

FABERGÉ: A CULTURAL PHENOMENON OF THE MODERN AGE

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FIG 1 Business card of Carl Fabergé, France, early twentieth-century.

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When Marina Lopato died she was full of plans for future exhibitions and publications, most of which must remain unrealised. The following article was the last that she completed and was still untranslated at the time of her death: it is thus not edited as she would perhaps have wished. We have decided to publish it nonetheless, for it covers an important subject, one on which she felt strongly, and calls on us to reflect on the need for serious scholarship in order to withstand the pressures of those market interests that dominate the world of Fabergé, as well as other comparable fields, in the twenty-first century.

Today the name Fabergé is a brand. A brand on which thousands of people make money or make their name, which they use to win a popularity that is at times highly ambiguous. When the firm closed in 1918 it was employing some

500 people. If each of those was one of a family of five, some 2,500 people were living off Fabergé's earnings. That number can now be multiplied many times. Not only are there hundreds of stone-carvers, jewellers and enamellers quite openly creating imitations and fakes, or objects 'in Fabergé style' (as they say somewhat euphemistically) but there are dealers and collectors, all kinds of 'experts' and agents claiming to be connoisseurs or skilled valuers, through whose agency ever more fakes and imitations are allowed to enter the market. Publishers and their employees, gallery owners, journalists, writers of books, catalogues and articles, archivists and photographers, artists and exhibition designers: these are all part of the business that is what Fabergé has come to stand for. And each of them has a family. No less incredible is the geographical scope of the Fabergé phenomenon: while members of this 'community' are active mainly in Russia, the USA and Europe, they are also to be found further afield, in Turkey, South Africa and Australia. Their activities are supported through the media, through newspapers and magazines, radio and television, which in turn make money out of Fabergé by creating programmes and films. Fabergé exhibitions have become blockbuster entertainments, the walls plastered with blow-ups of Russian churches against a blood-red sunset, of coronations, of members of the Russian royal family and Rasputin, creating a setting for glamorous fashion shows within the exhibition space.

What does any of this have to do with Carl Fabergé and his indisputable achievements?

Fabergé owed much of his success to his understanding of people and their tastes, to a perspicacity and sound

FIG 2 —
Kettle, aluminium, circa 1915, Fabergé.
(The Russian National Museum, Moscow, on loan to the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph by Aleksey Pakhomov)



FIG 3 —
Carl Bulla, photograph of a charity exhibition of the products of Fabergé, von Dervis Mansion, St Petersburg, silver-bromine print, 1902.



business sense that allowed him to find his own niche even in the midst of serious competition. Standards, however, were always maintained, whether an object was part of his mass output or a unique piece commissioned by someone of wealth and rank. Whatever one's attitude to Fabergé's creations, there can be no doubt that Carl Fabergé himself was proud of his firm's products and where a genuine item seems to depart from his high standards, it was nearly always in reaction to some specific request from a particular client.

Fakes, imitations and repetitions represent the most acute problem faced by Fabergé scholars and collectors. More than a hundred years have passed since the firm ceased to exist, yet at times one almost feels as though its

output is as intensive as it was at the start of the twentieth century: 'Fabergé' works regularly turn up at auction or in the hands of dealers or collectors. It has been estimated that Fabergé sold about 250,000 pieces in total, but of the 50,000 to 60,000 works known today, on the market, in museums and in private hands, according to Geza von Habsburg (who coined the phrase 'Fauxbergés'¹) only about 20,000 are genuine. I myself have visited workshops where the shelves are stacked with plaster casts of elephants, bulldogs, pigs and monkeys used as models for stone carvings that are often of the very highest quality, but which are not true Fabergé.

Craftspeople have looked to the past throughout the history of silver and jewellery; they have absorbed its lessons,

1. Géza von Habsburg and Marina Lopato, *Fabergé: Imperial Jewellery*, exhibition catalogue, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 1993, pp 165-7.



FIG 4 —
Decorative *kovsh*, silver-gilt, House of Fabergé,
1899–1908.

using them to create their own individual style. Were not ancient engraved gems the touchstone for Italian Renaissance gem-engravers, inspiring them to imitate and to innovate? Outright fakes have always been a different matter, however, not least because no buyer or owner likes to think they have been deceived. In the end, making fakes is largely a matter of technical skill: it is much easier than creating a new work, even one in a similar style. To innovate one has so many options: to take the original and use it to resolve one's own artistic aspirations, to produce a subtle reflection of its inner essence, or merely replicate its characteristic forms and patterns. All too often, those who declare themselves to be 'continuing the tradition' are simply adopting the most superficial aspects of Fabergé's output, saccharine-sweet and not without a large dose of kitsch. It is not only the less-demanding and less well-informed who approve of such work: at times, even professionals are enthusiastic. Dangerously, it is often hard to see the dividing line between these pieces 'à la Fabergé' and deliberate fakes.

A HISTORY OF FAKES

Imitators were a problem even during Fabergé's lifetime and it is not always possible to distinguish the finer works

of the Petersburg jewellers Ivan Britsyn, Alexander Tillander or Karl Gahn from his firm's mass output. European competitors, meanwhile, sought to tempt wealthy clients by 'borrowing' aspects of the Fabergé style, particularly after his success at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. Amongst the larger firms were Kochert in Vienna, Collingwood and Co in London, and the Friedländer Brothers in Berlin, but perhaps the greatest rivals were Cartier (representatives visited St Petersburg several times) and Boucheron (who opened a branch in Moscow in 1897). Von Habsburg has demonstrated that Cartier's books record 169 flower compositions and 200 hardstone animal figures, many acquired from craftsmen who were supplying Fabergé, such as Mikhail Ovchinnikov, Karl Werfeland Alexey Denisov-Uralsky, and has pointed out that most are probably now mixed up among the objects attributed to Fabergé. The question inevitably arises as to whether this was Cartier's intention at the time.

On Carl Fabergé's death, his sons Eugène and Alexander established Fabergé & Cie in Paris selling, among other things, stone figures made to Alexander's designs in the town of Idar Oberstein, in Germany. Some of these too have inevitably been identified with Carl himself, whose close contacts with the town saw him acquiring stones there, and perhaps even ready-made objects.

True fakes started to turn up in large numbers in the USA in the late 1920s and 1930s, not without some assistance from Armand Hammer and one of the several Soviet bodies responsible for foreign trade. Emerging in major centres, these objects did much to promote a wave of interest in Fabergé.

In Russia itself, fakes came to prominence in the 1960s, thanks to Naum Nikolaevsky and his brother-in-law Vasily



FIG 5 — Pig figurine, beloretsk quartzite, wood and diamonds, 1900s, House of Fabergé.

Konovalenko. They specialised in the sale of genuine enamels, from which they had removed old marks, replacing them with those of Carl Fabergé, but their greatest success was to come with carved stone figures of people and animals, which found their way

onto the Western market.

When Nikolaevsky and Konovalenko were arrested and sentenced in 1969 the void was soon filled by Mikhail Monastyrsky. In 1977, after a stint in prison, he met a black-market dealer and handler of stolen goods, Albert Heifetz (known as Alik), who suggested that they turn out stone and silver items in the manner of Fabergé. Their well-organised enterprise involved numerous individuals, most of whom had no idea that the small pieces they were producing were to become part of larger objects put on sale in Leningrad, or further afield, via middlemen. Well-known artists, jewellers and stone carvers, as well as younger unknown individuals, found themselves caught up unawares in a large criminal operation. Although fully aware of what was going on, the law-enforcement agencies intervened only when foreign buyers started taking goods abroad. Monastyrsky was arrested for hard currency offences and illegal dealing in antiques, but the 'fake machine' continued its workings, gaining momentum and intensity.

WHY FABERGÉ?

To more fully understand the reasons behind, and the scope of interest in, Fabergé's products and to comprehend

how they came to exert such a strong influence on the revival of craftsmanship in Russia (above all on the carving of coloured stones), we need to consider the context in which this interest emerged. The ideological and spiritual vacuum left by the failure of the Communist system did much to promote a fascination with Russia's imperial heritage and with pre-1917 cultural traditions: a fascination that affected every layer of society to some degree. Idealised and mythologised, the past became a lost paradise contrasting with the grey reality of 'developed socialism', while the tragic end of the last tsar and his family did much to facilitate their elevation to the pantheon of hero-gods. But amongst the other symbols of 'Old Russia' was court jeweller Carl Fabergé, who encapsulated the image of Russian magnificence, of Russian skill and the Russian art of stone carving. By the late 1980s, not surprisingly, the art of Fabergé had come to be seen as the benchmark of aesthetic quality and as a model of impeccable taste, shaping the artistic preferences of a generation of collectors and admirers of jewellery and hardstones in the new Russia. For many years, such collectors judged contemporary pieces by their similarities to the products of the famous pre-revolutionary firm. This inevitably had an effect on those craftsmen and artists whose livelihood depended on their clients' desires. The growing market needed to be fed, and demand led to increased production of both more-or-less precise replicas and outright fakes. But the use of precious stones and metals was strictly regulated by the authorities and such items were increasingly exported illegally, avoiding customs duties and leading the law-enforcement agencies to take a closer look.

Ironically, it was this situation that did much to stimulate specialist study of the firm's history and output for, when objects were confiscated, museum



FIG 6 —
Fish-shaped ashtray, silver, 1890s, House of Fabergé, master Julius Rappoport

FIG 7 —
Framed miniatures of the Russian Imperial family, watercolour on ivory, gold and silver-gilt, circa 1896–1905, House of Fabergé, master Johan Viktor Aarne (Cleveland Museum of Art, the India Early Minshall Collection)



2. Irina Alexandrovna Rodimtseva, *Ювелирные изделия фирмы Фаберже*, [Jewelled Objects of the Firm of Faberge], Moscow, 1971.
3. Kenneth Snowman, *The Art of Carl Fabergé*, London, 1953.
4. Marina Lopato, 'Ювелирные изделия Фаберже' [Metalwork by Fabergé], *Декоративное искусство СССР* [Decorative Arts in the USSR], no 6, 1983, pp 41-3.
5. Marina Lopato, 'Fresh Light on Fabergé', *Apollo*, January 1984, no 263, pp 43-9.
6. Marina Lopato, "'Faberge Eggs'. Re-dating from New Evidence', *Apollo*, February 1991, no 348, pp 91-4.
7. Géza von Habsburg, Marina Lopato, op cit, see note 1.

specialists were asked to provide an expert opinion. Until the 1980s Fabergé had been largely ignored: there were no publications save for a slender brochure published in 1971 by Irina Alexandrovna Rodimtseva², whose status as director of the Armoury in the Moscow Kremlin allowed her to bypass the unspoken ban on publications dealing with this symbol of tsarist Russia. Works in museums were kept in store and the Hermitage had no scholarly literature, save a copy of Kenneth Snowman's *The Art of Carl Fabergé*³ that someone had brought back from a rare trip abroad.

When I was approached by the authorities for information on fakes I was forced to dig into the archives. With beginner's luck I immediately discovered fascinating documents relating to the first Fabergé Easter eggs and other early pieces, as well as to Fabergé's work as restorer for the Hermitage. Thus began a new stage in the study of the firm's history, fed by a rich body of archive material. Publication continued to be controversial, however, and it was only after a battle royal that I was able to publish an article in 1983: 'Metalwork by Fabergé'.⁴ Permission was required from the Ministry of Culture before this material could be published abroad, but in 1984 an English version appeared in *Apollo* under the title 'Fresh Light on Faberge'⁵ followed by another article in English in 1991.⁶

By this time Fabergé was on everyone's lips. In 1989 Vyacheslav Vasilyevich Mukhin, Director of the Elagin Island Palace Museum in St Petersburg, had the idea for an exhibition entitled *Great Fabergé*, still a daring move. Not only was it the first display of works by the firm of Fabergé in the USSR but, thanks to Ulla Tillander-Godenhielm, it included loans from foreign collections. The exhibition was the catalyst that sparked interest in the art of coloured hardstones for a whole new generation of enthusiasts.

In 1992 Mukhin initiated a second exhibition, *The Fabulous Epoch of Fabergé*, held in the Catherine Palace at Pushkin (Tsarskoe Selo), south of St Petersburg. That same year the Armoury held its own *World of Fabergé* exhibition in Moscow, organised by Rodimtseva. Already in the planning stage in 1991 was a large show organised by the American Fabergé Arts Foundation jointly with the Hermitage Museum, *Fabergé: Imperial Jeweller*. With loans from museums in St Petersburg and Moscow and from major foreign lenders, it was held in the George's Hall of the Winter Palace in 1993–94, before moving on to Paris and London.⁷ Running in parallel was an exhibition of works by contemporary St Petersburg metalworkers and stone carvers, entitled *Under the Mark of Fabergé*. The Fabergé Arts Foundation did much to support contemporary craftspeople, holding exhibitions and



FIG 9 —
Imperial Red Cross Easter Egg, gold, silver gilt, enamel, glass and ivory, 1915, House of Fabergé,
master Henrik Wigström
(Cleveland Museum of Art, the India Early Minshall Collection)



8. Notably Rifat Gafifiullin, *Изделия фирмы Фаберже конца XIX – начала XX века в собрании ГМЗ “Павловск”* [Works by the Fabergé Firm Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century in the Collection of Pavlovsk State Museum Reserve] IX/ 1, St Petersburg, 2013 (Pavlovsk State Museum Reserve Full Collection Catalogues).

competitions, bringing them together to talk about their plans and their problems. On the initiative of the Foundation three shows were held in the BlueBedroom of the Winter Palace between 1997 and 2000, under the common title *Great Fabergé in the Hermitage*. Many articles and books have appeared since, the work of Valentin Skurlov, Tatiana Muntyan and Alexander Ivanov, and new authors continue to emerge, who have concentrated on specific aspects of the firm’s history or on individual works.

The advancement of Fabergé studies relies on archival work, in which context we must draw particular attention to the catalogue of the 1993 exhibition which set a high standard, matched by only a few since, notably Rifat Gafifiullin, whose publications reflect his unparalleled knowledge and understanding of the archives.⁸ Only careful use of archival material can help us sort out the vast body of objects that go under the name of Fabergé, to understand the cultural, social and philosophical aspects of

the Fabergé phenomenon and to be of service to scholars, dealers and collectors. As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of that ground-breaking exhibition of 1993, and interest in Fabergé continues to grow, we must always keep this in mind.

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