



Aleksandr Opekushin
(1838–1923)

CATHERINE II

Russia

1896

Marble

CATHERINE HALL
OF THE GRAND PALACE

Architect: M. Posokhin

2006–2007

About the project

<https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/special/p/lyudi-i-fondy-eng/>





SELECTED BY

Viktor Egorychev,

Director General

of the Tsaritsyno Museum-Reserve

from September 10, 2001, to July 24, 2006,

Ph.D. in Art History



From 2001 to 2006, I had the honor to be Director General of the Tsaritsyno Museum-Reserve and to have taken part as such in the reconstruction of the Grand Palace, designed by the team from the Mosproekt-2 Institute and supervised by the Mayor of Moscow at the time, Yuriy Luzhkov.

In 2005, the head of Mosproekt-2, M. Posokhin, suggested to the mayor that we create in the palace a ceremonial hall with two tiers of windows in the manner of famous royal residences. To do this, it was required to merge two large rooms, which according to the idea of the great architect M. Kazakov had originally been located above each other. I was strongly opposed to such a gross violation of the historical layout of the palace. Contrary to classical architectural logic, high windows would be above small ones, and the layout of the entire interior space of the Grand Palace would be distorted. But Luzhkov insisted on this impressive vision. The new hall with columns, lavish gilding, ornate parquet and a balcony was named the Catherine Hall.

Later in 2005, I learnt that the governments of Moscow and the Republic of Armenia had come to an agreement on the return to Moscow of the marble statue of Catherine II, created in the late 19th century by the sculptor A. Opekushin to decorate the meeting hall of the Moscow City Duma in the building that would later serve as the Lenin Museum. This statue had been gathering dust for many decades in the courtyard of the Picture Gallery of Armenia, where I had seen it before.

Luzhkov was the Head of the Board of Trustees of the Tretyakov Gallery and promised its Director at the time, V. Rodionov, to gift the Opekushin statue to this very museum. The Tretyakov Gallery restorers started to restore the damaged sculpture.

I was an old friend of Rodionov's, but I got invested in the idea of intercepting the statue to put it in the soon-to-be Catherine Hall of the Tsaritsyno Grand Palace. The director of the Tretyakov Gallery, however, agreed only for a short-term lease of the work. The chairman of the Moscow Committee for Culture, S. Khudyakov, and other officials did not dare to contradict the mayor. And then I decided to, as they call it, buck the odds.

On the 1 of June 2005, a large interdepartmental meeting on the urgent matters of Tsaritsyno's reconstruction was convened in the Moscow City Hall at Tverskaya, 13. All the highest Moscow officials were present, headed by Luzhkov, and they discussed at length all manner of things. At the very end of the meeting, I took advantage of a pause and, turning on the microphone, addressed the mayor, 'Yuriy Mikhaylovich, may I make a small request?' Luzhkov tensed slightly and replied, 'Yes, I'm listening'. I reminded him briefly of the Opekushin sculpture and suggested that it be installed in the reconstructed Grand Palace in Tsaritsyno. The mayor pondered for a few seconds and firmly replied, 'I agree'. Then he left the meeting room. The bewildered officials looked at me like I was insane, but I was delighted. It is not every day one gets precious museum relics so easily...

The penultimate paragraph of the official record of that meeting was supplemented by a subparagraph and read:

'22. To accept the suggestion of V.V. Egorychev to transfer the statue of Catherine the Great by the sculptor A.M. Opekushin, which is in the state ownership of the city of Moscow, to the collection of the Tsaritsyno Museum-Reserve for placement in the ceremonial hall of the newly reconstructed Grand Palace.

22.1. S.I. Khudyakov, V.N. Silkin, and V.V. Egorychev shall formalize in the prescribed manner the transfer of the sculpture to the museum collection'.

Rodionov was deeply offended, though. 'This is our item! We restored it! How dare you?!' he was seething after Luzhkov's order. 'Calm down, my friend', I told him, 'You have plenty of all kinds of art in the Tretyakov Gallery as it is. And this sculpture belongs with us'.

Now Opekushin's wonderful work is a jewel in our collection, and I am quite pleased with this achievement...