

April 6th, 2013

# Collector's Mementos of Nicholas & Alexandra on the Block

by Jeanne Schinto



Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Skinner

Skinner's European furniture and decorative arts sale on April 6 featured Connecticut resident John Fletcher's collection of material from imperial Russia. From the age of 20, Fletcher, who was born in 1943, has collected items related to Czar Nicholas Romanov (Nicholas II), his wife, Alexandra, and their five children. Skinner department director Stuart Slavid said the more than 200 lots represent the entire Fletcher collection and that Fletcher has kept only one item, promising "to send it here once he's gone." Slavid added that Fletcher is "still very much alive but dying of cancer" and consigned the items—framed photographs, autographs, porcelain, religious icons, silver, military medals, and other mementos and decorative arts—because "he wanted to take care of his family with the proceeds."

Only coincidentally did the sale fall in the 400th anniversary year of the start of the Romanov empire in 1613 with the reign of Mikhail Romanov. That didn't matter to Fletcher, Slavid said. "In fact, it took him two years to agree to the sale. It was hard for him to part with the collection."

The top lot, going to an Internet bidder at \$15,990 (including buyer's premium), was a circa 1838 icon, depicting Our Lady of Kazan in gilded silver and enamel. The image is considered by many to be the holiest of all Russian Orthodox icons. The original was purportedly discovered in Kazan in 1579 by a little girl who was led to its location underground by the Virgin Mary. It was kept in a monastery there for centuries until it was stolen in 1904 by thieves, who apparently coveted its jewel-encrusted gold frame. The frame was recovered; as for the icon, there are several reputed originals extant.

A room bidder paid \$15,600 for a pair of gilded silver and enamel napkin rings made between 1908 and 1917 in Moscow by Fabergé. Scott Ruby, associate curator of Russian and Eastern European art at Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C., discussed the Fabergé mystique in a lecture to previewers on the night before the sale. He said, "We think of Fabergé as a great jeweler who created magnificent things, but he was instead a great workmaster who employed a crew of people." As for the famous Fabergé eggs, Ruby told his audience, it was Alexander III (1845-1894) who in 1885 asked Peter Carl Fabergé (1846-1920), son of the firm's founder, Gustav, to make him a jeweled egg to give his wife, Maria Fyodorovna, for Easter. The giving of a Fabergé egg thereafter became an Easter tradition in the imperial family. An approximate total of 50 eggs, always with a surprise inside, were made, some for Alexander III, others for Nicholas II. Forty-two of these imperial eggs survive. A couple of them are at Hillwood, once the home of Marjorie Merriweather Post, who amassed the most comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art outside Russia.

"In the public's mind the eggs have an allure," said Ruby. "They were sensationalized by the New York auction houses." It's a reference to the nine imperial eggs that were assembled by Malcolm Forbes and offered at auction at Sotheby's by heirs of Forbes in 2004. (They were bought before the auction began by Viktor Vekselberg, the Ukrainian-born Russian billionaire.) But Fabergé made thousands of eggs for sale to the public—so did other firms. At this sale, an Easter egg made in the 20th century by the Imperial Porcelain Factory sold for \$11,400 (est. \$1500/2000) to phone bidder 997. Six others from the late 19th or early 20th century sold for \$338 to \$3600.

A silver and enamel kovsh dating from 1896 to 1908 sold to a very active Internet bidder who bought dozens of items at the sale. Identified only as SK2023, he or she paid \$7995 (est. \$2000/4000) for the small drinking vessel or ladle that was made in Moscow by Maria Semenova, who accented its polychrome enamel with raised silver droplets. The lot included a fragment of lace decorated with an imperial family symbol, a double-headed eagle.

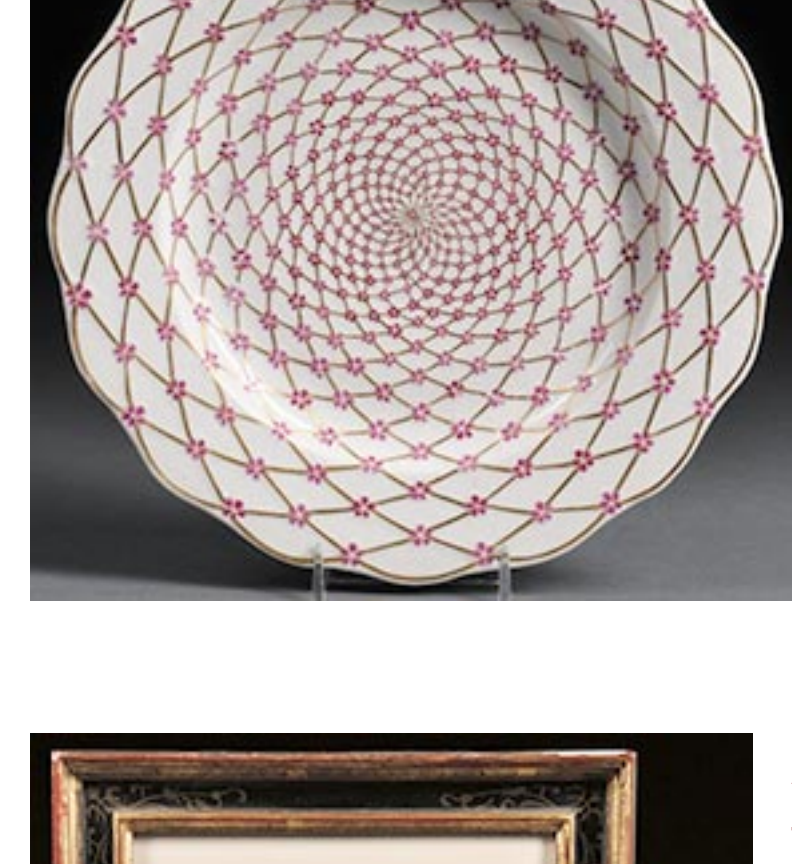
One purpose of Fletcher's collection, according to a Skinner statement, was to gather objects that "reflect the splendor and magnificence of Russia's cultural Golden and Silver ages." It was also "to show the achievements of Romanov Russia, and how the Romanovs counteracted Soviet propaganda against their family." This second purpose was best fulfilled by the photographs that Fletcher collected.

Most of those images document the splendor of the imperial family's personal lives, and these are the ones that the bidders preferred over any reminders of their tragic deaths at the hands of a Bolshevik firing squad on July 17, 1918. For example, a circa 1914 studio portrait of the two oldest Romanov daughters, Olga and Tatiana, sold to an Internet bidder for \$3198 (est. \$600/800), while six framed items relating to the murder made \$615 (est. \$1000/1500).

The sale as a whole, which offered approximately 700 lots of decorative arts and furniture from other consignors, was 93% sold for a total of \$1,572,219. (Presale estimates were \$827,300/1,237,450.) For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).



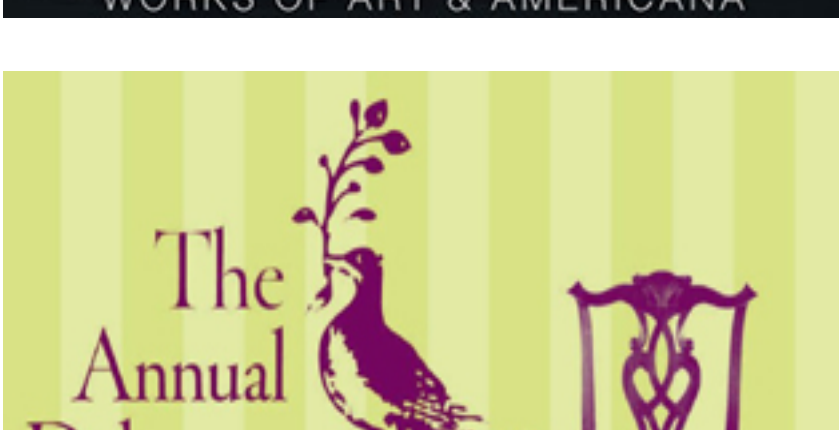
This pair of 1908-17 Fabergé gilded silver and enamel napkin rings sold to a room bidder for \$15,600 (est. \$6000/8000). Each is 1 3/8" wide. They were sold in their original box, which was monogrammed "CGM."



This 10" diameter Imperial Porcelain Factory plate, made in St. Petersburg in the early 19th-century period of Nicholas I, sold for \$5535 (est. \$600/800) to SK2023. It was cataloged as "after" the original from the service of Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1762), daughter of Peter the Great.



A white leather child's shoe, by tradition belonging to Czarevich Alexei Nikolaevich, sold to an absentee bidder for \$9600 (est. \$3000/5000) along with a framed real-photo postcard of Alexei wearing the shoe.



A 6½" x 8½" circa 1905 gelatin silver print of the Russian imperial family aboard their yacht *Standart* brought \$2640 (est. \$1000/1500).



A 1912 menu from the yacht made \$2160 (est. \$500/700). It was signed by dinner guests.



This 6 5/8" x 3 1/2" circa 1907 photogravure of Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna in a frame with her clipped signature sold for \$2520 (est. \$800/1200). She is wearing a diadem. The image is documentation of an imperial jewel that no longer exists, said Scott Ruby, a curator at Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens ([www.hillwoodmuseum.org](http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org)). "The diadem was broken up some time in the 1920's, to sell the jewels it contained," he explained. "It may have been auctioned in London in a big sale in 1927, but it is unclear as to what actually happened—a very sad loss of a beautiful object."



Photographs of Grand Duchess Irina Alexandrovna (1895-1970) and her husband, Felix Yusupov (1887-1967), along with Felix's signature, sold to an Internet bidder for \$3198 (est. \$300/500). Irina was the daughter of Xenia, sister of Nicholas II.



This drawing of Grigori Rasputin, the imperial family's resident "mystic," went for \$1353 (\$500/700) to SK2023. The image in polychrome pastels on gray paper (sight size: 19¼" x 13¼") was sold along with signed letter to Fletcher from Rasputin's daughter, Maria (1898-1977). Written in 1974 from Los Angeles, where she lived and worked as a writer, the letter said her latest book had not yet been published and that she would be glad to meet the collector.



This circa 1914 collodion print of the Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana Nikolaevna went to an Internet bidder for \$3198 (est. \$600/800). Embossed with the mark of the Boisson and Eggler workshop of St. Petersburg, it is 15¼" x 12 3/8".



Alexander III was officially coronated and anointed two years after his father's assassination in 1881. A phone bidder paid \$3000 (est. \$400/600) for this glass beaker and saucer made to commemorate that occasion in 1883. The 3½" tall beaker is decorated with the initials "AA" for Alexander Alexandrovich.

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