

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



**Attributed to Ivan Nikitich Nikitin (Moscow c.1680 - 1742)**

## **Portrait of a Youth in a Powdered Wig, probably Tsarina Elizabeth I Petrovna**

oil on canvas  
60.3 x 48.2 cm (23¾ x 29 in)

The fair complexion of the sitter, dressed here in a coat of green velvet trimmed with gold fringe and a powdered wig, and her subtle expression of amusement and defiance, give the unmistakable impression of a woman in men's clothing. The painting was traditionally thought to portray Catherine the Great of Russia. However, the likeness seems closer to that of Tsarina Elizabeth I Petrovna, daughter of Peter the Great and Catherine's predecessor. In a portrait of Elizabeth by Carle Van Loo (1705-1765) her oval face, languid eyes and delicate features are identical to that of the woman portrayed by Ivan Nikitich Nikitin (1760, Peterhof Palace). Given her famed beauty as well as a love of material excess and spectacle, it seems fitting that the Tsarina be portrayed in such a provocative manner.

Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1762) reigned as Tsarina of Russia from 1741 until her death. The second eldest daughter of Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine I (1684-1727) she was proclaimed a Tsarina in 1721.<sup>1</sup> Although her father had ambitious marriage plans for her, she remained officially unmarried throughout her life. An attempt to marry Elizabeth into the French Bourbon dynasty through a union with the young French King Louis XV proved successful while her betrothal to Prince Karl Augustus of Holstein-Gottorp was ill-fated as he died several days after the ceremony.

Elizabeth was doted on by her father who saw her as his feminine replica and she was well educated by her French governess, speaking fluent French, Italian and German. A somewhat self-indulgent,

vivacious young girl, she delighted the court with her talents for dancing and was frequently declared to be the leading beauty of the Russian Empire.

After the death of her father and the accession of her cousin Anna as the new Tsarina, Elizabeth, with no potential suitor for marriage, took several lovers including a coachman and a waiter. However it was Alexey Razumovsky (1709-1771), a peasant and member of the choir at the Ukrainian palace in St. Petersburg who would steal her heart and become, as many believe, her secret husband. Elizabeth was devoted to Razumovsky, taking him to the imperial court in 1732 and on becoming Empress making him a Prince and a Field Marshall. Though he had no profound personal and political ambitions, under his influence the court had a passion for music and singing.

Elizabeth became Tsarina in 1741 after a bloodless coup by the Preobrazhensky Regiment who had been particularly loyal to her father. The bloodlessness of Elizabeth's accession would be replicated throughout her reign as she refused to sign a single death warrant, making her one of Russia's best loved rulers.

Though she was inexperienced and often inefficient, Elizabeth, like her father Peter I, possessed a knack for government and her good judgement and tactful diplomacy served the Russian Empire well. As a childless and - supposedly - unmarried ruler she sought to secure a legitimate heir to the Romanov dynasty, choosing her nephew Peter III (1728-1762), husband of Catherine the Great. Yet her reign was not without political and military turmoil, notably the Seven Years War (1754-1763) where Russia, due to Elizabeth's personal dislike of the Prussian king, Frederick the Great, entered into an alliance with France and Austria to weaken Prussia.

During Elizabeth's reign, the Baroque style prevailed in the arts as it had during the first years of the century. Its development reached its high point between 1730 and 1750 and the splendour and solemnity of the style corresponded to the growing power of the Russian monarchy. Many foreign artists and architects were invited to work in Russia whilst others came opportunistically. Elizabeth's reign marked the next stage in the development of Russian art after its Europeanization by her father, Peter I. Addicted to pleasure and display; she undertook building on a scale unprecedented in Russia in a deliberate attempt to rival the French court at Versailles and her court became famous for elaborate festivities amid luxurious settings, including Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli's (1700-1771) new Winter Palace and the adaptation of the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo.

Indeed the scale of Elizabeth's courtly grandeur is epitomised in the new ballroom she commissioned at the Catherine Palace (1752-1756) with its spectacularly painted ceiling. This room spanned the entire width of the palace and was intended for her balls, formal dinners, and masquerades. Her love of pageantry resulted in St. Petersburg's first professional public theatre in 1756. Indeed, the empress set a personal example by frequently attending the theatre.

Though artistic life remained dominated by foreigners, Elizabeth encouraged Russian artists such as Ivan Nikitich Nikitin, and it was with the express aim of fostering native talent that the Academy of Arts was established by imperial decree in St. Petersburg in 1757, on the initiative of Ivan Shuvalov, Elizabeth's lover and rector of Moscow University, who became the first President of the Academy. Indeed Elizabeth's passion for the arts led her to entrust the care of her father's collection to Georg Christoph Grooth (1716-1749) and later Lukas Konrad Pfandzelt (1716-1786).

Official portraiture was still the most important genre in Russian art. Russian and foreign artists created numerous sculptures, paintings, prints, and drawings of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna. These formal portraits were intended to decorate the palaces, state institutions, and mansions of the Russian nobility. Amongst these artists were Ivan Nikitich Nikitin and the French painter Louis Toque (1676-1772) who [painted Elizabeth in 1758, full-length, in all her regal majesty](#). Once again the soft rendering of her rounded features, almond-shaped eyes and flushed skin tone in Toque's portrait are very closely comparable to the appearance of the figure in the present work and lends further credence to the identification of the sitter as Elizabeth rather than Catherine the Great.

Elizabeth lived the first thirty years of her life as a Russian debutante and on becoming Tsarina, her Francophile court at St. Petersburg was one of the most splendid in Europe, impressing foreigners with

its lavish balls and sumptuous masquerades.

In fashionable eighteenth-century society, cross-dressing was a sophisticated source of entertainment and Elizabeth pioneered the elaborate masquerade balls that were to become all the rage throughout Europe. The present work is most probably a portrait of Elizabeth dressed as young male courtier during one of these court festivities.

In *Women and Gender in 18th Century Russia*, Wendy Rosslyn writes of the period's 'readiness to destabilise gender distinctions via dress, particularly during Empress Elizabeth's reign, when imperial decrees frequently required women to appear at court in male attire and vice versa, as attested to in Catherine II's memoirs. Recalling a Moscow ball of 1744 for which Elizabeth compelled her guests to cross-dress, without masks, her successor records:

*"Such metamorphoses did not please the men at all, and most of them would appear at the masquerade in the foulest mood, for they could not help but sense how hideous they looked in women's dresses. The ladies, for their part, resembled pathetic boys; fat, short legs made the older women look ugly; and of all of them the male outfit suited only the empress. With her tallness and heftiness she looked marvellously attractive in male attire. I have never seen a single man with such wonderful legs; the lower parts of her legs were amazingly shapely."*<sup>2</sup>

A talented dancer, Elizabeth was also passionate about fashion and her outward deportment. She is said to have owned fifteen thousand ball gowns, several thousand pairs of shoes as well as an unlimited number of silk stockings. Furthermore, in order to regulate the appearance of her court she issued decrees governing the styles of dresses and decorations worn by courtiers, forbidding anyone to have the same hair style as her.

However the lavish excesses of Elizabeth's court passed not without criticism. It was expressed most loudly from the Grand Princess Catherine who frowned upon the quixotic transvestite balls and crude dictation of other ladies' style and attire as well as Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov who accused Elizabeth of accelerating the 'corruption of manners' by pandering to a culture of corrupt excess, an inevitable accusation from disgruntled aristocrats amid the costly ongoing Europeanization of cosmopolitan high society.

*Portrait of a Youth in a Powdered Wig, probably Tsarina Elizabeth I Petrovna* is attributed to the first Russian painter to be appointed portrait painter to the imperial court. He was the son of a Moscow priest who had close ties with the imperial court, and is thought to have studied at the workshop of the Armoury Palace in Moscow. Subsequently he worked mainly in St. Petersburg where his earliest portraits were of Peter the Great and his family. There are eighteen known portraits by Nikitin, the earliest being [his charming portrayal of the infant Elizabeth Petrovna between 1712 and 1713](#). Here he has not only tried to precisely convey the girl's appearance, but also her mood and character. She wears a sumptuous, heavy, low-necked dress and an ermine mantle, her hair dressed like that of an adult, as was customary in formal royal portraits. Painting the young Elizabeth when she was around three years old undoubtedly established an early relationship with the Tsarina. It is not surprising, therefore, that Elizabeth would later feel comfortable enough for Nikitin to paint her controversially and comically dressed as a young boy.

Other portrait commissions included [Natalia Alexeyevna, sister of Peter the Great](#). In his early works, Nikitin established a style of Russian painting that traced its roots in the medieval manner of Russian portraiture, as is apparent in the stiff formality of his painting of Natalia Alexeyevna.

In 1716, Nikitin and his brother Roman (1691-1753) were awarded grants to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. Nikitin returned to Russia four years later, exhibiting greater artistry and an awareness of the latest developments in European painting. His mastery of portrait painting in this period is evidenced in works such as his portrait of the Field Hetman, Sergey Stroganov (1726, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg), and the present painting, which exudes naturalism and confidence. Throughout his career, Nikitin predominantly executed bust-length portraits and placed his sitters

against plain backgrounds, as can be seen here.

In 1732, Nikitin and his brother were arrested for treason due to slanderous accusations and endured five years of imprisonment, interrogation and torture in the Fortress of St. Peter and Paul. Then they were subsequently exiled to Tobolsk and acquitted only in 1741, but Nikitin died in 1742 on his return from exile.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of her birth, her parents' marriage was not publically acknowledged and her 'illegitimacy' was later used by opponents seeking to challenge her right to the throne.

<sup>2</sup> Rosslyn, W., *Women and Gender in 18th Century Russia* (Ashgate Publishing, 2003) p. 77.

### **Provenance:**

Julius Aufseeßer;

his sale, Henrici, Berlin, 1-2 November 1926, lot 260, as Pietro Antonio Rotari, *Portrait of Catherine the Great*, ("Kaiserin Katharina II. von Russland"), illustrated.

### **Artist description:**

Ivan Nikitich Nikitin was a Russian portrait and battle painter.

Nikitin was born in Moscow to a family of an Orthodox priest. He received his first artistic lessons from Schwonbek, a Dutch artist, at the engraving shop of the Kremlin Armoury. In 1711 the Armory was moved to St. Petersburg. In St. Petersburg under Danhauer and was amongst the first of the *artistes pensionnaires* of Peter I along with Andrei Matveev (1702-1739).

Between 1716 and 1720 he and his brother Roman Nikitin were sent to Italy by Peter the Great (1672-1725). There the brothers learnt the art of painting at Florence, with Redi (1665-1726) and Venice. He also studied in Paris under De Largillière (1656-1746). After returning to Russia Nikitin became the favourite court painter of Peter the Great. He worked in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

After Peter's death Nikitin continued to work at the court until 1732, when he and his brothers Roman and Rodion were arrested for treason due to slanderous accusations. Nikitin was tortured, imprisoned and then exiled in Tobolsk.

In 1740 Anna of Russia (1693-1740) signed an amnesty for the brothers. The amnesty came into force in 1741. At the request of the new Empress Elizabeth of Russia (1709-1762) Nikitin travelled back from Tobolsk to St. Petersburg. He died somewhere on the road, either in late 1741 or in early 1742.

The early portraits by Nikitin were strongly influenced by the traditional seventeenth century Parsuna style : no perspective, rigid local colours, dark backgrounds. The later portraits are typical Baroque paintings.

Besides portraits Nikitin was also considered to be the first notable Russian battle painter.

Nikitin is represented in the following collections : the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow ; the State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg ; the Museum of the Academy, Saint Petersburg ; amongst