

A Closer Look at the 1901 Queen Wilhelmina Nephrite Tray Last Seen in 1980

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Queen Wilhelmina Nephrite Tray by Fabergé, 13 1/4 in. (34 cm.) long (Christie's London and Tillander-Godenhielm, Ulla, et al. *Carl Fabergé and His Contemporaries*, 1980, p. 19)



View of the Decorated Red Gold Handles from the Top and the Underside (Courtesy Tillander-Godenhielm, *Ibid.*, and *The Connoisseur*, June 1962, p. 99)



For the wedding of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands (1880-1962) to Duke Henry of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1876-1934) on February 7, 1901, an avalanche of gifts poured in from all over the world. Members of the Dutch community in St. Petersburg chose a very suitable present from the Fabergé firm - a nephrite presentation tray in the *Renaissance-style*. In 1974, when Christie's auctioned it for the first time, the tray was front-page news in the Netherlands: how did an artifact from the Royal Family end up at auction? Was it stolen? The tray, considered an absolute highpoint in Fabergé's production was once again at auction in 1980, but has not been seen in the last 38 years. This research contribution offers a reconstruction of the tray's history and close-up photographs of the handles.

Christie's¹ described the presentation tray in 1980:

“A magnificent rectangular nephrite tray with diamond set and enameled gold mounts in the *Renaissance-style*, the tray formed as a shallow dish with curved ends carved from a block of slightly transparent black-speckled brilliant green nephrite, the red gold handles reserved with granulated yellow gold fields and decorated with scrolls, foliage and strap work, painted in shadings of green and translucent scarlet or black and opaque white enamel; set with stripes of rose-diamonds, two smaller and a large diamond in raised black and white enamel collets, the reverse of the handles finely engraved with strap work, with two elaborate double-scroll supports - 34.4 cm. long, signed *Fabergé*, workmaster Michael Perkhin, inventory number 4151, Kokoshnik gold mark, 1899-1908, in original fitted maple wood case stamped in Russian and French ‘Fabergé, St. Petersburg, Moscow’ and with the Imperial eagle.”

Géza von Habsburg and Alexander von Solodkoff in their 1979 book² wrote about the nephrite tray: “This [is] one of Fabergé's major pieces and the best example of the *Renaissance-style* in his oeuvre.” And Sotheby's London in its 2012 *Russian Art* auction catalog³ states, “*Renaissance-style* objects are rare in Fabergé's production; all known examples ... were produced in Perkhin's workshop (active, 1860-1903). Famously inspired by Carl Fabergé's admiration of early objects in the Green Vaults which he studied during his time in Dresden, other examples in this group include:

- 1894 Renaissance Egg (<https://fabergeresearch.com/eggs-faberge-imperial-egg-chronology/#renaissanceegg>)
- Smoky quartz cup (1899-1903), purchased by Leopold de Rothschild from Fabergé's London branch in 1912
- Rock crystal vase (<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/themes/publications/faberge-in-the-royal-collection/vase>) also presented by Rothschild to King George V and Queen Mary on their Coronation and now in the Royal Collection
- Covered smoky quartz cup sold by Sotheby's Geneva, May 17, 1984, Lot 667, and Sotheby's New York, April 16, 2008, Lot 411.

The extraordinary quality of the presentation tray says much about the (inter)national event the wedding of 20-year old Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands with Duke Henry of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. At age ten, Queen Wilhelmina had succeeded her father King William III as Queen under the regency of her mother Emma. Wilhelmina was the last hope for continuing the Dutch monarchy under the rule of the House of Orange-Nassau. The 1901 wedding made it more unlikely that her German cousins would inherit the throne. Much pressure lay on the shoulders of the bridegroom Duke Henry, youngest son of Grand Duke Frederick Francis II of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and youngest half-brother of Duchess Marie, better known as Fabergé's patron Grand Duchess Vladimir of Russia. Newspapers in the Netherlands extensively covered wedding details, the many presents and also the Faberge tray, which made "a splendidly rich impression, like a treasure from [...] Thousand-and-one-nights". The Dutch legation in St. Petersburg arranged the safe shipment of the valuable tray to The Hague⁴, likely via diplomatic mail.

The 1974 Auction⁵

While in 1901 the tray was mentioned in newspaper articles, in 1974 the object was front-page news: 'Royal Art Treasure Mystery at Auction' wrote *De Volkskrant* on April 11. At Soestdijk Palace, the residence of Queen Juliana (1909-2004) and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands (1911-2004), the discovery was made when the auction catalog arrived. According to the media the 'vaults' were immediately checked and indeed the tray, 'from the private collection', was gone. It was confirmed officially the Royal Family never sells gifts – as is still the policy – and theft could be 'ruled out almost certainly'. The tray was not missed until then 'because properties are not checked on a daily basis'. *De Volkskrant* mentions an increase in Queen Juliana's income from the State was on the political agenda in 1970, because her income was not enough to cover all costs and she had to make use of her private fortune to pay for all expenses incurred.

"It was not officially disclosed which private assets were sold, but according to experts it was mainly shares. One of the theories for the disappearance was it could have been lent to the organizers of a Fabergé exhibition but never returned. Naturally, Christie's refused to disclose the name of the American collector who auctioned the tray, but they confirmed it was rightfully acquired, and that the tray already was exhibited in New York (1968) and in London (1971) and on both occasions the Royal House was not the lender."⁶

A week later, an explanation was given after checking the administration: 'Disappeared dish (*sic*) was sold with the Queen's permission', wrote *De Tijd*. The explanation given: on May 18, 1948, Noordeinde Palace in The Hague was partly destroyed by fire, after which certain objects were relocated. The Court confirmed a number of items were sold in 1963, because they did not have any use anymore, or were not deemed 'desirable to possess' due to limited available storage space.⁷ On May 4, *De Volkskrant* presented the 'real' explanation, confirming what was already mentioned on April 11 in one article: 'Queen sold present due to a shortage of money'.⁸ According to the article, after the fire in 1948 a number of objects were spread out over different locations awaiting definitive storage. When a new administrator was appointed in 1963 his task was to bring order in the thus far quite chaotic organization structure of the royal court's finances. During inventories made back then, a number of artifacts were to be disposed of discreetly (which other items was not made clear). The explanation of storage room shortage "is explained in The Hague as a meager attempt to not squarely refute the first official explanation [...] it was explicitly stated that gifts to the Royal House are never sold. Now it appears that is what actually happened. Half and half, it is admitted the valuables were sold to cover the deficits in the State income of the Queen."

The Queen's Finances

Indeed, Queen Juliana's finances were less than ideal in the 1950's and especially in the 1960's. In 1948, her mother Queen Wilhelmina abdicated, making Juliana Head of State with all its burdens, but without inheriting the family's capital. Especially the pensions of the palaces' staff were a heavy burden, which was solved in 1959/1960.⁹ In 1961, Queen Juliana decided to pay her staff according to then current standards, which considerably raised her annual expenses, but in the same year her State income was increased from 1.5 to 2.5 million guilders per annum.¹⁰ By the mid-60's, the Queen started to incur private losses of 2.5 million guilders per annum, and since her private income from investments and possessions started to decrease, her private fortune started to shrink. In 1966, the Dutch government started proceedings to correct this situation, which was also extensively covered in the press. So, when in 1974 Queen Wilhelmina's Fabergé tray mysteriously appeared at auction, Juliana's financial situation certainly came across as a credible excuse for the sale in 1963. But was it true?

Prince Bernhard Enters the Stage

On May 2, 1974, *De Tijd* reported the tray was sold for 360.000 CHF (324.000 guilders) at auction in Geneva, '100.000 CHF lower than the seller had hoped for'. The buyer was a Mr. Afshar from Iran, a collector who traveled to Geneva for the auction (Ed. note: The precise identity of the buyer is unknown).¹¹ In 1977, the presentation tray was exhibited in Kenneth Snowman's loan exhibition of Fabergé works at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee.¹² In 1980, the tray was again auctioned in Geneva by Christie's. Although the tray is mentioned in the 1980 exhibition catalog of the Museum of Applied Arts in Helsinki, it was never exhibited there because Christie's deemed the tray too fragile to travel.¹³ And of course, the auction was news in the Netherlands once more with some newspapers incorrectly concluding Queen Juliana was selling another object from her collection.¹⁴ A regional newspaper included interesting information - in 1974 Christie's explained Queen Juliana's husband Prince Bernhard had sold the tray

in 1962 to 'his British friend Kenneth Snowman', who sold it a year later to an American collector.¹⁵ Which is very close to the truth: it was the British dealer Wartski who had acquired the tray from Prince Bernhard in 1963, and sold it the next year.¹⁶

This is interesting, because in November 1962 Queen Wilhelmina passed away, which means her estate – including the tray – was Queen Juliana's – Wilhelmina's only child – when Prince Bernhard sold the presentation tray to Wartski. It also means Juliana was in possession of her mother's money that year, making the financial problems given as motivation for the sale quite unlikely, at least for 1962/1963. This is further confirmed by the official account the Dutch government published in 2017 on the history of the financial relationship between the Dutch Royal House and the Government. The report explicitly states Queen Juliana started paying for her official expenses from her private accounts since the mid-60's¹⁷, not the early 60's. The three arguments given for the increased costs also do not hold for 1962/3. The increase in staff salary since 1961 was countered by an increase in income of 1 million guilders that same year. The increased number of state visits started from 1963, in the ten years before the number of state visits were minimal, plus: the different ministries covered involved costs. The increased family costs started in 1964, when the first of their four daughters got engaged (Princess Irene; the Princesses Margriet and Beatrix in 1965, and Princess Christina in 1975). So when in 1974 the Palace needed one week to come up with an implausible explanation of the disappearance, and two more weeks to come up with a 'credible' story disproven above, it appears likely Prince Bernhard did indeed sell the tray to Wartski but without his wife Queen Juliana's knowledge in 1963. Hence the confusion when the loss of the artifact was discovered in 1974, and the urgency to state the sale happened with the Queen's knowledge and approval.

Snowman's Article in *The Connoisseur*

But there is more: The June 1962 issue of the art history journal, *The Connoisseur*, had already featured an article on this tray written by A. Kenneth Snowman, proprietor of Wartski, with photography by the Rijksmuseum, the national museum of history and art in Amsterdam, and an illustration of the 1901 presentation booklet.¹⁸ Snowman writes:

“Always sure of his materials, Carl Fabergé's use of nephrite combined with bright translucent and painted enamels on gold must be accounted one of his happiest inspirations. The magnificent tray [...] is carried out as a pastiche in the Renaissance taste. However, instead of rock crystal, lapis lazuli or some variety of agate, a large slab of this dark rich jade from Siberia has been found and faultlessly carved (probably in the neighboring workshops of Karl Woerffel), in the form of a rectangular shallow tray with gently curved ends. The handles of red gold with reserved fields of granulated yellow gold, are composed of an elaborate system of scrolls enameled translucent scarlet and pale green on *guilloché* backgrounds and opaque black and white.

To give yet another dimension to this already sumptuous object, rivers of rose diamonds and large single stones in raised collets serve to light up and punctuate this splendid example of St. Petersburg work. It is cradled in an engraved gold strapwork frame which gives an impression

of lightness, one might almost say levitation, to the whole design. [...] the inscription set out in the presentation booklet (illustrated below):

Madam,

Respectful love for and loyal attachment to the House of Orange have always been the pride of our Fathers and the glory of their children.

'Neither Moscow's ice nor snow did ever freeze the ardour burning in our breast, made the keener by absence.' (Ed. note: quotation from the 17th century Dutch Shakespeare, Joost van den Vondel)

Your faithful subjects in the far North beseech God: radiant be the path of life of our Queen and of her Royal Consort.

May the wish of Holland's greatest poet come true in the length of the days of your House;

'Wherever the sea is stayed in its course by beach and dunes ... be blessed and envied.'

Your Majesty's faithful subjects"



Wedding Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Henry of the Netherlands, 1901
(wiki)



Queen Wilhelmina Wedding Tray and 1901 Presentation Booklet
(Snowman, A. Kenneth, "A Group of Virtuoso Pieces by Carl Fabergé",
The Connoisseur, June 1962, pp. 96-99)



Presentation Booklet
(1962 Article in *The Connoisseur*)

The beautifully-made booklet – which includes a drawing of the St. Petersburg statue of Emperor Peter the Great, Queen Wilhelmina’s great-great-grandfather – probably is still in the collection of the Royal House Archive in The Hague. Most intriguing about Snowman’s article are the photo credits: “The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam” and “Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands and His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard.” If the tray in 1962 was the personal possession of Queen Wilhelmina (died in November 1962), Prince Bernhard had no gracious permission to give, also not if the tray was part of the Royal House Archive collection, or part of Queen Juliana’s collection. It is possible Snowman wanted to acknowledge his friend Prince Bernhard’s role in allowing the tray and the booklet to be photographed for his article, which further strengthens the thesis that the sale was well prepared along the common practice in the art world to first get the object published, then sell it. Other supporting evidence: not long after the sale to Wartski in 1963, Foundations to hold the collections of the Dutch Royal House were established, and 1962 was a very busy year for the Royal House Archive because every week a new chest filled with historical items from Soestdijk Palace arrived at the archive to be incorporated in the historical collection, one of the items being a rare 25 kg heavy volume on jade...¹⁹ Considering these factors it is difficult to maintain, especially after the 1962 article in *The Connoisseur*, if Queen Juliana would have forgotten about the sale of this tray with her consent in order to compensate for financial losses.

Prince Bernhard: Loss of Status, Loss of Fabergé

Watergate, the scandal ending Nixon’s Presidency, uncovered a whole new scandal known as the Lockheed Scandal where Prince Bernhard fell from grace, because up until this scandal broke in 1975/1976, he was revered as the national war hero. King George VI of the United Kingdom supposedly said Bernhard was the only person who had enjoyed World War II and it is supposed that the character of James Bond is partly based on him. After Bernhard’s death in 2004, well-researched books were published uncovering the web of lies with which the Prince carefully maintained a false public image. One of the most elaborate attempts was the publication of Alden Hatch’s biography of the Prince published in 1962.²⁰ Scholarship by now has carefully debunked the content of this book, co-edited by the Prince, as a hagiography. The Lockheed Scandal uncovered Prince Bernhard’s acceptance of bribes from the aviation company, payments totaling 1 million dollars happening

between 1960 and 1962. The scandal caused a constitutional crisis, which could have been the end of the Dutch monarchy, but in the end stripping the Prince of his military positions and uniforms solved it. Academic books have also documented the Prince's lifelong habit of acquiring money from everywhere he could, including involvement in illegal international arms and airplane trade, especially right after the war. In 1962, *De Telegraaf* wrote a profile on the Prince, featuring quotes from him, stating the fascinating observation: 'Bernhard is friendly, but no one needs to fear he will allow himself to be exploited, there is a higher chance people will discover, during a friendly conversation, they just bought a Fokker Friendship'²¹, which was a Dutch-built type of airplane. Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard's marriage was rocky, to say the least. By now it is well-documented the Prince treated the Queen in a demeaning manner even in public. He considered himself, especially around 1962, as master of the household, including its finances.

In the same year, Queen Juliana was livid about the concept text of the biography Alden Hatch wrote. It is also documented that on several occasions Prince Bernhard sold items, for example paintings, from the Royal Collection for his personal gain and for the sake of his World Wildlife Fund, with and without permission of Juliana. The Prince would have had no problem in selling Queen Wilhelmina's Fabergé tray without asking permission from the Queen, his wife Juliana. Bernhard's father-in-law, Queen Wilhelmina's deceased husband, never received a state allowance but lived on her money, which led to problems with his continuous borrowing of money, to such an extent Wilhelmina refused his inheritance when he died in 1934. Having learned from that episode, the Dutch government did give Bernhard his own income when he married Juliana, to prevent problems. But Bernhard's personality type and life circumstances made it impossible. Despite his State allowance Prince Bernhard was hemorrhaging money throughout his lifetime, but especially in the years 1960-1962 this was the case.

His farm project in Tanzania had considerable losses. In 1952, his first – as far as we know – out-of-wedlock daughter was born, and regular payments went to her and her mother. He also had to take care of his mother Princess Armgard of Lippe-Biesterfeld out of his own pocket. The estate he bought her for 250.000 guilders in 1952 was paid in cash, and each year an equal amount went to her for the upkeep of her status as royal mother-in-law. For comparison: his State allowance in the early 60's was 300.000 guilders, increased to 450.000 in 1966. From first-hand accounts it is also known the Prince made a habit of trying to sell planes in order to pay for the upbringing of his second daughter born out of wedlock in 1967. The Prince was always looking for cash, while carefully maintaining the outward image of being frugal and complaining about a shortage of money for the royal household in general, even in the Dutch media. As Prime Minister Den Uyl – who dealt with the Lockheed Scandal – said: the Prince felt untouchable.²²

A commentary by B.Kr. in *De Tijd* in 1974 stated the Rijksmuseum would have enjoyed adding the presentation tray to their collection, especially since hardly any Fabergé works are included in Dutch public collections and because the tray was a gift of Dutch citizens living in St. Petersburg to the Head of State for her wedding.²³ Instead, the tray – according to the greatest Fabergé scholars an absolute highpoint in its body of work – disappeared from public view in 1980, when it was auctioned for the second time. But we still have the pictures... Information on the current whereabouts of the tray is very welcome: erikschoonhoven@gmail.com | <http://erikschoonhoven.nl/>

Endnotes:

- ¹ Christie's Geneva, May 12, 1980, Lot 292, includes literature and exhibition citations. The tray was not shown in Helsinki as suggested by the auction catalog and also in the object list with the exhibition catalog cited under endnote 13.
- ² von Habsburg-Lothringen, G. and von Solodkoff, A., *Fabergé, Court Jeweler to the Tsars*, 1979, illus. # 45, p. 41.
- ³ Sotheby's London, *Russian Art*, November 27, 2012, Lot 557.
- ⁴ *Haarlem's Dagblad*, 7 February 1901, Tweede Blad.
- ⁵ Christie's Geneva, May 1, 1974, Lot 232.
- ⁶ *De Volkskrant*, 11 April 1974, *Koninklijk kunstbezit raadsel op veiling*, p. 1; *Het Vrije Volk*, same date, *Kostbare schaal van koningin duikt op bij Christie's*, p. 1; *Trouw*, 12 April 1974, *Koninklijke vaas (sic) op onbegrijpelijke wijze opgedoken op veiling*, p. T3; *De Volkskrant*, 12 April 1974, *Koninklijke schaal (sic) blijkt al in '68 verdwenen*, p. 6; *De Telegraaf*, 12 April 1974, *Koninklijk huwelijkscadeau op de veiling aangeboden*, p. 7.
- New York exhibition in 1968 at A La Vieille Russie, *The Art of the Goldsmith & the Jeweler*, p. 132, illustrated between pages 132, 133 number 349 (Ex-Collection: Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands and His Royal Highness Princess Bernhard). The tray was not included in the printed 1971 London exhibition catalog, *A Thousand Years of Enamel*.
- ⁷ *De Tijd*, 19 April 1974, *Verdwenen schaal met goedvinden Koningin verkocht*, p. 5.
- ⁸ *De Volkskrant*, 4 May 1974, *Koningin verkocht gift omdat ze krap zat*, p. 1.
- ⁹ Woelderink, B., *Geschiedenis van de Thesaurie*, 2010, p. 212.
- ¹⁰ Van Baalen, C. et al., *Het inkomen van de Koning*, 2017, pp. 21, 27, 59, 107-8, 232-3.
- ¹¹ Kati David, *Koninklijke schaal voor 324.000 gulden naar Iran*, in *De Tijd*, 2 May 1974, p. 2.
- ¹² Snowman, A. Kenneth, *Fabergé, 1846 – 1920: An International Loan Exhibition Assembled on the Occasion of the Queen's Silver Jubilee and Including Objects from the Royal Collection at Sandringham*, June 23- September 25, 1977, P12 on p. 110, illus. p. 82.
- ¹³ Tillander-Godenhielm, Ulla, et al. *Carl Fabergé and His Contemporaries*, March 16-April 8, 1980, pp. 19-20. Email communication with the organizer and also the author of exhibition catalog, 13 January, 2018.
- ¹⁴ For example *Limburgs Dagblad*, 12 April 1980, *Koningin verkoopt dienblad*, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Leeuwarder Courant, 11 April 1980, *Schaal van Wilhelmina weer te koop*, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Confirmed by Geoffrey Munn OBE, Managing Director of Wartski.
- ¹⁷ van Baalen, C., et al., pp. 232-233.
- ¹⁸ Snowman, A. Kenneth, "A Group of Virtuoso Pieces by Carl Fabergé", *The Connoisseur*, Vol. 150, Nr. 604, June 1962, pp. 96-99.
- ¹⁹ *De Tijd De Maasbode*, 28 April 1962, *In het Koninklijk Huisarchief*, p. 25.
- ²⁰ Hatch, Alden, *Prins Bernhard. Zijn plaats en functie in de moderne monarchie*, 1962.
- ²¹ *De Telegraaf*, 9 November 1962, *Voor dit baantje heb je de huid van een olifant nodig*, p. 13.
- ²² Withuis, Jolande, *Juliana. Vorstin in een mannenwereld*, 2016, Aalders, Gerard, *Niets was wat het leek*, Amsterdam, 2014; *Bernhard Zakenprins*, 2010; *Het Lockheedschandaal*, 2011, *De Prins kan mij nog meer vertellen*, 2009. For the mythology of the Prince's youth, see Annejet van der Zijl, *Bernhard, een verborgen geschiedenis*, 2011.
- ²³ *De Tijd*, 19 April 1974, *Vrijmoedig commentaar*, p. 4.