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Feature

The Russian Academy: Preliminary Notes

By [Joseph Brodsky](#)

In the fall of 1995, Joseph Brodsky put forward a plan to found an Academy in Rome where Russian scholars and artists could resume a longstanding tradition of Russian study in Italy. He submitted the following proposal to Francesco Ruttelli, the mayor of Rome, who expressed his enthusiasm for the project shortly before Brodsky's death on January 28, 1996. The search for an appropriate building was already underway. His proposal is reprinted here in full.

1. Preamble

For obvious reasons, everything of value in Russian art for the past two centuries has owed a great debt to, and shows the unmistakable influence of, the great Italian culture with which Russian painters, architects, musicians, and writers were during those two centuries in constant contact. The dependence of Russian culture on these contacts cannot be overstated. The great Osip Mandelstam spoke of Orthodox cathedrals "with their Italian and Russian souls"; we would have no Tchaikovsky operas or symphonies were it not for his sojourns in Italy; the development of the Russian school of painting is unthinkable without Alexander Ivanov's years in Rome; and, as for literature, we would still be rehashing our folk tales were it not for Pushkin's attempts to translate Dante or for Gogol's residence on the via Sistina.

One could go on, citing the impact of Italian futurism on Russian visual arts and literature at the onset of this century, but one is loath to state the obvious, and preambles must be brief. So, in order to make an immensely long story short, let's confine ourselves to the obvious truth that Italian culture is indeed the mother of Russian aesthetics and that for seventy of this century's years this connection between the mother and her child was artificially severed. Much of what has transpired in Russia—in its mental climate specifically—is this unfortunate break's direct result, and the idea of establishing a Russian Academy in Rome has to do with a desire to restore that child to its natural, healthy condition.

2. Guiding Principles

The Russian Academy in Rome should be modeled on its French and American sisters, with one distinction inevitable at this stage: it has to be privately funded, at least initially. The preference for private funding for such an institution has to do not only with the perilous financial circumstances of Russia's nascent democracy but also with the desirability of such an institution's independence from the vagaries of Russia's political climate in the near future.

In the initial stage, the funding should be strictly Italian (municipal or corporate) in

its origin, and so should be the administration of the Academy. Eventually, perhaps, Russian financing should be accepted, provided it is private and comes from enterprises doing business in or with Italy. The involvement of the Russian state during this initial period—of, let's say, five years—should be nil.

The selection of candidates for scholarship and residency in such an institution should be conducted by an independent panel of artists and scholars whose credentials have been established both in Russia and abroad. Nominations for a Russian equivalent of the Prix de Rome should come to this panel from the Russian Academy of Science and the Dante Institutes in St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well, perhaps, as the Russian Ministry of Culture. It should be understood, however, that the task of the aforementioned bodies, is solely to recommend and not to make selections. The selection of candidates is to be entrusted to the above-mentioned panel of artists and scholars (both Italian and Russian).

3. Fellowships and Stipends

A fellowship in the Russian Academy in Rome is to last one year. It is to come with a stipend (whose size is to be determined later) and free accommodations for the term. Food and transportation from Russia to Italy and back are to be the fellows' own responsibility.

Initially, four departments of fellowship are envisioned: Architecture, Music, Painting, and Literature (poetry and translation of poetry).

The stipend is subject to a particular arrangement and preferably is to be paid by the Russian side. However, the Academy would have a crisis fund in case the Russian side refused to subsidize this or that person who won the fellowship on merit (as determined by the independent panel). In that case, a stipend paid by the Italian side should be offered to the fellow upon his arrival at the Academy.

The amount of stipend should accommodate slight fluctuation according to a fellow's seniority.

4. Probable Venues and Logistics

a) The Rome Municipality is to lease for five years to the Russian Academy a building, or a set of buildings, large enough to accommodate its administration and four, or more, fellows. Preferably the fellows in the departments of painting and music would be provided with studio space.

b) The office space should be sufficient for a staff of, at minimum, three, including the Coordinating Director and two assistants—administrative and financial. Since these are to be Italian nationals and residents of Rome, no accommodations will be required. The office should be equipped with a telephone, Xerox, and fax machines.

c) The accommodations for the fellows shouldn't be below the standards of a two-star hotel. Running hot-and-cold water and central heating are required, as well as laundry service.

d) It is desirable that the premises of the Academy include space for a library and a conference room/salon where the fellows could entertain the Academy's visitors or give demonstrations of their work in progress.

e) The premises, as well as access to the building, should be guarded by the municipal police—as much in view of possible political demonstrations as of Russian tourists inclined to interfere with the fellow's activities.

f) Every effort should be made by the Academy's administration and its sponsors to secure the cooperation and assistance of other similar institutions in Rome for the Russian fellows, since the French, American, and German Academies in Rome, as well as the British Institute, have experience and facilities that could be put to use by the Russian fellows, either free or with a minimal charge. There is no doubt that such cooperation could be secured at least from the American Academy in Rome.

5. Fund-raising

Regardless of the Roman Municipality's good will, it is obvious that the project will require substantial funding, at the initial stages especially. To that end the undersigned guarantees the active participation of several Russian artists of note. In particular, the project has been discussed with Mr. Mikhail Baryshnikov, who whole-heartedly agreed to design and participate in a fund-raising event, which might include the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the pianists Sviatoslav Richter and Vladimir Ashkenazy. Fund-raising efforts could be increased and/or diversified to meet the demands of the Academy's programs.

However, the major player in realizing this project is, and for some time will remain, the Roman Municipality. As it seems to the undersigned, the main issue is not the money: it is the place. What one thinks about here is a reasonably large, unoccupied building, with water and electric wiring intact, and preferably without major structural flaws. And not necessarily in the heart of Rome. Of course, it would be preferable if the building had some pedigree; but at this juncture Russians are functionalists first and romantics second. In two or three years, Russian national pride and vanity will transform the place into something reasonably elegant and efficient. All the Russian Academy in Rome needs is a generous start. The consequences for everybody involved, not to mention the future, could be only beneficial, since currently the Russian appetite for its Italian cultural patrimony is extraordinary. Italy was a revelation to the Russians; now it can become the source of their renaissance.

To honor Brodsky's memory, his friends have established a Russian Academy in Rome Fund. Inquiries and donations may be addressed to the Russian Academy in Rome Fund, c/o Townsend and Valente, 489 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6105.

Letters

April 10, 1997: Alexander Schouvaloff, [RUSSIAN ACADEMY IN ROME](#)