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Unknown artist

**JOHANNA ELISABETH,  
PRINCESS OF  
ANHALT-ZERBST**

About the project

[https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/  
events/special/p/lyudi-i-fondy-eng/](https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/special/p/lyudi-i-fondy-eng/)

Germany (?)

Second half of the 18th century

*Oil on canvas*





SELECTED BY

**Svetlana Kalinina,**

*Senior Researcher, Ph.D. in History*



Johanna Elisabeth, Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, mother of Catherine the Great. Why did I choose this exhibit? The 18th century has been fascinating me since my freshman year of college. Courseworks, graduation work, thesis, everything was connected with this period and the people who lived then. And the reign of Catherine the Great, a German by birth, who had no rights to the Russian throne but became one of the most prominent public figures in this country, has always been my priority. The imperial 18th century is closely connected with the capital of that time — Saint Petersburg. But what about Moscow? What in my hometown is more clearly connected with Catherine the Great, what serves as a reminder of her glorious victories in foreign policy and architectural leanings? Of course, the Tsaritsyno ensemble! I had no choice, this place makes you fall in love once and for all. But let us get back to the portrait.

Princess Johanna Elisabeth was born into the family of the famous German house of Holstein-Gottorp, which by then had lost its influence.

Johanna was raised at the court of her relative Sophia Maria Duchess of Brunswick-Lüneburg, who, when the princess was fifteen, married her to a 37-year-old Prussian general, Prince Christian of Anhalt-Dornburg. After the marriage, the family settled in the Prussian castle of Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland). In 1729, their daughter Sophia Augusta Frederica (future Russian Empress Catherine II) was born. In 1742, Christian August was granted the title of coruler (together with his brother Johann Ludwig) of the Principality of Anhalt-Zerbst, which significantly changed Johanna's life: she was given the title of Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, the family moved from provincial Stettin to the capital city of Zerbst, and her brother Adolf became heir to

the Swedish crown. All these changes ensured that Johanna could arrange favorable parties for her children.

The Russian Empress Elisabeth had chosen her nephew, the son of her sister Anna Petrovna, Prince Karl Peter Ulrich, as her heir. In February 1742, the Prince arrived in Saint Petersburg. The next step of the Russian Empress was to find a bride for the heir. Elisabeth's attention was drawn to the young Princess Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst and she invited her and her mother to come to Russia. The arrival of the German guests was shrouded in secrecy: they travelled under false names and stayed in the most unassuming places. After arriving in Saint Petersburg, they received a warm welcome, and soon Princess Johanna Elisabeth was awarded the Order of St. Catherine of the first class.

However, Johanna Elisabeth could not arrange her life in Saint Petersburg in a reasonable manner. Letters to the Prussian King Frederick II, whom she informed of all events that had taken place since their departure from Zerbst, as well as intrigues and romances, turned Elisabeth against Johanna. Immediately after the marriage in 1745 of her daughter Sophia and Pyotr Fyodorovich (this was the name given to Karl Peter Ulrich after his baptism into the Orthodox faith), the Empress banished Princess Johanna Elisabeth from Russia.

Shortly after Johanna's return to Anhalt-Zerbst, in 1747, her husband Christian died, and Johanna took over the principality until her son Friedrich August came of age. Johanna Elisabeth died in Paris on May 30, 1760.