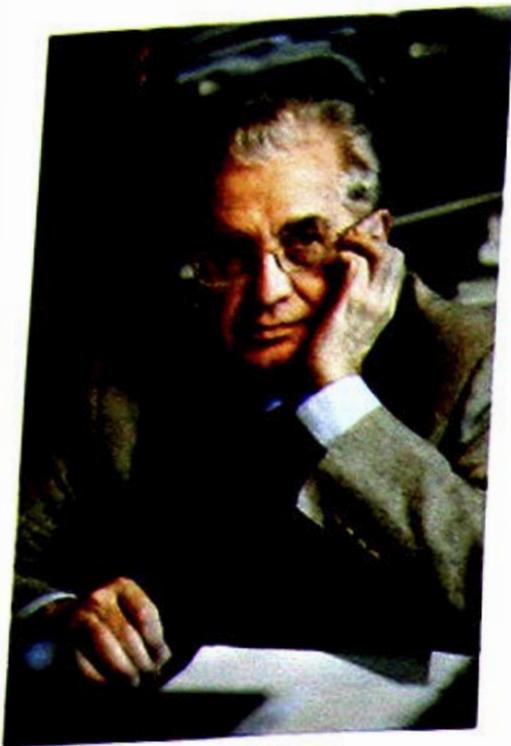


THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM ANNUAL REPORT • 2013

## THE YEAR OF EXTRAORDINARY EXHIBITIONS



The majority of visitors are coming to the Hermitage to see its permanent displays. This means that our museum can do what others like the Uffizi Gallery do and stage exhibitions that do not aim to draw in the crowds but rather cater for more refined tastes. This sometimes implies a more limited audience, although some of these displays can turn out to be very popular. This year was very rich in these unusual events which are special to the Hermitage. The exhibition entitled "From Guercino to Caravaggio" ended up being the fifth most popular event in the world for single-ticket museums, according to the "Arts Newspaper". This means the fifth place in the world as a whole (545,000 visitors, 11,122 persons a day). The exhibition prepared in cooperation with our Italian partners contained superstar masterpieces, including around ten Caravaggios from popular and private collections that are a real hit with the public today. But the exhibition managed to tell both the story of the artists and that of the famous collector and connoisseur Sir Denis Mahon who helped the world rediscover the art of the Italian academic painting by collecting these works and donating them to museums. The exhibition highlighted the role of the museum and art studies within art history. This was an exhibition both for the masses and the "gourmets".

A justly topical answer to the current mood in society was provided by the long-expected exhibition on the art and aesthetics of Russian freemasons. After a long gap, items from two famous collections of Dmitry Burylin and Fedor Plyushkin were put on display. Once they were saved by museum workers from being sent abroad and now they have been returned to the public at a time when the nature and role of freemasonry in our history is becoming a sensitive political and ideological issue. This is true for everyone, and especially for the connoisseurs. For many years, our Russian and German colleagues have worked together to prepare a very high-brow archaeological exhibition "The Bronze Age. Europe without Borders". The General Staff Building housed famous hoards and burials that shed the light on one of the most remarkable periods in European history. This was a feast for scholars' eyes. However, the exhibition also had an unusual political aspect. It contained the so-called displaced cultural assets, archaeological items that used to belong to German museums before the Second World War and are now in several Russian museums. There are many political and property-related disputes around them. The Hermitage came up with the idea of laying these disagreements to one side and joining efforts to make these objects the focus of scholarly and museum attention. Several joint exhibitions were a product of this idea. A recipe for cooperation in an imperfect world was found.

This academic initiative was appreciated by the politicians. The President of Russia and the Chancellor of Germany agreed to visit the opening of the exhibition at the Hermitage. Just before the opening, the German media launched a campaign calling on the Chancellor to cancel

her visit since she would allegedly not be allowed to voice her opinion about the problem of trophy art. There was such eagerness to disrupt the event that it is still widely believed in Germany that the visit was cancelled. However, despite all the controversy, both Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin visited the exhibition, expressed their deeply-held and divergent opinions, and noted that museum workers were offering a good example to the politicians. There are very few works by German Expressionists at the Hermitage. This year, two different exhibitions provided a temporary solution to this problem. The Nicholas Hall of the Winter Palace accommodated a grand display from the famous Albertina Museum in Vienna focusing on the art of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, Emil Nolde. The General Staff, meanwhile, housed the wonderful George Economou collection that introduced the public to masterpieces of the new Expressionists: Georg Baselitz, Neo Rauch, and Anselm Kiefer. In the Hermitage, everything is part of the whole, and even exhibitions serve to complement one another.

After many years of scientific conservation and restoration, Titian's *The Flight into Egypt* was a revelation – a first work by a great master that combines the splendour of the Venetian tradition with a brilliant study of Northern landscape art. After a short presentation, we took the painting to Venice so that the work of restorers and art historians could be put to the test of the special Italian appreciation and artistic instinct. Once again, we have demonstrated a special approach to something that is of interest both to the general public and the “gourmets”. Venice was captivated.

The free manner of display organisation, the open and innovative life of the museum nowadays go hand in hand with a greater emphasis on procedure, administrative discussion, and approval. This is only natural given that the museums are playing a more important role in public life and receiving more funding from the Government. This year, for the first time in many years, three of the Hermitage issues were discussed by the collegium of the Ministry for Culture. The museum development strategy, based on the concept of the Greater Hermitage and designed to ensure a dynamic and global accessibility of the museum's collections, was discussed and approved. A separate discussion focused on the role of research in the Hermitage. The collegium's decision, perhaps contrary to the current fashion, approved on the principle of mandatory fundamental research as the basis for creating the museum's cultural “product”. Another issue that was discussed concerned a different aspect of the museum's development, the architectural design for the next stage in the construction of the Hermitage in Staraya Derevnya, the “Cube” to house the Open Library and the Institute of Costume. All these discussions stimulate the debate which has a paramount importance for museum life and in which the Hermitage is meant to play a leading role. What is the criterion of a museum's success? To comply with the figures somebody else came up with, or to be able to solve one's own problems? We are fighting for the second option to be recognised. The museum has to understand how many visitors, and what kind of visitors, it needs in order to fulfil its mission. The museum cares about providing free access to those who find it hard to come to the museum but who are needed by the museum. These people account for one third of visitors to the Hermitage. The museum maintains the balance between its functions as an academy, a university, a theatre, and a temple. The museum determines the atmosphere of the district, the city, the country. This is something that is hard to gauge, but if anyone can measure it, it should be the museums themselves. All they need to do is take stock of the previous twenty five years.

The Hermitage is looking forward to a year of celebration. This year will help us to evaluate what our predecessors have done in 250 years and what we have been able to do over the last twenty five or so.



Mikhail Piotrovsky,  
General Director of the State Hermitage Museum