

New \$27 Million Museum Aims to Push Russian Art Into Global Limelight

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Rem Koolhaas, left, and Dasha Zhukova at Garage's opening Wednesday.

As politicians and church leaders trumpet Russia's role as a guardian of conservative social values in a world drowning in decadence and obscenity, the country's artistic elite are vying for influence in the international art scene.

The desire to push Russian art into the international limelight was on display Wednesday at the press launch of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's grandiose new gallery space, the museum's first permanent home.

See the photo gallery: [Garage Art Gallery Opens New Venue in Moscow](#)

"I believe contemporary art is important because it reflects the moment that we are currently in," said Dasha Zhukova, the founder of Garage and wife of billionaire oil tycoon Roman Abramovich.

"In 2007, when we came up with an idea to create an art institution in Moscow I could never have imagined that Garage would become what it is today," Zhukova told journalists in the museum's spacious lobby, its walls adorned with an iconic Soviet-era mosaic.

First opened in 2008, Garage quickly became a force to be reckoned with, setting trends and defining standards for Russia's contemporary art scene. In the years that have since passed, it has exhibited the works of some of the world's most respected modern artists, including the likes of Mark Rothko, Marina Abramovic and John Baldessari.

Despite these foreign acquisitions, Garage's primary mission has always been to push Russian contemporary art into the global spotlight.

In its early years, Garage occupied a relatively modest temporary venue. But Zhukova's sights were always set on something grand: a full-scale museum that would stand as the pinnacle of Moscow's modern art scene.

In 2012, Garage commissioned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, winner of the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize, to overhaul what at that point were the derelict remains of what had once been a legendary Soviet restaurant, transforming the space into a sleek, glittering museum.

The end result of the \$27 million project is a sprawling space, its edifice at once utterly sterile and unapologetically hip. The building is wrapped in a thin double layer of translucent polycarbonate, as if in an attempt to appear open, while also imposing a sharp boundary with the outside world.

Garage's new permanent space is at home in the recently gentrified Gorky Park, which has become a hub for Moscow's trendy masses.

But it stands in stark contrast with much of the rest of the country.

In recent years, socially conservative activists have protested against the emergence in Russia of various contemporary art exhibitions and theater productions.

In 2008 Andrei Yerofeyev, head of the contemporary art department at Moscow's world-renowned Tretyakov Gallery, was fired from the prestigious post after curating an exhibit that featured an image of Jesus wherein his head had been replaced with an Order of Lenin medal. A similar image featured Christ with the head of Mickey Mouse.

In a recent high-profile iteration of anti-modern-art sentiment, Boris Mezdrich, director of the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater, was ousted from his position after he refused to cancel the theater's run of the Richard Wagner opera "Tannhauser." The controversial production featured a poster depicting a crucifix between the legs of a naked woman, provoking the ire of the regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In his annual address to Russian lawmakers in 2013, President Vladimir Putin urged the imperative of protecting traditional values.

"This destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis

of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values," he said at the time.

Kate Fowle, Garage's British chief curator, dismissed speculation that Garage is swimming against the Russian mainstream.

"In the post-Soviet generation there are many people who have very many interests in working and thinking internationally and amplifying all the different perspectives that are happening here. What we need to do is look around us and see how Moscow, how Russia, connects to the international universe," Fowle told The Moscow Times.

Garage has attempted to remain above the fray as far as these gaping cultural divides are concerned, adroitly dodging potentially controversial artistic themes. Among the eight inaugural exhibits, none contained a predominantly political subtext — a fact that helps ensure against arousing the ire of angry activists, but that also deflates the museum's potential to address the issues most important to modern Russia.

Still, Garage is now nestled in its permanent home, and the team behind the contemporary art space are in it for the long haul. Among the many objects on display in the cavernous space is a concrete case expected to contain a work made from nuclear waste. However, the team behind the nuclear piece need to wait for the item to vitrify — a lengthy process. The piece that will occupy the cement case is set to arrive at Garage in the year 3015.

"Just in case anyone doubted it, Garage is here to stay ... forever," said museum director Anton Belov.

The museum will be open to the public on June 12.

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