**The Hermitage**

The State Hermitage in St. Petersburg ranks among the world’s most outstanding art museums. It is the largest museum in Russia: nowadays its vast and varied collections take up four buildings; its rooms if stretched in one line would measure many miles in total length, while they cover an area of 94240 square meters. Over 300 rooms are open to the public and contain a rich selection from the museum’s collections numbering about 2500000 items. The earliest exhibits Date from 500000-300000B.C., the latest are modern works.

The collections possessed by the museum are distributed among its seven departments and form over forty permanent exhibitions. A common feature, characterising these exhibitions is the arrangement of items (all of them originals) according to countries and schools in a strictly chronological order, with a view to illustrating almost every stage of human culture and every great art epoch from the prehistoric times to the 20th century.

Fabulous treasures are gathered in the Museum. It contains a rare collection of specimens of Soythian culture and art; objects of great aesthetic and historical value found in the burial mounds of the Altai; a most complete representation of exhibits characterising Russian culture and art. The Oriental collections of the Museum, ranking among the richest in the world, give an idea of the culture and art of the people of the Near and the Far East; India, China, Byzantium and Iran, are best represented; remarkable materials illustrative of the culture and art of the peoples inhabiting the Caucasus and Central Asia, also from part of the collections of the Department. The Museum numbers among its treasures monuments of ancient Greece and Rome and those from the Greek settlements on the North coast of the Black Sea.

World famous is the collection of West-European paintings, covering a span of about seven hundred years, from the 13th to the 20th century, and comprising works by Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Titian, El Greco, Velazquez, Murillo; outstanding paintings by Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Rubens; a remarkable group of French eighteenth century canvases, and Impressionist and Post Impressionist paintings. The collection illustrates the art of Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Germany, France, Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and some other countries. The West European Department of the Museum also includes a fine collection of European sculpture, containing works by Michelangelo, Canova, Falkonet, Houdon, Rodin and many other eminent masters; a marvellous collection of prints and drawings, numbering about 600 000 items; arms and armour; one of the world most outstanding collections of applied art, rich in tapestries, furniture, lace, ivories, porcelain metalwork, bronzes, silver, jewellery and enamels. An important part among the museum possessions is taken by the numismatic collection, which numbers over 1 000 000 items and is regarded as one of the largest in the world. A permanent exhibition of coins, orders and medals is open on the 2nd floor, rooms 398-400. There are auxiliary displays of coins forming part of exhibitions in other departments as well. A temporary exhibition of West-European medals is on view in the Raphael Loggias (1st floor, room 227).

The seven departments of the museum, i.e. the Department of Russian Culture, Primitive culture, Culture and Art of the peoples of the Soviet East, Culture and Art of the Foreign Countries of the East, Culture and Art of the Antique World, West-European Art, Numismatics, together with the Education Department, the Conservation Department and the Library determine the administrative and academic structure of the museum.

Within the past few decades the Hermitage has become one of the country’s most important centres of art study with a research staff of about 200 historians carrying out a vast program of research on art problems, and responsible for the preservation of the museum treasures, their conservation and restoration, and also for the scientific popularisation of art. The results of this varied work are published in the form of books, articles, periodicals, pamphlets, etc.

Since 1949 a post-graduate school has been functioning at the Hermitage, specialists in art working here at their theses.

An important aspect of the Museum’s research activities is the work of the annual archaeological expeditions organised by the Museum either independently or in co-operation with other Soviet scientific institutions. The most notable among them are: the Kazmir-Blur expedition making excavations of the city of Taishebaini dating from the 7th century B.C and situated on the Kazmir-Blur hill near Erevan; the Chersonese and Nymphaeum expeditions working on the sites of the ancient Greek towns in the Crimea, the Tadjik, Altai, Pskov and some other expeditions.The material discovered by them is of exceptional value, for not only does it throw fresh light on the problems of the history of the art and culture, but it also serves to enrich the Hermitage collections.

Most helpful in the Museum’s research work is the Hermitage Library which contains about 400 000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and is one of the largest among the art libraries in Russia. It was started in the 18th century and contains works on all branches of fine and applied arts. In addition to the Central Library each Department has at its disposal a subsidiary library of special literature. Of these, the library of the Hermitage exchanges books with a number of Russian and foreign museums. It is open to every student of art.

All these are but a few aspects of the varied work carried out by the Museum and constantly achieving still greater scope and a few forms, meeting the growing cultural demands of the Russian people.