# Voiceless Vanguard

## The Infantilist Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-Garde

Sara Pankenier Weld

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THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

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*Chapter One*

# Infant Art: Mikhail Larionov, Children's Drawings, and Neo-Primitivist Art

BORN IN THE CREATIVE FERMENT between the beginning of the twentieth century and the impending upheaval of the 1917 October Revolution, the Russian avant-garde came of age in a uniquely tumultuous space and time. In its confrontation with the new age defined by modernity, and later by revolution, the Russian avant-garde sought a radical disruption with the past in its search for the new art of the future. Defining themselves as *'avant-garde,'* originally a militaristic term for the vanguard that precedes the main forces both spatially and temporally, these innovative artists fought a war against time. Formed by the apocalyptic sensibility of the fin de siécle and revolutionary eschatology, the avant-garde foreswore linear time in favor of the simultaneity of an eternal present.[1] Emblematic of their war on time, primitivism offered these avant-garde artists an opportunity to reject preceding influences, revisit archaic origins in the distant past, and catapult themselves forward into the future through a new vision of art. Published in *Mirskontsa* (*Worldbackwards*) (1912)[2] and set to Velimir Khlebnikov's text that reads "Dying half-children call the dear universe / and the dying curse" (*Vselenochku zovut mireia poludeti / i umiratishche klianut*), Mikhail Larionov's graphic work shown in figure 3 displays a diminutive universe (*vselenochka*) aswarm with primitivist influences. The violent scene of the collapse of cosmic time conjures different temporal spheres as it combines the Neolithic art of the past, children's drawings, and apocalyptic visions of the future. It also collapses personal time by combining imagery of death with the idea of half-children, a fit coinage for the doubly encoded use of the infantile by adults practiced by Russian Neo-Primitivists like Mikhail Larionov.

In conflating and combining primitive influences through the imitation of prehistoric art, an unschooled artistic hand, and children's drawings, this image also raises the issue of how the equation of primitive and child, as Lévi-Strauss observed,[3] is equally unjust to all concerned. In fact,

Figure 3. *Vselenochku . . .* (*Universelet . . .*), graphic work by Mikhail Larionov in Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, *Mirskontsa* (*Worldbackwards*), 1912
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (88-B27486). Copyright © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

the primitivist framework confers a benefit only to the Western adult who categorizes them in this manner, as Johannes Fabian notes in *Time and the Other*.[4] Indeed, Larionov deploys the primitive as part of a revolution against traditional aesthetics and the art of the immediate past. Here and elsewhere, the avant-garde exploits the primitive to level the field, demolish artistic conventions, shatter accepted notions of artistic representation, and, ultimately, offer its own new view of art. In this context, Mikhail Larionov and other artists associated with Neo-Primitivism construct the child as primitive as a strategic anachronism to demolish the past even as this primitivist practice seems to provide new directions for the future of art by offering a return to origins. By recovering the supposed infancy of art, Neo-Primitivists sought to catapult the Russian avant-garde to the forefront of artistic innovation and experiment as they claimed the mantle of "primitives of the twentieth century."[5]

In the essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), Joseph Frank argues that atemporal spatial form characterizes avant-garde art and all forms of its artistic and literary activity.[6] Indeed, the avant-garde obsession with temporality and defiance of its conventional strictures by collapsing dimensions of time and space not only serves as an effective lens through which to view the artistic and literary experiments of the Russian avant-garde in

general, but also explains the avant-garde turn to the 'infant/child.' Russian avant-garde artists use the child as a strategic anachronism that offers a return to the origins of art and originary artistic perception, thereby providing an alternative artistic path forward that is not bound by previous laws of space and time. This same collapse of time not only brings the avant-garde to the child, but also, in so doing, the avant-garde adopts the eternal present of the child's concept of and experience of time. As Wilfried Lippitz writes in "The Child's Understanding of Time," citing Piaget's view, "time does not exist for children up to the age of operative intelligence."[7] Alongside other primitive sources of inspiration, the avant-garde uses the newfound infantile to embark upon a course toward formal simplification and abstraction that suited their artistic agenda. Indeed, what the Neo-Primitivists discovered and emphasized in children's art reflects more about their own artistic goals and assumptions than it reveals any essential features of children's actual art, since no primitivist enterprise can escape the limitations of the colonizing perspective that defines the other as a 'primitive' atavism. Nevertheless, this chapter explores how the avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov, along with other artists involved with "Neo-Primitivism," function within a primitivist framework when they construct the child as primitive and their own art as infantile even as they define themselves as the primitives of the twentieth century in order to stage a spatiotemporal coup in the world of art.

For modern art in general, the practice of primitivism has often been used as a device to revolt against tradition, time, and the rhetoric of linear progress. In *Primitivism and Modern Art* (1986), Robert Goldwater defines primitivism as the cultivation of 'primitive' art as a source of renewed vitality in art.[8] For twentieth-century artists confronting modernity with a critical eye, primitivism offered an alternative to the rhetoric of progress through a regressive return to mythic origins in the past. Initially, the temporal escape from modern civilization was accomplished by spatial dislocation, such as in the case of the painter Paul Gauguin, who spent most of his last twelve years in Tahiti.[9] Tellingly, this return to the past sometimes tends to be framed according to the personal past and in the language of childhood; Gauguin argued, "In order to produce something new, one must return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind."[10] Indicatively, Gauguin wished to paint "like children," as Vincent Van Gogh noted approvingly,[11] and Gauguin summed up his aesthetic in the statement, "I have gone far back, farther back than the horses of the Parthenon . . . as far back as the Dada of my babyhood, the good rocking-horse."[12] Comments such as these display the modernist primitivist's desire to shed the accretions of the historical past to reach an illusory primitivist paradise through a simulated temporal and spatial journey to a perceived place of origin conveniently constructed as 'primitive.' Indeed, this battle against tradition and time, whether the struggle against

modernity or a revolutionary rejection of the past, first brings modern artists to the child. These primitivists construct childhood as an ideal space from which to derive artistic renewal and inspiration, but, in truth, the attraction of the voiceless 'primitive' is the blank canvas it offers for the representation of what they themselves seek.

Beyond the limits of civilization, in the realm of a primitive 'other,' conveniently unable to protest or speak for itself, modern artists believed they could return to the beginning of time and rediscover the origin of art and language. Following in the footsteps of a figure like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and influenced by Romanticism, they made use of the idea of the noble savage to shed the encumbrances of civilization and reeducate themselves from first principles. By a parallel path, they rediscovered the child, conveniently close at hand, as a strategic anachronism collapsing both time and space and offering a form of access to origins. The ontogenetic fallacy that constructed the 'infant/child' in this manner was pervasive at this time. For instance, the respected Russian scientist Nikolai Morozov remarked in 1916:

> The successive stages of the mental development of the child repeat in simplified forms the prehistoric stages of development of all mankind since the time of his origin on earth. In the first sounds of infantile speech we hear the first attempts at speech by our distant ancestors; in the first scribbles of children's drawings we see their first attempts to depict the surrounding world and all that they desire to see in it. Children's drawings—these are the vestiges of epochs long since past.[13]

Apart from its dubious scientific accuracy, the ontogenetic conceptual framework endowed the scribbles and babble of the child with tremendous significance. The 'infant/child' thus seems to offer the possibility of traveling through time. Similarly, the view of the child as 'primitive' proffers tantalizing access to the origins of art and language, even as the child becomes a tool and anthropological object.

At the turn of the century, across Europe, the primitivist gaze fixated on newly discovered 'primitives' of various types, whom they viewed as standing in a privileged place outside the flow of time. These primitives of the twentieth century became the objects of the artistic, intellectual, and anthropological gaze. As George Saiko reflects in the article "Why Modern Art Is Primitive" (1934), modern art "based itself on three spheres in which kindred aims seemed to be realized: on the art of primitive peoples, on prehistoric art, and on the 'artistic productions' of the child."[14] The fallacious parallel drawn between these three forms of 'primitives' notwithstanding, this analysis of the infantile primitivism of the Russian avant-garde takes as its focus the third, namely, the artistic productions of the child. Artists practicing infantile primitivism regarded children's own artistic productions as

more spontaneous, naive, and pure than adult works. These seemed to grant access to a more expressive creative world, as would be explored further in later Surrealist movements.

Insofar as primitivism reevaluated or revitalized marginalized subjects belonging to the spatial and temporal periphery of contemporary society, it also reconceptualized the child as a strange 'other' close at hand. As if a modern-day savage, and new incarnation of the 'noble savage' of the Enlightenment and Romanticism,[15] the child represented an externalized form of access to the primitive past. The idea of child as savage also extended internally within the individual, since psychoanalysis had painted the infantile psyche as primal and savage compared to its later encrustations.[16] The primitivist focus on a distant space and time, or the spatial and temporal periphery, also applies to the avant-garde fixation on the 'infant/child,' since the child represented an opportunity for renewal of the arts from the temporal and spatial periphery of the semiotic sphere—at a maximal remove from the artistic establishment.

The imperialist context of primitivism, which similarly subjects prehistoric man, savage, and child to a colonizing gaze that predetermines their status as 'other,' reveals how primitivism proves vulnerable to a postcolonialist critique. In *Time and the Other,* Johannes Fabian discusses Claude Lévi-Strauss's critique of "the archaic illusion" that imagines the minds of children, lunatics, and the "primitive mind" as parallel.[17]

> This old evolutionist strategy of arguing from ontogeny to phylogeny (and back) is of course a classical example for 'methodological' abuses of Time: Primitive thought illuminates the thought of Western children because the two are equidistant from Western adult thought. Both represent early stages in a developmental sequence.[18]

The equation of lunatic, primitive, and child, as Lévi-Strauss observed, is equally unjust to all concerned, except to the Western adult who categorizes them in this manner and subordinates them through a hierarchy defined by time.[19] Fabian develops his critique further in ways relevant for this study when he begins to apply postcolonialist thinking to the child by asking,

> Are we to overlook that adult-child relations are also, and sometimes primarily, fraught with barely disguised attitudes of power and practices of repression and abuse? Even worse, are we to forget that talk about the childlike nature of the primitive has never been just a neutral classificatory act, but a powerful rhetorical figure and motive, informing colonial practice in every aspect. . . . Aside from the evolutionist figure of the savage there has been no conception more obviously implicated in political and cultural oppression than that of the childlike native.[20]

If the childlike native is a construct interrogated by postcolonial theory, then the present work sets out to interrogate its mirror image—the child as savage.

As in ethnography, artistic primitivism often equated the savage and the child quite literally. For example, in 1908 a Parisian art critic makes this parallel and takes the next logical step:

> "From the point of view of the arts of design," [E.-T. Hamy] says, "as from so many other points of view, savages are true children; they draw, they mess in paints, they model, like children." And Hamy claims, as others have claimed since, that where we lack evidence of savage art we can follow the aesthetic evolution of mankind in the development of the abilities of our children.[21]

After the initial assumption that constructed the child as savage, primitivism progressed through certain typical stages. The early stages of primitivism often involve a conscious collection of original works of the 'primitive' as exotic artifacts, such as the collection of African art and sculpture by Pablo Picasso.[22] Framed in a particular way, these artifacts then serve as a source of inspiration for primitivist imitations. At all times, however, the primitivist frame of reference involves a colonial gaze that constructs a strange 'other' according to a preconceived colonialist mold that proves less an image of the colonized subject than an objectifying construct that reflects the aspirations of the colonizing agent. As Marianna Torgovnick observes, "The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy."[23] Her wording underscores the usefulness of the voiceless primitive in a manner particularly apt with regard to the unspeaking *infans* that is the subject of this book. Such a postcolonialist critique applies also to the infantile primitivism of the Russian avant-garde, which collects, frames, and employs children's creative production in order to advance its own self-construction and to accomplish the radical reconfiguration of art that was its aim.[24]

In early twentieth-century Russia, the character of the avant-garde movement was uniquely bound up in the idea of revolution, which is itself a metaphor for "revolt" and tumultuous change, or a rapid rotation with respect to time and space. The elevation of savagery over civilization, and the child over the adult, should be seen within the anti-hierarchical and even carnivalesque reversal of positions that expressed the spirit of the times. The spirit of the fin de siècle and political tumult of 1905 would only build toward the 1917 Revolution, civil war, and a radical political reconfiguration with countless casualties. In the year 1909, however, as this account of the avant-garde begins, revolution remained a utopian idea and an inspiring prospect for the future. Nonetheless, the temporal orientation implicit within the term

'avant-garde,' as well as in the 'primitivism' discussed in this chapter and 'futurism' in the next, serve as an effective reminder of the revolutionary goals of this new art which sought in the distant past represented by primitivism a radical path to the future.

Beginning with the actions and innovations of Mikhail Larionov and his contemporaries, the Russian avant-garde indeed did reposition itself at the forefront of artistic innovation and shocked its audience with aesthetic spectacles. With avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov in the lead, Neo-Primitivist artists constructed the 'infant/child' and themselves as the true 'primitives of the twentieth century' in order to accomplish their own revolutionary artistic aims. Through primitivism, they sought to escape from the traditional relations that define Russia as temporally backward, spatially peripheral, and hierarchically subordinate to the West. Their assertion of artistic autonomy comes, however, at the expense of the child, who becomes a chronological construction and savage defined and delimited by preconceived ideas of linear progress that define the child as primitive.

As typical of primitivist practice, the equation of the savage and the child through essentialist definitions means that the reality and the projection cannot be distinguished. When faced with drawings by the children of artists from the World of Art movement, Fyodor Sologub perspicaciously remarked, "Charming, apart from the fact that they are still too much us, and too much in our own manner" (*Ocharovatel'no, nesmotria na to, chto eto vse eshche slishkom my, i slishkom po nashemu*).[25] The same can be said of the artwork, often by these same World of Art children, which was collected, exhibited, and imitated by Neo-Primitivist artists. As Robert Goldwater notes in *Primitivism in Modern Art,* when he distinguishes between the production of the 'primitive' and the 'primitivist,' "Nor are the productions of adults the same as those of children, however imitative their intention may be."[26] Imitation itself involves interpretation and conscious or unconscious principles of selection that construct the object of the gaze in a hypertrophied way. The same applies, of course, to the infantile primitivism of the Russian avant-garde.

## EARLY MANIFESTATIONS OF INFANTILE PRIMITIVISM

After attending the exhibition "Art in the Life of the Child" ("Iskusstvo v zhizni rebenka") held in Saint Petersburg in 1908, the Symbolist poet Maximilian Voloshin, like many other artists and intellectuals provoked by this exhibit to take an interest in children's art, asked, "Should children learn from adults or adults from children?" (*Detiam li uchit'sia u vzroslykh ili*

*vzroslym u detei?*).[27] Voloshin here alludes to Leo Tolstoy's 1862 pedagogical article which asks, "Who should learn to write from whom, the peasant children from us or we from the peasant children?" and unequivocally claims that adults should learn to write from children.[28] Tolstoy, who himself conflates peasant and child as primitive 'other,' such as when he speaks of "the pure primitive soul of a peasant child,"[29] indeed stands as a significant predecessor in the revaluation of the child as idealized primitive and his words echo in twentieth-century statements about children's creative production.

If Voloshin approaches children's art from the perspective of Symbolism, and the World of Art artist Alexandre Benois, who declared in 1908 that "all children's play is art,"[30] approaches the child's creativity from the oblique angle of his own artistic perspective, then such examples illustrate how children's art and the idea of child's play had begun to occupy a significant place in the discourse of the literary and artistic elite at the beginning of the twentieth century. The avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov and his colleagues who collaborated under the banner of Neo-Primitivism, however, constructed the child as artist-exemplar in both theory and practice. Through the practice of infantile primitivism, which involved the collection, exhibition, and imitation of children's art and led to a deepening interest in infantile perception, Mikhail Larionov and his collaborators led Russian art toward a process of formal simplification and increasing abstraction that marks the first accomplishment of infantile primitivism.

Although Russian artists and intellectuals in this period frequently construct the 'infant/child' as an abstract creative ideal, the avant-garde artists of Neo-Primitivism take this primitivist interest further by incorporating the forms of children's creative production into their own artistic practice, thereby reifying the avant-garde interest in the infantile. In so doing, Mikhail Larionov and his Neo-Primitivist colleagues led the way for the development of the infantilist aesthetic of the Russian avant-garde. Passing through the characteristic stages of primitivism, avant-garde artists' serious attention to children's art began with its private collection, continued with its public exhibition, and then received further emphasis and critical attention in the manifestoes and theoretical statements of Neo-Primitivism. Once primitivist notions of children's art and creativity pervaded all levels of artistic practice, they not only provoked imitation but also began to shape artistic development and aesthetics on a more abstract and deeper level. Through their practice of infantile primitivism, Larionov and other Neo-Primitivist artists used a model of the infantile to achieve their artistic goals of liberating themselves from artistic conventions, incorporating innovative elements in their art, and moving toward a simplification of form that charted the future course of the avant-garde. In this chapter I argue that Larionov's infantile primitivism plays

a significant role in leading him on a path toward a simplification of form concomitant with an increasing degree of abstraction.

## IN PRAISE OF BARBARISM AND THE INFANTILE

Through primitivism, Russian artists attempted to end centuries of cultural subordination to the West by reconceptualizing Russia's cultural 'backwardness' as a strength. This view of Russia's delayed development formed a recurrent strain in Russian intellectual history at least since Petr Chaadaev's "First Philosophical Letter" (1829), which lambasted Russia's anachronistic features, and the later "Apology of a Madman" (1837), which reformulated Russia's backwardness as a strength.[31] Less recognized than this prevalent theme of Russia as retrograde is the degree to which it, dating back to Chaadaev's original formulations, characterizes Russia as infantile. After commenting on how Russia is neither West nor East and stands outside of time, Chaadaev speaks of Russians as having "come into the world like illegitimate children" (*iavivshis' na svet kak nezakonnorozhdennye deti*).[32] In his opinion, nineteenth-century Russia had not yet undergone a period of "adolescence" when "faculties reach their peak";[33] he thus defines Russia, by implication, as a mere child on a linear time scale of progress.[34] Chaadaev frequently draws upon imagery of childhood as he explores the formation and education of people and compares Russians to children who cannot think for themselves: "We are like those children who have not been taught to think for themselves" (*My podobny tem detiam, kotorykh ne zastavili samikh rassuzhdat'*).[35] He detects only "some of the virtues of peoples that are young or lagging behind civilization" (*nekotorymi dostoinstvami narodov molodykh i otstavshikh ot tsivilizatsii*).[36] In his view, geography and other circumstances have infantilized the Russian people and left them in a state of immaturity and helplessness comparable to that of a child.[37] Chaadaev's cynical belief that Russians exist only "in order to teach some great lesson to the world" (*chtoby prepodat' kakoi-to velikii urok otdalennym potomkam*)[38] later becomes reformulated more positively and, indeed, this is the charge taken up by primitivism and the avant-garde as part of a broader revolutionary context. Clearly this old sense of Russia as an anachronistic, atavistic, and only marginal member of a wider Western or Eastern society contributes to the comparison of Russia to a child. The infantilization of Russia thus has a considerable prehistory already by the beginning of the twentieth century when primitivist practice begins to confront this theme and turn it on its head.

Under the banner of primitivism, the Russian avant-garde claims greater access to authentic origins, due to its temporally and spatially peripheral

position. Rejecting a Westernizing emphasis on progress and imitation of the West, Russian artists assert the value of their Slavic past and claim to possess privileged access to a deeper past through their Eastern heritage. In this way, the Russian avant-garde employs primitivism to escape from the subordinate position they were allotted by a spatiotemporal hierarchy that placed Russia behind in the rhetoric of progress and marginal with respect to European artistic tradition. Within infantile primitivism, the child emerges as a new artistic ideal that offers Russian and avant-garde art the chance to reconceptualize its weakness as a strength by reevaluating the infantile. In the revaluation of the 'primitive' subject, Russian art not only discovers a new appreciation for the infantile, but also seeks to surpass all others in constructing itself, in the guise of the child, as the true primitive of the twentieth century and rightful heir to the future.

The temporal reversal inherent in the concept of primitivism as strategic anachronism thus helped reconceptualize Russia's perceived "backwardness" as a strength. In 1909 a contemporary critic observed this shift.

> A very short while ago it was a saying that if one scratched a Russian, one discovered a barbarian. Now we understand this more correctly, and in this barbarian we find a great artistic advantage. This fund of raw material succoured by geographical and ethnographical circumstances is a national treasure-house from which the Russians will long draw.[39]

Through primitivism, Russia's dubious claim to barbarism becomes an enviable source of raw material. Interestingly, the usage of 'barbarian' and, later, 'barbarism' evokes not only the sense of 'savagery,' but also its etymological link to the apparently incoherent speech or babble of the foreign other.[40] An underlying sense of foreign speech, its strangeness and its value, recurs in the critic's language. "The Russians spoke, and everyone's attention was attracted. We were made to envy them for the remains of barbarism which they have managed to preserve. While they wish to learn from us, it turns out that they are our teachers."[41] The reversal of the relationship between student and teacher described here, in many ways comparable to Tolstoy's question of "who should learn from whom," again reflects the reversal of power positions implicit within the elevation of the primitive, savage, and infantile to the level of an ideal. The subversive revaluation of adults/teachers and children/students thus strategically relocates Russian artists to a new position of power. Importantly, however, as Caryl Emerson observes when taking a Bakhtinian perspective on Tolstoy's idea of "who should learn from whom," no real challenge to authority is possible if the terms of the hierarchy are merely reversed about the same axis (Emerson, "Tolstoy Connection" 152).[42] A carnivalesque reversal of positions does not seriously, or permanently, chal-

lenge the authority of the powers that be, just as the Tolstoyan question does not truly challenge the impossible relations of children and adults.

The reevaluation of Russia's native tradition allows for a nationalism that places Russia closer to the origins of art. Through primitivism, Russian art speaks in praise of barbarism and identifies with the barbaric. Liberated by the rejection of the West, Russian artists glorify their ties to the East. In the manifesto of "Neo-Primitivism" ("Neo-primitivizm"; 1913), Shevchenko speaks for Larionov and other Neo-Primitivists when he pronounces:

> They call us barbarians, Asiatics. Yes, we are Asia, and take pride in this, since "Asia is the cradle of nations," a good half of the blood flowing in our veins is Tatar, and we hail the Coming East, the originary source and cradle of all culture, of all Arts. [*Nas nazyvaiut varvarami, aziatami. Da, my Aziia, i gordimsia etim, ibo 'Aziia kolybel' narodov', v nas techet dobraia polovina tatarskoi krovi, i my privetstvuem Griadushchii Vostok, pervoistochnik i kolybel' vsei kul'tury, vsekh Iskusstv.*][43]

Using the metaphor of the "cradle of nations," Neo-Primitivist artists reformulate Russia's spatially peripheral position with respect to western Europe as closer to an originary source in the East. As typical of primitivism, Asia is simultaneously exoticized and praised as the cradle of nations, culture, and arts, as if Asian art reveals the childhood of all peoples. That this primitivist interest in a return to origins employs the metaphor of the cradle hints at the parallel path by which Neo-Primitivism arrived at the infantile, that is, through a search for the origin of art on an individual scale. Through primitivism, Russian art relocates itself as closer to creative sources, including the symbolic infancy of art.

The manifesto of "Neo-Primitivism" also demonstrates the connection drawn by the Neo-Primitivists between Asiatic origins and the 'primitive' art of children. Shevchenko claims that Neo-Primitivism is entirely original, since it is a unique combination of primitivisms originating in the East, in national art, and in the infantile. He writes,

> Hence, Neo-Primitivism, while deriving its genesis from the East . . . is entirely original [*samobyten*]. To a great extent, it reflects the East, e.g., in its interpretation, in its traditions; and, yet, one's own national Art also plays a significant role, in the same way that children's art does—this one of a kind, always profound and genuine primitive [*tak zhe, kak i detskoe tvorchestvo, etot edinstvennyi v svoem rode, vsegda glubokii i podlinnyi primitiv*] art in which our Asiatic origin is evident in all of its fullness.[44]

Thus, in the central treatise of Neo-Primitivism, Shevchenko underscores the value these avant-garde artists placed on children's art, or as he puts it,

"this one of a kind, always profound and genuine primitive." As he tallies the major influences on primitivist art, from Eastern traditions and national art to children's creative productions, he seems also to recapitulate the chronological stages of Neo-Primitivism, whose end point thus appears to be children's art. He expresses his conviction that children's art offers access to artistic and cultural origins.

A close collaborator of the Neo-Primitivists, the artist known as Vladimir Markov (Woldemar Matvejs) strikes a similar tone in his article on "The Principles of the New Art" ("Printsipy novogo iskusstva"; 1912).[45] Taking a colonialist perspective on the 'other,' he infantilizes the ancient peoples and the East he elevates as an ideal. He writes,

> Ancient peoples and the East [*Drevnye narody i Vostok*] did not know our scientific rationality. These were children, in whom feeling and imagination dominated over logic. These were naive, uncorrupted children [*neumnye, neisporchennye deti*], who intuitively penetrated into the world of beauty, who could not be bribed by realism or by scientific investigations on nature. While with us here, "Die Logik hat uns die Natur entgöttert," as one German writer expressed it. Our stiff indifference toward the 'babble' of the East [*k lepetu Vostoka*] and our misunderstanding of it are deeply offensive.[46]

Markov borrows from Romantic notions of the child as ideal artist and extends these characterizations also to the 'East.' His revaluation of "the 'babble' of the East," meanwhile, betrays his artistic fascination for inchoate or incomprehensible forms of expression, including infantile babble. Here, the depiction of the babble of the foreign 'other,' like the concepts of 'barbarism' and 'barbarian' in their older and etymological senses, betrays a primitivist fascination with the exoticized 'other.'

By embracing the East, the Neo-Primitivist avant-garde signals its rejection of the West. For instance, the contemporaneous manifesto of "Donkey's Tail and Target" ("Oslinyi khvost i Mishen' "; 1913), signed by Natalya Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Aleksandr Shevchenko, articulates the rejection of the West along with all else. "We, the Rayonists and Futurists, do not wish to speak about the new or the old art and still less about contemporary Western [art]" (*My, Luchisty i Budushchniki, ne zhelaem govorit' ni o novom, ni o starom iskusstve i eshche menee o sovremennom zapadnom*).[47] The Russian Neo-Primitivists suppress their debt to Western European primitivism for helping them recognize the value of indigenous sources of primitivist inspiration. Shevchenko admits, "They accuse us of imitation of western Art," and it is indeed undeniable that Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh stand as precursors of modernist primitivism.[48] Though the western European espousal of primitivism helped legitimize this new

trend in the arts, Russian Neo-Primitivism arguably had more significant national antecedents in Russian intellectual history, including Tolstoy. In the Russian context, as Camilla Gray notes, the movement for the emancipation of the serfs and socially engaged realism in the arts prepared the way for the cultural revival of the folk tradition begun at the end of the nineteenth century,[49] which led the way to primitivism. Symbolism and the World of Art movements[50] also played a role in the discovery of the child as an artistic ideal.

Rhetorically speaking, these new expressions against the West represent a self-conscious declaration of independence for Russian art that simultaneously positions the avant-garde against Russian predecessors who embraced Western influences. Indeed, Russian Neo-Primitivist artists stand in a unique position with respect to later western European counterparts in terms of the comparatively early date of their engagement with children's art, the degree of their attention to it, and its impact on their practice of infantile primitivism. Other modernist artists in Europe who collected and imitated children's art, such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miró,[51] engaged in these activities later than did Larionov, Shevchenko, and the other artists of Russian Neo-Primitivism. Thus one might note that the Russian avant-garde effectively used infantile primitivism as an opportunity to situate itself at the forefront of the internationally active avant-garde and define itself, through the child, as the perfect 'primitive' and new future of art. At the same time, the practice of infantile primitivism also helped move the avant-garde into new experimental areas.

## THE NEO-PRIMITIVIST 'DISCOVERY' OF THE CHILD

Against the backdrop of an increasing attention to children's creativity and play displayed by Symbolists and World of Art artists, the artists of Neo-Primitivism concretized the abstract and general interest in children's art. Unlike other groups, they not only spoke about the artistic significance of children's art, but also incorporated theoretical views on the infantile into their artistic practice. In their work, Mikhail Larionov and his close associates Natalya Goncharova and Aleksandr Shevchenko not only reevaluate the art of the child, but also appropriate the child as a construct for their own radical, avant-garde aims. In their Neo-Primitivist writings, activities, and artistic practice, they display their interest in children's art and its specific formal techniques. They then go further when, as artists, they seek to imitate the primitive 'other' and emulate what they see in children's art through an artificial and self-conscious simplification of means. In so doing, they derive innovative approaches to art through the implementation of new principles

of form. The impact of their infantile primitivism thus has significant repercussions for the future of non-representational art, for Neo-Primitivism and its subsequent stages help advance artistic development toward an increasing simplification of form and artistic abstraction.

Though the first stage of infantile primitivism begins with the collection and exhibition of children's art, it gradually penetrates to a deeper level. This later stage involves the imitation of specifically infantile features and a deeper influence of artistic infantilism upon their course of development. Initially, Larionov, Shevchenko, and Goncharova participated in numerous exhibitions that reveal how highly they valued children's art and its aesthetic principles. In these exhibitions, the Neo-Primitivists not only offer children's drawings equal stature and prominence in their exhibitions; they even grant the artwork of children pride of place. At the same time, however, the very process of framing often reveals how artists employ children's art to advance distinct polemical aims.

In "Children's Drawings in Russian Futurism" (1998), Yuri Molok details the contents of four exhibitions of children's drawings between the years 1908 and 1913.[52] The "Fifth Exhibition of the New Society of Artists" (1908) included an "Exhibition of Children's Drawings" containing works collected by K. Siunnenberg, S. Chekhonin, and others.[53] Over the next several years, Larionov and his avant-garde colleagues involved themselves in three more exhibitions that featured art by children. First among these was a salon entitled "International Exhibition of Painting, Sculpture, Engraving, and Drawing" ("Internatsional'naia vystavka kartin, skul'ptury, graviury i risunka") organized by the sculptor Vladimir Izdebsky between December 1909 and July 1910. It included works by a wide range of artists with links to primitivism, like the Fauves, representatives of early Cubism, the Neue Künstlervereinigung from Munich, and numerous Russians living at home or abroad. Larionov's contributions included the early painting *Gypsy Woman* (*Tsyganka*), which Kruglov rightfully calls one of the exhibit's "classic examples of native [Russian] neoprimitivism."[54] This important exhibition also included children's drawings. Indeed, as Anthony Parton observes, "Izdebsky was one of the first to recognize the artistic importance of children's drawings, and four of these were exhibited as a finale to the exhibition."[55] Yuri Molok has uncovered the "names of the artists of the children's drawings," namely, "Vitya Fedorov, Anya Vengrizhanovskaya, Armand Altman, Volodya Rodionov," who were clearly the children of the artistic elite.[56] The exhibition thus gave a prominent place to artwork by actual children, since the finale represents a rhetorically powerful position in an implicit narrative. In fact, children's art frequently appears last in a sequence, just as the development of infantile primitivism over time often tends toward increasing attention to the creative production of ever younger children, as also proves to be the case in

Cubo-Futurist poetry. Such phenomena hint at the regressive tendency of primitivism that relates to the use of the child as a strategic anachronism.

This grand exhibition was followed in 1911 by a second Izdebsky salon entitled "International Art Exhibition" ("Mezhdunarodnaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka"), where leading Russian avant-garde artists like Larionov and Goncharova played a greater role.[57] This exhibit also contained "children's drawings" (*detskie risunki*) of unspecified number and of unknown origin.[58] These drawings are listed at the end of the catalog, after the names Yakulov, Yavlensky, and Ekster, as in the previous salon they had been listed after Yavlensky and Yakovlev.[59] A participant in both exhibits, the artist Alexei Yavlensky (Jawlensky) himself collected the drawings of his son Andreas, as Paul Klee did with his son Felix, and Lionel Feininger did with his son T. Lux. Like their Russian counterparts, these artists' children grew up in a highly artistic milieu, which closely watched, valued, and collected their artwork.[60] Yavlensky, like Vasily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, seriously pursued children's art within the context of the art movement known as Der Blaue Reiter.[61] Similarly, Münter and Kandinsky began to collect children's art in 1908, Vasily Kandinsky and others mention children's art in their theoretical writings, and the almanac of Der Blaue Reiter contained thirteen works by children.[62] The most prolific and published of these child artists is Lydia Weber, whose work is attributed to her in the almanac and specifically referred to by Kandinsky in his writings.[63] As this example demonstrates, these wide-ranging exhibitions resulted in creative cross-fertilization between contemporary movements and European branches of modernist primitivism even in their use of children's art.

Larionov's participation in these two Izdebsky exhibitions illustrates his and his colleagues' proximity to the contemporary display and exhibition of children's art. The Target (*Mishen'*) exhibition he arranged in March and April 1913 provides indicative evidence of Larionov's own serious artistic attention to children's art. His interest in 'primitive' art clearly motivated the inclusion of drawings by children in his Target exhibition.

> A majority of the works on show at the Target were executed in a neo-primitive style. . . . However, to emphasize the correspondence between their own work and popular art forms, Larionov included in the Target a selection of "contemporary primitive" art.[64]

Molok provides the titles of some of these children's drawings, which give some sense of their subject matter.

> The catalogue for this Moscow show includes, along with an introduction by Mikhail Larionov, "Children's Drawings from the Collection of A. Shevchenko" (nos. 153–80), without artists' names or titles, and "Children's

> Drawings from the Collection of N. Vinogradov" (nos. 201–9, without the artists' names, but with titles: 201–2, *Cossacks;* 203, *Reading a Manifesto;* 204, *Haymaking;* 205, *Village;* 206, *Drawing;* 207, *'Little Russian' Hut;* 208, *On the River,* 209, *On the Edge of the Village*).[65]

The display of children's drawings presupposes and depends upon a primitivist interest in its ethnographic collection. The attribution of one of these collections of children's drawings to A. Shevchenko provides additional evidence that the theoretician and critical voice of Neo-Primitivism himself collected children's art. That Shevchenko's primitivist attention to children's drawings had led him to amass a collection of children's art by the year 1913 demonstrates the depth of interest leading avant-garde artists had in children's drawings at this time.

Larionov and Goncharova also collected children's art, as Jonathan Fineberg argues in his study of "Mikhail Larionov and the 'Childhood' of Russia" (1997), where he reproduces three children's drawings he traces to the original collection of Mikhail Larionov.[66] In further affirmation of Larionov and Goncharova's collector's interest in children's drawings, Molok brings forward new evidence of a visit by Larionov and Goncharova to a 1915 exhibition of "War in Children's Drawings," where they purchased several drawings by children.[67] This fact provides evidence of their sustained attention to children's art and shows that they personally collected works by children. Later evidence of their interest and collection of children's drawings in the period of their emigration also abounds, such as in collaborations with Roger Fry discussed by Anthony Parton.[68]

My own research in the archives and holdings of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow uncovered several unpublished drawings by children from the former collection of Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova.[69] This collection includes striking examples of imaginative compositions by children that share patterning features with the more abstract compositions of Vasily Kandinsky. Such highly original contributions by an unknown child artist underscore how the process of selection privileges particular works that strike the fancy of the collector, rather than being reflective of an overgeneralized category of "children's art." Other children's drawings in this collection appear more conventional, such as a girl's portrait painted with bold fields of color signed "Elena" or a simplistic pencil-line portrait signed "Vera." As both of these are signed in Latin letters, they may date from a later period than the one in question here, as also may apply to a series of ornate costume designs with collage-style details that reflect the collector's theatrical interests and tastes. A few iconic Russian landscape drawings by children reflect a distinctly Russian everyday; in this sense they resemble the everyday motifs typical of the children's works on display in the Target exhibit, as evidenced

by their titles. One watercolor clearly dates from an early time of war, since it shows a patient reading a revolutionary-era Russian newspaper titled *Early Morning* (*Rannie utro*) in old orthography,[70] while a nun faces another patient recovering in his bed. A map of European Russia, with the juncture of Russian rivers represented in detail, hangs on the wall, and a snowy landscape appears in the windows. Clearly by a child, however mature and talented, this drawing fixes its impressions in a certain reality and definite time and place—wartime Russia. Such works serve as lasting and specific artifacts of the avant-garde interest in actual examples of children's art. At the same time they also underscore how individual and non-representative children's drawings can be. Generalizations frequently do not apply. In truth, there is no reason that children's art should be any less variable than adult art is presumed to be.

The fact that significant artistic figures of the time engaged in the continued collection of children's art demonstrates their serious interest in children's creativity and artistic activities. Parton notes that "at the same time a number of artists and writers were building collections of children's art."[71] The scholar Vladimir Markov remarks in his history of Russian Futurism that the Futurist poet Vasily Kamensky collected children's drawings.[72] Publication of children's drawings by other Futurist poets, such as those published by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Elena Guro's husband and posthumous publisher Mikhail Matiushin also implies the presence of other materials by children.[73] Clearly, Shevchenko and others had collections too, since they contributed these to the Target exhibition. One "child's drawing" (*detskii risunok*) belonging to Shevchenko has been preserved (see figure 4), since it was reproduced under this label as the final plate in his volume *Principles of Cubism* (*Prinstipy kubizma;* 1913).

The fact that Shevchenko includes what he labels as a child's drawing among the illustrations for this volume demonstrates his belief in the kinship of Cubists' and children's attitude toward artistic form. He thus advances the serious study of children's art as part of his own artistic rhetoric surrounding *The Principles of Cubism and of Other Movements in the Painting of All Times and Peoples* (*Printsipy kubizma i drugikh techenii v zhivopisi vsekh vremen i narodov;* 1913). The expressive title of his volume shows a primitivist approach to art not confined by time or space, and, rather, collapsing these dimensions. In addition to images by Larionov, Goncharova, himself, and others, Shevchenko ends the volume with an anonymous illustration he labels "child's drawing" (*detskii risunok*),[74] thereby creating a similar narrative arc to that evident in the exhibitions that display children's drawings at the end.[75] The narrative message thus indicates that the regressive trajectory of modern art draws it toward the principles of 'primitive' art made evident in a child's drawing.

Figure 4. Anonymous child's drawing, page from Aleksandr Shevchenko's *Printsipy kubizma i drugikh sovremennykh techenii v zhivopisi vsekh vremen i narodov* (*The Principles of Cubism and of Other Contemporary Movements in the Arts of All Times and Peoples*), 1913
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (88-B28061)

Technically speaking, the drawing, which depicts a boat on a river and a man walking along a path, has begun to approach the use of a vanishing point in the distance and employs reasonably sophisticated stylistic techniques. The proportions and respective sizes of man, boat, trees, and birds, however, represent the perspectival naïveté of an immature artist. In *Art and Representation: New Principles in the Analysis of Pictures* (1997), John Willats discusses the development of successive forms of projection in children's drawings.[76] According to the descriptive vocabulary developed by Willats, this drawing displays the use of "naive perspective" and thus might belong to the fifth stage out of six he identifies in the artistic development of children, thus marking it as fairly mature in its technique.[77] Though records attest that Shevchenko had a collection of children's art, the possibility exists that the labeling of this "child's drawing" is spurious. Indeed, the idea of the child as primitive serves a strategic purpose and amounts to a performance of

the infantile above all. For this reason, authenticity is beside the point; what is significant is how this image is being labeled, framed, and used rhetorically here.

Within the covers of his book on Cubism, Shevchenko equates the work of accomplished artists with primitive art. Such leveling of hierarchies proves typical of primitivism, which destabilizes conventional categories and offers a new frame of reference. Through the juxtaposition he constructs, adult artwork suddenly appears infantile and the child's artwork appears adult. All avant-garde art included in the volume appears primitive or infantile by association. For example, a composition by Natalya Goncharova that includes four figures under tall trees, which also appears in later versions of the work, could easily be mistaken for a child's drawing. It renders the human form in simplified shapes, as four figures play-act a scene of violence. Two men walk stiffly, while another points his arms forward, in a gesture of real or simulated violence, at a fallen figure whose hat has flown off dramatically. By assembling these drawings together in the artistic treatise on *The Principles of Cubism,* Shevchenko shows that his praise of children's art goes beyond mere words; he visibly displays children's art and puts it forth as a model for emulation at the same time that he draws attention to the infantile features of avant-garde art.

## INFANTILE PRIMITIVISM IN PRACTICE

Close analysis of examples from Mikhail Larionov's artistic practice, meanwhile, displays how the artists of Neo-Primitivism transformed a widespread cultural interest in children's art into a determining source of inspiration and influence. Here the anthropological fascination with the creative production of the primitive 'other' reaches a later stage, where the interest in the primitive 'other' begins to deepen. The 'infant/child' gradually shifts from being the mere object of the collector's acquisitive eye to becoming the site of an idealized perspective, however limited by the painterly gaze its construction may be. Larionov's early paintings, drawings, and graphic work display this transition from an interest in the child as primitive object to a view of the child as an independent artistic subject and example for emulation.

Larionov's painting known as *A Gypsy Woman in Tiraspol* (figure 5; *Tsyganka v Tiraspole;* 1909) exemplifies the first stage of Larionov's Neo-Primitivist practice. Like its depiction of an infant toddling uncertainly, it represents Larionov's first steps in a primitivist direction. Here the painter's observing eye turns toward a Roma woman, who is displayed as a partially exposed representative of the primitive body and the exotic 'other.' The bare-breasted woman faces the artist's gaze, though her eyes, set in an expres-

Figure 5. *Tsyganka v Tiraspole* (*A Gypsy Woman in Tiraspol*), painting by Mikhail Larionov, 1909. Private collection, Paris.


sionless face, stare past the viewer. She appears unaware of the exposed and oversized infant behind her, who toddles uncertainly with his arms reaching upward toward her in a gesture of mute request. The plight of the infant (*infans*) remains unspoken. Whether closer attention has been interrupted by the artist's intrusion, or whether the child frequently escapes notice, the painter here observes and depicts the neglect of the child. In this sense, the painting marks the discovery of the infant as a new and neglected subject, following behind the exoticized other as primitive.

The animals roaming freely in the background emphasize the painter's bestial depiction of 'primitive' woman and child. In fact, the implicit movement in the painting, and the composition of animals in the background and humans in the foreground, places the naked child in an intermediate position in a continuous curve from background to foreground. It thus marks an evolutionary progression from a schematically represented furry quadruped to the line drawing of a naked pig and awkwardly ambling child to an upright woman, partially clothed and rendered in greater detail. The infant is

thus categorized, in his nakedness, with the animals. At the same time, the rounded shapes of the infant's hairless head and body are echoed by the form of the large pig behind him, while his mother's exposed breasts serve as a reminder of the mammalian nature and bestial origins of man. In fact, the mother's bare breasts mark the center of the composition; in this sense the painterly perspective echoes that of the nursling-infant and even supplants the child by drawing the attention of the mother. At the same time, the initially peripheral object of the primitivist gaze thus begins to be recognized as a subject with an independent perspective, though his own needs may be ignored.

Larionov's primitivist view of mother and child marks a radical departure from the longstanding tradition of depicting mother and child, which was established by depictions of Mary and the infant Jesus in Orthodox iconography. Comparison with the specular moment and iconic embrace between mother and infant typical of old icons, such as the twelfth-century *Virgin of Vladimir* shown in figure 6, brings this contrast into relief. Despite the passage of many centuries, the artist Viktor Vasnetsov's painting *Mother of God with Infant* (*Bogomater' s Mladentsem;* 1895) still retains the pious modesty of their garments and preserves their close embrace, though he does open their posture to the viewer through the child's outstretched arms. In contrast to this longstanding tradition of depicting the Virgin and Christ Child in close contact, Larionov breaks apart the iconic embrace to display the mother and infant separately—in a way more bare and bestial than holy. Such modern representations emblematize how the infant has become a separate subject in its own right, independent of divine parentage or destiny. Over time, as paralleled in the history of art, the representation of the infant has become increasingly infantile, rather than being portrayed as a diminutive adult.[78] In the Russian context, this increasing realism with regard to the infant reaches a certain culmination in Larionov's work, where the child is no longer the infant Jesus as spiritual ideal, but an actual infant body, rendered crudely with the simple strokes of caricature. In fact, the infant body is the most crudely and simplistically rendered, hinting at Larionov's own future path toward greater simplification through the practice of infantile primitivism. Indeed, Larionov's primitivism dramatically secularizes mother and child and brings the vantage point down to earth.[79]

As opposed to the spiritual transcendence and idealism of traditional forms of representation, art here focuses on the infant body and adopts the primitivist perspective, even as the viewer too falls from a privileged position with respect to the work of art. Larionov begins to reduce form to the simplest and most minimal lines of a 'primitive' depiction. On the one hand, the painting frames the Roma woman and her child as objects of the painter's gaze and thus entraps them within a certain conceptual frame that defines

Figure 6. *Bogomater' Vladimirskaia* (*Virgin of Vladimir*), Russian Orthodox icon, eleventh or twelfth century, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Scala / Art Resource, New York. Copyright © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

them as primitive 'other.' At this early stage, however, Larionov's painterly interest in the *Gypsy Woman in Tiraspol* and the infant who toddles behind her also implies a reevaluation of such subjects. However limited by the objectifying painterly gaze and primitivist frame, the painting communicates a certain interest and sympathy characteristic of the discovery and revaluation of 'primitive' subjects.

The peasant women Larionov observed around his native Tiraspol in this painting and in *Woman Passing By* (1909) were Larionov's first direct portrayals of peasants[80] and reveal Larionov's earliest search for 'primitives' in his midst. As Parton observes, the onset of Larionov's primitivist practice first "represented a radical departure from previous paintings in both the choice of subject and the rejection of the stylistic conventions."[81] Indeed, Larionov seems liberated by his new subject to pursue a more stark expressive style where "figures fill the canvas and are characterized by strong contours and a

bold approach to modelling."[82] The simplified rendering of the infant form thus foreshadows Larionov's path toward still greater formal simplification through the practice of infantile primitivism.

The large pig that figures in the background of this painting recurs as a quirky and absurd figure in other paintings by Larionov from this time period. For instance, the pig is characterized by its incongruous color in the painting *The Blue Pig* (1909). The title marks the pig as the main character, as does his behavior, since he strides purposefully in the foreground while the hunched human figures are preoccupied and turned away. The pig also enters into the earlier painting *Walk in a Provincial Town* (1907–8), which Camilla Gray uses as an illustration of Larionov's "child-like indifference to conventional rules."[83] With these playful and comic allusions to literary manifestations of the pig in a Gogolian tradition, these works grant an unexpected and diabolical independence to the carnivalesque creature. Having escaped its confines, the incongruous pig continues its escapades in avant-garde art and literature in this period. Pigs also assume an inordinately large role in the primitivist poetry of Aleksei Kruchenykh treated in the next chapter, such as in the collection *Piglets* (*Porosiata;* 1913) that Kruchenykh coauthored with a child. The incongruous pig and the earthy humor it represents thus has a strong association with primitivism of the infantile variety and exhibits how the primitivist carnivalesque and 'uncivilized' earthy bodies liberate the artist from traditional painterly conventions on a path toward an increasing simplification of form and line.

In the years 1910–11, after being expelled from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, Larionov performed his military service and painted a series of primitivist works inspired by the vulgarity of soldiers' lives. Often incorporating soldiers' sayings and drawings in the background as grafitti on the walls, these paintings initiate a more casual use of lettering in Larionov's art. This blurring of the boundaries between image and text represents one of the major innovations that occurs during Larionov's primitivist period. Such examples of 'primitive' and 'low' art, such as folk art and the *lubok* popular prints or shop signs and graffiti all served as important precursors for Larionov's art with regard to experiments with text, but I would argue that Larionov's playfully naive orthography particularly draws upon the example of children's scrawls. Characteristic of children's art, the casual blurring of boundaries between verbal and visual art proves to be a common feature of avant-garde artists and writers in the ensuing period, including in Cubo-Futurist books discussed in the subsequent chapter.[84] At the same time, however, one might note how self-conscious and artificial is the replication of the naive when the orthography, like other features of the painting, only mimics the haphazard positioning of letters due to inexperi-

Figure 7. *Soldat na kone* (*Soldier on a Horse*), Mikhail Larionov, 1910–11. Oil on canvas, 80.7 × 99.1 cm, Tate Gallery, London.


ence and limited motor control, while the placement of individual letters remains balanced and harmonious. The painting is thus doubly encoded as infantile and adult.

Dated to this period, the painting *Soldier on a Horse* (figure 7; *Soldat na kone;* 1910–11) is executed in a particularly childish style. Fineberg details a few childish elements.

> *Soldier on a Horse* . . . perhaps the consummate work in the series, has the same outlining and flatness in the forms as well as the same simplicity in the description of its background planes as some of the paintings by children that Larionov owned at the time, such as *Dog on a Chain.* These two works even resemble one another in the yellow accents in the grass. The strict profile employed by Larionov is a commonplace of child art, as are the boxlike rendering of the muzzle of the horse and the oddly stuck-on look of the legs on the animal's far side. In addition, the artist has *named*

> the picture, as children often do, with lettering in the sky: '8 esk' for '8th squadron' (eskadron).[85]

The use of a consistent side profile and schematic geometric fields to represent the figure of the horse resemble childish conventions, while the human figure shows a more naturalistic body shape. More convincing still is the naively aperspectival composition in the painting. Other infantile features include the use of outlining and the exaggeration of defining features according to importance, such as the soldier and horse's eyes, or the geometric simplification of the hooves, for instance. The bold use of paint and line, perceptible brushstrokes, and the preference for bright and basic colors also resemble technical features of children's art. Fineberg notes that David Burliuk "singled out Larionov's 'soldier' paintings as an example" of what he called "free drawing."[86] In this article, "Cubism (Surface-Plane)" (1912), Burliuk elaborates on this term by explaining, "The fascination of children's drawing lies precisely in the full exposition in such works of this principle."[87] Burliuk's example shows that Larionov's contemporaries also were attuned to and perceived infantile elements in his art.

Larionov's infantile primitivism reaches its peak in the numerous works included in the Target exhibition where collections of children's art were on prominent display. For the contemporary viewer, the display of children's art alongside avant-garde paintings would accentuate the commonalities apparent in the technical aspects of these paintings, such as a simplification of form, naive approach to color, and casual use of lettering. At the same time, the question of "who learns from whom?" might be turned on its head, since the children's art on display might itself be an imitation of the primitivist art of adult artists devoted to the idea of child as artist. Indeed, the practitioners of infantile primitivism rarely acknowledge how impressionable children can be or how derivative children's art sometimes is, just as any work of art belongs in a certain context. The atemporal and decontextualized attitude primitivists take toward children's art thus underscores the anachronistic goals they have for their use.

The incorporation of traces of text like those evident in *Soldier* gradually increases during Mikhail Larionov's Neo-Primitivist period, as his experiments with infantile primitivism increase in intensity and originality. Artistic and aesthetic infantilism is particularly prominent in *Venus* (*Venera;* 1912) and several works in a similar style that are associated with the *Seasons* cycle (1912). Here Larionov casually juxtaposes image and text within the frame of the piece, such as to indicate the title, artist, and date. In this sense, it resembles the labeling of works by a child artist who does not yet observe the boundaries that frame a work of art and render it inviolable. Larionov signs the work with his first name only, as if an unknown and unspecified boy

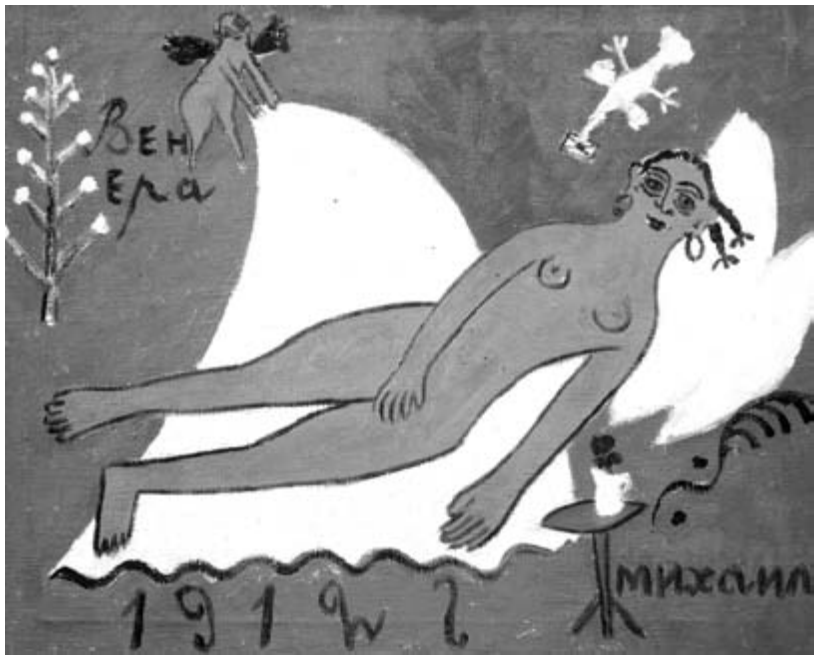


Figure 8. *Venera* (*Venus*), Mikhail Larionov, 1912. Oil on canvas, 68 × 85.5 cm, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.


named "Mikhail" and not the well-known artist identified by his surname "Larionov." At the same time, however, the careful placement of the self-consciously naive lettering betrays principles of design, alignment, and patterning that show it to be both naive and sophisticated at once.

In its composition, Larionov's *Venus* (figure 8; *Venera;* 1912) playfully confronts the conventions of artistic tradition and the portrayal of feminine beauty over the ages.[88] The artist reduces his subjects to the most basic elements of contour and line. Thick outlines render an approximate and simplified human form that lacks eroticism and sensuality; the human body has been abstracted to such an extent that the display of Venus's feminine beauty in this traditional artistic posture becomes nonsensical. It thus issues a challenge to the viewer, who does not know whether to interpret it as a naive drawing or a painting in the artistic tradition of Venus. A similar abstraction of shape occurs with the cherub, bird, and plant that ornament the upper fields of the canvas. These observe strict laws of symmetry and schematic simplification. The overly loyal geometry of the bird's feet and the reduction


Figure 9. *Osen' zheltaia* (*Yellow Autumn*), Mikhail Larionov, 1912. Oil on canvas, 53.5 × 44.5 cm, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. 

of a plant to lines and dots particularly display the infantile primitivism of the painting. Interestingly, as Willats notes in *Art and Representation,* children's drawings typically employ conventions like regions or lines to denote flat volumes.[89] These same principles apply to many plants and animals that ornament Larionov's primitivist compositions and figure in paintings from his period of infantile primitivism.

Larionov's painting *Yellow Autumn* (figure 9; *Osen' zheltaia;* 1912) preserves several of these infantile elements, even as it moves in new directions. The cherub and the bird retain their position in the upper fields of the composition where they minister to the ornamental needs of the oversized main subject of the painting. In this way, the primitivist work uses simplified shapes to toy with representational conventions in a sophisticated way, as in *Venus.* The main subject in the painting, however, is a mountainous human head. Its towering and even phallic centrality marks it as totemic and portentous, as do its placid features and oversized ornamental earrings. Like a

symbolic embodiment of "happy autumn" or a natural god able to grant one, the head even resembles an idol or Buddha reduced to simple shapes and features and even an infantile appearance. The lack of a neck or a body also typifies very young children's drawings that neglect non-salient bodily details that escape the notice of the inexperienced artist, whose world is defined by sense experience rather than conventional knowledge or schematic representation. At the same time, the fact that the figure extends beyond the frame belies greater sophistication and use of artistic conventions.

Again, the most unmistakeably infantile feature in this composition, however, is the text and title incorporated at the bottom of the canvas. The scrawled text combines print, cursive, and capital letters of various colors in a simultaneously haphazard and laborious manner. As if spontaneous and unplanned, the second word is broken into two lines rather than being centered or carefully spaced. Though the text clearly communicates the idea of a "happy autumn" through the phrase *"osen' schaslivaia,"* it employs an incongruous instance of capitalization and omits the virtually silent letter "t" in *schastlivaia.* A representative English equivalent, then, might be "happy autum." Displaying an aural mistake typical of a child whose familiarity with oral speech exceeds his or her experience with written language or linguistic roots, this text imitates lisping baby talk (*siusiukan'e*) or a speech impediment that accentuates the sibilant "s" sounds and hushers. An infantile voice is thus conjured in the very title of the piece, as if the artist performs a self-conscious and artificial imitation of a child's voice. Indeed, such a caricature of the infantile or childish proves typical of primitivism and simultaneously celebrates and denigrates the subject being viewed as primitive.

Though Larionov's typographic experiments in these works share features with other avant-garde works that experiment with the use of text, Larionov emphasizes the infantile nature of orthographic errors and phonetic misspellings. The texture of his lettering creates the illusion of inexperience, exaggerated effort, and a sense of laborious literacy through an irregular and haphazard style of lettering typical of a child's scrawl. Awkward lettering and phonetic misspellings add to the naive impression and draw attention to the texture of the lettering and the sound of the speech that it renders in an anticipation of what Formalists would term *zatrudnenie,* or retardation. In a typically primitivist fashion, oral language is celebrated over written language, just as the signifier takes precedence over the signified. Such orthographic manipulations effectively impede perception in a way that also infantilizes the audience that must struggle to interpret the text.

The main works in Larionov's cycle *Seasons* employ such lettering to maximal effect, marking the continuation of the initial impulse evident in *Yellow Autumn* and representing the high point of Larionov's infantile primitivism. The entire *Seasons* cycle was exhibited during the Target exhibition of

1913, which marked a high-water mark for infantile primitivism. A preserved photograph from the opening of the exhibition shows Larionov, Goncharova, and other contributing artists before the *Seasons* cycle, which appears to have been exhibited in the manner shown below.[90] An unusual feature of the *Seasons* cycle, which was replicated by its display pattern in the exhibition, is the division of the composition into irregularly partitioned quadrants, just as the four were displayed in a somewhat irregular arrangement. In each painting in the series, a selection of laboriously lettered text is sequestered in one of the lower quadrants. Another quadrant features a large humanoid shape engaged in a seasonally symbolic action. Finally, the remaining two quadrants are smaller in size and depict supporting images, scenes, or actions. The harmoniousness and balance of these compositions, even if their substance is infantile, still betray a sophisticated sense of design and balance.

Each painting in the *Seasons* cycle, such as *Winter* (*Zima*) shown in figure 10, contains a simple poetic text written in a childish scrawl of irregular

Figure 10. *Zima* (*Winter*), from the *Seasons* cycle, Mikhail Larionov, 1912. Oil on canvas, 100 × 122.3 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

and laboriously drawn letters. In Fineberg's words, each contains "a saccharine little poem such as children write about the seasons" (*Innocent Eye,* 38). The four naively descriptive poems can be translated as:

> Spring is cl/ear Beau/tiful With / bright / colors / With white / clouds / Summer is sweltering With / stormy clouds / with Scorched / earth With blue / sky With ripe grain / Fall is happy / Shining like / gold With ripen/ed Grapes With tipsy / Wine / Winter is / cold snowy / windy Bliz/zard enveloped and shack/led with ice

Fineberg comments on the visual impact of this use of text and reacts to the infantile impression created by its delivery.

> In these poems the block lettering, the lack of punctuation, the awkward hodgepodge of cursive and printing, lowercase and capitals, variant sizes, and random mistakes in spelling, all seem as deliberately childlike as the poetry and form in Aleksei Kruchenykh's contribution to *Worldbackwards,* created just a few months after these paintings, in the same year, and containing illustrations by Larionov in his neo-primitivist style.[91]

Fineberg rightly notes its interrelationship to Kruchenykh's Cubo-Futurist works, which are treated in the next chapter. One might add that the casual disruption and relocation of writing due to the presence of unexpected margins also replicates children's behavior and spontaneous accommodations to available space while writing. Here the adult artist performs an infantile spontaneity. John Malmstad also examines the interplay of word and image in Larionov's art and mentions the *Seasons* cycle briefly in this context, though his discussion of this theme mainly focuses on its resemblances to graffiti and the crude slang of the soldier.[92] When regarded within the context of infantile primitivism, however, such misspellings and laborious orthography have a decidedly infantile effect. Indeed, the infant/child on the verge of oral and written language and pictorial representation perceptually inhabits the juncture of word and image; for the illiterate child little distinction exists between image and text. For the adult consciously aspiring to this effect, however, the message becomes doubly encoded as infantile, on the one hand, and as an adult performance of the infantile on the other.

The text, as well as the visual elements of the picture, display a childish aesthetic. The regularity of their enumerative rhythm and the repetitiveness of sounds and structures produce an incantatory effect. The poems revel in the rhythm and sounds of strings of simple associations provoked by the name of the season. The simplicity and repetitiveness of the language and its underlying grammar resemble exercises given to children, as well as the spontaneous verbal play of children. As Kornei Chukovsky notes, children often string together sequences of rhymes for pure aural pleasure.[93] The

repetition of the same grammatical forms in sequence also typifies children's spontaneous talk. As the linguist Ruth Weir notes in her study of a child's private monologues, *Language in the Crib* (1962), children privately engage in extensive, repetitive practice of grammatical constructions they are working to grasp.[94] Such play with new structures just being mastered closely resembles the repetitive use of the instrumental case in these poetic texts. Incongruous capitalization and the seven-fold repetition of the preposition "with" signals its salience here. Indeed, this description of the seasons amounts to basic statements and lists of associations, as if in response to a series of simple questions about the seasons, such as "What is winter?"

The infantile effect of verbal and visual elements in the texts that accompany the *Seasons* cycle is enhanced by infantile features in the remaining portions of these paintings. Each painting features an oversized, androgynous human figure. Their exaggerated and schematic sensory organs—eye, nose, mouth, and ears—seem typical of children's early fixation on the sensory organs of the human body, which serve as the primary sources of sensual input in the infant or young child's interactions with the world. The absence of a neck also typifies children's drawings, as in the psychologically indicative and well-studied "tadpoles" of children's earliest representations of the human form, where the child artist often fuses limbs directly to the head.[95] Respective sensory importance also justifies the highly detailed illustration of exactly five fingers and toes. Apart from the head, hands, and feet, however, the plain white fields of their naked bodies lack other determining features. This lack produces a naive view of the human shape, since the lack of secondary sexual characteristics makes them entirely asexual and androgynous. In this way, these bodies are infantile, or rendered from an infantile perspective. They defy categorization and lack the markings that distinguish gender, age, and individual human types. Like the infant form, or the concept of tabula rasa associated with the newborn child, the body is blank, not yet encoded with specific meaning.

One strong color combination dominates each painting and characterizes the season portrayed. The atypical seasonal coloration includes a dark yellow in *Spring,* a nearly black blend of colors in *Summer,* a radiant dark blue in *Autumn,* and a reddish-brown in *Winter;* they thus defy the conventions of artistic tradition. Against this solid background, figures are painted largely with the addition of white and black to this base, so that the overall effect remains largely monochromatic. In the case of the jubilant yellow *Spring,* however, the figures emerge as a lighter yellow rather than the white figures in the remaining paintings, which only reflect a pale black, blue, and brown undertone. In this sense, each composition can be regarded as a free association provoked not only by the word for the season as a verbal dominant, but by the representative color as a visual dominant. This unusual

loyalty to one color also might be compared to the child's overdependence on a particular color or drawing implement, whether limited by lack of materials or simply exploring the possibilities of a single medium. It might also be explained by a short attention span. Indeed, an apparent hastiness of realization characterizes much modern art; just as infantile primitivism serves as a strategic anachronism, so does the illusion of spontaneity, however laborious or performed, help to to shed layers of sophistication. In Larionov's *Seasons* cycle, the use of color plays a key role in the naive effectiveness of these compositions, even if the uniformity of color amounts to a mere performance of spontaneity and the infantile.

Despite the irregular division of each canvas into geometric quadrants, each miniature composition and its components exhibit a strong sense of symmetry. The strong bilateral symmetry evident here is typical of children's early drawing preferences. The simple white line drawings of houses and trees in the lower left quadrant of *Winter* are rendered with bilateral symmetry and resemble chalk drawings by a child. Similarly, figures are reduced to schematic representations that represent the overall taxonomy of the referent. Indeed, children's keen attention to taxonomy has been exhibited in studies of language acquisition, which reveal that children often overextend words to apply to an entire descriptive category based on shape or taxonomy,[96] for example, dog for the category "animal" or watermelon for the category of "round things" in an example cited by Viktor Shklovsky.[97] Visual examples of such taxonomic attention evident in the *Seasons* cycle include the symmetrical flying birds that echo those in *Venus* and *Yellow Autumn.* These are accurate in a schematic sense only, since wings, legs, tail, head, and beak are given approximately equal weight in the symmetrical composition. These birds consistently appear in a bilaterally symmetrical arrangement, such as above the outstretched hands of the main figure facing forward in *Autumn* or above the wheat in *Summer.* In contrast, the dark bird depicted standing at the humanoid figure's feet in *Winter,* or the seated cat in the same painting, give no indication of having wings or legs, since this taxonomic detail has no relevance for their activity at present. Bilateral symmetry, also favored in younger children's drawings, thus prevails on the figural and compositional levels in *Seasons.* The symmetry and balance of the compositions in their entirety, however, exceed the artlessness of the naive.

Similarly, the schematically represented birds, trees, and large human figures that predominate in the paintings almost exclusively appear in a flattened frontal view. The accompanying paired human figures, marked by subtle adornments that designate them as male or female, frequently appear in profile. Bilateral symmetry often prevails on the compositional level, such as in the two human heads in profile looking at each other over a tree in bloom in *Spring* and the two human figures in profile raising their arms

toward each other from either side of a schematic tree in *Autumn.* These paintings, which show the most markedly infantile visual and verbal features among Larionov's paintings in this period, also demonstrate how Larionov begins to move toward ever greater simplification. On the model of children's drawings, taxonomic features move toward greater schematization and simplification that produce a more symbolic effect. Thus Larionov's practice of infantile primitivism helps to move him toward schematic simplification and symbolic abstraction as he begins to chart a course toward non-objective art.

## CHILDISH PERCEPTION AND A SIMPLIFICATION OF MEANS

The manifesto of *Neo-Primitivism* (*Neo-primitivizm;* 1913)[98] spells out the artistic principles of Larionov's circle and articulates the justification for the turn toward primitive art. Shevchenko expresses how Neo-Primitivists value "simple, unsophisticated beauty," "the severity of primitive art" (*strogost' primitiva*), and "the mechanical exactitude of its construction."[99] Among his observations of primitive art, he also lists harmony of style and wealth of color as positive traits it exhibits. Further detailing the virtues he perceives in primitive art, he offers a deeper explanation: "we find in them the most acute, the most spontaneous perception of life" (*naibolee ostroe, naibolee neposredstvennoe vospriiatie zhizni*).[100] In short, Shevchenko claims that "primitive" forms of art show a sharper and more direct impression of the world. This emphasis on powerful reactions and unmediated expression reveals a new attention to perspective and perception characteristic of a later stage of infantile primitivism that comes to fruition in the theoretical works of the avant-garde critics of the Formalist school. Shevchenko elaborates: "We consider work from an impression [*vpechatleniia*] to be the most valuable, the most productive. It provides a larger field for the expression of a personal view on the world and does not distract attention with insignificant details."[101] According to this primitivist view, the naive artist is endowed with an artistically unadulterated and more pure and true sensitivity to the world. Shevchenko advocates for the art created by 'primitives' as an exemplary model of this sensitivity. "Its simplicity, severity of style, and spontaneous and artistically true sensation of life only attracts us." (*Nas tol'ko prel'shchaet ego prostota, stroinost' stilia i neposredstvennaia, khudozhestvenno vernaia pochuvstvovannost' zhizni.*)[102] Thus the Neo-Primitivists privilege the naive observer, who has not yet been desensitized by experience or an overabundance of impressions and who has not yet been hampered in his free expression by learned conventions or artistic tradition. The shift from traditional attitudes held by others is signaled by the use of the adverb "only" (*tol'ko*)

and the pronoun "us" (*nas*). Within this primitivist framework, the 'infant/child' is perceived as an ideal artist whose perceptive innocence results in strong impressions more directly expressed in artistic productions. At the same time, the removal of details and simplicity praised in these quotations also shows how primitivism has traced a course toward increasing formal simplification.

A similar regard for children's particular perceptiveness also appears in writings by Vasily Kandinsky.[103] In his treatise "On the Spiritual in Art. (Painting)" ("O dukhovnom v iskusstve. [Zhivopis'])," written in 1910 and published in 1912, Kandinsky uses the child to cast his views in full relief.[104] Seeking to explain the attraction of artistic primitivism, he contrasts innocence and experience in an extended passage on the perceptiveness of the child. He constructs the child as one who is not yet spoiled by experience and therefore retains an enviable freshness of perception.

> Those objects, which we encounter for the first time, immediately make a psychic impression upon us. This is the sort of impressions the world makes on the child, for whom every object is new [*Tak vpechatliaetsia mirom rebenok, dlia kotorogo vsiakii predmet nov*]. The child sees light. The light attracts him. The child wants to catch it, burns his fingers, and is filled with fear and respect for fire. Later the child sees that, apart from its inimical properties, fire also possesses friendly ones, that it dispels gloom, prolongs the day, that it is in its power to warm, cook, and offer a pleasurable spectacle. Through the accumulation of these experiences, a familarity with fire is gained and this knowledge is stored away in the brain. The *vivid-intensive* interest [*iarko-intensivnyi interes*] disappears and only fire's ability to present enjoyable performances slows the advance of complete indifference. Thus, slowly and incrementally, the magic dissipates [*chary raspadaiutsia*]. Everyone learns that trees cast shadows, that horses run fast, automobiles still faster, that dogs bite, that the moon is far away, that the person in the mirror is not real [*chto chelovek v zerkale—ne nastoiashchii*].[105]

In this passage Kandinsky adopts the perspective of the child as he re-creates the child's perceptions and even evokes prehistory and Prometheus through his imagery of fire. Using simple and short prose segments, he re-creates the sensations and cognitive processes of the child experiencing the basic phenomena of the world and seeks to enter into the interiority of the child's experience of the world even, it would seem, before the mirror stage when the child discovers that the person in the mirror is a reflection of the self. As with the later stages of Neo-Primitivism, Kandinsky's view of the child as primitive leads to his attention to infantile perception. Early Neo-Primitivist practice, on the other hand, largely focuses on the artifacts of the child's artistic encounter with the world.

As Larionov moves beyond Neo-Primitivism, however, and founds the non-objective school of Rayonist art, he reveals the deeper impact of the practice of infantile primitivism. Like Kandinsky above, he reflects on the actual mechanisms of a child's visual perception. In the article "Rayonism" ("Luchizm"; 1913), Larionov outlines the principles of this new artistic movement, which emphasizes the depiction of the rays of light that emanate from objects and make impressions upon our senses, rather than those objects themselves.[106] In this way, Rayonism, which takes a naive approach to the recreation of unadulterated sensory impressions, moves from primitivist simplification of form toward increasingly non-objective art. I would argue that infantile primitivism plays a significant part in Larionov's artistic development toward this point; through an increasing simplification of technique and the cultivation of a naive and unsophisticated approach, as exemplified by children's art, Larionov moves toward an interest in the infantile perceptions of the world. This marks a fundamental shift from exteriority toward interiority at the same time that it increasingly liberates art from the strictures of realistic representation through a change in focus from the artistic product itself to the mechanics of vision that make perception possible.

Significantly, Larionov uses a child as an example of undistorted perception for the purposes of his article on "Rayonism." Like Kandinsky, he believes that the child's eye sees reality more directly than does the experienced and acclimatized eye of the adult. He writes:

> Our eye is an apparatus so little perfected that much which we think we transmit to the cerebral centers through sight arrives there in its correct form (in relation to real life) not thanks to sight, but thanks to other senses. For the first period of life, the child sees objects upside-down, and only subsequently does this defect of sight correct itself through the other senses. Despite all of his desire, the adult person cannot see objects inverted. [*Nash glaz—apparat nastol'ko malo sovershennyi, chto mnogoe, peredavaemoe nami, kak my dumaem posredstvom zreniia v mozgovye tsentry, popadaet tuda pravil'no otnositel'no real'noi zhizni ne blagodaria zreniiu, a blagodaria drugim chuvstvam. Rebenok vidit pervoe vremia predmety vverkh nogami, i vposledstvii etot nedochet zreniia ispravliaetsia drugimi chuvstvami. Pri vsem svoem zhelanii vzroslyi chelovek ne mozhet uvidet' predmet perevernutym.*][107]

Larionov here reveals a scientific interest in the mechanics of vision and the perplexing idea of the inverted retinal image.[108] He thinks deeply about the child's perceptual development as regards vision itself. Scientists long believed that it is during childhood that the direct image of the senses undergoes the processing that reinverts the image in the mind. Today, after a century of increased research into the development of vision and studies in visual

deprivation during development, cognitive neuroscientists still agree that infancy and childhood represent critical periods in visual development. In her chapter "Wiring Up the Visual Brain," Lise Eliot explains, "The second phase of visual wiring is controlled by experience, specifically, by the electrical activity generated by a baby's actual act of seeing."[109] Thus Larionov's idealization of the child's unadulterated perceptions of the world remains correct, although the paradox of inverted vision remains a complex issue he oversimplifies in telling ways. Most importantly, it usefully serves Larionov's purposes as a scientific justification for the child's *"le monde à l'envers"* viewpoint. It also has interesting points of contact with Viktor Shklovsky's ideas of turning an image upside down, as will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. Scientific investigations of the time thus can be seen to play a role in shaping views of childhood.

Betraying a nostalgic idealization of infantile perception, Larionov contrasts the child's ability to perceive exactly what the eye sees to the adult's inability to undo the involuntary processing automatically accomplished by the habituated brain as a result of visual wiring that occurs through visual experience in infancy. In the particular context of his developing theory of Rayonism, Larionov puts forth the child, and the child's initially unadulterated perceptions, as an example for imitation. Infantile perception thus forms part of his argument that art should be made to more closely resemble the original impression it makes upon our senses. In this sense, Larionov takes infantile primitivism to the next stage, where the child becomes more than a mere object and begins to be viewed as an idealized vantage point. After all, Rayonism aims to erase the effects of experience in order to restore to the adult the more 'pure' perceptions of the child as if moving tantalizingly closer to the recovery of the "original" image. Neo-Primitivism and Rayonism thus both rely on an idealization of infantile expression and impressions, although they also represent successive stages in a developmental sequence that moves toward increasing interiority and points toward an increasing abstraction of the image, initially begun through an infantile simplification of form, but which now continues through an artificial and purely theoretical replication of the infantile visual experience.

In the ensuing period of his career, Larionov continues to experiment with Rayonism, a movement that proves particularly significant in the history of Russian art as one of the first schools of abstract art in Russia. The influence of the infantile aesthetic that he develops during the period of his child-oriented primitivism remains in many of his Rayonist drawings, as well as in other drawings, portraits, and graphic design from this period. For instance, in his early Rayonist works, Larionov continues the search for universal symbolism through abstract representation, which also relates to his primitivist search for the origins of art in categories of the 'primitive.' He explores the

universality of primitivist symbolism in his drawing *Universelet* (*Vselenochka;* 1912) with which this chapter began. Simultaneously childish and Paleolithic, this piece draws attention to the universal features of primitivist expression, distilling art to its minimal components. Since it results in a universally readable composition and narrative despite the minimalist simplicity of its representation, Larionov succeeds in reducing visual communication to its most basic lines. Through primitivist simplification, he reduces the composition to minimal "picture primitives," to employ the terminology John Willats uses for children's drawings.[110] Primitivist and Rayonist simplification thus move toward an abstract universality, aspiring to a primitivist ideal of an originary visual language that precedes civilization. Here even the idea of the infantile, like the artistic product itself, becomes extremely simplified and abstract.

Many later drawings by Larionov, such as his *Portrait of Natalya Goncharova* (*Portret Natalii Goncharovoi;* 1913) shown in figure 11, or even more *Self-Portrait of Larionov* (*Sobstvennyi portret Larionova;* 1912)

Figure 11. *Portret N. S. Goncharovoi* (*Portrait of N. S. Goncharova*), Mikhail Larionov, 1913. Lithograph, 14 × 9.4 cm, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

not shown here, retain elements of the infantile aesthetic that the artist developed during his Neo-Primitivist period. Whether portraying the human form, as in numerous depictions like *Head of an Eastern Woman with a Thick Neck* (ca. 1928) shown in figure 13 or in the portraits mentioned here, Larionov displays a bold but imprecise use of line and an air of casual spontaneity that in some ways resemble the hand of a child, as evident also in his Neo-Primitivist works. Such a minimalist and Neo-Primitivist approach to drawing continues in his many book collaborations with avant-garde poets and writers over the next years. The simplified forms and schematic features in such drawings remain reminiscent of children's art, as do the laborious representations of images and lettering that blend into one cohesive and balanced composition. Also arguably infantile are the thick and prominent outlines, which emphasize contours, and the taxonomic shape that evokes the referent through its most basic form.

A purely Rayonist work like *Woman in a Hat* (*Pomade* [*Pomada*], 1913), shown in figure 12, on the other hand, may be seen to have reached the logical end of a trajectory. Reduced by primitivism to a truly minimalist use of line, the artwork also has begun to resemble the arbitrariness and uniformity of an exceedingly infantile work of art, which might boldly juxtapose a descriptive title and an entirely non-representative drawing. On the other hand, its angularity and interruptedness contrast with the fluidity and effortlessness of a child's scribble to such an extent that it more closely resembles the first, almost entirely arbitrary marks an infant might make on paper, before any fine motor control has been established. In a Neo-Primitivist sense, and by conflating prehistoric, primitive, and infantile art on one small canvas of a diminutive universe, this amounts to a deliberate return to the origins and absolute basis of art in infancy, even if artificially constructed and constituted. For indeed, in being simplified to its most minimal components, art here becomes extremely laborious, both for perception and interpretation. Through infantile primitivism, Larionov has come to develop an expressive style and symbolic language closer to the seemingly arbitrary scribble or lines of a child's first artistic encounter than to the realistic representation previously enshrined as the culmination of Western art. In this way infantile primitivism represents a strategic anachronism employed to reverse artistic history and temporality and accomplish a regression to the origins of art. Virtually the only representative aspect of the piece that remains is its title, which, like many children's drawings, issues more of an invitation or challenge to the viewer to decode the image and artistic intention behind it. Such a challenge is very much in the spirit of avant-garde and modern art in its playful or even agonistic relationship to audience and interpretation. In linguistic terms, signifier and signified thus move further apart, as art moves toward increasing abstraction through formal simplication, reduction to minimal components,

Figure 12. Illustration by Mikhail Larionov from
Aleksei Kruchenykh's book *Pomada* (*Pomade*), 1913
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (88-B26240). Copyright © 2013
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

and nearly apocalyptic self-obliteration in an artificial, staged return to the infancy of art.

Thus we have seen that Larionov's artistic development in painting and drawing in the period from 1909 to 1913 moves through infantile primitivism, and its concomitant simplification of form, toward the greater symbolic abstraction manifest in Rayonist painting, which culminates in non-objective and abstract art. Rayonist works, such as *Rayonist Portrait* (1913) and *Woman in a Hat* (1913), and many contributions to the art books of Kruchenykh and the Cubo-Futurist poets continue these tendencies toward simplification, as well as the distillation of the essential elements of art and the basic mechanics of perception and representation. In a primitivist spirit, Larionov rejects the traditional artistic progression toward greater realism in art; instead, he seeks to reverse the flow of time and return to the origins of art in order to rediscover the fundaments of art and perception. In so doing, he moves

toward greater simplicity and on a trajectory toward artistic abstraction as he seeks to recapture a romanticized and nostalgic experience of the infant eye.

In 1916 Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova moved to Paris, where they remained for the rest of their lives. In emigration, they escaped the threats that many avant-garde artists later faced. Yet they also lost the stimulating environment they had enjoyed in Russia, including the avant-garde context of infantile primitivism and the infantilist aesthetic that developed out of it. Some of their ideas, however, survived in emigration. Larionov's collaborative exhibitions involving children's work with the English critic Roger Fry, for instance, attest to the continued importance children's art held for Larionov and show that Larionov's interest in children's art outlasted the Neo-Primitivist phase of his career. The accounts of those who knew him also provide evidence for the continuation of his serious attention to children's art during this later period of his career. Parton quotes a contemporary who provides exactly such a portrait of the émigré artist.

> Mikhail Andreenko remembered that "Larionov made many visits to the area far from the Buttes-Chaumont where my studio was located. He used to sketch some of the drawings scribbled on the walls by naughty children. They attracted him because the execution of them was lively, natural and without set rules." Andreenko's recollections of Larionov's response to children's grafitti and Parnack's note about his fondness for "hopscotch" squares also testify to Larionov's lifelong interest in the naive creativity of children.[111]

Larionov's artistic eye thus continues to be drawn to the scribbles and traces left by children on the surfaces of urban life, like modern petroglyphs by the savage child and "primitives of the twentieth century" he had celebrated in his youth. This anecdote shows how the infantile aesthetic retained a lifelong value for Larionov. Perhaps he clung to it in part as a response to the displacement experienced by the émigré, who seeks to re-create the artistic glory days of his youth in another country.

In the emigration Larionov, whose artistic practice had waged a war on time, to some extent seemed trapped in the eternal recurrence of his youthful exploits and the practice of infantile primitivism. He obsessively re-created his early primitivist works of art, such as in *Head of an Eastern Woman with a Thick Neck* (*Golova vostochnoi zhenshchiny s tolstoi sheei;* ca. 1928) shown in figure 13, and shamelessly postdated and predated his works, creating many puzzles for art historians to solve.[112] For an artist obsessed with temporal experimentation in his early avant-garde phase, this indicates that the simultaneity of an eternal present that he sought through infantile primitivism never entirely lost its grip on him. After all, the artists of infantile primitivism sought not only to construct the 'infant/child' as the true primi-

Figure 13. *Golova vostochnoi zhenshchiny s tolstoi sheei (Iz tsikla "Puteshestvie v Turtsiiu")* (*Head of an Eastern Woman with a Thick Neck [From the Cycle "Travel to Turkey," 1907–9]*), graphic work by Mikhail Larionov, ca. 1928. Gray paper, gouache, 33 × 26.8 cm, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.


tive of the twentieth century, but also to occupy this position themselves and thus ensure their place in the art of the future.

In this regard, Larionov was only one example among many artists of the time, both within Neo-Primitivism and without, who constructed the 'infant/child' as an ideal artistic example for study, display, and emulation on superficial and deeper levels. Along with other artists of Neo-Primitivism, Larionov served as a pioneering example for avant-garde innovators who would follow in his footsteps in the pursuit of infantile primitivism and the infantilist aesthetic. Nonetheless, his view of the infant 'other,' as theirs would be as well, was restrictive and artificial. He found in the infant/child precisely what he was seeking as he engaged in a regressive performance of the primitive as part of his own aesthetic agenda.

Indeed, the Neo-Primitivists also bequeath to all their successors in

infantile primitivism and the infantilist aesthetic their own fundamental flaw—the inescapable blind spot of infantile primitivism—its dependence on a primitivist approach that falsifies an infant 'other' for the aesthetic purposes of the adult. Their application of the infant/child as device may differ from the Neo-Primitivists' use of it as a strategic anachronism to reverse linear time, or even from the Cubo-Futurists' use of it to access the future. Still, the fundamental premise is similarly flawed. Time remains irreversible and none can recover originary perception, just as the child is no primitive and the adult, due to the impossible relation of child and adult, can never truly access the interior experience of the child. Bold as the experiment is, the artificial representation of rays of light does not in any way resemble or replicate infantile perception. This purely theoretical idea of infantile vision only justifies a new and original artistic experiment reducing representation to minimal angular lines. At all turns, Neo-Primitivism uses infancy strategically and within a primitivist framework that predetermines the "findings" of the primitivist in the so-called primitive.

For the Russian avant-garde, the abundant artistic activity of Mikhail Larionov and his colleagues had provoked great interest in children's own creative productions that rapidly exceeded the boundaries of Neo-Primitivism. By 1916, the attraction to children's art had reached such a level that F. Berenstam commented, "In bygone times too little attention was paid to the artistic creations of children, while now it may be too much attention."[113] Yakov Tugendkhol'd had a more positive view when he reflected on this phenomenon: "The interest in children's drawings is a product of our time; I would say—one of the significant *discoveries* [*otkrytii*] of our time."[114] Even Alexandre Benois, the prominent artist, editor, and organizer of the World of Art movement, weighed in on the practice of infantile primitivism.

> Yes, at the present time the interest toward children and toward all things infantile [*k detiam i ko vsemu detskomu*] has acquired tremendous strength [*poluchil ogromnuiu silu*] . . . now the attention of the most varied people is fixed on children and all things infantile. . . . And the cult of the primitives itself—is it not the cult of childhood? [*A odin kul't primitivov—eto li ne kul't detstva?*][115]

By this point, infantile primitivism had so succeeded in defining the infant, and itself through it, as the ideal primitive of the twentieth century that Benois proclaims primitivism and the cult of childhood to be synonymous, a new high-water mark of infantile primitivism.

Avant-garde poets and writers would follow the lead of their close colleagues Larionov, Goncharova, and Shevchenko by taking an active interest in children's language and related poetic experiments. In *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922,* Camilla Gray credits Mikhail Larionov and

the Neo-Primitivists' experiments in art for inspiring the ensuing innovations of other branches of the avant-garde. She detects its influence in the poetic experiments of the Cubo-Futurists, treated in the next chapter of this book, citing as examples "the imitation of children's art"[116] and the use of "infantile language."[117] The links between the infantile primitivism of Mikhail Larionov and the Neo-Primitivists to that of Aleksei Kruchenykh and the Cubo-Futurists are many, both through their intimate collaborations as well as the commonalities of their aesthetic interests and primitivist practice. As Gray remarks, "Although for the first time painting thus led the way in Russia, painting and poetry were still intimately bound up together, and almost all early publications of these Futurist poets had illustrations by Larionov, Goncharova and other members of their group."[118] The next chapter will expose the deeper interconnections between these groups through their practice of infantile primitivism. In this sense, the avant-garde innovators of poetry and prose took up the banner of the infantile primitivism established by Mikhail Larionov and his colleagues in Neo-Primitivism.