

The Invisible Museum

by Yaël Kreplak

Though primarily a visual experience, the museum nonetheless depends on a number of invisible tasks. V.A. Lépinay's book uses the Hermitage Museum as a field of investigation and reveals the scientific work done on the collections, their constitution and their presentation to the public.

Vincent Antonin Lépinay, *Art of Memories. Curating at the Hermitage*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.

In the 2002 film *Russian Ark*, Alexander Sokurov brought his audience into the Hermitage Palace by means of a long sequence shot, which, from corridors to reception halls, followed an entire cast of characters of Russian history. Nearly twenty years later, Vincent Antonin Lépinay gives us once again a chance to immerse ourselves in the old Imperial Winter Palace seen from an entirely different perspective, that of the curation of its treasures by its “guardians,” in a palace that has become one of the most famous museums in the world.

Art of Memories. Curating at the Hermitage is thus closer to documentaries such as Frederick Wiseman's 2014 *National Gallery*, for example, which open up for us the daily life of museums: the hanging of paintings, the sweeping of exhibition halls, the surveillance of visitors, the team meetings... In following the curators, restorers, and museum guides, chapter by chapter V.A. Lepinay's work brings into sharp focus the

scientific work done on the collections, how they are composed, studied and presented to the public.

V.A. Lepinay tells us at the book's opening that it was by way of a meeting with the director that the museum was presented to him as a field of investigation. As a Frenchman in Russia, a specialist in financial systems, Lepinay had come to the Center for Science and Technology Studies which had been newly established by the European University of Saint Petersburg. Narrating the circumstances of his inquiry, V.A. Lepinay contributes to the long history in intellectual exchanges between France and Russia, and to the understanding of a post-Soviet context, particularly through the mention of the role of the *prikaz* (p. 241), this official mission order, that quite literally opens the doors to the museum to him—though not always easily.

The circumstances are not without significance. Faithful to the principles of science and technology studies, V.A. Lepinay places certain issues at the heart of his analysis: the role of documents, the problematics of access, the presentation of oneself, and the context of knowledge production in the way in which the Hermitage Museum defines and accomplishes its mission. That is the stated ambition of the work: "*experimenting with the Hermitage*" (p. ix). Put another way, its ambition is to make the museum a terrain for experimental research which would consist of benefiting from the intersecting contributions of media studies, organizational studies, and science and technology studies. The preceding would contribute to developing an idea of the museum as "technology of visibility" (p. 238), polarized between exposing its collections and preserving the secrets of their conservation.

The Eye of the Hermitage: History of an Exception

The Imperial Palace became a national museum in 1917. A cultural enclave under the Communist regime, this museum of 2000 employees and 2.5 million objects, which mixes the treasures of the Russian Empire with masterpieces of Western art, is frequented by masses of tourists from the world over. With such a history, the Hermitage stands as an exception (p. 1). Envisioning the museum as a "box" (an image much appreciated in sociology of sciences) that has been closed and then opened again in rhythm with political events, (p. 238), V.A. Lépinay questions the relationships that have developed with objects in the collections, between protection and exposition, between preservation and circulation.

In such a context, how is the “eye” of a professional of this museum trained? As V.A. Lépinay explains, the Soviet period leaned towards the development of what he calls the curators’ unprofessionalism (p. 143). Due to restricted access to norms and standards of the profession, such as those developed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) created in 1946, employees of the Hermitage developed their knowledge and structured their practice through daily contact with the works and referring to internal sources. Thus through fragments of interviews the great personalities of the museum appear: restorers legendary for their technical virtuosity and curators celebrated for their erudition. The terminology used reproduces the way in which the professionals see the uniqueness of their position: beyond the general category of “Hermitager” which encompasses all the employees, the “keepers” must be given special mention. These are the collections’ guardians whose missions can be compared to those of the curators (acquiring, studying, exposing). One must also mention the “methodologists,” former “keepers” in charge of the intensive training of the museum’s guides (who are the subject of the beautiful chapter 5).

One fact conveys the stakes tied to the promotion of this museum’s internal culture and its transmission: the director decided, in the early 1990s, to authorize the personnel to decline retirement (p. 2-3). In the terms of V. A. Lépinay, it appears therefore that the museum collects and conserves as much the objects themselves as the people who conserve these objects. Yet the development of collections, the turnover of personnel, their professionalization, the opening of the museum to international audiences have transformed this configuration from an artisanal kind of functioning to a scientific organization, whose tendency is to normalization and standardization.

A Laboratory of Transformations of Art History

Another unique aspect of the Hermitage, emphasized several times, is how it stakes its claim as a research center, with its 200 “keepers” as specialists of the history of the collections. How is research led within the framework of the Hermitage? With this, *Art of Memories* touches upon a current subject of debate in the museum world, that of the promotion of the research aspect of heritage work and the relations between

university and museum.¹ Without leaving aside the importance of institutional policies, V. A. Lépinay turns his attention rather toward the concrete means of the production of scientific knowledge. For him, the museum is a prime opportunity to retrace the chain of production of art history, as it is developed and diffused in the different aspects of work on the collections. This ranges from the composition of entries for catalogs to the guides speaking during tours, as well as to the material examination of works in order to reevaluate an attribution by way of new analytical technologies.

Chapter 2 harnesses the field of media studies² in order to explore the relationships between documentation techniques and scientific writing, and to reflect on the current status of art history as practiced by museum professionals and as academic discipline. The book's aim is to describe the work of professionals as a form of proto-art history, or of an art history "from the collections up" (according to the title of chapter 3), whose evolutions and forms must be retraced.

V. A. Lépinay envisions the early 1970s implementation of a database for the management of the museum collections as a pivot. In doing so, he mainly examines the mutations of two major intellectual operations of conservation work: classification and description. Thus, as he explains beforehand, conservation work depends principally upon the knowledge held by the people in charge of different sectors of the collection, communicated selectively and for the most part, orally. With the database, this individual knowledge becomes so much shared information; oral culture finds itself replaced by the importance of registering information in the base; and, finally, the art of describing works is replaced by the work of information by keywords... Furthermore, because of the growing volume of the collections (with new acquisitions each year) the database has become a vital and essential tool for managing the collections remotely, the main part of which being stored in the reserves.

V. A. Lépinay deals here with a classic problematic of technical and scientific studies, that of the effects of standardization implied by digitalizing of the

¹ As an example, in France numerous "laboratories of excellence (Labex)" were created in the 2010s. Increasingly publicized, they bring together research and museum laboratories in order to develop fields of study regarding heritage work, and are largely funded by the Ministry of Culture.

² For this discipline see in particular the works of Lisa Gitelman, whose book *Paper Knowledge: Toward a History of Media Documents*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, examines the challenges tied to formats and modes of circulation of different types of document technologies (pdf documents, administrative prints...).

organization of knowledge.³ Still, these are art collections characterized by often unique objects, whose historic, aesthetic, and economic value depends on this uniqueness. Their specificity incites us to further address the effects of separating the knowledge about the collections from the observation of the collections, through a reflection on the notion of attachment.

Attachment to the collections

Who is the closest to the works in the collections? The keeper who chooses to acquire or expose them? The restorer who can touch and examine them at leisure during intervention? Or the guide, who each day stops in front of them to present them to the public? From this angle, the question of the comparative merit of the different professions of the museum is spread throughout the entire book, examining forms of proximity (indeed, of intimacy) to the works and the modes of their appropriation. In doing so, it is not only a question of documenting the rivalry between heritage professions—as it is with the sociology of professions⁴—but also of offering another analytical framework, sensitive to the emotional and affective dimension of relationships to heritage objects.

What binds together the museum's personnel and its objects? How do these ties manifest and what is their nature? Chapter 4, devoted to restorers, explores this question by way of a reflection on what V. A. Lépiny defines as different forms of "modesty." The work of restoration implies in fact taking care of objects discreetly, since a good restoration must be appreciated without being visible, or only to the eyes of peers, who might furthermore be asked to "de-restore." This work also implies sometimes choosing to not intervene, when the state of knowledge or techniques do not yet allow it, and to leave such responsibility to others when the right time comes.

Through this characterization of the restorers' professional ethos, V. A. Lépiny opens up a renewed reflection on "the love of art," that of the professionals in charge of its preservation and transmission. These professionals are presented as a privileged public of such works, including those not exposed and which are sometimes difficult

³ See particularly the pioneering works of Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out. Classification and its Consequences*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999.

⁴ See for example Léonie Hénaut, « Capacités d'observation et dynamiques des groupes professionnels. La conservation des œuvres de musées », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 52, 2011, p. 71-101.

to access. Chapter 6, the most theoretical in the book, thus addresses the sometimes troubled relations that develop between the visible and invisible parts of the collections. He closes the book with a reflection on “the complex relation to secrecy and visibility” that museums cultivate (p. 238).

From the history of constituting the collections, to the guides managing the flow of tourists, to the organization of the database, *Art of Memories* ranges widely over the multiple facets of the life of the Hermitage. It is perhaps regrettable that in doing so the book goes over certain matters a little too quickly, especially when it sacrifices descriptions of the works that occupy the staff, the detailed presentation of their activities, or yet again the spaces of the museum, which are only barely sketched. Specific examples are rare and the work contains almost no images: it has a few graphics, as support for the quantitative analyses of the circulation of works of art and of persons, but only two reproductions of works of art, in black and white.

It is also regrettable that the author hardly discusses the existing literature on conservation work, such as museum studies (rapidly referred to, p. 18), or certain studies in the anthropology of heritage work. And even though they are close to the problematics of his work, he also leaves aside works written in the field of science and technology studies, which analyze the conditions of implementing visibility of objects and the infrastructures of their conservation.⁵ Putting observations into perspective would doubtless have eased the tension between promoting the Hermitage’s singularity on one hand (its “extraordinary” character) and on the other a tendency to increasingly generalize on the functioning of museums, a subject he seems sometimes to gloss over.

But these flaws are the just the reverse side of the principal qualities of the book: a great freshness in its perspective on the museum world, and the conceptual inventivity put into use in order to tell of it. In seeing the museum as a laboratory, as a box, or as an infrastructure, *Art of Memories* opens avenues to explore and it will be interesting to see how they will be taken up by the specialists and professionals of heritage work. Without a doubt, while waiting, the author’s palpable enthusiasm for

⁵ See in particular the works of Tiziana Beltrame on the management of database of the works of the Musée du Quai Branly and those of Fernando Domínguez Rubio on the upkeep of works of art, with the example of the Mona Lisa. Tiziana Beltrame, « Un travail de Pénélope au musée : décomposer et recomposer une base de données », *Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2012, p. 217-237 ; Fernando Domínguez Rubio, « On the discrepancy of objects and things : an ecological approach », *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 21, n° 1, 2015, p. 59-86.

his subject will be communicated to readers to this lively tale of museum collections and their creation.

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