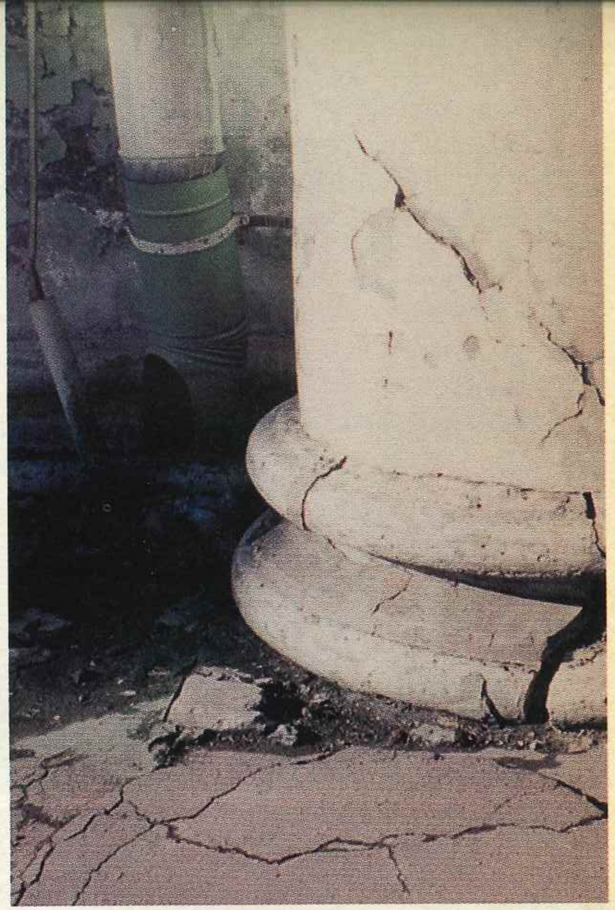
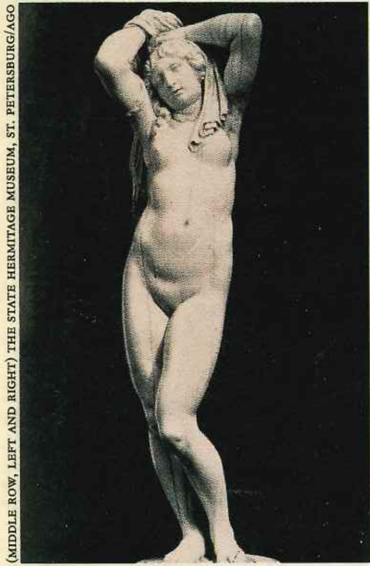


(MIDDLE ROW, LEFT AND RIGHT) THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG/AGO



THE TREASURE SEEKER

Robert Kaszanits has helped Russia's Hermitage Museum protect its vast collections from the ravages of time and human greed. Now he's tackling the biggest problem of all: bureaucracy *By Paul Webster*

ROBERT KASZANITS WAS AN ASSISTANT DIRECTOR AT THE National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa when he received the call that would change his life. It was from the Russian ambassador to Canada, Alexandre Belonogov, who was phoning on behalf of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, which is home to one of the largest art collections in the world. Belonogov had heard that Kaszanits, whose responsibilities at the National Gallery included security, exhibitions, and environmental-control conditions, had been advising museums in Czechoslovakia on improving their security. He said the Hermitage was facing a major crisis and needed his help.

The call from the ambassador came in August, 1992, about nine months after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By this time, certain details of the Hermitage's crisis, long hidden by Cold War secrecy, had already filtered through to the West, and Belonogov only confirmed what Kaszanits had already learned – that nearly a century of Communist austerity had pushed the building towards collapse, and its collection towards disaster. He asked Kaszanits if he could come to St. Petersburg as soon as possible.

Three months later, Kaszanits, then in his early forties, with a wife and three children in Ottawa, embarked on the sixteen-hour flight to St. Petersburg. His sense of anticipation quickened as the plane neared Russia. Throughout his career he'd heard about the Hermitage's many rooms of famous French, Italian, and Flemish masterpieces. The museum also had an enormous collection of antiquities, prehistoric and medieval art, jewellery, ceramics, sculpture, and it housed famous libraries, including those of Voltaire and Diderot. The Hermitage boasts that its extensive holdings – largely acquired by the empress Catherine the Great from the collections of aristocrats whose wealth was wiped out by the French Revolution – make it the world's largest, comparable in both quantity and quality to the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But apart from the unverifiable vastness of what the Hermitage was said to contain – it would take eleven years to spend a minute in front of each of its exhibits – Kaszanits had long been drawn to the mystery surrounding the works it held, a mystery perhaps only a handful of insiders had ever fathomed.

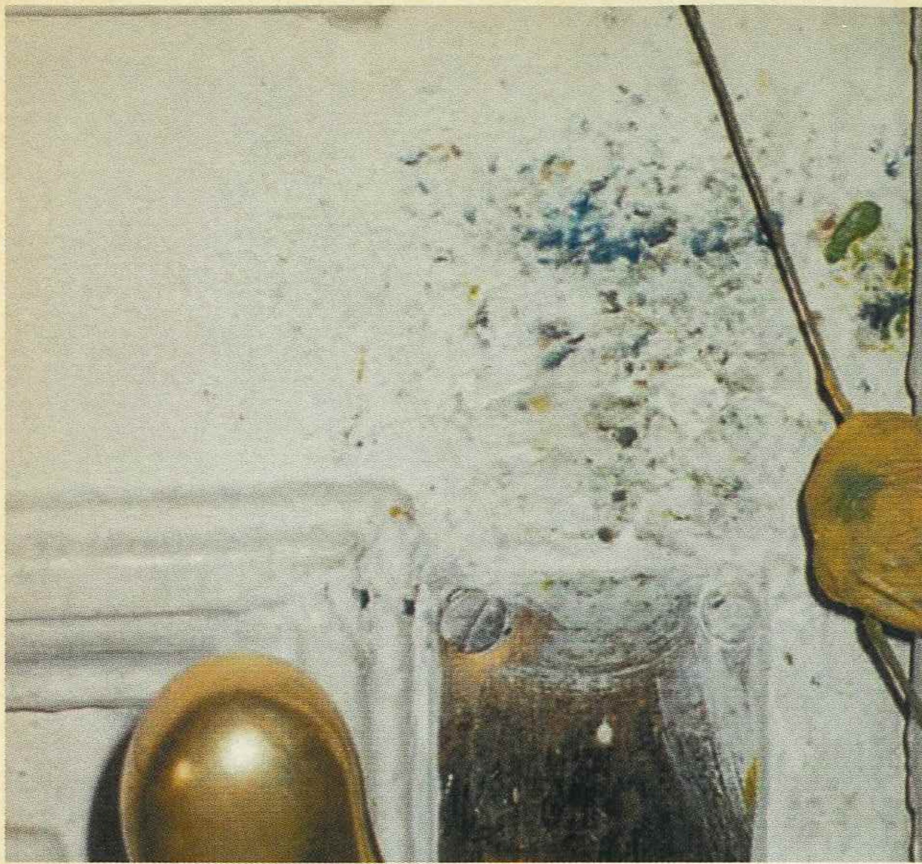
Kaszanits was picked up on a cold November afternoon in St. Petersburg by Nicholas Printsev, the Hermitage's chief engineer, along with several colleagues. They drove him straight to the Winter Palace, the massive baroque pile where Catherine the Great had established the museum in 1764. "As the car pulled into the square in front of the palace," Kaszanits says, "what I saw astounded me. It was like approaching the Taj Mahal. Or the Pyramids."

His hosts were in a hurry to show him the building before the daylight faded. "They rushed me up to the roof," Kaszanits remembers. "We came to a halt on a wooden boardwalk in the middle of a sea of rusted tin, so decrepit in places I could see into the building below. We stood there in the twilight, surrounded by the statues of the muses mounted along the palace facade. Right there, I fell in love with the Hermitage, crisis and all."

There was no mistaking the severity of that crisis. Rain, sleet, and snow had penetrated the storage vaults directly ›

(TOP ROW, FROM LEFT) THE WINTER PALACE IN ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA, WHERE CATHERINE THE GREAT ESTABLISHED THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM IN 1764; AFTER ALMOST A CENTURY OF COMMUNIST RULE, THE MUSEUM IS SHOWING SERIOUS SIGNS OF NEGLECT; (MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT) VENUS; AN EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WORK FROM THE HERMITAGE'S COLLECTION BY FLEMISH SCULPTOR GEORG PETEL; ROBERT KASZANITS IN THE HERMITAGE'S RESTORATION ROOM; BAROQUE ITALIAN SHIP PENDANT SET WITH GOLD, RUBIES, AND EMERALDS, *CIRCA* 1600; (BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT) 200-YEAR-OLD WOOD WINDOWS ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THE HERMITAGE'S HUMIDITY PROBLEMS; THE NEVA RIVER AND THE CANALS AROUND THE MUSEUM HAVE FLOODED ITS BASEMENT; THE DILAPIDATED ROOF, WHICH HAS CAUSED ENORMOUS WATER DAMAGE, WOULD COST AN ESTIMATED $1 BILLION TO REPLACE

Photographs by Paul Webster



beneath the roof that housed much of the museum's holdings. Water damage was ruining the masterfully moulded plaster ceilings, lifting some of the friezes and frescoes from the walls of the museum's 1,000 rooms. Meanwhile, at the base of the building, the waters of the Neva River, as well as the ancient canals that surround the museum, had flooded the basement.

Russia's wrenching shift from Communism to a market-based economy was only making things worse. Salaries had been dramatically devalued and government subsidies slashed. In the winter of 1996, four years after Kaszanits's first visit, the Hermitage made international headlines when its heat was cut by the government-owned power company. Except for three years during the Second World War, when the collection was evacuated and the city starved under Nazi siege, the decade following the Berlin Wall's collapse in 1989 were the hardest years in its history.

The Hermitage is part of an extraordinary collection of baroque and neo-classical buildings at the centre of St. Petersburg, the famously beautiful eighteenth-century city built by Peter I and Catherine the Great to establish Russia's primacy on the world stage. At the heart of these is the Winter Palace, home to Russia's ruling Romanov family from 1762 until the Bolshevik ("February") Revolution in 1917. One of the most beautiful baroque structures ever built, the palace rises like an enormous green wedding cake along the banks of the Neva. The Hermitage has survived the ravages of time and history – fire, revolution, and numerous wars – and still inspires awe the way it did back in 1855 when Czar Nicholas I walked through its galleries the day before he apparently committed suicide, saying, "Yes. Here is perfection."

ON THAT FIRST EYE-OPENING TRIP to the Hermitage in 1992, Kaszanits spent several days walking around the museum with Printsev and others. "I was trying to assess the physical security of the collection," Kaszanits says. "Compared to the Louvre, the Hermitage has better theft statistics, but after being up on the roof, I realized that the larger threat to the collection was its exposure to the elements."

Trying to repair the roof was far too expensive a project for Kaszanits to contemplate tackling, so when he returned to Canada he began raising money for more manageable improvements aimed at protecting the collection. First, he managed to obtain a small grant from Pepperdine University in California to finance the installation of a computer-monitored humidity-control system for the Hermitage's public galleries. It was installed in 1994. Then, two years later, Kaszanits quit his job at the National Gallery of Canada and formed a museum consulting firm with clients across Canada. It gave him the financial freedom to concentrate on more rescue efforts at the Hermitage. By 1998, after the Hermitage had managed to empty its basement of water and patch its roof, Kaszanits raised $700,000 from donors with business interests in Russia, such as Lavalin and Bombardier, for the Hermitage's 2,213 windows to be fitted with clear plastic shields to protect the collection from damaging ultraviolet rays.

This effort led to the creation of the State Hermitage Museum Foundation of Canada, which has since devised new plans for raising money. For instance, Kaszanits persuaded the Hermitage's director, Dr. Mikhail Piotrovsky, to approve a major show of Hermitage paintings at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), which opens this weekend. In 2003, the Montreal Museum of Fine Art will also host a major Hermitage show. And next year the Hermitage will host an extensive exhibition of Canadian contemporary and historical work from the AGO.

Kaszanits's latest plan, though, is, by far his most ambitious. Having now made thirty-one trips to St. Petersburg in the last nine years, he hopes to raise $5 million to inspect and catalogue the Hermitage's entire collection. There is no way to properly secure the collection, Kaszanits feels, if no one is completely sure what it contains.

The faded cardboard tag listing all of the paintings on a large rack doesn't match what's actually there. Kaszanits isn't surprised. In 1996, workers stumbled across a Van Gogh in one of these attic vaults

The project he is proposing will involve logging a detailed digital description of each of its 2.8 million artifacts into the first inventory produced at the Hermitage in half a century. Such an exercise would make Kaszanits the first outsider to map what for centuries has been the art world's last vast *terra incognita*. But in doing so, Kaszanits has run into a force more cagey and elusive than the forces of time and history, something built into the very DNA of the institution: its secretiveness.

The museum's secrets have been fiercely protected by generations of curators loyal to Catherine the Great's insistence on intense privacy, long ago formalized with this rule posted for Hermitage visitors: "One shall not wash dirty linen in public and shall mind one's own business until one leaves." To succeed with the inventory, Kaszanits will have to overcome both the legacy of intense privacy left by Catherine the Great, and a very modern dash of Soviet-era paranoia. Not all of the Hermitage's 600 curators are unanimous in seeking his help. The project would involve letting a foreigner roam freely through the museum's labyrinth of storage vaults, where many believe substantial piles of forgotten treasures have been stashed away for decades.

Six years ago, Van Gogh's *White House at Night* was found – apparently by accident – in one of the Hermitage's vaults. If anything, this seriously reinforced what Kaszanits had been telling the Russians all along about the urgent need for a complete inventory.

Luckily, Kaszanits has found an ally at the Hermitage where it counts most, in director Mikhail Piotrovsky. A historian best known for his use of ancient Yemeni manuscripts as sources for critical analysis of the Bible and the Koran, Piotrovsky took over as director in 1992 from his father, an archaeologist who had managed to survive Stalin's purges before going on to run the Hermitage for nearly thirty years.

Before the Czars were deposed during the Bolshevik uprising, the Hermitage buildings and collection were strictly maintained as the private ›

(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) HERMITAGE CURATORS STILL USE WAX SEALS ON THEIR RECORD CABINETS TO GUARD AGAINST UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY; HERMITAGE DIRECTOR MIKHAIL PIOTROVSKY IN

domain of the ruling Romanov family, with the public rarely granted access even to the small selection of works displayed in the galleries. Even after the museum was opened to the public in 1917, behind the gallery walls nothing changed. The details of the inventory of the newly renamed State Hermitage Museum remained totally private.

Within a few years, privacy at the Hermitage took on increasingly sinister implications as the Bolsheviks organized a program of massive foreign sales between 1928 and 1932. The value of the art, and the abysmal sums raised in selling it, sealed the museum's records in secrecy. In 1931, the Soviet government sold Rembrandt's *Christ and the Samaritan at the Well* – taken from the Stroganov family collection and placed in the Hermitage collection after the revolution – in Berlin for $49,980 (U.S.). By that point, the inventory had become a full-blown state secret, and the collection a key source of the foreign income Stalin relied on to consolidate power.

That same year, the American industrialist Andrew Mellon, who had extensive business interests in the Soviet Union, used his clout as secretary of the U.S. Treasury to quietly seal an enormous deal that gave him dozens of the Hermitage's best paintings, including Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi.* The scale of Mellon's coup became evident when he later surrendered twenty-one of his purchases (for which he paid less than $7 million) to the U.S. government to settle tax-evasion allegations. They included Van Eyck's *Annunciation,* Raphael's *Alba Madonna,* Titian's *Venus with the Looking-Glass,* as well as major pieces by Perugino, Veronese, Van Dyck, Frans Hals, Rembrandt, and Velazquez. These paintings now form the core of the National Gallery in Washington.

Hitler's invasion, and the ensuing evacuation of the collection, conferred the status of military secrecy on the collection – a trend that continued when the victorious Red Army began sending home trainloads of trophy art captured across Western Europe during the final months of the war, much of it delivered to the Hermitage. Although the most famous examples of trophy art – Botticelli's *Madonna with a Pomegranate,* Raphael's *Colonna Madonna,* Van Eyck's *The Virgin in a Church,* numerous crates of Heinrich Schliemann's Trojan gold, and the entire Pergamum altar frieze (which alone filled forty train cars) – are widely known to be in Russia, the full extent of the Hermitage's war booty remains secret.

Except for the Second World War, when the collection was evacuated while Leningrad starved under Nazi siege, the hardest years in the museum's history came after the collapse of the Berlin Wall

Until the 1995 publication in Germany of *Stolen Treasure,* a major exposé by Konstantin Akinsha and Grigory Kozlov, two former Hermitage curators, museum officials refused to discuss the topic. The revelations of Akinsha and Kozlov, who fled Russia to publish the results of their quiet, eight-year internal investigation, prodded the museum to mount an exhibition consisting of hidden treasures. It attracted so much attention it has become a permanent display.

For director Mikhail Piotrovsky, running the Hermitage for the past decade after seventy years of neglect under Communist rule has meant having to contend with a single, achingly profane problem – money. Although President Vladimir Putin, who comes from St. Petersburg, intervened last year to ensure that the government delivered fully on its budget commitment to the museum (the Hermitage is the only Russian cultural institution with its own line in the Russian budget), it has received only about a quarter of its allotted government funding since the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991. When the museum's heat was cut off in 1996, Piotrovsky turned the crisis into a rallying point by marching through the galleries wearing a handknit scarf for the benefit of reporters and cameras, and threatening to close the museum. (The heat was soon turned back on.)

Hermitage employees also pay severely for the museum's poverty, with senior curators making not much more than Russia's average salary of $100 a month. Employment policies from the Soviet era left the museum with a conspicuously inflated staff, but Piotrovsky says it's his "social obligation" not to slash the payroll. "I'm reluctant to let anyone go," he says. "Even the ones who have been pensioned can't live on their pensions. And while it's true our salaries are too small, I put it in perspective: salaries in the West are too big."

Piotrovsky spends much of his time travelling abroad, drumming up funds through increasingly adventurous strategies. Last fall, the first of a series of planned Hermitage subsidiary museums opened at Somerset House in London. There is also talk of a Hermitage room in New York. But some Museum officials worry that franchising the collection may ultimately transform the Hermitage's identity into a brand name for luxury-commodity manufacturers, a prospect that could turn Catherine the Great's vision into just another moniker on a line of handbags.

Kaszanits's more conventional fundraising efforts, though, recently won him a singular form of recognition from Piotrovsky, who wrapped up a meeting with the announcement that the museum's "Canadian angel" has been granted the Hermitage's highest accolade: honorary status as an *ermitaghnik.* The *ermitaghniks* are a select group of devotees who have been embraced by the museum's most senior management – an honour bestowed on very few foreigners.

KASZANITS WILL NEED THAT STATUS, in addition to all the support he can get from Piotrovsky's office, to face his biggest challenge: inserting himself into the museum's records office, down the hall from Piotrovsky's and up a narrow spiral of cast-iron stairs. This is the domain of Tatiana Zagrebina, the museum's chief curator. As Kaszanits and I circle upwards towards Zagrebina's door, the air thickens with cigarette smoke. Thirty or more people – almost all of them women with advanced degrees in art history – work in the cluttered series of rooms nearby. There are plenty of computers around – there were none when Kaszanits first arrived in 1992 – but there is still no administrative system to connect them.

Those working in this area must pass the boss's desk every time they enter or leave, giving Zagrebina full surveillance of those she calls her *devuchkas* – a diminutive for women not yet sufficiently grandmotherly to be termed *babushka*. Strategically placed a few feet from her desk, the communal coffee table and smoking area, with its continuous flutter of gossip, further cements Zagrebina's grasp on power.

Although only in her early fifties, Zagrebina has worked in the Hermitage's records office for thirty years. A woman with bifocals and a penchant for woolly black sweaters and direct humour, she was put in charge of the museum's 600 curators five years ago. If the Hermitage is right in claiming that its collection is the world's largest, Zagrebina could fairly be said to be the most powerful curator in the world.

That record is locked behind time-rippled glass doors of the many delicate, ceiling-high rosewood cabinets that line the interior walls of her office. Getting a peek can take a full day of badgering, joshing, cajoling, and begging. But I am lucky; she eventually surrenders and cuts through the thick wax seals on the cabinet doors and pulls out a few of the antiquated folio volumes of collection records that date back two-and-a-half centuries.

According to Kaszanits, the Hermitage's records are incredibly meticulous. They have survived the occupation of Napoleon's army – when the records were kept in French – and heavy bombing by the Germans in World War II. Kaszanits says that he's seen a copy of a 1954 British newspaper article that suggests an inventory was done at the Hermitage that year. He hasn't seen any evidence of it yet, but if the inventory does exist – and he thinks it probably does somewhere – it is certainly the last time such an attempt was made.

Zagrebina acknowledges the symbolic value of the records with obvious emotion, but is adamant they are also accurate. "They are completely reliable," she says, reshelving the folios and securing the locks with the time-honoured stamp of her signet ring in fresh wax. "And they are safe. The museum cannot have holes in its inventory. It's impossible there are articles we don't know about."

With Kaszanits out of earshot, she says she has no intention of surrendering the old order. "We won't drop the old system," she insists. "We'll keep it." In her view, Kaszanits's innovations will simply automate the data contained in her dog-eared folios. Questioned about Kaszanits's plan to thoroughly verify her records through a complete investigation of the Hermitage vaults, and then to replace her system with a database containing digital imagery and portals to the world through the Internet, she appears nonplussed. "The ministry will deal with this problem," she shrugs.

"This is not going to be easy," Kaszanits admits, looking decidedly out of place in his soft, pinstriped suit and steel-framed glasses amid the faintly Bohemian gathering of curators around Zagrebina's coffee table. He's just spent the morning briefing Zagrebina and her subordinates on the purpose of this visit to St. Petersburg. He has plans for a series of seminars in the Hermitage conference theatre on collections-management software. But first Kaszanits needs Zagrebina to free up her staff so they can attend.

The meeting this morning was brittle, with various turf battles won and lost and a lot of confusion translating Kaszanits's management parlance into Russian. (There may not actually be a way of saying, "Let me walk you through this process" in Russian, Kaszanits's translator says.) But Kaszanits's patience pays off. The seminars will go ahead; Zagrebina eventually concedes, somewhat grudgingly, that she should hear what he has to say before making judgments.

"It's how they operate," Kaszanits says about his forbidding counterpart. "I'm not going to get into a debate with her about how proud she is of her records and I'm not challenging her professionalism, but what's the good of an inventory if it's not verified for accuracy?" >

SKETCHBOOK

LIA JAMES