

# *RUSSIAN ART at HILLWOOD*

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# PORTRAITS of CATHERINE THE GREAT

Before the age of photography, heads of state in Russia relied on artists to record their features for official purposes. Portraits by the dozens had to be sent to governors' palaces and embassies abroad or were presented as awards to diplomats or deserving subjects. The need was so great that a particular portrait was repeated over and over again, either by the original creator or by assistants in his studio. Thus it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain who created these works and when. Copyists at a later date frequently made replicas in different materials and dimensions. Engravings after paintings or drawings were printed in large numbers to be disseminated among the populace, and coins and medals in metal usually required images of the sovereign. To represent this variety of materials as well as the names of some of Russia's leading artists of the second half of the 18th century, eleven portraits of Catherine the Great, among others at Hillwood, are singled out for discussion here.



*Fig. 7. Engraving, H. 20 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
W. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  in., mid-18th century.*

Catherine (1729–1796), originally an obscure German princess named Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst, arrived in Russia in 1744 at the age of fifteen. Tsarina Elizabeth, who lacked a legitimate heir, had designated her nephew, Duke Peter of Holstein-Gottorp, as her successor and sent for Sophia to be his bride. Upon their marriage, Sophia was obliged to adopt the Orthodox faith and the Russian name Yekaterina Alekseevna. Portraits of the bridal pair were immediately necessary, and a commission to produce them was given to Georg Christoph Grooth (1716–1749), a German artist at Elizabeth's court. His likeness of the youthful Catherine was the model for a miniature (Fig. 9, left) and an engraving (Fig. 7). At Elizabeth's death in 1761, Peter ascended the throne as Peter III, but his reign turned out to be a short one. Unattractive physically, he was also irrational and ineffectual as a leader and so became a target for his ambitious and strong-minded wife, who seized power with the help of a group of friends. Peter was assassinated during the turmoil of the coup.

The coronation of Catherine in 1762 occasioned the creation of innumerable official portraits of the new ruler by an array of artists connected to the court; some of these portraits were probably turned out in haste. In this category is a canvas showing Catherine wearing a crown and holding the scepter and orb from the imperial regalia as symbols of her power as tsarina (Fig. 10). However, the head and costume are after a portrait painted when she was still only a grand duchess, indicating that these accessories were added by the later copyist. The awkward pose and the stiff, unarticulated parts of the body are





Fig. 8. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 27 in. W. 22 in., 1773, signed and dated "P. Falconet 1773." Catherine wears the star and blue sash of the Order of St. Andrew and the star of the Order of Saint George.

Fig. 9. Left: Miniature in gouache, H.  $4\frac{3}{8}$  in. W.  $3\frac{1}{16}$  in., mid-18th century, after a painting of c. 1745 by Georg Christoph Grooth (1716–1749). Catherine wears the star, red sash, and badge of the Order of St. Catherine and holds a fan in her right hand. Right: Miniature in gouache on ivory in a gold frame, D.  $3\frac{1}{4}$  in., 1784, after a painting of c. 1770 by Fyodor Rokotov (c. 1735–1808).







*Fig. 10. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 49 in. W. 39 in., c. 1762, after a painting by Pietro Rotari (1707–1762). Catherine wears a crown, the blue sash and star of the Order of St. Andrew, and holds the orb and scepter from the imperial regalia.*



*Fig. 11. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 102 in. W. 73 in., late 1770s, attributed to Dmitri Levitski (1735–1822). In the left background, over a bust of Peter the Great, is written the phrase in Russian, "What was begun is accomplished." Visible on the back of the chair at the right is the double-headed imperial eagle. An engraved silver plaque on the frame bears an inscription stating that the portrait was given by Catherine in 1788 to Henry Hope for his financial negotiations on her behalf (he was a Scottish banker based in Amsterdam).*

evidence that this unidentified artist was somewhat unschooled.

Portraiture in Russia in the first half of the 18th century was sometimes technically deficient according to western standards because of an historical lack of exposure to cultural developments in the west. The level of achievement rose markedly in the second half of the 18th century after Peter the Great called in artists from Western Europe and sent aspiring Russians abroad for training. Moreover, Catherine actively patronized the arts by acquiring whole collections of European old masters, thus providing models for study, and by commissioning new works from native and foreign artists.

The prototype for Figure 10 was by Pietro Rotari (1707–1762), an Italian who had been called to St. Petersburg in 1756 by Tsarina Elizabeth and attached to the court. He was very active and successful and exerted great influence on native Russian practitioners in the second half of the 18th century. One of his followers was Fyodor Rokotov (c. 1735–1808), whose version of Catherine's features she considered especially true to life. A miniature after one of his oil paintings suggests his soft feathery brushwork (Fig. 9, right).

A full-length, life-size canvas (Fig. 11) according to tradition has been attributed to Dmitri Levitski (1735–1822), who was the best known outside Russia of the native-born Russian portraitists of his day. Somewhat confusing, however, is that the pose, costume, and background of this portrait were stock features used by several other painters, including Rokotov. The large scale and grand effect through the use of rich materials, jewelry, velvet curtains, and classical columns are typical of a so-called parade portrait, the formula for which was perfected by Anthony van Dyck.

Alexander Roslin (1718–1793) was a Swede who spent many years in Paris. In 1775 he was called to St. Petersburg by Catherine, and his parade portrait of her made her face seem plump and even genial with a trace of a smile. Thus he established another prototype that was frequently repeated, as in this half-length canvas (Fig. 12) showing her wearing the lavish diamond-studded collar of the Order of St. Andrew and an ermine cape.

In contrast with the opulent parade type are the following two examples. A bust-length view (Fig. 8) is signed by the painter Pierre Falconet (1741–1791) and dated 1773, the year he arrived in St. Petersburg from Paris. He was the son of the sculptor Étienne Falconet, who sent for him to help produce the monumental equestrian statue of Peter the Great commissioned by Catherine. Pierre, introduced to Catherine by his father, was immediately ordered to create a portrait of her.

An unpretentious half-length canvas (Fig. 13) reflects the advancing age of the subject, who is dressed simply in a small fur hat and a red jacket adorned only with stars of orders, and no jewelry. The original work was by Mikhail Shebanov (dates unknown), a serf belonging to Catherine's favorite, Prince Gregory Potyomkin. She posed for Shebanov when she was in Kiev on her trip south in 1787 to witness at first hand Potyomkin's development of the Crimea.

Toward the end of the century, Rokotov and even Levitski were





Left:

Fig. 12. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 31 in. W. 23 in., late 18th century, after a portrait of 1777 by Alexander Roslin (1718–1793). Catherine wears the diamond-studded collar of the Order of St. Andrew and the striped dark yellow and black sash of the Order of St. George.



Above:

Fig. 13. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 28 in. W. 21¾ in., late 18th century, after a canvas by Mikhail Shebanov (dates unknown). Catherine wears the stars of the Orders of St. Andrew and St. George.

Left:

Fig. 14. Painting in oil on canvas, H. 34 in. W. 26½ in., after a full-length parade portrait of 1794 by Giovanni Battista Lampi (1751–1830). Catherine wears the sash of the Order of St. Andrew.





Fig. 15. Medallion in silver, D. 2 $\frac{3}{8}$  in., c. 1775, inscribed in Cyrillic by the medalist "P. Lialin." An award for agriculture. Cyrillic inscription around the edge reads, "By the Grace of God Catherine II, Empress and Autocrat of All the Russias."

Fig. 16. Bust in marble, H. 26 in., late 18th century, by Fedot Shubin (1740–1805).



overshadowed by a painter who had become very fashionable. He was Giovanni Battista Lampi, who came originally from the Tyrol, Austria, and left Russia eventually to settle in Vienna (1751–1830). Here is a half-length version of his full-length parade portrait, dated 1794, in which he glossed over the fact that his subject was 65 years old (Fig. 14). The pose is easy, the modeling smooth.

When a likeness is executed in a medium without color it becomes less realistic, and a profile, which is based on a silhouette rather than on surface details, is more abstract than a full face. Coins and medals are related to ancient cameos in their use of very low relief and usually bear profiles, which are more suited to the material and technique than a frontal pose and are more quickly recognizable.

The bust of Catherine in profile appears on a commemorative medallion (Fig. 15) inscribed with the name of Pavel Lialin, who was a member of a family of medalists active at the St. Petersburg mint over several generations. It is possible that Lialin copied a likeness of the tsarina made some years earlier.

A solid substance like marble connotes permanence even more than does metal. An impression of timelessness is further enhanced by Neoclassic idealization, a style well illustrated in a sculptured head of Catherine (Fig. 16) that is a repetition of a piece created in Rome in 1771 by Fedot Shubin (1740–1805), the leading Russian sculptor of his day. The slight smile is what has been called "The Smile of Reason,"\* a facial expression evident in French portraiture in the second half of the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment. This confident smile was also appropriate for someone who corresponded with Voltaire, Grimm, and Diderot.

Official portraits tend to flatter. Even so, as one surveys these illustrations one realizes that Catherine, although vain, was no classic beauty: her brow was high, her mouth small, her nose and chin long. But one also senses her self-assurance, alertness, and intelligence.

These portraits at Hillwood offer a rare opportunity to judge the appearance and personality of an individual who holds such a prominent place in history.

\*Clark, Kenneth, *Civilisation*, Harper & Row, New York, 1969, p. 245.

# PAINTING



Fig. 17. Portrait of Tsar Nicholas I, H. 32½ in. W. 26 in., c. 1850, after Franz Krüger (1797–1857). (All the paintings illustrated in this chapter are in oil on canvas unless otherwise noted.)

Hillwood contains about seventy Russian paintings. Some twenty-five of them are official portraits of Russian rulers and nobility of the 18th and 19th centuries that have considerable historical value. One of them is an oval portrait of Tsar Nicholas I, shown half-length and wearing a uniform (Fig. 17). The composition is after a prototype by the German painter Franz Krüger (1779–1857), who travelled several times to St. Petersburg to paint the tsar. Among the other paintings at Hillwood, works by eight Russians of the 19th and early 20th centuries are singled out for discussion here.

The earliest is Karl Briullov (1799–1852), an important figure in the history of Russian painting who rose to prominence during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. An outstanding student at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, he was sent abroad in 1822 to further his education. He settled in Rome, where he remained for twelve years with the goal of producing an epic historical subject. This he achieved by completing *The Last Day of Pompeii* in 1833, a huge canvas now in the Russian Museum in Leningrad. His portrait *Countess Samoilova and Her Foster Daughter* was painted in Rome at this time (Fig. 18).

Julia Pavlovna Samoilova was the daughter of Count Paul Petrovich Pahlen and Countess Maria Pavlovna Skavronski. Her first marriage was to Count Nicholas Alexandrovich Samoilov. Having incurred the displeasure of Tsar Nicholas I by lavish entertaining at her estate in St. Petersburg, she moved to Italy, preferring to live in a freer society, surrounded by musicians and painters. The young girl in the portrait is Giovannina Paccini, the niece of the opera composer Giovanni Paccini. Documents indicate that Briullov was romantically attached to his sitter, who from all accounts was charming and vivacious. She is shown joyfully stepping into a room from a terrace seen through an open door, being greeted by Giovannina, a dog, and a servant who takes her shawl. The varied textures of lace, satin, velvet, and fur have been simulated with technical proficiency. The figures form a compact pyramidal group reminiscent of the antique sculpture of Laocoön in the intertwining of the arms and the folds of the shawl. On the wall to the right is the lower left-hand corner of a large framed picture that depicts an elderly man with a staff. This is a replica of the corner of *The Last Day of Pompeii*. Further allusion to the theme of his *magnum opus* is the Pompeiian design of the necklace worn by the countess and the water in the distance, which has been identified as the Bay of Naples. Over the doorway is a sketchy rendering of



Fig. 18. Countess Samoilova and Her Foster Daughter, H. 106 in. W 79 in., 1832–1834, by Karl Briullov (1799–1852).



the countess' coat of arms, which incorporates the device of Count Pahlen.

When Samoilova moved to France later on she took her portrait with her. After her death in 1875 it passed through various hands in Europe and was brought eventually to the United States in the 1930s.

Shortly after this portrait was finished, Briullov returned to Russia. In 1839 Samoilova made a visit to St. Petersburg, at which time Briullov painted a second monumental portrait of her called *The Masquerade*, which now hangs in the Russian Museum in Leningrad.

An even greater stress on naturalistic detail marks the style of Konstantin Makovski (1839–1915), who painted *The Boyar Wedding* about fifty years later (Fig. 19). The canvas is signed and dated 1883. The surface of brocade and fur, light gleaming on jewels and silver, are the artist's chief concern, more than any formal composition. Explicit facial expressions tell a story in this romantic recreation of 17th-century Boyar life. The room, similar to those in the old Terem Palace

Opposite page:  
Fig. 19. *The Boyar Wedding*, H. 93 in. W 154 in., 1883, by Konstantin Makovski (1839–1915).







in the Moscow Kremlin, is cluttered with objects in silver, colored enamel, and carved walrus ivory.

As a young man, Makovski rebelled against the rigid classical tradition of the Academy and exhibited with the members of the Association of Travelling Art Exhibits (the *Peredvizhniki*), who wanted to break away from prescribed history painting and choose their own themes from contemporary reality. However, he later became a successful academician himself and preferred subjects from the past.

*The Boyar Wedding* was exhibited in 1885 at the International Exposition in Antwerp, where it received the highest prize, the *Médaille d'Honneur*. It was bought at the fair directly from the artist by Charles William Schumann, a New York jeweler who also secured all rights of reproduction. Schumann then sold color prints of it to a large clientele. Along with several other European paintings that he had imported to bring culture to America, as he hoped, it was put on exhibition in his shop on Broadway at 22nd Street. He no doubt hoped also that the display would attract customers for his jewelry. *The Boyar Wedding* remained in the possession of the Schumann family until 1936, when it was acquired by Robert Ripley, the creator of the feature "Believe It Or Not."

While Makovski found a wide public for his specialty of imaginary scenes of Boyar life, Ivan Aivazovski (1817–1900) was acclaimed for his seascapes based on sound first-hand observation of the Black Sea area where he was born. The thousands of compositions he produced in his long and prolific life vary in size from huge to minuscule. In the Hillwood collection there are three tiny seascapes in oil and a creation in two media.

A photograph (Fig. 20) shows the bearded artist himself, brush in hand, seated in his studio before an easel supporting a framed seascape that appears large in the scale of the room. However, it is actually another one of these miniature oil paintings. The photograph is signed. It also bears an inscription in Russian script that might possibly read "to Maria Konstantinova Rusakova." The photograph is dated 1888. A contemporary account relates that a jubilee was held to honor Aivazovski (probably for his seventieth birthday) and in turn he gave a dinner for 150 persons who had attended the jubilee, each of whom received from him one of these photographs cum paintings.\*

A younger contemporary of Aivazovski, and also a successful academician who won many medals, was Peter Sukhodolski (1836–1903). Born in Kaluga, he at first painted realistic landscapes of his native province. Later in life he branched out to include seascapes and battle scenes. His ability to integrate many figures in space by the use of light and dark areas and atmospheric perspective is well illustrated in the small painting that bore the title *The Fair at Sorochinsk* when it was acquired (Fig. 21). It is signed and dated 1888. Roughly dressed



Fig. 20. The Artist in His Studio, photograph and oil on canvas, H. 9¼ in. W. 7½ in., 1888, by Ivan Aivazovski (1817–1900).

\*Brandes, Dr. Georg, *Impressions of Russia*, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1889, p. 75.





Fig. 21. The Fair at Sorochinsk, H. 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. W 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  in., 1888, by Peter Sukhodolski (1836–1903).



Fig. 22. Cutting Ice in the Neva River, oil on wood, H. 8 $\frac{1}{16}$  in. W 12 $\frac{3}{16}$  in., c. 1880, by Alexander Beggrov (1841–1914).



peasants stand amid their wagons, horses, and cattle in a setting with a thatch-roofed cottage, birch trees, and church towers.

Another small painting represents an unmistakably Russian subject—cutting blocks of ice in the frozen Neva River in St. Petersburg (Fig. 22). It is signed by Alexander Beggrov (1841–1914), who at first attended the Russian Academy and then continued his studies in Paris with L. Bonnat and A. Bogoliubov. In the 1870s he took part in the exhibitions of the *Peredvizhniki*. This painting is based on sensitive observation and executed with subtle tonal variations. As an officer and artist in the Navy Department, he travelled abroad and painted views of ports in France and Italy as well as of his native city.

A painter with even broader international contacts created the winter landscape *Russian Village at Sunset*, which is signed and dated 1894 (Fig. 23). Julius von Klever (1850–1924), who was of Baltic origin, exhibited in Paris, Munich, and in Berlin, where he met with such favor that the German emperor gave him a title in 1893. At the International Exposition in Antwerp in 1885, where *The Boyar Wedding* was on view, he had an official position to promote Russian art. His composition reproduced here was so popular that he repeated the elements over and over again. A narrow snow-covered road passes over a bridge toward a gate. Thatched huts and a small church nestle at the edge of a grove of trees illumined by the dramatic firelike glow of the setting sun.

Any such romantic tendency is absent in a view of people lined up on an embankment watching the breaking up of the ice in the Mos-

Fig. 23. *Russian Village at Sunset*, H. 36¾ in. W. 54¾ in., 1894, by Julius von Klever (1850–1924).





Fig. 24. Breaking up of Ice in the Moscow River, 12¼ in. W. 30¼ in., 1902, by Aleksei Korin (1865–1923).



Fig. 25. Snow Scene with a Brook, H. 9¾ in. W. 13⅞ in., c. 1920, by Ivan Choultsé (1877–1939).



cow River (Fig. 24). It has been identified as by Aleksei Korin (1865–1923), a genre painter who taught at the Moscow art school and exhibited in Paris and Rome as well as in Russia. This small canvas is a study for a larger composition that was reproduced in the catalogue of the thirtieth exhibition of the *Peredvizhniki* in 1902. The present whereabouts of the finished painting is unknown.

Romantic light effects are seen again in the work of Ivan Choultsé (1877–1939). Known as the “Wizard of Light,” he painted moonlight, slanting rays, and the rosy glow of sunset on snow (Fig. 25). Choultsé was born in St. Petersburg in a family of German origin named Schultze. At the time of the Revolution he escaped to Paris, where he adopted a French transliteration of his name. He never returned to Russia. Before he left he had visited Norway often and afterwards had spent much time in the French Alps, so many of his paintings, such as this one, are of West European scenery.

All of these artists had academic training and were recognized in Russia during their lifetimes. In addition, their paintings can be found in Russian museums today.