

***Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great.*** By Rosalind P. Blakesley. London: Lund Humphries, 2023. 152 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Plates. \$45.00, hard bound.  
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For centuries, the ability of women to work as professional artists was in doubt. The legendary Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1656), one of Italy’s most accomplished artists and member of the Florentine *Accademia delle Arte del Disegno*, felt she needed to acknowledge her presumed feminine weakness. In 1649 she reassured one of her patrons, Don Antonio Ruffo, a Sicilian nobleman, by writing to him, “[Y]our Most Illustrious Lordship will not suffer any loss with me, and that you will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman.”<sup>1</sup> When a female artist’s patron is herself an almighty woman of veritable Caesarian spirit, such as Catherine the Great, one would hope things would be different. Indeed, it appears that they were, but only to a certain degree.

Rosalind Blakesley’s most recent book expands on a topic that has occupied her for years, namely the role women played in Russian visual culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This most recent book is a beautifully illustrated hard-cover volume containing eight chapters, an Introduction, and Epilogue. The author’s attention is focused on several women artists of exceptional talent and extraordinary accomplishments. In order of appearance, they are: Anna Rosina Lisiewska (1713–1783; Chap. 1: Creating an Empress and Chap. 2: Academy and the Hermitage); Anna Dorothea Lisiewska, in marriage Therbusch (1721–1782; Chap. 3: Complicated Relationships); Marie-Anne Collot (1748–1821; Chap. 4: The Chisel and the Mallet); Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) and Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757; Chap. 5: Unexpected Treasures); Angelica Kaufmann (1741–1807; Chap. 6: The Doyenne of Rome); Grand Duchess, future empress Maria Feodorovna, born Sophia Dorothea of Württemberg (1759–1828; Chap. 7: An Artist in the Family); Elisabeth Louise Vigée le Brun (1755–1842; Chap. 8: The Triumphant Refugee).

Blakesley urgently notes that “[o]ne of the striking features of this book is the dearth of Russian women artists” (7). She convincingly explains this state of affairs as part of the drive to westernize Russia and resulting in the placement of a premium on foreign art; the westernizing imperative started before Peter I, culminated during his reign, and thoroughly dominated Catherine’s rule. To this explanation one might add the impact of a century-old tradition according to which Russian women of high social standing engaged with the visual arts, either as patrons or makers (embroidery and other textile work, as well as icon painting), all as a form of piety; a way of pursuing religious devotion. Indeed, tradition asserts that two Romanov tsarevnas, Peter I’s paternal

1. Mary D. Garrard. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, 1989). Letter #24: 396–97.

aunt and his half-sister, each created works of religious art. In view of these precedents, the artistic creativity of Catherine's daughter-in-law emerges simultaneously as an echo of this time-honored custom and as a departure from it because of the strictly secular and emphatically neo-classical nature of Maria Feodorovna's work.

The book addresses two cardinal questions. First, did the gender of the artists matter to the empress; did she view the abilities of women as equal or surpassing those of man? Second, was the artistic sensitivity of a woman particularly appealing for Catherine II? The empress was supremely gender conscious. How could she not be? She was after all a woman who deposed her husband and seized the throne that rightfully belonged to him. Being savvy about matters of gender is what kept Catherine alive and in power. So, gender must have been of significance when it came to the visual arts, too, since the empress made them a central part of her campaign to promote a new governing agenda, to advance education and to better society in general. In the introduction Blakesley states: "[d]uring a momentous 34-year reign, [Catherine's] intellectual curiosity and rapacious vision led to vast territorial expansion; civil educational and social reforms; town planning and construction across the empire; and Russia's confirmation as a power on the European stage" (6). Furthermore, we are reminded that "[t]he violence of Russian imperialism and the oppression of serfdom under Catherine thus co-existed with a genuinely modernizing agenda, however challenging this proved to effect. It is against this background that the histories narrated here unfold" (9).

Making the subject of women's creativity a conspicuous part of the story about Catherine's reign allows Blakeley to reveal how most consequential changes in attitude and practice occurred incrementally, in ways that often remain opaque to a contemporary observer, one used to clear-cut statements and the most unambiguously defined positions on matters of gender and policy. The author warns readers of the pitfalls of ahistorical interpretations of the past, and then she rewards us with stories rendered with subtlety, perceptiveness, and empathy. Along with detailed accounts concerning acquisitions and commissions of art, the narrative includes essential political and cultural developments during Catherine's reign. It takes mastery to maintain the balance between the bird's-eye view of the matter at hand and the close-up look, as if under a magnifying glass, at a painting or a sculpture. This approach enables Blakesley to offer new insights into works of art known because of their historic significance, but underappreciated regarding the artistic accomplishment they manifest (11–32). The book reveals intricate, highly gendered, human entanglements—artists, critics, patrons, and mediators—embodied by works of art created by women and acquired by an empress, ever inquisitive, visually sensitive, and very keenly aware of her own femininity.

Catherine's choices were not defined by considerations involving the gender of the artist, but instead by the quality of the work and its subject matter; the goal for the empress was to bring to Russia and insert into its cultural discourse the best of what European art had to offer. The women artists

in Catherine's collection not only rivaled but often surpassed their male counterparts in creating the most desirable works of art in the second half of the eighteenth century. These were predominantly portraits but included historic and mythological scenes as well as. When the empress acquired their works, these women artists had already gained fame and acolytes; they were members of art academies and were accepting commissions from royal courts across Europe. One notable exception was Marie-Anne Collot, who arrived in St. Petersburg as the humble assistant to E. M. Falconet, the sculptor chosen by Catherine to create Peter the Great's equestrian monument. Collot launched her career as a portraitist by sculpting likenesses of the empress, and showing courtiers and other high-ranking aristocrats as alluring, enlightened individuals with expressive faces, suggestive of rich inner lives. The empress and high society in St. Petersburg responded with great enthusiasm to Collot, not only because of her superb technical skills and ability to capture physiognomy, but also for her feminine benevolent gaze with its talent for sharp observation, along with a complete absence of any passing of judgment.

Apart from individual artists, Blakesley discusses the institutions supported or created by Catherine in her pursuit of establishing standards for excellence; one of them was the Academy of Fine Arts, which was founded by Catherine's predecessor, Elizabeth Petrovna. Despite the fact that this institution's main benefactors were two empresses, the academy, as was customary across Europe, did not admit or train women. Among the rare exceptions were academicians' family members and imperial grand duchesses who received private tutoring. Notably, another institution founded and patronized by Catherine, the Russian Academy, had a woman at its helm. On the pages of this book, Princess Catherine Dashkova "the most high-profile woman under Catherine who occasionally fell foul of the empress, flits in and out of focus from her precarious perch" (9). As Dashkova's appointment confirms, gender mattered and a new attitude toward women's place in public life was promoted from the highest authority.

Perhaps Catherine's most enduring impact on Russian visual culture was the formation of her own art collection—the Hermitage. Its size expanded with a staggering speed. The Hermitage's early purchases did not include women artists. Although there is no surviving record of paying attention to considerations of gender, slowly this process started happening in the late 1760s when works by women artists were acquired; inevitably and conspicuously, they "brought with them histories replete with the charged, conflicted and at times prejudicial debates that invariably accrued to the production and display of women's art" (43). Providing the opportunity for seeing these works, as well as contemplating and discussing them, was in its right a major stride forward, widening horizons and adjusting prevailing attitudes.

A notable example of a work of art displaying female sensitivity while suiting societal needs and responding to established customs is the engaging portrait of Catherine, at the time the fourteen-year-old Princess Sophie of Anhalt-Zerst. The work is now in the collection of the Russian Museum (first figure in Blakesley's book). The artist (Anna Rosina Lisiewska), the

sitter (the Princess), the mediator (Sophie's mother Johanna of Anhalt-Zerbst), and the patron who commissioned the work (Empress Elizabeth of Russia) were all women. As Blakesley explains "[engagement portraits were] expected to confirm virginity at the same time as intimating fertility; to indicate a future majestic stature and dignity while presenting no threat to the standing of any current queen in terms of regal hierarchy or physical allure. . . . Lisiewska brushstrokes also work to evoke the faintest of blushes in skin color and with it a squeak of sexual allure. . . . Crafted with skill and panache, the portrait captures with keen empathy the precarious balance, both physical and emotional, required by a girl on the cusp of adult responsibilities" (13).

Blakesley's book demonstrates an arc within the span of fifty years, from the 1740s to the 1790s. At the start there are Anna Rosina Lisiewska's sensitive, rich but subtle portraits, such as the engagement picture, while at the opposite end of the spectrum one encounters the work of Angelica Kaufman, including her canvases of mythological and historic scenes—considered the most prestigious genres, and the domain of male artists. In the middle of it, dating to the 1760s, are paintings by Anna Dorothea Therbusch, notably a mythological canvas that went missing during World War II, and an exquisite and supremely subtle genre scene at the Pushkin Museum. Indicative of the headwinds women artists faced when venturing beyond the realm of portraiture is the vicious criticism received by the former work, and regarding the latter painting—the lack of acknowledgment for its high artistic merits; these are all eloquently discussed by Blakesley (49–53).

The book is beautifully written and abounds in exceptional turns of phrase that bring to life a historic figure or event, putting in words an elusive facial expression in a portrait, or highlighting subtle and not often noticed details on the painted surface. Here are just two of the countless memorable examples: in the description of early portraits of Catherine—the painting is a "cogent exercise in sensory allure" with "gemstones urging their way through a lace ruff"; or in the assessment of the empress's unfortunate husband at the time when they first met, which rings true when applied to the rest of his life as well—"unprepossessing and jejune, he was of limited intellectual application" (16).

In the Conclusion Blakesley writes: "[k]ey enigmas remain. Was Catherine as little bothered about the gender of artists as this book suggests? Were Russian women artists really as late to the party as current research maintains? . . . What is clear, however, is that a number of exceptional women artists found agile and productive ways of working outside dominant cultural institutions with the support of Russian patrons in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century" (135).

ASEN KIRIN  
*Lamar Dodd School of Art*  
*Parker Curator of Russian Art*  
*Georgia Museum of Art*  
*The University of Georgia*