

The Imperial Court and the Hermitage

The Hermitage Amsterdam opens with a large exhibition devoted to the culture and aesthetics of the Russian imperial court. This is indeed most fitting. The roots of this innovative museum undertaking lie with the first Russian emperor, Peter the Great, who saw the Amstelhof building even before he founded St Petersburg. He lived very close by, in what was then the Doelen Hotel, and it was here that Fyodor Golovin, the head of his diplomatic service, developed a taste for oysters... For more than a hundred years the Hermitage was called the Imperial Hermitage, its modern title, the 'State' Hermitage, being simply a modern translation of the word 'Imperial'. Today the Hermitage is under the official patronage of the President of the Russian Federation, not simply as an international encyclopaedic museum, but as a unique monument to the history of Russian statehood during its imperial period, which had its beginning and its end in these buildings. The walls of the Hermitage preserve and pass on historical memory to new generations.

The culture of court life is not just impressive and beautiful. It is an important symbol of Russia's oneness with Europe, of their unbreakable ties. The Russian court was not simply a – very successful – rival to other European courts. It mastered and advanced the symbolic code of European culture and its political system. That code was embodied in ceremonies and ceremonial attributes, in official and semi-official behavioural patterns. Our exhibition is intended to show the two sides of palace life in St Petersburg. On the one hand we find the symbols of state power, of autocracy, military might and self-confidence, and the symbols of links with European powers, of equality with them, of an ability to speak to them in the common language of ceremonial gesture. On the other is court life, costumes and weapons, porcelain and accessories, shoes and fans, books and notes. In all this too there is a behavioural code, sometimes hiding – and sometimes revealing – genuine emotion. The luxury of ceremonies and everyday life is combined with the symbolism of everyday life and ceremonies, and we see at the same time the human scale of court life. At the head of everything stood the tsars, each of whom was a diplomat, a military commander, and at the same time a husband, a wife, a father, a mother, a lover. The personality of each left its mark on the age and therefore each age is

Unidentified Artist:
PORTRAIT OF PETER I
Late 18th – early 19th century
Oil on canvas. 88 x 70

rightly known by the name of the tsar: the age of Peter, the age of Catherine... After them came the courtiers – politicians, diplomats, commanders, intriguers and gamblers. Each of these too was – to a lesser or greater degree – a remarkable individual. Like much else, all of this is captured in objects, in authentic objects. Objects are bearers of their own memory, their own energy. This exhibition therefore, for all its theatrical nature, is radically different from today's fashionable virtuality.

Good old virtuality, however, can have its uses. No such exhibition today could exist without references to Alexander Sokurov's film *Russian Ark*, a film that created a marvellous image of a magnificent ambassadorial reception and a magnificent ball in the Winter Palace. It represents not a reconstruction but rather our perception today of that culture. Yet it is a perception founded on an understanding of the authenticity of those things.

A throne and a chamberlain's uniform. Imperial regalia and the imperial grand piano. Diplomatic gifts to and from Russia. Military trophies and presentation snuffboxes. An amazing collection of very beautiful items, of artistic masterpieces, each suffused with history, memory, admiration and veneration. All these and many other things have been preserved in the Hermitage, itself a great cultural product of Russian imperial history. Creating and watching over the Hermitage, the Empire and its Emperors demonstrated to the world Russia's incontrovertible place as part of Europe and simultaneously its special role alongside Europe. In order to be a great power a state had need not only of a full treasury and a strong army but also of rich artistic collections. It was particularly significant and instructive that these collections made their appearance and found their home in this distant northern land, to which they made their way along rivers, across snows and through mud. The Hermitage as an art collection was always tied closely to the court. Palace and court ceremonies took place in the rooms of the Winter Palace and the Hermitage and the Hermitage Theatre. Ambassadors were often taken to see the Emperors via the Hermitage in order to immediately create the right impression on them, to 'put them in their place'. The Hermitage was like a brilliant parure in the crown jewels.

After the revolution in 1917 the Winter Palace was gradually transformed into part of the Hermitage. Under the new conditions, however, the 'tandem' of the memory of world culture and of Russian statehood was preserved. It was preserved and found a new existence. To an even greater degree than before, court culture became part of national culture (despite the fact that it was often declared to be that of an alien class). We got used to it and learned to be proud of it. And though it was not always popular, indeed it often irritated, it was stronger than those who ruled Russia briefly over the centuries. It is curious how the Hermitage as a traditional complex of museum buildings and the Winter Palace as an imperial residence

seem to be linked by a single umbilical cord. They created and preserved an exchange, an echo, between their main spaces: the St George's and Armorial Halls and the Large Skylight Room. The Gallery of 1812 and the Hall of the History of Ancient Painting (the Raphael Loggias). The Jordan Staircase and the Hermitage Staircase. The Rotunda and the Twelve Column Hall. The Nicholas Hall and the Twenty Column Hall. Each of us could continue this list. The spaces of palace and museum interflow today as they did in the past. This is one of the most important features of the Hermitage, of that memory which it preserves: Peter the Great, Rembrandt, Catherine, Rubens, Alexander I, Caravaggio, Nicholas I, Leonardo da Vinci, Paul, Matisse, and so on and so on... Great art was part of court life and is today part of the memory of Russian history. It is this complex and multifaceted, multilayered and polysemantic picture of Russian history and culture that we wish to present today and hereafter in the Hermitage Amsterdam.

We are very pleased that this purpose has brought together so many people in the Netherlands and Russia. We are most grateful to those who made possible, with their resources, energy and intelligence, the completion of our grandiose undertaking. We are happy that those traditional ties and that permanent goodwill between Russia and the Netherlands has found an embodiment so worthy of our ancestors. Thank you.

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