

# 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 Mislser 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 Analytiks – 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

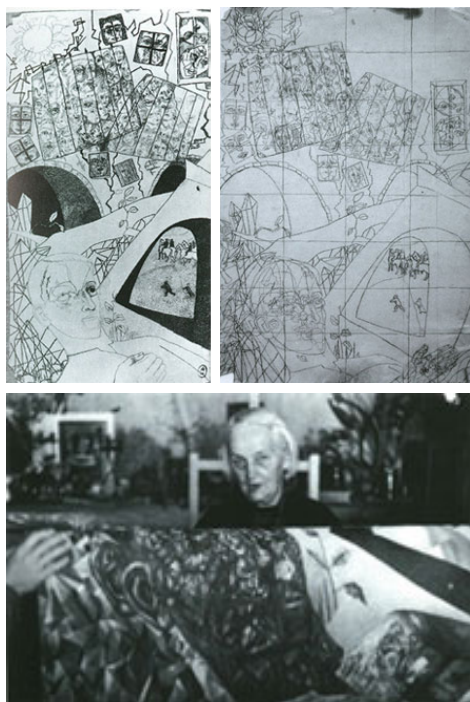


Fig. 4  
Tatiana Glebova  
*Study for the picture in the Press House, Prison, 1927-1928*  
State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

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.