SALES OF WORKS OF ART FROM THE LENINGRAD PALACE-MUSEUMS, 1926-1934

In the three years following the 1917 Revolution Russia witnessed a genuine museum boom. Hundreds of palaces, mansions and estates were nationalized and turned into museums. Art historians and scholars devised the most incredible plans for transforming and utilizing these unique cultural monuments. Almost all of the palaces that formerly belonged to the Romanovs in Petrograd and its environs were transformed into museums of history and everyday life. (See Appendix A.)

Georgii Lukomskii, the first director of the palace-museums at Detskoe Selo (formerly Tsarskoe Selo), summed up the first years of their existence as follows:

The system of transforming the palaces into museums adopted by the Commission [on Museum Affairs] (in other museums it was almost the same, except for the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg) was quite distinct from that used by curators in the former royal residences of Western Europe. As a matter of fact, the Residenzschlossen in both Munich and Dresden and in Vienna (the Hofburg and Schönbrun) were adapted in quite a different way. Even the period 1870-1900 is not represented in these palaces fully and typically, down to the last detail, to say nothing of the era of the last members of the dynasty (1900-1918), which the new regime destroyed outright or condemned to removal (dismantled by relatives or by former kings). The apartments of Franz Josef, Charles I, and others are virtually empty rooms with just a few sticks of furniture. . . . The viewer can form no picture of their lives, their lifestyle, or their taste. By contrast, in St. Petersburg and the suburban palaces (Gatchina, Peterhof, Pavlovsk, Oranienbaum) the decision was made not only to preserve just this very aspect of how people lived, but also to intensify it by recreating it at the expense of removed objects, on the basis of prints, old photographs and suchlike. And the result really was palace-museums.¹

¹ G. K. Lukomskii, Tsarkoe Selo: Opisanie dvortsov, sada i paviljonov (Munich: Orkhis, 1923), p. 41.
In the early 1920s the country’s economic situation rapidly worsened and the government was obliged to abandon the policy of War Communism and adopt the New Economic policy (NEP), which had an immediate impact on the museums. In his presentation to the Petrograd Provincial Museum Conference of 1923, the head of the Petrograd museums, G. S. Iatmanov, noted that one of the most persistent obstacles to the comprehensive development of museum activities was the lack of adequate reserves, while many museums lacked adequate staff even for such basic tasks as protecting their collections. Many museums at this period were in an utterly desperate situation. On April 11, 1923, with the goal of gaining material support for the government’s protection of the RSFSR’s cultural treasures (museums, works of art, and antiquities), the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) passed a resolution granting Narkompros the right to have special funds for its museum section and related institutions. These funds would be obtained by charging entrance fees, selling publications and publishing rights, utilizing plots of land, buildings, and other property of no historical or artistic value, but connected to the museums, palaces, and so on under the museum section’s control.2

As had already happened during the famine year of 1922, in 1923 the proposal was once again made to “utilize” items without museum significance and thereby acquire supplementary funds for the upkeep of the museums.3 On April 30, 1923 at a session of the Council for Museum Affairs,4 the curator of the Gatchina Palace-Museum, V. K. Makarov, broached the question of the subsequent fate of the large number of paintings in the palace that had no historical connection to it.5 In the debates that followed M. P. Kristi, the deputy head of Glavnauka, pointed out that, “Petrograd was overloaded with art treasures, whereas the provinces had virtually none, and he proposed the necessity, in view of the government’s tight financial situation, of resorting to

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3. In January 1922, in connection with the famine in the central regions of Russia, a Commission on the Registration and Consolidation of Valuables was created, with Feliks Dzerzhinski appointed its chair. An Expert Commission on Science and Art was created in every museum, its task to single out for sale objects without museum significance that were used for religious purposes. The funds raised were to go towards famine relief. On June 6 the Sovnarkom passed a resolution on confiscating “from the museums items of high material value” for sale on the domestic and foreign markets. It was proposed that part of the funds raised could be used for the upkeep of the museums.
4. The Council for Museum Affairs was the executive body of the directors and curators of the Leningrad museums in the period 1921-28.
5. About 2,000 paintings by West European artists of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, acquired in the mid-nineteenth century, were housed in the Gatchina Palace. An exhibition was to be arranged in the palace, but the higher organizations forbade it on two counts: first because it fell outside the desirable norm and then for lack of funds.