

EXHIBITION REVIEW

JENNIFER MILAM

A Collection Worthy of a Cosmopolitan Patron of the Arts

Masterpieces from the Hermitage: The Legacy of Catherine the Great, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 31 July – 8 November 2015

There is, perhaps, no more appropriate exhibition within recent memory to display the 'cosmopolitan moment' of Enlightenment art patronage and collecting than *Masterpieces from the Hermitage: The Legacy of Catherine the Great*. Touted as a 'sweeping survey of art from the Russian court', the exhibition provided visitors with the most extraordinary glimpse into to the cosmopolitan taste of Catherine II, who ruled Russia for 34 years, between 1762 and 1796. Her reign spanned the period of Enlightenment and the revolutions that Enlightenment thinking gave rise to in America and France. A frequent correspondent with French *philosophes*, such as Voltaire and Diderot, she became disillusioned with Enlightenment ideas following the imprisonment and execution of Louis XVI and the violence of the Terror. Her collections, nevertheless, stand as visual evidence of her interest in art, not only as an extension of her grandeur as a ruler, which was typical of the age of absolutism, but also as the material expression of her intellectual curiosity and openness to other cultures.

Previous exhibitions of Catherine's collections outside of Russia—such as the 2005-2006 exhibition in Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the 2013-2014 exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art—pale in comparison to the magnificent selections that were sent to Melbourne. With over 500 art works and objects from the Hermitage on display, many of the items were among her most prized possessions: exquisite carved gems, the extravagant Sèvres *Cameo Service*, superb Old Master paintings from the Renaissance and seventeenth century, remarkable drawings ranging from head studies to highly finished compositions, and avant-garde works by the leading contemporary painters in eighteenth-century France and England. It is well-known that Catherine acquired works by proxy at key auctions in Paris, as well as purchasing entire collections by negotiation, such as that of Sir Robert Walpole. An entire room of the exhibition was given over to pieces from this important acquisition by Catherine in 1779, and by displaying the works together in this way, visitors at the NGV were able to get a real sense of its significance, not only in terms of the quality of the works, but also

how such purchases helped her to build a reputation as a connoisseur with tastes that accorded with the best collectors of eighteenth-century Europe.

While the majority of the exhibition demonstrated Catherine's ambition to form a serious and varied collection of European art, it was in the final rooms that her cosmopolitan efforts as a patron and collector came into focus for the visitor. For Catherine was not just interested in collecting European art that had the mark of approval of previous collectors and connoisseurs. She also maintained an interest in Chinese art and supported the travel and training of Russian artists to meet her specifically cosmopolitan taste for *chinoiserie*. By hanging the architectural drawings of the Ilya Neyelov and Yury Velten in close proximity to Catherine's collection of Chinese and *chinoiserie* objects, what becomes visible is her pursuit of an aesthetic that found beauty in the art forms of both Eastern and Western cultures. While Catherine's tastes are often seen as derivative, following the fashions of Europe, it is in her acquisition of Chinese objects and interest in developing original *chinoiserie* designs by the hands of locally-trained artists that we can see a uniquely Russian 'cosmopolitan moment' in the history of collecting and patronage.

Russia's geographic location straddles Europe and Asia. For a thousand years or longer, this physical positioning of Russia between East and West has led to a conceptualization of a relationship with China that differs from that of the rest of Western Europe and which was often in flux. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Kievan principalities had commercial and cultural ties with European and Asian lands, but by the thirteenth century, the Mongolian occupation resulted in severing Russia's connection with the West until the time of Peter I. Relations with the East fared little better and it could not be said that Russians considered their nation to be Asian any more than European in these intervening centuries. Muscovite Russia is understood by history as insular and lacking curiosity for the outside world; however, there is every indication that contact with China at the middle of the seventeenth century stimulated an interest in incorporating Chinese art objects into Russian interiors. Peter I, who travelled beyond Russia's borders, opened up himself and his court to westernization, and in turn to the origins of European Enlightenment thought. While the matter of Russia's process of westernization was announced as complete by Catherine II with her declaration in the Instruction of 1767 that "Russia is a European State", the expanding empire's position in regards to China and other parts of Asia remained open to interpretation. On the one hand, imperialist ambitions defined Catherine's attitude towards the East, specifically in relation to the Crimea; while, on the other hand, like Peter I, she remained culturally curious and diplomatically cautious about China.

Scholars have explored Catherine's writings, as well as those of others in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, to derive some understanding of the Russian attitudes towards China during this period, but direct commentary that fixes a position, official or otherwise, is limited. Catherine herself made many contradictory

statements, most famously describing the Chinese emperor as her “nice and ceremonious neighbor with tiny eyes.” This comment is at once complementary and derisive, indicative of a characteristic Russian ambivalence towards China. There is enough evidence from the late eighteenth century onwards to confirm that some Russians felt a certain closeness to Asia, including Nikolai Karamzin, which counters the received notion that the East was perceived primarily as a place to be conquered, so that the empire could expand. In *Russian Orientalism*, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye has convincingly demonstrated the complexity of Russian views of Asia, to counter the adoption in respect to Russia of Edward Said’s framework of orientalism as a weapon of western imperialist oppression. He proposed, in alignment with my own recent conjecture regarding Catherine II’s projects at Oranienbaum and Tsarskoe Selo, that “Asia was the one place where Russians could be the European’s equals.”¹ Similarly, I have argued that the incorporation of an idea of China into Russia’s otherwise westernized building projects presented Russian patrons with the ability to frame their aesthetic achievements as both *avant garde* and on par with their European peers.² While it is beyond the scope of an exhibition review to explore the tensions between emergent notions of nationalism, imperialism and cosmopolitanism within Russian thinking during the eighteenth century, the Chinese and *chinoiserie* objects on display in the final room of the exhibition initiate a more nuanced understanding of Russia’s engagement with China through the visual evidence of what I define as a cosmopolitan aesthetic in eighteenth-century Russia, evidenced in *kitaischina* (the term that is closest to a description of *chinoiserie* in Russian) that emerged under Peter I, was elaborated upon in spaces associated with his successors, and became most fully expressed in the building projects, art patronage and collecting practices of Catherine II.

Studies of *chinoiserie* are too often separated from a concern with China and Chinese objects. Moreover, developments in Russia are generally ignored. Hugh Honour’s eponymous study of the artistic style, for example, defined *chinoiserie* as a “European vision of Cathay”,³ rather than a genuine engagement with Asian culture, and touched only briefly upon a few Russian examples: the lacquer room and porcelain display at Monplaisir (early 1720s); the Chinese pavilion and palace at Oranienbaum (1760s); and the Chinese Village at Tsarskoe-Selo (early 1780s). To these examples, we can add several other major projects of the eighteenth century to include: the Chinese Hall (1756; dismantled in the 1770s) at Tsarskoye Selo, designed by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli for Elizabeth I; the Chinese interiors (1758-62) of Peter III’s palace at Oranienbaum by Antonio Rinaldi; the Divan Room and the Crown Room at Peterhof, created by Yuri Felten in 1770 for Catherine II; the

¹ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2010, p. 4

² Milam, 2012.

³ Honour, 1973, p. 7

Chinese townscape (1772-73) designed by Rinaldi for Catherine on the outskirts of Tsarskoe Selo; and a number of smaller *chinoiserie* garden structures (usually called 'Chinese houses') from the 1760s and 1770s at Kuskovo, Sheremetev Park and Repnin's house.

Russian historiography on the issues surrounding imported Chinese art objects is more extensive; nevertheless, there has been no focused study of *chinoiserie* in Russia other than Dmitri Shvidkovsky's "Architecture of Asian Bliss", which urged the incorporation of exotic structures in Moscow and Saint Petersburg into the "image of international influences in world architecture" during the eighteenth century.⁴ At the same time that Shvidkovsky acknowledged the significance of Russian contributions to pan-European tastes for *chinoiserie* and *turquerie*, he argued that these orientalist styles were imports from the West and "stood apart" from genuine models of oriental architecture located in Russia. Looking at the drawings and prints that record Kuskovo and Rainaldi's Chinese townscape designs, there is a great deal of merit to this position. Oriental features—derived more from the European rococo idiom than Asia—tend to crown simplified classical architectural forms. Even so, more can be made of the blending of genuine Chinese imports and Russian manufactured *kitaischina* into architectural projects – hand painted silk wall paper, porcelain objects, lacquer panels– that were consistent with European tastes and simultaneously marked Russia as unique through its direct diplomatic contact with China. Consequently, the Russian development of *kitaischina* should not be considered as purely imitative or derivative of European *chinoiserie*. The fact that collections of Chinese decorative arts were noticed and notable provides an important context for understanding the contemporaneous development of *kitaischina*, as does the direct diplomatic contact that existed between Russia and China at key moments of interest in a Chinese artistic manner, whether genuine or imagined. There were significant collections of Asian art that were prominently displayed in Russian palaces and townhouses throughout the eighteenth century. Peter I and Aleksandr Menshikov had extensive collections of Chinese and Japanese porcelain, parts of which were acquired through the official embassies to China, while other objects were bought from the Dutch East India Company, which had better examples of Asian porcelain. More than 500 porcelain objects were displayed on purpose built shelves incorporated into the room décor at Monplaisir alone. Many other items in Peter's personal spaces were displayed as Chinese, rather than *chinoiserie* objects. Inventories of Peterhof and Ekateringof make reference to such items: "a mug with nine inset beakers, a Chinese emperor's gift"; "Chinese cups"; "a porcelain screen depicting a ceremonial procession of the Chinese emperor and his retinue".⁵ Archival documents related to Menshikov's estate list over 3000 items. Menshikov, who accompanied Peter on his first

⁴ Shvidkovsky, 1991.

⁵ Milam, 2015, p. 268.

European grand tour, used Chinese porcelain extensively in the interiors of his residences, including in the Japanese Pavilion at Oranienbaum. An eighteenth-century description of the latter notes that a room on the main floor contained “a lot of different types of precious porcelain; another one was decorated in Chinese style with black and gold lacquer”. Catherine II’s collections of genuine Chinese objects were similarly admired. In 1787 Pyotr Borisovich Sheremetev described the objects in the Catherine II’s Chinese Mezzanine of the Hermitage as “like a museum...decorated with taste and opulence and they contain a lot of rarities, especially Chinese items.”⁶ These included lacquer chairs, painted screens, boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl and tortoise shells, bronze figurines, fabric dolls and other objects. Also in the 1780s, Francisco de Miranda described the rooms at Catherine’s Chinese palace in Oranienbaum: “the objects that decorate [the rooms] were brought directly from China and this is why they are interesting.”⁷ These collections functioned as visual references to Sino-Russian contact, as much as situating Russian patrons as active and lavish participants in the commerce of Sino-European luxury goods.

It is for this reason that the final rooms of *Masterpieces from the Hermitage* tell us so much about the legacy of Catherine the Great. By shifting attention away from the European masterpieces that she acquired to her lesser-known activities as a patron of Russian artists and collector of Chinese objects, we are better able to understand, as a result of the Melbourne exhibition, her ambitions for the State collection that she formed at the Hermitage as not looking exclusively towards the West.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Honour, 1973: Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Milam, 2013: Jennifer Milam, “Toying with China: Cosmopolitanism and *Chinoiserie* in Russian Garden Design and Building Projects under Catherine the Great,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 25, 2013, pp. 115-138.

Milam, 2015: Jennifer Milam, “Betwixt and Between: ‘Chinese Taste’ in Peter the Great’s Russia” in *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges in China and the West*, eds. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Ding Ning, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015, pp. 264-86.

⁶ Suslov, 1928, p. 22.

⁷ Miranda, 2000, p. 118.

Miranda, 2000: Francisco de Miranda "Rossiyskiy dnevnik. Moskva – Sankt Peterburg" trans. from the original Spanish by V. A. Kapanadze and E. F. Tolstaya, Moscow: Nauka, 2000.

Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2010: David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Catherine the Great to the Emigration*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Shvidkovsky, 1991: Dmitry Shvidkovsky, "Architecture of Asian Bliss", *Arkhitektura SSSR*, 1991, 100-111.

Suslov, 1928: A. Suslov, *Zimniy dvorets (1754-9127): istoricheskiy ocherk*, Leningrad, 1928.