

Using the State Hermitage Museum, how easy is it to gain a sense of what constitutes Russian culture?

Introduction

The Hermitage Museum is a museum of art and culture in Saint Petersburg, Russia. It holds an impressive collection of over three million pieces, consisting of paintings, sculptures, archeological artefacts, antiquities, and more (The State Hermitage Museum, 2024). This museum will be explored via a virtual tour, in order to ascertain how easy it is to gain a sense of what constitutes Russian culture. An overview of the museum and its website will be given to provide context. Its collections as well as target audience, two significant components of the museum, are also explored in relation to how the museum represents Russian culture.

Overview Of the Hermitage Museum

The Hermitage museum was founded in 1764 during the reign of empress Catherine the Great who had amassed a personal collection of paintings (Cameron and Lapierre, 2007, p.65). It is considered one of the oldest museums in the world (2007, p.65), and is among the most visited, with a total of 2,812,913 visitors in 2022 (Ledsom, 2023). It is worth noting that visits to the museum may have been impacted by the war between Russia and Ukraine during this time, and would have likely been even higher if not for this factor.

The location of the Hermitage museum holds a breadth of historical significance. Mikhail Piotrovsky (2003, p.9), director of the museum, describes it as a “living memorial” to eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia. The Winter Palace, where the main museum complex is located, is a significant site in the history of the Russian Revolution, which began in 1917 and sought to abolish the Russian empire (McCaffray, 2018, p.3). It was the primary place of residence of the ruling Romanov family, and McCaffray (2018, p.5) states that during their reign, the Winter Palace was a “setting for displaying wealth, power, and sophistication”. One could argue that the Winter Palace still serves to display those particular qualities. However, the Winter Palace is more than a symbolic stage for Russia’s former monarchy. Following the Russian Revolution, the palace was claimed by the public (2018, p.9), and over the following centuries, the symbolism of the palace has shifted from representing the monarchy to representing the people of Russia. Thus, at first glance, the palace may seem to represent wealth, imperialism, and grandiosity, but it is a significant symbol of the revolution.

Overview of the Hermitage Website

The Hermitage museum has opened its doors to visitors all over the world who wish to experience the museum’s vast collections as well as its stunning and impressive architecture via a virtual tour, which can be accessed on the museum’s official website. The current website is, in fact, the second website that was created for the museum. The first was created in 1995 and was developed in Russia. It was of a lower quality and standard than the current website, due to its creator’s limited technological knowledge and expertise (Leigh Morbey, 2006, p.271). Piotrovsky wanted the website to

be accessible to a global audience with whom to share Russian history and culture, thus the museum partnered with the American multinational technology company IBM to launch a new website in 1999 (2006, p.271). The website was reconstructed in 2014, taking into consideration technological advances (The State Hermitage Museum, 2024). An interface, for example, was developed to enable viewing on mobile devices (2024). The website was restructured and interactive services were implemented to enhance the experience of the virtual visitor (2024). This indicates that the virtual experience is a priority to the museum.

Morbey (2006, p.268) proposes a notion of “cybercolonialism” with regards to how computing ideas initiated by IBM, an American organisation, are influencing the Hermitage website. It is further argued that the current website strongly resembles those of American museums, and that this limits representations of Russian culture (2006, p.273). There are, for example, obvious similarities in the design and layout between the Hermitage website and that of The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (fig.1 and 2). This raises questions about whether national identity is being represented on the museum’s website.

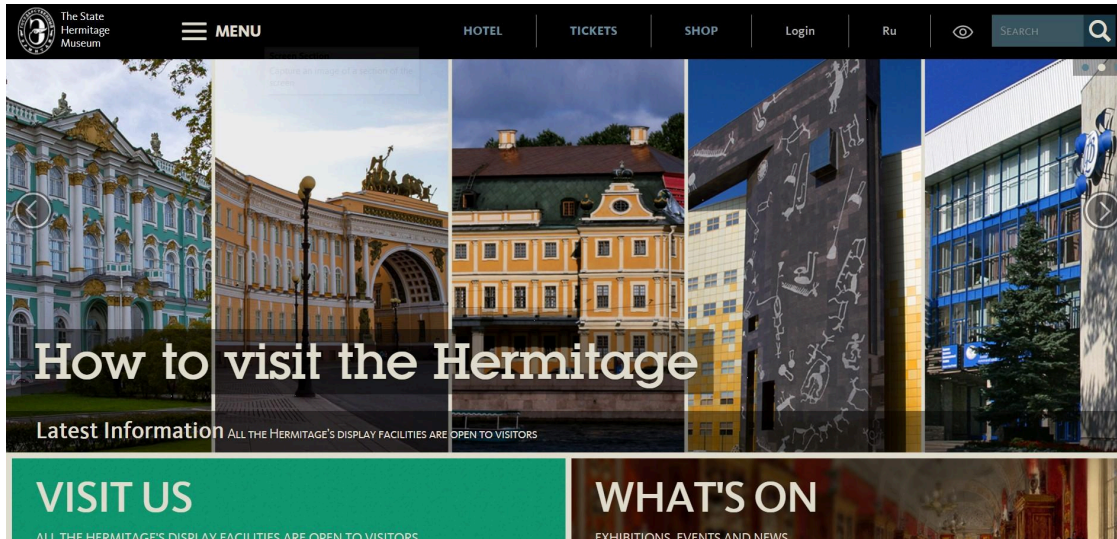


Figure 01. The State Hermitage Museum Website

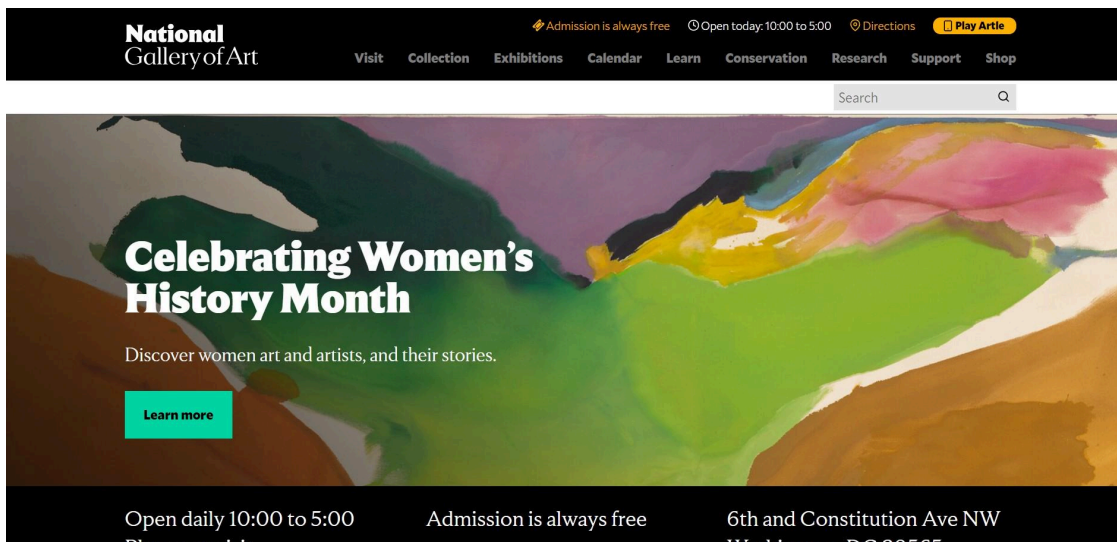


Figure 02. The National Gallery of Art Website

Virtual Visitor Experience

Practically every step of the museum has been captured in panorama shots, allowing visitors to experience the museum from the comfort of their own homes. This is available on the “Virtual Visit” page, of which there are numerous options of things to

explore. The layout of this page is logical and easy to navigate. The Main Museum Complex, which is in the Winter Palace, is the first option on the “Virtual Visit” page, and by far the biggest, containing 741 panoramas through which to explore the museum’s collections. There are three floors in the Main Museum Complex, the pages for which contain a floor map as well as a list of collections, both of which are interactive and take visitors directly to their corresponding panorama with just one click. The layout is clear and simple to navigate, although I felt rather overwhelmed by the vastness of the collections on offer.

Exploring the main museum complex itself is arguably as significant an aspect of the experience as the collections themselves, due to the historical and grandiose architecture. For example, the Jordan Staircase (fig.3) is more than a means for ascension, it is a sublime sight, containing Italian marble sculptures and gold detailing. Information is available for this section, describing it as a “space that needs to be perceived in motion”, indicating the museum space is as integral an aspect of the museum’s narrative as the collections on display.

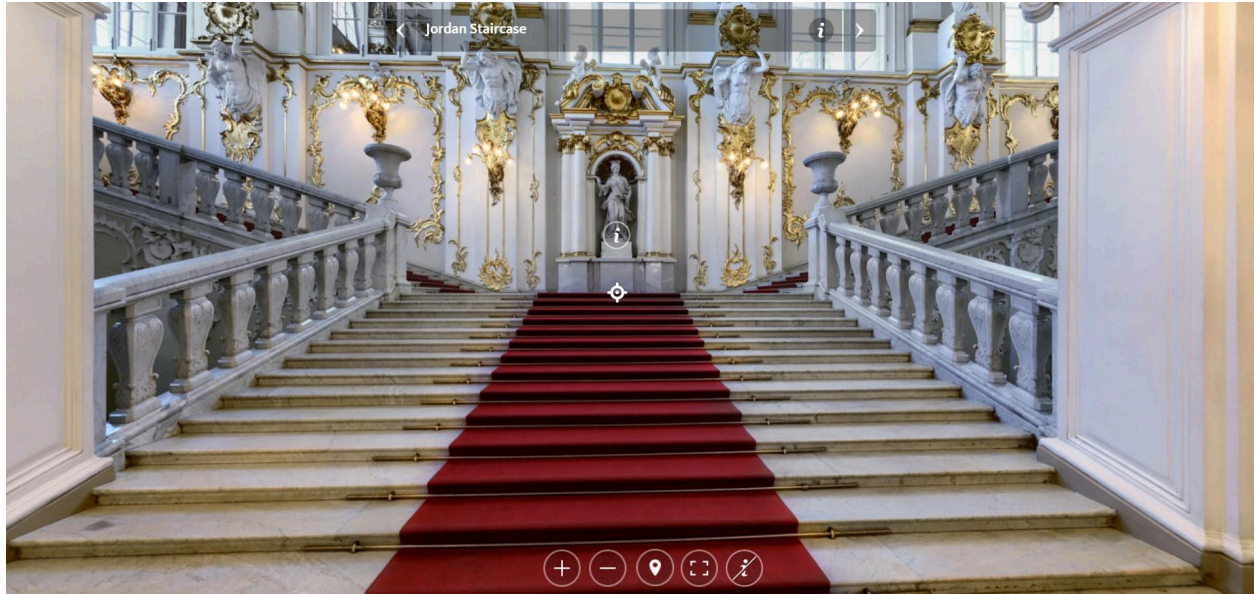


Fig.3 “The Jordan Gallery”, The State Hermitage Museum

I began my visit by virtually making my way from the Jordan Staircase onto Ancient Egypt. In this section, one can click on points dotted about the room that transitions to another panorama, effectively moving around the environment. In this way, one can look around the whole room. Each different panorama gives an overview of information about the items on display in that area. One can zoom in or out to get a better view of the items, though this does not allow me to get as close to some items as I would like, especially as zooming in too far produces a pixelated image. When visiting a museum in person, I am more interested in the physical items on display than I am the accompanying information, however when visiting online, I find I am more interested in the information than in the images on the screen. As I virtually move through the space, I am amazed by the stunning architecture and grandiosity of the building, for example, in the Alexander Hall (fig.4). It occurs to me that experiencing the space through a

screen is a limiting substitute for experiencing the space in person, and it is likely considerably more breath-taking to move through the actual building.

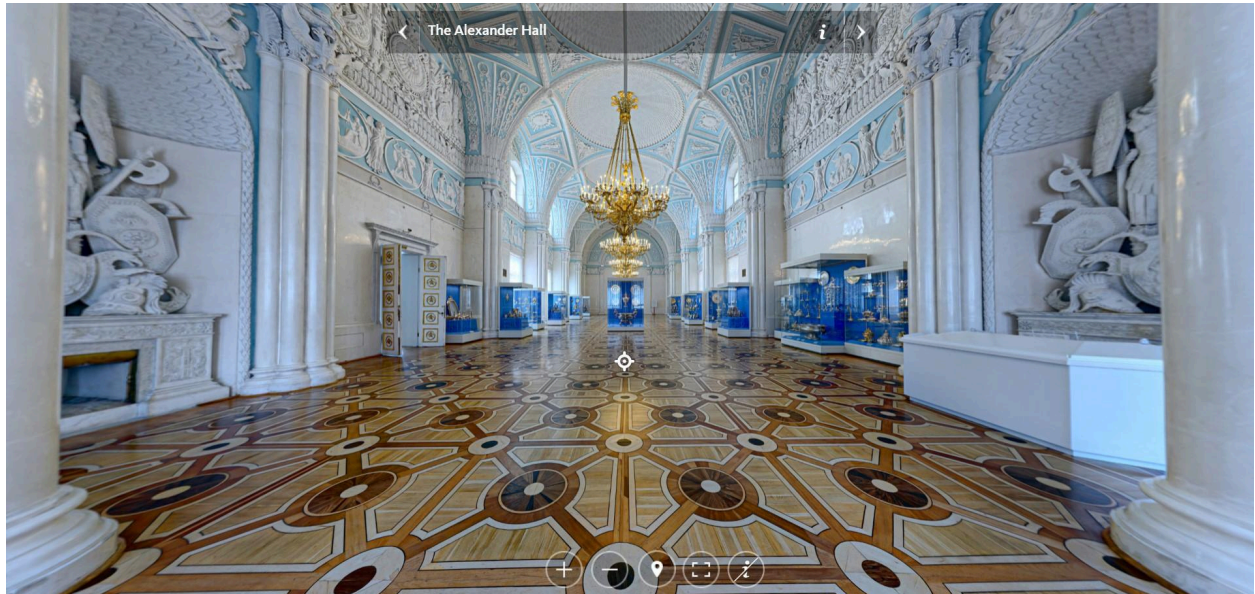


Fig.4 “The Alexander Hall”, The State Hermitage Museum

Target Audience

As stated by Piotrovsky, the intention behind the museum website was to reach a global audience (Leigh Morbey, 2006, p.271), and certainly providing a virtual tour allows many people who may never visit Russia to explore the museum. However, access to the virtual tour requires the resources to access the internet. According to statistics, 66.2% of the global population use the internet, and there is a significant correlation between income and access to the internet (Petrosyan, 2024). Thus, having access to the internet is a privilege, and whilst the Hermitage website may be available globally, it is only accessible to those who possess that privilege.

The website is available to view in either Russian or English, which could indicate that it primarily caters to the anglophone population of the world. In comparison, the website for The Louvre in Paris can be viewed in English, French, Spanish, or Mandarin (Le Louvre, 2024), whilst the Tokyo National Museum website can be viewed in Japanese, English, Traditional or Simplified Chinese, Korean, German, French, or Spanish (Tokyo National Museum, 2024), indicating that these websites, and by extension the museums, cater to a truly international audience.

Education appears to be a key principle of the museum. The museum offers specialised tours for students ranging from preschool aged children to eighteen year olds, as well as themed tours for parents and children, and classes for children with special needs (The State Hermitage Museum, 2024). This suggests that children and teenagers are a key demographic for the museum, which aims to be inclusive and accessible. There is also a theatre and a lecture hall. The pages for these facilities on the website seem to be available only in Russian, indicating that these aspects of the museum are targeted specifically towards local visitors. It has been argued that overtime, museums have shifted from being focused on the collection, to more visitor orientated. This viewpoint has been discussed by deputy museum director Stephen Weil (2007) in his essay “From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody”, in which he suggests that museums are now more focused on providing educational services (2007, p.30). He suggests one significant reason that museums are focusing more on the visitor experience is simply funding. The majority of the world's museums were established after WW2 in 1945, thus, museums have received less governmental support, meaning

that museums are now more reliant on visitor support than they were previously (2007, p.32).

Collections

The Hermitage houses an extensive collection of approximately three million objects, which consists of approximately 16,700 paintings, 12,500 sculptures, 300,000 objects of applied art, 620,000 works on paper, 725,000 archeological artefacts, and 1,125,000 numismatic objects (Cameron and Lapierre, 2007, p.66). Evidently, the museum's vast collection of art is one of its most significant assets. The collections span over multiple regions of the world over multiple periods in time, such as ancient Egypt, the neolithic and early bronze ages, Italian Renaissance art, the art of Japan between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, to name just a few examples. The collections are extensive and diverse. However, museums that possess collections of artefacts and antiquities from around the globe are a controversial subject, as this raises questions of rightful ownership. The British Museum is one such museum that is often the topic of debate, as it has acquired numerous valuable treasures through British imperialism throughout the nineteenth century (Aronsson and Elgenius, 2014, p.16). For this reason, showcasing such collections could be seen as displaying one nation's dominance over other parts of the world.

There are a number of collections pertaining to Russian history and culture. For example, there are Russian icon paintings from the fourteenth through to the eighteenth century, as well as a collection of "The Culture and Daily Life of Early Rus", which

displays artefacts representing material and spiritual culture in early Russia, dated from the tenth to fourteenth century. Such artefacts give an impression of Russia's history, which is an integral component of a country's culture, but there is a lack of items within the collection that tell visitors much about modern day life in Russia or its rich and diverse culture.

Conclusion

The Hermitage museum is a stunning and historically rich museum with an impressive collection. The virtual visit is interesting, highly informative, and easy to navigate. However, viewing the museum's collections through a screen is limiting, especially as the history and culture of the museum is more so displayed in its architecture than in the collections on display, which neglect to represent Russian culture. It could be argued that the location and buildings of the museum give one a greater sense of Russian history and culture than the museum's displays. Due to the Hermitage's collaboration with IBM, the website is also not representative of Russian culture. Like many modern museums, education seems to be a priority within the Hermitage, and there seems to be a great focus on the visitor experience. Overall, it appears that the visitor experience and reaching a global audience is a higher priority of the museum than representing Russian culture.

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