

## HISTORY OF FABERGE EGGS

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### ABSTRACT

*Faberge's primary source of inspiration came from works of previous centuries. Translucent enameling was a valued technique in the nineteenth century that required several coats of applied enamel and the "firing" of the object in an oven after each coat. However, only a small number of colors were used in the nineteenth century, and so Faberge took it upon himself to experiment and soon came up with over 140 shades. Technique used by Faberge included guilloche, a surface treatment that could make waves and striations in the design and could be done by machine or by hand. Faberge used natural stones often found in abundance in the area.*

*Fifty six Imperial eggs were made, forty-four of which have been located today and another two that are known to have been photographed. Another twelve Easter eggs were commissioned by Alexander Ferdinandovich Kelch, a Siberian gold mine owner.*

*However, the Imperial Easter egg collection commissioned by the last of the Russian Tzars is the most celebrated. Fabergé was given carte blanche in creating the Imperial eggs, the only requirement being that each must be unique and each must contain a surprise.*

KEYWORDS: *technique, surface treatment, egg collection*

### 1. Introduction

Born in 1846 Peter Carl Fabergé, would become the most famous goldsmith of his time. Son of jeweler Gustav Fabergé, owner of a small silver and jewelry shop in St. Petersburg, Carl Fabergé was well-trained in the jeweler's art by apprenticeships in the major centers of the European decorative arts.



**Fig.1.** *The young Fabergé.*

By the time Carl was twenty, he had also received a solid foundation in economics and commercial affairs. When Carl took over his father's jewelry firm in 1872 at the age of twenty-four, it was not much different from several other workshops catering to the upper classes of St. Petersburg. But the young Fabergé (Figure 1) was determined to distinguish the family name.

Jewelry and the decorative arts of the day had previously been valued by the size and weight of the precious stones and metals. In a departure from such gaudy ostentation, and with the help of his younger brother Agathon, a talented designer and valued advisor, Fabergé eagerly formulated a new aesthetic, which he hoped would capture the fancy of the Russian aristocracy.

According to Fabergé collector Christopher Forbes, "His feeling was that it should be creativity and craftsmanship rather than carat-content that dictated the appreciation of a piece – and he certainly had a wonderful sense of humor. So his pieces caught the attention of Alexander III, who admired them as examples of Russian genius."

"And here you see the shrewd man, the businessman," says author and Fabergé expert, Géza von Habsburg.

"He worked for an institution called the Imperial Cabinet, which was in charge of all the treasures of the Tzars in the Hermitage. And he worked there free-of-charge and repaired things, appraised things, and so on." Having earned the recognition of this prestigious organization by virtue of his expertise in the task of restoring its collections, Fabergé was invited in 1882 to participate in the Moscow Pan-Russian Exhibition, where he earned a gold medal and a good deal of press for his innovative work. It was at this event that Tzar Alexander III and his wife, Maria Fedorovna, became acquainted with the House of Fabergé, captivated by the exquisite display of jewels and *objects de luxe*

In 1885, Fabergé's hard work, meticulous standards and shrewd positioning paid off when he was given the highest honor possible for a jeweler: an appointment as "Supplier to the Court of His Imperial Majesty" (Figure 2).

That same year he received the now famous order from the Tzar to create the first Imperial Easter egg for the Tzarina [1].



**Fig. 2.** Russian Imperial Court.

In 1885 Fabergé won the Gold Medal at an exhibition in Nuremberg for his replicas of the antique treasures of Kerch. It was also in 1885 that the first Imperial egg was produced.

The beautifully simple egg opened up to reveal a yolk. Inside the yolk was a golden hen and inside the hen was a diamond miniature of the crown and a tiny ruby egg.

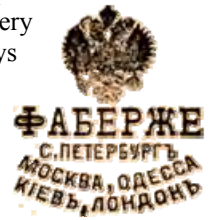
### **1.1. House of Fabergé**

"Once you were one of the approved suppliers to the Crown, it was a very lucrative source of business," says Fabergé expert Christopher Forbes.

"Every time the Tzar went on a visit or received another head of state, there was an exchange of gifts. Also Russia was growing as an industrial power, and Fabergé was catering to this whole class of nouveau riche Russians.

The Imperial eggs were his loss leaders to give him the cachet. But the cash was all coming from these newly minted millionaires in Russia". Author Géza von Habsburg continues: "And when the Tzar and Tzarina traveled, they traveled with suitcases full of Fabergé, which were presented here and there to people in thanks. By 1896, the year of the coronation of Nicholas II, virtually all the major presents came from Fabergé"[2].

But ironically, the man who conceived of and hand-delivered these incredible pieces had little to do with their actual fabrication. According to Christopher Forbes: "Fabergé was the head of the firm.



**Fig.3.** House Fabergé in Moskau.



**Fig.4.** Carl Fabergé.

He had the best designers, the best goldsmiths, the best jewelers, the best stonemasons, the best miniaturists all working for him. At the top of the success of the firm he had over five hundred employees, four shops in Russia, one shop in London and a catalogue operation.

He provided the taste and the direction, and he was the genius that got all these artists and artisans to work together to produce these incredible fantasies."

These men were organized into autonomous workshops under master craftsmen hand-picked by the Fabergé brothers. "The head workmasters were the key persons in the realm of Fabergé," says author Géza Von Habsburg. "They stood at the apex of the

pyramid immediately under Fabergé, and they controlled the entire output of the workshops. The inventions came from Fabergé.

These were discussed with the head work masters, and then taken to the design studio."

The process of making the eggs usually took about one year. After the preliminary period of detailed and meticulous planning, sketches and models were prepared. Discussions were held among the goldsmiths, silversmiths, enamellers, jewelers, lapidary workers and stonecutters who would contribute their talents to the finished creation. Then the parts were farmed out to the various Fabergé workshops.



*Fig.5. Fabergé workshops.*

"Fabergé had his mechanisms made in Switzerland, and he had the portrait miniatures either done by Russians or Germans or Scandinavians," adds Forbes". He used the best available craftsmen from wherever he could find them to create these objects. But most of the eggs, as far as we know, were made in the workshops of either Michael Perkhin or Henry Wigstrom, who were sort of the head craftsmen. And they had whole teams of people working under them". (figure 3,4,5)

Fabergé refused to be limited by nineteenth century goldsmith techniques. If methods did not exist to execute his ideas, he required that his craftsmen invent them. In the field of enameling, they developed and perfected techniques that far surpassed those of the competition: "Creating the eggs with the tools that they had, by hand, and making them look as though they were just some miracles that had occurred, is actually an enormous feat of technology," explains author Lynette Proler". Fabergé used an extraordinarily complicated enameling process, a technique that cannot be duplicated, even today.

The House of Fabergé actually buried their own documents, and his formulas and techniques have been lost. They're secreted away someplace, and are hoping one day that somebody will find them." While his competitors used a standard palette of whites, pale blues, and pink, Fabergé took it upon

himself to experiment. He created resplendent yellows, mauves, salmon and all shades of greens – over one hundred forty new colors in all [3].

"Fabergé wrote to his clients saying that everything he produced was one-of-a-kind, guaranteed," adds Von Habsburg. "Anything that was unsold at the end of the year – this was real salesmanship at that time – would be destroyed. So shopping at Fabergé's must have been the ultimate experience, because everything was unique. This is the greatest thing about Fabergé and the reason I admire him most of all. He never repeated himself. Imagine producing 150,000 different objects without repeating yourself!"

Faberge's primary source of inspiration came from works of previous centuries. Translucent enameling was a valued technique in the nineteenth century that required several coats of applied enamel and the "firing" of the object in an oven after each coat. However, only a small number of colors were used in the nineteenth century, and so Faberge took it upon himself to experiment and soon came up with over 140 shades. The most prized of these was oyster enamel which varied in color depending on the light. Materials used by Faberge included metals - silver, gold, copper, nickel, palladium - that were combined in varying proportions to produce different colors. Another technique used by eighteenth century French goldsmiths and again Faberge involved a simple tinting of the completed work using stones and enamel. Another technique used by Faberge included guilloche, a surface treatment that could make waves and striations in the design and could be done by machine or by hand. Faberge used natural stones often found in abundance in the area. These included jasper, bowenite, rhodonite, rock crystal, agate, aventurine quartz, lapis lazuli, and jade (nephrite mostly although he would sometimes use jadeite). Precious stones including sapphires, rubies and emeralds were used only for decoration, and when used they were en cabochon (round cut). Diamonds were typically rose-cut. Semi-precious stones including moonstones, garnets, olivines, and Mecca stones were used more often en cabochon. Fifty six Imperial eggs were made, forty-four of which have been located today and another two that are known to have been photographed. Another twelve Easter eggs were commissioned by Alexander Ferdinandovich Kelch, a Siberian gold mine owner. However, the Imperial Easter egg collection commissioned by the last of the Russian Tzars is the most celebrated.

Fabergé was given *carte blanche* in creating the Imperial eggs, the only requirement being that each must be unique and each must contain a surprise. Concealing his plans – even from the Tzar – Fabergé would spend nearly a year meticulously designing and crafting appropriate surprises. "And we're told these

eggs were, at that time, conversation pieces. And even the Tzar would ask, 'What's the surprise going to be in the next running?' But Fabergé would only say, 'Majesty will be satisfied.' So it was the best-kept secret in St. Petersburg." [4].

## 2. The history of the eggs

When an egg was complete, it was brought to the palace and presented to the Tzar in person by Fabergé, while the anxious craftsmen remained at their workstations, waiting until Fabergé returned to assure them of its safe delivery.

The **Lilies of the Valley egg (1898)** is a translucent pink-enameled treasure covered with gold-stemmed flowers made of pearls, diamonds and rubies. One flower, when turned, releases a geared mechanism inside to raise the fan of tiny miniatures from the top – portraits of the Tzar and his first two daughters, Olga and Tatiana. Every spring, Alexandra had the rooms of the palaces filled with beautiful floral bouquets. Fabergé knew that pink was the favorite color of the Empress, and lilies of the valley her favorite flower.

The jade **Alexander Palace egg (1908)**, Figure 6, contains a perfect replica of their favorite royal residence in the country – only two and one half inches long. And sailing on the clear rock crystal sea of the **Standart egg (1909)**, is a replica of their royal yacht – reproduced to the last detail – where many happy days were spent together (Figure 7).



Fig.6. A. Palace egg. Fig.7. Standart egg.



"I think that was where Fabergé differed so much from all the other jewelers of the period," adds author Lynette Proler. "Where they were only interested in large gemstones, Carl Fabergé was interested in the ultimate effect that a piece would have, a lasting effect so that every time you looked at a particular object, you would have this great sense of sheer enjoyment and pleasure from it."

Fabergé knew both the joys and sorrows of the Romanovs. According to Proler, "It wasn't very well known, of course – the Imperial family kept it very

quiet – that the Tzarevich had hemophilia. He was dying; he was very close to death, so close that the Imperial Court had already written out his death notice. But Alexei survived, and Fabergé designed a special tribute. The **Tzarevich egg (1912)** was Alexandra's most cherished (Figure 9).

In 1900, the railway that would link European Russia with the Pacific coast was near completion, an accomplishment that brought Nicholas great satisfaction and the support of his country. Fabergé devised an ingenious offering to celebrate the event.

Etched on a belt of silver encircling the **Trans-Siberian Railway egg (1900)** is a map of the railway line, the stations marked in precious stones. And inside there is a little train just one foot long (Figure 9) [5].

"It's made out of gold and platinum, and its headlights are diamonds, and its rear lights are rubies, and the coaches are individually labeled for gentlemen, for smoking, for ladies.

There was a restaurant car, and at the end there was the traveling church, which was appended to the Imperial train. It winds up, and I've tried it myself," says author Géza von Habsburg.

"The mechanism is a bit rusty, and it moves slowly, but it's like a sort of old 'dinky toy'" [6].



Fig.8. Tzarevich egg. Fig.9. Trans-Siberian.

### Railway egg

But most Russians had no time for toys. The zeal to expand the empire led to a disastrous war with Japan and further demoralized the country.

Hopeless wars, famine, disease and despair were unraveling the fabric of faith the Tzar's people once had in the divine right and benevolence of the monarchy. Choosing to believe in the unflinching devotion of his people, Nicholas became a prisoner of his self-delusion.

### 2.1. Outrageous opulence

With every egg, Fabergé outdid himself in technique, detail or complex mechanics. Some of the world's best examples of handcrafted automata are hidden in the jeweled shells of the Imperial eggs. At the stroke of the hour, a ruby-eyed rooster emerges

crowning and flapping its wings from the top of the elaborately designed **Cockerel egg (1900)**. Fabergé was known to have worked on the mechanism of the Peacock Clock in the Winter Palace, and his familiarity with that famous automaton no doubt inspired the creation of this egg. "Fabergé, who had traveled a lot, had absorbed all the currents, the various artistic currents, in Paris, in Florence, in Dresden, in London," says author Géza Von Habsburg. "He could go back to this memory bank and select objects from it.



**Fig.10.** Bay Tree egg.

For instance, the Bay Tree egg in the Forbes Magazine Collection is based on an 18th century mechanical orange tree, a French automaton, which was a fairly well-known object which Fabergé must have seen during his travels.

Other eggs that Fabergé made were based on objects he saw in the imperial treasury and used as prototypes for his first eggs. The **Bay Tree egg (1911)**, Figure 10, is laden with gemstone fruits set among carved jade leaves. Turning one of the fruits opens the top of the egg as the tiny bellows inside producing the sweet song of a feathered bird.

As if to bolster the Tzar's self-image during his most trying times, Fabergé presented Nicholas with a series of eggs commemorating achievements of the Romanovs. In lavish Rococo style, the **Peter the Great egg (1903)** celebrated the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding St. Petersburg; the **Napoleonic egg (1912)** honored the Motherland's victory over the French general and his armies, Figure 11,12[7].



**Fig.11.** Peter egg.



**Fig.12.** Napoleonic egg.

In 1913, the three-hundred-year rule of Russia under the House of Romanov was recorded in the portraits encircling the **Tercentenary egg (1913)** – from the founder, Mikhail Fedorovich, to Catherine the Great, and Nicholas himself, Figure 13.



**Fig.13.** Tercentenary egg.

The white enameled shell of this egg is nearly obscured by over eleven hundred diamonds and golden symbols of royal order. Inside, a globe of burnished steel inlaid in gold displays the frontiers of Russia in 1613 and the vastly extended borders of Russia under Nicholas II.

Two Eggs presented to the Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna – the **Winter egg (1913)** and the **Grisaille egg (1914)** – may best represent the height of Fabergé's career, expressions in miniature of the life of Imperial privilege. Both were kept at Maria's favorite Anichkov Palace: one inspired by the serene surroundings in winter; the other by the opulent embellishments of the palace interior, where many of the ceilings are painted *en grisaille*.

At that time, there was great hope that Russia would yet prevail in the war, and Fabergé was asked to continue the tradition of Imperial Easter eggs. But to match the solemn mood of the nation and reflect the noble efforts of the family, Fabergé wisely altered the tone of the Easter gifts that year [8].

Inside the **Red Cross egg (1915)** given to the Dowager Empress Maria, are portraits of the Romanov women dressed as Sisters of Mercy, Figures 14,15.



**Fig.14.** Romanov women.

Inscribed inside are the words, "Greater Love hath no man than this, to lay down his life for his friends."



*Fig.15. Red Cross Egg.*



*Fig.16. Image of Nicholas.*

In 1915, the Tzar appointed himself "Supreme Commander of the Army," displacing one of the top generals. For this act, he was awarded the Order of St. George, given for outstanding military bravery or achievement. "Nicholas had decided to take over from his cousin, Grand Duke Nicholas Nikoliovich, this tall giant of a man, beloved by his soldiers, who had been at the head of the armies. And this was maybe, for the Tzar, the high point of his reign," says author and Fabergé expert, Géza von Habsburg. "He could do no wrong at that time, and the war went very favorably at first for Russia."

Believing as many did that now the Tzar would overcome the difficulties, Fabergé designed two eggs to applaud the event. For the Tzarina, he painted an image of Nicholas consulting with his officers at the front (Figure 16).

Resting on the points of four miniature artillery shells, the **Steel Military egg (1916)** makes up in sober significance what it lacks in ornamentation, Figure 17.



*Fig.17. Steel Military egg.*

According to Von Habsburg: "Fabergé had to close down his workshops because his craftsmen were all at the front. He was unable to continue to make

these objects of art. He had no more precious materials.

Gold and silver were no longer allowed to be handled by jewelers at that time so it was steel and brass and copper that they were using. And the imperial family could also not be seen ordering expensive things from Fabergé at a time when Russia was bleeding to death." The simple **Order of St. George egg (1916)**, given to the Dowager Empress Maria that year, was another gesture to wartime austerity.

Away from St. Petersburg supervising Red Cross activities in the south, she wrote to her son: "I thank you with all my heart for your lovely Egg, which dear old Fabergé brought himself. It is beautiful. I wish you, my darling Nickya, all the best things and success in everything. Your fondly loving old Mama."

## 2.2. The fate of the eggs

In 1918, after the death of the Romanovs, the House of Fabergé was nationalized and ransacked by the Bolsheviks. Fabergé and members of his family (Figure 18) left Russia on what was to be the last diplomatic train to Riga, not realizing that they would never be able to return to their beloved Russia again.



*Fig.18. Fabergé and members of his family.*

According to author Géza von Habsburg: "When Fabergé saw that all was lost – all of the members of the Imperial family on Russian soil had been murdered – he decided that was it, his whole world had collapsed, and he fled to Switzerland, where he died in 1920 of (I would say) a broken heart." Soon after the revolution, the contents of the Romanov palaces were confiscated by the Bolsheviks. Most of the Fabergé eggs, along with masses of Imperial gold, silver, jewels and icons were inventoried, packed in crates and taken to the Kremlin Armoury. Several eggs disappeared during the looting and pillaging of the palaces. The only egg not found at the time was the Order of St. George egg, which the Dowager Empress had managed to save, along with other valuables, when she was evacuated from Yalta to England aboard the British battleship Marlborough.



"All the other jewelry and the eggs were sent, by order of Lenin, to Moscow and stayed there," says Von Habsburg.

"They were lost in some dark passage in the Kremlin Armoury storerooms; nobody knew where they were." There the crates containing the eggs remained, unopened, guarded by Kremlin staff. But Lenin's efforts to preserve Russia's cultural heritage were undermined when Joseph Stalin came to power. Stalin began trading the Russian Imperial legacy for desperately needed Western currency to support his new regime. "The treasures were rediscovered somewhere around 1927. For the communists, there was the idea at the back of their minds that these things might actually be sold for the good of the new Bolshevik government, to finance their economic plans. So these things were taken out of safekeeping, appraised, and offered to the West." (Von Habsburg).

Recognizing that the treasures of a dynasty were being swept into oblivion, the eminent businessman and socialist sympathizer brought ten of the eggs to America in the early 1930's. Hammer set up business and heavily marketed and promoted the sale of these riches, but during the Depression years, even the most stable American fortunes had faltered. A friend of Hammer's ironically observed that while the Fabergé eggs were indisputably beautiful, they were not, in fact, edible [9].

According to Géza von Habsburg: "Hammer arrived here in New York in 1931 with thousands of Russian works of art to be sold on behalf of the Soviets. At the time there was no money... deepest Depression... nobody was interested... until he struck on the idea of marketing these things through department stores. And he took them through North

America, from the East coast to the West coast, stopping at department stores in every major city and touting these things, lecturing about how he discovered these things. And they caught on."

There were five major collectors in the early days here in the United States: Matilda Geddings Gray, Lillian Thomas Pratt, Marjorie Merriweather Post, India Early Minshall and Malcolm S. Forbes.

Though some Imperial eggs originally were sold at auction for as little as four or five hundred dollars, it took several decades for the eggs to gain recognition as magnificent works of art. Now they are valued in the millions.

### 3. Conclusion

- The technique used by Faberge included guilloche, a surface treatment that could make waves and striations in the design and could be done by machine or by hand.

- Faberge used natural stones often found in abundance in the area.

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