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Catherine the Great's Danish Portraitist: Projecting Majesty across the Baltic Sea

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Abstract:
This chapter considers the Baltic Sea as a unique conduit for Russia's transcultural exchange, with all the imperialist rivalry that this entailed. It takes as its case study a handful of portraits that the Danish artist Vigilius Eriksen painted for Catherine the Great in the 1760s and '70s, and the way in which their circulation and display enabled the empress to become arguably the most efficient ruler of her generation to foster a personal iconography that announced and then cemented her eminence on the European stage. Tracing the trajectories of Eriksen's portraits reveals a commanding nexus between political ascendency, international relations, and visual imagery, and the function of paintings as highly charged conductors of regal clout around the Baltic Sea. Collectively, they engaged with power differentials in highly suggestive ways, confirming the vitality with which portraiture constructed and signalled status and authority between some of the Baltic's most competitive courts.

In October 2021, at the conference "Gdańsk-Danzig-Gduńsk within the Baltic Borderlands" (co-organised by the Faculty of History at the University of Gdańsk and the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge), the historian Norman Davies declared that "Russia is a latecomer, not to say an imperial intruder" on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Just four months later, Vladimir Putin's neoimperialist ambitions caused shockwaves around the world when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

In light of the historic imperial aggression that Davies refers to, not to mention the horror of its current incarnation and the postcolonial imperative to examine the power dynamics between oppressed and hegemonic communities, it is understandable that

scholars of cultural interaction around the Baltic Sea have been prioritising the perspectives, experiences, and agency of those who lived under, rather than imposed, colonial rule. Yet the Baltic region played as formative a role in imperial Russia's artistic development as it did in social, economic, and geopolitical life. Focusing on the mid-eighteenth century, this chapter considers the Baltic Sea as a unique conduit for Russia's transcultural exchange, with all the imperialist rivalry that this entailed.

It takes as its case study a handful of portraits by the Danish painter Vigilius Eriksen (1722–1782) who, failing to find favour at the Royal Danish Academy of Portraiture, Sculpture, and Architecture, relocated to Russia in 1757 and in due course became Catherine the Great's most inventive portraitist.[1] In the two short years straddling Catherine's *coup d'état* against her husband, Peter III, in 1762, Eriksen portrayed her in three strikingly different guises: as mourner-in-chief for her husband's predecessor, Empress Elizabeth; as confident usurper; and as crowned monarch. The artist's copies of the last of these were sent to fellow rulers, including Frederick the Great of Prussia and the Danish King Frederik V, projecting Catherine's majesty across the Baltic region as well as further afield. What is more, even after he returned to Copenhagen in 1772 and became court painter to the Danish Queen Dowager Juliane Marie, Eriksen painted two further portraits for Catherine, of Juliane Marie and her son, which were sent to St. Petersburg and displayed in ways that continued to blazon the empress's supremacy.

Catherine's preference for Eriksen over local artists presents no surprises. Ever since Peter the Great had lured foreign talent to Russia on advantageous terms as part of his project of modernising his country by introducing new skills, the more affluent of his court-watching compatriots had entrusted their foremost commissions to foreign artists.[2] It was not until later in the century that native or naturalised artists routinely began to win major commissions, bolstered by the professional opportunities and accreditation offered by Russia's fast-maturing Academy of Arts (though even then, they often continued to be paid significantly less than foreign artists were for comparable work).[3]

[1] This research was generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust as part of a Major Research Fellowship for the project "Russia, Empire, and the Baltic Imagination."

The Royal Danish Academy of Portraiture, Sculpture, and Architecture in Copenhagen was inaugurated on 31 March 1754. Its name was changed to the Royal Danish Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in 1771.

[2] For the effect of Peter's policies in the artistic sphere, see: James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Olga S. Evangulova, *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo v Rossii pervoi chetverti XVIII v. Problemy stanovleniia khudozhestvennykh printsipov Novogo vremeni* (Moscow: Moscow State University Press, 1987). For early accounts of Russian artists working in Russia, see: A.P. Miuller, *Byt inostrannykh khudozhnikov v Rossii* (Leningrad: Academia, 1927); A.P. Miuller, *Inostrannye zhivopistsy i skul'ptory v Rossii* (Moscow 1925); and Nikolai N. Vrangel, "Inostrantsy v Rossii," *Starye gody* (July–September 1911): 5–94.

[3] For the Academy's structure and priorities in the eighteenth century, see: Nina Moleva and Elii Beliutin, *Pedagogicheskaia sistema Akademii khudozhestv XVIII veka* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1956). For

What has been under-researched, however, is the way in which the circulation and display of some of Eriksen's portraits promoted forms of political self-representation that fuelled Catherine's quest for broader international prestige. To address this lacuna, the argument here attends to the details of Eriksen's portraits and the nature of their exhibition alongside epistolary sources and eye-witness accounts to illuminate a notably agile route through which Catherine vied for precedence over some of her rivals. Indeed, it was thanks to the work of Eriksen as much as any other artist that she became arguably the most efficient ruler of her generation to foster a personal iconography that announced and then cemented her eminence on the European stage. Tracing the trajectories of Eriksen's portraits thus enables us to resurrect a commanding nexus between political ascendency, international relations, and visual imagery, and to consider the function of paintings as highly charged conductors of regal clout around the Baltic Sea.

The acuity with which Catherine understood and deployed the semantic power of portraiture was evident from the moment Empress Elizabeth died on 25 December 1761. Seeking to publicise her veneration of the deceased monarch and position herself as a more respectful and worthy heir than her husband, Catherine took up vigil by the imperial coffin, her sorrowful demeanour standing in sharp contrast to the levity with which Peter had met his aunt's demise. What is more, she determined to commission a portrait to memorialise this act of homage and, with a weather eye to the signifiers of dynastic continuity, turned to one of Elizabeth's portraitists, Vigilius Eriksen. The Dane had in recent years affirmed his courtly credentials by portraying the late empress as a buxom beauty of exemplary carnation and lasting radiance, expertly sidestepping the ravaging effects of intemperance and gluttony that had in fact marked her final years.[4] He was, therefore, an artist sufficiently familiar with courtly protocol and the nuance of artistic license to rise to the challenge of capturing the reverential piety of the as yet undeclared pretender to the throne.

Eriksen began this project of painting the grieving Catherine with a preliminary study which shows her wearing the insignia of the Order of St Catherine (bestowed on every grand duchess on their birth or marriage into the imperial family), confirming that she was not yet empress when work on the portrait began. She was in fact pregnant with her lover Grigory Orlov's child at the time, which her

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the development of portraiture, see: Olga S. Evangulova and Andrei A. Karev, *Portretnaia zhivopis' v Rossii vtoroi poloviny XVIII v.* (Moscow: Moscow State University Press, 1994). For the implications of gender within this, see: Antonia Napp, *Russische Porträts: Geschlechterdifferenz in der Malerie zwischen 1760 und 1820* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2010).

[4] Vigilius Eriksen, *Empress Elizabeth Petrovna*, late 1750s, oil on canvas, 88 × 70 cm, Catherine Palace, Tsarskoe Selo State Museum Reserve. For two studies for this portrait, now in the State Hermitage Museum and attributed to Eriksen by Elizaveta Renne, see: Alexander A. Babin and Elizaveta P. Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran i Finliandii XVIII–XX vekov. Katalog kollektsii* (St. Petersburg: State Hermitage Museum, 2018), 27–28.

capacious mourning weeds helped to hide. Yet in the final version, completed after she had given birth to an illegitimate son and then deposed her husband in June 1762, she wears the turquoise sash and star of the oldest and highest of Russia's chivalric orders, the Order of St Andrew the First Called, which she had granted herself on the day of her *coup d'état*.[5] In its very execution, Eriksen's portrait thus traced a new axis of power, as the conspicuous change of order from that of St Catherine in the preparatory study to that of St Andrew in the finished painting marked Catherine's ascent to the throne. Repeatedly copied and engraved, the portrait's dissemination endorsed Catherine's narrative of rightful succession by recording her stalwart devotion and linking her spiritually to the deceased empress.[6]

Catherine's choice of artist for this portrait was surely no accident, as Erin McBurney has suggested.[7] As Duke of Holstein-Gottorp since 1739, Peter had planned from the moment he became emperor to restore to his duchy those territories of Schleswig that had been ceded to Denmark at the culmination of the Great Northern War in 1721.[8] Catherine fiercely opposed this hostility towards Denmark and often ridiculed her husband's nostalgia for his birthplace. In one of several instances of this in her memoirs, she wrote: "I was hardly in bed when the Grand Duke came running with all his might and told me to get up and come without delay to eat the very freshest oysters that had just been brought to him from Holstein. When they arrived it was for him a grand and double feast; he loved them, and they also came from Holstein, his native land, for which he had a great predilection but which he did not govern any better for that."[9] Within this context of Peter's aggression towards Denmark and his wife's scorn for his attachment to Holstein, her recruitment of a Danish artist for her mourning portrait was a pointed and quasi-political act.

Catherine equally recognised that her efforts to evince her grief for Elizabeth would be well served by a foreign artist who had worked for the late empress yet was untrammelled by the viperous and unstable political associations that bedevilled the Russian court. Eriksen duly enjoyed rapid preferment and was

[5] Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in Mourning*, 1762, oil on copper, 20 × 18 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Inv. 4049.

[6] I owe the observations on the development of this painting to Erin McBurney, "Art and Power in the Reign of Catherine the Great: The State Portraits" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014), 113–115, 118–119. For a drawing made from Eriksen's portrait the same year it was complete, see: Evgraf Chemesov, *Catherine II in Mourning*, 1762, pencil on paper, 15.5 × 12.5 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Inv. 2811.

[7] McBurney, "Art and Power," 112.

[8] For this territorial transfer, which France, England, Sweden, and Russia agreed as part of what they termed "the repose of the north," and for details of Peter's failed quest "to restore Schleswig," see: Carol S. Leonard, *Reform and Regicide: The Reign of Peter III of Russia* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 118–119, 126–127, 135–137.

[9] *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, translated by Mark Cruse and Hilde Hoogenboom (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 85.

soon entrusted with a further commission, to portray the new empress astride her favourite horse Brilliant as she rode to secure her husband's abdication the day after her revolt (Fig. 1).[10]

Fig. 1. Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II on Horseback*, 1764, oil on canvas, 385 × 356 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-4734

In this celebrated portrait, Catherine is depicted in the uniform of the Semenovsky Guards Regiment that she is known to have borrowed and worn that day.[11] Behind her,

[10] For this commission, see: Babin and Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran*, 32–38.

[11] For clarification of the uniform that Catherine wore and the significance of its representation in Russian cultural texts, see: Victoria Ivleva, "From Catherine II's Coup to Alexander Pushkin's 'The Captain's Daughter': A Reflection on Sartorial and Spiritual Searching in Russian Culture," *Вивліоѳика: E-Journal of Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies* 8 (2020): 85–128.

soldiers from the Preobrazhensky Regiment who had sworn allegiance to their new empress less than twenty-four hours earlier are silhouetted against a distant image of the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery on the coast of the Gulf of Finland – the very place where Catherine had awaited her husband's written abdication. The original painting was intended for the Throne Room of the Great Palace at Peterhof but in due course Catherine commissioned several author copies (at least six versions are known), confident in the portrait's ability to broadcast the fluency with which her power grab had unfolded around the easternmost shores of the Baltic Sea.

So popular that it inspired multiple iterations in different media, including a porcelain figurine produced at the acclaimed Meissen factory in Saxony in 1770,[12] Eriksen's portrait was soon imbued with an aura of veracity, as the comments of her son's tutor confirm. Taken to see one version of the portrait in 1765, he wrote: "Her Majesty is painted in the uniform of the infantry guards and on the grey horse on which she deigned to ride back here from Peterhof on her ascension to the throne. Her hair is painted loose and her dress is covered in dust, just as we saw it with our own eyes."[13] Particularly notable is that Catherine is portrayed riding astride rather than side-saddle – a longstanding preference of hers which, according to her memoirs, had attracted Elizabeth's disapproval for the risk it was believed to pose to the then grand duchess's childbearing ability, but was emphasised in the portrait to invoke the decisive, even manly authority that would become a well-crafted hallmark of her reign.[14]

Eriksen's portrait of Catherine astride Brilliant became a lynchpin of her imagery.[15] He was later commissioned to paint two more equestrian portraits, of Grigory Orlov and his battle-scarred brother, Aleksei, both of whom had played leading roles in her accession.[16] Aleksei had also been present at her husband's demise, apparently in a drunken brawl, within a week of his deposition. The pictures of the two brothers

[12] Johann Joachim Kändler, after Vigilius Eriksen, *Empress Catherine II on Horseback*, 1770, porcelain, 25 × 24 × 12 cm, Meissen Collection, Meissen. See: Elizaveta Renne, "Catherine II through the eyes of Vigilius Eriksen and Alexander Roslin," in: *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, ed. Magnus Olausson (exh. cat., Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; Helsingborg: Boktryck AB, 1999), 100.

[13] Semën Poroshin, *Zapiski, sluzhashchiia k istorii Ego Imperatorskago Vysochestva Blagovernago Gosudaria Tsesarevicha i Velikago Kniazia Pavla Petrovicha, naslednika prestolu rossiiskago* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Karla Kraiia, 1844), 312.

[14] *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, 112.

[15] For this broader context, see: Yuri Epatko, "The Portrait Iconography of Catherine II," in: *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, 81–95.

[16] Vigilius Eriksen, *Count Grigory G. Orlov*, 1766–1772, oil on canvas, 392.5 × 358 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-9783; and *Count Aleksei G. Orlov*, 1766–1772, oil on canvas, 398 × 356.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-9782. Grigory and Aleksei Orlov are depicted respectively in the Roman and Turkish costumes they wore at a resplendent carousel tournament that Catherine presided over in front of the Winter Palace on 16 June 1766. The paintings were later installed at Gatchina Palace and then moved to Pavlovsk Palace Museum before being transferred back to the State Hermitage Museum in 1958. For these commissions, see: Babin and Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran*, 41–47.

flanked a version of Eriksen's equestrian portrait of Catherine in the Hermitage gallery during her lifetime, confirming the artist's ability to inscribe the power and panache of not only the empress but also the mainstays of her court.

Long before that, however, Eriksen had instantiated the empress's sovereignty in more formal ways, when he was commissioned in 1762 to travel to Moscow to portray Catherine in her coronation robes (Fig. 2). This complemented another coronation portrait by the Italian Stefano Torelli, who was invited from Dresden to Moscow to undertake this by Ivan Shuvalov, the inaugural president of Russia's Academy of Arts who had lived in Italy for many years.[17] Shuvalov's Italophilia doubtless influenced his recruitment of Torelli.[18] Eriksen's portrait, meanwhile, was commissioned by Ivan Betskoi, a mercurial polymath who became Catherine's trusted educational advisor and in 1764 would succeed Shuvalov as president of the Academy – a position he held for all but four years of Catherine's reign. Betskoi had been born in Stockholm and studied in Copenhagen, which surely influenced his decision to commission Eriksen, a Dane, in contrast to Shuvalov's preference for an Italian.[19] While Catherine would have had the final say on both commissions, Betskoi's countermove to Shuvalov's commission confirms the agency of Baltic networks in shaping her growing iconography.

Eriksen's densely textured portrait pulled out all the stops to confer dynastic legitimacy on Russia's new empress. Catherine's statuesque frame fills the canvas as the artist conjures with illusory skill the weight of her coronation robe of silver brocade and, draped over it, the imperial mantle made specially for the occasion from the pelts of 4,000 ermines. Contrasts are purposefully made, with the turquoise sash of the Order of St Andrew set against opalescent flesh and the glinting clasp and chain. At the same time, Eriksen's brushwork makes vividly palpable the proud embroidery of the two-headed imperial eagles that embellish the mantle and gown, and the gossamer softness of the ermine tails. Notably bravuristic is his rapier sharp depiction of the coronation regalia commissioned from the court jewellers Georg Friedrich Eckart and Jérémie Pauzié, including an orb crafted in gold and diamonds and topped with a 47-carat sapphire; and a new crown of split hemispheres emblazoned with a double row of pearls, some 5,000 diamonds, and a 398-carat red spinel which had been requisitioned from the crown of Empress Anna, the niece of Peter the Great.[20]

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[17] Stefano Torelli, *Coronation Portrait of Catherine II*, 1763–1766, oil on canvas, 244 × 178 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. Ж-5808. While commissioned in 1762, this painting was begun the following year, as the earliest that Torelli arrived in Moscow was January 1763.

[18] For Russian patronage of Italian artists in this period, see: Sergei O. Androsov, *Russkie zakazchiki i ital'ianskie khudozhniki v XVIII veke* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2003).

[19] For Betskoi's background, see: *Catherine the Great & Gustav III*, 359.

[20] Later known as the Imperial Crown of Russia, Pauzié's crown was used at the coronation of every future Russian ruler until the February Revolution toppled the tsarist autocracy in 1917. For

Fig. 2. Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in Her Coronation Robes*, 1762–1764, oil on canvas, 220.5 × 151 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-9499

Mindful of Catherine's instruction that the crown should not be altered in future, Pauzié wrote in his memoirs that he "selected all the largest stones that are not suitable for fashionable dress, some diamond, some coloured, which created the richest object that Europe has to offer."[21]

the symbolic representation of crowns in Catherine's portraits, see: Ekaterina Skvortcova, "Stephano Torelli's 'Coronation Portrait of Catherine II': Crowns as a Visual Formula of the Lands of the Russian Empire," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Arts* 10/2 (2020): 274–299.

[21] Jérémie Pauzié, "Zapiski pridvornago bril'iantshchika Poz'e o prebyvanii ego v Rossii. S 1729 po 1764 g.," *Russkaia starina* 1/3 (March 1870): 229–230.

Replete with the fluted column and burgundy drapery typical of state portraiture as well as a glimpse of the imperial throne, Eriksen's portrait was delivered to the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts on 12 July 1765, just as Catherine was revivifying this august institution with a lavish ground-breaking for its new, permanent home. Copies were soon commissioned for foreign courts, among them one for a gallery of thirteen portraits of reigning monarchs that the Danish King Frederik V established in the Christiansborg Palace that same year.[22] In 1766 Russia's minister of foreign affairs informed the Danish ambassador to the Russian court that this portrait was largely complete, but its dispatch was delayed while it was first sent to Moscow for Catherine to check its quality, confirming the attention she paid to the visual record of her reign.[23] Only in July 1767 did it travel back to St. Petersburg and on to Copenhagen where it took its place among portraits of members of Europe's ruling elite.

Two years later a further version of Eriksen's coronation portrait was commissioned for the Palace of Sanssouci in Potsdam as part of an exchange of portraits with Frederick II.[24] "I was delighted to learn of the safe arrival of my portrait and that Her Imperial Majesty was kind enough to accept it as a token of my attachment and my friendship," Frederick wrote on 28 June 1769 from Potsdam to Count Solms, the Prussian ambassador to Catherine's court. "That of this great Princess has also reached me, and you will not forget to thank her a thousand times and to assure her that I felt the full extent of the favour that she has kindly shown me on this occasion. I found it a strong likeness, and I have all the more reason to be convinced of this because I felt that I saw in it different features, very well expressed, that I knew of her in her youth."[25]

Catherine's portrait was displayed in Frederick's private apartments in his palace in Berlin by 1779 at the latest and was still there in 1786, as mention of "the portrait of the current Russian Empress with a large gilded frame" in successive editions

[22] Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in Her Coronation Robes*, 1766–1767, oil on canvas, 284 × 173.5 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Inv. KMSsp854 (currently on display in the Palace of Christian VII at Amalienborg, Copenhagen).

[23] Renne, "Catherine II," 100.

[24] Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in Her Coronation Robes*, 1769, oil on canvas, 282 × 214 cm, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg, Inv. GK I 1023. For the portrait exchange, see: Gustav Berthold Volz, "Ein Geschenk Friedrichs des Großen an Katharina II," *Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch* 12 (1908): 49–61.

[25] "Au conseiller privé de légation comte de Solms à Saint-Pétersbourg. Potsdam, 28 juin 1769," in: *Politische Correspondenz Friedrich's des Großen*, 46 vols, eds. Johann Gustav Droysen *et al.* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1879–1938), vol. 28, ed. Gustav Berthold Volz, 1903, 405: digitised as *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand – Werke Friedrichs des Großen: Digitale Ausgabe der Univeritätsbibliothek Trier*, http://friedrich.uni-trier.de/de/politKorr/28/405-o2/?h=au+conseiller+privE+de+lEgation+comte+de+solms+a+saint-pEtersbourg, accessed on 22 IV 2022. I am grateful to Dr. Alexandra Nina Bauer, Curator of Paintings of the Dutch and German Schools, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg, for drawing my attention to this source.

of an account of the royal residences in Berlin and Potsdam confirms.[26] It is striking that the painting was accommodated in the personal spaces of one of Catherine's keenest rivals. This was perhaps a canny move of Frederick and his courtiers to restrict access to such an imperious image. The positioning nonetheless meant that the Prussian king would have been regularly exposed to this overt display of Russian majesty. In the coming decades, a further version of Eriksen's painting would find its way to the British court.[27] Reproduced more than any other image of Catherine in her coronation attire, the portrait's dissemination across the Baltic region as well as further afield attests to the power of imagery to project triumphant sovereignty, to signal both the glittering present and the future promise of her magnificent rule.[28]

Eriksen was paid handsomely for his St. Petersburg commissions. Jacob von Stählin, the principal chronicler of Russia's painters and sculptors during Catherine's reign, claimed that "he was never on a salary, and made [his clients] pay for each painting separately and at a premium. His annual earnings at the court alone were estimated to be 5,000 rubles."[29] Other records noted that he received 3,000 rubles for his enigmatic *Catherine II in front of a Mirror* on 22 May 1764,[30] and 4,000 rubles in 1766 for a version of Catherine's equestrian portrait.[31] His Russian contemporaries would be lucky to be paid a fraction of that sum (three decades later, leading Russian painters could still rarely expect to earn more than a third of what their western European contemporaries could command), attesting to Eriksen's stature and to the ongoing preference among predominant patrons

[26] *Beschreibung der königlichen Residenzstädte Berlin und Potsdam und aller daselbst befindlicher Merkwürdigkeiten*, 2 vols (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1779), vol. 2, 645; and *Beschreibung der königlichen Residenzstädte Berlin und Potsdam: aller daselbst befindlicher Merkwürdigkeiten, und der umliegenden Gegend*, 3 vols (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1786), vol. 2, 870. I am grateful to Dr. Alexandra Nina Bauer for drawing my attention to this source.

[27] Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in Her Coronation Robes*, c. 1765–1769, oil on canvas, 270 × 198.8 cm, Royal Collection Trust, London, Inv. RCIN 404774. See: *Russia: Art, Royalty and the Romanovs*, eds. Caroline de Guitaut and Stephen Patterson (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2018), 38–40. Further versions of Eriksen's coronation portrait are now in the Davids Samling, Copenhagen; the Krasnodar Regional Museum of Fine Arts of A.F. Kovalenko; and the National Museum, Warsaw.

[28] For Eriksen's initial commission and the painting's various iterations and copies, see: Babin and Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran*, 39–41.

[29] Jacob von Stählin, *Zapiski Iakoba Shtelina ob iziashchnykh iskusstvakh v Rossii*, 2 vols, ed. and transl. by K.V. Malinovskii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990), vol. 1, 83. For commentary on von Stählin's copious writing, see: K.V. Malinovskii, "Iakob fon Shtelin i ego zapiski po istorii russkoi zhivopisi XVIII veka," in: *Russkoe iskusstvo barokko: materialy i issledovaniia*, ed. Tatiana V. Alekseeva (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 173–211.

[30] Vigilius Eriksen, *Catherine II in front of a Mirror*, 1762–1764, oil on canvas, 262.5 × 201.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭS-1352.

[31] Troels Andersen, "Vigilius Eriksen i Rusland," *Artes: Internationalt Kunsttidsskrift* 1 (October 1965): 86–87 (45–89).

for foreign artists.[32] He went on to enjoy consistent imperial favour and a lucrative career as Catherine's most prolific portraitist, sustained by the skill with which his stately images of the empress effaced memories of her scandalous accession to the throne.

This experience proved invaluable when Eriksen returned to his homeland in 1772 and was appointed court painter to Frederik V's widow Juliane Marie, who was then on the cusp of power as de facto ruler of Denmark's regency from 1772–1784. From Copenhagen, he carried out two further commissions for Catherine when he painted Juliane Marie and her regent son for the Chesme Gallery – a collection of portraits of contemporary monarchs and their relatives that the empress acquired specially for a new palace she had commissioned outside St. Petersburg in 1773 (Figs. 3 and 4). In 1780, this was renamed the Chesme Palace in honour of the tenth anniversary of Russia's destruction of the Turkish fleet in Chesme (Çeşme) Bay in July 1770.[33]

The gallery consisted of ten halls in which were displayed fifty-nine full-length, life-size portraits commissioned from established artists at fourteen royal courts, some of which were paid for by Catherine while others were presented to her as gifts. These were hung beneath fifty-eight marble roundels on which Fedot Shubin sculpted half-length bas-relief portraits of members of the Rurikid and Romanov dynasties which, since the late ninth century, had successively governed lands that now formed part of the Russian empire. The gallery thus had the effect of inserting Catherine into what the imperial imagination saw as a glorious lineage of "Russian" rulers (in fact those of Kyivan Rus' and its successor republics and principalities, as well as those of states which eventually comprised modern Russia). At the same time, it established her kinship with an often consanguineous community of Europe's reigning elites.

[32] In the 1790s, the Austrian painter Johann Baptist Lampi the Elder was paid 6,800 rubles for his portrait of Prince Platon Zubov and 12,000 for a double portrait of the Grand Dukes Alexander and Konstantin, while Dmitry Levitsky requested only 2,500 rubles for a full-length portrait of Empress Maria Fedorovna in 1797, and Vladimir Borovikovsky was paid just 1,200 rubles for his *Portrait of Murtaza Kuli*. See: Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2016), 54.

[33] On the Chesme Gallery, see: Ekaterina Skvortsova, "Representing Power in Eighteenth-Century Russian Art: The Portrait Gallery of the Chesme Palace," in: *A Century Mad and Wise: Russia in the Age of the Enlightenment*, eds. Emmanuel Waegemans, Hans van Koningsbrugge, Marcus Levitt and Mikhail Ljustrov (Groningen: Netherlands Russia Centre, 2015), 455–469; and Elizaveta P. Renne, "Ekaterina Velikaia – soavtor proekta galerei portretov Chesmenskogo dvortsa," in: *Ermitazhnye chteniia pamiati V.F. Levinsona-Lessinga (02.03.1893–27.06.1972). 2017–2018. Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* 96 (2018): 358–370. For its portraits of Scandinavian rulers and their relatives, see: *eadem*, "Kartiny skandinavskikh khudozhnikov v russkikh sobraniiakh XVIII veka," in: "*Strana zhivitel'noi prokhlady…" Iskusstvo stran Severnoi Evropy XVIII–nachala XX veka iz sobranii muzeev Rossii*, eds. V.A. Mishin and V.A. Sadkov (Moscow: Krasnaia ploshchad', 2001), 18–19.

Fig. 3. Vigilius Eriksen, *The Queen Dowager Juliane Marie*, 1776, oil on canvas, 284 × 194 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Inv. KMS4056

Catherine's own portrait, together with those of her son Paul and his first wife Natalia Alekseevna, were painted by the French painter Pierre-Etienne Falconet, son of the sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet who was then sweating blood and tears over Catherine's equestrian monument to Peter the Great.[34] After Natalia died in childbirth in 1776, a further portrait was commissioned of Maria Fedorovna,

[34] Pierre-Etienne Falconet, *Catherine II*, 1773, oil on canvas, 163 × 238.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-4480.

Fig. 4. Vigilius Eriksen, *Prince Frederik, Regent of Denmark and Norway*, 1777, oil on canvas, 236 × 196 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-4455

Paul's second wife, to ensure that the gallery embodied not just Russia's past and present rulers, but also those who in future would carry the flame. These were hung in a domed circular hall at the top of the parade staircase, together with a marble statue of the empress as Minerva to proclaim her military prowess.

This arrangement ensured that the visitor would first encounter the portraits of Catherine and her family before moving on to the portraits of foreign rulers and their relatives which were hung in subsequent and, by intimation, subsidiary halls. These were named after the country of the royal house whose images they displayed.[35] The Danish portraits, however, were not given their own designated room but instead

[35] For the complex hierarchical and symbolic priorities that dictated the arrangement of the portraits in the Chesme Gallery, see: Skvortsova, "Representing Power in Eighteenth-Century Russian Art," 463–466.

joined those of the British king and queen and their two eldest sons in the "English" hall.[36] While this elision stemmed from the fact that the two families were closely related, it had the effect of side-lining the Danish royals. None of these arrangements would have been casual or accidental, but would have been carefully deliberated by courtiers and agreed by the empress. Indeed, such was her creative investment in the gallery that about a decade after it was complete, she wrote a curious satire in French in which the portraits' sitters come to life and evaluate each other's historical significance, giving Catherine opportunity to deride the shortcomings of her European peers as well as some of her predecessors on the Russian throne.[37]

This, then, was the nakedly competitive context for which Eriksen was commissioned to portray Juliane Marie and her son. Matters were complicated further still by the fact that in the Chesme Gallery these two portraits would join that of Juliane Marie's stepson, the Danish King Christian VII, which Catherine had commissioned from the Swedish painter Peder Als in 1773 and had been completed by his pupil, the Danish artist Gotthard Wilhelm Åkerfelt, after Als' death in 1776.[38] Christian's longstanding mental illness meant that he was now king in name only, with Juliane Marie largely holding the reins until Christian's son, the future Frederik VI, seized power and was installed as prince regent in 1784.[39] Eriksen's portraits of Juliane Marie (effectively proxy of an incapacitated king) and her son therefore had to navigate highly sensitive political terrain.[40]

The artist responded by drawing on some of the strategies that he had perfected in his work for Catherine. The exalted pose and virtuosic painting of frills and

[36] For the portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte by Nathaniel Dance and that of George, Prince of Wales and his brother Prince Frederick by Benjamin West, see: Elizaveta Renne, *State Hermitage Museum Catalogue. Sixteenth- to Nineteenth-Century British Painting* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2011), 49–53, 233–235.

[37] Ekaterina II, "Le Château de Chesme: L'Entretien des Portraits et Médaillons," in: *Sochineniia Ekateriny II na osnovanii podlinnykh rukopisei i ob'iasnitel'nymi primechaniiami akademika A.N. Pypina*, vol. 12 (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia Nauk, 1907), 583–594. For incisive interpretation of Catherine's text, see: Ekaterina Boltunova, "The Historical Writing of Catherine II: Dynasty and Self-Fashioning in The Chesme Palace (Chesmenskii Dvorets)," in: *History and Drama: The Pan-European Tradition*, eds. Joachim Küpper, Jan Mosch and Elena Penskaya (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 86–95.

[38] Peder Als and Gotthard Wilhelm Åkerfelt, *Christian VII, King of Denmark and Norway*, oil on canvas, 286 × 197.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ 4471. For this commission, see: Babin and Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran*, 23–26.

[39] For the relative domestic stability in the Danish-Norwegian monarchy in this period and the environment it provided for the emergence of public debate, despite the challenges of Christian VII's dementia and the successive regencies, see: Thomas Munck, "Absolute Monarchy in Later Eighteenth-Century Denmark: Centralized Reform, Public Expectations, and the Copenhagen Press," *The Historical Journal* 41/1 (March 1998): 201–224.

[40] For these commissions, see: Babin and Renne, *Zhivopis' skandinavskikh stran*, 51–52; and *"Strana zhivitel'noi prokhlady…,"* 255. However, the sitter in the second portrait, Hereditary Prince Frederik (1753–1805, regent from 1772–1784), is confused in both these sources with his half-nephew Crown Prince Frederik (1768–1839, regent from 1784–1808 and King Frederik VI from 1808–1839).

fabrics in his portrait of Juliane Marie, for example, owe much to the compositional and painterly approach that Eriksen had finessed in his portraits of the empress and members of her court (see fig. 3). Particularly striking are the formal equivalencies of the hand gestures, which in Eriksen's work frequently interrupt a background detail or an expanse of fabric to impose their subtle chiaroscuro and warmer tones.

He was similarly well prepared to depict Juliane Marie's son (confusingly, another Prince Frederik) in a frockcoat with lace ruff and cuffs, waistcoat, breeches, and buckled shoes (see fig. 4), having painted Catherine's twelve-year-old son Paul in comparable pose and attire a decade earlier.[41] Notable here are the textural brio and tonal intensity of the sumptuous outfits (in a velvety turquoise for Frederik and a silken vermilion for Paul), and the skill with which the shimmering highlights of opalescent stockings are deployed to contour the musculature of finely turned calves. Equally compelling is the brushwork with which Eriksen renders the varied surfaces of the sashes and stars of the royal orders – in Paul's case, that of St Andrew the First Called, and in Frederik's, the Order of the Elephant, Denmark's own oldest and highest chivalric award.

Yet the portraits of Juliane Marie and Frederik take care not to overstep hierarchical lines. Frederik, then regent but ceding power to his mother, is strangely lost, emasculated even, in his cavernous setting with its vast, adumbral wall paintings. Meanwhile Juliane Marie, dressed in blameless white, projects seemly widowhood by pointing respectfully towards a shadowy bust of her deceased husband, Frederik V. Such compositional arrangements enabled Eriksen to adapt cultural and stylistic conventions that he had honed in St. Petersburg to produce portraits suitable for a gallery designed to proclaim Catherine's supremacy. The success with which he navigated this process testifies to the visual and semantic acuity that he had acquired in Russia, and the ingenuity with which portraits were mobilised to reify regal and political hierarchies around the Baltic Sea.

In 1830, the Chesme Palace was turned into an almshouse for war veterans and invalids, whereupon the medallions were moved to the Kremlin Armoury in Moscow and the portraits were installed in Gatchina Palace and the English Palace at Peterhof. Evacuated to Moscow after the Revolution of 1917, they were returned in the early 1920s to Leningrad, where some entered the collections of the State Hermitage Museum while others were put up for sale by the Soviet trading agency Antikvariat. Als and Åkerfelt's portrait of Christian VII and Eriksen's portrait of Frederik were retained for the Hermitage whereas that of Juliane Marie was sold, reflecting the gendered evaluations of portraits and their sitters at the time. Purchased by the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, Juliane Marie's portrait once more crossed the Baltic to return to the city where Eriksen had painted it, concluding its long process of severance from both the context for which it had been commissioned and the companion portraits with which it had been displayed.

[41] Vigilius Eriksen, *Grand Duke Paul Petrovich in the Classroom*, 1766, oil on canvas, 186 × 142 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. ГЭ-9909.

For all Catherine's adroit cultivation of a powerful personal iconography, there is scant record of her response to specific portraits. Yet she is known to have made efforts to view Eriksen's work, noting on one occasion: "After eating, [I] walked through the gallery to the room near the small one-time church to look at my Imperial portrait done by the Danish painter" (the picture in question was her equestrian portrait).[42] In 1778, six years after Eriksen had left Russia, she also wrote cryptically to her indefatigable correspondent Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, of the profusion of portraits of her by Eriksen and another Scandinavian artist, the Swedish painter Alexander Roslin. "I have ordered that my portraits by Eriksen be bought up, whatever the cost, even should there be thirty of them. Besides that, there is a prodigious number of my portraits in my gallery that are being copied from the Roslin [portrait]. Everyone will have one, and when they do, will they make one fatter or thinner, and what does it matter to me whether they have them or not?"[43] Such comments confirm that Eriksen's work registered in the empress's consciousness, even if the finer detail of her opinion is unknown or unclear.

Eriksen, for his part, continued to prosper after he returned home. One of the reasons he had initially moved from Copenhagen to St. Petersburg was his frustration at the way in which the Danish Academy discounted his work as it placed such a premium on history painting. "Your Grace should understand that the court needs portraits just as much as historical paintings," he had written pointedly before he left to Count Adam Gottlob Moltke, Lord Stewart of Denmark during Frederik V's reign.[44] Yet after his triumphant homecoming as Catherine's fabled portraitist, he was made not only court painter to Juliane Marie but in due course a counsellor of state as well, cementing his position within the cultural firmament of his native land and vindicating his earlier decision to turn his back on Copenhagen to establish fame and fortune abroad.

Eriksen thus long reaped the rewards of his skilled work for Catherine, just as she benefitted from the suasive power of his visual texts. While Catherine's commissions enabled for Eriksen a triumphant homecoming as a preeminent court portraitist, he mobilised political readings with forensic precision to establish his patron as the exemplar of sovereignty and, in his mourning portrait, even suggest a dynastic imperative for her to rule. Collectively, these paintings engaged with power differentials in highly suggestive ways, confirming the vitality with which portraiture constructed and signalled status and authority between some of the Baltic's most competitive courts.

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[42] Augusta Pobedinskaya, "The 'Hermitages' of Catherine the Great," in: *Catherine the Great: Art for Empire. Masterpieces from the State Hermitage Museum*, ed. Nathalie Bondil (exh. cat., Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 222.

[43] Letter from Catherine to Grimm, 24 August 1778, in: *Sbornik russkago istoricheskago obshchestva*, 148 vols (St. Petersburg/Petrograd 1867–1916), vol. 23, 1878, 100.

[44] Renne, "Catherine II," 97.