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Pictorialist Photography in the Collection of the State Museum and Exhibition Centre ROSPHOTO

*Lecture on November 23, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
“Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered”*

The collection of the State Museum and Exhibition Centre of Photography ROSPHOTO in St. Petersburg, Russia, is relatively young. It was started at the same time that ROSPHOTO was founded in 2003 and currently includes over 17,000 items. A museum institution and a subdivision of Russia’s Ministry for Culture, ROSHPOTO imposes high standards for acquiring items for its collections, taking into consideration their historical and documentary value and paying special attention to their artistic value. Although ROSPHOTO primarily focuses on collecting Russian and St. Petersburg historical and art photography, the actual span of its holdings encompasses much more. ROSPHOTO has a large archive of foreign view photography from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a collection of Russian historical and regional history photography. ROSPHOTO’S collection includes portraiture, ethnographic, architectural, archaeological, and tourist photography of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The institution also keeps and collects works of famous Russian twentieth-century photographers, as well as contemporary artists, with a total of some one thousand artists listed in the collection.

There is no separate Pictorialist collection within ROSPHOTO’s archive. The works that can be considered Pictorialist are found in various collections, locatable only by name or time period. Pictorialist photography represented in ROSPHOTO’s archive is interesting as a selection of work of famous masters of photography but in fact primarily serves as an illustration of seminal moments specific to the national history of photography.

The examples of Pictorialist photography in ROSPHOTO’s collection clearly illustrate that, although Pictorialism (by the standards of the world history of photography) was mostly declining in the West by the mid 1910s, it was still flourishing in Russia and even later in Soviet times through the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, the Pictorialist tradition might have lived on had it not been banished by the government, a topic that was touched upon in the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Quiet Resistance* (2005) by the Moscow House of Photography. The ROSPHOTO collection holds works by several world-famous Russian photographers who were practicing Pictorialist aesthetics: Alexander Grinberg, Vasily Ulitin, Max Alpert, and Moisey Nappelbaum.

ROSPHOTO has several prints by **Alexander Grinberg** (1885–1979), a member of Moscow’s Russian Photographic Society from 1907 and one of its directors from 1912. He received the gold medal of the International Photography Exhibition in Dresden in 1909. From 1914 to 1922 Grinberg worked as a cameraman at various film studios; from 1922 to 1930 he taught photography composition at the State Institute of Film while also holding photography-related side jobs. Grinberg’s photographs were exhibited at international exhibitions in Tokyo, Turin, Toronto, and Paris. Although he was already being persecuted in 1929 (largely due to his images of the nude body), Grinberg risked exhibiting his nudes at the Masters of Soviet Art Photography exhibition in Moscow in 1935. That was enough to have him arrested and accused of dissemination of pornography. He spent several years in the Stalinist camps and was freed in 1939, after which he continued as a photographer and

teacher at photography clubs.

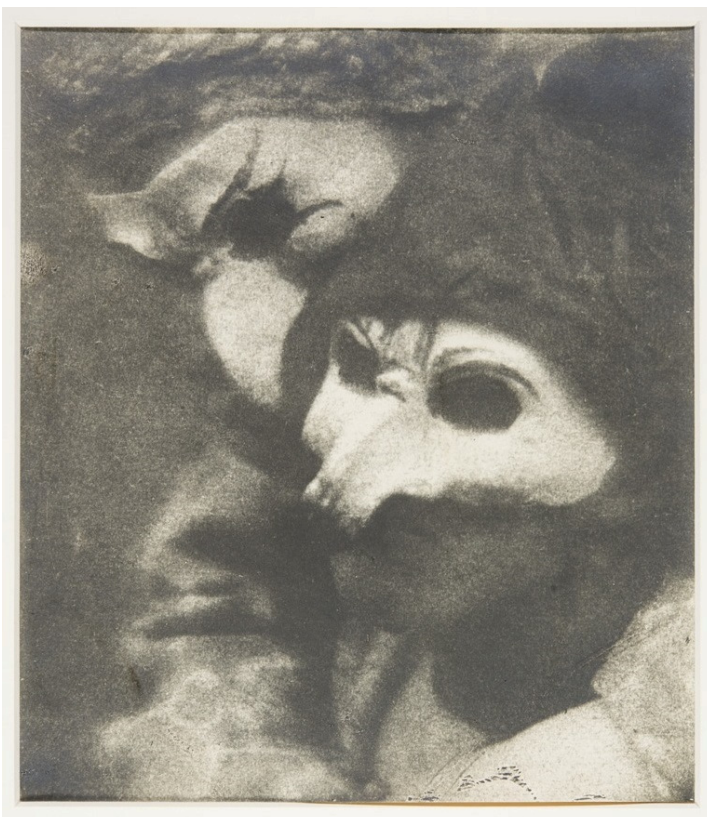
Grinberg's photographs in the ROSPHOTO collection deal with topics characteristic to the artist's work: staged, decidedly theatrical scenes (two gentlemen in the company of a skeleton), the female beauty (a portrait of a lady). One piece is a beautifully composed close-up of two female hands locked in a recurring rhythm of curving lines and soft contours reminiscent of Renaissance painting but simultaneously similar to the new visual language of early-twentieth-century photography.

Fig. 1



Another famous Russian photographer, **Sergey Ivanov Alliluev** (1891–1979), is represented in the collection by a bromoil entitled *Jesters*. Ivanov Alliluev was known as a magician of photographic lines and wizard of printing, especially skillful in special printing techniques: bromoil, toning, gum arabic, solarization, ozobrome etc.

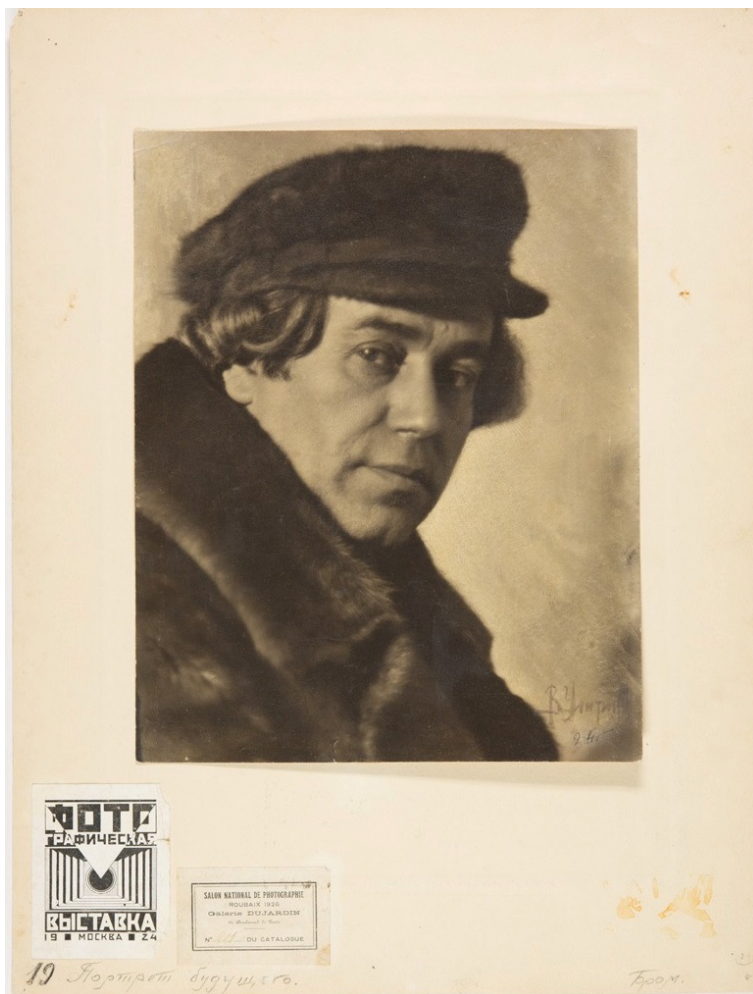
Fig. 2



He gained a reputation as a photographer during his days as a student. A member of the Russian Photographic Society, he had the opportunity to meet such masters as Alexander Grinberg, Moisey Nappelbaum, and Nikolay Svishov Paola, to name only a few. Ivanov Alliluev received his first award in 1911 at the Antwerp photographic salon. In the 1920s and 1930s he participated in virtually every large international photographic exhibition, becoming especially known for his landscapes. He received the prize of the same Soviet photography exhibition in 1935 that had such sad consequences for Grinberg. In 1928, the press referred to Soviet photography as “the surprise” of the photographic salon in Toronto. “Photographs show that art is flourishing in Russia and this is reflected in the collection that is amazing in its technique, originality and strength.” (*Photographer Magazine*, No 11-12, 1928)

Another well known Russian photographer of the time, **Vasily Ulitin** (1888–1976), was born in Serpukhov near Moscow and took fine art classes from childhood on. He graduated from the Moscow College of Commerce and Chemistry and from 1909 to 1915 worked in printing and photography studios, including the studio of well known Moscow photographer Fischer. Ulitin also started working on his own, joined several photography societies, and taught photography. During the 1920s he actively exhibited in Europe and Japan, where he received a number of awards. The labels of photographic exhibitions can still be seen on his works. After the ill-fated 1935 exhibition of Soviet photography, Ulitin was also persecuted like many photographers who participated in the show. In 1942 he was sentenced to ten years of labor camps. The sentence was later changed to restrict him to live in the small town of Balakhna for 15 years with no right of residing in capital cities. In the 1950s Ulitin returned to Moscow but never actively took up photography again.

Fig. 3



A number of very interesting photographs in ROSPHOTO's collection are signed simply M. Vitoukhnovsky. There is no information to date about the photographer, although it may have been the scriptwriter Mikhail Vitoukhnovsky (1903–1976), who graduated in 1931 from the cameraman department of the State College of Film and was well known for his work as a scriptwriter for fictional films. After the close of World War II, Vitoukhnovsky was engaged mostly producing popular science films. The film *Novel of the Life of Plants*, shot in 1947 based on his script, won the major prize at the International Film Festival in Venice. If this assumption of the photographer's identity is correct, we can regard the several Vitoukhnovsky portraits in ROSPHOTO's collection as possible photographic tests of actors for their film roles.

Fig. 4



Defining a term like Pictorialism is not an easy task, as it involves the knowledge of the history of photography in its national and international contexts, the aesthetics, iconography, methods and tools characteristic of the movement, a photographer's individual scope of images and attitude toward his or her own work. Since we often lack various elements of this information, we cannot complete the puzzle and must instead rely on generalizations that may lead us to tenuous conclusions. Russian and Soviet photographers who did not necessarily proclaim themselves Pictorialists nevertheless used the same technical methods employed by Pictorialist photographers in the West – soft focus, elaborate hand printing techniques, retouching of negatives, use of photographs as raw material for final art works – all of which led to the Pictorialist appearance and uniqueness of the resulting photographs. We can also define a familiar range of subjects – landscapes, portraits, the body, staged scenes – all of which, together with the romanticized treatment of the subject, might be considered quite different from the modern subjects of the day (especially in the 1920s and 1930s). But there are many examples of work that clearly employed Pictorialist methods and Pictorialist vision – either created alongside other work or integrated into the body of work as a whole – that do not closely adhere to strict Pictorialist principles.

The work of **Moisey Nappelbaum** (1869-1958), one of the great photographers of his time, provides an example. Nappelbaum was born in Minsk and started his apprenticeship as copyist at Osip Boretti's photography studio at the age of 14, to be promoted three years later to photographer. In 1888 he left Minsk for a journey around Russia and beyond, including Vilnius, Warsaw, New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburg. Having returned to Minsk in 1895, he opened his own portrait studio. In 1910 he moved to St. Petersburg and founded in 1912 a photography studio where he took portraits of artists and other men of culture, with many of whom his family was close. In 1918 Nappelbaum made a number of portraits of the people of state, Lenin's comrades in the Party. With an aim to continue this enterprise, he was supported by statesmen to open the first state photographic studio at the USSR Central Executive Committee in 1919. Between 1935 and 1955 several solo exhibitions of Nappelbaum's photographs were held. A large collection of Nappelbaum's work was left to the State Central Archive of Film and Photo and Audio Documents.

Nappelbaum is primarily known as a master of the photographic portrait, and some of the characteristic features of his style are well reflected in the works in ROSPHOTO's collection. For instance, Nappelbaum was very thoughtful about lighting, pursuing a Rembrandtesque effect in his portraits and even inventing his own lighting technology with a single light source of one thousand electric bulbs in a self-made projector. He used a simple, objectless background or retouched the background by hand on the negative. Nappelbaum's sitters usually do not hold any objects. Several portraits by Nappelbaum in ROSPHOTO's collection depict the family of chemist and restorer V.N. Kononov who was a lecturer at the Higher Petrograd Institute of Photography founded by the Soviet state in 1918. It remains unknown whether Kononov was only a client or perhaps in fact a closer acquaintance of Nappelbaum's. (They may have been acquainted through Kononov's work at the Institute of Photography or through common friends.)

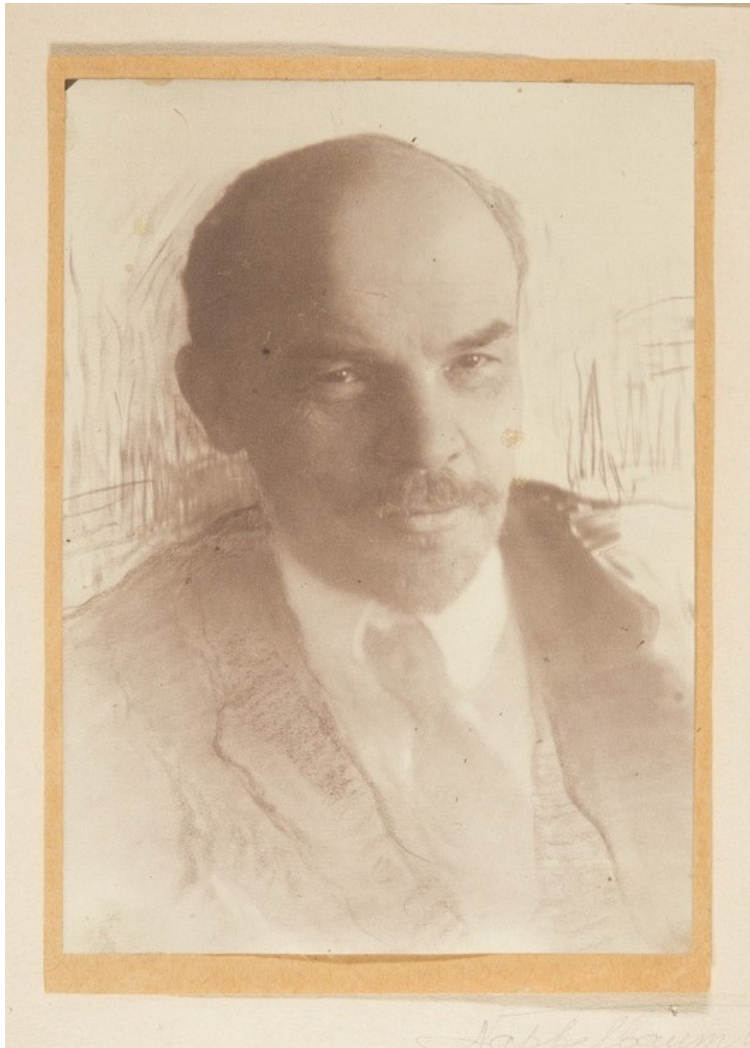
Fig. 5



Nappelbaum easily employed the aesthetics and methods we consider Pictorialist in his commercial photographs and official portraits of politicians and cultural figures, even if this contradicts the idea of the Pictorialist photographer as an amateur in the sense of pursuing purely artistic aims, of not being engaged in commercial work. Considering that Pictorialist methods and aesthetics were fiercely criticized by the state-approved "new Soviet photography," it is extremely interesting to think about how Nappelbaum was able to get away with a recognizably Pictorialist style in his portraits of statesmen, including of heads of the Party. The portrait of Vladimir Lenin in the ROSPHOTO collection, for example, is one of many copies of the first official portrait of Lenin made in 1918 in order to publicize the leader's face to a wide audience. Recalling this meeting later, Nappelbaum admitted he was

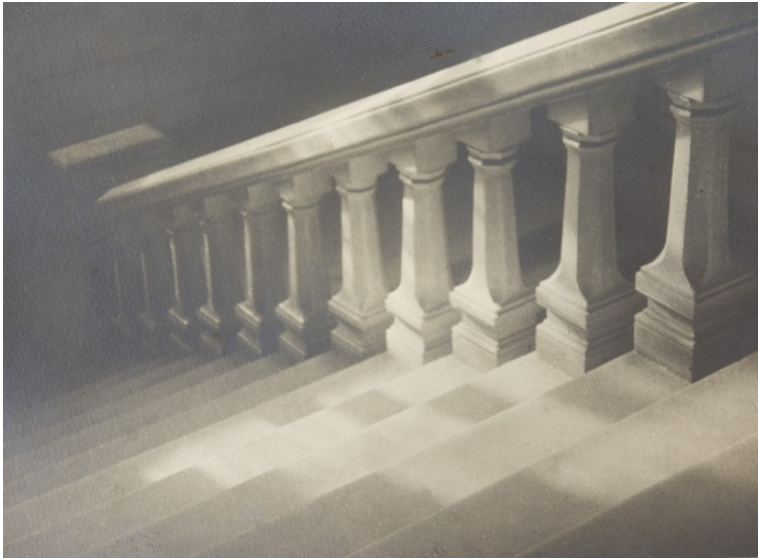
“amazed by [Lenin’s] simplicity. No posing, no attempts to look effective.” Nappelbaum was repeatedly interrupted by people coming and going, asking questions, or bringing papers for Lenin to sign. Despite the lack of sufficient light, he was lucky to be able to use the brief rays of sun from the window and photograph several plates. In his workshop he later made two portraits with different compositions. One of the two was signed by Lenin, with the note, “I very much thank tovarish Nappelbaum. Lenin.” With this approval, the image was published as the official portrait of the head of the state. It was this photograph that first made the image of Lenin recognizable and was later used for a postage stamp depicting Lenin. Although Lenin was photographed many times later on, it is Nappelbaum’s image that he would give as present when asked for his photograph.

Fig. 6



A closer look at many of the photographs in the ROSPHOTO collection shows that the photographs we consider Pictorialist actually merge Pictorialism with other trends of Russian/Soviet photography of the time: official or commercial portraiture, reportage, avant-garde, etc. This mixture is even more interesting considering that Pictorialist aesthetics and subjects were regarded as archaic and obsolete, contrary to the new and modern reportage and avant-garde. Yet some photographs testify to the use of Pictorialist traditions alongside other contemporary methods. For example, the staircase by Mikhail Vitoukhovskiy can be defined both as Pictorialist for its optical softness and chiaroscuro effect and at the same time avant-garde in its choice of subject, viewpoint, and dynamics and rhythm of abstract forms.

Fig. 7



Or consider two works by **Max Alpert** (1899–1980), a photographer primarily known for his wartime reportage, photo-stories, and portraits of Soviet workers for *Building USSR* magazine. These photographs show another face of Alpert's reportage and portraiture: the Pictorial qualities in the softness of contours, the glow of the sitters' white capes, and the lack of accidental, superfluous details inevitably present in reportage photography that Pictorialists of course aimed to eliminate. These specific aesthetics lend the portraits a somewhat surreal, staged feeling.

Fig. 8



This brief text serves both to give an overview of ROSPHOTO's collection of "Pictorialist" photographs and to argue for a reassessment of the Pictorialist title in this context, given that many works merged the Pictorialist tradition and aesthetics with other contemporary genres in photography. Further research in this direction would undoubtedly provide more insight into the exchanges and relationships between contemporaneous genres and approaches in photography and visual art in Russia/Soviet Union in the first half of the twentieth century and into the influence of the cultural and political circumstances underpinning these changes and interrelations.

In addition to early- and mid-twentieth-century works, the ROSPHOTO collection also owns works by many contemporary Russian artists who declare themselves followers of the Pictorialist tradition. These Moscow and St. Petersburg photographers employ optical and technological methods characteristic of Pictorialist photography and, like Pictorialists, turn to similar, eternal topics that eschew modern trends and are often deeply symbolic in nature. These artists also use photography as a means of artistic expression, not as a practical application for creation of images, linking them further to the Pictorialist tradition.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10



ROSPHOTO (www.rosphoto.org) was founded in 2002 (first as the National Centre for Photography) as a subdivision of the Ministry for Culture of the Russian Federation to preserve national photographic heritage and further develop and popularize photography in the country. ROSPHOTO, now conveniently located in downtown St. Petersburg, next to St. Isaak's Cathedral, operates three exhibition halls, a restoration laboratory, scientific expertise laboratory, photo studio, conference hall, library, and museum shop.

Since 2008 ROSPHOTO has been in charge of the federal Program for Preservation of Russia's Photographic Heritage, by appointment of the Ministry for Culture. The program is aimed at the discovery, research, preservation and communication of photographic collections in state-run museums, archives, libraries etc. Its mandate includes collecting data about Russia's state photographic collections through annual conferences and publications, which will result in the upcoming publication of a general catalog of the state photographic holdings.

ROSPHOTO has tackled the topic of Pictorialism over the past several years. In 2002, the institution held a large exhibition of Pictorialist photography 1890-1920 from state and private collections. In 2011 ROSPHOTO displayed the works of 25 contemporary St. Petersburg Pictorialist photographers, followed in 2012 by a retrospective exhibition of St. Petersburg photographer Lyudmila Tabolina.

Illustrations:

Fig.1. Alexander Grinberg. Untitled (Hands). 1921. Toned silver gelatin print. 13.0 x 18.9 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.2. Sergey Ivanov Alliluev. Jesters. 1928. Bromoil (?). 19.3 x 16.5 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.3. Vasily Ulitin. Portrait of the Future. 1924-1925. Silver gelatin print. 27.0 x 21.7 cm. Attached on cardboard mat are labels of 1924 Photography Exhibition in Moscow. 1926 Photography Salon in Paris. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.4. Mikhail Vitoukhnovsky. Untitled (Portrait of a girl). 1929. Silver gelatin print. 17.4 x 12.6 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.5. Moisey Nappelbaum. Untitled (Wife and daughter of V.N. Kononov seated on a sofa). 1910s. Silver gelatin print. 15.5 x 10.7 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.6. Moisey Nappelbaum. Portrait of Lenin. 1918. Silver gelatin print. Negative retouching. 15.5 x 11 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.7. Mikhail Vitoukhnovsky. Untitled (Stairs). 1920s. Silver gelatin print. 17.5 x 23.5 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.8. Max Alpert. Untitled (Two highlanders). Kashtani. North Caucasus. 1930s. Silver gelatin print. 22 x 17.5 cm. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.9. Alla Poletayeva. Fishing Nets. 2011. Silver gelatin print. ROSPHOTO collection.

Fig.10. Lyudmila Tabolina. From Snow in May. 2007. Silver gelatin print. ROSPHOTO collection.

Maria Gourieva, an independent researcher and lecturer in photography and visual arts, earned a Ph.D. in cultural studies at St. Petersburg State University in 2010. From 2004 to 2013 she headed international projects for the State Museum and Exhibition Centre for Photography ROSPHOTO, and in 2012 and 2013 she taught the history and theory of photography at St. Petersburg University of Technology and Design. Gourieva currently teaches curatorship at the State University of Culture and Arts, as well as an introduction to museum conservation at St. Petersburg State University.