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

Introduction

[SLIDE 2] 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 the early 1960s), 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 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 2nd 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: why were they commissioned in 1926? 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 Ilia 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.

The *Age of Life* Sculptures: Some General Points

The *Age of Life* sculptures are large, cast and carved plaster reliefs. Both are 0.8m deep at the base and 1.3m wide. The orangutan piece is 3.1m high and the other slightly shorter at 2.6m high. Why might Kots have commissioned such large works from Vatagin in 1926? One likely incentive was a Decree issued by the government in that year, responding to Kots pleas with the promise of a new and larger museum building.¹ Although it never materialised, the hopes of more exhibition space may have prompted not only the commissioning of these works, but also in 1927 of a monumental sculpture of *Seated Darwin*, and a taxidermised African elephant.² Moreover in May 1926, a speech by the historian and art critic K.S. Kogan particularly emphasised the need for, and political value of monumental art works in places "which attract people in their thousands".³ Additionally, since 1925 Vatagin's art work had been shown in the International Expositions of Art in Paris and Venice and in 1926 gained favourable reviews from the leading art critic Yakov Tugen'khold and from the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky himself.⁴ What better way to demonstrate the museum's political correctness and worthiness of new premises than to commission monumental art works from an artist admired by Lunacharsky.

¹ Picturing Evol, p.159, fn.21

² Ibid. fn.22.

³ Ibid. fn. 23.

⁴ Ibid. fns 24 & 25

[SLIDE 4] Indeed, the choice of the relief format may have been another piece of political correctness, as Vatagin had used this format for a memorial to the medieval icon painter Andrei Rublev that was accepted by Lenin's "Campaign for Monumental Propaganda" in 1918. This too had been made of plaster and suffered the same fate as the other temporary monuments to revolutionary or Russian working class "heroes", that replaced Tsarist military and other memorials during the short-term "Campaign". Although a cast of Rublev's head resides in the Darwin Museum archive as shown in my slide, the original sculpture dissolved because it was placed outdoors, unlike the *Age of Life* sculptures that have survived due to their indoor locations. [SLIDE 5] One last point to make here is that, the *Rublev* monument and *Ages of Life* sculptures potentially shared a Russian Symbolist approach – ie. visually encrypted references to concepts and constructs – which Vatagin had absorbed in his pre-Revolutionary training at the shared atelier of the Symbolist sculptor Ivan Dudin, and the painter Konstantin Yuon – famous for his post-Revolutionary work, *New Planet*, 1921.

[SLIDE 6] The *Age of Life* sculptures may have been conceived of as a narrative pair, but they are not identical twins or mirror images of each other. The subject matter – orangutans and people - the modes of facture – rough for the orangutans and smooth for the humans - even the heights of the works are different. This rather suggests that, despite sharing a basic Darwinian theme regarding the evolution of humankind from apes, as stated in *Origin of Species* (1858), that each work requires a different form or level of interpretation in relation to the context of 1926. So now I am going to look at the potential contextual reference points for each sculpture individually, although, clearly there will inevitably be some overlaps.

[SLIDE 7] *Age of Life: Age Variability in Humankind, 1926*

In the representation of the women – subtitled *Age Variability in Humankind* - there are smooth, almost neo-classical, idealised bodies. The mass of figures are clearly delineated, ordered, healthy-looking, slender, and seem to be represented as co-operating across the generations. There is no famously Darwinian "struggle for existence" represented, and it seems easy to read the life-cycle narrative from baby to child, to nubile woman, then from mother to mature woman and crone. The nudity of the youngest figures might be

associated with childhood innocence. The pose in which the nude, nubile young woman is depicted seems to offer a fairly stereotypical, western “arty” image of sensuous female body-consciousness, parallel, for example, to that of Rodin’s *Toilette de Venus*, (1885). Vatagin, who was known to have been interested in the work of Rodin and other late C19th French artists,⁵ would have had access to such images in the pre-revolutionary period at the homes of the Moscow mercantile art collectors, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, as well as after the Revolution at the Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow, where these, now sequestered collections were displayed.

While Vatagin’s sculpture *Age Variability in Humankind* is a mostly a high-relief, in which most of the figures offer the illusion of three-dimensionality, there is an exception in the case of the topmost image of the mature woman in contemplative pose. This does not project far and merges fluidly with the material. The other figures’ attention seems focused on the image of the infant. The topmost figure is the only one that appears to gaze out at the viewers, as if inviting them to consider her “vision” of the life cycle. In relation to the context of production as part of the display at the Darwin Museum, this seems a deliberately stagey ploy to engage the viewers with the presented educational narrative. After all, within the post-Revolutionary context after 1924, the function of the museum displays was to tell the evolutionary story not only to undergraduate women students, but also to people who were probably illiterate.

While the imagery in this sculpture seems preponderantly female the infant depicted at the bottom of the sculpture possibly appears to be male. However, the key issue here seems to relate to the apparent definition of the evolution of humankind as particularly connected to women/reproduction. So how might this connect to the sorts of contemporary Soviet bio-political discourses, with which the Darwin Museum might have needed to demonstrate engagement in 1926? In my view, two key, interlinked aspects of contemporary discourse were paramount here – Soviet eugenics and “hygienic maternity”.

Soviet Eugenics and Hygienic Maternity

As in nationalist discourses in Europe and elsewhere, from the 1890s until the 1930s, Russian and then Soviet politicians and bio-scientists became concerned about issues of

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population degeneracy, and the possible avenues of population regeneration. The nascent Soviet Union, was already ravaged by international and internal wars and the accompanying exacerbation of already extant large-scale epidemic diseases (malaria, typhus, typhoid, syphilis, and dysentery to name but a few). Resolution of these issues was crucial to the survival of the new state. It is therefore entirely unsurprising that the Bolsheviks initially encouraged discourse on eugenics, a recent European (pseudo)-science based on the ideas of Charles Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, that held out the hope that there might be economically viable solutions to certain physical, mental and social problems within the workforce, by the exertion of certain forms of bio-social control.⁶ This is something that the Darwin Museum seems to have taken on board around 1926, in the sense that the museum can be seen to have subscribed to the 1926 volume of the *Russian Eugenics Journal* (at least). **[SLIDE 8]** Moreover, Kots was friends with the leading Soviet eugenicist, Nikolai Kol'tsov, commemorating him in the Darwin Museum collection with busts by Vatagin and the famous Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina.⁷

Central to contemporary, eugenics-inspired propaganda on regenerating the Soviet population, was the notion of "hygienic maternity". This was propagandised by the Department for Public Health, presided over by Nikolai Semashko, the Commissar for Health.

[SLIDE XX] *Age of Life: Age Variability in Orangutans, 1926*

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