

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



Benjamin Patersson (Varberg, Sweden c.1748 - St. Petersburg 1815)

Catherine the Great Visiting the Ice Mountain, St. Petersburg

signed, inscribed and dated 'Benj:Patersson pinxit 1788' (lower right)

grey ink and watercolour, heightened with gouache on paper

46 x 69.5 cm (18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{3}{8}$ in)

Catherine the Great (1729-1796) is being led from the direction of the Winter Palace, by a procession of mounted guardsmen, towards the temporary 'ice mountain', on the frozen River Neva. Sliding down its frozen slopes was one of Catherine's great pleasures. The entire crowd looks on at their Empress in awe, their hats off and some bow their heads. Decorative blue and white andreyevsky (the cross of St. Andrew) flags are flying on top of the ice mountain. The crowd is about to witness Catherine the Great joining them in her favourite winter pastime of riding down the ice slide. The Imperial Academy of Arts, only recently christened by Catherine, can be glimpsed in the background. The Academy is in the middle of its twenty-five year rebuilding programme and, as yet, it does not have the great Egyptian sphinxes which flank its entrance on the Neva.

1788, the date of the present watercolour, was a year of some political turmoil for Catherine. The Ottomans declared war on Russia, in an attempt to repossess the land they lost in the previous Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774). 1788 also marked the start of the Russo-Swedish War. Under the instigation of King Gustav III of Sweden (1746-1792), Catherine's cousin, the Swedes plotted to attack St. Petersburg directly, but were overpowered by Russia's Baltic Fleet. Although it is not clear whether the present watercolour was executed at the beginning or end of 1788, Catherine's calm demeanour is fitting for the formidable Empress.

The prototype of the modern roller-coaster, the 'ice mountain', otherwise known as an 'ice slide', first appeared during the seventeenth century throughout Russia, but with a particular concentration in the St. Petersburg area. During the winter festival season, slides were built in Russia's squares and public spaces, usually near a river. They were constructed of wood, and sometimes measured between seventy and eighty feet high, stretching for hundreds of feet in length and accommodating many large sleds at once. The earliest sleds were made from ice blocks that were chipped into shape. Straw was laid down in the hollow to create a seat, and a piece of rope attached to a hole in the sled was the only way for riders to grip on. The speed of the ride was such that sand was often used at the end of the ramps to slow down the hurtling sleds. The slides themselves were packed with snow and sprayed with

water daily, in order to create a sheet of smooth ice several inches thick. The platform, to which one ascended by wooden stairs, was supported by tree trunks and wooden pillars. Riders climbed the stairs attached to the back of the slide and would be sent careering down the slope, a fifty degree drop, and then ascend the stairs on the opposite side. Such was the popularity of the slides that the 'ice mountains' in St. Petersburg were decorated with coloured lanterns so that its inhabitants could continue to ride into the night.

The slides gained favour with the Russian upper classes and some, such as the one depicted by Patersson, were ornately decorated with flags and trees to provide entertainment fit for royalty. Catherine the Great enjoyed these slides so much that she had several built on her own properties, as well as having wheels added to the sleds so that she could enjoy the sport in both summer and winter.

By 1855, Robert Sears records that 'ice mountains' were erected in the courtyards of some of St. Petersburg's great edifices, and even in the halls of several upper class Russian homes, where the slides were fashioned from polished mahogany. Sears describes them as an 'amusement in which a Russian's delight is part of his very nature, and they are enjoyed alike by prince and peasant... In every town and village these slippery declivities are crowded with youths and maidens rushing down with the swiftness of arrows. The sledges are made of ice, dextrously shaped into ships.'¹

During the Napoleonic Wars many French soldiers grew fond of the 'ice slides' whilst in Russia, and brought the custom of the 'roller-coaster' back with them to France; one built in Belleville in 1812 was named *Les Montagnes Russes* ('The Russian Mountains') and was the first ride to have the 'cars' fixed to the track. It was in France too, in 1817, that the first two roller-coasters to operate on a continuous circuit were built.

The slides had also been a great passion of Catherine the Great's predecessor, Empress Elizabeth (1709-1762), so much so that she held a carnival in honour of ice sliding in 1754 and, whilst living in retirement in her estate near Moscow, used to slide down ice hills. Her chief architect, Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli (1700-1771), also created such a hill for sliding down near the palace in Tsarskoe Selo.

When Patersson first arrived in St. Petersburg in 1787, he had only ever painted portraits and historical pieces. Nevertheless, he soon established himself as a landscape artist, dedicating his oeuvre to the city. Patersson had no doubt been familiar with the prints of the engraver Gavriila Skorodumov (1754-1792), who died five years after his arrival in St. Petersburg. Skorodumov himself had dedicated a series of prints to the Neva embankments which not only provided an architectural view of the city but also a glimpse into daily life surrounding the river's banks, an approach also adopted by Patersson. Patersson quickly mastered the techniques of perspective art and concentrated initially on views from the Neva embankment.

The artist's [*Embankment of Vasilyevsky Island near the Academy of Arts*](#) is an example of one such early work. Dating to around the same time as *Catherine the Great Visiting the Ice Mountain, St. Petersburg*, it provides us with a different view of the Academy, as well as a glimpse of the city in warmer months. A sharpened perspective in both works provides a structured background against which Patersson's figures busily interact.

Executed on a large scale of 66 x 100 cm, Patersson's oil painting, [*View of St. Petersburg on the Day of the 100th Anniversary*](#), treats the St. Petersburg cityscape in the same way as one of Canaletto's (1698-1768) Venetian landscapes. In both the painting and the present work, Patersson skilfully presents the viewer with a combination of architectural precision and an historical record of the festive events that occurred in St. Petersburg. In the background of both works, the spectator is delighted with open, sweeping perspectives of the ordered city. The respective foregrounds, which are filled with a busy array of figures are, however, treated as independent spaces in which Patersson recreates the grandeur of the city's 100th anniversary, and Catherine the Great's attendance at the 'ice-slides', both executed in such an informal way that they almost appear to be everyday events. Both works are presented to us in a genre scene format, rather than as history works, thus making them more accessible to the viewer, who is invited to enjoy them on several levels.

Patersson was born c.1748 in Varberg, Sweden. The son of a customs' scribe, he was a member of the Society of Painters in Gothenburg, where he studied in the studio of the painter S. Frick. In the late 1770s he travelled throughout Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and then on to Riga in 1784 where he lived and worked. Three years later he visited and re-settled in St. Petersburg, where he lived until the end of his life. Some twenty of his works were transported from the Hermitage to the Peterhof Palace near St.

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Petersburg, and was renowned for his paintings and engravings of the city. He created about one hundred views of St. Petersburg, of which thirty-three were paintings and the remainder watercolours and engravings. In 1798, Patersson became a member of the Stockholm Academy of Arts, where he exhibited his works many times. The artist died in 1815 in St. Petersburg.

¹ Sears, R., *An Illustrated Description of the Russian Empire*, (Robert Sears, New York, 1855), pp. 538 & 549.

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Collections

View of the Summer Garden and the Bridges on the Neva, St. Petersburg is part of the Stockholm Academy's collection.