁷ This was somewhat ironic given his past, his position as cultural commissar, and his later proclamations on Socialist Realism.

It was only owing to subsequent financial and staff cuts introduced by the state in October 1921, that most of Litkens' structural changes did not survive. With the financial reorganisation in October 1921, Lunacharsky managed to negotiate that the arts department be retained and that the Academic Centre be elevated into a new chief administration. This amounted to a protection of the positions of the avant-garde or the so-called formalists which the Central Committee and Litkens were trying to dislodge.

In March 1922 Lunacharsky, who had nevertheless experienced a significant loss of control in the cultural sector, made a speech to the Congress of Local Education Departments in which he suggested that NEP had destroyed all the gains that had been made in culture since the October revolution. To some extent it had. All the autonomous cultural activity which Narkompros had financed had been transferred to a self-

55. Lunacharsky was more receptive of the criticism and advice of individual members of the old art union who had adopted a more conservative position in the arts and who had decided to work with the Soviet government for the preservation of Russia's cultural heritage, namely A. Benois and Count V. P. Zubov (Tolstoy 1990).

56. Private art collections had been nationalised and positions of museum directors abolished and replaced with artistic soviets. The one exception was the Tretyakov Gallery where I. E. Grabar had resisted such a change.

57. See exchanges between Lunacharsky and Kherzentsev in Fitzpatrick (1970:154-157).

supporting basis or had been left to private enterprise, but little of it survived the changes. Hundreds of cultural practitioners and teachers were unemployed and Narkompros owed millions in salaries. There no longer existed one coherent body in the face of the multiple divisions in the cultural sector. And yet despite Litkens' rationalisation Narkompros survived (Fitzpatrick 1970:258-289).

Lenin lent Lunacharsky support in the face of the Central Committee's dissatisfaction with the department and its staff cuts of 66%. Lenin's support hinged on a policy of cultural tolerance, but whereas for Lunacharsky this meant tolerance of the avant-garde, for Lenin it meant assuring a place for easel art and so-called bourgeois culture. If the intention of the Central Committee had been to remove all trace of Bogdanovites, Cubofuturists and cultural iconoclasts via their support of Litkens, they were far from successful.⁵⁸ Although Lenin intervened to call for cultural tolerance, the immediate effect was not one which he anticipated. The rejection of all signs of so-called bourgeois cultural concerns had always been seen as inappropriate by Lenin and he maintained this position right up to his death in 1924.⁵⁹ While Lenin helped Lunacharsky to persevere with a policy of cultural pluralism which would favour bourgeois practice, his own loyalty to the cultural expression of the bourgeoisie prevented him from perceiving what the internal dynamics of its cultural vanguard would lead to (i.e. to iconoclasm and Productivism). Lenin believed that he was promoting a reconciliation between the old cultural intelligentsia and the left wing Communist Party members who were unsympathetic to the importance of past culture. Lenin tried to dissuade Narkompros from its 'excessively permissive' attitudes toward the avant-garde and to deter Communists from their 'too stern' approach to culture, as was typified by

58. They were in fact to encounter even greater difficulties after the disillusioned departure of Bogdanov from the subsumed Proletkult. What they faced was the emergence of the more radical views of his successors. The same radical iconoclasm was true of Lunacharsky's subordinates at Narkompros. However Narkompros was to remain completely reliant upon the left. For the position of head of the arts sector of Glavpolitprosvet there was no opposing candidate to V. F. Pletnev, a radical iconoclast and president of Proletkult. Pletnev was thus tolerated and he pursued political education in the style of the civil war years, with speeches, banners, parades and agitational work in regional clubs, schools and reading rooms.

59. See Chapter One above.

Preobrazhensky's intolerance toward the cultured middle class. Yet Lenin, by approving of the introduction of the VKhUTEMAS, inadvertently lent support to the erosion of the cultural artifacts he was most partial to, and despite the efforts of the technical lobby, by the end of 1921 the Cubofuturists were still entrenched in their relatively new positions of power within the Commissariat. The prioritising of economic needs and associated technical skills emphasised by Litkens gained impetus in later years, but during NEP the technical emphasis was sketched out by the artists themselves.

The artistic left were unresponsive to government criticism and to Lunacharsky's warnings against monopolies. They were intent on outdoing one another in their attempts to develop a materialist aesthetics that would be informed by the developments of the revolution and that would be deserving of the title 'proletarian culture'. Their battles with the state formed but a small part of the broader cultural debate in which they set themselves up in opposition to all who seemed to evince 'pre-revolutionary' interests and even against one another. Even though the major alternative cultural activity of autonomous groups such as Proletkult ceased when Narkompros cut off all financial support in 1922, what gained impetus both within Narkompros, its affiliated training institutions, and in INKhUK was a cognizance of the need for a *new* 'proletarian culture'. The artistic left ensconced within state structures defined this as the possible application of the principles of design to the industrial production process and an introduction of these principles to the labouring forces. In effect this meant a redefinition of 'professional' cultural activity.

Those Proletkultists who were still on the scene defined it as a new form of industrial design and production which would be devised and executed by workers on the basis of information absorbed from specialists. This too was a lobby for a new type of artistic training. However, since the Proletkult studios were no longer financed, the emphasis was still on design rather than the production process per se. This increased awareness of economic needs thus found formal expression in the VKhUTEMAS.⁶⁰ Narkompros

⁶⁰. Theorists promoting Productivism within the VKhUTEMAS included Kushner, Arvatov, and in part Shterenberg.

maintained links with artists representing a diversity of interests and styles but in general, in 1922, cultural iconoclasm flourished in the institutions as a result both of the Cubofuturists' development of Productivism and, ironically, of the state's promotion of technical education. The resultant technical imperatives incumbent on those involved in culture were evidenced on the one hand in the artists' own development of their Constructivist concerns into the Productivist call for a utilitarian, industrial and mass produced art but on the other in the development of figurative art into a vehicle which could espouse the importance of revolutionary history, planning and identity. NEP favoured neither of these two developments exclusively. With NEP's emphasis on industrialisation, whether it be via an alliance with the peasantry as argued by Bukharin, or at the expense of the rural sector as argued by economists like Preobrazhensky, it provided a context in which the technical emphases of Productivism won support but so too did the documentary representational strategies of the new realist groups. These constitute the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STATUS OF FIGURATIVE ART IN RELATION TO THE CHANGING SOCIO-POLITICAL EVENTS BETWEEN 1921 AND 1934

Introduction

In this chapter I trace the status of figurative art from approximately 1921 to 1934, focussing not on figurative art practice but on the theoretical intentions of figurative artists and the informative factors of these arguments. Due to the complexity of these theoretical debates and the circumstances which informed them I have chosen to address them separately in this chapter before going on to assess them in relation to figurative art practice in Chapter Four. The context under consideration in this chapter includes the polemical debates figurative artists engaged in with leftists, political and economic debates pertinent to the USSR in this period and the varying theoretical proclamations by diverse figurative groups established throughout this period. These cultural proclamations in defence of figurative art were informed by early theories of revolutionary Marxists as outlined in Chapter One, by the positions of the leftists as outlined in Chapter Two, as well as by the changing socio-economic context of the early twenties and thirties as outlined below.

A consideration of the status of figurative artists also entails a consideration of the status certain groups attained retrospectively because of the state endorsement of figurative Socialist Realism. This chapter will therefore also include some comments on the development of Socialist Realism. It was only in 1934 that certain artists, theoreticians and politicians organised themselves into a formal lobby calling for Socialist Realism to be seen as the most suitable cultural expression of the revolution. This was then endorsed by the state and supported by various Party proclamations and state interventions over the following years. However it was not an imposition on the part of the state but a result of artists' own attempts to find an agreement on what constituted a revolutionary culture. The consensual agreement on Socialist Realism at the crucial 1934 writers congress,

involved a reconciliation of various arguments dating back to Plekhanov, and echoed in manifestos of artists throughout the twenties and early thirties. A central argument in these manifestos and originating in Plekhanov's theories was the issue of the 'recommended' degree of objectivity or partisanship on the part of the artist. This issue of partisanship or non-partisanship also affected artists' rationalizations of the purpose, forms and necessary training in visual art. In accordance with theories summarised in Chapter One, artists debated whether the function of the art object was for individual pleasure or social use; the formative factor of intuitive feeling or rational explanations of the interrelationship of social phenomena; the acceptance of contradictory content or insistence that this content conform with a 'correct' political analysis; and the general extent of individual despair or faith in social progress exhibited in their work. In their theoretical declaration the figurative artists positioned themselves at various points along this continuum, although, as will be seen in Chapter Four, their work did not always reflect their theoretical intentions. In this chapter I will limit myself to a survey of the theoretical intentions of the figurative artists in an effort to illustrate that most of these artists shared the same broad ideology with leftists. In general they espoused faith in socialism, and agreed on the need to contribute individual efforts toward the building of a socialist future. Yet how they aimed to contribute ideologically to the project of the revolution varied in respect to the above mentioned issues, for example, some placed greater emphasis on intuition or objectivity or partisanship. All of this was theorised in terms of what was thought most suitable for the post-revolutionary context.

Where they diverged from leftists was with regard to their stylistic objectives and the training they presumed to be necessary. Theories pertaining to style also echoed, in various forms, debates articulated in the past by Plekhanov and ideas more recently espoused by Lunacharsky and Bogdanov, Trotsky and Lenin. While some artists were tolerant of twentieth-century developments toward abstraction, others favoured only clear and immediately identifiable subject matter. Some of these artists emphasised the importance of 'traditions' of 'bourgeois' culture, yet others rejected such a heritage, particularly the styles of nineteenth-century realism. Some conceded the importance of detail, others construed it as disruptive of the desired harmony of the whole. The theories of figurative artists did not constitute an homogenous body of thought.

The origins of the leftist-figurative opposition were largely due to early manifestos of the artists who set the terms of the debate in accordance with the *pre-revolutionary* opposition of Nonobjectivism and figuration. The antagonism toward abstraction can be traced back to Plekhanov's insistence on recognisable form and his aversion to contemporary formal developments. This aversion was echoed in Trotsky's preference for historically entrenched frames of reference or conventions and in Lenin's preference for 'bourgeois' realism which he believed 'reflected' reality. Although in the post-revolutionary climate Nonobjectivists abandoned their purely formal programme and allied their 'revolutionary' forms with a revolutionary socio-political project, even outdoing figurative artists with their didactic programmes of intent, these Nonobjectivists continued to be seen as formalist by the figurative artists who favoured older forms of realism and by the socially concerned critics who preferred tendentious **Peredvizhniki** realism. Apart from these critics, of Nonobjectivism, there did exist, amongst post-revolutionary figurative artists, a number who defended their own interests in modern formal developments and in the contemporary techniques of leftists. In their manifestos they reflected this desire to defend what they had absorbed from the Nonobjectivists while simultaneously declaring an interest in 'objective' reality. The use of the term 'objectivity' could thus imply an interest in a concrete definable world as well as a detached attitude to this world. When combined with detachment these renditions of the concrete were prone to attacks by partisan critics demanding a more explicit allegiance to the ideological programme of the revolution and there were various claimants to this position of revolutionary 'correctness', as exemplified in Chapter One between Proletkultists and Communist Party members.

The issue of objectivity or partisanship pertained to the class nature of the alliances which artists forged between themselves and which they envisaged would occur with their audiences. These artists' positions were also informed by arguments posited by political cultural theorists who variously defended alliances between bourgeoisie and proletariat, proletariat and peasantry, or proletarian identified interests only. The identification of these allegiances and the extent to which figurative groups did or did not privilege exclusively worker-identified interests was also linked to their tolerance/intolerance of other groups and hence the extent to which they were in favour of a climate of pluralism.

The class profiles of these groups which informed the allegiances they struck up with one another also informed their attitudes toward Party proclamations and state interventions. These class relations and relations with Party and state impacted on the type of training preferred by artists, ranging from preferences for training amateurs at a grass roots level to embracing a far more formalised and academic system of training.

As illustrated below, attitudes toward the formal or informal assimilation of past 'bourgeois' techniques, the rigorous critical assimilation of such techniques or an outright rejection of them was also a debate shaped by pre-revolutionary theory, by the economic requirements of the day and also by the implementation of NEP. In theory most of the figurative groups attempted to reflect the post-revolutionary philosophy of scientific materialism in their adoption of a quasi-scientific language deemed appropriate to NEP construction. All these artists theorised, in unison with the theorists mentioned in Chapter One, the centrality of human labour to artistic production, and accordingly redefined creativity as objective construction (see sections C and D below). Nevertheless the dual nature of the term objective again raised contentious debate regarding the desirability of professional detachment or partisanship in the 'construction' of artworks. In the climate of NEP the debate was extremely weighted because 'bourgeois' expertise was regarded as desirable but 'bourgeois' disinterestedness, which characterised many professionals, was regarded as undesirable. Because of the links drawn between bourgeois expertise and individualism, the idea of professionalism proved to be a problematic one for those radical artists who favoured an exclusively proletarian programme. The debates were often crudely posed in terms of technique versus content. Because of the negative associations of professionalism, especially European professionalism, many artists who were radical workerists favoured content over technique. Although figurative groups did build alliances around technique these often broke down due to their divergent attitudes toward the anticipated functioning of content (see section E below).¹

1. This was to lead to considerable debate in the future when theorists such as Lukacs argued for tolerance of 'bourgeois' critical realists as opposed to exclusive tolerance for Socialist Realists. This was in opposition to the position which had been argued by Maxim Gorky at the 1934 congress.

When tracing the technique-content debate in the years immediately preceding the cultural revolution of 1927, what is evident is that artists became increasingly militant in relation to both content (see **AKhR** and **October** in section E below) and in relation to technique, some even emphasising a collectivity of production (see **RAPKh** in section E). This led to the eradication of the cultural pluralism defended by Trotsky and Bukharin and nurtured by Lunacharsky in his early years and to a position antithetical to the class allegiances which had been advocated by Lenin in the early twenties. In the late twenties these radical proletarian-identified artists were scathing of Lenin's notions of building on bourgeois culture and averse to the practice of 'fellow-travellers'.² These more militant artists echoed the ideas of Proletkult leftists and for a short time, prior to the 1932 state decree which dissolved artists' groups, they cohered with leftists in **RAPKh**. They emphasised the need for changes in the relations of production and the importance of worker involvement in the production of 'new' proletarian culture. In this respect they recalled the very early theories of Lunacharsky and the entire body of Bogdanov's writing.³

Despite the central involvement of the ex-Proletkultist Maxim Gorky at the 1934 Congress when Socialist Realism was endorsed by artists and state representatives, (see section F below), what was most evident at this stage was the inclination of artists to embrace the idea of Party allegiance. With the advent of Socialist Realism the old Proletkult ideas, posited by Bogdanov and in early Lunacharsky writings, became thoroughly discredited. The whole idea of a 'new' proletarian culture was collapsed into the idea of Socialist Realism. This occurred despite the prestigious presence of Proletkultist Gorky who argued against the continued relevance of 'bourgeois' critical realism and for a grassroots art education for workers. Art training institutes were soon to be reorganised in accordance with pre-revolutionary academic models without regard for a democratisation or proletarianization of art. All that was retained from the theories for a new revolutionary proletarian culture was an emphasis on the centrality of labour,

2. See Chapter One for reference to 'fellow-travellers'.

3. This is evident in the paintings of **AKhRR** artist Ryangina who depicts soldiers being trained to paint, illustrated in Chapter Four below.

an aversion to 'individualism' and support for collective and industrial projects of the USSR. However all of this was to be combined with an obligatory optimism and faith in an uninterrupted progress, the evidence of which was considered to be already in existence. These ideas were thought to constitute the suitable content of works of art and the struggle against art 'without content' was declared over.⁴ What this amounted to was a belief that exploratory technique was no longer necessary – the ideological and formal requirements of what culture was deemed most 'suitable' for the post-revolutionary context had been sketched out with some authoritative finality.

A. 1921-1923: Easel art groups react to leftists criticisms (The Makovets, NOZh, Bytie and AKhRR).

The influx of leftists into the post-revolutionary cultural administration did not undermine the status of figurative art in the newly administered organisations. This was largely due to the efforts of Lunacharsky and David Shterenberg whom Lunacharsky appointed as head of education in the visual arts department, IZO. Shterenberg occupied an interesting and important role in the painting faculty in that he was supportive of all factions: the academic easel artists or so-called purists⁵ and those who grew out of the Cubofuturist tradition. The position of Shterenberg was pivotal in the VKhUTEMAS, not only as someone who ensured the presence of Constructivists and Productivists and figurative easel artists but also because, as head of IZO from 1918-1921 and as chief administrator of Professional Education from 1921, he ensured that professional education was based upon a training in figurative easel art as well as in industrial

4. See essay by Stetsky, "Under the Flag of the Soviets, Under the Flag of Socialism" in Scott (1935:270).

5. The label 'purist' denoted old Peredvizhniki members, Cezannists and Post Impressionists alike. It was a derogatory label for all who did not overtly change their art practice to include more contemporary formal analyses or to anticipate the utilitarian needs of the new soviet economy.

production.⁶ Disputes did nevertheless occur between departments. By 1923 Nonobjectivists were formally excluded from the painting faculty.⁷ Those figurative painters who were left constituting the department were termed so-called 'purists' by leftists critical of their conviction in the 'pure' act of painting without explicit utilitarian application.⁸

A number of members of the painting faculty who were termed 'purists' belonged to the **Makovets**, a grouping which established itself in 1921.⁹ The **Makovets** held their first show in 1922, which was entitled "Exhibition of Pictures by the Art-Life (**Makovets**) Union of Artists and Poets"¹⁰. This group argued that art could only be revived if continuity with artists of the past was retained and in this way a link with "vital and eternal sources of creativity awakened" (Leniashin 1988:88, and Bown 1991:32). At the same time that the Constructivist/Composition debates were taking place, figurative

6. From 1921-1923 the VKhUTEMA departments were painting, sculpture, graphics, textiles, ceramics, woodwork, metalwork and architecture. Constructivists were to be found in the graphics, woodwork, metalwork and architecture departments. Productivists found their way into ceramics and textiles but these departments placed little emphasis on the formal innovations of Nonobjectivism and Constructivism. Nonobjectivists worked in the graphics and painting faculties alongside artists influenced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments in French art. The sculpture department focussed only on figurative and monumental sculpture and paid little heed to either Nonobjectivism or the industrial interests of the Constructivists. An introductory Basic Course was premised on an acknowledgment of the developments of Cubofuturism and centred on two-dimensional form. Thus despite the varying foci of different departments, contemporary formal experiments of a Nonobjective nature were introduced to all students in their introductory years (Lodder 1983:109-130).

7. Those who had been excluded from the faculty included Rodchenko, Popova, Klyun and Vesnin (Lodder 1983 126-7; Khan-Magomedov 1987:103-4).

8. Many of these artists included old **Jack of Diamonds** members who displayed a kind of Russian Cezannism. They effectively supplanted the old **World of Art Society** which was linked to the Academy. This grouping included Konchalovsky, Mashkov, Falk and Osmerkin. See Chapter Four for examples of their work and the essay by Aksenov in Bowlit(1988:60-69) for **Jack of Diamonds'** primary interest in colour and form.

9. Gerasimov, Istomin and Shevchenko were painting faculty members who were also **Makovets** (Bakos 1988:268,270,289).

10. The society had over twenty members including Vasily Chekrygin, Nikolai Chernyshev, Vladimir Favorsky, Konstantin Istomin, Alexandra Shevchenko and Sergei Gerasimov. They produced a journal which came out twice in 1922 and once in 1923.

artists had thus begun vehemently to assert a place for the continuous tradition of easel art and subjective contemplation.¹¹

Leftists were unconvinced by figurative artists' declarations of interest in the contemporary material conditions of the world around them. Furthermore leftists regarded these artists as a threat to their claims to being the rightful representatives of the new proletarian culture. Because of what leftists perceived as a failure on the part of the VKhUTEMAS to meet the ideological and practical needs of a present and future proletarian culture, they proposed a reduction in the number of 'purists' teaching in the VKhUTEMA faculty and an expansion and consolidation of the industrial faculties and production departments. Although this was not successful, the technical and industrial direction of the VKhUTEMAS was given emphasis by their formalising links with centres of the state economy and political education.

Still fearing growing official support for the figurative easel art groups, leftists organised themselves into a group called **LEF**¹² and in 1923 issued their first editorial statement entitled "Comrades, Organisers of Life!". It entreated artists to stop 'decorating' canvases whether with 'colour patches' or the 'easy life of the bourgeoisie' (Rosenberg 1990:244). This criticism was directed at all easel artists who were accused of maintaining a professional status which separated them from the 'people'. **LEF** argued that easel art perpetuated the divide between a specialised sphere of fine art with its associated privileged experience of aesthetics and the collective energy of production located in the streets, squares and factories. They called these groups 'rightist' and saw their proliferation and separate existence as particularly divisive and counteractive to **LEF's** desire for collectivity and objectivity in all domains. **LEF** encouraged all leftists to establish a single Front of the Left Art, The Red Internationale, stating that "only in conjunction with the workers' revolution can we see the dawn of future art" (Rosenberg

11. Leniashin (1988:82) suggests that their name was derived from a hill on which the fourteenth Zagorsk monastery was built, thus indicating the emphasis the society placed on the spiritual quality of art .

12. See Chapter Two for information on **LEF**.

1990:244-255). This was an attempt at binding art to the theory of the International Proletariat Revolution as espoused by Trotsky and the leftists and workerists.

It is nevertheless problematic to call figurative artists rightists and to overlook the fact that a number of these groups were also committed to notions of objectivity and collectivism. Although certain figurative painters did introduce decidedly subjective commentaries into their renditions of contemporary Soviet reality, these were not unaffected by the prevalent material conditions as was suggested by **LEF**. The New Society of Painters (**NOZh**)¹³ was established in 1921 and members included ex-pupils of Vladimir Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich and Alexandra Exter whose Nonobjectivism they rejected.¹⁴ **NOZh** committed itself to a search for 'real' art outside of the theories of their professors, and emphatically reasserted the importance of depicting the objective world i.e. a 'recognisable' reality.¹⁵ They asserted their commitment as follows: "We are pioneering an unprecedented revival of Russian painting and objective painting" (Leniashin 1988:114). Their manifesto also contained the statement that this portrayal of 'objective' reality was to occur in the form of a personal 'reappraisal' or a critical commentary on the reality which existed 'objectively' in the world.¹⁶ Their style was reminiscent of 'primitivists' such as Henri Rousseau but their evaluations and their satirical treatment of the petit bourgeoisie were to find little official support.¹⁷ This critique of contemporary reality was as unlikely to find political patronage as were the contemporary but unheroic images of the **Makovets**.

13. Included in the first show was the work of Samuel Adlivankin and Georgi Riazhsy (Leniashin 1988:114).

14. This group represent a growing dissatisfaction with the old avant-garde, a dissatisfaction which was manifested in a student delegation to Lunacharsky protesting against the formal innovations of Cubofuturism and Nonobjectivism and requesting a greater presence of realist artists in the VKhUTEMAS (Bowl 1971:48).

15. See Leniashin (1988:114) for **NOZh** manifesto.

16. See Chapter Four for visual examples and an analysis of such examples.

17. See, for example, the 'official' criticism of their work in VOKS (1934:17).

The figurative easel group **Bytie** shared with the **Makovets** and **NOZh** a direct challenge to the developments of Nonobjectivism.¹⁸ **Bytie** was organised in 1922, drawing primarily on the younger and more radical of the **Jack of Diamonds** members. **Bytie** artists stated explicitly that they intended not only to assimilate the culture of French Cezannism, but also to revise it: "We want to reflect the revolution in our technique. We want to prepare a pictorial art of high *quality* to serve the revolution" (Voks Almanac 1934:17-18. My emphasis). This was an ambiguous commitment to the revolution, acknowledging the importance of combining technique and social concern but not going so far as to call for tendentious subject matter. They argued against the importance of painterly technique as an end in itself, thereby criticising Nonobjectivists, but their work was nevertheless almost entirely concerned with painterly technique.¹⁹ This emphasis on a professional commitment to technical expertise was shared by most figurative easel painters, all of whom were supported in this by Lenin's theory of building on the expertise of the bourgeoisie. In later years such programmes were criticised for an uncritical assimilation of European painterly techniques. This is evidenced in the state bulletin VOKS, which reported on **NOZh** thus: "An uncritical assimilation of the formal traditions of the heritage of Cezannism hindered this society from developing into a great artistic organisational centre" (VOKS nos 9-19 1934:18). By the thirties such critics regarded form and content as irreconcilable interests and considered attention to form and technique as 'formalist' and without social relevance.

It was left to **AKhRR** to fulfil the popular organising role anticipated in the anti-technical criticisms such as that quoted above. The figurative arts group **AKhRR** was also itself largely responsible for the anti-technical bias which developed in the art sector, although this was not the case in the early years of its formation. In 1922 **AKhRR** established itself as the "Association of Artists Studying Revolutionary Life". It then became "The Society of Artists of Revolutionary Russia" and thereafter, until 1928, was known as **AKhRR**

18. Members of **Bytie** included Skalia, Sretensky, Lebedev and Taldykin. Bogorodsky, Razhin and Pokazhevsky were at one time members, as were older artists from the VKhUTEMA painting faculty, Konchalovsky, Kuprin and Osmerkin.

19. See example of Osmerkin's work in Chapter Four below.

(Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia).²⁰ **AKhRR** showed signs of what was to be a major trait of artists during the cultural revolution of 1927 i.e. the tendency to prioritise ideological objectives over stylistic concerns. The manner of organization of **AKhRR** also showed signs of what was to become a feature of artistic activity in post-NEP years, namely the forging of alliances with the Soviet bureaucracy which flourished under NEP. This was part of **AKhRR's** strategy to consolidate a monopoly on state commissions and it was over this issue of state patronage that they clashed most fiercely with the leftists (see section E below).

The language with which **AKhRR** described itself was every bit as militant as that of **LEF**. In this regard they could not be labelled bourgeois individualists as **LEF** was prone to label them along with all other easel artists. **AKhRR** was disparaging of the contemporary technical accomplishments of the avant-garde and declared more vehemently than any other easel group that their form of realism constituted the new proletarian culture, but it was a realism built on the example of past realistic styles. The stated aim of **AKhRR** was to represent realistically the everyday life of the proletariat, the peasantry, the Red Army and revolutionary heroes, but as is argued in Chapter Four, during these years the heroic language of **AKhRR** was not reflected in an heroic pictorial content.²¹

The actual founding of **AKhRR** was inspired by the 47th group show of the **Peredvizhniki** that opened in 1922 in Moscow (Leniashin 1988:116) and it was to the **Peredvizhniki** form of realism in particular that they turned. Some old **Peredvizhniki** actually played a part in establishing **AKhRR** as an autonomous body under the Moscow Academy of Artistic Studios. The work at **AKhRR's** first show consisted largely of **Peredvizhniki**-like

20. Later **AKhRR** changed its name again to the "Association of Artists of the Revolution" (**AKhR**).

21. **AKhRR's** 1922 exhibitions were entitled the "Exhibition of Pictures by Realist Artists in Aid of the Starving", the "Exhibition of Studies, Sketches, Drawings and Graphic Works from the Life of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army", and the "Exhibition of Pictures, Studies, Sketches, Graphic Works and Sculptures from the Life of Workers". Artists involved included, amongst others, Fiodor Bogorodsky, Isaac Brodsky, Alexander Gerasimov, Aleksandr Grigorev, Boris Ioganson, Sergei Malyutin, Pavel Radimov, Evgeni Katsman, Boris Kustodiev, Georgi Riazhsy (Leniashin 1988:121).

genre scenes, landscape and portraiture broadly characterised by a somewhat sombre palette. **AKhRR** allied themselves with the **Peredvizhniki** on the basis of their nineteenth-century painting techniques as well as their tendentious themes. The artistic left had always been disparaging of the **Peredvizhniki**, especially of their ultimate co-option by the academy and this criticism they extended to **AKhRR**. Like the **Peredvizhniki**, **AKhRR** desired incorporation into the official annals of history. We see this in their attempt to validate their existence by recommending to the state that old **Peredvizhniki** become recipients of state medals and that they be seen as the natural heirs of a constructed national figurative tradition.²² On behalf of the government **AKhRR** members tried to induce the old **Peredvizhniki** artist and academician, Ilya Repin, to return from Finland to receive the same title. This involvement with and support for the **Peredvizhniki** laid the ground for the Soviet government to emphasise the link between the two groupings in later years.²³ Leftists were extremely critical of **AKhRR's** claims to legitimacy²⁴ and it could be argued that they feared this growing government support for their 'accessible' form of realism.

Despite **AKhRR's** links to **Peredvizhniki** artists, figurative painters from Impressionist and other French or Russian schools who wished to place their painting at the service of the proletariat revolution joined **AKhRR**. **AKhRR** acted thus primarily as a federation for artists painting under a broad banner of realistic figuration. In their first statement in 1922, **AKhRR** described pre-revolutionary art movements as having developed without a coherent ideological direction and as having deteriorated into the production of

22. In the same year as their first commissioned exhibition and on the request of **AKhRR**, the Soviet government awarded the title of "Peoples' Artist" to Nikolai Kasatkin. In response to works such as Kasatkin's "Miners" (1895), critics as recently as the 1960's wrote : "No matter how our tastes have changed with the years, in the treasured corners of our minds,(the **Peredvizhniki**) pictures have kept their importance of honourable witness to the lives of our ancestors." See Alpatov's writing in Valkenier (1989:95).

23. All evidence of disparaging remarks which were made by some **AKhRR** members in relation to the **Peredvizhniki** were later edited out of official accounts of their history. See for example **AKhRR** artists Evgeni Katsman and Viktor Perelman's equation of the **Peredvizhniki** with the Populists as opposed to linking them to revolutionary Marxism (Valkenier 1989:153).

24. See LEF manifesto in Rosenberg (1988:244-245).

'abstract concoctions' which 'discredited' the revolution.²⁵ In theory **AKhRR** was in search of a 'truth' which it believed would emerge in an heroic content represented in the style of heroic realism and which would be the foundation of all future art in a classless society (Bowlit 1988:267). This belief in the realist art forms which preceded Nonobjectivism was one of the first signs of anti-formalism in the twenties. I believe that **AKhRR** was attempting to create the impression of a coherent historical 'tradition' of Russian painting as figurative, as narrative in content, and as accessible to a broad public unschooled in debates about form. This myth was extended in the defences of Socialist Realism from approximately 1933 onwards.

AKhRR proceeded to grow rapidly under its stated proclamation and its carefully designed relations with party bureaucracy. Its claim to a clear ideological direction eventually drew in artists from the **Makovets**, **NOZh** and **Bytie**, none of whom had previously prioritised an art work's ideological function over its technique. What **AKhRR** offered these artists was the promise of commissions, publicity and a stable base. The organization was bolstered in 1923 when it received a commission from the Red Army for their fifth anniversary exhibition. Due to this commission the entire exhibition was paid for and thereafter it constituted the nucleus of the Museum of the Revolution. The military council's justification for this investment was that **AKhRR's** realism was in keeping with the 'sober' Marxist view that art be completely intelligible and without any 'intellectualising' (Valkenier 1989:152). The commissioning of works and the submission of preliminary sketches to the commissioners led to some tension amongst **AKhRR** artists who had initially demonstrated their support for the revolution through their own choice of subject matter. Their eagerness to carry out commissions was described by Leftists as the behaviour of opportunists who produced not heroic realism but heroic servility. Official patronage from e.g. the military council continued to be bestowed upon **AKhRR**. **AKhRR** submitted to its patron's requirements and increasingly won support from the growing party bureaucracy.

25. This echoed the **Peredvizhniki** criticism of the **World of Art** and **Union of Youth**.

Due to this state patronage of the figurative work of **AKhRR**, there has been a tendency to link *all* easel art with party dictates and *all* figuration in the twenties as a precursor to Socialist Realism. That this is incorrect is obvious when we begin to acknowledge the diversity of the realist claims of groups such as the **Makovets**, **NOZh** and **Bytie**. Furthermore the position of individual politicians and cultural theorists in the Communist Party Central Committee, like Bukharin and Trotsky, was more complex than simply to favour one group or even one formal approach over another. So as to ascertain the extent of 'state' intervention in the arts, and to test the commonly held thesis that figuration was a direct result of state imposed controls, their positions will be briefly outlined below.

B. The impact of the NEP debates on the status of figurative art.

After Lenin's death the political theorists addressing culture were Trotsky and Bukharin. Their views on culture were informed by their political theories, which evolved in the context of the first few years of NEP. Trotsky and Bukharin differed with regard to the idea of building 'socialism in one country' – Trotsky was inclined toward international socialism while Bukharin's political views were marked by a nationalism which appealed to old Slavophiles.

In the art world this was echoed in part in that many figurative artists began to emphasise the importance of constructing a national identity, some even reviving old tendentious Slavophile themes as seen in **AKhRR** above. Although leftists could be linked to Trotsky's internationalism, this link was eroded in later years by leftists lending support to efforts to consolidate socialism in one country. It is important to avoid mechanistic links between the pro-NEP policies of Bukharin and figurative art, and the super-industrialisation of Trotsky and leftists like the Productivists. Although the associations do exist we need to look closely at the cultural proclamations of the politicians so as to distinguish between what they were advocating and how their theories were taken up by various art groupings. Moreover Bukharin and Trotsky did not themselves directly support one or other group of artists.

A year after the proclamation of NEP at the 11th congress, Lenin declared the period of retreat over, but this was qualified by his declaration:

all talk of the cessation of the retreat must not be understood in the sense that we have already created the foundation of the new economy and that we can proceed tranquilly. No, the foundation has not yet been created (Lenin Works Vol XVIII part 2:13).

The fact that Lenin had decided to halt the move toward privatisation, even though the economy was not yet strong, left the party secure in its ideals but in a quandry with regard to the economy. Nor did Lenin's ill health and absence from daily politics help matters. The state had insufficient fixed capital to build up an industrial sector. Lenin's death in January 1924 left a space for huge disagreements with regard to the way forward to rapid industrialisation and socialism, and whether to continue or cease NEP policy.

Trotsky's position was that the long-term objectives of the International Revolution were not to be jettisoned in the search for local pragmatic solutions which ignored the dynamics of a world economy. For Trotsky, cognizance of this world economy entailed recognising that the survival of socialism in one country was impossible. The state was not in a position to provide goods for a consumer market and it could therefore not entice the peasantry to sell their surplus. The prospects for the success of socialism were gloomy. Although the projected plan, as posited by Preobrazhensky, had been for the socialist sector ultimately to 'devour' the private sector, there was no possibility of this occurring and little prospect of a nonindustrial socialist country surviving in a hostile international world market unsympathetic to the existence of a socialist workers' state. Together with Preobrazhensky, Trotsky had advocated a rapid industrialisation, at the expense of the peasantry if necessary. Both were unwilling to see NEP as anything but a short-term strategy to elicit the state capital needed to build industry and to attain international strength. In opposition to this, "socialism within one country" flourished as a slogan associated with the type of narrow nationalism embraced by Stalin.

Trotsky's arguments for War Communism and for permanent revolution and international socialism were attacked by Bukharin and Stalin. Bukharin recognised that there was indeed a goods famine and that the country was in a state of crisis, but the peasant unrest in 1924/25 led to him arguing not for War Communism but for greater economic

concessions to the peasantry thereby emphasising the importance of a proletarian-peasant alliance (Tucker 1977:184-201). The political left argued that this promotion of accumulation in the peasant economy would lead not to an alliance but to the growth of class divisions and to the appearance of a middle and rich peasant class of kulaks (Trotsky 1974). 1924 was marked by this rampant confusion amongst Bolsheviks, with both Bukharin and Trotskyist leftists claiming Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy.

Trotsky criticised the Bolshevik government for its growing bureaucracy which threatened to become a class of its own, and criticised Bukharin for playing a part in upholding this bureaucracy. Political leftists termed Bukharinism middle-peasant Bolshevism in that it favoured an alliance with the petit bourgeoisie. The works of figurative artists were viewed by LEF as reflecting precisely the interests of this growing petit bourgeoisie and the interests of its bureaucracy which favoured reformism over and above the revolutionary heroic tradition. Bukharin's cautious pro-NEP attitudes were a direct incentive to figurative art, but the growth of figurative art during the NEP years did not occur to the exclusion of leftist experimentation and iconoclastic developments. It must also be remembered that Bukharin's cautious advocacy of realistic easel art did not include the prospect of militant monopolistic claims of Socialist Realists.

Bukharin's 1925 essay "What is Art" (Solomon 1979:205) was important in relation to the resurgence of figurative art because he argued for retaining a place for emotion and feeling. As such his argument could be seen to favour figurative artists like the **Makovets** and **AKhRR**, and to be less sympathetic to those intent on objectivity and analysis, be they Constructivists or figurative groupings who claimed to be objective in approach. Bukharin criticised the Constructivists' and Productivists' equation of art and labour and insisted that art was essentially an emotional and psychological commentary. His was an argument with little tolerance for the contemporary developments of, for example,

Nonobjectivism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*.²⁶ Instead he favoured work which set out to 'infect' its audience emotionally (Bukharin's term). For Bukharin art could socialize feelings and this meant that art groups which set out to do this in an overt manner could gain more credibility by drawing on theories like those of Bukharin.

One such group was **AKhRR**. In its 1924 circular to all its branches **AKhRR** stated the need for an "invigorating style that organises thought and feeling" and in this manner argued for an heroic realism (Bowlit 1988:268-271). For **AKhRR** art was to be an ideological weapon and to have the "honour of shaping and organising the psychology of the generations to come" (Bowlit 1988:270). Such declarations received the political sanction of important commissars like Bukharin, but only for so long as they were *not* linked to calls for support that would exclude the artistic rights of other groups. Bukharin favoured supporting a diversity of artistic forms of realism, and although he believed in the possibility of a separate proletarian culture emerging, he opposed **AKhRR**'s later monopolistic claims to being the authentic representatives of proletarian culture.

It was largely Bukharin's work that comprised the argument of the important 1925 document entitled "On the Party's Policy in the Field of Art and Literature" (Vaughan James 1973:116-119). In this document Bukharin argued against the state recognising any one group as representative of the proletariat. At the same time he tried to protect the less ardent of the realists and those more in line with older so-called bourgeois forms of realism, namely the 'fellow travellers'. This was in keeping with his encouragement of class collaboration i.e. of a proletariat-peasantry alliance within which the new bourgeoisie could participate within limits.²⁷ As in the political arena so in the cultural,

26. It is interesting that in the 1930s Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs reiterated this by accusing such artists of, on the one hand, an inability to distinguish between outer and inner reality and therefore the difference between imagined and real possibilities and on the other a tendency to fetishize fact at the expense of depicting an actively evolving human consciousness in artworks (Lukacs 1964:17-46).

27. Bukharin's justification was that class struggle would die out and be replaced by a depersonalised competition between economic forms with the more efficient socialist units finally displacing private capital. This programme of gradualism was contrary to the prevailing revolutionary-heroic tradition.

he believed in persuasion and peaceful competition, but the degree to which feelings were to be 'organised' by the artist was obviously open for debate. To use art to organise feeling, as proposed by **AKhRR**, was acceptable to Bukharin, but to demand that the state recognise their monopolistic claims was to suppress the possible emergence of various autonomous groups which could have arisen as a result of mass initiative.

Trotsky argued that none of the existing artists could claim to be true representatives of proletarian art. For Trotsky the new art would however of necessity be realist. By this he meant that all this art would have a common philosophical concern with concrete living conditions in their present and changing forms. The new art could not be a retreat or a flight from these conditions and could not take the form of romanticism or mysticism.²⁸ According to this argument realism was less a matter of formal characteristics and more one of philosophical attitude. As such, it could draw on past or present artistic processes as long as it engaged with the present material conditions. Trotsky remained noncommittal to both the leftists' and **AKhRR**'s desire for sole monopoly in the visual arts. What was clear however was his intolerance of painting that made no reference to the concrete world. In his 1924 essay "Revolutionary and Socialist Art"²⁹ Trotsky continued to insist that a proletarian culture, or as he referred to it in this essay, socialist art, had as yet no basis from which to develop. None of the existing art forms deserved a monopoly on state support as none was yet true socialist art (see Chapter One above). He conceded that revolutionary art existed i.e. either as art whose themes reflected the revolution or as art which was imbued with a new consciousness coming out of the revolution. However he argued that even these reflected some form of class antagonism and were not yet marked by disinterested camaraderie or commitment to international socialism. He was intolerant of the 'tendentious' themes of the **Peredvizhniki** and similar

28. Trotsky's call for realism was articulated as follows: "Our age wields an axe. Our life, cruel, violent and disturbed to its very bottom says: 'I must have an artist of a single love. Whatever way you take hold of me, whatever tools and instruments created by the development of art you choose, I leave to you, to your temperament and to your genius. But you must understand me as I am, you must take me as I will become, and there must be no one else besides me'" (Rosenberg 1991:279).

29. This essay is reprinted in Rosenberg (1990:275-291).

contemporary painters (e.g. **AKhRR**) whom he saw as still stuck psychologically in their search for an egalitarianism which had not yet emerged. At the same time he also saw the leftists as inherently privileged and as similarly marked by pre-revolutionary social attitudes.

What is apparent is that Trotsky and Bukharin refused to favour any one group, but Bukharin's argument did lend itself to being used by figurative artists for their monopolistic claims. Neither approved of the iconoclastic calls of the leftists nor of the more militant figurative groups such as **AKhRR**. What artists took forward from these theorists was a clear commitment to Marxist Realist philosophy, usually reflected in their programmes as a position of scientific certitude and objective analysis. NEP had been introduced on the premise that the unification and the survival of socialism depended upon technological and industrial advance. Thus artists across the spectrum embraced the idea of reconstruction, industrialisation and scientific objectivity and tried to outdo one another in their claims to contemporary relevance. The leftists believed their shift to Productivism to be the most correct and radical response to industrialisation. Their fight against the figurative artists and those whom they termed 'purists' was centred in the VKhUTEMAS and the responses to this attack will be discussed below.

C. The Discussional Show 1924.

It appears to have been David Shterenberg's introduction of technology into the VKhUTEMAS introductory course that resulted in a 'studio revolution' announced on 23 December by a group of figurative artists or so-called rightists. These figurative artists described themselves as a party cell and in this way seemed to claim party political legitimisation for their 'purist' intentions. GLAVPROFOBR considered reorganising the VKhUTEMAS in the light of this fierce struggle for power and it was probably as a result of this that the "First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art" of 1924 was organised. In effect both leftists and figurative artists in the show described themselves as being interested in professional technical research in

the service of contemporary subject matter and as objective in approach (Bowl 1988:237-243). Both groupings thus reflected Trotsky's disapproval of non-concrete or mystical art.

The exhibition opened at the VKhUTEMAS in Moscow on 11 May. The word 'discussional' in the title implied that a number of issues were up for debate. The fact that the show consciously juxtaposed so-called rightists and leftists all under the same banner underlined their common but competing claims to being the most relevant form of art for the proletariat and for the new revolutionary state. Being a VKhUTEMAS enterprise, the 1924 Discussional show was bound to reflect the different means chosen by its staff members in its various departments. In that it was INKhUK which influenced the VKhUTEMAS course design, this meant that the aims of INKhUK groups such as the Working Group of Objective Analysis as well as the First Working Group of Constructivists were evident at the show.

The show consisted of eight groups, four of which were figurative easel art groups, one a group of figurative sculptors, and three Constructivist/Productivist groups. The easel groups were: the **Bytie** group,³⁰ a group of young VKhUTEMA graduates called the **Association of Three**,³¹ the **Concretists**³² and The **Projectionist** Group.³³ The other three groups were the **First Working Organization of Artists**,³⁴ the **First Working Group of Constructivists**³⁵ and the **Constructivists**.³⁶ The terms of the debate

30. Members of Bytie who exhibited but not mentioned previously included Ivan Pankov and Konstantin Parkhomenko (Bowl 1988:237-238).

31. Members included Aleksander Deineka, Andrei Goncharov and Yuri Pimenov, all of whom later joined OST (Bowl 1988:238)

32. Members included Piotr Williams, Boris Volkov, Konstantin Vyalov, Vladimir Lyushin and Yuri Merkulov (Bowl 1988:240).

33. Members included Serge Luchisken, Alexander Tshyler, Solomon Nikritin, Kliment Redko and Nikolai Tryaskin (Bowl 1988:241).

34. This group included Prusakov, formerly a member of OBMOKhU (Bowl 1988:237).

35. This was a group which Gan claimed he founded in 1920 (Bowl 1988:238).

36. This group comprised Medunetsky and the Stenberg brothers (Bowl 1988:237).

between 'purists' and leftists were more complex than these labels suggest. Broadly the easel artists justified their production in the same terms as the leftists. These similar claims to 'objectivity' will be discussed below while keeping sight of differences between the exhibiting groups. What the figurative artists shared with the leftists was a commitment to 'scientific' formal analysis and 'objectivity'. All schooled in the VKhUTEMAS, they were informed by the scientific research which was conducted at INKhUK.

The approach of the **Concretists** and **Projectionists** was in effect a continuation of the working principles devised by the **General Working Group of Objective Analysis** at INKhUK.³⁷ **The Working Group of Objective Analysis** set as its task the theoretical analysis of basic elements of paintings, i.e. the material properties of painting, not their socio-political history, nor their reception. Two members of **The Working Group of Objective Analysis** who had subsequently moved into the painting faculty of the VKhUTEMAS were A. Drevin and A. Udaltsova.³⁸ A number of the exhibiting artists were VKhUTEMA painting students of Drevin and Udaltsova and although figurative artists, they too reflected a commitment to the formal analysis of so-called laboratory work. In this respect the **Concretists** and **Projectionists** shared the same foundations and interests as 'leftist' groups.

A further link can be drawn between the supposed objectivity of figurative groups and leftists, evidenced in the language of their manifestos. The figurative artists at this show all subscribed to the broad idea of art as the creation of 'objects'. What this meant was that creativity could be defined as a construction in its broadest sense, namely as an analytical method as was defined by the INKhUK Nonobjectivists in their so-called

37. See Chapter Two above. This group had been established after Kandinsky's departure and survived the Construction-Composition debates, but as separate from the Working Group of Constructivists.

38. Drevin and Udaltsova had confined their definition of construction to two-dimensional work and saw it as the creation of the painting itself. The First Working Group of Constructivists had denied the two-dimensional nature of construction completely, seeing it as three-dimensional construction in real space informed by the practical problems of material manipulations which were often contingent on technological knowledge.

laboratory works. All INKhUK artists had tried to relate the principles of organization informing the art work to those principles at work in the contemporary industrial milieu. The **Concretists** and **Projectionists** referred to the artwork as an object which was valuable in its own right, as something that was systematically planned and objectively executed. Art was referred to as the creation of an object similar to the organization of material which went into the creation of any other work of labour.³⁹ At the show, easel artists together with Constructivists and Productivists argued that art was a rational organising activity, but some positions were more extreme than others. One such extreme voice was that of Alexai Gan who contributed to the polemic which situates figurative artists and leftists at opposite ends of the spectrum of political and formal concerns (see Chapter Two).

Gan's was the central voice of **The First Working Group of Constructivists** at the show.⁴⁰ He too shared with the figurative artists the idea of commitment to the 'object' and to concrete reality. However he took this idea to its logical conclusion: that art not just reflect concrete reality objectively and thereby reinforce it but that it reinforce reality by infusing the actual everyday object with quality so that its form would be best suited to its social purpose. He criticised all figurative artists for relying on abstract notions of beauty and spirit⁴¹ and ignored the fact that **all** artists at the show justified their art in terms of an objective realism which engaged with contemporary urban issues, the need to construct a socialist society, and to industrialise at a rapid rate.

39. It suited artists of figurative and utilitarian persuasion to define creativity simply as organization akin to that which occurs in the workplace because then art might be regarded as conceptually accessible to the populace.

40. Gan's working group consisted of production groups which he called 'cells', devoted to theory and to the production of children's books, typography and clothing. Due to a split in the group it now operated without the support of INKhUK Constructivists such as Rodchenko and Stepanova.

41. Gan's criticism was even levelled at the formal innovations of LEF Constructivist artists like Rodchenko and Stepanova whom he criticised for making 'mere' art. Gan wrote the following: "...our Constructivism is aggressive and uncompromising: it wages a severe battle with parasites, with left and right painters, in a word with all, who even slightly defend the speculative aesthetic activity of art. Our Constructivism is fighting for the intellectual and material production of a communist culture" (Lodder 1983:238).

This attempt to associate themselves with industry was evident in the latent technicism in the programmes of the figurative artists. Accumulating technical skill had been advocated by Lenin as part of the NEP strategy of reconstruction. The Discussional artists included in their manifestoes this idea of building on the expertise of the past. The **Concretists'** manifesto at the Discussional Exhibition echoed Lenin's ideas on culture by emphasising the place of historically accumulated social and technical skill and a commitment to a clear-sighted approach to solving contemporary formal problems (see Chapter One above). This they defined as a concern with the formal organization of the material properties of the painting as 'object'. Although they theorised about painting an external concretely located reality, with little trace of personal introspection, their practice did not always reflect these intentions.⁴²

Like the **Concretists**, the **Projectionist Group** also proclaimed the importance of formal and scientific investigations into the properties of materials and in this they echoed the Nonobjectivist and leftists' project. Although they were trained as professional painters, they linked their desire for technical expertise to the socialist project of industrialisation, stating: "1, 2 or 100 artists cannot organise the environment – only *industrial* production can" (Bowlit 1982:208). Although they committed themselves to art as a method for the 'organisation of materials', they included into their systematic 'projection' of life and events the personal vision of the artist. This personal vision at times disrupted the coherent 'realist' representations.⁴³

Despite the figurative artists' emphasis on industrial and mass production and their theoretical commitment to objectivity, subjective commentaries were still visible in the works. This is evident in the **Association of Three**⁴⁴ who also described their work as

42. The Concretists reflected a wide knowledge of art historical movements – namely the Rayonnism/Futurism evident in Aleksandr Volkov's work, the Impressionist techniques of Piotr Williams and the Surrealist figure and landscapes of Konstantin Vialov. See Chapter Four for examples of Volkov and Vialov's paintings.

43. In this respect their work was more Surrealist than realist. See examples of this work in Chapter Four below.

44. See footnote thirty one above.

a form of realism which dealt with contemporary subject matter in an ostensibly detached manner. Although their work was rendered with an 'objective' clarity of outline, it was accompanied by an incisive personal commentary on 'objective' material conditions. This ostensibly 'detached' vision of the world was similar to that found in the work of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists exhibited in Moscow and Leningrad that same year.⁴⁵

All the artists in the Discussional show claimed to be rendering reality in a neutral manner. This they did under the guise of holding a pragmatic attitude to the world, one which announced contemporary concerns, the 'objective need' for industrialisation, and which was intolerant of personal incertitude or overly subjective expression. This they claimed even though in practice there was often evidence of overtly subjective interpretations which threatened to disrupt the coherence of the 'objectively' rendered picture (see Chapter Four). The issue of style was conceptualised in terms of the degree of 'accuracy' in documentary depictions, the extent to which the artist absented her/himself and how intact (non-sketchy) the contours of the painted objects were. What most threatened to disrupt these containing contours was the tendency toward abstraction. In *subsequent* years Soviet critics linked this abstraction to an inward attitude on the part of the subject who was seen as alienated from the surrounding world and unable to effect change.⁴⁶ During the mid-twenties this divide was not entrenched, although it was latent in the criticism of ardent social documenters such as **AKhRR**. Despite the scientific justifications of their work, not all figurative artists equated rational analysis with the disappearance of subjective interpretation, nor did all figurative social commentators resist the near abstraction or fragmentation of their forms.

45. This "First German Art Exhibition" involved 126 artists of all schools including the Verists of the Red Group, Grosz, Dix, Schlicter, Griebel etc. For details on German influences on Soviet art see Gray (1959:37-38) and Bowlt (1982:211-215).

46. See for example the theories of Georg Lukacs mentioned in section F below. Lukacs tried to build a broad front of bourgeois realists and proletarian realists in the fight against fascism, claiming that the 'irrationalism' of fascism was reinforced by the 'irrationalism' of Modernism.

D. Objectivity and scientific analysis remain the hallmark of most figurative groups after the Discussional Exhibition.

After the 1924 Discussional show there existed a proliferation of easel art groups all with contesting claims to creating the most appropriate form of realism for the new society. Their definitions of realism were hinged around the relationship of individual and social consciousness. In later years some groups were accused of emphasising individuality at the expense of collective identity.⁴⁷ A crude extension of this argument was that being individualistic was equivalent to being a bourgeois who used technical skill to express personal insight only rather than social concern. Informed by the experience of NEP, technical know how was desired, but it was also equated with a people who historically had acted with social indifference. For those critics who placed social and even party allegiance foremost it became important to identify how technique was prioritised by artists.

However it appears as if it was only in the late twenties and early thirties that the professionalism of the figurative groups of the twenties was construed as a sign of individualism. For the figurative groups in the twenties it was an attempt to contribute technical skills to a new society. Nor was this intense focus on technique and form akin to individual improvement and subjective concerns which excluded societal concerns. Training and knowledge of historical and contemporary European painting was emphasised by all figurative groups, except for **AKhRR**,⁴⁸ and this was to become exaggerated as an issue of dispute in later years – an issue which contributed to the view of figuration versus formalism. To be concerned with patriotic and revolutionary themes over and above an interest in the means of representation was a stance proudly assumed by **AKhRR** artists. In different ways the **Filinov** school, **OMZh**, **OST** and **The Circle of Arts** tried to combine their commitment to the needs of the revolution with their interest

47. See for example the implicit criticisms levelled at **OST** in the manifesto of **AKhRR** reprinted in Bowlt (1988:268-271).

48. However even in the ranks of **AKhRR** there were ex-**Jack of Diamonds** members teaching Cezannist techniques to **AKhRR** members. See, for example, the role of Mashkov in Chapter Four below.

in painterly form. This was exemplified by Filinov with his obsessively personal documentation of socially related themes, by **OMZh** building on the past from their Cezannist base, by **OST** detailing contemporary reality with homage to the international return to figuration as in *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and by **The Circle of Arts** combining a typology reminiscent of old Russian icons with a youthful absorption of turn of the century modernism. **The Four Arts** with their insistence on individual lyricism, was possibly the only group exemplifying the non-concrete mystical concerns criticised by Trotsky and not committing themselves to the revolution in their manifesto.⁴⁹ However in that the students of **The Four Arts** members organised themselves into the **Circle of Arts** and heralded an 'objective' world perspective, the non-concrete concerns of **The Four Arts** were in effect denounced by this younger generation.

What follows is an attempt to trace the place of rational detachment in the groups' programmes and to ascertain how this relates to the idea of professionalism and the place of the individual in society. **Filinov** was determined to retain a balance between subjective intuition and rational analysis. This meant a balance between form and content and the implications of this was an attempt to retain a balance between emphasis on the individual and the collective. Filinov established his school in 1925 and called it the **Collective of Masters of Analytical Art**.⁵⁰ Here he challenged the idea of content having to be immediately recognisable so as to be accessible, and suggested that the artist must rely instead on the intellect of his fellow proletarians. Even though the artist might be a proletarian himself, his task was to challenge the comprehension of his audience and to present more than they could understand at their 'present state of development'(sic)⁵¹ (Bowl 1988:286). In effect there was no distinction between internal and external reality

49. See manifesto of **The Four Arts** in Bowl (1988:281-284).

50. Members of the Filinov school included Tatiana Glebova, Alisa Poret, Yulia Arapova, Mikhail Tsybasov, Pavel Zaltsman, Evgeny Kibrik, Boris Gurvich, Sofia Zaklikovskaia, Pavel Kondratiev and Vsevolod Sulimo-Sauilo.

51. This echoes the thought of Bertold Brecht whose defences of Modernism from a Marxist perspective were only published in 1967, due to his belief that they would not be well received in the Soviet Union in the mid-thirties.

in Filonov's work, just as there was none between form and content.⁵² He justified a near abstract form of representational painting saying that work on form and work on content were one and the same.

In sharp contrast to this, **OST**⁵³ insisted on a revolutionary contemporaneity and a *clarity* of subject matter. **OST** rejected both the near abstraction of the Filinov school and total abstraction of Nonobjectivists and the Peredvizhniki-like treatment of **AKhRR**. **OST** artists intended that their work be innovative in style and narrative in theme. **OST** distanced itself from other groups as follows: "Sketchiness is a phenomenon of latent dilettantism" and "Cezannism is a disintegrating force" (Leniashin 1988:150). Despite this not all **OST** work echoed these intentions. But what they did all exhibit was a concern with their contemporary urban environs. **OST** artists sought to portray the New Soviet Person existing within an industrialised order. Their work was not however victorious in the unproblematised manner of much of the later figurative eulogies of industrialisation.⁵⁴ Theirs was a realism characterised by traces of cynicism in German Expressionism and in *Neue Sachlichkeit* works, and at times even Surrealist in tone. It is interesting to note that in the thirties official Soviet critics⁵⁵ accused **OST** of morbidity, subjectivity and mysticism. When the criticism of 'formalism' was levelled at the leftists,

52. See examples in Chapter Four below.

53. **OST** had arisen out of the Discussional Exhibition and included members from The Projectionists, Concretists, and Association of Three. They were characterised by their VKhUTEMA training and their exposure to contemporary avant-garde teachings. Between 1925 and 1928 they organised four exhibitions in Moscow and contributed to two multi-media travelling exhibitions. The founding members of **OST** were Yuri Annenkov, David Shterenberg, Lazar Vainer, Vladimir Vasilev, Piotr Williams, Konstantin Vialov, Alexander Dcineka, Nikolai Denisovsky, Sergei Kostin, Alexander Labas, Yuri Merkulov and Yuri Pimenov (Bowl 1988:279-281).

54. See examples of **OST** works in Chapter Four below.

55. See for example criticism in "Iskusstvo v massy", No 4, 1930:15.

OST was also included under this label, further complicating the false and exaggerated rift between the leftists and the figurative artist.⁵⁶

The one figurative group which was singled out in the mid-twenties for its individualism and absence of social concern was **The Four Arts Society**.⁵⁷ This was a large and loose association of artists which specified no stringent requirements of subject matter or style apart from figuration. Although they declared themselves uninterested in subject matter and concerned only with the creative transformation of material into artistic form, what they in effect argued was that verisimilitude was of less importance than the manipulation of the medium, as it was the latter that was seen to be responsible for affecting the spectator's feelings.⁵⁸ They stressed the importance of international developments to be used to build a Russian school of painting and in their manifesto they stated that the French school was the most valuable with regard to learning about artistic quality (Leniashin 1988:124). This overriding interest in form and feeling was probably the result of a number of its members having originated from the Symbolist **Blue Rose**⁵⁹ group and the **World of Art** group, both of which favoured a more individualistic conception of

56. The root of this criticism might lie in the fact that a rift did develop *within* **OST** between those who injected their work with personal observations, whether ironical, whimsical or cynical, and those who desired a complete effacement of the creator. The latter broke away in 1931 to form the **Visual Arts Brigade** insisting on collectivism over and above personal vision.

57. **The Four Arts** had branches in Moscow and Leningrad and members from all over the Soviet Union. Members included figurative painters, graphic artists, sculptors and architects. The following were part of the society: Meier Axelrod, Elena Bebutova, Vladimir Bekhteev, Lev Bruni, Iosif Chaikov, Vladimir Favorsky, Rudolf Frenz, Lado Gudiashvili, Konstantin Istomin, Alexai Karev, Ivan Kliun, Alexai Kravchenko, Pavel Kuznetsov, Vladimir Lebedev, El Lissitzky, Piotr Lvov, Alexander Matveev, Piotr Miturich, Vera Mukhina, Piotr Neradovsky, Ignaty Nivinsky, Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva, Martiros Sarian, Nina Simonovich-Efimova, Nikolai Tyrza, Nikolai Ulianov, Piotr Utkin, Georgi Vereisky (Bowl 1988: 281-282; Leniashin 1988: 124).

58. That **The Four Arts** favoured realism over and above abstraction was their most 'political' assertion expressed in their 1929 document in relation to the importance of a Russian style as follows: "Within the conventions of the Russian tradition, we consider painterly realism to be the most appropriate to the artistic culture of our time" (Leniashin 1988:124).

59. For information on the **Blue Rose** see Bowl (1988:2, 3, 6, 7, 10) and Bird (1987:187, 189, 191, 195, 216, 261, 263, 277).

art. This led to their being criticised by **OST** and **AKhRR** even though it could be argued that the subject matter of some of their works did affirm the new Soviet reality.⁶⁰

One way of affirming the new Soviet reality was by developing ‘types’. This can be seen in the work of the **Circle of Arts** painters who established themselves in 1926.⁶¹ In their work there emerged the attempt to portray ‘typical’ rural regions and to identify and portray ‘types’ of rural and urban workers.⁶² In 1926 these artists rejected the individualism of their teachers from **The Four Arts Society** and committed themselves to collective leadership.⁶³ What they retained from their teachers was a respect for technical accomplishments of the past, but clearly put to the service of the social collective. They disapproved of **AKhRR** artists’ poor training and in relation to the leftist groupings they denounced their obsession with styles and ‘isms’ (Leniashin 1988:168; Bown 1991:46). In effect what they were trying to do was to assert the importance of a technical training in easel painting and the importance of figuration in documenting and informing the public of the new Soviet citizen. In the same fashion as other artists at the time, they spoke of representation as a concrete painterly expression which might serve as one way in which life could be ‘organised’.

This idea of painting as a means of organising and reconstructing life was to remain foregrounded over the years with groups competing with one another in attempts to be more radical and agitational in their ideologies. The position of groups also changed as they emphasised more political or technical concerns irrespective of political implications.

60. See for example illustrations of Petrov Vodkins’s *Death of a Commissar* in Chapter Four below.

61. This interest in an identity defined according to the collective revolutionary project is particularly evident in the work of Pakulin and Samokhvalov. See Chapter Four below. In its short existence The Circle of Arts functioned with a membership of circa forty members and held four exhibitions.

62. Here again it is interesting to note the distinction that Lukacs draws in later years between ‘types’ in bourgeois realism and ‘stereotypes’ in Socialist Realism. See section F below.

63. The painters in this group had been pupils of Alexai Karev, Kuzma Petrov Vodkin and Alexander Matveev.

One such group was **OMZh** (The Society of Moscow Painters).⁶⁴ Composed of former **Jack of Diamonds** members and painters of still life and landscape, **OMZh** rejected the idea of art as a "static replication of life" and posited that art be a "powerful tool for exerting a creative influence on the world, a tool for the active reconstruction of life" (Leniashin 1988:190). As **Jack of Diamonds** members in pre-revolutionary days they had argued against the literariness of the **Peredvizhniki**, admiring the more cosmopolitan **World of Art** group but critical of this group for still retaining a degree of literariness.⁶⁵ They celebrated the return to 'painting' and combined this with a sensitivity to folk art and contemporary European painting.⁶⁶ We find this same rejection of literariness in the practice of **OMZh** members fourteen years on. However this foregrounding of painterly concerns was combined with the theoretical commitment to painting as a popular and accessible medium which would seem to suggest literariness.⁶⁷ This was not however their intention. In 1925 **OMZh** declared:

We therefore reject naturalistic genre painting together with superficial and static literalism because they are incapable of helping art do the enormous job that faces it today (Leniashin 1988:190).

In 1926 **OMZh's** nationalism and its belief that painting could become a mass art drew them toward **AKhRR** with whom they merged. This brought together an essentially old and liberal organization with a young radical organization but the alliance was to last only a year. The link that was forged between **AKhRR** and **OMZh** was on the basis of their belief in affecting peoples' perceptions of their world, but in different ways. **OMZh**

64. **Jack of Diamonds** members included Robert Falk, Mikhail Avetov, Alexander Drevin, Igor Grabar, Alexander Kuprin, Piotr Konchalovsky, Boris Korolev, Aristarkh Lentulov, Ilya Mashkov, Vasily Rozhdestvensky, Nadezha Udaltsova, Alexander Osmerkin, and Vera Favorskaia (Bird 1987:196; Bowlt 1988:xxvii-xxviii).

65. See for example Aksenov's declaration "On the Problem of the Contemporary State of Russian Painting, 1913" in Bowlt (1988:60-69).

66. The influence of Cezanne was evident in Konchalovsky and Falk, that of Fauve painters in Mashkov and a combination of folk art and Cezannism in the work of Osmerkin. See Chapter Four below.

67. In their 1925 declaration **OMZh** stated that "painting can and should exist and evolve as a mass art" (Leniashin 1988:190).

members had shared a past in the **Jack of Diamonds** which although opposed to literariness had nevertheless produced recognisable portrait, nudes, still life and landscapes. They held one joint show in 1926 entitled "The Life of the Peoples of the USSR". The subjects of **OMZh** artists could lend themselves to the political or nationalist claims implied in the title to this show and subscribed to by **AKhRR**. Portraits could be construed as asserting the importance of the proletariat and recognisable urbanscapes as celebrations of Soviet land,⁶⁸ both of which served to reinforce the notion of a Russian identity. Such images could be seen as celebrations of the expansion and stabilisation of the urban working class, which accompanied the unexpected industrial and economic recovery associated with NEP.

In contrast to these scenes which *lent* themselves to nationalist sympathies, **AKhRR** artist forged their nationalism in verbal statements, in their selection of exhibition themes and in the works themselves. As early as 1922 **AKhRR** had described their interests as primarily ideological.⁶⁹ While **AKhRR** admired the **Peredvizhniki**, as old **Jack of Diamond** members, **OMZh** had opposed their literariness. While **OMZh** depicted Russian life it was not in a didactic manner or with political intent. In the light of these similarities and differences, and the different traditions that they drew on, it is difficult to understand the brief merger between **OMZh** and **AKhRR** except as a move which **OMZh** might have felt it could benefit from. **AKhRR** was a far larger organisation, had more resources, was absorbing members from **NOZh** and **Bytie** plus other small groupings and in its 1924 circular to all **AKhRR** branches, **AKhRR** had made some compromises in their stance regarding the 'French School'. They conceded that the achievements of French art in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century could not be ignored but also ought not to be mindlessly transposed into a different context. They argued that the revolution demanded invigorating and precise forms⁷⁰ but were probably willing to make compromises at this

68. See for example the images of Falk and Konchalovsky in Chapter Four.

69. See also declaration of **AKhRR** from 1922 in Bowlt (1988:265-267).

70. See 1924 circular sent to **AKhRR** branches reprinted in Bowlt (1988:268-71).

point because of coming under attack as vulgar naturalists. As potential recipients of state funding they would also have had to concede the type of argument put forward by Lenin on the need to build on past cultural achievements. This is born out in that by 1934 **AKhRR** was already being criticised for its rejection of technique in government funded journals.⁷¹

The overt political programme of **AKhRR** was rejected by most of the **OMZh** members who had temporarily moved into **AKhRR**. These artists were to find greater comfort with old **Jack of Diamond** colleagues from the **Makovets** and **Bytie**. In 1927 these old **Jack of Diamond** colleagues from **OMZh**, **Makovets** and **Bytie** formed **OMKh** (the Society of Moscow Artists).⁷² **OMKh** was a more conservative grouping, a number of whose leading members, such as Konchalovski, Drevin, Gerasimov and Osmerkin, worked in the painting faculty of the **VKhUTEMAS** (renamed the **VKhUTEIN** in 1925). True to their work within the **VKhUTEMAs** as teachers of painterly technique, in **OMKh** they tended to emphasise technique over and above subject matter. Bown (1991:44) writes of **OMKh** as follows

Despite a whiff of avant-gardism which was still attached to Cezanne in Russia and their politically stated belief in painting as a mass art, the real enthusiasm of **OMKh** members were unimpeachably traditional and resistant to political ideology. Landscape, portraiture and above all still life were their preferred genres, approached often in sombre tones that were a legacy of the 19th century.

I would argue that it is precisely this traditionalism that had formed some sort of a basis for their previous alliance with **AKhRR**. These claims to tradition are however quite complex. The influence of French painting was not simply indicative of the avant-garde as had been the case ten to fifteen years earlier. These influences had passed into the academies by the twenties. What is important here is that Fauvist and Cezannist works

71. See **VOKS** nos 9-10 1934:19.

72. **OMKh** had approximately 70 members, including Aristarkh Lentulov as chair, Sergei Gerasimov (ex-**Makovet**) as vice-chair and Osmerkin (ex-**Bytie**) as secretary. **OMKh** held three exhibitions in Moscow between 1928 and 1929 and took part in IZO's travelling exhibitions. See Leniashin (1988:188) for their statement of intent and complete list of members.

could be regarded as both acts of innovation and of tradition.⁷³ What is also significant is that in later years **OMKh** artists maintained positions in official institutions precisely because of their knowledge of these avant-garde attempts to rejoin tradition and revolution. They maintained positions of power because of this assimilation of a cultural heritage which lent weight to its own artistic and political project. Theirs was not an uncritical re-presentation of nineteenth-century forms of realism but a commitment to the reciprocal influence of old and new forms of painting, a belief that painting had a history which could not be jettisoned, that it had the potential to inform peoples' attitudes to the world and could continue to do so drawing on accumulated technical knowledge. It was thus an attitude that found official patronage and one that could coincide with Lenin's views on culture i.e. the need to build upon a bourgeois heritage. **OMKh** insisted on the importance of painterly activity as a 'reconstruction' of life as opposed to passive reflections of life.⁷⁴ I would argue that while this seemed to be a politically motivated justification in the context of attacks on easel painting, it was actually motivated by a firm belief in the power of painting to shape politics.

Ensnared in positions in the establishment, not only did **OMKh** forego their theoretical political justifications, but they also resisted pressure from the leftists. The response of leftists on the governing body of the VKhUTEMAS to this perceived conservatism in the painting faculty was to request that the painting faculty shift focus *away* from easel art toward production which had a direct 'use' in everyday life (Khan-Magomedov 1987:106). Painters in this faculty were considered extremely conservative by their more radical colleagues because of their supposed resistance to agitational political ideology and to all avant-garde movements after Cezanne. However in later years Soviet art critics heralded **OMkH** artists as important role models for artists committed to the idea of a Soviet art precisely *because* of their adherence to academic tradition. Throughout the period of polemical interchange within the VKhUTEMAS, the **OMKh** artists never abandoned the idea that easel art could have mass appeal. They pursued this in the way

73. Cezanne and the Fauves themselves reformulated the dominant artistic traditions of the day, namely Classicism and Impressionism.

74. See **OMKh** declaration in Leniashin (1988:190).

they drew on 'traditional' painterly developments and in the avant-garde development at the turn of the century. In this way they maintained a place for themselves, representing the state's wishes as well as incorporating some of the more radical developments of the early twentieth century.

Within the VKhUTEMAS technical expertise was evident in two respects, firstly with regard to this emphasis on the profession of painting, but secondly with respect to teaching industrially applicable skills.⁷⁵ This professionalism meant that technical specialisation flourished in the VKhUTEMAS, or VKhUTEIN as they were later known. However it was strongly opposed by groups who prioritised subject matter over form and therefore the production of less skilled and amateur painters.

Although sympathetic to the Peredvizhniki who were absorbed by the academies, **AKhRR** followed a policy of inclusiveness regardless of professional training. This was possibly a contributing factor to their fallout with **OMZh**. By 1926 **AKhRR** had 34 local branches and a membership of 650, many of whom were amateur painters. In addition they established a publishing house and youth organization called **OMAKhRR** which offered art instruction in factories. This attempt to democratise art was in line with the initial approach of Narkompros, and in the late twenties Lunacharsky lent open support to their large thematic pictures or 'kartinas', urging other artists to strive toward this type of social realism in which the Soviet collective was idealised.⁷⁶ However Lunacharsky's influence was fading fast and groups stood a greater chance of success if their support came from more strategically placed commissars such as Trotsky and Bukharin (for so long as these individuals were not ousted from the Central Committee by Stalin).

75. 1926 marked Novitskii's appointment as rector and the cutting down of the basic VKhUTEMAS course from two years to one term with less emphasis on personal exploration and more on technical content. This was paralleled by a reintroduction of entrance examinations which effectively reduced the number of workers gaining admittance (Lodder 1983:113-114). What this indicated was a shift toward promoting professionalism and this occurred despite the continued existence of RABFAK as a bridging faculty designed to admit people otherwise uninformed about art and unskilled. See also Bojka 1974 for information on the VKhUTEMAS.

76. For examples of these 'kartinas' see work by Brodski in Chapter Four below.

In the post-NEP period attitudes became increasingly militant and Stalin used these to introduce a Five Year Plan of enforced industrialisation, consolidation of socialism in one country and the orchestration of all segments of society toward this end. The emphasis on technical skill during these years was increased because of the drive for Soviet industrialisation and the consolidation of the USSR as a nation state, but pressure was also exerted on artists to produce agitational imagery, which meant drawing on media which were not constrained by the easel. The effect of the requirements of the state and the question of the extent to which the figurative techniques directly reflected a state imposed anti-formalist policy needs to be considered in relation to the context of the political changes following the demise of NEP. This forms the focus of the following section.

E. 1927-1931: The proletarian culture debate assumes a more militant tone with the formation of October, AKhR and RAPKh.

In this section I will argue that the militancy of artists in the late twenties was not a direct consequence of the 'official' tactics and criticism of the state, but that it was a position artists developed independently based on their objectives from earlier years. I will also argue that the cultural revolution of 1927 can be viewed as a reflection of the militancy felt across the country and that it was not simply an orchestration on the part of the Party, headed by Stalin.

NEP had created a climate of impatience amongst revolutionaries committed to socialism and to the ascendance of the working class. The gradualism of NEP's permissive agrarianism had evoked sharp criticism from workers. Critics on the left built their critiques of NEP opportunism on the revolutionary heroic tradition exemplified by Trotsky's example of War Communism. They pointed to the dangers of entrenching classism under NEP as some peasants were accumulating wealth and therefore control over others (Fitzpatrick 1982:88). Criticism was also directed at petit bourgeois traders and bureaucrats who benefitted personally under NEP, both at the expense of the proletariat. By February 1928 even the state newspaper, Pravda, was arguing that the

kulak was enriching himself at the expense of the poor peasantry, and that rapid industrialisation was necessary to induce peasants to sell more grain to benefit the urban proletariat (Carr 1979:81). This proletarian militancy was also evident in the radicalisation of demands amongst figurative artists and leftists. At the same time the state attempted to rally all members of society to the cause of its new political and cultural programme. In the early years of Stalin's rule, militant 'figurative artists existed side by side with militant leftists, sharing the same ideological goals and reflecting the general anti-NEP feeling of the populace. As indicated above their pro-worker militancy was initially associated with the militancy of Trotsky's War Communism, but in later years artists lent their support to Stalin's drive to consolidate socialism in one country, a drive in direct opposition to Trotsky's long term goal of an equal commitment to international socialism.

The way in which this militant mood was used by Stalin to support his Five Year Plan is extremely interesting in that it resulted in his ridding the party of both Trotsky and Bukharin. In the winter of 1927/28 Stalin began to criticise Bukharin's cautious NEP policies for depriving the party of its industrialising initiative. Public opinion shifted away from Bukharin's 'ethical' commitment to the masses, and toward support for Stalin's proposals of coercion toward, and if necessary war with, the kulaks and rich peasantry (Carr 1979:83;). Although this was a militancy which had originally been advocated by Trotsky, the Central Committee effectively silenced the Trotskyist left wing in the party which in 1927 had organised street demonstrations to protest against abandoning international socialism and confining the socialist revolution to the USSR. The post-NEP era was thus characterised by the absence of Trotsky and Bukharin and in the cultural sector this meant the absence of both their positions with regard to cultural tolerance and respect for 'fellow travellers'.

The post-NEP crisis signalled the collapse of both NEP policies and the alliances of the working class with the peasantry and the bourgeois intelligentsia. Workers had moved up rapidly in the party ranks to form a party apparatus which was at least 50% working class in origin. This meant that they were in a strong position to express their resentment of the continued privileges experienced by bourgeois experts. It was in this climate that Stalin launched his drive to industrialisation and collectivisation. To support his First Five

Year Plan (1929-1932) he drew on workers' anti-NEP sentiments. These economic measures introduced by Stalin were thus seen to herald a proletarian cultural revolution directed against the old intelligentsia (Fitzpatrick 1982:129-134). The climate of mounting distrust of the bourgeoisie was fuelled by the Shakhty affair in 1928. This was an event which marked the end of good relations with bourgeois technical "specialists" i.e. professionals who as advantaged members of the bourgeoisie had acquired skills prior to the 1917 revolution (Fitzpatrick 1979:377-382; Fitzpatrick 1982:112). I believe that it was this shift in attitudes towards 'specialists' that began to be felt in art circles as a renewed anti-technical bias, expressed by militant proletarian artists in opposition to formally trained artists.

The Shakhty case was orchestrated by the state to place on trial a number of bourgeois 'specialist' engineers, accused of disrupting the revolutionary objectives of the state. The so-called bourgeois wreckers served as useful scapegoats for the economic failures of the government and for the general fall in living standards which had occurred when all resources were directed into industrialisation. Hereafter 'cultural revolution' implied not a slow process of cultural development (as argued by Lenin) but concerted class warfare. With Lenin dead, and Trotsky and Bukharin sidelined, cultural transformation in the late twenties amounted to a political confrontation between 'proletarian' Communists and 'bourgeois' intelligentsia.

The Party now echoed working class sentiment and accused the bourgeoisie of having dominated the schools and other cultural arenas for too long. It was argued that NEP had enabled a new intelligentsia to develop but had allowed the old intelligentsia to remain ensconced. Thus the literary and artistic intelligentsia came under heavy attack.⁷⁷ The entire cultural administration of Narkompros was criticised for having failed to recognise the bourgeois threat, disarmed as they were by "an anti-revolutionary opportunist conception of cultural revolution as a peaceful, classless raising of cultural standards, a conception which does not distinguish between bourgeois and proletarian

77. Even Lunacharsky, although convinced of the irreplaceability of their skills and their right to privileges, had identified a certain arrogance on the part of the non-Marxist intelligentsia.

elements of culture" (Fitzpatrick 1978:10). The cultural revolution of 1927-28 marked the transition from NEP 'pluralism' to Stalinism. In short, it was encouraged as an iconoclastic working class youth movement directed against the older bureaucratic authorities who had reigned under Lenin and against Lenin's notions of culture as a continuation of bourgeois democratic forms. This new 'cultural revolution' offered the opportunity of rapid upward mobility and an opportunity for a younger generation to establish local militant power bases in opposition to the centre of old revolutionaries' power.

In the visual arts sector it provided the context for the transformation of **AKhRR** into the more militant **AKhR** (Association of Artists of the Revolution) which took place in 1928, and for the formation of **October** as a militant grouping of avant-gardists arguing for the application of the various arts to the needs of collectivisation and industrialisation. However during these early years of Stalin's rule the visual arts were still characterised by the *coexistence* of militant leftists and figurative artists, both assuming the same ideological arguments. It was only in the thirties that some of these artists, who had links with the liberal bourgeoisie, or 'fellow travellers' as they were called, eventually came under fierce criticism as 'party rightists'. This included artists who had been trained by 'bourgeois' artists and who advocated the importance of such a training.

Those politicians, theorists and artists who supported the cultural revolution branded both Trotsky and Bukharin as collaborators for having tried to negotiate alliances between proletarian art groups and the bourgeoisie. The fact that Trotsky and Bukharin's position had reflected early post-revolutionary Bolshevik policy was ignored, as was the fact that Bukharin had himself initially been part of Proletkult. The underlying issue was that Stalin had shifted away from the position he had shared with Bukharin on the peasant question and had instead opted for enforced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. Stalin thus encouraged the construction of Bukharin as a right wing opponent to the cultural revolution on the basis of Bukharin's cautious promotion of class alliances (Tucker 1977:160-210). Trotsky, who remained critical of Stalin's methods though not of his goal of rapid industrialisation, was construed a deviationist and finally expelled from the party in 1929 (Carr 1979:165). Lunacharsky and his colleagues at

Narkompros were also victims of this onslaught carried out by the Politburo and construed as right wing anti-revolutionaries who had to be ousted. Bolshevik revolutionaries who were deemed a threat to Stalin's policies were thus lumped together with the bourgeois intelligentsia and with the resistant peasantry as targets for attack.

The artistic avant-garde, despite its links with the bourgeoisie in pre-revolutionary years, also exhibited the iconoclasm and militarism of the period and argued more vehemently for industrial art, agitational graphics, cinematography, painting, sculpture, architecture etc. They argued that all these should serve the needs of the proletariat, and help to influence the peasantry and the so-called backward national groups.⁷⁸ In 1928, recalling the ideas of Proletkult, they organised an Association of Artistic Labour named **October**.⁷⁹ The group organised only one exhibition but printed a number of declarations and articles in a publication entitled "The Visual Arts Front. The Class Struggle on the Spatial Arts Front". A 1929 declaration by the National sector of **October** explicitly rejected the idealized pre-revolutionary art forms of **AKhRR** which recalled nineteenth-century realism. **October** was equally critical of the passive documentary style of the youth section, **OMAKhR**. Theirs was a more agitational stance, favouring ideological propaganda in the form of pictures, frescoes, printing etc., or the direct organization of life in the form of industrial art, architecture, mass festivals etc. Inherent in their declaration was the belief that they, the avant-garde, had to raise the consciousness of the revolutionary industrial proletariat to the level of a true socialist consciousness which would be based on an appreciation of organization and industrial technology. The artist should not work as a passive individual documenter but had to 'fight' on the cultural 'front' to organise mass psychology.

78. See, for example, declarations in Bowlt 1988, chapters, "The Revolution and Art" and "Constructivism and the Arts".

79. Members included Aleksandr Alekseev, Mecheslav Dobrokovsky, Vasilii Elkin, Paula Freiberg, Paul Irbit, Gustav Klutssis, the Vesnin brothers, Alois Kreichik, Nikolai Lapin, El Lissitzky, Dmitri Moor, Diego Rivera, Nikolai Sedelnikov, Sergei Senkin, Solomon Telingater, Bela Uitz, Viktor Toot and for a time, Alexander Deineka. **October's** first exhibition was held in June 1930. For information on **October** see Bowlt (1988:273-279), Bown (1991:65) and Bird (1987:237, 246, 249, 266, 268).

From **October's** stated intentions it is evident that it was a top-down organisation, hoping to stimulate creative activity and familiarity with artistic technology in proletarian art circles. Yet their declaration of intent exhibits a shift away from the slogan 'art to the masses' toward 'art of the masses'. This raises the issue of the profile of their membership. Membership reflected their international links, with Hungarians, Germans, and the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera included for a short time. This internationalism set them apart from the more nationalist groups which were wary of 'bourgeois' expertise.

October committed itself to a building of membership which was to proceed according to three central principals: organisation, rationality and collectivism, all principles espoused by figurative artists at the time. The organization was continually aware of the need to safeguard its ideological position in the art world. Although **October** supported the call for a federation of art groups (see below) it remained wary of collaborating with groups which it reckoned jostled for ideological monopoly. Its main worry was **AKhRR**, which was enjoying greater state support in the way of commissions and which would have been centrally placed in the federation.⁸⁰

What was really at issue here was **October's** definition of realism as one which could embrace artistic attitudes which were not confined to realistic figurative treatments in the sense established by the **Peredvizhniki** and early **AKhRR** artists. **October** defended its form of realism not only by drawing on references to international contemporary and historical developments, but by presenting a strong argument in favour of a *critical* evaluation of past technical achievements. It regarded **AKhRR's** figurative works as petit bourgeois and considered its own methodology and techniques as superior in that they created entirely new types of art for the proletariat. Statements such as the following were directed at **AKhRR**:

80. **October's** 1928 declaration explicitly stated: "We reject speculation on social commissions, which occurs beneath the mask of revolutionary themes and everyday realism, and which replaces any serious effort to formulate a revolutionary world view and world perception with a simplified interpretation of a hurriedly invented revolutionary subject" (Bowlit 1988:278-279).

We reject...naturalistic realism with its fruitless copying of reality, embellishing and canonizing the old way of life, sapping the energy and enervating the will of the culturally underdeveloped proletariat (Bowlit 1988:277).

Despite **October's** claims to being representative of the people, this was an unashamed display of its self-image as an avant-garde.⁸¹

Contrary to **October**, **AKhRR** had always had a larger amateur membership and therefore greater claims to being a 'peoples' organisation'. From being a broadly based realist grouping of differing stylistic tendencies it spread into a number of provinces and also opened its doors to non-professionals. In 1928 **AKhRR** changed its name to **AKhR** (The Association of Artists of the Revolution) to eliminate specific reference to Russia and to indicate its new pan-Soviet role. On the basis of its claims to being an authentic representative of the Soviet realist artists it launched its organisational drive. **AKhR** had posited the unification of all revolutionary artists into a single organisation, **INTERNAKhR**, which would take as its basis not the creation of an absolutely new proletarian culture, but in accordance with Lenin, a development of older cultural forms. This **AKhR** argued was the way of arriving at a true style of heroic realism, the content to be informed by a history of democratic struggles culminating in the class struggle and the current drive to reconstruct Russia. In 1928 **AKhR** shifted away from **AKhRR's** 1922 goal simply to document great moments in history in realistic forms comprehensible to the 'masses'.⁸² **AKhR** combined the use of old formal conventions with ideas reflecting the increasingly militant ethos of the day. The 1928 declaration stated as an objective, the realisation of "the slogan of the cultural revolution to organise the feeling, thoughts and will of the toiling masses" (Bowlit 1988:277). Here, as evident in **October**, was the

81. The descriptions of **October's** interests were in later years ironically to be built into documents defending Socialist Realism e.g. the concept is evident in this following commitment they made to: "dynamic realism that reveals life in movement and in action and that discloses systematically the potentials of life" (Bowlit 1988:277.) This is important because these same words were echoed in the first definitions of Socialist Realism at the 1934 congress. See section F below.

82. Declarations by **AKhRR** and **AKhR** appear in Bowlit (1988:268-272).

incentive to make agitational art which would bring about a future they envisaged for the Soviet Union. Their new activism now directly echoed new state policy.⁸³

It was due to direct criticism from the Central Committee's agitational and propaganda department that **AKhR** began to shift emphasis away from the 'petit bourgeois populism' of its easel art forms toward monumental and public art. Heroic realism was now described as a monumental style (Bown 1991:66). Easel painting remained the dominant activity in **AKhR** but in the period 1928-30 it developed in accordance with government orchestrated campaigns e.g. campaigns against religion and against alcohol. Ultimately the effect of the cultural revolution on **AKhR** was that it disowned its 'passive' traditionalist element and the 'academic' language of the **Peredvizhniki** which had informed its work. **AKhR** decided to purge its ranks in the manner that many other purges were occurring in the new Stalinist regime.⁸⁴ So-called fellow-travellers were purged from their ranks e.g. Isaac Brodsky (see Chapter Four below), Igor Grabar and ex-Peredvizhniki Abram Arkhipov.⁸⁵ The new young Communist leadership of **AKhR** prevailed upon older members to admit their political 'errors' and to renounce documentary illusionism. This led to more 'traditional' realist painters leaving over the next two years e.g. Evgeny Katsman (see Chapter Four below).

In 1928 the class warfare ushered in by the cultural revolution was also felt in the formal sector. There developed an antagonism to all personnel and training thought to have arisen in the pre-revolutionary era and this was enacted in the belief that an entirely new

83. See Chapter Four below for examples of **Octobers'** work.

84. The purges in the organization echoed the state wide purges e.g. the university purges by local Party committees who took it on themselves to remove the children of kulaks, priests, merchants, tsar officers and sometimes intellectuals and even state employees. Bureaucrats were purged from government jobs and thousands of engineers were arrested. This was a replay of the civil war, enacted by the Komsomol (Communist youth), whose members were too young to have participated in the actual revolution and who were drawn to militant frames of reference e.g. the 'cultural front', 'cultural army', 'campaign' against illiteracy etc. (Fitzpatrick 1971:236-252; Fitzpatrick 1982:125).

85. This occurred despite Arkhipov having been awarded the title of 'peoples' artist the year before for his images of peasant women at work.

Soviet order should emerge minus all evidence of a pre-revolutionary history. Twenty-five old professors, a number of whom were 'bourgeois' realists, were dismissed from the VKhUTEIN (Valkenier 1989). Theoretical instruction was replaced by practical courses for industrial design and factory apprenticeship for students.⁸⁶ The effect of this was to weaken the monopolistic claims of figurative art.

The response of art groups was to push ahead with their own definitions of proletarian culture, definitions that evinced a commitment to consciously shaping the ideological views of its artists and public. The Party hoped to coordinate these initiatives and like **AKhR** it favoured the idea of establishing a 'broad front' of arts groups. The Party hoped to reconcile the various conflicting claims for a new proletarian culture. At a meeting in November/December 1929, thirteen Moscow art groups resolved to form a 'federation' to unite groups which Narkompros sanctioned as non-bourgeois and as ideologically correct.⁸⁷ This federation of arts groups demanded the re-organisation of all those groups which had "been formed on formalistic and not ideological bases" (Gray 1959:39), thus reflecting a popular bias toward realism. The federation called itself **FOSKh** (Federation of the Association of Soviet Workers in the Spatial Arts) and issued a journal called "Artists' Brigade". Their sanctioning by Narkompros probably held little weight in the Party's eyes because between December 1929 and January 1930 a so-called rational purge of Narkompros occurred, justified by the state as a necessary elimination of a politically dangerous old intelligentsia. The state was critical of the leftists' presence in Narkompros and was probably equally critical of their presence in **FOSKh**. Even though the state was in effect supporting the leftists' programme by approving of art

86. Although the cultural revolution encouraged the iconoclasm and technical training which the avant-garde had favoured, in 1929 the research institute INKhUK, home to the avant-garde, was closed down. This occurred despite it having privileged the place of technique for the purposes of the new society.

87. For information on the federation **FOSKh** see Gray (1959:39), Bowlt (1988:288), Bown (1991:69) and Bird (1987:260).

institutes shifting toward industrially applicable training, the purges resulted in Lunacharsky's resignation in 1929⁸⁸ and **FOSKh** was to be short-lived.

In principle **October** lent support to this idea of a federation and individual members became actively involved, e.g. Lissitzky executed designs for this journal. However the alliance was fragile and many members of **October** were wary of subscribing to a federation which included **AKhR**. The federation was also built on an uneasy alliance between **AKhR** and modernist groups like **OST**. The contentious issue remained that of **AKhR**'s monopoly on commissions. In 1929 commissioning had been systematised through **Vsekokhudozhnik** (the All Russian Union of Co-Operative Comradeship of Workers of Representational Art).⁸⁹ Organisations who issued commissions through **Vsekokhudozhnik** included Narkompros, the Red Army and the trade unions. It was the latter two which favoured the figurative work of **AKhR**, although in general **Vsekokhudozhnik** was an organization which commissioned figurative work only. In July 1930 a decree by the Council of Peoples' Commissar's resulted in **Vsekokhudozhnik** sending 200 artists to construction sites and collective farms for a period of two months each, to document the 'successes' of the five year plan. In 1933, 400 artists were sent out on such commissions. Artists chose their locations, but **Vsekokhudozhnik** then had the power to accept or reject the commissions.⁹⁰ It is obvious that the granting and acceptance of commissions was informed by what was regarded as an 'appropriate' form of realism and that this federation had a determining influence on artistic developments

88. Lunacharsky's resignation followed rumours of his being a cultural 'NEPman' corrupted by travel, privilege and foreign influence (Fitzpatrick 1971:17-19).

89. **Vsekokhudozhnik** (All Russian Union of Cooperative Comradeships of Workers Of Representative Art) was founded in 1929. By 1934 the cooperative had 4000 members in Russia alone. A congress of representatives of local organizations elected the board which had a 'method council' pertaining to the 'suitability' of works. The cooperative sold work to the Central State Buying Commission, the Central Art Museum, organizations for the study of various regions, palaces of culture, workers' clubs, sanatoria and rest homes, shops, factories and other organizations. For further information on this cooperative see *Voks Almanac* Nos 9-10 1934:104-110, Bown (1991:40-41), Bowlt (1988:288) and Bird (1987:260).

90. Locations included the Ural Machine building plant, ship building wharves in Leningrad, the Baltic White Sea canal, Chelyabstroy, Berezhniki-Khimstroy, Samarkand, other collective tea farms, machine and tractor stations, new electric power stations etc. (*VOKS* 9-10 1934:104-110).

from this point on. The commissioned scenes of collectivisation thus echoed organisations like **AKhR**'s intention to reflect society in its 'dynamic development',⁹¹ and due to this inbuilt romanticism sanctioned by Party officials, it was revolutionary idealism rather than realism that prevailed.⁹²

In accordance with this new climate and notwithstanding the efforts of **October** and **AKhR**, young Party members of proletarian origin within **AKhR** joined with communists from other organizations and rebelled against the old **AKhR** leadership to form **RAPKh** (the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists) in May 1931.⁹³ **RAPKh**'s formation has been argued to be due to the March 1931 Central Committee resolution by the Party, which urged a higher ideological level of posters and illustration of Stalin's political objectives (Valkenier 1989:59). This is to suggest that **RAPKh** was initiated from above i.e. by state decree, but it is more useful to see it as an organization formed by those Party members from **AKhR** who desired a more aggressive commitment to proletarian art and who were dissatisfied with older easel artists in **AKhR**. They stressed the importance of Party membership, thereby echoing the wide scale expansion of the Party base under Stalin (Bown 1991:68). This return to class warfare was reminiscent of the theories of old Proletkult and also of the literary organization **RAPP** (the Russian Association of Proletariat Writers), which had requested that the Central Committee support a hegemony of 'proletarian' communists rather than 'bourgeois' fellow travellers.

91. See Chapter Four for images of collectivism under the Five Year Plan e.g those by Deineka, Gaponenko and Gerasimov.

92. Scenes of idyllic collectivisation were a far cry from the realities of state coercion, prosecution, harassment, purges, arrests of private speculators and mass scale liquidation of so-called kulaks. Even the leftists or so-called formalists were unlikely to point to the drawbacks of enforced collectivisation and industrialisation given their own eulogies about industry over the years. Terror prevailed throughout the villages as a result of the purges and grain requisitioning. The state confiscation of peasant grain led to a large scale exodus from rural areas. Because of this exodus, Stalin introduced a policy of organised recruitment which in effect meant an enforced control of this movement from rural into urban areas, exercised and policed by roadblocks, passes and detentions (Fitzpatrick 1971).

93. Prominent members of **RAPKh** who were part of the department of monumental painting included **VKhUTEIN** graduates Yakov Tsirelson, Lev Vyazmenski and Fyodor Konnov. For information on **RAPKh** see Bown (1991:67-68), Bowlit (1988:273, 288), Bird (1987:260) and Valkenier (1989:59).

Proletkult and **RAPP** thus set precedents in their criticism of social privileges and bourgeois enterprises. With a similar revolutionary militancy **RAPkH** criticised **October** for promoting 'bourgeois technicism' and **AkhR** for promoting 'bourgeois easel painting'.⁹⁴ In opposition to this **RAPkH** posited the promotion of collective figurative mural painting.⁹⁵

RAPkH's radicalism was a challenge to both **October** and **AKhR**. Late in 1931 **AKhR** relented and so too did **October**, with a number of **October** members moving into **RAPkH's** ranks (Bown 1991:68).⁹⁶ **October** was convinced by the call to revise their techniques such that their mode of production also reflected the goals of the revolution – the collective methods of mural painting and monumental art which drew on the labour of non-professionals won out over the 'technicism' of individual easel art production. **AKhR** was not able to withstand the accusation of being bourgeois since this was the antithesis of its claim to existence. The result of **AKhR** and **October** relenting to **RAPkH's** criticism was a brief period of collective figurative enterprises. The leftists and the figurative painters who were later constructed as arch enemies of one another were now not only sharing a common ideological platform but also the beginnings of a common form. Despite this narrowing of differences, the perpetuation of the idea of leftist or so-called formalist production as antithetical to figurative production was given historical impetus by the state's intervention in 1932. This took the form of a decree which called for the dissolution of all existing arts groups, discussed below.

94. In their journal, "For a proletarian Art", **RAPkH** accused easel painters such as Theodore Bogorodski and Aleksandr Gerasimov of being fellow travellers and agitated for **AKhR** to abandon 'individualist' easel art for the 'brigade' method of collective production. See Chapter Four for examples of Bogarodsky and Gerasimov's work.

95. See examples in Chapter Four below.

96. See for example Deineka in Chapter Four below.

F. Increased role of the state in the consolidation of art groups and the promotion of Socialist Realism after the cultural revolution.

In the 1930s official art histories of the Soviet Union began to create a crude polemic between Russian and European influences. This attempt to define a truly 'Russian' art had made itself felt in earlier years⁹⁷ but it reached its zenith in the years that Stalin redefined socialism as a national rather than an international endeavour. Those historians who resisted this acknowledgement of cosmopolitan influences in art were prone to linking leftists unilaterally with internationalism and to separating them from the Soviet socialist project. This has resulted in the assumption that figurative artists did not experiment with their forms, were isolated from contemporary European developments and reflected the interests of a Soviet government favouring Socialist Realism. This polemic between figurative and leftist artists is echoed in Western art historical accounts for somewhat different reasons, but as in Soviet accounts, is seen as leading inevitably to Socialist Realism. In the West innovative art forms are assumed to be the product of Modernist leftists and seldom associated with Soviet figuration. Modernism has been 'claimed' by Western societies who presume that their free market economies were supportive of artistic experimentation and conducive to the growth of Modernism and that the USSR's centralised economy was responsible for the death of the Modernist project in the Soviet Union.⁹⁸ The way in which the Soviet Union offered a space for Modernists to exercise their utopian visions was discussed in Chapter Two, and much of Chapter Three has been given over to an explication of artists' positions vis-à-vis European influences. As seen in the examples of the **Makovets**, **Bytie**, **OMZh** and even **AKhRR**, advocates of realist art tried to claim a continuous history with Cezannist groups like the **Jack of Diamonds** and even the cosmopolitan **World of Art** artists from the turn of the century.

97. The search for a Russian art was illustrated in 1911 by Larionov and Goncharova's formation of the **Donkey's Tail** in opposition to the **Jack of Diamonds**.

98. See my Introduction for exceptions to this.

While the emphasis of this and the preceding chapter has been on illustrating how the artists' developed their own theories and diverse forms of realism, it is nevertheless necessary to acknowledge the role the state did play in giving shape to artistic organisation, methodology and form. State decrees in the late twenties provided an indication of increasing Party involvement in culture. A decree in December 1928 declared the function of literature to be that of communist education and a decree in 1929 was drawn up to reprimand Proletkult for criticising old Proletkultist Gorky for adhering to the Party line. These were important signs regarding the Party's expectations of artists' loyalty to government political programmes and cultural dictates. In April 1932 the state issued a decree abolishing all proletariat and other artistic organizations.⁹⁹ Its intention was to replace the numerous artistic organizations with a single union for each profession, each with its own Communist cell. The decree criticised the narrowness of existing programmes, implying that even the militant proletarian group **RAPKh** was out of line with state efforts to consolidate all tendencies into monolithic organizations. Despite the state's attempt to institute a single union for each of the arts drawing together separate artists unions formed in Moscow, Leningrad and other towns, each regional union enrolled practitioners from varying disciplines and maintained their regional profiles. It was only in 1939 that a single artists' union (Orgkomitet) was founded. Prior to this it was the Moscow union, **MOSSKh**, which assumed a significant role in determining the ideological direction of the debates (Bown 1991:86).¹⁰⁰

RAPKh's militant proletarianism was assumed inappropriate because in 1932 Stalin declared an end to the class struggle and that henceforth all efforts be concentrated on building an intelligentsia of the new ruling class. For the past decade the Party had urged its young artists to learn from the bourgeois 'specialists'. However now that a whole new

99. The state decree was entitled "On Reform of Literary Artistic Organizations". The full decree is reprinted in Vaughan James (1973:120).

100. In 1932 the **MOSSKh** painting section comprised 192 ex-**AKhR** members, 82 ex-**RAPKh** members, 34 ex-**OMKh** members, 30 ex-**OST** members and 65 others, indicating a predominance of figurative artists who favoured a style of heroic realism.

generation had emerged that were no longer reliant on the bourgeoisie, the Party felt strong enough to rely on this emerging intelligentsia.

In part the 1932 decree seemed conciliatory because it encouraged the participation of existing artistic organisations such as **Vsekokhudozhnik**, but it soon became apparent that the Party wanted to determine production and distribution directly. The party decided that it was time to use artists more aggressively in the campaign to win the hearts and minds of all people. It was now the Party, not the artists, that would selectively draw from pre-revolutionary values and modes of cultural expression. Implicit in this decree was a reiteration of the 1925 party policy guidelines on methodology,¹⁰¹ the difference being that there was now some structural weight behind this ideological counsel.

For some time **RAPKh** refused to heed the 1932 creed to disband. Doing so it became subject to the criticism Stalin levelled at other resistant groupings, namely that of exhibiting 'menshevism idealism'.¹⁰² This seemed hardly necessary given that **RAPKh** was an initiative of young Communist Party members of **AKhRR**, agitating for works in direct accordance with Stalin's desire for propaganda. It seems that this rather late action by the state in 1932 simply condoned what was already occurring in art circles. Most groups who advocated proletarian art received this 1932 decree enthusiastically because it declared non-proletarian elements in art 'alien'. The state did not need to introduce a policy on realism or to coordinate the artistic groupings' allegiance to its policies. Most of the organised efforts in the cultural and scientific sectors had already synthesised views along Party lines. This was not because of state intervention but as a result of the complexities, ideological tensions and class divisions which had occurred under NEP and which had resulted in mounting disdain for bourgeois culture. In trying to achieve what young activists were already doing it called these young activists to order and officially

101. See section above on Bukharin's involvement in drawing up this 1925 decree "On Party Policies in the Field of Literature".

102. This was a criticism levelled at Proletkult and at all political opponents within the broad revolutionary front who chose to disagree with Stalin's plans.

closed the space for artists working with reference to Western European trends, Nonobjectivism and 'leftist' Productivism.

In cultural circles heterogeneity did finally disappear but this was only when the Party had set up and properly staffed its organisational channels and propagated a distorted construction of painterly realism as a continuation of a national tradition. The manipulation of the **Peredvizhniki** heritage into a proto-political programme was designed to encourage artists to continue in this realist style in support of the Party line. As from April 1932 the **Peredvizhniki** were resuscitated as supreme exponents of realism such that their formal expression became the *only* model of realism. Due to state intervention those artists with **Peredvizhniki** links were reinstated in their official capacities in groups from which they had previously been purged. Isaac Brodski's **AKhR** membership was restored and Brodski was also granted a professorship in the reorganised **All Russian Academy of Arts**. This resurrection of the old Academy was accompanied by the appointment of numerous proponents of realism. Lunacharsky's absence from cultural circles contributed to the abandonment of cultural pluralism and the state now blatantly supported one particular style. When in November 1932 a retrospective show of Soviet art was organised in Moscow, the new commissar Andrei Bubnov intervened to privilege realism and remove many so-called 'formalist' works e.g. works by Malevich, and Filinov (Valkenier 1989:167). Bubnov began to publically attack formalism for its "perverse content and infantile leftism" (*Iskusstvo* no.4 1933). The Tretyakov gallery was instructed to remove all the 1928 labels pertaining to the class origins of artists and to display works in accordance with a construction of an historical evolution of styles, underscoring the importance of **Peredvizhniki** realism in the overall development of Russian art.¹⁰³ In later years the Tretyakov gallery continued this process of 'uncovering' the historical precedents of Socialist Realism e.g. in nineteenth-century realism and even in the **World of Art** movement. They thus perpetuated this illusory separation of the so-called formalists or leftists from the 'realist' easel painters.

103. Bown (1991:93) comments on the Party's portrayal of the **Peredvizhniki** as proto-revolutionaries despite having been characterised as bourgeois by leftist artists in the twenties. See Valkenier (1989) for information pertaining to this characterisation.

The reconstruction of Soviet art history was condoned in May 1934 when the Party issued a decree on the teaching of history. This ordered that the teaching of 'abstract sociological themes' be replaced by a consecutive exposition of civic history (Valkenier 1989:171). This was an official policy that history was a nationalist enterprise and by extension the history of art had to be presented as such.

The support for realism by both artists and Party officials gained enormous impetus in August and September 1934, at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. Although writers such as Lunacharsky and Gorky had already made reference to 'socialist' realism prior to 1934, at the 1934 Congress the concept was debated and refined.¹⁰⁴ By the end of the Congress it was largely Andrei Zhdanov's definition of Socialist Realism which was agreed to. Zhdanov prioritised the ideological task of the artist, differentiating it from academic descriptions of 'objective' reality. According to Zhdanov, Socialist Realism was a 'method' requiring of the artist "a true, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development" (Scott 1935:15-24). This, he argued, was to be combined with the "task of the ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of Socialism". Artists were to find inspiration from actual historical events and to interpret these in accordance with how these furthered the Bolshevik cause. This implied a necessary optimism about the progressive improvements which were already underway as a result of the working class struggle which was led by the Party. Artists were called upon to lend support to Stalin's efforts to improve the national economy and to eradicate the surviving elements of capitalism in the consciousness of the people. This implied absolute faith in peoples' abilities to shape the world according to their grand design, and expressed as an aim of Socialist Realism at the Congress as follows: "The aim [of Socialist

104. See Chapter One above for reference to Lunacharsky on Socialist Realism and essay by Gorky entitled "Soviet Literature" in Scott (1935:27-69). According to Bown (1991:89) the term first appeared in the Literary Gazette of May 1932 in a statement which asserted that the 'masses' demanded of an artist honesty and Socialist Realism. Evidence of debates regarding Socialist Realism also occur in references to visits by artists Katsman and Brodski to Stalin and Voroshilov (Bown 1991:92-93). Also important was the 1933 publication of Osip Beskin's book "Formalism in Painting" (Bown 1991:118).

Realism] is the uninterrupted development of the priceless individual faculties of man [sic], with a view to his [sic] victory over the forces of nature...".¹⁰⁵

At the Congress and in line with early Proletkult theories of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov, Gorky argued against the separation of thought and labour. However given the context in which the Congress occurred i.e. the end of the first Five Year Plan and at the beginning of a second, labour was the hero of the day. Labour was not only emphasised as the foundation of creative activity, as had been argued by Bogdanov, but was now the recommended subject of works. Artists were explicitly called on to depict feats of industrialisation and heroic collective acts.

At this point Socialist Realism was referred to as a 'method' and not a specific style, the artist being left to find a form, style or genre with which to work.¹⁰⁶ In that 'detached' and 'objective' documentations of reality were discouraged, works were expected to be tendentious and optimistic. Introspective and individualistic works were to give way to works which displayed faith in social and collective activity. Artists who did not engage with the actual material conditions of society were termed mystical as well as romantic, a derogatory reference to nineteenth-century despair about the possibility of reconciling individual and social interest. The term 'romantic' was appropriated to mean revolutionary romanticism i.e. the envisaging of a better tomorrow built upon evidence of progress already underway in the present.

Despite reference to Socialist Realism as a method only, the precise forms most suitable for all of this was an issue which did arise in the debates and which was framed in terms of the continuation or the rejection of past cultural formal conventions. Ex-Proletkultist

105. See essay by Gorky in Scott (1935:65).

106. Igor Grabar was the only visual artist present at the congress and in line with congress participants he criticised all art production which had occurred prior to 1917. Grabar referred to Socialist Realism as the only relevant style of art, a style which would be embraced by a future congress of artists devoted to the idea of art as a class weapon. Ilya Mashkov also condoned the theory of Socialist Realism which emerged at the Congress by presenting a painting to the convenors (see examples of Mashkov's work in Chapter Four).

Gorky argued for the need for new forms and against the continuing relevance of 'critical' realism i.e. 'bourgeois' realism. Others called for stylistic elements which implied a preference for older forms of realism.¹⁰⁷ The artwork was conceived of as a work in which "everything should be finished off",¹⁰⁸ which implied the type of detailed completion of nineteenth-century realism which exhibited immediately recognisable content, explicit narrative and didactic purpose. Although this Congress was a literary Congress, these stylistic formulae were carried over into the visual arts as was the idea of a work having to reveal clear explanatory connections between all phenomena in terms of a Marxist-Leninist understanding of social developments.

After this congress the debate over the flexibility or narrowness of the definition continued, with Narkompros defending a more flexible attitude toward the older 'bourgeois' forms of realism. In opposition to this broad inclusive definition critics continued to argue that Socialist Realism ought to embrace only the 'best' traditions from classical antiquity, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune and the *plein-air* discoveries in the West, in this way preventing the possibility of assimilating contemporary post-Impressionist developments. Over the next twenty years one of the major theorists of Socialist Realism was Hungarian Marxist literary theorist Georg Lukacs. Lukacs' defences of realism and his critique of the 'anti-realist' works of Modernism and the 'passive' documentations of objective reality which typify Naturalism have come to form the core of Marxist aesthetics. It is useful to turn to Lukacs briefly for a synopsis of attitudes which emerged from the 1934 Congress.

Lukacs adopted a pro-Lenin analysis and supported the 1932 state decree as a necessary censure of Proletkultist activities which intended to promote the growth of a new uniquely proletarian culture. In opposition to this he acknowledged the necessary continuation of older forms of realism, which he called critical realism, since much of this

107. See for example Stetsky and Zhdanov in Scott 1935.

108. See essay by Stetsky in Scott (1935:270).

realism did contain within it critical analyses of bourgeois society.¹⁰⁹ Lukacs believed that **RAPP** writers and **RAPKh** artists were incorrect in their intolerance of 'fellow travellers' and that an alliance between Critical Realists and Social Realists was necessary to counteract Modernism. He associated the irrationalism of Modernist artworks with the irrational philosophical content of fascism in the thirties and believed that the introverted despair and alienation that typified Modernist works served to further the fascists cause since they did not explain the inter-connections between phenomena, nor point toward possible resolutions of conflicts.¹¹⁰ This, according to Lukacs, promoted a stasis similar to that promoted by Naturalism. In contrast to naturalism, Lukacs believed that Critical Realism, even though produced by the bourgeoisie, could contribute toward a critique of capitalism (Lukacs 1962:101). This bourgeois form of expression shared with Socialist Realism a history of nationalist struggle and a concern with societal contradictions which prevented the unimpeded development of human capacity. In contrast to Critical Realism which was limited to protest, Socialist Realism located human qualities which *contributed* to societal growth. Socialist Realism provided the possibility for comprehensive descriptions of the totality of society, a totality which could include an envisaged future.

This emphasis on the relationship of the individual to the building of a future became the central feature of Socialist Realist works.¹¹¹ The assumption was that individual and social consciousness evolved in tandem. Lukacs argued that to communicate this totality in Socialist Realism, it was necessary to construct types, based upon an analysis of societal contradictions and an identification of an Archimedian point amidst them. This understanding of the general significance of a type was presumed possible only if one had an inside experience of a situation, and the strength of Socialist Realism is that it offered the possibility of envisaging a future from the inside. Typification in Socialist Realist works could reflect this individual and societal evolution. Typification in Critical Realist

109. See essay by Lukacs "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism" in Lukacs (1962:93-135).

110. See Lukacs' essay "The Ideology of Modernism" in Lukacs (1962:17-46).

111. See examples of works produced in 1933 and 1934 in Chapter Four below.

works occurred in a different form, the artist focussing on an individual and having to build *outwards* toward social significance.

This notion of types is extremely important because most works produced in the thirties revolve around this attempt to construct convincing images of the 'new' Soviet man and woman. What many artists fell back upon however was the assumption that there were no longer any contradictions in society and that the 'new' citizen ought to reflect the unimpeded growth of the nation – a message peculiar to Stalin's rule. Lukacs warned against fatuous typification and the possibility of types deteriorating into stereotypes. What he meant by stereotype was an ahistorical typology, much like that found in Naturalism, namely static illustrations of abstract truths and simplifications of developments which did not allow for antagonistic contradictions (Lukacs 1962:119). Lukacs warned against the production of stereotypes resulting from what he called an overly pragmatic and dogmatic approach on the part of the artist. The production of stereotypes was a subversion of the dialectical link between the individual and the typical which characterised realist typology. Instead, the stereotype comprised an *opposition* of the typical and the individual and confused what was subjectively desirable with what contradictions still informed the present objective material conditions. Possible protagonists of what Lukacs termed revolutionary 'romantic' attitudes were 'sectarian' Communists arguing for an entirely new proletarian culture and 'romantic anti-capitalist Modernists'. Artists such as those in **AKhR** and **October** would, according to Lukacs, have been guilty of the production of stereotypes. In accordance with this analysis a more complex typification would have characterised the work of artists informed by pre-revolutionary training and redolent of 'bourgeois'/critical realism, such as that of the **Makovets**, **NOZh**, **OMZh** and even early **AKhRR** with its **Peredvizhniki** links.

Despite efforts to preserve some leeway in the application of this concept of Socialist Realism, artists began increasingly to reflect the Party's preference for a mode of expression which would be immediately intelligible, heroic, and optimistic. The three basic principles which came to be associated with Soviet aesthetics were *narodnost*, *klassovost* and *partiinnost* (see below). In Soviet society these three elements of art were seen to coalesce, which was not the case in Western art according to Soviet aestheticians.

Narodnost was that quality which a work should aspire toward so as to be significant to the 'masses' in society. This quality resulted from a work reflecting the 'highest level' of social awareness attained in an epoch. It would be recognised by the populace and would inevitably become popular.¹¹² *Klassovost* pertained to the class nature of art and the idea that even art produced by reactionary classes could communicate useful information about the class nature of society. However while all 'genuine' (i.e. realist) works communicated an objective reflection of some aspects of social life, *klassovost* was expressed in the extent of an artist's conscious reflection of the social relations (in the West, the contradictory social relations). *Partiinost* pertained to the open allegiance of art to the cause of the proletariat and the future of socialism. Freedom was redefined to mean freedom from 'bourgeois' individualism, greed and careerism and for this Party guidance was required so as to prevent the damaging effect of these bourgeois attitudes communicated through art to the masses. The proletariat recipient was to have a say in artistic production and their interests were to be represented by the state.¹¹³ In accordance with this last principle, furthering the interests of the masses became equivalent to furthering the interests of the Communist Party.

To view all figurative art in the twenties and early thirties as realist and as a logical and *necessary* step toward Socialist Realism is to risk overlooking the various shifting definitions of 'proletarian culture' with which they were operating. It is also to ignore the fact that some figurative artists contradicted the assumptions informing the Marxist Realist project and produced deliberately ambiguous works. To view realism as a state imposed development is as problematic as viewing the cultural revolution as simply orchestrated from above. Such assumptions are problematic given the complex relations that existed between state and civil society. Militant groupings within society exerted their own pressures on other groups and sought alliances independently with the state. The state found ready support among certain groups which were then used to suppress others. In that the state took the initiative to encourage transformations from 'above' it did

112. See summary of official Soviet attitudes on Socialist Realism in Vaughan James (1973:1-14).

113. The principle of *Partiinost* was based strongly on Lenin's 1905 article "Party organization and Party Literature". See Chapter One above.

interfere with maturation from 'below'. The result was that the 'cultural revolution', which was argued for by the likes of Bogdanov prior to 1917, emphasising collective decision making and creativity above all else, was re-conceived in the thirties by the Party as a cultural revolution designed to entrench a working class intelligentsia plus a strata of officials more loyal to the Party than to the working class.

This should not obscure the fact that artists were themselves involved in trying to forge a proletarian culture in the twenties and thirties, nor should it lead to a conflation of these different figurative works into the heroic or monumental realist project favoured by the state. The early years were still marked by a belief in the project of the proletarian revolution even if at times this meant criticism of state policy and the effects of state/Party policy. While the above chapter has attempted to challenge the separation of 'anti-realist' or Modernist leftists from 'realist' figurative artists by underlining the similarities of ideological intent shared by many of these artists, in Chapter Four the polemical separation of realism and anti-realism will be challenged from another direction. Selected examples of figurative art production of the twenties and early thirties will be viewed within the context of the *diverse* practice of the artists. This will be done, not in relation to the socio-economic context as outlined above, but in the form of a *visual* analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF FIGURATIVE ART PRODUCTION BETWEEN 1921 AND 1934.

Artists' debates on realism were framed in terms of a history of debate about what culture best suited a new proletarian or 'classless' society. As seen in Chapter One, these debates were informed by Marxist theorists' definitions of realism. Some of these theorists emphasised matter over consciousness while others were loathe to underemphasise the importance of individual enlightenment. This was translated by visual artists into arguments about the degree of objectivity or subjectivity that they believed works should display. Proponents of realism tended either toward a positivistic emphasis of 'objectively' observed detail in the form of a nineteenth-century type of documentation, or toward an abstraction and generalisation of what was considered most 'appropriate' from this reality. As seen in Chapter Three the latter was an attitude evinced by the more radical Proletkultists and leftists. It was also an attitude manifested in certain figurative groupings. The debate about the inclusion of detail was mediated by a concern with how detail would affect the attitude of the artist or viewer: would it reinforce the Marxist Realist project by constructing an image of the typical but not stereotypical subject; would detail be selectively used to construct idealised types; would the inclusion of excessive detail subvert the prospect of the construction of a fixed typology; or would the denial of detail render irrelevant the importance of the conscientised human subject in the work? These considerations of typology and totality involve a consideration of the relationship of detail to the whole and are central to the formal analysis of figurative work produced in the Soviet Union in the twenties and thirties. What is meant by typology is this construction of types in accordance with the use of detail either to denote a concern with 'excessive' minutia or to indicate simply what the artist considered to be significant; or to indicate what was considered most desirable/politically correct.

The relationship of detail to the whole also reflects the relationship that was envisaged by the artist between the individual and the social collective and whether this was one of irreconcilable or reconcilable interest. In Marxist theories of realism dating from the early

twentieth century Realist works were identified by the desire to reflect life in its totality, as a cohesive social event in which the individual is consciously located as an active subject. The opposite of this would imply life in stasis and the depicted subject as passive, alienated and without the possibility of actively intervening in 'fateful' circumstances. Debates between artists thus centred on the presence or absence of a dialectical synthesis of individual and social existence. Common to works which embraced Marxist Realism was the portrayal of processes of reality as knowable, changeable and responsive to resolution. In the visual analyses below, concepts of individualism will be considered in relation to those of social responsibility and also heroism.

As seen in Chapter Three, these considerations constituted the core of the debates in the twenties and thirties. The identification of detail in accordance with type, stereotype, ambiguous or explicit accounts of the interconnectedness of phenomena will also enable an understanding of those works which were inclined toward Socialist Realism and those which were more closely allied to the critical 'bourgeois' realist phase of production. What will be indicated is the diversity of realist expression and the presence of both realist and anti-realist elements in works which to date have been subsumed unproblematically into the category of realism and into the trajectory of Socialist Realism.

As outlined in Chapter Three the theoretical intentions of most of the figurative art groups in the twenties and early thirties were couched in the same ideological terms as those of the co-called formalist leftists. Although definitions of realism and even Socialist Realism were bound by attitude rather than style, certain ideas of style were discussed within the same parameters of debate (see section F of Chapter Three above). Artists' styles did not however always illustrate the theoretical intentions of the groups. Artists' works will be examined below with the intention of illustrating the diversity of their styles as well as the inappropriateness of conceiving of the figuration of this period as an homogeneous category which leads 'inevitably' to Socialist Realism. As seen in Chapter Three, visual artists and critics were obsessed with the debate regarding what style should be carried over from the past into the future and so observations of typology and totality will also be discussed in relation to what artists considered the most appropriate 'professional' response in the forging of a new style.

The choices were between a qualified or unqualified rejection of the past, a continuation of past cultural forms of expression or a modification of these. Realism was variously interpreted in terms of these attitudes toward innovation or tradition. The identification of works as forms of critical or 'bourgeois' realism, as 'objective'/'scientific' observations of detail with or without a Marxist ideological perspective, as generalisations or idealisation often referred to as revolutionary romanticism, all relate to this issue of tradition or innovation.

Although theorists such as Lenin¹ had always advocated that a revolutionary culture be built upon a continuation of nineteenth-century forms of realism, other political theorists had emphasised that formal innovation might indeed be part of the Marxist Realist project.² It was only in the mid-thirties that innovation became intransigently linked to anti-realist attitudes in the official imagination. Although formal innovation did often function to challenge the idea of empirically identifiable data, it could also be used to reinforce both the materialist philosophy of Marxist Realism and the implementation of this philosophy by the state. The figurative works discussed below will thus be identified as realist or anti-realist irrespective of the degree of formal innovation they display. Of primary concern will be the extent to which they do or do not lend ideological support to the Marxist Realist philosophy which informed the political and social developments in the USSR at the time. In certain instances the contradiction of Marxist Realism assumed the form of a contradiction of older formal conventions, in other instances these works which exhibited formal innovations could serve to reinforce the Marxist Realist project. What aspects of Marxist Realism the works reinforced or contradicted was an issue which was informed by the historical and class allegiances of artists, the pre- and post-revolutionary training of these artists and obviously their personal attitudes to the revolution and the government of the day.

1. See Chapter One for information pertaining to Lenin's attitudes toward culture.

2. See, for example, the theories of Trotsky in Chapter One and that of leftist theoreticians in Chapter Two.

Certain artists set themselves up as harbingers of truth and asserted that a distinction existed between fact and fiction. Others displayed little attempt to assert fact as different from fiction and the artist operated as more than an 'objective' documenter of empirical detail. How the artists attempt to insert themselves into or efface themselves from the artwork is an indication of the degree of 'subjectivity' or 'objectivity' that they assume in their documentation of and interaction with contemporary events. Attempts to absent the creator imply that the artist is innocent of ideological intent. Decisions as to whether or not to represent the world as a unified totality; whether to represent 'verifiable' Russian types and perpetuate their acceptability; plus decisions pertaining to constituting one's profession on the basis of a continuity or rejection of formal elements from the past were all mediated by the artist consciously acting as 'objective' observer or subjective creator of a fictive image of reality.

Common to artists embracing Marxist Realism were attempts to state 'universal meaningfulness', unequivocal and objective truths and totalizing frames of reference. The works discussed below have been selected from artists in each of the figurative groups outlined in Chapter Three and on the basis of the issues outlined above. Some may be seen in terms of Marxist realism, others not. They do not all function as clear illustrations of realism or anti-realism but combine elements of the above in different ways, illustrating the problems raised by the realist/anti-realist divide. The combination of elements in each artist's work was informed by their definitions of proletarian/revolutionary culture, their artistic allegiances, political allegiances and the personal sense they made of the contexts in which they were working. Each artist's work will be discussed according to the objectives of her/his group as set out in Chapter Three. These groups will be roughly divided into separate sections according to a) their continuation of 'bourgeois' realist concerns, b) their engagement with contemporary European and 'leftist' developments in visual art, c) their attempt to develop a typology based on older Symbolist forms, d) their adoption of 'revolutionary romantic' platforms and overtly

militant programmes of action. The number of artists selected from each group has been contingent on the available information on figurative art from this period.³

A. Figurative groups working in the style of pre-revolutionary realism and Russian Cezannism: Makovets, Bytie, NOZh and OMZh.

The artists of the above mentioned groups shared what Lukacs referred to as the attitudes of Critical Realists, namely a critical engagement with the material conditions in which they lived. They did not display a concern with abstraction, evident in much of twentieth-century Modernism, nor an eagerness to display elements of *partiinost* which came to be seen as a requirement of Socialist Realism in later years (see Chapter Three). However what they did share with Socialist Realists was a respect for ‘academic’ traditions and on this basis they were assimilated into the ‘trajectory’ toward Socialist Realism which was retrospectively constructed by Soviet critics. Their use of so-called bourgeois conventions also served as a bond between artists who moved between these groups and formed alliances with one another (see below).

Four artists from the **Makovets** provide interesting indicators of this group’s professed intention to build upon the past and to synthesize spirit and matter.⁴ This is visible in the following **Makovet’s** works: Sergei Gerasimov’s *Our Daily Bread* (1921), Vera Pestel’s *Interior. Family at the Table* (1921), Alexander Shevchenko’s *A Woman Ironing* (1920) and Nikolai Sinezubov’s *A Street, Early Spring* (1920) and *Mother and Child* (1919). It is important to contextualise the figuration of this group as a form of expression which follows on from the decorative and European elegance of the **World of Art**, the

3. References used for visual material include the following: Leniashin (1988); Bowlt (1988); Bown (1991); Preciado (1988); Holme (1935); VOKS Almanac 9-10 (1934); Bakos and Havos (1988); Aurora Art Publishers postcard series (1990); Lodder (1983); Chen (1943); Bird (1987); Elliot and Dudakov (1989); Selizarova and Barabonova (1966); Motchalov (1971); Sysoyev (1967); Loukanski (1945); Ya Rusakov (1975).

4. The 1922 **Makovet** proclamation read: "The task of our creativity is to fuse the spontaneous voices of nature elevated to the highest sphere of spiritual life with nature herself and to confine them in mighty, cohesive images which will synthesize these conditions". See Bowlt (1982:213).

European Modernism of the **Jack of Diamonds**, the Neoprimitivism of the **Donkey's Tail**, and the rejection of imitative realism by the **Union of Youth**.⁵ It is particularly in the light of the Nonobjectivist claims of **The Union of Youth** that their figuration should be viewed. Compared to the elaborate elegance of the **World of Art** or the schematic abstractions of the **Union of Youth**, the **Makovets'** are extremely literal images evoking in one sense a continuation of late nineteenth-century forms of realism. However the figurative treatment of the **Makovets** is far more simplified, each shape distinctly delineated from the next. This is particularly evident in the Cubist geometricisation of Gerasimov. As a group they had also obviously absorbed the vigorous paint application of post-Impressionists but not their liberated colour palette. Yet what they revived was not just a continuity of a European past (see Chapter Three) but a distinctly Russian history, characterised by their concern to fuse spiritual and material concerns.⁶ In general their figuration is constrained by profuse black contours which could be said to indicate a tension between resistant material boundaries and abstracted spirit.

When examining these works for evidence of a shift in societal values incurred by the revolution or for a redefinition of social types, what is evident is that pre-revolutionary types are firmly in place: Gerasimov's peasant father is provider; Sinezubov's women are defined in one image as mother, in another as sex-trade worker; Pestel depicts a nuclear family; and Shevchenko a housebound ironing women. These are not revolutionary 'types' depicting revised societal roles and functions. They do not provide evidence of the individuality of subject but nor do they function as generalised acclamations of 'types'. Anonymity persists because of this absence of detail, preventing both identification and

5. The **Union of Youth** was formed in 1910 and organized six exhibitions of avant-garde work. Their journal appeared once in 1912 and twice in 1913 and included extracts from Futurist manifestos. The final issue included a statement by Olga Rozanova which read as follows: "The aesthetic value of an abstract picture lies in the completeness of its painterly content..." Leniashin (1988:31). For full text see Bowlt (1988:103-110). See also Bowlt (1988:23-38) on the place of intuition in their journal, especially the articles by Markov. Members of the **Union of Youth** included Annenkov, the Burliuk brothers, Chagall, Exter, Filinov, Kliun, Malevich, Miturich, Puni, Rozanova, Shevchenko, Tatlin, Tyrsa, Udaltsova.

6. This desire to understand the relationship of spiritual and material factors on life is reflected in the work of a number of Russian philosophers, for example Nikolai Strakov, Nicholas Danislevsky and Vladimir Soloviev (Nolte 1989).

character study. The sex-trade worker has skeletal features, the farm-worker exists in schematic outline only, Pestel's subjects' faces are clouded in shadow. What is intriguing is that Shevchenko's image of *A Woman Ironing* (124x88 cm) [Fig 9] gives over all of its space to a domestic scene which has no claims to significance. In that it documents a submissive resignation to the eternal demands of labour, it might seem to be a 'tribute' to this labour, but what it is not is a glorification of labour. The evident exhaustion written into the colour that makes up the face of the labouring women precludes any such assumptions. The image is not one of liberation nor does it suggest the possibility of liberation, but it is rendered with a grace and lyricism which evinces some sympathy and admiration for the subject. The artist does not question the role of the labouring woman but nor does he assume a total moral silence.

The overall tone of these works reflects the **Makovets'** professed desire for spiritual rejuvenation. What we see in the expression of the depicted figures in these works is not only the desire for spiritual solace but also for improved material conditions. These reflections of sobriety probably resulted from the experience of harsh living conditions during the civil war in the early twenties. The images are not visions of a world of plenty. Decorative touches are limited to the self-conscious placement of fruit and flowers on the ironing board in Shevchenko's *A Woman Ironing*. The only beauty in Sinezubov's *A Street* [Fig 10] is the accidental reflection of the light on the melting snow while his drab interior in *Mother and Child* [Fig 11] is set off by a touch of gold in the mother's ear. In Pestel's *Interior* [Fig 12] he appears to assert the impossibility of aesthetic and physical fulfilment. In this image we are faced with framed images decorating the walls of the home but the heavy black contour lines which signify these frames are juxtaposed against the absence of content within them. This indicates that they are not symbols of decoration or plenitude but instead are related in significance to the empty dinner plates on the table. In *Our Daily Bread* [Fig 13] Gerasimov depicts the austere lifestyle of stoic workers.⁷ Each of these artists makes their presence felt in the form of a desire for more than that which exists, more than the domestic isolation, familial routine and the

7. This interest in austerity is developed in Gerasimov's later works executed during his years as an **OMZh** member and as a Socialist Realist.

meagre rewards of robust labour. Despite the theoretical claims of the **Makovets**, these are not syntheses of subjective and objective realities. Instead these images depict the absence of an interventionist revolutionary consciousness in post-revolutionary years. What they make evident is that the promises of liberation have not been felt except as an absence, and here they are quietly mourned.

Gerasimov's *A Townswoman* [Fig 14] (1923) is an unflattering image of an urban working class woman whose dignity appears to be based on the history of her labour, evident in her stressed facial expression and rigid posture. Her appearance seems to speak of a defensiveness and strict adherence to a social code which she cannot afford to transgress. This image might well reflect the type of critical realism defended by Lukacs, affiliated as it is to 'bourgeois' Cezannism, and communicating a 'useful' description of the subjects material and social status.⁸ It was on the basis of such 'critical realist' features that Gerasimov was probably able to identify with **OMZh/OMKh** in later years. His conservative Cezannism was also readily accepted by **AKhRR** painters (see below).

While **Makovet** artists assumed that the viewer shared and recognised a common reality, they alluded to the desire for more than what this reality offered. **NOZh** too declared an interest in what reality could become. This was expressed by calling for painting that was 'objective and realistic' combined with a 'reappraisal of literal reality' (Leniashin 1988:114). The use of the term 'objective' accompanied by the term 'realistic' presumably implied an interest in the objective world as opposed to an abstract one comprised entirely of subjective visions. **NOZh** artists believed however that 'artistic' feeling could be accommodated in these 'objective' observations. In an effort to understand this relation between 'detached' characterisation and the 'reappraising' commentary of the creator it is useful to consider the work of Samuil Adlivankin. Adlivankin achieved this in the form of satirical renderings of contemporary life. In *Tram B* [Fig 15] (1922) he simplified and exaggerated features of physique and dress which he observed and

8. Lukacs argued that any critical documentation of material conditions served as a useful contribution toward a critique of life under capitalism. See "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism" in Lukacs (1962:93-135).

identified as essential indicators of class, occupation and familial status. In this image, workers, intellectuals, peasants, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and women, defined in terms of an interface of urban and sexual concerns, each occupy their allotted place in the bus queue or are seated ready for transit. However this order goes awry in the bottleneck of action where a number of characters try to squeeze into the same space. The lack of involvement of the characters in the image who are unaffected by the fray seems to be a reflection of Adlivankin's own emotional distance from the 'struggle'. They assume a crucial function in what seems to be an ironical comment on the struggle for equity. This image subtly suspends the moral and emotive content which was implied in that part of **NOZh**'s manifesto which encouraged artists to find art through 'suffering and struggle'.⁹ Instead it displays a critical *distancing* to exemplify **NOZh**'s stated commitment to objectivity plus reappraisal.

Adlivankin's *Clearing up a Crisis* (1931) [Fig 16] was painted nine years later after Adlivankin had left **NOZh** and worked as an unaffiliated painter. It documents in a cynical manner, the results of the enforced egalitarianism humorously commented on in *Tram B*. The subject of the work is collectivisation and here agricultural workers are pictured in the process of resolving a crisis. What is of interest in this image is not the overt and apparent collective effort indicated by the numbers of workers present, but the causes of conflict revealed through Adlivankin's composition and formal emphases. In place of a celebration of democracy we are presented with a foregrounded opposition between a worker whose face, literally 'sun-drenched', signifies rural peasant labour, and an ashen-faced worker with goggles who appears to be an industrial worker. It is not insignificant that this image was painted in 1931, the last year of Stalin's first Five Year Plan to industrialise and to enforce the collectivization of agriculture. This was post-Shakhty,¹⁰ post-Stalin's defeat of the left and right within the party and after the

9. See **NOZh** declaration in Chapter Three above.

10. See Chapter Three Section E above.

suppression of this peasant resistance.¹¹ Not only are we asked to witness the conflict between the rural and the technological but also the thorny problem of 'democratic' representation and the reactions to legislated gender equality.

The woman 'representing' the workers is not only literate but also connected telephonically to the site of real power, which notably lies outside of the ambit of these concerned workers. The written document, which is overtly rendered, draws attention to the new significance of literacy skills in organisation. The detail provided by Adlivankin coincided with the historical practice of central government appointing chairpeople in the collectives who most often were urban-based Communists. But for its title, there is nothing about unified collectivity in this image. Traditionally women were not equal members of the peasant *mir* or commune, but on the collective farms or *kolkhoz* they became equal in status (Fitzpatrick 1982:151). The new centrality of women in the *kolkhoz* is underscored in Adliviankin's image by the sharp contrast of the appointed chairwoman's pale face enclosed within the black scarf, emphasising her firm control and stern visage. The men seem to exhibit extreme tension in the presence of her 'control'. A discordant clash of complimentary colours is held in check by a predominance of black, which disallows any retinal play or light-heartedness. Faces are in deep shadow and all eyes are averted, except for one individual who stares directly at the viewer as if asking for a witness to this event. Although this is an attempt to solve a crisis, it is evident that this is not a comfortable resolution. Adliviankin's reference to the unfamiliar political authority of woman is used to enhance his comment on the troubled efforts of collectivisation.

While **NOZh** artists interpreted realist figuration as a combination of objective renderings and personal reappraisals, **Bytie** artists committed themselves to figuration, the social relevance of which lay solely in its technique and in the elaboration of what they termed

11. After the deportation of over a million 'kulaks' to Siberia, the Urals, and the north between 1930 and 1933, the remaining peasants were expected to market three times the produce they had previously marketed. They were forced to work in tandem with the tens of thousands of Communists and urban workers mobilized to work in the countryside as organisers.

Cezannism.¹² Many figurative artists shifted between groupings and Alexander Osmerkin is one such artist whose travels provide some indication not only of his own concerns but also of the nature of the groups themselves. That he found comfort in **NOZh**,¹³ **Bytie** and **OMZh** is some indication of the similarities between these groups, namely, the continuing development of late nineteenth-century pictorial techniques. It is this combination of verisimilitude and technique which **Bytie** artists shared rather than a common commitment to a philosophy of Marxist Realism. An examination of a work by Osmerkin painted in 1921 illustrates this commitment to *pictorial* technique.

Portrait of Ekaterina Barkova [Fig 17] is a large Cezannist portrait of a woman who is an 'object' of study and might just as well be a still life upon whom Osmerkin exercises his painting skills. She is not rendered with feeling so much as with painterly finesse and with the intention of defining a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface. In this respect Osmerkin reflected the intention of the old **Jack of Diamonds** group expressed as follows:

painting is coloured space...one must remember that nature for the artist and for painting, is exclusively an object of visual sensation (Bowl 1988:70).

In Osmerkin's painting, the subject is indeed reduced to its surface construction and the orchestration of colour. The viewer is led to believe that the presence of the artist is effaced in this 'objective' imaging. The work tends more toward a statement about professional expertise applied to an objective analysis of a figure than a portrait of a particular individual. Such celebration of technique by **Bytie** was coincident with the celebration of technique accomplishment under NEP, but Osmerkin's image does not reflect the revolution in his subject choice, nor does he arrange its presentation in accordance with the principles of Marxist Realism. The work is not a redefinition of societal or psychological values, it does not present us with the construction of an identifiable type and it does not refer us to a social context outside of the individual. The individual depicted is not rooted in a community of shared thought or feeling and in this

12. For information on **Bytie** see Chapter Three above.

13. In 1924 most **NOZh** artists moved into **Bytie** (Leniashin 1988:114) and also went into **AKhRR** (Voks nos 9-10 1934:17).

sense the work exists outside of the ideological concerns common to those in support of the revolution. It is nevertheless interesting that despite the persistent foregrounding of technique in **Bytie** works, in later years Soviet authorities regarded these images in a *more* favourable light than that of the leftists because here was still overt evidence of an objective and identifiable world. The sober ‘Cezannism’ of **Bytie** artists also coincided with the way in which **AKhRR** artists rendered reality, not only in painterly application and selection of colours but in their effort to efface the presence of the originator of the image. It is this absence of contesting subjectivities and controversy in the works of **Bytie** artists that inclined later Soviet officials to favour its work and the associated Cezannist style.

The argument for easel painting that was supported by references to the easel art ‘traditions’ of late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century artistic developments, with an emphasis on Cezannism, was shared by artists from the **Makovets**, **Bytie**, **OMZh** and **OMKh**, and also by **AKhRR** in 1926 and 1927. As ex-**Jack of Diamond** members, many **OMZh** painters had spent years studying European painterly movements and applying this knowledge in the form of still life studies. Early still lifes by **OMZh** artists Robert Falk [Fig 18] and Petr Konchalovsky [Fig 19] attest to their knowledge of post-Impressionist techniques.¹⁴ The accusations of being decadent ‘European Cezannists’, which had been levelled at them in their **Jack of Diamonds** days, were reiterated in the post-1917 climate by young leftists critical of **OMZh**.¹⁵ Ironically these ex-**Jack of Diamonds** artists were themselves accused of leftism in 1911, but young leftists in the twenties regarded **OMZh** as traditionalists who were resistant to interrogating the place of easel art and resistant to the idea of developing a proletarian culture. Although **OMZh**

14. In their youth as **World of Art** members and **Jack of Diamond** exhibitors Falk and Konchalovsky not only studied Parisian works but also co-exhibited with Parisian artists in Russia. At the first **Jack of Diamonds** show in 1910/11 Falk, Konchalovsky and Mashkov were referred to as the Russian Cezannists who had been expelled from the Moscow College of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture for their ‘leftism’. See Bird (1987:197).

15. Fellow exhibitors in **Jack of Diamonds**, Larionov and Goncharova initiated these accusations and left the **Jack of Diamonds** to form the Neoprimitivist group **The Donkeys Tail**, itself influenced by European Futurism as well as local folk art forms.

did merge with **AKhRR** for a short time, an examination of their paintings verifies the accusations of leftists in the twenties, namely that **OMZh** was resistant to a redefinition of easel art in terms of the needs of a new proletarian culture. These leftists arguably had more in common with **AKhRR** than did **OMZh**. Nevertheless the brief merger between **OMZh** and **AKhRR** existed in defence of easel art and in the belief that the unifying exhibition of 1926, "The Life of People in the USSR", would elicit works with elements in common from both organisations.¹⁶

It was on the basis of his academic study of contemporary painting that **OMZh** artist Robert Falk was employed at IZO between 1918 and 1921 and at the SVOMAS/VKHUTEMAS from 1918 to 1928. His *Self-Portrait* (1924) [Fig 20] is an affirmation of his status as an easel painter. In this work Falk holds his arm protectively across his body, firmly grasping three paintbrushes in his right hand. He is neatly attired in yellow cardigan and scarf and presents the image of an earnest intellectual engaged in the private activity of art making. This is a serious comment on the importance of painting, the statement reiterated in the technique itself, in the lavish but considered and controlled painterly texture. Falk pictures himself convinced in his resolve to paint. The intensity of this resolve is underscored by the concentrated energy which informs the small painterly gestures which build up subtle modulations of colour. It was on the basis of his conviction to continue to paint canvases of his own choosing that Falk was later prohibited from exhibiting.¹⁷

The lessons of Fauvism and Cezannism were evident also in the work of **OMZh** artist Petr Konchalovsky, ex-president of the **Jack of Diamonds**, contributor to **World of Art** exhibitions, contributor to the 1926 **AKhRR** show, contributor to **Bytie** shows in 1926/7, member of **OMZh** in 1927, **AKhR** in 1928 and then **OMKh** thereafter. It is the influence of Cezanne's style that is most notable in Konchalovsky's *Soldiers Bathing* (1922) [Fig 21]

16. See Chapter Three for comments on the way in which **OMZh** works probably functioned as contributions to this show.

17. This prohibition lasted from 1938 to 1958, the year of Falk's death. Just before his death he was granted a small vetted exhibition in Moscow (Bird 1988:264).

but the painting is also important for its reworking of a popular post-Impressionist theme into a specifically Russian context. The thematic recurrence of the 'everyday' scene of bathers is here invested with overt political and didactic intent. While Fauvist works of such themes communicated an implicit nationalism through idyllic scenes of people enjoying their natural rights to their land (Herbert 1992), Konchalovsky's work was an *explicit* commentary about the political relationship of the human body to its natural domain. Konchalovsky depicts a scene of leisure which has been hard won by the relaxing soldiers. The focal point of the scene is a naked soldier who stands on crutches, leg amputated above the knee, perusing a card game played by his comrades. He is positioned as a full frontal classical nude, but here marked by the effects of war. Despite this, Konchalovsky celebrates his virile body, as well as the 'fruits' of his sacrifice, namely the ownership of the land by the Soviet people.

In this work Konchalovsky reclaims not only Russia's past military exploits but also the importance of a European cultural heritage. It is precisely this combination of European culture evident in the painterly references, and Russian subject matter, that guaranteed Konchalovsky a place in the academies and in the hearts of Soviet officialdom.¹⁸ His works were considered to be affirmative views of life in Russia in that they described its physical reality and its subjects. *Pushkin* [Fig 22], *The Return From the Fair* [Fig 23] and *The Novgorodians* [Fig 24] were examples of works admired for reflecting this essentially Russian subject matter, whether as records of Russia's cultural past or of its contemporary urban and rural culture.

Konchalovsky's *The Novgorodians* (1925) pictures residents of Novgorod, a town approximately 150 km south of Leningrad. At its simplest the painting communicates the joys of human company and the ease of social discourse in a comfortably equipped home. This image of an uninhibited exchange of ordinary people also called up a rich history of Russia, dating back to its origin in the city-state of Novgorod in the ninth century. It is for this reason that the work probably had resonance enough for Soviet patriots. The

18. Konchalovsky was a merited artist of the RSFSR and was awarded the State Prize of the Soviet Union in later years.

Novgorodians were historically wealthy traders who had survived centuries of invasions, a massive fire and devastation of the city-state in the 1700's, and a period of renewed growth prior to 1914 (Parker 1968). The work must have also evoked feelings of survival and well-being experienced against all the odds of history. Konchalovsky's representation of prosperous Novgorodians whose wealth was founded on trade, was possibly related in part to the effects of renewed trade under NEP and its fuelling of the 'resilient' Russian spirit. Whether or not explicitly informed by political events, his works were nevertheless popular. In 1934 his works were praised for being easily understood, for exhibiting a respect for the 'outside' world as opposed to being ultra-subjective, and for not contradicting the style of Socialist Realism.¹⁹ This would lend support to the notion of them appealing to a pride in Russian history and Russian subjects. A work such as *The Novgorodians* would probably have evoked the nationalist sympathies of **AKhRR** artists, recalling the study of Russian types evident in themes of the **Peredvizhniki**, such as Repin's *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Reply to the Turkish Sultan* [Fig 25], *Barge-Haulers on the Volga* [Fig 26] and Surikov's *Boyarina Morozova* [Fig 27]. It must have been on the basis of such works that his brief 1928 venture into **AKhRR** territory with **OMZh** was tolerated by **AKhRR**. He was however to retreat into the more conservative grouping **OMZh**, reorganised as **OMKh** in 1928.

Some critics nevertheless lamented Konchalovsky's 'diminished' status due to his not adopting the new style of Socialist Realism. N. Schekotov wrote of him thus:

Konchalovsky has much talent...but does not succeed in creating a type of the portrait of the new man of the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat....Modern reality is a stranger to him....It is of these masters who are still working, that one still hopes something (Loukomski 1945:48).

These academic 'Cezannists' in the **Makovets**, **Bytie**, **OMZh** and **OMKh** were tolerated by groups like **AKhRR** because of their respect for past cultural formal conventions, and their wariness of total abstraction. On this basis they were later assimilated into a general 'history' of Socialist Realism even though not embracing the *partiinost* displayed by **AKhRR** and required by Socialist Realism.

19. See Tikhonova in VOKS nos 9-10 (1934:110-110).

B. Modernist figurative groups formed in response to the 1924 Discussional Show: Association of Three, Projectionists, Concretists and OST.

The figurative groups which emerged with the VKhUTEMAS graduates and as a result of the 1924 Discussional show were more problematic to subsume into the 'history' of Socialist Realism. These figurative painters confused the conservative and academic proponents of a 'suitable' realism to be built upon traditions from the past. The work of these diverse new groups was confusing not only because they reflected an array of contemporary approaches but also because much of the 'new Soviet' subject matter was ambiguous in its treatment. Although they couched their manifestos in the 'correct' scientific jargon of the day (see Chapter Three), some of these works were decidedly critical of the Soviet project, while others were more supportive and reflected the 'officially' desired strength, clarity and conviction in their Soviet subject matter.

Alexander Deineka was a member of the **Association of Three** which exhibited at the 1924 Discussional exhibition under the banner of contemporary realism. Deineka drew on contemporary European trends such as *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Surrealism, and although ostensibly documenting 'new and revolutionary' subject matter in the USSR, he also communicated, through his style, an ambivalence about the Soviet project in his early works. In later years he allied himself to didactic pro-Soviet programmes and chose 'heroic' revolutionary themes. Because of this his entire oeuvre was assimilated into the 'history' of Socialist Realism, his stylistic ambiguities and 'anti-realist' influences ignored.

While still a member of the **Association of Three** Deineka painted *Girl Seated on a Chair* (1924) [Fig 28]. It is interesting to compare this work with **Bytie** artist Osmerkin's *Portrait of Ekaterina Barkova* [Fig 9] discussed above. In contrast to the conventional $\frac{3}{4}$ pose in Osmerkin's work, which locates the viewer slightly below the subject, Deineka represents the woman he paints in her physical entirety, viewed from above and yet appearing to loom over the viewer in her monumental enormity. Despite the large dimensions of the work (118x72.5 cm), the figure is given very little space, the head literally forced against the upper limits of the canvas and the feet pulled in awkwardly at the bottom right. The substance of this figure is further emphasised by the clear delineation of composite

shapes against an empty ground. An even light reveals the weight of all shapes with the same uncompromising precision. His graphic training makes itself felt in his bright white outlines which serve to flatten the chair on which the substantial woman is placed. These outlines serve to silhouette her form, as if it were an out-of-register print, and render its volume in palpable contrast to the two-dimensional space around it. Both graphic and painterly techniques are used to assert the uncompromising frontality of the subject. Informed by this fascination with graphic juxtapositions of positive and negative space, of two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, Deineka communicates an interest in the physical immediacy of 'objective' reality as well as the fictitious construction of this three dimensionality. It is this conscious reference to the processes of pictorial construction that identify him as a Modernist despite his being eulogised as a Socialist Realist in later years.

As a member of the **Association of Three**, Deineka's project was to document the exterior 'objective' surface of contemporary subjects. This he did in a tightly controlled manner, but as if conceding the complexity of events beneath this surface reality. This was in distinct contrast to the overt painterly 'disintegration' associated with artists from **OMKh** and the old **Jack of Diamonds**, committed to a Cezannist analysis of form. In contrast to the Cezanesque Osmerkin, in Deineka's *Girl Seated on a Chair* there are no discrete brushstrokes or fragmenting formal facets. His smoothly modulated exteriors are unsettling in their precision, as if concealing activity beneath the skin. This is evident in Deineka's very detailed attention to areas of flesh coloured blue, red, and mauve, shadowed and almost translucent in places.

The use of tightly modulated exterior surfaces echoed a contemporary rejection of 'sketchiness' and 'Cezannism', a central principle of **OST** which Deineka joined in 1925. **OST** emerged out of the 1924 Discussional show groups, and included the **Association of Three**. Deineka remained an **OST** member until 1927. The same tension between exterior realities and underlying realities are evident in his **OST** works. **OST** claimed a 'revolutionary contemporaneity and clarity' in their subject matter (see Chapter Three) which because of the loaded use of the term 'revolutionary', is a more difficult aim to demonstrate in Deineka's work. It implied a contemporaneity of technique suited to the

context of revolutionary Russia and functioned as an attempt to claim legitimacy for modern figurative techniques. Three works produced by Deineka during this period prove useful in a test of Deineka's stake in 'revolutionary contemporaneity'.

Before Descending the Mine [Fig 29] is a large oil painting (246.8 x 209.8 cm) executed in 1925. It has been described as a monument to workers who are depicted with rough brute strength set against the graphic beauty of industrial structures (Basner and Gusarova 1988:74). That Deineka chose to paint an image of workers in various stages of descent into a mine and that the mechanism of the lift in the mineshaft is the context within which workers are situated does seem to lend credence to the idea that this image is about contemporary issues, i.e. the proletariat revolution and industrialisation (Basner and Gusarova 1988). However what I would like to draw attention to is Deineka's interpretation of comradesly interchanges, as well as his 'contemporary' technique which add additional levels of meaning to the image. In the same way that the *Girl Seated on a Chair* seems to conceal as much as it reveals, so in this work Deineka's style invites diverse interpretations.

Diverse styles successfully coexist in a composition which is literally divided into thirds. In one third of the canvas a figure floats without a contextual background, other figures are set in a more convincing and identifiable space, and still others are schematically rendered against a flattened graphic pattern indicating a wire grid. Formally and thematically Deineka appears to work within a realist paradigm but in effect he subverts it by giving equal space to contrary styles and interests. Deineka's men are arranged in positions of waiting which emphasise either their solitariness prior to the descent underground or their attempts to bridge this solitariness through casual but charged encounters. A kind of tense resignation is written into the body language or facial expression of those isolated individuals, and a tentative interdependence is written into the complementary bodily gestures of the men who are arranged in pairs. This is an image which might well be a tribute to comradesly relations of workers, but it could be seen as an initiation into male society, where intimate exchange is desired and is set against the backdrop of solitary contemplation. The space between the paired figures is a space charged with anticipation of response. In each pair, one of the figures seems to

gaze at, or engage directly with the other. It is a kind of homo-erotic encounter within the safe context of the industrialising endeavour.

Deineka's undulating graphic profiles of men, flattened and simplified, contrast sharply with the detailed realism of the face highlighted within the dark interior of the lift. This isolated face is in turn contrasted with and framed by the two warmly lit faces of the men outside the shaft and seeking company. This carefully considered combination of older painterly forms of realism and a new graphic realism sets up a play of oppositions and stylistic negotiations within the picture plane which underscores the oppositional isolation and pairing between the men. Painterly realism is contradicted by a schematic graphic simplification, and the relation between state and worker is overwritten by a fascination with the physical conduct and emotional exchanges, or lack thereof, between men.

In a 1926 work *The Construction of New Shops* [Fig 30], Deineka again makes no attempt to construct a convincing realistic space. What he draws attention to is the construction of pictorial space and this is as important as the narration which pertains to the economic project of the day i.e. the expansion of industry and state commerce. In the foreground, metal girders divide the canvas horizontally and vertically, providing reference points to locate the two large central figures and to lead the eye to middle and far distance, indicating the framework of the shops under construction. The plane is traversed horizontally and vertically by railroad tracks over which a woman tries to haul a laden trailer. The focal point of the work is the effort entailed in this task, but what is significant is that it is a task involving the physical prowess of a woman who literally pulls herself out of the detailed contextual space over into an area of the unmarked canvas, as though this were an area of experience yet to be explored. What we are provided with is evidence of the capability of women, but this is not a simple celebration of gender equity.

The statement is complicated by the treatment of space and the situation of figures around her. Her bodily strength is signified by the colours of blood and muscle with which her clothing is rendered and by her enormity against the diminutive men in the far distance. The woman to her left stares on with a slightly dazed smile of admiration, her

idealised expression suggesting the 'romantic revolutionary' faith of later Socialist Realist works. However this woman's body is contorted, her hands anxiously clasped, neck muscles strained and body restricted by the tightness of her clothing. Her gestures undo the notions of pride or admiration written into her expression and instead convey anxiety, uncertainty and discomfort. There exists a precarious balance between this windblown, distraught woman who seems to hover in space and the able-bodied woman on the right who pulls her way into uncharted territory. There is a precariousness also in the apparent strength of these bodies. Short haired, simply dressed and barefoot, Deineka suggests on one level that they are workers. On another he erodes their strength by emphasising the vulnerability of these bodies: a blinding white light highlights the juxtaposition of durable metal and overexposed skin which is coloured to appear harshly burned in this light. The bare feet of the active worker are extremely vulnerable and positioned precariously close to the heavily loaded trailer. Deineka masters these tensions of space to suggest a world which is ambiguous and sometimes hazardous.

It is precisely this ambiguity in the works of his **OST** period that Soviet writers have either excused or ignored. Nikiforov argued that the above two works exhibit a coldness and a treatment which is too rationalistic but that nevertheless the figures are the first successful examples of working class types in Soviet art (VOKS nos 9-10 1934:125). Claiming Deineka as a precursor of Socialist Realism, Sysoyev wrote of *The Construction of New Shops*:

In this canvas the artist succeeded in revealing the spiritual world of the builders of a new life, the masters of their own country (Sysoyev 1967:19).

What neither of these writers uncovers is that this process of 'mastery' is *not* one of unremitting control and assurance.

Deineka's works during the twenties were not uncomplicated celebrations of the rights of workers, soldiers and women, although he did address all of these issues. His *Textile Workers* (1927) [Fig 31] is about factory labour and its efficient organization, but it is also a comment on the disconcerting sterility and functionalism of the environment. In this highly organised space each person has their allotted place and task, but these tasks are executed in robotic manner. The flattened repetition of industrial shapes are exposed in

a cold splendour, but human forms sweat quietly beneath this harsh light. Deineka objectifies these working women, revealing bodily details through their thin clothing as if these women are too hot and preoccupied to be aware of their appearance. That this labour is arduous and that it will take its toll on the workers is indicated by a stylistic device similar to that used in *The Construction of New Shops* [Fig 30]. A woman seems oblivious of the direction in which she pulls her burden and appears about to step beyond the pictorial plane into unmarked territory. The disturbing edge to Deineka's works lies in his characters' apparent oblivion of these spatial 'traps' he sets for them. These uncharted spaces in his work seem to refer to territories, psychological, economic, social and sexual which are yet to be explored. Whether about women's labour, industrial self-sufficiency, or intimate comradesly relations, these were new and adventurous themes to be dealing with.²⁰

Problematic eulogies were also written in relation to Deineka's *Defence of Petrograd* (1928) [Fig 32]. Sysoyev wrote:

so great is the energy emanating from the people, and so clearly expressed is the indomitable will seen in the figures of the Red Guards (Sysoyev 1967:19).

The work was shown at an exhibition held to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Red Army. It depicts the Petrograd proletariat marching forward to defend the city from the White guard. On one level this image does communicate the new face of a peoples' militia. Women are accorded a central place in the composition, signifiers of an egalitarian socialist society whose members are committed to the task of defending the revolution which installed it. It is this content which would have won approval from the revolutionary establishment and this no doubt is what the critic Sysoyev responded to. What he did not read is Deineka's resolution of portraying a narrative in the fullness of time i.e. his description of a time frame which extends beyond the moment to indicate events subsequent to this moment. Deineka depicts a continually moving line of soldiers who begin by marching toward the viewer, turn right, march out of the picture plane and return, after the encounter with the assailants, at the top right of the canvas to march

20. It is interesting to note the disappearance of these incomplete contexts in his later works, marked as they are by less spatial ambiguity and a more identifiable celebration of collective endeavours (see Section D below).

back into the picture across a bridge which delineates the different time frames. However the bridge delineates more than a different time span, it separates out the determination and hope written into the faces and the positioning of figures prior to the event from the dejection written into their return. The image could be read as a tribute to those who experienced the physical and emotional effects of the defence, but it is not a glorification of the military exercise. It is characterised by the biting social realism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters rather than the romanticisation characteristic of Socialist Realism. Even the expressions of those soldiers who set out to defend the city are not the stuff of heroes. Coming up the rear are two important characters, one who is decidedly fearful, the other of whom gazes out at the viewer, haggard faced, as if confronting us with our knowledge of the consequences of military action. This was a work far removed from the intentions of Socialist Realism.

To illustrate that the work of the early twenties communicated a sometime cynical view of the social project it is also useful to turn to the work of Yuri Pimenov. Pimenov was part of the **Association of Three** with Deineka and he too moved into the organization **OST**. Like Deineka he was to be awarded numerous state prizes and was constructed as a defendant of Socialist Realism in later years. A close study of work by Pimenov produced during the time that he belonged to **OST** will serve to illustrate that Pimenov was far more critical than the state supposed. Technically his works communicated the complex debates about technique in the twenties and did not assert an unproblematic conviction in their status as figurative images.

Disabled Veterans [Fig 33] was painted in 1926, two years after the death of Lenin. It could be described as an image of veterans from the first world war, from the 1917 revolution and from the civil war. However like Deineka's *The Defence of Petrograd*, this is not a victorious image designed to evoke national pride. This is an image which brings to mind the cynicism of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists such as Otto Dix. Two survivors are pictured against a ground the colour of clotted blood, split mid-canvas from a ghoulish green sky. One figure marches forward, face fixed in an irresolute expression as if to draw attention away from the wounded body and with eyes turned inward from the surrounding devastation. The eyes of his companion are rolled upward to reveal what

could be interpreted as an hysteria of pain and anguish. Both appear to be physically and emotionally incapable of shaping their worlds. This helplessness is signified by the neon-green outline of one lame hand set against the severed fingers of another and the blood-stained bandages of a third. The figures stand in a scorched space with little sign of hope or renewal and Pimenov adds weight to his protest against war by using a large format 265.6 x 177.7 cm in size. Socialist Realist canvases of this same size were devoted to uncomplex glorifications of war and heroism. In contrast this is a bold statement of despair made by a young artist in the context of extreme disillusionment with the progress of the revolution. It is significant that Pimenov chose to paint this work during the period in which many party members were questioning their contributions to the revolutionary struggle and many youths were voicing impatience with NEP (see Chapter Three).

Pimenov's work was not an example of a one-dimensional figurative style. He used figuration as a means with which to comment on the debates about style itself. In a 1927 work *Portrait of Architect Andrei Burov* [Fig 34], Pimenov treats his canvas unequally, working over some areas closely, leaving parts in sketchy outline and literally suspending his principle figure in a sitting posture. He pictures the architect Burov who is gazing at an archaic Greek torso while paging through a book which illustrates the formal elements of the 'new' Nonobjective art. Pimenov refers us to the connection between the geometric simplicity of this new language and its classical antecedents. It too is characteristic of an entrenched political order and Pimenov in his own commitment to this uneven figurative treatment comments on the historical specificity of style. This surely is a statement which denies the possibility of declaring one style fixed, static and superior, and in this regard Pimenov undermines the central claim of Socialist Realism.

The ambiguity of Pimenov's style is persistently overlooked in texts which unquestioningly accept him as a herald of Socialist Realism. In Preciado (1988:174) we read with reference to his *Girls with a Ball* [Fig 35]: "images of athletes were among the most popular subjects for members of OST". If one examines this as an ostensible image of healthy sporting Soviet types a different interpretation is suggested. The physique of both these women is insubstantial and unconvincing. The figure on the right seems virtually

twisted at both torso and neck while the pelvic area and thigh are rendered almost transparent. This is not about the victory of physical achievements. In fact it is an image that subverts the presumed primacy of the material order. The entire bottom half of the image is an ethereal play of transparent floating forms. Pimenov takes all sorts of liberties here with regard to how shapes are abstracted, highlighted and juxtaposed. There are two foci in the composition; one revolves around the eye contact between the girls and the balls, and the other the floating geometric forms near the legs of the women. The arm of the smiling woman who holds the largest ball seems literally to fuse into the ball itself. That arm of the woman who holds up a smaller ball (or orange) as if for exchange is thoroughly distorted to reach around the larger ball. This fusion of flesh and of circular motifs constitutes the most solid part of the composition, as well as being an area of the most saturated hue. Across the rest of the canvas Pimenov literally dissolves the forms thus providing no concrete clues about societal context. Most striking of all contradictions in this image is how this dreamlike base of the composition is supposed to support the material edifice above. Here is a determined blurring of truth and interpretation and an emphasis on the duality of objectivity and subjectivity. The ambiguity in this work denies the possibility of the sort of totalizing frame of reference operative in Socialist Realist works.

We are Building (1929) [Fig 36] is one of Pimenov's more unequivocal images of collective endeavour. Faces turned away from the viewer, workers dedicate themselves wholly to their mechanical counterparts. On the basis of such images it is possibly easier to understand Pimenov's construction as patriotic Soviet artist. However in this image Pimenov uses these human forms to create a near abstract formal arrangement, their black silhouettes punctuating an empty white space. His subjects are suspended beyond time and space and although echoing the country-wide project of industrial endeavour, they are rendered as pure form with little attention to context. Nor is there evidence of the way in which individual consciousness evolves dialectically in relation to this context, as was proposed by the more mature proponents of Socialist Realist such as Georg Lukacs. Here then is a work regarded as realist because of its subject matter, but which formally defied much of what Marxist Realist theorists desired i.e. the importance of

recognisable context, comprehensive detail and individual consciousness in an active relationship with the social organism.

The extent to which images of this period privileged the individual or the collective related to the artist's belief in the powers of the individual vis-a-vis the state. Images of the individual, and images emphasising the particularity of the individual in relation to collective endeavour, tend to raise questions about the adequacy of large systems in meeting individual needs – psychological, social or physical. On the other hand, where the image of the individual is less important than images of collective activity or is simply rendered in a generalised manner, the artist communicates a clearer faith in the macro-design of systems. These issues become increasingly complex however when considering the work of the **Concretists**.

The analytical 'objectivity' of the **Concretists** was discussed in Chapter Three as were their aims of contemporaneity and clarity of execution.²¹ Konstantin Vialov's 1923 work, *A Militiaman* [Fig 37], raises interesting questions about the way in which the individual is pictured in terms of the collective revolutionary project. What is not clear is the place that is demarcated for individual will in this design. The militiaman is placed in the centre of the canvas, extending from top to bottom and is viewed from below, club raised in a stiff somnambulistic pose. The viewer is confronted by the guard and is left to wonder what or whom the guard is protecting and in whose interests this guard acts. In the bottom left of the canvas a diminutive limousine is pictured in which sit a well dressed couple and chauffeur. The guard is placed between the limousine and the viewer. What is subtly questioned is the exercise of individual will on the part of the somnambulistic guard as well as that of the (absent) subjects whom he supposedly guards. In fact the whole question of what/whom he represents is suspended uncomfortably in this work because of the possibility that it is the interests of the privileged couple that he defends in a seemingly dazed manner. Their status, together with the moon/clock motif in the top right of the canvas indicating the transitory nature of this event, refer us to NEP as an interim period of economic recovery. On the basis of the sheer size of the militiaman,

21. See Chapter Three above.

it has been described as an image which "memorializes the new Soviet way of life" (Preciado 1988:228). Vialov's 'concreteness' is however one of exaggerated dimensions, surreal juxtapositions, ambiguous light sources and forms which either dissolve into the surrounding darkness or solidify into geometric abbreviations of themselves. This is an image which is designed to raise questions about the status of the revolution during NEP and the permissibility of individual speculation. The disjuncture of size and the ambiguity of light and facial expression all serve to create a reality which is more illusory than 'concrete'. Vialov was a student schooled in the particularities of formal language, an exponent of Nonobjective works and an artist who organized his canvas with formal sophistication. That the work takes as its subject matter the victory of the revolution is not in dispute. What is in dispute is what it says about the status of the revolution. Soviet ethics promised to resolve the conflict between individual freedom and security by eliminating 'negative' aspects of freedom, meaning those aspects of life in which individuals were left to their own devices. Vialov seems to question the erosion of these individual liberties and their replacement by the *regimented* control of the economy, work, movement etc. which in effect, under NEP, only served to benefit an *already* privileged class. It is the various and subtle commentaries on the revolution which are usually ignored when analysing these early figurative images, all of which have been assumed to lend support unproblematically to the state's proclamations and the Socialist Realist project.

The issue of the status of the individual in relation to the collective assumes a different guise in the work of **Concretist** Alexander Volkov, one that is mediated by Volkov's concern with the status of peoples in Uzbekistan. When comparing *Tea* (1926) [Fig 38] executed when he was a member of the Concretists with *Cotton Hilling* (1930s) [Fig 39] painted during the time of his **AKhRR** membership, we are faced with a radical shift in statement. The first is a statement about individual certitude and meditation, the second a statement about ensuring survival through the collective harvesting of cotton, the chief crop in the watered areas of Soviet Central Asia. The 1926 work is marked by its flattened clearly delineated forms and its lyrical decorative quality.

Schooled by Modernists, Volkov does not revert to nineteenth-century forms of realism. *Tea* marks the stage during which Volkov had committed himself to the **Concretist** programme and its definition of both depicted object and formal treatment as concrete. In this work he attempts to negotiate a position midway between the abstraction of his teachers and the tendentious realism of **AKhRR** to which he was later inclined. The intimate 30x30 cm work *Tea* has as its subject the quiet certitude of an Islamic man drinking tea in a physical space which does not need to be vigorously shaped but is already designed according to his individual needs. Merited artist of Uzbekistan, Volkov was heralded for producing works of a regional character which were also indicative of the national Soviet project. That he combined these depictions of regional lifestyles with Soviet plans for the country is evidenced in the 208x118 cm canvas, *Cotton Hilling* where an Islamic minority is shown toiling for the collective good of the union. The 1930 work assumes a volumetric solidity akin to the early figurative works of Kazimir Malevich. Although absorbed into the Socialist Realist tradition, stylistically Volkov's work contradicted such a 'tradition'. It was a continuation of the Neoprimitivism of earlier years, which in its celebration of the 'simplicity' of folk forms seemed more conducive to his rural subject matter.

Figurative paintings erroneously regarded as precursors to Socialist Realism not only exhibited styles contrary to Socialist Realism and not only privileged the place of individual over macro-human designs, but could also suggest the presence of determining forces in life which were *beyond* rational control. Such, one might argue, was the case with many **Projectionist** works. Despite the scientific connotations of the term 'objectivity' in their declarations, what their images reflected were the liberties they took when portraying 'reality'. The **Projectionists** used the scientific jargon of the day to differentiate the role of the artist from that of the designer of consumer goods, insisting that art was a 'science' of organising material (see Chapter Three). Their interest in the specificities of material and the potential of narrative was brought together by Alexander Tshyler in a form of poetic and painterly surrealism. Tshyler had studied under the Nonobjectivist Aleksandra Ekster and the master of engraved illustration, Vladimir Favorsky, thus combining a sensibility to formal experimentation with an interest in narrative detail and story.

Tshyler's ephemeral works play on what is assumed to be the truth, that which is taken at face value but which he shows to be constructed presentations of truth. His interest in these notions of intentional and illusory display were informed by productions he designed for the Byelorussian Jewish theatre in Minsk and the Kharkov Jewish theatre. To allude to these 'presentations' of truth or the relationship between illusory fiction and reality, Tshyler used as symbols in his work formal allusions to stage sets, and staged presentations of marionette-like characters. His surreal presentations have about them a Chagall-like quality, Chagall having also worked in theatre at the Jewish State Theatre in Moscow in 1920, producing works of a similar surreal and imaginary quality.

Tshyler's *Sportsparade* (1929) [Fig 40] is not a conventional representation of a sportsparade but it *is* about the release and containment of physical energy. It is a narrative about energies which are upheld, withheld and released. The title suggests an interest in the idea of physical prowess. The work is indeed about the 'desire' for sport, but here sport seems to be a metaphor for sexual release and woman is constructed as simultaneously desirous, unobtainable and uninhibited. Clothed men team together as if to help prop up a structure which serves to both veil a central female character and to support the frolicking exploits of a naked woman who is about to be joined by another naked woman and a man. The veiled/contained woman is larger than life, her lower torso covered by a cloth which echoes the grid-like pattern which features elsewhere, echoing the idea of sportsground, pavilion or surface-for-play. The idea of physical release is projected onto the figure of the woman above the contained and constrained space. The effect of this release appears to be an accumulative one as though the retiring men are now encouraged to express their libido and to join her. The choppy painterly rendition of earth and sky reiterate this feeling of displaced, agitated desire. Tshyler returned repeatedly to the idea of woman as entertainer in his works.²²

In *Portrait of a Woman* (1934) [Fig 41] we see a similar depiction of a woman's head constrained within a structure, literally 'shuttered' off from the body. Her head severed

22. See, for example, a work as late as 1964 entitled *Fairground Entertainer* [Fig 43], reminiscent of *Portrait of a Woman* 1934 (discussed below).

from her body, this woman's sight is confined to what her situating framework enables her to see. Allusions to staging and puppetry are evident in these divisions placed over the body so that we see only that which is 'framed' and must guess at the remaining detail. An exquisite play of hues diffusing into the pale ground renders her ephemeral body just visible below the window, as though we are able to see through the wall to that which we imagine. Framed thus the woman appears to be both spectacle and observer. By severing head from torso Tshyler seems to refer us to the idea of sight severed from touch, the rational from the emotional. The 'suggested' body is also subtly constricted, at the line of sleeve meeting flesh and with the fine red mark which slices the body as waistband. This partly formed body speaks of Tshyler's lack of conviction in the Socialist Realist project, a project which was to present an intact version of the individual relating to the social 'whole'. Tshyler disrupts the realist's claim that such a whole exists and can be pictured.

The bodily distortion pictured in Tshyler's *Woman and an Airplane* (1926) [Fig 42] also communicates Tshyler's interest in that which is presumed possible and that which has defied realistic presuppositions. The dizzying heights of technological achievements are here witnessed by a head literally twisted around and around in its viewing of the projected dreams of humankind. The uneasy relationship between anticipated and unanticipated developments contradicts the notion of an easily defined and determinable world order evident in Socialist Realist works of later years.

Another **Projectionist**, Solomon Nikritin tended toward a reorganisation of reality as opposed to the 'organisation' of materials referred to in the Projectionists' manifesto. In a 1928 self-portrait [Fig 44] Nikritin features himself in worker's garb with head averted from the light, preventing an explicit revelation of himself and suggesting a preference to view reality from ambiguous positions. He looks askance at the viewer from an area of deep shadow which provides him cover.²³ This interest in describing a subject whilst

23. Despite Nikritin's obvious commitment to metaphor, personal expression of anguish and foreboding, he referred to his works as 'tectonic researches' – the term echoing the Nonobjectivists' formal and scientific investigations.

simultaneously concealing it recurs in a 1930 work *Composition* [Fig 45]. The image is barely identifiable as if what we are witnessing is a mirage or a vision in the dead of night. Red flags mark the location of a throne or seat of power. Amassed people flank the seat of authority bearing arms and flags and towering over this scene of organised human power is a Lenin-esque monument to evoke the idea of a grand revolutionary order. A civilian couple observes the pomp and ceremony and the woman's civilian attire underscores the exclusivity of this grandiose performance. Approximately one sixth of the canvas is given over to this barely distinguishable scene, the rest of the canvas describing in broad gestures the darkness which engulfs the event. Hovering above the scene are faint indications of equestrian statues which point to the idea of military accomplishment and triumphal arches. These are set in a dark and oppressive sky which engulfs the cavernous scene below. This painting is not about uncomplicated victories and governments made visible for patriots in the light of day. It is a disturbing image which raises questions about power, the way in which organizations and sects are born and the promises of dreams attached to such organisation. It is not about accessible spaces for democratic representation. While he constructs a political tableau he simultaneously deconstructs the political pageant as public spectacle. Here it is partly concealed, difficult to identify, to approach or to believe in. While this does not undermine its grandeur or significance he does make of it a mystery and in this sense undermines the realist project.

In a 1934 image entitled *The Old and the New* [Fig 46] Nikritin uses light to a similar effect, namely to raise questions about the credibility of 'new' orders of representation. An uncompromising source of light exposes two (role) models: one in the demure posture of a classical 'nude', the other a strident woman of the 'new' order. The bodies of the two seated at their feet are less exposed and not clearly engendered. As in Thsyler's work, Nikritin uses woman's body to signify liberated energy and the promise of a liberated socio-political space. The seated, leaning figure which is more masculine in physique turns away from the demure 'classical' model toward the new 'role model'. The latter's face, in contrast to her antecedent, is detailed and bathed in a golden light, her body more confident in posture. She gazes into the distance as if into the future, while the masculine figure gazes at the light, as opposed to a shadow, which she seems

to 'cast' between her legs. The figure on her left, almost childlike in its physically undeveloped shape, gazes up at her as though at an image of a desirable ideal.

Although Nikritin ostensibly embraces a Socialist Realist theme, his treatment is stylistically far removed from the 'accurate' documentations of Soviet life encouraged by advocates of Socialist Realism. In *The Old and the New*, each limb is composed by one or two gestural strokes, the contrasts of which describe their volume. It is the contiguity of these shapes which suggest that they are human figures and not the transcription of accurate details. This focus upon the arbitrary relations between parts is what characterised the 'formalist' project and yet here Nikritin applies such interests to a definite narrative. The work was painted in the year that Socialist Realism was officially endorsed and offers us an example of the complex manifestations of figurative works of the time. In its reference to changing human consciousness and through the strident figure of the 'new' order placed against a bold expanse of clear blue sky, it appears to be a harbinger of assertive Socialist Realist images. The difference with this work however is that it comments on the emergence of these stereotypes; in itself it is not a stereotypical, nor even a typical, image. It seems to suggest the presence of past ideals, present ideals and the uncertain development of future forms. It asks us to consider the functioning of such images and that which they promise. This is quite different to images which presume a commitment to pre-established orders of representation.

While many of the above works have illustrated supposedly revolutionary works which contain elements of dubious or incredulous commentary, some figurative works were definite eulogies to the Soviet government and its project of technological modernisation. Alexander Labas provides an example of a painter whose works reflect absolute faith in the project of the Soviet revolution, but whose technique was far removed from the type of 'finish' associated with Socialist Realist works. Labas graduated from the SVOMAS in 1919 and went on to teach at the VKhUTEMAS and to co-found **OST** in 1925. The **OST** programme declared a commitment to 'revolutionary contemporaneity and clarity of subject matter' (see Chapter Three). This Labas clearly illustrates but what is less clear is how work such as Labas' could have been accepted by an organization also committed to a 'rejection of sketchiness as a phenomenon of late dilettantism' (see Chapter Three).

In a 1929 work *Celebrating Arrival of Steam Locomotive on the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad* [Fig 47] we are presented with three factors: the natural environment, amassed people and a large locomotive steaming mid-centre through the natural environment. Labas uses scale and light to make a statement about the power and glory of technology. While light defines the large locomotive, the diminutive human figures are further reduced in significance by their blurring or disintegrating into the surrounding space. Although both landscape and train dwarf the human figures the locomotive signifies collective human power. The barely distinguishable red flags both on the train and to its side make clear that it is the new Soviet government that is responsible for a technologically-based infrastructure which will reach into the remotest regions of the Soviet Union.

Labas exhibits similar faith in the accomplishments of the Soviet five year plan in his work *Airship and Children from Orphanage* (1930) [Fig 48]. He organises his canvas along a diagonal division, giving half over to an airship taking off at a precarious angle, and the other to orphaned children gathered together on the rooftops to witness the event under the supervision of state-approved guardians. The state is celebrated for two reasons here: for its technological accomplishments resulting from its commitment to the Five Year Plan to industrialise and for its social programme, caring for the young future citizens in the absence of parental care. The shortest edge of the rectangle serves as the base of the canvas thereby emphasising the airship's ascent and the modern capacity to conquer and colonise spaces previously unattainable. Labas constructs an image about the promise of this new world order and he provides as witnesses children who will grow up to enjoy its benefits because of the state's role as surrogate parent. The children seem to stand assured in the knowledge that they will be the recipients of the fruits of Soviet progress. This is an image of salvation and Labas colours the whole a rosy pink.

Labas pictures a world in which precise demarcations of space and efficient manouvres in such space are indicative of the feats of human engineering. These are usually juxtaposed against backdrops of diffuse washes signifying wide open spaces yet to be shaped. This is evident also in a small watercolour entitled *Airship over a Town* (1932) [Fig 49]. Despite this potential power of dissolution inherent in natural elemental forces,

we are presented with an image of humans moving in organised fashion from one place to another and exhibiting a united and determined will to survive. This idea of communication or transport networks is common to many of Labas's images (see above). It is this unshakeable faith in technological progress which marks Labas's images and no doubt made him acceptable in **OST** and artistic circles informed by the Soviets' drive to industrialise and mechanise. For this reason his insubstantial forms set within near transparent planes were not regarded as ideologically disruptive even though devoid of the detail, volume and density of late nineteenth-century realism. Labas's human subjects are never isolated or foregrounded as individuals. Their survival is pictured as dependent upon the greater organized collective. The utopian desire informing these images was similar to that which fuelled politicians' revolutionary rhetoric about what the future offered and ironically it was this revolutionary romanticism which made them acceptable as Socialist Realist works despite their loose and sketchy formal treatment.

An **ex-Projectionist** and member of **OST** Sergei Luchiskin seems to carry through the **Projectionists'** commitment to painting as a means of expressing (projecting) the method of organising materials. The **OST** programme developed this idea further by calling for this method to be characterised by clarity of form and subject matter, the latter to be identified by 'revolutionary contemporaneity'. The works executed by Luchiskin during his years in **OST** reflect these objectives more directly than does the work of other members. He rendered his formats as flat surfaces patterned by a systematic repetition of motifs across them. Each placement and detail was made explicit without being obscured by atmospheric perspective or deliberate blurring or sketchiness. It is Luchiskin's clear delineation of popular communal events which leaves no doubt as to his celebration of 'contemporary revolutionary' Soviet society.

Luchiskin provides an interesting comparison with Labas because of his treatment of Soviet societal organization. He emphasised *human* activities, efforts and celebrations, as opposed to the objectified symbols of human achievement visible in the work of Labas. In *Skiers* (1926) [Fig 50] individuals hurtle down the bank or along the parades, carried along in the throng, suffering their falls alone while surrounded by a community of similarly struggling participants. In *Book Festival Tverskoy Boulevard* (1927) [Fig 51] the

individual act of reading is celebrated in the form of a public carnival. Luchiskin recorded the 'popularisation' of literacy through the older forms of expression, namely the shared oral practices of popular performance. This interest in popularising cultural forms is also evident in his pictorial arrangement, which brings to mind the lubok woodcuts of earlier folk expression. His choice of an odd birds-eye view, but located mid-way up the vertical plane, functioned as an attempt to efface individual human perspective, to remove his own persona as originator and to provide a macro-perspective on public festivities. Luchiskin painted mainly young energetic types, who, in *Book Festival*, dressed brightly and as young pioneers, literally carry knowledge to a public which included amongst it older and rural types. It would appear to be this celebration of the optimism of a new generation committed to the socialist project which informed Luchiskin's receipt of the title of merited artist of the RSFSR.

Both Labas and Luchiskin had been students at the VKHUTEMAS during the year that **OST** was founded. Most **OST** members were former VKHUTEMAS students who had studied under David Shterenberg, ex-head of IZO from 1918 to 1921.²⁴ Since Shterenberg was himself instrumental in the founding of **OST**²⁵ it is useful to examine his visual practice for evidence of what his figuration communicates of **OST** claims and the status of realism in **OST**. Shterenberg trained in Paris under Kees van Dongen and Henri Matisse and on his return to Russia he established KOMFUT, a union of artists who were both Communists and Futurists. This group was partly linked to Proletkult in its rejection of 'bourgeois' art and this together with Shterenberg's Parisian training clearly identified Shterenberg as a radical leftist. However, as head of IZO, Shterenberg was expected to bridge the gap between older realists, Cezannists, Nonobjectivists and iconoclasts, drawing on all their services in the creation of art forms suitable for the new

24. Under Shterenberg the commissariat issued a journal entitled "Iskusstvo Kommuny" (Art of the Commune) challenging the restricted idea of fine art as individual easel painting, positing that art should have a collective basis and that it should include mass art forms such as monuments. It was in this journal that Kushner, Punin Brik and other forerunners of industrial constructivism published.

25. The published programme of **OST** was probably based on Shterenberg's lecture on **OST** delivered at the Communist Academy in Moscow in 1928. See Bowlt (1988:280).

state. In these early years Shterenberg called for a new art of mass creation distinct from the old 'museum' art²⁶ yet by the time of the formation of OST he had developed a programme to further painting, drawing and sculpture, and opposed the dissolution of the arts into applied and industrial arts.²⁷ Despite his more conservative position in later years, Shterenberg's reputation as a leftist was to influence critics and historians adversely during the years of Socialist Realism. His early years of political and stylistic compromise stood him in little stead.

Shterenberg's training with Matisse no doubt informed his dislike of what he regarded as 'sketchy', 'disintegrating' Cezannism. His work echoed Matisse's crisp, simplified and flattened forms, Van Dongen's intense saturated hues and Picasso's and Braque's incorporation of collage. Shterenberg's combination of representing identifiable subject matter, reorganising its exterior surfaces and foregrounding various conventions of spatial depiction within one image, situated him mid-way between ardent Nonobjectivists and figurative realists.

That Shterenberg was a master of compromise is illustrated by his use of the same technique in different ways in both political and nonpolitical works. In *Portrait of Nadezhda Shterenberg, the Artist's Wife* (1925) [Fig 52] he depicts a woman self-consciously attired in a garment similar to the Constructivist ensembles designed by artists such as Stepanova and Exter and poised on a precariously angled platform. The realistic and three-dimensional treatment of this figure is contradicted by the flattened forms and unrealistic context in which she is situated. Disruptive Cubist planes and Constructivist forms floating in at the right appear to refer the viewer to those visual developments which threaten the status of figurative painting. What we thus see is a strategic assimilation by Shterenberg of these tendencies combined with the objective of preserving the status of easel art.

26. See Bowlt (1988:186-190).

27. His work was largely neglected until 1962 when the "Thirty Years of Moscow Art" show revived interest in Shterenberg, plus amongst others Tshyler and Falk, previously regarded as too 'formalist' in approach.

In an overtly political work entitled *Agitator* (1928) [Fig 53] Shterenberg's reference to Modernism is as important as the narrated events. Shterenberg transposed his interest in Modernist still life into a narrative on collectivity, hence 'justifying' it by the political context. He depicts a group of peasants listening to an 'agitator' and evincing attitudes which seem to range from suspicion, and defence to disinterest. The work referred to the need to win over the rural populace to the Five Year Plan for collectivisation and mechanisation. However the work is not only about the resistance of these painted subjects but is also about Shterenberg's own resistance to an entirely literal and illusionistic representation of politically 'correct' subject matter. He takes liberties in his formal treatment which recall his still lifes of earlier years, for example, in the tilting of the table surface so that it lies parallel to the picture plane. It is not the need to collectivise that is the focus of this work but the 'still life' of the precariously balanced newspaper and glass. The table arrangement is similar to that in almost all of Shterenberg's still lifes [Fig 54, 55 & 56]: one or two objects sparsely arranged on a tilted surface – one in the foreground, another toward the top of the canvas, and usually comprising simple food stuffs like bread, water and fish and simple appliances like bowls and gaslamps. These objects signified the bare essentials of life. In the case of this work the bare essentials were the printed government media and water, symbol of rejuvenation. Here the formal arrangement of the table and its contents is justified by the symbolic overtones which pertain to the promises of the new political order.

Shterenberg's work serves as a good example of the diversity of works produced under the umbrella of **OST**, which combined formal experimentation with Marxist-Leninist ideology. In some of the works these ideological commitments were more important than formal exploration, in others the formal interests prevailed. Labas and Luchiskin reflected the 'correct' ideological position but Labas deviated from **OST's** 'anti-sketchiness' claims. Ex-**Concretist** and **OST** member Vialov, and ex-**Association of Three** members and **OST** members Pimenov and Deineka privileged formal experimentation and produced decidedly surreal images as well as ambiguous comments about the post-revolutionary order. However, what all these artists did share was that they chose to comment on contemporary affairs in a manner which was decidedly more modern than the **Peredvizhniki** approach of **AKhRR** and the Cezannism of artists who had links to the old

Jack of Diamonds group. Yet with these artists they shared a rejection of total abstraction and a defence of easel art.

C. From Symbols to Types: Filinov, The Four Arts and The Circle of Arts.

According to Georg Lukacs (see Chapter Three), realist works were characterised by types who were neither average nor exceptional but who gave a sense of the dialectical relationship between the typical and the individual. In a strange way the Symbolism²⁸ of early twentieth-century Russian art coalesced with Socialist Realist interests in post-revolutionary years. According to Lukacs, a political conception of typology, as found in Socialist Realism, *opposed* the typical and the individual, rather than linking them dialectically. Symbolism too, opposed the typical and the individual, but laying stress on the individual above all else.²⁹ What Socialist Realism shared with Symbolism was the creation of a typology which was not real, but which stood for what was subjectively desired or imagined. It is true that the content of these subjective desires differed considerably between the two groups, but the synthetic construction of 'eternal' truths by Symbolists shared much in common with the fabrication of generalised truths by Socialist Realists. Both assumed the task of creating archetypes, Symbolists referring to early history for authentication of their imagery, Socialist Realists setting up their own prototypes.

The production of appropriate symbols and types for the post-revolutionary situation did not occur in an homogeneous fashion, but was produced in various stylistic and ideological variations. The degree of subjective commentary which was laid over the symbolic forms and typologies also varied. Pavel Filinov made it his continuing objective to foreground the analysis of form and processes of constructing imagery. He chose to

28. Early twentieth-century Russian art was characterised by the Symbolist interests of the likes of Alexander Benois and Nikolai Ryabushinsky.

29. Benois expressed this, in 1902, as a "refined epicureanism of our time, the extreme refinement of man's individuality, his effeminacy, morbidity and solitude" (Bowlit 1988:5).

explore the construction of 'types' but presented the viewer with an intensity of detail which act against their functioning as stereotypes. It is the ensuing tension between the particular and the general which is supremely illustrated in his works. That this is a tension and not a dialectical resolution is what characterises these as anti-realist works. The types which he depicts appear to be comprised of multiple defining layers, not of their own making. Filinov questions the relationship of individual will to causal law, notions of good and evil, and the presumption of a rationally explicable general nature of the world.

In the post-revolutionary climate of the USSR in which the government intentionally undermined the status of Eastern Orthodoxy his works become wry comments on this dissolution of Christian faith. Filinov re-works Christian iconography to subvert the presumed natural order of things and to introduce the prospect of apocalyptic developments, a far cry from Socialist Realist visions of a glorious future. Small areas of his picture surfaces are reserved for 'realistic' treatment, the rest rendered as if transparent or soluble. Forms overlap one another and are nervously overworked as if in an attempt to 'draw' them into reality, and yet these intense and agitated lines seem to undo the solidity of the forms rather than to restate their 'real' existence. Filinov not only used excessive detail to fracture the whole but intentionally mixed up the dialogue between objective events of life and subjective commentaries on life, so that the question of what was exterior or interior and rational or irrational became impossible to answer. In these works Filinov demonstrates that truth is interpretation and that there can be no easy assumptions when viewing his images. It is for this reason that his work was removed from public view for many years.³⁰

In a small untitled ink and watercolour work of the 1920s [Fig 57] Filinov presents us with what is not a still life, a portrait or an abstract composition of form, but a work

30. In the last decade of his life (1931-41) Filinov was censured for exhibiting a "monstrous hybrid of metaphysics and vulgar materialism...manifesting a complete confusion in the face of reality" Bowlt (1988:286). His 1930 show was cancelled due to pressure exerted by **AKhRR**. He showed 72 works in 1933 at "Fifteen Years of Art in the RSFSR" but from thereon up to his death in 1941 he was not allowed to exhibit his works (Bird 1987:266).

which defies categorisation as well as easy identification. The composition is composed around a foregrounded character who is not however seated upon the centrally positioned chair, but whose body parts instead disintegrate, multiply and, in displaced combinations, rest upon one another and suggest a world which is unpredictable. The fish, the chair/throne, the forehead touched by the bare foot combine as if in allusion to the Christian practice of anointing priests/kings, but here the combination of foot above forehead is a strange subversion of the concept of divine right. This is a consecration of a different sort, with workers' boots signifying the *departure* of kings and priests. The fish literally swims in the obsessively textured ether of Filonov's canvas, as important in this scheme of things as its human counterpart. A plethora of forms and markings within and outside of these forms mark the space. No object can exist in isolation in Filonov's vision. Images from the past and future coexist in this multidimensional world as if past and present merge into a single moment. Ironically the most solid areas of colour are small areas of shadow, so that it is the reflection or 'aura' of things which are given substance. It is Filonov who determines this order, without any attempt to underplay his subjective vision. For Filonov there is no such thing as a logically ordered world, preexistent to the individual fictive construction; it is what one makes of the world which gives it form and how one combines its components that gives rise to meaning.

Instead of typifying Soviet proletariat heroes, Filonov chooses as his subject for two images in the mid-twenties, the lumpen proletariat. The first, an ink and pencil work entitled *Rowdies* (1925-26) [Fig 58], does not feature a victorious working class, but two figures from an underclass who seem to wander unconsciously through the stratified social grid surrounding them. Their size in conjunction with the small houses, apartments and factories in turn pictures them as clumsily negotiating a path for themselves. Two statuesque heads on pedestals watch these figures closely as if to raise questions about who has been and will yet be commemorated. This issue of social sanctification is reiterated by the small icon framed top centre of the work. Set amongst representations of social heroes and religious saint, the lack of status of these 'rowdies' is amplified. In this work the volumetric solidity of the figures is undermined by the multiple floating forms which surround them and between which they seem to lose their bearings. Filonov reserves his nervous and disintegrating line for a faint tracing of pathways between these

forms. He works with the constituent elements of realist figuration but uses this as material for transformation. He provides indicators of a physical locale but makes an identification of this context impossible and thus subverts the very notion of contextualisation.

The second work featuring the lumpen proletariat is *A Burglar* (1926-28) [Fig 59], another reversal of heroisation. A scarred and grimacing face emerges from a torso inscribed by patterns which suggest war medals. The torso fragments into an explosive pattern signalling Filinov's interest in the unpredictable. In this work Filinov treats only the facial area as a distinct form. A chimera of microscopic detail suggests both the aftermath of devastation and the possibility of discerning new patterns within such chaos. This is a commentary on whom society construes as criminal. Here there is nothing solid, nothing that can reliably be grasped or defined. Stippled patterns and weaving lines mark all surfaces except for that 'recognisable' part i.e. the typified burglar's face. This is rendered in outline only, with no substance filled in. What Filinov does instead is to draw us to another visage behind it, one of introspective expression in direct contrast with the distraught expression on the part of the burglar. We have two sides of this criminal described, his identity open to redefinition. The military identity signified by medals suggests that those who were once military heroes are now criminals and so the question is raised as to the status of present-day heroes. Crime is pictured as an ongoing activity which also raises the issue of control, who controls, who is controlled and who finds it necessary to assert themselves via unlawful control.

It seems plausible to suggest that Filinov should be viewed as an artist who asks uncomfortable questions by inverting patriotic subject matter and realist motifs. We have only to look at *The Narva Gates* (1929) [Fig 60] in which Filinov takes as his point of departure the Narva triumphal arch built by classical architect Giacomo Quarenghi, a symbol of Russian military might over the Napoleonic forces.³¹ This classical form is

31. Napoleon had been perceived by the Russian nobility as a threat to serfdom but the war of 1812 turned out to be a great patriotic war which entrenched the power of tsar Alexander 1 in Europe.

literally splintered into multiple shards of reflected light and so we have a supposed commemoration of this event in the form of a shifting and intangible present; a 'real' history rendered in an abstract prismatic manner. The one centrally placed figure whose fist is raised as though to signify victory is isolated and written over with layer upon layer of detail as if such detail is transposed from other areas to *fragment* this very gesture of triumph and to render the 'working masses' without power. Above the gates is the creator or orchestrator of events, surrounded by bestial horses whose expressions seem to range from blind obedience to triumphant certitude and willful domination. An impending doom is signified by the rearing horses about to be released upon the world below. The Russian citizens pictured below the arch are not members of a victorious proletariat. Their dissatisfied subservience seems juxtaposed to the righteous anger of the creator above. They appear suspicious and bowed over before the looming state monument. Drawing on this apocalyptic Christian iconography, he raises questions as to who 'defends' or 'leads' the nation and what will befall it in the future.

The grand orchestrator of events has what appears to be a floating embryonic form within him, falling toward a crib-like receptacle sketched into the stomach of the beast just below. This 'messiah' is neither born into the material world nor does he ascend into the spiritual but, frozen between these states, is a symbol of the need for a new order. This state of being mid-way between two worlds or multiple layers of existence is an appropriate metaphor for Filinov's own analytical and painterly pursuits. The triumphal arch marks an end and a beginning, an entrance and an exit, but the promise of what lies beyond the gate remains just that – it is a *promise* and not an area which has been traversed yet by these small and defensive citizens. They are subjects who are acted upon and in this sense Filinov undoes notions of subjects acting, writing and living a revolutionary history.

In a 1931 painting *A Collective Farmer* [Fig 61] Filinov appears to make a greater effort to represent a definitive generalised type. Identifiable motifs convince one of their corporeality and there are no forms which are overlapping or set within contradictory contexts. However every centimetre of his canvas is textured with the same intense detail as in earlier works. The artist still seems to reveal to us that which lies beneath the

surface of things and refuses to confine his analysis to the surfaces of reality. All things exhibit and share an atomic structure. The irises of the farmer's eyes reflects the same quality as the water behind him, his flesh reflects the texture of the river banks and house walls. The entire surface vibrates with this detailed and faceted application of colour, an application which asks us to consider the passage of time by its particularity and regularity. This might well be an image of a 'collective' farmer as is indicated by the title, but Filinov appears to subvert notions of the 'new' and the industrial by emphasising a timeless quality. He depicts a man who seems always to have been held together by almost petrified cellular striations, most visible in beard, neck and brow. Filinov constructs a subject who stoically observes the passing of time and whose very oneness with the earth would seem to differentiate him from the rapidly changing climate of post-revolutionary developments. His is a gaze which appears not to rest on a distant object but which seems somewhat introspective. It is as though he is unmoved by promises of a utopian future and rests instead on a confidence in that which is tested by time. In that the image is entitled *A Collective Farmer* and is one of his more realistic images Filinov appears to be presenting the public with a safe subject for a Socialist Realist painting. However, through a range of subtle techniques whereby oppositions between culture and nature are reversed, Filinov questions notions of inevitable cultural progress and points to the possible difficulties of the collectivisation project in the Soviet Union.

Few figurative groups in the twenties declared an interest in formal qualities over and above choice of subject. But this is just what **The Four Arts Society** did, and for this they were to be severely criticised by the political administration, by **OST** and by **AKhRR**.³² Following on from the Discussional Show, these artists committed themselves to painterly realism, to 'French' techniques, and to the need to synthesise creative endeavours.

It was this idea of synthesis that had characterised the Symbolist movement at the turn of the century, expressed thus in Ryabushinsky's journal "The Golden Fleece":

32. The **Four Arts Society's** 1929 declaration read as follows: "This new form is important not because of its similarity to the living form, but because of its harmony with the material out of which it is constructed" (Bowl 1988:284). See Chapter Three for information on **The Four Arts Society**.

We are in sympathy with all who work for the rebirth of life...we believe that life without beauty is impossible....Art is symbolic for it bears within it the symbol, the reflection of the eternal in the temporal (Bowlit 1988:8).

Members of **The Four Arts Society** included ex-Symbolists who had exhibited at the **Crimson Rose** and **Blue Rose** shows from 1904-1907 and who continued to manifest an interest in eternal symbols of beauty and rejuvenation.

One such artist was Pavel Kuznetsov who had spent one year studying in Paris in 1906 and thereafter exhibited at the Salonne d'Automne. Although a Symbolist and averse to the positivist impulse informing the early Russian realism of the **Peredvizhniki**, like the Modernist Shterenberg, he occupied a key position in the arts establishment. Leader of **The Blue Rose** in 1907, Kuznetsov taught at the Moscow School of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture from 1910 to 1913. After the revolution he retained a teaching position in the SVOMAS/VKhUTEMAS, and in 1919 succeeded Shterenberg in directing the painting section of **IZO** Narkompros until 1924. From 1924 to 1931 Kuznetsov was chairperson of **The Four Arts Society**. Although he was awarded the status of merited artist of the RSFSR in the thirties, he was admonished for his lack of realistic detail. Kuznetsov managed to continue teaching and exhibiting probably because his Symbolist landscapes were based on studies of rural life in various republics of the USSR namely, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Caucasus region of the RSFSR. In later years Kuznetsov introduced into his idyllic and abstract scapes some anecdotal material in concession to Socialist Realists. A similar idealism prevailed in these Socialist Realist works, but the resonant symbols which claimed 'eternal' significance in his earlier works, were later pared down into generalised types, also ahistorical, but without the layers of potentially resonant meaning suggested by his early formal experimentation.

In the twenties Kuznetsov set out to define that which essentially characterized life in the rural areas. His works reflected not only the land but also what was yielded from this land, be it wheat, tobacco, wine or sheep. Sometimes it was the abstraction of the landscape and its transformation into painterly areas that served as the rationale for the work. The figurative reference in his 1925 oil entitled *Mishkor* [Fig 62] occupies only one corner of a canvas, which without it would be an entirely abstract work of broad bands of primary colour and one or two areas of secondary colour. Nevertheless the ambience

created by these shapes and colours obviously correlated with that evoked by the South-Western, Caucasus and Crimean landscapes and such evocations won him favour with patriots in later years. In *Tobacco Worker* (1925/6) [Fig 63] Kuznetsov uses the same range of colours as in *Mishkor*, but foregrounds a schematic rendering of two seated woman tying tobacco leaves within an idyllic sun-drenched setting. Again there is no tonal modulation, only a play of primaries, complimentaries and tertiaries in various degrees of saturation. Large, barefoot, without adornment, sunburned and minus any signs of individual facial detail, these figures function as a celebration of 'typified' rural women.

Kuznetsov's technique belied realistic documentation not only in its colour and lack of tonal modulation but also in its gestural application, an application usually evident in tempera and not oils. **The Four Arts Society** had declared 'artistic quality' central to their aims, and this combined with the term 'painterly realism' suggested a primary interest in the painterly qualities of an artwork above subject matter.³³ A free application of paint and colour was evident as late as 1930 in a work of Kuznetsov's entitled *Red Grapes* [Fig 64]. Like *Tobacco Worker* the work could be read as a tribute to the Soviet Union's riches and the plenitude of a grape harvest in the south coast valleys of the Crimea. This emphasis on fecundity was simply a continuation of Kuznetsov's Symbolist interests in the creative essence of life, but it obviously also appealed to Soviet nationalists who could bask in the glory of Soviet productivity. The work did however differ from paintings which praised collectivity in that here the human factor signifying the planning and control of production is *not* important. In a rapid impasto application across the centre of the canvas and behind these grapes, Kuznetsov suggests the presence of women bearing bowls of fruit. The work is rendered in bright reds, greens, blues and yellows which do not function as references to local colour but to the sheer splendour of the pigment and qualities of the paints themselves. These graffiti-like gestures refer back to Modernist developments in Russia at the turn of the century, namely Neoprimitivism and Cubofuturism. In the face of theoretical claims for precision and objectivity in these post-

33. **The Four Arts Society's** declaration read as follows: "This new form is important not because of its similarity to the living form but because of its harmony with the material out of which it is constructed" Bowlt (1988:281-284). See also their 1929 declaration in Leniashin (1988:124).

Discussional exhibition years, Kuznetsov's riotous ambiguity of marks and colours existed as an extremely individualist statement.

Up until 1930 the identity of Kuznetsov's figures was contingent on the spaces in which they were situated; they featured as extensions of the harmoniously patterned landscapes. Thereafter he attempted to shift into a Socialist Realist framework but still assumed that an harmonious world order informed his subjects even though this was no longer a determining *natural* order. The determining order became *political* and signifiers of nature in the form of lambs, tobacco, grapes etc. became signifiers of culture in the form of tractors, maps, metallic towers and powerlines.³⁴ In *Mother* (1930) [Fig 65], Kuznetsov clearly privileged the subject of national 'produce' over formal concerns. In *Red Grapes* the produce of grapes elicited a multitude of associations apart from those associations pertaining directly to the growth of the Soviet economy. In *Mother*, the nursing rural mother is transformed into an iconic mother of a nation and sign of a fertile land positioned in front of a literal depiction of a combine harvester. Here there is little room for the multifarious readings generated by Symbolist works.³⁵

Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin was also a member of **The Four Arts Society**. It was his Symbolist background which allowed him to synthesise information from a variety of individual studies to present a 'typology' of Soviet subjects, subjects who appeared almost iconic in their treatment. Petrov-Vodkin had worked as an icon painter on the Volga in his youth and it is this religiosity that lingers even in his portraits of revolutionary heroes. What had been symbols in his pre-revolutionary years became 'types' after 1917, with the multiplicity and ambiguity of associations from the Symbolist years considerably narrowed down. What remained a central concern for Petrov-Vodkin was those moments which he believed constituted the continuity of life, namely birth, initiation (akin to baptism) and

34. This is particularly evident in Kuznetsov's 1935 work entitled *Guarding the Socialist Motherland* [Fig 66].

35. The work was probably one of **The Four Arts Society** works exhibited at the 1930 "Life of Children in the Soviet Union Show" in Leningrad and requiring explicit illustrations of popular themes akin to those produced by Socialist Realists in later years.

death. In subject matter and in his use of crisp, clear and shallow modelling Petrov-Vodkin's paintings recalled early Renaissance works, especially works by Masaccio and Piero Della Francesca. His forms were built up of subtle hues, very bright highlights and few deep tonal areas. The result was an uncanny stillness, a light which seems to transform its subjects into a shallow relief cast in stone. It is this 'eternalised' sense of things that creates an affinity between Petrov-Vodkin's works and the abstracted and generalised types of Socialist Realism. His idea of giving form to an ideal, to making the idea appear as corporeal as possible, was no doubt admired by Socialist Realist protagonists. It was this romantic construction of reality which characterised the Socialist Realist project despite its claims to depicting 'real' contemporary scenes.

Petrov-Vodkin was in Paris during the years of the first Symbolist shows in Russia but on his return he exhibited in the shows sponsored by Ryabushinsky in 1909-1910. From 1911 he exhibited with **The World of Art** and when Narkompros was established, he was invited to help reorganise and teach in the Academy of the Arts/SVOMAS. By the time **The Four Arts Society** was established in 1925, Petrov-Vodkin was 47 years old and a well-known and respected artist. Praised by many for his successful synthesis of academicism, individualism and revolutionary ideals,³⁶ he is an interesting example of an artist who fuses his post-revolutionary subject matter with that earlier Symbolist ideal of reflecting 'the eternal in the temporal'. Although Petrov-Vodkin was assimilated into the constructed history of Socialist Realism, what appeared to remain central to his work was a fascination with what lay behind or beyond life, and in later years this lack of faith in 'material reality' became even more pronounced.

Petrov-Vodkin brought together past Symbolist and current realist concerns by juxtaposing in single images a foregrounded plane of reality and a symbolic background. This is evident in *After the Battle* (1923) and *Portrait of Akhmatova* (1922). In *Portrait of Akhmatova* [Fig 67] Petrov-Vodkin presents us with two planes of existence – one which is immediately apparent and accessible to our consciousness and one which underlies this reality. Akhmatova's three-dimensional form, the rectitude of her posture and her direct

36. See for example Galushkin in *Voks* nos 9-10 (1934:114) and Bird (1987:263).

gaze indicating surety and self-knowledge, all point toward the place of rational intellect in this world. The background to this work seems to refer to a plane of the unconscious or the inferred, a realm of dreams or ideas of the kind communicated in the love poems of Akhmatova. It is this similar duality of emotion and intellect, inner life and outer landscape that characterises her poetry pulled as it is between her passion and austere sense of self.³⁷ That he chose to paint Akhmatova is a significant indication of his commitment to the revitalisation of the Symbolist project, a revitalisation undertaken by Akhmatova and her fellow "Acmeist" poets.³⁸

After the Battle (1923) [Fig 68] was painted the year that Petrov-Vodkin first exhibited with **AKhRR** and presents us with an interesting example of what passed as realism in the early twenties, probably even as heroic realism, given that its subject is death resulting from service in the civil war. As in *Portrait of Anna Akhmatova*, the foreground is rendered with an unrestricted colour palette and is warmer in tone than the blue background indicative of an abstract realm of memory/thought/the past and the afterlife of the dead. Despite this work having been accepted as realist, what is suggested here, is that this abstract or less tangible dimension is one which can be recognised by all and is shared by all present in the image. Two living/surviving comrades eat and smoke and are interrupted by a third comrade. The interruption is registered as though the viewers' public perusal interrupts the privacy of their space. The response of one comrade is to

37. Not for weeks, not for months have we parted,
But for years. Here at last the day
That the chill of true freedom has started
And the wreath at the temples is grey

There's an end to betrayals, to treasons
And no more do you hear, rain or shine,
Irrefutable torrents of reasons
For that rivalress rightness of mine.
(Akhmatova, 1924)

38. Walter Arendt (Arendt 1985:xxx) argues that Akhmatova might be seen as an artist who rides the downward slope of the subsiding state of Symbolism, her emotional content referring back to it but her technique to the future, marked by Expressionist and Cubist interests. It might be useful to view Petrov-Vodkin as occupying this same point of transition between the legendary "Scythian" past and Russian Modernism.

gaze up and out at the viewer in serious anticipation of response/explanation. The response of the other is to gaze pensively into the distance without expectation. The locus of this interruption/questioning/pensiveness is the information stated in the abstracted but shared realm behind them i.e. the death of their comrade. Petrov-Vodkin uses the signal of a fallen cap to indicate death here, as in both of his versions of *Death of a Commissar* in 1928 (see below). The hand over the heart, the closed eyes and the use of a flattened and tilting picture plane all inform the viewer that this is an image of a fallen hero. He has taken the liberty to assert a dimension beyond this known world. Here death evokes not an absence but the presence of a common reminiscence, not an end but a continuity in a different dimension. It was this concern with the underlying meaning of life that characterised his works even though such works were regarded as supportive of the positivist, materialist Marxist philosophy on which the USSR was founded.

In 1925, when Petrov-Vodkin began exhibiting with other ex-Symbolists in **The Four Arts Society**, his works referred back to pre-revolutionary Symbolism but with a 'safe' veneer of revolutionary realism. His *Fantasy* (1925) [Fig 69] is a direct reworking of the 1912 work *Bathing the Red Horse* [Fig 70]. *Bathing the Red Horse* is an image of naked youths in various stages of mount, drawn toward the centre of a pool of water. In the foreground a lithesome youth sits on a massive horse which he restrains just prior to their entry into deep waters. The image evokes ideas of water as a reservoir of all potentialities of existence, as a realm of initiation and a medium for rebirth.³⁹ *Fantasy* (1925) seems to be a continuation of the earlier themes but here the rider is on a red horse, which is no longer restrained, but which literally flies up into the sky. The rider is clothed, looks behind him rather than to the future and seems not to be an initiate as in *Bathing the Red Horse* but to have been already initiated into 'warriorhood', hence experiencing a soaring release. The world that is pictured here is far wider than that in the earlier versions of the theme. The clothed, soaring figure seems to refer to the elevated status of workers and peasantry following on from the victory of the Bolshevik's Red Army.

39. This idea was developed by Petrov-Vodkin in a 1914 work entitled *Warriors tormented by Thirst* [Fig 71] in which the youth is slightly older and enters the water in pursuit of the naked women within the pool.

These political references take the place of the references to restrained sexual energy in *Bathing the Red Horse*. Whereas the 1914 work functioned as if it were an image of a 'real' youth, it aspired toward evoking multiple readings of the reality depicted. The 1926 work *Fantasy* however, proclaimed itself as fantasy. It justified its fantastical status in an art context averse to 'unreality' by serving as a literal homage to the idea of initiation into 'manhood' and the enactment of heroism through the Bolshevik dream.

In his search for resonant symbols, Petrov-Vodkin seized on notions of male prowess and the importance of motherly protection. For Petrov-Vodkin, machismo is that which is learned and nurtured, it grows out of a space of vulnerability and women's role is to ensure its development. This theme is explored through references to Christian iconography of the self-sacrificing mother who cares for the future hero/martyr. A consideration of an early work *Morning Bathers* (1917) [Fig 72] reveals Petrov-Vodkin's quasi-religious treatment of Russian mother and child as a sacred couple. In this image a naked mother and child walk forward to bathe outdoors, conscious of their nakedness but protected by the presence of adult companions behind them. Their central placement, the somberness of the moment and their nakedness described them as spiritual initiates, iconic in appearance. This was another creation of a Russian Madonna and child, both unadorned and to be adored for their purity.

The transition of this quasi-religious imagery into more overt political statements is evident when comparing *A Mother* (1913) and *The Year 1918 in Petrograd* (1920) with his 1924/25 works *Motherhood* and *At the Height*. In *A Mother* (1913) and *The Year 1918 in Petrograd* (1920) we see the nursing mother as a metaphor for all that Russia offers. In *A Mother* [Fig 73] Petrov-Vodkin situates the mother and child in the fields, she is barefoot and, like Renaissance images of the Madonna in the Meadows, she is a symbol of humility and plenitude. She passes on the 'gift' of life in her mother's milk which symbolises Russia as the promised land. In *The Year 1918 in Petrograd* [Fig 74] the mother and child are presented in working-class attire on a balcony above an Italianesque courtyard, recalling Petrov-Vodkin's admiration for the early Renaissance. Like early images of the Madonna the mother's head is inclined to one side but she does not avert her eyes demurely. She looks directly at the viewer to witness her knowledge of the

portentous future. In this respect the work recalls images of the *Mater Dolorosa*, a mother who wishes that she could bear the pains of her son and absorb the grief of the future she portends. Petrov-Vodkin even paints her with the Madonna's mantle imbued with prophylactic powers against death and evil.

In that these Madonna-like images appeared as though personifications of the mother of the abiding nation they became appropriate symbols in post-revolutionary years. Although a work such as *Motherhood* (1924-5) [Fig 75] does not refer directly to Christianity, it is obvious that Petrov-Vodkin's concerns are embedded in the traditions of Christian iconography and that Soviet Realist critics chose to overlook but enjoy these connections. This closely pictured scene of suckling child and mother is witnessed by a second woman who shares the intimacy of the moment and recalls images of St. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and confidant of Mary, mother of Jesus. The child is encompassed within wraps of cloth, the mother's hands, the presiding companion and the full breast on which she/he suckles. This early nurturance serves as the basis for growth into responsible adulthood and citizenship.

At the Height (1925) [Fig 76] is a companion piece to the 1924-25 work *Motherhood* (1925), but here the youth is pictured without the protection of the mother. He stands naked and extremely vulnerable, placed diagonally across the canvas and mirrored by another naked youth who stands, back to the viewer, in a classic contrapposto pose, one arm raised, one knee bent. Again the subject is that of bathing and the ideas which Petrov-Vodkin seems to work with pertain to purification and initiation into adult responsibility. The image seems to speak of youths on the edge of adulthood, conscious of their physical development but exhibiting a fragility in their present state of development. The formal device used in this image, as in many of his previous images, is the tilted and spherical horizon. Placing the figures on a diagonal axis and against this backdrop gives added weight to the subject of his work echoed in the title, *At the Height*. What Petrov-Vodkin seemed to deal with here was the notion of growth and he used his theories, which were antithetical to notions of geometrical perspective, to draw attention to this. His aim was to make visible those forces that build up the object from within, that

define its borders and construct its axes.⁴⁰ His interest in the tension between existing physical forms and future growth lent itself to the subject of an adolescent's development. He wished to make evident those forces which limited a form's outward thrust by defining the pressure of the atmosphere or the 'background' which has its own shape, solidity and opposition to the thrust of the object.⁴¹ It seems as if spherical perspective was used in this image, as in others on youth, initiation, male prowess and heroism, to define the processes of growth not as an easy vertical ascent but as a more circuitous pathway which involved the negotiation of social custom and political behaviour. What Petrov-Vodkin referred to here was not the easily attainable strength pictured in later Socialist Realist works, but the less predictable aspects of growth.

Nevertheless Petrov-Vodkin became an honoured artist of the RSFSR. This was largely on the basis of a work painted in 1928 entitled *Death of a Commissar* [Fig 78]. This work was assumed to be a tribute to patriotic martyrs who sacrificed themselves for the Soviet cause and was believed successfully to have synthesised a Soviet 'type'. VOKS bulletin described the work thus:

[it is] one of Petrov-Vodkin's most popular and most important works, an important stage in the development of his own creative work but also of the entire Soviet art. This composition – heroic in its subject matter and not devoid of romanticism – is of great social significance. The artist gives a deep synthetic image of the new human being (Galushkina in VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:116).

The work was commissioned for the Red Army celebrations of 1928 and although still a member of the **Four Arts Society**, Petrov-Vodkin exhibited this work with **AKhRR**. There are two versions of this work, both executed in 1928, both 198x248 cm. Nevertheless despite assumptions that they were uncomplex tributes to Marxist Realism, it is his same concern with a purpose *beyond* the confines of the material present that recurs in these works. It is interesting to compare them since one seems to serve as a study for the other. One of the works [Fig 77] is looser in style, less detailed, situated in

40. Petrov-Vodkin wrote about spherical perspective as an emphasis upon the axes which he believed controlled pictorial space, cutting into the flatness of the picture and projecting out from it to the viewer. See "Extracts From Euclidean Space, The Book by K. S. Petrov-Vodkin" in E. Selizaev and N. Barabonova (1966:140-143).

41. See Petrov-Vodkin's declaration in E. Selizaev and N. Barabonova (1966:141).

a closer perspectival space and depicts a man who resembles the dead comrade in *After the Battle*.⁴²

In contrast the other version of the work [Fig 78] depicts a man in the process of dying, thereby portraying a more dramatic moment than the former, and a face invested with greater significance.⁴³ Despite the apparent theme of equality and fraternity, this man is invested with a more privileged social and military status, the latter indicated by his differentiated uniform. In this version the man who comes to his aid is far more focussed on the death of his commissar and does not turn back to watch his departing comrades. He is unquestioningly loyal and does not grip his rifle in his anxiety to retreat, as in the other version. Here the dying man can still clasp his weapon firmly as opposed to the sketchier version in which the weapon rests in the limp hand of an already dead commissar. This commissar is thus depicted as noble, duty bound and a hero, further separated from his comrades by the depiction of another collapsed and dying soldier in the middle ground, who is not given the attention that a commissar 'deserves'. The presence of the soldier witnessing his death is crucial as it suggests the possibility of the later construction of this death as heroic martyrdom, in turn justifying the continual 'initiation' of men into war.

Although the image foregrounds death it allows for the display of love and the release of emotions by men within the safety of military parameters. Petrov-Vodkin selects as his heroic subject matter that moment in which emotional release is permissible, the moment at which men are exposed to forces beyond their control. He describes the determined

42. This figure was actually a self-portrait of Petrov-Vodkin. This is evident if one looks at his *Self-Portrait* 1926-7 [Fig 79] and at photographs of Petrov-Vodkin.

43. This comrade has been painted with finer features thus rendering him more Caucasian and hence suggesting his historically privileged position vis-à-vis the masses. As from the eighteenth century Russia had undergone rapid westernization and in almost every aspect of culture the Russian nobility became Europeanized. This accelerated toward the end of the French revolution with the integration of a number of French aristocrats into Russian society. Westernisation was confined to the gentry and an enormous gap existed between the aristocracy and the masses, particularly between those of European and Asiatic origin. See Auty (1980) for information on the westernisation of Russia.

battle for freedom which results in death, ironically a freedom from all that binds one in and to life. Although celebrated as a Socialist Realist this work of Petrov-Vodkin's is about tragedy, about the hero who can only fuse meaning and daily life in his dying agony. In that tragedy is about these heightened instants of crisis, Petrov-Vodkin is not referring to a conflictless continuity of life.⁴⁴

A lurking dissatisfaction with the prevailing material reality reaches its height in a work of Petrov-Vodkin's entitled *The Alarm. 1919* [Fig 80] painted in 1934. The insecurity alluded to in the picture is expressed in the form of a working class nuclear family under threat. The father watches anxiously out of the window while the rest of the family is frozen in anticipation of the attack. Pictured within a sparsely furnished room, the mother tries to comfort her daughter while gazing protectively toward her small sleeping child. This is the same protective gaze which appears in other works by Petrov-Vodkin, such as in *Sleeping Child* (1924). But this is a far cry from the ample nourishment of his nursing mother and child images of earlier years.⁴⁵ This is not about the blissful union of mother and child but about the disruptive broader social and political relations which frame this primary relationship. It seems to be a realization of that foreshadowed future in his early *Mater Dolorosa* images. Epitomising this dis-ease is the young girl whose stillness echoes the wider stasis evoked by fear. She seems resigned to being constrained by her mother, but looks out at the viewer apparently displaying little faith in the prospects of the situation of which she seems perfectly aware. This consciousness of her vulnerability and her inability to act upon it create a central and lamentable tension. This vulnerability is linked to the apparent inability of the man to enact heroically the role of protector. Petrov-Vodkin's superhuman archetypes of earlier years, namely heroic warrior and nurturing Madonna, are no longer visible. It is as though they have lost their former power to direct their own destinies and in this they echo the status of ordinary Soviet citizens in the mid-thirties.

44. See Jameson on tragedy in Jameson (1971:170).

45. See for example *A Mother* (1913) and *Motherhood* (1924-5).

Although the work ostensibly pertains to the civil war years it was painted in 1934, just after Stalin had demolished all opposition within the state and party, after radical purges of industry and government, after forced collectivisation in the countryside and the after trials and exiles of those construed as bourgeois ‘wreckers’ and bourgeois ‘formalists’. Petrov-Vodkin would have witnessed this persecution of colleagues and so-called formalists such as Akhmatova⁴⁶ (see portrait of Akhmatova above) and Mandelstam. In the light of this it is not unlikely that this work was a comment on the fear and harassment which characterised Russia in the mid-thirties. The title would have functioned as a form of legitimisation of such a subject. Even if this were indeed meant as a reference to the civil-war years, in choosing to paint such a scene in 1934, Petrov-Vodkin draws attention to society in a state of dis-ease because of the presence of an enemy likely to attack at any point. This is not an image about unqualified faith in the patriarchal protectors of home and hearth but it is about the desire for security. The power of the Soviet state is cast in doubt by virtue of this pictured insecurity.

Less ambivalent in relation to the Soviet ideals of scientific objectivity, collectivity and the ‘necessity’ for a style of the new era⁴⁷ were **The Circle of Arts** artists. These artists were graduates from the Leningrad Vkhutemas, many of whom had studied under Petrov-Vodkin. Like **The Four Arts Society** artists they emphasised the importance of ‘professional’ (i.e. formal) qualities in art works and although they combined this with the project of developing Soviet ‘types’ in a contemporary style deemed ‘suitable’ for the times, they were nevertheless criticised for the ‘formalist’ heritage in which they had been schooled. In VOKS bulletin Bush and Zamoshkin wrote of them thus:

The artists of this period had a wrong conception of realism....Although they revised these views even now the accentuated formality in the thematic pictorial art of **The Circle of Arts** frequently obscures the theme (VOKS Nos 9-10 1934:118).

46. Three years after Petrov-Vodkin painted her portrait Akhmatova was officially forbidden to publish her verse, and in 1934 her son was arrested in an effort to pressurise her to conform to literary requirements – a tactic which was used at various intervals of her life (Mandelstam 1976).

47. See declaration of **Circle of Arts** in Chapter Three above.

The effects of such reductive criticism were evident in the changes which ensued in the work of artists in the thirties. Painterly explorations underscoring their heroic themes were toned down such that what remained were tame illustrations of politically desirable content.

This transition from the Symbolist influence of their teachers to the typology of Socialist Realism involved a philosophical shift toward intellectual materialism. Whereas the Symbolists had emphasised the role of intuition in creating artworks, young artists such as those in **The Circle of Arts** began increasingly to emphasise an intellectual understanding. Whereas Petrov-Vodkin had been interested in the formation of matter, the becoming of things and the relativity of reality and unreality, the works of his students successively exhibited particular instants of singular views of people/things as though these were the definitive moments of a stable reality.

This is illustrated in the development of the work of Alexander Nikolaevich Samokhvalov, a student of architecture prior to the 1917 revolution and from 1920 to 1923 a painting student in the Vkhutemas. He completed his studies in the studio of Petrov-Vodkin and went on to co-found **The Circle of Arts** in 1926. During this time Samokhvalov consciously tried to evolve a 'style of the era' by constructing a Soviet typology of women who were monumental in size and mood. The images of these women undergo this shift from complexity and ambiguity in the twenties to singular definitive statements in the thirties. Whether tramconductors, soldiers or collective farm workers his women were large, and able-bodied, celebrated for the tasks they could perform. Nevertheless there is a disconcerting discrepancy between the proclamation of an equity in gender status, ostensibly celebrated by painters like Samokhvalov, Pakulin and Riazhsky (see below)

and the absence of women documented as figurative artists in the mid-twenties to thirties.⁴⁸

Samokhvalov's paintings from the mid-twenties on became more and more poster-like in their execution, exhibiting types within a simplified generalised form.⁴⁹ The subjects are large, easily identifiable and placed right up against the picture plane with little heed to the space in which they are situated.⁵⁰ In *Tram Conductor* (1928) [Fig 84] he boldly places the tram conductor in the centre of the canvas, as if viewed from below. She stands holding a strap from the roof of the tram in a gesture which can also be read as an attention-getting command, as though hailing or halting traffic. The tools of her trade hang from the strap of the money pouch strung across her chest like a bandoleer. The exaggerated perspective of the tram interior behind her, the radiating lines constituting the shadow of her cloak and the luminous green light which wipes out half her face and outlines the remaining features and her upheld hand, combine to create an impression of enormous energy, speed and blinding light. Despite the suggested mobility of the tram and the ambience of celerity this woman holds her ground, as the symbol of a new era, too large to argue with or to remove from her newly acquired position of power. Half of the image is given over to the enormity of her thighs which ensure her rootedness. Samokhvalov's scrubbed on and overpainted surface with its shallow modelling contributes to creating the effect of a modern icon in its fresco-like treatment. The work

48. Of the more renowned women working as figurative artists, Zinaida Serebriakova moved to Paris in 1924; Tatyana Yablonskaya only graduated from Kiev Art Institute in 1941; Sarra Lebedeva and Vera Mukhina were sculptors; and Olga Yanovskaya of **AKhRR** has very little of her work documented in the available literature. M. Yablonskaya's book *Women Artists of Russia's New Age* (1990) provides some information on Antonina Sofronova from **Group 13** and on Eva Rozengolts-Levina, a student of Robert Falk and a member of the **Union of Social Artists**.

49. No longer was Samokhvalov producing small semi-Cubist landscapes with wide open spaces and faceted natural formations. See for example *Among the Rocks* (1921-2) [Fig 82] and *A Camel* (1921) [Fig 81]. He began to print colour lithograph posters such as *The Atmosphere of Tension of the 1905 Revolution United the Workers Under Lenin* (1926) [Fig 83], clear didactic messages calling for united support of the government. It was probably his poster-making expertise which allowed for his easy transition into **October** in later years.

50. This shallow illusion of space has been related to the influence of old frescoes on which Samokhvalov worked in the Giorgiev cathedral in Ladoga (Bown 1988:46), but it was also learned in the painting studio of Petrov-Vodkin prior to this experience.

serves as a tribute to a new Soviet type but in its execution, particularly in the treatment of colour and light, it retains the quasi-religious overtones of Symbolist works.

In *Two Collective Farm Workers* (n.d) [Fig 85], Samokhvalov depicts two women as convinced defenders of the collectivist project. Here again the focus is not on open ended spaces but on human determination to occupy or give shape to these spaces. He allows for no room around their closely positioned heads and torsos. This is a tight composition about collective resolve, and pride in their status as labourers. The handle of an implement cutting diagonally across the composition between the women also serves to bind them as the symbol of the unifying ‘tools’ of their labour. With the onset of the Five Year Plan, rhetoric about care for collective tools was spelt out by every local factory and farm activist and tool production was a special emphasis of Stalin’s Five-Year Plan. As evident in this work, Samokhvalov was far less ambiguous in his support of the Soviet cause than was his teacher, Petrov-Vodkin.

The foregrounding of machine-tools is reiterated in a work of Samokhvalov’s entitled *Woman with a File* (1929) [Fig 86]. Three quarters of the tools used in the USSR prior to 1928 were imported (State Planning Commission of the USSR 1933). One of the goals of the Five Year Plan was to reverse this and increase tool production. A new consciousness had to be raised around the importance and care of tools.⁵¹ Carefully positioned and styled this is an image of a youthful, serious and capable worker. Arms raised above her head she leans her full weight upon the sturdy metal tool – a symbol of the centrality of the steel and engineering industry for the agricultural and military needs of the country. These were images both to document and inspire the birth of an heroic working class, and to mythologise increased productivity under The Five Year Plan. Samokhvalov with his training under ex-Symbolists, his knowledge of contemporary painting techniques, his work on monuments and iconic frescoes and his youthful enthusiasm for the Soviet project was perfectly equipped to do this. However due to his

51. See also the emphasis on tool production in Samokhvalov’s *Woman Metro-Builder With a Pneumatic Drill* (1937) [Fig 87]. This was virtually a monument to the manufacturing of these highly specialised pieces of equipment in the USSR.

connection with leftist and Symbolist teachers in the VKHUTEMAS, he and other **Circle of Arts** members were accused of formalism (see above). Given the enthusiasm with which figurative artists such as Samokhvalov constructed a new mythology of Soviet types, it is ironic that this 'new style' was curbed on the grounds of its 'formalism'.

Viacheslav Pakulin, Samokhvalov's colleague, was president of **The Circle of Arts** from 1926 to 1931. His Soviet 'types' are extremely stylised and his women labourers more objectified than Samokhvalov's. He chose to paint ample bodied women in exaggerated poses, these formal configurations then abstracted into roughly modelled geometric forms, reminiscent of the late twenties neo-classical forms of Picasso. The use of women's bodies to celebrate the strength of the proletariat and peasantry served a number of other purposes as well. Woman rendered as beast of burden was mythologised to indicate a willingness to toil for the Soviet cause. Woman's body as art historical site of interest also provided the dual justification of formal integrity and sexual appeal.⁵²

In *Woman Carrying Water* (1928) [Fig 88], Pakulin painted his subject in a dress cut widely across the shoulders, revealing most of one shoulder, and around her broad neck placed a delicate necklace thereby setting up a subtle juxtaposition of a state of dress and undress. She is painted as though off-balance in the process of lifting up pails of water. The pails are barely noticeable, as though not important in the depiction. Because they are not immediately apparent, nor is the effort of the woman in the act of lifting them. The subject of the work is thus rendered in an abstracted pose, an inexplicable semi-squat. The awkwardness of this act is transformed into a stylish arrangement of this woman's physical magnitude, frozen mid-action and displayed for the perusal of the viewer. Her dress is hauled up above her knees, her chest is expanded and her arms pulled back by the weight of the yoke. Thus despite her size, she presents a figure of

52. In her book, the "Female Nude", Lynda Nead (1992:48) quotes Kenneth Clark on traditional attitudes to women's bodies in painting as follows: "[Artists] have found it easier to compose harmoniously the larger units of a woman's torso; they have been grateful for its smoother transitions, and above all they have discovered analogies with satisfying geometrical forms, the oval, the ellipsoid and the sphere". It is this (ab)use of woman's body for formal and sensuous pleasure that is also evidenced in Pakulin's work.

extreme vulnerability. Moreover it is probably because of her size that Pakulin delights in rendering her as physically desirable and exposed. Ostensibly powerful, she is positioned as defenseless. Despite **The Circle of Art's** avowed dislike of trendy 'isms' what we see here is a new fashion; the small stylish Soviet star on her headscarf also marking her as an obedient Soviet subject. These works are not documents of reality but rather unabashed constructions of the new Soviet mythology.

A Woman Reaping (1926-7) [Fig 89] is also large in scale (152x187 cm). Here again one figure occupies the entire canvas. In this study the woman grasps a bundle of wheat in one hand and a sickle in the other – two primary symbols of the USSR. The woman's pose is awkward and exaggerated such that the articulations of torso, waist, buttocks, thighs, arms and enormous feet become the focus of attention. These are images of women rendered as though beasts of burden, without individuality, and aestheticised for the viewers' delight, a delight which resides not just in the work which they perform but in the composition of their figures. This use of women's bodies as symbols of the country's strength, fertility, and endurance was to become increasingly evident in Socialist Realist works.

It is noteworthy that Pakulin images of men do not exhibit this exaggerated physical amplitude. They are also less heroic. In *Sailors in a Tavern* (1929) [Fig 90] five figures constitute a far more complex composition of smaller dimensions. That the **Circle of Arts** painters were against 'styles of the past'⁵³ is evident in the references to contemporary painterly developments in this work. Pakulin creates a mood which is markedly different from that of his labouring women. In the relaxed ambience of a tavern these sailors indulge in the pleasures of drink, smoke and contemplation. Here a woman is pictured with a drink in hand alone in a tavern, her bright white legs and violent orange hat making of her a somewhat ghoulish image hovering behind a doleful sailor. Pakulin presents a stereotypical scenario of what awaits sailors in port, pointing to the lamented absence of domestic comforts and to the idea of woman's availability for the

53. See declaration of **The Circle of Arts** in Chapter Three above.

occasion of male comradeship and sexual satisfaction.⁵⁴ One might ask of Pakulin's works what this 'style of a new era' actually conveyed. The stylised objectification of rural women and of sailors pursuing age-old haunts and habits was surely not the redefinition of roles, relationships and values promised by the revolution.

Common to Filinov and ex-Symbolists Kuznetsov and Petrov-Vodkin was the attitude that matter could be endowed with new form. Not limited by the boundaries of real objects, they decomposed and recomposed at will. In this they reflected early Modernist aesthetics and an interest in the flux of that which we call reality. Filinov particularly seemed to assert the relativity of that which we call real, to that which we do not understand or desire and which we call unreal.⁵⁵ In contrast to regarding all form, even natural form, as artificial or provisional and determined by subjective assumptions, the **Circle of Arts** artists tried to dissociate themselves from the 'individualism' of their teachers. They assumed that the order desired by the Soviet government was reality, and drew upon the techniques of their teachers to construct fixed and mythologised moments of it. In the process they obliterated that dialectical tension between individual and society, referred to by Lukacs, and ignored the individual for the sake of collective need. In that they subsumed individual needs into increased productivity, these images did not communicate new and revolutionary values which guaranteed freedom. Institutional control remained evident and even the images which ostensibly referred to women's equal status with men were informed primarily by an economic rationale. That the values communicated by Socialist Realist works, or works which lent credence to this aesthetic, did not guarantee a revolution in ethics, and in women's rights, is increasingly apparent in the thirties. The social contradictions and struggle for these rights was less and less apparent because of the 'revolutionary romanticism' favoured by Socialist Realists (see Chapter Three). It was

54. Despite the libertarian philosophy of equality of the sexes at the time of the revolution, throughout the civil war and during NEP, women continued to be the recipients of male violence, allied as it was to the frustration of their economic, social and psychological needs. During the NEP years the number of reported rapes increased, especially of women teachers who came from religious or wealthy/kulak peasant families. These rapes were committed by Communist officials using women for the purpose of venting their political frustrations (Fitzpatrick 1982:133).

55. See Henri Bergson on "Creative Evolution" in Harrison and Wood (1992:140-143).

for such reasons that Lukacs regarded Socialist Realism as a deviation from realism, despite its claims to describing in a full and complete manner the relationship of the individual to her/his societal context.

D. Traditionalists and leftists share a didactic platform: AKhRR, AKhR, October and RAPKh.

Far more conservative in painterly treatment were the Soviet types in the works of **AKhRR** artists. As mentioned in section A above, a dubious link existed between the Cezannists in **OMZh** and the **AKhRR** painters, illustrated by their brief merger in 1926. To understand this temporary link and the place of Cezannist technique in **AKhRR** painting itself it is useful to turn to the work of Ilya Mashkov. From 1924 to 1932 Mashkov was an **AKhRR** member and from 1925-1929 he headed a central studio of **AKhRR**. What Mashkov shared with **OMZh** members was a common history. In 1910 he too had been a member of **The Jack of Diamonds** and in 1911 he had exhibited with the **World of Art**. Under Shterenberg, with Robert Falk, Mashkov had helped establish IZO of Narkompros. In 1918, with other Cezannists, he had been employed to teach in the SVOMAS. Throughout this period these ex-**Jack of Diamonds** members shared a resistance to pressure from the leftists to change the painting faculties into industrial design centres. As an ex-**Jack of Diamonds** member Mashkov was obviously a key link between **AKhRR** and **OMZh**, and while still head of a central **AKhRR** studio he acted as a key organizer for **OMKh**.

Even in his pre-**AKhRR** still lifes and portraits, Mashkov used colour, ornamentation and subject matter to celebrate how Russia differed from Europe.⁵⁶ His works communicated an unrestrained joy in that which he regarded as essentially Russian. He executed these works in the style of Russian Neoprimitivism combined with Fauvist influences. What Mashkov and many young **Jack of Diamonds** members took from the

56. See, for example, Mashkov's *Portrait of a Boy in an Embroidered Shirt* (1909) [Fig 91], *Still Life with Poppies, Cornflowers* (1912-13) [Fig 92] and *Still Life with Samovar* (1919) [Fig 93].

Fauves was the permission to be rustic, naive, violently expressive and the use of these qualities to talk about everyday objects and experiences in Russia. Mashkov carried this strange 'cultured' European rejection of civilisation over into the **AKhRR** project in 1922, ostensibly to make art in distinct opposition to 'bourgeois' over-refinement. His use of the painterly mark and of bright unmodulated colour was criticised as rough by critics who instead advocated work which obscured its technical basis and which inspired viewers to thoughts which 'transcended' the painterly means. Artists like Mashkov, Konchalovsky and Falk, celebrated the physical substance of things through their emphasis of tactile surfaces and the physicality of their materials. It was this emphasis on the tactility of paint and therefore the tactility of the rendered objects that many Soviet critics lamented, believing that it obscured the 'inner essence' of things, or the 'true kernel' of reality. No doubt those ex-**Jack of Diamonds** members continued to use Fauve-like quick and tactile applications to sanction their beliefs that painting transcribed nature naturally, free from the 'artifice' of artistic intercession.⁵⁷ They counterposed this against the smoother surfaces of the **Peredvizhniki**, who were extolled as role models. It was this emphasis on painterly treatment that, through Mashkov, coexisted with **Peredvizhniki** influences in **AKhR**.

Mashkov's fascination with decorative ornamentation can be traced back to his Neoprimitivist days. As a Neoprimitivist Mashkov had defined Russia in terms of its Asiatic culture. His images reflected the ornamentation of Oriental fabrics, handcrafted Asiatic wares and the influence of Occidental forms fashioned on Byzantine forms. This ornamentation found expression in later years in abundant still lifes of food, sumptuously arranged in decorative displays and appropriately entitled *Moscow Delicacies* (1924) [Fig 94] or *Moscow Food; Meat Game* (1924) [Fig 95], or *Soviet Loaves* (1936) [Fig 96]. *Soviet Loaves* is an exuberant tribute to Soviet produce on a large canvas 145x175 cm. Mashkov combined his love of excessive ornamentation and Fauve-like delight in colour and in the physical immediacy of objects with the ideological project of the Soviet Union in the thirties, namely the need to inspire faith in an improved quantity of goods produced for

57. See Herbert (1992) for a critique of Fauvists' claims to spontaneity.

mass consumption under The Five Year Plan. Around a loaf shaped as a wreath of wheat encompassing the emblem of a hammer and sickle, Mashkov placed approximately thirty different types of loaves and rolls and an array of cakes. With every centimetre of the canvas groaning under the weight of this abundance of Soviet production, the work functioned to suggest that there was no end to this plentiful supply. Such a work needs to be seen in the context of the proliferation of scenes of collective farms depicting 'enhanced' standards of living and productive output (see Deineka and Gerasimov's works below). It also suggested that the plan of replacing the private sector with socialised trade had succeeded, that the consumers' co-operative organization, the co-operative trading system and State commodity circulation produced enough and benefitted all. Mashkov's work presented a unique solution to fulfilling his desire to produce tactile still lifes while simultaneously appealing to popular political sentiment.

Also a founder member of **AKhRR** and honoured artist of the RSFSR, Evgeni Katsman, remained with **AKhRR** until 1932 producing studies of new Soviet 'types'. Unlike Mashkov, Katsman's works do not provide evidence of the influence of early Modernists like Cezanne or Matisse. Katsman's images of workers, peasants, soldiers etc. were painted in a sombre and detailed style of realism informed by the tradition of the **Peredvizhniki**. His belief in the form of easel works as opposed to collective agitational murals or public monumental works placed him firmly in the early **AKhRR** genre. As such he was, in the terminology of Georg Lukacs, more of a Critical Realist than a Socialist Realist and more inclined to point to unresolved contradictions than to idealised scenarios.

Village Teacher (1925) [Fig 97] is a full length study of a man defined in terms of his role as teacher. What few props Katsman uses he uses to full effect: namely the poster on the wall, the rolled-up printed matter held by the teacher and the accessories of clothing. These functioned as signs of authority which would separate him from other villagers and place him in a position of authority over the learners. Unlike later Socialist Realist paintings of heroes, Katsman tried to make of an 'ordinary' teacher an admirable proletarian type. The facial expression of the teacher exhibits both emotional defensiveness and intellectual keenness. Filling the canvas from top to bottom and

commanding attention this teacher does not present an heroic image of joy and certitude as in later Socialist Realist images.

Katsman's *Listening (Members of the Communist Faction From the Village of Baranovka)* (1925) [Fig 98] is a charcoal study of three Communists listening attentively to what one must assume is a speech, given that there is no evidence of dialogue and debate. The implications are that these rural Communist Party members are receiving Party instructions. Baranovka is a small town in Bellorussia, 470km southwest of Leningrad and 150 km southwest from Minsk. Villages and farms in the region had long been poverty stricken, although 1925 had seen good harvests.⁵⁸ Rural workers had however hoarded their grain. Due to the lack of consumer goods and the lowering of taxes they did not feel compelled to exchange their grain for money. The marketing of the harvest was a disaster for the government, and the crisis had split the party between claims of centralised planning and industrialisation and a continuation of the NEP market economy.⁵⁹ This image is important because what we see here are one of the earliest signs of increased centralisation, loyal Communist members receiving the Party word to implement in the outlying regions. Nevertheless the focus is still on the individual recipients of these instructions, and not on Soviet leaders and heroes.

Kalyzin Lacemakers (1928) [Fig 99] is another pastel by Katsman which like the painting *The Village Teacher*, was in later years criticised for being naturalistic in detail and anecdotal rather than monumental, popular rather than heroic. The problem with this image was obviously the absence of the veneer of heroism which would obscure the poverty and toil in these women's lives. The image shows four lacemakers, young and old, facing a young woman who reads from a book. Her ability to read is foregrounded and as such refers to the importance of literacy campaigns being conducted in rural areas.

58. see Parker (1969:85) on The White Russian Republic.

59. What was most important this year was that Kamenev and Zinovev, who had criticised the theory of a leader, were defeated by Stalin. Although they had argued for industrialisation, Stalin defeated them and then launched an offensive for centralised planning and collectivisation beyond anything they had envisaged.

convictions, calculated and passionate. It was this balance of characteristics that Brodski set out to develop in his portraits of the idealised party leader, portraits which proved indispensable to the centralist organization of the Party.

Lenin in Front of the Kremlin (1924) [Fig 103] was a full length portrait of Lenin, based on sketches from life. Brodski depicted Lenin on the banks of the Moscow river as though arbiter over the Moscow landscape and imbued with as much historical status as the Kremlin featured in the background. In this work Lenin stands as rightful heir to 800 years of government executed within the walls of the Kremlin, but here he stands in the open air, 'on the ground' as it were, but a leader nonetheless and separated from the flag-wielding crowd in the distance. That Lenin is a symbol of the proletariat is also suggested by his worker's cap set off against his suit. The work marks the beginning of the production of an entire genre of Party leader images and is an important precursor of the flood of Stalin portraits in later years. This shift from the proletariat as the revolutionary agent to the centralized party as the avant-garde of the proletariat was to become a hallmark of Socialist Realism and Brodski's endorsement of this shift led to his becoming a merited artist of the RSFSR and receiving the Order of Lenin.

Brodski, together with Katsman, had discussed the importance of art in the Soviet Union with Stalin and Voroshilov and had agreed on its primary task being the consolidation of socialism in the new Soviet state. Stalin had conceived of the idea of 'socialism in one country' because the proletariat in Western capitalist systems was becoming increasingly reformist and losing its status as a revolutionary class. On the basis of this Stalin had resuscitated and discredited Trotsky's 1905 calls for permanent and *international* revolution, drawing on Lenin's critique of this position (Carr 1979:71-72). Stalin's centralized mode of party control was justified as an international Communist strategy which prioritised industrialisation over socialisation within the Soviet Union with the state as the basic instrument for establishing communism (Marcuse 1958:105-6). Accordingly, art works were to reflect Soviet patriotism and the need to protect the motherland. This was prioritised over the principle of international proletarianism, which was redefined as a movement to be guided by a centralised party machine. One way of building up patriotism and ensuring loyalty to the new party powers was by referring back to times

when the country was under threat from foreign invasion. Here again Brodski fulfilled the task. In *Shooting of the 26 Baku Commissars* (1925) [Fig 104] Brodski depicted the execution of revolutionary commissars by the White Army aided by the British, conjuring up feelings that the Soviet Union was still under threat from a foreign enemy. Baku was a crucial port in Azerbaydzhan, during the civil war years a point of entry for the allies to land troops and arms. In that the Azerbaydzhanis were trying to claim their independence, the allies lent them support in an effort to undermine the Bolshevik forces. The White army, shown executing these Baku commissars, comprised anti-Bolshevik Persians, Armenians and Turks from the local area, peasants, cossacks and in this case British forces. Such an image was bound to stir up sentiments against those constructed as counter-revolutionary opponents within the country and to build faith in a unified Soviet State fearful of attacks from a conservative Europe. As such, it fulfilled the Socialist Realist requirements of *partiinost* (see Chapter Three) and was of direct use to the state, also lending support to Stalin's decision to oust the Trotskyist contingent which he construed as an Imperialist bourgeois betrayer of the country. The image focused on the defiant commissars who, once executed, would be dragged into a ditch pictured in the foreground of the image. In the style of the historical narrative painting of the **Peredvizhniki**, Brodski included plenty of historical and anecdotal detail. The function of the two figures in the bottom right of the canvas is crucial in that they represent those 'guilty' counter-revolutionaries faced with the ghastly evidence of their betrayal of the revolution.

Even though Brodski's work echoed state policy, the surge of radicalism and iconoclasm that preceded Stalin's cultural revolution had led to radical youth in **AKhRR** criticising Brodski, as they did Katsman, for being a 'bourgeois' fellow-traveller wed to the 'individual' easel production of the **Peredvizhniki**. Thus the initial reasons for which Brodski was invited into **AKhRR** were in 1928 turned into reasons to oust him. Thematically his work did not change, but although works prior to 1929 were grand in scale, his 1929 work became truly colossal, possibly reflecting **AKhR's** demand for massive public monuments.

Brodski's 1929 work *Lenin's Speech at a Worker's Meeting at the Putilov Factory in May 1917* [Fig 105] pictured Lenin five months prior to the October revolution, rousing the industrial proletariat to overthrow the Provisional government to replace it with a revolutionary Bolshevik government which would push for immediate socialism. This focus on the industrial proletariat and on the urgency for socialism to take effect echoed Stalin's attempts to mobilise workers in support of the Five Year Plan in 1928-29. This plan had been endorsed at the sixteenth conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1929 and the state was required immediately to win worker support and to counter the left's pessimism. It is possible that Brodski was commissioned by the state to execute this work, given that its date coincides with the year in which the commissioning agency **Vsekokhudozhnik** was founded. Its massive size, 280x555 cm also attests to its possibly being a commissioned work. The importance of worker solidarity is evidenced in the unified attention workers pay to Lenin's speech, but for the small group in the act of 'signing up'. In this respect the work is a direct call for allegiance to Party and state. A single worker identity is evident in their identical dress. The call for Communist Party membership coincided directly with the new cadre policy which had begun to emerge at the Central Committee plenums in 1928,⁶³ followed by a campaign to recruit more proletariat into the Communist Party.

Brodski pays attention to the minutest of detail in this attempt to reconstruct history and to convince his viewers that they have a continuing role to play in the making of this history. As in *The Shooting of the 26 Baku Commissars*, he uses the right hand corner of the canvas for the 'significant detail', namely the signing up. The vast industrial scape in which Brodski locates the scene is also significant given the drive for increased industrial growth in 1929. The possibility of the realization of these plans is made evident by Brodski painting electrical cables strung diagonally across the composition above Lenin, signifying Lenin's calls for electrification of the country and the accomplishment of this plan within the first couple of years of Bolshevik rule.

63. S.Fitzpatrick outlines the growth of a new elite under Stalin in *Slavic Review* 38, 3, 1979:378-400.

Six years after Lenin's death Brodski continued to manufacture images which informed the cult of leadership in the Soviet Communist Party. *Vladimir Ilich Lenin in Smolnyi* (1930) [Fig 106] is an image of Lenin as humble worker in direct contrast to a history of images of overindulgent tsars and aristocrats. This is an image about toil, not the cultured pursuits of a *leisure* class. A different sort of culture is implied in Brodski's work, that of austerity, self-denial and self-perpetuating discipline. It is precisely these qualities of a postponed happiness linked to the idea of socially necessary labour that were propagated by Stalin and echoed by advocates of Socialist Realism.

In that Lenin's private work space is bared to the public in this work, we, the viewers, are now privileged to be given an interior view into the origins of state policy. Lenin is pictured in private, as a man too practical and humble to remove the dustcover of the chair on which he sits. He is surrounded by empty chairs, one of which takes up an entire half of the canvas. These chairs suggest the importance of receiving and consulting with comrades, yet the fact that they are unoccupied suggests that it is Lenin who is the indisputable leader and principal protagonist. The printed media on the table attest to Lenin's word becoming *the* word which is communicated to the people. In this work Brodski meticulously renders the furnishings in what was Lenin's office at the Smolnyi Institute in Petrograd. Brodski's technical choices reinforced his thematic concerns. His determination to capture every last detail of the scene was not only an attempt to re-infuse life into the deceased subject, a kind of embalming of the past akin to the state's decision to embalm Lenin's physical body, but also an attempt to keep alive the **Peredvizhniki** realist techniques of the nineteenth-century and to refuse to admit any influences of Modernism. Brodski must have been well aware of Lenin's dislike of Modernism and so the exercise of this tight formal control serves to lend credence to Lenin's views, cultural and political, as well as to Brodski's own artistic choices. The minutiae of the scene executed with intense patience also communicated the intensity of Lenin's concentration and dedicated political service. The technical control and harmonious finish of the image prevent the very thought of Lenin's decisions being ill-considered. Brodski's subdued tonal range established the necessary sober atmosphere in which to picture the life of a 'disciplined' leader of the working class.

She seems to be contrasted with workers who, probably illiterate, have more limited opportunities in their lives. The only worker who focuses sharply on her work is the oldest of them, who has no future to dream of. The suggestion of a world beyond theirs is conveyed by the young literate woman and her contentment is contrasted with the evident tension the other women display, pulled between their work and the desire to envisage more. Katsman lingers on every detail of their clothing, facial expression and particularities of their working conditions. This is a tribute to their labour, but it does not gloss over the complexities of the relations of this labour. Old and young are subjected to the same age-old working conditions. This is not a eulogy to industrialisation and progress but it does suggest the need for an alternative future which can in part be orchestrated by the campaigns of the Soviet state.

These works of 1925 and 1928 were produced prior to and on the brink of the First Five Year Plan and picture the proletariat as the agents of the revolution, with only the suggestion of Party control. They do not display the ideas which informed the belief in 'socialism in one country' and are not images in praise of modern industrialisation, collectivism and competitive efficiency. The individuals are pictured in such a way that their individuality or autonomy is not surrendered to the public domain. That individuals are not defined in terms of this *res publica* and have not fused ethical and political values is particularly evident in *Kalyazin Lacemakers*, where the attitude of the older individuals exists in a tense relationship to that of younger citizens. Although Katsman's works point to the tensions between 'peasantry' and proletariat, mental and physical labour, the old consciousness and new socialist mentality, it was not a tension that was resolved. It would seem to be precisely this lack of resolution that informed the attack on Katsman which was led by the more radical members of **AKhRR** and **RAPKh**.

Despite his firm commitment to **AKhRR** and the Party, Katsman was accused of being a naturalist and of not agitating sufficiently for an heroic reconstruction of the country in the form of monumental public works. Katsman was intent on preserving the **Peredvizhniki** tradition but wanted to combine these 'academic' realist techniques with the project of evolving a Socialist Realist style. It was on the subject of Socialist Realism that he met with Stalin, Voroshnikov and fellow painter Isaac Brodski (see below). This

was followed by his engaging the services of party publisher I. Gromski to talk to **MOSSKh**⁶⁰ members about putting academic painting techniques to the service of the working class.⁶¹

Arguing for the same position as Katsman was Isaac Brodski. Brodski was invited into **AKhRR** in 1923, on the basis of his having been an exhibiting member of the **Peredvizhniki** in their 1914-16 shows. Brodski's landscapes and urbanscapes produced between 1917 and 1922 show Russia described in terms of geographic features. Small settlements or diminutive humans are set within vast physical spaces as if dominated and determined by these geographical spaces.⁶² After Lenin's death in 1924 Brodski began a series of tributes to the deceased leader of the Soviet Union and began to define Soviet society not in terms of the determining natural environment but in terms of the voice of the Party. It is significant that he began the production of these works at a time when the party was emerging from an absence of leadership experienced during Lenin's illness. This was followed by the simmering tensions between Trotsky and the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin. The work reflected the need for unification and in part sanctioned the period of the purging of Trotskyites which took place under the guise of orthodox Leninism. Stalin modelled himself as Lenin's disciple and cultivated the notion of party 'orthodoxy', party 'truths' and the party being above criticism. This idea of party policy being threatened by enemies within the country was linked to the idea of external threats to the USSR, a position Stalin summed up as follows:

We have lagged fifty or one hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must close this gap in ten years. Either we shall do it, or they will crush us (Dukes 1974:254).

In this context the place of Party role models became crucial. The ideal authority figure was characterised as idealistic but industrious, all knowing, calm, neither too left nor too right, neither too romantic nor too pessimistic, part of the people but with exceptional

60. See Chapter Three Section F above.

61. The talk was countered by one organised by Shterenberg on modern figurative techniques.

62. See, for example, *Winter Landscape* [Fig 100] and *Winter* (1917) [Fig 101], and *Street in the Town, Evening* (1922) [Fig 102].

In a massive canvas (280x422 cm) entitled *Lenin Giving a Farewell Speech to Detachment of the Red Army About to Leave for the Polish Front on May 5, 1920* (1933) [Fig 107] Brodski reiterates the themes of solidarity and allegiance. However this crowd is not composed of industrial workers but of soldiers in the Red Army, about to embark on a defence of the borders of the Soviet Union against foreign invasion. This idea of there being a permanent threat to the Soviet State was not confined to the notion of there being an external threat but, as seen above, also that of an internal threat. Trotsky continued to pose a threat in exile, particularly with his formation of the 4th Internationale in 1933. The history of the trial of Bukharin and Party 'rightists' was also fresh in the minds of the people. There were some reasons for concern regarding external threats⁶⁴ but the state was beginning to sign non-aggression pacts with most of the states of Europe. What was probably the primary incentive for formulating this idea of an external threat in 1933 was the huge internal domestic crisis brought about by the famine of 1932, by the high procurement of grain by the state and its refusal to cut grain exports. This had led to the death of between 3 and 5 million people in rural areas.⁶⁵ The place that Brodski assumed in all of this was to help issue the call for continued patriotism, to defend the need for political and social hierarchies, and to respect what was construed as a revolutionary 'tradition' of civil defence.

Merited artist of the RSFSR and recipient of the Stalin Prize in 1946, Fyodor Bogorodsky also produced images which spoke of the need for comradeship and the importance of the patriarchal authority offered in the form of the state. Bogorodsky was praised for his construction of Soviet types⁶⁶ most of which were produced when he joined **AKhRR** in 1924. However, with the formation of the more radical **AKhR** and **RAPKh**, he was criticised as a fellow traveller. During the years that **AKhRR** was reorganised into **AKhR**, Bogorodsky was visiting the old Proletkultist Gorky in Italy. At the time younger and

64. The Soviet Union had signed non-aggression pacts with Mongolia and China in reaction to Japan moving into Manchuria in 1931.

65. See Fitzpatrick (1982:137).

66. See VOKS nos 9-10 1934:29.

more radical Proletkultists were criticising the older Proletkultist Gorky for having lent support to the conservative Leninist position on culture adopted by the state, so by association Bogorodsky would have been branded a fellow-traveller despite the record of his party service. During his student years in the VKhUTEMAS Bogorodsky had belonged to the figurative group **Bytie**⁶⁷ but had interpreted their intention of 'reflecting the revolution in our technique' not by an emphasis on technique as had Osmerkin (see above), but by a preference for tendentious subject matter. **AKhRR** provided a more suitable home for Bogorodsky, particularly in the light of his Communist Party membership and his service in the Soviet security force, Cheka. It is not unimportant to note that prior to being a painter, Bogorodsky had been a circus performer, a pilot and a law student. This, together with his service in Cheka, provide evidence of someone with a strong wish to envisage and give shape to his dreams of a new order. It was this romantic proletarianism that drew him to the early ideas of Proletkult and that informed his visit to Gorky. It was probably this romanticism evident in his depiction of subjects of the revolution that met with disfavour in the late twenties.

Bogorodsky's images communicated an interrelationship of individual and state in which the Soviet State secures the comfort of its subjects but does not subsume the individual entirely into the greater public domain, as became desirable in the late twenties. This importance of both individual and state was illustrated in his portraits of homeless children produced between 1925 and 1926. One such work entitled *An Orphan* (1925) [Fig 108] pictures a young boy who is seated in front of a faded picture on the wall, featuring the outline of what appears to be a patriarch of sorts. What seems to be implied here is that there is a need for the guidance of such innocent subjects who, but for the intervention of the state, would be left without place and purpose. Bogorodsky's studies of army and naval personnel communicate, in their dress and posture, an almost familial allegiance to the state but this emphasis on civil duty does not obliterate the importance of individual comfort.

67. See Chapter 3, Section A above.

In *Red Navy Poet* [Fig 109] Bogorodsky attempts to fuse these interests in the particularity of the individual with broader political concerns. The navy poet is rendered not as overly heroic in attitude but as a dreamer and a visionary. It is the dream that is important to Bogorodsky, that desire to transcend the present and to envisage and forge a perfect future.

Despite the criticism by younger **AKhRR** members and the organization **RAPKh**, Bogorodsky persisted in his easel portraits of subjects of the revolution. On his return from Italy in the thirties, he produced a number of almost formulaic portraits, all characterised by a somewhat romantic element, for example, *Sailors* [Fig 110], *Father and Son* [Fig 111], *Self-Portrait* (1932) [Fig 112] and *At a Photographers* (1932) [Fig 113]. In all of these images we see defenders of the revolution set against sunset or moonlit skies. These images appear as if modelled on photographers' studio shots, the subjects presenting themselves self-consciously for appraisal. All Bogorodsky's men are defined in terms of their military attire. In his *Self-Portrait* he presents himself attired in an accumulation of all this military apparel: bandoleer, rifle, heavy overcoat etc. Bogorodsky pictures himself as both protected and protector, equipped to survive against all odds. Common to all of these images is a belief in the dreams or 'causes' which embrace state, friend and family.

At a Photographers (1932) depicts a working class couple who present themselves against a backdrop which might well symbolise their dreams. The woman is earthbound in physique and posture, meeting the viewer's gaze with her own steady look. The man's energy and attention is elsewhere as he holds his rifle with both hands. He is pictured as the wanderer, the defender, envisaging a future he must fight for. Here war is glorified in that it is pictured as necessary for the achievement of romantic visions. Domesticity is the guise for military adventurism. Bogorodsky suggests that woman/home/motherland must be defended, but it is the antithesis of this which holds his interest, namely the homeless, adventure and spaces beyond such domesticity. Although this romantic sentiment was probably popular, Bogorodsky's works were not regarded as sufficiently agitational by the youth in **AKhRR** and by **RAPKh**. His images were probably regarded as too focussed upon the individuality of the subjects. During the cultural revolution, the

place of individual dreams had to be subsumed into the public dream, with little space for family sentiment. That Bogorodsky's images were redeemed by the state and that he was later an admired and rewarded artist was probably due to the return of 'family' values in the heyday of Socialist Realism.

Georgi Riazhsky fulfilled the criteria of the radical **AKhR** and **RAPKh** membership, and was eulogised in 1934 as follows:

Riazhsky...is one of the most important and leading artists of this [realistic] school....It is the task of an artist, first and foremost, to find the most characteristic type of the new man, and at the same time...to avoid treating this type in an empirically narrow manner. In the artist's portraits there is none of the salon intimacy of the bourgeois portrait. Riazhsky's portraits provide the image of a fighter, of a representative of the ideas and of the practice of the new order. In Riazhsky's portraits, the new Soviet woman is not only a mother, but an active builder of the new world, it is the image of an active worker with...the will to fight (P. Kaptsov in VOKS No9-10, 1934).

What is suggested here is that in Riazhsky's work both motive and character become subject to 'objective' societal evaluation. This was probably because from 1924 Riazhsky was not only a member of **AKhRR** but also of the Communist Party.

That individual will coincides with the general will is illustrated by Riazhsky's *Chairwoman* (1928) [Fig 114]. In this work a chairwoman proclaims her views, and picturing her from below, Riazhsky emphasises her authority. The depiction of a woman projecting herself authoritatively in a public space was antithetical to images of women in the past, including more recent images such as Shevchenko's *Ironing Woman*, Osmerkin's portraits and even Deineka's ostensibly able-bodied women (see above).

The economic need of the first Five Year Plan had led to a massive campaign to include women in the workforce.⁶⁸ Because the demand for labour exceeded the supply, women, including married women, were drawn into the workforce. Riazhsky's images in the early-thirties served to celebrate the full participation of women in the economy, conferring on

68. In metalwork the numbers of women rose from 4 800 in 1926 to 68 700 in 1931; in printing numbers of women increased from 5 200 to 12 900; in building figures rose from 700 to 1700 and women machinists increased from 600 to 12 500. (State Planning Commission of the USSR 1933:188).

them the status of equal citizens valued for their full participation in the economy, and not only as mothers or receptacle for male fantasies. This was however a short-lived period in which women were to enjoy full equality and power over their lives. That this growing productivity in the nation was not controlled by the individuals themselves became evident from the mid-thirties when divorce laws and abortion laws were repealed. After 1934 it became far more difficult to obtain a divorce and abortion was no longer legal and free.⁶⁹

Riazhsky's 1933 work *Girl on Skis* [Fig 115] stresses the importance of athleticism as well as intelligence in the 'new' Soviet woman. As in *Chairwoman* it is the depicted subject's determination and 'will to fight' that is emphasised. This image was produced by Riazhsky after he had left **AKhRR** for **RAPKh**. In contrast to Bogorodsky he joined **RAPKh** in 1931-32 and after the 1932 state decree which dissolved all art organizations he joined the Moscow Union, **MOSSKh**. In **MOSSKh** Riazhsky used his ex-Cheka experience to screen prospective members. It is this 'political correctness' that is reflected in his paintings. Technically they are clear, have unobtrusive backgrounds, are sombre in tone and the subjects depicted are serious healthy young activists. That they are idealised is indisputable but they were probably seen as less sentimental than the popular images of Bogorodsky. Riazhsky was not in favour of 'personal' interpretations of reality even though he had been a member of **NOZh**.⁷⁰

Common to all his works was the intense focus on the formation of political character. *Political Chat* [Fig 116] functions similarly to Katsman's *Listening* emphasising the importance of proclamations from leadership and printed in the official media. His subjects are also depicted as if engaging directly with the viewer with unflinching certitude

69. By 1934 there were three times as many abortions as live births. In 1936 the state prohibited abortion to encourage large families. The repeal of the divorce decree was also intended to encourage family life and large families. By 1938 the birth rate had doubled (Parker 1968:341).

70. The realism embraced by Riazhsky was considerably different from the work of other **NOZh** artists such as Adlivankin (see above). Riazhsky went on to reflect that very 'socio-economic theory' which the **NOZh** declaration warned against (see Chapter Three for information on **NOZh**).

of their 'political correctness'. The fundamental difference between the works of Bogorodsky and Riazhsky would seem to be that Riazhsky's works were infused with the idea that there exists a universal work ethic and his depicted subjects display this competitive efficiency. In contrast, the psychology exhibited by Bogorodsky's subjects is one which is informed by romantic and adventurous notions of a space beyond the present, hence indicating a transcendent component of which young activists were probably intolerant. In Riazhsky's work subjective reason is subsumed completely into state reason. It is his subjects' sense of certitude in the entire social system which seems to define their thought and action. It is the *pre-established, pre-defined* state of affairs which allows for their rectitude.

In turning to the work of **AKhRR/AKhR** artist Serafima Ryangina, we see a similar attempt to reflect the actual shaping of Soviet life. Her works serve almost as a direct illustration of the words of Kravchenko:

Soviet artists do not suffer from a lack of themes, they have no need to search for subjects, for new 'catchy', 'sensational' themes. Soviet life...brings the artist...the most interesting situations (VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:106).

Red Army Art Studio (1928) [Fig 117] is a work which takes as its subject that much cherished relationship between **AKhRR** and the Red Army. In its initial declaration **AKhRR** promised to depict the life of the Red Army, revolutionary activists, workers and peasants.⁷¹ A number of their exhibitions were also organised in celebration of anniversaries of the Red Army.⁷² As a member of **AKhRR** Ryangina would probably have been directly involved in running drawing classes for soldiers. The scene depicted here is probably based on **AKhRR** classes run at the Grekov studios which were set up by Voroshilov for training soldiers in the visual arts.

Ryangina chooses the age-old theme of artists at work in a studio, the obvious point of interest here being that it is soldiers from the Red Army who learn to be artists. The

71. See Chapter Three above for information on **AKhRR**.

72. Two major **AKhRR** shows were one in 1922 to coincide with the 5th anniversary of the Red Army, and one held in 1932 to celebrate The Red Army's 15th anniversary.

larger statement is that the state has the interests of its servants at heart and that the new social order works to eradicate differences between mental and manual labour, state service and creative pleasure, cultured artist and layman. That they work on easel art and a banner is not insignificant given the revised **AKhR** declaration in 1928 to produce paintings and public agitational works.⁷³ The idea communicated here is that we see in the artworld a perfect fusion of the old 'academic' tradition and the new agitational needs. The former is also signified by the plaster cast on the wall reminiscent of a classical past.

Stylistically, in its extremely detailed surface, the work endorses **AKhRR**'s commitment to the Russian realist school of the **Peredvizhniki**. Ryangina adopts as her vantage point a position above the soldiers who appear as if enclosed in a low-roofed space within an atmosphere of intense concentration. The disconcerting perspective of the departing figures in the background emphasise the confines of the foregrounded space and the contained concentrated activity. Dramatic use of chiaroscuro also emphasises the confines of the space, reinforced by the single and limited light source. The old stone walls which enclose the space seem to define the ambience and the activity within these walls. It is as though it is the institutional space itself which makes possible this acquisition of skills within it. The group identity, stated via the uniformed dress of the soldiers, also communicates the idea that individual fulfillment occurs in terms of the broader social or political whole.

Agitational Brigade (1931) [Fig 118] is a more difficult work to understand because although, here again, Ryangina depicts Soviet reality, it is from the vantage point of workers who watch an agitational brigade trying to shape reality while they themselves are uninvolved. These workers are situated in the foreground observing a group in the middleground who harangue a worker. The subject of this work was the institution of

73. See Chapter Three above for **AKhR** declaration. **AKhR**'s reflection of state policy can be illustrated by a consideration of the commissions its artists received. One such commission was for Boris Ioganson to paint *A Soviet Court* (1928). The work, depicting a kulak trying to defend his advance, was reproduced by **AKhR** in an edition of 40 000, and was published and distributed to act as propaganda on behalf of the policy of collectivisation.

'shock' or 'agitational' brigades in industry, dedicated to 'enhancing' socialist production, and inducing amongst 'backward' workers the "enthusiasm necessary to overcome the non-proletariat, petty bourgeois traditions brought into the proletarian environment from the outside" (State Planning Commission of the USSR 1933:183). This idea of re-educating the proletariat to assume responsibility for the social process of production is shown taking effect here in such a manner that the chorus of criticism experienced by the 'backward' worker induces him to cringe in shame and fear. This scene takes place at the dizzying height of a mammoth construction site. The painting refers to the Five Year Plan, and the need to 'initiate' the increased number of workers in the building industry into the collective effort.⁷⁴ Ryangina's loose technique, her chiaroscuro, exaggerated birds-eye perspective, and the height at which the scene occurs all combine to produce an extremely unsettling effect with regard to vantage point and atmosphere. Whether this was simply an 'objective' record of the type of activities occurring at the large construction sites across the Union, or whether Ryangina endorses the urgency of the situation for the sake of Socialist production, is difficult to ascertain. Given her eulogies to the importance of the public definitions of the individual in her other works it is likely that what we are seeing here is in effect a dire warning to those who resist the new rationality of socialism in one country.

Higher and Higher (1934) [Fig 119] pictures the results of individuals lending their full efforts toward the Five Year Plan. The work is a clear tribute to the productivity of labour in the Soviet Union, and the benefits subsequently enjoyed by those who toil for the collective goal. The work was probably amongst the hundreds commissioned by **Vsekokhudozhnik** in 1933⁷⁵ to depict sites of construction including that featured in this image, namely the powerful new electric stations. The work testifies to the growth of communication systems, new towns, new technical skills of workers, particularly of

74. There occurred a 21% increase of workers into the building industry between 1928 and 1932. See State Planning Commission of the USSR (1933:193).

75. In 1933 four hundred artists were commissioned to document construction in the Soviet Union, by the Council of People's Commissars, **Vsekokhudozhnik**, the Peoples Committee for Communications and the All Union Central Trade Unions.

women, and the entry of the young urban proletariat into industrial co-operative ventures. Bown (1988:108) writes of the work as follows: "[it] conflates a young couple's mutual attraction with their love of the task of socialist construction". Their mutual attraction does indeed seem to be based upon the success of the socialist project and in their youth, vigour, practical skills and their physical ability, they stand as symbols of responsible citizens who enjoy the 'heights' of their success. That this height of success is defined in terms of the possibility of a sexual union is probably due to the emphasis that was being placed on the family as reproductive unit of the Soviet Union from the mid-thirties on.⁷⁶

By the thirties private morality was redefined so that many of the egalitarian dreams of the earlier era and the challenges to conservative bourgeois morality were abandoned. The state encouraged monogamous relations directed toward the production and raising of loyal Soviet citizens. Ironically it is in the leftist organization, **October**, that we can see the uneasy combination of women depicted as having moved into 'traditionally' male spheres of activity, while simultaneously appreciated for their qualities of 'motherhood'. At no point in figurative production does it seem as if women ever escaped the stereotypical uses of their bodies as symbols of all-encompassing care, reliability, and also sexuality but this is fully endorsed in the work in the thirties combined under a disturbing veneer of equality evidenced in the work of Alexander Samokhvalov and Alexander Deineka exhibited at the 1930 **October** show.

Recalling the ideas of Bogdanov's Proletkult, **October** believed that a new proletarian style of art should replace the older 'bourgeois' forms of realism and in this respect differed in their proclamations from a group like **AKhR**. What the group shared with groups like **AKhR** however was a commitment to the new rationality informing the Five Year Plan, namely industrialisation, collectivity, efficiency, and the strengthening of state,

76. Fitzpatrick (1982:151) notes that the state became increasingly involved in matters of private sexuality in the mid-thirties. Apart from divorce and abortion being more difficult to obtain, as mentioned in footnote 69 above, 'free marriages' lost the status they had under Lenin's rule and homosexuality was criminalised.

military, managerial and party machinery to enforce the above.⁷⁷ In **October** works one also detects the politicisation of morality. This is reflected in works calling for national pride and solidarity, respect for Socialist labour and property, and love and loyalty in relation to the socialist family and the party. This was evident in both the posters and easel paintings of **October** members.⁷⁸

If, as was believed by adherents of the classical Marxist model, culture reflected the economic base, then, so it was argued, culture in the Soviet Union in the thirties should have reached the state of reflecting the social base and the 'true' satisfaction experienced under the nationalised economy. According to this belief a new relationship existed between ideology and reality, i.e. that ideology would no longer be a reflection of the 'false' consciousness promoted by a ruling class,⁷⁹ but that it would be coordinated with the established order. It is this belief in a lack of conflict between thought and existence, or human 'essence' and Soviet reality that was to characterise the works of the leftist group **October**.⁸⁰

As an **October** member, ex-**Circle of Arts** artist, Samokhvalov carried through his early attempts to portray Soviet 'types'(see above). *A Member of Osoaviakhim* (1932) [Fig 120] is a work which is less experimental in technique than his earlier works, has greater thematic transparency and is more illustrative in its use of medium. The work is less of a 'new' Soviet 'type' as in *Tram Conductor* [Fig 84], and tends toward the construction of a 'stereotype'. Here two women are engaged in the defence of the USSR dressed in army fatigues and invested with the responsibility of full citizenship. Samokhvalov sets this military scene in a light green field sprinkled with yellow flowers, thereby evoking sentiment informed by pride in the country, the beauty of the land, of youth and of these

77. See Marcuse on the New Rationality (1955:78-79).

78. See, for example, posters by Gustav Klucis.

79. See Chapter One above for Plekhanov on the interrelationship of 'base' and 'superstructure'.

80. See Chapter Three for information on **October**.

women. National defence is pictured as a sport in sunny climes outdoors, a sport which now admits women into its ranks.

Nevertheless images such as these fulfilled **October's** call to fight on the cultural front in an effort to 'organise' mass psychology. The proletariat were, through the work of **October** artists, to be conscientised into an appreciation of industrial technology and one way to do this was not only through paintings but also through posters.⁸¹ As a member of **October**, Alexander Deineka produced both easel art and poster art. Not only does his work communicate dual messages about women, thereby reinforcing a new Stalinist morality, but it does this also in its messages about work and leisure. Leisure was redefined as that which did not exist in its own right but as that which made possible the continuing efficiency of the Soviet State.

That Deineka's style was far removed from the nineteenth-century Russian realism advocated by conservative critics and pro-**AKhRR** critics, was overlooked because of his having shifted toward a direct illustration of Soviet slogans.⁸² Nikifirov wrote of him thus:

He uses colour, light and the laws of optical perspective only as a means of expressive treatment of forms, subordinated to the general problems of the ideological and emotional content of his pictures (Voks nos 9-10, 1934:125).

This is interesting given that Deineka's technical treatment reflected the European contemporary influences of Surrealism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, as was clearly illustrated in his **Association of Three** and **OST** works in earlier years (see above). As a member of **October** he still allied himself with artists averse to **Peredvizhniki**-type realism but managed nevertheless to win the favour of patriotic and conservative critics. After **October** Deineka also joined **RAPKh**,⁸³ thereby joining forces with the more radical

81. See, for example, Alexander Deineka's 1930 poster *We are Mechanizing the Don Basin* [Fig 121] which is a direct tribute to the state orchestrating all the labour in the country to push ahead with the Five Year Plan, the basis of which was the development of the fuel industry.

82. See, for example, Deineka's illustration of Stalin's slogan on the mastering of technique in a poster entitled *We must Ourselves Become Specialists* [Fig 122].

83. See Chapter Three above for information on **RAPKh**.

elements of **AKhR** who felt they had failed to transform **AKhR** into a proletarian organization. Although he had belonged to all those groups most severely criticised by the state in 1932, he attained the reputation of being a great patriotic figurative painter. After 1933 critics inclined to favour Socialist Realism accounted for his lack of detailed observation by referring to it as a 'laconic' style (VOKS 9-10 1934:124). His formal explorations were thus excused as a particular form of brevity, and condoned on the basis that not all art work needed to 'overstate' its point. It was precisely Deineka's overt commitment to Soviet slogans in the thirties, and his efforts to promote a new Soviet psychology, which ensured the acceptance of his 'modern' techniques.

Of his figures Soviet critic Nikifirov also wrote:

In Deineka's pictures, types are at the same time both generalised and individualised. One of the greatest achievements of Deineka's latest pictures is his skillful representation of the new Soviet types (VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:125).

Clearly Deineka struck the 'correct' chord in his constructions, and this is most evident in his portrayal of women. It would seem that here Deineka managed that unique combination of depicting woman as capable Soviet citizens but who were also most interesting and worthwhile for their sexual and reproductive qualities, as referred to above.

In *A Mother* (1932) [Fig 123] Deineka uses the image of woman as a symbol of the nation, a body necessary for the reproduction and care of its (male) citizens. Not only is she a 'capable' but also a 'sensual' creature, as evidenced in the modulated treatment of her bared back. And yet in 1934 Nikifirov writes:

The women in Deineka's pictures...attract the spectator with their well emphasised psychological characteristics (VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:125).

Deineka seemed to have struck the correct balance between his sensual and sexualised treatments and objective statements about the importance of motherhood. This appears to be achieved through a clever use of colour, a warm play of her Caucasian skin tones against an oil wash of browns, olives and yellows. This sensuous play is abruptly halted by the bright white wash on the woman's face, forcing a recognition of her individual expression and intelligence. This would seem to lend credence to Nikifirov's observation of his maintaining a balance between generalised and individual types (VOKS 9-10

1934:125). Without this abrupt shift the work would rest at the level of a sentimental picture of mother and cherub-like child whose sleeping vulnerability and fragility against the able-bodied mother would form the sole focus of attention. Instead, it is not just the visible juxtapositions such as the small hanging arm of the child against the full supportive arm of the mother, or the small hand on the large neck, but also the less visible tensions which give substance to the work – these are tensions between woman admired for her ‘social’ reproductive’ tasks, and woman objectified and admired for her body outside of these socially defined duties.

The same play of tensions occurs in Deineka’s *At Noon* (1932) [Fig 124]. On a relatively small canvas Deineka creates a sort of romantic accolade to industrial growth in the USSR, through the vehicle of women’s bodies. Five naked women run toward the viewer through a river which constitutes the entire foreground of the work. It is as though their bodies are ‘spotlit’ by an extremely bright sun, which both reveals and almost ‘flattens’ and ‘obliterates’ them in its harshness. Nevertheless sufficient detail is suggested to arouse the viewer’s interest in their exposed bodies. They function to communicate sheer delight in the natural resources of the land, resources which are also depicted as harnessed so as to ensure a greater level of comfort for all. It is this juxtaposition of naked humanity and industry, play and labour, harnessed energies and released energies which Deineka appears to hold in ‘approved’ balance in accordance with Soviet morality in the thirties. The background provides the ‘serious’ commentary, the implication of which is that the physical enjoyment pictured here is without sexual overtones. It is ostensibly a celebration of ‘natural’ goodness which serves to suggest, by association, that Soviet industrial development is natural and good. But Deineka uses *women’s* bodies to interest, to arouse and to inspire and these emotions he wishes to evoke in relation to the ‘Soviet dream’ are absolutely dependent upon the nakedness of these figures.

In works which were supposedly tributes to the newly encouraged physical culture in the USSR in the thirties, Deineka also sexualised his treatment of women. In *Morning Exercises* (1932) [Fig 125] Deineka clothed the exercising man and positioned him in a compact pose. In contrast, the woman is arranged in an exposed and more vulnerable position and she is unclothed. Deineka treats her entire body with an impasto pink paint,

which seems to suggest that a layer exists over her skin, but simultaneously the pigment is used to emphasise the fleshiness of her bare stomach and breasts. The ambiguity of such techniques and interests is again cleverly set off by the inclusion of a small wooden child's toy next to the exercising couple. The suggestion of a child's presence indicates the 'approved' domestic confines of the activity of this 'disciplined' young Soviet couple who by implication are presumed to execute their social duties with as much dedication. It is this indication of domesticity/marriage which serves to condone Deineka's sexualised treatment of the woman. Deineka not only managed to create erotic images of naked women which passed as praiseworthy representations of physical culture denoting moral and physical health, but he also managed to carry off adventurous technical explorations which were tolerated because of the ostensibly patriotic subject matter. In this work the figures literally float on a flat ground, shapes are mapped out in their most basic forms with a highly selective use of detail and the technique is exceedingly rough compared to the likes of **AKhR** artists such as Brodski. Despite this very rough modelling of his form, his scrubbing technique akin to the use of tempera, and liberal application of thin oil washes, Deineka was nevertheless heralded as an Honoured Artist of the RSFSR and awarded the Lenin Prize for these portrayals of the 'new idea of physical culture for the youth' (VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:124).

Other examples of Deineka using the guise of healthy outdoor sport to paint the 'female nude' are *Playing Ball* (1932) [Fig 126] and *Bathing Girls* (1933) [Fig 127]. In the former, Deineka places women into the position of guileless, natural/innocent children, uninhibited in their enjoyment of their physical capacities. They appear as if unconscious of the possibility of being sexually objectified, rendered, in Bown's terms (1988:252), without "erotic coyness". However it is the painter who delights in their nakedness while construing them as unselfconscious. This makes it 'permissible' for the painter to dwell on their physiques, their skin textures, their exposed buttocks, breasts and pubic areas. Supposedly admiring the benefits of physical culture for the nation, the Soviet viewer is provided the opportunity to in effect 'enjoy' the age-old equation of woman and nature. In his images, youthful vigour is pictured as the backbone of the nation, and Deineka's 'clean cut' technique lends itself to the activity of these trim and fit subjects whose edges, physical and psychological, are not permitted any blurring. But it is Deineka's own

objectification of them, that renders their specimen-like qualities disconcerting as though receptacles for fantasies other than social and political.

Giving over a large canvas, 200x260 cm, entitled *Running* (1934) [Fig 128], to the subject of honouring the physical abilities of the Soviet citizen, Deineka could develop his discourse about the body and sexuality in a legitimate way. This is not simply a race between men, but is witnessed by a woman who stands inexplicably close to them, examining their best efforts to excel physically. She appears to focus on the central male runner somewhat anxiously as if with vested interests. She is dressed in a light dress which blows around its hem and is drenched in a white light which gives her a strangely surreal presence particularly placed, as she is, so close to the track. Deineka's flattened picture plane, his sketchy applications and careful modulation of selected areas point to his assimilation of contemporary techniques and his comfort with dissonances, which, because of his subject matter, was condoned. His juxtaposition of the physical prowess of men, against the nervous anxiety of the woman, their extended physical forms and her bodily restraint serve to set up a subtle sexual play of constructed opposites which, arguably, is the real focus of Deineka's works.

That power is ultimately in the hands of the patriarch is illustrated in Deineka's 1934 *A Collective Farm Work Team* [Fig 129], most probably a **Vsekukhudozhnik** commission.⁸⁴ Next to the old man is an old woman who sits dramatically emphasised against a large black portion of the fields stretching out behind them. No longer to be admired for her reproductive abilities or 'sexuality' she is depicted as worn out, sorrowful, almost bitter, and somewhat fearful. She serves as a symbol of the negative and 'backward' resistance to a glorious collectivised Soviet future. However surrounded by youthful blissful faces exhibiting faith in the project of collectivisation, the message is that these fears and resistant attitudes from the past can be overcome. Even in this tribute to collectivisation Deineka's attitudes toward women serve as the subtle focus of attention. Women are

84. The role of women as providers, happy to sit back in the face of patriarchal pronouncements about the 'advantages' of collectivisation is also evident in the work of ex-**Makovet**, ex-**OMKh** and **AKhR** artist, Sergei Gerasimov. See, for example, his *Feast at Kolkhoz* (1937) [Fig 130].

rendered as central to the family structure and their relations with men are not subjected to critical scrutiny. It was probably because of his clever combination of age-old attitudes to women as dependable companion and nurturer, with contemporary visions of woman as fit and competent protectress, that Deineka was so easily assimilated into the Socialist Realist tradition.

These attitudes toward women as dependable workers and mothers are evident also in the paintings of **RAPKh** member Tarro Gaponenko. Gaponenko graduated from the VKhUTEMAS/VKhUTEIN in 1930, during which time he had been associated with **AKhR** but in 1931 and 1932 he worked as a **RAPkH** painter, convinced of the need to depict collectivist activities in support of party proclamations. In *Collective Farm Women Workers Going to Work* (1933) [Fig 131] women are depicted determinedly striding to work in the fields, rakes slung over their shoulders, one even used as a mast on which is tied a red scarf/flag. Here they endorse the state decision to collectivise private holdings into large-scale operations which require the common cultivation of land.⁸⁵ An image such as this was imperative to provide 'evidence' of the rural populace's 'approval' and fulfillment of the state's instructions to work collectively, and here it is women who obediently execute the tasks and cultivate the food for the nation. In Gaponenko's *Feeding Children* (n.d.) [Fig 132] women are not only important for their role in the production of food but also for their role in 'producing' the very nation itself. Here women gather around a cartful of babies before going to work in the fields. The work speaks of communal child care, and the importance of labouring as both mothers and field workers.⁸⁶ The place of the father in the family unit is emphasised by a man who spiritedly tosses a child in the air above him while the 'mother' looks on gingerly and another woman looks over with an expression which could be one of concern or even

85. By 1932 75% of the land had been turned over to collective enterprise and together with state farms yielded 84% of the total marketable grain (State Planning Commission of the USSR 1933:147).

86. *Feeding Children* probably dates from 1936, the year that Stalin outlawed abortion and instituted childcare in the form of kindergartens, maternity homes and nurseries (Parker 1968:341).

envy. This woman appears to function as that reminder of Stalin's conservative definition of the desirable 'duties' of woman as childbearer and responsible wife.

What these **AKhR**, **October** and **RAPKh** images of the thirties had in common, and how they seemed to differ from images of earlier figurative groups, was in the vision of the future which they projected. It was an image of the future based upon what was presumed to be a reality in the present. That which was hoped for or desired was thus shown already to exist, and as legislated in accordance with what the state could offer. It is interesting that this ideology of progress was shared by 'leftist' or so-called formalists in **October** and artists in **AKhR** and **RAPKh**. This ideology prioritised a rationality in which the technological was privileged over the individual human component. In this respect it simply reflected an ethic common to all of modern civilisation. Nevertheless what was to characterise Soviet cultural developments was an increasing intolerance of works which seemed in any way to question rationalism and the 'objective' validity of an historically defined direction of progress.⁸⁷

Nonetheless what is surprising is that even though many figurative works were indeed irrational, contradicted the Marxist Realist project in their practice, and were even sometimes identified as problematic at the time, for the most part the work of figurative artists was, by the late thirties, subsumed into a 'trajectory' said to lead inevitably to Socialist Realism.

Some figurative groups shared assumptions that a common language existed which was universally meaningful, e.g. the **Makovets**, **OMZh**, some members of **The Four Arts Society** such as Kuznetsov, **The Circle of Arts**, **AKhRR**, **AKhR**, **October** painters and **RAPKh**. Artists in these groups were clearly realist in the sense of sharing these assumptions. However not all of them indicated that the knowable reality was changeable or responsive to resolution, and thus not all were Marxist Realists. The **Makovets**, **OMZh**

87. See Marcuse (1958:228) on the interface of Western and Soviet ethics.

and even some early **AKhRR** artists did not depict the world as changeable. There can be no easy equation of figuration and Marxist realism, nor even of figuration and realism.

Of those who privileged technical innovation, such as **Bytie**, **Association of Three**, members of **NOZh** such as Adlivankin, the **Concretists**, **Projectionists**, members of **The Four Arts Society** such as Petrov-Vodkin, and Pavel Filinov, not all were anti-realist in the sense of emphasising the relativity of reality and fiction, or the disintegration/fragmentation of contemporary reality. Thus the equation of formalism and anti-realism is as problematic in relation to figurative artists as it is to the leftists.

Figurative work of the twenties and early thirties did not constitute an homogeneous category and cannot be seen to lead 'inevitably' to Socialist Realism. In later years works which were Cezannist, based on **Peredvizhniki**-like realism, Symbolist or more contemporary in their Modernist references, were all assimilated into the 'trajectory' of Socialist Realism if they did not overtly contradict the optimistic premises of Socialist Realism. Some artists who were overly ambiguous e.g. Tshyler; cynical, e.g. Adlivankin; pessimistic, e.g. Filinov; or 'incorrectly' aligned politically, e.g. Shterenberg;⁸⁸ were not accepted as painters whose works lent themselves to Socialist Realism. However the ambiguity of many other painters' works was overlooked, e.g. early Deineka, Pimenov, Vialov, Nikritin and Petrov-Vodkin, and despite their anti-realist tendencies, they were assimilated. Works contrary to the 'finished' and detailed clarity of form advocated by proponents of Socialist Realism and exhibiting a sketchiness and looseness, were also absorbed into 'official' histories if their subject matter endorsed the Soviet project, e.g. work by Nikritin, Labas and Kuznetsov. Not only were diverse styles assimilated, although contradicting stylistic expectations of conservative proponents, so too were works in which the subtle questioning of the place of individual will in relation to collective will was not recognised. Such was the case in certain works of Petrov-Vodkin and Vialov mentioned above. Works with Symbolist overtones and references to individual subjectivity were assimilated if these subjective visions lent themselves to romanticised visions of the

88. See Chapter Three Section A and Chapter Four Section B, above, on Shterenberg's position in IZO, Narkompros and his association with Lunacharsky.

future. Where Symbolist typology benefitted the construction of Socialist Realist typology its 'individualistic' history was overlooked. Ultimately it was the ideology of the artists that identified them as acceptable or not, and the fact that style itself exemplified ideology and the reworking of ideological forms seemed to be only partly understood by critics. That in certain works various styles coexisted, often setting up a commentary on style, e.g. in works by Pimenov, Deineka, Shterenberg and Petrov-Vodkin, was not interpreted as a declaration against the possibility of there having to be one static and superior style. In this sense it was not recognised that these works contradicted the idea of Socialist Realism.

Early **AKhRR** works with their **Peredvizhniki** and Cezannist influences probably laid the firmest basis for Socialist Realism, but the fact that many **AKhRR** artists were criticised as 'fellow travellers' during the cultural revolution, prepared the way for the creation of works far more optimistic and imminent in tone, more akin to the works of **October** painters and **RAPKh**. **October** works like those of Samokhvalov and **RAPKh** works like those of Ryangina's *Higher and Higher*, and Gaponenko's *Feeding Children*, were virtual prototypes of Socialist Realism. They were characterised by an unequivocal verisimilitude and endorsement of the Soviet government's policies but what they were not, were reflections of the type of realism argued for by Lukacs, i.e. reflecting individuals engaged in the resolution of social contradictions. In these works social responsibility transmuted into heroism, there was no evidence of real contradiction, resolutions had already occurred, and projected visions of the future took the place of depictions of contemporary reality. This then was the redefinition of realism into Socialist Realism.

One might argue that these Socialist Realist works were no more illusory than the visions of the **Projectionists** in the twenties, the difference was however that the former consciously addressed the relativity of fact and fiction, while the latter effaced the difference and any evidence of the personal interpretation of the subjective creator. In this respect these Socialist Realist prototypes were a perfect example of the triumph of Marxist-Leninist interpretations of culture over the arguments of early Lunacharsky and Bogdanov and even over the moderate cultural tolerance theorised by Bukharin and by Trotsky. They were however only one form of realism which emerged during the twenties and early thirties, amidst various other stylistic assertions of Marxist realism, 'bourgeois' realism and forms of anti-realism.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation the following questions have been raised: why was it assumed that all figuration of the twenties and early thirties was realist, that it led 'inevitably' to Socialist Realism, and that the so-called formalist leftists were antagonistic to the philosophical framework of Marxist Realism? Certain officials and critics persistently referred to leftists as formalist in the pejorative sense, meaning that they were *unconcerned* with socio-political events. Leftists were believed to be concerned primarily with consciousness rather than material matter, they were thought to be endorsing Kantian notions of 'art for art's sake' i.e. privileging contemplation which was confined to the abstract realm and which was therefore thought to imply the ultimate 'unknowability' of things. This was obviously an incorrect analysis of Modernism in the Soviet Union, but what it also illustrates is an absence of understanding of the relationship between Modernism and Marxism.

That visual art critics used the term 'formalism' as a pejorative description of practising artists deemed uninterested in socio-political developments, could have been the result of crude misunderstandings of the formalist theoretical enterprise. It is more difficult to assert a misunderstanding on their part of the leftist Cubofuturist practice in the post-revolutionary context and Productivist theory, the latter blatantly dedicated to affecting socio-political change. Despite a limited understanding of the revolutionary potential of formalist theory, critics seemed to exhibit a prejudice against leftist artists and an eagerness to presume that they were fundamentally interested in abstract contemplation rather than material 'progress'. This prejudice against the leftists in the post-1917 context was informed by the fact that the avant-gardists had at one time been Nonobjectivists who in pre-revolutionary years *had* prioritised the formal means of art works over a philosophical content designed to evoke socio-political effect. The prejudice against so-called formalist practitioners in the *late* twenties and thirties was further informed by the fact that leftists had in pre-revolutionary times been strongly influenced by European cultural developments and in the minds of orthodox Soviet critics who believed in the principle of 'socialism in one country', the 'leftists' were still negatively linked with these internationalist associations. Nevertheless the prejudice against them did not originate

under Stalin's rule but, as seen in Chapter One, was clearly articulated in Lenin's statements of distrust. This distrust, as seen in Chapter One above, can be traced back to pre-Leninist thought as well, as exemplified in Plekhanov's writing. The leftist's claims to realism were continually contested by conservative Marxist critics who attempted to uphold a history of 'orthodox' Marxist cultural criticism based on Plekhanov's stylistic preferences and his mistrust of Modernism.

Underlying attitudes to the Modernist developments of the avant-garde was the belief that these developments were inimical to Marxism and that they were anti-realist. To equate Modernism with anti-realism is problematic since not all Modernists disputed the notion of truth. As argued in Chapter Four a number of figurative artists were anti-realist and as demonstrated in Chapter Two, the so-called leftists in the USSR lent support to the philosophy of Marxist Realism. To understand the origins of these misconceptions it is useful to consider briefly the history of the term 'formalist', to review the relationship of Marxist theory and practice in the light of 'formalist' theory, and to distinguish between realism, Marxist realism and anti-realism in the Soviet Union. On the basis of these considerations, the relationship between Modernism and Marxism in the USSR, traditionally viewed as a polemic between anti-realists and realists, can be re-assessed.

The pejorative label of 'formalism' was initially applied to a group of like-minded scholars including Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Jurijj Tynyanov and Roman Jakobson. What they shared was an interest in 'scientific' questions of 'literariness' and a belief that the specificity of literature, or its difference from 'non-literary writing' could be defined solely with reference to its formal properties. Early 'formalist' theory was characterised by an interest in specifying¹ formal properties of an 'artwork' in an effort to illustrate that in literary/art works referential and communicative meaning receded in importance while an aesthetic play of signification was foregrounded.² In that artworks were regarded not as reflections of reality but as organized significations of it, formalist

1. The term 'specifying' was one preferred by these theorists who chose to refer to themselves as 'specifiers' rather than 'formalists' (Matejka and Pomorska 1971).

2. See Bennett (1986:18-20).

theorists tended to prefer works which explicitly displayed their processes of working, to works which attempted to present themselves as complete, or as 'finished' reflections of 'true' reality. Formalists tended to regard *all* conventions as significations of reality and none as more realistic than others. This was in marked contrast to early Marxist theorists and critics who judged art works according to their 'accurate' reflection of what was assumed to be the underlying logic of history.³

It is obvious from the discussion of leftist Cubofuturism in Chapter Two that the leftist practitioners were far from apolitical in their interests. They too focussed on the importance of the 'device' (specific component) in the artwork, but with the purpose of revolutionising the technical arrangement of these devices so as to shock the spectator and induce a re-evaluation of habituated modes of viewing a subject or thinking about it. Osip Brik described this technique of making objects unfamiliar and of lengthening and problematising perception as a way of undermining ideologically habituated modes of perception and as shifting the aesthetic function of the 'device' toward its servicing a social purpose.⁴ The meeting place of formalist theoreticians and leftist practitioners was in the LEF and NOVYI LEF grouping, and in LEF's journal formalist theorists were encouraged to provide not only technical accounts of artworks, but socio-historical ones as well. In response to this and to the rapid changes in the post-revolutionary climate, formalists began to develop accounts of the ideological uses of 'devices' in an artwork. What formalist theorists continued to maintain however was that artworks could not be reduced to economic, social or historical considerations and that there persisted a need for an autonomous level of theorizing the unique features of artworks.⁵

As discussed in Chapter One, Marxist criticism prior to the twenties and thirties was exclusively concerned with artworks in terms of the underlying 'world view' which they communicated. These Marxist theories were based on Hegelian thought which devalued

3. See Bennett (1986:26).

4. See Chapter Two above for information on Osip Brik.

5. See Bennett (1986:33).

considerations of aesthetic form in relation to philosophical content. What mattered according to theorists such as Plekhanov was the essential unity of content and 'truth' in an artwork. Such truth was to be measured in accordance with the model of reality proposed by Marxism i.e. in accordance with a theory of class struggle. Since formalist theoreticians argued that all forms were equally conventional modes of signifying reality no matter their ideological claims, Marxists obviously objected to this assertion that artworks need not reveal the world 'as it really is'. Formalist theorists' redefinition of realism as a *conventionalised* system of representation had radical ramifications for Marxist Realist theorists and practitioners.

If, as argued by formalist theorists such as Bakhtin and Medvedev (1978), artworks could be reconceived as old conventions worked over so as to make way for new conventions, then art could be theorised as a process of transformation. In certain contexts formal combinations might achieve an aesthetic effect, while in others it might not. The implications of this were that artworks could no longer be regarded as immutable forms but instead had to be thought of as *functions* in terms of their historically changing relations with other forms, artistic and non-artistic. This emphasis on the relativity of art threw into question the entire notion of tradition, on which most Marxist theorists had relied so strongly.⁶

That formalist theory developed in the late twenties⁷ toward a consideration not just of the formal properties of the text but of its intertextual relations within an ideological field, was ignored by most Marxist theorists and critics. This redefinition of art as function echoed the Productivist/Constructivist programme and verified the leftists' claims to being as 'realist' as practitioners perpetuating nineteenth-century forms of realism. Just as the Constructivists/Productivists argued that art was not eternal, so formalist theoreticians argued that nineteenth-century realism was not more real but simply more familiar. This

6. See, for example, the importance of cultural 'tradition' in the theories of Plekhanov, Trotsky and Lenin in Chapter One.

7. See Chapter One "The Study of Ideologies and Its Immediate Tasks" in Medvedev and Bakhtin (1978:3-14).

function of familiarity was central to the construction of the Socialist Realist 'tradition'. The construction of Socialist Realism, undertaken by curators, historians, critics and government administrators, illustrates the point that traditions are not composed of immutable works but are actively constructed through the appropriation of older and habitual forms arranged in congruence with prevalent and dominant ideologies. Exploding the myth of traditions was obviously perceived as an unwelcome exercise by Marxist theorists who sought to *legitimise* their new socio-political order with notions of Socialist Realism as an 'inevitable' progression of 'realistic' forms based on the supposedly 'latent' democratic forms in past bourgeois culture.⁸

This claim to a 'natural' development of realism was not uncontested and nor was the route toward the definition of Marxist Realism an uncontested route. Dating from the late nineteenth-century, Marxists had defined realism in various ways depending on their attitudes to the role of culture in the struggle for proletariat equity. In attempting to ascertain whether or not *figurative* artists embraced the definition of realism posited by these Marxist theorists it has been necessary to define realism in terms of philosophical tenets commonly held by these theorists, whilst also keeping in mind their attitudes toward style. In the introduction to this dissertation, this underlying definition of realism was defined as a 'reliable evaluation' of events in life, assessed in accordance with the particular Marxist theory of societal change that the critic would hold. These attitudes toward change were demonstrated as shifting, the most notable theoretical shifts between 1921 and 1934 having occurred after the civil war during the period of NEP, in the years just prior to the cultural revolution of 1927-28 and in the period of conservative re-evaluation during the early to mid-thirties. These shifts in theories of social change were accompanied by shifts in the anticipated role of the proletariat in relation to the peasantry and bourgeoisie. Throughout this period realist works were assumed to be works which presented a reliable evaluation/analysis of events on the basis of the assumption of pre-existing facts and 'objective truths' external to the artwork.

8. See theories of Plekhanov and Lenin in Chapter One and Georg Lukacs in Chapter Three.

Many artists claimed that their works functioned as 'objective' and 'scientific' presentations of a rationally explicable reality. Those works which did function in this manner could be said to display a form of realism. Marxist Realists demanded that in addition to this 'scientific objectivity', aesthetic experience ought to lead the human subject to an understanding of how to resolve the problem of conflict between anticipated ideals and actual reality. Artists responded in various ways to this prospect of dealing with societal contradiction: some simply described reality without attention to human ideals and contradictions (this being the route of artists who were termed 'naturalists' by disparaging Marxists); the 'critical' or 'bourgeois' realists depicted societal contradiction without pointing to ways of resolving it; 'scientific' commentators using contemporary techniques and claiming to be realist often depicted contradiction with a skepticism about its possible resolution; 'ideal' Marxist Realists, according to theorists such as Lukacs, depicted the contradiction and the struggle of attempting to resolve it; while the 'ideal' Marxist Realists, according to proponents of Socialist Realism in the USSR in the thirties, would omit the depiction of contradiction altogether, assuming contradiction to be absent in the new Stalinist state.

It is more difficult to define the notion of anti-realism in relation to artists' responses in the twenties and thirties, because the term developed greater resonance in the *late* thirties. The tendency to view the so-called formalist work of Modernists or leftists as anti-realist has occurred largely as a result of Lukacsian notions of style. Lukacs' writings were highly influential in Germany which was the centre of intellectual Marxist enterprises in the West in the twenties and thirties. As a result, the Western world tended to absorb Lukacs' formal analyses of artworks and has accordingly underplayed the role of the 'Formalists', 'Futurists' and 'Expressionists' in attempting to forge a proletarian or revolutionary culture. The term anti-realism had appeared in formal criticisms in the USSR in the early thirties, most notably in the work of Osip Beskin, who referred to anti-realists as those who failed to perceive the inter-connectedness of things.⁹ That Beskin's work was published by the commissioning federation **Vsekokhudozhnik** is significant given the powerful role of **Vsekokhudozhnik** in determining the shape of art from the time of

9. O. Beskin wrote "*Formalizm v zhivopisi*", Moscow, Vsekokhudozhnik, 1933.

its inception in 1929. The acquisitions commission of **Vsekokhudozhnik** only acquired works which made evident a causal and sequential interdependence of phenomena which did not endorse the idea of living in the abstract realm of ideas. Works were not bought if thought to promote the idea of people being isolated and hopeless.¹⁰ I would argue that Lukacs' theories of realism and anti-realism can thus be seen as a formulation based not only on a history of stylistic assumptions dating back to Plekhanov but also on criticism in the late twenties and thirties in the USSR. The term 'anti-realism' became a reference to works which renounced the principle of causality, the possibility of providing totalistic or comprehensive explanations of the world, which revealed the world as arbitrary and which failed to distinguish between appearance and reality, the rational and irrational and interior consciousness and exterior reality.¹¹

The debate about emphasising an abstract contemplation of form over a concern with material matter can be traced back to debates about the interrelationship of spirit and matter as articulated between Marxist theorists. According to Marxist theory, spirit and matter could be reconciled through praxis. The world outside of subjective spiritual contemplation was redefined as a manifestation of subjectivity, i.e. as history. This was in accordance with the Hegelian challenge to Kant's assertion of the 'unknowability' of things. Marxists argued that the point of origin and destination was not 'spiritual contemplation' as assumed by Hegel, but human labour (McLellan 1977). Productivity defined the shape of history, was destined to improve labouring conditions and was contingent upon heightened consciousness plus material change. The 'external world' was thus both definable and changeable but as seen in Chapter One some Marxists conceived of change occurring primarily through a change of consciousness which *preceded* political and economic change and others saw change occurring initially as political and economic change, to be *followed* by a change of consciousness.

10. See Kurt London's *The Seven Soviet Arts* (1937), John Bowlt's reference to Beskin in his essay "The Society of Easel Artists" (*Russian History*, 9, 2-3, 1982:203-26).

11. See Lukacs (1963), Lukacs (1964) and Lukacs (1971).

The divide between Marxists, echoed also in the divide between Bolsheviks, was centred on this issue of whether socialism could be built only after the 'masses' had acquired a truly proletarian class consciousness based on educational and cultural programmes, or whether a radical transformation of the economy was more urgent than the psychological transformation of the 'masses'. The latter position was adopted by Trotsky and Lenin who prioritised the needs of rapid industrialisation and economic recovery over cultural transformation. The former position was held by those who favoured a proletarian culture, such as Lunacharsky in his early years, and Bogdanov. They too conceded the importance of industrialisation, but not at the expense of attention to cultural transformation.

As demonstrated in Chapter One, Bogdanov believed that science, art and ideology did not only reflect the socio-economic base of a society, but played a significant part in organising and creating the structure of society. Lenin opposed this idea of the physical world as a reflection of 'socially organised experience' and objected to Bogdanov's questioning the distinction between base and superstructure.¹² His insensitivity to the possibility and importance of changing consciousness through cultural production was carried over into the post-revolutionary climate when government largely ignored the cultural sector until after the civil war. As seen in Chapter Three, the debate about the relationship between spirit and matter was then carried through in the concern of critics and artists regarding which artworks seemed to prioritise abstract contemplation over and above a pragmatic concern with effecting socio-political change.

Throughout the twenties the radical iconoclastic leftists were tolerated, but the tendency on the part of critics and artists to echo Lenin's respect for bourgeois cultural traditions was equally strong. This 'tolerance' of bourgeois culture waned in the late twenties and thirties when critics began to assert the importance not only of describing the world in the fashion of bourgeois realists, but of communicating the necessity for change. Constructivists/Productivists claimed to be reconciling spirit and matter through their monistic philosophy of production, but they too were accused either of reducing art to

12. See McLelland (1980:407-408).

the level of facticity,¹³ or of being utopian idealists echoing the philosophies of Bogdanov's Proletkult. The production of the figurative artists elicited various responses. It was not homogeneous and as seen in Chapter Four different groupings assumed different positions on this issue of the relationship of spirit (consciousness) to matter. Bourgeois 'critical' realists were subjected to agitational criticism as were artists who had rejected both 'traditional' realism and iconoclasm and had opted for contemporary Modernist techniques in their easel art. Works began to be evaluated accordingly and those which were thought to emphasise abstract consciousness over and above the anticipated call to embrace pragmatic Soviet programmes were condemned.

As argued in Chapter Four there were figurative works in the twenties and thirties which can be described as anti-realist. Some works were recognised as anti-realist, but others were not so long as their 'content' was thought to pertain positively to the Soviet cause. Subtle re-workings of older art forms and critical analyses of and commentaries on contemporary society were overlooked by zealous critics eager to construct a history of figurative work thought to lead toward Socialist Realism. Some decidedly Modernist figurative works *were* however supportive of the philosophical assumptions of Marxist Realism and, as argued in Chapter Two, so too was the work of the leftists. Marxist Realists who were prejudiced against stylistic innovation were incorrect in assuming that Modernism and anti-realism were synonymous. Many Modernist works, even anti-mimetic and entirely abstract Modernist works, were based on the assumption that life was ordered by an underlying set of rules or some sort of cosmic order. In that they presumed the presence of a set of 'causes' in the world, they were still illusionistic and not anti-realist. The relationship between realism and Modernism made possible the contributions of Modernist artists to *Marxist* Realism. It is on the basis of this philosophical link between realism and Modernism that the similarities between the work of the leftists and many figurative artists can be understood. *In addition to this* these artists shared the Marxist project of trying to develop a cultural expression deemed appropriate to the new and changing political dispensation in the twenties and early thirties. That some figurative artists were cynical of these political solutions is also evident as is their anti-illusionistic

13. See, for example, the criticisms levelled by Georg Lukacs.

stance, and their interest in exploring the illusoriness of artistic production. The extent to which artists reflected a faith in an exterior materiality over and above an interest in processes of constructing an illusionistic world, comprised primarily of ideas, was a firm indicator of where artists positioned themselves in relation to the proletarian culture debate.

The **Makovets** and **NOZh** drew on older realist techniques plus a combination of Symbolist and Cubist techniques and, in that these artists believed in the commonality of their 'language' and its accessibility to all, they functioned philosophically as realists.¹⁴ However the **Makovet** and **NOZh** artists bemoaned the fact that reality and spirit were not reconciled and that material reality was far from ideal. Their work did not agitate for a change in proletarian consciousness although it did reflect the common lot of peoples in the USSR.¹⁵ Many **Bytie** artists asserted that professional expertise and an assimilation of French Cezannism was the best way in which to serve the revolution. They did however provide a training for future realists, and they asserted the importance of an objective analysis of form. This commitment to the explicability of events identified them as realist, if not as Marxist Realist. They avoided the issue of either developing a 'new' proletarian culture or of asserting the importance of tendentious realism. **OMZh** also committed itself to the concrete and the explicable without evincing any overt faith that the promotion of 'proletarian consciousness' would ensure a reconciliation between the realm of ideas and that of material reality. The brief merger of **OMZh** with **AKhRR** revealed that to some extent they shared **AKhRR** artists' endorsement of Lenin's desire that cultural groups build upon the past achievements of realists. They did not however reflect a commitment to Marxist Realism as did **AKhRR**.

14. This interpretation is in distinct contrast to the 'official' assertion of the **Makovets** as a religious-mystical grouping. See VOKS nos 9-10, 1934:20.

15. In the works of **NOZh** portrayal of objective reality was to occur in the form of personal and often critical commentaries as opposed to the supposed impersonal documentations referred to in their manifesto. This critique of contemporary reality was as unlikely to find political patronage as were the contemporary but unheroic images of the **Makovets**.

OST best exemplifies the diverse state of figurative art in the Soviet Union in the twenties.¹⁶ Certain **OST** artists were realist, others anti-realist, but common to all of them was an interest in Modernist techniques. Critics varied in their response to these artists, at times accusing them of formalism, at other times heralding the work of some of them as proto-types of Socialist Realism.¹⁷ Some **OST** artists held positive attitudes toward Marxist realism but did not echo the stylistic expectations of conservative Marxist critics.¹⁸ While certain **OST** artists tried to forge a form of popular expression,¹⁹ others were overtly cynical of a content which evinced faith in the prospect of social change and contradicted the stylistic expectations of conservative Marxist critics.²⁰ Within this one figurative grouping there existed artists who constructed totalistic visions of society which illustrated a realist belief in the principles of causality, plus artists who seemed to suggest the impossibility of making total sense of 'real facts'.

The Four Arts proved an interesting example of artists who declared the importance of both past and contemporary artistic techniques, as well as the continuity of the easel art tradition irrespective of a politically oriented 'content' or subject matter. A number of these artists did however compromise their stance and in later years lent their ahistorical Symbolist analyses to a similarly ahistorical construction of a Socialist Realist typology.²¹ Filinov's school devoted itself to a critical analysis of past forms of realism and eroded all distinction between interior consciousness and exterior reality. For this reason, despite Filinov's attempts to adopt Marxist typologies, his work and that of his students was

16. **OST** artists like Shterenberg continued an interest in Cezannism, others such as Pimenov absorbed the influences of German Expressionism, and artists such as Tshyler reflected Surrealist influences. See Chapter Four for examples of their work.

17. See Bush and Zamoshkin on **OST** in *VOKS* nos 9-10, 1934:20-21 and Bowl's essay "The Society of Easel Artists" in *Russian History*, 9, pts 2-3, 1982:203-26.

18. See, for example, the work of Labas in Chapter Four above.

19. See, for example, the work of Luchiskin in Chapter Four above.

20. See, for example, the work of Pimenov in Chapter Four above.

21. See, for example, references to Petrov-Vodkin and Kuznetsov in Chapter Four above.

rejected as anti-realist and as anti-Soviet. Modernists who were more favourably received by conservative Marxist critics were **The Circle of Arts** artists. Their idealised typologies lent support to Marxist realism as it was defined during the cultural revolution and in the early thirties. Not all critics ignored the formal innovations in their early work and these did elicit a degree of adverse criticism.

The creation of an idealised Socialist Realist typology has often been traced back to **AKhRR** because its Marxist Realism complemented government policy as it changed from the era of NEP to the more militant agitational policies of the late twenties. **AKhRR** artists tried to create images in which the individual was situated in 'real', often far from idyllic circumstances, but engaged in the effort of changing these. Contrary to this, in the images of both **AKhR**, **October** and **RAPKh**, the gap between the realm of envisaged ideas and reality was assumed to be closed. These images were of a distinctly utopian and idealist nature and yet were heralded as supreme examples of Marxist Realism in later years. Whereas leftists in **October** favoured the idea of collectivity in industry and **AKhR** favoured the individual production of easel art, **RAPKh** drew these artists together by fusing the notion of collective production with that of easel art production itself. Their heroic paintings and murals proved to be significant proto-types of Socialist Realism which in 1934 was declared equivalent to Marxist Realism.

Socialist Realism had been arrived at through re-awakening the drive to create a proletarian culture, a route which involved a crude blend of the revolutionary militant heroism reminiscent of the civil war days plus a utopian collectivism reminiscent of Proletkult days, and marked by an absence of the cultural compromise called for by Lenin. Having achieved the goal of defining the shape that proletarian culture should take in the Soviet Union, Lenin's policies were invoked and the agitational proletarian activism of cultural theorists and practitioners was again discouraged. The elements of proletarian culture which remained in the Socialist Realist project were the centrality of labour and the subsumption of the individual into the collective project. What was ignored was the querying of the techniques of production which had been undertaken by both leftists and certain figurative artists. These techniques were simply taken over from the mimetic traditions of nineteenth-century realism, and in this respect endorsed

Plekhanov's and Lenin's notions of form. A cautious attitude toward technique was to be combined with a militant and utopian attitude toward subject matter, but what was ignored entirely was the function of the artistic 'device' itself as part of the content and effect on the spectator.

Ironically, in its conception of the whole, the Marxist Realist project in the USSR reverted to the legacy of classicism with its notion that detail subverts the operation of the sublime. This importance of the general idea in the Soviet Marxist Realism of the thirties echoed Hegel's aesthetics based on the Ideal. The Ideal implied the negation of the particular, the absence of 'decadent' detail and the 'integration' of the whole preceding all else. The threat of parts or detail not cohering was a threat to an all pervasive ideology claiming the truth of its analysis of reality. This required that the artistic 'device' be regarded as a transparent medium containing 'truth'. What was banished from figurative production in the thirties was not only the excessive presence of 'disruptive' detail, but also the place of individual consciousness, the place of feminist consciousness and the presence of older popular forms of expression, all of which might have undermined the authority of the newly institutionalised patriarchal collective. The 'problem' of the relationship between the particular and the general was resolved by an elimination of the particular.

Typologies were created as a means of mediating between the particular and the universal, and if detail failed to lend credence to coherent typologies, as in the work of Filinov, and contributed to a disembodied state of consciousness, then such works were disapproved of, regarded as anti-realist and as decadent. The question of whose 'coherent and totalizing' analysis the artwork was to reflect was not addressed directly as it was simply assumed that the prevalent social order in the USSR was a reflection of 'true' Marxism and it was this reality that should be endorsed. Detail which resisted the dominant codes and which resisted analysis was either misinterpreted in accordance with the prevalent ideology as a reflection of it, or it was prohibited. With its images of the future reflecting what the state planned to carry out, Socialist Realism appropriated the transcendental function of earlier idealist art and under the name of realism, its transcendental or idealist claims were legislated.

The gratification provided by Socialist Realist images was to be experienced at the level of societal consciousness and not at the level of individual consciousness. Images were expected to reflect the absence of contradiction between individual and social labour. As from 1934, most images of individuals reflected such individuals contributing all their efforts to the Soviet cause. This intensification of labour was equated with a new ethics, an industrial morality which had been evident in the twenties but not to the same degree. The Proletkult promise of a transformed proletariat consciousness which would make possible the creative expression of individuals in a democratic society was replaced by the actuality of a continually labouring proletariat developing the productive forces for the sake of technological development rather than an improved and liberated human consciousness.

The utopian Marxist notion of a community of individuals free from toil and able to realize their potentialities was forgotten in this rigid disciplined commitment to a work collective, a collective ever labouring to reproduce itself, to reproduce the institutions of Soviet society and intolerant of 'unuseful' behaviours and detail disruptive of totalizing analysis. To recognise that the so-called anti-realists were lending their efforts to the fulfillment of revolutionary plans would have been tantamount to admitting that revolution could occur in a variety of forms, on various fronts and, most significantly, had succeeded as a result of a history of diverse forms of resistance. It is precisely these diverse forms of support for the Marxist Realist project, as well as the diverse forms of resistance to totalizing visions, which characterised artistic production in the USSR during the twenties and early thirties.

That social reality was to be the final framework for artistic content had been asserted by anti-mysticists and anti-transcendentalists for some time, but for so long as the political system was still characterised by pre-revolutionary ideas, philosophies and remnants of older political and economic systems, the reference to 'prevailing' social reality was not an uncomplex endorsement of it. The transcendentalist elements remained present as did critical attitudes, cynicism, desires to 'escape' the present reality etc. Fifteen years after their coming to power, the Bolsheviks demonstrated clear intolerance of diverse responses to the present and forcibly determined the production of works which would

reflect satisfaction with present circumstances. This does not mean that such works were not in existence before then, as evident in the work of Riazhsky, Brodski and Katsman. The complexities arose however when artists had to agree on what constituted the present social framework and when it was assumed that reality had to be seen as already embodying the ideal.²² It was at this point, when the promise of the beyond was thought to be in the present, that realism and romanticism converged.

What the Marxist Realist project could not cope with in the USSR was the *foregrounding* of illusion. This was particularly difficult for Soviet Marxists in the thirties when the intention of the government was to pretend that the reality which was desired by all was *already* in existence and that there was contradiction between 'spirit'/consciousness and matter. As a Marxist Realist, Lukacs warned against this attempt to absent contradiction, but this did not mean that he embraced the prospect of inexplicable presentations of reality in which contradiction prevented the possibility of ordered resolution. Lukacs warned against Socialist Realism regressing into reconciliation without contradiction, as evidenced in its utopian visions of the present-as-the-future. He also warned against an equivalent abstract reconciliation, evident in the works of Symbolists, which assumed reconciliation in memory, or which assumed an ontological harmonious interrelationship of human and nature. These warnings by Lukacs pointed the way to a broader vision of Marxist Realism than that which was adopted in 1934 in the USSR. His position was still marked by stylistic prejudices against Modernism and 'leftist' work but it enabled an acknowledgement of the contributions of 'bourgeois' realists and it emphasised the importance of not assuming the absence of problems in Soviet society.

Although leftists shared with advocates of Socialist Realism the utopian belief in the *absence* of contradiction in the new Soviet society, as exemplified in **October** and the Constructivist/Productivist project, the redefinition of Marxist Realism as Socialist Realism excluded leftists' attitudes toward style. Constructivists/Productivists were accused of undermining the status of art and yet in writing out the representation of contradiction, ambiguity and a critical commentary on historical developments, Socialist Realism

22. See Marcuse (1958:128-131).

undermined the status of art in as definitive a manner. In contrast to this a number of figurative artists, leftists and 'formalist' theorists *had* in the late twenties recognised the complex structure and function of artworks as well as the fact that ideology was built into the form of an artwork itself. Such theorists had realised that to seek for or to propose that works contain an 'essence' was fallacious and that the function of a work was not contingent on such an essence but on determinations surrounding the work. 'Formalist' theoreticians thus began to study the work as a concrete, historically changing entity, subject to different determinations, appropriations and relationships with preceding and current artworks. Forms were recognised as ideological and as having both an autonomous identity and as being explicable in terms of economic and social relationships, though not reducible to these. It was precisely these ideologically infused forms which constituted Socialist Realism and not unchangeable 'true' and realistic forms from the past as they asserted.

The early phase of Marxism, as illustrated in the theories of Plekhanov, had sought to systematise historical materialism in an effort to compete with traditional bourgeois disciplines. As argued by Bennett,²³ competition between Marxism and bourgeois thought led to Marxism realigning with these bourgeois disciplines and assuming certain common categories of thought, one of these being the problems of traditional aesthetics. In attempting to answer the question as to what it was that constituted an artwork, these Marxists arrived at idealist solutions. The idea of artworks having to exhibit a universal and always present formal essence was continued through the thought of Lenin and was echoed in the realist theories of Lukacs, and in a different manner in the 1934 Socialist Realist theories as well. This tendency to seek out an ideal Marxist Realist form of expression should not however be emphasised to the exclusion of a recognition of the *various* definitions of proletarian and revolutionary culture which had been posited in accordance with contesting revolutionary theory and shifting Soviet policy. As evident in Proletkult thought, some of these theories of proletarian culture had attempted to redefine art as process rather than as immutable object.

23. See Bennett (1986:101-106).

Leftist theory and practice, certain figurative production and 'formalist' theory, had offered a critique of habituated modes of perception, as well as a foregrounding of their own formal operations. The political consequences of these transformations of old ideological forms was recognised and used in the work of so-called formalist leftists and certain figurative artists and was beginning to be recognised by 'formalist' theorists with Marxist sympathies. That this dialogue between 'formalism' and Marxism was perceived of as dangerous by Socialist Realist advocates as from the mid-thirties, was an enormous loss to Marxist Realism. The ability of artists to distance ideology from within, to make evident the co-existence of styles and re-workings of past conventions, afforded a recognition of the ideological workings of past form and of the way in which these forms constructed notions of reality and social relationships. One consequence of this recognition of the forms themselves as ideological was that the idea of art 'reflecting' reality would have to be jettisoned and the notion of art 'constructing' reality or what we believe to be reality, would have to be conceded. Given the professed adherence to Marxist-Leninism in the USSR, this was tantamount to a contradiction of all that Lenin had fought against in his battles with 'bourgeois idealism' and 'utopian Proletkultism' i.e. the battle against the idea that consciousness determines reality.

Conservative Marxist critics in the USSR believed at the time that to concede this would have been a betrayal of the Marxist cause. They did not recognise the potential of a radical Marxist challenge to the notion of a cultural theory seeking a universal essence. They did not conceive of an analysis of different relationships that could exist between different forms of cultural expression and their associated, possibly even conflictual, ideologies. If the radical implications of the formalist project had been conceded in the Soviet Union, and its relation to Marxism admitted, then criticism would have lost its authoritative and controlling role. It would have been recognised for the political exercise that it was and what would have been recognised was that artworks *did not* contain essential meanings which could be evaluated positively or negatively. Theoreticians and critics who were bound by their stylistic definitions of realism purposely overlooked the fact that the 'formalist' project in the twenties and thirties was concerned with arriving at a cultural analysis and practice which could further the Marxist cause of promoting both changes in perception and therefore societal change. Instead these theoreticians and

critics supported the Stalinist project which was more concerned with an *entrenchment* of power than with a radical *querying* of prevalent ideologies. The radical potential of the formalist project was written out of history, 'formalist' practitioners were assumed to be anti-realists, figurative artists were arrogated to the cause of Socialist Realism and assumed to be realists where remotely possible, and incontestable anti-realists were prohibited from exhibiting. The existence of realist leftists and anti-realist figurative artists attest however to the fictivity of authoritative Soviet and Western myths which establish an opposition between so-called formalist and anti-realist leftists and supposedly realist figurative artists.

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State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
132. *Feeding Children* (no details).

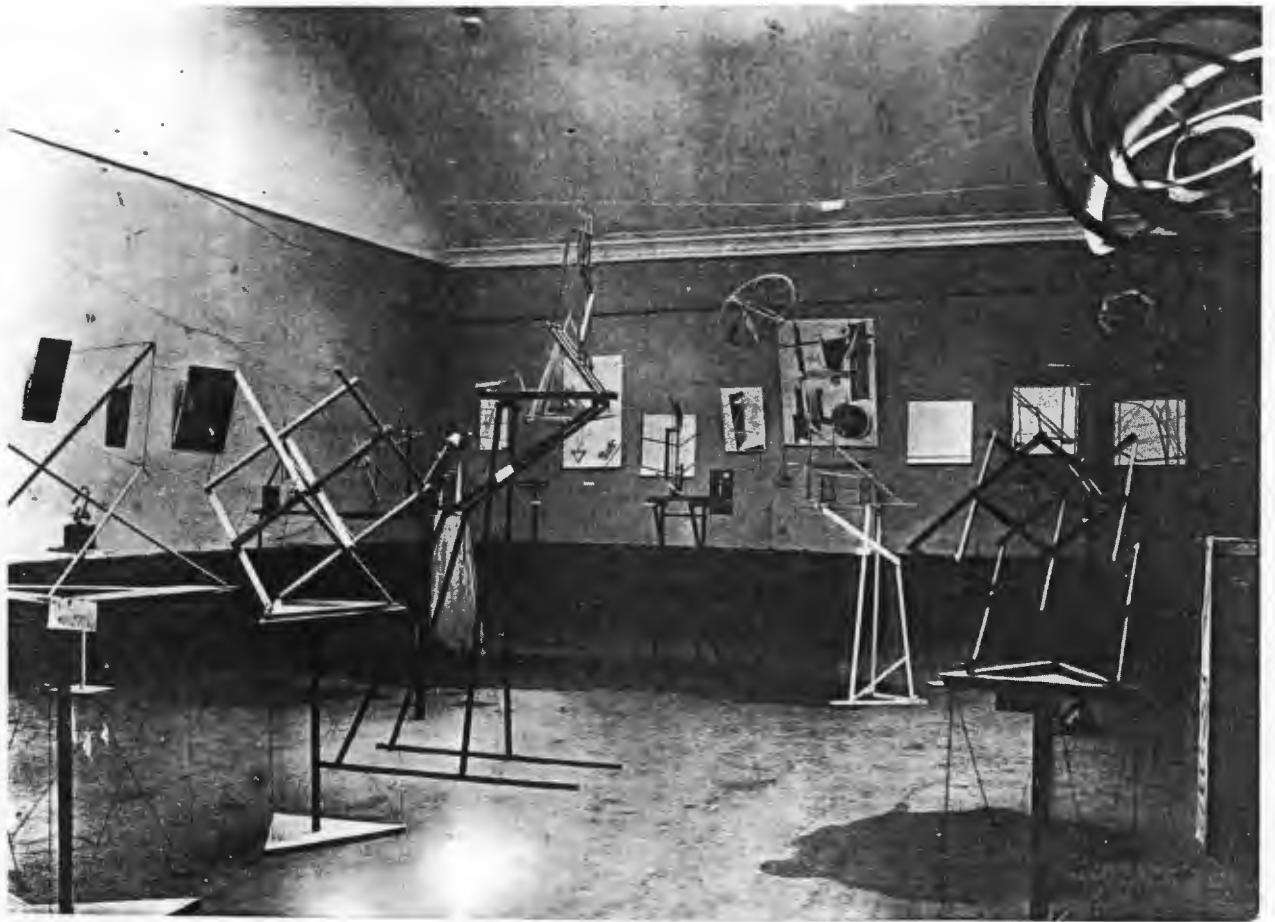


Fig 1

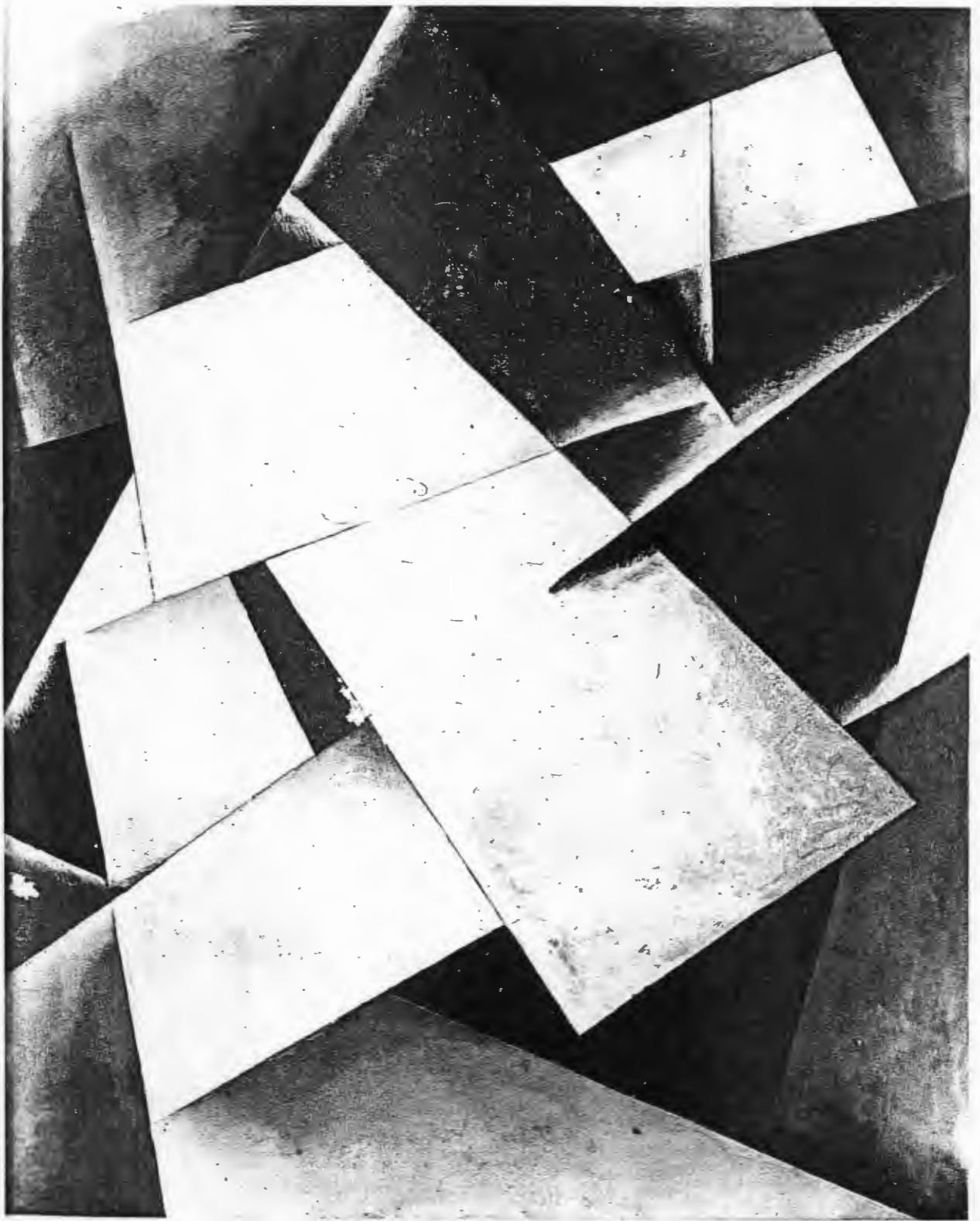
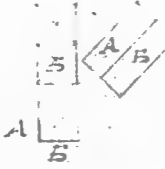


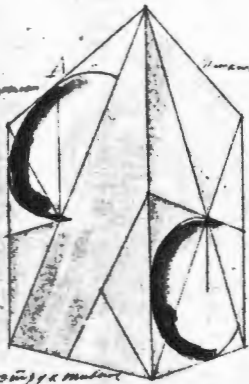
FIG 2.



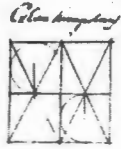
fig 3



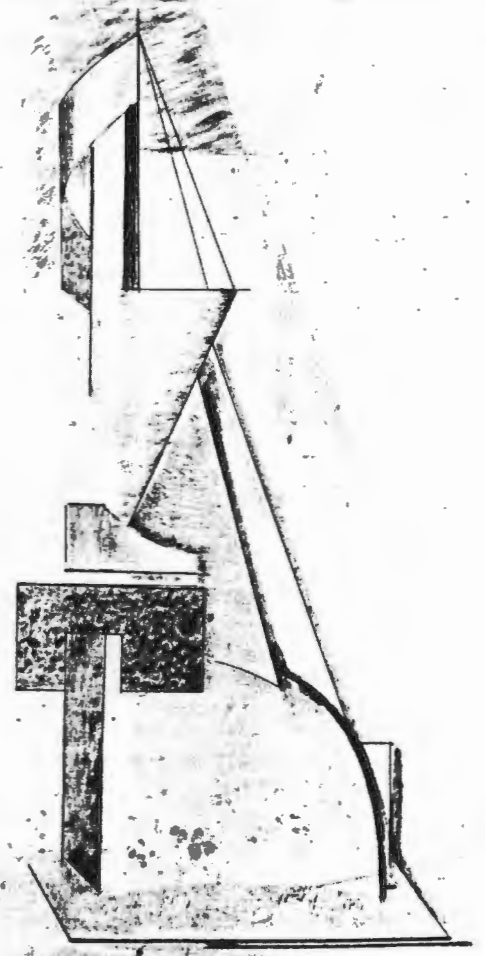
Слон 4 стороны. (а б)
 и стороны 4 стороны. (а б)
 и стороны 4 стороны. (а б)
 и стороны 4 стороны. (а б)



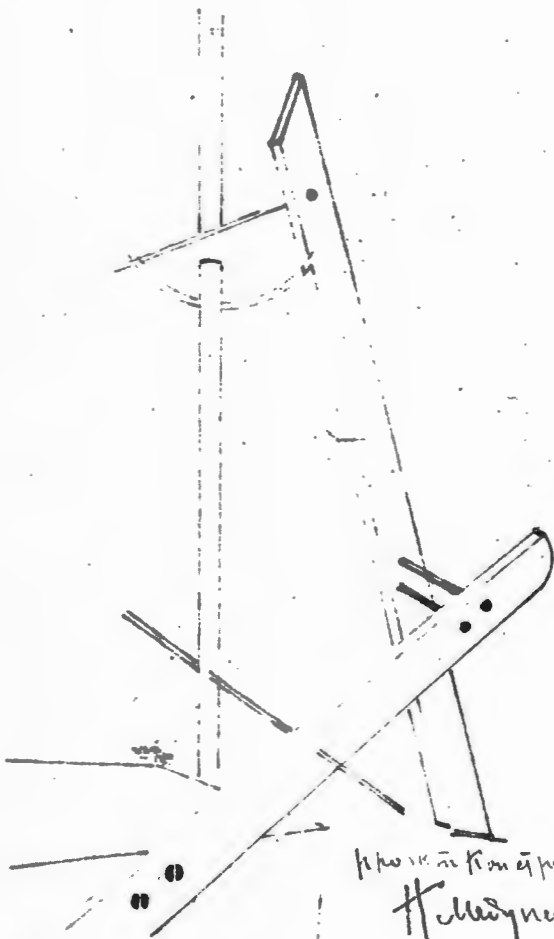
Слон 4 стороны
 и стороны 4 стороны
 и стороны 4 стороны



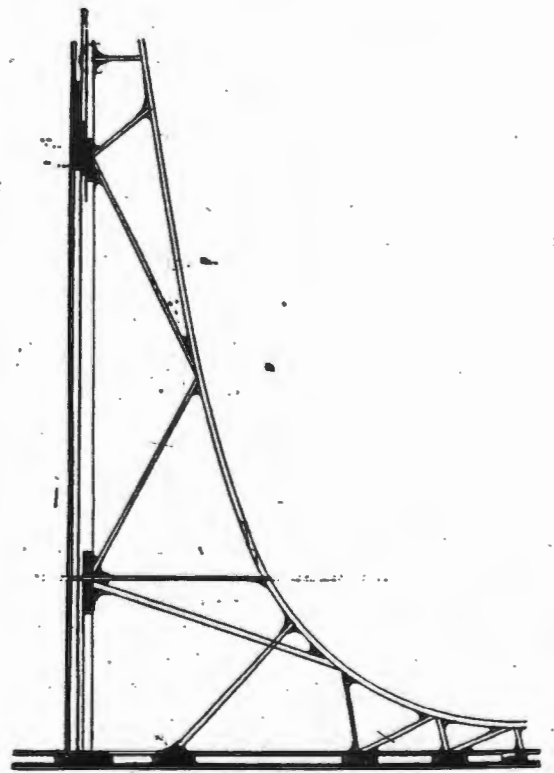
Слон 4 стороны
 и стороны 4 стороны



ii



Слон 4 стороны
 и стороны 4 стороны
 и стороны 4 стороны



В. СТЕШЕП.

iii

iv

Fig A

Л Е М П Е Ч Е Н Ы Е

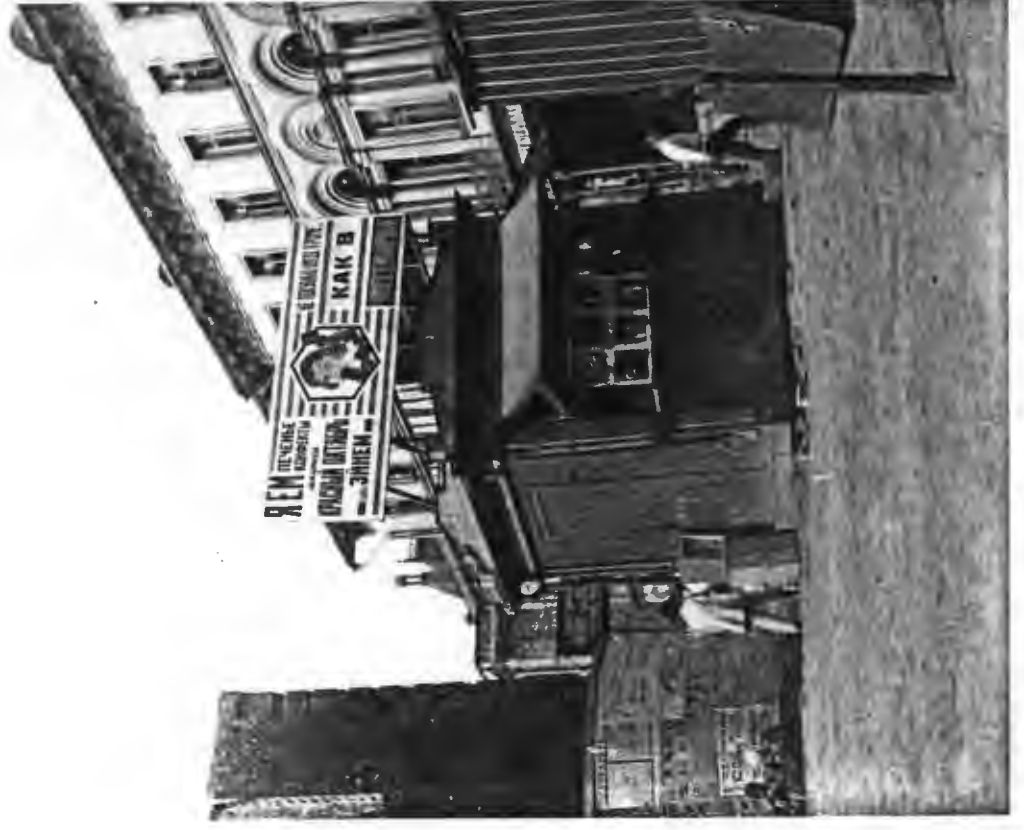
Ф А Б Р И К И К Р А С Н Ы Й О К Т Я Б Р Ь

БЫВШ
З И Н Е М



Н Е П О К У П А Ю Н И Г Д Е К Р О М Е , К А К В

М О С С Е Л Ы П О Р О М



kg 5



Fig 6

КРЕСТЬЯНСКОЕ ХОЗЯЙСТВО УЛУЧШИТ ГРАМОТЕЙ



ПО УЧЕБНИКАМ ГОСИЗДАТА УЧИ ДЕТЕЙ

ОТДЕЛЕНИЯ:

- | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| <p>Москва, Гурьевский, 11
 Ленинград
 Вильнюс, ул. К. Маркса, 10
 Минск, ул. М. Горького, 12
 Мухоморова, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Новгород, ул. Мухоморова, 2
 Омск, ул. Мухоморова, 10
 Орск, ул. Мухоморова, 10</p> | <p>Рязань, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Саратов, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Симбирск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ташкент, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Уфа, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Челябинск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ярославль, ул. Мухоморова, 14</p> | <p>Владивосток, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Хабаровск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Иркутск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Красноярск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Новокузнецк, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Кемерово, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Прокопьевск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Топки, ул. Мухоморова, 14</p> | <p>Бийск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ново-Сибирск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Омск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Тара, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Троицк, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Тюмень, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Челябинск, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ямал, ул. Мухоморова, 14</p> | <p>Алтай, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Башкортостан, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Бурятия, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Дагестан, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ингушетия, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Кабардино-Балкария, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Карачаевская ЧР, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Чеченская ЧР, ул. Мухоморова, 14</p> | <p>Адыгея, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Алтай, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Башкортостан, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Бурятия, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Дагестан, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Ингушетия, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Кабардино-Балкария, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Карачаевская ЧР, ул. Мухоморова, 14
 Чеченская ЧР, ул. Мухоморова, 14</p> |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|

Госиздат, Ленинград, ул. Мухоморова, 14

1-е Отделение: Москва, Ленинград, 14

Fig 7



Fig 8



fig 9



Fig 10



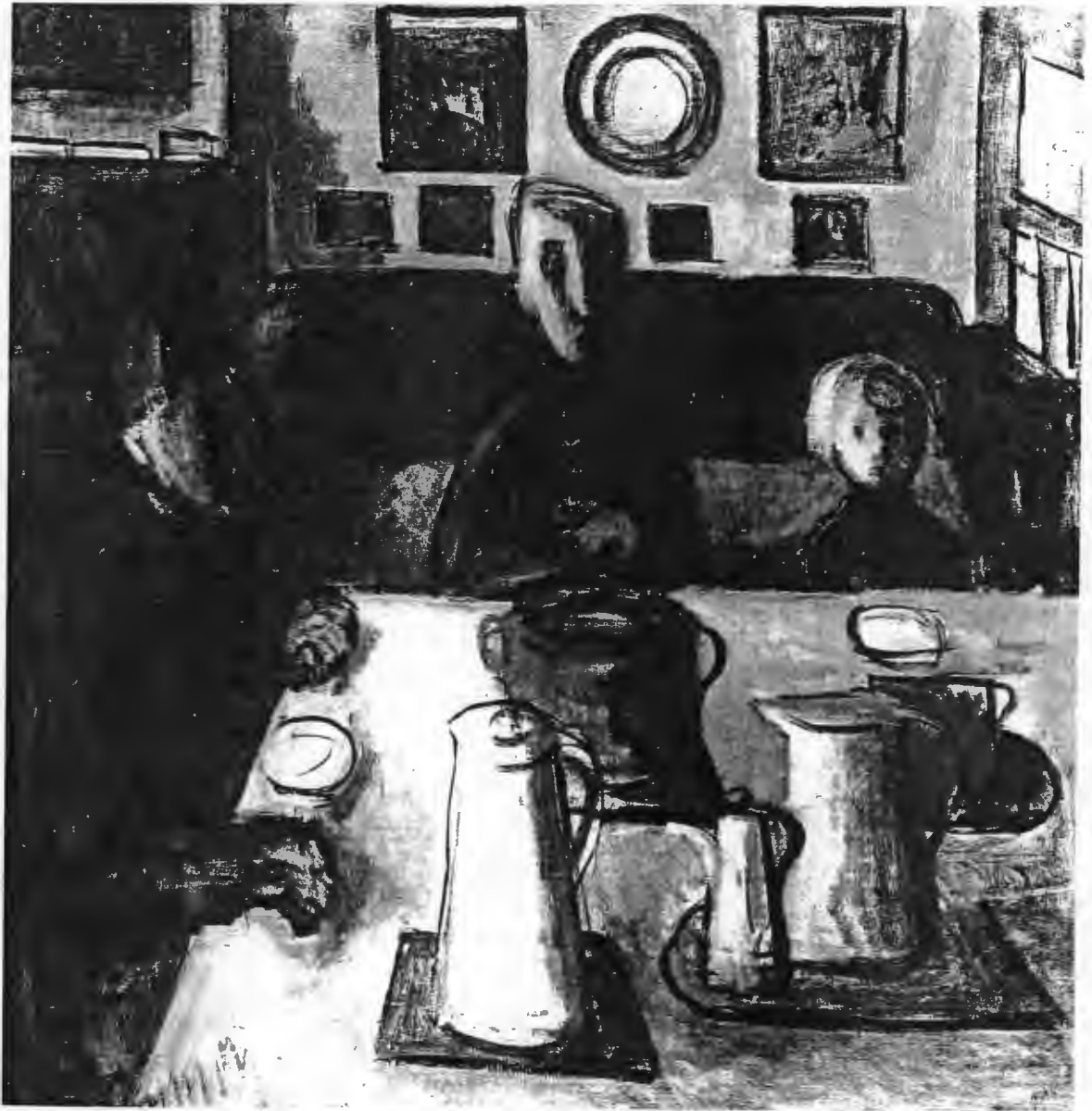


fig 12



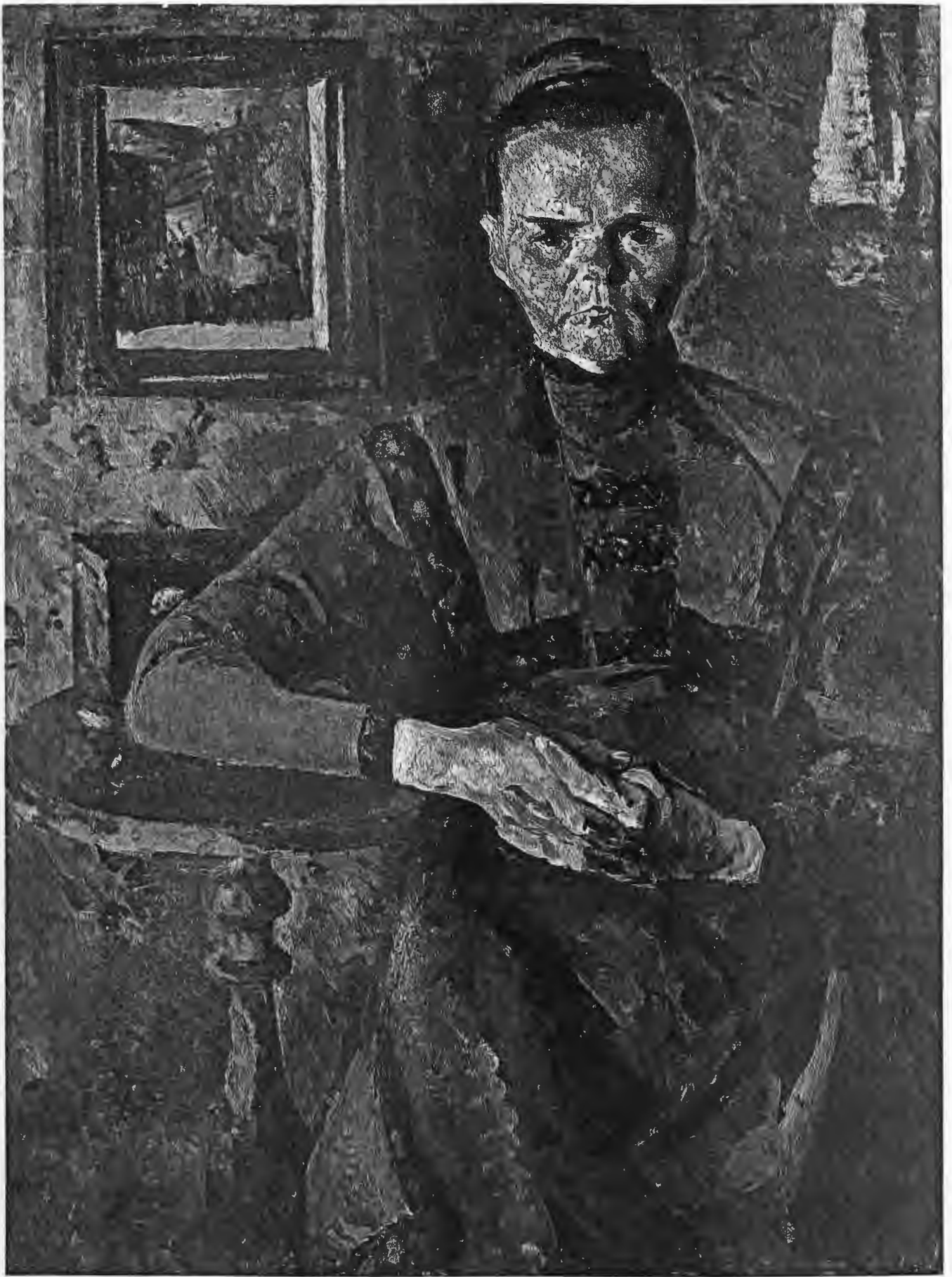


fig 14



fig 15



fig 16



fig 17

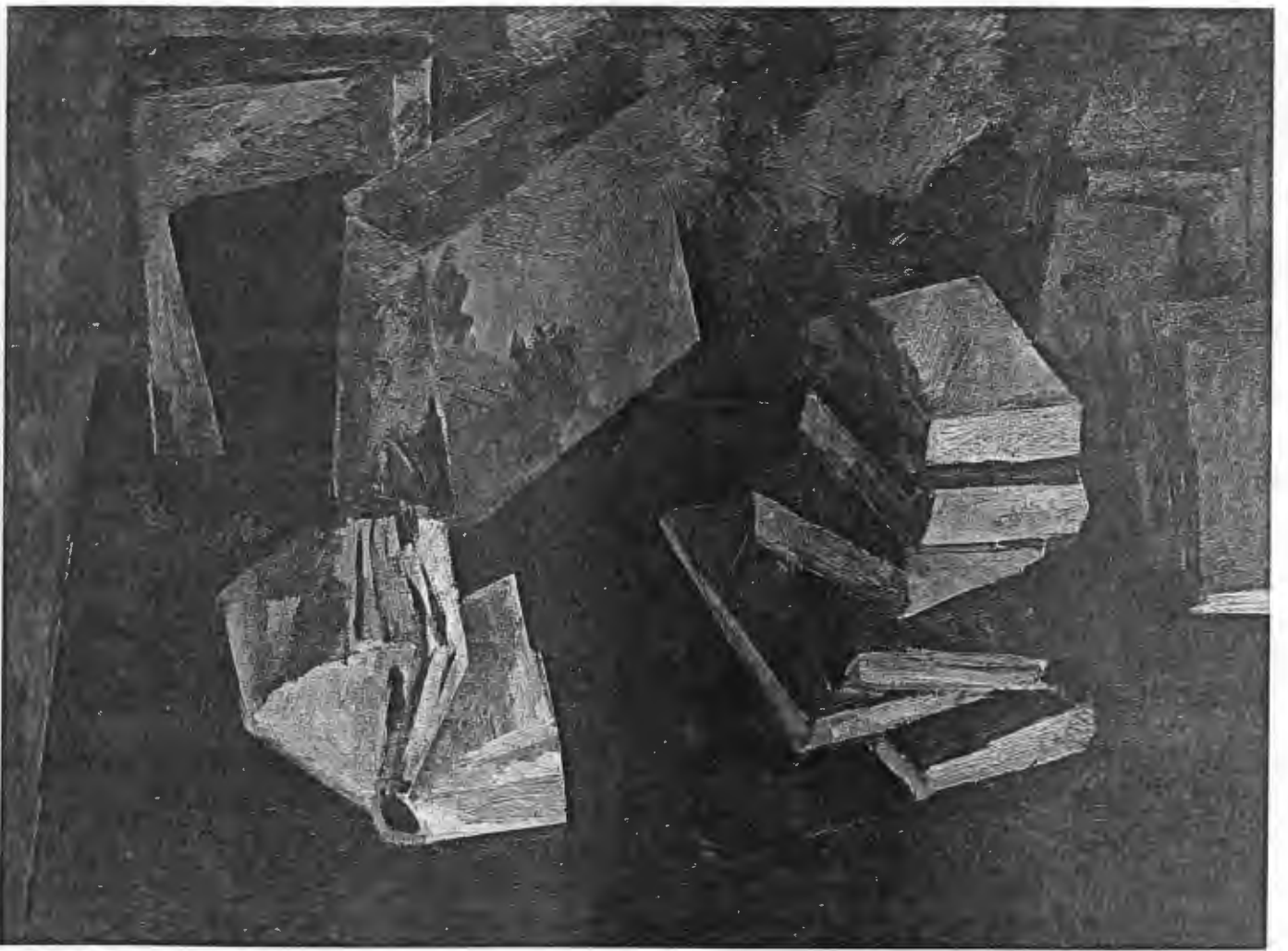


fig 18



fig 19

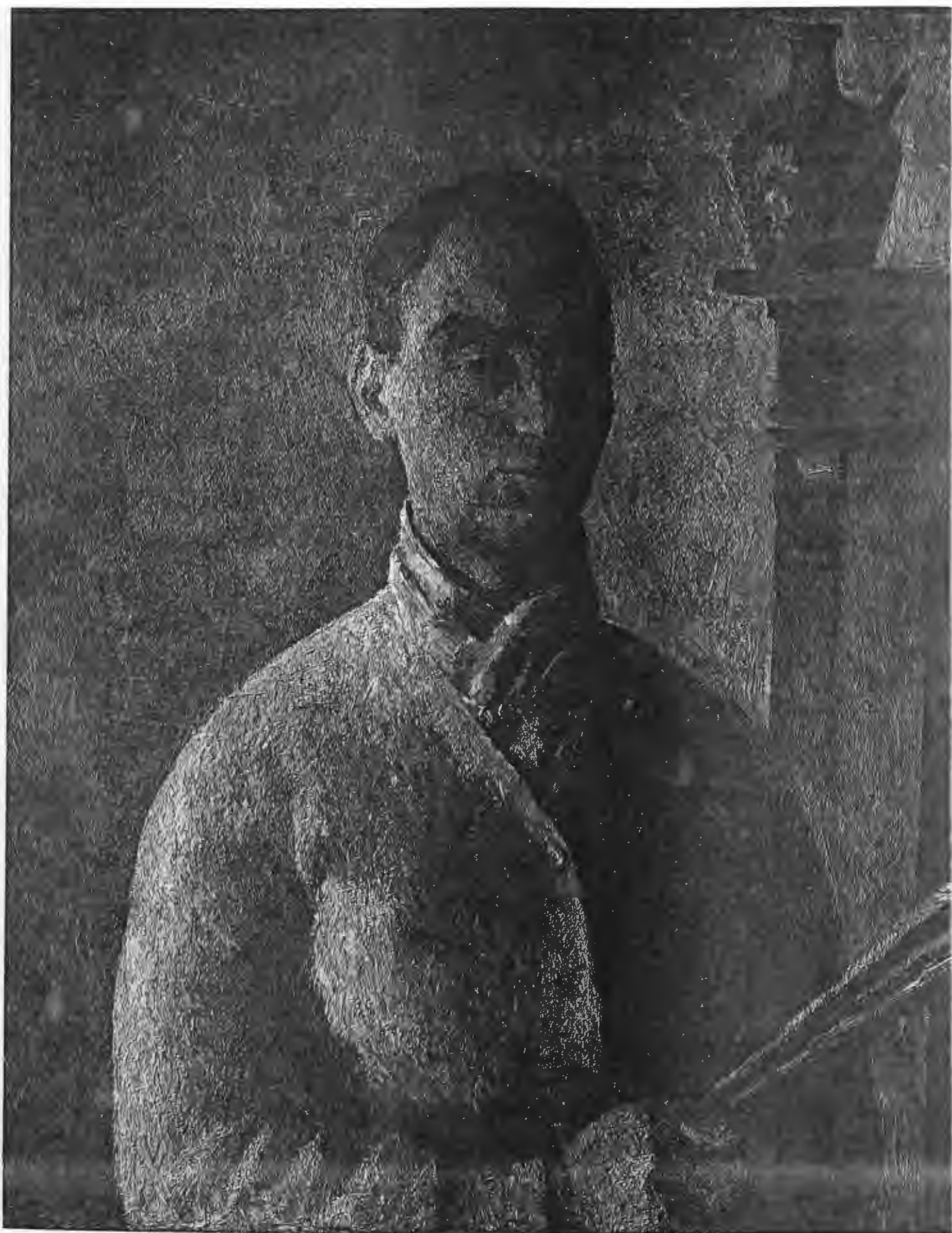


fig 20



fig 21







fig 24



fig 25

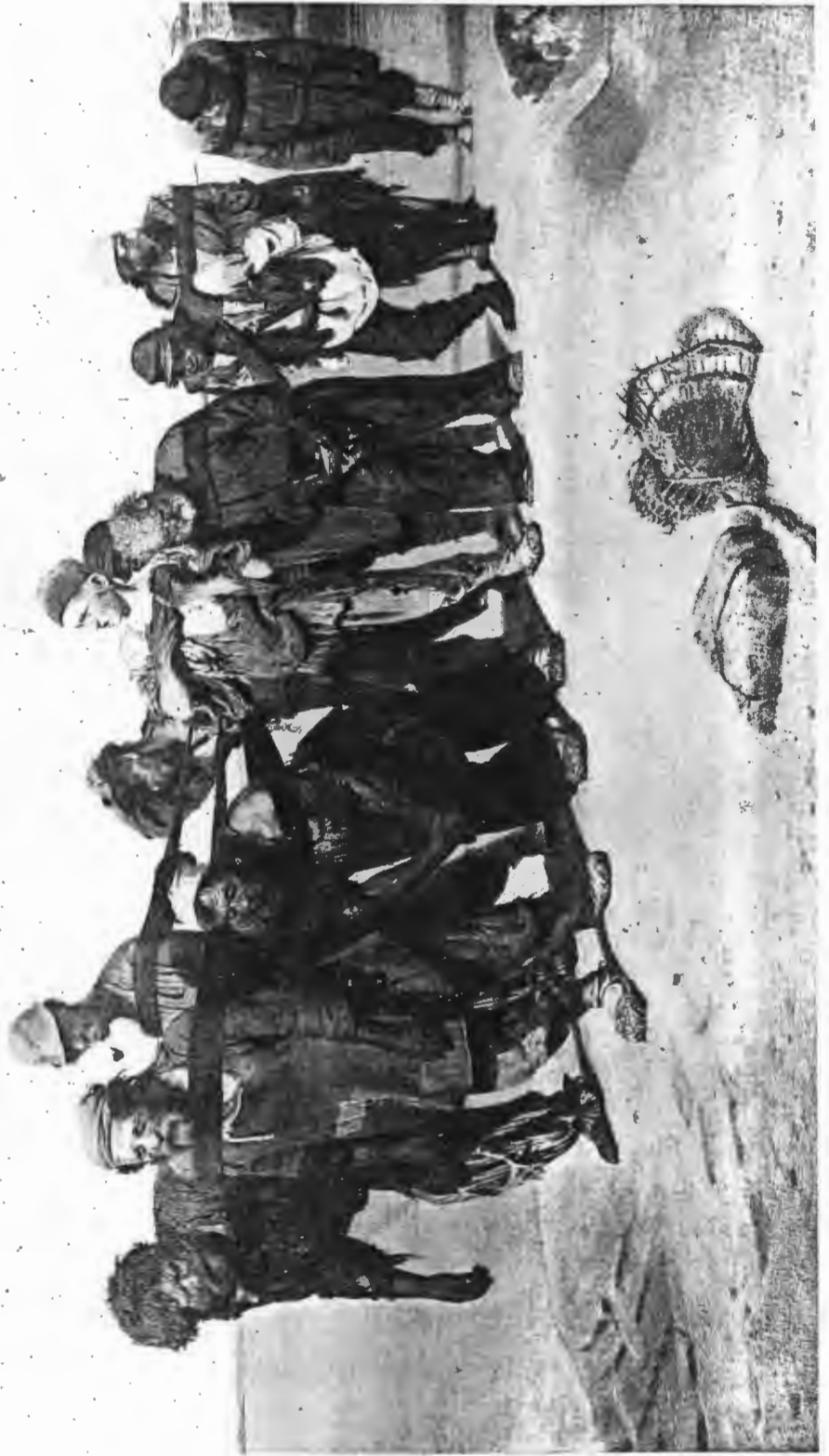


fig 26

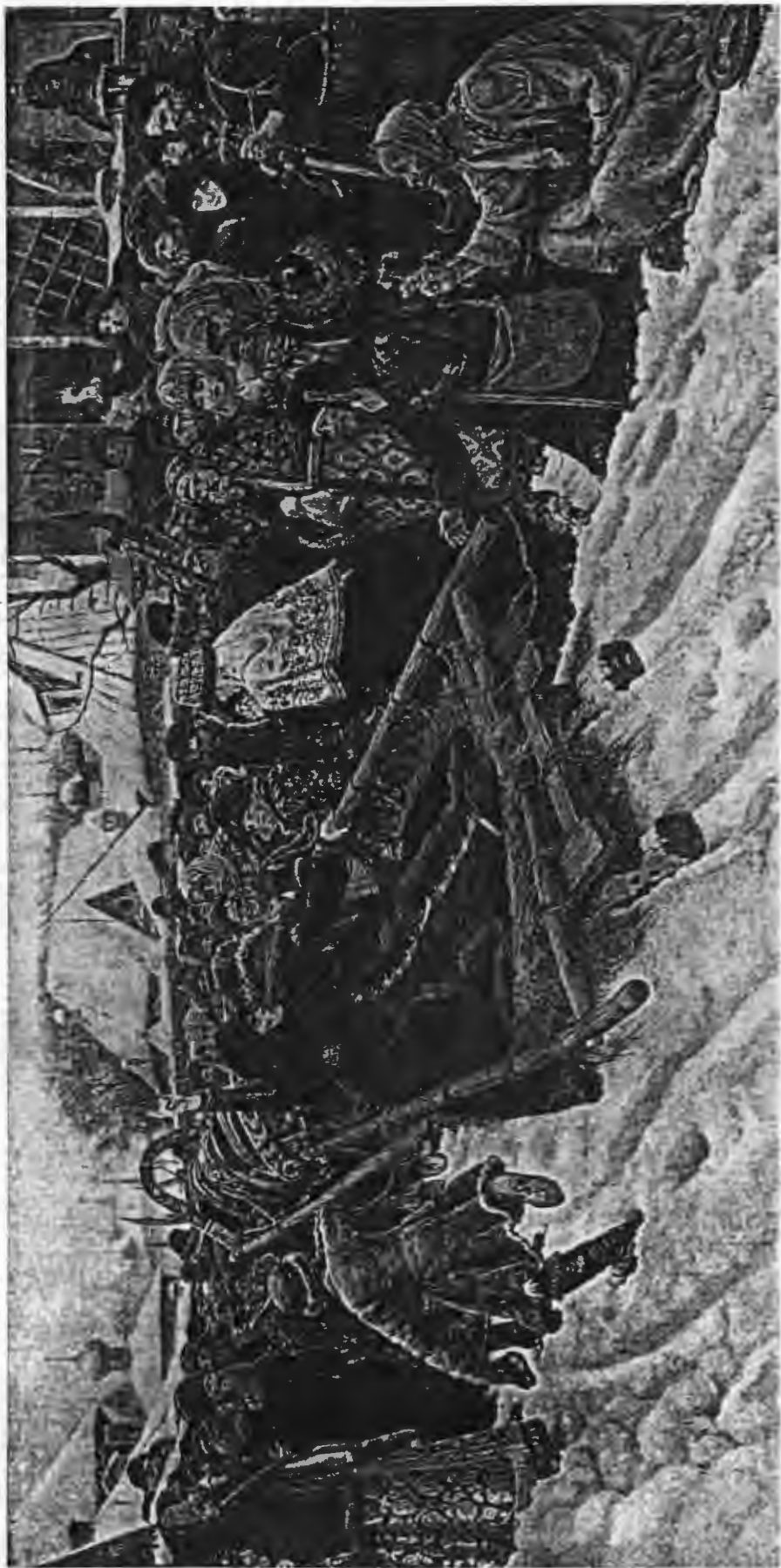


fig 27



Fig 28



17

Fig 29



Fig 30

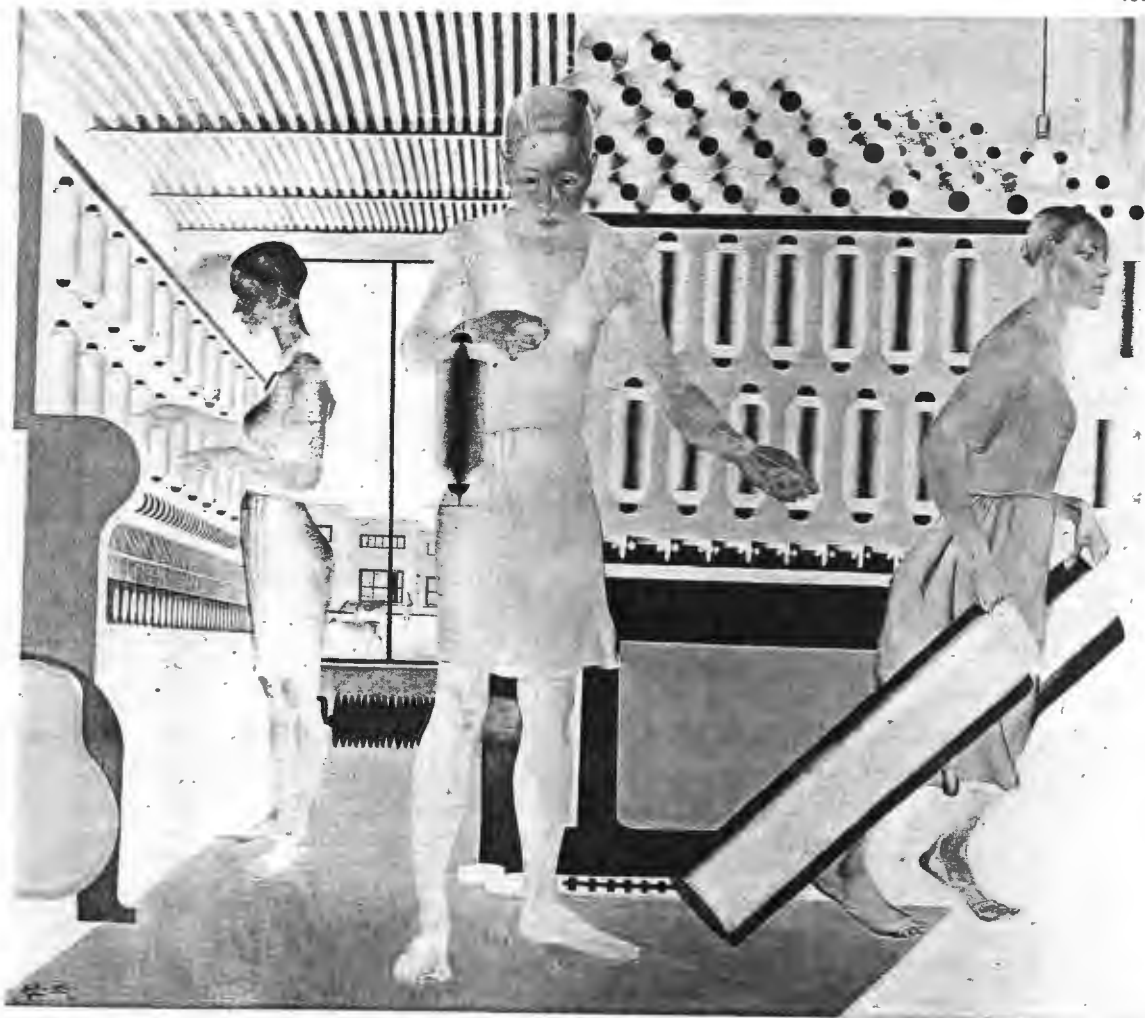


Fig 31



Fig 32



fig 33



Fig 34

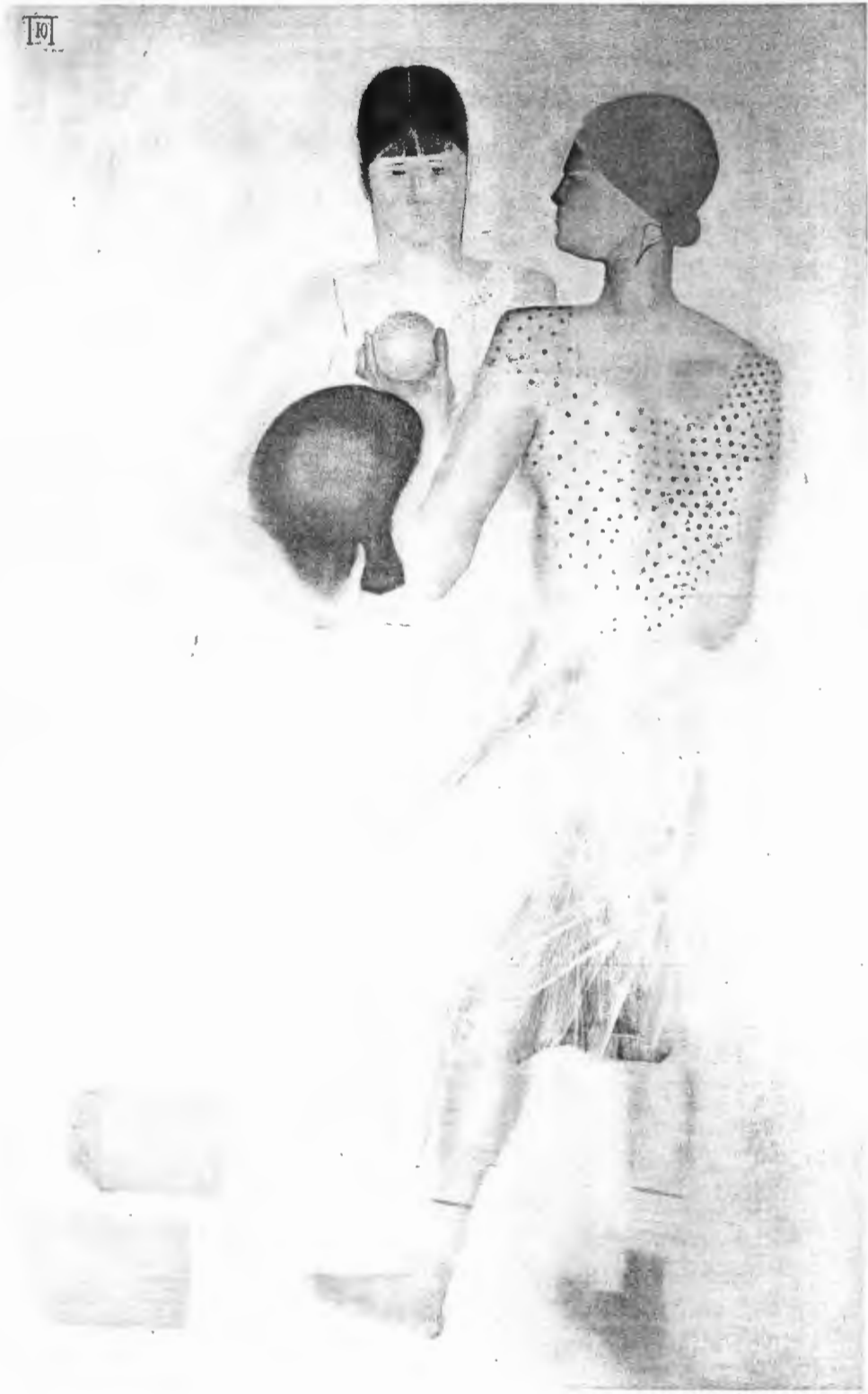


Fig 35



Fig 36



Fig 31



Fig 38



Fig 39.



Fig 40



Fig 41

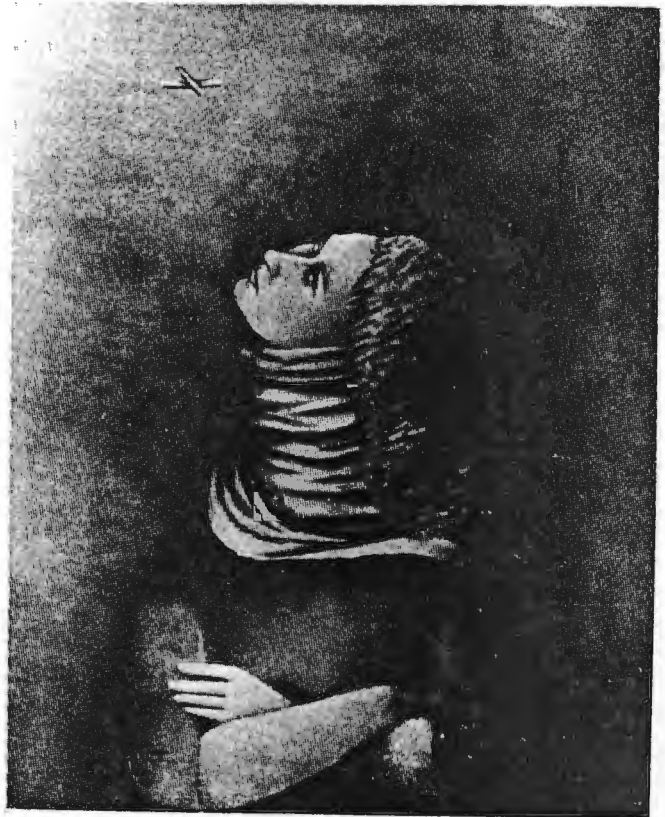


Fig 42.

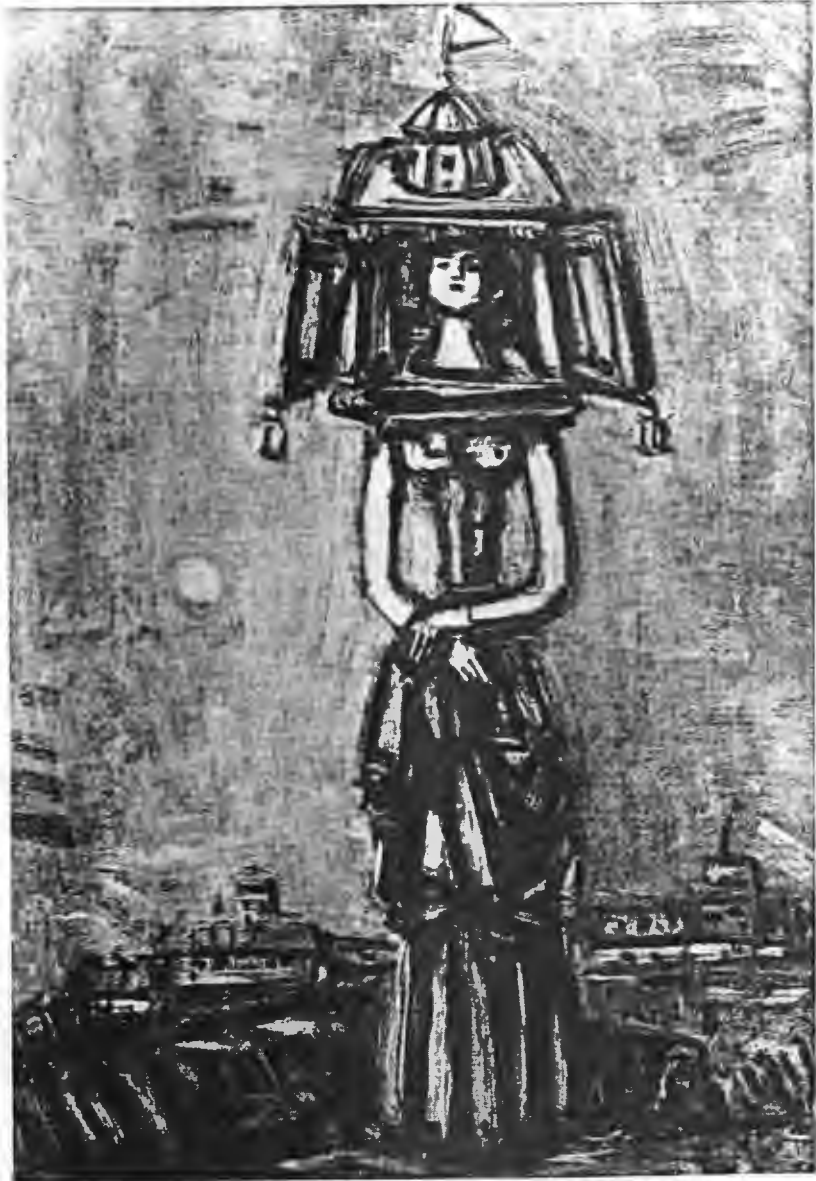


Fig 43



Fig 44

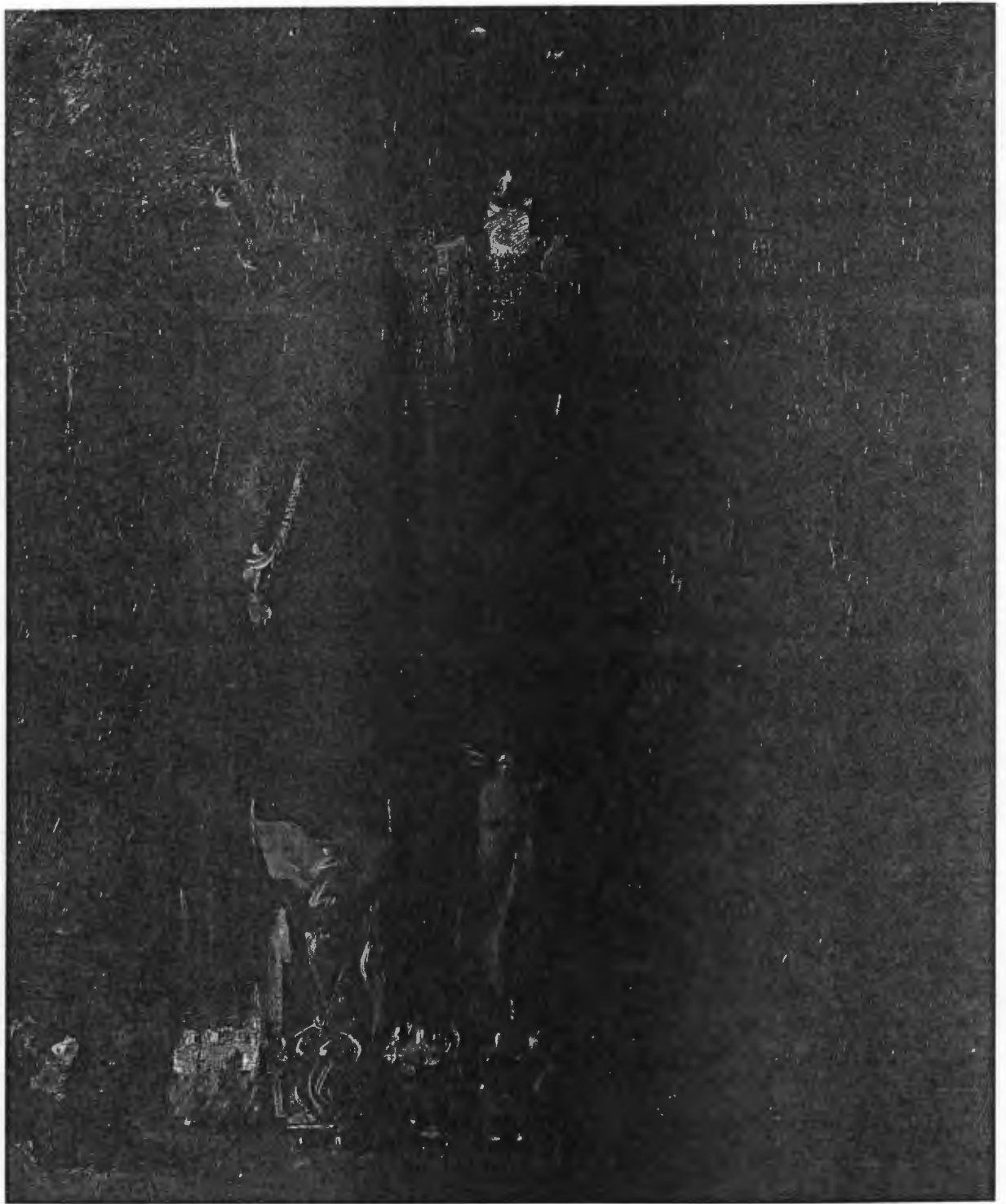


fig 45

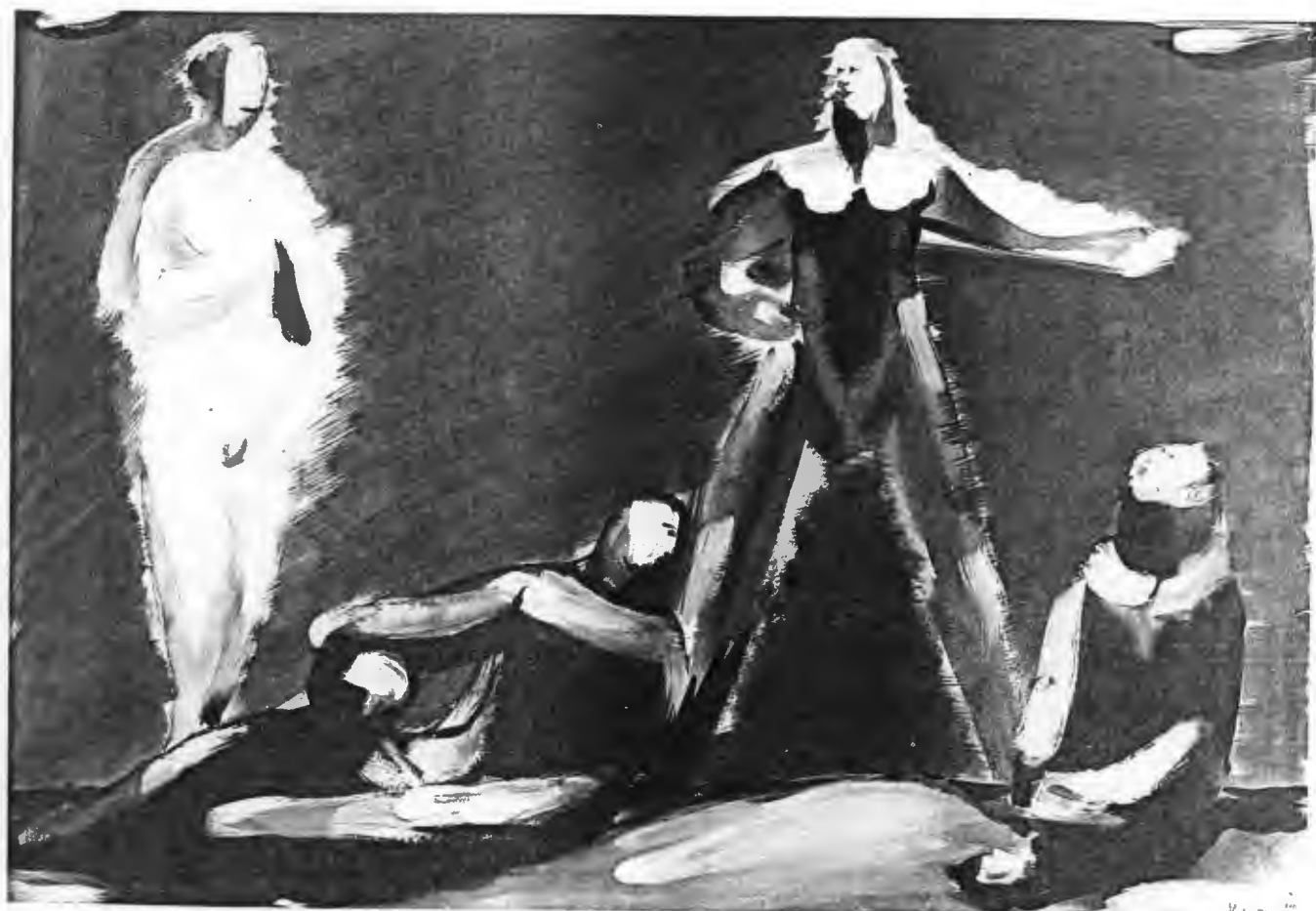


Fig 46



fig 47



Fig 48

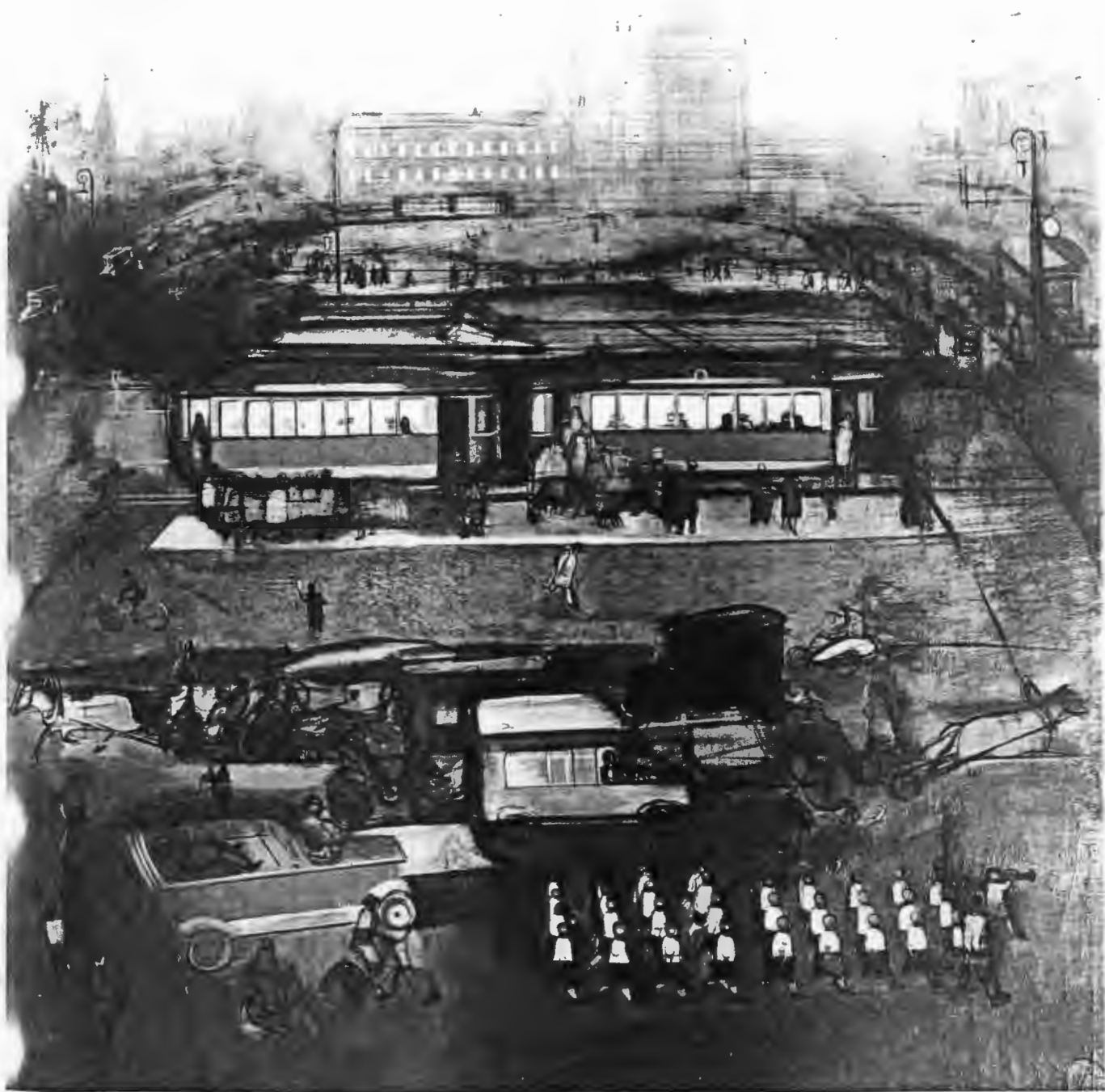


Fig 49.



Fig 50



Fig 51



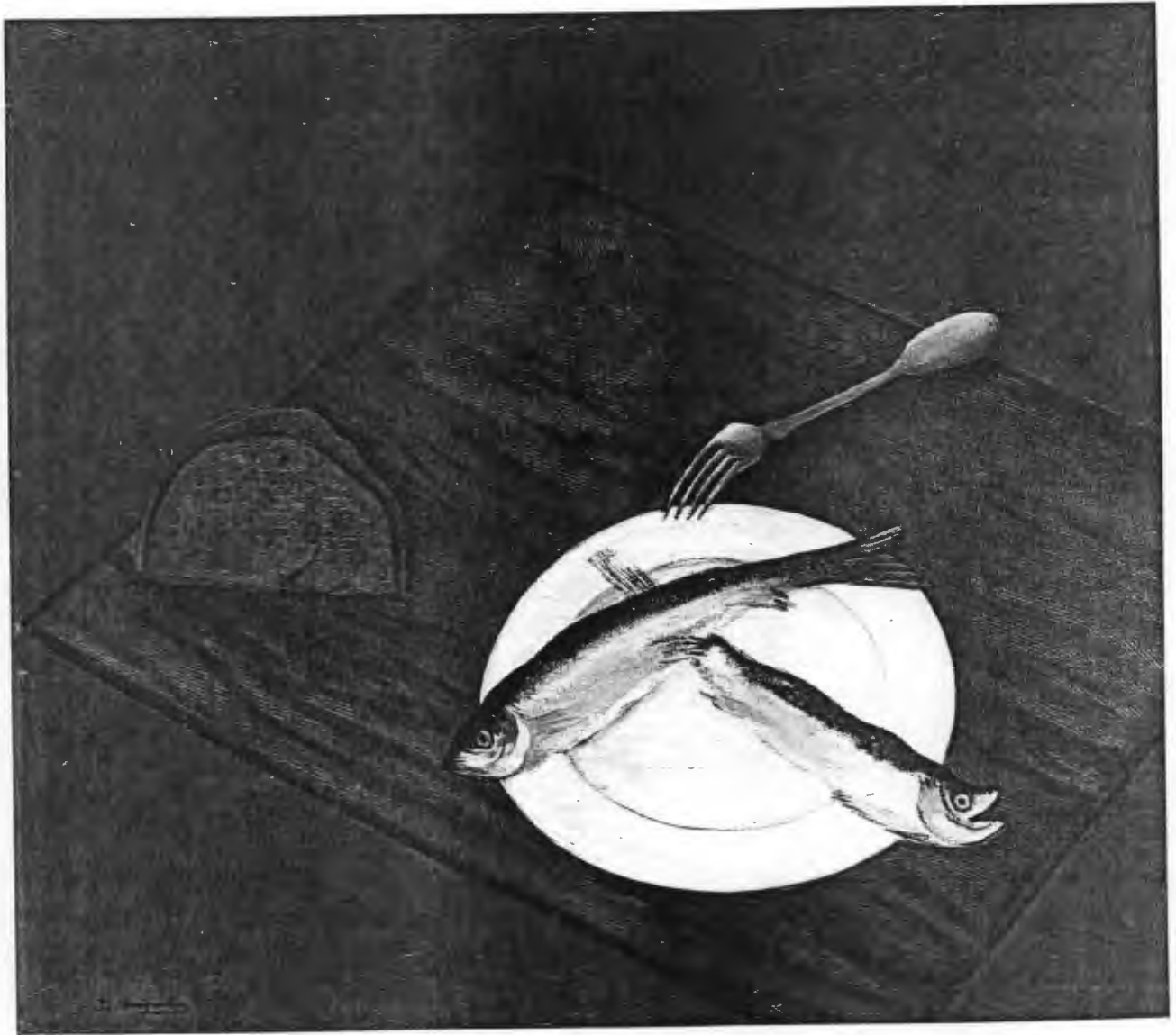
Fig 52



Fig 53



Fig 54



• Fig 55

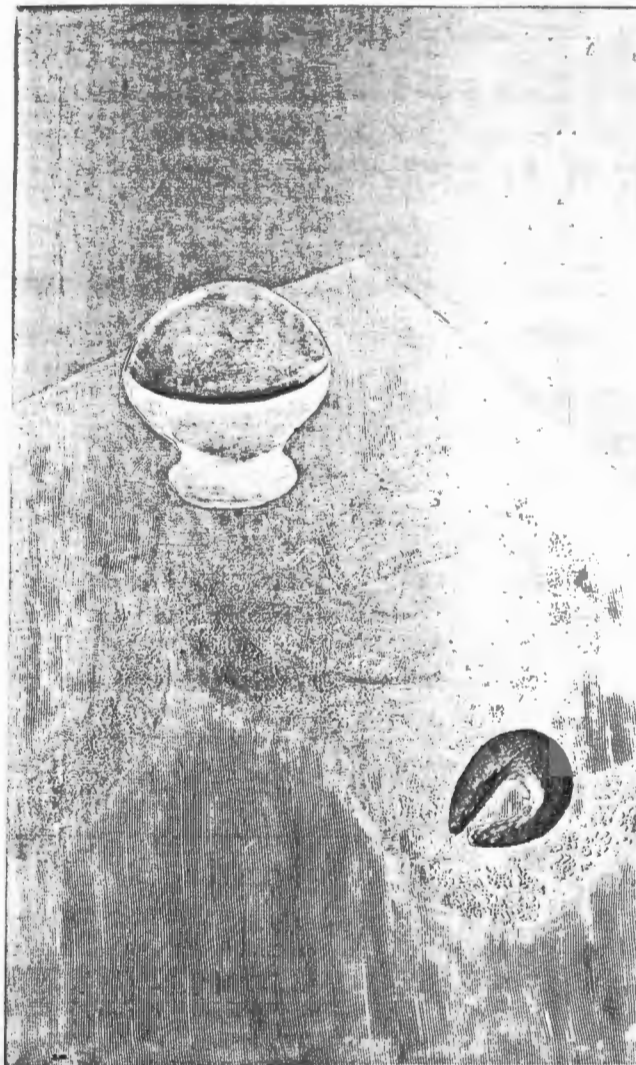


Fig 56



Fig 57

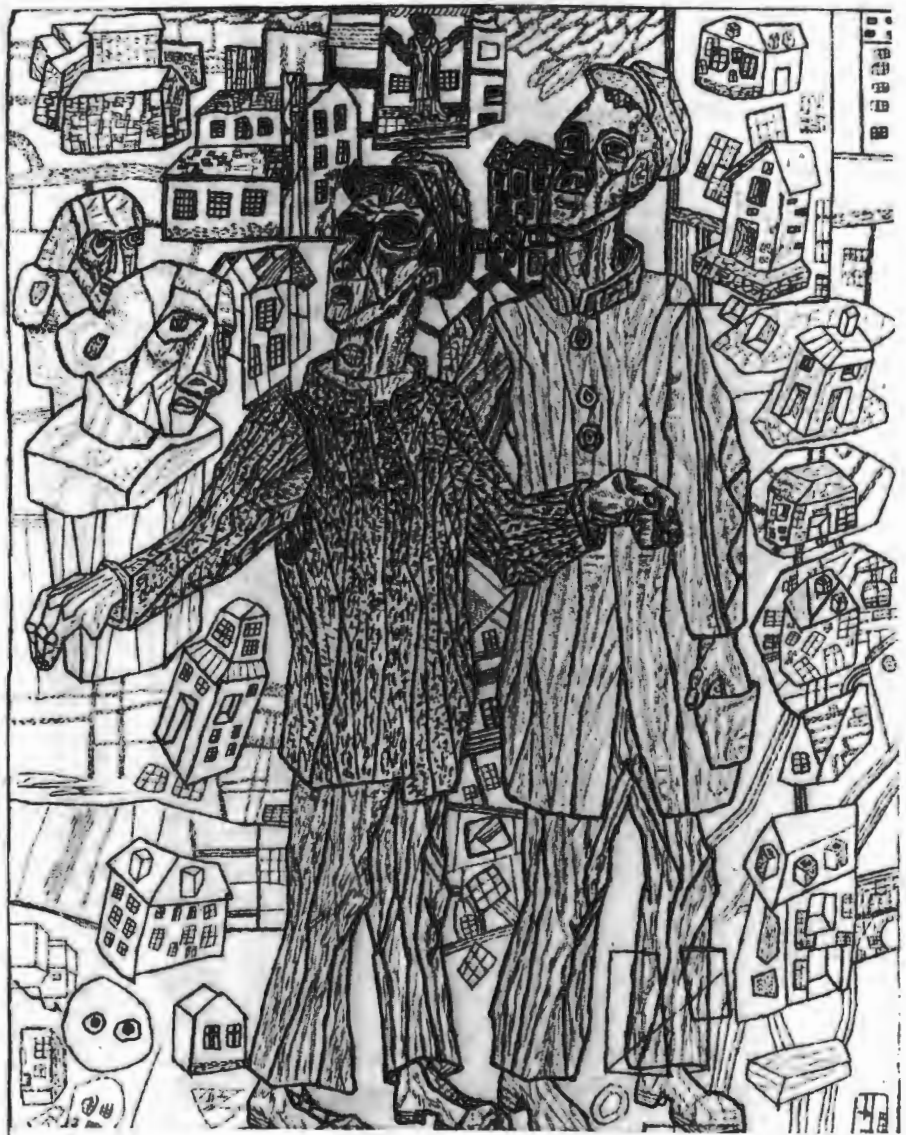


Fig 58

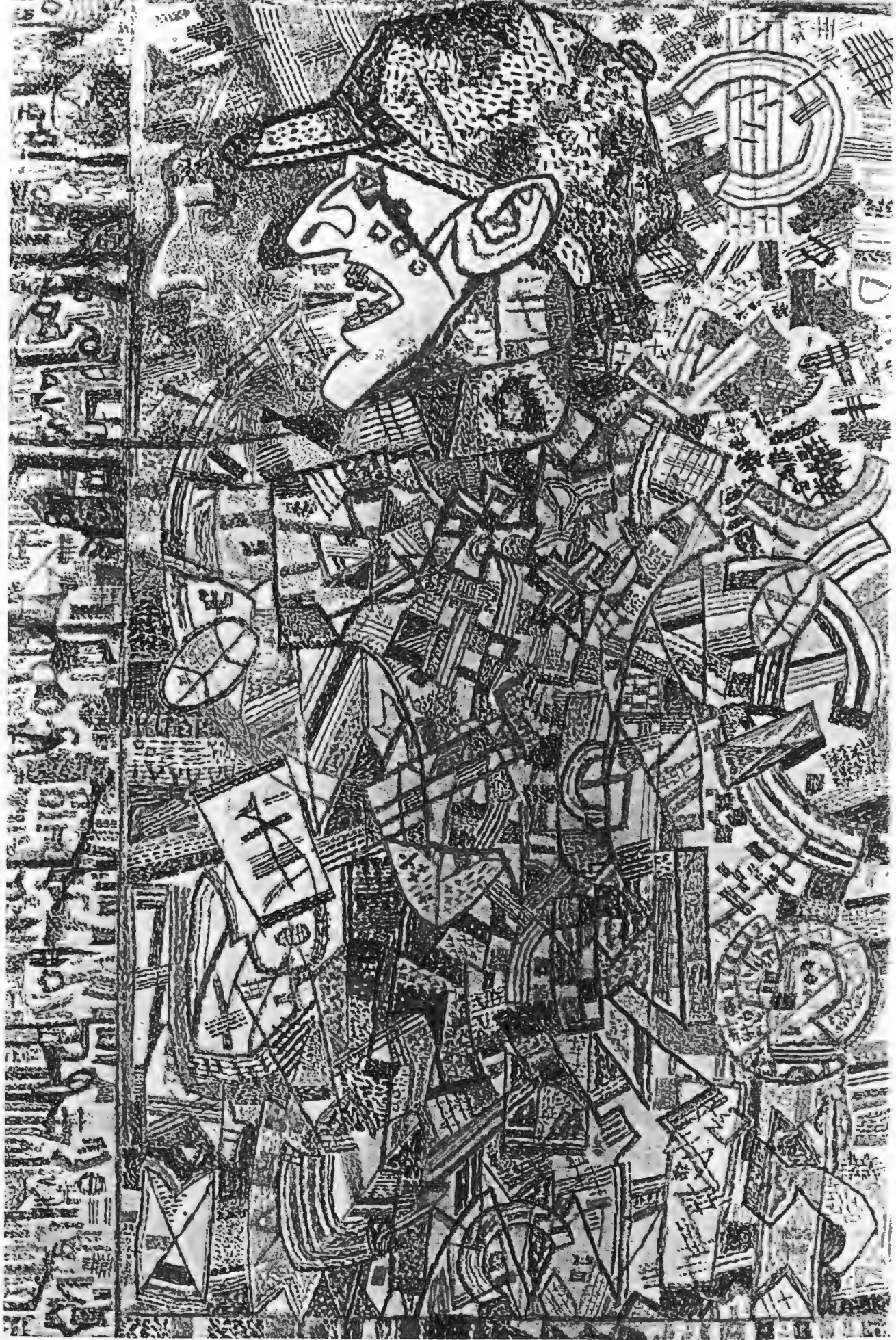


Fig 59



Fig 60



Fig 60



Fig 62



Fig 63



Fig 64



Fig 65

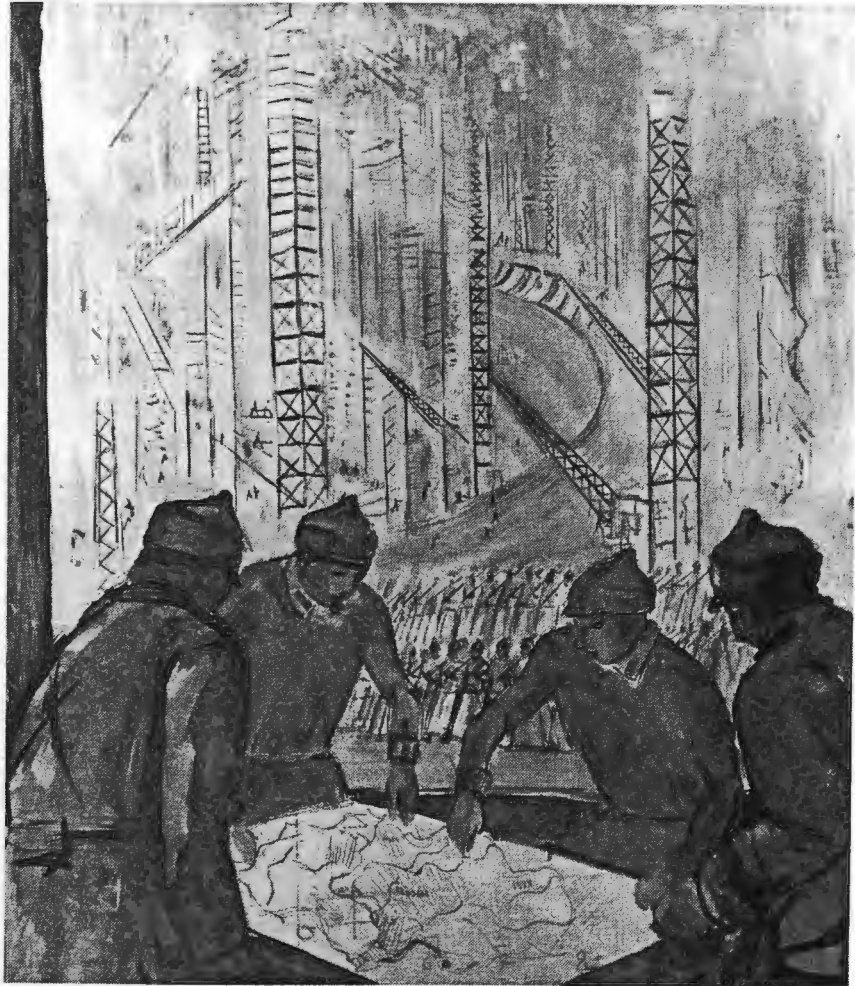


Fig 66



Fig 67



Fig 68



Fig 69

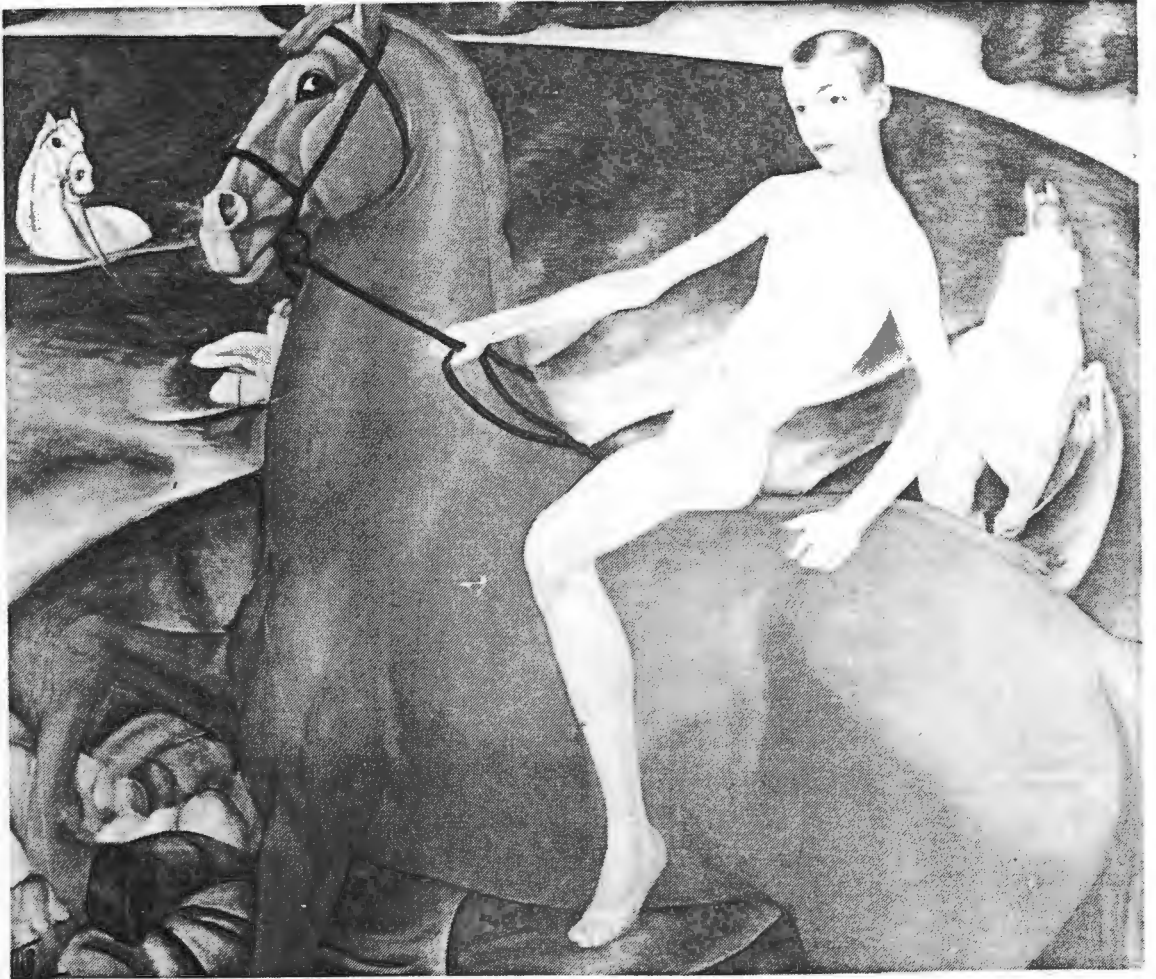


Fig 70



Fig 71



Fig 72



Fig 73



Fig 74



Fig 75



Fig 76



Fig 77



Fig 78

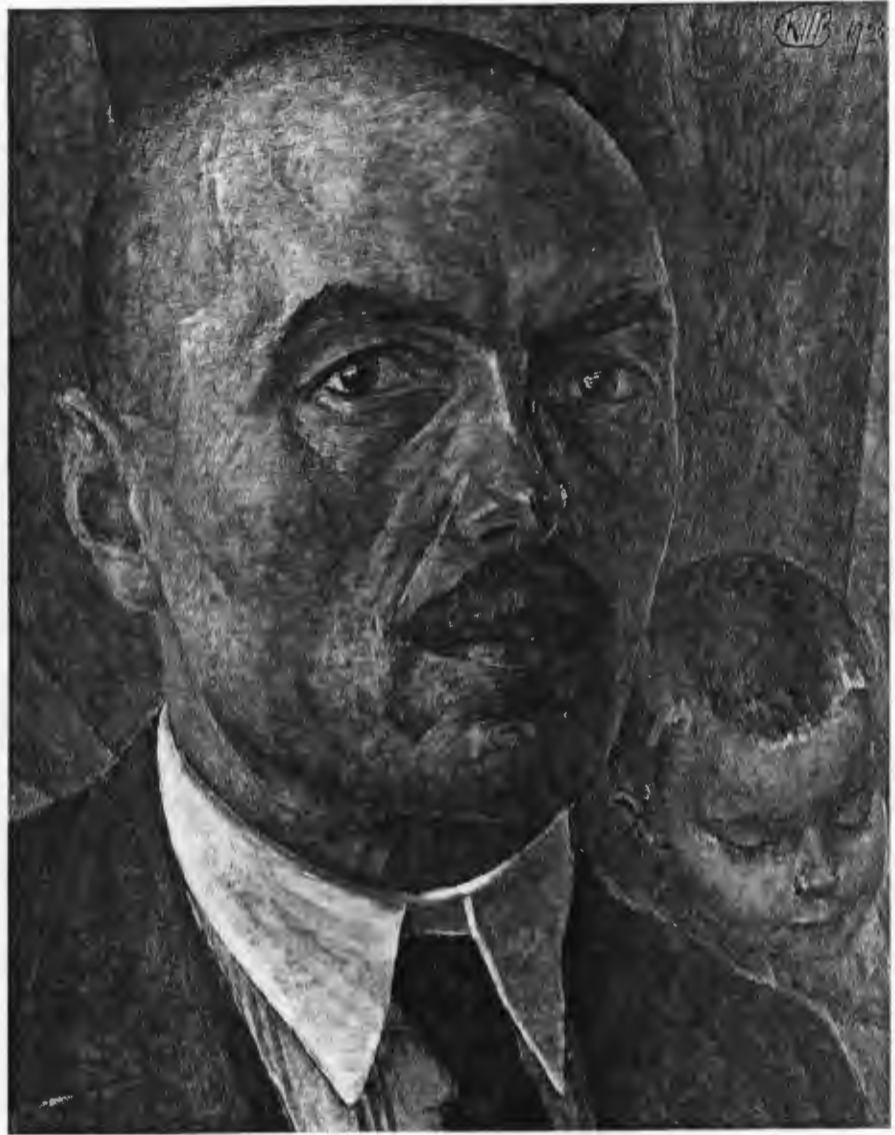


Fig 79



Fig 80



Fig. 81.



Fig 82

**РАБОЧИХ и ЛЕНИНА
СОЕДИНИЛА В СВОЕМ ПОРОХОВОМ
ДЫМУ**



РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ 1905г.



fig 84



Fig 85



Fig 86



Fig 87



Fig 88



Fig 89



Fig 90



Fig 91



Fig 92



Fig 93

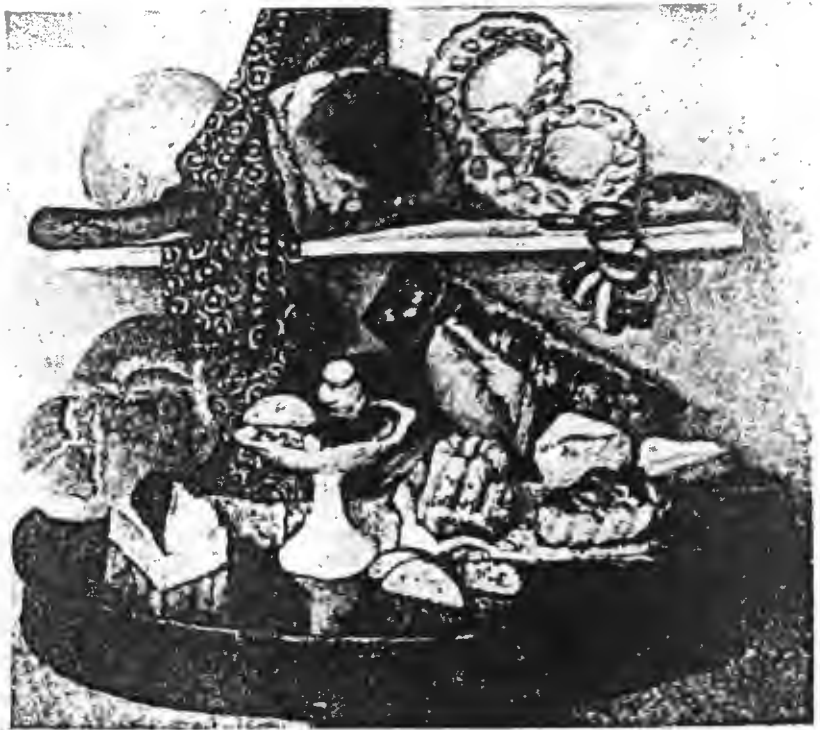


Fig 94

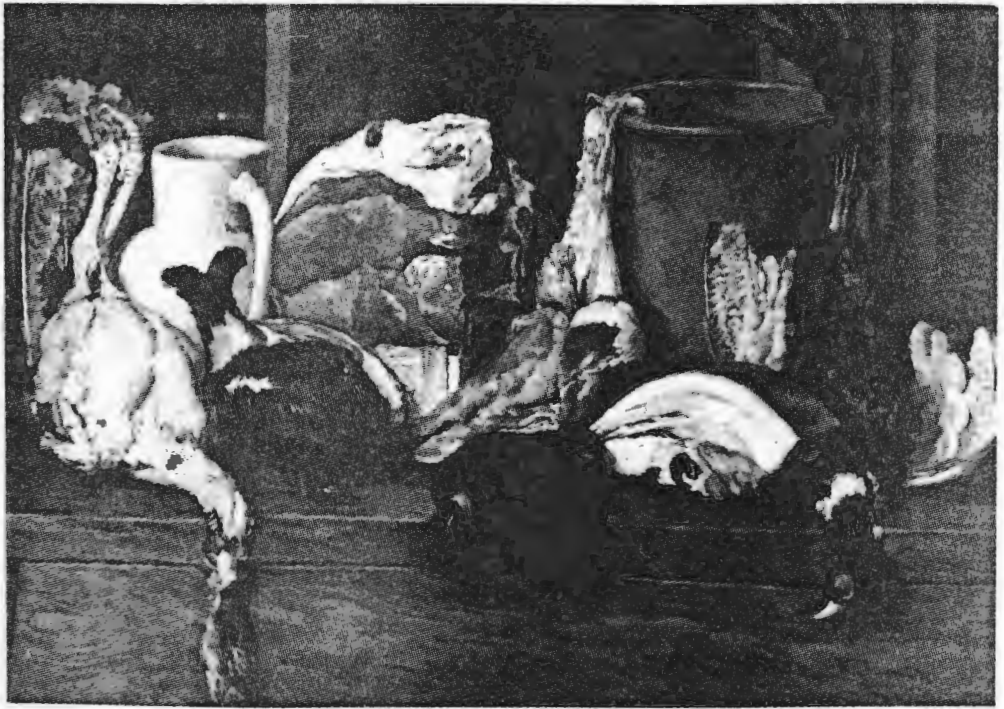


Fig 95



Fig 97



Fig 98



Fig 99



Fig 100

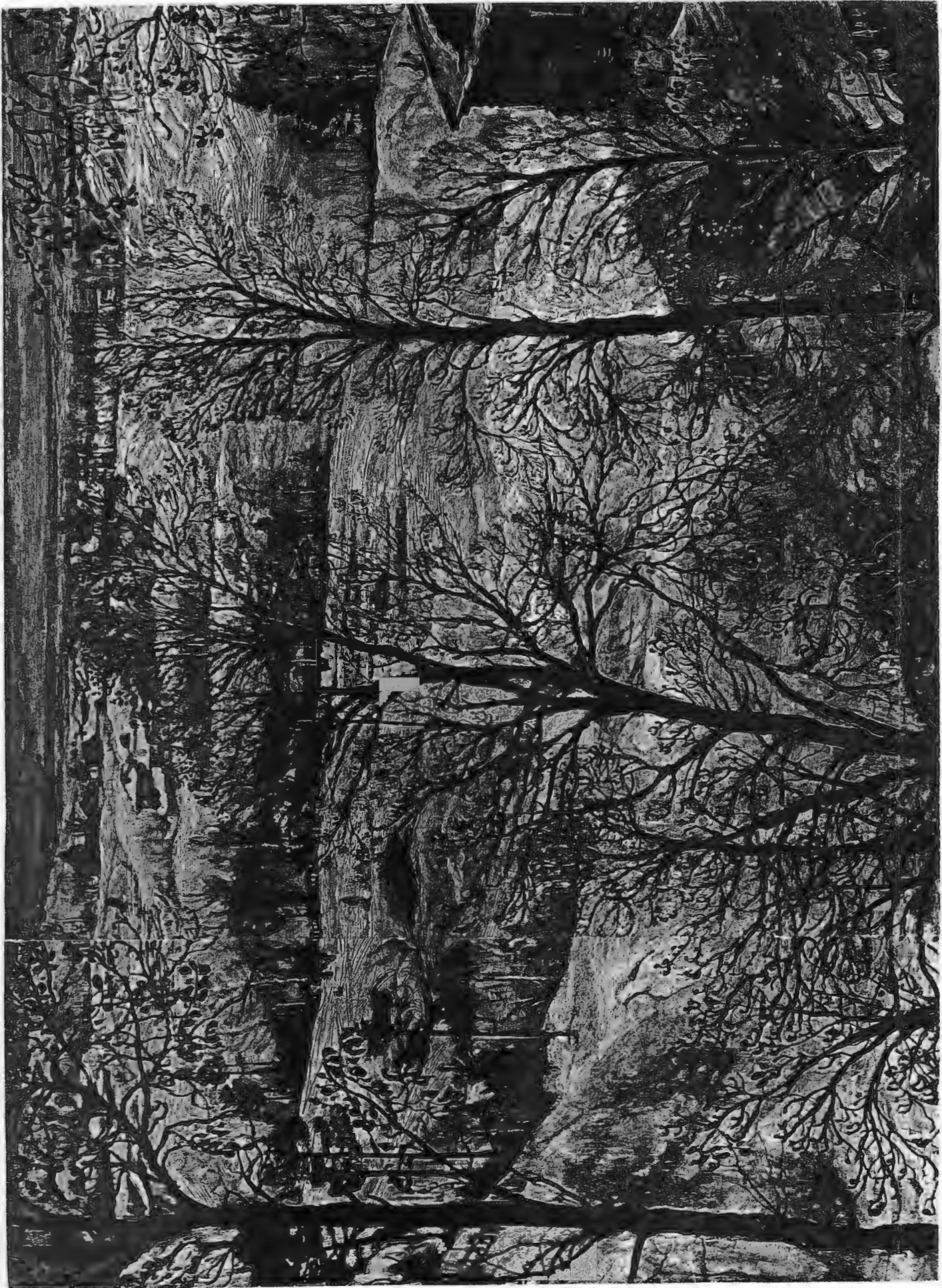


fig 101



fig 102



Fig 103



Fig 104



Figios



Fig 106



Fig 107



Fig 108



Fig 109



Fig 110



Fig III



Fig 112



Fig 113



Fig 114



fig 115



Fig 116



Fig 17



Fig 118



Fig 119



Fig 120



Д.30.

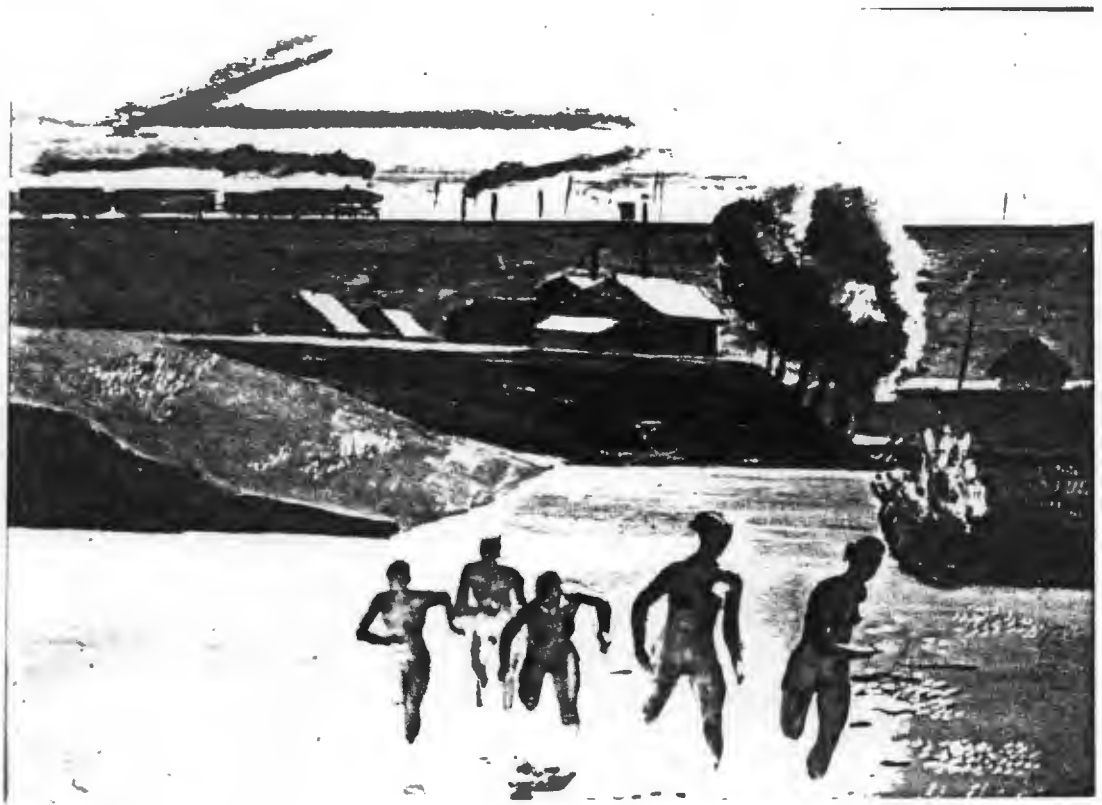
Fig 121



Fig 122



Fig 123



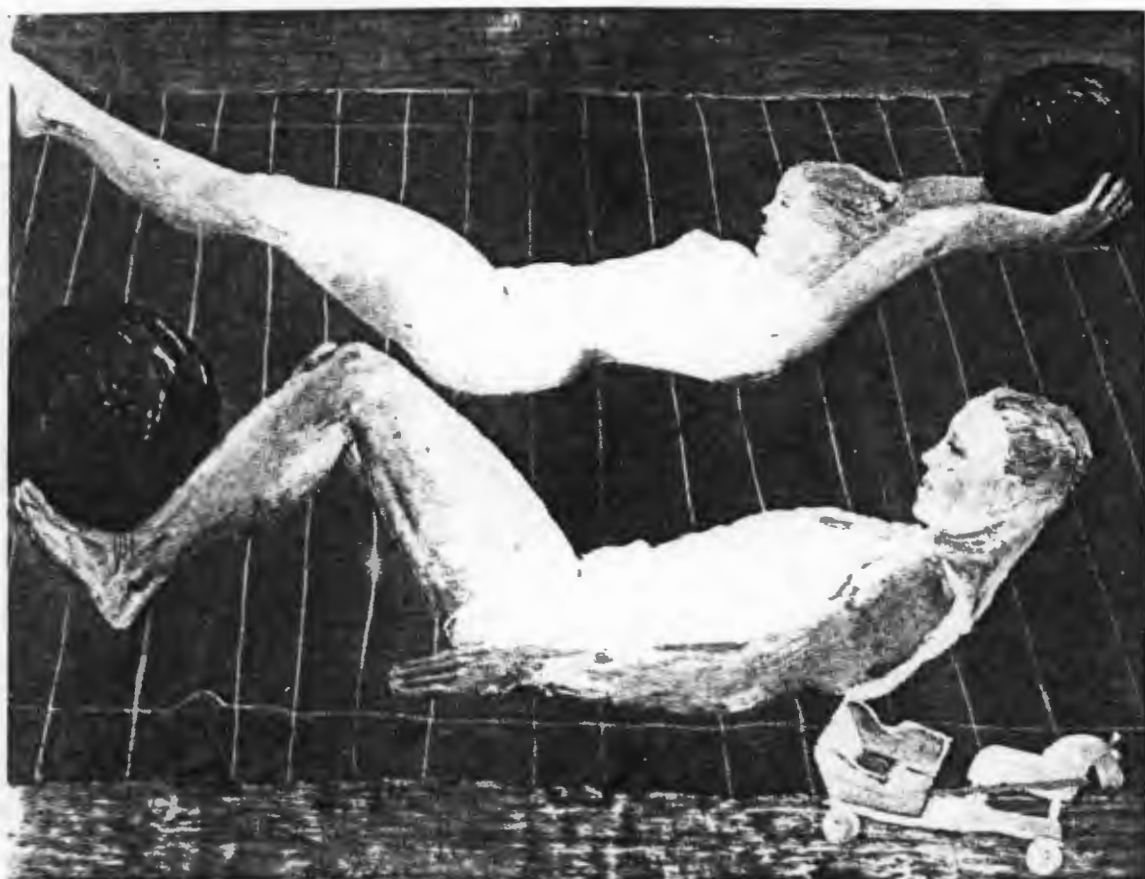


Fig 125

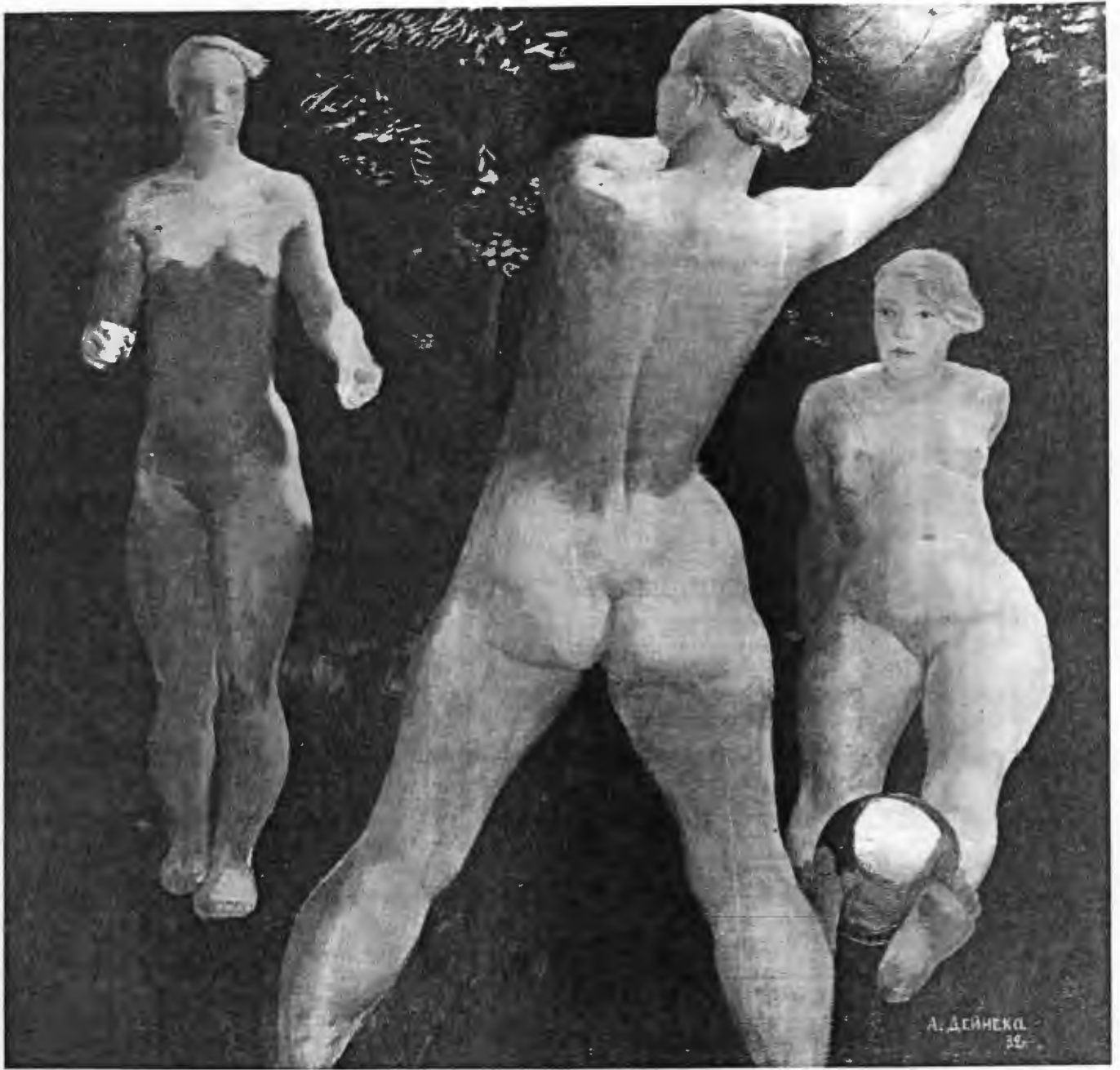


Fig 126



Fig 127



Fig 128



Fig 129



Fig 130



Fig 131



Fig 132.