

# **The Hermitage Programme as a therapeutic holding environment**

*Having time and being there*  
*Consistency and dependability*  
*Continuity of contact*

These are three key features in the creation of a therapeutic holding environment and the Hermitage programme for children with special needs fulfils these criteria.

Throughout the children's period of attendance they have the same guide, who has time for them and is there for them and thus a warm relationship can develop.

The systematic presentation of the courses building on knowledge previously imparted and discussed can develop a sense of consistency and dependability. The new being built on the old, which is familiar.

Having the same guide also provides the all-vital continuity of contact, as does visiting and revisiting, over a period of years, the same physical environment – the Museum.

The Hermitage is vast and awesome, but calling the programme 'Our Hermitage' lends a human quality to the museum which, hopefully, enables the children to develop a sense of being part of the culture and history of their country.

Helena Abram

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# **The Hermitage Museum St. Petersburg.**

## The Museum and Special Children – Conference Papers

### **PREFACE**

A conference on the Hermitage's work with sick or 'special' children, as it is customary to call them nowadays, should be of interest not only to the specialist guides who work with them in the museum but also to those teachers, psychologists and medical professionals who are concerned with these children and the effects of art on their health.

The Hermitage has always paid a great deal of attention to the specific needs of sick children. For many years the museum has been organising visits for blind children and for those with illnesses of the motor system. For the former, tours are arranged which enable them to touch exhibits with their hands. For those with mobility difficulties we provide wheelchairs and a lift to first floor galleries. Everything is done to make the children feel comfortable within the museum.

For a little over five years now, the Hermitage has been working with children with retarded mental development. Our specialist guides will talk about their experience of this work, their research and methodological findings. These guides form a special group within the museum under the direction of our School Centre methodologist, Larissa Yaroslavovna Shostak.

Teachers, psychologists and doctors have observed the effects of museum visits on children. Their findings are especially important and interesting for the Hermitage staff. What do the children gain from the tour? What sort of behaviour do they display after their visit? How do these visits help the work of health professionals? Is it possible to affirm that art therapy is not simply a medical expression, but a new method of treatment that will benefit children's health? I hope that the conference will answer these and other questions.

I. A. Kureyeva.

Director of the School Centre

## THE MUSEUM AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE HUMANISTIC EDUCATION OF SPECIAL CHILDREN

L. Ya. Shostak

These days it is customary to call 'special' those children suffering from some kind of physical or psychological ailment which affects their development and behaviour. They require care and attention, especially in these current uncertain times in which they have even fewer opportunities than their contemporaries for the development of their individuality and for preparing to lead normal lives.

Special children are vulnerable to influence and suggestion, which may not always be positive. As Professor L. M. Shchipitsina noted, they "are more likely to follow instinctive impulses and inclinations. During their adolescent years they may easily adopt the ideas, behaviour and way of life of criminal circles" (Shchipitsina, 1994). The Hermitage assists those special schools that are dedicated to the humanistic education of sick children and their integration into society. It helps those teachers who understand the enormous contribution of art to the formation of the personality and its beneficial effect on the psyche of the sick child.

In 1990, when orphanages and special schools first came to the School Centre, they had only a narrow aim in mind: to give children introductory tours of the Hermitage. It immediately became apparent however, that the general nature of such tours was ineffective. The children's capacity to perceive and comprehend the material on display was extremely limited and they lost interest very quickly. At first it was suggested that we should work with children of middle and senior school age, who had already acquired a certain stock of knowledge, ideas and understanding from history and literature lessons at school. In fact children of junior school age, like their healthy peers, are more open to fresh impressions and knowledge. They are more trusting and open towards the staff who lead the study sessions and thus constitute a more receptive audience.

We offered the schools a programme of systematic studies at the Hermitage aimed at second to ninth year pupils<sup>1</sup> and adapted to the ages and specific psychological characteristics of children with retarded mental

development. The programme was called 'Our Hermitage,' and offered two types of study tour. For younger pupils, a set of ten to twelve visits introduced them to the world of the museum; for older children a series of visits was linked thematically to their school history studies.

Systematic work with special children demanded deeper understanding of their psychology and responses to the art of the museum. We took as our starting point the lectures of the child psychologist Professor D. N. Isayev, and the research of the museum psychologist T. O. Oderisheva. We added to this the experience of holding study sessions with groups of junior school children in the Hermitage, and readings from specialist literature on the question of sick children's creativity and their perception of art.

We developed our methodology by observing the effects of art on the children and their reactions to the material presented to them. We trained members of Hermitage staff who were already experienced in working in our school lecture hall and who had the desire and requisite skills to find a common language with our target groups of children. Each member of staff was assigned a particular group. This was crucial at the first stage, for the psyche of these special children is particularly vulnerable. They must adapt to new surroundings and become accustomed to their new guide. They are highly responsive to kindness and attention. Our staff treat each child with respect, irrespective of his state of health, avoiding pity and condescension. Equally, they respect the child's personality, recognising its unique value and potential. As a result the children rapidly become attached to their 'Hermitage teacher.' The effectiveness of the study sessions depends to a large extent on their regularity and follow-up. It is important to note that the directorate of the Hermitage allows special schools to participate without payment and that we always provides these visiting groups with a member of staff.

The goal of our work is to help the sick child develop his personality and to build his mental strength through contact with world art and culture. We proceed from a basis of humanistic psychology, which believes in the unique individuality of each person and in his creative potential. It affirms that true mental health depends upon the opportunity for the self-actualisation of the individual. The

American expert in the field, C. Rogers, believed that for each individual the foundation of the self, the personality, is just such a creative process. He wrote, *“Close acquaintanceship with those who, in the course of psychotherapy, originally and effectively fashion themselves as individuals inspires faith in the creative potential of every human being.”* (Rogers, 1994) By lifting the fetters and obstacles created by external conditions, the doctor’s role is to establish conditions for the emergence of the spirit’s potential.

The influence of art on the emotional sphere of the spirit can be a powerful stimulus towards the manifestation of its potential, to the expression of the ‘ego’ and to changes in perceptions of reality. In the museum the child enters into a new relationship with his environment, his horizons constantly expand, external impressions leave vivid traces on his soul which in some form or other will be reflected in his future life and activities. For a child suffering from low self-esteem, study visits to the Hermitage reinforce belief in his own powers and in the possibility of overcoming his weaknesses and difficulties.

The museum environment is an accumulation of the highest level of achievement in human thought, talent, skill and spirit. It nurtures the child’s sense of perception. Our task is to foster in problem children a desire to visit the museum and to teach comprehension skills which will enable them to develop a love of art.

The perception of art is a creative process, a dialogue between the viewer and the producer of the work. For this process it is vital to establish conditions of freedom in which the child feels free to express his thoughts, impressions, questions and feelings. The museum staff must not be mentors, but willing helpers, sensitively grasping what and how the child sees and understands. They unobtrusively guide the child through this new world. The guides see their task as one of the development of perception, of enabling the children to see and observe, to form the ability to view intelligently, and to acknowledge spontaneous emotional impressions. These skills are hard enough for any viewer, for they demand a certain foreknowledge, experience, development of the associative thought process, imagination and command of special words and terminology. It is all the more difficult for children with retarded mental development. However,

this path is the only way of connecting the child to the world of art, and we follow it slowly, step by step. We are aided by the emotional openness of the child, his appreciation of beauty and capacity for surprise.

The study sessions take the form of free discussion, supplemented by play and drawing of exhibits in the museum. This method activates the child's perception, entertaining him and allowing him to engage in creative effort. We do not try to turn the whole session into a game, but we bring elements of play into our study, aiming these at the child's imagination, suggesting that he picture himself in different roles and costumes, as a fairy-tale personage, a hero of mythology or participant in important events. The child is asked to find analogies, to look for familiar attributes and subjects, and to answer the questions: 'What does this resemble? Where have we already seen this?' Play activates the child's imagination, helping him to form associative ideas.

Introduction to the Hermitage begins with its architecture, applied and decorative arts. Spatial design is the art form most intimately connected to human life. In portraying the former inhabitants of the palace, the owners of its contents, their choice of ornamentation, customs and mode of behaviour, their use of interiors and why, we take the children into an environment created by preceding generations. As he explores this environment the child absorbs socio-historical experience, which deepens his knowledge about those who lived in the past. In this process we neither adhere to a strict chronology nor go into great historical detail, but reference should be made to Peter the Great, founder of St Petersburg, whose name is already well known to the children. The importance of the 1812 war in Russian history should also be outlined. In the state rooms the children's attention is drawn to architectural symbols of government which embody the concepts of wise rule, national prosperity and Russian military victory. This gives the children an impression of the official atmosphere of life in the Tsar's residence.

All this is related to the task of developing the child's aesthetic capacity to perceive the architecture and artistic style of the main hall. The spatial arrangement of the front enfilade of state rooms is designed to give an impression of movement; they are decorated on the principle of contrast. The children are

asked to observe and compare the principal elements of dimension and style of decor. In doing so, they answer the question: 'By what means were the architects, in conjunction with other artists, able to create such distinctly beautiful interiors?' In doing so we do not go into too much depth about problems of changes in style as these would be too abstract for the children.

The art of sculpture opens up the poetic world of myth to the children, creating a vision of ancient peoples, an understanding of nature, humanity, divinity and moral values.

At first glance the sculpture of antiquity may seem to the children to be too uniform: marble statuary of a basic white colour, 'identical poses', 'similar' faces, no dramatism, no clear expression of emotion.

Study sessions in the halls of antiquities should be preceded by reading myths at school or at home, with the intention that the children themselves should be able to retell them. They should convey an image of the country where the mythological figures lived, their natural environment and beliefs. In the museum the children see how ancient people conceived their gods and how these conceptions were embodied in works of art. The children then identify the gods according to their physical attributes. Together with their guides they recall scenes from myths. As the ancients endowed their gods with human characteristics and behaviour which reflected relations within human society, so each God possesses his own face. Consequently, antique sculpture loses its uniformness in the eyes of the child; each personage takes on his or her own specific human type and character. Children perceive the means by which sculptors rendered the power and strength of Zeus, the grave beauty of Athena, the femininity and grace of Aphrodite. We use the poetic language of myth, its epithets and metaphors to view the sculpture, to enable it to 'speak', and to bring its form to life.

At the same time the children learn about sculpture's different forms and materials, the means of working on the surface of stone, the creation of texture, states of repose and of movement. The Hermitage exhibition of classical art is displayed in a way that makes it possible to envisage the spatial environment for which they were originally intended (temple, palace, or atrium).

The myths of antiquity lead us naturally to painting, as we demonstrate the significance of mythology in the development of art of Western Europe. In an age when ancient states had long since disappeared and people's world view had changed, mythology still exerted its influence on minds and inspired artists, thanks to its humanity, wisdom and beauty. However, those very gods and heroes of antiquity were created in different images, as each age endows something of its own to the concept of personal beauty.

We demonstrate how painting offers more widely expressive possibilities than sculpture: it may represent not only a central figure, but a whole group of personages, thus opening up the subject in more narrative and detail.

The basis of painting is colour. It is used to express the world in all its beauty and many forms, and to express different moods. However, at our first encounter we should introduce only some elements of the language of painting, avoiding the use of specialised terminology.

The formation of perception skills at a young age facilitates the development of interest in the world of art and prepares the way for further more complex themed tours. Many of our colleagues have noticed that over time the children become attentive, absorbed and active participants in their tours.

The Hermitage collection allows one to look at art and peoples from different epochs - from the ancient past to modern times. This presents a panorama of unusual and differently formed imaginations and customs. Art reflects eternal moral problems, highlighting human relations to the darker, negative side of life - the constant struggle for survival, cruelty and the cult of power. However, throughout the course of time good has striven to overcome the bad. Human appreciation of higher moral qualities in art would seem to oppose modern tendencies which value economic prosperity above all and ruthlessness as a means of attaining it.

When working with children with unstable minds and without sensitive moral understanding the selection of information about the past is very important, as is the point of view from which it will be examined. Such children sometimes have a particularly morbid outlook on the world. They experience frequent feelings of fear, defencelessness and lack of self-confidence. They may



even cry (for example, over a too-detailed description of the rites of embalming a mummy). It is vital therefore, to concentrate on optimistic ideas, emphasising goodness and justice. We must not create a gloomy atmosphere when showing the art of Egyptian funeral cults. In revealing the meaning of the rite we must portray the ancients' belief in the eternal and happy life of the human soul. In mythology we do not mention practices or beliefs which might appear to be cruel or immoral in our time. We draw attention to benevolent gods who bring good to human beings. When we introduce the display of knightly weapons, to take another example, we should not limit ourselves to a vivid description of warlike qualities and the propensities of offensive weaponry for this could promote aggression in the children. We recommend instead that exercises are devised in which the child discovers the noble ideals of the code of honour and the rules of courtly life. These make a strong impression on the child and can play a positive role in his character formation.

For the sick child the authority of the Museum's art and of his 'Hermitage teacher' is very great. He perceives artistic forms that exemplify high moral qualities. These have a profound effect upon his emotions and his soul, and help him to relate to the world in a spirit of love for mankind.

**L. Ya. Shostak**

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<sup>i</sup> Equivalent to ages seven to fourteen [trans.]

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## THE ART GALLERY AND PROBLEMS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

T.O. Oderisheva

From their early years children with developmental problems require special medical, social and educational treatment.

Today's crisis in the Russian system of education in mental health is directly related to the need for change in governmental and social attitudes to the sick and disabled, to be precise, to the granting of full civil rights to the disabled and the recognition of the unfair division between the fully-valued majority and the undervalued minority (Malofeyev 1997).

In Western Europe a fundamental reexamination of special education took place in the 1970s; in Russia it occurred twenty years later. Over there, changes in the system of special education came about in the context of a struggle against all types of discrimination; in Russia the humanisation of attitudes towards the invalid is taking place against a background of a sharp drop in living standards for many sections of society.

Are standard Russian schools ready to accept children with developmental problems? Today in the West the number of specialised schools, which once reached 15% of the total, has been sharply reduced, while at the same time the number of special classes in normal schools has increased (in comparison, according to 1998 statistics there are 49 special educational institutions in St Petersburg, or 8% of the total number of schools).

Here, the Russian Educational Academy supports integration through treatment in early childhood, which should begin in the first months of the child's life, and which should promote his future health and ability to realise his potential. There is a choice between integration and separate special education. Mental health experts from other countries insist on the earlier integration of special children into society.

As far as educational content is concerned there is a tendency today toward the amalgamation of studies for all children, without providing for meaningful development of the child's personality and his preparation for independent adult life.

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In these difficult times the correlation between the child's educational achievements and his successful acquisition of life skills is coming under reexamination.

We offer a new course: 'The inner world as a subject for study in special schools' (Goncharova, Kukushkina 1998). This course examines not only the existential side of life, but is directed toward self-knowledge, feelings, wishes and actions.

The programme encourages children to absorb material by observing their own behaviour and that of other people, and by introducing them to works of art. Ideas and impressions 'inscribe' themselves onto the child's concept of the world, as he mediates them verbally and then through the exploration of various forms of expressive activity.

The art gallery is ideally suited to the latest concepts in special education (which aims to teach self-control and successful social cooperation), for it represents and preserves the highest standards of human spiritual achievement. The role of the museum as an independent educational institution is expanding as new organisational structures emerge in Russia and abroad: museum-teaching centres, where school and museum boundaries merge. Schoolteachers prepare children for their museum visit and assign work; the museum helps them in this by providing recommendations on the form and content of the study sessions, illustrative material (slides, video film, reproductions), and literature on art, history and pedagogy. A guide accompanies the children on tours.

A similar scheme for cooperation between museums and schools for mentally retarded children is even more effective. As these children's cognitive activities tend to be passive, they need a considered system of teaching and guidance.

The Hermitage has been working with specialists in city schools for seven years. Our cooperative efforts have produced a cycle of active study sessions which entails close contact between teachers and parents. 'Attention and support' are key words of gratitude that parents have expressed towards the Hermitage.

Older children who have completed cycles of study sessions at the Hermitage express interest in the museum, positive memories of their visits, and

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the desire to visit it independently. Teaching methods that use art to enliven the inner world of mentally retarded children are becoming subjects of discussion in pedagogical conferences in the city. This spreads word of our work and attracts more schools to the Hermitage.

Doctors working at special schools note that among other positive effects, museum study sessions can soothe children's emotions. Teachers report that joint trips to the museum serve to unify the class, improve relations between the children, promote considerate behaviour and help to develop the children's aesthetic appreciation of the world around them. Mentally retarded children are easily suggestible and prone to imitation. These qualities serve the children well in this instance, for the museum provides them with a beneficial environment.

Our research concentrated on the study of speech as an integral characteristic of mental development. An educational experiment was conducted with the third class of School number 34 in the 1994/95 academic year.

By means of practical work (discussions about the tour in school), creative work (essays in class and at home on themes related to the museum visit), and active vocabulary work we were able to measure the growth of speech activity, lexical improvement and the overcoming of grammatical faults.

In concluding, we note that children from special schools who have followed a course of study at the Hermitage remember it for years, not only as a collection of exhibits (in this case, of decorative and applied art), but as a place where their own personality and achievements are recognised and valued. We hear the question: 'Are our drawings still hanging in the Hermitage?' (meaning the exhibition of children's framed work celebrating 'Our Hermitage').

Raising the self-esteem of the mentally-impaired is an extremely important form of rehabilitative work. Cooperation between the Hermitage and special schools has proven to be an effective means of integration of sick children into society.

**T.O. Oderisheva**

Source : Mrs Helena Abram  
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