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Nikolai Tarabukin at the State Academy of Artistic Sciences: The Problem of Style

Abstract: This article examines Nikolai Tarabukin's work in the field of art theory during the years of his affiliation with the State Academy for Artistic Research (GAKhN). This period was marked, among other things, by significant changes in Tarabukin's views on art: from the avant-garde theory of Productivist art he moved toward a sharply critical stance against the newest left-wing artistic movements. The most striking expression of this shift can be found in his original conception of style, namely in his stylistic interpretation of artistic genres, which Tarabukin developed throughout the second half of the 1920s. The examination of this conception constitutes the central focus of the present article. In addition to Tarabukin's published writings, the study draws on extensive archival materials and unpublished manuscripts, while also situating his ideas within the broader intellectual context of the period. Through this approach, the reconstruction of Tarabukin's conception emerges as a revealing case study of the effort to define artistic terminology, as well as of the ideological assumptions that may have underlain this fundamental task.

Keywords: Nikolai Tarabukin, GAKhN, style, "nature morte worldview", Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft

In the history of art, Nikolai Tarabukin is mostly known as the author of the tract *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (*From the Easel to the Machine*), published in 1923, which established his reputation as one of the most important theorists of Productivism. This text emerged from Tarabukin's deep involvement in debates about the future course of artistic development conducted by left-wing artists and theorists affiliated with the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), where Tarabukin served as academic secretary. In 1924, INKhUK – having previously been subordinated to the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) – ceased to exist, and a new phase began in Tarabukin's professional life, now

connected directly with the Academy itself. He took the most active part in its work, which continued almost up to the Academy's dissolution in 1931. Throughout this period, Tarabukin's views underwent significant changes, leading his critics later to assert that, having begun "with a defence of new forms of art and new methods of studying artistic facts", by 1927–1928 he had "successfully arrived at openly idealistic positions".¹ It is this turn and the conceptual form it assumed in Tarabukin's writings that the present article examines.

In professional terms, the period of Tarabukin's work at GAKhN was perhaps the most productive in his life. His deep interest in the theoretical problems of art – attested by the publication of the book *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (*Toward a Theory of Painting*, 1923) – found in GAKhN a maximally nourishing intellectual environment. Here Tarabukin not only found himself at the forefront of Soviet and, more broadly, European art-historical scholarship, becoming a participant in the most pressing debates accompanying the formation of art history as a fully autonomous discipline, but also got directly involved in the development of the language of this "new science of art".

It was for this reason that Tarabukin is discussed within the project devoted to the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terms*. With regard to the number of contributions to the volume prepared by the Division of Spatial Arts, Tarabukin, the author of twenty-seven articles, is surpassed only by Dmitrii Nedovich, who contributed more than eighty articles (that is, almost one third of all the entries in the volume). At first glance, the range of topics addressed in Tarabukin's articles appears diverse; however, nearly all of them can be integrated, in one way or another, into the broader set of problems in art that concerned him. Moreover, they bear the imprint of his independent theory of art, developed throughout the 1920s and finally articulated in the unpublished monograph *Teoriia iskusstva* ("Theory of Art", 1929). Thus, the entire range of Tarabukin's entries² is connected with the distinction between art and "remeslo" ("craft"), which underscores the shift in Tarabukin's views – from defining art as "mastery" in his productivist theory to defining it as a form of "orientirovka" ("orientation"), understood as an expression of the art-

1 «[...] начал с защиты новых форм искусства, новых методов изучения художественных фактов, а к 1927–28 г. благополучно добрался до откровенно идеалистически позиций» (M. A. 1929: 7). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine. – E. I.

2 See especially: "Khudozhnik" ("Artist"), "Master" ("Master" e.g. artisan), "Shablon" ("Pre-established scheme").

ist's worldview and embodied in art as a "khudozhestvennyi obraz" ("artistic image").

Without the possibility of addressing all aspects of Tarabukin's theory of art in detail, this article focuses on only one of them, namely, his original conception of style, which Tarabukin himself regarded as one of his achievements. Thus, describing his work at GAKhN, he writes: «Мои исследовательские работы, по утверждению критики, ставят ряд проблем совершенно по-новому. Это относится, например, к статьям о пейзаже, портрете, натюрморте, жанре, в которых эти категории я рассматривал не тематически, а стилистически»³ (cit. after Dunaev 2023: 161). An acknowledgment of this achievement may be seen in the fact that he was entrusted with writing the entries on landscape, portrait, and still life for the Encyclopedia.

The earliest manifestations of Tarabukin's conception of style may be traced to his paper on the "Left Front" (March 1925), where he seems to have articulated, for the first time publicly, a sharply critical stance toward left art as a whole, asserting that the "label <klichka> of futurism, budushchnichestvo" had failed to justify itself, and that the alliance with production did not take place (Tarabukin 1925: 8c). Tarabukin holds Cézanne responsible for this turn of art toward a dead end. It is with Cézanne that he begins the substantive part of his paper on left art: «Первым жестом Сезанна было изъятие „души“ из внешнего мира и превращение его в натюрморт.⁴ „Чело“ думающее и „сердце“ чувствующее отменены. [...] Натюрморт воцарился»⁵ (Tarabukin 1925: 5). He finds these same "*nature morte*" tendencies in poetry, theatre, and music as well (ibid.).

At that point, however, these ideas had not yet been articulated in terms of style. This came somewhat later, and the stimulus for this work was likely provided by the formulation of the general problem of style by the Philosophical

3 "My research work, according to critics, poses a number of problems in an entirely new way. This applies, for example, to articles on landscape, portrait, still life, and genre, in which I approached these categories not thematically, but stylistically".

4 Since, for Tarabukin, the Russian term "natiurmort" – following its French source – is grounded in an etymology that crucially points to death (*morte*), the term will be given in its French form in the discussion of his conception. Tarabukin opposes the *nature morte* to the English "still life", like the Dutch "stilleven", as a depiction of life.

5 "Cézanne's first gesture was the removal of the 'soul' from the external world and its transformation into *nature morte*. The thinking 'brow' and the feeling 'heart' have been abolished. [...] *Nature morte* has come to reign".

Department of GAKhN. Its first mention appears in the plans of the Commission for the Study of the Problem of Artistic Form for the 1924/1925 reporting year (Iakimenko 2017: 354). At the very end of 1924 and the beginning of 1925, several papers on this topic were delivered; however, the systematic elaboration of the problem of style dates to the subsequent reporting year, when it was included in the plan of the Philosophical Department in the form of a series of plenary sessions held jointly with the divisions. In addition to these, independent papers addressing this general theme in one way or another were presented in each of the Academy's divisions, as well as in the Sociological Department. As stated in the Academy Bulletin, work in this direction became "one of the first attempts to unite different specialists around a single problem or a complex of problems".⁶ According to the report by the Division of Spatial Arts, it was precisely within its Subsection on Theory that the problem of style evoked "the most lively response" ("naibolee zhivoi otklik"): almost all of the papers heard in the Subsection between January and June 1926 addressed this theme (ibid.: 54).

Tarabukin's first paper, which served as a kind of introduction to his conception of style, was also delivered in the Theory Subsection of the Division of Spatial Arts on 15 October 1926 and was entitled "Formal'no-stilisticheskie kategorii zhivopisi" ("Formal-Stylistic Categories of Painting"). It was followed by an entire series of papers that continued throughout 1927 and, in fact, were meant to act as chapters in the planned monograph *Problemy stilii v zhivopisi* ("Problems of Style in Painting"), which remained unpublished. Leaving aside for the moment the paper and its discussion, let us turn to the background of its preparation. In fact, Tarabukin first undertook a systemic approach to the problem of style in his likewise unpublished monograph *Khudozhestvennaia kul'tura* ("Artistic Culture"), written, as he himself noted, in the summer of 1925 and edited in the summer of 1926 – that is, in the wake of the moment when the problem of style began to be discussed at the Academy. In this work, Tarabukin introduces the concept of "formal-stylistic tendencies" ("formal'no-stilisticheskie tendentsii"), which, in his view, makes it possible to overcome differences specific to individual art forms on the path toward formulating general laws governing the evolution of artistic culture. Tarabukin

6 «[...] одной из первых попыток объединения разных специалистов вокруг общей проблемы или их комплекса» (Biulleteni GAKhN 1926: 29).

distinguishes five such tendencies, deriving them from five basic forms of art: architectonicity, plasticity, painterliness, musicality, and literariness. Each of these tendencies predominates over all forms of art during a particular historical period, a predominance accompanied by the dominance of the corresponding art form. Subsequently, however, Tarabukin narrows his focus and concentrates on only one of these “formal-stylistic tendencies” – painterliness. The special significance he attached to this concept is also evidenced by his organization of a group for the study of painterliness at GAKhN, as well as by his preparation of the dictionary entry on “painterliness” for the *Encyclopedia of Artistic Terms*. The same concept underlies the monograph *Problems of Style in Painting*.

In the preface to this book, Tarabukin writes that “art study, if it asserts its scientific autonomy [...], inevitably poses its problems as problems of style, that is, as problems of artistic worldviews”.⁷ Even this initial thesis already calls for some clarification, which may be provided by turning to the intellectual context of the period. The surge in the popularity of the concept of “style” was due first and foremost to the works of Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen (Problems of style, 1893)*, and Heinrich Wölfflin, *Grundbegriffe der Kunstgeschichte (Principles of Art History, 1915)*, which promised the possibility not only of systematising the entire diversity of works of art, but also of identifying the common factors underlying the emergence of their geographical or historical differences. Unlike the preceding positivist approach, most clearly exemplified by Gottfried Semper’s book *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten (Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, 1860–1863)*, the basis of change was understood to be not in external conditions (whether constraints imposed by technique and material or the influence of the environment), but a certain internal unity of form, its own logic and, in Riegl’s terminology, its “Kunstwollen” (“directed will”). This made it possible to free art history from its dependence on historical or psychological methods, which had dominated the study of art in the second half of the nineteenth century. This idea found particularly clear expression in a formulation by Konrad Fiedler, widely regarded as the founder of the movement in art history that sought to combine sci-

7 «Искусствоведение, если оно отстаивает свою научную самостоятельность [...] неизбежно ставит свои проблемы, как проблемы стиля, т. е. как проблемы художественных мировоззрений» (Tarabukin 1927c: 5).

entific rigour with independence from other disciplines. This formulation was quoted by Gustav Shpet in the article “K voprosu o postanovke nauchnoi raboty v oblasti iskusstvovedeniia” (“On the Formulation of Scholarly Work in the Field of Art History”), published in the *Bulletin of GAKhN*: «He методы истории и психологии делают искусствоведение точным, а познание необходимой связи в стиле»⁸ (cit. after Shpet 1926: 8). To demonstrate how strongly hopes for the systematisation and scientisation of art history were linked to the concept of style at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in his article on the history of this concept, quotes the following passage from Guido Adler’s book *Der Stil in der Musik* (1911):

Eine einheitliche Behandlung <of the concept of style> ist bisher noch nicht versucht worden. Und doch besteht darin das Um und Auf kunstwissenschaftlicher Betrachtung und Behandlung, die Stilbestimmung ist die Achse kunstwissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis. Die Stilfragen sind das Sublimat aller theoretischen und historischen Untersuchungen und Feststellungen.
(cit. after Gumbrecht 1986: 771)

A unified approach [to the concept of style] has not yet been undertaken. And yet this is the crux of art-historical observation and analysis: the determination of style is the axis of art-historical knowledge. Questions of style are the culmination of all theoretical and historical investigations and findings.

Explaining the significance that the concept of style acquired in this period, Gumbrecht notes that it functioned as a kind of “key” – a category through which it became possible to move from the strict empirical observation of objects to broad historical generalisations (ibid.: 771). In other words, style could be understood as an interface: the external formal expression (accessible to objective description) of a certain inner content, which – unlike the notion of “form”, which functioned in a similar way – possessed a historical dimension. As Williband Sauerländer sharply formulated this point: “Other disciplines could only try to understand historical processes; art history alone could see evolution” (Sauerländer 1983: 265).

8 “It is not the methods of history and psychology that make art history precise, but the cognition of the necessary connection in style”.

The historical specificity of what thus became visible to the art historian is what Tarabukin calls an “artistic worldview”. The concept of “worldview” also had its own history of development. Gaining in prominence throughout the nineteenth century, it reached the height of its influence at the beginning of the twentieth, owing in large part to the contribution of Wilhelm Dilthey and his “Weltanschauungslehre” (“theory of worldviews”). In his approach, worldviews are interpretations of reality that seek to articulate the meaning and significance of the world; conditioned by the time and place of their emergence, they therefore enter into struggle with one another (Dilthey 1964: 379). Proposing for the first time a typology of different worldviews, which receive their conceptual articulation in philosophy, Dilthey maintains that they find their initial expression in poetry and religion. Developing these ideas, Dilthey’s student Herman Nohl applies Dilthey’s established typology of worldviews to the visual arts as well.

Although Nohl was far from being the first to bring together the concepts of “style” and “worldview” (style as the expression of worldview in the generally accepted sense of the term was at that time rather the dominant trend), he, first, saw his task as demonstrating the very possibility of a specifically artistic worldview, expressed formally rather than conceptually, and, second, relied on an already elaborated typology of “worldviews”, thus seeking to resolve the problem of arbitrariness in judgements about a worldview expressed in visual representation (Nohl 1920).

The influence of Nohl’s ideas can be seen, in particular, in the fact that, within the work on the problem of style at GAKhN, one of the very first sessions, held in February 1925, was devoted to a discussion of his book *Stil und Weltanschauung* (*Style and Worldview*). While it is noteworthy that the speaker, Timofei Rainov, challenged Nohl’s claim of a direct correspondence between these concepts, the discussion that followed the paper shows that the opponents tended rather not to agree with Rainov’s position. Thus, for example, Alexander Gabrichevsky noted that the speaker’s “separation of worldview from style [...] provoked bewilderment”⁹, since, in his view, judgements about worldview foundations cannot be derived from anywhere other than stylistic forms. A similar opinion was expressed by Nikolai Zhinkin.

9 «[...] отмежевание мировоззрения от стиля [...] вызвало недоумение» (Plotnikov/ Podzemskaja 2017: 406).

In addition to Nohl, Oswald Spengler was another thinker who also perceived a correspondence between style and worldview; as Maria Gough has shown, he had a significant influence on the formation of Tarabukin's views already by the time he was writing *From the Easel to the Machine* (Gough 2000). For Spengler, style is above all a “style of culture” – a “destiny”, a “soul”. The categories already established in art history (Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque), as Spengler emphasizes, are only stages of one and the same style, namely the Faustian style of Western European culture, which is genuinely distinct from styles such as the Egyptian or Babylonian. Each culture is characterized by a distinct worldview, or worldsense. Stages within a culture also have their own worldview; in this sense, Spengler speaks of the Baroque worldview, or the Gothic worldview.¹⁰ Thus, the connection between worldview and form becomes apparent. As Tarabukin writes in the preface to *Problems of Style in Painting*, “the artistic worldview developed by an epoch becomes a formative factor in works of art”.¹¹

However, Spengler's thesis concerning the linkage of culture – and thus of style – to the nation could not satisfy Tarabukin, since the theory of art he was developing had to operate with cross-cultural categories that could be applied with equal success to European, Russian, and Japanese painting alike. In this respect, Tarabukin positioned himself as a proponent of *Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (General Science of Art) – a research initiative that may be regarded as the foundation of the Academy's shared theoretical aspirations (Kollenberg-Plotnikova 2017: 143), although it was by no means supported by all of its members. Thus, for example, Dmitrii Nedovich expressed a markedly sceptical view of General Science of Art (Nedovich 1927: 9). Tarabukin, by contrast, can be described as a committed supporter of this intellectual movement, which he understood primarily as an effort to establish general categories of the study of art. It was precisely this task that Tarabukin set for himself in *Artistic Culture*, where he introduced the concept of “formal-stylistic tendencies”. As he wrote in the same work, “the scholar concerned with

10 Spengler, Oswald: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes – Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte. Band 1: Gestalt und Wirklichkeit*. Wien: Braumüller, 1918; Spengler, Oswald: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes – Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte. Band 2: Welthistorische Perspektiven*. München: C. H. Beck, 1922.

11 «Художественное мировоззрение, вырабатываемое эпохой, становится формообразующим фактором произведений искусства» (Tarabukin 1927c: 4).

the general problems of art faces the task of creating a terminology common to the presently fragmented, partial, and specialized disciplines of the study of art".¹²

Having subsequently narrowed his inquiry to the problem of painterliness, Tarabukin arrives at a new concept – namely, that of “formal-stylistic categories”, which he presented in the paper of the same title mentioned above. These categories, in Tarabukin’s view, could serve as a necessary classificatory scheme and as a means of ordering the mass of “raw” factual material. As such formal-stylistic categories, Tarabukin proposes concepts that in art scholarship are conventionally referred to as genres: landscape, portrait, genre painting, and still life. This conceptual conflation, paradoxical at first glance, may be partly explained by a borrowing from literature studies, where, as is well known, style had been understood since antiquity as a mode of imitation of reality divided into high, middle, and low, and thus forming the basis of a genre system. Nor is the general observation of the predominance of particular genres within different historical styles in itself unusual. A direct indication of the possibility of such an approach can be found, for example, in Aleksei Sidorov’s article, published in the first issue of the *Bulletin of GAKhN*, where he briefly remarks: «Пейзаж как центральная тема живописи характерна для иного времени, чем натюрморт. По эволюции тематики можно строить также легко историю стилей»¹³ (Sidorov 1925: 27). Tarabukin, however, goes beyond a mere acknowledgment of the connection between subject matter and style: «[...] не портрет, как тема, а портретная интерпретация реального мира, не натюрморт как изображение „мертвых вещей“, а изобразительная форма, как выражение натюрмортной ориентировки» (Tarabukin 1927c: 5–6).¹⁴ These are the problems that express a stylistic approach and thus correspond to the fundamental tasks of the science of art.¹⁵

12 «Перед исследователем общих проблем искусства стоит вопрос о создании терминологии общей всем раздробленным сейчас, частным и специальным дисциплинам искусствознания» (Tarabukin 1926: 173).

13 “Landscape as the central theme of painting is characteristic of a different period than still life. From the evolution of subject matter one may just as easily construct a history of styles”.

14 “[...] not portrait as a theme, but the portrait interpretation of the real world; not *nature morte* as the depiction of ‘dead things,’ but pictorial form as the expression of a *nature morte* orientation”.

15 Another, less radical example of a stylistic interpretation of genres may be found in Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov’s *Russkoe iskusstvo promyshlennogo kapitalizma* (*Russian Art of Industrial*

Tarabukin's conceptual innovation, however, was met with a certain degree of scepticism by his colleagues at GAKhN, as is evident from the minutes of his papers' discussions. Even the very first paper – despite the general approval of Tarabukin's intention to define concepts – raised numerous questions and doubts among the listeners. The first and most obvious objection was voiced by German Zhidkov. While agreeing with the speaker that approaching art from the standpoint of subject matter (portrait, still life, and so forth) was unproductive, he nevertheless expressed surprise that “the speaker does not propose a new terminology and, while criticising the old one, nevertheless returns to it and assigns it a new interpretation”. He points out that “the old terminology (landscape, still life, portrait, and so on) has existed for a long time and possesses its own content, which is fully justified; in the speaker's usage, however, it has lost its meaning”.¹⁶ A similar point was made, in slightly different terms, by Nikolai Zhinkin, who remarked that “a portrait always conveys individuality; one may portray objects, but this would still be a still life, since the concept of a portrait is associated for us with the depiction of individual human forms”.¹⁷ In response, Tarabukin denied that he was offering a new interpretation of old terms, stating that he was “merely uncovering the genuine meaning of the term”.¹⁸

A more detailed answer on this debate can be found in *Artistic Culture*, where Tarabukin explains that terms, as a rule, arise accidentally and do not correspond to the essence of the concepts they designate, while artificially invented terms usually fail to gain currency. For this reason, he regards the borrowing of the most precise terms from specialized disciplines, and their

Capitalism), in which the successive predominance of different genre principles is understood primarily as conditioned by the logic of the formal development of the modern style. A comparison of the two conceptions, however, calls for separate and detailed consideration.

16 «[...] почему докладчик не дает новой терминологии и критикуя старую, он все же возвращается к ней и дает ей новое толкование. Старая терминология (пейзаж, натюр-морт, портрет и т. д.) существует уже давно, имеет свое содержание, которое вполне оправдано, у докладчика же она потеряла смысл» (Protokol №1 Sovmestnogo zasedaniia Teoreticheskoi podseksii i Zhivopisnoi komissii SPI GAKhN [“Formal'no-stilisticheskie kategorii zhivopisi”. Tezisy i preniia.] (1926). RGALI. F. 941. Op. 3, Ed. khr. 67. L. 1 ob.).

17 «[...] портрет всегда передает индивидуальность, можно портретировать предметы, но это будет все же натюрморт, поскольку с понятием портрета у нас связано представление об изображении индивидуальных форм человека» (ibid.: 2).

18 «[...] лишь открывает подлинный смысл термина» (ibid.: 2 ob.).

extension to a broader range of concepts, as a compromise solution (Tarabukin 1926: 174). It should be noted, however, that despite his aspiration to precise definitions, Tarabukin remained inconsistent in his use of the terms he proposed. Thus, although at first he attempted to be cautious, employing the notions of “formal-stylistic tendencies” or “categories”, in his later published texts he freely replaces them with the term “style” itself, speaking, for example, of a portrait style or of *nature morte* as a style, while at the same time using such expressions as painterly or plastic style. Yet, he continues to employ genre terms in their traditional sense as well, speaking simultaneously of landscape as the depiction of nature and of landscape as a style – thereby creating terminological ambiguity, despite his repeated caveats that thematic and stylistic understandings of these terms do not coincide.

In addition to doubts concerning the overall validity of the proposed approach, Tarabukin’s colleagues also directed their criticism at a number of more specific points. Thus, replying to the same first paper, German Zhidkov considered it incorrect to speak of a historical succession of the categories under discussion, since they can exist not only within a single epoch but even within the work of a single artist. Dmitrii Nedovich disagreed with the classification established by Tarabukin, regarding it as insufficient, and also expressed doubts as to whether the proposed categories could in principle be considered formal-stylistic. Nikolai Zhinkin, for his part, pointed out the impropriety of opposing portrait to *nature morte*, and noted that in the speaker’s presentation the concepts of painterliness and landscape ended up overlapping (Protokol no. 1, 1926).

These remarks lead us to what is perhaps the most problematic and at the same time the key characteristic of Tarabukin’s conception. In essence, by interpreting genres stylistically, Tarabukin on the one hand overcomes the classical hierarchy of genres, at whose apex stood history painting; yet, on the other hand, he implicitly replaces it with a hierarchy of his own, within which landscape and portrait occupy the highest position, while still life unquestionably stands at the bottom. As German Zhidkov aptly observed during the discussion of the paper on still life, Tarabukin’s presentation was “in essence directed against contemporary painting” («по существу направлено против современной живописи»). As he went on to explain, “contemporary painting is indeed inclined toward still life; hence, apparently, the identification of con-

temporary painting with still-lifeness and the clearly unflattering evaluation of this category, transformed from a generic one into a psychological one”.¹⁹

While in his articles for the Encyclopedia Tarabukin generally adheres to a traditional, thematic interpretation of the terms “landscape”, “portrait”, and “still life”, only mentioning in passing the differences in their stylistic treatment and thus avoiding evaluative judgments, in his published journal articles he focuses entirely on his original stylistic interpretation. Let us briefly outline the content of this interpretation.

The principal formal features of landscape as a stylistic form are “air” and “svetoten” (“shading”), through which the living countenance of nature is revealed. Thus, landscape, in the stylistic sense of the word, according to Tarabukin, originates only with Leonardo da Vinci, who was the first to present nature “in a painterly guise, as a living organic space filled with air and saturated with light”.²⁰ From this perspective, Tarabukin refers, for example, to Titian’s depiction of Saint Sebastian as a landscape “in the genuine stylistic sense of the term” («в подлинном стилистическом смысле этого термина»).

The stylistic features of portrait, according to Tarabukin, consist “in the treatment of a phenomenon as a living and individual image” («в трактовке явления как живого и индивидуального образа»; Tarabukin 1927a: 164). “This style”, Tarabukin writes, “emerged as the result of an organic sense of the world, through which the world came to be perceived as a unified whole, as a beginningless and infinite flow of vital energy in a state of perpetual becoming”.²¹ From this perspective, portraits would include, for example, the landscapes of Camille Corot and the still lifes of Willem Claesz. Heda.

The stylistic characteristic of genre painting, Tarabukin argues, lies in “an everyday perspective on events and their external localization in space and time” («[...] бытовой аспект на события и внешняя их локализация

19 «[...] современная живопись, действительно, склонна к натюрморту: отсюда, по видимому, и явилось отождествление современной живописи с натюрмортностью и явно не лестная оценка данной категории, из жанровой – превращенной в психологическую». (Protokol no. 7 Zasedaniia Komissii po izucheniiu zhivopisi SPI GAKhN [“Natiurmort kak problema stil’ia”. Preniia.] (1927): RGALI. F. 941. Op. 3. Ed. khr. 108. L. 1 ob.)

20 «[...] в живописном облике, как живое органическое пространство, наполненное воздухом и насыщенное светом» (Tarabukin 1927b: 38).

21 «Этот стиль явился результатом органического мироощущения, благодаря которому мир стал восприниматься, как единое целое, как безначальный и бесконечный поток жизненной энергии, находящейся в состоянии вечного становления» (ibid.: 173).

по месту и времени»; Tarabukin 1928b: 13–14). The worldview of the genre painter, in his view, is bourgeois, and the creative act itself is devoid of any imaginative ascent. At the same time, he emphasizes that it is not the depiction of everyday aspects of life as such that he calls bourgeois, but only a mode of treatment in which any event appears to the viewer solely as “bytovye épizody” (“everyday episodes”). Thus, for example, he discerns genre-like qualities in the religious subjects of Andrea Previtali.

Finally, the stylistic specificity of *nature morte* consists in the fact that “the *nature morte* worldview conveys in pictorial form not the living substance of a phenomenon, but the dead form of the thing”.²² It is characteristic that the notions of “style” and “worldview” become interchangeable for Tarabukin, especially in relation to *nature morte*. In his view, the *nature morte* worldview has come to dominate not only almost all contemporary painting and other arts, but even the study of art itself – this is precisely how Tarabukin interprets the turn toward the formal method. Without offering clear formal characteristics of *nature morte*-ness, he broadly equates it with formalism as such, which in turn is identified with “veshchnost” (“thingness”). The “veshchnoe” (“thing-like”) is nothing other than “dead nature”, deprived of life and soul. “In place of the ‘soul’”, he writes, “‘construction’ appears. In place of the living organism of art – a dead mechanism of craft”.²³ *Nature morte*-ness thus appears not merely as a style, but rather a threat to life and to art as such. As Tarabukin writes, “the *nature morte* style is the antipode not only of portrait style, but a kind of monstrous antithesis within the very depths of art [...]. The worldview of *nature morte* is the assertion of the power of the dead over the living [...]”.²⁴

As mentioned earlier, Tarabukin assigns Cézanne the role of progenitor of *nature morte* and of a *nature morte* world perception. It is therefore to be expected that the latter becomes the object of the same strong aversion as the “style” itself. “The terrible vivisectionist, who deprived artists of their living

22 «[...] натюрмортное мироощущение передает в изобразительной форме не живую субстанцию явления, а мертвую форму вещи» (Tarabukin 1928a: 42).

23 «Вместо „души“ появляется „конструкция“. Вместо живого организма искусства — мертвый механизм ремесла» (ibid.: 47).

24 «Натюрмортный стиль — антипод не только портретного стиля, но какая-то чудовищная антитеза в недрах самого искусства [...]. Мироощущение натюрморта — это утверждение силы мертвого над живым [...]» (ibid.: 51).

human perception of the world <...> it was he who transformed the painting of life into the painting of death,” Tarabukin writes (Tarabukin 1928a: 47). And what is remarkable here, is that until this point, Cézanne had apparently never become an object of such bitter accusations in Russian art critique. Perhaps the harshest criticism Cézanne was subjected to was the accusation that his painting was charlatanism – or simply ugly. Even within the most conservative art critique, which regarded European modernist painting as a threat to humanism and traditional spiritual values as well as a symptom of the European culture’s degeneration, Cézanne was not branded as its embodiment. This role was initially assigned to Impressionism and, among individual artists, above all to Picasso. In his discussion of Cézanne and *nature morte*, Tarabukin in fact reiterates the tropes of the anti-modernist Russian critique devoted to Picasso and Cubism. The transformation of the living into a dead “thing”, the growing mechanical and geometrical character of art, and hence the predominance of *nature morte* – all these ideas can already be found, for example, in Sergei Bulgakov’s “Trup krasoty. Po povodu kartin Pikasso” (“Beauty’s Corpse: Apropos of Picasso’s Paintings”). Tarabukin does not, however, conceal this affinity. In an article that remained unpublished during his lifetime, “Problema intérieur’a i extérieur’a v iskusstve” (“The Problem of Intérieur and Extérieur in Art”, 1926), he writes that Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov “merely registered a real fact in a mystical form” when they discerned the “demon of materiality” that had enslaved the “living soul”²⁵ in Picasso’s paintings.

Why, then, does Cézanne and not Picasso become, for Tarabukin, the artist who marks the “beginning of the decline” in modern art? The answer apparently lies in the fact that the influence of Cézanne reached its apogee after the Revolution, and it was he who was celebrated as the fountainhead of the new art. This line of succession was most clearly outlined in Kazimir Malevich’s pamphlet *From Cézanne to Suprematism* (1920). Although Cézanne was at that time acknowledged by various artistic movements – most of which saw his significance precisely in the possibility of a return to representational painting (Dorontchenkov 2009: 14, 276) – Tarabukin here followed an explicitly avant-

25 «<Когда Булгаков и Бердяев> бежали от „дьявольского наваждения“ картин, коими владел „демон материальности“, полонивший „душу живую“ и оставивший одну „неодухотворенную плоть“, они только в мистической форме констатировали реальный факт» (Dunaev 2024: 10).

garde logic that regarded Cézanne as the figure who, through geometrization, opened the path to Cubism and ultimately to non-objectivity. Thus, on the one hand, Tarabukin's critique reproduces in its form earlier anti-modernist criticism almost entirely; on the other hand, it is directed not at modernism as a whole, but only at that particular branch, which, in Tarabukin's view, led to the death of art – a dead end from which an escape had been promised but never achieved – namely, the art of the avant-garde, culminating in Constructivism.

There was, however, likely yet another reason for this sharply articulated antipathy – namely, the image of Cézanne that took shape after the Revolution as the foremost materialist in painting, a quality, of course, deemed necessary for an artist celebrated in the Soviet state. “Cézanne was the first materialist in painting”, wrote Dmitry Melnikov in a 1921 article (Melnikov 2009: 296). Yet whereas for Melnikov Cézanne's “extraordinary sense of materiality” constituted a virtue – pointing the way toward a new classicism and even providing grounds for a flattering comparison between Cézanne and Marx – for Tarabukin it was an unmistakable flaw. This is precisely what Tarabukin has in mind when he speaks of the “thingness” of *nature morte*. Although in his published texts Tarabukin prudently avoids a direct condemnation of materialism, in *Filosofia ikony* (“Philosophy of the Icon”) – a text evidently not intended for publication, completed in 1935 though dated 1916 by the author²⁶ – he writes of “materialist painting generated by positivist consciousness” («материалистическая живопись, порожденная позитивистическим сознанием»; Tarabukin 1999: 106). Here, materialism is firmly embedded within a constellation of concepts – positivism, rationalism, and mechanicism – that together characterize an anti-religious worldview, which, in the context of a book expressing the author's deeply Christian views, is, of course, cast as hostile.

For Tarabukin, the “thing-like”, understood as dead, is consistently opposed to the organic – the living.²⁷ It is evident from the preceding exposition, as revealed in a series of concepts – materialism, thingness, positivism, rationalism, as well as formalism – which, in Tarabukin's view, and in accor-

26 According to N. K. Gavriushin, this date is a mystification, while Dunaev maintains that the first drafts of the text date back to 1916. See: Tarabukin 1999: 185.

27 The importance of the concept of “life” for Tarabukin, and its connection with the philosophy of Georg Simmel, has been discussed in detail by Nataliia Zlydneva (2024).

dance with the established critique of modernity from conservative positions, characterise contemporary civilisation. The same series includes the increasing division of labour, differentiation, and specialisation, which fully manifest themselves both in the sphere of art and in the sphere of its study. Thus, what becomes a target here, among other things, is the principle of autonomy, Tarabukin's critique of which will reach its culmination in the aforementioned *Philosophy of the Icon*, where he will state directly that art can be justified only by religious content (ibid.: 51).

Tarabukin unexpectedly finds a redemptive antidote to all these “disintegrating” tendencies in the concept of the General Science of Art, which, as it appears to him, proposes not an analytical but a synthetic approach to art – the overcoming of art's intolerable fragmentation through the establishment of general categories of art. In the General Science of Art, Tarabukin discerns the same “monistic principle” (“monisticheskii printsip”) that is characteristic of modern physics, which “establishes the homogeneity of the composition of matter” («устанавливающей однородность состава вещества»; Tarabukin 1929: 73), or of biology, which demonstrates the commonality of different species of animals and plants. The subject of the General Science of Art, the genealogy of which Tarabukin traces back to Hegel, is, as he states, “the grounding of the specific character of the artistic in its ontological essence”.²⁸ In addition to a general definition of art as such, the resolution of this task also includes the determination of the categories of the artistic, which are categories of a formal-stylistic kind. “Problems of style in the proper understanding of this term”, Tarabukin writes, “are the cardinal problems of the General Science of Art”.²⁹

Thus, when Tarabukin establishes “portrait”, “landscape”, “genre”, and “*nature morte*” as formal-stylistic categories, he engages in a kind of struggle against what, in the words of Pavel Florensky, may be termed “entropy”, and its ultimate embodiment, the “*nature-morte* worldview” – a struggle that at times takes on eschatological overtones. As Tarabukin writes on the establishment of the general categories of the theory of art, its aim is “to reduce the diversity

28 «[...] обоснование специфика художественного в его онтологической сущности» (ibid.: 76).

29 «Проблемы стиля в подлинном понимании этого термина [...] суть кардинальные проблемы общего искусствознания» (ibid.: 77).

of reality to an intelligible unity”. This task, formulated in passing, perhaps best characterises his entire scholarly project, to which he devoted himself during his years of work at GAKhN – the creation of a unified and autonomous science of art, directed at its core against the principle of autonomy.

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