

Title: "The Münchhausen of the North": The Literary Masks of Stepan Pisakhov
Author: Anna Yatsenko, Reed College

A socio-cultural approach to the analysis of literary texts, this presentation examines the intersection between the creative and everyday life of the artist and the socio-historical context, and the correlation between the artist' work and its critical reception.

The paper focuses on the life and oeuvre of Stepan Grigor'evich Pisakhov (1879-1960), painter, writer, and traveler, who was born and lived in Arkhangelsk. In the 1920s he transitioned from landscape painting to literature, with a special focus on fairy tales. Pisakhov was an expert in the folklore of the Russian North, who knew the Pomorian dialect and culture. His fairy tales were written in the style of oral tradition, and reflect the typical aspects of the local dialect. For the "fables," (nebylitsy) he deployed a special narrator persona named Senya Malina, a peasant from the village Ujma, near Arkhangelsk. Pisakhov published the early episodes under the titles "Northern Münchhausen," and "Münchhausen from the village Ujma." The tales were well received in serial publications throughout the 1920s and 1930s, although they were published as a collection only in 1938. At the same time, in the 1920s, Pisakhov himself changed his personal style of self-presentation and manner of speech, taking on the mask of an eccentric old man: he grew a long beard, whiskers, and long hair, wore outmoded, dark clothing, a hat with a large brim, and muttered incoherently. Pisakhov lived this persona until the end of his life.

This paper examines Pisakhov's literary and personal masquerade as a form of aesthetic and cultural play. What is the connection between Pisakhov's choice of genre, dramatic form, and the revolutionary (Soviet) social context in which he lived? How has the reception of Pisakhov's work and biography changed over time? What has motivated the renewed attention to his work in terms of the recent re-issuing of his tales, the publication of a biography, and the opening of a museum dedicated to his artistic production?