The Concept of *Life* in Soviet Art History and Paintings of the 1920s¹

**Abstract:** The article explores the concept of *life* in Soviet art history of the 1920s, as well as in the Soviet expressionism in painting. The notion of *life* was examined both by the art historians of the State Academy of Art Science (GAkHN) who adhered to the classical art tradition, and the formalists (literary and art theorists of the left front) focused on the reduction of aesthetic values in line with their utopian social program. The two groups understood life differently: as a motion par excellence, in the first case, and as a simplified form (primitivism), in the second. However, elements of both perspectives were implicitly present in modern artistic practice, which manifested in the phenomena of Soviet expressionism. The painters combined fluid pictorial substance, motion in compositions, and dramatic conflicts in the plot, on the one hand, and simplified (“primitive”) forms on the other. Although paintings of Drevin, Gluskin, Golopolosov and other artists associated with this movement did not receive support from either the traditionalist art critics or the formalist group, all of them were immersed in the semiosphere of the time, equally nourished by its creativity. While they rejected modern expressionism, the art theorists paradoxically professed its principles.

**Keywords:** concept of life, Soviet art history, painting, Soviet expressionism, primitivism

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Soviet art in the 1920s was very turbulent and vivid. While the previous decade witnessed battles between the avant-garde and traditionalists, now all the flowers bloomed: the diverse art groups emerged and disappeared rapidly, exhibition activities expanded, and creative exploration thrived, influenced by close contact with Western Europe (particularly Berlin), and heated discussions were commonplace. The world of art studies was equally intense and fruitful: despite the emigration (mainly due to forced expulsion from the country) of many prominent scholars, there still remained a strong connection with the intellectual heritage of the Fin-de-Siècle Age, and the prospects of building a new world, for all their utopian doom, they poured new wine into old wine skins. It is important that scientific ideas and artistic practices were immersed in a single whirlpool of the actively expanding atmosphere of the epoch. However, these two segments of culture today are most often considered separately and within distinct disciplines – the history of art criticism and philosophy on the one hand, and the history of art on the other. In this article, I attempt to integrate both areas of knowledge by examining the concept of *life* in the writings of art critics of various trends and its portrayal in the paintings of that time (here and hereinafter italics are mine – N.Z.). The concept of *life* appears to encompass a variety of ideas and practices bridging their meanings and reflecting the core issues of the epoch. It becomes even more intriguing to combine the thought of art and the practice of the painters, since the bearers of both areas of culture themselves were largely unaware of this underlying connection. The concept of *life* enables the identification of implicit layers of convergence between scientific reflection and contemporary art, particularly shedding light on lesser-known yet profoundly impactful phenomena like Soviet expressionism of the late 1920s to early 1930s.

*The concept of ‘life’ in the State Academy of Art Science*

The subject of this article prompts us to turn first of all to the works of the employees of the State Academy of Art Science (hereinafter referred to as the GAKhN) in Moscow, where the concept of *life* was almost at the very core of the art studies. The institution, that was established on the initiative of Wasyly Kandinsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky in 1921 and dispersed with the onset of a tightening of social policy in 1929, has recently attracted more and more attention from Russian and foreign scientists (GAKhN URL). The academy brought together esteemed art historians, experts in theater and dance, sociologists and psychophysicologists of art, linguists and philosophers in various departments. The intellectual leader of the Academy was
the renowned Soviet linguist and philosopher, Gustav Shpet (1879–shot in 1937), the founder of the Russian school of phenomenology. The team aimed to combine art studies with contemporary art practices and bridge different fields of humanities. Therefore, along with their scholar activity, the members of the Academy arranged art exhibitions, gave public lectures, joined various discussions in order to find the ways of uniting different fields of knowledge. As proponents of phenomenology, they placed special emphasis on visual arts – considering the visible surface as the path to understanding the profound meaning of any artistic expression. W. Kandinsky, the author of the initial project for the Academy, left Russia soon after its establishment, but his idea of creating an art science was taken up by such notable art historians like Nikolay Tarabukin, Alexey Sidorov, Aleksandr Gabrichevsky, Dmitiry Nedovich and others. Collaborating with fellow sociologists and the philosophers of language, they worked on the Dictionary of Artistic Terms, some other studies, and their collective work “The Art of the Portrait (Art, 1927)”, which holds particular relevance for this article, was published in 1927.

The concept of life was central to the study of portrait forms, evident from the frequent occurrence of the lexeme life and its derivatives, which appeared approximately 60 times in the 192-page text. The exploration began with Lev Zhinkin’s article “The Portrait Forms”. A linguist and psychologist, Zhinkin later became the founder of the Russian school of psycholinguistics. During his time at the GAkHN, Lev Nikolaevich Zhinkin (1908–1971) was associated with the philosophy department and focused on issues related to the art perception. In his investigation of the portrait, Zhinkin sought to discover the “formula” of a personality, particularly within the realm of art. He examined the specific characteristics of the portrait form using the model of the inner form of a word (in linguistics); he tried to find a correlation between the external expression and its underlying meaning as the basis of existence. Zhinkin found out that it was not in the subject of the image (the human body and face) or even in the individuality of the portrayed person, but in the structural whole of the natural properties of the physical matter of the image and the artist’s creative efforts to express these properties. Not a face, but an impersonation is created in a portrait image: “In his creative act the artist recognizes and visually presents the portrayed person. He not only unmasks his posture and gesture, but shows him positively, i.e., in the certainty of the content of the ‘physiognomy’ of the individual,” he wrote (Art, 1927: 32). In connection with the personality created by the artist on the crossroads of image and expression, the article delved into the subject of interest: “the life of extraordinary power is invested in the portrait, the life that is recognized as the only one for the personality, through which it is formed” (Art, 1927: 44). According to Zhinkin, the portrait refracted nature in an act of culture, generating the energy of being, rather than merely displaying the life of the portrayed character.
In his article, “The Problems of the Portrait Language,” Alexey Tsires follows Zhinkin’s ideas about the portrait-personality and endeavors to construct a form of portrait hermeneutics. Unlike psychology, “the portrait personality is not divided into features and properties drawn together by associations, it is internally integral and continuous”, and its unity is “the complexity of continuous musical harmony” (Art, 1927: 150). The perception of the portrait image is “the process of getting used to the inner life of the formal elements depicted in the portrait and their combinations into images of various things” (Art, 1927: 151). This hermeneutic approach delves deeply into the living and continuous environment of the portrait, demonstrating that Tsires perceived life in oil painting as a fluid substance with shimmering meanings, which at the same time elude any direct gaze.

The most frequent and significant concept of life is expressed in the article “Portrait as a problem of style” by N. M. Tarabukin, a well-known art critic and philosopher of the 1920s, who later taught at various higher educational institutions in Moscow. According to Tarabukin the sign of life is an essential property of portrait art. He states, “The stylistic features of a portrait, as a kind of artistic form, lie in the interpretation of the phenomenon as a living and individual image” (Art, 1927: 164). Tracing the chronological development of portraiture from the illusionistic Roman portraits through the portraits-faces of Byzantium and the animated yet not alive Quattrocento faces, ultimately arriving at the vivid images of the Italian Renaissance (“In the eyes of Gioconda, the bottomless depth of life is captured, pouring in a slow but uninterrupted stream”; Art, 1927: 174), Tarabukin highlights the transition from the mask-like representations to genuine portraits, where visual means are employed to convey the human personality. The pinnacle of the genre occurs, in his opinion, during the Baroque period, the 17th century, when characteristic portraits and portrait-biographies arose: both enabling the revelation of “a person who lives a lasting life, who feels, thinks, who has his past and who lives” (Art, 1927: 178–179). The portrait-biography is the highest achievement of the baroque style, and is exemplified in the portrait paintings by Velázquez, Goya, El Greco and, most notably, Rembrandt. Like Tsires, Tarabukin draws comparisons between painting and music to describe the vitality of portraits: in the portrait of the artist’s mother (Vienna), “Rembrandt unfolded an epic symphony about a long and difficult life, in which joys died out under the burden of sorrows and anxieties” (Ibid., 184). In contrast to the “exterior” Rubens (as Tarabukin named him) and later Van Dyck, Rembrandt expresses “the penetrating essence of life phenomena” (Ibid). Music as a metaphor for continuity, the essence of time in spatial arts, and the depth into which you need to immerse yourself in order to comprehend the meanings of the portrait – this is what bring Tarabukin’s ideas closer to those of Tsires, the representation of the flow of time is achieved through the fluid substance
of the picturesque masses and the interplay of chiaroscuro, which imparts movement expressed through the quality of painting itself.

To convey motion in painting means to imbue the model with lifelike qualities, and, according to Tarabukin, it can also be achieved through composition and gesture. In general, the concept of motion (in dance, music, and visual arts) was extensively discussed within the departments of the GAkHN and at the jointed forums. Tarabukin wrote the special article about motion for the Dictionary of the Artistic Terms (Dictionary, 2005: 126–127); he also gave it significant attention in his book Gesture in Art (Zlydneva, 2022), as well as in his numerous recent articles on the subjects of space and composition. In the mythological worldview, which inevitably emerged during the humanitarian discourse of the 1920s, the dynamics were considered the distinctive feature of living beings, while a static state signified the matter of dead. It is the same in a portrait: when a swirling composition, a dynamic brushstroke and a rhythmic pulsation of chiaroscuro appeared in Baroque paintings, the image of the character got transformed: the viewer saw an alive personality, the understanding of which requires a reciprocal “motion”, delving into the dynamics of the form and the image structure. Tarabukin’s article is especially characterized by the poetic convergence of the lexemes painting and life², frequently occurring within the same syntagma. For example: “only a pictorial interpretation formally enabled the artist to paint a living human face, which was interpreted by the plastic style as an illusionistic mask” (174); “Raphael achieved lifelikeness not by an illusionistic technique, but by exclusively pictorial means” (180); “If we leave aside some coldness, pomposity and little picturesqueness of David and Gérard, then the portraits of Ingres, K. Bryullov, P. Sokolov and others represent significant milestones on the path of bringing art closer to real life, this primary source of all artistic achievements” (188). Through the connection between painting and life, Tarabukin restores the original semantics of the word “painting” in Russian, revealing its inner form and thus effecting a metaphorical shift in meaning, elevating its significance. All this points out the importance of the concept of life within the framework of ideas put forward by Tarabukin and his colleagues at the GAkHN.

Here we should briefly delve into the intellectual context that shaped the ideas of life in painting. We should take into account the importance of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and his “philosophy of life” that influenced the art historians of GAkHN. The concept of life held a central place of the German thinker and drawing inspiration from the ideas of A. Bergson and G. Husserl. G. Simmel was also closely related to Wilhelm Dilthey’s hermeneutics. The scholars at GAkHN were drawn to Simmel’s keen attention

² In Russian the two words ‘painting’ (‘picturesqueness’) and ‘life’/’alive’ derive from the same root: ‘zhivopis’ and ‘zhizn’/’zhivoy’.
to the issues of personality formation, the aesthetic form of cognition, the model of which was fine art, where the boundaries between the external and the internal seemed to blur. One of the most widely read was Simmel’s book “Rembrandt” (1916), and the name of the Dutch artist appeared in about every article within the collected papers on the problem of portraiture. In this book by a German philosopher, one can find many topics that are reflected in the articles by the GAkHN scholars. Analyzing the influence of the German philosopher on the GAkHN, Maria Ghidini notes that, according to Simmel, Rembrandt’s portrait “attempts <...> to express the very motion of time, to present life as a fluid unity in its various temporal dimensions”, a kind of Bergson’s duree (Ghidini, 2017: 208). Tarabukin’s ideas about the portrait-biography can be traced back to Simmel’s thoughts on the individual’s destiny: it “deals with a meaningful life connection, which is our life in the light of interpretation” (Ghidini, 2007: 210). The problem of personality as a unifying factor ideas and a person’s biography was studied by Simmel through the case of Goethe (Simmel, 1913). The remarkable German poet, thinker and naturalist, exemplified a life and accomplishments intertwined with a common structural principle, which also captured the attention of the Moscow scientific and artistic community. It is known that W. Kandinsky was interested in Goethe’s color theory, serving as a foundation for the studies of color by the artist, composer and scientist Mikhail Matyushin. “The authors of the GAkHN developed the ‘Goethe myth’ precisely in Simmel’s terms” (Ghidini, 2017: 210). According to Ghidini, Goethe’s morphology, as presented by Simmel, resonated with the scholars of the Academy in their quest to find “a stable core <...> in the changing flow of time” (Ghidini, 2017: 213), essentially equivalent to the concept of fate and the very process of life.

The Left Front Theories and the Concept of ‘Life’

The ideas explored by Moscow art historians in the 1920s within the GAkHN were relatively conservative. To fully grasp their significance, it is essential to consider them within the broader context of the intellectual conservatism prevalent in European art history during that period. The opposite pole was represented by the formalists, closely connected to the legacy of the early Russian avant-garde, who adhered to leftist, anti-traditionalist positions and declared them not only within the framework of academic science. As Galin Tikhanov aptly remarked, “there was a certain neo-romantic pride in being at the forefront of these new trends in the humanities and, albeit indirectly, in changing the old social and cultural order” (Tikhanov, WWW). The formal method was not entirely foreign to the scholars at GAkHN– G. Shpet went his own way developing a sort of pre-semiotics. However, art historians leaned more towards the German tradition, despite expressing critical positions towards both groups. However, in the context of this article, it is intriguing to trace the common features that – in
addition to conscious attitudes – manifested themselves in both groups of the scientists. And this commonality can be seen in a special interest in the concept of life.

It is known that the formalists (among them there were Osip Brik, Victor Shklovsky, Nikolay Chuzhak and some others) in the 1920s took part in the creative association “Left Art Front” (1922–1929), which advocated for the abolition of artistry in literature and art in favor of documentary, as they believed that only through documentary could the truth of life be conveyed. Their collective work “Literature of the Fact” (Literature of the Fact, 2000), published in 1929, elaborated on the ideas of documentary essays and cinema as the most relevant genres of the time. The writers and journalists of the left front insisted on the urgency of removing artistic prose from fiction and on the value of unprofessionalism in art, opening the way to living life. The titles of their articles reflected these intentions: “Literature of Life-Building” (N. Chuzhak), “Dead Cliché and Alive Person” (T. Grits), “Vivid and Pulp” (S. Tretyakov), “Alive Man of History” (N. Chuzhak), “Living ‘Living’ Person” (N. Tretyakov). In his article “Literature of Life-Building,” N. Chuzhak posed a rhetorical question: “The whole truth of genuinely real life – or is it the plausibility of idealistic “realism”? The junction of science and literature in the treatment of fact – or is it an idle invention of ignorant imitators of life, if not class enemies? (Literature of Fact, 2000: 66). He answered his own question: “Only the complete overthrow of dead aesthetics will consolidate the advancement of living craftsmanship” (Ibid: 67).

In the search for the authenticity of life, literature takes a step towards the fine arts: in the essay by S. Tretyakov “Through unworn glasses”, when describing an airplane flight, the present tense is actively introduced, which enhances the effect of involvement in what is going on, and the visual is by its nature related to the present: “Flying above the ground, I randomly swallow with my eye both the patches of canvases, amazing in their length, glued to the ground, and the zebra-shaped mowed grass of the copses, and the apiaries on which the beehives stand, like falcon gymnasts (with what ease you again fall into the usual artistic metaphorism!)” (Literature of the Fact, 2000: WWW). The concept of vision dominates the text, with the word ‘see’ and the concept of vision occurring seven times in one paragraph alone. In the article by S. Tretyakov “To be continued”, a dialogue with the masters of fine arts has already been developed in the form of an imperative:

For us, factovists, there can be no facts “as such”. There is a fact-effect and a fact-defect. A fact that strengthens our socialist positions and a fact that weakens them. Fact friend and fact enemy. This should be remembered by our closest neighbors of fact workers (photographers) and film fact workers (workers of films). (Literature of the Fact, 2000: WWW).
The present tense in the form of a documentary fixation of what is seen at
the current moment brings documentary prose closer to the spatial arts – painting
and graphics. The literature of fact is often considered parallel to production art
(‘proisvodstvennoe iskusstvo’), a form of constructivism that aimed to move away
from artistry. However, this literature shares more similarities with the activities of non-
professional self-taught amateurs. The reduced aesthetics of painters working outside of
‘the school tradition’ should be compared with the historical avant-garde of the 1910s:
Nikola Pirosmani’s primitive paintings resonated with the primitivism of such different
professional painters as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, Marc Chagall and
David Burliuk. A mass emergence of non-professionals arose in the 1920s, alongside
a growing appeal to primitivism by professional craftsmen. Among them were Georgy
Rublev, Alexander Tyshler, Kliment Redko and many others. However, there is very
little in common between the primitives of the 1910s and the ones of the 1920s–1930s.
While in the first decade the intrusion of the primitive art into the mainstream represented
a complete break with the academicism of the past and a radical departure from the
norms of the traditional poetics, the primitive art of the 1920s should be considered
from the viewpoint of pragmatics – that is as a turn of the art towards life itself. The
issue of life is now regarded through constructing the new world that has shaken off the
aesthetic “prejudices” of the “bourgeois” past. It means the face-to-face encounter with
the concept of life, a continuous flow of the process of becoming. If we ignore social
engagement, the notion of life becomes a common ground that brings the understanding
of the concept closer between the left front and the art critics of the GakHN.

It should be emphasized that the dialogue between the traditionalists of the
GAkHN and the formalists of the LEF did not occur in the realm of ideas. However, this
realm of ideas was, in many ways, consonant with the artistic practice of the time and
its poetics, despite the negative attitudes of its bearers towards contemporary art. The
inclination towards primitive art only partially reflected the situation – it primarily dealt
with a phenomenon that has only recently started to gain attention from art historians in
Russia and abroad – I am referring to the Soviet expressionism in painting (Rojtenberg,
2004; Balashov, 2005; Golovoy 2018).

Expressionism of the 1920s and the Concept of ‘Life’

It is well-known that art historians sometimes exhibit resistance to modern art
practices, even though their theories may be aligned with them in essence. Thus, the
founder of the Vienna School of Art History, Alois Riegl, rejected impressionism, despite
his theory of close and distant vision bearing resemblance to the mental projection of
impressionist painting. The authors of “The Art of the Portrait” were often critical of Futurism, Constructivism, and what they broadly referred to as Expressionism. During that time, the latter (the term “expressionism”) served as a collective label for various formal experiments. When discussing the portrait in the avant-garde, Zhinkin referred to it as “constructivism,” stating: “some more significant force coming out from inside the picture, from the background, produces this distortion, sees through it, shows its ‘shaggy face’” (Ibid: 46). He attacks expressionism with the following words: “expressionism is engulfed in the frenzy of the thing” (Art, 1927: 9), “expressionism, not only in painting, but also in literature and theater, embodies the life of the thing: the terrible and beating power of verbal turnover, the life of a frozen mask and the amazing action of gesture. But is it possible to think that expressionism turns a thing into a person, gives life to a thing? No – rather the opposite” (Art, 1927: 10) He argues that in expressionism the problem of personality is impersonal (Art, 1927: 11), while simultaneously acknowledging the significance of expressive gestures and paying tribute to the expressive means of painting. Expressive forms and composition, expression as a means of enhancing perception are in focus in the text of A.G. Gabrichevsky “Portrait as a Problem of Image” as the author criticizes “extreme expressionism” (a term not used in modern terminology) for its dry schematism. Describing Cézanne’s portraits, Tarabukin claims that they “lack an alive feeling, thinking human face”, and laments that in modern art in general “the alive human face has left the paintings” (Art, 1927: 191).

Meanwhile, it is in Soviet painting of the late 1920s – early 1930s, in the movement that has recently been called Soviet expressionism, that one can find all those features that the art critics of the GAkHN previously praised as virtues of “alive” portraits. This movement primarily consisted of artists from the turn of the century generation, who, although not formally belonging to a common union, exhibited remarkably similar, if not identical, stylistic features. Notable among these painters were Alexander Drevin (1889-1938), Boris Golopolosov (1900-1983), Roman Semashkevich (1900-1937), Alexander Tyshler (1898-1980), Alexander Gluskin (1899-1969) and others. Their style was characterized by dynamic compositions, an energetic elongated impasto brushstrokes, sometimes contrasting colors and, typically, dramatic plots. Russian / Soviet expressionism made a bright and talented appearance in the mid-1920s. However, its existence was short-lived, as by the mid-1930s, it came to an end due to the harsh social circumstances and the enforced turn towards socialist realism, propagated by the authorities. Some artists – Drevin, Semashkevich – were arrested and executed, while others abandoned their previous manner, and many artworks were destroyed or lost.

In their art, these painters showed the expressive motion which was primarily evident in their compositions – the issue associated with life par excellence. Thus, the painting A Car (1930) by R. Semashkevich captures a swirling motion along a curve
A. Drevin’s painting *Gazelles* (1930-1931) is built on a diagonal (Fig.2). The power of motion is most vividly conveyed in B. Golopolosov’s dramatic piece *Battle for the Banner* (1928), depicting wounded fighters bleeding and falling (Fig.3). The motion expressed through the plot can be seen in A. Tyshler’s *Gulyaei-Pole* (1927) which portrays a galloping wagon with the corpses of victims trailing behind (Fig. 4). Motion is conveyed on the canvas by A. Drevin *Altai. Dry Birch* (1930): the motif of a dead tree is elevated to a tragic level thanks to the expressive arabesque of branches against a sky streaked with running clouds (Fig.5). The death as a reverse of life is also represented by A. Gluskin’s *The Tragedy of the Goose* (1929): the bird’s body twisted in a metaphorical mortal combat, symbolizing the last degree of suffering flesh (Fig.6). The dynamics are emphasized by fluid oil paint texture and sinuous impasto brushstrokes in Drevin and Semashkevich’s pieces, fractional prickly linearity in Golopolosov’s work or a blurry, vibrating colorful mass in Tyshler’s paintings. The contrast palette consisting of archaic primary colors (red, white and black) used by Golopolosov enhances the dramatic impact of the scenes depicted. The other masters – Drevin, Semashkevich, Tyshler – demonstrate a pastel, almost monochrome palette and shimmering chiaroscuro, evoking the poetics of Rembrandt.

The main features of Soviet expressionism – such as the fluid pictorial manner that conveys the state of formation, the dynamics of composition and vibrating colors – align closely with the description of the concept of life in the texts of GAkHN art historians. One can also find some shared treats with the attitudes of the left front towards reducing artistry in art and literature. In expressionism it is expressed in the simplification of shapes, evident in Golopolosov’s “wooden” human postures, Drevin’s generalized silhouettes of animals, reminiscent of ancient cave drawings, and the grotesque and primitive treatment of humans in the works of Gluskin and Tyshler. In the elements of primitivism that can be found in the stylistic composition of this movement, it is hard not to catch the will to transcend the boundaries of art tradition and come out into the realm of life.

There was one more circumstance that led to the actualization of the concept of life – the social upheavals of unprecedented strength: the experiences of the First World War and the Civil War, the Revolution, and the premonition of impending Stalinist repressions. All these events brought up the layer of existential experiences in society. While the ideas of art critics addressed these experiences in a rather veiled form, art, as a being acutely feeling the rhythms of history, reflected them in full.
Conclusion

The concept of life was central to both the art critics of the State Academy of Art Sciences (GAkHN), who were oriented towards the classical artistic tradition, and the representatives (literary and art theorists) of formalism at the Left front, who emphasized the radical reduction of aesthetic attitudes in accordance with their utopian social program. The understanding of life differed between the two groups: as a motion par excellence, in the first case, and as a primitivism, in the second one. However, the ideas of both of them were implicitly embedded in modern artistic practice — particularly by Soviet expressionists: the style was characterized by a combination of fluid pictorial substance, the representation of motion in composition, and dramatic conflicts in the plot, on the one hand, with elements of simplified (primitive) forms on the other hand. Although paintings of Drevin, Gluskin, Golopolosov and other artists associated with this movement did not receive support from either the traditionalist art critics or the formalist group, all of them were immersed in the semiosphere of the time, equally nourished by its creativity. Although they rejected modern expressionism, the art theorists paradoxically professed precisely its principles.

Figure 1. Roman Semashkevich “Car” (1930)
Figure 2. Alexandre Drevin “Gazelles” (1930-1931)

Figure 3. Boris Golopolosov “Battle for the Banner” (1928)
Figure 4. Aleksandre Tyshler “Makhno’s. Gulyay-Pole” (1927)

Figure 5. Alexandre Drevin “Dry Birch” (1930)
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Koncept života u sovjetskoj istoriji umetnosti i slikarstvu 1920-ih

**Apstrakt:** Rad se bavi konceptom života u sovjetskoj istoriji umetnosti 1920-ih, kao i u sovjetskom ekspresionizmu u slikarstvu. Pitanjem života bavili su se, kako istoričari umetnosti Državne akademije umetničkih nauka (GAkHN), naklonjeni klasičnoj likovnoj tradiciji, tako i formalisti (teoretičari književnosti i umetnosti levog fronta) usmereni na redukciju estetskih vrednosti u skladu s njihovim utopijskim socijalnim programom. Ove dve grupe, pojam života su shvatale na različite načine: kao pokret par excellence, u prvom slučaju, i kao pojednostavljenu formu (primitivizam), u drugom. Međutim, ideje oba pristupa bile su implicitno ugrađene u modernu umetničku praksu koja je došla do izražaja u fenomenima sovjetskog ekspresionizma. Slikari su kombinovali fluidnu slikarsku supstancu, pokret u kompozicijama, dramatični sukob u zapletu s jedne strane, i pojednostavljene (‘primitivne’) forme s druge strane. Iako slike Drevina, Gluskina, Golopolosova i drugih umetnika koji su pripadali ovom pravcu nisu naišle na podršku ni u prvom ni u drugom taboru kritičara umetnosti, svi su oni bili uronjeni u semiosferu epohe, jednako nego i njenoj kreativnošću. Iako su odbacivali moderni ekspresionizam, paradoksalno, teoretičari umetnosti su upravo propovedali njegova načela.

**Ključne reči:** koncept života, sovjetska istorija umetnosti, slikarstvo, sovjetski ekspresionizam, primitivizam