

Book Review by Timothy Adams

Art Historian and Historical Gold Work Scholar (USA)

The Fabergé Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, in its long-awaited book, showcases many of its exquisite pieces by Fabergé and others artists of the time by giving the reader a broad view of the time in which Faberge worked. Included in the book are essays by many of the leading Fabergé scholars of our time.

Fabergé: Treasures of Imperial Russia - Fabergé Museum, St. Petersburg is beautifully illustrated with not only objects from the Fabergé Museum, but also photos of the palatial rooms within the Shuvalov Palace which houses them. The interior photos give the reader a sense of grand setting in which these artifacts of yesteryear live, an environment similar to one in which many of them lived a century ago. Each chapter is generously illustrated with full-page color photographs of Fabergé's work, along with unique detail shots.

The book opens with an essay by Géza von Habsburg*, *The House of Fabergé*, detailing the history of the family and the firm. Archival photos of the Fabergé buildings in St. Petersburg, London, and Moscow illustrate the chapter along with a lovely full-page photo of a pink enamel triangular photo frame by Fabergé workmaster Viktor Aarne. Of course, the Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs are prominently featured in the chapter, *Fabergé Eggs: The Return of Lost Treasures* by Tatiana Muntian*, curator at the Moscow Kremlin Museums. She writes about the Forbes collection purchase and gives the provenance on each of the Imperial Eggs which are illustrated with new full-page color photographs. Each egg is described in scholarly detail; materials, artists, workmasters are all explored.

The role of the *Imperial Cabinet Gifts* is researched by Russian scholar Valentin Skurlov*. The Cabinet kept detailed records of incoming and outgoing Imperial commissions from jewelers, including Fabergé. Among the Cabinet archives, now at the Russian Historical Archives (RGIA), are found a treasure trove of historical information. In these archives, scholars found the original recipient of the famous Fabergé Coronation Snuff Box, often shown with the Coronation Imperial Easter Egg, was Lieutenant General Arthur von Bolfras, chief of the Military Chancellery of Austria's Emperor Franz Joseph I.

In a chapter dedicated to *Objects of Fantasy*, Fabergé author and scholar Kieran McCarthy* delves into the world of whimsical objects made by the House of Fabergé. The majority of objects produced by Fabergé were utilitarian pieces for accessorizing the turn of the century elite, cigarette cases, cane handles, bell pushes, etc ... But the objects of fantasy were just made to delight the eye and bring a smile to the beholder. Hardstone figures, animals, miniature furniture crafted of semi-precious stones, enamel, gold and gemstones are all photographed in beautiful detail.

Mark Schaffer*, director of A La Vieille Russie in New York, writes about *Jewelry & Accessories* in the Fabergé Museum. He explores Fabergé's jewelry designs from historical revival pieces to modern Aesthetic movement pieces, as well as accessories of everyday life, cigarette cases, belt buckles, desk sets, clocks and frames. Illustrated is a mauve guilloché enamel card playing set with chalk holders and brushes. A complete boxed nécessaire set from Henrik Wigström's workshop is shown with all its accoutrement, as is a bowenite parasol handle with a diamond monogram of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna.

Some readers may ask, “Do I need another book on Fabergé, will I learn anything new?” The answer is a resounding “Yes.” Essays by eleven historians and scholars cover a wide array of topics related to the diverse objects in the Fabergé Museum from Imperial Eggs to Imperial porcelain and silver. Ulla Tillander-Godenhielm* explores *Gold Snuff Boxes of the Eighteenth & Nineteenth Centuries* found in the collection. Boxes from various master goldsmiths utilizing champlevé and guilloché enamel, and pietra dura inlay, are included along with scholarly descriptions of the pieces and backgrounds on each of the artists. A landscape with a peasant couple, houses, and a river is depicted in a micro-mosaic, attributed to George Ferdinand Weckler (1800-?), and adorns an 1853 chased gold box by Johann Christian Heyde (1819-56). Full-page color photographs allow the viewer a chance to see the intricate complexity of decoration these snuff boxes possess.

Alexander von Solodkoff*, art historian and author, contributes a scholarly essay on *Russian Silver* highlighting some of the great silversmiths represented in the Fabergé Museum. He focuses on the development of the art of the silversmith in the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Examples of works from Pavel Sazikov, Johann Keibel, Pavel Ovchinnikov, and Fabergé’s workmaster, Julius Rappoport, richly illustrate this chapter with silver pieces from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. Next, the advent of a unique Russian style around 1850 that utilizes traditional Russian and Byzantine decorative motifs, and how this pan-slavic style becomes especially popular in Moscow, is discussed. Elaborate tea sets, kovshi, samovars, and *tromp-l’oeil* decorated trays illustrate the history of Russian silver.

Irina Buseva-Davydova, a Russian art historian, writes about *Russian Icons*. Using several examples from the museum’s collection of over 300 icons, she illustrates their history, and their importance to Russian society. This essay delves into the manufacturing processes and how they develop from simple handmade to more elaborate productions in factories with the prosperity of the country. The history of each icon illustrated is explored as is its iconography.

Ekaterina Khmelnitskaya, art historian and curator of porcelain and ceramics in the State Hermitage Museum, evaluates *Imperial Porcelain Vases*. The Imperial Porcelain factory made about 30 monumental vases a year, painted with a copy of one of the paintings in the Hermitage collection. The author goes into detail of how these vases were ornamented, and the process of copying the Hermitage paintings onto the vases while they were in the palace itself. Vases with elaborate landscapes, battle scenes, and portraits show how the artist had to keep the proportions of the original as he worked with the shape of the round vase.

Masterpieces of Russian Enamel, an essay by Tatiana Muntian* is extensive and wonderfully illustrated with outstanding examples from the Fabergé Museum collection. Because of its diversity of type and ornamentation, the collection has “few equals” according to Muntian. She explores important pieces by Pavel Ovchinnikov (1830-1888), Ivan Khlebnikov (1819-1881), and Feodor Rückert (1851-1918) along with the history of each of these prominent goldsmiths. The chapter is lavishly illustrated with enameled objects from many of the major suppliers to the Imperial Court, including Fabergé.

The book ends with an essay, *Carl Fabergé: The Return to St. Petersburg* by Mikhail Ovchinnikov*, First Deputy Director of the Fabergé Museum. He writes briefly about the history of St. Petersburg and its founding by Peter I, and the Emperor’s command that a jewelry trade be established in the city. He then gives the reader an overview of the city’s monuments, buildings and historical places

connected to Fabergé, and there are many. The firm seems to be connected deeply in this great Russian Imperial Capital, and the Fabergé museum collection is a testament to its august history.

The beautifully illustrated book is a wonderful addition to the library of historians and art lovers alike. The lack of an index and see references from informative texts to illustrations appearing later in the book are minor drawbacks to serious researchers.

*Fabergé Museum Advisory Board Members