SPHINX FINE ART



Louis Caravaque (Marseilles 1684 - St. Petersburg 1754)

Portrait of Tsesarevna Elizabeth Petrovna, Later Empress Elizabeth I of Russia (1709-1761)

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

This rare and unusual portrait depicts Tsesarevna Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1761), who would later become Empress Elizabeth I of Russia, disguised as a man and dressed in hunting costume. Elizabeth is wearing a white shirt with a jabot around her neck, over which is an elegant green velvet coat, richly embroidered with gold braid. Covering her hair is a male wig, which is cropped short in a style typical of the 1730s. She meets the viewer's gaze with the confidence of someone proud of their beauty and position, and the hint of a smile suggests that she is greatly enjoying the novelty of having her portrait painted in this unusual costume.

Elizabeth was known to have been extremely proud of the fact that she could successfully dress as a man. Before she became Empress in 1741, hunting was her favourite occupation and 'She was a magnificent horsewoman and since her legs were shapely and her figure good she could appear to advantage dressed astride a spirited horse'.[1] Her pride in her ability to ride and hunt like a man was still apparent in later years, in her attitude towards the young Yekaterina Alexeevna (1729-1796), the future Catherine the Great: Elizabeth encouraged Catherine's enthusiasm in their shared enjoyment in horse riding, but commanded her to ride side-saddle, rather than astride as she did, so as to avoid comparisons between them.[2] In 1744 Elizabeth also initiated her famous metamorphoses balls, at

which cross-dressing was mandatory for all guests. Unsurprisingly these balls were extremely unpopular with many attendees, in particular the men who were forced to wear large hoop skirts. However, Elizabeth loved these events, partly due to her sense of fun and partly due to vanity. Grigory Potemkin (1739-1791) said that she was 'the only woman who looked truly fine, and completely a man...As she was tall and powerful, male attire suited her'.[3] Today the metamorphoses balls are often mentioned in discussions of Elizabeth, but the present work provides fascinating evidence that her fondness for cross-dressing long predates her elevation to Empress.

The present work was previously only known through an obscure anonymous copy in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. A label on the stretcher of the Tretyakov work reads 'L. Caravac [illegible] de imp. Elisabet en costume masculin'. In addition to confirming that the sitter is indeed Elizabeth, this label attributes the work to Louis Caravaque, a French artist who was one of the most dominant figures in Russian portraiture in the first half of the eighteenth century, and a great favourite of the Imperial family and in particular Elizabeth. On stylistic grounds scholars have dismissed the idea that the Tretyakov work could have been painted by Caravaque, believing it more likely to have been a copy of a missing original by Caravaque.[4] The current work may be that missing original. Both artist and sitter have previously been misidentified: in the 1926 sale of the Julius Aufseeßer collection the work was attributed to Pietro Antonio Rotari, and the sitter was thought to be Catherine the Great. Although this is clearly wrong, it is interesting to note that the picture had an acknowledged history of being a Russian empress despite her male appearance and the lack of royal iconography. In spite of this confusion, the work can now be re-presented as what must be one of the most unique and unusual depictions of a royal subject.

The present work was probably painted in the early 1730s, a conclusion reached not only by the aforementioned style of wig, but also by comparing Elizabeth's appearance in the present work to other securely dated paintings. This places the portrait during a particularly precarious period in Elizabeth's life, and goes some way to explaining her unusual appearance. Elizabeth was the daughter of Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine I (1684-1727). After Peter died at the age of fifty-two, Catherine ruled for a further two years until her own death in 1727. Elizabeth was eighteen at this point, and her circumstances changed dramatically. Her nephew Peter II (1715-1730) was proclaimed Catherine's successor but Russia was in effect controlled by the powerful Prince Aleksandr Menshikov (1673-1729), rather than the young emperor. Menshikov disliked Elizabeth intensely and severely limited her funds. Despite Menshikov's downfall her poverty became more acute during the reign of Anna Ioannovna (1693-1740), a situation she would never forget.[5]

The relationship between Elizabeth and Anna was poor. Anna's accession to the throne was controversial and 'The knowledge that her young relative had a better right to the throne than she must have made her anxious'.[6] Throughout the 1730s Elizabeth's 'beauty, obvious happiness and increasing popularity roused Anna Ivanovna's jealously', and the Tsesarevna was watched closely and nearly committed to a convent.[7] Realising that her situation was potentially perilous, for much of Anna's reign Elizabeth sensibly tried to avoid court life, preferring to live on the estate of Ismailovo. Here she could indulge her love of the Russian countryside, often organising expeditions that would last days, and in the evenings indulging in 'amateur theatricals and games of many kinds'.[8] It is also worth noting another portrait by Caravaque, of a young boy in a very similar hunting costume to that worn by Elizabeth in the present work (Louis Caravaque, Portrait of a Boy in Hunting Costume, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). It is thought that the boy is possibly Peter II. Peter and Elizabeth were very close and were known to have hunted together.[9] This portrait therefore reflects both Elizabeth's predicament and her personality. The relatively humble costume and complete absence of regalia is surely a very deliberate distancing from any claims to the throne. The lack of imperial grandeur seems calculatedly unprovocative to the wary and hostile Anna. This becomes all the more evident when the present work is compared to another portrait by Caravaque, painted in 1725, which depicts Elizabeth's sister (Louis Caravaque, Portrait of Tsarevna Anna Petrovna, 1725, State Tretyakov, Moscow). Anna Petrovna is

dressed in the manner traditional to a princess, with a thick ermine laced with gold, and the ribbon of the Order of St. Catherine across her chest.

However, despite aspects of the work being understated, the portrait also reflects Elizabeth's originality and independence. It demonstrates her pride in her beauty, her love of hunting and her sense of fun. Her independence is perhaps best seen in her attitude to her love life. She once said that 'I don't want to be like all those princesses who become victims of state considerations. I want to marry according to my inclinations in order to experience the delights of loving the man I marry'.[10] In any case, during the 1730s marriage to a suitable European prince or noble was always unlikely, as it would have been interpreted as an unfriendly act towards Anna Ivanovna. However, had she married a commoner Elizabeth would have forfeited her title, property rights and claim to the throne.[11] With typical self-confidence, she instead took on a series of unsuitable lovers, including a soldier, a coachman and a waiter. Eventually, she fell in love with Alexis Razumovsky (1709-1771), a Cossack shepherd, who would eventually rise to become a Count of the Holy Roman Empire, a prince of Russia and perhaps Elizabeth's secret husband.[12]

When Anna died, the reign of the infant Ivan VI (1740-1764) lasted less than a year before Elizabeth seized power with a bloodless coup. Despite her inexperience she proved a popular and effective ruler. She rid government of many of its Prussian influences and promoted Russian nobles, and these advisors helped bring about major domestic and foreign successes. She abolished the death penalty, initiated major building works and encouraged the establishment of the University of Moscow and the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. Her court became known for its extravagance and opulence, and 'was arrayed in cloth of gold, her nobles satisfied with only the most luxurious garments, the most expensive foods, the rarest drinks, that largest number of servants and they applied this standard of lavishness to their dress as well'.[13]

Elizabeth remained incredibly proud of her appearance throughout her life and she desired to be the most attractive amongst any company at all times. She is reported to have owned 15,000 dresses, and she issued a decree against wearing the same hairstyle, dress, or accessory as the Empress.[14] This vanity led to some vicious outbursts of anger. One courtier, Natalya Lopukhina, accidentally wore the same item as the Empress and was lashed across the face for her offense.[15] On another occasion Elizabeth was unable to remove some powder from her hair, and was therefore obligated to cut out the patch, and in turn she made all of the ladies at Court do the same, which they did 'with tears in their eyes'.[16]

As the leading portraitist in Russia, Caravaque recorded Elizabeth's beauty throughout her life. Born in Marseille, he started working for Peter I in 1716, 'to serve His Royal Majesty for three years painting in oil, historical pictures, portraits, battle scenes, forests, villages, flowers, animals and also miniature portraits and historical scenes' and also 'to employ into his service Russian people directed to him by His Majesty for study and instruction in all pertaining to fine art'.[17] He painted Elizabeth at least twice prior to 1720, including a double portrait with her sister Anna Petrovna, as well as multiple portraits of Peter I and Catherine I. Under Peter's patronage, Caravaque flourished. He lived in a house on Vasilevsky Island, near the Menshikov Palace, given to him by the emperor and received an annual salary of 500 roubles.

Subsequent rulers also found Caravaque indispensible, and he remained in Russia for the rest of his life. Under Anna Ivanovna, he was appointed official court painter and his salary was increased to 2,000 roubles a year. In addition to painting her official coronation portrait, he designed interiors, fancy-dress balls, fireworks, and even some of Anna's dresses. He maintained this prominence under Elizabeth,

and painted a series of portraits of her to be hung in Russian embassies. These focused on 'regal greatness and dignity...while also emphasizing her beauty, the feature that the Empress herself found most endearing'.[18]

As the country's leading portraitist, Caravaque's influence on Russian art was considerable. When he arrived in Russia he worked in a European Rococo style, but he was also influenced by the art of his adopted country. With his portraits of the imperial family he invented the template for their depictions, and his paintings were widely copied. Although best known as a portraitist he also executed battle scenes, cartoons for tapestries, embroidery designs, and commemorative coins and medals. He was integral to the education of the next generation of Russian artists, drawing on the ideas and systems of European art academies. The present rediscovered work is one of his most interesting an innovative, and lacking some of the regal grandeur of other paintings it reflects the personality of his subject in a way many of his royal portraits do not.

We are grateful to Dr. Ludmila Markina for her assistance in researching the present work, having examined it in the original.

[1] Talbot Rice, T., *Elizabeth Empress of Russia* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1970), p. 33.

[2] *Ibid*, p.113.

[3] Sebag Montefiore, S, *Prince of Princes: The Life of Potemkin* (St. Martin's Press, 2000) p. 26.

[4] Gregory Dmitrievich Molchanov is one of the names which has been suggested. He found a niche by painting copies of portraits of the imperial family.

[5] Herzen, A., *Mémoires de l'impératrice Catherine II de Russia* (London, 1859), p. 115.

[6] Talbot Rice, p. 31.

[7] Ibid, p. 36.

[8] Ibid, p. 32.

[9] Talbot Rice, p. 25.

[10] Olivier, D., *Elizabeth de Russie* (Paris, 1962), p. 69.

[11] Coughlan, R., *Elizabeth and Catherine: Empresses of All the Russias* (Millington Ltd., London, 1974), p.59.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Berdnikov, L., 'The Iron-Fisted Fashionista' in *Russian Life* (Nov-Dec 2009), p.64.

[14] Antonov, B., *Russian Tsars* (St. Petersburg, 2006), p.107.

[15] Berdnikov, p.59.

[16] Sebag Montefiore, p. 24.

[17] *Успенский А.И. Словарь художников, в XVIII веке писавших в Императорских дворцах*. — М., 1913. С. 95.

[18] Markina, L., 'The Spark of Peter the Great' in *The Tretyakov Magazine* (vol 20, no. 4 2010), p. 14.

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.