



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

**John Bowlt**

**Topic of research: "The Literary Heritage of Leon Bakst"**

The focus of my research is on the writings of the artist Lev Samoilovich Bakst (Leon Bakst, 1866-- 1924), especially on his correspondence, creative prose and theoretical articles concerning, art, dance, fashion technology, etc. Bakst is known for his brilliant stage designs for the Ballets Russes in the 1910s, but rarely acknowledged as a sophisticated, elegant and intelligent writer.

**Relevance and contribution to field:** For Policy Research and Development scholars please provide a brief description of the scholarly impact and policy significance of your research. For Humanities scholars please provide a brief description of the scholarly significance of your research and its impact on the field:

Bakst is celebrated for the revolution that he made in stage design (costumes, backdrops, props, etc.) for operas, ballets and dramas both in Russia, Europe and America. Examination of his writings has shed much light on the genesis and developments of his decorative ideas, especially in terms of sources and provenances (Ancient Greece, Egypt, Middle Ages, etc.). Apart from this, a reading of his letters provides a valuable context for understanding the reasons for such and such a commission, his esthetic, thematic and financial demands, and his attitudes towards other luminaries of the time (Cocteau, Debussy, Diaghiev, Stravinsky, etc.). As far as Bakst's creative prose (e.g. unpublished novels and librettos) is concerned, this exposes is a new and vital facet of his

career as artist and underlines, for example, his particular interest in the relationship between visual and literary culture. All in all, inspection of Bakst as a writer not only enhances our current knowledge of him as a creative individual, but also points to a previously unrecognized and unfamiliar aspect of his individuality. This avenue of enquiry will, in turn, leave a substantial imprint on the way in which, traditionally, we have narrated the history of the Russian Silver Age.

**A concise summary of your approach and research methodology including a list of research sites:** I relied essentially on archival depositories in Moscow and St. Petersburg, especially the Manuscript Divisions of the State Tretyakov Gallery, the Bakhrushin Museum, the State Library (Leninka), RGALI and the Glinka Theater Museum, the Saltykov-Shchedrin Library and the State Russian Museum. The State Tretyakov Gallery, in particular, has a rich Bakst archive (donated by the family from Paris in the early 1960s) and I conducted much of my research there. My methodology was basic: reading relevant materials, noting and or copying significant portions, comparing drafts and versions, highlighting passages that seemed especially relevant to Bakst's artistic career, establishing a detailed chronology on the basis of these materials.

**A summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions:** I found a wealth of material, more than I anticipated, and was very pleased with the way things went. The monumental result will be a three-volume collection of Bakst's writings to be published by 'Russkii put' in Moscow under the editorship of a team of specialists led by me.

**Suggestions for future research agendas in your field for the scholarly community:** Perhaps remind colleagues that many of their heroes, especially of the Russian Silver Age, were interdisciplinary, i.e., competent in more than one discipline, and that, to provide an accurate assessment of a poet or painter, the researcher may need to examine achievements from the standpoints of parallel media.

**Any recommendations for the US Policy Community:** Nothing comes to mind.