

Fantastical Fabergé

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The Easter egg everyone wants

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As a child, I wanted nothing more than a Fabergé egg. I was endlessly fascinated by their delicate mechanisms, bejewelled panels unfurling like a chrysalis to reveal anything from a sultry ruby to a miniature train. My childlike fascination in Fabergé has been shared by generations of collectors and admirers. Emperors, kings, socialites and princesses from across the globe have all lusted after the unmatched craftsmanship of a Fabergé piece.



An Imperial miniature pendant Easter egg by Carl Fabergé
Chief Workmaster: Michael Perchin, St Petersburg, c. 1900.
Length: 2.5 cm (from top of loop)
Image courtesy of Wartski

Much like the Mona Lisa has come to represent the total sum of Da Vinci's artistic prowess, Fabergé's genius has been unfairly distilled down to a few handfuls of Easter eggs. In reality, both he (Carl) and the house of Fabergé produced some of the most unusual and beautiful items running the whole gamut of artisanal skills. Enamelling, gem-setting, goldsmithery, silverwork, glassblowing and wood carving are all present in Fabergé's works, and the diversity of items would fill a (very glamorous) department store. He created cufflinks and hat pins, parasol handles and cross quartz owls. There was seemingly Edwardian object he could not render beautiful.



Hat pin, Carl Fabergé, c.1890
Chief Workmaster: Michael Perchin, St. Petersburg, pre 1896.
Contained in its original silk and velvet lined wooden box.
Image courtesy of Wartski

After inheriting his father's jewellery business in 1882, Carl Fabergé rapidly developed the name into an international icon. He moved away from the blingy but traditional gold and diamond jewellery to focus on design-led pieces which showcased his astonishing workmanship. Having studied at Dresden Arts and Crafts School, Carl toured Europe learning different artisanal skills. He went on to work as a restorer at the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg (his home town), focusing on gold and enamel snuff boxes.

He quickly put his new skills into practice – the workshop became renowned for having perfected the enamelling process – and his works caught the eye of Tzar Alexander III who put them on display in the Hermitage. This led to the first Imperial Easter Egg commission in 1885, and Fabergé was established as the most desirable craftsman in all Russia.

Word of his exquisite objets d'art spread among the world's elite. By 1890 the Fabergé workshop had doubled in size to nearly 500 craftsmen, and 1900 saw the house's first appearance at the World Exhibition in Paris. In 1903, the first international House of Fabergé opened on Bond Street, and the great British love affair with Fabergé blossomed.

The great and the good(ish) of Britain vied to procure a piece from Fabergé, but entry to the ownership club was hard to come by. Much like an Hermes Birkin today, it wasn't possible to simply waltz in and select your bijoux of choice. Introductions had to be made, and handshakes exchanged. For some, the opening of a physical shop was greatly lamented – Empress Maria Fedorovna wrote to Queen Alexandra complaining "Now that that silly Fabergé has his shop in London, I can't send you anything new, I am furious!"



An Enamel and Gem-set Easter Egg Pendant by Alexander Tjander, St Petersburg, c. 1900
Signed: 'AT' for Alexander Tjander
Length (excl. loop): 1.8 cm
Image courtesy of Wartski

Fabergé's charm lay not just in his exclusivity, but in his ability to create gifts for the people who had everything. His clients would already have owned houses and jewellery boxes groaning with treasures, so the value had to lie elsewhere. His exemplary craftsmanship was unquestioned, but Fabergé was also a shrewd creator. He knew that his pieces had to be able to surprise and delight those who had grown tired of unbridled luxury. He thus turned to sentimentality.

Fabergé knew well of the Brits' obsession with their pets and was keen to cater to his new customer base in England. Cherished animals recreated in precious gems were enormously popular – a beloved Fox Terrier carved in white onyx with sparkling ruby eyes, a prize bull hewn in glistening obsidian and even an intricately wrinkled turkey decorated with lapis lazuli were given as gifts among the Royal Family. These animal figurines are among the most valuable pieces today and prices can run in to the millions thanks to their clear provenance – many bore the engraved name of the pet depicted making them easy to trace.

In a further attempt to woo his British fanbase, Fabergé decided to capture the very country in his works. Intricate enamelled boxes depicting stately homes and castles painted on to gold and mounted in nephrite frames served

as decadent postcards and proved a shrewd business move from Fabergé . How could his clientele resist purchasing such an ornate depiction of their own pied-a- terre in snuff box form?

While many modern collectors may be unable to find their own home depicted on one of Fabergé 's creations, those with a healthy budget will be able to find many items with which to fill it. Kieran McCarthy, an eminent Fabergé expert and Managing Director at Wartski advised that prices can range from £2,000 for a piece of silverware up to several millions for unique figurines, flowers and animal studies with exceptional provenance. As with any collectable, rarity sharply increases value and can allow condition to be somewhat excused.



A match-striker by Carl Fabergé

The matches are taken from a cavity in his back and struck against his sandstone body in order to light them.
Workmaster: Julius Rappoport, St. Petersburg, before 1896.
Image courtesy of Wartski

With such a vast array of items on offer, it can be difficult to know where to begin. What unites these seemingly disparate pieces is the mix of exemplary craftsmanship and sheer whimsy. What desk wouldn't wish to be adorned by a hefty silver anteater paperweight or a rather cross frog? While the infamous eggs served only to astonish, the more practical Fabergé pieces are not to be overlooked. A handsome set of cake cutlery can fetch about £8,000, while a cigarette case creeps to the £45,000 mark. For those seeking an interesting yet more adorable entry in to the Fabergé owners club, sketches of his works are a marvellous alternative starting at about £1000 and offering a glimpse in to the creative process of arguably the world's most inventive artisan.