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Passion of the Empress: Catherine the Great's Art Patronage
At Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens
February 15-June 8, 2014

Decorative art, books, and liturgical treasures commissioned by Catherine the Great explore the powerful empress's lasting imprint on the art and culture of Russia

WASHINGTON— A dazzling array art in porcelain, gold, silver, and enamel; liturgical treasures; and images of the empress in all types of media reveal the power and patronage that marked the reign of Catherine the Great, one of Russia's foremost art collectors and shrewdest political and cultural leaders, in the special exhibition ***Passion of the Empress: Catherine the Great's Art Patronage***, on view at Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens from February 15 to June 8, 2014.



For 34 years, Catherine reigned over a golden age of Russian culture, founding what would become the State Hermitage Museum and transforming St. Petersburg into one of Europe's cultural centers. ***Passion of the Empress*** presents a selection of finely-crafted decorative objects and works of art to explore how the famous tsarina masterfully blended traditions of Byzantium with the Western neoclassical style that was a hallmark of the Enlightenment, to create an art form that was distinctly Russian.

With the stunning *Buch Chalice* as the centerpiece, 27 works from Hillwood's [Russian imperial art collection](#) form the foundation of the exhibition. Other lenders to the exhibition include

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

4155 Linnean Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20008 (202) 686-5807 www.HillwoodMuseum.org

the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum, Dumbarton Oaks, The Birmingham Museum of Art, and private collections.

“Exploring the art patronage of Catherine the Great in the context of founder Marjorie Post’s Russian art collection at Hillwood prompts comparisons of these two fascinating women,” said Hillwood executive director Kate Markert. “For both, art collecting was a passion driven not just by the beauty of the objects but also by a deep understanding of the power of art to reflect the owner’s stature and refinement —especially important for two visionary women of their time.” Marjorie Post was already an avid collector of royal French and European decorative arts when she discovered the treasures of imperial Russia in the 1930s while in Moscow with her husband, the ambassador to the Soviet Union. It was there that she formed the nucleus of her Russian collection with the discoveries she made in the Soviet commission shops and warehouses. Today, Hillwood houses the largest collection of Russian imperial art outside of Russia.

Catherine the Great’s Art Patronage

When she took the throne in 1762, Russia was considered throughout Europe to be culturally lacking and Catherine was determined to change this perception. Having lived at court since 1744, when she became engaged to the future Peter III, while educating herself about Russian culture, language, and the Orthodox Church, Catherine quietly developed her own sense of style. It was her correspondence with the French philosophes in particular that eventually strengthened French taste in Russia and enabled Catherine to foster the arts, science, and education.



Though she is best known for collecting thousands of paintings, Catherine commissioned splendid metalwork, porcelain, glasswork, and books for her own use and as gifts for courtiers. It is in these objects that the blending of Byzantine and classical influences shows Catherine’s desire to forge a new direction for Russian culture and align it with the West. Many of the objects in the exhibition bring focus to Catherine’s use of ancient and medieval carved cameos and intaglios and her incorporation of those into her commissions for new works of art.

The most exquisite example of this intermingling is the *Buch Chalice*. Commissioned in 1790, Iver Windfeldt Buch produced two liturgical sets, each comprising a chalice and several other pieces necessary for celebrating the Divine Liturgy. To construct the sets, Catherine provided Buch with gold and diamonds from the State Treasury and carved gems representing scenes from the life of Christ, saints, and angels, which came from her private collection. Of the gems, a 13th-century Byzantine cameo of the Archangel Michael is the oldest. The remaining ones are mostly contemporary. Catherine presented a communion set, including this chalice, to the Trinity Cathedral in the Aleksandr Nevskii Monastery in St. Petersburg on August 29, 1791.

Other highlights of the exhibition include a glass cameo of *Catherine II in the Guise of Minerva*, based on a Siberian jasper cameo carved by Catherine's daughter-in-law, Maria Feodorovna, depicting Catherine as the goddess Minerva wearing a helmet decorated with a winged sphinx crown and laurel wreath; a late 17th-century censer that is one of the most stunning examples of metalwork in Hillwood's collection; and pieces from the Orlov Porcelain Service, the expansive set made at Catherine's request by the Imperial Porcelain Factory for Count Grigory Grigoryevich Orlov (1734-1783), the count who, with his brothers, organized a coup that placed Catherine on the throne. Another piece in the show that is believed to have been a gift to Orlov is a gold and enamel *Potpourri Vase with Classical Figures*, on loan from the Walters Art Museum. Made by Jean Pierre Ador, the vase demonstrates the goldsmith's mastery of casting, chasing, and chiseling and has been called his masterpiece.

Organization and Publication

Organized by the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens. The exhibition is supported by grants from the Frances Wood Wilson Foundation, Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the W. Newton Morris Charitable Foundation, and by Mr. and Mrs. James T. Mills, Jr. and the Friends of the Georgia Museum of Art. Additional support is provided by the Georgia Council for the Arts through the appropriations of the Georgia General Assembly. The Council is a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The curator is Dr. Asen Kirin of the University of Georgia Lamar Dodd School of Art. An accompanying, 232 page-publication, also titled *Exuberance of Meaning: The Art Patronage of Catherine the Great (1762-1796)*, examines Catherine's use of art patronage as a tool to solidify her power through her evocation of both the classical past and Byzantine heritage. An essay by Kirin provides an intriguing and first-ever scholarly comparison of Catherine the Great and Marjorie Merriweather Post as art collectors. Hillwood curators Liana Paredes and Dr. Scott Ruby and archivist Kristen Regina contributed essays and catalogue entries.

Programs and Events

An array of lectures and programs will offer additional opportunities to learn about the art patronage of Catherine the Great. A special Valentine's Day event, ***The Queen of Hearts***, will celebrate the opening of the exhibition with cocktails, hors d'oeuvre, and dancing on Friday, February 14, 2014.

Sponsors

The exhibition is supported by the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation, Bonhams, Ellen MacNeille Charles, Mr. and Mrs. Dale Church, Cyril Geacintov, Ph.D., Elizabeth Trey, and a memorial gift in honor of all of their parents from the Davison and Cheremeteff families. All exhibitions and programs are funded in part by the U.S. Commission on the Fine Arts through the National Capital Arts and Cultural Affairs program.

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

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Hillwood Background

When Post cereal heiress, art collector, social figure, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post left to the public her northwest Washington, D.C. estate, she endowed the country with the most comprehensive collection of [Russian imperial art](#) outside of Russia, an [exquisite 18th-century French decorative art collection](#), and 25 acres of serene landscaped gardens and natural woodlands.

Opened as a public institution in 1977, today Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens offers a gracious and immersive experience unlike any other. Highlights of the collection include Fabergé eggs, Russian porcelain, Russian orthodox icons, Beauvais tapestries, and Sèvres porcelain, and Post's personal collection of apparel, accessories, and exquisite jewelry. Thirteen acres of enchanting formal gardens include the [Japanese-style Garden](#), [Rose Garden](#), [French Parterre](#), and working greenhouses full of exotic orchids.

GENERAL INFORMATION

- What:** *Passion of the Empress: Catherine the Great's Art Patronage*
- When:** February 15–June 8, 2014
- Where:** 4155 Linnean Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
Metro: VanNess/UDC, Red Line (20 minute walk)
- Information:** (202) 686-5807 or www.HillwoodMuseum.org
Follow us on Facebook www.Facebook.com/HillwoodMuseum
- Hours:** Tuesday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm. Closed Mondays, most national holidays, and for two weeks in January. Open on Select Sundays throughout the year.
- Café:** The [Café](#) serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday from 11:00 am to 3:30 pm.
Afternoon Tea is served on Sundays only from 1 to 3:30 pm.
Express Dining, featuring a quick selection of sandwiches, salads, snacks, and beverages (cash only) is available Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am to 4 pm and Sunday from 1 to 4 pm.
Call (202) 686-5807 for café reservations
- Suggested Donation:** \$15; \$12 for seniors (65 and older); \$10 for college students; \$5 for visitors age 6 to 18. Donation waived for visitors under age 6.

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