

Life Stories: Catherine the Great

Dates	Thursdays 29 February, 7 and 14 March 2024
Times	11.00-13.00 GMT
Location	Online (Zoom Webinar)
Tutor	Professor Rosalind Polly Blakesley
Level	All Levels



Miniature by an unknown artist, *Catherine II, Empress of Russia, 1800-1870*

Course Description

The Wallace Collection holds fascinating objects relating to Catherine the Great's reign. Trace the story of her remarkable life, from her early years as a run-of-the-mill Prussian princess to her phenomenal rise to Empress of All the Russias, holding the throne for no fewer than 34 years. We'll examine Catherine's ascent within a political context, underpinned by her imperial ambitions.

We'll also consider the effects of the rigidly stratified society during her lifetime, in which the luxurious existence of Russia's noble elite starkly contrasted with the challenging and often-precarious circumstances of around nine million serfs. Artistic production will feature throughout, helping us to see how Catherine positioned herself as a paragon of the Enlightenment through her determined, and at times, voracious patronage of the visual arts.

Session One: From Prussian Backwater to Russian Court

We'll begin by looking at Catherine's childhood, when she was selected as consort of the heir to the Russian throne. We'll consider her escalating power and influence in St Petersburg, leading to her coup against her husband, Peter III, and her coronation as Empress. We'll also develop knowledge of the painters whose professional acuity played a key role in establishing Catherine's unassailable position at the Russian court.

Session Two: The Edifying Potential of the Arts

In our second session, we'll think about Catherine's dynamic first decade as Empress, and the cultural offensive characterising her early reign. We'll focus particularly on the Hermitage - Catherine's famed retreat from official court life - where she encouraged disinhibited revelry and amassed vast collections ranging from paintings and sculpture to cameos and antiques. We'll also assess the growing agency of the Academy of Arts and its explicit mandate to nurture a Russian school of art.

Session Three: The Height of a Reign

In our final session, we'll address key moments at the height of Catherine's reign: from a devastating plague to favoured paramours, and from triumphalist warfare to palatial designs. We'll consider shifting relations with western Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and Russia's subsequent cultural realignment. We'll conclude our course by considering the confidence that underpinned Russia's artistic production as Catherine's long reign reached its close.

Course Tutor

Polly is Professor of Russian and European Art, and a Fellow of Pembroke College, at the University of Cambridge. A specialist in the visual arts of the former Russian Empire, her publications include *Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great* (shortlisted for Apollo Book of the Year) and *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757-1881* (winner of the Pushkin House Russian Book Prize and the Art Newspaper Russia Best Book Award). She has served on the boards of the National Portrait Gallery and the Fitzwilliam Museum, and is currently a Trustee of the V&A and the Samuel Courtauld Trust.

Previous Skills, Knowledge or Experience

None required. This course is designed as an introduction to the subject.

Joining Information and Format

This course will be taught through [Zoom Webinar](#). Each course session duration is 120 minutes, including a five-minute break and time for Q&A with the tutor.

Tickets are for all advertised dates. Ticket holders will be emailed the Zoom link, Webinar ID and Passcode 24 hours in advance of the first course session, which should be retained for accessing both sessions of the course.

Course Recording

This course will be recorded. Within 48 hours of each course session, ticket holders will be emailed a link to view the recording, which will be available for two weeks only.
