

The Use of Platinum by Carl Fabergé

NEW EVIDENCE FROM THE DESIGN BOOKS OF HOLMSTRÖM

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Combining imaginative design with outstanding craftsmanship, the decorative objects made by Fabergé, for many years Goldsmith to the Imperial Court of Russia, were intended not only to delight but also, in many instances, to amuse those fortunate enough to receive them. The masterpieces produced in his workshops continue to be highly regarded by museums and private collectors, and demonstrate his ability to use a wide variety of precious materials, including platinum and its alloys, to create fascinating objects for a privileged clientele, which was later destroyed or dispersed by the combined effects of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

Although there had been earlier rumours that platinum had been found in Russia, it was 1819 when small pieces of heavy white metal recovered from a gold mining area on the slopes of the Urals to the south of the city of Ekaterinburg were confirmed to be platinum. By 1824 native platinum had been identified in placer deposits

to the north of Ekaterinburg, and other discoveries quickly followed.

The early use of platinum in Russia was problematic, but its properties led to the suggestion that it should be used as a coinage metal. Indeed, by 1826 a series of medals were struck in platinum to commemorate the coronation of Tsar

Peter Carl Fabergé

1846 – 1920

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, of Huguenot descent, Fabergé was educated in England, France, Germany and Italy. In 1870, at the age of 24, he inherited the jewellery business which his father had established in St. Petersburg twenty eight years earlier, and quickly gained an international reputation as a designer of fine decorative objects, making use of the noble metals and a wide variety of precious and semi-precious stones. His patrons included the royal families and aristocracy of Europe, particularly those of Russia whose interest led to the creation of the celebrated "Imperial Easter Eggs". Under his supervision, retail premises were opened in Moscow, Kiev and London, the latter being managed for a time by Nicholas, the youngest of his four sons. When his business was destroyed by the turmoil in Europe, Fabergé moved to Switzerland where he died in 1920; some seventy years later his productions continues to fascinate connoisseurs and collectors of fine objects



Nicholas I. The idea that platinum should be used in coinage drew impetus under Count Egor Frantsevich Kankrin (1775–1845) Minister of Finance and Head of the Department of Mining, who in March 1828 ordered the preparation of dies for a 3-ruble coin. On April 24th, 1828, the issue was authorised and 6-ruble and 12-ruble coins followed. This ran for eighteen years and by the end of this time some 485,505 ounces troy of platinum had been used for this purpose.

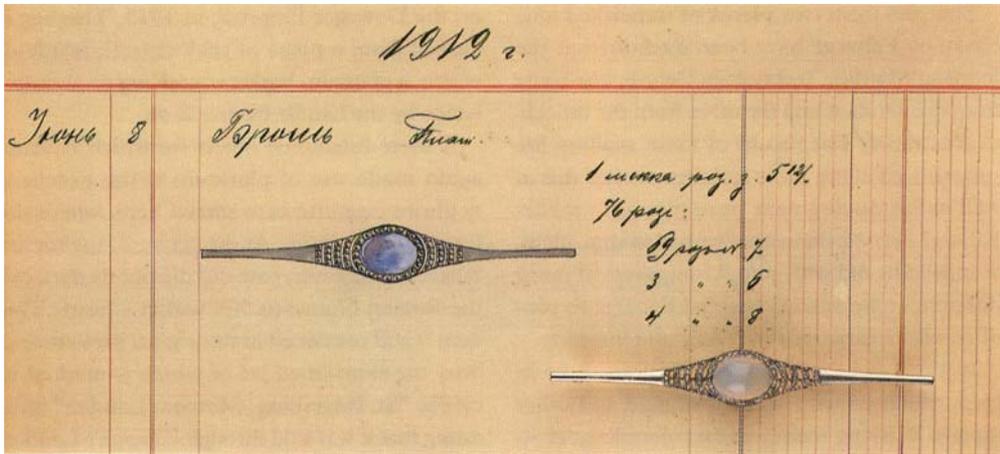
After 1845 demand for platinum fell away in Russia, although it continued to find limited application including use in jewellery. Of the designers, goldsmiths and jewellers of that period, one of the best known was the Russian Peter Carl Fabergé (Karl Gustavovich Fabergé) who in 1870 inherited his father's jewellery business in St. Petersburg, and went on to establish retail outlets in Moscow, Kiev and London. At that time a hallmark was not required in Russia for platinum artifacts, and therefore a precise attribution of a piece of jewellery without its original case can be difficult. There is thus an intriguing possibility that many a family safe might contain a previously unrecognised item of Fabergé jewellery!

This account is based in part upon information gleaned from two recently discovered design books by August Holmström, who was Fabergé's chief workmaster, which have thrown much needed light on the use of platinum by Fabergé. The books record the output of jewellery items made between 6th March, 1909, and 20th March, 1915. They are illustrated with drawings in pen

and pencil, with some washed in watercolour. Even now when an item of jewellery is placed on a page alongside its original design the rigour and precision of its execution is instantly demonstrated. To the right of each diagram there is a neat handwritten description of the materials, quantities of stones, and weights. Above the drawing in cyrillic characters is the single word "brooch" or "pendant", followed, where appropriate, by the abbreviation "Plat" indicating platinum. The absence of this abbreviation would seem to suggest that another white metal or alloy was to be used.

In the second volume of the design books, on pages 194 and 195, dated August 27th, 1914, is a show of eight brooches in the form of frost flowers. These brooches are set with rose-cut diamonds and an occasional brilliant diamond, the former having the top cut into triangular facets while the latter is a circular cut diamond with a flat top. To the right of the design are the words "silver, gold, platinised". Also, in Fabergé's London sales ledgers, certain pendants and brooches are described as being in platinum or half platinum. A jewellery piece made in 1911, and similar to a mount illustrated in the design books, was sent to the Assay Office at the Goldsmiths' Hall, London, for analysis. This established that the material was a silver-gold alloy, the purity being about 6 carats, the surface of which had been platinised. This way of making items of jewellery was clearly quite usual, and as a technique it proved to be both practical and economical.

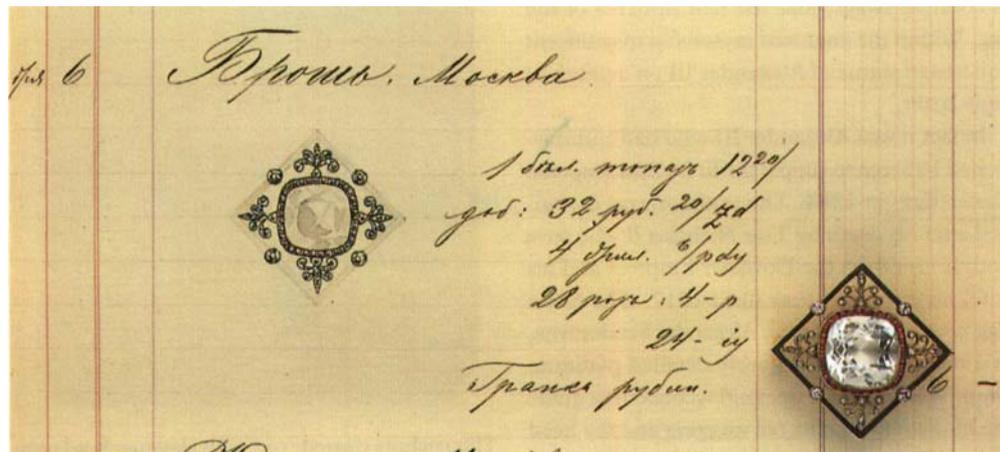
Analysis of Fabergé Jewellery Samples by Wavelength Dispersive X-ray Analysis on an Electron Microprobe		
	Nephrite pendant	Mecca stone brooch
Element	Composition, weight per cent	
Silver	75.7	0.4
Platinum	20.5	96.0
Gold	2.1	1.6
Copper	1.5	0.9
Iron	0.1	0.4
Rhodium	0.1	0.6



This platinum brooch of openwork design is set with diamonds arranged around a single Mecca stone, stained chalcedony. Here the item, which is 3.5 inches long, is displayed to the right of the original design



This unmarked circular openwork pendant is set with rose-cut diamonds around a single piece of Siberian jade, nephrite. The absence of the abbreviation for platinum in the design book suggests that another material was to be used. However, recent analysis has found it to be a silver-rich alloy containing 20.5 per cent platinum



This unmarked openwork brooch by Fabergé consists of a large white topaz with calibrated ruby surround, set further with rose-cut diamonds and roses (very small uneven cut diamonds), shown here to the right of the original design by August Holmström. Analysis has established the mount to be platinised silver-gold alloy

Samples from two pieces of unmarked jewellery by Fabergé have been examined at the Johnson Matthey Technology Centre, one being from the pendant and the other from the brooch, as illustrated. The results of these analyses are summarised in the Table and demonstrate that as well as producing near pure platinum pieces Fabergé also experimented with platinum alloys, as indeed he did with gold. Using alloys of many different compositions enabled Fabergé to produce subtle variations in colour and intensity.

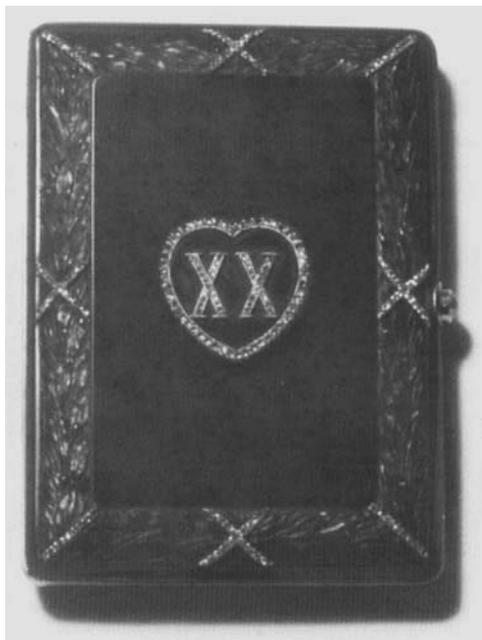
It was usual for Fabergé's creations to be in gold, mounted with an alloy of gold and other metals. Working mainly in 56 zolotniks gold — which is the equivalent of 14 carats — he added silver, copper and palladium to produce the desired colour. His attitude to other metals was determined by the visual impression they could impart. Platinum was used sparingly, for special cases. One notable example of its use is the Alexander III Equestrian Egg, which was presented to the Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna by Tsar Nicholas II in 1910 and was made, presumably, to perpetuate the memory of Tsar Alexander III. The egg is carved from a solid piece of the colourless quartz known as rock crystal and is surmounted by lattice work made from platinum and encrusted with diamonds; it is supported upon the wings of four chased platinum amoretti set on a carved rock crystal base while two vertical motifs, each slung with carved decorative swags, join the hemispheres of the egg. Within the engraved crystal is a magnificent equestrian statue of Alexander III on a plinth of lapis lazuli.

In fact it was Alexander III who had commissioned Fabergé to supply the first of the Imperial Easter Eggs in 1884. The tradition was continued after his death by Tsar Nicholas II who gave both his mother, the Dowager Empress and his wife, an egg every year until 1917. The Swan Egg presented to his wife, Alexandra Feodorovna, in 1906, contains a superbly detailed platinum swan. When wound up, gold webbed feet guide the bird along with its tail wagging and the head and neck are proudly raised to display each feather separately. Another egg displaying fine work in platinum is the Winter Egg presented to his moth-

er, the Dowager Empress, in 1913. This egg is carved from a piece of rock crystal, inside of which, a platinum basket containing snowdrops, hangs by the handle from a hook.

A more functional object for which Fabergé again made use of platinum is the excellent nephrite cigarette case shown here, where the bezel is of platinum. At the centre of the carved Siberian jade cover, rose-cut diamonds trace out the Roman Numerals XX within a heart. This item is still contained in its original presentation box, the satin-lined lid of which is marked in cyrillic "St. Petersburg, Moscow, London" indicating that it was sold through Fabergé's London branch, which was opened in 1903.

The sales ledgers of this branch relate to the period from 1907 to 1917. Initially located at the Berners Hotel, this business was run almost as an off-shoot of the Moscow branch, but in 1906 a shop in direct contact with the main St. Petersburg workshop was opened and managed by Fabergé's son Nicholas, in collaboration with Henry C. Bainbridge, its last address being 173



This nephrite cigarette case with platinum bezel measures 3.5 inches in length, the carved Siberian jade cover is set with diamonds, and the case is opened by a diamond thumbpiece

Private collection: courtesy of Christie's Images



The Alexander III Equestrian Egg was presented to the Dowager Empress in 1910. The setting for this egg consists of platinum lattice work set with diamonds and four chased platinum amorette which are set on a carved rock crystal base. The equestrian statue is contained within the hollow rock crystal egg

Height of egg 6.125 inches

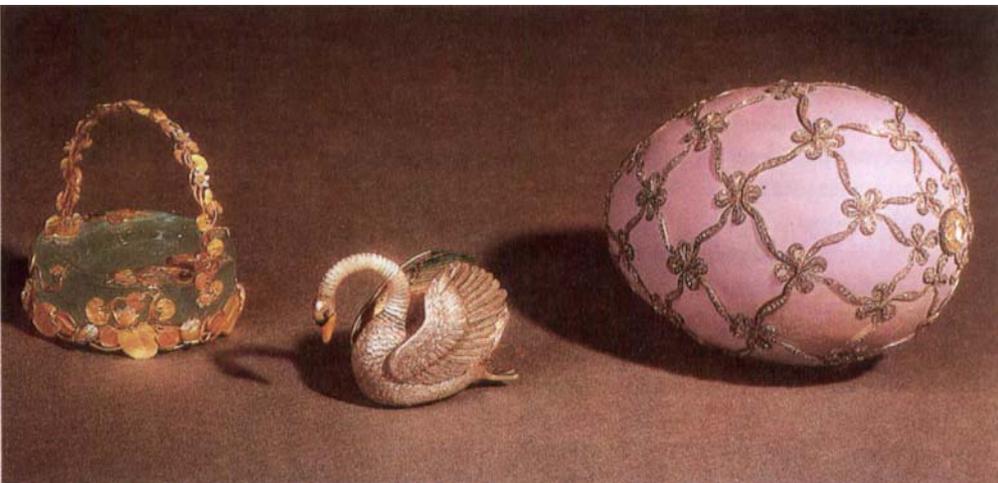
Courtesy of Armoury Museum of the Kremlin, Moscow



Within the Winter Egg, presented to the Dowager Empress in 1913, there is suspended a platinum basket embellished with diamonds and filled with snowdrop flowers made in white quartz with gold-set olivine centres, the leaves of which are made from pale nephrite while the stalks and earth are in gold

Height of egg 4 inches

Private collection



The Swan Egg presented to Alexandra Feodorovna by Tsar Nicholas II in 1906 consists of a magnificent swan made in platinum which rests on a carved miniature aquamarine lake decorated with gold water lilies and is contained in the gold matt enamelled mauve-coloured egg

Private collection

Height of egg 4 inches

Customer's Name	Description of Goods	Stock Number	Selling Price				Total	N.L. Price		Cost Price
			£	s	d	¢		Shs.	¢	
			<u>Brooch</u>				124	15		595.50
Lady Gerard	Frame, pink & white opt. enamel, silver gilt mounts 19890	1010							90	00
	Frame, light green opt. enamel, silver gilt mounts 19892	115	27			100			60	00
Lady de Trafford	Brooch, mauve enamel, brilliants 88937					7	15		110	00
Countess of Devon	Brooch Pendant, brilliants & roses in half platinum, platinum chain 88995					40	5		140	00
Madame Koch	Repairing gown stan 70141								21	46
Mrs E. Clayton	Watch case, plain gold, for one row of matches, 18927								42	00
Lady Sister Kaye	Replacing wood part of own knitting needle 71167								2	50
H. J. Whitaker	Paperknife in platinum 19844								15	00
Lord Alington	Brooch, pink enamel opt. and 1/2 pearl, white opt. enamel 89009	410							22	00
	Brooch, lt. blue enamel									

Record books from the London office show that Fabergé worked in half platinum, as well as in platinum. In addition to chains, brooches and pendants, a paperknife incorporating platinum was sold to H. J. Whitaker in 1910

Bond Street. Information given in the ledgers includes a description of the object, date of sale and the name of the buyer, together with the cost and selling prices. An entry dated July 13th, 1910, shows that a platinum paper knife by Fabergé was sold at the London branch for £15 to a H. J. Whitaker. Between 14th August and 13th September 1910 a Fabergé brooch/pendant in platinum decorated in steel blue enamel set with brilliants and roses sold for £40; it was purchased by the Earl of Rosse.

To buy a single platinum chain from the Fabergé London branch in 1909 would have cost £2.15s.0d (£2.75), a longer version of the same £9.10s.0d (£9.50). It is interesting to note that at about the same time Lord Revelstoke paid £9.10s for a long red and gold chain. If the purchaser of a platinum chain wished to adorn it with two enamel pendants, they would have to part with another £4.

One can conclude from this brief study that Carl Fabergé's main consideration was the visu-

al impact made by a piece of jewellery or object d'art. It therefore follows naturally that he would select the most suitable materials for the purpose. The beauty of platinum or one of its alloys was chosen for its colour and intensity, rather than for its intrinsic worth. The legacy left by these unmarked items of jewellery offers students of Fabergé the exciting challenge of investigation and attribution.

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