

THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM
REPORT FOR 2000



THE HERMITAGE AS A NEWSMAKER

Anything to do with the Hermitage is always an event. This year, however, the museum drew more attention from both press and public than usual, perhaps something to do with the turn of the millennium.

First, our finances. As in 1999, the state fulfilled its budgetary obligations one hundred per cent. Yet state funding composes only 45% of the museum's extremely modest overall funding requirement, the remaining 55% being generated by the Hermitage itself. In this context, the state's continual refusal to fulfil promises to finance the conclusion of construction of the first phase of the Hermitage's Open Storage Facility at Staraya Derevnya seems a shame. Almost complete, the six-storey block with its superb spaces for storage and restoration workshops, equipped with the latest conservation technology, has been the frequent object of television programmes and articles in the press. Working with the city, the museum plans to create a new pedestrian zone between the Open Storage Facility and the recently opened nearby metro station.

Projects such as this are part of The Greater Hermitage programme, much discussed over recent years, at the very heart of which lies adaptation and use of the East Wing of the General Staff Building on Palace Square. After a lull resulting from the financial crisis of 1998, work has revived on drawing up plans, restoration of the Chapel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ministerial offices has been completed. A new entrance area has been created, and the Hermitage Lecture Theatre has been given

a new home, equipped with all the latest equipment. The project has not been without its lighter moments: a modest plan for a technical underground passage beneath Millionnaya Street and Pevchesky Proyezd has been fantastically transformed in the press into a grandiose underground complex. We have been forced to explain repeatedly and publicly that we have no plans to dig beneath Palace Square.

With financial assistance from Interros Holding Company, restoration has also begun on the Chariot of Glory which rises up above the arch of the General Staff Building. As ever, the Hermitage continues to carry out vital if somewhat prosaic work on its main buildings. The museum's fate depends on these projects: for instance we are replacing water pipes and engaged in the hydro-insulation of the cellars. With the aid of the government of Denmark, we are establishing a number of energy centres which will allow us both to realise savings on electricity and to regulate the temperature in the Winter Palace.

The throne in the St George's Hall has been restored.

With the aid of the Dutch Friends of the Hermitage major works have been carried out on reconstruction of the Dutch Painting rooms, while the Department of Classical Antiquity renovated yet another room, the Pompeian Hall.

Exhibitions in the Hermitage in 2000 were extremely successful, bringing the museum new types of visitors, drawn by both artistic and civic interests.

In international terms, a survey of exhibition visitor numbers throughout the world compiled by the authoritative Art Newspaper placed two Hermitage exhibitions in 2nd and 3rd place overall: *Earthly Art – Heavenly Beauty: The Art of Islam, and Sinai. Byzantium. Rus.* Certainly both exhibitions generated very positive reactions internationally. An exhibition of traditional Australian art was described by Australian colleagues as the best exhibition of Australian aborigine art for many years, while an exhibition celebrating 300 years of the Russian Guards achieved the level of a state event, arousing responses across Russia and among the Russian diaspora. An exhibition of the work of Andy Warhol caused a sensation on the Russian art scene, gathering crowds of young art lovers, while the Hermitage took a new step in the traditional collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with a small but striking exhibition of works by Jackson Pollock.

Of great public significance was an exhibition *The Treasures of the Golden Horde*, organised in Kazan jointly by the Hermitage and the State History Museum (Moscow), under the patronage of the President of Tatarstan. Masterpieces of medieval jewellery took their rightful place in the ongoing discussion of the role played by the Mongol invasion in the history of Russia's cultural heritage.

Vast success was enjoyed by a joint exhibition with the Russian Museum (St Petersburg) devoted to the Stroganov family and their activities as collectors, which travelled to several museums in North America.

Another major event was the display of Michelangelo's masterpiece, *Crouching Boy*, in his native land, set in a scholarly context and accompanied by material relating to the history of its creation. Another outstanding example of international collaboration was *The Golden Deer of Eurasia* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) which presented the Hermitage's famous Scythian collection alongside recent finds of extremely rare Scytho-Sarmatian artifacts from the Academy of Sciences of Bashkortostan (Ufa). Much praised, the exhibition demonstrated how new finds can be rapidly introduced to the international scholarly and museum world. But success often provokes envy and ill-will. Against the background of the Hermitage's active public and cultural activities, it seems strange to look back on the slanderous campaign begun by a few employees of the Audit Chamber (no longer employed there) and carried on in the press after publication of results of the Chamber's audit of the Hermitage. The report contained a number of largely mistaken criticisms, but all were confined within the bounds of common sense, providing no basis – as was shown by numerous subsequent checks by competent bodies – for accusations of a serious nature. Nonetheless, the press published a number of ill-considered and even laughable interpretations of the report, creating an atmos-

phere of hysteria. Initially concerned about what they read, the public at last smiled and then laughed, when they realised that the accusations had reached the point of total absurdity.

The museum world paid close attention to the signing of an agreement between the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, the State Hermitage Museum and the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation regarding close collaboration between the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Hermitage. Under this agreement, it is proposed that the Hermitage collections of classical art and the modern art of the Guggenheim Museum should be used to create joint exhibitions and web sites. Guggenheim participation is proposed in the creation of a Department of Art of the 20th Century at the Hermitage and in the reconstruction of the General Staff Building, while there are plans to create a Hermitage gallery in the planned new Guggenheim Museum building in New York. Such a union of two famous names and the new forms of collaboration put forward in this agreement represent a new step in international practice, heralding the arrival of the museum of the 21st century. Thus it was that this union aroused extensive discussion in the international press and in museum circles.

The innovative approach of the Hermitage has also been revealed in its establishment of a permanent exhibition centre in London. The Hermitage Rooms at Somerset House, opened with great ceremony in 2000, will host exhibitions from the Hermitage which will change every six months. Five rooms have been decorated in a style which recalls the interiors of the New Hermitage, and one large room is devoted entirely to information about the museum in St Petersburg, including access to the Hermitage's own web site and a special computer programme created in collaboration with IBM. The first exhibition, *Treasures of Catherine the Great*, was opened by the Prince of Wales.

The Hermitage Rooms have been and continue to be extremely popular, and were greeted with a warm reception in the press. It has been said by many observers that it is a long time since the British press has published such an abundance of positive material about Russia.

Such a new Russian cultural presence has fitted well into the vibrant cultural life of the British capital. Next in line is creation of a Hermitage exhibition centre in Amsterdam.

In 2000 the Hermitage also regularly played host to informal meetings between the President of Russia and international statesmen. Thus culture continues to serve the aims of mutual understanding.

A key element in both Russian and world culture, the Hermitage is using its work to do everything it can to improve the quality of life for us all.

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