

Blog



ON THE HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION OF REMBRANDT'S PAINTINGS IN SOVIET MUSEUMS

The collection of Rembrandt's paintings in Soviet museums is one of the most outstanding in the world. It is concentrated in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad; six more paintings are to be found in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. The Russian collection has long enjoyed world fame, being considered, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the world's finest both in quantity and quality. Since then, certain changes have taken place. The leading American museums have greatly increased their collections. With the advance of knowledge, many works formerly attributed to Rembrandt have been found to belong to his pupils. Nevertheless, the Soviet collection remains one of the finest. It could not be otherwise with a collection of such exceptional quality, the vast majority of the paintings of which are so well preserved and so varied, a collection that contains such masterpieces as Danaë and the Return of the Prodigal Son.

The first Rembrandt painting appeared in Russia during the rule of Peter the Great, who laid the foundations of Western European art collections in Russia. He began this project during his first trip abroad in 1697, when his interest was aroused by the works of Dutch marine painters. Sent to Holland in 1715, Yuri Kologrivov acquired 43 paintings at The Hague for the decoration of the Tsar's summer palace of Monplaisir, then under construction in Peterhof. This was followed by the purchase of 117 paintings in Brussels and Antwerp. Similar instructions were given to B. Kurakin, the Russian ambassador to The Hague, and to Osip Solov'yov, the Russian Trade Commissar in Amsterdam. On June 30, 1716, Solov'yov sent to St. Petersburg 121 paintings "bought at public and private sales". In the list accompanying the letter, we find mentioned Rembrandt's David and Jonathan, acquired, as was recently established, at the auction of Jan van Beuningen's collection in Amsterdam for the price of 80 guildens. This was a time when the voices of Rembrandt's sworn enemies in art rang loud, when they lifted their heads after his death and labelled him "the greatest heretic in art". Due to the efforts of those who defended the academic aesthetic principles, Rembrandt's paintings, no longer popular, were rarely put up for sale and sold at very low prices, as in the case in point.

The sixties of the eighteenth century opened a new page in the history of Russian art collections. It was then that the Winter Palace picture gallery was born; it grew with such speed that in the span of two decades it gained a pre-eminent place among Europe's art collections.

The first collection of paintings was acquired for the Hermitage in 1764. Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky, a Berlin merchant, offered his paintings in payment of a debt to the Russian treasury. The Gotzkowsky collection, brought to St. Petersburg in the summer of 1764, numbered 225 paintings, mainly of the Dutch and Flemish schools. Although the general level of that collection was not very high, it did