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Museum of Russian Icons peeks into Romanov cupboards

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF MAY 01, 2014



GIOVANNI LUNDARDI PHOTOGRAPHY Cigar case made between 1908-16 by Fedor Ruckert for Fabergé.

CLINTON — The romance of the Romanov dynasty — in odor so like certain over-evolved orchids — has been affiliated, aptly enough, with fragile accessories forever. One thinks, above all, of the products of the House of Fabergé, but more generally of the decorative arts (particularly porcelain) produced specifically for the Romanovs between the 18th and early 20th centuries, when the dynasty came to its bloody and unambiguous end.

The Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton is currently hosting a show called “The Tsar’s Cabinet: Two Hundred Years of Russian Decorative Arts Under the Romanovs” that’s filled with porcelain, as well as glass, lacquer, enamel, and other luxury materials.

Drawn from the private collection of consultant Kathleen Durdin (who, according to a biographical note in the show’s catalog, used to collect magazine advertisements that featured the Forbes Fabergé collection), the show summons the rich history of Romanov rule.

It comes to Clinton at the end of a five-venue tour of Canada and the United States. It was organized by the Muscarelle Museum of Art, which is on the campus of the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Va., in collaboration with International Arts and Artists, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.

The show is dense with text, most of it typed on object labels that sometimes seem to take up more space inside the glass cases than the objects themselves. But labels and objects together open up a fascinating period in history, and the show gets more compelling the further into it you advance.

Why the emphasis on porcelain?

A taste for fine Chinese and Japanese porcelains had developed in European courts in the 17th and early 18th centuries. It wasn't until Johann Friedrich Böttger at Meissen, in Saxony, cracked the secret to making it (basically, kaolin clay baked at very high temperatures) that European courts were gradually relieved of the great expense of importing it in quantity, and instead began to compete with each other to produce their own porcelain products.

Elizabeth I of Russia was at the forefront of this push. With crucial technical breakthroughs imminent, she established a porcelain factory in 1746, and two years later, it began producing the real thing.

Grand banquets celebrating marriages, military victories, coronations, and diplomatic visits were regular occurrences at the time. Dining ware — especially porcelain services — played a leading role in establishing prevailing tastes, as well as communicating courtly magnificence and, not incidentally, national pride.

The story told by the various objects in this show is in large part a story of the Russian court's seesawing sibling rivalry with its more sophisticated confreres in Europe. Under first Elizabeth I, then Catherine the Great, Alexander I, Nicholas I, Alexander II, Alexander III, and finally Nicholas II, Russia was nothing if not fickle in its affections for European culture, and many of the objects in this show express an ambivalence that continues to this day. (Hello, Ukraine).

Catherine the Great commissioned services (sets of matching dishes and utensils, often running into the hundreds or thousands) to accompany lavish meals cooked by French chefs, their designs and decorations clearly in thrall to the latest European styles (particularly classicism). But under succeeding czars these European styles alternate with proud reassertions of a unique Russian identity.

Nationalist pride came to the fore under Alexander I after the defeat of Napoleon. It's hard to associate the image of Napoleon's horrifically ragged retreat with gorgeously painted soup tureens, but one result of Russia's defeat of the invaders was a surge in plates, tureens, salts, and chargers all proudly painted with Russian scenes, including views of St. Petersburg, and all manner of military images.

Nicholas I, his successor, had it both ways, commissioning new editions of old services in both Russian and European styles. And so it went — albeit with steadily diminishing returns. Alexander II, having lost the Crimea, and conscious of having inherited an empire in financial distress, showed little interest in porcelain. His son Alexander III and his successor Nicholas II commissioned only three services between them.

In many cases, it's difficult to distinguish between designs that signify European cosmopolitanism and those that assert a more nationalist viewpoint, because the stylistic waters are constantly muddied by the Romanovs' ambivalence, and trumped, moreover, by a more brutal prerogative — the glorification of Romanov power.

Many of the later objects, even as they conjure that power, are almost heartbreaking in their delicacy: a porcelain Easter egg painted with a red cross that was produced in the middle of the Great War (and one year before the Bolshevik Revolution); a lacquer cigarette case studded with small diamonds; a Fabergé cigar case in gilded silver and shaded cloisonné enamel, and inscribed with the words, “Dear Sasha from the person who loves him very much Leekee 1916.”

The show comes to an abrupt end with a porcelain plate produced by the Meissen factory in 1950, several decades after the Revolution. It’s painted in blue with a scene of revolutionary soldiers storming the Winter Palace in 1917.

Nothing ambivalent about that.

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