Aspects of Artistic Life in St Petersburg during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century. Private Collections Open to the Public, Exhibitions and Auctions

Pyotr Semenov's collection was born in the 1860s, a key decade in Russian history, a time in which the first shoots of liberalism appeared in a society that had been awakened at least in part by the horrors of the Crimean War. Russia's very way of life was being radically changed.

It became possible to travel freely in Europe, something it had been hard to imagine just a few years earlier. Under the old regime, during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55), a foreign passport cost 500 silver roubles, a vast sum, but even those with sufficient money were only allowed to travel with the permission of the monarch himself. Applications had to set out the reasons for travel in detail and replies were often long in coming. All too often they contained a refusal of permission.

Now at last many were able to fulfil a dream of visiting foreign lands, and as one contemporary, the journalist Evgeny Feoktistov, put it: 'a whole crowd of Russians descended on Paris.' In April 1867 the Exposition Universelle was opened with much pomp on the Champs Elysées, proclaiming the arrival of a new age of arts and industry. Russia was amongst those states demonstrating their dedication to technical progress. The French capital was also the site of the first international statistical congresses in the 1860s, congresses attended by the Director of the Central Statistical Committee, Pyotr Semenov, who took advantage of the trip to visit museums, exhibitions and auctions in his free time.

Paris was still the centre of art dealing in the mid-nineteenth century. It was this city, with its huge market, that had in the past so influenced Russian collecting. Courtiers and grandees of the age of Catherine II had brought back from here canvases by masters old and new. The Hermitage owes many of the masterpieces which are now its pride to the French dealers of the eighteenth century, to Pierre Remy, Augustin Menageot, Vincent Donjeux and Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun.
Two key aspects of the art world in mid-nineteenth-century Russia should be noted. The first was the taste for the Dutch masters that had emerged in the second quarter of the eighteenth century and gained momentum over the next hundred years. It was the Comtesse de Verrue, a celebrated trendsetter, who started the fashion for the northern school. Interest in Dutch painting soon spread to all European art lovers; collectors were charmed by the entertaining subject matter and the tiny details to be picked out in the genre scenes of Gerard Dou, Frans van Mieris I, Caspar Netscher and Philips Wouwerman.

Secondly, as waves of émigrés left France in the wake of the Revolution in 1789, Western European art flowed into Russia via Poland. Foreign dealers working in Russia, the most famous of whom were Robert, Leonelli and Tiorez, regularly provided works to the Moscow and St Petersburg markets.

Semenov already knew much about artistic life in France from his earlier trips: as he later recalled, visiting Paris in 1853 he decided not to make any acquaintances there but to devote his time to the closest possible study of art and historical monuments. 'Le vieux Louvre' provided him with some of his strongest impressions.

In the Louvre gallery I saw the paintings of the great artists for the first time outside the Hermitage... It was only here that the veils fell from before my eyes and as I looked at these great examples of the art of painting, I was so taken with them that by studying over time the history of painting and by visiting all the accessible galleries and private collections of pictures, I was to become not only an enthusiastic collector but an expert in art.

During other visits to Paris to attend statistical congresses, Semenov acquired a number of paintings. It has been possible to establish that in April 1864 he took part in an auction organised by Jean-Jacques Meffre and went home the proud owner of a large landscape by Joris van der Haagen and Dirck Wijntrack (Inv. GE 3388). Of greater importance were the purchases he made at other sales in those years, among them an Annunciation by Pieter Lastman (Inv. GE 3997; see fig. 16), which he managed to acquire extremely cheaply, literally for a few dozen francs. This small composition bears the artist's signature and the date 1618. Such a purchase of a work by a celebrated artist – Rembrandt's teacher! – marked a superb start to what was still at this period a vestigial collection. Although Semenov took his first steps in the field of collecting whilst abroad, however, his activities were to unfold fully in Russia, in St Petersburg, where social changes were making themselves sharply felt.

No longer was this Emperor Nicholas I’s severely correct militarised capital the city in which Pyotr Semenov had arrived when he came to study in St Petersburg in 1841. Then parades and reviews and the changing of the guard were all very much part of city life. Regulation governed even civilian society, with the tiniest details of attire significant in the differentiation of status. ... The incorrect use of street uniform for a lackey or the wrong type of hat on the head of a merchant’s or burger’s wife might lead to police intervention.

Baron Nikolay Egorovich Wrangell, keen observer of his native city in the 1860s when he returned home after several years studying in Switzerland, wrote:
St Petersburg has changed. It has not grown up, but the atmosphere is different. One feels that here people no longer tremble in fear, but that they are real human beings. Soldiers no longer march like tin automata, but walk along like real people. Artisans no longer run around the streets with their long shirts hanging out and slippers on their bare feet; women travel without liveried grooms on the box not only when travelling behind a pair, but in single-horse carriages, and they walk around the streets without being accompanied by a lackey; civilians walk around like they do abroad, in bowler hats... children run around on their own. Nor does one see fighting any more. Out on the streets people smoke, speak loudly, laugh out loud, vendors shout out the titles of magazines... Now we have flower shops, coffee shops and cabs, none of which were seen here before.

Glimpse of the Past: Birth of the Collection of the Imperial Hermitage

From the eighteenth century onwards St Petersburg drew European travellers in part because of the encyclopaedic treasures of the Hermitage. At the heart of this extensive conglomeration of Classical Antiquities, objets de vertu, coins and medals, manuscripts and rare books, lay the Picture Gallery. It owes its existence entirely to Empress Catherine II (reigned 1762–96). And within that Gallery works by Dutch and Flemish masters occupied a very visible place.

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. 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 over-enthusiastic attribution of works to Rembrandt that was common at the time, the number is impressive. In essence, Catherine's vast palace gallery was created in just sixteen years.

St Petersburg did not have the centuries of a tradition of collecting of the kind that lay behind the princely collections of Europe. When she came to the throne in 1762, therefore, Catherine deliberately set out to assemble a picture gallery in the shortest possible time. The mania that Catherine herself described as 'gluttony' reached a grandiose scale: a 'hunt' for masterpieces that initially formed part of her policy of positive propaganda as an enlightened monarch was gradually transformed into a matter of state prestige.

From the end of the 1760s the Empress and her artistic advisers consistently acquired works of art through the network of Russian diplomats based at foreign courts, and through expert-marchands and brokers. Prince Dmitry Alexeevich Golitsyn, one of the most brilliant Russian officials of the Empress's circle, probably came up with the idea of acquiring not individual pictures but large collections en bloc. This erudite diplomat, writer and scientist was in 1769 appointed Russian Minister Plenipotentiary (ambassador) to the Republic of the Netherlands. He spent many years in The Hague where he lived on the Lange Voorhout and corresponded with members of the Dutch scholarly elite. It was largely thanks to Golitsyn that during the second half of the eighteenth century a number of...
celebrated art dealers and auctioneers were involved in supplying pictures to Russia, among them Pieter Fouquet, Cornelis Ploos van Amstel, Hendrik de Winter and Pieter Yver.16

Over just one and a half decades the Imperial Hermitage swallowed up, one after another, six famous European collections of paintings. That of the Saxon minister Count Heinrich von Brihl 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 Thierry in 1771 aroused the ire of all Paris and added another 451 paintings, including Rembrandt's Holy Family and Danaë. In 1770, St Petersburg gained 100 canvases from the Geneva collection of Francois Tronchin, most of them by 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.'13 (This response contains a reference to the tradition in the Orthodox Church of kissing icons.)

Seven years later, in 1779, Catherine's already impressive collection gained more than 200 more paintings assembled by the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, which had hung at his Houghton Hall estate. This included Rembrandt's monumental Abraham's Sacrifice.14

By 1782 the first catalogue of the Hermitage gallery had been compiled by Baron Ernst von Münnich, covering nearly three thousand paintings in three volumes.15 Overall, works by artists of the Northern and Southern Netherlands made up over half of the gallery.

In 1773, after the sale in Amsterdam of the collection of Gerard van Rossem, an early monumental canvas by Jan Victors, The Continence of Scipio, was sent to St Petersburg. Catherine soon presented that work, along with many other paintings, to her new favourite, Grigory Potemkin. These were not the only paintings to leave her picture gallery: at the end of her reign the Empress ordered that several Flemish masterpieces be handed over to the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St Petersburg.

Not always was Catherine successful in her acquisitions. When Dmitry Golitsyn managed to purchase a whole series of Dutch masterpieces at the auction of the collection of Gerrit Braamcamp in Amsterdam on 31 July 1771, the ship carrying them, Vrouw Maria, sank in the waters of the Gulf of Finland, taking its precious cargo with it.17

Catherine's example was to inspire many Russian aristocrats to collect. From the middle of the eighteenth century news of major European sales travelled regularly to St Petersburg. Historian Pyotr Stolpsyn, for instance, recorded an announcement in the St Petersburg Gazette [Санкт-Петербургские ведомости] for 1772 regarding the forthcoming sale of 'drawings by the most famous Dutch and Flemish painters, also outstanding prints from the collection of Dionys Muilman, counsellor to the city of Amsterdam.'18 The sale of this collection of prints and drawings on 29 March 1773 was one of the most important of the Dutch art market. It included works by Hendrick Goltzius, Rembrandt, Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan van Huysum and many other outstanding artists.19 Amongst those buying (via representatives) was – of course – Prince Golitsyn.

Although Catherine herself never left Russia after she came to the throne in 1762, many young nobles from her court made the Grand Tour of Europe, often returning to St Petersburg with works of art they had acquired abroad. One of the most notable of these was Count Alexander Stroganov, who spent his youth in Europe and formed a superb cabinet of paintings that included works by Italian, French, Flemish and Dutch masters.20 Such aristocratic collections based on European models were to become characteristic of St Petersburg, and by the end of the eighteenth century a good number of the nobility's city mansions contained picture galleries.

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.'21

No matter what their contribution to the Hermitage Picture Gallery, none of the succeeding Russian monarchs was ever to match the scale of Catherine's artistic acquisitions.

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.22 Paintings considered to be of 'indecent subject matter' were removed from display and put in storage, among them Rembrandt's Danaë. If we have no idea which paintings Catherine preferred, we can identify quite precisely Paul's favourite. According to contemporaries, the Emperor always kept 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 (now in the royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague).