



fig. 1
*Display of student work from the color discipline, Basic Division,
Vkhutemas, 1926.*

The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde

Natal'ia Adaskina

The Moscow Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) has traditionally been regarded as one of the most significant centers of the Russian avant-garde. Its prominence was owing not solely to the natural confluence within its walls of many of the avant-garde's leading members but also—and with greater reason—to its having been there, in the workshops, that the principles of avant-garde artistic culture were forcefully revealed.

Even as Vkhutemas was being organized, in order to accommodate a number of changes demanded by the evolution of art, the need to derive teaching methods suited to the new artistic trends was one of the school's reasons for being. Analytical methods of investigating artistic form—methods born of the avant-garde's experimentation—were the cornerstone of Vkhutemas's pedagogical system. At Vkhutemas, the fundamental tendencies of the avant-garde movement were theorized and developed. Here, too, the contradictions that had accumulated within the avant-garde, the conflicts among its various strands, and the crises in its development were in dramatic evidence.

The creation and operation of Vkhutemas were not, of course, joined solely to considerations of the avant-garde; Vkhutemas was an institution with links to the artistic currents in Russian culture of the 1920s as a whole. The spirit of the avant-garde, however, and the tasks of the avant-garde movement shaped what was most essential in its character. The program of study and the teaching methods employed at Vkhutemas embodied in full the chief tenets and contradictions of the avant-garde: an orientation toward artistic experimentation; exploration of form; maximally individual, subjective creation uneasily allied with the search for collective, objective knowledge in the products of artistic experimentation; solution of the dilemma of analysis and synthesis in artistic practice and in the theorization of contemporary art; the variance between the avant-garde's programmatic orientation toward absolute innovation and the historicism that was characteristic of leading vanguard artists; and the search for ways to resolve the conflict between an orientation toward the irreplicably personal, the unique creation of genius, and an interest in industrial production, mechanical reproduction, and the organization of the life of the masses.

Before proceeding to the heart of this essay, a brief review of the history and structure of Vkhutemas is in order.¹ This summary is indispensable, inasmuch as where Vkhutemas has been described by scholars, it has often appeared to be a peculiar chimera, made up of elements which could not possibly have coexisted (but which did, in fact, characterize it at various times). It is essential that the reader have some notion of a structure that underwent continuous, and at times fundamental, change.

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, the system of art education in Russia, centered on the Imperial Academy of Arts, had been in a state of profound crisis. Piecemeal reforms were no solution: the system could not accommodate new artistic phenomena, which existed apart from and even in defiance of academic orientations; nor was it able to meet the demands which industrial development placed on art schools. The first problem was to a certain extent solved—other than by the flight of young people to art schools in Paris and Munich—through an expansion of the number of private schools and workshops in Russia (including “workshops without a supervisor”), where new methods of art education began to evolve. To the second problem there was for the time being no solution. Those artistic-and-industrial schools that existed in Russia were oriented entirely toward manual, artisanal methods in the fabrication of everyday objects, in



fig. 2
 Foreground, display of student work from the space discipline,
 Basic Division, Vkhutemas, 1926.

printing, and so forth, and failed to react at all to progress in industry.

The Moscow Vkhutemas came into being as a consequence of the reform of art education introduced in Russia immediately after the October Revolution. The reform was carried out in two stages. The first, in 1918, entailed the abolition of the academic system: the Academy of Arts and an array of art and artistic-and-industrial schools and academies in various Russian cities were put on an equal footing—all were converted into State Free Art Workshops.² It was thus that the First State Free Art Workshops (formerly the Stroganov Artistic and Industrial School) and the Second State Free Art Workshops (formerly the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture) were created in Moscow.

The conversion of the Academy of Arts and other educational establishments into State Free Art Workshops was no mere formality; there were material changes. In the majority of the new institutions priority was given to “pure” art, to painting above all, and individual workshops were introduced, each workshop following one or another artist’s own program and methods. The State Free Art Workshops thus endeavored to replicate the Renaissance studio, where the master worked amid apprentices and disciples and passed his experience and artistry on to them. Students were allowed, however, to elect workshop supervisors and to choose freely with whom to enroll. Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment) consistently adhered, moreover, to a policy of equal participation in artistic life for all movements, and set a quota for them in the workshops.

The State Free Art Workshops opened for classes in the autumn of 1918; for the first time in its history, art education in Russia was based on the principles of freedom and democracy. That the new institutions had as many definite shortcomings as incontestable virtues—both organizationally and

pedagogically—gradually became apparent in the two years that followed.

It was in the State Free Art Workshops that a number of leading artists, primarily members of left movements, began to create a system of art education derived from the experience of the new art. As can be ascertained from archival materials, the programs of Kazimir Malevich, Georgii Iakulov, and Aleksei Babichev in the First Free State Art Workshops, and of Vasiliï Kandinskii in the Second, were highly innovative. Through the efforts of these and other artists, new methods were originated which liberated students from the routine acquisition of professional skills; the new methods developed students' powers of perception and gave them the means to fix their perception in the wealth of artistic forms. Yet, insofar as the pursuit of primacy in formal discovery and invention (in general inherent in the avant-garde) continued inside school walls, there was no broad sharing of educational innovations among the workshops. There was a danger of creating closed circles, which would lead to students' merely duplicating the individual styles of their teachers.

A fair number of instructors, moreover, held to their old tested methods of teaching. And they were supported by a large proportion of students who during their previous years of study in the former schools had become accustomed to a certain logic in the stale programs and modes of instruction, and strove to preserve continuity.

As a whole, however, the State Free Art Workshops in Moscow were, during their two years of operation, a breeding ground for new initiatives. Avant-garde art continued to evolve, both within the educational framework and parallel to it; it assumed new forms. Thus at the exhibitions of Obmokhu (the Society of Young Artists), a group which had been formed in 1919 by students at the First State Free Art Workshops, there were already no Tatlinesque "selections of materials" but experimental constructions not seen heretofore. (The Obmokhu exhibition in May 1921 would be recalled as the crucible of Constructivism.) At the end of 1919, Sinskul'ptarkh (the Synthesis of Sculpture and Architecture Commission), which had been under the auspices of Izo Narkompros, was reorganized into Zhivskul'ptarkh (the Synthesis of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture Commission) by young artists and architects, many of whom were at the time students in the State Free Art Workshops; it was the first group oriented toward forms that, consonant with a new phase of artistic evolution, synthesized the arts. These developments had their direct continuation inside a new educational institution on whose fate they exercised a substantial influence: Vkhutemas, which came into being when the First and Second State Free Art Workshops were merged in 1920.

The creation of Vkhutemas belongs to the second stage of the reform of art education, when educational institutions everywhere underwent consolidation. The reasons for this action were various;³ two deserve mention. First, students had by this time become dissatisfied with the workshops' lack of clearly delineated programs and with a system that led to the mass production of "little Konchalovskiis" and "little Tatlins."⁴ Second, among avant-garde artists, notions of the objectivity of formal laws were gaining more and more ground, leaving it clear that objective methods should be made the general basis of art education.

The Decree of the Council of People's Commissars on the Moscow Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops was ratified on November 29, 1920, and signed by Lenin on December 18th. It is symptomatic that the decree was silent on the graduation of "pure" artists, traditionally the chief aim of art education; that is, unlike the State Free Art Workshops, Vkhutemas tilted from its inception in favor of an artistic-and-



fig. 3
Workshop in the Woodworking Faculty, Vkhutein, 1928.
Photograph Aleksandr Rodchenko.

technical education. The decree also set out the structure of Vkhutemas. It would have eight faculties—Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Textiles, Ceramics, Woodworking, and Metalworking—for each of which a preparatory (or basic) division was envisioned.

The history of Vkhutemas/Vkhutein⁵ falls rather neatly into three basic periods, each corresponding to the tenure of one of its three rectors. The principal conflicts and many of the personnel changes at Vkhutemas were in one way or another, directly or more often indirectly, linked to the issue of Vkhutemas's orientation. The chief battles were fought over whether that orientation should be toward "pure" or production art.

Insofar as it is possible to characterize each of these periods succinctly and schematically, the sculptor Efim Ravdel's term as rector (1920–23) can be labeled the period in which Vkhutemas's pedagogical methods (its so-called *distsipliny*, or disciplines) were formulated and its eight faculties, with a preparatory course (offered in the Basic Division) common to all, put in place. Ravdel's term also witnessed the rise of Productivist tendencies (which, though they had been mentioned in the 1920 decree, had then yet to take root), culminating in the transfer of a number of left artists of a Constructivist orientation from the preparatory-course workshops to the production faculties.

Vladimir Favorskii, who served as rector during 1923–26, presided over the most fruitful and harmonious period in the history of Vkhutemas. In these years, its structure attained its final form. The preparatory Basic Course—where the formal-analytical disciplines had first been employed and which had originally been developed as an introduction to architecture and non-objective painting and later oriented toward production art—was rethought and adapted to encompass all varieties of artistic work, to the point of including the principles of Realist figurative art in its teaching. The Basic Course became, that is, the universal foundation of art education. An effort was likewise made to regulate and systematize the programs of Vkhutemas's faculties. During this period, moreover, "easel art" and production art attained, and maintained, an equal footing. It was not an artificial equilibrium, for Favorskii conceived the various fields of art as a single system, and he endeavored to make this belief the guiding principle of Vkhutemas.

Favorskii was succeeded in 1926 by Pavel Novitskii, and a technical preoccupation again came to the fore, accompanied this time by "sociologizing" tendencies in the fine-arts faculties. The notion of the formal oneness of all varieties of art, which had been so diligently nurtured in previous years, was discarded. The Basic Division, where students of all specializations were taught the same formal and artistic principles, was cut back sharply, the length of its course reduced from two years to six months. The links of each faculty to the others were considerably weakened. Vkhutein was splintered into self-contained faculties, each of whose fates was individually determined—and ceased to exist.

Let us return, however, to the matter of the avant-garde. Vkhutemas gathered together within its walls the most prominent representatives of avant-garde trends of the 1910s. A number of these artists—Aleksandr Shevchenko, Anna Golubkina, Aleksandr Drevin, Kandinskii, Petr Konchalovskii, Boris Korolev, Pavel Kuznetsov, Aristarkh Lentulov, Il'ia Mashkov, and Robert Fal'k, among others—were given their own workshops in the Painting and Sculpture faculties. Others—Vladimir Baranov-Rossine, Nadezhda Udal'tsova, Ivan Kliun, Aleksandr Vesnin, Liubov' Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksandra Ekster, and Aleksandr Os'merkin—received workshops in the Basic Division.

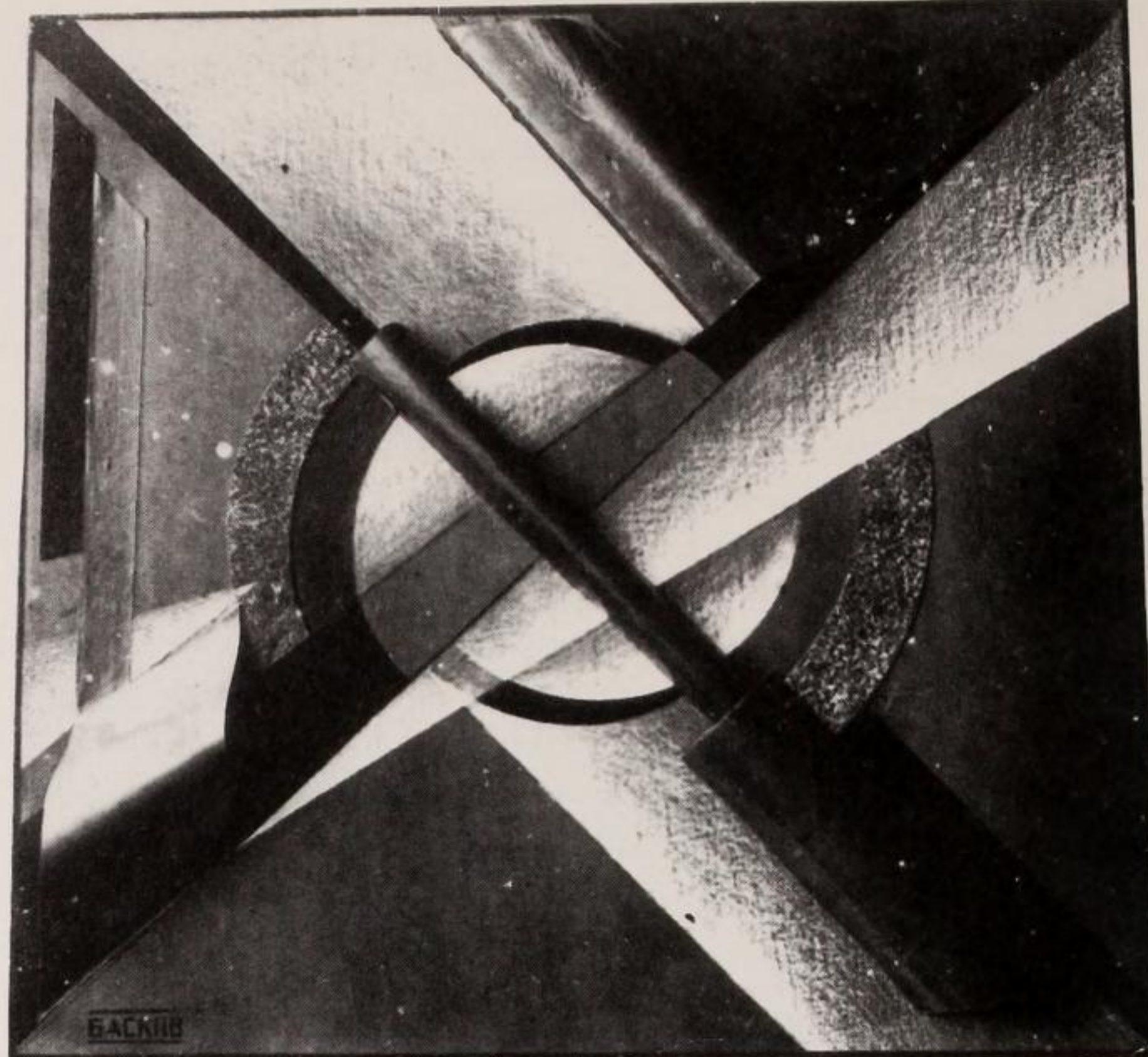


fig. 4
Baskov
Student work from the color discipline, Basic Division, Vkhutemas.

Throughout all the organizational changes and fluctuations in policy at Vkhutemas/Vkhutein, the workshops in the Painting Faculty preserved as best they could their character—acquired back in the days of the State Free Art Workshops—as self-sufficient studios centered about one master artist. They were an embodiment of the avant-garde cult of the artist as demiurge, of the absolute creative personality. The influence of these artist-teachers on their students can be discerned in the stylistic tendencies of later Soviet painting; distinct trends can be traced to students of Shevchenko, Fal'k, Kuznetsov, Konstantin Istomin, and others. There was, of course, no hard and fast correlation between such influence and a teacher's originality. David Shterenberg's students, for example, showed no discernible signs of his influence. (It is no coincidence that it was in Shterenberg's workshop that the student Aaron Rzhzhenikov organized, as was allowed under workshop rules, a "workshop without a supervisor" at the end of the 1920s.)

Not only the subjective and individual but the objective and universal—that is, both halves of the fundamental avant-garde antithesis—came into play at Vkhutemas. Even in its earliest stages, formal experimentation by the avant-garde took on the features of a scientific inquiry. Spontaneous self-expression, both in the work of a single avant-garde artist and in the self-reflexion of a group of artists, was constantly conjoined and intertwined with attempts to formulate objective laws of perception and form. The work of Kandinskii is without question the best example of this conjunction of the subjective and objective.

Kandinskii was at the forefront of the Russian avant-garde's artistic science, having organized Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture) in 1920 precisely for the conduct of objective investigations into the elements of art. Kandinskii drew up a research program for Inkhuk and initiated its implementation; shortly afterward, however, disagreements arose; Kandinskii departed, and Inkhuk followed a somewhat different course from that mapped by him. There is not space here to examine in detail the work and interaction of those affiliated with Inkhuk. Suffice it to emphasize Kandinskii's indisputable influence on an array of artists who would seem to have rejected his conceptions and methods. Certain of those artists were teachers at Vkhutemas. (The research at Inkhuk and the work of Vkhutemas were tightly interwoven.)

The work done at Vkhutemas testifies, above all, to the avant-garde's love of theorizing. The impulse to theorize—which at earlier stages (and in other social and cultural conditions) had found an outlet in manifestos and pamphlets and in oral, colloquial forms—now, at the beginning of the 1920s, was funneled into scientific papers (at Inkhuk) and academic programs (at Vkhutemas; at GVTM [the Higher State Theater Workshops], organized by Vsevolod Meierkhol'd; and elsewhere). Creative work—reflections on artists' individual and group evolution—continued to be the stuff of these new (to artists) genres of theorizing.

By this time, of course, theories had been advanced in some quantity by art critics and historians. Nikolai Tarabukin (also a member of Inkhuk) had already written his *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (*Toward a Theory of Painting*, 1916), in which he defined the study of the history of art as the "analysis of the elements of artistic creations."⁶ During the same period, Nikolai Punin's examination of contemporary tendencies in art had led him to a variant of the formal-analytical theory of art. Punin had also played a crucial role in defining the concept of "artistic culture," the theoretical underpinning of the measures enacted by the Petrograd Izo Narkompros in the immediate postrevolutionary period.⁷ "Artistic culture" was a notion derived by theorists of the Russian avant-garde from the actual practice of new artistic trends. The values of "artistic culture"

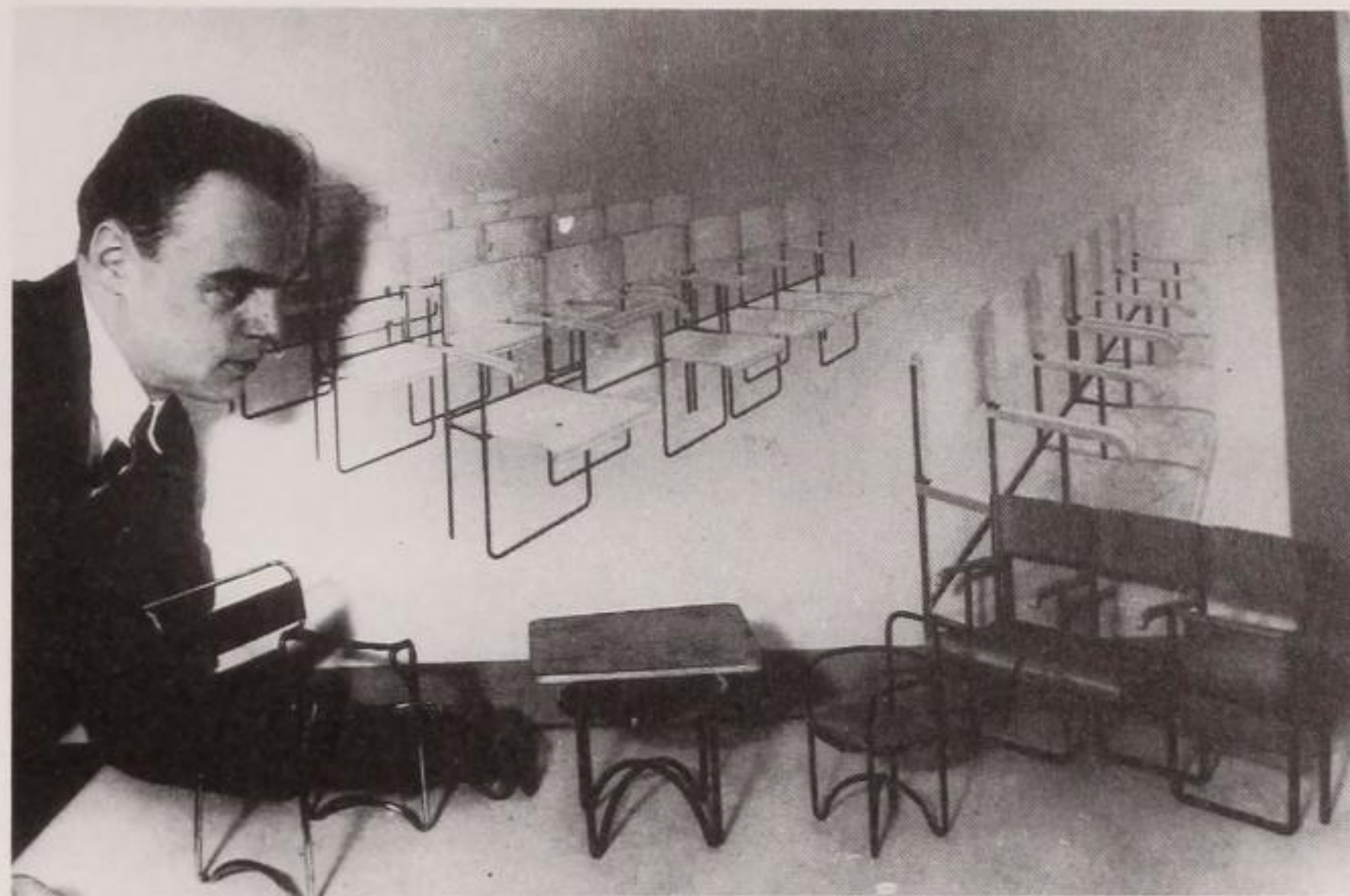


fig. 5
Petr Galaktionov with his diploma project: furnishings for a movie theater, Vkhutein, 1929.

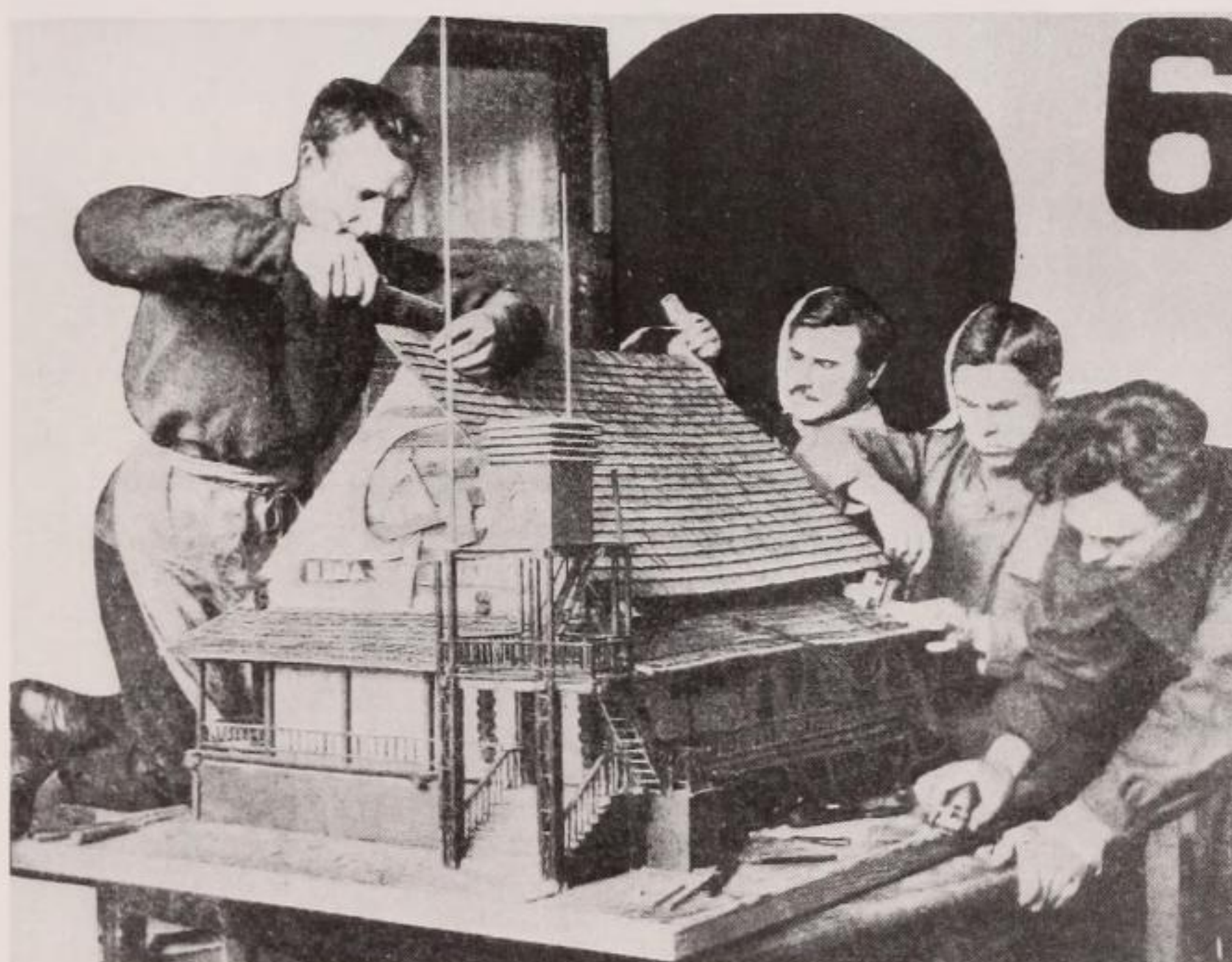


fig. 6
Students in Lavinskii's workshop building a model of a rural reading room for display at the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, 1925.

В Х У Т Е М А С

ВЫСШИЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЕ
ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННО-ТЕХНИЧЕСКИЕ МАСТЕРСКИЕ

were defined as purely professional ones, the product of the "sustained artistic labor" of various schools.

At the beginning of the 1920s, analysis—isolating among the wide range of professional artistic means and devices those of chief importance to a given movement, and making them absolutes in artistic work—became the chief method of the new art scholarship, as well as the organizing principle of artistic life—of exhibitions, museums, and art education.

Describing his plans for the Museum of Painterly Culture, Kandinskii wrote in 1920: "It will collect experiments in formal construction according to the principle of juxtaposition: color planes and linear planes; the alignment, collision, and resolution of planes; the relation of surface-plane and volume; treatment of surface-plane and volume as self-sufficient elements; the coincidence or disconnection of linear and painterly planes and volumes; experiments in the creation of purely volumetric forms, both unitary and combinational, and so forth."⁸ It was certainly under the influence of these conceptions of Kandinskii's—though already in his absence—that Babichev and Popova evolved their research programs in the Monumental Art Section of the Working Group of Objective Analysis at Inkhuk. The same conceptions lay at the heart of the system of disciplines in the Basic Division of Vkhutemas—whose most active creator and coordinator was, again, Popova.

For Kandinskii, analytical work was merely an interim stage in the quest for synthesis, or, in his terminology, "monumental art." For members of the Objective Analysis Section at Inkhuk and for teachers in Vkhutemas's Basic Division in 1921–22, however, analytical work was no mere sideline or auxiliary stage but an artistic and theoretical value in its own right. For them, moreover, the synthesis of formal and analytical experimentation—when they spoke of synthesis—was not Kandinskii's "monumental art" but production art, a specifically Russian offspring of the analytical stage in the evolution of the avant-garde. This bears on the fate of the Basic Division in Vkhutemas's first period and of those production faculties which came under the influence of Rodchenko's group.

At Vkhutemas, it was Favorskii's policy, followed in 1923–26, which, in its conception of the unity of the arts and its support for the work of art as an integrated and finished expression of artistic reality, was kindred with the ideas of Kandinskii. There were, of course, critical discrepancies between Kandinskii's understanding of these matters and their interpretation by Favorskii's adherents. Thus, whereas Kandinskii sought to study the laws of artistry as a whole, embracing both the spatial and the temporal arts, Vkhutemas confined itself strictly to the spatial arts.

In the clash between the Constructivism of the Productivists and Favorskii's synthesizing, two principles of the Russian avant-garde—the mechanical and the organic, respectively—collided. (Although somewhat later, in the latter half of the 1920s, Petr Miturich, in the Printing Trades Faculty [as the Graphics Faculty had been renamed], rebelled against Favorskii's methods as mechanistic from the point of view of free artistic intuition.)⁹

The notion of the oneness of the formal laws of all the spatial



fig. 7
Aleksandr Rodchenko
Design for a signboard for Vkhutemas, 1924.

fig. 8
Cover for Vkhutein prospectus, 1929.

arts was the cornerstone of Vkhutemas's educational system and united proponents of diverse trends. Zhivskul'ptarkh had been the first to experiment in promoting this unity—prior to the establishment of Vkhutemas. Its exhibitions were noteworthy not merely for joining architects, painters, and sculptors in one show but for their astonishing blending of art forms. The painters Rodchenko and Shevchenko, the sculptor Korolev, the architects Nikolai Ladovskii and Vladimir Krinskii, and others exhibited works belonging to one and the same nontraditional genre: fantastic architectural projects for “houses of Soviets,” kiosks, communal housing, and so on. These “paper projects,” executed in the Cubo-Futurist painting style of the era, were presented more as “easel art” than traditional architectural production. They bore witness to the organic unity of formal conceptions held by representatives of different fields of art; to the significance, at that moment, of formal experimentation in painting for all types of art; and to the importance of space as the material and constructive principle of form—not just for architects and sculptors but also for painters, who had not turned merely by chance to creating architectural projects on paper.

Joining forces in Vkhutemas's Basic Course, Rodchenko, Popova, Anton Lavinskii, Vladimir Khrakovskii, Viktor Kiselev, Korolev, Ladovskii, and Krinskii—painters, sculptors, and architects—fashioned teaching methods based on their shared conceptions. In 1920, Ladovskii independently worked out “psychoanalytical” methods in the Obmas (the United Workshops of the Architecture Faculty). In 1920–21, an effort was made in the Basic Division to assign successive phases in the study of form in painting to separate workshops: “color” would be studied in certain of them, “volume in painting” in others, “construction” in yet others, and so on. At that time, Popova and Vesnin's workshop, for instance, was labeled “Discipline No. 1: Color.” These first analytical endeavors were, however, still very imprecise.

During the next stage (1922–23), the artists worked at systematizing programs and student work, having added “volumetric” and “spatial” disciplines to the “painterly.” The task of integrating the new disciplines into the training of students of all specializations was taken up by the architects Ladovskii and Krinskii.

As this effort proceeded, the aim of the Basic Course changed. Initially, when they created their introductory program—the analytical or, as they were also called, “objective” disciplines—the teachers of the Painting and Sculpture faculties had seen their goal as the training of “easel artists,” of non-objective artists. During 1921–23, the notion of production art—whose forms were typically refutations of “pure” art—came to the fore and gathered momentum in vanguard circles. By late 1922–early 1923, a new preparatory course had been conceived; it was based on the analytical study of form according to a clear-cut logic—from surface-planarity through volume to space—and was intended to foster production artists.

A group composed of Rodchenko, Aleksandr Vesnin, Lavinskii, and Popova presented Vkhutemas's directors with a plan (of Popova's design) to convert the Basic Division into a design faculty with a two-year introductory program and a two-year course in production art—production art at that moment being conceived to include street and interior decoration, industrial graphics, clothing design, and so forth. It was a plan, that is, to prepare students for the very same work that the Constructivists-Productivists were turning to at the time. But the plan was rejected and never put into effect. Rodchenko, Lavinskii, and Kiselev—all now Productivists—moved to the Metalworking and Woodworking faculties and there began instituting changes, replacing old received notions



fig. 9
Students in Rodchenko's workshop, Vkhutemas, 1924.

of applied art with new Constructivist tenets. Popova had started teaching at GVTM under Meierkhof'd in 1921, and in 1923 left Vkhutemas.

Conflicts between the Productivists and the partisans of traditional artistic forms were a hallmark of the years 1923–24. While the Constructivists-Productivists—also known as the “Productivists from Lef [the Left Front of the Arts]”—resolved the “easel versus production” impasse unequivocally in favor of production art, Favorskii and his sympathizers—Nikolai Dokuchaev, Istomin, Pavel Pavlinov, and certain others—saw the matter differently.

Favorskii, whom the “Productivists from Lef” had trouble putting their finger on (was he an “easel painter,” “applied artist,” or “Productivist mystic?”),¹⁰ by and large erased the distinction between the two areas of creation. According to Favorskii’s theory, the evolution of form proceeded from surface-planarity through volume to space—in the same sequence, that is, as was followed in the courses of the Basic Division. Once he became Vkhutemas’s rector in 1923, Favorskii aspired not only to shore up advances already made in the Basic Division and to make the preparatory course compulsory and profitable for students in all faculties but to extend the logic of the formal disciplines to Vkhutemas’s structure and methods as a whole. Favorskii’s theoretical views relied both on the traditions of European Formalism and on direct analysis of avant-garde art and the practices of Russian artists, his Vkhutemas colleagues included. The Productivists, nonetheless, did not view Favorskii as one of their own.

In the middle and late 1920s, Constructivist tendencies were strong in the Metalworking Faculty, where Rodchenko and Tatlin were teachers; in the Woodworking Faculty, where Lissitzky had been teaching since his return from Europe; and in the Textile Faculty—there the result of Varvara Stepanova’s influence. In the Architecture Faculty, traditionalists, Formalists (Ladovskii and his colleagues), and Constructivists (the Vesnins and their followers) all battled for influence. The Formalists’ theoretical and artistic orientation came closest to Favorskii’s conceptions, though Favorskii was not reckoned, as were the Formalists, among the innovators.

More and more painters who had once belonged to the avant-garde—members of Bubnovyi valet (Jack of Diamonds), including Mashkov, Lentulov, and Konchalovskii; and artists of Orientalist and Primitivist allegiances—were flocking to traditionalism by this time. Their evolution led them further and further away from formal and artistic experimentation. As a result, they strove in their teaching practices as well to keep to the model of the turn-of-the-century Parisian studio—and one of a moderate bent at that.

In mid-decade, it was in the Basic Division and the Printing Trades Faculty that the formal and analytical methods created by non-objective artists in 1920–23 were adhered to most closely and consistently. They were employed by, among others, Istomin, Pavlinov, Khrakovskii, the sculptors Nina Niss-Gol'dman and Romual'd Iodko, and the architects (students of Ladovskii’s) Viktor Balikhin, Mikhail Turkus, Mikhail Korzhev, and Ivan Lamtsov. Yet, while in the Basic Division attitudes toward these methods remained unchanged over the entire decade, members of the specialized faculties complained more than once that they amounted to an unnecessary academic exercise, a waste of students’ time.

Toward the end of the 1920s, as mentioned earlier, Vkhutein witnessed a growing technical preoccupation, a tendency to, as Favorskii put it, “play engineer.” The finely adjusted balance between artistic and technical disciplines in the education of designers (graphic artists, furniture designers, textile designers, ceramists, and so forth) and of architects was targeted for change, at the expense of the formal artistic disciplines. In the



fig. 10
Aleksandr Deineka
Vkhutemas, illustration for Revolutionary Moscow, 1921. The album was distributed among delegates to the Third Congress of the Comintern.

training of "pure" artists (painters and sculptors), more and more attention was paid not to professional but to ideological requirements. It was Novitskii—a theorist and member of October, one of the last left groups in Soviet art—who presided over the adoption of technical and "sociologizing" approaches to art. His disposition toward sociologizing was shared by such "right" groups as OMAKhR (the Young People's Section of the Association of Artists of the Revolution), whose ranks included students at Vkhutein.

The pitched battle among artists' groups in the middle and late 1920s drew in a large number of Vkhutemas/Vkhutein's teachers and students. The most influential groups, apart from October and AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia; from 1928 the Association of Artists of the Revolution, or AKhR), were Ost (the Society of Easel Painters)—whose members included both Vkhutemas/Vkhutein teachers (Shterenberg and Nikolai Kupreianov) and graduates (such as Andrei Goncharov, Iurii Pimenov, Aleksandr Deineka, and Petr Vil'iams)—and Four Arts, an association that brought together diverse, chiefly middle-aged artists, many of whom taught at the school (Favorskii, Istomin, Miturich, Kuznetsov, Vera Mukhina, Ivan Zholtovskii, and others).

The October group stood for the avant-garde's movement into production. The members of AKhRR, among whom were many solidly left artists of the 1910s (such as Lentulov and Mashkov), were apostates who renounced the avant-garde entirely. The young artists of Ost adapted the avant-garde legacy to easel painting and figuration (it is here, perhaps, that the legacy of Vkhutemas is most pronounced). And Four Arts sought to preserve artistic culture in conditions of increasing ideological pressure. (Yet, while many artists of this group were at home with the latest innovations, they perceived them solely in the context of the centuries-long evolution of art.)

A tendency to fall back on tradition had existed at Vkhutemas alongside the enthusiasm for innovation inherited from the avant-garde of the 1910s. And although the study of traditions and history (of professional trades, art forms, and artistic trends and schools) was not put forward as the chief method of art education—as it had been, for example, at the former Stroganov School (everything there was based on a thorough study of styles) or in the architecture department of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture—it did, after a certain struggle, find a place in the programs of various faculties. That it did is not solely a measure of the influence of purely traditionalist tendencies having no relation whatsoever to the avant-garde; it is also an index of the avant-garde's own attention to history. For when they turned to the theorization of vanguard trends in art and to the creation of educational systems and teaching methods, Malevich, Moisei Ginzburg, Popova and her colleagues at Inkhuk, and other artists traced the historical evolution of art with great care, uncovering the "additional element" (Malevich's famous term) in each new movement. They sought to organize exhibitions in the new museums of painterly or artistic culture according to the same evolutionary outline.

It should be recalled that in 1923 Moscow's Museum of Painterly Culture moved to one of the Vkhutemas buildings at 11 Rozhdestvenka (previously the site of the Stroganov School). Rodchenko had been the museum's director in 1920–22; Vil'iams and Lazar' Vainer administered it, and Solomon Nikritin headed its Research Board, in later years (all were Vkhutemas graduates). There Nikritin applied the method of formal analysis to the study of masterpieces of the past and endeavored to find exact and reliable mathematical formulas for the older artists' work. In 1925, the museum was the site of the survey exhibition *Levyte tsebeniia v russkoi zhivopisi za 15 let*



fig. 11
The former Vkhutemas building on Kirov Street, 1976.
Photograph Aleksandr Lavrent'ev.



fig. 12
Sergei Sen'kin
Tablet for the former Vkhutemas building commemorating Lenin's visit to the school on February 25, 1921; first version, 1960s.

(Left Trends in Russian Painting over the Past Fifteen Years).

But, of course, what linked Vkhutemas to the avant-garde above all and made it, for all the twists and turns in its orientation and history, a center of the avant-garde was the spirit of invention and experimentation which prevailed in the majority of its classrooms and workshops. The production faculties, under the guidance of such leading artist-constructors as Rodchenko, Tatlin, Lissitzky, and Stepanova, were a major site of innovation. Two vanguard movements—Constructivism and Rationalism—took shape in the Architecture Faculty. (Graduates of the Architecture Faculty included such major figures as Ivan Leonidov.)

But while unconcealed and programmatic innovation in architecture and design flourished at Vkhutemas, and was difficult to oppose, the situation in the Printing Trades Faculty was not so straightforward. Students in that faculty practiced Constructivist-style innovations, based on exploitation of the possibilities of typographical techniques, yet these innovations occurred outside rather than within the classroom, where formal mastery, achieved via the study of traditional techniques and devices, was wanted. Once students had acquired those skills, however, they incorporated in their work lessons learned from Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Gustav Klutssis, and other artists, who may not have been teachers in the Printing Trades Faculty but were continually at the center of students' attention. The vanguard artists' influence showed itself constantly, in both the students' assigned and their elective work.

By virtue of its concentrated atmosphere of exploration and innovation, Vkhutemas was for many years the site of diverse artistic undertakings. Among them were the Workshop of the Revolution—an attempt to translate the energy of the avant-garde into agitational forms—that Sergei Sen'kin, Klutssis, and others made plans to organize in 1924. A Projectionist Theater, an experiment by Nikolai Triaskin, Sergei Luchishkin, and Nikritin with Abstractionism in the theater, offered performances in 1923 and 1924. And the overwhelming majority of the participants in the *Pervaiia diskussionnaia vystavka ob "edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva* (First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art, Moscow, 1924), held in an exhibition space belonging to Vkhutemas, had connections to the school; they were teachers, students, or recent graduates.

What, then, was the role played by Vkhutemas in the history of the Russian avant-garde? Before attempting an answer, one should recall that Vkhutemas came into being when the avant-garde movement was already waning (its peak, of course, came in the mid- to late 1910s). Vkhutemas, by assembling vanguard artists to be its teachers, became a repository of the spirit of the avant-garde. And it met the avant-garde's quest for its own educational institution and teaching methods—methods which the avant-garde was obliged to create, because the values it championed were professional values.

With the adoption of the formal-analytical studies and synthesizing ideas of the avant-garde into art education, these values became an integral part of the artistic consciousness of Vkhutemas's graduates. And of succeeding generations. Because graduates of Vkhutemas became teachers in Moscow's institutions of higher education; the ideas and formal discoveries of the Russian avant-garde—which had become the ideas and practices of Vkhutemas—were part of the consciousness of young artists of the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Nor have these ideas lost their significance for art today.) Vkhutemas's introduction of the values of avant-garde art into artistic culture as a whole was, without question, its greatest achievement.

—Translated, from the Russian, by Jane Bobko

Notes

1. Thus far, research on Vkhutemas has been scattered throughout a large number of articles. The principal studies are those of R. Antonov, A. Lavrent'ev, S. O. Khan-Magomedov, and this author in the journal *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* and the *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* series of the Trudy VNIITE (nos. 28, 34, and 41 are the most pertinent). Khan-Magomedov's *VHUTEMAS. Moscou, 1920-1930*, trans. Joëlle Aubert-Yong, Nikita Krivocheine, and Jean-Claude Marcadé, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1990) has recently appeared, and a volume entitled *Vkhutemas—Vkhutein. 1920-1930* is forthcoming from Sovetskii khudozhnik. There is reason to hope that the gaps in our knowledge of Vkhutemas will soon be filled.
2. The entire conversion was overseen by Narkompros, which at that time counted many leading artists among its members, most of them adherents of the left (Cubo-Futurists, non-objective artists, and Suprematists) or center (Cézannists, Orientalists, and Primitivists).
3. Narkompros's limited resources for the upkeep of educational institutions were one of the reasons. Nonetheless, the creation of Vkhutemas via the consolidation of the State Free Art Workshops is highly reminiscent of the measures adopted in a number of European countries in the 1900s and 1910s, when the demands of industrial development were met by merging academies of fine arts and schools of applied arts into a new type of art school.
4. The unhappy students once hung a placard in the First State Free Art Workshops' entryway, on which they had written: "Down with the titanic Picassos and Gauguins! It's enough to mass-produce Tatlins, Konchalovskiis, Fedorovskiis, Os'merkins, Lentulovs . . ." (the list continued through all the teachers' names).
5. Vkhutemas was renamed Vkhutein (the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute) in 1927.
6. N. Tarabukin, *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1923), p. 6. The book was written in 1916.
7. The statute of the Department of Fine Arts and Artistic Industry on "artistic culture" was published in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, February 16, 1919. For a detailed discussion of this concept, see Svetlana Dzhafarova, "The Creation of the Museum of Painterly Culture," in this volume.
8. V. Kandinskii, "Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury," *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* 2 (1920), p. 20.
9. See N. Adaskina, "Iz istorii poligraffika Vkhutemasa (Ob"ektivno-analiticheskie i tvorcheski-lichnostnye nachala khudozhestvennoi pedagogiki)," in *Sovremennyi dizain i nasledie Vkhutemasa*, Trudy VNIITE, vyp. 34 (Moscow: Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut tekhnicheskoi estetiki, 1982).
10. *Lef* 2 (1923), p. 174.

The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,
1915–1932*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

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Kazimir Malevich
*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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