

Fatal Fabergé Eggs: Ruinous Symbols of the Russian Empire

Danielle Jump

Danielle Jump is a first-year undergraduate in History of Art at St John's College, Cambridge, interested in Russian art of the eighteenth–twentieth centuries. She is pursuing a career in the arts and curatorial industry alongside her studies at Cambridge. She is an Assistant Art Editor at CJLPA.

The Russian jeweller Peter Karl Fabergé achieved enduring fame under the last Czar of the Russian Empire, Nicholas II. Fabergé is best known for his eggs, which are better described as objects of opulence and *fantaisie* than as pieces of jewellery. In the form of small pendant eggs, these Easter gifts were adorned with gemstones, chromatic porcelain, and Imperial monograms.

Although Fabergé eggs represent only a fraction of the magnificent jewellery the house produced for the Romanovs, they are key symbols of the Russian Empire. Peter Fabergé was appointed jeweller to the Imperial Court in 1886. He was at the heart of Imperial production, and described as the ‘reinventor of Russian jewellery’.¹ In celebration of Easter, Nicholas II’s Czarina and mother would receive a Fabergé egg each year. 52 Imperial Fabergé eggs were produced between 1885–1917. They often took more than a year to complete, and are now exceptionally rare. These Imperial treasures were therefore incredible displays of affluence. However, the significance of Fabergé eggs extends beyond their glittering façade. They were to become symbols of the schism between the Russian people and the Romanov dynasty.

After almost 300 years of Romanov rule, Fabergé eggs came to symbolise the extravagance of the Russian Empire. They were polyvalent, simultaneously reminders of Christ’s death and of his revolutionary resurrection.² They would become emblematic of the attempts to uphold the artificial, luxurious façade of the Romanov Empire in Russia, which concealed the discontentment permeating through society. The contrast between actual events in Russia and these lavish gifts is one between violence and beauty, destitution and extravagance. By exploring Fabergé eggs as an insight into the watershed of the 1917 Revolution, I intend to highlight the stark disconnect between the last Romanov Imperial family and their country’s people.

1 ‘Carl Faberge’ <<https://biography.yourdictionary.com/carl-faberge>> accessed 14 February 2021.

2 *ibid.*



Fig 1. The Danish Palaces Egg (House of Fabergé 1890). James Petts, Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Faberge_egg_-_49571636897.jpg>.

Blinding glory and magnificence

The memory of a previously magnificent Russia would distort the reign of Nicholas II, who was both a deeply religious and absolutist. The Romanovs saw themselves as irreplaceable, each of them being a gift of revelation by God to Russia. Their privilege was perceived as a rightful consequence of their God-given status. Although the jewelled eggs were gifted through an annual tradition, commemorating Easter festivities, they had the political aim of illustrating Nicholas II's transcendent power, unique to the Czar. Nicholas II's coronation of 1897 was marked by the 'greatest' and most significant Fabergé egg, the 'Coronation Fabergé Egg'.³ As Malcolm Forbes put it, 'one man's decadence is another man's creative art'. Forbes characterises the Romanovs' lifestyle as both excessive and artistically enriching, illustrative of the growing moral and cultural severance of the Imperial court from its nation.⁴

Made of red gold, the egg was covered in yellow enamel, and encrusted in a lattice pattern of black Romanov eagles. Drawing inspiration directly from Czarina Alexandrovna's coronation attire, the colours of the Fabergé egg were intended to evoke power, succession, and the extreme luxury of celebration.⁵ The egg opens to reveal an exact replica of the coronation chariot, constructed with remarkable delicacy. The main frame of the carriage is encrusted in diamonds and red enamel. The chariot's detailing extends to the windows, made of rock crystals, and to the tyres, made of platinum. The chariot alone took 15 months to complete. The jeweller did not spare on materials—these objects were of astounding luxury. This projection of power and expressive visual opulence seems incongruous with the actual events of the coronation in 1897, which the Romanovs may have preferred to forget.

Ambitions to secure a smooth transition of monarchical power from Alexander III were crushed at Nicholas II's coronation. Whilst an elaborate coronation ritual was orchestrated to reinforce the notions of a positive 'consensus of a new monarch', events transpired that became known as the 'Khodynka Tragedy'. As authorities failed to maintain civic order, a rush to acquire celebratory gifts resulted in a catastrophic crowd crush following the coronation.⁶ The repercussions of the event caused approximately 5,000 deaths.⁷ Despite the number of lives lost, festivities continued as soon as the Czar and Czarina appeared, suggesting a dismissive element to the Czar's early governance. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of deprivation—with citizens desperate to receive edible gifts—is symbolic of the dichotomy in Russia at this time. Despite fabricating opulence with the Fabergé traditions, the system of dynastic power was not representative of contemporary life. The precursors of revolution were already occurring in the newly anointed Czar's Empire. While the Romanovs continued to fund their lavish lifestyles, the Czar was turning a blind eye to the mass poverty and deprivation in his country. Thus, the glorious tradition of the coronation ended up as a blood-stained reminder of the beginning of the end for Russian dynastic rule.

Although these events were not known to the jewellery house at the time of the gifts' conception, the 'Coronation Fabergé Egg' had

3 'Fabergé Imperial Egg Chronology' (*Fabergé Research Site*) <<https://fabergeresearch.com/eggs-faberge-imperial-egg-chronology/>> accessed 14 February 2021.

4 Toby Faber, *Fabergé's Eggs* (Random House 2008) 206.

5 *ibid.* 46.

6 Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol 1 (*Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I*, Princeton University Press 1995) 89–90.

7 Faber (n 4) 47.

become a tainted symbol of Nicholas II's ascension to the throne. The concepts of the Fabergé egg were leveraged from the Empire's traditional past, characteristic of state ideology under the fatal rule of Nicholas II. Alla Bychkova further encapsulates the significance of historicity for Fabergé: the jewellery house was 'breaking through all the barriers between the past and the future, between myth and reality'.⁸ Although the Empire was founded in ruthlessness and ruin, both jeweller and Czar developed their image by invoking historical power.

The growing divide between Czar and subject was embedded in this dynastic flamboyance. Although they shimmered, the Fabergé eggs also blinded the dynasty to its true situation: a ticking time-bomb which culminated in revolution.

Reality and the dynasty

The contrast between dynastic majesty and harsh reality in Russia was concealed by the scalding grip of Nicholas II. Transfers of power were initially straightforward in the Romanov Empire. However, the throne changed nine times during the nineteenth century, much more often than in any other European state.⁹ Following the shooting of Alexander II, initial reforms towards a more democratic Russia were upturned.¹⁰ The Duma had broken down into a number of warring factions. Nicholas II reverted to conservative reform, considering it to be more successful at maintaining social order. The normal 'metamorphosis from absolute monarchy to democracy' did not occur. This was one of the many consequences of Romanov rule.¹¹ Those who celebrated absolute monarchy and political stability were misguided, as revolutions do not simply erupt unexpectedly.

The tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty was marked by celebration across Russia. Culminating in the grand entry of Nicholas II to Moscow—upon his return across the Volga river from Kostroma—the Imperial family were greeted by immense crowds of people wanting to get a glimpse of the Romanov Czar and Czarina.¹² The events of 1897 seemed to have been safely overlooked and cloistered. This momentous event was independently celebrated with the commission of the 'Tercentenary Egg' by Fabergé. The jewelled Easter egg's surface incorporates 18 separate miniatures, one for each Romanov Czar, from Michael I to Nicholas II. Within the Fabergé egg is the surprise of a rotating globe of the Earth. One hemisphere shows the original Empire inherited by Michael Romanov in 1613. The other hemisphere shows the Romanov Empire in 1913, which had grown to a vast 6.2 million square miles.¹³ The messages of the egg are Imperial strength, power and, notably, continuity of expansion. The materials of enamel, gold, and precious stones are mimetic of sovereign affirmation, having been extracted from the lands of Romanov Russia. For the Czarina, that there were personal and national celebrations upon their return to Moscow signalled that the rumours of revolution were false. Remarkably, she told her lady-in-waiting, 'We only need to show ourselves, and

8 Alla Bychkova, 'Peter Carl Fabergé, Biography, History of the Fabergé House in Russia' (*La belle époque*) <https://www.liveinternet.ru/users/la_belle_epoque/post73433488/> accessed 14 February 2021.

9 Cynthia Hyla Whittaker, 'The Idea of an Elected Monarch in the 18th century' (2001) 18 *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 1.

10 *ibid.*

11 Daniel Gordon, "'Public Opinion" and the Civilizing Process in France: The Example of Morellet' (1989) 22 *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 302.

12 'Fabergé Imperial Egg Chronology' (n 3).

13 Faber (n 4) 95.

at once their hearts are ours.¹⁴ As usual, the Romanovs perceived their dynasty as the jewel of the Empire. They did not even attempt to understand the real situation of Russia.

The corollaries of the 1912 famine, and increased demonstrations for workers' rights, were more indicative of the reality of the Empire on the ground. Whilst the Romanovs squandered the nation's wealth on Fabergé eggs—the 'Tercentenary Egg' was valued at 175,000 rubles in 1927—their country lived in poverty.¹⁵ The causes of the 1905 Revolution continued to affect the lives of radicals, trade unionists, and ordinary people. Disastrously, two million deaths followed the 1912 famine, and three million workers came out on strike between 1912 and 1914.¹⁶ A morbid awareness of extreme poverty became widespread as the endemic deprivation created a sense that life was fleeting. Education was seen as the best means to increase the workforce's productivity, but it had uncomfortable political consequences—literacy rates remained at only 24% at the start of Nicholas II's reign.¹⁷ This highlights that the regime was more concerned with self-preservation than with promoting education, especially since education could increase actions against their absolutism. Lenin's vision of a communist Russia was becoming more appealing by comparison with the deeply flawed and archaic actual system. Revolution was in the air and it seemed only a matter of time before the business of 1905 was completed.

The duality of Romanov Russia is manifest in the Imperial jeweller's creations. The dynasty was resistant to recognise the constant hunger and the dire conditions of their nation's workers. Fabergé eggs were still produced in the First World War, and even in 1917 epitomised the extreme naivety of the Romanovs. The jewels of the Empire, which seem to speak of eternal life, would come to emblematised death.

Converted symbols of revolution

On the brink of revolution in 1917, these works were still being created. The volatility of the situation did not diminish the extravagant tradition. The production of the 'Steel Military Egg' by Fabergé would come to symbolise the destructive force of war and Romanov misfortune. Intended to have a finish of dull blackened steel, with minimal decoration, the Easter egg is supported on four small artillery shells. Hidden inside is a surprise miniature of Nicholas II and his son. The humility of father and son, and the bond between them, are captured in the miniature surprise. However, both were trapped in a politically volatile situation, inside and outside the image. The Czar was unable to uphold his sovereignty and Romanov rule. His son, Alexei Nikolayevich, would never succeed to the throne, because of his haemophilia. In the image, father and son are surrounded by soldiers, who are a poignant reminder of the imminent revolution. Kenneth Snowman described the egg as a 'banal kitsch', as its black finish has gradually degraded, symbolising the breakdown of the dynasty.¹⁸

¹⁴ *ibid* 96.

¹⁵ 'Fabergé Imperial Egg Chronology' (n 3).

¹⁶ Fuyuki Kurasawa, 'The Making of Humanitarian Visual Icons: On the 1921–1923 Russian Famine as Foundational Event' in Jeffrey C Alexander, Dominik Bartmański, and Bernhard Giesen (eds) *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012) 68; Faber (n 4) 96.

¹⁷ Lenore A Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Kluwer Academic Publishers 2003) 46.

¹⁸ A Kenneth Snowman, 'Carl Fabergé Goldsmith to the Imperial Court of Russia' (Debrett's 1979, as cited in Faber (n 4) 112).

Eventually, this breakdown was completed. The way forward for Russia, following the 1917 revolution, was the formation of Vladimir Lenin's communist government. As Tatiana Muntian argues, the Fabergé eggs were a 'tangible symbol of the destruction of the Russian monarchy'.¹⁹ This interpretation evokes the Romanovs' ignorance to the Russian people's plight. The fragile nation and Imperial family became subverted upon revolution, just as the polishing away of the egg's black finish revealed an artificially glistening metal shell. This destruction is epitomised by the abandonment of the jewels in the wake of the forced abdication and exile of the Romanov family.²⁰ Fabergé eggs were confiscated and nationalised. Such was the denouement of the jewelled dynastic symbol of Imperial Russia. The remaining Fabergé eggs are a nexus to the times of the Romanovs, a reminder of previous, opulent suppression. As substitutes, pluralist experience and commonality came to the forefront of political symbolism in the new socialist Russia.

The Romanovs were sentenced to death by communist revolutionaries. Thus, the Fabergé traditions of splendour vanished, never to return.

Loose ends of Fabergé

Today, Fabergé eggs are objects of Russian cultural heritage, exhibited around the world. Several Fabergé eggs disappeared during the pillaging of palaces, and 12 are still missing. However, Tatiana Muntian and Marianna Chistyakova have solved the intriguing mystery surrounding a 1917 Easter egg, the unfinished 'Blue Tsarevich Constellation Egg', discovered in 2003. This egg represents the final struggle of the Romanovs, who refused to entertain the possibility that their Imperial opulence may have sparked revolution. It represents 'a scattered [and] incomplete' façade of the Romanovs, cracking under revolutionary force.²¹ The fragments left over from the Easter egg's construction by Fabergé likewise 'epitomiz[e] the collapse of the illustrious firm'.²²

Nevertheless, the eggs originally had a religious purpose: to reflect the resurrection of Christ. These decorative objects remain an insight for the contemporary viewer into the turbulence of the Romanov dynasty. Even though the dynasty collapsed, Fabergé eggs have been revived for the contemporary viewer on view in museums, in keeping with the Easter egg's religious connotations of revival.

¹⁹ 'Fabergé Imperial Egg Chronology' (n 3).

²⁰ Faber (n 4) 129.

²¹ 'Fabergé Imperial Egg Chronology' (n 3).

²² *ibid*.