— Как ситуация с COVID-19 повлияла на взаимодействие Эрмитажа с публикой? What have you done to adapt?

— Это, конечно, катастрофа, но каждая катастрофа чему-то нас учит. Люди больше не путешествуют, но предметы искусства путешествуют по-прежнему. Поэтому мы открываем выставки, на которые приезжают экспонаты, не курьера. Вчера, например, открылась выставка «Железный век». Немецкие коллеги приехать не смогли, но они прислали предметы. Мы открывали её по-новому: сами приусствовали на открытии посредственно, а мой немецкий коллега Герман Парцингер — виртуально, на экране. Нам удалось втиснуться между двух волн COVID-19, чтобы поменять выставку: одну — в музее «Эрмитаж Амстердам», другую — в центре «Эрмитаж-Казань», и этого сами музеи закрыты, выставки в них экспонировать невозможно. Кроме того, мы организовали несколько новых выставок в Зимнем дворце. Вполне возможно, что завтра мы закроемся. В настоящее время попасть в Эрмитажную территорию могут по-прежнему предварительной онлайн-регистрации и в маске. Маска стала новым дресс-кодом — вроде смокинга. Придя в музей, вы увидите, что там продолжает кое-что теплиться жизнь: вокруг много посетителей. В настоящее время это в основном жители Санкт-Петербурга. Так что мы работаем для них, но мы понимаем, что люди ждут не дождутся закончится, и пытаемся приспособиться.

Есть два важных момента. Первое — это то, что вирус делает со всеми нами: он нас разделяет, заставляет изолироваться, сидеть у себя дома, у себя в стране и т. д. Изоляция — не лучшее явление. Это то, что периодически происходит в нашей истории в целом. В период подъёма глобализма мы плохо знаем чужие культуры и не нуждаемся в иностранных языках, оставаясь в своём узком кругу. И это очень плохо для культуры. Музеи этим боролся. Они перебрасывают мосты между странами, создавая перекрёстки культур и народов, — и необходимо сохранить эти культурные мосты. Даже теперь, когда мир политически расколот, я продолжаю повторять политикам: вы можете делать всё, что вам угодно, можете взорвать экономические мосты, но культурные мосты должны сохраняться до последнего. Выставка «Железный век», которую мы открыли вчера, носит археологический характер, но при этом затрагивает один весьма деликатный вопрос. Многие из представленных вещей были перемещены из Германии в России в качестве компенсации за ущерб, причинённый в годы Второй мировой войны, и хранятся в российских музеях, но немцы считают, что принадлежат этим вещи им. Это непростая и деликатная проблема, отчасти политическая. Наше дело — культурная: вместе с немецким коллегами мы проводим реальные и виртуальные выставки, печатаем каталоги. Это не решение проблемы, но это побуждает нас работать, и движение по соединяющему нас культурному мосту происходит в обоих направлениях. 20 лет назад российско-германские отношения были прекрасными, и трофейное искусство оставалось единственной проблемой. Теперь наши отношения с Европой испортились, но мы всё же нашли способ работать вместе. Так что культура предлагает хорошие решения. Культура приучает — это ведь как раз то, чем занимаемся вы, дипломаты, во многом помогая нам в наших начинаниях.

Другой момент заключается в том, что мы делаем все усилия ради успеха, и искусство помогает с этим справиться. Искусство, конечно, бывает разным: порой оно непонятно или говорит нам о странных вещах, это вовсе не лекарство — это искусство иного рода утешает нас своей красотой. Люди приходят в музей, пусть даже в онлай-режиме, чтобы получить это лекарство. В период пандемии наш веб-сайт и страницы в соцсетях посетили 68 миллионов человек. Крайне важно попытаться работать в таких условиях.

Недавно мы обсуждали с Европейским университетом в Санкт-Петербурге программу, посвящённую искусственному интеллекту. Мы подготовили несколько выставок на тему искусственного интеллекта, пытаясь понять, как разные культуры работают с ним. На выставке, прошедшей пару лет назад, были представлены работы художниц из арабских стран, созданные с помощью искусственного интеллекта на основе арабского языка и орнамента. Я вижу, что это очень сильно отличается от того, что делает европейцы. Искусственный интеллект — явление универсальное, но вместе с тем оно может различаться в зависимости от того, какие люди им управляют. Крайне интересно, как вещи более или менее одинаковые начинают различаться, оказавшись в другой культуре. Музеи имеют дело с различиями, которые прекрасны и сложны; прекрасно, что люди различаются, хотя и не все это понимают.

— Другими словами, вирус стал вызовом всем нам, оказался вызовом на любую жизнь, — вызовом, подобного которому я не видел за всю свою сознательную жизнь. Но, как вы сказали, он также предлагает определённую возможность для публичных учреждений, таких как Эрмитаж, справиться с ситуацией, и 68 миллионов посетителей — весьма впечатляющая цифра. Как этот период отразится на будущем? Думаете ли вы, что музеи и другие культурные институты будут и дальше развивать онлайн-программы?

— Я think so. Now we are learning to cope with more complex tasks. We have worked in the digital environment before, but until recently this aspect of our activity was not so popular. Now our methods for posting materials online have become more complex. Previously, we thought that the online version would attract more visitors. Now we are developing various areas of communication. For example, we conduct online tours that do not require registration: the guides are open and sometimes make mistakes, as in live communication. We organize lectures by major experts in public speaking. We have programs for children, as well as meetings with specialists who will take you to places in the Hermitage where no one usually looks — to the departments of Byzantine, Chinese, and Islamic art. We have always wanted to teach visitors to pay attention not only to the Hermitage's main masterpieces. There are masterpieces of different levels, and in the Hermitage you need to see not only Leonardo da Vinci or the Peacock Clock, but also the oldest carpet in the world, medieval crafts from rock crystal, Buddhist icons from Khara-Khoto, etc. Thanks to virtual activity, our audience is more prepared for a real visit to the Hermitage after the end of the pandemic. Now many people come to the museum for the first time, see something, enjoy it, but many things escape them. We are developing this skill and, I think, we are succeeding. In the future, the Hermitage will have more order, many processes will be better organized, and we will not return to the previous chaos: standing in line for many hours, etc. We have learned something during this time, but, of course, much depends on how events will develop in general.

— For me, the Hermitage serves as the ultimate beacon at the crossroads. When I walked around the museum during several of my visits there, it was as if I was traveling the world as I moved from hall to hall. Exhibits related to different cultures are carefully organized and beautifully presented, so that we visitors have the opportunity to visit the places where these items come from. How would you describe the Hermitage as a cultural crossroads for people not only from Russia, but also from all over the world? What is the museum's message to the present and the future?

— Each room in the Hermitage is dedicated to a particular culture, and the museum as a whole brings them together in a dialogue. We are trying to show visitors how beautiful it is that things are different. Sometimes differences make people angry: "It is not like me. I would rather not touch it." We want to explain that differences are good. History has been based on wars: Russians fought against Tatars, Tatars fought against Russians, and wars were constantly waged against someone or something. And everywhere we see the continuation and revival of these wars of former times. The museum says: let's have a dialogue of cultures, let's talk and discuss inside the museum. Humanism originates in culture. People will not believe you if you voice a different political position, but they will believe the beauty of Chinese painting, Arabic ornament, and European religious art.

There is another thing that is important: St. Petersburg is a crossroads within Russia itself. The Hermitage is a universal museum: it is a three-dimensional encyclopedia dedicated to the cultures of the past, but this encyclopedia was written in Russia. Its collection was assembled in different parts of the world by the Russian emperors from Catherine the Great to Alexander the Third. This art has been kept in the Hermitage for centuries, so the Rembrandts from our collection are our Rembrandts: they have been in our collection for 250 years and have become part of Russian culture. We present viewers with the world from which this picture comes, and we also present the Russian view of it. Diversity is the thing we try to teach everyone. Peter the Great built a city that is open to the whole world: different cultures meet here and work together for the benefit of Russia and the whole world.

— Speaking about the diversity and openness of St. Petersburg to the world reminds me of the role of Catherine the Great — in particular, that she founded a number of institutions that were engaged, among other things, in the study of the Arabic language and the translation of the Quran. This is consistent with what you said about engagement and dialogue, and I would like to ask you about Catherine the Great's experience in the Middle East. Today, these cultural crossroads have been lost due to recent conflicts. What can we do about it on a social and cultural level? How do you see the role of the government and public institutions in this situation?

— The bottom line is that we keep our bridges open. Their importance is now more evident than ever. The political situation in the world is extremely tense, to be sure. But we hold Hermitage Days in Doha, Hermitage Days in China, we send exhibitions there, and in cases where this is not possible, we hold meetings. The Hermitage is engaged in a variety of work, not always related to the exhibition of art. We must be active in our relations with other institutions. Two weeks ago, we had an official ceremony involving the American ambassador, at which we discussed the restoration of the Hermitage. In my 28 years as director of the Hermitage, this is the first official event attended by a US ambassador. Previously, we didn't need ambassadors — we were in direct contact with museums, foundations, and other institutions. Now the situation has changed, there are many obstacles, and we need ambassadors. The situation with Arab countries is different: we have met with ambassadors more than once, and held official and informal meetings. You have to be creative to handle the situation. I am grateful to you for this conversation, as well as for what you and the State of Qatar have been doing to promote mutual understanding.

— I have always been conscious of the role of cultural institutions in connecting people around the world, but at the same time, as a diplomat, I am also aware of my role in helping such institutions, especially those in Qatar. Moving from Qatar and Russia to a more abstract level on the concept of crossroads, I think of the great cities on the Middle East, such as Jerusalem, Damascus, or Istanbul. Walking down the street of such cities, you meet people of all colors, religious, and backgrounds, people who call that city their home. Over the past ten years, we have seen an increase in tension, which has been reflected in a series of conflicts. We are grateful to Russia for its role in resolving the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. But the Azerbaijanis won't converse with the Armenians, and the Armenians won't converse with the Azerbaijanis at the popular level. We remember the Great Silk Road and Jerusalem as great examples of religious and ethnic crossroads. What is your view on this? Is the concept of a crossroads applicable today? How can we support the beautiful crossroads that have existed in the past?

— There are some things we can do, but we need to be realistic. As we know from history, no one learns from history. But you still need to know it to navigate it better. The word "crossroads" means several different roads converging in one place. These places attract different people who deliver goods there, exchange them, and benefit from it. Or they deliver different religions, which is more difficult, but at least they share knowledge. We remember that all these cities — Jerusalem, Damascus, and Istanbul — have served as cultural, religious, and ethnic melting pots for centuries. When different people are in the same place, there is always a danger that they will try to kill each other. We need to find a peaceful way to bring them together. An important function of intellectuals is to prevent this explosion. As a historian, I know that the same problems come up again and again. And we need to think about how to solve them and try to find a way to live together.

At the beginning of our conversation, I mentioned the German exhibition. Of course, the Germans will always assume that items from their museums belong to them. And of course, we were attacked by Germany, which makes moving these items a fair compensation provided by their museums to ours. From the point of view of our laws, everything is fine, but from the point of view of international law, it is not. There is a conflict, but our German colleagues and I have decided not to fight — let the politicians do it. If museums fought each other, we would never have achieved anything. Meanwhile, we have published a large book in Russian and German, *The Iron Age: Europe Without Borders*, and before that we held an exhibition dealing with the Bronze Age. Although it is difficult to achieve in the field of economics and politics, in the field of culture it is quite possible to find a common ground where people can meet and say to each other, "We can have a normal dialogue and do something together." It is particularly important to do something together. Sometimes politicians do not like these peaceful solutions, they want culture to join in the confrontation. And sometimes this is tempting: cultural confrontation is attractive from the point of view of propaganda. But we need to find a level at which people can talk to each other.

— You made an important point that culture should not be part of the confrontation, that it should overcome the political barriers that people often build up among themselves. It reminded me of an initiative made by Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim — the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. It attracted criticism from various sides, but time has shown that it was truly innovative. When you play Mozart or Tchaikovsky, the audience hears harmony in the music performed by an orchestra consisting of different people, people of different nationalities and races. It requires them to perform this beautiful music in harmony. And the cultural dialogue that you support in the work of the Hermitage should not stop. I am glad to hear you say that culture should not be used as a weapon and refer to the role of intellectuals in this process. Sometimes the problem is that intellectuals are caught up in a general wave and allow themselves to be turned into tools to build insurmountable barriers. Cultural interaction is necessary, employing as many instruments as possible, such as museums or orchestras. How do you regard projects like the West-East Divan Orchestra in this regard?

— They are fantastic, and exactly what I meant when I talked about recipes. Everyone knows that music brings people together. People from the East understand European music, just as Europeans understand Eastern music. Music is a great recipe, and the orchestra is a great example of that: it is something small, which, however, brings people together, like symposia and exhibitions. Sometimes it is easier to take sides and say: he is my enemy. But we must remember that every enemy becomes a friend one day — perhaps in a few generations — and we must prepare these future generations: old friends become enemies; enemies become old friends. We must be prepared to change the situation. People who are separated today will talk to each other tomorrow. The cultural ground must be prepared for political change.

— My personal experience of visiting numerous Russian museums — small regional museums and such large ones as the Hermitage — led me to understand that these museums give me, as a foreigner, the opportunity to delve deeply into the mindset of the culture, whether past or present. When these items travel from the Hermitage to Qatar or another country, it has a strong impact on the public and raises a lot of questions, causing people to question their long-held ideas about history, which affect their perception of the present. How do you see the role of educational institutions (in particular, at the primary level) in shaping cultural understanding? Do you think that museums can interact with the education system?

— Yes, I do, and not only at the primary level. Today, education should be considered as entertainment. This is a good theory: people should always learn. Everything is constantly changing, and if we want to keep in touch with reality, we must constantly learn, regardless of age. The museum is an institution that provides us with new knowledge. The other day I was talking to the directors of various museums around the world, and one of them said, "I don't want to be the director of a place where people come to see themselves, I want to be the director of a place where people come to see things they haven't seen yet. Not a selfie, but something else." A museum is an educational institution, a university, a school. We want to find the right balance between education and entertainment. We are rather on the side of the former. Without museums, education would be incomplete and insufficient. This is why the museum's online activities are so important. Half of the 68 million online visitors I mentioned earlier have never been to the Hermitage physically, and half will not be able to do so soon. We try to maintain an online platform that is as close as possible to the real-time visit model. Here in the museum, people don't feel like they are learning, rather they think they are having fun, so this is a special type of education.

— I would like to move on to another topic. Our publication is called *EastEast Paper*, and its concept is partly that the East (no matter how we interpret this concept) breaks the West–East dichotomy, often associated with tensions, conflicts, but also with cooperation, as in the case of links between German and Russian museums. What is the idea of the East for you? Do you think that dialogue on the East–East axis is necessary in the current situation of internal tension in the region?

— Islam teaches that many problems can be solved by talking through them. The East–West dichotomy goes back to Kipling's words, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." But then Kipling goes on to write, "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!" When people are confident in themselves, when there is no feeling that they are oppressed and worse than others, they do not feel mutual hostility. There is something else connected with the idea of East and West. At St. Petersburg University, at the Faculty of Asian and African Studies, we studied this discipline and adhered to this name. Now there is no East or West. Students from the East study at our university, and Arabic philology or Islam is not something external to their world, Western and Eastern students study together. But there is still the problem of the Other. We need to bring people together, but cultures remain different. And we need to learn how to translate from one language to another.

We spend a lot of time trying to make everyone look like each other, make everyone speak the same language, which is terrible. People should remain different, but the difference between them should not be a reason for hostility: it is necessary to understand this difference and enjoy it. Oriental studies provides a theory of how to unite people, how to understand the Other, how to translate other cultures. This is what imagology does, the study of images of the Other. It is a serious area of research, and there is, in particular, one interesting work about the Chinese, Russians, and Americans, about how Americans see the Chinese and Russians. Why, from a sociological point of view, do Americans usually have negative feelings towards Russians and positive feelings towards the Chinese? Because most of the knowledge about Russians was inherited by Americans from the 19th century — Siberia, prisons, the despotic Russian Empire — even before the Soviet Union. And most of the books about the Chinese were written by Christian missionaries who loved China and its people, and the image they created was adopted by American culture. It may be completely wrong, but it shows how people perceive each other: it is extremely important who the information comes from.

— You have raised the extremely important issue of diversity, which calls into question the ideology that has persisted for a century and a half since the industrial revolution, i.e., modernism. Modernism achieved hegemony throughout the world, largely ignoring local differences in the name of a certain utopian world, as it was imagined by German and French philosophers. Was this experience positive or negative in terms of your understanding of the concept of diversity?

— The historical process is full of ups and downs. Of course, this is a noble idea. Exaggerating differences leads to the fact that they begin to oppose each other: one difference puts itself above the other. What is globalism? On the one hand, it is a great way of establishing global connections and a global culture, but on the other hand, it begins to seem a little too much when we lose our sense of home, etc. The global economy is good, but at some point it destroys the local economy. Global culture is good as long as small nations don't start to feel uncomfortable.

— The Islamic world is well aware of the concept of diversity, because the Quran says, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another." It follows that diversity is not an accident, but something we are born with, and this idea implies that we accept each other. When I remember this line from the Quran, I always think about whether people understand this.

— This is an important and exciting part of the Quran. Different tribes should coexist with each other, and the fact that they differ from each other is not a reason for them to hate each other. What is great about Oriental studies is that it allows you to understand other people's feelings. As an Arabist, I understand the Palestinians perfectly — better than the average person who just reads newspapers. In personal, psychological terms, I combine three ethnicities: Russian, Polish, and Armenian. My mother was Armenian, and my father was half Russian, half Polish. When I'm in Poland and someone speaks ill of Russia, I become a Russian chauvinist. When I'm in Russia and someone speaks ill of Poland, I become a Polish chauvinist. When I'm in Armenia, I'm a Russian chauvinist, and when I'm in Russia, I'm an Armenian chauvinist. I am joking, of course, but it is as if I move from one body to another, which makes me richer. Diversity makes us richer both spiritually and practically. You diplomats know how important it is to reach out to people based on your own ideas.

— We can say that you yourself exist at a biological, cultural, and intellectual crossroads.

— Absolutely.

— What is the difference between the Orient and the East? Can the East be defined only in a geographical sense?

— There is no hard border between East and West. What is the East and the West in general? I was surprised when I first went to Italy, to a university in Vatican, where there is an Oriental studies department, which includes Russia. Russia? But it is the West, isn't it? No, for Italy, Russia is the East. And that includes Russian and Byzantine culture. When I talk about China, I represent the West; when I talk about America, I represent the East. After all, China is the East, and the Middle East is the East. But the Middle East is linked to our culture, while China is distant from it.

— Let's talk about the concepts of East and West, which, as you noted, change their meaning depending on the speaker's position. What would you say to those who argue that the contribution of the East to philosophy, literature, and art has no adequate platform in the world? This is the result of a long history of colonialism: as such, it has ended, but its legacy remains. Most of what we know today in the fields of literature, art, and music comes directly from the West, which understands other cultures as local, giving them a place in the East. What do you think about this?

— If we look at the history of culture, we will see a kind of relay race of cultures. The Greeks and Romans created philosophy, literature, and then the Islamic world took up the baton, which is especially true for philosophy. Centuries later, all this was passed on to Europe, which in the Renaissance took the baton, receiving something that had not existed before — for example, a mathematical way of thinking and a sense of joy in being that was not present in the Middle Ages. Everything grows, and every nation plays and will play its role in this process.

— Can culture be moderated? Who should moderate it?

— Culture moderates itself somehow. We pretend that we moderate culture, and we do this and that. Frankly speaking, humanity is a colossal organism and functions autonomously to keep itself alive. Culture moderates itself, although it needs help sometimes. But as we say at the Hermitage: we are nothing compared to the Hermitage, we are just tiny insects working in the way that Hermitage wants us to work. If we do something good, it is not us that does it, but the Hermitage that does it. Culture is more important than any one person.

— That is a great answer: culture moderates itself. I will definitely keep it in mind. After this wonderful exchange of thoughts between us, I would like you to make some final remarks about how you see *EastEast Paper*. How it can serve cultural diversity in a way that helps bring people together? How it can collaborate with the Hermitage going forward?

— We could, for example, compile a selection of Islamic art from the Hermitage and the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar. It would be interesting to see the differences, since many of the items of Islamic art in the Hermitage were produced by artists for Christians, and many of them are clearly Islamic or proto-Islamic in style, but Christian in content. The Museum of Islamic Art is a miracle in itself. As we know, all valuable items are now stored in museums and nothing can be purchased, but the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art was formed through purchasing items from different collections, at auctions, and in other ways. It has a special story.

— And the last question: what is your forecast for 2021?

— We have to wait until 2020 ends. We hope that this will all end. But there is still some uncertainty, and we must learn to live in new circumstances. For three months, the museum was simply closed, now it is not. When Moscow started talking about closing museums, we protested: don't do this! People need us. You can close cinemas and bars, but museums are safe, they control crowds. We need to rethink a lot of things so that we don't have to be afraid of the coronavirus.

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“We Keep Our Bridges Open”

Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of the State Hermitage Museum, in conversation with **Fahad bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Qatar to the Russian Federation.