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THE HAMPTON COURT ALBUMS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

Containing drawings, mainly of the palace and its surrounds,
by Capability Brown's draughtsman and surveyor, John Spyers,
purchased by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia





1. Richard Cosway, *Portrait of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown*, c. 1770-75.

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A DISCOVERY IN THE HERMITAGE

The Hermitage collection contains some three million items, drawn from the imperial collections of Russia and a multitude of other sources. From time to time a curator discovers something new that is lurking there overlooked. This was the case with Mikhail Dedinkin when he took over responsibility for the English drawings in 2000. He was fascinated by an album labelled 'Drawings of the Royal Palaces &c, at Hampton Court' which had belonged to Catherine the Great. He thought that it must be possible to trace its origin and identify the artist.

Visiting Britain in 2001 he brought with him photocopies of pages from the album. Anthony Cross's book about the British in St Petersburg, *By the Banks of the Neva*, provided the crucial clue – a record of the purchase of drawings for Catherine. In the Victoria and Albert Museum library Dedinkin found reproductions of drawings by John Spyers and evidence that Spyers was Capability Brown's official draughtsman. So the album, which had lain unnoticed in our store for 200 years, was recognised as one of the most complete visual records of a historic landscape ever captured before photography, and as the work of the close associate of Britain's most celebrated garden designer.

Catherine the Great, the founder of our museum, and an inspired collector, had a passion for English gardens in the 1780s. She may have paid a very high price for the album – but she knew what she was doing! We are delighted that a wider public will be able to share her enthusiasm through this publication.

MIKHAIL PIOTROVSKY
Director, The State Hermitage Museum



THE PUBLICATION OF THIS BOOK
HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE
BY EVGENY LEBEDEV

Cover: John Spyers, *The West Front of the Royal Palace at Hampton Court* (detail)

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In the early 2000s two albums of drawings were discovered in storage in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Purchased by Catherine the Great in 1783, they had lain unnoticed for over 200 years. Hermitage curator Mikhail Dedinkin identified the artist as John Snyers, Capability Brown's draughtsman and surveyor for many of his most famous landscape designs. The drawings in the first album are exclusively of Hampton Court Palace and its parks and gardens, where Capability Brown was Chief Gardener to King George III for the last 20 years of his life. The second album contains a mixture of landscapes, architectural drawings and studies.

This book reproduces all 149 drawings. It also includes another remarkable discovery: in the course of restoration for an exhibition at Hampton Court Palace in 2016 – the tercentenary of Capability Brown's birth – pencil drawings precisely mirroring the final watercolours were found beneath 14 of the pages.

Catherine the Great was a passionate enthusiast for the English style in gardening and landscape design. Although she did not succeed in persuading Capability Brown himself to visit Russia, she would have drawn inspiration from these albums, particularly for her new English park at Peterhof, near St Petersburg. Now finally in the public domain, it is clear that the drawings of Hampton Court represent one of the most complete visual records of an historic landscape ever captured before the age of photography.