Chapter 13

Sociable Solitude: The Early Modern Hermitage as Proto-Museum*

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In 1842, the German travel writer and geographer Johann Georg Kohl visited the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg—which had been expanded considerably with the addition of the New and Great Hermitage buildings since its foundation in the 1760s by Catherine the Great (1729–1796). The remarkable description he gave of it in his guide to St. Petersburg related the name of the institution to its contents:

[...] daß ein Eremit immer dreist der übrigen Welt entsagen könnte, wenn er sich mit dem Mikrokosmus der Petersburger Eremitage klausnerisch verschließen könnte, wo die halbe Natur- und Menschenwelt sich ihm auf Leinwand, in Farbe, Marmor, Glas und Elfenbein, gemalt, gemeißelt, gedruckt, gewebt, und gefeilt darbietet.1

One might assume that Kohl was merely using a playful literary conceit to solve the apparent contradiction between the act of reclusion and the worldly pleasures of art, but his description actually suggests an awareness of a function of the Hermitage that was lost on most nineteenth-century observers, let alone the modern visitor.

Instead of an oxymoron, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg is only seemingly a paradox of secular versus religious culture, and public versus private space. This paradox forms the basis of the museum as a modern institution; the ‘solitary’ behaviour of its visitors in a public sphere has remained one of the key

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1 Kohl J.G., Petersburg in Bildern und Skizzen (Dresden – Leipzig: 1841), vol. 1, 261: ‘A hermit might boldly renounce all the rest of the world if he could shut himself up in the microcosm of the Petersburg Hermitage, where half the natural and man-made world presents itself before him on canvas, in colours, in marble, glass, and ivory, painted, chiselled, printed, woven, and filed’.

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concepts of the etiquette that governs museums to the present day. The common roots of this particular combination of space and ceremony in late eighteenth-century Russia can be traced to Italian sixteenth-century courtly society, where two other concepts dating even further back—the classical *diaeta*, as part of villa culture, and the medieval, monastic place of solitary religious retreat—were developed, conflating in the seventeenth century into one building type that was often indicated by the term “hermitage” (*romitorio* in Italian, *ermitage* in French and *Eremitage* in German).2 During the eighteenth century, this space was subsequently developed in several European countries into the private proto-museum—a semi-public location designed to house an encyclopaedic collection of art and natural objects. Simultaneously, the antecedents of the hermitage—places for private prayer in seclusion—were gradually transformed into a location for sociable activities, *in primis* the discussion of the arts and sciences, where “solitary” study of objects alternated with polite conversation.

This social process, which is documented best in Rome but which was by far not restricted to this city, left traces in the act of attentiveness towards or contemplation of *artificialia* and *naturalia* which remains a feature of how visitors to most museums behave today. It also affected the two interrelated ways in which we behold an artwork—both as something referring to a historical and thus distant moment, while at the same time as self-referential, constituting an everlasting here and now. When the hitherto forgotten double root of modern museum culture in the early modern hermitage is considered, an alternative narrative of the history of the institution becomes visible, in which the concept of sociable solitude is key to its understanding.

The Plinian *diaeta*

The roots of the early modern museum can be traced back to antiquity—and not merely in the etymological sense of the word.3 In many respects, the

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