# Promotion of Cultural Cooperation between Russian and European Cultural Operators Outside of Capital Cities and Major Towns in order to Reach Out to a Wide Variety of Cultural Services Consumers

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According to the Museums’ Union of Russia, there are more than 50,000 museums in Russia at present. Just over 2,000 of them are federal museums. Approximately 80 million museum items are stored in Russian museums. Every year they are displayed at over 10,000 exhibitions including foreign presentations. At the same time, on the basis of official statistical data it is possible to draw the conclusion that over half of Russian museums have never taken out their collections not only beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, but not even beyond their own rooms. That is, on the one hand, a huge number of Russian monuments have been removed from cultural turnover, i.e. they are virtually disappeared. And on the other hand, the majority of the Russian population living outside the capitals and large regional centres is cut off from the opportunity to become acquainted with samples of the world cultural heritage. And regretfully, it is necessary to recognize that the situation has not improved recently and has become even worse. As an example, we can illustrate it with the data from Yaroslavl Region. There are 19 museums (one federal, 6 regional, 11 municipal and one private) operating in the region. Five museums are located in the regional centre (Yaroslavl) or near it, and the others, including the federal museums are in other towns of the region. Over the last 20 years, only 6 museums took part in the international cultural exchange. At the same time, only three museums independently organized exhibitions abroad, and the others took part with their pieces in foreign exhibition projects of the central museums (State History Museum, Tretyakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, etc.), and the halls of only four museums received foreign exhibitions. Over the last five years, only three museums of Yaroslavl Region took part in international exhibition projects. What is the reason for such low activity of museums in the development of international cooperation? In our opinion, there are many reasons, but we shall look at some of them.

The first reason, although perhaps not the most important, for such behaviour of provincial Russian museums should be considered the “protective” tradition of Russian museums. In the 20th century, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, the state did not particularly agree with the opinion of museum experts in decision-making connected with museum collections (museum treasures were sold or destroyed for ideological reasons, etc.). Thus the museum staff got accustomed to the idea of acceptability, and even the usefulness of hiding information about collections, for the sake of their preservation. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that for almost a century Russian citizens lived behind the Iron Curtain when any international exchanges were strictly limited, regulated and basically reduced to the leasing of items only from the leading museums of the country. In addition, during Soviet times, even internal exhibition practice was reduced to few exhibitions of the capital’s museums in the regional centres, to “increase the cultural level of the regions” and very seldom the other way around. Considering the few serious publications of that time about regional collections, it becomes clear that many products kept in storerooms and even exhibitions of small museums remained unknown to the general public and experts at home and abroad.

Due to the lack of promotion of collections from local museums, it is difficult for potential partners to have an idea of what joint projects could be generated, i.e. for foreign experts it is difficult to imagine what pieces are stored in our museums, and for Russian museum staff, due to the lack of a real practice of cooperation, it is also difficult to imagine what can interest the public in other countries.

A language barrier, remains an important obstacle in the path of cooperation although this seems strange in our globalised times, but few employees of the museums can speak several languages, or, at least, know English to a reasonable level. And the problem is not only in the “laziness” of museum staff because one can’t learn language without using it: you need to communicate in it, and Russian local museum staff as a rule has no such opportunity.

Within the framework of the “language barrier” problem on the path of professional dialogue among museum staff, there is another important aspect: there is a significant difference in terminology and standards of description of museum collections in Russia and abroad. The problem of standardisation of the museum object descriptions has been around for more than a decade, but has so far not been resolved, and therefore descriptions of the same objects in different museums around the country sometimes differ significantly, and when there is a task of adequate translation into another language, the problem becomes many times more complicated. In a small town where qualified translators can be counted on one hand, finding an expert who knows museum terminology is a serious problem. In the Rybinsk museum, almost 10 years ago a website providing Internet users access to the museum database was created, but it is still only available in a Russian language version, and although there are pages about the museum in English, the most valuable part of the site, namely the access to the database, has still not been translated into any language.

Nevertheless, among museum staff there is a desire not only to receive travelling (including foreign) exhibitions, but also, first of all, to show their collections in other places, especially abroad. Every new exhibition is a big event in the cultural life of a small town – it raises the prestige of the museum, in the eyes of society, as well as in the eyes of the town’s leadership. And for the sake of this, museum staff is prepared to overcome difficulties. And these difficulties are considerable.

The procedure to receive permission to take out cultural valuables is quite a complex and a long process. And as paradoxical as it sounds, the smaller the museum is and the further it is located from Moscow, the more difficult it is to issue this permission. For federal museums, the decision of the museum and then of the Ministry of Culture which gives similar permission is enough. A regional museum also has to get the approval of the culture agency of the region, and a municipal museum also has to receive the permission from the municipal directorates of culture. And if you add the factor of remoteness from Moscow, it becomes clear that the process of organizing a foreign exhibition for a municipal museum is really a big problem.

So, it turns out that the most valuable museum objects are concentrated in the central museums, and it is most difficult to organize an exhibition of municipal collections. And we know examples of how regional authorities really did block the allocation of exhibits for foreign exhibitions from their subordinate museums, based on their own ideas about priorities in the exhibition policy.

It is impossible to dismiss financial problems which in small towns are even harder to solve. Take the issue of insurance, for example. Today, there is no legal methodology of defining the insurance cost of items. This gives a wide open space for subjective value of the required insurance sums by officials of a various levels, which certainly does not simplify the life of exhibition organizers.

And nevertheless, despite these complexities, cooperation between museums should be expanded and developed.

Some measures are necessary to overcome the problems described above. Let us begin with the problem of receiving permission.

As we have already mentioned, the current practice is not particularly logical. In our opinion, the system can and should be simplified. It is possible to work on this in three directions.

Firstly, at a federal level it is necessary to register precisely and legislatively approve an unequivocal methodology of defining insurance costs of museum pieces and risk assessment, similar to the travel insurance for those going abroad.

Moreover, it seems reasonable to expand the number of insurance companies which insurance policies are accepted by the Ministry of Culture for issuing permission, particularly among regional insurers.

At the international level, it seems useful to agree on immunity of museum valuables regarding property claims from third parties so it would be in principle impossible to consider cultural valuables as property on which legal arrest can be imposed. This could facilitate reduction of legal risks in the organisation of exhibitions.

Moreover, at the level of the Ministry of Culture, it is necessary to take a decision either to delegate to regional culture directorates the rights of issuing permission for taking out the collection, or to accept documents issued by those museums regarding export, without creating a long chain of agreements.

And now let us move on to cooperation. Many of the difficulties described above will not be solved by museums through their own inertia: why study a language if there is nobody to talk to, etc. Therefore it is extremely important to expand the practice of various joint seminars, conferences and symposia directed towards the study of collections, exchange of information about products, etc. As an example, I can cite the remarkable seminar conducted by the (Leo Tolstoy) memorial museum Yasnaya Polyana estate together with the Dutch Foundation for Culture Inventarisation, Cultural Heritage Fund, Collections Institute of the Netherlands and the International Council of Curators of Dutch and Flemish Art, devoted to the study of objects of Dutch art stored in various, non-central museums of the Russian Federation. The advantage of such action is mutual and vast. For the Dutch, it is certainly expansion of knowledge of art of their country by formation of a full database about paintings of the Dutch masters, and for Russian participants it means consultations by experts from various museums, study of different methodologies of attribution as well as study of objects and learning the foreign standards of description and research of museum objects thus attaining an additional stimulus for studying collections. As the seminar was directly aimed at studying collections, not only heads of museums took part in it, but also direct curators of collections, who, as a rule, even less often have the opportunity of participation in international cultural exchange. In expanding the geography of similar seminars, the mutual advantage would be even greater as in this case foreign partners would learn about the variety of our museum collections and there would be a basis for the expansion of a spectrum of joint projects.

This seminar has also emphasized the importance of the cooperation expansion in another direction: providing access to cultural heritage through the Internet. So far in Russia this has not been going very well. Only two museums have placed a significant amount of information about their collections on the Web. While our colleagues in Europe are already incorporating the Internet resources to have access to various parts of cultural heritage stored in archives and in museums as well as in libraries, in Russia there is no resource uniting any significant number of museum objects. Some museums of the Russian Federation are taking part in the project to place their resources in the EUROPEANA incorporated European library. And if European museums are doing this on a significant financial basis, Russian organisations are mostly doing it within the framework of volunteer work which does not simplify the process of integration of Russian cultural heritage into the all-European resource. Of 3 million electronic pages that will be accessible on the mentioned Internet resource by mid 2010, the Russian segment will not exceed several thousand pages at best. And this in turn also generates another problem. With the generally multilingual interface of the European electronic library (it is currently available in 26 European languages), Russian language is not presented there. This leads to a restriction of access to it by Russians, the majority of whom do not possess sufficient language skills. Many potential consumers of cultural heritage knowledge from countries of Europe are cut off from that.

Ways of increasing cooperation to expand Internet access to international cultural resources are envisaged in three directions:

1. In stimulation from the state as the main holder of museum collections of expansion of Internet-resources of Russian museums providing access to information about museum objects.
2. In the prompt formation of a common national Internet resource to facilitate access to the museum objects stored in the museums (probably the most logical would be to use the State Catalogue of the museum stock as such a resource, of course if this catalogue contains enough information).
3. In the stimulation, first of all financial, of integration of Internet projects already operating for access to museum collections in all-European projects, and formation on this basis of the Russian-language sector of European projects. Here again, efforts should be directed in two opposite directions:
* translation into European languages (or at least into English) of Russian Internet resources;
* formation of a Russian-language interface for access to incorporated European resources on cultural heritage.

Also important in this connection is the problem of unifying descriptions of museum objects both at Russian and at international level, and for this purpose it is necessary to direct efforts towards general acquaintance of Russian museum experts with international standards operating in Europe and the world. With this aim, it is necessary not to simply translate them into Russian (which is currently not really a topical issue), but also to organize seminars for experts with the purpose of explaining various aspects of these standards and widening of mutual understanding between museum staff of different countries.

Of course, the main aim of any international cooperation in the field of culture is the expansion of mutual knowledge of the cultural heritage of the world’s nations for people of various countries. And this effort should be directed not only towards establishments of culture or authorities and directorates, but also towards public organisations and the business community. These processes also require purposeful stimulation, above all from governmental agencies.

The stimulation can be of a different nature. It is necessary to develop and implement as measures of moral incentives (honorary awards, titles, etc.) along with various economic incentives and preferences. All these measures should certainly be fixed at the level of federal legislation, as well as in the form of new acts, for example the law on patronage, and in the form of changes of articles of current legislation. In recent years, while struggling against corruption, in our opinion, legislators have so zealously tried to register the inadmissibility of various privileges that the baby got thrown out with the bath water. Statistics show that over recent years, the number of cultural exchanges at regional level has seriously been reduced, first of all due to lack of finance. This is resulting not only in a fading interest in Russia by foreign countries, but also does not allow the satisfaction of interest of Russian citizens in the culture of other countries. It is necessary to activate international cultural cooperation and to involve in it not only people from capitals and regional centres, but also from small towns and remote places.

After decades of the Iron Curtain, Russians have a huge interest in the culture of peoples from other countries. And meeting this demand can seriously increase both the general intellectual and cultural level of Russian citizens as well as raise the prestige of cultural establishments in society. Alongside this, it is important to remember that Russian museums store huge stocks of cultural treasures, and their presentation to visitors will not only serve to strengthen friendship between peoples, but will also help to enhance Russia's prestige raise the authority of Russia in the world.