

Symbols of artistry, craftsmanship, thoughtfulness, thorough professionalism, and, above all, hard work... no wonder Fabergé objects have been so sought-after through history.

■ BY KALPANA SUNDER

# An Egg-straordinary

# Tale

Would you shell out \$17 million for an egg? Well, not just any egg but an opulent one, made of enamel and encrusted with precious stones? This egg can open at the flick of a mysterious mechanism and reveal a surprise, which could be an exquisite miniature portrait of a loved one, a small detailed boat, or a bunch of flowers. A thing of beauty that may be impractical but makes you covet it... a metaphor for a golden age lost forever...

I am at the famous Fabergé Museum in the small German town of Baden-Baden at the fringes of the Black Forest. The iconic landmark is owned by billionaire art collector Alexander Ivanov. Located in a four-storeyed 19th-century town house, the Fabergé Museum is home to a collection worth around \$1.5 billion, protected with bulletproof cases and overseen by video cameras. A million euros were spent on its state-of-the-art security system alone.

Studded with exquisite villas of the rich and famous, Baden-Baden has always had a considerable Russian presence, and writers such as Turgenev, Gogol, and Dostoevsky have walked the leafy boulevards of the Lichtentaler Allee park here, looking for inspiration and luck in gambling at the famed casino.



Kalpana Sunder



Image courtesy Fabergé Museum

## BIRTH OF THE EGGS

Created by Peter Carl Fabergé ('Fabergé' is coined from the Latin word *faber*, which means 'smith' or 'maker'), Fabergé objects were indeed the ultimate status symbols of their times. Born in 1846, Fabergé went on to undertake a Grand Tour of Europe in his youth, where he allowed his travel experiences to shape his sensibilities and influence his style. He later joined his family's jewellery business. However, it was in 1885 that he got his big break when the Tsar asked him to design a special Easter egg that was to be gifted to the Tsarina, and offered him a sum of 4,151 roubles for the order. Fabergé created the iconic 'Hen Egg' — crafted out of gold with an enamelled shell and a gold hen, which contained a diamond replica of the imperial crown. From then on, he became a goldsmith for the royal family. He was flooded with commissions from the nobility, the princes and pashas, and the intelligentsia of those times. He created 54 Imperial eggs, of which 42 have survived.

It is said that each egg took almost a year to make, and undoubtedly it had a lavish use of whimsy and creativity. The Tsar laid one condition before Fabergé: every egg had to have a surprise element that would appear when a hidden mechanism was operated. Fabergé thus made mechanical cocks, bouquets of flowers, and, in 1897, a coronation egg with a miniature of the coronation coach.

Fabergé employed over 500 artisans and was known for his rigid quality control. "What is the real hallmark of a Fabergé piece?" I ask John Varoli, the press officer for the museum. "Fabergé's absolute and unprecedented precision in craftsmanship," he replies, "For instance, today, one can spot a fake because often there is something wrong, such as hinges on a box that don't work perfectly." Each piece was personally inspected by Fabergé himself, and any flawed ones were instantly rejected. He made sure that every piece was unique, and it was the extraordinary technical expertise and meticulous construction that set his work apart.

## A FAB LEGACY

We go around the museum looking at clocks, cigarette cases, samovars, bejewelled snuff boxes, enamelled photo frames, and parasol handles. I marvel at the craftsmanship and think of the countless artists who have spun, blown, gilded, and enamelled these masterpieces. Our guide Ludmilla points out the last two Imperial eggs, neither of which could be delivered to the recipients, owing to the 1917 revolution that toppled monarchy in Russia. The Constellation Egg — made of nephrite, rock crystal, blue glass, and diamonds, encrusted with gold and more diamonds, and with a ring around it like a constellation — was commissioned for Empress Alexandra. The Birch Egg was to be gifted to

Opening image: Fabergé will forever be revered in history for his elegant artworks, especially for the exquisitely crafted Fabergé eggs. Shown here is the egg depicting the Gatchina Palace.

Top left: The facade of the Fabergé Museum in Baden-Baden, Germany.

Top right: Alexander Ivanov, the billionaire art collector from Russia and owner of the Fabergé Museum, holding a Fabergé silver hare.



Images on these two pages courtesy Fabergé Museum

**FABERGÉ DEVELOPED MORE THAN 150 ENAMEL COLOURS, AND IT IS SAID THAT WOMEN OFTEN MADE DRESSES TO MATCH THE SHADES THAT HE CREATED!**



the Tsar's mother on the Easter of 1917. As the Tsar was forced to abdicate in March that year, the egg was never delivered. For more than 80 years, it was considered lost and even said to have been smuggled abroad, till Ivanov purchased it from a European collector in 2001.

Stories of greed, mysterious disappearances, sorrow, devotion, and romance are linked to each piece. Many of Fabergé's creations were objects of love — gifted by kings to their wives or secret paramours, some on occasions like weddings and christenings. The Fabergé eggs are indeed his enduring signature creations. Apart from these, there were ornate cigarette cases and snuff boxes with a crest of diamonds, which made great diplomatic gifts — they often had pencilled notes or secret messages of illicit love tucked into them! Sometimes, Arabic inscriptions or some symbol of eternal love was the hidden motif, visible only to the discerning

eye. Fabergé also made tactile stone carvings of animals, birds, and flowers. By 1917, he had created over 1,00,000 precious items.

Fabergé employed some special techniques for production. The enamelling he used was a delicate process that involved liquefying finely ground glass of various colours in a kiln and then applying the resulting material in various layers onto metal. Also, he often used guilloché, where, with the help of a machine called tour à guilloché, he would engrave striations and waves on metal. Fabergé developed more than 150 enamel colours, and it is said that women often made dresses to match the shades that he created! Firing the enamel at a high temperature like 800°C was a difficult process. Even a slight mistake could have been dangerous. Thus, the highlight of his creations was the finish — smooth and without any imperfections. He used a variety of materials too. Besides precious metals and diamonds, he worked with metal alloys such as copper and nickel; natural stones such as jasper, lapis lazuli, rock crystal, agate, and jade; wood; steel; and sandstone.

My favourite in the collection is a set of silver hares in a glass case. There is also a perfect diamond and gold miniature Christmas tree made for the Tsar's mistress — a Russian



ballerina — and an ornate silver table clock that weighs more than 44 kg, made for Tsar Alexander III's 25th wedding anniversary by members of his family. A famous jade Buddha in the collection once belonged to Aristotle Onassis, a Greek billionaire. I look at a tray with torn newspapers, a half-empty glass of vodka, a fried egg, some fish bones, and an unfinished cigarette. A closer look reveals that the fish and the paper are made of silver, the cigarette has been fashioned out of quartz and crystal, and the egg has been made of white egg and amber. Apparently, the piece carries a deeper political message, as the newspaper is on the page of the October manifesto of 1905.

**BEGINNING AGAIN**

Owing to the October Revolution of 1917, Carl Fabergé escaped to Switzerland, where he died in 1920. The name Fabergé was acquired by a U.S.-based cosmetics company in 1964 and also used with Brut deodorants!

After the fall of communism and with changes in the Russian economy, wealthy Russian collectors started investing in artworks such as the Fabergé creations and picking them up from collectors and auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's. In 2009, the Fabergé family, led by Carl Fabergé's great-granddaughters, Tatiana and Sarah, launched its first high jewellery line.

And history came full circle. Fabergé objects will forever be famous for their timelessness — their worth is based on not just the value of stones or precious metals used but also the artistry and craftsmanship employed.

**FABERGÉ FACTS**

- The Rothschild Egg, made as an engagement gift for the wealthy European banking family, was bought by Ivanov at Christie's in London in 2007 for eight million pounds. It is the most expensive Fabergé item ever sold.
- The eggs are represented in popular culture as a sign of wealth and opulence. For example, in *The Simpsons*, Bleeding Gums Murphy, Lisa Simpson's mentor, is addicted to Fabergé Eggs!
- Although Lenin tried to preserve these treasures, Stalin sold off many as a way to make a quick buck and used them to reward Soviet agents.
- The Forbes family held a collection of Imperial Easter eggs worth millions till 2004, when Russian tycoon Viktor Vekselberg picked them up for an undisclosed sum.
- In *Octopussy*, the 13th James Bond film, the wily 007, played by Roger Moore, shrewdly swaps a real Fabergé egg with a fake one that has surveillance equipment.

From top to bottom:

Innovatively crafted Fabergé clocks at the museum.

An assorted range of bejewelled Fabergé snuff boxes.

The Birch Egg, one of the last two Imperial Fabergé eggs.

From left to right:

Ornamental bleeding hearts in a vase.

The silver table clock, which was especially created by Tsar Alexander III's family members for his 25th wedding anniversary.

The Rothschild Egg, meant as an engagement gift for the Rothschilds, the influential banking family. Ivanov purchased the egg in 2007 for eight million pounds, making it the priciest Fabergé item sold.