

# Open Windows 3

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## Open Windows 3

This third issue of *Open Windows* opens with a detailed study of *La Piazza Navona, Rome* by Gaspar van Wittel, a spectacular urban view of 1699 in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. In addition, and in conjunction with the new display of the *Museum's Russian avant-garde paintings*, this issue includes two articles: the first on recent discoveries concerning Ivan Kliun's Suprematist painting *Composition*, which came to light following a study of the work by the Museum's Conservation Department; and the second on *Prison* by Tatiana Glebova, a painting that was attributed to her teacher Pavel Filonov until 1993.

# Gaspar van Wittel, *The Piazza Navona:* episodes, scenes and characters on a market day

Mar Borobia

Fig. 1  
Gaspar van Wittel  
*Piazza Navona, Rome, 1699*  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection  
on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Among the Museum's collection of Old Masters' paintings, the oil paintings of urban views constitute a particularly attractive group, depicting celebrated locations in cities such as Florence, Padua and Venice. This genre, known as *vedute*, reached a peak of unparalleled splendour in the 18th century in the work of artists such as Giovanni Paolo Panini (Piacenza, 1691-Rome, 1765), Canaletto (Venice, 1697-1768), Francesco Guardi (Venice, 1712-1793), Giuseppe Zocchi (Fiesole(?) 1716/1717-Florence 1767) and Bernardo Bellotto (Venice, 1721-Warsaw, 1780), all painters represented in the Museum's collection. To find the most immediate forerunners of these views, however, we need to look back not only to the Grand Tour, but also to the previous century and to the early decades of the 18th century, more specifically to the work of the Italian painter Luca Carlevarijs (Udine, 1663-Venice, 1731)<sup>1</sup>, the German Joseph Heintz the Younger,<sup>2</sup> (Augsburg, ca.1600-Venice, 1678), and the Dutch painter Gaspar van Wittel (Amersfoort, 1652/1653-Rome, 1736). Together, they evolved a new approach to the genre of view painting. The most important of the three was Gaspar van Wittel, whose manner of understanding and interpreting the urban landscape laid the way for the view paintings that would triumph in the *Settecento*.<sup>3</sup>

Gaspar van Wittel is represented in the Museum by two views of outstanding quality in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: *The Piazza Navona, Rome*, and *The Darsena, Naples*,<sup>4</sup> while further works by the artist are to be found in various Spanish collections.<sup>5</sup> Of the present pair, it is the view of the Piazza Navona (fig. 1) that depicts the bustle of city life in what is still a key hub in the centre of Rome as well as an extremely important area with regard to its architecture. Van Wittel, who made Rome the principal motif in his temperas and oil paintings, has been the subject of interesting scholarly discussion that has focused on the innovations that this Dutch artist introduced into view painting. These innovations include the viewpoints that he selected, particularly when the subject

was a contemporary city, newly embellished through rebuilding, remodelling and new buildings. Other interesting aspects of his work include the close relationship between his graphic output and his painting; the regular and rational construction of the perspective that he used; the type of compositional framing; his realist approach and his particular manner of describing the subject. Despite this, attention still needs to be drawn to an interesting aspect of his work that becomes evident to the viewer who focuses in particular on the streets and squares in Van Wittel's views and which involves characteristics typical of the northern European schools. Among them are a taste for reproducing detail and textures and for depicting the everyday nature of man and his environment. These characteristics, which the artist undoubtedly learned, assimilated and experienced during his formative years, led Van Wittel to reproduce with great care and exactness a wealth of details that fill one of the most famous city squares in the world, imbuing it with life and colour. In addition, they convey to the viewer the nature of the artist's rigorous process of visual reflection and his desire to reproduce, in the manner of a print, the nature of the life in that particular place.

### Traders and customers

The Piazza Navona in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection is depicted with all the activity of a normal market day in which peasants have taken over the space to set up their stalls and offer passers-by produce from their market gardens on the outskirts of Rome. In addition, and particularly numerous on the right and left sides, the painting also depicts the shop-keepers who have opened up for the same purpose.

Looking at the left side of the painting, at the large diagonal created by the spatial recession and which is articulated through the base of the buildings, it is possible to see two bookshops, among others (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> All these shops protected their doorways and merchandise from the strong sun and the heat with awnings of similar colours in tones of beige, green and blue, some of them repaired<sup>7</sup>, judiciously mixed with others of blue and white stripes. These cloth coverings, which indicated to passers-by that there was merchandise for sale, could reach as far as the ground, obliging potential purchasers to go round the side of them in order to enter the shop. The awnings were held up at the front with simple poles stuck into the ground, while at the top they were attached to the shop fronts at the two corners or hung on a rail. In one case in the painting, that of a shop near Sant' Agnese, a red carriage without its horses has been left underneath one such awning. A book shop with awnings frayed with age is to be seen just past the imposing entrance



Fig. 2.  
Detail of the left side with one  
of the bookshops



Fig. 3  
Detail of the right side with the clothing  
and accessories shops

to the Pamphilj palace<sup>8</sup>. Van Wittel captures the moment when a woman and a dog are about to cross the threshold, just where the bookseller has laid out his wares, careful not to invade the public space. The books, some of them open, are neatly piled up on a surface covered with vividly coloured red rugs, creating the effect of a shop window display<sup>9</sup>. Hanging at different levels in the same entrance are what seem to be reproductive prints, while the upper part of the bookshop's façade is adorned with three framed paintings that hang at different angles, presumably functioning like a shop sign to attract attention. Their horizontal format is intended to fit into the small space available. The left and central paintings clearly depict marine views while the right one seems to be a bust in a medallion. From the presence of the paintings it would seem that the shop had three entrances, the first lacking an awning but the next two protected by awnings. In contrast to the objects inside this establishment, a homely note is added by the presence of the white washing of the person living on the upper floor, hanging from a washing line and from the balcony rail. As a result, shirts and other garments announce their presence in the piazza.

Located on the opposite diagonal, on the right, the first shop to be seen sells clothing and cloth (fig. 3). A lady holding a fan walks towards it, following by her maid, dressed in black. At the door of the shop, which is again protected by an awning, is a bench on which a man has sat down to wait patiently, perhaps for the woman who is now approaching the shop to make some purchases. The goods are displayed in an orderly way outside the shop, which in this case does not have a sign of any sort. Next door is a small shop with an attractive blue façade and a large window that illuminates the interior. Lined up on the sill are three bonnets or headdresses. Like the previous shop, this one also has a bench for waiting.

Permanent shops continue in the section of the piazza between San Giacomo degli Spagnoli<sup>10</sup> and the first opening from the street onto the square, through which emerges a dazzling light that abruptly breaks the shadow of the buildings that falls on the ground. The five awnings in this section are precisely aligned and chromatically harmonious. The entrances to the shops are clearly marked and the awnings are carefully tied at the sides so as not to deter customers. Here the shop owners have decided to display their wares in front of their premises and for this reason have set up various sloping trestles in order to better display the merchandise, which is neatly set out and easily visible in circular baskets of various diameters, and also suspended from the lintel of the doorway. Van Wittel groups a large number of figures in this area in order to convey the bustle of the intense activity taking place.



Fig. 4  
Detail of the foreground of the street market with traders,  
customers and two young men walking past



Fig. 5  
Detail of a stall at the start of the line of stands

### A street market on the square

While the two principal diagonals that create the perspective of the painting are the location for the permanent shops at ground floor level, the central space in the piazza is the location for the street market specialising in food. Interesting, the line of stalls is arranged on the right to take advantage of the shade created by the façades of the buildings, although one group of country people has opted to take the initiative and set out their wares in the full sunlight in a strategic spot near the Fontana del Moro (fig. 4).

Facing the viewer is a rough sort of counter with the recipients for holding the produce set at an angle, while two baskets have been left on the ground for the unwary passer-by to trip over. Upright buckets act as stools while three vendors organise the stand. Of them, a woman rolling up her sleeves looks at the others, whose gestures indicate that they are discussing the watermelon stall next to them. This improved stall with its large melons piled up and spread over the ground in the piazza, offers fine produce to passers-by. Here Van Wittel has included an agreeable episode in which a vendor has chosen a watermelon for a customer from those he is holding up but the fussy customer, dressed in a red frock coat and leaning forward, rejects it, pointing resolutely to a different watermelon. Meanwhile, another man is waiting to be served. To create a further link between the two stands, and in addition to the use of gestures, Van Wittel includes a woman who has already purchased a watermelon and who is handing over the required amount to the fruit seller.

Occupying part of the right foreground but slightly lost among the passers-by is a woman sitting on the ground and selling fowl, holding up one of them in order to draw attention to it. Beside her and next to a young girl's foot is her basket of eggs. Slightly further back, where the stalls start, is a sizeable group of baskets of different depths and widths filled with fruit, presided over by a vendor with a pair of scales. He serves a young woman who holds out a cloth to hold the fruit. Behind, the artist has included a young man waiting to be served and two more figures (fig. 5).

The line of more than five temporary stands on the right have their counters facing the façades of the buildings in order to catch the passers-by who have come to visit the permanent shops, while the side facing the piazza is used as storage area for piling up the containers for the produce, for keeping further supplies of merchandise and for leaving the animals that have brought the produce in from the countryside. Here Van Wittel depicts the disorder produced by the upturned baskets dotted here and there, the produce that has spilled out and the mules with their saddle bags, loaded or unloaded and patiently waiting next to the stalls. In this area, where there are few

passers-by, a striking note is created by a man dressed in shades of brown who seems to making a gesture of disapproval regarding the location of a large, empty basket that is located at some distance from the back part of the stall.

### Everyday images of a popular location

Van Wittel's painting is articulated through small scenes in which the artist undoubtedly reproduced his observations of daily life that corresponded to an environment and atmosphere that he himself had experienced and seen. In addition to the passers-by crossing the piazza alone, accompanied or in groups, and like those who enter or leave the shops or buildings (a good example being the man in blue about to enter the Pamphilj palace), the painter captures other moments that convey a profound sense of lifelikeness.

Among these small vignettes is that of the water-seller who has set up his table with glasses and a bottle next to the carriage on the left and who is pouring out water for the soldier holding a glass (fig. 6). Another detail is that of the couple seen from behind with a young man tugging the skirt of the young girl next to him, drawing her attention to something that he has seen. The two men standing in front of the Fontana del Moro seem to be discussing a particular group in the piazza, namely the individuals who have got out of their coach by the doorway to Sant' Agnese and who are about to enter the church, or perhaps the passer-by who has been approached by a beggar asking for alms from this gentleman. As might be expected, these scenes are depicted in a precise manner in the foreground and middle-ground, filling the great open space in the centre of the painting with life and bustle. Near the Four Rivers Fountain we see another group of four soldiers with their backs to the viewer. They seem to be placidly admiring Bernini's great masterpiece.

Turning our attention once more to the foreground in front of the stalls, three men are talking together, followed by a family comprising the parents and two daughters. The younger one turns her head towards the proudly upright figure of the mother in order to point out the sculptural group in the foreground (fig. 7). Van Wittel uses the empty space between the fountains to locate various carriages, as well as figures with dogs and a depiction of four mules with their driver that proceed towards one of the stalls or stands at the end of the market. An interesting detail is the presence of more animals drinking in the Four Rivers Fountain in the shadow created by the sculptural group and imposing obelisk.

The artist used a prominent position on the right to locate two men chatting as they stroll along. It is easy to determine which of the two is speaking due to the rhetorical gesture of one of his hands,



Fig. 6  
Detail of the water-seller on the left of the painting



Fig. 7  
Detail of two groups near the Fontana del Moro



Fig. 8  
Detail of the entrance to the church  
of San Giacomo

while the other listens attentively (figs. 4 and 9). Also prominent is the dandyish figure in the foreground with his rather artificial pose, holding a staff and with one hand on his hip, his head turned to one side. His intention appears to be that of displaying his splendid clothing of an elegant blue tone. Close by him are two Franciscan monks in sandals and habits, one of them holding up his garment in order not to dirty it on the dusty ground.<sup>11</sup> Immediately beside the right façade, between the young people with loaded trays and baskets on their heads, two people have met by chance and greet each other with a bow of the head from a discreet distance, removing their hats. At the doorway of San Giacomo, Van Wittel has included a small scene that can still be seen today and which remains timeless despite the centuries that have passed since the execution of this painting: the presence of the poor and needy who sit at either side of a church door and beg for alms or hold out a tin plate in the hope of receiving a few coins from those attending a service. This scene is repeated by the two figures in white tunics sitting on the ground in the corner, their heads and faces concealed by their ample hoods. Both have small plates in their laps to hold the coins given by those entering the church of San Giacomo (fig. 8).<sup>12</sup>

### Visitors and residents, figures and brushstrokes

Like many other works by Van Wittel, this composition would not be the same without the figures that fill it. Despite the role played by the buildings, monuments and other architectural features of the city, these urban views are brought to life through a universe of figures taken from the real world that give life and movement to the buildings and make them seem more real.<sup>13</sup> For Van Wittel, the figures have as much importance as a wrought-iron grille, a balustrade, the lintel of a doorway or a block of stone. This is evident in the care with which he depicts and individualises the poses, clothing and physical features (when size allows us to see them). The proportions of the bodies are long and slender, making these small figures (which were added once the background had dried) elegant in themselves. The flesh tones are warm, with a predominance of red and orange tones on the faces and hands. In the foreground figures, such as the two young men walking in front of the first stall, the features of the faces are precisely defined, including the eyes, nose and mouth (fig. 9).

This precision of detail also applies to the clothing, and Van Wittel has individualised the lace collars, sleeves, the edging of the shirts and even the belt buckles. As if this were not sufficient, the textiles are extremely light and delicate, particularly the cloaks that move gently in the breeze, creating a pleasing effect of folds at the hems and on the women's skirts. One example is that of the two young girls in front



Fig. 9  
Detail of two figures near one of the market stalls

of the fowl seller, wearing large white bonnets. Despite the small proportions of the figures, Van Wittel experiments with textures that differentiate the various types of clothing, from the rough, heavy garments of the peasants to the light, satin ones of the most elevated social classes. He even takes care to accurately depict the sandals and heavy cloth of the Franciscan monks' habits. In general the palette is based on earth and grey-brown tones with touches of black and some glowing reds and electric blues, such as the blue of the clothing of the elegantly dressed man standing in the right foreground. Van Wittel is well known for the skill with which he depicted the different materials of the buildings in his compositions, including the stone blocks and decorative elements of the façades, the wood in some structures, the decorative metal elements and locks and bolts, and the glass, all present in this depiction of the Piazza Navona.

### A touch of Nature in the city

It is clear that Van Wittel embellished this depiction of the Piazza Navona, as he did other paintings, with small details that reveal his conscientious approach. The precise and meticulous execution of his views and the often rapid brushstrokes that capture and reproduce even the small details make these scenes unique geographies in which, little by little, the viewer enters into a fragment of reality. One interesting small detail, also found in other works, is the artist's interest in depicting the flower pots that adorn the most unlikely spots within his compositions. In the present work Van Wittel has carefully located five, attractively proportioned, wide-lipped earthenware flower pots containing different plants on the exterior of the first floor of the clothes shop on the far right.<sup>14</sup> They rest on a special wooden ledge located under the first floor windows and resting on the sloping roofing above the shop. Three more pots are to be seen at this level in a corner of the balcony. Another striking element is the presence of a woman who looks out from one of these windows towards the position occupied by the viewer (fig. 10). This concern to embellish the architectural elements means that a surprising location such as the dividing walls of Sant' Agnese also feature another small, single flower pot holding a flourishing shrub which, despite its diminutive size, provides a focal point among the areas of roofing, the façade walls and the drum of the church's dome (fig. 11). This is also the case with the three pots perched dangerously on the rail of the balcony above the bookshop (fig. 2)<sup>15</sup>. Van Wittel was undoubtedly guided by aesthetic criteria, albeit with a naturalistic intent, when unifying colours such as those of the curtains and awnings that protect the interior of the dwellings giving onto the piazza, for most of which he used blue, combining this colour with red hangings in some places.



Fig. 10  
Detail of the first floor of the building  
in the immediate foreground on the right



Fig. 11  
Detail of a flower pot  
among the dividing walls  
of Sant' Agnese

While there is no doubt that architecture is the protagonist in Van Wittel's work, both with regard to subject and composition, it is no less true that for the artist the figures and other minor details to be seen in any corner of a great city represented a fascinating universe that he never hesitated to reproduce in his canvases and whose inclusion associates him with the northern approach in which the conquest of reality involved highly developed powers of observation.

## Notes

- 1 Paintings of Venice by Lucas Carlevarijs are to be found in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, the Palazzo Corsini, Rome, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, among other museums and private collections.
- 2 The Museo Correr in Venice has a series of four, large-format oils (more than 2 metres wide). Heintz described in precise detail the episodes and public celebrations depicted in these works, set against the backdrop of Venice. They include *Procession of the Feast of the Redeemer* (oil on canvas. 115 x 205 cm; inv. 2058); and *The Entry of the Patriarch Federico Corner into San Pietro in Castello*, 1649 (oil on canvas. 117 x 207 cm; inv. 2060). The Museo Correr also has a *Perspectival View of Venice* (oil on canvas. 171 x 269 cm; inv. 2159), which is based on the famous aerial view of the city by Jacopo de'Barbari published in 1500.
- 3 For the artist's life and work, see the monograph by Giuliano Briganti, *Gaspar van Wittel*. Electa, Milan, 1996. See also the catalogue that accompanied the most recent exhibition on the artist, 2002-2003 (see note 5 below).
- 4 Oil on canvas. 96.5 x 216 cm; inv. CTB. 1978.83. Painted in Rome, it is signed and dated with the artist's initials on the bollards of the Fontana del Moro: "Roma/1699 c.VW". Oil on canvas. 74 x 171.8 cm; inv. CTB. 1996.36.
- 5 The Museo Nacional del Prado has a *View of Venice from the Isola di San Giorgio* of 1697 that belonged to Isabella Farnese (oil on canvas. 98 x 174 cm; cat. 475), and two small views of Neapolitan subjects: *Outskirts of Naples* (oil on canvas. 32 x 37 cm; cat. 2462), and *The Grotto at Posillipo (Naples)* (oil on canvas. 32 x 37 cm; cat. 2463). Patrimonio Nacional has a *View of the Piazza San Marco*, the pair to the one in the Prado, also signed and dated 1697 (oil on canvas. 96 x 171.5 cm; inv. Pl-1812202P). One of the most important holdings of the artist's work, however, is that of the Medinaceli Collection (Spain), as Van Wittel was summoned to execute an important group of paintings for the 9th Duke, Luis Francisco de la Cerda Aragón (1660-1771), Marquis of Cogolludo and Viceroy and Captain General of Naples during the Reign of Charles III. See in this respect the posthumous inventory, published in "The Art Collection of the Ninth Duke of Medinaceli" by V. Lleó Cañal, in *The Burlington Magazine*, 1989, CXXXI, 1031, pp.108-116. See also the inventory of Ludovica Trezzani, which lists 35 paintings by Van Wittel, published in the exhibition catalogue *Gaspare Vanvitelli e le origini del vedutismo*, Rome, Chiostro del Bramante, 26 October 2002 to 2 February 2003, and Venice, Museo Correr, 28 February to 1 June 2003, p. 45.
- 6 The large diagonal on the left starts with a bookshop in which the merchandise is displayed on a simple table and three shelves.
- 7 To be seen on one of the awnings on the right, to the left of the red carriage stationed at the shop door, and on one of the awnings that opens the line of stalls of the street market.
- 8 The remodelled façade of this great palace opens the painting on this left diagonal. Particularly striking is the large entrance arch with lateral openings, framed by four attached columns. The large coat-of-arms of the family appears in the centre of the façade above the piano nobile.
- 9 This detail can also be associated with a characteristically northern aesthetic. The Museum's collection includes depictions of tables and other surfaces covered with carpets. Examples include *Vase of Flowers* by Memling, inv. 284b (1938.1.b), *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet with his Secretaries* by Sebastiano del Piombo, inv. 369 (1934.20), and *Portrait of a Man reading a Document* by Gerard ter Borch, inv. 392 (1969.18).
- 10 The church located on the right axis, almost next to the bonnet shop. It was funded by the Spanish in Rome until 1818 and was altered and remodelled several times. The façade

## Notes

- to be seen here was altered in the 19th century and in the painting has a pentimento in the underdrawing, indicating that the building originally projected in more pronounced foreshortening towards the right.
- 11 Pairs of Franciscan monks are common in Van Wittel's paintings. They are to be seen, for example, in *View of the Royal Palace in Naples* (oil on canvas. 75 x 125 cm) in the collection of the Banca Commerciale Italiana.
  - 12 These figures are repeated singly or in pairs in works such as *View of the Piazza del Popolo* of 1718 (oil on canvas. 56 x 109 cm), signed and dated, in the collection of Intesa-Banca Commerciale Italiana, where one is located by the entrance to Santa Maria del Popolo. In *View of the Arch of Titus and of the Orti Farnesiani* (oil on canvas. 23 x 38.8 cm), private collection, in which one is seated on the ground near the arch, while in *View of the Grotto at Pozzuoli or Posillipo* (oil on canvas. 74 x 99 cm) in the Cesare Lampronti collection a beggar stretches out his hand on the narrow pavement at the entrance to the grotto.
  - 13 While not typical of most of the artist's drawings, studies of figures in poses that could be used for final paintings are to be found in the collections of the Royal Palace at Caserta and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Berlin.
  - 14 Other locations used for the placement of flower pots include the floor above the striped awnings at the end of the piazza and two further locations on the roof terrace of that building. We also find flowerpots on some window sills on the right in one of the buildings near the central entrance onto the piazza.
  - 15 This device is repeated in other compositions in which the artist locates flower pots above doorways, on the tops of walls and other locations, for example, *View of Marino from the Villa Colonna di Belpoggio* (oil on canvas. 87.5 x 185.5 cm), *View of Vaprio d'Adda* (oil on canvas. 49.2 x 98.2 cm), both in the Colonna princely collection; *Landscape with a Villa and River* (oil on canvas, 35 x 44 cm), private collection, and *View of Sorrento* (oil on canvas. 71 x 123 cm), Fundación Casa Ducal de Medinaceli.

# Composition by Ivan Kliun. A revolutionary painting

Marta Ruiz del Árbol

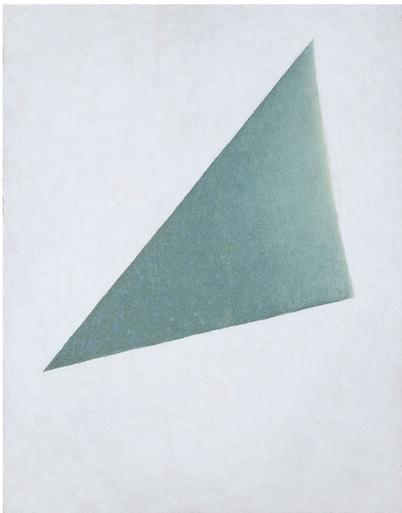


Fig. 1  
Ivan Kliun  
*Composition*, 1917  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2  
Ivan Kliun, 1920



Fig. 3  
Ivan Kliun and Kasimir Malevich, 1914-1915

Anyone interested in the great artistic renaissance that took place in early 20th-century Russia will come across the name of Ivan Kliun on more than one occasion. Kliun is associated with many of the movements that arose in the turbulent Russia of that time. Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubo-futurism, Suprematism and Purism successively make their appearances in his career, reflecting the changing history of Russian art in the early 20th century.

In contrast, however, to the attention that Malevich and other representatives of the Russian avant-garde have received for some decades, Kliun's importance has barely been recognised. To understand the obscurity into which his name fell we need to look back to the rigid artistic norms imposed by Stalin after his rise to power in the mid-1920s. Avant-garde art was accused of being "formalist" and of not promoting State proclamations. While Socialist Realism became the regime's official artistic idiom, abstraction was banned and its creators persecuted. The names of the artists involved were forgotten and for decades their works were kept hidden away in artists' houses or in Soviet museum stores.

The first to rediscover Kliun's merits as an artist was George Costakis. This important collector of Russian art met Kliun a couple of times in the early 1940s. Some time after the artist's death in 1943, Costakis made contact with Kliun's heirs in order to try to buy work by him. After various unsuccessful attempts he made contact with the artist's daughter. She had most of her father's works stored in her house and sold the majority of them to Costakis.<sup>1</sup>

The Costakis collection was shown in Düsseldorf in 1977 and at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1981. The publications that accompanied these events cast new light on the figure of Kliun, who once again started to be referred to as a member of the avant-garde. In 1983 the Matignon Gallery in New York devoted the first retrospective exhibition to the artist<sup>2</sup> and in 1999 the Tretyakov Gallery celebrated the 125th anniversary of the artist's birth with another exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

While many art historians have acknowledged the originality and quality of Kliun's work,<sup>4</sup> most analyses of his career have been structured around his relationship with Kasimir Malevich. The close friendship that arose between the two artists in the early years of the 20th century when both studied with Fedor Rerberg in Moscow has been seen to indicate Kliun's willingness to follow Malevich's artistic theories and practices.

It cannot be denied that Malevich played a decisive role in Kliun's career and that his powerful personality left its mark. Nonetheless, it is also true that Kliun was able to break away and express his disagreement with Malevich's Suprematist theories. *Composition*, in the collection of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, already reveals certain features that anticipate Kliun's break from the rigid premises of Suprematism, allowing him to embark on his own artistic path as an individual artist.



Fig. 4  
Photography with transversal  
light of *Composition*, 1917  
Photo: H el ene Desplechin

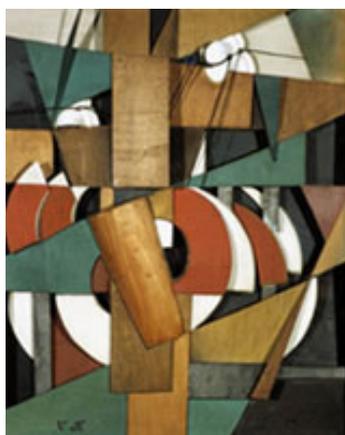


Fig. 5  
Ivan Kliun  
*Landscape Racing By*, 1915  
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Mosc u

Fig. 6  
Exhibition 0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition,  
Malevich Suprematist Section, 1915,  
Petrograd

### The secret of *Composition*

The Museo Thyssen has only one painting by Ivan Kliun in its collection. Dating from the artist's Suprematist period, it offers numerous keys to understanding his creative process and principal artistic concerns. In addition, thanks to the technical study undertaken by the Museum's Restoration Department, the painting can be used to analyse Kliun's evolution over the time that he was associated with the movement promoted by his friend Malevich as well as to appreciate certain features that anticipate the subsequent development of his work.<sup>5</sup>

Among the images taken of the painting during this technical study is a photograph that reveals the presence of an earlier composition below the visible paint surface (fig. 4). Taken with the light positioned behind the stretcher, this photograph reveals that when creating *Composition* Kliun reused a canvas on which he had previously painted. Beneath the white pigment it is possible to see a series of geometrical shapes, including a red triangle towards the bottom and various curved forms towards the top.

Kliun devised this composition during his early Suprematist phase. Probably painted in 1916, it reflects his rapid assimilation of Malevich's theories. His early period of training lay behind him, during which he had met Malevich and had been one of the artists that revived and renewed the pre-Revolutionary Russian art scene. This was the period when Kliun took an active part in Futurist projects and events in his spare time while continuing to work as a respectable accountant. During those years he met members of the Union of Youth, while he also ceased to sign his works with his real name, Kliunkov, in order to avoid possible problems in relation to his normal job.

Like many of his contemporaries, in a few short years Kliun evolved from the Symbolism of his early works towards Cubo-futurist forms. His assimilation of this new artistic idiom is evident in the sculptures and reliefs (fig. 5) that he showed in *0.10 Last Futurist Exhibition*, held in Petrograd (modern-day Saint Petersburg) in 1915.

It was at that celebrated event that Malevich showed *Black Square* for the first time, which was the work that marked the start of Suprematism (fig. 6). While Kliun exhibited works in the Cubo-futurist style, he co-signed the Suprematist manifesto that accompanied the exhibition, along with Malevich and Mikhail Menkov.<sup>6</sup>

Kliun's work thus evolved towards the complete abstraction of Malevich and of the other artists with whom he participated in the project for the magazine *Supremus*. Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova and Alexandra Ekster were among the female artists who were involved in the project.

"After accepting the straight line as a point of departure, we have arrived at an ideally simple form: straight and circular planes (sounds and the letters of the words)."<sup>7</sup>

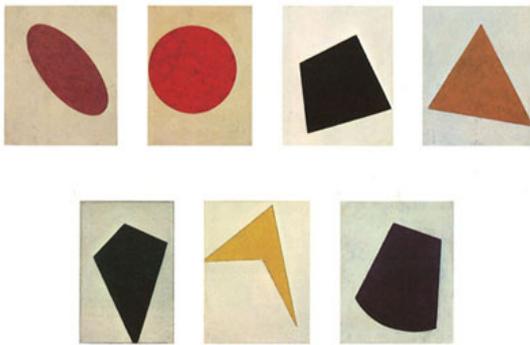


Fig. 7  
Ivan Kliun  
*Colour Researches Series*, ca. 1917  
George Costakis Collection

With these words, written at the early date of 1915, Ivan Kliun summed up the new artistic concept that aimed to achieve “the supremacy of pure sensibility”. In this approach, flat, geometrical planes are the key elements, located against a background on which they appear to float. The image that has been identified underneath the surface of the Thyssen-Bornemisza painting corresponds to this approach.

#### A revolutionary type of painting

Ivan Kliun returned to the canvas in question in 1917, the year of the October Revolution. Kliun was one of the oldest of the avant-garde figures. By this date he was forty-four and a fully mature artist.

In comparison to the complexity of the first composition, the definitive solution is extremely simple. The triangle of green tones that is the sole motif in the composition floats on a white background. The straight lines of which it is formed are not aligned with the edges of the canvas, giving the shape an effect of movement and a sense of weightlessness, as if liberated from the laws of gravity.

In addition to the simplification of forms, Kliun was clearly also interested in colour. As Andrei Nakov explained, February 1916 saw the start of a second phase within the Suprematism of Malevich and his colleagues and one that focused on the dynamic possibilities of colour. Colour ceased to be an attribute and became a self-sufficient entity. It was now material per se, liberated from the form that had controlled it up to that point.<sup>8</sup>

The colourful optimism that invaded the work of the members of Supremus due to the infinite possibilities of the non-objective universe was particularly evident in Kliun’s case. In November 1917, the year of the painting in the Museo Thyssen, he presented various works under the title *Colour Investigations* in the exhibition *Knave of Diamonds* (fig. 7).<sup>9</sup> These works are based on the interaction of colours and their relationship with the geometrical forms in which they are contained. In many of them Kliun depicted just one geometrical shape of a single colour. Their similarity with *Composition* has led Vassily Rakitin to suggest that the latter belonged to the same series.<sup>10</sup>

*Composition* is also notably close to various works by Malevich and by other members of Supremus. Nonetheless, although still corresponding to the “colourist” Suprematism of the moment, *Composition* already reveals some signs of the pronounced artistic personality of Kliun, who would soon break from Malevich. While *Yellow Quadrilateral* by Malevich (fig. 8) involves a gradual reduction of the pictorial elements that would culminate in his white series, Kliun had already embarked on his evolution towards “compositions in which the essential was the effect of luminescence”.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 8  
Kasimir Malevich  
*Yellow Quadrilateral*, 1917-1918  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

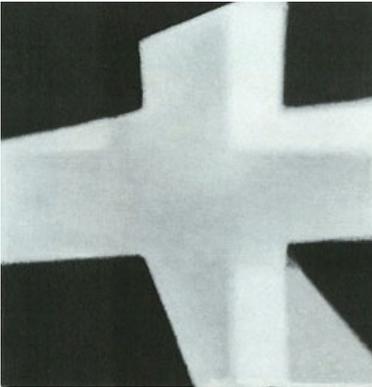


Fig. 9  
Kliun's chart on compositions problems of 1942  
George Costakis Collection

Fig. 10  
Ivan Kliun  
*Composition*, 1924  
Antigua George Costakis Collection

Colour, which had always been of outstanding importance for Kliun, becomes the principal subject of *Composition*. Over time it would become the basis of his painting, endowing it with movement, power and tension. Kliun's interests moved away from those of Malevich: while the former studied the optical effects of colour, the latter became immersed in a process of de-materialisation that would culminate in the application of white onto the white of the canvas.

In the *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism* of 1919, Kliun expressed his disagreement with the process initiated by Malevich in an essay in the catalogue. Entitled "The Art of Colour", it attacked Suprematism for being a "decorative art" and accused it of being "the cadaver of pictorial art". In contrast, Kliun upheld the "vitality of colour", arguing that it was from colour that "the painting of the future" would spring.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1920s, after his break with Malevich, Kliun embarked on a period of continuous experimentation. Stimulated by his new position as a teacher at the Svomas (Free State Art Studios) where he gave classes on colour, Kliun returned to creating more complex compositions in which he investigated the relationship between colours and geometrical, spatial tensions. While his works continued to conform to many of the Suprematist theories, he now used them in the realisation of his new artistic aim, namely that of depicting the movement of light through colour. *Composition* of 1924 (fig. 10) appears to be a firm critique of Malevich. It uses a typically Suprematist composition but distorts the form and makes the colours transparent.

## Notes

- 1 The more than 200 works that Costakis acquired are to be seen with the rest of his collection in the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Salonica.
- 2 *Ivan Vasilievich Kliun*, [exhib. cat.]. New York, Matignon Gallery, 1983. Introduction by John Bowlit, pp. 3-6.
- 3 Ia.V. Bruk: *I.V. Kliun in the State Tretyakov Gallery: On the 125th anniversary*, [exhib. cat.]. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, 1999.
- 4 The only monograph on the artist was written by his granddaughter in 1993: Svetlana Kliunkova-Soloveichik: *Ivan Vasilievich Kliun*. New York, IVK Art, 1993 [copyright 1994]. In addition, John Bowlit's work in this area should also be mentioned. Finally, a recent doctoral thesis places considerable emphasis on Kliun with regard to the evolution of the avant-gardes: Marina Bordne: *Landschaft als Fluchtraum: zum Problem des Genre in der Geschichte der Russischen Avantgarde*. [Doctoral thesis]. Heidelberg, Universität, 2005 (<http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/6417>).
- 5 I would like to thank the Museum's Restoration Department for its technical study of the painting, which provided the basis for further research.
- 6 The part signed by Kliun was devoted to the issue of sculpture breaking away from the imitative function that had characterised it until then. Published in English by John Bowlit (ed.): *Russian Art of the Avant-garde. Theory and Criticism. 1902-1934*. London - New York, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 114.
- 7 Ivan Kliun: "Primitives of the Twentieth Century" (1915). In Bowlit 1988 (op. cit.), p. 137.
- 8 Andrei B. Nakov: *Kazimir Malewicz. Le peintre absolu*. Paris, Thalia, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 264-269.
- 9 Some of these works are now in the Costakis Collection. See Rowell and Angelica Zander Rudenstine: *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the Costakis Collection*, [exhib. cat.]. New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981, p. 112.
- 10 See John E. Bowlit and Nicoletta Misler: *Twentieth-century Russian and East European Painting. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Philip Wilson - Zwemmer, 1993, p. 158.
- 11 Paloma Alarcó: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, p. 303.
- 12 Ivan Kliun: "The Art of Color" (1919). Quoted in Andrei B. Nakov: *Tatlin's Dream. Russian Suprematism and Constructivist Art 1910-1923*, [exhib. cat.]. London, Fischer Fine Art Limited, 1974, p. 63.

# A new attribution for *Prison*. Tatiana Glebova and the working methods of the Masters of Analytical Art

Clara Marcellán

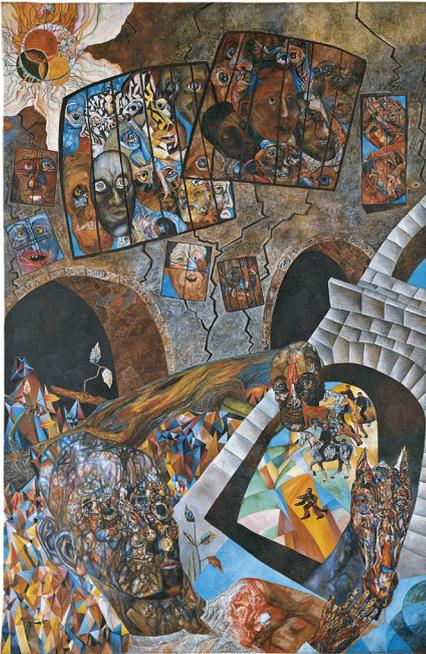


Fig. 1  
Tatiana Glebova  
*Prison*, 1927  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

In 1925 the young Tatiana Glebova aspired to enter the Fine Arts Academy in revolutionary Leningrad. Curiosity took her to the studio of Pavel Filonov, where she became involved in one of the latest experiments of the Russian avant-garde, namely the MAI group (Masters of Analytical Art). Together they undertook projects on an epic scale that Stalinist policy of the 1930s would subsequently condemn to oblivion and in some cases to complete disappearance. So effective were the Stalinist campaigns against avant-garde artists and movements that the Russian public eventually knew nothing of their existence.

Over the past few decades the figure of Filonov and his work have been rediscovered, along with the names of his followers, known as *filonovets*. The high value of Filonov's work on the present art market combined with the scant amount of documentation on this period has resulted in questionable or poorly argued attributions of the works created by the MAI group. This is the case with *Prison* (fig. 1), which was attributed to Filonov and Glebova or to Filonov alone until 1993 when John Bowlt and Nicoletta Misler published it as a work by Glebova.<sup>1</sup> In the most recent catalogue raisonné of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection<sup>2</sup> this attribution has been maintained. The present article sets out to reconstruct the creation of the painting and hence to clarify its problematic attribution.

## A Universal Flowering<sup>3</sup>

In her *Memoirs of Filonov*<sup>4</sup> Glebova describes the impression that his studio made on her during her first visit: the walls were hung with studies and half-finished paintings that, to Glebova's surprise and consternation, all imitated Filonov's style. Glebova attributed the uniform aspect of these works to the fact that his pupils had deliberately abandoned their own artistic personalities. Nonetheless, she decided to join them and to put her own artistic identity to the test.

The success of Filonov's method was evident in the loyalty of his followers who, in Glebova's words, "were filled with enthusiasm and faith in the precision and uniqueness of our way of working." The certainty and conviction with which these groups, who were stirring up the Russian art world, adopted the philosophies of their respective gurus – Malevich for the Suprematists and Filonov for the Analytics – resulted in indistinguishable works of art which their creators considered to be charged with potential for changing the reality of the time. According to Boris Groys, we should bear in mind the fact that, "[...] the stylistic variety of the avant-garde was associated with the constant rifts and struggles among leading artists [...] Within each faction, however, discipline and the striving for standardisation prevailed, making, for example, the faithful disciples of Malevich almost indistinguishable."<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 2  
 Staircase of the  
 Shuvalov Palace,  
 premises of the Press  
 House in Leningrad  
 in 1927

Filonov's approach, which the young *filonovets* completely assimilated and emulated over the course of long working days, moved from the particular to the general, with each element painted in great detail and applying a method that was both scientific and intuitive. During these sessions master would read out his manifestos in which he preached the importance of a complete command of technique. He also recommended examples as diverse as Russian 19th-century painters, Dürer, Cranach and Neo-primitivism. In practice, the resulting images are obsessively and disturbingly precise and richly coloured, making use of a multiplicity of planes in which drawn lines cover the entire surface. The motifs are linked together so that their apparent fragmentation takes shape as an organic whole. For Filonov, this organic character reflected the continual growth of the universe and of the work, a phenomenon that he termed "universal flowering".

Once converted to Filonov's cause, Glebova participated in the founding of the MAI group, which would make its first public appearance in 1927 with the commission for the murals of the Press House in Leningrad, a project to which Glebova contributed *Prison*.

### Preparations for the Press House

The avant-garde poet Igor Terentiev commissioned the set and costume designs from Filonov and his school for the production of Gogol's play *The Inspector General*. In addition, the director of the Press House, where the play was to be performed, proposed a second commission: that of decorating the recently opened building, which was a 19th-century palace on the banks of the Fontanka river. During the four months that they were given to complete this project, the MAI group took over the Press House and worked long days. All those who were not engaged in producing the paintings for the lobby, the principal hall and the stairs (fig. 2) worked on the set and costume designs for the play.

Adopting the theme of "The Death of Capitalism", around twenty *filonovets* presented proposals in which they depicted an episode or aspect of the Revolution and denounced injustice and social degradation. In the case of *Prison*, three preparatory studies are known which, like the other proposals for the finished works, were revised and approved by Filonov before the final version was executed on canvas. As Glebova recalled, her initial proposal was not particularly successful: "The theme of my preparatory sketch was a revolutionary scene on the street, a revolutionary crowd. The piece was not topical enough and was therefore a failure. The size also wasn't right: if it had been enlarged to a big canvas, the proportions wouldn't have worked (the head would have taken up half of the canvas). Later on I redid this as *Prison*."<sup>6</sup> Glebova was probably referring to fig. 3, a small study that was sold at auction in 2005 at Galerie Lempertz (Germany).



Fig. 3  
 Tatiana Glebova  
 First sketch for the  
 wall painting of  
 the Press House in  
 Leningrad, 1926-1927  
 Sold at Lempertz  
 Galerie, June 11, 2005



Fig. 4  
Tatiana Glebova  
*Study for the picture in the Press House, Prison, 1927-1928*  
State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

Fig. 5  
Tatiana Glebova  
*Preparatory pencil sketch for Prison,*  
Dated on the reverse: "1928"  
Private collection, Saint Petersburg

Fig. 6  
Tatiana Glebova in her studio in Peterhof, Leningrad,  
around 1982, holding *Prison*



Fig. 7  
Pavel Filonov  
and Alisa Poret  
*Poor People, 1927*  
Sold at Sotheby's  
New York 26 April 2006

### All hands on deck

The next study by Glebova (fig. 4), now in the State Russian Museum, is much closer to the final version of *Prison* but further modifications are evident in the last known study (fig. 5) in which various elements in the upper part are re-located. The final canvas also includes a horse's head at the lower right that is attributed to Filonov in accounts by other members of the group.<sup>7</sup> Glebova referred to Filonov's involvement in the painting on several occasions, stating that it only consisted of the large head at the lower left: "Seeing the slowness with which I was fiddling around with a small brush with the fragmented design that I had transferred to the canvas, Pavel Nikolaevich seized a large brush and in the blink of an eye drew a large head on my canvas in a broad, free manner, which totally pulled together my preparatory drawing."<sup>8</sup>

At that date the name of the artist responsible for each work was not made known and Filonov did not record which student was responsible for which work in his diary. This vagueness regarding attributions and the fact that these works rarely appeared on the market were intentional. Filonov considered them to be a great, organic whole that he hoped to display in a future museum of Analytical Art. This, however, never materialised.

Given that Glebova acknowledged Filonov's contributions in her notes and interviews, it seems unlikely that she would not mention other interventions by her teacher. In 1982, on the back of a photograph in which she appears holding *Prison*, she made the following annotation: "This painting (oil on canvas) MOPR (*Prison*), as P. N. called it, was painted by me, in 1927-8 as a part of the design for the Leningrad Press House executed by Pavel Nikolaevich's group of pupils, 'The Masters of Analytical Art' under the supervision of Filonov".<sup>9</sup> More than fifty years later Glebova thus precisely recorded to what extent she was responsible for the creation of *Prison*.

### Give Way to Analytical Art!<sup>10</sup>

The group presented its creations to the public on 17 April 1927 with the title *Exhibition of Masters of Analytical Art*. From its outset, *Prison* was associated with another painting in the exhibition entitled *Poor People*, by Alisa Poret (fig. 7).<sup>11</sup> The two artists shared artistic affinities as well as an apartment and on this occasion also shared an enormous canvas, as was the case with other students. If the dimensions of the two paintings as they are in the present day were added up, the result would be a canvas measuring 250 x 300 cm. Poret painted the right side and Glebova the left. *Prison* and *Poor People* ultimately occupied one of the wall sections in the lobby of the Press House.



Fig. 8  
 Tatiana Glebova in the thirties

The extremely hostile reviews that the exhibition received focused on the grotesque nature of the images and the contrast with the splendid building for which they had been created. According to John Bowlt and Nicoletta Mislner, when the exhibition closed, probably on 17 May 1927,<sup>12</sup> the various artists involved collected their works. Glebova, however, remembered the situation differently in 1982: “When the Press House moved to another and smaller premises, the works were given back to the artists. We divided up our picture as A. Poret moved to Moscow and I stayed in Leningrad.”<sup>13</sup> This indicated that there were two different reasons for the removal and division of the canvases: firstly, the change of venue of the Press House, which according to the *Saint Petersburg Encyclopaedia*<sup>14</sup> took place in 1929, and secondly, the fact that Poret moved to Moscow during World War II.<sup>15</sup>

### Ostracism...

The years that followed the *Exhibition of Masters of Analytical Art* were turbulent ones for the group. In 1929 the monographic exhibition that the State Russian Museum had intended to devote to Filonov did not open to the public, while the organisers included an essay that was overtly scornful of his work in the catalogue. In 1930 a rupture occurred in the group and from 1932 the decree concerning the “Reconstruction of literary and artistic organisations” condemned them to permanent obscurity. Filonov was accused of individualism and of distorting reality but Glebova and other followers such as Poret remained loyal to him. Filonov starved to death during the siege of Leningrad in 1941, still clinging on to the creations of a lifetime that he never wished to sell.<sup>16</sup>

Glebova was able to escape from Leningrad and spent the rest of World War II in Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan). There she met her future husband, the artist and follower of Malevich, Vladimir Sterligov. They continued to devote their activities to art, art teaching, illustration and stage design. Their avant-garde backgrounds brought them insolence and hostility on the part of the authorities and their work of the 1920s and 1930s was dispersed or permanently lost. For this reason, *Prison* is a particularly valuable testimony to the period.

### ... and rehabilitation

In 1981, a few years before Glebova’s death, the Union of Artists in Leningrad devoted a monographic exhibition to her. Around this date Glebova also met E. Spitsyna on several occasions, resulting in the interviews and photographs that have provided us with more information on *Prison*. It was also around this time that Glebova sold the canvas to Mikhail Meilakh, a philologist who specialised in the avant-garde poets with whom the Masters of Analytical Art were associated. After

that the painting turned up in Europe, in the Galerie Gmurzynska (Cologne), from where it was acquired by Baron Thyssen in 1984.

In 1988 the painting was exhibited in public for the first time since it was removed from the Press House. It was included in the exhibition *Wege zur Abstraktion. 80 Meisterwerke aus der Sammlung Thyssen-Bornemisza*, which was seen in Luxembourg, Munich and Vienna. The painting was shown untitled and attributed to Filonov. The initials MOPR (the acronym for International Aid Organisation for Combatants of the Revolution) that Filonov had used to refer to the work and to which Glebova referred in her annotation on the photograph in 1982, meant that the painting was on occasions entitled *MOPR, Prison*. However, the title most frequently encountered in Glebova's writings, in references to the 1927 exhibition, and in the writings of experts on her work is *Prison*, which is the one used in the Museum's new catalogue raisonné.<sup>17</sup>

The last few years have seen a large number of exhibitions and publications on Filonov and on some of his followers. Until mid-February 2011, for example, visitors could see an exhibition on Tatiana Glebova at the State Museum of History in Saint Petersburg. In the present day, reconstructing and rediscovering the key figures and experiences that political events and the passing of time have obscured seems more possible than ever before.

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#### Notes

- 1 John Bowlt and Nicoletta Misler: *Twentieth-Century Russian and East European Painting: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Zwemmer, 1993, pp. 116-123.
- 2 Paloma Alarcó: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, p. 316.
- 3 The name of the artistic theory that Filonov promoted in his 1923 manifesto.
- 4 Glebova wrote *Memoirs of Filonov* in 1967. It was not published until 1983, when Jean-Claude Marcadé translated the text into French. Tatiana Glebova: "Souvenirs de Filonov", in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, Paris, 1 June 1983, no. 11.
- 5 Boris Groys: "The Birth of Social Realism". In Bowlt, John E. and Matich, Olga: *Laboratory of Dreams. The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 209
- 6 Spitsyna, E.: "T. Glebova: Vremia ucheniia: Dopolnenie k vospominaniiam", in *Experiment*, Los Angeles, 2005, no. 11, p. 228.
- 7 Kondratev and Mordvinova in interviews conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. John Bowlt had access to this information through his conversations and correspondence with Vasily Rakitin between 1984 and 1985. Rakitin wrote about *Prison* in the 1970s, attributing it to Filonov.
- 8 Glebova 1983, p. 119.
- 9 Bowlt/Misler 1993, pp. 122-123.
- 10 In 2007 the Rumiantsev House in Saint Petersburg reconstructed the exhibition *Masters of Analytical Art* of 1927, using the same title. Only ten works from the more than twenty that were involved in the original project have survived to the present day.
- 11 Alisa Poret: *Poor People*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 153.7 cm. Sold at Sotheby's New York, 26 April 2006. Lot 96.
- 12 This is the date proposed in Glebova 1983, p. 119, note 5.
- 13 Bowlt/Misler 1993, pp. 122-123.
- 14 <http://www.encspb.ru/en/article.php?kod=2804004437>
- 15 <http://www.gov.karelia.ru/Karelia/887/29.html>
- 16 Pavel Filonov's sister donated the collection of his work to the State Russian Museum in 1977.
- 17 Alarcó 2009, p. 316.