

HUMBLE MOTIFS ON LUXURY OBJECTS: FEDOR RÜCKERT'S ENAMELWARE  
IN THE RUSSIAN SILVER AGE, 1880-1917

by

Yana Myaskovskaya  
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Committee:

Angela George Director

William

Geilva Anderson

William Program Director

Brian R... Department Chairperson

8 Z... Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my grandparents Samoil and Nina, who have always inspired me to stand strong in the face of adversity, and to pursue only those dreams that represent my true and honest self.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics .....	USSR
Fedor Rückert Factory Mark.....	ФР
Fabergé Factory Mark.....	Фаберже
Silver Mark: 88/96 or .92 parts pure silver .....	88

## ABSTRACT

### HUMBLE MOTIFS ON LUXURY OBJECTS: FEDOR RÜCKERT'S ENAMELWARE IN THE RUSSIAN SILVER AGE, 1880-1917

Yana Myaskovskaya, M.A.

George Mason University, 2012

Thesis Director: Angela George, Assistant Professor and Academic Coordinator

The last quarter of the nineteenth century in Imperial Russia saw a flowering of artistry and culture that historians often regard as one of the most significant in the nation's history. Scholars refer to this period as the Silver Age, and this pinnacle of artistic and literary innovation lasted until the Russian Revolution in 1917. It was among this milieu that Fedor Rückert (1840-1917), a German artisan who owned an enamelware workshop in Moscow, began producing his historically significant *objets d'art*. I argue that by combining European-style enamel motifs with Russian Folklore Revival painted miniatures, Fedor Rückert bridged the ideological and economic gap between the Westernized aristocracy and the traditional peasant class in turn-of-the-century Russia. This essay will examine three enamel objects by Fedor Rückert as a means by which to study his significant contributions to the industry. His enamelware tells the story of

Rückert's success as a luxury artisan within the context of Russia's industrialization, and anticipates his equally drastic decline in the final years under Imperial rule.

## INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of the nineteenth century in Imperial Russia saw a flowering of artistry and culture that historians often regard as one of the most significant in the nation's history. Scholars refer to this period as the Silver Age, and this pinnacle of artistic and literary innovation lasted until the Russian Revolution in 1917. The world recognized that a new cultural elite – painters Ivan Bilibin and Mikhail Vrubel, writers Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva, legendary artisan Peter Carl Fabergé, and literally hundreds of others – contributed to visual and intellectual achievement during the *Belle Époque*. It was among this milieu that Fedor Rückert (1840-1917), a German artisan who owned an enamelware workshop in Moscow, began producing his historically significant *objets d'art*. His work is unique; unlike his contemporaries Ovchinnikov and Khlebnikov who worked predominantly in a revival aesthetic, alternatively called the “Old Russian” and the “Neo-Russian” style, Rückert incorporated Celtic, Jugendstil, and Scandinavian motifs into the decorative grounds for his caskets, boxes, and *kovshi* (ladle-like drinking vessels). These grounds often surrounded enamel reserves with copies of paintings by artists working within the ideology of the Russian Folklore Revival, an influential movement that tried to revive traditional Russian folklore and iconography in a response against the rapid industrialization of Imperial Russia.

I argue that by combining European-style enamel motifs with Russian Folklore



Revival painted miniatures, Fedor Rückert bridged the ideological and economic gap between the Westernized aristocracy and the traditional peasant class in turn-of-the-century Russia. His enamelware tells the story of Rückert's success as a luxury artisan within the context of Russia's industrialization, and anticipates his equally drastic decline in the final years under Imperial rule.

Before delving into the complexities of Russian history and its impact on the enamelware industry, this thesis will introduce Rückert as a master silversmith often overshadowed by his better-documented contemporaries. American collections contain hundreds of his enamels, each one resplendent in vivid colors and precious metals. While these objects often provide ample clues to his interests and inspirations, the greater question still remains: who was this elusive Moscow silversmith, whose primary legacy exists solely within the confines of his miniature jewel-tone masterpieces? As with many such under-researched artists, there is limited personal information about Rückert. In her article "A key to the past: Fedor Rückert's miniature picture gallery," Hillwood Museum curator emerita Anne Odom describes him as "...an independent silversmith in Moscow who sold much of his work through Fabergé. There is a cup of 1912, commemorating Rückert's twenty-five years of association with Fabergé, and so we know their association began in 1887..."<sup>1</sup>

Little is known about Rückert's early life. In a 2000 interview with his granddaughters Evgenia Mikhailovna Rudnyanskaya and Zinaida Mikhailovna Shutovaya, Kremlin Armoury Museum curator Tatiana N. Muntyan provided some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Odom, "A key to the past: Fedor Rückert's miniature picture gallery," *Apollo: The International Magazine of the Arts* Vol. CXXXVII No. 371 (1993): 22.

first archival information accessible to the public. His archives indicate that Fedor Ivanovich Rückert was born Friedrich Mauritz Rückert in Alsace-Lorraine in 1840 to German parents.<sup>2</sup> At the age of fourteen, he was brought to Russia to work for either the Yusupov or Golitsyn family, where he eventually met his first wife Emilie; they had three children together before her death. Rückert married Evgenia Kalistratovna Belovaya, with whom he had six more children before her death 1902. His granddaughters remember him as an intelligent man whose role as the familial patriarch brought him great personal joy.<sup>3</sup>

If information about the artisan's personal life is scarce, his business records are virtually nonexistent. His archives allow us to piece together that his "workshops were situated on the first floor of the house on Vorontsovskaya Street" in Moscow.<sup>4</sup> Rückert was the head of the firm; this is evidenced by the workshop mark "ФР" – the Cyrillic letters for his initials, "F.R." Nonetheless, his actual participation in the manufacturing process is unclear; was Rückert the businessman, designer, or craftsman? How similar was Rückert's workshop to that of Fabergé? Did Rückert differ from his colleague in that he was the silversmith responsible for most of his firm's production? Experts like Odom and von Hapsburg use "Rückert" and "Rückert's workshop" interchangeably in reference to both his early enamels and painted miniatures. It is noteworthy, too, that several of the miniatures are signed by other artists. Odom admits that:

The signature of Aleksandr Borozdin has been found on miniatures attached to

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Géza von Habsburg, *Fabergé: Imperial Craftsman and his World* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 81

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

silver objects made by Fabergé's Moscow silver workshops. An identical, but unsigned, miniature is also on a Rückert box...so [Borozdin] clearly worked for both Rückert and Fabergé, perhaps as an independent artist.<sup>5</sup>

These insights are crucial, but future research will hopefully answer the question of authorship when it comes to the objects produced in Rückert's workshop. For the sake of brevity, this thesis will refer to any object produced in Rückert's Moscow workshop as a Fedor Rückert piece.

I will examine three enamel objects by Fedor Rückert – a letter stand and two boxes – as a means by which to study his significant contributions to the enamelware industry and to counter traditional histories of Russian art. Contemporary art historians most often study Russia as a link between the visual vocabularies of the East and West, excluding Russian art from chronologies and timelines of Western art. Instead, I will attempt to understand the nation in terms of its internal struggle, focusing on the ideological and artistic division between the upper echelons of society and the lower class. Therefore, the first chapter will attempt to place Fedor Rückert's early enamel work into historical context by surveying a silver letter stand produced by his firm. The chapter will explore how the metal and silver industry, which had comprised a significant part of the Russian economy since the seventeenth century, evolved into an international business specializing in luxury products sold through firms like Fabergé, Ovchinnikov, and Khlebnikov. It will also identify the standard of the "Old Russian" style and its prevalent use among enamelware workshops.

Later chapters will investigate two boxes made after 1907 in order to explore the

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<sup>5</sup> Odom, "A key to the past," 24.

tenuous relationship between Rückert's stylistic influences. Chapter Two will explore how the aristocracy, with its established connection to the cultural ideals of Western Europe, repudiated the revitalization of traditional Russian culture and folklore among the peasant class. Finally, the last chapter will discuss how changing economics at the end of the nineteenth century initiated capitalist growth that produced a bourgeois class of artisans with relationships to both the Russian elite and the lower class. These artisans were acutely aware of the cultural arguments of their time: a dissension marked by the acceptance or rejection of Russian nationalism. Unlike the nobility, whose aesthetic preferences assimilated French, German, and British decorative sensibilities, the artists of the Russian Folklore Revival embraced orthodox Russian motifs and folk tales.

Among his contemporaries, Rückert alone manipulated the feelings of the *fin-de-siècle* into a cohesive style that concurrently embraced the past and foreshadowed the future. His work is simultaneously vibrant and reserved, whimsical and austere. Careful analysis presents an unparalleled look into the imagination of a man who produced work during the height of a radically changing era. Perhaps most importantly, his work visually reflects his changing stylistic influences and his eventual development of a style that made him truly the embodiment of the Russian Silver Age.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INDUSTRIALIZATION AND PROMINENCE: THE PINNACLE OF ENAMELWARE IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA**

An early example of Fedor Rückert's enamels, this silver letter stand (Figure 1 and Figure 2) was manufactured circa 1880-1910, and is stamped with "206" – likely a model number. Like all of the pieces I examined in this thesis, this object is part of a large Russian enamelware collection Jean Riddell bequeathed in 2011 to the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. The craftsman that manufactured this letter stand embodied the versatility of the new century; he combined a revival style with century-old craft techniques to create a form that appealed to an emerging class of Russian *nouveau riche* consumers. As meticulous as its craftsmanship seems, this object's production represents the conspicuous consumption that materialized in every nation with a rapidly restructuring economic system in the second half of the nineteenth century.



Figure 1: Fedor Rückert, Letter Stand, 1880-1910. Silver, *cloisonné* enamel, garnet. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.



Figure 2: Fedor Rückert, Letter Stand (side view), 1880-1910. Silver, *cloisonné* enamel, garnet. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.

Nineteenth-century global industrialization changed more than the landscape; it shifted the population into an urban environment and challenged traditional social values. In Europe and the United States, factories replaced local artisans. An emerging middle class composed of bankers, factory owners, and merchants altered the social and economic dynamic within urban centers. Industrialists laid thousands of miles of railroad track to move goods and people over land, providing access to remote corners of the world previously accessible only by month-long journeys. The enamel industry in Russia was somewhat remarkable, as it allowed small, privately-owned firms to produce artisan-grade silver *objets d'art* until the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Before dwelling on the intricacies of the enamelware industry in late-nineteenth century Russia, I will discuss the social and economic undercurrents that defined the nation at this climactic point in history. Although its infrastructure did eventually succumb to the Communist Revolution, Imperial Russia was a rapidly industrializing nation with growing access to education and social reform. Whether because of inaccessibility to research or lingering Cold War prejudices, Western historians traditionally present the Russian Empire as largely agrarian, focusing on its adapted medieval system of feudalism that continued until 1861. It is certainly true that the medieval Russian Empire's comparatively sparse population traditionally favored the village model, with smaller farming districts surrounding large mercantile centers. Nonetheless, a successful merchant class had long been established in Russia. In his extensive 2005 study of Russian foreign and domestic trade, Jarmo Kotilaine states that the growth of this merchant class prompted the government to establish an elite



corporation of merchants, called *gosti*, towards the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> This system of localized trading corresponded to similar trends in what academics traditionally consider industrialized nations. In medieval Scotland, for example, the development of regionalized economic sectors called *burghs* roughly paralleled the growth of Russian towns. Scottish historian Elizabeth Ewan writes:

The surviving records have most prominence to a small group, the merchants involved in overseas trade, partly because they had most contact with royal government, partly because they saw themselves as the town leaders and the true representatives of the community.<sup>7</sup>

Like their medieval counterparts in medieval Scotland and elsewhere in Western Europe, sixteenth-century *gosti* “were clearly intended to play a leading – one might argue even exclusive – role in Russian foreign trade.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Russian merchant cities experienced remarkable economic growth in both foreign trade and local artistry, creating national wealth that existed well into the eighteenth century.

The expanding European production of goods in the eighteenth century encouraged industrial development in the Russian Empire. Western European nations fought to establish their economic identities in the global market: the creation of porcelain factories in Saxony and France during the first half of the eighteenth century represented a royal interest in national economic growth,<sup>9</sup> as did the exclusive trading relationship between

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<sup>6</sup> Jarmo Kotilaine, *Russia's foreign trade and economic expansion in the seventeenth century: windows on the world* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 202.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. S. Barrow and Alexander Grant, *Medieval Scotland: Crown, Lordship and Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Kotilaine, *Russia's foreign trade*, 203.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Christian Dauterman, *Sèvres* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), 7-8.

China and Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> In Russia, the growth of the mining industry began around the same time, paving the way for the nation's early reputation as the headspring of precious resources and metalworkers. Scholars traditionally attribute this burgeoning success to Tsar Peter the Great, whose desire for modernization initiated a Russian fascination with Western European philosophy.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1719, Tsar Peter had established "The Mining Privilege," a document governing and taxing metallurgical exploration on both government and private land.<sup>12</sup> In *Iron-making Societies: Early Industrial Development in Sweden and Russia*, scholar Maria Ågren focuses on the administrative conditions that accounted for the growth of the iron industry in Russia during the mid-eighteenth century. Ågren explains that by the 1780s, the Swedish iron industry, which until this point accounted for over 75 percent of the iron imported to Britain, lost its hold on the market when Russian iron ore imports to Britain rose to 63 percent.<sup>13</sup> More crucially for enamel firms, "The Mining Privilege" governed silver and gold excavation and distribution. Reports from the Imperial Ministry of Finance from 1893 reported that, "Although the first discovery of silver ores in the district of Nerchinsk in eastern Siberia was made in the beginning of the second half of the seventeenth century, still the actual smelting of silver was not begun before 1704."<sup>14</sup> These dates coincide with the early

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<sup>10</sup> Sir Lindsay Ride, May Ride, Bernard Mellor, *An East India Company Cemetery: Protestant Burials in Macao, Volume 73* (Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Random House Digital, Inc., 2012), kindle edition.

<sup>12</sup> Russia: Minestersvo finansov, and John Martin Crawford, *The Industries of Russia: Volume 1* (St. Petersburg: Trenke & Fusnot, 1893), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Ågren, ed., *Iron-making Societies: Early Industrial Development in Sweden and Russia* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1998), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Russia, *The Industries of Russia*, 20.

production of enameled silver objects in cities like Nizhny Novgorod and Solvychevodsk, two of the major enamelware centers in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like early iron-making societies, which were based primarily in rural villages with access to transportation and iron deposits, early developments in Russian enamelwork began in accessible trading routes near established cultural centers. These economic improvements, albeit somewhat localized, were a crucial stepping stone in the nation's goals towards industrialization.

Later reforms undertaken by Tsar Alexander II's regime in the mid-nineteenth century were perhaps the most drastic since Peter the Great. These reforms eradicated serfdom, established systems of local self-government, and created a State Bank.<sup>15</sup> Russian historian Geoffrey Hosking explains that, "The founding of a State Bank in 1860 also helped to raise confidence in Russian credit-worthiness...The immediate result was a railway boom, partly financed by banks in London, Paris, and Amsterdam. The track mileage rose nearly sevenfold during the 1860s, and doubled again in the following decade."<sup>16</sup>

By the late-nineteenth century Russia was rapidly redirecting many of its industrial efforts into the growing urban centers of St. Petersburg and Moscow, while simultaneously developing a *kustar*, or peasant artisan, industry. Focused on presenting Russia as a powerful nation during the era of World Fairs, Tsar Nicholas II hired photographer Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii to document the nation's changing

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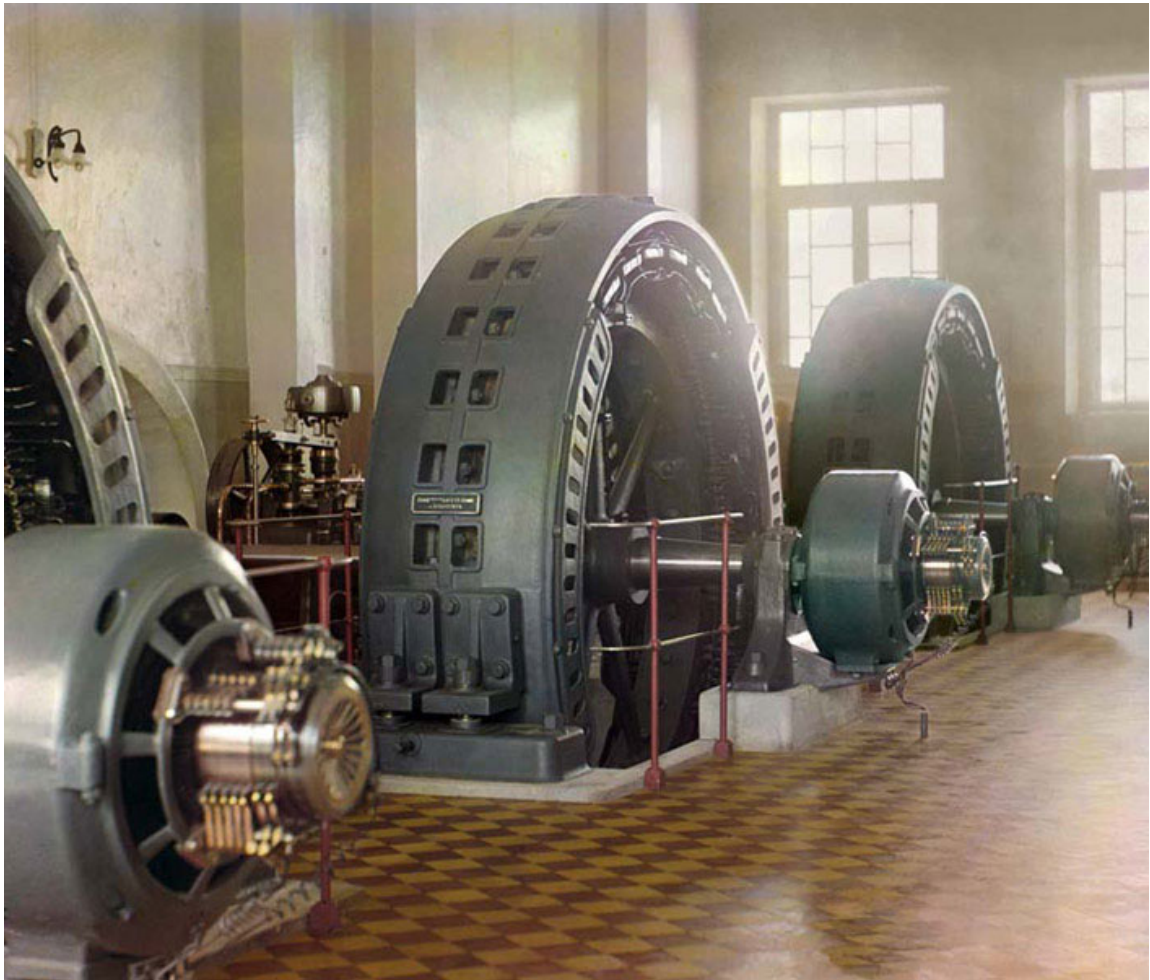
<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey, Hosking, *Russia: people and empire, 1552-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 340.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

landscape. Prokudin-Gorskii's revolutionary color photographs, taken as early as 1907, showcase metal truss railroad bridges (Figure 3), mining operations, and factories (Figure 4) from Hungary to Siberia. These photographs represent more than just an imperial interest in visual archiving; Prokudin-Gorskii's invention of a new color photographic process foreshadowed Russia's role as an artistic force.



**Figure 3: Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, Siberian Metal Truss Railroad Bridge, 1907-1915. Digital color rendering. Washington, DC: The Library of Congress.**



**Figure 4: Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, Factory Interior Showing Electrical Generators, 1907-1915. Digital color rendering. Washington, DC: The Library of Congress.**

Prokudin-Gorskii's images show a completely different story of Russia than what Western historians generally present: this is not a nation trapped within the confines of medieval agrarianism, but an emerging economic powerhouse. Within this context, Russian artisans had to either produce innovative wares that appealed to their clientele's interest in novelty, or else reinterpret traditional techniques into nostalgic vestiges. Rückert's letter stand represents more than a brightly-colored trinket produced for the

upper-class market; it denotes a centuries-old process that not only lasted through Russia's earliest industrial breakthroughs, but eventually evolved to remain artistically relevant at the height of the country's artistic affluence.

## **The History of Russian Enamelware**

As innovative as his later pieces undoubtedly were, Rückert's early work embrace a well-established enamelware style that had roots in pre-Russian history. Historians like Odom believe that enamel production in Russia began in the Grand Dukedom of Kiev in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>17</sup> Kiev was the ecclesiastic center of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Kievan Rus', and early enamel was likely made for the Church in the Byzantine style. Odom explains that, "...in Russia in the late 16th century, the silversmiths of Novgorod, Solvychevodsk, and Moscow began to apply enamel on silver filigree in a process known as *skan*."<sup>18</sup> The objects produced in these early enamel centers combine uniquely Russian forms – *lartsi* (caskets) in the form of *teremoks* (castles) – with paisley decoration that clearly alludes to Middle Eastern design. As Russian political and economic power shifted to Moscow in the seventeenth century, the city became one of the influential enamel centers of Russia. Its best-regarded work was produced in the workshops overseen by Bogdan Matveevich Khitrovo and remained somewhat conservative in style until the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Following the height of historic Russian enamel during the sixteenth and

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Odom, *Russian Enamels: Kievan Rus to Fabergé* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Limited, 1996), 60.

<sup>18</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> von Habsburg, *Fabergé*, 60.

seventeenth centuries, the industry suffered several centuries of stagnation. It was not until the nineteenth century, during the Industrial Revolution, that the industrial manufacture of jewelry and *objets d'art* led to a revival of enamel production. In *Fabergé and the Russian Master Goldsmiths*, Gerard Hill describes the history of early firms like I. Chichelyov, Gubkin, Orlov, and Ovchinnikov. Several other important firms like Shelaputin, Khlebnikov, and Klinger were established after the abolition of feudalism in 1861.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the firms that specialized in producing wares of the “Old Russian” style were based in Moscow, the historic center of early enamel production in Russia. Using Peter Carl Fabergé’s business model, Hill explains:

There was a difference in the organization of the St. Petersburg and Moscow establishments. In St. Petersburg, there were a number of discrete workshops, each headed by a separate master goldsmith or jeweler known as a workmaster. Fabergé’s Moscow branch was managed as a more or less unitary workshop.<sup>21</sup>

Although this may have been the case for Fabergé’s firm, there were certainly individual silversmiths in Moscow, including Fedor Rückert. Regardless of their location, turn of the century workshops were notable for more than their artistic output; Hill discusses their influential role in establishing *artels*, some of the earliest forms of industrial regulation in Russia:

At the turn of the century, and especially after the 1905 Revolution, goldsmiths in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev tended to combine in *artels*, or guilds. In Moscow

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<sup>20</sup> Gerard Hill, ed. *Fabergé and the Russian Master Goldsmiths* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1989), 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

alone, according to the data available, there were about thirty of these artels. The increased production that took place in Russia after the 1861 reform led to an intensive development of joint-stock, manufacturing, and trading companies.<sup>22</sup>

This rapid creation of enamel firms in Russia, combined with the necessity for a guild system, indicate that the top competitors in the market had interest in protecting their artistic innovations. A country's decorative arts production can be a vital clue to its financial stability; accessibility to precious metals, innovative technical developments, and international artistry all imply that Russian enamelers found a successful market for their wares. Their presence at World Fairs and Imperial art exhibitions gave selected firms the opportunity for global exposure before the Soviet era. Renowned Fabergé expert Dr. Géza von Habsburg notes that, "Tiffany's in New York retailed enameled wares from Russia, chiefly ordered from the Muscovite silversmith Kusmichev, but also from Ivan Andreiev and others."<sup>23</sup> After the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, American clientele as influential as the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts visited Fabergé's flagship headquarters in St. Petersburg. This interest in Russian art at the *fin-de-siècle* is relevant; it proves that these firms could turn a profit and successfully compete with their American and Western European counterparts. Like his colleagues, Rückert produced wares for a niche trade, cornering the market on objects that had both domestic and international appeal.

Many of his contemporaries overshadowed Rückert's small practice, partly because of his choice to sell his wares through Fabergé rather than founding a larger

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>23</sup> von Habsburg, *Fabergé*, 61.



workshop. Both Pavel Ovchinnikov and Peter Carl Fabergé (1846-1920) received the Legion d'Honneur in 1900 for their wares at the Exposition Universelle. Ovchinnikov had founded his firm in 1853 and predominantly filled commissions for the royal family.<sup>24</sup> Barrymore Laurence Scherer notes that, "[Ovchinnikov] was the first Russian silver maker to embrace the pan-Slavic revival style, and in 1868 nearly two decades before Fabergé, the firm received the title of court supplier, allowing it to incorporate the imperial double eagle in its trademark."<sup>25</sup> Note the comparison between Ovchinnikov and his rival; there are few authors indeed who broach the subject of Russian enamel without reference to Fabergé. The firm of Peter Carl Fabergé represented the pinnacle of exquisite craftsmanship and brilliant marketing. Under his personal guidance, Fabergé's firm produced Tsar-worthy art objects and Imperial eggs, but the firm was equally important as one of Rückert's primary sales channels. Fabergé's relationship with Rückert is a vital one; many of Rückert's pieces are stamped with both his and Fabergé's marks. Although the aforementioned letter stand does not have a Fabergé mark, Rückert may have certainly produced it to satisfy Fabergé's "Old Russian" style enamel inventory.

## **Enamel Techniques and Stylistic Influences**

Having discussed the role of industrialization and history of enamel production in Russia, my examination will turn to the physical attributes of Rückert's letter stand. The front of the stand is elaborately decorated with *cloisonné* and painted enamel. Two

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<sup>24</sup> Barrymore Laurence Scherer, "Glittering Competition: The Rival of Faberge," *The Magazine Antiques*, accessed January 3, 2012, <http://www.themagazineantiques.com/articles/faberge/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Russian guards called *Streltsy* cross bardiches, or glaive pole weapons popularized during the sixteenth century, over an iron-clad door, complete with a whimsical lock and enamel faux wood accents. Ornate columns flank the door, and the enamel decoration extends to the stand's curled feet. The back of the stand is uncovered silver pierced with a bird and flower motif. The cloisonné work highlights his innovative use of finely-coiled silver wire to separate the individual enamel compartments. The artisan's masterful painted enamel technique draws attention to details in the composition, such as the floral motifs on the columns and the guards' individual faces. Minuscule paint lines embellish the bardiches, sabers, and door trimming, and a single cabochon garnet emerges from the base before the guards.

In *Materials & Techniques in the Decorative Arts: An Illustrated Dictionary*, conservator Sandra Davison defines enamel as:

A vitreous substance normally applied as a dried frit to a metallic surface such as copper, silver or gold and fused to the metal...A true enamel must be so formulated as to have a coefficient of contraction roughly equivalent to that of the metallic substrate.<sup>26</sup>

This use of fired frit, essentially a finely-ground glass, to decorate jewelry, statuettes, and other small tokens was prevalent throughout the ancient world. For a detailed account of the enameling process in Russia, this chapter primarily relies on Odom's research from her book *Russian Enamels*, which remains one of the few American texts on the topic. In this text Odom identifies the various techniques and materials used in the enamelware

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<sup>26</sup> Lucy Trench, ed. *Materials & Techniques in the Decorative Arts* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 143.

process. Although the earliest history of enamel is vague, scholars have documented enameling around the globe in regions as widespread as Egypt, Byzantium, and France. Early enamel forms highlight *champlevé*, the earliest known compartmental enamel technique used on metal objects, a technique that required artisans to gouge compartments into a metallic surface, eventually filling those compartments with polychrome frit. It is important to note that each enamel color requires a separate firing at a specific temperature, highlighting the early technical proficiency of these wares.

At the height of Silver Age Russian enamel production, workshops used three primary techniques: *cloisonné*, *plique-à-jour*, and painted enameling. *Cloisonné* enameling involves separating a metal backing into smaller sections by wiring, and filling each individual compartment with enamel. This technique naturally evolved from *champlevé* with the invention of metallic hot working. Odom describes painted enameling, which was developed during the Renaissance and became particularly known near the city of Limoges, France, thus:

A thin sheet of metal served as the support on which an *apprêt* or preliminary layer of moist white enamel was applied over a previously fired coating of dark enamel. Then, in an intaglio process, a design was drawn with a needle or spatula revealing the dark layer beneath. Other colors were applied as translucent washes...<sup>27</sup>

*Plique-à-jour* enameling was the latest and arguably most challenging technique. It involved suspending panes of enamel between metallic frames, creating the effect of miniaturized stained glass. *Plique-à-jour* enamel achieved popularity in Russia during the first two decades of the twentieth century, likely due to the influence of French

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<sup>27</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 14.

jeweler René Lalique, who perfected the process. In *The Master Jewelers*, curator Abraham Kenneth Snowman describes how “...Lalique improved the method by using saw-pierced sheets of gold for cloisonné, usually with an acid-soluble copper backing, making a much sturdier framework.”<sup>28</sup> His artistry and craftsmanship made Lalique a recognizable figure in his lifetime. He received a Grand Prix after exhibiting at the Exposition Universelle in Brussels in 1897, and the French government awarded him the Legion d’Honneur in 1900.<sup>29</sup> It was the firm of Pavel Ovchinnikov, which also received a Legion d’Honneur that year, which introduced the process to the Russian market.<sup>30</sup> Although firms like Ovchinnikov did make use of the *plique-à-jour* technique, Fedor Rückert’s workshop was notable primarily for his later innovations in combining *cloisonné* and painted enamels, the primary techniques he used to create the letter stand previously introduced in this chapter.

With this letter stand Rückert’s stylistic influences are still predominantly restricted to the accepted symbols and palettes of the “Old Russian” style – a combination of visual stimuli that referred back to the period of economic prosperity in Russia’s late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century past. There was a noteworthy cultural difference between seventeenth-century Russia and other Western European nations; the Renaissance, which flowered in Italy during the sixteenth century and in Northern Europe during the seventeenth century, never took hold in Imperial Russia. Instead, growing financial prosperity created what twentieth-century Russian artisans referred to as the “Old

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<sup>28</sup> Abraham Kenneth Snowman, *The Master Jewelers* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), 137.

<sup>29</sup> Victor Arwas, *Art Nouveau: the French Aesthetic* (London: Papadakis Publisher, 2002), 338.

<sup>30</sup> von Habsburg, *Fabergé*, 61.

Russian” or “Neo-Russian” style, a period when Russian artistry exemplified the unique aesthetic sensibilities that define true Russian art. It was this period that Russian Folklore Revival artists like Victor Vasnetsov and Konstantin Makovsky sought to honor in their work, and which Fedor Rückert would immortalize in his *objets d’art*.

This aesthetic further extends to both the enamel color and decorative elements on the letter stand. Turn of the century Russian enamel workshops all used similar colors, composed primarily of light and dark blue, red, pink, green, cream, and brown. Enamel workshops likely perceived these specific colors as representative of the “Old Russian” style, basing this interpretation on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century architecture and decorative objects. St. Basil’s Cathedral, contemporarily known for its elaborate architecture and vivid colors, is one of the most recognizable sixteenth-century churches in the world. The church acquired its recognizable color scheme of vivid reds, greens, blues, yellows and creams from around 1680 onward.<sup>31</sup>

St. Basil’s interior features original murals, which were common wall decoration for palaces and places of worship. This contemporary photograph of the interior (Figure 5) illustrates a similar floral motif and rounded doorframe to that which inspired Rückert. There are evident similarities between the columns, individual flowers, and even the position of the outlines. It is logical to assume that Russian artisans, who would have encountered this visual vocabulary all over Russia, would have adopted it as the archetypal Russian art. Only the olive green and orange tones in his letter stand hint at Rückert’s eventual transition to a novel – and completely individual – color palette.

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<sup>31</sup> Alexey Komech and A. I. Pluzhnikov, ed., *Pamyatniki arhitektury Moskvyy. Kreml’, Kitai Gorod, tsentral’nye ploschadi* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1982), 402.



Figure 5: An Interior Hall at St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, 2008. Digital photograph.

The decoration on the stand also places the object firmly within the “Old Russian” tradition that was prevalent on enamel *objets d’art* during this period. Its motif – two traditionally-clad Russian *Streltsy* – alludes to a glorified military post popularized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Originally established by Ivan the Terrible (1530-1584) sometime around 1550, *Streltsy* were Russian guardsmen who participated in military and guard duty, most notably guarding the Kremlin.<sup>32</sup> Due to poor management and mandatory hereditary service, the *Streltsy*’s political and military influence gradually waned over the course of the next two centuries. They assisted Sophia Alekseyevna, Peter the Great’s half-sister, with her failed coup. Because of their direct involvement, Peter the Great disbanded the *Streltsy* in the beginning of the eighteenth century. This process was contemporaneous with one of Peter the Great’s most important reforms: replacing the *Boyar Duma*, a council of Russian nobleman, with a ten-member senate. Like the *Boyars*, the *Streltsy* became synonymous with the erosion of traditional Russian ideology. Their presence on this object, therefore, coincides with a renewed interest in Russia’s glorified past and a revival of what artisans perceived to be a historic Russian visual vocabulary.

Fedor Rückert’s early work, including the letter stand, definitely shows an understanding of traditional iconography, and is therefore an excellent representation of period enamel production. Even at this early stage, however, Rückert’s work shows allusions to a transitional color palette and an innovative use of technique. It would be

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<sup>32</sup> Michael C. Paul, "The Military Revolution in Russia 1550-1682," *The Journal of Military History* 68 No. 1 (January 2004): 21.

this transition that would partially define Rückert's work as the visual bridge between the ideologies of Western Europe and the Russian Folklore Revival.



## CHAPTER TWO: INTERNATIONALISM: THE INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN DESIGN ON RÜCKERT'S BACKGROUND DECORATION

The previous chapter established that the enamel industry in Russia catered to both a domestic and international market, with firms like Fabergé outsourcing specific designs to smaller workshops. This association reflected a long-standing relationship between the Russian aristocratic elite and Western Europe, a cultural exchange that had begun in the seventeenth century with Tsar Peter the Great. To improve what he perceived as a backward-looking national identity, Tsar Peter contracted architect Alexandre Jean Baptiste LeBlond to redesign St. Petersburg in the French style.<sup>33</sup> These renovations evolved into a connection between the Russian elite and Western Europe that remained tangible even at the end of the nineteenth century. It was clearly this link that Rückert, who was born abroad and brought to Russia by an aristocratic family of considerable means, sought to incorporate into his ground decoration.

In order to examine his European and Eastern influences firsthand, I will examine two works produced during Fedor Rückert's most creative period, which spanned from around 1907 to his death in 1917. The first work (Figure 6) is a small box of the kind that was frequently produced and exported by the workshop. It features a miniature of the Konstantin Makovsky painting, *The Russian Bride's Attire* from 1889, and is marked with the Cyrillic letters "MAB," the date 1910, and Rückert's workshop mark, "ФР."

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<sup>33</sup> Massie, *Peter the Great*.

The second object (Figure 7) is a diminutive box (H. 1  $\frac{3}{4}$  in., W. 3 in., D. 1  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.) painted with a replica of Viktor Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878). The box is stamped with a *Kokoshnik* mark – a woman's right-facing cameo wearing a Russian headdress – the royal-mandated hallmark for objects produced after 1908.<sup>34</sup> It also carries marks for both Fabergé's firm and Rückert's workshop.



Figure 6: Fedor Rückert, Box with Painted Miniature of Konstantin Makovsky's *The Russian Bride's Attire* (1889), 1910. Silver, gold wire, *cloisonné* enamel, painted enamel. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.

<sup>34</sup> Abraham Kenneth and Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *Fabergé, Jeweler to Royalty: exhibition from the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and other British lenders, Cooper-Hewitt Museum....April 15-July 10, 1983: catalogue* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution: 1983), 26.



**Figure 7: Fedor Rückert, Box with Painted Miniature of Viktor Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878), 1908-1917. Silver, gold wire, *cloisonné* enamel, painted enamel. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.**

The “Bride’s Attire” Box, as this essay will hitherto call it, features a black ground with a motif that art historians would generally describe as a Celtic or Scandinavian knot pattern. These motifs are not native to the Russian decorative arts, and their presence signifies that Rückert had access to a vast visual vocabulary of international aesthetics. What makes his work unique, therefore, is his decision to embrace these patterns at a time when other Moscow enamel workshops were working almost exclusively in the “Old Russian” style. Black enamel is rarely used as a dominant color in Russian enamelware, and the box’s black body and greenish-blue accents naturally suggest copper

verdigris. Although not typical of the more vibrant “Old Russian” style, this color combination can be found prominently on objects made during the Bronze and Iron Ages in various regions of Scandinavia. The Scandinavian Peninsula’s proximity to Russia, its contentious history, and the Russian penchant for foreign labor all contributed to the accessibility of Nordic motifs.

## **Scandinavian Influence**

The role of the Norse in Russia’s early history is instrumental in defining the origins of many of Rückert’s decorative elements. More importantly, this history might justify *why* Rückert limited his European and Eastern inspiration to those cultures that had, at one time or another, challenged the “Old Russian” style. In *Viking Rus: studies on the presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, archaeologist Wladyslaw Duczko elaborates on the arrival of Nordic explorers in the Kievan Rus’ in the second half the ninth century. His primary source is one of Russia’s oldest historical documents, the *Povest’ vremennykh let*, commonly referred to as the *Primary Chronicle*. Compiled in Kiev circa 1113, the *Primary Chronicle* details the early history of the Kievan Rus’ state from about 850 to 1110. Duczko extensively quotes from the *Chronicle* when he notes that:

In the entry sub anno (s.a.) 6367 (859) in the Russian *Primary Chronicle* we are told ‘The Varangians from beyond the sea imposed tribute upon the Chud, the Slovene, the Meria, the Ves, and the Krivichi...’ Three years later, 6370 (856), these Varangians were driven back and the mentioned people ‘set out to govern themselves’ but they failed to do so. As a result, they invited from the oversea ‘the Varangian Rus: these particular Varangians were known as Rus, just as some are called Swedes, and others, Normans, Angles, Gotlanders...Thus they selected three brothers, with their kinsfolk, who took with them all the Rus and migrated. *The*

*oldest, Rurik, located himself in Novgorod...*<sup>35</sup>

Duczko argues that nationalistic pride may have caused the author to take some liberties with historical events.<sup>36</sup> Even so, this record documents some of the first Nordic influences on Pan-Slavic culture. Whatever its definitive origins, the resulting Rurik Dynasty was instrumental in combining Northern European and Near Eastern ideologies. One of its most influential representatives, Kievan Prince Vladimir the Great, established a mercantile relationship with the Byzantine Empire that fundamentally altered the social and political dynamic within Eastern Europe. In 988, Vladimir converted the nation from Pagan ritualism to Christianity, a decision that would drastically influence the artistic culture of the Russian Empire.<sup>37</sup>

With the waning of Kievan Rus' power in the fourteenth century, the Grand Duchy of Muskovy became the primary ruling state within Eastern Europe, eventually consolidating Northern and Central Rus' with the Eastern Roman Empire. By the sixteenth century, Russia's territorial growth into the Baltic caused a strenuous relationship between Russia and Sweden, which resulted in the Great Northern War of 1721 – a campaign that proved successful for Peter the Great. Following his predecessor's success, Alexander I acquired the Grand Duchy of Finland from Sweden in 1809. It would be this relationship that would become particularly important for the enamel market in turn of the century Russia.

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<sup>35</sup> Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: studies on the presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 10. Italics by the author.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> *Primary Chronicle*, year 6495 (987).

Historians like Anthony F. Upton often note that the Russian Empire's relationship with Finland deteriorated drastically towards the last few decades of the nineteenth century, culminating in Finland's declaration for independence in 1917.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, the industrialization of St. Petersburg and Moscow provided ample labor opportunities for foreign workers, and the enamel industry relied heavily on artisans from Finland and Sweden. In an exhibition catalog highlighting the relationship between Finnish and Russian artists at the turn of the century, Anna Laks describes how the artists in both nations established early communication when she states that, "The first wave of interest came in the early 1870s, following the completion of the Helsinki-St Petersburg railway."<sup>39</sup> Laks further writes that there was a healthy artistic exchange between Russian and Finnish artists, reaching a pinnacle with exhibitions held in 1896 and 1898:

Finnish National Romanticism absorbed elements from Art Nouveau and *Jugendstil*. Artists travelled to Italy; the early Renaissance came into vogue. Finnish artists' attitudes to Russia were sympathetic on the whole, as evidenced by the Russian Art and Industry exhibition that took place in Nizhny Novgorod in the summer of 1896. The Finns compiled a distinguished sample of work: all the most important painters were represented with major canvases, and Finnish exhibits made up approximately one tenth of the total.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps more to the point, *Fabergé Eggs: a retrospective encyclopedia*, lists at least a dozen Finnish artists employed at Fabergé's various workshops, including Adam Herttuainen, August Fredrik Hollming, Senior Workmaster Henrik Immanuel Wigström

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<sup>38</sup> Anthony F. Upton, *The Finnish Revolution, 1917-1918* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Laks, "Gosudarstvennyi russkii muzei (Saint Petersburg, Russia), Suomen taiteen museo Ateneum," *"Mir iskusstva": on the centenary of the exhibition of Russian and Finnish artists, 1898* (Palace Editions: 1998), 217.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

and his son Henrik Wilhelm Wigström, and Antti Johann Nevalainen, among many others.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, it remains extremely likely that Rückert's workshop employed at least several Finnish Workmasters,<sup>42</sup> and that Fedor Rückert himself was familiar with their artistic history.

The point of this historical analysis is to present evidence on how Rückert may have acquired the ability to produce work that so clearly reflected motifs outside of the traditional Russian *oeuvre*. The major contradiction to this assumption is, of course, that other Russian workshops like Fabergé, Ovchinnikov, and Khlebnikov employed Finnish workers, yet successfully sustained the “Old Russian” style. Although it is certainly possible that Rückert encouraged his Workmasters to create designs that represented their cultural heritage and that he was the only silversmith to do so, it is equally likely that his inspiration came from his exposure to other media and his discovery that the market clamored for work inspired by alternative sources.

The spread of cultural and artistic information in the nineteenth century was significantly aided by both technological and scientific advancements. Archaeological excavations at a number of locations – Ireland, Denmark, and Greece – fueled the public fascination with the antiquities. Some of the objects found during these explorations became significant artistic influences, encouraging hundreds of replicas and reinterpretations. In a paper published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1900, Professor Oscar Montelius presented several

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<sup>41</sup> Will Lowes and Christel Ludewig McCanless, *Fabergé Eggs: a retrospective encyclopedia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 205, 224, 243.

<sup>42</sup> In this instance, the term “Workmaster “ refers to the master or head workman at a particular workshop.

illustrations of Bronze Age objects from Denmark and Sweden. Object 17 (Figure 8) in this illustration shows a *fibula*, a kind of large clothing fastener used in many early societies across the globe.<sup>43</sup> This particular fibula terminates in two distinct tight coils, which are replicated twenty times on the top of the “Bride’s Attire” Box. Ancient craftsmen around the world employed the technique of applied coiled decoration, but the patterns tend to be regionally unique. The Egyptians, for example, used a number of spiral patterns, usually in association with the lotus motif.<sup>44</sup> Unlike ancient Egyptian coils, in which the spirals themselves are only two or three layers deep and the stems veer at an angle,<sup>45</sup> Scandinavian coils have straight stems with robust tightly-wound coil heads. When identifying the inspiration for Rückert’s decoration, clearly the Scandinavian region predominantly influenced his work in this instance.

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<sup>43</sup> Oscar Montelius, “On the Earliest Communications Between Italy and Scandinavia,” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 30 (Trübner & Co., 1900), 94.

<sup>44</sup> Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, *Egyptian Decorative Art* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1999), 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



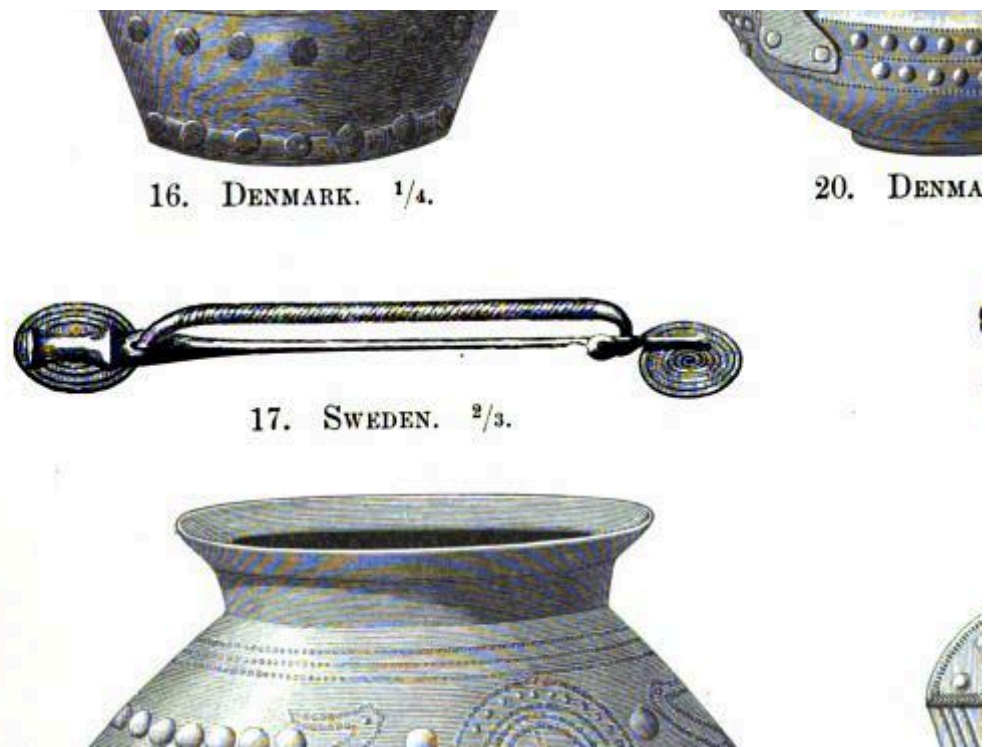


Figure 8: Object 17, a fibula with tightly coiled ends, 1900. Oscar Montelius, “On the Earliest Communications between Italy and Scandinavia,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900), 94.

## Celtic Inspiration

While the color scheme and coiled decoration allude to Scandinavian origins, the greenish-blue knotted motif on the box’s lid potentially reflects another influence.

Interest in archaeological discoveries was not limited to the Continent, and significant discoveries in Ireland and Scotland inspired a growing interest in the collection and marketing of Celtic folklore. One discovery – that of the Tara Brooch in 1850 – particularly excited historians and the general public alike. Since its reappearance, art historians often consider the Tara Brooch (Figure 9) to be one of the finest examples of

Celtic metalwork ever produced.<sup>46</sup> Made of cast and gilded silver, the Tara Brooch highlights several of the most commonly replicated Celtic motifs in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its elaborate pin features a Celtic knot very similar to the one seen on lid of the “Bride’s Attire” Box. The original craftsman decorated the triangular base of the pin with a dragon head composed of two spirals facing away from each other, and embellished the dragon’s snout with angled parallel lines. Slightly modified, this decoration could have easily been the visual inspiration for the spiral forms on the “Bride’s Attire” Box.

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<sup>46</sup> William Frederick Wakeman, John Cooke (M.A.), *Wakeman’s handbook of Irish antiquities* (Hodges, Figgis, 1903), 360-361.



**Figure 9: Silver-gilt annular brooch (The Tara Brooch), 8<sup>th</sup> century. Silver, silver gilt, enamel, amber, glass.  
Dublin: National Museum of Ireland.**

Discoveries as significant as the Tara Brooch were publicized across Europe. The Tara Brooch's first proprietors, Dublin-based Jewelers Messrs. Waterhouse, displayed the original brooch at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, using it as a promotional tactic to sell replicas.<sup>47</sup> Illustrations of the Tara Brooch were circulated across Europe in texts such as *Wakeman's handbook of Irish antiquities* (1903)<sup>48</sup> and *Ireland Illustrated with Pen and Pencil* (1891).<sup>49</sup> The brooch likely served as inspiration for many of the Celtic designs in Owen Jones influential text *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856). Jones describes the influence of another iconic object, the Aberlemno Cross (Figure 10), in establishing a symbolic vocabulary for the Iron Age Picts.<sup>50</sup> The elaborate curves of the type of knot published in the *Grammar of Ornament* can be seen most prominently on the four sides of the box (Figure 11), where Rückert combines a Celtic pattern with traditional Russian floral motifs in orange, purple, olive green, vivid blue, red, aqua, and light green on a cream-colored background. Only in the recesses of the Celtic motif did the workshop employ black enamel, preferring the lighter background that remains so descriptive of the "Old Russian" style.

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<sup>47</sup> "Shawl Pin/Jewellery Case," last modified 2012, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=82803&partid=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectId=82803&partid=1).

<sup>48</sup> Wakeman, *Wakeman's handbook*, 360.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Lovett, *Ireland illustrated with pen and pencil* (London: Hurst, 1891), 40-41.

<sup>50</sup> Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day and son, 1856), 306.





Figure 10: Owen Jones, Drawing of the Aberlemno Cross from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.



Figure 11: Fedor Rückert, Box with Painted Miniature of Konstantin Makovsky's *The Russian Bride's Attire* (1889) (side view), 1910. Silver, gold wire, *cloisonné* enamel, painted enamel. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.

These excavations and exhibitions provided an admittedly speculative, yet documented, opportunity for Rückert to have seen an archaeological object firsthand. In a British parliamentary review from 1864, a conversation between the Chairman and a member of the Royal Irish Academy, Sir William R. Wilde, revealed that the Academy received a pair of ancient Celtic *torques*, or armbands, “...shortly after they were returned from Russia.”<sup>51</sup> Current access to archival evidence provides little information regarding Rückert’s capacity to travel; although the previous chapter established that Rückert sold his wares through Fabergé, available records lack information on whether Rückert

<sup>51</sup> Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *Reports from committees*, 1864, 297.

attended any World Fairs personally. His patronage by one of two prominent aristocratic families, however, would indicate that he would have at least had access to visual dictionaries and contemporary publications. Although it is infinitely more likely that Rückert's Celtic inspiration came from published and circulated sources, these Parliament records denote one of the many opportunities Rückert would have had to see historical objects firsthand.

### **The Role of Art Nouveau and the Vienna Secession Movement**

The New Art movement, prominent from around 1890 to 1915, typifies the changing perceptions of artistic purpose through its use of curves and botanical motifs to reflect movement and technological ingenuity. Artists and designers strove to simplify and elevate line, imitating the emerging aesthetics of industrial design. In *Art Nouveau*, Lara-Vinca Masini claims that, "In traditional styles of painting, architecture and applied arts, formal, representational and emotional values had always overwhelmed decorative elements, while the Art Nouveau style attempted to liberate pure visual appeal from the restraint of meaning."<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the style represented a major shift for the decorative arts into an early abstraction of floral and linear motifs. A version of the movement localized in Austria, known as the Vienna Secession, became particularly influential for Rückert's background decoration.

If Rückert regressed at least partially to "Old Russian" motifs with the "Bride's Attire" Box, then the "Knight" Box eliminates this allusion completely. Decorated with white, pale shimmery blue, dark brown, red and dark green enamels, the patterns reflect a

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<sup>52</sup> Lara-Vinca Masini, *Art Nouveau* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1984), 12.

simplified approach to symbolism that prevailed in the European aesthetic during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Von Habsburg addresses Rückert's use of gilded wiring when he states that, "A unique characteristic of these late enamels by Rückert is the independent role played by filigree wires twisted into tightly coiled springs and by gilded pellets, forming patterns of their own."<sup>53</sup>

This "Knight" Box displays this innovative wiring, but it also features another novel technique Rückert developed. Anne Odom explains that, "What appears to be wirework invading the painting at the bottom and to the left is in fact a lustre glaze of the type used on ceramics. Rückert frequently used this technique for cross-hatching his metal wires and for dots inside wire circles."<sup>54</sup> Upon closer inspection, this lustre glaze is composed of tiny, color-filled spirals and rectangles in an abstract pattern. This composition shows remarkable similarity to the work of an Austrian painter who employed a nearly identical aesthetic of gold spirals and contained gilded rectangles – Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). Odom mentions this relationship briefly in *Russian Enamels*, but provides minimal exploration of its significance.<sup>55</sup> Klimt was one of the most influential painters of the Vienna Secession movement, and he worked contemporaneously with Rückert. His portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Figure 12), painted in 1907, conveniently predates the "Knight" Box by at least a year. His color choice – gold, dark blues, light gray blues, reds, browns, and white – are almost identical to the colors Rückert used on the "Knight" Box. Close-ups of the portrait reveal gilded spirals

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<sup>53</sup> von Habsburg, *Fabergé*, 62.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Odom, *Russian Enamels: Kievan Rus to Fabergé* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Limited, 1996), 162.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



(Figure 13) and small rectangles (Figure 14) that comprise sections of the image. Similar spirals can also be seen along the gilded top border on the sides of the “Knight” Box. The painting includes the elongated spiral forms seen between the griffin and swan symbols on the box’s sides, and even Klimt’s decision to use gilding as a primary element in his work finds a parallel in Rückert’s unusual decision to back his symbols with solid planes of gold.



Figure 12: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, 1907. Oil, silver, and gold on canvas. New York: Neue Gallery.





Figure 13: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (detail), 1907. Oil, silver, and gold on canvas. New York: Neue Gallery.





Figure 14: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (detail), 1907. Oil, silver, and gold on canvas. New York: Neue Gallery.

In the period of Klimt's career when he produced *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, he was heavily inspired in both motif and decoration by the Byzantine mosaics he had seen in Ravenna.<sup>56</sup> Either Klimt and Rückert had both been inspired by the same source media and produced strikingly similar works simultaneously, or one had influenced the other. Since it is more common for decorative arts to react to paintings and illustrations, Klimt likely influenced Rückert's style. Perhaps most poignantly, the "Knight" Box showcases Rückert's interest in Byzantine source material, reflecting a stylistic source that had influenced Russian art in the tenth century.

## Symbolism

Rückert's depiction of the three symbolic creatures on the "Knight" Box – the swan, the griffin, and the bird – find root in Russia's well-established relationship with Byzantium (Figure 15 and Figure 16). The previous chapter discusses the Byzantine origins of the "Old Russian" style, reflected by its paisley curves and vibrant hues. The symbols on the "Knight" Box, however, reflect an older history and are not unique among Russian enamelware. A pair of twelfth-century Kievan *kolt*, or *kokoshnik* pendants, depict simplified birds in primary colors. One of Mariia Adler's jewel caskets features griffins (which Anne Odom incorrectly identified as dragons) on its side panels. The firm of Pavel Ovchinnikov decorated a *plique-à-jour kovsh* with a swan, its feathers composed of individual minuscule panes of glass.<sup>57</sup> What is unique about the "Knight" Box lies in Rückert's interpretation of the symbols to match the decorative motifs of the

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<sup>56</sup> Gilles Néret, Gustav Klimt, *Gustav Klimt, 1862-1918* (Taschen, 2007), 33.

<sup>57</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 27, 127, 129.

box lid. The decision to select familiar creatures and present them in a novel, Byzantine-influenced style proved particularly innovative.



Figure 15: Fedor Rückert, Box with Painted Miniature of Viktor Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878) (side view), 1908-1917. Silver, gold wire, *cloisonné* enamel, painted enamel. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.





Figure 16: Fedor Rückert, Box with Painted Miniature of Viktor Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads* (1878) (side view), 1908-1917. Silver, gold wire, *cloisonné* enamel, painted enamel. Baltimore, MD: The Walters Art Museum.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire maintained trading relations with its southern neighbors. A book published by London-based John Murray in 1855 and titled *The Englishwoman in Russia: Impressions of the Society and Manners of the Russians at Home* provides a first-hand account of Russia's relationship with Europe and Asia. Like Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which studied the social conditions of the United States in America circa 1835, *The Englishwoman in Russia* analyzes Russian culture, ideology, and social practices. In her letters to her English brother, the anonymous author describes her ten-year experience living in Russia during the 1840s. Although influenced by the English concept of civilization and the "Other" that often permeates correspondence during the mid-nineteenth century, her letters paint a vibrant picture of the Russian elite and the proletariat from the perspective of a European foreigner at large.

The opening chapter becomes immediately relevant to this study when she describes how:

The native barks glided calmly past us, strange-looking things, gaudily painted with red, black, and yellow designs, on the rough wood. Their clumsy vanes resembled those on Chinese junks; some were in the form of a serpent, others in that of a fish, *a griffin*, or some fabulous creature or other, and decorated with streamers of scarlet...<sup>58</sup>

As this document verifies, the griffin had existed in Russian decoration for at least fifty years before Rückert selected it as a symbol for his enamelware. Globally, the symbol actually dates back to as early as the third century B.C.E., when the region of the world

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<sup>58</sup> Anonymous: A Lady, *The Englishwoman in Russia: Impressions of the Society and Manners of the Russians at Home* (London, John Murray: 1855), 2. Italics by the author.



known as Russia today was primarily composed of nomadic tribes called the Scythians.<sup>59</sup> The Scythians adapted much of their symbolic culture from the Greeks, who settled in regions across Eastern Europe.<sup>60</sup> A nineteenth-century description of Greco-Scythian objects held at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) described a scabbard as “...the work of a native artist taught in the Greek school.”<sup>61</sup> The scabbard’s representation of a “griffin of Panticapæum,” therefore, presents an important connection between Greek and Scythian art.<sup>62</sup> Historically accepted as a development of Persian, Greek, or Islamic origin, the griffin was predominantly a symbol of virtue and order. Descriptions of the griffin generally describe it as:

“A fabulous creature, half animal, half bird, imagined by the ancients. It was usually described in literature and represented in art as having the head, beak, and wings of an eagle and the body and legs of a lion...this creature was conceived by the peoples of the valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates as one of the chimerical genii...”<sup>63</sup>

The griffin on the “Knight” Box is enameled onto a gilded background. Rückert’s depiction combines an eagle beak, pointed ears, squared-off wings emerging from spiraled joints, a two-pronged scaly tail, and a red lolling tongue. Its depiction was likely intended to be symbolic; the painted miniature depicts a Knight at a crossroads, where the crossroads represented a physical or psychological division traditionally associated with

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<sup>59</sup> Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen, *Medieval Islamic symbolism and the paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1986), 122.

<sup>60</sup> Alfred Maskell, *Russian art and art objects in Russia: A handbook to the reproductions of goldsmiths’ work and other treasures from that country in the South Kensington Museum* (London: Pub. For the Committee of Council on education, by Chapman & Hall, 1884), 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> New International Encyclopedia, Volume 10 (Dodd, Mead, 1915), 379.

both griffins and sphinxes in ancient mythology.<sup>64</sup>

The griffin is flanked on either side by white swans, which face the griffin with bowed heads, splaying their red-enameled feet in a somewhat comical fashion. The same book that described the Scythian scabbard, *Russian art and art objects in Russia: A handbook to the reproductions of goldsmiths' work and other treasures from that country in the South Kensington Museum*, discussed a Kremlin collection of fifty-eight *charki*, or liquor cups from the sixteenth century, "...the most ancient of which (reproduced) is in the centre a swan with this inscription: 'Drink if it does not harm you: drink with moderation. It is not wine but drunkenness which is to be blamed.'"<sup>65</sup> In literature, the Russian poet Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin used the swan as a symbol of beauty and restraint when he penned *The Tale of Tsar Saltan, of His Son the Renowned and Mighty Bogatyr Prince Gvidon Saltanovich, and of the Beautiful Princess Swan* in 1831. Vrubel revisited the story in his monumental work *The Swan Princess* (1900), which Pavel Mikhailovich Tretyakov later acquired for the State Tretyakov Gallery.

The bird motif on the sides of the "Knight" Box represents one of most ancient Russian forms, tracing back to the Kievan Rus' and the enamel production there. Odom explains that, "Birds were an important pagan and religious symbol because they are able to fly between earth and the rain-producing clouds. As a Christian symbol they provided a link between heaven and earth."<sup>66</sup> Rückert's composed his birds from spiral forms,

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<sup>64</sup> William Henry Goodyear, *The grammar of the lotus: A new history of classic ornament as a development of sun worship, with observations on the "bronze culture" of prehistoric Europe, as derived from Egypt* (London: S. Low, Marston, & Co., 1891): 216.

<sup>65</sup> Maskell, *Russian art*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 26.

using spirals for the head, wings, and wing joints. The bird's long tail feathers allude to the common Russian depiction of the *Alkonost* – a chimera with a woman head and a Bird-of-paradise<sup>67</sup> body. The closest visual inspiration for these birds may have come from a church in Pokrov on the Nerl near Moscow, which features two doves on its stone façade dating back to circa 1170 (Figure 17). Allowing for stylization, when combined with the other symbols on the “Knight” Box, these birds establish a direct link between historical Russian art and the emerging styles of Europe.

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<sup>67</sup> Here the term “bird-of-paradise” refers to the avian species *Paradisaea apoda*.



Figure 17: Church stone façade showing doves, circa 1170. Pokrov on the Nerl.

## Conclusion

Because of its unique location straddling both Europe and Asia, Russian art often combines a tantalizing visual vocabulary from a number of sources. By exploring Russian history and access to visual influences, this chapter identified some of the dominant motifs Fedor Rückert developed for his pieces. Analyzing the possible sources for Rückert's work verifies that his workshop was not only able to mimic the European

and Eastern styles it encountered, but could redesign them into cohesive explorations of a novel style. By combining internationalism with native Russian motifs, Rückert could appeal to a wider audience. This thesis will further examine this idea in the following chapter, which will turn inward towards a glorified Russian past to examine Rückert's painted miniatures and discuss their relationship with the Russian Folklore Revival – a relationship that will prove significant to Rückert's body of work.

### CHAPTER THREE: A RETURN TO TRADITION: THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN FOLKLORE REVIVAL IN RÜCKERT'S MINIATURE RESERVE ENAMEL PAINTINGS

Having explored the international influences of his ground decoration in the previous chapter, I will now focus on perhaps the most immediately recognizable aspect of Rückert's enamelwork: his painted miniatures. By the time Rückert's workshop ventured into painted enamels, the technique had a storied past in Imperial Russia, primarily with ceremonial objects and the Russian Orthodox Church. As this thesis briefly discussed in the introduction, the technique had evolved in Western Europe during the Renaissance, particularly in Limoges, France, and the approach became widespread in Russia by the eighteenth century.<sup>68</sup> In *Russian Enamels*, Odom catalogued several early Russian pieces that made use of painted enamels. The first, a medallion reliquary, portrays Christ interacting with Doubting Thomas. Odom suggested that the technical proficiency of this medallion indicates that it was probably made in St. Petersburg from around 1741-61.<sup>69</sup> Unlike contemporary painted enamel objects from France, which primarily depicted pastoral scenes in the Rococo style, eighteenth-century Russian enamel objects generally feature religious themes, suggesting their importance to the Church.

With the establishment of large enamel firms in St. Petersburg and Moscow,

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<sup>68</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 72.

workshops like Ovchinnikov and Khlebnikov began specializing in enamel portraits. A ceremonial bread and salt dish made by the firm of Pavel Ovchinnikov in 1883, for example, features three detailed painted miniatures of Emperor Alexander III, Empress Maria Feodorovna, and the Tsarevich Nicholas. Many of Fabergé's eggs, frames, and other intimate objects also feature enamel portraits of the royal family, establishing a trend for the practice among many of the major firms. Moving beyond ceremonial vignettes and portraiture, Fedor Rückert settled on images of the Russian Folklore Revival for his painted miniatures.

Rückert's early work, including the letter stand discussed earlier, often incorporated graphic interpretations of Russian iconography. However, by the last decade of the nineteenth century his workshop produced enamel miniatures almost exclusively. Using the technique of enamel painting, Rückert managed to create hundreds of known objects with complex motifs. Although Rückert's workshop was certainly not the only firm producing enamel miniatures, his are the most consistent in their treatment of Russian Folklore Revival paintings. Those objects attributed to his workshop primarily borrow from only several Russian artists working predominantly in the Russian Revival style, including Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1946) and Konstantin Makovsky (1839-1915).<sup>70</sup>

For the sake of consistency, I will examine the same two boxes I featured in the previous chapter: one with a copy of *The Russian Bride's Attire* by Makovsky (Figure 6), and the other showcasing an interpretation of Vasnetsov's work, *Knight at the*

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<sup>70</sup> Although this essay will not discuss copyright logistics extensively, I will note that Rückert's workshop did require permission to copy paintings or objects within museum collections at both the State History Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery. See Odom, "A Key to the Past," 25.

*Crossroads* (Figure 7). Before analyzing the individual enamel miniatures and their relationship to the original source material, this chapter will contextualize the importance of the Folklore Revival and the Arts and Crafts movement in Russia and abroad. This background examination is critical in understanding why Rückert chose these particular motifs and how his selection reflects a critical turning point in Russian history.

The previous chapter established that Russian artists and craftsmen had extensive access to a visual vocabulary outside of traditional Russian art. The Imperial Academy of Art, established in 1857 in St. Petersburg, awarded travel opportunities to Russian artists, to educate them in both the Neoclassical and Renaissance styles.<sup>71</sup> Shifting attitudes towards nationalism and the role of the artist in society, however, forced artists around the world to question academic training and the ideologies offered by national academies. Vasnetsov and Makovsky were both affiliated with a group of Russian artists who revolted “...against the esthetic and pedagogical strictures of the Imperial Academy of the Arts in St. Petersburg in 1863.”<sup>72</sup> This group, called the Society of Wandering (or Traveling) Exhibitions, was more commonly known as the *Peredvizhniki* (literally, the Wanderers). It would be remiss not to point out that the year the *Peredvizhniki* chose to leave the Academy was the same year that the *Salon des Refusés* was organized in Paris in opposition to the French *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. In his definitive text on Silver Age art, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the early twentieth century and the “World of Art” group*, art historian John Bowlt explains that, “...the new generation of Realists affirmed

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Harvey Brown, *Postmodern Representations: Truth, Power, and Mimesis in the Human Sciences and Public Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 161.

<sup>72</sup> John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the early twentieth century and the “World of Art” group*. (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1979), 15.



that the primary subject for artistic interpretation should be Russian reality ‘as it is’ and not an idyllic Grecian Arcadia or a Scandinavian legend.”<sup>73</sup> Although their individual styles evolved beyond realism and genre painting, these artists became instrumental in the development of the “Neo-Russian” style that became such a favorite for Rückert’s enamel miniatures.

### **The Folklore Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement**

A cursory examination of Makovsky and Vasnetsov’s oeuvre reveals that they gravitated towards very different subject matters. Makovsky tended to paint historical scenes featuring seventeenth-century Russian noblemen, and Vasnetsov primarily depicted Russian folk stories and epic heroes. Thus, lumping them into the same artistic movement seems initially problematic. Consequently, understanding how their work expresses an ardent Russian desire to discover a pre-Western past requires an exploration into the rapid social and political changes occurring at the *fin-de-siècle*.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a renewed interest in local folklore swept across the European continent. This fascination was generally termed the Folklore Revival, and a number of factors contributed to its widespread influence. Scientific innovations debunked the myths surrounding many of the natural phenomena previously attributed to magic and the meddling of fairy folk. Rapid urbanization and population growth created a “...nostalgia for the past and a feeling that the modern world debased everything – men, women, children, love, the cities, the nations, the race – even

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 16.

death.”<sup>74</sup> This nostalgia encouraged individuals to seek out forms of escape, especially through what they may have perceived as the tales of a distant, romantic past. The preoccupation with the supernatural and imaginary still held the attention of the public as testament to this escapism. It is notable that individuals like Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859), John Francis Campbell (1821-1885) and Elena Polenova (1850-1898) realized the necessity of preserving folktales in countries where oral communication still dominated the historical record.

Campbell’s work, for example, was instrumental to the recognition of Scottish folklore in London and the British Isles during the nineteenth century. He was one of the first individuals that collected and systematically studied the folklore of the Gaelic-speaking West Highlands, and according to historian Frank Thompson, “Campbell was the British counterpart of the Grimm brothers, with whom he had more than a metaphorical connection.”<sup>75</sup> In his discussions with G.W. Dasent, Campbell identified one of the most important reasons for the growing popularity of folktales when he wrote that, “...the interest which is attached to these stories is caused by their universal occurrence in all languages.”<sup>76</sup> This shows that the interest in folklore expressed by nineteenth century society was universal and far-reaching, seeking stories from original, undiluted sources. In her analysis of Scottish lore, historian Lizanne Henderson notes that, “Throughout the nineteenth century the elves littered the pages of Scottish

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<sup>74</sup> Walter Laqueur, “Fine-de-siecle: Once More with Feeling,” *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 31, No. 1 (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1996): 23.

<sup>75</sup> Frank G. Thompson, “John Francis Campbell,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 54 (Inverness: Mainprint, 1987): 26.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

literature...Folktale collections significantly added to the corpus of lore, as did the energies, or imaginations, of legions of antiquarians.”<sup>77</sup>

Like its Western European counterparts, Russia experienced a revival in traditional folk culture and lore towards the end of the nineteenth century. There was a particular interest in the *kustar* industry, which had existed unaltered in the Russian countryside for hundreds of years. Historian Wendy Salmond explains why so many artists and their patrons relied on the influence of objects produced in the *kustar* manner:

As in other countries struggling to construct a tangible national identity at this period, it was above all to ornament that Russian architects turned for the seminal ingredients of a revived “Old Russian style” in architecture and the applied arts. Motifs derived from the daily life of the peasant – from wood carving, embroideries, and laces – became especially important elements of this new ornamental language, because through them a direct and unbroken line could be traced that linked Russians on the brink of modernity back to their pre-Western roots.<sup>78</sup>

Elena Polenova, the daughter of an archaeologist and a significant painter in her own right, was instrumental in preserving many of the decorative objects that influenced craftsmen at a Russian utopian workshop known as the Abramtsevo colony. Her participation was not limited to the cataloguing and reinterpretation of *kustar* artifacts; during her tenure at the colony Polenova also collected traditional folktales from local bards and craftsmen, and many of these stories would become influential in the work of artists like Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Vrubel.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Lizanne Henderson, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>78</sup> Wendy R. Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>79</sup> Bowlt, *The Silver Age*, 35.

In Western Europe, the Romanticism that inspired the Victorian fascination with the “Other” evolved into the Arts and Crafts movement, a social and artistic crusade that embraced artisan pride as a counterculture to the mass production of an increasingly industrialized age. In his essay titled “Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain,” Alan Crawford explains that, ‘I see the Arts and Crafts movement as a late episode in the history of Romanticism. It upholds the imagination over reason, feeling over intellect, and the organic over the mechanical.’<sup>80</sup> The movement was primarily based on the ideas of Oxford professor John Ruskin (1819-1900), who romanticized the medieval craftsman as a figure that oversaw the entire conception and production of an object, and consequently represented the British past in a way that mass-produced objects never could. He and his contemporary William Morris (1834-1896) believed that, “By uniting art with labor, craftsmanship hoped to counter the fragmentation that had destroyed beauty in the process of degrading work.”<sup>81</sup> Both Ruskin and Morris were involved in various social ventures to improve working conditions in Britain. Morris’s enterprises – Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co., Kelmscott Press, and Merton Abbey – are perhaps better known today, likely because of the enthusiasm and personal involvement of Morris himself.<sup>82</sup> In the later part of his life, Morris became enraptured with Karl Marx (his Kelmscott Press published several work by the German author), and he lectured and wrote extensively on the benefits of the socialist system.

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<sup>80</sup> Alan Crawford, “Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain,” *Design Issues* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 1997): 24.

<sup>81</sup> Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the craftsman ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), xi.

<sup>82</sup> Boris, *Art and Labor*, 7.

Although Morris's socialist tendencies instigated little political change in Great Britain, their influence was felt much more strongly in Eastern Europe. Russia struggled with the comparatively recent abolition of serfdom and a continued discrepancy between the Intelligentsia, who generally accepted Western doctrine, and the proletariat, who still relied primarily on oral histories and local industry for their national identity. In *The Silver Age*, Bowlt explains how this disparity encouraged several sympathetic members of the elite to attempt a revival of traditional Russian art and folklore.

Specifically, Bowlt focuses on a wealthy Moscow industrialist named Savva Ivanovich Mamontov (1841-1918), who founded the aforementioned Abramtsevo colony fifty-seven kilometers from Moscow.<sup>83</sup> Both the Folklore Revival and his interactions with several key artistic figures during his travels abroad in 1873-74 fueled Mamontov's passion for artistic democracy.<sup>84</sup> Bowlt explains that many of the *Peredvizhniki* wanted to find an authentic Russian art, an art free from the influence of what they perceived as an increasingly industrialized and homogenous Western aesthetic, which he describes when he quotes [Ilia] Repin in a letter to the critic Stasov: 'Modern French painting is so empty, so ridiculous in content: the painting is talented but there's only painting -- no content at all.'<sup>85</sup>

The answer to this dilemma, as Mamontov and the *Peredvizhniki* saw it, was to return to the pre-Western Russia, and to adopt the architectural and decorative elements that were untouched by foreign influence. Historians often credit Viktor Vasnetsov with

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<sup>83</sup> Bowlt, *The Silver Age*, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

having one of the strongest visions for the success of the “Neo-Russian” style. In her biography of Vasnetsov, Nadezhda F. Shanina provides further insight into his search for the “Russian Style” when she translates the work of Lobanov’s *Viktor Vasnetsov v Moskve*:

We shall contribute to the treasury of world art when we concentrate wholly upon developing our native art, that is, when we can portray, with all the perfection and wholeness of which we are capable, the beauty, strength and significance of our native imagery: our Russian landscape and the men of Russia, our life today and our past, our dreams and our faith, and succeed in reflecting the eternal and universal through our national reality... Only the man who is sick or evil does not remember or value his childhood and youth. It is a pitiful nation which does not remember, value and love its history.<sup>86</sup>

Founded in 1870, the Abramtsevo colony provided inspiration for Russian Revival artists like Valentin Serov (1865-1911), Mikhail Vrubel, and Viktor Vasnetsov. The colony featured furniture, ceramic, and textile workshops, as well a museum dedicated to the folk arts. The furniture workshop, run primarily by Mamontov’s wife Elizaveta Grigorievna, produced objects inspired by Polenova’s collections of artifacts. Mamontov and his wife collaborated during the Nizhnii-Novgorod All-Russian Exhibition of 1896, for which Mamontov designed the Northern Pavilion, and Abramtsevo wares were financially successful at the exhibition.<sup>87</sup> Although not as short-lived as Arts and Crafts entrepreneur Charles Robert Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft at Chipping Campden in England, the Abramtsevo Colony lasted only until the first decade of the twentieth century. The workshop became gradually less successful as it transitioned to a more

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<sup>86</sup> Nadezhda F. Shanina, *Viktor Vasnetsov* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1979), 44.

<sup>87</sup> Bowlt, *The Silver Age*, 36.

industrialized form of production in 1902, and by Mamontova's death in 1908, the experiment was in its final throes. Its role in the development of the Russian Folklore Revival style, however, was significant, and both Makovsky and Vasnetsov owed much of their individual artistic perspectives to the colony.

### ***The Russian Bride's Attire***

Despite his influence as an important member of the *Peredvizhniki*, Konstantin Makovsky (1839-1915) remains virtually unknown to historians outside of Russia. Fortunately, some of his best-known paintings found their way into American collections before the Russian Revolution, and are represented at institutions such as the Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. An issue of *The Mentor* from 1917 notes that, "...two of the most familiar and popular pictures in the art shops of the country are Russian. And both of them are by the same artist – Konstantin Makovsky."<sup>88</sup>

Makovsky's interest in storytelling stemmed from more than the *Peredvizhniki* fascination with Russian folk tradition. Rather than painting dramatic historical scenes like Repin or folk tales like Vasnetsov, Makovsky depicted subtle interpretations of seventeenth-century Russian traditions. Perhaps his lack of popularity stems from the understated nature of his work; on the surface, his paintings are luxurious representations of the Russian Renaissance, but deeper exploration reveals his talented use of light to convey meaning and his delicately critical approach to the Russian past. One of his most

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<sup>88</sup> William A. Coffin, "Russian Art," *The Mentor* 143 (November 15, 1917), 12.

popular paintings in an American collection hangs in the California Palace of the Legion of Honor and exemplifies this subtlety. Acquired in 1926 at the bequest of M. H. de Young, *The Russian Bride's Attire* (Figure 18) showcases Makovsky's interest in the Russian Folklore Revival style.



Figure 18: Konstantin Makovsky, *The Russian Bride's Attire*, 1889. Oil on canvas. San Francisco: California Palace of the Legion of Honor.

Makovsky painted the bride, dressed in a white silk embroidered gown and surrounded by her retinue. The bride looks thoughtfully towards another young woman,



perhaps for reassurance. Her surroundings indicate that the bride is from a Boyar family; the large, well-appointed room features carved wood panels and painted motifs. The chairs are carved and painted in the “Old Russian” style, and a small enameled casket, overflowing with pearls, sits on the dressing table. Her relatives and friends wear *kokoshniki* decorated with embroidery, gold, and pearls, and a bridal headdress cascades over the edge of the table. The matriarchal woman combing the bride’s hair is likely the matchmaker who represented the bride in the customary arrangement process. In the background, a family member forbids entry to a man carrying a casket – perhaps a gift for the bride from the groom’s family.

The painting presents an ancient tradition; Russian marriages from the twelfth century onward were more than a mere economic transaction between two families. Two *Svakhas*, or Matchmakers, would oversee the entire courtship and ceremony. The ceremony ended with the bride’s Matchmaker ritually combing the bride’s long braid, since “In Muscovite Russia, only maidens wore their hair loose; combing the bride’s (and groom’s) hair symbolized their new status as an adult, married pair.”<sup>89</sup> Makovsky, who must have been familiar with traditional Russian wedding customs, focused on the transitional nature of this moment.

Although Makovsky presented a seemingly vibrant illustration of the opulent Russian past, he likely intended this painting to be far from a mere historical reference. Makovsky bathed the bride and the women around her in white light, alluding to the purity and innocence of her childhood. The light from the window, however, is the

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<sup>89</sup> Carolyn Pouncy, *The “Domostroi”: rules for Russian households in the time of Ivan the Terrible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 221.

fading light of late afternoon; the bride will soon abandon the comfort of her childhood for the house of her future in-laws. Behind the bride, the man is bathed in shadow, and the darkness behind him likely represents her unknown future at the hands of a husband she has met only in brief interludes. Makovsky positioned the matchmaker between the bride and the doorway, creating a visual metaphor for the role that the matchmaker plays in this crucial transition. The artist's use of soft pinks, golds, and pale blues to highlight the figures in the painting shows an evident nod to Impressionism; only his crisp rendering of the rug and furniture visually mimic the true "Old Russian" style.

Rückert's treatment of the subject matter shows a decidedly more decorative approach. The artist clearly borrowed the composition from Makovsky; the figures are identically positioned and similarly clad. The enamel miniature eliminates the right-hand portion of the composition beyond the matchmaker, erasing the man in the doorway. Unlike Makovsky's original, the miniature features even lighting – the enamel painter rendered the tall wooden dresser in the far left of the composition with equal intensity to the figures in the foreground. The interplay between the glowing impressionistic figures is gone; the scene has a flat, precise uniformity. Although the miniature depicts a recognizable (and consequently marketable) motif, most of the original artist's commentary on the tribulations of tradition and history disappears.

The workshop achieved the enamel's visual consistency in color and light through an acid wash process that created a matte finish on the surface. Compared to the shiny black, turquoise, and gold background decoration, *The Russian Bride's Attire* seems almost to recede into the silver, as if flanked by a metaphorical frame of Western

influence.

### ***Knight at the Crossroads***

If the work of Konstantin Makovsky remains little known outside of Russia, art historians generally regard Viktor Vasnetsov as one of the most prolific and influential artists in the history of Russian art. A major figure in the Russian Folklore Revival movement, Vasnetsov designed the church at Abramtsevo, the Tretyakov Gallery, and the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Moscow. His tenure in Paris encouraged Vasnetsov to paint fairy tale subjects, shifting his work from icon and genre painting. In a 1878 letter to fellow painter Ivan Kramskoi, Vasnetsov described a painting of a *Vityas*, or Russian warrior, that he refused to sell so that he could continue his exploration of the subject matter.<sup>90</sup> By the time he painted *Knight at the Crossroads* (also alternatively referred to as *Warrior at the Crossroads*) in 1878, Vasnetsov had become one of the key artists working in the “Neo-Russian” style.

*Knight at the Crossroads* (Figure 19) depicts a *Bogatyr*, or medieval Russian knight, looking at a large, tomb-like stone marker. Vasnetsov painted the *Bogatyr* on a desolate plain, where the gently rolling hills are highlighted with green and gold sprouts of grass. The knight sits astride a powerful white horse, whose long mane and tail blow softly in the wind. To the right of the marker, human and horse skulls lie amidst a scattering of bones. Two crows perch on top of a lichen-covered rock, and a third flies at

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<sup>90</sup> Viktor Vasnetsov, letter to I.N. Kramskoi, September 18, 1878. Translated by the author from Yaroslavtseva, N.A. *Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov: Pis'ma, dnevnik, vospominanii, suzhdenii sovremennikov*. Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1987.

away at the knight's approach. A path to the left of the knight travels narrowly between several large stones, snaking into a disappearing expanse.



Figure 19: Viktor Vasnetsov, *Knight at the Crossroads*, 1878. Oil on canvas. Kiev: The Museum of Russian Art.

Vasnetsov was well-versed in the art of symbolism, and his ancient knight presents a powerful visual metaphor. Like their British Pre-Raphaelite counterparts who revived tales of medieval knights and King Arthur, Russian artists turned to their own epic heroes for visual inspiration. Russian epic poetry dates back to the Kievan Rus' with stories of Ilya Muromets, Alyosha Popovich, and Dobrynya Nikitich. Although Vasnetsov never specified that his knight was one of the three major epic heroes, there are strong indications that the artist depicted Nikitich here.

As with other pre-Christian cultures, Russian folk tales are often based on a combination of pagan beliefs and later Christian additions. Therefore, the three major times of a twenty-four-hour period – day, evening, and night – were often depicted as three knights: the first on a white horse representing dawn, the second on a red horse representing day, and the third on a black horse representing night.<sup>91</sup> The iconic portrayal of these three riders, titled *Bogatyrs*, is actually Viktor Vasnetsov's most well-known painting (Figure 20). Art historians universally accept that the painting simultaneously depicts the riders of Russian legend, as well as the three most important epic heroes: Dobrynya Nikitich, Ilya Muromets, and Alyosha Popovich. Here, Nikitich is the left-most Knight, drawing his sword. For aesthetic reasons, Vasnetsov painted each of the knights with a different weapon – Nikitich with a sword, Muromets with a spear, and Popovich with a bow – even though any *Bogatyr* would have been in the possession of all three. Although Vasnetsov painted this work twenty years after *Knight at the Crossroads*, he used a similar visual vocabulary in both pieces.

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<sup>91</sup> The best known contemporary depiction of the three riders came from Alexander Afanasyev's *Vasilisa Prekrasnaya*, published in 1899 and illustrated by Ivan Bilibin.



Figure 20: Viktor Vasnetsov, *Bogatyrs*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Moscow: The Tretyakov Gallery.

Vasnetsov's artistic decisions were informed from Polenova's collections of Russian folk tales, and consequently reflected subtle color and symbol decisions that further the interpretation of his work. *An Anthology of Russian folk epics* tells the story of Dobrynya Nikitich, who killed the dragon *Zmey Gorynych* and spent three days stuck in the dragon's blood, until a heavenly voice instructed him to stick his spear into the ground and recite a spell.<sup>92</sup> In *Knight at the Crossroads*, he holds a red spear, likely a metaphor for the dragon's blood. Like his facsimile twenty years later, the Knight sits astride a white horse, which Vasnetsov may have chosen because of its relationship with

<sup>92</sup> James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova, *An Anthology of Russian folk epics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 82.

dawn, and therefore the earliest light of the sun.

In as much as the rider might depict a particular epic figure, he may also be a representation of human decision. The knight in the painting is tired – his spear droops, his horse bows its head in exhaustion, and the knight's posture reflects the challenges of his journey. Although death is inevitable, the unknown may still be worse, and the Knight needs to make a choice. He represents the commitments faced by every individual; the need for responsibility amidst the obstacles of life.

Rückert used this painting on many of his objects; there are similar boxes at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and at the Walters Museum of Art. In this miniature, Rückert places more emphasis on the sunset than Vasnetsov did, integrating the vivid red-orange with the lustre decoration around the miniature. To accommodate his unique glaze technique to the left of the painting, Rückert had to paint over parts of the path. Although problematic for the interpretation of the painting, the artisan's seamless integration of the colors with the background motif form an exceptional decorative arts object. Unlike the Makovsky miniature, which had been treated with acid, the craftsman left this enamel painting in its original polished state. This lends a vibrancy to the work that better combines the background decoration with the enamel medallion.

## **Conclusion**

The natural disparity between Makovsky and Vasnetsov's original paintings and Rückert's enamel interpretations should not disregard the fact that these miniatures still form a vital connection between the source material and the Russian Folklore Revival.

As a comparatively small object, the enamel box was a portable artistic reference that a buyer could easily transport from place to place. Whether sold internationally or in Russia, its owner could proudly showcase his or her interest in avant-garde art without needing to acquire the original painting, and the boxes' utility naturally added to its appeal within the domestic setting. Odom infers that Rückert's wares were sold primarily to the Russian *nouveau riche*, a class that had only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>93</sup>

Here, the question of subject matter becomes an important one. Why did Rückert's enamel paintings deviate from the enamel paintings made simultaneously at other firms? Although Odom argues that Rückert's wares were sold primarily within Russia, the extensive collections of Rückert's work in American museums such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Walters Art Museum, and Hillwood Museum testify otherwise. In fact, since many of these objects were made for Fabergé (as evidenced by the frequent juxtaposition of Fabergé and Rückert's marks), these objects entered private collections around the world. Odom ends her essay speculatively:

It is interesting to note those artists whose paintings were not chosen by Rückert: Ilia Repin, for example, whose historical paintings, which might have been of interest have a political edge to them, although Riabushkin's scenes of old Moscow potentially fit the requirements, but they also are not found. Why did Rückert choose Viktor Vasnetsov, but not his brother, Apollinari, who painted historical views of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Moscow?<sup>94</sup>

Although Odom never answered her own question, it is likely Rückert's choices had as much to do with his intended audience as his personal artistic decisions. If we

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<sup>93</sup> Odom, *Russian Enamels*, 26.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



accept Odom's argument that Rückert primarily sold his work in Russia, then his selections may have simply been an attempt to attract as many customers as possible; painting politically-charged images would have undoubtedly been a poor business decision. What is more likely, however, is that Makovsky and Vasnetsov's painting better served the niche that Fabergé was looking to fill with his wares abroad. Fabergé's enamels are well known for his scenes of Russian architecture, royal portraits, and later Art Deco styling. For a Western market clamoring for authentic Russian enamels, Rückert's vibrant wares presented both an international flavor and an allusion to the Russian Folklore Revival. In short, his work encompassed the ideal ethnic kitsch.

## CONCLUSION

The second half of the nineteenth was a period of industrial and cultural growth in Imperial Russia that represented the nation's rise in global prominence. Emerging factories, social reform, and unparalleled production contributed to a newfound financial stability for the populace, and the bourgeoisie's growing interest in the arts supported workshops and artisan revivals. Unfortunately, this prosperity was short-lived; the Silver Age came to an abrupt end in 1917 with the advent of the Russian Revolution, and Western access to the Russian empire would remain carefully regulated until the last decade of the twentieth century.

The story is a familiar one: an underlying class struggle sparked the violence and restructuring of the world's largest nation, converting the Empire into a conglomerate of nations collectively known as the USSR. Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks eradicated the Royal Family and redistributed land among the proletariat to create one of the most extensive and long-lived Communist regimes in global history. State-run factories replaced capitalist economic ventures, simultaneously eliminating the middle class and the need for luxury products. This had an expected and profound impact on the economy: one 1915 sampling of Russian class distribution showed that over 25% of the

population belonged to the emerging bourgeoisie class;<sup>95</sup> at the time of the post-Soviet system collapse that number had been reduced to 5%,<sup>96</sup> with 40% of the population living below the poverty line in 1998.<sup>97</sup>

To pay for their costly Communist experiment, the government sold off Russia's treasures – Imperial regalia, gifts to the Church, and the nation's stores of precious gems and metals – to foreign diplomats and international envoys. In *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia*, Tim Tzouliadis describes how Hillwood's original owner, Marjorie Merriweather Post, acquired an extensive part of her collection of gold and Imperial artifacts through the Russian black market while married to diplomat Joseph E. Davies.<sup>98</sup> Hillwood remains one of several prominent American collections of Russian fine and decorative arts. Recognizing their technical mastery and artistic influence, American museums are presently reinvestigating their collections of Russia paraphernalia; both the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Frick have recently held major exhibitions on Fabergé and the Russian master goldsmiths. Curators have presented Rückert's work strictly through his collaboration with Fabergé, but the quality and innovative techniques in Rückert's pieces demand art historical reevaluation. More than any of his contemporaries, Rückert embraced the division in Russian historical

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<sup>95</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 248.

<sup>96</sup> Jason Bush, "Russia: How Long Can the Fun Last?" *Businessweek*, December 7, 2006. The 5% statistic was derived from the 8 million individuals in the middle class out of the 2000 census population of 146 million.

<sup>97</sup> Branco Milanovic, *Income, Inequality, and Poverty During the Transition from Planned to Market Economy* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 1998), 186-189.

<sup>98</sup> Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2009), kindle edition.

influences and combined these variable motifs into work that exemplified the spirit of the nation.

Poignantly, Fedor Rückert died in 1917 following the outburst of the Revolution, and although his son Fedor and daughter Sophia continued to work in enamels during the early Soviet era, the workshop's production was limited to enamel badges for the Ossoviakhim workshops.<sup>99</sup> Eventually, the government auctioned off or melted down his exquisite silver objects to support the failing economic system. If his work was a metaphor for the tenuous relationship between aristocratic internationalism and peasant nationalism, then the Soviet destruction of his wares represented the systematic elimination of Russia's Imperial history. In other words, the Revolution eradicated an enterprise that had represented a bright artistic flame during Russia's artistic zeitgeist.

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<sup>99</sup> von Habsburg, *Fabergé*, 81.

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

Yana Myaskovskaya was born in Moscow, Russia in 1987, and graduated with highest honors from Wheeling High School in Illinois. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts from Northwestern University in 2009, where she majored in Art Theory and Practice and Animate Arts, she spent a sabbatical year toying with computers at Apple, Inc. Realizing her passion for art history and eager to continue her historical education, Yana enrolled in the Smithsonian Institution – George Mason University program to pursue a Master’s degree in the History of the Decorative Arts. To further enrich her understanding of curatorial and research practices, she researched collections of American ceramics for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. During her second year in the program, Yana also worked as a Curatorial Fellow at the Heurich House Museum and as a Museum Assistant at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.