DAVID BURLIUK AND THE JAPANESE AVANT-GARDE *

David Burliuk lived in Japan for only two years, between 1920 and 1922, and during his short stay he spent the winter of 1920-21 in the Bonin Islands. While admittedly contemporary Japanese art did not exert an influence on Burliuk as an established artist whose ultimate destination was, as he said frankly to his closer acquaintances in Japan,1 the United States, the impact of the intensity of his artistic theory and Futurist work on the Japanese avant-garde cannot be over-exaggerated.

The ship which Burliuk took from Vladivostok reached Japan on October 1, 1920,2 and, together with Viktor Pal'mov, who accompanied him, he organized an exhibition in Tokyo just two weeks later. The show (to be discussed below) presented original paintings by Russian Futurists to Japanese artists for the first time. Still this does not mean that their outstanding accomplishments were little known in Japan before the exhibition. The introductory survey on Russian modern art in Japan below helps to elucidate the significance of Burliuk's ardent activities in Japan.

No article in Japanese art journals, as far as we can tell, encouraged readers to pay serious attention to Russian Futurism at the time when its Italian counterpart was being fervently discussed and growing in popularity.3 Ironically enough, an article which gave a partial, if distorted, view of Russian Futurism did appear in an art journal, Chuo Bijutsu, in April 1916—"ironically enough" because the piece in question was Alexander Benois' harsh and

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1. Interview with Mr. Tomojiro Morimoto, February 1977.
notorious criticism of the *Last Futurist Exhibition “0,10”* in 1915. Although the propagation of Russian modernism thus started in a very prejudicial way, the later developments certainly demand our attention. In coming to appreciate the Russian accomplishments, the Japanese were actually ahead of the West which, in 1914, lost contact with the Russians owing to World War I.

Kanae Yamamoto is well-known in Japan as one of the talented artists who led the “original print” movement in which he insisted on a violent departure from the traditional Ukiyoe prints which were produced by systematic collaborations among illustrators, woodcutters, and printers. In 1912 Yamamoto came to Europe and settled in Paris. Judging from his letters to family and articles contributed to art journals, he was not strongly attracted by the latest artistic trends of Cubism and Futurism in Paris. After the outbreak of World War I, Yamamoto vainly tried to remain there. Toward the end of June 1916, he left London for home via Scandinavia and Siberia, but, unfortunately (or fortunately), he was forced to stop in Moscow for some months.

During his stay, however, as with Burliuk in Japan, Yamamoto’s activities were numerous and energetic. He painted people and landscapes in Russia, visited the famous collections of Shchukin and Morozov and was deeply impressed by the peasant crafts. A letter to his family in the early months reveals,