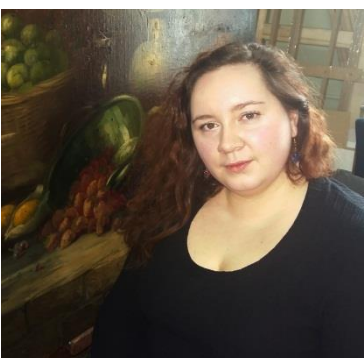


Preservation of Russian Abstract Art of the second part of the 20th century

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Introduction

Recently Russian museum and scientific community has turned its attention to the abstract paintings of the second part of the 20th century. Prominently theoretical and artistic works of group organized by Soviet artist Ely Bielutin in 1950s.

After graduating from Fine Arts faculty of the Moscow Pedagogical Institute, where he studied under Aristarkh Lentulov, Nikolay Kuznetsov and Lev Bruni, Bielutin starts teaching himself and imparting his “Theory of Universal Contact” to students. He formulated the “law of emotion” as a main force of the development and functioning of the society. He understood how to affect the emotional sphere aesthetically by means of a metalanguage, making the purified feeling the subject of a portraiture. Followers of Bielutin were working since 1950s till 2000s, forming a group, whose main aim was to express their creativity, show the emotional part of reality awareness.



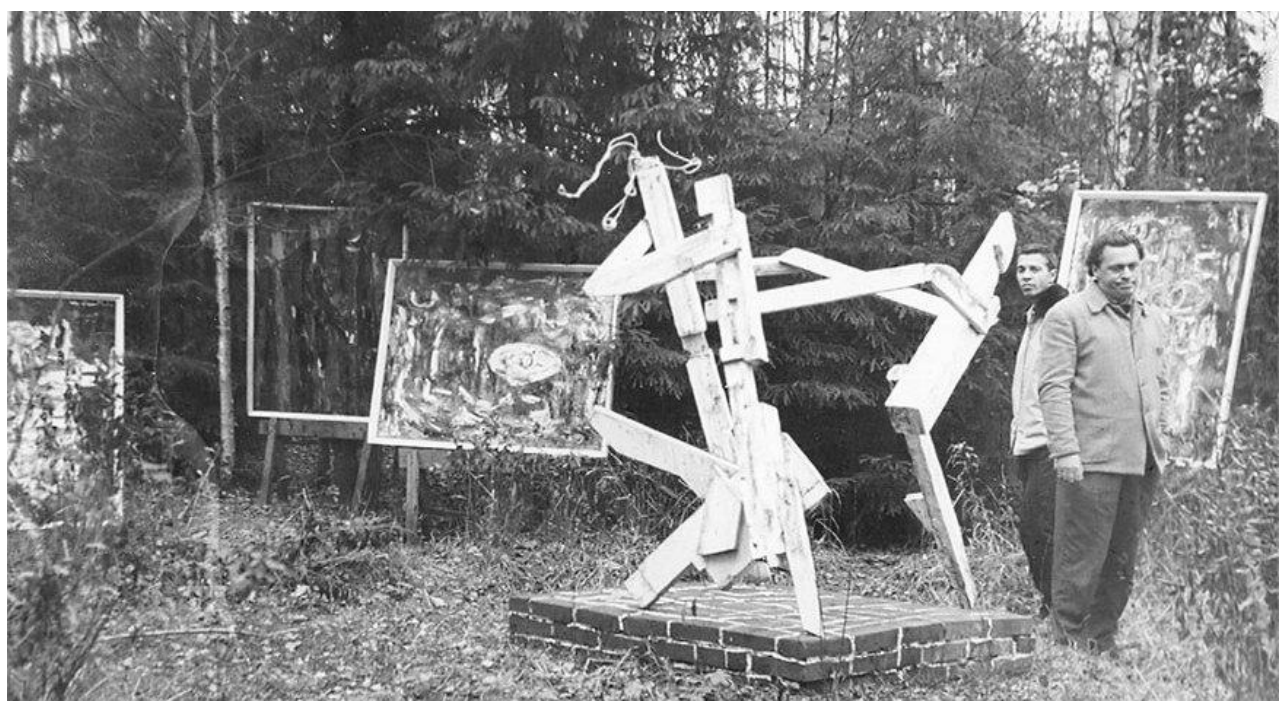
Ely Bielutin

Historical context

New artistic ideas and expressive means of Ely Bielutin totally belonged to the spirit of the Thaw period of Soviet culture, but very soon they had to meet with the misoneism and imperception of the authorities. 1st December 1962, Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, was taken to the Manege Gallery to view an exhibition "30 Years of the Moscow Union of Artists" which included a number of avant-garde and abstract works next to official art of representationalism. On seeing the latter, Khrushchev exploded with anger, describing the artworks as "dog shit" and proclaiming that "a donkey could smear better art with its tail". After this event, and for the next 30 years, government officials didn't express anything but disparagement of abstract art.



Nikita Khrushchev in Manege. 1st december 1962



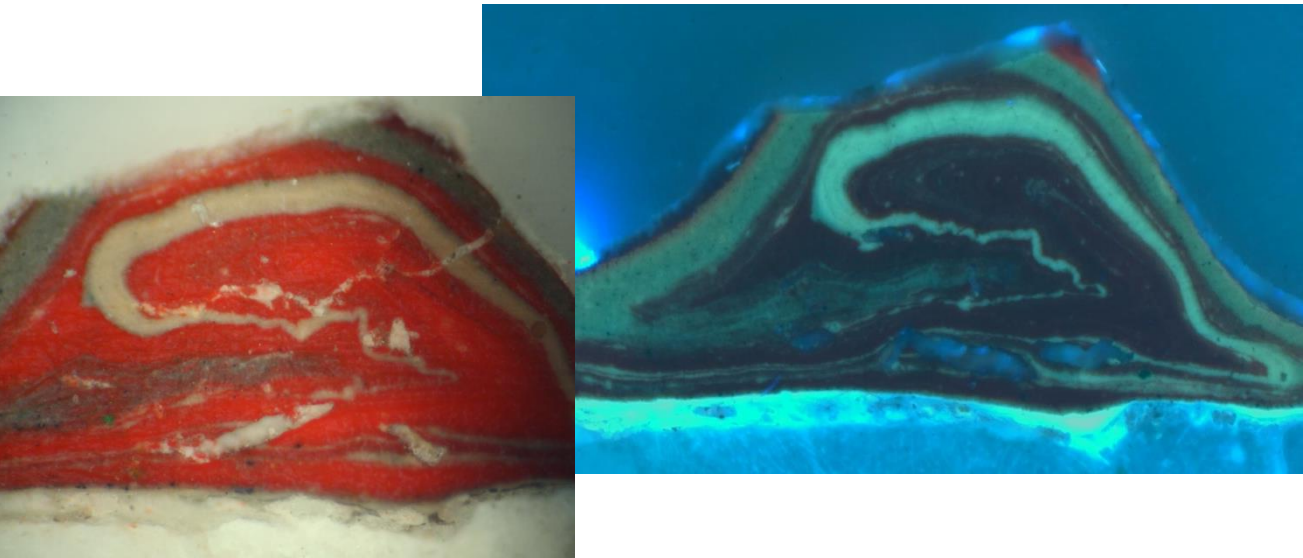
Exhibition in the open air. Abramtsevo

The artists who stayed devoted to their teacher Ely Bielutin and his theories formed the core of the studio The New Reality. Being an underground part of Soviet culture they never had a chance to have official exhibitions or be published in books or magazines. Creating their art pieces for self-expression, they were indifferent to preserving their works. Some of them stayed in their studios, but mostly they were stored in lumber rooms or upper storeys of their summer houses, some literally stayed in the street, suffering from rains and snowfalls.

In the past few years specialists from the State Research Institute for Restoration (GosNIIR) started to collaborate with Russian Abstract Art Foundation. Its collection comprises about 1000 paintings and works on paper, sculptures and installations by artists who were members of The New Reality studio at different stages of their artistic careers. Team-work of chemist-analysts and conservators has orientation on supporting exhibition activities of the foundation.



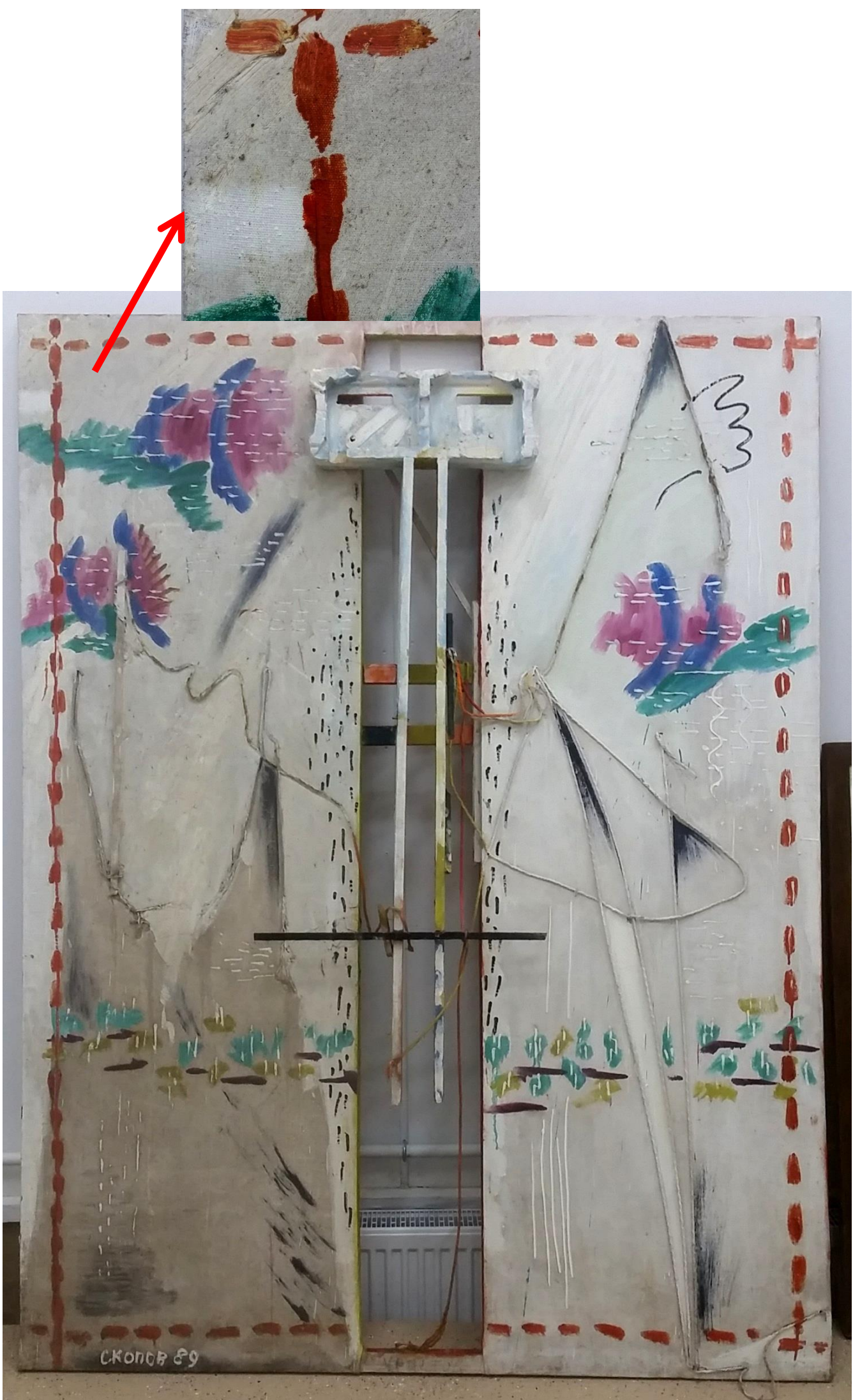
Relief of the painting by V. Zubarev. Reveller, Oleg Sataev.



Microsectioning of the painting layer. V. Zubarev. Reveller, Oleg Sataev. Prepared by Irina Kadikova. Laboratory of Physical and Chemical research GosNIIR

Art technique

At the present time, as paintings and installations, created by members of The New Reality group, are becoming a part of state museum and private collections, conservators face serious challenges treating them. Aside from very bad storage conditions preservation of abstract artpieces depends a lot on painting materials. As each work was created as a pure artistic experiment the variety of materials can really impress. Fiberboard, canvas, cardboard, paper, wood or even foam plastic could be used as a ground. And the coating layer, if used at all, could be covered by oil, pentaol (based on pentaerythritol esters of fatty acids of linseed oil) or acrylic paints, tempera, water colour, gouache, encaustic and drawing ink. As remembered by one of the group members Inessa Ryabinina, the quality of artistic materials was far from perfect. As professional artists' colors of high quality were luxury goods in the Soviet period, so often industrial oil or even alkyl paints would be used.



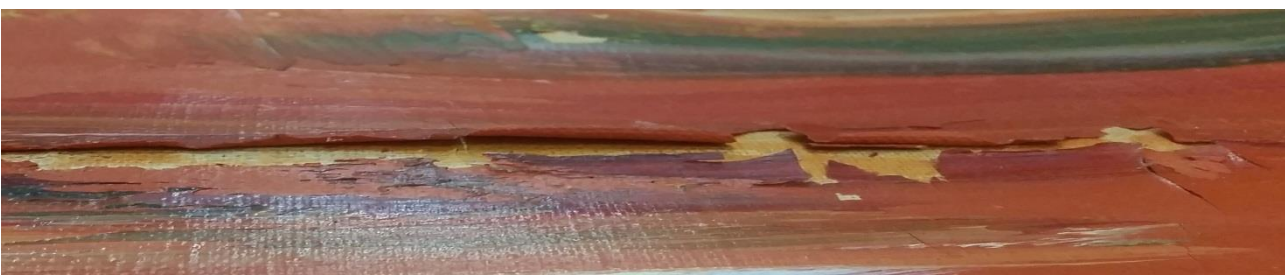
Test on removing surface dirt. Jury Skopov. Christ. Oil on canvas

Conservation issues

Russian traditional conservation methods include gluten glue (e.g. sturgeon glue) for consolidation and ox bile solution for surface cleaning. But these methods were developed decades ago for treating pictures created in classical painting techniques. Russian abstract art of the second part of the 20th century is drastically different in all ways. Structural conservation of such complex pieces of art usually implies usage of either water- or alcohol-based synthetic adhesives for consolidation. But the choice of cleaning methods can be much more complicated. As a matter of fact the decision making in this case is absolutely impossible without technological examinations. Mostly the paintings of the New Reality group are not varnished, so knowing the binding media of the paint layer can give a key to choosing a cleaning formulation. Sensitivity to water and the brittleness of the paint layer play a very important role.



Lucian Gribkov. Composition. Oil on canvas.

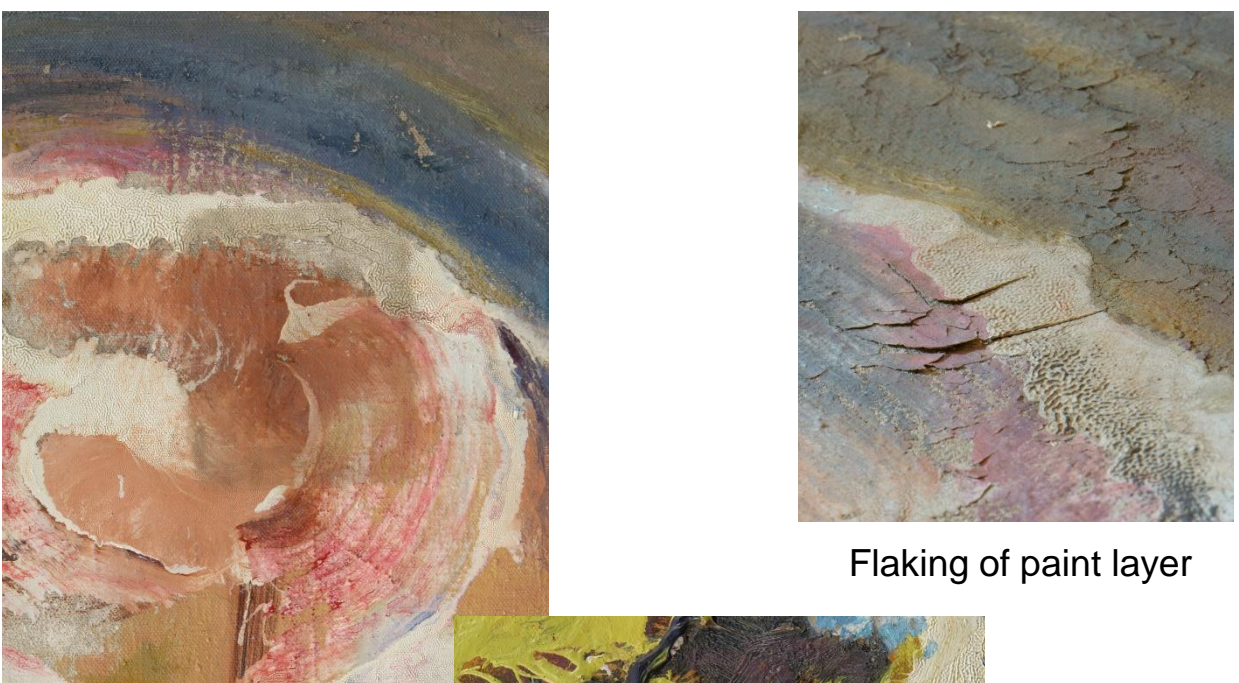


Flacking paint layer

Case study. “Composition” by Lucian Gribkov. Oil on canvas, 173 x 70 cm.

Picture by Lucian Gribkov was created in a very expressive manner. The texture of painting layer changes from very thin, almost transparent, to very thick, formed with spatula. Very interesting technique was used by the artist to create an effect of shrinkage of the paint. In certain pastose areas of white oil paint he added a large amount of siccative which gave a very beautiful impression. The painting was unvarnished.

The painting needed consolidation, strip lining, stretching on a new frame and surface cleaning. Abstract composition looked as if it never experienced conservation before, probably it wasn't even dusted. Treatment started with consolidation in the areas with lifted paint surface. As an adhesive conservators used 10% AK211 (copolymer of butyl acrylate with methyl methacrylate) in isopropanol. On stretching the painting the subject of surface cleaning came to the fore. In this particular case the key problem was in the difference in relief on different parts of the picture. Series of cleaning tests were established in order to find an appropriate cleaning solution. It turned out that even ingrained dust could be gently removed with distilled water. But a common variant with cotton swabs could be used on a very limited part of the surface. So the GosNIIR specialists made a decision to wet the most prominent parts with a sponge. The deepest and the hardest to access parts of the impasto were carefully treated with a bristle brush after the dirt got a little loosened. The process in the segment was finished by wiping with absorbing sponge. During the surface cleaning process it turned out that on some areas the dirt was more resistant. In these areas conservators would use a small amount of ph-neutral soap dissolved in distilled water, which was further rinsed. As a result of the treatment conservators of GosNIIR returned the brightness of colors to the picture so that it could be displayed during the next exhibition arranged by Russian Abstract Art Foundation.



Removing surface dirt

Flacking of paint layer

We would like to thank our colleagues from Oil painting department of the State Research Institute for Restoration and the director of Russian Abstract Art Foundation Anna Karganova