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Enlightened Princesses : Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World



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This exhibition explores the story of three remarkable German princesses : Caroline of Ansbach, Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, and Charlotte of Mecklenberg-Strelitz, all of whom married into the British royal family in the eighteenth century. Caroline and Charlotte became queens consort to George II and George III respectively ; Princess Augusta never achieved this distinction but held the titles of Princess of Wales and Princess Dowager, and was mother to King George III.

Through their wide-ranging intellectual, social, and political interests, Caroline, Augusta, and Charlotte helped to shape court culture and the age in which they lived, and would leave a lasting legacy. They encouraged the greatest philosophers, scientists, artists, and architects of the day ; and they brought art, music, dance, enlightened conversation, and experimentation into the palaces and royal gardens, and supported industry, trade, and imperial ambition. The exhibition includes many important works of art and manufacture, which belonged to these women and their families, or were commissioned by them. Works by Hans Holbein, William Kent, Allan Ramsay, Sir Joshua Reynolds, George Stubbs, Thomas Gainsborough, Johan Zoffany, and many more are on display. It also features a new work by the artist Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) (b. 1962) specifically for this exhibition.

Enlightened Princesses focuses on five themes, explaining the princesses' activities and interlocking contributions over the course of their lifetimes. Firstly, "Cultures of Learning : Powerful Conversations" examines how Caroline, Augusta, and Charlotte built pivotal relationships with leading cultural and intellectual figures of their age, and the far-reaching consequences of those exchanges. This leads into a consideration of "The Court as a Stage," not only in the literal sense for the performance of music, dance, and theater but also as a political and cultural arena in which the princesses had to navigate the inherently political nature of public and private life. "Royal Women : Mothers of the Nation" considers the princesses' engagement with evolving contemporary philosophies about childhood, both as active contributors to the educational programs devised for their own children and in their public roles as encouragers and protectors committed to the development of wide-reaching philanthropic projects. Next, "To Promote and Protect : The Princesses and the Wider World" shows how the princesses supported enterprising industrialists and furnished their own homes and developed their gardens, so as to champion national manufacturers and the produce of empire. Finally, a concluding section on "Political Gardening" shows how Caroline, Augusta, and Charlotte explored contemporary garden philosophies and exercised their architectural ambitions for both personal and political ends, all the while reacting to a volatile commercial environment as well as a changing perception of the bonds between the dynasty, nationhood, and empire.

Enlightened Princesses : Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World is a collaboration between Historic Royal Palaces and the Yale Center for British Art. Following its showing in New Haven (Thursday, February 2, 2017 - Sunday, April 30, 2017), the exhibition will be on view at Kensington Palace from June 22 to November 12, 2017. The lead curator is Joanna Marschner, Senior Curator at Historic Royal Palaces, assisted by Samantha Howard, Curatorial Assistant. The organizing curator at the Center is Amy Meyers, Director, who is assisted by Lisa Ford, Assistant Director of Research ; Glenn Adamson, Senior Research Associate ; and Tyler Griffith, Postdoctoral Research Associate.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication of the same title, a beautifully illustrated catalogue of works edited by Joanna Marschner, with the assistance of David Bindman and Lisa Ford. Co-published with Historic Royal Palaces in association with Yale University Press, the book features contributions by an international team of scholars.