

THE MINERAL COLLECTION OF RUSSIAN EMPRESS CATHERINE II

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Specimens: Mining Museum of
St.-Petersburg Mining University.

Photos: Michael B. Leybov.

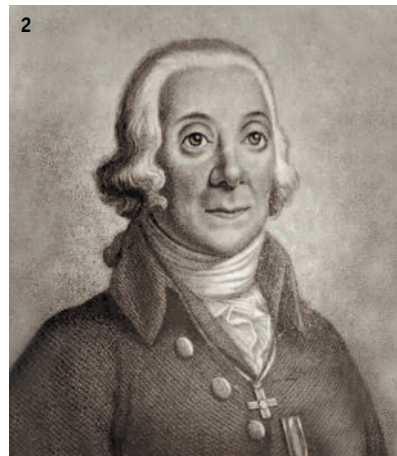
Russian society of the 18th century was captivated by the idea of collecting natural objects, therefore in the second half of the century private collections of “wonders and rarities” were widespread. Empress Catherine II was not an exception. Her passion for collecting natural objects, including those with no aesthetic or decorative value, enabled her to create the Mineral Cabinet at the Imperial Hermitage. Over time, enthusiasm for mineralogy became universal. Expedition activity of the Academy of Science also made mineralogy popular. A significantly increased number of expeditions at the Urals, Altai and other distant regions contributed to discoveries of the new land, deposits and minerals in the Russian Empire; this broadened the understanding of previously unknown parts of the Empire. It kept the society interested in resources of the Russian land and also led to an increasing number of private mineral and rock collections from various parts of Russia.

The history of Catherine II’s private mineral collection is fascinating. In his guidebook, Johann Gottlieb Georgi mentioned that “*there were few natural wonders in the Hermitage; but in 1786 besides the greenhouse and the aviary in the hanging garden Empress had bought a splendid collection from Pallas, the famous researcher of nature; it also received many wonders from all the parts of Russian land*” (Georgi, 2014, p. 362).

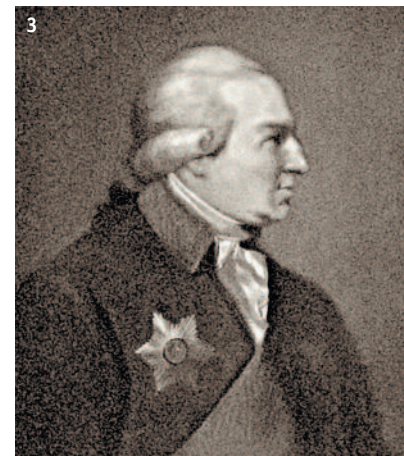
We will focus on the personality of Peter Simon Pallas, a famous traveler and naturalist, an outstanding researcher of the Age of Enlightenment, a versatile scientist and a polymath. In 1767, being already a well-known scientist, he was invited to the Russian Academy of Science, and in the late 1760s—early



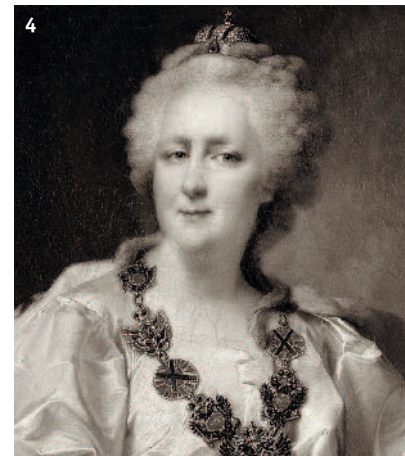
1. Showcase and trunk for the storage of the Catherine’s II mineralogical collection at the Winter Palace in St.-Petersburg. Both are now in the Mining Museum of St.-Petersburg Mining University.



2. Peter Simon Pallas
(1741–1811).



3. Peter A. Soymonov
(1737–1799).
Portrait from St.-Petersburg
Mining University collection.



4. Catherine II, Russian Empress
(1729–1796).

1770s he led one of the academic expeditions for the study of territory from the Urals to Altai. Pallas’s Altai expedition was very important. After the third part of the 18th century there was a considerable time gap, and therefore Pallas’ effort re-discovered the region of Ore Altai and Minusinsk basin for science.

In 1777 the results of expeditions by Peter Simon Pallas were published in the extensive historical geographical survey “*About Russian Discoveries at Seas between Asia and America*”, and later — in the study “*Description of Russian Flora*”. Pallas held the position of an academic curator of the natural collections at the Kunstkammer (Curiosity Cabinet). Catherine II assigned him to teach natural history to Grand Prince Alexander I.

During his scientific research, Pallas discovered many new species of mammals, birds, fish, insects, and plants, and investigated remnants of extinct animals: mammoth, buffalo, and woolly rhinoceros. His scientific focus was on botany, zoology, paleontology, anthropology of minor ethnic groups inhabiting the studied territories, and also geology and mineralogy, which are basically all the areas of natural history. He was the first scientist who described a stony-iron meteorite, discovered in Russia, and thus immortalized his name in the one “*Pallas Iron*”.

The Empress entrusted Pallas to systematize her natural collection. According to memoirs of the contemporaries, he had compiled a full description of the Cabinet in the German language, and had labelled every specimen. At present, the original description of the Mineral Cabinet of Catherine II made by Peter S. Pallas is not recovered.

Archival documents reveal that the building of the private mineral collection of Catherine II had not been limited to the acquisition of Pallas’ collection only. In charge of acquisition of new minerals and other objects for the private collection of the Empress was Peter A. Soymonov — State Secretary of Catherine II (1778–1793), who was the head of the Kolyvano-Voskresensk expedition (1784–1793), the director of the Mining School (1784–1793), the member of the Academy of Science (since 1783) and the president of the Ministry of Commerce (since 1797).

By chairing the Kolyvano-Voskresensk expedition he arrived in Altai in 1785 where became familiar with the industry. At that time Peter A. Soymonov had wide experience in managing the Mining School and its Mineral Cabinet,

5. Catalogue frontispiece
“*Mineralogical Collection of Mining
Intitute of Empress Catherine II*”
by A.E. Kupfer, 1911.





29. **Orthoclase**. 10 x 5.5 cm.
St.-Gotthard, Switzerland. MGS#828/21.

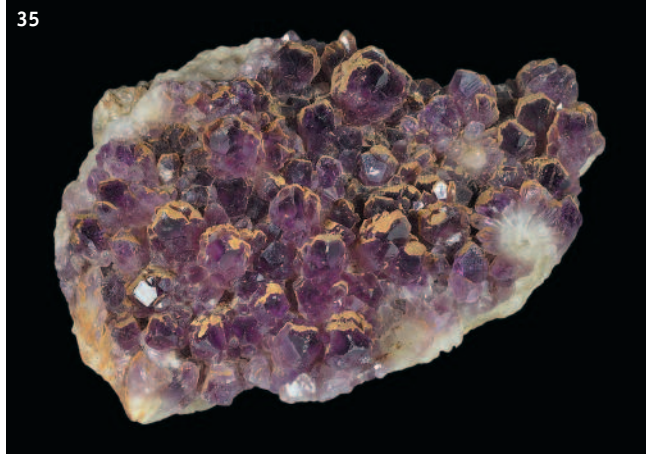
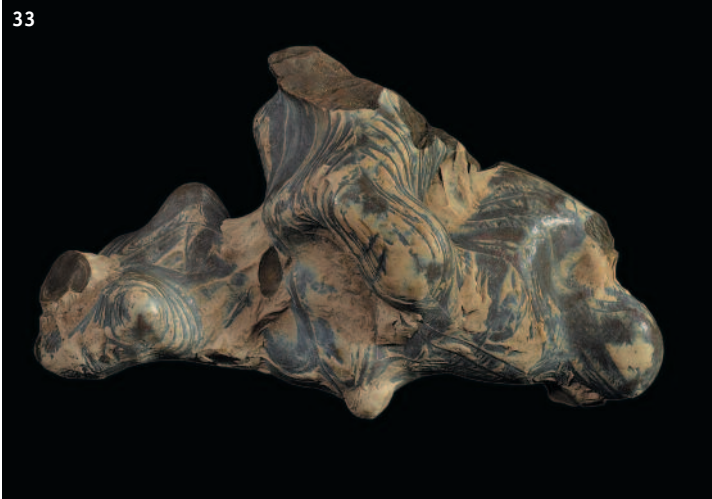
30. **Smithsonite**. 12 x 14 cm.
Chagirsky Mine, Altai, Russia. MGS#264/25.

31. **Chalcedony** pseudomorph after **dolomite** on **quartz**. 8 x 7 cm.
Strontian, Scotland. MGS#174¹/37.

32. **Quartz**. 10 x 8 cm.
Banska Štiavnica, Slovakia. MGS#173⁶/65.

33. **Menilite**. 11 x 7 cm.
Menilmontan, France. MGS#198¹⁰/4.

34. **Jasper**. 18 x 12 cm.
Altai, Russia. MGS#174⁹/7.



35. **Quartz** (amethyst). 11 x 7 cm.
Banska Štiavnica, Slovakia. MGS#173³/62.

36. **Chalcedony**. 17 x 12 cm.
Faroe Islands, Denmark. MGS#174¹/43.

37. **Magnetite**. 9 x 10.5 cm.
Kadainky Mine, Nerchinsk district,
Eastern Transbaikalia, Russia. MGS#405/1.



In 1816 the collection of 3400 specimens of “*mostly Russian minerals... along with two huge redwood cabinets with 30 drawers, decorated with finest bronze: these cabinets carry four long and four short low cases with mirrored glass — on their top; two large cases with five mirrors in each — for gorgeous groups of corals; three short closets with three mirror glasses in each; and two long cabinets with 3 and 2 big mirror glass*” (CSHA SPb, F. 963. op. 1. D. 2991. L. 14) was moved to the Mining Corps of Cadets from the Imperial Hermitage.

The keeper of the Mineral Cabinet of the Mining Department D.I. Sokolov, who accepted the collection, had no task to preserve it as a whole; therefore it was spread over various already existing systematic collections of the Mining Department Cabinet. The specimens from the Hermitage collection were assigned the new numbers. Their primary labels, as well as the catalogues, obviously were kept in the Hermitage, along with the rest of the collection. The genuine numbers from the Hermitage catalogues were kept only in two collections — planks of decorative rocks and marbles of Karelia. That is exactly what helped to identify them in the modern collection of the Mining Museum.

The specimens that were transferred in 1818 from the Imperial Hermitage were used to form the collection of the Warsaw Lyceum, 3000 rubles worth. In 1829 Sokolov had organized the mineral collection worth 5000 rubles, as a gift for Frédéric-César Laharpe — a personal teacher of Alexander I of Russia. In 1820 a mineral collection, consisting of 16 specimens from the Hermitage collection, was sold to His highness, Prince Lopukhin. In 1825, according to His Imperial Highness, a mineral collection was made for Duchess Anna Pavlovna; this one also contained specimens from the Hermitage. This is the incomplete list of collections, which Hermitage-origin constituents had left the Mining Department during the first half of the 19th century. Again, after acquisition of the Hermitage collection by the Mining department there was no aim of preserving it, therefore during all the 19th century its specimens were used for creating various mineral collections.

The rest of the mineral collection was kept in the Hermitage until 1833 when, according to the Emperor’s Nicolas I decree, it was relocated to the museum of the Mining Institute. Only 154 specimens were catalogued to the main systematic collection, and over 2000 — were moved to the storage. Besides, according to the decree of the minister of finance, part of the specimens were transferred to the