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# FOREWORD

## 'WHITE GOLD'S' EVERYDAY EXISTENCE

Porcelain was born, or rather, invented, in China. The whole world envied China and dreamed of learning how to produce this magnificent material, so often described as white gold since it is no less beautiful and no less precious than that yellow metal. It is, moreover, the product of mankind's talents, not something stolen from nature. Porcelain became one of China's main exports, made specially to suit the taste of both Asiatic and European consumers, who themselves sought to create something similar. This led, for instance, to the superb examples of glazed ceramics found across the Islamic world from Nishapur to Kashan in Iran, from Cairo in Egypt to Malaga in Spain. European majolica was the next link in this chain. All these places created ceramic masterpieces and yet had no porcelain. Only after many years of effort and cunning did Europe discover porcelain's secret, leading to the establishment of factories in Prussia, Austria, France and Russia that are famous to this day. Porcelain production became a sign of the success of a nation and its policies, a mark of status. Porcelain remains a symbol of national culture and an important and significant gift.

This exhibition, brought to Amsterdam from St Petersburg - home to the Imperial Porcelain Factory founded by Empress Elizabeth that continues in production today - presents some of the greatest porcelain masterpieces made in different European countries. They are united by the concept of Russian imperial dining. Individual objects and tables laid

with services create the atmosphere of everyday life at the Russian court, that luxurious court of which we told the tale in our very first Hermitage Amsterdam exhibition.

This exhibition tells the story of how ceremonial banquets were served according to Russian and other traditions, of official balls and receptions, of very long and very short banquets during the reigns of different emperors. It describes the architecture of the laid table and how table decorations changed in style, from large sculptures and sculptural compositions to elegant candelabra and real flowers. It deals with colour schemes and notes how droll simple Russian dishes such as cooked grains and rissoles - with which Russian rulers liked from time to time to tease their guests, particularly foreigners - looked when placed upon magnificent plates. Elegantly beautiful menus also list other, more refined and complex dishes that every visitor can try and reproduce for themselves.

Such celebrated services from the most renowned manufactories of Europe, all marvellous in themselves, also tell the tale of important episodes in Russian history, sometimes more eloquently than any book of history. Frederick the Great presented the Berlin Service to Catherine the Great, on whom he initially looked with favour and whom he saw as his pupil. This vast service was a mark of favour to his former student in recognition of her successful war

< Items from the Green Frog Service,  
see pp. 72-81



against the Turks, events from which are reflected in the painting and sculptures. Wedgwood's masterpiece, the Green Frog Service, tells the story of Catherine's love for England, which she saw as a model state, combining both enlightened values and monarchy. The Sèvres Cameo Service recalls the Empress' love of engraved gems, a love that gave birth to our museum, the Hermitage. Payment for the Cameo Service saved the Sèvres manufactory from what looked like inevitable bankruptcy during the French Revolution.

A series of services made for the ceremonial gatherings of knights of the Russian Orders unexpectedly reveal the great role played by private manufactories in imperial Russia, while the celebrated figures of the 'Peoples of Russia', made at the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory, illustrate the variety of cultures and traditions of which the Empire was so proud. A touching wedding present of a Meissen porcelain service was given to Russian Emperor Nicholas II by German Emperor William II at a time

when no one guessed that the two states and the two rulers would clash in a fatal battle that would bring down the whole world. A handsome Hungarian service presented to Stalin is not only a pleasure to the eyes but reminds us that it is a terrible thing when state gifts are not transferred to a museum but, as happened in 1950s Moscow, become the sole content of a museum. The museum of gifts to Stalin was a perverted form of the concept of an imperial collection.

The everyday life of the emperors and their court was both varied and hemmed in with all kinds of ritual. Imperial porcelain - with considerable help from scholars at the Hermitage - tells us its story.

Mikhail Piotrovsky,  
Director State Hermitage Museum

Items from the Cameo Service,  
see pp. 94-107



## EXHIBITION DETAILS

### Exhibition committee

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*Commissar*

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*Commissar*

### **Hermitage Amsterdam**

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*Exhibition project manager*

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*Exhibition curator*

The exhibits have been restored in the Restoration and Conservation Laboratory of the State Hermitage Museum.

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Teksten voor musea

### **Exhibition design and styling**

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### **Graphic design**

Studio Berry Slok

< Items from the Berlin Dessert Service,  
see pp. 60-69



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### Editor's notes

*Imperial Russia used the Julian calendar, which was slightly behind the Gregorian calendar widely used in Western Europe. The dates given in the text are Julian. The equivalent Gregorian date would have been eleven days later in the eighteenth century, twelve days later in the nineteenth century and thirteen days later in the twentieth century.*

*The objects that are displayed with a service but are not part of it are included in the catalogue in the chapter on that particular service but not in the list of items at the beginning of each chapter.*

> Official Engagement Photograph of Nicholas II and Alexandra (colourised), 1894



Porcelain played a starring role in the lavish ball and banqueting culture of the Russian tsars. They commissioned ornate services from leading porcelain factories such as Wedgwood, Sèvres and Gardner, whose artistic achievements were astounding. The services made by the factories in Meissen and Berlin and given to the Russian rulers as diplomatic gifts were no less extraordinary. This book presents eight magnificent services from the collection of the Hermitage in St Petersburg, seven owned by the tsars and one by the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin. The beauty of the porcelain is an important focal point of the exhibition, but there are also fascinating stories associated with the services and their owners. The introduction explores the grandeur of Dining with the Tsars through the centuries.

*Dining with the Tsars* is the title of this catalogue and the exhibition organised to mark the occasion of the Hermitage Amsterdam's fifth anniversary. Especially for this festive celebration, fitting decorations and masterpieces in silver, bronze and glass will be displayed along with the services.

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