

...Had one trod the banks of the Neva a hundred years ago, when the foundations of Petersburg were not laid, and forced his way through the bull-rushes which then overspread them, and were he now to behold this new creation, he would imagine himself in a dream, reading the Arabian Nights Entertainment.

This morning, for the first time, I saw the sun rise from the woods surrounding Petersburg. Having made the tour of the streets, I sat down to write you a description of a city — but taking accidentally a volume of Fénelon's, I found it done to my hand.

'Salentum is yet in its infancy; the walls are not yet built; the Doric, the Corinthian, the Ionic pillars of its temples are just forming. The sound of the hammer, the songs of the workmen, re-echo from the neighbouring forests. The Household Gods of the Salentians are not yet placed in their niches.

Idomeneus, the great founder of this emporium, too soon entered into quarrels with the adjoining states. He laid the foundations of his city upon disputed ground...'

As I wandered in the streets, the first object that struck me was the equestrian statue of Peter the Great. I cannot describe the emotions I felt. This statue does equal honour to the munificence of Catherine II and to the artist, M. Falconet. I saw, at some distance, the imperial residence. I walked in front of it. Perhaps this is Catherine, at the window...

...Petersburg, with all its stately palaces and gilded domes, is situated in the midst of a wood, as wild and barren as any in the north. It presents a wonderful picture of what power and genius can accomplish. Independent of art, the Neva is its only ornament; a dead, sandy, flat country, covered with brushwood, surrounds it on every side; a few miserable huts scattered about complete the scene. The great Peter did not look to the most beautiful, but to the most useful spot, for the site of his capital: his object was commerce solely. Petersburg is the emporium for naval, Moscow for rural affairs. The city of Petersburg is not huddled together: it spreads out, like the wings of its Imperial Eagle. The principal quarter stands upon the continent and upon the south banks of the river Neva; the second division is what is called Old Petersburg, and is situated upon several islands towards the north banks; the third quarter, upon William's Island, in the middle channel of the Neva, between the other two. This notable river, after embracing the whole in its course, empties itself into the Gulf of Finland, immediately below the city.

The old city, originally built upon one island, bearing its name, now stretches over several lesser ones; it is very irregularly built, and consists chiefly of wooden houses. Here, however, are the first objects that draw attention — the Citadel, in which is the cathedral, a fine pile of building with its gilded spire and turrets, whose sparkling grandeur strikes the eye at a great distance, and marks the sacred spot where lie interred the remains of Peter I and his Empress, the Livonian Villager, Catherine I! This is the Russian Mecca, and none but infidels will neglect to make a pilgrimage to it.

From Old Petersburg we proceed, along a bridge of boats, to William's Island. Upon the north side, and fronting the old town are the Merchants' wharfs, the Exchange, Custom-House, and warehouses. In the river, between Old Petersburg and William's Island, lie all the vessels that take down to Cronstadt the produce of Russia, to larger foreign ships, that cannot come to Petersburg, the channel being narrow and shallow at the mouth of the river.

The south side of William's Island fronts the new city of Petersburg and here is built a superb line of houses, among which are the Imperial Academies, and the Museum. The Imperial Academy of Sciences is a grand structure, and is amply endued for its support. The Professors are eminent in the republic of letters, and are of different nations. Her Imperial Majesty, to adorn these establishments, selects merit from every climate and country.

The Museum is situated upon the highest and east point of William's Island, opposite the Imperial Palace, upon the continent, to the south; and the Citadel to the north. The west point of this island reaches to the mouth of the Neva. The Cadet Corps, or Academy of War, formerly the Palace of Prince Menzikoff, is situated betwixt the Academy of Sciences and the Museum...

Except this line of buildings upon the banks of the Neva, and another street, the whole of this quarter of the city consists of wooden houses: these are built very regularly in streets, cutting each other at right angles: canals run through the middle of the streets, but, owing to the level surface of the ground, the water in them, in the heat of summer stagnates, and is offensive. They serve no purpose and it would be proper to fill them up with earth. A bridge of boats crosses the Neva, opposite the Cadet Corps, making a communication from William's Island to the grand quarter of the city upon the continent. As you walk along this bridge, you have a front view of the equestrian statue of Peter I which is erected upon the opposite bank of the river; the horse, upon the summit of a rock, majestically rearing, and pawing the air — he seems conscious of his rider; 'he smells the battle afar off, his neck is clothed with thunder'.

Upon the right hand of the statue and to the east, is the Admiralty and Dock-yards, and immediately beyond these the Imperial Palace. At this instant there are two first rate ships of war building under the Palace windows. From the Admiralty spire, all the streets run out as radii from the centre of a circle. The principal street is that line of buildings fronting the Neva, for an extent of between three and four English miles: the bank, for the same extent, is lined with granite stone, with ballustrade and foot-path of the same materials. Near the extremities of this superb street, called the Grand Million, and which taking the course of the Neva, forms a vast obtuse angle, a canal is cut across the main land, making the base of this angle, and surrounding the city upon the continent to the south; so that this quarter is entirely enclosed, with the Neva upon one side, and this canal upon the other, for an extent of about eight miles; the whole banks lined with granite stone, having granite ballustrades, or iron railing. Over these canals are erected draw-bridges, likewise built of granite stone. The quarter without this canal may be deemed the suburbs; the houses are mostly of wood, but the houses within the canal are mostly of brick, and plaistered, painted with every variety of colours! No wooden house is suffered to be re-built within the canal, but with brick, and the new is quickly driving the old city out of the gates! Amidst these wooden fabrics, the Russian churches everywhere shoot up their antique turrets! The Russians hold the form of their church walls as sacred as their forms of religion within them. The roofs are covered with block tin, and many of them gilded.

There are in Petersburg three Imperial Palaces. The palace near the Admiralty, in which Her Imperial Majesty resides, is a magnificent edifice of brick stuccoed, and adjoining is a long range of buildings, fronting the Neva, including the private Theatre of the Court. The Marble Palace is built of the stone which gives it this name. The third is the Summer Palace, built of timber, and yet the most regular and elegant. It is placed in the Summer gardens upon the banks of the river, and is truly a delightful residence...

The new church near the equestrian statue is a building of the finest Siberian marble, and will be one of the most costly and superb structures in the universe. The palace near the Admiralty is situated at the point of the angle which the river makes; and here the Neva rolls his tide, embracing the lodging of his Sovereign. From this spot one has the grandest prospect imaginable: before you, upon the other side of the river, is the old city, with its citadel and gilded spire; the houses surrounded or intermixed with woods. William's Island presents another prospect, of a different nature: a wood of masts, planted in front of the

streets: to the right and left is the Grand Million, every house in which is of elegant structure, and inhabited by the principal Russian Nobility and Gentlemen.

Travels into Norway, Denmark and Russia in the years 1788, 1789, 1790, and 1791, London, 1792.

ANDREW SWINTON

December 1788

...As I walked about this metropolis I was filled with astonishment upon reflecting, that so late as the beginning of this century, the ground on which Petersburg now stands was only a vast morass occupied by a few fishermen's huts. The first building of the city is so recent as to be almost remembered by some persons who are now alive; and its gradual progress is accordingly traced without the least difficulty. The despotic authority of Peter, and his zeal for the improvement of the new capital, will appear from the orders issued by his command... The streets in general are broad and spacious; and three of the principal streets, which meet in a point at the Admiralty, and reach to the extremities of the suburbs, are at least two miles in length. Most of them are paved; but a few are still suffered to remain floored with planks. In several parts of the metropolis, particularly in the Vassili Ostrof, wooden houses and habitations, scarcely superior to common cottages, are blended with the public buildings; but this motley mixture is far less common than at Moscow, where alone can be formed a true idea of an ancient Russian city.

The brick houses are ornamented with a white stucco, which has led several travellers to say that they are built with stone; whereas, unless I am greatly mistaken, there are only two stone structures in all Petersburg; the one is the church of St. Isaac, of hewn granite, and marble columns, but not yet finished; the other is the marble palace constructed at the expence of the empress, on the banks of the Neva, facing the citadel. The mansions of the nobility are many of them vast piles of building, but are not in general upon so large and magnificent a scale as several I observed at Moscow: they are furnished with great cost, and in the same elegant style as at Paris or London. They are situated chiefly on the south side of the Neva, either in the Admiralty Quarter, or in the suburbs of Livonia and Moscow, which are the finest parts of the city.

The views upon the banks of the Neva exhibit the most grand and lively scenes I ever beheld. That river is in many places as broad as the Thames at London: it is also deep, rapid, and as transparent as chrystal; and its banks are lined on each side with a continued range of handsome buildings. On the north side the fortress, the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Arts are the most striking objects; on the opposite side are the Imperial palace, the Admiralty, the mansions of many Russian nobles, and the English line, so called because (a few houses excepted) the whole row is occupied by the English merchants. In the front of these buildings, on the south side, is the Quay, which stretches for three miles, except where it is interrupted by the Admiralty; and the Neva, during the whole of that space, has been lately embanked, at the expence of the empress, by a wall, parapet, and pavement of hewn granite; a most elegant and durable monument of imperial munificence. ...Petersburgh, from its low and marshy situation, is subject to inundations, which have occasionally risen so high as to threaten the town with a total submersion. These floods are chiefly occasioned by a west or south-west wind, which, blowing directly from the gulf, obstructs the current of the Neva, and causes a vast accumulation of its waters... The people did not (even during this extreme cold) add to their ordinary cloathing; which is at all times well calculated for the severities of their climate. They are careful in preserving their extremities against the cold, by covering their legs, hands, and head, with fur.



Their upper garment of sheep-skin, with the wool turned inwards, is tied round the waist with a sash; but their neck is quite bare, and their breast only covered with a coarse shirt; these parts, however, are well guarded by their beard, which is, for that reason, of great use in this country.

Travels into Poland, Russia,... London, 1784.

WILLIAM COXE
1778

...But what shall I tell you first, what leave to second place, of this city, this great window newly opened in the north through which Russia has, so to speak, gazed on Europe?

We arrived in Petersburg a few days ago after passing two days at Kronstadt with Admiral Gordon. We had to leave the ship at Kronstadt as it draws about eleven feet; a little more water and we could have gone as far as Peterhof. We went up the Neva in a pretty decorated boat lent us by the admiral. For seven months of the year the Neva is a passage for boats, the other five for sledges...

After travelling for several hours, seeing nothing around us but water and the ugly, silent forest, suddenly there is a bend in the river and immediately, exactly as if we were at the Opera, the scene of an Imperial city lies before us. On either side of the river rise splendid palaces grouped together; towers with gilded spires, here and there pyramidal in shape; ships with their masts, their ensigns waving in the breeze, interrupt the lines of buildings and differentiate the planes of the picture. That, they tell us, is the Admiralty and the Arsenal — this, the Citadel, over there the Academy, here the Czarina's Winter Palace.

...Once we have entered Petersburg it no longer seems quite what it had seemed from a distance, perhaps because travellers are like hunters or lovers — or perhaps because its appearance was no longer enhanced by the proximity of the dreadful forest. However it may be, the situation of a city that is built on the banks of a great river and on several islands, which provide a variety of viewpoints and effects of perspective, cannot be other than beautiful. The buildings of Petersburg also make a fine impression, to those who retain in their mind's eye the houses of Reval and other cities of this northern region.

But the ground on which it is founded is low and marshy; the immense forest which surrounds it, seems lifeless; the materials of which it is built are undistinguished, and the designs of the buildings are not those of an Inigo Jones or a Palladio. The style of architecture that reigns here is a bastard mixture of Italian, French and Dutch in which the Dutch predominates. This is not surprising since it was in Holland that the Czar as it were commenced his studies, and from Sardam, like a new Prometheus, he carried that flame with which he brought life to his people. It seems, in effect, that purely as a remembrance of Holland he has chosen to build in the style of that country, to plant trees along the streets, to divide up the city with canals; which are certainly used as they are in Amsterdam or Utrecht.

...The boyars and gentlemen of the Empire were obliged by the Czar to leave Moscow, which was close to their country estates, to follow the court and to set up their homes here. Most of them have built palaces in accordance with the royal decree rather than from choice, so that here and there the walls are falling apart, or are so badly cracked that they hardly stand erect. Someone said that elsewhere ruins make themselves but here they are built. In this new metropolis they are constantly compelled to build new foundations for the buildings, both for this reason and also because of the lack of good material and the treacherous soil.

Opere scelte, Milan, 1823.

FRANCESCO ALGAROTTI
1739

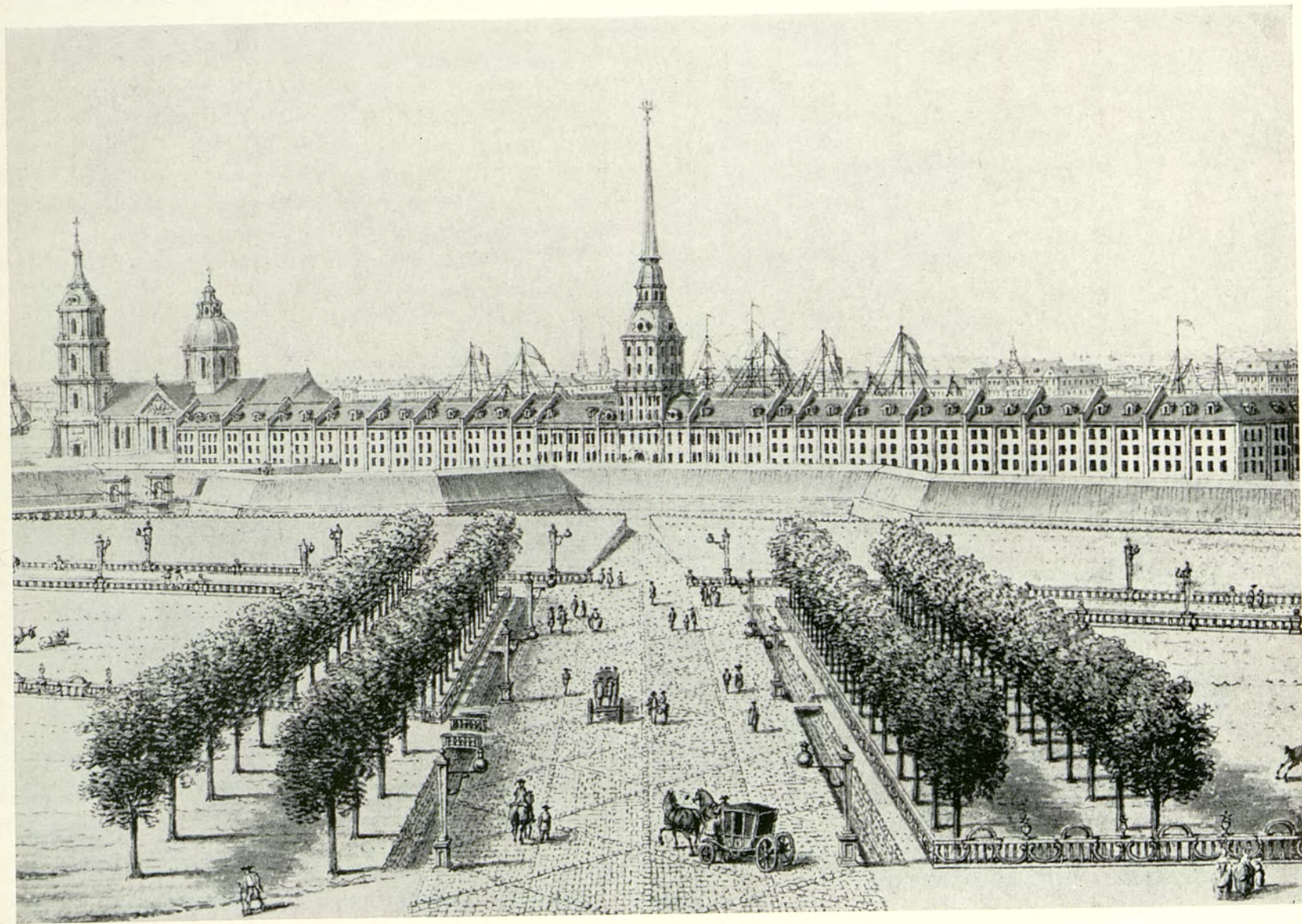
199. LOUIS-NICOLAS DE LESPINASSE: *View in Petersburg* (detail). Paris, Private collection.

The detail shows one of the many palaces of the nobility along the banks of the Neva. In the background are seen the walls of the fortress and part of the façade of the Peter and Paul cathedral with its slender spire.



200. LOUIS-NICOLAS DE LESPINASSE: *View in Petersburg*. Paris, Private collection.

Lespinasse here shows the Admiralty, begun by Peter the Great in 1705, almost completely destroyed by fire in 1783 and then reconstructed by the architect Zakharov. Within the fortress walls, on the left, is the Peter and Paul cathedral, built by Domenico Trezzini, where Peter the Great and Catherine II are buried. Beyond are merchant ships on the Neva, and on the left bank of the river, to the right of the picture, are the buildings of the new Petersburg.



201. GIACOMO QUARENGHI: *Roseschina*. Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica.

This drawing shows a picturesque corner of the Russian countryside, the church tower dominating the little town.



202. GIACOMO QUARENGHI: *Poskoff*. Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica.

Another of the drawings from the albums at Bergamo, showing the ruins of the castle near the village of Poskoff.

