

# Contemporary Art and Classical Museum: Conflict or Symbiosis?

Mikhail B. Piotrovsky

Prof. Mikhail B. Piotrovsky  
State Hermitage Museum  
Dvortsovaya Naberezhnaya (Embankment) 34  
190000 St. Petersburg  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: museum@pisem.net

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## *Contemporary Art and Classical Museum: Conflict or Symbiosis?*

This paper examines some of the aspects of exhibition practice at the State Hermitage Museum, in particular, projects related to contemporary art in the context and space of classical museum. The Hermitage Museum as a universal museum, the museum of different styles and epochs. Therefore one of its intentions is to show the art of the latest trends, whether such demonstration is a sign of evolution, or, on the contrary, of regression of culture. Despite the inconsistency of criteria of classical aesthetics in evaluation of art from the 20th to the early 21st century, the museum may show the continuity of tradition while exhibiting contemporary art in the context of art of the old masters.

Key words: State Hermitage Museum, museum, contemporary art, exhibition, curator, aesthetics, authenticity

The Hermitage Museum is a universal museum – a museum of all styles and eras. The appearance of the project “The Hermitage XX-XXI” is quite logical in this context. The objective of this project and its working group is to identify the criteria of artefacts in the field of contemporary art, which can be demonstrated in the Hermitage.

“What to show” means exactly what sort of contemporary art should be displayed in such museum as the Hermitage. The second question is how to show: in form of long-term exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, festivals, mixed exhibition projects (e.g., held in 2014-2015 *Manifesta 10*, the main platform for which was the Hermitage). And only afterwards, we consider the question of specific names and artworks.

In our long-term plans there is a list of *desiderata*, of the artists we would like to show. It is quite large, even too large. In this situation, you need to choose which contemporary works should be in the museum, and especially the museum that displays art in general, not just modern and contemporary. They are completely different organisms: a museum of contemporary art and a museum showing contemporary art. We can name three different kinds of museums working with contemporary art. We can name the Metropolitan Museum in New York with the Department of contemporary art at the MoMA, which is similar to Metropolitan with all its modern classics. And Guggenheim museum, which includes collections, galleries, and which is more focused on working on the market of contemporary art.

As for the Hermitage, we need to determine, what to show temporarily, and what to show permanently. The permanent exposition of contemporary art in the Hermitage is a very important question.

You need to choose things that will resonate with the core of the Hermitage collection and traditions of the museum carefully. This approach may at first seem narrow, but in fact, we will

seek harmony with what is in the Hermitage: it is necessary to select the type of content. As for the quality of art: in the past, before the creation of the program “XX-XXI” our position on this problem was as follows: we exhibited the art, which had been already in the encyclopedia, which entered the history of art. We showed an artwork as a sample of taste, as a true art. But the concept of taste and the notion of aesthetic judgment as applied to contemporary art is inadequate, as stated by many researchers.<sup>1</sup> Now we have already crossed this stage and take the responsibility to show things that we think are interesting, but about which it is difficult to say for sure, if they get in the encyclopedia in the future, or not. At the Hermitage we opened *Manifesta 10*. This is the exhibition of stylish, interesting artists, but who of them will remain in the history, not to mention modern classics like J. Beuys, we do not know. And we demonstrate their works, not claiming that they will remain in history. It is rather a call for discussion with a small scandal, that will help us and our audience to determine, what we really need to buy and keep in the Hermitage.

We have to take into account, that a place reserved for contemporary art at the Hermitage, is not big, and will never be large, since it must remain proportionate to the rest of the museum’s collections. So, we have to decide what will be exhibited permanently, and which part of the exposition will change. This is a special system at the Hermitage, as the museum has a huge collection that is constantly rotating.

When Catherine the Great gathered her collection, then this art was also contemporary, and probably also caused some controversy, although it had been collected with the help of D. Diderot. Catherine the Great, Nicholas I, and Alexander III were collecting contemporary art. And what they collected, did not cause much objection from anyone, as they were the emperors. Catherine collected artworks of different quality, for example, J. Reynolds, who definitely is a great artist, and J.-B. Greuze, whom, in my opinion, no one likes, but his name is included in the encyclopedia. Nicholas I was brilliant enough to discover Caspar David Friedrich, and Alexander III – J.-L. Gérôme, who generally belongs to salon art, as one believed even then.

To assume the role of Diderot we now expect Norman Rosenthal and Michel Strauss, that is, the people of museum and auction world. But there is still a lot of “dirty work”. Because the display of contemporary art is largely the “dirty work”, which is unusual in a regular museum. These are things that are formally destroyed, these are artists with their ambitions. All of this requires far more people that are included in the project. And I think we are definitely going to engage students to do a part of this work, and engage actively, because in this work will be determined their research interests and their future in the museum world. Here we must remember about the educational role of museum.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of museum is closely related to the concept of “masterpieces”, because a large museum is a collection of first-class objects. But since the second half of the 20th century art rejects the notion of “masterpiece”, as well as the term of “genius” and even “author”. Are these concepts relevant when working with the art of the latest trends? I believe the word “masterpiece” is not sufficiently adequate here. One often says: “masterpiece”, “masterpiece”,

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, DANTO, Arthur C. *The abuse of beauty: Aesthetics and the concept of art*. Chicago: Open Court, 2003; DEAN, Jeffrey T. The Nature of Concepts and the Definition of Art. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61(1), 2003, pp. 29-35.

<sup>2</sup> O’NEILL, Paul and WILSON, Mick (eds.). *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London/Amsterdam: Open Editions/De Appel, pp. 83-96; BIRYUKOVA, Marina and NIKONOVA, Antonina. Art Therapy in St. Petersburg’s Museums. In: *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 76(2), 2015, pp. 291-304; RICE, Danielle and YENAWINE, Philip. Conversation on Object Centered Learning in Art Museums. In: *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 45(4), 2002, pp. 289-301.

“masterpiece”, “masterpieces at the exposition”, “twenty masterpieces had been stolen” or even “two hundred masterpieces” (although there was no trace of any masterpieces initially). Moreover, the State Hermitage Museum is not an art museum, but a museum of cultural history. We consider all the museum’s artefacts very important, but not all of them can be called masterpieces. For example, a stone axe could be named a “masterpiece”: we have a number of truly beautiful stone axes in our collection. But, what is a “masterpiece” for us, in the context of another collection can be perceived differently. Therefore, this word should be used very selectively and carefully, because not everything can be named so, but only really unique things.

Another problem is that every museum has its own level of collecting. As for the art, in the Hermitage this level had been marked by Catherine II, and it is quite high. I would not call these things masterpieces too, but they demonstrate quality: great names represented by very good artworks. And it imposes certain obligations in relation to the collection of contemporary art. Apparently, the Hermitage will not collect contemporary art of the recent years. We will only show it in the halls of the museum. We will buy the art of the second half of the 20th century. We have a ready list of a few names, whose works we should try to obtain. Another way to fulfill the collection is gifts. For example, Pierre Soulages donated his picture to the Hermitage.

Using different methods to add works to the collection, it is important to be very careful, focusing not on masterpieces, but on the level of the museum’s collection. The main question here is: who makes the final decision. Of course, we accept decisions of councils, scientists, expert committees, although at some stage the decision should be made by the Director of the museum. And then he bears responsibility for what he has collected.

In a sense, contemporary art, art of the second half of 20th - beginning of 21st century is an homage to classics and tradition: the desire to create “anti-form” confirms unwillingness to compete with “strong” and beautiful forms of the old masters. In this regard, increases the importance of the context of classical museum for demonstration of contemporary art. I believe that a classical museum like the Hermitage must show that between P. Potter’s dog and P. Picasso’s cat there is no substantial difference. I believe it is essential.

Museum should tell you, that there were no revolution in the art world, done by the new art. Certainly, the 20th century demonstrated the rapid development of art, but a revolutionary turn in the field of art has not happen. It is still the same art with the same criteria and features, that we do not understand just because there was no sufficient time for perception, everything is changing too quickly. I think that precisely this situation can and must be shown today in a museum.

For example, the Hermitage participated in a very interesting exhibition *Matisse and the East* in Rome, where literally to every painting by Matisse was suggested a parallel image – a work of Oriental art. Another example is in the field of historicism. Historicism – a great epoch, based on rethinking of the former stages of development of artistic culture and creation of entirely new forms. The Hermitage is a museum that lives in the interiors of historicism. And, generally speaking, all our postmodern era is also a kind of historicism.

All these issues, in my opinion, are within the competence of classical museum: it is able to play with serious and original material. For this kind of cultural games in the museum there are resource funds, and professionals who live in these two worlds. For example, such an employee at the State Hermitage Museum is Dmitry Ozerkov, which deals with the art of 20th-21st centuries and is a specialist in French engravings. Or Arkady Ippolitov, whose research interests are in the field of contemporary art and the Italian graphics.

A few people may realize this symbiosis of scientific interests, because for its realization it is necessary to know the old art thoroughly, as well as the museum and its collections. Nowadays many researchers write about the role of a curator.<sup>3</sup> Curatorial parallels between contemporary and classical art, in our opinion, can be very interesting and useful for understanding art in the context of museum. This is a remarkable aim of the Hermitage Museum in the area of display of contemporary art, because only a few museums in the world can afford to develop such practice. Metropolitan Museum is trying to work in the same direction. Other major museums – the Louvre, for example, demonstrate contemporary art and classical art separately.

I think that museum demonstrates the continuity of tradition and even has to dictate it, because the continuity of tradition exists, and God provides it to us, but it is necessary to implement pushing, to remind that here it is, the tradition. Museum thinks in thousands of years, not decades. Here we have the Maykop culture of the 2-3 thousand BC and the art of today. Here is the link for the arts of different styles and epochs, and what is in the middle, is not so important, if the tradition lives. It is imposing a little, but I think that is one of the missions of museum. To impose this unity of art in the historic change of eras.

When in the space of a museum intrudes or comes contemporary art, there is often a scandal, because contemporary art does not fit into the context of traditional aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Of course, contemporary art is one of the most interesting museum's areas. Although every time I demonstrate contemporary art, I think this is the last time I am doing it.

Museum curators are not accustomed to working with living artists. An artist says: "I want", and they say: "And why should I listen to what he wants. I will do it my way". But it is a living person, and it is his art. However, a curator cannot be always "true to artists", according to I. Gaskell.<sup>5</sup> That is, there is a constant conflict.

And the second problem. The traditional museum audience is different: a part of it prefers the new art, another part comes to see the classical art. Regardless of age, some hypothetically spit on artworks, others admire them, and others want something they arrange or create themselves. In this situation appear different interesting audience groups. And this situation we are trying to use. To display the new art in the Hermitage the halls at the Saltykov entrance have long been used, opposite the halls of Pazyryk with remnants of graves, mysticism, tattoos. This magical roll call played well with the content of contemporary art exhibitions. It developed different thematic lines. Contemporary art can reveal extraordinary aspects of these ancient things, as some theorists of museology notice.<sup>6</sup> For example, so it was with A. Warhol. The magical side of Pazyryk began to sound different near his works.

In the postwar art criticism appeared a number of theories that emphasized the role of personal ideas about what is art; this is due to the difficulty of definition of art as applied to the art of our time. Among them the theories of hypothetical museums: "Imaginary Museum"

<sup>3</sup> ACORD, Sophia K. Beyond the head: The practical work of curating contemporary art. In: *Qualitative Sociology*, 33(4), 2010, pp. 447-467; OBRIST, Hans Ulrich and BOERI, Stefano. Moving Interventions: Curating at Large. In: *The Journal of Visual Culture*, 12(2), 2003, pp. 147-160.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, COSTELLO, Diarmuid. Greenberg's Kant and the fate of aesthetics in contemporary art theory. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65(2), 2007, pp. 217-228; DANTO, Arthur C. and GOEHR, Lydia. *After the end of art: Contemporary art and the pale of history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; DANTO, Arthur C. *The abuse of beauty: Aesthetics and the concept of art*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003; PARSONS, Michael. Aesthetic experience and the construction of meanings. In: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 36 (2), 2002, pp. 24-37.

<sup>5</sup> GASKELL, Ivan. Being True to Artists. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61(1), 2003, pp. 53-60.

<sup>6</sup> ALEXANDER, Victoria D. (1996). Pictures at an exhibition: Conflicting pressures in museums and the display of art. In: *The American Journal of Sociology*, 101, 1996, pp. 797-839.

by A. Malraux, “Anti-museum” by J. Cladders, “Museum of Obsessions” of H. Szeemann.<sup>7</sup>

For me, the ideal museum does not exist. Of course, this is a game. When it had been invented by Malraux, it was interesting, something new. And now, when there is the Internet, and all make their museums, and when on a museum website there is a special notepad where you can create your own collection, it becomes a normal fun, an exercise for everyone. The theory of hypothetical museums have resulted in the practice of virtual museums.<sup>8</sup>

The place of the ideal museum for me, of course, occupies the Hermitage. Because I grew up in it, and its combination of different artefacts is unique and very interesting.

Another important problem of our world’s perception. In today’s culture there are a lot of imaginary things. In a row of rare “non-imaginary” things are museums. Of course, one cannot touch a Rembrandt’s picture, but one knows it is there. A real one. It is a special museum thing to be proud of. Museum means objects, things, and the quality of real things becomes of special value today. Why do people stand in line to see exhibitions at museums for hours? Why stand for hours, for example, for A. Modigliani?

You can see the real thing, not virtual, not imaginary, but genuine. And even the inexperienced people feel it and understand it. Therefore, the authentic thing is so important. It is more interesting to visit a museum or to collect one’s own small collection, than to have one’s own virtual museum. Better to have two or three simple things, for example, buy coins, hold them in your hands. When we did a complex, very important for the Hermitage exhibition project *The Golden Horde*, I had bought in an antique store a few silver coins of the Horde. I was looking at them, read the texts, studied entirely for myself the numismatic history and felt what it had been – the Golden Horde. And then I wrote a preface to the catalogue, not about coins, but under the impression of these coins, which I held in my hands. And there is practically no difference in this feeling of authenticity, whether you see an ancient artefact, or contemporary artwork. We go to museums for the sake of experiencing it.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, CISNEROS, J. R. Imaginary of the End, End of the Imaginary. Bazin and Malraux on the Limits of Painting and Photography. In: *Cinemas: Journal of Film Studies*, 13(3), 2003, pp. 149-157; GUILLEN, E. M. Real museum, imaginary museum: reflections on the concept of the museum as a stage for metamorphosis. In: *Espacio, tiempo y forma*, 7(1), 2013, pp. 129-145; MALRAUX, Andre. *Le musée imaginaire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965; MORRIS, Rachel. Imaginary museums: What mainstream museums can learn from them? In: *MIDAS. Museus e estudos interdisciplinares*. 4, 2014, pp. 89-97; SZEEMANN, Harald. *Museum der Obsessionen von/ ueber/ zu/ mit Harald Szeemann*. Berlin: Merve, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, BATTRO, Antonio M. From Malraux’s imaginary museum to virtual museum. In: PARRY, Ross (ed.) *Museums in a Digital Age*. London and New-York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 136-147.

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