

RECENT ACQUISITION

THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINEARTS: A MASTERPIECE BY FABERGE IN THE NEO-RUSSIAN STYLE

BARRY SHIFMAN



FIG 1 —
Covered tureen, tray and ladle, silver, silver-gilt, cabochon amethyst, chrysoprase, chalcedonies and garnets, Moscow, 1908-17, warrant mark of Fabergé.
(Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange.
Photo: Travis Fullerton © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

Born in St Petersburg, Carl Fabergé (1846-1920) was the head of the leading firm of pre-Revolutionary jewellers and goldsmiths in Russia, whose name is still known today throughout the world. The Fabergé firm created fantastic and luxurious objets d'art such as imperial Easter eggs, jewellery, enamelled boxes and cigarette cases, parasol handles, picture frames, silver and gold services, and official presentation gifts for

the last two Russian tsars. The business was started in 1842 by Gustav Fabergé, in St Petersburg; by 1872, his son Carl was managing the firm, and he expanded it with shops in Moscow, Odessa, Kiev, and London, overseeing a large staff of artists and craftsmen who created more than 300,000 intricate objects. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 Fabergé fled to Switzerland where he died in 1920.

The rare and monumental jewelled tureen, tray, and ladle in the neo-Russian style recently acquired from Wartski in London by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) was made in Moscow by Fabergé and is marked for 1908-1917. It is decorated with swans, porpoises, and other distinctive ornamental motifs. The overall decoration on the tureen includes stylised waves in the form of geometric zig-zag shapes, curvilinear algae at the base, and peacock feathers and there are pairs of stylized dolphins on the cover. The tray is elaborately decorated with geometric motifs and acorn leaves, set with cabochon stones in a similar manner to the tureen.

Although the pieces now in Virginia are marked, including with inventory numbers, it has not been possible to establish, through the Fabergé archives in Moscow, the original owner or who commissioned it. Due to its sheer magnificence, this splendid object must have been commissioned or acquired by a very wealthy member of society. On the finial to the cover are entwined initials surrounded by a garland which, together with the swan handles of the tureen (swans are a symbol of fidelity as they mate for life), suggest that this was a wedding or anniversary gift.

While many objects made by Fabergé in St Petersburg were in a pronounced European neo-Classical style much of Fabergé's silver was made in their workshops in Moscow. The firm's workshops in the city, established in 1887, were by the end of the century creating pieces catering for a distinct taste for pieces in the neo-Russian style or 'Styl modern' favoured by the newly affluent middle class of the city. Although these works featured decorative motifs and forms found in sixteenth and seventeenth century architecture, metalwork, and paintings they were reinterpreted and given a more modernistic slant exemplified by the angularity of the handles of the tureen, its attenuated lines and the remarkable contrasting finishes to its surfaces. The revivalist themes are illustrated by the form of the cover of the tureen which reflects the pointed helmets which the epic *bogatyrs*, akin to knights errant, are often depicted wearing which were in turn modelled on the Monomakh's cap in which Ivan the Terrible had himself crowned. This taste for pieces, redolent of Russia's early history, in particular the early Muscovite rulers such as the Romanovs, pervaded architecture and the decorative arts towards the end of

RECENT ACQUISITION

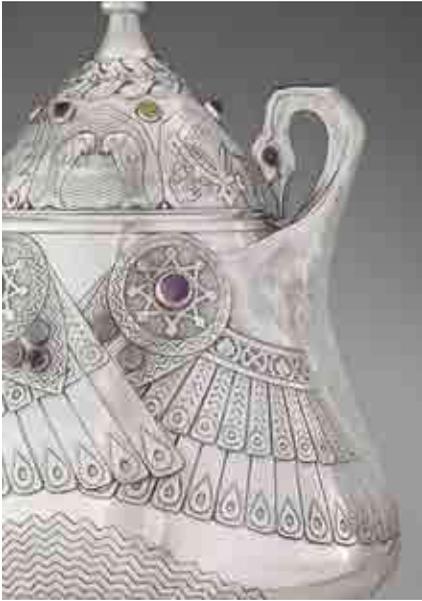


FIG 2
Detail of handle of covered tureen, Moscow, 1908-17, [Fig 1] warrant mark of Fabergé. (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange. Photo: Travis Fullerton © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)



FIG 3
Kovsh, silver, silver-gilt, chrysoprase and amethyst, Moscow, 1899-1908, French import mark from 1903, warrant mark of Fabergé. (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of Silver. Photo: Katherine Wetzell © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century.

The tureen acquired by the museum is a splendid rarity: much pre-Revolutionary silver was melted down in Russia after the Revolution to raise funds for the Bolshevik government. Objects owned by the imperial family, the aristocracy and the church were systematically confiscated and melted down as they were deemed of no cultural value and the government was desperate to raise money to fund its military efforts. At this period, the government certainly did not value these objects but saw them only as a form of currency.

The tureen was acquired by Sydney and Frances Lewis of Richmond, Virginia at auction at Sotheby's, London, on 8 May 1972 (lot 221) and a day later, Sotheby's sold the tray and ladle privately to the couple. The set was then sold in 2013 by Mrs Lewis to a private collector before it was acquired by Wartski. The set was exhibited in 1996 in the *Fabergé in America*, organised by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and was at one time on display in the VMFA in 2011.

The VMFA has the largest public collection in the United States of objects by Fabergé amounting to about two hundred pieces and five imperial Easter eggs: it was bequeathed to the museum in 1947 by Lillian Thomas Pratt. The collection is especially rich in enamels and hardstones, specifically parasol handles and picture frames, made in St Petersburg but it did not include important silver objects made in the firm's Moscow workshops. The museum's collection also includes a lavish silver *kovsh* by Fabergé, also made in Moscow in the neo-Russian style, donated by Jerome and Rita Gans.

Barry Shifman is the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Decorative Arts 1890 to the Present at the VMFA since 2007 and before this he was in charge of the Department of Decorative Arts at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (1988-2006). He has published extensively on various aspects of the decorative arts, including Sèvres porcelain, silver and gold treasures from the Armoury Museum at the Kremlin, American Arts & Crafts, Augustus Pugin and Leighton Hall, as well as contemporary glass.