

The Artist vs. The State in the Soviet Union



The Feast of Kings, Pavel Filonov, 1913, from The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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In the Soviet Union, the power of the artist was recognized by the state because the arts symbolized an alternative allegiance. Literature, painting and music were instruments of battle, thus all artistic quests were subsumed to a single system and a single language of ideas. Artists who served the Muse and not the State faced persecution, even death, while socialism's servile lackeys reaped its bountiful remunerations. In more "liberal" eras artists could live in the official "Lie" while their canvases spoke in metaphors. Underground artists were condemned to a private flight into the shadows.

The revolution meted out a cruel fate even to artists like Pavel Filonov (1883-1941), the most outstanding figure of the Russian avant-garde, who had welcomed 1917 as the dawn of a new age. From 1917-1924 Filonov was at the forefront of the new revolutionary art movement as exemplified by his works *October* (1921), *Formula of the Revolution* (1920), and *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat* (1920-1921). The Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, who saw Filonov's works at the Winter Palace in 1919, noted: "Filonov is a great master...in the future he will become the pride of the nation."

But his theory of art called "universal flowering," the basis of initiation at his School of Analytical Art, was a cosmic utopia that would evoke the authori-

ties' hostility. This transcendental vision of mankind, which contravened Communism's materialism, convinced Filonov that the coming of a great upheaval would bring universal well-being and harmony between man and nature. But Filonov would be betrayed by the revolutionary idea which he believed in — the idea of renewal and purity.

In 1929 his own personal exhibit of 300 works was mounted in the Russian Museum, Leningrad, but only for limited public viewing. As Leftist cadres began an attack on all "isms" in the arts to parallel the launching of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan, Filonov was now condemned to oblivion. Yet he persisted in his solitary path. The prophetic nature of the series, *A Raid* (1938), with its oppressed and oppressors, evokes the world