

FABERGE'S BIRDS

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Peter Carl Fabergé was born in St. Petersburg in 1846, and eventually became Goldsmith to the Imperial Court of Russia, and a supplier of wonderful artworks worldwide. He assumed charge of the workshop his father had established in St. Petersburg when he was only twenty-four years old, and presented the first Imperial Easter Egg to the Russian royal family in 1884. The workshop survived until 1918, by which time Russia had succumbed to revolution and the royal family was no more. Fabergé himself escaped to Europe and died in Switzerland in 1920.

Jo Wicht penned an interesting article on Fabergé's various creations, and the stones and metals that were used, for the Mineral Chatter of April 2007. Although his most famous creations are undoubtedly the Imperial Easter Eggs, his workshops produced an incredible range of artworks including jewelry, clocks, buttons, decorated boxes, figurines, enameled plants and flowers, and hardstone carvings of animals and birds. One of the books in our Club Library illustrates a selection of these; it catalogues the exhibits on display in London for the Queen's Silver Jubilee.

The Bird Collection

Many collectables were purchased by members of the British Royal Family and are still in the Royal Collection today (see <https://www.rct.uk/collection>). This article concerns the avian hardstone carvings – by 1977 there were fifty-nine birds in the Royal Collection, presently eighty-five bird “studies” are listed, but not all consist of stone. The bird's range in size from a tiny agate owl (around 16 mm tall) to the crow pictured below which is ten times that size. The birds are usually stand-alone, but some are on metal perches, and even inside cages. Birds represented are both wild and domesticated, and of worldwide occurrence. Even extinct birds such as the dodo and the great auk feature. There are cute chicks and ducklings, and ugly vultures and Marabou storks – the entire avian spectrum is covered!



Right. Flamingo in pink agate. Royal Collection Trust, ©Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

The Russian Empire, as it was known in Fabergé's day, was a plentiful source of gemstones and precious metals. The most important areas for gemstones were the Ural Mountains, the Caucasus Mountains and Siberia. At least twenty different stones were used to produce the bird carvings, many carefully selected to provide appropriate colors and textures. The most frequently-used stones include variously-colored agate, chalcedony, jasper, carnelian, nephrite, obsidian and quartzite. Rarer examples were carved from rock crystal, rhodonite, bowenite, aventurine, labradorite, onyx, crocidolite and lapis lazuli. The eyes of the birds were fashioned from cabochon rubies, rose diamonds, olivine or aquamarine. Metal or alloy trimmings were formed from gold, colored gold, silver or gilt.

Bird carvings were started in the stone-carving workshop to Fabergé-approved designs. Carvers often worked ground stone referring to a “maquette”, a wax model made by the St. Petersburg artists, often from a live study (and this sometimes-involved international travel). The lapidary work included the use of hand tools, as well as cutting and polishing wheels. After this, carvings made from stone combinations (known as “mosaic” sculpture) were assembled and glued, and the resulting models were sent to the jewelry workshop headed by Henrik Wigström for mounting or trim.

Styles used for the bird carvings vary, even with models produced within two or three years. The realistic style true to color and feather texture was frequently made up from a number of different stones. Other birds were designed to bring out a particular characteristic, such as the clumsy pelican, or the fluffy chick. A third style was influenced by Asian art. Three birds are pictured in this article and these are described below.

The pink agate flamingo is a bird familiar to all Capetonians, but banded pink agate is rare in Southern Africa. The stone has been cleverly carved so that the color bands of the agate coincide with features on the beak tip and back feathers of the bird in real life. This sculpture, carved between 1903 and 1908, stands 10.2 cm tall; the eyes are rose diamonds and the legs are fashioned from gold.



Right. Crow in obsidian and jasper. Royal Collection Trust, ©Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

The “hoodie”, or hooded crow, of Scotland and Northern Europe is a grey and black version of the South African pied crow. The stones used here are plain black obsidian with no “snowflakes” and grey Kalgan jasper. Russia is known for the many colors of jasper to be found, especially in the Ural Mountains. The crow has eyes of aquamarine and silver-gilt legs. It was carved in 1907 and is relatively large (15.7 cm from head to tail). The combination of stones and overlying feather texture of the bird are very life-like, and the jasper and obsidian fit together seamlessly.



The 5.6 cm-tall kingfisher (or ice-bird as it was known to the Russians) consists of dark Siberian nephrite, with rose diamond eyes and gold feet. It has a mate in the Royal Collection which is made in the same style out of pale green bowenite. Both birds exhibit a completely different style to the previous two birds, as the design was influenced by Fabergé’s interest in Asian art – he had a personal collection of Netsuke, or traditional carvings. Another example of Japanese influenced style can be seen in the “puffy sparrow” on the Royal Collection website. The angular lines of the kingfishers (carved in 1900) were made in the style of Ittobori carving from early 19th century Japan.

Left. Kingfisher in nephrite. Royal Collection Trust, ©Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

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- The catalogue in the Club Library is “Faberge 1846-1920”. Library number 107/S24, written in 1977.