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UNCOVERING FABERGÉ

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

BY DIANA JARRETT

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 jewelry 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 features portraits of Nicholas II and his two oldest daughters, Olga and Tatiana.

Motion ring featuring diamond, emerald, demantoid and peridot, from Fabergé's Emotion collection

Fabergé's airy Ida Pure White necklace evokes the artistic spirit of Russia's Silver Age.

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 czaritsa's first jeweled Easter gift 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 bejeweled egg received inspired Fabergé to aim to continuously outdo himself with each succeeding commission.

Year after year, Fabergé's fertile imagination and eye for 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.

Fantasy Factory

As Fabergé's reputation soared, his production exploded. At the height of the house's fame, he had little to do with the actual construction of the famed baubles. He'd assembled a team of the best designers, the top goldsmiths, the best of everything—stonecutters, bench jewelers and miniature portrait artists, all working to deliver wonderful treasures to satisfy the lavish tastes of the aristocrats.

At one point, Fabergé employed more than 500 artisans in shops in Russia and London. "Apart from conventional jewelry items, Fabergé excelled in desk accessories like paperweights and photo frames, and fashionable baubles like snuff boxes, jewelry cassettes, cigarette cases and cigarette lighters," Sanfaçon says. "His firm also made miniature enameled and bejeweled egg charms." Between 1882 and 1917, the House of Fabergé produced some 150,000 to 200,000 objects.

The jewel-studded confections provided a window into the extravagant lifestyle of the imperial family, to whom nothing was denied for amusement's sake. From a historical standpoint, however, the works represent the pinnacle of perfectionism in the jeweler's art. They're as revered for their superlative skill as they are lauded for their whimsy.

Fabergé expert Dr. Géza von Habsburg, author of several well-researched books including "Fabergé, Court Jeweler to the Tsars," describes the fierce allegiance the Romanovs showed to Fabergé's work. "When the czar and [czaritsa] traveled, they traveled with suitcases full of Fabergé, which were presented here and there to people in thanks," von Habsburg explains. "By 1896, the year of the coronation of Nicholas II, virtually all the major presents came from Fabergé."

COURTESY OF TATIANA FABERGÉ

Peter Carl Fabergé

Egg Hunt

Fine auction houses, especially those in Europe, are the best venues to see works by Fabergé and to discover what collectors are willing to pay for these treasures. Contemporary collectors appreciate that the present-day Fabergé brand embodies elements of the original house, including expert craftsmanship, prowess in the enamel arts and a sense of playfulness. Christie's Auctions & Private Sales in London has brokered the sales of some outstanding Fabergé pieces, such as a

OPPOSITE PAGE PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE FORBES COLLECTION, NEW YORK; ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra Feodorovna, surrounded by their five children: the last imperial family of Russia

ICONIC MOMENTS IN FABERGÉ HISTORY

1870: Peter Carl Fabergé joins father Gustav Fabergé's jewelry firm.
1885: Fabergé creates the first imperial Easter egg for the Romanovs.
1916: The last imperial egg is completed for the imperial family.
1951: The Fabergé heirs lose the rights to produce designs bearing the Fabergé name.
2007: The Fabergé brand is reunited with the Fabergé family name.
2009: The Les Fabuleuses Collection debuts.

COURTESY OF THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCE

Fabergé's Nobel Ice egg and "surprise" watch pendant, originally completed in 1913

rare egg that had been in the Rothschild banking family for more than a century and sold in 2007. It took just 10 minutes of spirited bidding to close the sale at $18.5 million to a private Russian buyer.

"For Fabergé and works of art collectors of means, a Fabergé egg—especially an imperial egg—will always remain the ultimate trophy," explains Mark Moehrke, director of Russian works of art at the London, King Street location of Christie's. "Scarcity remains the greatest obstacle. There were only 50 imperial eggs ever made, and most are held in private or public collections."

Because the name Fabergé is synonymous with the famed eggs for so many people, Moehrke says, some may be surprised to discover all of the other things that Fabergé created. "The House of Fabergé produced an astonishing breadth of objects in an array of materials," he notes. The general public may not recognize items like jeweled fans or Fabergé's amusing animal figurines carved from hardstone. But to the cognoscenti, "Fabergé is renowned for the wide range of works [the house] produced, from highly decorative ... presentation pieces [to] functional everyday objects.

"When Fabergé imperial eggs came on the market in the years following the Russian Revolution, they were purchased by Europeans and Americans, most notably," Moehrke continues. "The demand has only broadened. ... This broad international appeal means that collectors come from countries across the globe."

Continued Fascination

In 1951, the Fabergé heirs lost the rights to produce designs bearing the Fabergé name, but the blow did not quell their determination to perpetuate the legacy and legend of Fabergé. By 2007, the brand's name and philosophy had been reunited with the family name. In 2009, a high-end jewelry collection, Les Fabuleuses, was

COURTESY OF THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCE

A three-compartment vanity case designed by Fabergé in 1910

The Rothschild Fabergé egg sold at a 2007 Christie's auction for $18,499,830—a world-record price for a Russian art object (excluding paintings).

CABS OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

Ever the innovator, the House of Fabergé in October 2013 embarked upon an eye-catching promotional campaign that will be in circulation for one year in London. The traditional English taxis driving around the West End and Knightsbridge got a dazzling color boost from Fabergé via the embellishment of brightly colored gemstone and ring images from Faberge's Emotion collection, reminders of the whimsical nature that still takes priority at Fabergé.

launched. The focus of this 21st-century collection, developed under the guidance of great-granddaughters Tatiana and Sarah Fabergé, pays homage to the spirit of Peter Carl Fabergé. The detailed, jewel-encrusted pieces are more like miniature works of art that prompt the immediate awe of anyone who sees them.

As emblems of a gilded age of excess, the works of Fabergé have reignited the imaginations of jewelry fans who gravitate toward the wit and workmanship of these dazzlers. Museums across the globe continue to play host to various collections of coveted Fabergé items, including the Houston Museum of Natural Science's exhibit, "Fabergé: A Brilliant Vision," in 2013. The exhibit included some 350 items from the McFerrin family collection, considered to be one of the world's most significant private assemblages of Fabergé items. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art even boasts a long-term installation simply titled "Fabergé," which includes works commissioned by the Romanov family and three imperial Easter eggs from the Matilda Geddings Gray collection. In addition, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' collection of Fabergé objects will travel to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for an exhibit running June 7 through Oct. 5. Meanwhile, visitors and locals alike can now visit, by appointment, St. Petersburg's newly opened Fabergé Museum at the Shuvalov Palace, a profound tribute to Fabergé in his historic birthplace.

With the brand's message so dependent upon the creative genius of its original designer, Fabergé's death could've easily signaled the end of his legacy. But the frenzied adoration that he incurred during his lifetime sustains the house's momentum even today. Now, Fabergé's name alone evokes a sense of perfectionism that manifests itself in bejeweled objects, inspiring the house's continued re-emergence as a vibrant luxury brand. M