

The New York Times

After Cutting Ties With Russia, a Hermitage Museum Outpost Rebrands

The Hermitage Amsterdam broke away from its St. Petersburg mother ship and will now be called H'Art Museum, presenting works from the Smithsonian, the Centre Pompidou and the British Museum.



The Hermitage Amsterdam was established as an independent nonprofit in 2009, with the right to use the Hermitage name and “unlimited rights” to borrow works from the Russian collection. Credit: Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times.

By Nina Siegal

Reporting from Amsterdam

June 26, 2023

In March 2022, a week after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Hermitage Amsterdam museum severed ties with the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

The decision was a “moral” one, said the Hermitage Amsterdam’s director, Annabelle Birnie, in an interview. But it had major practical consequences for the museum, which had been founded in 2009 as a kind of satellite of the Russian institution.

Without the link to St. Petersburg, the Hermitage Amsterdam was adrift, without an identity or art to exhibit. It had to reinvent itself quickly, or simply close its doors.

At a news conference in Amsterdam on Monday, flanked by international museum directors and diplomats, Birnie announced that the museum is now re-emerging with a new name and a new group of collaborators.

As of Sept. 1, it will be renamed H’Art Museum, and it will present exhibitions in partnership with three international museums: the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington D.C.; the Centre Pompidou, in Paris; and the British Museum, in London.



The H’Art Museum’s new branding was developed by Studio Berry Slok, from Amsterdam. Credit: Alizé Barthélemy.

“We’re going to be like a museum for museums,” said Birnie. “Three partners will bring you a lot more than one.”

H'Art will have separate contracts with each of the partner institutions, Birnie said Friday by phone, so that it can receive art loans, and share information plus curatorial and educational resources. Sometimes, H'Art will borrow full exhibitions, and perhaps adjust them for the Dutch audience; other times it will develop new shows using art from a partner's collection. The financial arrangements have not yet been settled, Birnie said, but the collaboration agreements had already been signed.

The Pompidou has agreed to work with H'Art on five exhibitions over five years, starting in 2024 with a show of Wassily Kandinsky works from the French museum's collection. The partnership comes at an advantageous time for the French contemporary and modern art museum, as it will close for renovations in 2025, and is expected to be shuttered for about five years.

"It is a great joy for us to join the H'Art Museum as it begins this new chapter," said Laurent Le Bon, the Pompidou's president, in an emailed statement, "as it will be the first long-term partnership between a Dutch cultural institution and the Centre Pompidou."

The Smithsonian and the British Museum will work with H'Art Museum curators to mount three exhibitions each in the next six years, Birnie said, adding that the full schedule for the coming years would be released in the fall.

The Hermitage in St. Petersburg did not immediately reply to a request for comment on Monday.

The Hermitage Amsterdam was established as an independent nonprofit by a board of private individuals in 2009, and had its own artistic direction finances, and curatorial staff. Its contract with the St. Petersburg Hermitage gave the Amsterdam museum the right to use the Hermitage name and "unlimited rights" to borrow works from the Russian collection.

For the 14 years since it opened, the Hermitage Amsterdam mounted 30 exhibitions with art on loan from its St. Petersburg mother ship, including significant shows of French Post-Impressionist and Flemish old master paintings.

About a third of the shows were linked to Russian culture and history, such as exhibitions about the Hermitage's founder Catherine the Great and "Jewels! The Glitter of the Russian Court."

Such celebrations of imperial glamour seemed less appealing to the public while Russia was bombing Ukraine, Birnie said. "I think the magic of Russia has disappeared with the war," she added.

The Hermitage Amsterdam's final collaboration with the St. Petersburg museum, "Russian Avant-Garde: Revolution in the Arts," was scheduled to show for a year, but it was closed after five weeks when the museum cut ties with Russia. The museum took a roughly \$2 million loss by closing it early, Birnie said.

“We felt this was the only right thing to do,” said Birnie. “We had to live with the consequences, but we held onto that decision with pride. As the situation developed in Ukraine, time proved us right.”



The American billionaire Thomas Kaplan will also provide a major loan of Dutch masters paintings to the H'Art Museum for an exhibition in 2025. Credit: Herman Wouters for The New York Times.

In the months after the Hermitage Amsterdam cut ties, Dutch museums stepped in to help it stay afloat, temporarily loaning some of their star works in gestures of solidarity. The Rijksmuseum gave Johannes Vermeer's "The Milkmaid"; the Van Gogh Museum, Vincent Van Gogh's "The Yellow House"; and the Boijmans van Beuningen, its "The Tower of Babel" by Bruegel. The museum also raised almost \$1 million through a crowdfunding campaign.

In February, the Hermitage Amsterdam opened "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," which is still on view. That show assembles 35 artworks from a private trove of Dutch Master Paintings owned by the American billionaire Thomas Kaplan.

Kaplan will also provide another major loan of Dutch masters to the H'Art Museum for an exhibition in 2025, which will include 17 Rembrandt paintings he owns. He said he was enthusiastic about the museum's choice to partner with the Smithsonian, the Pompidou and the British Museum.

"The collaboration with these great museums," he said, would "act as a magnet for other great collaborations."

"Success breeds a desire by others to participate," Kaplan said. "So not only will the museum have made the break with its origin story with Russia," he added, it would "emerge from it an even more vital force than ever before."