

Fabergé and the Rothschilds

Drawing on sources at The Rothschild Archive and at Wartski, the centre for Fabergé research, Kieran McCarthy describes the significance of Fabergé gifts as ‘social currency’.

Henry Bainbridge, the manager of Fabergé’s London shop, knew the Edwardian Rothschilds as ‘Their Exquisitenesses’. Their loyal and discerning patronage made them, after the Royal family, Fabergé’s most important English customers. Bainbridge established a close relationship with the family and tailored Fabergé’s work to reflect their interests. The pieces they acquired offer a glimpse into their lifestyles and relationships. From records in The Rothschild Archive it has been possible to study the family’s dealings with Fabergé and to identify a hitherto unknown link between a series of Rothschild purchases.

Peter Carl Fabergé, Goldsmith to the Imperial Court of Russia, took control of his father’s business in 1872 aged twenty-six. His firm is famous for, and his name synonymous with, luxury, largely because of the Easter Eggs he made for the Tsars. However, of the thousands of pieces his firm made only fifty were Imperial Eggs. The mainstays of the business were finely crafted *objets de vertu* in precious metals and hardstone. They were in high demand in Russia and the business became an unrivalled success, employing at its height over five hundred people with branches in St Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa and Kiev.

Fabergé’s work was just as fashionable in England and another branch of the firm, the only one outside Russia, opened in London in 1903. It existed ostensibly to serve King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, sister of the Dowager Tsarina Marie Feodorovna, but quickly attracted a wider clientele. Its growth was largely due to two reasons. The first was Fabergé’s popularity at court. Edwardian Society centred on the court and the King and Queen’s patronage ensured Fabergé’s success. It made his work highly fashionable and brought it to the attention of the Edwardian elite. The King’s indication that if he were to be offered a gift it should be from Fabergé further guaranteed the demand for his work. The second reason why Fabergé prospered in London was the function his objects served for his English customers. Fabergé’s work, whilst costly, focused on craftsmanship and design over intrinsic value. When questioned on the role of precious materials in his work Carl Fabergé responded, ‘Expensive things interest me little if the value is merely in so many pearls or diamonds’.¹ The judicious use of valuable materials and its popularity at Court made Fabergé’s work ideal gifts, and as the exchange of gifts was an important element of Edwardian life, customers flocked to the London shop to buy gifts for each other.

The Rothschilds purchased Fabergé exclusively from the firm’s London branch. In all twenty-five members of the family were customers from its opening to its closure in 1917. This number includes members of the European branches of the family. The French Rothschilds made purchases from Fabergé in London and on the firm’s regular sales trips to Paris. However it was the English Rothschilds and in particular Leopold, son of Baron Lionel de Rothschild, who were the firm’s principal patrons. Leopold was introduced to Fabergé through his friendship with Edward VII, which had begun in their student days at Cambridge. Later, when Prince of Wales, Edward had attended Leopold’s marriage to Marie Perugia at London’s Central Synagogue in 1881. Although Leopold had an interest in Russian decorative arts fostered by a visit to St Petersburg and Moscow in 1867, he did not collect Fabergé for himself. Like the majority of Fabergé’s London customers, he and his family largely acquired Fabergé as gifts for others.

A gem set and enamelled smoky quartz cup in the style of the renaissance by Fabergé, 8.8cm., bought by Leopold de Rothschild from Fabergé’s London branch on 9 July 1912 and the fourth of the ‘Rothschild series’ of Fabergé pieces given by Leopold to his brother Alfred.
Wartski, London



Bainbridge emphasises the purpose of these purchases by commenting that when Mrs Leopold de Rothschild bought a piece for Leopold, 'like all good Edwardians, she made use of Fabergé objects for the purpose they were designed; in her case to say something to her husband'.² This is borne out by the Rothschilds' account books, which show that purchases increased significantly before Christmas.

To ensure that pieces intended for the Rothschilds were quick to sell Bainbridge instructed Fabergé's craftsmen to tailor their work to reflect the family's interests. Leopold's animals were modelled in hardstone and silver. Animal studies were a speciality of the firm and were often carved from Russian hardstones whose natural configurations mimicked the colouring of the animal's pelt. Variegated red cornelian was used for foxes and the shimmering grey of the volcanic glass obsidian for sea lions. The Royal and Rothschild families' animals were the only ones to be modelled by Fabergé in England. King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra's menagerie of animals at Sandringham were the first to be modelled. At the suggestion of Mrs George Keppel, in 1907 Fabergé sent sculptors from Russia to the estate to carve the animals in wax. The waxes were then returned to Russia and reproduced by the firm's workshops in hardstone or silver. As part of the commission the King's favourite horse, Persimmon, was cast in silver and mounted on a nephrite base representing turf. It was this study of Persimmon and the horse's connection to the Rothschilds that led to Fabergé's modelling of Leopold's animals. The King and Leopold were fierce rivals on the turf and the meeting of Persimmon and Leopold's horse St Frusquin in the Derby of 1896 was one of the most momentous races of the nineteenth century. The horses were half brothers sired by St Simon and the race was divided between them with St Frusquin the favourite. It began as expected and Leopold's horse led until the last furlong when Persimmon rallied dramatically and finished, to tremendous cheers from the crowd, a neck in front.³

Having supplied the study of Persimmon to the King, Bainbridge approached Leopold and suggested that as there was so little to choose between St Frusquin and Persimmon that St Frusquin be 'immortalised' also. Initially Leopold showed little enthusiasm and replied dryly, 'such a luxury is all very well for the King of England, I can't afford it'. Undeterred Bainbridge proposed the same to Mrs Leopold. Knowing of her husband's fondness for the horse and recognising the study's potential as a gift she agreed. With her help Fabergé's sculptors progressed from Sandringham to Leopold's Southcourt Stud to sculpt St Frusquin. It proved to be a difficult task, Bainbridge recounts how the horse was 'worth £60,000 and knew it'. He was temperamental and the slightest 'clanking' of a stable mate's chain set him off, making him impossible to model. The sculptor was as unpredictable as St Frusquin and when the horse was still he was 'tearing his hair' and refusing to work. Bainbridge calmed the horse by bringing his favourite companion to the modelling sessions. It was the stable kitten. He overcame the problems with the sculptor by enlisting the help of his friend the artist Frank Luitger⁴ and eventually the finished wax was sent to Russia. There it was cast in silver oxide and on its return to England was bought by 'Mrs Leopold in December 1912 for £110'.⁵ Leopold was thrilled with the study and on 9 December the following year acquired two bronze copies from Fabergé for £30.

Leopold's other passion was for stag hunting. He had inherited his family's enthusiasm for the sport and bred staghounds for the pack established by his father in 1839. Bainbridge and Mrs Leopold also arranged for two hounds from Leopold's kennels at Ascott House to be

A Fabergé invoice addressed to Mrs Leopold de Rothschild for a bell push and pencil dated 26 February 1914. The invoice reveals Fabergé gave discounts to the Rothschilds. The Rothschild Archive





Above

A silver and nephrite study of Persimmon by Fabergé. Persimmon was King Edward VII's favourite racehorse and won the 1896 Derby, beating Leopold de Rothschild's horse St Frusquin into second place. The Royal Collection © 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Above, right

St Frusquin, a study by Fabergé in silver oxide presented to her husband Leopold as a gift by Marie de Rothschild. Private collection.

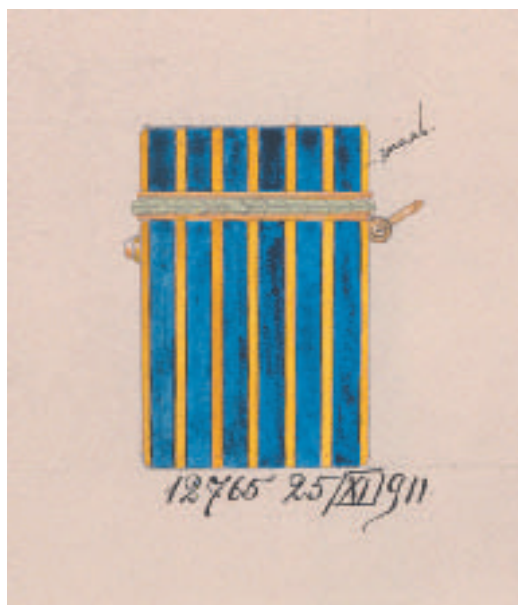
modelled. The first, named Herald, was carved in sardonyx and bought by Mrs Leopold in 1909. Leopold himself bought the second of the hound Harbinger, in 1912 for £36.⁶ Bainbridge also noted Mrs Leopold's fondness for her French Griffon, Pixie, and had her carved in chalcedony and mounted on a lapis-lazuli base. Mrs Leopold bought the study as soon as it was ready for £29 and kept it in the saloon of her Bedfordshire home Ascott House.⁷ Mrs Leopold later kept a pet Maltese terrier and Leopold bought a Fabergé carving of a Maltese terrier on 21 November 1916 for £18.

Fabergé's use of enamel is perhaps the most prized aspect of his work. Typically his pieces are decorated with unblemished and vibrantly coloured enamels. Fabergé also tailored his work to the Rothschilds by enamelling pieces with their blue and yellow colours. When the idea of using them came to Bainbridge he cabled Fabergé, 'Everything that has been made before now make in the Rothschild colours'.⁸ Fabergé responded by supplying a range of pieces including, to Bainbridge's astonishment, a motor mascot in the form of a bird with 'large diamond eyes' and wings that flapped when the car moved.⁹ Bainbridge intended the pieces to be bought as gifts for the family. However realising their value as Rothschild tokens the family acquired virtually all of them as gifts for others.¹⁰ Leopold bought the first of these objects enamelled in the racing colours, a pair of candlesticks, matchbox and bonbonnière on 7 December 1909 and they continued to be made until 1913. Bainbridge wrote that Leopold and James de Rothschild acquired all the pieces in their colours and that Leopold kept them to hand so that,

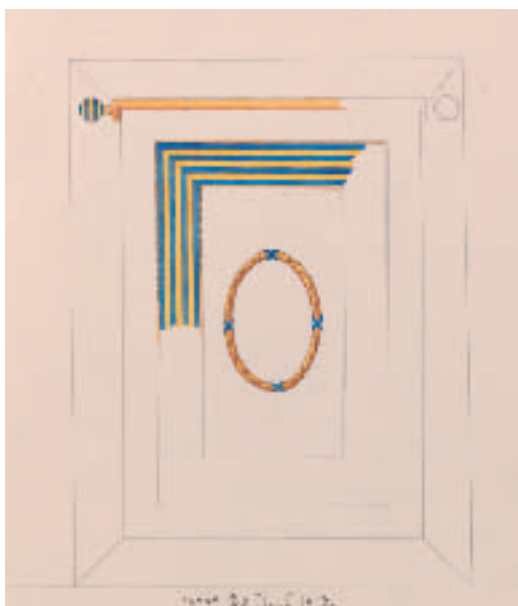
Whenever he wanted to say 'Good morning!' 'I like you!' or 'Don't bother me any more!' he simply slipped a dark blue and yellow Fabergé object into his friend's pocket.¹¹

However Leopold and James were not the only members of the family to purchase pieces decorated with the Rothschild colours. Surprisingly, perhaps, Alfred de Rothschild's natural child the Countess of Carnarvon, née Almina Wombwell, and her husband, the Egyptologist and alleged victim of Tutankhamun's curse, the fifth Earl of Carnarvon, bought two apparently identical bell-pushes and an India rubber holder enamelled with the colours.¹²

A single Fabergé frame in the Royal Collection is decorated with the colours of King Edward VII and it appears that the King's and Rothschilds' racing colours were the only ones ever to be represented in the firm's work.¹³



An enamelled gold and rose diamond mounted vesta case enamelled with the Rothschilds' racing colours, bought by Leopold de Rothschild from Fabergé's London branch in December 1911 and the design for the case from the Wigström design albums dated June 1911. Case: Photograph courtesy of A La Vieille Russie. Design: Private collection, photograph courtesy of Wartski, London



Left
A design dated July 1913 for a notepad holder enamelled with the Rothschild racing colours, from the design album of Fabergé's Chief Workmaster Henrik Wigström. Private collection, photograph courtesy of Wartski, London.

Right
A design dated February 1912 for a hatpin enamelled with the Rothschilds' racing colours, from the design album of Fabergé's Chief Workmaster Henrik Wigström. Private collection, photograph courtesy of Wartski, London

Records in The Rothschild Archive have revealed a hitherto unknown link between a series of purchases made by Leopold. Between 1909 and the outbreak of the First World War he acquired an object from Fabergé every July. They were bought as gifts for his brother Alfred's birthday on 20 July. Alfred was a collector of Renaissance and eighteenth century works of art and Leopold chose Fabergé pieces that reflected his taste in antique goldsmiths' work. On 12 July 1909 he bought a Louis XV-style miniature escritoire for £150 15s. The desk appears in the inventory of Alfred's possessions compiled after his death in 1918.¹⁴ The inventory gives its location as the vitrine next to the fireplace in the private sitting room, adjacent to the bedroom, of Alfred's London home, 1 Seamore Place. It was later acquired from Wartski by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and is now in the Royal Collection. On 10 July 1910 he purchased a model of a Louis XVI sedan chair for £146. This was kept in the same vitrine and is now in an American collection.¹⁵ On 10 July 1911 Leopold chose a Louis XVI-style gold box mounted

with moss agates and set with rose diamonds for £88. This box was displayed in the vitrine ‘near the door’ of the private sitting room in Seamore Place. Its description matches that of one later acquired by the Coca-Cola heiress Matilda Geddings-Gray, now in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art.¹⁶ On 9 July 1912 he purchased a neo-Renaissance enamelled and gem set smoky quartz cup for £75. It was kept in the vitrine of the telephone room at Seamore Place and is now with Wartski. The whereabouts of the last two gifts, a blue enamel frame bought on 13 July 1913 for £135 and a silver gilt mounted purpurine vase purchased on 13 July 1914 for £75 are unknown. Leopold also gave Alfred’s daughter, the Countess of Carnarvon, at least one example of Fabergé’s work. In December 1908 he bought her a hardstone Fabergé flower study in the Japanese taste, which cost £35. The Countess returned the flower to Fabergé in the New Year for a full refund.¹⁷

Leopold did not just reserve Fabergé gifts for his family. In 1911 he gave King George V and Queen Mary a display of his prize orchids from his glasshouses at Gunnersbury to mark their coronation. The flowers were presented in an enamelled gold mounted rock crystal Fabergé vase in the style of the Renaissance.¹⁸ Leopold’s gardener brought the orchids to Fabergé’s Bond Street shop and arranged them in the vase early on the morning of the coronation. Later it was taken to Buckingham Palace and placed on the Royal breakfast table.

The Rothschilds were discerning visitors to Fabergé’s London shop and purchased some of the firm’s most ambitious creations. Two such acquisitions merit special mention. On 23 December 1908 Leopold acquired a circular guilloché enamelled gold box with articulated painted ivory figures in its lid. The figures danced an African-American dance that parodied the American white upper classes called the ‘cakewalk’.¹⁹ It is from the workshop of Fabergé’s last chief Workmaster Henrik Wigström. Only a small number of boxes of similar inspiration were made and they are among Fabergé’s most eccentric work. In 1908 Tsar Nicholas II presented a similar box with figures in Swedish folk costumes to Prince William of Sweden.



A Louis XV style enameled gold miniature escritoire by Fabergé, purchased by Leopold de Rothschild from Fabergé’s London shop in 1909 and the first of the ‘Rothschild series’ of Fabergé pieces given by Leopold to his brother Alfred between 1909 and 1914. The Royal Collection © 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



An enameled and gem set gold mounted rock crystal vase in the style of the renaissance by Fabergé, given by Leopold de Rothschild to King George V and Queen Mary on their coronation day, 22 June 1911.
The Royal Collection
© 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

In December 1910 Leopold purchased another Fabergé rarity, a miniature-working model of a roulette wheel in steel blue guilloché and opaque white enamel, with a pearl ball.²⁰ It was one of only two known to have been made and was both a playful and symbolic piece. Leopold's contemporary, the King's friend and financier Sir Ernest Cassel, acquired the other. Sir Ernest identified his with the wheel of fortune and kept it as an emblem of the luck he enjoyed. Leopold gave his away, but its special significance could hardly have eluded him.

Interest in Fabergé has never been higher; its links with Imperial Russia and to the crowned heads of Europe increase the appeal of its work. Modern day interest in the firm's work is fuelled by a fascination for the firm's patrons. The Rothschilds' loyal and discerning patronage placed the family amongst Fabergé's most important customers. The extension of their taste for the finest antique goldsmiths' work to the twentieth century and Fabergé is an eloquent tribute to his craftsmanship and can only buoy the demand further.

Founded in North Wales in 1865 Wartski is a family owned firm of antique dealers, specialising in fine jewellery, silver and Russian works of art, particularly those by Carl Fabergé. Kieran McCarthy lectures and publishes widely on the history of the firm and on Fabergé.

NOTES

- 1 *Stolitsya y Usadba* [Town & Country], St Petersburg, 15 January 1914.
- 2 H.C. Bainbridge, *Peter Carl Fabergé: Goldsmith & Jeweller to the Russian Imperial Court & Principal Crowned Heads of Europe* (London: Batsford, 1949), p.89.
- 3 St Frusquin and Persimmon met three times; the Derby was Persimmon's only victory.
- 4 Bainbridge diplomatically does not name the first sculptor. He was Boris Frödman-Cuzel who previously worked on the Sandringham commission.
- 5 Leopold acquired two bronze copies of Fabergé's St Frusquin model on 9 December 1913 for £30 – not six as stated in H.C. Bainbridge, *Twice Seven* (London: Routledge, 1933), p.241. The date of modelling in 1908 and date of purchase in 1912 conflict with Bainbridge's assertion that Mrs Leopold ordered it as a gift for Leopold's birthday in 1912, *op.cit.* p.239.
- 6 Bainbridge says two further staghounds named Pilgrim and Harriet were modelled but there is only evidence for these two. Bainbridge, *Peter Carl Fabergé*, p.89.
- 7 Bainbridge makes reference to a carving of a Jersey Bull undertaken for Miss Alice de Rothschild. Although Alice was a keen livestock breeder no further record of this bull exists. Bainbridge, *Twice Seven*, p.168.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.229.
- 9 The Rothschild family's pioneering role in early motoring may have inspired this design. The car that won the Coupe Rothschild in Nice in April 1902 was coincidentally nicknamed 'the Easter Egg'.
- 10 Exceptions are a clock purchased by the American heiress Lady Cooper of Hursley on 10 December 1909 and a stamp box bought by a H.F. McCormick.
- 11 Bainbridge, *Peter Carl Fabergé*, p.84.
- 12 Bainbridge makes special mention of three pieces enamelled with the Rothschilds' colours: a large table cigarette box, a parasol top and a hatpin as big 'as a football'. Although a design for the hatpin exists no record of its sale has been found; the box Bainbridge says was acquired by James but Baron Albert de Goldschmidt-Rothschild bought it in July 1913 for £125 and the parasol top he wrongly recalls James not buying, as he did on 26 February 1913 for £120. Bainbridge, *Twice Seven*, pp.230–2.
- 13 The silver gilt frame enamelled with the King's red and blue colours is in the Royal Collection, RCIN 15168.
- 14 The Rothschild Archive London (RAL) 000/174.
- 15 A private collection.
- 16 <http://www.noma.org>
- 17 See illustration, p.41.
- 18 Bainbridge says the vase, costing £430, was specially made for Leopold. It however bears the mark of Fabergé's second Chief Workmaster Michael Perchin who died in 1903. Bainbridge, *Peter Carl Fabergé*, p.242.
- 19 The Rothschild box is an unusual example of the influence of American culture on Fabergé's designs.
- 20 The wheel passed to the collection of King Farouk of Egypt and was bought from the Egyptian Republic's sale of his effects in Cairo in 1954 by Wartski. It was then sold to Mrs Henry Ford II, of the automotive family. She liked it so much she took it on beach picnics near her home on the American East Coast to entertain guests. It is said that on returning home after one such outing she discovered the wheel had been left behind. She swung the car around and sped back to see, to her horror, that the tide had come in and washed it away.



An enamelled and gem set hardstone flower study by Fabergé, in the form of a spray of Japonica emerging from a hanaiire bamboo flowerpot. In December 1908 Leopold de Rothschild gave his niece the Countess of Carnarvon a Fabergé flower exactly matching this description. Photograph courtesy of Wartski, London