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Catherine the Great Exhibit Opens

By The Moscow Times

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A 1763 portrait of the “Enlightened Empress” by painter Fyodor Rokotov

EDINBURGH, United Kingdom — Empress Catherine the Great demonstrates her powerful and enduring cultural influence over Russia in a new art exhibit at Scotland's National Museum.

The Edinburgh museum's show in collaboration with the Hermitage museum is overflowing with incredibly rich and rare pieces related to the 18th century Russian ruler, including a freshly restored giant coronation portrait of Catherine that has not been on public display since the Russian revolution in 1917.

The exhibition, which opened Friday, falls on the 250th anniversary of the coup d'etat in which Catherine's unloved husband Tsar Peter II was killed and she started her 30-year reign as empress and sole ruler of a rapidly rising Russia. It runs through the Edinburgh festival season to October 21.

"Catherine the Great: An Enlightened Empress" is the third major exhibition the Scottish

museum has put on in close conjunction with the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, which has provided a treasure trove of over 600 artifacts from its own collection.

Asked the value of the display, Hermitage director Mikhail Pyotrovsky said it ran into "many millions of pounds."

It brings together an extraordinary range, including paintings, documents, jewelry and porcelain, Catherine's hunting weapons, fabrics and furniture and even a highly ornate and gilded winter sleigh that the empress used.

Born into a minor German nobility in 1729, by the time of her death in 1796, "Russia had become a true world power, with expanded borders, reformed church and state, hugely developed military and industrial capabilities and a glittering court that was the envy of Europe," the Edinburgh museum notes said.

The exhibition also covers the influence of Scots in the Russian court, from positions as doctors at the imperial court to their influence on architecture, industrial development and the rapidly expanding Russian navy.

On a broad scale, Catherine was a leading figure in the 18th century European enlightenment and a correspondent with leading figures such as Voltaire and Diderot, whose libraries she purchased.

Her agents scoured Europe for collectable items, which laid the foundation of the Hermitage itself as one of the world's greatest museums.

Pyotrovsky said Catherine and the exhibition "are very important to us for explaining what Russia is and what Russian culture is. It's a story perfectly told, the story of a ruler who developed the testament of Peter the Great to make Russia a great country, to make Russia great."

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