

# FOUR SEASONS

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{ WRITER }

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Steven Beschloss ("**Help for the Hermitage,**" page 160) writes about culture, cities and international affairs. He is a co-author of the recently published *Adrift: Charting Our Course Back to a Great Nation*. His writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *National Geographic Traveler*. His fiction and non-fiction film work, including *The Miracle*, shot in St. Petersburg, has been seen in more than 20 countries and translated into more than a dozen languages. Find out more at [www.stevenbeschloss.com](http://www.stevenbeschloss.com).

(ST PETERSBURG)

## Help for the Hermitage

How does St. Petersburg maintain—not to mention expand—one of the world's largest and oldest museums? With a little help from friends, both near and far. | By Steven Beschloss



**Along Came a Spider**  
Louise Bourgeois' bronze sculpture outside the former residence of the tsars typifies the museum's fresh direction.

IN ST. PETERSBURG'S STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, IT'S EASY to drift into a dreamscape, to be overtaken by this mysterious palace of a bygone era, once home to Catherine the Great, Alexander I and Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II. Founded by Catherine in 1764 and first made public in 1852, this imperial museum is a singular expression of Baroque architecture and design, a gilded showcase of nearly incomprehensible wealth, beauty and artistic achievement. The Hermitage comprises 365 rooms and some 3 million objects, a collection so vast that it would require more than a decade to spend a minute with each piece and a journey of nearly 22 kilometres (13 miles) to traverse every room.

One could understand if the Hermitage was solely focused on restoring what was and maintaining what is. Yet since the early 1990s, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Hermitage has begun a visible process of reinventing itself, expanding its identity to make itself contemporary and relevant—indeed, to enable itself to survive. Step by step, the Hermitage has drawn on the help of new international partners and philanthropic friends to introduce its collection outside Russia's borders and to bring more modern art and contemporary influences to St. Petersburg. The result is a bold expansion of the Hermitage brand.

In 2001, the Hermitage placed an immense spider, forged in bronze by French-born American sculptor Louise Bourgeois, in the Great Courtyard of the Winter Palace. Backed by the Hermitage Museum Foundation (USA) in New York, the exhibition pointed to the museum's emerging direction. Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the Hermitage since 1992, was delighted. "To everyone's amazement, the sculpture by one of the most controversial contemporary artists fitted in exceptionally well among the trees of the palace garden against a background of Baroque columns and scrolls," he wrote in his summary report. "The tactful combination of enduring traditions and unobtrusive innovation lies behind all the Hermitage's activities."

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Louise Bourgeois' MAMAN (1999) photo: Andrea Stappert Art © Louise Bourgeois Trust / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

“The tactful combination of enduring traditions and unobtrusive innovation lies behind all the Hermitage’s activities.” —MIKHAIL PIOTROVSKY

Fast-forward a decade and examples of change abound, many of them having benefited from the financial and active engagement of the Hermitage Museum Foundation (USA) and other Friends of the Hermitage groups in the U.S., the U.K., the Netherlands, Canada and Italy. Recognising that the museum is missing post-World War II contemporary art “due to historical circumstances,” Piotrovsky and his curators worked with the Hermitage Museum Foundation (USA) to feature exhibitions in St. Petersburg including Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Willem de Kooning, Chuck Close and Bourgeois. This is part of what Paul Rodzianko, chairman of the board of the Hermitage Museum Foundation (USA) in New York, describes as his group’s commitment to “cultural diplomacy” and the combination of “continuity and innovation.” In addition to raising about US\$3 million to restore gates, buildings, flooring, paintings and tapestries, the foundation also organised acquisitions such as *The Printer’s Mistake*—a set of prints by Russian-born, American-based artist Ilya Kabakov—and a significant collection of antiquities from Urartu, an Iron Age kingdom located where Armenia is today, to augment the museum’s Oriental collection.

Perhaps the splashiest example of the Hermitage intention to experiment was its partnership with the Guggenheim Museum to launch a Hermitage branch in Las Vegas. The branch closed in 2008, after seven years, but it illustrated the museum’s openness to new ideas and partnerships, even in unexpected locales.

In contrast, Amsterdam offered a more natural setting for the museum and an ongoing exchange. The Hermitage Amsterdam opened in 2009 following a EUR 40 million renovation of a 17th-century building donated by the Amstel Foundation. Recognising the friendship between Peter the Great and Nicolaes Witsen, a 17th-century mayor of Amsterdam and a historian of shipbuilding, the Hermitage Amsterdam has expanded the Russian-Dutch cultural partnership with exhibitions drawn from

## Pending Projects

Here are a few Hermitage projects seeking donors to help fund restoration and development:



### • THE TAKING OF SEVILLE

This 17th-century Spanish painting (above) by Carreñao de Miranda, bought by Alexander I in 1814 and lost for nearly two centuries, was heavily damaged in a ship sinking and never displayed. The painting was only unrolled and examined in 2007.

### • PENJIKENT MURAL RESTORATION

The scene of a funeral in ancient Tajikistan, covered with dust and soot, consists of eight fragments that were originally reconstructed in 1950.

### • VIGILIUS ERIKSEN PORTRAITS

Two faded oils by this artist, hung in the Winter Palace until 1796 and in storage during World War II, depict confidantes of Catherine the Great.

### • HERMITAGE 20/21

This contemporary art project will support temporary exhibitions and acquisitions for the renovated General Staff Building.

the Russian holdings that include Flemish masters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, French Impressionists Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Russian pioneers of the avant-garde Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky. During 2013, the Amsterdam branch will celebrate Peter the Great, who drew inspiration from Amsterdam’s canal ring when he created St. Petersburg and began modernising Russia.

With the help of the Hermitage Foundation UK, established in the late 1990s, the Hermitage displayed works in Somerset House in London for seven years and helped mount shows on sculptors Henry Moore and Antony Gormley, among others. These days, the U.K. leadership has set its sights on assembling shows that highlight 20th-century art: German Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art. Many of these art movements have never been seen in a museum in Russia before. “The Hermitage needs outside bodies such as ours to promote and raise awareness of the museum,” says Katya Galitzine, chief executive of the Hermitage Foundation UK. “It is only with international funding and sponsorship that it can maintain its position as a museum of international status.”

The next two years will see the finishing touches to the dramatic expansion of the Hermitage—just in time for the museum’s 250th anniversary in 2014. The addition of a renovated General Staff Building across from the Winter Palace will provide a significant increase in storage space and new galleries to exhibit 20th- and 21st-century art. Half an hour away, a vast new complex of eight buildings called Staraya Derevnnya will provide a home for the restoration and display of works that have largely remained

out of view: ornate Russian carriages, large-scale tapestries, Russian paintings, furniture and iconography among them. “The Hermitage,” Rodzianko says simply, “can’t stand still.”

Steven Beschloss is a writer, filmmaker and former Moscow resident.