

IS IT REALLY FABERGÉ?

by Will Lowes

This is the perennial question would-be collectors must ask of themselves, of auction houses, and of the recognised experts. In most cases, there are various clues to help find an answer. Sometimes there are not, in which case, potential buyers should be very, very wary. The international expert Géza von Habsburg has written in detail about Fabergé fakes – Fauxbergé he calls this particular *genre* – and users are urged to take heed of Dr. von Habsburg's wise words

The problem is that the House of Fabergé was a vast conglomerate, even by today's standards, employing hundreds of people in five different branches, acquiring work from external workshops and, on occasion, even retailing the work of opposition houses. While there are general guidelines to the marking of Fabergé items, there are always exceptions to these rules, brought about by a series of situations, and occasionally by simple, human failings.

Fabergé had to balance two conflicting forces: the standard of workmanship and the pressure to produce. The demand for Fabergé objects was such that overtime was almost constantly worked, and the pressure for completed items seldom waned. But Fabergé would not compromise on quality and one employee, Andrei Plotnitski, has left a graphic account of what happened to objects which were not up to the master's exacting standards: a hammer literally came down on an item that failed to please and the worker was told to start again. There is some evidence that Plotnitski may have embroidered these recollections and while these memories are interesting, they should be treated with some scepticism.

Nevertheless, with such pressures in place, some items made it through to the front counters for sale without marks of any kind. Workmasters simply failed to stamp these items. There are at least three Tsar Imperial Easter eggs in this category. The very first Hen Egg of 1885, the 1901 Flower Basket Egg and the 1910 Alexander III Equestrian Egg appear to have no marks at all, yet they are unquestionably Fabergé's work. Some items simply couldn't be marked: the animal and bird figures fashioned from hardstone, for example. There is evidence that efforts were made most of the time to stamp the flower studies from Henrik Wigström's workshop but again, there are examples where this did not happen. Platinum items (including the 1910 Alexander III Equestrian Egg) were not marked for one simple reason: Russia had no mark for the metal at that time.

External political considerations interfered, such as when artisans were called to arms in wartime. This first became a problem for Fabergé in the Russo-Japanese War which broke out in 1904, and then in the internal political problems which afflicted Russia in 1905. But the House of Fabergé suffered its heaviest depletion of artisans during World War I and documents exist in which Fabergé pleaded with the authorities to let him retain valuable craftsmen so work could continue.

Then there are the items that came from other sources. Independent Moscow artisans such as Fedor Rückert and Maria Semionova, for example, provided Fabergé with finished *cloisonné* items in the traditional Russian style. Is this really Fabergé? The House retailed the items, so they obviously met the standards Peter Carl Fabergé set for his own workers. Fabergé's mark may accompany such items, but it is more than likely some were retailed by Fabergé without house marks being stamped on the items in question. Only those items from outside sources which also carry a Fabergé mark or retain their original fitted Fabergé cases should be regarded as 'Fabergé.' Fabergé was probably Rückert's biggest 'customer', but as an independent producer, Rückert also supplied items to Fabergé's main competitors.

It is now known that hardstone figures for Fabergé were carved in workshops at Idar-Oberstein in Germany. Are these items really Fabergé? These workshops were Fabergé suppliers that

happened to be in another country. Since the items met Fabergé's standards, and were retailed by the company, they are included as part of the House of Fabergé's *oeuvre*.

Regrettably, most of Fabergé's account books, design stock books and other records disappeared after the October Revolution of 1917. What became of many of these records remains a mystery. It is known the new Bolshevik authorities made unsuccessful efforts to find them because they wanted the names of Fabergé employees. Vladimir Averkiev, one of Fabergé's close financial advisers, possibly hid the records. He disappeared after being tracked down and arrested in 1927. Averkiev had successfully hidden a trove of Fabergé jewellery, which only came to light in 1990. To survive the dangerous times following the October Revolution of 1917, former Fabergé employees were forced to maintain a discreet silence about their employer and their colleagues. Because of this wall of silence and the absence of official records, it has been a long and often difficult journey to discover answers to such simple questions as who were the Fabergé workmasters. Some are still unidentified today.

So, when considering legitimate Fabergé items, there are particular questions to be asked and answered, and this is best done by those who have worked in the field for many, many years. It is imperative to know well the Fabergé workmasters and their marks, as well as the house marks and the Russian hallmarks of the time. For example, any item with St. Petersburg marks for the years 1908-17 and stamped with Mikhail Perkhin's mark would need very close inspection, since Perkhin died in 1903. Similar considerations led to the exposure of the so-called Nicholas II Equestrian Egg, purportedly given to the Tsar by his wife to celebrate the Romanov Tercentenary in 1913. But the egg carried the mark of Viktor Aarne, who had sold his workshop in 1904.

Potential Fabergé buyers should also note that Carl Fabergé himself was in reality, the general manager of a vast business enterprise, organised along very progressive lines. He is not known to have *personally* produced any object. He designed items and he approved nearly all other designs (sometimes his sons would do this, if Fabergé himself was unavailable), and he checked the finished objects, but he did not make them himself. His various marks represent the House of Fabergé, and its standards.

There are of course, physical clues to real Fabergé: the way hinges are so perfectly fashioned as to be all but invisible, the way a cigarette case closes, the way hardstone is carved, the methods of enamelling, the chasing and engine-turning techniques, and above all, the meticulous attention to detail. But again, a practised eye is needed if there are any doubts. Provenance details also mean a great deal, and it is a huge bonus if the item retains its original case, or bill of sale. These testaments to an item's origins automatically enhance its monetary value. These remarks apply particularly to unmarked items, such as hardstone figures.

The lack of official Fabergé records caused problems for auction houses staging the first sales of Fabergé material between the two world wars. When Christie's held the first major sale in London on March 15, 1934, there was little information to provide for prospective clients. It would be another 15 years before the first monograph on Fabergé, Peter Carl Fabergé (London, 1949), would be written by Henry Bainbridge, the joint manager of Fabergé's London branch.

Gradually, a more complete picture of the output of the House of Fabergé has emerged. Occasional pieces of the jigsaw are still falling into place as more and more archival information emerges from Russia. This is just as well: the ever-increasing prices paid for Fabergé have given forgers the incentive to continue their illegal practices, some of them with a diligence that even Carl Fabergé may have grudgingly admired. The standard of lot descriptions in catalogues has improved accordingly.

Catalogues provided by the major auction houses have, in general, become increasingly more sophisticated over the years. By the 1980s, Christie's was able to provide the following guidelines for prospective buyers:

Marked Fabergé, workmaster....	in our opinion a work of the master's workshop inscribed with his name or initials and his workmaster's initials.
By Fabergé...	in our opinion, a work of the master's workshop, but with his mark.
Marked with the Imperial warrant of...	in our opinion a work of the master with his Imperial Warrant mark
Bearing ... marks	in our qualified opinion, probably not a work of the master and bearing a later mark

This is an excellent starting point for prospective buyers.

So, is it really Fabergé?

With tongue firmly in cheek, this writer suggests: If the item carries the appropriate marks, meets the stringent stylistic and technical considerations of international experts, has a long provenance dating back to a wealthy original purchaser in St. Petersburg, Moscow or London, has its original fitted Fabergé case, and is listed in the London stock books or one of the known Fabergé design books, then it's likely to have been made by the world renowned House of Fabergé!