

THE HERMITAGES, plural form

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF URBAN PLANNING, THE "HERMITAGE" BRAND EXTENSION HAS BEEN AN ABSOLUTE SUCCESS: IN TOWNS WHERE LOCAL CULTURAL LIFE MIGHT NOT INCLUDE FAMOUS NAMES WIDELY KNOWN IN RUSSIA AND BEYOND, THE MUSEUM'S CENTERS HAVE BECOME THE MAIN CULTURAL ATTRACTION.

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Economics has an interesting view on financing culture: money invested in art returns to society in revenue from businesses which feed the theatre and museum visitors, accommodate those who come from other cities, and sell them books, albums and souvenirs. Museums and theatres create jobs, helping the develop-

ment of related infrastructure: workshops, studios and publishing houses. The compulsion to form a "creative" economy in major Russian cities is important not only for the culture, but also for the prosperity of the country. Fortunately, it seems that this is evident to the municipal authorities in Ekaterinburg, Vladivostok, Kazan and Vyborg: they are actively supporting the work of the future and existing Hermitage branches.

When defending himself from the obscurantist attacks on the Chapman³ Brothers exhibition and on contemporary art as a whole, Mikhail Piotrovsky said: "It is the museum that decides what is art and what is not". The sacred position of the Hermitage in Russian culture will help carry this view into the major Russian cities. When radical activists impose their censorship even in the very heart of Moscow, the Hermitage branches will be a reputable interlocutor in the dialogue on the acceptability of art, and their reasonable but firm position — such is the corporate culture of the country's main museum — will help bring mutual understanding between creative circles and the conservative public, who are often the victims of the atrocious demagoguery of speculators trying to commercialize the notion of "spirituality".

The Hermitage's international activity is becoming especially important. At a time when relations be-

tween Russia and the West are quite complex, the Hermitage is one of the pillars of our culture which evokes only positive images: Saint Petersburg, enlightenment, Catherine the Great and her patronage of the arts, breathtaking beauty, a collection of inestimable cultural and historical value, and Mikhail Piotrovsky. British Museum director Neil MacGregor stated recently in *The New York Times*, "Most of us [museums' executives] consider him the best director in the world."

At the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice almost all the employees speak Italian with a very pronounced American accent. This is, undoubtedly, *soft power*: we are very far away from you, we are accused of isolationism, of being self-centered — but here are dozens of young people studying your culture and your language who came from the other side of the Atlantic. It would be nice to see this in the Hermitage branches abroad — in the Netherlands, in Italy, in Israel, in the USA: the museum shows the world an image of educated Russia, and this image should include people who live and work in the present, who reflect the best we have in us. Besides arts and sciences, the Hermitage should have within it the human being. Let him or her speak English and the local language fluently, with a mysterious Russian accent: the James Bond series already proved to us that this is very attractive for Her Majesty's subjects — and not only for them.

It remains to be seen if the Ministry of Culture will be willing to support such a project at the present time, but one can only wish that there will be philanthropists who understand the importance of fostering cultural and human dialogue, now more than ever.