



PORTRAIT OF CATHERINE II

Imperial Tapestry Manufactory,
Saint Petersburg, Russia

1780s

About the project

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

*Wool, silk, metal thread,
hand tapestry weaving*





SELECTED BY

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Before joining the Tsaritsyno Museum, I was mainly focused on the history of European fine art and Russian architecture. The tapestry for me was a way into the world of arts and crafts as well as into our museum's collection. For me, Tsaritsyno was above all a magnificent architectural and park ensemble, but I did not feel so strongly about the collection within the palace walls. The tapestry managed to 'shatter' this detachment.

Tapestry (in Russia, it is often called 'gobelin' as in the name of the famous French Gobelins Manufactory) is considered to be a unique type of artistic weaving. It is a canvas with woven on it stories or decorative images.

The Tsaritsyno Museum holds a large collection of tapestries. In its heart are the works of Russian and Soviet artisans of the 20th and 21st centuries, but there are also fine examples of ancient tapestries.

This piece of art is based on a portrait by Fyodor Rokotov. The Empress liked it so much that she encouraged other artists to use it as a reference for her portraits, so there were many copies of the painting. In this case, we see a reproduction made at the Imperial Tapestry Manufactory in Saint Petersburg.

The art of tapestry is complex and incredibly time-consuming. This is why tapestries were not only expensive but also rare enough to come into the possession of royal courts and aristocracy.

In Russia, tapestry production emerged under Peter the Great — after the tsar visited the famous Gobelins Manufactory in France in 1717. Peter managed to arrange for several of its artisans to move to Russia, and in the same year, the Tapestry Manufactory was established near Saint Petersburg.

In its early days, French examples were copied, but soon artists began to make images inspired by the imperial painting collection, as well as to come up with their own stories and

decorative compositions. By the 1740s, more than 40 Russian artisans were already working there. The quality of workmanship was close to the standards of the best European manufacturers.

During the reign of Catherine the Great, the Russian tapestries developed a distinctive style. The virtuosity of the tapestry manufactory artists reached a level that allowed them to create the finest tonal changes, while taking a turn to realistic images of small formats. It was portrait tapestries that became the trademark of the Imperial Tapestry Manufactory, something that set its production apart from all European manufacturers.

The portrait from the museum's collection was probably created to decorate the chambers of the imperial palace and to impress foreign visitors, or it may have been intended as a diplomatic gift. Unfortunately, the threads have become dull under light with time, but even today we still admire the surprisingly fine and sophisticated interweaving and smooth transitions of colour shades.

I highly value that the exhibition project, created for the 40th anniversary of the museum, allowed us to show this image of Catherine the Great — a testament to the peak of tapestry art in Russia at the time.