

Political climate created great art museum

Barry Fagin

Russia's Hermitage Museum may be the most intimidating place on Earth. As you step inside, the building doesn't so much welcome you as overpower you, like an enormous Russian babushka smothering you in her embrace.

I lived a few kilometers from this former palace of the czars. If it wasn't too cold, I could walk to it in about 45 minutes, along the (now frozen) Neva river and then across the Palace Bridge. It's a walk I've done many times, because frequent visits are the only way to do justice to the Hermitage. As a monumental masterpiece of Russian Baroque architecture, it spans several city blocks and has hundreds of rooms. It's not the sort of place you can check off your "been there, done that" list by ducking in on your lunch hour.

Even if every one of its rooms were empty, the sheer scale of the Hermitage would inspire awe. But of course the rooms aren't empty; they're filled with some of the greatest works of art in the world. The Hermitage houses the world's largest collection of Rembrandts. Its Western European holdings include dozens of works by Matisse, Monet, Gauguin, Renoir, and Picasso. Van Gogh's "The Lilac Bush" is here, as is Michelangelo's "Crouching Boy" and the only two da Vincis east of Rome. The list goes on; only a tenth or so of the museum's collection is on display at any given time. The palace, big as at is, can't hold any more.

On one of my visits, as I was checking my coat a woman noticed my accented Russian and asked, "Why would you want to live in America, where there is nothing like this?" Ever the diplomat, I muttered something complimentary about the magnificence of the Hermitage and how fortunate she was to be able to visit it whenever she wished.

Another time, as I was eating lunch at the Hermitage Internet café, a woman sat down at my table (strangers often share restaurant tables in Europe). A former doctor who lost her position after perestroika (until then virtually all doctors in Russia worked for the state), she let me know in no uncertain terms how much better things were in the Soviet Era. She came to the Hermitage every day, and her obvious surprise at finding a Russian-speaking American with an interest in art suggested that she viewed America as an unsophisticated country.

Perhaps for some Russians, the Hermitage is a symbol of national pride, a reminder of the country's days as a great power, and suggests that Russia can still aspire to artistic and cultural leadership in the world. Painfully conscious of their relative poverty among the community of nations, Russians can look to the Hermitage as a reminder of the vast wealth their country used to enjoy. But where did the wealth of the Hermitage come from? There's no denying that it is a architectural masterpiece, and one of the two great museums on the planet. But the Hermitage was built by the czars, absolute monarchs with the legal right to the wealth of millions of their citizens.

St. Petersburg is a gorgeous city, but it was built by common folk who died by the thousands during its construction under Peter the Great. The Hermitage is a beautiful building, but its windows cost more than the tradesmen who built them could earn in a lifetime. Its art collection is magnificent, but it was bought by Catherine the Great, who in one year spent a sixth of Russia's treasury just to keep her court in luxury. Today, strolling through the Hermitage's Malachite Room or admiring "The Prodigal Son," we reap the benefits of the czars' passion for art. We forget those who paid the costs.

In some sense, my Russian acquaintances were right. There is nothing like the Hermitage in America, nor will there ever be. America is much younger than Russia, and has a far, far different political history. My European friends who view American culture as hopelessly inferior to their own also have a grain of truth: MTV will never be the Louvre. But admirers of the world's great art, on both sides of the Atlantic, would do well to understand the reasons for the difference: Europe's long history of monarchy and power versus America's short history of democracy and freedom. Great art has always been associated with great wealth. In Europe, great wealth meant Louis XIV and Catherine the Great. In America, it means Bill Gates. Small wonder that our artistic cultures took different paths.

Art purists may cry foul here, arguing that politics and history have no place in a discussion of artistic merit. This is not a view I share. The beauty of a work of art, it seems to me, is only enhanced by an understanding of the larger human experience that helped produce it. Such an understanding will help us get past the nationalistic pride and snobbery of my conversations in the Hermitage, towards a greater understanding of the human condition.

Surely that, in the long run, is what art is all about.

- Fagin, a computer science professor in Colorado Springs, recently wrote this commentary while on sabbatical in Russia at St. Petersburg Technical State University. He is a member of the International Friends of the Hermitage Museum (www.hermitage.ru).