

## **The Hermitage Known and Unknown**

**Irina Sokolova**

In 2014 the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg will be celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. A number of thematic exhibitions are being held to mark the date and, quite importantly, this anniversary gives us a chance to look back once more from the viewpoint of the 21st century into the distant past. To recall some of the key moments in the Museum's history that have shaped its character today.

Since the eighteenth century the Hermitage has been an encyclopaedic collection, incorporating coins and medals, antiquities and precious jewels, rare manuscripts and books. The heart of this vast conglomerate, however, was always the picture gallery. It owes its existence entirely to Empress Catherine II (reigned: 1762-1796). No other autocrat of the House of Romanov assembled works of art in Russia on the vast scale achieved by this particular monarch. Although there is an extensive literature dealing with the history of the Museum, much has remained unpublished. So whilst much of what I will tell you about today has already been the subject of some attention, I would also like to bring in some less well known facts. And since this meeting is taking place in the heart of Amsterdam, the obvious focus of our attention is the collection of Dutch painting.

It is widely recognised that the basis for the Hermitage picture gallery was laid with the acquisition of 225 paintings in Berlin in 1764. This occurred at the very start of Catherine's reign. Less than two years after her coronation. When society was still rife with rumour about the way the Empress came to the throne. To European eyes it looked very much like a double theft: not only had she seized power from her husband but she had not then passed it on to the rightful heir, her son Paul. Catherine therefore had an interest in demonstrating that she was in fact a truly enlightened ruler, familiar with and indeed supportive of the ideas of Voltaire and Montesquieu.

The creation of a large picture gallery was fully in accordance with the image she wished to create, allowing her to manifest the open-handedness and the fine taste of a patron of the arts. Trusted representatives in the literary salons of Paris, Denis Diderot and Baron Friedrich Grimm, skilfully supported the legend of the Minerva of the North. The 'hunt' for masterpieces, initially part of the Empress's policies of positive propaganda, was gradually transformed into a matter of state prestige.

The idea of setting up a picture gallery in the Winter Palace did not spring forth fully formed. That first

purchase of paintings in 1764 was largely a matter of chance. They were a collection formed by the Berlin merchant Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky, and were acquired in part payment of his debt to the Russian treasury. Catherine II could not resist the very pleasant opportunity offered ... of acquiring paintings intended for that famed connoisseur and patron Frederick II, King of Prussia. Particularly since he had been forced to turn them down due to financial difficulties.

Amongst the 225 works of different schools were many superb paintings from the Netherlands, among them Hendrick Goltzius' *The Baptism* and *The Fall*, Dirck van Baburen's *Concert*, two portraits of men from the brush of Frans Hals, and Mattheus van Bloemen's *Hunting Trophies*. *The Rest on the flight to Egypt* described as *Cornelis van Poelenburch* (in reality the work of Dirck van der Lisse as first recognized by Marijke de Kinkelder).

From the mid-1760s to the early 1770s Catherine's agents bought up paintings for her, mainly at auctions in Western Europe. It is usually said that Paris was the main source of these early acquisitions. But there are documents confirming that many valuable works were purchased during this period also in the Netherlands. Nicolaes Berchem's *Rape of Europa*, Jacob Duck's monumental *Soldier's Rest* (149.5 x 207.5 cm) and so called *Scholar's Family* ( *Een Speldewerkster*) by Domenicus van Tol's were acquired for 730 florins, 1,050 florins and 385 florins respectively, all of them at the sale of the collection of Joan Hendrik van Heemskerk here in Amsterdam in 1770. A group of pictures, among them, *the Portret of King Willem III* by Hendrick Verschuuring, *Winter View Near The Hague* by Jan van Goyen and Jan Steen's *L'histoire d'Ahasuere & Esther* came from the auction of the Cabinet des Tableaux of Hendrick Verschuuring on 17 September that same year, in The Hague. In 1773, after the sale in Amsterdam of the collection of Gerard van Rossem, the early canvas by Jan Victors, *The Continnence of Scipio*, was sent to St Petersburg. Catherine soon presented the latter work, along with many other paintings, to her new favourite, Grigory Potemkin.

The monarch had already made numerous such gifts. Back in the 1760s a whole series of paintings was removed from the Hermitage to the residence of Count Grigory Orlov, one of the key figures in the palace revolt that brought Catherine to power in 1762. An album of drawings showing the display of paintings in his Marble Palace allows us to identify, for instance, a pair of landscapes by Abraham Bloemaert, Abraham dismissing Hagar and Ishmael then attributed to Rembrandt and a boy with a hat leaning against the balustrade, now in Cincinnati Art Museum Ohio.

In later years the Empress was generous with gifts of paintings from the Hermitage to her young

protégé Alexander Lanskoï. He, for instance, gained paintings purchased in 1780 from the Baudouin collection in Paris, including so called Rembrandt's *Portrait of an Old Jew* and *Portrait of an Old Woman*. But we should note that Catherine, calculative as she was, did not omit to buy back her gifts from their heirs when each of these favourites died.

From the end of the 1760s the Empress and her artistic advisers applied a new and consistent strategy of making purchases through a network of Russian diplomats at foreign courts, expert *marchands* and brokers. The idea of acquiring not individual pictures but large collections *en bloc* came from Prince Dmitry Alexeevich Golitsyn, one of the most brilliant Russian officials of the Empress's circle. This erudite diplomat, writer and scientist was in 1769 appointed Russian Minister Plenipotentiary (ambassador) to Republic of the Netherlands. He spent many years in The Hague where he lived on Het Lange Voorhout and corresponded with many members of the Dutch scholarly elite.



*D.A. Golitsyn by M. Collot (Priv. coll. Moscow)*

Saint Petersburg did not have the centuries of a tradition of collecting of the kind that lay behind the princely collections of Europe. Catherine therefore sought to assemble a picture gallery in the shortest possible time. Sixteen years were spent on realising the idea. The mania that Catherine herself described as 'gluttony' reached a grandiose scale. Over just one and a half decades the Imperial Hermitage swallowed up, one after another, six famous collections of paintings. That of the Saxon minister Count Heinrich von Brühl alone brought the gallery 600 or so canvases in 1768, among them masterpieces by Jacob van Ruisdael, Rembrandt, Jan Wijnants and Frans van Mieris I. The purchase of the collection of Baron Crozat de Thiers in 1771 aroused the

ire of all Paris and added another 415 paintings, including Rembrandt's *Holy Family* and *Danae*. In 1770, Saint Petersburg gained the Geneva collection of 100 canvases from the collection of François Tronchin, most of them the work of Dutch and Flemish masters.

In March 1772 Voltaire, who took an ironic view of the Russian Empress's plan, wrote to her: 'Madame, I am well aware that you are no supporter of iconoclasm since you are buying paintings.' To which Catherine replied jokingly: 'Like the [Byzantine] Empress Theodora I do love "icons", but I like them to be well painted; she kissed hers, whereas I do not' (letter of 19 March 1772). (This response contains a reference to the tradition in the Orthodox Church to kiss icons.)

In 1779 another 201 paintings were added to the string of brilliant acquisitions. These were formerly the property of the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole and had hung at his Houghton Hall estate. They included numerous Italian and Flemish masterpieces, but also *Abraham's Sacrifice* by Rembrandt. Once again the purchase caused public outcry, this time amongst the British public. Members of parliament spoke out in an effort to save 'one of the most capital collections in Europe'. A political caricature of 1792 by James Sayers, *The Patriot exalted*, shows the brutal Russian Empress removing with her own hands a marble bust of liberal politician Charles James Fox from her gallery. Also tossed onto the floor is the set of engravings after works from the Houghton Hall collection.

Statues of Demosthenes and Cicero flee their niches in horror, unable to bear the terrible sight. Catherine herself was well informed about such satirical responses to her purchases.



Despite the dismay in Europe, in 1780 the Empress was able to acquire yet another superb collection of paintings, that of Silvain-Raphaël Baudouin. Most of the 119 works were by artists of the Netherlands.

As Catherine's collections grew apace, two new buildings were erected alongside the Winter Palace to house them: the Small Hermitage, by the architects Georg (Yury) Velten and Jean-Baptiste Vallén de la Motte, and a little later the Large Hermitage – now known as the Old Hermitage – again by Georg (Yury) Velten. Strung out along the Neva Embankment, they formed a single architectural complex.

'One of the small palaces that bears the name of the Hermitage', wrote the Abbé Georgel in 1799, 'conceals... magnificent paintings, which Catherine II purchased from the most famous collections in Paris.' Every Thursday, here in a series of small rooms or cabinets the Empress held receptions for a close circle of friends. Dinner was served on a special *table volant*, allowing them to do without servants; there were games of charades, poetry readings and dances, as well as discussions of paintings, drawings and prints.

By 1785 the first catalogue of the Hermitage gallery had been compiled by Comte Ernest de Munich, covering nearly three thousand paintings in three volumes. The very first painting in the manuscript catalogue is Anthony Van Dyck's *Christ the Saviour* (its present location unknown). The

second was described as 'Paul Rembrandt Van-Ryn... la Femme au collier de perles, Demi Figure sur toile'. This is in fact the work of Philips Koninck. Not at all surprisingly, the last painting in the catalogue is also a work of the Dutch school: number 2658 is a portrait of a man by Gerard Dou, then thought to be a self-portrait. Amongst the works most particularly prized was a canvas that the Empress described in one letter as 'My Prodigal Son'. Overall, works by artists of the Northern and Southern Netherlands made up over half of the gallery.

Catherine's own tastes determined the atmosphere in the Hermitage. The hang observed no chronology, no division into school, but was made so as to create a pleasing effect. Canvases were mounted in gilded, silvered or simple wooden frames. Some, according to contemporaries, were without frames at all. But there were several exceptions to this principle. At the end of the eighteenth century 59 paintings by Rembrandt were set aside in a separate room, known as the Billiard Room. Even taking into account the overenthusiastic attribution of works to Rembrandt that was common at the time, the number is impressive. We should recall that the French Royal collections had just eight works given to Rembrandt before 1789. The vast number of paintings by the Dutch artist in the Louvre arrived there in the nineteenth century as part of Napoleon's war booty.

Documents list nearly a hundred pictures by Rubens in Catherine's Hermitage, although that no doubt included studio works. They ran from small sketches to vast altarpieces. At the end of her reign the Empress ordered that several Flemish masterpieces be handed over to the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in Saint Petersburg. It was at this time, too, that Adriaen Backer's *Archangel Michael Casting Down the Demons* was allocated to the church in the Taurida Palace, although that picture was to return to the Museum in 1923.

With the death of Catherine II in 1796 the Hermitage's Golden Age came to an end. In melancholic tone the Marquis de Custine wrote: 'An inexpressible grief reigns in the palace... after the death of she who brought life to it with her presence, her wit. No one understood private life and the charm of conversation as did this absolute monarch.'

From the very start of his brief reign, Catherine's heir, her legitimate but unloved son Paul, sought to eradicate his mother's legacy. A new catalogue of the Hermitage, commenced in 1797, was compiled not in French but in Russian. Paintings considered to be of 'indecent subject matter' were removed from display and placed in storage, among them Rembrandt's *Danae*. If we have no idea which paintings

Catherine preferred, we can identify quite precisely Paul's favourite. According to contemporaries, the Emperor kept always in his apartments one picture, 'Portrait of a knight with a Banner'. This was the title then given in Russia to Thomas de Keyser's *Portrait of Loef Vredericx*. This portrait was an unwilling witness to the assassination of the monarch by conspirators on the night of 11 March 1801.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the flow of new acquisitions slowed to a trickle. Only the odd outstanding work was acquired. Amongst them we should particularly note Paulus Potter's *Farm* and *The Punishment of a Hunter*, both brought from France in 1815. And a magnificent *Family Portrait* by Bartholomeus van der Helst, purchased in 1850 at the auction of the collection of William II of the Netherlands.

Nonetheless, this was a period of considerable significance in the history of the Hermitage, the time when it was transformed from a palace gallery into a publicly accessible museum.

Pan-European changes taking place across Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars had a marked effect on art life in Russia. Exhibitions, charitable bazaars and public auctions were regularly held in Saint Petersburg, and people from ever wider social circles were increasingly drawn to take an interest in the arts. The education of public taste came to be seen as one of the tasks of the age.

On 5 February 1852 the Imperial Museum at last opened its doors to the public, proudly housed in the purpose-built edifice now known as the New Hermitage. The concept of the public museum, still unfamiliar in Russia, became a reality.

Even the most exacting visitors could not help but admire the picture gallery laid out in the rooms on the first floor. More than 200 works of the Dutch school hung in the grandiose Tent Room alone. Beyond it opened up a view of a large hall in which canvases given to Rembrandt were hung in three rows. More rooms and cabinets were crammed with paintings by Flemish artists.

Within the magnificent interiors there was now strict uniformity: paintings were arranged according to school, the walls were painted the same colour, and the frames in which the paintings were hung were of a standard type. This reflected the character of the monarch himself, Nicholas I, an ardent proponent of military discipline and subordination in all things.

We know that in 1853 the Emperor personally looked over the paintings remaining in the Museum stores and gave the order that those he did not like be allocated for sale. Realisation of the plan was delayed by the Crimean War and the auction of Hermitage paintings eventually took place after Nicholas's death, in the

summer of 1855.

In all 1218 paintings by Old European masters were sold. For comparison, a similar auction held the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1828 in Amsterdam sold just 46 paintings from the Rijksmuseum and 64 from the Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen in The Hague.

But if the Hermitage auction of 1855 represented the first major loss to the Museum, it was not to be the last. Much conjecture surrounded the Hermitage auction for many years but archive documents have made it possible to establish the truth and dispel some of the legends. Today we know, for instance, that the sale was held in the building of the Dutch Church on Nevsky Prospekt in Saint Petersburg. The paintings sold included the wings of Lucas van Leyden's triptych *The Healing of the Blind Man of Jericho* of 1531, which went under the hammer for just one hundred roubles. Later, in the 1890s, the Hermitage bought it back from a private individual, this time for eight thousand roubles. With time the Museum was also able to buy back Pieter Lastman's *Abraham on the Road to Canaan*. But the vast body of the paintings sold passed into the hands of antiquarians and collectors in Saint Petersburg. At least six came into the possession of Pyotr Semenov (1827-1914), explorer, statesman and collector. The character of this unique Russian idealist deserves a closer look.

In the history of Russia the name of Pyotr Semenov is forever linked with the land reforms and liberation of the serfs in 1861. Up until this point all peasants had belonged to the landowner and could be sold like any other goods, or could be flogged at will. Semenov was a member of the committee responsible for compiling the Manifesto that ended 'Russian slavery' and corporal punishment. Moreover, Semenov left his mark on several spheres of learning, from geography, entomology and botany to statistics. He was the first European to visit the Tian Shan Mountains. The Tian Shan mountain range is in Central Asia, running along the border of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia and China. As a result of his dangerous expedition, into the Tian Shan in 1856–57, Russia peacefully annexed extensive territories in the Central Asian region. For this exploration he was granted the honorific 'Tyan-Shansky', becoming Pyotr Semenov-Tyan-Shansky. Until relatively recently, however, one area of his activities remained known only to the narrowest circle of specialists. This was his collecting of Dutch painting. I have devoted many years to the study of this area and in 2009 my book on Semenov's gallery and on private collections of Dutch painting in Saint Petersburg was published in Russian. I hope the English version will be soon excisable.

With his vast erudition and boundless energy, Semenov was able to fill his modest house with more



than 700 paintings by artists of the Netherlands. He specifically concentrated his attention on the work of artists who were not represented in the Hermitage.

When Semenov started collecting Dutch painting in the 1860s, radical changes were taking place in Russia. Defeat in the Crimean War contributed to a growth of national self-awareness. The winds of change blew strongly and social and legal reforms altered the very way of life. It became possible to travel freely in Europe. The Netherlands, with their ideas of civil liberty and respect for the individual, were the object of keen interest in Russia and were seen by many as a model for a new society. Dutch art inspired in Pyotr Semenov an interest in the wider world. In the genre scenes and landscapes of the seventeenth century the Russian collector sensed the beating heart of the national character.

Semenov embodied a new type of 'art lover'. Unlike the possessors of noble family collections, he created his gallery using money that he had earned, with the good of society as his ultimate purpose. He managed to buy some very important paintings, such as works by Pieter Lastman, Bartholomeus van der Helst, Jacob Backer, Matthias Stom. Without the kind of capital required to purchase masterpieces only, he started studying the work of lesser-known artists. Over time he became a leading specialist in the 'mass art production' of the seventeenth century. So broad was the range of these works that he owned, so carefully were they selected, that they served as a marvellous complement to the paintings which could be seen in the Hermitage picture gallery.

In the middle of the nineteenth century technical achievements such as the development of the railways and steamships considerably reduced travel time between Europe and Saint Petersburg. During the last third of the nineteenth century the Russian capital was visited by some of the leading authorities in the sphere of art history: by Wilhelm Bode, Abraham Bredius and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot. Each of them developed a good relationship with Pyotr Semenov and they were frequent guests at his house during their visit. Bredius even stayed there. The correspondence between these foreign experts and the Russian collector makes clear that each of them facilitated the purchase of paintings for his gallery.

In 1910 the aged senator Semenov proposed to the Director of the Hermitage that the gallery be purchased for the Museum at precisely half its value, a noble gesture, particularly bearing in mind Semenov's large family and modest finances. When the official purchase took place, the Museum allowed the collection to remain in its former owner's hands for the remainder of his lifetime. Just four years later, on Semenov's death in 1914, the paintings were transferred to the Museum and a special exhibition organised to mark their accession.

Semenov's collection formed a large and extremely valuable 'Studiensammlung', of a kind unparalleled even today in Eastern Europe. One of the key conditions of his sale to the Hermitage, however, that the collection, 'gathered as the result of fifty years of hard work and knowledge... should not be broken up', was soon to be defied.

The outbreak of the First World War and then the Revolution of October 1917 overturned the whole way of life in Russia. The old regime collapsed. The Hermitage – now State rather than Imperial – had to adapt to totally new conditions.

The 1920s and early 1930s are one of the dark periods in the Museum's history. Initially there was a huge inflow of paintings from nationalised private collections that not only increased the collection in size but altered its very quality and homogeneity. Where once the display had been dominated by works by the most famous names, now those paintings rubbed shoulders with numerous creations of little known or unknown artists. Curators were faced with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, in those troubled times the Hermitage represented the sole guarantee of the safety of paintings from private collections and curators were keen to bring works into the Museum. On the other, it was simply impossible for them to study all these new acquisitions in the necessary depth. And before they could fully come to terms with the new situation the Museum received the first government telegrams demanding that the Hermitage hand over large numbers of works for sale. Despite its declared aims, the new government does not seem to have been driven by a philosophy of humanitarian values. Documents published in recent years provide evidence that the auctions that took many of the Hermitage's masterpieces abroad were part of a wider plan for the total dismantling of the 'imperial' heritage. In addition to the paintings that were irretrievably lost to Russia, many of the Dutch paintings still in the Museum bear paper labels indicating that they too were intended for sale. It was the economic crisis in Europe that did much to put a halt to the sales, but the scale of the de-accessioning was huge. Of course Russia's immense loss was Europe's gain. For instance: the Rijksmuseum came into possession of two portraits by Antonio Moro: the portrait of *Sir Thomas Gresham*, ca.1560 the *Portrait of Anne Fernely*. The Rijksmuseum also became: Rembrandt's *Jeremiah mourning over the Destruction of Jerusalem*, *Titus as a monk* and *Peter's Denial*. While the Mauritshuis has a work by Emmanuel de Witte and Thomas de Keyser's *Portrait of Loef Vredericx*.

From the middle of the 1920s various newly-established museums across the Soviet Union also gained from allocations of works out of the Hermitage. Canvases were sent to the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow,

which acquired a whole series of works by leading Dutch artists, including Rembrandt, Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, Nicolaes Berchem and Jacob van Ruisdael. Dutch paintings were sent in large groups to provincial museums around Russia and to the capitals of the Soviet national Republics. In order to truly understand the scale of this mass 'emigration', it is enough to realise that of Semenov's 700 paintings, 280 left the walls of the Hermitage during this period. In the course of my attempt to reconstruct Semenov's gallery, I uncovered paintings in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine, in museums in southern Russia and in the Far East, in towns as far apart as Krasnodar, Odessa and Alupka, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk and Tyumen.

At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s the Hermitage found itself totally isolated from the processes taking place in the Western European museum world. The last article by a Soviet author appeared on the pages of *Oud Holland* in 1926. ( *Pappe A. Overzicht der Litteratuur betreffende Nederlandse Kunst: Sowjet-Rusland OH 1926 XLIII p. 127-150, 197-200*) Thereafter scholarly ties were to be broken for long years to come.

During the Second World War the Hermitage collection was evacuated, which did much to further defer the problem of the scholarly study of the collection. Many works with unclear attributions were not included in the Museum catalogues of 1958 and 1981 and they remained unknown even to art historians. New literature was inaccessible to most Russian specialists and receipt of periodical publications was uneven. Despite the handicaps, however, Hermitage staff continued to work as best they could, gathering information about the works in their care.

The situation changed for the better after the Perestroika of the late 1980s. For the first time, all of the paintings were photographed and an electronic database made it possible to sort and record the vast body of material scattered around the different parts of the Museum. Although the twentieth century was a time of instability and upheaval for the Hermitage, it emerged with its status as one of the world's great museums intact.

The monumental painting of Joachim Wtewael 'Lot and his daughters', which was discovered in 1989, during the restoration of the interior of one of the theatres in St. Petersburg, became the biggest adding to the collection of the museum over the past decade.

The Hermitage is extremely rich in Dutch paintings. It's one and a half thousand works by artists of the Northern Netherlands reflect the broad panorama of the Golden Age. Over the last few decades it has proved possible to establish the provenance of many of them. Much attention has also been paid to the question of attribution. The authorship of many formerly 'anonymous' paintings has been established, in which no small

thanks are due to colleagues at the RKD.

A number of works mistakenly attributed to other schools have recently been returned to their rightful place in the Dutch section. This includes Paulus Moreelse's *Saint Cecilia*, formerly thought to be a work by the French artist Nicolas Colombel, two paintings by Willem Drost that had been hidden amongst canvases of the Venetian school, and a *Saint Jerome* by Hendrick van Someren, traditionally given to Jusepe de Ribera.

This is not a one way road, however, and in at least one case a supposedly Dutch painting has been allocated to a different school. Its story illustrates the kind of unexpected discoveries that have been made throughout the preparation of our forthcoming catalogue of all the Dutch paintings in the Hermitage.

*Young Woman Painting a Portrait of a Man*, a composition which reveals some associations to the works of Gerrit van Honthorst, was to be found among the anonymous works of the Dutch school. It was documentary evidence, followed up by stylistic analysis, which made it possible to establish incontrovertibly that the canvas is a lost self-portrait of the Bolognese artist Elisabetta Sirani (1638 - 1665). The painting was known only from a reproductive print (1833) and had been thought lost since the middle of the nineteenth century. The portrait's exclusion from the Dutch catalogue, therefore, represents no loss in the overall scheme of things, since it is a valuable addition to the Italian school.

On this curious story I shall end my talk. It confirms the great complexity of work involved in producing a catalogue of so varied a collection with so eventful a history. Much work is still to be done but at the present time the first of two volumes of the catalogue of Dutch painting in the Hermitage is nearing completion. It will be yet another contribution to the celebration of the Hermitage's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014.