

## **Faik Tagirov, A Tatar Rodchenko**

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By [Maxim Edwards](#)

The early photomontages and avant-garde style of the Constructivist movement during the nascent years of the Soviet Union were conceived during an atmosphere in which breaking violently with artistic tradition was strongly encouraged. The literary world too saw upheavals, with the Astrakhan-born futurist poet Khlebnikov (a contemporary of Mayakovsky's) going as far as to issue a manifesto urging writers to "throw Pushkin off of the steamship of modernity" and to tell Dostoyevsky the news. Bravely experimental, full of abstract symbolism invariably towing a revolutionary line, this early constructivist and futurist culture would blossom bravely before artistic talent was rudely shoehorned into the Socialist Realism of the Stalin era.

Tatarstan's early artists during the first years of Soviet rule along the Volga were no less eager than their Russian counterparts, challenging what they saw as the outdated and oppressive social hierarchies of traditional Tatar Muslim society. An long trek past meters of Stalinist glory immortalized on canvas in Tatarstan's National Gallery yields a few small tradition-breaking gems. Current exhibitions include sketches by former national artist of Soviet Tatarstan, Baki Urmanche (including some superb caricature-style illustrations for Tukay's poetry) and those of the more idiosyncratic A. Abzgildin (b. 1937), who has developed a taste for portraying life in Tatarstan with the apparent style of a Russian Orthodox icon-painter, reaching its apex in a Triptych showing former President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev as the prodigal son, flanked by apostles in the form of famous Tatar historical and cultural figures. Urgently deserving of some deep analysis, it would seem.

Conspicuous in their absence among this unusual buffet is the work of Faik Tagirov (1906-1978) and his colleague Alexandra Korobkova, whose centenary exhibition was held in the National Gallery in November 2006, along with the work of other, lesser-known Tatar artists from the experimental years of the 1920s. With a particularly strong interest in publishing, Tagirov was the author of the first illustrated Tatar alphabet in 1914, and from the mid 1920s was deeply involved with the left-wing of Tatarstan's literary scene, where he worked with Tatar authors such as Adel Kutuy and Kadi Nazhmi. Fascinated in typeface and book design, many of Tagirov's works are illustrations and cover designs, perhaps an explanation for why they have not been frequently exhibited in Kazan's galleries.

In 1925, Tagirov began experimenting with the technique most famously known outside Russia as that of Rodchenko-photomontage. With a focus on machinery and industrialization, he became an active developer of Soviet "Agit-Prop," and several of his works were even exhibited at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris that same year. By 1927, Tagirov and his colleague Korobkova had become designers and graphic artists for many of the leading Tatar-language magazines and journals published in Moscow, such as "Igencheler" (Peasants), Aeshche (Working), and Kechkene Iptechler (Young Comrades). Photomontage and experimentation with abstract and geometric forms by Tagirov and the illustrative skill of Korobkova helped to found what Tagirov called a new "architecture of books." Perhaps his most potent illustrations for foreigners are those from 1933's album "New York", a "collection of works from revolutionary American writers." The statue of liberty holds a banknote waving in the wind high above an impoverished city.

A giant cowboy astride a horse kicks against the Flat Iron Building on 23rd street. A picture of Kellogg is shown torn into pieces, a particularly anti-American breakfast to prepare for a day of wholesome Communist propagandizing.

The Tatar themes in Tagirov's work are perhaps one of its most striking features, setting it apart from his Russian counterparts. Perhaps the only artist in the world to have perfected drawing a constructivist "Tübeteke" (Tatar hat), his earlier works bear their revolutionary slogans in the Tatar Arabic script of the time. The sense of enjoyment exuded by this artist who loved the art of the book so much is palpable when we see the range of different types he experiments with in Arabic. The very presence of Arabic script in these boldly modernist, Communist works, with which Cyrillic would seem more natural seems almost anachronistic. This would not last long, however: when, in the 1930s, it was decided to change written Tatar into a Latin-derived script known as Janalif, Tagirov was at the forefront of the campaign for its promotion. Posters and pamphlets urging literacy in the new script such as "Can you read it?" (1927) and "Our alphabet" (1930) all benefited from Tagirov's expertise. The final letters in the long and verbose alphabet of Tagirov's career would be Cyrillic ones, where from 1938 on he worked on the promotion of new Cyrillic scripts for many of the Soviet Union's languages, finding the opportunity to work with languages even more diverse, from Uighur to Korean, to Hindi, in the 1950s and 1960s

Perhaps, had Tagirov still been alive during Tatarstan's failed attempt to switch back to Latin during the 1990s and early 2000s, his fascination with alphabets and their place in art could have served Tatarstan yet again. As eager to put pen to paper as he was to put scissors to photograph, Tagirov's deep connection with a literature now associated with a troubled

Soviet past could be a reason for why he is not as well known as his more conventionally artistic colleagues. A picture tells a thousand words, and more often than not we choose the words they tell us, unlike Tagirov's posters, as bold in color as they are in statement.

A memorial plaque is set to be unveiled on the first of June to Faik Tagirov's father, Shakhirdjan Akhmedjanovich Tagirov, opposite the Ğabdulla Tukay Museum on ulitsa Tukaya, so it is tempting to think what form a monument to Tatarstan's Rodchenko could take. Judging from his striking form and style evident in his posters and photomontages, it is fair to conclude that such a monument to Tagirov, were it created, would make Namdakov's controversial statue seem like a still life with a bowl of fruit.