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LOOTED! Art History through the Stolen Object

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Fabergé Eggs: Treasure Within a Treasure

Research Paper

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Art Appreciation 1301 – SH1

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November 26, 2016

The *Fabergé Eggs* or *Imperial Eggs* (1895-1916, various artists), were created by Fabergé for the Russian royal family. The first Imperial Egg, titled, *The Hen Egg (fig.1)* was created in 1885. It was commissioned by Emperor Alexander the III for his wife, Empress Marie Fedorovna. The Emperor followed the creation of the egg and gave detailed instructions as to its design. (Faberge.com 2016)¹ The egg is simplistic in nature, resembling the form and lines of a natural egg, but holds within it a treasure of a golden yolk with a golden hen inside the yolk. Inside the hen lay a miniature replica of the imperial crown and a miniature egg-shaped ruby pendant. Simple, intriguing, pure in form and color on the outside, the egg held a hidden treasure within to please and cherish. Truly a treasure within a treasure.

The eggs carry the geometric design of an oval, with one end having a larger circumference than the other. The scale of the egg is relative to the size of hen eggs found in nature, approximately 2-1/2 inches by 1-1/2 inches. The implied line of the egg carries the eye along the form, designating the shape. The organic egg shape carries with it a sense of life, birth, something new. The egg shape implies that there is something inside, whether visible or not. Curiosity is piqued.

The surface of the egg is smooth. Gold, enamel and jewels were used to create *The Hen Egg* and its treasures. The design was meant to resemble a natural egg.

The Hen Egg was very simplistic in nature, featuring a gold egg with a white enamel overlay that very closely resembled a chicken egg. The gold band around the largest part of the

¹ 2016. *Faberge.com*. Accessed October 06, 2016. http://www.faberge.com/news/47_story-of-faberge.aspx.

circumference of the egg was an indicator that there was more to the egg than its shell. The miniature contents of the eggs were replicas of real-life objects, such as the yolk, the hen, the crown, and egg.

. The genius of creating a 3D object within a 3D object, that could be touched, held, manipulated, and admired, were cherished gifts for the royal family. There is no doubt that *The Hen Egg* gives the impression of the construct of an organic object that has been transformed into an opulent masterpiece. A treasure in its own rights, holding a treasure within its framework.

The *Imperial Eggs* were an extravagant gift that Alexander the III purchased for his family.² A tradition that lasted for 32 years, from 1895 through 1917. Carl Fabergé was commissioned by Alexander the III to create an egg for his wife, Empress Marie Fedornova.³ Carl Fabergé was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia in 1846. He began working in his father's workshop at an early age. In 1860 his father retired and moved the family to Dresden Germany. It is there that Carl began to hone his art as master craftsman. Carl visited jewelers in England, Italy, and Paris where, "Cartier and Boucheron were turning out designs that married traditional craftsmanship with

² Kiste, John Van Der. 1998. "The Romanovs 1818-1959." In *The Romanovs 1818-1959*, by John Van Der Kiste, 228. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited.

² 2016. *Faberge.com*. Accessed October 06, 2016. http://www.faberge.com/news/47_story-of-faberge.aspx.

³ Faber, Toby. 2008. "Faberge's Eggs : the extraordinary story of the masterpieces that outlived an empire." By Toby Faber, 302. New York: Random House.

creative flair”⁴ In 1872 Carl took over his father’s business in Saint Petersburg. “One of Carl Faberge’s great achievements was that he not only made beautifully designed jewelry, but succeeded in selling it to the Russian aristocracy. He changed the taste of Saint Petersburg.”⁵ In 1885, with the presentation of the first *Imperial Egg*, Carl Fabergé became an official “Supplier to the Imperial Court with the right to bear the state Coat of Arms in his shop’s sign”, thus beginning his formal relationship with the Czars.⁶ Over the next thirty-two years fifty eggs were created. As Fabergé’s business grew, he hired work masters to oversee the craftsmen that created the works. “Fabergé provided the designs, sourced the materials, and marketed the finished product.”⁷ Fabergé began expanding the color of the gold he worked with. Other goldsmiths could produce four main colors; red, green, white and yellow by mixing base metals with the gold. Fabergé’s goldsmiths continued to develop their techniques and added blue, lilac, purple and gray to the pallet.⁸ The enamel work that was produced by Fabergé was what separated him from the other jewelers. He created more than one hundred different colors of enamel. The level of skill to create the smooth layers of enamel was perfected by his craftsmen. He would often engrave designs on the surface of the metal before the enamel was applied, “the result was guilloche enamel.”⁹ Fabergé used machine tools to do the engraving, which enabled him to create designs that were more intricate. Some of his egg creations had layers of colored enamel that would change the appearance of the egg as it was turned in the light. In others, a single layer of opaque color with layers of translucent enamel would make the object look like an opal or a

⁵ Faber, *Fabergé’s Eggs*, 7.

⁶ “Ibid.”, 16.

⁷ “Ibid.”, 21.

⁸ “Ibid.”,

⁹ “Ibid.”, 22.

pearl.¹⁰ Fabergé was not only able to harness the creativity and talents of others, he could manage the business end of things well. The quality of the work that Fabergé produced was maintained by a single work master, even-though many hands may have been involved in creating the object. “At ten A.M., every morning Carl Fabergé would start a tour of his workshops. Occasionally he would examine an object that was nearly finished, put it on an anvil, and smash it with a hammer, adding a rebuke that was all the more telling for the mild manner in which it was delivered: “You can do better. Start again and do it right.”¹¹

As the saying goes, “All good things must come to an end”, it is true for the Fabergé Eggs. In 1914 Germany and Austria declared war on Russia. In February of 1917 Revolution broke out in the capitol. By March of 1917 the Romanov’s had abdicated the throne and by late Spring and early Summer the family had become a collective scapegoat not only of those who perceived the family as oppressors but by the Provisional Government as well.¹² By then the Romanovs were preparing for exile. They had begun the process of determining what to take and what to leave. The eggs never made the list of items to be taken with them. “The value of the eggs had never lain in their materials; beautifully worked enamel counted for little now. They were bulky – and difficult to conceal.”¹³ In February 1918, the Bolsheviks, (Revolutionists), renamed themselves the Russian Communist Party.¹⁴ Their mission was to “loot the looters”¹⁵ Their thought being that the monarchy “stole” from the poor to live opulent and extravagant lives. Nothing was sacred, everything was up for grabs, even private property. The eggs were now owned by the

¹⁰ Faber, *Fabergé’s Eggs*, 22.

¹¹ “Ibid.”, 23.

¹² Perry, John Curtis. 1999. “*The flight of the Romanovs: a family saga.*” 425. (New York: Basic Books). 171.

¹³ Faber. *Fabergé’s Eggs*, 129.

¹⁴ “Ibid.”, 136

¹⁵ “Ibid.”

state.¹⁶ The dowager empress, Marie was exiled to Britain. In her possession was her jewelry chest and a Fabergé egg. Upon her passing, an inventory was made of her jewelry and the possibility of the survival of an egg appeared. The inventory declared, “a gold chain set rubies and diamonds with gem set Easter egg”.¹⁷ The egg became the inheritance of one of her daughters. It seemed of no monetary value. It was the 1916 *Cross of Saint George Egg*, (fig2.), the last Fabergé egg given as a gift while the czars were still in power and the only Fabergé egg to remain with its original owner.¹⁸

After the eggs were seized, their journey began. “In 1920 a number of Fabergé Easter eggs had already appeared on the market. They were offered for sale by the jeweler, Morgan, in the Rue de la Paix in Paris”¹⁹ Leon Grinberg purchased six of the “Fabergé Eggs for \$3,000.00!”²⁰ Most of the eggs were sold either to the British Royal family or found homes in the United States. Very few stayed in Russia. Of the fifty Easter Eggs created by Fabergé, forty-three have been accounted for. There are still seven missing eggs.

In 2014 the third *Imperial Easter egg*, (fig3), was found in a junk metal bin at an estate auction in the United States. The headline read, “Scrap metal dealer’s junk market purchase turns out to be \$33 million Faberge egg”²¹ The new owner of the egg needed money and believed that the scrap metal he purchased would give him the boost he needed. However, the value of the egg

¹⁶ “Ibid.”, 140

¹⁷ “Ibid.”, 151

¹⁸ Faber. *Fabergé’s Eggs*, 16.

¹⁹ Solodkoff, Alexander von. 1984. "Masterpieces from the House of Faberge ." In *Masterpieces from the House of Faberge*, by Alexander von Solodkoff, 192. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.,

Kuruvilla, Carol. 2014. *nydailynews.com*

in materials was only worth about \$500.00.²² He decided to turn to the internet to see if he could find anything out about the egg. He typed in egg and the name on the egg, “Vacheron Constantin” and found an article that described his egg and what it had sold for in 1964. He was beside himself. He flew to London and met with Kieran McCarthy, a Fabergé expert, mentioned in the article.²³ The junk dealer showed McCarthy pictures of the egg, which prompted McCarthy to make a trip to the Midwest to examine the egg in person.²⁴ “McCarthy said the man had overestimated the value of the egg's materials -- which were worth about what he'd paid for it -- but underestimated its value as a work of art.”²⁵ “The Third Imperial Egg has been purchased by a private collector who has allowed the public to glimpse it at Wartski before it disappears from general view again.”²⁶

Another recent find was one of the treasures from an *Imperial Easter* egg. It is an elephant automaton, (fig.4). It was the treasure for the *Diamond Trellis Egg*. (fig5). The egg “ made its way to the US, and now belongs to the McFerrin family.²⁷ Over the years the contents and the stand were separated from the egg. The find was announced at a conference held at the *Fabergé Museum* in St. Petersburg. The curator of the *Royal Collection Trust* had photographs of the elephant. Upon further investigation, the elephant was determined to be the missing treasure to the *Diamond Trellis Egg*.²⁸ The elephant has been restored and is fully functioning.²⁹

²³ Kuruvilla, Carol. 2014. *nydailynews.com*.

²⁴ “Ibid.”

²⁵ Cullinane, Susannah. Updated 2:16 PM ET, Mon June 29, 2015 . <http://www.cnn.com>. June 29. Accessed 12 4, 2016

²⁶ Cullinane, Susannah. <http://www.cnn.com>.

²⁷ Cascone, Sarah. 2015. *news.artnet.com*. October 25. Accessed December 4, 2015.

²⁸ Cascone, Sarah. 2015. *news.artnet.com*

²⁹ “Ibid.”

There is an “impassioned group of experts and enthusiasts from Russia, the UK, the US, Switzerland and Finland are on the trail of the missing seven eggs. Géza von Habsburg, one of the world’s leading Fabergé experts, has been on the egg hunt for more than 40 years.”³⁰

Vincent Palmade and his wife spend around 10 hours a week researching the eggs. Their research helped lead to the discovery of the third egg that was destined for the junk pile.³¹

The following is a list and description of the seven missing eggs.

1. Hen With Sapphire Pendant (1886): Golden hen studded with rose diamonds plucking sapphire egg from nest. Last seen in the Kremlin’s Armory Palace in 1922.

2. Cherub With Chariot (1888): Angel pulling chariot containing an egg. Studded with sapphire and diamonds. Angel-shaped clock “surprise”. Probably bought by Armand Hammer. Possibly sold again in 1941.

3. Nécessaire (1889): Gold egg with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds. Inside were 13 diamond beauty accessories. It got to England and was in the first Fabergé exhibition in 1949. Bought for £1,250 in 1952.

4. Mauve (1897): Mauve enamel with rose-cut diamonds and pearls and a “surprise” of heart-shaped frames with portraits of Nicholas, Alexandra and their first child, Olga. Frames are in a collection.

³⁰ Everett, Lucinda. 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>. June 29. Accessed December 4, 2016.

³¹ Everett, Lucinda. 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

5. Empire Nephrite (1902): Made of mineral nephrite. Diamond-studded golden base hides a tiny portrait of Alexander III. Possibly exhibited in London in 1935. One author claimed in 2004 that the egg had been found. Most experts disagree.

6. Royal Danish (1903): Enamel and gold, with precious stones, heraldic lions and royal arms with jubilee portraits of king and queen of Denmark, Maria's parents.

7. Alexander III Commemorative (1909): Platinum, gold and white enamel with lozenge-shaped diamond clusters containing a gold bust of Alexander. Known only from a single black-and-white photo and not seen since before the Russian Revolution.³²

Although the Imperial Eggs were not looted or stolen in a theft, they were spoils of war and part of Russian history and the end of an era. The eggs now seem almost priceless. They tell a story with their treasures hidden inside, of an Imperial family and ruler-ship that no longer exists.

³² Speegle, Trey. 2015. www.worldwonder.net/the-300-million-hunt-for-7-lost-faberge-easter-eggs/.



Fig. 1 Carl Fabergé, *The Hen Egg*, 1885. Gold, white enamel, 6.4cm. Link of Times Foundation Collection



Fig.2 Carl Fabergé, *The Cross of Saint George Egg*, 1916. Silver, gold, opalescent white, rose, pale green, White, orange and black enamel, 9cm. Link of Times Foundation



Fig.3 August Holmström, *The Third Imperial Egg*, 1896-1897. Gold, Sapphires, 8.2cm. Private Collector



Fig.4 Carl Fabergé, *Elephant Automaton*, 1892. Ivory, gold, Diamond, brass, nickel, 6.0x5.5x3.4cm. Royal Collection HM Queen Elizabeth II



Fig.5 Carl Fabergé, *Trellis Egg*, 1892. Gold, jadeite, Rose cut diamonds, silver and satin, 10.8cm. McFerrin Collection

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