



ANTIQUES

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Q&A: Mark Schaffer

Mark Schaffer, PhD, is a principal at A La Vieille Russie (ALVR), leading specialists in fine European and American antique jewelry, Fabergé, gold snuffboxes, objets de vertu and Russian decorative and fine arts. The company recently moved to sleek new quarters at 745 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The sun-splashed gallery is the fifth New York venue for this firm founded in Kiev in 1851. We caught up with the peripatetic dealer amidst a recent taping of PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* and a trip to Las Vegas for the jewelry shows, followed by visits to Hillwood, Dumbarton Oaks and the Walters Art Museum.

How do you like your new gallery?

It's a positive change. The space had been a gallery previously, so we were able to use some of the existing infrastructure. Our name is on the door downstairs with the other gallery tenants, which makes us easy to find. We just concluded our first exhibition in the new space, "Celebrating Royal Fabergé - The Return," a sequel to the major presentation at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts in Norwich, United Kingdom, this past winter.

Can you tell us more about the "Royal Fabergé" shows here and abroad?

The Sainsbury Centre houses an unexpectedly wonderful and interesting collection presented in a compelling way. The building is Sir Norman Foster's first public commission and is not far from the Queen's estate, Sandringham. Animals at the Royal Zoo in Sandringham inspired a group of



hardstone animals made by Fabergé for the British royal family and still in the Queen's collection. After the Royal Collection, ALVR was the biggest lender to the Sainsbury Centre exhibit.

Why did you reprise the show at ALVR in New York?

It was a great opportunity to show some works from the ALVR collection that are not normally on view. Nothing in either exhibition was for sale. To Sainsbury, we loaned the biggest and perhaps best known of Fabergé's hardstone figurines, the gypsy singer of Varvara Panina. With Fabergé flowers, which we also loaned, the figurines rival the importance of the Easter eggs. Furthermore, every time there is an exhibition we learn more about pieces.

Which is more important to your business, shows or your shop?

There has always been an interplay between the shop and the shows. We've had gallery clients who become show clients out of convenience and vice versa. Among the things we love about shows such as TEFAF Maastricht, where we exhibit along with TEFAF New York Fall and the Winter Antiques Show, is their collegiality and diverse clientele. This year's Winter Antiques Show was especially memorable for us. The loan show from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts included the Imperial Peter the Great Easter Egg presented by Nicholas to Alexandra in 1903. My grandparents sold it to VMFA benefactor Lillian Thomas Pratt in the 1940s.

Why did you become a dealer?

Opportunity was part of it, of course. I have been handling Fabergé since I was a child. It was always in the blood. I knew my grandfather, Alexander Schaffer, and worked with my grandmother, Ray. My grandparents had a good sense of what was beautiful and what people liked. They developed the market and stimulated appreciation for Fabergé and Russian works of art in the United States, little known here before then, and established the high standards for which ALVR is known.

What do you love most about your work?

The art. Beyond that, the business of art enhances one's appreciation and sharpens one's eye. They are quite connected. There are dealers who can sell anything. For me, a piece must resonate.

Other interests?

I'm interested in botanical history, which relates to my academic training in plant molecular biology. Botanical porcelain and antiquarian books are passions of mine.

What don't we know about you?

One of my big hobbies is recreational and competitive swimming. About four years ago, I swam the Hellespont, as the ancients called the body of water separating Europe and Asia that we know as the Dardanelles. That same year I visited one of Vienna's great museums where I happened upon a piece depicting Hero and Leander, the original Hellespont team.

Is the Russian investigation affecting the market for Russian art?

It's too soon to answer that, but world events always influence people's thinking. The question of whether art trumps politics is a constant across literature, music, and the visual and performing arts.

Are you traveling with PBS's Antiques Roadshow this season?

ALVR has participated from the series' inception. Tapings are underway, and it's quite interesting to do. Every city is different. We see good jewelry and some Russian works of art, but I can't say I've become a household name!

Pending projects?

Perhaps in the fall. For now, we are just letting people enjoy the galleries.

A La Vieille Russie is at 745 Fifth Avenue, 4th floor, in New York City, between 57th and 58th Streets. For more information, 212-752-1727 or www.alvr.com.

-Laura Beach



Silver stamp moistener in the form of an elephant standing on its tusks and forelegs, the tail serving as the moistener, Fabergé, workmaster J. Rappoport, St Petersburg, circa 1895, height 4 inches.