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Sculpture in St. Petersburg in the Age of Enlightenment: Actors, Uses and Places

My research focuses on sculpture in St Petersburg in the 18th century. It is divided into three main areas: the profession of sculptor and artist in Russia; collecting; the spatiality and semiotics of the work in the city. I am also interested in the circulation of works of art, people, and ideas during the Enlightenment period, based on important archives kept in Saint Petersburg and Moscow.

The notion of the artist, especially the place of artists in St Petersburg society, is the first part of my thesis. I first study the arrival of sculptors, often foreigners, in St. Petersburg and their locations in the city to see how communities of artists are created in the city. Then I explore the apprenticeship of sculpture, through training on the building site, in the sculptor's workshops, or at the Academy of Fine Arts and the Academy of Sciences. This part of my work focuses on the social dimensions of the artist's life, using methodologies specific to the study of mobilities and circulations in Europe. I can thus present why artists (from Italy, France, or the Holy Roman Empire) decide to leave their home country to go to St. Petersburg, and what the resistance to these mobilities is.

The second major axis is based on the acquisition of sculptures by the Russian elite (empresses and great families) and state institutions such as academies. This part allows us to analyze two main points: on the one hand, the birth of a taste for sculpture, which was then no longer acquired only to be used as a symbolic weapon, but also for its beauty. On the other hand, it allows us to identify the birth of a real market for the art of sculpture in Europe, which Russia had just joined. Thus, it was during the reign of Elizabeth and Catherine II that a new cultivated elite began to decorate their grand residences in Saint Petersburg with sculptures very similar to those found in Paris, Rome, or Vienna. This section allows me to return to gender issues when discussing the role of empresses in the choice of works, or their patronage. About Catherine II, as Rosalind P. Blakesley points out, she seems to have been "inspired by male advisers and collectors such as Diderot and Frederik the Great, it may be that she unconsciously perpetuated male bias"¹. It is

¹ Rosalind P. Blakesley, *Women Artists in the Reign of Catherine the Great*, Lund Humphries – Northern Lights, 2023, p.8.

thus more a question of showing how she appropriated codes specific to men of power to legitimize her position as sovereign.

Finally, the last major focus of the thesis returns to the place of sculpture in the city and in the interiors of St Petersburg. Observing the uses of sculpture allows us not only to identify the places where various urban activities took place (places of promenades, great celebrations, military parades, etc.), but also to shed light on the daily orientation of the mentalities of the inhabitants of Saint Petersburg (courtly sociability, demonstration, and legitimation of imperial power). With this last axis, I was able to address points related to the environment, discussing how to observe sculptures when the temperatures are particularly cold, or the daylight hours are very short. By using methodologies related to the history of affect, I believe I can say that the uniqueness of the climate of St. Petersburg has played a decisive role in Russian visual culture.

This thesis thus allows me to revisit the role and place of sculpture and the sculptor in eighteenth-century Russian society. Although this art form was long proscribed by the Orthodox Church, it is important to observe how it became one of the main tools used by the Russian powers to show their domination to the populations of the Empire, the USSR and even the post-Soviet period.