

## Plenary Talk

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**Title:** Imag(in)ing Revolutionary Evolution in Apes and Humans in the 1920s: The *Ages of Life* Sculptures at the Moscow Darwin Museum.

### Abstract:

From its inception in 1907, the Darwin Museum in Moscow was deeply committed to using artworks (especially paintings and sculptures) to support and illuminate the shifting and sometimes competing contemporary concepts of evolution in the West and Russia. The museum was officially adopted by the Higher Women's Courses section of Moscow University in 1914. After the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, its position within the new Soviet Moscow State University was confirmed. Throughout this time (and indeed until 1964), the museum remained under the directorship of Professor Aleksandr Kots - a zoologist and ornithological expert - and his wife, Nadezhda Ladygina-Kots - a zoo-psychologist and ape-researcher initially interested in the possibilities of "evolutionising" apes through education.

In the 1920s, the chief museum artist was Vasilii Vatagin, who is now well-known, at least within Russia, for his extremely accurate animal and nature paintings, while perhaps being better known in the western art market for his geometrical abstract works of the early Revolutionary period. Significantly for this paper, in 1926 Vatagin produced for the museum two rather curious, apparently symbolic, plaster bas-relief sculptures entitled *Ages of Life*. One of these sculptures represents the reproductive cycle and sociability of Orangutans and the other represents those of human women.

There is currently no explanation of these works provided by the museum either in its official publications or in its archives so far as I can find, despite the fact that the sculptures are still very prominently displayed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor gallery of the current museum. So the main question addressed by this paper is: what may these sculptures be about, given the context of their production? Supplementary questions to be addressed are: to what notion/s of post-Revolutionary Darwinism, and indeed other potentially related, politically driven concepts might they also refer?

In conclusion, I will suggest that while there is a sense in which the sculptures were a memorial to Ladygina-Kots' ape research at the Darwin Museum, the complex imagery in the sculptures also relates specifically, not only to contemporary early Soviet crypto-Lamarckian theorisations of the Revolutionary evolution of the "New Man", but also to the speculative "evolutionising" ape research of I. Ivanov and Ladygina-Kots in the 1910s-1920s, as well as to contemporary Soviet propaganda on hygienic motherhood as a pathway to the generation of the Soviet "New Man". Moreover, I will suggest that the pair of sculptures share a projected positive vision of what Foucault would call "docile bodies" – both ape and human - scientifically objectified and medicalised to serve the interests of the new state.

(424 words)