

## **Lecture on Fabergé – by Tim Adams**

Docent Guild General Meeting, May 23, 2012

(Notes taken by Carol Hallenbeck)

When we think of Fabergé, we think of the Imperial Easter eggs –  
of the delightfully jeweled, enameled works and of gold work techniques.  
In a San “Diego exhibition there were 27 Easter eggs –  
They had eggs from every known collection.

But Fabergé was so much more.  
He was a designer and a goldsmith.  
He owned a business.  
He had engineers, enamellers, gem setters, goldsmiths as employees – 2700 at one time.  
He was the visionary.  
He supervised everything  
Nothing left his workshop without his approval.

He had shops in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, Kiev, London.  
They were Edwardian jewelry stores.

The store in St. Petersburg had the shop on the first floor,  
workshops and design center on the second and third floor.  
He and his family lived on the top, or fourth, floor.

He told the story of Maria Pavlovna and her Fabergé collection, part of which was purchased  
by the McFerrins and is on display in our exhibit.

The Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna was a good customer of Fabergé.  
On December 30, 2009, Sotheby’s in London auctioned some of her important pieces.  
They came from a newly discovered cache of Fabergé objects that she owned.  
She was the wife of Grand Duke Vladimir, the brother of Tsar Alexander III.  
The McFerrins purchased some of the most impressive pieces.  
They represent the highest quality of craftsmanship from the House of Fabergé.

Pavlovna’s story represents intrigue and danger during the darkest hour of Russian  
history.  
She and her husband lived in the Vladimir Palace in St. Petersburg.  
Due to war and civil unrest, on May of 1917 she closed the Vladimir Palace  
and moved herself and her household to the southern most borders of Russia.  
They went to the spa town of Kislovodsk in the Caucasus Mountains.  
She owned a summer villa there.  
Following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II,  
hostility increased towards the Imperial family,

Albert Stopford was an Englishman  
who was befriended by the Grand Duchess while in St. Petersburg.

She was arrested briefly at 2:30 a.m. on March 30, 1917.  
This made her decide to leave Russia.  
She wanted to gather her valuables from the Vladimir Palace back in St. Petersburg.  
Stopford decided to make the three-day journey to visit her.  
He then returned to St. Petersburg  
    instructed to recover the valuable jewels from the Palace.  
He managed to get into the private apartments of the palace  
    and grab as much as he could.  
He took pillowcases off two bed pillows  
    and then removed the striped underpillow cases and filled them full  
    of Fabergé pieces –cigarette cases, cuff links, and other valuables.  
Later the pillowcases were sealed with wax.

As a diplomatic courier, he took them to London.  
More than a year later, a man named Professor Bergholz  
    (most likely Alexander Bergholz) took the two cases to the Swedish Legation  
    in Petrograd. Bergholz was President of the Academy of Fine Arts.

In 1918 diplomatic relations between Russia and Sweden were severed,  
    and the Swedish Legation was closed.  
It seemed likely that the pillowcases were taken to Stockholm at that time  
    and deposited on behalf of the Grand Duchess.  
Her name is handwritten in India ink on both bags.

In the autumn of 1919, the Grand Duchess decided to leave Russia,  
    -- the only route was through the Caucasus Mountains to the White Russian  
    stronghold on the Black Sea, the port of Novorossiysk.  
She journeyed 50 miles to the nearest working railway station,  
    arranged for her own train and -- kept all of the trimmings  
    of her bygone splendid days  
    in a time when even Generals were lucky to find a horse-drawn cart.

She obtained passage to Venice just a month before Novorossiysk fell to the Red Army.

Stopford received her in Venice and arranged passage to Switzerland  
    and then on to Paris. She died at age 66 just a few months after reaching Paris.

The pillowcases sat in an archives room in the Swedish Foreign Office,  
    secure but mostly forgotten.

In 1952, during an inventory, the wax seals were broken to create an inventory.  
The cases were then stored away again and forgotten.

They were rediscovered in 2008, during an internal reorganization of the archives  
    in the governmental office.

The heirs were identified, and the property handed over to their representatives.

They chose to sell the items in London at Sotheby's.

The heirs shared some of the funds generated with causes

that the Grand Duchess had supported during her life,  
particularly a Russian Orthodox Chapel in France she had built in 1909  
and dedicated to her husband.

Next Mr. Adams showed slides of some of the objects that will be in our exhibit,  
talking about the techniques used to make them so that we will recognize them  
and be able to point them out to our visitors.

**chasing** –a technique of working metal from the front using a tool with a rounded end so  
that the pattern is indented into the surface.

**repoussé** -- a technique of working sheet metal from behind with punches to raise the  
pattern, which stands in relief on the front. (also called **embossing**)

**engraving** – a technique of cutting patterns into a surface with a sharp tool.

**cloisonné**—a technique of soldering wires onto a metal surface forming cells  
(cloisonnes), which are then filled with enamel.  
(cloisonné means “an enclosed space.”)  
Faberge used 144 different colors of enamel.

**enamel**—colored glass in powdered form is fused to metal surfaces in a firing process.

**champlevé enameling** – the design is carved into the metal, using an engraving tool  
and then filled with enamel.

**en ronde bosse enamelling** - a technique of applying translucent enamel onto curved  
surfaces. Fabergé used an organic glue base, then applied a coat of enamel and  
fired the round object at 750 degrees F. He applied several layers, polishing the  
object on a wooden wheel after each coat. The process is labor intensive.

**guilloché** – a means of working and engraving metal with a lathe-like machine to create  
patterns on the surface of the metal. The object is then covered by several layers  
of translucent enamel that allows the pattern to show through. Guilloché  
patterns are often moiré (water-like patterns), sun rays or wave patterns.  
This technique was used on the Coronation egg – eight layers of enamel were used.  
First the object was turned on a lathe, and then finished off by the enameller.  
There is a sunburst pattern and basket weave patterns.

Mauve was a very popular color, found on many Fabergé objects.  
It was a sentimental, romantic color.

Tsarina Alexandra had a whole room painted in this color.

This color was popular during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

**Dendritic design** – a fern or tree branch design is painted onto the enamel to  
emulate moss agate

Adams' slide showed a 3-compartment vanity case that shows an aesthetic blend of materials and techniques that shows Fabergé as a talented artist-jeweler.

It combines guilloché patterns engraved on the surface of the gold, covered by layers of translucent enamel.

Then swags and garlands in multiple colors of gold are added, accented by tiny rose cut diamonds.

These diamonds have from 3-24 facets.

No one part stands out.

Each part works with the others to make a harmonious whole that is aesthetically pleasing.

This is what sets Fabergé's work apart.

He used four colors of gold, changing the color by adding other metals. Adding copper makes the gold rose or reddish.

Before the Crimean War, (1853-1856) men either smoked a pipe, took snuff by inhaling it or chewed tobacco.

But after that war, smoking cigarettes became popular.

Jewelers shifted from making snuffboxes to making cigarette cases.

These cases became one of the most popular and most frequently made objects by the House of Fabergé.

They were made in a great variety of styles, enamel colors, and stones.

The cases had a compartment for the tiny matches, called *vestas*, and a striking surface. Since *vestas* were expensive, the cases also contained a tinder cord which pulled out of the case.

The tinder cord was a braided cord with a knot tied on one end.

The owner of the case pulled out the cord, lighted it with a vista,

and then could pass the case with cord around to his guests

so each could light his own cigarette from the lighted cord and admire the case.

Then the cord could be pulled back into the case into a hollow tube, which sealed it, cutting off the oxygen supply and putting out the fire.

Passing the case from guest to guest enabled one to show off his lovely Fabergé case.

A pearl or stone acted as a cap to close the opening.

A cabochon-cut jewel might be used to close the case.

When the cigarette lighter was invented, this style of case became obsolete and Fabergé began making cigarette lighters.

We will have one in rose and gold, engraved with swans and garlands.

Fabergé pioneered the design for the modern cigarette case,

eliminating the built-in match compartment and tinder cord.

Cigarette cases now became less cumbersome and more streamlined.

Fabergé used all kinds of materials for his cases –

--wood, steel, copper, nephrite . . . whatever appealed to him.

How the case opened and closed was important.

The opening and the hinges should be invisible, so the line between the lid and the case should also be as invisible as possible.

The precision of craftsmanship in Fabergé cases is legendary.

They open and shut with only a slight sound,

close almost airtight and remain tightly shut without a clasp.

The “button” to push to open the case was part of the design. Often a jewel.

The Tsars had a “presentation room,”

a room filled with lovely objects they could give as souvenirs to important guests who visited, most of which were made by Fabergé.

There were picture frames, cigarette cases, boxes, *objects de'art*.

If something remained in this room for more than a year, Fabergé got rid of it.

Tsar Nicholas II liked to give more showy objects than his father.

Foreigners kept these objects, displayed them, placed them on their desks.

Russians returned them and preferred money.

Visitors were allowed to take the gift or the equivalent monetary value.

The invention and popularity of photography in the 1900s created a need for picture frames to display the photographs.

The Tsar Nicholas II loved photography.

(When you went into an Edwardian period home, there were photos everywhere.)

Fabergé met the demand for frames with hundreds of frames,

frequently made of precious metals, stones or native Russian woods.

Every one was a one-of-a-kind, although there is some similarity.

Elaborately enameled and jeweled pieces were appropriate

for visiting dignitaries and servants,

but the royal family preferred simplicity and wooden frames.

Karelian birch was a favorite wood, enhanced with enamel and silver accents.

There is one birch frame with an aperture of orange guilloché enamel.

It holds a photo of Grand Duchess Anastasia,

the youngest daughter of Nicholas II.

A presentation gift frame holds a picture of the Tsarina,

painted by a Danish miniaturist who painted on ivory with a single hairbrush.

The famous fire screen picture frame is considered one of the finest examples of gold work ever produced by the House of Fabergé,

It is believed to have been given by Nicholas II to his mother

and to be inspired by a fire screen in her apartment,

made by a famous French cabinetmaker, George Jacob,

who specialized in Louis XV and XVI styles.

It uses all the techniques of the goldsmith's art.

Fabergé made many small *objects de fantaisie* –

-- a combination of the traditional *object d'art* with modern functions

carried out with exquisite taste and with the highest degree

of technical perfection.

They were small valuable artistic pieces.  
Many of these were carvings in hardstone.  
He used hard stone from all over Russia – nephrite, bowenite, rhodonite, rock crystal, aventurine quartz, lapis, malachite etc.  
Many he purchased – from Idar Oberstein, Germany; from Ekaterinburg, Russia, and from Berqin-Varagoz, Paris, who also supplied Cartier.  
Eventually he bought a stone carving business in Russia from a German stonecutter.

Cane and parasol handles were popular with the fashionable elite –  
one way they could show off their good taste and personal style.  
Some ladies would take their Fabergé parasol handles to their dressmakers and order dresses to match.  
One handle is a whimsical little hippopotamus carved from Bowenite with ruby eyes.  
Fabergé made hundreds of parasol handles.  
He knew how to create whimsy.

Fabergé said in 1914, “There are people who already have enough diamonds and pearls. Sometimes it is not even suitable to give jewelry as a present, but such a small thing (an object d’art) is the right thing.”

Flowers and figures of animals were a specialty of the House of Fabergé.  
There is a scent bottle, carved from nephrite, that looks like a pickle.  
It is hinged together with gold and rose-cut diamonds.

There is a parrot made from polished agate with cabochon ruby eyes who hangs from a silver stand.  
Fabergé took great care to select the right stone for his small animals to mimic their natural markings.  
The sea lion is carved from obsidian. The shiny surface makes the seal look wet.

Fabergé made some remarkable flower studies.  
His lily of the valley pieces are remarkable.  
The leaves are made of carved nephrite.  
The flowers of seed pearls and small rose diamonds.  
The vase is made of rock crystal drilled out to look like the vase is half full of water.  
Flowers give hope for spring during the long Russian winter.  
The Imperial Russian family had a garden of such flowers.

When homes were wired for electricity,  
electric bell pushes replaced the long strips of fabric that had been used to ring bells in servant quarters to summon servants.  
Fabergé made electric bell pushes that summoned servants.  
They looked like small art objects. They were called *Objects de Vertu*.  
They were placed on desks or tables in living rooms,  
readily accessible if servants needed to be summoned.  
King Edward VII gave one to his mistress.

It looked like a mushroom, finished in pink guilloché  
with a cabochon moonstone push surrounded by rose-cut diamonds.

A rare triple bell push features elephants standing on carpets with castles on their backs.  
One elephant was used to call a Lady-in-Waiting; two others for other attendants.  
It was supposed to belong to Empress Maria who was a Danish princess married to  
Alexander III.

Such elephants were a heraldic motif of Denmark.  
Nicholas II may have purchased it for his mother.

The late Malcolm Forbes had a number of these bell pushes in his collection.  
Fabergé made everything for a man's desk –  
pencil holders, calendar holders, picture frames, etc.

One of the few important pieces of Fabergé jewelry to survive  
is the Empress Josephine Tiara.

She divorced Napoleon in 1810.

Tsar Alexander I gave her the briolette-cut diamonds and pear-shaped diamonds that  
hang from each arch of the tiara.

A few years later, in 1814, she died.

Her son Eugene, from her first marriage, had been adopted by Napoleon  
after his father was killed in the Reign of Terror.

and was given the throne of Italy, named Viceroy of Italy and Prince of Venice.

One of his descendants, a Duke of Leuchtenberg, married into the Russian royal family,  
and the diamonds were returned to Russia.

The House of Fabergé set them into a beautiful tiara

along with 214 old cut diamonds and 400 rose-cut other diamonds.

### **Easter Eggs**

Easter is the highest holiday in the Russian Orthodox Church calendar.

Traditionally Easter eggs are exchanged as a sign of the Resurrection and of new life  
and of the end of the cold Russian winter.

-- wooden eggs, porcelain eggs, glass eggs, silver and gold eggs,  
hardstone carved eggs.

Alexander III commissioned an Imperial Easter Egg for his wife from Fabergé in 1885.

The first egg was a simple white enameled egg,

that opened to reveal a gold yolk,

that opened to reveal a small hen

that opened to reveal a miniature crown and egg shaped ruby pendant.

The Tsarina Maria Feodorovna was delighted.

The impressed Tsar made a standing order for an Imperial Easter Egg  
every year after that.

The only stipulation was that each egg should contain a surprise.

The following year, when the Tsar asked what the surprise would be,

Fabergé said, "Your majesty will be pleased."

The next Tsar, Nicholas II, continued the tradition.

But he ordered two eggs, one for his wife and one for his mother.  
Some 50 eggs would be made up until the Revolution.  
Two were made in 1918, but were not allowed to be delivered  
because the Imperial family were under arrest.

The eggs became more and more complicated,  
including mechanical toys and clock movements.  
All were encased in precious metals, enamel work, and jewels.  
During the First World War, Nicholas asked that the eggs reflect  
the austerity of the times.  
So the eggs of 1915 and 1916 were made of simple materials.  
The Steel Military Egg of 1916 was made of steel with little gold.  
The surprise was a miniature painting of the Tsar and his son  
on the battlefield greeting his generals.

Fabergé created thousands of works in enamel with an egg theme –  
smaller egg charms and pendants, candy boxes known as *bonhonnieres*, seals,  
scent bottles, even picture frames

One important client was Industrialist Emmanuel Nobel, the nephew of Alfred Nobel.  
He produced 1/3 of Russia's petrolatum at the turn of the century.  
He presented lavish gifts to his guests and friends at parties.  
In 1911 the House of Fabergé received an urgent request  
for a collection of 40 party gifts in a modern design, preferably broaches.  
The design commission was given to Alma Pihl, a young designer  
in the workshop of her uncle, Albert Holmstrom.  
She created a "modern" design, inspired by the frost that formed  
on the windows of her studio.  
She designed a series of rock crystal broaches with brilliant cut diamonds set in platinum  
arranged in tiny frost-like patterns in the shape of snowflakes.  
The gifts were a big success, inspiring an ice crystal and frost flower collection.

Then Nobel asked her to design an "Ice Egg" in 1913.  
It is made of platinum, silver, seed pearls and translucent white enamel.  
The frost pattern is created by engraving on the metal base  
as well as engraving and painting in between the layers of enamel.  
This gives the egg a lustrous shine and glow.  
The surprise inside is a rock crystal, platinum and diamond watch pendant.  
Fabergé asked her to design an Imperial Egg – the highest tribute he could offer.  
She was only 25 years old.  
She designed the "Winter Egg" for the Dowager Empress Maria in 1913.  
She also designed a "Mosaic Egg" for the Empress Alexandra for the Easter of 1914.