

Russia on the Amstel

Hermitage Amsterdam

Following thorough renovation, the Hermitage Amsterdam opened its doors to the public on 20 June 2009 with an exhibition on the splendour of the Russian court. It is a branch of the world famous museum in St Petersburg and an important acquisition for both the art world and tourism in Amsterdam. The opening was a festive occasion, attended by the Russian President Medvedev and Queen Beatrix.

Russia and Holland have historic ties. During a visit to Holland at the end of the seventeenth century, Tsar Peter the Great was so inspired by what he saw that on his return to Russia he applied it to the reorganization of his immense empire. The historic ties turned out to be of major importance for the goodwill needed to make a success of such an ambitious project as Hermitage Amsterdam.

This new cultural centre is the brainchild of Ernst Veen, who was highly successful as the director of the New Church in Amsterdam. He converted this wonderful church, centrally located next to the royal palace on the Dam, into a very popular exhibition venue. For the exhibitions he organised in the New Church, Veen regularly loaned objects from St Petersburg. And so

the plan emerged to create a permanent showcase in Amsterdam for the Hermitage's fantastic collection, which numbers more than three million objects, only a fraction of which can be exhibited in Russia.

In 1999, the city of Amsterdam acquired the *Amstelhof*. This three-hundred-year-old nursing home for the elderly was no longer suitable for its original purpose. In the years that followed, the city council looked for a new, cultural use for this monumental building. With its impressive neoclassical façade, its beautiful inner courtyard and its position on the Amstel, the *Amstelhof* had invaluable assets. Ernst Veen saw his chance. He invited Mikhail Pietrovsky, the director of the Hermitage, to Amsterdam to visit the site. Together they decided that the *Amstelhof*, after thorough renovation, would be a wonderful location for what is now the Hermitage Amsterdam.

The renovation transformed the old rooms and the gloomy corridors of the nursing home into a modern museum. Hermitage Amsterdam has two large exhibition rooms and some forty display cases in which to show objects. There are also three museum shops, a restaurant, a large auditorium and a separate building that houses the 'Hermitage for Children'. There was also space for a few historic rooms such as the old chapel and the trustees' chambers.



Address from the throne by
Nicolas II, 1906, studio K.E.
von Hahn.
© Hermitage St Petersburg.



The Amstelhof, host of the Dutch branch of the Hermitage.

The huge and dazzlingly white exhibition rooms, situated behind the historic façades, create a somewhat unreal impression. But they are splendidly equipped to accommodate large-scale exhibitions on a wide variety of subjects. This was already apparent at the opening. Under the title '*At the Russian Court – Palace and Protocol in the 19th Century*', the exhibition boasted more than 1,800 official portraits, along with gala uniforms, ball gowns, weapons, table services, jewellery, fans and golden snuffboxes, all evoking the glamour of the era of the Tsars.

There was also a political motive behind all the opulence that was once on show at the court in St Petersburg. It was a demonstration of the power of the Tsars and their empire. The Russians wanted to make it perfectly clear that they were on a par with Paris, Vienna and other European cities. To this end they had to accept the squandering of wealth and the rigidity of the protocol, which ensured the pettiest details of life at court were laid down in cast-iron rules. The October Revolution of 1917 would bring this ostentatious show to an end forever.

To tell this story, the Russian curators sent some exquisite pieces to Amsterdam. While paintings by Ilya Repin, jewellery by Peter Carl Fabergé and the throne of the Romanovs were certainly among the eye-catchers, it was the abundance of so much extrava-

gance that clearly impressed visitors the most. There were also rare historical documents on display, such as the old films of market scenes and parades in St Petersburg and photos of the destruction wrought by the revolutionaries in the rooms of the Winter Palace. The exhibition, which ran until January 2010, turned out to be an immediate success among a broad public. After only a month, it had already welcomed 100,000 visitors.

The Dutch branch of the Hermitage has all it needs to grow into a lively cultural centre and tourist attraction. A welcome bonus for Amsterdam, where two important museums – the *Rijksmuseum* and the *Stedelijk Museum* – have already been closed for some time for renovation. The Hermitage has no wish to compete with other museums though. It will only hold exhibitions that would not otherwise be seen in the Netherlands. The programme for 2010 offers a wide selection from the Hermitage's famous department of modern art (with masterpieces by Matisse, Picasso and many others) and an exhibition on the conquests of Alexander the Great.

The Russians have in the past had a few nasty experiences with outposts of the Hermitage. However, the arrangement that was adopted in Amsterdam – an independent institution financed by sponsors and admission charges, with works on loan from

St Petersburg – offers advantages to both parties. Mikhail Piotrovsky intends to make the Hermitage a ‘global museum’. He views the branch in Amsterdam as a visiting card. He hopes, with these exhibitions in the Netherlands, to arouse people’s interest in visiting St Petersburg. There is also a minor financial benefit for the Russians – from each ticket sold, 1 euro goes to the museum in St Petersburg. The proceeds will be put towards the much-needed restoration of works of art in its collection.

Jan Van Hove

Translated by Gregory Ball

www.hermitage.nl

Exhibitions:

Matisse to Malevich. Pioneers of Modern Art from the Hermitage (6 March 2010 - 17 September 2010).

Alexander the Great. The Road to the East (18 September 2010 - Spring 2011).

‘Van Eyck to Dürer’

A Matter of Influence

In 2002, as a major attraction for Bruges’ year as Cultural Capital of Europe, the city’s museums mounted the exhibition *Van Eyck, early Netherlandish painting and the south, 1430-1530*. It clearly showed that in the fifteenth century what was called the *ars nova* of the Low Countries, which started with Van Eyck’s generation, had a fundamental influence on painting in southern Europe – Italy, southern France, Spain and Portugal – and was seen as an inspiring source of renewal. This reversal of the traditional image of the development of Renaissance art – although it is of course well known and has been regularly studied – was a revelation to the many art lovers who poured into the exhibition. It was a huge success and the catalogue has become a standard guide to this subject.

At the end of 2010, the *Groeninge Museum* will, as a sequel to the 2002 exhibition, be taking up an even more complex challenge. Under the title *Van Eyck to Dürer* it will outline the artistic exchanges between the Netherlands and Central Europe from about 1420 to 1530. In this instance, Central Europe is defined geographically on the basis of the Holy Roman Empire and its immediate sphere of influence, and so – although the present national borders bear little similarity to the situation at that time – it extends roughly from the Baltic States through Poland and Germany south to the northern part of Romania and parts of the Balkans. In terms of dates, the exhibition starts with the generation that included Van Eyck, Campin and Rogier Van Der Weyden and ends with the decade following Albrecht Dürer’s celebrated journey to the Low Countries in 1521, a journey which was this German master’s homage to the pictorial culture of the Flemish Primitives, but at the same also marked the triumphant entrance of a new type of Renaissance artist. In contrast to the 2002 exhibition, this complex artistic interaction is shown not only by means of paintings, but miniatures, prints and drawings, and to a lesser extent sculptures, will also help tell the story.

After a brief introduction describing the late mediaeval ‘international style’ that prevailed all over