

Press Release

'The Empress and the Gardener'

New exhibition at Hampton Court Palace to mark 300th anniversary of Capability Brown's birth.

Opens 28 April 2016 - 4 September 2016
Press Preview 27 April 2016, 10.30am - 1pm

A remarkable collection of watercolour paintings and drawings once owned by the Empress Catherine the Great of Russia will go on show at Hampton Court Palace this spring, as part of the nationwide commemorations marking the 300th anniversary of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's birth. Never displayed before, the collection of almost 60 intricately detailed views of the palace, park and gardens vividly captures Hampton Court during the time when Capability Brown served there as Chief Gardener to King George III. The intriguing history of this collection, which lay forgotten in the stores of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia for over two centuries, will be explored in a new exhibition: *'The Empress and the Gardener.'*

Arguably Britain's most famous landscape gardener, Capability Brown served as Chief Gardener to King George III at Hampton Court Palace from 1764 - 1783. The job came with a handsome salary and residence at the palace, but Brown, who famously transformed landscapes across the country, actually did very little to change the palace's Baroque formal gardens, choosing instead to preserve them out of respect for his predecessors. Nevertheless, by the time he moved into royal service, he was already operating a busy landscaping business, and winning international acclaim as one of the most famous proponents of the 'English Style' of landscape design.

Famously a voracious consumer of foreign culture, Catherine the Great was a great admirer of all things English, declaring to the philosopher Voltaire that 'Anglo-mania rules my plantmania.' She built herself an 'English Palace' and 'English Park' at her palace at Peterhof, with the help of British designers but was unable to find a Capability Brown of her own. Seizing a lucrative opportunity, a figure in the shadows, John Spyers, assistant to Brown, sold two albums of his detailed drawings from Brown's home and workplace, Hampton Court Palace, to the Empress for the huge sum of 1,000 roubles.

Quite how Spyers managed to achieve this extraordinary coup remains a mystery, but ironically the Empress found herself the possessor of an album of drawings of a palace landscape which Brown himself had barely touched. The albums, which alone had cost Catherine a tenth the price of creating her new gardens, disappeared in her collection at the Winter Palace (now the State Hermitage Museum) and lay forgotten for over two centuries before being rediscovered by Hermitage curator Mikhail Dedinkin in 2002.

Today, the Spyers views are a unique survival: the richest and most revealing record of how Hampton Court gardens looked when Brown was in charge. Together they are considered one of the most complete visual records of any historic landscape ever captured before the dawn of photography. From rare glimpses of the ordinary people who lived in or visited the palace and its gardens, to evocative details of Hampton Court's celebrated courtyards, passageways and picturesque corners, they explore an almost-forgotten period in the palace's history in vivid detail.

The Empress and the Gardener will see these rare works go on public display for the first time, in the very setting that inspired their creation. The exhibition will also feature contemporary portraits of Capability Brown, the Empress Catherine and King George III, previously unseen drawings of Catherine's 'English Palace' in the grounds of Peterhof near St. Petersburg and several pieces of the famous 'Green Frog' dinner service, a triumph of British design created for the Empress by Wedgwood, featuring images of some of the celebrated landscapes Brown had created across England.

Sebastian Edwards, exhibition curator, said,

'We are thrilled to be able to present this remarkable window into a forgotten Georgian era in the palace's past, in the year when garden lovers up and down the country are celebrating the 300th anniversary of Capability Brown's birth. After enjoying 'The Empress and the Gardener', we hope our visitors will follow in John Spyers's footsteps, out into Hampton Court's magnificent gardens, and discover how they have changed over the centuries.'

An accompanying book, 'Capability Brown and Hampton Court', by Mikhail Dedinkin and David Jaques will be published in April.

For more information on 'The Empress and the Gardener' exhibition and images, please contact Laura Hutchinson in the Historic Royal Palaces Press Office: laura.hutchinson@hrp.org.uk / 0203 166 6338/07990 726 229

Notes to Editors

Capability Brown and Hampton Court
Mikhail Dedinkin and David Jacques
Landscape Design
101 illustrations • 28.0 x 28.0cm • 160pp
ISBN 978 1 906 257224 • April
£32.00

This album publishes, for the very first time, 100 hitherto unknown watercolours/drawings of Hampton Court Palace and gardens, during Capability Brown's tenure as Chief Gardener to King George III. These were purchased by Empress Catherine the Great of Russia through her own gardener James Meader, a disciple of Capability Brown. John Spyers, the artist to whom the albums have been attributed by Hermitage curator Mikhail Dedinkin, was Brown's surveyor. Catherine the Great paid the huge sum of 1,000 roubles for them in the early 1780s and they were clearly bought as Capability Brown drawings. Almost no other visual material about Hampton Court and its gardens and park at the period when Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was the resident Royal Gardener has survived, so the importance of these

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HAMPTON COURT PALACE

views, which have never been published or on exhibition before, cannot be underestimated. *Mikhail Dedinkin* is Deputy Head of Western European Fine Art at The Hermitage Museum. *David Jacques* is a garden historian and consultant.

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[The State Hermitage Museum]

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