

Romanov Treasures

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Paris Art Studies

– The Romanovs, the Tsars as Collectors

Peter the Great - Reign:
1689-1725

1697-98 – First trip abroad of a Russian tsar. Peter discovers Western Europe and its civilization. Peter visits museums, libraries and art collections in Amsterdam and Dresden. He takes lessons on printmaking in Holland and increasingly assumes the posture of the enlightened European monarch.

1707– In Poland and the Baltic countries during the Swedish wars he buys local art collections and has them sent to St. Petersburg. He also buys sculptures though they are forbidden by the Orthodox church.

1716 – Second trip to Europe. The tsar visits Poland, Germany, Holland, Denmark and France. Russian agents and diplomats abroad are instructed to look out for works of art for purchase.

1717 – 32 statues and 12 busts, many copies in lead of the Versailles garden sculpture, arrive in Petersburg for the royal gardens. They do not however survive long the rigors of the Russian winters. Most of the paintings purchased for Peter are of the Dutch and Flemish schools, though 70 Italian paintings are also purchased by the Russian diplomat Beklemichev in Venice in 1722.

1722 – Peter orders the purchase from his widow of the collection of the Dutch merchant Hauptman in Vologda.

Peter will buy close to 400 works of art altogether most of which are placed in the palace of Peterhof where they will suffer greatly from humidity. Some are today housed in the Hermitage.

Catherine II the Great -

Reign: 1762-1796

1764

– Catherine orders the construction of the first (Small) Hermitage to house her art collections next to the Winter palace in St Petersburg. It will be completed in 1775. A second Hermitage (the Old) is launched in 1774 and finished in 1787. The renowned collection of the Berlin merchant Johan Ernst Gotskowsky is given to Russia as part of the Prussian war debt. Catherine's policy is to create a great encyclopedic art collection in her capital. She declares herself an admirer of the great figures of the Enlightenment, Voltaire and Montesquieu and she corresponds with the French philosophers Diderot and Grimm. They in turn will name her the "Semiramis of the North";.

1767 – Catherine's

ambassador at the court of Versailles Prince Golitsyn, one of the great, cultivated cosmopolitan figures of the age, will also be instrumental in purchasing works on the Paris art market and commissioning original works from French painters and sculptors. Purchase of works from the posthumous sale of the renowned collection of Jean de Julienne collector and friend of Antoine Watteau.

1768 – Purchase of the

collection of the Austrian ambassador to the south Netherlands, Carl Philippe Cobenzl. It is composed of Dutch and Flemish pictures but also 4000 drawings which will become the foundation for the Hermitage drawing collection.

1770 – Purchase (for 460

000 livres) of the Pierre Crozat collection probably the greatest private French art collection, housed on the Place Vendôme, from the heir of the famous banker. Diderot and the Genevois collector Tronchin negotiate this purchase on behalf of Catherine. The collection contains 2 Rembrandts, works by Veronese, Van Dyck, Giorgione, Raphael, Titian, Fetti, Poussin, Lancret and Greuze. Diderot will also be responsible for the purchase of pictures from more prestigious French collections including that of the duc de Choiseul (French minister of foreign affairs and political rival of Catherine) in 1772, Gaignat (1769), de Gagny (1776-77), de Boisset (1777) and Prince de Conti (1777). Catherine will also purchase the private libraries of Voltaire and Diderot. She spent hours overlooking the arrangement of pictures and objects in the Hermitage galleries.

1771 – An entire shipment of

pictures from the Dutch Braamkamp collection sinks in the Baltic. "We have only lost 60 000 ducats"; declares Catherine disdainfully.

1779 – Having virtually filled her

museum Catherine's purchases slow down. Two last collections, that of Sir Robert Walpole (1779 – included Reni, Giordano, Van Dyck and Rubens) and count Baudoin (1781) will be purchased in her later years. By the end of her reign the Hermitage boasted nearly 4000 paintings. Catherine is by far the greatest of the Romanov collectors.

Alexander I - Reign: 1801-1825

1808 – Franz Labensky chief curator of the Hermitage is sent to Paris to purchase pictures. He will collaborate with Vivant-Denon Napoleon's famous first director of the Louvre museum. Vivant-Denon will send 40 pictures (including Caravaggio's Lute Player) to Russia.

1814

– Alexander visits the famous William Coeswelt collection in Amsterdam, known for its Spanish paintings, and immediately orders its purchase. The Spanish resistance to Napoleon had rendered that country particularly sympathetic to the Russians. The result is that Alexander will create the first great Spanish art collection outside Spain. In the same year Alexander meets the former empress Josephine in her château of Malmaison near Paris. Shortly after her death, he discreetly negotiates the purchase of 38 works from her private collection originally looted from abroad by the Napoleonic armies. These include Canova, Rembrandt, Rubens, and Metsu. The price is high: 940 000 francs. Alexander will also interest himself in engravings and architectural drawings. Under his reign the Hermitage museum will be reorganized in a more scholarly fashion and the first engravings of its famous pictures will be published.

Nicholas I - Reign: 1825-1855

1826

– Nicholas loves art and likes painting military scenes in landscapes specially prepared for him by professional painters. He orders the purchase of the collection of Michael Miradovich, governor of St Petersburg.

1829

– Buys the collection of Hortense de Beauharnais, Josephine's daughter.

1831

– Purchase via the Russian ambassador in Paris, Pozzo di Borgo, of the collection of Manuel Godoy, former prime minister of Spain (includes works by Lotto, Honthorst, Murillo).

1837 – A fire destroys entirely the Winter palace and nearly spreads to the neighboring Hermitage. Nicholas orders the rebuilding of the palace which will be accomplished in an extraordinarily short time. The new palace is inaugurated in 1839. This disaster undoubtedly inspires him to also build a new museum for his art collections. This disaster undoubtedly inspires him to also build a new museum for his art collections.

1842 – Beginning of the New Hermitage designed by the Bavarian architect Leo von Klenze, architect of the famous Glyptothek and Pinacothek of Munich.

1845 – Extended trip to Italy. Nicholas visits Rome, Naples, Florence and Venice. He commissions marbles from Italian sculptors (Tenerani, Bienaimé, Rinaldi) constituting an important neoclassical collection for the Hermitage.

1850 – The purchase without previous examination of the Barbarigo collection, one of the oldest in Venice, proves a great disappointment. Most of the pictures turn out to be in a terrible state of conservation and many are resold in 1855. A number works by Titian, Bassano and Palma are nevertheless kept.

1852 – Purchase of the Spanish collection of the Napoleonic Marshall Soult. Inauguration of the New Hermitage museum.