

Two more years

The past two years were full of both disappointments and of small miracles.

The Museum's financial standing remained desperate; even government funding that had already been approved was reduced. This resulted in the accumulation of multiple debts.

The Museum was on the verge of closing several times as it was unable to pay for basic utilities, fire safety service, and security. Payments from the federal budget for maintenance of the Museum did stabilise slightly at the end of 1998.

However, federal shortfalls remain disastrous to the Museum's major reconstruction project, the building of the Centre for Restoration and Conservation in the Staraya Derevnya area of St. Petersburg. Now that the first phase of work (a depository for art holdings and an engineering block) is nearly complete, it is especially disappointing that, as with many times before, construction will likely be suspended again. The Decree of the President of the Russian Federation ordering the payment of the budget debt for the depository was issued 1996, but has not been made.

There is a new trend within Russia of ~~weakening~~ the independence and autonomy of the financial activities of museums. This is very dangerous. The Hermitage had been removed from the list of institutions funded directly from the federal budget. However, we have regained government recognition of our status as one of the world's great museums.

We have also insisted on a review of the government's resolution to bring the current accounts of cultural institutions under the Treasury's control.

These struggles consume too much energy and time. They are made imperative, however, by a world-wide trend in reducing the state funding of museums. In our case the problem is aggravated by the financial crisis in Russia. Under these conditions only autonomy and independence in managing finances and other activities, which are guaranteed by law, will allow the Hermitage to survival. The word 'survival' is used here in its literal sense, as the average salary of staff members of the Museum remains below the official subsistence wage. Against this background, the execution of the second section of the President's Decree was a real miracle. The Museum was allocated 20 million roubles from the state budget for the purchase of art. It was the first time in many decades that such a considerable amount was allocated for acquisitions. It enabled the Museum to adopt a new, independent acquisition strategy. This strategy had two main objectives: filling gaps in the Hermitage collections and regaining important pieces of national artistic and cultural heritage.

Following in the steps of Russia's great collectors, Shchukin and Morozov, the Hermitage purchased works by Boudin, Utrillo, Rouault, Dufy, Soutin and Maillol. For the first time the Hermitage has acquired excellent examples of ancient Chinese ritual bronze vessels.

The goblet once presented to the *stolnik* Musin-Pushkin by Peter the Great is now back in Russia. Among other objects that have found their way back to Russia is the banner of the Preobrazhensky Regiment, dating from the time of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, and a *porte-monnaie* that belonged to Alexander II.

Another miracle we witnessed was the display in the Museum of *The Annunciation* by Jan van Eyck. This painting was sold to a foreign buyer by the Soviet Government and is presently kept in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The exhibition was a token of the mutual confidence and cooperation between our two museums. A series of publications issued in conjunction with the exhibition included documents detailing the tragic history of the sales of these treasures. The first Hermitage interactive computer programme was created for this exhibition. Programmes of this kind have become an indispensable part of the Museum's major exhibitions.

The preservation of our rich cultural heritage remains the main objective of the Hermitage. The construction of a new storage facility for the Museum's art holdings is in progress; a drainage system project which will secure our buildings from floods and underground waters is nearly complete; a large-scale programme securing efficient and even distribution of heat among the Hermitage's buildings was launched with the assistance of the Government of Denmark. The restoration of several more façades has been accomplished. The government of St. Petersburg financed the restoration of the pavement in front of the Neva River façade of the Winter Palace. A gift from The Dutch Friends of the Hermitage enabled the Museum to restore the roof above the Rembrandt Room. Work on the construction of a new entrance to the Hermitage began with the refurbishment of the Jordan Vestibule, which has been redesigned and equipped with new information facilities.

New installations with improved lighting systems appeared in some of the Hermitage's rooms and halls, such as the Hall of the Kolyvan Vase, the Hall of Hellenism, the great Skylight Halls, the Rembrandt Room, and the Room of Rembrandt's School. After many years' restoration Rembrandt's *Danaë* was again put on display to the public. A new display from the Treasure Gallery opened in March, 1998. Three new rooms opened for visitors in the Menshikov Palace. A special room was created for the demonstration of pastel works. Restoration work began in the historic St. George's Hall and the Gallery of 1812. Regrettably, many restoration projects had to be temporarily suspended for lack of the promised allocations from the federal budget. In spite of its difficult financial position, the Hermitage does continue to work on its long term general reconstruction programme.

During the past two years, new concepts for the Museum's development have been elaborated. First and foremost is the project to reconstruct the eastern wing of the General Staff Building, which has recently been allocated to the Hermitage. The main objective of this project is to combine traditional exhibitions with a cultural and entertainment museum centre. The project will help the Museum to introduce new kinds of activities, enhancing its influence upon the society, as well as to raise funds for the building's further reconstruction. The Museum is always in search of new forms of funding which will enable it to survive without relying completely on federal support. The projects associated with the development of the Hermitage have become an integral part of the urban development of the historic centre of St. Petersburg.

Our striving for higher standards of service to visitors has become the focus of the Museum's policy for the past two years. Three major objectives should be mentioned in this regard. The first is to improve access to the collections kept at the Hermitage. This may be achieved through the expansion of exhibition space, organising of exhibitions from the Museum's reserve collections, loan exhibitions travelling to foreign museums, and the rotation of exhibits. Our revised conception of the new depository for art holdings assumes open access to the Museum's reserve collections. To improve intellectual access to the collections CD-ROMs in various languages have been issued, as well as computer programmes for children, new publications, and guide books. But the best achievement of the Museum in this area is its rich site on the World Wide Web. The past two years also saw the realisation of the "Hermitage-IBM" project. With a considerable grant from IBM and the enthusiastic assistance of its staff, we created a database of high quality digital images accessible to the public through the Internet. Work on computerised guided tours of the Hermitage and navigation kiosks continued; and children's computer class was also initiated.

Another objective is the creation of a warm atmosphere for the public and to make visiting

the Museum easy and pleasurable. A new Visitor Services Department has considerably improved the Museum environment in this area. New detailed bilingual signs and better designed tickets add to the climate of friendliness. To our regret the Museum's shopping facilities and cafe may disappoint some visitors, but we are planning great improvement in these services as well. A development programme for the Hermitage and Palace Square, approved by the Governor of St. Petersburg, will enable the Museum to effectively use its newly acquired space, where updated public services can be accommodated.

The third objective encompasses education through entertainment and the further development of programmes catering for children, who constitute about 50% of the Museum's visitors, and for adults. Our children's computer class has become a significant supplement to our lecture series and increasingly popular study groups. Children themselves have become competent creators of computer programmes. A new education centre with programmes devoted to classical antiquity and biblical themes in art appeals to both adults and children. The Hermitage was a co-founder of the Department of Art History at the European University of St. Petersburg. The Department organises summer and winter courses for Russian and foreign students wishing to obtain a deeper knowledge of the Museum's collections.

Music was destined to play a special role in the life of the Museum. The Hermitage Theatre and the Chamber Music Orchestra of the Hermitage have made the Museum an important centre of musical life in St. Petersburg. A series of special musical programmes and festivals was augmented with a programme by the Hermitage Academy of Music. The programme included innovative concerts held in the halls of the Museum. The concerts were performed by the Chamber Music Orchestra with the violinist Sergei Stadler and many other musicians. Major Hermitage exhibitions of course stood out as significant cultural events. Works of art from the reserve collections of the Museum were presented in such exhibitions as "Siamese Art", "British Art", "Christians in the Holy Land", "The Collection of Chancellor Gorchakov" and "The State Coat-of-Arms of Russia. 500 Years". The "Treasures of Khan Kubrat" exhibition, organised in Kazan under the auspices of the President of Tatarstan, was a great public success.

The President of Russia and the King of Sweden patronised two exhibitions co-organised by the Hermitage and museums in Sweden: "Peter the Great and Charles XII" and "Catherine the Great and Gustav III". The "Schliemann. St. Petersburg. Troy" exhibition, including many objects on loan from Berlin, was a remarkable example of co-operation among scholars within the delicate and almost diplomatic realm of "trophy art". An exhibition held in the Art Museum of Munich and in the Hermitage reunited Rubens' studies for *The Lion Hunt* and his Maria de Medici cycle. The exhibition "Cézanne and the Russian Avant-Garde" was the first recent large-scale project involving four Russian museums: the Hermitage, the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, the Russian Museum, and the Tretyakov Gallery. The Hermitage organised rare opportunities for the public in St. Petersburg to view masterpieces of world art such as *The Annunciation* by Jan van Eyck, *Triptych* by Francis Bacon, early works by Velázquez, *The Postman Roulin* by Van Gogh, *The Dressed Maja* and *The Nude Maja* by Goya, the collection of Matisse's from Copenhagen, *The Cycle of Genevieve* by Picasso, as well as exhibitions devoted to Magritte and Hans Arp. An exhibition of works by the photographer Irving Penn not only aroused great public interest but also induced Hermitage researchers to begin the study and collecting of art photographs. A Hermitage exhibition of Italian sculptural models was held in several American cities. Samples of Venetian painting

from the Hermitage collection were displayed in Udine and Brussels. The Hermitage and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York exchanged exhibitions devoted to masterpieces of drawing. And the "Nicholas and Alexandra" exhibition was an overwhelming success with the American public in Wilmington, Delaware.

I have deliberately mentioned outgoing and home exhibitions together. The multifarious exhibition activities of the Hermitage fulfil one purpose. Loan exhibitions travelling to other museums have already become tradition. This enables us to expand access to our collections to foreign audiences, as well as to provide better rotation of exhibits. It is worth mentioning that in 1998 the attendance of the Hermitage was approximately 1,800,000 visitors, with an additional 1,000,000 people visiting our exhibitions abroad. Plans to establish permanent Hermitage satellites in Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are part of the Museum's long term exhibition strategy.

The Museum's traditional openness and readiness to co-operate with institutions around the world is expressed not only in its exhibitions. Two important co-operative restoration projects were accomplished. The Rovinsky collection of etchings by Rembrandt was restored in co-operation with experts from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the Levashovs' Album was restored in collaboration with the Restoration Centre of Andover, Massachusetts. And our "Children's Embassies" united young art lovers from St. Petersburg, Amsterdam, and Stockholm.

The Hermitage greatly appreciates international assistance which is so important especially during these challenging and difficult times. UNESCO continues to be instrumental in encouraging world-wide support for the Museum. The Hermitage's International Advisory Board, consisting of the most authoritative experts in the museum world, continues to play a tremendous role in assisting the Museum in adopting and deploying the latest museum practices. The International Hermitage Friends' Club is successfully functioning at the Museum. Friends of the Hermitage societies have been organised in The Netherlands, USA, Canada, France and Japan. We are deeply grateful to our numerous Friends, as well as to all those whose financial, intellectual, and moral support enables us to hold for all mankind the unique collections that make the Hermitage a monument to Russia's cultural past and traditions.

On 11 April 1997, Minor Planet No 4758 of the solar system was named the Hermitage. Simultaneously, at the recommendation of the Hermitage, another planet was named after the Louvre.



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