

Topics in Gemology

Topics in Gemology is a monthly column written by Diana Jarrett, GG, RMV, based on gemological questions posed to her over the years by beginners and experts alike. Contact her at dianajarrett.com.



Uncovering Fabergé (Part I)

The jeweler made famous by royalty has withstood revolution, a change of hands and joyful reunification. All the while continuing to captivate the world.

Few jewelers' names are more universally recognized than the venerable House of Fabergé. Although inextricably linked to the Russian imperial family, the house also maintains a vibrant presence today. Peter Carl Fabergé was a famed jeweler to royalty, a path chosen for him early in life when his father, Gustav, groomed him to inherit the family's Russian firm, established in St. Petersburg in 1842. Keen to give his talented son the training and exposure needed to become a prominent jeweler, Gustav sent him to explore the rest of Europe. Peter Carl Fabergé apprenticed in Paris, London, and Frankfurt, Germany, before returning home to oversee the House of Fabergé in 1870.

Still in his 20s, Fabergé set his sights on the Winter Palace, the home of Russia's reigning czars since the 1730s. He earned the confidence of the imperial family through his masterful restoration of royal treasures housed there and, in 1885, created the first of a series of imperial eggs as an Easter gift from Alexander III to his wife. Thus, the tradition that made the Fabergé name a legend was born.



The Lilies of the Valley egg (1898) features portraits of Nicholas II and his two oldest daughters, Olga and Tatiana.

Created for Royalty

With Easter being the most celebrated holiday in the Russian Orthodox Church, it was typical in the 1800s for families to gather and exchange decorated eggs after religious services. The czaritz's first jeweled Easter egg appeared to be a simple enameled egg that opened up to a golden yolk. The yolk then separated to reveal a golden hen, which concealed a miniature, diamond-encrusted royal crown and a delicate ruby egg. The positive reception this first jeweled egg received inspired Fabergé to aim to continuously outdo himself with each succeeding commission.



Three Emotion collection rings: Each is set with more than 300 gems that together form one glittering whole – clusters of pink (right) and green (left) stones and, in the most dramatic of the three (center), a multi-colored melee of emeralds, pink diamonds, purple sapphires and Paraiba tourmalines.

Year after year, Fabergé's fertile imagination and eye for the whimsy were only surpassed by his exquisite skill as a goldsmith and enamelist. His creations resided in a rarefied stratum, notes **John Sanfaçon, a Russian linguist, historian and member of the New York Mineralogical Club**. "The firm of Ovchinnikov was his most talented competitor," Sanfaçon says. But Fabergé's output was prolific and immense, and even his nemesis couldn't penetrate his mystique.

Fabergé created some 50 imperial eggs before the collapse of the government in 1917 and the execution of the czar and the entire imperial family in 1918. "Fanciful ones, like the Coronation egg, could take up to a year and a half to produce," Sanfaçon points out. The last imperial egg was completed in 1916. Following the coup, the House of Fabergé was nationalized and ransacked by the Bolsheviks. Fabergé was arrested, subsequently released and fled to Switzerland, where he died in 1920.



Peter Carl Fabergé (1846 - 1920)

(Continues next month)