



## Eggs-travagant! The World's Most Expensive Easter Eggs

**When you celebrate Easter with your family, what gift can you expect? A chocolate egg? A fuzzy Easter bunny? A bit of pocket money? For some of the world's elite, Easter has always demanded that little bit extra: Gold enamelled miniatures of carriages and elephants; chocolate masterpieces of fantastical beasts; and eggs encrusted with diamonds and gold. These are just a few of the 'eggs-traordinary' gifts that have been exchanged to mark the death of Christ.**

Probably the most common and ancient gift for Easter is the Easter egg. In many cultures, this symbolises rebirth and regeneration (replicating Christ's empty tomb after his resurrection). In many eastern European countries – such as Russia, Ukraine and Poland – the tradition of giving decorated eggs is a long-held one. Real hen or duck eggs can be simply dipped in various colours of dye, wax-resist dyed or intricately painted with the thinnest of paint brushes.

While egg decorating has always been something of a folk-art form, one family took the practice to the next level.

Peter Carl Fabergé had come to the attention of the Russian imperial family in 1882, when he and his

brother won a medal at the Pan-Russian Exhibition for their beautifully worked reproductions of ancient jewellery from the Hermitage Museum. Fabergé's work was so impressive that Tsar Alexander III requested that some of his pieces be displayed in the museum's contemporary collection. It was only a matter of time before the tsar called on the Fabergé family with a more personal commission.

In 1885, Tsar Alexander III wanted an Easter gift for his wife, the tsarina. He commissioned Carl Fabergé to produce something beautiful and Fabergé delivered. The final piece (simply called 'Hen' in Fabergé listings) was a hen's egg like no other. The outer shell was made of solid gold but covered in opaque white enamel to give the appearance of a real egg. When the egg was opened along its central hinge, it revealed a golden yolk which in turn opened to reveal the 'surprise', a golden chicken with ruby eyes. Within the hen were two further 'surprises', a gold imperial crown and a small ruby pendant (these last two surprises are now missing). The tsar and tsarina were entranced and quickly made Fabergé 'Goldsmith by special appointment of the Imperial Crown'. This gift was the first of 50 jewelled Easter eggs made for the royal Romanov family by the Fabergé workshop.

The fabulous Easter egg designs were to continue, one per year, until Alexander's death in 1894. The tsar wanted the eggs to be a surprise for himself as well, so he left the design completely to Fabergé. He only stipulated that each be unique and contain a 'surprise' of some description. On the death of the tsar,





his son, Nicholas II, began to commission eggs for both his mother and his own wife. From 1894 until 1917 (apart from a two-year gap during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-5), Fabergé produced two eggs per year for the royal family, as well as being commissioned to complete similar pieces for other wealthy patrons around the world.

The eggs are exquisite. Some include painted miniatures of the royal family; one includes a miniature royal coach and another a working clockwork train with rock crystal windows (the Trans-Siberian Railway).

Some people appreciated their monetary significance more than their artistic value, however. When the communists took over Russia in the revolutions of 1917,

the days of imperial Russia were at an end. By the close of 1917, the royal family who had commissioned the works had been executed, thousands of wealthy and titled Russians had fled the country and the Bolsheviks had taken over Russia. In 1918, Lenin (the Bolshevik leader) nationalised the Fabergé company, along with oil and gas reserves but, rather than work under the new regime, the Fabergé family fled to Switzerland. Carl Fabergé never recovered from the events of the revolution. He died in 1920; his family believed it was from a broken heart. The palaces of the tsars were ransacked and their treasures sent to the Kremlin Armoury. In 1927, as part of the 'Treasures for Tractors' incentive, the leader of the communists, Joseph Stalin, sold off many of the eggs to provide foreign currency for the dwindling communist coffers.

### Record Breaking Chocolate Eggs!

The chocolate Easter egg is a common treat in many countries, but how would you make this a super special treat if you were super rich?

There are two chocolate egg creations that stand out as being truly excessive. In March 2012, a chocolate egg made the Guinness Book of Records for being the most expensive chocolate egg (non-jewelled) to be sold at auction. The 'eggstravaganza' was created from Amedei chocolate and edible gold leaf, was 107cm tall and weighed over 50kg. It was decorated with 12 smaller eggs, white flowers and 20 mini chocolate bars and took three days to make. It sold for a whopping £7000! That's a lot of Easter egg.

Another contender for world's most extravagant chocolate gift has to be the amazing creations of Choccywoccydoodah of Brighton, England. Their trio of chocolate eggs, featuring unicorns or dragons (your choice), show three stages in the hatching of the fabled animals and weigh an amazing 100kg in all. The creative director of Choccywoccydoodah said that she loved the original Fabergé eggs for their pure indulgence and wanted to create something in a similarly ridiculous vein. If you want your own piece of these crazy concoctions though, you'll have to pay £25,000 for the privilege.

While the Fabergé eggs were really a creation of a bygone era, new jewellers have attempted to revitalise the interest in the jewelled egg in the 20th and 21st century. In 1990, Paul Kuchinsky was commissioned by the Argyle Diamond Company of Perth, Australia to create an objet d'art to showcase their diamonds. He took the imperial eggs of the Romanov family as his inspiration and created a 60cm tall egg made of 18 carat gold sheets, inlaid with 24,000 pink diamonds. Six master craftsmen worked for 10 months on the item, which took 7,000 hours to create. The finished piece is worth in the region of \$11.5 million and features a 'surprise', just as the original Fabergé eggs did. The 'surprise' in this piece is a rotating miniature library and portrait gallery of five portrait frames. A complicated clockwork mechanism makes the frames rotate within the egg. Fittingly it is called the 'Argyle Library Egg'.

Another egg with almost as much 'bling' is the 'Mirage' egg. This modern wonder has been compared to a Damien Hirst skull, because of its diamond encrusted exterior, which contains over 1,000 diamonds of various sizes and cuts. The diamond covered outer shell opens to reveal an enamelled globe, which in turn opens to reveal a rock crystal dove, with a gold beak and gems for eyes, sitting on a golden olive branch. The whole piece is engraved with the words for 'World Peace' in several languages. It is estimated that the egg (presently in a private collection) is worth upwards of £5 million. Not a bad thing to find in your basket on Easter Sunday!

### The World's Most Amazing Egg Hunt!

Fancy a most fabulous Easter egg hunt? With their dark history of revolutions and uprisings and being sold off to the highest bidder, the Fabergé eggs were bound to have a precarious place in the world. Of the 50 eggs known to have been created for the Romanov family, the whereabouts of only 43 are known today. Many of the known eggs are still missing their 'surprises'. The rest are recorded as lost. But are they?

Around the world, a small group of impassioned enthusiasts and treasure hunters are in search of the smallest clues to the whereabouts of the lost eggs. One, Geza von Hapsburg, has been on the hunt for 40 years, visiting the most unlikely garage sales and antique centres in search of the great prize.

The search is made all the more difficult by the fact that no design information or photographs

survive of some of the eggs. No-one knows what they are looking for. Vincent Palmade and his wife (both self-styled amateurs) spend about 10 hours a week researching and perusing pictures and auction catalogues in the hope of finding images of the lost eggs. Their hours of research sometimes pay dividends. In 2011, they found an image and description of the 1887 imperial egg and shared their findings with a Fabergé symposium. A Fabergé expert at Wartski, a London jeweller's, published the image in The Telegraph, hoping that someone, anyone might recognise it. The move paid off when, in 2014, a scrap metal merchant from the American mid-west, who had been about to melt the item down for its scrap gold content, saw the image and got in touch. The egg (a solid gold piece containing a working clock) has since sold to a private collector for a multi-million-dollar sum!