

ARTS & 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.

OTHER NATIONS

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

OTHER NATIONS

Kraft, a syndicated columnist, many senior Saudi officials welcome a breather after a decade of helter-skelter modernization.

Riyadh's revenues from oil and other sources are down this year from \$90 billion to \$70 billion. The resulting cuts in public works spending have hurt Saudi construction companies. But the Saudi government's savings will ease the pain; some \$10 billion will be withdrawn from foreign banks to make up the deficit. No fiscal crisis looms.

Meanwhile, the Western-educated "technocrats" in the Saudi cabinet view the construction slowdown as an opportunity to shift the nation's emphasis from steel and concrete—schools, bridges, highways—to basic "people" services. Magnificently equipped new hospitals abound, for example, but many village water supplies are still polluted.

Culturally, the Saudis are undergoing a kind of restoration, says Kraft. The American influence is apparent in English-Arabic street signs and other ways, but Westerners are leaving as demand for their expertise dries up. The maintenance and operation of the refineries and factories built by Americans and Europeans is being assumed by a growing labor force of Pakistanis, Filipinos, and Koreans, whose customs conservative Moslems find less threatening to traditional mores.

Indeed, Islamic fundamentalism is resurgent, Kraft reports. The religious extremists who seized Mecca's Grand Mosque in 1979 accused the Saudi royalty of abandoning the true faith, and the resulting publicity stirred a back-to-basics movement. Public segregation of the sexes is enforced with growing rigor; Saudi Arabia is the only Persian Gulf state where women are not allowed to drive automobiles.

Still, the Westernization begun during the 1960s may be irreversible. Women are opening their own boutiques and beauty salons, and 25,000 women work for the government. Another 10,000 are enrolled in (single-sex) Saudi universities. "You can't keep women in the house if you educate them," remarked a Riyadh bureaucrat.

Saudi Arabia's economic revival, dependent on a renewed demand for oil, is likely to follow recovery in the West. But Saudi officials seem in no hurry to embark on the next round of growth. Said one, "We are in the position of an overweight man who goes on a diet."

South Africa's Grand Designs

"Destabilisation in Southern Africa" by Simon Jenkins, in *The Economist* (July 16, 1983), P.O. Box 2700, Woburn, Mass. 01888.

South Africa's political leaders spent much of the 1960s and 1970s trying fruitlessly to win friends overseas. Pretoria promised reform of its apartheid system, made overtures to black African states, and, for a time, worked closely with Washington. Now Prime Minister P. W. Botha has given up on popularity; his regime is trying to dominate its neighbors by force or subversion.

Jenkins, an *Economist* writer, traces the country's new go-it-alone attitude to two events: Washington's refusal to back a 1975 South African