

Glitzy New York Dinner Backs St. Pete's Hermitage

By [Alexander Osipovich](#)

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Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Russian-born artists, were honored at the Hermitage event in New York this month. **Alexander Osipovich**

NEW YORK — Both the Georgian wine and the charitable donations flowed freely at a recent fundraiser aimed at supporting the State Hermitage Museum and bringing the venerable St. Petersburg institution into the 21st century.

Manhattan hedge fund managers, heirs of Russian nobility and former Soviet dissident artists mingled at the \$1,000 a plate dinner earlier this month, eating seared tuna and politely listening to speeches on U.S.-Russian cultural diplomacy.

The splashy dinner was the initiative of the Hermitage Museum Foundation, a New York-based charity bringing business know-how and an international cast of donors to assist the museum as it expands and modernizes.

“Every museum in the world needs help,” Paul Rodzianko, chairman of the foundation, told *The Moscow Times* in an interview on the sidelines of the fundraiser, held at Sotheby’s auction house in New York.

Notably, the foundation is helping the Hermitage find artworks from the 20th and 21st centuries to exhibit in the General Staff Building, where the museum is planning to open a new wing. The grand building on Palace Square, with its semicircular facade opposite the Winter Palace, is being renovated and converted into museum space in a long-running project slated for completion in 2014, when the Hermitage will celebrate its 250th anniversary.

“Trying to place American art in the Hermitage is one of our goals,” Rodzianko said.

Rodzianko has personal reasons behind his love of the Hermitage. His great-grandmother was a member of the Stroganoff family, a clan of pre-revolutionary aristocrats who (in addition to their association with the famous beef dish) were prominent art collectors that helped form the Hermitage’s present-day collection.

The foundation is also working with U.S. tech giant IBM to help the Hermitage redesign its web site, which has been criticized for its lack of user-friendliness.

Founded in 1994, the U.S.-based foundation is part of an international network of similar groups in countries like Britain, Canada and the Netherlands, many of which call themselves “Friends of the Hermitage.”

The foundation has enlisted wealthy supporters such as Len Blavatnik, the Moscow-born billionaire who owns stakes in major industrial firms like TNK-BP and United Company RusAl through Access Industries, his New York-based investment company. Blavatnik was a leading benefactor of the Nov. 5 fundraiser in New York, though he did not make a personal appearance.

The Hermitage’s expansion plans were a much-discussed topic at the fundraiser. Not everyone in St. Petersburg’s deeply conservative cultural establishment has welcomed the museum’s move into modern and contemporary art. But the sentiment among the crowd at Sotheby’s was distinctly supportive of Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky for leading the museum’s transformation.

“A great museum can’t stay in one place,” Ilya Kabakov, one of Russia’s best-known living artists and one of three honorees at the fundraiser, told *The Moscow Times*.

“Without Piotrovsky, it’s hard to imagine that the museum would be working with living artists,” said Sergei Bugayev-Afrika, another honoree. “It’s very important for the Hermitage to turn from an archive into a living organism.”

The foundation’s fundraiser, an annual event, did not go seamlessly this year. Piotrovsky had been due to give the keynote speech but canceled for health reasons. The third honoree, U.S. abstract artist Cy Twombly, died in July at age 83 and was honored posthumously, with his son Alessandro accepting the honor.

But the event still drew its fair share of high-profile guests, including Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, who stopped by the

dinner on his way to Washington.

In a speech at the fundraiser, Margelov stressed the importance of U.S.-Russian cultural exchanges. He also praised the Teliani Valley wine on offer at dinner, even though Georgian wine has been banned in Russia since 2006.

“Georgian wine has improved over the past few years,” Margelov said. “I hope that after we reach agreement on the WTO, we’ll be able to enjoy it again,” he added, referring to talks between Moscow and Tbilisi on Russia’s long-delayed bid to join the World Trade Organization.

Expats who are unable to attend the Hermitage Museum Foundation’s fundraising events in New York can still support the foundation by taking part in its annual White Nights Tour of St. Petersburg, held each year in late June. The price and itinerary of the tour vary from year to year.

For more information about the foundation, including the White Nights Tour, visit www.hermitagemuseumfoundation.org.

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