

Unscrambled Eggs

In an important reinterpretation, jewellery expert **Geoffrey Munn** claims the true inspiration for some of Faberge's remarkable **Imperial Easter Eggs** came from folklore, Christian lore and even throwaway greetings cards



TSAR NICHOLAS II CELEBRATED his last Easter less than 100 years ago in 1918. However in the space of a lifetime it seems that the world has shifted on its axis; what has been gained in technology has been lost in religious faith and liturgical traditions.

In order to estimate the gulf between our immediate predecessors and ourselves it is necessary to recall a society without television and radio, and mostly without the telephone and electric light. Entertainments were limited to banquets, balls, theatres, and country sports but the church, with its annual festivals, remained the focus of everyday life for everyone. This was a life illuminated not by the glow of the computer screen but by hobbies, books, hand-written letters and greetings cards. For many people there was much more available time, and to fill it a number of covert means of communication, based on historical precedent were revived and elaborated. These included the language of flowers and the lore of the lapidary.

By the early 1900s so many booklets had been published devoted to the meaning of

flowers that it is pointless to single out any one of them here. Understandably the focus was narrower for those that classified the meaning of precious stones and so it is worth mentioning at least one or two. In 1907 George Bratley published *The Power of Gems and Charms* and in 1913 Frederick Kunz, vice president of Tiffany, tried to have the last word on an ancient tradition in his book *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*. More often than not

the lore of the lapidary paralleled the amatory meaning of flowers; for example the forget-me-not echoes the turquoise in standing for true love and the rose mirrors the ruby in signifying the pleasure and pain of love, even the blood of Christ.

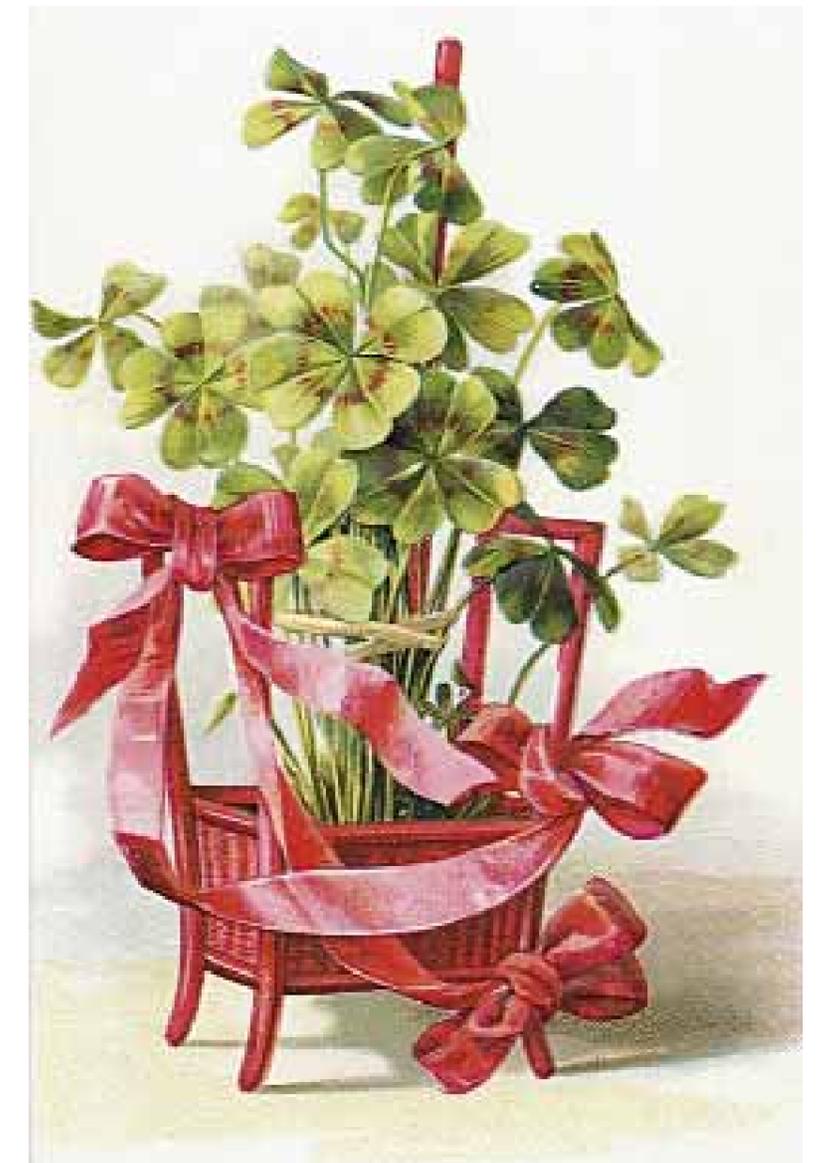
After the guns of two World Wars finally fell silent it was not only capital cities that had been leveled but also society and many of its customs. Later modern electronic advances,



Opposite: Fig. 1 The Imperial Easter Egg of 1902 known as the Clover Egg in the form of four-leaf clover rendered in pique-à-jour enamel, diamonds and calibre rubies. Kremlin Armoury Museum, Moscow.

Above: Fig. 2 An undated design for a jewel in the form of a four-leaf clover set with diamonds. Each leaf has an open aperture, probably for miniatures or photographs. From the Holström Archive. Wartski, London

Right: Fig 3 An Easter card in the form of four-leaf clover tied with a red ribbon, c. 1900. Private Collection.

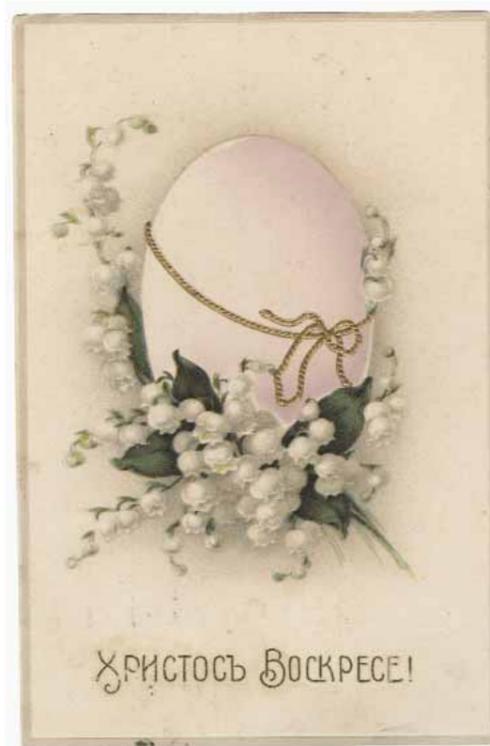


including television and radio, completely obscured the artificial systems described above. Consequently it is necessary to examine them afresh before the meaning of some of Fabergé's work is fully understood.

At the close of the 19th century the allusions referred to above were a godsend to the international jewellery trade and were enthusiastically exploited. In New York it was Tiffany that was their greatest exponent but Cartier and Boucheron in Paris, Garrard, Hancocks and Giuliano in London and Bolin and Fabergé in Russia were also the keenest possible advocates. Indeed the Fabergé record books from the Holmström workshop abound with related material (fig 1). However it was not only in Fabergé's jewellery but in the famous eggs and botanical studies that the covert meaning of flowers and gemstones can be decoded.

Setting aside the meaning the Clover Egg for a moment let us consider the unusual way in which it is made. The enameling techniques used to construct the openwork shell of the Egg were virtually unprecedented at Fabergé and take the form of a delicate tracery of overlapping trefoils in plique-à-jour enamel interspersed with others entirely set with diamonds. Plique-à-jour, sometimes known as transparent enamel is sometimes said to have been invented in the late nineteenth century but in fact a simple form of it was made in eighth century France. Undoubtedly this technically demanding technique gained momentum in Japan in the nineteenth century where it had evolved as an extension of cloisonné enamel. However in Paris Fabergé's contemporaries took the process to new heights of expertise and inspiration. At the L'Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, where Carl Fabergé was a member of the jury, plique-à-jour enamel was shown by a number of jewellers including Lalique and Fouquet and was greatly admired.

With the challenge of inventing an original and witty design for the Easter egg intended for 1902 it is likely that the art nouveau jewellery at the exposition had fertilized Fabergé's concept of an egg arranged as a posy of clover, laced together with a meandering ribbon of blood-red calibre rubies. Like the majority of Imperial Easter Eggs it originally contained a surprise; in this case a quatrefoil jewel with apertures for miniatures, presumably likenesses of the Grand Duchesses, (fig 5). An undated design of a jewel of this form



survives in the Homström archives and is shown in fig 2.

To scholars of the Imperial Easter Eggs it is not only the unique application of plique-à-jour enamel that makes the egg of 1902 such an enigmatic object but also its meaning; a meaning that goes well beyond the simply decorative.

Owing to its heart-shaped leaves all varieties of clover have associations with luck and love and appear in aspects of decorative art as disparate as jewellery and raffle tickets. Consequently it has been suggested in *The Fabergé Imperial Easter Eggs* (Christie's 1997) that the choice of clover was an allusion to Tsar Nicholas's 'luck in love' with his bride, the mother of his four daughters. In fact the Tsar's luck had not extended to a long awaited male heir and such a specific reference would certainly be tempting fate and can be challenged. Despite its rich decoration this remarkable object is first and foremost an

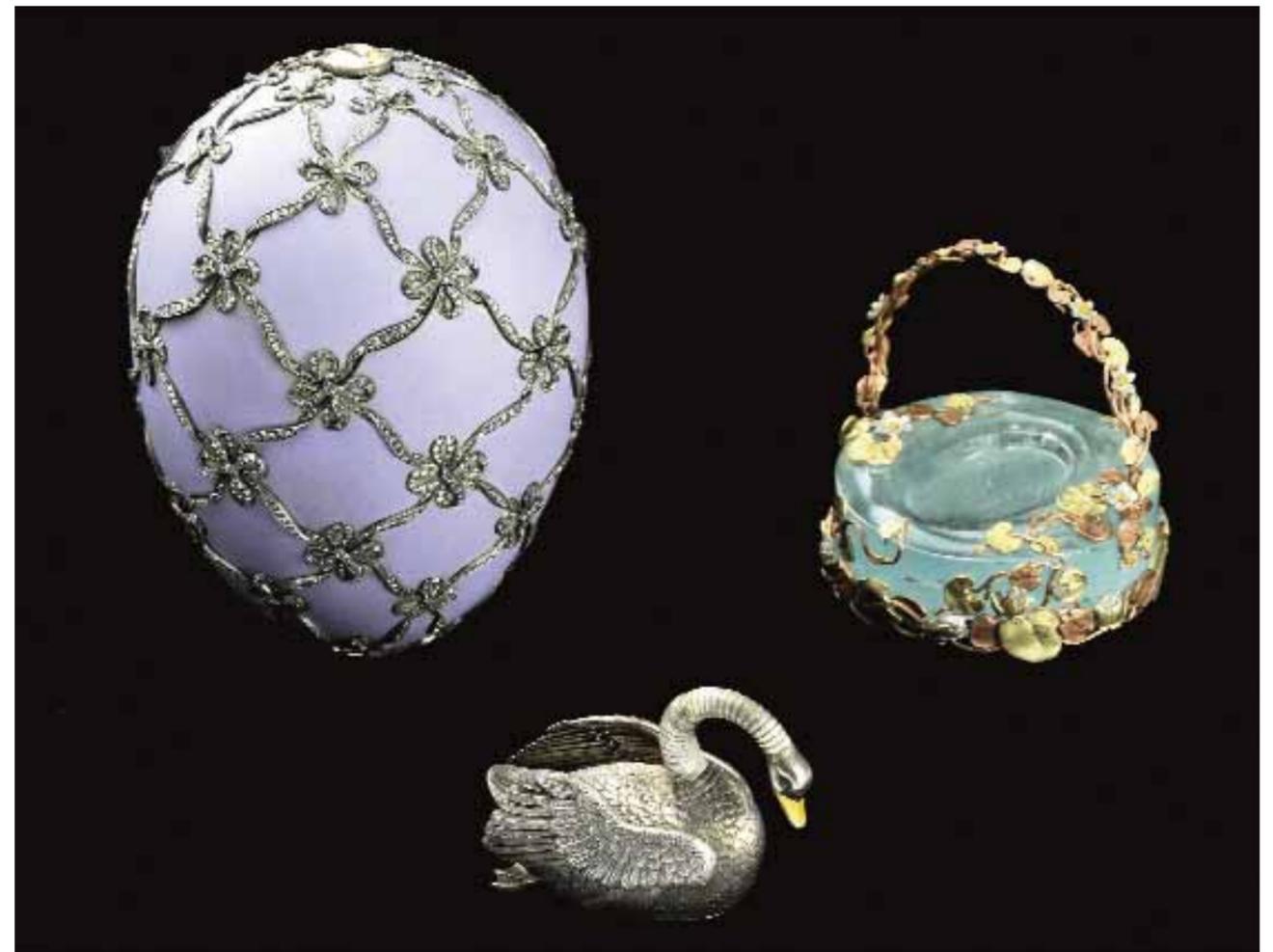
Easter egg and the symbolism of the clover; indeed the blood-red rubies, is likely to run much deeper than the Victorian convention of Luck in Love into the realm Christian mythology.

Common clover has just three heart-shaped leaves and as a trefoil it is an ancient emblem of The Trinity. This alone might have been perfectly suited to the design of an Easter egg but one species, called Calvary Clover (*Medicago echinus*) has a special relationship with the crucifixion since it grew beneath the cross is said to have been streaked with Christ's blood. Owing to its close association with the Passion, convent gardeners believed that clovers would never germinate unless planted on Good Friday; a superstition endorsed by the seedpod of Calvary Clover which, unfurled, resembles the crown of thorns (note 3).

The folklore of all the clovers is very ancient and some herbalists believed that this modest little plant sprang up along the path of Pontius Pilate when he went to Calvary to see that the sign 'Jesus of Nazareth,

Above: Fig 4 A Russian Easter card decorated with a pink egg cradled in a bouquet of lilies of the valley. It reads *Christos Voskresel!* (*Christ is Risen!*) in Cyrillic characters, c. 1890. Author's collection

Left: Fig 5 The Imperial Easter Egg of 1898 known as the Lilies of the Valley Egg. Gold, pink enamel, pearls and diamonds. The Link of Times Foundation



King of the Jews' was properly affixed to the top of the cross. As early as the 4th century Julian the Apostate (332-363) wrote that each of the leaves of the clover had, in his time, three white crosses and that the larger central crosses was always the last to fade (note 1).

In the second half of the 19th century a good deal of the visual vocabulary of Easter was broadcast in printed ephemera.

Indeed the Tsarina's grandfather Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria brought the concept of greetings cards from Germany to the United Kingdom in the 1840s. Consequently Easter cards became popular throughout the royal houses of Europe as a vehicle for the proliferation of autographs. Unsurprisingly the Empress Alexandra was an enthusiast and sometimes painted them herself; when royal duties encroached on her time she sent commercially available reproductions instead.

One card in particular, printed in Germany in about 1900, seems to have a particular resonance with the Clover Egg (fig 1). Indeed there is strong visual



evidence that Easter cards influenced not Fabergé but also his Imperial clientele in the making of not just the Clover Egg but several other Imperial Easter Eggs.

Lilies of the valley, linked with the seasonal sense of rebirth and renewal are always an emblem of the return to happiness. On several 19th-century Russian Easter cards the delicate, highly scented flowers appear against a pink egg that immediately evokes Fabergé's famous Lily of the Valley Egg where a profusion of pearls, attributes of Venus, endorse their covert message of love revived (fig 5).

In the language of flowers the pansy (*pensee* in French) means 'think of the

Fig 6 The Imperial Easter Egg of 1906 known as the Swan Egg. Coloured gold, enamel silver and diamonds. Foundation Eduard & Maurice Sandoz (FEMS), Pully, Switzerland. Photograph by Reno Sterchi

Fig 7 An Easter card in the form of a pair of swans on a lake in an egg-shaped cartouche framed with lilac-coloured flowers and matching bow, c. 1900. Private collection



Fig 8 The Apple Blossom Egg made by Fabergé for Alexander Kelch in 1901. Siberian jade, coloured gold, enamel and foiled rose-cut diamonds, © Liechtenstein National Museum, photo Sven Beham



Fig 9 An Easter card in the form of a putto carrying an egg away from a spray of apple blossom. Printed in Germany, c.1900. Private collection

giver' and, flowering throughout the winter; it too is a favourite emblem for Easter greetings cards (fig 13). In jewellery design it usually appears with diamonds, for constancy, and then the message is extended to 'always think of the giver'. This is the unequivocal message of the Pansy Egg of 1899; a message endorsed by the heart-shaped frame housed within which is decorated with the lamps of love and garlands of roses for Venus (fig 12).

Another common device on Easter cards across Europe in the 19th century is the farmyard cart brimful of seasonal references. One in particular, loaded with a garlanded egg and drawn by angels, (fig 10) evokes what little we know of the missing Cherub Egg of 1888 (fig 11)

Like so much of Fabergé's work the full significance of the Swan Egg has yet to be realised. The romantic concept of the swan song heralding the death of the beautiful white bird originated in the 3rd century BC and has been continually reinterpreted. References appear in the writings of Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, Chaucer, Shakespeare and notably Tennyson in his poem of 1893: *The Dying Swan*.

Seven years earlier (Note 2) in 1886, the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns published *Le Carnaval des Animaux* in which the dying swan is an important part of the sequence. Deriving from it was a short ballet of the same title, choreographed in 1905 by Mikhail Fokine and performed by Anna Pavlova.

Fokine's *The Dying Swan* was first

performed on December 22, 1905 and that was just too late to have inspired Fabergé's Swan Egg, which was delivered only months later at Easter 1906; nonetheless it demonstrates a significant confluence of ideas that may well derive from the popularity Tennyson's poem of 1893.



Fig 10 An Easter card in the form of a garlanded Easter egg in a chariot pulled by amorini. A bouquet of lilies of the valley is seen to the left. Made in Germany, c.1885. Author's collection

It seems we must search elsewhere for aesthetic ancestry of this remarkable object. In Christian lore the swan, singing its dying breath, denotes Jesus's last cries to God from the cross and by extension the crucifixion, all martyrs and Christian resignation. These attributes perfectly suited to any Easter egg, even the most extravagant of those made by Fabergé (note 3). Although the mechanical concept of the Swan Egg has been given to the automaton by James Cox (c. 1723-1800) its aesthetic ancestry is likely to be composite. Enameled pale purple, the colour of religious devotion and set



Fig 11 A drawing by Anna Palmade of the missing Imperial Easter Egg of 1888 called the Chariot Egg. This is based on the only evidence of its appearance; an indistinct photograph taken in March 1902 © Anna Palmade



Fig 12 The Imperial Easter Egg of 1899. Nephrite, silver gilt, diamonds, and enamel. Private collection, USA



with diamonds, emblems of constancy, the Swan Egg may, in fact, have been partially inspired by a favourite form of Easter card such as the one illustrated here (fig 6).

Even the richly decorated Basket of Flowers Egg of 1901 and the Kelch Apple Blossom Egg (fig 8) of the same year seem to owe a good deal to a type humble Easter cards (figs 9 and 13).

Until now we have associated the majority of the Imperial Easter Eggs with the revived decorative schemes that characterise a good proportion of Fabergé's work. However some were clearly hatched from a more egalitarian tradition, now all but forgotten. It is an equally fascinating and contradictory concept that the humble Easter cards sent by emperor and commoner alike

Fig 13 An Easter card in the form of pansy flowers hatched from a green egg. It reads *Loving Easter Greetings*. Made by Tuck & Sons. English, c. 1900. Author's collection

have been transmuted, through Fabergé's alchemy, into some of the most opulent and improbable objects ever made by man.

Note 1: *The Folklore of Plants* Margaret Baker: 2005

Note 2 *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. 1959.

Note 3 *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, J.C.Cooper 1978

For more information on Fabergé's Imperial Easter Eggs see Anne Miek's website, www.mieks.com.

Geoffrey Munn is one of the experts of the BBC's Antiques Roadshow and the managing director of the London jewellers Wartski; his specialisation is 19th-century precious metalwork and Fabergé. He is the author of several books including *Tiaras a History of Splendour* and *Wartski the First One Hundred and Fifty Years both available at www.antiquecollectorsclub.com*.