

Russian Imperial Porcelain in the Winter palace during the reign of Nicholas I.

E.S. Khmel'nitskaya

From its inception in 1744 the Imperial Porcelain factory played a fundamental role in Russian decorative art. Empress Elizabeth, the daughter of Peter the Great, fulfilled one of her father's dreams when she founded the Imperial porcelain factory in St. Petersburg. When the factory was re-organised by Catherine II production increased and quality improved. However, production reached its climax during the reign of Nicholas I and maintained an exceptionally high level of quality. Nicholas was a devoted patron of the Imperial porcelain factory and took the arts more seriously than any other Russian ruler except Catherine II. During this period of outstanding artistic achievement, the factory produced more porcelain than at any other period before or since. The range of wares was extraordinary, from tablewares to vases, Easter eggs, military plates, porcelain plaques, mirror frames, clock cases, and 'one-of-a-kind' decorations. Under Nicholas I the quality of production was improved when imported Limoges clay began to be added to the paste. This period saw the invention of a special method of gilding porcelain. The gilded pieces that have come down from Nicholas I's reign are recognised by their superb appearance, fine polish and the resilience of gilding. Platinum was also used in ornamental painting.



*Figure 1, Vase with depiction of the copy of Van Dyck's painting
Children with the bird. 1848
Painter P. Nesterov
65 x 54.5 cm*



The role of Nicholas I as a patron of the arts deserves greater recognition. Despite his reputation as a tyrannical ruler, he stands out as the last real leader of fashion amongst the Russian rulers and as a major patron of the decorative arts. Nicholas I has been harshly judged for putting down the Decembrist uprising in 1825 and for ruthlessly punishing its leaders, men from prominent Russian families who had hoped to create a constitutional government. The French Revolution and the wars that followed shook the enthusiasm of many Russians for Western ways and led to an anti-Western reaction among the elite. At that time Nicholas I did a lot to revive the traditional national style, although he carefully followed mainstream western art, which remained the main influence for Russians. The Emperor was anxious to establish order and bring everything under control including the choice of the models pro-

Figure 3, View of the living room in the Winter palace (with vase decorated with hunting scenes on the back). 32.2 x 44.4 cm

Figure 2, Vase with depiction of the copy of the P. Potter's painting *Punishment of the hunter*. 1830. V.A. Stoletov. 129 x 44 cm



Figure 4, Vase with malachite background. 1830
72 x 51. cm



duced at the court factories - and the porcelain factory. They were strictly determined by the tastes and wishes of the factories' owners and regulated by the multilayered procedure of design and product approval.

In the middle of the 19th century the Russian Imperial Porcelain Factory produced a remarkable number of vases. These impressive vases, which supplemented the Winter palace picture gallery with their superb copies of famous paintings, were the acme of the art of porcelain making at the time of Nicholas I. (Fig. 1) They were individually made as annual presents for the Emperor and were used not only to decorate the many palaces, mansions, and pavilions that were being constructed in the still relatively new city of St. Petersburg, but they were also ideally suited as grand presentation gifts to both foreigners and Russians. They were always a part of the dowries of Nicholas' daughters¹. In the 1860's these vases were increasingly sent to international exhibitions to show off the technical and artistic abilities of the factory.

During this period vases began to be decorated with copies of old master paintings and popular contemporary paintings, both Russian and European. (Figs. 2, 3) Copying paintings onto the surface of a plate or vase began at Sèvres and flourished in Berlin and St. Petersburg. Nowhere else in Europe, however, were so many paintings copied on vases or for so long as in Russia². The factory artists increasingly used the central section of the vase as an easel for reproducing favourite paintings. Russian vases, with their paintings fully framed in tooled gold, took on the aspect of a small-scale moveable picture gallery.

Copying paintings tended to stifle creativity as factory artists developed into professional copyists. In this role they were superb, achieving remarkable precision when their painting on porcelain is compared to the original. The artists were gifted at learning how to adjust paintings to the curved surface of the vase, avoiding distortion. Painters knew how to convey the interplay of light, colour and form and imitate the texture of bronze and malachite. (Fig. 4)

The artists copied all types of paintings without discrimination - old masters like Gerard Dou, Van Dyck and others, works by popular artists such as Alexander Calame and also by Russian artists³. Paintings were sometimes brought to the fac-

tory for copying and sometimes the artist worked in a special room in the Hermitage museum. Many of these original paintings were sold or sent to provincial collections either in the 19th century or in the 1920s and 1930s making it difficult to identify those depicted on the vases. Ludmila Nikiforova, a former curator of Russian porcelain in the Hermitage museum, has estimated from archival material that copying a painting onto a vase took from two to six months depending on the complexity of the composition and how much the artist had to change the proportions of the painting to fit the vase⁴.

By the end of the 1860s the copying of old master paintings on porcelain had ceased. It became clear to the factory owners that Emperor Alexander II and Empress Maria Alexandrovna were no longer interested in this style of vase. Despite the overuse of European paintings on vases during the reign of Nicholas I, Russian vase production is still remarkable and without equal in the rest of Europe. Today these vases still have



Figure 6, Biscuit flower bouquet. 1850
P. U. Ivanov
101 x 79 cm



Figure 7, Coronation service of Nicholas I. 1826

the power to impress with their technical excellence and fine painting.

Combined with a variety of other materials, porcelain was used in the manufacture of standard lamps, furniture, plaques, mirrors and doors. (Fig. 5) The standard lamps and chandeliers to be found in the Winter Palace and other Imperial palaces demonstrate highly sophisticated combinations of bronze, crystal and porcelain. The famous architects G. Bosset and A. Krakau sketched porcelain objects such as vases, fireplaces, clock cases and lamps in the 1850s⁵. During the decade that followed, Alexander Novikov was the most recognisable designer, whose works reflected a whole range of retrospective tastes peculiar to the epoch of Eclecticism.

One of the masterpieces of the Imperial Porcelain Factory is the famous Biscuit flower bouquet which was presented to

Figure 5, Plaque with portrait of Russian Empress Alexandra Feodorovna in ceremonial Russian-style dress. Ca. 1840
Copy from painting of F. Kruger.
22.8 x 16.2 cm

Nicholas I for Christmas in 1850. (Fig. 6) This flower composition by Petr Ivanov is one of the finest in terms of modelling. It was designed to be displayed at the World Exhibition of 1851 in London. However being too fragile, it could not be safely transported there, and remained in the Factory's museum. Petr Ivanov managed to improve the porcelain pastes for statuary and moulded décor, obtaining a highly pliable and durable paste used in sculpting the most delicate biscuit flowers.

The first table service Nicholas commissioned from the factory, was his Coronation service. (Fig. 7) The motif in the centre of the plates is the Imperial coat of arms – the double-headed eagle, surrounded by the Chain of St. Andrew, placed on an ermine mantle, and topped by the Imperial crown. Helmets, trophies, and lion masks decorate the rims of the dinner plates. The same décor plus the griffins, the symbol of the Romanov family, are found on the dessert plates. All are rendered in tooled gold on a cobalt blue ground. At Nicholas' coronation this service was actually used on the Emperor's



Figure 8, Banquet service for the Crown prince, Grand Duke Alexander Nikolaevich. 1841

table, which was set on a dais above the rest of the people in attendance. Others ate from silver services belonging to the vaults of the Kremlin. This porcelain service was never again used at a coronation, and was returned soon after the coronation to the porcelain storages of the Winter Palace. One interesting detail - None of the known plates from this service is marked. Using unmarked white ware was quite common during the previous reign of Alexander I, especially for transfer printed plates.

The Empire style was widely used in porcelain decoration until the 1830s. The classical forms harmonised with the ceremonial rooms of the Winter Palace. The enhanced scale of the adornments, rich and elaborate ornamentation, and the abundance of gilding, made the objects look as if they were made of solid gold. Such imitations of solid gold are to be found in two ceremonial porcelain services produced by the Imperial Factory. Described as Ministerial and Armorial Gold, they were used as table ornaments.

The Armorial (Gold) dinner and dessert service was commissioned in 1827 for Pavlovsk Palace, the residence of the

Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna, and was presented to her by her son Nicholas I. The centre of the dessert ensemble is the magnificent table decoration designed as 20 gilded baskets, supported by porcelain figures of the heroes from ancient mythology and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. All of them were executed under the supervision of sculptor Stephan Pimenov, the painting was supervised by the master painter Alexei Kanunnikov. The dinner part of this service comprises 240 serving and soup plates and 48 round and oval dishes of various dimensions, centred with the depiction of the Russian arms of the time of Nicholas I. The abundance of gold décor gave one of the names for this service - Gold service. Later, in the middle of the 20th century, during one of the museum inventories, the service was called the Armorial Service because of the arms on the dinner plates. 666 pieces were executed, of which 325 are now in the Pavlovsk museum, where they are on display in the White Dining-room. 16 pieces are in the collection of the Her-



Figure 9, Konstantinovsky service (Wedding service of Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich). 1848
Designed by F.G. Solntsev

mitage museum and some pieces can be found in Russian museums, the Peterhof museum and in private collections.

In the same year, in 1827, the Ministerial service was ordered for the Winter Palace. It was designed for 60 people and comprised dinner and dessert sets, in all 1,500 pieces. Later this number was increased by repeated additions to the service. These additions were regularly used in the Winter Palace and were produced into the early 20th century.

Unlike topical ideological examples from the Age of Enlightenment, the new ceremonial services commissioned from the Imperial porcelain factory from 1830-1840s derived from particular stylistic prototypes. The kaleidoscopic variety of Historicism significantly influenced the production of the Imperial porcelain factory. For example, the Solitaire tea service painted in chinoiserie, the Dairy service for one of Nicholas I daughters carried motifs in the rococo style; the Banquet Service, manu-

factured in 1841 for Crown prince Alexander's wedding, also had Rococo-inspired ornamentation; the services designed with Russo-Byzantine style ornaments. (Figs. 8, 9)

International exhibitions became the framework for touting national achievements starting in 1851, each country searching their history for its own distinctive and defining style. The Russians found the *russskii stil* (Russian style) particularly suited for disseminating their country's rich national heritage abroad. They carefully reconstructed this artistic tradition through exploration and study, just as the English researched and expressed their Gothic tradition in the works of, for example, Owen Jones and Augustus Welby Pugin. Few visitors to the Russian pavilions at world fairs, however, appreciated the serious meaning that the Russian revival held for Russians⁶. The dramatic changes brought by the efforts of Peter the Great to Westernize his country had altered the life of the Russian elite forever. Thus, Russians found themselves in the awkward position of being both European and Eastern at the same time, but no matter how hard they tried to be European, Western travellers generally viewed them as backward and in need of



Figure 10, Plate from the Kremlin service. 1838
Designed by F.G. Solntsev

the IPF and it became the quintessential Russian service, used at coronations and other major celebrations until 1917⁷. As the model for the dessert plates Solntsev copied a gold and enamel plate made in the Kremlin Armory workshops in 1667. This plate and Turkish washbasin, whose ornament also served as a model for designs on parts of the Kremlin service, were among the objects included in *Antiquities of the Russian State*. The decoration of the “white service”, a part of the Kremlin service, included four double-headed eagles, linked by various interlaced ornaments. The motifs can be viewed as highly stylised versions of the Cap of Monomakh, the ancient crown of Russia and the Imperial crown.

The Kremlin service was used at coronations and other major banquets, such as the Moscow celebration of the Tercentenary of Romanov rule in 1913. It symbolically linked the later Russian tsars to their Romanov ancestors of the pre-Petrine period (period before Peter the Great).

The popularity that Russian style arts enjoyed in the West in the second half of the 19th century goes a long way to explaining the extraordinary number of works available today. The Russian style sold well then, and remains popular today in both Russia and abroad.

Nicholas I expressed interest in the Russian style as well as in Gothic and Pompeian designs, which were soon copied. ‘Historical’ masquerade balls had appeared during the reign of Nicholas I and one of the first was the ‘Gothic Ball’, for which the table was laid with the Gothic Banquet Service, presented to Nicholas I at Christmas in 1833. (Fig. 11) Richly decorated with red, gold, and green geometric patterns on a bright blue ground, the design was inspired by the stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals. Intended as a dinner and tea service with 150 place settings, the service comprised 1,832 pieces. This service was used for state balls and receptions in the Winter Palace throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the famous Russian Ball in 1903.

Balls and receptions were amongst St Petersburg’s favourite ‘arts and entertainments’. Foreign visitors to St Petersburg expressed amazement at the taste and interiors of the Imperial residences, rivalling those of even the most brilliant European courts. At the start of the twentieth century the French ambassador Maurice Paléologue wrote of the Russian



Figure 11, Gothic Service. 1832

court: “The wealth and elegance of court ceremonies were intended to demonstrate the might and power of the Russian Empire, since ‘the rulers of one sixth of the earth’s surface could receive their guests only in an atmosphere of wasteful luxury’⁸. Court ceremonial tradition determined the programme for each individual celebration, of which grand dining formed an important part. Dinners were planned down to the last detail, with carefully conceived decorations, the invitations and colourful menus often designed by leading artists. The leading role in state dining was naturally played by the Emperor himself. During the State dinners in the Winter palace ‘Emperor (sic) passed from table to table, addressing a few words to those whom he wished to particularly notice, sometimes sitting down and sipping from a glass of wine before moving on. Those few minutes are considered a great honour’⁹.

Dinner in the Winter Palace commenced immediately after the dancing, and sometimes both dinner and dancing were held in the rooms of the Hermitage, amidst the paintings and sculptures. On such occasions the museum halls were adorned with rare plants and flowers, huge palms were brought in from the palace greenhouses and from St Petersburg’s Botanical Gardens to serve as ‘umbrellas’ beneath which the tables were placed. The tables of both the Emperor and of the highest-ranking guests were laid separately, on a dais. Théophile Gautier,

describing a ball in the Winter Palace in the middle of the nineteenth century, recalled: “The Empress, surrounded by a number of high-ranking individuals, went up onto the dais on which stood a horseshoe-shaped table. Behind her gilded chair, like a huge vegetable firework, stood a vast pinkish-white camellia splayed out across the marble wall. Twelve tall Negroes, chosen from amongst the handsomest members of the African race, passed up and down the steps of the dais, handing plates to lackeys or accepting dishes from their hands. Forgetting Desdemona, these sons of the East majestically performed their duties and thanks to them an utterly European dinner seemed like some Asiatic feast in the very best tradition’¹⁰.

Military themes painted on porcelain were especially favoured when national pride ran high in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The fascination, indeed, the obsession, with the military that was exhibited by Tsar Paul and his sons Alexander I and Nicholas I, was not limited to the battlefield and parade ground. Military uniforms, trophies, and images of the heroes were used as decorative elements on porcelain. The fashion for decorating plates with soldiers and their officers in the uniforms of their various regiments seems to have started

civilising. In the hierarchy of nations exhibiting at the world fairs during the second half of the 19th century ‘northern Europeans were held in the highest regard, followed by southern Europeans, with Russians, Asians and others bringing up the rear’. Thus, in reviving the Russian style and marketing it abroad, Russians were seeking to establish their more sophisticated national identity, which had been lost or compromised in the process of Westernization. The Russian style did not originate as a great national movement, however; it was a court style commissioned by Nicholas I and had important political implications. Following the disruptions of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, many of the Russian elite became suspicious of the virtues of Western culture. Inspired by studies of ancient Greek and Roman art, Russians began to explore their own past. By the 1830s Russian archeologists and restorers were at work at various locations in Russia. Amongst them was archaeologist and artist Fyodor Solntsev, who later designed the Kremlin and Konstantin services in the Imperial porcelain factory. In 1830 he was sent to Moscow to make drawings of Russian artifacts. Some five hundred of these drawings were included in six volumes entitled *Antiquities of the Russian State*. In 1836 Nicholas I commissioned Solntsev to design a porcelain service for the Great Kremlin Palace. (Fig. 10) This well-documented service for 500 was made in the same year in



Figure 12, Military plates with green and golden borders. 1830-1840s.

in Berlin. The first examples may have been the military figures featured on the ice pails of the service that Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia commissioned for the Duke of Wellington in 1817. Such military views soon became a special feature of the Imperial factory. The first series of plates appeared at the end of Alexander I's reign and were made continually throughout the 19th century; with the last set being produced during the reign of Nicholas II. Production of these plates, however, reached its height during the reign of Nicholas I. Clearly they reflect Russia's military society, led by the Tsars and other members of the Imperial family.

These series are listed in documents as dessert services or simply plates 'with illustrations of military figures'. In 1827 Nicholas I commissioned one set with gold rims for 60 place settings (120 dessert plates). Other documents mention additions to this set, which extended production of the plates from 1828 to 1836. Nicholas presented a set of more than 2 hundred plates to his father-in-law Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia¹¹. While they may have been intended originally as dessert services, they quickly became cabinet pieces. The king of Prussia framed his plates for display in a new pavilion at Charlottenburg palace in Berlin.

Images of the plates with the gold rim were taken from drawings that were eventually lithographed and published in 1830 in the volume called *Collection of Uniforms of the Imperial Russian Army*. As military uniforms changed, new drawings were produced, and new plates were added to the series. The rank of the individual and his unit are identified on the reverse of each plate. The names of the artists who painted the plates usually appear. Another series with a green border seems to have been started at a later date. (Fig. 12) In 1840 a set of plates, which was probably a duplicate of the set with the green border, was ordered for the future wedding of Alexander II.

It is impossible to overestimate Nicholas I's role as a patron of the Imperial Porcelain Factory. He lavished funds on its wares, and he also appreciated the role it played as a model for private porcelain factories in Russia. Beginning in 1829 with the first All-Russia exhibition, the Imperial factory displayed its wares regularly at exhibitions, where they were well received. The factory's success at these exhibitions led Nicholas to found a museum at the factory in 1844, on the centenary of its founding by Elizabeth. He ordered numerous 18th century examples to be removed from the stores of the Winter Palace and placed in the museum, a museum that exists to this day.

Notes

- 1 RGIA, fond 468, opis 10, delo 1, list 109-112, 419, 423.
- 2 Odom A. Paintings on porcelain vases at Hillwood. // *Antiques. Hillwood museum and gardens*. March. 2003. P. 137.
- 3 Odom A. Paintings on porcelain vases at Hillwood. // *Antiques. Hillwood museum and gardens*. March. 2003. P. 138.
- 4 Nikiforova L.R. *Decorativnuje vazy Kazjennogo farforovogo zavoda pervoj poloviny XIX veka*. // *Trydu Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha: iz istorii rysskoj kyltury*. XXIII. L., 1983. P. 89.
- 5 Kudrjartseva T. *Russkij Imperatorskij farfor*. SPb., 2003, P. 132.
- 6 Odom A. *Russian Imperial Porcelain at Hillwood*. Washington DC, 1999, P. 57.
- 7 RGIA, fond 468, opis 10, delo 821, list 18.
- 8 Paoleolog M. *Dnevnik posla*. M., 2003, P. 546.
- 9 Tuytcheva A.F. *Pri dvore dvuh imperatorov*. M., 1990, P. 96.
- 10 Goutier T. *Puteshestvije v Rossij*. M., 1988, P. 46.
- 11 Odom A. *Russian Imperial Porcelain at Hillwood*. Washington DC, 1999, P. 63.