Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs

The Fifteenth Anniversary Egg, 1911

What are Fabergé Imperial Easter eggs?

Why are these eggs considered such technical and artistic marvels?

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What are Fabergé Imperial Easter eggs?

Traditionally, colored eggs were given (and still are given) as gifts for the Russian Orthodox Easter celebration. These one-of-a-kind Easter gifts were commissioned by the last two Russian Tsars from the Moscow based jewelry and goldsmith company, Fabergé. The eggs are made of precious metals like gold, silver and platinum and adorned with pearls and gem stones such as diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds. Many include fine enamel work, ivory and rare woods. There seemed to be only three conditions given to Fabergé for the creation of these eggs.1

1. The gift had to be an egg-shaped oval.
2. There had to be a surprise of some kind included with each egg.
3. There were to be no repetitions.

Why are these eggs considered such technical and artistic marvels?

The House of Fabergé seemed to have an “unerring sense of proportion and design”. Meticulous planning and coordination went into the creation of each egg. A difficult engraving technique known as guilloché is employed on many of the eggs. It consists of cutting assorted patterns of lines into the gold or silver ground before the colored enamel was applied in multiple layers. “The lines reflect and scatter any light striking the enamel, creating a sensation of movement beneath its smoothly polished surface”.

Frequently, the surprise was revealed through the use of a spring mechanism. These mechanisms would have to be engineered to fit exactly into the small egg shaped forms. A good example of this is the Lilies of the Valley Egg. “When a pearl button at the side of the egg is turned, three miniature portraits rise and fan out from its top”. The base, spring and portraits all fit into a space less than six inches high and less than three inches wide.

“This series of Imperial Easter eggs is the most ambitious project ever entrusted to a goldsmith”.

Lilies of the Valley Egg, 1898
How much did Fabergé eggs cost?

The very first egg was given by Alexander III to his wife Marie Fedorovna for the Russian Orthodox Easter of 1885. Called the Hen Egg, it is enameled matte white covered gold 2 ½ inches long. The surprise is a gold hen with ruby eyes inside a dull-gold yolk. The two additional surprises, gold straw and a miniature crown, are lost. It cost 4,151 rubles which in today’s U.S. dollars would be $43,000. “It represented a tiny fraction of the tsar’s annual income that year – an estimated nine million rubles ($94 million)”. For some perspective… in the United States in 1890 one dozen eggs cost approximately 20 cents, and a half gallon of milk cost 14 cents.
**Where are the Fabergé eggs today?**

The Fabergé eggs are located in private collections and museums all over the world. After the revolution, the contents of the palaces were sent to Moscow for storage. While Lenin wanted to preserve Russia’s cultural heritage, Stalin sold off some of the eggs and other items made for the Romanovs by Fabergé for strong Western currency. “Between 1930 and 1933, fourteen of the Imperial Easter eggs were sold and left the country.”\(^8\) Of approximately fifty eggs created between 1885 and 1917, forty-four are known to exist today. Ten of those remain in the Kremlin. The whereabouts of seven are unknown. One egg that lost its *provenance* (history of creation and ownership) over most of the 20th century was found in the United States by a strap metal dealer in 2014. He bought it for approximately $14,000. It is estimated that he sold it for $33 million. Archival research has identified this egg as the third Imperial Egg given to Marie Fedorovna by her husband, Alexander III in 1887.\(^9\)
Did Fabergé only make eggs for the Imperial family?

Fabergé and the craftsmen working for him made many kinds of things for the Russian elite. Photograph frames, small boxes, clocks, cases for thermometers, figurines, jewelry for men and women, paperweights, desk sets, chairs, vases, and bowls were among the items created. Works by Fabergé were very popular not only among the Russian aristocracy, but also wealthy people in Western Europe and America.

There is an egg that has “the unique distinction of being the only major Fabergé egg made for an American”. It is called, The Duchess of Marlborough Egg. “Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough, was born Consuelo Vanderbilt, daughter of wealthy railroad builder, W. K. Vanderbilt”. Consuelo married the English 9th Duke of Marlborough in 1895. The Duke and Duchess of Marlborough purchased the egg-shaped clock during a visit to Russia in 1902. They may have seen a similar clock egg made for the Imperial family when they were received by Marie Fedorovna, mother of the last Tsar.10

Duchess of Marlborough Egg, 1902
What, if any, meaning is there to the Fabergé Eggs today?

“In the harsh light of historical hindsight, the Fabergé Imperial Easter eggs can be seen as nothing more than the frivolous indulgences of a decadent monarchy. But stripped of revolutionary ideology, they endure simply as fragile mementos of the doomed Russian dynasty, each not only an artistic masterpiece, but a remarkable reflection of the joys and achievements of a family at the crossroads of history”.11

Coronation Egg, 1897
Works Cited


