

Soccer Club Gets Involved in Museum Debate

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Russia's cultural elite is at loggerheads over whether to rebuild a museum closed by the late Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, with the fate of masterpieces by Monet, Renoir and Picasso at stake.

Shut down in 1948 for being too "bourgeois", Moscow's State Museum of New Western Art housed a collection of more than 500 Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works, including scenes of fin-de-siecle Parisian life and more than 50 early works by Pablo Picasso.

The paintings were divided up between the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, but in April Irina Antonova, the Pushkin Museum's 91-year-old director, petitioned President Vladimir Putin to rebuild the museum in Moscow so that the collection could be reunited under one roof.

"This is about recreating a great museum of the 20th century — the world's first museum

of modern art, founded even before New York's MoMA (Museum of Modern Art)," the white-haired Antonova said, her voice at times wobbling with emotion as she and other museum heads and Russia's Culture Minister discussed the issue on Tuesday.

The resurrection of the museum would involve St Petersburg's Hermitage returning around 300 paintings to Moscow, including the red-skinned revelers of "La Danse", a seminal giant canvas by French painter Henri Matisse.

Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky, who opposes the plan, suggested the paintings could be united in an online virtual collection instead.

His misgivings were given extra weight when Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky warned of the dangers of attempting to right history's wrongs.

"Frankly, I'm convinced that a big mistake was made in 1948, it wasn't necessary to eliminate the museum, but I'm not sure that correcting the error would not be a bigger mistake," Medinsky said.

Soccer Fans Protest

The director also won support from an unlikely quarter earlier in May, when fans of St Petersburg soccer club Zenit, bitter rivals of Moscow's clubs, posted an online petition.

"Moscow has decided to take the most valuable collection of paintings from our city's main museum ... every signature is important and will help preserve the Hermitage," the petition said.

Other suggestions at Tuesday's meeting included collecting the paintings for a book and a one-off exhibition that would tour Russia. The proposals will be gathered in a final report by June 3 for evaluation by the Union of Russian Museums.

The paintings have a checkered ownership history. The majority of them were expropriated by the state from the private collections of two Moscow businessmen, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

"Shchukin was different. He started to collect unpopular art that the Louvre and other museums didn't want," Antonova said in a 2005 interview with a Russian paper.

"I think he heard the underground tremors that were soon to change the world. It's that kind of collector a country produces before a revolution," she said.

(Editing by Michael Roddy)

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