# The Europe – Russia – Europe Exhibition: Dreams and Reality

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In our lives, art museums have been assigned the role of mediators between the Public and Art. The world has plenty of museums that are famous for their outstanding collections. These establishments become tourist destination points – people are simply dying to get to the Louvre, the Prado, the Saint Petersburg Hermitage, the New York Metropolitan, the London collections and the magnificent museums of Vienna. But even the aces of the museum world do not simply put up their temporary exhibitions when the fancy strikes them. They want regular attendance. And what they really want is for their museums to become just like theaters and concert halls, with a devoted audience going to their various exhibitions just like they now attend concerts and plays.

We must understand that we have not only the oil that we are pumping and selling with varying degrees of profit and success, but also another never-depleting oil – our “museum oil.” But in Russia, this other oil is only really pumped by those who have any interests in it. This situation has resulted in an incredible isolation of Russian museums and it simply must be corrected. What do I mean? We have probably all heard about the incredibly successful Russian art exhibitions that have recently traveled the globe – The Russia! exhibition that drew more than half a million people in New York; the Bonjour, Russia! exhibition that successfully traveled across Britain and Germany; and Russian Art in the Second Half of the 19th Century: A Quest for Identity, which was exhibited at the Musée d’Orsay. Russia for its part cannot boast of too many truly major or elaborate exhibition projects – ones that showcase foreign museum collections in our own land. This does not mean that our museums have no life at all. They do, but somehow, this is more of a cloistral and private existence.

As a result of the growing threat of terrorism, the ever-more frequent thefts, and the constant need to replace outdated museum equipment and improve the methods of restoration, the upkeep of museums has become quite an expensive venture. Museums have to be successful and dynamic. They need to make money and to search for new images and forms that win audiences as well as patrons. And so, exhibitions are suddenly turning into an increasingly relevant endeavor for museums of all rank – from the largest holders of collections to the smallest municipal ones. We can all cite examples of how the views of the professional museum community about a particular exhibition diverge from those of the public at large. This is especially the case with contemporary art. Furthermore, we all understand that the Moscow public differs from the Vienna one – and that both differ from those found in Japan or the United States. What remains constant is the importance that most museum visitors place on the magic of names: exhibitions of Chagall, Kandinsky, Picasso, Matisse and the Impressionists draw tremendous audiences crows across the globe: from the United States and Japan to Rome and Baden-Baden. But it is no secret to many of us here that some of the most wonderful exhibitions that are full of new ideas but composed primarily of works from the museum’s own endowment, or that of a few museums in one country, could easily fail to draw the audience appreciation they deserve. They might not receive the press attention that works from several foreign collections displayed together can get. And the same principle holds true for exhibits of monographs by a world-renowned artist.

In the recent years like many other museums the Tretyakov State Gallery in Moscow (which is our national museum) has been on the one hand actively seeking out new ways to popularize Russian art in Russia and abroad, and on the other – to try and position its own impressive collection of Russian school masters in the global art history context. And when the opportunity suddenly presented itself to use the Russian – European Union Summit to prepare an exhibition involving foreign collections, the Tretyakov State Gallery literally “jumped” at this “offer that could not be refused”. The project could have gone under a different name – Museums in a Museum. This benefit event opened and closed the anniversary program Museums of the World Congratulate the Tretyakov which ran from May 2006 through May 2007 in honor of the Gallery’s 150-year anniversary.

Unfortunately, the organization’s budget for staging gala festivals and exhibitions was quite limited and the Gallery is always looking for new ways to “illuminate” the first Russian art museum. So when the European Union Delegation to Russia offered the museum a chance to prepare a project coinciding with the Summit, the museum’s management said yes. The European Union assigned 700,000 euros for the project’s implementation. This was clearly not enough to cover all of the expenses, with the project receiving additional sponsorship support from a bank, a major Russian steel company, and even a private individual in Switzerland. After some wavering, the project also received the support of the Russian Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography.

The exhibition’s idea unfolded in the shape of a unique conceptual pilot project that drew us in for many reasons – the first among these being that “one of the curator’s organizational gestures” involved providing a venue for displaying the foreign component that is so popular with the Russian audience. This venue marked a crossroads for different schools art, with the works of many renowned European masters on display: both the classics and contemporary artists. The more refined public had a chance to reflect on the global and local aspects of art, and to catch “the air of the times” – to try and detect the general trends that come from the same period but from different national schools.

Instead of the old building on Lavrushinsky Lane, whose collection of 17th century through 1917 works draws vast audiences throughout the year, the exhibition’s nearly 100-strong collection of works was displayed at the Gallery’s Krymsky Val branch. The public is usually far less eager to visit this vast gallery, which showcases the works of Russian 20th century artists. The general Russian audience has only a superficial acquaintance with this period of Russia art – even with the socialist realism. It is no exaggeration to say that Russian avant-garde artists are now better known in the United States, Europe and Japan. Sometimes, the halls of the new 20th century exhibition have more foreign visitors that the Russian ones. A ticket offers the public a chance to visit and compare each of the Krymsky Val halls –its exhibitions as well as permanent collections. We hoped that if only for curiosity’s sake, many of the Europe – Russia – Europe visitors would first stroll through the permanent collection halls and then peek into the contemporary art rooms – places that shock many of the Russian visitors and become subject to some extremely aggressive criticism as well.

This project’s contents may be conditionally divided into three parts: the artistic component of the exhibition, its technical support, and the impression it had on the Russian public.

As far as the artistic component is concerned –of a special interest to us was the fact that we had asked the curators of these nations’ museums to select works that would represent each of the European Union nations. Having worked in museums for many years, I know how unwillingly these custodians allow their own museum collections to be moved for exhibitions – particularly if they are not involved in the “thought process” involved in preparing the exhibition.

I can perfectly well understand the irritation caused by situations in which museums receive a certain letter (especially the one coming from the top) informing them that someone is organizing some sort of exhibitions, and that they will have to lend five or 10 specific works. In other words we have a case in which the science and knowledge of these museums remain unclaimed – and they end up standing to the side, outside the actual exhibition context. This is exactly why we decided to change the concept and stage an exhibition that became a sort of “exhibition lottery” for the organizers. We decided to pay our partners their due respect and ask them the following question: “In your opinion, which of your significant works would best exemplify your country at the Russia – Europe – Russia exhibition?” There were 28 participating countries (the 27 European Union nations plus Russia). And of course, we received the broadest range of responses. A very strong political component unquestionably played its role: countries that had the motivation to do so – such as Italy, which at that moment was due to assume to the EU presidency, or Romania, which was preparing to join the European Union – provided us with brilliant contents. Meanwhile places like the National Gallery in Prague, someone we had relied on quite strongly, refused to take part in the exhibition. We suspect that political motives played their role as well. In contrast, the Moravian Gallery in Brno – which was expecting a European Union grant – was tremendously eager and happy to get involved. We experienced a certain degree of uncertainty though. Thus, at the very last moment, Estonia – which had announced a very interesting selection – because of that tremendously ugly incident involving the monument said that it would probably prefer not to risk sending its works to a Moscow museum. It said it was afraid of acts of vandalism. And this despite the fact that everyone knows that national museums are nothing but fortresses that are able to resist any attack. And some of the partners simply had a formal attitude to the project, having received a corresponding directive from the European Union’s leadership… They gave whatever they felt they could spare – pieces that were retired from exhibition and kept in the reserve stock…

Each exhibition represents a declaration of readiness and openness. Our exhibition, especially at the start, was rather a demonstration of the various stages of closure – some of the countries issued flat-out refusals to cooperate, while others opened their doors but not completely.. It would be inopportune at best to be speaking here about complete openness. And I mention this not as a matter of reproach to our partners, but simply is an example of that very lack of training that I mentioned in respect to Russia above, that lack of confidence in the Russian organizers’ business credentials. Everything concerning the “openness – closure” dilemma begins with mistrust. One of the Belgian museum directors told me that despite his tremendously long tenure, he does not recall anyone in his country ever giving anything to Russia. So this mistrust created a situation in which the masterpieces were “hold back.”

There were also some doubts and uncertainties about the legal basis. Each of the 50 museums taking part in the exhibition drew up their own draft contracts. And this despite the fact that the Tretyakov State Gallery had developed – or so it thought – a single standard contract that could be used by all. Now, of course, we see that the position of strength comes with a museum being asked to provide works for an exhibition, gives them the freedom to dictate as strict a set of conditions as they like.

A separate “blood curling” moment involved everything dealing with fulfillment of the technical content of the exhibition, as well as its actual implementation (the custom duties and taxes, for example, came out of the 700,000 euros assigned by the European Union, to provide just one example). We also ran into serious difficulties with insurance – obviously, each of the museums wanted the insurance company that they trusted most and which they had experience with in the past (and which, as a rule, was foreign). Apparently everything dealing with insurance deserves its own chapter. At the moment, insurance companies that gain access to museum projects and the “museum body,” if such an expression can be used, often simply do nothing but fill their wallets. Soon, within the frameworks of the Year of Russia and France and the Year of France in Russia, Russia will be hosting a Picasso exhibition that includes some 150 works. Can you only imagine this project’s insurance cost?! It will come to tens of millions of euros. This means that if you do manage to slip into this pool of insurers, you can rest easy about the future even in times of crisis. For as a rule, museums do everything to prepare for these projects the best they can to avoid any possible emergency scenarios.

The last thing I would like to mention concerns the impression the exhibition made in Russia. Initially, the exhibition’s structure was planned in complete accordance with the catalogue presented here at this workshop. In this structure, each of the countries was assigned its own compartment where it could display three of its works. However, the project’s preparations made it obvious that were sending the wrong signal. First of all, this is because Russia subscribes to a fairly conservative view of museum projects – particularly ones involving contemporary art. So we decided to play a special tactic. You are aware how acutely averse the predominant majority of the Russian public is to contemporary art. And we are talking here about the so-called museum-going public here – the people who have seen a lot. We felt that by first administering a kind of European injection, introducing works of art that had been previously recognized and selected by Europeans for Russian display, we could then “force” our citizens to think about their own country’s possessions comparing them to the works available in Europe, and contemplating what exactly contemporary art was. So when structuring the exhibition, we decided to take a chronological approach. What did this boil down to? For example, if the visitor only wanted to enjoy classical art, he could remain on the third floor. But if he actually wanted to seem some Henry Moore and Brancusi, he could come down to the second floor (allow me to note that the Russian public at large is still largely unfamiliar with these masters, and does not classify them as true 20th century masters). And if the visitor was completely “advanced,” then he could come all the way down to the first floor, where he could get his fill of the contemporary art selected and carefully dosed out by the curators.

I have already mentioned Estonia here in connection with its refusal to submit works out of fear of vandals. Nevertheless, their contribution still looked very strong – which was probably the case because the Tretyakov State Gallery has a wonderful collection of Estonian art. Under agreement with our Estonian colleagues, their contribution to the exhibition was selected from the Tretyakov’s own collection.

The only thing we did manage to get from the Estonians was video art – we were sent a video recording of the wonderful master Jaan Toomik, where he was displayed skating naked on a frozen lake. He swirled around the ice to the sounds of a chant sung by his son. Everyone here is probably clear that what we are talking about is the fact that we are all, in some respect, naked before our conscience, before God (for those who believe in him) and before our children – who are perfectly aware of the difference between truth and lies, between honesty and hypocrisy. An artist’s aspiration to find harmony with the surrounding world, to understand and find one’s place in the world – this is what the idea behind this work. And yet I found the following visitor’s comment in one of our book, something that left me truly stunned: “Estonia been dying to show its ass to Russia, and it managed to use the Tretyakov Gallery to do so.” Sometimes you come across the most remarkable comments… But it is these that leave the clearest impression of what we must all still do in the field of culture and education, of how much work still lies ahead…

Nevertheless, this research project – which had initially presumed a large number of participants, and despite all the organizational shortcomings and stressful situations for the curators – still managed to go ahead. Which is not the case with many of other projects that I heard about from my colleagues, and which remained wrapped in “museums” dreams. So cultural mobility – in terms of its interaction with the economy, international relations, and the various cultural players involved – the very concept of mobile works of art is something that still requires a great deal of thought and detailed elaboration. And if I were allowed to make a few proposals, I would say that in my opinion, what is important is not waste the money, but focus on creating a certain stabilization fund that would ease the state’s adoption of guarantees for various international projects. In that case, governments would know that somewhere out there in the European Union, there is this trust – or bank, or fund, or whatever you might call it – that has a certain amount of money for the so-called “dire” insurance cases (damage, theft, loss of the exhibit, and so on). I think that it would help to substantially lower our overall insurance costs (in other words, taking some of the cash out of the pockets of the insurance companies and the insurance brokers). And this, in turn, would help ease the various countries’ ability to offer and accept the state guarantees. We need to make sure that governments understand that in case of an insured event, many of the pains involved with resolving the arising problems will be shared by someone else. At the moment, not every state guarantee issued by a particular country can be accepted by another nation. So we have to understand how fully this government covers its risks, and the extent to which it meets its international requirements.

Finland’s experience leaves me with nothing but envy, in the good sense of the word. This small and probably not the richest of European nations is able use its Ministry of Culture and Sport to offer state guarantees. And thanks to the substantial savings it makes on costs that would have been otherwise spent on insurance, the country is able to reallocate finances and display exhibitions that many can only dream of here.

In my opinion, we could also agree on a certain draft agreement that is not only acceptable to the various cultural institutions, but can also help alleviate some of the legal wrangling involved. After all, mistrust, misunderstanding and an inability to tell the difference between laws spawns nothing but one wish – a desire not to get involved and sit quietly in one’s corner, so to speak. Or, in the best-case scenario, wait things out until they stabilize somehow. I think that the situation’s stabilization rests squarely in our hands. So I call on all the interested parties to think about this.