# The Museum as a Roadmap of Contemporary Cultural Space

Dr. **Vladimir M. Grusman**

Director of the Russian Ethnographic Museum

Honored Worker of Culture of the Russian Federation

Looking back at history, the term “roadmap” was first used by diplomats in their efforts to resolve the diplomatic problems of the Middle East. The situation is fairly unstable there, and this term became associated with a sense of unease. In our case, cultural cooperation through museum activities is unquestionably associated only with positive emotions.

It is necessary to underscore that our understanding and awareness of the inner form of culture happens primarily through perception of its exterior forms. This explains why we must make a commitment to accumulating material items of cultural value as social processes become more complicated. Traditional, pre-industrial society was characterized by a highly-integrated social culture that was primarily based on interpersonal interaction. The transmission of social and historical memory and its associated cultural experience was mainly implemented within small social groups.

Unlike that era, the post-industrial period is characterized by a differentiation of social structures and the institutionalisation of various fields of social reality which, in turn, results in the “autonomy” and “anonymity” of the individual. Under these circumstances, in order to create and support his “picture of world,” the modern individual becomes increasingly reliant on the importance of social institutes and processes that support his cultural identity. A special place in this system of institutes that preserve and reproduce cultural values is reserved for the museum: throughout the centuries it has played an increasingly important role in the spiritual life of society, its enlightenment and education, as well as the moral and ethical upbringing of its people, their information and communication processes, and affirmation of national consciousness. One may confidently affirm that the museum provides a sort of “roadmap” for our contemporary, multi-level and multilayered cultural space.

The Russian Federation currently has 1,854 museums storing 70 million museum items. Though, it is typical that 25 percent are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. This Museum Fund of the Russian Federation is something that is immortal and ineffable, something that must exist forever, something that was passed onto us by our forefathers and which we must shortly pass on to our own offspring. In the aspect of our gathering here today I would like to note that *75 per cent* of Russia’s museum fund is located in Russia’s European territory. And this is very important, because in reality, the main mass of Russian culture is concentrated in the part of the European continent that represents to us our sense of a whole European culture.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that it is no accident that the Russian coat of arms represents a two-headed eagle, with one head looking to West and the other one – to East. Taking this into account, we can formulate a thesis stating that Russian civilization represents a unique phenomenon of the Eurasian civilization. This is precisely why its inclusion in relations with European Union not only means the expansion of its European cultural field, but also – thanks to Russia’s location, geopolitical situation and cultural traditions – the joint organisation of an entire series of projects, including those involving museums. It also means the inclusion of all the values – both material and spiritual, those belonging to the past and the present day – that were created by Asian culture on the territory of the Russian empire.

It should be especially underscored that Russian museums are associated in a common union that provides us with a certain political and practical advantage. Sometimes, the process of interacting with other state agencies runs into certain problems. And in this case, the museum union becomes an unconditional backup not only in resolving disputes, but also in supporting a particular museum. The presidency of the Museum Union of the Russian Federation is currently held by State Hermitage Museum Director Mikhail Borisovich Piotrovsky.

I would like to say a few words about the Russian Ethnographic Museum. The museum was established in 1902 by a personal decree of the last Russian tsar, Nicholas II, as the ethnographic department of the Russian Museum. However, in 1934 the museum became an independent museum of federal importance. Its endowment contains 750,000 exponents and a fundamental library of 80,000 books, many of which are unique and go back to the 16th century. The museum also has a unique photography archive that lists 140,000 units. I bring up these figures to emphasize that we find this to be a unique field that could be used jointly in the process of implementation of international cultural projects between the European Union and Russia.

Russian Ethnographic Museum exhibitions are presented on almost every continent, including countries such as the United States, Japan, India and China. However, it seems that those museum projects that are associated with the European Union have special value and importance, particularly within the frameworks of the Seminar’s program.

We should start, in our opinion, with the latest events. So, for example, on the initiative of the Government of the Republic of Finland, the year 2009 was very broadly and ambitiously marked as the 200-year anniversary of Finland’s entry into the Russian Empire – this was a remarkably significant event that resulted in Finland becoming an autonomous republic that had its own parliament and so on. This state of affairs helped account for our nearest and dearest – in the cultural sense – neighbor’s self-sufficiency. Within the frameworks of Finland’s 200th anniversary, the Russian Ethnographic Museum took part in a major scientific research program called “General”. The program’s frameworks involved ethnographers from Finland and its various museums, as well as researchers from the Russian Ethnographic Museum.

In continuation of our joint work with Finnish colleagues, we prepared an exhibition in Helsinki devoted to researchers who began at the turn on the 18th and 19th centuries to study the unique features of the Finno-Ugrian culture in Finland and Russia. Helsinki was also the venue for the preparation and staging of an exhibition entitled “Karelia: Meeting at the Borders”. Needless to say that Karelia is a territory that distinctly displays all the similarities of these two northwestern region’s cultures – Russian Karelia and Finnish Karelia – and that was also the subject of our joint research.

It should be pointed out that in recent years the cultural and political vector of the European Union has altered. First of all, the European Union now includes nations that are primarily made up of representatives of the southern and western Slavic peoples – in other words, nations whose scale and cultural character are kindred to the peoples of Russia. In this case, we are discussing cooperation with an entire group of nations that is studying the Finno-Ugrian culture for historically established reasons. These nations include Finland, Estonia, Hungary and Norway – in other words, countries, the territories of which have been home to the Finno-Ugrian peoples for a long time.

Next, I would like to go through a few joint projects with the European Union. First and foremost, I must mark an entire series of projects with the Federal Republic of Germany. These projects involve such German museum centers as, for example, in the city of Pforzheim, which has Europe’s only Jewelry Museum. We worked on this exhibition together with our Pforzheim colleagues. Another major exhibition recently ended in Stuttgart. It was devoted to that unique global occurrence and world outlook called shamanism. In Stuttgart, we worked together with Europe’s oldest ethnographic museum – the Linden Museum – to prepare an exhibition devoted to Siberian shamans. This project’s uniqueness and special interest rested in the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century, this German museum formed its endowment in approximately the same manner as it was done by the Russian Ethnographic Museum. We worked jointly with German researchers for three years, with this exhibition representing the final product of our joint work.

Another very interesting project was developed jointly with the Museum of Ethnology in Valencia, Spain. This museum of ethnology is associated by many years of friendship to the Russian Ethnographic Museum. The project, which stretched over three years, was called “Two Iberias”. Iberia is the ancient name of Spain, and we took note of the complete similarity between the material and spiritual cultures of the peoples who lived in the pre-Mediterranean mountains of Spain and the North Caucasus territory of the Russian Federation. We attempted to prove that there were a vast number of similarities in the material and spiritual culture spheres. We organized two joint expeditions: one was held here, on the territory of Russia, and the other – on the territory of Spain. The Two Iberias exhibition was what emerged from this research.

Museum work, especially those that involves the process of international cooperation, presumes the existence of certain laws. The main law of any museum consists of the following: every museum must firstly collect exponents and, second of all, preserve these exponents, studying them and making them available for scientific research. And thirdly, the top point of the museum business is that the organisation of any exhibition, especially a foreign one, presumes the accumulation and maximum utilisation of all the opportunities available to the museum institution. This is precisely why the Russian Ethnographic Museum takes foreign exhibitions particularly seriously.

If one moves on to the unifying features of the museum exchange sphere, the sphere of this aspect of culture in Russia and the European Union, this probably concerns the organisation of such major events as – for example – the Days of Russia in France, which are coming up next year. We are very scrupulous in our preparation for this event. Within this project’s frameworks, we plan to organize an exhibition in a completely unique, protected French state monument of architecture – Chambord Castle – where we intend to present the most unique examples of traditional Russian regional dress.

It is necessary to mention our cooperation with Norway. Norway is not a member of the European Union, but it is a member of the Schengen Agreement. We have been working on joint Russian-Norwegian projects for the past five years. We should note that for the Norwegian side, the role of project patron was served by King Haakon, and for the Russian Federation – the president (of the time), Vladimir V. Putin. And it seems to me that such events – when not only museums but the entire aggregate of the nation’s culture is working on representing the Russian Federation’s culture abroad and accepting samples of European culture here in Russia – represent unique and essential mechanisms and channels of cooperation between nations in the modern world.

A few words should also be said about the potential difficulties that could emerge during museum exchanges. It is a well-known fact that before museums can take their exponents out of the Russian Federation and present them on the territory of any of the European Union nations, they must first fulfill an entire series of international agreements and international laws. First of all, I would like to touch upon the international Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora – CITES. The fact is that ethnographic exponents are very often executed from materials such as walrus tusks and mammoth ivory. All of these materials rest under the watchful “eye” of the CITES organisation. However, it is also the case that sometimes, museums have to take out exponents that were created 150 years ago, when the organisation of nature and animal conservation has not yet exist. Nevertheless, we sometimes encounter problems and, in some cases, are even unable to take out exponents that some European Union nations see as unethical and illegal for presentation. For this reason, we feel that we simply must go back and review certain provision of the CITES convention that concern either exponents or museum items made from unique materials.

I would like to say a separate word about a category called “in unity.” “In unity” is an issue that comes up in the signature of any international contract. When moving a museum exponent abroad, a federal museum must obtain a guarantee from the receiving party stating that the removed object will not be subject to infringement by a third party. But some European nations have still not worked out their final approach to this phrase, which means that we must pay particular attention to the formula of state guarantees. There are, however, some completely unique and positive examples in this case – first and foremost, the examples of Germany and France.

In conclusion, I would like to say that contrary to most expectations, the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries was marked not by a leveling of national self-consciousness, but otherwise – we are dealing with a strong rise in national self-consciousness. People want to learn about themselves, they want to learn about their culture and their roots, and it is natural that in order to do so, they must also learn about their neighbors, receiving as much information as possible about similar cultures. And in this connection I believe that cultural exchanges – particularly museum exchanges – play an irreplaceable role. Consequently, the museum can be viewed as a complicated mechanism that provides for retrospective information’s involvement in the modern being’s “picture of the world.” It acts like an intermediary between the individual and the cultural sphere, bringing forth a full set of spiritual values, ideas, emotions and traditions of a particular people. And in doing so, museums include every human involved in our common cultural and historical process, offering the individual a special “map” that could be used to help locate oneself on this cultural field.

The experience of Western nations, along with our own domestic research, confirms the growing role that ethnographic museums play in contemporary society. New trends have emerged in European ethnographic museums’ activities over the past 10 years that testify to qualitative shifts in the organisation of their operations: the concepts and names of museums have changed, with transformations occurring in the very technology used to transmit ethno-cultural information and interactive forums playing an ever increasing role.

An early 21st century museum is a social and cultural institution of a developing information society, with museum activities determined both by the global problems of the new century and the particular characteristics of Russian society itself. In the contemporary world, a museum is perceived as a symbol of culture, a guardian of both traditions and channels of communication – something that helps transmit social memory, social and cultural experience, and socially-significant knowledge. It is a “special scientific and cultural establishment that selects and collects natural and public objects that are of real value and used for scientific and cultural purposes.”[[1]](#footnote-2) The museum shapes the cultural medium of society; its work is directed at nurturing a sense of public self-awareness; through its exhibitions and events, the museum addresses each visitor, emotionally affecting the audience, educating and entertaining at the same time.

1. L. M. Shlyakhtina, S. V. Fokin. The Foundations of Museum Work. – Saint Petersburg: Special Literature, 2000. Pg. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)