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Sergei Chekhonin and the New Soviet Porcelain

The concepts of “Chekhonin porcelain,” “Chekhonin graphics,” and the “Chekhonin style” are ones that have been well established in the history of Soviet art. Each of these concepts is associated with particular landmarks in the development of art. Sergei Vasil'evich Chekhonin (1878-1936) was the artist responsible for them.1

Chekhonin’s artistic legacy is diverse. At one time or another he worked in every artistic sphere. Master of many techniques, Chekhonin was able to work in creative media, often inaccessible to other artists—such as enamel, porcelain decoration and the miniature. On the border of two centuries, Chekhonin belonged to various art groups, all of which influenced him. But the specific features of his creative work, which were formed literally in his childhood and youth, always distinguished him as a highly individual artist and enabled him to become an innovative applied artist.

Chekhonin was born in a small village near Novgorod into a poor peasant family. At the age of eight, he was given into the custody of one Strugovshchikov, a landowner and, by training, a chemist. The huge library of old books and engravings, the unique collection of porcelain and West European painting and, above all, Strugovshchikov himself played a decisive role in Chekhonin’s life. Strugovshchikov was inclined towards experimentation in chemistry and he passed on much of his knowledge to Chekhonin. At fifteen, Chekhonin entered the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg and studied in the ceramics class. Later on, when he was art supervisor for the Lomonosov Factory, he mentioned in one of his lectures that, by the age of eighteen, he had already mastered all the techniques of the applied arts. Chekhonin’s first independent work was done in connection with designs for ceramic panneaux for Moscow and St. Petersburg buildings. Then he took the position of artist and consultant at the Rostov Enamel Factory; and he also worked in gold-embroidery, leather-stitching and furniture workshops in various gubernii.

As a graphic artist, Chekhonin was associated with various tendencies—Symbolism, the stylization of the St. Petersburg World of Art group (Mir

iskusstva), Futurism, Constructivism and Cubism—although his art as a whole cannot be accommodated within any single movement. Chekhonin's was a very impressionable nature and he apprehended new ideas in art or politics simply as impulses for the creation of appropriate works of art. But his gift as an artist, as a craftsman constantly linked to the technical production of works of visual art, determined his real and permanent place amongst his colleagues, especially amongst those who attempted to find a resolution to their artistic searches after 1917 in the field of the applied arts.

In 1918 Chekhonin became head of the Art Section at the Lomonosov Factory in Petrograd. He was in charge of many painters and graphic artists such as Petrov-Vodkin, Dobuzhinskii, Narbut, P. Kuznetsov, Dan'ko, Altman, Belkin, Shchekotikhina-Pototskaia, Lebedev, and, later, the highly experimental artists such as Malevich, Chashnik, Tatlin, Kandinskii, Popova, Samokhvalov and Rudnev. In this way, the Lomonosov Factory brought together artists often of antagonistic or hostile camps. But their endeavors and aspirations to create an art of a new kind, appropriate to the time, produced potential and influential results.

The so-called "agit-porcelain" was a phenomenon without precedent in the universal history of applied art. Items of everyday use—china—came not only to fulfill their immediate function, but also to serve as a medium of political influence. The Revolutionary theme and the political slogan became the decorative content for china services, cups and saucers. Recourse was made to the dicta of great writers and revolutionaries and aphorisms such as "He who does not work does not eat," "The kingdom of the workers and peasants will be without end," "Heroes are born through struggle" et al., were taken from newspapers, journals and leaflets. Among the first such projects were plates carrying slogans and designed by Chekhonin: the diversity of scripts, intelligent and delicate distribution of the letters on the porcelain ground, feeling for the material, for its specific properties and potentials—these things distinguish Chekhonin's porcelain. The agit-porcelain is remembered not only for its content, but also for its new means of expression. Artists at the Lomonosov Factory utilized a new coral paint (invented at the Factory) and this enabled them to attract the attention of the masses, to exert a more emotional appeal. The new subject-matter, the new composition and coloring transformed items of porcelain into works of agit-art.

Like many other artists, Chekhonin displayed his adherence to the traditions of World of Art stylization, at least until 1919. But after that date, Futurist elements began to appear in porcelain decoration and these were able to reflect more clearly the tensions and excitement of the early Revolutionary period: the Cubo-Futurists Boguslavskaia and Kliun tried their hand at porcelain design; on a different level, Pavel Kuznetsov was also involved. Andrei Belyi was justified in observing that "it is almost impossible to express