

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Young Historians Conference

Young Historians Conference 2013

May 2nd, 1:00 PM - 2:15 PM

A Western Empire

Grace Garrett
Riverdale High School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Garrett, Grace, "A Western Empire" (2013). *Young Historians Conference*. 17.
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2013/oralpres/17>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Historians Conference by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

A Western Empire

By

Grace Garrett

LPB

History of Western Civilization

November 4, 2012

Grace Garrett

LPB

History of Western Civilization

November 4, 2012

A Western Empire

Essential Question: What role did art have in the Westernization of Russia in the reign of Catherine the Great?

Few women in history had the power to shape their own destiny, let alone that of the largest nation on earth, as completely as Catherine the Great of Russia. Born as an obscure German Princess, she was offered a chance to marry the future Tsar of Russia. Finding this was not enough, she groomed herself to take his place as absolute ruler. Throughout her reign, Catherine continued the process of “Westernizing” Russia that had been set in motion by Peter the Great a century earlier. While he made his mark by building a magnificent new capital city, she made hers by filling it with artistic wonders. Catherine the Great used art collecting both as a political strategy to establish Russia as a Western empire and symbol of her commitment to Enlightenment ideals.

Catherine’s story begins before her birth, with the reign of Peter the Great. It was he who began the transformation of Russia into a European power, and Catherine who established it as such. Peter became co Tsar with his half brother Ivan at the age of ten, but was soon after banished by Ivan’s sister Sophia, who acted as regent. He therefore grew up away from the court and received little formal education, a loss he felt keenly. “My father often repeated” his daughter Elizabeth later wrote, “that he would have given one of his fingers if his education had

not been neglected. Not a day passed in which he did not feel this deficiency” (Massie 300). This insecurity was a driving force behind his reformations.

Instead, Peter was influenced by the foreign immigrants flooding into the country. He shaved his beard, a symbol of piety in the Russian Orthodox Church, and instead grew a thin, European style mustache (Norman 7). He copied western manners and styles and learned to speak Dutch rather than French. He developed a passion for ships and shipbuilding, a hobby that would later influence the construction of Saint Petersburg (Norman 7). Sophia was eventually overthrown, but Peter, disliking the duties of a monarch, had his mother perform his royal duties for him. Though a naturally powerful man, he disliked the restrictions and conventions of his position as Tsar, opting instead for independence and freedom whenever he could.

In 1697, Peter went on a “Great Embassy” to see for himself the courts of Europe and devise ways to copy them in Russia (Peter the Great, Reigned 1682-1725 1). While he was officially in disguise for this trip, the six foot seven inch Russian and his 250 man entourage were hard to miss (Norman 7). Soon after returning, Peter built a fortress on the Neva river to protect Russia from the Swedes as the two countries prepared for battle. This became the first building in Saint Petersburg, Peter’s greatest creation.

Saint Petersburg, the “Venice of the north” became the capitol of Russia in 1712 (Steinberg). Peter himself brought in foreign architects and oversaw its construction while living in a mud and log cabin nearby. Strict laws enforced rich nobles living on country estates to build grand town houses in the new city, and craftsmen of all kinds were gathered from all over Europe to construct his poster city (Madariaga 20). It was also Peter that opened St. Petersburg’s first museum, the “Kunstammer”. He was not the great lover of art that Catherine would be, and

filled his collection with odd curiosities collected during his travels rather than marvelous paintings or sculptors.

Many exhibits from Peter's Kunstkammer have ended up in the Hermitage, but art was not its main focus. As the German term Kunstkammer implies, it was a 'cabinet of curiosities' of the kind accumulated by both scholars and monarchs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a combination of found objects, such as shells and minerals, scientific specimens, curiously wrought craft works, jewels and paintings (Norman 10).

The contents of Peter's collection are indicative of his purpose. Catherine's hermitage displayed a vast and impressive collection, meant to garner the respect of Western Europe. Peter's Kunstkammer seemed to be a more trifling collection of artifacts connected to his various interests and hobbies.

To complete his model city, Peter built the Peterhof, a magnificent baroque palace inspired by Versailles. It was here that Russia acquired its first hermitage, the dwelling place of a hermit. They began to appear in Renaissance Italy as places for Italian princes to "mix piety with pleasure" on their estates (Norman 4). From there the fashion spread, first to Spain, and then to France and England. The idea behind this small structure changed in France. "In the late seventeenth century Louis XIV built the Chateau de Marly as a place of retreat, where he could escape the rigid etiquette he had instituted at Versailles, and called it his Hermitage" (Norman 4). By the eighteenth century, hermitages had become popular garden features for the wealthy (Norman 3). Many still housed hermits, but they were also used as a sort of garden retreat to host informal parties. Peter used his Peterhof hermitage in this way, as an annex to entertain his friends. An advanced pulley system lowered or raised dinner tables from the first floor, allowing

for a relaxed, servant free setting (Norman 5). Peter's hermitage was yet another symbol of his love of Western customs.

Peter's daughter, Elizabeth, continued her father's tradition and included hermitage in the plan of her own country palace, the Tsarskoe Selo. More significantly, it was she who ordered the construction of the famous Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, which now houses the world famous State Hermitage Museum. Elizabeth commissioned the architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli to build her winter palace on the banks of the Neva River in a baroque style. She died before its completion in 1762, leaving it for Catherine and her husband to enjoy.

Elizabeth was an important part of Catherine's early life. She had been passed over four times for the throne after her father's death. During these years, the citizens of Russia found themselves caught in a tangle of war over power and influence. By the time Elizabeth finally declared herself empress in a coup de grace, Russia was a country struggling to find its identity. Immigrants had been steadily flowing in for decades, Peter the Great had completely abolished the old ways, and many of those who followed him had not been Russian at all. Elizabeth was beautiful, charming, and the daughter of the great hero himself. The unmarried and childless empress chose her nephew as heir. The law giving a monarch the power to choose who would take their place was another legacy of Peter's (he himself chose his second wife, a foreign born former serving girl, as his successor). Peter III was summoned by his aunt Elizabeth to come and live with her in Russia and prepare for his future. Elizabeth's next step was to solidify the dynasty by procuring a wife for him.

Sophie Friederike Auguste, the future Catherine the Great, came from good family connections on her mother's side. Her mother's brother had been the fiancé of Empress Elizabeth before his early death; the closest she had ever come to marriage. As her mother often told she

was not pretty, the young Sophie focused on her education. She grew up learning French language and court customs as was the fashion of the day (Massie 7). Even with these accomplishments, it was incredibly good luck for Sophie when her mother received a letter from Empress Elizabeth inviting them both to Saint Petersburg for Catherine to be considered to marry the future Tsar.

Sophie seized the opportunity, determined even at her young age to make the most of it. “It did not take Sophie long,” writes Robert Massie in his biography of Catherine, “to understand two underlying facts about her position in Russia: first, that it was Elizabeth, not Peter, whom she had to please; and second, that if she wanted to succeed in this new country, she must learn its language and practice its religious faith”(Massie 52). And so the young Sophie reinvented herself, becoming Ekaterina, or Catherine. While her future husband clung stubbornly to his German customs and language, she converted from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodox and eagerly studied Russian language and history. This gained her the sympathy and interest of the Russian people, and more importantly, of Elizabeth. Whether by design or not, Catherine displayed her strategic and resourceful mind in doing so that would eventually make her one of the greatest political masterminds of her time.

On 21 August 1745, Peter and Catherine married at the respective ages of seventeen and sixteen (Massie 83). Elizabeth, who had picked these two young people and arranged their courtship as surely as a young girl playing with dolls, now fully expected an heir to be born. Years passed, and no children arrived. Catherine was blamed and began to fall out of favor with Elizabeth. It was a dangerous position to be in, as Peter could easily divorce her and send her to a convent if she did not bear children. Catherine, who had started out as a childhood friend to Peter, now found his immaturity and crude habits repulsive (Massie 101). On September 20,

1754 Catherine finally gave birth to a son, although the child's paternity is unclear to this day. It did not matter to Elizabeth, who immediately took the child away, named it Paul, and essentially adopted it as her own (Massie 164). A daughter born three years later produced the same effect. Although Catherine had little to do with the raising of her children, it strengthened somewhat her weakened claim to power.

Elizabeth died on Christmas day in 1761, and Peter made Tsar in her place (Massie 240). He had never been popular with the Russian people, and "succeeded within six months in alienating many among the elite, lay and ecclesiastical, by his treatment of the Church, army, and Senate, and his unpopular foreign policy" (Bartlett 116). "Peter III had lost the few wits he had" Catherine wrote in a letter (Massie 275). His actions during his short reign made it clear that he had very little interest in Russia. Unlike Catherine, he had never attempted to study Russian history or language, and stuck to the Prussian habits he had grown up with. After six months, he was overthrown and later murdered as part of a conspiracy Catherine herself was rumored to have a part in. In the words of Frederick the Great of Prussia, Peter's hero, he was "deposed like a child sent off to bed" (Bartlett 116). Catherine, who had been overshadowed for her entire life, was now Empress.

As a foreign born usurper, Catherine knew she had to work hard to solidify her new status. The European world in general did not expect her to last long. Catherine began to make strategic connections with important diplomats, politicians, and philosophers of her time. Two years after her ascension in 1764, she made her first art purchase of 225 paintings from a Berlin dealer named Johann Gotzkowski (Komelova 29). The collection included three Rembrandts and other notable Dutch, Italian and French works (Norman 29). Most historians consider this to be the foundation of the Hermitage museum's collection. It was also significant as an example of

how Catherine used art collecting and building as a political strategy, this time against Frederick the Great.

While the Russian imperial family has produced many big spenders, Catherine was probably the biggest – but her spending was driven by political calculation. She realized early on that the splendor of her court would enhance her reputation in Europe and have a direct impact on diplomatic relations. It was no coincidence that the paintings she purchased from Gotzowski in 1764 had been accumulated by the dealer on the instructions of Frederick the Great of Prussia – who could not afford to buy them after his financially crippling seven years war with Austria, Russia and France. Her husband, Peter III, made a highly disadvantageous unilateral peace with Frederick, his hero, which Catherine renege on – but she got her own back by buying Frederick's pictures (Norman 22).

As well as tactfully shaming her husband's idol, the purchase of such a large collection raised eyebrows throughout Europe and began to establish Catherine as a modern enlightened ruler over a country ready to be taken seriously.

A great reader, she had been strongly influenced by the works of the philosophes, intellectuals who became the greatest voices in the Enlightenment. None impacted her more strongly than the French writer and philosopher Voltaire. In October 1763, she wrote him a letter saying “whatever style I possess, whatever powers of reasoning have all been acquired through the reading of Voltaire” (Massie 330). For his part, the aging Voltaire was at first reluctant to begin a friendship with the new empress, who had been on the throne for only fifteen month at this point. “I do not think that Catherine II will profit long from her husband's death,” he wrote in a letter to Chauvelin, “you know what disorder prevails in Russia at present” (Voltaire,

Catherine, and A. Lentin 9). However, “once it was apparent that the German princess had a firm seat on the Russian throne, [he] began to see her as an enlightened monarch who might work to apply the principles of justice and tolerance that he proclaimed” (Massie 335). Thus began a fond, mutually influential, and mutually flattering correspondence that lasted until Voltaire’s death in 1778.

Another philosophe ally of Catherine’s was Denis Diderot. In 1762, the year Catherine rose to power, Diderot was having trouble publishing his *Encyclopedie*, an ambitious compilation of human knowledge and important Enlightenment work, published in France. Catherine heard of this and offered to have it published in Russia instead. Hearing of this, the French government relented and Catherine assistance was made unnecessary, though gratefully acknowledged by Diderot.

Another opportunity arose for Catherine to help him in 1765, when he was forced to offer his valuable library for sale due to the publishing costs of the *Encyclopedie*. Hearing of this, Catherine offered him twenty thousand pounds (five thousand more than the fifteen thousand he had asked for) and requested that he keep the collection for the remainder of his life saying, “it would be cruel to separate a scholar from his books” (Massie 337). Thus Diderot became Catherine’s librarian, a duty she paid him an additional thousand pounds per annum to perform. The second year, when the salary was forgotten, an embarrassed Catherine sent Diderot fifty thousand pounds to cover fifty years in advance (Massie 338). This extreme generosity became the talk of Europe and convinced the grateful Diderot to leave France for the first time in his life and journey north to pay his respects in person. As Voltaire could not be convinced to visit St Petersburg in his old age, Diderot was the only Enlightenment figure of note Catherine would meet in person.

Catherine was an avid participant in the modern intellectual life of the eighteenth century. She modeled her style of ruling after Enlightenment ideals to some extent, becoming one of the “enlightened despots” of the eighteenth century along with Maria-Theresa and Joseph II of Austria, Frederick the Great, and Charles III of Spain (Bartlet 117). An ideal Enlightened Despot was intelligent, secular and open minded, cultured, generous, and humane (Voltaire, Catherine, and A. Lentin 17). Such ideals were difficult to balance with the business of ruling an empire.

The primary goal was state power; Enlightenment ideas and values were influential only insofar as they furthered that goal. Enlightened humanitarianism could also play some role, but governments’ concern with good administration and law, public health, education, population growth and the state of the peasantry had a strong utilitarian motive: welfare and warfare were closely connected (Bartlet 117).

Some historians consider her interest in the Enlightenment as hypocritical because she had no intention of making any reform that would limit her power, but the effects it produced were substantial.

Catherine reviewed and reorganized the military, making it stronger than ever. She reformed education and health care, even writing her own manual for educators. She used foreign trade to boost the economy, resulting in the introduction of Russia’s first paper money, called “assignats”. Symbolically important, Catherine and Paul, her son and heir, were both inoculated against smallpox in secret (Bartlet 119). Horses stood at the ready in case the operation should go wrong and the physician needed to make a quick escape. The Russian people, who were largely ignorant about the medical advances of the time, were inspired by their

monarch's faith in them and felt more open to immunizations as a way to prevent many epidemic diseases.

In 1765, Catherine commissioned that a hermitage be added to the Winter Palace to accommodate her growing art collection. It was designed by the design by the architect Yury Velten and completed the following year. This "small hermitage" was the first building of what is now the Hermitage museum. Catherine used it as a sort of private club. She invited nobles to dinner parties and an annual ball. Like Peter the Great and Elizabeth's own hermitages, it featured mechanical tables to bring food up to the guests on the second floor. Catherine drew up a list of ten rules for her hermitage, the first of which was "all ranks shall be left at the door, as well as swords and hats". She wanted it to be a place of perfect equality. A place where she could forget about being the empress and enjoy time with people she liked. Distinguishing accessories like swords and hats had no place in Catherine's hermitage (Norman, 30)

Catherine's art collection continued to grow with the help of Diderot and her French ambassador Dmitry Golitsyn, both men of renowned artistic taste, who searched out great paintings for her collection (Norman 29). In 1766, she acquired "The return of the Prodigal Son" by Rembrandt for five thousand and four hundred livres. Catherine was not as partial to sculpture, but acquired some notable pieces nonetheless including an unfinished Michelangelo and a life sized statue of her friend Voltaire seated in an armchair. She had a passion for carved gems, an art form that had been rediscovered in the Renaissance. She continued to use art purchases as a political statement. In 1779, she bought the collection formed by Sir Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister of Britain, "demonstrating the superior purchasing power of the Russian Empire over the British (Komelova 29). Six years before her death, Catherine wrote in a letter: "besides the paintings and the Raphael Loggia, my museum in the Hermitage contains

38,000 books; there are four rooms filled with books and prints, 10,000 engraved gems, roughly 10,000 drawings and a natural history collection that fills two large galleries” (Norman 23). She was the greatest art collector of her time.

Catherine the Great profoundly altered the course of Russia’s history. She completed Peter the Great’s work of building a Western Empire from the ground up. A great symbol of her success still exists in the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Starting as Catherine’s private collection, it has grown to be one of the world’s greatest museums, on par with the Louvre, Metropolitan, and the British Museum. In her own time, it gained her the respect and attention of Europe, which was forced to acknowledge Russia as a modern, intellectual and culturally significant eighteenth century nation. Her friendships with notable philosophes such as Diderot and Voltaire impacted the spread of the Enlightenment in Russia and solidified her status as an Enlightened Despot. Fearlessly making the most of every opportunity life gave her, Catherine took her life into her own hands and shaped it into a remarkable story with history altering effects.

Works Cited

- Bartlett, Roger P. *A History of Russia*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- DeMadariaga, Isabel. *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*. New Haven [u.a.: Yale Univ., 1981. Print.
- Komelova, Galina Nikolaevna., and Edward Booth-Clibborn. *The Treasures of Catherine the Great*. N.p.: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1991. Print.
- Massie, Robert K. *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*. New York: Random House, 2011. Print.
- Norman, Geraldine. *The Hermitage: The Biography of a Great Museum*. New York: Fromm International, 1998. Print.
- "Peter the Great, Reigned 1682-1725 : Explorers & Leaders : Sea & Ships Fact Files : Sea & Ships : Explore Online : RMG." *Peter the Great, Reigned 1682-1725 : Explorers & Leaders : Sea & Ships Fact Files : Sea & Ships : Explore Online : RMG*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and-ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/peter-the-great>>.
- "The State Hermitage Museum: Hermitage History." *The State Hermitage Museum: Hermitage History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2012. <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/05/hm5_1.html>.
- Steinberg, Mark. "The Russia of Peter the Great's Childhood." Lecture. *A History of Russia: From Peter the Great to Gorbachev*. 24 Oct. 2012. *The Great Courses*. The Teaching Company. Web. <http://www.thegreatcourses.com/tgc/courses/course_detail.aspx?cid=8380>.

Voltaire, Catherine, and A. Lentin. *Voltaire and Catherine the Great*; . Cambridge, Eng.: Oriental Research Partners, 1974. Print.