

Pavel Leonov

by Olga Dyakonityna



Most naïve artists live a hard life. But the story of **Pavel Leonov** reveals a strange tale of comedy and tragedy.

Born in the village of Volotovskoe near the city of Oryol, **Leonov** grew up in a large family. He described his father as a rough, cruel, egotistical and dissolute man, an alcoholic, who was his family's worst enemy. In this kind of environment, the child was forced to grow up quickly. People like that tend to create their own identity and the results can be unpredictable. Such is the destiny of self-made men.

An eighteen-year old boy with just five roubles for a train ticket to the nearest city, **Pavel Leonov** embarked on a journey which was to last thirty-seven years - through republics, regions, towns and villages, via

factories, mines, construction-sites and collective farms, where **Leonov** worked as a librarian, handyman, artist and decorator, as a plasterer and even a cart-horse driver. These were the zig-zags of his fate.

Life dealt **Pavel Leonov** blow after blow, yet despite it all, he remained a dreamer who believed in the spirit of a social utopia and which he referred to in an appropriately exaggerated manner: My struggle against injustice. Because of this, he quit twelve jobs and was fired from thirteen, with jail sentences in between. Always the reason was the same: My struggle against injustice!

In 1975 **Leonov** decided to settle down in the Ivanovo region. He bought a small house and soon married Zinaida Strakhova, who lived in the neighbouring village. Soon they gave birth to their son Sergey. Zinaida could hardly be accused of being the best housewife. Yet they lived happily, and in this relationship, **Leonov** discovered the warmth of a family home and the love of someone close, things he had dreamed about during his years wandering the country. He was already over seventy at this point. But he felt responsible for the life of his only son and tried to make every effort to support his family.

After I first met him in 1990 **Leonov** began to paint again, which became the main source of income for the family. In January 1992, I exhibited four of **Leonov's** paintings in a show called The Gold Dream in Moscow. Suddenly artists, critics, collectors, journalists and TV

people began visiting **Leonov**, buying his works and bringing with them all kinds of new ideas and inspirations. In 1997 global recognition came when **Pavel Leonov** was awarded the Grand Prix at the INSITA-97 Triennial in Bratislava. His prize was a solo show in 2000. He was the first Russian artist ever to be given such a prestigious award.

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