



IT'S MORE THAN A BIT IRONIC

THAT THE DESCENDENT OF FRENCH HUGUENOTS — PROTESTANTS WHO LEFT THE PAPACY BECAUSE OF ITS EXCESSES — ENDED UP JEWELER TO 19TH-CENTURY RUSSIAN TSARS, WHOSE PENCHANT FOR EXTREME LUXURY IS AMONG THE CAUSES OF THE FIRST SOCIALIST REVOLUTION.

Carl Fabergé's family immigrated from France to Russia, where he was born in 1846. His father, Gustave, set up a well-regarded jewelry firm that served as Carl's training ground; by 1870 he was running the show. His award-winning work caught the eye of Tsar Alexander III, who in 1885 commissioned the first fabled Fabergé egg for his wife and soon after appointed Fabergé as Imperial Goldsmith.

Fabergé's career intersected with whirlwind changes in culture, including the end of the 300-year rule of the Imperial Romanoffs, the dawn of the Industrial Age, the rise of merchant wealth and the fall of Fabergé's

elite clientele at the hands of the Bolsheviks in 1917. As impressive as his art and times are, it's those jewel-encrusted eggs that everyone remembers. Eggs were symbols of fertility and rebirth in both pagan and Christian cultures, so all Russians made and exchanged them as Easter gifts. Common folk made them of wood with painted decorations; the nobility and the newly monied turned to Fabergé's studio for eggs crafted from precious metals and priceless gems.

"Fabergé: Imperial Jeweler to the Tsars," at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California, features 100 objects created by the storied luxury-goods house, including this ornate green-enamel and gold desk clock. Photo © Eric Stoner

The Bowers Museum, in the Orange County town of Santa Ana, has mounted a jaw-dropping exhibition, "Fabergé: Imperial Jeweler to the Tsars," which showcases more than 100 works from the House of Fabergé — including several of those famous eggs — collected by Arthur and Dorothy McFerrin of Houston, Texas.

Timothy Adams, an art historian and Fabergé scholar, was invited to oversee the show, which includes a surprising array of jeweled picture frames, clocks, tiaras, cigarette holders (Fabergé is said to have "invented" the device for new urban sophisticates) and other dazzling objects, all made under the tutelage of the master or by the stable of expert artisans he employed in his flagship studio in St. Petersburg and at branches in Kiev, Odessa and London. (No works remain from Fabergé himself.)

Adams spoke with *1stdibs* shortly after the show opened at the Bowers — it runs until January 6, 2013, after which the McFerrins' rare cache will travel to Houston, where it will remain on permanent loan at the city's Museum of Natural Science.

The exhibition includes several of Fabergé's famous eggs, as well as an array of jeweled frames, clocks, tiaras and cigarette holders collected by Arthur and Dorothy McFerrin of Houston, Texas. Photo © Eric Stoner

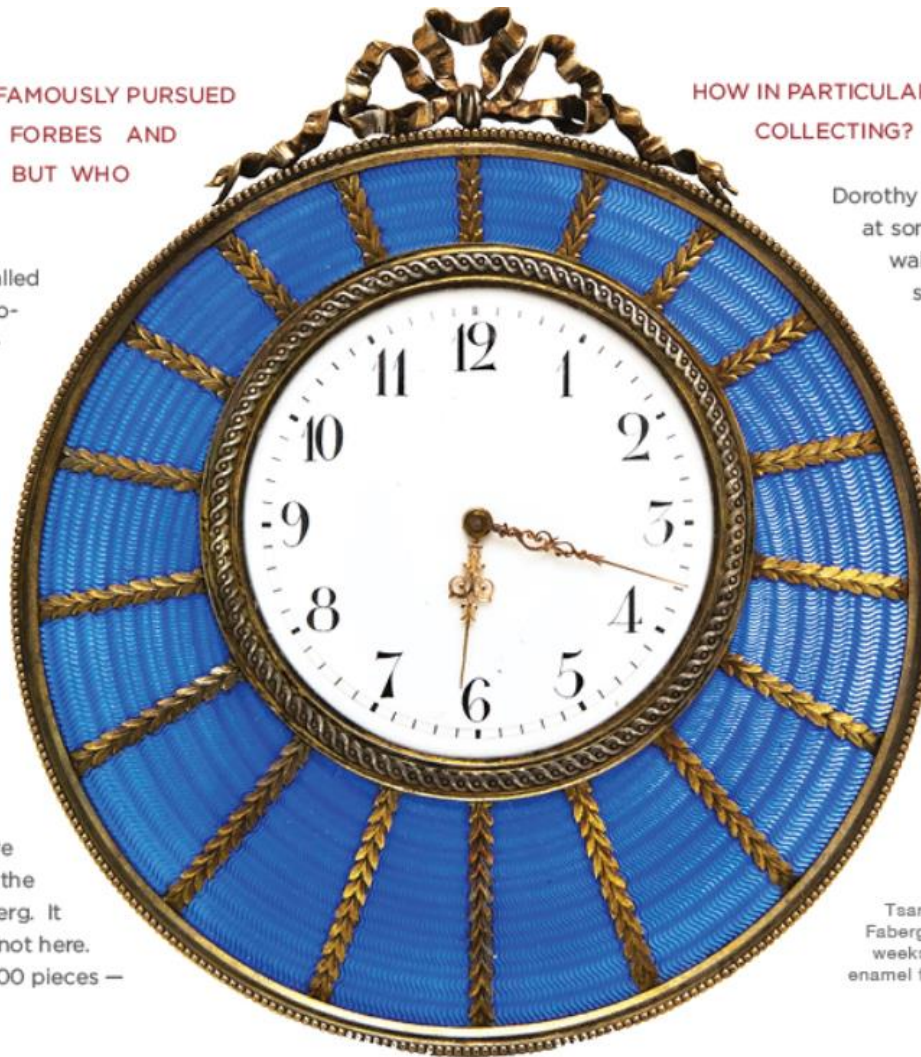


IN THE PAST, FABERGÉ HAS BEEN FAMOUSLY PURSUED BY THE LIKES OF MALCOLM FORBES AND MARJORIE MERRIWEATHER POST. BUT WHO ARE THE MCFERRINS?

Arthur — or Artie as he likes to be called — and Dorothy are the most down-to-earth, gracious people. They're self-made, started with little and built a fortune on just hard work. Arty was an chemical engineer who eventually became involved in additives for petroleum products.

HOW DOES THIS COLLECTION COMPARE WITH, SAY, THE VERY FAMOUS FORBES HOLDINGS?

Well, the late Malcolm Forbes concentrated mainly on high-profile imperial eggs — the very top of the line — and he owned about 11. In 2004, his whole collection was bought before the Sotheby's auction even began by the Russian oil billionaire Victor Vekselberg. It went back en masse to Russia, so it's not here. The McFerrin's collection is larger — 300 pieces — more eclectic and still here.



HOW IN PARTICULAR DID THEY START COLLECTING?

Dorothy likes to tell this story. She was at some auction looking for French wall sconces, and someone said she had to see this Fabergé egg — it was not an imperial egg but one of the many the studio put out for the general public.

AND SHE FELL IN LOVE?

Yes, and bought it immediately, but she then found out it was what we Fabergé scholars call a *faux-berge* — very well-made, stamped with the Fabergé name, but not original.

Tsar Nicholas II and his wife purchased Fabergé's Blue Wedding Clock, 1896, just weeks after they were married. The blue-enamel finish represents true love. Photo © C&M Photography



I'M SURPRISED THAT SORT OF EXPERIENCE WAS INSPIRATIONAL!

These are alert, engaged people; it made them learn everything they could about Fabergé. They met with experts like the Schaffers of A La Vieille Russie in New York, who've been dealing in Fabergé since the early 1940s. They absorbed so much in six or seven years, they've become highly discriminating buyers.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FAKE?

They kept it in their collection as a teaching tool, and side-by-side this really remarkable *faux-berge* falls short.

SO WITH THE FORBES COLLECTION BACK IN RUSSIA, IS THIS THE LARGEST AMERICAN COLLECTION?

I believe so. In fact, I can share with you that the McFerrins very recently bought an extremely important imperial egg, the Trellis Egg, so-called because it has a perfect trellis of diamonds and other gems covering its surface. It's not in the show because they just got

it. But it will be highlighted when the objects on view here join the other 300 of their pieces at the Museum of Natural History in February 2013.

WHAT MIGHT AN EGG LIKE THEIR TRELIS PIECE COST?

The McFerrins are discrete people. It's never about that for them — they don't say. I can tell you that another Russian, Alexander Ivanov, bought the egg Fabergé designed for the Rothschild family in 1902 and took it back to Russia as well — he paid \$16.5 million.

An undated photo of Carl Fabergé at work in his studio. When he was a young jeweler, his pieces attracted the attention of Tsar Alexander III, who commissioned the first Fabergé egg for his wife in 1885.

WOW — THAT SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT POST-SOVIET CAPITALISM! IT ALSO RAISES THE OBVIOUS QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT A SHOW LIKE THIS RUNNING IN 2012 WITH ITS PARTICULAR ECONOMIC PROFILE?

In *any* economic era, for some reason we want to focus on the nobility or status of the people who owned Fabergé pieces. What I am particularly interested in is the nobility of the persons producing these objects. If you look closely at the handwork, the thought, skill, time and pride that are reflected in them, it's a kind of nobility of creative purpose. I am more interested in the artisans than the patrons.

YOUR COMMENT RAISES AN INTERESTING POINT. FABERGÉ WAS NOT THIS SOLITARY GENIUS BUT THE HUB OF A BUSY DESIGN STUDIO — AN EARLY MODEL OF FINE ART AS LEGITIMATE ENTERPRISE.

Yes. He trained and employed some of the finest jewelers from all over the world. And there is something else related to notions of wealth and economy that fascinates me more than the noble patrons — he was known for treating the people who worked for him with amazing respect.

He paid the highest wages of any fine craft studio, and he was very progressive in that he had women working for him at very high levels of design.



Fabergé created the Nobel Egg, 1914, for Swedish industrialist Dr. Emanuel Nobel. The enameled egg opens to reveal a rook-crystal-and-diamond pendant watch. Photo © C&M Photography



DID FABERGÉ HAVE ANY OFFICIAL ART TRAINING?

In those days a very well-placed apprenticeship was your schooling. Also, Fabergé did what all well-off young men did: in his teens he went on a grand tour of Europe. He visited Italy, Germany and England, and over those four years studied with some of the most renowned goldsmiths, like Joseph Friedman.

SO, ON TO THIS EGG THING. HOW DID THESE SPECTACULAR OBJECTS FIRST COME TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE ROMANOVS?

In 1885 Alexander III commissioned Fabergé to make an egg for his wife, which is not in the show. It was a simple white egg made out of fine enamel that opened up to show a solid gold yolk; then the yolk opened to reveal an intricate, astoundingly complex hen, which opened to reveal a miniature crown and egg-shaped ruby pendant.

WELL THAT WOULD GET YOU THE JOB OF JEWELER TO THE TSAR, FOR SURE!

Alexander died, and his son Nicolas ordered eggs for his wife and his mother. Each of Fabergé's conceptions outdid the last, and it became a royal tradition that lasted 30 years.



From left: The Tsarina's Triangular Pink Clook; Nicholas II Presentation Snuff Box, one of the lavish diamond-and gemstone-encrusted gifts the tsar gave to foreign dignitaries visiting Russia. Photos © C&M Photography

AND LIKE TODAY, WHEN KATE MIDDLETON SPORTS A FASHION AND EVERYONE FOLLOWS, HIS EASTER EGGS CAUGHT ON WITH THE WEALTHY OUTSIDE THE COURT.

Yes, his studios made eggs for every income. He was a remarkable businessman and one of the first jewelers to have a mail-order catalogue. Fabergé himself made eggs for only a very exclusive circle. In the show we have the Nobel Egg that was designed for the Swedish industrialist Dr. Emanuel Nobel in 1913 to 1914. It's a white enamel egg, very elegant and clean, even modern looking. It's expertly engraved to look like delicately patterned frost gathering on a misted ground. Inside, the egg holds a stunning rock crystal and diamond pendant watch. Fabergé designed party favors for Dr. Nobel in this same ice motif, and they are on view here.

FABERGÉ DESIGNED WHAT ARE CALLED PRESENTATION BOXES, INTENDED TO HOLD A GIFT OF SOME SORT FOR DIPLOMATS COMING TO THE COURT. THEY'RE ENCRUSTED WITH DIAMONDS, INLAY, GEMSTONES AND SO EXTRAVAGANT ONE CAN'T IMAGINE HOW THE GIFT INSIDE COULD POSSIBLY SURPASS THE CONTAINER.

I think that was sort of the point. We have a really famous box that Nicholas II had Fabergé design in 1902 for the visiting French diplomat Leon Bourgeois; I think that is the one you mean, with the Emperor's initials in precious stones. It was in the style of a snuff box. Did you have a favorite object?



This fan, created in 1890, was painted by Jules Donzel fils, one of a celebrated family of late 19th-century French painters. It depicts the Fountain of Youth and Venus Triumphant, surrounded by cupids. The gilded mother-of-pearl sticks are Fabergé. Photo © Eric Stoner

The briolette diamonds that make up the Empress Josephine Tiara, ca. 1890, were a gift from Tsar Alexander I to the empress after her divorce from Napoleon Bonaparte.
Photos © C&M Photography



I HAVE TO SAY THAT I WAS PREDICTABLE AND NOT SUBTLE BECAUSE MY FAVORITE WAS THAT OVER-THE-TOP EMPRESS JOSEPHINE TIARA.

That's a crowd favorite, and it has a kind of romantic story. So the young Tsar Alexander I met and fell smitten by Empress Josephine, and when she divorced Napoleon, he presented her with those briolette diamonds that hang on that headpiece. Just a year later Josephine passed away, and in 1890 Fabergé turned the gems into that tiara.

A SCANT 30 YEARS AFTER THAT TIARA WAS MADE, THIS OPULENT WORLD OF PRIVILEGE CAME TO A CRASHING HALT WITH THE REVOLUTION. EVERYTHING GOT NATIONALIZED OR DESTROYED AND I ASSUME FABERGÉ WITH HIS TIES TO WEALTH WAS IN DANGER; WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?

Well, some of his family, like his brother Eugene, were rounded up, but Carl managed to flee with his wife to Switzerland, where he died in 1920.



ONE FINAL QUESTION: YOU COULD HAVE A SERIOUS CASE OF OVERKILL SEEING THIS MUCH GLITTERY STUFF AMASSED LIKE THIS, BUT SURPRISINGLY THAT DOES NOT SEEM TO HAPPEN HERE.

I relied on our installation experts, and the one thing that we tried to do was to allow full in-the-round views whenever possible, because these were not static objects but things that people wore, used, exchanged and lived with. For all his success and impeccable technique and all the grandeur of his creations, Fabergé had a real sense of whimsy, so we tried to let the objects retain some delight, not just pomp.

The exhibition allows full in-the-round views of the jewels on display. "Fabergé: Imperial Jeweler to the Tsars" runs through January 8, 2013. Photo © Erio Stoner