

Renewal in the New Hermitage: The Restoration of Leo von Klenze's Galleries in the State Hermitage Museum

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In 1997, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia committed itself to restoring the galleries of the “New Hermitage” to their original mid-nineteenth-century appearance as initially designed by the German architect Leo von Klenze. Since its inauguration in 1852, the collections of classical antiquities and painting galleries were reinstalled multiple times, masking Klenze’s imaginative employment of the “Neo-Greek” aesthetic. The rapidly expanding collection and the shifting demands of public access necessitated modifications to the galleries’ layout and the importation of relevant technologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Currently, the scheme of refurbishment, the New Hermitage’s most costly and ambitious conservation effort to date, has uncovered many layers of decoration, providing insight into Klenze’s architectural practice, in terms of style and use of materials.

The New Hermitage Museum’s scholarly importance as Russia’s first publicly accessible institution for the consumption of art is increased by its significance in Klenze’s *oeuvre*. Klenze, famed at the time of the St Petersburg commission for his Glyptothek and Alte Pinakothek in Munich, has often been overshadowed by his great rival, K. F. Schinkel. The New Hermitage galleries, however, remain some of the only museum interiors that espouse Klenze and Schinkel’s ingenious theories that survived World War Two largely unaltered. The innovative practice of these two architects prepared the visitor for a deeper understanding of each exhibit by combining the vocabulary of neoclassicism with decorative references devised from contemporary archaeological discoveries. Key to this methodology is the direct correspondence of each gallery’s decorative program to the period of artistic production from which the objects emerged.

From the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), the Romanov imperial collection of fine art rapidly expanded throughout the eighteenth

century to become one of the world's richest collections of Western European art by the nineteenth century. The collection grew most rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century under Catherine the Great (1762-1796). Catherine saw in her collecting practices the potential to slight her political rivals in Europe. With a vast treasury and absolute control over the mechanism of state, the empress could bid on most significant collections that appeared on the market. Throughout her thirty-four year reign, Catherine exhibited feverish collecting habits, spending enormous sums to out-bid other European monarchs through her agents in London, Paris, and Berlin. It was not until the reign of her grandson, Nicholas I (1825-1855), however, that the concept of a publicly accessible museum structure was realised.

The New Hermitage, as it became known, was an extension of the private display spaces next to the Winter Palace called the Small or Old Hermitage, and the Large Hermitage. Nicholas envisioned a museum rivaling the grandest exhibition spaces in Europe including the Louvre, Berlin's Altes Museum, and London's National Gallery. The design for this ambitious project was entrusted to Klenze, then the court architect of Bavaria. Nicholas met Klenze in 1838 on a trip to the Bavarian capital, and while being led on a personal tour of the Glyptothek, he invited the architect to St Petersburg. There, Klenze was asked to complete a section of interior decoration in St Isaac's Cathedral, which had been an ongoing imperial project for twenty years. Shortly after amending the Cathedral, Klenze and the Tsar began to negotiate plans for the New Hermitage.

Since its completion in 1852, the New Hermitage has been reinstalled several times, resulting in negligence toward Klenze's conception of the museum. The demands of public architecture and theories of display have changed dramatically since the mid-nineteenth century, necessitating equally dramatic architectural alterations. Museological solutions to these stipulations proved especially damaging to Klenze's decorative scheme during the Soviet period. In the late 1990s, the Hermitage and its commercial partners secured investments to restore the halls and galleries of the New Hermitage in the style of Klenze. This was partially motivated by the approaching celebrations commemorating 2003's three hundredth anniversary of St Petersburg's founding.

Refurbishment began in 1997 to restore the classical antiquities galleries. Work initiated in the Hall of the Art of the Archaic and Early Classical Period, formerly the Room of Russian Sculpture. Despite the shift in theme, this room remains a typical example of the Neo-Greek style Klenze

employed throughout the museum. Unlike several of its neighbours, the gallery's decoration has survived almost unchanged. As early as the 1860s, Russian works of sculpture were removed and objects from the earliest period of Greek artistic production were placed on display. Today, this is the first gallery visitors experience in a series illustrating the succession of Mediterranean development, from the archaic to the flourishing of Hellenism.¹ The vaults' arabesque decoration was completely restored by 2003, featuring its original medallions with the portraits of philosophers.

The program of restoration has been an enormous expense, resulting in periodic pauses in work, but has thus far unearthed new information about Klenze's architectural practice and his employment of materials native to Russia, Siberia and the Ural Mountains. When later additions to the galleries were removed, curators discovered that Klenze's design was adapted before the museum ever opened its doors. These findings, and the actions taken in outfitting the museum for a twenty-first-century audience, present several difficulties for the attempted reconstruction of the original appearance of the New Hermitage. The task before Hermitage curators has been a delicate balance preserving the architect's vision while maximizing display space for the extensive collections, necessitating the combination of scientific and aesthetic approaches.² Anna Trofimova, Director of the Department of the Art and Culture of Antiquity explains:



Fig. 1. Johann Drollinger and David lensenn, *Griffin fresco* in Corner Room I, c. 1849 50. Tempera, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: author.

... in taking up the reconstruction of the exhibits of antique art, we turned first of all to the history—the ideas of the architect, who created the New Hermitage, and also to the experience of predecessors—keepers and curators... The key idea of the program lies in the fact that the exhibits located in the halls of the New Hermitage must be built in 'the style of Klenze' and in accordance with the prevailing historical structure of the museum.³

The Department of the Art and Culture of Antiquity remains confident that the chronological arrangement of the galleries by periods of artistic production remains as instructive to today's public as to mid-nineteenth century audiences.

Klenze had to negotiate a number of difficulties when planning the New Hermitage halls and galleries. The museum acquired several new features as a result of the 1837 Winter Palace fire. The fire's point of origin was the Field Marshall's Hall, which quickly collapsed, revealing the shortcomings of the architect Auguste Montferrand's design. This incident may have destroyed a vast portion of the Imperial collection if links to the Small Hermitage had not been rapidly disassembled. The fire devastated all of the Winter Palace interiors, however, and contributed to Nicholas' notorious paranoia. He demanded that his art collection be protected against any similar risks, and thus the initiation of the New Hermitage project can in part be attributed to the Winter Palace restoration. Klenze, whose architectural training in Berlin had been grounded in a strong understanding of engineering, consulted Russian engineers to create an elaborate iron trussing system for the museum's roof. Bernhard Heres has pointed out that the volume and consistency of design of the New Hermitage's roof trussing remains utterly unique in steel work of the 1840s.⁴ Further innovation toward fire prevention is evidenced in the installation of painted metal ceilings in the coffered ground floor galleries.

The architect's permanent engagement at the Bavarian court of Ludwig I posed another major challenge. That appointment required his residency in Munich for the greater part of each year. During the twelve years that the New Hermitage construction and installation of works took place, Klenze visited St Petersburg just seven times. This left the supervision of daily works to two architects nominated by the building commission, Nikolai Yefimov and Vasily Stasov. Stasov, a respected senior architect at the Romanov court, had been responsible for the complete restoration of the Winter Palace after 1837, a feat he carried out in less than two years. Yefimov was a young energetic figure who spent his early career living and working in Italy after his education in Russia. He returned to St Petersburg with the specific intention of taking up a position in the museum's construction. Despite the experience of the former, Klenze and the building commission communicated almost exclusively with Yefimov, rather than deferring to Stasov. Klenze's correspondence with the building commission reveals many tense periods of disagreement between the main architect and his Russian counterparts, and Klenze was disappointed a number of times.



Fig. 2. Leo von Klenze, *Room 116* (formerly *Library Room IV*), 1840-52, restored 2008, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: author.

Stasov complained that Klenze had a poor understanding of Russia's climate, which led to potentially damaging structural decisions. Klenze frequently appealed to the favour of 'His Majesty the Emperor,' citing his proven expertise in museum design and the construction of large monuments to Western civilisation such as the Walhalla, Regensburg. On one such occasion he wrote:

It is constant and proven, that the ... design best calculated for harmony and for effect; together can be completely spoiled if he to which the design belongs cannot himself direct the execution, or if those who carry it out do not have an intimate intelligence of this that they have to make. Only one tone of color too strong or too low in the painting of decorations or the marble-*scajole*, and all may be spoiled in the eyes of the expert.⁵

Conservators discovered adjustments to Klenze's plans for the "Corner Room" painting gallery when exploration of wall surfaces revealed painted frescoes that were designed by Klenze in the 1840s. These paintings were masked for more than one hundred and fifty years, as the walls were covered by red fabric before the museum's opening [Fig. 1]. This room was designed for larger Dutch and Flemish paintings, and was at first designated as a space for training artists to copy Old Master paintings. Johann Drollinger and David Iensenn executed Klenze's gryphon patterned fresco using a size-tempera technique. Immediately after the fresco's completion in 1850, however, the building commission decided to line the walls with red silk prior to the installation of canvases. Subsequently, the room was painted green/gray before the First World War when the red panels were removed from the walls. It was not until restoration of this interior began in 2006 that the Neo-Greek frescoes were revealed.

Hidden decoration also exists in three rooms formerly included in the museum's ground floor library, including the home of Voltaire's personal library that Catherine I purchased after the *philosophe's* 1778 death. In these spaces, a unique pale pink, blue, and yellow striped colour scheme was used [Fig. 2]. The interior of *Library Room IV* remained intact until the years preceding World War One when the walls were painted green, after which they were painted red in the Soviet era. Also in the Soviet era, a set of windows opening the library to a courtyard were filled in, making the space dark, cavernous, and rather isolated from the rest of the public galleries.



Fig. 3. After Leo von Klenze, *Display Cabinet*, recreation in the style of Klenze, c. 2003. Amaranth and beech wood, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: author.

Black display cabinets replaced Klenze's book cases before painting took place, and remained in situ throughout the museum's 1970s redecoration. As a result, the walls retained large fragments of the original scheme. Restoration of the pink, blue and yellow scheme was completed throughout the summer of 2008. Trofimova, the chief fund-raiser and researcher behind this project, emphasises the difficulty the museum staff had in determining the dimensions of the stripes.⁶ Curators were not content to rely on the interpretation of the interior as presented in the Constantin Ukhomsky's watercolour views (1852-1860) of the sculpture galleries and suite of library rooms.⁷ These were executed nearly a decade after the museum's completion during C. G. Waagen's 1860s gallery restructuring. The 2008 refurbishment team instead worked with the Hermitage's conservation lab to determine the original pigment shades and to create a pattern based on remaining fragments.

Trofimova engineered the restoration and reconstruction of Klenze-style display cabinets for the re-opening of the ancient art galleries. Klenze designed display cases and furniture for every room of the New Hermitage,



Fig. 4. Leo von Klenze, *The Hall of Twenty Columns*, 1840-52. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.
Photo: author.

though only a small number of sets were ever constructed.⁸ Some original cabinets remain on display today in four classical antiquities galleries. Not only have these pieces been restored to their best condition, but a new series of cabinets was created to match the existing units. Cabinets were equipped with fluorescent lights and nineteenth-century panes of glass were replaced with shock-proof glass. To create Klenze's cases, the current designers were guided by the repetition of scale, form, decorative elements, and materials. In two locations authentic cabinets have been removed from their original locations, drawn to the centre of the room and placed in a protective case to highlight their craftsmanship. In other rooms new cabinets were manufactured to compliment authentic pieces [Fig. 3]. Curators expect the new series of cabinets to adhere to Klenze's display ideas that encouraged close examination of objects by comparison with other artefacts of the same classification.

Unlike the fabrication of Klenze's cabinets, the architect's furnishings fell victim to the stringent building committee. The architect designed chairs, settees, and console tables specific to the ornamentation of every room of the New Hermitage. With the cost of the museum project skyrocketing, however, the Tsar, under advisement from the building commission, decided that there was nothing particularly remarkable about these pieces. Furnishings for the New Hermitage were instead drawn from the enormous collection that had been distributed amongst the Winter Palace, the Marble Palace, and the Tauride Palace. While it is true that Klenze's New Hermitage pieces strongly resembled those used in his redecoration of the royal apartments of the *Königstracht* and the *Festsaalbau* in Munich, the New Hermitage furnishings do differ in that they were created on a substantially larger scale.⁹ The forms of the bases of the console tables respond directly to the gryphon motif employed in the ceiling frescoes of several painting and sculpture galleries, and to the bases of the exceptional obelisk-style display cases. In addition, the front legs of all of the chairs were designed with the unique addition of steel shafts, making the furniture significantly heavier and cumbersome to displace.¹⁰ In the end, the Tsar opted to install furnishings that predated the museum in every room except one.

While the New Hermitage galleries' reconstruction has revealed a number of architectural and decorative features distinct to Klenze's vision, this program of refurbishment nonetheless raises several problems for reconstructing the interiors of the museum in its first decade. First, the consideration of illuminating the halls and galleries was also a serious dilemma

in Klenze's time. He was a progenitor of the museum configuration oriented around large galleries outfitted with skylights which are abutted by smaller cabinets. In Klenze's age this arrangement became entrenched in the development of universal museums across Europe as seen in the Louvre, the Alte Pinakothek, the Dresden Gemäldegalerie, and Berlin's Altes Museum. Subsidiary cabinets in the New Hermitage are side-lit, but are quite dim throughout a significant part of each day. In the absence of electric lights, Klenze faced the reality of increasingly short St Petersburg days during autumn and winter months. Gas lighting was employed at this time, and remained the only form of artificial illumination until the installation of electricity in the early twentieth century. In the absence of gas lights, it is nearly impossible to grasp the difficulty of viewing works of art in faintly illuminated galleries, or indeed to understand this scheme's atmospheric effects. Accounts of the museum's gala opening cited its romantic, grand atmosphere. Florian Gille, the first appointed curator of the New Hermitage recalled the following details:

Ladies of the court in their exquisite dress grouped around the treasures of the Hermitage, chivalrous groups of soldiers in bright uniforms, the ministers of court, and the civil servants represented in this enclosure of privilege, all this pageantry accompanied by the Imperial Family, gave a new gloss to the selected room. The splendour of the festival was enhanced by the infinite art presented, which lit the rooms where 600 members of court suppered. The Italian Room, the Van Dyck Room and that of Rubens, with their immense vases and candelabra of malachite and jasper lit the space in a brilliant and inviting manner.¹¹

The present refurbishment aimed to bring greater clarity to Klenze's elaborately painted ceilings with the installation of light-emitting-diode (L.E.D.) lighting in the form of work lights and spotlights. This updating gives a false impression of the "essence of Klenze" as it is referred to in conservation reports, but does allow the public to view Klenze's frescoes like never before. The addition of ceiling lighting provides an unmatched view of Klenze's precise arabesque designs and the superior draughtsmanship with which they were carried out by Russian painters [Fig. 4].

Today's New Hermitage, while undoubtedly Klenze's masterpiece of museum construction, is not the museum of his 1840s designs. Still, it

is the only of Klenze's museums to survive mostly in tact that date from the 1820s to the 1850s. Both the Glyptothek and the Alte Pinakothek were completely devastated during World War Two and underwent heavily debated and widely publicised modernist reconstructions in the 1950s. The destruction of these interiors makes the Hall of Twenty Columns the only entirely preserved Klenze museum interior in the world. Perhaps for this reason it is one of the best-known rooms in the New Hermitage. It reopened in 2004 after a year of restoration funded by the Hermitage and the Confederation of Italian Industrialists. Their efforts to preserve Klenze's singular vision exemplifies the primary goals of the New Hermitage restoration program, which are to maximize display space for exhibiting St Petersburg's world class collections, and to facilitate public education on Klenze's pioneering theories of museum design.

- 1 A. Trofimova, 'Restoration in the Halls of Antique Art, 1998-2004,' *Communications of the State Hermitage*, LXII 2004, 244 (in Russian).
- 2 Ibid., 241-2.
- 3 Ibid., 241. All translations are the author's.
- 4 B. Heres, 'The Iron Roof Trusses of the New Hermitage in St. Petersburg - Structural Survey, Analysis and Assessment of a Masterpiece of Structural Steelwork from the 1840s,' in M. Dunkeld et al. (eds.) *Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Construction History*, Vol. 2, Exeter 2006, 1558.
- 5 Russian State Historical Archive, St. Petersburg, *Klenze to the Building Commission, 1845*, Archiv: fol. 176r [sic!] (in French).
- 6 The author thanks Anna Trofimova for sharing her insights on the state of refurbishment as of Autumn 2008.
- 7 For the entire series of drawings see A. N. Voronikhina, *Views of the Hermitage and Winter Palace*, Moscow 1983 (in Russian).
- 8 The creation of furnishings and display cabinets is not well documented. See T. B. Semenova 'Series of Display Cases for the New Hermitage,' *Communications of the State Hermitage by Order of Lenin*, LI Leningrad 1986, 19-22 (in Russian).
- 9 V. Shaefer, *Leo von Klenze: Furniture and Interiors*, Diss., Munich 1980, 91-96 (in German).
- 10 See T. Semenova and S. Wesnin, 'Leo von Klenze: Planning of the New Hermitage as reflected in his Letters to Saint Petersburg,' in W. Nerdinger, (ed.), *Leo von Klenze: Architect between Art and Court, 1784-1864*, Munich 2000 (in German), and T. Semyonova, 'The decoration of the New Hermitage: Nicholas I's public museum,' *British Art Journal*, Vol. II Winter 2000-2001, 127-134.
- 11 F. Gille, *Museum of the Imperial Hermitage. Notice on the Formation of the Museum and a description of the various collections it contains with an Introduction to the History of The Hermitage of Catherine II*, Saint-Petersburg 1860, xxvii-xxviii (in French).