

Fabergé Basket of Flowers Egg: Mystery of pearls unveiled

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The Imperial Easter eggs are the most celebrated creations by the now defunct House of Fabergé, even though they only constituted a very small portion of the Russian jewellery firm's total production. Regarded as masterpieces of decorative arts, they were commissioned by the two last Tsars of Russia as Easter gifts. Starting in 1885, Alexander III gave one annually to his wife Maria Feodorovna and, after his death, from 1895 his son Nicholas II presented one to his consort Alexandra Feodorovna and another to his mother, the dowager Empress.

The series is composed of fifty eggs manufactured between 1885 and 1916. Those commissioned for Easter 1917 were never delivered to their intended recipients as a result of the February Revolution and the events that followed. Seven Imperial Easter eggs are still missing or lost,¹ as well as some of the surprises. During the massive sales of art treasures carried out by the Soviet regime in the interwar period, most of them were sold to the West in the 1920s and 30s. This is how three Imperial Easter eggs ended in the British Royal Collection, one of them is the so-called Basket of Flowers (Figs 1 and 2), purchased in 1933. This egg was originally presented by Nicholas II to his wife, the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, on Easter day 1 April 1901.²

¹ Those presented to Maria Feodorovna in 1886, 1888, 1889, 1897, 1902, 1903 and 1909. There is an ongoing debate among scholars about whether the 1902 Empire Nephrite Egg has been discovered.

² Fabergé, Proler and Skurlov, *The Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs* (London, 1997), p. 156.



Fig. 1. Cropped image showing the original opalescent oyster guilloché enamel base, as displayed in the “Charity Exhibition of Fabergé Artistic Objects, Old Miniatures, and Snuff Boxes” held at the Baron von Dervis mansion in St. Petersburg in March 1902. Photo: K. K. Bulla, 1902.



Fig. 2. Between 1933 and 1949 the base was re-enamelled in blue due to damage sustained after the 1917 Revolutions. Courtesy: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019.

The invoice (Fig. 3) issued by Fabergé to Nicholas II briefly describes this piece as:

*“Easter egg, white enamel. Basket with bouquet of wild flowers,
with 4176 rose-cut diamonds and 10 pearls 6850 r.
St. Petersburg, 16 April 1901”*³ (English translation)



Fig. 3. “C. Fabergé/Purveyor to the IMPERIAL Court/Jeweller” (English translation). The paper’s letterhead is printed in two languages; Russian at left and French at right. Below are listed the two 1901 Easter eggs. Source: Fabergé et al., *The Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs*, p. 156.

There are no trace of those pearls on the egg-shaped basket, its supporting base and oval handle, so suggestions have been made over the years the pearls might be connected with a possible surprise. In the last few years, however, several Fabergé enthusiasts suspected the presence of pearls in the centre of certain flowers by watching pictures.

Earlier in 2019, I asked the Royal Collection Trust staff to examine the Basket of Flowers Egg to check if there were pearls, how many, and if it had any mark or indication of a detachable surprise which might have existed in the past. After microscopic examination, it was confirmed there are now four pearls and six prongs (where there used to be pearls) surviving (Fig. 3). It is believed the pearl losses to have been historic, as the enamel was also damaged before the object was acquired by the British Royal Family.⁴

³ Fabergé et al., *The Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs*, p. 156.

⁴ Information provided by the Royal Collection Trust staff.



Fig. 3. Partial view of the colourful bouquet. Red arrow points a prong, black circles surround pearls. Courtesy: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019. Symbols added by the author.

This examination corroborates that the artefact originally had the ten pearls specified in the invoice. If it came with a surprise is unknown, there is no evidence on the objet d'art that it ever had another piece attached or with it⁵ and, so far, no document or photograph has been found proving the existence of an accompanying surprise.

The Basket of Flowers Egg remains as a memento of the Empress' passion for flowers and the close relationship between the court jeweller Peter Carl Fabergé and his patrons. His craftsmen created for her personal delight a bejewelled basket containing a naturalistic bouquet dotted with tiny pearls. Unlike the majority of Imperial Easter eggs, this one was not designed to hide a surprise but to show an always visible tribute to the beauty of nature.

For further information on the Basket of Flowers Egg visit the Royal Collection Trust website: www.rct.uk

Acknowledgements

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⁵ Datum provided by the Royal Collection Trust staff.