

LEV CHAIM

NIKOLAI TARABUKIN

Nikolai Mikhailovich Tarabukin (1899-1956)¹ joined RAKhN as a corresponding member in 1924. By then he was already moving away from his earlier support of the avant-garde, although the following year, at his first RAKhN lecture on the "Left Front in Russian Art of the October Epoch," he maintained that "officially I have abandoned the left front. But in fact I still consider myself 'leftist'."²

Although in the texts below Tarabukin disavows an exclusive allegiance to Formalism, his early examinations of the visual arts such as *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* [An Experiment in the Theory of Painting], *Ot molberta k mashine* [From the Palette to the Machine], and *Iskusstvo dnia* [Art of Today]³ were rigorous, intrinsic analyses of device, form, and style. Certainly, it would be misleading to speak of a Formalist school in Soviet art criticism of the 1920s, i.e., one that could compete with the Formalist school in literary studies, but Tarabukin did much to replace the descriptive, narrative tradition with a method that stressed the inner components of the painting or sculpture. As he observed in *Opyt teorii zhivopisi*, the apology for abstract painting that he wrote in 1916 and one of his most radical treatises, "The contemporary artistic consciousness provides three resolutions of the problem of form. The first could be called the naively realistic one, the second the rational one, and the third — one that is intuitive in creativity and formal in theory."⁴ Even so, Tarabukin regarded Suprematism in an ambiguous light, referring to Kazimir Malevich as a "typical discoverer of Americas already discovered."⁵

Like Boris Arvatov and Osip Brik, Tarabukin championed industrial design and Productivist art (although he had very definite opinions about

1. For further information on Nikolai Tarabukin, see A. Nakov, ed., *Nikolai Taraboukine. "Le dernier tableau; écrits sur l'art et l'histoire de l'art à l'époque du constructivisme"* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1972); A. Kovalev, "Samoznanie kritiki," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* (M), No. 26 (1990), pp. 344-80; for bibliography, see A. Dunaev, comp., *Bibliograficheskii ukazatel N. M. Tarabukina, arkhivnykh materialov i literatury o N. M. Tarabukine* (M: GITIS, 1990).

2. N. Tarabukin, "Levyi front v russkom iskusstve Oktiabrskoi epokhi," in RNL, f. 627 (Nikolai Tarabukin), karton 4, ed. 4, l. 1.

3. N. Tarabukin, *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (M: Vserossiiskii proletkult, 1923) (Tarabukin wrote this text in 1916); *Ot molberta k mashine* (M: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1923); *Iskusstvo dnia* (M: Proletkult, 1925).

4. Tarabukin, *Opyt teorii zhivopisi*, p. 13.

5. N. Tarabukin, "Levyi front v russkom iskusstve Oktiarkoi epokhi."

how they should develop), arguing that the new art and art history should be oriented more towards the scientific and rational: "If art history does not want to become an archival science, studying objects that have been excavated and possessing only archaeological interest, and if it wishes to follow in the wake of life, then it must change into a science of industrial mastery."⁶

Tarabukin's historical interests were wide-ranging and, like his colleague Nikolai Punin, he did much to reassess Russian artists of the nineteenth century and before such as Andrei Rublev, Pavel Fedotov, and Vasilii Surikov. In this regard, the monograph on Mikhail Vrubel that he wrote over many years is of particular importance, for he touched on aspects of the artist's work that until then had been disregarded or misinterpreted. In his numerous publications of the 1920s Tarabukin also discussed artists such as Konstantin Bogaevesky, Cézanne, Robert Falk, and Petr Konchalovsky, and it was this orientation rather than his sympathy for the avant-garde that encouraged RAKhN to organize his several lectures there between 1924 and 1928, including the ones on the theory of painting and eccentric space. In addition, Tarabukin also spoke "On Russian Expressionism" (November 14, 1924), "The Leftist Front in Russian Art of the October Period" (March 11, 1925), "The Portrait as a Stylistic Form" (February 17), "Coloring as a Determining Factor in Landscape Painting" (March 10), "Interior and Exterior as a Problem of Style" (March 16), "Formal-Stylistic Categories in Art" (October 15), "General Presuppositions on the Problem of Space" (October 18), "Composition and Rhythm in Painting" (December 1 and 8), "The Impressionist Still-Life" (December 7), and "Painterliness in Contemporary Art" (December 21) (all 1927), and "The Art of the Poster and Its Specific Characteristics" (January 20, 1928).

Tarabukin continued to research, write, and teach in the 1930s, lecturing at the State Institute of Theater Art (GITIS) and examining diverse subjects — from Transcaucasian architecture to the philosophy of culture. What Mikhail Alpatov described as Tarabukin's "sensitivity to art and innate artistry"⁷ were manifested most clearly in the monograph on Vrubel and his course of lectures on the history of costume which he undertook in the 1930s, but which were published as monographs only much later.⁸

6. Tarabukin, *Ot molberta k mashine*, p. 18.

7. M. Alpatov, "Neskolko slov ob avtore," in N. Tarabukin, *Mikhail Alexandrovich Vrubel* (M: Iskusstvo, 1974), p. 6.

8. See L. Gorbacheva, ed., *N. M. Tarabukin: "Ocherki po istorii kostiuma"* (M: GITIS, 1994).