Pavel Florenskij tra Icona e Avanguardia
a cura di Matteo Bertelé

Like Night and Day
Pavel Florenskiĭ, Igor' Grabar', and the Fate of Icons in the 1920s

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The preservation of medieval icons in the early years of Soviet power is deservedly considered one of the cultural triumphs of that iconoclastic period, when the very future of icons hung precariously in the balance. The nationalization of church property, the dissolution or destruction of so many monasteries and churches, and the pervasive mood of iconoclasm that followed the Bolshevik Revolution placed Russia's most important icons in a precarious position. Their survival depended on the efforts of a small group of scholars and restorers operating under the aegis of NARKOMPROS's museum and conservation wing (Glavmuzeĭ in its various iterations; later consolidated in the Central State Restoration Workshops).[1] But the physical preservation of icons was not the only challenge. At issue was whether they could acquire an acceptable meaning that would ensure them sanctuary in this hostile new world. For this reason, the language used to talk about icons was particularly important in creating a powerful rhetorical field of protection and validation. My essay considers the metaphorical refashioning of icons, from the unstable transitional years of 1918-1920, when multiple possibilities for the treatment of cultural heritage still beckoned, to 1928-1931, when those pos-

1 For the most authoritative account of the workshops' history and activities, see I. Kyzlasova, *Istoriīa otechestvennoĭ nauki ob iskusstve Vizantii i Drevneĭ Rusi 1920-30 gody*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Gornykh Nauk, 2000; also G. Vzdornov, *Restavratsiīa i nauka. Ocherki po istorii otrkytiīa i izucheniīa drevnerusskoĭ zhivopisi*, Moskva, Indrik, 2006, 89-135.

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sibilities had dwindled to a single, ideologically dictated option. In this contentious process, Father Pavel Florenskiĭ and the artist and art historian Igor' Grabar' came to occupy positions on either side of a growing cultural abyss.

For Florenskiĭ, the decades leading up to the 1917 Revolution had been twilight years of transition, as the positivist "daytime culture" he associated with Renaissance humanism gradually expired and a new "nocturnal" world rooted in medieval spiritual values emerged. The icon had long been for Florenskiĭ *the* defining "symbol of the beyond". While at work on his long theoretical essay, *The Stratification of Aegean Culture*, in 1909-10, he had been a witness to the way in which early efforts by private collectors at cleaning icons made these sacred images, so familiar to Orthodox people, newly visible to a modern secular audience as sublime works of art.[2] It was certainly in part this renewed capacity to appreciate the visual language of medieval culture that encouraged him to predict, in 1913, that

> the evening shadow of a new culture that is swiftly approaching us obviously represent[s] a break with the traditions of the daytime culture of the New Age that directly preceded it. Society's invisible arteries and nerves are being nourished and stimulated by the thought of the Middle Ages, which until quite recently was thought dead and buried.[3]

Florenskiĭ noted the significance, for his view of history, of contemporary man's capacity to see in the icon, not deviations from the normative seeing established in the Renaissance (for him the rational, man-centered daytime culture par excellence), but its own refined language, complete with a coherent spatial and expressive vocabulary (for example, reverse perspective and the force-lines of drapery folds). The icon's reappraisal in the last decades of the Imperial Period would thus have already exemplified for him, not the triumph of secular aestheticism, but «the inexorably advancing destruction of rationalism in all spheres, along every avenue, and in all its fundamentals, and finally the disillusionment with exact science as a system for understanding life».[4] That this elemental cultural shift might continue its momentum after 1917 must have seemed – for a fleeting moment, at least – a plausible hope to all those who, like Florenskiĭ,

2 Cf. P. Florenskiĭ, *Naplastovaniĭa Ėgeĭskoĭ kul'tury*, in "Bogoslavskiĭ vestnik", 11/16, 1913, 346-89. For a translation see *The Stratification of Aegean Culture*, in Pavel Florenskiĭ, *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art*, edited by N. Misler, engl. tr. by W. Salmond, London, Reaktion Books, 2002, 137-73.

3 Florenskiĭ, *Beyond Vision*, 142.

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looked for a way to help icons, and the cultural values that shaped them, survive the dictates of an atheist and materialist regime. Despite the destruction wrought by the Revolution, Florenskiĭ held out hope that icons might continue to live in their natural habitat or ecosystem as the active centre of a synthetic experience within liturgical space.

In November 1918, a Commission for the Preservation of Art and Antiquities was established at the Troit͡se-Sergieva Lavra, one of Russian Orthodoxy's holiest sites, and Florenskiĭ was appointed its academic secretary. For the next two years, he laboured to bring order to the Lavra's chaotic storerooms, with their mix of priceless treasures and pedestrian artefacts, through a process of systematic inventorying and analysis.[5] Together with Count I͡Urii Olsuf'ev, he devised an exceptionally nuanced descriptive system for dating and attributing the Lavra's icons, rooted in empirical observation and a scientific method of comparing minute stylistic variations.[6] Steeped in the cultural values of the Silver Age and well read in contemporary German art history, he was fully alive to the aesthetic considerations that dictated the creation of a hierarchy of values within the rich archaeology of the Lavra's collections. Thus, icons of the "New Time" (of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) were to be separated out from the medieval icons proper, while each icon's capacity for communicating the canonical purity of its prototype was duly noted using an exacting formalist terminology.

Florenskiĭ also supported the cleaning of icons, as a means of restoring their link with their original prototypes in a way that perfectly mirrored his image of the iconostasis as a window providing access to the beyond with greater or lesser clarity. The Lavra was the first regional branch of Glavnauka's Moscow icon restoration workshops to be created after 1917, and thus the first step in a crusade to recover the lost history of icon painting on a national level.[7] The practical work of restoration and classification that went on at the Lavra during Florenskiĭ's brief tenure there was not intrinsically alien to his worldview. In fact, the very concept of revealing, uncovering, and "removing veils" (layers of dirt, soot and overpaint) that made up the icon conservator's art was remarkably well suited to

5 On the Commission see M. Trubachëva, *Iz istorii okhrany pami͡atnikov v pervye gody Sovetskoĭ vlasti. Komissii͡a po okhrane pami͡atnikov iskusstva i stariny Troitse-Sergievoĭ lavry 1918-1925 godov*, in *Muzeĭ 5*, Moskva, 1984, 152-64.

6 For examples of the forms that Olsuf 'ev and Florenskiĭ designed to inventory and describe the Lavra's icons, see Vzdornov, *Restavratsii͡a*, 181.

7 The number of old icons within the Lavra complex was so great that Glavnauka's Moscow restoration workshops opened their first branch there in 1918, staffed by Grigoriĭ Chirikov and other experts from the Kremlin commission, under the supervision of Igor' Grabar' and Aleksandr Anisimov.

Florenskiĭ's metaphorical cast of mind, and no doubt enlivened his understanding of the icon's symbolic system, albeit on the level of the earthbound, material "here" rather than the spiritual "beyond".[8] Patriarch Tikhon (Bellavin) gave his personal blessing to the work of the icon restoration studios, entrusting its co-directors, Igor' Grabar' and Aleksandr Anisimov, with overseeing this ideologically fraught project.[9] But in private correspondence Florenskiĭ shared with the Patriarch that his personal concern as a member of the Commission was to ensure that religious sensibility should not be offended as a result of the purely technical and ostentatiously scientific process of cleaning the Lavra's icons, among them Andreĭ Rublëv's icon of the Old Testament Trinity.[10] The orderly process of inventorying, describing, and restoring icons, and ultimately plumbing the mysterious link between their material form and spiritual content not only coincided with Florenskiĭ's scientific training, it also answered that all-encompassing search for relationships between inner and outer, below and beyond, on which his entire world view was based. This harnessing of the scientific method in the service of greater spiritual goals is reflected in the title of a work that Olsuf 'ev and Florenskiĭ completed together in 1922, but which remained unpublished: *Symbols of the Beyond: An Analysis of the Icons of the Troitse Sergieva Lavra as an Experiment in Iconology*.[11]

Much of Florenskiĭ's theoretical writing during the period of his work at the Lavra focused on the latter's survival as an organism made up of integrated and inseparably linked parts. In this respect his personal philosophical worldview seemed to coincide harmoniously with the enthusiastic embrace by early Soviet museum theorists of the *istoriko-bytovoĭ muzeĭ* [the museum of everyday life and history] a space in which objects lived rich interconnected lives as integral parts of the cultural environment that produced them.[12] His vision of the Lavra as a living museum in which works of art (icons as well as the embroideries, liturgical plate, books, and other con-

8 Of the devotional icons belonging to St. Sergiĭ of Radonezh, the Lavra's founder, Florenskiĭ wrote: «The artist doesn't compose an image out of himself, but merely removes the veils from an image that already exists. He doesn't apply colors to the canvas, but, as it were, cleanses it of its extraneous deposits, "zapisi" of spiritual reality».

9 See I. Kyzlasova, *With Patriarkh Tikhon's Blessing: Protecting and Restoring Works of Early Painting*, in *Treasures into Tractors. The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*, edited by A. Odom, W. Salmond, Washington DC, Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens, 2009, 57-61. Also A. Pyman, *Pavel Florenskiĭ. A Quiet Genius*, New York-London, Continuum, 2010, 131.

10 See Kyzlasova, *With Patriarkh*, 60-1.

11 *Simvoly gornevo. Analiz ikon Troit͡se-Sergievoĭ Lavry kak opyt ikonologii*.

12 On the theory of the *bytovoĭ muzeĭ*, see M. Kaulen, *Muzeĭ-khramy i muzeĭ-monastyri v pervoe desi͡atiletie Sovetskoĭ vlasti*, Moskva, Luch, 2000; also B. Shaposhnikov, *The Museum as a Work of Art*, in "Experiment", 3, 1997.

tents of the Lavra's churches, sacristies, and storerooms) continued to live in their natural habitats is poignantly recorded in his lectures to the Commission in late 1918 and 1919, and his articles inspired by the Lavra's history and spiritual atmosphere.[13] In his evocation of the modern world of museums, he conjured up the sad picture of animals confined in cages, exhibits pickled in jars of alcohol, a shaman's tambourine lying in a dusty ethnographic museum case.[14] It was precisely this fate that he dreaded for the icons of the Lavra. Like his friend and fellow Commission member Pavel Kapterev, working on the geology, fauna and flora of the Lavra, nothing could be more destructive than the removal of any single piece of its habitat. To do so was to "rip it out by the roots," to "loose three quarters of its value," and in the process to destroy the *genium loci*, the richly layered archaeological site that gave it meaning.[15] This heart-felt imagery of thoughtless damage and destruction visited on a complex system, whether historical, geological, or liturgical, permeated the deliberations of the entire Commission. Even those aesthetes of the pre-revolutionary era who had heralded the icon as a great work of art earned Florenskiĭ's ire:

> Taking just one facet for the whole thing, he tries to cut the threads or the main arteries connecting it to other facets, but which he doesn't notice, he destroys the unity of content and means of expression, he destroys the style. The work of art is artistic only in the complete presence of its conditions…[16]

That there was an inherent, though unstated difference of mentality and outlook between Florenskiĭ and his closest colleagues on the Lavra Commission on the one hand, and those in charge of icon restoration initiatives in Moscow on the other, became evident with the arrival, in early 1920, of new administrative direction in the form of art historian Nikolaĭ Shchëkotov and others more attuned to the dynamic tempo of restoration and discovery that was the order of the day. In a series of SOVNARKOM decrees issued that April and June, the first intrusions were made on the Lavra's organic unity, with the sequestering of its artistic and historical valuables in a newly formed museum, while the buildings deemed of no artistic value were turned

13 I.e., *The Troitse-Sergieva Lavra and Russia*, *The Most Venerated Icons of St. Sergii*, *Celestial Signs*, *Reverse Perspective*, *Amvrosii*, *Fifteenth-century Master-carver of the Troitse Monastery*, *Iconostasis*.

14 P. Florenskiĭ, *The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts*, in Florenskiĭ, *Beyond Vision*, 102.

15 For Florenskiĭ's elaboration of this idea, see Florenskiĭ, *Beyond Vision*, 95-111.

16 Florenskiĭ, *Beyond Vision*, 107.

over to the local Soviet.[17] Although Florenskiĭ and Olsuf 'ev were retained for their acknowledged object expertise, they were now manifestly unsuited to oversee the management of a task that was already moving in directions inimical to their most cherished ideas. As more and more icons were cleaned and removed from monasteries and churches to the premises of the State Restoration Workshops in Moscow, or the storerooms of the State Historical Museum, a vision of art in its natural habitat came to seem increasingly irrelevant and counterproductive to the goals of Soviet museum science.

Very early in the 1920s the icon became a pawn in the increasingly brutal anti-church rhetoric inspired by the campaign to confiscate church valuables ostensibly in aid of the Volga famine victims. In addition to the crude slogans of militant atheism that branded icons as a particularly noxious means of drugging the masses, another kind of rhetoric was now deployed, one associated with the enlightenment values of science and the museum. No-one was more committed to these values than Igor' Grabar', whose buoyant, go-getter personality dominated the practice of Soviet restoration throughout the decade. The inner divide between Florenskiĭ's view of the icon and Grabar's art historically informed perspective was most strikingly expressed in their attitude towards the lighting best suited to an icon's display. In his beautiful description of the conditions under which an icon lives its full life, in *The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts*, Florenskiĭ explained that

> for the icon's artistic existence its illumination should be exactly that under which it was painted. In this instance, the illumination is quite unlike the dispersed light of the artist's studio or the museum gallery, rather it is the uneven and irregular, flickering and perhaps partially twinkling light of the icon lamp. Calculated [to be seen] in the play of a flickering flame that moves with every breath of wind, making allowance ahead of time for the effects of coloured reflections from the bundles of light passing through coloured, sometimes faceted glass, the icon can be contemplated as such only in the presence of this stream, only in this flood of light, fragmenting, uneven, seeming to pulsate, rich in warm prismatic rays—a light which all perceive as alive, warming the spirit, emitting a warm fragrance. Painted under more or less the same conditions, in a half-darkened cell with a narrow window, lit with several kinds of artificial lighting, the icon comes to life only in

17 For the sequence of decrees on the Lavra's fate after 1917, see http://qrsp.ru/1-noyabrya-1918-goda-prinyato-postanovlenie-sovnarkoma-rsfsr-o-nacionalizacii-troice-sergievoj-lavry-sredi-ego-punktov-sozdanie-komissii-po-oxrane-pamyatnikov-iskusstva-i-stariny-troice-sergievoj-lav/ (last visit: June 2015).

> corresponding conditions. Conversely, it grows numb and distorted in conditions which, in abstract and general terms, might seem the most favourable for works of the brush—I am speaking of the even, calm, cold and strong lighting of the museum. And many peculiarities of the icon which tease the sated gaze of modernity—the exaggeration of certain proportions, the accentuation of lines, the profusion of gold and gems, the frame and the haloes, the pendants, the brocade and velvet veils sewn with pearls and precious stones—all this, seen in conditions natural to the icon, exists not at all as piquant exoticism, but as the essential, absolutely unremovable, one and only means of expressing the spiritual content of the icon, i.e. as the unity of style and content, in other words—as authentic artistry.[18]

Compare this with Grabar's confident insistence (later in the decade, but consistent throughout his career) on the necessity for removing icons to the safety of the museum:

> [I]n the North, where darkness prevails for the greater part of the year and the air is damp, pictures naturally suffer the greatest damage. Such, moreover, as are exhibited in well-lit galleries can be preserved better than those that are kept in badly lighted churches, where candles, church lamps, and incense spread a daily coat of smoke over them.[19]

As a man exceptionally well informed about modern museum practices and yearning to show the outside world the astonishing achievements of Soviet conservation under the most trying of conditions, Grabar' epitomized the spirit of the modern museum as it developed in the twentieth century — the world of white gloves and climate control, of selective culling so that only the best are displayed and the viewer's aesthetic contemplation is not compromised, of the art museum as a sanctuary removed from the lowly distractions of *byt*.

At the same time, Grabar' was fully alive to the ideological complexity of the project to rehabilitate icons in a climate that was becoming increasingly strident in its attacks on religion. As early as 1919, he had advanced the notion of restoration as a secular "miracle" — the scientific equivalent of the icon miraculously made new by

18 Florenskiĭ, *The Church Ritual*, 107. Avril Pyman has pointed out, however, that Florenskiĭ could also argue the opposite case for the most effective display of icons. See Pyman, *Pavel Florenskiĭ*, 135.

19 I. Grabar, *Ancient Russian Painting. Icons from the 12th to the 18th Centuries*, in *Ancient Russian Icons Lent by the Government of the USSR to a British Committee and Exhibited by Permission at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, 18th November to 14th December, 1929*, London, 1929, 5.

divine intervention. As the 1920s progressed, there emerged a new metaphor of the icon as a noble but passive victim — a singular survivor deemed worthy of emancipation from its enslavement to superstition and brought safely into the controlled light of modern secular consciousness. Russia's most sacred icons were like patients in a sanatorium, rescued from the dangerous clutches of the church and cult practices, their physical wounds and illnesses scrupulously tended to while their spiritual aura was deliberately allowed to wither.[20] Obliged, in the perilous climate of 1931, to defend the work of the Central Restoration Studios against charges of anti-Soviet activity, he countered that

> the entire activity of the workshops in restoring icons was genuine anti-religious work, for in removing from the iconostasis icons which were sometimes "miracle-working", the Central Workshops transferred them on to various museums, thereby unshackling works of art and turning them into museum exhibits. Suffice it to mention such celebrated works as the Vladimir Mother of God from the Moscow Dormition Cathedral, the Don Mother of God from the Annunciation Cathedral [of Donskoĭ Monastery], the Trinity from the Sergieva Lavra, all now in the Tret'i͡akov Gallery.[21]

In 1929, Grabar' presided over the first major exhibition to introduce the Western world to the icon-as-art, a traveling exhibition of 150 icons chosen to illustrate two central themes: the triumphs of Soviet restoration and the emergence of a new history of medieval painting in the light of what that restoration had uncovered.[22] In the catalogue for the exhibition, and in numerous interviews he gave, Grabar' evoked the motifs of liberation, emancipation, and enlightenment as a framework in which icons might make their final passage from the sphere of the church to that of the modern museum and ultimately the individual art collector. In releasing them from the prison of their silver jeweled covers and the layers of over-painting added by an insensitive clergy, Grabar' transformed icons from

20 Thus, describing an exhibition of restored icons in 1927, Grabar' wrote: «It's not so much an exhibition of works of art as we're used to seeing them in our museums, as a demonstration of restoration methods, developed by contemporary science and practice […] they are not permanent exhibits as in other museums, but just temporary guests, they are patients, brought in for a short time for treatment to this curious "restoration" sanatorium».

21 I. Grabar', Letter concerning an article in "Bezbozhnik", 25 March 1931. OR GTG, f. 106, 540, l. 5 ob.

22 On the exhibition see W. Salmond, *How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930-32*, in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, edited by D. Greenfield, J. Gatrall, University Park, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 128-43.

active to passive entities, from emitters of light to objects of enlightened investigation and intervention (the role of X-rays, for instance). Above all, he firmly established the physical form of the icon as its highest meaning. In doing so, and of necessity, he asserted the ultimate triumph of that daylight consciousness and vision whose decline Florenskiĭ had believed was at hand — «exact science as a system for understanding life».