

Paintings that Prophesied the Spirit of the Age

Mikhail B. Piotrovsky

The Hermitage is presenting yet another exhibition in its 'embassy' in Amsterdam, the twelfth since the opening of the Hermitage-Amsterdam and the second in its new large premises in the Amstelhof. The success of the last exhibition, *At the Russian Court*, has demonstrated that we have found the correct equation for coordinating the work of colleagues in St Petersburg and Amsterdam.

The presence in Amsterdam of the St Petersburg Museum is a significant cultural phenomenon, one with quite specific qualitative features. The Hermitage-Amsterdam is located at the very heart of Europe, alongside some of its greatest museums and cultural institutions. To find one's correct niche within this situation one needs to be able to combine the experience, character and traditions of the Hermitage with an understanding of and respect for the traditions of the Dutch public and Dutch museum learning. Queues for our exhibition in the Amstelhof reveal that we have been successful so far. Yet the programme also consists in continuing Hermitage traditions in the study, conservation, interpretation and display of objects. The Hermitage is an encyclopaedia of world culture, an encyclopaedia written in Russian. The Hermitage long ago became a phenomenon of Russian culture within worldwide culture. Our task is to translate the Hermitage encyclopaedia into other languages, without losing any of its key tenets, preserving the charms of its original language. A task that is by no means simple and that is very rarely achieved when an exhibition is transplanted from one museum to another. Here, however, the situation is somewhat different, for the Hermitage on the Amstel is an integral part of the Hermitage on the Neva. The situation is unique, with many advantages, but it is also filled with potential pitfalls.

Our strategy in Amsterdam is based on a very simple idea – to make our collections, our understanding and interpretation of them, accessible to the widest possible range of visitors. Differences in terms of the context –

both architectural and cultural – in which the exhibits find themselves in Amsterdam both lead to problems and create amazing opportunities to regroup and throw new light on celebrated works. Together we seek above all to show those collections for which the Hermitage is particularly renowned, to relate the incredible stories of Russian collecting, the links between Russian political history and world culture. We want to show the kinds of art that are not so well represented in Dutch museums and to tell the story of how that art is perceived and understood in Russia.

Our exhibitions contain many works and objects that are particularly attractive to the wider public, but all of our exhibitions are also 'intelligent', filled with things to tempt the appetites of specialists and 'gourmets'. Such is the Hermitage itself, providing food for the eyes and for the souls of very different people. Which makes the Hermitage one of the most democratic cultural institutions on earth. It has everything for everyone. It is for everyone a refuge, a place where one can get away from everyday cares; it is a veritable 'hermitage'.

The concepts and ideas behind our exhibitions are born in the Hermitage in the course of joint discussions. We bring in many of our friends in the Dutch art world. This time – by no means the first time! – we are working with our old friend Henk van Os, a profound specialist in museum matters, capable of combining the apparently incompatible: learning and public interest. In lively discussions with Albert Kostenevich and Mikhail Dedinkin, the Hermitage curators who are specialists in our collection of modern art, the concept of this exhibition was born, to be developed by our regular partners, the curators at the centre in Amsterdam.

It tells the tale of artists who, these scholars feel, set in train the course of the new art, the true avant-garde. Yet it departs somewhat from standard conceptions, which see the start of that art in the Post-Impressionists. It does

not touch on Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin. It departs from the didactic historical line set out in school teaching, by which everything commenced with the Impressionists' experiments.

From a formal point of view, the traditional exhibition on the top ("third") floor of the Winter Palace, which runs seamlessly through the nineteenth century, seems to be broken: we start in the middle, with Matisse and Picasso. This immediately gives the exhibition in the Amstelhof a new dynamism. Those artists who followed on from Matisse and Picasso appear in a new light.

The Hermitage's collection of works by Matisse and Picasso is one of the best in the world. When set alongside each other, these works create a somewhat different picture to that of the celebrated large 'Picasso-Matisse' retrospective. Encompassing a much shorter time frame, the comparison of works created by the two most important artists of the twentieth century seems all the more dramatic. Matisse, seeker after 'le bonheur de vivre', creator of joyous beauty. Picasso with his tragic tension, his terror at the horrors of existence and suffering. The two main threads of art, fed by the rich traditions of the Orient and of Africa. It is in these paintings that this is most clearly seen. In the Hermitage's works by Matisse one finds echoes of Persian miniatures; the Hermitage's Picassos contain echoes of the idols of the African tropics.

Out of the circle of friends and followers who fluttered around these two geniuses grew the musical mysticism of Kandinsky and the mathematical horror of Malevich. Once again, a comparison of two key yet profoundly different giants of world art. These artists prophesied the further development of the twentieth century.

Moreover, it is here that we find the three main paintings of the century – veritable symbols of the age. Matisse's *Dance* (able to travel only for two months) is the highest expression of 'bonheur de vivre'. Kandinsky's *Composition VI* is an abstract-realist depiction of universal catastrophe. Malevich's *Black Square* is the manifesto of a sea of troubles put right by the artist.

So strong a collection has its own history, no less dramatic and fascinating than the art-historical story it tells.

Everything started with two great Russian collectors, men of incredible business and aesthetic sense, who not only gathered works by artists fated to enjoy worldwide fame, but who chose the very best of those artists' works. The names of Sergey Shchukin and Ivan Morozov illuminate this exhibition. The accessibility of their collections in pre-revolutionary Moscow played a huge role in the birth of the celebrated Russian avant-garde, which is inconceivable without them. Nationalised after the Revolution of 1917, the collections formed the basis of the State Museum of Modern Western Art, the world's first museum of contemporary art. Other artists appeared alongside Picasso and Matisse, among them Kandinsky. In the 1930s modern art fell out of favour with the Soviet authorities and the collections were threatened with sale and even destruction.

Salvation came in the form of a division of the collections of the Museum of Modern Western Art between the Hermitage and Moscow's Pushkin Museum of Fine Art. This took place in several stages, before and after the Second World War. As a result the 'pioneers of modern art' found themselves returned once more to the context of the history of world art. After a period in which their display was banned, it became possible to display the works within this context once more, and the Hermitage's celebrated 'third floor' became a Russian cultural phenomenon, playing a huge role in the education of young Soviet artists in the 1960s and 1970s. In many ways the high quality of 'underground' art owed much to the 'third floor'.

Few additions were made to the collections in later years, but each of them was a major event. Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse's secretary and muse, presented to the Hermitage priceless paintings, drawings, sculptures and books by the artist. Picasso's lithographs arrived in the Hermitage thanks to the dealer Kahnweiler and the dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov.

In 1996 President Yeltsin allocated a sum of money to the Hermitage for new acquisitions that was unprecedented

in the post-war period. This led to the appearance on the walls of works by Rouault, Dufy, Utrillo and Soutine. In 2003 Vladimir Potanin, Chairman of the Hermitage's Board of Trustees, presented to the museum Malevich's *Black Square*. Other gifts came from artists and collectors.

In 2008 the Hermitage launched its project Hermitage 20/21, the task of which is to present the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries more broadly and more profoundly. We have no doubt that the Hermitage centre in Amsterdam and Dutch artistic circles will play an active role in this project, helping us to continue that important tradition of collecting contemporary art which runs from Peter I and Catherine II through Alexander I and Alexander II to the Moscow merchants, modern patrons and enlightened politicians. A huge thank you is owed to all those who made this exhibition possible. We have before us in the halls of the Amstelhof a monument to artistic perspicacity and the most refined taste.

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