

Behind the Image, Beyond the Image

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Yuri Pimenov's *Portrait of Architect Burov* The Image of the Era

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Abstract This article overviews the image of Andrey Burov, a constructivist architect, an innovator, a publicist and a former student of VKHUTEMAS, in the portrait created by Yuri Pimenov. The architect's image encodes a whole layer of culture of that period, the openness of Soviet artists and architects of the 1920s to the world art trends, their awareness of the world as a single whole moving towards progress and of humanity on the threshold of grandiose positive changes.

Keywords Pimenov. Burov. Constructivism. Architecture. Society of Easel Painters.

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1 Introduction

In Yuri Pimenov's painting *Portrait of Architect Burov*, the artist depicts Andrei Burov exactly as he was in real life – an extravagant and bright man, an active propagandist of new views and ideas, almost an icon of the new age. The background for his figure is an antique sculpture and a graphic sheet that resembles one of Burov's sketches for his constructivist architectural design of a state farm to be used as a backdrop for Sergei Eisenstein's film *The Old and the New* (*The General Line*, 1929), and that at the same time refers to the elements of the Villa Savoy by the architect Le Corbusier, Burov's idol.



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Encrypted in the appearance of the architect is a whole cultural layer of that period, the openness of the masters of the 1920s to the world art trends, their awareness of the world as a single whole moving towards progress, and of humanity on the threshold of grandiose positive changes.

2 **Portrait of Architect Burov**

Andrey Burov (1900-1957) was an outstanding Soviet architect-urban planner, a set designer, an engineer and an inventor. In the 1920s, Andrey Burov was a proponent of constructivism; he was a member of the Organization of Contemporary Architects led by constructivist architects - Vesnin, Gan and Ginzburg. In 1926, Burov was a member of the editorial board of *The Modern Architecture* magazine published by the Organization of Contemporary Architects. He actively participated in creative discussions organised by the magazine, and promoted new views and ideas. Many of his design works reflecting new trends and the nature of modern architecture were published on the pages of the magazine. This overview, however, focuses not on his architectural work, but on his portrait created by Yuri Pimenov in 1927 (1928?) and on the way this painting may reflect modernity. Although the painting itself does not exist anymore, the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery includes a copy of the work created by the artist decades later, in 1972.

Fortunately, not only do we know that this portrait existed, but we also have a rare opportunity to compare the author's copy with the original, as it was reproduced in the *Iskusstvo* magazine as a part of Zinger's article (Zinger 1973, 25) devoted to Pimenov's portraits. So that the art critic could illustrate his article, Pimenov coloured the black-and-white photograph of the portrait and presented it to Zinger. Later Pimenov made a painted copy of the portrait. As I have mentioned before, the original artwork does not exist any more; it was either lost or destroyed by the artist himself. It happened because after a deep depression that Pimenov plunged into in 1931 and that lasted until the summer of 1932, the artist radically changed the style of his works from neorealism with tendencies to German expressionism to his own version of impressionism. This shift transformed his artistic vision, as well as his attitude to the early works. It is known that Pimenov ruthlessly ruined his early paintings. Even those canvases that were already in the museum collections he first exchanged for later works created in the new style, and then destroyed. Thus, quite a few of the paintings were lost for good. Many masterpieces by Pimenov from 1920s are presently known only from black-and-white reproductions in old magazines and exhibition catalogues. That is why the existence of a late author's version of the portrait is so re-

markable. Probably, in the 1970s, Pimenov reassessed his art again concluding that the early paintings, at least, had the right to exist. This explanation is supported by the fact that in 1974 Pimenov, together with a group of artists – ex-members of the Society of Easel Painters, one of the most famous Soviet New-Figurative art groups of the 1920s (Konstantin Vyalov, Andrey Goncharov, Nikolai Denisovskiy, Alexander Labas, Sergey Luchishkin, Evgeny Melnikova, Alexander Tyshler) –, signed a letter addressed to the Deputy Minister of Culture of the USSR Popov that concerned the organisation of an exhibition of the Society of Easel Painters in the State Tretyakov Gallery. This exhibition, according to the artists themselves, was of ‘artistic, vital and modern significance’.

When creating Burov's portrait, Pimenov was a young but already well-known artist, a graduate of VKHUTEMAS, a contributor of the *International Exhibition in Dresden*, a theatre designer, an illustrator of the magazines *Samolet*, *Krasnaya Niva*, *Sovetskij Ekran*, one of the creators and a participant of three exhibitions of the Society of Easel Painters. According to an art critic Fedorov-Davydov:

Их картины полны движения, ни одна фигура не покоится, каждая форма показана вразвертывании. Это очень характерная черта урбанизма. [...] в их творчестве можно усмотреть черты будущего. И их мы назвали-экспрессионистический реализм. (Fedorov-Davydov 1975, 15)

Their paintings are full of movement, not a single figure rests, each form is shown in unfolding. This is a very characteristic feature of urbanism. [...] In their work one can see the features of the future. And we call them expressionistic realism.¹

In the portrait, the architect is depicted sitting against the background of an antique sculpture and a graphic sheet attached to the wall. This drawing is one of Burov's sketches of a dairy farm design for the film by Sergei Eisenstein *The Old and the New*, and it possesses certain elements of the Villa Savoy by Le Corbusier. The architect's personality is represented through his professional and taste preferences. The book lying in his lap and open on a page with a drawing of a profile and a key is also ‘talking’. In the original version of the painting, the antique sculpture in the left part of the composition was a statue of a man, in the author's copy of 1972 it is a female torso. This difference may have a completely personal explanation – after the 1930s, Pimenov generally preferred female images to male ones. Wanting to accentuate the image of a rationalist architect and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.

his contemporaneity, Pimenov depicts Burov sitting on a console chair designed by Marcel Breuer.

Burov is sitting in a tense and even uncomfortable pose, as if deep in thought. He is clenched within the framework of the portrait; he is almost ready to jump up from his chair and rush into the future open to him alone.

To emphasise the modernity of his hero, Pimenov seems to refer to the magazine illustration for the article *Mechanics of the Soul* (Alchevsky 1927, 11), which described some physiological aspects of the brain as a part of a new understanding of human physiology. Here we can see the same components – a key and a human profile. However, this is just a version, and other explanations may be plausible.

3 Portraits in the Paintings by the Masters from the Society of Easel Painters

In the 1920s, Yuri Pimenov did not often turn to the genre of a male portrait. Presently known are only the *Portrait of architect Burov* and the drawing *Artists in the Studio* (1928, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), where Pimenov depicts himself and his friend Andrei Goncharov, a fellow student at VKHUTEMAS and a fellow member of the Society of Easel Painters, from the back.

The artists of the Society of Easel Painters quite often portrayed their colleagues – artists, actors, directors and art-historians. A typical example is a cubistic portrait of Konstantin Vyalov painted by Deineka, another member of the Society of Easel Painters. A year later, Deineka painted his lover, the artist Paula Freiberga, in a style created under the influence of his VKHUTEMAS teacher Vladimir Favorsky. Peter Williams, one of the founders of the Society of Easel Painters and a future famous theatre designer, created a painting recognised by the members of the Society of Easel Painters themselves as a standard of new techniques – *Portrait of Vsevolod Meyerhold* (1925, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). The famous theatrical director is depicted against the background of a constructivist backdrop designed by Lubov Popova for the play *Zemlia Dybom*. In the painting *Acrobat* (1925, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) Williams shows his wife, an actress Anna Amkhanitskaya, as an Acrobat from the play *The Mandate* staged at the Meyerhold Theater. They are depictions of a new being and represent a new figurative manner of painting meant to reflect the time.

4 **Burov's Design of a State Farm for Sergei Eisenstein's Film *The General Line*, and the Constructivist Architecture**

In 1926, Burov was invited by Sergei Eisenstein to design the set for the film *The Old and the New*. Burov envisioned the architecture of the state farm not as something extravagant made 'for the cinema' or to reach 'decorative effects as an end in itself'. He wanted:

Через фильм провести в жизнь новые методы индустриализированного сельского хозяйства и оформление самих построек, исходя из новых материалов и конструкций. (Rzhekhina, Blashkevich, Burova 1984, 57)

Through the film to implement new methods of industrialised agriculture and construction, based on new materials and structure.

Studying at VKHUTEMAS at the same time as Burov and being an impressionable and receptive person, Pimenov could hear Burov's brilliant and extremely emotional speech dedicated to his work on the film *The Old and the New*. V.F. Markuzon recalls that Burov was full "целеустремленной уверенности и непринужденности" (of purposeful confidence and ease), and seemed to him "доблестным воином-одиночкой на поле архитектурных распрей" (a valiant lone warrior on the field of the architectural strife) (Markuzon 1980, 236). Later, in an interview with the art critic Zinger, Pimenov admitted that he painted the portrait with great passion, and considered it to be "программно-конструктивистским" (program-constructivist) (Zinger 1973, 24).

Burov wrote about the architecture of the state farm:

Трудно говорить об архитекторе как о декораторе в кино, потому что работа его не может и не должна быть названа декоративной в общепринятом смысле. И вот почему: кино открывает возможности архитектору вообще всем нам осуществить такие задачи, которые до сих пор в силу целого ряда обстоятельств в жизнь проведены не были. И поэтому архитектор работает в кино не как декоратор, а как архитектор. (Burov 2000, 8)

It is difficult to talk about an architect as a decorator for a movie, because his work cannot and should not be called decorative in the generally accepted sense. And here's why: cinematography opens up opportunities for the architect, and generally for all of us, to carry out such tasks that have not yet been carried out due to a number of circumstances. And that's why an architect works on a movie set not as a decorator, but as an architect.

The article "The New Clientele of Architect Le Corbusier" quotes the words of the master himself:

Со стороны архитектурной, совхоз "Генеральной линии" имеет все данные носить название образцовый и что здания, которые я привык видеть на западе в качестве вилл и особняков, в рабоче-крестьянском государстве строятся для утилитарных сельско-хозяйственных нужд. (V.S. 1928, 5)

From the architectural point of view, the state farm in *The General Line* has everything to be called exemplary... The buildings that I used to see in the West as villas and mansions, in the country of workers and peasants are built for utilitarian agricultural need.

According to Sergei Eisenstein and Grigory Alexandrov:

Образцовый совхоз - это форпост новой, еще нарождающейся сельско-хозяйственной культуры [...] не смотря на идеи "натуралистического подхода" к кино [...] идеи пропагандизма одержали вверх над смущением и совхоз был построен. (V.S. 1928, 5)

An exemplary state farm is an outpost of a new, still nascent agricultural culture. [...] Despite the ideas of a 'naturalistic approach' to cinema. [...] the ideas of propaganda won over the embarrassment, and the state farm was built.

The influence of Eisenstein's films was so great that Konstantin Vyalov, a member of the Society of Easel Painters, created a large canvas entitled *Eisenstein and Tisset on the Set* capturing at once two of Eisenstein's films, *The General Line* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, in the process of filming, with the entire composition emphatically placed within the movie frame.

Pimenov, of all the members of the Society of Easel Painters, appealed to the constructivist architecture in his drawings and paintings most frequently. The process of filming *The Old and the New* might have inspired the drawing *On the Agricultural Film Set*. In the foreground we can see two milkmaids walking widely with buckets, and a bull, and the background, which the bull is looking intently at, shows small and comic figures of the film crew members fussing around the camera tripods.

It appeared in Burov's architectural setting for Eisenstein's film praised by Le Corbusier himself, and inspired the interior of the Pimenov's *Dairy Factory* (1930, private collection), which seems to illustrate the image of the future from the plays by Vladimir Mayakovsky: a perfect organisation and order, the sterility and white-

ness of the newest workshops flooded with sunlight from big constructivist windows. Pimenov's workers demonstrate a whole range of mental states – from joy to intense curiosity.

In 1928, being impressed by the architectural appearance of the state farm building, Yuri Pimenov, illustrating *Sonny and the Kid*, a children's book by Ch. Roberts, uses this very building as a backdrop for a happy cow family, pigs and chickens. Horizontal black-and-white stripes of ribbon windows are placed in the background of almost all of the illustrations for the book *Pets*, and later in one of the illustrations for Zharov's book *Spring-Autumn* – though like an echo, with the concreteness of the image, its objectivity almost lost.

Pimenov drew and painted modernity with passion, he thought that everything “наисовременное” (most modern) (Pimenov 1951, 390) was worthy depicting. “Горячий, стремительный, напористый... непосредственный и впечатлительный” (Hot, impetuous, assertive [...] direct and impressionable) (Goncharov 1973), he acutely felt the pulse of time and created accurate and emotional images of every day. The architecture of constructivism is a frequent ‘guest’ in the artist's graphics. For example, in the foreground of a sketch for the poster *We Build* (1929, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) we see characters whose multidirectional movements create an impression of a real street bustle. Workers and employees here are hurrying on business, chatting, or even are about to go skiing. And all these activities are depicted against the background of constructivist buildings.

In the painting *Running* (1928, location unknown), the expressive figures of athletes with elongated proportions emphasising their final exhausting push for a record are against the background of a rainbow, a flying seaplane and the strict forms of the new architecture accentuated by the horizon line. It should be noted that the prototype of the building depicted on the right was the house built by Andre Lursa in 1925 in Versailles; its photos were published in *The Modern Architecture* magazine. It means that Pimenov does not always just fantasise when creating architectural images, he, welcoming everything latest, utilises both ready-made domestic and foreign examples, feeling his art as a part of the world art process.

From the 1920s, Pimenov often turned to the theme of the transforming Moscow, inspired by the signs of the new in its appearance. In the drawing *Rain* (1929) for the magazine *Krasnaya Niva*, depicting no specific topography and without any accuracy of architectural details, he places in front of the buildings of different centuries a huge constructivist structure, the prototype of which was the house of the cooperative *Dukstroy*. Somewhat transforming the facades of the real building, the artist enhances the cutting-edge modernity of the new Moscow architecture.

Most likely, the same house with balcony railings made of thin metal pipes appears in two more paintings: *New Houses* (1929, location un-

known) and *Children on the Balcony* (1929, Ludwig Museum, Cologne). The first work shows a young woman in the interior of a newly built building, with a constructivist block of the renovated city seen in the distance. Even the plants in pots are not petty-bourgeois ficus trees or palm trees, but serene cactuses. The laconic interior corresponds to the concept of the functional simplicity and cleanliness of a modern home, or a dream of it. The painting was presented in 1930 at the *Exhibition of Works on Revolutionary and Soviet Themes* in the section *New Life* (as opposed to the 'old, dirty, uncultured life'). The work *Children on the Balcony* is also devoted to the same idea. Here, the figures are shown in the light cage of the balcony, in the height of the shining blue sky; they seem to belong to the world of air and sun. The style that Pimenov chooses for these two works is close to metaphysical painting and New Objectivity. In these paintings, united by the theme 'guests in a new home', the artist captures the present and dreams about the future.

I would like to return to the cactus as a motif in Pimenov's oeuvre of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In addition to *New Houses*, cactuses feature in A. Goldman's ex-libris (1930s, The Krasnodar Museum). The very way Pimenov depicted succulents evidences his awareness of the 1920s German art; for example, the painting *Cacti and Semaphores* by Georg Scholz (1923, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), *Cacti and Ink* and other works by the masters of the New Objectivity, such as Alexander Canoldt, Fritz Burman, Wilhelm Hayes, Franz Lenk, etc.

In 1920s, German still-life's featured these southern prickly plants with fleshy stems as the central motif. Cacti became popular and even fashionable after appearing in American cinematography. Later, they were a favorite subject in German photography, for example, in works by Albert Renger-Patch, and then in painting. In 1925, Adolf Wortmann wrote poetically:

Aren't cacti vegetal crystals, living architecture? [...] Is our newly awakened love for these abstract geometric plants not to be compared with our efforts to design spaces out of the fundamental forms of delimitation, the sphere and the cube? [...] We struggle to achieve the clear, chaste, and naive form. We are tired of what is digressive and capricious. We want laws. For the meaning of being human is the will to form, to the cosmos. (Wortmann 1925)

The constant repetition of this motif in German painting is, on the one hand, the realization of a passion for everything exotic, and on the other hand, a tribute to the plasticity of the New Objectivity, for which the fleshy faceted stems suited perfectly. For Pimenov, depicting the cactus is emphasizing the novelty and modernity of the interior and its inhabitants.

5 Conclusion

In the late 1920s, Soviet fine art began to utilise the spectacular, cutting-edge forms of functional architecture to denote the pulsating time rushing forward. The images of buildings acted as a symbol of total renewal – the displacement of the old world, the replacement of the former forms by the modern ones. Images of buildings made of glass and concrete became an indispensable part of magazine reports about the ‘unstoppable’ growth of Moscow. They were almost invariably provided with propaganda titles: ‘Every victory on the housing front is a victory of a new way of life’ or ‘From dark basements and damp corners’. The new architecture was given a role – to serve as a ‘visual aid’, as a tool that transforms the consciousness of the masses.

In the portrait of Andrey Burov, a constructivist architect, an innovator, a publicist, a former student of VKHUTEMAS, Pimenov depicts him exactly as he was in real life – an extravagant and bright person, an active propagandist of new views and ideas. This portrait has a clear association with the time of the roaring 1920s. A whole cultural layer of that period is encrypted in the appearance of the architect: the openness of the masters of the 1920s to the world art trends, their awareness of the world as a single whole moving towards progress, of humanity on the threshold of grandiose positive changes.

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