

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

*Beautiful Trifles*

"Marvels in Miniature" by Dale Harris, in *Connoisseur* (April 1983), P.O. Box 10120, Des Moines, Iowa 50350.

Peter Carl Fabergé (1846–1920) was the jeweler to the Tsars. In a way, his elaborate jeweled Easter eggs symbolized the decadence of Imperial Russia.

Most of Fabergé's creations were domestic items—picture frames, parasol handles, cigarette cases. "Playful, tiny, elegant, designed to enchant, not to dazzle, they must have helped to mitigate the formal splendor of court life," writes Harris, a Cooper Union art historian.

Fabergé, the son of French Huguenot immigrants, was born in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) and took over the family jewelry business there at age 24. He was the manager and chief designer. Though trained as a jeweler and goldsmith, he probably did not personally produce any of the House of Fabergé's famous baubles. As the firm prospered, he opened branches in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and London, employing up to 500 craftsmen and salesmen. Legend has it that he kept a hammer at his desk to smash any work that did not meet his standards.

Fabergé was a genius in "the art of elegant diversion," says Harris, and never was there a more insatiable clientele than the privileged classes of turn-of-the-century Russia and Europe. In his designs, Fabergé looked back, as did his customers, to the royal fashions of 18th-century France. Harris says his emphasis on craftsmanship and design—in contrast to the ostentatious display of costly gems—set him apart from such rivals as Alfred Cartier and Charles Lewis Tiffany, whom he scorned as mere "merchants."

Fabergé's taste was not without its lapses—among his products was a saltcellar in the form of a bidet. But most of his creations hit closer to the mark. Harris cites, for example, an egg topped by an orange tree of gold, nephrite, pearls, and rubies with a tiny concealed gold-feathered nightingale that popped up and sang.

The 1917 October Revolution drove Fabergé into exile. He died in Switzerland in 1920, leaving, says Harris, a legacy of "beautiful trifles," which today are displayed in museums as objects of art.

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**OTHER NATIONS**


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*Saudi Slump*

"Letter from Saudi Arabia" by Joseph Kraft, in *The New Yorker* (July 4, 1983), 25 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The impact of today's "oil glut"—and lower prices—on Saudi Arabia's economy is obvious to any visitor. The Saudis are curbing their free-spending ways: Huge new apartment complexes built for foreign workers stand empty, and once-bustling hotel lobbies are quiet. Yet, reports