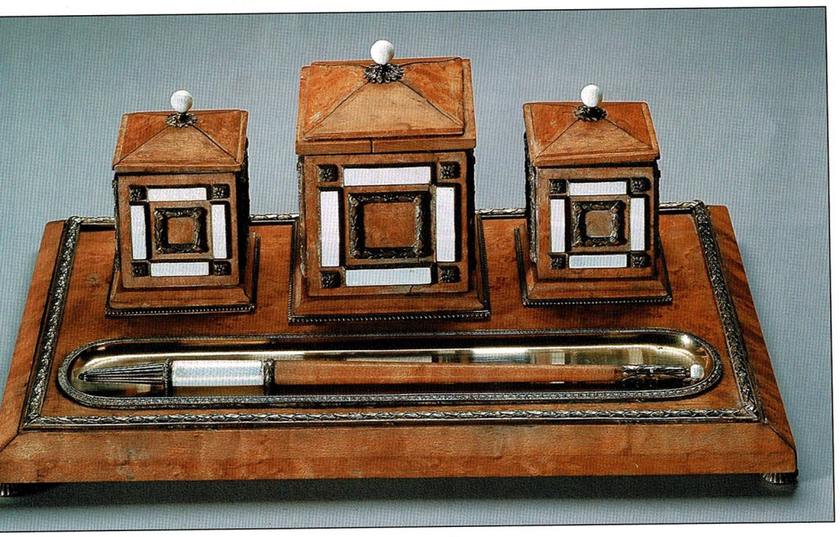
# Forgotten Fabergé

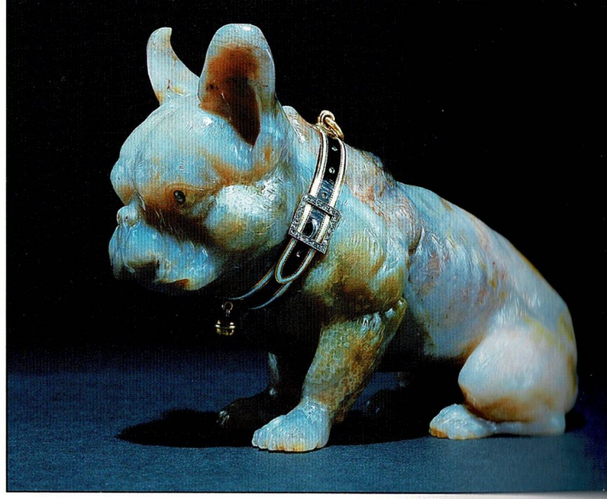
Despite being largely remembered for working in precious materials, Fabergé was equally happy exploiting the decorative appeal of wood. This a pioneering study of this aspect of this output. By KIERAN McCARTHY

The recent exhibition of the Royal Collection's Fabergé at Buckingham Palace and excitement surrounding the sale of the Forbes collection in New York are the latest expressions of the never-ending fascination for the Tsars' goldsmith. His impeccable craftsmanship and the allure of Imperial Russia have made his name famous and have led to virtually every aspect of his work being minutely studied. In all, over three thousand books and articles have been published on Fabergé. However, one area to have largely escaped attention is the work he undertook in wood. A surprising array of items were fashioned from wood and they played an important role within the firm, catering for customers from American railroad heiresses to the Imperial Family, who often preferred wooden pieces to those in precious metals and hardstones

Although Fabergé's name is synonymous with luxury because of the lavish Easter Eggs he made for the Tsars, of the thousands of pieces his firm made only fifty were Imperial Eggs. The majority of his work consisted of transforming everyday items into works of art emphasising design and beauty. Despite being a goldsmith Fabergé had little interest in the intrinsic value of his materials; he prized only their contribution to the aesthetic of a piece. In 1914 he expounded his thoughts on the relationship between art and a goldsmith's materials by saying 'Expensive things interest me little if the value is merely in so many diamonds and pearls'. This ethos led to Fabergé often abandoning more valuable materials to exploit the decorative appeal of wood. Commonplace in the firm's stock were ranges of wooden photograph frames, desk sets, paperknives, letter racks, notepad holders, calendars, bell pushes, cigarette cases, table boxes and crochet hooks. Excepting jewellery, almost all the objects which the firm supplied in metals and hardstones, were also offered in wood. The firm even ventured into selling full size pieces of furniture; these are exceptionally rare and only a few examples are now known. A Fabergé table with chased silver festoon mounts dating from 1899-1908 was sold at Christies in November 2003 for £229,000 (fig.8).



*Above left, fig. 1. An Imperial silver mounted birch photograph frame by Fabergé, applied with chased silver Imperial emblems and containing an original signed photograph of Tsar Nicholas II. Workmaster Hjalmar Armfelt, St. Petersburg, 1908-1917, 17 ½ inches high.*
*Louise and David Braver collection.*
*Above right, fig. 2. An Imperial birch frame by Fabergé, with chased silver Imperial mounts, contains an original photograph signed by Nicholas II's children, the Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and the Tsarevich Alexei. Workmaster Hjalmar Armfelt, St. Petersburg, 1908-1917, 17 inches high.*
*Louise and David Braver collection.*
*Left, fig. 3. An inkstand from an enamelled and silver gilt mounted Karelian birch desk set by Fabergé, Workmaster: Henrik Wigström, St. Petersburg, 1908-1917.*
*Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Washington D.C, 12.147, photo: Edward Owen.*



*Top left, fig. 4. A silver gilt and palisander table box by Fabergé, mounted with chased gilt cornflowers and geometric motifs in the Art Nouveau taste. Moscow workshops, before 1899, 5 inches long.*
*Louise and David Braver collection.*
*Top right, fig. 5. A petrified wood carving of a French bulldog by Fabergé, with enamelled gold collar and rose diamond set eyes, purchased from Fabergé's London branch by Mrs Mango for £90 in November 1916.*
*Private collection.*
*Above left, fig. 6. A birch display box by Fabergé, with glass lid and chased two coloured gold mounts, and opening with a gold key. Workmaster Hjalmar Armfelt, St. Petersburg, 1908-1917, 8 inches long.*
*The Royal Collection© 2004, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.*
*Above right, fig. 7. A gem-set wooden cigarette case by Fabergé, the ebony panels mounted en cage in decorated gold, the lid centred with a rose diamond set basket of flowers. Moscow workshops, 1908-1917. 3 ½ inches long*
*Wartski, London.*
*Right, fig. 8. A full sized silver mounted wooden table by Fabergé, with chased silver pine-cone and laurel wreath mounts. Workmaster Julius Rappoport, St. Petersburg, 1899-1908, 27 ⅝ inches high.*
*Christie's Images Limited, 2003.*

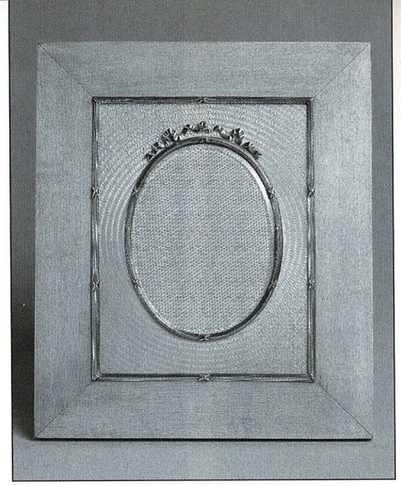
Fabergé worked in over twenty varieties of indigenous and tropical woods. The native woods used were birch, oak, plane known as 'tchinara', tooya, whitewood, holly, various maples and fruitwoods including pear, cherry and nut. Those from overseas included: palisander, amaranth, cypress and satinwood from equatorial America; mahogany and ebony from Africa; plus padouk and snakewood from East India. The firm's use of wood extended to prehistoric specimens. Fabergé noticed that the organic inclusions of petrified wood mined in Siberia resembled fur and used them for some of his miniature animal carvings. Its mottled brown appearance made it particularly appropriate for representing cats and dogs. (fig.5).

Fabergé's woodworking was relatively simple, employing rudimentary tongue and groove joints, chiselling and basic turning. The refinement came from the addition of enamelled and gem set silver and gold mounts by the firm's workmasters. Photograph frames, supported on their characteristic struts, closing flush to the backs, were mounted with panels of guilloché enamel within chased borders. Bellpushes were mounted *en cage* with gold and, like their hardstone counterparts, were set with cabochon gem pushes. Cigarette cases with gold hinges were opened by gem set thumbpieces and desk pieces were applied with coloured gold festoons. The type of wood used influenced the choice of mount. Rose cut diamonds were twinned with ebony (fig.7), allowing their scintillation to be best seen, whilst satinwood with

its rich lustre was combined with silver and pale enamels. On occasion wood and mount were used to convey the covert messages sometimes found in Fabergé's work. The mounting of a palisander taper box with a coloured gold representation of Hymen's flaming torch (fig.10) is a play on combustibility and a reference to the flames of passion.

The mounts used not only complemented the woods but also coincided with the firm's established styles. Whether in the neo-classical, rococo or pan-Slavic tastes they are indistinguishable from those used with other materials, allowing the wooden pieces to merge into the Fabergé stock. Fabergé was not the only pre-Revolutionary Russian goldsmith to use wood. Bolin, Grachev and Köchli also continued the tradition, which originated in the eighteenth century. However Fabergé was the only one to seamlessly and consistently blend it into his work.

Fabergé himself did not produce any of the pieces that bear his name. Instead he divided the firm into workshops and entrusted the Workmasters who headed them with supplying the products. This allowed Fabergé to concentrate on managing the business and ensure quality through the rigorous vetting of pieces. Wooden objects were made by the firm in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. In St. Petersburg the mounting of wooden pieces was concentrated in six of the twenty-two workshops based there, those of: Henrik Wigström, Michael Perchin, Hjalmar Armfelt, Johann Viktor Aarne, Anders Nevalainen and Julius Rappoport. The identities and roles of employees of the workshops are well recorded. Franz Birbaum, in his account of his time at Fabergé, lists the names of enamellers, lapidaries, engravers, designers, and various other types of craftsmen. The woodworkers however have never been identified. Despite there being no direct references, the evidence suggests the workshop that made the boxes in which pieces were sold also supplied the firm's woodwork. It was run by the Finnish carpenters Käki, Kämära and Ampuja and was housed in the firm's St. Petersburg premises on Bolshaya Morskaya Street. A photograph of the workshop in the Fersman Mineralogical Museum shows a circular wooden frame being worked on and a number of finished objects on a workbench. The firm's offering of a repair service for wooden pieces and the uniformity of woodworking across different workshops further suggests a dedicated single source. This tallies with Fabergé's efficient organisation; wherever possible tasks were kept in-house to reduce costs and maintain control.

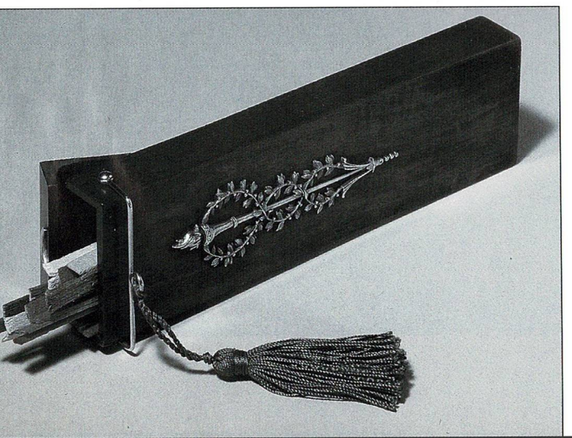


Fabergé's business was a considerable success; at its height it employed over five hundred people and had five branches selling works of art to an elite clientèle. The patronage of the Russian Imperial family made his work highly fashionable and attracted the world-wide aristocratic, rich and ambitious to his shops. Competitors cast envious glances in his direction and Cartier, in a futile attempt to match him, started producing objects in the 'Russian style'. The popularity of Fabergé's work in wood contributed to this success and accounted for many of the pieces he sold. His customers did not discriminate between materials or consider a piece in wood any less Fabergé. The purchases of The Princess Hatzfedlt, a colourful American railroad heiress were typical. Between 1907 and 1916 she bought fifty-eight items from Fabergé's London branch on Dover Street. Of these fourteen were made from wood and they made up the largest grouping of any one material.

Fabergé's widespread use of wood and its popularity with his customers are related to its universal presence in the home. Fabergé was not working in isolation and his choice of material for a piece was influenced by the architectural and decorative styles of the day. His wooden pieces were made to complement these interiors and were bought because they fitted effortlessly into them. Wood dominated Russian interiors; Grand Duke Kyrill, grandson of Tsar Alexander II, testifies to this in his memoirs by recalling that his first memory was the potent smell of polished wood in the Alexander Palace. Wood featured prominently in the fashion for parquet flooring. The floors of Palaces in St. Petersburg and Moscow are characterised by the elaborate use of a variety of woods. That of Catherine the Great's Chinese Palace at Oranienbaum, outside St. Petersburg, is laid with fifteen different woods. There was also a vogue for rooms to be panelled with wood. The Arsenal Chamber of the Gatchina Palace designed by Kuzmin in 1850 was decorated with oak throughout, the dining room of the Yelagin Palace was entirely walnut and most famously there were the Maple and Palisander rooms commissioned by the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna for the personal use of the Imperial Family. One of the Tsarina's favourite pieces of Fabergé was a silver mounted palisander trunk in the Art Nouveau taste that she kept in the Palisander room. The wood most associated with the firm Fabergé is however Karelian birch, a subspecies of European birch peculiar to Karelia, a province north of St. Petersburg bordering on Finland. Unlike normal birch it grows with protuberances on its trunk and produces a unique timber with ornamental markings reminiscent of marble. The scale of its use by Fabergé owed more to its presence in Russian interiors than its beauty. As a quintessentially Russian wood it was highly fashionable in the nineteenth century and consistently utilised by architects and furniture makers in the homes of their customers.

Wooden objects were popular for meeting the needs of Fabergé's customers in another important way. Very few people, in contrast to the modern pattern of Fabergé collecting, bought pieces for themselves. Fabergé instead was the world's grandest gift shop, where the èlite of Russian and Edwardian society bought gifts for others. The provenances of Fabergé pieces record the relationships and systems of patronage of the time. For instance, the loyalty of Earl Howe, Lord Chamberlain to Queen Alexandra was expressed in his gifts of Fabergé to the Queen and that of businessmen in the Fabergé they gave to the Rothschilds. Etiquette demanded a gift's value should not compromise its recipient and a wooden object from Fabergé was ideal because it was prestigious yet not outwardly valuable. Sonia Keppel, daughter of Edward VII's companion Alice, in her account of Edwardian life writes that wooden gifts were reserved for those 'down the scale of social standing'. This however was not always the case. In addition to lavish gold and hardstone gifts, Nicholas II also chose wooden items for his presentation pieces. Birch frames decorated with Imperial emblems and containing signed photographs of the Tsar's family were frequently given to dignitaries, (fig. 1).

The significance of wood to the firm is shown by Fabergé's final and most notable use of it. Henry Charles Bainbridge, Fabergé's London manager, recounts Eugène Fabergé mentioning that his father's last grand commission, the Easter egg of 1917 ordered by Nicholas II for his mother the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, 'was in Karelian birch'. He writes regardless of the Great War and revolutionary 'events fast moving to their terrible climax', Fabergé believed the egg would find its rightful home and continued to make it. His optimism was tragically misplaced; Bainbridge continues 'by Easter Eve The Tsar, with the Tsarina and their five children, were prisoners in the Alexander Palace' and delivery of the egg was not allowed. ▲



*Above left, fig. 9. A wooden photograph frame by Fabergé, mounted with a plaque of enamelled translucent pale blue over a concentric guillochage, with tied silver reed borders, the aperture surmounted by a bow. Workmaster Anders Nevalainen, St. Petersburg, 1908-1917, 8 ¼ inches high. Wartski, London.*
*Left, fig. 10. A gold mounted palisander taper box by Fabergé, applied with a chased gold representation of Hymen's torch in red and yellow gold entwined by green gold laurels. Chief Workmaster Henrik Wigström, St. Petersburg, 1896-1908.*
*Private collection.*

The porcelains produced at Swansea and Nantgarw in South Wales during the second decade of the nineteenth century are well-known, compared to those of many Staffordshire factories of the period. Collected by connoisseurs of British porcelain within a generation of their manufacture, they were seen as the final flowering of the eighteenth-century English soft-paste tradition, and today even a relatively standard piece may fetch a four figure sum. Do they deserve their high reputation? They are rarely seen - they were made over a period of less than ten years - and the principal public collections are those of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales in Cardiff and the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea. A visit to either of these will confirm that Swansea and Nantgarw are among the most attractive, elegant and cosmopolitan porcelains made in Regency Britain. These porcelains were a source of great pride in Wales when they were made, and have remained so ever since. The market for them has been dominated by collectors from Wales,