

Peter the Great, an Inspired Tsar

Review on the exhibition devoted to Peter the Great (1672–1725) at the Hermitage Amsterdam between 9 March and 13 September 2013



1.

Two Pine Trunks Joined with a Bough Grown from One Trunk into the Other, on a Stand. Russia, St Petersburg. First half of the 18th century. Wood (pine); turned. 64.5x99x31.5 cm. Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

The above object, rather sombre at the first glance (it may evoke the combined images of a guillotine and a coffin in sensitive souls), represents a rare natural phenomenon: the two tree trunks are joined through a bough which grew from one trunk into the other. This piece stood surprisingly unnoticed¹ among the items of Peter the Great's Cabinet of Curiosities but for me it had an obvious symbolic value: the two pine trunks that grew together through a common branch stood for a natural analogue to the growing together of the Russian Empire and the Dutch Republic, through the person of Peter the Great. The strength of the relationship between the Dutch and the Russian nations in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries becomes evident in this brilliant show, as well as the hard-working and stormy character of this Russian emperor who well merits the epithets «great» and «inspired». The exhibition was jointly opened by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and Russia's prime minister Dmitry Medvedev, hallmarking the «Year of Dutch-Russian Relations».

¹ It took me quite an effort to get an authorized picture of this object since it is featured neither in the exhibition catalogue nor on the website of the Hermitage Amsterdam.

From Infant Prodigy to Emperor

Peter the Great (1672-1725) was born into the House of Romanov, the second and last imperial dynasty to rule over Russia (Muscovy). The Romanovs reigned for over 300 years, from 1613 until the 1917 revolution when the royal family was executed.

Peter was born in 1672, as the fourteenth child of Alexis I and the first child from Tsar Alexis' second marriage. The boys from the first marriage were all weak and sickly, so it came as a great relief to the Russian ruler to see this lusty boy. The little Peter was more than lusty, he was an infant prodigy: already walking by the age of six months, restless, inquisitive, quick in the uptake and exceptionally skilful.

He was about ten years old when the rivalry between the relatives of the two wives of the late Tsar Alexis I led to the Streltsy Uprising where a number of supporters of Peter's family, including two of his uncles, were killed. It made a deep impression on the young boy who eye witnessed the events. As a result, Peter was proclaimed second tsar after his semi-disabled half-brother, Ivan V, and he withdrew with his mother to Preobrazhenskoye, some 18 kilometres north-east of Moscow.

Not only was it safer in Preobrazhenskoye for the young second tsar, he could also undisturbedly follow his interests. These interests would later on all turn into crucial elements in his reforms. His favourite game was the «war-game». He set up a toy army of his playmates– the sons of noblemen- and organized mock battles. In the course, he studied gunnery, marksmanship, military tactics, uniforms and flags, as well as drumming. Gradually, his toy army grew into a regiment which would later become the Russian Imperial Guard. His other pass-time was visiting the 'German Quarter'. It was a neighbourhood where non-Russians were required to live (according to a law implemented in 1652 which meant to protect the native Orthodox believers from Catholic and Protestant influence). The 'German Quarter' was populated by foreigners from Western Europe (collectively called "Germans"), working there as merchants, store owners, or army officers. Despite his mother's disagreement, Peter kept on visiting the district which made a deep impression on him with its cleanliness, order, and the great variety of people there. The tsarevits learnt all kinds of skills there, such as horse riding, fencing, dancing, or speaking Dutch, but he also acquired a taste for tobacco, wine and beer. He listened to stories about faraway lands, and made friendships, among which were some of his future associates, such as Patrick Gordon and Franz Lefort, as well as his mistress Anna Mons. When an old sailing boat was found in a village near Preobrazhenskoye, Peter got interested in shipbuilding. Next to a nearby river he set up a boatyard under the guidance of a Dutchman and began implementing a new idea: to create a navy for Russia.

Thus Peter reached the age of 24 when -following the death of his half-brother-, he seized absolute power. On the below painting of Pieter van der Werff we can see the Tsar in his full youth: self-confident, good-looking, and intelligent.



2.

Portrait of Peter the Great
Pieter van der Werff, 1697-1700. Oil on
canvas. 56 x 49.5 cm. © State Hermitage
Museum, St Petersburg

Altogether, Peter was an interesting phenomenon to look at. He was a very tall man (2,08 m), balancing on very small feet, he was handsome but had notorious facial tics. There was a deep ambivalence in his appearance as well as in his behaviour. Despite being the ruler of an enormous empire, he preferred the company of ordinary people. He liked walking instead of travelling on a carriage, he preferred to stay in wooden houses instead of fancy palaces, he liked to cloth as a simple worker, was extremely modest in eating, and extremely excessive in drinking. His cruelty was as legendary as was his mercifulness. «A righteous monarch he appears to be, a virtuous man as well, but an irretrievable sinner at all that»². He was intuitive; he got easily exited by new ideas and projects, and drew on all available resources to realize them. He was also impulsive; he would rather implement ten decisions out of which only seven proves to be right, than making just three thoroughly planned decisions³. However, about one thing Peter I was always very clear: that his principal role was to serve the motherland. He worked very hard; he woke up at four every morning (even when feasted the previous day) and promptly set to work.

On the below picture is a nice object from the exposition: a knitted hat. The tsar loved to put on a worker's cloth and this hat was one of his favourites. If we look at it from close, we can see the very fine handwork behind the searched simplicity.

² quote from the notes of a German princess who met the tsar personally (in: Peter the Great. An Inspired Tsar. Background of the exhibition)

³ Shekshnia, 2004



3.

Hat from a sailor costume worn by Peter. Russia, Russian and Dutch tailors, 1690-1725; Woollen thread, velvet, silk; knitted. Hat 24 cm; Ø brim 35 cm

© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Peter I's great achievement was that he transformed his huge but backward country, hardly known in Europe, into a leading power which exercised enormous influence on European and Asian affairs. He reached it by increasing the territory of Russia by one million km² at the one hand, and by fundamental reforms on the other. For his reforms, he took several Western European countries as models but relied greatly on the Dutch model.

«Apprenticeship» in Western Europe: 1697-1698 and 1716

After his first successful military campaign against the Turkish city of Azov the young tsar began an extraordinary journey through Western Europe. The Grand Embassy, with its 250 people including the tsar (travelling incognito under the name of Pyotr Mikhailov) visited the most influential courts in West Europe to solicit their cooperation against the Ottoman Empire. «Pyotr Mikhailov» also had another, equally important, goal and that was «to see and to learn». Next to shipbuilding which stood at the focus of his interests, he attentively studied the systems of government in the countries he visited.

The longest and richest part of the journey was the time the tsar spent in the Dutch Republic. During the «Golden Age» the Dutch Republic was one of the wealthiest and most economically powerful states in the world. And what a great place for someone eager to learn! The country attracted scientists and philosophers from all over Europe. Book publishing flourished. (Many books deemed controversial abroad were printed in the Netherlands – a tradition that is still alive.) The Dutch trade, military, fine and applied art were equally world-famous.

Peter the Great befriended many leading figures in the Dutch society, among them Nicolaas Witsen (mayor of Amsterdam), and Frederik Ruysch (physician, anatomist and botanist). Himself a keen collector, Witsen introduced Peter to many exhibitions and cabinets of curiosities, where plants, animals and rare objects were on view. Frederik Ruysch, on his part, initiated Peter into the art of dissection and taught him medical skills, such as pulling teeth. (For Peter the Great medical art was just another handcraft, so he practiced it with similar enthusiasm he had for shipbuilding or cannonry. It is said that his attendants were afraid to show any sign of toothache in his presence and that a sack full of teeth that he had pulled out was found after his death. According to another story, the tsar forced his

entourage to tear at corpses' muscles with their teeth at the anatomy theatre in Leiden – just to prove their loyalty.) In Leiden the tsar saw the mercury thermometers made by Daniel Fahrenheit and bought two of them. He also visited Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in Delft and looked through his microscope and admired Jan van der Heyden's improved patented fire hose. He also studied printing, geometry and physics, but, primarily, deepened his skills in shipbuilding and learned on the theory of it.

Profound Reforms

Following his return from Western Europe, Peter the Great began a huge series of reforms. Big changes often start simple: when he got back to Russia and saw the boyars (the aristocrats) coming to receive him, he yielded to a sudden impulse and cut off their beards. Later on, he introduced a beard tax for those who insisted on keeping their masculine ornament. On another occasion, at a banquet, he cut off the long and wide sleeves of the boyar's gala costumes to make it more «European».

Instead of waging war against the Ottoman Empire Peter I attacked Sweden. In this exhausting war, which lasted for twenty-one years, Sweden had lost almost all of its "overseas" holdings and ceased to be a major power. Charles XII of Sweden, who at first underestimated the capacities of Russia, noted with exasperation that he was fighting against «Dutch ships and Dutch generals». In this war, Russia gained its Baltic territories with an access to the sea and definitively established itself as one of Europe's great powers.

His most illustrious achievement was the foundation of a new capital. Peter I disliked Moscow from his childhood because of the strong religious influence. It was the city of Amsterdam, in particular, with its pattern of streets and canals that inspired him when founding St Petersburg. He has chosen a swampy area «where no one in their right mind would have built a capital city»⁴. He did and he succeeded: the new capital mirrored perfectly the image of a strong absolutistic empire in the Age of Enlightenment. Its skyline is dominated by huge state buildings instead of churches (as in Moscow) and shows more similarity to Madrid or Berlin than to other Russian cities. Peter I called his new capital: "window to Europe."

Behind all his decisions, we find an advanced sense of state. He created a new administration system, which was clearly designed to be more efficient and augmented the autocratic power of the tsar. He also strengthened the feudal system, making the serfs legally part of the land. Furthermore, he abolished the patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and placed religious affairs under the control of a government department. He believed people were wasting their time as monks and they would better do working for the state. (Quite a familiar idea for communists.)

⁴ Shekshnia, 2004

He modernized the Russian alphabet, introduced the Julian calendar⁵, and established the first Russian newspaper. It is interesting to note that there was practically no secular culture before Peter I. 90% books published were religious texts.

Peter focused on the development of science and recruited several experts to educate his people about technological advancements. He ordered the establishment of technical schools. A school of navigation was also founded and a seaman's academy. (Hence the numerous Dutch loan-words related to shipping in the Russian language.) Also, the newly acquired territories in the West and East, which were economically more advanced than Russia proper, served as models and provided administrative and scientific talents. Substantial funds were provided for Russia's industrial growth; domestic and foreign trade were improved as well.

Thus Peter the Great's reforms «Westernized» Russia even while they strengthened traditional institutions like the monarchy and the feudal system. Obviously, such reforms, especially what regarded the serfs, provoked discontent and resistance. And not just the changes themselves. Hundreds of thousands of people perished in the wars and the construction projects, and from hunger and disease. The human costs of these reforms were around 500,000 lives (Kluchevsky, 1989⁶).

Collections

In the 17th and 18th century any prominent person considering himself well-educated would have established a Cabinet of Curiosities, dedicated to preserving "natural and human curiosities and rarities". Peter the Great collected many items, including fine and applied artworks, items from Eastern cultures and «exotic» lands, archaeological objects, etc. but was most interested in *naturalia*, especially in human malformations and anatomical deficiencies. The tsar's personal collection features a large assortment of human and animal foetuses of the kind. During his travels he purchased animals, dried plants and anatomical specimens in great quantities, even entire collections (e.g. that of Albert Seba and of Frederik Ruysch).



4.
Bullet extractor; Western Europe, 1690-1720; Steel, brass. L 21 cm
© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

⁵ A funny thing is that Peter I introduced the Julian calendar (which used to be prevailing in Protestant countries) precisely on the day when the Dutch Republic changed to the (Catholic) Gregorian calendar. This results in an 11 days difference between the systems of reckoning.

⁶ Kluchevsky, 1989 cited in Shekshnia, 2004



5.

Peter's travelling medicine chest; Augsburg, Tobias Lenghardt and Hans Georg I Brenner, 1613–15; Wood, copper, steel, silver, glass, silk, velvet, braid; oil paint on copper, ebony veneer, gilding. 39.5 x 41 x 32.5 cm

© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



6.

Wet Dry Anatomical Preparation: Child's Hand; Northern Netherlands, Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731). 1700–17. Glass, vaseline, paint, spirit, child's right hand, cotton lace, prepared, with arterial injection; jar 5.8, h 14 cm.

Provenance: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstammer), Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg

© State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Ruysch was an unrivalled expert in anatomical preparation. The quality of his wet dry preparations is still inimitable. Together with Ruysch's collection, Peter the Great also bought the secret recipe for making similar preparations. In fact, Ruysch's technique consisted of injecting white or red wax into the blood vessels which he could carry out with such precision as no one else after him.

This trend of collecting odd and surprising items and stuffing them haphazardly into cramped rooms was the predecessor of today's systematically organized musea. Peter the Great's personal collection is now a precious part of several museum collections, including that of the State Hermitage Museum.

Among the most important ones is the *Siberian Collection*. The collecting of Scythian gold objects began in the years 1715-18 upon the orders of Peter the Great. The two hundred ancient gold artefacts that we find in his collection include magnificent belt plates and clasps with scenes of animals fighting, torques and bracelets. Many are adorned with turquoises. Peter I purchased them from robbers of ancient graves, and in this way he preserved them for the posterity. However, we should not forget to pay tribute to the Amsterdam major Nicolaas Witsen, who opened the tsar's eyes for the exquisite beauty of these objects⁷. Today the world's most important collection on Scythian art is to be found in St Petersburg, of which 17 golden objects can be seen in the Hermitage Amsterdam.



7.
Belt plaque: Battle between a wolf and a snake
Siberia, 4th-2nd century BC. Chased gold, turquoise, glass; moulded on a relief matrix. 14 x 8.5 cm. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



8.
Belt plaque: battle between a monster and a horse
Siberia, 4th-3rd century BC. Chased gold. 12.3 x 8.2 cm. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Art collection

Similarly to other enlightened rulers in Europe, Peter the Great put emphasis on collecting artworks. He purchased numerous works during his travels abroad and later hung them in his residence. He particularly enjoyed the works of Adam Silo who was specialised in depicting maritime scenes and those of Adriaen van der Werff, renowned in his time for technical finesse and subtle erotica. Adam Silo even gave drawing lessons to Peter the Great. Spending considerable amount of money on artworks did not prevent the tsar from destroying them when he liked. Meanwhile Peter I was deepening his skills in shipbuilding at the English Deptford Dockyard, King William III lent him and his people Sayes Court, widely celebrated for its beautiful garden. The damage that the Russian delegation caused was so important (e.g. the paintings in the mansion served as targets for shooting exercises)

⁷ Witsen's contribution to archaeology and linguistics cannot be overemphasized. He accounted on all the information available to Europeans at that time about the northern and eastern parts of Europe and Asia, and also about the Volga area, Crimea, Caucasus, Central Asia, Mongolia, Tibet, China, Korea and the neighbouring parts of Japan, including word lists on more than 25 languages, illustrations of the writing systems, and drawings on Scythian gold objects.

that the Russian tsar was made to pay the sum of £350 9s 6d (£36.8 thousand as of 2013) in compensation.

Thanks to the passionate collector Catherine the Great, by the time the last Romanov ascended the throne in 1894, he was heir to the greatest collection of art in Europe.

Significance

The changes that Peter the Great brought about were enormous and swept through Russia like a sudden storm – changing everything from economy and social structure to army and navy, education and life-style... With his skilful hands, Peter I reshaped Russia. As we are viewing the relics of the great tsar at the exhibition, e.g. his death mask and handprint, his most personal belongings, carefully preserved for the prosperity as cult objects, we should not forget that such radical reforms unavoidably led to rebellions and the overwhelming majority of the Russians felt an enormous relief when the great tsar (= the Antichrist, as many believed) passed away.

It is still debated if the strong kick of Peter's reforms really produced a long-lasting momentum (Shekshnia, 2004). Certainly, Russia needed another emperor for consolidating the changes, which she got in the person of Catherine the Great, some seventy years later. However, one thing is sure: under Peter the Great Russia became an international power, a position that she has maintained ever since, despite the successive governmental changes and the various hardships on common people.

About the exhibition

The Hermitage Amsterdam is the only European satellite of the famous St Petersburg museum. It has been opened in 2009, as a result of the joint efforts of several leading Dutch private companies. The idea of the present exhibition was conceived at the opening. The exhibition is based on the collection of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, with additional pieces from other Russian and Dutch museums.

In parallel to the exhibition at the Hermitage Amsterdam, artworks of renowned Russian artists are to be seen at various locations in the Netherlands. In the Hague, both the plein air exhibition at the Lange Voorhout and the exhibition at the Museum «Beelden aan Zee» merits our attention and impresses us with their inherent striving for monumentality.

Sources

In writing the present article I relied on the following sources:

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