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Pompidou Center Sets Up in Hermitage Museum

By Sophie Gaitzsch

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Garouste's "Balaam" is one of 12 major French art pieces that the Pompidou Center has brought to St. Petersburg.

ST. PETERSBURG — Paris' Pompidou Center has become the latest guest of honor at the State Hermitage Museum, with the opening of an exhibition showing 12 major works of 20th-century French art from the center's collection.

Along with a contemporary art festival, the exhibition is part of "The Pompidou Center in the State Hermitage" project, organized in close cooperation between the two cultural institutions as part of the Year of France in Russia.

The exhibition starts with Marcel Duchamp's famous "Bottle Rack," which the Hermitage's director Mikhail Piotrovsky described as a "symbol of 20th-century creativity." The piece, an actual bottle rack, is what the artist called "readymades" — found objects that Duchamp, whose work had a great influence on subsequent generations of artists, chose to present as

art. Starkly contrasting with the imperial splendor of the Winter Palace building, "Bottle Rack" still seems to surprise visitors, the question "Is this art?" echoing in the room as people pass by — nearly 100 years after its creation in 1914.

From that point, the exhibition moves through the second half of the 20th century, showing emblematic paintings, sculptures and installations of artists from very diverse artistic movements — Georges Mathieu, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Cesar, Robert Filliou, Jean Dubuffet, Roman Opalka, Daniel Buren and Gerard Garouste, among others — all of which are on display in St. Petersburg for the first time. A model of the iconic Pompidou Center building, an example of constraint-free architecture designed in the spirit of the 1960s by Italy's Renzo Piano and Britain's Richard Rogers, is also part of the show.

The surprisingly small size of the exhibition is not because of unforeseen circumstances but rather a deliberate choice. "The exhibition is part of a larger project," explains Dmitry Ozerkov, head of the Modern Art section of the State Hermitage, who was in charge of selecting works from the Pompidou Center's 60,000-piece collection.

"And since the second part of 'The Pompidou Center in the Hermitage' project is about contemporary art, we picked works that show what the basis of contemporary art actually is," he said.

Rather than simply importing paintings and sculptures from the Pompidou Center, the Hermitage tried to seek inspiration in its French cousin's approach to contemporary art.

"The Hermitage is trying to open itself to 21st-century creativity and thought of the Pompidou Center as a model, which we are very honored by," Bernard Blistene, deputy director of the Pompidou Center, said at the exhibition's opening.

The Pompidou's own interdisciplinary and interactive vocation is reflected in the festival part of the project, which kicked off on Oct. 5. Visitors to the Hermitage can hop next door to the room adjoining the exhibition, where impressive installations by Viennese artist Heimo Zobering and Cuban artist Jorge Prado are on display as part of the festival, or attend one of the round tables, workshops, experimental dance and theater performances or showings of video-art installations.

Those who are eager to continue the experience and are not afraid of braving the cold can investigate the Contemporary French Art Circuit in St. Petersburg, showcasing contemporary French art at participating centers and galleries around the city through Nov. 14.

"The Pompidou Center in the State Hermitage" runs through Nov. 14 at the State Hermitage Museum, 2 Palace Square. Tel. (812) 710-9625, www.hermitagemuseum.org. For info about the Contemporary French Art Circuit, visit www.ifspb.com.

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