# SOVIET MUSEUMS BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

## ART HISTORY ON DISPLAY

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART MUSEUMS AND EXHIBITIONS

MARIA SILINA

ROUTLEDGE

# Soviet Museums Between the Two World Wars

Examining the history of Soviet museums in the 1920s and 1930s, this book engages with the core problem of interwar museology: adequately representing the historical development of art to create a plausible and coherent version of its evolution.

The book critically analyzes the evolution of museology and art history during a period recognized as a crisis point for museums, characterized by the ascent of the modernist museum and the decline of previous museum representation forms such as universal collections and period rooms. Building on the concept of museums as agents of cultural diplomacy and soft power, the book considers museums as spaces where negotiations, often unsuccessful, occur among various stakeholders: museum practitioners, authorities, private collectors, auction houses, and the public. The challenge of handling millions of nationalized objects since the 1917 Revolution posed a particularly complex issue for Socialist museums, necessitating accumulation, distribution, and display. It also proposes a historical account of the establishment of Soviet art departments in the mid-1930s, serving as showcases for Socialist Realism. This composition was subsequently replicated across the country and throughout the Communist bloc.

This book is ideal reading for researchers in History of Art, Museum Studies, Soviet Studies, Eastern European Studies, and 20th Century History.

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# Soviet Museums Between the Two World Wars

## Art History on Display

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# Notes on Translations and Names

Russian names are transliterated according to the ALA-LC (Library of Congress) Romanization system without diacritics, with minor variations reflecting conventional English usage for certain individuals (e.g. Alexander Benois, Tretyakov Gallery).

Titles of museums are given without the word *State* for reasons of readability, since all museums of the era were state institutions. Personal names are included when available; birth dates are not provided.

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# Introduction

## Russian Museums Between the Revolution and the World Wars

The imperative behind this book is to tell the history of Soviet Russian museums displaying art in the 1920s and 1940s and to make sense of this in a broader European and North American context.

Soviet museums are rarely analyzed in studies on interwar museums on account of the diplomatic isolation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the apparent lack of exchanges with Western museums, and their socialist character, which, in the context of the Cold War, was claimed to be unique and endemic to the Communist bloc, exhibiting no common shared practices with the wider world whatsoever. This book aims to demonstrate the opposite. As the following chapters show, in debates about new museum types as well as in practices of display and visitor outreach, Soviet curators operated within an international museological context. In striving to build socialist museums, they strategically adopted the best practices from abroad while at the same time deliberately dissociating them from the capitalist regime.

Most scholarship on Russian museums has focused almost exclusively on two perspectives: art museums as avant-garde collections and museums as instruments of totalitarian propaganda.[1] Boris Groys famously brought these approaches together, arguing that avant-garde ideas about the fusion of art and life became central to the formation of Stalinist totalitarianism, as Soviet cultural institutions grew increasingly isolated from global artistic currents.[2] Since then, the concepts of the (artistic) avant-garde and (state) totalitarianism have been treated as two distinct forces placed in various forms of interrelation, while museum studies – despite its distinct professional history – has remained largely outside the focus of this discussion. As early as the 2000s, Maria Gough was the first to specifically address the museological concepts of such avant-garde artists as Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, seeing this as a distinct area of their activities. She analyzed the state-funded museums of contemporary art run by artists, most notably the Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow (1919–1929, *Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury*) and the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture (1923–1926, *Muzei khudozhestvennoi kul'tury*), valorizing these as an "alternative canon" to contemporary museums governed by boards of trustees and professional curators. For Gough, Soviet museums were unique examples of collecting, acquiring, and displaying contemporary art, led by contemporary artists who were supported by state funding but guided by their own professional considerations. The contribution of art historian Pamela Kachurin was another step forward in nuancing Soviet museum history. In her 2013 book, Kachurin showed that artists who feature in history as avant-gardists had at the same time been state functionaries, and hence not dissidents who entirely opposed state control as the totalitarian paradigm "the state vs artists" would have us assume.[3] The most recent study to move beyond artists'

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activities in museums toward a multilayered history of museum work was undertaken by Masha Chlenova.[4] She was the first to offer an analysis of specifically curatorial work carried out in Soviet museums. Most importantly, she rejected an isolationist view of how these institutions historically operated and conducted a comparative study of the curatorial and educational strategies of Alfred H. Barr and Alexei Fedorov-Davydov, one of the chief protagonists of this book. Chlenova uncovered interconnections between art history, art appreciation, and art criticism, and drew affinities between the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tretyakov Gallery (*Tretyakovskaya galereia*) in Moscow, not only in their approaches to displaying art but also in the educational programs they held. My book takes Chlenova's perspective as its starting point and presents the Soviet history of museums as a terrain of experiments with display, art appreciation, and the engagement of the public – all tasks that Soviet experts shared with museum practitioners in Western Europe and North America. My analysis goes beyond art museums alone, looking to reveal a variety of cultural and historical displays that made use of artworks in the quest for modernization.

In this book, I examine different types of Soviet museums in Russia that exhibited art for certain purposes – artistic, educational, and propaganda – in various cultural settings – art galleries, historical interiors, and factories. These include memorial museums, such as Moscow's Museum of Everyday-Life of the 1840s *(Muzei byta sorokovykh godov)*, where the display itself was constructed as a work of art – or as a total installation, as we would say today – as well as art galleries, such as the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, which was briefly converted into a set of historical period rooms where art was shown in line with the history of class struggle. The book also looks at temporary quick-response exhibitions held in various non-art venues around the country in order to talk about anticolonialism and militant atheism, and even tackles the issue of public health through works of art.

The emphasis on museum typologies reflects the status of museums since the last quarter of the 19th century, when institutions across Europe underwent reforms to better serve the public. Their public function was conceived and shaped through diverse traditions and purposes of display associated with different museum types. For instance, what we now call art museums originated from several distinct forms of collections and collecting principles: cabinets of curiosities, repositories of casts, historical (archaeological) museums, and art galleries. Until recently they have all been studied interchangeably in studies on modern public museums.[5] Now scholars are beginning to pay attention to the conceptual differences between the various types that informed the development, as well as the inherent conflicts, of modern public museums.[6] This book continues this line of inquiry by examining the creation of the new socialist public museum as a history of the transformation of traditional modes of collecting and display.

## The International Context and Soviet Museums

Chronologically, this book covers the extended interwar period, including wartime developments, from the First World War (1914–1918) to the end of the Second World War (1939–1945). This focus is intended to show the close ties with European museum history, which regards these dates as marking a well-established historiographical period. I begin with the First World War as I consider the 1917 Revolution to have been one of the immediate outcomes of that conflict. The reopening of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in May 1945, as an important event marking the nation's resilience and celebration of

Soviet culture, concludes the narrative. It gives a sense of how global aspirations that had been developed by numerous protagonists of the book made a full circle and had been reintegrated into the national discourses on museums without any references to international practice.

The interwar period in the history of European museums has been attributed in a twofold manner as a "*période d'une crise*" (period of crisis), as Bénédicte Savoy put it, and simultaneously as a period of the most prolific, engaging, vivid, and ever-expanding importance of museums as public institutions, and key to the professionalization of museum practitioners.[7] This contradictory perception is the most attractive characteristic of the period with its great wealth of ideas and projects – and while most of these, especially in the USSR, were never fully brought to fruition, they still continue to inspire creative practice today.

Around the time of the First World War, many were critical of museums. These included museum practitioners such as the radical visionary John Cotton Dana, who criticized North American museums for their adoption of established European hierarchies of art, most notably the division into high and decorative arts. Dana sought to turn art museums into venues showcasing contemporary design and art by cultural groups and local communities, including immigrants.[8] In France, their number included such reputed museum professionals as Louis Réau and Henri Focillon. They were critical of several persistent problems associated with museums, such as a lack of professional training, delays in acquisitions, and a general conservatism, all of which had been relevant for decades at that point.[9]

Contemporary Russian cultural figures expressed the exact same concerns. Kazimir Malevich was the most unapologetic critic of the museums of that era for their rigidity and their inability to inspire artists to create new art. Malevich compared museums to a burden: "old wisdom that causes only 'anxiety'."[10] As Maria Gough has convincingly demonstrated, Malevich as well as his fellow art critic Osip Brik and curator Nikolai Punin worked tirelessly to establish new, experimental, flexible, and dynamic museums as laboratories, as hubs for the dissemination of contemporary art through state-funded museum networks and traveling exhibitions. Their criticism was in fact triggered by a powerful desire to renew a traditional function of the art gallery by turning it into a cutting-edge laboratory as a multi-functional space for experimentation and exchange. As this book demonstrates, not only venues for contemporary art but also the majority of displays and exhibitions mounted during the interwar period in Soviet Russia were conceived as experimental endeavors, with museums understood as part of a broader network of cultural hubs open to local communities.

At the same time, the 1900s–1930s were the time in which museums saw how long-awaited changes finally came into action. It was an urgent matter for museums not only to renew their acquisition policies but also to provide access to non-professionals, i.e. the general public, and to do this in a meaningful way. This involved the creation of educational programs, especially for children, *hors les murs* ("beyond the walls") activities, traveling exhibitions, regular museum program tours and guided excursions, the creation of reproduction facilities to disseminate art, and much more.

Improving museums' accessibility in every possible sense became a genuinely international endeavor. The pursuit of this goal took shape within a limited but collaborative field of initiatives. French scholars played a leading role by establishing the *Office international des musées* (1926–1946), the predecessor of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), founded in 1946 to promote cooperation and ethical

standards among museums worldwide. The emerging sense of museology as a unified professional domain was inspired and shaped by the German museum reforms initiated a decade earlier by Wilhelm Bode and his colleagues, whose focus on collection reorganization profoundly influenced the museum field globally. These principles were further enriched through educational programs developed by museum practitioners in the United States, who emphasized audience engagement and the pedagogical mission of museums.[11]

This book reconnects Soviet museum practices with these core professional tasks that emerged internationally in many ways. For example, during the interwar period in Soviet Russia, international trends, such as decluttering displays, researching visitors' behaviors, and implementing educational programs, all came within the scope of Soviet museum practitioners despite the travel restrictions and diplomatic crises of the day. For instance, Soviet Russia was one of the most attractive and thriving centers for the promotion of children's creativity and exhibitions for young audiences in a systemic state-wide perspective. The exhibitions for children and on children's books that come under focus in this book were organized by Alexander Zelenko and Yakov Meksin – active members of the Moscow Institute on Methods of Extracurricular Work (1923–1931, *Institut metodov vneshkol'noi raboty*), under the auspices of the People's Commissariat for Education (*Narkomat prosveschenia*, hereafter Narkompros). Zelenko, an admirer of North American museums for children, helped to integrate North American display practices and cultural programs into Soviet museums. Zelenko's 1925 publication *Children's Museums in North America* (*Detskie muzei v Amerike*), which is analyzed in this book, became the source for Soviet practitioners for the next decade. Another important research unit that is key to understanding Soviet museum history is the Commission for the Study of Primitive Art (1923–1930, *Komissiia po izucheniiu primitivnogo iskusstva*) at the Academy of Artistic Sciences (1921–1930, *Akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk*, hereafter GAKhN). Under the guidance of Anatoly Bakushinsky and his approach to *perezhivanie* ("experiencing"), based on German experimental psychology and aesthetics, the Commission's members carried out a great deal of practice-driven research on children's creativity and appreciation of art. From the mid-1930s, direct links between Western theories and Soviet practice were censored due to numerous repressive campaigns in the cultural field that opposed socialism to capitalism. These campaigns both in the press and among the staff of institutions were led by Communist activists like Osip Beskin and Vladimir Kemenov. They masterfully elaborated a unique Cold War paradigm of a Soviet Socialist style of art and museum practice that recalibrated regional cultural influences along the axis of Moscow and denied any Western influence. This book takes the lead in the quest to restore some of these links and aims at re-incorporating Soviet museum practices into international museum history.

## Regional Relationships and Power Dynamics

This book focuses on selected histories of museums in Soviet Russia, primarily in Moscow and in Petrograd/Leningrad (known as Petrograd from 1914 to 1924 and Leningrad from 1924 to 1991, now Saint Petersburg). The selection stems from a personal perspective: I was raised in Moscow and have, since my first steps in academia, studied the history of the networks, mass culture making, and infrastructures that enabled the circulation of ideas and images across the USSR. In the nation's capital, local cultures

are virtually completely swept aside by imperial institutions that produce the canon for the rest of the territory under Russian cultural and political influence. Many museum policies and practices that had been elaborated first in Soviet Russia were then, as various case studies show, negotiated and translated across the USSR, though of course with numerous modifications.[12] Recent research on museums also showed that the critique of the Russian-imposed narratives should go in parallel to the studies that reflect the perspective of local communities to effectively discern points of influence, tensions, and emancipatory perspectives.[13] Patterns of Neo-imperialist ambitions and most importantly the emancipatory history of Ukrainian museums became especially vital with the temporary yet still ongoing occupation of Crimea by Russia beginning in 2014, and the outbreak of the full-scale Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022. As scholars have shown, museums in Ukraine are entwined with military ambitions that extend into the sphere of cultural domination – an enduring manifestation of Russia's long-standing imperial aspiration to shape and control the region's cultural narrative.[14] These ambitions, rooted in centuries of expansionist policy, remain visible today in the use of heritage and museum institutions as instruments of influence. As a work of history, this book focuses on Soviet Russian museum practices, some of which are crucial for understanding the persistent patterns of imperial and transregional power relations that continue to define the region. For instance, the entire sixth chapter devoted to Socialist Realist display in the 1930s and 1940s offers a perspective on the elaboration of unified if not standardized museum representations in museums across the Soviet Union, with the obligatory insertion of a hall dedicated to Vladimir Lenin and his images, produced by Moscow artists. The case of the Georgian art exhibition held at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1937 equally demonstrates that the remaking of local history in favor of the narratives of those in central government was one of the common strategies employed in turning local cultures and histories into the Soviet mainstream. Another possible framework that my study proposes is that of looking at the creation of Soviet culture through the lens of the reactivation of pre-Revolution networks of artists from non-Russian cultures. Thus, in analyzing socialist display, I evoke how the common experiences of studying in European and Russian academies of beaux-arts or in such multinational centers as Paris facilitated the (re)introduction of artists from the territories of Poland and Romania occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939.

In terms of historiography, the book follows the decades-long trend of revising the totalitarian model and its actors. According to this trend, scholars are increasingly focusing on the nuanced network and agents that created the Soviet cultural industry both for the domestic market and in cultural diplomacy, rather than on the descriptive features of totalitarianism, such as unified state control over the industry and direct pressure on individuals and institutions.[15] One of the book's contributions to the history and culture shaped by the Great Purge (1936–1939) under the leadership of Joseph Stalin and several Politburo members is an analysis of the distribution of power in the mid-1930s. Here, the book continues the efforts of art historian Susan Reid in analyzing propaganda exhibitions in the age of Stalin as sites of power dynamics among different agents.[16] As I show, despite the consolidation of ideological control directly under Stalin and his closest ally and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, the dynamics of art commissions, acquisition, and curatorial practices were set by the activities of several wealthy Commissariats and cooperatives that created the artistic industry of Socialist Realism, its material content, and its diversity.

## Experiments and Emancipatory Projects in the Interwar Museum History of Soviet Russia

The interwar period in Soviet Russian museum history is treated as unique in this book, but not because it would become the highest achievement in Soviet museum history. In fact, almost everything that had been initiated in the 1910s would only see its formulation after the Second World War and is thus beyond the scope of this book. For example, in bureaucratic terms, the Ministry of Culture, responsible for museums in Russia until the present day, was only created after the Second World War. The departments responsible for museums at the Narkompros and the Committee on the Arts, two organizations active in the 1920s and 1940s and given center stage in this book, had ceased to exist by 1953, and thus their role was transitional in Soviet museum history. Furthermore, one of the core museum types analyzed in the book, namely the everyday-life (*bytovoi*) museum and its numerous derivatives, including so-called Marxist displays at the Tretyakov Gallery, met with criticism and had lost their influence by the mid-1930s.

In this book, I look at these types, organizations, and histories as cases of experiments and trials whose failures have often been as much a matter of historiographical oversight as a conceptual defeat. One vehicle for amnesia about the cultural projects of the interwar era was identified by David Brandenberger in his seminal study, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, published in 2011. For him, the retreat to conservative ideals in the mid-1930s, or, in the case of the story told here, the rejection of Marxist displays, was not due to the government's changing ideology, but primarily a means of salvaging a failed ideological mobilization that was too radical for Russian society.[17] As Brandenberger identifies, the consequences of such failures to create a usable past and a mass culture in the early 1930s have become a great loss to identity politics for generations to come, resulting in a certain alienation from the socialist educational agenda. The trauma from the failed social agenda of mass culture is particularly clear today in the historiography of the 1920s and 1930s, which is mostly focused on politics at the expense of intellectual history. This period is still perceived not simply as a failure (in contrast to the "success" of the Stalinist repressive machine of 1937–1939), but as a generally undesirable episode in the history of Soviet culture. In revising the histories of Soviet museums that were judged to be unsuccessful, vulgar, incorrect, or outmoded, I can only rephrase Eric Naiman's thought: do we really need to think about museums that did not survive the Second World War the way they were presented by those who criticized them and shut them down?[18] I believe that the history of errors and their conceptual and creative potential is a type of history that scholarship on the Soviet interwar era is much in need of today.

Indeed, to take an example, the class-focused art history, additional and augmented displays, as well as period rooms and the mixed interior settings known as Marxist displays, did in fact continue to proliferate in Soviet Russia and, most importantly, exerted influence on museum exposition across the Communist bloc. They were just no longer called everyday-life museums or Marxist museums – terms that had been publicly defamed in the press for decades. Their international perception, however, is very rich and multidirectional. For example, Marxist displays were appreciated by Frederick Antal, an art historian and political activist who later immigrated to England and there became the source for the dissemination of knowledge and practices of Marxist art history.[19] Antal visited Soviet museums in 1931, most notably the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and was profoundly inspired by their innovative programs. In a text written after his return from the Soviet Union, he detailed the displays and their heuristic and political power:

the immersion of the works in the context of the economic conditions of production, and the abundance of additional information such as statistical data and archival documents to reflect the class history of the art industry and art market.[20] Today, despite the conceptual complexity of these displays and their still largely untapped curatorial potential, the long-standing tendency to regard Marxist art-historical projects and writings as "mechanistic" continues to prevail.[21] By focusing on the activities of Marxist curators Alexei Fedorov-Davydov and Natalia Kovalenskaya at the Tretyakov Gallery, I address both the cultural value of their work and pitfalls they encountered in their practice and never had the opportunity to correct because of the ban on their approaches by 1934.

Later, from the 1950s to 1980s, countries with very different museum traditions, such as Cuba, China, and the German Democratic Republic, experienced a series of museum reforms similar to those introduced in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s.[22] In Cuba, for example, under the Communist regime, the number of museums grew from just a handful to around 250 by 1985. They followed Soviet Marxist display templates to narrate revolutionary history and developed a network of local studies museums.[23] Chinese museum practitioners visited Moscow in 1950 to mount a massive exhibition on Chinese art at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Hermitage in Leningrad, initiating a brief but intense period of knowledge transfer, which involved study trips to Soviet Russia, and lectures by Soviet practitioners in China.[24] Across the globe, Soviet publications such as the 1955 manual *The Principles of Soviet Museum Studies* (*Osnovy sovetskogo muzeevedeniia*) became an important means of translating Soviet class-based display throughout the Communist bloc and beyond in the 1960s and 1970s.[25]

Still, the theory and practice of the socialist museum was and remains an uncomfortable figure of the past. As in the Global North, the 1970s saw the emergence of a new museology in the USSR, which became more concerned with the sociology of art, visitors' experiences, and experiments in creating immersive, emotionally charged museum spaces.[26] However, unlike Western scholarship, which has highlighted the positive aspects of pre-war museology, Soviet and later post-Soviet studies have tended to associate the pre-war experience primarily with the trauma of political repression and censorship in museum work. The heuristic value of the museum projects of the 1920s and 1930s has only been briefly postulated; it has rarely been analyzed in detail. In this semi-recognized and unreflected-upon form, Marxist museology has been left in the historiography without an emancipated voice of its own that would have been provided by Soviet museum professionals. For example, Soviet museologists working in the 1960s and 1970s sought to avoid analyzing the political and economic specifics of museum formation and infrastructure, as well as their distinctions from bourgeois institutions. Instead, scholars of this period turned to cybernetics, among other methodologies, to describe museums as information carriers or neutral containers, detached from the political considerations of the day.[27] But what these scholars failed to mention was how the information itself, its content and paths of dissemination, was controlled by ideological bodies regardless of how neutral they desired to imagine museums as carriers.

In the contemporary scholarship, too, there is a general distrust among researchers globally that theory in museology was possible in the USSR at all, though this is now slowly being overcome.[28] Even today, scholars tend to rely on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology to study the habitus of museum collectors in Russia and the USSR, while the work of Alexei Fedorov-Davydov and Natalia Kovalenskaya – who, as early as the 1920s, examined the class value of art for different social groups and explored the sociology of patronage – has been largely overlooked.[29] This book aims to reassess established

conventions that determine who is considered worthy of reference within the histories of museology and art theory.

Finally, the project of socialist museum management also contains ruptures and potential conflicts that need to be reintroduced. The large-scale nationalization of art and cultural property and its redistribution among state-governed museums since the first decade after the revolution was the main drive in the development of both the theory and practice of Soviet museums in the interwar era. Today, in practical and legal terms, the socialist model of museum management is a major point of reticence. There is an ongoing denationalization of museum property, as well as growing tensions between former Soviet republics in regard to displaced national heritage during Soviet times.[30] The lack of transparency in the relationships among museums in the region, together with Russia's refusal to engage in sustained collaboration with Germany, Hungary, Poland, and other countries on the history of large-scale displacements of museum collections by the Soviet Army to the USSR in 1945, defines the broader geopolitical stance of the Russian museum field and its (dis)connection to international practice. Disputes around nationalized collections after 1917 and requests for restitution from former owners and their families of Jewish origin still define the global landscape, too, in terms of both museum loans and national regulations on museum objects. Ongoing bans on museum exchanges and immunity legislation governing traveling exhibitions from Russia have been put in place to preclude legal claims by former owners of nationalized and displaced artworks who appeal to international legal and institutional frameworks, such as those established for the restitution of Holocaust-era assets.[31] These historical tensions, as well as the perspectives of further international inquiries into Russian museum practices in relation to looting from museums during the Russian–Ukrainian war and absorption of Soviet-era Ukrainian collections into Russian museums, will define regional dynamics in the museum field for decades to come.

## Notes

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2 Boris Groys, "The Struggle against the Museum; or, The Display of Art in Totalitarian Space," in *Museum Culture. Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (London: Routledge, 1994), 144–162.
3 Pamela Jill Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918–1928* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 3–36.
4 Masha Chlenova, "Innovative, Polemical, Dogmatic: The Case of Soviet Experimental Museum Displays, 1930–1933," in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, ed. Anne Folke Henningsen, Anne Gregersen, and Malene Vest Hansen (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 223–236. See also works on interwar museum and exhibition history: Masha Chlenova, "On Display: Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928–1933" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010); Masha Chlenova, "Staging Soviet Art: 15 Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic, 1932–33," *October* 147 (January 2014): 38–55.
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# 1 Locating Soviet Museum Theory and Practice

## 1910s–1920s

This chapter locates Soviet Russian museums united into a state network after the Russian Revolution within a European and North American context. The First World War (1914–1918) led participating countries such as France, England, Germany, and also Russia to work out stricter guidelines and regulations on cultural treasures, museums, and the antiquities market. In Russia, this urge was exacerbated by the Revolution in 1917, which put an end to the 300-year rule of the Romanov dynasty. This launched an all-encompassing nationalization, unprecedented in coverage, including the appropriation of all private property, from buildings and lands to museum treasures. As this chapter shows, this nationalization defined the history of museum management for decades and still frames tensions provoked by the irregular redistribution of collections between large museums such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow and the Hermitage Museum in Petrograd (since 1924, Leningrad; now Saint Petersburg) as well as the obscure and chaotic management of myriad nationalized objects, unsurprising given the massiveness of the task.

As this chapter argues, the nationalization of museums per se would not have been possible without the active collaboration and work of dozens of museum practitioners of all political backgrounds. The drive to safeguard these treasures was accompanied by a radical desire to rationally and scientifically reorganize every collection in the country, thus forming public and accessible displays while sustaining further decontextualization and alienation of objects from their original communities and contexts. In conceptualizing new categories and types of museums after 1917, Soviet practitioners got inspiration from their German colleagues who championed museum reforms in Europe. In the USSR, the work of classification done by scholars went together with the reorganization of the largest museums that accumulated the majority of the best art objects. By revealing the tight bond between abstract categories emerging from research units and the material reorganization of collections, I trace the complex interrelations among the science of museums, economics, and the material history of cultural institutions in the 1920s.

### The Museum in a State of Emergency

Museums have always been symbols of both loss and preservation, tightly bound up with such states of emergency as wars and revolutions. In Russia, the 1917 Revolution was in many ways part of the global geopolitical crisis embodied in the First World War. Soon after the war's outbreak, European museums, including those in Russia, began to feel the impact of this conflict.[1] For some of them, such as the

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University of Tartu Museum in Estonia, the war meant the evacuation of their collections to Russia, many of which have never been returned in their entirety due to the establishment of new borders and respective legislation in the aftermath of the fall of the Russian Empire.[2] Others saw new opportunities arise. As early as November 1917, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin proclaimed the right to political and cultural autonomy for all ethnic minorities and subsequently called for the repatriation of museum and heritage assets that had been seized during tsarism.[3] Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia, though in varied political contexts, initiated negotiations to regain their national treasures. Poland operated within the post-First World War Riga Treaty (1921), and its efforts, as an independent state, were the most successful.[4] The hopes of the Ukrainian intelligentsia for systematic repatriation of national relics from the times of the Zaporozhian Sich (1552–1775) transported to Russia in the 18th century were enmeshed in political considerations that lasted for decades. Ukraine, represented by independence-era authorities between 1917 and 1921, later pursued restitution through the so-called Parity Commission (1928–1934, de facto absorbed by the Committee on the Arts in 1936). These efforts resulted in only a partial return of objects despite continued claims in the 1930s.[5] The national treasures of Georgia became the subject of lengthy diplomatic negotiations not only between Soviet Russia and Georgia but also with France (where some of the treasures were evacuated) until after the Second World War.[6]

The First World War also re-actualized demands for the restitution of objects on a transnational level in a more indirect way. Beginning in 1914, a number of German cultural activists set to work identifying and locating works of art that had been relocated from Germany to France in the times of Napoleon Bonaparte. Some of those works had ended up in Russia and were viewed by Russian counterparts within the broader legacy of the French Revolution and its aftermath.[7] Indeed, in 1815, the Russian Emperor Alexander I had purchased several paintings from Empress Joséphine's Malmaison Palace near Paris, which had earlier been removed from the collection of German local ruler Wilhelm VIII of Hesse-Kassel. A survey of looted museum treasures carried out by Ernst Steinmann, director of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, listed 21 paintings, originally held in Germany, which had reached Saint Petersburg in varied ways.[8] Rembrandt's *Descent from the Cross* (1634), now a core work in the Hermitage collection, was among them. The 1917 Revolution gave the Germans the opportunity to directly claim the objects in question. However, the newly established Soviet government fiercely refused any cooperation regarding the satisfaction of "German appetites" (*nemetskie appetity*).[9]

On the domestic level in Russia, war-related events in the museum domain were no less dramatic. The Hermitage Museum had initiated preparations for evacuation in the face of the potential threat of a military invasion as early as 1914. Its huge and priceless collections, among other imperial collections in Petrograd, were made ready for a temporary relocation to Moscow, much further away from the fronts of the First World War.[10] From March 1918, Moscow became the new capital of the country. The return of the collection to Petrograd was then met with numerous and continued attempts on behalf of local museum workers and officials to keep part of it in Moscow on various pretexts.[11] It was only by 1920, as one of the reports of the Museum Department of the Ministry of Education (Narkompros) proudly stated, that the Hermitage's "colossal" task of regaining its collection was complete – with all 800 boxes back safe and intact.[12] Other collections were returned in a less complete state.[13]